Oscillating from a Distance: A Study of Metamodernism In Theory and Practice

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"On or about December 1910, human character changed." Or so said Virginia Woolf, tongue-in-cheek, about the rise of modernism. It goes without saying that literary movements are not like presidential terms; they have no inauguration date. But in the last century (though certainly long before then), literary critics and authors have described the dominant cultural sensibility with terms like "modernism" and "postmodernism." These terms are only heuristic labels; the temporal boundaries they attempt to establish are inevitably nebulous. Modernist writers did not stop writing after postmodernism became the dominant literary mode in the late 1960s. Rather, as Brian McHale describes, the transition from modernist to postmodernist fiction is marked by a "change of dominant" (11) — specifically, a shift from foregrounding epistemological questions to foregrounding ontological ones.

The term "postmodernism" has long since percolated into public consciousness, and academics in the past few decades have begun to question whether postmodernism is still the dominant literary aesthetic, asking when and if and what will eventually take its place. As early as the 1990s, writers and literary critics were contemplating the death of postmodernism and anticipating the rise of its elusive successor. Postmodern writer John Barth was asked in a 1994 interview, "What's the future? Where do we go from here? Is there a post-postmodernism?" His answer: "I attended a seminar in Germany two summers ago on the end of postmodernism, new beginnings, just when I thought I was beginning to get the hang of what the term postmodernism means" (Barth 1994). Writers and critics were not the only ones anticipating the end of a postmodern era. In 1997, the University of Chicago hosted a philosophy conference called *After Postmodernism*. In 2011, The Institute of Classical Art and Architecture held a conference in New York called *Reconsidering Postmodernism*. That same year, the Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibition, *Postmodernism – Style and Subversion 1970–1990*, depicted postmodernism as a historical movement that had come to its end. In the past decade, many works announcing the end of postmodernism have been published: "*The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond*" (2006), *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* (2007), *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (2008), *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2011), and *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (2013). While these theorists identify different factors that led to the decline of postmodernism, many critics agree that postmodernism has now been replaced by something else. In this paper, I will engage with the critical debate surrounding the post-postmodern moment in American fiction, exploring "metamodernism," one of postmodernism's proposed successors, in theory and in practice.

Though a vocal cadre of staunch modernists have refused to acknowledge the cultural predominance of postmodern thought, and though some continue to view postmodernism as modernism's degenerate follower and a dead end in literature, the vast majority of critics agree that postmodernism became the literary *costume de rigueur* in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. David Foster Wallace, one of the first writers to articulate both postmodernism's successes and shortcomings, argues in his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" that the avant-garde movement which became known as postmodernism was enormously effective at exposing corruption and disrupting our delusions about reality:

> [B]y offering young, overeducated fiction writers a comprehensive view of how hypocritically the U.S.A. saw itself circa 1960, early television helped legitimize absurdism and

irony as not just literary devices but sensible responses to an unrealistic world. For irony — exploiting gaps between what's said and what's meant, between how things try to appear and how they really are — is the time-honored way artists seek to illuminate and explode hypocrisy. (182)

Wallace explains that when postmodernism became the dominant movement in American literature, its existence as a form that challenged the establishment eventually *became* the establishment: "irony, irreverence, and rebellion [have] come to be not liberating but enfeebling in the culture today's avant-garde tries to write about" (183). Grappling with the oppressive cynicism that had come to characterize fiction and the fact that nothing had come along to take its place, Wallace writes:

[I]rony is *still around*, bigger than ever after thirty long years as the dominant mode of hip expression. It's not a rhetorical mode that wears well. As Hyde puts it, "Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage." This is because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks. (183)

As Wallace suggests, readers of postmodern works grew accustomed to the genre's self-conscious irony and metafiction, and began to sense that postmodernism lacked solutions for the questions it was posing. Ultimately, Wallace argues, postmodernism's inability to provide any answers engendered a sea of accusations that postmodernism was pessimistic, a dead end, and morally and intellectually bankrupt. Philosopher Daniel Dennett, for instance, objected to postmodernism on the grounds that its ontological uncertainty stands in direct contrast to the idea that things can be known:

Postmodernism, the school of "thought" that proclaimed "There are no truths, only interpretations" has largely played itself out in absurdity, but it has left behind a generation of academics in the humanities disabled by their distrust of the very idea of truth and their disrespect for evidence, settling for "conversations" in which nobody is wrong and nothing can be confirmed, only asserted with whatever style you can muster. (*Edge*)

Unlike some of postmodernism's detractors, Wallace forecasts a solution in "E Unibus Pluram," predicting a new generation of literary rebels willing to eschew irony, self-consciousness, narcissism and solipsism. Wallace envisions that these rebels — or anti–rebels — will determine the future of fiction, write in the service of sincerity, "endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles" (192), and speak to "plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (193).

Wallace's predictions proved startlingly prescient. Over the past few decades, the labels "New Sincerity" and "post–irony" have become part of the cultural conversation. Furthermore, the critical debate about how to characterize and what to call this post-postmodernist movement has begun. In 2002, Linda Hutcheon asserted in *The Politics of Postmodernity* that the postmodern moment had "passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on" (Vermeulen and Akker 2), and called for a new label to replace the humorously inadequate and semantically meaningless "post-postmodernism."

"I used to have a formula for my undergraduates," said John Barth in 1994, "that Enlightenment plus industrialism generates Romanticism, and that Romanticism plus catastrophe or revolution generates modernism and that modernism plus the threat of apocalypse may generate postmodernism" (Barth 1994). What does postmodernism plus the problems of postmodernity generate? Many critics after Linda Hutcheon sought to give this new cultural paradigm a name to describe

what has been added to postmodernism and the new aesthetic it has generated. Proposals have included "Transmodernism," "Avantpop," "Performatism," "New Sincerity," "Altermodernism," "Hypermodernism," "Digimodernism," "Pseudomodernism," and "Automodernism." However innovative and creative these proposed successors might be, none of them adequately describe deviations from the postmodern condition, and none have been able to gain traction in the academic community, let alone become part of mainstream usage. Whatever movement will take postmodernism's place must incorporate old and new, modernism and postmodernism, irony and sincerity.

The term "metamodernism" appeared as early as the 1970's, used by critics in philosophy, political theory, and social theory, but metamodernism as a cultural paradigm did not receive substantial attention until Dutch cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker discussed it in detail in their 2010 article in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, "Notes on Metamodernism." Vermeulen and Akker argue that climate change, the financial crisis, political instability, and the digital revolution have conspired to catalyze the decline of postmodernism and instigate the ascension of "an emerging structure of feeling" (2), what they call metamodernism. More than just a proclamation that the era of postmodernism as dominant has ended, metamodernism is a sensibility situated between "a modern desire for *sens* [meaning] and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all" (6).

In order to define the particulars of this theory, it may be useful to return to McHale's "From Modernist to Postmodernist Fiction: Change of Dominant." Epistemologically (that is, in terms of knowledge and understanding), postmodernism conceives of knowledge as unknowable and history as incoherent, while metamodernism conceives of knowledge and history with a "negative idealism" that can be described as "as-if" thinking (Vermeulen and Akker). Metamodernism treats history's grand narratives with just as much skepticism and mistrust as postmodernism does, but it simultaneously acts *as if* these narratives can be known. Ontologically (that is, in terms of being and identity), "metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony" (Vermeulen and Akker 2). Like a pendulum, oscillating back and forth between one extreme and another, "the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern" (Vermeulen and Akker 2).

To understand this betweenness, this pendulation so central to metamodernism, it is essential to fully understand the prefix "meta." In "metamodernism," "meta" does not signify merely self-reflexivity or a change of position; it also refers to Plato's *metaxy*:

> With metaxy, Plato meant the oscillation between two states: in the myth of Heracles, for instance, metaxy referred to the tragic entrapment between the world of the gods and the world of the humans, without ever entirely being a part of either of them ... [M]eta signifies an oscillation, a swinging or swaying with and between future, present and past, here and there and somewhere; with and between ideals, mindsets, and positions. (Vermeulen)

Because "meta" means "'*with*,' '*between*,' and '*beyond*,'" (Vermeulen and Akker 2), critics argue that "metamodernism should be situated epistemologically *with* (post) modernism, ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism" (2).

In 2011, a London based artist published a *Metamodernist Manifesto*, calling for an end to "the inertia resulting from a century of modernist ideological naivety and the cynical insincerity of its antonymous bastard child." In 2011 and 2012, metamodern artists staged museum exhibitions in New York and Berlin, evincing a wider cultural acceptance of the movement. And in 2013, the *American Book Review* dedicated a special issue to metamodernism, identifying authors such as Robert Bolaño, Dave Eggers, Jonathan Franzen, Haruki Murakami, Zadie Smith, and David Foster Wallace as metamodern. Over the past few years, cultural recognition of metamodernism and its influence has been expanding, and certain authors are being "claimed" by metamodernism.

In order to explore metamodernism in practice, I will examine the work of one of these so-called metamodernist writers, David Foster Wallace. The claim that Wallace's fiction — some of which was

written decades before the term metamodernism gained modest recognition — can be characterized as metamodern may incite some doubt, but it is a claim that can be put to the test by examining one of his short stories: "Lyndon." Wallace's stories have a reputation for wild experimentation, for breaking fiction's rules, for self-conscious virtuosic prose. It is surprising that "Lyndon" was the story anthologized in *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology.* In contrast to his more experimental works, "Lyndon" stands out as an uncharacteristically "real" portrayal of a public, historical figure. Despite the story's striking realism, however, there are moments of abstraction and distance that call the realistic elements of the story — and the reader's assumptions about reality itself — into question. The last few pages of "Lyndon" reveal that at its core, Wallace writes a story not about the postmodern tropes of mirrors, language, art, or self-reflexivity, but about love and distance. By enabling these two contrapuntal themes to interact in the story's final scenes, Wallace's "Lyndon" remains in a liminal space, oscillating between modernism and postmodernism, irony and sincerity, and thus exhibits discernible metamodern characteristics. Unlike postmodernism, the lens of metamodernism captures the nuances and collapses the contradictions of Wallace's story.

Wallace published "Lyndon" six years before he wrote "E Unibus Pluram," and in many respects, it resembles a realist story. "Lyndon" represents a true historical figure — Lyndon Baines Johnson — as he actually was: an up-and-coming United States Senator from Texas, who eventually became Vice President and then President. The realism of "Lyndon" is heightened for those who remember his presidency; they realize that Wallace captures LBJ's infamously abrasive and domineering personality: "One day he'd be as kind as you please and the next he'd be screaming and carrying on and cursing you and your whole family tree, in the most vile language in front of your public coworkers" (368). Quotations like these — this one attributed to a "[f]ormer typist in the office of LBJ" (368) — are interpolated throughout the story, putatively attributed to one or another office aide, to an author of an LBJ biography or to Lyndon himself. The quotations are fictional, but they buttress the verisimilitude of Wallace's narrative, giving the impression that the text contains multiple voices. This narrative heteroglossia serves two important purposes: first, it provides additional characterization of Lyndon, and second, it disguises the fact that Wallace is the only real voice behind the curtain, a rhetorical move that a staunch postmodernist would refrain from making. Realism is dependent on the artist's ability to camouflage the fact that he is constructing a representation. The realism of "Lyndon," however, serves another purpose; it is a means to perpetually and unironically push the reader to accept a truth that Wallace eventually reveals as artifice.

At the very end of the story, Mr. Boyd, Lyndon's assistant-cum-confidante, travels to Lyndon's private residence in Texas to visit the President on his deathbed. When Boyd enters the President's bedroom, he finds Duverger, Boyd's Caribbean husband. Boyd notices painfully how Duverger's "spread cold hand partly covered that Presidential face as in an interrupted caress" (390). Lyndon has been sleeping with the man Boyd loves. This scene comes as a complete surprise, and even contemporary readers too young to remember Johnson's presidency experience the shock of this ending. *Did President Lyndon Johnson really die in 1968 from HIV/AIDS he contracted from having homosexual sex with a Haitian immigrant?* For readers who lived through, or are otherwise familiar with the life of LBJ, this scene instigates a dramatic "interpretive vertigo." That is, this textual moment stands out so starkly from the rest of the story as a fiction constructed by Wallace that the entire story is thrown into interpretive limbo. Upon recognition of this gross fabrication, readers are prompted to reevaluate the quotes and interviews in the story that they were so quick to buy into. The reader feels cozened, lulled into gullible naiveté, and wonders what it means to have been so easily deceived.

Thematically, the end of "Lyndon" engages with both love and distance. In the story's penultimate scene, beset by illness and literally retching during the conversation, Boyd listens to Lyndon's wife Lady Bird speak about her relationship with the President, his conception of love and the distance that love requires:

> Love is simply a word. It joins separate things. Lyndon and I, though you would
> disagree, agree that we do not properly *love* one another anymore. Because we ceased
> long ago to be enough *apart* for a 'love' to span any distance. Lyndon says he shall
> cherish the day when *love* and *right* and *wrong* and *responsibility*, when these words,
> he says, are understood by you youths of America to be nothing but arrangements of
> distance . . . Lyndon is haunted by his own conception of distance, David. His hatred of
> being alone, physically alone, no matter atop what — the area of his hatred in which
> your own devoted services have been so invaluable to us — his hatred of being alone is
> a consequence of what his memoir will call his great intellectual concept: the distance
> at which we see each other, arrange each other, love. (389)

Lady Bird claims that she and Lyndon are not far enough apart to love one another, that some
distance is necessary for the type of dialogic interaction we call love. The reverse however, too much
distance, precludes the possibility of love as well.

In the last few pages of the story — with Lady Bird's abstractions and the interpretive vertigo
conveyed by the shocking end — Wallace distances the reader, both thematically and narratively,
from the text in almost Brechtian fashion. This would seem to be a strikingly postmodern move.
Wallace's *verfremdungseffekt*, in Brechtian terms, has the potential to alienate the audience from
his work such that they are unable to engage with it emotionally, which, according to Brecht's
theory, assists his audience to analyze art on an intellectual level, thus inciting them to social
action. One of Brecht's techniques to create this distance, a breaking down of the so-called "fourth
wall" — allowing the actors to be in direct conversation with the audience — is in some ways much
like the metafiction of postmodernism, peeling back the curtain to reveal the artist pulling the
strings. The problem with Brecht's theory, of course, is that if the audience becomes too distanced
from the actors in the play or the characters in the story, they will not be spurred to action.
They will not care. This failure to galvanize the audience reflects precisely the frustration with
postmodernism Wallace describes in "E Unibus Pluram" and the sentiment Lady Bird expresses at
the end of "Lyndon." Postmodernism has not evolved from its navel-gazing locus of hyperacademic
experimentalism, ironic contrivance, and social inaction.

However, this story's engagement with "distance" is not purely postmodern. Postmodern fiction
manages to collapse some of the distances it depicts — the distance between reality and fiction,
popular culture and high art. Yet postmodernism also works to keep other distances conspicuously
open and may even extend them — the distance between signifier and signified, author and reader
(i.e. "Death of the Author," though this distance is sometimes collapsed). "Lyndon" plays with some
of these oppositions and adds some of its own: the distances between history and reality, cynicism
and optimism, irony and sincerity. Employing a realist, "historical" plot and a postmodern distrust
of authenticity and metanarrative, "Lyndon" collapses these distances through oscillation, proving
that they are mutually compatible and that they actually coexist—a distinctly metamodernist idea.

Wallace's fiction often lives in contradictions; despite his criticism of institutionalized irony, he
is an ironist himself. Some critics argue he uses irony against itself — irony in service of sincerity
— others argue that his work lives among both:

> "Single-entendre principles" is a cleverly tossed off phrase, but Wallace is temperamen-
> tally committed to multiplicity — to a quality he has called, with reference to the film-
> maker David Lynch, "bothness." He wants to be at once earnest and ironical, sensitive
> and cerebral, *lisible* and *scriptable*. (*NYBooks*)

Wallace's rejection of binary oppositions and embracing of "bothness," "multiplicity," and oscillation
provide insight into what makes "Lyndon" a metamodern work. In the story, Wallace achieves a
metamodern end through oscillation between realism and postmodernism, artifice and reality, irony
and sincerity — presenting each without allowing one to be privileged over the other.

Wallace's flippant treatment of history stands in sharp contrast to the claim that "Lyndon" adheres to realism — or to "single-entendre," sincere values. How sincere can Wallace be if he tells us that Lyndon died in 1968, that he contracted AIDS from having sex with a Haitian man? There is a manipulation happening, a manufactured reality that bears little resemblance to the way history actually happened. By waiting until the end of the story to reveal the artifice, Wallace forces his reader to think the interpolated quotes, the characters, and the plot of "Lyndon" are real. Thus, Wallace has manipulated his readers just as he has manipulated history; "Lyndon" cannot be understood merely as a realist or modernist story.

But, "Lyndon" also avoids the postmodern trap of mere cynicism and irony by presenting equal measures of optimism and sincerity. Displaying remarkable compassion, Wallace's "Lyndon" represents his characters as sympathetic, "real" people, with whom one is able to sincerely connect. In the wake of his escalation of the Vietnam War, LBJ incurs violent hatred from the American public that he loves so much. As one former aide says of Lyndon, "I never saw a man with a deeper need to be loved than LBJ" (371). "Does he know that I love?" Boyd wonders (389). For both characters, unrequited love leads to feelings of betrayal: for Lyndon when the American people misunderstand him, and for Boyd when he "heard lips that kissed the palm of a black man as they moved together to form words" (391). The end of the story leaves both Johnson and Boyd lonely and isolated — abstract pain matched by their physical illnesses — plagued by a desire to be loved.

"Lyndon" cannot be understood merely as a postmodern story either. Seth Abramson, a metamodernist poet, writes:

> Metamodernism seeks to collapse distances, especially the distance between things that seem to be opposites, to recreate a sense of wholeness that allows us to — in the lay sense — transcend our environment and move forward with the aim of creating positive change in our communities and the world. (*The Basics I*)

Instead of reinforcing distance by laughing as the world is about to be blown up, decrying the end of reality as we know it, or remaining mired in the indeterminacy of meaning and language (all postmodern responses), "Lyndon" calls for the collapsing of distance between ourselves and others, and most of all, for love. Lyndon's America, our America, "is to be understood in terms of distance" (389). Though Lyndon is not "enough *apart* [from Lady Bird] for a 'love' to span any distance" (389), Lyndon's love for his country "is a federal highway, lines putting communities, that move and exist at a great distance, in touch" (389). With the right amount of distance, Wallace suggests, people may love one another, just as Boyd loves Duverger.

Requiring his reader to concurrently doubt the narrative history he weaves and to accept it as truth, Wallace refuses to allow the reader to choose between two possibilities, closing the distance between them instead. Like the epistemological "as if" of metamodernism, the reader must simultaneously trust and mistrust, suspect and suspend disbelief. Wallace's "Lyndon" has a surprising sincerity of purpose, suggesting that its author had clued into the much–needed authenticity he would call for years later in "E Unibus Pluram." Yet, in order to appreciate that sincerity and authenticity, the reader must suffer through the subversion of his expectations in the story's final scenes — distanced from the text and forced into a jarring interpretive vertigo in the same way that Lyndon is a "believer in folks maybe needing to suffer some" in order to survive (383). Thus "Lyndon" may be described as a sort of proto-metamodernism — employing equal parts artifice and sincerity, closeness and distance, realism and postmodernism — achieving the aims of a metamodern text before metamodernism as a cultural construct even existed.

In the story, Lyndon asks himself every night: "What did we do today that we can point to for generations to come, to say that we laid the foundations for a better and more peaceful and more prosperous and less-suffering world?" (367). These are metamodernist ideas, for metamodernism diverts from postmodernism in that "metamodern irony is intrinsically bound to desire, whereas postmodern irony is inherently tied to apathy" (Vermeulen and Akker 5). This is what makes

metamodernism such a fertile intellectual idea. It neither neglects the movements that preceded it, nor extends them; it oscillates between, forging ahead to form something entirely new and downright daring. As Wallace writes, "Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*." "Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this dark world *and* to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it" (Interview with Larry McCaffery in 1993, the same year of "E Unibus Pluram"). Metamodernism, then, is reflective of a generation reacting to its predecessors by saying, "We're tired of listening to your whining. If you are so concerned about the moral state of society, then do something about it" (Vermeulen). Well, the next generation of artists *is* doing something about it:

> [Y]oung artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind. (Saltz)

It may not be this year or the next, but a metamodernist culture of negative idealism is poised to displace postmodernism as the dominant cultural paradigm. As the next generation experiences this change of dominant, writers will pass on, critics will continue to define the cultural moment, and something will eventually come along to take metamodernism's place. But for now, metamodernism's oscillatory, "as if" mentality indicates that humankind will continue to progress toward confronting the issues of the twenty-first century.

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