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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" (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*, 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.

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Meanwhile, even 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* and *Inherent Vice* seem to continue "the process of undercutting our ontological assumptions" through the metafictional devices and tropes of indeterminacy exemplified in *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, but have also shifted to a mode of new sincerity; or as Kathryn Hume puts it: a "new departure" (Hume 2007, 163).

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In this paper I want to train a harsh critical gaze upon an emergent strain of post-postmodernism that purports to rethink these issues: "metamodernism". Simultaneously, I want to amalgamate Wallace's and Pynchon's often assumed, but never fully formulated, points of convergence while disturbing the concept of a millennial turning point for a revived, ethically-viable fiction. While Wallace worked to demonstrate "that cynicism and naivety are mutually compatible" (Boswell 2003) - an aim accurately described by "metamodernism" - much of Pynchon's fiction can also be so described; it appears that metamodernism's *Vice* could be *Inherent* within postmodern literature. Indeed, although it is accurate to describe both of these writers as metamodern, as a form of post-postmodernism, metamodernism cannot be used as a temporal specifier, but rather as an identifier of important shared thematic attributes; those aspects that point toward a regulative utopianism.

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Let me begin by talking, briefly, about "metamodernism". Metamodernism is a term coined by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in which *metaxy*, or between-ness, is posited as the central component. Although there are many nuances to their definition, it is profitable to outline several of the key aspects before moving to examine how these could be perceived as emerging in Pynchon's and Wallace's fiction around 2000. **[SLIDE]** Firstly, Vermeulen and van den Akker's theorisation of metamodernism is characterised 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 utopianism to the unconditional belief in Reason)" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010). **[SLIDE]** Secondly, they claim a shift from a "positive" (Hegelian), to "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". **[SLIDE]** 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." Metamodernism is 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.

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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 which must be pre-emptively highlighted. Particularly problematic is the historical and philosophical lineage within which they situate their discourse. For instance, 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". 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" which 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, whereas when considered en masse, 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 puts it, in this piece, at least, Kant's history does not play a "regulative role" as the "Idea" here is theoretical, rather than transcendental (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 rather abandon the search, only to find the truth in which it disbelieves regardless.

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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". This is incorrect; Thomas 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 attempting to

shoehorn into academic discourse. This could be indicative of some manner 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 theorisation, why should it still be considered?

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One of the key problems with Brian McHale's formulation of a shift in dominant towards the ontological in postmodern fiction is that in a setting deliberately posited outside - as "a" universe in McHale's terms - and fixated upon notions of representation, works tend 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-/dsy- topanism could be trained back upon the contemporary experienced topos.

This is where metamodernism might hold potential, for all its flaws, which I will explore further by looking at the various instances in Pynchon's and Wallace's fictions. 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". To clarify, then: in metamodernism, the epistemology is an oscillation "between naivete and knowingness [...] purity and ambiguity," while the ontology moves "between hope and melancholy, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation".

From this, the metamodern ontology in literature (hope, melancholy, empathy, apathy, unity, plurality, totality and fragmentation) can be thematically 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.

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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, perhaps the most surprising element in *The Pale King* is the introduction of a meta-reflexive authorial character, introduced with a faux-innocent "right here is me as a real person, David Wallace" (2011, 66). This fits well with McHale's ontological premise.

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Regardless of the insincerity of the author's claim to "find these sorts of cute, self-referential paradoxes irksome," (Wallace 2011, 67) the metafictionally 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, discussion of naivety (2011, 77) and paranoid allegations of conspiracy (2011, 83,85). Further to this, portions of §22, the narrative of 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle (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” (2011, 155) before a transition to the revelation of a hidden substratum through a Jesuit figure (2011, 216-233), a key signifier of postmodern paranoia in both Pynchon and DeLillo (Ostrowski 2002). What is perhaps less obvious, however, is the embedded, allusive context of other, supposedly “straight” passages of the novel. Consider §8 which features the history of Toni Ware. At first glance this 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, the first portion of which reads:

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 spasms 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 (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 (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,” (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” (2011, 58), an “incredibly obvious double entendre” (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:

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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)

Clearly, Wallace is structurally invoking the metafictional tradition in his twenty-first-century work. For reasons of time, you're going to just have to take my word for it that Pynchon has also continued his metafictional tropes into the 21st century, albeit perhaps somewhat softened when he writes about tatzelwurms, in *Against the Day*, that “[i]t is comforting to imagine this as an outward and visible manifestation of something else [...] but sometimes a Tatzelwurm is only a Tatzelwurm”.

However, the direction in which I want to now head for the final section of this paper is to examine how, in many senses, the postmodern fiction that preceded this later batch actually contains all the same ethical seeds.

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Although Pynchon's most lauded work is known for its schemas of indeterminacy and cynicism, *Gravity's Rainbow* has a deeply ethical core of revealing the transatlantic transference of power post world war 2. It also, though, has a personal narrative of redemption hidden among the disintegrating subjects and epistemological play.

Vaslav 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 (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” (1995, 293). This version of Tchitcherine as overly stylized aggressor is enhanced when it is revealed that he is on a mission to track down and kill Enzian who, in the very best tradition of track down and kill narratives, is his “half-brother” (1995, 329). The reason for this aggression “isn’t politics or fuck-your-buddy, it’s old-time, pure, personal hate” (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 King Hamlet, Sir Balin and Sir Balan and, in more recent fiction, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* This build-up continues over the course of four hundred pages in which Tchitcherine is described as a “mad scavenger” possessed of “steel teeth” with a “compulsive [...] need to annihilate,” (1995, 337-338) a “suicidal maniac,” (1995, 345) “[r]eckless,” (1995, 347) responsible for Slothrop's interrogation in the “Sodium Amytal session,” (1995, 390) with his secret “vendetta” (1995, 564) amid revelations of “the shape of defeat, of operational death,” (1995, 566) while he seeks “comfort in the dialectical ballet of force, counterforce, collision, and new order ” (1995, 704).

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Tchitcherine's personal redemption represents an untempered moment of utopian optimism in the perverse anti-climax to the aggressive build-up. 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” (1995, 735). The utopian element is clear: **[SLIDE]** “[t]his is magic. Sure – but not necessarily fantasy”. Thus, 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 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). As the final rocket falls, the audience can carry on as-if it did not; surely, like Tchitcherine, all will be redeemed? *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).

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“[C]oncentrating intently on anything is very hard work,” as Wallace puts it (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” (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,” (1996, 592) an “absolution via irony” (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” (1996, 694). The locus of cynicism and naivety in Wallace's earlier 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. Consider, for instance, the bedside visit of Joelle van Dyne whose sympathy towards Gately is described, sentimentally, thus: “[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” (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 in only the next paragraph, veering back towards cynicism, for “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”.

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 [read: book] itself” (1996, 946). Consider, for instance, the missing year of the narrative that precedes the beginning and follows the novel's end and the additional level of indeterminacy this adds 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* puts it: “if you're there to look at the experiment, it supposedly messes up the results” (Wallace 2011, 482). 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?

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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 has clearly been seen that it could also be categorised as metamodern. *Infinite Jest*, a supposed failed attempt, also demonstrates metamodernism to some degree. 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 so broad as to exclude virtually no work, then it adds no value to a discussion; Borges' one-to-one map of the world, perhaps. Metamodernism is such a classification. 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 undermined by scepticism. This specific constellation could be called the “metamodern aspect” of a text.

Metamodernism as a reading practice provides a means to excavate buried ethical connotations of supposedly nihilistic postmodern texts. In the light of this, it is a tool for rethinking the millennial turning point for a new literary ethics, examined here all too briefly in Pynchon and Wallace, a tool that can help us deal with the compulsion, in the generic classification of the ethics of fiction, **[SLIDE]** to go on.