Characterizing postmodernity: developing ethical paradigms in the novels of David Foster Wallace

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CHARACTERIZING POSTMODERNITY:
DEVELOPING ETHICAL PARADIGMS IN THE
NOVELS OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

by

Thomas Patrick Cook

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“Characterizing Postmodernity: Developing Ethical Paradigms in the Novels of David Foster Wallace” argues that the critical discourse on David Foster Wallace’s novels neglects the relationship between Wallace’s postmodern aesthetics and the historical period of postmodernity out of which Wallace’s novels emerged, contending that this relationship not only accounts for the form of Wallace’s novels and their protagonists, but also points toward new understandings of postmodernity’s relationship to history.

Focussing on the dialectic between historical conditions of late capitalism and the agency and action of characters with respect to consumerism, Wallace uses social conditions themselves as the primary antagonists to his protagonists, rather than other characters, for instance. Wallace’s characters struggle to cope with, live within, and transcend their conditions, and the site of their struggles, as it reveals the irresolvable and dialectical relationship between postmodernity and the postmodern subject, suggests an ethical paradigm based on individual action. Today, as the conditions of postmodernity and our theorizing of them continue to evolve, a study such as this provides an opportunity for using the recent past as it is depicted in Wallace’s novels, to inform the present.

“Characterizing Postmodernity: Developing Ethical Paradigms in the Novel of David Foster Wallace” argues that Wallace’s aesthetics, when understood in historical and ethical contexts, provide a model by which the fiction of today might continue to historicize the conditions of postmodernity in their present form.
INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2009, when I started coursework for the degree that this dissertation partially completes, the field of David Foster Wallace studies did not exist. Only a few articles had been published on Wallace’s work, some of which I had read with partial understanding as far back as my junior year of undergraduate study, and none of which predicted the field of Wallace studies would come into existence in the coming years. In those articles, I found three points of a seemingly contradictory consensus: Wallace’s novels were postmodern; they critiqued postmodernism; they depicted a postmodern dystopia. But there was little tying these contentions together beyond their general observations about Wallace’s work and his interest in the postmodern culture in which he lived. One additional observation that was consistently unintegrated into the analyses in those articles, functioning more as a loose context than an argumentative framework, was the note that Wallace was an inheritor of some kind of postmodern literary tradition that began with John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, two writers who I had not at that point read much of and with whose writing I now have spent enough time to say that Wallace’s novels and theirs are alike only to a small degree. Nevertheless, seeing Wallace as a second (or even third) generation postmodern novelist is important to the historical dimension of my argument in this dissertation because of the fact that today, perhaps more than at any other time, when we say postmodernism or postmodernity we seem to be referring to many different short periods within a long and increasingly complex discourse on postmodernism in the arts and postmodernity as a historical condition. To be
certain, Wallace’s novels are postmodern and a product of postmodernity in a way that is specific to the middle postmodern period in which he lived and wrote, roughly two decades between the middle 1980s and the middle 2000s, a period that is rapidly becoming distinct from both an earlier period of postmodern literary production as well as the contemporary moment.

This is to say that what began as a personal and somewhat undirected interest in Wallace became both an academic focus for me and a legitimate subfield of academic research rather simultaneously only in the last seven years since Wallace’s death in 2008. So at the same time I was reading articles on Wallace, not necessarily because I believed that I would write a dissertation on Wallace’s novels, but rather because as someone who was trying to write fiction and held Wallace’s work in high esteem I was curious about what critics and scholars were saying about his writing. I was, importantly, also engaged with Wallace scholarship in three different seminar papers, each of which focused on different aspects of Infinite Jest. Even though after those seminars I wouldn’t return to thinking about Wallace’s work from a critical paradigm until my third year at SUNY when I studied toward exams, I’d begun to develop a way of thinking about Wallace’s novels that made sense to me and allowed me to see ways to tie the articles that I’d read into a sensible set of observations about the aspects of postmodern culture with which it seemed Wallace’s novels were primarily concerned, even though my thinking about postmodernism and postmodernity was relatively secondary. Those aspects, which I’ve now researched and will develop in chapter one, revolve, essentially around the agency of individuals in the social conditions of postmodernity, conditions that by their very nature are interested in little more than exploiting that agency for the purpose of capitalizing on
it. I became, through my research, convinced that a theory of postmodernism and postmodernity ought to foremost engage with the material reality that surrounds us and account for things in the economic and social spheres that determine so many lives. This is not necessarily to say that I believe the economic and social reality in which we live is by design sinister, but I do believe it is for the most part inescapable, proportional to amount of wealth that one has, anyway, and it became clear to me that Wallace’s novels were interested in exploring that inescapable dimension of postmodernity. Of course that’s not the end of any analysis of a Wallace’s work, but it is to say that I came to believe and so developed a dissertation focused on subjects with which I believe Wallace’s work is foremost interested, namely the developing consumption patterns of the postmodern American consumer, the cultural sanctity of economic and political forces aimed at exacerbating those patterns toward the ends of maximum profit, and the incredibly (literally almost unthinkable) nuanced set of relationships that defines the dynamic between those social conditions and the individuals who live within them. All of this, I felt, was predicated on Wallace’s interest in the will of the individual to act in such a way that tested his or her individual agency within such conditions.

Later that year, I learned that Gregory Carlisle, who at that time had published only an obscure (and now out-of-print) reader’s guide to *Infinite Jest*, a volume I’d purchased for the same reason that I was reading Wallace scholarship, had called for the formation of Wallace studies in a keynote address that became the introduction to a collection of papers presented at the first conference on Wallace’s work.¹ Carlisle’s call

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¹ Carlisle’s introduction appears in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. (Part of the reason his reader’s guide is out of print may be the criticism it receives in the introduction of Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn’s *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies.*) Even when I was only an
to organize was not necessarily the catalyst to the formation of Wallace studies, but, looking back, I can say it was predicative of a movement already underfoot through the individual efforts of dozens of writers and scholars, most of whom I was interested in reading, but I also began to see, as I read Carlisle’s volume, a rather gaping hole in the critical discourse on Wallace. Wallace’s novels were certainly expansive enough to allow for all kinds of different disciplines to find points of interest, but no one seemed to be writing about Wallace from a craft standpoint. No one seemed to be talking about how his fiction worked, instead focusing on some of the abstract ideas with which it engages, of which there is no shortage. Today, the efforts to cull ideas out of Wallace’s novels has resulted in an identifiable body of work that, from my vantage, has the potential to grow, diversify, and sustain itself as David Foster Wallace studies while maintaining vital connections to other fields of study, most notable postmodern studies, but I am concerned that this growth will leave Wallace’s writing further and further behind.² I say this because the growth of Wallace studies over the last five years alone has been nothing short of overwhelming and it seems as though there is new Wallace criticism published every few weeks.³ Postmodernism and postmodernity still feel somewhat at the center of

² It is possible, for instance, to read entire articles on Wallace’s work where characters are not mentioned, or where novel plots are not important to the analysis. It is almost without exception that criticism on Wallace’s novels neglects the whole for a single part.

³ For example, I recently submitted a book review of a volume of essays on Wallace edited by Marshall Boswell and entitled David Foster Wallace and ‘The Long Thing’: New Essays on the Novels to the book review editor at Twentieth-Century Literature. They politely suggested I instead review Heather Houser’s Ecosickness: Environment and Affect in Contemporary U.S. Fiction because Houser’s longest chapter is written on Wallace’s Infinite Jest. Some weeks later, I received, unbidden, a copy of Allard den Dulk’s monograph Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers, and Foer from the publisher of The Long Thing, along with the note that they hoped I might be interested in reviewing it.
Wallace studies, and the contours of the relationship between Wallace and postmodernism and/or postmodernity have become clearer, but they still want for further definition, and, I would argue, they still need to be more meaningfully connected to the form of Wallace’s fiction in general.

In part because of the overwhelming nature of the proliferation of Wallace studies, as well as the continued development of postmodern studies, I am now able to articulate in a way I would not have been five years ago my project’s specific contribution to the field of Wallace studies, which is this: I write about his protagonists and their relationship to the novels of which they are a part, and I do so with a focus on how Wallace develops their ethical paradigms with respect to those of his novels, each of which focuses on specific dimensions of postmodern American culture. To that end, my dissertation is, fundamentally, a dissertation on Wallace’s craft, the way that he writes characters, and it is secondarily a dissertation about the history of the culture that his novels depict, which is indisputably contemporary American postmodern culture, which throughout the dissertation I refer to simply as postmodernity. I am interested in what defines Wallace’s characters, their currency as fictional content, and what tethers them to the conditions in which they live. I am also interested in how they try to transcend those conditions in order to live lives that are full and fulfilling. It is my contention that Wallace’s novels suggest it is not easy to live in America at the end of the twentieth century, and for that reason, the conditions themselves, the postmodern world and its cultural history, both as it existed in the material world and as Wallace depicts it, underlie

I had no idea this latest book was being published, in part because I had only just finished reading the last one. Three weeks later, another book, Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace arrived. Needless to say, the recent arrival of these volumes will preclude me from using either of them in this dissertation.
my analysis of Wallace’s characters. It is ultimately my claim that an analysis of
Wallace’s character will reveal new paradigms through which to think about agency and
ethical action in the postmodern period.

Because each of the chapters that follow have their own introductions, I will
describe the organization of the dissertation as a whole only in brief here. The first
chapter of the dissertation describes my approach to ethics, agency, character, and
postmodern history in detail, and the argument is intended to serve as a kind of
theoretical template for arguments that follow in the rest of the dissertation. The second,
third, and fourth chapters, address Wallace’s novels chronologically. Chapter Two begins
with *The Broom of the System* published in 1987, Chapter Three focuses on *Infinite Jest*
published in 1996, and the subject of Chapter Four is *The Pale King*, which was
published posthumously in 2010. Though the argument of chapter one underlies the
approach to each chapter, the topics are different from one another because they follow
from the subjects of the novels as well as the attendant criticism of those novels.

After the chapters, I include a brief conclusion that looks back on the process of
writing the dissertation and ahead to what comes next for both my own writing process
and Wallace studies in general.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This chapter describes the theoretical and historical framework supporting the central argument of the dissertation. In the first section of the chapter, I define my concept of ethics and ethical action, describing how novels develop ethical paradigms through the actions of characters. I argue that Aristotle’s ethical writing in *Nicomachean Ethics* and his aesthetic writing in *Poetics* comprise a coherent theory of agency, action, and representation that supports my fundamental claim that the ethical dimension of novels becomes tangible to the extent that their authors depict a range of choices available to their characters and, following from that, depict characters in the process of exercising agency to act on those choices. I further claim that depictions of choosing, because they require describing multiple choices from which characters necessarily choose a limited range of those actions, reveals the historical and ideological dimensions of a given novel. I support this claim through the use of Georg Lukács’ writing on the aesthetic, historical, and ideological dimensions of the novel form in *The Theory of the Novel* and *The Historical Novel*. As I do with Aristotle, I read Lukács’ works together, in this case because each foregrounds the actions of characters. In *The Theory of the Novel*, the actions of characters determine the form of a novel’s ethical paradigm, and in *The Historical Novel* actions are symptoms of the historical conditions out of which they arise. This section of the chapter ultimately argues that the novels reveal history through the aesthetic depiction of the range of choices available to characters determined by
historical conditions and the choices on which characters act within the range of choices presented to them.

The second section of the chapter addresses history, specifically the postmodern period in which Wallace lived and in which his novels are set, the last quarter of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. Unlike the theoretical framework of the first section of the chapter, the historical framework of the second section does not treat an abstract or conceptual understanding of history; rather, it argues that the social conditions of the United States during an initial period of postmodern change, roughly the 1960s and 1970s, affect historical consciousness and actions of individuals living in the decades before and after the millennium. My argument focuses on the effects of three dominant conditions of postmodern America: the superabundance of choice, particularly consumer choice, the precariousness of ethical positions, and the effect of economic and political systems on individual agency. Based on these three defining conditions, I use David Harvey and Fredric Jameson, whose primary works on the postmodern period, *The Condition of Postmodernity* and *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, respectively, reinforce my argument about the relationship between postmodern material conditions, postmodern cultural production, and ethical representation in novels. The work of Harvey and Jameson is interested in consumer choice and individual agency, but it does not address ethics. Their historical sense of the period allows me to make my claims about the ethical and aesthetic dimension of postmodern novels when I argue that ethical positions and the ability to make ethical decisions are complicated and in some cases compromised by the superabundance of choice and the threats to agency that characterize the conditions of the
In the postmodern period and continued to develop in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Moreover, in this section I argue that Wallace’s novels portray characters who must make ethical decisions under such conditions and, in so doing, his novels reveal not only the historical conditions of postmodernity, but, crucially, the relationship between those conditions and ethical paradigms for acting under such conditions.

In the final section of the chapter, I contend that Wallace’s nonfiction writing presents ethical positions toward the postmodern period that should inform our reading of his fiction, which, rightfully, does not simply fulfill the ideals of his ethical positions or challenge them with clear or direct oppositional forces. Instead, through their forms, Wallace’s novels explore multiple ethical paradigms that relativize the agency of his characters and emphasize how they are forced to develop their own ethical paradigms in a world where ethical norms cannot be understood or established. I argue that in two pieces that appeared in the summer 1993 issue of *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Wallace offers positions on the possibility of ethical action and agency in the postmodern period that his protagonists generally adopt. However, the forms of Wallace’s novels, which are nonlinear, fragmentary, and indeterminate, subvert the basis by which his characters attempt to act ethically, while also revealing the important fact that postmodernity continues to change even as we try to respond to it. Ultimately, my argument points not to the relative success or failure of Wallace’s novels in realizing ethical ideals, but to what the successes and failures of his characters suggest about novel aesthetics, postmodern history, and ethical action in the postmodern period.
Throughout the following chapters I argue for a definition of ethics rooted in action because I claim that ethics becomes tangible in the novel through action rather than thought, through the concrete rather than the abstract. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which he focuses on “virtuous activity” rather than “knowledge” of the virtuous, underlies my fundamental claim about ethical action and aesthetics (Crisp viii-ix). Aristotle’s interest in virtuous activity contrasts, of course, with his teacher Plato’s. Plato, and Socrates before him, held that knowledge of the good and the form of the good were of primary importance to the field of ethics, but in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle criticizes that position as too abstract, claiming that virtuous activity cannot exist independently of the action that embodies it or, most notably for my argument, the context in which that action takes place.

Aristotle’s criticism of Plato and the theory he develops in opposition to it are particularly apt for application to novels because they approach the ethical value of any given action with a series of qualifications. In order to understand the uniqueness of Aristotle’s approach to virtuous activity and the reason that I argue it is applicable to novel studies, we should begin with Aristotle’s definition of virtues themselves. For Aristotle, virtues encompass a range of qualities and characteristics, each of which has a positive and negative sphere of value. For example, courage is an Aristotelian virtue, and courage can take the form of either fear or confidence, depending on the magnitude of courage exhibited. Additionally, though we might assume that one who acts with a large amount of courage would be seen as confident, while one who acts with a small amount would be seen as fearful, that is not always the case. Central to Aristotle’s ethics is the
notion that no given magnitude of courage (or any other virtue) is equally ethical across all possible situations. In some situations, fear might be courageous, while in others confidence might be. Ultimately, both confidence and fear can be good or ethical, and both can lead to eudaemonia, the good life, or the aim of all human beings. Moreover, Aristotle describes a dialectical relationship between confidence and the good life that is relevant to my argument. He takes the example of a boxer, who in the exercise of his confidence -- which is ethical considering that he is a boxer -- also feels considerable pain as he engages in the virtuous activity of competing in a boxing match. The pain, which is in itself bad and not at all virtuous—generally, it would never be virtuous to feel pain—is not less courageous for the pain that he feels. Potentially, he could even be considered more courageous. This depends on his comportment toward the match, not simply the act of boxing and absorbing pain itself. A less courageous boxer might absorb pain while boxing, feeling that he has nothing to lose; a more courageous boxer, however, does not “sell [his] life cheaply” but instead “chooses what is noble” (Ethics 54). This deeply subjective assessment of virtue is a key dimension of Aristotle’s ethics.

In order to get a better sense of how to assess the ethical value of a virtue in a given situation by Aristotle’s model, I’ll provide an example of the exercise of courage. If I had a mouse phobia and, one evening, were to see a mouse in my apartment, I would fear that mouse certainly, and one could say, based on my phobia, that I am acting ethically, carrying out a virtuous activity by fearing the mouse that is the object of my phobia. Depending on the depth of my phobia, one could say that I were acting ethically if the sight of the mouse drove me to jump out of my slippers, or chase the mouse down the hallway with a broom, and or hide under my bed covering my eyes with my teeth
clattering. Basically, one could judge the appropriate level of courage exercised on my part at the sight of a mouse relative to my level of phobia. But what if I were mortally afraid of mice? What if I believed that mice could do me mortal harm? In that case, Aristotle would say, it might be perfectly ethical and in keeping with virtuous activity for me to run screaming into the street, break my lease without notice, and move out of my apartment and across the country to where I believed mice were scarcer than they’d proven to be in my apartment. That could be an exercise of courage.

My phobia of mice and the appropriate level of courage to exercise in a situation where I am confronted with my phobia, however, must also be balanced against my exercise of other virtues in order for us to understand and assess the full ethical value of the situation and the character of my ethical activity. So to push the example further, let us also consider the virtue of friendliness and the sphere of social relations with respect to my mouse phobia. Let’s say that after spotting the mouse I exercised courage not to the extent of moving across the country but to the extent I’d chosen to run out into the street screaming. That might be a perfectly ethical exercise of courage based on my phobia of mice, but a less than ethical exercise of friendliness considering that my neighbor, who works very early and does not find rising to sound of a man screaming in the street pleasant, had recently asked me to do what I could to temper responses to my phobia. And, moreover, because I’d known in advance of spotting the mouse that my neighbor had kindly asked me to temper responses to my phobia, and in response I’d promised avoid running into the street screaming at the sight of a mouse, my response to the mouse would also have significant implication for the virtue of truthfulness.
This example of a range of possible actions based on a mouse phobia and of the ethical value of those actions follows from Aristotle’s system of ethics demonstrates a clear way that those ethics might be applied to the study of a novel. In a novel, as in Aristotle’s system and my example, the ethical value of an action taken by an individual is determined by the exercise of a number of virtues, the contexts in which those virtues must be considered, other possible actions that would exercise virtue to different extents, and the world of the novel, which potentially comprises additional conditions beyond those of individuals exercising their virtues (e.g. social class, laws, historical events). As I have suggested, in the aesthetic system that Aristotle describes in Poetics, he focuses on the action of characters in the same way that he focused on individual action in his ethics, but his aesthetics actually reveal a more totalizing worldview than his ethics do, and his focus on totality is based on his contentions about literary form. In Poetics, Aristotle argues that characters exist only “for the sake of their actions,” going so far as to suggest that drama, tragedy specifically, could exist without characters at all (51). This is because Poetics assumes an ethical normativity based in the form of tragedy. In tragedy, where the fate of each character and often a population as a whole—consider the fate of Thebes in the Theban trilogy at the center of Aristotle’s analysis—Aristotle defines character as “that which reveals moral choice” and “what kinds of things an agent chooses or rejects” (53). In Poetics, then, a character is nothing more than the choices that he or she makes because those choices are made in service of and with reference to the aesthetic whole of the drama or the series of plays of which the work in question is but one. Therefore, though it seems as though Aristotle’s ethics would point toward a non-normative
aesthetics, *Poetics* presents a norm-based approach to action determined by the totality of conditions depicted in the world of the drama(s).

We can further see the applicability of Aristotle to the novel form when we realize the extent to which Georg’s Lukács’ *The Theory of the Novel* in indebted to Aristotle’s *Poetics* and in which Lukács examines aesthetic forms and their relationship to ethics based on the historical periods out of which these forms arise. In order situate his fundamental contention about novels, Lukács contrasts the novel’s and the epic’s relationships to ethical totality. “The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given,” Lukács writes, “in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality” (*Theory of the Novel* 56). Both the epic and the novel form aim to depict a totality or ethical whole, but for the novel the ethical dimension of the world has been “concealed,” which suggests that the ethical dimensions of a novel are not given; they need, instead, to be revealed through the depiction of ethical action (60). Despite this, Lukács claims that the individual subject or character defines the ethical dimension of novels through actions when he claims the “ethical subject is constitutive … when it acts from within” (65). Though – and perhaps because – the ethical subject acts from within and without immanent meaning in the world or a sense of totality, the ethical structure of novels thereby become “visible in the creation of every detail and hence [ethics] is, in its most concrete content, an effective structural element of the work itself” (72). Thus, Lukács contends that the actions of characters and the concrete details of novels structure the ethical totality of the novel form despite the absence of a cohesive ethical paradigm in the modern world. Because, unlike the epic, there is no “purely formal pre-condition” for
ethical normativity, the novel’ form is always in the “process of becoming” and it becomes ethical through its own aesthetic production (72-3). This does not mean, for Lukács’s argument or for mine, that the novel form is purely subjective or that it can only express “a subjective aspect” of its ethical whole (74). Rather, the novel and the characters who act within it form a representative whole, a totality in which ethical paradigms are both constructed and challenged. But also, because the totality of the world of a given novel is incomplete with respect to the objective world of human beings, *The Theory of the Novel* suggests, novel characters are always searching for ways to act that will satisfy not only the ethical paradigms the novel in which they act has developed, but also something more that the novel form necessarily precludes, namely an ethics that is applicable to the world outside of the novel.

In the years after *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács turned away from this approach to understanding ethics through aesthetics in the novel form because he thought it was too influenced by his reading of Hegel. In addition to writing a rather dismissive preface to later editions of *The Theory of the Novel*, his novel study, *The Historical Novel* revises some of his positions on the relationship between aesthetic production and the material world. Nevertheless, we can observes a continuity between the two works in Lukács’ claims about the way in which novels develop their own ethical paradigms through the actions of their characters, even if there is a fundamental difference between the grounds upon which the studies begin.

In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács begins with the individual searching for wholeness and totality, seeking commensuration of the soul with the world through ethical action, while in *The Historical Novel* he begins with the individual and the novel
themselves as products of the historical conditions of the period in which they were produced, the materiality of historical process determinate of certain dimension of the character actions and novel forms. My argument is closer to where the *The Historical Novel* begins than where *The Theory of the Novel* does because of my focus on the relationship of the ethical action of novel characters to the historical conditions under which a novel is produced. One of the defining aspects of the historical novel according to Lukács is “the derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarities of the age” (*Historical Novel* 19). Essentially, Lukács suggests the characters that I have argued act ethically and are defined by those ethical actions choose, in the historical novel, from a range of possible actions that are, to some degree, determined by historical conditions. For example, Lukács argues that the historical novel became possible in the decades after the French Revolution, when the “nations of Europe underwent more upheavals than they had previously experienced in centuries” (23). Upheaval on this scale is necessary to create the “mass experience” that, Lukács argues, “strengthen[s] the feeling first that there is such a thing as history” (25). Mass experiences are what allows that average individual in a given society to understand history as, “an uninterrupted process of changes,” that has the ability, in its upheavals, crises, and transformations to have “a direct effect upon the life of every individual” and, to a large extent, also dictate the range of choices and actions available to a character at any point in time (25).

Because Lukács contends that the historical novel portrays the effects of history on the lives of all individuals and not, for example, the protagonist only, the protagonist of a historical novel is not a figure who is responsible for the catalyst of the mass
experience, but rather one that has an average conception of history, that is “more or less mediocre” (33). Indeed, the hero of the historical novel must be an average individual because the average individual becoming enmeshed in historical process is precisely the mass experience of history that Lukács describes. Moreover, the protagonist of a historical novel only “generally possess a certain, though never outstanding, degree of practical intelligence, a certain moral fortitude and decency which even rises to a capacity for self-sacrifice, but which never grows into a sweeping human passion, is never the enraptured devotion to a great cause” because it is through such an average character that the historical forces and conditions of a given age become tangible (33). The historical protagonist must struggle with the materiality of the world and choose the right action to the best of his or her ability, despite having limited agency within that world. Through the relation between mass experience and the mediocre protagonist, Lukács claims that the historical novel “disclos[es] the actual conditions of life, actual growing crises in people’s lives, depict[ing] all the problems of popular life which lead up to the historical crisis” (35).

The Defining Conditions of Postmodernity: David Harvey and Fredric Jameson

David Harvey’s The Conditions of Postmodernity, one of the principle works of postmodern history, focuses on, among other topics, superabundant choice and the economic and political circumscriptions of individual agency, two of the historical conditions of the postmodern period on which I analyze in Wallace’s novels. My use of Harvey will be focused on the transition, as he describes it, between two different modes of production over the last half of he twentieth century with particular attention to the
effects of macroeconomic policy shifts on the lives of individuals living under those systems, which I believe reflect the arguments about the individual and the world, the protagonist and the novel from the first section of this chapter.

Harvey characterizes the American economy of the postwar years, roughly 1945-1972, as Fordist and “less a mere system of mass production and more a total way of life” (130). What Harvey means by this is that Fordism determined not only the way that the American economy produced and sold consumer goods, but also that it habituated workers into becoming certain kinds of consumers. In the first decades after the war, for the first time in American history, Harvey argues, an increasing majority of the American population had stable incomes, discretionary spending, and time enough to purchase the consumer goods that were being manufactured by various industries across the country. Essentially, a mode of production began to dictate not only how Americans worked but how they lived, and though the system was successful for a couple of decades of unprecedented economic growth, the difficulty of maintaining this system was that it required “continuous acceleration in the productivity of labour in the corporate sector” (139). Additionally, as Harvey points out, by the 1960s “counter-cultural” critiques and social movements aimed at the system’s “depersonalized” and “bureaucratic” nature coincided precisely with the fall of corporate profits and declines in productivity (139).

Though Fordism had helped create a class of consumers, the rigidities of the space and time required to continuously produce and consumer an increasing amount of goods at rising costs eventually became untenable.

At the same time, under these conditions the consumer class was growing and in order the keep the economy afloat, the government and private business had to each
develop ways to keep people working and consuming at sustainable growth rates. This imperative led, during the years 1965-1973, to an “extraordinarily loose monetary policy” that, in general Harvey refers to as “flexible accumulation” (147). Flexible accumulation, the mode of production and consumption with which Harvey aligns postmodernity required new “patterns of consumption,” “sectors of production,” and “markets,” but, at the same time, “accelerating turnover time in production would have been useless unless the turnover time in consumption was also reduced” (156). At the government level, Keynesian measures such as the deregulation of financial systems allowed, at the level of private business, an increase in consumer credit that allowed individuals to consume goods more quickly and in a faster turnover time. As an example, Harvey notes that in the early 1970s, the textile and clothing industries saw the half-life in which consumers purchased new goods cut in half, while in “thought-ware industries,” such as home entertainment, the half-life of new purchases dipped down from 5-7 years to a year and a half (156). And, with more lines of credit extended to a larger percentage of the population, more and more of the goods being purchased were done so with money that people didn’t have.

The world that Harvey depicts, where more and more choices are available to consumers, but in which the choice to purchase those things with credit actually limits one’s future agency, is precisely the contradiction in the late capitalist mode of production the effects of which Fredric Jameson theorizes in Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Though Jameson’s influential work is as multi-dimensional with respect to aesthetic production as Harvey’s is with respect to economic conditions, I will here focus on Jameson’s observations about the effects of the mode of
production Harvey describes on the individual. Jameson has famously called the postmodern age one in which individuals have “forgotten how to think historically in the first place,” and I argue that it is precisely the economic and social history I’ve described above that we’ve lost the ability to think about and act cogently within (ix).

Perry Anderson’s work on Fredric Jameson is helpful, here, because it distills Jameson’s argument down to a several key aspects. Anderson describes Jameson’s “capture” of postmodernity in his own book on the subject, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, as based on the “anchorage of postmodernism in the objective alterations of the economic order of capital itself,” rather than a mere “aesthetic break or epistemological shift” (54). My arguments do not seek to revise this understanding, but rather to utilize its focus on materiality, the material social conditions and also the object-world of postmodernity for thinking about Wallace’s engagement with that world. After establishing the fundamental economic and material basis of Jameson’s theory, Anderson turns to an effect that I argue afflicts Wallace’s characters throughout his novels, namely the “consequences of this change in the object-world experience of the subject [or] the metastases of the psyche” (56). Anderson notes how Jameson connects these metastases to “the political defeats of the seventies,” and “the loss of any sense of history” that attended these defeats (56). Essentially, by fighting against the Fordist mode of production I’ve described above on aesthetic grounds rather than on economic grounds, the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s were less effective than they might have been when confronted with the conservative economic polices that came to dominate the 1980s during the Reagan presidency. As Anderson describes it, Jameson claims that the
“social processes” that determined the “surge into postmodernist way of thought,” were unable to “invoke economic determination” (57).

This inability of the left to utilize economic determination in their resistance to social change is, importantly, a theme throughout Wallace’s writing, something he explores in an early essay from 1993, “E Unibus Pluram,” which I discuss in the next section, but the failure of the left in this regard also proves to be the primary theme behind that development of The Pale King’s Chris Fogle, a character discussed in chapter four. Fogle to a large extent, and other of Wallace’s characters to a lesser extent, encounter and must cope with disenfranchisement that is connected to their material reality and economic mobility. Indeed, Wallace often thematizes this precise disconnect, between the economic conditions that govern his characters and their initial predicament. Lenore Beadsman in The Broom of the System, for example, initially fails to grasp the extent to which her father has determined the parameters of the world she explores, while the reader of Broom sees how her father’s controls of the largest industries in Cleveland are the root cause of the disappearance she is trying to solve.4

In order to explore this phenomenon of psychic disenfranchisement, Anderson describes Jameson’s notion of the loss of a sense of history across the “the terrain of culture itself,” and I argue that form of Wallace’s novels dramatizes precisely this aspect of postmodernity through the dynamic way in which they engage characters in historical processes (60). Anderson notes that Jameson identifies, first in film and later in the novel, “a nostalgia for the present,” a symptom of the quintessentially postmodern

4 In this regard, Wallace’s novels can be seen to dramatize the left melancholy that Walter Benjamin first explored, a subject that has been more recently elaborated by Wendy Brown and challenged by Rosalyn Deutsche. In both contemporary cases, the notion of a loss of a sense of history is integral to left melancholy and tied to the relationship of left politics to material social conditions.
“impossibility of holding steady any historical referent” (60). With respect to novel form, in Postmodernism, Jameson argues that the postmodern sense of history, the nostalgia for the present, “makes it virtually impossible for us to reach and thematize those official ‘subjects’ which float above the text but cannot be integrated into our reading of the sentences” (23). My argument is that Wallace makes the feeling of nostalgia and the subjects to which Jameson refers tangible by creating something that Jameson theorizes, a “monument to the aesthetic situation engendered by the disappearance of the historical referent” in our own culture (23-5). Our “nostalgia for the present,” then, can be apparent in our novels, even our “historical novel[s],” which “can no longer set out to represent the historical past” (25). Wallace’s first two novels are not historical in the sense of depicting events from the actual past, but they become historical because they show a way to represent the past that involves portraying the actual consequences of the present beyond “our ideas and stereotypes about that past,” something Jameson suggests the postmodern novel is not capable of (25). Indeed, Wallace resolutely avoids stereotypes about the past, which according to Jameson have the effect of relegating “cultural production” to “a mental space,” precisely by avoiding exposition about the actual past and focusing instead on a fully imagined future that is its result (25). Thereby, Wallace avoids the postmodern trope of “seek[ing] History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history” (25). Instead Wallace’s novels seek history, sometimes even through the simulacra that Jameson warns is ahistorical, and their use of futurity coupled with the
depiction his characters’ relationship to historical process, creates a historicizing form capable of capturing the period of postmodernity in which his novels were produced.\(^5\)

David Foster Wallace and the Postmodern Period

In *Postmodernism*, Jameson contends that the technological products of our advanced capitalist society are “mesmerizing and fascinating,” not necessarily because they are themselves mesmerizing and fascinating but because they serve as a “representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp” (38). As such shorthand, these products suggest a metonymic or synecdochic relationship to the “network” Jameson refers to throughout *Postmodernism*: the world system of capital. Part of what makes the world system of capital non-representable, Jameson claims, is that it exists at a “complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind” (38). I don’t dispute Jameson’s claims about the complexity of the non-representable, but I do take seriously the opening that he leaves for its representation, albeit through shorthand, because shorthand may very well be all that a fiction writer has at his or her disposal (or desires to use) to insofar as her or she attempts to represent this complex system.

Furthermore, bringing the world system of capital to bear on a novel through writing that focuses on consumable products, is exactly what Wallace’s fiction does. Products emblematic of postmodernity allow Wallace, to lean on Jameson once more, “to

\(^5\) *The Pale King*, as I have suggested in the Introduction, is the exception to Wallace’s use of futurity, at least in the sense of using the future as the general setting and time period of a novel’s action. However, even *The Pale King* makes use of futurity through its use of 1984-85 as a catalyst to future, impending changes in the structure of the IRS with respect to agency’s use of computers for the (potentially) formerly human task of processing returns.
think” this network and “the impossible totality of the contemporary world system,” because his characters engage directly with the materiality of the age (38). To take this a step further, I suggest that Wallace does, due to his focus on the way his characters live with these products, comes close to representing the dimly perceivable aspects of the non-representable. In fact, we can often see the non-representable in between the lines, so to speak, of the detailed exposition that characterizes Wallace’s fiction as a whole. I claim that the root of the representational impossibility Jameson describes, the irreconcilably dense network of capital that circulates the globe, is less important than the fictional forms that it inspires and how those forms strive to think that network in order to depict forms of the postmodern condition.

This is why the form of Wallace’s novels, which is often neglected or simplified by those who write on his novels, is central to my argument about Wallace’s contribution to theorizing the developing conditions of postmodernity. I have suggested that Wallace’s novels are driven less by plot than they are by dialectical interactions between postmodern conditions and the struggles of characters within those conditions. Ultimately, I contend that those interactions prove to be irresolvable, but that the exchanges they comprise define narrative space and narrative time, accumulating into the defining forms of the novels. Wallace’s novels end not with resolutions to any of the problems his characters face, but with those problems compounded and transformed; thereby, the irresolvable nature of postmodern dialectical action becomes the content of Wallace’s novels, suggesting that we examine the processes that lead up to this present situation at the same time that their irresolvable nature points toward their next transformation.
This moment of transition in the processes that comprise the development of postmodernity is something that Wallace’s contributions to the summer 1993 issue of *Review of Contemporary Fiction* reflect. In the issue, where Wallace contributes both as an essayists, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” and as an interviewee, Wallace discusses how the postmodernism of the 1990s is informed by the postmodernism of the 1980s and earlier decades, as well as what is likely to represent the next, subsequent wave of postmodern fiction. I argue that it is now time to revise the common ways of understanding Wallace’s position in these often-referenced texts.

On the opening page of his essay, Wallace remarks on the pace of literary innovation, observing that the “literary terrain” of the twentieth century “has gone from Darwinianly naturalistic to cybernetically post-postmodern in eighty years” (151). By “post-postmodern,” Wallace means that by 1993 not only had classically postmodern fictional forms from the 1960s and 1970s become standard forms, but he is also pointing to a dialectical relationship between fictional production and televisual production that has occurred in the intervening years. Wallace argues that television’s adoption of forms that were traditionally used by postmodern fiction in programming and advertising deadened the ability of those forms to critique American culture, and so fiction writers began to react to television’s appropriation of their forms. This meant that something new and different was taking shape in American fiction, again, a movement within postmodernism itself, and that the new postmodernism was both related to earlier forms of postmodern fiction as well as to more recent developments within the culture via television. Moreover, Wallace argues that the fiction of the 1990s is result of a series of exchanges between television and fictional forms dating back to the televising of the
Vietnam war and its related protests in the middle of the 1960s, suggesting that postmodern fiction itself “evolved” due to “prior changes in readerly taste” in the same way that “students we saw on television protesting the war in southeast Asia … may have hated the war, but they also wanted to be seen protesting on television” (160). Wallace’s argument about the similarity between a taste for postmodern fiction and an appetite for televised war and protest is connected through his belief that television contributes to each of these transformations because of the way its programming and advertising absorb and mimic postmodern forms that were, at one time, revolutionary. Essentially, Wallace sees an the inception of postmodern fiction in general as tied to television’s ability to reflexively show us ourselves and, as time goes on, show us ourselves showing us ourselves in a properly meta fashion.

For this reason, Wallace identifies the “institutionalization of hip irony” as a hallmark of postmodernism and an aspect of the next wave of fiction; but this is a cautionary note, because Wallace is concerned that the next wave of postmodern fiction will only again become absorbed by television. Wallace counts himself as one of the next wave writers, but he articulates the need to find a fictional form that can engage the ironic, self-aware, television culture that produced protesters more interested in being seen than what they were protesting, lest the fictional forms themselves become too easily duplicatable by television and its related products (181). The central difficulty for Wallace, however, remained the reflexive nature of the products of postmodernity, which was too “good at discerning patterns in the flux of popular ideologies, absorbing them, processing them, and then re-presenting them as persuasions to watch and to buy” (174).
As an example, he cites commercials aimed at “eighties’ upscale boomers,” and their use of “processed versions of tunes from the rock culture of the sixties and seventies,” which “elicit[s] the yearning that accompanies nostalgia and to yoke purchases of products with what for yuppies is a lost era of genuine conviction (“Pluram” 174). And so, though Wallace does not make this explicit in his essay, it seems to be that the danger in producing new postmodern fictional forms would be not only that they were too easily duplicable, but also that they were themselves too clearly a result of the dialectical process by which television had already absorbed earlier postmodern fictional forms; essentially, how could one be certain that what was producing was not a product of television itself?

By respecting the “power” of television “to jettison connection and castrate protest fueled by the same ironic postmodern self-consciousness it first helped fashion,” Wallace take seriously the way even a commercial can adopt “self-mocking materialism, blank indifference, and the delusion that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive” (184). The danger in simply portraying self-mocking and cynicism is, in Wallace’s estimation, comparable to the way that French poststructuralists “celebrat[ed]” the idea of the world “being enmeshed in the logos” to construct critical paradigms that were ultimately unsustainable of cultural critique (189-90). The route of literary protest available to U.S. fiction writers, Wallace suggests, is to “instantiate single-entendre principles” (190). Wallace imagines a wave of postmodern fiction that “treat[s] the plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and convictions” (190). Most critics read Wallace’s essay as a call for a simple and straightforward kind of fiction that does away with the postmodern novel’s self-consciousness and multiform
structures, and so taking Wallace at what they believe to be his word they are confronted with the fact that *Infinite Jest* and the *The Pale King*, published after “Pluram,” do not abandon postmodern forms but instead seem to reinvest in them completely. In this way, Wallace’s later novels “risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists,” not by avoiding postmodern tropes, but by using them to new ends (“Pluram” 190).

In the interview that accompanies “Pluram,” Wallace is asked about what “solutions” his fiction might offer to the representational problems I’ve described when he is asked, “Are you saying that writers of your generation have an obligation not only to depict our condition but also to provide the solutions to these things?” Wallace’s answer to that question, which is worth quoting here in full, is as follows:

**DFW:** I don’t think I’m talking about conventionally political or social action-type solutions. That’s not what fiction’s about. Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking human being. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction’s job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still “are” human beings, now. Or can be. This isn’t that it’s fiction’s duty to edify or teach, or to make us good little Christians or Republicans; I’m not trying to line up behind Tolstoy or Gardner. I just think that fiction that isn’t exploring what it means to be human today isn’t art. We’ve all got this “literary” fiction that simply monotones that we’re all becoming less and less human, that presents characters without souls or love, characters who really
are exhaustively describable in terms of what brands of stuff they wear, and we all buy the books and go like “Golly, what a mordantly effective commentary on contemporary materialism!” But we already “know” U.S. culture is materialistic. This diagnosis can be done in about two lines. It doesn’t engage anybody. What’s engaging and artistically real is, taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic, how is it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn’t have a price? And can these capacities be made to thrive? And if so, how, and if not why not?

Wallace’s answer provides a basis on which we can think about the seemingly paradoxical approach to fiction writing that Wallace adopts after “Pluram,” wherein he tries to reinvest postmodern tropes with the sincerity. In his answer we can see the dialectical way that Wallace views the predicament in language that suggests the individual’s relationship to the conditions in which he or she lives. Where Wallace posits a “being,” he also suggests that there are “things” that make it hard for that being to simply be, and that “fiction’s job” has two fundamental parts that are essentially the equal elaboration of those sides that are in conflict. Important here also is the fact that Wallace turns away from the idea of “solutions” and of “diagnosis.” Rather than write fiction that leads to either of those ends, he focuses on “connection,” a concept that suggests not only an exchange, but, in the terms that Wallace describes it, an exchange that takes the individual’s relationship to certain conditions as “axiomatic” and is invested in exploring not that fact or even what underlies it, but rather what, taking those facts as axiomatic, how our human “capacities” manifest today.
CHAPTER TWO

Introduction

In chapter one, I argue that the protagonists of Wallace’s novels exercise agency, acting ethically in a world that makes virtuous activity difficult if impossible to determine, but also that their actions, ethically indeterminate though they may be, actually determine the forms of Wallace’s novels and are part of the process of revealing the historical conditions of the postmodern period. Wallace’s first novel, The Broom of the System, engages with these historical conditions primarily through the ideas of poststructuralism. In this chapter, I argue that Broom’s protagonists, Rick Vigorous and Lenore Beadsman, represent different levels of faith in the poststructural project and that the form of the novel points toward an epiphany at which Lenore never arrives. Rick, a fiction writer and editor of the Frequent Review, and Lenore, a Wittgenstein enthusiast and recent Amherst college graduate, represent the literary and literary-critical cultural production of the mid-to-late 1980’s. Rick writes, edits, and publishes postmodern metafiction, while Lenore adopts an increasingly skeptical and philosophical stance on her relationship with Rick due to her investment in Wittgenstein. In the end, Broom’s form suggests that neither character nor its representative paradigm is able to reconcile the action of the novel on its own terms; instead, a new fictional form that incorporates the aesthetics of each is forged. Ultimately, I argue Broom’s form illustrates the tendencies in metafiction and poststructuralism that reflect the entropic features of postmodern cultural production, continuously re-consuming and recapitalizing on itself, but that Broom also suggests an alternative to this distinguishing feature of postmodernity.
The plot of *Broom* is not necessarily difficult to follow, but that is because so much of the material world that is suggested by the text is left out as the novel follows Lenore on her quest to find her missing grandmother in a linear narrative. Nonetheless, a sketch of the world that *Broom* suggests is necessary for my argument because, though I argue that the material world of *Broom* remains in the periphery, I also ultimately argue that it bears directly on the novel’s form. The novel is set in the near future, the 1990s, and for decades, the Beadsman family has lived in East Corinth, Ohio and operated the Stonecipheco Baby Food Company, named after Stonecipher Beadsman II, Lenore’s grandfather. Stonecipher Beadsman III, Lenore’s father, is the family’s patriarch and current CEO of the Stonecipheco Baby Food Company, and Lenore Beadsman Sr., Lenore’s namesake is his grandmother, wife of the late Stonecipher Beadsman I.\(^6\) The plot begins with the unexplained disappearance, or so it seems at first, of Lenore Beadsman Sr. from the Shaker Heights nursing home. Lenore Sr., who is a former student of Ludwig Wittgenstein, is an influential figure in Lenore’s life, most notably through their shared interest in the work of Wittgenstein. As it turns out, however, Lenore Sr. has not disappeared but escaped, and she has done so holding a recipe for baby food capable of stimulating the linguistic capability of infants. Lenore’s father wants the recipe for the company, of course, but Lenore Sr., for reasons the novel does not explore, wants to keep it from him.

Lenore Jr. never solves the mystery of Lenore Sr.’s disappearance or her father’s role in it. Instead, she is preoccupied with the feeling that she has lost control of herself

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\(^6\) Lenore Sr. is technically Lenore Jr.’s great-grandmother, but Lenore Jr. calls her "gramma" throughout the novel.
and that she might in fact be nothing more than the words that can be used to describe her, a character in a novel. The other main obstacle to Lenore’s search for her grandmother is Rick, “a kind of pomo Scheherazade,” who tries to keep Lenore unaware that she is a character in a novel by telling her stories that distract her from her own (Olson 21). The novel is structured around Lenore’s search for Lenore, a poststructuralist gag on its own terms. Rick’s stories are his attempt to pull her in to the narrative he wants her to be a part of, their courtship, while her own search undermines his efforts because through searching for herself she learns to be a better reader of a poststructuralist text, namely Broom, and that threatens Rick’s hold over her. While Rick is successful to some degree at keeping Lenore unaware of the gag of her dual search and thus able to maintain the metafictional dimension of the text, in the end Lenore both finds her grandmother, deflating the text’s poststructural ruse, and also falls out of love with Rick and his metafictions.

With that synopsis in mind, the argument of this chapter unfolds over three sections. In the first section of the chapter, I describe two contemporary approaches to postmodern metafiction in order to describe Broom’s place in the subgenre. One of those approaches, exemplified by Mary Holland’s work in Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Fiction, looks back to the postmodern metafiction of the twentieth century to suggest that its aesthetics continue into twenty-first century novels which repair metafiction’s relationship to language and the world through a humanistic use of the same devices that had been previously used solely for self-referential irony. The other approach, described by Daniel Graussam in On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War, essentially revises a common
assumption that the first wave of postmodern metafiction written in the postwar decades of 1945-1972 was self-referential and ahistorical, arguing instead that it captures the pervasive nuclear anxiety of American culture during the postmodern period. My argument is that *Broom*, which falls somewhere in between the periods on which Holland and Graussam focus, is a uniquely historical metafiction in the sense that it metafictionalizes and historicizes metafictional literary production.

The second section of the chapter looks at *Broom’s* use of two different but related philosophies of language: Wittgenstein’s and Jacques Derrida. In this section I argue that, though Wallace opposes the work of Wittgenstein and Derrida to some extent in order to illustrate the limits of aspects of their philosophies of language, *Broom’s* form absorbs them each equally through the actions of Lenore and Rick, organizing a more coherent understanding of their shared aspects than has yet been explored by other scholars, such as Marshall Boswell and Bradley Fest, who have written about the influence of these two philosophers on the novel. In the third section of the chapter, I turn to the relationship between Lenore and Rick after returning to the specific passage in *Investigations* from which Wallace adapts *Broom’s* title. Here I describe the specific kind of historical metafiction that *Broom* is – a metafiction about metafiction – as one that keeps the poststructural imaginations of Wittgenstein and Derrida in play throughout, so as to suggest their bearing on the material world that Lenore traverses by exploring the tension between her poststructural and metafictional sensitivities and the material world that surrounds her.

What results is a novel that is both invested in the generative possibilities of postmodern and poststructural tropes which at the same time tries to form those tropes
around a narrative that has actual consequences for its protagonists. Therefore, though we see both Lenore and Rick utilize as well as be manipulated by poststructuralism and metafiction, their limited agency with respect to these postmodern literary forms does not render *Broom* ahistorical. Rather, those aspects of *Broom*, which are commonly viewed as the novel’s shortcomings – give some concrete examples here separated by n-dashes--actually enrich the novel overall by illustrating the relationship of such tropes to the more concrete aspects of the Cleveland, Ohio that Wallace describes. including the phone lines of the Bombarding Building, the building itself, and The Great Ohio Desert that exists at the edge of civilization. These structures, which organize the flow of industry in the world that Wallace has created, confront the poststructural imagination of Lenore and Rick with the actual, physical limits of their social conditions. Thereby, the world of *Broom* finds its poststructural counterpoint in material reality of the near-future in a way enacts the dialectical relationship between historical development and individual agency. Lenore and Rick, as they move toward mutual recognition of one another’s language games, are more and more hemmed in by what the Bombardini building in specific represents, which is an industry that it capable of growing to infinite size and casting a shadow over the entire city.

**Contemporary Approaches to Postmodern Metafiction: Mary K. Holland and Daniel Graussam**

Currently, the discourse on postmodern metafiction is following two distinct paths that I believe should be reconciled in order to understand *Broom*’s contribution to the
canon of postmodern metafiction. For the sake of economy, each of those paths is here represented by one title. In *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Fiction* Mary Holland argues that the changes in postmodern metafiction over the last several decades should be defined in terms of aesthetic developments. *Succeeding* argues that late twentieth century postmodern metafiction is distinct from early twenty-first century metafiction because twenty-first century novels uses metafiction toward humanist ends, whereas twentieth-century metafiction used it towards ironic ends. For Holland, the aesthetic change in twenty-first century metafiction novels has to do with how those novels represent language’s relationship to humanity. Holland’s book thus claims that in this millennium the relationship between the human and logos has been, in some sense, repaired. The postmodern novels of the twenty-first century that she focuses on embody “a new faith in language and certainty about the novel’s ability to engage in humanist pursuits that have not been seen clearly since poststructuralism shattered both in the middle of the past century” (15). Moreover, Holland argues that twenty-first century metafiction “uses self-conscious representation not only to return to presence and the real,” but also, importantly for my argument about *Broom*, that “these novels enact poststructuralism turned toward the ends of realism and humanism” (20).

The other line of discourse, represented by Daniel Graussam’s *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War*, seeks to revisit and revise the common claims that the aesthetic innovations of first wave of postmodern novels, roughly 1945-1972, represent an ahistorical, relativistic view of history that occludes rather than contributes to meaningful discourse on the postwar period of the last American century.
Graussam’s argument finds some kinship with Linda Hutcheon’s early work on “historiographic metafiction” in her influential book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Text*, wherein she argues that though representations of history is problematized by postmodern literary devices, postmodern novels are, nevertheless, steeped in history. Graussam finds his main antagonism in the pervasive belief most concisely described by Jameson and discussed in chapter one, that the postmodern is “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (*Postmodernism* ix). Graussam argues, instead, that “the historiographic complexity of postmodern fiction is a representation of, and an attempt to come to terms with, a radically changed understanding of historical time that potentially makes historical consciousness impossible” (7). Revising Jameson, Graussam argues that postmodern fiction post-1945 “attempts to think the present historically in an age that invented and deployed a technology that, if used, would make historical thinking impossible through its nearly instantaneous obliteration of the world” (7).

With Graussam’s and Holland’s claims for metafiction’s historical trajectory and historicizing capacities in mind, I turn to *Broom* as a novel emblematic of the period of metafictional literary production of the 1980s as well as a metafiction about the relationship between the poststructural philosophies of language and metafiction itself, including the relationship between postmodern fiction and its readership. I argue that, by laying bare the functioning of its metafiction *Broom*, decades before Holland identifies the trend, is a novel that begins to repair the relationship between language and humanity by thematizing the common criticisms of metafiction and poststructuralism and creating a protagonist in Lenore Beadsman who can actively interrogates their forms and structures.
of meaning. At the same time, because *Broom* does this both as a work of fiction itself and through the stories that Rick tells throughout the novel, it also historicizes the effect that metafictional cultural production such as stories, but by extension also advertising, movies, and television had on the lives of individuals during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

**Poststructural Philosophies of Language: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida**

While critics have consistently noted the influence of both Wittgenstein and Derrida on *Broom*, they have typically described that influence as a set of competing rather than complementary forces. Along those lines, with Wittgenstein representing one theory of language and Derrida another, Bradley Fest has claimed that *Broom* stages a complex exploration between Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida,” that “plays out between . . . theoretical constructs that are thinly veiled as characters, Lenore Sr [sic] and Norman Bombardini,” versions of Wittgenstein and Derrida, respectively (88). For Fest, Beadsman Sr. and Norman Bombardini, a prominent property owner who is only in two rather peripheral scenes of the novel, represent “poles,” their “asymptotic limits” illustrating how one philosopher diverges from the other (88).

Fest illustrates these divergent limits – and the novel’s ultimate preference for Derridean theories of language – through a reading of the end of the novel, where Wallace famously omits the final word: “I’m a man of my . . .” (467). Fest reads the end of the novel as a way of depicting Bombardini’s success at a task that he sets for himself early in the novel: “to grow to infinite size” (*Broom* 91). Though Fest’s focus on an odd quality of a peripheral character is suspect, it does allow him to argue, more
clearly than any writer on the novel thus far has, for the importance of Derrida to *Broom*. Where most critics read the end of the novel as a gesture of poststructural participation, a kind of Wittgensteinian language game wherein the reader must provide the final word, which, and perhaps because it ironically seems to be “word,” the reader is prepared to provide, Fest suggests something dynamically different. When he turns to Bombardini (Derrida), who by accomplishing his goal and growing to infinite size “to such an extent that he becomes the world of the text,” Fest claims that Bombardini consumes and now contains whatever final word there may have been, thus creating “a narrative-textual space that could never be an accomplice of eschatology, for it would be a kind of ‘universe without organs,’ a vast physical region with no distinction between one thing and another” (95). Essentially, Fest argues, we cannot know for a fact that the final word of the novel is meant to be “word,” regardless of how sensible it might seem. Fest’s contention firmly aligns him with a Derridian reading of the text because intention is inconsequential to Derrida’s philosophy of language. In Derrida’s paradigm, language is a system that is unstable in the sense that it cannot mean what a speaker or writer intends for it to be in that speaker’s or writer’s absence. So without Rick (and without Wallace, actually, as Derrida would argue about the whole of *Broom*) we cannot know what language means, and we most certainly cannot know what an absence of language (an absence of something that already only exists in absence) could possibly mean.

Moreover, it is on these grounds of intentionality and context that philosopher John Searle famously disagreed with Derrida’s critique of J.L. Austin’s speech act theory, which posited that language (even written language) can be intelligible through an understanding of the intention of the speaker and the context of the speech. This
fundamental disagreement between Derrida and Searle/Austin came to characterize their work in the decades after their public disagreement. Fest may be right to suggest that supplying the final word of Wallace’s novel is very un-Derridian, but at the same time its absence does not necessarily suggest all that Fest claims it does either; all he has done is suggest that a an absence signifies a particular context instead of a reasonably logical word that could be supplied. What is more important to the novel’s engagement with poststructural history as part of the postmodern history is that fact that the absence remains open, and non-signifying. In that openness, the form of *Broom* suggests not an either/or between, say Wittgenstein or Derrida, but rather a synthesis of these possible readings.

It is, nevertheless, true that Fest’s inversion of the typical way to read *Broom’s* ending thus allows him to make a larger argument about novel writing after the height of poststructuralism’s influence in the humanities. The Derridian, “narrative-textual space” that Wallace creates at the end of the novel, Fest argues, is Wallace’s attempt to show that “in the wake of poststructuralism . . . a novel cannot work through the structural aporias of the novel” (96). Ultimately, however, Fest maintains the idea that Wittgenstein and Derrida are oppositional figures in poststructural philosophies of language, but is there not room in the narrative-textual space that Fest suggests for both figures? Rather than see the possibility of a coherent form in *Broom’s* ending, Fest’s reading participates in the standard evaluation of the *Broom* as an exercise that “discloses the failure inherent in any structural project,” making the novel essentially an illustration of futility rather than a positive illustration of the specific philosophical problems with which both Wittgenstein and Derrida were concerned (96).
Readings such as Fest’s, which spends considerable interpretive energy establishing ways to read Broom as a conflict between opposing bodies of philosophical thought, arguing that novels ultimately illustrate a particular philosopher’s paradigm, recall William Gass’s that “readings [that] continue to interpret novels as if they were philosophies themselves . . . content not form . . . have regarded fictions as ways of viewing reality and not additions to it” (25). In this spirit, I argue that the end of Broom is not simply a “playing out” of a Wittgensteinian or a Derridian philosophy of language, but is structurally and formally engaged with the overlapping worlds on which their philosophies bear, most importantly, on the actions of Rick and Lenore, who inhabit a space in which both philosophies exist simultaneously.

Broom is not, then, a novel to which Wallace applied philosophies as Fest and others ultimately seem to suggest; Broom is instead, and as Gass would argue, an addition to their philosophies. In Broom, Lenore and Rick grow and change as the novel progresses. Their ontological status as characters and representations of human beings changes based on their experience with the metafictional aspects of the text, and those changes are driven by how the world of Broom ultimately makes sense of their language games. This is to say that, as Broom develops, the context in which we read Lenore Jr. and Rick changes and, further, that they have the agency to identify and attempt to affect the contexts in which they are defined.

In fact, context is a concept through which the philosophies and methodologies of Wittgenstein and Derrida have historically been linked. Henry Staten’s influential study of the two thinkers describes context as a point of “convergence” in their methodologies, each of which rests on “the notion of continually different contextualized meaning” (25).
For Wittgenstein and Derrida alike, context is constantly shifting, so it is not sufficient to say, for example, the context of the novel *The Broom of the System*. Within *Broom*, there are potentially infinite contexts because context relies not only the text itself, which is, again, unstable, but also on the context in which the text is received. Essentially, each encounter with a text approximates Derrida’s notion of the event, a discrete occurrence of an utterance that is only deferred with respect to that original occurrence each time that the text is encountered. Therefore, context is not something that can be abstracted and understood generally for a number of similar occurrences of the use or reception of spoken or written language, and this is something that *Broom* dramatizes. Lenore’s inability throughout most of the novel to put together, for instance, that Rick’s story are attempt to shift the context of their conversations is an example of Lenore’s inability to abstract a general rule about how Rick uses context to manipulate her in each instance when he begins to tell her a story.

For Staten, the infinite difference among contexts and the resultant deferrability of meaning transfers directly to fiction writing. Staten even describes these phenomena on the level of the text. “The word,” Staten writes, is “like a face, is a set of characters. None are essential or all are essential. A word is . . . a transitive essence” (248). And this is precisely how *Broom* treats the use of the words Lenore Beadsman. The name passes between two characters, depending on the context in which it appears, and Wallace’s text plays with the transference of not only that name, but the Stonecipher family name which Lenore, her great grandmother, and three generations of men also share. Naming, whether between the Lenores or among the Stonecipher family becomes a shell game. The essences exist under the surface of the text and only under the scrutiny of context do the
essential characteristics of the character represented by a name emerge. As Lenore’s brother, a Stonecipher says, when Lenore calls him by a shortened version of his last name: “Stoney is everybody … Stoney reminds me I’m probably just a part in a machine I wish I wasn’t part of” (Broom 250). The youngest Stonecipher’s observation reminds us that without the context of his being, “where I leave off and others start,” all we know of him is a name, and this is exactly what haunts Lenore about her own predicament within the novel (250). Like Lenore, Stoney is not concerned about his name itself and the fact that he shares it with the other male Stoneciphers; instead, he is concerned about how his name is used, with what intention and in what context, because like Lenore he is sensitive to the fact that intention and context can determine meaning. Lenore’s awareness that intention and context can determine meaning, most importantly her own meaning, takes both Wittgenstein and Derrida as well as Austin seriously in this sense: Lenore knows that without context she may mean nothing, and yet she needs a specific context, that of the poststructural novel that surrounds her, in order to solve the mystery of to where exactly Lenore has disappeared.

Characters in Context: Lenore Beadsman and Rick Vigorous

Broom’s title, of course, is a direct reference to Part I section 60 of Philosophical Investigations. In section 60, Wittgenstein inserts the word “broom” into both a proposition and a command in order to submit the word to analysis and show that it does not necessarily stand for the thing we commonly call a “broom” nor, necessarily, the constituent parts of that thing, for which we also have names. It will be useful to quote this section at some length:
When I say: ‘My broom is in the corner,’—is this really a statement about the broomstick and the brush? Well, it could at any rate be replaced by a statement giving the position of the stick and the position of the brush. . .

Imagine a language-game in which someone is ordered to bring certain objects which are composed of several parts, to move them about, or something else of the kind. And two ways of playing: in one (a) the composite objects (brooms, chairs, tables, etc.) have names . . . in the other (b) only the parts are given names and the wholes are described by means of them.—In what sense is an order in the second an analysed form of an order in the first? Does the former lie concealed in the latter, and is it now brought out by analysis?—True, the broom is taken to pieces when one separates broomstick and brush; but does it follow that the order to bring the broom also consists of corresponding parts? (PI 29-30).

This deconstruction of propositional logic, of the idea that the elements of language such a the noun “broom” have a stable relationship to reality, is among the first fundamental moves of Investigations and of course it famously challenges the foundations of Wittgenstein’s first book, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. In the passage above, Wittgenstein undermines not only the relationship of language to reality and the form of proposition, but also the notion that the analysis of language can bring one closer to the reality underlying language. Importantly, though, this does not mean, for Wittgenstein, that language does not have the capacity to mean or communicate. Instead, what it suggests is that any persons involved in using language to communicate must first decide on the terms of the language game being played, that is to say, on the context. Thereby,
even if the “word” broom does not denote what one think it denotes, one could still
conceivably propose or command something with respect to the object(s) that comprise
the thing(s) commonly referred to as “broom.” It is on this Wittgensteinian concept that
the title of *Broom* is predicated, that this concept or “broom”/Broom is part of the system
represented by the novel as a whole.

Sensitivity to this Wittgensteinian dimension of language is *Broom*’s point of
entry into the metafictional aesthetics that govern the novel. As the quote from *Broom* at
the head of this section suggests, the words “Lenore Beadsman” function like
Wittgenstein’s broom in the passage above. “Lenore Beadsman” stands for both Lenore
Jr. and Lenore Sr., and almost exclusively, Wallace omits the titles Jr. and Sr., pointing to
the ambiguity of the referent. Like “broom” above, “Lenore Beadsman” has two parts
that can be used together or separately. Broom dramatizes the separation of the two parts
that share a name and the inability of either part to fully function without the other.
Without Lenore Sr., Lenore Jr. tells her psychologist, Dr. Jay, that she has “feelings of
disorientation and identity-confusion and lack of control” (Broom 61); without Lenore
Jr., Lenore Sr. is in hiding, trying desperately to communicate with her great-
granddaughter from a base within a phone company tunnel. As suggested above, the plot
of the novel is a detective story, wherein Lenore is searching for Lenore. The added
dimension of one part of the name “Lenore Beadsman” searching for the other, to
complete it, metafictionalizes the very passage to which the title refers and suggests the
novel itself (named Broom) comprises also some set of both independent and dependent
parts. Like Lenore, the novel itself searches for the context that will bring coherence to its
name.
In actively trying to solve the disappearance of the other part of her name (and so bring coherence to herself), Lenore Jr. has an identity crisis, which is “a deterministic crisis” in which she worries that she has “some function beyond herself,” which Dr. Jay, her psychologist, questions (“A plot thing?”) and of which she has only vague notions (66). In proper Wittgensteinian fashion, Lenore searches for the means by which to enter the language game going on around her, and her progress in this search, which is measurable, can be seen through the way in which she comes to understand the shifting contexts around her, most notably those supplied by Rick. In this way the novel and Lenore’s search progresses from what could be a series of poststructural gags—Lenore searching for Lenore ad nauseam—through a series of temporarily mutually-determined contexts wherein Lenore and Rick occupy the same textual space. This often takes the form of a scene written entirely in dialogue or as one of Rick’s stories. In each case, these sections are told without exposition, eliminating the context of authorial narration and circumscribing what we know solely to the words each character speaks.

At the beginning of the novel, Lenore implores Rick to tell her stories as they lie in bed. She likes to hear Rick recount the stories that he reads as an editor at Frequent Review and she often identifies with one of the characters, which we come to learn is because Rick embellishes them to address the way in which he hopes to manipulate Lenore, which is primarily to try and get her to fall in love with him. Rick’s stories serve as temporary pacification. Lenore gets by on them, for a time, but as they become more elaborate and more aimed at Rick’s goal (to “own” Lenore, to compel her to love him), Lenore comes to an understanding both about how the contexts of Rick’s stories have
potentially entrapped her but more importantly about the larger contexts of storytelling and communication in general. Essentially, Lenore becomes sensitive to what Derrida would calls the “problem of context,” the very thing that Rick has been knowingly manipulating. For Derrida, context is inherently fraught because, as a starting point, all writing exists in lieu of the writer. Writing only exists because things need to be communicated in absence of those who are communicating. This is a particularly salient problem for Lenore to become sensitive to in her relationship with Rick because Lenore begins to pick up on problems of context in the stories the Rick tells her, his own stories or those he receives at Frequent Review, and she is able to do this after reflecting on what was said to her but in the moment that she listening to Rick tell them. She never experiences this same kind of reflective moment with respect to Broom and the story in which she is actually involved, however, because she never gains a critical distance from the writing of which she is a part in the absence of the author communicating.

Nevertheless, though it may be true that Lenore fails to gain critical distance with respect to Broom, which would be the ultimate self-reflexive metafictional turn, her ability to gain perspective on her function in Rick’s stories is important for the relationship between the form of the novel and the material conditions that define its world. That is, by coming to understand the function of Rick’s Frequent Review as a vehicle for fiction like Rick’s, Lenore is able to break free of what has been keeping her from seeing the truth behind Lenore’s disappearance and effectively solve the mystery at the center of the novel’s plot.

As Lenore’s search for Lenore expands, and the world of the novel comes to include characters beyond Rick who have an interest in Lenore, most notably her brother
LaVache, who talks through their great-grandmother’s understanding of Wittgenstein with her one afternoon, she becomes skeptical of Rick and stops asking him for stories. Rick senses that Lenore’s understanding of her context and the contexts in which he tries to place her is expanding. Lenore begins to question the difference between the stories Rick tells her and her own life. In a session with her psychologist, working through a story that Rick had recently told her, Lenore realizes, “The fat lady’s not really real, and to the extent that she’s real she’s just used, and if she thinks she’s real and not being used, it’s only because the system that educates her and uses her makes her by definition feel real” (122). The next time that Rick tells her a story, rather than listen intently and identify with one of the characters, Lenore tells Rick that she “feel[s] the need for context” (189). Lenore is, here, becoming a reader of the language games of which she is a part, both the metafictional stories that Rick tells and, potentially, the novel itself.

At the same time, Rick remains invested in his pursuit of Lenore, which means his pursuit of her affection and her status as a character that he can manipulate. In an attempt to keep Lenore close to him and invested in stories, he asks her to become a reader at the Frequent Review. Shortly thereafter, he slips one his own stories (aptly titled “Love”) into a pile that he asks Lenore to read. Lenore, who is becoming wise both to Rick and to the devices of metafiction in general, properly identifies metafiction (without using the word) when she tells Rick that his story “Love” felt more like “a story about a story” rather than a story (259, 335). Rick is somewhat offended by Lenore’s distaste for his story, which causes Lenore to ask him, “This means my tastes aren’t keened to the right pitch?” (335). And indeed, they are no longer keened to Rick’s metafiction, or else she
would have been kept from finding Lenore Sr. and the “problem” of the concept of context – its indeterminability – would have continued to trouble her (“Signature” 310).

The Derridian notion of the “structural nonsaturation” of context, an extension of Wittgensteinian language games (but for which the idea of language games is still necessary) is precisely what Lenore becomes comfortable with as she breaks from Rick and pursues the resolution of the novel (310). As Lenore closes in on her great-grandmother, who had been beneath the Bombardini Building where she works all along, Rick confesses a dream where Lenore “transcends her context” to Dr. Jay (Broom 343). Finding Lenore Sr., the representative “absence” in the writing, the iterability of her name across the text, satisfies the deconstruction of the concepts of communication and concept (because Lenore does not herself understand the reunion with great-grandmother in those terms). Thereby, Broom, resists J.L. Austin’s notion of total context that would allow for nonverbal context to influence meaning, and supports again Derrida’s problematized version of context (“Signature” 313, 315).

The end of the novel, then, can not be the end of the novel. There are more pages after the scene wherein Lenore Sr. emerges from the tunnel, pages wherein the story of Rick is somewhat elongated to include the final omission of which much has been made. But it is more fitting to see the recombination of Lenores as the novel’s end, considering what the plot of the novel is up to that point. Rick’s words—his lack of a final word—serve only to support what Lenore has come to realize about the structural nonsaturation of context. Rick’s story cannot end when Lenore finds Lenore. He must go on telling stories, being “a man of his...”.
For these reasons, if one were to write a historical novel of the period’s literary and literary-critical production, it would follow that the main characters were an amateur philosopher and fiction writer. Moreover, it would be most fitting to have one of the novel’s main plotlines be the ways in which one tries to control the other and the other tries to break free. Lenore Beadsman Jr. and Rick Vigorous, in this way, are what Lukács describes as “historico-social types” (36). As Wallace’s biographer, D.T. Max tells us, *Broom* may have originally been the honors thesis of a precocious undergraduate who double-majored in English and philosophy, but it was finished and revised while Wallace was in an M.F.A. program in the middle 1980s. Max, who looks deeply into the correspondence between Wallace and Gerry Howard, *Broom*’s editor at Viking Penguin, writes, “Howard had an affection for postmodernism and nostalgia from the literary culture it came out of. He loved word games and writing that exposed the artificiality of language” (*Ghost Story* 66). When Howard asked Wallace to edit parts of the book, however, Wallace resisted, explaining that “a big subplot of the book, which is essentially a dialogue between Hegel and Wittgenstein on one hand and Heidegger and a contemporary French thinker-duo named Paul DeMan and Jacques Derrida on the other,” was integral to his novel’s structure (69). The result is that the book was published nearly unchanged, and that the philosophical/fictive dialogue that Wallace envisioned has been kept for the most part intact. Though I would argue that Wallace conflates Hegel and Wittgenstein on one side and Heidegger, DeMan, and Derrida on the other, the important thing with respect to *Broom* and my argument is that the philosophical dialogue that Wallace imagine carrying the plot of the novel is, by its design, the reason for the novel’s seemingly unresolved ending. The unresolved philosophical discourse, far from
suggesting an ambivalence toward resolution, points toward the place of discourse in general within the other larger workings of the novel.

Wallace’s use of metafiction and poststructuralism as defining aspects of the world of Broom, conditions that need to be overcome in order to gain perspective on the world that dictates the terms of one’s existence as the poststructural gag of her missing self dictated the terms of Lenore’s, suggests that, upon overcoming that realization that Lenore ostensibly breaks free and avoids being reabsorbed in its self-reflexive structure, it would be important to observe what Lenore breaks free into, and in the this case it’s the lobby of the Bombardini Building. In the chaos of the final scenes of Broom, the plot threads come together to suggest that Lenore’s poststructural, metafictional problems were really just simple, material problems. It is a phone repair man who makes intermittent appearances throughout the novel to work on crossed phone lines that, when he enters the tunnel beneath the building, finds Lenore among a number of other escape retirees. This suggests that, underneath the language games, there is simple kind of communicative problem: crossed wires. Lenore, who had been working at the switchboard and dealing with the nuisance of crossed wires throughout the novel seems both surprised and perturbed that a repairman is able to able to find her grandmother by tracing the interference problem to the basement of the Bombardini Building as though it were a “big old cranky nervous system” while her search has taken her to the east coast and into The Great Ohio Desert (456). Thus Wallace is able to finally undercut the notion that his novel is about any single poststructural philosophy being better at diagnosing the
material issue at stake in the novel that is the cause of so much confusion and miscommunication.

_Broom_ may ultimately prove to be Wallace’s most minor work of fiction for, if nothing else, its rather convenient set of endings, where first the phone lines are fixed and Lenore emerges, and then Rick extends the poststructural gesture, but it is an important book for its connection to previous postmodern metafictions, such as *The Crying of Lot 49*, and also for what it predicts of Wallace’s later novels. _Broom_ is a detective story like _Lot 49_, and this has been discussed at length by several critics, but its key difference is that at least part of the poststructural puzzle is solved, however quaintly. _Broom_ also looks ahead to *Infinite Jest* in the way that it is willing to take on deeply abstract philosophical questions and allow characters to try and solve them, even if, in this case, Wallace is happy to allow some of the discourse remain over the heads of his characters.
CHAPTER THREE

Introduction

Chapter two argues that *The Broom of the System* represents its protagonists, Lenore Beadsman and Rick Vigorous, as postmodern subjects conditioned by poststructural theories of language and self-reflexive metafiction, and also that *Broom* emerges as a postmodern historical novel through its depiction of the dialectical relationship between Lenore and Rick and those conditions. However, the conditions that define the world of *Broom*—the semiotically-dense crossed phone lines at the Bombardini Building, the coldly-capitalistic operations of the Stonecipheco Baby Food Company the logos-laden mysteries of the Great Ohio Desert—are elaborated only to the point that they affect the rather insular world of Lenore and Rick, and this limits *Broom’s* historical scope. In this chapter, I contend that *Infinite Jest* more fully explores the social conditions that define postmodernity than *Broom* and that, as Wallace imagines a dystopian version of those conditions affecting the entire North American continent, he fictionalizes a Lukacian “mass experience” that turns the illimitable acceleration of American consumerism into a historical event on par with a revolution or a war.

The plot of *Infinite Jest* is relatively straightforward, though the narrative is not, which makes a linear synopsis of the main plotline useful at the outset of the chapter. In a near-future North America, copies of “Infinite Jest,” an entertainment so compelling that

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7 Hereafter, I refer to the entertainment “Infinite Jest” as “the Entertainment,” which, because its content is unknown to those who have not viewed it, is how most of the characters in the novel refer to it.
one who watches it wants to do nothing more than watch it until he or she expires, begins to arrive in the mailboxes of unsuspecting citizens, who have been conditioned by continuous accelerations in the production of consumer entertainment technologies to be optimally receptive to the pleasure that an entertainment such as “Infinite Jest” provides. James Incandenza (b. 1954) is the entertainment’s auteur, and he is recently deceased. He created the film for his son, Hal, as a way to communicate something to him, we learn, but the film is never delivered and the master copy has gone missing. Seventeen-year-old Hal, a student of Enfield Tennis Academy, an institution of which Incandenza is the founder, and Don Gately, an adult resident of neighboring Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, are the novel’s protagonists. As Hal and Gately individually cope with their own additions (Hal is addicted to marijuana and Gately is recovering from a Demerol and Talwin addiction), different political groups strive to recover the master copy of “Infinite Jest.” Their motive is that whoever is first to recover the master copy will be able to either withhold it from and save, or deploy it against and destroy a North American population that, as a result of its exacerbated need for mass consumption of entertainment, is vulnerable to precisely the commodity that is mysteriously arriving in unsuspecting mailboxes.

The Organization of North America Nations, or O.N.A.N., an exaggerated version of N.A.F.T.A., governs the continent. In Jest, O.N.A.N. is a supremely exploitative economic partnership wherein the U.S., headed by President Johnny Gentle, bullies Canada and Mexico into trade relationships and economic partnerships that benefit only

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8 The shared title of the novel and the entertainment sets up a metafictional dimension of the text that the narrative indulges in the way Broom does, for example, with its own status as novel. I will explore the metafictional dimension of Jest final section of this chapter, which focuses on the novel’s form.
the U.S. In a later development, the Prime Minister of Canada and the Presidente of Mexico become cabinet members in the Gentle administration. A key part of the partnership between the U.S. and Canada is Gentle’s gift of most of upstate New York and all of northern New England to Canada. This gesture is a prelude to the “experialist” policies that later characterize his administration. After bestowing the massive land gift on Canada, Gentle turns the area into a dump by shooting waste into a region that soon becomes known as The Great Concavity (or The Great Convexity, depending on its rapid floration cycles) in order to keep America clean. More exploitative yet is the process of annular fusion that the Gentle administration uses to turn the waste in the area that is technically Canada into energy that it can sell back to both of the O.N.A.N. nations. When the Gentle administration learns of the Entertainment, its main concern is to recover it and keep it out of the hands of citizens, who are of course better alive than dead.

With these conditions in mind, this chapter is divided into three parts. In part one I argue that Wallace’s protagonists in Jest have a degree of agency that is different and greater than that argued for by the most influential attempts to understand Jest. N. Katherine Hayle’s attempt, for instance, to tie postmodern subjectivity to the postmodern world argues that when Jest’s characters “valu[e] autonomy without attending to recursivity” they indulge in “destructive behaviors” that play out in “virtual environments” (678). Holland, in contrast, ties postmodern subjectivity to the postmodern world through the concepts of irony and narcissism. Like autonomy and recursivity, irony and narcissism work against one another with destructive force. In Holland’s analysis, Wallace creates characters “who register the threat of irony,” but, like Wallace himself
fall prey to “not just destructive irony but the pathological narcissism that makes us feel, when we try to reach out to others through earnest communication, like fish out of water” (220-221). In my account, Don Gately exhibits far more agency, considering the condition he is in, than either Hayles or Holland allow. Furthermore, the degree to which Gately exercises his ability to act ethically, because, as a recovering drug addict whose rehabilitation requires it of him, reveals the relationship between the motives for one’s actions and those actions themselves in its most basic form. For Gately, ethical action might not be easy, but it is his only route to remain out of prison; though the form of the action is not at first natural (or even palatable), he comes to understand first its necessity and ultimately its virtue.

In part two of the chapter, I focus on one of the most dominant conditions of postmodernity depicted in Jest: a rapidly accelerating consumer entertainment and communications industry that drives consumers to consume more entertainment more quickly, significantly affecting the lives of O.N.A.N. citizens and, dialectically, causing repercussions within those industries. The home entertainment products that are aimed at maximizing the pleasure of the consumer and thereby the profit of the company that produces them are centered around a single product, the Teleputer, a kind of television/telephone/computer highbred like the tablets and phones of this century. The Teleputer is the invention of InterLace TelEntertainment, a private company that later enters in a government partnership under the Gentle administration after monopolizing the electric grid. In this section of the chapter, I use Jameson’s contention that video is the art form most fitting to represent the postmodern age to argue that Wallace’s use of the Entertainment as the ultimate symbol of consumerism necessarily involves depicting
the involved set of governmental, private, and interpersonal investments in the creation and dissemination of the object, thus illustrating

Finally, and fittingly considering the form of *Jest*, part three of the chapter returns to the last section of the novel and the considers the novel’s metafictional form in terms of the relationship between agency and action that the novel explores. In this section of the chapter, tennis (for Hal) and Alcoholics Anonymous (for Gately), are described as alternatives to consumption that provide a moral basis by which to constitute the self in the postmodern world. This section argues that tennis and Alcoholics Anonymous are not alternative worlds where Hal and Gately go to escape postmodern conditions. Rather, tennis and AA are structures within the postmodern world that make possible the negotiation of that world, a world where capitalism has pushed consumption patterns, the environment, and the political status quo to the brink of disaster.

N. Katherine Hayles, Mary K. Holland, and the Agency of Don Gately

In Hayles’s essay, she argues the characters in *Jest* suffer from the “illusion of autonomy” (676). Autonomy, that “very American virtue,” blinds *Jest*’s characters to the dynamics of recursive systems, such the “dump” explained below, and the paradoxes of coproduction, while the virtual environments of millennial America (e.g. The Great Concavity) “intensify the already existing paradoxes” because they “bind[] us into interconnections” (678). Focusing on what she calls “the dump,” Hayles argues that The Great Concavity and the annular fusion process that takes place therein are results of the illusion of autonomy; essentially, we consume and create waste because we think more about ourselves than the world that has to reabsorb the byproducts of our consumption. Citing Kristeva, Hayles sees the dump as a manifestation of abjection. For Hayles, the
virtual environments of *Jest* are the results of misapprehensions of autonomy that overflow into the world of the novel creating dumps and “underground pathways” that reconnect the abject to the culture (691). In this reading, the lethal Entertainment “Infinite Jest,” “reinscribes with toxic force the illusion of autonomy and the fact of recursivity,” because while watching it one disappears into solipsism and acts as though there is nothing in the world beyond oneself and one’s entertainment. Addicts in particular are susceptible to this kind of misapprehension because the consumption of drugs conditions them for this kind of behavior.

Hayles’s reading of Gately’s attempt to use AA “to restructure the autonomous liberal subject” is that it does not cure the “dysfunctionalities of autonomous selfhood,” despite his attempts to remain clean at the end of the novel (692). In her reading, Gately’s failure to intervene in Fackleman’s torture provides the novel with an illustration of the “constructive potential of hitting bottom,” which can “spring the addict to change” (695). By observing the potential for recursivity, we “punctur[e] the illusion of autonomous selfhood” (695). In total, Hayles contends that the novel “suggests a more constructive approach when it shows that the idea of the autonomous liberal subject can be a recipe for disaster in a world densely interconnected with interlocking complex systems,” and that “[w]e escape from Entertainment not by going to the woods but by recognizing our responsibilities to one another” (696).

Holland’s essay – “‘The Art’s Heart’s Purpose’: Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest,*” -- replaces Hayles’ illusion of autonomy and fact of recursivity with secondary narcissism and postmodern irony, arguing in a similar way that Gately’s actions are what lead to his potential relapse. In it, Holland asks, “How can
fiction devoted to the same techniques of irony and mediation convey more than its medium?” (219). With her question, Holland references the techniques (“the same”) that Wallace claims an earlier generation of postmodern novelists used in order to critique the culture of the 1950s and 1960s. In Jest she expects Wallace to “forsgo the solipsistic disaffection that has become identical with postmodern irony and reach out the reader and create characters that also reach out to each other in earnest connection” (219). For Holland (via Freud’s concept of secondary narcissism), narcissism is linked to need; she writes “the solipsistic narcissism of contemporary American culture” is essentially the need for “the superior reassurance of ceasing to need” (221). She cites Wallace’s essay, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll never Do Again,” where Wallace reports on his experience aboard a cruise ship and “the nonstop flow of staffers’ servitude and guests’ indulgences,” as an example of this narcissism at work; on a cruise ship, all one’s needs are met, as they are by the mother in Freud’s primary narcissism (221). In secondary narcissism, where one is forced to meet one’s own needs, she locates “a brand of American” narcissism, a “postmodern consumer-culture reworking of modernist, existential despair” where the need to meet our needs leads to solipsism (221, 222). Like Hayles, then, Holland sees what Wallace calls the drug addict’s “need-schedule” as a perfect illustration of the narcissistic quest for constant and unending fulfillment (Jest 906). Furthermore, just as AA only reproduced the illusion of autonomy in Hayles’s analysis, so does it serve only to gather “a collection of people defined by their solipsism” for Holland (233). This leads to her reading of the ending of the novel, in which she sees the childhood memories that rise to the surface as Gately attempts to convalesce as an “unprocessed pull toward solipsism that thwarts any attempt to grow
free of the clutches of a culture of narcissism” (234). She reads Gately’s dreams and memories as “ironic wakings” that “void any notion of heroic transformation” (236). In the end, the novel fails to deliver on its agenda of replacing postmodern irony with a more sincere mode of communication because, Holland argues, Gately’s inability to transcend the infantilizing set of circumstances at the novel’s end (for him to even desire Demerol) is evidence of “the inescapability of the drive to infantile self-satisfaction that permeates the novel, regardless of its near-heroic attempts to break free from its culture of disaffection and irony” (239).

Both Hayles’s and Holland’s arguments strive to articulate systems (the illusion of autonomy/the fact of recursivity, narcissism/postmodern irony) in order to explain the way that the postmodern subjects of Jest relate to the postmodern world that the novel depicts. Though they have vastly different interpretations of the novel’s ending – Hayles’s largely hopeful (perhaps idealistic) and Holland’s largely damning (perhaps pessimistic)—their readings are more fundamentally similar than they are different. Both critics approach the creation of systems that can describe the novel’s action through the combination of a psychological concept (the illusion of autonomy, narcissism) and a social concept (the fact of recursivity, postmodern irony). And in each the psychological concept occludes the subject’s ability to overcome the social concept; indeed, in each analysis the postmodern subject is not even aware of the social concept’s dominant position in their relationship. In Hayles, the illusion of autonomy is just that, an illusion, and it is quickly reabsorbed into the fact of recursivity; Don Gately’s effort at the end of the novel provides only a modicum of hope. In Holland, Gately’s narcissism is real, and the result is that his effort than can only reproduce narcissism that fuels postmodern irony
(and the form of the novel). Thus, both Hayles and Holland defer to the social concepts in their analysis, proving that Gately’s will does not ultimately win out again the forces of recursivity and irony. But what produces recursivity and irony in Jest? More specifically, what do the aesthetics of recursivity and irony in Jest represent in terms of the material conditions of postmodernity? Do recursivity and irony have a materiality?

The answer is, of course, yes, and Wallace provides the novel with an emblematic product, a commodity through which can refract our thinking about materiality: the lethal entertainment, “Infinite Jest.” Hayles and Holland are quick to reconcile “Infinite Jest” as the prime example of the psychological diagnoses at the heart of their analyses, but neither analysis fully grapples with materiality of “Infinite Jest” and what it represents in terms of the novel’s social conditions and the patterns of consumption that have preconditioned the citizens of O.N.A.N. to willingly receive it. This preconditioning is what makes Gately’s resistance of a narcotic at the end of the novel so remarkable. He, like the other characters in Jest, but perhaps even more so due to his history of substance abuse, has been conditioned to seek infantilizing pleasure, in his case through the drugs Demerol and Talwin (among others). Gately’s conscious resistance of the narcotics at the end of the novel is not only a sign of strength of will and his ability to choose sobriety as a value over all else; it also symbolizes his resistance to the entertainment-saturated culture of O.N.A.N.

To illustrate this point, I turn to the last chapter of Jest, where the key difference between Hayles’s and Holland’s readings of the novel is most clearly distinguished by what each claims (or does not claim) about the postmodern subject’s relationship to postmodern conditions. The last chapter of Jest is an extended exercise in stasis. Like
Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*, Don Gately spends the entirety during of the final chapter (173 pages) supine and within his own head. Most of what we read, then, is Gately’s internal monologue, what his visitors say to him, and what he remembers. Unlike Molly, though, Gately is not at home but rather in a room of St. Elizabeth’s Hospital’s Trauma Wing. This is due to the fact that (approximately 200 pages earlier) Gately has been shot in the shoulder by a Canadian chasing Randy Lenz, a fellow resident of Gately’s at Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, back to the Ennet House property (the Canadian suspects Lenz of killing his dog). Gately had stepped between the two men in an effort to diffuse tensions, but instead received a bullet meant for Lenz and was severely wounded. At the hospital, the pain from the wound is so unbearable that Gately drifts in and out of consciousness through the entire chapter: “The whole right side of himself hurt so bad,” Wallace writes, “each breath was like a hard decision” (818).

While Gately suffers in a pain-induced semi-conscious state, he is haunted by the traumas of his past (specifically those that relate to his decline into drug abuse and crime), as well as the ghost of James Incandenza. Gately does not recognize Incandenza at all and refers to this black figure that flits around his room as a “the wraith;” nor should he recognize him, considering they’ve never met. Adding to Gately’s painful and disorienting predicament is that fact that he is intubated and thus unable to speak while various visitors (mainly other Ennet house residents and his AA sponsor) come to his room; at one point, Gately thinks of himself “as [a] huge empty confessional booth” (831). He is so badly off, in fact, that not only must he be fed through a tube but his bowels are emptied through another. He is helpless, at one point hallucinating that “he
was a gargantuan toddler in an XXL Fisher-Price crib in a sandy field under a storm-cloud sky that bulged and receded like a big gray lung” (915).

Despite the precariousness of his position, Gately is fully conscious of one thing during the final chapter: he’s an addict. Therefore, and because he is an addict committed to remaining sober, Gately repeatedly refuses the pharmaceutical relief the hospital prescribes for his worsening condition. Because he can’t speak, he gestures at his chart; for some reason the doctors and nurses who cycle through his room “haven’t bothered to read the HISTORY OF NARCOTICS DEPENDENCY NO SCHEDULE C-IV+MEDIC. that he’d made Pat Montesian swear she’d make them put in italics on his file or chart or whatever, first thing” (814). Despite Gately’s best efforts, and despite the chapter’s focus on this primary struggle of Gately’s will in the face of the prospect of narcotizing relief, Wallace implies a grim fate for Gately, though he doesn’t explicitly include it in the novel; there is no scene in which a nurse or a doctor administers Demerol to Gately. Rather, pages 973-74 shift from Gately’s hospital bed, where “part of him hoped they were putting Demerol in his I.V. without him knowing,” to Gately’s memory (“[h]is open eyes could see the luxury apt. window”) of the gruesome torture of his former partner-in-crime, Gene Fackleman, a scene where Gately is nearly as helpless as he is in his hospital bed and where he receives intravenous drugs against his will (973-74).

During the scene in Gately’s memory, Bobby C, the hit man who is sent to kill Fackleman, finds Gately and Fackleman in the middle of a Demerol binge that Fackleman has funded with money stolen from Bobby C’s employer. That fraud is the reason Bobby C has been sent. With the help of a couple of henchmen, Bobby C lifts Gately up and removes him from Fackleman’s pile of Demerol, which lies on the floor
near a puddle of Fackleman’s own urine. Bobby C tells Gately “he didn’t need to do anything except kick back and enjoy the party and let Fackleman face his own music” (977). He tells Gately not to entertain any “notions of defending the weak” before pulling a needle out in front of the nearly-overdosed Gately (977). Gately tells him that he’s “pretty much straight,” but Bobby C takes the needle and “slide[s] it in expertly,” like a “pharmacist,” and Gately slumps to floor at the novel’s end, engaged in a memory of overdosing (979-81).

Even after Gately is able to bring his condition to the staff’s attention, the doctor badgers him: “‘Surrender your fear of dependence and let us do our profession, young sir,’ the Pakistani sums up, standing right up next to the bed,” and Gately has to take matters literally into his own hands: “Gately’s good left hand skins a knuckle shooting out between the bars of the bedside crib-railing and plunging under the M.D.’s lab-coat and fastening on the guy’s balls and bearing down. The Pakistani pharmacologist screams like a woman. It isn’t rage or the will to harm so much as just no other ideas for keeping the bastard from offering something Gately knows that he’s powerless at this moment to refuse” (888-889).

In the memory, Gately is certainly partially to blame both for Fackleman’s demise and his own inaction; he ingests drugs to point of complete incapacity, which makes him vulnerable to Bobby C and unable to help his friend. His arrival in the hospital, however, is the result of an opposite situation, the result of taking action and stepping between Lenz and the Canadian, of being sober enough to recognize the danger and trying to avoid it. Not only that, but at the end of the novel Gately has been clean for months, engaged in a treatment program, AA, and a conscious struggle to avoid giving in to the
temptation to use, whereas Fackleman’s torture comes at a time when Gately is in the throes of addiction. By paralleling these two points in Gately’s life and deciding to end the novel within the gruesome scene of Fackleman’s torture, Wallace suggests the injustice done to Gately at the hands of hospital as well as the possibility that it could lead to his relapse to addiction and crime.

Even with that in mind, however, there are two different ways to read the ending. One of the first people to visit Gately in his hospital room is Pat Montesian, the Ennet House director who entrusts Gately with some of the house administration. When she visits, she tells him that he is “showing tremendous humility and willingness” by resisting narcotic painkillers, but that also that he’s “not in charge of anything except putting himself in his Higher Power’s hands and following the dictates of his heart” (818). She tells him that “codeine or maybe Percocet or maybe even Demerol wouldn’t be a relapse unless his heart of hearts that knew his motives thought it would be” (818). And it’s on that point, the point of Gately’s will (and thereby Wallace’s) that Hayles and Holland are divided. And yet their approaches do not account for the dialectical process initiated by Gately’s resistance to the drug in the first place. They focus on the end result, that he may have been administered the drug against his will, but that fact alone is not as important as the prolonged and somewhat tortured way that Wallace draws out Gately’s attempt to avoid the drug to the fullest of his capacity. Gately’s agency then, however limited, symbolizes the larger struggle of the novel’s characters as they each face, in one way or another, a version of the persistent pushing of narcotizing pleasure that Gately experiences in the hospital.
The Social Conditions of the Organization of North American Nations

In the introduction to this chapter, I suggested that in Jest, far more than in Broom, Wallace elaborates and makes clear the social conditions that bear on the lives of his characters, challenging their ethical exercise of agency. This section of the chapter examines just one dimension of those conditions, the rapidly accelerating consumer entertainment and communications industry that I argue exacerbates an increasingly entertainment-dependent population to the point that they are maximally vulnerable to the lethal value of the Entertainment. The conditions under which Incandenza produces “Infinite Jest” can be characterized by their increasing compression of space and time, which of course suggests the radical acceleration of capitalist production described Harvey in chapter one. It’s important to stress that the world of Jest is dystopic before the arrival of “Infinite Jest.” In fact, the novel suggests generations of entertainment consumers have been complicit in the process of consumer technology and entertainment taking over major aspects of their lives. Beginning with the advent of syndicated television reruns and the demise of network television, two actual historical developments of the late twentieth century, Wallace moves on to imagine the now prescient seeming “videophony,” and the pressures that it puts on consumers and the entertainment industry itself. Each step in the process that this section articulates accelerates consumption patterns toward the lethal entertainment, forming the basis on which to make the argument that “Infinite Jest,” unprecedentedly lethal as it may be, is not an unpredictable development in the consumer entertainment industry but rather a kind of logical outcome of its own internal development.
The sections of the novel that I connect to form this large-scale picture of the technological culture that Wallace describes are connected but not emphasized in the novel’s main narratives; however, they are worth explicating in length because they show that Wallace, unlike Jameson, for example, is not interested in using a single technology such as video to stand in for the art form most fitting to represent the postmodern age. Instead, Wallace is interested in tracing the historical antecedents of a particular form of entertainment consumption that begins with broadcast television and showing how all of the historical developments that contribute to such consumption have prepared the population for the arrival of something as devastating as “Infinite Jest.” The hyperbole or distortion of tracing the development of these consumption patterns over decades leading up to the production of single, specific entertainment, originally filmed and now copied onto an unknown number of video cassettes and, potentially, ready to be disseminated wirelessly though the InterLace TelEntertainment grid is Wallace’s way of connecting all that has lead up to this, still-developing moment in the history of postmodernity. “Infinite Jest” thus represents a possibility that such a thing is possible in the near future, even if it is not imaginable right now.

We begin, then, with the story of Hugh Steeply’s father, narrated by Hugh. It is 1 May Y.D.A.U, and the novel has returned to the scene of Steeply and the Quebecois Wheelchair Assassin Remy Marathe stranded on a plateau in Tucson, AZ. They are on official business for their respective government’s secret service agencies, each of which hopes to gain information about the origin and dissemination of “Infinite Jest.” Unofficially, they become involved in a circuitous conversation about entertainment, choice, desire, and love that spans multiple sections of the novel. Their dialogue provides
a philosophical and political context for the events of the novel from an American viewpoint (Steeply) and a Quebecois viewpoint (Marathe).

Steeply begins musing about his father’s decline. The story serves as an extended example of Steeply’s search for “a specific analogy with the Entertainment” that satisfies Marathe, who sees the American penchant for the consumption of entertainment to be a weakness of character (474). Steeply confides that he and his family, “watched [his father] get consumed with a sort of entertainment” (639). “It wasn’t pretty,” Steeply says, and “I was never sure how it started or what it was about” (639). To make his point about the analogy, Steeply emphasizes that his father’s consumption of entertainment was “nothing like this Entertainment,” that is was a “plain old television program,” but of course the context that Wallace establishes for this conversation suggests the opposite: that plain old television consumption, like that Wallace discusses in “E Unibus Pluram” in fact precipitates dangerous involvement with entertainment (639). From there, Steeply, describes his father’s attachment to the television program M*A*S*H and its exacerbation due to the revenue-increasing evolutions in syndication.

Steeply tells Marathe that his father’s decline begins with a very normal American activity, “getting attached to a show” (639). According to Steeply, there was “nothing […] exceptional” about the attachment, admitting, “[g]od knows I was attached to my share of shows” (639). And so Steeply describes what we might call tuning in to a program as a “habit,” on “Thursday nights at 2100h” (639). The regular nature of this habit should at first suggest an alignment with time that resembles prior modes of social organization, such as Fordist production, which regularized television viewing for a mass audience. In fact, Harvey discusses this briefly in the third chapter of *The Conditions of
Postmodernity, explaining it as a way that network broadcasting capitalized on Fordist workweek in the later decades of that organization of the workforce, though here I suggest that Mr. Steeply’s habit portends of a future organization of the work/leisure divide more postmodern in nature due to the way that it is structured around the need-cycle of the consumer. Steeply’s father, appropriately, is employed by a heating oil company, based out of Troy, New York, a company that represents an older mode of production and labor relations that brings his burgeoning postmodern consumption pattern into relief.

And so Wallace establishes the era of broadcast television, long before syndication, with this initial attachment that required that Steeply’s father “start to schedule[] his Thursday around the show, to an extent” (639). For the Steeply family, “It was hard to pinpoint anything wrong or consumptive. He was, yes, always home from work by 2050 on Thursdays. And he always had his supper watching the program” (639).9 Wallace then emphasizes the role that syndication plays in the acceleration of Steeply’s father’s decline by abruptly beginning the next sentence with a subordinating conjunction and dramatically emphasizing “syndication” with a colon:

But then: syndication. ‘M*A*S*H.’ The show was incredibly popular, and after a few years of Thursday nights it started also to run daily, during the day, or late at night, sometimes, in what I remember all too well was called syndication, where local stations bought old episodes and chopped them up and loaded them with ads, and ran them. And this, note, was

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9 Readers of Jest will recall that the Entertainment’s first victim was a found in fact in front of his teleputer with dinner out before him on a tray.
while all-new episodes of the show were still appearing on Thursdays at 2100. I think this was the start. (*Jest* 639-640)

As Steeply describes it, syndication is not simply an airing of reruns; it is a process by which television capitalizes on itself, which reminds us of Hayles’ notion of the “dump.” Not only that, of course, but when stations buy the rights to syndicate a program, they buy those rights permanently, which means that programs can be cut up and filled with ads over and over again, repeatedly.¹⁰ After syndication, when Mr. Steeply can watch the program at virtually all times of the day, his decline continues apace. Steeply explains, “the reruns [became] extremely important to him, too. As in like not to be missed” (640).

Marathe, representing a non-American point of view, does not understand Steeply’s father’s interest in watching reruns (“Even though he had viewed and enjoyed them before, these reruns”) but he picks up on what Steeply implies about syndication (“Virtually a bombardment of this U.S.A. broadcast comedy”) (640). Steeply then describes a process of “gradual immersion. The withdrawal from life. I remember guys from his bowling league calling, that he’d quit […] every night […] as if pulled toward the screen” (640). The signs of Mr. Steeply’s withdrawal from life become increasingly intense. In his consumption of the program M*A*S*H, what Steeply calls the “dark shift in his attachment to the program,” he begins to confuse his real life with the story of the program (640). For example “the notebook […] appeared,” in which. Mr. Steeply begins “[t]he scrupulous recording of tiny details, in careful order, for purposes you could just

¹⁰ The role that syndication has played in first the U.S. and later the global market, has been well-documented by Bielby and Harrington, who in their book, *Global TV: Exporting Television and Culture in the World Market*, trace the process of deregulation of syndication law through the repeal of the Federal Communications Commission’s Fin-Syn Rules and Prime Time Access Rule, which were slowly fought by stations and ultimately phased out in the last quarter of the twentieth century.
tell were both urgent and furtive” (641). He begins a “habit of quoting little lines and scenes” (641), and later “he [is] no longer able to converse or communicate on any topic without bringing it back to the program […] without some system of references to the program” (642). The world of the program begins to consume the actual world, and the compression of space and time discussed above takes place on the individual level of Mr. Steeply, whose is essentially producing and reproducing the program for himself based on his need-cycle and consumption pattern rather than on the network schedule. It is as though he takes production into his own hands. Mr. Steeply, it is here worth noting, due to the emphasis that his story receives, serves as a kind of synecdoche for the population as a whole. He is precisely the kind of average individual described by Lukács through whom history becomes a tangible, mass experience.

But to exaggerate the point, Wallace elaborates Steeply’s father’s decline at the hands of television further yet. Because as time goes on the syndicated programming is not enough, Mr. Steeply begins “a practice of magnetically recording each week’s 29 broadcasts and reruns […] stor[ing] the tapes, organizing them in baroque systems of cross-reference that had nothing discernible to do with dates of recording […] beg[ining] to sleep at night in the easy chair in his den, the Swamp. Or pretend to. Sleep” (642). Recording for repeated and constant re-viewing directly parallel the continuous cycle of that “Infinite Jest” creates as well as other chemical addiction cycles depicted elsewhere in the novel and discussed above. Finally, “one day in the garbage can out behind the house [Steeply’s mother] found a number of letters addressed to a “M*A*S*H character named–this I fucking–A sure remember–Major Burns” (642). Steeply notes that he remembers the Major Burns character, “portrayed by I remember the actor Maury
Linville, a plain old employee of 20th Century Fox,” but also that “the letters were addressed to Major Burns. Not to Maury Linville. And not c/o Fox Studios or wherever, but addressed to an involved military address, with a Seoul routing code” (643). Effectively, Steeply’s father had entered the world of M*A*S*H and television and left his life behind.

As Steeply nears the end of narrating the story of his father to Marathe, he realizes, “I’m trying to reconstruct things that weren’t even clear at the time” (645). One of the important things that Steeply realizes through his narration, though, involves the fact, “that the historical Korean Police Action of the U.N. lasted only roughly two-odd years, but that “M*A*S*H” itself was by then into something like seventh year of new episodes” (646). The program had effectively extended the action of the Korean War beyond its actual timeframe, and changed his father’s (and presumably others’) conception of the duration of the actual historical conflict. Steeply notes, disconcertedly, that “[s]ome characters on the program were getting gray hair, receding hair, face-lifts” (646). But Mr. Steeply had only integrated these changes into the system that he’d devised in order to sustain continual consumption of the program:

The old man was convinced this signified intentional themes […] [a]s the years of the new seasons went on and some actors retired and characters were replaced by other characters, the old man generated baroquoco theories about what it was that had quote-underline ‘really’ happened to the absent characters. Where they’d gone, where they were, what... written

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11 In an odd bit of intertextual inconsistency, the actor to which Steeply refers is actually named Larry Linville. It is unclear if the error is Steeply’s or Wallace’s.
in a kind of medical-slash-military-looking code, though indecipherable.

(Jest 646).

So Mr. Steeply had not only been drawn in to the program, but he’d also begun using the logic of the program to explain empirical reality outside of it.

Needless to say, Marathe grows tired of the tangent, and so he attempts to make the connection for Steeply. Referring to Steeply’s father, Remy surmises, “His unbalance of temptation cost him life. An otherwise harmless U.S.A. broadcast television program took his life, because of the consuming obsession. This is your anecdote” (646). Ironically, though Steeply resists this clear connection, “No. It was a transmural infarction. Blew out a whole ventricle. His family had a history: the heart. The pathologist said it was amazing he’d lasted this long” (646). That Steeply can narrate this entire anecdote to Marathe and yet not grasp the connection that Marathe makes suggests the resilience of the kind of thinking of which Steeply’s father is an example, the inability to see how one is entertaining oneself to death. Steeply’s own father, for example, slowly and deliberately entertained himself to death over the period of a number of years, essentially the Fordist form of death that “Infinite Jest” promises. At the same time, Steeply insistence on the physical form of his father’s death, is crucial: the two types of death are equally material, and both are based on sitting before a screen, but one happens far more rapidly than the other.

Importantly, Marathe retorts, “The obsessed frequently endure” (646). Steeply seems to be trying to diagnose something beyond his father, something that his father’s decline presages. He compares his father, “[t]he old man,” to those that he’s seen consumed by “Infinite Jest,” “Hoyne, the Arab internist” by suggesting that each of them
was found to be, “Stuck, Fixed. Held. Trapped. As in trapped in some sort of middle. Between two things. Pulled apart in different directions” (647). Nevertheless, he seems unable to make the same connection that Marathe makes to consumption. Steeply has something less intentional in mind, something that takes the responsibility away from the consumer: “Not even cravings so much. Emptier than that. As if he were stuck wondering. As if there were something he’d forgotten […] Misplaced. Lost” (647).

Steeply’s inability to yield to the idea that part of his father was somewhat responsible for his own decline is telling in terms of the narrative of the novel going on around this conversation. Because the situation is such that history, embodied by Steeply’s father, is repeating itself through “Infinite Jest,” it seems to satisfy Jameson’s claim that the postmodern period has forgotten how to think historically when Steeply himself cannot connect his own family history to the mystery that he is trying to solve in the present.

At the same time, Jest suggests that Steeply’s father may not have become knowingly obsessed with the television program M*A*S*H; at some point, he may have stopped choosing to sit down watch, record, and come up with “baroquoco theories” about the program. At some point, through his consumption, he becomes consumed in “a situation” that Jameson refers to as “total flow” (Postmodernism 70-71). In this situation, Jameson explains, “the contents of the screen screaming before us all day long without interruption (or where the interruptions—called commercials—are less intermissions than they are fleeting opportunities to visit the bathroom or throw a sandwich together),” which of course recalls Mr. Steeply’s immersion in the swamp, where he begins to take his meals and perform bodily functions (70-71). The result, for Mr. Steeply, as Jameson has it, is that “what used to be called ‘critical distance’ seems to have become obsolete”
Hence, Mr. Steeply’s inability to understand the aging of the characters or the extension of the war as anything beyond a further implication of the program’s meaning.

This example of the interrelation of the syndication and addiction to entertainment is the earliest (historical) model in Jest of the materialist dialectic at work in postmodernity, and so it is important to reiterate the terms of Steeply’s father’s decline so that they can be understood in the next context of the demise of broadcast television. First, what appears to be a simple or normal habit, such as tuning in to a regular broadcast of a television program, may actually be the first indication of the way a cultural product commands one’s space and time (e.g., one must be in front a screen at a specific place and time in order to view what the screen displays). Broadcast television not only requires one to be in front of a screen for the duration of a single broadcast, but, due to the serial, continual character of individual programs, it also requires a repetition of that viewing activity at regular intervals. Second, broadcast intervals are determined by a complex series of political and economic decisions, which, historically, have weighed regulatory concerns on the part of government bodies and fiscal concerns on the part of television stations, but which eventually resulted in a massive liberalization of syndication policies which dramatically increased the frequency of the viewing intervals to which television consumers have become accustomed. The result is that viewers view more frequently, at almost continuous times of the day, and are willing to watch repeated broadcasts or reruns of programs that they have already seen. Finally, as television consumption increases, viewers use other technologies such as the recording of programs for playback to replicate the syndication and program schedule dictated by the stations, even increasing the frequency of dissemination to the point of “total flow.” The
consumption habits produced by syndication, which are developed years before “Infinite Jest” and tend toward a desire for “total flow,” are thus predictive of our the larger symptom of addiction in the culture.

The next development Wallace describes in the progression toward lethal entertainment is the demise of America’s “Big Four” network television stations and the market of television advertising, which is the result of a Boston-based advertising firm, Viney & Veals, whose executive P. Tom Veals, after successfully destroying network television, goes on to direct the campaign of president Johnny Gentle. This section adds the dimension of industry intent to the passivity that is revealed in the conversation about Steeply’s father. The section containing this narrative is one of many that take places on November 11, Interdependence Day, and is told through the memory of Hal Incandenza, who had written a paper on the topic for an Entertainment Studies course at Enfield Tennis Academy. Adding another layer to the narration of the section, we find Hal, “swin[ish] with sugar, […] sinking, emotionally, into a kind of distracted funk” watching a historical dramatization of the events that led up to and followed from the formation of O.N.A.N. (410). With other members of Ennet Tennis Academy, he is watching his damaged brother Mario’s “puppet-film,” which stages a series of events that lead up to the formation of O.N.A.N. Hal’s mind wanders from the play and comes to focus on “one of the only two academic things he’s ever written about anything even remotely filmic [about the] tangled fates of broadcast television and the American ad industry” (411).

In one sense, Wallace tells us that what we’re reading is Hal’s recollection of the analysis he’d written in the Entertainment Studies paper. In another sense, Wallace’s prose is so dense and detailed (and far from Hal’s consciousness, point-of-view-wise),
that the framing device feels more like an excuse to write an exhaustive exposition of the historical processes involved in the “tangled fates” of the entities mentioned above. Through its form, Jest signals to the reader that these historical events are interconnected, which proves to be true when we later learn of the connection between the Gentle administration and InterLace. Wallace thus describes a series of intricate causal events that unfold over many years in a dialectical process. In order to keep the dynamics of the events clear, it will be important here to introduce the parties in involved. There are five key parties: the “Big Four” television networks (“the Big Three plus the fast-starting and low-endurance Fox”), America’s 100-plus regional and national cable networks, who form a trade union (the “American Council for Disseminators of Cable” or “A.C.D.C.”), Viney and Veals Advertising (“V&V”), Noreen Lace-Forché, who founds InterLace TelEntertainment, a home entertainment company that produces the Teleputer for home use, and, of course television consumers.

The catalyst to the events that unfold in the section is that “the Network television industry” is “in serious trouble” (411). There are a number of contributing factors (“the exponential proliferation of cable channels, the rise of the total-viewer-control […] , and VCR-recording advances that […] edit most commercials out of any program taped […] ”) that lead to “problems drawing the kind of audiences they needed to justify the ad-rates their huge overhead’s slavering maw demanded” (411). Like any capitalist enterprise, network television needs to grow to sustain profits, and as technology advances more and more quickly in the late twentieth century, that growth is challenged by an increasing number of conflicts and rigidities. Compounding the problem of the networks’ need for ever-increasing profits is an effort by A.C.D.C., who have hired V&V to mount “an
aggressive hearts-and-minds campaign that deride[s] the ‘passivity’ of hundreds of millions of viewers” (412). The campaign, which uses the slogan “Don’t Sit Still For Anything Less” is aimed, simply, at attracting more cable consumers, by suggesting that network viewers are “forced to choose nightly between only four statistically pussified Network broadcasters” (412). At the same time, the campaign “extoll[s] the ‘empoweringly American choice’ of 500-plus esoteric cable options.” Hal ties the A.C.D.C. ad campaign to an ideology that the Big Four had instilled in viewers:

[T]he American Council of Dissemninators of Cable [were] attacking the Four right at the ideological root, the psychic matrix where viewers had been conditioned (conditioned, rather deliciously by the Big Four Networks and their advertisers themselves, Hal notes) to associate the Freedom to Choose and the Right to Be Entertained with all that was U.S. and true. (Jest 412)

Hal’s use of the idea of conditioning reminds us, looking back again to Harvey, of how accelerating production patterns leads to accelerating consumption patterns, even when advertising campaigns draw attention, facetiously, to the idea of choice. Hal’s paper argues that the material social conditions, represented by the habitual consumption of television and advertising, create an ideology that allows viewers to connect choice and entertainment, the agency and right to be passively entertained, with truth.

At the same time, the advertising industry’s need to maximize its own profits drives another, parallel development aimed at consumers. Wallace refers to this as “greedily buttering its bread on every conceivable side” (412). Essentially, V&V start to capitalize on the decline of the Big Four by selling them ads for “products and services
that wouldn’t previously have been able to afford national image proliferation,” not until consumers started to be pulled from network to cable. This parallel development aimed at maximizing the television advertising market, results in V&V-organized collaborative advertising efforts between entities such as “[the] Nunhagen Aspirin Co. [and] National Cranio-Facial Pain Foundation” (412). For V&V, the resulting ads, which “cost nothing to produce,” were essentially “paintings by artists with crippling cranio-facial pain about crippling cranio-facial pain. [...] simply silent 30-second shots of some of the exhibits, with NUNHAGEN ASPIRIN in soothing pale pastels at lower left” (412). This dynamic created massive profits on one side (the advertisers), while it created a need for profits on the other side (the networks). For a time, “sales went nationally roofward even as ratings for the Nunhagen ads themselves went from low to abysmal” (412). This is because viewers, who “found the paintings to be so excruciating that they were buying the product but recoiling from the ads,” were also “compromis[ing] ratings figures for the ads that followed them and for the programs that enclosed the ads” (412). This parallel development was in turn exacerbated by the success of V&V’s other campaign, “‘Don’t Sit Still for Anything Less,’” and consumers were “awakened from their spectatorial slumbers” to “the power and agency their thumbs actually afforded them” (412-13). Essentially, the same ads that were keeping the networks financially afloat were also driving viewers away from their programming. Wallace writes that, “[f]rom a historical perspective it’s easy to accuse the Network corporations of being greedy and short-sighted,” but also that it’s “hard to be restrained and far-sighted when you’re fighting [...] for your very fiscal life” (413). The networks had become nothing but a medium for the
circulation of capital. Their content became worthless while their advertisements soared in value.

On the part of the Big Four and V&V both, the above situation seems not only “short-sighted,” but also clearly paradoxical. Aren’t both of the parties involved only rather precipitously putting both themselves and one another out of business rather quickly? Harvey has a clear answer to this paradox in a section entitled, “Time and Space as sources of social power.” It has been seen above that the means of production (network television stations) have, in Wallace’s imagining, become nothing except a medium through which capital circulates. Both the Big Four and V&V, in seeking profit, have had to change the time and space in which they deliver their commodities to the market in order to “overcom[e] spatial barriers” (Harvey 229). The Big Four have had to marginalize their actual programming in favor of advertisements, and V&V has had to essentially advertise against itself, seeking out all possible ad-space, rather than doing so in a strategic, moderate, or sustainable way. V&V is both “launch[ing]” capital into circulation and “recuperat[ing]” the profit in mutually destructive markets (229). They realize, as Harvey would say, that both “efficient spatial organization” and “socially necessary turnover time” are “subject to change” (229). The problem is that they are pushing the medium of television advertising to its limit.

This reorganization of time and space in order to maximize capital has real (and reciprocal) consequences. The “spinal camel-straw” for the Big Four turns out to be the camel-straw for television advertising as well. The last and most successful ad that Wallace describes is for “NoCoat” brand tongue-scrapers. Though the ads “create[] a national tongue-scraper industry” (414), by “creat[ing] an anxiety relievable by purchase”
they also cause a recoiling of viewers that is “closer to the soul than mere
tastelessness can get” (414): “These ads shook viewers to their existential core” (414),
and they also caused the demise of two industries and the rise of another. The tongue-
scraper industry boomed, while the Big Four “fell off the shelf, fiscally speaking,” and
V&V “went down, too, in the Big Four maelstrom” (414-15).

But the story of the demise of network television and network television
advertising does not end there. It goes on to evolve into the medium that ultimately
disseminates the lethal entertainment and the political career of Johnny Gentle. From the
ashes, the Big Four, though “muted and unseen,” do have some “creditor-proof assets” on
which to survive (415). In a properly dialectical fashion, they cut their employees “down
to a skeleton of a skeleton staff” and they “rise[] from the dust-heap […] ironically
deploying V&V’s old pro-choice/anti-passivity appeal to obliterate the A.C.D.C. that had
just months before obliterated the Big Four” (415).

At this point, Noreen Lace-Forché, “the USC-educated video-rental mogulette”
enters the storyline (415). With a plan to consolidate capital, Lace-Forché “[c]onvinc[es]
the rapacious skeletal remains of the Big Four to consolidate combined production,
distribution, and capital resources behind a front company […] an obscure-sounding
concern called InterLace TelEntertainment” (415). Lace-Forché, with the help of newly
under-employed P. Tom Veals, sells the “Big Four” on a new kind of entertainment
experience that further morphs time and space in the new and evolving market for video
entertainment. Wallace reproduces the P. Tom Veals’ sales pitch, which, at this late stage
in the evolution of video consumer entertainment, reminds us of the Steeply-Marathe
dialogue about “Infinite Jest”:
What if–according to InterLace–what if a viewer could more or less 100% choose what’s on at any given time? Choose and rent, over PC and modem and fiber-optic line, from tens of thousands of second-run films, documentaries, and occasional sport, old-beloved non-‘Happy Days’ programs, wholly new programs, […] all prepared by the time-tested, newly lean Big Four’s mammoth vaults and production facilities and packaged and disseminated by InterLace TelEnt. in convenient fiber-optic pulses that fit directly on the new palm-sized 4.8-mb PC-diskettes InterLace was marketing as ‘cartridges’? Viewable right there on your trusty PC’s high-resolution monitor? Or, if you preferred, jackable into a good old pre-millennial wide-screen TV with at most a coaxial or two? Self-selected programming, chargeable on any major credit card or on a special low-finance-charge InterLace account available to any of the 76% of U.S. households possessed of PC, phone line, and verifiable credit? (Jest 416)

InterLace TelEntertainment capitalizes on a long-developing, technologically-induced, neurosis, one of the symptoms of which is that individuals will choose to be passively and totally entertained through video. Essentially, the idea is that “the viewer could become her-his own programming director […] and define the very entertainment-happiness it was her/his right to pursue” (416). So, “with advertisements […] now out of the televiusal question,” Interlace TelEntertainment purchases the entire “InterNet fiber-optic transmission-grid” for a measly “.17 on the dollar from GTE after Sprint went belly-up trying to launch a primitively naked early mask- and Tableauxless form of videophony,” and the entire consumer home entertainment market “became almost
Hobbesianly free-market” (416) The governing principle behind what viewers chose to have disseminated to their homes was, “The more pleasing a given cartridge […] the more orders there were for it from viewers. (416) Finally, Wallace surmises, “Personal pleasure and gross revenue looked at last to lie along the same demand curve, at least as far as home entertainment went” (417). The demand for personal pleasure via TelEntertainment allowed InterLace to essentially achieve a monopoly in both the market for video entertainment and viewers’ choice in entertainment medium.

InterLance TelEntertainment has been focused on tying consumers as closely to their Teleputers as possible, and so with the entertainment market cornered, it launches a new product called videophony that is meant to replace not only the telephone but also in-person communication. The videophony section of the novel, narrated from deeply omniscient third person, has the odd tone of a historical report as it describes a technology, essentially a video chat with which people with smartphones and computers are today familiar, with a tone of wonder and fascination; of course Wallace, writing in the early 1990s had no personal experience with such a technology, and so as he imagines a series of problems which drive people further into individualized entertainment bubbles his elaborate videophony as the next stage of development of home entertainment after the fall of broadcast television is an effort to show the way that the favorable reception and mass consumption of one technology enables the development, based on the projected consumption, of the next.

By definition, videophony is a two-way video phone call, a technology that allows people to interface through screens rather than through ear and mouth pieces. It also brings the postmodern form of video into the sphere of telecommunications, and Wallace
narrates the dialectical relationship between the technology’s resultant commodities and the “videophone consumers” who use them first in the title of the section itself reproduced here in full because the form of the sentence that serves as the title and the form of the narrative it describes are equally dialectical in nature:

WHY–THOUGH IN THE EARLY DAYS OF INTERLACE’S INTERNETTED TELEPUTERS THAT OPERATED OFF LARGELY THE SAME FIBER-DIGITAL GRID AS THE PHONE COMPANIES, THAT ADVENT OF VIDEO-TELEPHONING (A.K.A. ‘VIDEOPHONY’) ENJOYED AN INTERVAL OF HUGE CONSUMER POPULARITY–CALLERS THRILLED AT THE IDEA OF PHONE-INTERFACING BOTH AURALLY AND FACIALLY (THE LITTLE FIRST-GENERATION PHONE-VIDEO CAMERAS BEING TOO CRUDE AND NARROW-APERTURED FOR ANYTHING MUCH MORE THAN FACIAL CLOSE-UPS) ON FIRST-GENERATION TELEPUTERS THAT AT THAT TIME WERE LITTLE MORE THAN HIGH-TECH TV SETS, THOUGH OF COURSE THEY HAD THAT LITTLE ‘INTELLIGENT AGENT’ HOMUNCULAR ICON THAT WOULD APPEAR AT THE LOWER-RIGHT OF A BROADCAST/CABLE PROGRAM AND TELL YOU THE TIME AND TEMPERATURE OUTSIDE OR REMIND YOU TO TAKE YOUR BLOOD-PRESSURE MEDICATION OR ALERT YOU TO A PARTICULARLY COMPELLING ENTERTAINMENT-OPTION NOW COMING UP ON CHANNEL LIKE 491 OR SOMETHING, OR OF
ABRUPT CONSUMER RETREAT BACK TO GOOD OLD VOICE-ONLY TELEPHONING?” (Jest 144-45)

This title claims that the following section will provide an answer to the layered “WHY?” question. As Wallace expands the subject of the question with interruptives, the question grows to encompass the totality of the process of videophony’s rise and fall. The section itself then begins with the component pieces of the answer it will supply: “The answer, in a kind of trivalent nutshell, is: (1) emotional stress, (2) physical vanity, (3) a certain queer kind of self-obliterating logic in the microeconomics of consumer high-tech” (145). It is of course the relationship between these three pieces that is most important, and before we explicate the dialectic of that particular nutshell, it is important to note the relationship described in the title itself.

The title compresses a series of complex socio-economic processes into a relatively short period of time, five sales quarters or sixteen months. This short period exaggeratedly depicts the “intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation” that Harvey notes characterize the era of “flexible accumulation” (146). Furthermore, the contractions and resolutions in which each step of innovation results illustrates the “direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism” also characteristic of this era. For example, when Wallace writes that “video-telephony entrepreneurs lost their shirts” and that two mutual funds were “destabilized,” he gives examples of what happens when one invests in the infrastructures or “rigidities” or reified “products, and patterns of consumption,” which are Fordist holdovers in contradiction with “the emergence of […] new ways of providing financial services” (147). In other words, for one to invest in a technological advance like videophony, either independently
or on the behalf of a pension fund, is to ignore the intensified rates of innovation that in postmodernity render individual technologies and commodities obsolete far more quickly than one was accustomed to during the post-war Fordist boom. Finally, understood against the backdrop of flexible accumulation, the “trivalent” qualities within the “nutshell” are connected through a mode production and consumption that produces and consumes technologies which present their own contradictions and ultimately their own “kicked tent.”

This trajectory of videophony also has an historical basis in twentieth-century America. In *Telecoms in the Internet Age: From Boom to Bust To—?*, Martin Fransman traces the developments of the Old Telecoms industry as it turns into the New Telecoms industry, and his analysis logically arrives at Infocommunications, a category introduced with the widespread use of the internet a medium of communication and, ultimately, consumption of entertainment. In a section on “Co-evolving Consumer Demand,” Fransman writes, “In some cases, indeed, products and services are developed before consumer demand exists, with the intention of creating the very demand that the product or service is intended to satisfy” (72). He cites the “video-phone” as one such product. Noting that Bell Labs began work in the 1950s on “video-telephony” under the assumption that “[p]eople who can hear each other will also want to see each other,” he indicates various steps and setbacks in the launching of video-phone technology. Over the course of forty-year period, AT&T spent nearly half a billion dollars developing a business plan, testing markets, and ultimately backing away from the project leading up to its relaunch in 1992. Of particular interest for Wallace’s section on “videophony” is M. Katz’s explanation of the “interpretive ambiguity” in the failure of the video-phone:
“‘The price was too high and people are not used to it’ versus ‘people often feel uncomfortable under close visual scrutiny and don’t want it’” (Fransman 74).

To illustrate an understanding of the antecedents of such a failure, Wallace appropriately begins with an earlier technology, the telephone, and describes how the emotional stress videophony produces is itself caused by a “wholly marvelous delusion” that “conventional voice-only telephony” had conditioned in consumers (Jest 145). This delusion is tied to the problem that one faces in terms of paying attention to the person with whom one is communicating:

Good old traditional audio-only phone conversations allowed you to presume that the person on the other end was paying complete attention to you while also permitting you not to have to pay anything even close to complete attention to her. (145-146)

Wallace summarizes the above phenomenon as the “bilateral illusion of unilateral attention” (146). Ultimately, talking with someone over videophone disabused videophone consumers of the bilateral illusion. With videophony, no longer could one “look around the room, doodle, fine-groom, [or] peel tiny bits of dead skin away from [one’s] cuticles” (146). Wallace is careful to tie to videophony the preceding technology, aural only telephony; that is, telephoning created the illusion. Wallace writes, “a hand-held phone whose earpieces contained only 6 little pinholes but whose mouthpiece (rather significantly, it later seems) contained (6² or 36 little pinholes)–let you enter a kind of highway-hypnotic semi-attentive fugue.” (146) Significant indeed that the telephone physically embodied the dynamic inherent in the bilateral illusion: the design of the phone itself contributed to the inability to pay attention and the ability to assume that one
was receiving full attention because the commodity privileged the voice one projected
over the voice one heard. The “bilateral illusion,” Wallace writes, “was aurally supported:
the phone line’s other end’s voice was dense, tightly compressed, and vectored right into
your ear, enabling you to imagine that the voice’s owner’s attention was similarly
compressed and focused” (146). That was no longer the case with videophony. Now,
when one looked up to see the person on the other end of the videophone call not paying
attention, the results were “traumatic” (146). Hyperbolically, Wallace likens the loss to an
“expulsion-from-Eden,” because one realized the “whole infantile fantasy of
commanding […] attention” was just that: a fantasy (146). The result was “monstrously
stressful” (147).

At the same time, interfacing via videophony requires not only paying attention to
another human being, but also paying greater attention to oneself, at least to one’s
physical appearance. Wallace describes how the original technological advance of
videophony affected consumers again by comparing it to the preceding technology,
telephony:

Good old aural telephone calls could be fielded without makeup, toupee,
surgical prostheses, etc.... But for the image-conscious, there was of
course no such answer-as-you are informality about visual-video
telephone calls, which consumers began to see were less like having the
good old phone ring than having the doorbell ring and having to throw on
clothes and attach prostheses and do hair-checks in the foyer mirror before
answering the door. (Jest 147)
So videophony requires physical preparation in a way that telephony did not, but that physical preparation is complicated by “(2) physical vanity.” Videophony is problematized by “the way callers’ faces looked on their TP screens... something essentially blurred and moist-looking... pallid indefiniteness... furtive, untrustworthy, unlikable” (147). Consumers are, in general, “horrified at how their own faces appeared,” and the solution, both to “(1) emotional stress” and “(2) physical vanity,” is another commodity: “Video-Physiognomic Dysphoria (or VPD)” (147). Here the dialectic between evolving technologies and consumption patterns begins to take shape as the contradiction that resulted from the first commodity is synthesized with the next commodity. This new commodity, Wallace writes, brings on the “the advent of High-Definition Masking” or “high-definition videophonic imaging” (147). Essentially, this is a “broadcastable composite of a face wearing an earnest, slightly overintense expression of complete attention” (148). It was a mask, which had to be strapped on to take a call and hung up when not in use, and, “for a couple of fiscal quarters phone/cable companies were able to rally VPD-afflicted consumer’ confidence by working out a horizontally integrated deal where free composite-and-masking service came with a videophone hookup” (148). The deal was, Wallace writes, “a viable industry response” (148).

And so it is that the “obliterating logic in the microeconomics of consumer high-tech” continues to work dialectically, with the emotional stress and physical vanity and videophone initiated VPD of videophone consumers. It is at this point, Wallace writes, that we can see, “natural entrepreneurial instinct” and the “equally natural distortion in the way persons tend to see themselves, and it becomes possible to account historically for the speed with which the whole high-def-videophonic-mask thing spiraled totally out
of the control” (148). As it turns out, the creation of masks, leads to the desire for better masks—“Optimistically Misrepresentational Masking (or OMM)—masks that were better because they did not look much like videophone consumers at all” (149). This, in turn, leads to “psychologically unscrupulous entrepreneurs” who “began marketing full-body polybutylene and -urethan 2-D cutouts,” and eventually, “costs started to press the envelope of mass-market affordability” (149). Ultimately, the relationship between masking producers and neurotic customers led to a “relentless entrepreneurial drive” that resulted in the development of “Transmittable Tableaux,” the apex of videophony. “TT” was a “video-transmitted image of what was essentially a heavily doctored still-photograph, one of an incredibly fit and attractive and well-turned-out human being” (149). With TT an image could be “focused attentively in the direction of the videophonic camera” (149). Of course, “there’s some sort of revealing lesson here about the “classically annular shape” of innovations in “consumer technology” (150):

First, there’s some sort of terrific, sci-fi-like advance in consumer tech—like from aural to video phoning—which advance always, however, has certain unforeseen disadvantages for the consumer; and then but the market-niches created by those disadvantages—like people’s stressfully vain repulsion at their own videophonic appearance—are ingeniously filled via sheer entrepreneurial verve; and yet the very advantages of these ingenious disadvantage-compensations seems all too often to undercut the original high-tech advance, resulting in consumer recidivism and curve-closure and massive shirt-loss for precipitant investors. (Jest 150)
Here Wallace describes the material dialectic of a technologically advanced consumer society in microeconomic terms; “disadvantages” create “market-niches” that are filled with “entrepreneurial verve.” Though in this section, he focuses on the “curve-closure” of a specific set of commodities, the emotional stress and physical vanity that the videophone consumers experience due to these technologies live on in the rest of the novel. They are only two of the symptoms created by ongoing capital accumulation and the modes of production required to support it, and they are early symptoms as well. Videophony is developed before the subsidized year in which the novel takes place. It creates symptoms that most every character in the novel deals with in one form or another. In fact, though “consumers remained verifiably reluctant to leave home and teleputer and to interface personally,” the world of the novel marches on because the symptoms of the consumers “d[o]n’t cause much industry concern” (151).

Here again we can turn to Jameson for a theorization of this manifestation of video. His iteration of the kind of subjective/objective conundrum caused by videophony is tied back to the medium of video in a way that resonates with the symptoms of syndication as we have already seen them. With video, Jameson writes, “[t]he machine [is] on both sides, then; the machine as subject and object, alike and indifferently: the machine of the photographic apparatus peering across like a gun barrel at the subject, whose body is clamped into its mechanical correlative in some apparatus of registration/reception” (Postmodernism 73-74). Here, Jameson highlights one of the repulsions of videophony as a fact of two-way video. Though the videophone consumers in Jest may foremost experience the phenomenon of videophony as one of emotional stress due to their physical vanity, Jameson more clearly articulates their predicament as a
result of video technology itself, “where spectators of video time are then as immobilized and mechanically integrated and neutralized as the older photographic subjects, who became, for a time, part of the technology of the medium” (73-74). Jameson even theorizes video’s entrance into the home with respect to consumers’ attention:

The living room, to be sure (or even the relaxed informality of the video museum), seems an unlikely place for this assimilation of human subjects to the technological: yet a voluntary attention is demanded [emphasis mine] by the total flow of the videotext in time which is scarcely relaxed at all, and rather different from the comfortable scanning of the movie screen. (Postmodernism 73-74)

In sum, the rise and fall of videophony in the postmodern era, like the rise of syndication, leading up to Y.D.A.U. and Jest’s main narrative, creates certain symptoms that affect the characters of the novel in broader ways than just their entertainment consumption. Though emotional stress and physical vanity of course predate videophone technology, Wallace is interested in technology’s ability to exacerbate existing tendencies.

As we see first with Mr. Steeply, second with videophone consumers, and lastly, nationally, through the monopolizing force of InterLace TelEntertainment, the technological evolutions of the postmodern era of Jest condition the characters to want and desire new forms of what amounts to entertainment and their desire and capacity for consumption spurs additional innovations aimed at maximizing the profitability of entertainment content and mediums. We have also seen how the intensifying evolution of video has lead to the symptoms by which video consumers are conditioned to respond to the “signifying system” of “experimental video, or video art” represented by “Infinite
Jest” (76). The conception of the “fictive” is no longer in play in postmodernity, nor is the “material punctuation” that can “convert” entertainment of “external bodily stimuli” into the “appearance of beginnings and endings”; that is a function left behind, a historical fact of commercial television. Importantly, *Infinite Jest* does not dramatize the full-scale arrival of “Infinite Jest”; instead, it depicts the conditions that could lead to such an apocalyptic event, where a single entertainment product might actually destroy an entire population. Such product, which when consumed blurs and even eliminates the distinction between beginning and ending, between the self and the world of the entertainment, is at the heart of Wallace’s formulation of what makes entertainment potentially lethal, and it also suggests the form of the novel itself.

**The Metafictional Form of *Infinite Jest***

The text of *Infinite Jest* doesn’t explicitly discuss the fact that it shares a title with the lethal Entertainment around which it’s structured, but Wallace’s decision to give them the same name invites us to compare them, and I argue that their the effect of their forms is closely aligned and suggests a metafictional dimension of the novel that has been ignored by critics who write on it. *Jest* begins at the latest point chronologically in the narrative, which suggests that upon reaching the end of the book one should continue reading again at the beginning; that much is indisputable, once one puts the chronology of the whole together, but the form of the novel also emerges as a way to think about the limits of the self and their relationship to formal systems of morality that structure their lives. Essentially, the form of the novel suggests that, like the lethal Entertainment with
which it shares its name, the novel is not only designed for continuous, circular consumption, but that something happens to the individual through such a consumption pattern. I contend that *Jest’s* form, like the entertainment, confuses the boundary between the individual and the system, the self and its boundaries, in such a way that illustrates a radicalized definition of those aspects of the consumer and entertainment that “Infinite Jest” threatens. At the same time, the form of the novel also begins to explain the relationship between Gately and Hal, who never meet in the pages of the novel and the two alternative moral systems they represent: namely Alcoholics Anonymous and competitive tennis. Finally, my connection between the novel’s form and the alternative moral systems at work in the book reveals the way the novel uses *Hamlet*, the work from which it takes its title. This layer of intertextuality helps explain the radicalization of the self through the use of the ghostlike wraith figure that haunts Gately in the final scenes of the novel.

As I have suggested throughout this chapter, as well as across the dissertation more broadly, the site of conflict in Wallace’s novels is where individuals act in response to the social conditions that govern them. In the case of *Jest*, the conditions that I have outlined in the previous section amount to a formidable a set of social relations where on one side we find the collaboration of private industry and government toward the ends of maximizing the profitability of entertainment products through encouraging the increased dependency on those products, while on the other side we find the citizen consumers who are drawn to entertainment to the point that they about it more than their overall wellbeing. This appetite for infantilizing entertainment leads to the addictive behaviors that *Jest* describes, but it also leads to the development of coping mechanisms and
alternative structures of being that enable individuals to live in such a predatory environment.

In the previous chapter, where I argued the protagonists of *Broom*, Lenore and Rick, encounter the limits of the poststructural and metafictional systems that structure their beings, here I argue Gately and Hal ultimately reach the limits of the systems that they have adopted to cope with the social conditions in which they live: competitive tennis and Alcoholics Anonymous. Unlike in *Broom*, where the form of the novel ultimately undermined the ability of poststructuralism and metafiction to Lenore and Rick with respect to the material world, in *Jest* competitive tennis and AA not only help Hal and Gately constitute selves that are somewhat resistance to the conditions in which they live, but they also enable them to transcend their own individual limits and appetites in a way that transforms their subjectivity as radically as the Entertainment transforms those that fall prey to it.

Furthermore, a focus on the form unites the belief systems of tennis and AA. Essentially each system provides a set of rules that governs how one should act and suggests that by following those rules one is acting ethically, regardless of how one feels. In fact, posing an intellectual resistance to the form is expected as part of the dialectical process through which one transforms habit into substance. This is something that Gately encounters at his early AA meetings where he was “sitting there, spraying vitriol, trying to get kicked out” so that he would have an excuse to relapse (*Jest* 464). Instead of getting kicked out, however, Gately’s resistance to the system authenticates his need for it to the other AA members. When they identify with his sentiment and encourage him to return, they absorb his resistance as a part of what it takes to adhere to the system and
live life according to its rules. Gately’s case shows that it does not matter whether the individual actually believes in the code that he or she follows; the form of adherence ultimately equates with belief when the behavior becomes habituated. If one is able adopt the form of belief, as Gately is, for instance, with his evening prayer to a Higher Power that he does not necessarily believe in, over time “the desire to ingest synthetic narcotics [becomes] mysteriously magically removed” (Jest 466).

Ultimately, Gately learns that adhering to the principle of “Giving It Away,” becoming selfless, sharing, and identifying, “a cardinal Boston AA principle,” both allows him to manage himself and also transcend his need for the destructive products of the society in which he lives (344). After one learns to give it away, and does so long enough, however, one begins “to ‘Get In Touch’ with why [one] used Substances in the first place,” and this is a much darker prospect (446). As he faces his most difficult test of sobriety at the end of the novel – in those scenes described in section one of this chapter – Gately recalls how he had been a top high school athlete, in football, and “he had disciplined personal rules back then” (905). As he lies in the hospital bed, he remembers that he used substances “only at night, after practice,” and “[n]ot so much as a fractional foamer between 0900h. and 1800h. during the seasons of practice and play” (905). Here, Gately’s story begins to intersect with Hal’s through their shared background in high school athletics and dangerous cycles of recreational drug use.

Indeed Hal had, early in his life, gleaned an understanding of the “boundaries of self” from tennis (82). By choosing tennis and focusing on his improvement as a player, Hal learns, that “athletics [is] basically just training for citizenship … about learning to sacrifice the hot narrow imperatives of the Self—the needs, the desires, the fears, the
multiform cravings of the individual appetitive will—to the larger imperatives of a team” (82-83). Tennis for Hal, as AA does Gately, teaching him that a “flat and short-sighted idea of personal happiness” will not amount to anything, and, most importantly, that the “true opponent, the enfolding boundary, is the player himself” (83-84). Just as Gately’s resistance is reabsorbed by the structure that guides his life, so does tennis, for at least his early life, guide Hal to “vanquish and transcend the limited self whose limits make the game possible in the first place” (84). Like AA, tennis provides a system for self-management and preservation that is designed to reabsorb resistance, making it part of the game, in this case, or the program with respect to AA.

As I suggested earlier in the chapter, however, Hal and Gately follow opposite trajectories in the novel, and thus their actions allow us to observe two very different relationship to the moral systems in which they are enmeshed. As Gately adopts the good habits necessary to remain clean and, essentially, acts ethically, Hal is drawn in to the use of recreational substances in the same way that Gately once was and both his tennis and his overall quality of life suffer. He becomes withdrawn and depressed and struggles to keep clean and continue to perform at a high level. In fact, drawing their oppositional trajectories even closer, Wallace describes Hal’s descent in language that anticipates the language of Gately’s recovery, which comes much later in the novel, when he writes of Hal’s growing interest in getting high on marijuana in secret that, “American experience seems to suggest that people are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away [my emphasis], on various levels … [some] prefer to do it in secret” (46). Though tennis and AA essentially teach Hal and Gately the same thing – that in order to reach their full potential they have to know the limits of the self in order to transcend them – the
philosophy of treating the self as a competitive space that can be mastered is not a failsafe way to ensure ethical action. Hal gives himself over to the use of recreational substances, which, like the recreational enjoyment of entertainment, can lead to addicting behaviors that dilute rather than constitute an individual’s will, despite the fact that he knows the rules of the game. This part of Hal’s character allows Wallace to explore a different and less successful way that an individual might act within these alternative moral systems.

Wallace suggests Gately and Hal are two-sides of this coin through a little explored dimension of the text that involves a degree of suspending disbelief in the supernatural and a short explication of the Entertainment itself. The synthesis of these two ideas ultimately points to the metafictional dimension of the text. I have thus far argued for the complementary though opposite trajectories of Hal and Gately, but I contend that their symbiosis is actually richer than that. A peculiar set of events toward the end of the novel, including the appearance of a wraith that resembles James Incandenza in Gately’s hospital room point toward a deeper relationship between these two protagonists. It is well observed that Hal and Gately never meet in the course of the novel, this despite the fact the Enfield Tennis Academy and Ennet House neighbor one another; however, there are two places in the novel, on pages 17 and 934, that suggest that Hal and Don do meet and that they in fact, together, go in search of the master copy on “Infinite Jest” by digging up James Incandenza’s casket. (There is a rumor that the master copy is buried in his skull.) It is therefore popular to suggest, as I just have, that Gately and Hal’s meeting takes place outside of the space of the text because, we do not see it depicted in any one scene. But none of these reading account for Wallace’s odd and, frankly, supernatural infiltration of Gately mind with another “brain-voice,” which I
argue does bring Gately and Hal together (831). As Gately slips in and out of consciousness due to the pain he is experiencing from the gunshot wound at the novel’s end, words that he does not understand flash through his mind and the text in all capital letters, “CHRONAXY,” “PROPRIOCEPTION,” and “POOR YORICK,” for example (831-832). These words, which perplex Gately, are words that Hal, lexical prodigy that he is, knows, and they also recall both the Entertainment, which is released by Poor Yorick Entertainment Unlimited, and of course Hamlet.

The brain-voice, which I take to be the voice of James Incandenza, the dead king, as it were, suggests that Gately and Hal do meet within the ghost’s skull. Furthermore, as Gately writhes in bed, infiltrated by ghost words, Hal is wandering the halls of ETA, trying himself to avoid using drugs, and he thinks quite randomly about Hamlet: “It’s always seemed a little preposterous that Hamlet, for all his paralyzing doubt about everything, never once doubts the reality of a ghost” (Jest 900). A ghost is precisely what Gately sees in the form of the wraith, and, it would seem, the reality of that ghost is on Hal’s mind. Hal’s extra-sensitivity to Hamlet and the ghost is a point of intersection with his consciousness and Gately’s that cannot rationally be explained, considering that they have, up to that point, never met in the flesh; however, because I contend that this “brain-voice,” as Gately calls it, actually sutures their consciousnesses together and compels them equally to try and unearth the Entertainment, we can observe how the form of the novel itself aims to bring these characters together, their opposite trajectories finding an equilibrium as each character weakens—Hal by his own will and Gately by order of the hospital—under the weight of substances, Hal as he wanders the ETA halls and tries to avoid the urge to get high and Gately as he tries to resist narcotics. The “brain-voice”
issuing from the auteur of the Entertainment, which is the ultimate source of narcotizing pleasure, calls them equally and together.

Little is described about the content of the Entertainment outside of a few key details. One of them, however, illustrates the circularity and interconnection of two figures. In the scene, the figures continually pursue one another via a revolving door, a structure that facilitates their continued pursuit but prevents their meeting, and which is obviously enough evocative of consumption and addiction cycles. The other scene features a figure that represents both one’s death in one life and one’s mother in the next. The figure bends over a crib, like the bed in which Gately lies, and repeatedly apologizes to the camera and the viewer. (It is not known for what the figure is apologizing). We know that outside of the novel’s pages that Gately and Hal do meet and decide to go in pursuit of the Entertainment, but it is my suggestion that they actually meet through the “brain-voice” issued from the wraith and affecting each consciousness. They are susceptible to the voice and the Entertainment because, even though they are headed in opposite directions overall, their will is weakened. This is what makes the Entertainment’s auteur audible.

The form of the novel, however, which is circular in the way of the Entertainment, suggests that Gately and Hal may be reborn as the person each pursues. It suggests that in transcending the self there is an opportunity for either regression or transformation, but that one is ultimately reborn and provided the opportunity to begin one’s pursuit anew. Hal is becoming Gately as he becomes addicted and Gately is becoming Hal as he gets clean; neither path, however, is fixed. Each requires constant
maintenance. At the center of their efforts is the challenge of the ultimate Entertainment, which calls them give in, ask them to give up their wills, and give themselves away as they have learned to do in both tennis and AA. The novel’s resistance then, to depicting their meeting, to depicting their digging up of Poor Yorick and their viewing of the Entertainment (if that does indeed happen) actually reinforces their shared potential for transformation rather than any particular regression. The metafictional import of the novel is potent in this respect: Gately’s and Hal’s desire to find the Entertainment may recreate that desire in the reader, and a reader may read the novel circularly in pursuit of the clues to the Entertainment’s content and its role in the larger plot.

However, the kind of attention that Jest requires to read is the opposite of the passive reception that the Entertainment meets and inspires to a fatal end. In fact, many would argue that Jest offers little to no Entertainment, that it is unfulfilling and unsatisfying as entertainment due to its length and complexity alone. And yet it is precisely this materiality of Jest, the physical object that one must makes one’s way through and navigate through a fragmented narrative and its accompanying pages of notes that mark it as an object, a technology, that reflects the age in which it was produced. The conditions of postmodernity that Wallace describes necessitate that an entertainment capable of absorbing a reader in the same way that the Entertainment does in the novel has precisely these kind of preconditions of time, concentration, and retention of information. It also necessitates that one be able to derive substance from a narrative that chases itself through a revolving door.
CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

This chapter focuses on Wallace’s last novel, *The Pale King*, which remained unfinished at the time of his death in 2008 and was published only after significant editorial intervention in 2010. I mention these facts surrounding the publication of the novel because the unfinished nature of the text bears on its overall form, which I discuss less in this chapter than I do in the previous two, focussing instead here on the forms of particular sections of the novel which are more or less complete when compared to the whole. My fundamental contention about *The Pale King* rests on its connection to Wallace’s previous novels, most notably *Infinite Jest*. I argue that *The Pale King* shows Wallace’s continued commitment to depicting the postmodern social conditions he explores in *Jest* and I describe in chapter three, while it also simultaneously diverges from a depiction of the effects those conditions—rampant addiction and blind consumption, for example—focusing instead on characters who have found an equally extreme, though opposite, way to cope with postmodernity. *The Pale King* thereby

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12 Michael Pietsch’s Editor’s Note reveals that, at the time of Wallace’s death he (Pietsch) had not seen so much as a page of the novel beyond what had been published in magazines. Wallace had left a dozen chapters that totaled close to 250 pages organized under the title *The Pale King*, but Pietsch was also given “a green duffle bad and two Trader Joe’s sacks heavy with manuscripts” from which he ultimately assembled a 538-page manuscript (*TPK* vi). By Pietsch’s own admission, “[n]owhere in all these pages was there an outline or other indication of what order David had intended for these chapters” (vi-vii). Essentially, Wallace’s editor compiled a substantial portion of a long manuscript with very little indication of the author’s intention.
provides a counterpoint to *Jest*, a description of a complimentary set behaviors that reveals another dimension of the complex dialectic between the conditions of postmodernity and the ethical action of characters that I have argued predominates Wallace’s career-long approach to novel writing.

*The Pale King* complicates the portrayal of this dialectic in two important ways that distinguish it from both *Jest* and *The Broom of the System*. First, unlike the earlier novel, *The Pale King* is structured around a set of recognizable historical circumstances, such as the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980’s and his signature tax cuts as well as contemporary tastes in literary publishing, which suggest a relationship between both the events of the novel and historical events as well a relationship between the production of the actual novel *The Pale King* and contemporary postmodern literary publishing.

Thus, *The Pale King* pursues a more historically-based depiction of the conditions of postmodernity than *Broom* and *Jest*, which though interested in such history are more exaggeratedly dystopic than *The Pale King*, and it also pursues a more nuanced meta-commentary on its status as a product of those conditions than the previous novels through the fictionalizing of its production. The second way that *The Pale King* complicates the argument I have developed about *Jest* is by elaborating what I have called a dialectical counterpoint to *Jest’s* most overt subject -- the effect of developing postmodern social conditions on the lives of individuals -- by focusing on a seemingly opposite phenomenon: boredom, a coping method in line with, but significantly different form, the function of Alcoholics Anonymous or competitive tennis in *Jest*.

Despite the fact *The Pale King* will always be unfinished, and the pages collected under its title comprise a book with an even less coherent narrative than Wallace’s
previous novels, it’s possible to isolate these dominant concerns within the novel and also to claim that two of its characters, David Francis Wallace and Chris Fogle, emerge as central enough to the novel’s discernible plot to be treated as protagonists who are defined by their relationship to the social conditions of the 1980’s and boredom. The chapters of the novel that contain the Wallace and Fogle narratives are, therefore, the focus of my argument about The Pale King not only because Wallace and Fogle describe the historical circumstances that determine their choice to seek employment with the Internal Revenue Service in 1984-85 and thus tell us something about ethical choice, which The Pale King signals primarily through its characters’ vocations, but also because the chapters in which we find their narratives are layered with metafictional forms that allow Wallace (the author) to explore the dialectical relationships between the conditions that have led to Wallace’s and Fogle’s employment with the IRS as well as the conditions that have led to the writing and publishing of The Pale King itself. Therefore, through the Wallace and Fogle narratives, we can read a meta-analysis of the production of metafictional postmodern novels that informs Wallace’s oeuvre as a whole. The Pale King then ostensibly becomes Wallace’s reflection not only on the processes involved in producing a single novel but also on the progression of his own body of work, which increasingly seeks to depict the relationship between the conditions of postmodernity and its cultural products.

13 Describing the plot of The Pale King is considerably more difficult than describing the plots of Wallace’s previous novels, but it is safe to say, based on the novel as Pietsch has constructed it and the collection of Wallace’s notes included in The Pale King, that the action of the novel revolves around the recruitment of new IRS examiners. David Francis Wallace and Fogle are the two recruits whose stories are presented with the greatest depth (539-547).
More specifically, the metafictional forms that Wallace utilizes in *The Pale King* create additional layers of metafiction related to these social concerns because, as the forms, such as monologues, are often occasions for reflection and self-analysis, they both tell a story about stories and at the same time are conscious of their function within the novel form and thus their context as part of a product. For instance, chapter 22 takes the form of an uninterrupted 98-page monologue in the voice of Chris Fogle because, as we learn through clues in other chapters, it is a transcript of a promotional video shot as part of an “IRS Personnel Division motivational and recruitment effort” (72). Fogle is aware of the fact that he is meant to explain his motivation for joining the IRS, and thus he is forthcoming with significant details about why, in the 1980’s, a job with IRS might have been a desirable occupation; at the same time, in a note Wallace reveals that Fogle may not be aware that the video is a ploy to get him to reveal information about a secret series of numbers that he can recite in order gain full concentration on his work, thus revealing an additional layer of the plot that suggests the central importance of committing to a boring vocation and being able to concentrate on that boredom. The layers of formal innovation and a\(^{14}\) Similarly, the David Francis Wallace chapters (9, 24, and 38) are all part of an “Author’s Forward” to what Wallace (the character) refers to as a “vocational memoir” titled *The Pale King*, which he contends is in fact that book that we’re reading, a book that has become a fiction only for legal reasons (71). His story is also self-reflective, as he reaches back to his adolescence in order to explain the financial circumstances that have lead him to write the book. He implores the reader to understand.

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\(^{14}\) One note that Wallace has on Fogle reads as follows: “‘Irrelevant Chris’ is irrelevant only on the subject of himself? On all other topics he’s focused & cogent and interesting? … ‘Film interview’ a sham? Point to extract from Chris the formula of numbers that permits total concentration?” (*TPK* 541)
the novel’s style in this context. The centrality of these metafictional devices to the text of *The Pale King* coupled with the novel’s simultaneous interest in civic responsibility, morals, and ethics comprises a nuanced set of metafictional gestures that take postmodern metafiction seriously at the same time that they expose that metafiction’s pervasive textuality. For this reason, I contend that *The Pale King* represents Wallace’s most sustained meditation on metafictional forms and the possibilities those forms hold for expressing the dialectical relationship between ethical action and the social conditions of postmodernity.

With this contention in mind, the argument of the chapter is divided into three parts. In the first section of the chapter, I use the only essay published to date that focuses significantly on metafiction in *The Pale King*, Henry Veggian’s “Anachronisms of Authority: Authorship, Exchange Value, and David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*.” Building on Veggian’s fundamental contention, that “*The Pale King* passes through the production and valuation of its own literary commodity form in such a way that illuminates the production and valuation of literary commodity forms in general,” I argue that a similar dynamic is at work in the metafictional narratives of Wallace and Fogle as that which Veggian identifies in the novel as a whole (100). The story of David Francis Wallace, specifically the circumstances that lead him to pursue work with IRS and write *The Pale King*, are essential to understanding more broadly how *The Pale King* “cast[s] a sidelong glance at its own commodification” (101). Where Veggian argues that the “sidelong glance” is the result of the novel’s passing through author, editor, and a postmodern publishing industry with a postmodern metafictional sensibility, a process that takes place after the writing of the book as it passes through stages of production and
consumption, I argue that Wallace (the author) creates characters in David Francis Wallace and Fogle who are themselves sensitive to and reacting against the forces that Veggian describes in their individual narratives; thus the commodification process is actually inscribed in the narrative itself.

With that in mind, I turn to the Fogle narrative in the second section of the chapter and explicate the distinction that Fogle makes between self-consciousness and self-awareness, which he first achieves through the use of the drug Obetrol. Fogle’s coming to self-awareness lends his monologue, which already bears the formal mark of metafiction, an additional dimension of reflection on the story that he tells about how he came to the IRS. Obetrol, Fogle contends, gives him “the ability to choose” what he concentrates on, and allows him to gain a self-awareness that he refers to as “doubling,” a way of seeing himself acting out the choices that he has consciously made rather than simply acting them out (180). In this section of the chapter, I analyze Fogle’s description of his conversion from a self-proclaimed “wastoid” to an IRS examiner, drawing on Robert C. Hamilton’s analysis of The Pale King’s discourse on boredom in his essay, “‘Constant Bliss in Every Atom’: Tedium and Transcendence in David Foster Wallace’s The Pale King.” Hamilton’s essay explores theories of the relationship between boredom and transcendence in Thomas Aquinas, William James, and Martin Heidegger, and he discusses, via James’ Varieties of Religious Experience, Fogle’s decision to choose boredom rather than the life of a wastoid as an example of a secular conversion in the Jamesian sense. Borrowing from James, Hamilton argues that Fogle finds his job at the IRS a “‘moral equivalent’ of religion” and contends that The Pale King demonstrates a “dialectical relationship between religion/transcendence and boredom/tedium” (175). In
this section of the chapter, I argue that choice and action determine the terms of the
dialectical relationship in which Hamilton is interested, and that Fogle’s narrative in
particular, through Fogle’s metafictional self-awareness, reconfigures the relationship
between the agency of the individual and the world he inhabits, between choice and
postmodernity.

In the final section of the chapter, I turn to the historical dimension of The Pale
King: 1970s and 1980s suburban and central Illinois, where the characters of David
Francis Wallace and Chris Fogle grow up and lead lives that, through quite different
paths, arrive at the IRS. In this section, I explore the influence of the tax code on the lives
of Wallace, Fogle, and American culture at large. In both the David Francis Wallace and
the Fogle sections of this chapter, this history weighs on the choices that are available to
the characters and the relative agency that they have in taking action based on those
choices. Here I draw on Marshall Boswell’s essay, “Trickle Down Citizenship: Taxes and
Civic Responsibility” to fully sketch the political dimension of 1970s and 1980s
portrayed in the novel while also connecting the idea of citizenship to Wilson Kaiser’s
notion of Wallace’s “ethics of affinity” (54). I argue that Kaiser’s affinity ethics and
Boswell’s citizenship each point to the centrality of macroeconomic policy on
microeconomic choice. Moreover, I argue that the self-aware metafiction of Wallace (the
character) and Fogle, both enable a historical perspective on the period in which they
chose to become IRS examiners while also, due to the same self-aware metafictional
form, keeping each of the characters in a kind of stasis or eternal present that is
classically postmodern and ahistorical. In this way, Wallace historicizes the postmodern
condition through a metafictional and self-aware narration that reveals the limits of that
form of thinking with respect to the historical period that it seeks to describe. By creating a series of self-aware, metafictional forms about a self-aware, metafictional period of cultural production, Wallace illustrates the effect of inwardly-directed analyses that attempt to subsume the social in the individual. A key difference between this metafictional style and that of Jest and Broom, then, is the awareness that Fogle and even more so Wallace have of the function of their narratives within the structure of the novel. The protagonists of Jest and Broom do not have a sense of how their actions and their stories determine the form of the novels of which they are a part, let alone the way that their actual narration becomes the text of those novels. In The Pale King, Fogle and Wallace understand how both the form and content of their narratives becomes The Pale King.

David Francis Wallace

Henry Veggian’s analysis of The Pale King’s commodification is predicated on a reasonable assumption and a productive hypothetical. Veggian assumes that most people who will take the time to read The Pale King are “Model Postmodern Readers,” “MPRs” who have at least some working knowledge of postmodern discourses of authorship, textuality, and the kind of literary commodities that postmodern literary markets have produced and, at least through an example such as The Pale King, continue to produce. Broadly, what this means is that Veggian assumes The Pale King’s readership has some sense of the author as a diffuse entity constructed from a host of sources rather than as an autonomous individual genius, of a text as a similar amalgamation as its author rather than a unique product of individual authorial genius, and of literary commodities as objects that are as much a result of publicity, the market for books, and distributive
channels as they are the result of artistic creation. With this kind of reader in mind, Veggian suggests that there is something to be gained by indulging the hypothetical situation in which the MPR who reads *The Pale King* would be willing if not predisposed to read Michael Pietsch’s Editor’s Note that precedes the text of novel as part of the actual text of the novel authored—I use the term loosely in this context—by David Foster Wallace. Veggian’s assumptions about *The Pale King*’s readership and his hypothesis regarding the note guide his analysis of the commodity form of *The Pale King* and they connect to the radical understanding of authorship I find in the Wallace and Fogle narratives. Where Veggian’s argument focuses on the author, text, and book market, however, mine focuses on the novel’s own processing of metafictional forms.

Veggian begins with the contention that *The Pale King* is as whole or complete as any postmodern text is because, he argues, postmodern novels have never aspired to be whole or complete. Rather, postmodern novels have always been evidence of the partiality and incompleteness of any text, and their awareness or dramatization of their partiality and incompleteness is often signaled with formal techniques such as the fictional Editor’s Note and Author’s Forward that can be found in *The Pale King*, formal devices that point toward the process of construction and production of postmodern texts in general.\(^{15}\) Essentially, our notion of how *The Pale King* is incomplete is part of what makes it completely postmodern, a notion that underlies our (as MPRs) approach to all texts, and so we are prepared for it and ready to accept its function with respect to the

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\(^{15}\) A quintessentially postmodern example of this is John Barth’s novel *Giles Goat-Boy* with which Wallace was no doubt familiar considering his (Wallace’s) use of other Barth texts in his early short fiction. In *Goat Boy*, the text of the novel, which itself is actually a fragmented and reorganized transcript of audio recordings, is preceded by a Publisher’s Disclaimer, Notes from Editors A, B, C, and D, and finally a Cover Letter to the Editors and Publisher, all of which are of course written by Barth.
novel we are reading. In keeping with the premise of *The Pale King’s* complete/incomplete dichotomy, Veggian points out that Pietsch’s note suggests *The Pale King*’s complete/incomplete dichotomy is actually “consistent with David Foster Wallace’s earlier writings,” those he lived to complete, and each of which is itself “complete because it is incomplete,” and so, Veggian argues, it is fair assume that even if Wallace had lived to complete *The Pale King*, it likely would have meant a novel that was purposefully incomplete, not much different from the novel that we now have (100). This seems clear enough, at least to this MPR, but Veggian further argues that the same MPR would be quick to read Pietsch’s note as yet another example of postmodern textualism; however, Veggian argues, such a reduction overlooks the “concealment of intellectual labor and associated forms of production,” and this oversight is common to analyses and readings that rely on postmodern textualism, a tendency of the MPR (101). *The Pale King*, Veggian claims, instead asks that the MPR regard Pietsch’s note not as textualism but as a necessary step in the novel’s production and reification as a product of the postmodern publishing industry.

Therefore, *The Pale King* exposes the place of the editorial process in its “‘completion,’” and thus “may be considered typical of the postmodern commodity form” in general (102). The additional dimension of the novel’s material commodification with respect to what is commonly regarded by MPRs as textuality allows Veggian to argue that postmodern novels, in general, and Wallace’s novel, in particular, are a prime example of the postmodern literary market’s collaboration, across the processes of writing, editing, publishing, marketing, and distributing, in producing the incomplete/complete novel. Ultimately, the novel exhibits a “tension between the
published commodity (which resembles a ‘finished’ book) and the unfinished narrative
(with its author’s discourse on publishing and authorship)” (101-02). The Pale King,
Veggain contends, passes back and forth between the terms—finished, unfinished—that
create this tension, back and forth “through the aesthetic to the literary novel as a
postmodern commodity as such without reducing [itself] to mere textualism” (102). I
contend that The Pale King enacts this same tension in the narrative that David Francis
Wallace tells in his Author’s Forward and that this tension, when understood on the level
of the David Francis Wallace narrative, inclusive of the details Wallace provides to
explain the writing of The Pale King, enlarges the dimensions of The Pale King’s
metafictional gesture to include the dialectical relationship between the conditions of
postmodernity and the production of novels with respect to the position of the author, a
dimension that Veggian’s analysis, due to the fact that he only briefly discusses things
that happen in the text of the novel, neglects.

David Francis Wallace’s Forward comprises a temporally complex narrative and
authorial gesture, as it claims to be written only shortly in advance of the publication of
The Pale King and to describe the circumstances, decades earlier in the late 1970’s and
early 1980’s, that informed the narrative of the book and, in the first decade of the
2000’s, dictated the style in which the book is written and the genre in which it is
categorized. Importantly, David Francis Wallace is initially aware, it seems, that a reader
might suspect him of being only a metafictional device, and so he self-consciously asserts
that he is “the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract
narrative persona” (66); however, he also reflects that, “[g]ranted, there sometimes is
such a persona in The Pale King,” and when it appears it’s “mainly a pro forma statutory
construct, an entity that exists just for legal and commercial purposes, rather like a
corporation” (66). At the outset of his narrative, then, David Francis Wallace draws, to
some extent, on Veggian’s MPR’s conception of the author, but Wallace’s awareness of
this conception and explicit address of it coopts the analysis that an MPR would make
and reabsorbs it as a dimension of the metafictional narrative. Moreover, in the same way
that David Francis Wallace preemptively debunks the notion that he could be a literary
construct and suggests that David Foster Wallace is nothing more than a persona, he
further undermines the material reality of The Pale King and who we might understand as
its author by suggesting that the disclaimers and legal protections that identify The Pale
King as a work of fiction are themselves “fictional” because they fall “within the area of
special legal protection established by that disclaimer” (67). Essentially, David Francis
Wallace claims that his relationship to David Foster Wallace is the inverse of what it
actually is, and he supports this claim with the text of The Pale King (see footnote 16)
and the official legal and publication rights that would suggest otherwise. Thereby, I
argue, the metafictional capacity of David Francis Wallace presents David Foster
Wallace (the actual author of and not the periphery character in The Pale King) the
opportunity to pursue a discourse on authorship and authenticity in postmodern fiction

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16 In the course of his narrative, David Francis Wallace suggests that he is incorrectly processed upon
arrival at the IRS REC in Peoria due to a confusion between himself and another David F. Wallace. David
Foster Wallace does not appear, per se, in the novel, but he shares a number of traits with David Francis
Wallace, such as the fact of growing up in Philo, IL, being educated at an elite private college in New
England, and dreaming of becoming a great writer. The novel implies that Francis Wallace is incorrectly
processed due to the presence of Foster Wallace, and this fact is doubly supported by the book’s
metafictional dimension because while it is true that the presence of Foster Wallace leads to the incorrect
processing of Francis Wallace in Peoria, the presence of Francis Wallace threatens to lead a reader of the
novel to incorrectly process Foster Wallace or the author function of postmodern texts in general,
considering that Francis Wallace is simply the manifestation of a particular dimension of the postmodern
author and not a presence that excludes the possibility of Foster Wallace. In each case or incorrect
processing it is the relationship between the two Wallaces, the tension between their individual presence
and absence, that propels the narrative forward or sustains the form of the novel.
that could only be pursued through a character that could challenge the legal disclaimers necessitated by the publication of fiction.

In a larger way, I argue that David Foster Wallace uses David Francis Wallace’s self-awareness to augment the self-reflexive metafiction that he began exploring in *Broom*. In *Broom*, a metafiction aimed at interrogating the novel form on the textual level through poststructural language games, Wallace created as set of characters in Lenore Beadsman or Rick Vigorous who both were both generated and contained by the text without reference to the whole of the novel. David Francis Wallace, by contrast, attempts to explain his reflexivity in terms of the postmodern techniques of which he is, like Lenore and Rick, essentially composed. Importantly, Francis Wallace, as a writer, claims that such techniques are necessary to describe the postmodern world. Though Rick, an earlier version of a postmodern writer of metafiction, used his stories to control Lenore, he did not, as Francis Wallace does, relate his story the whole of the text. Similarly, in *Jest*, metafiction – through the lethal entertainment with which the novel shares its name – emphasizes the individual’s status as a consumer of the text, but doesn’t address the reader as a potential responder to that culture. In this sense, the David Francis Wallace character represents Wallace’s most evolved attempt at creating a character that could push back on the conditions and the world out of which he was created.

Ultimately, *The Pale King* uses the self-reflexivity of its characters to determine the limits of the fictional form of which they are a part, and like *Jest* it draws attention to the object of the novel itself and that object’s relationship to the modes of production responsible for its existence, but, like neither of Wallace’s previous novels, *The Pale King*, processes the role of the author in the generation of the text, and it does so with
respect to actual legal and historical markers of the culture out of which it is produced. In this sense, Wallace’s final aim in *The Pale King* is to turn his metafictional lens back on both mechanisms that make fiction possible, insisting on the necessity of these forms today and their use in historicizing the 1980s and contemporary period of literary production that is capable of reflecting on the 1980s.

It is in this spirit, then, of the necessity of metafictional forms to explain how the social conditions of the 1980 have lead to the publication of *The Pale King*, that David Francis Wallace not only provides a forward to *The Pale King*, but he also reflects on his life as a writer. This reflection takes aim at postmodern authorship in general and the feasibility of writing fiction as a full-time pursuit. Francis Wallace had “dreamed of becoming an ‘artist,’ i.e. somebody whose job was original and creative instead of tedious and dronelike,” specifically he had hoped to become “an immortally great fiction writer”; however, during college the only fiction that he produced was, primarily, papers and essays for other students (73). Essentially, he became a professional plagiarist, and his “chief motivation behind this little endeavor was, as it so often is in the real world,” he explains, “financial” (74). Basically, Francis Wallace had to take on a crippling amount of student loan debt in order to finance his education, and it was his college experience vis-à-vis taking out loans and writing papers for his wealthy peers to offset his loan interest, that served as his “introduction to the stark realities of class, economic stratification, and the very difficult financial realities that different sorts of Americans inhabited” (74). As Wallace describes the financial imperative for his creative writing pursuits (i.e. his plagiarism), we begin to sense that the amount of ghostwriting he did for
his peers in college kept him from pursuing his dream of becoming an artist. Or perhaps he became one, just not the type that he expected.

One of the ironies of Francis Wallace’s story is that, when he was caught plagiarizing, he held by his own “ethics” that the college’s academic honesty code ought to place the “practical and moral responsibility” for the kind of plagiarism with which he was involved on the client; nevertheless it was he who was kicked out of school for a year and sent home to Philo, IL (76). At home, faced with his student loan debt, he pursued employment with the IRS, and Peoria, IL REC. Wallace mentions this episode in college, he claims, “only to provide some context for the ostensibly ‘fictional’-looking formal elements” of The Pale King, and to “explain what I was even doing in one of the most tedious and dronelike white-collar jobs in America ... so that obvious question isn’t left to hang distractingly all through the book” (76). He asks the reader to bear in mind that The Pale King is essentially true save for the aspects that had to be “distorted, depersonalized, polyphonized, or otherwise jazzed up in order to conform to the disclaimer,” which, bear in mind, is part of the fiction as Francis Wallace sees it (72). He then explains that the book’s postmodern techniques (“shifting p.o.v.s, structural fragmentation, willed incongruities”) are the products of his own authorial attempts to get his story to conform to the “legal-slash-commercial constraints” required by fiction, essentially changing and altering the truth just enough for it to be unrecognizable (72). In this way, Francis Wallace’s story also becomes one of the institutionalization of postmodern devices, a concern with which Wallace has been explicitly occupied since writing “E Unibus Pluram.” Highlighting the theme of institutionalization is the fact that Francis Wallace is willing to make these artistic concessions and transform his memoir
into a novel only because, “like so many other Americans” he has “suffered reverses in the volatile economy of the last few years,” and, he rationalizes that “these reverses have occurred at the same time that my financial obligations have increased along with my age and responsibilities” (81).17 Wallace summarizes that he would be “a rank hypocrite” to pretend that his choice to publish *The Pale King* were not the result of “market forces” (81). David Francis Wallace does, therefore, become an artist, but he becomes one whose work is shaped by economic realities—student debt, the book publishing market, and the recession. First he plagiarizes to pay his debt, and second he writes *The Pale King* to capitalize on his work experience and alleviate financial strain.

All of this, however, is not to say that David Francis Wallace does not have other reasons for telling the story of his time in the IRS. He claims that he wouldn’t have spent the time getting *The Pale King* into its publishable form, had he not seen “social and artistic value” in a book about the relationship between individuals and the tax code. Attempting to draw a parallel between one’s personal finances and one’s worldview, Wallace cites his supervisor’s contention about an individual’s relationship to taxes, essentially that if you know someone’s “take” on them you can “determine [his/her] whole philosophy” (82). Beneath David Francis Wallace’s economic imperatives to write *The Pale King*, then, is his belief that a person's attention to tax code taps not only into his/her philosophy, but into another, important relationship for all American citizens: his/her relationship to “boredom,” which is tied to his/her capacity for paying attention to

17 It is important to bear in mind here that “the last few years” refers to the economic downturn of the end of the first decade of the 2000’s and not the 1980’s during which time David Francis Wallace was in college because he is effectively writing about two different economic situations, each of which forced his hand.
the world around them (82) “To me,” Wallace remarks, “the really interesting question is why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention” (85).\(^{18}\) Wallace suggests that *The Pale King* describes an American population that, due to its inability to give its “full attention” to the world, remains unaware of the “something else, way down” that is the root of the “terror of silence with nothing diverting to do” (85).

Taken as a whole, the circumstances that contribute to the writing of *The Pale King*, first those that lead to Wallace’s suspension from college in the 1980’s and later the publication of the novel in the 2000’s, suggest a dynamic and decades-long dialectical relationship between David Francis Wallace’s economic situation and the ultimate production of the literary object *The Pale King*. Therefore, I argue that the novel speaks not only to the present postmodern literary market but also to the intervening decades between the postmodernism of the 1960’s and 1970’s and today. As Veggian argues, the timeline of the novel suggests that it is “not so much a pessimistic novel about the ‘end of the sixties,’” but is instead “a writer’s unfinished yet defiant reply to the economic forces and institutions that allegedly limit the figural possibilities of the literary in the present time” (Veggian 124). This is no doubt true, but Veggian neglects to account for the way in which the novel dramatizes, through the characters of Wallace and Fogle, a way to reply to these forces. As I have argued, Wallace (the character) is in fact trapped by the market forces that lead him to publish *The Pale King* in this form. Wallace (the author),

\(^{18}\) Adding to the David Francis Wallace/David Foster Wallace conflation and inversion is the fact that what Francis Wallace claims the novel is about is also what Foster Wallace claims it is about in the “Embryonic outline” included in the notes: “2 Broad arcs: /1. Paying attention, boredom, ADD, Machines vs. people at performing mindless jobs. /2. Being individual vs. being part of larger things—paying taxes, being ‘lone gun’ in IRS vs. team player” (*TPK* 545).
however, through his use of the Wallace (the character) as the writer of *The Pale King*, is able to reflect on these “figural possibilities,” as Veggian calls them, without reducing that reflection to a textual effect. The dynamic between Wallace and Wallace is, therefore, one of interminable exchange. As the David Francis Wallace forward continues, the tension between author and character becomes less important than the coexistence and exchange between the two entities, an exchange that focuses the novel on the themes that both (the character) and Wallace (the author) suggest. David Foster Wallace’s enactment of postmodern authorial deconstruction through the character of David Francis Wallace is, in this way, heightened by the necessity of the character’s existence. Through the interplay between David Francis Wallace and David Foster Wallace, David Foster Wallace (the actual author of the text) is able to reflect on the conditions that have lead to the production of *The Pale King*, conditions that at one time produced postmodern metafiction and have, in this case, shown the roots of its necessity again.

In this respect, it is important to note the economic necessity at the heart of *The Pale King*’s publication in order to answer precisely what is at stake in Wallace’s (the author’s) metafictional project. As far as David Francis Wallace is concerned, there is an economic necessity to publish *The Pale King* as nonfiction, as a memoir, but the legal constraints of doing so preclude him from that route and the financial gain that would result. Instead, we have a work of fiction that is, ostensibly about boredom and the important of treating boredom not as an impediment to concentration but as generative force in its own right, an effect of our lives that can be channeled into focus as easily as we can be convinced to stare at a screen for several hours a day or ingest substances or
pursue whatever pursuits bring us pleasure. Boredom can be entertaining too, suggest both Wallace (the author) and Wallace (the character). Therefore, we can say that at the heart of The Pale King’s metafictional project is not only an inversion of Jest’s overt preoccupation with entertainment and pleasure, but the more subversive suggestion that perhaps these two emotional seemingly oppositional forces, pleasure and boredom, are in fact equally a part of our contemporary experience and, moreover, that our social conditions rely on the dialectical relationship between the two in order to market pleasure to us in the form of entertainment while requiring that we work in boring, non-creative jobs in order to afford such entertainment and develop a capacity for it. And if pleasure and boredom are themselves not truly mutually exclusive opposites but rather dialectically at play throughout our lives, then David Francis Wallace’s willingness to publish The Pale King in a genre different from the one in which he wrote it is symptomatic of the fact that cultural production observes this dialectic closely through the simultaneous marketing of a fiction about boredom, a product written in a genre that aims to entertain but written about a thoroughly boring subject, which pretty much guarantees that the resulting book will itself be boring. Finally, what most clearly underscores this point is the fact that The Pale King itself, in its admittance that nothing more than some stylistic alterations help identify it as fiction rather than nonfiction, exists at the margins of a book written to entertain and a book written out of economic necessity.
Chris Fogle

Like the David Francis Wallace chapters, the Chris Fogle chapter of *The Pale King* is self-contained, lacking any exposition or text outside of that spoken by Fogle. Without interjection from other characters or the use of any other formal devices, Fogle is able to both tell and reflect on his story, deepening his observations and gathering momentum through actively questioning how well he is explaining himself, his shifting focus, and the occasion of the recording that is being made. Considering how tangential Fogle’s monologue is, however, one feels that what Fogle has provided those producing the promotional video cannot be completely useful. It will either need to be heavily edited, or else, Wallace seems to suggest, all of Fogle’s monologue is relevant to the story of his career in the IRS. The former is a provocative possibility because it would suggest that all conditions surrounding Fogle’s choice of vocation actually bear on his decision. If the entire monologue is in fact relevant, which I contend that it is, then even Fogle’s most unfocussed memories, such as when he remembers a particular cardigan worn by Jimmy Carter, add to the total picture of the historical context out of which his work in the IRS emerges. In the chapter, for instance, Fogle recounts a lifelong oscillation determined along the lines of the dialectic discussed in the previous section between pleasure and boredom, but the lines between the two are not always completely clear, and the rather meandering form of the chapter is what allows the narrative to take shape around the choices Fogle makes, choices fueled by pleasure and boredom equally, sometimes to productive and other times to destructive ends.

The irony of the chapter, then is that everything that Fogle says is relevant, even what sounds like an aside. In fact, Fogle’s circuitous narrative touches on all of *The Pale King*. 

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King’s themes as it winds anecdotally through Fogle’s adolescence and young adulthood. For this reason, the Fogle chapter has become a touchstone for critics writing on The Pale King, most notably Robert C. Hamilton, whose essay “‘Constant Bliss in Every Atom’: Tedium and Transcendence in David Foster Wallace’s The Pale King,” focuses on the idea of boredom and the transformative power of focusing on the phenomenon, whether it manifests itself abstractly or in relation to task or job. Hamilton contends that Wallace “stages tedious” throughout The Pale King “in order to make the higher point that tedious can be endured, and, if endured, can be transcended and transcend itself” (Hamilton 169).

I argue that Fogle describes, through the process of “doubling,” a means by which to transcend boredom that is reflected across the metafictional dimensions of his narrative. In the same way that David Foster Wallace requires David Francis Wallace to reflect on his authorial gestures, Fogle requires a double to reflect on his actions. In the case of Fogle, I argue that doubling allows the perspective necessary for reflection and ethical judgment. In turn, that capacity, produced through metafiction, reveals the historical conditions that facilitate Fogle’s doubling and ultimate conversion to an IRS examiner.

Hamilton argues that two of The Pale King’s themes, boredom and religious conversion are “inextricable from one another” and that the novel’s depiction of a “direct relationship between conversion or epiphany and encounters with tedious” leads to “tangible changes” in the lives of its characters and, ultimately, the “abandonment of [their] former lifestyles” (169). Drawing on William James’s The Varieties of Religious Experience, Hamilton describes the epiphany in terms of a divided self that becomes one or whole through an ethical intervention that might be religious or secular (171). The argument in Hamilton’s essays rests on the notion of passivity, of a change that is
“subjective,” which “may indeed seem insignificant to an outside observer” and is not facilitated by any specific action on the part of the individual (171). Here I differ with Hamilton, despite his productive approach to the transcendent power of boredom. By ignoring the agency that Fogle exercises on his way to conversion, Hamilton not only neglects the narrative arc of the Fogle chapter but he also neglects the metafictional and temporal dimension of the monologue. Fogle does not passively receive the experience that leads to his transformation; instead, he makes a conscious choice to convert, as it were, by changing his major from English literature to accounting after being inspired by a professor. Boredom does become transcendent for Fogle just as it does for David Francis Wallace, but in Fogle’s case that happens only after an effort to focus on that which bores him.

In terms of how Fogle articulates his relationship to boredom and work in the IRS, it is important to remember that he is recording the monologue live, in the 1980’s, as he reflects back on his life in 1970’s. His goal is to attract potential IRS examiners to join the service, but the effectiveness of his message is unclear without any exposition or additional context. We do not even see the prompt that begins his narration, but, based on the first paragraph of the transcript we can assume that he is asked something about what he remembers about his choice to pursue a career with the IRS:

I’m not sure I even know what to say. To be honest, a good bit of it I don’t remember. I don’t think my memory works in quite the way it used to. It may be that this kind of work changes you. Even just rote exams. It might actually change your brain. For the most part, it’s now almost as if I’m
trapped in the present. If I drank, for instance, some Tang, it wouldn’t remind me of anything—I’d just taste the Tang. (*TPK* 154)

Here Fogle expresses a conundrum that should inform our reading of his entire story. He is asked to remember and describe, yet he feels incapable or remembering or associating his memories with anything other than the immediate sensations that they illicit, a symptom that harkens back to classic critiques of postmodernity’s ahistorical and relativistic dimension, a condition that I would argue closely borders on the ambivalence of nihilism. Not only that, but by attributing his change to his current vocation, he seems to suggest that the IRS has exacerbated rather than cured him of his nihilism. Nonetheless, he beings his story by explaining that he was, before his conversion, the “the worst kind of nihilist” (154). In the opening paragraphs of Fogle’s story, then, his thoughts about the path that has lead him to where he is are circuitous, meta thoughts, reflecting on their own capability and skipping across the surface of what they seek to describe like the taste of Tang.

And this condition that Fogle describes as he begins to tell his story is the condition that characterizes most of his life until he begins using Obetrol. He describes starting college, when all of his courses were “fuzzy and abstract and open to interpretation and then those interpretations were open to still more interpretations,” a fact that, he seems to imply, had the effect of making “the whole thing,” meaning higher education, a process of just going “through the motions” (155). All of the humanities courses that Fogle took “didn’t mean anything,” and so he dropped out and began working (155). However once he joined the workforce, he found that “after a while” he “couldn’t handle the boredom of the jobs, which were all unbelievably boring and
meaningless, and I’d quit and enroll someplace else and essentially try to start college over again” (155). Fogle is describing a dialectical process by which he became numb to both higher education and the working world, either of which might have seemed to offer, at any point, the promise of pleasure or the certainty of boredom. More important is the fact that Fogle grew bored with each, alternately, and one drove him to the other, repeatedly, a pattern that suggests more about the conditioned habit itself than about the nature of any one of the pursuits.

It’s during Fogle’s final stint in college, the one during which he changes majors from English to accounting that he is finally able to gain perspective on his life as a self-proclaimed “wastoid” and “nihilist” with the aid of Obetrol, the diet drug that he had been using recreationally. The scene in which Fogle has the out-of-body experience that allows him to see himself for what he is happens, appropriately, while he is passively consuming a television soap opera, As the World Turns. As Fogle watches and realizes that he is fact watching the world turn while watching As the World Turns, he is able to see himself from outside of himself and examine the life that he has chosen to lead; Obetrol allows him to metafictionalize his life, realizing that he “was nearly always the hero of any story or incident [he] ever told people” (214). It is shortly thereafter that he happens into an accounting class while looking for a study session for another course. There, he immediately becomes inspired by the clear and deliberate manner in which the accounting professor begins to deliver his lecture. As the professor describes the “heroic” work of accounting in a world where “boundaries are fixed, and most significant facts have been generated,” Fogle is drawn in enough to the accounting jargon that he hears and the reverent students taking notes that he remains in his seat throughout the class and

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thereafter changes his major to accounting (228-32). Unlike Hal and Gately, who are selected and required, respectively, to follow the moral systems that they try to adhere to in Jest, Fogle chooses accounting and later his career in the IRS. In the process, he learns not only to accept but to embrace boredom as a heroic pursuit.

Hamilton describes the Fogle chapter as a “spiritual autobiography,” while at the same time he notes that Fogle’s decision to become an accountant is “supremely pragmatic” because Fogle is, up to that point rather shiftless and in need of a vocation (171-73). Drawing on James, then, Hamilton explores Fogle’s decision to account as one that not only embraces boredom ultimately but one that was motivated by it, citing a “dialectical relationship between religion/transcendence and boredom/tedium” (175). However, Hamilton’s focus on passivity and its relationship to transcendence does not account for the active sense of “paying attention” to boredom stressed by David Francis Wallace, the text itself, and even Fogle, who has to train himself to become acclimated to “the sheer boredom of depreciation schedules,” among other things, in order to succeed at his chosen path (TPK 155).

The truly important part about Fogle’s narrative, then, is not necessarily that accounting is pragmatic or that he is able to learn to cope with boredom. Rather, what aligns his story with the concerns of David Francis Wallace and others in The Pale King is his choice to “pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find” (546). Fogle’s ability to choose is ultimately important to The Pale King’s metafictional project because even if Fogle is not in fact totally in charge of his fate and his choice as he would have us believe, he is convinced that he is. Fogle’s belief that he is in charge of his own

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19 This line is spoken by Shane Drinion, another IRS examiner, one whose powers of concentration actually allow him to levitate.
story, and narrating it for the purpose that he believe he is narrating is central to The Pale King’s larger interest in dialectical process because it suggests, as Jest does with Gately, that the form of belief can lead to the transcendence of social condition simply through habituation of that form. Fogle may or may not have been completely in control of his pragmatic decision to join the IRS, but, because he believes that he was he believes that the work of paying attention to boredom has helped him overcome being a wastoid, and so he has indeed transformed the material condition of his life to an important degree, even if beneath that transformation it is truly the social conditions that have inspired (or forced) him to account.

The World of The Pale King

Though I have suggested parallels between Gately’s relationship to his program, AA, and Fogle’s relationship to his, the IRS, the difference between the function of those programs for the characters with respect to the society in which they lives highlights the difference between Wallace’s conception of the world of Infinite Jest and the world of The Pale King. Underscoring this difference is the fact the novels are shaped by roughly the same period of postmodernity. The action of Jest is set post-millennium, but the narrative is dictated by historical events that take place in the 1990’s, such as the founding of O.N.A.N. and the inauguration of Subsidized Time, while the action of The Pale King takes place immediately prior to that, in the middle 1980’s, and portends a darkly bureaucratic future. In Jest, Gately needs AA to structure his life outside of the consumer culture of that forces such as O.N.A.N. and Subsidized Time support, but the IRS allows characters like David Francis Wallace and Fogle to assimilate into the world
of *The Pale King* rather than resist it. The assimilation of David Francis Wallace and Fogle is ultimately, far more sinister than Gately’s resistance, because in each of the novels society is depicted as a corrupted and corrupting system. Making the world of the *The Pale King*’s even more convincingly bankrupt than the society in *Jest* is Wallace’s investment in the real economic and political history of the 1980’s, even though key parts of that history are fictionalized. The narratives of David Francis Wallace and Fogle that I’ve elaborated above each shows how *The Pale King* depicts the economic imperative behind the choices of those character to assimilate into the ultimate engine of the society I’ve described, namely the revenue-generating machine of the IRS.

In “Trickle Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in *The Pale King,*” Marshall Boswell gives an account of the connection between the world the Wallace constructs in *The Pale King* and the 1980’s social history from which it borrows. Though I fervently disagree with Boswell’s claim that Wallace’s earlier two novels are “a-historical” and “obscure[] the historical contingency” of their plots, I agree that *The Pale King* is uniquely careful in its “reconstructed historical past” (209). Wallace makes the Reagan tax cuts of 1981 an explicit part of the conversation in hallways and elevators around Peoria’s IRS REC, elaborating the controversial conservatism that the cuts represented and their long-lasting effects on American society. Boswell goes so far as to claim the cuts are, today, “Year Zero of our current political morass” (213). But Wallace adds a fictional dimension to the debate about the tax cuts and the plot (to the extent that it exists) which aligns *The Pale King* with *Jest* and David Francis Wallace’s and Fogle’s work at the IRS with a truly dystopian political vision: the supplanting of intellectual human labor with automated machinery.
The novel’s ethical discourse surrounding the tax cuts themselves is made clearest in chapter 19 of the novel. In this section, DeWitt Glendenning and a number of less senior IRS employees ride an elevator and discuss the relationship between tax code and citizenship, or the individual and the society in which he or she lives, or, more simply, civics. The conversation is heady, though not necessarily coherent, and it has the effect of laying out a series of dialectical relationships that do not easily resolve themselves. The dialogue in the section is completely unattributed, though the sense is that several people are present, and they bring up relationships such as those between “liberal individualism” and “consumer capitalism,” between “obligation” and “moral responsibility,” between a production model of American democracy” and “something like a consumption model,” and between “the post-production capitalist” and, ultimately, “the death of civics” (135-146). Of course the conversation is purposefully incoherent, because it illustrates the difficulty in attributing a single intention or moral code or theory to something as fraught with complexities as tax code.

Among the voices, there are a few who claim that the entire conversation is both “depressing” and “boring” (144). In light of the David Francis Wallace and Fogle narratives, these voices of course suggest that because the conversation is boring it is in fact important and worth paying attention to. The Pale King, however, like Jest before it, does not suggest a single or simple solution to the problems that face, in this case, America. Hence the need in Jest and here in The Pale King to make these abstract and difficult philosophical questions concrete through imagining their material manifestation. The philosophical debate about the Reagan tax cuts therefore takes shape in the narrative
in the form of a technological threat to the good and civic work of interpreting and processing individual income tax filings.

The “Machines vs. people” note that Wallace makes to himself in order that he can shape the novel around its “broad arc,” suggests that the real threat is not either side of the debate that we hear in the elevator, but rather the absence of that debate, which would be the result of a machine takeover of income tax processing, totally eliminating the need for the examiners whose job it is to scrutinize the returns. Indeed, throughout *The Pale King*, one finds many suggestions that examiners are already, essentially, “data processors” (340) who must concentrate on “unbelievably meaningless and small” tasks (318); yet, the larger suggestion is that this work serves an important purpose not only for the government but for the individuals who perform it as well. For individuals such as David Francis Wallace and Fogle, paying attention to such boring work and committing to a life of accounting is necessary in order to give their lives meaning, and it certainly does have a function within the society as well, to collect revenue, but on its face it is not only dull and relatively unskilled but can also easily be replaced. The computer technology, therefore, that looms in the background of *The Pale King* as a potential replacement for humans, actually encourages humans to take its shape, to function as it does, and to make themselves valuable by striving to be as capable of processing uninteresting data as a computer is. I cite here again Wallace’s note about Fogle, who has found a string of numbers that he can recite to gain concentration enough to process forms at near-computer speed.

Aspects such as the human/computer competition within *The Pale King* have inspired Wilson Kaiser in “David Foster Wallace and Ethical Challenge of
Posthumanism” to argue that the ethical dimension of Wallace’s work represents a “movement away from what we call a standard humanist ethics” (54). In contrast to posthumanism, which traditionally sees the moment away from humanist ethics as one towards an ethics of human-machine hybridity, a theory Kaiser notes certainly has some purchase on the narrative of The Pale King, he argues that “Wallace’s ethics consists of affinities within a network of possibilities rather than sweeping claims about self and other” (54). Kaiser’s notion of Wallace’s “affinity” ethics fits well with my argument of the function of the threat of computer takeover in The Pale King because rather than a synthesis of human and machine, I argue instead that the human/computer competition for work in The Pale King is simply a symptom of a larger development in the society depicted in the novel. The development of the computer IRS examiners is, since Wallace keeps it just outside of the pages of the novel, only one way to suggest the still-evolving forms that will shape a society of the future and leave behind its own products as well as citizens. Human and computers will not merge and become hybridized; rather, they will continue to be in opposition and in the instances where they intersect their relationship will take a dialectical form.

Ultimately, as a novel set in the near-past The Pale King asks us to consider how its narrative informs the present. Francis Wallace and Fogle, as two human who adapt to work within an organization such as the IRS, which is tending toward a closer working relationship between humans and computers, are figures who can stand in for us today, in contemporary American culture, in a small window of time (perhaps now elapsed) between the 1980s and the world that a novel such as Infinite Jest projects, where computers, such as the Teleputer, haven’t melded with our biological form but have
become programmable conduits for the delivery of many of our needs and the primary medium through which we work and engage in the social sphere. *The Pale King*, then, represents Wallace’s attempt to show what comes before the future of his first two novels and what kind of attitude and approach to the world is necessary in order to cope with its continuing advance. Returning to the question of form, I argue that *The Pale King*, even if Wallace had lived to finish it, truly would have needed to be his messiest and most incomplete novel, because describing the near-past of the contemporary moment with a degree of fidelity to history requires portraying a still-developing phenomenon known as the postmodern condition.
CONCLUSION

At many points during the course of writing these pages, I had to ask myself what my entire project was about, and the questions that I asked myself at those times were complicated by the fact that, as I was writing, the project was changing. Though some of the fundamental aspects of the project have been in place from the beginning of my writing, more has changed than has stayed the same, and this is clearest to me when I look at the draft I submitted to my committee members fifteen months ago in the spring of 2014. That draft contained an introduction, versions of the first three chapters, and an outline of the fourth chapter, not a single part of which hasn’t been completely revised and reshaped; in fact, with the exception of chapter three, I’ve actually completed deleted and rewritten the whole in the last fifteen months. The result is, of course, the draft that comprises the preceding pages, which I find much improved but which I still see in flux, in the process of transformation.

Rather than recount in the detail where the project has been, I’d like to focus on where it is now and where it is going. As a single-author dissertation, and also a single-author dissertation that focuses on one dimension—novels—of the author’s output, the chapters above each discuss the novels on which they focus in considerable detail. The other aspect of each chapter that is present in the project’s current form is the connection between my arguments about Wallace’s novels and the most current and compelling criticism on those novels. A third dimension of the chapters, and the one that no doubt will become more developed in the project’s next iteration is that connection between all that I argue about Wallace with respect to the attendant criticism on his novels and the
contemporary discourses on poststructuralism, postmodern metafiction, postmodern consumer culture, and the now historical aspects of postmodernity.

It is on this last point, that of the now historical aspects of postmodernity, that I’d like to focus my thoughts for the purposes of this conclusion, mainly because it is on the moving target of postmodern history that much of my argument and analysis has tried to aim. I call postmodern history a moving target not only because like all history it is constantly under revision, but, more importantly than that, postmodern history, because it is the most recent period other than the contemporary generally cited by writers and scholars interested in modern history, is also always in the process of absorbing the contemporary. On this point, I cite a recent review passed on to me by my dissertation director, “The Presence of Postmodernism in Contemporary American Literature,” written by Mathias Nilges and published this spring in American Literary History, wherein Nilges claims that though the “macrotheoretical models” of postmodern theory, those of Fredric Jameson and David Harvey, both continue to structure our thinking about the postmodernity at the same time that their focus on the now classic postmodern American culture of 1960s and 1970s points toward reification and development of different aspects of that culture in the 1980s or the 1990s (186). In short, as postmodern history goes on, it is now possible to identify a middle period of postmodern development different from the 1960s and 1970s and as well from the contemporary decades of this millennium.

Of course it is this now distinguishable middle period in which Wallace lived most of his adult life and wrote most of his fiction, and so it will make sense, in a future iteration of the arguments herein to take into account this new stratification of
postmodern history which I can only assume will become further defined in the coming years. Thus, it might be possible to say, that for all of Wallace’s interest in the classic ideas of postmodernism and postmodernity, for all of his effort to predict future developments in American culture by projecting his novels into the future, it may very well be the case that his writing ultimately comes to rest in this early-middle period of postmodern literary production, one that, partly defined by his novels, will be regarded as a period of literary production with concerns about representing the past and future, ethical choice, and economic determination in such a way as I have argued in these chapters.

A particularly telling moment in where I imagine the discourse on postmodern history might go is crystalized in one of Nilges’s short analyses of the slipperiness of periodization in the postmodern era. With respect to postmodernism in the arts, Nilges writes,

[W]e are faced with a situation that suggests that postmodernism is not simply contemporaneous with postmodernity. Instead, postmodernism corresponds to postmodernity in its incipient stage. Once the material structures we associate with postmodernity rise to dominance, culture begins to depart from the forms we ordinarily associate with postmodernism. (191)

I refer to the above dynamic as slippery with respect to periodization because, of course, as culture departs from one form and takes another, the very material structures that define a period also change, I would argue, in a dialectical fashion. The 1990s commercial that appeals to baby boomers through the use of 1960s music that Wallace
cites in “Pluram” is just one example of such a development. That is to say, that culture and materiality or materiality and culture, existing as they do in a perpetual exchange of forms, is truly reified only once one can look back on a past form from the vantage of an evolved form that has resulted from the same conditions on which one is looking back.

It is this historical aesthetic that I hope to research leading up to the next iteration of this project, so that I can connect a deeper historical sense of the postmodern era to each of my readings of Wallace’s novels and better connect his work to the contemporary work being done on the subject with which his novels are occupied.
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