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Abstract: Before the publication of *Infinite Jest* in 1996, no less than a dozen excerpts from Wallace’s novel had already been published in various journals and magazines. The essay presents the first complete overview of these previously neglected excerpts and analyzes how they frame *Infinite Jest*. Drawing on theories by Bryant, McGann and Bhaskar, the analysis shows that the excerpts function as ‘paracontent’ that occupies a gray area between self-contained content and marketing. The essay then considers the sum of excerpts, which exhibits a surprising bias in favor of certain parts of Wallace’s novel, and discusses the implications of this imbalance.

Key terms: David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, excerpts, paratexts, publishing

Introduction

In the months leading up to the publication of *Infinite Jest* in February 1996, David Foster Wallace’s publishers Little launched an elaborate marketing campaign for the novel. One of their initiatives was to send a series of alluring postcards to four thousand reviewers, producers and booksellers. With each round of postcards, a few extra details of the title were revealed against the lightly clouded sky of the jacket illustration, accompanied by promising messages such as “the biggest literary event of next year” and “[j]ust imagine what they’ll say about his masterpiece” (Max 2012: 211).

One of the more restrained postcards merely stated: “It’s coming”. This terse statement almost sounds like a threat and provides the impression of some rough beast approaching, its hour come round at last, slouching towards Bethlehem to be born. These associations are of course derived from William Butler Yeats’s classic poem “The Second Coming” (1920), whose title aptly describes the staggered publication of *Infinite Jest*. Since 1992, a significant proportion of the novel-to-be had
already been published as excerpts in various journals, magazines and newspapers, so the coming promised by the ominous postcard was at best a Second Coming.

Publishing excerpts of upcoming novels is a fairly standard practice in the US book market. Another hefty novel, Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, ran in 27 installments in the magazine *Rolling Stone* from July 1984 to August 1985 before its publication as a book in 1987. Pre-publication excerpts from modern classics such as Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) and Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985) were also released, sometimes five or six years before the novels came out. This practice serves at least a double function. It generates attention for the coming work, and it allows authors (and their agents) to be paid for the same piece of text more than once. Because of their dual promotional and commercial nature, pre-publication excerpts are thus situated in an indeterminate zone between paratexts and self-contained literary texts.

The pre-publication excerpts from *Infinite Jest* were, however, of a different nature than those from the novels mentioned above. While the excerpts from *Catch-22* and *Blood Meridian* numbered one or two, and while Wolfe’s novel was serialized in full, no more or less than a dozen excerpts from *Infinite Jest* were published between 1992 and early 1996, some of them more than once. Neither the sparse appetizers from Heller’s and McCarthy’s novels nor the full, systematic serialization of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, the many pre-publication excerpts from Wallace’s most important work occupy a very uncommon position in-between.

The many excerpts from *Infinite Jest* have not been systematically studied before, maybe because they are considered preliminary and incomplete dress rehearsals for the real show. On the other hand, the even more preliminary manuscripts in the Wallace archives at the Harry Ransom Center have attracted massive attention from scholars (see for example Staes 2014; Hering 2016; Miley 2016), whose archival studies have provided important insights into different stages of the novel’s composition. Furthermore, the arduous editing process of *Infinite Jest* has recently been analyzed extensively by Tim Groenland (2019) and Emilio Englade (2019). Both Groenland and Englade, however, focus on the editing and copyediting of the completed book manuscript, and do not consider the earlier editorial work that must have gone into the individual excerpts before their publication in various magazines and journals. The editing of *Infinite Jest* is thus basically portrayed as a dialogue between Wallace and his editor Michael Pietsch (as well as a few inhouse copyeditors), whereas the contributions of the many people involved in the publication of the excerpts, as well as the excerpts themselves, remain unacknowledged and unstudied.

It is my thesis that these pre-publication excerpts constitute equally important steps in the gradual movement towards the published novel; an intermediary stage between manuscript, uncorrected proof and first edition. Nevertheless, they
have largely gone unnoticed by Wallace criticism. Existing lists of the excerpts are incomplete and, in many cases, also riddled with errors, and the individual excerpts and their important function as framing devices for the complete novel have not been studied. The aim of the present essay is therefore two-fold: Firstly, it will present the first complete overview of the excerpts and thus establish a foundation for further research; secondly, drawing on theories by Jerome McGann, John Bryant and Michael Bhaskar, it will analyze how the excerpts function as ‘paracontent’ that occupies a gray area between self-contained content and marketing and frames Infinite Jest in significant ways. The analysis will begin with a close reading of a few selected excerpts and their material contexts to show how they each relate to the novel. It will then consider the sum of excerpts, which exhibits a surprising bias in favor of certain parts of Infinite Jest, and it will conclude by discussing how this imbalance coerces readers to consider the novel in a way that aligns with Wallace’s vocal critique of his postmodern predecessors.

**Bits and Pieces: An Inventory**

As argued above, the publication strategy for David Foster Wallace’s magnum opus is a highly unusual case. While pre-publication excerpts from modern American novels usually number at most a couple (and often none), no less than a dozen pieces from Infinite Jest appeared in a wide variety of journals and magazines before the appearance of the first edition. This does not exactly amount to the planned and regular serialization through which most Victorian novels and later works such as The Bonfire of the Vanities and William Gibson’s Count Zero (1986) have been published, but it nevertheless represents a massive flow of texts that deviates from the norm, even considering the vast size of the novel. It can even be argued that the pre-publication excerpts from Infinite Jest due to their high number form a sort of unsystematic, partial and distributed serialization that recalls Mark W. Turner’s discussion of “the unruliness of serials” (2014: 11). Certainly, readers in the early 1990s with an interest in the work of David Foster Wallace had rich opportunities to follow the gradual becoming of his second novel.

As a result of their sheer number and dispersed nature, previous surveys of the excerpts have been incomplete and/or erroneous. In the following, I shall therefore present the first full inventory of these textual bits and pieces, with a specification of which parts of Infinite Jest they correspond to. I have completed the inventory by collating existing bibliographies,¹ by pursuing references in...
interviews and critical essays – and generally by spending more time (and money) on eBay and AbeBooks over the last few decades than is strictly advisable.

The chronological list states where and when the excerpts appeared, their title and the corresponding pages in Wallace’s novel. I believe the inventory to be complete, but due to the scattered and unsystematic nature of the excerpts, the map may still have blank spots (when can one confidently say that one has counted all the whales in the ocean?). It is safe to say, however, that the following is the hitherto most complete and correct list, which can lay a solid groundwork for further studies of the slowly unfolding publication of *Infinite Jest*:


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2 The excerpt is not listed in the otherwise very helpful section “Uncollected DFW” on Nick Maniatis’s *Howling Fantods* website. The back cover of the first printings of the trade paperback of *Infinite Jest* (1997) wrongly states that an excerpt from the novel appeared in *The Paris Review*. Wallace has indeed published fiction in *The Paris Review* (“Little Expressionless Animals”), and it seems likely that the appearance of this story has led the publisher to conflate *Harvard Review* and *The Paris Review*.

3 The excerpt was nominated for the Pushcart Prize and was subsequently reprinted in this anthology, which on the copyright page of *Infinite Jest* is erroneously listed as number XIII.
6a: “It Was a Great Marvel That He Was in the Father Without Knowing Him 2”, \textit{Iowa Review} 24.2, 1994 (corresponds to pp. 157–169 of \textit{Infinite Jest}, where Jim is lectured by his drunken father on the correct use of a garage door and his own body).

6b: Same as 6a, reprinted in \textit{Transgressions: The Iowa Anthology of Innovative Fiction}, 1994.\(^4\)

7: “It Was a Great Marvel That He Was in the Father Without Knowing Him 1”, \textit{Iowa Review} 24.3, 1994 (corresponds to pp. 27–31 of \textit{Infinite Jest}, where Jim dresses up as a conversation coach).\(^5\)


10a: “Adventures in Regret IV”, \textit{The Los Angeles Times}, June 1995 (corresponds to pp. 205–211 of \textit{Infinite Jest}, depicting Tiny Ewell’s fascination with tattoos).\(^6\)

10b: “High Regret Ink”, \textit{Puncture} 35, Spring 1996 (almost the same as 10a).


After having set the record straight, we can now proceed to a discussion of what (and how) it all means.

\(^4\) The bibliography on the website \textit{Pink Asphalt} wrongly lists excerpt #7 as the text appearing in this anthology.

\(^5\) Note that number 1 appeared last, which has caused some confusion in existing bibliographies (see note 4). Bonnie Nadell’s archive at the Harry Ransom Center only contains one of the two excerpts: <http://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/pdf/00541.pdf>.

\(^6\) As far as I have been able to ascertain, there are no Adventures in Regret I-III, so the numbering is probably of the whimsical kind familiar from Wallace’s story “Octet” (which was anything but an octet).
Material Matters

The many pre-publication excerpts from *Infinite Jest* are situated in a gray area between self-contained stories and a widely distributed paratextual network meant to alert readers to the second coming of Wallace’s novel. Taking his cue from Gérard Genette’s seminal work *Paratexts*, Michael Bhaskar has labeled such texts that “exist between content and marketing” as “paracontent” (Bhaskar 2011: 26–27). Bhaskar’s discussion is mainly focused on a digital publishing environment, which abounds with easily available excerpts from upcoming works. While the practice of excerpting has certainly taken new, creative directions in the current digital culture,7 his description of ‘paracontent’ as a form of advertising that is “advertising itself, as the advert is actually part of the thing being advertised” (Bhaskar 2011: 29) is equally relevant for print culture and helps us understand the complex operations that surround the twelve excerpts: They can easily be enjoyed as aesthetic experiences on their own, even while they peddle an upcoming product.

From the perspective of genetic criticism, the individual excerpts merit attention since there are often textual variations between the excerpts and the corresponding parts of the first edition. To take an example, the first sentence of excerpt #8 reads: “Poor Tony Krause had a seizure in the fall” (Wallace 1994d: 164), while the corresponding sentence in the novel reads: “Poor Tony Krause had a seizure on the T.” (*IJ*: 299).8 To develop a theoretical framework for describing such variations, John Bryant has proposed the concept of the ‘fluid text’:

Simply put, a fluid text is any literary work that exists in more than one version. It is ‘fluid’ because the versions flow from one to another. [...] Literary works invariably exist in more than one version, either in early manuscript forms, subsequent print editions, or even adaptations in other media with or without the author’s consent. The processes of authorial, editorial, and cultural revision that create these versions are inescapable elements of the literary phenomenon, and if we are to understand how writing and the transmission of literary works operate in the processes of meaning making, we need first to recognize this fact of fluidity and also devise critical approaches, and a critical vocabulary, that will allow us to talk about the meaning of textual fluidity in writing and in culture. (2002: 1–2)

With their many variations in wording, the excerpts are all important instances of this textual fluidity, and the list above can form a useful starting point for future bibliographical studies of the textual evolution of *Infinite Jest*. In this essay, how-

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7 For elaborate analyses of such innovative digital excerpts, see for instance Sarah Mygind’s (2015) discussion of McSweeney’s iOS app, or my own analysis (2017) of David Mitchell’s creative use of Twitter fiction to advertise an upcoming novel.
8 Here and henceforth, *IJ* refers to *Infinite Jest* (Wallace 1996c).
ever, I am not as concerned with small textual differences as with more external factors that frame the excerpts and the novel of which they are a part: publication venues, illustrations, titles etc. Such elements are all examples of what Jerome McGann has called “bibliographical codes” – material and paratextual features that literary scholars according to McGann habitually neglect in favor of “the linguistic code (which we tend to privilege when we study language-based arts like novels and poetry)” (1991: 56). Bibliographical codes are often the work of other agents than the author (for instance graphic designers, typesetters and editors), but as both McGann and Bryant point out, they still express their own intentions that add nuances of meaning to the text. As a result of this collaborative dimension, Bryant argues that fluid texts are “the material evidence of shifting intentions” (2002: 9; original emphasis). To take an example, the excerpts from *Infinite Jest* are often accompanied by titles or illustrations that do not appear in the novel. Such elements are usually not considered in analyses of the texts they present, but as Genette (1997: 25; original emphasis) points out with an apt double negation, they “cannot not” serve as a paratextual threshold that shapes our interpretation.

To map this intricate interaction between texts, paratexts and material contexts, McGann (1991: 124) has proposed a mode of interpretation that he calls “radial reading”, which focuses on “the complex radial networks and communicative exchanges” that surround the text. Such forays into a larger network of paratextual and other contextual relations are crucial if we are to understand how the pre-publication excerpts relate to Wallace’s novel, and I will therefore undertake radial readings of a few selected examples. The twelve excerpts originally appeared in a wide variety of publications that spanned from scholarly journals to much broader venues such as music magazines and newspapers, and I have chosen an example from each end of the spectrum to show how they in very different ways pave the way for the publication of *Infinite Jest*.

My first example, #5 from the list above, hails from the Summer 1993 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. The tri-quarterly journal was founded in 1980 by the publisher John O’Brien, and since 1984, it has been published by the Dalkey Archive Press (also established by O’Brien). The journal is mainly of academic bent, featuring both critical essays about and fiction by “writers whose work resists convention and easy categorization” (n. d.: n. pag.), according to its website. The issue containing the excerpt from *Infinite Jest* was the inaugural Younger Writers Issue, which according to the preface was devoted to “younger

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9 See for instance my essay “Judging by the Cover” (2012) for an elaborate analysis of how the dust-jacket to the first edition of *Infinite Jest* affected the reception of the novel.
writers whose works are promising enough to suggest they will eventually achieve historical importance” (Moore and McCaffery 1993: 7). It was edited by Steven Moore and guest editor LarryMcCaffery, and it holds a special position for Wallace scholars as a result of two central texts: the long interview with Wallace by Larry McCaffery, which is still by far the most quoted interview in Wallace studies, and the foundational essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction”. Together, these two texts represent Wallace’s most elaborately formulated critique of postmodernism, and with their programmatic and eminently quotable reflections on the necessity of a showdown with the self-reflexive, abstract and ironic literature of the postmodern patriarchs, and their urgent call for new literary rebels who “dare to back away from ironic watching” (Wallace 1993b: 192) and “eschew self-consciousness” (Wallace 1993b: 193) in favor of sincerity and sentimentality, they have had an enormous impact on the reception of Wallace. The whole idea of Wallace as a postironic (Andersen 2012, 2014; Konstantinou 2012, 2016), postpostmodern (Burn 2008; Staes 2014; McLaughlin 2004), metamodern (van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen 2017) representative of a literary New Sincerity (Kelly 2010a) can be traced to the agenda launched by Wallace in these seminal texts. Acknowledging their importance, Adam Kelly has dubbed the two texts “the essay-interview nexus” (2010b: n. pag.), but this otherwise fitting phrase does not capture the important fact that the same issue of the journal also contained an excerpt from *Infinite Jest*.11

The excerpt is simply called “From *Infinite Jest*”, and it is the first of the twelve excerpts to name the title of the upcoming novel. The four-page text follows Ken Erdey and Kate Gompert to an NA meeting (devoted specifically to marijuana addiction), and like much of the novel it thus revolves around topics like depression, addiction and the struggle to become and stay sober. After the initial mise-en-scène, the excerpt describes Ken Erdey’s reluctance to hug other people after the meeting; a reluctance he quickly overcomes after strong insistence (and overt physical threats) from Roy Tony. In the closing sentence of the

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10 Especially van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen have been very vocal in their attempt to argue that their term, ‘metamodernism’, denotes something completely different than for instance ‘postpostmodernism’, but in reality there is so much overlap between the various labels and the literary examples used to support them that they can easily be considered different names for the same literary movement, which rebels against postmodernism by combining its self-reflexivity and interest in systems with a stronger focus on character.

11 Furthermore, the issue contained a short memoir by Mark Costello on Wallace’s struggle to write, as well as two academic essays on Wallace. Surrounding the Wallace cluster were texts by and about William T. Vollmann and Susan Daitch who were also presented as two of the most significant younger fiction writers of the time. In addition to texts relating to these three authors, the issue contained ads for other publications such as *Conjunctions* and *The Pushcart Prize*. 
excerpt, we are told that “Erday had both his arms around the guy’s neck and was hugging him with such vigor Kate Gompert later said it looked like Erday was trying to climb him” (Wallace 1993c: 198). The excerpt is thus a perfect condensation of the argument set forth in the essay-interview nexus: Erday, who works in advertising (a trade Wallace in “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” presented as a supreme example of postmodern cynicism), is too self-involved to be comfortable with physical contact with other human beings, but both literally and metaphorically he ends up embracing humanity in what Wallace in the McCaffery interview poignantly calls “a living transaction between humans” (1993a: 142). The excerpt follows directly after “E Unibus Pluram”, and the brief scene depicted in it is closely aligned with the essay’s and the preceding interview’s declared interest in “old untrendy human troubles and emotions” (Wallace 1993b: 193) and the dangers of solipsism (Wallace 1993a: 143). At the same time, the two longer texts clearly instruct us how to read the excerpt. The themes in the short text are both supported by and support the essay and the interview, which thus function as a launching pad for not only an aesthetic agenda, but also an upcoming novel. If we were ever in doubt that the essay-interview nexus was primarily a prophecy about Wallace’s own future work (rather than the work of other rebels, as Lucas Thompson suggested in his paper at the conference OzWallace 2017 in Melbourne), a consideration of the close alignment between the three parts of the extended essay-interview-excerpt nexus will put us right.13

The Review of Contemporary Fiction is a scholarly journal with a limited readership, but other excerpts appeared in much more popular magazines. The US publishing field has a very rich tradition of publishing magazines that house fiction, from lurid publications such as Cavalier and Playboy to more highbrow channels. Wallace has certainly not refrained from publishing fiction in skin magazines (his story “My Appearance” originally ran in Playboy), but the excerpts from Infinite Jest generally appeared in more venerable magazines, including The New Yorker and Harper’s. The first of two excerpts in The New Yorker (#8 on my list) appeared in a double issue in the summer of 1994, and it depicts Poor Tony’s downturn and eventual seizure as a result of drug-withdrawal. Like the excerpt in

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12 Once again, the text differs slightly from the published novel, where the corresponding passage reads: “Erday had both arms around the guy’s neck and was hugging him with such vigor Kate Gompert later told Joelle van Dyne it looked like Erday was trying to climb him” (If: 507).
13 “E Unibus Pluram” was originally dedicated to Mary Karr, whom Wallace famously stalked as he composed Infinite Jest (Max 2012: 146–149), and who has later contributed to Wallace being posthumously exposed to the #MeToo movement. In the essay collection A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again (1997), the dedication to Karr has been discreetly removed.
The Review of Contemporary Fiction, it thus presents us with a grim depiction of addiction and an unflinching portrait of a person hitting bottom.

Unlike the piece in The Review of Contemporary Fiction, the story about Poor Tony is not labeled as a part of an upcoming novel. Rather, it is presented as a self-contained piece of fiction, and the same goes for the excerpt in Harper’s (#4 on my list). The effect of this is to camouflage the excerpts’ paratextual status as something more (or less) than complete stories in their own right. But even though the excerpt about Poor Tony lacks an upcoming novel or an accompanying essay-interview nexus to provide a larger topical framework, there are other elements in its immediate material context that shape our preconceptions of the text. Not least of these is of course the magazine itself, a prestigious venue that since its inception in 1925 has been tantamount to a cultural seal of approval and a way station for authors on the road to book publication.

The New Yorker not only shapes our preconceptions of the text, but also the text itself. As pointed out earlier in the article, a number of editors were involved in the individual excerpts before Michael Pietsch began his work on the completed manuscript, so portions of the novel have been through the editorial crucible more than once – a fact that has been mostly neglected in the existing archival research on Wallace, obscuring how collaborative a process the composition of Infinite Jest really was. The New Yorker is famous for its stringent house style, which among other things involves the widespread use of ‘close punctuation’ (a form of punctuation where commas are used generously to emphasize meaning and syntax). Wallace is justly famed for his long, fluid sentences, which in spite of their sparing use of punctuation are fairly easy to navigate, but the excerpt in The New Yorker has been made to conform to the magazine’s house style, and the frequent use of commas is a departure from Wallace’s signature style. Some of these commas have been removed once again in the published novel. The third sentence in the excerpt thus begins: “He’d been drinking codeine cough syrup in the men’s room of the Armenian Foundation Library in ghastly central Watertown, MA, for over a week” (Wallace 1994d: 164), while the corresponding sentence in the novel reads: “He’d been drinking cough syrup in the men’s room of the Armenian Foundation Library in horrid central Watertown MA for over a week” (IJ: 299). While steps have thus been taken in the final editing of the novel to reestablish the fluidity of Wallace’s prose, the chapter about Poor Tony’s sei-

14 As David Hering has demonstrated, many of the stories published by Wallace in the latter part of his life were also originally intended as parts of The Pale King (Hering 2016: 132). For some reason or other, perhaps to fulfil a book contract, many of the excerpts ended up in the story collection Oblivion instead. By refraining from labelling the excerpts as excerpts, Wallace kept his options open.
zure still seems to retain more commas than the surrounding chapters. A comma-riddled sentence such as: “Then, wholly friend- and connectionless, Poor Tony, in hiding, began to Withdraw From Heroin” (IJ: 300) is a relatively rare occurrence in Infinite Jest, and The New Yorker’s house style has thus survived to some extent in the published novel. The chapter’s origin as an excerpt has left its mark on the final version, underscoring the highly collaborative nature of Wallace’s text.

In addition to its famous house style, The New Yorker is characterized by a rich visual dimension that is an integral part of the magazine’s identity. Its cover illustrations are generally the work of high profile artists, and the cover of this particular issue is no exception. It is created by Edward Sorel and titled “The Melting Plot”, and it depicts a number of prominent American writers showing off their canonical works under a sky illuminated by Independence Day fireworks. The double issue is specifically devoted to the theme of fiction, and the cover illustration (and theme itself) thus amount to a somewhat self-congratulatory celebration of the journal’s long history as a venue for American fiction of the highest caliber. The celebratory aspect of the double issue seems to confer even more prestige than usual on the stories contained within, and the excerpt by Wallace is accompanied by fiction from such established authors as Nicholson Baker, Alice Munro and Elmore Leonard.

Within the covers of the magazine we find more illustrations, not least a large number of the sardonical cartoons about modern urban life that have long been a signature of The New Yorker. In this issue, the cartoons are exclusively devoted to the topic of literature, and they are interleaved with the many stories in the magazine – not Wallace’s story, however. The only illustration adorning the four-page excerpt is the capital illustration, a P in the form of a belt looped around a drug addict’s arm, emphasizing that the excerpt like the one in The Review of Contemporary Fiction deals with the serious theme of addiction. Perhaps as a result of this decidedly unfrivolous subject matter, the story is both free of the cartoons and the many ads that usually grace the pages of the magazine (and which adorn Wallace’s other excerpt in The New Yorker). The lack of additional visual material is of course also a likely consequence of the brevity of the excerpt, and the much longer story by Nicholson Baker in the same issue is interspersed with a large number of cartoons and ads. Such peripheral elements invariably draw the readers’ gaze away from the text itself, and radial reading is thus often inherent in the material form of fiction published in magazines. The story of Poor Tony’s seizure, however, stands relatively undisturbed, without sophisticated cartoons and frivolous ads to clash with the grim subject matter.

The cryptical title of the excerpt, “Several Birds”, is not a phrase that appears in the excerpt itself or in Infinite Jest, for that matter. It functions as a composite reference to Poor Tony’s extravagant feather boa, to “The Old Cold Bird” (Wallace
that is his private term for heroin withdrawal, and to his hallucination of a “huge and orange-eyed wingless fowl hunched incontinent” (Wallace 1994d: 165) atop the toilet stall he lives in. Titles to excerpts are a good example of the supplementary meaning that often arises as parts of a novel are distributed to readers before the publication of the full work. Historically, there are countless similar examples of installments of serialized novels bearing separate titles that were removed or replaced with chapter numbers when the installments were gathered into a book. Considering its unusual nature, the title “Several Birds” is probably Wallace’s own, and in principle it therefore assumes a different, more authoritative status than the other bibliographical codes (for instance the capital illustration and the theme of the special issue) discussed above. While it seems reasonable to distinguish between paratextual features (authorized by the author) and broader contextual features created by others, we need to bear in mind that these broader contextual elements also express their own intentions, as both McGann and Bryant remind us. Sometimes these intentions are in conflict with those of the author, as is evident in the other excerpt in The New Yorker, “An Interval” (#9), whose various vignettes from Ennett House are interspersed with irrelevant cartoons of for instance a dog (or pig or sheep, it’s hard to tell) with headphones. Nevertheless, such seemingly peripheral bibliographical codes disturb our reading experience and thus tinge the meaning of the text. As McGann (1991: 81) puts it: “the verbal text and the documentary materials operate together to a single literary result”.

Yet other forms of signifying contextual frameworks are found in the longest and shortest of the twelve excerpts. The excerpt “From Quite a Bit Larger Thing in Progress” (#3) was printed in 1993 in a special issue of the journal Conjunctions titled “Unfinished Business”, and with its 50 pages it alone accounts for almost half of the collected number of excerpt pages. The excerpt was prefaced with a short text by Wallace on writing, which was later cannibalized in the essay “The Nature of Fun” (since reprinted in Both Flesh and Not), and the discussion in this preface of all the hard work going into the construction of a novel naturally framed the excerpt and novel-in-progress in a way that underscores the vastly ambitious nature of the undertaking. The shortest excerpt, simply titled “An Excerpt” (#12), appeared in a promotional folder released shortly before Infinite Jest.
itself. The folder is a flimsy piece of ephemera and hence often overlooked (it does not appear in any of the other bibliographies), but it is still bibliographically significant, since it – besides the usual textual variations – contains the first appearance of a small essay by Wallace on the woes of “being a fiction-writer in the middle of writing a long book” (1995/1996: n. pag.). Drawing on a metaphor from Don DeLillo’s *Mao II* (1991), Wallace memorably depicts a book-in-progress as “a kind of hideously damaged infant that follows the writer around” and “a cruel and repellent caricature of the perfection of its conception” (1995/1996: n. pag.). While purportedly stressing the imperfect nature of his fiction, Wallace nevertheless subtly underscores its qualities, both by aligning himself with the eminent writer Don DeLillo and by hinting that the imperfections pertain to the work-in-progress rather than to the complete novel, which we are assured in a blurb just beneath the essay is “a genuine work of genius” (1995/1996: n. pag.; original emphasis).

**A Fine Imbalance**

The contexts of the pre-publication excerpts analyzed above vary wildly, but it has hopefully become evident that each of them affects our notions of what kind of novel they simultaneously advertise and are a part of. After having pointed out the shades of meaning added by a few selected examples of ‘paracontent’, I will now move on to a discussion of what the sum of excerpts signifies. First of all, it should be noted that the remarkable diversity of publication venues, from academic journals to popular cultural magazines and newspapers, hardly seems to express any clear notions of *Infinite Jest*’s target audience. Wallace and his agent and publisher could certainly be praised for this open, democratic strategy of introducing the upcoming novel to as many different reader segments as possible, but it could just as easily be argued that the many widely distributed excerpts represent a slightly desperate scattershot publication strategy that evinces ill-formed notions of the novel’s intended audience. The piecemeal, unsystematic and dispersed arrival of *Infinite Jest* is certainly very different from the highly targeted serialization of for instance William Gibson’s *Count Zero* in *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*.

If we look at the content of the gathered excerpts, a curious and very striking bias reveals itself. The book description on the dust-jacket for the first edition of *Infinite Jest* rightly informs us that the novel is focused on “a Boston halfway house for recovering addicts and a nearby tennis academy”, and later paperback editions confirm this unsurprising information by stating that the novel is “[s]et in an addicts’ halfway house and a tennis academy”. These dual locations, Ennett House and Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.), are evidently central to the novel, and as every reader of *Infinite Jest* will know, each of the two locations has a
corresponding main character, Don Gately and Hal Incandenza, respectively. The
twin locations and main characters are loosely connected by the wheelchair as-
sassins and their violent quest to obtain the movie *Infinite Jest*, but by and large
they remain separate.\(^{16}\) The division between the strictly regulated tennis acad-
emy on the hill and the chaotic halfway house below is a basic structuring device
in *Infinite Jest*, which combines the story of Don’s climb from the bottom of society
with the story of Hal’s fall from the top.\(^ {17}\) Strikingly, however, by far the majority
of the pre-publication excerpts derive from only one of the novel’s dual strands,
the Ennett House strand. Don Gately and the other denizens of the halfway house
appear in nine of the twelve excerpts, while Hal is only present in a single excerpt
(#7), and the E.T.A. locker-room guru Lyle appears very briefly in another one
(#3).\(^ {18}\) This constitutes a pronounced imbalance, both in relation to the novel it-
self and to the selection of excerpts found in *The David Foster Wallace Reader*
(2014), where Ennett House and E.T.A. are about equally represented.

In his preface to the long excerpt in *Conjunctions*, Wallace himself remarks
that: “I’m doing this long piece of fiction, and parts of it are a lot like this excerpt,
and parts aren’t like it at all” (1993d: 223). This is of course an inherent limitation
of most pre-publication excerpts: They can hardly hope to represent the whole
work, especially one as long and complex as *Infinite Jest*. When the number of
excerpts is as substantial as in the present case, however, it becomes much easier
to present readers with a selection of parts that provides a more adequate impres-
sion of different aspects and settings from the novel they are lifted from. Still,
E.T.A. and Hal remain strikingly absent from the majority of excerpts. A pertinent
question is of course whether this absence is the result of a conscious strategy by
Wallace and/or his agent, or whether it is largely a matter of coincidence. A pos-
sible explanation for the imbalance is that the sections about Don and Ennett
House were written later than many of the sections dealing with Hal and the
E.T.A. (see Moore n. d.; Hering 2016; Max 2012 for more full accounts of Wallace’s
composition of *Infinite Jest*),\(^ {19}\) but the time of composition does not necessarily
stand in a causal relation to the selection of excerpts.

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\(^ {16}\) Famously, Hal and Don only ‘meet’ in a surreal memory in the novel’s first (but chronologically
last) chapter (*If*: 17).

\(^ {17}\) In his review of the novel, David Kipen pointed out this dual structure, which led him to de-
scribe *Infinite Jest* as “a sort of elephantine variation on ‘Entropy,’” Thomas Pynchon’s classic short

\(^ {18}\) Hal’s father James Incandenza appears as a child in two excerpts (#4 and #6) and is thus repre-
sented much more fully than Hal himself.

\(^ {19}\) In his essay “The Unfinished”, D. T. Max writes: “Though *Infinite Jest* had begun as a book with
Hal Incandenza at its center, as it grew Wallace moved his focus more to the figure of Don Gately”
(2009: n. pag.).
A more likely explanation for the bias is found elsewhere: As pointed out in the discussion of the excerpt from *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, *Infinite Jest* was presented by both Wallace and his publisher as a much-needed critique of the irresponsible and inhuman irony of the postmodern patriarchs, and in many sections of the novel we do indeed find the sincerity and the gritty and realistic focus on “old untrendy human troubles and emotions” that Wallace set forth as an ideal in “E Unibus Pluram”. Other parts of the novel, however, particularly the ones devoted to E.T.A., are rife with supernatural elements, zany humor and, yes, a pronounced irony that for lack of a better word can be described as Pynchonian.20 It is thus clear that the sum of excerpts and its privileging of the poor addicts in the halfway house express a set of intentions that is more aligned with Wallace’s very vocal rebellion against postmodernism than a more balanced selection of excerpts would have been.

Biographical evidence suggests that Wallace was worried that *Infinite Jest*’s maximalist critique of our enslavement to entertainment was sometimes a bit too entertaining for its own good; something he attempted to redress in *The Pale King* with its more restrained style and its insisting focus on boredom (see e.g. Max 2012: 225).21 With its clear privileging of scenes and characters from the halfway house, the selection of pre-publication excerpts from *Infinite Jest* points in a similar, sober direction. The sum of them underscores what Wallace in essays and interviews pointed out as new and different in *Infinite Jest* compared to, for instance, the work of John Barth, while the comic, supernatural and ‘postmodern’ traits in the novel are relatively absent from the excerpts, and from the ensuing reception of the novel. As I have argued in the article “Pay Attention!” (2014), many critics have tended to follow the guidelines Wallace laid down in the essay-interview nexus: both by overemphasizing the solipsistic and irresponsible nature of postmodernism, and by overemphasizing the degree of sincerity in Wallace’s own fiction.22 A similar argument has been made by Stephen J. Burn, who

20 Note for instance the marked contrast between the exuberant shenanigans of the Eschaton chapter (*IJ*: 321–342) and almost any scene from Ennett House or the AA meetings its inhabitants attend. Likewise, the supernatural presence that moves the furniture around at E.T.A. has no counterpart in Ennett House. In his chapter in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, Brian McHale (2013: 194–195) discusses *Infinite Jest*’s debt to Thomas Pynchon. While the long list of similarities is largely convincing, it may to some extent be the result of a confirmation bias on McHale’s part. In the introduction to *Constructing Postmodernism*, McHale (1992: 10) openly acknowledges his tendency to see the influence of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* everywhere he turns.

21 In § 9 of *The Pale King*, the “Author’s Foreword”, the narrator insists that “the very last thing this book is is some kind of clever metafictional titty-pinch” (Wallace 2011: 67).

22 With its somewhat too facile contrasting of postmodernist novels of “mastery” that are primarily out to “judge us” with works of ‘New Sincerity’ that exhibit “basic decency and fairness and
complains that Wallace’s work has often been favorably compared to a simplified “strawman postmodernism” (2011: 467) characterized by irresponsible irony and historyless self-reflection. Such reductive comparisons between Wallace and his postmodern forebears are to a large degree encouraged by, if not the result of, the rather coercive fashion in which the author presented his own aesthetic agenda in essays and interviews. The overrepresentation of Ennett House in the pre-publication excerpts constitutes a similar coercion, I would argue; a coercion which in many ways runs counter to Wallace’s often expressed ideas of the author-reader relationship as one of respect, equality and even love (see Kelly 2010a and Englade 2019 for discussions of these egalitarian ideas).

Other critics have also pointed out the importance of approaching Wallace’s influential self-representation with a certain degree of skepticism (Burn 2012b: 21; Herman and Staes 2014: 1; Konstantinou 2018: 52; Williams 2015: 312; Groenland 2019: 15), and recent years have seen a spreading realization that it is sometimes necessary to read Wallace against his own declared agenda. Examples of this critical reevaluation can be found in for instance Joel Roberts’s and Edward Jackson’s (2017) critique of Adam Kelly’s term ‘the New Sincerity’, which according to them positions itself altogether too closely to Wallace’s own arguments in the essay-interview nexus. The critical reassessment of the relation between Wallace’s eloquent self-representation in interviews (for instance, Burn 2012a; Lipsky 2010) and essays and the actual nature of his fiction is thus well under way, but it has arrived somewhat late, and it can be argued that this is partly due to the remarkable unity of vision presented by Wallace in the essay-interview nexus and in the sum of pre-publication excerpts; a unity of vision that shapes the first, partial coming of the novel, but which is not present in its second, complete coming, which is equally the work of a sincere literary rebel and a comic prankster.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have presented the first complete inventory of the unusually many pre-publication excerpts through which *Infinite Jest* was gradually revealed to sensitivity to the audience’s own hopes and fears” (Kelly 2010a: 144), Adam Kelly’s influential essay “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction” is a good example of this tendency.

23 It could easily be argued that Burn presents a similar strawman version of postmodernism in his book *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2008). See particularly pp. 15–27, where he discusses how the postpostmodernism of Franzen and Wallace differs significantly from the postmodernism of Pynchon, Gaddis, Coover and Barth.
readers in the first half of the 1990s. Furthermore, I have discussed how their individual and not least collective framing of the novel expresses certain intentions that have contributed to guiding interpretations of the work in certain directions. The essay supplements existing archival studies by analyzing a usually overlooked step in the publication process. My radial readings of this ‘paracontent’ can certainly not replace the valuable genetic criticism already undertaken by for instance Toon Staes, David Hering and Mike Miley. Moreover, future studies of the novel’s long and winding composition and publication history could profitably involve interviews with Wallace’s agent and editor, Bonnie Nadell and Michael Pietsch, who might shed further light on the reasons for the almost complete absence of Hal and E.T.A. from the excerpts. Finally, a study of the selections from Infinite Jest that Wallace chose for his many public readings could provide even more information on how the novel-to-be was presented to a larger public in various textual and verbal forms.

However, the purpose of the present essay has been to focus on some of those early inklings of Infinite Jest that unlike the manuscripts in the archives were originally meant for public consumption and thus in principle available to anyone interested; and it has been to discuss their collectively authored expressed intentions, which may be hard to distinguish from Wallace’s own intentions, and which at any rate affect our reading in a similar fashion – in this instance by directing our attention clearly towards Ennett House and the critique of postmodern irony it represents, and by eliding the zany humor and metafictional games that characterize many of the E.T.A. sections and the hilariously scary wheelchair assassin plot. As A. O. Scott was one of the first to point out in his essay “The Panic of Influence” (2000), much of Wallace’s career was shaped by his complex agon with Pynchon and other postmodernists, and the present article has shown that this constant struggle can be traced not only in his interviews and essays, but also in something as seemingly inconsequential as the selection of pre-publication excerpts. Infinite Jest both had a first and a second coming, and the partial first coming framed the upcoming novel in a way that has made it difficult to grasp the complexity of the self-contradictory, equally sincere and insincere, sentimental and ironic masterpiece that was first released in full to a wider public in February 1996.

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**Consulted Bibliographies**


