Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace and the
Problems of ‘Metamodernism’
Post-millennial Post-postmodernism?

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ABSTRACT
David Foster Wallace’s long standing ambition was to move beyond postmodern irony, which he claimed introduced ‘sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct’ into literature and culture. This article disturbs and troubles the concept of a millennial turning point for notions of a revived, ethically viable fiction. Arguing that if twenty-first-century fiction is easiest to categorize as metamodern, it is because of a shift of critical perspective overly rooted in positivist historical thinking, seeking a parallel progression in its object of study. Rather, this shift should now recognize that metamodern ontology and epistemology are also applicable to many postmodern fictions to their fictions.

KEYWORDS
metamodernism • postmodernism • post-postmodernism • Thomas Pynchon • utopia • David Foster Wallace

‘in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on’
(Beckett, 1958: 414)
By the publication of *Infinite Jest* in 1996, it had long been David Foster Wallace's ambition to move beyond the now 'critical and destructive' (Wallace, 1993: 183) postmodern irony that he claimed introduced 'sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct' into literature and culture (McCaffery, 1993: 147). With the posthumous publication of *The Pale King* (2011), scholars can now begin to appraise Wallace's twenty-first-century writing against that ambition in contrast to most accounts of *Infinite Jest* as a derailed, failed attempt. One of the redemptive tactics that is and surely will continue to be applied is to classify *Infinite Jest* as a thrust at, and *The Pale King* as an exemplar of, the post-postmodern.

A cursory glance at the twenty-first-century fiction of Thomas Pynchon, the most frequently named influence upon Wallace, appears to reveal a similar shift. Both *Against the Day* (2006) and *Inherent Vice* (2010) seem to alternate between a playfulness and a mode that abandons many of the metafictive devices and tropes of indeterminacy exemplified in *V* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), for which Pynchon is now typecast as the godfather of American postmodernity.

This article trains a harsh critical gaze upon an emergent strain of post-postmodernism formulated by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker: 'metamodernism'. Through an exploration of this paradigm, it draws together Walllace's and Pynchon's points of convergence while disturbing the concept of a millennial turning point for a revived, ethically viable fiction. Wallace and Pynchon have very different literary projects, but while Wallace works to demonstrate 'that cynicism and naïveté are mutually compatible' (Boswell, 2003: 17) – an aim accurately described by 'metamodernism' – much of Pynchon's fiction, including his earlier novels, can also be classed in this way; it appears that metamodernism's vice could be inherent within postmodern literature. While acknowledging their irreconcilability on many points, this article will examine Pynchon and Wallace's limited crossover. Although it is accurate to describe both of these writers as metamodern, as a form of post-postmodernism the generic is insufficiently delineated from its antecedent. As a consequence, metamodernism cannot be used as a temporal specifier, but possesses a nominative function; a designation of metamodern can productively unearth critically-neglected ethical tropes in postmodern fiction as a form of dialectical image. Metamodernism as a generic category is flawed, but nevertheless identifies important shared attributes as a thematic taxonomy; the 'meta-modern aspects' of a text that point towards a regulative utopianism.
Metamodernity

Metamodernity is perhaps best introduced through a close reading of Wallace’s 2001 short story, ‘Another Pioneer’, which both structurally enacts and explicitly details the phenomenon in all but name. In this story, Wallace establishes a frame narrative *in medias res* through a formal presentation to a group of unspecified ‘gentlemen’, reminiscent of Kafka’s ‘A Report to an Academy’ (Wallace, 2004: 117). The subject of this account is a description of an ‘exemplum’ of the ‘mythopoeic cycle’ (Wallace, 2004: 122) related by an airline passenger, ‘the acquaintance of a close friend’ of the narrator who overhears a conversation between two anthropologists. The subject of their conversation is a tribal village blessed with a prodigal child possessed of extreme knowledge and wisdom. The discussion is fragmented, incomplete and second-hand as ‘the fellow could not understand or reproduce the airline passenger’s pronunciation of the dominant village’s name’ (Wallace, 2004: 125), while also being devoid of ‘enframing context’ (Wallace, 2004: 117) and taking place between two people who could alternately be ‘cognitively challenged’, ‘hard of hearing’ or ‘non-native speaker[s] of English’ (Wallace, 2004: 118). Able to answer, in a manner ‘ingeniously apposite and simple and comprehensive and fair’ any question posed by the villagers, this oracle is placed upon a pedestal and the villagers flock, once per lunar calendar, to ask for solutions to their woes. In Borgesian style, the story forks down multiple paths until the child’s ability to answer questions is abruptly and irreparably damaged. Instead, the answers are embedded within a wider context, demonstrating an awareness far beyond the practical value desired by the tribes-people. This mutates one step further into the form of reflexive questioning and seemingly aporetic riddles designed to incur moral reflection in the questioning subject. Dissatisfied and no longer believing they should fund the non-utilitarian lifestyle of this child, the villagers burn the platform upon which their positivist hope of salvation had once been founded. This tale is presented at a conference, having been partially overheard aboard an aeroplane, by a third party, in intermittent fragments, in a conversation between two opinionated ethnographers.

There is an allegory of epistemological progression from positivism to nihilistic despair at work in this piece; the village descends through unchecked optimism into a chasm of postmodern scepticism. By itself, this would be merely Yet Another Metafiction, but Wallace’s framing conflates many stages of this historical progression into a single instant. The conversation between the ethnographers, the product of an imperial, positivist age, takes place aboard an aircraft flight – an engineered application of the pure sciences – encapsulated within a presentational
schema of indeterminacy and refracted knowledge, demonstrating an oscillatory fusion of postmodern indeterminacy and its antecedents. Such an oscillation is encapsulated in the notion of *metaxy*, a Greek term appropriated and popularized by Eric Voegelin, but originally found in the writings of Plato, especially the *Symposium*.

More important for the matter at hand, *metaxy*, or between-ness, is posited as the central component of ‘metamodernism’ in the founding article on this proposed strain of post-postmodernism, Vermeulen and van den Akker’s ‘Notes on Metamodernism’. Although there are many nuances to their definition, it is profitable to outline several key aspects before moving to examine how these could be perceived as emerging in Pynchon’s and Wallace’s fiction around 2000. Firstly, Vermeulen and van den Akker’s theorization of metamodernism is characterized by an oscillation between ‘postmodern irony (encompassing nihilism, sarcasm, and the distrust and deconstruction of grand narratives, the singular and the truth) and modern enthusiasm (encompassing everything from utopism to the unconditional belief in Reason)’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). Second, they claim a shift from a ‘positive’ (Hegelian) to a ‘negative’ (Kantian) idealism and theory of history, ‘most appropriately summarized as “as-if” thinking’. Indeed, they posit an ontology of regulative ideas, of Beckett-esque compulsion to continue regardless: ‘The current, metamodern discourse also acknowledges that history’s purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it as if it does exist. Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). Finally, they conclude that ‘both the metamodern epistemology (as if) and its ontology (between) should thus be conceived of as a “both-neither” dynamic. They are each at once modern and postmodern and neither of them. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). Metamodernity seems to be a mode of constellatory thinking, it is a movement between contradictory elements that, when brought together in configuration, even temporal configuration, light up with the Benjaminian flash of illumination.

While Vermeulen and van den Akker’s paradigm has already found its way as far afield as psychoanalytic discussion of transgender subjectivity (Hansbury, 2011: 219), there are many serious failings in their model. Particularly problematic is the historical and philosophical lineage within which they situate their discourse. Their direct citation of Kant is a poor, flawed choice: ‘Indeed, Kant himself adopts the as-if terminology when he writes “[e]ach [...] people, as if following some guiding thread,
go toward a natural but to each of them unknown goal”. That is to say, humankind, a people, are not really going toward a natural but unknown goal, but they pretend they do so that they progress morally as well as politically’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). It is clear that Kant’s ‘as if’ does no such thing but rather, in this translation, deploys a second conditional with the past continuous subjunctive to indicate that it is the ‘guiding thread’ that is hypothetical, as mirrored in the original German (‘als an einem Leitfaden’) and other translations (‘as by a guiding thread’ [Kant, 2009: 10]). The gloss they put on this sentence is in contradiction to its meaning; for the individual, actions appear free, chaotic and unpredictable. When considered en-masse, however, human behaviour conforms to overarching predictable laws: ‘the annular tables [...] prove that they occur according to laws’ for ‘[a]ll natural capacities of a creature are destined to evolve completely to their natural end’ (Kant, 1963: 11–12).

As Henry E. Allison argues, in this piece at least, Kant’s history does not play a ‘regulative role’ as the ‘Idea’ is theoretical rather than transcendental (Allison, 2009: 24). Metamodernism, if aligned with Kant’s grand narrative, would not seek ‘forever for a truth that it never expects to find’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010), but would abandon the search, only to find the truth in which it disbelieved regardless.

Vermeulen and van den Akker also inflate the novelty of their work: ‘[i]t is somewhat surprising that we appear to be among the first academics to discern in contemporary arts a sensibility akin to Romanticism’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). This is incorrect; Pynchon identifies himself in his early phase ‘as one who has dabbled for short spans of time with a contemporary Romantic view, only to swing back [...] to a “classical” outlook’ (Weisenburger, 1990: 696) and this has been seen in critical work even before *Vineland* (Black, 1980: 248; Chambers, 1996: 21). As metamodernism claims to juxtapose elements of the postmodern alongside the modern, swinging, like Pynchon, from one to the other in the epistemic and ontological regions respectively, a neo-Romantic trend is documented and unsurprising.

Finally, concern should also be raised by the extra-textual work surrounding metamodernism, with the authors running a blog (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2011) and Twitter account (@metamodernism) focusing upon, and monitoring usage of, the terminology, which they seem to be shoehorning into academic discourse. This could be indicative of some form of Sokal-esque affair; a social experiment in its own right to ascertain how far a neologism of questionable background will travel. Given this aspect and the fact that metamodernism is clearly a flawed theorization, why should it still be considered?
Modernism, Postmodernism and Literature

Vermeulen and van den Akker make their case across multiple media, but not literature. Although the term ‘metamodern’ has been used differently in literary studies by Andre Furlani (2002: 713–14) and Alexandra Dumitrescu (2007), despite its theoretical failings this new paradigm offers an interesting twist on postmodern discourse for literature. The leading figure in this latter area is Brian McHale who suggests the movement, albeit with moments of overlap, from a modernist dominant of epistemology – unreliable narrators and mediated consciousness – to a postmodern dominant of ontology, defined in the sense used by Thomas Pavel as ‘a theoretical description of a universe’, with the stress upon the indefinite article attached to ‘universe’ (McHale, 1986: 75; Pavel, 1981: 234). Under this rubric, predicated upon Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia (McHale, 1986: 68; Foucault, 1986: 24, 2007: xix), the work of Wallace and Pynchon should be classed as firmly postmodern; as with McHale’s example of Robert Coover, ‘real-world historical figures, corporate trade-marks [...] and national symbols [...] purely fictional characters – have been gathered together in an impossible, heterotopian locus’ (McHale, 1986: 72). The problem with such an ontological independence, a setting deliberately posited outside – as ‘a’ universe in McHale’s terms – is that it tends towards a formulation of apathy; it becomes very difficult to regain, in this mode of absolute other-worldliness, any positivity because, while Against the Day, The Pale King, Gravity’s Rainbow and Infinite Jest all deploy anachronistic and heterotopic dislocation, it would only be through the reinsertion of a naive enthusiasm that a pragmatic-idealistic u-/dys-topianism could be trained back upon the contemporary experienced topos. Admittedly, Wallace’s and Pynchon’s heterotopic environments are different, yet they fulfil the same function; a determinate negation of a specific historical period with a topographical other, a superimposed u-/dys-topian critique. It must be remembered, however, that Pynchon is sceptical as to how effective this technique might be, giving the reader the potential for ‘[a]nother world laid down on the previous one and to all appearances no different’ (Pynchon, 1995: 664).

This is where metamodernism, for all its flaws, might hold hope. By splitting epistemology and ontology (in a more traditional sense) as an oscillation across the two categories, instead of viewing this alterity as irreconcilable it can become, as the pre-release blurb to Against the Day puts it, ‘not the world’, but ‘what the world might be with a minor adjustment or two’. In metamodernity, the epistemology is an oscillation ‘between naïveté and knowingness [...] purity and ambiguity’, while the ontology moves ‘between hope and melancholy [...] empathy and apathy,'
How, then, can metamodernism be applied to literature? Vermeulen and van den Akker’s blueprint indicates that some system of fragmentol-ogy – presented in relation to the Frankfurt School’s constellations by Sam Thomas in his influential recent work on Pynchon (Thomas, 2007: 21) and through Philip Coleman’s plea for attention to detail in Wallace’s work (Coleman, 2010) – would suffice. In such a case, to nominate as metamodern would be to find instances of each epistemological and ontological pole leading to an irony ‘intrinsically bound to desire’ rather than ‘apathy’; a movement between modernist ‘utopic syntaxis’, post-modern ‘dystopic parataxis’, to a final spaceless moving betweenness: ‘a-topic metaxis’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010).

Given that much discussion of Pynchon and, to a greater degree, Wallace, has already focused on notions of (post-)postmodernity and generic classification (Boswell, 2003; Benzon, 2010; Kelly, 2010; Luther, 2010; McLaughlin, 2004), the scope of this investigation must be strictly limited, not least because of the critical difficulties involved in marshalling four enormous novels. Does the metamodern paradigm apply to the writings of Pynchon and Wallace? Does this application become valid solely in their post-millennial works? And does metamodernity, as a category, assist thought, classification and description?

The Pale King and Against the Day

‘a sort of dutiful tedium of energy and time and the will to forge on in the face of despair’ (Wallace, 2011: 406)

The metamodern ontology in literature (hope, melancholy, empathy, apathy, unity, plurality, totality and fragmentation) can be reduced to the oscillation of eternity against time and reflexive stasis against utopia, with the epistemological ‘as-if’ drive located in the movement between each pole. Before beginning though, it is important to note that The Pale King is a reconstruction from Wallace’s papers by Michael Pietsch, his longtime editor. Pietsch’s unquestionable competence aside, this poses considerable difficulties for macro-structural analysis. As Wallace writes: ‘the book’s editor [...] was sometimes put in a very delicate position’ (Wallace, 2011: 70). However, with this proviso, several features of the novel are interesting from the perspective of a metamodern analysis.

Reflexive stasis in postmodern fiction comes about through metafic-tive fixation on representation leading to infinite recursion, perhaps best seen in Barth’s Lost in the Funhouse, which leads to the cynicism of which Wallace writes. With this in mind, the most surprising element in The
Pale King is the intrusion of a meta-reflexive authorial character, introduced with a faux-innocent ‘right here is me as a real person, David Wallace’ (Wallace, 2011: 66). This seems to fit with McHale’s ontological premise since, as Timothy Aubry puts it: ‘In McHale’s examples [...] the author actually appears as a named character within the fiction and thus seems to straddle the boundary between the real and the fictional world. In Infinite Jest, Wallace avoids that particular gimmick’ (Aubry, 2011: 125). However, as it later emerged, in The Pale King he did not.

Regardless of the insincerity of the author’s claim to ‘find these sorts of cute, self-referential paradoxes irksome’ (Wallace, 2011: 67), the meta-fictionally-induced reflexive stasis of this section and its continuation in §24, is beyond dispute, featuring cyclical reference to the book’s copyright disclaimer, re-introduction of footnotes (returned to below in regard to Infinite Jest), reference to a situation in which ‘the ethics here were gray at best’ (Wallace, 2011: 75), discussion of naivety (Wallace, 2011: 77) and paranoid allegations of conspiracy (Wallace, 2011: 83, 85). Further to this, portions of §22, the narrative of ‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle (Wallace, 2011: 257), are almost direct invocations of Wallace’s ‘E Unibus Pluram’ with classes wherein ‘nothing meant anything, that everything was abstract and endlessly interpretable’ (Wallace, 2011: 155) before a transition to the revelation of a hidden substratum through a Jesuit figure (Wallace, 2011, 216–33), a key signifier of postmodern paranoia in both Pynchon and DeLillo (Ostrowski, 2002). What is perhaps less obvious is the embedded, allusive context of other, supposedly ‘straight’ passages of the novel. The history of Toni Ware, which features in §8, appears to be the classic sincerity with which Wallace is credited. The episode tackles serious subjects, including sexual assault, in a non-ironic, head-on and sympathetic fashion, while avoiding condescension. However, the section begins with an extremely long sentence:

Under the sign erected every May above the outer highway reading IT’S SPRING, THINK FARM SAFETY and through the north ingress with its own defaced name and signs addressed to soliciting and speed and universal glyph for children at play and down the black-top’s gauntlet of double-wide showpieces past the rottweiler humping nothing in crazed spasm’s at chain’s end and the sound of frying through the kitchenette window of the trailer at the hairpin right and then hard left along the length of a speed bump into the dense copse. (Wallace, 2011: 53)

This structure of ‘throughness’ movement, itself implying positive progression, time’s forward movement, mediated by locative prepositions relational to various objects, had also appeared in the first episode of the novel: ‘Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the
place beyond the windbreak’ (Wallace, 2011: 3). There are two points of significance to this syntax, both of which frame the later sincerity in terms of a flawed metafictive quest. The first is that the opening section ends with an invitation to interpret the interminable chain of signifiers across the landscape of America: ‘[r]ead these’ (Wallace, 2011: 4), which must necessarily be mirrored when this structure recurs, particularly as Toni Ware is described as one who ‘made it her business to read signs’ (Wallace, 2011: 58), an ‘incredibly obvious double entendre’ (Wallace, 2011: 163). The second, further demonstrating the ways in which The Pale King remains laced with subdermal traces of agnosis and reflexivity, lies in the syntactic allusion of this passage to the opening of Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49. This work – of which Wallace was acutely aware (Wallace, 1993: 45) – could be called the ultimate postmodern anti-quest narrative and the structural resonance is striking, even for The Pale King, which Tom McCarthy believes is already heavily indebted to Pynchon (McCarthy, 2011):

> Through the rest of the afternoon, through her trip to the market in downtown Kinneret-Among-The-Pines to buy ricotta and listen to the Muzak (today she came through the bead-curtained entrance around bar 4 of the Fort Wayne Settecento Ensemble’s variorum recording of the Vivaldi Kazoo Concerto, Boyd Beaver, soloist); then through the sunned gathering of her marjoram and sweet basil from the herb garden, reading of book reviews in the latest Scientific American. (Pynchon, 1996: 6)

> Many of Pynchon’s metafictional tricks have crossed into his twenty-first-century work. Although since Mason & Dixon in 1997 there has been a move away from radical epistemologies – a phenomenon that Wallace tentatively recognized in Pynchon’s post-Vineland writings: ‘maybe even Pynchon [has] recently written books that rely on more traditional forms’ (McCaffery, 1993: 150) – Against the Day remains rich in notions of indeterminacy, irony and metafictional self-reference. In the opening pages, Pugnax reads of ‘the rising tide of World Anarchy’, albeit ‘safely within the leaves of some book’ (Pynchon, 2006: 6) or later, the ‘[s]mall pictures, almost newspaper-cartoon drawings, of intricate situations Cyprian felt it was important to understand but couldn’t’ (Pynchon, 2006: 936), which equally applies to Pynchon’s novel. Although there are moments of simplicity and sincerity – Cyprian’s emotional departure from the transgressive triad merged into family structure (‘Don’t remember me [...] I’ll see to all the remembering’ [Pynchon, 2006: 962]) – these are undercut by the very historiographic nature of Pynchon’s work. Naivety is seen through a glass cynically, the dramatic irony of the text’s historical fourth wall forewarns the reader that the hell the Chums of Chance fly towards is not really any form of ‘grace’ (Pynchon, 2006: 1085) but World War II and the events of Gravity’s Rainbow.