A Narrative Slop:

Revision of Postmodernism, Neo-Realism and the Short Fiction of David Foster Wallace

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Für meine Eltern.

***A Narrative Slop*:**

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INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism, Neo-Realism, Short Stories: 'A Narrative Slop'

> *If the newer fictional movement [...] catches on enough to deserve a name, [...] call it narrative slop [...] an almost reckless irony and an adamant refusal to bow to the more precious aspects of what in writing classes is called "craft."*
>
> *-V. Passaro-*

Is contemporary short fiction indeed only a form-defying and self-involved collection of narratives that lacks a clearly distinguishable direction within today's massive literary output? Is the youngest generation of writers still as much at a loss for ways of expression as John Barth was when his essay *The Literature of Exhaustion* was published? More than thirty years after Barth's diagnostic text, it is unlikely that new and time-relevant narrative forms have failed to appear. Currently it is safe to assume that young writers have managed to overcome the almost proverbial Barthian exhaustion and moved on to exploring their own narrative ideas. However, as their progress is deeply rooted in the work of the early postmodernists, an inquiry into the status of the postmodern funhouse, Barth's favorite literary playground, becomes a central part of any further analysis. Has the once much-discussed and even glorified phenomenon turned into an impenetrable pile of rubble? Have its remains been strewn all over the literary campus rendering postmodernism a matter of the past? To the contrary, the fiction output of the 1990s suggests a rather subtle but well perceivable revival, in which younger writers appear to draw considerably from postmodernism's experimental spirit and apply fictionalization, digression and fragmentation to their own thematic choices. What has changed is the focus, which has shifted away from the act of writing itself toward the reality outside of literary boundaries. This reality resurfaces as a source and opens a wide field of narrative opportunities ready to be explored by a new generation. Lack of narrative possibilities is in the course of evolving into an act of replenishment.

Vince Passaro addressed this development in his essay *Unlikely Stories: The quiet renaissance of American short fiction* in which he examined the state of short fiction of the 1990s characterizing it as something that is an almost reckless irony and a refusal to bow to the craft of literary writing: a *narrative slop*. Yet, what Passaro considers a refusal may as well be a process of trial and error intent on finding new forms of narration. With the awareness of the *craft of literary writing* serving as a foundation, it is not blind ignorance or rebellion but rather conscious decision that leads to the search for different ways of expression. In a re-cycling like approach, the provided tools are often questioned but never overthrown or denied existence. Consequently, Passaro does not see the short story in a state of deterioration, rather in

a process of renewal, presenting the reader with *some of the best and formally most innovative* short fiction ever. However, this development remains largely unnoticed because not only the creative process but also the publication and distribution of its results have changed. While on one hand, the number of stories published in magazines has been drastically reduced to only a fraction of the output, on the other side the options for self-publication have grown immensely. Next to online publishing, advanced and more easily accessible editing and printing technology make it much easier for an individual to compile a book and find a way to distribute it. The paradox lies in the well known fact that quantity is not a warrant for quality, further complicating any attempt of characterization. None the less, Passaro sees a new chance for American fiction not only in the transformations within the business of publication, but also in the fact that short fiction appears to have come back full circle to its origins. After a century of development from a quick rise to high popularity and a steady source of income to mass commercialism which was paid for with a loss of quality and popularity, short story seems to have finally been stripped of all unnecessary formal and personal restrictions, and has re-opened towards experiments and a wider range of expression. This shift also re-introduces the concept of literary postmodernism as a symbol of rebellion against literary conventions, and opens the door for a re-evaluation of the term that—since its appearance in the late 1960s—has inspired a spectrum of response ranging between acceptance and skepticism. Its *anything goes* approach made it a perfect symbol of progress and anarchy in one. Acting more like a phantom than like a concrete object, postmodernism's evasive character is rooted in a constantly shifting form that has lead to a rather blurred and obscured shape and inspired a vivid discussion of its role as a literary term.

John Barth was, among others, the initiator of the discourse about the impact of a postmodern world onto literature. His collection of short fiction titled *Lost in the Funhouse* is an exploration of possibilities in a literature that has run out of narrative options. The crisis consisted of an exhaustion of, until then, familiar-forms of literary expression and was caused by changes in the world outside of literature. As a result, a search for new narrative options appropriate for the contemporary world became necessary. John Barth thematized this problem in experiments with classical and modernist narrative forms attempting to postpone the end of the art of narration. *Lost in the Funhouse* represents a fictionalization of this theory. With a range of experimental stories in which self-reflection, fragmentation and digression were indicating a possible way out of the crisis, Barth pointed at the dilemma and demonstrated the quest for new ways of storytelling. The funhouse as a place designed to generate fun, to offer surprise, to be a little frightening but most of all to entertain, offered a wide range of opportunities for exploration but also for play and suspense. It is therefore not surprising that over the years the concept of the funhouse has become an ideal symbol for postmodernism's playfulness and an icon of postmodern literature. However, meanwhile the form and intensity of amusement has changed, bringing some inevitable consequences for the funhouse as well as for postmodernism. Both have lost their attraction, started showing wear and tear after years of extensive use, and often have even been thought to cease to exist entirely. An analysis of contemporary fiction indicates that this is not necessarily the case pointing to the tendency that both concepts have resumed their impact—albeit in a less obvious

and rather subtle almost invisible way.[1] Currently Barth's quest seems to experience a quiet revival and the results of his experiments with literature's possibilities are visible in the work of his successors. David Foster Wallace's body of work, in particular, presents a rich example of this renewed interest. Not only his novels- *The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest* but also the two collections of short fiction discussed in this paper, *Girl With Curious Hair* and *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men,* represent his own search for narrative alternatives.[2] Barth's influence on Wallace is particularly clear in a piece titled *Westward The Course Of Empire Takes Its Way* which tackles the issue of postmodernism and metafiction with a high degree of intellectual intensity. Wallace re-visits Barth's funhouse and, as any good student, first questions his teacher's theories before he deconstructs them in parody. In the next step, taken in *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men,* he attempts a construction of his own funhouse based on new plans. Yet, even then it is impossible for him to ignore postmodernism entirely as he still utilizes some of its original components.

Wallace's fiction proves that postmodern literary techniques are still widely in use, even when Wallace himself remains highly skeptical of this heritage. The extent of his skepticism becomes most visible in *Octet*—a piece entirely dedicated to the discussion of metafiction. It not only represents Wallace's criticism of this aspect of postmodern literature, but also displays his poetics. Viewing human existence as a place of suffering, Wallace assigns fiction the duty of bringing relief through imaginative access to other consciousness and shows the reader that he is not alone in this state. His method is the thematic and stylistic challenge of the reader into participation rather than mere consumption. Stories of human suffering as well as experiments with digression, fragmentation, self-reference and linguistic play force the reader to turn from a mere consumer into an active participant. Based on the demand that fiction should affect the reader emotionally and intellectually, the use of metafiction is considered futile because it misses this mark in the majority of cases. According to Wallace, it is merely a tool used to distract attention from the aesthetic failure of a piece of fiction. In other words, the intentional focus on the narrative process itself is a targeted attempt to save a bad text. *Octet* contains a twofold message: on one hand there is the question of the price of human relationships, on the other the question for the consequences of the use of metafiction. The necessity of a sacrifice is identified as the one common point of all relationships and the difficulty to convey this idea as a writer's greatest challenge. Sacrifice is identified as the central aspect of a relationship, but it also illustrates how an author's dissatisfaction with his own work leads him to transforming it into a metafictional text. In sum, Wallace's short stories serve as an example for the not always consciously perceived, yet very present discussion of postmodernism and prove that the next generation of authors is very much aware of postmodernism and its immense influence onto their work.

Postmodernism however, is not the only mode of writing that prevailed into present day. Realism also retains a strong presence, and with a history of transformation reaching as far back as the late 19th century, its character has evolved into that of an underlying base that allows literary experiments to thrive. Ken Foster's collection of short stories titled *The KGB Bar Reader* is one example of American

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[1] The computer age has turned contemporary funhouses into complex worlds of virtual reality where, and here it is no different than the old funhouse, it is left to the visitor to decide which turn to take. Almost unnoticed, the funhouse has undergone a transformation, and its updated appearance continues to challenge our narrative abilities.

[2] Wallace published another collection of short fiction in 2004 under the title *Oblivion:Stories*. They have not been included in this paper's discussion.

literary realism in its most contemporary form. Its stories depict present day reality's brutal side in an absolutely straightforward way. This type of realism has, among others, been dubbed neo-realism and is as ambiguous—yet at the same time as universal—as postmodernism. In its goal to reflect everyday life without any idealized or sentimental traces, neo-realism not only presents a harsh reflection of our surroundings, it also provides postmodernism with material to which it can apply its literary devices. Neo-realism's technical simplicity is compensated with a radical thematic choice that often leads to a strong visceral reaction on the side of the reader who is confronted with extremely detailed accounts of horrifying human experience. Many stories appear to be fictionalized reality, adapted from television or the newspaper rather than credible fiction and there are no happy endings—only a disturbing silence.

American Short Fiction of the 1990s has undergone yet another transformation and the following chapters are an attempt to investigate the condition and relevance of postmodernism within this process. Literary texts involved in the analysis intend to illustrate and support the idea of an ongoing evolution of postmodernism as a literary term and its association with neo-realism. In order to examine the current state to which this transformation has lead, comparisons between past and present are inevitable and are followed through with the examples of short fiction written by John Barth, David Foster Wallace and others. Further, even though this is not primarily a historically oriented study of the genre short story—much rather a display of the short story as a particularly suitable medium to explore a new way of critical literary discussion—a brief introduction into historical and theoretical developments within the genre of short fiction is as essential as a tentative approach toward a definition of postmodernism as a literary term. Several factors support the choice of the genre of short story: one is its brief but highly condensed form, which allows covering a wide but very clearly defined area of studies; another is its ability to produce a complex and intense content full of high intellectual and emotional density within a fairly limited space and time. From the writer's perspective the short story is a wide-open field to practice and experiment with theme, style, point of view, voice and symbolism. Its short form makes long-term planning and complex plots unnecessary, yet its demand for a strong effect on the reader requires a high level of stylistic expertise that is determined not only by talent but mainly by practical experience.

In this paper the point of discussion is the observation that in the 1990s American short fiction has reached a state of transition, in which existing forms are utilized with the goal to find new narrative possibilities. The examination of Wallace's fiction intends to present a revision of postmodernism following the philosophy of a critical discussion of the past with the goal to identify his generation's course of literary action.

1.
The Short Story: From Poe to Postmodernism.

Is a short story just a story that is short? Is it, as many think, just an abbreviated novel or is there more to it? Why is a short story short? What are the specific characteristics that distinguish it from the novel? What is the purpose of short stories? Why do they even exist? Ever since Poe formulated his definition, the genre has experienced a continuous evolution and inspired a vivid debate over its significance within literary fiction. Its role changes depending on the perspective from which it is approached. There is the reader for whom it is mainly a quick literary sound bite; there is the critic for whom it is often a first impression of a writer; and finally there is the author for whom it is an ideal tool used for practice and experiment in his craft. The latter is the main cause for short fiction's difficulty with being taken seriously as a relevant literary genre. Its reputation as merely a medium for practice, a pre-stage on the way to what some call the *true* literary work, the novel, is as constant a presence as the publisher's mantra: *Love your story, let me see your first novel.*[3] —a well known phrase within the literary community. This perception of a secondary genre is rooted in a classically American literary institution, the fiction writing seminar that has established the short story as a perfect field for exercise among its students. For over a century it has shaped the American literary landscape by constantly supplying it with new material. Additionally, short story's rather transitory character also contributes to the rather ambivalent attitude toward it. Considering that until the late 1970s and early 1980s the main platform for publication was popular magazines, the image as a short-lived form—the lifespan of which did not extend that of a periodical—was easy at hand. This attribute did not necessarily create the air of seriousness that surrounds other literary genres. The question is whether this seriousness is desired in the first place or whether it is assumed by critics simply because everything literary must be taken seriously. Here, short fiction itself provides the answer: in order to guarantee a constant progress it is vital for the short story to maintain its experimental character and the desire to play with forms and themes. A certain lack of seriousness is inherent in this approach. Yet, the goal is to create a strong effect by masterfully composing individual aspects to one unit that touches the reader on an intellectual and emotional level and stands for absolute integrity.

Finally, short story's relevance as a modern literary medium is expressed in its adaptability and applicability to present day and to the changing ways of human thinking. At the end of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century, human perception of its surroundings has become very fragmented and frame like. Every bit of information—be it on TV, in the print media and particularly on the Internet—is divided and offered to the consumer in small, subdivided increments or frames. These frames often represent entire narrative units and are comparable to short stories. In

[3] Grimes. Tom. *The Workshop, Seven Decades of the Iowa Writer's Workshop.* Hyperion. New York. 1999. p. 101.

this context, it is important to ask where the future of the short story lies and whether there are tendencies that would counteract its qualification as a mere *narrative slop*.

Currently one of the most universal and widely spread definitions is provided by M. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*[4]. There it is described as a brief form of prose fiction that consists of elements, types and various narrative techniques of the novel. And although length is still considered as its main distinction to the novel, it is also viewed as a tool used to achieve different effects than those of the novel. Action, thought and interactions of characters are organized into an artful pattern of a plot, which may be comic, tragic, romantic or satiric and present itself from one of many available points of view. The story begins often close or on the verge of the climax, and only a very limited number of persons are introduced. Characters are not developed and analyzed. Exposition, details of setting and complications are kept very minimal and do not consist of detailed studies of a social milieu. The goal is to have the central incident manifest as much as possible of the protagonist's life and character. All details are meant to carry maximum import for the development of the plot. Finally the denouement is cleared up quickly. Abrams adds that many stories depart from this paradigm: the tale being interested in the course and outcome of events, the story of the character focusing on the state of mind and its motivation, or on psychological and moral qualities of the protagonist, the short short story being no more than a slightly elaborated anecdote of maximum five hundred words and the novelette with its more extensive length placing it between the novel and the short story. Abrams' definition of the short story as *narrative fiction in prose, which in short*, is not as insufficient as it may initially appear to be. Its universal character provides the writer, as well as the reader, with possibilities to explore new narrative options, and leaves much open space for developments in various directions.

The history of contemporary short story theory goes back to the mid 19th century where it is nested within the tradition of European Romanticism[5] with Goethe, Tieck and Schlegel as a strong impact on Irving, Hawthorne and Poe. Yet, its roots go as far back as *The Arabian Nights,* Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* counterbalancing the strong notion that the short story is a purely *American invention* perpetuated by a persistently more or less direct reference to Poe's definition in most theoretical discussions. He was the first to direct critical attention to the process of composition of a short narrative piece and to formulate concrete rules for it.[6] His successors, which include Brander Matthews, Frank O'Connor, Raymond Carver, Charles E. May, and Susan Lohafer, have steadily refined and re-discussed his ideas.

Poe's interest towards the technicalities of composition of a short story was first driven by his own aspirations as a writer and publisher. In this function he strived

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[4] Abrams. M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* Harcourt Brace College Publishers. Fort Worth. 7thEd. 1999.

[5] Its claim that artistic creativity was a matter of innate genius, elevated the writer and his work above and outside of society and created the image of godlike superiority. In this context, literature, considered divine, could be neither approached nor criticized by the average human being.

[6] It is well known that Poe's reasons for this close attention were not of purely literary character as he was a magazine publisher familiar with the economical challenges involved as well. (A. Levy presents more details in his work *The Culture and Commerce of American Short Fiction.*) The fact that his definition, no matter how controversial or obsolete it has become in the course of time, has survived until today and is still the subject of discussion, proves that he touched the right nerve. With this, his name entered the literary hall of fame and it is safe to say that as a writer he can, in a way, be considered the *patron saint* of the short story.

to combine the art of narration with economic success. And although literary interests did not only motivate his definition, it has remained a major landmark in the history of short fiction. Jonathan Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*[7], reviewed by Poe for *Graham's Magazine* in May 1842 and for *Godey's Lady's Book* in 1847, provided the basis on which Poe exemplified his theories.[8] He generated a set of characteristics that define a short story, which was based on his own writing and the review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* praising him for his originality and stylistic purity. For Poe, Hawthorne was *a man of the truest genius* that is manifest in invention, creation, imagination and originality but also in novelty of tone and matter.

A closer look at Poe's definition reveals its progressive and universal character that clearly delineates and articulates the concept of literary composition and criticism. Viewing the composition of a rhymed poem as the best form of expression for a genius, Poe sets the short story right next to it characterizing it as a class that offers *the most advantageous field of exertion.* Further, he identifies unity of effect or impression as the most important aspect and stresses that any author's sole intention should be to impose this effect on the reader. The quality of the effect is determined by its unity, which as the predominant principle of composition, can only be preserved when the reading can be completed during one session. According to Poe, the best form of composition that fulfills these requirements is the short prose narrative or the prose tale because it can not only be read within one half to two hours, but also because totality as its major force enables the author to carry out the fullness of his intention. The significance of the effect becomes clear when Poe sets it over the choice of theme. In his opinion, a skillful author does not fashion his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but invents such incidents and combines them in a way that serves his goal to achieve a desired effect upon the reader. In consequence, the very first sentence should assist in the creation of the effect and there should be no word written that does not serve this pre-established design. Poe's fiction represents the implementation of his theories. A feature that also explains its remarkable un-reality results exactly from the fact that the pieces are meticulous constructions meant to be realizations of a particular effect. In *The Cask of Amontillado*[9] the reader as much as the victim Fortunato, is lead step by step into his undoing. The narrator describes exactly how he lured his victim into the catacombs and how he proceeded in the execution of his plan to kill him with the goal to allow him to feel the terror of being buried alive. What creates the suspense and the terror—in other words, the strong effect—is the detailed reproduction of the event itself. A similar pattern is followed in *The Tell-Tale Heart* [10] in which a vendetta is undone by a single detail, the ticking of a watch. These are only two of many instances that exemplify what Poe meant when he stated that effect goes above incident and technical ability above content. Those tales are not meant to be reflections of reality but artifacts composed to create a calculated result.

Since Poe's time, the popularity of the genre has grown steadily and with it the field of theoretical and critical approaches. And despite the fact that Poe was the first to direct the view on formal aspects and to thematize them in such a prescriptive form, it took more than fifty years for the actual theoretical discourse to continue. In 1901,

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[7] Hawthorne. N. *Twice Told Tales.* 1837.

[8] In this essay he established the terms of discussion for short story as an individual genre and, ironically enough, himself an everlasting memorial as critic and writer. Something he wasn't able to achieve during his troubled life.

[9] Poe. E. A. *The Cask of Amontillado.* 1846.

[10] Poe. E. A. *The Tell-Tale Heart.* 1843.

Brander Matthews[11] provided another definition. Initially continuing in Poe's footsteps, he still named unity of expression as the most essential characteristic of a short story. He deviates by comparing it to the novel as a point of reference instead of to the poem as Poe did. For Matthews, a short story is more than a story that is short. It is its own genre, a *high and difficult department of fiction*, completely independent from the novel and its goal is to create a single effect, something that is complete and absolutely self-contained. This effect is achieved by focusing on a single character, a single event, a single emotion or a series of emotions called forth by a single situation. In order to fulfill this demand the author of a short story is required to be concise and must be able to compress. He must have a sense of form that results in neatness of construction and polish of execution and that through a logical, adequate and harmonious construction leads to symmetry of design. However, every formal aspect is solely designated to support subject and plot. In opposition to Poe, for Matthews a short story cannot be about anything. There has to be some form of action involved. In the end after assembling an extensive list of characteristics for a short story, Matthews admits that no strict and rigid classifications can be provided and that a clear distinction between the short story and the novel or any other prose form is impossible.

Over the years many more attempts for a definition followed, but focus has shifted from the critic who talks about the writer's work to the writer who explains his own motivation and creative process. One of those voices is Frank O'Connor[12] who views the process of storytelling more as an organic, than artistic event. Like Poe, O'Connor also considers the short story to be *the nearest thing to lyric poetry*[13] yet his attempt at characterization again utilizes the novel to create a contrast. While the composition of a novel requires much logic and a wide knowledge of circumstances, the short story shares with poetry a detachment from those circumstances. As the novel creates a sense of continuing life and is built around the character of time, the short story merely suggests this continuing life. A novel is progressive, extends into time, moves forward whereas the short story is static and extends only sideways; it is a suspension of time intended to show only one moment of life. It does neither look into the past nor into the future because the events of the story are in no way related or influenced by it.[14] For O'Connor, the short story functions in a different way than the novel. Because it does not have to create the complexity and identification process of the novel, there is no character and no society with which the reader would eventually identify. It can be about anything. There is never a hero. Instead, there is a *submerged population group,* which for O'Connor consists of tramps, artists, lonely idealists and dreamers. This group changes its character from writer to writer and from generation

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[11] Matthews. Brander. *The Philosophy of the Short Story.* New York: Longmans, Green and Company. 1901.

[12] O'Connor. F. interviewed by Anthony Whittier. *Paris Review.* Issue. 17. Autumn-Winter. 1957.

[13] O'Connor in Charters. p. 1523.

[14] O'Connor describes his own process of writing as fairly unrestricted and almost intuitive but stresses the importance of theme. A theme has to be worth something to everybody and make the reader part of it: *The moment you grab somebody by the lapels and you've got something to tell, that's a real story. It means you want to tell him and think the story is interesting in itself. If you start describing your own personal experience, something that's only of interest to yourself, then you can't express yourself, you cannot say, ultimately what you think about human beings. [...] Dragging the reader in, making the reader a part of the story--the reader is part of the story. You are saying all the time, "This story is about you--de te fabula."* (O'Connor in Paris Review. p. 22) However, before any stylistic or aesthetic work can be done, the theme has to be roughly formulated. Only after he has seen the design of the story, will the writer begin to fill it out with details.[14]

to generation and creates the sense of outlawed figures wandering on the fringes of society. It remains remote from the community by being romantic, idealistic—even intransigent—and creates an intense awareness of human loneliness. The short story is approached with a different mood than the novel. It is not a companion but rather something that confuses and frightens the reader and O'Connor admits that there is no essential form for the short story because it can never refer to any totality. A writer is forever selecting, and this selection must happen very carefully. As a consequence a storyteller must have much stronger writing, artistic and dramatic abilities than the novelist. He has to have *the sense of theater*. And only the material determines the spatial volume of the short story:

> *One could put it crudely by saying that the form of the novel is given by the length; in the short story the length is given by the form. There is simply no criterion of the length of a short story other than that provided by the material itself [...] the very term "short story" is a misnomer. A great story is not necessarily short at all, and the conception of the short story as a miniature art is inherently false. [...] Basically, the difference between the short story and the novel is not one of length. It is a difference between pure and applied storytelling [...] Pure storytelling is more artistic, that is all, and in storytelling I am not sure how much art is preferable to nature.*[15]

In the end, the act and art of storytelling goes beyond relating something in the form of a novel, it is about writing itself not about stories; it is pure storytelling.

This technical approach finds its ultimate application in Raymond Carver for whom writing a short story is an act of discovery—at the beginning of which often only the first line that exists in the writer's mind pushes off the plot[16]; the writer does not know how it will turn out at the end:

> *A short story is something glimpsed from the corner of the eye, in passing.*[17]

This glimpse is given life. It turns into something that illuminates the moment and may have further-ranging consequences and meaning. A writer's task is to invest the glimpse with all that is in his power: intelligence and literary skill. Intelligence manifests itself in the author's unique and exact way of looking at things and results in a world that is made according to his own specifications. Literary skill is expressed in a fundamental accuracy of statement. There is no place for tricks or gimmicks in fiction; they are boring. For Carver, a short story can be about common places, yet they have to be given power by precise and accurate language. The author has to take care for what he has done by choosing the right word and setting the right punctuation: *No iron can pierce the heart with such force as a period put just at the right place.*[18] The reader's artistic sense has to be engaged. There needs to be a sense of threat or menace in a short story that creates tension, imminence and relentless motion. Carver also expects writing to give the reader some news of the world, something recognizably human, not a desert landscape. Carver's adoption of the role of a critic is closely tied to a tradition that created a growing awareness and factual

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[15] O'Connor. Frank. *The Lonely Voice* in *Short Story-Theorien (1573-1973)Eine Sammlung und Bibliogrphie englischer und amerikanischer Quellen.* 1977. p. 180-184.
[16] Carver. Raymond. *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories.* 1985.
[17] Pritchett in Carver
[18] Isaac Babel in Carver. p. 1581.

knowledge about the creative process: the fiction writing seminar. A classically American institution, fiction writing seminars are a major force on the American literary landscape and have contributed significantly to the image of the short story as a predominantly American genre.[19] The active discussion of form, style and content allowed the writer not only to develop his skills but also empowered him as a critic who is able to provide a systematic analysis of fiction. Within this environment short stories are not only considered as the art for the most skilled, but also as an ideal beginner's ground. Its high technical demand for absolute linguistic and lexical precision and efficiency, offers the right frame for practice and experiment.

The beginnings of fiction writing seminars lie in Edwin Piper's *Poetics* class. Established in 1896 at the University of Iowa with the goal to teach *Verse Making,* it was the forerunner of the later famous Iowa Writer's Workshop. Since then a flood of writing seminars has spread across the United States granting graduate degrees credits for creative work. What started as the attempt to teach verse making through a critical discussion of a student's work, has become an American institution that regularly fills the literary stage with new generations of writers. Fiction writing ultimately stepped out of the ivory tower of literature that was created by Romanticism and into everyone's life in the 1920s when the University of Iowa began granting graduate degree credits for creative work. Literary creativity ceased to be the provenience of a selected few, and became available to anyone who was interested in it. Now, a person's literary skill and creativity could be measured and qualified, by a set of preset standards, and expressed in a written certificate that would officially recognize the candidate as a fiction writer. In becoming a measurable object, the character of American literature has changed forever.

The Iowa Workshops, which meanwhile inspired the establishment of 300 other programs that are offered throughout the United States, also offer an historical insight into the development of short fiction. In its early stages, in the 1930s, Iowa was the only school of higher education undertaking the risk of granting graduate degrees in the unscholarly subject of creative writing. In the years to follow it gained the status of a renowned institution and a model for university-sponsored workshops at public and private schools throughout the country with stylistic and thematic tendencies of those years as a confirmation of its progressive position. Before 1931, Edwin Piper, one of the first instructors, focused on regional writing. He stressed the return to southern agrarian roots as an antidote to twentieth-century industrialization and a perceived East Coast elitism. From 1931 on, when Norman Forester convinced the administration of Iowa to grant Ph.D. degrees in creative writing, it was not about teaching a different style or even a countermovement in literature anymore, but rather about instructing the writer in the craft of creative writing. The intention was to aid the development of a writer through the study of literature. At this point it becomes very obvious that writing seminars are not about the development of a new literature but instead about the development of the writer. A workshop, as Tom Grimes describes it[20], creates a hospitable environment—a place where a writer has the opportunity to meet other writers and exchange knowledge and experience, where creative energies are brought to a flow because of the company of similarly oriented

[19] For the non-American, who in his perception of literary writing as a high art will of course raise the brow asking *How can writing and creativity be taught?,* fiction writing seminars can be characterized as the academically organized approach to literary creativity.

[20] Grimes. Tom. *Workshop and the Writing Life* in *The Workshop, Seven Decades in the Iowa Writer's Workshop.* p. 8.

individuals.[21] Over the years, fiction writing seminars have thus become an enormous source of new talent that creates literature of high artistic value, a fiction that manages to touch the reader, stick to his mind and create the strong effect that earlier Poe was calling for. There are graduates who can legitimately be called fiction writers because they create literature beyond entertainment—they create art. And those who do not make the cut, for lack of talent or dedication or both, to quote Vince Passaro[22], become at least good readers and critics, who know what to look for in a piece of fiction.[23]

While Iowa represented the academic branch of creative writing, its economic aspect did not remain unnoticed either. Edward J. O'Brien founded the most widely known collection of short fiction on the book market, The *Best American Short Stories*[24] because he saw the American short story as an art form destined to interpret American consciousness. He believed that the short story was the ultimate American form of expression reflecting most faithfully the American soul and American life. This observation was reflected in the works of John Steinbeck and Richard Wright who used literature as a form of protest against economic and racial injustices in American life. Wallace Stegner—believing that a writer's work was linked to his sense of place—went back to Regionalism, engaging the rest of the world to look at a specific place, creating a typically American realism. The years of high time, in the 1930s and dominated by Fitzgerald and Hemingway, were followed by some less successful times. WWII governed the 1940s. As a result, writing programs nationwide slowed down in growth, as did the until then well-paying market for short stories. But this was also the time when professional writers became faculty members, and the G.I. Education bill lead to record enrollments by war veterans. Small magazines like *The New Yorker* took over the publishing stage. Many of them were politically engaged—drawing from the experience of war and the recent Great Depression. Steinbeck, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer and Nelson Algren were the predominant names of this Social Realism. The 1950s were a high time again as creative writing programs were proliferating. The workshop gained the status of a national institution with its graduates publishing their work in the best magazines and journals. The program was not only a place of study for future writers but also a job opportunity for teachers. A new course, called *Form and Theory* was specifically introduced to study the *predominant techniques in the modern short story*. The 1960s are marked by a focus on immigrant fiction and the margins of society, but also by the emergence of metafiction. As a form of positioning the text itself at the center of attention, it exposed the creative process and in its highly self-reflective and almost non-narrative form was received with skepticism. Its experimental character most certainly posed a

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[21] In a place dedicated to writing only, the writer is given the chance to focus on nothing but his talent and creativity. He arrives at the workshop seeking instruction and advice that would show him the way to the author he wants to be, but very soon he finds out that this transformation happens through a confrontation with his own limitations and flaws. He finds out that in order to achieve his goal he has to step back and let the text be the main protagonist and that writing is a continuing process of self-sacrifice and extinction of personality. The workshop considers the writer a craftsman not a genius or a magician. And so, its goal is to turn the apprentice into a master, teach him all the necessary technical skills, so that he can bridge the gap between ambition and mastery. It does not teach creativity, it teaches how to process and transcribe it into a literary text.

[22] Passaro. Vince. *Unlikely Stories: The quiet renaissance of American short fiction* in *Harper's Magazine*. NY. August 1999.

[23] This side effect may turn into a benefit for literature because those trained readers might be the ones who change the reading market by pointing out deficits and showing new directions.

[24] An annual anthology dedicated to the publication of American short fiction, it was first published in 1915, and still appears annually.

limitation to its popularity. The 1970s experienced an explosion of writing programs filled with growing numbers of mainstream students—white, middle class—and as a result a growing number of bad stories, but also a growing number of educated readers. Ethnicity begins to play a role and in order to uncover what lies beneath the realistic surface, mainstream fiction was paired up with pathos. *The New Yorker,* the *Esquire* or *Harper's,* widely popular magazines of the age, became the main publishing stage for short stories. And finally with the 1980s, the last high time was reached. The minimalist movement lead by Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason or Tobias Wolff gave the short story glamour and high acceptance on the literary market. Their work was characterized as plain, direct and sincere prose. Due to the atmosphere of growing political conservatism, it lacked irony or political charge and was rather determined by naivety, sentimentality and political correctness. The point of interest shifted from self-expression to family values and from the depiction of the margins of society to representations of individual and domestic troubles. Raymond Carver[25] epitomizes this change in his minimalist writing, which was distinguished by simple sentences and a first person narrator who created an illusion of intimacy and distance at the same time. Toward the end of the 20th century, the focus on the individual grew even stronger. Political correctness and sincerity were supposed to reestablish a sense of community and distract from such serious issues as the separation between rich and poor and the consolidation of corporate power. Sincere realism was about depictions of dysfunctional families and self-exposure, which was nourished by a growing awareness of the self, and its subsequent fading found expression in a boom of memoirs. It developed out of a diminished sense of privacy that was caused by the media and replaced the ironic play of the previous decades.

In the following years it became a mass product, something not only made for the masses but also made by masses. Every year countless students who graduate with a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing try their luck on the literary stage and provide the readership with ever-new work. This development is met with objections that are based on the argument that literary creativity has become a matter of the right training, not of outstanding talent. Critics of the workshop ask whether it is possible to teach creative writing at all, and why storytelling—an activity as fundamental and time consuming for a human being as breathing, eating and sleeping—requires instruction. Nelson Algren considered it an exercise in painless creativity that was based on self-deception, and that it has not produced a single remarkable novel, poem or short story.[26] Cormac McCarthy calls the teaching of creative writing a scam and even John Barth, a teacher of creative writing himself, views Iowa as a place where *those with any aptitude for [writing] ...hone what skills they have.*[27] A serious writer should study four proper objects: his material represented by human life; his medium represented by language; his craft; and art, which is the inspired and masterful application of his craft and medium to his material. For Barth:

> *[...] art is more the hope than the curricular goal of a sound writing program; it comes from mastery of the other three objects of study plus a dash of genius.*[28]

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[25] Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* has been extensively discussed by others as a classic example of minimalist fiction.
[26] Algren in Grimes. p. 5.
[27] Barth in Grimes. p. 6.
[28] Barth in Grimes. p. 7.

The most contemporary voice is that of David Foster Wallace for whom teaching creative writing is a fairly limited activity.[29] In his own words:

> *I was hired to teach creative writing, which I don't like to teach. There's two weeks of stuff you can teach someone who hasn't written 50 things yet and is still kind of learning. Then it becomes more a matter of managing various people's subjective impressions about how to tell the truth vs. obliterating someone's ego.*[30]

Wallace prefers to teach literature to freshmen because it gives him the chance to introduce them to literature and to make them recognize its value:

> *To watch these kids realize that reading literary stuff is sometimes hard work, but it's sometimes worth it and that reading literary stuff can give you things that you can't get otherwise, to see them wake up to that is extremely cool.*[31]

In his role as a writer Wallace also thematizes the dynamics of a creative writing seminar in his own work.[32] But the criticism is not limited to writers only. The reader is also able to see the obvious: the fact that the massive output of writers or, persons who want to be called fiction writers, has a significant impact on literature. The vast number of alumni of those programs creates the impression that anyone who feels inclined to write fiction—who thinks he or she has something important to say—now has the opportunity, if only he or she manages to pass all tests. This situation is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it is a very attractive and encouraging opportunity for those who seek instruction and encouragement. On the other hand it poses the question whether those who sign up for the programs really are the literary elite—those who not only master the art of writing, but also have something to say that is worth saying. When looking at the immense output they produce, it is easy to view fiction writing as an epidemic that has a degenerative effect on literature, as anything that is mass-produced slowly but surely begins to loose its quality. This not so new phenomenon has reached new dimensions with the explosion of consumerism, mass media, computer technology and globalization. The goal to produce as much as possible, as cheaply as possible to be able to sell as much as possible at the highest possible price, is no stranger in literary circles.[33]

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[29] David Foster Wallace was, until his premature passing on September 12, 2008, a Professor of creative writing at Pomona College in Claremont, California.

[30] Wallace. D. F. in Miller. L. *The Salon Interview.* March 8, 1996.

[31] Wallace in Miller. p. 5.

[32] *Westward The Course Of Empire Takes Its Way*, which will be thoroughly discussed at a later point, is about a group of creative writing seminar students who in the course of discovering their skills take a critical look at their teacher Prof. Ambrose.

[33] Over the years fiction has also been as much affected by the ideology of the masses as anything else, and has been treated like yet another economic entity. A work of fiction that is considered good is mainly measured by its position on a bestseller list, not on its aesthetic, intellectual or emotional value. Sales numbers are the main indicator for the reader to read or not to read a book. This opens a vicious circle in which an author who wants to be successful is tempted to follow the demands of the market, instead of imposing his ideas on the reader, serve instead of provoking him. The results are twofold: first fiction is designed after a certain, successful pattern instead of being composed out of a creative impulse; second its variety is limited. As Frank Conroy sums it up, the book industry is interested in trends which bring money and *[...] the money revolves around a dozen or so "slots" [...] Thriller. Romance. Asian American. Historical novel. Big Name author (a number of slots) Male Mystery.* 32 [cont'd] *Female Mystery, and so forth. As a book in one slot fades, it is often replaced by a similar*

Over the course of its evolution, especially as a subject that could be taught in class, the short story eventually also became the object of theoretical analysis. The field of short fiction studies moves away from the author, over the concept of the story as a mythical phenomenon, toward the primary process of recognition and classification of a short story, toward the reader. Contemporary short story theory still asks: *What is a Short Story?* but poses the question from a different perspective. It examines the metaphoric motivation in short fiction and looks at the margins and boundary zones of narrative. Another question is that of the ending and looks at a story's unruliness, its rhythm and sequence. *How has story evolved?* traces back the rise of the genre, and finally *how is story processed?* detects the relation between discourse analysis and the short story, and the effects of preclosure, second stories and destabilizing frames.

Charles E. May and Susan Lohafer see the short story as a primeval narrative form that is caught in formalisms. May's anthology of theoretical texts about the short story[34] presents a more cognitive approach that views the short story as an ancient, most natural mode of narrative communication used as a means to express ones feelings about experience in life. This experience was passed on in the form of stories that were short. The systematic pattern came later and was extrapolated from what was already there.[35] In his essay *The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction*[36] May deploys the discussion about the difference between the novel and the short story as a mainly formal distinction in length and importance. For him the short story is short because of the kind of experience that is embodied in it. It is a different mode of knowing. Opposed to the novel, which derives its conventions from conceptually created experience, the short story demands a subject matter and a set of artistic conventions that acknowledge the primacy of one particular experience directly as it was emotionally created and encountered. In other words, the short story is more spontaneous and a more organic form of narration. It is less artificial and therefore much closer to reality than the novel. The novel creates an illusion of reality out of facts from the external world, whereas the short story wants to be authentic to the immaterial reality of the inner world. For May, the novel takes place in the social and material world but the short story is interested in the primitive, antisocial world of the unconscious and its major concern is dreams. The result is that the novel is a social and public form structured on conceptual and philosophic framework, and the short story is intuitive and lyrical, rooted in the mythic and spiritual. The novel reaffirms everyday reality whereas the short story defamiliarizes it. As a consequence, storytelling is not the result of confrontation with the everyday world but of the confrontation with the sacred or the absurd.

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book. At worst, it is essentially the same book by a different author and with a different cover. (Conroy. Frank. *Introduction* in *The Iowa Award, The Best Stories 1991-2000.* p. 7.) Short stories, due to their abbreviated character, are particularly prone to this type of exploitation. Because writing and publishing a story appears to be such an easy thing to do, the book market is flooded with fiction of often-questionable value. But more stories do not automatically mean more stories that are good, and the abundance of short fiction makes it particularly difficult to spot and extract the significant ones. This admittedly bleak view is only one side of contemporary fiction. The other side is that it bears an enormous creative literary energy that benefits the constant rejuvenation of literature through an endless flow of new ideas and developments. It keeps fiction alive.

[34]May. Charles E. *Short Story Theories.* 1976.

[35]We saw Poe providing the pioneering definition earlier in this chapter.

[36]May. Charles E. *The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction* in *The New Short Story Theories.* Ohio University Press. Athens. 1994.

As May's ontological approach searches for the origins of short fiction in its psychological function, Susan Lohafer takes a cognitive approach to storyness and provides us with a theory that focuses on the viewpoint of the reader. For Lohafer, stories are usable but indescribable. And even though they are necessary and unique in the family of genres, the question is *Why?* Lohafer's point of interest lies in the interaction between reader and text and the cognitive processes, which make the reader recognize a story. She claims that it is not the formal, culturally unmarked and structuralist approach as previously discussed, but rather a psychological one. The reader recognizes the difficulty or importance of the goals for which the protagonist strives or the affective or emotional states which are produced while reading because each reader has his own internalized story-scheme—a set of expectations about what a story offers. Lohafer looks at how these schemes and expectations work in order to produce a story and asks: what is our primal experience with the short story that makes us feel that it does and is something different and how do we recognize it? Short span reading experiences serve as a method to determine the processes. Here, the reader's direct response is required. His reaction to typical syntactic and lexical features shows the mode of entering, moving through, and getting out of a story. The process is not only for scholar's interest. Journalism, history, social psychology, psycholinguistics, cognitive sciences, and discourse analysis are also very much involved. Their approach is data-driven, culturally determined and social-sciences oriented, and the specifics of the reading process are detected via reader experiments.

While the studies conducted by May and Lohafer show that the importance of short fiction as an oral tradition is being recognized again, they also show a continuity of its discussion as a genre. Throughout the history of short story definition, voices have ranged from a rather prescriptive list of characteristics as presented by Poe to the most recent, rather cognitive universal idea as offered by May and Lohafer. As various as those voices seem to be, they are united in the fact that the short story is its very own specific genre completely independent from the novel. It is a short but complex narrative intended to create an intense effect on the reader. Its shortness is determined by the material itself, and its complexity and stylistic quality stands next to that of a poem. However, as opposed to a poem, a short story is almost never about beauty or love, and it almost never addresses the future or the past as it lives entirely for the present. It does not idealize or express a longing or desire but deals with what is right in front of it, the naked reality of every day life disregarding the confinements of a narrative style. The idea of a literary gut reaction is an easy reach. A story's intensity derives from its honesty and directness, and because it reacts to the immediate present and allows the reader to relate to it much easier than to a novel, it is also always *en currant.*

In the 1990s, short fiction appears to have reached another transformative stage. Beyond the glamour of the 80s but not at a new peak yet, it seems to be on the way to gaining new significance. While Vince Passaro believes to perceive a process of rediscovery, short fiction of the 90s appears rather mild, unassuming and in quite some disregard. It is fairly obvious that the preset rules of composition still apply but, it is also clear that young writers do show strong tendencies towards what May describes as a mythical phenomenon, a primacy of one particular experience directly and emotionally created and encountered; something very spontaneous, immediate and emotionally loaded. The short fiction discussed in this paper[37] offers evidence in support of this tendency, even when it seems to be caught in the formalism of a

[37] *The KGB-Bar Reader* and *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*

definition because at the same time it appears to defy it by opening itself to experimental impulses. It is Poe's merit that the importance of a story's intensity was recognized, but it is because of non-conformist writers such as John Barth and David Foster Wallace, who looked beyond the rigidity of Poe's definition, that the door to experiment was opened.

2.
Postmodernism: Chasing a Phantom

Ever since its emergence in the late 1960s, literary postmodernism has been at the center of a controversy evolving around its resistance of any form of definability. Its multitude of shapes and directions gives it a rather phantom-like quality despite the fact that in the course of over thirty years it has permeated society and culture to the highest degree. Reactions range from admiration and respect toward anyone who is able to explain what postmodernism is, to irony and sarcasm because its transient and almost mythical character makes it rather difficult to grasp. This chapter presents an attempt for a contemporary definition based on the historic development of the term. Voices from the past are introduced as witnesses of its philosophical inception while more contemporary agents explain their understanding of the term as something that has always been a permanent part of their existence. The intention is to provide the theoretical background for a subsequent discussion of a specific set of short fiction,[38] based on which the continuity of the term postmodernism will be demonstrated.

Identifying a change

With his almost apocalyptic statement that literature of the late 1960s has run out of narrative options, John Barth initiated a vivid discussion about what he calls a *used-upness* of certain forms and possibilities in literature. Basing his argument on the fact that the present times are characterized by ultimacies and final solutions in all aspects of contemporary life including technology, weaponry, theology, society and the arts, Barth describes the current situation and attempts to provide a solution to the problem. Ultimacy means for him the feeling that such modern day achievements as the atomic bomb, television, ideology of the masses and mass consumerism, cannot be surpassed anymore. Consequently, the chance of creating something new, even in the arts, appears to be completely out of the realm of possibility. However, in its function as a mediating, creative and reflecting agent, art still finds a way to respond to the alleged ultimacy by thematizing it through such art forms as dramatic and musical happenings, pop art and intermedia art. In literature this means the development of Science Fiction, the Western, Pornography and Metafiction. Their common denominator is a rebellion against tradition, against rules and forms that, after their modernist deconstruction, seem out of place. For Barth, artistic forms and techniques are closely tied to history and as history progresses so do they. It is essential that any artist who intends for his work to reach a high degree of relevance follow this movement. Also in this context, the artist's role shifted from someone endowed with a talent and who manages to transcribe this talent into an artistic effect to someone who eliminates the boundaries between artist and audience often

[38] Foster Wallace. David. *Girl With Curious Hair* and *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men;* Foster. Ken. *The KGB Bar Reader.*

including the audience in his work. In the late 1960s this meant not only reflecting but also acting upon the finality by confronting the intellectual dead end and employing it within the literary work. The writer finds himself in the ironic situation of having to satisfy two extreme opposites: time and timelessness. He is in the double bind of adjusting his writing to the current situation in order to remain relevant, but at the same time creating a piece of work which will remain memorable to the reader and will become valuable as a witness of history. Another challenge is posed by the awareness that life and all its events are subject to recurrence. This means that at this point novelty becomes almost unattainable. The recognition of this predicament is of existential dimensions: how is a writer supposed to remain motivated in his search for new forms and themes, when he knows that any story he decides to write has already been written? How is he supposed to overcome the irony and cynicism induced by this situation, if not with irony and cynicism? For Barth, irony is a tool used to create a connection between the past and the present—between already existing art and art that is being created right now. It is a way to address ultimacy because it allows the introduction of works from the past into the contemporary world without making them look ridiculous, and to signify the awareness of the historical aspect of a work of art. This means that an examination of a work of art can only happen before the background of this past and with the awareness that it does not relate to the present in any other way but historic. The employment of irony allows the writer to call his work unique, even if it is just an imitation of something that has been created before.

For Barth, the only way to approach ultimacy is to place it in a different context, project it into the present, embed it into another story, and create a story within a story. It is a logical, but also a fairly problematic solution. As a *regressus in infinitum*, it is an endless recurrence to what has already been said and as such signifies exhausted literary possibilities. Barth's way out of the dilemma is the introduction of a labyrinth as a representation of endless possibilities. Adopted from Borges' *Fictiones*, it stands for all narrative possibilities that must be exhausted before the heart, or the end of the narration, is reached. The writer has to turn every corner and see what is around it before he moves on. Yet, for Barth the contemporary writer does not need to exhaust all the possibilities before he reaches the heart. He only needs to be aware of and acknowledge them on his way straight to the accomplishment of his work. This goal is achieved when one of two tasks have been accomplished: either the development of an original and unique style—an almost impossible act considering the fact that narration is as old as mankind—or the acknowledgement of this predicament through the employment of irony as an indicator of the awareness of the imitation of previous works. In this context then, exhaustion does not refer to a lack but rather to a used-upness or fatigue of narrative forms. A state in which a constantly evolving culture and society no longer allows them to retain relevance. Barth's views created a shockwave in his contemporaries and provoked a vivid discussion about the future of fiction.

In a follow up essay titled *The Literature of Replenishment*[39] Barth further clarifies his position and characterizes postmodernism as a reaction to modernism that as any movement, by its very nature, inspired a countermovement. As modernism was prompted by the rigidities and limitations of nineteenth-century bourgeois realism and the theories and discoveries that were made at the turn of the century in the fields of technology, psychology and many others, postmodernism was intended to create a

[39] Barth. John. *The Literature of Replenishment* in *The Friday Book.* The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London. 1984. 193-206.

fiction that was democratic, easily accessible and would appeal to a readership outside of the academic circles. Barth views postmodernism as a fiction that emphasizes the performing self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of modernism in a spirit of cultural subversiveness and anarchy and that carries to the extreme modernism's antirationalist, antirealist and antibourgeois program. Barth demands that the program of postmodernism should be a synthesis or transcension of the antitheses of pre-modernism and modernism. For him the ideal postmodernist author should neither repudiate nor imitate either of the styles, he should be aware of both:

> *He* [the author] *has the first half of the century under his belt, but not on his back.*[40]

Postmodernism should not be deplored as the result of the exhaustion of literature, and literature should not be considered as completely leaving the contemporary writer with only the option to parody and travesty his predecessors. For Barth, literature can never be exhausted because a single text can never be exhausted, since with every reading new aspects will come to the surface. The concept of exhaustion relates only to the fact that artistic conventions are temporary and liable to be retired because they are so closely tied to human history, something that is an ever-evolving matter in itself. Postmodernist fiction is the attempt to create the next thing after modernism; it is the attempt to replace the aesthetics of modernism with something more contemporary. However, for Barth, terminology is secondary. Based on his view that virtuosity is a virtue and that what artists feel about the state of the world they live in and their art is less important than what they do with this feeling, Barth concludes that critical categories are only a necessary evil that provides a discussion with tools that facilitate a dialogue. Yet, a good writer should rise above what he considers aesthetic principles and his work should take primacy over contexts and categories.

- ***Demanding adjustment***

Leslie Fiedler offers a view of the dilemma from the perspective of a literary critic. In his essay *Cross the Border, Close the Gap*[41] Fiedler acknowledges the impact of cultural and social progress onto literary forms of expression, and suggests a radical turn within the perception of art: the abandonment of the distinction between high and low art. His argument is rather ideologically driven and is based on the demand to close a gap between classes and generations and ultimately arrive at a strictly art-focused distinction between good and bad art. He demands, from literary criticism, to stop being too serious about itself and to adjust to the era it is criticizing because in order to overcome the distance between high and low art, new literature needs to stop taking itself seriously as well. This lack of self-importance would then also make the old measuring standards obsolete. For Fiedler, the distinction is no longer valid, because the values that were tied to it are no longer valid. In his work as a critic, Fiedler observed a discrepancy between the language of the new literature and the language that is used to describe it. He found himself confronted with the lack of appropriate words to do so and a language too constraining for the task of a literary critic. Because new literature was so completely different from what had been written before, not even modernist terms would suffice. In order to grasp the latest

[40] Barth, J. *Literature of Replenishment.* p. 203.
[41] Fiedler. Leslie A. *Cross the Border, Close the Gap.* Stein and Day Publishers. New York. 1972.

development in literature, the invention of a new set of terms that would be appropriate for the criticism of postmodern fiction and verse was inevitable. For him postmodernism, as opposed to the intensely critical modernism, is distrustful of self-protective irony and too greatly self-aware. It is dedicated to misology and prophetic irresponsibility and if criticism intended to remain relevant it had to adjust to these shiftings by abandoning formalism and becoming contextual. Criticism should focus on the reader rather than the text and not be concerned with the words on the page but rather with the juncture of the reader's own private contexts and experiences.

The importance of this adjustment lies in the fact that criticism is also considered literature. Fiedler defines criticism as the ability to find the right words, rhythms and images appropriate to express what they evoke; differing from other forms of literary art only in the fact that it uses one work of art as an occasion to make another. Contemporary criticism in its up-to-date*ness* that matches the atmosphere of the current age with comedy, irreverence and vulgarity must still retain some of its poeticism and aesthetics. It has to be able to make fun of art and itself instead of being rigid like a commandment. And because only the recognition that an old form has died allows for the development of a new one, the new form of criticism should demand the death of art. This demand bears consequences for all three parties of the literary process. It affects the writer in his creative process, the way his work is communicated (printed text) and the reader (perception/reception of the text). The writer finds himself in the precarious position of knowing that because the traditional novel as such is dead, he has to distance himself from all work he has written so far in order to be able to develop something new and contemporary. His work becomes a constant process of killing and reinventing. Also, the fruits of his work—the printed text—experience an impact bordering on the extinction of its traditional form, the book.

Spurred by the constant necessity and demand for change as well as by advances in communication technologies, it appears only natural to consider the option that the printed book as a traditional form of literary communication is an endangered species. And indeed, the role of the book as the primary source of communication has been subject to change in the recent past. Now it can afford to be less serious and more frivolous because it is increasingly growing into a form of entertainment. For Fiedler, the serious novel as represented by Proust, Mann and Joyce, as well as serious criticism, were doomed by the technology and philology of the 20th century. Those works must be put aside because they are still considered a scripture, just like the Bible, something that provides the rules of life for a society. However, over time these rules have changed and the scripture as a book of law has become art and finally just another book. Its prescriptive character has been replaced by the desire to please. Fiedler wants the new novel to go back, before the time it became serious so that it can become popular again; not quite reputable and even a little dangerous. It must become anti-art, anti-serious and entertaining because its function is to close the gap between elite and mass culture. In order to mix the meaningful with the banal or pop culture, it should be immersed in pop culture as well as satirize high art. The outcome would be the Pop Novel: a form as far removed from art and avant-garde as possible; a form that intends to distance itself from inwardness, analysis and pretension and that is immune to lyricism or righteous social commentary. And as such it would not be afraid to be close to the market, to

consumerism and exploitation by the mass media. To the contrary, it would seek its association.[42]

As much as Fiedler advocated new literary forms, he also demanded new ways of criticizing this new literature. He suggested exaggeration, grotesque emulation of the classic past and adaptation of pop forms. The goal was to remove High art from its overtly elevated pedestal and at the same time to integrate and elevate Mass art into High art's vicinity so that the class and generation gap could be closed. Pop art represented the war against the anachronistic survival of the distinction between a notion of one art for the cultured, meaning the university educated minority, and one for the uncultured, meaning the higher education and taste deficient majority. Pop art's hostility toward order made it a subversive threat to all hierarchies and made it possible to classify art into good and bad categories independently of whether it was High or Low art. In this sense postmodernism demanded the closing of the gap between critic and audience, artist and audience, amateur and professional. The postmodernist mass audience urges the critic to abandon his elite status in exchange for freedom. Jack-of-all-trades and master of none was now the predominant ideology. The audience was invited to create their own art and the artist was invited to leave the confinement of his own art form behind and cross over into another. During this process highly specialized artists became artistic amateurs again: the poet turned to making music, the novelist to writing songs, the musician to writing novels and so leveled the play field. Fiedler considered Pop art as the contemporary form of the old concept of pilgrimage and quest; the Western, Science Fiction, and Pornography as the only analogues for the tradition of Journey or Pilgrimage toward a transcendental goal, a moment of vision. However, the images of quest have been corrupted by the literary forms that have thrived on them over the years, and in order to create space for new ideas those images must be abandoned entirely. Fielder asked what kind of images would those be, and listed comic figures, jazz, rock, old movies and talk shows as the new anti Gods and anti Heroes. He saw the surrounding world on its way into literature and writers thematizing pop culture as the one setting familiar to them. Instead of capturing old myths, they would include the authentic context of contemporary world before it turned into a myth. In addition to his demands for adjustment to a highly technologized world, Fielder also recognizes the need for a higher meaning of literature, for something that goes beyond technical formalities.

[42] Fiedler considers the Western, Science Fiction and Pornography as the most suitable genres for this type of involvement with consumerism. The Western, in its notion as an account of an idyllic encounter between White man and Non-White in a variety of wilderness settings, is the most pop cultural genre of all because of its well-established image of myth and entertainment rather than literature. It has appeared in pulp magazines for many years and because it is not considered art, it cannot be harmed by parody or irony. The mythological innocence of the American culture is preserved in it because it helps to overcome the gap that was created by the aristocratic concept of separate literatures—one aimed at children, the other at adults. The Western provides the act of initiation which is necessary to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. But because the Western is considered children's literature it also contributes to the image of American literature as being immature, juvenile and even infantile so the question is: how can it be taken seriously? Probably only under the aspect of providing a transition and filling in the gap between children's and adult literature. Its merit comes from the fact that it allowed the writer and the reader to cross easily into the world of imagination, magic and enchantment. The frontier was not very far away and provided a perfect opportunity to step into the realm of fantasy and adventure. And it was accessible to any readership: children, adults, educated, uneducated. It allowed Americans to live their dreams and look at the world across the border with childish innocence, and to *imagine* destiny rather than to inherit one as it is happening (as with Europe's vast historical heritage). In America myth and dreams are used as a form of escape or a way of closing a gap between the personal and public.

This something could be, for example, a return to the more mythical function of literature creating a dream, a vision or ekstasis as its main goal.

Because postmodernism, or as Fiedler called it *post-electronic Romanticism*, did no longer pursue the uncorrupted Wild West—the frontier has already been explored and all horizons have been reached—it recognized that it was necessary to find and live the myth within the existing world, within the influences of technology and the support of machines. In other words, go with time and be contemporary instead of giving in to nostalgia. Yet, in the end, machine civilization also produces the primitive: *ekstasy* is the end of advanced technology and mysticism is the by-product of scientific research. At a time of closing the gap, literature becomes prophetic and universal: a continuing revelation, the function of which is to transform a secular crowd that has lost its faith into a crowd that believes again. It has to transform the masses into a community that equally believes in the advantages of technology and in the world of wonders. It has to be able to combine both worlds by accepting technological progress and retaining the values of the world of myth and wonder at the same time.

Naturally, Fiedler was not the only one demanding an adjustment in the way art would respond to the contemporary world. In the multitude of voices, F. Lyotard represents the philosophical side of the need for change. This need is driven by the desire for unity in a culture that has been deconstructed by modernism. For Lyotard, modernism has split unity into many independent specialties that are only accessible to a small circle of experts and the concrete individual perceives them only as a heterogeneous bundle of meanings. His essay *The Postmodern Condition*[43] expresses the desire to overcome modernism's deconstructing mode—its *splintering of culture*—and replace it with, for everyone comprehensive, unity. The goal is to bridge the gap between discourses and open the way to a unity of experience. In the 1960s and 70s a re-examination of modernist approaches became essential and a growing demand to replace modernism's experiments with functionality was perceivable. Realism and postmodernism were among the re-visiting movements, and their common denominator was: a desire to liquidate avant-gardism and bring artists back in touch with their community; to re-create unity, identity, security and popularity. Realism intended to stabilize the referent, to arrange it to the point where it has a recognizable meaning, which the addressee—here the consumer or reader—would be able to recognize and understand easily because it would also allow him to recognize his own identity and receive approval from others. That this could only happen when everybody spoke the same language—used the same communication code—was for Lyotard obvious, but not necessarily desirable. In his eyes the painter or writer should refuse themselves of such simplistic mechanisms and should instead question the rules of writing and painting, as they know them, even if this means the loss of credibility and audience. That this type of liberation was not easily achieved was determined by the artist's material needs as a living human being. They rendered him unable to withdraw completely from outside forces in order to focus on his work. In other words, his art is—whether he likes it or not—under a massive influence of political and economic power; two factors that execute a strong impact on cultural policies and the developments on the art and the book market. Those instances often recommend the production of art concerned with familiar subjects, which would allow the consumer an easy identification and promote his ability to create an opinion. This

[43] Lyotard. Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis. 1979/1984.

type of art in turn would more likely encourage him to go back and spend more money and possibly even provide a certain amount of comfort because he would be confronted with something already familiar that does not require any intellectual engagement. But the distribution of political and economic power goes beyond a merely general impact. It can also determine which form of writing is considered the most appropriate at a given time. Is the power in the hands of a totalitarian political party? If like communism, realism is the preferred mode. In this case it serves as a remedy for the anxiety and depression experienced by the audience. In times of an oppressed society, the demand goes toward unity, simplicity and communicability. Artistic experimentation is under attack. Is the power, on the other hand, determined by capitalism? Then, avant-garde or postmodernism become the preferred mode of expression because they are flexible, open to experiment and allow art to develop in many different directions. This eclecticism leads to a wide range of creative work, yet its "anything-goes" attitude can also create confusion within the public concerning the qualification of taste. With money as the dominating factor, aesthetic criteria lose their importance and the distinction between good and bad taste becomes obscured. Following the mantra that there is a place for all tastes as long as they have purchasing power, it does not matter what good or bad taste is.

While the political and economic powers exert their influence on art through science and industry, they also face significant problems with reality. Because science and industry are strongly dependent on a consensus between partners over certain knowledge and certain commitments, their reality is created by this agreement. If there is no agreement, there is no reality. Modernism shattered familiar beliefs and uncovered a lack of reality, which in turn created the need to invent something in its place—another reality. Lyotard calls this lack of reality the aesthetic of the sublime. The sublime does not require any knowledge about reality or the union of faculties that are needed for the development of the notion of beauty or of taste, because it does not operate with ideas that can be represented by concrete objects. Sublime ideas are unpresentable and modern art wants to present the fact that the unpresentable exists—that the sublime exists. It is the goal of modern painting to express that there is something that can be conceived but can neither be seen nor made visible. But how can the invisible be made visible? Kant suggested formlessness as the index of the unpresentable. For him, the abstract is what the mind experiences when looking for a presentation of something as unpresentable as the infinite. It is a negative representation that avoids figuration. On the other hand, the avant-garde alludes to the unpresentable by means of visible presentation. But even this presentation can only be abstract or in no way resembling what has been done before because it refers to something that has no visible form. Consequently, any avant-garde has the role of disqualifying reality by examining its pictorial techniques. It constantly disqualifies artifices of presentation such as drawing, mixing of colors, linear perspective, the display or the museum because they distract from the unpresentable. There are only two ways to approach the sublime relation between the presentable and the conceivable: first stress the powerlessness of the faculty of presentation, its inability to give the unpresentable, an idea or emotion, a concrete form; or second point out the positive aspects of inventing new artistic rules as an expression for overcoming the dilemma.

Lyotard considers postmodernism not as modernism at its end but as its pre-state. It represents the continuous act of recognition of certain rules. The difference between modernism and postmodernism is that the former seeks to present the unpresentable, the sublime, through missing contents yet in a form that is still

recognizable to the reader. The latter constantly searches for new forms of representation of the unpresentable by giving it its own form that is manifest in the lack of familiar structures and through the invention of new aesthetic values that are unfamiliar to the reader. These new forms are not meant to entertain the reader but rather to stress the significance of the unpresentable. Consequently the postmodern author does not write literature that wants to please the reader. To the contrary it intends to illustrate the challenge of the unpresentable; show him that there is something that cannot be represented and point out the difficulty in expressing this fact. When producing a new text the author finds himself in the position of a philosopher looking for new categories and new rules of judgment. Consequently, his work cannot be qualified by familiar and well-established categories because it does not follow them anymore. For Lyotard, a work of art is created without any rules in order to create rules. Yet as soon as those rules are created they become a matter of the past and a subject for postmodern questioning themselves. This process turns a work of art into an event. The goal is not to supply reality to the conceivable, to the sublime, but to invent allusions to it. The goal is not to try to present the unpresentable with familiar means of presentation, but to invent new ways of making clear that the unpresentable exists without providing visible evidence for it.

Lyotard's essay represents, as much as that of Barth and Fielder, an assessment of fiction in an evolving world. In the process of confirmation of a new presence, it was an attempt to grasp the changes and find the right words to describe this new condition. The next generation of writers as well as of critics, encounters a different set of circumstances: the challenge of coming to terms with the postmodern heritage. It is not so much a description anymore, but rather an evaluation of something that constitutes the world as they know it. The goal is to display the effects of a postmodern world onto fiction.

- ***Applied postmodernism***

For Mark Currie, one result of the postmodern world's influence onto fiction is metafiction, which he considers as being more than a mere technical exercise. In his studies of postmodern narrative theory, he sees the narratology of the 1980s in a state of transition. It shifts away the formalism and structuralism of the past and toward the ability to apply its expertise to the rapidly increasing variety of objects such as films, music videos, advertisements, television, paintings, songs, jokes, accounts of daily life and many others, for narratological analysis. It is a transition in the general assumptions and procedures of post-structural narratology, and is characterized by diversification, deconstruction and politicization.[44]

The change began with diversification or the intention to shift away from the scientific assumption that narratology could be an objective science that discovers formal and structural properties in its object, the narrative. Poststructuralist narratology moved toward the recognition that the reading constructed its subject and that structure was something that was projected onto the work by a reading. Narratives were not solid buildings anymore but rather narratological inventions construable in an almost infinite number of ways. Diversification was followed by deconstruction or a step away from the presentation of narratives as stabile, unified and coherent structures toward sustaining their contradictory aspects, toward

[44] Before 1987, studies were very much focused on linguistics and structure in literature. After 1987, they became more interdisciplinary, less abstract, less scientific and more politically engaged.

preserving their complexity and refusing the impulse to reduce the narrative to a stable meaning or coherent project. Deconstruction allowed for the reintroduction of historical perspective into narratology and the introduction of new methods for the unmasking of political ideology.[45] Literature ceased to be an ideological form. Instead it became an individual intention again. Consequently a new model for critical change became necessary. It had to be able to describe the heterogeneity of contemporary narratology and at the same time to summarize this diversity and to assemble a more general collection of principles and techniques.

Within this context Currie sees metafiction or, as he calls it theoretical fiction, as a form of criticism, a way for literature to express ideas without being too closely tied to the factual world and without ceasing to be a narrative. Fiction's subtle mechanisms of persuasion—its ability to explore ideas or historical forces as they are lived by individuals and to express ideas that escape systematic knowledge—are the main reasons for its use as a vehicle for criticism. Theoretical fiction's performative character does not try to state the truth about an object-narrative but rather enacts what it wishes to say about a narrative while being a narrative itself. For Currie, this shift from theory to fiction inevitably results in narrative self-contemplation. Based on Roland Barthe's definition of a theoretical discourse as a self-reflexive discourse, the export of critical expertise into the novel is a way of giving it a critical function—the ability to explore the logic and philosophy of narrative without recourse to metalanguage, a process that renders fiction theoretical. As such, theoretical fiction is not about a writer who has become a critic, it is about the discourse that dramatizes the boundary between fiction and criticism or uses it as a source of energy. Because the metanarrative sign is a moment of reflexivity that can happily co-exist with straight-forward referential aspects of the narrative, Currie views the metafictional device as it is represented by means of self-reflexivity or self-consciousness in a narrative, as a function inherent in all novels.[46] Growing cultural self-consciousness inspired by films, fashion, architecture, TV game shows or a response to developments in theory in language and literature, require the novel to reflect on its role in the construction of reality. Therefore, as the narrative consciousness has become even more a feature of contemporary literature, metafiction has become the definitive characteristic of postmodernism.

Over the years many attempts at definition were made with the goal to find some basic shape for literary postmodernism's transitory character. For Barth, it is the awareness of a constantly evolving world and the resulting exhaustion of narrative possibilities; for Fielder, it is the necessity of adjustment of qualitative perception and terminology; for Lyotard, it is the continuous act of recognition of certain rules; and for Currie, postmodern metafiction is a form of criticism. In general, it appears possible to characterize literary postmodernism as the materialized search for a way to overcome the results of modernism's harsh treatment of tradition as represented by late nineteenth-century realism. It is an ironic re-visitation of the past with the goal to find the future and is determined by a strong experimentalism. John Barth is a member of the first postmodernist generation who set out to go beyond the boundaries of modernism. His short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* marked the beginning of his experimental journey. It continued to *On With The Story* before arriving at *Click* which adheres to Barth's own demand for up-to-dateness by not only thematizing but also imitating the Internet in its narrative technique. David Foster

[45] Marxism for instance viewed the production of language as the unknowing reproduction of ideological forms and values and not as an original act of undetermined creativity.

[46] He detects it as early as in the work of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and the Epistolary Novels.

Wallace, in many ways Barth's successor, demonstrates in his early work, *Girl With Curious Hair*, a strong awareness and an active discussion of his postmodern heritage exposing the role of postmodernism for a contemporary writer. In a later collection, *Brief Interview With Hideous Men,* Wallace not only continues his great experimental activity as a predominant force of creative work as demanded by Barth, but also substantiates Currie's concept of theoretical fiction by utilizing metafiction for his own discussion of postmodernism.

3.
John Barth: Pioneering Postmodernism

In the late 1960s John Barth represented one of many critical voices involved in the qualitative assessment of the next stage in the continuing transformation of American fiction. He perceived a shift in the demands toward contemporary fiction and called attention to the necessity of adjustment. His own reaction to a literature in a state of re-orientation is best represented in a collection of short narratives titled *Lost in the Funhouse*[47] which supplies the theoretical discussion of postmodernism with a practical reference. For Barth, fiction that intends to retain its relevance must continually update itself and invent new ways of expressing its reactions to the world around it. *Lost in the Funhouse* examines and executes multiple narrative options as an attempt to overcome the perceived exhaustion of narrative possibilities. It points at the dilemma and demonstrates the quest. Barth approaches the issue of exhaustion with a range of experimental stories in which self-reflection, fragmentation and digression serve as tools in the process of finding a way out of the crisis. The goal is to thematize as many aspects of writing as possible in order to underline the necessity for experimentation as a means of determining the best way of expressing a theme:

> *[...] the regnant idea is the unpretentious one of turning as many aspects of the fiction as possible – the structure, the narrative viewpoint, the means of presentation, in some instances the process of composition and/or recitation as well as of reading or listening – into dramatically relevant emblems of the theme.*[48]

In order to illustrate this idea, the image of a funhouse and its labyrinthine character serves as a metaphor of journey and quest on which fiction, as well as writer, embark during the creative process. On one hand it symbolizes the quest of an author looking for new forms of expression; on the other the inexhaustible possibilities literature offers to him during this creative process. The concept of a funhouse suggests a loss of orientation, loss of direction, of identity, of a center and of tradition, but it also bears a promise of discovery and re-orientation. For fiction, this means re-orientation and discovery of new forms through technical experimentation. This central concept of loss and discovery first appears in the title *Lost in the Funhouse* and continues throughout the collection.[49] The meaning charged title is followed by a strongly

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[47] Barth. John. *Lost in the Funhouse, Fiction for print, tape, live voice*. Anchor Books Doubleday. New York. 1968/1988.

[48] *Seven Additional Author's Notes*, in *Lost in the Funhouse*. note #1.

[49] For example *Night-Sea Journey* represents the image of journey, as a constant existential presence, that inspires the traveler, equals narrator, to inquire into his destiny and its justification. In relation to Barth's theoretical work, *Night-Sea Journey* represents the continuous journey of a writer in quest of a reason for what he does. Love represents the ambiguity of this reason but also the hope that this ambiguity will be rewarded with the creation of something new that will alleviate the writer's fear of

symbolic introduction entitled *Frame Tale,* which consists of a brief invitation to the reader to construct a Moebius[50] strip with the inscription: *Once upon a time there was a story that began.* [51] Molded after the strip, the following pieces undergo a constant oscillation between inside and outside, between stepping into the narration and becoming involved with it and stepping back, outside to look and reflect on it. The inscription on the strip—which in its very traditional, almost medieval character simultaneously creates an atmosphere of expectation and skepticism—is the link between the mathematical figure and literature. There is expectation because of the traditional opening and there is skepticism because of its placement on a seemingly unrelated object, the Moebius strip. By linking those two items, a very concrete and rational geometrical figure and a very unrestricted first line of a story, Barth announces the playful and ambiguous character of the collection at its very beginning.

The central piece of the collections is a story titled *Lost in the Funhouse* in which a boy named Ambrose literally gets lost in a funhouse. While trying to find his way out he enters a slightly hallucinatory state of mind and begins to reflect on himself in relation to other persons. To overcome his fear of the labyrinth he begins to tell stories, imagining situations in the future and reflecting on situations from the past. By the time he finds the exit he has decided to create and operate his own funhouse. Barth introduces the labyrinthine structure of the funhouse as the story's central metaphor intended to represent the process of trial and error in literary composition. A linear frame tale is interrupted with seemingly unrelated text inserts resulting in a composition that is characterized by strong fragmentation, collage-like narration and countless digressions. Comments on the usage of punctuation, length of a protagonist's uninterrupted speech or the effectiveness of descriptions of outer appearances are the tools of digression:

> *A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type, which in turn is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and phrases as well as the customary type for titles of complete works, not to mention.*[52]

Another group of digressions consists of self-reflexive comments on the previously written text made by the narrator:

> *We should be much farther along than we are; something has gone wrong; not much of this preliminary rambling seems relevant.* [...] *At this rate our hero, at this rate our protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever.*[53]

A third group of digressions addresses the events during Ambrose's stay in the funhouse:

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49 [cont'd] ultimacy. The story's apocalyptic character is overcome by love's creative element that prevents ultimacy because it is the reason for new creation.

[50] Moebius strip: a one-sided surface that can be formed from a rectangular strip by rotating one end 180° and attaching it to the other end. In Second *College Edition, The American Heritage Dictionary,* Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston. 1982. In its two-dimensional view, the mathematical figure represents endlessness but an endlessness that in its third dimension reveals an inner and outer surface that keeps oscillating, depending on where the turning point is. In this specific point that results from the geometrical construction of the figure, the inner surface becomes the outer surface and vice versa. It is this point that has the power to turn everything inside out and upside down.

[51] *Lost in the Funhouse.* p. 1.

[52] *Lost in the Funhouse.* p. 72.

[53] *Lost in the Funhouse.* p. 78-79.

> *Ambrose wandered, languished, dozed. Now and then he fell into the habit of rehearsing to himself the unadventurous story of his life, narrated from the third person point of view, from his earliest memory parenthesis of maple leaves stirring in the summer breath of tidewater Maryland end of parenthesis to the present moment. Its principal events, on this telling would appear to have been A, B, C, and D.*[54]

Ambrose's search for the exit is a metaphor for an author looking for the right way to tell a story. He has to turn every corner to make sure he did not miss it. This exploration of the labyrinth indicates the lack of orientation and the process of exploration of narrative possibilities. Every turned corner represents one option in the development of a story.[55]

As a unit, the stories collected in *Lost in the Funhouse* mimic a walk through a funhouse where lowered lights, strange sounds, smoke, horrifying figures and a labyrinthine shape create a mysterious atmosphere. It appears to be a road of no return, but it is also a world of endless possibilities allowing the visitor to find his own way through the labyrinth. The fragmented world of the funhouse is an open invitation for discovery and construction of individual images according to ones own imagination. Each story in the collection represents one turn in the maze and each of them confronts the reader with a new question. The answer is always love because as an ambiguous concept, it is indefinable and stands for no answer and all answers in one. It does not provide for a closure but keeps the process of story-telling going and so avoids ultimacy or the end of story telling.

As *Lost in the Funhouse* looked into the past in search for narrative opportunities as a way to deal with the feeling of exhaustion, focusing on Greek mythology in *Menelaiad*[56] and *Echo*[57] and on WWII in *Ambrose His Mark*[58], Barth's most recent piece, *Click*[59], published more than 30 years later, takes up the present and applies postmodernism's stylistic devices to a significantly changed reality. In 1997 it is a world dominated by mass consumerism, globalization and computer technology, and Barth demonstrates once again what he meant by being *up-to-date* as a writer[60]. *Click* provides the opportunity to watch a writer respond to an evolving world. A classic Barth text with a simple plot dominated by a complex style and theme, *Click* is a multilayered construction of meaning, stretching from the relationship between men and women, through the influence of electronic media onto human lives, the interaction between the real material world and the virtual reality of the Internet and

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[54] *Lost in the Funhouse.* p. 96.

[55] The search continues in *Anonymiad,* a circular narration by a minstrel entrapped on a deserted island. He recounts the story of another minstrel who made a career from a goat-boy to chief minstrel at king Agamemnon's and queen Clytemnestra's court in antique Mycenae. The narrator, a.k.a. young minstrel, is a simple, inexperienced and naïve young man craving to see what is outside of his island. A trip to Mycenae turns into an adventure which involves him into the affairs on the king's court, and when he accompanies Aegistus, Queen Clytemnestra's lover, on a wine-trading trip along the coast, he ends up stranded on a lonely island with nothing but nine jugs of wine. Those jugs become the vehicle for his art. When emptied, he begins to fill them with goatskins inscribed with poetry and sets them out to sea hoping they will reach other shores. This process keeps him occupied for a while, but when he reaches the ninth and final jug he decides to fill it with something completely new and extraordinary.

[56] *Menelaiad* in *Lost in the Funhouse*: 130-167.

[57] *Echo* in *Lost in the Funhouse*: 98-103.

[58] *Ambrose His Mark* in *Lost in the Funhouse*: 13-34.

[59] Barth. John. *Click!,* in *The Atlantic Monthly.* 280. No. 6 (December 1997): 81-96.

[60] *Literature of Exhaustion*

finally to its impact onto literature. Its initial extensively cut up and seemingly incoherent structure reveals, at a second viewing, the typical underlying intricacy of a postmodern text and illustrates the idea of postmodernism as a process of continuous transition and adaptation to current realities. In order to illustrate this adaptation, Barth turns to his immediate reality and utilizes humanity's most recent technical achievement, the Internet. Constructed like a website, *Click* consists of endless links to click on and, as does the World Wide Web, has the character of a tightly knit textile with a complex pattern.

Click's complexity begins with the two main characters: Fred and Irma. They are middle-aged, not married, no kids, two incomes (TINKs) who explore the Internet after a session of love making following a heated argument. Intrigued by the invitation on the screen of their computer to *CLICK*, they do so and the title *The Hypertextuality of Everyday Life* with the instruction to *click on any of the above*, appears. From now on the story develops along the different clicks they decide to follow and turns into a game that depends on who is currently in control of the computer mouse. After a while they click onto a link called: *the sore subject of their Saturday set-to* that introduces the events leading to the current situation and so circles back to the beginning of the story. Very soon Fred and Irma turn out to be screen names chosen for the sake of anonymity. They are virtual copies of Mark and Valerie, the actual protagonists in *Click*. Mark and Valerie *meet* Fred and Irma while surfing the Net. Mark is characterized as *the Expediter,* an aspiring *not-yet-successful novelist, who writes capsule texts on everything under the sun for a CD-ROM operation in College Park, distilling masses of info into style-free paragraphs of a couple hundred words.* Valerie works as an interior designer for a D.C. housing developer. Mark and Valerie live together in a home described as a detached suburban house jointly owned by both parties, commodious, well-appointed split-level in Silver Spring, MD. Their *Saturday set-to* takes place in Baltimore at the Inner Harbor on their way to the National Aquarium. After constant sidetracking to other locales within the harbor, the argument blows up publicly under the bowsprit of the old *USS Constellation*. The setting is completed with a third location: the narrator's workroom in which he is composing the story at hand. It is a virtual space only accessible through the computer, and has the character of a *locus amoenus* in the sense of a remote and pleasant place in which a muse lives. It is a direct hint at the process of composition and brings the metafictional aspect into play:

> *Restless Fred moves to click on action but defers to Irma [...], who clicks on scene and sees what the Author/Narrator sees as he pens this: a (white adult male right) hand moving a (black Mont Blanc Meisterstück 146 fountain) pen (left to right) across the (blue) lines of (three-ring lose-leaf) paper in a (battered old) binder on a (large wooden former grade-school) worktable all but covered with implements and detritus of the writer's trade. [...]The mirror (left of center) gives back a view not of the viewer—fortunately, or we'd never get out of the loop and on with the story—but of the workroom door (now closed against interruption) in the wall behind.*
> *(Click on any of these items, including those in brackets.)*[61]

This detailed yet highly fragmented scene contains all three of Barth's subject matters: the difficulties involved in human relationships, the way fiction is influenced

[61] *Click*. p. 3

by electronic media and the impact of this media onto the writing process, and is represented by the concept of hypertext. Within *Click* there are two functions assigned to the idea of hypertext[62] On the surface it is a sign that the following will be as multifaceted and complex as a hypertext; on a second level it creates the illusion of openness and endless possibility by giving the reader the impression that if he follows the links on the computer screen he will be able to influence the flow and outcome of the narration. This notion of the possibility of readerly influence induces a lively debate and a certain amount of skepticism in the approach toward this newly emerging literary genre.

Whereas the practicality of hypertexts for the non-fiction sector appears obvious—it provides an enormous flow of information—the idea of hyperfiction as a literary genre evokes skepticism. On one hand literary critics see it as the future of literature, the next and up-coming stage in its development and base their position on the speed of technological advance and the ever-growing dependency on the computer as an essential part of our daily life. Fiction writers, on the other hand, meet its influence on the creative process with reservations basing their argument on the fear of blurred boundaries between fiction and reality and the effects of an omnipotent reader on the development of a narration.

Considering the hypertext as an opportunity for the reader:

> *[...] to pursue various diverging paths through a story. The writer can link any section within the text to many other parts. One segment can then lead to any of several alternative continuations or digressions in the text.*[63]

R. Kendall[64]views hyperfiction as a promoting force that intensifies the link between reader and text. It involves the reader in the writing process by providing extensive material that allows him to become creative himself. He participates in the text instead of simply receiving it. In the role of a writer, the reader has the chance to experience the creative energy behind a text and feel as if he wrote it himself. It is quite an elating experience, but what are the benefits of this involvement? What is in it for the reader? Kendall calls upon the unique interaction between reader and text and the effectiveness of a nonlinear structure. For Kendall, it is the ability of the story to break the restrictions of linearity and stasis imposed by paper, and to draw the reader into its world by giving him a role in its creation. This empowerment results in a fundamentally different reading experience: it makes the reader aware of the mechanics of writing, specifically of the effects individual decisions have on the further development of a story. Kendall considers this the sole hallmark of a good hypertext and the only meaningful distinction between a hypertext and a printed page.[65] What he does not consider, however, is the question for the benefits of this act: for whom did the reader write this text? The answer is inevitably: for himself and for himself only. In the end a reader's ultimate freedom of creativity also becomes his ultimate limitation. By creating his own individual version of a story, he is also its only audience and critic, as the intellectual events related to the plot of a story are

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[62] A hypertext is defined as: A text made up of short units (a paragraph or 24 lines) between which the reader may jump using links assigned in advance. [...] allows any of a number of pages to follow the one being read, and in any desired order. OCEL.

[63] Kendall. p. 4.

[64] Kendall. Robert. *Writing for the New Millennium. The Birth of Electronic Literature.* in *Poets & Writers Magazine*. Nov./Dec. 1995.

[65] Kendall. R. *But I Know What I Like.* SIGWEBNewsletter. June 1999. Vol. 8. No. 2. p. 1.

restricted to the inside of his own mind and result in a loss of exchange with any other instance but his own mind. However, literature is about exchange. It is a give and take between writer and his audience and, in an ideal case, a cause for discussion among the audience. With the disappearance of exchange, the benefit for the audience—in our case for the reader—seems to be minimal. Now the distinction between author and audience is cut short because what the writer provides now are options for a story not a cohesive unified text that creates a certain effect. Individual paragraphs become pieces of a puzzle that can be set together in a deliberate order and consequently always lead to a different image. Whether this is a desirable idea depends on whether the goal of the text is to promote the reader's individuality or, to communicate a certain individual's, other than the reader's, perspective and to create a specific effect.

John Barth approaches the issue of hypertext in an essay titled *Virtuality* in which it is initially characterized as:

> *interactive computer-fiction in which the 'author' designs a matrix of lexias through which the 'reader' navigates [...] entering or exiting the fiction at any of many available doors and steering the plot along any of many optional waypoints.*[66]

Barth's curiosity about the possibilities of creating electronic fiction is paired with reservations toward the fast progress of virtual reality and his objections are directed at the increasingly blurred line between the told and the teller. The cause of his concern is the disruption of the traditional distinction between writer and reader by the chance given to the reader to influence the progress of a story. In this place the argument could be made that Barth's own metafiction, in its attempts to blur the boundaries that encourage a certain degree of interaction and communication between narrator and reader, moves right along the same premises as a hypertext. Yet, metafiction in its strictest sense is a one-way street that intends to illustrate its self-awareness by making the creative process visible and to demonstrate to the reader the forces involved in the composition of a text. In comparison, hyperfiction appears to be strongly consumer oriented. Its freedom of choice caters to the reader because the hyperlink as a tool allows him to determine the course and outcome of the narration. This freedom of choice creates the illusion of not only endless possibilities but even more so of total control on the side of the reader. Barth's concern is the fact that despite the enormous difference between electronic virtual reality and literature, the possibility for misinterpretation, due to distortion of boundaries between the two realities, exists. He questions the reader's ability to distinguish between virtual reality and fictitious, literary reality. For him, a reader who is used to virtual reality as the very first source of reality and whose experience is limited to the tactile feedbacks of an electronic medium[67] is prone to confusing their individual function. Barth does not disapprove of virtual reality entirely. His intention is rather to point at the shift it may cause in the perception of literature, stressing the significant difference between virtual reality as a method of virtually conveying reality (or as Barth calls it *real virtualities*) and literature as a medium that right from the beginning operates with virtualities (or in Barth's terms *purely virtual Virtuality of literary texts* or *fiction*). As fiction's intention is, and always has been, determined by the communication of virtual contents, stories, through a virtual medium, language, the function of

[66] Barth, John. *Virtuality*. http://www.jhu.edu/~jhumag/994web/culture1.html Johns Hopkins Magazine. September1994. p.1.

[67] Barth uses the electronic glove as an example for the close link between the factual and virtual world

electronic media is to convey reality via a virtual medium into another reality that can only be perceived through this medium. In other words, it is an attempt to create reality out of virtuality, an act that is not comparable to the implicit virtuality of literature:

> [...] *it* [fiction] *does not exist in our nerve-endings but in the pure hyperspace of our imaginations.*[68]

For Barth the endless possibilities of narration are provided by the real world as we experience it with our own senses and not as they are mediated by an artificial source.

Click is Barth's literary response to the influences of electronic media. His criticism of the computer as a main source of knowledge and wisdom targets its limitations when compared to the infinite potential of any existing form of communication outside of the electronic device. The piece illustrates how the way of thinking is determined by hypertextuality, and how the stream of thought developed into cluster-like intellectual activity where original notion induces further ideas simultaneously progressing in many directions instead of following a linear path. It is a diffuse and spontaneous, yet complex and heterogeneous, line of thought and *Click's* central theme evolves around the influence of this process onto our way of creating and reading fiction. A main motif is the difficulty to balance two opposing forces: first is the natural linear progression of all worldly things; second the tendency to endless digression. Their individual energies are antagonistic to each other, yet when united they act in synergy. This theme is illustrated on two different models: one is the relationship between a man and a woman; the other the process of creating fiction. Each is used to explain the other. The challenges of a relationship are projected onto the obstacles that arise during the creative process of writing fiction. Mark and Valerie's relationship is challenged by Mark's driven-ness and Valerie's love for deviation, and is the ultimate reason for their argument. A fiction writer faces a similar issue when trying to balance progression and digression within a narrative. The technique of hypertext *illustrates* the narrator's attempt to transform the endless possibilities of the Internet as represented by countless links, into a way of writing fiction. He projects the multidirectionality of an electronic hypertext onto the narrative process by giving the protagonists the freedom to click on different links and to decide for themself about the next turn in the plot:

> *"Click?" So (sans question mark) reads the computer monitor when, in time, "Fred" and "Irma" haul themselves out of bed,* [...][69]
> *So they click (Irma does) on Click, and up comes a familiar title, or in this case maybe a subtitle-- The Hypertextuality of Every Day Life—followed this time by a parenthesized instruction: (Click on any word of the above).*[70]

Additionally *Click* is also a representation of the authorial explorations of the narrative possibilities of virtual reality. Intertwining virtual and fictional realities create a complexity that is represented in reflective parts in which the narrator talks about the creative process:

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[68] *Virtuality*. p. 3.
[69] *Click*. p.1.
[70] *Click*. p.1.

> [...] *(This parenthesized matter, they agree, is stuff that might be left out of or cut from The Fred and Irma Story -- see below -- but that they've agreed to leave in, at least for the present.)* [...][71]

Barth introduces the writer's search for a CNG, a center of narrative gravitation as one of the most difficult tasks for a writer. It is defined as *the author's narrative viewpoint*[72] and depends heavily on his ability to select and balance all narrative elements:

> *For what is Valerie, finally, what is Mark, what are you, and what am I – in short, what is the self itself- if not what has been aptly called a "posited center of narrative gravity" that, in order to function in and to be overwhelmed by the chaotically streaming flood of sense data, continuously notices, ignores, associates, distinguishes, categorizes, prioritizes, hypothesizes, and selectively remembers and forgets; that continuously spins trial scenarios, telling itself stories about who it is and what it's up to, who others are and what they're up to; that finally* **is**, *if it is anything, those continuously revised, continuously edited stories? In sum, what we're dealing with here is not trifling or merely academic matter, friends: finding, maintaining, and forever adjusting from occasion to occasion an appropriate balance between the "Mark" in each of us and the "Valerie" ditto is of the very essence of our selfhood, our being in the world. We warmly therefore hope, do CNG & I (click on that & and see it turn into an =, + much more on intrapersonal relations), that the couple works things out, whenever and wherever they recouple.* [73]

A good story is characterized by an adequate mixture of detail, amplification, analysis and efficiently directed forward motion, or *profluence*[74]:

> *Myself, I'm on both their sides in this matter, not only because M and V seem equally reasonable, decent, harmless souls, but also because their tendencies represent contrary impulses of equal validity and importance. A satisfyingly told story requires enough "Valerie" – that is, enough detail, amplification, and analysis – to give it clarity, texture, solidity, verisimilitude, and empathetic effect. It requires equally enough "Mark" – that is, efficiently directed forward motion, "profluence", on-with-the-storyness – for coherence, anti-tedium, and dramatic effect. In successful instances a right balance is found for the purpose (and adjusted for alternative purposes). In unsuccessful instances ...* [75]

Barth's focus on the writer's ability to establish the right proportions between detail and progression, between digression and continuation gains relevance through the employment of a universal concept: the relationship between Mark and Valerie. Their individual characters represent the opposing attributes in a narrative: male straight-down-to-the-pointedness collides with female attraction to digression. In an ideal end

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[71] *Click.* p. 1.
[72] *Click.* p. 13.
[73] *Click.* p. 14.
[74] *Click.* p. 13.
[75] *Click.* p. 13.

both are combined into an equilibrium. Mark and Valerie's Saturday afternoon at the Harbor ends in a massive argument exactly about this issue. Only the couple's love for each other allows them to overcome their differences and so guarantees a continuation of their relationship as well as of the narrative. For Barth, love is the ultimate energy behind everything. It wins over any argument and over any technology:

> *We warmly therefore hope, do CNG & I (click on that & and see it turn into an =, + much more on intrapersonal relations), that that couple works things out, whenever and wherever they recouple. [...] Mark (inescapably himself even when determined to be more Valish) is off the porch and through the dining room and up the staircase and into the upstairs hallway by the time Valerie (who, decidedly herself even after deciding to be more Marklike, has stepped from M's work room first in the No. 2 bathroom to do a thing to her hair or face before hurrying porchward, then into their bedroom to slip a thigh-length T-shirt over her undies in case their neighbor lady's out there gardening by streetlight, then back into M's workroom to exit the Internet so that their access meter won't run on while they finish making up, which could take a happy while), hearing him hurrying herward, re-rises from Mark's Macintosh to meet its open-armed owner with open arms.*
> *To her (glossy) (walnut) hair he groans, "I love you so damned much!"*
> *To his (right) collarbone she murmurs, "I love you more."*
> *[...]*
> ***Not too fast there, Mark. Not too slow there, Val. That's got it, guys; that's got it** ... (so "CNG" [=I/you/eachandallofus] encourages them from the hyperspatial wings, until agile Valerie lifts one [long] [lithe] [cinnamon-tan] leg up and with her [left] [great] toe give the Mac's master switch a* [76]

It is for the sake of love that swimmers keep swimming, stories are being told and couples overcome their differences. The end of *Click* circles back to the beginning where the narrative finds its temporary ending. It is temporary because the couple's retreat to bed does not necessarily symbolize the end. To the contrary, this rather open ending suggests a continuity, an *on-with-the-storyness* in Barth's best sense because it culminates in the union of two seemingly antagonistic yet essential forces in a narration: progression and digression. And as long as those two forces manage to unite, narratives will continue.

In this sense the past discussion reveals continuity rather than stasis within established forms. *Click* represents Barth's ongoing effort to fulfill the obligation of a true postmodernist to keep the style and theme of his fiction up-to-date, means synchronized with time and circumstances. Certain aspects of postmodernist writing such as digression, fragmentation or playfulness are still in use, but in order to maintain the link to the reader they are applied to current subjects. In its character of fictionalized everyday life, *Click* is an excellent example of the effort to coordinate past and present, reality and literature. Mark and Valerie's relationship is an essential aspect of human existence; hypertextuality is the involvement of this existence with the world around it.

But *Click* also symbolizes the connection between real life and the virtual reality of the Internet. Barth exposes the digressing and fragmenting character of the

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[76] *Click*. p. 14

hypertext so he can utilize it as a metaphor for the contemporary world as we perceive it. The Internet, in its broken off and heavily truncated appearance, is a representation of the way the present is perceived by a human being: as a set of details, individual fragments, or in literary terms digressions which he connects to a larger image.[77] Digressions, presented in insignificant links such as *the* and *of* are a form of parody showcasing the incredible amount of unfiltered and unrequested information that confronts a human being on a daily basis:

> *Some (the computer script declares now in effect, along with much of the paragraph above) out of mere orneriness will select one of the phrase's apparently insignificant elements—the The , for example, or the of – as if to say "Gotcha! You said 'Click on any word'... The joke, however, if any, is on them: A good desk dictionary will list at least eight several senses of the homely word "the" in its adjectival function, plus a ninth in its adverbial [...] – twenty lines of fine-print definition in all, where as the comparatively technical term just after it, "theanthropic,"is nailed down in a mere three and a half. [...] Try "as," [...]: the "simple" words you'll find hardest to define, whereas such technoglossy ones as "hypertextuality" ...*[78]

Exaggerated and embellished descriptions of settings and situations—a view of and from a study, the bitter argument, and the invitation to click on *any* link—are a parodist statement about the accomplishments of contemporary everyday life as influenced by electronic media. *Click* in its form as a fictionalized website is a perfect example of postmodernist writing because it shows the evolution of a writer in accordance with the changes to the time he lives in. Barth not only demonstrated his up-to-dateness by including everyday reality into his work but he does so in a narrative technique that is appropriate for this reality.

Barth's experiments with narrative possibilities did not remain without impact on the next generation and one will find in David Foster Wallace at least one strong successor. His two collections of short fiction, *Girl With Curious Hair* and *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* re-visit Barth's funhouse while searching for a new narrative voice.

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[77] One of those larger images for example, is in Barth's work the ever occurring concept of love.
[78] *Click.* p. 2.

4.
David Foster Wallace: Deconstructing the Funhouse

> *The only stuff a writer can get from an artistic ancestor is a certain set of aesthetic values and beliefs, and maybe a set of formal techniques that might—just might—help the writer to chase his own click.*
>
> *D.F. Wallace*[79]

As the process of creating fiction is irrevocably determined by a constant pursuit of the best possible relation between content and form, every serious fiction writer finds himself constantly searching for that one form that would most appropriately express his intentions. For David Foster Wallace, this journey leads to what he calls the *click* and is described as a special feeling that arises when intellectual efforts begin to present solutions of their own and become epiphanies. Yet, before beginning this pursuit a writer has to build up a certain set of knowledge and skill that will function as a basis for his work. This knowledge comes from the past and is an accumulation of laws and formulas assembled from human experience. When the most recent generation of fiction writers turns to the past, they find that the images or the set of aesthetic values and the range of formal techniques have already been broken by its predecessors who were known for their rebellion against the present and for an almost nihilistic approach to the future. *The Wasteland's*[80] *heap of broken images* comes easily to mind. It appears almost impossible to follow in their footsteps. This group of writers grew up in an environment that considered nineteenth-century Realism as bourgeois, Modernism as preoccupied with the structure of literature itself and Postmodernism as devoid of any rule and structure. Traditional linear narration appeared old fashioned, the mechanics of a text have already been uncovered, and metafiction was viewed as just a vain navel show. Considering all those limitations, there does not seem to be much left to work with. In David Foster Wallace this generation of writers finds a representative who expresses the dilemma most explicitly by addressing postmodernism's self-conscious and self-reflexive tendencies. His short stories offer a tangible example for a process of transformation that consciously combines postmodern techniques with real-world subject matters. Postmodern literary theory is put into practice when fragmentation, self-referentiality, digression and irony are applied to present day reality and encourage an open discussion of postmodernism. In fulfilling Barth's demand that a writer who critically reflects on his heritage evolves into a writer who acts upon it, Wallace demonstrates a continuous alertness of his surroundings and translates its influence onto his craft into stories that bear a strange sense of uneasy familiarity. They address subject matters

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[79] McCaffery. Larry. *An Interview With David Foster Wallace.* in *Review of Contemporary Fiction.* Summer 1993. Vol. 13.2.

[80] Eliot. T.S. *The Wasteland* in *Collected Poems 1909-1962.* Harcourt Brace & Company.1992.

familiar to every reader, yet they leave him with an uncomfortable tension created by the glimpse of what lies beneath the surface of his reality that is provided by the story.

Wallace's vision of fiction is deeply informed by the perception of life as a form of torment a human being has to endure, and the belief that this torment can be eased by fiction. Within this concept, fiction has a certain responsibility toward the reader: that of providing humans with imaginative access to other selves as a form of consolation for the suffering that being in this world brings. This suffering is caused by a lifelong accumulation of a variety of phobias all of which are induced by the all-present and predominant fear of death. Yet, it is not the shear fright of ceasing to exist that makes humans fear death, but rather a jealousy for the living—for their ability to continue to enjoy life with all it has to offer, while the dead have no access to it anymore. Deeply informed by the materialism of the world, it is a feeling of missing out. This universal horror produces a sub phobia: the fear of loneliness, which arises from the fact that in our death we are alone and from the knowledge that a cure is impossible. For Wallace, the magic of fiction lies in the fact that it addresses and antagonizes this loneliness by using language and linguistic intercourse as a form of relief. Humans feel better when they know that they are not alone in their suffering, it makes them feel less alone inside. Yet, fiction is not the only form that can accomplish this goal. Its heaviest competitor is television with its capability to provide this relief much easier than fiction.[81] While for Wallace serious art intends to challenge the reader, make him uncomfortable and force him to work hard to access pleasure, television demands nothing in exchange for the enjoyment it provides. Its success lies in the recognition that the average viewer prefers one hundred percent pleasure over a fifty-fifty mix of pleasure and pain, as it is presented by fiction. Consequently it has become more and more difficult to engage the viewer in serious art because he has become spoiled and childish in his expectations. Increased television consumption leads to the viewer's loss of the ability to distinguish between the reality of his own surroundings and the reality of television. This inability is the result of television's selfish manipulation that is motivated by the need to generate profits and its recognition that the easiest way to do so is through providing pleasure to the viewer. As a writer, Wallace wants fiction to display the manipulation, to uncover the fact that this reality is mediated, or constructed for the sake of television. In this context, his work explores possibilities outside of already well-known and established forms. During this quest he experiences obstacles: first there is the search for specific literary solutions, for the development of adequate literary forms, which would be suitable to express present reality. The second, and more fundamental obstacle, is the lack of guidance. It refers to the difficulties the next generation of writers experience when looking for a set of rules that could serve as a base for their own developments. Yet, one look at the predecessors exposes an overwhelming deficit of such preset standards. The early postmodernists are responsible for breaking all rules and launching a rebellion and can therefore not function as a source of direction. While Wallace acknowledges the value of postmodernism for the late 1960s and early 70s as a movement that aimed at breaking down boundaries, rebelling against social and cultural confinements and exposing the hypocrisies of its time, he also blames it for robbing his own generation of its literary future.

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[81] Wallace explores this situation in an essay titled *E Unibus Pluram: television and U.S. fiction.* It is an evaluation of television's influence on the contemporary individual, including the writer, and offers a detailed insight into Wallace's own perception of the link between the common material world and literature. See chapter 4.2.

As much as he approves postmodernist's use of irony and sarcasm as tools to diagnose the state of contemporary culture; as means to create a distance to reality in order to expose its deficits:

> *Sarcasm, parody, absurdism and irony are great ways to strip off stuff's mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it.*[82]

he also criticizes their inability to supply their own set of literary values. Wallace praises the development of metafiction, because its self-reflexiveness created a distance by focusing on the narrative consciousness and making it the subject matter of a text. This process made the reader aware of the narrative self and showed him the consciousness behind the text. As a game that revealed itself but also helped expose fiction as a meditated experience and reminded the reader that there is always a recursive component to utterance, it was a perfect tool: it gave writers a chance to break free from taboos and explore other narrative options, and to be innovative. However, for Wallace formal innovation only happens in the service of an original vision and a writer should be primarily committed to his story not to his style. This means, that if a story cannot be told in his predominant narrative technique he should abandon the technique before he abandons the story. Setting technique over vision would overshadow the importance of the story and lead to a scrutiny that would eventually press it into a rigid rule, into something that can be picked up by others, copied and taught at writing seminars. For Wallace, this process robs the original idea of its artistic value. He sees that metafiction's pointing at itself has worn out, mainly because recursion became empty and solipsistic and spiraled in on itself. Postmodernism grew to be a continual avant-garde, a constant rush forward without direction or goal. It became boring and ineffective not only because it did not manage to go beyond this self-observation, but also because it became widely accepted by the public and the academia. But, too much acceptance of radical new advances eventually reduces their importance. Once postmodernism was absorbed by American commercial culture, it lost its image as a rebellious movement and became mainstream—an item that was just as mass-produced and distributed as a fashion statement as any other product. Self-consciousness and anarchy have become poisonous for young writers because they were not a novelty anymore but a widely spread style, imitated by, to use Wallace's own term, *crank turners*[83]. Postmodernism has met its limitations and become redundant. In their search for a certain set of aesthetic values and beliefs that they could inherit from postmodernism, fiction writers look at the results of this rebellion and ask what comes next?

> *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? Irony's good for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S. has now been done and redone. [...] Postmodern irony and cynicism become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy.*[84]

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[82] Wallace in McCaffery p. 18.
[83] Defined as someone whose only interest is to reduce the original idea to a formula which can be multiplied and exploited to the maximum.
[84] Wallace in McCaffery. p. 18.

Because sarcasm, cynicism, ennui and suspicion of authority rendered postmodernism's aesthetic values unsuitable, young authors are forced to consider other sources for guidance and inspiration. Enter television. Just like postmodernism, it has become a permanent and almost inescapable part of human reality and as an essential part of popular culture, television is a significant source of inspiration. Any writer who intends to create fiction that is in any form relevant has no choice but to refer to popular culture and consequently also to television. Doing otherwise would deem him old fashioned and out of tune with his surroundings. The irony is that as soon as he turns to this source, he is confronted with another dilemma: the amount of televisual influence on his work. Television's reality determining factor has grown immensely over the years, to the point where it is in the position to dictate what the viewer considers as real. Its success lies in the fact that it manages to engage him to such an extent that he loses sight of everything else and gradually begins to consider television as the single source of reality. This reality is self-proclaimed as it is only interested in fulfilling its own needs. For the writer the problem lies in the fact that also he is a member of television's audience, which means that he also is prone to its manipulations. This manipulation grows exponentially considering the fact that as a representative of the youngest generation, his world has always included television. Not knowing what it looks like without television, it becomes difficult for the writer to step outside since televised reality is the only reality he knows. The failure to create this distance results in the depiction of a reality meditated by television and compromises not only his thematic but also stylistic choices. Adopting themes from television means writing fiction about fiction as television's reality is obviously fictitious. On the formal level, it means increased imitation of television's techniques: the work will be dominated by quick imagery and pastiche adopting the appearance of a television show. However, if the writer manages to remove himself from this kind of meditated reality, the question is how else can he express his intentions? How can he depict present day reality? Of what does this reality consist and which themes are important?

For Wallace, the role of fiction in the postmodern world has shifted from informative to explorative as it does not need to provide data about distant cultures and persons anymore. Rather, it has to look behind the scenes and expose the banal components of a product with the intention to place high and low culture in a new context. Furthermore, in times when everything is very close and familiar, fiction has to defamiliarize—make the familiar strange—in order to remember that what is considered as familiar is meditated by television or the Internet. Wallace sees the writer's duty in making the reader realize that what he is reading is the representation of a meditated material, it is not the reflection of everyday reality. He addresses the theme of television in stories about game shows[85] or about the politics behind the scenes of television.[86] On the formal level it is a matter of creating a challenge for the reader, of generating a feeling of uneasiness that will force him to fight through the meditated voice. Wallace views the awareness of form as a means to call attention to the narrative consciousness: flash-cuts encourage the reader to make narrative arrangements; digression and interpolation interrupt the narrative flow and force him to actively participate in the linguistic work. This activity establishes a relationship between the writer's and the reader's consciousness, and is essential in fulfilling fiction's duty of giving something back to the reader or providing an extractable

[85] Wallace D. F. *Little Expressionless Animals* in *Girl With Curious Hair.*
[86] Wallace D. F. *Tri-Stan: I Sold Sissee Nar To Ecko* in *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men.*

value. Consequently the sole motivation for a writer to compose a story should be the presence of that extractable value. Any attention, work and engagement that are required from the reader while reading fiction must be to his own benefit, not the author's. For Wallace, good art is characterized by heartfelt emotions and good writing is timelessly vital and sacred. If the fiction writer intends to make a strong impact on the reader, he has to be willing to open himself up and disclose his own feelings. Wallace considers this to be a highly courageous act that he himself is not able to commit yet. As talent is only an instrument, it is necessary that an author force himself to talk from the part of his being that loves literature and loves writing. Only if the reader walks away fuller, enriched either on an intellectual or emotional level, has the author truly fulfilled his mission. However, on the way to achieving it he encounters a fundamental problem that potentially threatens to destroy his credibility as a serious writer: the temptation to create pure pleasure as a result of televisual competition.

As the TV's employment of aesthetically appealing imagery intends to manipulate the viewer into liking it, the author also runs the risk of falling for the temptation to do anything to achieve reader sympathy. It is an act that might not only easily lead to the abandonment of the original idea, but also to giving up control over his work. The reader becomes the final authority in the creative process, with the power to decide what he wants to hear and so can easily avoid less pleasant topics. This is a significant shift of power that does not remain without consequences as the disempowerment of the author very soon leads to feelings of hostility and cynicism toward the reader. Wallace himself admits to succumbing to this hostility. It finds expression in a fiction of confusing messages that pretends to pursue a serious intention only to purposefully disappoint this expectation. The reader becomes the object of useless jokes, gags and empty expressions. There are overlong sentences interrupted by endless deviations into apparently unnecessary details and extensive amounts of data. Complex compositions build up expectations, which are created only for the sake of disappointing, making the reader fight through the text without any apparent result or benefit. Wallace's own work makes it difficult to draw a clear line between the intention to challenge the reader for his own sake or the desire for a writer's revenge. His fiction is full of gags inserted for no other purpose but fun; he admits to major difficulties with concision, and digression often happens to the point of loss of plot. Considering all the stunts, he seems to dislike the reader a lot. Yet, on the other hand Wallace's main thematic focus lies on the human being and its survival in a world that is dominated by materialism. He inquires into his ability to remain emotional and human in an environment that is mainly interested in material values:

> *Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking human being. If you operate, [...], from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still "are" human beings, now.* [87]

These two halves are dramatized in a composition that defies traditional rules of narration. His stories are long, told in a language characterized by a complex syntax and sophisticated lexicon, the plot is often secondary and the theme difficult to identify. This makes for a fiction that is complicated, intellectually challenging, but

[87] Wallace in McCaffery. p. 5.

also smart and full of irony; it is not an *easy read.* Wallace's extensive play with form originates in his belief that innovation is not achieved through the breaking of rules but through a continuous rearrangement of what already exists. Because neither serious readers nor serious writers are interested in destroying the laws of writing fiction, its rules and limitations retain their significance.

His view of postmodernism is determined by a critical deconstruction exposing its failure to provide answers and to function as a guideline:

> *For me, 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. [...] For a while it's great, free and freeing, parental authority gone and overthrown, a cat's-away-let's-play Dionysian revel. 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 some fucking order in your house. [...] The postmodern founder's patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years. We're kind of wishing some parents would come back. [...] and then the uneasiest thing of all, as we start gradually to realize that parents in fact aren't ever coming back—which means "we're" going to have to be parents.* [88]

Wallace expresses this disconcerting feeling of being left without a heritage yet, knowing that eventually there will be a next generation looking for guidance, in a cluster-like display of the many directions the quest for innovation takes him. *Girl With Curious Hair,* his first collection of short stories, includes a piece titled *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way.*[89] that is a re-visitation and a critical deconstruction of Barth's *Funhouse.* There, he not only questions the sense of its existence and therefore questions postmodernist writing in itself, but as a reflection on his predecessors he also shows the amount of influence John Barth had on his development as a fiction writer. *Westward* was intended to expose the illusions of metafiction, and demonstrate that art is a living transaction between humans. Even if, after many years, Wallace himself finds *Westward* crude, naïve and pretentious, it still manages to address the transformation that postmodernism has undergone in the 1990s and to demonstrate the dynamics of an active and critical approach toward the evolutionary processes in literature. In *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men,* his second collection of short stories, Wallace continues the process and takes the next step attempting a new construction, remarkably recycling the rubble of the old funhouse.

In the end Wallace's fiction raises the question whether its intellectual and technical brilliance truly leads to a consolation of the reader. More than once does his work appear empty, like a deserted landscape, lacking any emotional involvement of the reader, or so it appears at a first glance. Not knowing any better, it would be easy to disqualify his stories as coldheartedly sarcastic highly intellectually charged masterpieces composed as a sneer at a world that appears oblivious of its own demise. The slightest spark of emotion is killed with complex verbosity and the question is

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[88] Wallace in McCaffery p. 21.

[89] *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* will be discussed in the following chapter.

whether this is a lack of desire and ability to express feelings or an illustration of the world's emotional bareness?

4.1
A Funhouse in distress: Looking for orientation

As progress is fueled by experience, any new generation, no matter how independent and progressive its perception of self is, refers to the past as a way to learn for the future. While outgrowing its predecessors, it also comes to realize that time and circumstances are in constant flow and require an ongoing adjustment of values. Consequently every new generation develops the need to find its own time-appropriate way to articulate its experience of the surrounding world. David Foster Wallace is one of many young fiction writers in search of their very own way of leaving a lasting impact on the literary stage, and his *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*[90] is a pertinent example for this process. The challenge is significant considering the circumstances of this quest. This generation's point of reference is a past that considered 19th century realism as bourgeois and outdated, modernism as too preoccupied with the structure of literature itself and postmodernism as entirely devoid of rules; its only ideology being that of *anything goes*. When traditional linear narration is considered as old fashioned, the mechanics of a text have already been uncovered and the vanity of postmodernist metafiction is exposed as mere navel show, prospects for the future do not appear too rosy. Nevertheless, in order to shape the future, a look at the past is inevitable and Wallace's *Westward* represents such a retrospective. It is a critical look at its strongest influences and John Barth's experimental approach to fiction as found in *Lost in the Funhouse* is on top of the list.

As *Lost in the Funhouse*, in its metafictional form, represents an experiment conducted with the goal to overcome a strongly perceived exhaustion of narrative possibilities through the exploration of various narrative forms of the past, *Westward* represents a critical discussion of the outcomes of this experiment with the goal to illustrate its impact on the next generation. In *Westward,* David Foster Wallace voices his own ideas about postmodernism and metafiction as well as demonstrates Barth's strong impact onto his work. Yet, what initially appears like a re-visitation of Barth's *Funhouse* as a tribute to a master, very quickly develops into a critical deconstruction. Wallace does not show much respect for his predecessor, and by using Barth's and so postmodernism's own devices such as digression, fragmentation and metafictional reflections on the written text, exposes what he considers the shortcomings of postmodernist writing: a detachment from daily reality and an inability to provide a set of valid literary standards to serve as orientation for the next generation. In its parodistic deconstruction of *Lost in the Funhouse*, *Westward* expresses the insecurity and self-consciousness of this generation but also its determination to find its own

[90] *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, was published in Wallace's first collection of short fiction titled *Girl With Curious Hair* in 1989. It exceeds the dimensional frame of a short story by far as it is 140 pages long and would also qualify for a novelette. However, as has been pointed out earlier, spatial dimension is overcome by the characteristic so often attributed to short fiction, of a narration suspended in time. (See O'Connor in chapter 1 of this paper.) Additionally, for practical reasons, any further reference to this story will be made in a shortened form as *Westward.*

place in the greater context of the world. Wallace himself is in the middle of this quest and even if he hasn't completed it, he manages to disassemble the present structure to see what it is made of. The reason for this deconstruction is Wallace's criticism of a world in which the human being has become a victim of a manipulative economic system that promotes mass consumerism as a central objective of a human life. The significance of this theme lies in the function of this world as a point of reference for a fiction writer. Its heavily manipulated reality is a serious obstacle within the creative process and forces the author to a re-consideration and re-orientation of his values. Wallace's criticism finds its concrete representation in the image of the funhouse that, as it undergoes a process of transformation, represents the shiftings inherent to the progression of all things in the world as we know it. Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*[91] is for Wallace a historical and ideological reference.[92]

Wallace deconstructs the funhouse in several stages. There are intertextual references to Barth's work, to main characters, to the plot, to the style and the choice of theme. Barth's protagonists interact with Wallace's. Wallace employs metafictional devices as well as irony and sarcasm, and Wallace is thematically concerned with the creation of fiction, with postmodernism and metafiction.

Westward opens with an inscription familiar to any Barth reader:

> *"For whom is the Funhouse fun?"*
>
> -- *Lost in the Funhouse*[93]

In its original version, it is the opening sentence to *Lost in the Funhouse* and presents the story's central theme: lack of orientation. The following exposition, titled *Background That Intrudes And Looms: Lovers And Propositions*[94], continues on the second page of *Westward* with the actual mention of *Lost in the Funhouse* and its main protagonist Ambrose and his first love interest Magda, referring to it as the work of an idolized writer. The parallels to *Lost in the Funhouse* continue with the progress of *Westward.* Metafiction determines the narrative style and functions as both an *intra-* and *inter*-textual reference. Over the course of the narration, the function of this extensive intertextuality becomes increasingly clear.

As in *Lost in the Funhouse*, where during WWII a family makes its way to Ocean City's fun park to celebrate Independence Day, also in *Westward* there is a group of persons traveling to a common destination. This group consists of Drew-Lynn (D.L.) Eberhardt and Mark Nechtr, members of a creative writing program at the East Chesapeake Trade school and Tom Sternberg, D.L.'s friend. Later they are joined by a flight attendant named Magda Ambrose Gatz, and are greeted by their host and the owner of the country's second-largest advertising company J.D. Steelritter and his son DeHaven. They are traveling to the company's mass reunion of all participants who were ever involved in its advertising campaigns for a specific product. As it turns out the product is the McDonald's food chain, and D.L. and Tom had acting parts as child-actors in its commercials. Their trip to the reunion proves rather difficult as they get held up at the Central Illinois Airport from where they expected to be transported to the actual location of the reunion. When this finally

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[91] The title story in *Lost in the Funhouse.*

[92] Written in the 1960s, it definitely is a matter of the past and the fact that it denotes the evolution of postmodernism as a literary style assigns it an ideological value.

[93] *Westward* in *Girl With Curious Hair.* p. 232.

[94] A complete list of chapter titles can be found in Appendix I. Each title provides a brief outline or summary of the following chapter and so underlines the metafictional character of the story.

happens, it is already very late and all six persons are forced to squeeze into a strange looking automobile which is supposed to carry them the remaining distance to the remote and very rural location of the reunion in Collision, central Illinois. Shortly before the party reaches its destination, the car breaks down in the rain and the story ends with a farmer attempting to pull it out of a ditch with the help of a horse. Above this tableau hovers, phantom-like, the invisible figure of Prof. Ambrose in his multifaceted role as the author of *Lost in the Funhouse*, the teacher of the above mentioned writing seminar and J.D.'s long-term friend and future entrepreneur in the field of a Funhouse Discotheque Franchise, the advertising company's future project. Although Prof. Ambrose never steps out of the background, he is still a strong link connecting all characters and establishing the relation between past, present and future. Another, slightly weaker link to the past is Magda Ambrose Gatz. Introduced as Prof. Ambrose's ex-wife, she is also a familiar character from *Lost in the Funhouse*. Currently an ageing flight attendant, she is also a former participant in an ad campaign and is on her way to the reunion.

Westward's more character-than-action-heavy plot develops around Wallace's central point of interest: the difficulties involved in being a contemporary fiction writer and the role of postmodernism and metafiction within the process. He translates this theme into the form of a critical deconstruction of the funhouse with individual protagonists representing various points of view. There is a young woman named D.L. She idolizes Prof. Ambrose to the point of asking him to autograph a copy of *Lost in the Funhouse* during the very first workshop session-*at East Chesapeake Trade something One Did Not Do.*[95] D. L. considers herself a postmodernist writer *specializing in language poetry and apocalyptically cryptic Literature of Last Things, in exhaustion in general, and Metafiction.*[96] This does not win her the sympathy of her fellow-students, who consider her neurotic. With the progress of the seminar, D.L. grows increasingly critical of Prof. Ambrose whose writing she classifies as *indulgent, cerebral but infantile* and *masturbatory.* Her skepticism eventually leads her to the decision to drop out of school completely. She represents the eager and prolific student who fully embraces her teacher's ideology only to find it betrayed by the same. Because she has lost her faith in Prof. Ambrose as a true artist, D.L. wrote a rather critical poem[97] on the black board of their instruction room, an act that catches the attention of another protagonist Mark Nechtr, also a student. Mark's telling name implies sweetness of character and is ultimately expressed by his good, healthy looks and his popularity with everybody he meets. He is everybody's darling and the antagonist to D.L.'s bleak and depressing figure. Mark and D.L.'s relationship developed accidentally after Mark caught D.L. writing the ominous poem on the board and chose not to giver her up to their teacher and the rest of the class. She is impressed by his behavior; he is impressed by her verses, which struck a chord in his consciousness as a writer. They get married very soon after the incident:

> *[...] Mark had thought he'd maybe seen a little true thing, a tiny central kernel of illumination in that failed limerick D.L. had composed and graphed critically over Professor Ambrose's – and American metafiction's – most famous story, an accidentally-acute splinter that got under Mark's skin and split wider the shivers and cracks inside him, as somebody being taught how but not why to write fiction. He had, quietly, stopped totally trusting his*

[95] *Westward.* p. 234.
[96] *Westward.* p. 328.
[97] A closer discussion of this short piece will take place at a later point in this chapter.

teacher, inside, by then. Mark was down, blocked, confused then about what he was even doing at E. C. T., not producing what he was supposed to be producing.[98]

Over the course of the narration Mark's character, however, reveals more than the initial sweetness. As Prof. Ambrose's student, he is withdrawn and critical. He distrusts and questions his theories characterizing Ambrose's work as *almost Talmudically self-conscious* and *obsessed with its own interpretation* yet, at the same time he is just as much an aspiring writer as Prof. Ambrose was. Mark represents the young writer who struggles with his art, because his own theories about writing fiction collide with those of his teacher and whose insecurity is expressed in his less than prolific work. This lack of confidence is in counterpoint to J.D. Steelritter and his overwhelming belief in the power of commercial advertising. For J.D. a human being is dominated by its fears and desires and whoever is able to exercise any form of influence on both will achieve a higher state of existence. It appears that J.D. is on the way to finding this state as he has learned to manipulate and exploit human fears into human desires through advertising campaigns.

"You think an ad is just a piece of art?" J.D. is saying. "You think it's not about what life's really about? That your fears and desires grow on trees? Come out of nowhere? That you just naturally want what we, your fathers, work night and day to make sure you want? Grow up, for Christ's sake. [...] We produce what makes you want to need to consume. Advertising. Laxatives. HMO's. Baking soda. Insurance. Your fears are ***built****—and your wishes, on that foundation."*[99]

"And you think how you appear, how you feel, are your adman's only levers? Your only source of fear? That Today has gone on for ever? [...] 'Cause the ad business goes way, ***way*** *back. You've got fears so deeply conditioned they're ingrained. Built right in. Hidden in plain sight. You know, you feel it back there. This feeling it's so conditioned it's part of you.*[100]

He is the owner of the second-largest advertising company in the country and the list of brands he has worked for—Coca Cola, McDonald's, Lucky Strike, Kellogg's and many others—prove how well he has mastered this trade.

"[...] Over at Steelritter Ads we've done conditioning research up to here," holding one hand like a blade to his fine head's top, [...]. "Your adman's basic challenge: how to get folks' fannies out of chairs; how to turn millennial boredom around, get things back on track, back to ward the finish line? How to turn stasis into movement, either flight or pursuit?" [...] "But how to do that? How to do that? With ***symbols****, is how. You make a gesture. You show you desire not to hear the ching."*[101]

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[98] *Westward.* p. 237.
[99] *Westward.* p. 338.
[100] *Westward.* p. 339.
[101] *Westward.* p. 340; the term *ching* refers here to Pavlov's Conditioning.

As the host of the McDonald's reunion, J.D. is a father-figure for all his former actors. And despite the fact, he has neither understanding for Ambrose's insecurities about the project of building a real funhouse:

> *The supersized ego of an arrogant pussy, is what J.D. had really thought. Of course you need it. [criticism] Spare me chumpness about this. Criticism is response. Which is good. If J.D. lays out a campaign strategy nobody criticizes, then J.D. right away knows the idea's a dink, a bad marriage of jingle and image, one that won't produce, just lays there, no copulation of engaging gears, no spin inside the market's spin. You need it. Eat it up. It's attention. It engages imagination. It sells. It works off desire, and sells. It sold books, it'll sell mirrored discotheque franchises. The criticism'll be what fills the seats with fannies. J.D. 'd bet his life.*[102]

nor for his writing:

> *"Gotta tell you, in confidence, though," J.D. says, [...] "Never could get all the way through a single one of those things the guy writes. Not one of them, and we're friends. Sent me the whole box of his stuff. Couldn't even lift the box. Figured that was a bad sign right there" [...] "And sure enough, " J.D. says. "Un-get-throughable. Troubled marriages all over the place. Hard as hell to read."*
> *"Sometimes boring, too, " D.L. says, nodding as if in admission. "Indulgent. Cerebral but infantile. Masturbatory. A sort of look-Dad-no-hands quality."*
> *"Or, in the opposite concept, too, " J.D. Steelritter says [...] "too smart. Too clever for its own good. Makes it too coy."*[103]

he still considers him a close friend. In this lack of understanding for Ambrose's writing, J.D. represents the reader who reads for the sake of entertainment only, for whom style and technique are of minimal significance and who fails to see—is probably not even looking for the message behind the intellectual challenge. All he wants is to consume. J. D. dislikes stories about stories, because they lack emotion and so have no value:

> *"Personally I'm a hundred percent behind your basic phenomena of interpretation," [...]"interpretation is meat on my table and burger coupons in you kids' wallets. But for instance his story we had to use to blueprint the franchise off of ... that* ***For Whom*** *story, in Sixty-Seven. Liked the concept. Did* ***not*** *like the story. Do* ***not*** *like stories about stories." [...] "Because never did and never will do an ad for an ad. Would you? A salesman selling salesmen? Makes no sense. No heart. Bad marriage. No value."*[104]

As a dominating character he does of course have his own, however professionally tainted, theories about the character of a story. However, because J.D. knows everything about the philosophy of commercial advertising and the creation of desires and manipulation of the consumer, he is unable to be objective. He compares a story

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[102] *Westward.* p. 239-240.
[103] *Westward.* p. 329.
[104] *Westward.* p. 330.

to an ad campaign, which he in turn associates with what he calls *getting laid*, being penetrated, but not really noticing it:

> *"Stories are basically like ad campaigns, no? [...] "Which they both, in terms of objective, are like getting laid, as I'm sure you know from trade school, Nechtr" [...] "'let me inside you', they say. You want to get laid by somebody that keeps saying 'Here I am, laying you?' Yes? No? No. Sure you don't. I sure don't. It's a cold tease. No heart. Cruel. A story ought to lead you to bed with both hands. None of this coy-mistress shit."*[105]

As Mark and J.D. represent the main points of discussion, they are surrounded by a group of secondary characters. There is DeHaven Steelritter, J.D.'s son. In his job as Ronald McDonald, his life is understandably difficult under the eyes of his dominant and demanding, yet loving father. Indifferent toward his job, DeHaven is desperate for his father's respect, who in turn persistently nicknames him *Shitpeck*. DeHaven's passion lies in art. He chose to become a composer of atonal music instead of taking over his father's business. The third McDonald's commercial alumnus to meet D.L. and Mark at the Central Illinois Airport is Tom Sternberg. Tom is an aspiring commercial actor with a rather unlucky outer appearance: his eye is turned inside out, as if he is looking at the inside of his head. This abnormality creates the impression that he knows what is going on in his own head, but in reality he is an awkward claustrophobic outsider, who has not come to terms with his own body. He does not really participate in the plot, he only watches things evolve. And finally there is Magda and D.L. who function as tricksters and represent the past in the present as well as those who say out loud what no one else dares to say. J.D. and DeHaven drive the group of latecomers to the re-union in a car that is as symbolic as every other object or character in this narration. Put together of parts from many different car brands, it is as fragmented as a postmodernist narration, and eventually the car breaks down.[106]

But fragmentation and digression are not only represented in a malevolent car, but also in a narrative voice that continues to shift from first-person-singular, to first-person-plural and third-person-singular. In classic metafictional manner, the plot is interrupted by inserts made by a first-person-singular narrator, commenting on the previous narration:

> *All that may have seemed like a digression from this background, and as of now a prolix and confusing one, and I'll say that I'm sorry, and that I'm acutely aware of the fact that our time together is valuable. Honest. So, conscious of the need to get economically to business, here are some plain, true, unengaging propositions I'll ask you just to acknowledge.*[107]

In contrast to Barth, whose metafictional remarks still had the character of a writer responding to his own work in the form of an interior monologue:

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[105] *Westward* p. 330.

[106] The image of the broken down car stuck in the mud can be easily understood as a metaphor for the perception of postmodernist fiction as a heterogenic mess, stuck in its own mud with no hope for progress.

[107] *Westward.* p. 235.

To say that Ambrose's and Peter's mother was ***pretty*** *is to accomplish nothing; the reader may acknowledge the proposition, but his imagination is not engaged.*[108]

At this rate our hero, at this rate our protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever. [...]We should be much farther along than we are; something has gone wrong; not much of this preliminary rambling seems relevant.[109]

Wallace's comments are directed at the reader, apologetically explaining the course of events and promising immediate continuation, so as not to bother him unnecessarily. But next to its function as a stylistic device, metafiction in *Westward* is also the object of a critical discussion of itself. [110]

Wallace's deconstruction of the funhouse continues in the choice of theme. Beginning with an emblematic title and an increasingly complex and multilayered plot that is only united through the journey to the reunion, the motif of constant progress of all things, a certain continuity and *on-with-the-storyness*[111] persistently weaves its way through the narration. It is mirrored in the set of characters that consists of a formerly young generation, which has since grown up and been replaced by its successors, and the origin and the destination of the journey: a writing seminar at Eastern Chesapeake Trade school at Chesapeake Bay, and the reunion in Collision, Illinois. The plot develops along those locations creating the feeling of transition and transformation, not only within the story, but also on the intertextual level. East Chesapeake Bay, as the travel's point of origin and the location of the student's writing seminar, is a well-known setting for most of John Barth's works as well as the place of his professional and private life.[112] All protagonists, with the exception of Prof. Ambrose, meet at Central Illinois Airport and drive down country roads leading to a city named Collision, the location of the reunion. The airport in Central is a point of transfer, where everyone gathers and continues to Collision. Established and named after an actual head-on-collision between a car and a tractor that involved a rich woman from Chicago and a farmer, J. D.'s parents, Collision is the meeting and transition point of two generations.[113] It is the place where the past is celebrated through a reunion but also where the future is planned through the Funhouse Discothèque Franchise. This meeting however, also bears a potential conflict, a conflict that thematically evolves around one central aspect: the state of contemporary fiction. It is a head-on-collision, between those who believe the funhouse can only exist as an intellectual construct, and those who want to exploit it economically. The complex set of characters, references and images serves as a backdrop for this conflict. In the end, two generations are linked by a common interest: the funhouse. D.L., Mark and Tom, but also DeHaven represent a young generation and J.D., Prof. Ambrose and Magda represent their predecessors. As the young look to their precursors for guidance, it turns out that those have ceased to believe in their own

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[108] *Lost in the Funhouse.* p. 75.
[109] *Lost in the Funhouse.* p. 78-79.
[110] In which form this happens will be shown at a later point in this chapter.
[111] One of Barth's favorite terms, often employed to overcome narrative stasis and promote continuity and endlessness, it found its ultimate application in his collection of short fiction titled *On With The Story.*
[112] Barth is Professor Emeritus in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University.
[113] As Maryland for Barth, Illinois is David Foster Wallace's home state and the setting of many of his stories. By the time *Westward* was published Wallace lived in Bloomington, Illinois. Since then he has moved to southern California, pursuing a teaching position at Pomona College.

teachings and left their ideals behind. They have moved on to beliefs and lifestyles that are dominated by the rules of economy and its desire to generate maximum profits. This advance embodies *Westward's* key motif: the constant progression of things.

But the dynamic lexical choice of the title *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* is not the only indicator of progress. It is also a historically and culturally charged reference to British and American colonial history, in that it involves two mutually intertextual pieces of art: an 18th century poem and a 19th century painting.[114] On one hand there is George Berkeley's composition titled *America or The Muse's Refuge, A Prophecy.* Published around 1752 it conveys the spirit and motivation behind colonial expansion of the British Empire. On the other, is Emanuel Gottfried Leutze's painting from 1861 titled *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* that presents a literal reference to Wallace's story. Berkeley's verses,

> *The Muse, disgusted at an Age and Clime,*
> *Barren of every glorious Theme,*
> *In distant Lands now waits a better Time,*
> *Producing subjects worthy Fame:*
> *[...]*
> *Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way;*
> *The four first Acts already past,*
> *A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day;*
> *Time's noblest Offspring is the last.*[115]

imply a cultural degeneration of society and a desire for renewal of ideal values. In the age of colonial expansion, it is clearly Europe that is considered as disgusting to the Muse and on a cultural downward spiral. It has exhausted its creative potential and is unable to produce anything outstanding anymore. But there is hope. In the West, where the empire continues to expand, there is a better environment for the creation of new ideas. The West are the colonies, the New World, which bear new prospects and will provide a better place for the chosen ones, the *noblest Offspring*. In the poem's last verses this expansion is already in a far progressed stage and, leaning on the biblical *the last will be the first*[116], announces an upcoming conclusion that will culminate in the arrival of the most valuable progeny. Berkeley sees the American colonies as the promised Garden of Eden, where all that has failed in Europe will come to blossom again, where there will be another golden age. In its prophetic voice, the poem announces a final and ideal solution for the problems of the Old World: the westward expansion. This image of expanding into the West fell on fertile soil in mid 19th century America and found its visual representation in Leutze's painting.

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[114] The grandiosity of language in the title implies a reference to an already existing piece of art. However, at this point it is necessary to remark that the understanding of the intertextual reference depends on the cultural affiliation of the reader. The concept of Manifest Destiny, which is implicit in this title, is not universal and can easily be overseen by the non-American reader.

[115] Berkeley. George. *America or The Muse's Refuge, A Prophecy.* 1752. The complete poem can be found in Appendix 2. [Online reference in bibliography under **Berkeley.**]

[116] Metzger. Bruce M., Murphy. Roland E., Eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. New Testament*: Math. 19:30, 20:16.

Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way[117] illustrates the progress of expansion into the American West as promoted by the spirit of Manifest Destiny.[118] Leutze's painting shows an idealized view of the Frontier. A group of pioneers, men, women and children are gathered on a rock platform looking down at their final destination, the Promised Land of the Western Frontier spreading as far as the eye can see. The painting's spiritual aura derives from the central motif of a family of three and evokes depictions of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. In its symbolism it is an ambitious statement of cultural nationalism and represents the western expansion as a divinely ordained pilgrimage. With this image in mind, Wallace's choice to utilize it for his own story becomes very clear. As a tableau it is a perfect representation for *Westward.* There is the endless landscape: here the West Coast verging on the vastness of the Pacific; there the endless cornfields of central Illinois. In both pieces there is a group of persons traveling under difficult circumstances to a distant destination and both pieces exude the spirit of quest for direction and hope for a better life. However, Wallace's use of Leutze's title and its imagery is an ironic allusion to the spirit of uninhibited progression and continuity as the divinely ordained expansion in pursuit of a better place and time, or a Garden of Eden, does not happen without consequences. The incessant progression that evokes the feeling of a constant and never ending motion also contains the inevitability of being left behind, of a failure to follow and so the failure to be up to speed with the time. The feeling of failure grows out of the fact that over the years of relentless progression the empire has developed so much energy and determination, so much momentum, that it continues in its forward motion even without any outward influence. It has grown to enormous dimensions and its progressive energy is fueled from within, resisting any form of control. Like a steam engine cut lose, it will continue running with increasing speed as long as there are tracks; it is unstoppable and uncontrollable and will run over anything that happens to be in its way. This sense of lost control is what interests Wallace. He applies this ideal image of a progressing empire, to present times, as they are dominated by crude consumerism with the intent to expose the degeneration of an ideal. The direction this ideal New World has taken is not an age that is noble, wise or

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[117] Leutze's painting from 1861, is a study for a mural. Commissioned by the U.S. Congress to be displayed in the Capitol, in Washington D.C., it is currently on display in the west stairwell of the House of Representatives. Leutze was born in Schwaebisch-Gmuend on May 24, 1816 the son of a silversmith who emigrated to America in 1825 for religious reasons. He grew up in Fredericksburg, Virginia, but obtained his professional training in Germany at the Art Academy in Düsseldorf where he lived between 1845 and 1859. By the time of his return to the U.S. in 1859, Leutze has received the title of a professor from the King of Prussia and was a celebrated artist on both continents. His works include *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), *The First Landing of Normans in America, Crown Prince Friedrich's Return From Spandau* and *Washington Rallying the Troops at Monmouth* (1854, currently on display in the Doe Library at U.C. Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, U.S.A.). He introduced the sentimental realism of German historical painting into America and became the most prominent historical painter in 19th century America. [All information was gathered from several electronic resources, which are listed in the bibliography under **Leutze.**]

[118] The ideology of Manifest Destiny was an expression of the American expansionist urge and operated under the premise that North America was chosen by providence to be the stage for history's purposes and so was entitled to expand its territories as far as the Pacific, Canada and Mexico. It was fueled by the belief that the United States had the divinely ordained responsibility to expand its borders across the entire North American continent and, in the process, to spread its democratic principles and its Christian civilization to less developed and unenlightened people. John O'Sullivan, who is considered the originator of the term, wrote that it was America's *manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying million.* This divine mandate also justified the extinction of any culture, for example Native Americans, which was considered incapable of adopting the settler's rules.

golden. The empire has betrayed the hope of a better future by taking a wrong turn and not reaching the Promised Land. It succumbed to materialism and mass consumerism for the sake of economical success. Wisdom and nobility have been replaced with greed and hunger for profits. Wallace finds the materialized and meanwhile corrupted desire for expansion in J.D. Steelritter's advertising company, an empire in itself. Driven only by the ambition to maximize profits, it will not pass any chances to do so, even if this means to betray such ideals as the funhouse. Utilizing Leutze's mythical title that refers to the historical desire of improvement and the pursuit of happiness in a better place, allows Wallace to create a certain level of expectation that stands in stark contrast to the subsequent story in which he demystifies the dream and shows where it has ended.

In a literary context, the betrayal of ideals, or loss of the right way, means a criticism of postmodernism and metafiction. The funhouse's ideal value as a place of literary creativity has degenerated to a material object of economic profit, and *Westward* is the expression of disappointment caused by unfulfilled high hopes. The funhouse will be built to entertain the masses and so yield as much money as possible instead of offering refuge to writers looking for orientation and inspiration. As such it has lost its value as a new direction in literature and the trust of the youngest generation of writers—as represented by D.L. and Mark. D. L.'s poem written on the blackboard gives their disillusionment a direct voice:

> *For lovers, the Funhouse is Fun*
> *For phonies, the Funhouse is love.*
> *But for whom, the proles grouse,*
> *Is the Funhouse a house?*
> *Who lives there when push comes to shove?*[119]

Qualified by the narrator as *anti-Ambrose doggerel* and a *petty critical limerick*, and by Prof. Ambrose as a devastating assault on his work, it is not only another intertextual reference to Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, but primarily a rhetorical questioning of the material realization of the funhouse. The question of for whom the funhouse might be a real house, refers to the fact that until now it was more valued for the ideas it represented than for its actual material qualities. Initially also a material object in *Lost in the Funhouse*, it receives its abstract connotation by way of Ambrose's exploration. The simple necessity of finding his way out of the fear-inducing maze leads Ambrose to initially question the fun-aspect of the funhouse:

> *For whom is the funhouse fun?*
> *Perhaps for lovers.*
> *For Ambrose it is a place of fear and confusion.*[120]

before he discovers the narration as a form of overcoming his fear:

> *Ambrose wandered, languished, dozed. Now and then he fell into this habit of rehearsing to himself the unadventurous story of his life, narrated from the third-person point of view, from his earliest memory parenthesis of maple leaves stirring in the summer breath of tidewater Maryland end of parenthesis*

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[119] *Westward.* p. 239.
[120] *Lost in the Funhouse.* p. 72.

to the present moment. [...] He imagined himself years hence, successful, married, at ease in the world, the trials of adolescence far behind him.[121]

In the end he resolves to construct his own funhouse, a place where the switchboard will be under his control.

He dreams of a funhouse vaster by far than any yet constructed; [...] he envisions a truly astonishing funhouse, incredibly complex yet utterly controlled from a great central switchboard like the console of a pipe organ. Nobody had enough imagination. He could design such a place himself, wiring and all, and he's only thirteen years old. He would be its operator: panel lights would show what was up in every cranny of its cunning of its multifarious vastness; a switch-flick would ease this fellow's way, complicate that's, to balance things out; if anyone seemed lost or frightened, all the operator had to do was.
He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator—though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed.[122]

Ambrose's walk through the maze is symbolic of Barth's idea of creating fiction in the form of an explorative process.[123] Based on the concept of trial and error, the visitor is required to turn many unknown corners; go back and forth, face reflections and distortions in mirrors and overcome illusion and fear. Yet, on his way to the exit he also has the chance to discover something new, find perspectives different than those he has known so far and experience a variety of emotions. A fiction writer finds himself in a similar position while writing a story, turning as many narrative corners as necessary. By fictionalizing the process in *Lost in the Funhouse,* Barth gave the ideal concept a material structure that, whether intended or not, developed its own dynamics and became a model for young authors, including D.L. and Mark who consider it a guideline for their own work. However, over the years the idolized mode of writing has lost its guiding power, because it stopped providing the so sought after security and stability of a written law. In their search for something concrete, it seems that the youngest generation has fallen for a concept that bears the deceiving promise of a specific set of characteristics that would provide values currently missing in the world that surrounds them. In *Westward* they are in the course of discovering that what they thought would provide guidance is in fact only an idea that can be just as easily discarded. Instead of being a source of belief, it has become a material object without any idealistic value what so ever. Their high priest, Prof. Ambrose, the man who represents all those ideals, has decided to materialize them and to construct a real building: a new and improved funhouse, a discotheque. It will be a place where people will meet and be entertained by loud music and drinks, and its goal will be the generation of highest possible profits. That Ambrose's students do not agree with this *selling out* finds expression in D.L.'s critical poem. For them it is a place of illusions and secrets and by turning it into a real building its magic will disappear. D.L.'s verses represent a generation of students' voices and, who when looking back at the recent past, discover that what they thought to be a solid base is a loose conglomerate

[121] *Lost in the Funhouse.* p. 96-97.
[122] *Lost in the Funhouse.* p.97.
[123] His approach has been introduced in chapter 2.1.

that is unreliable as a source for actual guidance. What they do not know, or maybe do not remember or simply chose to ignore, is that before the funhouse became an ideal, it existed as a real structure. It owes its function as a literary metaphor only to Barth's theoretical explorations, and only after Ambrose's visit did it evolve into an abstract concept. The discotheque franchise is the fulfillment of Ambrose's childhood dream.

In *Westward,* Wallace utilizes the reference to Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* as an opportunity to argue the value of metafiction. His objections are addressed in best metafictional manner in a chapter titled *A REALLY BLATANT AND INTRUSIVE INTERRUPTION*:[124]

> *As mentioned before—and if this were a piece of metafiction, which it's NOT, the exact number of typeset lines between this reference and the prenominate referent would very probably be mentioned, which would be a princely pain in the ass, not to mention cocky, since it would assume that a straightforward and anti-embellished account of a slow and hot and sleep-deprived and basically clotted and frustrating day in the lives of three kids, non of whom are all that sympathetic, could actually get published, which these days good luck, but in metafiction it would, nay* ***needs*** *be mentioned, a required postmodern convention aimed at drawing the poor old reader's emotional attention to the fact that the narrative bought and paid for and now under time-consuming scrutiny is* ***not*** *in fact a barely-there window onto a different and truly diverting world, but rather in fact an "artifact", an object, a plain old this-worldly thing, compose of emulsified wood pulp and horizontal chorus lines of dye, and* ***conventions****, and is thus in a "deep" sense just an opaque forgery of a transfiguring window, not a real window, a gag, and thus in a deep (but* ***intentional****, now) sense artificial, which is to say fabricated, false, a fiction, a pretender-to-status, a straw-haired King of Spain—this self conscious explicitness and deconstructed disclosure supposedly making said metafiction "realer" than a piece of pre-postmodern "Realism" that depends on certain antiquated techniques to create an "illusion" of a windowed access to a "reality" isomorphic with ours but possessed of and yielding up higher truths to which all authentically human persons stand in the relation of applicant—all of which the Resurrection of Realism, the pained product of inglorious minimalist labor in countless obscure graduate writing workshops across the U.S. of A., and called by Field Marshal Lish (who ought to know) the New Realism, promises to show to be utter baloney, this metafictional shit ... plus* ***naïve*** *baloney-laced shit, resting on just as many "undisclosed assumptions" as the "realistic" fiction metafiction would try to "debunk"—one imagines nudists tearing the poor Emperor's clothes to shreds and then shrieking with laughter, as if they didn't go home to glass-enclosed colonies, either—and, the New Real guys would argue, more odious in the bargain, this metafiction, because it's a slap in the face of History and History's not-to-be-fucked-with henchman Induction, and opens the door to a fetid closet full of gratuitous cleverness, jazzing around, self indulgence, no-hands-ism, which as Gardner or Conroy or L'Heureux or hell even Ambrose himself will tell you are the ultimate odium for any would-be passionate virtuoso—the closest we get to the forbidden, the taboo, the odium, the* ***asur****...--and so the number of lines*

[124] The long extent of the following quote is directly related to the fact that the entire excerpt represents a single sentence—the disruption of which would diminish its significance as an argument and as an example of Wallace's style of writing.

between won't be mentioned, though its ass-pain would have been subordinate to and considerably more economical in terms of severely limited time than this particular consideration and refusal—there's to be, today, a Reunion of everyone who has ever appeared in any of the 6,659 McDonald's commercials ever conceived and developed and produced and shot and distributed by the same J.D. Steelritter Advertising that has sent myriad and high-technically seductive invitations, information packets, travel vouchers, brochures, and carefully targeted inducements and duressments (no maps, though, oddly) to everyone who's ever appeared. [125]

This prolonged statement, that has the energy of an intellectual outbreak in the form of an interior monologue, has the goal to expose metafiction as an entirely superfluous form. The repeatedly inverted sentence is a parody of metafictional self-reference. Its ongoing recurrences and endless digression characterizes it as a way of calling attention to itself through disclosure. By exposing the fictitiousness of fiction and with it the fictitiousness of realism, metafiction hopes to increase its own credibility and become real. However, it achieves rather the opposite because it interferes with the single most important aspect of reality: it questions history. And for the narrator history is the one thing that is unquestionable.

Yet, D.L.'s verses and the above quote are only an introduction to the topic at stake: the role of metafiction within the literary context. The discussion continues as a projection onto *Westward's* protagonists, mainly onto Mark, whose critical approach toward fiction and toward Prof. Ambrose's teachings are the main causes for his writer's block:

The writer and academic C----- Ambrose, with his birthmark and cheery smile and a maniacal laugh the whole workshop has decided we associate most closely with Gothic castles and portraits with eyes that move, exerts an enormous influence on Mark Nechtr's outlook. Even when Mark doesn't trust him, he listens to him. Even when he doesn't listen to him, he's consciously reacting against the option of listening, and listens for what not to listen to. [...] And yet the stuff exerts a kind of gravity like force on Mark Nechtr, who distrusts wordplay, who feels about Allusion the way Ambrose seems to feel about Illusion, who regards metafiction the way a hemophiliac regards straight razors. But the stuff sits on his head. D.L. doesn't. It's really kind of a wonder he produces at all, back East.[126]

Mark's dilemma is that on one hand he completely distrusts his teacher, yet as a student who is looking for guidance, he is unable to ignore him. As a source of knowledge Prof. Ambrose however, fails Mark because of the way he approaches the business endeavor:

Mark Nechtr has taken keen personal interest in J.D. Steelritter's informal criticism of Dr. C----- Ambrose's famous metafictional story, "Lost in the Funhouse." He thinks J.D. is wrong, but that the adman's lover/story analogy is apposite, and that it helps explain why Mark has always been so troubled by the story, and by Ambrose's willingness now to franchise his art into a new

[125] *Westward.* p. 264-266.
[126] *Westward.* p. 292-293.

third dimension—to build "real" Funhouses. He believes now that J.D. Steelritter and the absent Dr. Ambrose have not just "sold out" (way too easy an indictment for anybody to level at anybody else) but that they've actually done it ***backwards****: they want to build a Funhouse for lovers out of a story that does not love. J.D. himself had said the story doesn't love, no?*[127]

The failure lies in Prof. Ambrose's intent to create something emotional out of something that in Mark's view is not. For him, *Lost in the Funhouse* does not touch the reader's emotions and therefore does not enrich him in any aspect. Existing only for its own sake, it merely intends to disclose the unreality of fiction in order to dispel its magic. But for Mark, the true value of a story is solely based in its effect on the reader:

> *Yes. However, Mark postulates that Steelritter is only half-right. The story does not love, but this is* ***precisely because it is not cruel****. A story, just maybe, should treat the reader like it wants to ... .Well, fuck him. A story can, yes, Mark speculates, be made out of a Funhouse. But not by using the Funhouse as the kind of symbol you can take or leave standing there. Not by putting the poor characters in one, or by pretending the poor writer's in one, wandering around. The way to make a story a Funhouse is to put the story itself in one. For a lover. Make the reader a lover, who wants to be inside. Then do him. Pretend the whole thing's like love. [...] reader's inside the whole thing. Not at all as expected. Feels utterly alone. The thing's wildly disordered, but creepily so, hard and cold as windshield glass; each possible sensory angle is used, every carefully taught technique in your quiver expended, since each "technique" is, really, just a reflective surface that betrays what it pretends to reveal.*[128]

Just like an emotionally highly charged relationship, the relation between reader and story should be highly intense. The story must be able to maneuver him into investing his own emotions so that in the end the reader feels penetrated and deeply involved with it. The funhouse would then not be a metaphor for the creative process, but rather for the story itself serving as a vessel for the narrative developing along the turns of its maze. However, what initially appears as a promising new idea of a young writer, very quickly reveals not only its disappointing aspects but also Mark's rather pedestrian poetics:

> *Except the exit would never be out of sight. It'd be brightly, lewdly lit. There'd be no labyrinths to thread through, no dark to negotiate, no barrels or disks to disorient, no wax minotaur-machina to pop out on springs and flutter the sphincters of the lost. The egress would be clearly marked, and straight ahead, and not even all that far. It would be the stuff the place is* ***made*** *of that would make Fun. The whole enterprise a frictionless plane. Cool, smooth, never grasping, well lubed, flatly without purchase, burnished to a mirrored gloss. The lover tries to traverse: there is the motion of travel, except no travel. More, the reflective surfaces in all directions would reflect each static forward step, interpret it as a backward step. There'd be the illusion (sic) of both the*

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[127] *Westward.* p. 331.
[128] *Westward.* p. 331.

dreamer's unmoving sprint and the disco-moonwalker's backward glide. The Exit and Egress and End in full view the whole time.[129]

In its translucence and predictability the described narration strikes as very static, baring any forward motion and raises the question of the purpose of a story that lacks any feature that would promote its narrative progress. What would make it special and worthwhile reading? What would challenge the reader? And where is the benefit for him to know how it will end, right at the beginning? Mark does not provide an answer for those questions, he only knows that it would take a very special author to write it and that there would be no term to classify it. Is he talking about something completely new or something completely non-artistic?

> *But boy it would take one cold son of a bitch to write such a place erect. A whole different breed from the basically benign and cheery metafictionist Mark trusts. It would take an architect who could hate enough to feel enough to love enough to perpetrate the kind of special cruelty only real lovers can inflict. The story would barely even be able to be voluntary, as fiction. The same mix of bottomless dread and phylogenic lust Mark feels when he bends to the pan's sizzle to see what...*
> *Except Mark feels in his flat young gut, though, that such a story would NOT be metafiction. Because metafiction is untrue, as a lover. It cannot betray. It can only reveal. Itself is its only object. It's the act of a lonely solipsist's self-love, a night-light on the black fifth wall of being a subject, a face in the crowd. It's lovers not being lovers. Kissing their own spine. Fucking themselves. True, there are some gifted old contortionists out there. Ambrose and Robbe-Grillet and McElroy and Barthelme can fuck themselves awfully well. Mark's checked their whole orgy out. The poor lucky reader's not that scene's target, though he hears the keen whistle and feels the razored breeze and knows that there but for the grace of the Pater of us all lies someone, impaled red as the circle's center, prone and arranged, each limb a direction, on land so borderless there's nothing to hold your eye except food and sky and the shadow of one slow clock. ...*[130]

The only thing Mark knows is that it would certainly not be metafiction, because metafiction is untrue; it cannot betray as fiction can. Looking back at itself, it is merely revelatory, and although there are quite few *gifted old contortionists* it is not enough. As an act of self-love it is not made for a reader because it does not fulfill his expectation of creating an illusion in which he could get lost for a while. In metafiction illusion is destroyed and fiction demystified. But Mark seems to aim at the exactly opposite in his own work:

> *Please don't tell anybody, but Mark Nechtr desires, some distant hard-earned day, to write something that stabs you in the heart. That pierces you, makes you think that you're going to die. Maybe it's called metalife. Or Metafiction. Or realism. Or gfhrytytu. He doesn't know. He wonders who the hell really cares. Maybe it's not called anything. Maybe it's just the involved revelation of betrayal. Of the fact that "selling out" is fundamentally redundant. The*

[129] *Westward.* p. 332.
[130] *Westward.* p. 332.

stuff would probably use metafiction as a bright smiling disguise, a harmless floppy-shoed costume, because metafiction is safe to read, familiar as syndication; and no victim is as delicious as the one who smiles in relief at your familiar approach. Who sees the sharp aluminum arrow aimed just enough to one side of him to bare himself, open ...[131]

He is looking for absolute passion, for something that considers the reader as its one and only target. Terminology is in this case of little or no significance. Only the need to convey the message counts. However, when Mark finally manages to present a story to the seminar he is very skeptical about it:

Mark [...] will shut the Funhouse franchise doors against the reveled babble, sit his ass down, and actually write a story---though it'll be one he'll believe is not his own. He'll see the piece as basically a rearranged rip-off the radio's "People's Precinct" episode they've heard just now, and of the whole long, slow, stalled trip in general. It'll be a kind of plagiarism, a small usurpation; and Mark will be visibly embarrassed about the fact that the Nechtr-story Professor Ambrose will approve best, and will maybe base letters of recommendation on, will not be any type of recognized classified fiction, but simply a weird blind rearrangement of what's been in plain sight, the whole time, through the moving windows. That its claim to be a lie will itself be a lie.[132]

It turns out to be a convoluted piece of love, murder, mystery and drama, with betrayal as its central theme.[133] With its autobiographical tendencies—Mark is a competitive archer himself and his protagonist's initials D and L are easily linked with D.L., his wife—and a less than happy ending—Dave finds himself severely injured in the prison hospital still resisting to give anything away—Mark creates an open ended story about one of his greatest concerns: betrayal as an act of deception and as an act of giving someone up to others. His concern relates to his work as a writer:

Well and understandably Mark Nechtr wants to know, too. Does the archer who's guilty of his lover rat? Doesn't he, Mark Nechtr, have to know if he is going to make it up? And how can he in good conscience just rip off, swallow, digest and expel as his what an alumnus with a streaked orange face and removable hair has clearly seen first herself? Would that be honorable, or weak? Don't make light of it. Don't laugh. Look at him, beseeching soaked, scalded. He looks like a supplicant, one of us, the unspecial who burn without ever getting to ignite, as he lies stabbed for real, finally, by this one gift that always returns [...][134]

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[131] *Westward.* p. 333.
[132] *Westward.* p. 355- 356.
[133] During a heated argument between Dave and L---, a young couple who live together, L--- stabs herself, with Dave's competitive arrow and dies. Because it is not clear whether it was an accident or deliberation, Dave, although innocent, is sentenced to jail. In prison he encounters a particularly brutal cellmate who under the threat of death obligates him not to betray or *rat* his escape to the authorities. Dave doesn't *rat* and endures the warden's brutal attempts to make him talk. Although Mark's piece is passionate, he does not consider it fiction. For him it is reality reproduced in printed word.
[134] *Westward.* p. 370.

Mark is anxious that as an author he is unable come up with anything new and special. The fear that his work is a repetition of something that has been written before is universally faced by every single fiction writer including John Barth whose work receives a final nod in the last paragraph of *Westward*:

> *Just a tad too long? Lovesick! **Mark'd!** I have hidden exactly nothing. So trust me: we will arrive. Cross my heart. Stick a needle. To tell the truth, we might already be there. [...]*
> *See this thing. See inside what spins without purchase. Close your eye. Absolutely no salesman will call. Relax. Lie back. I want nothing from you. Lie back. Relax. Quality soil washes right out. Lie back. Open. Face directions. Look. Listen. Use ears I'd be proud of to call our own. Listen to the silence behind the engine's noise. Jesus, Sweets, **listen.** Hear it? It's a love song.*
> *For whom?*
> *You are loved.*[135]

This closure that ushers the reader out with a classical metafictional digression, indicates the end of a discussion about form and invites him to give in to the story and let passion take over intellect. Just like Barth, whose stories, despite their metafictional character, are almost exclusively about love, so does Wallace end *Westward* on the note of love as a universal answer to all unanswered questions. Whether in acknowledgement, in mockery, or both, Wallace applies Barth's closing to his own narration and, in allusion to fiction's emotional character, invokes the *love conquers all* spirit of his teacher's work.[136] In the end, after all the theoretical discussions in *Westward*, love is a signal for a return to the actual story. Through the voice of the first-person-singular pronoun, the story itself addresses the reader, and invites him to succumb to the temptation of a passionate relationship. It is an essential connection, if the story intends to succeed in creating an effect on the reader and so receive a purpose. Unlike Barth's work, in which metafiction creates a distance between narrator and narration allowing him to step back and reflect on his work, in *Westward* it is rather the opposite. Here, metafictional digression is not there for the narrator but for the reader, as it aims to reduce the distance and to intensify the relationship between reader and story. In the course of this process, the effect is reversed from an obvious and intended disclosure of the fictitiousness of the text, as seen in Barth, to a gradual diversion from this fact.

Westward combines two central aspects in Wallace's work: on one hand it expresses his beliefs as a fiction writer; on the other it introduces his thematic interests. As a re-visitation of Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, *Westward* is a fictionalized discussion of postmodernist principles with the goal to establish their value in contemporary fiction. While deconstructing Barth's funhouse, Wallace takes the opportunity to approach those aspects of postmodernism that concern him most. Disguised as a critical encounter with commercial advertising, the discussion evolves around the function of metafiction as a role model for future generations. Simultaneously, the corruptive impact of mass economy onto the human being is exposed as one of his central themes. For Wallace, human perception of reality is strongly influenced by mass consumerism and its perpetuation by mass media. His argument is exemplified on the transformation of an idea into a concrete object and

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[135] *Westward.* p. 372-373.
[136] One of many examples is Barth's earlier discussed *Night-Sea Journey* in *Lost in the Funhouse.*

personified in two successive generations, one of which looks at the other for guidance only to discover an ordinary *sell out* of ideals. The process of transformation serves as a tool to criticize the evolution of a world dominated by mass consumerism as propagated by commercial advertising. The Funhouse Discotheque Franchise is the material representation of this transformation and as an idea that has turned object it is a symbol of betrayal and corruption. Referring to the funhouse as a literary metaphor, Wallace presents his own critical viewpoint of postmodernist metafiction through two main protagonists, who represent the writer's as well as the reader's perspective. As an aspiring writer, Mark despises metafiction because it fails to involve the reader emotionally. J.D. Steelritter, as an advertising professional representing the consumer, here the reader, considers *un-get-throughable* and *infuckingsufferable* as appropriate attributes to characterize Prof. Ambrose's metafiction.

Wallace's criticism is further expressed in a parodistic use of self-reflection, fragmentation and digression as tools to deconstruct Barth's funhouse. The goal of this demolition appears to not only be the exposition of its weaknesses but also the construction of a new and different funhouse. Some rudimentary traces of this new structure are already visible in *Westward*. However, it is only the beginning of Wallace's quest. He reaches the next stage of his journey in his later work.[137] There, a strong tendency toward the experiment bears a significant resemblance to what he has criticized so vehemently in *Westward*: postmodernist metafiction. When J.D., Mark or D.L. describe Prof. Ambrose's fiction as *almost Talmudically self-conscious, obsessed with its own interpretation, un-get-throughable, hard to read, too smart, too clever for its own good, too coy, no heart, no value, indulgent, cerebral but infantile and masturbatory*, they could just as well be talking about Wallace, whose fiction is every bit as demanding. In fact, in the course of his explorations, he seems to elevate all those characteristics to another dimension. As if to test their durability, he exaggerates and puts them to the extreme.

[137] This mainly refers to the, in chapter 4.3, discussed collection of short fiction titled *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men,* as well as to his most recent work, again a collection of short fiction, titled *Oblivion.*

4.2
What's TV got to do with it?: Influences in contemporary U.S. fiction.

What is a writer's source for a story? What provides him with ideas and inspires his creativity? Is it a current political event, a social or cultural situation, technological advance or the discovery of new worlds or planets? In times of globalism, mass media and computer technology, sources are rich and finding inspiration causes no problem. What does cause a problem however is the appropriate form of expression for the incessant flood of events that produce an omnipresent mass of images. Today's average reader is much higher educated, or at least more informed than thirty years ago when postmodernism began pointing at the drastic changes in the world. Technological advance made more information more easily available and novelties of the 1950s and 60s have become everyday routine. That these changes would also have a strong impact on the function of literature is only a logical and very obvious consequence. According to Leslie Fiedler, the loss of literature's function as a main source of information was a significant aspect of the shift. Suddenly news was provided by a different medium, television, and literature was expected to be not much more than entertainment. As television managed to establish itself very quickly as the dominant means of distribution, it not only gained enormous influence on the quality and quantity of information the consumer received, but also the way he perceived his surroundings. Meanwhile television is a firm presence in every aspect of daily life, providing news, entertainment, social, cultural and even moral advice interspersed with commerce at every hour of the day or night. That this inescapable existence would eventually execute a significant impact onto the fiction writer and his work, was only a matter of time and currently there is no doubt that television is a major source of inspiration for any writer whose intention it is to produce relevant work. However, the question remains as to how this torrent of information can be harnessed and translated into fiction. David Foster Wallace, as a member of the youngest generation of writers, addressed this dilemma in his 1993 published essay *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*[138] and by posing a series of questions, provided his own analysis of postmodern American culture. He argues that television has significantly changed the individual human being's—and therefore also the fiction writer's—perception of reality because it manipulates the viewer into accepting as real what has been constructed as a spectacle. Driven by the need for commercial success as a warrant for its survival, television fabricates specific sets of images and concepts intending to augment the viewer's desires thereby matching the offers of the market. In this context the human being is a victim of televisual manipulation that is motivated by economical greed. For a fiction writer, this corruptive energy however is counteracted by television's role as a valuable source of insight and inspiration. Watching television enables him to conduct the necessary research about what is

[138] Wallace.D.F. *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction* in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again. Essays and Arguments*. Little, Brown and Company. Back Bay Edition. 1998.

currently considered American normality. Ironically enough, through its own research television itself determines what this reality is. After finding out how the average person wants to be perceived, it translates this information into a nationwide desire and tells the viewer that what he sees is what he wants. Based on this observation Wallace asks: what makes the viewer accept this kind of intrusion into his life and why does he allow television to define him? His answer: because TV caters to one very strong human trait: tendency to laziness. In a very passive process—in which the viewer is not challenged in any way—he can watch without being watched, he can relax because he does not even have to worry about what he looks like to others—his intellect is put to sleep. He becomes a dull ogler without any ability to discern valuable from useless information, and he turns into a voyeur. However, this concept is misleading because what TV offers is not voyeurism, but rather a set up spectacle that only presents the illusion of voyeurism. And because a spectacle by pure nature requires an audience, TV produces this illusion just to make the viewer watch it. Ironically, the viewer, although aware of this, decides to ignore the fact that he is being lied to and continues watching. Again, the question is why? Why does he buy into the illusion of reality? Wallace sees the answer in another human trait: the tendency to laugh at others, to make fun of others. This time television itself is the object because over time the viewer has become familiar with its tricks and manipulations and is able to laugh at the spectacle. For him it is an opportunity to vent irony and cynicism without any further consequences.

If there is ever any criticism voiced of television as being superficial, dull and lacking any meaningful connection to the outside world medium, then it is launched by those who take it too seriously in the first place—critics and scholars. Their objections however, have since become futile. Not because they are untrue, but because they are irrelevant. Television does not need to refer to anything outside of itself because today's audience has been trained by television to respond to television only and does not want to look at anything else. Consequently, any outer world references have been discarded for lack of utilization. The extent of this impact becomes clear when it fails to be recognized anymore because it has fused with reality to the point of invisibility. One example of this failure is the fiction writer. As opposed to the rather "ivory tower" approach of scholars and critics, the writer on one hand does not take TV seriously enough and therefore fails to recognize its role a potential disseminator and definer of cultural atmosphere. On the other hand, he is faced with the problem of credibility regarding his source of inspiration. The reality he wants to fictionalize already is fiction. It has been created and disseminated by television to present a reality that would match its own needs. This enormous amount of power over the viewer's world makes Wallace perceivably uneasy and leads him to search for a response to this impact. Simply stating the problem is not enough; Wallace is calling for action. For him, fiction is the only field in which the important questions are being asked: what exactly do we hate about television? Why do we still watch it if we hate it? What does it mean about us if we insist on this ambiguity? Ironically enough, television itself provides the answers to those questions since it has become its own analyst and critic. Based on the premise that television is about television only and everything that happens on television is about television, it is self-referential or *metatelevision*—an in-*joke within in-joke*. The long-time conditioned viewer understands it and laughs with television about television because he is as much a part of television as television is a part of the viewer's interior. This internalization consequently leads to introspection, and the viewer becomes something that Wallace calls a *knowledgeable audience*. Because the viewer is now

looking at himself via television, the best shows are about ironic self-reference, a process particularly well executed at the end of a show when the camera swings at the production crew to make sure every one knows that this is *just* a show. Wallace calls this phenomenon *metatelevision* linking it directly to its literary counterpart metafiction. With increased amounts of TV watching, a human being's understanding of itself becomes more spectatorial and self-conscious and therefore resembles more and more metafictional self-referentiality. Self-conscious irony is the main common denominator between television and fiction because it is everyday business for fiction writers, but it is also an important tool for the understanding of TV. Yet, the use of televisual irony is a double-edged sword: on one hand irony is needed to create tension between what is said and what is seen and finds expression in the juxtaposition of pictures and sounds. On the other hand lies TV's fear of irony as a means to expose shortcomings.

Based on the fact that television is often viewed as an example of low art that only pleases the viewer because it wants his money, Wallace's next question is: why does the viewer choose to consume TV at an average of six hours a day? Why does he spend his free time in front of a device that seems to do nothing else but condition his desires in order to promote its own benefit? First, television has no choice but to want as much money as possible because it is the only way in which it is subsidized. Consequently, it has to attract the masses, and to do so it has to generate a program as standardized as possible. Its vulgarity and dumbness comes from the fact that masses usually share bad taste but are different in refined, aesthetic and noble interests. The second reason for the extended watching lies in its convenience. It is a one-way street that engages without demanding anything in return—like a *special treat.* However, this special treat eventually turns into a need and at this point the viewer becomes addicted—a teleholic. In its quality as one-way entertainment, television cannot but attract masses of unsocial and lonely people. And by liberating them from the necessity to interact with other human beings, it continues to perpetuate their loneliness. Finally, the third reason for massive TV watching lies, for Wallace, in the simple need for distraction from everyday reality—in the need for escape. Televisual conditioning trains the audience to respond to television and expect low art. The viewer expects dumb and vulgar shows because through their sameness they provide the relaxing routine he craves after a long day of handling life outside of television.[139]

For Wallace, literary postmodernism is the result of interaction between television and American literature. Television exploits the old conflict between what people do and what they ought to desire by creating a vicious circle of a culture-of-watching that is closely tied to the cycle of indulgence, guilt and reassurance. Television's characteristic as a medium of the masses has united those masses through common images not through common ideas. Consequently pop-cultural references

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[139] So what happens to the dream of a better life? Does television really create it? According to Wallace, no. Anchoring his answer on the commonly known fact that almost every more demanding show almost always gets bad ratings, Wallace accuses the viewer of failure to deal with challenge and change. He claims that, even though he *thinks* he ought to crave novelty, the viewer prefers sameness over creativity. If followed through, the conclusion can only be that lack of creativity is not really TV's fault. The viewer does not want it to be any different. But the question is why does the viewer still consume those massive amounts of television every day even though he knows deep down in his subconscious that it is too much? The reason is that he has been trained by television itself to ignore this voice. The viewer finds himself in the growing conflict between what is and what should be; what he wants and what he should want. Television supports this ambiguity with the self-mocking invitation to itself as indulgence and with postmodern irony. It gives the viewer permission to do exactly what he feels bad about: *eat a whole lot of food and stare at the TV.*

have become potent metaphors in U. S. fiction. Postmodernism has especially provided massive opportunity for the deployment of such references and created a completely new combination of high and low culture. Wallace calls it the *apotheosis of pop* and asks: to which extent are those images important for the youngest generation of writers? He finds the answer in the fact that, as opposed to their predecessors, the latest generation of writers is the first to live *with* the TV instead of only watching it, therefore giving it centre stage in their lives. For them, television presents and defines the contemporary world, and the constant exposure leads them to consider pop images as mimetic devices. In this sense they become *a self-defined part of the great U. S. Audience.* Then, it is only a logical consequence that the production of fiction would change, and certain literature would begin responding and commenting on the act of watching itself. Over the years, postmodern literature turned from *television-images as valid objects of literary allusion to television and metawatching as themselves valid subjects* and made irony its major tool. Absurd situations are being sneered at to diagnose the reader's and watcher's disease: being the victim of metawatching, which is watching for watching's sake; watching because everybody else does, independently of whether what is being watched is really worth watching. *Irony, poker-faced silence and fear of ridicule* are the effects on the reader. But these features are only briefly entertaining and eventually lead to a stasis of culture. And although Wallace considers the intent to change this effect as his generation's main objective, he does not give it much chance because in his opinion, television has the power to neutralize the struggle against *passive unease and cynicism*—features needed to handle several hours of TV per day. Instead, he presents three concepts that could be viewed as a response to television's impact on contemporary literature: post-postmodernism, hyperrealism or Image-Fiction. Further he identifies the creation of fiction within a fictionalized reality as the goal of contemporary literature.[140] Wallace defines Image-Fiction as a natural adaptation of the well-known techniques of literary Realism to the world of the 1990s whose defining boundaries have been deformed by electric signal. Realism's goal was to show the reader something he did not know yet, bring unknown worlds to him, and make the strange familiar. But because of globalization and advanced information technology, almost everything is familiar. So the most ambitious fiction of today, Image-Fiction, attempts the opposite. It tries to *make the familiar strange.* It demands access behind lenses, screens and headlines and re-imagines what life might be like on the other side of illusion, mediation, demographics, marketing and appearance. The goal is to show the real reality as it is, uninfluenced by pop culture and television. Image-Fiction attempts *to restore and reconstruct reality to its three dimensions* out of a set of two-dimensional images provided by television. However, it is not particularly successful and Wallace sees the reason for this failure in the fact that writers still work with the tools of the past: irony and self-consciousness. The problem is that meanwhile TV also adopted these tools and applies them for its own purposes. Irony and parody are used by television to disperse the viewer's unhappiness about spending a lot of time watching. But the irony is that he can't do anything different than watch because television has manipulated him into dependency. Exploiting the viewer's biggest fear—loneliness—television offers him the chance to be part of the watching masses and so escape this unpleasant effect.

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[140] As postmodernist writers considered *pop images as valid referents and symbols,* Image-Fiction writers consider the myths of popular culture as *a world* in which they have to imagine apparently real but actually pop mediated characters. In other words, the fictitious world of pop culture becomes reality and the writer has to imagine his fiction within this fiction.

The reason for this dependency lies in the fact that for the time being the viewer considers television as the *ultimate arbiter of human worth, an oracle which has to be consulted.* It is rooted in American's historically close relation to technology as a source of freedom and power, on one hand, and chaos and slavery, on the other. Americans look to technology for solutions to problems that the same technology causes. Short attention span is one of those problems, and television reacted quickly with shows that match this deficit. To avoid *zapping,* it began using postmodern literary tools and created advertising as attractive as the show itself so that lines between genres would be blurred. To obscure the issue of televisual dependency even further, television acquired the same features as post-modernist literature: cynicism, irreverence, irony and absurdity. It began pointing back at itself, showing to the world that it knew about its own troubles and shortcomings. This solution eventually resulted in a shift from over-sincerity to irreverence, and allowed television to more or less do whatever it wanted because it has already admitted to its sins. The shift however, also affected the way art was perceived: it caused *a transition from art being a creative instantiation of real values to art's being a creative rejection of bogus values.* The viewer became distrustful and bored with television, yet he would not watch less because for now TV has managed to make him believe that by being critical he has already recognized the problem himself and could not be fooled anymore. Television's self-parody enables the viewer to easily recognize its own manipulation and congratulates him on being smart and getting the joke about fooling people with advertising, instead of falling for it himself. But, in the end, he still does fall for the joke, because he sees in the ironic and parodist ad—which acknowledges that commercials are pure manipulation and the public dumb enough to believe them—his own opinion and is relieved that finally someone agrees with him. As proof for this stance, he then goes and *buys* the product! So in the end, he falls for the deception that he thought he saw through in the first place.

Currently every television show acknowledges the tactic of parody by discharging and ridiculing old commercial virtues of authority and sincerity. It creates an authority vacuum, which is then filled with what television constructs as our world view. Any judgment about TV as being shallow is consistently dismissed because it admits itself to be so. By displaying *self-mocking irony* television shows sincerity, yet it is a *sincerity with a motive.* The motive is to induce in the viewer a feeling of canny superiority, something that he learned to crave from the TV. It keeps him watching TV, which is not only the source for this emotion but also the only place the individual viewer can indulge in it without consequences. There is nobody around to offend with this arrogant attitude. Yet, this is also the place where he learns to be lonely because with the attitude of superiority there is also the risk that somebody else might have the same mindset and consider the viewer inferior, laugh at him, exclude him because he betrayed such feelings as value, emotion or vulnerability. And again, it is television that provides him with a remedy by teaching him the blank, bored, too-wise expression of a televisual insider. This behavior also teaches him how to be unsocial by allowing him not only to watch events which are very far but also consider those very close to him as mediated through a TV screen view as TV shows. Without the separating quality of the screen, human contacts become almost impossible and the viewer begins to distribute his attention very sparsely as he considers it his chief commodity.

For Wallace, the relation between literary postmodernism and television is determined by television's historical role as the disseminator of postmodern ideas. When, in the 1960s and 70s, postmodern fiction evolved as an *intellectual expression*

of rebellious youth culture, it was television that made this development possible because it erased communicative boundaries between regions and created a society with *a national-self consciousness stratified by generation.* Absurdism and irony, the main tools artists used to illuminate and explode hypocrisy, were then not only literary devices but also legitimate responses to a deeply hypocritical American self-image that was dominated by banality, naivety, sentimentality, simplism and conservatism. Postmodernism pointed out that the world was not as it seemed and that such authors as Kesey, Pynchon, DeLillo, Burroughs, Gaddis and Coover exposed all the apparently normal things as hypocrisies used to cover up manipulations.

> *And the rebellious irony in the best postmodern fiction wasn't just credible as art; it seemed downright socially useful in its capacity for what counterculture critics called "a critical negation that would make it self-evident to everyone that the world is not as it seems" [Greil, Marcus, Mystery Train, Dutton, 1976]* [141]

However, over the years the roles have been reversed and now it is television using postmodern elements such as involution, absurdity, sardonic fatigue, iconoclasm and rebellion for its own purposes of spectation and consumption. Literary postmodernism became television's main supplier of tools of expression, and avant-garde became mass culture. As a result, the existence of literary postmodernism in the 1990s remains unquestioned. What can be questioned are the results of the rebellion.

Wallace considers postmodernism a failure because—and despite its idealistic assumption that by revealing hypocrisy and manipulation it would inspire society to a change—it was not able to provide solutions. Irony's critical, ground clearing and even destructive character still does not offer concrete alternatives. It is rebellious but not reformatory, and after a while it becomes tiresome and eventually even oppressive since in order to keep its power it has to eliminate any other voices that could eventually rebel against it. Over the years irony has become an institution and the contemporary writer has lost his device. Irony has been absorbed and emptied by the same televisual establishment against which it originally raised a rebellion, and the consequences for literature are not insignificant. Presently a writer's biggest problem is the question of how to rebel against TV's aesthetic of rebellion. How to make the reader aware that contemporary televisual culture has become a cynical, narcissistic and empty phenomenon. How to rebel against contemporary postmodernism. To find out what responses to television's corruptive commercialization are possible. For Wallace, there are three possible responses, but it is clear that for him only one of them offers a real chance of change. Option one suggests a turn away from everything and a return to what was before. Revive traditional Realism, for example. Initially a rather limiting option, since it seems to be moving backward, it may have some merit considering the fact that the writer's goal is to create work that is relevant for its time.[142] Option two, and the easy way out, is to blame technology for being only a one way system on which the viewer has no influence: he is given pre-formatted images, which he can neither save nor format. The illusion is that if given all the freedom to influence what the viewer wants to see, *the totalitarian grip on the American psychic courage will be broken.* However, considering the fact that in the mean time the viewer's ability to make decisions as such has been severely compromised by

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[141] Wallace.D.F. *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction* in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again. Essays and Arguments.* Little, Brown and Company. Back Bay Edition. 1998. p. 66

[142] A goal not necessarily restricted to postmodernism.

television itself, this really is an illusion. We already know that television has made the viewer lazy. And finally option three—and allegedly the only change bearing option—is to celebrate television's corruptive commercialization, *transcend the feelings of mass defined fear by genuflecting it*. Wallace admits that it is not the ideal solution because it means giving in to the beast, but it also contains the possibility of fighting it with its own weapons and so acting upon the problem instead of giving up.[143] This kind of writing however is doomed to shallowness because it wants to ridicule something that has already been ridiculed by itself. There is no particular point in ridiculing it again, which makes this type of response entirely futile.

Wallace's own solution is informed by the view that it is impossible to rebel against something that promotes rebellion. For him, the only way out of the dilemma seems to be a return to passivity as a form of anti-rebellion in which fiction writers should not rise against their subject matter but rather ogle back away from irony and instantiate single-entendre principles and plain human troubles and emotions to avoid self-consciousness and fatigue. In Wallace's eyes a rather uninspiring solution that will quickly be considered outdated from being too naïve and anachronistic. Wallace, whether because he really means it or out of desire for provocation, indeed considers this a valid attitude since risking disapproval is the main point of a rebellion. For him, the outstanding new thing might be what today's hip society considers boring, banal and sentimental, and he views today's fiction as the *line's end's end* about which everyone can draw his or her own conclusion.

In its description of a literary present that is bleak and uninspired and that is looking at an even less promising future, *E Unibus Pluram* presents Wallace's assessment of contemporary fiction within the context of televisual influence. Based on TV's overwhelming impact, contemporary fiction seems to have indeed reached the exhaustion that was already perceived by Barth. Wallace blames it on a manipulated perception of reality fostered by television's existential need for commercial success. He provides a comprehensive diagnosis of a U. S. viewer's relationship to the medium characterizing it as a circle of seduction and dependency in which reality is formed according to its own needs. Through the construction of its own credible version of reality, television manages to immerse the viewer to a point of absolute identification and dependency. And even when he realizes what happened, the situation is impossible to escape because by admitting to the manipulation television flatters his intellect and makes him feel smart and so tricks him into continuous watching. However, it also has the power to make the viewer feel self-conscious, should he fail to recognize this maneuver. The other impact of excessive TV watching is the increased loneliness caused by television's home delivery effect.

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[143]As an example, Wallace quotes Mark Leyner's novel *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* in which pop pastiche, offhand high-tech televisual parody, surreal juxtapositions, grammarless monologues, flash-cut editing, irony designed to make the frantic tone seem irreverent instead of repellent, mocking self-reference and lack of identity are major constituents. For Wallace, Leyner shows what the freedom to deconstruct and re-configure experience brings: no change at all, each quantum is as good as the next and its quality can only be measured with regards to its weirdness, incongruity and ability to stand out from a crowd of other image constructs. This novel reflects literature's absorption with television's icons and techniques by embracing its main objective: to "wow" the viewer/reader in order to make sure he keeps watching/reading. Leyner's response to television is *prose television.* There is neither a plot nor characters and the only unifying aspects are moods and recurring *key images* as a challenge to the reader to prove that he is consumer enough to absorb the flood of images and choices. This work is an excellent example for Image-Fiction writing because it re-absorbs features TV itself has absorbed from post-modern art. It re-recycles post-modernism which makes it the perfect union of U.S. television and fiction.

It conveniently brings the world to his home allowing him to stay in—preventing him from establishing contacts with other individuals. Through this lack of opportunity the viewer eventually forgets how to interact with other humans and his love of convenience and the tendency to create habits turns him into a televisual addict. The dilemma for literature lies in the fictitiousness of televisual reality. In one solution it embraces the challenge of fictionalizing TV's constructed reality, of fictionalizing a fiction that the majority of viewers consider as their reality. Wallace calls it *Image-Fiction* and characterizes it as an attempt to break the surface of televisual reality by applying the techniques of literary Realism to contemporary world. The goal is to create the opposite effect of Realism: instead of making the strange familiar, making the familiar strange. However this practice is doomed to fail almost immediately because in the mean time television has also adopted irony as its own tool and so robbed the writer of an important device to disclose the manipulation. If Wallace's argument—that contemporary fiction is heavily influenced by television—is followed through, it becomes clear that the tools for this development were provided by no lesser instance than literature itself. And even if it was to be assumed that postmodernism in literature is an outdated item, it is in full swing on television. The reason why it is not perceived as such anymore is the fact that it has transitioned from a medium that aims at mirroring reality to a medium that, to a significant degree, influences—if not even creates—reality.

In the end one questions remains: how does Wallace react to television's massive impact on literature and the reading public? Does his own fiction reflect any of his theories? Does he make the familiar strange or does he *genuflect* to television? Or is he even the anti-rebel who does not want to revolt but rather ogles—backs away from irony and avoids self-consciousness? As *Westward* presents an ironic assessment of the past focusing on commercial advertising as one aspect of every day reality that is very closely tied to television, it will be a matter of further analysis to detect in which direction his later work, specifically the story collection *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, has progressed.

4.3
Fiction for the reader: consolation and extractable value

David Foster Wallace's fiction is driven by the intent to give the reader imaginative access to other selves as a form of consolation for the suffering that being a human being brings with it. Through his work, Wallace wants the reader to feel less alone on the inside and more at ease with the world. *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men,* his second collection of short stories, exposes the suffering and represents another step in his quest for a fiction that would fulfill the poetic goal. His stories are characterized by a stylistically and thematically complex composition that, rather than entertaining and pleasing him, challenges the reader on all levels of perception. Through this active involvement in the narrative process, the reader is transformed into a participant rather than a mere consumer. In intellectually demanding, emotionally touching and formally challenging stories, Wallace explores the impact of a media-driven and consume-oriented world onto the human life. He shows the casualties of an ever-faster evolving and more cruel life, those who fall between the cracks, and asks: what consequence does a materialistic and consume-oriented world that uses sex as a marketing tool have on the human being? His approach is that of a gradually increasing extremity of images in which the role of sex in contemporary life, for example, is exposed as a tool to exercise power over others.[144] Yet, this is only one aspect. There are also stories such as *Think* in which women seduce men, or *Adult World I* and *II* in which a young wife is concerned about her marital sex life. There are three separate pieces called *Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders* which, apparently randomly, deal with childhood memories, a man's ever recurring nightmare and divorcing parents flipping a coin for the custody of their child. The protagonists are anonymous figures marked either by their family relation to other protagonists, by their initials or simply by personal pronoun. Their dialogues evolve around their insecurities—self-doubt and low self-esteem. There is also *Tri-Stan: I Sold Sissee Nar To Ecko*—a biting satire of the television business. And finally, there is *Octet* that embarks upon deconstructing metafiction to the level of absurdity.

Every piece is independent in its own thematic and stylistic entity, a feature that is easily and often viewed as a struggle for coherence,[145] but that is rather an expression of Wallace's awareness of the multiplicity of narrative voices. It is also an

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[144] Over the course of the collection, Wallace gradually increases the extremity of the sexual acts and the four groups of actual interviews that give the book its title: *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men,* exemplify what happens when things go wrong when they eventually arrive at rape and murder. The interviews are conducted with men who can only be characterized as sexual predators—spiritually and emotionally bankrupt—who interchangeably seduce, exploit or abuse women without any sign of remorse whatsoever.

[145] LeClair. Tom. *The non-silence of the un-lamblike* in The Nation. New York. July19. 1999. Vol.3. p. 31-34.

indicator of his search for a voice and of a certain fondness of play and experiment. While digressions, fragmentation, self-reflexivity and linguistic playfulness often strain the reader's patience with page-long sentences and impenetrable lingo,[146] he will just as well find himself dealing with the other extreme: an economy of composition that is represented in pieces such as *Datum Centurio.* It is written like an entry in a dictionary, concise and abbreviated to the utmost. Yet another indicator for Wallace's search for his own voice are stories written in the realist tradition in which he stuns the reader with poetic descriptions of a southwestern landscape in *Forever Overhead* or with accounts of the banal act of giving away farm equipment for free in *The Devil is a Busy Man. Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* is a collection of wide narrative variety. There are short short stories between short stories between long short stories. There are several versions of one story as well as several stories with the same title. Viewed favorably, this apparently random mixture is a sign of diversity, anything less would lead to the accusation of randomness. Yet, Wallace has no choice but to be playful and experimental. Life and reality are in a constant flux, and if his intention is to remain relevant—which in itself is a suspiciously postmodernist ambition—he must insure that his themes are communicated in the most suitable form. And despite Wallace's deep disapproval of the term, *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* undeniably demonstrate his ongoing discourse of postmodernism as a literary form.

- ***Forever Overhead:* quiet before the storm**

Wallace's fondness of experiment and consciousness of form finds its first expression in *Forever Overhead.*[147] It surprises the reader with an innocence that stands in a sharp contrast to the deliberate impurity of the other pieces in the collection. Its almost traditional linear form of narration and poetic language create an image that resembles Realism more than experimental Postmodernism. The story is about a teenage boy who spends his thirteenth birthday with his family at the local public pool in Tucson, Arizona. On that September afternoon he decides to take his very first jump from the high board, and the narration evolves around his thoughts and emotions on the way to the board until it is his turn to jump. In the course of this short trip his courage becomes hesitation, and when he finally arrives at the end of the board he does not automatically jump, as everybody else, but stops in his tracks and begins to reconsider his decision. What makes him falter is the creeping recognition that at the end of his ascent things suddenly look different, and he realizes that he based his decision to jump on wrong assumptions:

> *At some point the wrongnesses have piled up blind: pretend-boredom, weight, thin rungs, hurt feet, space cut into laddered parts that melt together only in a disappearance that takes time. The wind on the ladder not what anyone would have expected, the way the board protrudes from shadow into light and you*

[146] *Death Is Not The End* is a three-page but mere four-sentence-long tableau of a poet laureate sitting by his pool, and is only outdone by *The Depressed Person* that talks about a depressed person's attempts to deal with unceasing emotional pain. In long, detailed and tedious sentences, with page-long footnotes serving as digressions, just as if they were literally transcribed therapy sessions, the reader is confronted with the self-destructive energy of a depressed mind.

[147] Wallace. D. F. *Forever Overhead* in *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men.* p. 5-16. In the following referred to as *F. O.*

can't see past the end. When it all turns out to be different you should get to think. It should be required.[148]

As the boy begins to look around, reassessing the situation from the end of the board, he feels as if time had slowed down:

Climb up onto the tower's tongue. The board turns out to be long. As long as the time you stand there. Time slows. It thickens around you as your heart gets more and more beats out of every second, every movement in the system of the pool below.

While watching others jump, he observes that from the time they push off the board to the time when they hit the water there is a split second in which there is no account of their presence. They seem to disappear in a different realm, an act that evokes a strong sense of insecurity and a disquieting loss of control:

She disappears in a dark blink. And there's time before you hear the hit below.

Listen. It does not seem good, the way she disappears into a time that passes before she sounds. Like a stone down a well. But you think she did not think so. She was part of a rhythm that excludes thinking. And you have made yourself part of it, too. The rhythm seems blind. Like ants. Like a machine.[149]

It is disconcerting to him that he cannot explain what happens between the take off the board and the moment when they hit the water:

The board is long. From where you stand it seems to stretch off into nothing. It's going to send you someplace which its own length keeps you from seeing, which seems wrong to submit to without even thinking.[150]

Yet they keep doing it, without giving it a second thought. This lack of thinking signifies the boy's greatest fear: giving in to something that seems absolutely irrational. He is afraid of not thinking because he does not know whether it is right or wrong:

You decide this needs to be thought about. It may, after all, be all right to do something scary without thinking, but not when the scariness is the not thinking itself. Not when not thinking turns out to be wrong.[151]

At the same time the change of perspective gives him the opportunity to step back and discover new points of view:

Where you are now is still and quiet. Wind radio shouting splashing not there. No time and no real sound but your blood squeaking in your head.

Overhead here means sight and smell. The smells are intimate, newly clear. The smell of bleach's special flower, but out of it other things rise like a

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[148] *F. O.* p. 12.
[149] *F. O.* p.12.
[150] *F. O.* p. 13.
[151] *F. O.* p. 12.

weed's seeded snow. [...] And the smell of tons of water coming off tons of skin, rising like steam off a new bath. Animal heat. From overhead it is more real than anything.

Look at it. You can see the whole complicated thing, blue and white and brown and white, soaked in a watery spangle of deepening red.[152]

The intensified perception makes him lose track of time and only calls from the next person in line break the spell. Suddenly he realizes that time has progressed while he was standing at the end of the board contemplating everything:

Hey kid are you okay.

There's been time this whole time. You can't kill time with your heart. Everything takes time. Bees have to move very fast to stay still.[153]

Slowly but surely it dawns on him that the world is not just black or white, but that it is black AND white and that things are not as clearly defined as he thought:

So which is the lie? Hard or soft? Silence or time?
The lie is that it's one or the other. A still, floating bee is moving faster than it can think. From overhead the sweetness drives it crazy.

The board will nod and you will go, and eyes of skin can cross blind into a cloud–blotched sky, punctured light emptying behind sharp stone that is forever. That is forever. Step into the skin and disappear.

Hello.[154]

Going to the top means stepping back from the world and seeing it from a different angle. As his body changes its location his mind also changes its viewpoint. From the top of the tower the boy is able to realize life's complexity for the very first time—*the whole complicated thing*—and what he sees is different and more ambiguous than he thought. At the end of the board things are not as he thought they were, and the new perspective fills him with insecurity. He feels insecure. The boy's decision to jump off the high board, to *do the thing,* is an act of initiation. The stretched out walk to the board represents his epiphany, and the pool filled with swimmers stands for life itself. He is literally ready to jump into life and become an adult, and the final *Hello* is a welcome and an announcement at the same time. When boy and adult world meet, it appears that the world is welcoming him. At the same time he presents himself to it as if saying: *here I am, I'm ready. Hello* is not negative or threatening; it does not induce fear, but is rather just a friendly greeting that stimulates curiosity over what is yet to come.

Forever Overhead, placed at the beginning of the collection, represents the quiet before the storm. An idyllic landscape filled with metaphors creates the image of a still peaceful world in which the reader is able to relax and let go before he is confronted with the full force of everyday life:[155]

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[152] *F. O.* p.14.
[153] *F. O.* p.15.
[154] *F. O.* p.16.
[155] *Forever Overhead* is followed by the first of four sets of *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, which delve head on into the ugly side of life.

Around the deck of this old public pool on the western edge of Tucson is a Cyclone fence the color of pewter, decorated with a bright tangle of locked bicycles. [...] A dull field of dry grass and hard weeds, old dandelions' downy heads exploding and snowing up in a rising wind. And past all this, reddened by a round slow September sun, are mountains, jagged, their tops' sharp angles darkening into definition against a deep red tired light. Against the red their sharp connected tops form a spike line, an EKG of the dying day.[156]

This type of landscape descriptions alternate with the boy's interior monologue and create a sense of two worlds running parallel to each other: the outside reality and the interior world of the boy's mind. His thoughts make everything appear in slow motion; a few minutes of real time are now stretched out into an eleven-page story.

No time is passing outside you at all. It is amazing. The late ballet below is slow motion, the overbroad movements of mimes in blue jelly. If you wanted you could really stay here forever, vibrating inside so fast you float motionless in time, like a bee over something sweet.[157]

The image of a bee suspended in midair yet moving very fast so that it is able to maintain the suspension, is a reference to the concept of stillness in motion and its inherent antagonism. Wallace shows that the universe is in constant motion even if it appears to be standing still, and reality is a kaleidoscope that changes with the perspective from which it is viewed. Consequently there is no definite boundary between right and wrong, and opposites are not mutually exclusive. Their appearance is always a matter of individual perspective, and continuity is existential.

Forever Overhead is a peaceful image of youth and innocence: a time when nothing has yet gone wrong, and the outlook at the world is still untainted by the ugly side of life. This poetic, almost romantic picture is part of a deceptive strategy that will eventually lead to the intended effect of luring the reader into the cocoon-like safety of a child's world; to create a sensation of familiarity and trust so that what follows appears in even greater contrast. Addressing the universal concept of initiation in such a poetic way grabs the reader by his heart, not by his intellect, and surprises him with an unexpected gentleness of tone. Through the second person narration he is able to follow the boy's interior monologue as if the boy's thoughts were his own, and distant but very well known memories are awakened. For a short period he is set back into the relaxing safety and comfort of his own childhood. This peaceful image of youth and innocence comes as a surprise to a reader who is used to Wallace as an author. For often Wallace is looking for the most suitable not the most beautiful way of expression. The reader knows Wallace for his love of stylistic and linguistic experiment not for evoking sentimental feelings. Yet, it is exactly this sensation of safety and comfort that also creates a certain amount of suspicion. Why does a writer who is known for his love of challenge and provocation present the reader with such a sweet, non-offensive and non-challenging reading experience? Why does he render such an idyllic image of the world? The reason for this evasive maneuver lies within the context of the remaining stories in which the world is everything but ideal. In the end this step back to almost traditional narration is exactly

[156] *F. O.* p. 6.
[157] *F. O.* p. 14.

what defines the piece's postmodernist character: Wallace's willingness to go back to the past and utilize a traditional form of narration. With the tools of Realism he composes an aesthetically pleasing narrative that creates an intellectual challenge through a tension generated by contrast. This contrast finds its execution in the pieces following the idyllic *Forever Overhead.* Particularly the clusters titled *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* set, in their harshness, the tone for the remainder of the collection.

- ***Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*[158]: shared suffering.**

The eighteen pieces titled *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*—organized in four chapters that are nested among the other stories of the collection—represent a thematically as well as stylistically challenging mixture. By conducting interviews with various more or less disturbing men, Wallace explores the depths of the human psychology and presents a particularly disconcerting image of humanity. Utilizing the interview as a form of every day conversation, Wallace lures the reader out of the passivity of the listener into active participation, and sends him on a kaleidoscopic journey through the male consciousness. In each interview the reader is confronted with a different behavioral pattern, the sum of which creates a disturbing image of the male psyche. This involvement is reinforced even more by the piece's outer appearance: what the reader sees is only one part of the text, only the answer is actually printed on the page. The other half, the question, remains invisible. A capitalized letter *Q* functions as a placeholder. It is left to the reader's imagination or ability to conclude from the provided responses, to determine what the interviewer had asked. This process establishes a high degree of intimacy because now the reader is forced to formulate the questions on his own, and is thereby immediately drawn into the piece.

> *[...] I don't know what it's about and I can't help it.'*
>
> *Q.*
>
> *'"Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!" Only way louder. As in shouting it. [...]*
>
> *Q.*
>
> *'Well, it totally freaks them out, what do you think? And I just about die of the embarrassment. [...]*
>
> *Q.*
>
> *'It wouldn't be so embarrassing if it wasn't so totally fucking weird. If I had any clue about what it was about. You know?*
>
> *Q. ...*
>
> *'God, now I'm embarrassed as hell.'*[159]

Yet this high level of comfort does not create sympathy for the interviewee. To the contrary, its main function is to create a strong contrast to what is being talked about, and so to evoke an atmosphere of disgust, disapproval but also curiosity.

The interviewed men talk about women. They explain how they seduce women, how they sexually interact with women and what they think about women. Just as one man is trying to come to terms with his uncontrollable habit to scream

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[158] Wallace. D.F. *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* in *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men.* For practical reasons any further reference to this title will appear as *Interviews.*

[159] *Interviews.* p. 17-18.

strange things during orgasm,[160] another one is trying to explain his own proclivities based on his father's tendencies towards domestic violence.[161] In a break-up situation a man explains the reasons why he is leaving,[162] and in another conversation two men discuss what they think women want from men:

> *K---: 'What does today's woman want. That's the big one.' [...] 'Whether it sounds Neanderthal or not, I'm still going to argue it's the big one. Because the whole question's become such a mess.'*
> *E---: 'You can say that again.'*
> *K---: 'Because now the modern woman has an unprecedented amount of contradictory stuff laid on her about what it is she's supposed to want and how she's supposed to conduct herself sexually.'*
> *E---: 'the modern woman's a mess of contradictions that they lay on themselves that drives them nuts."*[163]
> *[...]*
> *E---: 'But you can't just go by what they say, is the big thing.'*
> *K---: 'There I'd have to agree. What modern feminists-slash-postfeminists will say they want is mutuality and respect of their individual autonomy. If sex is going to happen, they'll say, it has to be by mutual consensus and desire between two autonomous equals who are each equally responsible for their own sexuality and its expression.'*
> *E---: 'That's almost word for word what I've heard them say.'*
> *K---: 'And it's total horseshit.'*
> *E---: 'they all sure have the empowerment-lingo down pat, that's for sure."*[164]
> *K---: 'When they say **"I am my own person," "I do not need a man," "I am responsible for my own sexuality,"** they are actually telling you just what they want you to make them forget."*[165]

In every interview the reader meets a different type of personality and another piece is added to the puzzle of male psyche. Interview number 3 conducted in Trenton, New Jersey, is about a man who tells another man how he met a young woman at the airport, and how he took advantage of her broken heartedness—her fiancé didn't pick her up—in a sexual way:

> *R-----: 'Except for over by there's this one girl left over by the rope looking in peering gazing in down the jet way thing there as she sees it's me as I'm looking at her as I come out because it's emptied out except for her, our eyes meet and all that business like that there, and what does she she up and goes down on her knees drops crying [...] bent over so you can you know just about see her tits. Totally hysterical and with the waterworks and all like that there.'*
> *[...]*

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[160] *B. I. #14 08-96* conducted at *St. Davis, PA* in *Interviews*. p. 17.
[161] *B. I. #15 08-96* conducted at *MCI-BRIDGEWATER OBSERVATION & ASSESSMENT FACILITY BRIDGEWATER, MA* in *Interviews*. p. 18.
[162] *B. I. #11 06-96* conducted in *Vienna, VA* in *Interviews*. p. 20.
[163] *Interviews*. p. 226.
[164] *Interviews*. p. 228.
[165] *Interviews*. p. 233.

R-----: 'And I'm basically, I'm standing there holding coffee I don't even it's too late I don't want even decaf I'm lending the ear and my heart I go to say it my heart going out a little bit to this girls for this heartbreak. I swear kid but you have never seen anything like this heartbreak on this girl with the tits, and I start telling her how she's right the guy's a shit and don't even deserve and how it's true most guys are shit and how my heart's going out and all like that.'

A-----: 'Heh, heh. So then what happened?'

R-----: 'Heh heh.'

A-----: 'Heh heh ***heh.****'*

R-----: 'You really got to ask?'

A-----: 'You bastard. You shitheel.'

R-----: 'Well you know how it is I mean what are you going to do.'

A-----: 'You shitheel.'

R-----: 'Well you know.'[166]

As outrageous and annoying as *R's* hypocrisy may be to the female readership, it is harmless in comparison with some of the other conversations. There are pieces that have the character of transcribed psychological interviews recorded in therapy sessions during which the interviewee—in a self-analysis—very eloquently explains his point of view. Logical reasoning mixed with professional jargon makes the men appear very intelligent and even intellectual. One hundred percent convinced of their theories, they believe in what they say, and this confidence is unsettling:

'It is a proclivity, and provided there's minimal coercion and no real harm it's essentially benign, I think you'll have to agree. And that there are a surprisingly small number who require any coercion at all, be appraised.'

Q.

'From a psychological standpoint the origins appear obvious. Various therapists concur, I might add, here and elsewhere. So it's all quite tidy.'

Q.

'Well, my own father was, you might say, a man who was by natural proclivity not a good man but who nevertheless tried diligently to be a good man. Temper and so forth.'

Q.

'I mean, it's not as if I'm torturing them or burning them.'[167]

The openness with which the men share their motivation and emotions when they, for instance, invite a woman to *a domination play* catches the reader by surprise:

I know what the contract is about, and it is not about seduction, conquest, intercourse, or algolagnia. What it is about is my desire symbolically to work out certain internal complexes consequent to my rather irregular childhood relations with my mother and twin sister.[168]

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[166] *Interviews.* p. 26-27.
[167] *Interviews.* p. 19.
[168] *Interviews.* p. 104.

The purpose of the contractual nature of masochistic or {f.f.} bonded play [...] is to formalize the power structure.[169]

My own mother was, by all accounts, a magnificent individual, but of somewhat shall we say uneven temperament. Erratic and uneven in her domestic and day-to-day affairs. Erratic in her dealings with, of her two children, most specifically me. This bequeathed me certain psychological complexes having to do with power and, perhaps, trust.[170]

So far, these are merely verbal—if extremely verbose—expositions of theories about taboo subjects, and even if they expose the men's sexual proclivities they do not signify the ultimate atrocity yet. Interview number 46 does. Conducted in Nutley, New Jersey, it is one man's attempt to argue the allegedly *positive* effects of rape, using the experience of a Holocaust survivor as an example:

'Alls I'm---or think about the Holocaust. Was the Holocaust a good thing? No way. Does anybody think it was good it happened? No way. But did you ever read Victor Frankl? Victor Frankl's ***Man's Search for Meaning****? It's a great, great book. Frankl was in a camp in the Holocaust and the book comes out of that experience, it's about his experience in the human Dark Side and preserving his human identity in the face of the camp's degradation and violence and suffering's total ripping away of his identity. It's a totally great book and now think about it, if there wasn't a Holocaust there wouldn't be a* ***Man's Search for Meaning****.'*

Q.

'Alls I was trying to say is you got to be careful of taking a knee-jerk attitude about violence and degradation in the case of women also. Having a knee-jerk attitude about ***anything*** *is a total mistake, that's what I'm saying. But I'm saying especially in the case of women, where it adds up to the very limited condescending thing of saying they're fragile or breakable things and can be destroyed so easily. Like we have to wrap them in cotton and protect them more than everybody else. That it's knee-jerk and condescending. I'm talking about dignity and respect, not treating them like they're fragile little dolls or whatever. Everybody gets hurt and violated and broken sometimes, why are women so special?'*

Q.

'Alls I'm saying is who are we to say getting incested or abused or violated or whatever or any of those things can't also have their positive aspects for a human being in the long run. Not that it necessarily does all the time, but who are we to say it ***never*** *does, in a knee-jerk way? [...] Alls I'm saying, it's not impossible there are cases where it can enlarge you. Make you more than you were before. More of a complete human being. Like Victor Frankl. Or that saying about how whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. You think whoever it was that said that was* ***for*** *a woman getting raped? No way. He just wasn't being knee-jerk.'*

Q.

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[169] *Interviews*. p. 106.
[170] *Interviews*. p. 107.

'I'm not saying there's no such thing as a victim. Alls I'm saying is we tend to sometimes be so narrow-minded about the myriads of different things that go into making somebody into who he is.' [...] 'Alls---how it's possible even the worst things that can happen to you can end up being positive factors in who you are. What you are, being a full human being instead of just a---think about getting gang-raped and degraded and beaten down to within an inch of your life for example. Nobody's going to say that's a good thing, I'm not saying that, nobody's going to say the sick bastards that did it shouldn't go to jail. Nobody's suggesting she was liking it while it was happening or that it should have happened. But let's put two things into perspective here. One is, afterwards she knows something about herself she didn't know before.'

Q.

[...] 'Her idea of herself and what she can she can live through and survive is bigger now.' [...]

Q.

'And plus now she knows more about the human condition and suffering and terror and degradation.' [...] 'I'm not saying she's thrilled about it. But think how much bigger now her view of the world is, how much more broad and deep the big picture is in her mind. She can understand suffering in a totally different way. She's more than she was. That's what I'm saying. More of a human being. Now she knows something you don't.' [171]

'Do you think anybody cared about Victor Frankl or admired his humanity until he gave them ***Man's Search for Meaning****? I'm not saying it happened to me or him or my wife or even if it happened but what if it did? What if I did it to you? Right here? Raped you with a bottle? Do you think it'd make any difference? Why? What are you? How do you know? You don't know shit.'* [172]

What a monstrous argument! The surprising aspect is that it is not wrong. On a superficial level it does make sense, yet it is the aftertaste it leaves behind that makes the reader feel uneasy. The man is obviously familiar with the subject of rape and its effects on the victim. The question is why? His language—the persistent use of *Alls* at the beginning of every answer—betrays him as an amateur psychologist rather than a highly educated scientist, yet the logic of his argument and the reference to a renown psychoanalyst and survivor of the Holocaust, grants him a high level of credibility. This combination makes the reader temporarily blind to the true motif behind the argument—the twisted defense of a psychopath. His detailed knowledge of this particular act of rape, makes the suspicion that he may be the rapist become more and more alarming. When, toward the end, the reader realizes that he has allowed a criminal to pull him into his world and that this could just as well have been his own reasoning, a feeling of disgusted embarrassment creeps in. It is an unnerving sensation that will remain with him throughout the rest of the interviews, and will culminate in the final piece. In interview number 20, the strangeness reaches its peak when the reader is subjected to over thirty pages of a man's account of falling in love with a woman who has been the victim of rape:

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[171] *Interviews.* p. 116-119.
[172] *Interviews.* p. 124.

'And yet I did not fall in love with her until she had related the story of the unbelievably horrifying incident in which she was brutally accosted and held captive and very nearly killed.'

Q.

'Let me explain.' [...] 'In bed together, in response to some sort of prompt or association, she related an anecdote about hitchhiking and once being picked up by what turned out to be a psychotic serial sex offender who then drove her to a secluded area and raped her and would almost surely have murdered her had she not been able to think effectively on her feet under enormous fear and stress.' [...]

Q.

'Neither would I. Who would now; in an era when every---when psychotic serial killers have their own trading cards? I'm concerned in today's climate to steer clear of any suggestion of anyone quote asking for it, let's not even go there, but rest assured that it gives one pause about the capacities of judgment involved, or at the very least the naiveté---'

Q.

'Only that it was perhaps marginally less unbelievable in the context of her type, in that this was what one might call a quote Granola Cruncher, or post-Hippie, New Age, what have you,' [...] 'terms comprising the prototypical sandals, unrefined fibers, daffy arcane, emotional incontinence, flamboyantly long hair, extreme liberality on social issues, financial support from parents they revile, bare feet, obscure import religions, indifferent hygiene, a gooey and somewhat canned vocabulary, the whole predictable peace-and-love post-Hippie diction that im---' [173]

Q.

'Fluffiness or daffiness or intellectual flaccidity or somehow smug-seeming naiveté. Choose whichever offends you least. And yes and don't worry I'm aware of how all this sounds and can well imagine the judgments you're forming from the way I'm characterizing what drew me to her but if I'm really to explain this to you as requested then I have no choice but to be brutally candid rather than observing the pseudosensitive niceties of euphemism about the way a reasonably experienced, educated man is going to view an extraordinarily good-looking girl whose life philosophy is fluffy and unconsidered and when one comes right down to it kind of contemptible.' [...][174]

'I know I'm not telling you anything you haven't already decided you know. With your slim chilly smile. You're not the only one who can read people, you know. He's a fool because he thinks he's made a fool of her, you're thinking. Like he got away with something. The satyrosaurian sybaritic heterosapien male, the type you short-haired catamenial bra-burners can see coming a mile away. And pathetic. He's a predator, you believe, and he too thinks he's a predator, but ***he's*** *the really frightened one,* ***he's*** *the one running.'* [175]

'All right. Once more, slowly. That literally killing instead of merely running is the killer's psychotically literal way of resolving the conflict between his

[173] *Interviews.* p. 287-288.
[174] *Interviews.* p. 289.
[175] *Interviews.* p. 304.

need for connection and his terror of being in any way connected. Especially, yes, to a woman, connecting with a woman, whom the vast majority of sexual psychotics do hate and fear, often due to twisted relations with the mother as a child.' [...] 'The psychotic's relation to her [mother] is one of both terrified hatred and terror and desperate pining need. He finds this conflict unendurable and must thus symbolically resolve it through psychotic sex crimes.' [176]

This much elongated and intense account would remain without much significance if not for the angry and aggressive last lines that suggest a rather unnerving if not violent outcome of this relationship:

'But if you could understand, had I---can you see why there's no way I could let her just go away after this? Why I felt this apical sadness and fear at the thought of her getting her bag and sandals and New Age blanket and leaving and laughing when I clutched her hem and begged her not to leave and said I loved her and closing the door gently and going off barefoot down the hall and never seeing her again? Nothing else mattered. She had all my attention. I'd fallen in love with her. I believed she could save me. I know how this sounds, trust me. I know your type and I know what you're bound to ask. Ask it now. This is your chance. I felt she could save me I said. Ask me now. Say it. I stand here naked before you. Judge me, you chilly cunt. You dyke, you bitch, cooze, cunt, slut, gash. Happy now? All borne out? Be happy. I don't care. I knew she could. I knew I loved. End of story.' [177]

This outburst belongs to a person full of insecurity and guilt. It is easy to think that the narrator and the *psychotic serial killer* who brutally abused and *nearly* killed the woman are one and the same person, and the suspicion that he actually did kill her is difficult to ignore.

Throughout the interviews the reader is confronted with an image of men that presents them as ugly and lust driven monsters. Their detail-packed accounts full of strange, threatening, disgusting and degrading comments create the uneasy feeling of dealing with institutionalized psychopaths in closed therapy. It is not their, never mentioned, outer appearance that makes them hideous, but rather their inside—the mix of an intellectually clear, yet emotionally disturbed mindset that is capable of such atrocities. But what is the point of presenting this much hideousness? Why does the reader have to suffer through all the hate and crime? By now, it is clear that simply pointing at a two dimensional image of the hideous side of humanity does not go along with Wallace's goal to provoke his reader into participation. Wallace wants him to get involved with the piece and to activate his intellect and his emotions so that he can sense the protagonist in his own core. Only then is he able to feel that consolation that is the main purpose of Wallace's fiction:[178] *the knowledge that he* [the reader] *is not alone in his suffering that being a human being brings with it.* The interviews approach human suffering from three different perspectives: first there is the quite obvious suffering of the women those men talk about. Second there is the less apparent, yet still perceivable, suffering of the interviewed men expressed in the openness of their answers. Their willingness to communicate with other human beings

[176] *Interviews*. p. 305.
[177] *Interviews*. p. 317-318.
[178] Wallace in Larry McCaffery.

shows that they are trying to come to terms with their actions instead of remaining complete emotional derelicts. And finally, there is the indirect but still intended suffering of the reader who creates the experience through reading. However, it is not the women's gruesome experiences alone that cause him pain but, his own reaction to the narration: a slight touch of understanding for the interviewee's convincing reasoning. There is the disturbing realization that, even if he does not really sympathize with them, those actions make the men literally and metaphorically hideous. He has fallen for the *brilliant* logic of none other than a psychopath. The reader is shocked and disgusted because it becomes a gloomy recognition that he is not too far from being just as sick, perverted, criminal and hideous as the interviewee. Considering the fact that those men seem to be criminals of the worst sort—sociopaths, psychopaths, sick individuals with whom any *normal* person, here the reader, would not want to be associated or identified—the thought that the reader is not much different than that despicable guy who takes advantage of women is a disconcerting notion.

Wallace's hideous men put our perception of the world upside down and make us question and re-evaluate our moral standards. The *Interviews* expose the ugly side of life and present it as an undeniable part of every individual. By letting the monster out, those men put our greatest fears and possibly most secret dreams into actions. In the end the entire world appears to be filled with psychopaths, liars and other more or less emotionally and psychologically disturbed individuals. When his protagonists are allowed to talk about taboos and to express their most secret and intimate thoughts, they create an active link between reader and interviewee. Since painful experience is a part of every human's life, its depiction in the *Interviews* is the connection between interviewee and reader. The reader's most basic instincts of what is right and what is wrong are addressed, and force him to re-think his judgment. Now it is not about pointing at someone else anymore; now it is about the reader himself. In the *Interviews,* Wallace shows that the sick, the criminal, the evil and ugly are everywhere. Not only that, he also shows that it is part of every single human being, and that there is no escape from it. Because we the readers often agree with what the men say out loud and act upon, deep down in our core we are just as hideous as the men in the interviews. The difference is that the majority of humans, hopefully including the reader, manage to control this hideousness—contain it within the boundaries of their personality and social and cultural norms. Those who do not manage are the men in the interviews.

Another aspect that contributes to the strong effect of the *Interviews* is their narrative form. Utilizing the interview as a common form of communication and giving the reader the role of the interviewer not only facilitates an easy access to the text, but also maneuvers the reader into a precarious situation. Lacking the printed question, the reader is forced to formulate his own and has no choice but to become involved with the interview. Suddenly he finds himself actively participating in the exchange and the emotions evoked by the piece become a personal affair. Yet there is also a less dramatic and more pragmatic aspect to this technique: the same lack of questions also signifies Wallace's playfulness and love of experiment. By leaving out a part of the narration, he not only underlines its fictitiousness but also creates opportunity for interaction, play and experiment. When the reader realizes that it is up to him to ask the questions, he knows that this is a game, not reality. It is a very effective game that on the one hand manages to stop the reader in his tracks and reconsider certain standards, and on the other maintains its artificial character through disruption and fragmentation.

- ***Octet, Pop Quiz 9:*** **deconstructing metafiction.**

While the *Interviews* focus on the exploration of the human psyche and where technique takes only a secondary role, other pieces in the collection evolve entirely around the technical side of writing fiction. One example is the previously discussed story *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,* which represents Wallace's critical position toward postmodernism as it is symbolized through the funhouse. Reflecting on John Barth's concept of the funhouse as a literary labyrinth that contains countless narrative opportunities, Wallace not only questioned its transformation from an idea to a material object made of brick, but also the function of metafiction as a valid narrative form. Several years later, in *Octet,*[179] he continues the discourse focusing entirely on metafiction. Since, for Wallace, emotional and intellectual impact on the reader is the highest priority, *Octet* explores the impact of metafiction onto this goal by displaying its effects on the narrative process. For him, metafiction is a highly manipulative tool used by writers to distract from aesthetic failure due to mediocre narrative effort, and he accuses them of insecurity and dishonesty. In uncovering the act of writing, metafiction becomes a symbol of pretended honesty that intends to divert the reader's attention away from a piece of poor artistic value and solicit his compassion for the effort and sympathy for its fruitlessness. Consequently the reader is unable to see the actual story because he is preoccupied with its technical composition. This shift of focus deprives him of his right to use the narrative as a means to escape his own everyday reality—to take a brake from participating and making decisions. Wallace calls this maneuver in disdain: *pseudometabelletrisic gamesmanship* and *postclever metaformal hooey.*

Octet illustrates Wallace's point by confronting the reader with a confusing composition assembled out of a loosely tied set of narrative pieces headed by a misguiding title.[180] It is a sequence of five psychology pop-quizzes. In each of them a specific scenario is described and the addressee, in our case the reader, is pragmatically ordered to answer the question posted at the end:

> *Q: Which one lived.*[181]
> *[...]*
> *Q: (A) Is she a good mother.*[182]
> *[...]*
> *Evaluate.*[183]

There is a palpable sterility typical of the academic environment that is created by anonymous yet stereotypical characters called X and Y; the pragmatic jargon of the sciences and the obvious fact that pop quizzes are commonly conducted in the educational field. Yet, this formality is balanced with the use of the second person singular pronoun as well as with spoken language that gives the quiz the character of a dialogue. A sense of intimacy reduces the distance and deformalizes the relationship

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[179] Wallace. D. F. *Octet* in *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men.* p. 131-160.
[180] Generally the term octet refers either to a musical group of eight, or a musical piece composed for a group of eight singers or musicians. However, in *Octet* the reader finds himself only counting to five when reading the individual sub-pieces.
[181] *Pop Quiz 4* in *Octet.* p. 131.
[182] *Pop Quiz 7* in *Octet.* p. 135.
[183] *Pop Quiz 6(A)* in *Octet.* p.145.

to the reader. At the end there is a strategically posted metafictional dismissal of the entire previous exposure as *too ambiguous to qualify for a pop quiz*[184] that serves as a link to *Octet's* central piece: *Pop Quiz 9.*

Based on the strategy of the previous pop quizzes, which is characterized by inclusion of the reader rather than plain exposure of a problem, *Pop Quiz 9* presents another scenario at the end of which the reader is expected to make a decision. Throughout the exposition, the reader is asked to put himself into the position of a fiction writer who is in the middle of composing a piece of fiction. His goal is to write one cohesive unit of fiction; something that can be considered as *literary*: a piece of belletristic art described as *a plicated (arranged in folds) -yet-still-urgently-unified whole.*[185] The writer's motivation is the urgency to communicate a message, but also to interrogate the reader and to palpate him with this work. *Pop Quiz 9* voices all his doubts and questions, focusing on the function and justification of metafiction as a narrative tool that would serve this goal.[186] That it is not an easy process is made clear in the opening line that implies a certain strain that makes fiction writing appear as a burden and hard labor:

> *You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer.*[187]

In a second function, this line also annihilates the distance and re-directs the attention from writer to reader, and so makes the text inclusive and participatory rather than exhibitionist. Because the reader must become aware of the complexity of the writing process, he is placed in the writer's shoes to follow his footsteps from here on. As the narrator laments the fact that it is impossible to make a living with writing fiction alone, there is a certain sense of resignation about the efforts of the writing process palpable throughout the piece. At one point he remarks in an ironic, almost sarcastic, tone of voice that it is too time-consuming. Yet time is something an author does not have because in addition to writing he has to go to work to make a living. However, because the writer feels the urgency to address a certain topic in order to find out about—*interrogate*—the reader's feelings about a specific issue, it is necessary that he continue writing. What the issue is, has yet to be determined. It could be anything that the author considers important or worthwhile addressing. The only thing he is certain of is his intent to satisfy the *urgency of interrogation* by confronting the reader with a situation he thinks will provoke a thought process or an emotional response:

> *How exactly the cycle's short pieces are supposed to work is hard to describe. Maybe say they're supposed to compose a certain sort of 'interrogation' of the*

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[184] *Pop Quiz 6* in *Octet*. p. 134.
[185] *Pop Quiz 9* in *Octet* p. 151.
[186] That metafiction, as a tool of postmodern fiction, never had an easy stand is a well-known fact. Ever since postmodernism appeared on the literary stage, metafiction's self-reflective and self-questioning character focusing on the display of the writing process as such—the techniques and conventions it involved and the role of the author within this process—have been the cause for heated debate. In making fiction its subject matter, metafiction has opened the door to a new realm and signified the strong experimental energy of the late 1960s and early 70s. Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Donald Barthelme and Robert Coover tried the limitations of traditional narration and fused everyday reality with narrative invention with the goal to blur boundaries between categories or overcome what John Barth called narrative exhaustion. Over the years, metafiction has been glorified and despised, found highly progressive or simply exhibitionist. In *Pop Quiz 9* Wallace takes the opportunity to express his own perception of metafiction.
[187] *Pop Quiz 9* in *Octet*. p. 145.

person reading them, somehow---i.e. palpations, feelers into the interstices of her sense of something, etc. ... though what that 'something' is remains maddeningly hard to pin down, even just for yourself as you're working on the pieces [...][188]

Providing a detailed account of the problems an author faces when writing a story increasingly involves the reader within the process: he follows all thoughts, begins to feel the insecurity, the inner conflict, the doubts and questions, the complexity. After a while, it becomes clear how a story crystallizes out of countless ideas and impulses, and how difficult it is to make choices that would be beneficial:

So you do an eight-part cycle of these little mortise-and-tenon pieces. {footnote #1: (Right from the start you'd imagined the series as an octet or an octocyle, though best of British luck explaining to anyone why.)} And it ends up a total fiasco. Five of the eight pieces don't work at all---meaning they don't interrogate or palpate what you want them to, plus are too contrived or too cartoonish or too annoying or all three---and you have to toss them out. The 6th piece works only after it's totally redone in a way that's forbiddingly long and digression-fraught and, you fear, maybe so dense and inbent that nobody'll even get to the interrogatory parts at the end; plus the in the dreaded Final Revision Phase you realize that the rewrite of the 6th piece depends so heavily on 6's first version that you have to stick that first version back into the octocyle too, even though it (i.e., the first version of the 6th piece) totally falls apart 75% of the way through. [189]

Gradually the distance disappears and reader becomes writer. Now he does not only watch the process but is also the one making decisions and feeling all the insecurity and self-doubt of a writer. And exactly this insecurity is considered the single most difficult and tempting aspect of the entire creative process. It puts the writer at the risk of jeopardizing his work by maneuvering himself into a vulnerable and awkward position. But, unintentionally as just a human being, it is easily conceivable that the writer wishes to overcome his insecurity and so takes steps toward improving the situation.

As any performer—and since a writer is a performer given the fact that an act of writing is a presentation of artistic work to a reading audience—an author wants to see the effect of his work on the reader. And as any performer, the writer prefers the confirming applause over the disapproving *booohhh!* But because he is deprived of the direct contact to his public and its instant response, the writer is very tempted to go into the offensive and do something that in the end may compromise the value of his work. His need for more immediate feedback makes him prone to do the unthinkable: step out of the text and approach the reader with the most direct question possible: *Do you like my story?* An, at first glance, innocent inquiry. What should be wrong with a request for sympathy? Nothing, except the fact that while trying to calculate whether a piece will be *liked* or not, or even as much as thinking about the reader when writing a story, the author turns to metafiction and runs the risk of depleting his narrative effort. The *Do you like my story?* question is considered the most destructive thing a writer can do to his work because it maneuvers him into what

[188] *Pop Quiz 9* in *Octet*. p. 145.
[189] *Pop Quiz 9* in *Octet*. p. 146.

is called a *lethal belletristic corner*—a place that is almost impossible to escape. Its power lies in its ability to disclose the fictitiousness of a narrative and so, making the reader aware of it. It transforms fiction into metafiction. Pointing at a story's formal presence, the question bares it of all its message, intention and seriousness, and turns it into a technical exercise. The text becomes reality because its authority and innocence have been compromised and all that remains is the exposed writer. Yet, becoming visible only puts the writer in an awkward position. The question *Do you like my story*? not only asks the reader to make a judgment before he finished reading and tries to anticipate his reaction but, and this is the worst part, also solicits his sympathy—an act that makes the writer appear weak and dishonest. To illustrate the consequences, Wallace introduces the analogy of a partygoer:

> *Imagine you've gone to a party where you know very few of the people there, and then on your way home afterwards you suddenly realize that you just spent the whole party so concerned whether the people there seemed to like you or not that you now have absolutely no idea whether you liked any of* ***them*** *or not. Anybody who's had that sort of experience knows what a totally lethal kind of attitude this is to bring to a party. (Plus it almost always turns out that the people at the party actually* ***didn't*** *like you, for the simple reason that you seemed so inbent and self-conscious the whole time that they got the creepy subliminal feeling that you were using the party merely as some sort of stage to perform on and that you barely even noticed them [...])* [190]
>
> *[...]*
>
> *[...] the idea of saying this sort of thing (Do you like me? Please like me.: the author) straight out is regarded as somehow obscene. In fact one of the very last interpersonal taboos we have is this kind of obscenely naked direct interrogation of somebody else. It looks pathetic and desperate.*[191]

An exposure of this kind is meant to indicate courage and sacrifice in the name of art, yet it is considered ambiguous and artificial because it appears that all the writer seeks is applause for his openness and honesty. The showcase of vulnerability intends to manipulate the reader into a sense of sympathy. As a result, the actual intellectual communication and exchange are overshadowed by formal tricks and pure and superficial entertainment instead of intellectual value. It is not the effect that was created, not the result that earns the author credit but the simple fact that he had an idea and made the attempt to transform it into a piece of fiction. The story becomes show, its fictitiousness is exposed and the reader is deprived of his right to consolation through fiction.

Another destructive force created by the question for sympathy lies in its immense power over human personality. *Do you like me?* immediately erases any traces of individuality and makes everyone look the same:

> *{footnote #16: [...] because once even just one party-conversation reached this kind of urgent unmasked speak-your-innermost-thoughts level it would spread almost metastatically, and pretty soon everybody at the party would be talking about nothing but their own hopes and fears about what the other people at the party were thinking of them, which means that all distinguishing*

[190] *Pop Quiz 9* in *Octet*. p. 153.
[191] *Pop Quiz 9* in *Octet* .p. 154.

*features of different people's surface personalities would be obliterated and everybody at the party would emerge as more or less exactly the same, and the party would reach this sort of entropic homeostasis of nakedly self-obsessed sameness, and it'd get incredibly boring,*plus the paradoxical fact that the distinctive colorful surface difference between people upon which other people base their like or dislike of those people would have vanished, and so the question 'Do you like me?' would cease to admit of any meaningful response, and the whole party could very well undergo some sort of weird of logical or metaphysical implosion, and none of the people at the party would ever again be able to function meaningfully in the outside world.***

(It's maybe even interesting to note that this corresponds closely to most atheist's idea of Heaven, which in turn helps explain the relative popularity of atheism.)*

*** (I'd probably leave all this implicit, though, if I were you.) }* [192]

According to the narrator, a lack of distinctive features equals boredom and destroys the ability to live in the outside world. Just as in the real world, in fiction the question changes the way a story is perceived because it strips it of all personality and reduces it to just one feature. Suddenly every story looks the same. Metafiction creates this lack of distinctive features by stripping the text of its fictitiousness, and presenting it as a product of reality assembled with the help of a set of technical tools. It is no surprise that this action appears honest. However, this honesty can also be viewed as tactical manipulation employed to salvage a fiasco—a bad text—by winning the reader's sympathy instead of offering him the chance for emotional and intellectual gain.

For the narrator in *Pop Quiz 9* it is not the initiative but the result—the achieved goal, interrogation of the reader's sensitivity, which leads to a certain intended effect—that presents the ultimate and most important validation of fiction. The extent to which metafiction is a distraction from this goal is exemplified in the highly disjointed structure of the quiz itself. Digression, fragmentation, self-reference and self-irony are predominant features utilized to emphasize the narrator's notion of metafiction as a *lame, tired and facile* tool of the 1990s that was employed because it was fashionable and a convenient excuse for any defunct piece of fiction. Wallace illustrates his point with a stylistic device that symbolizes digression best: the footnote. Seventeen, partially very extensive, footnotes[193] provide more details and further elaborations, but most of all contribute to the disjointedness of the text and stress the argument against metafiction. A continuously interrupted narrative flow causes the reader difficulty finding his way back into the piece, and illustrates very clearly what fragmentation and metafictional digression mean. Additionally, as if to stress the point, the effects of the use of metafiction are thematized in great detail in footnote #2. Here, the narrator exposes metafiction not only as a technical exercise in interrogative structure, but also as destructive to the fictitiousness of a piece. This exposition is immediately followed by yet another metafictional digression in footnote #3. Expanding over four pages, it is the longest footnote in this piece and includes two brief but complete story plots that are intertwined with the narrator's comments on

[192] *Pop Quiz 9* in *Octet*. p. 158.
[193] Eight of the 16 page long text is dedicated to footnotes.

why and how they should or should not be worked into the larger picture of *Octet.*[194] They are drafts of possible stories and placing them in a footnote represents not only another disruption but is also an example of an author's struggle with the composition of a piece:

> *You know for sure, though, that the narrative pieces really are just 'pieces' and nothing more, i.e. that it is the way they fit together into the larger cycle that comprises them that is crucial to whatever 'something' you want to 'interrogate' a human 'sense of,' and so on.*[195]

He is aware of the disconnectedness and puzzle-like style of his work and knows that those are merely *fragments, or vignettes,* meant to fit into a larger cycle. They provide the skeleton for the story, and will later develop into something that addresses the specific emotion the author intends to touch in the reader—that *sense of something* that also promotes the writer's motivation. Yet, he is unable to decide which of those pieces suits his needs best.

There is only one exception that justifies the use of metafiction and gives the writer permission to destroy the veil of artificiality: it is his genuine insecurity about the effectiveness of his work. Only then is he allowed to step forward, address the reader directly and ask him whether he liked what he has read:

> *[...] address the reader directly and ask her straight out whether she's feeling anything like what you feel.*
>
> *The trick to this solution is that you'd have to be 100% honest. Meaning not just sincere but almost naked. Worse than naked---more like unarmed. Defenseless. 'This thing I feel, I can't name it straight out but it seems important, do you feel it too?'---this sort of direct question is not for the squeamish.*[196]

Should an author decide to inquire into the effectiveness of his work, then he has to be willing to expose himself in absolute and complete honesty—become defenseless. Only one hundred percent honesty justifies the use of metafiction because then it is not about the writer making comments about the text, as if he was talking to himself, it is about talking *to* the reader—involving him within the piece instead of pushing him away with narcissistic rambling. If there is going to be a voice other than that of a protagonist speaking, then it needs to address the reader. The narrator in *Pop Quiz 9* wants a dialogue, not self-involved murmur.[197] Absolute sincerity assures that the reader does not feel solicited for sympathy and used or manipulated. Ironically, the way to do it is by way of a metatext:

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[194] In plot #1 a pharmacologist develops a wonder drug and has to endure the overwhelming gratitude of the healed masses. In plot #2 a group of immigrants in the U.S. plotting revenge on an immigration officer who translated their names into undignified English counterparts and who now lives in the same nursing home they do.

[195] *Pop Quiz 9* in *Octet.* p. 145-146.

[196] *Pop Quiz 9* in *Octet.* p. 154.

[197] It is almost as if he was saying: 'if you are going to destroy the veil of fiction and take away the pleasure of escaping into it, then at least involve the reader in it, make him feel valued and ask for his opinion. Do not patronize him with incomprehensible monologue that sounds to him like meaningless noise'.

In other words what you could do is you could now construct an additional Pop Quiz---so the ninth overall, but in another sense only the fifth or even fourth, and actually maybe none of these because this one'd be less a Quiz than (ulp) a kind of metaQuiz---in which you try your naked best to describe the conundrum and potential fiasco of the semi-octet and your own feeling that the surviving semi workable pieces all seem to be trying to demonstrate {footnote #7} [...]

> *{footnote #7: That might not be the right word---too pedantic; you might want to use the word* ***transmit*** *or* ***evoke*** *or even* ***limn*** *(****palpate's*** *been overused already, and it's possible that the weird psychospiritual probing you mean it to connote by medical analogy wont' come across at all to anybody, which is probably marginally OK, because individual words the reader can sort of skip over and not get too bothered about, but there is no sense in pressing your luck and hammering on* ***palpate*** *over and over again). If* ***limn*** *doesn't end up seeming just off-the-charts pretentious I'd probably go with* ***limn.****}* [198]

However, when choosing this option the writer should be prepared for a response other than sympathy and be willing to accept it. Since reading is considered a retreat from a world in which the reader himself has to create a meaning—an escape from the *insoluble flux of themselves* into an already created universe—the exposure and destruction of illusion may lead to considerable irritation and make the reader less appreciative. By dedicating time to a piece of fiction, the reader wants to escape the outside world and follow somebody else's lead for a while. He expects the writer to be a superior guide who will help him explore other realms of his consciousness and create a link to his own life. A guide, however, who is lost and confused looses this special position and becomes an escape artist himself. Taking the writer off his authorial pedestal levels him with the reader, and shows that he is not *clean and dry and radiant of command presence and unwavering conviction,* but also only a reader. As a reader, however, the writer loses his position of authority and fails to fulfill his agenda of interrogation; he misses the goal of creating *a plicated-yet-still-urgently-unified whole*. The narrator exemplifies this point in the middle of his elaborations on metafiction, when he finally addresses the purpose of *Octet*:

> *[...] some sort of weird ambient* ***sameness*** *in different kinds of human relationships, {footnote #8} some nameless but inescapable 'price' that all human beings are faced with having to pay at some point if they ever want truly 'to be with' {footnote #9} another person instead of just using this person somehow [...]*
>
> > *{footnote #8: Be warned that this has become a near-nauseous term in contemporary usage,* ***relationship****, treaclized by the same sorts of people who use parent as a verb and say share to mean talk, and for a late-1990s reader it's going to ooze all sorts of cloying PC- and New Age-associations; but if you decide to use the pseudometaQuiz tactic and the naked honesty it entails to try to salvage the fiasco you're probably going to have to come right out and use it, the dreaded 'R'-term, come what may.}*

[198] *Pop Quiz 9* in *Octet*. p. 155.

{footnote #9: Ibid. on using the verb ***to be*** *in this culturally envenomed way, too, as in 'I'll Be There For You,' which has become the sort of empty spun-sugar shibboleth that communicates nothing except a certain unreflective sappiness in the speaker. Let's not be naïve about what this 100%-honest-naked-interrogation-of-reader tactic is going to cost you if you opt to try it. you're going to have to eat the big rat and go ahead and actually use terms like* ***be with*** *and* ***relationship,*** *and use them* ***sincerely****—i.e. without tone-quotes or ironic undercutting or any kind of winking or nudging—if you're going to be truly honest in the pseudometaQuiz instead of just ironically yanking the poor reader around (and she'll be able to tell which one you're doing; even if she can't articulate it she'll know if you're just trying to save your own belletristic ass by manipulating her—trust me on this.)}* [199]

Octet is about the attempt to communicate the common denominator of human relationships that is identified at a price. It is something that has to be sacrificed for the sake of being with another person, and *Pop Quiz 9* is about the difficulties to grasp this point and to communicate it to the reader.

But *Pop Quiz 9* is also about the consequences of using metafiction as a narrative device; about the drawbacks and the benefits it may have on the work of fiction as well as on the relationship with the reader. It is about the transformation of a literary text into metafiction due to an author's dissatisfaction with the original outcome of his work that drives him to rewrite it and to include a large amount of additional comments—an act that automatically turns it into a metatext. This outcome is dissatisfying because it is the last escape before failing to achieve the goal of interrogation by way of writing a literary text. In the end, it becomes clear that it is merely an attempt to salvage an aesthetic disaster.

Octet is the fictionalization of a transformative process in which Wallace's familiar disdain for metafiction transitions into its acceptance. Through the deconstruction and parody of its implementation, metafiction turns from a merely technical tool into a narrative form that can be utilized to create a desired effect. In order to achieve this transformation all common notions of metafiction must be destroyed before it can be employed again.[200] Wallace's goal is not solicitation of sympathy or compassion, but inclusion and increased communication with the reader. The intent to palpate and interrogate him is executed on two levels. First, there is the imperative tone of voice that seems to challenge the reader to a role play. Second, the form of a pop quiz—in its function as a brief and quick evaluation of a student's knowledge that evokes a spontaneous reaction induced by the surprise effect it has on the student—reduces the distance between reader and text. A pop quiz is a moment of truth in which the student, just like the fiction writer, has to expose himself, step on the stage and say: *this is what I know.* Just like an author, he has to face an audience and take its judgment. But it is not only the moment of total exposure that creates the personal aspect, it is also the fact that as a form of a one-on-one conversation, a pop quiz addresses only one individual. And this sense of personal address transfers onto the reader and makes him feel included within the text; it appears to surround him rather than facing him like a wall.

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[199] *Pop Quiz 9* in *Octet*. p. 154-155.

[200] The next step of this development only becomes explicit in Wallace's next collection of short fiction titled *Oblivion,* published in 2004.

- ***Tri-Stan: I Sold Sissee Nar to Ecko:*** **meditated** ***reality***

An entirely different form of reader involvement occurs when Wallace approaches the other central object of his critical discourse: television. In *Tri-Stan: I Sold Sissee Nar to Ecko*[201] Wallace explores the role of television in the contemporary world and its influence on the human being—exposing it as a highly dubious medium. In a plot that is based on the ancient Greek myth of *Narcissus and Echo,*[202] a very successful and influential television executive named Agon M. Nar becomes the victim of an elaborate manipulation aimed to destroy one of his three daughters, Sissee Nar. Sissee, his favorite, is an aspiring actress who keeps enhancing her beauty with surgical procedures to the point of near physical perfection:

> *But it was Agon M. Nar's youngest daughter, his Baby, his Love-Dumpling, his Little Princess—viz. Sissee, the Nar family's lone aspiring thespian, haunter for casting calls for commercials & daytime serials—who did become Herm ('Afro') Deight the Enhancement* ***techne****cians favorite & Personal Project; & after much non-HMO tribute, plus rituals & procedures so grisly as to compel lyric restraint, the eventually 100%-Enhanced Sissee Nar so like totally surpassed her acrobatic sisters & all the fluorescent basin's other maidens that she seemed, according to* ***Varietae,*** *'...a very goddess consorting with mortals.'* [203]

It is only logical that her beauty attracts not only a lot of male attention but also a lot of female envy:

> *The tragic historian Dirk of Fresno records that so vertiginously protrusive was Sissee Nar's bust that she needed aid to recline, so juttingly sepulchral her cheekbones that she cast predatory shadows & had to do doorways in profile, & so perfectly otherworldly her teeth & tan that the BC demiurges Carie & Erythema, mortally affronted & blasphemed, entered an appeal for aesthetic justice (specific appeal: for a nasty attack of comedones & gingivitic recession) to Stasis—i.e. yes* ***the*** *Stasis. Overlord of San Fernandus, Board-Chair* ***ex off*** *of Tri-Stan's parent, the Sturm & Drang Family of Exceptionally Fine Companies; Stasis as in* ***summum solo,*** *Olympic Overseer, God of Passive Reception & all-around Big Mythopoeic Cheese.*[204]

One day Stasis also falls for Sissee and when his wife, Codependae, finds out about his infatuation she swears revenge:

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[201] Wallace. D.F. *Tri-Stan: I Sold Sissee Nar to Ecko* in *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men.* p. 235-255. For practical reasons any further reference will appear as: *Tri-Stan.*

[202] The myth of Narcissus and Echo, as Ovid relates it in the 8th century BC, is the story of Narcissus for whom Tiresias the seer predicted a long life provided he would never see his mirror image. Echo, a nymph of the woods, was punished by Zeus's wife Hera for distracting her with long stories while her husband was committing adultery with other nymphs. From then on Echo is only able to use her voice to repeat what other's say and is not able express her own thoughts. Echo falls for Narcissus who by virtue of his beauty already attracts countless suitors. Narcissus ignores her just as all the others until one day Narcissus, tired from deer hunting, lies down next to a pond. When he sees his own image for the very first time, he falls in love with it. Driven by the impossibility to fulfill this love and unable to hear Echo's attempts at consolation, he takes his own life.

[203] *Tri-Stan.* p. 237.

[204] Same as footnote 201.

[...] the basin's Queen Goddess, Codependae, was seriously ill pleased that Stasis spent more quality time admiring Sissee Nar's camcorded image [...] than he spent even bothering to deny his infatuation [...] well, this was understandably impossible to detach from; & Codependae vowed retaliation against this mortal & undulant strumpet before her entire Support Group.[205]

She begins to manipulate Agon M. Nar to Sissee's demise,

[...] Codependae herself began work on the heart, mind, & cojones of Agon M. Nar, insinuating herself into his 4-5 A.M. REM-stage as the Cerberian image of Tri-Stan's three CEO Stanleys, ancient entertainment-kabalists who never left their video center & shared but a single large-screen CCTV monitor & remote between them. Under Codependae's direction their images began to kibbitz at Nar's psyche, & to Foretell.[206]

and at one point subliminally influences Agon into creating a new form of television station, the *Satyr-Nymph Network* or *SNN* as something that would surpass everything that was known so far:

O verily must Tri-Stan get its foot in the door of Cable's ground floor while there is still time, sings the three-headed siren; & Agon M. Nar, asleep and nystagmic, can feel the epiphanicity of what the three S.'s Foretell, the best of both possible worlds: no Sermonette, no India crying at litter, no anthem or flags or sign-off at the Close of the Broadcast Day, ***no Close of the Broadcast Day at all:*** *instead, a 24-hr low-overhead loop of something so very archaic as to appear forward-looking, & not on any 'cable' but on & in the very air.*[207]

When Sissee begins auditioning for the first original production on *SNN*, Codependae's plan begins to unravel. The new format is a great success and Sissee, although completely untalented, *her unEnhancable voice was like nails on a slate*, ends up with countless fans, mainly male followers. One of them is Reggie Ecko, Agon's former rival whom he eliminated in the race for the position as the head of *Tri-Stan*. Meanwhile a drug addict, he falls for Sissee to the point of obsession and begins to stalk her:

Malignly serenaded by Vaughan, Domino's, & Latin creditor, plus of course no stranger to obsession since his incorporate displacement & Lucifer-like fall into what had started as mere recreation. R. Ecko of Venice was ripe for metamorphosis into that most dread of the fluorescent basin's BC monsters: the lunatic stalker-type fan. What little psyche did remain to him was in a twinkling consumed & possessed by the image of what he saw lying there passive on Latmus before him. He began to live all & only for the reappearance of ***Beach Blanket Endymion*** *every morning at 4-5 PT, at the same time that he began to see the cathode screen itself as the dimensional*

[205] *Tri-Stan*. p. 238.
[206] *Tri-Stan*. p. 239.
[207] *Tri-Stan*. p. 240.

barrier that prevented his 3-D union with Sissee Nar's much-Enhanced 2-D image.[208]

Codependae's revenge reaches its climax when Reggie finally finds Sissee, and kills her first before committing suicide. The story makes big news in the rainbow press even if, for the sake of sensation, many facts have been turned upside down, left out or added:

> *... w/ the tragicomic irony here being that Ecko's wacko & retrograde Romantic dream of union with Sissee in death turned out to* ***come true****. For S. Nar & Ecko were recombinantly joined in just precisely the 2-D world he'd Foreseen as their only possible union. For the syndicated vehicles* ***Donahue!*** *&* ***Entertainment Tonight*** *& its many avatars like* ***Oprah*** *&* ***Geraldo!*** *[...] paid lavish & repetitive tribute to the now-tragic epic of Sissee Nar's cometic rise & Reggie Ecko's fall [...] & the very most famous* ***Varietae*** *photo of an unconscious Endymionic Sissee & a photo of Reggie Ecko jet-skiing with Ricardo Montalban [...]—these two images kept getting juxtaposed on-screen & placed side by side [...]& the Enquirer even did the job right & spliced the negatives together & claimed they'd been lovers all along, Ecko & Sissee [...] ... & so fan/lover & star/object really were, in a sort of cynically campy but still contemporarily deep & mythic way, united, melded in death, in 2-D, in tales & on screens.*[209]

In the end, the only person who steps out of this tragedy unharmed is the journalist who writes the story. For him, Sissee's demise means fame and big profits:

> *So Ovid ended up having to stick all this narratively important background in right at the end, pretentiously referring to it as an 'epexegesis,' & the Acquiring Editor of the respected glossy organ he'd solicited was ill pleased, & the organ didn't buy the thing after all, although Ted of Atlanta's cable H.o.M.N.* [*Hit or Myth Network*: the author] *bought the rights to Ovid's overall concept for one of those 'Remembering Sissee'-type tribute specials that lets you use a whole lot of public-domain footage over & over again under the rubric of Encomium; & even though 'Remembering Sissee' didn't actually ever make it onto the wire (Hit or Myth was by then processing 660 myth-recombination concepts per diem), its Option Payment to Ovid was far from dishonoring, & between that & the respected glossy organ's Kill Fee Ovid the Obtuse ended up making out okay on the whole thing; don't you worry about Ovid.*[210]

By presenting Ovid as the ruthless journalist who will do just about anything, including manipulating the story itself just so it sells, Wallace circles back to the beginning of *Tri-Stan* and draws attention to its actual subject matter: the corruptive energies of mass media. In this environment, the truth is of minimal significance and it is not important *what* actually happened and how the events are connected. What is important, is the *how*; the method with which the consumer's attention is summoned to convince him to spend money and buy some form of access to further details. His

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[208] *Tri-Stan.* p. 247.
[209] *Tri-Stan.* p. 252.
[210] *Tri-Stan.* p. 254-255.

addiction to shopping is being exploited to the maximum. *Tri-Stan* exposes the mechanisms behind the exploitation and captures the cutthroat atmosphere of an industry that is solely oriented on the amount of profit it can extract from the viewer.

Wallace's protagonists are superficial, profit hungry, manipulative creatures who will do anything for a piece of the rich mass-media cake. With a plot located in the center of U.S. television industry, Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley, and the abbreviated jargon of a show script, Wallace creates a quick paced atmosphere that resembles behind the scenes of a TV production. In the manner of a *Roman à clef,* here also the reader is able to identify characters and authorities from real life. Suspiciously familiar sounding names such as *Tri-Stan* and acronyms such as *SNN* are assigned double values. *Tri-Stan* is not only the name of Agon M. Nar's production company but can also easily be associated with Tri Star—a real life movie production business—and very loosely linked to the figure of Tristan in the tale of Tristan and Isolde.[211] The same applies to SNN (Satyr-Nymph Network), the name of the new television network. It not only resembles the all-too-familiar *CNN* (Cable Network News) but it also alludes to Greek mythology. In full intertextual manner, names of ancient mythological figures are reconfigured into contemporary names: Sissee Nar can be easily recognized as Narcissus. The same applies to Ovid the Obtuse, which refers to Ovid of ancient Rome, and Reggie Ecko as Echo of *Narcissus and Echo.* And just as in the ancient myth, Ovid is the one who reports the story of Sissee Nar and Reggie Ecko, the victims of the system: Sissee, because she succumbed to its enticing yet completely misguiding promises, and Reggie because despite recognizing the manipulation he still took part in it. The mythological reference continues in the composition of *Tri-Stan,* which follows the pattern of a Greek tragedy with a contemporary setting. Well-known media figures are stylized into gods, demigods and other mythological characters, and are involved in a plot that is loosely based on the myths of Narcissus and Echo. Wallace's technique of projection not only stresses the ficticiousness of the story, but also demonstrates the mechanics of myth creation rooting it in the desire of the contemporary U.S. society to achieve a certain degree of significance within history:

> *[...] a nation whose great informing myth is that it has no great informing myth, familiarity equaled timelessness, omniscience, immortality, a spark of the vicarious Divine.*[212]

In this context television is viewed as the myth-creating instance:

> *There existed today, the three sham-Stans sang, an untapped national market for myth. History was dead. Linearity was a cul de sac. Novelty was old news. The national I was now about flux and eternal rerun. Difference in sameness. "creativity"—see for instance Nar's recombinant own—now lay in the manipulation of received themes. & soon, the C# siren Foretold, this would itself be acknowledged, this apotheosis of static flux, & be itself put to the cynical use of just what it acknowledged, like a funnel that falls through itself.* ***"Soon, myths about myths"*** *was the siren's prophecy & ling-range proposal.*

[211] However, it appears to be only for its historical gravity that the name Tristan is alluded to. None of the protagonists resemble in any form the medieval Tristan.
[212] Same.

TV shows about TV shows. Polls about the reliability of surveys. [...] 'I.e., the Medium would handle the Message's P.R.[213]

With the viewer's attention as the only source of business and the sole reason for its existence, television is forced to hold on to this attention at all times. The goal is to maximize the time of product offering because only then is it possible to generate the necessary funds. In order to guarantee a constant growth of income, television will go as far as inventing its own message that will provide an uninterrupted flow of captivating images. Consequently, the consumer is blinded with useless stories that create an illusion of significance but in truth only keep him watching—means to continue generating profits. The viewer unknowingly becomes the victim of televisual manipulation that is not motivated by charitable feelings toward a myth-less society, but rather by the economic possibilities evolving from a nation whose masses turn to television as their myth. Agon M. Nar's network suits the need perfectly because its endless repetition of programming makes it familiar to the viewer and creates the illusion of the so sought-after sense of timelessness and immortality:

[...] the Satyr-Nymph Network:... basically an ingeniously simple 24-hr interspliced loop of mythopoeia harvested from the gravid stockrooms of the BBC's antically antique '60s & targeted at that uneasily neoclassical demographic class that already consumed reruns without even chewing.[214]

Wallace translates the unceasing economic pressure as it is expressed through time as the industries' greatest asset, into a quick paced narrative that does not leave any room for formal considerations. Elaborate language takes too much time that the industry does not want to spend because that would mean getting less selling message out into the ether and consequently less money. He mocks the situation with almost impenetrable lines that counteract the quick pace with a surface that is packed with linguistic play. It blinds the reader with overlong, extremely involved and lexically rich sentences diverting his attention from the actual plot. The superficial character of the industry is translated into a conglomerate of words that defies easy and quick consumption:

Here the prefeminist epiclete Ovid the O. usurps & dithyrambicizes—without credit or tribute—the historian Dirk of Fresno's account of S-NN's philosophy, Codependae's invidious dreamsong, Agon M. Nar's onerically inspired bid to launch the greatest kabal network of all BC time—the Satyr-Nymph Network: [...][215]

In allusion to the essay *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,* which identifies television as a major reference of reality for the consumer as well as for the writer, *Tri-Stan* fictionalizes the addictive effects of the medium. Reggie Ecko and Sissee Nar are two victims who, as they seem to enact the script of a television show, represent both sides of the screen. Judged by their lives and their actions, it appears that the behavior of a TV character is the only thing they know, and a tragic ending

[213] *Tri-Stan.* p. 241-242.
[214] Same.
[215] *Tri-Stan.* p. 241.

the only possible outcome.[216] When Reggie forcefully causes their paths to cross, not only Codependae's plot reaches its climax but also the consequences of televisual addiction reach their maximum impact: both characters pay with their lives.

Considering that Wallace's work evolves around the question of how it is possible to remain human in a world ruled by superficial materialism, *Tri-Stan* is an attempt at an answer by making the background of the television industry visible and by exposing the extent of its manipulation in the service of consumerism. Choice of theme and stylistic device used to convey this statement, make it impossible to deny *Tri-Stan's* postmodern character as understood by Barth. On one hand it combines mythological narrative tradition with a contemporary topic, and on the other it supports this scheme technically with a style that is appropriate for the time and subject matter. Wallace utilizes the ancient myth to introduce and discuss another more contemporary myth. But he also fulfills his own call to defamiliarize the familiar, and so to expose the artificiality of what the reader considers as real. Because the contemporary reader knows everything about television, yet nothing about Greek mythology, his *ignorance* is a perfect tool to create an unfamiliar image. Suddenly the story adopts the character of a fairy tale and its fictionality is restored. *Tri-Stan's* final postmodernist feature is its intertextuality. It represents a very subtle but very present reference to Wallace's predecessors and any reader familiar with the work of John Barth will easily recognize the allusions strewn throughout the story. Beginning with the title as a playful hint at the ancient Greek myth, it also refers to Barth's own take on the same myth in a story titled *Echo*[217] and ends with a direct reference to contemporary critics:

> *Soon, perhaps, respected & glossy high-art organs might even start inviting smartass little ironists to contemporize & miscegenate BC mythos; & all the pop irony would put a happy-face mask on a nation's terrible shamefaced hunger & need: translation, genuine* ***information,*** *would be allowed to lie, hidden & nourishing, inside the wooden belly of parodic camp.*[218]

- ***David Foster Wallace:*** **exploratory fiction**

That television is of great influence on Wallace's work is as obvious as it is inevitable. Because it is an all-present medium in the contemporary world, it is almost impossible to remain out of its reach. While a complete embrace is just as unacceptable as utter rejection, the former would result in imitation while the latter in losing touch with present reality. Wallace chooses the golden middle and follows a philosophy of pointing at the influence and making the reader aware of the situation. In its sarcastic exposure behind the scenes of the television industry, *Tri-Stan: I Sold Sissee Nar to Ecko* is an example of a thematization of the medium. Its imitation of a

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[216] Reggie Ecko has become a drug addict because he lost his job within the industry to Agon M. Nar, Sissee's father. Now he spends all his time watching television and that's where his second addiction begins: Sissee's show. On the other hand, there is Sissee who was born into the artificial world of the industry and who does not know anything else but the artificially inflated aesthetics of television. Under those circumstances it is no surprise that she becomes obsessed with cosmetic surgery—just like everybody else in San Fernando Valley.

[217] Barth. John. *Echo* in *Lost in the Funhouse, Fiction for print, tape, live voice.* In contrast to Wallace, Barth created a metatext based on the ancient myth of Narcissus and Echo that intended to illustrate playfulness within narrative voice and time frame.

[218] *Tri-Stan.* p. 242.

tragic soap opera-like plot and its abbreviated language of a show script capture the cutthroat character of that industry. What makes the reader aware of the fictitiousness of the story, and so of the fictitiousness of his surroundings, is the mythological backdrop that contributes to the atmosphere of unfamiliarity. That the technical aspect of the composition does not remain untouched by televisual influence is, for Wallace, just a matter of historical consistency since he sees literary postmodernism as the originator of pastiche, digression and quick cut. Television only utilizes those devices for its own purposes.

Out of the awareness that meditated reality needs a relevant form of expression, Wallace's work reflects a conscious discussion of contemporary writing techniques, focusing on postmodernism as the approach that is most familiar to this generation. The discourse takes place in theory as well as in practice, and often large portions of a piece are dedicated to his postmodern predecessors. In *Westward,* for example, John Barth and the Funhouse are a central motif and subject of deconstructive scrutiny. Just like Barth, Wallace is interested in the playful experiment and is willing to give up his personal style of writing, which he claims not to have in the first place, for the sake of the appropriate narrative form. But unlike Barth, whose focus was strictly directed onto the text, Wallace is also interested in the reader, making sure that he does not feel discouraged by the experimental character of a story. It is always clear that his fiction is made for the reader and that it intends to include him, not push him away.

In *Westward* one of the characters describes Prof. Ambrose's work as un-get-throughable, too smart and too clever for its own good, indulgent, cerebral but infantile, lacking heart and value, even masturbatory. It is a harsh assessment for a piece of fiction. Yet, ironically enough the same attributes can be applied to Wallace's own work. Emotionally cold, sarcastic and high-minded appear to be the appropriate descriptors—which raises the question for the reason to present the reader with a body of work that is as impenetrable as it is discouraging to read. The answer lies in the role fiction carries for Wallace. For him, it has a higher responsibility toward the reader than providing him with soothing mainstream entertainment. Fiction has the responsibility to console the reader in his suffering as a human being in a world that has become an extremely hostile and materialist environment. Wallace sees the present day reality as determined by a materialism that is controlled and perpetuated by mass media, especially by television, and fiction is there to show the reader that he is not the only one suffering from the exposure to this environment. The influence of television on the human being, and the quest for the best possible form to express this influence, are at the center of Wallace's poetics. His work evolves around the social function of fiction, its significance for the reader in a world that is dominated by television and a culture that is devoid of structure. Yet, consolation is not the only extractable value that should be provided by fiction. It should also remind the reader that his daily reality is strongly influenced by television and that he should continue to question this reality to maintain his capability to distinguish between TV-*meditated* and *unmeditated* reality. Wallace's fiction is exploratory, driven by the need to look behind the scenes of this materialist machinery to uncover the results and consequences of its manipulation. The explorations show the discomforting image that lies beneath a superficial mask. It is perceivable throughout his entire body of work and it is reflected in the choice of themes as much as in the choice of narrative technique.

The question whether Wallace's work can be called postmodernist or neo-realist or whether it can or should be qualified at all, appears superfluous considering

his ongoing efforts to offset this qualification with a fiction that is various and unruly. Yet, if a critical consciousness of his surroundings and active reaction to them in his work is what defines a postmodern writer, then David Foster Wallace is most definitely a postmodernist. Even if it is difficult for him to admit—for in his eyes postmodernism has reached its limits and become redundant—there are features in his work that show that its tools contribute significantly to his narrative process. Wallace considers sarcasm, parody and absurdism as suitable features to strip off masks to reveal the unpleasant reality behind them. He explores metafiction as a tool that has immense influence on the relevance of a story. In *Octet* pro and contra of metafiction is evaluated in very great detail, and at the same time employed within the piece to demonstrate the point. Additionally, there is the general disjointedness and a lack of homogeneity perceivable not only within individual stories but also within the collection. And it is exactly this incoherence that gives his work the playful and experimental character, and exposes Wallace's goal to advance his art to a next stage. It is not clear yet what that stage is, but what *is* clear is the fact that instead of settling for established forms, he is in a constant search for something new. Wallace is obviously very aware of his position as a member of the next generation of writers who have to deal with what postmodern rebellion of earlier years has left behind as he displays visible attempts to take the next step and develop his own set of narrative values. Commenting on and questioning postmodernism's devices while actively employing them in his fiction, shows that continuous discussion that Lyotard exposed as a major feature of postmodernism. In this context, postmodernism is not an empty rebellion that merely exposes a problem without providing a solution. Its answer is mobility, the active process of deconstruction and re-construction, a constant up and down of establishing rules and overthrowing rules for the sake of establishing new ones. Wallace's resistance to being qualified as a postmodernist writer is rooted in his refusal to give in to something that already exists, to take over old rules. He sees himself as a self-aware but individual artist dedicated to his craft and only to the story and nothing else. This dedication is executed in a fiction that is dominated by a wide variety of form that only answers to the demands of the story, not to the writer's established style. For Wallace, story goes beyond technique and he would abandon rigid rules of technique for the sake of the story, viewing this act as the only way to remain flexible and independent from trends and fashions. As a result every piece is different and almost impossible to classify. The goal is to prove that fiction is a *living transaction between humans,* constantly adjusting to its surroundings and to the needs of the story. As long as the reader gets to carry away a benefit, Wallace considers his goal as fulfilled, even if it is not always clear what the benefit of a particular piece is. The extractable value for the reader is the result of his active involvement with a story that in turn is a link to the writer's consciousness—a link that is essential if consolation is the goal. What some critics view as a struggle with coherence and obstructed imagination,[219] as reduced to language and vocal impersonation and as free of context,[220] can also be understood as a way of capturing the reader's attention and challenging his intellect. Those technical aspects, in conjunction with Wallace's thematic choices, achieve the desired effect on the reader. This fiction does not intend to please or entertain, it is meant to challenge the reader and make him become aware of it.

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[219] LeClair. Tom. *The non-silence of the un-lamblike* in *The Nation.* New York. July 19,1999.

[220] Passaro. Vince. *Unlikely Stories: The quiet renaissance of American short fiction.* in *Harper's Magazine.* NY. August 1999.

However, this ongoing challenge also presents a test for a work of fiction. As a creature of habit, the human being handles the insecurities of daily life by counteracting them with something that is safe, stabile, familiar, soothing and comforting—with something that *only* gives and does not demand anything in return. Consequently the reader demands pleasure, relaxation, comfort and security from a piece of fiction. This is a demand that is easily satisfied by mass-produced popular fiction that does not require any intellectual work. And herein lies the risk for a writer: his need for approval or *reader sympathy*. Because the writer stands in direct competition to television's easily digested stories, he has to decide what is more important for him: the sympathy of as many readers as possible or the uniqueness of his message. Giving in to the temptations of mass media and creating a fiction that appeals to a mass market also means giving up the power over the creative process and leaving it to the reader to decide about what to write. Yet this step, if taken, bears the potential danger of developing a hostile attitude toward the reader since the writer gives up control over his work. Confusing messages, pretended and later disappointed serious intentions, complex compositions that are difficult to follow are one way of expressing this hostility. Making the reader subject of useless jokes, gags and empty expressions is another. Wallace's play with form, language and structure often suggests that he took this step and gave up the power over his work. It often appears to be exactly that, just a game—an expression of his playfulness. No more, no less. But then the question remains: why in the end does the reader still feel touched, addressed and involved in some strange way that is difficult to define, yet clearly perceptible? The answer lies in the fact that Wallace's work is first and foremost dedicated to the human being. It is made for the reader intending to bring him relief and consolation. Everything else exists in service of this goal. *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, as experimental or in his words *exploratory* as they are, are still about human beings and their suffering.

5.
Neo-Realism: in touch with life.

Globalization, computer age and mass media are some of the strongest influences in contemporary life. The 1990s experienced a growth of immense corporate power, a demand for political correctness and a loss of privacy and individuality, raising the question of how does the human being cope and respond to the increasing flood of influences, thus shifting the focus from the world around to its effect onto the individual. In this context, it is legitimate to assess American short fiction of the 1990s as an attempt to determine the mode of expression for the shift. Realism, in its position as a well-established narrative style, offers an adequate starting point for any further analysis.

Definitions of realism range from characterizing it as a late 19th century European and American movement in prose, fiction and drama, to a style that uses techniques, scenes and local effects to produce verisimilitude in a work of fiction, and to a tool used to illustrate underlying economic and social forces in the early 20th century. This last, rather political aspect seems to have lost its power in the days of globalization and apparent ideological freedom. However, together, all three contexts constitute a mode of writing that seeks to reflect the actual world as it happens around us in its social, political and cultural state.[221] While verisimilitude, reportorial representation and mimesis were originally employed to describe the lives of underprivileged social classes, currently those tools intend to provide an account of individual experience made while searching for a way to handle the ever changing and challenging events inflicted upon a human being by everyday reality. This reality consists of multicultural experience, existential and religious conflicts, family relations and social and ethnic relationships. In an attempt to qualify the shift of objective, the term neo-realism is frequently introduced. Considered by some critics as a mere progression of realism, in a minimalized and self-examining form, and by others as a link between post-modernism and realism, neo-realism appears to be an adequate concept for a shift that suggests the establishment of new narrative connections.

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[221] Originally a counter-movement to mid 19th century romanticism, realism has had an enduring and significant impact on fiction ever since it appeared on the literary stage. French realism had the function to truthfully show the observed, often gloomy, facts of 19th century life.[2] In its reaction to the overstated sensitivity and highly idealized representations of romanticism, realism intended to produce the effect that life is represented, as it seems to the common reader[3]. Its intention was to depict everyday life of a place or period through accurate documentation, sociological insight and accumulation of details. This reflection was established and supported by characters that could easily be found in real life, and by settings located within a specific era and cultural group. Realism retained its antagonizing character onto various literary developments from the late 19th throughout the 20th century. Toward the end of the last century, this role has undergone yet another transformation and moved away from counteracting a present mode of writing toward providing a solid base for upcoming literary forms.

While realism's sociological and political ideology originally intended to depict underlying economic and social forces and to imply an ideal socialist world, these ideals are now outdated and the question is: to what does literary realism of the 1990s react and what does it want to display? First and foremost, it is the human being in its response to this environment as well as to other humans who are in the same position of keeping up the pace with an ever faster-turning world. The quest for ones own place in this reality is a struggle with an often extreme experience, and the writer's task and dilemma is how to capture this struggle. It is a dilemma, since the author's duty of stepping back and writing about this increasingly intense world is impeded by the fact that he is also part of this environment and stepping outside is nearly impossible.

Philip Roth was among the first to realize the absurdity of the situation and addressed it as early as 1961 in an essay called *Writing American Fiction.*[222] To him:

> *The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.*[223]

Roth felt constantly discouraged by the incredibility of every day events, sensing a disconnectedness from reality and apprehension to approach it on an imaginative level. However, the alternative of turning away from reality would mean loosing subject, lacking material and would inevitably lead to the complete cease of literary output. What remained was the head-on confrontation of the question of how to cope with the challenges and to continue writing. How complex it has become to handle this reality, finds expression in literary figures who live in specially created worlds that stand as metaphors for what it means to be human. A turn to the self as the only real thing in the world signifies, for Roth, the awareness that the only fact that matters is existence itself, and that denial would lead to nothingness—an entirely unacceptable option. However, he questions the prospects of a literature that is based on the self as the only reason for existence. For him, this kind of self is not part of reality. Rather it is detached from it and excluded from society. Yet, as society and reality are progressive entities, more than thirty years later the question whether contemporary writers still have the same problem and whether reality is still outdoing their talents, appears less relevant than the question of how they harness the continually increasing extreme experience.

While Roth recognized the dilemma and initiated the quest for solutions, some twenty years later, Tom Wolfe provided a response that demonstrated an embrace of reality to the extreme. New Journalism's focus on real life events was as sobering to the public as it was provocative to literary circles. Wolfe's[224] way out of the crisis required a complete embrace of the surrounding world and its utilization as a premiere source. Not as much talent as material, the *what* represented the writer's biggest problem, and the question of theme was far more imminent than that of technique. In Wolfe's eyes, *the surrounding world provides enormous choices* and a writer should

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[222] Roth. Philip. *Writing American Fiction in Commentary.* American Jewish Committee. March 1961. 31:3. p. 223-233.
[223] Roth. P. p. 224.
[224] Wolfe. Tom. *Stalking The Billion-Footed Beast: A literary manifesto for the new social novel* in *Harper's Magazine.* New York. November 1989. p. 45-56.

embrace the possibilities.[225] While considering the American society of the 1980s as difficult to define because it was constantly undergoing profound changes—it was chaotic, random, discontinuous, absurd, varied and complicated—he still encouraged young writers to take the challenge and *wrestle* reality into their fiction. That this is often easier said than done, is an experience made by his successors who often view the endless possibilities of the real world as rather inhibiting to the creative process.

Jonathan Franzen for instance voiced these reservations in an essay with the programmatic title *Why Bother?*[226] In it, he addresses the feelings of an author whose environment, as part of its effort to satisfy the commercial demands of the book-market, appears to dictate what his art should be about. This situation has a strong inhibiting effect on creativity, and often results in a complete disconnectedness from reality and total abandonment of literary work—a *why bother?* attitude. For Franzen, Wolfe's high expectations toward the writer are not supported by a reason to follow them. Rather, he follows Roth's position and more than thirty years later still expresses the same despair about American fiction that Roth did in 1961—identifying television as a writer's strongest competitor. In its ability to dictate to the consumer what his needs are, it has a much more immediate impact on culture than a work of fiction.[227] The author has difficulty keeping up with TV's pace as it continues to confront the public with always up-to-date and provocative news, making it almost impossible to engage with an audience that is less and less interested in fiction. With often critical and unpleasant subject matters, fiction's offerings are not as attractive as a quick paced TV show or the juicy revelations of the rainbow press. Yet, for Franzen as for many fiction writers, the confrontation with the unpleasant side of real life is the main function of literature. In times of political or religious fanaticism it is a form of opposition because it points at what has gone wrong, showing the public an unfavorable reflection of itself. It goes under the surface and engages with reality in a very intense and straightforward way:

> *[...] novelists are preserving the tradition of precise, expressive language; a habit of looking past surfaces into interiors [...] realism preserves access to the dirt behind the dream of Chosenness [...]*[228]

Even if fiction does not have the power to change things, it certainly raises enough questions to make the reader aware that the reality that surrounds him is not as perfectly smooth and optimistic as the cultural and political system wants him to believe. In the end, Franzen returns to Wolfe's demand to *wrestle the beast,* suggesting that if an author intends to continue writing and to maintain his creativity he should not remove himself from the outside world. To the contrary, in order to

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[225] Ironically enough, Wolfe also admitted that present day reality did not leave much space for creativity as it provided the most surprising turns itself. The advantage of a fiction writer in this situation however, is that as opposed to the journalist who is obligated to report in exact detail and according to what has really happened, the fiction writer—while using the tools of journalism—is free to play with the facts, leave out or add things, arrange them in a way that serves his intentions best. This game has a twofold effect: first it creates verisimilitude, in Wolfe's eyes an important factor when aiming to catch the reader's attention and absorb him; second it gives the writer the freedom to create new links, points of view and to focus on details other than those of the journalistic report.

[226] Franzen. Jonathan. *Why Bother?* in *How To Be Alone: Essays.* Farrar, Strauss, Giroux. New York. 2002. p. 55-97.

[227] That he is not the only one with this opinion should be clear after the discussion of David Foster Wallace's essay *E Unibus Pluram* in the previous chapter.

[228] Franzen. p. 35.

allow his creativity to expand, he should not estrange himself from his surroundings but rather participate in it so his work can thrive on the contrast between the outside and his own fictional world. This imaginary environment will allow him to place the outside world problems within it and to voice his criticism. Franzen is only one of many representing the young generation of writers. Ken Foster, Lorrie Moore, David Foster Wallace, Rick Moody, to name just a few, are also among those whose work contributes to the development of new tendencies in fiction.

Vince Passaro[229] presents an updated review of the state of contemporary short fiction in the U.S. of the 1990s characterizing it as a *narrative slop*—as something that is an almost reckless irony and a refusal to bow to the craft of literary writing.[230] As fiction writers stopped orienting themselves on Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, Henry James or even Hemingway as role models, their fiction became smart—started moving away from a strict definition and going back to variety, experimentation, biting irony and intellectual challenge. While in a state of transition, the short story is not as glamorous as in the days of Hemingway or Fitzgerald, but it is not completely forgotten either. And although its original experimental character—its openness and great range of formal expression—have temporarily become rather mild and unassuming, it is not deteriorated. Going through a process of renewal, the short story presents the reader with *some of the best and formally most innovative* short fiction ever[231] and the following discussion of *The KGB Bar Reader*[232] is a relevant example for this development. With subject matters ranging from social and family relationships, emotional conflicts, sexual abuse and personal failure to loneliness and death, it takes the reader on a kaleidoscopic journey into the less glittery yet, all too familiar aspects of human life. Brutally candid descriptions of events involve the reader immediately within the protagonist's emotional aura, and a very personal tone of voice creates a certain inclusive privacy. The goal appears to be to shock the reader with first-hand insight into the cruelty of a world that he also considers his own. Passaro ascribes this intensity to a new sensibility that shows high interest in human psychology, individual biography, religion, sex, blood and history. Since short fiction of the 1990s is smart, varied, experimental, urbane, funny, ironic, idiosyncratic in voice and expansive, it is not interested in average, even banal situations and events happening in the neighbor's garden or at the supermarket. Rather, it wants to peak under the polished surface, aiming at the disturbances and outrageous occurrences of crime, sex, drugs, secret fantasies, unfulfilled dreams, behavioral disorders and many other topics. Often denied existence, in the end they are an inevitable part of each single individual. Criticism is directed at a society that is superficial and self-involved; a society that completely ignores the human need for emotional warmth because it does not know how to react to the instability it creates. In sum, realism of the 1990s aims at the shortcomings of present day reality, and differs from previous forms in its focus on the effects of this world onto the internal world of a human being.

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[229]Passaro. V. *Unlikely Stories: The quiet renaissance of American short fiction* in *Harper's Magazine*. NY. August 1999.

[230] Passaro. p. 84.

[231] This renewal began in the 1980s, after an era of decline in the 1970s when it became a commercial enterprise following the supply and demand rules of the publishing market. More complex and intellectually sophisticated stories, full of symbolism and a memoir like tone, began appearing again. They were psychologically rich, confrontational, less obviously realistic and disturbing in outbreaks of violence. Passaro sees many of those features carried over into the 1990s, but he also sees some new characteristics: emotional intensity and extreme experience take a significant part in the newer stories.

[232] Foster. Ken [Ed.] *The KGB Bar Reader*. Quill William Morrow. New York. 1998.

5.1
KGB Bar Reader: fiction of loss

Ken Foster's collection of short fiction titled *The KGB Bar Reader*[233] is in his own words *a representation of what writing is: an act of curiosity and generosity.* What inspires the author to write fiction is his willingness to share something about himself that others would consider not worthy or not suitable of sharing. While the subject matter may be very individual, the one common motif is the universal story of someone losing something: one's innocence, one's faith or hope, a person or anything else that a human being considers valuable. Besides fulfilling Ken Foster's rather personal agenda, *The KGB Bar Reader* is also an example for the way a young generation of writers translates the increasing cruelty and brutality of daily life into fiction. The result are stories that plunge straight into reality, *wrestle the beast* and are not shy to expose the ugly side of life. Viewing this life as a single source of pain, they express this pain in extreme images. As a social commentary, this kind of fiction does not withdraw from the reader and his realities by experimenting with forms, but rather is very much in connection with life as it is felt. It seeks strong reader identification through verisimilitude and plausibility, through stylistic simplicity, minimalism and focus on details. A close reader-protagonist relationship is established when familiarity with incidents and situations is used as a means to draw the reader in, and is facilitated through the exposure to a multitude of details. Involving the reader emotionally with the protagonist, those incidents are not simply received but encountered. In this type of fiction protagonists are almost eaten alive, sexually molested, emotionally neglected, lonely, hopeless and melancholic. Their search for orientation and a place in a cold and hostile world, makes them die or become abusive, self destructive, disillusioned or failures in life, and translates into a fiction that is about the ugly, cruel and brutal side of life. While these stories address a variety of themes, their common denominator is their focus on the individual instead of on a social or cultural group. They look at the different life stages of this individual and at the experience that comes with them. There is a young generation looking for a new point of orientation after losing its innocence. There are those who waste their lives doing nothing, those who run away from it, or those who get too much involved, or not involved at all, and finally those who die. The related experience is always extreme. It is extreme in the choice of event, extreme in its emotional intensity for the protagonist and extreme in the effect it has on the reader. A young man explores the

[233] When Foster compiled *The KGB Bar Reader,* in 1998, his intention was to publish the most memorable pieces of a reading series that was taking place at the *KGB Bar* in New York since 1994. Over the years, this small event has developed from an opportunity for aspiring writers to present their work to the public, to a city-wide known, weekly occurrence with the audience overgrowing the capacity of the bar by a manifold. Those, whose work has not been published yet, had a chance to learn from the public's reactions, and those more seasoned could present their newest pieces. *The KGB Bar Reader* is the result of this success.

boundaries of physical pain by piercing as many parts of his body as possible with as many different objects as possible. There are illegal sexual relations between teachers and students, between mothers and their young sons, between minors and adults. And finally there is death represented by a mother of two who succumbs to a seizure. Stories are radical in their brutal straightforwardness, and not only expose the protagonists but also the reader to significant emotional distress. There are no happy endings—only a disturbing silence and the painful realization that the just-read text is much more a fictionalized reality than actual fiction. In this context it quickly becomes obvious that the line between fact and fiction is floating. The lack of allusion or metaphor directs all attention to the subject matter, and emotional intensity is created through intimacy. Reflective aspects are pushed to the background in favor of an autobiographical character that allows the reader to make his own judgment. For the narrators, these stories represent a mostly painful past; for the reader, they are a reflection of life as a single source of pain—a life that is dominated by cruelty, brutality, sexual abuse, violence, indifference, loneliness, fear and death. Physical pain is an expression of disorientation and emotional neglect, sexual experience is a tool of abuse and manipulation and finally death represents the ultimate source of suffering for those left behind as they struggle to accept it.

- ***Looking for orientation***

As an emotionally and intellectually charged event, the act of initiation is accompanied by a strong sense of insecurity and disorientation. While desperately searching for direction within themselves and the world of adults, subjects explore and push social and personal boundaries. Whether by way of comfort and relief on one hand or the infliction of even more pain on the other, the goal is to conquer the experienced suffering and regain orientation. One extreme reaction is self-inflicted pain as a form of superficial distraction from a psychological state that is far more complex. This pain, whether inflicted by others or through self-mutilation, is often only a tool used to achieve an altered state of mind.

In *A Good German*[234] a young man named Ben attempts to find his own place in life through a series of unconventional steps, which culminate in a bloody act of self-mutilation:

> *He stabs a needle into his nose. The pain is blinding. It tears through his eyes and right into the brain which approaches but does not reach blackout and in wavering tells him this is nothing, this is minor. The hurt he feels just proves the pain isn't big enough to grant an adrenaline rush or the mercy of shock. He needs more. He tears into the flesh below his lower lip and cries out confused with how terrible it is and how amazing and with the ice cube melting as it move up inside him. If he withdraws the needles now, he'll leave puncture wounds, incompletely ravaged flesh, but he can't bear at first to push them through, and anyway, he has more needles. He goes about it methodically, opening one wound and then another, bit by bit until each needle is filled with its share of him. Into his nose, though the needle jams halfway through. Then there's a brief gush of blood. Into his cheek, his eyebrows, though a person cannot do this to himself, not just because of pain which he doesn't feel now, but the blood spilling into his eyes to blind him,*

[234] Lefer. Diane. *A Good German* in *The KGB Bar Reader*. p. 154.

and now he has no grasp, his fingers slick with it, not spurting but pouring, and seeping into his mouth and throat and leaking a little around the needles which for the moment still plug the new holes. From his lower lip, where he's gouged sloppily, it's dribbling and burbling till he sucks it in and swallows and he wants more as though he's forced open some rusty tap and gotten for his efforts only a few gurgles waiting in the line. [...] He stumbles entangled in his fallen pants and through the apartment spotting the rag rug and the linoleum. He should have done this in the tub so that's where he lies down. The sounds coming out of him seem to come from somewhere else and they distract him till pain overwhelms all distraction. Pain shoots his eyes out and shoots to his groin and all the way to his toes. The pain goes so deep, not at all like the razor slash, the cross he draws now across his chest, it's so amazing, so sharp, you don't even feel it. The sting comes later; the blood first makes an outline, a sign, and then a thin red sheet. He tries to force the needles through with both hands. A sharp point emerges inside his mouth, the spike passing through soft tissue and mucous membrane till he can touch it with his tongue. He could jab his tongue, prick it, open it, pull cords through it. Anything is possible. Everything tempts him—his navel, for example, his penis, or the webbing between thumb and forefinger [...] He pinches the flesh, tests it. It's asking for a needle.

It is remarkable to him a body in shock does not shut down but simply goes about its business. [...] (His mind is detached and still working, he can think this. He's a smug automaton, a selfcongratulatory machine that bleeds.)

Then suddenly he's suffering again and there's a time-lag till he understands why the trance is broken:

"Oh my god, what have you done, what are you doing?" Lora is screaming. "That's enough. Ben! Enough!"

But it isn't.[235]

With the gory details of the act, the author not only introduces her conflicted protagonist to the reader but also bridges the gap between them. Ben's almost palpable pain leads the reader to look for an answer to this self-mutilation:

(He is being clawed, ripped open, torn apart. He longs for a wash of endorphins—the word is benign and makes him think of euphoria and of dolphins. Or, failing that, pain distracting him from inner pain.)[236]

What Ben wants is the effect of pain that goes beyond the stage of physical perception. He wants to experience the physiologically induced "high" that would numb his inner suffering caused by the events of a childhood spent with a gang that he refers to as *the Battalion.* Not much is known about the group or its leader, Ned, only that he was their father figure and spiritual instructor with an affinity for guns. At one point they were involved in a criminal activity during which several people were killed, and even after twenty years it is obvious that the incident was a very traumatic experience for Ben:

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[235] *A Good German.* p. 163-165.
[236] *A Good German.* p. 161.

> *When the State sent him to therapy, it was too easy: he chatted about his memories and the pain remained unreachable, without catharsis. The only words he ever stumbles over: "I should have been able to do something." Like everyone else the therapist reassured him: "You were just a child. What could you have done?" "I don't know." After all these years he still didn't know, as inadequate now as ever.* [237]

As memories haunt him he is constantly looking for ways to dull them, trying to occupy his restless mind with various activities. He goes to school to learn languages: Russian, Gaelic, Greek or Turkish—the more complicated the better—but the irony is that as soon as he has mastered a subject, his head begins to buzz again and he needs more distraction. In addition, a deep sense of loneliness creates a need to seek human company. He attends religious services to experience a sense of belonging, as they give him the feeling of being part of something:

> *He went to Sufi gatherings where most people didn't speak English, where he could be greeted, given a glass of tea and a sheepskin to kneel on, be accepted yet never incorporated, he could find the reassurance he craved without the surrender.*[238]

In his despair Ben convinces himself that physical pain is a way of finding himself, not an attempt at self-destruction:

> *This was not self-hatred, he thought. It was a quest for self, a road he wished he didn't have to go alone. He imagines a brotherhood, of people cutting one another with razors, anointing each other's wounds, sharing unacceptable secrets and then accepting them. (Maybe Ned didn't really hate the Jews he killed; he made the women kill them with him so that they could never leave him.)*[239]

He is a young man without direction, a survivor who has to cope with a traumatic experience. Ben's status as a victim of circumstances, allows the reader to establish an emotional connection—as he would feel compassion for a lost child—for someone who is outside of society and unable to re-enter because of his dark and secret past.

Whereas in *A Good German* the protagonist tries to find a way back to his own self and to acceptance from society, in *Hyena*[240] the main character voluntarily abandons a society that is insensitive toward its members. Physical pain is the price of this retreat and is represented in a young woman whose semi-self-inflicted pain is the result of a quest for her own place in the world. Joanna Greenfield tells a story of a Kibbutz volunteer at a wild animal shelter who is mauled by one of her charges—a hyena. It is a brutal unexpected attack that displays the full frenzy of a wild animal in captivity:

> *The mind, I found, is strange. It shut off during the attack, while my body continued to act, without thought or even sight. I don't remember him sinking*

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[237] *A Good German.* p. 155.
[238] *A Good German.* p. 160.
[239] *A Good German.* p. 162.
[240] Greenfield. Joanna. *Hyena* in *The KGB Bar Reader*. p. 206.

his teeth into my arm, though I heard a little grating noise as his teeth chewed into the bone.

Everything was black and slow and exploding in my stomach. [...] I saw at a remove the hyena inside my arm, and my other arm banging him on the head. [...] I tried to pinch his nostrils so he'd let go of my arm to breathe, but he shook his head, pulling me deeper into the cage.

I think it was then that he took the first piece from my arm and swallowed it without breathing, because a terror of movement settled in me at that moment and lasted for months. He moved up the arm, and all the time those black, blank eyes evaluated me, like a shark's, calm and almost friendly. By this time, my right arm was a mangled mess of flesh, pushed-out globs of fat, and flashes of bone two inches long, but my slow TV mind, watching, saw it as whole, just trapped in the hyena's mouth, in a tug-of-war like the one I used to play with my dogs—only it was my arm now instead of a sock. It didn't hurt. It never did. [...]

He came around behind me and grabbed my right leg, and again there was no pain—just the feeling that he and I were playing tug-of-war with my body—but I was afraid to pull too hard on the leg. He pulled the leg up, stretching me out in a line from the door, where I clung with the good arm to the mesh, like a dancer at the bar. It felt almost good, as if the whole thing was nearer to being over. In three moves I didn't feel, he took out most of the calf.[241]

The intensity of this account is generated by the juxtaposition of the details of each individual bite—sending shivers down the reader's spine—and the self-proclaimed cool bloodedness of the protagonist, for whom it is more an out of body experience than a painful attack. While the hyena almost tears her to pieces and only by a hair's breath does she manage to escape and save her life, she still does not hate the animal, does not even blame it for what it did to her. Considering herself as a guest in the animal world, she displays a deep sensitivity toward the laws of the wilderness, viewing the attack as only natural and to some extent predictable:

I had expected the price I paid for Africa to be high. The need that had driven me since I was eight years old had made me willing to risk anything, even death, to be in Africa watching animals. Anyone who works with animals expects to get hurt. You are a guest in their life—any intrusion is a threat to them. It is their separateness that makes them worthy of respect. [242]

The significance of the protagonist's childhood dream of going to Africa becomes apparent when she explains the roots of her fascination. It is a physical disability, a vision impairment that made her turn to the animal world:

Before I was born, my eyes lost their attachment to each other, the instinctive knowledge how to swivel together, how to analyze data in tandem. [...] My eyes do not work like two halves of a whole, and I have no perception of depth, so human faces blend in their background and are unreadable. The unreadable is frightening. [...] I had to learn about emotions, which are subtle

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[241] *Hyena.* p. 211-213.
[242] *Hyena.* p. 218.

and often masked, from animals, who signal theirs so much more clearly, with mane and tail and the position of the body. Human beings were a hazard.[243]

Her inability to perceive her surroundings in three dimensions leads to distrust and outright fear of humans. The distinctive body language of an animal, on the other hand, is significantly less frightening. Its much more defined and clear character is a source of comfort and reassurance, and switching societies from human to animal allows for an easier existence. To her, the animal world is—in its clarity of signals—more honest than the world of humans.

The intensity of her passion for Africa is expressed in the fact that not even the brutality of the incident manages to overshadow the story's romantic atmosphere:

Africa is like no other place on earth, and there is no better place to watch animals. [...] I had wanted to go to Africa since my childhood. [...] I had never wanted to work anywhere else except in Africa [...].[244]

The cruelty of the attack is counterbalanced with poetic, almost Hemingwayan, images of the African landscape setting the significance of the continent itself over a horrifying accident:

Africa smells of nothing but dust, and that dust lingers with sweetness in the nose and like powder on the skin. It comes from everywhere, even the greenest grass, and it fingers into clothing like minuscule parasites. Shirts blossom red or brown, sometimes yellow, with dust; when clapped they puff into a cloud of color, like a dandelion blown adrift. With the wind in my face and the dust drifting over me, I have never felt so clean. [245]
[...]
I had almost died, eaten alive, and I was glad to be alive. [...] The one war wound, the bump that grew where I hit the hyena, still hurt, but I was back in Africa.[246]

Africa is the protagonist's place in the world. Here she is accepted as the person she is, with all her imperfections, and the attack established a permanent link to the wilderness:

The hyena and I were bonded now. Even if someone did come to help, there was still something left to finish between us. I was marked—his.[247]
[...]
An animal trainer told me that once you've been bitten badly enough to limp, even if the limp is almost imperceptible the animals will know, and from then on you are prey, not master.[248]

With *Hyena* Greenfield addresses two sides of a contemporary problem. On one hand, she points at the cruelty of a perfection obsessed society that drives its less

[243] *Hyena.* p. 208-209.
[244] *Hyena.* p. 208-209.
[245] *Hyena.* p. 218.
[246] *Hyena.* p. 219.
[247] *Hyena.* p. 213.
[248] *Hyena.* p. 219.

perfect members away. On the other, she shows the despair with which humans pursue the sense of belonging and acceptance within this society. A membership of this kind requires a prior acknowledgement of an individual existence. Yet, in a world preoccupied with itself, establishing this existence has become increasingly challenging. In a mass culture, individuality is nothing and social status everything.

Novice Bitch[249] shows what drastic measures are taken to overcome the sense of non-existence, and exposes a life that is dominated by loneliness and absence. Here, the 17-year-old Mary Beth who attends a very strict Catholic private school and who lives with her mother, experiences the full extent of parental neglect. In an attempt to overcome the financial defeat after divorce, her mother has turned to breeding dogs instead of dedicating time to her daughter's needs. When she introduces Mary Beth to the *therapy* for overeating, her miserable failure becomes very obvious:

> *When I was fourteen, my mother taught me how to throw up. She'd come home from a New York Kennel Club meeting and found me sprawled and groaning on the family room floor, skirt unbuttoned, legs akimbo, wallowing in a sea of shiny cellophane Little Debbie Snack Cake wrappers. The way she reacted you'd have thought she'd found me doped up and naked with a Puerto Rican boy.*
>
> *After nearly making me beg her to make it better, she dragged me to my feet and pushed me into the bathroom. [...] I had this vision of my mother holding my chin as she fed me spoonfuls of sweet pink Pepto-Bismol, then tucking me into her big bed with a glass of ginger ale. [...]*
>
> *"Here," she said, kneeling in front of the toilet the way we knelt together at mass.*
>
> *"Come on," she said gently, and pulled me down beside her. "There's nothing to be afraid of." [...] "Now, you want that garbage gone, don't you? Because that's what it is right now, just garbage," she said, her voice suddenly hard and purposeful.*
>
> *I nodded again.*
>
> *"Gone forever from your body. You want to feel light and clean, don't you?" she said as though she weren't just teaching me to puke but also offering to wash away my sins.*
>
> *"Of course you do." [...]*
>
> *"Just these two fingers," she directed, holding up her first and middle fingers pressed together. "That's good."*
>
> *So I opened my mouth, leaned over the toilet, and stuck my fingers in my mouth. [...] I gagged, but nothing happened. I was failing her. Hail Mary, I prayed.*
>
> *"Here, let me help you," she said, taking my hand and guiding it into my mouth, my teeth scraping the top of my hand. She was biting her lip, deep in concentration as she pushed my hand further and further until both of my fingers were well down my throat, the tips of my fingers touching my windpipe. She held my hand there, even as I started to gag, my stomach leaping like a trampoline, tears bouncing into my eyes. She let go just in time and everything came up—[...]*

[249] Schappell. Elissa. *Novice Bitch* in *The KGB Bar Reader*. p. 70.

"Don't worry; it gets easier," my mother said, then stood up and straightened her skirt. "You did very well. I'm proud of you." [250]

Ironically enough, Mary Beth remembers this incident as something positive that brought her closer to her mother:

That was the closest we've ever been. That day I felt she saw me. She knew me. She wanted to help me, and I think I loved her then. I can't remember anything else she's taught me other than how to respond to a formal party invitation and when and where you can wear white shoes. Anytime I make myself throw up, I think of her. Sometimes I think, ***See, take that. I am not fat, and I am not a child. I can take care of myself.*** *Sometimes I think,* ***I don't want to be you. I want to be just the opposite of you.***[251]

But, it is not only her mother who fails in her role. Mary Beth's father is just as guilty. He is the rich, invisible always absent figure who never calls, not even on her birthdays, and who keeps sending postcards from vacations he takes without his daughter. It is her father who teaches her absence and that money can fix any problem, even that of emotional neglect:

Blah blah blah. Like he can't call me up? Like he can't pick up the phone and ask me how I am? I haven't heard his voice in weeks and weeks. I run my finger over his big, loopy script, watching my hand move. Is that how his hand moves?

"Be good," he writes.

"Love, Dad," he writes.

I throw the card in the trash, then pick it out. I am so weak.

I think about buying myself a beautiful pair of Italian leather boots with his credit card. He gave me my own charge because he knows how tightfisted my mother can be. [...]

I like using his card; it's like he's buying me things. Sometimes when I'm feeling blue, I'll go shopping. I'll hold up dresses and ask, would he like this? Would he think this looked pretty on me?[252]

Mary Beth translates her longing for her father's affection into sexual escapades with men much older than herself. One of them is Philip, a stockbroker, the most recent man by whom she becomes pregnant. After writing her a check for over $2000 to pay for the abortion, he leaves her to handle the rest. There is also Dr. Andrews, the gynecologist, who performs the procedure and who in his concern about her health plays, rather involuntarily, the part of a father figure. It is in his office that she feels a little bit of the care and attention she would like to receive from her parents:

The first time he asked me if I wanted a nurse to hold my hand during the procedure. He asked if there was someone waiting for me, or should someone call me a cab. I said yes someone was waiting for me, [...] I didn't want the doctor to think I was a slut, or somebody who nobody cared about.

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[250] *Novice Bitch.* p. 72-73.
[251] *Novice Bitch.* p. 74.
[252] *Novice Bitch.* p. 78-79.

The second time he didn't ask me if I wanted a hand-holder; instead he told me jokes. [...]

Today, who knows, maybe Dr. Andrews will sing "Old Man River" to me and accompany himself on harmonica—that would be a nice counterbalance to the drone of machines, the awful sucking sounds. Today when Dr. Andrews asks me about the cab, I'll say, Can't you take me with you? Or, maybe you could just drop me on your way home? [...] I'll tell him my really dumb knock-knock jokes, and he'll ask me if I want to go to the aquarium this weekend to see the seals, and I'll say yes, yes please.[253]

All of Mary Beth's actions are an expression of the desperate need for her parents' attention, and the ultimate symbol of her loneliness is the waiting room at the abortion clinic that—in its cold inhospitality—represents her own life:

The clinic's waiting room is full of slick, uncomfortable orange and yellow plastic chairs, bus station furniture designed to cause discomfort, to make loitering impossible, as if anybody would want to hang out here. The ceiling is low. Overhead one of the fluorescent lights has a bad tube. [...]

I pace for a while. My feet are freezing from the tile floor, so I finally climb up on the table. It's a huge stainless steel table covered with white paper that comes off a giant roll, the kind you used in art class as a kid.[254]

The detailed description of the procedure exposes her sense of guilt about her actions but also a self-accusation of inadequacy as a person:

I lay down, scoot my butt down the table and stick my feet into the icy stirrups. The red-haired nurse comes in and lifts my feet out for a moment, then slides two folded-up paper towels into the stirrups, so they aren't so cold and hard. I don't know what to do with this kindness. I cross my arms behind my head like I'm lying on a tropical beach. I'm casual and cool. Get it out of me, just get it out of me. But when he inserts the speculum and winches me open, when he goes inside me with the tube, my whole body cringes. Before I'd been so relieved, so ready, out out damn spot! Sayonara. [...]

I swear I feel as though something is wrong with me. Mary, give me a sign, I pray. I feel like glass jar spidered with cracks, just waiting to shatter. Do I have to break for Mary's goodness to enter me? What has to happen to make me pure? [...]

At the front desk I pay for the abortion on my father's credit card. I sign my name boldly, and I write on the bottom of the credit card slip, ***Weather is here, wish you were beautiful.***[255]

The note on the slip is the ultimate call for help and attention. By charging this abortion, her third, to her father's credit card she makes him literally and figuratively pay for it. Only once in the course of the narration is there a fleeting glimpse of hope:

"Thank you," my mother says, touching my shoulder like I might think she was talking to somebody else. [...]

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[253] *Novice Bitch.* p. 82-83.
[254] *Novice Bitch.* p. 79-81.
[255] *Novice Bitch.* p. 84-85.

"You'll stay, won't you?" my mother asks. [...] "Please stay; we'll go for ice cream afterwards, my treat," she says like I'm a little kid who can be bribed. [...] "Oh come on, say you'll stay," my mother says. "You'll like it. I know it."

"You don't know what I like," I say in a voice that seems too loud. My head is full of static; my mother's lips are moving but I can't hear what she is saying. She reaches out and grabs my arm and it's funny how she slides to the floor like a rag doll, like I'm pushing her down, but I'm not, I don't weigh anything. I'm just a kid. For a moment she looks afraid of me; then she pulls me slowly into her lap. We're wedged in tight between the toilet and the wall, my feet sticking out of the stall. My mother smoothes my skirt down over my knees. I'm afraid that I'm dying right here on the floor by the toilet. I'm bleeding to death. I want to tell my mother something, but I'm not sure what. I listen to the water running in the toilet. It's so soothing. My mother's breath hums in my ear. I think I hear her say, "I'm here."[256]

A straightforward narrative kept in the slightly sarcastic teenager's tone of voice, *Novice Bitch* is an accusation toward a society that perpetuates loneliness. In presenting the girl's disillusion and disappointment, it creates a sense of responsibility in the reader as part of a society that is too preoccupied with its materialist desires to realize that its members are staying behind.

- ***Lost innocence***

Another form of pain addressed in the collection is that imposed by sexual abuse. Here, not the protagonist's desire for pain but the unsolicited suffering that is brought upon him through sexual acts is on display. Stories expose the full scope of the traumatic event leaving the victim, as well as the reader, in its aftermath. Once again absolute openness about the details of the incident and a first person narration create an intimacy that makes the suspicion of autobiographical traces difficult to shake. In *His Confession* [257] a nine-year-old boy is subjected to the trauma of sexual molestation, not once but twice within two days—once at the hands of a stranger and once at the hand of his own mother. Unable to cope with his father's sudden death, the boy's mother has been institutionalized and only occasionally comes to visit at his grandmother's. On one of those visits she takes her son to her hometown, Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, where, mother and son visit a bathhouse:

"I'm frightened," she suddenly says. Her face has lost its color. She goes white, deathly white. "Give me a hug."

I go to her. Swim there. She pulls me against her. My cheek, my mouth, is at her breast. She flattens me against it and sees my embarrassment rise under the water.

Mama smiles and hugs me hard.

"Go ahead," she says, holding my head in her hands, turning it so that my lips are at her nipple. "If it belongs to anyone, it belongs to you." She moves my head back and forth over it. The softest skin, not skin but a strange fabric, a rare silk. My lips are sealed.

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[256] *Novice Bitch*. p. 90.

[257] Homes. A. M. *His Confession* in *The KGB Bar Reader*. p. 166.

She rubs her finger over my mouth, "Open," she says. "Open up. It's only me, it's your Mama. Taste, just taste."[...]

She reaches for my hand. I try to pull away. "No."

"Yes," she says pulling harder on the arm, leading it toward the place between her legs.

"No," I say, more desperately.

My hand goes through a dark curtain, parting velvet drapes. My fingers slip between the lips of a second, secret mouth. My mother makes a sound, a guttural ahhh. I try to pull my hand out but she pushes it back in. pushes it in and then pulls it out; pushes and pulls, in and out, in, out.

"It's your home," she says, one hand at the back of my neck, holding my head against her still, the other on my hand, keeping me there, her leg wrapped around my leg. [258]

Here, the act of sexual abuse is at its most disturbing because it is committed by the one person any child trusts implicitly—the mother. The suffering is twofold: once from the actual sexual act and also from broken trust. While confusion, anger and helplessness intermittently wash over him, the boy gradually realizes the wrongness of what happened and, epiphany-like, experiences a change in his own person:

Right there at the table, I am growing, turning more complex. I push some things down and let others come to the surface. There is no point to certain things. I am different from these people and will always be different. I love Mama and I hate them. I hate Mama and I hate myself. I hate myself. I am a bad boy.[259]

[...]

I am a boy, still a boy. Tired boy. Stunned boy. A boy who has just killed some part of himself.[260]

For the first time the narrator becomes aware of his own existence and personality, and the fact that he recognizes how inappropriate the incident was, makes him a conscious human being and an adult. The ordeal continues with the second act of molestation that occurs, once again, in the bathhouse:

A man comes up behind me, touches me. [...] He rubs his hands over me, taking the sheet down. He touches and pretends not to touch. He is over me and he is on me. I'm being laid upon. [...][261]

Yet, as disturbing as this event may be, it loses its power when a few days later the boy's mother dies in a car accident suddenly leaving him to handle on his own the effects of everything that happened:

Mama is dead.

The telephone rings, Grandma answers it, listens then hangs up, turns to me and says, "She went over, off the road at the panoramic view, by the steakhouse. She's dead."

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[258] *His Confession.* p. 172-173.
[259] *His Confession.* p. 176.
[260] *His Confession.* p. 177.
[261] *His Confession.* p. 180.

A bomb has been dropped. We're all dead only I don't know it yet. There is nothing left. I am alone, all alone. She has left me here with this woman who will keep me only because it would be more embarrassing not to.

The howling begins. A wail. A siren that never goes off, only grows distant and then more near, a siren that warbles within me, deafening me. And when they ask, I tell them I am an orphan raised from birth by my grandmother, my mother's mother. Orphan.[262]

Her death shatters his already fragile world and the realization that he is an orphan has the impact of a lethal bomb explosion. The sense of abandonment and responsibility becomes particularly overwhelming with the recognition that he cannot expect any support form his family:

That my family, my mother's family, never again mentioned her by name, never offered any explanation, was a detail I took as proof of my guilt, my own sick sense that I played part in things. That nothing was offered kept me from asking, kept me convinced that they knew, they all knew—it was my fault. At nine, it did not occur to me that it might have been their guilt, the undeniable idea that something in their actions had caused this horrible end. At nine, I was not so smart; I was only crazy with sorrow, furious that I'd been put up to such a thing. [263]

With this is cruel initiation, Homes initially evokes anger and disgust in the reader over the impact of the events on an innocent child's life and the damage they cause to his emotional make up. Later, this sensation is overcome by compassion invoked by the open and pure narrative voice, that of a nine-year-old child creating an atmosphere of innocent intimacy and anonymity. While the boy remains nameless and the only concrete information is provided in the geographical location of the setting: Morgan County Bathhouse in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, the first person narration still indicates a certain autobiographical quality. By doing so, not only is another level of suffering added, but also the line between fact and fiction is blurred—shifting the narrative toward fictionalized reality and away from straight fiction.

- ***Wasted life***

The most definite source of pain in human life is death. While its effect on the dying is finite, it is the individual way of processing death by those left behind that finds its way into fiction. In *Demonology*[264] a young man recounts the life and sudden death of his sister, characterizing it as the misery of a single mother of two, an alcoholic and divorcee who was never able and who probably also never wanted to gain full control of her existence. The narrator draws an image of a tired and worn out woman who is overwhelmed with a chaotic life in which she struggles to survive:

They came in bursts of fertility, my sister's kids, when the bar drinking, the home-grown dope-smoking, or bed-hopping had lost its luster; they came with

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[262] *His Confession.* p. 181.
[263] *His Confession.* p. 166.
[264] Moody. Rick. *Demonology* in *The KGB Bar Reader.* p. 285.

*shrill cries and demands—little gavels, she said, instead of fists—**Feed me! Change me! Pay attention to me!**—[...]*[265]

Puzzle-like paragraphs, narrated in a matter-of-factly, calm and sarcastic voice provide a retrospective of this banal life, gradually tainting the image until the time of her sudden death:

> *[...] and now the intolerable part of the story begins—with joy and excitement and a church interior.*[266]
> *[...]*
> *Out of nowhere. All of a sudden. All at once. In an instant. Without warning. In no time. Helter-skelter. **In the twinkling of an eye.** Figurative language isn't up to the task. My sister's legs gave out, and she fell over toward my niece's desk, by the door, dislodging a pile of toys and dolls (a Barbie in evening wear, a poseable Tinkerbell doll), colliding with the desk, sweeping its contents off with her, toppling onto the floor, falling heavily, her head by the door. My niece, startled, rose up from under covers. [...]*
> *My sister started to seize. [...]*
> *My sister's hands balled up. Her heels drumming on the carpeting. Her muscles all like nautical lines, pulling tight against cleats. Her jaw clenched. Her heart rattling desperately. Fibrillating. It was a conventional seizure, she was unconscious for this part—maybe even unconscious throughout—because of reduced blood flow to the brain, because of the fibrillation, because of her heart condition; which is to say that my sister's **mitral valve prolapse**—the technical feature of her **broken heart**—was here engendering an arrhythmia, and now, if not already, she began to hemorrhage internally. Her son stood in the doorway, in his pajamas, shifting from one foot to the other [...]. Her daughter knelt at the foot of the bed, staring, and my sister's boyfriend watched, as my poor sister shook, and he held her head, and then changed his mind and bolted for the phone.*[267]

In *Demonology,* Moody confronts the reader with the agony of death by describing the seizure in great detail and so presenting the sister's last minutes as the culmination of a life that in its demands simply overwhelmed her. The story's collection of snapshots, acts as an elongated exposition followed by a quick climax of her death, and a metafictional conclusion in which the narrator steps forward and reflects on his work:

> *I should fictionalize it more, I should conceal myself. I should consider the responsibilities of characterization, I should conflate her two children into one, or reverse their genders, or otherwise alter them, I should make her boyfriend a husband, I should explicate all the tributaries of my extended family (its marriages, its internecine politics), I should novelize the whole thing, I should make it multigenerational, I should work in my forefathers (stonemasons and newspapermen), I should let artifice create an elegant surface, I should make the events orderly, I should wait and write about it later, I should wait until I'm not angry, I shouldn't clutter a narrative with*

[265] *Demonology.* p. 285.
[266] *Demonology.* p. 292.
[267] *Demonology.* p. 294.

fragments, with mere recollections of good times, or with regrets, I should make Meredith's death shapely and persuasive, not blunt and disjunctive, I shouldn't have to think the unthinkable, I shouldn't have to suffer, I should address her here directly (these are the ways I miss you), I should write only of affection, I should make our travels in this earthly landscape safe and secure, I should have a better ending, I shouldn't say her life was short and often sad, I shouldn't say she had her demons, as I do too.[268]

The last paragraph oscillates between two functions: first it is a shift of narrative technique; second it continues to progress the story. What initially looks like a blunt turn to metafiction, in the end still remains the expression of a brother suffering from his sister's death. In this context, the moment of reflection is not a mere exercise in a writer's technical skill, it is also—and mainly so—a narrative tool that serves the overall effect of the story. While stepping forward, the narrator still remains the brother who expresses his anger and suffering over his sister's death. Consequently, this self-reflective last paragraph could then be interpreted as Moody's tendency toward a re-approach of postmodernism since embedding a postmodernist element within a realist story gives it a purpose that goes beyond its established technical function. That the link between neo-realism and postmodernism is not insignificant, finds proof in the attention literary scholars such as Winfried Fluck [269] direct to it.

Fluck's discussion of the re-emergence of realism and the emergence of neo-realism is based on the observation that postmodernism has become too radical in its linguistic play and so, less attractive to a reader who still considers identification with a text as one of his highest priorities. Characterizing American fiction of the 1990s as a mixture of experimental and realistic writing, Fluck views neo-realism as one of its outcomes and the tie between postmodernism and realism. For him, it represents the current cultural situation of growing pluralism in which reality is no longer the source of knowledge. In this context, reality is seen as a sequence of de-contextualized moments dominated by banal or unusual circumstances and the ordinary has no signifying power anymore. Because reality does not have the authority to influence the view culture has of what is valid knowledge, it cannot tell a character and with it the reader what is right or wrong, true or false. It is also not the source of universal knowledge anymore but rather a series of ordinary events. For Fluck, loss of context leads to a more intense aesthetic effect but fails to provide a deeper meaning. Consequently texts are realistic on the surface but don't lead anywhere behind the scenes, and so provide an experience which consists of a game between subversion of what is reality and a promise of depth. A constant back and forth between de- and re-contextualization now attracts the reader's attention. This interplay is provided by postmodernism's liberation from a strong signifier and realism's sharp focus on reality. Realism offers a way of recharging the linguistic surface that is the basis for postmodern aesthetics, and helps introduce new material in order to re-energize the aesthetic experience. Neo-realist writing relies on de-contextualization and de-chirarchization because it changes the aesthetic impact of the literary text and the knowledge it provides. As knowledge changes every day, so does reality—which is now seen as a set of signs that are constantly proliferating. The attempt to order them becomes arbitrary. Consequently contemporary realism seems no longer to be

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[268] *Demonology.* p. 295.

[269] Fluck. Winfried. *Surface and Depth: Postmodernism and Neo-Realist Fiction.* Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Short Fiction. Editions Radopi B. V. Amsterdam - Atlanta, GA. 1992. p. 65-85.

interested in representing reality but in exploring a de-contextualized surface. It reflects the current cultural situation that is characterized as a set of relations within a growing plurality of cultural styles and modes of writing. Fluck sees here a favorable environment for a replenishment of postmodernist writing since its openness, *anything-goes* attitude and the approval of experiment and play that is expressed in features like fragmentation, non-linearity and strong self-reference seem to find their way back into literature. Contemporary stories provide sufficient evidence that the next generation of fiction writers has take up the challenge of a drastically changing world, and has translated it into a fiction that consciously utilizes both, postmodernist and neo-realist tools. Their work focuses on individual human experience, the details of its world and its search for a way to come to terms with it. In an era of electronic media, nuclear age and global political conflicts, it represents the attempt to articulate the purpose and direction of literature. Verisimilitude, simplicity and plausibility allow the reader an easy identification on one hand, and on the other provide an intense aesthetic effect that explores a de-contextualized surface while searching for a vision.

Fluck is not the only one to observe a shift. In an attempt to find appropriate terminology for this next step in the development of realism, Malcolm Bradbury discusses neo-realism in the context of a progression of realism. In an essay titled *Neorealist Fiction*[270] Bradbury characterizes its evolution as a history of recurring appearances acting as counter-movements to the predominant mode of writing at a given time. [271] Often viewed as the regulating authority in literature:

> *a ritual of redemptive form laid over chaos*[272] *that appeared on the literary stage whenever creativity and experimentalism started bearing absurd and over-excessive results*

realism found a way out of the crisis through minimalism and self-examination. Bradbury calls upon Cheever, Updike and J. D. Salinger as agents of a deep disquiet contained in contemporary American life. A sense of existential crisis, absurdity and nihilism gave this realism a new turn, and its purpose was not to mirror the outer world as much as to:

> *[...] search for a vision that could relate an oppressed response to society and history to an awareness of individual loneliness, moral and transcendental*

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[270] Bradbury. Malcolm. *Neorealist Fiction* in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. p. 1126-1141.

[271] In the 1850s it was the over-idealized, over-mystified and over-imaginative development of romanticism that caused a radical turn toward realism. By the end of the 19th century the upcoming experimental and eccentric spirit of modernism gradually replaced its mirror-like reflection of the world. And after WWII, when modernism found itself in a crisis and its revolutionary techniques obscured and exaggerated, realism came to term, representing a post-war atmosphere of human outrage and terror, seeking recovery from totalitarianism, and expressing the voice of oppressed humanism. Yet, after the excitements of modernism, the post-war novel was rather conventional, conformist—neither avant-garde nor intellectual. It was responding to a world of material reward, welfare and urbanized social order in which the human being grew comfortable, passive and indifferent. All this was considered as dulling to the instincts of art, and prompted a search for new avant-garde energy and intellectual excitement. In an attempt to turn away from a once again radically changing and often as stupefying, sickening and infuriating considered reality, fiction turned in a different direction. Writing became disoriented, distanced from all fixed social categories, highly experimental and self-reflexive. The results are called postmodernism and beat literature.

[272] Bradbury. p. 1138.

hunger, and which in its quest for the reality of moral and existential existence often reached extremity or despair.[273]

Neo-realism is also, for Kristiaan Versluys,[274] a progression of realism. It seeks to focus on the details of this world to allow the reader an easy identification. Individual human experience, simplicity, verisimilitude and plausibility are the tools employed to support this process in which bi-cultural experience, religious conflicts, sexual experience, drug use and family relations are addressed. Neo-realist features can be easily found in *The KGB Bar Reader* as its stories expose the undercurrents of society through images full of extremity, pain and despair—focusing on dysfunctional human relations in which individuals are subject to neglect and abuse.

Tom Grimes[275] calls this type of fiction sincere realism and ascribes its evolution to a shift within the American society and culture toward more sensible ways of communication. Since political correctness—initially intended to avoid offending members of a race, a culture or a gender—resulted in restraining many forms of expression to guarded formulations of a message, it became almost impossible to write emphatically about any social or cultural group other than one's own. Empathy was replaced with sincerity as a form of redirecting the focus of fiction from others to oneself. Sincerity—in its intention to re-establish a sense of community through sharing one's victim status with others—resulted in a flood of memoirs and was an expression of the fading sense of self that has been destroyed by mass media. In an attempt to return to individuality, memoirs replaced ironic play with self-exposure and reduced the artistic value of fiction. For Grimes, this self-exposure does not provide new meaning through epiphany; it does not reveal any truths but rather uncovers secrets. Art, however, requires a certain degree of detachment from the subject matter, making it necessary to retain a certain level of ironic play so that truth can be revealed.

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[273] Bradbury. p. 1139.

[274] Versluys. Kristiaan. [Ed.] *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction.* Editions Rodopi B. V. Amsterdam - Atlanta GA. 1992.

[275] Grimes. T. *1990s* in *The Workshop, Seven Decades of the Iowa Writer's Workshop.* p. 554.

CONCLUSION

Postmodernist Neo-Realism or Neo-Realist Postmodernism?

In 1999 Vince Passaro characterized American short fiction as a *narrative slop* and based his statement on the observation that the youngest generation of fiction writers appeared to have lost respect for its predecessors and refused to adhere to the so far known strictures of creating fiction. Listing Marianne Moore, Ken Foster, Rick Moody, David Foster Wallace and many others as the main representatives of a group of writers whose work stands out as avant-garde, irreverent and full of irony for previous works, Passaro's article in *Harper's Magazine* may not be a revelation but it inspires the question of condition and relevance of American postmodernism and its association with neo-realism. The discussion must inevitably begin with Barth's early postmodern metafiction before it transitions to more contemporary forms of postmodernism and realism as presented by David Foster Wallace and other contemporaries. While Barth, as one of the originators of literary postmodernism, fully accepted the funhouse as a model for creating fiction, Wallace questions its role for his generation, indicating the desire to create his own structure.

Throughout history, the genre short story has evolved from Poe's formulaic definition, to May's and Lohafer's rather cognitive universal idea of the more recent past. Entirely independent from the novel, a short story is a short but complex piece of narrative prose intended to create an intense effect on the reader. It lives entirely for the present and looks at what is right in front of it—the naked reality of every day life, deriving its intensity from honesty and straightforwardness. Several characteristic features render the genre a suitable medium for a wide range analysis: first its brief but highly condensed form allows to cover a large but very clearly defined area of studies; second its ability to produce a complex and intense content, full of high intellectual and emotional density within a fairly limited space and time; and third the demand for a strong effect on the reader due to the lack of long term planning and complicated plots is of highest priority. All three features—although very conducive toward experiment with theme and technique—demand at the same time a high level of stylistic expertise. While Passaro views the transformations of the 1990s as a process of rediscovery and starting off to new directions, May observes young writers show strong tendencies toward a mythical phenomenon; a primacy of one particular experience directly and emotionally created and encountered. This experience is very spontaneous, immediate and emotionally loaded.

Within a wider literary context, Poe's efforts toward a definition have significantly contributed to short story's establishment as an independent genre. Yet it is because of experimental writers such as John Barth and David Foster Wallace, that a continuity of progress is guaranteed. Short fiction has reached its most experimental stage so far with postmodernism's demand to reevaluate established ways of literary expression as a reaction to the perceived need to find adequate forms of response to a

rapidly changing world. Literary postmodernism symbolizes the awareness of the transitory character of established rules and traditions—the consciousness that the world continues to spin faster every day, that globalization and mass consumerism make it increasingly superficial and that lack of substance makes it difficult to define who we are. Currently it appears, however, that over the course of almost three decades of pushing its experiments to the extreme and alienating the reader with empty fiction, postmodernism has also reached a point of saturation. While it is true that by becoming one with its surroundings postmodernism is barely perceivable anymore and has lost its avant-garde status, it is has certainly not ceased to exist. There is sufficient evidence for its ongoing presence to be found within contemporary literature, particularly in short fiction of the 1990s, which contains a display of a large variety of postmodern traces. With Wallace as one of the most progressive representatives, young writers seem to have overcome this almost proverbial Barthian exhaustion and have embraced the possibilities offered by their surroundings. They are not as devoid of narrative options as Barth was over thirty years earlier, and their perceived lack seems to have evolved into a process of replenishment with a new reality. This reality is the product of a quick paced world that is dominated by materialism, globalism and technological advance, and out of which evolves a realist fiction that is an amalgam of themes taken from daily life captured with postmodernism's tools. Barth's *Click* as well as Wallace's *Girl With Curious Hair* provide numerous examples for this union. In *Girl With Curious Hair,* Wallace demonstrates a strong awareness and an active discussion of his postmodern heritage before he increases his experimental activity in *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men,* making it a permanent and dominant force of his creative work. Considering this continuous intense involvement with postmodernism, the question should consequently not be whether postmodernism still exists as much as what appearance does it have in the present and how do young fiction writers utilize it within their own work?

While Barth's fiction represents the earliest example of literary postmodernism, it also shows signs of progress toward adjustment to current times revealing continuity rather than stasis. *Click* demonstrates Barth's ongoing effort to fulfill the obligation of a true postmodernist—to keep style and theme of his work up-to-date. This means synchronized with time and circumstances: Mark and Valerie's relationship is an essential aspect of human existence while the concept of hypertextuality creates a link to the surrounding world. Barth's experimental approach to narration is mirrored in the digressing and highly fragmented character of the hypertext in which a cluster-like structure perpetuates the postmodern idea of endless narrative possibilities. Its multi-directionality resembles postmodernist fragmentation and digression, deviating only in its focus on the reader rather than on the creative process itself. The ability to jump between links instead of following a certain flow in the narration, equips the reader with the liberty to choose the next step in the plot development and so empowers him to control the text. While it remains to be seen whether the hypertext is the next up-and-coming genre of fiction, it certainly can be considered as another step in the development of postmodernist pop-fiction as understood by Fiedler. His demand that art remove itself as far as possible from the avant-garde and seek association with consumerism and exploitation as the only way to overcome the gap between elite and mass culture, is certainly fulfilled by hyperfiction. However, fragmentation, non-linearity and discontinuity have been executed almost excessively by Barth in *Lost in the Funhouse*, in *On With The*

Story,[276] in *Click* and in many other pieces long before hyperfiction appeared on the literary stage creating a body of work that would have a strong impact on his successors. David Foster Wallace's two collections of short fiction, *Girl With Curious Hair* and *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men,* for instance are a re-visitation of Barth's funhouse and represent Wallace's own search for narrative options. As present day reality is determined by a materialism that is controlled and perpetuated by mass media, especially by television, his poetics are dominated by the quest to capture this influence on the human being. In this context, fiction's social function and its significance for a reader whose world is shaped by television and a culture that lacks structure, are central aspects of his work. It is exploratory and driven by the need to look behind the scenes of this materialist machinery to uncover the results and consequences of its manipulation. *Tri-Stan: I Sold Sissee Nar to Ecko,* in its sarcastic exposure of the backstage of television industry, is a strong example for a thematization of the medium. Its imitation of a tragic soap opera-like plot and its abbreviated language of a show script convincingly capture the cutthroat atmosphere of that industry. In addition to the awareness that meditated reality needs an adequate form of expression, Wallace's work also reflects a conscious discussion of contemporary writing techniques with a focus on postmodernism. Despite the fact that he himself considers postmodernism as having reached its limits and become redundant, his work is still a trove of postmodernist features, indicating that its tools contribute significantly to the contemporary narrative process. *Octet,* for instance, explores metafiction as a powerful influence on the outcome of a story by simultaneously thematizing and implementing the technique. In *Westward the Course of the Empire Takes its Way,* John Barth and the funhouse are subjects of deconstructive scrutiny. Just like Barth, Wallace is interested in the playful experiment, and is willing to give up his personal style for the benefit of the best narrative form. But unlike Barth, whose focus was strictly directed onto the text, Wallace's intentions are directed at the reader, assuring that he does not feel discouraged by the experimental character of a story. It is always clear that his fiction is made for the reader and that its intention is to be inclusive, rather than inaccessible.

Aware of his position as a member of the next generation of writers who have inherited what postmodern rebellion of earlier years has left behind, Wallace actively attempts to develop his own set of narrative values. The often-perceived fragmentation, lack of homogeneity and sense of disjointedness within individual stories—but also within the collection—are not a sign of authorial incompetence but rather a characteristic of playfulness—love of experiment and sign of resistance against stylistic classification. Occasionally it even appears as if Wallace actively counteracts this classification with a fiction that in its unruliness presents his own version of postmodernism. His poetics are determined by the premise that fiction is a *living transaction between humans.* One side is represented by the reader who turns to fiction in search of an extractable value, of something that he could carry away from the story; on the other side is the author who, via story, creates a link to his own consciousness, the source of this value. The ability to connect with the writer's consciousness gives the reader access to consolation, or the sense that he is not alone in his suffering as a human being—which is equal to extractable value. Wallace creates this link by making his reader perceive his story through unconventional choices of theme and style. What some critics consider a struggle with coherence and obstructed imagination should rather be viewed as a way of capturing the reader's

[276] Barth. John. *On With The Story.* Little, Brown and Company. New York. 1996.

attention and challenging his intellect instead of simply pleasing and entertaining him. Given that the reader's first and foremost goal is to find pleasure, relaxation, comfort and security in his reading, it is easy for him to dismiss Wallace's work and to turn instead to mass-produced popular fiction, or directly to television and its easily digested stories. This step bears an inherent danger for the writer who may now be tempted to produce work of an equally entertaining value. Yet, while it is very easy to succumb to the temptations of mass media and create fiction that will appeal to a mass market, this move also means giving up power over the creative process, and could potentially lead to acts of hostility toward the reader. Confusing messages, pretended and later disappointed serious intentions and complex compositions that are difficult to follow could suddenly become vehicles of resentment. Wallace's play with form, language and structure appear to be exactly that, just a game, an expression of his playfulness applied to camouflage his hostility. But, then the question remains: why does the reader still feel touched, addressed and involved in some strange way that is difficult to define yet, clearly perceptible? The answer is: mainly because Wallace's work is first and foremost dedicated to the human being, and everything else exists in service of this purpose. *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men,* as experimental, or in his words *exploratory* as they are, are still about human beings and their suffering. Marshal Boswell sees Wallace's work as an attempt to develop an innovative course for the literary practice without overthrowing or returning to postmodernism. Acting like a proper Barthian postmodernist, Wallace carries his heritage on his back while simultaneously continuing on his own path. The question whether David Foster Wallace is a postmodernist writer can only be answered before the backdrop of Lyotard's characterization of postmodernism as a continuous discussion, questioning and implementation of postmodernist devices. In this context, Wallace's critical consciousness of his surroundings and active response to them in his work, certainly makes him a postmodernist writer. His thematic choices, on the other hand, bring his work closer to neo-realism and thus create a bridge between generations.

Wallace's style however—heavily influenced by postmodernism—is one, but not the only form of response. American short fiction of the 1990s is a varied and vibrant collection of voices reacting to a world dominated by strong media influence, immense corporate power, political correctness and loss of privacy and individuality. At the center of attention is the individual itself as it deals with an everyday reality that creates the need to develop a narrative style suitable to convey this state of affairs. In its role as a solid base for upcoming literary forms, realism's tools—verisimilitude, reportorial representation and mimesis—provide another option. They allow an author to present an account of individual experience made while searching for a way to handle the ever changing and challenging events inflicted upon a human being by everyday reality. This type of realism does not aim at the universal picture of the world, but at the most personal details of which this world is made. In places it is viewed as a progression of realism and given the name neo-realism; on other occasions it is called minimalized, self-examining or sincere. The most suitable concept however, appears to be the idea of a link between postmodernism and realism. W. Fluck views this form that he calls neo-realism as a combination of the actuality oriented realism and the experimental postmodernism. M. Bradbury, on the other hand, sees in it not only a reflection of actuality but rather a reoccurrence that has a regulating influence on contemporary narrative culture. For him, neo-realism offers the opportunity to bring structure into a chaotic narrative because it is looking for a vision that would mediate a suppressed reaction to the conscious perception of individual loneliness and the moral transcendental hunger. This search often reaches

extreme forms and desperate measures—characteristics frequently found in the short stories of the 1990s. *The KGB Bar Reader* presents this development very clearly through a kaleidoscope of stories of violence, self-destruction, disillusion, failure and death. Biographical stories speak openly about dysfunctional human relations in which neglect and violence play a significant role—translating the cruelty of life into a fiction of extreme images. Tom Grimes calls this type of personal fiction sincere realism, and considers it a result of the shifting social and cultural values, growing media influence and with it the loss of individuality and privacy. Because the 1990s were dominated by politics and political correctness, authors were prevented from becoming involved with subjects outside of their own social or cultural circle. Consequently, their work concentrated on the experience of a single individual instead of a group, and was often presented in the form of an account rather than of a critical reflection. The subsequent increase in the output of memoirs and memoir-like texts is one explanation for the so very personal and autobiographical character of short fiction. In this context of a predominant realist fiction, postmodernism appears to have lost its momentum and become dated. Yet, a closer analysis suggests a chance to overcome the obsolescence by opening up to contemporary directions in literature. A majority of short fiction of the 1990s represents a wide display of such tendencies. Currently postmodernism and realism have entered a new stage in their relationship, simultaneously responding to the same altered sociological, historical and political background. They do not seem to act as opponents and paradoxes anymore but rather to fuse and complement each other. Wallace's *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* and Ken Foster's *The KGB Bar Reader* demonstrate this transition by exploring the possibilities of an application of postmodernist narrative tools to realist contents. And the only difficulty to recognize the process as such evolves around the definition of the term postmodernism itself as currently it is even less clearly distinguishable than in the late 1960s when its newness created a stark contrast to the past. In the 1990s the difference is almost imperceptible as the world has moved on, and what was once considered new and strange, is now well established and familiar. Barth's literary successors are immersed in the postmodern world. It is their reality—a fact that gives the claim that postmodernism still exists a high degree of validation even if the terminology has shifted. Today, what used to be called postmodernism is called realism and is the consequence of postmodernism's transition into an established literary form. However, as long as mass consumerism and media dominance remain a central part of contemporary life, this life will be characterized as postmodern. And as long as there are writers who follow the postmodernist creed of remaining up-to-date with the time they live in and display their awareness of the necessity to continue evolving with the progressing time in their work, this work should be called postmodern fiction.

Appendix I

Westward The Course Of Empire Takes Its Way: Titles

1. Background that intrudes and looms: lovers and propositions
2. The day of the moment we've all been waiting for
3. Why the kids are late
4. More quickly why they're late
5. How the complimentary flight to Chicago was
6. Aural illustration of the flight's shakiness from the contemporary actor and claustrophobe point of view of Tom Sternberg, tragic
7. How they all know each other
8. Where they live now
9. Why D.L. And Tom have never gone hungry at mealtime
10. How the central Illinois town of Collision came to be incorporated
11. A really blatant and intrusive interruption
12. Why J.D. Steelritter gave his son DeHaven the Ronald McDonald job in the first place, 'Stage Fright' incident aside
13. Another example of how of some J.D. Steelritter's most powerful anf lgendary public relations creations are really nothing more than a slight transfiguration of what really just goes on around his own rose farm's farmhouse
14. How, even though J.D. Steelritter and Ronald McDonald are bearing down, fuly intending simply to meet, gret, forgive all disruptions of schedule, and shuttle the awaited alumni westward, Tom Sternberg threatens, to the immesurable chagrin of everyone involved, to delay even further an at-last departure from their airport arrival and a hopefully quick trip to Collision, Illinois, and the still-on-impatient-hold fulfillment of the promise of reunion and pay off
15. Final interuption
16. I lied: three reasons why the above was not really an interruption, because this isn't the sort of fiction that can be interrupted, because it's not fiction, but real and true and right now
17. Actually probably not the last inturisve interruption
18. Foreground that intrudes but's really too tiny to even see: propositions about a lo

Appendix II

America or The Muse's Refuge
A Prophecy

By George Berkeley

The Muse, disgusted at an Age and Clime,
Barren of every glorious Theme,
In distant Lands now waits a better Time,
Producing subjects worthy Fame:

In happy Climes, where from the genial Sun,
And virgin Earth such Scenes ensue,
The Force of Art by Nature seems outdone,
And fancied Beauties by the true:

Ther shall be sung another golden Age,
The rise of Empire and of Arts,
The Good and Great inspiring epic Rage,
The wisest Heads and noblest Hearts.

Not such as Europe breeds in her decay;
Such as she bread when fresh and young,
When heavn'ly Flame did animate her Clay,
By future Poets shall be sung.

Westward the Coourse of Empire takes its Way;
The four first Acts already past,
A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day;
Time's nobles Offspring is the last.

(1752)

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