Humor after Postmodernism: David Foster Wallace and Proximal Irony

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In *Irony's Edge* (1994), Linda Hutcheon notes that the study of irony has tended to overshadow considerations of humor. "There has been a paucity of major scholarly work on the language of humor," Hutcheon argues, "because irony tends to be considered the "more appropriately 'serious' object of academic study" (25). In her earlier book, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Hutcheon helped to establish a particularly postmodern understanding of irony by championing the "subversive potential of irony, parody, and humor in contesting the universalizing pretensions of 'serious' art" (19). Few scholars have done more to connect the irreverence and ludic wordplay of postmodern literature to the concept of distanced irony than Hutcheon, yet her work clearly evinces a tension between this comic dimension of postmodern irony and the broader, "serious" critical aims of postmodernism to debunk cultural myths. While "irony makes . . . intertextual references into something more than simply academic play or some infinite regress into textuality," she points out, it does so through postmodern literature's humorous and parodic tendency to call attention to our representational structures (*Politics of Postmodernism* 95). Ludic, but with a serious edge, Hutcheon's image of postmodern literature has developed a foundationally important ironic critique of authority and authorial control based on a uniquely humorous style.

Like Hutcheon, the late American writer David Foster Wallace was concerned with the relationship between critical distance and the humorous aspects of postmodern irony. For Wallace, however, by the early 1990s postmodernism had lost its critical edge, along with the subversive potential of its ironic form. If Wallace worried that the critical distance that postmodern irony claimed had been effectively incorporated into the mainstream, he also acknowledged that this ironic form had become inescapably pervasive. At the same time that Hutcheon was turning scholarly attention to the "subversive potential of irony, parody, and humor," Wallace was writing analytical essays such as "E Unibus Pluram" (1993), which explored the themes of irony and parody in terms of the all-encompassing culture of television and other pop-media. In this key early essay, Wallace announces his abandonment of the intertextual, detached, critical form of irony that Hutcheon champions in favor of what I will call "proximal irony," a style of writing that maintains its playful sensibility while also acknowledging an un-distanced emotional involvement with the narrative's characters and events. Throughout his writing, Wallace develops a number of terms for describing proximal irony, including the key notion of the *komisch* adapted from his interpretation of Kafka, but through all the permutations of his humorous style, Wallace maintains the constant sense that he is too close to judge the strange fictional characters he creates in his novels and essays.

Proximal irony functions as Wallace's response to the malaise of late postmodernism as he saw it, a period characterized by an unstintingly cool irony in television and fiction. While these media "are entertaining and effective," Wallace argues, "at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture" that pose "terrible problems" for "aspiring fiction writers" like Wallace ("E Unibus Pluram" 49). Whereas Hutcheon locates a redeeming quality in postmodern irony's self-conscious attention to reflexivity, Wallace identifies it as the signal problem for artists and writers of his gen-

eration, because the endless, self-referential cycle of parody and pastiche ends by dominating any other dimensions of expression. For Wallace, new writers must find their way beyond the reflexive trap of postmodernism without losing the valuable attitude of play and irreverence that characterized its literature. Acknowledging his debt to insightfully comic writers like Don DeLillo, William Gaddis, and Robert Coover, Wallace nonetheless makes his case against the so-called "serious" intertextual dimension that Hutcheon identifies as the salient feature of postmodern critique.

If Wallace worries that "irony tyrannizes us" ("E Unibus Pluram" 67), it is surprising that he is also widely acknowledged as one of the funniest writers of his generation.[1] In contrast to Hutcheon, Wallace dehisces the twin effects of detached irony and humor, maintaining the style of play that for Hutcheon is intimately and tensely bound together with postmodernism's claims to cultural critique. Identifying himself with the group of aspiring authors whom he jokingly called the "Conspicuously Young Writers," such as Jay McInerney and David Leavitt, Wallace sought to reimagine the boundaries of postmodern fiction, dispensing with the sense of superior detachment he saw as the major problem with ironic distance. Instead, his deeply playful and often transgressive writing exhibits a sense of proximity and intimacy, generating a proximal irony that stays very close to its subject. His humor is rarely *about* his characters, but rather shares in their experiences and debacles, seeking points of connection from within the rhythms of their worlds.

Tracking Wallace's strong rejection of postmodern irony, Adam Kelly has argued that his fiction represents a turn toward a "new sincerity" (131). In his comments about the role of young writers in American culture, Wallace seems to confirm Kelly's interpretation. In a frequently quoted interview with Larry McCaffery following the publication of "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace claims that fiction should be about "what it is to be a fucking human being" (130), and elsewhere he contrastively accuses postmodern authors of "narcissism."[2] These concerns with "sincerity" do not prevent Wallace from developing a well-honed sense for the paradoxes and confusions of contemporary American life. Although he saw postmodern irony as making the fatal assumption "that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom," Wallace's writing rejects the inside/outside model of imprisonment and liberation in favor of the acknowledgment that we are all embedded in our environments ("E Unibus Pluram" 67). In short, for Wallace there is no ironic distance because there is no outside to experience. Sincerity, in this sense, is not about self-consistency or a commitment to larger ethical issues so much as the honest acknowledgment of one's ubiety, one's inevitable involvement in *this* particular world. Wallace's writing takes full advantage of this insight, developing his humor from the bizarre worlds and heterogeneous characters populating his fiction and prose.

This proximal irony invests Wallace's reportage as much as his fiction. Learning from ironically recursive forms like "the new journalism" but ultimately taking leave of them, Wallace's comic style develops a sense of embeddedness that pervades his writing.[3] Wallace's account of a luxury cruise for *Harper's*, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" (originally published as "Shipping Out" in 1997), exemplifies this refusal to create ironic distance. Embarking on a cruise liner he dubs the "Nadir," Wallace depicts a "microcosm" of pampering and privilege that admittedly makes him paranoid (350). Describing the cleaning service, he writes,

> The feeling's not all that dissimilar to the experience of being a guest in the home of somebody who does things like sneak in in the A.M. and

> make your guest bed up for you while you're in the shower and fold your dirty clothes or even launder them without being asked to, or who empties your ashtray after each cigarette you smoke, etc. For a while, with a host like this, it seems great, and you feel cared about and prized and affirmed and worthwhile, etc. But then after a while you begin to intuit that the host isn't acting out of regard or affection for you so much as simply going around obeying the imperatives of some personal neurosis having to do with domestic cleanliness and order . . . which means that, since the ultimate point and object of the cleaning isn't you but rather cleanliness and order, it's going to be a relief for her when you leave. (299)

The humor of this passage derives from tracing the narrator's thought sequence from a warm sense of wellbeing to an uncomfortable sense of guilt that, Wallace argues, saturates the entire experience of the cruise, creating an uneasy feeling of "pampering-paranoia": "I fully grant that mysterious invisible room-cleaning is in a way great, every true slob's fantasy," Wallace writes, "somebody materializing and deslobbing your room and then dematerializing . . . But there is also, I think, a creeping guilt here, a deep accretive uneasiness" (297). The humor of these passages depends on more than the reader's ability to relate to the Wallacian narrator; it requires an involvement in Wallace's microcosm of quirks, an investment in the hangups and fascinations through which he views the unfamiliar environment of the cruise ship.

Both familiar and strange, Wallace's microcosms are replete with small, disorienting objects that gain their shape and texture from within the non-normative perception of his characters and narrators. "The ingenious consideration of the anti-slime soap dish is particularly affecting," Wallace notes in his extensive elaboration of his cabin. The proximal irony of these remarks (which pile up as the essay goes on) develops out of the pervasive feelings of guilt, paranoia, and agoraphobia that haunt Wallace's narrator throughout his luxury cruise (302). Unwilling to simply accept his environment, he is constantly analyzing his context without, however, gaining an analytic distance on his situation: "There is something inescapably bovine about an American tourist in motion as part of a group. A certain greedy placidity about them. Us, rather. In port we automatically become Peregrinator americanus, Die Lumpenamerikaner" (310). Critical of the "Lumpenamerikaner" but inseparably bound to this group like an animal to its genus, Wallace's narrator is embedded in an environment that is thicker, more three-dimensional than his intellectual quips. He may complain that "discussing nausea and vomiting while eating intricately prepared and heavy gourmet foods doesn't seem to bother anybody," but he also shows up faithfully for each of these hyper-consumptive meals (282).

From journalism to his fiction, Wallace's writings introduce a host of characters who perceive the world through their non-normative attributes, from the agoraphobic Wallacian narrator in "A Supposedly Fun Thing" to Hal Incandenza's catatonic opening scene in *Infinite Jest* (1996) and the depressive mathematical geniuses in *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* (2003). These differently-abled bodies and minds generate proximal irony through their ability to displace the rigid coordinates of the normative world, but without being able to escape their own environments as a result. The result is a narrative world that is comic for its strangeness, but relentless in its almost claustrophobic intensity. In developing the intensively internal, embedded perspectives of his characters, Wallace refuses to join a literary heritage extending from Flaubert through Joyce to the postmodern ironists.[4] There is no movement towards the privileged position

that James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus calls the "God of creation," who "remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (*Portrait of the Artist* 249). Instead, Wallace's characters are locked in peculiar, often hilarious, but always intensively experienced worlds without an aesthetic or intellectual exit.

Wallace's short story, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" (2003), exemplifies his clear rejection of this detached attitude in favor of a proximal form of irony. Narrated from the viewpoint of a child on the autism-spectrum who experiences a profound trauma in his civics class, the story generates both its comic and poignant aspects from within the confines of the boy-protagonist's worldview. Whereas Joyce's hero confidently sets out to "encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (*Portrait of the Artist* 299), Wallace's narrator has a more tenuous grasp on "reality" from within his non-normative, embedded perspective. Rather than observing "reality" as a discrete actor or "forging" a broadly shared "consciousness," Wallace's character is struggling to cope with a private world of fantasy that impinges on his attention without remittance:

> I had primarily attended Civics in body only, my real attention directed peripherally at the fields and street outside, which the window mesh's calibration divided into discrete squares that appeared to look quite like the rows of panels comprising cartoon strips, filmic storyboards . . . Obviously, this intense preoccupation was lethal in terms of my Listening Skills during second period Civics, in that it led my attention not merely to wander idly, but to actively construct whole linear, discretely organized narrative fantasies, many of which unfolded in considerable detail. ("Soul" 71)

During one of the narrator's fantasy sessions (in which the reader is caught up), the substitute teacher, Mr. Johnson, has a nervous breakdown and begins scrawling "KILL THEM KILL THEM ALL" on the chalkboard, "looking simultaneously electrocuted and demonically possessed" (101). As the ordinarily uneventful civics class breaks down and students run in terror, the narrator struggles to focus his attention away from the imaginary comic strip, whose plot lines are also beginning to register the traumatic situation in the events they depict. The quickly shifting registers of these scenes are alternately playful and gruesome, shuttling swiftly between humor and terror in the proximal irony of the narrator's displaced, yet inescapable and intensively felt, experiences.

"The Soul Is Not a Smithy" expresses an almost existentialist engagement in the specificity of experience rather than the distancing effects of a postmodern irony of intertextual quotation. Closer to Dostoyevsky than John Barth or Robert Coover in its dark laughter, Wallace's writing often eschews any of the formulaic elements of humor that require distance between the reader and the object of amusement or ridicule. Such humor might distract the reader from the disorienting embeddedness of the narrative perspective that is so central to the effect created by Wallace's narrative worlds. In contrast to this embedded perspective, what Linda Hutcheon calls the "ironic double vision" of postmodernism is invested in the impossibility of avoiding quotation, or as Umberto Eco famously put it in his postscript to *The Name of the Rose* (1980): "books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told" (513). This sense of ironic distance in postmodern writing stems from an awareness of intertextual repetition. John Barth, who sought repeatedly throughout his career to explain his influential 1967 essay

on postmodernism, "The Literature of Exhaustion," approvingly cites Eco's description (Barth, *Further Fridays* 58). As Eco elaborates, since our cultural context cannot be ignored, it "must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently."

> I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly," because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." (530)

Eco's description of quotation would come to be known as the central stylistic device of Barth's influential comic style.

In opposition to this concern with postmodern intertextuality, Wallace's characters enact a disorienting distortion on the familiar world of postmodern sophistication. Their non-normative perspective estranges the text from the cycle of quotation that Barth and Eco developed in their writing. As Wallace's biographer, D.T. Max, has noted, Wallace's writing privileged "involvement" over these forms of "irony and distance." Characterizing Wallace's attitude toward detached irony, Max writes, "Postmodern fiction's original ironists – writers like Pynchon and sometimes Barth – were telling important truths that could only be told obliquely, [Wallace] felt. But irony got dangerous when it became a habit" (255). The "ironic double vision" described by Eco names just such a habitual distance from the embedded quality that drives Wallace's shift from postmodern irony to humor.

Repudiating the apparently facile and self-referential aspects of postmodern irony, Wallace turned to another genealogy of writers for models to express his aims. Like Wallace, authors grouped under the broad banner of existentialism explored a form of humor that was enworlded, situated within an environment that offered as much opportunity for tragedy as for laughter.[5] Wallace was drawn to the works of Franz Kafka and Dostoyevsky, after the publication of *Infinite Jest*. In his essay "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed" (1999), Wallace describes what he calls Kafka's *komisch* style, a mode of comedy that "is always also tragedy, and this tragedy always also an immense and reverent joy" (63). Reflecting on the difficulties of teaching this *komisch* dimension of literature, Wallace argues:

> It's not that students don't "get" Kafka's humor but that we've taught them to see humor as something you get – the same way we've taught them that a self is something you just have. No wonder they cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke: that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. (64)

This complex, embedded form of *komisch* writing is essentially different from the easy, pervasively ironic quotation that Wallace's students have grown up with, and which has given them a false sense of mastery over their lives and their surroundings. Writing about Dostoyevsky, Wallace poses this problem again in similar terms, asking "why we seem to require of our art an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions, so that contemporary writers have to either make jokes of them or else try to work them in under cover of some formal trick like intertextual quotation" ("Joseph Frank's Dostoyevsky" 271). Wallace's humor, by contrast, is committed to these "desperate

questions," drawing on a *komisch* style that embraces the strangeness of experience and the deeply embedded quality of life.

At the time that Wallace was reflecting on Kafka and Dostoyevsky, he was composing the heterogeneous short pieces that make up his disturbingly comic *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). As in his short story, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," the proximal irony in *Brief Interviews* often shifts into a darker, more disconcerting register as it explores the "horrific struggle to establish a human self" ("Some Remarks" 64). As with the other Wallace texts we have been examining, *Brief Interviews* is full of non-normative perceptual frameworks that disorient the postmodern tendency toward ironic detachment. The sections entitled "Brief Interviews" omit the interlocutor's voice, creating a literally one-sided conversation in which the speaker's pathologies can freely flourish. "Brief Interview # 11," for example, stages a break up in which the speaker unilaterally tries to explain his decision to leave his partner:

> Me leaving is not the confirmation of all your fears about me. It is not. It's because of them. Okay? Can you see that? It's your fear I can't take. It's your distrust and fear I've been trying to fight . . . If I loved you even a little less maybe I could take it. But this is killing me, this constant feeling that I'm always scaring you and never making you feel secure . . . It is ironic from your point of view, I can see that. And I can see you totally hate me now. And I've spent a long time getting myself to where I'm ready to face your totally hating me for this and this look of like total confirmation of all your fears and suspicions on your face if you could see it, okay? I swear if you could see your face right now anybody'd understand why I'm leaving. (17)

The compounded ironic self-reference of this passage mimics postmodern "double vision," but it is situated in the interpersonal pain of the breakup. The speaker's evident self-justification loops back on itself in a maneuver that at first seems purely self-referential, and yet the bitter humor and the pathos of the monologue develop from the absented other voice. This other is not a dialogic or a dialectic counterpart, but the persistent weight of experience and emotion counterpoising the speaker's sophistical rationalizations. The humor thus comes from the reader's recognition that the speaker's self-destructively airtight, circular logic is, in the end, not enough. Always caught in the mesh of our enworlded relationships, Wallace suggests, for there is no Archimedean point at which we can escape our proximity to each other and our milieu.

In the hermetic worlds of *Brief Interviews*, the speakers repeatedly try to escape their embedded condition. The enclosed fantasy worlds that they desperately try to create in order to avoid their problems are never entirely self-sufficient, however. Instead, the monologues continuously index an expanding web of relations and responsibilities toward others. The speaker of "Brief Interview # 59," for example, who spent his childhood in a Russian military outpost in Siberia, is perversely intent on separating himself from the world. As the speaker recollects, while his father worked on advanced mathematics for the military and his mother spent her days toning at the State Exercise Facility, he was discovering the American television show *Bewitched.* Elizabeth Montgomery's portrayal of the witch on the show captivated the speaker, especially with her ability to freeze time, which the boy soon incorporated into his intensive auto-erotic fantasies. Discovering that with a special motion of his hand he could harness "the supernatural power to halt time," he developed a complex set of fantasies involving the young women

at the State Exercise Facility (182). He finds this solipsistic fiction satisfying until one day he realizes that his fantasy world is involved in a more complicated set of consequences that he cannot avoid:

> The hand's supernatural power was perhaps the fantasy's First Premise or *aksioma*, from which all else then must rationally derive and cohere . . . for I was the son of a great figure of state science, thus if once a logical inconsistency in the fantasy's setting occurred to me, it demanded a resolution consistent with the enframing logic of the hand's powers, and I was responsible for this. If not, I found myself distracted by nagging thoughts of the inconsistency, and was unable to masturbate. (185)

This initial fault in the previously perfect coherence of his fantasy leads to a cascading series of complexities that expand outward to encompass more and more of his world:

> thus I soon was required to fantasize that only my one single hand's gesture—taking place in only one bleak Siberian defense outpost, and for the sake of entrancing the will of merely one female programmer or clerical aide—nevertheless now must accomplish the instantaneous freezing of the entire state, to suspend in time and consciousness almost two hundred million citizens in the midst of whatever of their actions might happen to intrude upon my imaginations. (187)

His despair increases as he realizes the extent of the insanely rational despotism that his fantasy wields over him for the sake of total imaginative control over his environment. He admits, "I all too quickly, as an adolescent, trying merely to masturbate in private, found out that my single fantasy of unknown seduction outside time required that the very world's entire population itself must be frozen by the single hand's gesture" (188). Overwhelmed by the "responsibility" incurred by his imagination, "which the American program of *Bewitched* had wholly suppressed and neglected during my childish viewing," he increasingly devotes his time "not to masturbating, but in the labor of imagination of constructing a sufficiently motionless and atemporal planet" (188).

Wallace's proximal irony demonstrates that the control necessary to maintain the Russian boy's atemporal detachment is ultimately as self-destructive and isolating as the circular logic of the speaker in "Brief Interview #11." The boy who at first thought he was endowed with the special imaginative power to stop time is, in the end, locked in a cycle that moves "onward and onward, an ever-expanding nightmare of responsibilities and labor, because yes the Milky Way Galaxy of itself also orbits the Local Group of galaxies in counterpoint to the Andromeda Galaxy more than some 200 million light-years distant" (190). This speaker is finally "deluded" and "broken" by this effort, choosing at last to literalize his isolating fantasy in a complete celibacy that is, he argues, the only logically consistent response to his domineering fantasies:

> None of these persons here . . . going through their oblivious motions outside of here, crossing streets and peeling apples and copulating thoughtlessly with women they believe they love. What do they know of love? I, who am by my choosing a celibate of all eternity, have alone seen love in all its horror and unbounded power. I alone have any rights to speak of it. All the rest is merely noise, radiations of a back-

> ground which is even now retreating always further. It cannot be stopped. (191)

Like the entropic universe of degraded intensities in which all objects are moving away from each other, the speaker concludes his monologue in the dark recognition of both the limits of fantasy and the impossibility of living without it. He is embedded in his experience, unable to find a safe purchase from which to observe the flow of time. The internal tensions of this tragi-comic conclusion describe an involved irony that is fundamentally different from the detached irony of postmodernism, which depends on the kind of distanced observation unavailable to Wallace's characters.

In the two "Brief Interviews" we have looked at, and in *Brief Interviews* as a whole, Wallace takes particular modes of thought or action and extends them to the point of absurdity. He does not, however, allow the representation of these exaggerated worldviews to devolve into parody. This style of amplification has the same comic effect that Wallace noted in Kafka, who tended to literalize everyday metaphors in order to draw out their intensively lived qualities. Discussing Kafka's short story "The Hunger Artist," Wallace notes that *anorexia* literally means longing. Exhibiting himself in a confining cage, the artist is eaten away by his longing, literalizing it as an embodied experience. This dark humor is not like "Pynchonian slapstick with banana peels or rogue adenoids, . . . Rothish priapism or Barthish meta-parody" ("Some Remarks" 62). Instead, "Kafka's funniness" depends on recognizing our embeddedness in language and milieu, our quality of being "inside" the cage of experience (65). Likewise, Wallace's narrator, living in the lonely Siberian outpost, finds that the literal result of stopping time for his own fantasies is complete isolation. In *Brief Interviews* and throughout his writing, Wallace develops his proximal irony from this alternately dark and hilarious *komisch* aspect of enworldedness.

In A.O. Scott's important review of David Foster Wallace's work, "The Panic of Influence," the journalist writes, "The feedback loop of irony and sincerity which animates so much of Wallace's writing turns out not to be an artifact of literary R&D, but a fact of human nature, or at least a salient aspect of the way we live now." Like the existential authors whom he admired, Wallace sometimes placed his writerly commitment to "human nature" squarely on the side of sincerity, generating stories of unremitting seriousness. It would be inaccurate to say that pieces like "Incarnations of Burned Children" or "The Depressed Person" exemplify Wallace's humor, but these deeply troubling stories are part of the same description of "the way we live now" extending from Wallace's refusal of ironic detachment. The dark aspect of his proximal irony develops from the same concerns, expressing a position from within, rather than about contemporary American culture.

Wallace's long fiction, like his essays and short stories, evinces the unstable *komisch* sense of humor that made his writing "blackly funny" (Allen). Wallace's unfinished novel, *The Pale King* (2008), provides an especially useful window into the working process by which he developed this comic element in his novels. Written as a fictional account of the contemporary American tax system, *The Pale King* would probably have been mainly set at the IRS bureau in Peoria, Illinois; in the form we have now, however, many of the novel's fragments deal with the background of characters before they come together in this IRS bureau. In these backstories, *The Pale King* shares the elements of proximal irony that run through all of Wallace's writing: an often hilarious description of an environment from the perspective of a character who is intensively embedded in this world and perceives it through a disorienting, non-normative cognition

that paradoxically derives its comic effect from the very serious existential struggle to "establish a human self" within this microcosm.

Of the many characters illustrating proximal irony in *The Pale King*, Chris Fogle, one of the novel's central figures, provides perhaps the clearest thematic link between the dark, existential elements of Wallace's writing and his pervasively comic style. In Section 22 of the novel, Fogle narrates his experience as a "wastoid" college student in the 1970s (180). In the experimental environment of that decade, drugs are his primary preoccupation, and he only casually mentions attending classes. He preferred an amphetamine-based diet pill called Obetrol to other drugs. "My affinity for Obetrol," he recounts, "had to do with self-awareness, which I used to privately call '*doubling*'" (180). In contrast to other drugs, which made him "self-conscious, sometimes so much so that it made it difficult to be around people," Obetrol

> didn't make me self-conscious. But it did make me much more self-aware. If I was in a room, and had taken an Obetrol or two with a glass of water and they'd taken effect, I was now not only in the room, but I was aware that I was in the room. In fact, I remember I would often think, or say to myself, quietly but very clearly, "I am in this room." It's difficult to explain this. At the time, I called it "doubling." (181)

Inducing a condition close to what Linda Hutcheon described as the self-aware "double-coding" of postmodern fiction, Obetrol serves as a parodic image of hyperactive reflexivity. Reflecting on his dorm room, Fogle notes, "normally I lived within these walls and was probably affected in all kinds of subtle ways by their institutional color but was usually unaware of how they made me feel, unaware usually of even their color and texture, because I never really looked at anything in a precise, attentive way" (182). As a "wastoid," Fogle is drawn to Obetrol because it makes him "aware of the awareness," an activity parallel to removing oneself from experience through aesthetic distance (183). From the quality of light in the room to the texture of the sofa he is sitting in to his own heartbeat, he seems to inhabit his life as a form of ironic estrangement.

Drugs both signal the loss of Fogle's embedded experience and create a "doubling" effect that he struggles to overcome throughout the narrative. The Obetrol serves him as a "signpost or directional sign, pointing to what might be possible if I could become more aware and alive in daily life" (186). These reflections on embodiment and alienation serve as the context for two key events in the speaker's life. The first is the traumatic loss of his father in a gruesome subway accident, witnessed first-hand by the narrator shortly before he has a conversion experience that functions as the climax of Section 22. Fogle's initial response to the death of his father is to remove himself from his emotional world with "doubling" techniques. Along with the drugs, he uses television to achieve this distance in his daily life, especially daytime soap operas like *As the World Turns*. Being able to observe the lives of others through television, he recuses himself from reflecting on his own lived time: "I'd gotten passively sucked into CBS afternoon soap operas, where the shows' characters all spoke and emoted broadly and talked to one another without any hitch or pause in intensity whatsoever, it seemed, so that there was something almost hypnotic about the whole thing" (221). Fogle is hypnotized by the intensity of others' experiences in the same way that he observes himself at a noncommittal distance. Nonetheless, after his father's death he begins to hear something strange in the network announcer's familiar declaration, "*You're watching* As the World Turns," which the television intoned "more and more pointedly each time—'*You're*

watching As the World Turns,' until the tone began to seem almost incredulous—'*You're watching* As the World Turns'—until I was suddenly struck by the bare reality of the statement" (222). As Fogle makes clear, the "bare reality of the statement" is not the ironic double-coding of the phrase: "I don't mean any sort of humanities-type ironic metaphor, but the literal thing he was saying, the simple surface level . . . I suddenly realized that the announcer was actually saying over and over what I was literally doing" (222). In the late 1970s, at what was perhaps the height of the influence of postmodernism, the "simple surface level" becomes the hardest thing for Fogle to locate within the intertextual play of signifying layers.

Rather than the hip paradox of gaining insight from a soap opera, Wallace's narrative confronts us with the proximal irony as Chris Fogle realizes his embedded, experiential condition:

> It was not even the obvious double entendre that struck me. This was more literal, which somehow had made it harder to see. All of this hit me, sitting there. It could not have felt more concrete if the announcer *had actually said, "You are sitting on an old yellow dorm couch, spinning a black-and-white soccer ball, and watching* As the World Turns, *without ever even acknowledging to yourself this is what you are doing.*" It was beyond being feckless or a wastoid—it's like I wasn't even there. (222)

In a world in which the young, educated generation is saturated with ironic double entendre, the less obvious insight comes from the "literal" realization of inhabiting a concrete body in a specific milieu that demands certain choices and relations. Fogle's college campus is saturated with the postmodern pose of indifference that excises the passive spectator from her milieu. He remembers that "many of the other DePaul students that year were hooked on the ABC soap opera *General Hospital*, gathering in great avid, hooting packs to watch it—with the hip alibi that they were actually making fun of the show" (221). Echoing Wallace's argument in "E Unibus Pluram" that postmodern irony leads to the false assumption that the "revelation of imprisonment leads to freedom," *The Pale King* suggests that these students are deluded to think they have escaped the same kinds of problems Fogle is facing (66-67). Despite his attempt to use drugs and his abstracted television viewing to anaesthetize himself into a detached attitude, Fogle eventually must find a way to respond to the trauma of losing his father.

The shock of realizing that he was using doubling to remove himself from his experiences leads Fogle to the second key moment of the narrative. Distracted by his father's death and the collapse of the protective shell of his "wastoid" life, Fogle accidently wanders into the review session for "Advanced Tax," where he sits down to hear a lecture that dramatically changes the direction of his life. In the teacher's closing remarks to the class, impressed indelibly on the speaker's memory in an exact inversion of the hazy experience of his father's death, he learns that "the accounting profession to which you aspire is, in fact, heroic," that is, it involves the real heroism of "enduring tedium over real time in a confined space" (229). The prophetic teacher concludes, "Gentlemen, welcome to the world of reality – there is no audience. No one to applaud, to admire. No one to see you. Do you understand? Here is the truth – actual heroism receives no ovation, entertains no one. No one queues up to see it. No one is interested" (229). Embracing this commitment to the thickness of lived time and the everyday quality of experience, Fogle abandons the "passive spectation" of Obetrol in favor of what

Wallace, in his interview with McCaffery, calls the "real time" of tax accountancy (McCaffery 134).

Moving from a "wastoid" to unheroic self-realization, Chris Fogle is drawn to accountancy because it involves a practice that promises to immerse him fully in his world without the film of anodyne drugs or the distraction of television. Like "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," Fogle's story is a retrospective account of how he recuperated from the debilitating effects of severe emotional trauma through intensive absorption in a delimited world. "Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space" takes on an unexpectedly positive connotation for the "wastoid" from within the framework of proximal irony, because this effort of enduring "real time" seems to be the only way to cope with the serious crisis of his father's death. His transcendent moment of self-understanding thus emerges from his life's central tragedy, but in the *komisch* world of Wallace's writing, this tragedy also always has the potential to become "an immense and reverent joy" ("Some Remarks" 63). Although it seems bizarre to think that tax accountancy might offer salvation, within Fogle's world this scenario takes on a force of possibility that is not absurdist, but rather an expression of the darkly humorous environment in which Wallace's embedded characters operate.

Many of the characters in Wallace's long fiction follow the pattern of proximal irony similar to that in Chris Fogle's narrative. In *The Pale King*, Claude Sylvanshine, David Cusk, Meredith Rand, and other characters exhibit an embeddedness in their perceptually specific worlds that denies any outside position from which to create distance or judge their experiences. Likewise, Wallace's characters in *Infinite Jest* frequently demonstrate the shifting relationship between the comic and tragic that comes out of the enworlded, experiential networks in which they struggle to establish a sense of self. Hal and Mario Incandenza, Kate Gompert, Don Gately, Joelle Van Dyne, and other characters intensively alternate between the isolation and overwhelming involvement that signals Wallace's abandonment of postmodern detachment in favor of a *komisch* humor and an existential poetics. The kaleidoscope of non-normative worlds in Wallace's writing reminds the reader that there is no standard position from which to observe these intensively felt realities. As an element of the "morally passionate, passionately moral" fiction that Wallace espoused, proximal irony describes not just what he sought to leave behind, but also—as he put it in "Joseph Frank's Dostoyevsky"--the "radiantly human fiction" that he was committed to creating (274).

While the size and intensity of *Infinite Jest* prohibit any thoroughgoing study of proximal irony in Wallace's magnum opus, it is worth considering the novel's putative central theme in terms of its relationship to postmodern irony and distance. At first glance, the "Entertainment" around which the loosely bound plot revolves seems to function as a dramatic figure for detachment in our media-saturated culture. But the viewer-victims who encounter the film are so deeply drawn into its world because of its affective appeal. Portraying Joelle Van Dyne as a mother figure, the fictional film speaks to the same uncomfortable world of needs and desires that Wallace explores in all of his fiction. Equally important, as the "Entertainment" careens through the lives of the different characters in the novel, it sparks numerous intensively felt subplots that, given more space here, could be fruitfully explored in terms of proximal irony: Don Gately's hallucinations during his hospital recovery; Joelle Van Dyne's radio broadcasts as Madame Psychosis; the long series of conversations between the Quebecois separatist Remy Marathe and the cross-dressing agent Hugh/Helen Steeply; Ken Erdedy's elaborate plans for sustaining his cannabis addiction; and so on. All of these episodes play along the edge of irony without

taking a distanced attitude toward the characters or events. It is this embedded quality that gives *Infinite Jest* its sense of intensity, I would argue, because there is no point at which the novel provides a simple map for navigating the novel's complex world of hopes, fears, and desires.

Before Wallace wrote *Infinite Jest*, he was concerned with the tension between postmodernism and the style he would develop into proximal irony. In what is widely regarded as Wallace's first substantial piece of writing, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," the young author takes up John Barth's quintessential postmodernist question, "For whom is the funhouse fun?" For Barth, this question from the cycle of stories published as *Lost in the Funhouse* describes the parody and pastiche that defined postmodern humor: the relativity of experience, the undecidability of truth, the groundlessness of origins, and the fiction of authorial control.[6] But the answer Wallace provides to this question in his own writing is far outside the ambit of postmodern concerns with discursive intertextuality. Instead, Wallace's writing abandons the tension between this comic dimension of irony and the broader, "serious" aims of postmodern critique that trouble Linda Hutcheon's description. For Wallace, the warped representation of the funhouse mirror can be realized as a joy and a terror only from within a perceptual microcosm, and this limited perspective is all we have. This decision to embed his characters allows Wallace to embrace a style of playful humor that is unequivocally serious in its commitment to his characters' particular struggles, without rehearsing postmodernism's "serious" claims to detached critique. Simply put, there is no outside to Wallace's humor, and this delimited viewpoint provides the ground for a unique style of proximal irony that resonates with a host of contemporary authors ranging from Jeffrey Eugenides and Dave Eggers to Louise Erdrich and Jonathan Lethem.

The strange characters who converge in Wallace's writing describe a disorienting world of proximal irony that is both compelling and new. Contrary to Paul Giles's claim that Wallace's writing represents a form of "sentimental posthumanism," his characters show little commitment to a return to the normative models implied by Giles's conception of sentiment. As Giles would have it, the sentimental side of Wallace's writing betrays a "nostalgia for more traditional forms of humanity," even as it depicts increasingly technocratic and dehumanized environments (335). Rather than Giles's negative "landscape" of "psychological fragmentation," which assumes normative categories of human psychology as the positive term in the equation, I would argue that Wallace's writing instead embraces variegated perceptual worlds that not only shun, but are simply not cognizant of "traditional forms of humanity" (330). My evidence is that the *komisch* dimension of Wallace's humor would lose the internal tension we have witnessed throughout this essay if his writing were an attempt to recuperate a lost humanity. In opposition to retrograde sentimentality, proximal irony gravitates toward another temporal frame altogether: what Lennard Davis names the "dismodernist mode." Unlike postmodernism, dismodernism describes a world in which "the ideal is not a hypostatization of the normal (that is, dominant) subject, but aims to create a new category based on the partial, incomplete subject whose realization is not autonomy and independence but dependency and interdependence" (Davis 241). Wallace's humor relies on just such a community of incomplete characters who reconfigure the pretentions to autonomy and control implicit in postmodern literature. In a dismodern world, the potential for a ludic response is not diminished. To the contrary, by abandoning the project of postmodern critique that requires a masterful subject, Wallace's enworlded humor of proximal irony gives us more perspectives from which to recognize the humor of lived experience.

Notes

[1] John Dee, for example, called Wallace "the funniest writer of his generation." See also D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 322 and *passim*.

[2] See "Certainly the End of Something or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think," in which Wallace dubs John Updike, Philip Roth, and other authors from the postmodern period the "Great Male Narcissists" (51).

[3] See Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism*. Wolfe's writings illustrate this detached irony in essays like "Radical Chic," which is narrated by an aloof speaker who distances himself from the wealthy New Yorkers whom he criticizes for their naive and hypocritical "*nostalgie de la boue*" (42).

[4] For a discussion of the common thread connecting these ironists, see J. Hillis Miller, "Indirect Discourses and Irony."

[5] For a discussion of the connections between the so-called "existential authors," see Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*.

[6] In "Lost in the Funhouse," the central character, Ambrose, answers the question by deciding that he must step outside of the funhouse in order to become its "secret operator," thereby gaining a greater degree of control over the slippery problems of representation (Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, 97).

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