Open Library of Humanities

Peer Review:

Copyright:

Open Access:

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE SPECIAL ISSUE

'They All Sound Like David Foster *Wallace*': Syntax and Narrative in *Infinite Jest, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, Oblivion* and *The Pale King*

Simon de Bourcier
Independent Researcher, GB
simon.debourcier@hotmail.co.uk

What kind of syntactic arrangement produces the distinctive feel of a Wallace sentence, and how does sentence structure relate to Wallace's wider themes, the larger narrative structures of his fiction, and the construction of his fictional worlds? The length and complexity of Wallace's sentences has often been remarked on, and sometimes satirised, but this essay breaks new ground by looking in detail at the syntactic structure of Wallace's sentences to understand the work done by that structure in the creation both of character and of ontologically complex fictional worlds. The essay is structured around close readings of individual sentences from *Infinite Jest, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, Oblivion* and *The Pale King*. I show that in *Infinite Jest* syntactic complexity is associated with addiction and with intractable psychological binds. Moving forward from *Infinite Jest*, I argue, Wallace pushes his fiction in two distinct directions. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* focuses on voice, the format of the 'Brief Interviews' in particular allowing Wallace to represent character mimetically through speech. *Oblivion*, on the other hand, indulges Wallace's characteristic authorial voice in all its oppressive maximalism, in order to explore its unique narrative possibilities. In particular, Wallace uses complex, hypotactically structured sentences to create fictional worlds in which the relationship between the actual and the conditional or hypothetical is often unstable. In *The Pale King*, despite its incompleteness, Wallace shows signs of achieving, I argue, a synthesis of the two, fusing the narrative and ontological complexity of *Oblivion* with the mimetic polyphony of *Brief Interviews*.

What kind of syntactic arrangement produces the distinctive feel of a Wallace sentence, and how does sentence structure relate to Wallace's wider themes, the larger narrative structures of his fiction, and the construction of his fictional worlds? Steven Poole, reviewing *Oblivion* (2004) for the *Guardian*, complains that the stories' narrators 'all sound like David Foster Wallace'.[1] If you are reading this, it is likely that you have a fairly clear idea of what 'sound[ing] like David Foster Wallace' entails. For Poole, it involves '[h]uge looping sentences' with 'nests of parentheses and involutions'.[2] We could add piled-up conjunctions and adverbs at the start of sentences (cheekily imitated by David Hering at the start of his Preface to *Consider David Foster Wallace*: 'And but so [...]'[3]), and batteries of nested possessives, such as 'the podiatrist's sign's foot' or '[t]he station's flagpole's flag's rope's pulleys'.[4] An entertaining online parody by James Tanner called 'Growing Sentences with David Foster Wallace' gives step-by-step instructions for turning a simple statement into a full-blown Wallace behemoth.[5]

While this kind of characteristic Wallace sentence does predominate in *Oblivion*, in *Infinite Jest* and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* there is a greater variety of voices and corresponding diversity of sentence forms. In this essay I advance a developmental narrative. Moving forward from *Infinite Jest*, I argue, Wallace pushes his fiction in two distinct directions. *Brief Interviews* focuses on voice, the format of the 'Brief Interviews' in particular allowing Wallace to represent character mimetically through speech. *Oblivion*, on the other hand, indulges Wallace's characteristic authorial voice in all its oppressive maximalism, in order to explore its unique narrative possibilities. In *The Pale King*, despite its incompleteness, Wallace shows signs of achieving, I argue, a synthesis of the two: although *The Pale King* includes, like

---

[1] Steven Poole. 'Clause and Effect'. Review of *Oblivion: Stories* by David Foster Wallace. *The Guardian* 24th July 2004. 22.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] David Hering. Editor's Preface. *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays.* Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media, 2010. 9–11. 9.

[4] David Foster Wallace. *The Pale King.* London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011. 245, 514.

[5] http://www.kottke.org/09/03/growing-sentences-with-david-foster-wallace Accessed 14th September 2015.

Brief Interviews, sections of self-parodic Wallace prose, it also includes passages, and sentences, which fuse the narrative and ontological complexity of *Oblivion* with the mimetic polyphony of *Brief Interviews.*[6]

Infinite Jest: addiction, Acadamese, and the cognitive challenge of 'difficult art'

According to Timothy Aubry,

> *Infinite Jest* is organized around a reductive polarity that divides the world into two camps: On one side there is drug abuse, irony, excessive self-obsession, mass-culture entertainment, hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, and on the other side there is AA-sponsored sobriety, sincerity, empathy, difficult art, and authentic feeling.[7]

Wallace attempts, Aubry argues, to weary readers with his postmodern sophistication until they are 'ready to trust the simple and apparently earnest statements [he] periodically produces.'[8] Aubry does not have much to say about sentence structure *per se*, but my hypothesis is that his paradigm can be expanded to include syntactic complexity in the camp of 'irony, intellect, [...] recursivity' and addiction, and a specifically *syntactic* simplicity with 'sincerity', 'empathy' and sobriety. I shall also, however, suggest in due course one respect in which a consideration of sentence-level structure tends to highlight the limitations of Aubry's analysis, suggesting that it is his account, rather than Wallace's novel, which is 'reductive'.

There is an obvious connection between verbosity and addiction in the gag about the 'Veteran but Methamphetamine-Dependent Headliner Finally Demoted after Repeated Warnings about Taking up Too Much Space.'[9] Geoffrey Day reminisces sarcastically about

---

[6] This developmental narrative is consistent with Hering's recent assertion, based on research in the Wallace archive, that while 'the fiction after 1996 comprises a set of coexisting and co-evolving literary projects', it also constitutes a single 'linear' project (Hering. *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016. 126).

[7] Timothy Aubry. 'Selfless Cravings: Addiction and Recovery in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest'. *American Fiction of the 1990s: Reflections of History and Culture*. Ed. Jay Prosser. 206–19. 213.

[8] Aubry 215.

[9] David Foster Wallace. *Infinite Jest*. London: Abacus, 1997. 391.

how, before joining AA, he 'used to think in long compound sentences with subordinate clauses,' but now he lives by 'clichés' that are '[t]erse, hard-boiled' and '[m]onosyllabic'.[10] We are told that Don Gately denies having cried when presented with a cake marking his first sober year, 'But he did'.[11] Wallace employs a 'terse', 'monosyllabic' three-word sentence to represent a moment of sincere, healthy emotion.

 Long, complex sentences are associated in *Infinite Jest*, then, with addiction, and serve to highlight (by means of contrast) the 'simple and apparently earnest statements' which give sincere expression to the authentic emotion associated with recovery. There are, however, two further identifiable characteristics of the passages and voices in *Infinite Jest* which use '[h]uge looping sentences' with 'nests of parentheses and involutions'. The first is nicely illustrated by Endnote 304,[12] which purports to quote at length from an article describing *Le Jeu du Prochain Train*, an article identified very specifically as an 'insufferable' example of American academic writing or 'U.S. Acadamese.' Jim Struck (the character reading the article) detects in it a 'foam-flecked megalograndiosity' he associates with drug and alcohol abuse,[13] reinforcing Aubry's idea that various pathological forms of expression are grouped by the novel into one malign 'camp'. In 'Authority and American Usage', Wallace describes 'Academic English' as 'a verbal cancer', and quotes as an example a sentence by Fredric Jameson 'in which not only is each of its three main independent clauses totally obscure and full of predicates without evident subjects and pronouns without clear antecedents, but whatever connection between those clauses justifies stringing them together into one long semicolonic sentence is anyone's guess at all'.[14] He singles out another heavyweight figure in the Humanities, Harold Bloom, for a scornful aside in *Infinite Jest*, dismissing his work as 'turgid'.[15]

---

[10]   *Ibid.*, 271.

[11]   *Ibid.*, 468.

[12]   Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 1055–62.

[13]   *Ibid.*, 1056.

[14]   Wallace, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*. London: Abacus, 2007. 114–15.

[15]   Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 1077. This is not the whole story of Wallace's relationship to Bloom, however. The latter's Oedipal theory of literary succession is the obvious source, for example, of his description, in an interview with Larry McCaffery, of John Barth as a 'patriarch' for his 'patricide' (Wallace, *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. Ed. Stephen J. Burn. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012. 48).

The author of the fictional article about the dangerous game is one G.T. Day, presumably the same Geoffrey Day who, as a resident of Ennet House, laments that he no longer thinks in 'long compound sentences with subordinate clauses'. The character who is reading the article, Jim Struck, has 'to read the first sentence a bunch of times to even make sense of it'[16] – as well he might. The sentence, which is quoted in full, shows Wallace giving full rein to his instinct for parody:

> 'Almost as little of irreproachable scholarly definitiveness is known about the infamous Separatist "Wheelchair Assassins" (*Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* or *A.F.R.*s) of southwestern Quebec as is accepted as axiomatic about the herds of oversized "Feral Infants" allegedly reputed to inhabit the periodically overinhabitable forested sections of the eastern Reconfiguration'.[17]

Note the redundancy of 'allegedly reputed', the sheer nonsense of 'periodically overinhabitable,' the narcissism of the aspiration to 'irreproachable scholarly definitiveness' undercut by the claim that little is known which meets that standard. The not-quite-appropriate word 'axiomatic' – part of an awkward-sounding string of words beginning with vowels – seems to have been plucked from a Thesaurus. Above all, however, note that this and subsequent sentences quoted from the fictional article are overlong and unnecessarily complicated, forcing Struck as he plagiarises for his assignment to 'carve up each of this diarrheatic [...] guy's clauses into less-long self-contained sentences'.[18]

This intradiegetic motivation – the parodying of academic prose when a voice or text represented within the novel is imagined as the speech or writing of a character with academic pretensions – also accounts for the comically complex sentences attributed to Molly Notkin. Notkin is a PhD from M.I.T.[19] Notkin gives an account, under interrogation by the U.S.O.U.S., of the events leading up to the disfigurement of Madame Psychosis, whom Notkin names as one Lucille Duquette[20] (although else-

---

[16] *Ibid.*, 1056.
[17] *Ibid.*, 1055.
[18] *Ibid.* 1056.
[19] *Ibid.*, 787.
[20] *Ibid.*, 787–95.

where in the novel she is identified as Joelle van Dyne). The syntax of this account becomes so convoluted that it is already starting to break down when it reaches the moment at which Lucille/Joelle's mother interrupts her husband's confession of his incestuous desires and his attempt to deny them to himself and his family. The sentence beginning 'The low-pH Daddy's enormous stress had apparently erupted', three-quarters of the way down page 793, and breaking off after 'all but tortured by the purity of his impossible love for the–', halfway down page 794, certainly qualifies as '[h]uge' (one of Poole's criteria for 'sound[ing] like David Foster Wallace'). It also provides a textbook example of one of the other characteristics of Wallace's prose identified by Poole: the words 'animals being way more sensitive than humans to emotional anomalies, in Molly Notkin's experience' fall within two levels of nested parentheses (one marked by dashes, the other by parens or brackets). The sentence presents Lucille/Joelle's father's words as rendered by Notkin in free indirect discourse, and is broken off in a state of anacoluthia or syntactic incompleteness in a mimetic representation of the confession being interrupted by his wife. By this point the sentence has become a branching delta of relative clauses, some nested within each other. Two of these clauses never reach the verbs of which their introductory pronouns are the objects: the one beginning 'whose physical vigor', and the one beginning 'through which, late at night'. In both cases the introduction of a further subordinate level of qualification serves to momentarily occlude the anacoluthia; the sentence becomes so convoluted that the reader can barely keep track of its syntax, and the interruption comes as a relief.[21]

As well as being 'Acadamese' – because it is mediated through Notkin's voice – this passage also exemplifies the other specific characteristic which I want to argue marks out the parts of *Infinite Jest* which conspicuously manifest the involutions and nestings which Poole sees as hallmarks of the Wallace sentence. Namely, it describes a psychological bind: Lucille/Joelle's father is caught between his incestuous desire and his need to deny it. This is why, even before he is interrupted by his wife, he is shying away from completing the clauses he embarks upon because to do

---

[21] Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 794.

so would mean acknowledging his own culpability. The missing verb whose object is 'whose physical vigour' would perhaps have been 'he had observed', or 'he had envied'. Whichever we imagine it to be, it would amount to a confession that, despite his earlier insistence that he would never 'ogle' Joelle, [22] and despite his protracted description of his attempts to resist the desire to spy on her and Orin having sex, he has in fact done so. The compulsive opening of fresh subordinate clauses rather than completing those already begun is a syntactical mimesis of the dynamic tension between the compulsion to express desire and the need to repress it. Mary K. Holland finds such a 'convoluted interdependence of insistent repetition and repression' to be central to *Infinite Jest*'s critique of contemporary culture.[23] In her unreconstructed Freudian reading, however, the novel itself 'can appear to attempt a talking cure' but 'instead creates the looping repetition of narcissistic infantile regression'.[24] She even argues that the language of AA is just as 'meaningless' as the world of addiction its members are attempting to escape,[25] but this is far less satisfactory as an account of the novel's presentation of the language of recovery than Aubry's.

There are other examples in *Infinite Jest* of syntax which stretches the limits of readability when describing complex psychological and emotional states. Don Gately accuses Joelle of 'talking like a fucking English teacher' and tells her to '[u]se less words' when she tries to explain the 'annular and insidious' cycle of shame which the U.H.I.D. veil aims to break; she in turn diagnoses his problem as being 'trapped in shame about the shame' about not being bright, whereas he is in fact 'not *not* bright'.[26] Her recursive language aims to map a psychological bind, but risks becoming incomprehensible.

The strategies Wallace employs to narrate such attempts to grapple linguistically with psychological binds can perhaps be better understood by thinking about them in the context of Wallace's reading. The Wallace archive at the Harry Ransom Center

---

[22] *Ibid.*, 793.

[23] Mary K. Holland. *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Culture.* New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. 74.

[24] *Ibid.*, 63.

[25] *Ibid.*, 60–1.

[26] Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 535–7.

includes a copy of *The Divided Self* by R.D. Laing, annotated by Wallace. In *The Divided Self* Laing presents a phenomenological theory of schizophrenia informed by the existential philosophies of Sartre, Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Stephen J. Burn notes that Wallace read and annotated *The Divided Self* 'during the years when he was planning *Infinite Jest*' and argues that Laing's book 'provided Wallace with a skeleton that helps organise the novel's overall structure'.[27] Burn also connects the 'barrage of allusions' in Hal's opening monologue to 'Laing's claim that the schizophrenic deliberately uses "obscurity and complexity as a smoke-screen to hide behind"'.[28] This resonates with Laura Miller's reading of *Oblivion*, discussed below, and my development of Miller's argument in relation to the idea of 'complexity' in *The Pale King*. What all these readings highlight is the possibility that linguistic or syntactical complexity may serve as a psychological defence mechanism, skirting and avoiding painful truths.

The collection of books in the Wallace archive does not include Laing's 1970 book *Knots*, but it is likely, given his interest in *The Divided Self,* that Wallace did encounter this strange little text.[29] Its content looks like poetry and, in some passages, like scripted drama, and uses convoluted, recursive language to describe intractable interpersonal problems. A brief preface sets out Laing's project:

> The patterns delineated here have not yet been classified by a Linnaeus of human bondage. They are all, perhaps, strangely, familiar.
> In these pages I have confined myself to laying out only some of those I actually have seen. Words that come to mind to name them are: knots, tangles, fankles, *impasses*, disjunctions, whirligogs, binds.
> I could have remained closer to the 'raw' data in which these patterns appear.
> I could have distilled them further towards an abstract logico-mathematical

---

27   Stephen J. Burn. '"Webs of Nerves Pulsing and Firing": *Infinite Jest* and the Science of Mind'. *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies.* Ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn. New York: Palgrave, 2013. 59–85. 72.

28   *Ibid.* 75, citing R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self.* Baltimore MD: Penguin, 1971. 163.

29   It is noteworthy in this regard that in the opening chapter of *Infinite Jest*, in which Burn detects Laing's influence, finds Hal at one point 'star[ing] carefully into the Kekuléan knot' of one his interviewers' ties (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 5).

calculus. I hope they are not so schematized that one may not refer back to
the very specific experiences from which they derive; yet that they are suf-
ficiently independent of 'content', for one to divine the final formal elegance
in these webs of *maya*.[30]

Here is an example of one of these 'knots', 'tangles' or 'binds':

Jack can see that he sees
      what Jill can't see
   and that Jill can't see Jill can't see it

Jack can see that he sees
    what Jill can't see
but Jack can't see
   that Jill can't see
     that Jill can't see it

Jack tries to get Jill to see
    that Jack can see
   what Jill can't see
but Jack can't see
   that Jill can't see that Jill can't see it

Jack sees
     there is something Jill can't see
and Jack sees
     that Jill can't see she can't see it

Although Jack can see Jill can't see she can't see it
he can't see that *he* can't see it himself[31]

---

[30] R.D. Laing. *Knots*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972. Unnumbered page.
[31] *Ibid.*. 57

When Wallace writes later in *Infinte Jest*, 'I merely *pretended* to pretend to pretend to betray',[32] or, 'You might think I'm wondering why you aren't asking me why thirty days',[33] we are in similar territory to that which Laing attempts to map in *Knots*. This ties into a thematic thread running through the novel about the tennis-player's self-consciousness,[34] the addict's '*Analysis-Paralysis*',[35] and the 'paralytic thought-helix' Hal finds himself in,[36] stoned and unable to begin to think through the 'almost infinite-seeming implications' of what is being said to him.[37]

Of course what makes a passage from *Knots* like the one quoted above so baffling and unintentionally funny is precisely that it is very difficult to keep track of its nested clauses and the 'levels of intentionality' they describe, a phrase I borrow from Lisa Zunshine. Zunshine makes use of research by cognitive scientists into 'theory of mind' or 'mind reading' – 'our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires' – to explain why many readers 'feel challenged' by Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway*:[38]

> Although theory of mind is formally defined as a second-order intentionality, as in the statements 'I believe that you desire X' or 'Peter Walsh thinks that Clarissa "would think [him] a failure"' […], the levels of intentionality can 'recurse' further back, for example, to the fourth level, as in a statement like 'I believe that you think that she believes that he thinks that X'. [Daniel] Dennett, who first discussed this recursiveness of the levels of intentionality, thought it could be, in principle, infinite. A recent series of striking experiments reported by Robin Dunbar and his colleagues have suggested, however, that our cognitive architecture may discourage the proliferation

---

[32] Wallace. *Infinite Jest* 94.

[33] *Ibid.* 772.

[34] *Ibid.* 249. See also Hal's 'self-conscious panic', 896.

[35] *Ibid.*, 203.

[36] *Ibid.*, 335.

[37] *Ibid.*, 341.

[38] Lisa Zunshine. 'Theory of Mind and Experimental Representations of Fictional Consciousness'. *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*. Ed. Zunshine. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010. 193–213. 195, 204.

of cultural narratives that involve 'infinite' levels of intentionality. […] The results suggest that people have marked difficulties processing stories that involve mind reading above the fourth level.[39]

Dunbar and his team asked subjects to read stories with differing numbers of levels of 'embedded intentionality', and found that readers started to lose track when stories moved from a fourth to a fifth-order intentionality.[40] If I say that Alice wants Brian to think that Charlie loves Diana you probably have little trouble keeping track of Alice, Brian, Charlie and Diana. If, however, I say that Alice wants Brian to think that Charlie hopes that Diana loves Eric you are more likely to get confused. Zunshine argues that *Mrs Dalloway* presents readers with a 'cognitive challenge' because it asks readers to 'process […] fifth- and sixth-level intentionalities,' which lie beyond the limit of our ability to easily grasp multi-levelled intentionality demonstrated in Dunbar's experiments.[41]

Now, the example given above of one of Laing's 'tangles' does not obviously pass this limit, but the fact that it presents third- and fourth-level intentionalities in which the same subject recurs at different levels, and the same verb, 'can't see', recurs at adjacent levels, adds to the difficulty of keeping track. Similarly, examples from Wallace's prose like 'I merely *pretended* to pretend to pretend to betray' and 'You might think I'm wondering why you aren't asking me why thirty days,' test the limits of cognition because of the repeated verb 'pretend' and the alternating personal pronouns: 'You', 'I', 'you', 'me'. Therefore, I shall refer to Wallace's use of high-order intentionalities to express the fact that such recursive grammatical structures are potentially confusing, even though technically they may not cross Dunbar's threshold.

I want to suggest that one reason for Wallace's interest in high-order intentionalities and similar linguistic phenomena (such as nested possessives, parentheses or relative clauses) goes something like this. Where modernist writing such as Woolf's

---

[39] *Ibid.*, 204–5.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] *Ibid.* 208–9.

had, as Zunshine shows, tested the limits of readers' ability to track high-order intentionality, postmodernist writing tends (despite her suggestion that 'our cognitive architecture may discourage the proliferation of cultural narratives that involve "infinite" levels of intentionality') to push through that barrier and into the infinite recursions implied by self-reference and its attendant paradoxes.[42] Metafiction says, picture two framed mirrors facing each other; it does not need to say, picture a frame, and a reflection of that frame, and a reflection of the reflection of that frame, and so on. What I think Wallace is doing with these nestings and Laingian knots is part of his wider project of breaking out of the postmodernist funhouse. He is trying to do the hard work of drawing every frame, and asking readers to do the hard work of keeping track of those orders of narrative and cognitive framing. This is the reason why syntactic simplicity and complexity do not perfectly map onto Aubry's binary schema: syntactic complexity is an attribute of 'difficult art', which belongs on the positive side of the polarity, but syntactic simplicity is associated with 'sincerity' and 'authentic feeling', also on the positive side. Thus, my argument about sentence structure builds on Aubry's argument, but also troubles it.

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: monologue, minimalism and polyphony

I have given a few examples of ways in which Wallace's use of long, syntactically complex sentences in *Infinite Jest* is motivated by intradiegetic considerations: parodying certain types of academic voice, and representing Laingian psychological binds. The latter project also finds him, I am suggesting, stalking the borderlands between countable cognitive framing and the infinite regresses of metafictional paradox. I began by stressing, however, that this type of sentence-making is not found everywhere in *Infinite Jest*, but sits alongside syntactically simpler voices. Wallace's 1999 story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* also showcases a diversity of voices, most notably in the 'Brief Interviews' themselves. Each of the 'Brief Interviews' conjures

---

[42] There is a wealth of criticism about Wallace's vexed relationship with metafictional self-reference, including Simon de Bourcier, 'Forms, Punch Cards, and *LETTERS*: Self-Reference, Recursion and (Un)self-Consciousness in *The Pale King*'s Representation of Bureaucracy'. *English Studies* 95.1 (January 2014): 40–58.

up an individual speaker through distinctive speech patterns and verbal tics, such as the repeated 'Okay?' of #11 or the aggressive hectoring questions of #46: 'What if I told you my own wife got gang-raped? […] What if I did it to you?'[43] The story 'On His Deathbed, Holding Your Hand, the Acclaimed New Young Off-Broadway Playwright's Father Begs a Boon' is essentially a monologue spoken by a specific character, apart from one brief retort by the addressee,[44] and is, among other things, a homage to Samuel Beckett (archly signalled by the Oirishry of 'bollixed').[45] It is marked by truncated sentences which break off before uttering difficult truths and approach them again from a different angle, rather than smothering them in iterations:

> Afraid that what she would hear would – hear only a bad father, deficient man, uncaring, *selfish*, and then the last of the freely chosen bonds between us would be severed.[46]
> I subjected her to a – the last twenty-nine years of our life together were a lie.[47]

'Church Not Made With Hands', similarly, approaches at times a narrative and syntactic minimalism that relies on suggestion rather than what we might think of as the more characteristic Wallace tactic of exhaustively spelling out every possibility:

> Bless me
> Do you take this woman Sarah
> To be my
> How long
> For I have[48]

Wallace's focus on voice in *Brief Interviews* becomes illuminatingly explicit in the schematic narrative of 'Adult World (II)':

---

43 Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. 1999. London: Abacus, 2001. 16–18, 101, 105.

44 *Ibid.*, 239.

45 *Ibid.*, 230.

46 *Ibid.*, 228.

47 *Ibid.*, 229.

48 *Ibid.* 166.

> Meanwhile F.L. is answering J.'s orig. question in vehement neg, tears
> appearing in eye: holy shit, no, god, no, no, never, had loved her always, was
> never as fully '*there*' as when he & J. were making love {if in J.'s p.o.v., insert
> 'together' after 'love'}.[49]

Here Wallace orchestrates three distinct voices in one heteroglot sentence: the initials
and abbreviations signal that this is part of a fiction writer's schematic outline for a
story; 'holy shit, no, god, no, no, never' is a direct rendering of the words of the Former
Lover (F.L.); and the conditional insertion 'together' would evoke Jeni Roberts's ('J.'s')
voice. The words of the Former Lover, then, are narrated by the imagined author, who
effectively presents two versions of the sentence, one of which filters the conversa-
tion through Jeni's voice by introducing the redundancy of 'making love […] together',
'Adult World (I)' having introduced this distinctive use of 'together' as a marker of her
point of view in its first sentence.[50] Note the way that the schematic format allows the
three voices to be yoked together fairly loosely. At the colon, the sentence shifts from
third person narration into what is effectively direct speech (although it modulates
into free indirect discourse with the introduction of the third person 'had' and the pro-
noun 'he'); the main verb in the parenthetical clause is an imperative addressed by the
imagined author to himself ('insert'). The structure of this sentence, in other words, is
paratactic rather than hypotactic. There is a fusion in the sentence of polyphony with
ontological plurality, or the multiplication of narrative levels, the two forces which, I am
arguing, shape the Wallace sentence at it develops through his later fictional writing.
However, that fusion is not achieved as gracefully as it is in *The Pale King*: Wallace relies
here on what he calls in 'Octet' 'the tired old "Hey-look-at-me-looking-at-you-looking-
at-me" agenda of S.O.P. metafiction'.[51] What I am suggesting is that in *Brief Interviews*
Wallace's focus is primarily on voice, whereas in *Oblivion* some of the concern for voice
is sacrificed in pursuit of ontological complexity, and it is only in *The Pale King* – as I
hope to demonstrate – that a more complete fusion of the two is achieved.

---

[49] *Ibid.,* 157.

[50] *Ibid.,* 137.

[51] *Ibid.,* 130.

Brief Interviews is thematically very unified: it is interested in recursion, self-consciousness, and whether being consciously aware of a bind and/or radically honest about it ever lets one out of the bind, or always knots one tighter into it. Miller observes, regarding *Oblivion*, that this kind of 'dilemma, in which every layer of self-knowledge is nested inside yet another layer that scrutinizes it mercilessly for inauthenticity, is a Wallace trademark'.[52] These questions link Wallace's meditations on self-consciousness as a strategy of postmodern fiction – 'the tired old "Hey-look-at-me-looking-at-you-looking-at-me" agenda' – and his investigations of psychological and emotional problems. The sections which most 'sound like David Foster Wallace' are, significantly, those which explicitly address the process of writing – *e.g.* the scenario in 'Octet' that begins 'You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer', from which the previous quotation is taken[53] – and 'The Depressed Person', which is thematically focused on a set of psychological binds. Throughout the latter story Wallace retrospectively qualifies pronouns: 'her (i.e., the depressed person's)', 'it (i.e., the suspicious death)'.[54] These qualifications are more often than not redundant. Much of the verbal texture of this story comes from the representation in free indirect discourse of the eponymous Depressed Person's habits of speech – such as constantly referring to herself as 'pathetic', which becomes the subject of explicit comment by her therapist[55] – but the parenthetical qualifications do not make sense as a verbal tic. There would be no need to qualify 'I' or 'my': it is only when the narrative is referring to both the Depressed Person and another character (such as her therapist) as 'she' that there is any plausible justification for them. Wallace seems to be trying to ratchet up the story's sense of being frustratingly convoluted and repetitive, but does so at the expense of maintaining a distinct, character-driven voice. Later in this essay, I discuss Meredith Rand's narrative in *The Pale King,* which achieves a more natural fusion of the delineation of an involuted psychological bind with a lively and plausible voice.

---

[52] Laura Miller. 'The Horror, the Horror'. Review of *Oblivion* by David Foster Wallace. *Salon* 30th June 2004. http://www.salon.com/2004/06/30/wallace_8 Para. 7. Accessed 12th September 2016.

[53] Wallace, *Brief Interviews* 123.

[54] *Ibid.,* 33, 43.

[55] *Ibid.,* 41.

Oblivion: hypotaxis and the ontology of narrative worlds

Given that *Infinite Jest* offers, in Holland's phrase, a 'collection of storytelling voices',[56] and that *Brief Interviews* is, if anything, even more conspicuously committed to experimenting with polyphony, why does the Wallace of *Oblivion* narrow his stylistic palette so much that Poole hears only one voice in the collection? I want to argue that Wallace starts doing something new with the Wallace sentence in *Oblivion*, and that is to exploit the potential of hypotaxis, of sentences comprising hierarchical structures of dependent clauses, to construct ontologically complex fictional worlds.

I shall use as an example this sentence from 'Mister Squishy':

Schmidt had had several years of psychotherapy and was not without some perspective on himself, and he knew that a certain percentage of his reaction to the way these older men coolly inspected their cuticles or pinched at the crease in the trouser of the topmost leg as they sat back on their coccyx jiggling at the foot of the crossed leg was his own insecurity, that he felt somewhat sullied and implicated by the whole enterprise of contemporary marketing and that this sometimes manifested via projection as the feeling that people he was just trying to talk as candidly as possible to always believed he was making a sales pitch or trying to manipulate them in some way, as if merely being employed, however ephemerally, in the great grinding US marketing machine had somehow colored his whole being and that something essentially shifty or pleading in his expression now always seemed inherently false or manipulative and turned people off, and not just in his career – which was not his whole existence, unlike so many at Team Δy, or even all that terribly important to him; he had a vivid and complex inner life, and introspected a great deal – but in his personal affairs as well, and that somewhere along the line his professional marketing skills had metastasized throughout his whole character so that he was now the sort of man who, if he were to screw up his courage and ask a female colleague out for drinks and over drinks open up his heart to her and reveal that he

---

[56] Holland 63.

respected her enormously, that his feelings for her involved elements of both professional and highly personal regard, and that he spent a great deal more time thinking about her than she probably had any idea he did, and that if there were anything at all he could ever do to make her life happier or easier or more satisfying or fulfilling he hoped she'd just say the word or snap her thick fingers or even just look at him in a meaningful way, and he'd be there, instantly and with no reservations at all, he would nevertheless in all probability be viewed as probably just wanting to sleep with her or fondle or harass, or as having some creepy obsession with her, or as maybe even having a small creepy secretive kind of almost shrine to her in one corner of the unused second bedroom of his condominium, consisting of personal items fished out of her cubicle's wastebasket or the occasional dry witty notes she passed him during especially deadly or absurd Team Δy staff meetings, or that his home Apple PowerBook's screensaver was an Adobe-brand 1440-dpi blowup of a digital snapshot of the two of them with his arm over her shoulder and just part of the arm and shoulder of another Team Δy Field-worker with his arm over her shoulder from the other side at a Fourth of July picnic that A.C. Romney-Jaswat and Assoc. had thrown for its research subcontractors at Navy Pier two years past, Darlene holding her cup and smiling in such a way as to show almost as much upper gum as teeth, the ale's cup's red digitally enhanced to match the red of her lipstick and the small scarlet hairbow she often wore just right of center as a sort of personal signature or statement.[57]

Here, Terry Schmidt reflects on the way his personal life seems to have been infected by the insincerity, and the presumption of insincerity, that characterize his profession, marketing. Consider, first of all, the basic syntactic armature of the sentence, upon which its narrative content hangs. The sentence begins with two clauses structured around three co-ordinate (or independent) verbs: 'had had', 'was' and 'knew'. None of these three verbs is subordinate to (or dependent upon) another; their arrange-

---

[57] David Foster Wallace. *Oblivion: Stories*. London: Abacus, 2004. 25–6.

ment is paratactic rather than hypotactic. They are connected by two instances of the word *and*. So far, then, there is no hypotaxis or hierarchical arrangement of clauses: these are three actions which the reader is told, by means of declarative (sometimes called *indicative*) verbs, that Terry Schmidt has performed. He 'had had' therapy; he 'was' not lacking in self-knowledge; and he 'knew' certain things. This is where it gets interesting. Everything that follows – the remaining 545 words of this gargantuan 563-word sentence – is subordinate to, or governed by, the verb *knew*, and introduced with the word *that* used as a subordinating conjunction. Wallace tells us at least three things *that* Schmidt knows: '*that* a certain percentage of his reaction' to the behaviour of the other men in the meeting is 'his own insecurity'; '*that*' he feels 'sullied and implicated' by the industry he works in; 'and *that*' his insecurity manifests itself as a certain 'feeling' [my emphasis]. Wallace now introduces a new level of subordination: Schmidt knows *that* his insecurity sometimes manifests itself 'as the feeling *that*' [my emphasis] certain things are the case. So the facts which the reader is about to be told are separated by two levels of syntactic subordination from the three co-ordinate verbs at the beginning of the sentence, which implies a different ontological status from the actions those three verbs describe. The reader's knowledge of these facts is only as reliable as Schmidt's knowledge about a feeling about them. It is possible to characterise this status in terms of a narratalogical categorisation of diegetic levels, that is, to say that they are hypodiegetic, where the initial co-ordinate verbs belong to the primary or base-line narrative level.

Here is where things get even more interesting, because a significant ambiguity now comes into play. It is far from certain whether subsequent clauses introduced by 'and that' refer back to 'he knew' or 'the feeling'. It seems likely, for example, that the clause 'and that something essentially shifty or pleading in his expression now always seemed inherently false' is part of the 'feeling' through which his insecurity manifests, but it could plausibly be another thing that Schmidt 'knew'. However, by the time the reader gets to 'and that somewhere along the line his professional marketing skills had metastasized throughout his whole character', the ambiguity has deepened. Is this something Schmidt knows, or does he just know that his insecurity manifests itself as a 'feeling that' this is the case?

Wallace then employs the conjunction 'so that' to lead into a new subordinate clause and a further level of hypotaxis: '*so that* he was now the sort of man who' – if he said certain things – 'would nevertheless in all probability be viewed as probably' wanting and doing certain other things [my emphasis]. Schmidt *knows that* his insecurity gives him the *feeling that* he is the type of person who, *if* he confessed his feelings for one of his colleagues, *would* be seen *as* having certain motives and secrets. Allowing, then, for the ambiguity I have described, those behaviours are separated from the primary narrative by either four or five levels of hypotactic subordination, one of which introduces conditionality. These conditional perceptions include the likelihood of the existence of a 'small creepy secretive kind of almost shrine' in Schmidt's apartment. The existence of such a shrine, therefore, is separated from the sentence's main declarative verbs (and hence from the primary narrative) by several layers of syntactic subordination, suggesting ever deepening ontological uncertainty; however – and this is the key point I want to make about this sentence – as readers we surely know that Terry Schmidt *does indeed* have a shrine in his home to his thick-fingered colleague Darlene. The redundancy of 'kind of almost' represents Schmidt's mind shying away from acknowledging that what he has made *is* a shrine, simultaneously cluing in the reader that it is not merely something that Schmidt fears that Darlene would suspect him of having constructed, but real.

The ontological relation of narrative levels here, then, is more complex than might first appear. The putative existence of the shrine bleeds through into the narrative's central world, and this represents a psychological reality: Schmidt's anxiety about how he will be perceived is based on his awareness of what he is really like. The irony is that the self-knowledge which he has apparently arrived at through therapy has not led to any alteration in his unhealthy behaviours, of which having a shrine to a colleague he has a crush on is by no means the worst. This sentence exemplifies nicely a phenomenon that N. Katherine Hayles identifies as a theme in *Infinite Jest*, the 'failure to contain damage within a prophylactically enclosed area'.[58] She

---

[58] N. Katherine Hayles. 'The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*'. *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999): 675–97. 686.

sees that novel as 'exploring the underground seepages and labyrinthine pathways through which the abjected always returns in recursive cycles of interconnection that inexorably tie together the sanctified and the polluted'.[59] Nothing could illustrate that 'interconnection' of 'the sanctified and the polluted' better than the fact that what Terry Schmidt tries and fails to insulate his public persona from, using layers of hypotactic language, is a forbidden and embarrassing shrine.

I have borrowed the image of *insulating* from Laura Miller, who suggests that the collection's title refers to what most of its characters are seeking:[60]

> Wallace's long arcs of prose and the narrative sidetracks are exposed not as tortuous strivings toward some hard-won truth but as an insulation people spin between themselves and the sharp edges of their condition[.][61]

She argues that in *Oblivion* Wallace's gaze is 'relentlessly trained on the things people do and say to bear the unbearable', 'the thickets of words and ideas and stories, awkward or artful, that people use to shield themselves'.[62] What we see in the sentence I have been analysing from 'Mister Squishy' is that although Terry Schmidt constructs an intricate insulating layer of conditionality and supposition between himself and the painful reality of his obsession, the 'sharp edges' of reality still poke through. Marshall Boswell concurs that *Oblivion*'s stories explore 'the linguistic nature of interior experience' and the 'layered, nested, entropic working' of their characters' 'interiors'.[63] He argues that the book's long sentences provide 'a visual analog for the state of consciousness Wallace depicts in the stories themselves', and that as a consequence 'Wallace's famously detailed and loquacious prose gets stretched to the absolute breaking point'.[64] However, it is important to note that in this sentence

---

[59] *Ibid.*, 687.

[60] Miller, 'The Horror, the Horror' para. 1.

[61] *Ibid.*, para. 11.

[62] *Ibid.*, para. 12.

[63] Marshall Boswell. '"The Constant Monologue Inside Your Head": *Oblivion* and the Nightmare of Consciousness. Boswell and Burn 151–70. 151.

[64] *Ibid.*, 152.

from 'Mister Squishy' it breaks in a different and subtler way than it did in my example from *Infinite Jest*. There, Wallace arranges for a long, cumbersome sentence to be literally interrupted, broken off with several of its subsidiary syntactic structures left incomplete. Here, the dynamic of conflicting drives within the sentence – to deny and to confess Terry's crush on Darlene – does not disrupt its grammatical completeness. Instead, Wallace exploits the sentence's extended, complexly hypotactic structure to show the reader how Terry's mind builds up what Miller calls 'thickets of words and ideas and stories' only to have those defences breached by the sheer inclusivity of the sentence's branching structure.

There are various well-known theoretical frameworks through which we can think about the way narrative statements with differing ontological status make up the world or worlds of a piece of fiction: Gerald Prince's category of the 'disnarrated', a term signifying 'all the events that *do not* happen though they could have and are nonetheless referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text'; Brian McHale's concept of 'worlds under erasure'; and narratological applications of possible worlds semantics, in particular Marie-Laure Ryan's notion of re-centering, in which a 'fictional world' becomes the centre of a 'textual universe' of non-actual possibilities.[65] I like the phrase 'textual universe', but the concept of 're-centering' is imperfect as an account of the ontology of Wallace's narrative worlds precisely because of its dependence on the idea of a central fictional world. I would submit that it makes more sense to consider every narrative level or world as equally real because they are all equally fictional: in Dorrit Cohn's formulation, fiction 'is not a matter of degree, but of kind'.[66]

Lubomír Doležel argues that the 'capacity' of a 'fictional text' to 'create fictional worlds' is 'a special kind of performative force'.[67] That is, if a fictional narrative states

---

[65] Gerald Prince. *Narrative as Theme*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. 30; Brian McHale. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1987. 99–111; Marie-Laure Ryan. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991. 21–3.

[66] Dorrit Cohn. 'Fictional versus Historical Lives: Borderlines and Borderline Cases'. *Journal of Narrative Technique* 19: 3–24. 16.

[67] Lubomír Doležel. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. 146. Doležel cites Roland Barthes and Wolfgang Iser as earlier proponents of this idea (262).

that a certain thing happened then that thing did, in the world of the narrative, indeed happen. There is no reference world to act as truth-maker. In such a model, I submit (although Doležel himself fights shy of going quite this far), there is no need to assign the status of primary narrative or central narrative world, so that there is no need, in the case of canonical texts which employ a framing narrative (such as *The Woman in White*, *The Turn of the Screw* or *Heart of Darkness*), to downgrade the story which constitutes the main substance of the text to the level of the hypo-diegetic. This is even more emphatically the case when it comes to postmodernist metafictions which continually draw attention to their own textuality: if the reader is constantly being reminded that she is reading fiction there is no urgency to assign a particular narrative level the status of primary diegesis, since the aesthetic and semantic qualities of every level of the narrative can be assessed or appreciated independently on its own terms. McHale and Prince's concepts allow for this democracy of narrative levels in a way which Ryan's model does not.

The Pale King: complexity and recursion

Wallace's exploration of the ontological possibilities of long hypotactically structured sentences continues in *The Pale King*.[68] Early in the book Wallace picks up *Infinite Jest*'s theme of '*Analysis-Paralysis*': Claude Sylvanshine finds himself standing on the tarmac at Peoria airport caught in 'a kind of paralysis' as he contemplates the 'logistics' of his onward journey. A lengthy sentence details the choices, possibilities and risks which run through his mind, beginning with 'Part of what kept him standing' and continuing through three full pages of text to 'finally, and forever, lost it'.[69] Here, again, excessively complex syntax is associated with an unhealthy mode of thought. Sylvanshine has to practise 'Thought Stopping' to break out of this 'cyclone of logistical problems and complexities'; but what replaces it is a sense of his surroundings and of his personal destiny that is apocalyptically bleak: 'as if the earth here had

---

[68] Sentence-level analysis is particularly appropriate when reading *The Pale King* precisely because it was not completed by Wallace but assembled posthumously by Michael Pietsch: complete narrative structures are simply not available for study in the way that they are with *Infinite Jest*.

[69] Wallace, *The Pale King*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011. 23–6.

been stamped on with some cosmic boot'. He feels 'the edge of the shadow of the wing of Total Terror and Disqualification pass over him'.[70] The interwoven recollections and imaginings that have paralysed Sylvanshine have been enabling for, indeed have formed the substance of, Wallace's narrative. They are what Laing might call 'webs of *maya*' – illusions which (in Buddhist philosophy) constitute the phenomenal world. Wallace's late works *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* owe a stylistic debt, in this regard, to Franz Kafka's final quartet of stories, particularly 'Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse-Folk', which consists to a significant degree of tendered then withdrawn hypotheses.[71] When Sylvanshine succeeds in stopping the 'cyclone' of projection and possibility, he short-circuits the narrative and brings the sentence to a close.

The Pale King is voice-driven to a greater extent than *Infinite Jest* or *Oblivion*. As in *Brief Interviews*, Wallace in *The Pale King* stages dialogues with one voice suppressed, rendering them effectively monologues, in the form of video recordings made as part of Merrill Lehrl's machinations. A description of the recording set-up followed by a series of first-person pieces to camera constitute §14, and also provides the narrative context for Chris Fogle's long monologue in §22. The dialogue between Shane Drinion and Meredith Rand resembles an interview too: Drinion's interjections, the 'little occasional response[s]' he makes at Rand's prompting,[72] have barely more substance than the contentless questions punctuating the 'Brief Interviews': Rand's narrative is essentially a monologue. The sections narrated by the fictionalised 'David Wallace' are also in the first person: not surprisingly, it is these three sections which, more than any other part of the novel 'sound like David Foster Wallace'. We find the trademark footnotes and nested parentheses in self-parodic abundance: a footnote to a parenthetical comment in one relatively brief sentence, for example, takes up almost two pages, and has its own subsidiary footnote.[73]

---

[70] *Ibid.*, 26.

[71] Compare Chris Fogle's 'But nor is it as though I consciously reflected on all of this at the time' (*The Pale King* 225) to the constant denials of Kafka's narrator: 'But this is simply not the case'; 'Now, this certainly not how the matter stands'. Franz Kafka. *The Complete Short Stories*. Ed. Nahum Z. Glatzer. London: Vintage, 2005. 365, 373.

[72] Wallace, *The Pale King* 474.

[73] *Ibid.* 70–1.

It is useful to place the structural and syntactic contortions of the Wallace-narrated sections in the context of *complexity* as an explicit theme in the novel, which surfaces particularly in Wallace and Fogle's accounts of how they came to work for the IRS. Fogle refers to the 'excessive complexity and minutiae of the recruiter's presentation', and the fictional Wallace describes the work of the IRS as 'mind-numbingly complex'.[74] In light of Miller's observation about *Oblivion*, quoted above, that 'Wallace's long arcs of prose and the narrative sidetracks are exposed not as tortuous strivings toward some hard-won truth but as an insulation people spin between themselves and the sharp edges of their condition',[75] the seemingly throwaway adverb 'mind-numbingly' will stand some unpacking. What if one of the salient points about complexity is that it literally numbs the mind? And what if that, from a certain point of view, is no bad thing?

The idea that the tendency of work at the IRS to be 'mind-numbingly' tedious may paradoxically make that work therapeutic or even redemptive is a theme running through all of *The Pale King* in its published form. A key summary of this comes in §44: the unnamed first-person narrator claims to have 'learned', while working at the IRS's Peoria Regional Examination Center, 'that the world of men as it exists today is a bureaucracy', that 'the real skill that is required to succeed in a bureaucracy' is 'the ability to deal with boredom': 'The key is the ability, whether innate or conditioned, to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex'.[76] A particularly significant example of the positive value of immersing oneself in bureaucratic complexity is the way that David Cusk uses concentration on IRS procedures to ward off his attacks of sweating, which are produced, as I have discussed elsewhere, by a recursive process in which anxiety about sweating tends to cause sweating.[77] Thus 'mind-numbing complexity' is an

---

[74] *Ibid.*, 248, 85. Recall also Sylvanshine's anxiety about 'logistical problems and complexities', quoted above.

[75] Miller, para. 11.

[76] Wallace, *The Pale King* 439–40.

[77] *Ibid.*, 331. For Cusk's sweat attacks as one of the novel's many images of recursion see de Bourcier, 'Forms, Punch Cards, and *LETTERS*'.

antidote to vicious cycles of recursivity. This contrast is analogous to the one I posited in relation to *Infinite Jest* between the laborious enumeration of frames and the shorthand of metafictional self-reference.

Syntactically complex prose may represent an attempt at, in Holland's phrase, a 'talking cure'. On the other hand, a viciously recursive bind may be cut through by terse and insightful brevity, as illustrated by a sentence from the dialogue between Shane Drinion and Meredith Rand (which, as I have mentioned, is virtually a monologue). This sentence also shows how Wallace, in *The Pale King*, achieves a synthesis of the sophisticated arrangement of narrative worlds by means of syntactic organisation (as in the sentence from 'Mister Squishy') and the evocation of character through voice, which is central to *Brief Interviews*. The sentence I want to look at in detail is this one:

> So we ended up spending a lot of the first couple days out in the stairwell talking about the whole business of my suspicions about what he wanted from me and why he was doing this, around and around, and he did tell me a little more about himself and getting cardiomyopathy in college, but he also kept saying OK, he'd talk about all this as long as I wanted to, but that it was kind of a vicious circle because anything he said I could be suspicious of and attribute some kind of secondary agenda to if I wanted to, and I might think it was all honest and open but it wasn't really intense or efficacious, in his opinion, it was more like going around and around inside the problem instead of really looking at the problem, which he said because he was a walking dead man and not really part of the institution of the nut ward he felt like maybe he was the only person who'd really tell me the truth about my problem, which he said was basically that I needed to grow up. (498)[78]

Rand's speech is colloquial, her syntax inelegant but coherent. For example, she introduces a new clause with 'but' ('but he also kept saying'), then within the

---

[78] Wallace, *The Pale King* 498.

reported speech that follows there is another 'but' a few words later. This makes perfectly legitimate sense, but it is awkward. Similarly, Rand does not 'sound like David Foster Wallace' when, in the penultimate clause, she unnecessarily says 'my problem', redundantly duplicating the clause's object, which has already been given (by 'which,' at the beginning). To clarify: Rand could say, 'my problem, which […] he felt like maybe he was the only person who'd really tell me the truth about', but she redundantly adds 'my problem'. This makes her sound very different from the grammatically pedantic David Wallace of the 'Author' sections.[79] The gracelessness of her meanderings might seem to become irrelevant when the diagnosis of Rand's 'problem' by her future husband Ed cuts through all the going 'around and around': 'I needed to grow up'. The conflict between syntactic complexity representing psychological knots and binds (on the one hand) and the terse brevity that Aubry associates with emotional health and healing apparently plays out within this single sentence.

There is more going on here, however. The internal dynamics of this sentence are also similar to those of the one describing Sylvanshine's anxieties at the airport: the substance of the sentence, its narrative content, is generated by 'going around and around inside the problem', before being abruptly curtailed by the terse final diagnosis. The sentence self-consciously evokes recursivity, the phrases 'vicious circle' and 'going around and around' describing exactly the sort of bind Miller identifies as a 'Wallace trademark', where 'every layer of self-knowledge is nested inside yet another layer that scrutinizes it mercilessly for inauthenticity':[80] in this case the explicit acknowledgement of Rand's suspicions that Ed might be motivated by sexual desire for her fails to dispel those suspicions. That whole question, however, is cordoned off as disnarrated: it is something that Ed says that 'he'd talk about […] as long as [she] wanted to', although Rand 'could' always respond with more suspicion. In other words, Rand is reporting something that Ed said about conversations that the two of them could hypothetically hold. However, the fact that she devotes so much

---

[79] It is true that an even more pedantic voice would begin the clause with 'about which' rather than leaving a preposition hanging at the end, but Wallace never seems too troubled by hanging prepositions, and even (like his postmodernist forebear Thomas Pynchon) seems to relish them.

[80] Miller, para. 7.

time, both within this sentence and in her narrative as a whole, to describing the problematic recursion gives the reader the sense that, to the Rand who is telling the story to Drinion in Meibeyer's (a bar frequented by IRS staff), her suspicions about Ed are just as real and pressing as the idea that her seventeen-year-old self 'needed to grow up'. (Wallace says in his notes that Rand feels 'trapped' in her marriage to Ed.)[81] The narrative ontology here is very similar to that of the Terry Schmidt sentence: a cause for anxiety and guilt is introduced as hypothetical but seeps (to borrow Hayles's imagery) from an ontologically subordinate world through insulating layers of hypotaxis and conditionality to pollute the primary narrative world, thereby undermining that very hierarchy.

Wallace achieves a fine balance between complexity and recursion in this sentence. He allows the syntactic looseness of the sentence to give Rand a distinctive voice, which – unlike the sentence from 'Mister Squishy', or even my earlier example from *The Pale King* – does not 'sound like David Foster Wallace'. Rather than enumerating all the possible permutations of nesting and recursion that characterize the situation Rand is describing, Wallace trusts the reader to have grasped the ineluctability of the knot she has tied herself in (like 'a machine that gave you an electric shock every time you said "Ow!"'[82]). In this sense *The Pale King* represents, if not a retreat from the strategy I described earlier of forcing the reader to pay attention to every frame, then at least an acknowledgement that, within the polyphony of Wallace's mature style, more concise images of recursion can take their place alongside exhaustive rehearsal and repetition, and that eschewing the laborious longhand sometimes aids in the creation of a wider variety of voices. At the same time, this sentence illustrates the way that *The Pale King* uses the narrative potential of long, syntactically complex sentences to conjure, in Ryan's phrase, a 'textual universe' of interpenetrating narrative worlds, in ways which Wallace tested out intensively and relentlessly in *Oblivion*, but using a richer range of voices than can be heard in that collection. In this essay I have traced the development of Wallace's syntactic

---

[81] Wallace. *The Pale King* 547.

[82] *Ibid.* 502.

experimentation through his later works, a subject critics and scholars have often touched upon but which has not hitherto been analysed in the kind of detail I have attempted here. By focusing on individual sentences, I have shown that syntactic structure is central both to Wallace's evocation of voice and to his construction of ontologically complex narrative worlds, and that a synthesis of these two projects is achieved with a greater degree of sophistication in *The Pale King*, despite its being unfinished, than in any of his previous books.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Aubry, T 'Selfless Cravings: Addiction and Recovery in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest'. *American Fiction of the 1990s: Reflections of History and Culture*. Ed. Prosser, J. 206–19.

Boswell, M '"The Constant Monologue Inside Your Head": *Oblivion* and the Nightmare of Consciousness'. Boswell and Burn 151–70.

Boswell, M and **Stephen, J B, Eds.** 2013 *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*. New York: Palgrave.

Burn, S J '"Webs of Nerves Pulsing and Firing": *Infinite Jest* and the Science of Mind'. Boswell and Burn 59–85.

Cohn, D 'Fictional versus Historical Lives: Borderlines and Borderline Cases'. *Journal of Narrative Technique* 19: 3–24.

de Bourcier, S 'Forms, Punch Cards, and *LETTERS*: Self-Reference, Recursion and (Un)self-Consciousness in *The Pale King*'s Representation of Bureaucracy'. *English Studies* 95. 1 (January 2014): 40–58. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2013.857852

Doležel, L 1998 *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hayles, N K 1999 'The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*'. *New Literary History* 30. 3: 675–97. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.1999.0036

Hering, D 2010 Editor's Preface. *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media, 9–11.

Holland, M K 2013 *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Kafka, F 2005 *The Complete Short Stories*. Ed. Nahum Z. Glatzer. London: Vintage.

Laing, R D 1971 *The Divided Self*. Baltimore MD: Penguin.

Laing K 1972 Harmondsworth: Penguin.

McHale, B 1987 *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Methuen. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203393321

Miller, L 2016 'The Horror, the Horror'. Review of *Oblivion* by David Foster Wallace. *Salon* 30th June 2004. http://www.salon.com/2004/06/30/wallace_8 Accessed 12th September.

Poole, S 'Clause and Effect'. Review of *Oblivion: Stories* by David Foster Wallace. *The Guardian* 24th July 2004.

Prince, G 1992 *Narrative as Theme*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Ryan, M-L 1991 *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Tanner, J 'Growing Sentences with David Foster Wallace'. http://www.kottke.org/09/03/growing-sentences-with-david-foster-wallace Accessed 14th September 2015.

Wallace, D F 1997 *Infinite Jest*. London: Abacus.

Wallace, 2001 *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. 1999. London: Abacus.

Wallace, 2004 *Oblivion: Stories*. London: Abacus.

Wallace, 2007 *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*. London: Abacus.

Wallace, 2011 *The Pale King*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Zunshine, L 2010 'Theory of Mind and Experimental Representations of Fictional Consciousness'. *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*. Ed. Zunshine. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 193–213.