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Narrative Modeling and Community Organizing
in *The Pale King* and *Infinite Jest*
Andrew Warren

But how to make that? How—for a writer today, even a talented writer today—to get up the guts to even try? There are no formulas or guarantees. There are, however, models.

—DFW, “Joseph Frank’s *Dostoyevsky*” (274)

He’d been studying for the CPA exam for three and a half years. It was like trying to build a model in a high wind. ‘The most important component in organizing a structure for effective study is:’ something. What killed him were the story problems.

—DFW, *The Pale King* (9)

In this essay I explore a number of narrative models as they appear in *The Pale King* and *Infinite Jest*. I look, that is, at places where those novels explicitly or implicitly model how narration works within the discourse of fiction. I limit myself to four: what I call the Contracted Realism Model and the Spontaneous Data Intrusion Model in *Pale King*; the Jargony Argot Model and the Free Indirect Wraith Model in *Infinite Jest*. The list is by no means exhaustive, but each example points towards a different way of constructing community within a novel, what I argue is a central aesthetic and ethical tension in Wallace’s oeuvre. The opening section of each novel ends with an allegory of both reading and narrative: “Read these” (*PK* 4); “So yo then man what’s *your* story?” (*IJ* 17). This modeling of narrative within narrative isn’t mere deconstructive play or postmodern recursion, but gets at the heart of why Wallace writes fiction at all. Further, it is crucial that there exist several competing, overlapping and perhaps incompatible models at work in any given novel; such competition and incompleteness prompts a continual negotiation among the communities posited or contested in the novels.

I. Model#1: Contracted Realism in Pale King

In a working note included at the end of *Pale King* we find what appears to be one of the novel's crucial organizing principles: "Central Deal: Realism, monotony." (PK 546). And yet: "Drinion is actually levitating slightly, which is what happens when he is completely immersed; it's very slight, and no one can see that his bottom is floating slightly above the seat of his chair" (485). And yet: "The truth is that there are two actual, non-hallucinatory ghosts haunting Post 047's wiggle room" (315). And yet: "he, the infant... like any other GM, had cleared its throat in an expectant way in order to get my attention... and, gazing at me fiercely, said—yes, said, in a high and *l*-deficient but unmistakable voice—'Well?'" (393). Or: "An obscure but true piece of paranormal trivia: There is such a thing as a *fact psychic*" (118). And finally: "Harriet Candelaria turns a page. Anand Singh turns a page. Ed Shackleford turns a page. Two clocks, two ghosts, one square acre of hidden mirror. Ken Wax turns a page. Jay Landauer feels absently at his face. Every love story is a ghost story. Ryne Hobratchk turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page..." (312, column 2).

Each of these moments challenges *The Pale King's* Central Deal, albeit in different ways. They also offer up models of reading and narration—again, in different ways. Those models, and their *raison d'être*, will be this article's guiding concern, but let's first cite the note more fully: "Central Deal: Realism, monotony. Plot a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens." In a sense, the explanation for the breaking of the Central Deal is written within it. If nothing is going to happen in *The Pale King*, then there needs to be a series of small readerly compensations: a couple of ghosts; a man levitating; a fact psychic; a talking baby; lyricism.

Realism, which Wallace here equates with a kind of narrative monotony, is both the novel's Central Deal and a Bum Deal, a "set-up." Hence, perhaps, the novel's continually

positing alternative models for reading and narrative. They are perks, benefits that a human author can offer a human reader, a negotiation which mirrors the novel's "Big issue... human examiners or machines" (545). It also reflects one of Wallace's most persistent, if obviously problematic (see Aubry 117-25), formulations of how literature works: "writing is an act of communication between one human being and another" ("Greatly" 144); or, more famously, "fiction is about what it means to be a fucking *human* being" (McCaffery 131). Indeed, it's no accident that the term, *human*, recurs no fewer than twenty times in that celebrated interview. What the "real author, the living human holding the pencil" (*PK* 67) can offer in a fiction like *Pale King* is, in a word, *wiggle room*, "some slack or play in the rules and procedures" (116) of a novel. This contract—the Deal—with the reader, in which the writer tenders a meditation on boredom and attention in exchange for the reader's actual boredom and attention, is therefore asymmetrical from the start, and it is so even if the writer's own boredom exceeds the reader's by a thousandfold.¹ The asymmetry is peculiar for the fact that both the reader and the writer sometimes appear to be giving up more than they are receiving, and this happens because the transaction is necessarily mediated through a vast, seemingly immovable economic and legal apparatus. It's the one discussed in the first "Author Here" section: "right here before us, hidden by virtue of its size" (85). Perhaps another name for the apparatus is "Reality" (or in the Kenyon Speech, "Water"), and any narrative which aims to render the readerly contract transparent must remain attentive to that arbitrating third party.

This is perhaps the most obviously foregrounded model for narration that runs through the novel: The Contracted Realism Model. It's a mode of storytelling that resonates with the novel's overtly political concerns, particularly the rise of the Neo-Liberal myth of

the autonomous individual's right to choose: to pay taxes and participate in civic life; to join a particular community, such as a church or the IRS; to purchase or read a novel. Realism *per se* is perennially difficult to pin down, but in its classical form we might say that it is a mode of representation particularly attendant to the causes and minutiae involved in day-to-day human life. But, of course, no actual realist believes that they could ever produce in art an isomorphic correspondence with reality. Reality as such is simply too large and complex to fit within any given representational form. Take the case of Claude Sylvanshine, *fact psychic*, an example to which we will return in the Sudden Data Intrusion Model of Narration. He "tastes a Hostess cupcake. Knows where it was made; knows who ran the machine that sprayed a light coating of chocolate frosting on top; knows that person's weight, shoe size, bowling average, American Legion career batting average; he knows the dimensions of the room that person is in right now. Overwhelming" (121). The web of causation involved in any particular human event is simply too vast and tangled to represent in full and a process of selection and arrangement becomes necessary. Literary realism is therefore self-consciously structured by a delimited (and delimiting) set of codes and conventions about which the reader is, or should be, aware.

At its core Contracted Realism, as I am calling it, aims to faithfully render reality's fine print legible; to, as it were, enlarge it. That task includes not only directing our attention to the—economic, social, political, legal, &c—interdependence of the contemporary U.S., but also pointing to the tacit contract between novel and reader. In the history of the novel that self-conscious discussion of the readerly contract is nothing new; with the "Bill of Fare" in *Tom Jones* (1749), for example, Fielding early on recognizes the novel as a genre ensnared in (ostensibly liberal) commercial and contractual discourses

(Fielding 31-4). Such recursion in *Pale King* would be, in Mark McGurl's terms, "perfectly routine" (48); that is, simply a depiction of what it means to create and consume art within the context of a system, even if *Pale King* tells us new things about the systems that surround and create us. Contracted Realism is therefore both a mode of constructing communities (between reader and author, reader and other readers, &c) and of rendering the workings of already-present communities explicit (say, AA or the IRS). It is, in other words, a *model*² of community, a topic I discuss at much greater length below.

Consider, in this context, the speech that converts Chris Fogle to the IRS:

"To retain care and scrupulosity about each detail from within the teeming wormball of data and rule and exception and contingency which constitutes real-world accounting—this is heroism... Routine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui—these are the true hero's enemies, and make no mistake, they are fearsome indeed. For they are real' (231).

The emphasis on the "real," "real-world" and "detail" clues us in to the fact that the speech is in a sense allegorical of one of the novel's central goals. At the same time, however, Contracted Realism is keenly aware that "routine, repetition, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence" make for a poor story. This tension over classical realism is registered again in Ch 9's collection of authors: "My specific dream was of becoming an immortally great fiction writer, à la Gaddis or Anderson, Balzac or Perec, &c" (73). Bold experimentalism (Perec, Gaddis) is here ballasted by French and American paragons of realism (Balzac, Anderson). And vice versa.

Hence the novel's aforementioned "compensations": the ghosts; the talking infant; the lyricism; the levitation. I do not believe, however, that these literary compensations are the same thing as mere "entertainment," that charged word in Wallace's oeuvre. Rather, they arise from Contracted Realism's alternate goal of faithfully representing the lived experience of human reality. This includes the notes' stated fact that "bliss—a second-by-second joy at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom" (546). Levitation or lyricism are perhaps indirect techniques or analogies for conveying that human "bliss," a way of putting some space between oneself and the earth. Just as *Pale King* every so often attempts to communicate the incommunicable expanse of external reality, it also is tasked with communicating a boundless internal reality, what in "Good Old Neon" is described as "the millions and trillions of thoughts, memories, juxtapositions—even crazy ones like this, you're thinking—that flash through your head and disappear" ("Good" 178). Such apparent incommunicability would seem to limit the intensity or fullness of the communities we can forge at the same time that it ties us to a more inexplicable one—those who are similarly constrained. It's a central tension in Wallace's oeuvre which, I argue, often expresses itself at the level of narrative technique.

II. Community Organizing and Model#2: Jargony Argot in Infinite Jest

Central to my thinking about Wallace's narrative models has been Hillis Miller's work on the relation between literature and speech acts, particularly as they bear upon how novels seem to form peculiar kinds of communities. In his own thinking Miller draws primarily on Jean-Luc Nancy's *La communauté désœuvrée* (*The Inoperative Community*, perhaps better translated as *The Unworked Community*), and his case study—a puzzling one—is Henry

James's *The Awkward Age* (1902). Miller initially justifies his linking of literature and community via an appeal to J.L. Austin, positing that "the felicity of speech acts depends upon the existence of a viable community" (Miller *Literature* 84). But what's a speech act? In Miller's succinct phrasing, speech acts are examples of language that *act* rather than *describe*; they are performative rather than constative utterances (Miller *Speech* 2-3). In the context of community speech acts—such as the buying or selling of property, the signing or breaking of contracts, getting married or divorced—are only possible because of more or less agreed upon sets of rules or codes. In Austin that set of codes and rules cannot be defined by any singular individual, but must be created by a community of language speakers. Meaning is therefore rooted in actual social usage, an assumption Wallace explicitly acknowledges in "Authority and American Usage": "But as Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* proved in the 1950s, words actually have the meanings they do because of certain rules and verification tests that are imposed on us from outside our own subjectivities, viz., by the community in which we have to get along and communicate with other people" ("Authority" 87). Put perhaps another way, meaning is derived not so much from a singular as from a democratic authority (as in "Authority," 122-4); speech acts work (or don't work) not because *I* say so, but because *they*—the community—say so.

Community, of course, is a necessarily vaguer concept than nation or even state, and yet Miller sharply distinguishes between two, albeit interdependent, notions of it. In the first conceptualization of community, whose origins overlap with those of the Neoliberal Mythos in *Pale King*, individuals are

pre-existing subjectivities. These subjectivities have bound themselves together with other subjectivities for the common good. Their mode of communication with

one another can be called 'intersubjectivity'... Literature within such a community is the imitation, or reflection, or representation of community. It is the construction of cunningly verisimilar miniature models of community. *Bleak House* allows you to carry the whole of Dickens's London in your pocket. Literature is to be valued for its correspondence to a community already there, for its constative value, not for any performance function it might have in constituting communities (88).

While a near-future, genre-defying novel like *Infinite Jest* poses some obvious and immediate problems for this view (which Miller is obviously depicting as naïve or uncritical), it's remarkable how much it can explain, albeit incompletely. Although you can't carry *Infinite Jest* (or *Bleak House*?) in your pocket, it does fairly describe *fin de siècle* American life, at least as it is or has been experienced. Many, for instance, take Hal's addiction to solitude as a description of what they themselves are feeling; and I for one can't drive along the Charles in Boston without mentally—or, if someone's in the car, loudly and fearfully—calling it “The Storrow 500.”

Of course, these two examples are not merely constative; they are also performative, they accomplish something. Let's take a potentially on-the-mark description of Hal's loneliness, say: “Forget so-called peer pressure. It's more like peer-*hunger*. No? We enter a spiritual puberty where we snap to the fact that the great transcendent horror is loneliness, excluded engagement in the self. Once we've hit this age, we will now give or take anything, wear any mask, to fit, be part-of, not be Alone, we young.” (695). This lyric description is formally offset from the paragraphs surrounding it by the inclusive “We... we young.” Suddenly it is not merely Hal or Kate Gompert who's craving Unalone-ness, but us, and the narrative voice, and—we are compelled to postulate—David Foster Wallace (see, e.g., L.

Miller). It's a sort of "community activism" that, in 1997, Wallace tried with palpable urgency to explain to David Lipsky:

there's a certain set of magical stuff that fiction can do for us. There's maybe thirteen things, of which who even knows which ones we can talk about. But one of them has to do with the sense of, the sense of capturing, capturing what the world feels like to us, in the sort of way that I think that a reader can tell "Another sensibility like mine exists." Something else feels this way to someone else. So that the reader feels less lonely (Lipsky 38).

In a deep sense the "We... we young" is redundant; the work of fiction always already assumes a performative aspect and even a simple third-person description of the loneliness would, or would hope to, have the same effect. When we hit the seemingly objective "one of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he's really lonely for" several sentences later we are meant to be drawn in by the same logic as the "we." One part of being not just "American," but "human" as Wallace uses the word, is being susceptible to being drawn in to such communities.

Such failed or felicitous attempts at community building are rife in Wallace's fiction. In *The Pale King* consider, for example, Lane Dean Jr.'s inability to make small talk during his fifteen-minute break at the IRS (126); or the description of the character David Wallace in high school not being "part of any one particular clique but [hanging] out on the fringes of several different groups" (337); or the second of the novel's "2 Broad arcs": "Being individual vs. being part of larger things—paying taxes, being 'lone gun' in IRS vs. team player" (545). This recursive back-and-forth between *The Pale King's* explicit thematic (individual vs. larger collective) and its self-conscious narrative forms is more than

metafictional “titty-pinching.” Rather, it’s a consequence of a larger trend in Wallace’s work that assumes that communities are built and dismantled by shared language. Similarly, it’s far from random that in *Infinite Jest*’s most extended description of loneliness and isolation Wallace models his narrative form—“We... we young”—on his content.

All of this is fairly close to how Miller describes the second conceptualization of community: *la communauté désœuvrée*. Recall that the more typical model of community is one composed of an aggregate of pre-existing subjectivities who have freely chosen to unite. In the second formulation—the “unworked” community—there are not pre-given subjectivities, but what Nancy calls *singularities*. As Miller puts it: “In place of individuals with self-enclosed subjectivities, Nancy puts singularities that are aboriginally *partagés*, shared, sheared, open to an abyssal outside. Singularities are extroverted, exposed to other singularities at the limit point where everything vanishes. Language in such a community becomes literature, writing, not sacred myth. Literature is the expression of the unworking of community” (Miller *Literature* 93). This connection or sharing among the singularities is aboriginal; it happens to them “from the beginning, by way of their shared mortality” (91). This second kind of community is therefore parasitic upon the first. It is in this sense that it is an “unworked” one; or rather, it is continually engaged in “unworking” the first kind of community, reminding the individuals within that community of their mortal limits at the same time that it works to bind them together through that shared mortality.

While we are on the topic of mortality it’s perhaps fair to return to *The Storrow 500*, which is nothing if not a reminder of mortal limits; indeed, it is a brief example of what I’m calling the Jargony Argot Model of Narration. For the characters in the novel “*The Storrow 500*” is not merely descriptive of a harrowing thoroughfare; put in circulation the phrase

also works to unite them. An endnote explains that it is “local argot for Storrow Drive, which runs along the Charles from the Back Bay out to Alewife, with multiple lanes and Escherian signs and On- and Off-ramps within car-lengths of each other and no speed limit and sudden forks and the overall driving experience so forehead-drenching it's in the metro Police Union's contract they don't have to go anywhere near it” (*IJ* 1034 n202). It is both a threat to one's life and something that signals the more general breakdown of community that is, in a sense, the novel's central theme. People speeding along in their cars, typically alone, outside the rule of law, risking their lives to maintain social or personal obligations: to get home or to work on time; to keep up with the rest of the traffic; or, in Gately's case, to secure some time away from his duties at Ennet House—that is, to cordon off some me-time. Cutting between Boston and Cambridge the highway, as it is described in the novel, is both a temporary danger that individuals are pressed to endure and a persistent low-level threat humming in the novel's background. In a sense “The Storrow 500” names not the highway itself but that fear and circumambient hum.

The Storrow 500—the phrase and the thing itself—is not alone in the novel as a reminder of the limits of mortality and of any given community; two far more prominently featured limits are The Great Concavity / Convexity and the *Infinite Jest* tape itself. Those two cases perhaps represent something like external and internal limits of the general state of emergency at play in Y.D.A.U. Boston: caught between the environmental threat of annular waste on one horizon and of one's own impulse to repetitive pleasure on the other, internal horizon. The communities that form in the novel—such as A.A., or E.T.A., or the A.F.R.—are forced to hover between these two limits of and threats to life.

Interestingly, when we first hear about The Storrow 500 it is described in terms of both a cartridge and a distant horizon. Orin, in his room at BU, is compulsively watching looped video of himself punting footballs when we learn that “a cartridge revolving at a digital diskette's 450 rpm sounds a bit like a distant vacuum cleaner. Late-night car-noises and sirens drifted in through the bars from as far away as the Storrow 500” (298). The Storrow 500 is both distant (to the north, like the Concavity) and close (its sound is juxtaposed with the cartridge in the room, which itself sounds like a distant vacuum). It is also, tellingly, a source of the sirens that press through the window's bars. The sirens, the barred windows, The Storrow 500, the looped video, Orin's budding pathologies all register different pitches of the threat that pervades the novel. In this first instance The Storrow 500 is slipped innocuously into the free indirect discourse, and we have to guess at both the joke and referent; unexplained, it is shuffled into the scene's dull, ominous catalogue. It's not until Gately's weekly errand outing several hundred pages later that we are given a full description of what it is: “Basically the Storrow 500 is an urban express route that runs along the bright-blue Chuck all the way along Cambridge's spine” (478). Oddly enough, the novel redundantly defines the term twice there—once in the body of the text and also in a footnote—despite leaving it unexplained in Orin's narrative.

The reader is thus slowly drawn into the novel's language community. We are first given a clue to how the term is used, and then a direct explanation of it, and then it is silently put back into use in the novel's dialog and narrative. It's a tactic employed across many of the novel's “local argots.” By the time The Storrow 500 is invoked for the last time the reader has become part of that community:

Mario's gaze keeps going from Avril to the window behind her... right to the north over lots of different lights is the red rotating tip of the WYYY transmitter, its spin's ring of red reflected in the visible Charles River, the Charles tumid with rain and snowmelt, illumined in patches by headlights on Memorial and the Storrow 500, the river unwinding, swollen and humped, its top a mosaic of oil rainbows and dead branches, gulls asleep or brooding, bobbing, head under wing (768-9).

The lyric pan across the evening comes at the end of the section where Mario asks Avril whether she is sad, a question he has been holding back for a good chunk of the novel. Her answer performs a typically Moms-like maneuver that shifts the burden of emotion back onto her children: "Mario Love-o, are *you* sad? Are you trying to determine whether I've been sensing that you *yourself* are sad?... Though of course the sun would leave my sky if I couldn't assume you'd simply come and tell me you were sad" (768-9). The narrative then zooms out to Mario view of the sunless landscape, out across the hill and down to the river illuminated by the headlights from the Storrow 500. Again, the phrase is lumped into a horizontic collection of low-level risk and isolation punctuated by the description of the brooding birds, "head under wing," simultaneously together and alone. Ugly as it is, The Storrow 500 has become available to the novel's lyric register, which so often acts as a transition between scenes. As in Nancy and Miller, the phrase—and mortal limits more generally—"unworks" pre-given communities (such as family) at the same time that it works to bind together other, more fragile communities.

This slipping between narrative registers is what I am calling the Jargony Argot Model of Narrative.³ Local argot—e.g., *the squeak*, *eating cheese*, *interface*, *eliminating one's own map*, *howling fantods*, or in *Pale King*, *shoe squeezing*, *wiggling*, *titty pinching*—which

starts out as a way of modeling community within the novel becomes a tactic for organizing community outside of the novel. The horizons of the characters' communities and isolation come to be shared by, first, the novel's narrative voice and then, via a complex movement, the reader. Put slightly differently, what first appears to be *constative* language eventually turns *performative*. One could trace, for example, a more involved evolution of *the squeak*, which comes to enter just about every register in the novel—from victim's hearing *the squeak* of the Wheelchair Assassins, to Steeply's pregnant description of the American dream of a "squeak-free porch swing" (423), to Day's essay on the origins of the term *the squeak*, to the painful sequence in which James O. Incadenza and his father try to locate the source of a bed's squeak (491-503). Although there are, of course, "innocent" *squeaks* in the novel, one could track a similar movement of the term between narrative registers: from constative to performative, from description within the novel to literary technique. In *The Pale King* phrases like *wiggling* or *wiggle room* begin as local IRS argot and later come to signal a complex negotiation between writer and reader; reading and writing themselves become kinds of *wiggling*. Perhaps the greatest example of this movement between registers, however, is the phrase *Infinite Jest* itself. Over the course of the novel it moves from naming a film or set of films to naming the novel itself and the "work" of the novel, its literary task. *Jest*, after all, comes from the Latin, *gerere*, "to do;" the novel becomes a gesture, a perpetual performance.

III. Model#3: Spontaneous Data Intrusion in Pale King

It's perhaps now, in 2012, fair to say that Wallace himself, more than anyone else, has structured the critical reception of his work. If Joyce's critics had Eliot's "*Ulysses*, Order and

Myth" (1923) and Gilbert's *Ulysses: A Critical Study* (1930), then Wallace's have had, well, Wallace. Or more specifically, we have 1990's "E Unibus Pluram," some editorial work and reviews, and about a hundred hours of interviews aggregated across a few websites. (For the moment we'll leave aside the perhaps more vexed matter of the meta-commentary *within* the fiction, which is the meat in this essay's sandwich). The non-fiction has provided fairly reliable footholds for those scaling *Infinite Jest* for the first time: "fiction is about what it means to be a fucking *human being*"; "make no mistake: irony tyrannizes us" ("*E Unibus*" 67); "I wanted to do something sad" (Laura Miller); *etcetera*.

As a critic—or more like a reader—the problem, as it's beginning to fall out, is that Wallace's commentary doesn't always add up to a coherent picture, either in itself or in relation to the fiction. This is a good thing—a good thing that's weirdly anticipated in a lot of his actual commentary about fiction. Consider, for example, these two seemingly contradictory comparisons of fiction and nonfiction:

1) I do not know why the comparative ease and pleasure of writing nonfiction always confirms my intuition that fiction is really What I'm Supposed to Do, but it does, and now I'm back here flogging away (in all senses of the word) and feeding my own wastebasket.⁴

2) Writing-wise, fiction is scarier, but nonfiction is harder—because nonfiction's based in reality, and today's felt reality is overwhelmingly, circuit-blowingly huge and complex. Whereas fiction comes out of nothing. Actually, so wait: the truth is that both genres are scary; both feel like they're executed on tightropes, over abysses—it's the abysses that are different. Fiction's abyss is silence, nada. Whereas nonfiction's abyss is Total Noise, the seething static of every particular thing and

experience, and one's total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect, and how, and why, etc ("Deciderization" xiv).⁵

The obvious contradiction here involves the alleged ease or difficulty of writing fiction and nonfiction. What interests me, however, is what these statements—each made in the middle of composing his post-*Jest* "Larger Thing"—bring to bear on *Pale King*.

Let's take a closer look at the aforementioned definition of a *fact psychic*, keeping in mind Wallace's description of nonfiction's abyss of Total Noise:

An obscure but true piece of paranormal trivia: There is such a thing as a *fact psychic*. Sometimes in the literature also known as a data mystic, and the syndrome itself as *RFI* (= *Random-Fact Intuition*). These subjects' sudden flashes of insight or awareness are structurally similar to but usually far more tedious and quotidian than the dramatically relevant foreknowledge we normally conceive as ESP or precognition... They come out of nowhere, are inconvenient and discomfiting like all psychic irruptions. It's just that they're ephemeral, useless, undramatic, distracting. What Cointreau tasted like to someone with a mild head cold on the esplanade of Vienna's state opera house on 2 October 1874... The exact (not estimated) height of Mount Erebus, though not what or where Mount Erebus is (118-19).

And so on. Claude Sylvanshine—a somewhat too obvious play on Claude Shannon, a founder of Information Theory—is afflicted by the, so to speak, disorder: "One reason [his] gaze is always so intent and discomfiting is that he's trying to filter out all sorts of psychically intuited and intrusive facts" (119).

Sylvanshine's curse is an uncanny juxtaposition of fiction's "silence, nada" ("they come out of nowhere") and nonfiction's awareness of the "seething static of every

particular thing and experience.” The difference, of course, is that “Claude Sylvanshine can’t help it” (120); it is imposed on him from the outside. I would like to propose, however, that in the figure of Sylvanshine we come upon a third model of narration: the Spontaneous Data Intrusion Model. In it we are given a character—and, allegorically, an author or narrative voice—exposed to a pure, threatening Outside without order or meaning. Any fact, any utterance, any connection between characters is possible. Ch 15’s narrative voice collects examples of random facts as easily as Sylvanshine himself does, and then does something Sylvanshine cannot: it sorts them into a neatly narrated explication of what it means to be a fact psychic. It is fairly easy to connect the model to Wallace’s quips about the difficulty of writing *Pale King*; that, for instance, he’d have to write “a 5,000 page manuscript and then winnow it down by 90%, the very idea of which makes something in me wither and get really interested in my cuticle, or the angle of the light outside.”⁶ How the model works in the texture of the novel’s sentences, however, is far from straightforward.

As with the local argots in *Infinite Jest*, the SDI’s first come to us unannounced in *Pale King*, as Sylvanshine is on a plane: “Men who cannot bear to wait or stand still forced to stand to stand still all together and wait, men with calfskin Day-Timers and Franklin Quest Time Management certificates... trying to cover the monthly nut, fish thrashing in the nets of their own obligations. Two eventual suicides on this plane, one forever classed as an accident” (18). This last sentence turns out, in light of our eventual knowledge of Sylvanshine’s SDI syndrome, to be a tricky piece of narratology. The sentence’s closing clause, which contradicts the official record, tips us off to the fact that we are hearing an objective truth, perhaps one obtained via an act of narrative omniscience. We might even

fear that one of those suicides is Sylvanshine himself. To the first-time reader the sentence is omniscient third person; to the re-reader the sentence is free indirect style—free indirect style whose origins bizarrely mirror a kind of omniscient narration.

But let us think more carefully about a first reading of the chapter, which should appear to move between seemingly omniscient third-person narration and free indirect style. Take, for example:

The interstate highway below disappeared and then sometimes reappeared at a spot Sylvanshine had to squash his cheek right up against the plastic inner window to see, then as the rain recommenced and he could tell they were beginning descent it reappeared in the window's center, light traffic crawling with a futile pointless pathos you could never sense on the ground. What if it felt this slow to actually drive as it looked from this perspective? It would be like trying to run underwater. The whole ball game was perspective, filtering, the choice of perception's objects (15).

A first reader would pick up on the fact that the passage is written, more or less, in free indirect style: Sylvanshine thinks the traffic looks futile and pointless; *he* asks the question about traffic feeling slow, and he gives the answer (“it would be like trying to run underwater”); he thinks about what we presume to be Dr. Lehl’s advice: “perspective, filtering, the choice of perception’s objects.” These very human-seeming thoughts are also peculiarly juxtaposed with free indirect data—e.g., “Direct material price variance.” (15)—that intrudes on the narrative. We know that this seemingly inhuman language is indeed free and indirect because on the plane Sylvanshine is studying to be a CPA. We should note, too, that the SDI’s are not wholly “inhuman” pieces of data, but relate to humanly defined

concepts, attributes, places; all of the data is, potentially, interesting to someone.⁷ Perhaps the most inhuman aspect of the SDI's is simply their bare existence.

A re-reader wouldn't have to rethink the above passage in terms of the SDI's, but there are a number of jarring, metafictional maneuvers at play in it. The question about how it feels to drive as slowly as it appears from an airplane, for example, is answered in Ch 24, the second "Author Here" section. "David Wallace" begins with a note that "the next salient feature of that day [of his arrival at the IRS] is that traffic along the city's circumambient Self-Storage Parkway was totally horrible," and then proceeds to spend fourteen pages describing that horror in bureaucratic detail (267-81). In Dr. Lehl's schema it is a matter of perspective, specifically narrative perspective, and the failure to properly filter out irrelevant facts. The chapter should strike one as an exercise in self-parody, though perhaps in a different register from the already-discussed "Author's Foreword." It is hard, for example, to imagine Ch 9's David Wallace writing something like "I think you deserve better [reader], and that you're intelligent enough to understand and maybe even applaud when a memoirist has the integrity to admit that he's not some kind of eidetic freak" (257 n3). This note, which comes early in Ch 24 and is followed by an exhaustive description of every inch of Self-Storage Parkway, pushes the episode squarely into parody.⁸

The point about perspective and filtering information in narrative, however, is a serious one. Consider the following introduction to *Sylvanshine* with that in mind:

When *Sylvanshine* studied for the exam now the worst thing was that studying any one thing would set off a storm in his head about all the other things he hadn't studied and felt he was still weak on, making it almost impossible to concentrate,

causing him to fall further behind. He'd been studying for the CPA exam for three and a half years. It was like trying to build a model in a high wind. "The most important component in organizing a structure for effective study is: something."

What killed him were the story problems (9).

Wallace himself famously took high-level accounting courses in the late 90's; and Michael Pietsch, his longtime editor, has spoken of a car ride where Wallace described writing *Pale King* to "trying to carry a sheet of plywood in a windstorm," a sentiment not unlike Sylvanshine's analogy of "build[ing] a model in a high wind."⁹ Anecdotes aside, we are still left with the passage's anxiety over "organizing structure" and "story problems." These are obvious points of concern for someone afflicted by SDI's, and have larger purchase on the way narration is modeled in the novel. Of course, the SDI's aren't the only narrative model in *Pale King*; but what Sylvanshine's intrusions register is the worry of being alone at work, the horror at "one's total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect, and how, and why, etc." Fiction's "silence, nada" is quietly replaced by this excess of potential information once a work becomes a work in progress. One becomes alone in a new way.¹⁰

This excess, again, is Sylvanshine's (and perhaps the novel's) basic problem. Recall, for example, the incommunicable web of causation that "overwhelms" Sylvanshine as he bites into a Hostess cupcake: its origin; the factory worker's weight, bowling average, and so on (121). If the Contracted Realism Model is tasked with sorting through that mass of data—i.e., negotiating with the reader so she continues to read—then we might say that the Sudden Data Intrusion Model is continually compelled to run us up against the data mass's implicit infinitude. Contracted Realism continually negotiates the terms of communion /

communication / community with the reader; Sudden Data Intrusions interrupt those negotiations. They “unwork” it, in Nancy’s terms, by threatening us with a “view from nowhere,” a view that lacks any particular human perspective (Nagel *passim*).

Tellingly, the SDI’s come to Sylvanshine with “constant headaches. The data sometimes visual and queerly backlit, as by an infinitely bright light an infinite distance away” (121). Light rays from such a source would—theoretically—appear as parallel and would therefore not be localizable at any one point (Hecht 161); it would lack, quite literally, a determinate point of view even if Sylvanshine himself naturally has one. The SDI’s signal a certain horror implicit in something like third-person omniscient narration or a “God’s-eye” point of view. On the plane Sylvanshine is intruded upon by this: “*Yaw was way in a mirror, it occurred for no reason*” (14). What’s spelled out in this optical play is, of course, *Yahweh* (God), and it does not occur “for no reason.” It heralds or holds out hope for something like an organizing, negotiating principle at work behind the text.

IV. Model#4: The Free Indirect Wraith in Infinite Jest

Perhaps a pre-cursor to the Spontaneous Data Intrusion Model, both for its emphasis on perspective and its sudden intrusions of language, is what I’m calling the Free Indirect Wraith model. I draw the idea from the extended scene in *Infinite Jest* (827-45) involving Don Gately and James Incandenza’s wraith, who introduces his predicament thus:

The wraith could empathize totally, it said. The wraith said Even a garden-variety wraith could move at the speed of quanta and be anywhere anytime and hear in symphonic toto the thoughts of animate men, but it couldn't ordinarily affect anybody or anything solid, and it could never speak right to anybody, a wraith had no out-loud voice of its own, and had to use somebody's like internal brain-voice if it

wanted to try to communicate something, which was why thoughts and insights that were coming from some wraith always just sound like your own thoughts, from inside your own head, if a wraith's trying to interface with you. The wraith says By way of illustration consider phenomena like intuition or inspiration or hunches, or when someone for instance says 'a little voice inside' was telling them such-and-such on an intuitive basis (831).

Hence the wraith's choice of Gately, currently in the hospital after being shot in the shoulder: like the levitating and hyper-focused Drinion, Gately currently has the time to hear the wraith out.

The wraith, further, knows the community-building power of empathy, a technique both he (that is, James Incandenza) and Gately learned in AA: "Boston AA, with its emphasis on the Group, is intensely social" (362). Its meetings, particularly The White Flaggers', are rooted in a regular sharing of bottoming-out stories and shared performative language not unlike that described in the Jargony Argot Model. So, for example, "Empathy, in Boston AA, is called Identification" (345); and, "Only in Boston AA can you hear a fifty-year-old immigrant wax lyrical about his first solid bowel movement in adult life" (351). When you hear that story you Identify with the speaker and, as a community, you also Identify the more pervasive and general threat under which you live: addiction, mortality. The paragraphs in those episodes alternate between relating the speakers' verbatim testimony and Gately's own free-indirect reception of those stories. The narrative voice weaves the speaker's words, Gately's thoughts and the more general mood of the Group into a kind of choral refrain, a call and response.

In the episode with Gately and the wraith it is sometimes difficult to untangle Gately's thoughts from either the narrative voice and the wraith's linguistic intrusions. This is typical of how free indirect style works. Take, for instance, Hugh Kenner's rightly celebrated example of the so-called Uncle Charles Principle, from Joyce's "The Dead": "Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet" (Kenner *Joyce's* 15). As Kenner points out, in that context the word "literally" must come from Lily's vocabulary because, used in that way, it doesn't make grammatical sense. The narrative dips into her consciousness and standing reservoir of language and draws out "literally." But where the narrative voice ends and Lily's begins, or vice versa, is impossible to tell: we might guess that the explanatory "caretaker's daughter" belongs solely to the third person omniscient voice, but what about "run off her feet"? The difficulty here is similar to that of sorting out the wraith's voice from one's own, since a wraith has to "use somebody's like internal brain-voice if it wanted to try to communicate something." The "like," here, is of course Gately's own version of Lily's "literally"—but the rest? This blending or entangling of voice is, perhaps, one of those thirteen magical things Wallace thinks fiction can do.

There are, nevertheless, a few clear instances where we can quantifiably track the wraith's intrusions into Gately's mind and the text. In the starkest instance we hear that the wraith "holds one knee to its sunken chest and starts doing what Gately would know were pirouettes if he'd ever once been exposed to ballet, pirouetting faster and faster" (832). At this point the word *pirouette* appears to belong to the narrative voice, an intuition reinforced when almost immediately: "into Gately's personal mind, in Gately's own brain-voice but with roaring and unwilling force, comes the term PIROUETTE, in caps, which term Gately knows for a fact he doesn't have any idea what it means and no reason

to be thinking it with roaring force, so the sensation is not only creepy but somehow violating, a sort of lexical rape” (832). “Lexical rape,” of course, is no more in Gately’s wordbank than “pirouette,” but the basic idea of it is raised in high school classes across the country every day: characters wouldn’t talk like that; that’s just the author talking. In a writer like Jane Austen, where there is clear narrative framing and a relative uniformity in spoken language, we can explain—to the students’ satisfaction or not—why that is so. In a work like *Infinite Jest*, where we so often have to rely on the vagaries of voice simply to identify who is saying or doing what, the matter is obviously more urgent. The scene with the wraith is, indeed, something of an interrogation of the ethics involved in narrating a character’s—or, more strongly, someone else’s—experience.¹¹

After PIROUETTE, the rate of lexical intrusion dramatically accelerates as the wraith begins communicating at something closer to his natural pace (which seems to be roughly a few thousand times faster than regular, human time):

Other terms and words Gately knows he doesn't know from a divot in the sod now come crashing through his head with the same ghastly intrusive force, e.g. ACCIAC-CATURA and ALEMBIC, LATRODECTUS MACTANS and NEUTRAL DENSITY POINT, CHIAROSCURO and PROPRIOCEPTION and TESTUDO and ANNULATE and BRICOLAGE and CATALEPT and GERRYMANDER and SCOPOPHILIA and LAERTES — and all of a sudden it occurs to Gately the aforethought EXTRUDING, STRIGIL and LEXICAL themselves — and LORDOSIS and IMPOST and SINISTRAL and MENISCUS and CHRONAXY and POOR YORICK and LUCULUS and CERISE MONTCLAIR and then DE SICA NEO-REAL CRANE DOLLY and CIRCUMAMBIENTFOUNDDRAMALEVIRAT-EMARRIAGE and then more lexical terms and words speeding up to chipmunkish

and then HELIATED and then all the way up to a sound like a mosquito on speed, and Gately tries to clutch both his temples with one hand and scream, but nothing comes out (832).

The terms are, of course, straight from James Incandenza's private stash. But it also turns out that the wraith had been inhabiting and translating Gately's brain-voice even before the intrusion of the terms "in caps": "the aforethought EXTRUDING, STRIGIL and LEXICAL themselves" had slipped in unannounced, in lower case. And so—in this episode, maybe even the novel more generally—we are left with the following puzzle: what exactly is the relationship between Gately's thoughts, the wraith's communiqués, and the printed word? The problem of capitalization extends beyond the words in all caps to instances like: "The wraith says Just to give Gately an idea, he, the wraith, in order to appear as visible and interface with him, Gately, he, the wraith, has been sitting, still as a root, in the chair by Gately's bedside for the wraith-equivalent of three weeks, which Gately can't even imagine." (836). The marked break between "The wraith says" and what the wraith reportedly says is supremely puzzling, due in part to the almost parodic play of pronouns. In some sense the clarifications denote the blurring of identity between Gately and the wraith, and yet we are still left wondering what exactly the wraith "says" to / through Gately.

Deeper into the conversation we at least learn *why* the wraith is interfacing with Gately at all: to communicate, in some way and at some time, perhaps indirectly, with Hal. The wraith, for example, relates that "he [the wraith] spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply converse... A way to say I AM SO VERY, VERY SORRY and have it *heard*"

(838-9). That medium is undeniably *Infinite Jest* (the cartridge), a sustained—if vexed—allegory for *Infinite Jest* (the novel). The problem, however, is that if the wraith’s fear is not being heard by a mute interlocutor whom he loves, Hal nevertheless ends up utterly unable to communicate with anyone (save, not unproblematically, for those reading his story). So the question stands: to what degree do Hal and James communicate in the novel? Perhaps no straight answer can be given, but a place to begin looking is with James’s peculiarly worded plan. “To contrive a medium” should be understood in two ways: 1) as both inventing a form (such as a filming technique, or a kind of novel) to effect a plan; 2) and also of finding or waking or disturbing or stirring up (Latin, *turbare*) someone who could communicate for you (as in the occult sense of *medium*). Gately—who is found / disturbed / woken up by the wraith and eventually meets “the muted son,” as we know from Hal’s initial monologue (17)—becomes a medium in this second sense.

After the original encounter with the wraith we come across a fairly odd scene involving Don Gately admiring an attractive nurse: “And then when she reaches way up to unscrew a bolt in some kind of steelish plate on the wall over the empty bed the like hemline of her uniform retreats up north so that the white stockings’ rich violinish curves at the top of the insides of her legs in the white LISLE are visible in backlit silhouette, and an EMBRASURE of sad windowlight shines through her legs” (919). Given the narrative and typological technique from the first encounter, LISLE (a kind of lacy fabric) and EMBRASURE (a beveled window, as in a castle) are straight from the wraith. On the next page we get the free indirect statement that, w/r/t the nurse and MD’s relationship, “It’d be CIRCUMAMBIENT sexual tension, would be the ghostword” (920). *Would* it be the ghostword, or *is* it the ghostword? That is, is Gately recalling it or is the wraith slipping it

into his brain-voice? A perhaps more unsettling observation involves Gately's careful attention to light throughout the scene, as though he were absorbing not merely the wraith's vocabularies but also his sensibilities; Incandenza had been, after all, an optical physicist and film maker. Indeed, the word LISLE points to an uncanny scatter of likely referents: the nurse's skirt; Lyle (Himself's friend and apparently possessing wraith-like abilities); and also L'Islet Province, where Hal, Gately and John Wayne presumably dig up Himself's interred head (17, 907). The wraith, the mover of furniture, at times comes to blend with what Hugh Kenner has dubbed the Arranger, an inhuman voice which allows "details... to find their way on to the page without regard for the consciousness of anyone present." The Arranger would, like Hal, test at "Whatever's Beyond Eidetic": it "enjoys a seemingly total recall for exact forms of words used hundreds of pages earlier, a recall which implies not an operation of memory but an access such as ours to a printed book, in which pages can be turned to and fro" (Kenner *Ulysses* 64-5).

V. Conclusion: Somewhere Beyond the Right Frame

What does the Free Indirect Wraith Model bring to bear on the relationship between narrative and community that this essay has been drawing out? An answer might be found in the wraith's description of one of his reason's for making films: to depict "real life's real egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world's real agora, the babble of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment" (835-6). This "radical realism" (836), as Tom LeClair has argued, is obviously allegorical for the novel's own project of giving voice to "figurants"—background characters—who would otherwise merely be attendant upon the protagonists' foreground

(LeClair 36). It's an attempt to reorganize politics through formal technique and its ultimate source of tension is what Alex Woloch has called *the character-system*: "how the discrete representation of any specific individual is intertwined with the narrative's continual apportioning of attention to different characters who jostle for limited space within the same fictional universe" (Woloch 13). I do not think, however, that Incandenza (or, by analogy, Wallace) wants to obliterate that tension: the intertwining of characters' lives, their jostling for position in *character-space*. It is, in fact, what Himself's camera records: "the unfiltered babble of the peripheral crowd" (836) and, of equal importance, the viewer's struggle to arrange it into a narrative whole. Returning to the novel, we might say that its characters therefore struggle not merely against one another but, more generally, against its narrative structure even as that structure struggles to encompass them. A charged example might involve the—violent and perhaps overwrought—convergence of minor characters (Poor Tony, Ruth van Cleve, Kate Gompert, Lenz, Matty Pemulis, &c) that prefigures and models the unrecorded convergence of Hal and Gately. It is, in short, a model of narration that perpetually works to create and undo community. In Nancy's words, the "practice of sharing voices and of an articulation according to which there is no singularity but that exposed in common, and no community but that offered to the limit of singularities... community, in its infinite resistance to everything that would bring it to completion" (Nancy 80-1).

Wallace's narrative models—Contracted Realism, Jargony Argot, SDI's, the Free Indirect Wraith—should also stand in perpetual tension with one another, and with other possible models. Alone, overlapping, or in concert they can never "complete" *Infinite Jest* or *Pale King*. It would be similarly naïve to explain the models' existence via a simple appeal

to the harmonizing virtues of “community.” The communities in Wallace’s fictions are not all good, and nearly every one of them exists only in relation to the threat of vast, compounded catastrophe: addiction, collapsing ecologies, death, loneliness, unchecked mechanization, eliminating one’s own map. *Pale King* and *Infinite Jest* aren’t themselves communities; they are gestures to community, and to its limits.

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NOTES

¹We see this in, say, the first “Author Here” section: “I am reasonably sure that I am the only living American who’s actually read all these archives all the way through. I’m not sure I can explain how I did it” (*PK* 84 n25).

²Perhaps the closest thing I have in mind to Wallace’s narrative modeling is systems theory’s emphasis on systems’ tendency to model themselves in order to better control their operations; Luhmann calls this modeling “planning,” among other things, and notes that “no system can provide itself with a complete self description” (470). Planning or modeling thus introduces even more complexity into a system. Hence, perhaps, the fact that Wallace’s novels contain *several* competing and overlapping models of community and narration. A work like *Infinite Jest* is, in turn, itself a model of a much larger “Novel System” or “Art System.”

³Paul Giles has made the smart point that one of Wallace’s uncanny strengths is his ability to absorb jargons and discourses—say, business-speak or academes— and then demonstrate what sorts of human beings are formed by / within those discourses (Giles *passim*). I, here, am interested in what happens when Wallace is actively inventing those systems of discourses.

⁴Wallace in a letter to Don DeLillo, cited in D.T. Max, “The Unfinished” (59).

⁵Thanks to Adam Kelly for calling my attention to this passage.

⁶DFW qtd. in D.T. Max, “The Unfinished” (58).

⁷Sylvanshine does not seem, for example, to intuit data about distant galaxies or microorganisms crawling along the Marianas Trench. The exact height of Mount Erebus, it turns out, might be connected to Sylvanshine on account of the mountain’s being the site of a plane crash in 1977.

⁸ Relatedly, see Wallace's 2005 note to Franzen: "Karen is killing herself rehabbing the house. I sit in the garage with the AC blasting and work very poorly and haltingly and with (some days) great reluctance and ambivalence and pain. I am tired of myself, it seems: tired of my thoughts, associations, syntax, various verbal habits that have gone from discovery to technique to tic. It's a dark time, workwise, and yet a very light and lovely time in all other respects" (Max 60).

⁹ Qtd. in D.T. Max, "The Unfinished" (58).

¹⁰ An analogy might be Derrida's discussion of "the invention of the other." In Hillis Miller's reading, Derrida claims that "a literary work is not the 'invention' in the sense of making up, fabricating, but in the more archaic meaning of finding, coming upon. What the writer invents, in the sense of finding or discovering it, is defined by Derrida as the absolutely 'other'" (Miller *On Literature* 79). The SDI Model is the simultaneous horror at the thought that the invention is *wholly* other or wholly solipsistic.

¹¹ In this context Marshall Boswell correctly reads the wraith as a particular inflection of Wallace's narrative voice (Boswell 170).

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