

When David Foster Wallace published *Infinite Jest* in 1996, critics began uttering his name in the same breath as Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis. The novel catapulted Wallace to near-legendary status, and reviewers ran through adjectives until no more could be heaped upon the book. The “grandly ambitious,” “sprawling piece of intellectual wizardry” is a “work of genius”¹ that left the literary world puzzling over the novel’s classification, given its intriguing blend of various literary aesthetics and aims. While the novel deserves every bit of praise that’s plastered across its cover and opening pages, it is at heart an attempt to emphasize the importance of emotion in contemporary literature.

At just over 1,000 pages—100 of which feature 388 endnotes—the most difficult thing about the novel seems to be its size. Once readers crack the spine, however, more difficulties arise: Wallace’s sentences often run for several pages, he liberally employs arcane words, and radical jumps between time and character take place from section to section. And for 200+ pages of *Infinite Jest* readers simply don’t know *when* certain events actually take place. The novel spans more than fifty years, but most of the action is set during Subsidized Time, a nine-year period in which corporations bid on the rights to endorse a given year. And don’t forget about those endnotes. It’s all emblematic of Wallace’s belief that serious art should “force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is often the by-product of hard work and discomfort.”² Still, events begin to gel *before* Subsidized Time is laid out. Striking connections between character and time—reminiscent of Pynchon and Gaddis—begin to cohere in the reader’s mind fairly early in the novel, which is surprising given *Infinite Jest’s* immensity.

The novel features three main storylines, one of which revolves around the Incandenza family. Hal Incandenza is a tennis and linguistic prodigy who attends the Enfield Tennis Academy. Dr. James Incandenza, Hal’s father, started the academy but retired after running it after a few years in order to focus on filmmaking. Hal’s father committed suicide after making a film entitled *Infinite Jest*. Hal’s mother Avril runs the

¹ Critical reviews cited in front matter of David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1996.

² Larry McCaffery, “An Interview with David Foster Wallace,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:2 (Summer 1993), p. 127.

academy with her half-brother during the novel's action. Hal's brother Orin attended E.T.A., but his horribly crippled brother Mario does not, even though he lives on-campus.

The second storyline revolves around Don Gately, a twenty-nine-year-old ex-con, recovering from drug addiction down the hill from E.T.A. at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (sic).

The third storyline follows the quest for the film *Infinite Jest*, which is so addictive it's actually lethal—anyone who sees the film wants nothing more than to watch it over and over, uninterrupted, forever. Various Canadian terrorist cells hunt for the film throughout the novel in order to unleash it on an unsuspecting American populace. The quest is sparked after Gately accidentally murders an important Canadian official during a bungled burglary attempt. In addition, several complex connections between the three main narrative strands surface throughout the novel.

Wallace's intentions in *Infinite Jest* are best understood in conjunction with two of his previous pieces: the novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," and the essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." In the novella, Wallace critiques the kind of metafiction popularized by John Barth, demonstrating the form's inherent solipsism. Barth's work had a big impact on Wallace, so understanding "Westward" and its influence on *Infinite Jest* requires at least a basic understanding of Barth. An essay entitled "The Literature of Exhaustion" forms the core of Barth's argument against realist and modernist techniques, while his short story "Lost in the Funhouse" is emblematic of his attempt to subvert both literary traditions. Wallace continued his critique of postmodernism in "E Unibus Pluram," an essay declaring that television has exploited postmodern literary techniques and, artistically speaking, rendered them useless. The essay incorporates aspects of Wallace's novella and reads like his own "Literature of Exhaustion." Thus, in a broad context, *Infinite Jest* can be seen as an attempt to depict and respond to pop culture while avoiding the essential emptiness, or exhaustion, of postmodernism.

"E Unibus Pluram" and "Westward" are cornerstones of Wallace's theories and diaries about his goals as a writer. Measuring *Infinite Jest* against them provides ample evidence as to whether or not the novel succeeds or fails in its attempt to rescue emotion from the jaws of a detrimental brand of postmodern irony.

John Barth Builds a Funhouse

It Tolls For Thee

In 1967 John Barth published an essay entitled “The Literature of Exhaustion,” which many students and scholars received as a eulogy for the modernist novel. But I agree with Barth when he succinctly replied, “It isn’t.”³ It did however raise some curious questions about the direction in which literature was headed, questions that would eventually be considered by David Foster Wallace.

“The literature of exhaustion” is a phrase Barth uses in order to emphasize “the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities”⁴ in the modernist novel. This basic thesis seems to be the source of the many misunderstandings and misreadings that have plagued Barth’s eminent essay since its publication. Careful reading reveals that Barth’s essay is not death knell but diagnosis, said diagnosis being that modernist fiction has thoroughly exhausted its own methods and modes of inquiry and can no longer stand in meaningful opposition to nineteenth century realism. Barth’s essay portrays modernism as a kind of backlash against realism, so a brief survey of realist techniques is necessary.

Pam Morris, in her book *Realism*, reminds us that realism is connected with the ideas formed during the Enlightenment; hence the realists’ emphasis on “using language predominantly as a means of communication,” and “offering rational, secular explanations for all the happenings of the world so represented.”⁵ These emphases appear in realist novels as stylistic shticks like linear plot development and characterization through objective detail: plots develop along an empirical cause-and-effect arc, while characters are formed by class status and physical description. Morris also points out that realism rose to popularity “alongside the other quickly popularized representational

³ John Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984, p. 64.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵ Pam Morris, *Realism*, New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 9-10.

practice of photography,”⁶ and indeed, many realist novels see their authors acting like literary cameramen. They seem to capture a single scene of reality on film by faithfully recording physical detail. That faithful record was also intended to render every aspect of the human condition—from gutter to mansion, worker to owner, peasant to bourgeoisie—allowing some realists to attack authority and uncover corruption.

Realism’s *raison d’être*—to accurately portray people in every sphere of society—was criticized by the early modernists. Artistically speaking, the modernists condemned the idea that pedantic physical description and cause-and-effect plot lines were equivalent to reality, insisting instead that they simply ignored the subjective and failed to capture the way people actually experience life.

Is it not possible that the accent falls a little differently, that the moment of importance came before or after, that, if one were free and could set down what one chose, there would be no plot, little probability, and a vague general confusion in which the clear-cut features of the tragic, the comic, the passionate, and the lyrical were dissolved beyond the possibility of separate recognition? The mind, exposed to the ordinary course of life, receives upon its surface a myriad impressions—trivial fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel.⁷

The above passage is from “Modern Novels,” the wonderfully eloquent essay by Virginia Woolf. In it are the seeds of several modernist techniques—anti-linear narration, plot disruption, subjective characterization—that will be used to produce fiction that challenges realism’s staples and creates a new dialogue about literature’s ability to imitate life.

⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, “Modern Novels,” *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume III, 1919-1924*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, London: The Hogarth Press, 1988, p. 33.

Misreading Mr. Barth

In 1979 John Barth published another essay, this time entitled “The Literature of Replenishment,” in which he explains “The Literature of Exhaustion” was really about “the effective ‘exhaustion’ not of language or of literature, but of the aesthetic of high modernism.”⁸ Modernism, in other words, is not *dead*; it’s simply no longer a viable means for making literature more realistic. The syntactic and stylistic methods employed by the modernists were undoubtedly groundbreaking, but they’ve become as stale as realism. *Exhausted*.

But fear not, for Barth has an antidote.

Considering Barth’s essays as companion pieces reveals that his targets are both modernism *and* realism, meaning his *postmodern* ideas actually form a broadly envisioned solution to the representational problems that have faced literature since its emergence as a popular artistic medium. If the realists relied on linearity and cause-and-effect plotlines, and the modernists on anti-linearity and plot disruption, then according to Barth, perhaps “a worthy program for postmodern fiction ... is the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses.”⁹ And how does one synthesize such elements? By writing a linear narrative that self-consciously comments on its own process as it progresses towards its end. Barth does exactly that in his seminal short story “Lost in the Funhouse,” in which the main character, Ambrose (perhaps the author himself), literally gets lost in a funhouse at the Ocean City amusement park. Here’s a passage:

He has come to the seashore with his family for the holiday, *the occasion of their visit is Independence Day, the most important secular holiday of the United States of America*. A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type, *which in turn* is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and

⁸ John Barth, “The Literature of Replenishment,” *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984, p. 206.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

phrases as well as the customary type for titles of complete work, not to mention.¹⁰

It's called *metafiction*, and though it has existed in some form or another since the days of *Don Quixote*, Barth's plan is to use it on a massive scale to make fiction conscious of itself *as fiction*. Metafiction seeks to reveal exactly what gives it life and sustains it by acknowledging its own status as an imitation of reality, which means "not just the *form* of the story but the *fact* of the story is symbolic; the medium is (part of) the message."¹¹ If realist fiction objectively tried to reflect reality like a mirror, and modernist fiction to examine subjectively everything that mirror could not properly reflect, then Barth's intent is to replenish both exhausted forms by inquiring into the nature of the mirror *even as he uses it*. By doing so Barth discovers the mirror is an imperfect medium for accurate duplication, and as John O. Stark points out, he uses mirrors symbolically in "Lost in the Funhouse" to mock "realism's claim that it can mirror reality."¹²

In the funhouse mirror-room you can't see yourself go on forever, because no matter how you stand, your head gets in the way. Even if you had a glass periscope, the image of your eye would cover up the thing you really wanted to see.¹³

Barth believes that realist writing cannot function like a mirror because any realist author who attempts to accurately describe the reflection he sees must perforce be part of that reflection.

Hence the transition to modernism, in which subjective experience takes primacy over objective hypotyposis, or the pedantic listing of detail. Once again, Virginia Woolf on the modernist method:

¹⁰ John Barth, "Lost in the Funhouse," *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice*, New York: Anchor Books, 1988, p. 72.

¹¹ John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," p. 71.

¹² John O. Stark, *The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov, and Barth*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1974, p. 140.

¹³ John Barth, "Lost in the Funhouse," p. 85.

From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life; ... Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent its appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.¹⁴

To trace disconnected and incoherent patterns, modernists often wrote stream-of-conscious narratives that took place entirely within the minds of their characters. Telling stories *through* characters—not *about* them—made it possible for authors like Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and James Joyce to imitate the fragmentary and protean nature of experience. In fact, every modernist technique was intended to trace the way conscious minds perceive reality.¹⁵

But despite the necessity and importance of the modernists' innovations, by the 1960s Barth believed they were nothing more than a collection of literary conventions, "neither more nor less 'accurate' than bourgeois realism and only slightly more current."¹⁶ To subvert modernism's focus on the subjectivity of consciousness, Barth uses metafiction to turn that subjectivity against the *narrative* consciousness, which allows him to explore the complications of literary representation even as he constructs stories right before the reader's eyes. Here's another passage from "Lost in the Funhouse," in which the narrative consciousness interrupts the plot:

Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction. It is also important to 'keep the senses operating'; when a detail from one of the five senses, say visual, is 'crossed' with a detail from another, say auditory, the reader's imagination is oriented to the scene, perhaps unconsciously.¹⁷

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, "Modern Novels," p. 33.

¹⁵ Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2003, p. 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁷ John Barth, "Lost in the Funhouse," pp. 73-74.

These interruptions occur several times per page and range from brainstorming on the story's action to lectures on literary theory. The most radical advance made by this kind of metafiction is the sense of a *shared* reality between author and reader. The reader is *included* in the story's construction, experiencing the text's progression like the author. Gone is the realist tendency toward objective superfluity and inane detail; gone is modernist access to the thought processes of various characters; in their place Barth puts the narrative consciousness center-stage and pits previously exhausted conventions against themselves by openly acknowledging their status *as* conventions. The above passage is a perfect example of something Barth does throughout "Lost in the Funhouse," but he goes a step further by italicizing all those standard methods of characterization, e.g., "he moved and spoke with *deliberate calm*"¹⁸ and "The boy's mother pushed his shoulder *in mock annoyance*."¹⁹ Certainly stock phrases in the world of literature, but by drawing the reader's attention to them through italics and narrative interruptions, Barth makes their use reflexive—a way to tap the reader on the shoulder and say, "Join me and we'll create the illusion of reality."

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 79.

Toward the Infinite

What's More Fun Than a Funhouse?

It is strange—metafiction seems like it's going to tell you exactly how the magician pulls a rabbit out of his hat. Seems likely to bleed literature of all its magic. But it doesn't, because the reader is never actually in on the trick. He's more like a member of the audience that has been called up on stage to assist the magician—a *part of the trick*, but still not quite sure how it is done. That is the real magic of metafiction.

Of course, no magician can make a living peddling just one illusion. Barth shattered the old mirrors used only to reflect and erected a funhouse atop their scattered shards. It became his metaphor for metafiction, a kind of literature the reader experienced from the *inside*, helping to create the reality it produced. Radical it may have been, but, as Barth says, “the forms and modes of art live in human history and are therefore subject to used-upness, at least in the minds of significant numbers of artists in particular times and places.”²⁰ In 1989 David Foster Wallace published a novella entitled “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” which, he claims, was intended “to get the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction's always been about ... over with, and then out of the rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans.”²¹ “Westward” is not about that transaction—it's about exposing metafiction's flaws. Wallace targets Barth as the patriarch for his patricide and openly declares the story is “written in the margins”²² of “Lost in the Funhouse.”

Briefly, “Westward” is about four twenty-somethings on their way to the filming of a McDonald's commercial in Collision, Illinois. Two of them, Drew-Lynn Eberhardt and Mark Nechtr, are students in a collegiate writing course taught by one Professor Ambrose, author of the famous piece of metafiction entitled “Lost in the Funhouse.”

²⁰ John Barth, “The Literature of Replenishment,” p. 205.

²¹ Larry McCaffery, “An Interview with David Foster Wallace,” p. 142.

²² Publishing information cited in front matter of David Foster Wallace, *Girl With Curious Hair*, New York: Norton, 1989.

J.D. Steelritter, head of J.D. Steelritter Advertising, is handling the MacDonald's commercial and opening a national chain of funhouses based on Prof. Ambrose's short story. Marshall Boswell notes the funhouse chain is Wallace's first and most critical reference to Barthian metafiction—it has become conventional through over-use and co-opted by popular culture.²³ But that's description, not examination. Throughout the novella narrative interruptions condemn metafiction while making the novella metafictional:

Again, the preceding generation of cripplingly self-conscious writers, obsessed with their own interpretation, would mention at this point, just as we're possibly getting somewhere, that the story isn't getting anywhere, isn't progressing in the seamless Freitagian upsweep we should have scaled by this, mss. p. 35, time. They'd trust, though, à la their hierophant C—— Ambrose, that this explicit internal *acknowledgment* of their failure to start the show would release them somehow from the obligation to start the show (269).

It has been said often enough in this essay that Barth ironically used metafiction to expose outdated literary conventions, but in "Westward" Wallace uses metafiction to call attention to *metafiction* (I won't even call it meta-metafiction), ironically exposing *its* recursive and self-conscious nature. His argument here is that if metafiction isn't in service to anything but itself then it "worships the narrative consciousness, makes *it* the subject of the text."²⁴ Theoretically Barthian metafiction *should* draw the reader inside the text and establish an unprecedented intimacy between reader and author. Instead, as Wallace claims, the reader is left outside the text because that relationship becomes one-sided, focused only on a narrative consciousness obsessed with its own interpretation.

The symbolic representation Wallace chooses for the literature he wants to write is something entirely new: the archer's arrow. Mark Nechtr, protagonist of "Westward" and Wallace surrogate, dreams of writing something someday "that stabs you in the

²³ Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 108.

²⁴ Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," p. 144.

heart” (332). (Not surprisingly, Mark also carries with him throughout the story a Dexter Aluminum target arrow.) Wallace’s literature/archery analogy begins like this:

the point of your arrow, at full draw, is somewhere between three and nine centimeters to the left of the true straight line to the bull’s-eye, even though the arrow’s nock, fucked by the string, is *on* that line. The bow gets in the way, see. So logically it seems like if your sight and aim are truly true, the arrow should always land just to the left of target-center ... (293-4).

However, the physics acting upon an arrow in mid-air (which Wallace explains) cause it to “stab the center, right in the heart, every time” (294). The conclusion Wallace draws from this analogy is that what matters most is not the person who shoots the arrow, or even the target the arrow stabs, but what happens to the arrow “*while it’s traveling* to the waiting target” (294). *That* is the experience the reader and the author will share.

Extending the analogy makes self-obsessed metafiction function like an archer who has aimed his arrow at the waiting target, but instead of firing he spends his time thinking about the nature of the bow and theorizing about the arrow’s path through the air. The arrow never gets a chance to travel, and certainly cannot stab the reader in the heart.

Again, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” is not about creating a living transaction between reader and author. It is not about creating a shared reality. It is not about the traveling arrow. Its purpose is to dramatize the one-sidedness and closed-circuit quality of Barthian metafiction in order to trigger that Armageddon-explosion Wallace was after. And out of the rubble, he creates *Infinite Jest*.

More Metafiction

Wallace does not simply dismiss the value of metafiction as a literary aesthetic, though, and insists in an interview that it “helped writers break free of some long-standing flat-

earth-type taboos,”²⁵ and more importantly, “helps reveal fiction as a mediated experience.”²⁶ The emphasis here is on *mediated*, suggesting fiction’s function as a transaction between reader and author—number one on Wallace’s list of priorities.

In order to avoid the solipsism of Barthian metafiction, Wallace mostly limits his use of metafiction to the endnotes in *Infinite Jest* ... all 388 of them. The endnotes range from one word to one paragraph, one page to several, or serve as references to other endnotes:

Those younger staffers who double as academic and athletic instructors are, by convention at North American tennis academies, known as ‘prorectors’ (983n4).

They provide definitions for off-the-wall words, translations of foreign phrases, or the chemical breakdowns of various pharmaceuticals:

Low Bavarian for something like ‘wandering alone in blasted disorienting territory beyond all charted limits and orienting markers,’ supposedly (994n36).

The information they provide is sometimes vital and sometimes extraneous, and by turns entertaining and grueling:

Freer’s ‘The Viking’ moniker is his own invention, and nobody else uses it, instead referring to him as just ‘Freer,’ and regarding it as a classic pathetic Freer-type move that he goes around trying to get people to refer to him as ‘The Viking’ (998n68).

But they always, as Boswell notes, disrupt the narrative²⁷ and remind the reader that *Infinite Jest* is a mediated construct.²⁸

²⁵ Larry McCaffrey, “An Interview with David Foster Wallace,” p. 134.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁷ Like so.

²⁸ Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 120.

Despite commenting on the main text of *Infinite Jest*, the endnotes rarely address the narrative consciousness. In fact, there seem to be only two verifiable instances in which they do—endnotes 117 and 119—although both are very brief: “over shot the place to mention ...” and “also overshot the spot to include ...” (1022). These moments almost seem like mistakes, but their inclusion in the text does not detract from downplaying metafiction. Wallace endeavors to render them *in service* to the main narrative since what happens *during* the novel (while the arrow is traveling to its target) is intended to take precedence over the novel’s *process*. Oddly enough, the endnotes almost feel more real than the main text—they create a consciousness that is already thoroughly familiar with the world constructed in *Infinite Jest*. Confined strictly to metafictional expression, these endnotes experience the text *along with* the reader and “enhance the reader’s intimacy with the text even as they highlight the story’s artificiality.”²⁹

A Postmodern Environment

There is no denying the obvious but striking link between literature and cultural taste. John Barth acknowledged it in 1979:

art lives in human time and history, and general changes in its modes and materials and concerns, even when not obviously related to changes in technology, are doubtless as significant as the changes in a culture’s general attitudes, which its arts may both inspire and reflect.³⁰

And in 1993, David Foster Wallace wrote about the link itself in an essay entitled “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction”:

²⁹ Ibid., p. 121.

³⁰ John Barth, “The Literature of Replenishment,” p. 200.

[Metafiction], in other words, was deeply informed by the emergence of television and the metastasis of self-conscious watching. And (I claim) American fiction is still deeply informed by television ... especially those strains of fiction with roots in postmodernism, which even at its rebellious Metafictional zenith was less a “response to” than a kind of abiding-in-TV (34).

Television has been popular culture’s preferred medium almost since its inception. TV is the kind of art that seeks little more than paying customers, but just because most TV is not engaged in “serious” art doesn’t mean it should not be taken seriously “as both a disseminator and a definer of the cultural atmosphere we breathe and process” (24). Barth was right about literature reflecting and inspiring pop culture, but Wallace proves that television has *absorbed* the techniques of postmodern metafiction and now reflects and inspires *it* instead. “It will take a while,” Wallace writes, “but I’m going to prove to you that the nexus where television and fiction converse and consort is self-conscious irony” (35). Recall that Barthian metafiction used self-conscious narrative to call attention to its own attempts at narration. It often functioned ironically because it used exhausted literary conventions while openly acknowledging their overuse. What the early postmodernists ended up creating were ironic parodies of literature that sought to investigate the very nature of literary representation. However, as Wallace argues, television has co-opted that technique and created a whole slew of new problems for fictionists.

TV was not so academic when it first began doling out irony in massive doses. It was simply an unparalleled medium for irony (and still is): “Since the tension between what’s said and what’s seen is irony’s whole sales territory ... [it] works via the conflicting juxtaposition of pictures and sound” (35). And it did not take long for television, like postmodern metafiction, to self-consciously turn irony against its own medium: talk show hosts that talk about being on TV; sketch-show parodies of those talk show hosts; shows that parody commercials; shows that parody and reference *other* TV shows. Television’s ironic exploitation of its own medium and method perfectly mimicked postmodern metafiction’s shift to the same technique.

Even though “E Unibus Pluram” examines the more corrosive effects television has on pop culture, Wallace does *not* believe it is “some malignancy visited on an innocent populace, sapping IQs and compromising SAT scores while we all sit there on ever fatter bottoms with little mesmerized spirals revolving in our eyes” (36). After all, it is not television’s fault that we watch so much television—it has just “become so terribly successful at its acknowledged job of ensuring prodigious amounts of watching” (38). No one can argue against the fact that television provides near-perpetual stimulation. Sitcoms are too short to bore; cop dramas are filled with shoot-outs and car chases; reality TV is interspersed with interviews and voice-overs; several shows have abandoned the use of steady shots, opting instead for wobbly camera-shots that create constant on-screen movement; and commercials have appropriated formulas from the programs they interrupt. More importantly, though, TV provides *easy* stimulation, much easier than the kind provided by, say, other human beings. And slogans like “Must See TV” and “Stay Off Task” assure the audience that it is all right to keep watching. TV asks very little: only that you “assume, inside, a sort of fetal position, a pose of passive reception to comfort, escape, reassurance” (41). But insofar as no one is being forced to watch all this TV, the fault rests heavily with the viewers.

In 2004, the average American watched about four and a half hours of television per day.³¹ In 2005, the average Australian watched over three.³² (Of course if there were more channels it might be a different story.) “How humans who absorb such high doses understand themselves,” Wallace writes, “will naturally change, become vastly more spectatorial, self-conscious” (34). For television is cyclical—pop culture takes its hints from television, and television simply re-presents the way in which pop culture sees itself. Wallace draws a simple conclusion: it is impossible to spend so many hours passively consuming television without adopting the attitude it espouses so often: self-conscious irony. Shows like *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and the

³¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “50th Anniversary of ‘The Wonderful World of Color’ TV,” March 11, 2004, <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features/001702.html> Last accessed 16 July 2007.

³² Australian Film Commission, 2005, <<http://www.afc.gov.au/GTP/wftvfast.html>> Last accessed 16 July 2007.

Idols and their ilk milk irony for all it's worth because irony is amusing and entertaining. But eventually it becomes detrimental:

And to the extent that [these shows] can train viewers to laugh at characters' unending put-downs of one another, to view ridicule as both the mode of social intercourse and the ultimate art-form, television can reinforce its own queer ontology of appearance: the most frightening prospect, for the well-conditioned viewer, becomes leaving oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability. Other people become judges; the crime is naïveté (63).

According to Wallace, TV created a culture-wide environment in which the only defense against irony seems to be *more* irony, resulting in a "contemporary mood of jaded weltenschmerz, self-mocking materialism, blank indifference, and the delusion that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive" (63). Make no mistake—cynicism is the acidic offspring of irony in Wallace's philosophy, for "cynicism announces that one knows the score, was last naïve about something at maybe like age four" (64). They are a particularly volatile combination that can produce new insights into art and new commentaries on society ... when used correctly. This is the root of the problem facing fictionists: if television uses irony to such an extent that it becomes the preferred mode of entertainment, protection against critique and condemnation, then irony is useless against artistic stasis.

The Solution?

The diagnosis Wallace sets forth in "E Unibus Pluram" is quite convincing. After all, who can deny the contemporary mood of jaded irony and cynicism when nearly every new show on television is rooted in the ironic and cynical judgment of its contestants? When reality TV celebrates exactly that? When comedy sitcoms are predicated on the idea that ridicule is the only way to relate to other people?

Of course, pop culture has been pervasive for a long time, and according to Wallace, the proof is also in the literature:

One of the most recognizable things about this century's postmodern fiction has always been the movement's strategic deployment of pop-cultural references—brand names, celebrities, television programs—in even its loftiest High Art projects (41).

Postmodern legends like Pynchon and DeLillo and Barth are guilty of using this technique, as well Bret Easton Ellis and his Brat Pack posse, whose characters are often defined by the brand names they wear. Even Wallace makes use of pop-cultural references in his fiction: *Jeopardy*'s Alex Trebeck is a character in "Little Expressionless Animals," and in *Infinite Jest*, references to pop culture abound. These references, Wallace writes, were initially used ironically to emphasize the emptiness of pop culture (42-43). Thanks to TV's own system of reference, however, that strategy is no longer useful since TV ironically draws attention to its *own* emptiness *and* the emptiness of the products it peddles twenty-four hours a day. So it should come as no surprise that:

What distinguishes another, later wave of postmodern literature is a further shift from television-images as valid objects of literary allusion to television and metawatching as themselves valid *subjects*. By this I mean certain literature beginning to locate its *raison* in its commentary on/response to a U.S. culture more and more of and for watching, illusion, and the video image (46).

Wallace mocks this shift in *Infinite Jest*, in which a video cartridge of the same name is so entertaining and addictive it is actually lethal. But the shift is also prominent in metafiction, which is, again, fiction about its own process.

The point, though, is that artistic stasis pervades pop culture because the early postmodern innovations—metafiction, self-consciousness, reference, irony—have all been co-opted by TV and exploited to a much greater degree. Serious fiction writers today face a perplexing problem: "how to rebel against TV's aesthetic of rebellion, how

to snap readers awake to the fact that our televisual culture has become a cynical, narcissistic, essentially empty phenomenon, when television regularly *celebrates* just these features in itself and its viewers?" (69). For today's fiction, Wallace writes, is "doomed to shallowness by its desire to ridicule a TV-culture whose mockery of itself and all value already absorbs all ridicule" (81).

In the final paragraph of the essay Wallace declares what seems like his solution to postmodern stasis. It is certainly a suggestion. His conclusion contains the kernels of his techniques and the content-oriented trends his fiction follows. But it is also somewhat strange:

The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip-fatigue. ... The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how *banal*." To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law (81).

This chunk of text is reprinted here in order to capture its full effect, for this is nothing less than a serious and sensitive artist passionately pleading for a change in the way art is being created. And while the argument for combating irony with everything it seeks to hide and/or devalue instead of combating it with simply *more* irony is compelling, it is also moralistic. Wallace calls for bravery, for a revolution in thought, for the willingness to undergo ridicule for the sake of one's work. He seems concerned with nothing more than content; nowhere in "E Unibus Pluram" does he formulate a new style of writing or even come close to suggesting a Barthian synthesis of past traditions. He certainly shows how exhausted and defunct postmodernism is due to TV's sovereignty over its once

revolutionary techniques, but what he suggests seems less a *moving beyond* than an *alteration* of those techniques. Even so, these alterations may have produced a new kind of literature. The question is, have they? The answer is waiting in *Infinite Jest*.

Some Characters in *Infinite Jest*

The Wallace canon thus far calls for a new kind of art: one that eschews the solipsistic webs metafiction spins; one that eschews hiply sophisticated irony and the emptiness it tries to hide; one that responds to pop culture without using the postmodern methods pop culture has long since absorbed. His program is further complicated by the call for an artist with renewed faith in untrendy human troubles, an artist unafraid to render emotion with a deep sense of reverence. This content-oriented call to arms means the focus must shift from form to character, since characters are literature's life-blood when it comes to portraying emotion and sentiment. Although several characters in *Infinite Jest* play out Wallace's postmodern theories on paper, four are especially emblematic of his concerns: James Incandenza, his two sons Mario and Hal, and recovering drug addict Don Gately.

Dr. James Incandenza

Incandenza—the dipsomaniacal patriarch of the motley and dysfunctional Incandenza family—is one of the characters Wallace uses to emphasize the emptiness of certain aesthetic techniques and demonstrate the dangers of postmodern irony.

There are two flashback sequences in *Infinite Jest* that provide insight into Incandenza's childhood. Boswell correctly identifies both as having profound impact on the boy and explaining the psychology behind the postmodern projects he created as an adult.³³ One sequence in particular provides Wallace with an opportunity to flesh out Incandenza's character by utilizing the detached style of realism. The sequence—Incandenza and his father fixing a mattress frame—is narrated by Incandenza and free of all feeling. In fact, Incandenza's internal monologue functions more like a mirror than an actual thought process:

³³ Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 161.

My father was bent over my parents' large bed, which was stripped of bedding all the way down to the mattress protector. He was bent over, pushing down on the bed's mattress with the heels of his hands. The bed's sheets and pillows and powder-blue coverlets were all in a pile on the carpet next to the bed (491).

This section is typical of the whole sequence: full of detail, devoid of emotion. The repetition here suggests pure reflection, a mirror, or in Incandenza's case, a camera, that continues to see only the surfaces that lie before it. Even the structuring of the sentences, which proceed quite logically from one to the next, mimic the careful ordering of details in realist writing. The narrative does not even change when Incandenza's father, also an alcoholic, blacks out in a pile of his own bloody vomit:

My father lay facedown in the mixture of the rectangle's thick dust and the material he'd brought up from his upset stomach. The dust his collapse raised was very thick, and as the new dust rose and spread it attenuated the master bedroom's daylight as decisively as if a cloud had moved over the sun in the window. ... The stomach material appeared to be mostly gastric blood until I recalled the tomato juice my father had been drinking (500-01).

Once again Incandenza narrates and responds to the action in the sequence using what Pam Morris has described as "the meticulous, impersonal objectivity of the scientist."³⁴ (Interestingly enough, Incandenza does become a scientist, one who specializes in *optics* no less.) Wallace's use of realism in this sequence highlights how effective the form can be: rendering Incandenza's interior monologue—a modernist method—in realist writing captures the cold and disconnected nature of the man's psyche. Of course, the predominance of realism's negative aspects is quite clear here—on objectivity, lack of interior emotion, pedantic ordering and listing of detail—but Wallace turns those flaws into psychological characteristics and captures perfectly the mind of a man obsessed with watching.

³⁴ Pam Morris, *Realism*, p. 64.

And Incandenza is certainly obsessed with watching. He spent several years as an elite optics technician, made his fortune patenting rearview mirrors and other optical devices, then spent the last twelve years of his life making films. One thing Wallace points out in “E Unibus Pluram” is that obsessive watching eventually turns against itself to investigate the very nature of watching. Hence metafiction’s self-conscious concern with its own medium as a kind of “abiding-in-TV.” Incandenza is Wallace’s example of that process in *Infinite Jest* because the man’s filmography “reads like an extended parody of the postmodern canon.”³⁵ His films, in other words, parody postmodern techniques that writers have exploited to exhaustion. For example, Incandenza’s films were often made “in certain commercial-type genre modes that so grotesquely exaggerated the formulaic shticks of the genres that they became ironic metacinematic parodies on the genres” (703). That is, word for word, a succinct description of Barthian metafiction. But it’s also applicable to “Westward,” the Wallace novella in which he purposely exaggerates the metafictional formula. And, as Wallace claims about Barth’s fiction, Incandenza “always seemed to get seduced by the very commercial formulae he was trying to invert” (703-04). Even Wallace admits to this in “Westward.”³⁶

More important issues lie deeply imbedded in Incandenza’s films, though, which recall both “E Unibus Pluram” and the difficulties involved in metafiction. Remember that “Westward” used metafiction to achieve an Armageddon-explosion that returned literature to a kind of ground zero. Afterwards, however, Wallace abandoned that kind of literature because it’s what he calls an “abstract-theory issue.” In *Infinite Jest* Incandenza’s films are condemned because “abstract-theory issues seemed to provide an escape from the far more wrenching creative work of making humanly true or entertaining cartridges” (703). His work is described as “Technically gorgeous,” but “oddly hollow, empty ... no sense of dramatic *towardness*—no narrative movement toward a real story; no emotional movement toward an audience” (740). The same could be said of “Lost in the Funhouse,” a short story that acknowledges its *own* lack of narrative movement: “And a long time has gone by already without anything happening

³⁵ Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 162.

³⁶ Larry McCaffery, “An Interview with David Foster Wallace,” p. 142.

... we will never get out of the funhouse.”³⁷ Clearly, Wallace is setting up Incandenza as another postmodern figure to topple, just as he did with Barth in “Westward.”

To that end, Wallace invents for Incandenza a series of theories and meta-techniques that parody postmodern literature’s early inclination toward abstract-theory issues. One glaring example is *The Joke*, a “film” in which Incandenza and his son Mario filmed the audience at each premiere and projected them on-screen. The audience watched itself on-screen for the duration of the film, which lasted as long as one viewer remained to watch himself up on-screen. The title of course comes from “the theater audience watching itself watch itself get the obvious ‘joke’ and become increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable and hostile” (989). Incandenza’s abstract-theory issues, which are dependent upon a relationship to the audience, actually alienate the audience, and remove the human element from his work. A film like *The Joke*—whose main character is *the audience*—becomes ironically inhuman because the project winds up being about its own reception. A relationship is formed with the audience but it’s queer, one-sided: they’re rendered in service to the film’s medium. A *Joke* the audience is obviously the victim of. And the absurdity of the last lone viewer, invariably an art critic studiously taking notes about what it means to watch himself studiously take notes about what it means, clearly echoes Wallace’s belief that abstract-theory issues like metafiction must be in service to the greater story. Otherwise, they become hiply ironic theoretical exercises whose only intentions are to be seen as hiply ironic theoretical exercises.

The emphasis here is on irony, of course, for once again, Wallace is not so much concerned with form as with content. In “E Unibus Pluram” Wallace argues that irony “serves an almost exclusively negative function” because it is “critical and destructive, a ground-clearing” (67). The kind of irony that pop culture extracted from postmodern literature and exhausted no longer serves any function beyond entertainment. Irony, in other words, has been devalued through over- and misuse, but what it parodies and trivializes has become devalued too, to such an extent that sentiment equals weakness, or worse, naïveté. There is not so much a postmodern aversion to feeling and emotion as an inclination to conceal it with irony. The result being, of course, that any move toward the un-ironic, toward sentiment, toward sincerity and naïveté, is ripe for ridicule.

³⁷ John Barth, “Lost in the Funhouse,” p. 77.

Incandenza's inability to address human issues in his work is described like this: "It was like he couldn't help putting human flashes in, but he wanted to get them in as quickly and unstudably as possible, as if they compromised him somehow" (741). One character even gets a grizzly image of him speeding up the frames that feature people (741).

Whatever the psychological, cultural, or theoretical reasons behind Incandenza's films, the fact remains that he's exemplary of what Wallace claims so many postmodern writers are producing: fiction that is somehow afraid to address "what it is to be a fucking *human being*."³⁸

Mario Incandenza

When Mario Incandenza—the middle child in the Incandenza family—has trouble sleeping at night he often walks down the hill E.T.A. is perched atop and past Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House [sic]. Some nights he even totters inside. Mario is well aware that a lot of Ennet's residents "are damaged or askew and lean hard to one side or are twisted into themselves" (590), but he likes being inside Ennet House "because it's very real" (591). *Very real* here comprises everything irony tries to hide. In Mario's mind it refers to the recognition and expression of feelings and emotions, whatever they may be. Inside Ennet "people are crying and making noise and getting less unhappy, and once he heard somebody say *God* with a straight face and nobody looked at them or looked down or smiled in any sort of way where you could tell they were worried inside" (591). These *very real* examples also correspond to the ones Wallace names in "E Unibus Pluram": sentiment, overcredulity, melodrama. Mario doesn't understand why everybody at E.T.A. "finds stuff that's really real uncomfortable" (592) because it crystallizes what it means to be human for him. But at E.T.A. "It's like there's some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody roles their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy" (592). The old familiar eye-roll and cynical laughter of the ironist, obviously.

³⁸ Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," p. 131.

Mario is clearly an example of the anti-rebel, the person courageous enough to treat human sentiment with a deep sense of reverence. It is no surprise then that he is also the character who commits artistic patricide against his postmodern father, James Incandenza. This kind of patricide has occurred elsewhere in Wallace's work, most notably in "Westward," but in *Infinite Jest* it is focused more on content, not form. Incandenza's films were mostly exercises in postmodern theory. They were disconnected from humanness, so much so that it's clear what he was really after was "Freedom from one's own head, one's inescapable P.O.V." (742). That fact is made more tragic given his method of suicide—exploding his head in a microwave oven. Mario, on the other hand, films his subjects through a *head-mounted* Bolex H64 camera. (Note also that the camera was a gift from Incandenza to Mario, the subtlety of which is quite rich, for just as Wallace took up the pen left him by his literary patriarchs, so Mario's artistic career was handed down to him. He thus commits a kind of *respectful* patricide, as Wallace did. Mario also remains Incandenza's staunchest supporter throughout the novel.) Unlike his father's films, Mario's feature a deliberate view *from* the artist—no attempt to escape whatsoever—which in turn forms a seamless link with the subject, and, by proxy, the audience. Even more unlike his father's films, Mario's are incredibly stripped-down: he doesn't carefully monitor film speed, he doesn't care about changing light conditions, he eschews technological innovations, and most of his work doesn't even contain credits. The cult favorite at the Academy is a political parody played out by puppets. His final film in the novel is listed as a work-in-progress documentary about E.T.A. that consists of him "just walking around different parts of the Academy with the Bolex H64 strapped to his head" (755). Mario's films capture life, as it is, however it looks. That does not mean his films are a throwback to realism, though. Mario's subjects are encouraged to interact with both camera and artist, creating a certain metacinematic quality that is perhaps his one concession to form. Form, again, must be rendered in service to subject, as Wallace so often reminds his readers.

Despite Mario's clear-cut faith in the "very real" and his artistic inclination toward capturing it on film, he is a complicated character from a theoretical standpoint because he is complexly deformed. His height is described as "somewhere between elf and jockey"; his arms are "withered-looking and bradyauxetic"; he has "not so much club

feet as more like *block* feet: not only flat but perfectly square”; one of his eyelids hangs down “like an ill-tempered windowshade”; and his skin is an “odd dead gray-green” (313-14). Mario requires a police lock—a kind of vest from which a steel pole extends to the ground at a 40° angle—just to stand up. His clawlike hands can hardly grip doorknobs or hold utensils at the dinner table, and tennis is *way* out of the question. And due to yet another defect, Mario cannot feel physical pain, but as stated above he is very sensitive to emotional pain: i.e. sadness, anger, embarrassment, etc. He is also slow, “but *not*, verifiably *not*, retarded or cognitively damaged” (314).

The complexity of Mario’s character clearly arises from the fact that he is arguably the most admirable and *human* character in *Infinite Jest*—sentimental, empathetic, sympathetic, honest—but also horribly deformed, ugly, even gruesome. Boswell argues that Mario’s deformities are emblematic of sentiment, which in a postmodern environment of irony and cynicism is a kind of deformity in itself.³⁹ Although he is probably right, that assessment is a little too simple. His real insight into Mario’s character is that he is “one more instance of Wallace parodying what he is embarrassed about, but still committed to, loving and affirming.”⁴⁰ Of course if that’s true, it might mean Wallace is unable to swallow his own medicine—“E Unibus Pluram”’s prescription for sentiment and the courage to portray it is hardly held aloft and celebrated when couched in a character like Mario. Perhaps that’s the point. Mario is a character that practically invites eye-rolls and ironic laughter, invites the indictment of the reader’s own ironic and cynical response to him. Mario may not have the mental capacity to see the world other than he does, so the only logical conclusion is again strangely moralistic: those guilty of hip irony and cynicism should work up the courage to see the world through Mario’s sentimental eyes. Would braving the resulting ridicule will be like living with horribly crippling deformities?

³⁹ Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. p. 158.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

Hal Incandenza

Hal Incandenza is the youngest Incandenza child, the diametric opposite of his older brother Mario. Athletic and attractive, Hal is a late-blooming tennis phenomenon ranked #2 in singles at E.T.A., and “sleek, sort of radiantly dark ... eyes blue but darkly so, and unburnable even w/o sunscreen” (101). Hal is also an intelligent, linguistic prodigy with an eidetic memory—he can recite entire pages from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

While Mario was the solution to his father’s postmodern exhaustion, Hal is an example of the sad products a postmodern environment inevitably churns out. He recognizes that “most of the arts here are produced by world-weary and sophisticated older people and then consumed by younger people who not only consume art but study it for clues on how to be cool, hip” (694). In this capacity he is merely a mouthpiece for Wallace, reiterating one of the theses from “E Unibus Pluram.” Hal even reminds readers to remember “for kids and younger people, to be hip and cool is the same as to be admired and accepted and included and so Unalone” (694). None of this is really new, but Wallace’s theories are compounded by Hal’s extensions of them:

We enter a spiritual puberty where we snap to the fact that the great transcendent horror is loneliness, excluded engagement in the self. Once we’ve hit this age, we will now give or take anything, wear any mask, to fit, to be part-of, not be Alone, we young. The U.S. arts are our guide to inclusion. A how-to. We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears (694).

Marshall Boswell makes a reference to *For Common Things*, a treatise on irony in America by Jedediah Purdy. Purdy astutely observes: “In the ironic view, each individual is essentially alone.”⁴¹ Postmodern irony makes us “suspect that our feelings, even those we would like to think most intimate, are somehow trite before we express them,

⁴¹ Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, New York: Vintage Books, 2000. p. 20.

sometimes even before we experience them.”⁴² Purdy draws the conclusion Wallace implied in “E Unibus Pluram,” but in *Infinite Jest* Hal is an example of that conclusion:

Hal himself hasn’t had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarefied equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he’s in there, inside his own hull, as a human being ... in fact inside Hal there’s pretty much nothing at all, he knows. His Moms Avril hears her own echoes inside him and thinks what she hears is him, and this makes Hal feel the one thing he feels to the limit, lately: he is lonely (694).

Hal is not so much a practitioner of postmodern irony as a victim of its detrimental effects. His mask of jaded irony is frozen to his face because he must wear it to relieve his loneliness. Perversely, the mask that grants him inclusion is what keeps him lonely because it “treat[s] anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool” (694).

Hal further typifies what it’s like to live in a postmodern environment because he knows—deep down inside himself really *knows*—that “what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of really being human” (695). Irony has made that fear encompassing and real, “since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic” (695). Here Wallace uses a narrative technique called the “Uncle Charles Principle,” a term coined by Hugh Kenner in *Joyce’s Voices*. According to Kenner, the principle occurs when “the normally neutral narrative vocabulary [is] pervaded by a little cloud of idioms which a character might use if he were managing the narrative.”⁴³ So Wallace writes *sentimental* and *naïve*, but adds Hal’s irony-tinged term *goo-prone* to really capture irony’s hold on pop culture. In Hal’s words these ideas and emotions are not just unsavory but downright ugly.

At one point in the novel, Hal attempts to attend a substance abuse meeting after suspecting he might be addicted to marijuana. Wandering nervously into what he thinks

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴³ Hugh Kenner, *Joyce’s Voices*, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1978, p. 17.

is a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, Hal instead finds himself at “one of those men’s-issues-Men’s-Movement-type meetings” (804), in which “nine or ten adult middle-class males” (799) are clustered about in a circle, each holding a small teddy bear and opining about all the parental love and affection they never received as children:

Hal now starts scrolling through an alphabetical list of the faraway places he’d rather be right now. He’s not even up to Addis Ababa when Kevin Bain acquiesces and begins very softly and hesitantly asking the mild-faced Jim, who’s put aside his yogurt but not the bear, to please come up and love him and hold him. By the time Hal’s envisioned himself tumbling over American Falls at the Concavity’s southwest rim in a rusty old noxious-waste-displacement drum, Kevin Bain has asked Jim eleven progressively louder times to come nurture and hold him, to no avail. The older guy just sits there, clutching his yogurt-tongued bear, his expression somewhere between mild and blank (806).

Given what we know about Hal—he attends an elite tennis academy, he’s a linguistic prodigy, and he’s been pulled so taut he’s about to snap—this passage is clearly tainted by his perspective and his idioms. The potency of the Uncle Charles Principle is really on display here, since “it requires a knowledge of the character at which no one could arrive by ‘observation.’”⁴⁴ We are thus given admission to Hal’s psyche, and indeed we *feel* his dread several times throughout the men-who-weren’t-nurtured-enough meeting:

The back of Kevin Bain’s head doesn’t move. Hal’s whole digestive tract spasms at the prospect of watching two bearded adult males in sweaters and socks engage in surrogate Infant-hugging. He begins to ask himself why he doesn’t just fake a hideous coughing fit and flee Q.R.S.-32A with his fist over his face (805).

The principle enables Wallace to create episodes that can be experienced *along with* his characters. But instead of trapping readers exclusively within Hal’s mind, the principle’s

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

“application to the character seems as external as costume,”⁴⁵ and Wallace can report on the entire uncomfortable meeting while occasionally allowing glimpses into the grotesquerie Hal witnesses.

The Uncle Charles Principle purposely generates a compelling conflict between character and situation in this section. On November 11, Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, Hal’s internal monologue holds forth about his feelings toward irony and sentiment: he feels that sentiment is something truly human, but since it’s pathetic and goo-prone—again, Hal’s term—people use irony to cover it up. However, Hal attends the men-with-teddy-bears meeting *six days later* and is repelled by it, as the meeting fairly drips with sentiment. So despite his previous internal ponderings, he remains unable to countenance sentiment when confronted by it. Wallace uses Hal’s “little cloud of idioms” to highlight the way the teenager’s psyche deals (or does *not* deal) with this situation. That is, what Hal does and does not notice is not as important as the *language* he uses when noticing anything. While the main narrative might be inclined to report on the prospect of two adults hugging, Hal sees the very same prospect as two bearded adult males engaging in surrogate infant-hugging, which, any way you slice it, sounds *much* worse. The point, though, is that pop culture’s use of irony has trained Hal to distrust and downplay such emotions. His language actually seems to be *separating* him from the situation instead of making him a part of it. So while we experience the absurd meeting along with him, we also experience his active withdrawal from it, his refusal to engage with sentiment, his abhorrence of goo.

Not surprisingly, Hal envisions a goo-prone and pathetically sentimental person as “some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool” (695). In other words: Mario. It’s a distinctively postmodern problem, according to Wallace; Hal has been trained to ridicule and distrust what he really wants, what he really needs. His predicament is tragic: be accepted but empty and thus lonely, or be goo-prone and exiled by mask-wearers into still more loneliness?

Hal broods over questions like this when engaged in what Wallace calls “marijuana thinking.” Hal smokes a lot of pot throughout the novel, but the term is

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

actually applicable to his intense and far-reaching self-consciousness. It's the same self-consciousness made popular by metafiction and made pervasive by pop culture. Among other things, "Hal worries secretly that he looks half-feminine" (101). He often wonders why he's more attached to the secrecy of getting high than to just getting high, but "Beyond that it all gets too abstract and twined up to lead to anything" (54). He lies to his older brother Orin about "meaningless details" during phone conversations but hardly wonders whether Orin does the same thing, which of course creates "spell[s] of marijuana-type thinking that [lead] quickly, again, to Hal's questioning whether or not he [is] really all that intelligent" (136). He wonders "whether he might deep down be a snob about collar-color issues ... then whether the fact that he's capable of wondering whether he's a snob attenuates the possibility that he's really a snob" (335). This kind of thinking is another instance of Wallace parodying the problems of postmodern irony. Hal is lonely for the "hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pulses and writhes just under the hip empty mask" (695) but his self-consciousness bars him from accessing it. Mario, clearly incapable of a thought process this complex, is quite familiar with this internal self, but Hal's thinking is "designed to obfuscate what it is actually determined to reveal."⁴⁶ What he thinks is blurred by what he thinks about what he thinks, then by what he thinks about what he thinks about what he thinks, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Just as metafiction's self-consciousness keeps the reader at bay, here, enacted in Hal, it ceaselessly reminds him to keep his distance from his internal self, to keep it masked and safe from ridicule. But it also ensures his ongoing loneliness.

Don Gately

Like James and Mario Incandenza—problem and solution respectively—big Don Gately supplies the solution to Hal's postmodern problems. As a resident/live-in staffer at Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House [sic] Gately must abide by a strict set of rules lest he be sent back to jail. Wallace makes it seem like drugs are easier to get in the slammer than on the street, but that does not by any stretch of the imagination make jail a

⁴⁶ Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. p. 140.

pleasant place to be, and Gately certainly has no intention of going back. One of Ennet House's rules decrees that Gately attend some sort of substance-dependency meeting every night of the week. He often goes to AA, but no matter the meeting he must, as part of his treatment, stand up in front of the group and share deeply personal issues involving weakness, embarrassment, pain, etc. He must, in other words, expose his hideous internal self in the company of (mostly) strangers on a nightly basis.

Gately's time at Ennet House was court-ordered as part of his burglary sentence. Naturally, in the early days of his enforced sobriety he wanted out of Ennet House because he was withdrawing and eager to get back onto the street and into other people's homes. So he found a loophole in the legal system and sought to exploit it—get kicked out without breaking any rules. At Beginner Meetings Gately would tell the AAs how much he hated them and how much he hated the whole program:

... new Gately sitting there spraying vitriol, wet-lipped and red-eared, *trying* to get kicked out, purposely *trying* to outrage the AAs into giving him the boot so he could quick-march back to Ennet House and tell crippled Pat Montesian and his counselor Gene M. how he'd been given the boot at AA, how they'd pleaded for honest sharing of innermost feelings and OK he'd honestly shared his deepest feelings on the matter of *them* and the grinning hypocrites had shaken their fists and told him to screw ... (353).

But a peculiar thing happened: the more Gately stood at the podium and shouted about the “limp smug moronic self-satisfied shit-eating” AAs, the more he shouted about their “lobotomized smiles and goopy sentiment,” the more he shouted that AA was just “limp drivel about gratitude and humility and miracles” (353), the more the AAs applauded him. Instead of giving Gately the boot the AAs cheered him at high volume and made him feel “like some sort of AA hero” (353). It perplexed and unnerved Gately for a while until he discovered what garnered him all the applause: honesty.

“It's got to be the truth” (369) Gately finds. “It can't be a calculated crowd-pleaser” (369). Even more importantly, what anybody says up at the podium must be “maximally unironic” (369):

An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church. Irony-free zone. Same with sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity. Sincerity with an ulterior motive is something these tough ravaged people know and fear, all of them trained to remember the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they'd had to construct in order to carry on Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle (369).

A cleverly crafted and surprising twist of theory, here, as Wallace equates the irony pop culture is, in a sense, addicted to, with the irony that addicts like Gately use to hide their addictions. This isn't just teenaged Hal tearing at his ironic mask; this irony masks something truly terrifying, something capable of destroying a human being. And this irony ties right back into self-consciousness, for Hal's self-conscious thinking, like the marijuana he smokes, keeps him hidden from himself. Gately knows, however, that self-consciousness and irony are forms of self-deception that can even cover up addiction. At 421 days sober, he now "tries to be just about as verbally honest as possible at almost all times ... without too much calculation about how a listener's going to feel about what he says" (370).

It is not simply that honesty equals inclusion in AA, though, because honesty only makes the audience listen. No, the real inclusion comes from what honesty *reveals*: not the hopeless personal struggles with substances or substance-related issues re work, family, school, etc., but how unalone the AAs really are: "You are not unique, they'll say: this hopelessness unites every soul" (349) in AA. An elder AA even tells Gately early on in his enforced sobriety: "just simply sit down at meetings and relax and take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth and shut the fuck up and just listen, for the first time perhaps in your life really *listen*, and maybe you'll end up OK" (353). From then on Gately dutifully sits front-row at every meeting and finds with every speaker "how fucking similar the way [they] felt and the way I felt were, Out There, at the Bottom, before we each Came In" (365). And AAs are able to look past the very unhipness of AA because it *works*:

And so this unites them, nervously, this tentative assemblage of possible glimmers of something like hope, this grudging move toward maybe acknowledging that this unromantic, unhip, clichéd AA thing—so unlikely and unpromising, so much the inverse of what they'd come too much to love—might really be able to keep the [substance's] toothy maw at bay (350).

AA is the Wallace equivalent to an irony-free world—a place where honesty reigns and people are free to connect with each other in deeply emotional ways. The idea here is that irony itself is like an addiction: it devours the user while it seems to provide a release from being devoured. What's really being devoured, though, is the internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need. So while AA cures Gately's addictions it also instills in him the value of honesty and other such unhip sentiments.

Furthermore, Gately's complete confusion over AA is a crucial part of his character:

Publicly, in front of a very tough and hard-ass-looking AA crowd, he sort of simultaneously confesses and complains that he feels like a rat that's learned one route in the maze to the cheese and travels that route in a ratty-type fashion and whatnot. W/ the God thing being the cheese in the metaphor. Gately still feels like he has no access to the Big spiritual Picture (444).

This passage certainly conveys the simplicity of Gately's speech, but more importantly, it captures Gately's inclination toward honesty. Compared to Hal's tightly constructed sections, Gately's are loose and conversational. Unlike Hal's, Gately's idioms seem communicative, candid. Gately is utterly incapable of dissembling. His speech is intended to *express*; Hal's only seems to *observe*. Wallace allows his readers to see Gately's confusion arising from his attempts to understand:

He says when he tries to pray he gets this like image in his mind's eye of the brainwaves or whatever of his prayers going out and out, with nothing to stop them, going, going, radiating out into like space and outliving him and still

going and never hitting Anything out there, much less Something with an ear.
Much *much* less Something with an ear that could possibly give a rat's ass
(444).

Wallace incorporates Gately's personality into the main narrative, obscuring the narrative authority so that he can maintain a surprising level of sympathy toward the ex-con. Just as Hal's dread could be felt at the men's-issues meeting, so Gately's confusion and vulnerability can be felt at AA. But the difference is again a little moralistic. Gately turns vulnerability into bravery and confusion into confidence, while Hal merely recoils from both in horror. And here's something even more intriguing: Hal dreads the Inner Infant, but Gately actually resembles one. He's confused and vulnerable, and angry about what he doesn't understand. He's even started having wet dreams again, at the age of twenty-nine (478). By the end of the novel—after being hospitalized by a gunshot wound—Gately, like Hal, is unable to speak, but also unable to move, and unable to wash or wipe.

Wallace's theories are convoluted as ever here because Gately, like Mario, is an unlikely choice with which to wage war against postmodern irony and pop culture. Again, why make the anti-rebel not just unattractive but *unlikely*? Even though Gately has come to trust exposing his inner self, Wallace surely does not expect his readers to forget that Gately was initially *forced* to do so. And even though Gately now risks that exposure by choice, it seems easier to do in AA than in the pop cultural theater—far less risk of ridicule in AA. It would be way too simple to say Gately represents the process by which one comes to value sentiment because he does so under extreme circumstances, the kind sane people would not want to emulate.

More than likely, Gately's story is an example of Wallace's "meta-ironic"⁴⁷ methods. It's ironic that Mario, a horribly crippled boy, and Gately, an ex-con and recovering drug addict, possess the qualities Wallace so highly prizes. But the exaggeration of their characters—Mario's gruesome deficiencies and Gately's long-time commitment to deceiving himself and others—turn irony against itself and "disclose what irony has been hiding."⁴⁸ These two characters function like Incandenza's exaggerated

⁴⁷ Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. p. 15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

parodies; but instead of revealing exhaustion, as Incandenza's metacinema does, Wallace's meta-irony reveals the qualities that irony has long been ridiculing.

Infinite Jest's exhaustive use of AA slogans functions the same way. Gately's speech is fairly peppered with them—Analysis Paralysis, Turn It Over, Keep Coming Back. Several characters in the novel complain that the slogans are empty clichés, and the over-deployment of them becomes comic, even ironic. But, as Gately and the other hardened AA members ceaselessly remind the reader, “the vapid the AA cliché, the sharper the canines of the real truth it covers” (446). After all, a slogan only becomes clichéd or ironic if it's true. Their ironically exaggerated overuse reveals the truths they speak. So “this goofy slapdash anarchic system of low-rent gatherings and corny slogans and saccharine grins” (350) unites these desperate souls. The corny slogans become support beams, words to live by. These unhip clichés *produce* those saccharine grins, which perversely turn out to be saccharine-free. The point is, irony may be capable of exposing the emptiness of its targets, but Wallace makes irony itself the target, revealing how empty and clichéd it has become.

Does Wallace Succeed With *Infinite Jest*?

There is ample evidence to support Wallace's ideas about pop culture's particular brand of irony and the detrimental effects it's had on postmodern literature. Plus, the theory he formulates in "E Unibus Pluram" certainly seems like a plausible solution to irony's emptiness and exhaustion. Again, that theory is based almost entirely on content, not form—by downplaying postmodernism's famous formal innovations, Wallace can be certain that the content of *Infinite Jest*'s story remains prevalent on its pages, that its characters take precedence over its narrator. Metafiction plays an auxiliary role in the novel, confined mostly to endnotes that provide supplementary information where necessary, and increase the reader's understanding of the text. The most visible emblem of the novel's form is its complicated structure, although it never seems to encroach on the novel's gargantuan yarn. So if one of Wallace's aims is indeed to remain focused on the events in *Infinite Jest*, then he definitely succeeds.

For various reasons, the same cannot be said of the characters—at least, not with any degree of certainty. But denouncing them as failures would be an equally egregious mistake. Dr. James Incandenza, for example, is a successful parody of postmodern literary techniques, but he is just that: a parody. Incandenza is seen through the eyes of others throughout the novel—which seems more tragic than the sadness that already surrounds his life—and the only real sense of his character is found in his films. He receives more narrative attention near the end of the novel, but even then he speaks through an incapacitated Don Gately, and as a wraith, no less. Still, Incandenza remains a compelling character throughout *Infinite Jest*, and his filmography is usually entertaining and/or amusing, despite its postmodern pitfalls. Thus he works quite well as an *idea* to be subverted, but mostly functions like the wraith he becomes: Incandenza casts a haunting shadow over the novel, endlessly cited as a symbol by those meant to succeed him.

The obvious candidate for that succession is his crippled son Mario, the aspiring filmmaker. Mario's honesty, as unflinching as his lopsided smile, is admirable in *Infinite Jest*; likewise his respect for emotion and untrendy human troubles. But once again, he's such a strange choice for that role. Perhaps he's emblematic of Wallace's ideas about his own work:

The best metaphor I know of for being a fiction writer is in Don DeLillo's "Mao II," where he describes a book-in-progress as a kind of hideously damaged infant that follows the writer around, forever crawling after the writer ... hideously defective, hydrocephalic and noseless and flipper-armed and incontinent and retarded and dribbling cerebo-spinal fluid out of its mouth as it mewls and blurbles and cries out to the writer, wanting love, wanting the very thing its hideousness guarantees it'll get: the writer's complete attention.⁴⁹

This passage certainly resonates with Boswell's belief that Mario allows Wallace to openly discuss what he's embarrassed about. And while it would be incorrect to claim that Mario gets most of Wallace's attention, the attention he does get is different than that accorded the other characters. While readers may pity Mario, feel sorry for him, even be disgusted by him, the narrative never treats him with anything less than reverence. In fact, several sections serve only to illuminate the crippled boy's inherent goodness. He encapsulates everything Wallace deems necessary for a novel attempting to overcome irony's peculiar solipsism, but the special circumstances in which Mario plays out these ideas cannot be denied.

The same goes for Don Gately. The ex-con/recovering drug addict is obviously the novel's other hero: he tries to be as honest as possible as at all times; he counsels other Ennet residents when they have trouble staying clean; he seems to be regaining a certain innocence his past had erased; and he takes a bullet in the line of duty as Ennet's live-in staffer—for someone he doesn't even *like*. But Gately is like Mario because he plays out unhip sentiments in such extreme circumstances. There's a slight difference, however, because Mario doesn't know any better. Gately, on the other hand, goes through a process in which he *learns* the value of untrendy human emotions. Readers may not find themselves in situations similar to Gately's, but, ideally, they can still experience that process along with him.

⁴⁹ David Foster Wallace, "The Nature of the Fun," *Fiction Writer Magazine*, Sept. 1998, <<http://www.ptwi.com/~bobkat/naturefun.html>>

Hal is, for the most part, a successful character because he's exemplary of postmodernism's irony-induced predicament. Hal understands why people downplay their emotions, but engages in it himself throughout the novel. Despite being armed with that understanding, he still finds it nearly impossible to even *entertain* the idea of displaying his emotions, and by the end of the novel the poor boy's gone mute, which is ironic given his knowledge and command over language. There are a few theories about the cause of his aphasia, but the real issue is his physical inability to communicate, which of course mirrors his emotional inability to do so during the rest of the novel. There's an interesting distinction between Hal and Gately's aphasia here. Gately, through no fault of his own, ends up not only mute, but in a state similar to infancy. He literally *becomes* the hideous internal self that needs to be nurtured and taken care of by others, a state that mirrors his confusion and dependence on AA. Hal, on the other hand, is trained to hide his internal self, and he does it so well that he loses the ability to connect with others, even to communicate with them in terms of simple syllables. If Hal, like Incandenza, is intended to be a caricature of Wallace's concerns, then he plays out his role to a T. If readers are meant to *feel* his inner turmoil, then he fails as a character. Although, perhaps not—we are given very few glimpses of Hal's inner life, but the teenager affirms that there's not much inside him anyway.

The Jest Ends

Wallace is dead-on in his assessment of TV-irony and the corrosive effects it's had on postmodern literature, particularly the kind produced by people like Bret Easton Ellis and Mark Leyner. Among his more prodigious peers, however, emotion is alive and well, warring with irony on every page in novels by authors like Richard Powers, William T. Vollmann, and Jonathan Franzen. Wallace has not abandoned any of the innovations commonly attributed to postmodernism. For example, the metafictional endnotes in *Infinite Jest* are nothing new in literature—one thinks especially of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and William T Vollmann's *Seven Dreams* series. Vollmann's *Seven Dreams* series even features massive glossaries and chronologies in

every book. Wallace's endnotes only *seem* new because they've never been used so extensively.

Wallace also seems committed to a modernist representation of subjective consciousness. Hal's narrative in particular fluctuates between first and third person and creates an overwhelming sense of the prodigy's character (even if, as stated earlier, there's not much to it). Most of the incidental characters in the novel get a few pages' worth of narrative filtered through their individual perspectives. And the occasional use of the Uncle Charles Principle—created by a modernist, remember—gives us glimpses into the internal workings of various characters even while the main narrative remains detached and simply reports on the action.

Furthermore, Wallace's sentences often read like throwbacks to realism. Here is an exemplary passage from *Infinite Jest*, necessarily lengthy but *still* abridged, about a recovering addict named Bruce Green, who once crashed a beach-themed college party and promptly embarrassed himself:

Green and Mildred Bonk [Green's girlfriend] and the other couple they'd shared a trailer with T. Doocy with had gone through a phase one time where they'd crash various collegiate parties and mix with the upper-scale collegiates, and once in one February Green found himself at a Harvard U. dorm where they were having like a Beach-Theme Party ... and Green had gotten so uncomfortably fascinated and repelled and paralyzed by the Polynesian tunes that he'd set up a cabana-chair right by the kegs and had sat there overworking the pump on the kegs and downing one plastic cup of beer-foam after another until he got so blind drunk his sphincter had failed and he'd not only pissed but actually *shit* his pants, for only the second time ever, and the first public time ever, and was mortified with complexly layered shame, and had to ease very gingerly into the nearest-by head and remove his pants and wipe himself off like a fucking baby, having to shut one eye to make sure which him he saw was him ... (584-585).

This sentence, so typical in *Infinite Jest*, continues for about another half-page. The overall effect almost buries the reader in information. The amount of objective description in this passage almost assumes the realist ordering of detail, but something fascinating happens within these sentences: the conversational tone and awkward syntax seems almost like a stream-of-consciousness. Again, Bruce Green:

then there'd been nothing to do with the fouled police-pants but crack the bathroom door and reach a tattooed arm out with the pants and bury them in the living room's sand like a housecat's litterbox, and then of course what was he supposed to put on if he ever wanted to leave that head or dorm again, to get home, so he'd had to hold one eye shut and reach one arm out again and like strain to reach the pile of grass skirts and bikini-tops and snatch a grass skirt, and put it on, and slip out of the Hawaiian dorm out a side door without letting anybody see him, and then ride the Red Line and C-Greenie and then a bus all the way home in February in a cheap leather jacket and asphalt spreader's boots and a grass skirt, the grass of which rode up in the most horrifying way, and he'd spent the next three days not leaving the trailer in the Spur, in a paralyzing depression of unknown etiology, lying on Tommy D.'s crusty-stained sofa and drinking Southern Comfort straight out of the bottle ... (585).

The sentence *still* isn't over (!), but again, the overwhelming mini-narrative is delivered in what seems like a stream-of-consciousness. This blending of realist, modernist, and postmodernist techniques is perhaps what's "new" about Wallace's work, and Marshall Boswell is probably right when he calls Wallace a "member of some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnamed-able) third wave of modernism."⁵⁰ And indeed, Wallace uses aesthetics from all three schools in *Infinite Jest* to tackle what postmodern irony has deemed "traditional" and "out-dated."

Modernism reacted against the moralistic objectivity of realism by emphasizing subjective consciousness and skewing plot and chronology in ways that more accurately mirrored an individual's experience of the outside world. Postmodern metafiction shifted

⁵⁰ Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. p. 1.

focus to the narrative consciousness, laying bare the essential artificiality of literature and questioning the methods of literary representation. Although Wallace never directly suggests a synthesis of these three traditions, *Infinite Jest* nonetheless presents readers with just that. Its third person objective narration is highly reminiscent of realism in passages like Bruce Green's (above), which is so heavily detailed its sheer physicality is impossible to miss. But Wallace also shifts into first-person narration with Hal, which grants readers access to the troubled teen's subjective experiences and rounds out his character more fully than either modernist or realist writing could do alone. These switches between narrative levels also allow Wallace to remain faithful to traditional narrative techniques while emphasizing the importance of individual experience. What's more, the metafictional endnotes in *Infinite Jest* play up the artificiality of the text while expanding the scope of the novel. And by explaining terms, providing extraneous information, and detailing characters' additional exploits, the endnotes create an intimate connection between the reader and the novel's narrative authority.

This synthesis of realism, modernism, and postmodernism isn't actually new to literature, and neither are the ends toward which Wallace directs them. Powers, Franzen and Vollmann come to mind once again, but none of Wallace's contemporaries have provided so complete a diagnosis of pop culture's addiction to irony, its distrust of sentiment and honesty, and its exhaustion of once-revolutionary literary techniques. Wallace's unique take on these issues and his continuous insistence on placing emotion front and center in *Infinite Jest* make the novel seem so much more intimate than those of his peers. That intimacy is due partly to his technical skill, and partly to his own ideas about literature. However, the novel's real success lies in its ability to be utterly believable and uncomfortably recognizable. In *Infinite Jest* David Foster Wallace presents his readers with a world they can experience from nearly every perspective, no matter how enjoyable or difficult it might be. It is almost overwhelming. Perhaps, then, this third wave of modernism might more accurately be called, in the words of Dr. James Incandenza, "radical realism" (836).

Introduction to “An Appointment with Dr. Butchell”

I do not wish to emulate David Foster Wallace’s verbal or technical prowess, but I am interested in the theories he formulates in “Westward,” “E Unibus Pluram,” and *Infinite Jest*. I decided to work through those theories by writing my own short story, which can stand on its own, but works especially well in conjunction with my thesis.

The following story, “An Appointment with Dr. Butchell”, is about a famous postmodern author named Malcolm Rainer. Malcolm has been writing for thirty years, but his new publisher rejects his latest manuscript. The publisher declares that the manuscript is the same postmodern metafiction that Malcolm has been turning out for years, and demands something new. Malcolm struggles to come up with an idea, but is blocked until he sees a commercial for Dr. Butchell’s Dentistry on television. The commercial is cheaply made, and features the awkward and unattractive dentist throughout. Malcolm ridicules the ad at first, but after watching it several times, its peculiar honesty and awkwardness becomes the subject of his new novel. Malcolm’s agent visits the author’s Manhattan apartment to talk with the blocked novelist. After discussing Malcolm’s other novels, and some new ideas about literature, Malcolm lets his agent read the new manuscript.

I believe, along with Wallace, that metafiction is a valuable literary convention that can be quite effective, if used sparingly. In “An Appointment with Dr. Butchell”, metafiction takes the form of a story-within-a-story: Malcolm and his agent discuss the new manuscript, which is then presented along with the main narrative. I believe this adds a certain depth to Malcolm’s character because readers get to see his thoughts, hear him speak, and read what he writes. This creates a comprehensive picture of Malcolm’s consciousness, and provides readers with an opportunity to judge his latest work against the novelist’s own theories and goals. This process reflects the ways in which I assessed Wallace’s work in the thesis. I also endeavored to ensure that the metafictional aspect of “An Appointment with Dr. Butchell” never interfered with the story’s progress, never

called attention to the narrative consciousness, and never drew attention away from the characters. The snippets of Malcolm's manuscript, on the other hand, deal more with presenting emotion, from the unattractive to admirable. The dentist, for example, is naïve and awkward, while the advertising executive he hires is smooth and persuasive. This strand of the story also unfolds within a more traditional narrative structure—no metafiction, no detrimental irony, no references to pop culture.

Taken as a whole, "An Appointment with Dr. Butchell" should be seen as influenced by David Foster Wallace, not an imitation of him. My goal was to spin my own tale about irony and emotion. Whether it succeeds or fails in terms of emphasis on each seems moot; it will either exemplify the qualities Wallace calls for, or else be emblematic of the difficulties in writing fiction today.

An Appointment with Dr. Butchell

A whiskey bottle stands almost empty on the coffee table, casting a long shadow. Stains from other bottles are spiraled about the base of this one like confessions of enduring consumption. In the bottle's shadow a lone coaster awaits the return of a long-missed tumbler. Across from the bottle Malcolm is slumped on one side of his leather couch, rubbing small circles into his temples and contemplating his first drink.

“Well.” Vollmann is standing at the window, looking down the steep drop to the street below. Still trench-coated against the November breeze, he seems a murky darkness on the apartment's periphery. “I was expecting worse.” He turns from the window and waves a casual hand at the apartment around him. “Empty bottles everywhere, cigarette burns in the furniture.” He smiles. “Maybe a little vomit on the carpet somewhere.”

Malcolm extends an unsteady hand toward the bottle and spins it label-out, examines the remaining whiskey. “Is that what they're saying about me now?” he asks, his smile the curve in the question mark.

Beyond Vollmann the sun is falling slowly behind the city's towering skyline. He shrugs the trench coat from his shoulders and lets it slide down his arms. “No, no. Just the usual—wondering who you are, where you live, what you'll publish next.” He drapes the coat over one of the leather recliners situated at either end of the coffee table. “Whether or not you've lost it.”

“You can assure the next person who asks that I'm quite sane, Jack.”

“You know what I mean.”

Malcolm nods toward the kitchen. “Will you get me a glass out of the dishwasher, please?” One of Vollmann's eyebrows goes up. “Um, one for yourself, too.”

Veins of color snake their way through the kitchen's granite countertops, which are spotless. An obsidian-colored stovetop lies dormant under its hood. A stainless steel fridge hums quietly in one corner, an identical oven and microwave next to it. Across the

kitchen, next to the sink, the dishwasher faces them stoically, the same stainless steel surface reflecting itself endlessly. The whole kitchen is cold, unbearable clarity under the halogen light.

The dishwasher turns on automatically with a series of beeps when Vollmann slides the top drawer out. A single crystal tumbler waits impaled on the dishwasher's prongs. "There's only one glass in here."

"Guess you're not having any."

Vollmann slides the top drawer in and the bottom drawer out, accompanied by arpeggiated beeps. "No, I mean ..." He repeats the process in reverse. "There is *nothing* in here but a *single* glass."

Malcolm shrugs. "Different bottles, same glass."

Vollmann returns to the lounge and sets the tumbler on the coaster, deep in the bottle's lengthening shadow. He settles into the recliner nearest Malcolm, legs crossed. "What about dishes?"

"I order out," Malcolm says, whiskey splashing into his tumbler with a satisfying sound. "Ask for extra plastic forks." The whiskey goes down quick and he pours one more, then stands the bottle back on the coffee table, cap off.

Vollmann pinches the crease in his suit pants between thumb and forefinger and runs the pinch along the length of his thigh. He waits while Malcolm drinks, Malcolm's hand around the tumbler shaking slightly.

"So have you lost it?"

"Lost what?"

"I don't know. Creativity, I guess."

"Excuse me?"

Vollmann leans forward, elbows on knees. "Don't bullshit me, Rainer. I'm your agent ... *and* your friend," he says, leaving no time for laughter. He settles back into the recliner and recrosses his legs. The fading sun outside is crystallizing the unnatural light in the apartment, making things sharper, more real. The bottle's shadow is slowly sliding up under it, chasing the November sunset out the apartment's window. "I'm a little concerned."

Malcolm sits up and sets the tumbler on its coaster.

“So have you lost it?”

He upends the bottle over the tumbler and watches the last few drops of whiskey fall quietly into it. Practically drops the bottle back onto the coffee table. It wobbles about its base a moment then settles. He’s looking at the tumbler but his eyes are glazed. “I don’t know, Jack,” he says. “I don’t know.” He blinks once, twice, looks up at his friend. “Would you mind?”

“Against my better judgment ...” Vollmann rises from the recliner and crosses the lounge to the liquor cabinet near the window. Bottles clink against each other when he opens the door. “Whiskey?”

“Of course.”

“Whiskey it is.” He reaches again into the cabinet. “I even found a glass,” he says, holding one up proudly. He returns to the recliner and stands the bottle on the coffee table. The cap cracks its plastic case as Vollmann spins it round the bottle’s top. A quiet ringing accompanies the final twist. “Now.” The full bottle glugs up its contents into both tumblers. “Talk to me, Rainer.” He slides a tumbler across the coffee table.

Malcolm takes it and leans back into the couch, eyes closed. “I don’t know.” His eyes open to the painting above the couch—a far-away woman in black crossing Central Park in a blizzard. She’s made it two-quarters of the way so far. His head snaps forward, eyes on the bottle. “Sometimes I sit at my computer for *hours* before anything comes.” Sip. “And when it does ... feels the same as always.”

“That’s good.”

“Therapeutic, intoxicating,” he waves an arm lazily in the air. “Feels great. But then ...”

“What?”

“I read what I’ve written,” shaking his head, “and ...”

Vollmann inclines his head toward Malcolm. “And ...”

“And he’s right!” Malcolm downs the tumbler. “Fucking Wallace is right! It’s the same garbage I’ve been turning out for the past thirty years.” He’s on his feet now, pacing around the lounge. “The same postmodern ... metafictional ...” his shoulders slump, “garbage I’ve always written.” He reaches for the bottle, hand no longer shaking

Vollmann notes. “It’s what made me famous. I mean you thought the last book was good right?”

“Well.” He looks across the apartment to the window where Malcolm is standing. “Different bottle, same glass.”

Malcolm returns to the couch and sinks heavily into it. “Exactly.”

x—X—x

“I see you got a new computer.” Vollmann gestures toward the ivory-colored iMac on the desk next to the leather couch. “But still nothing.”

Malcolm looks at the iMac from the kitchen and shakes his head. “Nothing. I expected the damn thing to write for me, considering what I paid for it.”

“Nothing even after four years.”

“Well ... I did send you some emails.”

“And even those weren’t well-written.” Vollmann sets his tumbler on the table, reaches for the bottle. “I know you Rainer. I know your process. You write every day. You save everything.” The crystal tumbler deepens the sound of whiskey being poured into it.

“I told you,” Malcolm says over the sound of ice cubes clinking in a bowl. He returns to the lounge and mumbles something about coasters before setting the bowl on the coffee table. “I haven’t saved anything.” Three ice cubes pile up in his tumbler. “I haven’t even *printed* anything.” Malcolm pours whiskey over them and waits for the cracking sound to subside. “Jesus Jack I’ve hardly *written* anything.”

“You’re serious.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

“Actually yes, you have.” Vollmann gently places the ice cubes in his whiskey to avoid any splash. “The first time we met. You told me you were Rainer’s agent. You had *Lowry* written on your coffee cup.”

“So? You had *Gaddis* on yours.”

“Except there’s no trace of paranoia in *my* aliases,” Vollmann says around the ice cube in his mouth. “Just plain fun.”

“You know it’s because I don’t like being recognized.” Malcolm shrugs. “Not many people could recognize me these days, but it’s still a habit.”

Vollmann spits the ice cube back into his glass. “So you really haven’t written anything? That’s hard to believe.”

“Have you ever wondered why I needed a new computer?”

“No. I didn’t know you got one until just a minute ago. Remember? I said ‘I see you got a new computer.’ You’re getting old, Rainer.”

Malcolm makes a sound like *bah* into his tumbler.

“So why did you get one?”

Malcolm sets the tumbler on the coffee table. He looks at Vollmann and starts chuckling.

“What?”

“I broke it.”

“Wow, real piece of the puzzle there, Mal.” Vollmann brings the tumbler to his lips.

“With a whiskey bottle.”

Vollmann coughs and spits whiskey back into his tumbler. “What!”

Malcolm starts laughing loudly now, his voice echoing around the apartment.

“A whiskey bottle.”

“Yup.”

“You’re serious.”

“Yup.” More laughter.

It’s infecting Vollmann now. “What are you, a rock star?” He indicates the room with his tumbler, whiskey sloshing dangerously close to the tumbler’s lip. “This isn’t your dressing room.”

Malcolm shrugs, his laughter dying away. “What can I say?”

“Say sorry to your old computer.”

Sunlight is burning-out in Central Park, from red to orange through the trees, and receding along the building-faces nearby. It's Malcolm's favorite part of the day—soon the sun will disappear, every sign that it was ever aloft in the sky drawn horizonward behind it. No cause for despair in Manhattan, though—lovers down below steal kisses against the setting sun while Central Park's old-style lampposts flicker to life.

“I've written a little, actually.”

They're sitting high above the park on Malcolm's balcony, Vollmann trench-coated once more, Malcolm wrapped in a robe so thick he looks obese. No snow this November but it's still quite cold.

They have adjourned to the balcony to smoke cigars. Vollmann is busy lopping off the end of his with his silver-plated cigar cutter. “A couple of drinks and the truth comes out. I knew it.”

Manhattan stands mightily before them, a churning center for culture, commerce, and politics that remains undeterred by recent events.

“I don't know how *different* any of it is though.” Malcolm takes the cigar cutter from Vollmann and carefully slices off the end of his cigar—it's his favorite part of the cigar-smoking routine. “Wallace seemed like he wanted some kind of ...” He shrugs.

“Progression?”

“Exactly.”

Their words are made physical but fleeting in plumes of icy breath that are stirred by the breeze.

Malcolm strikes a match and brings the flame to the tip of his cigar, then puffs dutifully away until the tip pulsates bright red in sync with his inhalations. He exhales smoke over the flame and it goes out with that satisfying little sound: *ffp*. He drops the match into the ashtray on the table between them. “This new stuff seems like more of a *regression* to me.”

Vollmann sparks a match off his thumbnail and lights his cigar much faster than Malcolm. “How so?” He drops the nearly unburned match into the ashtray next to Malcolm's charred and spindly one.

“At first I toyed with the idea of a new kind of metafiction,” Malcolm says. “Or a new way to use it, to be more precise. The type of metafiction I used in the first few books was ... I don’t know ... *playful*. That’s what first attracted me to it. So I wanted to recapture that quality.”

Vollmann nods while puffing on his cigar. “I’m with you so far,” he says, chilled breath indistinguishable from smoke now.

“I’ll show you.” Malcolm sets his cigar against the lip of the ashtray—crystal, part of the same set as the tumblers—and disappears inside.

It is well and truly dark now. Vollmann has never been able to decide which he likes better—daytime-Manhattan or nighttime-Manhattan. The alcohol is affecting him. He gets lost in questions like these when left alone after a few drinks, questions that have no contextual relevance to the events around him.

Malcolm returns with two books. He holds up the one in his left hand, “Book three: *Untied*,” and tosses it onto the table. In his right hand, “Book nine: *The Awareness*,” which he tosses onto the table next to the first.

Vollmann exhales a few smoke rings.

“Looks like we aren’t going anywhere for a while,” Malcolm says.

Vollmann laughs; the sudden gusts of breath tear his smoke rings apart.

Malcolm thumbs through *Untied*. “Here we go. Page 104: ‘And in the darkness her eyes seemed desperate to communicate, to make him aware of the danger he was in, but she shut her lips even tighter, choking any words she might accidentally let slip, and he was left only with that last little glimmer, fading—dying, if you prefer—in those eyes.’” Malcolm snaps the book shut triumphantly. “See? Only slightly metafictional. Yes, it calls attention to its artificiality, but it doesn’t subtract at all from the story.”

“Uh oh, academy-speak.”

“Jack, I’ve been cooped up in my apartment in front of my TV, talking to myself in fragments and slang. Give me a break.”

“All right, all right,” Vollmann says. “So I’m still with you. Metafiction in small doses gives the story a kind of playful quality. And in that passage, it even gives the reader an entirely different perspective from which to consider the novel’s events.”

“Exactly. Now,” Malcolm picks up *The Awareness* and thumbs through it. “Here. Ninth book, page 267: ‘The breeze blew in on the silence in the room, the silence mentioned not three sentences ago, which now seems lighter after being stirred by the breeze, and overall the feeling is now one of patient silence, instead of awkward silence, and there is a difference, if you only stop to think about it, which you should have a little time to do before this sentence runs into its period.’” He looks at Vollmann. “Huh? *Huh?*”

“It’s a doozie, Mal.”

Malcolm picks up his cigar and puffs heavily on it. “But what is it like, compared to the other one. What stands out?”

Vollmann draws on his cigar for a moment, expels smoke. “Language.” He drinks from his tumbler. “Gloves off, right?”

“Of course.” Malcolm tops off his agent’s glass.

“Well ...” Vollmann leans back, gazing out at the city. “Who *cares* about the silence in the room? The sentence obliterates the image in a paranoid consideration of words.”

“Exactly!” Malcolm is excited now, leaning forward in his chair. “And what’s that shit about the sentence running into its own period?”

“Clever, Mal, clever.”

“That’s it.” Malcolm points to his friend. “That’s the very word.”

x—X—x

“It’s like a bomb going off on every page.” A twisted line of smoke trailing from Malcolm’s cigar extends behind him as he paces the length of the balcony, then wraps around him when he turns back toward it and walks along the railing in the other direction.

“I know what you mean.” Vollmann is still seated. He puffs on his cigar, squinting through the smoke accumulating in front of him. “A medium’s reflection on itself.” He exhales forcefully and the smoke billows concentrically outward around his

breath. “It’s kind of unsettling for the reader. Makes them realize fiction isn’t necessarily confined by its own medium, that narrative can do so much more.”

Malcolm stops and leans back against the railing. “But what happens when a bomb goes **off** on *every* page,” he says, cigar cherry stabbing the air to emphasize the word. “*Nothing*,” accompanied by another stab.

“The silence never exists in that room because the sentence never gives it a chance—it’s too busy telling the reader that the breeze makes it a patient silence instead of an awkward silence.”

Malcolm shakes his head. “Don’t know what I meant by *that*.”

“Me neither,” Vollmann says, “but the sentence asks the reader to think about the difference between the two *instead* of asking him to think about what’s happening *in the room*.” He sits back, quite pleased with himself. “At that moment, a breeze blows in on the silence in the room, period.”

“That the breeze can even be noticed emphasizes how fucking quiet the room is.” Malcolm finishes off the whiskey in his **tumbler** and sits down again. Vollmann leans across the table and refills the **tumbler**.

Several minutes pass, during which they drink and smoke in silence, and look out at the city. Manhattan is blazing with light. Central Park’s paths are brightly defined, like some chaotic landing strip in the middle of a forest. Malcolm recalls that something like 26,000 trees vie for survival in the park, providing shade for nearly 9,000 benches. How many lampposts light up Central Park each night remains a mystery to him.

Vollmann is the first to speak. “I suppose ...” He stops to clear his throat. “I suppose that criticizing your own work so openly and extensively is a step in the right direction.”

“I’ve been thinking about my career a lot lately, Jack.” Malcolm swirls the whiskey around his tumbler by rotating his wrist. “I got ... cocky. Complacent.”

Vollmann remains reticent.

“I didn’t start out to be any particular kind of writer,” Malcolm continues. “I didn’t really have any theoretical or critical intentions.” He looks around suddenly—“Is the ice out here?”—and sees the bowl on the coffee table inside.

“You want me to—”

“Nah. Forget it. They’re going down pretty fast now aren’t they?”

“They are.”

“Anyway.” Malcolm lubricates his throat with whiskey. “After the first few books were published I started getting this reputation as a postmodern ... metafictional ... *master*.” He smiles. “So I went with it.”

“Sure,” Vollmann says. “Why not?”

“But it went to my head.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say—”

Malcolm waves a dismissive hand at him. “Not to my head as a person; as a *writer*.”

Vollmann seems satisfied by this and resumes puffing away thoughtfully on his cigar.

“Suddenly I had this reputation, and I felt like I had to defend it. Like I had to stay on top of the game. So anytime a critic compared someone to me I would get a little bristly, you know, feel like it was time to get off the throne and remind everyone who was in charge.” Malcolm grinds out his cigar in the ashtray. Vollmann pulls another one out his trench coat but Malcolm shakes his head. “‘A postmodern epic that rivals even Rainer’s techniques.’ Really? ‘Metafictional on a level not even Malcolm Rainer could achieve.’ Is that so? Well I’ll give you metafiction on a level you never *dreamed* of.”

“They’re all good books though.” Vollmann stubs out his cigar in the ashtray. “Don’t forget that.”

“May be true,” Malcolm replies, “but how many stories have I told?”

“I don’t follow.”

“Fourteen novels, but how many stories?”

One of Vollmann’s eyebrows arches up. “I don’t know.”

“Four? Maybe five? Certainly not fourteen.” He looks over at Vollmann. “You see what I’m getting at, Jack? I haven’t written a *story* in a while. I haven’t written about characters, developed plots, thought up good dialogue and action. I’ve been busy writing stories about stories; narratives about narratives; interrupting plots, acknowledging that I’ve interrupted plots, then commenting on what such interruptions might possibly mean, medium-wise. No story in a long time.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Mal.” Vollmann’s face is blank. “Except ... write one.”

“I want to show you something,” Malcolm says.

x—X—x

Malcolm fiddles with the Tivo for a minute then returns to the couch. Vollmann removes his trench coat and settles once more into the leather recliner.

“Now,” Malcolm begins, “I’ve been seeing this ad for some dentist in the West Side.” He aims the remote at the TV, hits a button, and the image of Dr. Butchell literally fills the entire screen.

“That’s my dentist!” Vollmann shouts.

“Really?”

“No, not really.”

“Very funny,” Malcolm says. “Look, I want you to pay attention to this ad. It’s had a profound effect on me and kind of jolted me out of writer’s block.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Vollmann sets his tumbler on the coffee table and points at Malcolm. “You said you haven’t written anything.”

Malcolm shrugs. “Maybe I lied.” Above him the woman in the painting is still floundering through the blizzard in Central Park.

“So when you asked ‘Have I ever lied to you?’ the correct answer was *yes, a lot.*”

Malcolm throws his hands up in defense. “Alright,” he laughs. “Guilty.”

Vollmann makes a sarcastic *uh-huh* sound.

“I felt the need to ... dissemble for reasons that should become clear after you see this damn commercial. And if they don’t, I’ll gladly explain myself.”

Vollmann *uh-huhs* again, and Malcolm hits play.

On-screen Dr. Butchell goes awkwardly about his business, chatting uncomfortably to patients reclined in those dental-office chairs. The patients appear only slightly less uncomfortable than he does. *Dr. Butchell’s, located conveniently on the West Side*, the voice-over begins, *is a friendly place to be. With years of experience and*

technical skill, Dr. Butchell goes to extraordinary lengths to take the anxiety out of going to the dentist. The Doctor is shown elbow deep in some unconscious patient's mouth

"I'm sorry," Vollmann interrupts, "but are they saying Dr. *Butcher*?"

Malcolm shushes him angrily. "Just watch."

A shot from the ground up of Dr. Butchell running a silver tooth scraper along a set of dentures reveals the true breadth of his blonde mustache and some cavernous nostrils. He's smiling like only the embarrassed can. *We are here for all of your dental needs, from dentures to fillings, from crowns to cleanings.* Another patient is shown opening wide, then the ad cuts to Dr. Butchell with his arm around a large woman his age, wedding rings gleaming on each other's left hands. *With over twenty-five years experience, we'll not only provide you with a friendly atmosphere and excellent service, we'll give you a mouth you'll want to put on display.* The shot begins to pan out slowly, revealing an all-female staff of two, gathered round Dr. and Mrs. Butchell, smiling as widely as possible, grotesquely even. The picture fades to an exterior shot of the building on the West Side, over which red, bubbly letters of the doctor's name, address, and phone number materialize. *We'll create a mouth you'll want to put on display* unrolls along the bottom of the screen in bright, twinkling white letters.

Tivo returns to some kind of menu and Malcolm practically leaps off the couch. "See? See?" he says, gesturing wildly at the TV, remote still in hand. He's looking expectantly at Vollmann, who looks rather confused. "See?" he says again hopefully.

Vollmann swivels in the recliner to look at the TV, and then swivels back to look at Malcolm. He reaches down and takes a sip from his tumbler without taking his eyes off the writer. "Are you trying to tell me I need some dental work?"

Malcolm sighs, exasperated. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Then tell me how an ad for an overweight dentist named Butcher helped jolt you out of an industrial-grade writer's block." He motions Malcolm back to the couch. "I'm listening."

"I've been watching a lot of TV recently."

"Obviously. Who records commercials?" Vollmann says to no one in particular.

Malcolm tops himself up. "I didn't record it the first time I saw it. In *fact*, I made fun of it. Viciously."

Vollmann reaches for the bottle. “Not hard to do.”

“Exactly!”

“Look, Mal, I’m getting pretty confused about this Butcher business, so if you could get to the point—“

“Butchell.”

“What?”

“*Butchell*. His name is *Butchell*.”

“Whatever. If you could get to the point and tell me why this commercial is so important—“

“I wrote a story about it.”

The bottle in Vollmann’s hand freezes over his tumbler in mid-pour. “Seriously?” He sets the bottle on the coffee table and eyes Malcolm. “A story?”

Malcolm nods.

“You’re not lying?”

“No.”

“So, for all the money, yes or no: have you written a new story?”

“Yes.”

Vollmann leaps out of his chair. “Why the fuck did you wait until now to tell me?” he shouts, smiling.

“I don’t know.” Malcolm shrugs. “Drunk.”

“Ha, ha. Seriously, though—why now?”

Malcolm looks out the window at Manhattan and seems to mull the question over for a while. When he finally turns back he seems nervous. “I think it’s time I got someone else’s opinion of it. I need to know if it’s any good.”

Vollmann drops heavily into the recliner. “Why wouldn’t it be good?”

Malcolm gestures toward the TV. “That’s where the commercial comes in.” Malcolm moves to his desk and retrieves what looks like a manuscript from the top drawer. “Here.” He drops the manuscript in Vollmann’s lap. “Take a look.”

Vollmann sets his tumbler on the coffee table without taking his eyes off the manuscript. “Well it’s about time.” He flips to the first page and begins reading.

Dr. Butchell is sitting at the desk in his office, gazing at the business card he's holding steadily in his right hand. The name on the card reads PERCY ELLIS, and just under it, LEVY & ELLIS ADVERTISING. Butchell rubs small circles into his temple with his other hand, struggling to phrase his next question correctly. This is the first business meeting in which Martha is not seated beside him, and right now Butchell wishes he could turn to her and ask for advice and/or encouragement. His ignorance of procedural etiquette makes him feel helpless and embarrassed whenever it is his turn to speak. The meeting is rendered even more complex by Ellis; his presence in the office confuses Butchell—why would a man whose name is part of the *firm*'s name bother to show up for a meeting about TV spots with a dentist on the West Side? When asked, the advertising executive had shrugged and said something about a friend of a friend being one of Butchell's patients. Butchell figured the omission of names was some kind of professional courtesy, arcane business etiquette.

Ellis, slicked-back hair resplendent with gel, hasn't sat down since he arrived forty-five minutes ago. When speaking to Butchell about advertising matters, he paces back and forth in front of Butchell's desk with short, rapid steps. During lulls in the discussion he wanders aimlessly about Butchell's office, inspecting and cocking his head at various dental posters, occasionally asking molar- and bicuspid-related questions. Ellis looks to Butchell like he would be comfortable in any situation. At the moment Ellis is considering a poster hanging near the window that displays the horrors of gum disease. He laughs softly to himself, which brings Butchell out of deep—if muddled—cogitation. Butchell knows there is nothing funny about gum disease.

He also knows that there is some kind of elaborate system for asking and answering questions in this kind of business setting, and has been struggling to figure out what it is. He's been mining the depths of his dental-addled mind, the places responsible for social protocol, but has thus far come up with nothing. "So, Mr. Ellis ..." Even as the words leave his mouth, Butchell reaches for a more forceful tone, something infused with the authority he thinks the situation demands. He can only manage, "How much are we, um, talking here? Cost-wise."

Ellis, still considering the gum disease poster, does an about-face on the heel of one of his superbly polished black wingtips. The look of the circling vulture is about him now, a fact lost on Butchell. He begins to pace. “Well that is certainly negotiable Dr. Butchell and there are many things to consider.”

Perhaps his refusal to sit down is a stage-setting business maneuver, a way to establish dominance over Butchell, who hasn't moved from his leather desk-chair since the meeting began.

“I think first we'll need to discuss how long you want the spot to be, which really has nothing to do with Levy& Ellis but the network you want the spot aired on and after we've nailed that down we can get on to the nitty-gritty, get down into the trenches as it were.”

Butchell had attempted—with Martha's help, of course—to dress up for this meeting. They had aimed for something like business casual, and had failed. Butchell's great mass of flat blond hair is always combed in such a way that it's perpetually mistaken for a toupee, or, when the lighting is bad, some kind of helmet. His face is beginning to droop with age, particularly the eyes and mouth, and gravity exacts a certain merciless toll from men that have been bending over open mouths for more than twenty-five years. His immense blond mustache twitches at unpredictable intervals, though noticeably more during times of stress, and gives his face the overall look of a toupeed or hair-helmeted walrus. He's wearing a massive khaki colored sweater, knitted lovingly by Martha out of some **incredibly** thick and otherworldly yarn—Butchell has had it for nearly thirty years and it has shown no sign of decreasing in size or thickness, despite being prone to shedding. Hundreds of little yarn-fibers are sticking out from the sweater at various angles, creating the illusion that Butchell's torso has no definite shape. It looks as if a giant piece of alien fuzz or lint has somehow clumped itself about the doctor's corpulent midsection. His slacks were bought only last week, but the seat has already suffered considerable abuse, worn smooth and shiny by the little steel stools in the exam rooms and Butchell's ponderous rump. Compared to the impeccable cut of Ellis's suit, the razor-sharp creases, Butchell doesn't look so much underdressed as absurd.

Nothing about the man is graceful. Except, of course, for his skilled and steady hands, a fact Ellis must have noticed immediately when the doctor had reached out from the depths of his sweater and shaken Ellis's hand.

Butchell's brow furrows slightly, and he says, "Well, um, how long do these kinds of spots usually run?" He clears his throat. "I mean in your experience."

Ellis has wandered over to a poster near the office door, a poster detailing tooth decay. He taps a set of jaws displayed in the poster and says, "Disgusting," to himself.

The tap bothers Butchell. The tooth decay poster was quite expensive—as dental posters go—and Butchell had had to endure three entire weeks as patiently as possible before the poster finally arrived. No fast-talking salesman should be tapping it so brazenly.

Ellis does another about-face and returns to pacing. "Spot-length is variable, Dr. Butchell, variable. Some spots run for thirty seconds and others run for a *minute* and thirty seconds. Length is a very tricky thing here, doctor."

Butchell's brow furrows again and his mustache begins twitching as Ellis launches into an exposition about spot-length, which the doctor can only follow if he concentrates very hard. As far as he can tell, a short spot means the voice-over will perhaps be a little rushed. According to Ellis, a rushed voice-over often bludgeons the viewer with information in such a way that the ad might seem threatening. Ellis believes that potential customers need not associate dentists with any more threatening feelings than they already do. The majority of potential customers *fear* the dentist, Ellis says, apologizing profusely when Butchell emits a small yelp. Furthermore, a "barrage" of information may leave the potential customer confused about what the ad is actually about. An "information overload" is never a good thing, Ellis assures Dr. Butchell.

Butchell's brow unfurrows at this point and he produces a low *hmm* sound. Suddenly, after understanding most of what Ellis just said, Butchell believes that he might not be so out of place at this meeting. Just then, however, Ellis launches into an exposition about the evils of voice-overs that don't contain *enough* information, and once again Butchell's mind has to race to keep up with the silver-tongued executive.

“Too *little* voice-over can leave the P.C.—that’s potential customer, doctor,” Ellis says, “—can leave the P.C. in the dark about the spot as well. After all, the P.C. can’t be expected to figure the entire spot out all by himself now can he?”

Butchell is a little bothered by Ellis’s belief in the ignorance of his potential customers, but before he can sort through his thoughts he’s sent reeling by everything else Ellis says. Butchell wonders briefly how it all relates back to spot-length, but just then Ellis says something about “atmosphere,” and though Butchell has absolutely no idea how the topic suddenly shifted to atmosphere, he finds himself nodding vigorously along with Ellis’s words.

“More importantly,” Ellis is saying, “the voice-over represents the atmosphere of not only the spot but what the spot *advertises*.”

“Yes!” Butchell says enthusiastically, the word bursting from his mouth and fluttering his immense mustache like a wave. “I’m really after a certain atmosphere here, Mr. Ellis. People are *still* frightened by the dentist. Even today!” His eyes light up. “Can you imagine? I mean with all the recent innovations in dental technology and anesthetics—”

“Very good Dr. Butchell,” Ellis says, “you are a fast learner. Why did you even hire me?” Of course Butchell hasn’t hired Ellis yet, but as far as Ellis is concerned, the deal is already sealed. “Naturally a voice-over that seems to bludgeon the potential customer with information such that it’s actually *threatening* will obviously cause the P.C. to subconsciously relate Dr. Butchell’s Dentistry to unpleasant feelings and dare I say *pain*.”

This elicits another little yelp from Dr. Butchell and much head shaking, his mustache making the soft rustling sound of a broom in motion.

“But likewise, doctor, a voice-over that is too sparse in the narrative department, the information-relating department, creates a certain kind of atmosphere, one in which the P.C. believes that you are too lax doctor, that perhaps you don’t care about your work.”

Butchell looks like he’s been slapped. “But I, I, we ...” Whenever somebody says something negative about him or his profession he stutters uncontrollably. He has never, in his mind, successfully reacted to untruths, taunts, or hostility.

“Now that’s not me I assure you,” Ellis says. “I know how much skill and attention to detail dentistry requires. How much raw *talent*.”

Butchell reddens.

“I know you’re the best dentist on the West Side. That’s why I’m here.”

Butchell reddens more, his mustache made almost vividly blond.

“Spot-length is up to you, Dr. Butchell. But if you want my opinion, my *professional* opinion, I’d be aiming at a spot that runs for say fifty to sixty seconds. Enough time for several shots of the building, the office, the waiting room, the staff, the tools, the dentist in action.” Ellis holds out his hands to Butchell. “And that would also be plenty of time to have a clear, concise, soothing, and above all *inviting* voice-over. Maybe a little jingle. Plenty of time to simply talk to the P.C., to let the P.C. know who Dr. Butchell is, how *good* he is, how much *talent* and *skill* he has, how nice and accommodating his staff is, and why the potential customer should by God ditch his other dentist and come see Dr. Butchell on Columbus and West seventy-second on the West Side today!”

“I love it!” Butchell leaps out his chair, hefting his bulk very quickly, sending hundreds of sweater-fibers spinning into the air. It’s the first time he’s been out of his chair during the meeting. “I love it!” he shouts again. “Let’s do it!”

x—X—x

“I will of course handle everything with the network and get back to you in a few days but why not get the ball rolling right now, doctor, because I want you to feel confident in Levy & Ellis but most importantly in your decision to sign these papers.”

Dr. Butchell scrawls his name on the last page of the contract, which Ellis then whips away and deposits into his briefcase so quickly it’s almost like sleight-of-hand.

“Where do we begin?” Butchell asks.

“Before we start talking about ...” Ellis shrugs and smiles at Butchell, “actors and scripts and lighting and cost, why don’t we start with what’s really going to turn those potential customers into *actual* customers.”

Butchell, happily ensconced in his desk-chair again, shakes his head in confusion.

Ellis spreads his arms and says reverently: “Slogan.”

“Oh, oh great,” Butchell says. “I have a few in mind that my wife helped me with. You may have seen her when you arrived earlier this afternoon—she usually works the front desk.”

“I did Dr. Butchell and may I say you lucky dog!”

Butchell laughs, feeling more comfortable now. Perhaps he’s getting the hang if this business thing.

Ellis picks up the set of false teeth Butchell has perched on the edge of his desk, which look to Ellis like they’ll begin hopping around on wind-up mechanism at any moment. He opens and closes the teeth repeatedly and says again, “You lucky dog!” More laughter. “Now doctor,” Ellis says seriously, “hit me with some of these slogans.”

“Alright.” Butchell sits up straight in his chair, getting into the act with Ellis. “Dr. Butchell’s: We provide relief for your teeth.” Butchell smiles, confident, the teeth in his lower jaw visible under the great mustache.

Ellis shakes his head. “No good.”

The mustache sweeps down over the smile like a curtain. “No good?”

“No good. I don’t like it.”

“Well, um ...” Butchell senses imminent stuttering. “Why not?”

Ellis starts pacing. “You’re relating pain to dentistry there, Dr. Butchell. You don’t want the potential customer to think he can only come to see you when he’s in pain.”

Dr. Butchell sinks a little in his chair, his great bulk settling. “But I thought, you know, since, since it’s *relief* from pain—”

“Doc, it’s not *bad*, see, it’s just that you do so much more around here.” Ellis spreads his arms to indicate the office. “Am I right? *Way* more than simply relieving pain.”

“Well, yes.”

“Relief from pain *is* a good thing, but you don’t want *pain* and *Butchell* to form as part of the same thought in the mind of a potential customer. And since a dentist does so much more ...”

Butchell starts nodding. “I see what you mean.”

“So hit me with another one.”

“Alright.” Butchell perks up again. “My wife and I really like this one. Dr. Butchell’s: Where your teeth are our concern.”

Ellis looks up at the ceiling, lost in marketing thought. “Concern. That’s good.”

“Great!”

“But ...”

Butchell’s mustache begins twitching. “But what?”

“Still not right,” Ellis says. He taps the fake teeth in his hand, then holds them out like Hamlet and considers them. “Concern is good. Once again, though, you haven’t told the P.C. what you *do*.”

“P.C.,” Butchell stutters. “Well, he knows I’m a dentist.”

“Right but you need to be very specific about what you do. We can’t let the P.C. come to his own conclusions. Concern is good but it sounds ... still like pain. Like ‘We’re *concerned* about your teeth, *concerned* because something is wrong.’ It just doesn’t sound right.”

Butchell leans back in his chair, brow furrowed.

“A concerned *atmosphere*,” Ellis declares. “That’s what we’re after. Let’s just make it lighthearted. Help me out here, doctor.”

Butchell leans forward and laces his fingers on top of his desk. They both mutter *concern* several times. “We want to be friendly?” Butchell offers.

“That’s it! Friendly!” Ellis holds out his arms in praise of Butchell. “Dr. Butchell’s: A friendly place to be!”

“I like it,” Butchell says. Then he frowns. “But, aren’t we supposed to, you know, talk about what I do? Like you said?”

“Ah Butchell, you’re very clever! Smarter than I am, beat me at my own game.”

Butchell’s face goes red; he flatters easily.

Ellis paces slowly back and forth in front of the desk for a few minutes, running his fingers across the false teeth’s gum line. Suddenly he stops. “Got it! We’ll make ‘A friendly place to be’ the second slogan.”

Butchell’s brow furrows again, his forehead’s many wrinkles used to the expression. “Second slogan?”

Ellis nods. “Second slogan. See during the spot the voice-over reads its little bit and tells the potential customer all about Dr. Butchell’s and how skilled you are and how long you’ve been practicing and how conveniently located you are on the West Side, but two or three times the voice-over repeats that Dr. Butchell’s is a friendly place to be, putting a little more emphasis on it each time—a friendly place to be, a *friendly* place to be, a *friendly place to be*. Then at the very end of the spot the voice-over says the real slogan, which gets written on-screen, and which we’ll have printed on your business cards and written on a little sign at the front desk.”

Butchell is oblivious to the fact that Ellis may have waltzed into an even bigger deal involving business cards and little desk signs, and probably flyers and magazine ads. Butchell’s only concern is coming up with the real slogan. He’s concentrating very hard. “That’s a great idea,” he says, “but my wife and I . . . we didn’t think of any more. I don’t have another slogan.” For some reason Butchell feels like he’s let Ellis down.

“That’s why you hired me,” Ellis says, triumphant. “Now most people don’t like the dentist—most people *hate* and *fear* the dentist. Now don’t look at me like that, doctor; you don’t need market research to figure that one out. Besides you should feel proud of what you do, *privileged* even, because your practice is a humble one, doctor, one which people may fear but one which they need, which they respect, which they can’t live without.” Ellis pauses for emphasis; Butchell leans forward in his chair. “One which you so modestly go about doing, knowing that demanding praise is the worst way to get it.”

“You’re too kind, Mr. Ellis.”

Ellis shrugs. “I merely speak the truth.” He clicks the false teeth’s jaws together a few times but the sound of tooth against tooth—false or not—is a little disturbing, so he stops, and resumes pacing. “Now, since most people associate the dentist with shall we say *negative* feelings, we want a slogan that emphasizes the product—not *what* you do, but what you *produce*. Are you with me?”

Butchell nods emphatically, but the hair on his head seemingly remains in place.

“I think we can agree that when people show up in your office for whatever reason the outcome they desire is better teeth, Dr. Butchell. Cavities, crowns, tooth pulling, teeth cleaning—all of them lead to . . .”

“Better teeth!”

“So we need a slogan that emphasizes better teeth.” Ellis taps his chin with his left hand and taps the false teeth with his right. He paces back and forth while Butchell’s eyes follow him anxiously. Suddenly Ellis stops, holds the false teeth at eye-level in front of him. His eyes widen. He sets the teeth back on the edge of Butchell’s desk. He holds out his hands to the teeth and says: “Dr. Butchell’s: We’ll create a mouth you’ll want to put on display.”

x—X—x

Vollmann peers at Malcolm over the manuscript. “It’s definitely different.”

Malcolm leans back in the recliner opposite his agent. “Different how?”

Vollmann flips through a few pages of the manuscript. “It’s ... *linear*. And there’s no meta-anything.”

Malcolm nods. “Well that’s the idea.”

“It’s not flashy, either, not pretentious. I think we can agree that some of your other stuff—”

Malcolm cuts him off. “I know, I know.”

Vollmann sips his whiskey. “It’s good, Mal. It is. One question though.”

“Yes?”

“Why him? Why the doctor? What is it about this commercial?”

Malcolm gets out of his recliner and picks up the remote. He plays the commercial again, freeze-frames a close-up of Butchell polishing dentures halfway through it.

“Look at this guy.” He gestures toward the TV with the remote. “Overweight, over-extended, over the hill ... embarrassed, unattractive. Absurd, putting this guy on TV, right? So easy to laugh at, to ridicule.” Malcolm wanders back to his recliner. “Especially when he’s sandwiched between lingerie ads and slick car commercials.”

Vollmann marks his place in the manuscript with his business card.

“So I thought, why not write a story about this ad?” Malcolm shrugs. “Why not write a story that uses TV to deliver everything popular TV denies?”

Vollmann shakes his head. “I don’t follow.”

“At first the ad’s absolutely ridiculous. But after a while, you see how embarrassed the guy is, how nervous and uncomfortable, but ... honest, vulnerable. It’s almost heartbreaking. There’s something about this ad that’s more real and appealing than all those ‘hip’ ads. Even if it starts off sort of grotesquely appealing.”

Vollmann considers the image on-screen. “He is a little grotesque. But so what?”

“So ... society at large takes its cues from TV. Mass culture looks to pop culture—mostly TV—for ways to be hip and sophisticated, for what to like, what’s in, what’s trendy.” Malcolm’s beginning to speak quickly, gesturing excitedly after every other word. “TV has this whole doctrine about how to dress, how to act, what to talk about—how to *feel*, even.”

“Easy, Mal.” It sounds terribly moralistic to Vollmann, even puritanical. But Malcolm has never been one to point fingers at popular culture. “That might be going a little overboard.”

They’ve been working this way for years. Malcolm needs a captive audience to help him sort through his ideas. Next to reading new manuscripts, it’s Vollmann’s favorite part of the job.

“How to feel might be harder to prove,” Malcolm continues, “but the others? Look outside.” Malcolm gestures toward the window. “Go down a few floors first, but go outside and look around. The evidence is there: a celebrity wears some brand-name pair of jeans or sunglasses, drinks a certain kind of coffee or soda, wears their hair a certain way and *bam*—trend created.”

“I won’t argue with that,” Vollmann nods.

“So going from *how to be hip* to *how to feel* isn’t that big a step. Mass culture already parrots all the external stuff, so why not the internal stuff too?” Malcolm’s nearly gestured all the whiskey out of his glass, and stops to refill. “Think about it—we watch TV for God knows how many hours a day. It’s bound to take a toll.”

Vollmann leans forward in his recliner. “It takes a toll, but what toll? What ‘internal stuff’ are you talking about?”

Malcolm gets out of his recliner and starts pacing around the living room. Vollmann can almost hear the gears whirring in Malcolm's head while he ponders the question.

Finally, he says, "When we were talking about metafiction earlier we forgot to mention irony. Metafiction is almost always ironic because irony is so good at exposing stasis."

"I agree. That's not news, but I agree."

"It's good at exposing absurdity and emptiness, too. But it only works in small doses, because it can't stand on its own. But *TV*," Malcolm points at the flat-screen, "TV *depends* on irony for laughs. It has made irony the driving force of every single sitcom. *Every single one*. But irony alone has no substance—it's empty, uninteresting. And all these shows depend on ridicule and self-deprecating irony. "

Vollmann concedes this point because it's pretty obvious: one character ridicules another, and in defense, the other character responds with self-deprecating irony, over and over, for most of the show.

"I see your point," Vollmann says, "but again, so what? I don't see a problem."

"The characters on these shows ..." Malcolm pauses to sip at his whiskey. "They're all thoroughly familiar with pop culture, right? Hip to the core."

"You mean they reference other shows and celebrities, quote popular catch phrases, etc."

Malcolm nods furiously. "Exactly. But this dependence on irony makes them all incredibly self-aware and jaded ... weary of the world in general. Which in turn leaves them with some strange aversion toward *real* emotions."

"Careful with that word 'real,'" Vollmann interrupts. "What do you mean by *real* emotions."

Malcolm points to the manuscript. "The stuff in there."

x—X—x

Dr. Butchell is locked in his office with an upset stomach. He's been in- and exhaling slowly and deeply for nearly twenty minutes but the feeling won't go away. His face is

paler than his blonde mustache, tiny red veins made grotesque against skin gone nearly translucent. His joints feel somehow inflamed and brittle, on the verge of audibly snapping if he moves too suddenly. His fat-fingered hands won't stop trembling, for perhaps the first time in his life. He shuts his eyes and begins breathing through his dime-sized nostrils, cooling the top of his mustache, one hand resting lightly on a bulbous belly which strains against the buttons of his smock.

There's a soft knock on his door, and his wife's muffled voice seeps through. "Honey, are you all right? Mr. Ellis is ready."

Butchell wonders why in God's name he agreed to do this. If his office were on the first floor he'd have jumped out the window and run screaming across the street long ago. And darn it, he'd turned down the first-floor office twenty-seven years ago for this one! A list of one million places he'd rather be flashes through Butchell's brain, some of them absurdly more unpleasant than his office here on the West Side. He can't remember the last time he did something like this—got up in front of strangers and, well, *performed*.

A number of voices engaged in discreet discussion can be heard on the other side of the door. Then Ellis's voice comes through, so confident it makes Butchell jealous. "Hey doc it's me, Percy Ellis. Look big guy the clock's running but you just take your time in there. We can wait."

Smug fast-talking salesman. He's spent his entire career on the *other* side of the camera. Like to see how confident he'd be if one were aimed at *him*. Butchell wanted actors—attractive, comfortable, confident—but no, Ellis wanted the doctor himself. For the sake of "realism" he'd said. How would the potential customers feel when they saw Butchell's hands shaking nervously over Mrs. Carver's delicate seventy-one-year-old mouth? How did Ellis even talk him in to this! Everything with Ellis is a blur. You're sort of on the fence about whatever he's fast-talking about and suddenly you're nodding and leaping out of your chair, signing whatever he puts in front of you.

"Honey," his wife's voice again. "Honey, I know you're nervous, but Mrs. Carver has a Century Club meeting and, well, she's your only appointment today. We cleared the schedule for the commercial, remember?"

“Doc?” Ellis’s voice again. “I’d hate to have to pack it in today without getting the lovely Mrs. Carver in the spot. Trust me doc she’s going to be a huge selling point for all the P.C.s out there. Apple pie and knitting needles and all that.”

Perhaps Ellis is right. Perhaps the potential customers will be more receptive to the spot if they saw Butchell in action. Yes, saw how ... how skilled he was, how he made his office *a friendly place to be*, how he put Mrs. Carver at ease without any nitrous oxide and fixed her up with such professionalism and talent that she’d have *a mouth she’d want to put on display*. And besides, who are they? Those potential customers. However modestly and humbly Butchell did his job they’d still see the uncountable diplomas and accolades cluttering up the walls in his office, overlapping each other so not a single speck of paint is visible behind them.

Butchell slaps his fat-fingered hands down on the desk, stands up and strides like a man determined to the door of his office, flings it open, surprising Mrs. Butchell, Mrs. Carver, his staff, Mr. Ellis and his crew, and yells: “Action!”

x—X—x

It was short-lived, that burst of confidence. Most of it died down during his hour in make-up. He’d held the **nervousness** against the periphery of his mind, where he could feel it slavering and gathering force, but for a while he’d been in control. And then, without warning, the immense wave had broken like a tsunami, engulfed his mind, and extinguished every last spark of confidence.

Now here he is, faced caked with kabuki-level amounts of make-up, sitting on a stool next to the reclined Mrs. Carver, shaking and sick to his stomach all over again.

A few feet away, behind a camera and some really bright lights, Ellis and his crew stand with Mrs. Butchell, who’s looking at her husband with so much sympathy it’s almost unbearable.

“Just remember that we’re not even on TV yet,” Ellis is saying.” This is just a dry run doc, remember? We might not even use it. I said we’d run through it without actors, go for a little realism, try to really connect with all those potential customers out there,

and save you a bit of cash while we're at it. If you don't like it just say the word and we'll bring in some actors. No big deal right?"

Butchell nods, feels powder fall from his face in a little cloud.

"And as far as strangers go," Ellis says, indicating the little group around him, "I don't see any strangers here. Do you?"

Butchell shakes his head and feels another little powdery avalanche gathering speed along the bridge of his nose. At least they didn't rouge my cheeks, he thinks. Or did they?

"The lovely Mrs. Carver, in the chair there, you know. Young and beautiful Martha Butchell you know." Ellis puts his arm around her briefly. Then he points to the crew. "Jerry the lighting guy, Chuck the cameraman, Gloria the make-up girl." He jerks a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of Butchell's staff. "Gina and Rachel," Ellis smiles. "So everybody knows everybody, right?"

Butchell nods, tries to prepare himself mentally again. His cheeks are burning; they probably didn't need to put any rouge on him.

Ellis steps away from the camera as Butchell takes his seat next to the reclined Mrs. Carver. "Don't worry ma'am we'll have you at the Century club in no time. So what we're after here," he says, addressing them both, "is a simple steady shot of you, I don't know, cleaning the plaque off of Mrs. Carver's teeth. So grab that little hooky thing you use to do it—"

"Periodontal probe," Butchell croaks.

"Yeah the periodactyl probe and just get to work."

"You mean, actually clean her teeth?"

"Well that's up to you. I mean she does have an appointment right? Anyway, just get in there and do what you do best and maybe try to exaggerate the movements a little—"

"Exaggerate?"

"Yeah, so it looks like your really working. And hey" Ellis says on his way back to the camera, "no talking or even looking at the camera in this one so just relax."

Butchell nods. "This will of course be complementary, Mrs. Carver. Thank you so much for appearing in our commercial."

“I’ve always wanted to be on television,” Mrs. Carver says in a grandmotherly voice. “One of my friends in the Century Club used to sing the Dental Pro Toothpaste jingle on the radio and I told her last week well I can do you one better—”

“Uh, Mrs. Carver,” Ellis whispers. “Quiet on the set please ma’am.”

“Oh, How silly of me. I apologize Mr. Ellis, it’s just that I’ve never—”

“Mrs. Carver.” Ellis holds a finger over his lips.

Dr. Butchell tries to catch his breath one more time without hyperventilating.

Ellis yells, “Action!”

Dr. Butchell gently holds the left side of Mrs. Carver’s jaw in his left hand and begins scraping plaque off of her teeth with his right.

“Exaggerate,” Ellis whispers.

Butchell purses his lips and tries to comply. Before long Mrs. Carver lets out a little yelp.

“Cut!”

“Oh my, I think you got me there, Dr. Butchell.”

“I’m terribly sorry Mrs. Carver. I’ve never done this before. I mean I’ve done *this* before,” Butchell points to the periodontal probe, “but I’ve never done a commercial. Again, this cleaning is on the house.”

“OK doc, just relax,” Ellis says. “Deep breaths. Nothing to be nervous about, you’ve done this a million times. We’re not even here.” Ellis disappears behind a large black alien-looking camera and two blinding spotlights with what look like umbrellas behind them. “And, action!”

Get a hold of yourself, Butchell. Think about anything except what’s over there. You *have* done this a million times. Probably more ... Actually, probably less. A million is a very large number. Twenty-seven years practicing and what, ten patients a day? Although when was the last time I worked a five-day week? Hmm. I’ve always admired Mrs. Carver’s teeth. Pretty nice teeth for a seventy-one year-old. Mine won’t be that nice when I’m her age. I wonder if patients look at my teeth and wonder if I’ve ever been to the dentist. They’re not *bad*, per se, but I’m a little embarrassed to be one of those dentists without *perfect* teeth. Good thing I have this mus—

“Cut!” Ellis yells. “That was great, doctor, just excellent. See? It wasn’t so hard was it?”

Mrs. Butchell runs over to give her husband a hug. “That was wonderful, honey. I don’t know why you get so nervous in front of people. You did great!”

“Really? I did?”

“You’re a natural doc,” Ellis says. “Ready for the next scene? Finish up with Mrs. Carver and we’ll shoot you talking to her. Not a moment longer, Mrs. Carver. A quick cleaning, a little chat with the doctor for our camera and off you go.”

“Well I think I could just stay here forever,” Mrs. Carver gushes. “This is how Ginger Rodgers and Mae West must have felt. Oh this is so exciting! I can’t wait to tell the girls down at the Century Clu—”

“Where’s that pterodactyl probe doc?” Ellis says.

x—X—x

Butchell listens as Jerry the lighting guy and Chuck the cameraman come up with various uses for periodontal probes—not all of them hygienic—while Gloria paints his face for the second time this shoot. Ellis is over in one corner talking to Mrs. Butchell about the finer points of television advertising, while Mrs. Carver gazes wide-eyed at the goings-on around her. Butchell can just tell she wishes she had a camera and one or two of her rivals from the Century Club here to witness the event. Gina and Rachel are in the waiting room, flipping through old issues of *People* and *Cosmopolitan*, answering the occasional phone call, making the odd appointment, and waiting for their time in the spotlight later this afternoon.

“OK!” Ellis claps his hands loudly and wanders over to make-up, where he whips off the little apron around Butchell’s neck in a flourish. Powdery remnants of make-up explode into a multi-colored mini-mushroom cloud. They settle lightly on the smock near his neckline, making it look like he’s been drooling mouthwash. “Back to work.”

In this scene, Ellis explains, Butchell is supposed to have a simple post-dental-exam chat with Mrs. Carver, during which both are to smile and nod at each other repeatedly. Ellis has assured Butchell that the potential customer will believe such body

language is indicative of a friendly little chat about, say, Mrs. Carver's kids, or Dr. Butchell's golf tournaments. Strictly no-business and non-teeth related, since, after all, Dr. Butchell's is a friendly place to be.

Butchell is considerably less nervous during this scene, but when Ellis yells "Action!" he freezes and stares blankly at Mrs. Carver, mustache spasming. Mrs. Carver keeps nodding and smiling at Butchell, waiting for him to start the conversation, eyes growing ever wider in encouragement. Ellis elects not to stop rolling, hoping that Butchell will eventually come back to earth and start chatting away, making the scene a bit more natural and spontaneous. Besides, Butchell's paying for the film anyway.

Ellis finally has to write out a little dialogue on the paper-towel drool-catcher thing tied around Mrs. Carver's neck so that Butchell can read off of it whenever he gets frozen. Mrs. Carver, for her part, just can't say enough. And since Ellis didn't write out any dialogue for her, her answers to Butchell's questions spin totally out of control:

"And how are the kids these days, Mrs. Carver?"

"Well, Donald, my grandson, my eldest son Steven's son—you know Steven, he's married to that awful Juliette, but that's another story—anyway Donald, my grandson, just got accepted to NYU. I'm so proud of him. You know who else went to NYU? David Copperfield. The magician! He taught a course in magic there when he was 16. Can you believe it? You know when Archie was still alive we went and saw David Copperfield in Las Vegas. Oh Archie loved Las Vegas. We used to go every year. It was much better when the mob controlled though, let me tell you. Sure they were criminals but they kept crime *down*, and now the police can hardly do anything about it. Of course back then most of the police were part of the mafia ..."

Finally Ellis decided to stand just behind Mrs. Carver, out of the shot, of course, and wave a handkerchief whenever he thought it was time for Butchell to cut her off and ask the next question.

After that the shoot proceeded smoothly, since the rest of the shots were all pantomime—Butchell working on Mrs. Carver's teeth from a different angle so that she

looked like a different patient (Ellis didn't tell Butchell that the camera was on), Butchell polishing a pair of newly-made dentures (nine takes to get it right), Gina and Rachel answering the phone (Ellis called the office and supplied the necessary dialogue on the other end of the line), Butchell shaking hands with a patient (Jerry the lighting guy) and gesturing him back toward the office, Butchell with his arm around Mrs. Butchell, Gina and Rachel on either side of them showing off their own display-worthy mouths, and finally a shot of the office from across the street.

At around six in the evening, after all the gear had been packed up and Ellis's crew had taken off for the night, Ellis shook hands with everyone on Butchell's staff and personally thanked them for doing such tremendous work. Butchell is pretty sure Ellis even got Rachel's phone number. He'd shaken hands and spoken to Dr. Butchell the longest, of course, promising the doctor that he would head straight for the editing room, *and* get his sound guy on the phone. He promised Butchell that in a week or so he'd have a completed copy of the spot, jingle and voice-over included, over-nighted to Butchell's office for his perusal. And, Ellis reminded Butchell repeatedly, if the doctor wasn't happy with the rough copy of the spot, for whatever reason, it would be scrapped and professional actors would be brought in. Ellis departed with a final promise for Butchell and his staff: *more customers*.

x—X—x

"I'm liking the story, Malcolm." Vollmann nods at the manuscript in his lap. "I'm not so sure about what 'real' emotions are coming through, though." He marks his place with the business card and shrugs at Malcolm.

"It's almost more about what's *not* coming through." Malcolm shakes his tumbler. The ice inside it clinks, sounding oddly hollow. "The writers that seriously try to write about TV and pop culture and this whole ironic attitude ..." Malcolm sighs. "The stuff is entertaining. I believe that. But the writers that try to expose the emptiness of this TV-irony, all this pop culture shit—they write about it with the same techniques. Using one technique to expose another renders both empty. So what's the point?"

Vollmann ponders this a moment. “So, by eschewing metafiction, irony, pop-reference—all those well known pomo techniques—you think you’ve ... gotten back down in the trenches. To quote, let’s see,” he flips through the manuscript. “Ellis.”

“Jack, I was writing this story and I realized: I don’t care about writing anything ‘new’ anymore. Anything ‘different.’ It’s about writing a story that will make the reader *feel* something.” He gestures lazily with one hand. “Besides a headache.”

Vollmann makes a steeple out of his fingers and rests his chin on its apex. “Well, I got humor, sympathy, a little bit of pity ...”

“That’s good. Those are all good.”

“Alright, well, let’s see what else.”

x—X—x

And then ... nothing.

A week went by, then two, but no packages arrived in the mail for Dr. Butchell, except for a new Lentulo spiral and an updated gingivitis poster. In light of Ellis’s disappearance, however, even these failed to cheer him. By the middle of the third week Martha had convinced him to call Ellis’s cellular telephone, which Butchell had always considered an invasion of privacy; but given the extreme circumstances, he’d acquiesced to her request. The first day Butchell called Ellis, he left one message, the second day, three, and exponentially for a few days after. Between patients Butchell would sit by the phone in his office like a teenage girl waiting for her boyfriend to call on a Friday night.

By the end of the third week Butchell had poured over every phone book in the office, scouring each page for Levy & Ellis advertising, and, not finding it, had even checked the phone books in the pay phones on the street near the office. He’d then called the New York City phone directory, but they had no record of the advertising firm either. Martha tried to calm Butchell down by telling him the number was probably unlisted, but not even Ellis’s business card had the firm’s number, not even a fax, just Ellis’s cellular telephone number.

Butchell’s mood deteriorated. Had he been the victim of a scam?

By the fourth week, he’d filed a police report.

Butchell, draped in yet another absurd Martha-made sweater, was sitting on the leather couch in his living room, waiting for the evening news broadcast to start. *The New York Times* lay in a pile next to him. So far, the police had no leads on Ellis. Rachel said the bastard hadn't even called *her*. Butchell kept imagining an empty office somewhere in which Ellis's cellular telephone sat on an unused desk, ringing and ringing.

"Are they ready yet?"

"Almost," Martha called from the kitchen.

Butchell brought *The New York Times*' business section back up to his face and resumed reading, inhaling the smell of chocolate chip cookies.

That's when he heard it:

Dr. Butchell's, located conveniently on the West Side, is a friendly place to be.

He lowered the newspaper in horror. "Oh my God!"

Martha's voice rang out in the kitchen. "What is it dear?"

"It's, it's, uh ..." The stuttering turned into aphasia, while his mustache fluttered chaotically on his upper lip.

With years of experience and technical skill, the voice-over continued, Dr. Butchell goes to extraordinary lengths to take the anxiety out of going to the dentist.

"Oh my God," Butchell managed to croak again.

"My goodness, Martin." Martha entered the living room with a plate of steaming cookies. "What is all the hollering out here?"

Butchell pointed an unsteady hand at the television.

With over twenty-five years of experience, we'll not only provide you with a friendly atmosphere and excellent service, we'll create a mouth you'll want to put on display.

"Oh dear," Martha muttered, nearly dropping the cookies.

Dr. Butchell's, the voice over concluded, white twinkling letters unrolling along the bottom of the screen, we'll create a mouth you'll want to put on display.

The evening news's high-gloss intro replaced the fading image of Butchell's office building on the screen.

Martha turned toward her husband with the plate. "Cookie?"

Butchell struggled up from the leather couch—no small feat—and walked over to the TV. "Did you see that? Did you *see* that? It was, was, it ..." He threw his arms up in disgust.

Martha set the plate of cookies down on the coffee table and removed her oven mitts. "I thought you looked adorable."

"Adorable?" Butchell's mustache resembled a cuttlefish in motion. "My God! I look like, like," spittle flew from his lips as he stuttered. "Like a ... *planet!* A planet dressed in a sea-foam green smock!"

"Oh, Martin. Here, have a cookie."

Butchell waved a hand dismissively at the cookie.

Martha gently placed it back on the pile. "I thought it was wonderful. And Mrs. Carver looked lovely."

"She looked like a corpse."

"Martin!"

"They'll start calling me 'Dr. Butcher.'"

"Oh they will not." Martha untied her apron. My Secret Ingredient Is Love was superimposed on top of a big red heart on the front of it. "I don't think it's any worse than all the other commercials on TV."

Butchell returned to the couch and let his bulk sink into it. Martha handed him a cookie.

"You know how much Ellis got away with?" he asked around a mouthful of chocolate chips. "That commercial was *cheap*. I bet he kept more than half. At least."

Martha stood next to him and smoothed his hair-helmet. "Let's just see what happens to business before we get upset, okay?"

Butchell nodded, mustache moving independently of his head.

"Okay," Martha cooed. "I'll go get you a nice glass of milk."

Television advertising takes time to work, but even after almost two months, business hadn't quite boomed.

The first patient to commend the commercial was, of course, Mrs. Carver, who, even with a sickle probe shoved halfway into her mouth, could not stop talking about how wonderful it was.

"It looked so great, doctor, I mean really, really great. Why, I didn't even recognize myself the first time I saw it. That make-up artist was amazing. And the picture! Why I thought I was watching one of those previews, you know, for the movies? I thought it was a movie preview, and even though I thought it was a movie preview I thought, now there's a movie I'd like to see. I must say, Dr. Butchell, I've never had such a wonderful time in all my li—"

Butchell nodded along while he cleaned her teeth. Mrs. Carver was a wonderful woman with a big heart, but Butchell quite rightly put absolutely no stock in her opinions.

After a month of on-air advertising, the practice had taken on three new patients. The first said his grandmother had recommended the place, but the other two claimed the commercial got their attention.

"And how did you hear about us, Mr. Mills?" Martha said to the young man on the other side of the reception desk.

"Oh, I saw that commercial."

Martha beamed.

"It's funny, you know," Mills said. "I mean the ad is ridiculous. No offense. But come on, the dentist looks like a P.E. teacher. You seem like good people, though. And Dr. Butchell doesn't look like the kind of dentist you'd be scared of."

Martha listened while the second new patient related much the same sentiment.

"The first time I saw it I thought it was a joke." The young woman across the desk laughed. "I hope you didn't pay the guy that made it."

After a month and a half of on-air advertising, two more patients had been added to the practice. But Butchell put the influx of new patients down to word of mouth, or, at best, curiosity. He'd seen the commercial, and was pretty sure that any potential customer

who saw it just wanted to meet the sap who was talked into putting such a ridiculous thing on TV. His ear had not been tuned to hear the complex levels of attraction each patient felt toward the commercial, so he only heard things like “I thought it was a home movie, but hey, I needed a new dentist.”

Slowly, though, with Martha’s incessant attempts at convincing him, Butchell began to hear what his patients were really saying. Or rather, how they danced around what they were afraid to say. He’d heard it first from Ms. Danata, a nineteen-year-old NYU student studying—of all things—film.

“My wife, up at reception, tells me you saw our little ad, Ms. Danata.”

She swirled and spit something foamy into the little basin next to her chair. “Oh, yeah. That thing.” She smiled, thick with pity, at Butchell. “Whoever you hired is really not up to speed with current trends. And I don’t even mean *intellectual* trends—advertising could never aspire to that. I mean he wasn’t even up to speed with advertising trends.”

“How so?”

“Steady-cam shots, that tired old frame-by-frame style, a voice-over that sounds like a plot synopsis—all throwbacks Dr. Butch.”

“I see.” Butchell just hates the ad. “You know I’ve never really liked—”

“I do like the bold attempt to capture the human subject, though. I mean, he didn’t quite succeed, but he’s obviously willing to suffer humiliation to capture the essence of normalcy.”

Butchell, brow furrowed, could only nod.

But Ms. Danata wasn’t the only one who felt that way about the commercial. She just dressed it up in hip film-speak. The patient that really got through to Butchell was a young man named Wallace.

“You got guts doc, I’ll give you that.” Wallace fiddled with the chain on his bib, struggling to get his ponytail untangled from it. “Don’t quit your day job, am I right?”

Butchell smiled. “So, teeth pulling? Root canal?”

“I couldn’t get up in front of a camera. I’d be too nervous. That’s the first thing I noticed about that commercial.” Wallace leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. “It’s

weird—you look totally nervous, but you actually did it. It’s easy to make fun of, but in a way, you’re immune to ridicule.”

“Ah, I see on the chart here. Just a simple cleaning.”

“You were willing to expose yourself, to put yourself on display for something you cared about. Not many people can do that. Especially not on TV.”

“Open wide.”

“I admire you doc.” Wallace opened his mouth, and his voice became cavernous. “It was nice to see somebody be himself on TV. Nobody’s willing to drop the act these days. We’re all so concerned with being self-aware, just so we never appear vulnerable. I tell you doc, you surprised me.”

Butchell’s hand froze above Wallace’s mouth, burnisher gleaming in the light from the overhead lamp. He considered telling Wallace that he hadn’t had the money for a better commercial, but decided against it. No matter the intent, the commercial was doing exactly what Ellis promised. Despite his anger and humiliation, he felt like thanking the con artist. Butchell smiled, snapped a sea-foam green facemask over his mouth and nose, and went about his business.

x—X—x

“Huh.” Vollmann bounces the manuscript on his knee a few times, straightening the pages.

Malcolm splits the last of the whiskey between two tumblers and slides one across the coffee table to Vollmann.

“What?”

“It’s just, I felt sorry for the dentist. He’s embarrassed and awkward when he’s not practicing. I wanted him to nail the commercial.” Vollmann sips his whiskey. “He doesn’t, then you find out he’s been scammed by this Ellis guy.” He shakes his head. “I’m just glad good things happened in the end.”

“Ha!” Malcolm spreads his arms. “When’s the last time you ever hoped for an outcome like that in one of my books?” He finishes the whiskey in his tumbler and reclines. “So?”

Vollmann nods at the manuscript. "It's good. I liked it a lot." He pauses. "It needs work."

"Naturally."

"Change Butchell's name, change Wallace's, obviously." Vollmann smiles.

"Learn more about advertising, more closure with Ellis ..."

Malcolm laughs. "I know all that. But the writing."

Vollmann shrugs. "Well, it's all about character. No irony, no metafiction, no real narrative distance. It's good, Mal."

Malcolm calls downstairs to arrange a cab for Vollmann. They drink in silence for a while, exchanges limited to just a few words.

"Different?"

"Worlds away from your other stuff."

"Wallace?"

"He'll go for it."

When the front desk calls to say the cab has arrived, Malcolm walks his agent to the door.

Vollmann, manuscript in hand, says, "I'll take this in on Monday and get back to you around Wednesday."

They shake hands. Vollmann exits into the hall.

Malcolm calls after him. "I'm not like that dentist, Jack. I won't wait four weeks. If I don't hear from you by Wednesday," he points to the manuscript, "I'm filing a police report."

