e-ISSN 2420-823X

English Literature
Vol. 8 – December 2021

Wallace After Postmodernism (Again): Metamodernism, Tone, Tennis

Timotheus Vermeulen
University of Oslo, Norway

Abstract David Foster Wallace's writing has come to be synonymous with post-postmodernism. Strategies that are often singled out in this respect include the return to epic forms of storytelling; a post-ironic attitude towards its subject matter; a concern with empathy and affective generosity; and an ambiguous but reinvigorated relationship of language to 'reality'. In this essay I consider some of these in the context of visual art. The aim is less to map one onto another, detailing how much they have in common, than it is to tease out some of the differences between them so as to pinpoint Wallace's position on post-postmodernism's cognitive map across the disciplines.

Keywords David Foster Wallace. Metamodernism. Post-irony. Art. Identity. Tennis.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Everything Will be Alright – Right?. – 3 Tennis for One.

Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2021-10-18
Accepted 2021-11-26
Published 2022-03-16

Open access

© 2021 | Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License

Citation Vermeulen, T. (2021). "Wallace After Postmodernism (Again): Metamodernism, Tone, Tennis". *English Literature*, 8, 105-124.

DOI 10.30687/EL/2420-823X/2021/08/006

1 Introduction

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that David Foster Wallace, the man as much as his oeuvre, has come to be synonymous with what is variously labelled the "passing of postmodernism" (Toth 2010), a "succeeding postmodernism" (Holland 2013), "post-postmodernism" (McLaughlin 2012; Nixon 2013), and metamodernism (Vermeulen, Van den Akker 2010; Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen 2017). This correlation can hardly be called a surprise. After all, Wallace himself in a series of essays and interviews explicitly cast his doubts on postmodernism's critical sustainability, while not dismissing its legacy altogether. Indeed, his relationship to the postmodern structure of feeling oft seems defined in the first instance by these commentaries more than his novels, which, though less emphatic, can equally be read as attempts to liberate literature from what to many in the nineties had come to feel – rightly or wrongly – like an epistemological, poetic and ethical straightjacket. But certainly there have been plenty of insightful and incisive analyses of these latter attempts as well.

I am not a Wallace scholar. But from what I gather from the accounts of Wallace's relationship to postmodernism and its perceived passing, a few strategies and devices stand out. These include: the return to epic forms of storytelling, in terms of word count (Cioffi 2000), footnotes (cf. Letzler 2012; Nadel 2012) and worldbuilding (Hayes-Brady 2016), but also in the way of ethical coverage and ambition (cf. Boswell 2014; Sher 2015); a sincere or more specifically a post-ironic attitude towards its subject matter (Kelly 2010; Konstantinou 2016; 2017); a concern with empathy and affective generosity, both towards and between characters (Timmer 2010; 2017); the reconstitution of self beyond the Cartesian subject and its subsequent deconstruction (Den Dulk 2014; 2015); and an ambiguous but reinvigorated relationship of language to 'reality' (Bolger, Korb 2014; Hering 2015). I am certain that this list is not exhaustive (nor the selected references), but it suffices for my purposes here.

What strikes me about much of the scholarship around Wallace, post- and post-postmodernism – as well as, I suppose, a lot of the scholarship on literature and the cultural dominant more generally – is that it, firstly, pertains predominantly to an Anglophone and often quite centralized American and British context; that it, secondly, is discussed in virtual isolation from the other arts, be they museal and curatorial practices or popular media; and that it, thirdly, only rarely takes into account issues of representation, such as those of race, gender, or class. This observation is not a criticism. Not necessarily in any case. Wallace was an American author writing in an American context. His output, essayistic or novelistic, related to US culture and politics more than the goings-on in, say, Norway, or indeed places like Argentina, Bangladesh, Russia or Rwanda, even if

it might have, as Lucas Thompson (2017) has pointed out, been influenced by some of these countries' cultural traditions (e.g. the oeuvres of Borges and Dostoyevsky). It should not come as a surprise that most criticism concentrates precisely on this American and literary context.

At the same time, it seems self-evident that the study of Wallace would benefit from scholarship that takes into account a global or in any case more transnational view and that considers his writing alongside other media and cultural forms. Judging from his essays and interviews, Wallace was a voracious consumer of popular visual media, whilst the global sales and critical influence suggests that, whatever it was that he was onto, it resonated with interests and attitudes elsewhere in the world. To situate Wallace's writing in a broader cultural context does not diminish any of what renders it special to its readers. On the contrary, it might help us understand precisely why it has such an impact. Tastes, after all, are fickle: they change over time. But we do know that they do tend to be shared within cultures, classes, generations and/or locales.

In what follows, I consider some of the above-mentioned strategies and devices in the context of visual art, popular media and even politics. I am interested specifically in what scholars like Lee Konstantinou (2016; 2017) and Lukas Hoffman (2016) have called "post-irony": a critical reconsideration, often but not necessarily in the service of sincerity, empathy or immersion, of postmodernism's project of irony. The aim is less to map one onto another, detailing – or marvelling – how much they have in common; than it is to tease out some of the differences between them, the nuances that separate Wallace's attitude towards his stories, worlds and the people inhabiting them from for instance Ragnar Kjartansson's ambiguous relation to his material or Wes Anderson's tone in his cinematic oeuvre. What do Wallace and studies of Wallace have to offer accounts of contemporary art or movies and the critical discourses they have prompted, and vice versa?

Towards the end of this essay, I want to spend some time thinking through Wallace's relation to some of the current debates around identity, a concept or politics that is one of the pivots, I think it is fair to say, of whatever it is that the post-postmodern structure of feeling is about (Van den Akker, Gibbons, Vermeulen 2017; Brunton 2018). I will do this resorting to a little discussed but recurrent concern throughout his oeuvre, fictional or documentary: the tennis player. As decades of structuralism, poststructuralism and more recently the affective turn have demonstrated, notions of identity have historically been developed relationally: here and there, I and you, us and others. This relationality was rarely democratic: one party was generally thought of as the measure by which the other was to be judged. We all know who this measure was, of course: the white man, more

often than not from the upper ranks of the socio-economic stratum. Interestingly, though Wallace's writing is said to be characterized by a multiplication of viewpoints and worldviews, I would suggest that he, too, positions, quite literally, a baseline from which the others deviate. This baseline is that occupied by – who else but – the mostly white tennis player: John "No Relation" Wayne in *Infinite Jest*, but beyond that Michael Joyce, Tracy Austin, and Roger Federer, each of them at once the center of a culture's attention (for Hal, for April, for Wallace) and the 'black hole', if that's the term, in which all cultural sensibilities disappear; both more than human and nonhuman. If the first part of this essay takes the form of a generalizing overview, recontextualising some of the research I and others have done already, this latter argument is both specific and provisional: an attempt to begin making sense of a trope that I suspect is both central to Wallace's oeuvre and his relationship with post-postmodern culture, but that requires far more study to be persuasive: the tennis pro.

2 Everything Will be Alright – Right?

Lee Konstantinou (2016) has argued that one of the defining features of Wallace's work in the context of post-postmodernism is what he calls "post-irony". Post-irony describes an attitude characterized simultaneously by a problematization and affirmation of irony, the latter the unshakeable burden of having grown up, as Zadie Smith (2007) once put it, "under postmodernity"; to behave postironically means you do not want to put everything in quotation marks but feel that doing away with them altogether seems ill advisable too – and anyway, you cannot help yourself. Post-irony resembles the new sincerity, the popular label proposed by scholars like Adam Kelly (2010; 2016) and A.D. Jameson (2012), but is not the same exactly. What distinguishes postirony from the new sincerity is first that it does not delimit itself to a single response: sincerity is but one of many possible registers, which can include "commitment, or passion, or emotion, or decision" (Kelly 2016, 38). Second, post-irony does not articulate a liberation from irony as much as that it reconceives our relationship to irony. It does not presuppose, for one, that sincerity and irony stand in opposition to one another. It suggests on the contrary that they are not mutually exclusive at all. As such, it revises not just the relationship between sincerity and irony, but complicates the very notion of irony itself.

This account of Wallace's writing itself undoubtedly resonates with scholars of contemporary art or movies. Indeed, defined as such, Wallace's project seems to be the literary variant of what I and others in cultural theory and art history have described as a return of a 'Romantic desire' – characterised as it is by oscillation between extremes – in art (Vermeulen, van den Akker 2010) and what in film

studies is called “quirky” (MacDowell 2010; 2012; 2017) or “eccentric cinema” (Wilkins 2019). For example, this is how the critic Jerry Saltz in the mid 2000s characterized millennial art:

> I’m noticing a new approach to artmaking in recent museum and gallery shows […] It’s an attitude that says, I know that the art I’m creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn’t mean this isn’t serious. At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind. (2010)

And here is a description of ‘quirky’:

> a modal combination of the melodramatic with the comedic; a mixing of comic styles such as bathetic deadpan, comedy-of-embarassment and slapstick; a visual and aural style that frequently courts a fastidious and simplified sense of artificiality; and a thematic interest in childhood and ‘innocence’. Most pervasive, however, is a tone that balances ironic detachment from, and sincere engagement with, films’ fictional worlds and their characters. (MacDowell 2017, 29)

I argue indeed that Wallace’s post-irony shares an interest, tonal approach and possibly even politics with each of these, as well as similar sensibilities in music, architecture, politics and philosophy. There is even a name for this widely shared sensibility, this prevalent structure of feeling: metamodernism. But for now, I want to narrow this general sentiment down to a few more specific devices to compare them in more detail. I will return to metamodernism briefly later in the essay.

To corroborate Konstantinou’s argument, we might turn here to Wallace himself, whose oft-cited call for a critical rejoinder to postmodern irony in an interview with Larry McCaffery suggests both a more ambiguous relation to irony and a more nuanced – and multiplicitous – understanding of irony.

> The problem is that, however misprised it’s been, what’s been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem. You’ve got to understand that this stuff has permeated the culture. It’s become our language; we’re so in it we don’t even see that it’s one perspective, one among many possi-

e-ISSN 2420-823X

> ble ways of seeing. Postmodern irony's become our environment. (McCaffery 2012, 147-8)

This seems obvious to me, but let me say it nonetheless: Wallace here discusses post-irony but not necessarily sincerity. What he talks about, explicitly, is redemption, which suggests atonement for committed sins as much as it does absolving one from them. Certainly each of these, in their own sense, implies a sincere attitude towards both oneself and the subject matter – the sin. But they could equally be said to indicate distinct registers of commitment, passion, decision, and so forth: the commitment to do good, the decision to save whatever one can salvage. Similarly, the mentions variously of "sarcasm", "cynicism", "ennui", "suspicion" of authority, and a "penchant for […] diagnosis" might all be related, but they are each significantly different variations of the theme of irony. It is true that sarcasm and cynicism are each intersubjective distancing devices. But sarcasm signals contempt on behalf of the listener or reader, whereas cynicism, on the contrary, suggests the speaker (or their statement) is found to be untrustworthy. In the same vein, suspicion and diagnosis are both depth-models, yet the former assumes ulterior *motives*, whilst the latter is interested in involuntary *symptoms*.

Infinite Jest's attitude towards and treatment of irony are more convoluted. It remains ambiguous, tonally and concretely, as to what the alternatives to irony might be, describing it through expressly self-aware and perhaps even apologetic adjectives such as "*gooey* sentiment" and "*unsophisticated* naivety". This postirony, moreover, appears unachievable except for in times, sites and characters of what Giorgo Agamben might have called "exception", localized suspensions of the rule of law that precisely exemplify the rule of law beyond it ([1995] 1998), such as John Wayne's drug induced, incomprehensible stream of consciousness, AA meetings, and the posthumanised figure of Mario Incandenza, the stumbling, "grey-green" dinosaur – hardly sustainable models for a more rewarding sociality. This ambiguity seems partly the result of an indefinite notion of all that irony might entail: intersubjective distancing techniques, "weary cynicism" when it comes to truth, "embarrassment" and discomfort with what's "really real", a laugh that is not "happy". Kelly (2014) calls *Infinite Jest* a "novel of ideas", but I wonder in this regard if we should not rather think of it as 'poetic theory'; an intuitive feeling out of what the concepts that make up much of the characters' and our frameworks of signification might entail.

There are, Konstantinou (2017) contends, at least four types of postirony. These are: motivated postmodernism, credulous metafiction, the postironic bildungsroman, and relational art. Not all of these are drawn from the novels of Wallace, nor do they each apply to it. Indeed, only credulous metafiction can really be said to be relevant

here. Credulous metafiction is the use of postmodern form precisely to "reject postmodern content" (2017, 93). Postmodern form here includes self-reflexivity, intertextuality, formal play, pastiche and a generalized irony. The rejection of postmodern content more often than not takes the shape of a return to pre-postmodern values and commitments. Konstantinou cites Wallace, who described his own practice as "using postmodern techniques […] a postmodern aesthetic", but

> using that to discuss or represent very old traditional human verities that have to do with spirituality and emotion and community and ideas that the avant-garde would find very old-fashioned. (93)

In practice, what this might look like in his writing is the movement between styles, sites and multiple competing viewpoints to render a fragmented yet coherent universe, as is the case in *Infinite Jest*; or the explication of artificial strategies to achieve human connection, like in the short stories "Octet" and "Good Old Neon". Credulous metafiction uses the tools that cut short the relationship of the words to things (i.e. 'reality') precisely to try and put the two together again in whatever form it manages to muster, like a puzzle made with no instructions and with pieces that belonged to different boxes; or a Lego figure thought up by a child. The point here is not to make the reader believe, connect or immerse themselves in the reality but rather to suggest to them the possibility of *a real world*. Robert McLaughlin has elsewhere characterized this as follows: this writing explores

> how to live in the world with incomplete systems of knowledge, how various systems of knowledge can be linked together or embedded within one another to create a contingent but useful structure. (2012, 221)

In summary, credulous metafiction acknowledges that metafiction has broken the relationship between language and reality beyond repair but not salvation – for the puzzle from the box and the puzzle pieced together from different boxes both communicate worlds, just as the Lego figure built after the manual marks a character no less than the five-headed, unstable one put together from scratch.

This description of credulous metafiction in literature could well have been the wall text accompanying any one of the art works considered by Saltz in his commentary on PS1's generational showcase *Younger than Jesus*, or indeed, nearly all of the practices that Robin van den Akker and I have discussed under the rubric of the return of a 'Romantic Desire' in art, 'informed naivety' in film and 'pragmatic utopianism' in architecture specifically and metamodernism more generally, but let me here discuss just a few. I mentioned above video and performance artist Ragnar Kjartansson, whose best known work

God, from 2007, depicts the artist as a crooner – his hair slick with gel and wearing a bowtie and smoking – standing in front of an eleven-piece orchestra, the stage and walls covered in pink velvet drapes, singing for thirty minutes straight the line "Sorrow conquers happiness", carefully looking for new pronunciations, notes and octaves to voice it with each new iteration. The visual aesthetic jars with the lyrical semiotics, the first suggestive of a heightened nostalgia for, as a New Yorker profile put it, "Frank Sinatra and Technicolor musicals" (Tomkins 2016), whilst the second calls to mind, I suppose, either the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard or the state of mind of a depressive – or both. This semiotic sense, however, is in turn called into question by a third register: that of the artist repeating the line again and again and again, seemingly ad infinitum reiterating this sad experience of the world, like a mantra of *Weltschmerz*. Yet because Kjartansson continually changes the manner in which he articulates the line, now altering his intonation then deciding on another note, the effect of the semiotic repetition is paradoxically one of affective movement, of progress: a feeling out of the possibility that somewhere between or beyond the words there is hope for another experience, and, indeed, in that feeling out the very experience of hope is achieved, rendering this video not so much as a mocking, indifferent account of despair but rather a manifesto for keeping the faith.

Guido van der Werve's video *Nummer 8*, also from 2007, follows a similar feedback-loop trajectory, a double redirection. The video opens with a note against a black screen stating: "Nummer Acht. Everything will be alright", which is followed immediately by an extreme long shot of a man strolling leisurely on a frozen sea as an icebreaker just behind him literally threatens to crush the ground beneath his feet. This juxtaposition between the proclamation and its apparent negation – the man is so insignificant, the ship so massive, the distance between them negligible, an instance at once of the mathematical and the dynamic sublime that conjures an image of catastrophe – is as surprising here as it is a cliché more generally, since this type of pun is common in late modern and postmodern video art but more still cinema, with directors like Todd Solondz, Alexander Payne and Quentin Tarantino frequently preparing characters or audiences for one reality only to, as a rule in a deadpan manner, deliver the opposite: the declaration of love in exceptionally unflattering lighting, or followed by a fart, the ice cream that falls on the ground, the grenade that is stuck to the finger. Yet like Kjartansson, van der Werve casts doubt on the video's dualistic structure by reneging to fulfil the second promise as well: for the duration of the video, the man keeps strolling, in the same constant, unhurried pace, whilst the ship remains at the same distance. The claim that "everything will be alright" thus goes from 'assuring' to 'preposterous' to 'hopeful in spite of, well, every rational thought or logic'.

The conceptual framework that Robin van den Akker and I (2010; 2015) have used to describe these feedback-loops is that of Romantic Desire as described by the philosopher Jos de Mul or, before him, Isaiah Berlin, and, before him, who else but Schlegel: a continuous oscillation between viewpoints, the pendulum's swing maintained by the equal but inconsistent pull of each of the different dispositions. One moment Kjartansson pulls us towards enthusiasm, the next he relocates the weight to pessimism, sincerity to parody, nostalgia to meditative mantra, just as van der Werve wavers between hope, despair, deadpan, etc. I do not have the space here to detail this oscillation in the feature length movies associated with quirky cinema, such as Wes Anderson's *Royal Tenenbaums*, Spike Jonze's *Her*, Miranda July's *You, Me and Everyone we Know*, or more recently Greta Gerwig's *Ladybird*, but James MacDowell (2017) and Kim Wilkins (2019) have suggested a similar productive tension is at play here, pitting against one another plot and mise-en-scene or performance and place only to subsequently problematize that ambiguity through yet another stylistic device – a diegetic impossibility, the cliché of the happy end, etc.

I would argue that an important distinction between Wallace's credulous metafiction and the Romantic Desires of some of these artists is that Wallace looks in vain for convincing solutions to the problem of depoliticized or corporatized irony, whereas the performance of Kjartansson and the video loop of van der Werve (and indeed, much of quirky cinema) find solutions – it is just that they are purposefully unpersuasive. This distinction becomes all the more pronounced in overtly political art practices, such as Ulf Aminde, Yael Bartana or Jonas Staal's performances of utopias that are as riveting (can diasporic cultures claim back land? Is this democratically functioning parliament of banned and terrorist groups really possible?) as they are ridiculous (for the answer is ultimately always no, the utopian performances expansions of our imaginary horizons more than programme politics).

Compare Wallace's project to David Thorpe's collages. Made from a variety of eclectic materials such as glass, steel, bark, leather, oil paint, paper, wood, and ceramics, these collages, often small in size, depict worlds that appear at once familiar and strange – and as uncanny as they are unmistakably utopian. They are familiar in that they appropriate conventions and motifs many of which can be assumed part of our globalised collective unconscious: we have seen them before, even if we might not be able to say where or when. These include: mid-century science fiction, new age and sectarian iconography, Populuxe, German Romanticism, nineteenth century American landscape painting, traditional Japanese wood cutting, Nietzsche's tightrope walker, indigenous architecture, and a range of religious and messianistic imagery and pagan elements. What is strange is that these eclectic conventions are not merely put into contact but seam-

e-ISSN 2420-823X

lessly integrated, an achievement that would appear to be ethically transgressive to the point of being impossible since they each connote conflicting and in many cases incommensurable worlds: single-minded utopias that either were never realized or that, upon actualization, turned into dystopias; but in any case truth systems that would not allow for any of the others. It is little surprise, in this regard, that few of the collages are populated: these imaginary places are not to be lived in. Indeed, few of the church and temple-like structures even have doors. Thorpe, in other words, constructs novel utopias by picking and mixing fragments and rubble from precisely those all-consuming, mutually exclusive grand narratives that postmodernism helped us dispel; a vision for the future that shows us the warnings from the past, an activist piecing together loose puzzle parts they found in a historian's archive, science fiction fair, and New Age second hand shop (for a detailed study of Thorpe's oeuvre see Vermeulen, Van den Akker 2015).

I think it is fair to say that Wallace and Thorpe's aesthetic registers have little in common: mathematics versus mythology, flat and barren midwestern landscapes vis à vis mountainous forests, the presence of people as absence versus the absence of people as presence, tennis as opposed to tightrope walking. Yet they certainly share an ethical concern: both appropriate postmodern techniques – or in any case techniques we've come to associate with postmodernism – such as self-reflexivity, eclecticism and/or pastiche, to invoke the tradition of the epic. I use the term epic here not simply to talk about a distinct poetic register, plot or length, but the expansive, incomplete and often contradictory world that these instantiate and of which they are a consequence. For as classicist John Peradotto notes, epics are defined as much by their teleological purposiveness as they are by "the gaps, the disjunctions, inconsistencies, contradictions, and indeterminacies" (Peradotto 2011, 390): however much ground a story covers, it is only a fragment of a cosmos the bounds of which are unknown. Indeed, epics often draw attention precisely to the myths that we do not get access to, the routes we will not travel, the characters we do not get to meet. The epic's "referentiality", writes Marilyn Katz, "is forever open to question" (Katz cited in Peradotto 2011, 390). *Infinite Jest* moves eclectically and self-reflexively between stories, lines of inquiry, characters, voices, styles, times, places and referential frameworks so as to communicate and immerse us in a world that appears to be near-infinitely expandible: each new story, character, or timeline adds to the world, to the point that the reader assumes the world is less an afterthought, a side-effect, than the novel's central concern; and not a closed system but a topology, opening up into all directions without fundamentally changing its ontological properties. Similarly, Thorpe's range of material, stylistic and ethical references is so varied that one cannot imagine anything being

e-ISSN 2420-823X

off-limits; indeed, in some sense Thorpe's collages remind me of the 'Wimmel' paintings of Brueghel or Bosch, where the most diverse, perverse and above all unrelated scenes compete for our attention across the visual field – just collapsed into one.

Evidently, Wallace is more descriptive, detailed, delineatory, in his account of the fictional world then Thorpe is. This includes the explicit address of referential frameworks, often through footnotes of scholarly length and precision. It is no surprise that Wallace's writing is often called "encyclopaedic" (Letzler 2012). Thorpe's collages are certainly representative, forms and colours designating recognisable objects, but minimalist and limited in size. The works also offer little in the way of explanation as to the references included and/or drawn on. Narrative, ontological properties and cultural context are the spectator's to figure out. If these differences appear unimpressive or insignificant, let me assure you they are not: they point to the artists' respective attitudes towards their work as well the nature of their engagement with us, a subtle but elementary distinction between two types, or media, or even pedagogies. Wallace sets out to connect with us by taking us by the hand, like an overeager parent or teacher, guiding us to the best of his ability through this world with the express purpose, I would argue, of having us experience differently and as such discover alternate models for inhabiting and reterritorializing ours. Thorpe, on the contrary, takes what I suppose we can call a more Montessorian or Steinerian approach: he allows us to explore and figure out this world – which is, of course, itself equally a commentary or revision of ours – and its possibilities on our terms.

I want to draw attention here, finally, to another recently popular approach in art making that is called 'parafiction'. Art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty defines parafiction as follows:

> like a paramedic as opposed to a medical doctor, a parafiction is related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction as established in literary and dramatic art […] It does not perform its procedures in the hygienic clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real. Unlike historical fiction's fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust. (2009, 54)

Interestingly, most parafiction I have come across the past years is explicit about its reference to fiction to the point of caricature: the real is reterritorialized by the most overtly surreal scenarios. If parafiction is about the "pragmatics of trust", its purpose appears to be to see just how far they can stretch that trust: how far are we able to extend our horizon of possibilities before it collapses in on

us? One case that I myself have written about in this context (Vermeulen 2014; Vermeulen and Van den Akker 2017) is Oscar Santillan's installation *Zephyr*, which was created between 2012 and 2014. *Zephyr* provides the account of the artist's real trip to the Ecuadorian Jungle to posthumously realise Carl Jung's alleged desire to see the Civilization of the Jaguar. Santillan's method for achieving this was, a slideshow of titled snapshots inform us entirely in earnest, to ask a local shaman for route descriptions, take a vacuum cleaner and suck up jaguar smells and dust from the assigned site, and deposit these into a sculpture that was made after Jung's astrological birth chart. The sculpture is placed squarely within the exhibit atop a thin column. This installation both multiplies and exacerbates the feedback loops or double negations characterizing the work of Wallace, Kjartansson et al. Indeed, each new element here reterritorializes the previous: the earnestness and even gravitas of the presentation (a darkened room, the clicking sound of the slideshow, the sacralization of the sculptural object as trace) versus the absurdity of the endeavor, the shaman and the vacuum cleaner, the smells as deposits, the sculpture and the birth chart, the whole unsubstantiated but possibly true backstory of Jung's desire, past and future, exoticism and the Occident, colonialism and heritage, the report of the slideshow and the indexicality suggested by the sculpture. The whole experience is as moving as it is ridiculous, imbuing upon the visitor the sense of significance being sought, meaning made, even in the most unlikely of combinations and configurations. Santillan scrambles together remains of a range of conflicting but each now abandoned systems of signification and affect, indeed, 'puzzles', to try and unearth something, anything of spiritual value in the process. If Wallace's postironic attitude in *Infinite Jest* is called credulous metafiction, then this might be labelled credulous metalepsis, or alternatively incredible realism.

Wallace's postironic attitude, thus, even as narrowly defined as it is here through the register of credulous metafiction, resonates across these various artistic and cinematic practices, regardless of their formal differences or ethical disagreements. Yet, to be sure, this resonance has little to do with the reflexive recursivity of the mirror. Rather it might be compared to what I believe in English is called the Telephone Game: a story is passed on from one to the other, and though the gist remains the same, its developments, characters and outcomes do not: possible impossibilities and impossible possibilities, encyclopedic epics and ill-defined myths, generosity of spirit and trust-based action, forking paths and circular reasoning. I do not think that Wallace initiated this game, to be sure; I doubt any one artist has. It is more likely that many of them around the same time began hearing, truly or falsely, whispers from all over the place – generational fatigue, historical revisionism, socio-economic

crises, political discourse, climate change, the advent of the Internet and later social media; fragments they themselves pieced together in whatever format made intuitive sense to them and which they shared with others, whether out of kindness, desperation or narcissism. What matters is that this indexical diffusiveness and incompleteness notwithstanding they each had the desire to reach out to one another – to connect. This – all of this – taken together, I would argue, is what we might call the 'metamodern structure of feeling': the intent to look for meaning precisely where you are unlikely to find it, together with varying others – but going ahead with it nonetheless because there is not anywhere else to rummage left; a re-energised and dispersed modernist impulse held in check (for better or worse) by postmodern doubt.

3 Tennis for One

"Wallace's characters and narrators", Timmer writes, "are not good at all at explicating what really moves them, what they truly value" (2017, 115). They are, of course, quite accomplished at talking through what they do not appreciate, about themselves or others: their anhedonia masking their existential loneliness, described as an inability to connect fully to the 'human' they hope but are by no means sure is still hiding somewhere deep inside of them. Few of Wallace's protagonists are more reflective, of course, than Hal Incandenza:

> Hal Incandenza, though he has no idea yet of why his father really put his head in a specially-dickied microwave in the Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar, is pretty sure that it wasn't because of standard U.S. anhedonia. Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like joie and value to be like so many variables in rarified equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being – but in fact he's far more robotic than John Wayne. One of his troubles with his Moms is the fact that Avril Incandenza believes she knows him inside and out as a human being, and an internally worthy one at that, when in fact inside Hal there's pretty much nothing at all, he knows. His Moms Avril hears her own echoes inside him and thinks what she hears is him, and this makes Hal feel the one thing he feels to the limit, lately: he is lonely. (694)

What is intriguing about this fragment is that Hal's neuroticism, perceiving himself as hollowed out, is communicated relationally: in relation to his father, the mystic/charlatan; his mom, the delusional; and, above all, John Wayne, the academy's star tennis player, who

he suspects of never having had any interior depth at all – an automaton, a 'robot'. Elsewhere in the novel other types are proposed, of course – the addict, the mathematic, the hysterical – but they are each variations on the same relational theme: responses to hollowness, depthlessness. For Wallace, identity is relational not by choice but by necessity: whatever homunculi, souls or transcendence there might once have been, it is gone now, consumed like any other commodity (undergarment, whoppers) by the late capitalist culture they inhabit and which – judging from the description of the "echoes" – inhabit them. This Cartesian emptiness is an open wound that, depending on the character, is confronted, oppressed, or disavowed differentially. To Hal's mind, the single exception is Wayne, however. For this "robot", supposedly, this emptiness is not a signifier of loss nor liberation but simply the absent index of presence. He passes through culture unaffected and culture passes through him unaffectively. Indeed, in a paradoxical sense, what renders Hal and others human, still, is precisely this ability to be culturally dehumanised. Wayne, in this regard, was never human to begin with: he is nonhuman.

There has, to my knowledge, been very little writing on Wayne, and the reasons would appear obvious: he is but a minor character; he appears almost exclusively anecdotally, in descriptions of others; and much of what these accounts tell us about him – a "machine" with "stellar calf-development" (956), "reserve in motion" (1073), whose locker is "neat and organized" (103), someone with only "one gear" (1010) with an "unreadable expression" – does not speak to the imagination, exactly, unless you're a fan of science fiction, and robots. (His single redeeming quality would seem to be that he farts like a Canadian, lifting one leg slightly, but this too is generic, the opposite of specific to him). At the same time, however, Wayne stands out, is to the other players what his famous namesake is to the other Waynes: the measure. He is the player they all desire to be, the one they compare themselves to. He is also the one they want (to want) to be more like them. They do not know how to interact with him, this silent guy with his "unreadable expression" – who, when he speaks, does so in platitudes and clichés. Larger than life and the most insignificant of them all, central to so much of the narrative and yet himself for the most part absent from the narration. (Indeed, there are a few indications in the text that hint at Wayne precisely as enigma: his obvious working class roots, his relationship with his family and country, his inner life as implied by the Joni Mitchell CD he quietly listens to, his acting out – or being abused into – what would appear to be Avril's sexual fantasy, and, of course, his final, drug-induced stream-of-conscious).

Readers of Wallace's essays on tennis (2014)[1] know these qualities well, for he describes exceptional tennis players along the same lines: idealized athletes who disappoint us spiritually ("flat" and "affectless" are words that are used frequently), human aliens who experience life on such different terms from most of us (moving with "transcendent beauty that makes manifest God in man" – from the essay on Austin) that they cannot be described in the vernacular we use to connote the latter, automatons beyond idiocy or mysticism, or sincerity or irony – for whom the cliché is not trite but "simply true", "imperatives that are either useful or not and, if useful, to be invoked and obeyed and that's all there is to it" (from the essay on Joyce). Considering the sparse allusions to Wayne to these latter reports, I argue that what these characters have in common is their relationship to their immediate environment, which is at once acute and disaffected. "Ascetic", Wallace calls it somewhere (Joyce). "Childlike", elsewhere (Austin). In Wallace's accounts, tennis pros pass through their environment and let it pass through them as evenly and cleanly as possible, except for the moments on the court, when they act in motion with it (as he puts it, like in *The Matrix*).

There are three observations I want to share here, provisionally. The first is this: in Wallace's conceptual framework of identity and culture, the tennis pro occupies a special place: they are both the frame, the boundary outside of which we are no longer in the territory of humans but nonhumans; and what in painting is called the 'vanishing' or 'direction' point, the point on the image plane where all lines converge – and which as a rule corresponds to the 'eye point', the position from which the whole should be viewed. This 'vanishing point' is either the invisible origin of humanity, humanity before culture; or alternately, as some commentators have suggested, a materialist understanding of the self, which is to say, the disintegration of the mind-body split (the "ghost in the machine") and the reconstitution of a monadic self, a "machine in the ghost" (cf. Burn 2012; Hering 2016). The tennis player, after all, is as pragmatic as they are unreflective. This, probably, is why Wallace finds them so fascinating: they are at once nonhuman and more than human. As for Wallace's other characters – and the rest of us: they find themselves suspended between, a ball moving between the baseline and net – which is to say, of course, a rock and a hard place.

The second observation is that this privileged position would seem to be not entirely unrelated to the tennis player's class and race. Even though Wayne is suggested to come from a working class background, tennis is not a working class game and indeed Wayne's life at the school, perched atop a hill towering over the rest of town, is no

1 Since I make use of the epub version, I refer to essay titles instead of page numbers.

e-ISSN 2420-823X

longer working class, economically or socially. The players to whom the essays are devoted are without exception middle class. What all of them further have in common is that they are white. What this suggests is that Wallace's framework for identity – the baseline and the net – quite literally is middle class and white (see also Hayes-Brady 2016). Indeed, I do wonder whether athletes playing sports that are either or both less middle class or/and less white, and especially athletes that are themselves neither of those, could serve the same function. Judging from recent discussions in popular media, especially around Colin Kapernick taking the knee and Lebron James' spat with Zlatan Ibrahimovic, which centered around the question whether an athlete should bring their politics to the game or their game to the politics, it seems unlikely. It might be further noted, in this regard, that much of the debates around post-irony, or indeed Romantic Desire in art or quirky in cinema, has been concerned precisely with middle class, white and more often than not urban authors, artists, filmmakers and characters. Given the difficulty in conceiving of a conceptual framework of identity and culture not bounded or centered around middle class or white athletes, how representative are these developments, really? Or put like this: who might we assume to be represented by them? If this question seems disingenuous to you, or at least an oversimplification, I urge you to consider those cultural products concerned with baseball, like the novels of Bernard Malamud, Phillip Roth or more recently Chad Harbach, or the films of Ken Burns or Richard Linklater: as scholars of these works have long acknowledged (cf. Elias 2001; Baker 2021), the American Dream as it is presented by the 'national pastime' is generally exclusive to middle class, white men from rural towns.

In the context of these two observations, let me make a third and final comment. Wallace's suggestion for a meaningful mediation of one's suspense on the tennis court, which was all he could imagine in the absence of a conceivable possibility to exit, i.e. to transcend, it altogether, was intersubjective care, empathy (Timmer 2010). His novels establish, between author and reader as much as between characters, what we might call a 'sensitive' or 'affective' community: slivers of space momentary sliced open in the middle of the game, sensations of a live lived differently only fleetingly available yet forever reterritorializing the horizon of possibilities beyond the baseline – on the baseline. It is this affective generosity – one that combines the ambition of the depth-model with the pragmatism of materialism, resulting in a performance of transcendence in a theatre where the audience knows metaphysics are a myth (a sentiment I have elsewhere described as "depthiness" – Vermeulen 2015) – that offers the impossible possibility of recontextualization, of reterritorializing the competitiveness, rules, divisions and straight lines of the tennis court into one of companionship.

If we ask after Wallace's reach beyond literature, I am not sure this suggestion has been heeded, especially not by the millennials and generation Z that are so often felt to be his intellectual and spiritual disciples. Here, in the despising and despicable post-truth populism of the alt right as much as the well-intentioned woke culture, this care itself is often argued to have become yet another abstracted commodity, a prized object to exchange on the public marketplace of moral virtue (Dean 2009). Not a use value as much as an exchange value. Not a reterritorialization of the competitive logic of the tennis court but another trick in the player's arsenal. Whether this is a fair assessment or not I am not sure, but judging from most self-presentations on social media and accounts in popular fiction ranging from *The Flame Alphabet* to *The Topeka School*, *I May Destroy You* to *The Chair*, and the comedy of Hannah Gadsby to the stand-up of Dave Chapelle, it is certainly one that is widely shared. Consider, for instance, this conversation between a middle-aged couple and their daughter in the recent HBO hit series *The White Lotus* (season 1, episode 3), a show concerned partly with this generational disparity. Father Mark, played by Steve Zahn, has just found out that his father, who was his role-model for how to be a man, was gay – and died of AIDS. He is taken by surprise by the news to the point of shock. His daughter Olivia (Sydney Sweeney) finds it difficult to empathise, as does her friend Paula (Brittany O'Grady). This, in turn, annoys Olivia's mom Nicole (Connie Britton).

Olivia: Dad, why are you so upset, though? You're like catatonic.
Nicole: Well, it was a secret that was kept from him his entire life, Liv. So now, whatever image he had of his father, of his childhood, has been pulverized.
Olivia: You know, he was probably a bottom. That's how you mostly get it, receiving. Dad, do you feel like your father was less of a man or something? […] Even if he wasn't a top, it doesn't mean he was a femme. He could've still been butch, dad. […] Maybe he was a power bottom. Does that make you feel better?
Mark: No. That makes me want to throw up.
Olivia: Dad, you don't want to say that.
Nicole: Well, he can say whatever he wants. You know, if he's having a negative visceral reaction to his father having gay sex, it's valid. It's fine.
Olivia: Well, it comes off as homophobic.
Nicole: Well, it's not. […] Luckily he is in a safe space and he's here with our family, so he can come off however he wants.
Olivia: Up to a point.
Nicole: Or what, you'll cancel him? Dox him? Sic the K-Pop fans on him?
Olivia: See [to Paula] what I have to deal with?

The White Lotus plays out empathy along two lines, which run parallel but never meet. The first is Nicole's private empathy for her husband's shock regardless of whether this is publicly ethically considerate (which, to be clear, it is not). Let us call this concrete and contextual empathy 'hypothetical'. The second is Olivia's public ethical consideration for an oppressed minority, LGBTQ, which allows no private affective generosity towards her father's feelings. Traditional philosophers might have termed this abstract and decontextualised ethics 'categorical'. This categorical approach is, however, suggested to be a question of principle as much as it is of peer-approval, and as much about the other as about oneself: she looks at Paula throughout to gauge her friend's opinion. Paradoxically, here, empathy is not so much a means of reaching out, as it is of receiving back. If it is absolute, it is also 'impure', disingenuous. It is a moral virtue not in its own right but to be shown off to others. To return to the vernacular of critics like Jodi Dean described above: it is less a use value than exchange value, not a signified but signifier. It buys one social credit.

Wallace proposes, in *Infinite Jest* as well as his other novels, essays and interviews, an intimate, immediate empathy that allows for the possibility of a more abstract affective generosity. What *The White Lotus* here suggests is that the former does not necessarily imply the latter, indeed, it might actually impede it, an extrapolated 'cruel optimism'; and that generation Z have turned their attention to empathy, but without heart, just another signifier in an endless chain of signifiers that has long been detached from whatever reality it was once locked to. This does not only not open up within the tennis court spaces of community, as Wallace had hoped, but is the opposite of what he had in mind: it closes down, fills up, even those remaining niches and cracks.

Bibliography

Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Akker, van den R.; Vermeulen, T. (2017). "Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism". Van den Akker, R.; Gibbons, A.; Vermeulen, T. (eds), *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*. London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 1-20.

Akker, van den R.; Gibbons, A.; Vermeulen, T. (2017). *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Baker, A. (2021). "Hollywood Baseball Films: Nostalgic White Masculinity or the National Pastime?". *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, n.p.

Bolger, R.K.; Korb, S. (2014). *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and philosophy*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Boswell, M. (2014). *David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing”: New Essays on the Novels*. London; New York. Bloomsbury.
Brunton, J. (2018). “Whose (Meta)modernism?: Metamodernism, Race, and the Politics of Failure”. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 41(3), 60-76.
Burn, S.J. (2012). *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
Cioffi, F.L. (2000). “An Anguish Become Thing: Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*”. *Narrative*, 8(2), 161-81. `https://www.jstor.org/stable/20107209`.
Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism & Left Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Den Dulk, A. (2014). “Boredom, Irony, Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self”. Boswell, M. (ed.), *David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing”: New Essays on the Novels*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 43-60.
Den Dulk, A. (2015). *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
Elias, R. (2001). *Baseball and the American Dream: Race, Class, Gender and the National Pastime*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.
Hayes-Brady, C. (2016). *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
Hering, D. (2016). *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
Hoffmann, L. (2016). *Postirony The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers*. Berlin: Transcript Verlag.
Holland, M. (2013). *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
Jameson, A.D. (2012). “Theory of Prose & Better Writing (ctd): The New Sincerity, Tao Lin, & *Differential Perceptions*”. *HTMLGIANT*, May 28. `http://htmlgiant.com/craft-notes/theory-of-prose-better-writing-ctd-the-new-sincerity-differential-perceptions/`.
Kelly, A. (2010). “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction”. Hering, D. (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 131-46.
Kelly, A. (2014). “David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas”. Boswell, M. (ed.), *David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing”: New Essays on the Novels*. London; New York: Bloomsbury, 3-22.
Kelly, A. (2016). “The New Sincerity”. Gladstone, J.; Hoberek, A.; Worden, D. (eds), *Postmodern/Postwar and After: Rethinking American Literature*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 197-208.
Konstantinou, L. (2016). *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
Konstantinou, L. (2017). “Four Faces of Postirony”. Van den Akker, R.; Gibson, A.; Vermeulen, T. (eds), *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*. London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 87-102.
Lambert-Beatty, C. (2009). “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility”. *October*, 129, 51-84.
Letzler, D. (2012). “Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction: *Infinite Jest*’s Endnotes”. *Studies in the Novel*, 44(3), 304-24.

MacDowell, J. (2010). “Notes on Quirky”. *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, 1, 1-16.
MacDowell, J. (2012). “Wes Anderson, Tone and the Quirky Sensibility”. *The New Review of Film & Television Studies*, 10(1), 1-22.
MacDowell, J. (2017). “The Metamodern, the Quirky, and Film Criticism”. Van den Akker, R.; Gibson, A.; Vermeulen, T. (eds), *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*. London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 25-40.
McCaffery, L. (2012). “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace”. Burn, S.J. (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 21-52.
McLaughlin, R.L. (2012). “Post-Postmodernism”. Bray, J.; Gibbons, A; McHale, B. (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*. London; New York: Routledge, 212-23.
Nadel, I.B. (2012). “Consider the Footnote”. Cohen, S.; Konstantinou, L. (eds), *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 218-40.
Nixon, C.R. (2013). *The Work of David Foster Wallace and Post-Postmodernism* [PhD dissertation]. Leeds: University of Leeds.
Peradotto, J. (2011). “Modern Theoretical Approaches to Homer”. Morris, I.; Powell, B.P. (eds), *A New Companion to Homer*. Leiden: Brill, 380-95.
Saltz, J. (2010). “Sincerity and Irony Hug It Out”. *New York Magazine*, May 27. https://nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/66277/.
Sher, G. (2015). “Wallace, Free Choice, and Fatalism”. Cahn, S.M.; Eckert,M. (eds), *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace*. New York: Columbia University Press, 31-56.
Smith, Z. (2007). “Fail Better”. *The Guardian*, January 13. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/21/zadie-smith-you-ask-the-questions-self-doubt.
Thompson, L. (2017). *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
Timmer, N. (2010). *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
Toth, J. (2010). *The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary*. Albany (NY): SUNY Press.
Tomkins, C. (2016). “Play It Again: How Ragnar Kjartansson Turns Repetition into Art”. *New Yorker*, April 4. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/11/ragnar-kjartansson-on-repeat.
Vermeulen, T. (2014). “Oscar Santillan”. *Frieze*, 167, November-December, 120-1.
Vermeulen, T. (2015). “The New Depthiness”. *E-Flux*, 61 (1). http://www.e-flux.com/journal/61/61000/the-new-depthiness/.
Vermeulen, T.; Van den Akker, R. (2010). “Notes on Metamodernism”. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2(1), n.p.
Vermeulen, T.; Van den Akker, R. (2015). “Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism”. *Studia Neophilologica*, 87(1), 55-67.
Vermeulen, T.; Van den Akker, R. (2017). “Parafiction, Autofiction, Perfiction”. Hoare, N. (ed.), *Para/Fictions*. Rotterdam: Witte de With Publishers, 19-29.
Wilkins, K. (2019). *American Eccentric Cinema*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.