

**“Not Another Word.”**

Metafiction and solipsism in the short fiction  
of David Foster Wallace

BA Thesis English Language and Culture  
Universiteit Utrecht  
Julio Pijnappel  
3279111  
Simon Cook and Onno Kusters  
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## Table of Contents

Abbreviations.....	3
Chapter 1 - <i>Metafiction</i> .....	4
Chapter 2 - <i>Octet</i> .....	14
Chapter 3 - <i>Good Old Neon</i> .....	24
Bibliography .....	36

## Abbreviations

- ASFT* Wallace, David Foster. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. New York: Back Bay, 1997. Print.
- BIWHM* Wallace, David Foster. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. 1999. New York: Back Bay, 2000. Print.
- EUP* Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. New York: Back Bay, 1997. 21-83. Print.
- GON* Wallace, David Foster. "Good Old Neon." *Oblivion*. New York: Little, 2004. 141-181. Print.
- IJ* Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. New York: Little, 1996. Print.
- KQED* Wallace, David Foster. Interview on *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. *Forum*. Michael Krasny. KQED, San Francisco. 1999. Web. 03 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.kqed.org/a/forum/R901010900>>
- PQ* "Pop Quiz" (in the chapter "Octet")

## Chapter 1 – *Metafiction*

*You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer...*

-- David Foster Wallace, "Octet"

Metafiction is, simply put, fiction that makes a comment on its fictional status, thereby giving off the impression of self-awareness – like a sentence in a BA thesis that reads: "I am just a sentence in a BA thesis about the use of metafiction in two short stories by David Foster Wallace." In literature, it manifests itself in the use of formal or linguistic devices within a work of written fiction that draw the reader's attention to the fact that the work is indeed fictional, an artistic construct for which there are certain conventions regarding plot and characters, and/or that it is a linguistic construct, employing phrases and the like (for which there are also conventions, i.e. grammar), and/or even just a collection of symbols (which are also based on agreed-upon conventions) in ink on a page, etc., *ad vertigo*.

This has an inherently ironic effect. The *OED* defines irony as "a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used," or, as David Foster Wallace puts it himself: "an implicit 'I don't really mean what I'm saying'" (*EUP* 67). The irony of metafiction lies in what it does to the reader's suspension of disbelief that is necessary for fiction. Metafiction works by creating a fictional world and then (or simultaneously) pointing out the obvious fact that it doesn't exist in reality. John Barth, in his short story "Lost in the Funhouse," starts the description of the main characters' physical characteristics with the sentence: "Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction" ("Funhouse" 2825). The metafictional writer makes explicit the normally hidden – or suspended – fact that all fiction writers "don't really mean what [they're] saying" (*EUP* 67) and because this is

made explicit *within* the work of fiction itself, metafiction is intrinsically ironic. This is also why so much of metafiction is parodic and so much parody is metafictional.

However, by using irony to lay bare its own artificiality, metafiction comments on much more than just its own fictional status. It comments on the conventions of fiction and what they say about interhuman connection, on the possibility of honesty in premeditated text, on the frail connection between novels and the outside world, and ultimately – and *ironically* – by virtue of how empty and meaningless it finally is, it exposes the fragile nature of language’s, or humans’, connection to reality itself. It has also, as David Foster Wallace argues in his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” shaped the mainstream entertainment industry into a state of ironic self-awareness that now “tyrannizes” modern writers (*EUP* 67).

Wallace argues that, though postmodernist irony – of which metafiction is the literary expression – was very useful in the hands of gifted ironists like Barth, Gaddis, Vonnegut and the like, the so-called “Black Humorists,” in debunking many American hypocrisies in the 60s, it has since then been assimilated and transmogrified: with time, the Black Humorists’ rebellious irony became pop-culture’s “hip cynicism” (McCaffery 147). When mainstream (televised) entertainment incorporated the postmodern aesthetic, being ironic in the arts became an end in itself – to appear smart and sophisticated in order to appeal to an audience that also wants to see itself as such – instead of a means of revealing things that are hypocritically kept hidden. The number of hours of television we consume coupled with the ubiquity of ironic self-awareness in mainstream televised entertainment has shifted irony from being a means of revealing what the status quo wants to conceal to *being the status quo*. But, Wallace argues, irony is an utterly empty and unattainable cultural norm, for it is a destructive force, with – by its very definition – no inherent meaning:

And make no mistake: irony tyrannizes us. The reason why our pervasive

cultural irony is at once so powerful and so unsatisfying is that an ironist is *impossible to pin down*. All U.S. irony is based on an implicit “I don’t really mean what I’m saying.” So what *does* irony as a cultural norm mean to say? That it’s impossible to mean what you say? That maybe it’s impossible, but wake up and smell the coffee already? Most likely, I think, today’s irony ends up saying: “How totally *banal* of you to ask what I really mean!” (*EUP* 67)

Another danger of metafiction is that performing an illocutionary act – to borrow the terminology used in John R. Searle’s *Speech Acts* – that points out a fictional statement’s fictional nature not only removes the reader’s attention from what the fictional statement wants to convey, but also places the act of self-referral outside the plane of the fictional discourse and on a plane where, ultimately, the only thing that *can* be said, is that what the reader is holding is a piece of paper with ink on it. In other words, unlike fictional utterances or nonfictional, true utterances, metafictional utterances cannot convey any other message than their very self-reference, which often consequently ridicules the surrounding fiction’s illocutions and threatens to make it very difficult to convey serious messages through metafictional art – metafiction pulls into question the existence of honest messages and the possibility of their communication.

However, it is difficult to ignore metafiction’s self-awareness once it has been exposed, for it reveals something salient about the nature of fictional texts and the relationship between reality and fiction that is normally suspended. This revelation has been reached through the use of irony, but now that it has been revealed, makes it difficult to say anything else. What could Magritte paint, *and mean it*, after he wrote “Ceci n’est pas un pipe” under his painting of a pipe? This is how metafiction moves from being liberatingly ironic to being quintessentially nihilistic and solipsistic: *Cela ne sera rien*.

The connection between metafiction as a formal aspect of a written text and solipsism<sup>1</sup> as a philosophical conviction follows from Wittgenstein's conclusions in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. This thesis does not purport to contain a comprehensive analysis of the implications of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, but must depart from a commonsensically formulated reading of some of his conclusions on the nature of the relationship between the subject, language, and reality. With his picture-theory of language, presented in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein discards the existence of metaphysics and states that all language can hope to achieve is to create mental pictures of reality (3)<sup>2</sup>. Since it is with and within language that we think and are able to think logically, the limits of our language are the limits of our thoughts and our comprehension of experience (5.61, 5.62) and therefore, the limits of our world (5.6) and our selves (5.63). However, we are only speaking in and of pictures, simulacra of the elements of reality: we can never ascertain the veracity of the relationship between our linguistic mental pictures and the actual external world, so we cannot know an external reality to be true. This means that there can be no certainty of a reality outside ourselves, i.e. solipsism. In proposition 5.64 of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says: "Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality coordinated with it."

It is obviously only of propositions – language – that we can say whether they are true or not: it is nonsensical to question the truth-value of something non-linguistic. However, we can never hold up a proposition against reality to check its veracity, for that would require being on a plane outside of language. Therefore, the only sentences we can say are verifiably

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<sup>1</sup> From Latin *solus* (alone) + *ipse* (self), solipsism is the philosophical view that the self is all that can be known to exist.

<sup>2</sup> Because of the numeric structure of the *Tractatus*, references are not made to page numbers of a certain edition, but to the number of the proposition.

<sup>3</sup> Because of the chapter structure of *El Fin de Big Brother* that contains the "Twelve Steps" part titled "How to Write a Standabout" (58).

<sup>4</sup> *Standabout* is the trademark of Wallace's writing, especially after his nonfiction

true are those that are recursive, tautological. Recursion is, in essence, what metafiction does: it “exposes the recursive component to language” (McCaffery 142) and by doing so, it exposes the frail relationship between language and reality.

Metafiction is, therefore, the literary expression of solipsism *sine pari*, because a writer that employs metafiction, like John Barth writing “Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness” in a story called “Title” (110), or Jorge Luis Borges writing “Tlön Uqbar Orbis Tertius,” a short story that “is about a story that invents an imaginary world, and it primarily and self-consciously *is* a story which, like all stories, invents an imaginary world,” is giving solipsism a literary form of expression by “impl[ying] that human beings can only ever achieve a metaphor for reality, another layer of ‘interpretation’” (Waugh 15), much more literally and poignantly than, say, writing “I am all that I can know to exist” or “I am my world” (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 5.64) would, since those sentences still speak of an “I,” evoking the idea of a person – other than the reader – uttering this, thereby failing to be solipsistic in itself. Succinctly put, metafiction does a better job of portraying solipsism than describing solipsism in words does.

Metafiction is not just postmodernist in its use of self-conscious irony, it is also the fiction of the postmodern generation: It is written and read by people who, due to the ubiquity of mainstream media, are familiar, often to the point of exhaustion, with the conventions of fiction, many of them also aware of the deconstruction of texts and of basic human psychology, and of the pluralistic view that there is no such thing as objective truth and that therefore, in fiction, there can be no such thing as *realism*. In short, it is the fiction of a culture that is unprecedentedly aware, both of itself and of the conventions of fiction. This accounts for the popularity of metafiction in the present culture and more generally of the “meta” prefix in the cultural discourse, and is why it is difficult for writers of experimental



fiction to ignore the illusions metafiction has laid bare and go about writing straight realist fiction.

Now that so much has been exposed by metafiction, any ordinary, “non-meta” work of fiction is in danger of coming across naïve and hokey in comparison: the butt of the ironist’s joke is always naiveté. Though Wallace argues throughout “E Unibus Pluram” that more and more of so-called “Low” art is becoming obsessively self-aware, non-metafictional books still undoubtedly outsell experimental, artistic metafictional books. However, for a large part of the population, the highly educated (young) adults that Wallace “imagine[s] [his] readership to be” (McCaffery 128), the hokey sentimentality of the majority of popular fiction is, argues Wallace, “revolting” in the same sense that “obscenity” used to be revolting (KQED), which severs the connection of the reader with the emotional message of the work.

David Foster Wallace’s fiction revolves around this double-bind that postmodernistic self-awareness has put fiction writers in: the desire to “try to do fiction about human beings, who are sometimes in pain and have sometimes emotional experiences that are powerful *because* they’re not unique and because they’re not complicated” while acknowledging that “to do that in a way that doesn’t come off as the sort of thing that Dan Aykroyd was parodying into oblivion 20 years ago . . . you know, I would just say it’s a problem” (KQED). The Black Humorists of the 60s greatly influenced Wallace – he calls John Barth “the patriarch for my patricide” (McCaffery 146) – and due to the fact that they drew the curtains and stumbled upon the fun-house mirror room of metafictional self-reference, Wallace seems unable to shy away from it and tries, in a way, to go *through* metafiction. Using the only tool that might be able to pin down an ironist – irony itself – he sets about exposing metafiction’s weaknesses and hypocrisies, to debunk metafictional irony itself, in order to show how empty it is a cultural norm: in the McCaffery interview, David Foster Wallace says of his short story “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” (from the collection *Girl with Curious*

*Hair*) that it was an attempt “to expose the illusions of metafiction the same way metafiction had tried to expose the illusions of the pseudo-unmediated realist fiction that came before it” (142).

The copyright page of *Girl with Curious Hair*, of which some sections were undoubtedly written by Wallace himself, states that “Parts of ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way’ are written in the margins of John Barth’s ‘Lost in the Funhouse.’” This short story by Barth is a touchstone of 60s metafiction, but already recognized the dangers of getting “lost” in metafictional recursion. In the story, “almost every sentence . . . is undermined and exposed as fictional” (Waugh 95). However, scattered between the incessant ironic authorial intrusions, there is a plot of sorts involving a boy that stumbles into the mirror room of the funhouse that lends the story its title. The imagery of the funhouse is a metaphor for fiction writing – the narrator mentions that “[i]n a perfect funhouse you’d be able to go only one way, like the divers off the highboard; getting lost would be impossible” (Barth, “Funhouse” 2833) – and the mirror room represents, quite directly, the self-regarding aspect of postmodernist fiction: just like a funhouse mirror, meta-consciousness reflects and distorts. By intruding metafictionally on the fictional story, the story itself changes, and this effect spirals into itself. The story deals with how metafictional self-awareness has caused the narrator to get “Lost in the Funhouse,” its final paragraph stating that the narrator “wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has” (Barth, “Funhouse” 2840).

The ending of “Lost in the Funhouse” shows the difficulty for writers of experimental fiction to ignore metafiction: We have entered the funhouse, so the question is not how to get out again, but how to achieve the same effect of writing deep, meaningful fiction from within self-referential metafiction. An analogy might be drawn with religion: Religious faith can have a powerful and positive emotional effect on people, imbuing their world with meaning, as long as they believe in it. If someone “finds out” that God does not exist and becomes an

atheist, she can't ignore this new knowledge and enjoy the same meaningful experience of the world that religious faith used to give her, but is now reliant only on herself, a much more daunting proposition.

Both the content of Wallace's fiction as his own stylistic struggle with metafictional self-awareness resonate strongly with this paradoxical idea of *believing* in a fiction. In his magnum opus *Infinite Jest*, a large part of which is set in a halfway house for drug addicts, one the main characters, Don Gately, joins Alcoholics Anonymous to combat his heroin addiction, and is instructed to follow its 12-step program, many of which steps entail a belief in a higher power to achieve a "spiritual awakening" (Alcoholics 59). Gately is very skeptical at first:

The idea that AA might actually somehow *work* unnerved him. He suspected some sort of trap. Some new sort of trap . . . It seemed to be impossible to figure out just *how* AA worked. It did, yes, tentatively seem maybe actually to be working, but Gately couldn't for the life of him figure out how just sitting on hemorrhoid-hostile folding chairs every night looking at nose-pores and listening to clichés could work. Nobody's ever been able to figure AA out, is another binding commonality. And the folks with serious time in AA are infuriating about questions starting with *How*. You ask the scary old guys How AA Works and they smile their chilly smiles and say Just Fine. It just works, is all; end of story. (350)<sup>3</sup>

However, by the end of the novel, Gately realizes that, whether or not he knows it to be a fiction, the performance of the ritual of belief indeed just *works* for him to overcome his addiction. The same might be said about Wallace's fiction as a whole, and his battle with postmodern irony: though the cynicism of metafictional awareness permeates his work, he is

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<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the chapter of AA's *The Big Book* that contains the "Twelve Steps" is titled "How It Works" (58).

constantly searching for a way to write fiction that has an emotional resonance; even though it's all just fiction, it *works*, and this pragmatic truth might be all the truth we are going to get.

Like Gately, many characters of Wallace's short fiction are antagonized by their postmodernistic self-awareness and their overconsumption of corporate television's bombardment of the sentiments that led to the culture's "hip" irony. Their cynical aversion of sentimentality and their hypersensitive self-consciousness lead them into a depressive, solipsistic narcissism, in which they crave an interhuman connection while simultaneously expressing their disbelief in the possibility of attaining it.

This paradox guides Wallace's employment of metafiction: Metafiction must create a lie while being aware that it is a lie, i.e. it must simultaneously believe and *not* believe in the fiction it creates – the word *believe* here needing the same transposing as the word *self-conscious* when applied to fiction. In Wallace's story "Good Old Neon," we have a protagonist who is aware of being a "fraud" (141), but is desperate to experience a human connection, even if, ultimately, he doubts human connections are possible. In all his work, Wallace is, like his characters, paradoxically trying to create a fiction that stands the scrutiny of the awareness that it is, like so many things, fiction. He endows his work with the same blend of debilitating self-consciousness and craving for emotional connection his characters have: like its inhabitants, the fiction is self-conscious and sensitive to avoid sentimentality and clichés, while at the same time desperately seeking an emotional connection.

The rendering of consciousness in his stories invariably employ metafictional devices, and in most of his stories it is the characters' own over-acute sense of self-awareness that they have as their antagonists, revealing something salient about the link between human and textual self-awareness, between consciousness and metafiction. In "Good Old Neon," he shows the paradox inherent in the concept of self-awareness most clearly: awareness is

necessary for emotion and experience, but when you are aware of yourself, you are by definition no longer experiencing something, but *watching* yourself experience it. When you, like the narrator in “Good Old Neon,” become obsessed with the fact that you tend to do this all the time, you are watching yourself *watching yourself*. Taken to its logical extreme – as Wallace’s fiction tends to do – this spirals in on itself into paralysis, much like metafiction spirals in on itself into tautology, showing that the destructively recursive effect metafictional self-awareness has on fiction writing is a simulacrum of the effects hyper-self-consciousness would have on a person.

Wallace’s short fiction is therefore looking for a way out of this recursive loop of self-awareness, simultaneously exposing the parallels between fiction’s battle with metafiction and humanity’s battle with solipsistic loneliness – the fact that you can never really bridge the distance between your consciousness and someone else’s. By dealing with sentimental subjects such as loneliness and human relationships like parent-child love or sexual love – subjects the culture has been bludgeoned into a stupor with by mainstream entertainment – within self-conscious experimental fiction, he moves the discourse of the clichéd and quotidian into the area of experimental self-aware metafictional irony, and therefore opens up a space in which he can communicate interpersonal sentimentality again, looking for the human connection that writing can achieve because “[we] know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another” (*ASFT* 134), while simultaneously exposing the shortcomings of the postmodernist irony that has come to dominate our culture.

## Chapter 2 – *Octet*

*I'd probably leave all this implicit, though, if I were you.*

-- "*Octet*"

It is immediately striking that, for someone who writes about how unprecedentedly difficult it is to write fiction nowadays, Wallace is a prolific writer, having published three collections of short stories alongside numerous works of nonfiction and the monstrous *Infinite Jest*. There is an arc in the evolution of Wallace's employment of metafiction in his short stories regarding the conundrum he puts forth in "E Unibus Pluram." His first collection, 1989's *Girl with Curious Hair*, has Wallace experimenting with very different styles of writing, giving the impression that he was either still looking for his literary voice or showing off how many different voices he could emulate, but from *Infinite Jest* onward, a more discernable writerly voice can be detected, and the *Wallaceian* is apparent throughout his work.

During the long process of writing *IJ*, Wallace wrote many works of nonfiction, some of which became immensely popular and were anthologized in two collections: *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* and *Consider the Lobster*. From this point onward, the nonfiction's influence on his short fiction is apparent. The manner in which the stories from *Girl with Curious Hair* are metafictional is much more structural and cerebral, while the metafictional aspects of most of the stories in his later work, especially in the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, are *conversational*.

This reaches its pinnacle in the short story "Octet" (*BIWHM* 131-161). Its structure is that of a series of "Pop Quiz[zes]" (131), in which he sketches several situations and asks the reader a question about them. All the short situations that are described in the different pop

quizzes deal with human relationships and moral conundra, in a way that Wallace described as “the shucking and jiving in this book is you’re watching a very nervous writer who’s trying to talk about emotional stuff and is also terrified of coming off sentimental” (KQED). The pop quizzes use indeterminacy, most clearly by having protagonists called X and Y. These have the ironic effect of pointing out the arbitrary nature of the choosing of character names, just like Thomas Pynchon’s use of ludicrous names like “Dewey Gland” and “Pig Bodine” in *V* has. The reader knows they are not actual people, so their names don’t need to be realistic. However, here it serves another purpose: X and Y’s use in mathematics as variables points out, instead of a playful ironic joke on arbitrariness, the *universality* of the moral conundra presented in the stories, while their metafictional nature distances the stories’ sentimental content from the reader: it’s easier to empathize with “Mary” and “John” than with “Y” and “X”.

“Pop Quiz 6(A)”, concerning a man who feels trapped in a double-bind of supporting his wife as she deals with her father’s terminal illness, while hating – and being hated by – his father-in-law so much he finds himself “rooting silently for the tumor itself, mentally toasting its health and wishing it continued metastatic growth” (140), is stripped by these metafictional devices of much of what would make the story connect with the reader in a traditional, realist-fiction sense, and is instead made awkwardly comical by its metafictional use of footnotes, indeterminacy, and the protagonists’ namelessness. Sentences like “then Y does something to hurt, alienate and/or infuriate X” (131), are therefore not just “tired old S.O.P.<sup>4</sup> metafiction” (153), for the sentence doesn’t just refer to fiction’s status as a linguistic construct, it also refers very emphatically to metafiction’s own inability to deal with human emotions. Wallace achieves this without disregarding or ignoring metafiction: The

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<sup>4</sup> *Standard Operating Procedure* – one of the trademarks of Wallace’s writing, especially after his nonfiction started influencing his fiction-writing, is the prolific use of abbreviations, the large majority of which are never explained within the text, and are held to either be self-evident, or to stimulate the reader into guessing what they are.

awkwardness of “Y does something to hurt, alienate and/or infuriate X” (131) points out, in the ironic, self-referring language of metafiction itself, that metafiction is terribly inept at conveying “genuine, intense, emotional stuff” (KQED). “Octet” successfully points out the shortcomings of metafiction in dealing with sentimental, human problems; it parodies irony itself by confronting it with the serious.

The need to communicate the sentimental/emotional within experimental metafiction is because “pseudo-unmediated realist fiction” (McCaffery 142) has lost much of its effect to those sensitive to mainstream entertainment’s use of “intense [and] emotional” with such a blatant economic agenda that it no longer communicates the “genuine” (KQED). The way out from between the rock of solipsistic metafiction and the hard place of clichéd conventional realism that Wallace finds is to use metafiction *conversationally*. Pop Quiz 6 digresses so heavily into metafictional indeterminacy as to end abruptly with “in fact the whole *mise en scène* here seems too shot through with ambiguity to make a very good Pop Quiz, it turns out” (“Octet” 134). Then follows Pop Quiz 7, and then Wallace starts Pop Quiz 6(A) with “Try it again. Same guy X as in PQ6” (135).

These conversational metafictional authorial intrusions culminate in the ninth Pop Quiz, when the narrator decides to “address the reader directly” (147) by starting the quiz with “You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer<sup>5</sup>. You are attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces” (145) and continues with a very long, digressive and footnote-rich description of what he is actually trying to do in the story, which is actually the whole book *mise en abyme*, and of what he wants to achieve with it. This highly metafictional section not

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that in this “address[ing of] the reader” (147), Wallace uses the term *writer* and not *author*. The text and its metafictional comment on its creation are not concerned with the “metaphysical viability of the author, [the] entity whose intentions are taken to be responsible for a text’s meaning” (*ASFT* 139), and about which Roland Barthes wrote his seminal “La Mort de l’Auteur,” but with the text’s *writer*, “the person whose choices and actions account for a text’s features” (*ASFT* 139). Wallace writes within the post-Barthian paradigm, eschews the word *author*, and in his own critical theory – as in “Greatly Exaggerated” (*ASFT* 138-145) – calls the whole poststructuralist question “sort of arcane...[f]or those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another” (*ASFT* 144).



only comments on the fictional status of the text, it also *changes* the text's fictional status: John Searle, in his "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," draws a distinction between the status of fictional and nonfictional discourse and mentions that some works of fiction contain utterances that are not fictional, but are serious utterances by the author (331). *BIWHM* as a whole is normally classified as a collection of fictional short stories, and Searle does not mention metafiction in his essay, but metafictional self-reference is, inherently, a "serious"<sup>6</sup> utterance, for it indicates the verifiably true fact that the text is an artificial linguistic construct created by the author.

Pop Quiz 9 seems, apart from its use of the second person pronoun and its frame as a Pop Quiz inside a series, to be both nonfictional and serious in a way that merges Searle's jargon with the quotidian use of the word, because the metafiction in PQ9 is also "serious" in the sense of being the *opposite* of ironic: instead of "an implicit 'I don't really mean what I'm saying'" (*EUP* 67), the metafiction here is "pious and melodramatic" ("Octet" 156). Wallace does this by using metafiction's truth-value as a device with which to move from fiction to the realm of nonfiction. Metafiction can attain a level of truth that is, even under skeptic metaphysical scrutiny, verifiable: though fiction is by definition untrue, the statements metafiction makes about fiction are verifiably true, because of their recursive nature. The only propositions that are indubitably true of any sentence, like "JFK was shot by Lee Harvey Oswald," are metalinguistic statements, such as that "it is a sentence," or that "it contains seven words," etc. Nonfiction is normally connected to truthful statements, but due to its mediated and premeditated nature, its veracity depends on the narrator's *honesty*.

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<sup>6</sup> "Serious" is used here as described by Searle in "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse:"

Just to have some jargon to work with, let us say that metaphorical uses of expressions are "non-literal" and fictional utterances are "nonserious" ... This jargon is not meant to imply that writing a fictional novel or poem is not a serious activity, but rather that, for example, if the author of a novel tells us that it is raining outside he isn't seriously committed to the view that it is at the time of writing actually raining outside. It is in this sense that fiction is nonserious. (320)

In the second footnote to “Octet,” the narrator explicitly criticizes “S.O.P.” metafiction as being a “sham-honesty” (147), the writer using the truth-value of metafiction as a rhetorical trick to make the writer come across as sophisticated and smart, meanwhile sabotaging the communicative value of the fiction:

[W]ith the now-tired S.O.P. ‘meta’-stuff it’s more the dramatist himself coming onstage from the wings and reminding you that what’s going on is artificial and that the artificer is him (the dramatist) and but that he’s at least respectful enough of you as reader/audience to be honest about the fact that he’s back there pulling the strings, an ‘honesty’ which personally you’ve always had the feeling is actually a highly rhetorical sham-honesty that’s designed to get you to like him and approve of him (i.e., of the ‘meta’-type writer) and feel flattered that he apparently thinks you’re enough of a grownup to handle being reminded that what you’re in the middle of is artificial (like you didn’t know that already, like you needed to be reminded of it over and over again as if you were a myopic child who couldn’t see what was right in front of you). (147)

As in most of David Foster Wallace’s metafiction, the metafictional “frames” that envelop the content of PQ9 – the footnotes, the footnotes within footnotes, the “Pop Quiz” conceit, and especially the sustained usage of the second person pronoun – are what prevent its content from coming across melodramatic and sentimental, thereby preventing it from being prone to ironic ridicule without forfeiting the message’s content’s honesty. However, in “Octet,” Wallace goes a step further, and uses metafiction’s self-awareness itself to *amplify*, instead of undercut, the sentimentality of the piece:

[T]he same structure that at first seemed urgent because it was a way to flirt with the potential appearance of meta-textual hooey for reasons that would

(you had hoped) emerge as profound and far more urgent than the tired old ‘Hey-look-at-me-looking-at-you-looking-at-me’ agenda of tired old S.O.P. metafiction . . . that this same potentially disastrous-looking avant-gardy heuristic form just might itself give you a way out of the airless conundrum, a chance to salvage the potential fiasco of you feeling that the 2+(2(1)) pieces add up to something urgent and human and the reader not feeling that way at all. Because now it occurs to you that you could simply ask her. The reader. That you could poke your nose out the mural hole that ‘6 isn’t working as a Pop Quiz’ and ‘Here’s another shot at it’ etc. have already made and address the reader directly and ask her straight out whether she’s feeling anything like what you feel. (154)

So in “Octet,” Wallace not only turns metafiction on its head by using metafictional irony to point out the crevasses in taking an ironic stance about serious matters, but also uses metafiction to *raise*, instead of ridicule, the seriousness and honesty of his fiction, by saying: “Yes, this is fiction, we all know that, but I’m trying to communicate something with it, is it working?” The “something” he is trying to communicate he finds difficult to put into words, because any direct formulation would invariably sound trite and banal, but it is “almost worth shimmying up chimneys and shouting from roofs about” (“Octet” 156), and is the subject of Nicoline Timmer’s *Do you feel it too? The post-postmodern syndrome in American fiction at the turn of the millennium*.

The length and complexity of the piece are also essential to the evocation of its message: With very few exceptions, Wallace’s writing is far from concise, and “Octet” is an especially digressive piece. But it is from the framing of the sentimental within long, complex structures that pushes it into a different domain, reevaluating it and allowing it to be seen again. If the whole of PQ9 had been written in the first person and less digressively, as

purely a note or commentary on the other Pop Quizzes in “Octet,” it would have been overly sentimental, and would have been much less effective in evoking an emotional response from a critical reader.

This is also why the narrator is constantly criticizing his – or “your” – word choice whenever the text threatens to get too “pious and melodramatic” (“Octet” 156), while saying that “you’ll” have to get up the courage to do it anyway. The message he communicates is very sentimental, but by describing it as “a sort of weird ambient *sameness* in different kinds of human relationships, some nameless but inescapable ‘*price*’ that all human beings are faced with having to pay at some point if they ever want truly ‘to be with’ another person” (155), with long footnotes criticizing both the words “relationships” and “to be with,” warning that the first has become “a near-nauseous term in contemporary usage” and that the second needs to be used in its “culturally envenomed way, too, as in ‘I’ll Be There For You’ . . . without tone quotes or ironic undercutting or any kind of winking or nudging – if you’re going to be truly honest in the pseudometaQuiz instead of just ironically yanking the poor reader around (and she’ll be able to tell which one you’re doing . . . trust me on this)” (155), it establishes a level of intimacy that flies, as it were, under the radar of cynicism that permeates postmodern culture, a radar that the narrator seems to have very finely attuned.

Metafictional devices always point out the artificiality of a text, and in doing so they also – more or less directly – point out the presence of “the artificer,” who’s “back there pulling the strings” (147). With the metafictional device of the authorial intrusion, the narrator claims, from within the text, for himself the role as its creator. The use of the second person pronoun in this section of “Octet” not only serves to make the piece read like the narrator is “*talking to you*” (“Octet” 147), but also blends the identity of narrator, reader and writer.

In PQ9, Wallace complicates and subverts this, by also attributing the creation of the text to this “you,” by saying, e.g.:

You decide to try to salvage the aesthetic disaster of having to stick in the first version of the 6<sup>th</sup> piece by having that first version be utterly up front about the fact that it falls apart and doesn’t work as a ‘Pop Quiz’ and by having the rewrite of the 6<sup>th</sup> piece start out with some terse unapologetic acknowledgement that it’s another ‘try’ at whatever you were trying to palpate into interrogability in the first version. (146)

Which accurately describes the structure of “Octet” and the beginning of its PQ6(A), thereby establishing PQ9’s addressee as the creator of “Octet” as a whole, while the narrator of PQ9 is another “I,” who is mentioned explicitly when this “I” is searching for a better word than “describe” and, after a long footnote that starts with “that may not even be the right word – too pedantic, you might want to use the word *transmit*, or *evoke* or even *limn*,” concludes with: “if *limn* doesn’t seem off-the-charts pretentious, I’d probably go with *limn*” (155).

The narrator also comments on these metafictional comments themselves:

These intranarrative acknowledgments have the additional advantage of slightly diluting the pretentiousness of structuring the little pieces as so-called ‘Quizzes’, but it also has the disadvantage of flirting with metafictional self-reference . . . which in the late 1990s, when even Wes Craven is cashing in on metafictional self-reference<sup>7</sup>, might come off lame and tired and facile, and also runs the risk of compromising the queer *urgency* about whatever it is you feel you want the pieces to interrogate in whoever’s reading them. (146)

What is visible here, is a type of “(ulp)” (“Octet” 155) *meta-metafiction*, as the narrator is metafictionally ruminating on the effects of “flirting with metafictional self-reference” (146).

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<sup>7</sup> A reference to the highly metafictional “*Scream*” horror movie franchise, which, unbeknownst to Wallace, had its 4<sup>th</sup> installment released this year (2011).

The piece reads as a sort of inner struggle within the writer/narrator that created the text, with which he is trying to reach out to “a reader” (154), but is afraid of coming across as “pathetic” (144) or “sentimental” (KQED). The use of “you” for the narrator’s voice solves this problem by unifying the reader of the text with the addressee, and by extension with the writer/narrator.

A text that is addressed to “you” generates an instinctive response on the part of the reader, because the usage of “you” in fiction is highly paradoxical: Fiction deals with the creation of worlds and characters that are imaginary, but anyone reading a fictional text is, necessarily, an actual living human being. Using the second person pronoun to “address the reader directly” is not uncommon to other metafictional works – Italo Calvino’s *If On A Winter’s Night A Traveler* and Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* both start by addressing the reader and commenting on the fact that they are reading. This sets up a degree of intimacy between writer and reader; since fiction reading is an essentially private enterprise, the reader feels addressed personally<sup>8</sup>.

In the McCaffery interview, Wallace said that “serious fiction’s purpose” is to give readers “imaginative access to other selves,” because the reader, “like all of us[,] is sort of marooned in her own skull” (127). In “Octet,” the interpersonal aspect of addressing “you” is intensified by inserting an excruciatingly self-conscious and detailed account of the anxiety of the creator of the text, and the identification of this creator as being the addressee. Wallace ends PQ9 with the narrator commenting on the effect that writing “Octet” the way it has finally turned out in the actual book would have on the reader’s perception of its creator:

[I]t’s *not* going to make you look wise or secure . . . or any of the things  
readers usually want to pretend they believe the literary artist who wrote what

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<sup>8</sup> Advertisements, textbooks, memos etc., also use the second person pronoun to address their audience directly and – in the case of advertisement – even appeal to this very same intimacy (“you know you want it” etc.), but they are all nonfictional – the promises made to “you” by advertisements are exaggerations and/or lies, not fiction, which entails the *willing* suspension of disbelief.

they're reading is . . . It's going to make you look fundamentally lost and confused and frightened and unsure . . . more like a reader, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a *Writer*, whom we imagine to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence and unwavering convictions as he coordinates the whole campaign from back at some gleaming abstract Olympian HQ. So decide. (160)

With this section the narrator makes explicit that the creator of the piece, the “you,” and the reader whose emotional connection is sought, have become one. In Pop Quiz 9, the battle against metafiction and the battle against solipsism converge, as it moves beyond conversational metafiction and narrator, writer and reader are imaginatively amalgamated.

In David Foster Wallace's “Octet,” metafiction, an intrinsically parodic, ironic and solipsistic literary device, manages to intensify the sentimentality of the emotional message of the text, while simultaneously attenuating the reader's cynical rejection of said sentimentality, thereby granting the reader an imaginative release from solipsism by merging the identities of narrator, reader and writer, muddling the difference between fiction and nonfiction, and pointing out the ineptitude of an ironic stance toward both texts and the world.

### Chapter 3 – *Good Old Neon*

*What exactly do you think you are? The millions and trillions of thoughts, memories, juxtapositions – even crazy ones like this, you’re thinking – that flash through your head and disappear? Some sum or remainder of these? Your history?*

-- “*Good Old Neon*”

Whereas “Octet” focused primarily on exposing the flaws of the postmodern ironic aesthetic and is a type of parody of metafiction, in “Good Old Neon,” from the collection *Oblivion*, Wallace explores the more profound predicaments metafiction lays bare; the paradoxical relationships between honesty and language and between thoughts and reality. The story is less overtly metafictional than “Octet,” and is – with perhaps the exception of the final pages – narrated autodiegetically by someone who declares, in the very first sentence of the story: “My whole life I’ve been a fraud” (*GON* 141). What follows is a rendering of this character’s consciousness, including meditations on the limits and possibilities of rendering consciousness with language, as he narrates how he feels depressed because of his inability to escape his fraudulence and just “be himself” (147), and how he ultimately commits suicide.

The consequence of the rejection of metaphysics that underlies postmodern philosophy – reaching back to Nietzsche – is the absence of anything beyond the level of projection and interpretation. By discarding metaphysics, the belief in a metaphysical “subject” or “inner self” that is, in some way, the *essence* of a human being becomes untenable, let alone the possibility of imbuing the outside world with any meaning. This is also why irony is so successful as a cultural norm within the postmodern paradigm; since irony itself does not *mean* at all, it only *doesn’t-mean*, it is the perfect language for nihilism, the philosophy that nothing has meaning. The protagonist of Wallace’s “Good Old Neon”



personifies this metaphysical void: throughout the story, he describes how he is “a fraud” (141) and how he is afraid that he “actually seem[s] to have no true inner self” (160).

The admittance of his fraudulence in the first sentence is immediately the first metafictional aspect of *GON*: In this case, of course, it is true that this character is a *fraud*: he is fictional. He has no “inner self” because he exists only as a construct on the pages between the covers of the collection *Oblivion*. It is likewise a metafictional nod to the protagonist’s lack of a “self” that so much of the narrative takes place in the office of Dr. Gustafson, his psychiatrist, since psychoanalysis departs from the belief in a *psyche*, an underlying unified personality that the individual possesses. However, the protagonist of *GON* insists that nothing can attenuate his feeling that all there is inside him is an “inner emptiness” and that he is a “basically empty, insecure person whose whole life involved trying to impress people and manipulate their view of [him] in order to compensate for the inner emptiness” (154). Then he mentions: “It’s not as if this is an incredibly rare or obscure type of personality, after all” (154). Like all fictional characters, he exists only within the utterances of the text, but the fleshing out of this character into something recognizable at a very intimate level by having a fictional character repeatedly and complexly questioning his own honesty, fraudulence and possession of an “inner self,” has, similarly to the intimacy reached in “Octet,” the effect on the reader that the nature and the existence of the *reader’s* “inner self” is pulled into question, as well as the relationship of this “self” to language (160).

Throughout the 40 pages of the story, we are presented with the written-down rendering of the consciousness of the hyper-self-conscious protagonist. The question that arises out of rendering consciousness with text, which is also addressed explicitly in the story itself, is whether a distinction can be made between language and consciousness. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein argues that consciousness is bound by language, and since we can never achieve anything more than pictorial representations of an outside reality, the only

thing we can know to exist is ourselves. However, in Wittgenstein's second major work, the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*, he sees the fallacy in his earlier<sup>9</sup> conclusion that language's lack of a connection to its external referents leads to solipsism: There is no such thing as a *private* language. A large part of the *Investigations* is spent making the point that the existence of language depends on the existence of a reference point *outside* the speaker. He compares the notion of a private language to the act of buying various copies of the same newspaper to verify "that what it said was true" (265), or invites the reader to "Imagine someone saying, 'But I know how tall I am!' and laying his hand on top of his head to indicate it!" (279). Therefore, even if humanity is, essentially, separated from the outside world and we all exist within the confinements of language, "we're at least all in here together" (McCaffery 143). Language may not connect to an outside reality, but it does – and *must* – connect to other speakers.

This is also represented in the way language is used in the two works by Wittgenstein: The earlier *Tractatus* uses short "X = Y"-type logical aphorisms, building further upon each conclusion. It argues that language creates pictures of reality, so that the meaning of a word is its referent in the outside world, and in the *Tractatus* language is used as such. The *Investigations*, on the other hand, is presented as dialogues, *conversations*, in which he portrays several different types of language-games and the various ways in which language is used, to argue the opposite assumption: "the meaning of a word is its *use* in the language" (43), out of which follows that *meaning* is something that is not inherent in the words or propositions themselves, but comes into existence during the exchange between speakers. This new definition of language also shows a more pragmatic model of truth; since we have

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<sup>9</sup> He even jokingly refers to his younger self not as "I" but as "the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*" (23)\*, to emphasize how he wishes to distance himself from the assumptions of his earlier work.

\* As with the references to the *Tractatus* before, these are the numbers of the aphorisms, not page numbers.

no way of metaphysically checking what we think against how it is in “reality,” the only level of truth we can attain lies in what *works*.

The central question of *GON*, posed even more overtly than in most of Wallace’s other fiction, is the attainability of an interpersonal connection, an escape from solipsistic loneliness: If our vast, complex and interconnected personal consciousness is “as though inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another,” to be able to “open the door and be in anyone else’s room in all your own multiform forms and ideas and facets” (*GON* 178), is what Neal<sup>10</sup> desires and what he feels his fraudulence prevents. However, honesty is only the first hurdle, complicated by the hip cynicism of the postmodern, media-savvy society:

I was a fair-haired boy and on the fast track but wasn’t happy at all, whatever *happy* means, but of course I didn’t say this to anybody because it was such a cliché – ‘Tears of a Clown,’ ‘Richard Cory,’ etc. – and the circle of people who seemed important to me seemed much more dry, oblique and contemptuous of clichés than that, and so of course I spent all my time trying to get them to think I was dry and jaded as well. (142)

And by the oversaturation of media-images that permeates the postmodern self-consciousness, as depicted in his description of his thoughts while writing his suicide note to his sister as a scene of someone writing “a heartfelt note on his last afternoon alive, the blondwood table’s surface trembling with sunlight and the man’s hand steady:”

Part of me sort of hovering above and just to the left of myself, evaluating the scene, and thinking what a fine and genuine-seeming performance in a drama it would make if only we all had not already been subject to countless scenes

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<sup>10</sup> The narrator of *GON* is called “Neal” (hence, partially, the nickname “Neon”), though this is mentioned very briefly and in an offhand way, with the narrator even distancing himself from the name by mentioning his adoption: “‘But if you’re constitutionally false and manipulative and unable to be honest about who you really are, Neal’ (Neal being my given name, it was on my birth certificate when I got adopted)” (153).

just like it in dramas. . . which is somewhat paradoxical when you consider – as I did, sitting there at the breakfast nook – that the reason scenes like this will seem stale or manipulative to an audience is that we’ve already seen so many of them in dramas, and yet the reason we’ve seen so many of them in dramas is that the scenes really are dramatic and compelling and let people communicate very deep, complicated emotional realities that are almost impossible to articulate in any other way. (176)

His tendency to self-consciously regard himself does not only alienate him from other people, but also prevents him from experiencing his life *first-hand*:

I remember being down in the rec room in Angela Mead’s basement on the couch and having her let me get my hand up under her blouse and not even really feeling the soft aliveness or whatever of her breast because all I was doing was thinking, ‘Now I’m the guy that Mead let get to second with her.’ (141)

As in “Octet,” *GON*’s narrator frequently makes explicit his difficulty with putting what he wants to say into words: “I’m aware that it’s clumsy to put it all this way” (150), which in an autodiegetic narration has the metafictional effect that the self-consciousness of the character and the self-consciousness of the text coalesce. However, unlike *Octet*’s narrator, Neal’s struggle with language does not just arise from a fear of coming across “pathetic and desperate” (“Octet” 154), but from the belief in and fear of an unbridgeable distance between minds, caused by the absence of a metaphysical “subject” underlying the person – the “inner emptiness” (154), by the barrier that self-awareness puts between experience and awareness, and by the problematic relationship between thought, time and language:

You know as well as I do how fast thoughts and associations can fly through your head . . . Many of the most important impressions and thoughts in a person's life are the ones that flash through your head so fast that *fast* isn't even the right word, they seem totally different from or outside of the regular sequential clock time we all live by, and they have so little relation to the sort of linear, one-word-after-another-word English we all communicate with each other with that it could easily take a whole lifetime just to spell out the contents of one split-second's flash of thoughts and connections, etc. – and yet we all seem to go around trying to use English (or whatever language our native country happens to use, it goes without saying) to try to convey to other people what we're thinking and to find out what they're thinking, when in fact deep down everybody knows it's a charade and they're just going through the motions. What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant. (151)

The different barriers that the narrator in *GON* tries to overcome in his yearning for connection converge in the story's climax. Throughout the story, little hints are dropped that the reader is hearing the narrative whilst sitting in a car with the narrator: “you're wondering why we're sitting here in this car using words and taking up your increasingly precious time” (152) and “the abutments themselves are just off the road and about as wide as this car” (177), with the narrator also commenting that the way he died was in a car crash: “I planned to drive my car at speeds sufficient to displace the whole front end and impale me on the steering wheel and instantly kill me” (176). Also, planted so early on that by the end it is forgotten by all but the most attentive reader is:

It doesn't really matter what you think about me, because despite appearances this isn't even really about me. All I'm trying to do is sketch out one little part of what it was like before I died and why I at least thought I did it, so that you'll have at least some idea of why what happened afterward happened and why it had the impact it did on who this is really about. (152)

The climax of *GON* consists not of a plot point, but of a dizzying series of shifts in time and perspective. The first shift is effected when the narrator says: "Meaning what it's like to die, what happens. Right? This is what everyone wants to know. And you do, trust me. Whether you decide to go through with it or not, whether I somehow talk you out of it the way you think I'm going to try to do or not" (178), thereby melding and confusing, much like in "Octet," the identities of reader, addressee and narrator. You as a reader are not only in the car with Neal, you *are* Neal, and his ruminations have now become yours:

The truth is you already know what it's like. You already know the difference between the size and speed of everything that flashes through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know. As though inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes.  
(178)

The narrator then exposes the way in which the problem of "squeezing" your inner consciousness through the "tiny keyhole" of language and outward appearance isn't fraudulence, but *freedom*:

And you think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction anyone else ever sees? Of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course

you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock. But at the same time it's why it feels so good to break down and cry in front of others, or to laugh, or speak in tongues, or chant in Bengali - it's not English anymore, it's not getting squeezed through any hole. (179)

The story then culminates in a double shift of temporal perspective as the narrative splits off between a footnote and the main text, the footnote ending earlier (spatially, in the material book's construction) than the main text, but containing the words "THE END" (179). The footnote is an interpolation on a paradox on the nature of time: "How are you supposed to measure the rate at which time moves? One second per second? It makes no sense" (179). Earlier on in the story, the narrator had already commented about time and dying:

The internal head-speed or whatever of these ideas, memories, realizations, emotions and so on is even faster, by the way – exponentially faster, unimaginably faster – when you're dying, meaning during that vanishingly tiny nanosecond between when you technically die and when the next thing happens, so that in reality the cliché about people's whole life flashing before their eyes as they're dying isn't all that far off – although the *whole life* here isn't really . . . a discrete, chronological series of moments that they add up and call their lifetime. It's not really like that. The best way I can think of to try to say it is that it all happens at once, but that *at once* doesn't really mean a finite moment of sequential time the way we think of time while we're alive. (152)

This section ends on page 154 with a metafictional question addressed to the reader: "How much time would you even say has passed, so far?" This question invites the reader to consider the complex relationship between time and texts. Then, near the very ending, he

suggests an answer for it: “What if no time has passed at all?\*” (179) This suggestion contains the footnote that constitutes one of the story’s two endings, where the narrator expands on the relationship between time and thoughts near the moment of death:

What if this is all unfolding in the one flash you call the present [and that] this *now* is infinite and never really passes in the way your mind is supposedly wired to understand *pass*, so that not only your whole life but every single humanly conceivable way to describe and account for that life has time to flash like neon . . . through your mind all at once in the literally immeasurable instant between impact and death, just as you start forward to meet the wheel at a rate no belt ever made could restrain. – THE END. (179)

This would suggest that the whole narrative – all 40 pages of it – takes place within the “exponentially faster” “head-speed” (152) of the protagonist in the “literally immeasurable” instant before his death (179).

This perspective-shift also connects to Neal’s earlier description of “what it’s like to die” (178) as being outside sequential time, like consciousness. The underlying metafictional message is of course that *texts* exist outside time. The book that contains the story of “Good Old Neon,” *Oblivion*, is there (many copies of it even), and all its words are all there at once, and in the case of a text “*at once* doesn’t really mean a finite moment of sequential time the way we think of time while we’re alive” (151). This is why “no time has passed at all” (179), and why Neal is narrating the story from outside time, after his death: Neal exists only in the pages of the text, but the text is no longer being written, it is finished. Both when it was being written as when it is read again, the text is put into personal, time-bound language, and we see “how clumsy and laborious it seems to be to convey even the smallest thing” (153), but at the same time language is “all we have to try to understand it and try to form anything larger or more meaningful and true with anybody else” (151). Since the book is published and the



text is finished and closed off, the limit of Neal's consciousness has been reached at a point where all of his consciousness is *there* at once, regardless of its "one-word-after-another-word"-sequentiality (151), between the covers of *Oblivion*.

The main text continues after the footnote containing "THE END" (179), however, and gives the story its final and most radical shift in perspective:

The reality is that dying isn't bad, but it takes forever. And that forever is no time at all. I know that sounds like a contradiction, or maybe just wordplay. What it really is, it turns out, is a matter of perspective. The big picture, as they say, in which the fact is that this whole seemingly endless back-and-forth between us has come and gone and come again in the very same instant that Fern stirs a boiling pot for dinner, and your stepfather packs some pipe tobacco . . . and David Wallace blinks in the midst of idly scanning class photos from his 1980 Aurora West H.S. yearbook and seeing my photo and trying, through the tiny little keyhole of himself, to imagine what all must have happened to lead up to my death in the fiery single-car accident he'd read about in 1991 . . . In other words David Wallace trying, if only in the second his lids are down, to somehow reconcile what this luminous guy had seemed like from the outside with whatever on the interior must have driven him to kill himself in such a dramatic and doubtlessly painful way. (181)

This metafictional twist finally reveals "who [the story] is really about" (152), and exposes the 40-page narrative of "Good Old Neon" as the "spell[ing] out [of] the contents of one split-second's flash of thoughts and connections" (151) of "David Wallace" (181). The story ends by connecting Neal's hyper-self-conscious way of thinking with David Wallace's, by showing how the whole narrative was a conscious exercise in not allowing self-consciousness

to paralyze the effort “to try to form anything larger or more meaningful and true with anybody else” (151):

With David Wallace also fully aware that the cliché that you can’t ever truly know what’s going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid and yet at the same time trying very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt or sending the whole line of thought into the sort of inbent spiral that keeps you from ever getting anywhere . . . the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him commanding that other part to be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, ‘Not another word.’ (181)

In this last sentence, we see “David Wallace” battling the same problems that Neal and the narrator (you) of “Octet” were up against: the knowledge that clichés are “hoary and insipid,” and how the awareness of that can “[mock] the attempt and [send] the whole line of thought into the sort of inbent spiral that keeps you from ever getting anywhere.” However, this particular cliché, “that you can’t ever truly know what’s going on inside somebody else,” is what fiction has always been about: “Imaginative access to other selves” (McCaffery 127). In *GON*, Wallace has distilled from metafiction purely its quality of intensification of the personal perspective by including the writer in the narrative, without its mocking irony or recursive self-awareness, using metafiction to make the writing *more*, not less, like “an act of communication between one human being and another” (*ASFT* 134).

In his interview with Larry McCaffery, David Foster Wallace said: “Fiction is about what it is to be a fucking *human being*” (131). The question of what it is to be a human being became a very nihilistic one when the postmodernist philosophical abandonment of metaphysics left a void where first there was a “subject” inside everyone. “Good Old Neon” and “Octet” show that Wallace’s comment is not to be interpreted merely as “fiction [should comment on] what it is to be a human being,” but that the only tool humans have available to

them to think about who they are and who other people are and to create something and imbue meaning into the human condition is *the narrative*.

Like *GON*'s Neal, we are all both fraudulent and fictional, manipulating that part of ourselves we push "through the keyhole" (*GON* 178) and constantly creating narratives about everything around us and inside us in order to make sense of it and function in quotidian life. Neal's demise is due to his inability to believe in the fictions he creates or is presented with, and unlike with Gately, the performance of rituals of belief – cf. the effects of Neal's meditation course (*GON* 160) v. Gately's AA (*IJ* 350) – did not just *work* for him to be able to function normally. Fiction, however, *does* work in filling the "inner emptiness" (*GON* 154), by showing how language can jump the chasm between minds, since meaning arises from linguistic interaction. By confronting the issue of the fictional status of human beings within a fictional story itself, David Foster Wallace gives the reader with "Good Old Neon," as with all his best work, a relief from solipsistic loneliness that is not about forgetting or ignoring undesirable truths about the human condition, but about transcending them.

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