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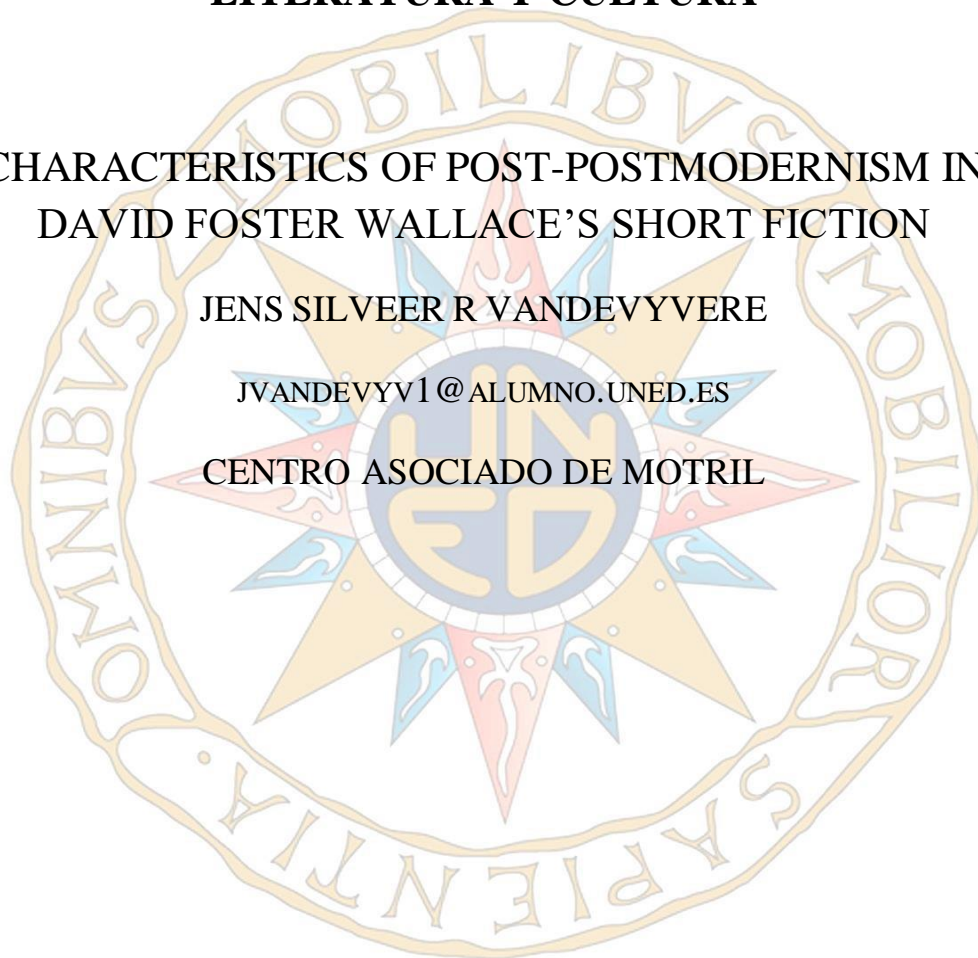
**GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES: LENGUA,
LITERATURA Y CULTURA**

**CHARACTERISTICS OF POST-POSTMODERNISM IN
DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S SHORT FICTION**

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Abstract

In this paper, the author analyses the defining features of the post-postmodern movement in contemporary U.S. literature in relation to the main tenets of postmodernism, out of which it developed. These characteristics are subsequently explored in three of David Foster Wallace's short stories, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way", "Octet" and "Good Old Neon", in order to show how they may be read from a post-postmodern point of view. His use of metafiction, in particular, is examined and contrasted in these stories to highlight the post-postmodern turn away from the exhausted self-referentiality that has characterised the conventionalised postmodern aesthetic.

Keywords: David Foster Wallace, (post-)postmodernism, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way", "Octet", "Good Old Neon"

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“I’m aware it ends up seeming somewhat lame. Which in fact it wasn’t, but I
won’t pretend it was fully authentic or genuine, either”
(David Foster Wallace)¹

1. Introduction

David Foster Wallace was an American author of novels, short stories and essays. He was of enormous literary importance around the turn of the 21st century and he continues to have a loyal audience of readers around the world. Wallace was born in New York in 1962, just as postmodernism was starting to take off in America. Growing up with such towering figures as Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, Wallace followed in their footsteps. As he matured as a writer, however, he started to set himself against the prevailing cultural mood of the age. Today, he is widely recognised as having been one of the leading voices of a new generation of writers who started to envision a move beyond postmodernism.

In order to properly evaluate any artistic movement, it is crucial to understand the historical and socio-cultural backgrounds out of which it grows. In the aftermath of the Second World War, widespread belief in the idea that rational ideas would always inform and propel humankind forward collapsed. For Americans, this crisis of faith was further compounded by the events that occurred on November 22, 1963. In this paper, two external factors are identified as quintessential contributors to the postmodern movements. The Kennedy assassination forms the historical constituent. The other one, technological as well as socio-cultural, is (the rise of) television culture. In this historical context, paranoia spread rapidly among the American public. The 1960s, in particular, imbued the general public with the sense that no narrative seemed able to rationally explain events any longer. This vacuum of narrative sense of direction had a profound impact on people’s sense of self. As the national myth began to lose its import, individuals became more alienated, lonely, and their identities fractured, vague. It is in this context that postmodernism, as an inherently sceptical cultural movement, was born. At the

¹ Wallace, David. “Good Old Neon.” *Oblivion*. London: Abacus, 2005. pp. 175.

same time, and inseparably intertwined with these events, television positioned itself as the main promulgator of meaning as it started to fill the aforementioned void. Certainly, early literary postmodernists did not fail to understand that television would come to represent a significant competitor for the attention of the public, and consequently, cultural relevance. But as they started pointing out the dangers of television in their work, especially through effective uses of irony directed at their naïve counterpart, TV in turn appropriated these techniques in apparent self-deprecation. Thus, popular culture developed an incredible reflex to absorb danger seemingly as soon as it appeared. This posed, and continues to this day, in fact, to pose, serious difficulties for contemporary literature as it was increasingly being robbed of its ability to become dangerous. Its cultural irrelevance appeared inevitable, and, soon, a conventionalised form of postmodernism appeared in literature (full of the now futile, not to mention weary, irony) which seemed capable of little more than repeatedly pointing out the same diagnoses by means of increasingly experimental linguistic games, to a mainly academic audience. These matters, among others, were thoroughly explored by David Foster Wallace in his 1993 essay “E Unibus Puram”, which will inform and enlighten a large part of this paper’s research.

In the essay and in many interviews Wallace gave throughout his life, he very clearly tried to distance himself from this conventionalised postmodern literature.² In one of the most significant of these interviews, he says:

If I have a real enemy, a patriarch for my patricide, it’s probably Barth and Coover and Burroughs, even Nabokov and Pynchon. Because, even though their self-consciousness and irony and anarchism served valuable purposes, were indispensable for their times, their aesthetic’s absorption by U.S. commercial culture has had appalling consequences for writers and everyone else. The [“E Unibus Pluram”] essay’s really about how poisonous TV postmodern irony’s become. (McCaffery 146)

² What Wallace himself called “the crank turners”: “after the pioneers always come the crank turners, the little gray people who take the machines other have built and just turn the crank” (McCaffery 135). Whereas he considered “early Barth and Coover” examples of authors who used “formal innovation in the service of an original vision” (McCaffery 145), “the crank turners” include T.C. Boyle, William Vollmann, Lorrie Moore and Mark Leyner (McCaffery 147).

As van den Akker et al. clarify, “it is a conventionalised form of postmodernism that stands accused” (106), and Wallace particularly reacts against metafiction and irony. At the end of the same interview, he concludes:

We’ve seen that you can break any or all of the rules without getting laughed out of town, but we’ve also seen the toxicity that anarchy for its own sake can yield. It’s often useful to dispense with standard formulas, of course, but it’s just as often valuable and brave to see what can be done within a set of rules (McCaffery 149)

It is this set of rules that he, and a whole generation of likeminded post-postmodern authors, are trying to outline in their work. However, to this day there is relatively little consensus among critics as to what constitutes this post-postmodern movement.

Savvas and Coffman, referencing Linda Hutcheon, expand on this lack of common ground as follows:

The lack of clarity is a problem of some concern, for the inability to establish the terminology and general thrust of critical projects relating to contemporary literary efforts hinders not only the critical enterprise, but also, and more importantly, the dissemination of critical insights to a wider audience. (197)

It is here that I consider the value of this research paper to lie. In this essay, I will argue that David Foster Wallace’s short fiction displays characteristics of post-postmodernism. The main objectives emanating from this thesis statement are manifold but can be split into two main categories: theoretic and literary objectives. In pursuing these objectives, which are outlined in more detail below, I am attempting to contribute some “clarity” to the surrounding debate. In pinpointing key characteristics of postmodernism and subsequently providing an overview of how these characteristics are reinterpreted by subsequent authors, “the terminology and general thrust of [the] critical projects” of both postmodernism and post-postmodernism should become clear. Analysing these features in David Foster Wallace’s short fiction, moreover, will ground these features in textual evidence and hopefully contribute to “the dissemination of critical insights”.

In the theoretical section of this paper, I turn to a several well-known authors and scholars in the field to determine first the context in which

postmodernism developed and, second, in which ways the literature responded to said context. In short, postmodernism's main theoretical arguments include a deep-rooted distrust of structured narratives and the search for meaning that can be inferred from them. There are experiments with form; abundant metafictional strategies; a loss of history and external references, which arguably limits its potential for political activism; a divided sense of self, and so on. The overall tone is one of doom and gloom. In the second part of this section, I show that post-postmodernism can be understood as an evolution from within postmodernism, which repurposes postmodernist techniques in order to espouse a more optimistic vision without dismissing its main theoretical arguments. There is a tentative reappraisal of realist modes of representation and the weary postmodern irony is reconciled; postmodern metafictional strategies are redirected outwards to restore connections with the real and the historical referent; new, less restricted ways are depicted to uncover meaning for the individual. Overall, human interconnectedness is posited as an alternative to postmodern solipsism and existential angst to restore empathic bonds with the reader and regain literature's cultural and political relevance in a fractured 21st-century world of aggressive capitalism and revolutionised by (information) technology.

In the second half of this paper, I analyse three of David Foster Wallace's short stories: "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way" from his first story collection *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), "Octet" from his second collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and "Good Old Neon" from his third and final collection *Oblivion* (2004). These stories were chosen because they are thoroughly representative of David Wallace's work as a whole, as well as the story collections to which they belong. Moreover, they can all be viewed as "manifesto-like stories Wallace wrote in which the problem of solipsism is very explicitly linked to postmodern metafictional writing and the style of hyper self-conscious thinking associated with it" (van den Akker et al. 106). As such, they lend themselves to comparative and contrastive analyses of the stories themselves as well as other, more easily discernible postmodern texts. In these analyses, I analyse specific elements of the literary texts, in particular Wallace's use of metafiction, in light of the conclusions reached in the first section. I

evaluate the use of metafiction, the use of irony, themes and symbols, among others, and the ends to which they are employed in these texts. I conclude that David Wallace ultimately manages, successfully, to turn his main literary device, metafiction, outwards, as opposed to his postmodern predecessors. I consider the short stories analysed above to belong to a post-postmodern literary movement that evolves from within postmodernism. Specifically, I view "Westward", from his first collection, as a postmodern text for failing to escape its own metafictional self-referentiality. Some early post-postmodern characteristics are pointed out, however. In his later stories "Octet" and "Good Old Neon", Wallace reunites more entirely many post-postmodern characteristics. Metafiction and irony are connected to the real, to the need for human interconnection as a cure for solipsism, and thus the search for meaning is no longer as restricted as in many postmodern works. Poststructuralist theory is never ignored and the fictional status of the stories is not denied, but reality can now be found *in* (post-)postmodern fiction. Generally, I consider David Wallace to be a truly life-affirming author who, through an empathetic bond between the reader and his work, looks to art as a way to alleviate solipsism and loneliness. New ways of human interconnectedness are indeed advocated for throughout.

2. Theory

First of all, I will turn to contemporary literary criticism to define some relevant characteristics of postmodernism and to get an idea of how post-postmodernism attempts to move beyond these boundaries. In which terms should this evolution be articulated? Does post-postmodernism break with its predecessor entirely or does it rather build on it? Is this shift easily discernable? What are the main characteristics of post-postmodernism? What labels are currently in use to represent this? However, none of this is without considerable controversy, so I think it is important to be clear on this from the outset and to point out that the academic approaches I am borrowing for my research may not always be testament to general consensus. The reason I have opted for the term post-postmodernism in this essay is because of its relatively minor connotative weight, which allows for the broadest possible theoretic approach. Many other terms are currently in use in academic circles, which I will revisit in detail in the section about post-postmodernism.

2.1. Postmodernism

In order to achieve answers to my theoretic objectives, it is important to understand the fundamentals of postmodernism first. Key to this is understanding the historical moment out of which the movement grows. The aforementioned DeLillo identifies the assassination of President John F. Kennedy as the starting point of an American postmodern world. In his novel *Libra*, he examines how this event created a widespread feeling of danger, of randomness and ambiguity for many Americans. If the events of World War II had already inaugurated a shift from rationality to a period of irrationality, the aftermath of the assassination in combination with the rise of TV culture, to which I will return in greater detail in the next section, showed how competing narratives could no longer explain what had really happened. In trying to fill in this gap, everything seemed possible and this led to paranoia. Americans started to believe there were secret manipulations of history. This also had a profound impact on people's sense of self. No longer able to unite behind the national myth, they became more alienated, lonely, and their identities fractured, vague. In short, there was a sense of something unravelling, a loss of narrative thread.

Consequently, as two of the most influential critics on postmodernism, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Linda Hutcheon, show, postmodernism is inherently sceptical of any narrative that attempts to impose meaning on reality. In order to tell stories, postmodernists build up narrative structures, only to then tear them down again. Their literature abounds with form experiments. Overarching narrative structures, like the realist mode of representation, are rejected in favour of temporal distortion, fragmentation and non-linear narratives. This draws the reader's attention to their stories' own artificiality. They are making the case that in fact no reality can ever be unfiltered and that our understanding of the world is equally artificial. There is no knowable objective truth. Any search for meaning has to be incomplete by its very nature. It is built up through layer upon layer of distorting narratives. As will become clear below, this is especially relevant to any discussion about the post-postmodern turn.

Lyotard defined postmodernism as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv), that is, the breaking down of overarching narratives that seek to impose meaning on our lives. Life is essentially unknowable and no story can lay claim to legitimating knowledge. "The narrative function is losing its functors," he writes, "its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal" (xxiv). Nicholas Frangipane convincingly argues that postmodern literature attempts to expose the extent to which fiction, and the narrative form, shape our interpretations of the events taking place around us, and it stands to reason then that "much postmodernist metafiction seems committed to reminding us of the danger of creating stories" (524). On this point, Hutcheon writes that "Totalizing narrative representation has (...) been considered by some critics as the defining characteristic of the novel as a genre, ever since the beginnings in the overt controlling and ordering (and fictionalizing) of Cervantes and Sterne" (60). However, this radically changes in postmodernist discourse, where there is a "paradoxical desire for and suspicion of totalization" (60), and so it both "inscribes and subverts" this desire. In other words, in writing postmodernist fiction, novelists need to simultaneously create a narrative and deconstruct it.

Another scholar who I think will prove particularly relevant throughout this research paper is Adam Kelly. In "Beginning with Postmodernism", he pinpoints

three key aspects of postmodernism with which subsequent post-postmodern novelists will need to grapple. They are: the metafictional nature of postmodern literature, filled with references to other works of fiction; its loss of history, in the sense of a fixed frame of reference which may be beyond dispute; and, its reliance on theory, resulting in a lack of external references outside of the text. These aspects are heavily interrelated.

Firstly, networks of allusions are ubiquitous in postmodern metafiction, and, within a form of artistic expression which constantly needs to draw attention to itself, as mentioned above, this should come as no surprise. In other words, intertextuality is an important feature of postmodernism. This may manifest itself in many different ways. There may be references to other literary works, evaluations of other works, parodying of style or content of other works or genres, and so on. David Foster Wallace's "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way", as a homage/parody of John Barth's earlier postmodern metafictional story "Lost in the Funhouse", is a perfect example.

Secondly, postmodernism exists in a symbiotic relationship with the heavily mediated information society. This brings about some specific anxieties. In Kelly's words, there is a "disconnection from historical time (loss of history) associated with the postmodern spatial turn." As mentioned above, "any claim to represent an objective historical reality becomes the subject of satire and subversion" ("Beginning" 395). Linda Hutcheon identifies this as historiographic metafiction, a genre of historical fiction within postmodernism, in which intertextuality plays a key part. In traditional historical narratives, the existence of an objective material reality outside of the text is taken for granted. This is not the case in historiographic metafiction. Instead, meaning is constantly deferred by references to other artistic or historical works. Once again, the mediations in the construction of history and its resulting artificiality are laid bare. Or, to state it in her words, "It implies that, like fiction, history constructs its object (...). The past really did exist, but we can only know it today through its textual traces (...)" (75). Moreover, in her view, "postmodernism and politics make curious, if inevitable, bedfellows" (2). After all, the act of reviewing history through a newly acquired awareness of its manufactured nature may be political in and of itself.

However, whereas the Canadian theorist believes the political is deeply embedded in these metanarratives, Fredric Jameson, another pillar of postmodern criticism, claims the opposite is true: “the spatial turn in contemporary art undermines the possibility of a politics” (“Beginning” 396). In his Marxist criticism, he blames this inherent relativity and consequent moral and political indifference for what he viewed as postmodernism's inability to offer constructive alternatives to society's problems (ix). This is a major source of concern in post-postmodernism.

And finally, the third sense in which post-postmodernists evolve from their precursors is related to both previous points: “they begin with the academic construction of American literature and society specifically as ‘postmodern’—in other words, they begin with the phenomenon of ‘theory.’” (Kelly, “Beginning” 396). This is of special importance in this paper since the lack of external references outside of the text and the resulting emphasis on the material word has been attested to repeatedly by Wallace in both his essay and fiction writing.

All of this should demonstrate how postmodernism devised literary strategies to interpret, and in effect respond to, the rapidly changing circumstances of the political and cultural period. As stated in the opening paragraph, this context did not only suggest an unravelling at a societal level. It profoundly affected people at an individual level as well. I turn to Jameson for an analysis of how postmodernism deals with the individual subject, in particular with regard to the idea of expression, traced from its modernist conception to its postmodernist equivalent. This will be essential in understanding the post-postmodern reinterpretation, to which I will return.

In his book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson introduces what he calls “the waning of affect in postmodern culture” (10). He takes Edward Munch’s painting *The Scream* as “a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation” (11) and he uses it as shorthand for the transformation of the aesthetic of expression itself. The very concept of expression, he argues, implies a separation within the subject of the internal emotion and the external

communication of that feeling. In poststructuralist theory,³ however, hermeneutic models of this kind are discredited on account of their totalising ideological nature. Thus, in the postmodern world, the modernist concept of expression is stripped of its depth and is replaced by a multiplicity of surfaces, which we have referred to above as intertextuality (13). “All of which suggests some more general historical hypothesis: namely, that concepts such as anxiety and alienation (...) are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern” (14). Instead, they give way to the subject’s fragmentation. This brings us to the “death” of the subject itself and the “*decentering* of that formerly centered subject or psyche” (15). What Jameson calls “the waning of affect” (10) refers to the consequences of this “decentering”:

As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. (15)

As a result, we find in much of postmodern literature, characters with a divided sense of self, a detached awareness on the part of characters of their being narrated, or a self-awareness of their being represented by technology, and so on.

To sum up, postmodernism’s main theoretical arguments include first and foremost a deep-rooted distrust of structured narratives and the search for meaning that can be inferred from them. Other characteristics emanate from this principle to a greater or lesser extent. There are experiments with form to make up for this scepticism; metafictional allusions to postmodern texts (and intertextuality in general); a loss of history and no escape from textuality, the material word and theory, which arguably limits its potential for political activism; a divided sense of self and a detached self-awareness on the part of characters of their being narrated or represented by technology, and so on. Basically, as Kelly states, “grappling with postmodernism inevitably means grappling with Jameson’s now-canonical formulations—the death of affect, the loss of history,

³ Poststructuralism here simply refers to the theoretical wing of the postmodern movement.

the fragmentation of the subject, (...) and so on” (“Beginning” 398). Understandably, the overall tone is one of doom and gloom.

2.2. Post-postmodernism

It was the late David Foster Wallace himself who examined one of the major contributing factors to the rise of postmodernism in the 1960s, TV culture. As stated above, television has had an enormous influence on life and contemporary fiction, and in his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction”, he eloquently articulated his views on it. In typical Wallace fashion, we are faced with an ambitious look into much more far-reaching effects on culture than are necessary for us to explore here. However, his views on the evolution from (late) realism to postmodernism and what he himself calls “post-postmodernism” or “Image-Fiction” (“Unibus” 171) are insightful in order to try and understand some of the perceived limitations inherent in postmodernism and indeed to be able to evaluate his own and other more widespread attempts to move beyond these boundaries.

In short, Wallace points out that before modernism, and possibly even before then, many realist fiction writers were already using what would later come to be labelled as TV techniques in their fiction. Stream of consciousness and montage are prime examples. After the postmodern turn, authors would no longer limit themselves to the use of these techniques, but would explicitly mention and examine the practices and influence of TV watching. Early generation postmodernists like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo would make use of irony to critique and rebel against what they saw as the dangerous effects of television and all that it entails in contemporary culture. According to Wallace, however, TV culture would come to adopt this irreverent irony in a wave of apparent in-jokes at its own expense to assuage viewers’ concerns about their compulsive watching and to bridge the gap between what audiences wanted to see and what they thought they should want to see, which finally rendered all criticism directed at it futile. And it is precisely this adoption of irreverent rebellion in counterculture by the mainstream that has led postmodernist fiction to the end of the line. Later postmodernists, or “Image-Fiction” (“Unibus” 171) writers, as Wallace calls them, responded to their

precursors by reimagining what human life might be like beyond the lenses, with varying degrees of success. In other words, they returned to a kind of new realism, but instead of making the strange seem familiar, they now set out to do the opposite. When every world event is never more than a click away, everything becomes familiar. The challenge now lays in making the familiar strange. DeLillo's third novel *Great Jones Street* and of course Wallace's own "My Appearance" from his first short story collection *Girl with Curious Hair* are good examples, as they do exactly that. The former centres on its rock star narrator, Bucky Wunderlick, and the latter is about an actress who is nervous about appearing on David Letterman. But a key problem with many of these writings, according to Wallace, is that irony, long ago rendered ineffective, is still being used as a tool for rebellion. Irony's greatest power lies in its ability to uncover hypocrisy and deconstruct narratives. But this irreverent rebel can only bring short-term insights. In the long run, it only serves to become a better tyrant. For how do you rebel against something that is constantly pointing out its own hypocrisies? In a quote by Lewis Hyde which Wallace often repeated: "Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage" ("Unibus" 183). At the heart of postmodernist deconstruction there seems to be an inability to create constructive alternatives.

It is evident from the ideas expressed in this essay from 1993 that Wallace considers the postmodern techniques of metafiction and, especially, irony to be exhausted at this point. And he lays the blame for this squarely on the evolution of television culture. These ideas can be placed within a wider movement taking shape in the 1990s. Many critics and writers start to analyse the failings of postmodernism and start looking for spaces beyond it. At its heart though, the criticism all converges on its ineffectiveness, its lack of weight, its narcissism. William T. Vollmann writes about "games of stifling breathlessness" (358) in his essay entitled "American Writing Today: A Diagnosis of the Disease". As I have already stated in the introduction, there is still much disagreement among critics about many aspects of this new wave of postmodernism. Pinpointing the exact endpoint of the movement is not easy.

However, what is clear, is that, in the words of Stephen J. Burn in his book *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*,

the 1990s appears to have been a transitional decade for American fiction, torn between the emergence of a generation of writers seeking to move beyond postmodernism and the prolonged vitality of many writers—Barth, Gaddis, Pynchon, Coover—associated with the original rise of the movement. (*Jonathan* 9)

As far as nomenclature is concerned, I have opted for the generic post-postmodernism, as stated in the introduction. The term allows for investigation into some of the most significant aspects of post-postmodernism without privileging any particular critical perspective. In keeping the reference to postmodernism, the term also suggests setting itself against the failings of the former. However, there are indeed numerous literary-critical approaches, some of which go right to the heart of what is at stake in post-postmodernism. Irmtraud Huber's "literature of reconstruction" (11) is a prime example for self-explanatory reasons. I quote Kelly when he suggests that "whether, in classifying the fiction that began to surface in the late 1980s and 1990s and has continued into the new millennium, critics favour "hybrid fiction" (Grassian), "American literary globalism" (Adams), "cosmodernism" (Moraru), "late postmodernism" (Green) or "post-postmodernism" (Burn)" ("Beginning" 392), it is clear that criticism on the subject is firmly underway, and little consensus exists. Each comes at it from a different angle. The separate distinctions which each of these terms entails, remain outside the scope of this paper and for reasons of brevity I shall not go into them further.

Turning to the main aspects of post-postmodernism, I will argue that, broadly speaking, Wallace's essay effectively outlines this new American literature. At its core, post-postmodernism does indeed come to reappraise realist modes of representation as it adopts a new naivety in order to reconcile the weariness of irony. I will show how it repurposes metafictional strategies; how it attempts to restore its connection to the historical referent; how it develops new, less restricted ways to uncover meaning for the individual beyond the postmodern fragmentation of the self; and how it alters its relationship with technologies of representation. In short, post-postmodernism tries to regain its constructive power and to restore the connection between the

reader and the text by pitting its philosophy of optimism and human interconnectedness against the solipsism of its predecessor.

One of the biggest culprits of the exhaustion of postmodernism, according to Wallace, is its use of irony. Not only is it an ineffective tool beyond its ability to deconstruct, but its capacity for absorption of criticism makes it extremely hard to fight back against. This problem is reflected by Robert Rebein in his 2001 book *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists* when he writes the following:

Insofar as metafiction was a response to a supposedly naïve view of language and reality, isn't the abandonment of self-conscious narration in our time a doomed and retrograde attempt to return to the days of unproblematic mimesis? To put the matter another way, isn't the writer of such neorealist fare pretending, in essence, that poststructuralist theory never happened? (17)

But the fact remains that “some sort of revitalization of realism has taken place” (17) among contemporary writers. Postmodernism, as seen in the previous section, in effect accepted the charge that reality could not be successfully translated into literature by mimicking it. Instead, it opted to draw attention to its own artificiality in order to expose our understanding of reality itself. In “American Fiction after Postmodernism”, Savvas and Coffman show how post-postmodernists avoid any such strategies (198).

As Cristina Garrigós explains in “Realism and Postmodernism: the Fiction of Jonathan Franzen and Richard Powers” (2016), this revitalised post-postmodern realism should not be viewed as a rejection of postmodernism. Many postmodernist strategies are preserved in fact, especially its intertextuality. And of course, no literature would be able to claim relevance nowadays without addressing in one way or another the unstable reality of our information society, of our rampant corporatism, widespread political terrorism and the consequent need for the written word to constantly compete for attention with new media. In Stephen Burn's words, post-postmodernists are “informed by the postmodernist critique of the naïve realist belief that language can be a true mirror of reality, and yet, they are suspicious of the logical climax of this critique” (*Jonathan* 9). So how do they reappraise realism as a mode of representation then? They return to the real. They bring back genuine narrative

structures and they return to a search for meaning, however incomplete. Post-postmodern realism is no longer abstract, and formal experiments take a back seat to social engagement. In order to reconnect with the reader, values of humanism are returned to the fore and their work, crucially, is characterised by empathy, towards their characters, and in regard to ethical and political positions. They underline the effects of contemporary life on individuals and the challenges this presents. And popular themes such as family life, dealt with extensively by Wallace in *Infinite Jest*, gender, race, and so on, reflect this new interest.

In essence, they go back to telling stories. Early on in *Infinite Jest*, after Hal Incandenza ends up in an emergency room after a breakdown, he muses about how it will all go down,

It will be someone blue-collar and unlicensed, though, inevitably—a nurse's aide with quick-bit nails, a hospital security guy, a tired Cuban orderly who addresses me as *jou*—who will, looking down in the middle of some kind of bustled task, catch what he sees as my eye and ask So yo then man what's *your* story? (17)

What is important here, is that it implicitly recognises the power of storytelling. To get to anything meaningful, human beings need to tell stories. The nature of what is real may prevent us from ever really accessing it, and this fundamental unknowability of the complete story is pointed out in various ways, but, as Frangipane demonstrates, they will then “tell their stories anyway, justifying their existence by pointing to the things that narrative can give us, such as hope and satisfaction, or empathy” (527). Again I turn to *Infinite Jest* to illustrate this point. Although it is true that we never learn the true nature of what happens to the eponymous tape, a fact entirely consistent with postmodernism's scepticism towards closed narratives, there is a reasonable level of coherence in that there are several plausible explanations available to us. There are plenty of worthwhile lessons to take away from the (nevertheless incomplete) search for meaning. The book still “inscribes and subverts,” but subversion is only the means to an end here, and not an end in itself.

To sum up these ideas about the revitalisation of realism within post-postmodernism, I have argued that as opposed to breaking entirely with

postmodern thought, contemporary writers maintain its epistemological scepticism and continue to use many of its narrative techniques. But, in order to give literature back its social engagement and to restore the connection with the reader, realist modes of representation are preferred, meaning more rigid narrative structures, comprehensive themes and psychological character studies. Human interconnectedness is posited as an alternative to postmodern existential angst. Or, in Wallace's own words: "Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it" (McCaffery 131). This is clearly a much more optimistic outlook. This new approach may still draw attention to its limitations, but whereas postmodernism's formal experiments and intrinsic relativity often mean sacrificing narrative, the post-postmodernists choose to centre on it and what it means to be human instead.

For David Foster Wallace, and as expressed by Mark Natchr in Wallace's "Westward", this meant to write a story "that stabs you in the heart" (332), to risk the scorn of the hip, irreverent crowd. And so his writing came to be seen as "the standard-bearer of an emergent 'New Sincerity' in American writing (...) seen as an attempt to move beyond the irony of postmodernist fiction, and to counter the 'waning of affect' that such fiction effected" (Savvas and Coffman 199). As Adam Kelly notes though, "Mark does not yet possess the tools to do it (as Wallace, at that early stage in his career, arguably also did not)" ("Beginning" 414).

Metafiction, then, does not disappear as a literary technique after the post-postmodern turn. This is of course abundantly clear in the work of David Foster Wallace himself, an author obsessed with self-reference. Think of the many David Wallaces who appear throughout his fiction. Not only in *The Pale King*, but in his short stories, such as "Good Old Neon", as well. The charge that was generally levelled at this metafictional device was that it had no depth and that its references were mainly to other postmodern texts with little or no relevance to the general public. Heide Zeigler, undoubtedly another of those early critics to signal the end of postmodernism, famously warned of its tendency to "degenerate into mere playfulness, while self-reflexivity can quickly

turn into narcissism” in the early 1990s (7). Post-postmodernists vary considerably in the degree to which they employ intertextuality and they repurpose metafictional devices in different ways.

Wallace, as will be made clear in the analysis of the corpus below, will attempt a kind of meta-metafiction. Two other authors are particularly relevant to mention alongside him here, not only because they were contemporaries of Wallace, but because they are every bit as committed as he was to pushing beyond postmodernism. They are Richard Powers and Jonathan Franzen. In his essay entitled “The End of Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium”, Stephen Burn argues that while, previously, intertextuality was mainly self-referential in that it referred to other artistic or literary texts, Powers utilises it to show “how art is situated in what critics have called an ecological relationship with other disciplines” (“The End” 227), such as molecular biology, computer programming, music, and so on. Burn continues:

Although the postmodern artist is commonly stereotyped as fascinated only with narcissistic works of increasing irrelevance to the rest of society, Powers is concerned with developing a conception of art that is predicated upon collaboration and human connection. (“The End” 228)

Franzen, on the other hand, while also seeking alternate ends for metafiction, chooses an altogether different path. Powers’ referential patterns are an essential part of his conception of post-postmodern literature, but Franzen’s “are optional extras that a reader might play with, should they choose to, rather than an organic element of the text itself” (“The End” 232).

It was Franzen himself who signalled the beginning of a move away from postmodernism in this well-known quote from his 1996 essay “I’ll Be Doing More of the Same”: “an era of (critically privileged) formal innovation is coming to an end, and (...) the time has come for form’s dialectical counterparts, content and context, to return as the vectors of the new” (38). He goes on to clarify that by a renewal of content, he means a dismissal, on the part of young writers, of (the subject of) media technology. Franzen’s disdain for technology is well-documented, but it is fair to say that media technology has not been taken off the agenda in post-postmodern writings. I will expand on this below.

However, his cry for the re-examination of “old content in new contexts” (38), in other words, the recovery of the loss of history in postmodernism, is a key point of the post-postmodern manifesto.

Which brings us to the points Adam Kelly made in this regard, and which I recounted in the previous section. Here is what he considers to be post-postmodernism’s inheritance from their predecessors:

in order to depict our present era as offering historical and political possibilities, one has to understand the world depicted by postmodern fiction—which is still, in many of its facets, the recognizable world facing the post-postmodernists— as itself historical, as the outcome of a historical process, and as capable of historical understanding. And one must do so while taking on board the forms and theoretical insights of postmodern fiction, and of the theory that grew up alongside it in the post-1960s academy. (“Beginning” 396)

In other words, and tying this in with the key ideas cited previously, if post-postmodern art is to retrieve its historical and political potential, it needs to put postmodern theory, and its metafictional narrative techniques in particular, to different uses. We have seen how Fredric Jameson lambasted postmodernism for its loss of history as a result of its exchanging an “interest in the referent represented for an interest in the representation itself” (Savvas and Coffman 200). This lack of external reference beyond the text is exactly what David Wallace criticised about postmodernism as well. Linda Hutcheon, notably, disagreed with this diagnosis and pointed out the “historico-political import” (Savvas and Coffman 201) which historiographic metafiction derived from their referential framework. This basically consisted in the potential for a renewed understanding of history through an awareness of its artificiality. In post-postmodernist fiction, however, there is a noticeable shift away from both points of view. Far from being vacuous, as Jameson would have it, many works still critique the historical past, as Hutcheon describes, but they now aim for “the possible terms of contemporary community informed by an understanding of that past” (Savvas and Coffman 201). This is of course in line with its humanistic objectives that were outlined above. How can we as a society come together and achieve meaningful interconnectedness in a fragmented world? In this environment, intertextual references are no longer empty or merely

concerned about representation itself. Instead, they are now “a means to enact affectively powerful and authentic considerations of the present in relation to the reality of the past” (Savvas and Coffman 201).

In order to read in a post-postmodern way then, one may focus on this renewed historical understanding. Visual imagery, for instance, needs to be scrutinised since the post-postmodernist “sees ‘signs and the possibility of signs,’” in “connecting them to historical referents, to the depth they might connote” (“Beginning” 409). The world is no longer entirely ahistorical, but history is rather suppressed and can and should be brought back. Visual advertisements are “the postmodern image *par excellence*.” and they, and other signs, often come to represent the replacement or the suppression of the real. In post-postmodern literature, on the other hand, signs may connote reality itself, a comforting way to access some “reality that is not being simulated” (“Beginning” 408). The aim is to create something authentic, not simulated, in a late 20th, early 21st-century world that has moved beyond the real into the *instagrammable* and beyond truth into *fake news*.

I consider it appropriate to sum up this section on post-postmodernism’s renewed connection to its historical past by means of another quote from Savvas and Coffman:

post-postmodern authors have displayed an ongoing interest in – and increasingly achieved a renewal of – historical awareness. In so doing, they have expanded the scope of the contemporary inclination to the recovery of the real, an inclination spurred in part by dissatisfaction with the ironic, postmodern rejection of the possibility of the authentic. To the extent that they have so far succeeded, contemporary authors engaging the deep truth of the past enable readers to recognise the historical conditions of our moment, and to consider terms for community today. (202)

As mentioned above, the post-postmodern turn to realist modes of representation also meant a reappraisal of the individual subject. The realist depictions of nuanced characters spark a renewed interest in the psychology of human beings. However, as we have seen, post-postmodernists do not merely return to a pre-modernist view of the world and thus the ideas of “traditional realism, that believed in a solid and continuous inner self, and dualisms (mind and body, reason and emotion)” (Garrigós 147) are unacceptable. The divided

sense of self that they inherited from their predecessors is still found in this new literature. But, as Adam Kelly convincingly argues, we now find characters “whose self-conscious doubt encourages empathy in the reader,” characters “who engage with their own postmodernity and try to find a way beyond its limits” (“Beginning” 412). This way beyond is achieved by the fact that “emotions, feelings and memory make a reappearance in the discourse, where the subject is neither in control, nor completely alienated” (Garrigós 133). Post-postmodernists combat “the waning of affect” (Jameson 10), in other words. They try to formulate solutions to the problems individuals face in today’s highly technologised world on the basis of empathetic bonds. On a narrative level, this means that closure is often reintroduced. Specific problems that are addressed include, as alluded to before, families, social problems and psychological disorders. They realise that beyond pointing to what is destructive about contemporary life, they need to offer tools to address those problems if literature is to reclaim its relevance from the increasing dominance of other media, not least television and social media. The need for human interconnectedness is defended.

Thus, technologies of representation also continue to feature heavily. The previous generation of writers were mainly commenting on the information revolution from the outside, looking in. And consequently, technology was received with a lot of scepticism, if not outright hostility. For younger writers though, the effects of information technology on society were no longer surprising. And so in post-postmodern works, they “explore the implications of our new media environment” further, as opposed to “simply condemning the virtual” (Savvas and Coffman 205-206). They routinely include “fragments, excerpts from news, articles, TV shows, youtube, facebook, myspace, lists, etc.” (Garrigós 148). Moreover, they integrate these digital phenomena into their texts in a way that recognises their potential for communicating new themes. Take the endnotes in *Infinite Jest* for example. Wallace explained in a letter to his editor how they allowed him to “mimic the information-flood and data-triage I expect’d be an even bigger part of US life 15 years hence” (Max 195). His metafiction is no longer only about technology, but is now rather technology through and through. And Wallace goes on: they “allow/make the reader go

literally physically “back and forth” in a way that perhaps cutely mimics some of the story’s thematic concerns” (Max 195). In other words, they are not merely artifice, they are meant to be connected to the world outside the text. Or, to express this in another way,

[they] stand between traditional print fiction and the realm of digital media, recognising that (...) digital multimedia phenomena are not necessarily hindrances to the representational work of fiction, but something that models and can be incorporated as a means to enact more faithfully that representational work. (Savvas and Coffman 205)

To conclude this section, I will briefly return to the contemporary criticism in relation to the post-postmodern shift. It is of particular importance here to point out areas of agreement as well as areas of conflict. To shed light on the essence of the critical debate, it has to be understood in relation to its predecessor, as should be evident from the findings in this essay. There is general acceptance that, as I have basically argued throughout, there does indeed exist a

contemporary American fiction [which] has (...) increasingly valorised such seemingly naïve literary qualities as a return to mimetic verisimilitude, a display of historical awareness, and a preoccupation with the physical nature of the textual artifact as keys to the revitalisation of a constructive textual authenticity, one that reinvigorates the exchange between reader and literary text. (Savvas and Coffman 196)

However, it is less clear how the nature of the relationship between postmodernism and this revitalised post-postmodernism should be understood. According to some critics, and I subscribe to this view, it should not be regarded as a separate literary movement at all. For them, what this new literature does, is take certain intrinsically postmodern ideas and techniques and develop them further or in new ways, and to refocus on certain aspects that were neglected previously (Savvas and Coffman 196). Others instead consider that a more radical break is needed. Alan Kirby’s book *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* is a notable example. This lack of consensus has not helped advance critical output. And as Linda Hutcheon explains in the epilogue to *The Politics of Postmodernism*, this is a concern, since the failure to establish common ground and terminology in regard to post-postmodernism may continue to impede

further critical endeavours and the ability to inspire a more general public debate.

To sum up this foray into the theoretical understanding of postmodernism and post-postmodernism, I can now formulate some decisive answers to the questions asked at the outset. It is true that there is no universal consensus on the direction contemporary literature has taken since postmodernism, or even whether or not it is in fact over. But there is no denying that the playful, but cynical spirit characteristic of the “literature of exhaustion” practiced by Barth and Borges and the overt theorising in postmodernism have brought about a sense of claustrophobia. And what seems clear to me is that a large subset of literary works is trying to overcome some of these obstacles inherent in postmodernism to try and offer more constructive alternatives. One major challenge for post-postmodernism is how to do this without dismissing postmodernism’s main theoretical arguments.

This evolution from within, for our purposes labelled post-postmodernism, repurposes many postmodernist techniques, so that we can broadly discern the following characteristics: there is a tentative reappraisal of realist modes of representation in an effort to restore literature’s social engagement, and new forms of naivety are experimented with in order to reconcile the weariness of irony and reconnect with the reader; postmodern metafictional strategies are redirected outwards to restore connections with the real and the historical referent to “consider terms for community today” (Savvas and Coffman 202); new, less restricted ways are depicted to uncover meaning for the individual beyond the postmodern fragmentation of the self by means of nuanced, psychological character studies, themes such as families and societal problems, and a tendency towards narrative closure; and, the relationship with technologies (of representation) is altered by an attempt to integrate technology into the text in a way that recognises its potential for communicating new themes. Overall, human interconnectedness is posited as an alternative to postmodern solipsism and existential angst. At its core, then, we find in this post-postmodernist movement a more optimistic outlook on life.

3. Analysis

In this section, the two most important research questions are: can David Foster Wallace's short stories be considered post-postmodern? And to what extent does David Foster Wallace manage to break with postmodernism? I will attempt to demonstrate how David Foster Wallace's short fiction evolved throughout his three published collections. I will analyse his novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way", from his first collection *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), as being a fundamentally postmodern work. To this end, I will consider mainly his use of metafiction and, to a limited extent, irony. From his second collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), I will look at "Octet". In a contrastive analysis between the former and "Westward", I will show how Wallace put those same strategies to a different use, this time post-postmodern, as I have defined it throughout this essay. It is in this, his second collection, where the dichotomy irony-sincerity relents. The sincerity question continues to surface, but this time, rather than proclaiming the need to overcome irony entirely, Wallace shows how irony and sincerity may have to coexist in an "age of lost innocence" (Eco 571). Wallace's focus arguably shifts to matters of individual self-improvement. From *Oblivion* (2004), Wallace's third short story collection, I will take a closer look at "Good Old Neon". Again, I will show how Wallace connects his metafictional strategies to the reality outside the text, this time in a more established form than was the case in "Octet". I will take a look at alternative readings of Wallace's (short) fiction. As well as pinpointing in these stories typical post-postmodern tenets, I will show how David Wallace's writing does not represent a radical break with postmodernism, but, rather, how it refocuses intrinsically postmodern techniques to espouse fundamentally different values. Because of the nature of this paper, I will necessarily have to limit the analysis of the corpus selected to a few aspects of Wallace's writing, in particular those discussed in previous sections in relation to both postmodernism and post-postmodernism. If the New Sincerity approach is only briefly commented on, this is because a deeper analysis would take me beyond this paper's objectives. As things stand, I have mentioned it only insofar as I consider it relevant to the assessment of Wallace's use of metafiction.

3.1. “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way”

David Foster Wallace’s first story collection *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989) can be read as an attempt to figure out what type of author he is going to be. He tries his hand at numerous approaches to postmodernism and enters in conversation with many of his postmodern forerunners. In this way, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way” is taken as homage to, and, at its heart, a patricidal killing of, John Barth. Essentially, it is a subversive rewriting of Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse”. For my analysis, I will borrow heavily from the work done by critics Marshall Boswell in his book *Understanding David Foster Wallace* and Charles B. Harris in his essay “The Anxiety of Influence”. My main point of focus will be Wallace’s use of metafictional devices.

The story is a fable about the death of metafiction in postmodernism and an exploration of the direction contemporary literature ought to take. The title already suggests this expanse, beyond the confines of postmodernism. In Wallace’s own words, he wanted to create an “Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction’s always been about, I wanted to get it over with, and then out of the rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans” (McCaffery 142). To this end, he himself leans heavily on metafictional connections to “Lost in the Funhouse”. All of this is mirrored in the setting of the novella against the backdrop of a creative-writing workshop. Ambrose is the protagonist in Barth’s self-referential story of a young boy coming of age, sexually as well as artistically. In “Westward”, Ambrose lends his name to the professor of the workshop, the writer of a story entitled “Lost in the Funhouse”. Thus, he is a thinly-veiled stand-in for Barth, and, more generally, postmodernism as a literary movement. Wallace’s protagonist is Mark Nechtr, who in turn becomes a surrogate for Wallace. This strategy allows Wallace to explore in a work of fiction the literary ambitions he would later express so unequivocally in his interview with Larry McCaffery, as well as in his television essay I discussed in the previous section. Mark is an archery prodigy and, according to Boswell, his identity as an author is intrinsically tied up in this metaphor, where the arrow and its target become symbols for the pen and the reader respectively (*Understanding* 106). The narrator, who identifies himself as being a member of Mark’s class, but whose narratorial closeness suggests he

might in fact be Mark himself, claims that the arrow must “stab the center, right in the heart” (“Westward” 294). This, then, as a figure of the story’s central patricide, moves Boswell to claim that “If Ambrose is Barth’s figure for the writer of exhaustion, then Mark Nechtr is Wallace’s projection of the writer of literature’s resuscitation” (*Understanding* 106). Mark is trying to write a story that calls out to and loves its readers (and not the other way around), as opposed to the tired old self-loving of postmodernism’s endless recursions. I have already mentioned Wallace’s claim, from that same interview with McCaffery, that postmodern authors tend to make the readers love their stories by giving their readership what they want. Wallace is more ambitious. He thinks art should “find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it” (131). In other words, it should enter into a meaningful relationship with the reader, rather than simply finding new ways to depict the same dark worldview through different versions of the same linguistic games. Consequently, Mark fears “solipsistic solipsism: silence” (“Westward” 337). He “hates to believe he is alone. Solipsism affects him like Ambrosian metafiction affects him. It’s the high siren’s song of the wrist’s big razor. It’s the end of the long, long, long race you’re watching” (“Westward” 303). The suicide image is one that returns time and again in Wallace’s fiction, the story “Good Old Neon”, as we will see, being a prominent example. Harris connects this apocalyptic imagery to Wallace’s idea about the “Armageddon-explosion” of metafiction. It “sits on his [Mark’s] head. It’s really kind of a wonder he produces at all” (“Westward” 293). This “anxiety of influence” Harris constructs his essay around, is reflected throughout the story. “The writer and academic (...) Ambrose (...) exerts an enormous influence on Mark Nechtr” (“Westward” 292). The binary opposition East-West is an interesting, albeit obvious, one in this regard (Harris 110): what lies “behind lies there fouled, soiled, used up, East” (“Westward” 355), whereas Mark’s future fiction will be achieved when the arrow “aimed with all sincerity, just West of the lover, is on line with his heart” (“Westward” 333). D.L., Mark’s wife and self-described postmodernist, steers “exclusively by their rearview mirrors” (“Westward” 355). Elsewhere, she is described as “underdeveloped” (“Westward” 282) and “unloveable” (“Westward” 281). Boswell sees another link to *Lost in the Funhouse* in D.L.’s, as it later turns out, faked pregnancy, seeing as the latter opens with the scene of a

sperm on his journey towards the egg. In his view, the fact that Mark believes and decides to marry her is proof, not only of D.L.'s inability to "'produce' as a lover but also that his new art will 'marry' D.L.'s cynical postmodernism with Mark's naïve openness" (*Understanding* 210). This birth of a new aesthetic out of the old is best exemplified by the characterisation of Magda, herself a character from Barth's story, whose various pasts, explains Harris, also include her marriage to Gatz, which he reads as a possible nod to modernism's Jay Gatsby, and her brief marriage to Ambrose (112). It is really she, who turns out to be Ambrose in disguise, who guides Mark in his development as an artist. Harris goes on,

Like *Funhouse* before it, then, "Westward" is a *künstlerroman*, and Mark's development as an artist becomes most evident in the novella's culminating scene, when he and Magda abandon DeHaven's stalled car and enter a rain-soaked cornfield. In sight of "where the last road takes its final *Westward* curve" (344, emphasis added), the rainy field is a complex metaphor for the direction Mark's emerging role as a writer must take. (113)

D.L.'s and Mark's respective reactions to the fields are telling: whereas she finds them "menacingly fertile" ("Westward" 275), Mark is happy to leave behind "the utterly enclosed, sheltering, rained-upon car" ("Westward" 345). This brings me to the novella's end, and Mark's story-within-a-story, in which, interestingly, he rewrites himself as "Dave" ("Westward" 356), one of many self-references Wallace includes in his work, "David Wallace" also appearing in "Good Old Neon", for example. In it, the narrator informs us, Dave, a young archer (like Mark) comes home one night and after a passionate lover's quarrel sees how his lover kills herself with one of his arrows. Hesitant about whether to attempt to save her and leave his fingerprints on the arrow, he decides to stand back and let her die. However, he is found guilty of her murder anyway, and although he did not actually commit it, he is of course morally to blame for her death in no small part. A repentant Dave is given life in prison and is brutally assaulted on a daily basis by his cellmate Mark. Boswell explains how "Mark here represents a recursive link back to the outer frame of the story and to Nechtr himself, but he also feeds back into the way the novella "counterfeits" Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" (...) the names create a closed circuit" (*Understanding* 111). When

Mark finally escapes prison, Dave decides to hold on to his “honor” (“Westward” 369) and he refuses to make a deal with Hawaii Five-0 warden Jack Lord to rat Mark out, despite having a bounty put out on him. Boswell continues:

by not giving over to the prison—which we now understand has been from the beginning a reference to the famed “prison house of language” erected by poststructuralist thought—“the one thing” that he cannot lose: his honor. (...) “The argument here is that [Dave’s refusal] keeps safe in its ghastly silent center the green kernel that is the true self” (368). (*Understanding* 112)

In other words, Dave, like Wallace, does not surrender to the “prison house of language”, but instead tries to maintain within it a connection to the real, “the world outside the text, that is, the text’s transcendent referent” (Boswell, *Understanding* 112). The story, like the novella in which it figures, does not reach a conclusion as the class is left to debate whether a character like Dave would in fact be able to “keep safe (...) the true self” (“Westward” 368). This is indeed the question I will attempt to formulate a brief answer to below. “Westward” itself ends by referring back to “Lost in the Funhouse” as it answers the latter’s “For whom is the funhouse fun?” Wallace responds: “*You* are loved” (“Westward” 373, emphasis mine). As explored above, this is indeed where he attempts to set his fiction against Barth’s, in going beyond superficial metafictional self-reference to forge a connection with the reader, through empathetic bonds forged in the real world.

Critical debate is divided, as is customary when it comes to David Wallace. Boswell, with some justification, argues that Wallace has managed successfully, albeit in slightly pretentious fashion, to connect his metafictional devices to the real world beyond the text. Harris, on the other hand, claims that Wallace essentially stays true to the postmodern idea that the extralinguistic reality cannot be accessed through language and so we “must be careful (...) not to overstate Wallace’s presumed rejection of Barth’s work in particular and postmodern fiction in general” (Harris 103). I tend to disagree to some extent with both authors and rather align myself with other critics still, some of whom I will turn to for my contrastive analysis of “Westward” in relation to “Octet”. It seems clear to me that “Westward” is at its core a post-postmodern attempt, even though it ultimately fails. Although far from being “big-R Realism” as

Wallace would have it (McCaffery138), there is a noticeable reappraisal of more coherent narrative structures, and of character and theme development. Empathy with the reader is established on many occasions as the exhaustion of irony is countered with a more naïve worldview. All of this is especially clear in “Dave’s” framed story, which, according to Harris,

risks censure to recuperate “naïve romantic thoughts about things like honor or betrayal” (“Westward” 362), thoughts rendered with a “pathologically unself-conscious sentimentality” (370). The outward manifestation of Dave’s honor, his refusal to rat, is the hoariest of crime fiction clichés. Again, however, that’s the point. The new literary rebel’s task is to rescue human values, “ideas so old they’re B.C.” (370). (116)

Dave’s justification for this echoes Wallace’s manifesto when he explains how to find a way “less toward “coming of age” than toward just plain old living in the adult world” (“Westward” 368). Other examples include Dave’s sincerity in refusing to “use the passive voice to articulate his love” (“Westward” 358). It is also in this story where we find a typically post-postmodern use of a metafictional device in the way I have described it in the previous section. For Mark Nechtr introduces “The Warden (...) Jack Lord, of fame (...) a popular icon, forged in the medium that is (sadly? *sadly?*) this generation’s unbreakable window on itself” (“Westward” 364) not for its own sake, but rather to connect it to real values, in particular “the place of honor in the general postmodern American scheme of things” (“Westward” 364). Where “Westward” fails as a radical break with postmodernism, in my view, is precisely in the fact that Wallace’s main metafictional network fails ultimately to do just this. It doesn’t succeed in escaping its own self-referentiality. Harris may claim that “Wallace uses reflexivity to call attention to his characters’ imprisonment within their own paralyzing self-consciousness” (107), but, as he himself admits, ultimately, “although we are told that Mark has “been in and out of places” for treatment of “professionally diagnosed emotional problems” (303), “Westward” is less interested in the psychological ravages of solipsism than its association with postmodern metafiction” (Harris 110). Moreover, the novella sacrifices narrative closure in both stories to make room for this self-reflection. By Wallace’s own admission, “In “Westward” I got trapped (...) trying to expose the illusions of metafiction the same way metafiction had tried to expose the illusions of the

pseudo-unmediated realist fiction that came before it" (McCaffery 142). If his criterion for judging meta strategies is "Do they serve a purpose beyond themselves?" (McCaffery 137), and we have concluded that in "Westward" they do not, this means that, fundamentally, it does not succeed in overcoming one of the major pitfalls of postmodernism. If the frame story seems to signal a way forward more successfully, Wallace still felt he had to bury it "in its ghastly silent center" ("Westward" 368). We can only assume Wallace was right in proclaiming that, at this point in time, he lacked the courage (McCaffery 149) to convert into fiction what he would later state in his non-fiction to be his post-postmodern manifesto.

3.2. "Octet"

In *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), Wallace's second short story collection, we encounter a more mature writer. The interviews involve exchanges between the hideous men from the title and a series of women, whose voices are suppressed. It discusses themes of solipsism, alienation and self-reflection. Thus, metanarrative strategies continue to play an important role, as they do in all his work. But here, they start to be employed more constructively and nowhere more so than in "Octet". The brief interviews, which are in actual fact monologues, are juxtaposed with this hyper-metafictional story, in which the Q&A format of the rest of the book is inversed and in which the narrator now interrogates the reader. In what follows, I will analyse the story mainly with the help of Thomas Winningham's essay "Author Here". I will contrast "Octet" with "Westward" and attempt to show how Wallace's metafiction hits the post-postmodern mark, as I have described it, much more successfully this time around. I will briefly comment on New Sincerity in relation to the story insofar as it serves a purpose in proving how Wallace's self-reflexivity manages to connect to matters outside of the text. And I will show how his thematic concerns broaden, away from the strict irony-sincerity dichotomy he elaborated in "E Unibus Pluram", and towards (Buddhist) ideas of self-improvement.

"Octet" is structured as a series of "Pop Quizzes", all meant to be interwoven and understood as a commentary on some common theme. Even though the title of the story implies there might be 8 quizzes, in reality, before "Pop Quiz 9"

("Octet" 123), which holds the key to understanding the "Octet", we only find, in chronological order, "Pop Quiz 4", "Pop Quiz 6" ("Octet" 111), "Pop Quiz 7" ("Octet" 113) and "Pop Quiz 6(A)" ("Octet" 114). In 4, we get a very brief picture of two dying drug addicts, one of whom shares his blanket with the other for warmth, in a comforting gesture. It ends: "Q: Which one lived." ("Octet" 111). The sixth quiz, as seen above, is actually split into two. The first part of which sets the scene for a story about X and Y, who have fallen out over an unnamed action of Y's, before the narrator gives up. Later, it is taken up again. This time, the story is rewritten to be about X's inner conflict over how to deal with his father-in-law's terminal illness in light of their mutual dislike for each other. In between, there is also a seventh quiz about a mother who gives up custody of her only child to its wealthy father. "Q: (A) Is she a good mother." ("Octet" 114). Finally, in "Pop Quiz 9", we read: "You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. (...) of very short belletristic pieces (...) supposed to compose a certain sort of *'interrogation'* of the person reading them" ("Octet" 123). The narrator/writer-character is placing you in the position of writer of the preceding pieces, which all show "some sort of weird ambient *sameness* in different kinds of human relationships" ("Octet" 131). The reader is hereby included in a discussion about what the ninth quiz should be, "a kind of metaQuiz" ("Octet" 131), as opposed to the other quizzes which the reader has already written. In this way,

the reader is primed to both expect that something other than a straightforward narrative is obviously at work, and see the repeated themes of interpersonal relationships, honesty, and the (im)possibility of unself-reflexively connecting with another person running through the quizzes. (Winningham 471)

This highlights two major constituents of the analysis below: unself-reflexivity and human interconnectedness.

I have shown how "Westward" fell into the trap of what Winningham calls "metafictional privilege", the "illusion that metafiction sits in a post-ideological position, that an awareness of the mechanisms by which subjectivity is created and controlled equals freedom from the same" (469). "Westward" and "Octet" are both meta-metafictions, in the sense that they are metafictional pieces about metafiction itself. But, whereas the former parodied and became trapped in self-referential recursions which failed to ground the text, the second-person

narrator in “Octet” aims for “direct communication between writer and reader as individuals” (Winningham 468). This second-person narrator breaks out for the first time in the “Armageddon-explosion” in “Westward”: “It’s the end of the long, long, long race *you’re* watching” (“Westward” 303, emphasis mine). But unlike “the occluded amalgamation of fictional and implied authorial voices in “Westward,” “Octet” offers in its appeal to the reader something close to a reciprocal form of metafiction” (Hering 14). Without ever directly asking the reader, “You are, unfortunately, a fiction *writer*” (“Octet” 123, emphasis mine), the narrator still manages to enter into a conversation with the readers about their feelings on metafiction. And, importantly, as opposed to “Westward”, the conversation this time is not concerned with “the technical tricks themselves but instead with their effects” (Winningham 470). Wallace himself commented extensively on the writer-reader connection in the interview with McCaffery, in particular in relation to television culture. It has already been explained that Wallace saw in television the main culprit for the rise of passive entertainment consumption. Think, for example, of the following quote, from his television essay: “Television’s biggest minute-by-minute appeal is that it engages without demanding” (“E Unibus Pluram” 163). In order to counter this and effectively compete for attention with this new form of entertainment, he saw the need for serious literature, not to supply the reader with entertainment unquestioningly, but rather to put the reader to work. It is not about writing a story to be loved, but to write a story that loves the reader instead, to both depict and illuminate (McCaffery 131). It is highly ironic, then, that the key to unlocking “Pop Quiz 9”, and by extension “Octet”, as well as, arguably, the whole story collection, lies in the narrator/writer-character’s suggestion to ask the reader ““This thing I feel, I can’t name it straight out but it seems important, do you feel it too?” (...) perilously close to *‘Do you like me? Please like me,’*” (“Octet” 131). The narrator understands that, if this quiz is going to be a “metaQuiz” (“Octet” 131) about the other pieces, highlighting the common theme of “*sameness* in different kinds of human relationships” (“Octet” 131), this question has to be asked with “completely naked helpless pathetic sincerity” (“Octet” 131). As such, the central question in “Octet”, according to Winningham, is “in what way can we move beyond postmodern self-reflexivity and present ourselves honestly to one another?” (470).

Going too far down the path of the irony-sincerity debate, would risk overstepping the limitations of this paper. However, the solution Winningham proposes in his essay is an enlightening one for our post-postmodern reading purposes. At this point, we have to address the philosophical quandary that arises when discussing the concept of honesty: the unknowability of whether we are being sincerely honest or in fact are only “sham-honest-so-she’ll-like-you” (“Octet” 131). Adam Kelly, in his seminal essay “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction”, admits as much when he states: “being a ‘post-postmodernist’ of Wallace’s generation means never quite being sure whether you are one, whether you have really managed to escape narcissism, solipsism, irony and insincerity” (145). In New Sincerity terms, for the writer, this means creating anyway, even in the face of uncertainty surrounding motives (and for the reader, it means taking a leap of faith and choosing to believe). Indeed, as the narrator/writer-character says, it means having to “actually use terms like *be with* and *relationship*, and use them *sincerely*—i.e. without tone-quotes or ironic undercutting or any kind of winking of nudging” (“Octet” 132). For these reasons, Iain Williams goes as far as to consider “Octet” the “Ur-text of New Sincerity” (300). The problem is, however, that, in a postmodern “age of lost innocence”, it may no longer be possible to be sincere without resorting to ironic self-reference, a sort of faux-innocence. Eco, in the *Postscript to the Name of the Rose*, once wrote:

the postmodern attitude [is] that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, “I love you madly,” because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, “As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.” At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. (570-571)

We see this in the way “Octet’s” narrator seems to constantly qualify and ironically undercut much of the “pathetic sincerity” (“Octet” 131) he purportedly suggests the reader-writer employ, regardless of claims to the contrary. Much of this is to be found in the footnotes, as when the word “relationships” is described as a “near-nauseous term in contemporary usage, (...), treacled by

the same sorts of people who use *parent* as a verb and say *share* to mean talk” (“Octet” 132), or when postmodern metafiction is lambasted for being considered “now *safe* and *innocuous* (...)”, only to go on to say: “but I’d opt to keep cultural politics out of it if I were you” (“Octet” 133). Savvas and Coffman put it as follows:

the extreme metafictionality of the text, the postmodern narratological modes employed, and the liberal extended footnotes which take over the ostensible main text, function to demonstrate just how difficult it is to escape the regime of irony that postmodernism installed. (199)

On the basis of this evidence, it would be hard to argue that “Octet” is un-ironic. And although I find the concept of being post-ironic, in the sense of ironizing irony, also deeply flawed, for various reasons, I do agree with Boswell when he writes that Wallace attempts to “prove that cynicism and naïveté are mutually compatible” (*Understanding* 17).⁴ It is the “classically Wallacian double-bind: a desire to please (to provide a (...) satisfying story), against which is the anxiety that what we have to offer is insufficient” (Winningham 475).

It is also in this double-bind that the guarantee of the success of Wallace’s reconnecting metafiction to the reality outside the text is found. Winningham proves why the shared empathy between reader and writer comes not, as Harris claims, from the “self-referential narrative techniques” (121), but from the underlying “*sameness* in different kinds of human relationships, some inescapable ‘*price*’ that all human beings are faced with having to pay at some point if they ever want truly ‘to be with’ another person” (“Octet” 131). If complete honesty is indeed “going to look desperate. Possibly pathetic” (“Octet” 135), then “the ‘*price*’ (...) the penultimate paragraph tells us, is, in fact, giving up the status of capital-A Author” (Winningham 473). Authorial effacement in fact is a theme Wallace engaged with on many occasions throughout his fiction. The author, or, at the very least, his authority, dies, and, in Wallace’s words, “the reader becomes God, for all textual purposes” (McCaffery 141). The price the reader pays, then, is that they are no longer able to “escape the soluble flux of themselves and enter a world of prearranged meaning” (“Octet” 136), “safe”

⁴ There do also appear to be instances of (attempts at) head-on sincerity in Wallace’s later work, especially *The Pale King*.

and “innocuous”. This is exemplified in the story’s last line: “So decide” (“Octet” 136). It is up to the reader to (re)construct meaning out of the rubble of the language. In return, a post-postmodern literature based on empathy and connection between the reader and the writer is born, one that depicts the world as dark as it really is, but one that enlightens at the same time. “Octet” is the offspring of this bond. And “the reader’s feelings *about* the fictional entertainment presented prior to the metafictional PQ9” (Winningham 476) are its grounding, the recognition of the “inescapable price” the people in the previous quizzes pay to truly connect with their fellow human beings,

the situated real-world experience of both reader and writer, mediated through the fictional text (...). The difference here is not between “truth” and “fiction,” insofar as fiction must announce its own status as such, (...) but the truth *in* the fiction itself. (Winningham 476)

In true post-postmodern fashion, it manages to underline its fundamental artificiality while also connecting it to the real world. In this way, it clearly posits the idea of human interconnectedness as an alternative to the postmodern self-referential solipsism. The double-bind can be resolved by paying the “price” and discarding the “sameness” of anxiety and motives, that which is in all of us, in favour of a new-found belief in the sincerity of what makes us truly unique. Or, in Winningham’s words:

What “Octet” ultimately tells us, and what the divisions between the Pop Quizzes make explicit, is that the inward turn toward anxiety—and metafiction—must be divorced from outward action, from surface personality, if we are to meaningfully connect with one another after postmodern cynicism. (477)

Apart from arguably marking a shift in Wallace’s attitude away from the more rigid irony *versus* sincerity debate, we find in “Octet” the expression of another profound interest of Wallace’s: personal self-improvement. His interest in Buddhist ideas, especially, is well documented in D.T. Max’s biography, and his later work continues to connect with these philosophies. Much of the imagery in “Good Old Neon”, as we shall see below, is borrowed from Buddhism and Daoism, for example. Mary K. Holland explains, in her essay entitled “David Foster Wallace’s OCTET and the ATTHAKAVAGGA”, that, without reinterpreting what has been said above, we can read in “Octet” many of the

core teachings of the “Atthakavagga” (166). She says that “the Buddhist text advises readers against desire, attachment, and judgment, but above all it warns against the perils of holding and especially of espousing positions of any kind” (Holland 166). “Pop Quiz 9” in particular does just this, as it enacts, but does not espouse, through “its fragmenting, self-referring, and self-contradicting footnotes” (Holland 167) as well as its final comment to “decide” (“Octet” 136), principles from the “Atthakavagga”. Being wary of self-interest is one of those principles, mirrored in the narrator’s self-consciousness of the anxiety to be liked (Holland 167). The awareness of some kind of “*sameness* in different kinds of human relationships” (“Octet” 131) similarly reflects the idea that the self is inextricably connected to the other (Holland 167). In short, “the metafictionally produced empathy and sincerity pursued through irony remain, but these innovations in technique and convention become mere mechanisms of a larger philosophical revelation” (Holland 168).

In conclusion, in “Octet”, we have a story that truly reunites many of the characteristics we have defined in the previous section as being fundamentally post-postmodern. What is significant about “Octet” is not that it might be entirely un-ironic, or wholly sincere. It is neither. Instead, Wallace tries to overcome this dichotomy by using self-reference to create a genuine connection with the reader. Metafiction and irony are connected to the real, to the possible realisation of an innate human “sameness” that should not be feared, but celebrated. Realistic effects are produced in the relation between the reader and fiction. But they are not produced by ignoring poststructuralist theory, the fictional status of the story is not denied. Rather, there is now reality *in* this fiction. Metafiction is constructively used and grounded in reality. The search for meaning is not shut down. There is empathy and optimism in a story of human interconnectedness. “Octet”, in other words, is a perfect example of a story that manages to overcome the pitfalls of postmodernism without succumbing to a deliberately enforced ignorance of the postmodern thought out of which it was born.

3.3. “Good Old Neon”

“Good Old Neon” is a short story from Wallace’s third and final collection, *Oblivion* (2004). As a whole, the book makes for gloomy reading. Marshall Boswell calls it Wallace’s “bleakest (...) a somber portrait of souls in isolation” (“The Constant” 151). Solipsism, linguistic experimentation, contemporary U.S. culture and what it means to be human in a highly capitalist, technologised world are ongoing themes in Wallace’s work. And they all feature heavily, again, in *Oblivion*. Each of the stories offers a linguistic exploration of the workings of the mind, and provides an introspective on individual consciousness, in particular the dangers of hyper self-awareness. This concern is perfectly exemplified in “Good Old Neon”. Below, I will provide my own reading, which varies to different degrees from analyses by many of the critics I dealt with in previous sections. I will show how the story can be read in line with the post-postmodern readings of “Westward” and “Octet”, provided above, and why I consider it, ultimately, to espouse a life-affirming message despite its unnerving subject matter. I will briefly highlight Buddhist influences, in line with the trend in his work that was outlined in previous sections. And finally, I will comment on a limited number of alternative readings and their perceived validity.

“Good Old Neon” can be read together with “Westward” and “Octet” as “three almost manifesto-like stories Wallace wrote in which the problem of solipsism is very explicitly linked to postmodern metafictional writing and the style of hyper self-conscious thinking associated with it” (van den Akker et al. 106). Solipsism, as we have seen, does indeed run through all three stories, and indeed his entire oeuvre. Already in “Westward”, Wallace, through his narrator, talks of the dangers of “solipsistic solipsism” (“Westward” 337): “Mark’s [delusion] is that he’s the only person in the world who feels like the only person in the world. It’s a solipsistic delusion” (“Westward” 305). What’s more, he describes it as a “contemporary flaw” (“Westward” 304, emphasis mine). This, of course, rings other bells, rung by David in his “E Unibus Pluram” essay, where he explicitly lays the blame for this “contemporary flaw” at the door of television: “The well-trained lonely viewer becomes even more allergic to people. Lonelier. Joe B.’s exhaustive TV-training in how to worry about how he might come across, seem to other eyes, makes riskily genuine human encounters seem even scarier.” (“E

Unibus Pluram” 181).⁵ All of these ideas resurface in “Good Old Neon” in Neal. Initially, the story seems to centre on Neal’s straightforward confessional monologue, which begins: “My whole life I’ve been a fraud. (...) Pretty much all I’ve ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired” (“Good Old Neon” 141). By now, this is of course a familiar concept, for a couple of reasons. First, Wallace identified as one of (late) postmodernism’s main faults the desire solely “to be liked” by the reader. In any allegorical reading of the story, Neal will necessarily come to symbolise the dangers of postmodern self-reflexivity. Second, the anxiety “to be liked” has been discussed at length in “Octet”, where a need to divorce this anxiety from surface personality was advocated for. It was argued that a leap of faith is needed in post-postmodern life in order to generate a renewed belief in real human connections. Neal’s fraudulence, he continues, is guaranteed to be perpetuated ad infinitum, because any success he achieves through putting up this front has really nothing to do with him, and so he feels even more like a fraud, which then makes him work even harder at this manipulation, and so on. The result of this “fraudulence paradox”, as he calls it, ultimately results in feeling “frightened, lonely, alienated, etc.” (“Good Old Neon” 147). Neal says he works in advertising, a prime target of Wallace’s and of many (post-)postmodernists as the epitome of empty (postmodern) cynicism. And his need to fit in with his colleagues, which he does by eschewing clichés and pretending to be “dry and jaded” (“Good Old Neon” 142) as well, immediately suggests a highly ironic stance: “this tactic of heaping scorn on pretensions to those old commercial virtues of authority and sincerity—thus (1) shielding the heaper of scorn from scorn and (2) congratulating the patron of scorn for rising above the mass of people who still fall for outmoded pretensions—” (“E Unibus Pluram” 179). This of course confronts the reader with a problem. How can we believe someone who self-identifies as a fraud? He may indeed be telling the truth about his fraudulence, but he may very well be manipulating our feelings in order to come across as genuine. Neal’s believability is further complicated by his promise that the narrative will soon get “a lot more interesting when I get to the part where I kill myself and discover what happens immediately after a

⁵ Wallace’s stand-in for “the average U.S. lonely person [is] Joe Briefcase” (“E Unibus Pluram” 152).

person dies" ("Good Old Neon" 143). This is resolved for the reader by the narrative twist at end of the story, however, as it turns out it is really "David Wallace (...) [who] is trying, through the tiny little keyhole of himself, to imagine what all must have happened to lead up to my death" ("Good Old Neon" 180). Boswell explains how this opens up "an outer layer of interiority into which the story's principal layer has been nesting all along" ("The Constant" 152). Following Lee Konstantinou's lead in his book *Cool Characters*, we might disentangle this by using Raoul Eshelman's post-postmodern narrative technique "double framing". According to Eshelman, the author sets up two frames of reference, where the "outer frame imposes some sort of unequivocal resolution to the problems raised in the work on the reader" (van den Akker et al. 183). Thus, Neal's story here is told from the perspective of "David Wallace".⁶ Whereas Neal's telling of his story from beyond the grave would require a significant suspension of disbelief, "Wallace's" vantage point asks the reader to believe that it is in fact "Wallace" who is imagining what might have gone on with Neal before his death. Moreover, "David Wallace" happens "to have a huge and totally unorganisable set of inner thoughts, feelings, memories and impressions of this (...) *guy*" ("Good Old Neon" 180, emphasis mine), which suggests he does not know Neal very well at all. However, the following quotation shows us how the crippling self-consciousness is in fact "David Wallace's":

(...) the dithering, pathetically self-conscious outline or ghost of a person David Wallace knew himself back then to be. (...) Verily a fair-haired, fast-track guy [Neal], whom in the very best human tradition David Wallace had back then imagined as happy and unreflective and wholly unhaunted by voices telling him that there was something deeply wrong with him that wasn't wrong with anybody else and that he had to spend all of his time and energy trying to figure out what to do and say in order to impersonate an even marginally normal or acceptable U.S. male. ("Good Old Neon" 181)

The facts of Neal's imaginary monologue may not be accurate, then, but the crux of his hyper self-awareness certainly is. Only it is "David Wallace" who is projecting his perceived fraudulence onto Neal. As such, Neal's motives for

⁶ For the purposes of this analysis, I will differentiate "David Wallace" the character from David Wallace the author by means of quotation marks. There is no textual evidence suggesting the two should be read as one and the same.

disingenuously affecting honesty are taken away and the reader can read Neal's as a fundamentally true account, details notwithstanding. Which brings us to the real essence of the problem, Neal's self-diagnosis as a fraud. Neal is a product of his times. In "Wallace's" descriptions of him, he appears with a "seemingly almost neon aura around him" ("Good Old Neon" 180). Neon, incidentally, may serve as a symbol for contemporary America, corporate and highly technologised, "life has time to flash like neon shaped into those connected cursive letters that businesses' signs and windows love so much to use" ("Good Old Neon" 179). In another turn away from the postmodern, visual advertising signs, Adam Kelly's "postmodern image *par excellence*" ("Beginning" 408), described in previous sections, does not represent here the suppressing of reality. On the contrary, it provides access to a renewed understanding of contemporary life. It is this contemporary America, according to Neal's therapist, that hardwired into its "Verily fair-haired, fast-track guys", this "conception of competitive, achievement-oriented masculinity (...) that caused a more or less constant state of fear that made genuine love next to impossible" ("Good Old Neon" 164). Neal was brought up on television, which as an intricate part of America's cultural output left him "feeling as if you were constantly being judged or on display" ("Good Old Neon" 163). Think of the following quote by Wallace himself:

For 360 minutes per diem, we receive unconscious reinforcement of the deep thesis that the most significant feature of truly alive persons is watchableness, and that genuine human worth is not just identical with but rooted in the phenomenon of watching. And that the single biggest part of real watchableness is seeming to be unaware that there's any watching going on. Acting natural. ("E Pluribus Unam" 155)

Neal has certainly assimilated this when he says: "at an early age I'd somehow chosen to cast my lot with my life's drama's supposed audience instead of with the drama itself, and that I even now was watching and gauging my supposed performance's quality and probable effects" ("Good Old Neon" 176). In other words, his self-reflexivity has made it impossible for him to escape back into the real world. This "basic inability to really love" ("Good Old Neon" "165") leads to loneliness. But this "contemporary flaw" ("Westward" 304) is indeed a delusion, the false impression that he's indeed "the only person in the world who feels like

the only person in the world” (“Westward” 305). And a way out is continually offered in Wallace’s writing. It is highly ironic, then, that for all Neal’s hyper self-awareness of layer upon layer of his own supposed fraudulence, he fails to realise this anxiety is not in fact fraudulence at all, but an essential part of what it means to be human. This is most obvious in his view on the line from “*Cheers*”, “If I have one more yuppie come in and start whining to me about how he can’t love, I’m going to throw up.” (“Good Old Neon” 168), which Neal understands gets a big laugh from the audience because “they had seen through the complaint’s inauthenticity”. In actual fact, the opposite is true. The reason the line gets such a laugh is precisely because it is true. We all feel anxious about not being able “to really love”. As we have seen above though, television has long since turned “clichéd” or “melodramatic” values (“Good Old Neon” 168), as well as the people who hold them, into the butt of the joke. As in “Octet”, the key is in escaping the turn inward and reconnecting with other people, taking part in “the drama”. Throughout the story, “David”, however, does appear to show glimpses of understanding this escape route from self-reflexive solipsism. And nowhere does he express this more poignantly than in the following quote:

And you think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction anyone else ever sees? Of course you’re a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it’s only a part. Who wouldn’t? (...) But at the same time it’s why it feels so good to break down and cry in front of others, or to laugh, or speak in tongues, or chant in Bengali — it’s not English anymore, it’s not getting squeezed through any hole. (“Good Old Neon” 179)

What we “squeeze through the (linguistic) keyhole”, ultimately, our surface personalities, are just the tip of the iceberg. What makes each of us truly human, is the anxiety beyond. The double-bind here, again, lies in the desire we have to connect with our fellow human beings against the anxiety that we may never truly be able to. But if we succumb to these anxieties, we risk the hyper self-reflexivity to which Neal, and metaphorically postmodernism itself, fell victim. This is what David Wallace anchors his metafictional devices to in this story. Throughout the narrative, we find self-references in Neal’s claim that English is inherently incapable of expressing the vastness of what it means to

be human, that which lies beyond the “keyhole”. For example, he says that “what goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant” (“Good Old Neon” 151). And he goes on:

Words and chronological time create all these total misunderstandings of what’s really going on at the most basic level. And yet at the same time English is all we have to try to understand it and try to form anything larger or more meaningful and true with anybody else, which is yet another paradox. (“Good Old Neon” 151)

This is indeed where the core of the narrative’s irony resides. English is fundamentally unequipped to deal with the vastness of human life, but it is here, paradoxically, used to enlighten the real world. It is also in this section that the 2nd person narrator rears its head again and directly addresses the reader: “And of course all this time *you’ve* probably been noticing what seems like the really central, overarching paradox” (“Good Old Neon” 152, emphasis mine). The metafictional self-references of the story are turned outward. Just like in “Westward”, we find in the nesting of Neal’s narrative in “Wallace’s” outside frame a closed circle of self-referentiality. In classic Wallacian post-postmodern fashion, however, and as we saw in “Octet”, these metafictional devices are here used to highlight the real, they underline the self-destruction that the solipsistic turn inward toward our anxieties engender. Neal’s postmodern self-referring loop ends in his suicide, which, not coincidentally of course, occurs in the only footnote to be found in the story: “THE END” (“Good Old Neon” 179). But we are not reading Neal’s confession. We are reading “David’s” projection of his insecure self-awareness. It is “David” who, through Neal, recounts to his therapist how he used to genuinely love baseball until he became hyper self-aware and began to obsessively self-observe, as we discover after the reveal of the narrative twist. The above-quoted passage, in which “Wallace” imagines what it would be like to be “as happy and unreflective” as he assumes Neal to be, goes on to say how he felt all this “as a knot in his stomach as he stood in his real parents’ kitchen ironing his [baseball] uniform” (“Good Old Neon” 181). So the facts about and the motives behind Neal’s suicide are unknown, both to “Wallace” and to the reader. But that is beside the point. We cannot truly know or express the vastness of what it means to be human. We can only choose to

believe in our surface personalities. But if we succumb to these anxieties, personal tragedies like Neal's are inevitable. "Wallace", in what gives the story its life-affirming quality, seems to have understood this lesson as he has matured as a person since their days in high school. He is aware of the unknowability of the human essence, and the inadequacy of language to express it,

yet at the same time [he is] trying very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt or sending the whole line of thought into the sort of inebriated spiral that keeps you from ever getting anywhere (considerable time having passed since 1981, of course, and David Wallace having emerged from years of literally indescribable war against himself with quite a bit more firepower than he'd had at Aurora West), the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him commanding that other part to be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, 'Not another word.'
("Good Old Neon" 181)

Ironically, and humorously, I would argue, this is of course followed by "another word" in what seems like Neal's dedication "[→NMN.80.418]", reminding the reader once more of the pervasiveness of self-reflexive anxiety and perhaps that life will go on.

This example of "Wallace's" attempt to silence "that other part" fits in with the trend in Wallace's later work to appraise more universal ways of self-improvement. Mary K. Holland points out that "Neil's postmortem discovery that he is like a whitecap in the ocean, not a separate self (152)" is part of a network of "imagery borrowed from Buddhist (...) texts" (166). A great many of the ideas expressed in "Good Old Neon", especially those referring to the spiritual interconnectedness and the afterlife, can be traced back to similar sources. Of course the most explicit references to spirituality are found in the passages in which Neal relates to his therapist how he has tried "to wake up spiritually instead of living in this fog of fraudulence" ("Good Old Octet" 156). And his efforts are not limited to Master Gurpreet's meditation classes either. In joining "the charismatic church up in Naperville" ("Good Old Neon" 156), Neal engages with (a Pentecostal branch of) the Christian faith as well. This section contains Biblical quotes: "'The truth shall set you free' — the Bible" ("Good Old Neon" 156) and "'One cannot serve two masters' — the Bible again" ("Good Old Neon"

164), as well as allusions: according to David P. Rando, “Wallace is particularly deft in choosing Lilith from *Cheers* for his narrator’s undoing, as the name evokes Eve’s powerful predecessor” (593). All of this mirrors not only David Wallace’s aforementioned affinity with Buddhist scriptures, but other, similar attempts at engaging with the Judeo-Christian faith as well, as his biographer D.T. Max has attested to on multiple occasions.⁷

“Good Old Neon”, then, can be understood through the same, mutually inclusive irony-sincerity lens through which “Octet” was analysed. Metafiction, as a reflection not solely on itself, but on the intrinsic human condition (what was described in the analysis of “Octet” as “reality *in* fiction” instead of the customary postmodern reflections *about* fiction), is turned outward. And again, a renewed belief in human connections is advocated for in the face of the all-consuming fire of self-reflection. To this end, this highly ironic narrative buries its self-reflexive protagonist in its metafictional footnote. And this may be clichéd, but that is kind of the point of Wallace’s post-postmodernism. “As a verbal construction I know that’s a cliché. As a state in which to actually be, though, it’s something else, believe me” (“Good Old Neon” 175). As the narrator, in true Wallacian fashion, brilliantly surmises in the following quote, coincidentally borrowed for the epigraph of this paper, “I’m aware it ends up seeming somewhat lame. Which in fact it wasn’t, but I won’t pretend it was fully authentic or genuine, either” (“Good Old Neon” 175). As such, “Good Old Neon” achieves similar post-postmodern ends as “Octet”, but this time in a less obviously explicit and more established form. More robust “realist” networks of symbols and themes can be discerned.

In order to conclude this section, I will comment on some alternative readings of Wallace’s (short) fiction. Divergent critical views are invariably enriching, and indeed inevitable, especially in (post-)postmodern writings. However, I do wish to make explicit my stance regarding a particular approach to Wallace’s work which is of relevance to the objectives of this paper. Cory M. Hudson argues that “a troubling trend has settled into Wallace studies, where the analyses of Wallace’s fictional works begin outside of texts themselves and with the para-

⁷ Ultimately, however, Max concludes that “Faith was something he could admire in others but never quite countenance for himself” (251).

textual materials that he left behind before his death” (298). I myself of course have largely taken such an approach throughout this paper. Hudson singles out the critics Holland and Konstantinou, in particular for their reading of the character “Wallace” in “Good Old Octet” as being a surrogate of the author. This would imbue “Wallace” with “the desires and beliefs of (...) the real-life counterpart who is portrayed through the prearranged/scheduled interviews or edited nonfiction essays” (Hudson 298). I agree that there is a danger in overprivileging his TV essay “as an interpretative shortcut through his fiction (...) [for its being] insistently predictive and conditional rather than descriptive” (Rando 589). And I also think that Holland’s and Konstantinou’s, albeit differing, readings of not only “Wallace”, but the narrator in “Octet”, are dubious at best.⁸ Indeed I have explicitly cautioned against such readings above. Still, I do not think “para-textual materials” have been used as an “interpretative *shortcut*” and it would be hard to argue that any part of the post-postmodern readings here rests in any evidence other than textual. Hudson’s alternative approach is undoubtedly a valuable one though, as he examines “how Wallace’s fiction acts as a node within a literary network of different genres, periods, and schools and the techniques that are being deployed in order to represent what exists outside of the texts” (298). His analysis focuses on the influence of Borges on “Good Old Neon” and suggests that the “concept of infinity perverts and guides Wallace’s writing” (299). While a more detailed account of his analysis would be wholly beyond the scope of this essay, his conclusion that the short story may be “an exhaustive attempt to demonstrate the impermeability of the bounds of consciousness” is an interesting one, and not entirely incompatible with my own. Beyond Hudson, there exists a not inconsiderable group of critics who have started re-reading Wallace with the express purpose of countering the “dominant emotional triumphalist readings” (Rando 577). In *Consider David Foster Wallace*, for example, Burn writes “There’s little doubt that Wallace exhibited a remarkable and voracious intellect, but a near-deification has allowed him to define the terms of his own critical reception too completely” (*Consider* 467). So, is Wallace being taken at his own word? David P. Rando, in his essay “David Foster Wallace and Lovelessness”, essentially sets out to

⁸ The reasons for which I do not have the space to go into here.

prove that in Wallace's fiction there is a "continuous struggle to overcome irony that ultimately fails (...) by tracking (...) the sentiment of love and love's absence" (577). As I have continually shown, "in Wallace's fiction, there is no return to a pre-ironic state" (Rando 591). When Rando concludes that "irony and affect are not counterposed but rather thoroughly conflated" (590), he is right. Of course, that is, in my view, precisely the point. Affect *is* "undercut or estranged by irony" and irony *is* "a response to the emotion of fear, a kind of affect" (Rando 590). However, the fact that "ironic or loveless structures emerge as the condition for affect" (Rando 590), which results in "the failure of love to emerge" (Rando 577) in his characters, does not mean his literature does not love. Lovelessness is indeed often depicted in Wallace's work, but as a whole, through the reconciliation of irony and sincere emotion, solipsistic loneliness is continually disavowed and human interconnectedness advocated for. As such, I refute Rando's interpretation and I generally disagree with the bulk of the counter-emotional readings. Ultimately, I do not believe Wallace is being sycophantically taken at his word. Rather, he resists both the categories of authentic sentimentalist and postmodern ironist.

4. Conclusions

I have tried to formulate well-developed answers to the research questions that were posed in the introduction. I have shown how David Wallace borrows his main literary device, metafiction, from his postmodern predecessors and redeploys it to forge empathic bonds between the reader and the text and to champion ideas of human interconnectedness over postmodern solipsistic cynicism. Thus, I consider the short stories analysed above to belong to a literary movement that evolves postmodernism from within.

I have argued that "Westward" remains at its core a postmodern text as its intertextual bonds with Barth's text fail to escape their own self-referentiality. The story is ultimately "less interested in the psychological ravages of solipsism than its association with postmodern metafiction" (Harris 110). However, there are certainly early post-postmodern characteristics to be identified, chief among which is a noticeable reappraisal of more *small-r* realist narrative structures, and of character and theme development. Empathy with the reader is sought on

many occasions and suggestions of a more naïve worldview as opposed to the weary postmodern irony can be glimpsed. But, it is in “Octet” and in “Good Old Neon”, where we encounter writing that truly reunites many of the characteristics we have defined in the previous section as being fundamentally post-postmodern. Metafiction and irony are connected to the real, to the need for human interconnection as a cure for solipsism, and thus the search for meaning is no longer as restricted as in many postmodern works. But poststructuralist theory is never ignored and the fictional status of the stories is not denied. Rather, there is now reality *in* (post-)postmodern fiction.

At its best, then, David Wallace’s fiction evades the traps of postmodernism, and reinvents life-affirming new possibilities from within poststructuralism; at its “worst”, it remains within postmodern confines and struggles to bond with the reader. Wallace’s post-postmodern reinvention of his postmodern heritage, as I have argued, resists easy categorisation. Maybe, when it really comes down to it, it should be viewed as “uncomfortable but sincere realism for a world that was no longer real.” (Max 231). I hope that by trying to disentangle Wallace’s extraordinary (short) fiction further, this essay may contribute to the divided critical debate that surrounds it. Ultimately, however, in the words of Mark Nechtr: “dividing this fiction business into realistic and naturalistic and surrealist and modern and postmodern and new-realistic and meta- is like dividing history into cosmic and tragic and prophetic and apocalyptic” (“Westward” 346). What matters, is that it “stabs you in the heart” (“Westward” 332).

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