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“THEN OUT OF THE RUBBLE”: THE APOCALYPSE IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE’S EARLY FICTION

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Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

In the emerging field of David Foster Wallace studies, nothing has been more widely cited in terms of understanding Wallace’s literary project than two texts that appeared in the 1993 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. “E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction” and a lengthy interview with Larry McCaffery have been significant landmarks for critics of his work in much the same way that T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” or Henry James’s “The Art of Fiction” were for critics of those writers. Following Wallace’s argument in “E Unibus Pluram,” that the “postmodern irony” of such writers like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo had infected United States culture at all levels, and especially the medium of television, much of the conversation regarding his fiction has revolved around irony and his sense of being a latecomer in relation to his postmodern forebears. Criticism approaching his work through the lens of “E Unibus Pluram” has been so prevalent that, one might be permitted to suggest, a “standard” reading of his fiction has emerged. Much of this criticism has been quite impressive, and the recent groundswell of work being done on Wallace since his untimely death in 2008 is in the process of forging new paths for understanding his contribution to American letters. But there has been a notable lack of attention paid to one of Wallace’s more important self-critical moments in the interview with McCaffery, specifically when he discusses his early novella, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,” which appeared in the collection *Girl with*

Curious Hair (1989): “My idea in ‘Westward’ was to do with metafiction what Moore’s poetry or like DeLillo’s *Libra* had done with other mediated myths. *I wanted to get the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction’s always been about, I wanted to get it over with, and then out of the rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans*” (McCaffery 142, my emphasis).

In a similar manner to how “Westward” explicitly targets John Barth’s much anthologized short story “Lost in the Funhouse” (1968), the target of Wallace’s comments to McCaffery were what Barth once called, in his own manifesto-like essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967), the “apocalyptic ambience” surrounding the postmodern novel:

[I]f enough writers and critics *feel* apocalyptic about [the novel], their feeling becomes a considerable cultural fact, like the *feeling* that Western civilization, or the world, is going to end rather soon. If you took a bunch of people out into the desert and the world didn’t end, you’d come home shamefaced, I imagine; but the persistence of an art form doesn’t invalidate work created in the comparable apocalyptic ambience. (*The Friday Book* 72)

Referring at once to the persistence of eschatological discourse despite the failure of the prophesied apocalypse ever to arrive (that Norman Cohn famously wrote about in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*) and the claims about the novel’s death, Barth arrives at a stunning insight. If one imagines the disaster often enough, here implicating literature in the work of imagination that brings the disaster about, it becomes a *considerable cultural fact*. Wallace’s first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), and “Westward” resist the imminence of this considerable cultural fact, attempting to find ways *not* to bring apocalypse, either projectively or literally, into the world.

In beginning to define his own literary project, he was explicitly aware that he inhabited the untimely position of a Nietzschean latecomer in relation to literary postmodernism, a position that caused him to read American metafiction of the 1960s to ‘80s as a literature obsessed with its own end. In contrast to someone like, say, DeLillo—who ended *White Noise* (1985) with a group of suburban Americans perched on the edge of a “computerized nuclear pulse,” an “ambient roar, in the plain and heartless fact of their decline” (325, 326)—Wallace had arrived at the end-of-the-world party after it was already over (though everyone was still standing around holding their drinks, wondering if they should go home). His comments to McCaffery reveal an exhaustion with exhaustion that often manifests itself through eschatological anxiety and resistance in *Broom* and “Westward.” Consequently, for an emerging field of study, it is striking that one of the most fundamental aspects of *any* narrative, what Frank Kermode once called fiction’s “sense of an ending,” has yet to receive significant attention, especially considering how prevalent apocalyptic formations are in Wallace’s work.

In this essay I will begin the work of rectifying this critical omission by analyzing Wallace's sense of an ending in *The Broom of the System* and "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way." In order to work through his exhaustion with exhaustion, Wallace *systematically* develops, explores, and then out of the rubble "gets over" various aspects of American metafiction's "Armageddon-explosion" in each text, thereby preparing a narratological ground for the emergence of *Infinite Jest* (1996). I argue that *Broom* constructs this ground through its exploration of two eschatological poles: Lenore Beadsman Sr. and Norman Bombardini, or rather, Ludwig Wittgenstein—whose importance for *Broom* has already been noted at considerable length by Marshall Boswell and others—and Jacques Derrida, whose influence on Wallace's work still remains largely unexplored.¹ Having thus emerged from his first novel with a theoretical sense of language capable of negotiating crises of textuality and communication networks, Wallace was then able to coherently confront the historical archive of "apocalyptic ambience," or rather, literary postmodernism. Working with Paul de Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1969)—a critic Wallace read carefully, but again, an influence that has received little attention—I reconsider Wallace's relationship with irony in "Westward" through an apocalyptic lens. Though this essay admittedly retreads some of the ground familiar to Wallace's critics (Wittgenstein, irony, postmodernism, etc.), to fully explicate the centrality of eschatology in his early work, such a reconsideration is not only called for but provides a framework for the necessary task of reconfiguring the dominant reading of Wallace's irony. Furthermore, explicating Wallace's anti-eschatological project in his early fiction further serves to emphasize his engagement with the waning of a larger coherent national narrative. "Westward" presents a culture that was about to lose its Other with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and see the grand narrative of Mutually Assured Destruction begin to fade. Lacking a coherent reference point outside of its own, the US culture "Westward" interrogates could only turn in on itself, parasitically consuming not only its own cultural products, but its waste and detritus as well. Wallace's insight in "Westward" consequently involves his perception of the reifying shackles of apocalyptic discourse and rhetoric, literary and otherwise, and the desperate need for US culture to articulate an alternative to the postmodern apocalyptic imagination.

Gardening the Machine: Narrative Liminality and *The Broom of the System*

The Broom of the System stages a complex exploration between Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida, and asks what it means to write a novel in the wake of poststructuralism. This interaction plays out between two other theoretical constructs that are thinly veiled as characters, Lenore Sr. and Norman Bombardini. These four poles form a semiotic square, describing strict asymptotic limits on the narrative's world. As one would expect, the

novel's very ability to end, as a text that could never be fully communicated to another, is continually demonstrated and dramatized in terms of thinking through Lenore Sr. and Norman Bombardini's stated goals to their uttermost conclusions. In short, the form of the novel itself imposes a seemingly obvious paradox. A novel where text *is the world* cannot end and yet the novel you are holding *ends* (it has a last page). Amongst the wealth of other effects this theoretical novel narrates, Wallace—in what I think should be read as a rather successful youthful exercise—asks some very basic questions about novelistic discourse at the beginning of his career, and most notably how our inability to communicate with one another could have quite disastrous, if often humorous consequences.

The novel begins with a systemic inability to communicate. The protagonist, Lenore Beadsman Jr., a telephone operator for the publishing company Frequent & Vigorous, experiences a repetitive technological problem: telephone calls do not arrive at their intended destination and conditions somewhere in the Bombardini Building are to blame. Near the end of the novel a repairman reveals to Lenore that, because a sub-basement communications tunnel was somehow being kept at a steady 98.6°, the “subpar service is due to your lines...bleeding calls into each other”; the tunnel has “kind of decided it's a real freakin' human being or something” (Wallace, *Broom* 457). At the center of this problem, Lenore knows, is her great-grandmother, Lenore Beadsman Sr., a former student of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose inability to regulate her body temperature demands that her environment be maintained at a steady 98.6°. Lenore Sr.'s absence throughout *Broom*, from her mysterious disappearance from a nursing home to the manifestation of that absence as material disruption in the means of communication, is of immense structural importance throughout the novel. She is a liminal horizon the novel repetitively posits that serves to question the very possibility for *any* communication within the system of novelistic discourse.

After disappearing, Lenore Sr. left behind “her notebooks, yellow and crispy, old, and her copy of the *Investigations*, and a small piece of fuzzy white paper....On the white back of the label something was doodled. There was nothing else in the drawer. Which is to say there was no *green* book in the drawer” (40, my emphasis).² Lenore Sr. is quite clearly a fairly blunt construct, a character that initially appears as a stand-in for Wittgenstein. And she has a *green notebook*. As so much of Wittgenstein's work was unpublished in his lifetime, the presence/absence of this green notebook, as opposed to a blue or brown notebook, implies that there is further work he did beyond the posthumously published *Blue and Brown Books* and *Philosophical Investigations*, and that Lenore Sr. has privileged access to this work. Lenore Sr. “has, from what little I can gather, convinced Lenore [Jr.] that she is in possession of some words of tremendous power. No, really. Not things, or concepts. Words. The woman is apparently obsessed with words....Words and

a book and a belief that the world is words and Lenore's conviction that her own intimate personal world is only of, neither by nor for, her. Something is not right. She is in pain" (73). There is a hidden revelatory truth to Lenore Sr.'s statement, who never actually *says* anything in the novel. Lenore Jr.'s pain results primarily from her fear that she is nothing but words, a fictional construct, a text, a character in a novel. The irony that she indeed *is*, would be her (though not our) revelation.

For the Wallace of *Broom*, Wittgenstein's thinking in *The Philosophical Investigations* has unintended apocalyptic implications: namely, the horrors of complete solipsism. Wallace clearly understands Wittgenstein's emphasis on the social *context* of language: for any meaning to be achieved by language, there must be at least two speakers, a self and other that are attempting to communicate. But the novel continually interrogates this formulation by asking, if we are in many ways constructed by language, what happens when language is no longer possible because there is no one to converse with, when there is only one lonely mind operating without social or discursive context? How is one anything except a *name*? Wittgenstein's answer deserves lengthy quotation:

"What the names in language signify might be indestructible; for it must be possible to describe the state of affairs in which everything destructible is destroyed. And this description will contain words; and what corresponds to these cannot then be destroyed, or otherwise the words would have no meaning." I must not saw off the branch on which I am sitting.

One might, of course, object at once that this description would have to exempt itself from the destruction.—But what corresponds to the separate words of the description and so cannot be destroyed if it is true, is what gives words their meaning—is that without which they would have no meaning.—In a sense, however, this man is surely what corresponds to his name. But he is destructible, and his name does not lose its meaning when the bearer is destroyed.—An example of something corresponding to the name, and without which it would have no meaning, is a paradigm that is used in connexion with the name in the language game. (*Investigations* 27^e, 55)

Seemingly, Wittgenstein's formulation of the indestructibility of the name, of a word's ability to designate something that can be communicated, even in the absence or destruction of the signified, protects language against complete destruction and ensures one's ability to speak, even in the aftermath of the disaster. The problem with this for Wallace is that Wittgenstein's response to a possible refutation of the immanence of meaning does not go far enough in terms of pursuing the eschatological and solipsistic limits that would upset the language game. Namely, what if that world only exists as *text* without any of the linguistic context necessary for the language game? What if there is no one to speak with? If we are *just* words? By asking such questions of Wittgenstein throughout his novel, Wallace attempts to exorcise his own anxiety as a first

novelist, a novelist whose own text might be erased—i.e., not read, published, etc.—and through this exorcism he contends with the act of writing a novel as a potentially lonely and narcissistically selfish act.

In an early review essay of David Markson's novel, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988), Wallace tellingly acknowledges these questions:

the novel succeeds in doing what few philosophers glean...: the consequences, for persons, of the *practice* of *theory*; the difference, say, between espousing "solipsism" as a metaphysical "position" & waking up one fine morning after a personal loss to find your grief apocalyptic, literally millennial, leaving you the last and only living thing on earth, with only your head, now, for not only company but environment & world, an inclined beach sliding toward a dreadful sea. ("The Empty Plenum" 220)

Wallace's assessment of Markson clearly expresses his apocalyptic (mis)reading of Wittgenstein. Lenore Sr. functions, both in terms of being a character in the novel and a stand-in for Wittgenstein, as a foil, a limit within which the world of the text must always operate, a boundary necessary for any language game to be played, while simultaneously being a danger to the very act of communication itself in that she represents what happens when everything is a text. She is the ground upon which the language game depends, while simultaneously a material disruption within the system that makes communication impossible. The indestructibility of the name and the world for Lenore Sr. is only possible if there is another participant in the language game. But Lenore Sr., for whom everything is language and who is only a name, saws off the branch upon which novelistic discourse must rest if it is not to slide toward a dreadful sea.

Wallace's decision to end the novel by erasing the word "word" contends with this limit in a complex way. In *Broom*'s final line, Rick Vigorous says, "You can trust me....I'm a man of my" (467). By omitting the final "word" here, Wallace blatantly calls attention to the textuality of the novel. We *know* the final word in this sentence is "word." Something in language has given us to understand that the entire novel is attempting to communicate a simple "word." We also know, however, that the final word of the novel could have perhaps been anything (say, "rutabaga" or Wittgenstein's famous philosophical grunt). Consequently, we can never know if whatever the novel is attempting to communicate actually comes across. This, in many ways, is a kind of inversion of Pynchon's final line of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), though it maintains Pynchon's refusal to provide any narrative revelation. Rather than fulfilling the language game of narrative closure promised by the title, by the name, and by the category of "novel," Wallace refuses to acknowledge that even a "word" has a stable meaning and that a "word" can fulfill the rules of the language game. The system of novelistic discourse prevents the communication of even a simple word, even while it depends upon its reader to provide the meaning

for the absent or destroyed word. There is, however, another reading of this moment that to my knowledge no one has yet suggested. This reading represents the other teleological limit of the text: Norman Bombardini's "eating to infinite largeness."

Early in the novel Norman Bombardini decides to incorporate the entire universe into himself by literally eating everything. He realizes, after both a disastrous divorce and an upsetting experience with Weight Watchers, that "Weight Watchers holds as a descriptive axiom the transparently true fact that for each of us the universe is deeply and sharply and completely divided into for example in my case, me, on one side, and everything else, on the other. This for each of us exhaustively defines the whole universe...Self and Other" (90). Holding to this, it follows that Weight Watchers, in attempting to decrease one's weight, is *ipso facto* suggesting that there must be as much other and as little self as possible. Bombardini has taken the opposite approach:

"We each ought to desire our own universe to be as *full* as possible, that the Great Horror consists in an empty, rattling personal universe, one where one finds oneself with Self, on one hand, and vast empty lonely spaces before Others begin to enter the picture at all, on the other...Rather than diminishing Self to entice Other to fill our universe, we may also of course obviously choose to fill the universe with *Self*...Yes. I plan to grow to infinite size." (90-91)

What has not been suggested about the novel, however, is that Bombardini actually accomplishes his goal, that he did in fact apocalyptically become the universe, that he pursues solipsism to such an extent that he becomes the world of the text.

There is evidence to support such a reading. At the climax of the narrative, Bombardini, now quite massive indeed, is throwing his entire weight against his own building. The narrative proper pretty much ends here, with a final dénouement where Rick Vigorous provides the subsequent story. Other than the final scene with Vigorous, we do not encounter any of the characters again, and he, it could be said, is merely there to "speak" the last unuttered "word." Nor do we really get an account of what Bombardini's ultimate fate might be. Wallace, even this early in his career, is here committing himself to a kind of aesthetic anti-eschatology, i.e., he often omits the most crucial points of narrative information in the text proper, and almost always eschews an "ending," leaving events and how one might read those events ambiguous and open to interpretation. The irresolution of Bombardini's eschatologically narcissistic fate should then strike one as significant (in the same way that the absence of the word "word" is significant). The absence of the final "word" of the novel implies the possibility that Bombardini swallowed the world right before Vigorous could complete the final sentence of the novel.

As stated earlier, Bombardini defines a semiotic relationship to Lenore Sr., a teleological limit that, if not exactly reached, structures the novel at its most basic level. The novel is everywhere concerned with the problems of communication, especially how they manifest in the aporia between self and other. What Bombardini's project makes clear is not simply a fairly obvious critique of the American consumer, but that an eschaton can be reached through *accumulation*. Lenore Sr., paradoxically enough, embodies what might be called the *threat* of language, the reifying threat toward the subject when the self is seen as possibly nothing more than a linguistic construction. This threat, if not clearly destructive, empties the subject of presence, and potentially even body, all the while withholding that one transcendent revelatory *word* the green book might contain. On the one hand, being consumed into Bombardini's "Project Total Yang" is completely destructive, it erases the other while unifying the world into "self." Bombardini's apocalypse, however, is also a limit that cannot be achieved or transgressed. For, if the final "word" of the novel has been erased, then there is always something that resists the all-absorptive quality of "eating to infinite largeness." The word is not written down so it cannot be consumed. It is known *only* outside the novel (with all the appropriate Biblical implications). Infinite accumulation—apocalypse through absorption—is ultimately impossible, for the very same reason counting to infinity is impossible. And on Lenore Sr.'s side, language might be eminently destructible, but there is always some name left behind.

It is no accident this name is in fact "Lenore." Lenore Jr. is, in one sense, always already Lenore Sr., but as Lenore Sr. is always absent, she is also most definitely *not* Lenore Sr. Rather, she functions as a kind of textual void whose role is to resist the novel's own necessary formal narrative reification, just as the novel resists reification by refusing to complete itself on its last "word." Unlike Pynchon's Oedipa Maas, Lenore does not ask, "can she project a world?" but rather, "am I the world's projection, an emergent signal from the background noise and texts?" For Wallace, Lenore represents the unambiguous autobiographical projection of an aspiring and textually unsettled novelist-self worried about where his fiction is coming from and how it appears. One of the central problems in Lenore's world is that she is in charge of directing communication to the appropriate people, but the wrong connections are being made within the network. She quite literally cannot read the incoming and outgoing language. And this is not because there is something inherent in language that breaks down, but rather the system through which these codes are transmitted is flawed. Wallace consequently understands novelistic discourse as a kind of systemic irony, a mode of ordered breakdown, of never being able to have a letter arrive at its destination because of a gross ordering of the atmosphere to 98.6° and its disruption of technological communication.

By projecting Lenore futuristically into the year 1990 in Cleveland, Ohio, Wallace forces the text to inhabit a landscape further marked by ordered,

systemic, material breakdown through his invention of the Great Ohio Desert, or G.O.D. In 1972 the governor of Ohio felt that,

“Guys, the state is getting soft...People are getting complacent. They’re forgetting the way this state was historically hewn out of wilderness. There’s no more hewing....We need a wasteland....a desert. A point of savage reference for the good people of Ohio. A place to fear and love. A blasted region....An Other for Ohio’s Self.” (54)

A tourist destination, a great blasted landscape with black sand, results from the governor’s perception of this need. Lenore must inhabit, traverse, and commune with this desert space. To reverse Leo Marx’s famous formulation, it is her garden in the machine, or rather, her wasteland in the machine. Ohio is a thoroughly developed, machinic landscape—indeed a network of human relationships has totally replaced any “wilderness” (to the point that one suburban development is “in the shape of a profile of Jayne Mansfield” [45]). Consequently, rather than commune with nature in some protected wilderness area, Ohioans go to a manufactured post-apocalyptic wasteland—ordered like a garden, built and maintained, but ultimately more savage than the landscape that was there in the first place. Within the logic of *Broom*, something like the G.O.D. must exist; its emergence from the surrounding suburban noise is necessitated by the very chaos of the communication systems that keep failing. The desert is a kind of ordered deconstruction, a breakdown necessitated by the ubiquitous (though failed) connectivity of a projected future. Rather than intrude upon the pastoral, the pastoral is hewn from the machine, not giving the illusion of some restored, idyllic past, but projecting a post-apocalyptic present instead.

The G.O.D., and specifically Lenore Jr.’s experience there, functions as an object of narrative resolution and synthesis. It is assembled and accumulated while always already being a space of ordered destruction. For Lenore to experience the desert is to allow her, quite literally, to complete the novel she inhabits as she subsequently finds an appropriate male love interest, moves away from the influence of her family, and escapes the parasitic Vigorous once and for all. The desert is a textual space that materializes the narrative’s limits represented by Bombardini and Lenore Sr. and there she escapes both representation and observation, transforming from an object to a subject and leaving the narrative behind. Wallace ends *Broom* and begins his literary project from a space that rigorously questions and problematizes liminality while still achieving affective narrative cohesion, even offering a relatively happy ending.

Many, including Wallace himself, have perceived *Broom* as a failure, a piece of juvenilia too self-aware and anxious to succeed in its literary project. And though some have contended otherwise, it should not surprise us that

Broom might in fact be a failure. *Broom* continually declines to aesthetically harmonize its various structural elements in favor of theoretically exploring what it means to be constructing such elements in the first place. In the words of Theodor Adorno: “What is qualitatively new in recent art may be that in an allergic reaction it wants to eliminate harmonizations even in their negated form, truly the negation of negation with its own fatality” (159). If narrative textuality is a thing to be deconstructed, an object whose inability to transgress its eschatological limits structures the object itself, then Wallace’s failure results from his attempts to negate the object’s own destruction and fatality, to negate this negation. In beginning his career from a formally anti-eschatological stance, having already exhausted ends at his “origin,” he questions the structure of narrative itself.

The “failure” of *Broom*, if it can indeed be located, is always already inscribed into Wallace’s first attempt at a novel, for, as has here been enacted up until this point, the novel’s other philosophical guide-post had already done an impressive amount of work exploding the textual foundations upon which Wallace might have stood, and he was acutely aware of this fact. If Lenore Sr. is absent, a phantom, a name without material signification, a name that cannot be destroyed even if it ceases corresponding to a living breathing being, we must understand this absence to also “signify” another unnamed specter: Jacques Derrida.

Wallace firmly felt, from the very beginning of his career, the critical importance that revolutions in theory and philosophy had to have on any of the fiction composed in theory’s wake. He firmly believed at the time of *Broom*’s composition that it was impossible to contend with his literary forebears without also contending with the theoretical landscape of the era.³ In other words, to compose a novel like *Broom*, obsessively concerned with its structure as it is, Wallace took the lessons of Derrida quite seriously, and perhaps especially, in terms of *Broom*’s broad questions, Derrida’s famous critique of structuralism:

And again on the basis of what we call the center (and which, because it can be either inside or outside, can also indifferently be called the origin or the end, *archē* or *telos*), repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations are always *taken* from a history of meaning [*sens*]—that is, in a word, a history—whose origin may always be reawakened or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence. This is why one perhaps could say that the movement of any archaeology, like that of any eschatology, is an accomplice of this reduction of the structurality of structure and always attempts to conceive of structure on the basis of a full presence which is beyond play. (Derrida 279, brackets in original)

To parse this in terms of the novel, we would do well to again refer to Norman Bombardini, and especially his own phantom-like nature at the end of *Broom*. In Bombardini’s world of total-self, there cannot be a center, for a center would

imply that there is some subject who is Norman Bombardini in the first place. In addition, such a universe would have no coherent “*archē*” or “*telos*,” no origin or end. It would be a narrative-textual space that could never be an accomplice of eschatology, for it would be a kind of “universe without organs,” a vast physical region with no distinction between one thing and another. If there is an anxiety in Wallace, the figure of Bombardini signals a problematic obsessively pursued on his part: that language and textuality prevent, before one even starts, the possibility for fashioning coherent meaning in something that had to first pursue the question of the “structurality of structure”—i.e., the self-awareness of fashioning an aesthetic object. In *Broom*, Wallace accomplishes understanding the failure inherent in any structural project attempting to refashion some solid ontological ground upon which to then proceed in the wake of poststructuralism. Ultimately, *Broom*’s “failure” allows him to acknowledge that structural aporias—namely those of any eschatologies whatsoever—could not be resolved in a form obsessed by those very aporias; a novel cannot work through the structural aporias of the novel. Acknowledging this allowed him to then turn toward the historical, material archive of American fiction, an archive he represented by the “presence” of John Barth in “Westward.”

The Threat of the Text: Ironic Apocalypse and “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way”

Wallace’s work revolves around the suspicion that there may be something actually quite *dangerous* about literature, both in terms of its composition and its contemplation. Somewhere within the dialogic interaction between text and reader, and between author and writing, Wallace saw contemporary American literature following a potentially catastrophic path of recursivity and self-conscious irony despite the exhaustive and commendable lengths postmodern metafiction had pursued to complicate these dialogic relationships and to strip them of any pretense of transparency or authenticity. For a US culture so often criticized as narcissistic and historically ignorant, as apocalyptically self-absorbed with the reproduction of itself, the dangers of postmodern self-consciousness, of texts spiraling into total solipsism, were acutely felt by Wallace.

For Wallace, the threat of the text resides not in literature’s possibilities for destruction, in either the material dissolution of the text nor in some sort of “lessening” of the reading subject, but rather in the vicious and infinitely recursive loop of contemporary US metafiction. The result of this loop is text dangerously *accumulating*. The danger of literature, for Wallace, is that metafictional recursivity has the potential to result in a kind of apocalyptically-solipsistic fugue-state, a wholly self-absorbed text which threatens to absorb the co-creator of that text as well, ultimately threatening the possibility of any subjectivity when confronted with a text. Nowhere is this formally recursive loop, this infinite possibility for the dangerous accumulation of text, more

evident than in Wallace's early novella, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way."

"Westward" quite unabashedly takes John Barth's 1967 story, "Lost in the Funhouse," as a model, reference, and polemical object. "Westward," rather than answering Barth's question, "For whom is the funhouse fun?" (*Lost in the Funhouse* 72), asks a different one. Drew-Lynn Eberhardt, or D.L.—self-proclaimed "postmodernist," student of Dr. Ambrose (who is clearly meant to be Barth himself), and recently married wife of Mark Nechtr (the protagonist)—early in the novella scrawled the following limerick on the chalkboard of an MFA creative writing classroom before Ambrose arrived to conduct class:

For lovers, the Funhouse is fun.
For phonies, the Funhouse is love.
But *for whom*, the proles grouse,
Is the Funhouse a house?
Who lives there, when push comes to shove? (Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair* 239)

D.L. is clearly meant to be read parodically within the space of the novella, oftentimes functioning as Wallace's own superego, sublimating his fears about the act of composing "postmodern" writing. So when she writes the above "critique" of Ambrose's (Barth's) story "Lost in the Funhouse," Wallace is simultaneously writing a critique of "Funhouse" (as well as "Westward" itself), while acknowledging that critique as fundamentally shallow, a result of a theoretical "fad," and yet somehow no less serious in terms of its central question: "for whom is the Funhouse a house?" In other words, who lives there, who are we asking to inhabit this metafictional terrain? Asking who the text is *built* for acknowledges that indeed no one may be able to feel comfortable within such a space; it cannot actually function as a *home* at all. The text only serves to continually upset its reader, to be an object whose goal is the production of the uncanny and a sense of homelessness (or *unheimlich*). Consequently, as something built, the novella threatens what it is built *for*.

As most critics have argued, "Westward" strives to overcome the dangers of solipsistic recursivity with a kind of hyper-meta-irony, an irony turned in on itself to the point of sincerity. The question that drives "Westward"—for whom is the Funhouse a *house*, who can actually *dwell* in the story itself?—forces us, however, to reconsider the commonplace approach to Wallace's relationship with irony. For it is crucial to understand that Wallace was implicitly aware of the hopelessness of "transcending" irony, of going somehow beyond Barth and other postmodern ironists, especially in his early work. His famous "prediction" or desire for a new sincerity was nothing more than a kind of hopeful non-transgressible limit imposed by the very historicity of irony itself. The house is built. If there is no one to inhabit it, unlivable as the postmodern condition might make it, there is no way to further critique the house of

metafiction without participating in the very mode it suggests. Perhaps more clearly than any US writer of his generation, Wallace understood that textual *accumulation* in all forms—commentary, influence, theoretical complexity, critical engagement, reading *itself*—was a *danger*, a *threat*, precisely through the continual ironic treatment of there not only being no world “outside the text,” but any world *in* the text, any house where we could live in the text itself.

In these terms, Paul de Man’s essay “On the Rhetoric of Temporality” is especially important for Wallace’s understanding and utilization of irony, not least because it affords us an insight into Wallace’s conception and mobilization of de Manian deconstruction within his own work.⁴ For de Man, when discussing irony, one is faced immediately with the problem of defining the term, for “in the case of irony, one cannot so easily take refuge in the need for a historical de-mystification of the term...[O]ne has to start out from the structure of the trope itself, taking one’s cue from the texts that are de-mystified and, to a large extent, themselves ironical” (211). In “Westward” Wallace saw the problem with irony and his own relationship to the development of literary irony in historical terms, and with the full awareness of how the very way he was approaching irony depended upon that history. Even though he is tangentially engaging US imperialism within the text of “Westward,” its title forces us to pause in terms of the *directionality* of the novella’s structure and its historical relationship to postmodern literature. Quite clearly he is suggesting that there is a deep and conflicted relationship between, say, Barth’s project and the “project” of Empire. This relationship, to put it overly simply, is that postmodern metafiction capitulates to the homogenizing banality imposed by “the course of Empire.” Metafiction follows this course rather than attempting to subvert it. The destructive capacity housed in literature’s accumulation has itself been *absorbed* into the greater historical problem postmodern irony had strove to highlight. In other words,

[t]he target of [these texts’] irony is very often the claim to speak about humans as if they were facts of history. It is a historical fact that irony becomes increasingly conscious of itself in the course of demonstrating the impossibility of our being historical. In speaking of irony we are dealing not with the history of an error but with a problem that exists within the self. (de Man 211)

For Wallace, this “problem that exists within the self” becomes literature’s apocalyptic site, an ahistorical space without the possibility for coherent communication with the other.

Wallace felt that postmodern irony had backfired, its intended targets merely absorbed into capitalism’s dominant aesthetic regime: advertising. In D.L.’s terms, metafiction could neither house the “proles” (proletariat), “lovers,” nor “phonies,” for its very operation had become one of control rather than providing a space for dwelling. But what would replace it?

Wallace does perceive one specific answer coming from the culture at large, and consequently the *direction* “Westward” takes is toward the filming of a commercial so grandiose it not only borders on the apocalyptic, but attempts to achieve *revelation*. Wallace reimagines the Funhouse as a McDonald’s-run night club whose grand opening will coincide with the filming of a reunion of everyone who has ever been in a McDonald’s commercial before. The brains behind this operation, J.D. Steelritter—quite literally Barth commercialized—imagines the results in quite lurid and apocalyptic terms:

And that, as they say, will be that. No one will ever leave the rose farm’s Reunion. The revelation of What They Want will be on them; and, in that revelation of Desire, they will Possess. They will all Pay the Price—without persuasion...Life, the truth, will be its own commercial. Advertising will have finally arrived at the death that’s been its object all along. And, in Death, it will of course become Life. The last commercial. Popular culture, the U.S. of A.’s great lalated lullaby....Their wishes will, yes, come true. Fact will be fiction will be fact. Ambrose and his academic heirs will rule, without rules. *Meatfiction*. (310)

In US culture, Wallace perceived that subjective desire *itself* had become a completely manipulable object. No longer is labor, one’s time and bodily energy, the object of capital’s violence toward the subject, but the very process of desire—in Steelritter’s vision of desire being synonymous with living—becomes merely an object of capital emptied of any “real” or “true” subjective content. Consequently, “Westward” contends with the disturbing fact that intellectual labor and the *avant garde*—i.e., postmodern American metafiction—was not only complicit with the culture industry’s reification of the subject, but through popular culture’s appropriation of postmodern irony, it may have had a large hand in *producing* the very conditions that made this reification possible.

That the limits of irony, both in terms of advertising and in terms of contemporary fiction, in other words, between “high” and “low” culture, are apocalyptic in its fullest sense of the term (as a revelation), should not surprise us. Not only had the lessons of Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” been learned exhaustively by Wallace, but proposing that any authenticity remained could not help but appear naïve. Rather than evoking the all-too-familiar claims of the “death of the novel,” or the “end of literature” (etc.), Wallace’s position in “Westward,” in a kind of Arnoldian-reverse, is a critic working in an artists’ time (despite writing fiction, of course), someone for whom the aesthetic landscape is *too* full, too aware of itself as full, and this landscape revels in that fact to the point of destruction. This is the logic of Steelritter’s McDonald’s commercial to end all commercials. Consumer desire, taken to its ironic limit, achieves a kind of advertising-aesthetic-stasis. There ceases to be any lag-time between the instantiation of desire and its object-

fulfillment. Any discord will be resolved with the cultural unity created by total solipsistic desire. Wallace's great fear throughout "Westward" might simply be that his *own* fiction is contributing to such assemblages.

With this in mind, de Man is again useful for understanding Wallace:

The moment the innocence or authenticity of our sense of being in the world is put into question, a far from harmless process gets underway [sic]. It may start as a casual bit of play with a stray loose end of the fabric, but before long the entire texture of the self is unraveled and comes apart. The whole process happens at unsettling speed. Irony possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not stop until it has run its full course; from the small and apparently innocuous exposure of a small self-deception it soon reaches the dimensions of the absolute. (215)

"Westward" takes us in the direction of the absolute as a kind of total-unraveling, a subject so turned in on herself as to vanish entirely. In refusing to actually reach Collision, Illinois, the site of the commercial, nor to end "Westward" properly in any sense at all, but rather to begin another narrative about the problems inherent in constructing a narrative, Wallace simultaneously acknowledges the impossible task of forging a direction toward something else, away from the course of Empire, while holding out a hope that perhaps *directionality itself*, or rather eschatology, can be overturned.

One of the ways this occurs is through a "casual bit of play." As noted above, in "Westward" Wallace "wanted to get the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction's always been about...over with." To do so, however, he had to account for the fact that many of the modes of getting it "over with" had already acknowledged the fact of metafiction's eschatological thrust with a fair amount of absurdity and irony. Consequently, he presents this fact fairly early on through the character of Dr. Ambrose: "Speaking of speaking about shit: Dr. Ambrose...could at this point profitably engage in some wordplay around and about the similarities, phonological and etymological, between the words *scatology* and *eschatology*. Smooth allusions to Homeric horses pooping death-dealing Ithacans, Luther's excremental vision, Swift's incontinent Yahoos" (256, emphases in original). Dr. Ambrose, or rather John Barth's *possible* (though unstated) ironic observation about the similarities between the words "scatology" and "eschatology" within the space of "Westward" are revealing with regard to Wallace's anti-eschatological project in two ways.

First, he *begins* from acknowledging that much of the veil-lifting of ironically treating the apocalypse has already been accomplished by postmodern metafiction. Significantly though, this accomplishment is posed as something Dr. Ambrose *could* do if he so chose, but has not. Ambrose's potential wordplay occurs to Mark Nechtr while,

basically they're just standing around, as people will...tired, with that so-near-and-yet type of tension, a sense of somewhere definite they must be at by a definite time, but no clear consensus on how to get there. Since they're late. As Dr. Ambrose might venture to observe, they're figuratively *unsure about where to go from here*. (257, emphasis in original)

What should be understood, and perhaps Wallace could be said to be slightly heavy-handed here, is that his *own* relationship to eschatology is not only problematic, but slightly confused. Barth did *not* complete metafiction's "Armageddon-explosion"-type goal, though Wallace plays with the idea that he *could have* by ironically treating the theme of the end of the world as nothing more than the study of, or obsession with, excrement, a theme that has been digested and excreted since the beginning of Western literature. The surrounding situation accompanying Mark's musing about the possibility of what Ambrose *would* say also displays this confusion. (And it is important that there is a character in the novel who is constipated.) They are in the midst of traveling, having just disembarked from a plane at the Central Illinois Airport, and, having missed the shuttles transporting people to Collision for the commercial, have no means of going further toward their destination; they are "*unsure about where to go from here*." In other words, Wallace is perfectly aware of four things: 1) postmodern metafiction as a project has not been completed even though it "could" reach its goal through the imaginative extrapolation of an eschatological direction (which is undesirable and potentially dangerous); 2) literature with any pretention of being "after" postmodernism, because of that, is unsure where to go; 3) anyone attempting to "go anywhere" is in a very difficult position because they are ultimately latecomers; and 4) a writer standing at this terminus is ultimately *exhausted*, an exhaustion produced by being a latecomer, as well as an exhaustion with teleological constructions themselves.

Secondly, the "full course" of this casual bit of play is expressed near the end of the novella in fairly succinct terms as the teleological limit of advertising's ability to turn anxiety into desire, and ultimately anxiety *par excellence*—one's fear of death—into a desire *for* death. It is nothing new that the end of the world as revelatory fulfillment, as a sublimation of the anxieties associated with inevitable subjective death, is often presented as something to be *desired*, a goal toward which to strive. Wallace's irony transforms this apocalyptic desire into not merely a cultural *telos* but the goal of advertising itself. If postmodern advertising, as he is so aware, works first and foremost through the creation of anxieties that produce consumer desire to relieve those anxieties, then the "course of Empire," or rather, the pursuit of capital/advertising's goal must be the production of a desire for death.

Steelritter understands that the course of advertising has produced a strange aporia. On the one hand, advertising has had to constantly reinvent itself, to

constantly confront the fact that its strategies for producing consumer desire through control and conditioning are only temporary solutions. Campaigns that were once effective are now “tired image[s]. Hackneyed jingle[s].... Conditioning has obsolescence built right in” (340). On the other hand, the more effective, aesthetically complex, and subtle the advertising, the more it comes to be indistinguishable from the very televisual entertainment it accompanies, and consequently the desire to actually “leave the couch” to go out and buy the advertised product becomes more difficult through sheer inertia and enjoyment of the entertaining advertisement. “Your adman’s basic challenge: how to get folks’ fannies out of chairs; how to turn millennial boredom around, get things back on track, back toward the finish line?” (340). Steelritter’s solution to the adman’s problem is to manufacture a mass-desire for death, which he views as the one great universal fear, and which he imagines will make “the whole huge historical Judeo-Christian campaign...spin in reverse, from inside” (341). Steelritter hopes to turn scatology into eschatology, to leverage the ultimate form of cultural detritus, waste, and excrement—advertising—into a form that produces a desire for death, a love of death. For if the huge historical Judeo-Christian campaign’s goal is love of the neighbor or the other, a desire for death is total solipsistic love, a love of that which is in the individual more-than-herself, something *no one* can ever access or confront but the self: death. (And it should be clear here that this solipsistic desire is in-and-of-itself impossible to achieve, for the subject cannot access her death—i.e., death cannot be *experienced*.) In this fashion the historical formation of apocalyptic fear and desire, though clearly always an allegory for subjective death, is transformed, even if only slightly.

If metafiction’s goal has always been an “Armageddon-explosion,” it is important to understand that for Wallace this goal is ultimately not *external*, not an eschatology of the *world*, but of the subject. This desire for death is *threatening* because it is produced by and within the apparatus of postmodernism *par excellence*, the “~~text itself~~,” and the object of this threat is the solipsistically absorbed self confronting that text (whether it is advertising or metafiction). Furthermore, this desire for death, for the ultimate end, is produced by a system without a goal, without a *telos*. Capitalism does not have any aim except to endlessly reproduce itself, to create more capital. Wallace’s conception of the postmodern condition is significant in that he sees capitalism performing this reification by mobilizing narrative’s most basic feature: that it ends, that it is inherently eschatological. For any lines of flight to be available from this dominating logic, literary fiction, if it in any way hopes to go forward and present alternative possibilities, needs to divest itself of just such apocalypticism.

In these two ways—postmodernism’s self awareness of always already treating the apocalypse ironically, and its complicity with the culture industry’s destruction of subjectivity by producing a desire for death, for the

subject's reification produced *by* and *within* that subject—Wallace's project in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way" should be understood less as his transcending irony, but rather, following Paul de Man reading Schlegel's "irony of irony" or meta-irony, as an understanding that there is no *end* to irony whatsoever.

The act of irony, as we know [sic] understand it, reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality. Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse with the inauthentic. It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it. It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world. It dissolves in the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from its meaning, and it can find no escape from this spiral. (de Man 222)

I have tried to emphasize, by mobilizing de Man's theory of irony, that irony by its very nature is totalizing and destabilizing—one is simply *never* saying what one means—and drawing attention to Wallace's own familiarity with de Man I believe that we should not wholly take Wallace at his word in "E Unibus Pluram." The dominant mode of understanding Wallace's relationship to irony up until this point has been to read him as meta-ironic, or else read his work as a valiant effort to leave irony behind in favor of something resembling a "new sincerity." "Westward"'s fictional project should instead be read, if not as accomplishing, then at least as pointing toward a relationship to irony that is anti-eschatological, that acknowledges irony's fundamental "temporality that is not organic," and that "allows for no end, for no totality." In other words, Wallace's mode of getting metafiction's Armageddon-explosion "over with" is based on an acknowledgment that not only can there *not* be such an explosion, but that the whole aesthetic approach that privileges such an eschatology is not only problematic but threatening. "Westward" ultimately opens up and points toward how such an aesthetic project might be conceived. This project's fruition can everywhere be seen in *Infinite Jest*, a work that not only confronts the more "real" apocalyptic limits in the US and the world—nuclear war, environmental disaster, the catastrophe(s) of capitalism, the tyranny of networked-being—but is everywhere engaged in proposing alternatives to the reifying dominance of apocalyptic discourse.

NOTES

¹ In Lipsky's recently published book length interview with Wallace, conducted after the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace emphasized that he considered *Broom* "a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida" (35).

² It also must be noted that the doodle is one of Wittgenstein's famous language games. The drawing is of a duck that, if turned 90°, appears to be a rabbit. The lesson of this particular game is that what we call something is dependent upon how we perceive an object, in other words, a name depends upon the particulars of the linguistic situation. And this is also to emphasize Wittgenstein's point: "An image is not a picture, but a picture can correspond to it" (101°, 301).

³ In a curiously overlooked early essay on the state of fiction within the academy, published shortly after *Broom*, Wallace emphasized the familiarity a contemporary novelist must have with the major theoretical and philosophical achievements of twentieth-century thinkers (with overtly self-conscious name dropping):

The climate for the 'next' generation of American writers—should we decide to inhale rather than die—is aswirl with what seems like long-overdue appreciation for the weird achievements of such aliens as Husserl, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Lacan, Barthes, Poulet, Gadamer, de Man. The demise of Structuralism has changed a world's outlook on language, art, and literary discourse; and the contemporary artists can simply no longer afford to regard the work of critics or theorists or philosophers—no matter how stratospheric—as divorced from their own concerns...Language's promotion from mirror to eye, from *organikos* to organic, is yesterday's news (except in those two lonely outposts, TV and the Creative Classroom) as the tide of Post-Structuralism, Marxism, Feminism, Freudianism, Deconstruction, Semiotics, Hermeneutics, and attendant –isms and –ics moves through the ('Straight') US academy and into the consciousness of the conscious American adult. ("Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" 51)

⁴ For instance, see Wallace's review of H. L. Hix's *Morte d'Author: An Autopsy* in "Greatly Exaggerated," where he shows a more-than-passing familiarity with the history of the intellectual formation of deconstruction: "Hix's discussion isn't comprehensive, quite: Heidegger and Hegel are scarcely mentioned, Husserl (a major influence of Derrida) is absent, as are such important contemporary figures in the debate as Stanley Cavell...*Paul de Man*, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak" (*A Supposedly Fun Thing* 141, my emphasis). By calling attention to absent thinkers in Hix's text, Wallace is also slyly demonstrating his own wide reading in the subject. Recall also that de Man was one of those "aliens" Wallace referred to in his "Fictional Futures" essay.

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