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SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S "INFINITE JEST"

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BEYOND ENDLESS “AESTHETIC” IRONY: A COMPARISON OF THE IRONY CRITIQUE OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND DAVID FOSTER WALLACE’S *INFINITE JEST*¹

ALLARD DEN DULK

Although David Foster Wallace’s critique of irony has received a lot of critical and scholarly attention, perhaps the most illuminating perspective has been largely ignored, namely the existentialist philosophy of Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard. Marshall Boswell has noted the relevance of Kierkegaard’s philosophy in relation to Wallace’s writing (137-40, 143-44). Wallace himself wrote, in my correspondence with him: “I too believe that most of the problems of what might be called ‘the tyranny of irony’ in today’s West can be explained almost perfectly in terms of Kierkegaard’s distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical life.”² In this essay, I will offer a systematic comparison of the irony critique of both authors, focusing on Wallace’s magnum opus *Infinite Jest*. Since essays by and interviews with Wallace have played an important role in the discussion about the irony critique in his work, I will include these in my analysis.

Below, I will analyze the resemblance between Kierkegaard’s and Wallace’s critique of irony on five crucial aspects: (1) their critique is concerned with irony as an attitude towards existence, not as just a verbal strategy; (2) they agree that irony can initially have a liberating effect; but (3) that things go wrong when irony becomes permanent—Kierkegaard calls this the “aesthetic” attitude; (4) that liberation from this empty, aimless form of irony cannot be achieved through the ironizing of irony, i.e. meta-irony; and (5) that liberation from irony is only possible through (what Kierkegaard calls) a “leap,” by “ethically” choosing one’s freedom, by choosing the responsibility to give shape and meaning to that freedom.

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Under the influence of postmodernist thought, most interpretations of Wallace's critique have approached irony as a linguistic phenomenon, and not so much as an existential attitude, which I think is the actual aim of the critique. Taking this latter approach also prevents the discussion from being narrowed down to the question whether alleged instances of ironic language use in Wallace's fiction contradict the irony critique formulated therein. To be sure: I am not arguing that Wallace's fiction does not contain any irony. What I do argue is that the irony critique in *Infinite Jest* is aimed at a specific, ironic life-view, and that the possible presence of other, verbal forms of irony in the novel does not contradict or refute the critique of that specific form. Here, it is also important to see that describing irony in order to critique it is not the same as being (verbally) ironic about irony. Such an equation would rely on a simplistic reading of irony as covering all instances of "not saying what you mean" or "saying what you do not mean," whereby "(not) *meaning* something" also takes on a signification—i.e., words (not) referring to a "real" state of affairs—that does not properly apply to the context of fictional texts. Such a reading would, in fact, render all fiction (verbally) ironic. In Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the difference is formulated as follows: "there is indeed irony in the book—but that does not mean that the book is irony" (2: 66).³ As in Kierkegaard's case, the ultimate test for the critique formulated in *Infinite Jest*, because it concerns an all-negating ironic attitude, is whether the novel succeeds in realizing a "positive" content, an affirmation of value or meaning.

Irony as an Attitude towards Existence

As was mentioned above, Kierkegaard and Wallace are not critical of all forms of irony. They do not regard irony as a single, monolithic phenomenon that is to be rejected in all of its forms, as for instance Michael Little writes about Wallace (66). In their critique of irony, Kierkegaard and Wallace are not concerned with irony as just a verbal strategy, a figure of speech, an indirect or ambiguous form of language use, but with irony as an *attitude towards existence*.

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, the ethicist Johannes Climacus, writes: "Irony is an existence-qualification, and thus nothing is more ludicrous than regarding it as a style of speaking or an author's counting himself lucky to express himself ironically once in a while. The person who has essential irony has it all day long and is not bound to any style" (1: 503-04).

An oft-cited example of irony as a figure of speech is the person who stands in the pouring rain and says "Lovely weather today," meaning that the weather is terrible (e.g., Cross 127). "The ironic figure of speech cancels itself," writes Kierkegaard, "inasmuch as the one who is speaking assumes that his hearers understand him;...it is like a riddle to which one at the same time

has the solution" (*Concept of Irony* 248). Of course, verbal irony can take on forms that are much more complicated—that are not so overtly “un-earnest” and, therefore, do not directly cancel themselves—and that are meant to be more exclusionary—to remain uncomprehended by “lay people” who are not part of a certain “inner circle” (which, in the most extreme instance, could consist of just the ironic speaker himself). But, in any case, irony as a figure of speech “targets” a more or less delimited part of reality and implies some sort of “positive” content (what is truly meant as opposed to what is said)—however vague or hidden, lying behind the ironic expression (*Concept of Irony* 249, 248). This is not the form of irony that Kierkegaard is concerned with.

Instead, he is interested in analyzing, as Andrew Cross formulates it, “what it is to be an ironist ‘all the way down’” (126). Kierkegaard calls this “irony as a position,” or “pure irony.” The distinctive aspect, in comparison to verbal irony, is that this “irony *sensu eminentiori* [in the eminent sense] is directed not against this or that particular existing entity but against the entire given actuality at a certain time and under certain conditions,” writes Kierkegaard (*Concept of Irony* 253, 254). “Existential” irony means taking up an ironic relation to the whole of reality. This also means that no positive content lies “behind” it, because existential irony places the totality of existence under negation, and, therefore, no possible meaning remains for it. Verbal irony can of course be expressive of such existential irony, or lead up to it. But, in itself, an ironic expression is not necessarily indicative of existential irony; that depends on (i.e., requires further analysis of) the underlying attitude towards existence.

With this Kierkegaardian perspective in mind, we can better understand the irony critique offered in *Infinite Jest*, by seeing that it is aimed at existential irony and that this does not imply all instances of ironic speech per se. Its critique of irony lies, not (as some critics have suggested) in an intention to completely abstain from ironic language use.⁴ Instead, it lies in the novel’s critical portrayal of the ironic life-view. *Infinite Jest* primarily deals with “irony as a position” through the portrayal of the life-view of the novel’s many addicted characters, for whom irony is inextricably tied up with addiction, as an escape from responsibility and from their problems. The novel describes this addict-type attitude as a culture-wide phenomenon: countless individuals—almost the entire society—living their lives through the perspective of irony. I will elaborate on these portrayals of the ironic life-view in the following sections.

However, many scholars and critics interpreting the critique have failed either to make the distinction between verbal and existential irony or to fully implement it in their interpretation. Although most of them acknowledge that Wallace is concerned with irony as an all-encompassing “attitude” that dominates contemporary Western culture, many subsequently call into question the validity and consistency of this critique by pointing out possible instances

of ironic language use in Wallace's work (e.g., Holland 218, Hultkrans 15). Some of these interpretations are the result of an overly broad use of the term irony, resulting, for instance, in the equivocation of irony and humor (cf. Hutcheon 5). Other interpretations are based on a more informed reading, but, nevertheless, turn on the same misunderstanding.

In a typical example of the mentioned misunderstanding, Andrew Hultkrans, after saying that he agrees with the general critique of the ironic attitude, speaks of Wallace's "struggle with his own ironic impulses," referring, among other things, to the pop references in Wallace's work—the fact that his "fictional characters appear on Late Night with David Letterman"—and to his sometimes absurd humor: Hultkrans mentions the acronym "O.N.A.N.," short for "Organization of North American Nations," in *Infinite Jest* (15-16). But, first of all, references to popular culture are not necessarily ironic:⁵ not in the verbal sense, wherein such a reference undercuts the seriousness of the story element in question; and not in the existential sense, wherein it negates the whole (portrayed) reality. Secondly, a relatively isolated linguistic joke, such as the mentioned acronym, perhaps amounts to verbal but not to existential irony. And, as we saw above, verbal irony always has a more or less delimited target and therefore does not automatically infect the novel's entire existence-qualification.⁶

The question whether *Infinite Jest* lives up to its own critique of existential irony does not depend on the absence of ironic language use, but on the attitude towards existence embodied therein—as will be described in the following sections: whether the novel succeeds in replacing irony's total negation by positive meaning.

Liberating Irony

In the previous section, I argued that we should understand the irony critique formulated by both Kierkegaard and Wallace as aimed at irony as an attitude towards existence, and not as just a verbal strategy. Therefore, from now on, my use of the term irony will refer to existential irony, unless otherwise specified. In the current section, I will show that both Kierkegaard and Wallace value the initial, liberating effect of this ironic life-view.

According to Kierkegaard, irony initially fulfills an important role in the existence of the individual. He writes: "just as philosophy begins with doubt, so also a life that may be called human begins with irony" (*Concept of Irony* 6). According to Kierkegaard, an individual is not automatically a self, but has to become one: *becoming* a self is the *task* of human existence. To become aware of this task, the individual has to free himself from what Kierkegaard calls "immediacy," which is to say that the individual has to realize that he does not coincide with what is "given": his upbringing, his social background, his culture. In the attitude of immediacy, the individual regards himself and his values as determined by the world around him.

Through irony, the individual frees himself from this immediate attitude: irony breaches his identification with the given reality. It is important to note that this movement is purely “negative”: irony destroys what is given, thereby “liberating” the individual, but it does not contribute anything to the formulation of the “new,” to the content of the individual’s self-becoming. Kierkegaard writes that for the ironist “the given actuality has lost its validity entirely; it has become for him an imperfect form that is a hindrance everywhere. But on the other hand, he does not possess the new. He knows only that the present does not match the idea” (*Concept of Irony* 261). Therefore, the freedom that arises from this break with immediacy, is merely a *negative* freedom: a freedom-*from*.

Kierkegaard calls this liberating form of irony *socratic irony*. Socrates used irony to topple the immediate actuality of his time, which to him had lost its validity. For Kierkegaard, this form of irony is the essential stepping stone towards a personal moral interpretation of one’s existence. The negative freedom that it brings about is a necessary condition for the subsequent formulation of a *positive* freedom (a freedom-*to*), in which one gives actual content (“positivity”) to one’s freedom and establishes one’s self-chosen life-view. However, because irony is pure negation, it cannot be the source of that positivity (cf. *Concept of Irony* 257). Consequently, Kierkegaard concludes that irony should only be employed temporarily, and that subsequently one should start to give positive meaning to one’s freedom.

It is also important to note that, although this liberating, socratic irony performs a total negation—it negates the whole of reality—this total negation is aimed at the totality of a *specific* reality. As we already saw above, existential irony is initially directed against “the entire given actuality *at a certain time and under certain conditions*” (*Concept of Irony* 254, emphasis added). Kierkegaard writes about Socrates: “to him the established actuality was unactual....But it was not actuality in general that he negated; it was the given actuality at a particular time” (*Concept of Irony* 270-71). We will see that this is a crucial difference with the problem of endless irony, which is not directed against a specific reality anymore but against *any* reality.

Wallace, too, acknowledges the valuable, liberating effect that irony can initially have. On the value of existential irony, as a critique of reality, Wallace states: “The great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets us up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicities....Sarcasm, parody, absurdism and irony are great ways to strip off stuff’s masks and show the unpleasant reality behind it” (McCaffery 147). For Wallace, the current problem of endless irony has its origins in postmodernist thinking being absorbed into mass culture (“E Unibus Pluram” 65; cf. Den Dulk, “American Literature” 229). But he acknowledges that postmodernist irony started off with an idealistic, liberating purpose: “the ironic function like in postmodern fiction started out with a rehabilitative agenda. Largely it was supposed to

explode hypocrisy—certain hypocritically smug ways the country saw itself that just weren't holding true anymore" (Wiley).

These comments tie in with Kierkegaard's view of irony as initially a valuable means of overthrowing a "given actuality [that] has lost its validity," of freeing oneself from what has become the standard, immediate way of seeing things that does not hold true anymore. In this context, Wallace notes, just like Kierkegaard, that irony should only be employed temporarily. In his essay "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace first quotes Lewis Hyde, writing: "Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage." (We will clearly recognize this image of being "trapped in irony" in the next section.) To this, Wallace adds that irony "serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (67).

Although *Infinite Jest* mostly portrays instances of existential irony that have progressed into a problematic form, we can recognize the initial liberating effect of irony in some elements of these portrayals. We can recognize it, for example, in the portrayal of the "Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed" (U.H.I.D.). Joelle van Dyne, drug addict and member of the U.H.I.D., explains that most people want to hide the shame they feel before the gaze of others: "What you do is you *hide* your deep need to hide," "You stick your hideous face right in there into the wine-tasting crowd's visual meatgrinder, you smile so wide it hurts," "You take your desire to hide and conceal it under a mask of acceptance" (535). According to Joelle, most people allow themselves to be "objectified" in this way (comforted, perhaps, by the fact that they do the same to others), or, in a more Kierkegaardian formulation: they accept themselves as an "immediacy," as determined by the world (by others). Conversely, members of the U.H.I.D. openly display their shame, their wish to remain unseen (and thus "un-objectified" by others), by wearing a veil: "unashamed about the fact that how we appear to others affects us deeply, about the fact that we want to be shielded from all sight," "we don the veil" and "hide openly," says Joelle (535).

What they do, in effect, is distance themselves from the rest of the world. Their veil is an ironic distancing mechanism that forms a separation between them and the world: literally in one sense, as a barrier, a screen placed in-between, but also by openly displaying their shame (as indicated by their need to wear the veil) and at the same time hiding that shame, placing it beyond reach, beyond determination by others, behind the veil. Thereby, in a sense, they become free. It is, in a twofold sense, a negative freedom: it is a freedom from the look of others, but no positive content has been given to one's own identity; worse still, and this is the second sense of the "negativity": it is an identity in hiding, and therefore at the same time not at all free. In the next

section, we will see that freedom remaining isolated is part of the escalation of irony.

The veils of the U.H.I.D. work as an interesting means of distancing from a culture that is itself “deformed,” but they do not offer a satisfactory alternative to that culture. In Joelle’s case it can even be seen as part of the attachment to secrecy that, in the novel, is typical for addicts. It is interesting to note, however, that the U.H.I.D. is described in *Infinite Jest* as a support group for the “aesthetically challenged” (187). As was mentioned in the introduction to this paper, Kierkegaard calls the problematic attitude of endless irony the “aesthetic” life-view. And all the characters in *Infinite Jest* who, at different points, seem to symbolize a digression or an alternative to the dominant culture portrayed in the novel are subsequently described as physically “repulsive,” or, in other words: as aesthetically challenged. This is most clearly the case with Mario Incandenza’s countless physical deformities, and—though less evidently—with Gately’s big, ogre-like appearance. But it also goes for Joelle, who is described as “[driving] anybody with a nervous system out of their fucking mind” (538)—although we never find out for sure whether this is because she is unbearably beautiful or horribly disfigured (or both, at different stages in life)—and for Hal Incandenza, who, in the opening chapter, is described like “some sort of animal with something in its mouth” (14), which I take as an indication that Hal is at that point actually “becoming a self” in the Kierkegaardian sense, and not psychically damaged, as other characters in the novel—and many interpreters of the novel—take him to be.⁷

Endless “Aesthetic” Irony

So, Kierkegaard and Wallace agree that irony can initially have a liberating effect. However, Kierkegaard also sees the danger of the ironist getting wrapped up in his negative freedom and turning irony into a permanent attitude. Kierkegaard describes this perpetuation of the ironic attitude as following from a heightened, continuous form of self-reflection:⁸ “Because reflection was continually reflecting about reflection, thinking went astray, and every step it advanced led further and further, of course, from any content” (*Concept of Irony* 272). Constant self-reflection means constantly distancing oneself from one’s thoughts and, as a result, from one’s words and actions; in other words: it leads to a permanent ironic attitude.

Kierkegaard calls this attitude the “aesthetic” life-view, and the individual who holds it the “aesthete.” The aesthetic life-view is characterized by an endless “total negative irony”⁹ through which the individual avoids all commitment, all responsibility, and retains his negative freedom at all cost. It is to this type of endless “aesthetic” irony that Kierkegaard is strongly opposed. He sometimes speaks of *romantic irony*, as he himself associated this problematic form of irony mainly with the Romanticist poets of the first half of the nineteenth century. The result of the aesthete’s endless irony is that, to

him, all distinctions and values have, *by definition*, become invalid (*Concept of Irony* 275).

This position differs fundamentally from the total negation of socratic irony, which is directed at a *specific* reality. The aesthete's total irony, on the other hand, has no specific target: "when the given actuality loses its validity for the ironist in this way, it is not because it is an antiquated actuality that must be replaced by a truer actuality, but because [no actuality is adequate]" (*Concept of Irony* 283). For the aesthete, no actuality suffices: as his total negative irony dictates that "true" actuality is by definition impossible, he is solely interested in his own "ideality," in what his own head can make of things. In his striving to "aestheticize" his life, to merge it with his own fantasy and desire, the aesthete accepts no limitations: *everything* should be possible.

Initially, the aesthete revels in this infinite, absolute freedom. He seems always in control, at least one step ahead of the people he manipulates. According to *Either/Or*'s ethicist Judge William, the aesthete A manages (through his ironic attitude) to escape everyone: "Your occupation consists in preserving your hiding place, and you are successful, for your mask is the most enigmatical of all; that is, you are a nonentity" (2: 159).

However, the last part of this remark also signals the problem the aesthetic life-view eventually runs into: the aesthete remains a "nonentity." When Kierkegaard describes the connection between constant self-reflection and endless irony (quoted above), he also remarks that the ensuing attitude will eventually lead to a disintegration of the self: "The more the *I* in criticism became absorbed in contemplation of the *I*, the leaner and leaner the *I* became, until it ended with becoming a ghost" (*Concept of Irony* 272). In *Either/Or* the aesthete A says about himself: "I have, I believe, the courage to doubt everything; I have, I believe, the courage to fight against everything; but I do not have the courage to acknowledge anything, the courage to possess, to own, anything" (1: 23). All of A's abilities are negative: he can doubt and fight things. But he is not capable of placing anything in their stead, of realizing a positivity in the ensuing void. Cross aptly labels A "the defeated aesthete": "[He fails] to assume responsibility for himself; when his life-project founders, this is seen not as evidence that he has made an unwise choice of life-projects but as evidence that no life can be meaningful" (145, 146-47). Kierkegaard writes: "Therefore, the ironist frequently becomes nothing" (*Concept of Irony* 281).¹⁰

In my opinion, Kierkegaard's critique of endless, aesthetic irony corresponds with the irony critique underlying *Infinite Jest*. This is the form of irony that, according to Wallace, has "permeated the culture," has "become our language," "our environment," that has "become an end in itself" and, as such, "tyrannizes us" (McCaffery 148, "E Unibus Pluram" 67). It has nothing to do anymore with the liberating, subversive effect that can rightly be attributed to certain (socratic) ironic attitudes. Wallace writes: "So what *does* irony as

a cultural norm mean to say? That it's impossible to mean what you say?... Most likely, I think, today's irony ends up saying: 'How totally *banal* of you to ask what I really mean.'" To which he adds: "herein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony...: the ability to interdict the question without attending to its *subject...insulat[ing]* itself" ("E Unibus Pluram" 67-68). Note the similarity with the aesthete A's ironic imperviousness to any meaningful choice or distinction: "These words Either/Or are a double-edged dagger I carry with me and with which I can assassinate the whole of actuality. I just say: Either/Or. Either it is this or it is that; since nothing in life is either this or that, it does not, of course, exist" (1: 527).

In *Infinite Jest* this ironic attitude is portrayed and critiqued, above all, through the theme of addiction. Boswell writes that "Wallace's desperate drug addicts are essentially 'aesthetes' in Kierkegaard's famous formulation" (138). Parallel to Kierkegaard, *Infinite Jest* connects (the addicts') irony to self-reflection: "most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking" (203). This constant self-reflection brings with it an attitude of permanent irony. Through self-reflection, as the internalized look of others, the addicted characters are constantly trying to manipulate how they (think they) are perceived. They are, in a sense, hiding; for instance, Kate Gompert who is "so obsessed with Do They Know, Can They Tell" (77). In Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the aesthetic life-view is characterized as "hiddenness" (1: 254; cf. Boswell 140). The addicted characters avoid taking responsibility for their actions, or committing themselves to anything. "[In performing such] functions, addiction finds its perfect companion in irony," Timothy Aubry writes. "Irony is a 'fortification'; it is like an outer layer, a mask on the self....Drugs too are a fortification, a shield; they offer a basis for disclaiming responsibility for one's behavior" (248). *Infinite Jest* describes it as "the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they'd had to construct in order to carry on Out There" (369).

Through irony, the addicted characters can deny the reality of their (addicted) existence, and instead continue to escape into the pleasure fantasy that is their addiction. Like Kierkegaard's aesthetes, the addicts are trying to "aestheticize" their lives: they chase the pleasure-filled ideality in their head and ignore the actuality of their lives. An extreme example in *Infinite Jest* is Gately's crime partner Gene Facklemann, who scams his boss in order to buy and ingest "staggering quantities of Dilaudid, trying to mentally blot out the reality of the fact that he was going to get demapped if he didn't take some kind of decisive remedial action at once." Thereupon, Gately realizes that a "[drug addict was at root] a thing that basically hides" (932). This aesthetic "escapism" also explains why the U.H.I.D. (discussed in the previous section), with its motto of "hiding openly," can eventually only add to the escalation of Joelle van Dyne's situation of addiction and does not embody an exemplary attitude in itself.¹¹

But, to be sure: this aesthetic condition does not just apply to the drug addicted characters in *Infinite Jest*. It holds true for almost everybody in the novel: the aesthetic attitude is the default life-view of the contemporary society portrayed therein. Another way to express this idea is to say that almost everyone is addicted to something (ranging from alcohol to entertainment). In *Infinite Jest*, it is contemporary culture—recall Wallace’s remarks about irony having become our “environment”—that teaches everybody the ironic-aesthetic attitude early on: “The U.S. arts are our guide to inclusion. A how-to. We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it’s stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté” (694).

Moreover, this condition is explicitly connected to an exclusive focus on *negative* freedom (resulting from the ironic life-view), through the words of the character Marathe, a Quebecois “wheelchair terrorist.” In the novel, Marathe’s conversation with Hugh Steeply, secret agent of a somewhat obscure American intelligence service (“the U.S. Office of Unspecified Services,” or: U.S.O.U.S.), functions as a general discussion of that cultural condition. That this conversation is not rendered as one continuous scene but rather in fragments spread out over the novel makes it into a narrative thread that seems to underlie one’s interpretation of the entire novel. Steeply functions as the spokesperson for the American, aesthetic attitude, while Marathe says: “your freedom is the freedom-*from*: no one tells your precious individual U.S.A. selves what they must do. It is this meaning only, this freedom from constraint and forced duress....But what of the freedom-*to*?” Marathe adds that, as a result, “you all stumble about in the dark, this confusion of permissions. The without-end pursuit of happiness of which someone let you forget the old things which made happiness possible. How is it you say: ‘*Anything is going*’?” (320).

As the ironic-aesthetic attitude is the dominant life-view in the society portrayed in *Infinite Jest*, the resulting state of depression is widespread as well. However, the sufferers of anhedonia try to carry their affliction as a badge of sophistication, just like Kierkegaard’s aesthetes—perhaps because the emptiness of their existence is in a sense the grand conclusion of their reflexive-ironic tour de force. As we read in *Infinite Jest*: “It’s of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool. It’s maybe the vestiges of the Romantic glorification of *Weltschmerz*, which means world-weariness or hip ennui” (694). Note that in this passage anhedonia and emptiness are connected, as in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, to a Romantic—ironic—attitude. Marathe calls it: “This irony and contempt for selves” (530). Kierkegaard speaks of the “superior indolence that cares for nothing at all...that disperses and exhausts all the powers of the soul in soft enjoyment, and lets consciousness itself evaporate into a loathsome gloaming” (*Concept of Irony* 295).

Wallace has described this aesthetic world-weariness, in which all meaning and value have been ironized, as the “congenital skepticism” of contemporary Western culture. Broadly speaking, skepticism is the refusal to grant that any knowledge or judgment is certain or justified. We can readily see the connection between such a refusal and the endless negation that characterizes aesthetic irony. With irony as our environment, we have been raised and conditioned to “distrust strong belief, open conviction,” writes Wallace (“Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky” 272). As was mentioned above, in *Infinite Jest* contemporary culture is described as teaching everybody the ironic-aesthetic attitude early on, including the young, (pre-)adolescent students at the Enfield Tennis Academy, who, as a result, already suffer from anhedonia. In the novel, too, this is labelled as the “worldly skepticism” of these children (116).¹²

This skeptical world-weariness might be regarded as the new ‘immediacy’ of contemporary Western culture. The feeling of ennui that accompanies the emptiness of the ironic existence is described by Kierkegaard as “boredom” and his aesthete A calls this boredom an “acquired immediacy” (*Concept of Irony* 285, *Either/Or* 1: 290). Boredom in the Kierkegaardian sense is the result of the negative freedom of the aesthete’s irony: it follows from the conclusion that there is nothing left in the world with which the aesthete is connected, which is of value to him. The term boredom is used to describe the individual’s basic, languid state of apathy, as well as the frenetic attempts that he might undertake, “out of boredom,” to distract himself from that boredom. Many characters in *Infinite Jest* can be seen as trying to dispel the boredom of their aesthetic existence through different forms of addiction, with disastrous existential consequences.¹³

In *Infinite Jest*, as in Kierkegaard’s analysis, this aesthetic total ironization of values and actions, in the end, leads to the disintegration of the self, to a state in which “the cliché ‘I don’t know who I am’ unfortunately turns out to be more than a cliché” (204). The result of the addict’s aesthetic attitude is the feeling of emptiness and despair that in *Infinite Jest* is called “anhedonia,” or depression (a term that Kierkegaard uses as well): “a kind of emotional novocaine,” “a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content” (692, 693; cf. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 1: 253; *Either/Or* 2: 204). The ironic-aesthetic attitude that for so long offered an escape from the limitations of reality comes to imprison and destroy the individual, as Joelle describes: “What looks like the cage’s exit is actually the bars of the cage.... The entrance says *EXIT*. There isn’t an exit.... It is the cage that has entered her somehow. The ingenuity of the whole thing is beyond her. The Fun has long since dropped off the Too Much” (222). Compare this to Wallace’s Lewis Hyde quote, cited in the previous section, of the ironist trapped in the cage of his own irony. Here we see the result of irony carried on for too long, the irony of the “defeated aesthete.” As Kierkegaard’s ethicist Judge William describes it: “you have seen through the vanity of everything, but you have not gone further.... You are like

a dying person. You die daily, not in the profound, earnest sense...but life has lost its reality" (2: 194, 196). In *Infinite Jest* anhedonia is described as "death in life" (839).

Meta-Irony?

So, in the end, the ironic-aesthetic life-view leads to the disintegration of the self. But how to rid oneself of this 'tyrannizing' form of irony? Some critics and scholars are of the opinion that in Wallace's works the ironic attitude is successfully overcome *by ironizing it*, by being ironic about irony; that is, by employing meta-irony. Below, I will describe why I think this claim is incorrect, why the ironic attitude analyzed above cannot be regarded as being overcome by being ironic about it.

"If one way to escape from the blind alley of postmodern self-consciousness is simply to turn around and walk in another direction...Wallace prefers to forge ahead in hopes of breaking through to the other side, whatever that may be," A. O. Scott rightly states but then concludes that Wallace "is less anti-ironic than (forgive me) meta-ironic. That is, his gambit is to turn irony back on itself" (40).¹⁴ Boswell formulates a similar view. He writes that irony is a "cage the doors of which [Wallace's] work wants to spring. He opens the cage of irony by *ironizing* it, the same way he uses self-reflexivity to disclose the subtle deceptions at work in literary self-reflexivity" (207).

I disagree with Scott and Boswell. Again, my point here is not that irony, in all of its forms, is absent from Wallace's work or, more specifically, from his portrayal of the ironic attitude and its resulting problems. Rather my point is merely that Wallace's works cannot be rightly described as successfully overcoming or going beyond the problematic ironic attitude described in the previous section by ironizing it. Although the suggestion sounds reasonable, envisioning how it works proves to be more problematic. An analysis of the relevant aspects shows that the suggestion of a liberating ironization of total irony does not hold up.

First of all, we should see that the claim of meta-irony cannot rightly mean that Wallace's works effect an ironization of irony simply by offering a (critical) fictional portrayal of irony and its resulting problems, for, as was argued above, that would render all fiction ironic (and the whole point moot). Secondly, we have to be careful not to equivocate irony, humor, and self-consciousness, or, more importantly, verbal irony and existential irony. Certain passages in Wallace's fiction can perhaps be read as mocking, or joking, or employing irony as a figure of speech in relation to certain aspects of the ironic attitude. However, such instances of verbal irony, which are always limited to a specific target, can never amount to the overcoming, to the total negation that is needed to ironize in turn the total negation that is existential irony. And even if such a total negation of existential irony would in fact be executed, the result would still be the same total negativity that one started out with, and not a specific

positivity that functions as an alternative to irony, for irony is incapable of producing this. Boswell seems to overlook this problem, when he writes that Wallace's fiction "treats the culture's hip fear of sentiment with the same sort of ironic self-awareness with which sophisticates in the culture portray 'goosey' sentimentality," and that "the result is that hip irony is itself ironized in such a way that the *opposite* of hip irony—that is, goosey sentiment—can emerge as the work's indirectly intended mode" (17). However, even socratic total irony can only expose the futility of, in this case, the "hip fear of sentiment," but it cannot be seen truly to "intend" any alternative (not even "indirectly"); for even if such an ironic "insight," in this case into the merits of "goosey sentiment," were to present itself, it would immediately be subject to the same ironic self-awareness that gave rise to it, and, as a result, only continue irony's spiral of negation.

For Kierkegaard the ironization of irony remains an integral, undisruptive part of the ironic-aesthetic attitude. Meta-irony forms part of what was described in the previous section as the perspective of the "defeated aesthete": he who has recognized the futility of his life-view and submitted his own ironic attitude to the viewpoint of irony. However, this meta-ironic "insight" does not give rise to change in life-view. Instead, the preference for one thing or the other becomes a matter of complete indifference to the defeated aesthete.¹⁵ The crucial reason why, for Kierkegaard, meta-irony cannot constitute a move beyond the aesthetic stage is that it merely emphasizes the futility of irony itself, but does not, and cannot, replace it with something else, a positivity, a freedom-to, which forms the only possible liberation from the suppression of negative freedom. "As [Kierkegaard] put it in his journals, one does not overcome a stultifying state of being by more knowledge or more thought," George Stack writes (33). Meta-irony—and the insight that the ironic attitude is futile—is simply another thought-movement in the spiral of "reflection reflecting upon itself": it does not break out of it, and as such does not constitute a liberation from the ironic-aesthetic attitude; instead, it forms a continuation of it.

We find a similar assessment of meta-irony in both Wallace's essayistic and fictional writings. We have already seen that Wallace regards irony as an instrument of negation, of destructive exposure, that should only be employed temporarily, exactly because of its negative character. In the essay "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace invites us to think of irony's purely "negative" character in terms of "Third World rebels and coups." He writes: "[they] are great at exposing and overthrowing corrupt hypocritical regimes, but they seem noticeably less great at the mundane, non-negative task of then establishing a superior governing alternative." To which he adds a remark that ties in with what we already saw about meta-irony: "Victorious rebels, in fact, seem best at using their tough, cynical rebel-skills to avoid being rebelled against themselves—in other words, they just become better tyrants" (67). These remarks seem to be at

odds with Boswell's claim that in Wallace's own works irony succeeds in being both "diagnosis and cure" (17). In fact, Boswell's claim brings to mind another remark by Wallace, about the "assumptions *behind* early postmodern irony," namely that it "assumed that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom." The import of Wallace's remark is precisely that this assumption—of irony functioning as both diagnosis and cure—has turned out to be mistaken, that irony has turned out to be "not liberating but enfeebling" ("E Unibus Pluram" 66-67).¹⁶

Furthermore, Wallace's view of the "literary subgenre" that he labels as "Image-Fiction," offers a clear argument against meta-irony. Wallace applauds the intention of Image-Fiction, of wanting to offer a contemporary "response" to the irony and hyperreflexivity of contemporary culture. However, he criticizes its conviction that this can be done by being "*reverently ironic*"—by portraying the ironic culture through its own irony, i.e., by being "meta-ironic." Wallace concludes that, as a result, Image-Fiction "doesn't satisfy its own agenda"; its response "via ironic genuflection is all too easily subsumed" into the ironic attitude: "It is dead on the page" ("E Unibus Pluram" 50, 80, 76, 52, 81).

Perhaps most importantly, *Infinite Jest* itself contains an explicit reference to the futility of meta-irony. The novel describes a film called "The Joke," directed by James Incandenza (whose tragic fate—he commits suicide, by sticking his head into a microwave¹⁷—functions as another emblem of the destructiveness of the ironic attitude). The film is advertised as: "*The JOKE: You Are Strongly Advised NOT To Shell Out Money To See This Film.*" However, "art film habitués of course thought [this] was a cleverly ironic anti-ad joke." Against the advice of the ads, people come to the theatre, where the screen simply shows a live recording of those same people entering the theatre and taking their seats. So, the film *is* a joke and the advice on the posters a meta-ironic trick aimed at an ironic audience, who will not take the warning at face value (397-98). In the novel, this "meta-ironic" trick is portrayed as a failure, as a continuation of the problem it supposedly points out. In his reading of "The Joke," Iannis Goerlandt writes: "a meta-ironic stance still employs irony and is not an authentic solution to the problem" (315-16). The example of "The Joke" makes clear that meta-irony is not a satisfying solution to the ironic attitude: it is a trick that partakes in and therefore continues the exact structures it claims to subvert; and this self-preserving character of irony is an important part of what makes it so tyrannical.

The Leap

So how *does* one overcome the ironic attitude? Kierkegaard's answer is deceptively simple: by choosing. The choice is the distinguishing characteristic of what Kierkegaard calls the ethical life-view. The ironic-aesthetic attitude is characterized by not choosing: the aesthete does not want to coincide with

anything, does not take up any of his actions as his own—he wants to retain his negative freedom. While the aesthete regards each “Either/Or” as an expression of the absence of meaningful choice, the ethicist claims that in fact “one is faced with a choice, an actual Either/Or” (2: 162, emphasis added). To overcome the self-destructive emptiness in which the ironic-aesthetic life-view runs aground, the negative freedom established through irony should be followed by taking up the responsibility to give shape and meaning to one’s life and thereby realizing a positive freedom.

By choosing, the individual commits himself to the actuality of his existence, as opposed to the aesthete who, in his preference for the ideality of his mind, neglects actuality. According to Kierkegaard, actuality “stands in a twofold relation to the subject,” namely as a “gift” and a “task.” Or, as Judge William explains in *Either/Or*: on the one hand, the individual finds himself in a concrete situation, and in that sense is a “product” of that situation (of which the actuality is “given,” a “gift”); on the other hand, by freely choosing to take on that situation as his own and from there give shape to himself, “he can just as well be said to produce himself”—it becomes his “task.” The self is not some pre-existing ‘core’ that the individual always already has, and that unifies his existence; instead, the individual’s existence is fragmented and has to be *made* whole—that is what it means to become a self. As such, the individual realizes a positive freedom, a freedom-to, by becoming himself: “Now he possesses himself as posited by himself—that is, as chosen by himself, as free” (2: 251, 223).

It is important to see that choice, as the characteristic of the ethical life-view, forms a radical break with the ironic spiral of the aesthetic attitude. Kierkegaard sometimes calls the ethical choice a “leap,” a term that expresses the fundamental uncertainty of each commitment to actuality: contrary to aesthetic fantasy, which is “safely” self-contained, the outcome of the individual’s ethical choice is dependent on actuality and therefore not fully under the individual’s control. This is a decisive difference between aesthetic irony (including meta-irony) and the ethical leap: instead of merely rejecting all actuality, the latter takes responsibility for a certain actuality and tries to reshape it.

Finally, we must note that the above does not mean that irony is absent from the ethical life. When the individual chooses, and thereby enters into a concrete commitment to actuality, that does not mean that the choice has been made and therefore the individual does not have to give thought to his life-view anymore. The reality of existence is constantly changing and the resulting paradox is that, exactly because of that change, the individual has to choose his changing existence as *his* existence, as *his* life, over and over again. As Judge William writes in *Either/Or*: “at the very moment he chooses himself he is in motion....he can remain in his freedom only by continually realizing it. He who has chosen himself on this basis is *eo ipso* one who acts” (2: 232). Choice is

never definitive: to be rightly called a choice, it cannot become a matter of self-evidence. Kierkegaard calls this process “controlled irony”: the act of choosing ethically has to be continually repeated if it is to remain a proper choice. This does not signify an endless total negation of actuality, like the irony of the aesthetic life-view, but instead, as Kierkegaard writes, places “the appropriate emphasis on actuality” (*Concept of Irony* 328), by emphasizing the importance of ethical commitment.

In my opinion, *Infinite Jest* successfully critiques and overcomes the ironic-aesthetic attitude through a literary execution of what Kierkegaard calls the leap; that is: through its realization of an alternative existential attitude. In addition to the critical portrayal of ironic existence, *Infinite Jest* features the portrayal of a contrasting life-view: one that emphasizes the importance of sincerity (openness, vulnerability), commitment to reality, and community. This article cannot offer a detailed analysis of this alternative attitude.¹⁸ Below, I do want to point out some of its aspects, to illustrate that they function in the same way as they do in Kierkegaard, and, as such, are part of the irony critique that Kierkegaard and Wallace share.

In *Infinite Jest* the importance of choice is discussed explicitly—and in terms very similar to Kierkegaard’s—in the aforementioned conversation between Marathe and Steeply. Marathe stresses the importance of positive freedom, and subsequently of choice: “What of freedom-*to*. How for the person to freely choose?...How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose?” (320). In *Infinite Jest*, this importance of choice is portrayed, for instance, in Gately’s struggle to overcome addiction. First of all, the moment of ultimate aesthetic despair as the moment of transition is described as “this cliffish nexus of exactly two choices, this miserable road-fork Boston AA calls your Bottom.” Gately adds that “Bottom” is actually the wrong word for it, because “it’s more like someplace very high and unsupported: you’re on the edge of something tall and leaning way out forward,” “the jumping-off place for just about every AA you meet.” Both descriptions clearly call to mind Kierkegaard’s leap.

Subsequently, the key to staying clean is described, through the AA “clichés” “One Day at a Time” and “Keeping It in the Day,” as a concrete choice that has to be repeated each day (347, 349, 858). Here, we can recognize Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the need for a repetition of the ethical choice if it is to remain a choice. Actually, in *Either/Or* Judge William, in his analysis of ethical choice, offers an example of (beating) addiction that is strikingly similar to Gately’s: “Imagine a person who has become addicted to gambling....If he is able to say to himself: At this moment I will not do it; I will not do it for an hour—then he is cured. This hour is the continuity that saves him” (2: 230). Gately speaks of the “leap it would take to live that way all the time, by choice” (860). What Gately describes is not just a way to get clean, but a way of life, an attitude that makes life possible. AA’s emphasis on the present functions

as an anchoring in reality, as a protection against aesthetic flight. The choice to focus on the present, and therefore on reality, creates a continuity in which the individual acknowledges the facticity of his addiction, and on the basis of that acknowledgment he chooses his actions directed at the future. This choice has to be made again every time, every day, because the person who does not really choose and act is in danger of relapse. Continuity—*doing* the work involved in AA (going to meetings, asking for assistance in coming off addiction), committing to it each day, choosing to stay clean—is what saves Gately.

To be sure: I am not suggesting that *Infinite Jest* simply proposes the AA model as *the* integral solution to all of the contemporary problems portrayed in the novel.¹⁹ Rather, I think that the novel emphasizes the importance of certain notions it attributes to AA and addiction recovery (and which can be found in other parts of the novel as well, for example in the conversation between Marathe and Steeply) that are also described by Kierkegaard as crucial to overcoming the ironic-aesthetic attitude and its problematic effects. The leap towards the ethical (towards recovery) is described in *Infinite Jest* as a “messy,” ongoing process that has to take place under many of the circumstances that made contemporary existence difficult in the first place; therefore overcoming these problems requires a continual reaffirmation of choice, of commitment to the reality of existence.

In fact, I think that *Infinite Jest*’s portrayal of the leap towards the ethical reflects what Wallace calls “*bothness*”—it is “complex, contradictory, real.”²⁰ In that sense, the novel is also an expression of the oft-contested compatibility of “cynicism and naïveté,” as Wallace calls it in several of his works, and that, as a result, seems to function as a leitmotif in his writing (“Westward” 304, *Infinite Jest* 694, “E Unibus Pluram” 63). More specifically: *Infinite Jest* describes difficult aspects of contemporary existence (“cynicism”), but also offer a portrayal of a possible solution, a commitment (and thus a vulnerability) to a positivity, something that is valued or affirmed again (“naïveté”). And in doing so, the novel not just portrays but *expresses* an ethical attitude. Its “leap towards the ethical” is perhaps best described by Wallace’s own formulation of what all good fiction “should do,” namely “both...depict [the time’s darkness] and...illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it,” applying “CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow despite the times’ darkness.” To which Wallace adds: “maybe half of fiction’s job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough [to be a real human being]. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now. Or can be” (McCaffery 131). That *Infinite Jest* also performs this second half of fiction’s job constitutes the ethical attitude of the novel.²¹

In Closing

The ethical life-view portrayed and expressed by *Infinite Jest* should not be considered as a way “back,” as opposed to what Scott calls a “breaking through to the other side” (40). The ethical attitude *is* a breakthrough, a leap forward, for it does not mean simply ignoring the difficulties of contemporary Western existence, such as excessive self-reflection and irony, but living (and writing) with these aspects and finding meaning nonetheless. We should not interpret this attitude as propagating a return to what Kierkegaard calls immediacy, as an unreflected acceptance of what is given.

The contrast between the aesthetic and the ethical life is aptly summarized by the two different denotations of the title *Infinite Jest*. On the one hand, there is the film *Infinite Jest*, which embodies the ironic-aesthetic attitude: the film sets off in its viewers an infinite, self-obsessed desire for entertainment, noncommittal pleasure, that ignores the world completely, and, in the end, proves to be fatal. On the other hand, there is the novel *Infinite Jest*, which is expressive of a completely different “infinity”: not an endless, aesthetic irony, but a novel that facilitates endless re-engagement, as an ethical choice that is constantly taken up again.

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NOTES

¹ This essay is an adapted version of a chapter of my dissertation, “*Love Me Till My Hearts Stop.*” *Existentialist Engagement in Contemporary American Literature*, a philosophical analysis of the fiction of David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Jonathan Safran Foer. A different, earlier version of the argument offered in this essay was published, in Dutch, in: den Dulk, “Voorbij de doelloze ironie.”

² Letter from Wallace to den Dulk, 20 March 2006.

³ Cf. Alastair Hannay about Kierkegaard’s dissertation on irony: “The dissertation is serious in what it says about irony” (152).

⁴ Wallace has explicitly stated that he thinks that verbal irony, in itself, “is fantastic. It’s one of the primary rhetorical modes. It’s been around forever. It’s intensely powerful. There’s nothing wrong with it” (Wiley).

⁵ Cf. Den Dulk, “American Literature” 236-38 and “Wallace and Wittgenstein” 355-56. Some aspects associated with “postmodernist irony” have become part of popular culture and, therefore, part of everyday reality. That is, a certain amount of fragmentation, mediation, and self-consciousness in a contemporary novel is, in the words of Wallace, “just plain realistic.” The same goes for pop references (cf. “E Unibus Pluram” 43, McCaffery 148). For Wallace, all these things are part of a reality of which *certain aspects* have become problematic. But while describing these problems and exploring possible ways to overcome them, a “realistic” description of the reality that forms the backdrop to these problems imports techniques that were previously deemed subversive.

⁶ In a more complicated example, Holland bases her claim that *Infinite Jest* “fails to eschew empty irony” on what she regards as the “ironic ambivalence” in the depiction of certain “sincere” characters and experiences (218, 220). For instance, Holland writes that by giving the sincere character Mario Incandenza a long list of physical ailments, “the novel only punishes [him],” “rather than celebrate[s]...those who resist the infantile fear of earnest emotion” (230-31).

Here, Holland prefers to focus on the far-fetched notion of a novel “punishing” a character by describing him as disabled, instead of relating that Mario is unreservedly portrayed as the happiest and most exemplary character in the novel. Similarly, when the other sincere hero of the story, Don Gately, after being shot, refuses all pain medication (because of his former drug addiction) and experiences pain-delusional dreams of his former drug use, Holland faults this description of the character, because “[r]ather than recalling the drug indignantly...Gately remembers it as ‘delicious’ and ‘obscenely pleasant,’ a welcome escape from the horror.” According to Holland, this completely undercuts the portrayal of Gately as embodying a successful critique of irony: “these ironic wakings void any notion of heroic transformation” (236). First, again it seems very far-fetched (disproportionate, to say the least) to regard the heroic fact that Gately succeeds in abiding the immense pain on willpower and dreams alone as ironically negated by the fact that some of those dreams are about drug use. Secondly, Holland fails to stress the fact that in these drug dreams Gately is not just “indulging the infantile desire to escape the pain of the world” (236), as Holland puts it, but is also confronted with horrifying memories of his life as an addict, and as such these drug dreams are actually part of AA’s recovery process—“you’ll begin to start to ‘Get in Touch’ with why it was that you used Substances in the first place” (446)—and, therefore, of the novel’s critique of irony. Above all, even if these “contrasts”—Mario’s disabilities, Gately’s drug dreams—were to be labelled “ironic,” these are verbal ironies (describing a contrast in a certain situation) that, as I have just described, cannot be rightly interpreted as taking down the novel’s whole portrayal of sincerity and critique of irony—for that, the “contrasts” that Holland discerns are much too strained. If anything, these contrasts, in the case of Gately, make him more real, more human; and in the case of Mario we see that none of these potential ironies can prevent him from being the warmest, most empathetic and humane character in the novel.

⁷ I elaborate on this final suggestion in my dissertation; see n.1.

⁸ I elaborate on *Infinite Jest*’s portrayal of excessive self-reflectivity (or “hyperreflexivity”) in my dissertation; see n.1.

⁹ Term adopted from Scholtens 21 (my translation).

¹⁰ The aesthete lacks what Kierkegaard calls “inwardness,” a term that does not so much refer to a form of self-reflection as to the individual’s ability to act on the basis of a set of personal values; in other words, the aesthete lacks a “self.”

¹¹ A preferable alternative seems to be what Gately tells Joelle about AA: “in AA they say they’ll love you till you can like love yourself and accept yourself, so you don’t care what people see or think anymore, and you can finally step out of the cage and quit hiding” (534); cf. section 5.

¹² Admittedly, this characterization is part of a remark made quite offhandedly by one of the older E.T.A. students, Michael Pemulis, while playing cards with a group of younger students. Still, in relation to the wider societal picture offered in the novel, it is a telling reference that ties in with remarks made by Wallace in other writings, such as the one quoted directly above.

¹³ Wallace’s unfinished, posthumously published novel *The Pale King* further focuses on this notion of boredom. I have further analyzed this in my paper “Boredom and the Bliss of Meaningful Existence: *The Pale King* Viewed in Light of Kierkegaard’s Existentialist Philosophy” at the “Work in Process—Reading David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King* Conference” (September 22–23, 2011; University of Antwerp).

¹⁴ Scott connects his attribution of meta-irony to Wallace’s appreciation of David Lynch. Scott writes: “Wallace is temperamentally committed to multiplicity—to a quality he has called, with reference to the filmmaker David Lynch, “bothness.” He wants to be at once earnest and ironical” (40). However, what Wallace means by Lynch’s “bothness” has little to do with irony or meta-irony. An important part of his fascination with Lynch lies exactly in the fact that, as Wallace writes, “nobody in Lynch’s movies analyzes or metacriticizes or hermeneuticizes or anything, including Lynch himself. This set of restrictions makes Lynch’s movies fundamentally unironic.” Wallace adds, “Lynch’s lack of irony is the real reason some cinéastes—in this age when ironic self-consciousness is the one and only universally recognized badge of sophistication—see him as a naïf or a buffoon” (“Lynch” 199). Wallace’s point about Lynch’s “bothness” actually has to do with existential complexity: “Laura Palmer in *Fire Walk with Me* is both ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ and yet also neither: she’s complex, contradictory, real,” Wallace writes. “Laura’s muddy bothness... [requires] of us an empathetic confrontation with the exact same muddy bothness in ourselves and our intimates that makes the real world of moral selves so tense and uncomfortable” (“Lynch” 211).

¹⁵ The aesthete A meta-ironically mocks his own ironic life-view by describing himself as having become, as a result of that view, “the unhappiest one”; at the end of the eponymous essay, however, he writes: “But what am I saying—‘the unhappiest’? I ought to say ‘the happiest’See, language breaks down, and thought is confused” (*Either/Or* 1: 230).

¹⁶ Also, this passage is directly followed by the remark discussed in the previous sections about irony becoming a cage and continued irony the song of the “trapped” coming to enjoy that cage.

¹⁷ In *Infinite Jest*, it is repeatedly pointed out that the several characters who commit suicide (or attempt to) opt to do so by “destroying” their head, the “headquarters” of their reflexive-ironic mind.

¹⁸ I analyze this alternative attitude in-depth in my dissertation; see n.1.

¹⁹ Cf. Wallace’s own statement: “I get the feeling that a lot of us, privileged Americans, as we enter our early thirties, have to find a way to put away childish things and confront stuff about spirituality and values. Probably the AA model isn’t the only way to do it, but it seems to me to be one of the more vigorous. The characters have to struggle with the fact that the AA system is teaching them fairly deep things through these seemingly simplistic clichés” (Miller).

²⁰ Cf. n.14.

²¹ Kierkegaard scholar Scholtens offers a description of the “aesthetic mistake” that is strikingly similar to Wallace’s description of the task of fiction: “Kierkegaard’s aesthete rightly states that existence is totally contingent. But he lacks the courage for the leap that is needed to regain positivity. He does not want to realize that his correct observation ‘It is dark in here’ is possible only by virtue of the fact that light exists” (Scholtens 22, my translation).

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