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Cliché, Irony and the Necessity of Meaning in *Endgame* and *Infinite Jest*

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With reference to the work of the ordinary language philosopher Stanley Cavell, this essay argues that David Foster Wallace's 1996 novel Infinite Jest deploys cliché to expose the workings of ironic language in a way that is complementary to a similar exposition in Samuel Beckett's 1957 play Endgame.

In his essay “Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett’s *Endgame*” the ordinary language philosopher Stanley Cavell begins by acknowledging an opinion that has become nearly universal amongst critics of Samuel Beckett: that Beckett’s work depicts a “meaningless universe” and that “language in his plays ‘serves to express the breakdown, the disintegration of language’” (115). The thrust of Cavell’s argument will oppose this commonplace: “The discovery of *Endgame*, both in topic and technique, is not the failure of meaning (if that means the lack of meaning) but its total, even totalitarian, success—our inability *not* to mean what we are given to mean” (“Ending” 117). In what follows I claim that the American writer David Foster Wallace’s magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996) presents the contemporary American condition as precisely this inability not to mean what we are given to mean, but offers in one strand the prospect of an escape from this condition—a prospect that depends crucially on Wallace’s deployment of cliché, and an escape that takes the form of an exception that proves Cavell’s rule.

Ordinary language philosophy developed in response to a philosophical movement often labelled logical positivism, which characteristically considered language to be a system of propositions about the world that must be either true, false, or nonsense. Ordinary language philosophy holds that everyday users of language make a great many utterances that do not fit any of these three categories. Cavell uses the example of the question: “Would you like to use my scooter?” In ordinary circumstances, he claims, this would not be understood as an enquiry into “your” state of mind but rather as an *implication* that he is offering the scooter’s

loan. Language is full of such implications, Cavell suggests, whose comprehension depends on a native/fluent speaker's expertise in a vast, complex, and mutable linguistic context ("Ending" 123). That particular expertise of a linguistic context differs amongst different fluent speakers is what actuates, for Cavell, the possibility of miscommunication, and the possibility of irony.

I place Wallace's work in this context because it has become famous as an indictment of the irony-pervaded society, an indictment that I suggest should be understood as a critique of a state of affairs in which individuals are unable not to mean what they are given to mean.ⁱ The force of this formulation resides in two aspects of its unusual syntax: first, the passiveness of the latter half of the phrase—"what they are given to mean"—suggests the inescapably public character of the process of meaning production. That meaning "is given" implies that no single individual subject—speaker or addressee—determines the meaning of an utterance. There is no guarantee that a speaker's remarks will come to have the meaning she intended; for Wallace and Cavell language's existence as a set of social agreements or conventions means that a speaker has no special authority over the meaning her words come to assume. In this way—to anticipate a character from a Wallace story who will return to the discussion below—a person may say, "Hang up the phone just as soon as you're tired of talking to me," and be given to mean, "Please reassure me that you're still interested in this conversation because if you hang up the phone I will be deeply hurt." Second, the negative construction expresses that this state of affairs is intensely unsatisfactory. Instead of stating the thought positively—"individuals *must* mean what they are given to mean"—the double negative suggests an endeavour thwarted, a condition in which we try very hard to maintain control over our meaning—try very hard not to mean what we are given to mean—but are defeated every time by language's intrinsically unstable character.ⁱⁱ According to Wallace this intrinsic character has become particularly pronounced in, and has had especially deleterious moral and social consequences for, the United States under late capitalism. Critics have noted the extent to which Wallace has subjected these consequences to fictional critique; this essay examines one instance in Wallace's fiction in which this critique operates through *negation*. In this instance Wallace asks: how would the world have to change in order for a condition of pervasive irony *not* to be the case? I suggest he answers this question by depicting a linguistic

community in which individuals do not mean what they are given to mean because they have renounced the privilege of being able to mean at all, a depiction that depends pivotally on Wallace's sustained deployment of cliché.

Cavell claims that an (ultimately futile) attempt to “undo” meaning or subvert ordinary language lies underneath the language of *Endgame*, and that this attempt is especially palpable in those lines whose effect is achieved through the subversion of the expected meaning of a clichéd use of language. He offers the following lines as one example: “Do you believe in the life to come?” asks Clov. “Mine was always that,” Hamm replies. Here Hamm makes a joke, argues Cavell, “that momentarily disperses ‘belief’ in the cliché ‘life to come’” (“Ending” 121; above *Endgame* quotations *ibid.*). Elizabeth Barry has made a similar case regarding Beckett's use of cliché, claiming that his practice of literalising figurative language awakens dead or hackneyed “images and ideas in familiar figures of speech” (50). An instance of such enlivening occurs in the following passage:

HAMM: That old doctor, he's dead naturally?

CLOV: He wasn't old.

HAMM: But he's dead?

CLOV: Naturally. (Pause) *You ask me that?* (Beckett 24-25).

Largely a conversation between the blind and paralysed Hamm and his adopted-son-cum-servant Clov set in a denuded, perhaps post-apocalyptic environment, *Endgame* presents a world in which, according to Clov, “there's no more nature” (Beckett 11). Taken together with the above utterances this statement produces a complex ambiguity. “Dead naturally” might seem to mean “dead of natural causes,” but a world in which there's no more nature would presumably be devoid of natural causes as well. This too is not Clov's objection: he rather points to Hamm's mistake about the doctor's age, which seems also relevant to a question of natural causes—in many cases the idea of “natural death” would plausibly have something to do with death in old age. Clov's final “naturally” thus becomes a site of paradox: with his completion of Hamm's interrogative statement “But he's dead” Clov might be given to mean that the doctor has indeed died naturally, though his earlier statement suggests that this would no longer be possible in the world of the play. “Naturally” might also be given to mean, as a sentence adverb, “obviously” or “of course.” In most contexts a fluent English speaker would interpret the response

“Naturally” to the question “But he’s dead?” in this last sentence-adverbial sense without giving it a second thought, but the play’s destabilising of language and concepts relating to nature and the natural ensures that Clov’s seemingly straightforward one-word answer fans out into an array of interpretive possibilities.

In the plot strand of *Infinite Jest* that I discuss here Wallace takes cliché and familiar language in the opposite direction. Instead of showing how meaning can proliferate, he asks what kinds of worldly conditions would have to obtain for meaning to remain uniform—to remain controllable and just about completely apprehensible. Cliché would seem an intuitively appropriate staging ground for such an enquiry as the language form most resistant to polysemy; it is just this resistance that makes Beckett’s project of animation possible. Barry’s work sets out a double-stranded understanding of cliché that supports such a view: one strand refers to a linguistic formulation, “a figure of speech felt to be repeated to the point where the original image has ceased to be striking,” while the other picks out a habit of thought, a kind of “lowest common denominator” of ideas that “falls foul of ideas of taste, even today, by virtue of being deemed to belong to everyone” (3). Most interesting here is the connection between linguistic dullness and commonality, a suggestion that the deadness of clichéd language produced a univocal meaning accessible to all. This is the connection Wallace exploits in his imagining of a world characterised by—instead of a condition of pervasive irony—an opposing condition of pervasive sincerity.

Sincerity/irony is one of a great many oppositions that critics regularly detect in Wallace’s fiction. There exists a more or less universal scholarly perception of Wallace’s work as an integration of elements that would be normally understood as antithetical or contradictory. One critic, for example, describes the landscape of Wallace’s fiction as a space “where the flattened postmodern vistas familiar from the works of, say, Don DeLillo are crossed with a more traditional investment in human emotion and sentiment” (Giles 330). Other opinions show a similarly doubled consciousness in the critical formulae they reach for time and again: “[L]abyrinthine” and “of Pynchonesque complexity” coexists with “tender and comic” (Boswell 117); *Infinite Jest* is “structurally forbidding” with a “shattered chronology” and a “fractal surface” but also includes a “directness,” an “effort to speak openly about things so obvious and so embarrassing that most of us, most of the time, just ignore them” narrated in an “eager voice reaching out to touch its knuckles to my being” (Turner);

Wallace's oeuvre is "a virtuoso compendium of tried and true avant-garde techniques," as well as "earnest" and "sensitive" (Scott). While the above oppositions are all particular responses to different dimensions of Wallace's fiction in a sense they are all versions of each other; all reflect distinctions between thought and feeling, intellectual and emotional apprehension, virtuosity and authenticity.

There are a number of reasons Wallace might seem to be the absolutely last writer to be interested in cliché, an intuition that seems especially plain in the context of Barry's definitional splitting of cliché into the conceptual and the verbal. Taking the conceptual sense first, Wallace's credentials as a thinker surpass those of most contemporary fiction writers: as an undergraduate he seemed to be heading towards a promising career as an academic philosopher; although he never graduated he was enrolled as a PhD student in philosophy at Harvard for a time and interest and expertise in philosophy and high theory continued to inform both his fiction and nonfiction until his death.ⁱⁱⁱ This is emphatically not to say that all philosophers are by definition incapable of conceptual cliché; my suggestion that Wallace's philosophical training might connect with an avoidance of "the lowest common denominator of thought" rather rests on testimonies of Wallace's remarkable philosophical ability from qualified judges,^{iv} as well as the relatively rare combination of this training with the fiction writer's perspective.

Turning second to verbal cliché, there exists a substantial perception that with his mature style Wallace managed to forge something genuinely new to a degree that few if any other late-twentieth/early-twenty-first century writers in English have matched. In an essay that takes into account the body of Wallace scholarship as well as reviews from critics and Amazon customers alike, Ed Finn identifies a wide-ranging impression that "Wallace is *different*: unlike contemporaries such as Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, Jonathan Lethem, or Michael Chabon, Wallace employs a style wildly divergent from that of anyone else on the literary scene [...] this uniqueness resulted in an oeuvre with a deep interiority to it, a cluster of texts that beckon readers almost invariably to read more Wallace, more of the "literary equivalent of cocaine" that they simply could not find anywhere else" (152). Surely the pursuit of such a style—a style with the potential to rivet and thrill narcotically, to follow Finn's quotation—would be antithetical to the associations of lifelessness and habit firmly entrenched in the concept of cliché?

Infinite Jest, Wallace's 1,000+ page magnum opus, has three distinct major plot strands; the one that speaks most directly to the question of cliché describes the experience of a number of characters living at Ennet House, a centre for recovering drug addicts whose aim is to rehabilitate its residents to become full participants in society. A condition of residence in the house is regular attendance at Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings, and the residents soon discover that AA discourse consists almost entirely of clichés. Some residents find this especially difficult to deal with:

I used sometimes to think. I used to think in long compound sentences with subordinate clauses and even the odd polysyllable. Now I find I needn't. Now I live by the dictates of macramé samplers ordered from the back-page ad of an old *Reader's Digest* or *Saturday Evening Post*. Easy does it. Remember, try to remember. But for the grace of capital-g God. Turn it over. Terse, hard-boiled. Monosyllabic [...] I walk around with my arms out straight in front of me and recite these clichés. No inflection necessary. (*Infinite* 271)

These are the words of Geoffrey Day, a former teacher of “something horseshit sounding like social historicity or historical sociality at some jr. College” who has just arrived at Ennet House fresh from a particularly unpleasant detox (*Infinite* 272). While a reasonable number of Ennet House residents formerly held jobs in the knowledge economy, residents' more typical former occupations include burglar, “boiler-room bunko man,” prostitute, truck driver, and drug dealer. It is significant that this particular objection to the cliché comes from the bourgeois Day, who cannot abide the possibility of living by the same words as everybody else. He reads lack of inflection as a sign of the absence of animating individual intelligence behind the words; not only are the words identical, various speakers utter these clichés with identical stress as well, obviating the possibility of injecting some measure of individuality into the cliché's performance through, say, a declamatory accent or a sceptical upward lilt. The uniformity of pronunciation echoes Barry's emphasis on the “commonness” of cliché—here both literally common, in that it is the same for all, and pejoratively common as experienced by Day, who takes immersion into a discourse of cliché to be a denial of the distinguishing faculty of taste he feels himself to possess. His effort at irony is an attempt to reclaim a language with which he can

express himself as an individual, to find a second meaning he can call his own in the univocality of the AA discourse.

But Day's efforts at irony are doomed to failure. The purpose of the rest of this paper will be to suggest that the unalterability of this doom is its crucial point: Wallace's achievement in the Ennet House sections of the novel is to create a speech context that inverts his sense of the usual contemporary state of affairs according to which sincerity is untenable because it is so easily ironically undermined. To make this case I need to set out Wallace's sense of this contemporary state of affairs in more detail.

In "E Unibus Pluram", the essay on television, irony, and contemporary fiction frequently taken to be his mission statement, Wallace's major argument is that "irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule [...] are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. Culture" (49). Critics often use the compound noun "hip irony" to pick out what Wallace means by "irony" with greater precision; frequently the meaning he intends with the term is not so different from "jadedness" or "cynicism." But such an account risks understanding the irony Wallace identifies as merely a cultural attitude that many contemporary Americans happen to hold. This understanding is not incorrect, but Wallace's most stimulating ideas on the subject are more nuanced and fundamental apprehensions of irony as a mechanism at the heart of language and cognition. His 1998 short story "The Depressed Person" is perhaps the clearest illustration of this mechanism.

Its protagonist is the never-named "depressed person" of the title, whose desperate attempts at sincere human connection are invariably incapacitated by her constant consciousness that she may not mean what she says. To take one example amongst a great many: When on the phone with various friends the depressed person is aware that for her friends speaking to a depressed person could well be disagreeable, and she implores them to let her know the second they become "bored or frustrated or repelled" ("Depressed" 44). The depressed person, however, realises that her friends might easily take these implorings as emotional manipulations whose ostensibly transparent good faith and sincerity will make it impossible for them to end the call, and so she assures her friends that she is conscious that her implorings might come across in this manipulative way and feels compelled to apologise for the possibility. This way regress lies: "Her apologies for burdening

these friends [...] were elaborate, involved, vociferous, baroque, mercilessly self-critical, and very nearly constant” (“Depressed” 58). The depressed person’s therapist then imputes a new meaning to her process of protracted apology, suggesting that it is in fact a staving off of any conversation that could require meaningful confrontation of the sources of the depressed person’s emotional trauma (“Depressed” 49), a possibility that the depressed person can then in turn factor into her protracted apologies. The depressed person is a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the irony-suffused society, a pathological picture of the possibilities of polysemantic language. Paralysed by consciousness of the plurality of what she may be given to mean, “The Depressed Person” shows a state of affairs in which sincerity is powerless against inescapable irony, and a sincere utterance is just more grist for the irony mill.

The Ennet House sections of *Infinite Jest* switch the terms of this equation: “hip irony” takes the place of sincerity as the taboo register; sincerity—in its extreme form cliché—becomes the pervasive condition. The switch begins to become clear in the above example of Geoffrey Day, where there is no possibility that the reader will take Day’s jaded pretensions to distinction of taste seriously; whatever grounds Day might have for grouching about the deadness of clichéd AA language his situation as an alcoholic fresh out of detox ensures that any utterances of this type must have the ring of prevarication or denial. The completeness with which this context determines interpretation is what is most fascinating about Ennet House as a setting: it dramatises not only the absence of irony but the absence of irony’s very possibility.

This is to say that in Ennet House irony becomes grist for the sincerity mill in precisely the same way that sincerity is grist for the irony mill in “The Depressed Person.” The remembered experiences of Don Gately, former drug addict, former burglar, and protagonist of the Ennet House sections, best illustrate this idea. Gately, now a staff member at the recovery centre, has the particular gift of conveying “his own experience about at first hating AA to new House residents who hate AA” (*Infinite* 352). Gately goes on to describe how, in the devastating early days of recovery, forced to sit through the nauseating platitudes of daily meetings at the White Flag AA Group, he began to speak publicly about how sickening he found the entire AA experience in the hope that the group would expel him and give him an excuse to stop coming:

. . . and but so in the meetings the poison would leap and spurt from him, and [...] he found out all that these veteran White Flaggers would do as a Group when he like vocally wished them harm was nod furiously in empathetic Identification and shout with maddening cheer “Keep Coming!” and one or two Flaggers with medium amounts of sober time would come up to him after the meeting and say how it was so good to hear him share and holy *mackerel* could they ever Identify with the deeply honest feeling he’d shared and how he’d done them the service of giving them the gift of a real “Remember-When”-type experience because they could now remember feeling just exactly the same way as Gately, when they first Came In, only they confess not then having the spine to honestly share it with the Group, and so in a bizarre and improbable twist they’d have Gately ending up standing there feeling like some sort of AA hero [...] (*Infinite* 353).

This passage, written in a free-indirect style tightly focalised to Gately’s consciousness, uses capitalisation to denote AA cliché; the semantic thrust of this device is to suggest the extent to which AA terminology has rooted itself in Gately’s way of thinking and to demonstrate the fluency Gately has acquired in AA’s specific language as he reconstructs this memory in the novel’s present. It shows the jarring *difference* that the sameness of such language produces, the extent to which clichéd phrases would begin to announce themselves as belonging to a special class of shared speech acts to an individual newly subjected to a daily program of these utterances. These emphases represent formally the ease with which clichéd AA discourse assimilates Gately’s anti-cliché rants in exactly the same way that Wallace understands ironic discourse to subvert and consume declarations of sincerity. For him, “All U.S. irony is based on an implicit ‘I don’t really mean what I’m saying’” (“E Unibus Pluram” 67). Gately’s audience, in contrast, values his speech precisely because they detect that he means exactly what he says, and they recognise in his words a meaning they once believed in themselves. In raging against the banality of AA sincerity Gately paradoxically becomes its outstanding exponent; a situation that absolutely demands to be labelled ironic, though it is precisely opposite to “hip irony.” Recall too that this early paradoxical experience allows Gately in the novel’s present to defuse the frustrations of newcomers to Ennet House who find themselves

similarly aggravated by the vapidness of AA-speak, adding another level to this “Depressed Person”-type regress.

Crucially, the irony inversion that characterises the linguistic setting of the Ennet House sections of *Infinite Jest* is a product of very specific conditions. It could not occur under ordinary circumstances. The most important of these conditions is a drastic level of desperation in its residents that engenders a willingness to try anything:

When you get to the jumping-off place at the Finish of your Substance-career you can either take up the Luger or blade and eliminate your own personal map [i.e. commit suicide] [...] or you can get out the very beginning of the Yellow Pages [...] and make a blubbering 0200h. phone call and admit to a gentle grandparentish voice that you’re in trouble, deadly serious trouble, and the voice will try to sooth you into hanging on until a couple hours go by and two pleasantly earnest, weirdly calm guys in conservative attire appear smiling at your door [...] (*Infinite* 348).

The second person narrative voice concedes that the “weirdly calm guys”—AA representatives—could well be exponents of “Unitarian happy horseshit” but asks “you” to consider the possibility that at this juncture Unitarian happy horseshit might not be such a bad alternative to the darkest depths of addiction (*Infinite* 348-349). “Hip irony” has penetrated the consciousness of contemporary life so thoroughly that the only people who will be able to tolerate the perceived triteness of AA discourse are those whose only other choice is death—those people, in other words, in the final stages of their “own personal” endgame. One of the more common clichés of the section is “The Gift of Desperation” (*Infinite* 367); only with sufficient desperation can recovery begin. To take another example, Pat, the director of Ennet House, owns two “hideous white golden retrievers with suppurating scabs and skin afflictions”; when applicants for places at the House arrive for screening interviews, Ennet House staff members—under the director’s instructions—whisper to the applicants that the key to securing admission is befriending the director’s dogs. Readiness to pet the revolting dogs betrays “a level of desperate willingness that Pat says is just about all she goes by, deciding” (*Infinite* 278).

On the level of language, the justification for Ennet House’s requirement for this level of desperation is that its residents must relinquish the ways of speaking

that distinguish them as individuals, which—for Cavell, and for Wallace—entails that they relinquish the possibility of meaning at all. After AA meetings speakers are congratulated with the phrase “Good to hear you”; “They can’t say like ‘Good job’ or ‘You spoke well,’ cause it can’t be anybody’s place here to judge if anybody else did good or bad or whatnot” (*Infinite* 362). It is impossible for Ennet House residents to mean what they are given to mean because they are not *given* to mean *anything*. Language’s inescapably social character entails that “being given to mean” is a social activity, one involving conversation, agreement and disagreement, competing understandings, judgments. Ennet House proscribes (“*it can’t be anybody’s place here*”) exactly this social activity of being given to mean, exactly this clash of linguistic perspectives that produces multivocality. “An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church. Irony-free zone,” the narrator declares soon after. Irony is no different to the doubleness that enables an alcoholic to continue behaving destructively while fully conscious of the destructiveness of his behaviour; Ennet House residents are urged to remember “the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they’d had to construct in order to carry on Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle” (*Infinite* 369). But the establishment of the irony-free zone comes at a price: the elimination of what Cavell, echoing Aristotle, understands to be true conversation, an encounter of discordant world views that offers a possibility of moral progress through the undertaking of each individual to make herself intelligible to the other through language, through a way of speaking that expresses her uniqueness (*Cities* 368). Ennet House cannot tolerate the possibility of irony, and the conditions for the possibility of true conversation and the possibility of irony are the same.

At the end of one of *Infinite Jest*’s major early Ennet House sections, a note of uneasiness creeps into the narrative voice when the narrator considers the way AA manages to maintain the integrity of their irony free zone: “So no whys or wherefores allowed. In other words check your head at the door. Thought it can’t be conventionally enforced, this, Boston AA’s real root axiom, is almost classically authoritarian, maybe even proto-Fascist” (*Infinite* 374). In comparison it is worth recalling the terms of Cavell’s original hypothesis: “The discovery of *Endgame*, both in topic and technique, is not the failure of meaning [...] but its total, even totalitarian, success.” With the Ennet House section Wallace shows that there are

only two viable alternatives to irony's totalitarian domination, both of which are themselves totalitarian: there is AA's radical abdication of the ability to mean, and there is death. The extremity of the problem entails the extremity of the solution. Where Beckett undoes cliché, Wallace intensifies it; where Beckett's critique is positive, Wallace negatively offers an exception that proves the rule, dramatising just how far humans must go in order not to mean what they are given to mean.

ⁱ Benjamin H. Ogden objects to this formulation of Cavell's, alleging that an ordinary language philosopher's use of such a "fuzzy" phrase defeats his enterprise (130). Where Ogden detects fuzziness I notice compression and precision.

ⁱⁱ The classic advocacy of this position is Cavell's master Ludwig Wittgenstein's argument against private language; for Wallace's fairly thorough treatment of the private language argument see FN 32 of his essay "Authority and American Usage" (87-88).

ⁱⁱⁱ For Wallace's experience as a philosophy student at Harvard (and in particular his experience as a student of Cavell) see Max esp. 132-134.

^{iv} For a detailed account of Wallace as a philosopher, the text of his undergraduate senior philosophy thesis, and responses to his work from other philosophers, see Wallace's *Fate, Time and Language*.

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