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Post-millennial Post-postmodernism?

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## 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 metafictional 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 Wallace'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

Metamodernism 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,



unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation' (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010).

How, then, can metamodernism be applied to literature? Vermeulen and van den Akker's blueprint indicates that some system of fragmentology – 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: 'atopic 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; Benzoni, 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 metafictional 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 De Lillo (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 metafictional 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*.

Instead of moving beyond this reflexivity, Pynchon opts to tie his 'counter realistic' (Seed, 1988: 13) mode to temporal structures through a subversion of Kant's a-priori forms of the transcendental aesthetic in the narrative of Kit Traverse aboard the *S.S. Stupendica*. This ship acts as an embodiment of the alternative time represented in the text and has a 'secret identity', for 'what she would turn out to be, in fact, was a participant in the future European war at sea [in which] the *Stupendica's* destiny was to reassume her latent identity as the battleship *S.M.S. Emperor Maximilian*' (Pynchon, 2006: 515). The dual existence of the ship in its military and civilian components serves not only as a representation of the offbeat conceptions of time in the text, but also to link back to Pynchon's earliest novel, *V.*, in its nautical context. This is achieved through multiple permutations on the 'Golden Fang' in *Inherent Vice*, one identity of which is the naval schooner *Preserved* (Pynchon, 2009: 92, 95), the same tactic of proliferation of the signified used in *V.* In this violation of reality and sensory certainty, the ship literally holds two identities, sharing 'a common engine room' but also existing discretely as *Stupendica* and His Majesty's dreadnought (Pynchon, 2006: 519). As Kit puts it, this is a '[t]emporary setback' (Pynchon, 2006: 520). The fluctuation between the mappable (linear) and unmappable (distorted/eternal) time structures, both of which result in readerly cynicism, present the metamodern oscillating optimistic 'as-if' in the flying, or sailing on, of the protagonists.

There are signs that Pynchon softens this reflexivity, not least the metaphor of the terrible Tatzelwurm dragons, for while '[i]t is comforting to imagine this as an outward and visible manifestation of something else [...] sometimes a Tatzelwurm is only a Tatzelwurm' (Pynchon, 2006: 655). However, Pynchon does not provide the criteria for discerning when this 'sometimes' applies. This problem rests upon a central aspect of post-postmodernist thought. Regardless of Pynchon's alternative temporal structures, it is not feasible to revert to a pre-postmodern, or pre-modern stance. Instead, the naivety-cynicism-sincerity movement appears to be a Benjaminian dialectical image (Benjamin, 1999: 462) in which the negating negation remains dependent upon, or saturated with, its forebear and must therefore appear as an oscillation of recurring negativity. Much of Pynchon's trans-temporal metaphor functions in this way, reversing the process to instil flashes of the present in the constellation of the past – be this in the pun of the Stooze-like fitters of the silent frock, 'L' Arimeaux et Querlis' (Pynchon, 2006: 502), or the trespasser Ryder Thorn's warning from the future (Pynchon, 2006: 551–6).

This phenomenon is not confined to historicity – Wallace's novel provides the same constellation in §25 of *The Pale King*: "'Irrelevant" Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page'. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page'. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken

Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page', interspersed with variants, minimal scenic detail and decontextualized poetic fragments: 'Every love story is a ghost story' (Wallace, 2011: 310–13). The superimposition of this experimental hyper-repetitive structure, mirroring the task of the tax agents depicted, over a bureaucratic enterprise, in parallel to the reader's experience of reading as a leisure activity, unites two areas of interest for the metamodern. First, in §10 of the novel bureaucracy is described as 'a world instead of a thing' (Wallace, 2011: 86). The reasoning behind this is that there is no infinite regress in the 'parallel' world of bureaucracy, for the 'elaborate system's operator is not himself uncaused'. This links back to dystopic Weberian bureaucracy, memorably proposed in *Gravity's Rainbow* as 'the only real fucking is done on paper' (Pynchon, 1995: 616) and to McHale's formulation of the postmodern ontology, 'a' world, oscillating between the two. Second, in its literal representation of boredom it reveals the structural core of a purely regulative utopianism that is central to post-postmodernism. As with *Infinite Jest*, the endurable instant of an unendurable eternity concludes with perfection. This tension of eternity against time and reflexive stasis against utopia is the core intersection between a political Pynchon and Wallace and is also integral to the metamodern schema, but how far back can this thematic co-incidence be traced?

### *Infinite Jest* and *Gravity's Rainbow*

I already believe I have to do it. I've accepted the injunction to do it. I believe I have no choice. But I can't do it. I haven't been able to do it' (Wallace, 1996: 964)

The central theme of Wallace's final novel links back to a core line in *Infinite Jest*, tying the concept of addiction to boredom. One of the many things learnt in Alcoholics/Narcotics Anonymous is '[t]hat concentrating intently on anything is very hard work' (Wallace, 1996: 203). Many critical appraisals of *Infinite Jest* consider Wallace to have failed in his post-postmodernist mission, or at least only partially succeeded. Mary K. Holland believes that in his attempt to solve the problem of his antecedent postmodern legacy, 'Wallace has managed in *Infinite Jest* the patricidal liberation of eliminating one key purveyor of self-reflexive schlock, Jim Incandenza, but has left in his place through Incandenza's final film an ill-guided and failed attempt at healing whose clean-up attempt only begets more solipsistic mess' (Holland, 2006), while Iannis Goerlandt is able to rescue the work only 'on the level of the novel's superstructure' where the reader experiences a 'nonironic 'infinite jest' by slowly walking away after putting the book down' (Goerlandt, 2006).

In any examination of the metamodern status of *Infinite Jest*, the degree of metatextual phenomena in the work, as with *The Pale King*, must be noted. The novel's fictional eponymous film, '*Infinite Jest (V) or (VI)*' (Wallace, 1996: 791), mirrors its enframing text through the creators, David Foster Wallace and 'Jim O.Incandenza', sharing an 'anticonfluent middle period' (Wallace, 1996: 396) defined in endnote 61 as 'an après-garde digital movement [...] characterised by a stubborn and possibly intentionally irritating refusal of different narrative lines to merge into any kind of meaningful confluence' (Wallace, 1996: 996). Conversely, there is also a pulling back from metatextuality. For instance, the reader is assured that there is no Pynchonesque sowing of the 'seeds of reality' (Pynchon, 1995: 388) in *Infinite Jest* as all the filmography entries are dated later than the episodes presented in the novel, as verified by Wallace's chronology of Revenue-Enhancing Subsidized Time (Wallace, 1996: 223). In *Infinite Jest*, metatextuality accurately reflects the masterwork, but is offset at an angle; signified and signifier are not confused through this strategy. That is not to say that there is no metatextual regress, but it is not infinite, merely an imperfect hall of mirrors effect. As Marathe questions: 'have I merely *pretended* to pretend to pretend to betray' (Wallace, 1996: 94). It is a recurrence of the impregnated dialectical image of significance since, as Timothy Aubry points out, the 'downward [...] spiral, a harrowing dialectic' is '[t]he experience of the addict' (Aubry, 2011: 107).

In Wallace's work, the 388 endnotes perform a deeper function than merely necessitating a second bookmark. In *Infinite Jest* – building upon the 'textual waste', reader-annoyance and distancing effects noted in Wallace's shorter works (Goerlandt, 2010) – the notes are a parody of academic discourse, elaborating upon the street names of the drugs listed throughout the text ('1. Metamphetamine hydrochloride, a.k.a. crystal meth' [Wallace, 1996: 983]), providing fictional academic reference sources for textual assertions ('144. E.g. see Ursula Emrich-Levine [University of California-Irvine], 'Watching Grass Grow While Being Hit Repeatedly Over the Head With a Blunt Object: Fragmentation and Stasis in James O. Incandenza's *Widower, Fun with Teeth, Zero-Gravity Tea Ceremony, and Pre-Nuptial Agreement of Heaven and Hell, Art Cartridge Quarterly*, vol. III, nos. 1-3, Year of the Perdue Wonderchicken.' [Wallace, 1996: 1026]), directly ridiculing real-world academics such as Harold Bloom ('366 [...] H. Bloom's turgid studies' [Wallace, 1996: 1077]), or providing condescending errata ('143. Sic' [Wallace, 1996: 1026]). Were the endnotes providing accurate additional information, the epistemology would be one of referential certainty. As it is, the parody is flagged up by the intermingling of the latter two uses with the first, adding an additional level of metatextual resonance with Mario Incandenza's pup-

pet film version of *'The ONANtiad'* which deploys the 'device of mixing real and fake news-summary cartridges, magazine articles, and historical headers', a device described as 'parodic' (Wallace, 1996: 391). As such, the novel's endnotes serve to cynically undermine academic referencing and epistemological certainty.

For evidence of a similar function in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it seems necessary to stand upon the shoulders of the 1980s-1990s critical giants in the Pynchon industry, referred to comically as 'I. G. Pynchon'. David Cowart, for instance, sees film in *Gravity's Rainbow* as providing an idealist 'flickering simulacra', always removed from the real object, except that in Pynchon, '[w]e will not see anything more real when we go outside' (Cowart, 1980: 62). This metatextual distancing from, yet simultaneous knotting into, 'a' reality, is played up through Deborah Madsen's political deployment of the Kantian term 'noumenon' (Madsen, 1991: 79), through which she reads a development of specific epistemological and hermeneutic problems in Slothrop's 'ability to interpret' (Madsen, 1991: 108), ultimately concluding with a paranoid readerly parallel in the 'absence of a clearly defined relationship between the narrative a second pretext' (Madsen, 1991: 110). Furthermore, for a writer concerned with Ludditism and technology, Pynchon's stance towards science has merited a large degree of critical commentary. This has been particularly true since the 1997 publication of *Mason & Dixon*. The obsession with cartographic 'violence' in this later novel overlaps with Wallace's territorial re-configuration scenario and his idiolectic slang for killing and injuring, 'de-mapping', or 'rearranging a couple of Canadian maps' (Wallace, 1996: 827). In the early phase of Pynchon's career, much scholarly work focused its attention upon epistemological conditions metaphorically abstracted from 'Heisenberg's 1927 "Principle of Uncertainty"' and the 'indeterminism' of quantum mechanics, addressed to problems of representation and reading (Cooper, 1983: 122-3; Friedman and Puetz, 1981: 75-6). The list goes on: Theodore D. Kharpertian writes that 'all of Pynchon's texts are in a fundamental way *about* signs and significances and their relations' (Kharpertian, 1990: 109) while Thomas Schaub devotes an entire book to Pynchon's 'uncertainties and ambiguities' (Schaub, 1981: ix).

While this article does not subscribe to readings of a purely indeterminate Pynchon, across both authors' earlier works, it is possible to identify two components of the metamodern schema; reflexive stasis and eternity with no utopian conclusion. To move towards the redemptive aspects of *Gravity's Rainbow*, though, is not so straightforward. Various characters explicitly exhibit nihilistic traits which metatextually mirror the auto-destruction of the novel's final obliterating ICBM: Roger Mexico (Pynchon, 1995: 57-8), 'Red' Malcolm X (Pynchon, 1995: 64), the

sadistic Captain Blicero (Pynchon, 1995: 96), Nora Dodson-Truck (Pynchon, 1995: 149) and most importantly of all, Vaslav Tchitcherine (Pynchon, 1995: 338). It is in the presentation of the latter that a redemptive hope, albeit through an impossible situation, can be seen.

Tchitcherine is first introduced when Slothrop is in Nordhausen, the site of the Dora concentration camp, at the start of Part Three, 'In the Zone'. Aptly for the setting, Tchitcherine is presented in the context of slavery, albeit metaphorically, through Geli Tripping, who, '[i]n a way' 'belongs to' Tchitcherine (Pynchon, 1995: 290) and, before long, Slothrop has mentally built him into a caricature of aggression: 'Tchitcherine comes roaring through the window, a Nagant blazing in his fist. Tchitcherine lands in a parachute and fells Slothrop with one judo chop. Tchitcherine drives a Stalin tank right into the room, and blasts Slothrop with a 76 mm shell' (Pynchon, 1995: 293). This version of Tchitcherine as an overly stylized aggressor is developed by the revelation that he is on a mission to find Enzian who, in the best tradition of track down and kill narratives, is his 'half-brother' (Pynchon, 1995: 329). The reason for this aggression 'isn't politics or fuck-your-buddy, it's old-time, pure, personal hate' (Pynchon, 1995: 331), the emphasis on the a-temporal historicity ('old time') of which, even if not the motive element, invokes a grandiose series of mythico-cultural and allegorical fratricides including Cain and Abel, Romulus and Remus, Osiris and Set, Medea and Absyrtus, Eteocles and Polynices, Claudius and Hamlet, Sir Balin and Sir Balan and, in more recent fiction, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* This builds over four hundred pages in which Tchitcherine is described as a 'mad scavenger' possessed of 'steel teeth' with a 'compulsive [...] need to annihilate' (Pynchon, 1995: 337–8) a 'suicidal maniac', (Pynchon, 1995: 345) '[r]eckless', (Pynchon, 1995: 347) responsible for Slothrop's interrogation in the 'Sodium Amytal session', (Pynchon, 1995: 390) with his secret 'vendetta' (Pynchon, 1995: 564) amid revelations of 'the shape of defeat, of operational death' (Pynchon, 1995: 566) while he seeks 'comfort in the dialectical ballet of force, counterforce, collision, and new order' (Pynchon, 1995: 704). Pynchon constructs a cynical caricature of hatred in the character of Vaslav Tchitcherine, seeking to eliminate the blackness that is both part of him and externally embodied in his brother, with all appropriate psychoanalytic overtones.

To appropriate T.S. Eliot, then: after such cynicism, what redemption? The chronological, temporal structure of *Gravity's Rainbow* is one of general progression, bar various interspersed analepses, until the final sequence. In this endgame phase Pynchon presents a reversal in the temporal movement between the launch of the 00001 and the 00000, mirroring the inverted causal chain of the V-2 strike sequence. The point around which these launches temporally orbit is the episode of Tchitch-



erine's redemption. This moment is one of the few genuine instances of naivety, empathy and purity in Pynchon's novel, representing an untempered moment of utopian optimism in the perverse anti-climax to the Tchitcherine narrative. After Geli Tripping casts her sexual magic to blind Tchitcherine to all but her, he speaks with his brother Enzian on a bridge in a simple act of bartering, with no awareness of their relation: '[c]ertainly not the first time a man has passed his brother by, at the edge of the evening, often forever, without knowing it' (Pynchon, 1995: 735). The utopian element is clear: '[t]his is magic. Sure – but not necessarily fantasy'. In one small corner near the close of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the critical point of oscillation for 'diagnosis: metamodern' is found; a redemption founded on a non-fantastic, but nonetheless magical, impossible occurrence; love. The regulative utopia, pivoted around conventional time, enmeshed in eternity and reflexive stasis brings *Gravity's Rainbow* to the metamodern, for it is 'a spacetime that is both-neither ordered and disordered' (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). *Gravity's Rainbow* begins by stating 'it is too late', only to end with a more optimistic, yet ironically infused, 'there is still time'. Of course, this magic was only possible because of a secret: '[t]he secret is in the concentrating' (Pynchon, 1995: 734).

'[C]oncentrating intently on anything is very hard work' of course (Wallace, 1996: 203), but one of the aspects upon which *Infinite Jest* concentrates is the way in which 'anhedonia and internal emptiness' are deemed 'hip and cool' in the 'millennial U.S.A.'; 'hip ennui' (Wallace, 1996: 694) in which 'there's some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy' (Wallace, 1996: 592), an 'absolution via irony' (Wallace, 1996: 385). Wallace also gives, for an analysis of the metamodern schema, a definition of naivety: '[s]entiment equals naivety on this continent', the incompatibility of which with cynicism is merely a 'queerly persistent U.S. myth' (Wallace, 1996: 694). The locus of cynicism and naivety in Wallace's novel, which performs a similar function to the Tchitcherine narrative in *Gravity's Rainbow*, is perhaps best examined through Don Gately's experience in hospital after he is shot defending Randy Lenz. In the bedside visit of Joelle van Dyne, sympathy towards Gately is described sentimentally: '[h]e feels self-conscious with her, Joelle can tell, but what's admirable is he has no idea how heroic or even romantic he looks, unshaven and intubated, huge and helpless, wounded in service to somebody who did not deserve service' (Wallace, 1996: 855). However, the sentiment and naivety of this setup, re-enforced through Wallace's shift of internal perspective which reveals the characters' mutual uncommunicated attraction towards one another, is undermined by the next paragraph which veers back towards cynicism, since 'Joelle doesn't know that newly sober people are awfully vulnerable to the delusion that people with more sober time than them

are romantic and heroic, instead of clueless and terrified and just muddling through day-by-day' (Wallace, 1996: 855).

The problem with *Infinite Jest* is that, as the novel metatextually remarks through James O. Incandenza's '*Accomplice!*', 'even though the cartridge's end has both characters emoting out of every pore, *Accomplice!*'s essential project remains abstract and self-reflexive; we end up feeling and thinking not about the characters, but about the cartridge itself' (Wallace, 1996: 946). The missing year of the narrative that precedes the beginning and follows the novel's end adds an additional level of indeterminacy in terms of reflexivity upon representation. As a counterpoint to this, the elements of Wallace's novel indebted to literary realism are supposed to demonstrate their distance from *Accomplice!* Instead, Wallace's text seems, like *Accomplice!* to oscillate (a very metamodern term) between emotional empathy, realism, sympathy and a level of meta-speculation that is an unavoidable consequence of its experimental style. As *The Pale King* suggests: 'if you're there to look at the experiment, it supposedly messes up the results' (Wallace, 2011: 482). While James Wood pejoratively termed such an oscillation, in both Pynchon and Wallace, hysterical realism, such a negative appraisal is deeply flawed, as has been explored elsewhere in detail by Jeffrey Staiger (2008). The last question to ask, then, is: does 'metamodernism' present itself, in light of this study, as a better term, free of pejorative connotations that can productively be used to group, and think about, the shared tropes of writing that appears distinct from its antecedent generic?

There is obviously a problem with metamodernism as it applies to the literary examples presented here. *Gravity's Rainbow* is considered to be an, if not the, archetype of postmodern writing, yet it could also be categorised as metamodern. This is not to say that a work cannot fall under two classifications, but rather that if the classification simply forms an overlay for an extant generic, or is too broad so as to exclude virtually no work, then it arguably adds no value to a discussion. Nonetheless, metamodernism does hold value, not as a generic classification, but as a set of tropes that identify regulative utopianism through the dialectical image of a sincerity infused with naivety and undermined by scepticism. This specific constellation could be called the 'metamodern aspect' of a text. Metamodernism as a reading practice offers a means of excavating the latent ethical connotations of supposedly nihilistic postmodern texts, it is a tool for rethinking the millennial turning point for a new literary ethics. Perhaps, though, literary generics must also be turned, reflexively, but without stasis, back upon the academy itself. Is the real turn, post-2000, towards ethical readings actually the result of an academic discipline desperately demonstrating 'relevance'? Is a post-millennial, post-postmodernism actually the result of a stuttered academic praxis that

couldn't go on, post-Beckett, post-Barth, post-Pynchon, post-Wallace, being compelled, in fact, to go on?

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