The Problem of Total Irony in the Writing of David Foster Wallace
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Introduction

“There is something hokey about an epigraph, even a straightforward epigraph: a posture of awe before some palimpsestic Other Text; a kind of rhetorical attitudinizing. Poshlost” (Barth, Friday Book, xvii).

The motto above is taken from an epigraph in John Barth’s The Friday Book. Upon reading it, it is not immediately clear what Barth is trying to say. The text seems to contradict itself by criticizing epigraphs in an epigraph. Therefore most readers will come to the conclusion that Barth is being ironic here, that he does not literally mean what he states. However, what the exact meaning is remains unclear. This is the nature of irony; there is a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. This contradictory nature of irony can be useful as well as problematic. This will become apparent when looking at both the theoretical origins of the phenomenon as well as the practical application of irony in the work of David Foster Wallace.

Irony as a concept is hard to define because it can refer to different practices. As a starting point it is useful to look at Claire Colebrook’s differentiations between three different forms of irony. Firstly, it can constitute a rhetorical strategy, as in saying the opposite of what you mean and thereby criticizing other arguments (Colebrook, 3). This form of irony is relatively straightforward: there is a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, yet the true meaning of an utterance will always be, and is always meant to be, understood due to the context in which it is said. Irony can, secondly, also refer to what is called cosmic, dramatic or situational irony, depending on the source. In this case it is the irony of existence; a twist of fate that becomes ironic in its contradiction between intention and outcome (ibid., 14). Examples could be going on a diet but increasing in weight, or Oedipus unknowingly killing his father. This type of irony is about “the relation between human intent and contrary outcome” (ibid., 15). The third, and for this essay the most relevant, form of irony is irony as
broader worldview or general attitude. This form of irony is hard to define because throughout history it has taken many different forms.\textsuperscript{1} Central to this ‘total’ irony is that everything is treated ironically. Irony has become an attitude that is no longer a reaction to one certain thing but to life in general.

One of the most significant explorations of this form of irony would come from the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. In The Concept of Irony Kierkegaard showed both the usefulness of irony as well as its hazards. His work is a reaction to the use of irony by Socrates, the Jena Romantics. Based on these earlier forms of irony Kierkegaard argues that irony can be a useful way to create some form of critical distance, but that it can never be a position in and of itself. Furthermore, irony can overstay its usefulness and become an impediment for sincere communication. To understand why this is it is useful to briefly introduce Kierkegaard’s thoughts on irony.

For Kierkegaard irony is a practical tool to help overcome immediate consciousness.\textsuperscript{2} Irony for Kierkegaard attempts to negate this immediacy and tries to uncover the hidden aspects of values. What irony can thus achieve is to enable people to scrutinize their given immediacy and thereby help to overcome themselves. What irony cannot accomplish, and this is Kierkegaard’s main criticism of the Romantics, is to become a valid philosophical position in its own right. This is because in his view irony always has to stand in relation to something. It always needs something to refute, otherwise it is devoid of meaning. In one of his journals, Kierkegaard summarizes it as follows: “[t]he ironical position as such is: nihil admirari [to admire nothing],” which can be described as being free of all influences and dependencies

\textsuperscript{1}The first occurrence of this third form of irony is generally dated back to Socrates (Booth, 270). After being ignored for many centuries this deeper form of irony was to be picked up again by the Jena Romantics in the late eighteenth century. This group’s use of irony would in turn influence many other nineteenth century thinkers like Schopenhauer or Nietzsche (Pippin, 112).

\textsuperscript{2}Immediate consciousness means that someone stands in immediate relation to something by accepting given values or laws without any critical reflection or distance: “immediate consciousness… in all its innocence accepts with child-like simplicity whatever is offered” (Kierkegaard, CI, 204). The concept of immediacy will be explained more in-depth further on in the dissertation.
(Kierkegaard, *CI*, 430). In opposition to this negative freedom, the freedom from something, Kierkegaard places a positive freedom, the freedom to something. As Cross states: “the positive freedom . . . would consist in realizing a life that is genuinely his own, a life shaped in accordance with a substantive ideal that he embraces in freedom, as contrasted with an ideal merely given over to him in virtue of his immediacy” (Cross, 138). This positive notion of freedom is crucial for Kierkegaard. Thus, in the end irony as such for Kierkegaard always remains empty and devoid of meaning because it only consists of the freedom from. This freedom should always be taken as a first step toward a positive freedom that is chosen free of the restraints of one’s immediacy yet nonetheless based on a substantive ideal.

Kierkegaard’s account of irony gives a good indication why so many modernist and postmodern writers would use irony in their work. For modernist writers, irony was an effective way to criticize and lay bare the hypocrisy of the values of their time. A frequently cited example is Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. A book that employs irony to heavily criticize what Flaubert saw as the hypocrisy of the French bourgeoisie (Hutcheon, 55 and Muecke, 94). By that time, irony as a general attitude was no longer used by only a small group of German writers; it had become an important concept for writers ranging from Charles Dickens to Thomas Mann. However, never was the concept as important as in the second half of the 20th century; a time in which writers brought the use of irony to its radical logical conclusion. Many of these writers, although in many respects they differ from each other, can be loosely grouped together as postmodern writers.3  Irony was an excellent way for writers to call everything into question and underline the contingent nature of all values. Claire Colebrook describes irony as used by postmodern writers as follows: “[I]f there is nothing other than signification, with no subjects who signify or world to be signified, then

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3 There are of course many differences in style, content and literary intent between the writers that are considered postmodern. However, when it comes to the use of irony by those writers, there are similarities that are relevant and warrant the provisional combining of the authors.
we would be left with a world of ‘saying’ without any possibility of underlying truth or ultimate sense…such a world would be radically ironic, for no speech act could be legitimated, justified or grounded” (Colebrook, 153-154). The important difference between this form of irony and the one employed by Socrates, the Jena Romantics and Kierkegaard is that the latter writers all believed in an ultimate truth, whereas most postmodern writers have abandoned this notion.⁴

Although specific manifestations of irony might be different in various historical periods, what they all have in common is that they negate the values of their time. As the philosopher Richard Rorty states in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*: irony has to “have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated” (Rorty, 88). Therefore, irony sits very comfortably in what can be loosely defined as the postmodern era: a period in literature and philosophy that is characterized by a declining belief in essential truths. Whereas the use of irony in nineteenth century literature, the time of Schlegel and Kierkegaard, was still a marginal practice, in the late twentieth century it seems to have become a perspective engrained in western culture. In her book on irony Linda Hutcheon claims that “irony appears to have become a problematic mode of expression at the end of the twentieth century (Hutcheon, 1). The fundamental difficulties of irony specified by Kierkegaard had thus become problematic on a larger scale.

American author and essayist David Foster Wallace (1962-2008) is one of those writers for whom irony in its postmodern form has become highly problematic. In this Wallace fits into a larger movement that tried to move away from what they saw as the dead end of postmodernism. Literary scholar Robert L. McLaughlin put it as follows: “many of the fiction writers who have come on the scene since the late 1980s seem to be responding to the

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⁴ A further subdivision should be made between Kierkegaard on the one hand and Socrates and the Jena Romantics on the other because the latter two believed it was impossible to ever get to that truth while Kierkegaard believed it was possible.
perceived dead end of postmodernism, a dead end that has been reached because of postmodernism's detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of nonreferential language” (McLaughlin, 55). Various scholars and writers tried to address this problem by creating a new kind of theory or fiction that would not be trapped in this dead end: “one can say that a new and different intellectual direction must come after postmodernism, simply because postmodernism is inadequate as an intellectual response to the times we live in” (Lopez and Potter, 4).

An account of what this amounts to for American literature is given by Nicoline Timmer in her book *Do You Feel it Too?* Timmer takes the work of David Foster Wallace, Mark Danielewski and Dave Eggers as examples of how some American writers try to find new ways of writing fiction. According to Timmer, there is a generation of young writers in whom “we can detect an incentive to move beyond what is perceived as a debilitating way of framing what it means to be human: the post modern perspective on subjectivity” (Timmer, 13). She continues to state that “[t]heir texts perform a complicit and complicated critique on certain aspects of postmodern subjectivity” and treat subjectivity in such a way that it can no longer be called postmodern (ibid., 13). Timmer’s analysis is confirmed by Josh Toth and Niel Brooks in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* who saw the rise of neo-realism as one of the signals of a possible move away from postmodernism (Toth and Brooks, 2). However, whereas neo-realism can be seen as being almost anti-postmodern in its intentions, the work of David Foster Wallace is something else entirely. Marshall Boswell claims that Wallace does not reject postmodernism but “moves resolutely forward while hoisting the baggage of modernism and postmodernism heavily, but respectfully, on his back” (Boswell, 1). This manifests itself distinctively in Wallace’s specific use of irony.

To understand the importance of the work of Wallace in general and his use of irony in particular, it is best to briefly trace the development in the use of irony in American literature
from after the Second World War up until the time during which Wallace wrote. For the first generation of postmodern writers, irony became a central element of their work, the best examples being John Bath, Donald Barthelme or Thomas Pynchon. These writers used irony to cut through what they thought was the hypocrisy of America during the 1950s and 1960s. This critical use, however, does not mean that these writers were using irony to destabilize or destroy everything on their path. Barthelme, for instance, seemed very much aware of the issues accompanying the use of irony:

> What is interesting is my making the statement that I think Kierkegaard is unfair to Schlegel… Because that is not what I think at all. We have to do here with my own irony. Because Kierkegaard was “fair” to Schlegel. In making a statement to the contrary I am attempting to… annihilate Kierkegaard in order to deal with his disapproval.

Q: Of Schlegel?

A: Of Me.

(Barthelme, 166).

After its first rise in postmodern literature, irony quickly moved from being an attitude of avant-garde writers to becoming a more widespread cultural practice, and in literature it became almost a prerequisite for many young writers. Writers like Bret Easton Ellis or Mark Leyner continued down the track outlined by the early postmodernists, but whereas those early postmodern writers still seemed somewhat anxious about the use of irony, the later writers seemed to fully embrace it as a way of looking at the world.²

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² The distinction between late and early postmodern writers made here is not a clear cut distinction, but only serves in this essay to underline the shift in the use of irony between different writers; i.e. to indicate the difference between using irony with the goal of improvement in mind and using irony for its own sake.
Contrary to Ellis and Leyner, Wallace was one of the first writers who consciously moved away from the use of this form of ‘total irony’ and wrote fiction that somehow tried to reclaim sincerity and naiveté. In response to the postmodern fiction of his time, Wallace tried to write a new kind fiction; a kind of fiction that critically looked at the postmodern literary tradition, but without rejecting everything postmodern and returning to modernism or even pre-modernism. This ambitious but self-aware goal of writing fiction in the shadow of postmodern fiction is something that is central to all his work. His debut novel *The Broom of the System*, using the theories of Wittgenstein and Derrida, was an enquiry into the relation between language and the world. In the collection of short stories that followed his debut, *Girl with Curious Hair*, he continued to criticize postmodern fiction by parodying the work of authors like B.E. Ellis, John Barth and Philip Roth. Besides criticizing these writers, he also tried to plot a potential new course for fiction in the novella-length story “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way;” a course that he would follow in his major work *Infinite Jest*, as well as in his later short stories and his unfinished novel *The Pale King*.

At the time when Wallace started to write, postmodern irony seemed almost unavoidable. Wallace argued that irony had saturated American culture; it was no longer limited to only a few marginal writers. Whereas Barth had still self-consciously used irony in response to his time and as a way of escaping modernism, Wallace argues that by the 1990s, irony had become deeply rooted in American culture at large. In his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” Wallace shows the degree to which irony has penetrated U.S. culture. Mainstream television shows like *David Letterman* and *Saturday Night Live* and even commercials now use the same kind of total irony as postmodern fiction writers like Ellis and Leyner had done earlier. Wallace criticizes these cultural products as having an empty, self-conscious and cynical worldview. This is of course not the first time someone accuses ironists of being empty and cynical; as noted before, this fundamental problem in the concept of irony
is something more writers have struggled with. The main difference is that in the case of Wallace, irony has now for the first time shifted from a marginal to a dominant cultural practice.

It is in their criticism of irony that Wallace and Kierkegaard resemble each other the most, as they both claim that absolute irony always leads to emptiness, and that it can never be used to positively assert something. Earlier generations of postmodern fiction writers had used irony to distance themselves from the world around themselves and had shown that everything is simulated and lacks real meaning (Colebrook, 19). However, the overuse of this absolute negative irony, so argues Wallace, has led to problems already identified by Kierkegaard. As Wallace states: “I too believe that most of the problems of what might be called ‘the tyranny of irony’ in today’s West can be explained almost perfectly in terms of Kierkegaard’s distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical life” (qtd. In den Dulk, 2).

In his later work, and mainly in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, Wallace tries to remedy the problems with irony he had outlined in his earlier work by attempting to show how to use fiction to overcome the cynicism so dominant during the nineteen nineties. As he states: “In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow despite the times’ darkness. 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” (Wallace quoted in McCaffery, 13).

The way in which Wallace tries to accomplish this is by using both irony and naïveté next to each other in his fiction. As stated before, Wallace does not dismiss all the issues raised by postmodern literature and theory, but he does try to find a way of being sincere in a time of absolute irony. As Wallace states: “[C]ulture-wise, shall I spend much of your time pointing out the degree to which televisual values influence the contemporary mood of jaded
weltschmerz, self-mocking materialism, blank indifference and the delusion that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive?” (Wallace, “E Unibus,” 63). Instead of viewing them as mutually exclusive, Wallace uses the postmodern tools of irony and self-awareness to recover some form of naïveté. This is again something that relates to Kierkegaard, who shows how irony can be used to detach oneself from the world, but who also argues for a new, freely chosen form of recommitment. Both authors thus criticize total irony as being an empty stance that cannot effectively speak about the world and try to find a solution in some form of conscious re-attachment.

The central argument in this dissertation is that for David Foster Wallace, the use of irony in American culture in general and in literature specifically has become problematic. It has lost its critical edge and initial purpose of improvement through criticism; it has become a stance on its own. This argument is supported by my broader claim, supported by the theories of Kierkegaard, that irony as a phenomenon has inherent qualities that make it useful as tool for criticism but that those same qualities make that irony can never be a valid position in itself. If this does happen, irony becomes an empty phenomenon that not only serves no purpose, but also actively hinders the attempts of those trying to wrestle free from irony. There is a line that separates useful irony from oppressive irony, and I will argue that for Wallace this line has been crossed by many postmodern writers. They tried to use irony to somehow seek improvement, but through their use of irony they reached a cynical dead end. This is an inevitable consequence of the use of total irony because of its negative nature and its inability to construct positive meaning. Therefore, I will argue that Wallace and Kierkegaard are correct in claiming that total irony is something that, in the end, has to be overcome.

In the first chapter I will first give an account of the different uses of irony and how it changed over time from Socrates to its postmodern users. Hereafter I will explain why for so
many American writers irony became such a tempting form of writing during the second half of the twentieth century: how they could use it to negate what they saw as the hypocritical and hollow values of their time, and how in time it became embedded in mainstream American culture. The second chapter will outline Wallace’s criticism of irony in postmodern literature. To do so I will analyze Wallace’s essay “E Unibus Pluram” and the stories “Girl with Curious Hair,” “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way” and “My Appearance” to show how he assesses the problem of irony in postmodern fiction. In the third chapter I will argue that in his later short stories as well as in Infinite Jest and The Pale King, Wallace tries to recover some form of naiveté in the face of irony, to be sincere in times of cynicism. I will argue that this is again in line with the philosophies of Kierkegaard; both think that irony can create freedom from previous restraints, but that it does not constitute freedom in itself. Both authors believe that freedom comes from freely choosing to become attached to something; this is especially the case in Wallace’s posthumously published novel The Pale King. Finally I will evaluate how Wallace’s work fits into the larger debate about the possibility of a post-postmodernism and if his way out of total irony can provide a satisfying answer.
Chapter 1: Origins and Evolution of the Concept of Irony

Kierkegaard’s Irony

The origins of philosophical irony can be found in the teachings of Socrates. This was the first documented case of the use irony not just as a rhetorical trick, as in saying the opposite of what you actually mean, but as a way of looking at the world, in this way using irony as a philosophical position (Colebrook, 23). Up until the Romantic period, irony was used in a more limited way in multiple instances. However, the group called the Jena Romantics recognized the deeper meaning of irony in the teachings of Socrates and used it to support their theories. Irony was important for the Jena Romantics because “[o]nly through irony could man achieve simultaneously closeness to reality and a distance from it. Only the ironic attitude enabled man to commit himself wholly to finite reality and at the same time made him realize that the finite is trivial when viewed from the perspective of eternity” (Firchow, 30). It was the use of irony by Socrates and the Jena Romantics that was starting point for Kierkegaard.

In 1841 Kierkegaard wrote his dissertation On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates. In his book Kierkegaard analyzes the roots and uses of irony in the work of Socrates and the Jena Romantics and outlines his own theory. Kierkegaard starts off his analysis by drawing a distinction between irony as a rhetorical device and irony on a deeper level. To make his point he starts with the foundations of communication: “when I am

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6 Examples could include Nicolas Machiavelli’s “The Marriage of Belphegor” in 1518 or the writing of Michel de Montaigne in the late sixteenth century (Farquhar, 791).

7 Schlegel states that irony should serve as a permanent parabasis, breaking up the aesthetic unity of a play. For Schlegel irony could best perform this role of interruption as it was the best way to reveal the underlying issues that were problematic. Irony “consists of a continual self-consciousness of the work itself, of an awareness of the work of art as a fiction and as an imitation of reality at one and the same time… the irony of a work of art corresponds to the ironic attitude which Schlegel saw as mandatory in actual life” (Firchow, 30).

8 In relation to Schlegel’s work, Kierkegaard states that: “What Lucinde attempts, then, is to annul all ethics – not only in the sense of custom and usage but all the ethics that is the validity of spirit, the mastery of the spirit over the flesh” (Kierkegaard, CI, 290).
speaking, the thought, the meaning [of an utterance], is the essence, and the word the phenomenon” (Kierkegaard, CI, 247). When someone states “I like reading” the listener will assume that this utterance (phenomenon) is representative of the thoughts (essence) of the speaker. Communication is thus based on the premise that what you say is what you mean, and in this way people can understand each other. However, this is different in the case of irony because if what is said is not what is meant, then communication is no longer bound to meaning and in this way the connection between meaning and utterance is broken (ibid., 248).

For Kierkegaard, however, in the case of irony as a verbal strategy, this referential freedom is immediately canceled out by the fact that the intended meaning of the utterance is still understood by the other party. For example the “isn’t-it-lovely-weather” remark, spoken while it is raining, still communicates, through an ironic loop, that the weather is actually miserable. The context makes sure that the speaking subject is still understood by the other person. This is a good thing, because the speaker actually wants to be understood, as it is ordinarily not the objective of the speaker to hide what he or she means. Kierkegaard states that “the ironic figure of speech cancels itself: it is like a riddle to which one at the same time has the solution” (ibid., 248).\(^9\) But what remains is that for Kierkegaard one of the most important features of verbal irony is that it is a contradiction between the external and the internal, between what is said and what is meant.

In Kierkegaard, irony as a verbal strategy serves as a useful starting point that exhibits certain features that are also present in the deeper form of irony, albeit in a more superficial way. One of the features that is important for Kierkegaard is the sense of superiority that comes along with using irony. Irony “looks down, as it were, on plain and simple talk that everyone can promptly understand; it travels around, so to speak, in an exclusive incognito and looks down pitying from this high position on ordinary, prosaic talk” (Kierkegaard, CI, 248).

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\(^9\) Here, irony as a verbal strategy becomes something like a metaphor or an idiom (Cross, 127).
Consequently in this way irony sets itself apart from the normal usage of language: “irony is in the process of isolating itself; it does not wish to be generally understood” (ibid., 249). It creates a difference between those who get it and those who don’t get it.\(^\text{10}\)

However, the most important feature of irony for Kierkegaard is its ability to create freedom for the ironist. In nearly all cases, when someone states something, that person vows for the truth of their claims. The claim is that what is stated is reliable and trustworthy. However, when using irony this is not the case; there is no pledge to the truth of what is being said, there is no commitment. So the more you speak ironically the freer you become from your utterances. This goes further than in irony as a verbal strategy mentioned before, because in the case of total irony an ironic statement no longer simply means the direct opposite of what is said. The true meaning of a statement it not discernible, because the ironist does not want to communicate it. It is, however, not the intention of the ironist to deceive or lie. He or she only wants the freedom that comes with using irony. It is here that the difference between (verbal) irony and total irony is most clearly visible: “The difference between a pure ironist and a person who is ironic in this less comprehensive respect is this: Pure ironists, according to Kierkegaard, fundamentally want to be free from the obligations, restrictions, and long-term commitments that accompany taking seriously one’s given place in a complex social order” (Frazier, 421).

An ironist is freed in multiple ways: firstly the ambiguous nature of the utterance makes him or her free from all accountability for how its meaning is interpreted. This responsibility is fully placed on the audience. This way, engaging in conversation is only a

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\(^{10}\) Hutcheon and Colebrook also touch upon this feature of irony. Hutcheon, for example, states that “there is an intending ‘ironist’ and her/his intended audiences- the one that ‘gets’ and the one that doesn’t ‘get’ the irony,” and Colebrook observes that “irony is elitist: to say one thing and mean another, or to say something contrary to what is understood, relies on the possibility that those who are not enlightened or privy to the context will be excluded” (Hutcheon, 10, Colebrook, 18). Whereas Hutcheon also stresses the importance of the interpreter of irony, Kierkegaard states that even without people understanding the irony in an utterance, it can still give the ironist a feeling of superiority and sophistication because the not getting of the irony by the listeners makes the speaker still feel superior to them.
form of playacting for the ironist because there is no commitment to what is said (Cross, 121). Secondly, the ironist no longer needs the understanding of a listener to fulfill his ironic intention. This was the case with irony as a rhetorical strategy, which requires someone to recognize it as ironic for it to work. This need for understanding is absent in the case of pure irony. It no longer needs someone to understand it as being ironic. The irony itself has become the point and it does not matter if it is understood or not. As Kierkegaard states: “irony [in this sense] has no other purpose but is self-motivated” (Kierkegaard, CI, 265). Because the ironist does not need others to get his irony for it to succeed, he or she has become independent from the listener.

As mentioned before, saying “lovely weather” while it is raining is still a successful form of communication for Kierkegaard; this way, via irony, the true meaning is still transferred. However, being a radical or total ironist means not communicating at all because nothing that is actually meant is brought across to the listener. For the ironist it is all a game, an ironist rejects the aims of the practices he takes part in and thereby “denies that they merit being taken seriously” (Cross, 133). So the ironist outwardly goes along with the reality of her time, but inwardly it is simply a game to play along with. This way the ironist lifts himself out of his surrounding world, (or immediacy as Kierkegaard calls it), by rejecting it altogether: “He is suspended above all the qualifications of substantial life” (Kierkegaard, CI, 217). The ironist is disengaged from his or her immediacy, and thereby also from the people around him. The ironist needs no other people to succeed in his irony; he has become independent of his listeners.

To understand why people would want to use irony, it is also important to understand what Kierkegaard means with the term immediacy; a term that is related to Hegel’s notion of Sittlichkeit (Frazier, 419). Immediacy can be used to describe someone as standing in immediate relation to something; as accepting any given situation uncritically. An example
would be the unreflective pursuit of hedonistic desire-satisfaction (Kierkegaard, *CI*, 204-205). In this case “the immediate consciousness… in all innocence accepts with childlike simplicity whatever is offered” (ibid., 204-205). This immediacy can also manifest itself as accepting and abiding by the laws of society without critically reflecting on these rules. It is “to take life as it comes, to take one's life as a kind of happening in which one finds oneself, whose nature is determined by various conditions that are also, unreflectively, accepted as just ‘the way things are’” (Cross, 136). It is to pursue something one thinks is good but without any critical reflection on where this idea of good comes from.

It is from this immediacy that the ironist wishes to be detached, and irony can help to accomplish this because it always negates the values and opinions it targets. Through the use of irony the immediacy of the ironists becomes something that is external to them. “The ironist separates himself from the self and the life that have hitherto been his; he ceases to identify himself with the identity and goals delivered to him by virtue of his particular location in a particular society, that is, his own history and upbringing, and so on” (Cross, 137). This is closely related to the possibility of freedom that comes along with the use of irony. Pure irony, as I have already quoted above, “fundamentally wants to be free from the obligations, restrictions, and long-term commitments that accompany taking seriously one's given place in a complex social order” (Frazier, 421).

Thus the pure ironist has freed himself from immediacy, but he has nothing to put in the place of this lost immediacy. This is why he is negatively free. “[H]e is nothing but this negating entity, this derogating and disengaging, carried on for its own sake rather than for the sake of some positive alternative” (Cross, 138). Borrowing again a term from Hegel, Kierkegaard calls this pure stance of irony “infinite absolute negativity.” Kierkegaard

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11 A wrong assumption would be that this could lead to some form of self-awareness, because this would be missing the point. For self-awareness would require the suspension of the ironic attitude, and therefore stop being total irony. This will be discussed in depth in chapter 3.
explains the notion of “infinite absolute negativity” as follows: pure irony “is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not” (Kierkegaard, CI, 261). This also leads to a problem for pure irony as a position in itself. Because absolute irony negates everything it per definition must also ironize the ironic position itself, and therefore it cannot hold as a position in itself. There are only two possibilities to resolve this dilemma: “either the ironist does not adopt an ironic attitude toward his own ironizing, in which case his irony is not total and he is not, by Kierkegaard's lights, a true (which is to say, total) ironist, or he does, in which case he can no longer regard himself as different from the others and is once again not an ironist” (Cross, 139). Irony can therefore never be a valid position in itself, it always needs something to be in opposition to.

This is irony’s biggest problem, not only for Kierkegaard and Hegel, but for nearly all commentators on the subject. It is true that through irony one can become detached from one’s surroundings and criticize them effectively, but once one is freed there is nothing to put in the place of all those things that irony exposed as being false: “since it [irony] has gone beyond all given actuality, one would think that it must have to have something good to put in its place. But this is by no means the case, for just as irony managed to defeat the historical actuality by placing it in suspension, so irony itself has become suspended. Its actuality is only possibility” (Kierkegaard, CI, 279).

Whereas the original intention of the person who uses irony was to gain some form of freedom, in the end this is not what is accomplished, according to Kierkegaard. First of all, the ironist – and therefore also the Jena Romantics, who are exemplary manifestations for Kierkegaard – never could attain what Kierkegaard thought was true freedom. Ironists “fail to recognize and realize the positive freedom that comes from… being integrated in some way into one's society, not wholly or mainly alienated by it” and by “being committed to others
through responsible choice in one's social roles” (Frazier, 443). However, not only can pure ironists not attain positive freedom; their negating relation to the rest of the world also makes ironists slaves of their moods and subjects them to boredom (Kierkegaard, CI, 285). Therefore Kierkegaard insists on a crucial difference between positive and negative freedom:

But for the individual, actuality is also a task that wants to be fulfilled… in order for the acting individual to be able to accomplish his task by fulfilling actuality, he must feel himself integrated in a larger context, must feel the earnestness of responsibility, must feel and respect every reasonable consequence. Irony is free from this. It knows it has the power to start all over again if it so pleases; anything that happened before is not binding. (Kierkegaard, CI, 279)

Because he has no meaningful commitment to the rest of the world, the ironist cannot develop relationships, which for Kierkegaard is essential to the development and continuity of someone’s identity. The result of this “is that ironists develop a very unhealthy kind of individuality, which is also destructive of certain communal goods” (Frazier, 444). This difference between positive and negative freedom is also something that will come back in Wallace’s last book The Pale King.

It is clear that for Kierkegaard irony in its pure or absolute form does not give real freedom, a fact which, however, does not make him reject irony completely. In the concluding chapter he proposes how to use irony in a controlled manner. As mentioned before, irony is a useful way to break free from immediacy, to become critical of one’s surrounding world. Being positively free does not therefore mean that such a life is a life without irony; “[t]o be controlled in this way… by no means indicates that irony should now lose its meaning or be totally discarded” (Kierkegaard, CI, 326). For someone who is positively free, irony can serve
in his or her personal life in the way that doubt can serve science: as a permanent check on those values and beliefs that are held true at the time. In this controlled way, irony “limits, finitizes, and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, content; it disciplines and punishing and thereby yields balance and consistency” (ibid., 326). Therefore Kierkegaard states that irony “it is not the truth but the way” (ibid., 327).

Postmodern Irony

Taking into account all of irony’s characteristics mentioned earlier, it is not surprising that, according to many critics, irony has become central to what can be loosely defined as postmodernism. “Many have argued that our entire epoch, as postmodern, is ironic…we no longer share common values and assumptions, nor do we believe there is a truth or reason behind our values; we always speak and write provisionally, for we cannot be fully committed to what we say” (Colebrook, 18) . Irony seems to fit perfectly into this way of looking at the world; there is no underlying truth to refer to in a postmodern world. This is not a problem for irony because it does not need an underlying truth to function. Furthermore, irony also specializes in disposing of these underlying truths. This negating quality of irony seems thus to go hand in hand with the radical doubt and relativity of the postmodern period.

Claire Colebrook describes postmodern irony as follows: “if there is nothing other than signification, with no subjects who signify or world to be signified, then we would be left with a world of ‘saying’ without any possibility of underlying truth or ultimate sense… such a world would be radically ironic, for no speech act could be legitimated, justified or grounded” (Colebrook, 153-154). This description of irony seems to correspond to the one offered by Mileur, who states that “[p]ostmodernity therefore reveals itself as an ironic notion communicating indirectly, by way of circumlocution, configuration, and bafflement, the necessity and impossibility of discussing the status of modernity in a straightforward and
meaningful manner” (Mileur, 200). A third definition is given by Wilde who states that postmodern irony is “chary of comprehensive solutions, doubtful of the self’s integrity, it confronts a world more chaotic… than any imagined by its predecessors and, refusing the modernist dialectic, interrogating both distance and depth, opens itself to the randomness and contingency of unmediated experience” (Wilde, “Irony,” 7).

All three authors see irony as particularly suited to postmodernism. According to them, postmodern ironists believe there no longer exists any identifiable underlying truth or integrity. Because of this loss, language cannot refer to a stable truth any more, and therefore language has become something like a game that only refers to itself. Irony fits into this worldview because it needs no stable truths to work; by negating everything, it exposes fundamental truth claims as being false. In other words: irony is used for disproving and negating but is never able to put something in the place of what it destroys. As Colebrook states: “no common ground is assumed, a life marked by irony remains open” (Colebrook, 18). Irony is also highly compatible with postmodernism because it has always treated language like a game; even rhetorical irony undermines the stability of language: “greater stress has been placed on irony that is undecidable and on modes of irony that challenge just how shared, common and stable our conventions and assumptions are” (ibid., 18). As Kierkegaard also stated, irony becomes a way of communication that does not really communicate anything. Because irony does not express any actual beliefs it fits perfectly with the doubt and uncertainty that is often associated with a postmodern way of writing.

In his chapter “Private Irony and Liberal Hope” in the book Contingency, Irony and Solidity, American philosopher Richard Rorty also comments on current uses of irony. For Rorty, an ironist is someone who has “radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies” (Rorty, 73). Moreover, “she realizes that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither
underwrite nor dissolve these doubts,” and lastly that “insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others” (ibid., 73). For Rorty, a final vocabulary would be the same as a set of values and beliefs someone upholds. Yet this so-called final vocabulary is not seen as a final truth by Rorty, but as something that is one of many other and different worldviews. Ironists are “never quite able to take themselves seriously because [they are] always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves” (Rorty, 73-74). For the ironist there is thus no stable foundation to their identities and beliefs, and therefore they cannot take themselves too seriously; their way of living is just one of many, and to take that as an ultimate truth would be wrong.

Rorty also states that the “opposite of irony is common sense… for that is the watchword of those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated” (Rorty, 74). This description closely resembles the way in which Kierkegaard previously described those people who are not liberated from their immediacy and uncritically uphold their values and beliefs. However, while for Kierkegaard irony was a way to overcome one’s immediacy, for Rotry the ironic stance is a worldview that fits those who doubt the fundamental nature of their values. It is more the result of a belief in relativity than a way to free oneself of the values and beliefs of one’s surrounding world.12 There thus exists a fundamental difference between Kierkegaard’s and Rorty’s notions of irony. Kierkegaard and the Romantics, while using irony to doubt the world around them, still believed in the existence of an underlying truth. For Rorty on the

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12 Rorty briefly touches upon this difference between his use of irony and that of Kierkegaard, and it becomes clear that the “Platonic Theory of Recollection, in the form in which this theory was restated by Kierkegaard, namely, that we have the truth within us, that we have built-in criteria which enable us to recognize the right final vocabulary when we hear it” is something Rorty does not believe in (Rorty, 76).
other hand the absence of a fundamental truth, or a final vocabulary, is the reason for people to adopt an ironic worldview.

For Rorty irony does not have a place in public discourse. Rorty states that the “suspicion that ironism in philosophy has not helped liberalism is quite right… because liberals have come to expect philosophy to do a certain job - namely, answering questions like ‘why not be cruel?’ and ‘[w]hy be kind?’ - and they feel that any philosophy which refuses this assignment must be heartless” (Rorty, 94). According to Rorty, irony cannot deal with the problems of liberalism because irony should be something private. He cites as examples of ironist philosophers Nietzsche, Heidegger, and most of all Derrida, whom Rorty sees as being the most contingent and therefore also the most ironic of them all. It is Rorty’s opinion that “ironist philosophers are private philosophers - philosophers concerned to intensify the irony of the nominalist and the historicist. Their work is ill suited to public purposes, of no use to liberals qua liberals” (ibid., 95). So irony can be a private way of looking at the world, but as a public point of view, irony should be avoided. Because of their contingent worldview, Rorty does not see the ironist philosophers contributing much to society. He states that: “within our increasingly ironist culture, philosophy has become more important for the pursuit of private perfection rather than for any social task” (Rorty, 94). By privatizing irony, Rorty thus tries to reserve the social sphere for more pragmatically oriented social engineering, which results in the figure of the liberal ironist, whose irony is a private matter, yet whose liberalism is public (Bhaskal, 82-85).13

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13 In his book Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom, Bhaskal criticizes Rorty for this strict split; he provides an extensive criticism of Rorty’s work, stating that the separation between liberalism on the one hand and irony on the other can never be clear or even possible at all. Bhaskal also draws a link between Rorty’s and the Jena Romantics’ notion of irony and criticizes it for being relevant only for the cultural elite: “whose lives may be devoted to the practice of aesthetic enhancement, and in particular generating self, other and genealogical descriptions. Their careers are a succession of poems, all marginally different; and a succession of paradigm shifts, for which no overarching or commensurating criteria can be given. They thus resemble Novalis and the Romantics” (Bhaskal, 134-135).
While Rorty understands why people would opt for an ironic worldview, he also recognizes that an ironic point of view can never be constructive. His split between public liberalism and private irony might not be ideal, but it does indicate that he shares Kierkegaard’s, and as will become apparent later in this dissertation, Wallace’s reservations about the widespread use of irony.14 “Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated” (Rorty, 88). This lies very close to Kierkegaard’s description of irony as infinite absolute negativity (Kierkegaard, CI, 261). For Kierkegaard and Rorty, irony is thus always parasitical. It is also something that should not be carried too far because it will in the end amount to nothing but empty cynicism. Both authors do recognize that irony may have some role to play, though; as Jacobs and Smith state: “In this respect Rorty's own arguments about the merits of private irony as a resource for liberal ‘selfcreation’ reprise those of Kierkegaard, albeit in a more secular mode” (Jacobs and Smith, 70). However, at the same time both authors also want to limit the use of total irony because of its absolute negative foundation.

Irony in American Postmodern Literature

Rorty saw contemporary American culture as becoming increasingly ironic (Rorty, 94), and this is particularly true for contemporary literature and popular culture. As mentioned before, irony seems to be highly compatible with postmodernist literature, but this does not mean that irony exclusively belongs that period. From the Jena Romantics onwards, irony has emerged in many different forms and was central to both romanticism and modernism. As Alan Wilde states: “Somehow irony manages again and again to escape its association with this or that

14 The split that is made by Rorty between private irony and public liberalism is often criticized and valid arguments can be made in opposition to Rorty’s assessment. In relation to irony, however, the largest problem is that, unlike Wallace and Kierkegaard, Rorty seems to underestimate the ways in which irony can be useful. In his work there is not enough recognition for the way in which irony can create a useful critical distance, even in the case of liberalism.
school and to recast itself constantly into new and unpredictable modes (Wilde in Bloland, 524). This being said, for many American writers after the Second World War, irony became central to their writing. It allowed them first of all to get rid of the traditions of early postwar America, but for many of them irony also reflected the demise of ultimate truths that they were experiencing.

There are many American postmodern writers that used irony in their work, including Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Vladimir Nabokov, and Kurt Vonnegut, yet I shall focus on the work of John Barth as an example of early postmodern fiction. First, because he is a key figure in the development of postmodern literature. Second, because he is an important influence on the work of Wallace. The work of John Barth is perhaps best known as being one of the first to employ what was later called meta- fiction; a form of writing that is closely related to irony. According to Marshall Boswell, Barth’s early work should be interpreted as a response to modernism. In his essay “The Literature of Exhaustion,” Barth explained what it meant for a writer to follow in the footsteps of modernism; as Boswell summarizes: “according to Barth, the modernist novel so thoroughly interrogated the nature of perception and the limits of literary interpretation that it effectively exhausted the form” (Boswell, 12).

The new methods that modernism explored to depict reality more effectively had, for Barth, become literary conventions that were now being overused, which is why he calls it “literature of exhausted possibility” (Barth, Friday, 64). This is reason for Barth to state that modernism had become a dead end. For Barth “the postmodern novel would employ literary conventions ironically, in the form of parody, thereby undertaking a self-reflexive inquiry into the ontological status of literary inquiry itself” (Boswell, 12).

15 In her book on metafiction Particia Waugh writes: “Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its own status as an artifact in order to pose the question about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh, 2). Barth’s short story “Lost in the Funhouse” is one of the most famous examples of metafiction and is also a text that Wallace later parodied in his book Girl with Curious Hair.
Barth uses irony and metafiction as a way to show the constructed nature of a text, much like, for instance, Friedrich Schlegel for whom irony served as a permanent parabasis. Barth uses irony because it allows him to convey the theoretical problems of writing. While it would be strange for a writer to claim that literature is exhausted but at the same time keep on writing, irony allows Barth, and other writers, to keep on writing after insisting on the end of writing. Both writer and reader know the text is a construct and the text is subject to all kinds of literary conventions that have been used so often that they have lost all their initial meaning. Quoting Eco, Barth summarizes the problem as follows:

[T]he postmodern attitude [is] that of a man who loves a very sophisticated 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 it 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… I like that, too: If for 'Barbara Cartland' we substitute 'the history of literature up to the day before yesterday,' it is the very point of my essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion.' (Barth qtd. in McLaughlin 59)

The same goes for irony, because, according to Barth, we can no longer truly speak about the world because all has been said before or has been exposed as a myth, and the only way left is to speak ironically about it. It is this apparent inevitability of irony that Wallace will try to deal with in his writing.
Chapter 2: Wallace’s Criticism of Irony

The Problem of Irony in the Work of David Foster Wallace

In most of Wallace’s writing the problem of postmodern irony is an important issue, but the text in which Wallace comes closest to Kierkegaard’s critique on irony is the essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.” The essay explicitly deals with the problem of writing fiction in a time of extreme irony, and specifically demonstrates the importance of television in US culture. It shows how television was essential for the widespread use of postmodern irony. He states that the “best of TV of the last five years has been about ironic self-reference like no previous species of postmodern art could ever have dreamed of” (Wallace, “E Unibus,” 33). Due to its ability to provide both sound and images, Wallace argues that that television is the ideal medium for irony.16 “Since the tension between what is said and what’s seen is irony’s whole sales territory,” television can show the discrepancy between pictures and sounds perfectly” (ibid., 30). It is also important to add that it is not only television programs have successfully adopted this ironic tone; commercials have also gained success by becoming increasingly ironic.17 This shows that irony has become more prevalent and is thus more than a trivial phenomenon used by marginal writers.

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16 Looking at the use of irony since its initial employment by Schlegel and his companions, it seems fair to argue that no better medium for the spread of irony can be thought of than television. While books can be ironic, their irony is often tricky to discern and is easily missed (see for instance Booth’s Rhetoric of Irony). Most irony on television on the other hand is hard to miss. Irony in Jane Austen or Mark Twain is harder to spot than the irony in David Letterman or Saturday Night Live.

17 Like Kierkegaard and Hutcheon, Wallace also notes the importance of understanding irony. For him this is an important reason why irony is so successful on television: people who get the joke somehow feel like they understand the medium and its manipulation and thereby think themselves better than the rest of the millions of viewers who do not get it. Ironic television successfully manages to pander to this feeling of superiority. The problem for Wallace is that ‘getting’ the irony of a commercial has become an advertisement strategy in itself that has proven to be very successful (Wallace, “E Unibus,” 61). Thus people see through the irony of a commercial and thereby get some feeling of being in on the joke, but at the same time the commercials prove to be very effective. In an essay about postmodern irony and U.S. television Lise Colletta states that “[p]ostmodern irony does not aim to get us to turn off the television, but to entertain us into staying tuned and to be consumers of all cultural product, all the while reassuring us with a wink that we are in on and somehow superior to the giant joke that is being played on us” (Colletta, 857).
Wallace sees a link between irony on television and the irony used by the early postmodern writers, stating that “TV has co-opted the distinctive form of… cynical, irreverent, ironic, absurdist post WWII literature” (Wallace, “E Unibus,” 59). There is, however, an important difference: whereas the early postmodern writers used irony as a way to deal with the problems of their time, the irony co-opted by commercial television has lost this critical edge altogether. This is in accordance with Kierkegaard’s argument; in this case the early postmodern writers used irony to create some distance between themselves and their society (or immediacy), but the television programs take irony as an end in itself and thereby get sucked into the vortex of infinite absolute negativity.

In an interview with McCaffery, Wallace comments on the enabling version of irony that “[i]rony and cynicism were just what the U.S. hypocrisy of the fifties and sixties called for” (Wallace in McCaffery, 147). This type of irony scrutinized old assumptions and therefore was very useful for many writers, but it was always based on the assumption that in the end it would lead to something else. “The assumptions behind early postmodern irony… were frankly idealistic: it was assumed that etiology and diagnosis pointed towards cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom” (Wallace, “E Unibus,” 67).

Wallace sees a clear change from the irony of early postmodern writers to the widespread use of irony in his time. He states that “even though their [Nabokov’s, Pynchon’s, etc] self-consciousness and irony and anarchism served valuable purposes… their aesthetic’s absorption by the U.S. commercial culture has had appalling consequences” (Wallace in McCaffery, 147). Having lost its ability to effectively criticize, because there was very little left that had escaped the scorn of irony, it quickly lost its usefulness. “The problem is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, ‘then’ what do we do?” (ibid., 147).
Wallace realized that in his time there was nothing constructive irony could do anymore: “Postmodern irony and cynicism become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy” (ibid., 147). This might not be such a serious problem when it only concerns some marginal postmodern writers, but Wallace points out that irony and cynicism have crept into the entire mood and culture of the U.S. Now the entire U.S. culture is saturated with a form of irony that has lost its initial purpose but nevertheless remains in place.

What is even more problematic for Wallace is that while irony initially intended to free culture from useless rules, it has now become that which it sought to destroy; a new set of values determining culture.\(^\text{18}\) Irony has become paralyzing; it criticizes anything genuine or sincere as being naïve. “Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what’s wrong, because they’ll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony’s gone from liberating to enslaving” (Wallace qtd. in McCaffery, 147). This leads Wallace to ask “What do you do when postmodern rebellion becomes a pop-cultural institution?” (Wallace, “E Unibus,” 63).

Not only is Wallace critical of those aspects of American culture that have become destructively and pointlessly ironic, he also singles out writers who have adopted this ironic tone in their work. The writers Wallace is most critical of are Mark Leyner and Bret Easton Ellis, both of whom adopt a highly ironical tone in their work. Wallace’s main point of critique is that these writers do not, as the early post-modernists did, use irony as a way to expose faults or hypocrisies in American culture, thereby eventually trying to improve this

\(^{18}\) Kierkegaard’s realization that irony can only negate and never assert is once again highlighted. Wallace is in complete agreement with Kierkegaard when he states that “irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function. It’s critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. But irony’s singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrites it debunks” (Wallace, “E Unibus,” 67).
culture. These writers have incorporated the irony of television and pop culture into their work and use irony now only for its own sake.\textsuperscript{19}

It is no secret that Wallace specifically disliked the work of Ellis (McCaffery, 131). It is also not surprising, considering the differences between the two authors. There are two instances in which Wallace directly criticizes the work of Ellis, the first being the story “Girl with Curious Hair” and the second an interview with McCaffery. In the interview he describes Ellis’s fiction as consisting of descriptions that are nothing more than lists of brand-name consumer products and dialogue consisting of “stupid people saying insipid stuff to each other” (Wallace in McCaffery, 131). Wallace continues:

> Look, if the contemporary condition is hopelessly shitty, insipid, materialistic, emotionally retarded, sadomasochistic, and stupid, then I (or any writer) can get away with slapping together stories with characters who are stupid, vapid, emotionally retarded, which is easy, because these sorts of characters require no development. (ibid., 131)

In Wallace’s view writers like Ellis write fiction that claims to be a commentary on an empty world but in reality is little more than a reflection of this world. “If readers simply believe the world is stupid and shallow and mean, then Ellis can write a mean shallow stupid novel that becomes a mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything” (Wallace in McCaffery, 131).

\textsuperscript{19} Kierkegaard stated that once irony has nothing left to negate it will lose all its initial usefulness and this is proven by the late postmodern writers who employed irony no longer to disprove something, but precisely because everything was already exposed as being artificial. Irony becomes a coping strategy that allows people to deal with the artificial world around them; everything is fake and everybody realizes this.
This is also the implicit argument of the story “Girl with Curious Hair,” which is a parody on the work of Ellis and writers like him. The story was actually written before *American Psycho*, but as Boswell states, “the story eerily forecasts Ellis’s slasher novel *American Psycho*” (Boswell, 79). The story is about a yuppie who befriends a group of anarchistic punk rockers. The protagonist seems completely disconnected from his world, and is obsessed by consumer products and extreme violence. Boswell states that “by placing his wealthy WASP narrator alongside the angry, disaffected punks, Wallace decisively explores the vacuity of Ellis and Eisenstadt’s phony nihilism” (ibid., 79). The emptiness of the main character is thus a criticism of the work of Ellis, whose bland characters are for Wallace nothing more than an easy reflection of a cultural image that is distilled from a shallow analysis of America in the nineteen-nineties.

Another work that Wallace sees as containing the highly problematic variant of postmodern irony is Mark Leyner’s *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*. This book, published in 1990, is an unending stream of ironical cultural references, and it takes the consumer society to its fictional extreme. In his essay “E Unibus Pluram,” Wallace extensively discusses Leyner’s work and claims that it can be seen as the logical conclusion of extreme postmodern irony. *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* is a continuous flow of ironical pop culture references and in that sense the book is very similar to ironical television programs for Wallace. This book resolves “the problem by celebrating it. Transcend feelings of mass-defined angst by genuflecting to them. We can be *reverently ironic*” (Wallace, “E Unibus,” 76). Therefore, this book is the ultimate example of irony for its own sake.

Five years before Wallace wrote his essay about television and irony he wrote a short story called “My Appearance” in which many of the themes outlined in his later essay

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20 Leyner writes for example: “I had just been fired from McDonald’s for refusing to wear a kilt during product launch week for their new McHaggis sandwich (Leyner, 18).
surfaced for the first time. Boswell even calls the “E Unibus Pluram” essay a footnote to “My Appearance,” (Boswell, 94). The story is about an actress who is to appear on the late-night talk show of David Letterman. This talk show embodies all those characteristics of ironic television mentioned above; it is cynical, ironically self-conscious, and ridicules those that are not. The reason the show is so successful is because it makes fun of itself as well as of the guests that appear on the show. The main character of the story can only prevent this by being in on the joke, thus she gets the following advice of her husband who is a television producer: “‘Make sure you’re seen as making fun of yourself, but in a self-aware and ironic way’” (Wallace, “My Appearance,” 182). This advice is followed by an explanation: “‘Sincerity is out,” Ron said. “The joke is now on people who’re sincere. Or who are sincere-seeming, who think they’re sincere, Letterman would say’” (ibid., 182).

This is the world of television as Wallace sees it: drenched in a thick layer of irony that rules out any attempt at being sincere. Being sincere is now seen as trying to appear sincere on television, which for an ironist is obviously nothing else than an attempt to manipulate people into thinking someone is sincere. The only way the actress in the story can survive ridicule is by going along with it, or at least this is the advice she gets. “‘In other words, appear the way Letterman appears, on Letterman’ Ron gestured as if to sum up, sitting back down. ‘Laugh in a way that’s somehow deadpan. Act as if you knew from birth that everything is clichéd and hyped and empty and absurd, and that that’s just where the fun is’” (Wallace, “My Appearance,” 182).

This is however not what the actress does when she is finally interviewed. Instead of going along with the self-aware mockery, she chooses to be honest with Letterman. She tells him: “You’re now looking at a woman with no illusions, David” (Wallace, “My Appearance,” 194). Her honest approach seems to defuse Letterman’s ridicule. She tells the story of her life in complete earnestness and doesn’t pretend to be anything else than she is. In relation to this
honesty the irony of Letterman is useless because the actress refuses to appear on the show in a way that is not herself. The possibility to refuse to be dictated by irony is something that Wallace himself also struggles with, as he too wants to stand up to irony. The story, like the essay, thus points at what according to Wallace is wrong with the overuse of irony in U.S. culture and shows that he was looking for a way to be sincere again in the face of irony.

It is helpful to return to Kierkegaard’s notion of positive and negative freedom to explain this problem. Irony could help people escape their immediacy after which they could freely commit themselves to something else and thus be positively free. In this sense, irony “is not the truth but the way” (Kierkegaard, C.I, 327). Once someone was, in Kierkegaard’s terms, properly situated (positively free), irony could serve as a useful check but it would never be ‘absolute total negativity.’ In an ideal situation irony could function in this way within a culture, criticizing without completely destroying and keeping a culture in check. For Wallace, however, as I have outlined, this is not the way irony functions in American culture. For him it seems that the essential step towards positive freedom was never taken and that books like American Psycho and television programs like Letterman remain thoroughly ironic and thereby function as a brake on those who which to transcend irony.

This is why for Wallace irony has become the new dictator. He states:

The last few years of the postmodern era have seemed a bit like the way you feel when you’re in high school and your parents go on a trip, and you throw a party. You get all your friends over and throw this wild disgusting fabulous party. For a while it’s great, free and freeing… but then time passes and the party gets louder and louder… and things get broken and spilled, and there’s a cigarette burn on the couch, and you’re the host and it’s your house too, and you gradually start wishing your parents would come back and restore… order in your house. (Wallace qtd. in McCaffery, 150)
Instead of being liberating, irony has become stifling and paralyzing, because it already rules out beforehand the kind of positive connection Wallace tries to establish in his fiction. This is why for Wallace irony now stands in the way of positive freedom. The sort of freedom he will try to achieve in the story “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way.” It is the reason why Wallace’s fiction so explicitly deals with irony as a concept, because for him as a writer it is that which he has to overcome in order to write the things he wants. This does not lead to a complete rejection of irony but to an incorporation of irony in a way that lies closer to what Kierkegaard had originally intended when he discussed the use of irony for those who had established some form of positive freedom. How exactly Wallace tries to accomplish this is something he first explored in his novella “Westward.”

“E Unibus Pluram,” “My Appearance” and “Girl with Curious Hair” criticize irony and suggest that there is a need for new ways to write fiction. The story that explicitly outlines this new way is the novella “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way.” The title unmistakably refers to the westward expansion of the U.S. and suggests an attempt at a progressive course by Wallace. Boswell comments on “Westward” that “as a freestanding work, the novella is an engaging piece of pretentious juvenilia; read as a precursor to Infinite Jest, it stands as a fascinating programmatic declaration of intent” (Boswell, 102). The story is mainly a reaction to the work of John Barth, specifically his metafictional text Lost in the Funhouse. Wallace’s central argument is that the irony and metafiction of Barth have become emptied out and used up, which is the same argument that Barth had made earlier with regard to modernist techniques. “Wallace makes the most overt argument that Barth’s postmodernist techniques have not only been appropriated by popular culture but in fact have been turned into a ‘franchise’ of sorts” (Boswell, 108). It is the same basic argument Wallace makes in “My Appearance” and “E Unibus Pluram.” Irony and metafiction have become “safe to read, familiar as syndication” (Wallace, “Westward,” 333).
However “Westward” goes beyond merely criticizing contemporary uses of irony and actually attempts to solve the problem. In the eyes of Boswell “the work seeks to chart… a new direction for narrative art, one that will move fiction past John Barth’s literature of exhaustion and the new realism of the 1980s” (Boswell, 102). For Timmer this text even marks the moment from which on Wallace’s fiction can no longer be called postmodern (Timmer, 102). In “Westward” the same funhouse (a metaphor for the postmodern text) that was central to the famous text by Barth has become a mass market entertainment venue acquired by fast food company McDonalds. At the same time a class of young writers is taking a creative writing course, taught by Embrose, who was also the main character in Barth’s story. This group of writers tries to deal with the influence of writers like Barth and the consumerist culture in which they grew up.

The point is that for Wallace, metafiction has become a safe trick and postmodern fiction only seems to reflect the emptiness of a culture obsessed with consumerism. Neo-realism on the other hand cannot be the solution either because, for Wallace, it does not affectively deal with what it means to live in the commercial culture of the nineties. To write about what it means to be human at the end of the twentieth century, Wallace searches for a new way of writing fiction. He states that a story is like a “whistling arrow” moving “alternately left and right, though in ever diminishing amounts… until at a certain point the arrow, aimed with all sincerity just West of the lover, is on line with his heart (ibid., 33). How these somewhat vague intentions are translated into practice becomes clear in his later fiction that will be discussed in the next chapter.

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21 Raymond Carver’s stories work fine if one’s reality consists of using divorce papers as a coaster for a bottle of cheap scotch while writing a sad letter to an estranged family member. However if one’s reality is using Gravity’s Rainbow as footstool while flipping channels between Letterman and Saturday Night Live, a different form of writing seems to be rightly called for.
Chapter 3

The Aesthetic Life and the Ethic Life

To adequately explain the solution to the problem of irony proposed by Wallace drawing on Kierkegaard, it is necessary to return briefly to the philosophy of the latter. For him, irony functioned within the larger existential structure he was to develop over the years. Kierkegaard divides life into three stages: the aesthetical, the ethical and the religious stage. Because irony has no function in the religious stage, and because it has no function in the work of Wallace I will only discuss the first two stages and leave out Kierkegaard’s elaborate thoughts on religion. For Kierkegaard, aestheticism can be understood as devoting one’s life to the experience of enjoyment, excitement or curiosity; as living for the moment.

“Committed to nothing permanent or definite, dispersed in sensuous ‘immediacy,’ the aesthete may do or think one thing at a given time, the exact opposite at some other” (Gardiner, 44). This is, however, also a life that is without any continuity, because an aesthete can be interested in something one minute and completely lose interest in it the next. It is a life that “lacks stability or focus, changes course according to mood or circumstance” (ibid., 44). Furthermore, in Either/Or Judge Vilhelm states that an aesthetic life is a life completely influenced from the outside. Therefore, the fulfillment of an aesthetic life is dependent on what is offered from the outside, i.e. on a contingent input. Although it shares characteristics with hedonism, Kierkegaard’s aesthetic life is not to be confused with simple hedonism. As “The Seducers Diary” shows, aesthetic life is not devoid of reflection or long term goals, but these are always an experiment and can, if necessary, be abandoned at any point. In the letter “The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage” in Either/Or, Judge Vilhelm, (who is the epitomization of the ethical sphere) warns A (who is the epitomization of the aesthetical sphere) that his “life will be nothing but approach-runs” (Kierkegaard, EO, 384). This statement by Judge
Vilhelm best sums up the aesthetic life: an aesthetic person is always willing to try but never willing to commit.

The ethical life, on the other hand, seems to be everything the aesthetic life is not. Kierkegaard states that instead of relying on the outside, the ethical life is turned inwards, fully focused on the individual. “For the person in the ethical sphere…meaningfulness is to be found in the realization of one's capacity for autonomous choice and willing” (Cross, 148).

This concept is based on Kierkegaard’s ideas about the difference between positive and negative freedom that he outlined in *The Concept of Irony*. However, his concept of the ethical life goes beyond these initial formulations. The ethical life is closely connected to the concepts of self-knowledge, self acceptance and self-realization. As Gardiner states, the “ethical subject is portrayed as one who regards himself as a 'goal,' a 'task set'” (Gardiner, 49).

Someone who has chosen to live his or her live ethically will regard their human nature as something that can be controlled and cultivated, instead of treating it as a given fact. An ethical person consciously chooses what he or she pays attention to and which goals to pursue in life. This way, for Kierkegaard, the ethical person takes responsibility for the way he or she is. This is related to the idea that the ethical life is to be shaped after an ideal. The life of an ethical person is based on a “conception of himself which is securely founded upon a realistic grasp of his own potentialities and which is immune to the vicissitudes of accident and fortune” (ibid., 50).

*Infinite Jest*

The rejection of irony that I claim is important for understanding the work of Wallace is most obvious in *Infinite Jest*, which is probably his best-known novel. The expansive work, which counts over 1000 pages, was first published in 1996. The novel is set in the near future and deals with a wide spectrum of subjects such as television, addiction, tennis, Quebec
separatism and depression. The book is in many ways a continuation of the themes that are present throughout Wallace’s entire work, themes that he sees as emblematic of American culture. The two main characters are Don Gately, a recovering drug addict who lives in a halfway house, and Hal Incandenza, who is a young tennis prodigy living at a tennis academy. The novel attempts to capture the struggle of people whose connection to the world around them is breaking down or has been broken altogether. This descent into isolation manifests itself on different levels. On a basic level it shows in, for instance, the dominance of television, or in the gradually increasing drug abuse of Hal. An ultimate form of isolation is reached in two instances, first in the film “Infinite Jest” made by the father of Hal, a film so seductive it leaves its viewers in a permanent vegetative state after watching, and secondly in final scene of the book, in which Hal is no longer able to communicate with the outside world although he can still think clearly.

Hal’s final and radical withdrawal inward gradually develops throughout the story. From the start, he is already someone who shows little affection for the people around him. In his outward appearance, Hal is thus much like Kierkegaard’s ironist; hiding behind a mask of irony, he treats language like a game and never shows his true feelings. However, while Kierkegaard’s ironist is someone who playfully and contently goes through life, for Wallace, on the other hand, an ironist is someone who hides his deep fear of loneliness and depression behind a mask of irony. For Hal, irony is not something that he consciously chooses; it is a coping mechanism he uses to deal with feelings of emptiness and depression. In this example, Wallace’s criticism of irony is once again apparent: irony ultimately ends in bleak isolation and makes it impossible to communicate in any sincere and meaningful way.

This inability to be sincere is also exemplified in Hal’s relation to the rest of his family. Throughout Infinite Jest Hal has multiple telephone conversations with his older brother Orin. These conversations are saturated with irony, with the result that both brothers
just talk randomly but never really discuss any of the issues they are dealing with. One of the telephone calls goes as follows:

‘Hey Hallie?’

‘After a burial, rural Papineau-region Quebecers purportedly drill a small hole down from the ground level all the way down through the lid of the coffin, to let out the soul, if it wants out.’

‘Hey Hallie? I think I’m being followed’

‘This is the big moment. I’ve exhausted the left foot finally and am switching to the right foot. This’ll be the real test of the fragility of the spell.’

‘I said I think I’m being followed’

‘Some men are born to lead, O.’ (Wallace, *IJ*, 244).

The relation between Hal and his father James is also characterized by failing communication. James becomes convinced that his son cannot speak to him even though Hal thinks he does speak to his father. James wants to make his son communicate and goes to extreme lengths to draw him out of his shell. The ultimate attempt is James’s film ‘Infinite Jest,’ which he made specifically for his son to make him talk to him again. The film, however, was so successful at pleasing its viewers that they were left in a permanent catatonic state, and Hal and his father never worked out their issues.

This story of the Incandenza family is counteracted by the story of recovering addict Don Gately. The most important thing in drug recovery, according to AA guidelines, is total honesty. Wallace thus describes AA meetings as being an “irony-free zone” (Wallace, *IJ*, 369). For AA style recovery to work, addicts need to fully commit to the often very trite rules of the program. The importance of commitment themselves to rules that often seem ridiculous
and banal is something that Wallace stresses multiple times throughout *Infinite Jest*. In the halfway house in which Gately works, new patients often arrive with an ironic stance toward the seemingly ridiculous rules of AA. The only ones that are successful in their recovery, however, are those addicts that manage to leave this irony behind and commit themselves to the rules, even though they seem ridiculous. This is not to say that Wallace promotes complete sincerity in all cases, but he does argue that irony can stand in the way of sincerity and that this can lead to negative effects.

It is this tension between irony and sincerity that forms a key aspect throughout the whole of *Infinite Jest*. At the end of his essay “E Unibus Pluram,” cited above, Wallace already foreshadowed this tension, stating: “culture-wise, shall I spend much of your time pointing out the degree to which televisual values influence the contemporary mood of jaded weltschmerz, self-mocking materialism, blank indifference and the delusion that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive?” (Wallace, “E Unibus,” 63) This is the earliest formulation of a problem that he has returned to in his subsequent work. Commenting on the same, issue Wallace writes in *Infinite Jest*:

We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where fact is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it’s stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté. Sentiment equals naïveté on this continent. (Wallace, *IJ*, 694).

In the same line, the following passage discusses the work of Hal’s father. It concerns a film called *The American Century as Seen Through a Brick*. In which the last part of the last sentence is practically a direct copy from the essay “E Unibus Pluram”: 
One of the things sophisticated viewers have always liked about J. O. Incandenza’s *The American Century as Seen Through a Brick* is its unsubtle thesis that naïveté is the last true terrible sin in the theology of millenial America. And since sin is the sort of thing that can be talked about only figuratively, it’s natural that Himself’s dark little cartridge was mostly about a myth, viz. that queerly persistent U.S. myth that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive. (ibid., 694)

These passages are a reformulation of an issue expressed before in many different ways by both Wallace and Kierkegaard: total irony excludes positive freedom. It is also something Hall himself struggles with; he too feels like his ironic isolation is more like a cage than a true representation of his personality:

Hal, who’s empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some basic interior way forever infantile, some sort of not-quite-right looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool. One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he’s really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia. (ibid., 694-695)

This passage show that Wallace followed up on his intentions outlined in “E Unibus Pluram” and “Westward.” In *Infinite Jest* Wallace attempts to face irony and show the emptiness
behind it. He states that while postmodern writers would face reactions like shock, disgust and accusations of nihilism and anarchism, the kind of fiction that he wants to write would face “the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile… the ‘Ow how Banal!’” (Wallace, “E Unibus,” 81). Wallace consciously wants to reclaim naiveté and sentimentality, knowing that he risks being seen by his readers as “too sincere” (ibid., 81). Taking this risk is essential for him, though, because it is the only way to write fiction that tries to break away from postmodern irony.

Throughout the novel there is a discussion between an American governmental agent, Hugh Steeply, and a Quebecois nationalist, Remy Marathe, that in some regards resembles the discourse between A and B in Either/Or. In one of his many condemnations of the U.S., Marathe states:

“Always with you this freedom! You and walled-up country, always shout ‘Freedom! Freedom!’ as if it were obvious to all people what it wants to mean this word. But look: it is not as simple as that. Your freedom is the freedom-from: no one tells your precious individual U.S.A. selves what they must do. It is this meaning only, this freedom from constraints and forced duress.” (Wallace, IJ, 320)

This passage could just as easily have been written by Judge Vilhelm in one of his letters to A. What Marathe sees as being typical of the U.S. is what Kierkegaard called negative freedom. It is the empty freedom that is gained by absolute irony. Marathe continues his denunciation of the U.S. in line with the ethical sphere of Kierkegaard’s philosophical system: “But what of the freedom-to? Not just this freedom-from. Not all compulsion comes from without. You pretend you do not see this. What of freedom-to?” (ibid., 320). The statement that not all compulsion comes from without is again in line with Kierkegaard’s notion of an ethical way of life. From this point of view the aesthete is criticized for being too dependent
on the outside instead of focusing on the internal nature of individuals. Similarly, freedom-to, as opposed to freedom-from, refers to the positive commitment that is required by the ethical sphere.

As in Kierkegaard, irony is also tied up with notions of positive and negative freedom in Wallace’s fiction. Irony can be overcome by moving from negative to positive freedom, but in a conscious manner. What is proposed is not the simple acceptance of immediacy, but a conscious choice to commit oneself to something. The problem for Wallace is that this positive commitment is made more difficult by the dominance of irony. Irony as mentioned in “E Unibus Pluram,” denounces such a commitment from the start. Treated as sentimental and naïve, positive freedom seems to have no place in postmodern U.S. fiction of the nineties. Using total irony excludes this part of human experience from the start. Irony hereby not only misrepresents what it means to be alive but also causes people to mistrust naiveté and sincerity, and thereby positive freedom. This harmful side of irony is what Wallace tries to lay bare in *Infinite Jest*, and it is also the problem to which he tries to find a possible solution in *The Pale King*.

**The Pale King**

The extent to which Wallace tried to leave behind postmodern irony by appealing to a state of being that closely resembles Kierkegaard’s ethical sphere most clearly manifests itself in his last book *The Pale King*. *Pale King* is in many regards a continuation of *Infinite Jest*. Although the subject matter is completely different, many of the underlying issues are still the same as in *Infinite Jest*. *The Pale King* is an unfinished novel that was published three years after Wallace’s death, in 2008. Like *Infinite Jest*, this novel consists of multiple story lines that revolve around certain fictional events in the history of the Internal Revenue Service. Focusing on this seemingly uninteresting subject, Wallace deals with issues like
concentration, boredom and commitment. Working on tax forms requires a great deal of concentration, and to be successful at their jobs, people who work for the IRS need to be able to commit themselves to something that at first sight seems very tedious. It is this ability to live a life of commitment to something that is hated by the better part of the nation that is central to *Pale King*. Herein lies the connection to the work of Kierkegaard, who saw the ethical life in terms of a commitment to something that does not provide instant gratification.

*Pale King* is extremely fragmented, but one of the storylines that is told in great detail is a first person account of a man called ‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle, who develops from being an idler to being an IRS agent. The man describes himself as being the worst nihilist when he was younger: “I was like a piece of paper in the street in the wind, thinking ‘now I think I will blow this way, now I think I will blow that way’” (Wallace, *PK*, 154). His life could be described as the aesthetic life of Kierkegaard: Fogle was completely dependent on outside input for his fulfillment. He switched colleges multiple times, regularly used drugs and felt no commitment to anything. The man explains that he “was, in a way, too free, or that this kind of freedom wasn’t actually real—I was free to choose ‘whatever’ because it didn’t matter” (ibid., 223). However, after some distressing events in his life, he rejects all his previous nihilism and applies for a job at the IRS. After this change of heart he begins to understand that for him “real freedom is freedom to obey the law” (ibid., 193).

Much of this change was inspired by an accountancy professor, who comments on the difficult work of an accountant. This professor states that it is wrong “[t]o experience commitment as the loss of options, a type of death, the death of childhood’s limitless possibility, of the flattery of choice without duress” (ibid., 228). Like Marathe in *Infinite Jest*, this professor shares the opinions put forward by Kierkegaard’s fictional representatives of the ethical sphere. The life in the ethical sphere is focused on internal wellbeing, not on external impulses. It is based on acting out of one’s own convictions without being distracted
or made to doubt one’s choices at every crossroad. The ethical life is also the type of life that might not receive much praise or attention, but this is not the goal of an ethic, whose reward is more long-term and internal. The professor highlights this when he states that “actual heroism receives no ovation, entertains no one. No one queues up to see it. No one is interested” (ibid., 229). The life as an IRS accountant, the ethical life, as opposed to the drug-using, dropping-out-of-college, “wastiod,” aesthetic life, is thus summarized:

Effacement. Sacrifice, Service. To give oneself to the care of others’ money--- this is effacement, perdurance, sacrifice, honor, doughtiness, valor. Hear this or not, as you will. Learn it now, or later--- for the world has time... [E]phemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui --- these are the true hero’s enemies and, make no mistake, they are fearsome indeed. For they are real. (ibid., 231)

It is the commitment to an ethical ideal that Fogle performs when he decides to pursue a career in accountancy; it is the conscious choice to leave one way of life behind in favor of another. It is, in his own words, the first time in his life that he has made “a meaningful, real-world choice” (ibid., 237).

This passage from *The Pale King* also highlights the difference between Wallace and Kierkegaard that was previously mentioned. Kierkegaard saw in irony a possible bridge between the aesthetical and the ethical sphere. A way to rise above those immediate impulses and to distance oneself from aesthetical entanglements. For Wallace, on the other hand, irony can be a hindrance in the pursuit of an ethical life; for him irony is much more difficult to let go of than Kierkegaard implies. While Chris Fogle does reach the insight to move away from an aesthetical life through the use of irony, this choice was made more difficult because of (postmodern) irony, the irony that mocks any earnest commitment as naïve and sentimental.
“The Art’s Heart’s Purpose”

Although I claim that Wallace was reasonably successful in leaving behind the total irony of postmodernism, not all agree with this statement. In her essay “‘The Art’s Heart’s Purpose’: Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest,” Mary K. Holland claims that Wallace does not succeed in surpassing irony. She states that “Infinite Jest fails to deliver on the agenda that Wallace set for it...because it fails to eschew empty irony for… earnestness,” and it “fails to recognize and address the cultural drive toward narcissism that fuels and is fueled by that irony” (Holland, 218). The point of her essay is that although Wallace’s critique of irony may be correct, it does not succeed in its goal of accomplishing sincerity and earnestness because there is a strong narcissistic undertow that makes it impossible to accomplish that goal. Holland states that “narcissists love others for reflecting what they think is best about themselves” (ibid., 224). Wallace’s solution to endless self-reflective irony is reaching out to people, like those in AA, and trying to establish a positive connection. This will not succeed, according to Holland, because in her opinion, people, and Americans in particular, always look for themselves in others and therefore fail to breach their isolation and solipsism. In Holland’s view, sincerity can thus never be achieved because there is always an aspect of narcissism present. For her, in the end, every human action is motivated by narcissism.

The problem with Holland’s argument is that if every human action is motivated by narcissism, thus also irony and sincerity alike, people will always be isolated. This erases the difference between irony and sincerity, and thus any attempt at sincerity is pointless because underneath there is always the same narcissistic drive. In Holland’s interpretation, sincerity, and every other human action, will always be self motivated and therefore not sincere at all. Yet in my view, this does not fully capture Wallace’s interpretation of irony. In Wallace’s
argument against total irony, sincerity becomes a way of breaking free from empty irony and a means of developing some form of earnest communication. Holland’s point therefore has little to do with the actual arguments made by Wallace, as her ideas about sincerity are challenged by Wallace’s texts.

Furthermore, Holland is wrong in claiming that Wallace does not deal with the possible danger of rampant narcissism with respect to sincerity. It is precisely this cynical attitude toward sincerity, the idea that sincerity can only exist out of self-interest, that Wallace tries to deal with. Although I would thus argue that Holland’s essay fails capture the essence of Wallace’s dealing with irony, it nonetheless does point out an interesting problem concerning sincerity and earnestness. A problem that Wallace focused on on multiple occasions, for instance in the short stories “My Appearance,” discussed above, “Octet,” and “Good Old Neon.” In the story “Octet,” for example, Wallace discusses the problem of distinguishing between “real-narrative-honesty -v.- sham-narrative-honesty” (Wallace, Brief, 125), i.e. the difficulty of writing honestly without seeming to do it only for appearance sake. This shows that he is all too aware of the ‘narcissism-versus-sincerity’ problem but that this should not stand in the way of attempting to be sincere since the latter is the only way to escape paralyzing self-reflective irony.

Thus in trying to reestablish sincerity in his fiction, Wallace makes himself susceptible to the criticism that his sincerity is in fact self-serving or artificial. To state, as Holland did, that he failed in his pursuit of sincerity because he “fails to recognize… narcissism” is incorrect; what is correct is that in spite of realizing this, Wallace still tries to leave the stifling postmodern irony behind himself. Furthermore, much of his fiction is devoted to this struggle of trying to be sincere. What Wallace thus shows is how difficult it is to be earnest; which is best noticeable in Infinite Jest, and more specifically in the struggle of Hal Incandenza to escape his isolation.
Postmodernism v. Post-postmodernism

Wallace’s attempts at leaving behind the constraints of postmodern fiction have induced some critics to call his work one of the first instances of post-postmodern fiction. Boswell and Timmer both state that Wallace’s work can no longer be called postmodern, but also that it should not be treated as a return to some pre-postmodern form of writing. According to Timmer “the return to the human in recent fiction and theory does not amount to a naïve return to the more traditional view of the self as centered and autonomous meaning-maker” (Timmer, 52). Timmer, then proceeds to formulate a larger framework in which Wallace’s fiction can be placed. In her book Do You Feel It Too, Timmer outlines the characteristics of post-postmodern fiction. Central to works that are post-postmodern is the idea that postmodern narrative structures no longer work and that there is a “re-humanization of the subject” in contemporary fiction (Timmer, 23). She claims that a new generation of writers, like Wallace, Dave Eggers and Mark Z. Danielewski, are examples of post-postmodern writers who try to find ways to describe what it means to be human. Key characteristics of the post-postmodern novel are thus “the search for new narrative strategies… the problem of solipsism” and a “focus on empathy and human interaction” (Timmer, 359-361).

Although Timmer only briefly treats the subject of irony her statements concerning post-postmodernism support the thesis that for Wallace irony in American fiction has become problematic. The fact that Wallace turns away from the absolute irony that characterized so much of postmodern fiction is in line with what Timmer states about the search for new narrative structures. It is this new kind of narrative that Wallace seems to be referring to in the statement that “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” (Wallace in McCaffery, 13). Postmodern irony as a way of describing the world has thus
lost its validity for Wallace, it can no longer function in the way Wallace wants fiction to function.

Timmer states about irony in the context of post-postmodernism that “the post-postmodern novel is not ‘beyond irony,’ or itself completely ‘irony free,’ but it is no longer the social convention or cultural norm in the novel itself” (Timmer, 360). This is a cautious formulation of, what I have hopefully proven is, a larger issue. In my view, Timmer is right in stating that the post-postmodern novel is not entirely free of irony, but what is important to note is that the irony that remains in the work of Wallace is never allowed to be the infinite absolute negativity of postmodern irony. It is not the irony of Rorty’s ironist, the irony that has its origin in relativism. The irony that remains in Wallace’s work is more akin to the irony Kierkegaard proposes as a permanent check on the ethical way of living at the end of The Concept of Irony than it is to his notion of total irony. Irony serves a purpose in Wallace similar to the form of irony used in Kierkegaard’s ethical sphere; it is not merely used for its own sake. Most forms of irony in the work of Wallace serve as an example of how futile ironic communication is; as in the example of the phone calls between Hal and his brother discussed above. This is what Boswell was cryptically referring to when he stated that Wallace was turning irony onto itself in order to reveal what irony had been hiding (Boswell, 15). This is most evident in Infinite Jest where self-conscious irony itself is treated ironically. As Kierkegaard stated, this was the problem of the pure ironist, as they could not treat their irony ironically. Doing so would immediately undermine their own position of pure irony. Yet the undermining of pure irony is what Wallace seems to do consciously, to show the emptiness of this way of looking at the world. This way Wallace utilizes irony without falling himself into its trap of infinite negativity. Thus, while Timmer is right in stating that the work of Wallace is not devoid of irony, it is important to realize that this irony is something completely different than the irony of postmodern fiction.
Conclusion

Looking at Wallace’s complete work, it can be stated that he started off as a somewhat prototypical ironic postmodern writer in *The Broom of the System*, but that with his last novel *The Pale King*, he ended as a writer who, according to several critics, could no longer be called postmodern. After his debut novel Wallace became more critical of postmodern irony: in his short story “My Appearance,” Wallace for the first time hinted at his discomfort with the widespread use of irony in American culture. This dissatisfaction would explicitly be articulated in his essay “E Unibus Pluram” and the novella “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way.” Whereas the essay’s main focus was the stifling effect of irony on writers, “Westward” on the other hand attempted to find a new way for fiction to deal with postmodern irony.

That dealing with irony is a difficult matter becomes clear in *Infinite Jest* and short stories like “Octet.” In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace depicts irony as a mask that hides true emotions, but which also isolates its bearers from the rest of the world. What the novel also shows is how difficult it is to escape from this ironic isolation. It is clear that for Wallace, total irony stands in the way of sincerity. However, this should not lead to the total exclusion of irony. For Wallace, irony and naiveté should not be seen as mutually exclusive; that they can coexist in fiction. This new form of irony is, however, different from postmodern irony. Irony in the work of Wallace is never the postmodern form of total irony that empties out everything; the irony in Wallace is only allowed to stand in the way of positive commitment when it serves as an example of the futility of postmodern irony. What can possibly come after irony is shown in *The Pale King*. In this book Wallace explores what it means for people to commit
themselves fully to something. The focus of the novel is the positive commitment of people in opposition to negative freedom.  

With respect to the notion of irony, the work of Wallace thus shows many similarities to Kierkegaard’s work. In their treatment of irony, Wallace and Kierkegaard are both critical of total irony but at the same time use some form of it themselves. They both realize that irony is an enabling way to gain some critical distance to the world around them. On the other hand, they also understand that some qualities inherent in irony make it as destructive as it is useful. This destructive side is effectively explained by Kierkegaard as infinite absolute negativity. Irony, in its pure form, thus dissects everything without ever replacing those things it destroys. The greatest insight both authors had with regard to irony is that they recognized this inherently destructive side. They both try to identify the point at which irony is no longer useful and becomes not only useless, since everything has been disproven, but also harmful, because it stands in the way of any positive commitment. For both Wallace and Kierkegaard, this is the biggest problem resulting from the use of total irony.

I would argue, however, that the problem was larger for Wallace than it was for Kierkegaard. Irony in the time of Kierkegaard was fairly marginal, being limited to a few writers like the Jena Romantics. During Wallace’s time, on the other hand, irony had become a widespread cultural practice. In U.S. fiction, television and general popular culture irony had become pervasive. Those problems with irony that Kierkegaard experienced were thus magnified in the American culture in which Wallace lived. This difference in context accounts for the largest difference between Wallace and Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard thought

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22 The work of Wallace shows that the idea that 9/11 was a breaking point for irony in American literature is not true. After 9/11 some critics stated that irony in fiction was dead (Beers, 1) and that 9/11 was some kind of breaking point for the use of irony. This assumption is incorrect. Studying the work of Wallace makes it clear that years before the events of 9/11 he was already criticizing irony and trying to find a way to write fiction that escaped the trap of postmodern irony. Furthermore, even before 9/11 other writers, like Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith or Dave Eggers, followed in the footsteps of Wallace and tried to deal with the problem of postmodern irony in a way similar to Wallace.
that irony was the way for someone to go from an aesthetic way of living to an ethical life. Irony in that case would be the way for someone to escape their immediacy and thereafter consciously commit themselves to an ethical life. In his fiction, Wallace proposes a similar commitment to a life that resembles the ethical sphere. However, he does not share Kierkegaard’s idea that this should be reached through irony. Irony for Wallace stands in the way of such a commitment. For Wallace, the dominance of postmodern irony in American culture has thus excluded the possibility for sincerity and earnestness since irony treats sincerity and earnestness as being terribly naïve. In this way, irony makes it nearly impossible for anyone to escape from its grasp and write fiction that is not completely ironic.

It is his explicit criticism of postmodern irony and his subsequent attempts at recovering some form of sincerity in his writing that make Wallace such an interesting figure in American literature. His work runs parallel to other forms of criticism on postmodernism that became increasingly prominent during his lifetime. Other critics have commented on the dead end of postmodernism and proposed different kinds of solutions, such as for instance, returning to a form of realist writing. This shows that Wallace was not unique in recognizing the problems of postmodernism, but what in my view does make Wallace distinctive is that, unlike those who preferred a return to realism, he did not reject postmodernism in its entirety but incorporated much of it in his writing. This becomes clear when we compare Wallace to early postmodern writers, only to find that he is very much indebted to different postmodern writers, including Pynchon, Barth and DeLillo. His work is, in this sense, not a rejection of every facet of postmodernism in general. There are aspects that he criticizes and tries to improve upon but he does not discard postmodern fiction in its entirety.

Although he remains indebted to many postmodern writers, his fiction nonetheless cannot be categorized as such. Most commentators on the work of Wallace, including Timmer, Boswell and Holland, agree that Wallace’s fiction is something else than
postmodern, but they also agree that it does not return to some pre-postmodern mode of writing. Through his criticism on postmodern irony and his focus on positive commitment, Wallace is thus able to provide an alternative to postmodern writing. This is not to say that he provides solutions to all the theoretical issues posed by postmodernism, but he does indicate that there is a way to write about sincerity and positive freedom despite the dead end of postmodernism.

Besides his criticism of irony, this notion of sincerity in the face of irony is Wallace’s most important contribution to American fiction. He has proven that there still is the opportunity for positive commitment when, at the same time, there also exist countless other ways of living that have equal merit. This is in agreement with both Kierkegaard, who also stated that the choice for an ethical life is made with the full understanding that is not the only way possible, and Rorty, who stated that for an ironist a final vocabulary is just one possibility out of many others. This realization makes a positive commitment difficult but, at the same time, also more valuable. What Wallace, in line with Kierkegaard’s ideas of the ethical sphere, proposes is a form of commitment that acknowledges the existence of irony and relativity but also realizes that this is a dead end, and consciously turns away from it.
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