Love me till my heart stops

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FOREWORD

'Love Me Till My Heart Stops': the words were spray-painted on the pavement with the help of a stencil. I stumbled upon them while walking down Valencia Street, in San Francisco's Mission District, in 2006. I had just come from the interview I did with the American writer Dave Eggers, at the start of my research project. It turned out that, throughout the neighbourhood, here and there, short phrases like this had been stencilled onto the sidewalk. I also found 'Your Existence Gives Me Hope', and 'You Make My Dreams Come True', and many others. Of course, such texts are easily exposed as affected, wall plate pseudo-profundities, as clichés that, even if they are seen to have some initial charm, will surely lose that spark of meaning in no time. But, somehow, 'Love Me Till My Heart Stops' stuck with me. It seemed to express a desire akin to the portrayal of contemporary Western life in the literary works of the group of contemporary American writers (David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers and Jonathan Safran Foer) that I wanted to analyze in my dissertation. Plus, I decided that the fact that someone had written 'Fuck off!' next to the text could be read as an indication that a naïve appeal like that of the stencil succeeded in making more cynical minds uncomfortable.

I inquired at McSweeney's and 826 Valencia (Eggers's publishing company and writing school, both situated on Valencia Street) whether they perhaps had anything to do with the stencils; I was told that, although they were quite fond of the sidewalk texts, they had not been involved in their creation. As for the phrase 'Love Me Till My Heart Stops': it seemed to be taken from the Talking Heads' song 'This Must Be The Place (Naive Melody)'. Perhaps this made the words even more apt: derived from a song released in 1983 (more than a decade before the novels I am researching in this study, symbolizing the recurrence of my subject), by a band from the 1980s, the heyday of cynical vacuity (in which the qualification 'naïve' was of course highly suspect), who reportedly wanted to write a real love song, consisting of simple (one could perhaps say: clichéd) declarations.

Later, I found on the Internet a somewhat longer note that had allegedly appeared simultaneously with the sidewalk texts. It read:

> WE CAN save each other. We see we are falling, but as we do we must just reach out and grab hold at the same time. We will surely fall. But as we fall together, there may be no bottom to break us apart. This is our chance. Do not wait, we are our own saviors, and now is the time. – AD.

The sender is unknown. The sign-off 'AD' could be someone's initials, but they might also be a pun on 'advertisement', as most street-art is partly a protest against the commercial vandalizing of public space. The message itself might, again, be read as affected and faux-sentimental. But when taken at face value, as a serious, sincere appeal, it directly calls to mind Albert Camus's description of the solidary community of individuals who all suffer from the same absurdity – from the uncertainty and meaninglessness – of human existence. It also resembles the desire, portrayed in Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, to form a "lattice", a mutually supportive framework, with as many other people as possible, "everyone holding another's arm at the socket, and if we can get everyone to, instead of ripping this arm from the socket, instead hold to it, tight, and thus strengthening".[1] All in all, the street texts seemed to symbolize a desire similar to the subject matter of my research.

This holds, above all, for 'Love Me Till My Heart Stops', which is why I decided to make it the title of my dissertation: for the phrase can be seen to offer a condensed expression of the engagement that is formulated by the works of the above-mentioned fiction writers, and that is referred to in the subtitle of this study. Firstly, 'Love Me Till Heart Stops' has the form of an appeal: it is a request to be loved. Such an appeal entails openness and vulnerability on the part of the person who formulates it. As such, it is an expression of what I will regard as *sincerity*, namely the person's desire to forge a stable connection with the world outside him. Secondly, the appeal contains an element of urgent *commitment* ('till my heart stops'), as the connection between speaker and addressee has to be established within the finite, uncertain *reality* of their existence. Finally, as an appeal, 'Love Me Till Heart Stops' is of course directed at someone else: the desired connection is the connection with another person. As such, it is an expression of the desire for *community* (which is what love is). These elements – the desire for sincerity, reality-commitment and community – constitute the engagement that will be analyzed in this study.[2]

We will see that the engagement, formulated by these literary works, functions in

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[1]   AHWOSG, p. 211.
[2]   There seems to be no authoritative definition of 'engagement'. Also, in English, the use of the term in the denotation intended in this study (as, broadly speaking, 'existential commitment') is not as common and dominant as, for example, in Dutch (in which it is mainly employed in the mentioned, intended sense). In English, 'engagement' is used in a variety of competing meanings (including, of course, 'betrothal', but also as referring to 'brand loyalty' or to the 'absorption' of readers in texts or of students in their learning materials).

response to the contemporary existential problems of 'hyperreflexivity' and 'endless irony': that is, in response to the constant self-awareness that over the past decades has made the Western individual so suspicious of, and eager to ridicule, all pretensions to sincere social commitment, to ideals and values. As such, this study itself can also be said to be partly an exercise against our (or, at least, *my*) own ironic reflexes and constant self-conscious distrust of such pretensions – of any appeal like 'Love Me Till My Heart Stops'. This philosophical work is written with the conviction that to overcome this contemporary Western predicament some things have to be taken at face value. Some things have to be trusted if meaning and, consequently, meaningful existence, is to be acquired at all. Distrust must perhaps be recurrent, but cannot be constant: it should always be replaced by trust that, when prompted by certain signals, should be questioned again.

As to the relation of this study to the engaged portrayals offered by the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer: they constitute a view that, as a result of the hermeneutic process of gaining and formulating a thorough understanding of it, I have come to share in many respects. Consequently, through the analysis offered in this study, I also hope to provide the view and its supporting arguments with further philosophical elaboration. I contend that it offers a promising and preferable view of overcoming the problems of contemporary existence and finding new sources of meaning.

INTRODUCTION

1 AIMS AND METHOD

From the first half of the 1990s onward a growing number of American writers of a younger generation (born, mainly, in the 1960s and 1970s) have started to express their discontent with the endless self-reflectivity and irony that during the preceding decades had come to pervade American culture (including American fiction). Moreover, their novels can also be seen to outline a response, a solution to the mentioned problems. David Foster Wallace (1962–2008) is generally regarded as the most important representative of this recent development in American fiction, and his 1079-page novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) – about addiction, irony, depression, freedom, and the general difficulties of contemporary human existence, of becoming a self – as its most important milestone. Dave Eggers (1971–) and Jonathan Safran Foer (1977–) are the two most pre-eminent examples of writers following in Wallace's footsteps, exploring similar paths in their own writing.[1]

The starting point of this study is the thesis that, in their portrayal of the situation of the contemporary Western individual, the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer share a certain philosophical dimension. In an interview, Wallace has stated:

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[1]   In my opinion, this development in fiction is mirrored by similar developments in independent cinema and alternative pop music during the same period. Initially, I wanted to include the analysis of these related developments in the current study, but it quickly became clear that this would make the project too large and unwieldy. However, to preserve some indication of the fact that the developments described in this study perhaps fit into a wider cultural tendency, the following eight chapters all carry a motto derived from a song by a musical artist that I regard as connected to what is described in this study. For the connection to film, see, for example, my article on *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Den Dulk, 'Een juweel op dun ijs').

> Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctly hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now. Or can be.[2]

Accordingly, the shared philosophical dimension of these works can be said to have two sides. On the one hand, they describe the above-mentioned hyperreflexivity (that is: excessive, constant self-consciousness) and endless irony as two main problems of contemporary Western culture, that for many individuals lead to (self-)alienation and loss of meaning. On the other hand, the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer formulate an attempt to overcome these problems, through a desire for sincerity, reality-commitment and community, as the elements that make us human, that can make us into human selves – the elements of what I will describe as the engagement portrayed in these novels.

To further explicate, describe and analyze the philosophical dimension of the work of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, I will employ relevant aspects of the philosophy of different thinkers as heuristic perspectives. These perspectives are drawn from philosophies that can all be characterized as 'existentialist', in the broad sense of the term: namely, the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and also the later Wittgenstein (I will elaborate this further on). It is my contention that the resulting analyses will offer an illuminating description of some of the problems of contemporary Western life, and also of possible ways to overcome these problems.

Together, the above-mentioned problems – hyperreflexivity, endless irony – and elements of engagement – sincerity, reality-commitment and community – form the shared philosophical dimension of the fictional works in question. They are the hermeneutic keys used in this study to disclose the meaning and significance of these works. From a methodological perspective, it is important to note that these disclosive principles are derived from the works themselves: they are clearly present (in some cases even explicitly discussed by characters) in the story worlds of these novels, and as such form the starting point of my analysis. This is one of the reasons why the insights of several philosophers are employed as heuristic perspectives: my aim is not to impose one philosophical view on a group of novels, and use these novels to illustrate a certain philosophical position; my aim, as mentioned above, is to bring out the philosophical views implied in these novels.

I regard the shared philosophical dimension of the novels as a set of 'family resemblances' between different 'language-games'; each novel represents its own language-game, that nevertheless displays certain kinships with the other novels (what I have called their shared philosophical dimension), which justify bringing them together under one view (perhaps more so than automatically taking together different works by the same author). The Wittgensteinian notions of language-games and family resemblances emphasize both the kinship and the particularity of the

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2   McCaffery, 'Interview', p. 131.

literary works in question; the studied novels are not regarded as exchangeable products of a monolithic philosophical system of unequivocal values and ideas.[3]

It is this shared semantic field of the novels, their explicit exploration of these existentially-laden issues (which amounts to their engagement) in the main story lines and most important characters, that in my opinion connects these novels and forms what we could call their 'new aesthetic'. Although the term 'aesthetic' might call to mind mostly issues of style and form, here it is meant to refer, above all, to a shared *thematic* preoccupation. In fact, by far the most important formal aspect of these novels is their reaffirmation of the possibility of connecting fictional stories to the real world.

This is also what distinguishes these novels most fundamentally from certain preceding literary 'trends'. For, in addition to the critical portrayal of the above-mentioned problems of hyperreflexivity and endless irony on the (existential) level of their story-worlds, the fictions of Wallace, Eggers and Foer also imply a critique of these problems on a more 'theoretical' level. These literary works inevitably embody a certain view of fiction, and as such can be seen to criticize the view of fiction underlying the preceding literary 'trends' of so-called 'postmodernist metafiction', epitomized by the work of John Barth (1930–), and 'postmodernist minimalism', epitomized by the work of Bret Easton Ellis (1964–). Whereas the works of Barth and Ellis can be seen to deny, as a result of their excessive self-consciousness and endless irony, the possibility of forging a meaningful connection between fiction and the real world, the works of Wallace *cum suis* reaffirm exactly that possibility. Part of the critique of these two instances of escalated reflexive-ironic fiction has been formulated explicitly by Wallace, in his fiction, and in essays and interviews. Another part of the critique lies on a more implicit level, namely in Wallace's, Eggers's and Foer's literary works 'doing it differently' – both formally and thematically –, in their new direction that contrasts with those preceding literary trends. The analyses of these underlying views of fiction will be addressed separately from the existential portrayal of the mentioned problems and solutions in the story-worlds of the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer.

I am aware that by placing the works of these writers together, and opposing them to other bodies of work in American fiction, I am not just making a philosophical claim about these works, but also a literary historical claim. This implies both an organization and an explanation of literary periodization. In my interpretation I am inevitably constructing certain contexts and then subsequently using those contexts to explain literary works (as shaping, 'causing' those works).[4] This process is always selective and can never be all-embracing. For instance, my decision to focus on the

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[3]   Alastair Fowler uses Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances to explain how works within a certain genre are connected (Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 41; cf. Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?*, p. 77).

[4]   cf. Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?*, p. 146; "The distinction between event and context is not intrinsic, but conventional and practical, the event being the portion of the context that one foregrounds and tries to explain" (Ibidem, pp. 147–148).

novels' thematic preoccupation with certain existential issues, means that some of the formal and stylistic aspects of these works will perhaps remain underexposed. The highest that any literary interpretation – including mine – can (and should) strive for is plausibility, which "must ultimately mean plausibility for me and for whoever thinks as I do", writes David Perkins. He continues: "This view of the matter does not in the least imply blithe tolerance of whatever opinion someone happens to maintain. The effort for plausibility is strenuous and self-corrective, if only because the criteria of credibility one happens to hold necessitate this."[5]

We can distinguish between the "descriptive" and "referential" plausibility of an interpretation: the former refers to the more self-evident "basic conventions of an interpretive argument" (among other things: having knowledge of interpretations of the same text or period – which I will of course explicate, at different points in this study); the latter refers to the argumentation for the employed framework of interpretation, of the factors Elrud Ibsch describes as "responsible for the final comprehensive meaning of the text".[6] The referential plausibility of the interpretations offered in this study is based on two different factors mentioned by Ibsch. First of all, my interpretations take into account the "context" in which the texts in question have been "communicated"[7], that is: they take into account the "problem situation" to which the texts are intended to be an "answer". This also means that comments by the author about the aim of his work are deemed relevant – even though, in my opinion, they can never underpin an interpretation by themselves, they are also not to be completely ignored as a source of meaning.[8] At the same time, my interpretations are necessarily based on the "interactive process" of the construction of meaning by myself, as a reader. In this study, my reading of the texts in question has led me to derive heuristic perspectives from existentialist philosophy. This is a specific and inevitably partial reading of the texts. However, this reading is prompted by the problems and solutions which these texts themselves explicitly address, and which are established existentialist themes. So, there is a constant reciprocity of the factors of interpretation – which is probably how it should be in all literary interpretations.[9]

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[5] Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?*, p. 17.
[6] Ibsch, 'The Conventions of Interpretation', p. 114; Ibsch, 'Der Interpretation und kein Ende', p. 25.
[7] Ibsch speaks of "authorial communicative context" (Ibsch, 'The Conventions of Interpretation', p. 114).
[8] Not least because, in a literary climate where a new book is promoted through author interviews, essays, et cetera, comments made by the real-life author about the background, motivations or aim of the book, are bound to influence the expectations of the reader and partly merge with the reader's perception of the communicative intention of the text; cf. Claassen, *The Author's Footprint in the Garden of Fiction*, p. 30.
[9] cf. "any sophisticated literary history must now draw on both immanent and contextual considerations" (Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?*, p. 173).

To summarize: in this study, I will analyze the philosophical dimension of the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, by viewing these literary works in light of heuristic perspectives derived from the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Sartre, Wittgenstein and Camus, in order to attain a better understanding of the novels' portrayal of the problems that characterize contemporary Western existence (hyperreflexivity and endless irony) as well as to better understand the way the novels suggest these problems can be overcome (through the virtues of sincerity, reality-commitment and community).

2   AN 'AESTHETIC SEA-CHANGE' IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

The new literary trend, embodied by the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, is increasingly recognized as an "aesthetic sea change"[10] in American literature.[11] We should note that the self-reflectivity and irony they criticize are established hallmarks of postmodernism,[12] in both literature and philosophy; they are the favoured instruments of the postmodernist strategy to expose the contradictions and hypocrisies inherent in contemporary Western thought.[13] However, from the perspective of this new group of works in American fiction, postmodernism is regarded as a "blind alley", as A.O. Scott writes.[14] In response to this perceived "dead end of postmodernism" – in Robert McLaughlin's formulation –, the mentioned writers place new emphasis on the idea that communication and searching for new sources of meaning are the most important purposes of fiction.[15]

As mentioned above, Wallace is regarded as the most important, pioneering

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[10]   McLaughlin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World', p. 55.

[11]   Throughout this study I will use 'fiction' and 'literature' as interchangeable terms to refer to the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer. I am aware that these general terms denote different, partially overlapping concepts. For example, literature includes not just prose novels but poetry and non-fiction writing such as biographies and memoirs, while the term fiction can be used to refer to, for instance, cinematic works of fiction, not just writing. Also, the term literature implies the notion of 'high art', of 'fine writing', whereas the term 'fiction' can be regarded as referring primarily to the fictionality of (the fictitious, 'non-existent' nature of what is portrayed in) a text or artefact that might very well be considered 'low art' or not art at all (cf. the separate chapters on 'Literature' and 'Fiction' in: Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, pp. 29–83 and 174–219). Therefore, I would like to specify that, in this study, my use of the terms fiction and literature refers specifically to the fictional prose novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer.

[12]   'Postmodernism' and the possible relation of the studied novels to this notion do not form a central subject of this study, because the unclarity and disagreement surrounding the term prevent it from truly furthering our understanding of the matter at hand. However, as it has become part of 'standing' terminology (as in the mentioned literary trends of postmodernist metafiction and postmodernist minimalism), the term has to a certain extent become unavoidable.

[13]   e.g. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 27, 182–183.

[14]   Scott, 'The Panic of Influence', p. 40.

[15]   McLaughlin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World', p. 55; cf. Den Dulk, 'American Literature'; Grassian, *Hybrid Fictions*, pp. 6–13.

member of this new group of writers.[16] In Wallace's writing the engagement with the above-mentioned problems, and with the need to move beyond them, is constantly present.[17] An analysis of these problems and possible solutions can also be found in Wallace's *non-fictional* texts – above all, the 1993 essay 'E Unibus Pluram' –, elements of which can also be recognized in his fictional writings. In this essay, Wallace describes the possible direction of the change in American fiction as follows:

> The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain and old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. […] The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how *banal*". To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity, of softness.[18]

A.O. Scott and Sven Birkerts, respectively, describe Wallace's work as striving to "forge ahead", as "bent on taking the next step in fiction".[19] Stephen Burn writes that: "[Wallace's fiction] circulates through the bloodstream of American fiction". He adds that: "[*Infinite Jest*] represents a culmination of reading and theorizing about contemporary fiction, and many of the signposts along that journey seem to have been written into Wallace's work during the period."[20] Adam Kirsch calls Wallace "the voice of his generation, for better and for worse", implying an awareness of the inherent difficulty with such pronouncements.[21] Jon Baskin formulates this difficulty more explicitly, while still confirming the underlying undeniability of such a contention: "It became a commonplace and then a cliché and then almost a taunt to call [Wallace] the greatest writer of his generation."[22]

Wallace's example of a new direction in American literary fiction has inspired many other novelists. Elise Harris calls Wallace the "tribal elder" who "challenged young writers" to act as he had suggested in the above-quoted essay, namely to "treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and

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[16]   cf. Annesley, 'Review Essay: David Foster Wallace', p. 132; Baskin, 'Death Is Not the End'; Burn, 'Some Weird Bunch of Anti-Rebels and Millennial Fictions'; Kirsch, 'The Importance of Being Earnest'; McLaughlin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent', p. 55.

[17]   Other writers, like Richard Powers and William Vollmann, have also been widely credited for their innovative fiction, which has often been compared to that of Wallace (cf. Leclair, 'The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann and David Foster Wallace'). But in their writing the problems of postmodernist literature and culture are, in my opinion, less prominent and less clear than in Wallace's.

[18]   EUP, pp. 81–82.

[19]   Scott, 'The Panic of Influence', p. 40; Birkerts, 'The Alchemist's Retort', p. 113.

[20]   Burn in: Moore et al., 'In Memoriam David Foster Wallace', pp. 12, 13.

[21]   Kirsch, 'The Importance of Being Earnest'.

[22]   Baskin, 'Death Is Not the End'.

conviction."[23] Kirsch writes: "In the fifteen years since Wallace published *Infinite Jest*, this sovereign sincerity, this earnest hostility to irony, has come to define the best younger writers, making them a distinctive literary generation".[24] As was mentioned, Eggers and Foer are the two most prominent examples of this influence and kinship.[25] Their works clearly exhibit the influence of the new aesthetic that Wallace's work can be seen to propose.[26] Burn writes that the "thumbprint of [*Infinite Jest*'s] influence" can be seen in "writers such as Dave Eggers […] and Jonathan Safran Foer".[27] When Kirsch speaks of "the young novelists who followed in Wallace's wake", who "have shared his righteous refusal of irony", and who "believe that literature should be positive, constructive, civically engaged, a weapon against alienation", he names Foer and Eggers as "the most prominent" of that group.[28]

The influence of Wallace and *Infinite Jest* on Eggers becomes clear in the foreword that Eggers wrote for the 2006 tenth anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest*, in which he describes the novel as "something other", that came across as "very different than virtually anything before it". According to Eggers, *Infinite Jest* gives the "sense" of a writer who "wanted" to "and arguably succeeds" at "nailing the consciousness of an age": "The themes here are big, and the emotions (guarded as they are) are

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[23]   Harris, 'Infinite Jest', p. 46. Harris calls Wallace "*ironic* tribal elder" (emphasis added, AdD), a potentially confusing statement, as a critique of irony is an important aspect of this new direction of fiction; cf. Baskin, who writes: "'E Unibus Pluram' inspired an assortment of earnest millennial fiction" (Baskin, 'Death Is Not the End').

[24]   Kirsch, 'The Importance of Being Earnest'; cf. Burn, who writes: "The desire to adapt (rather than explicitly reject) the legacy of postmodernism and move towards a fiction that humanly engages is probably *Infinite Jest*'s most palpable contribution to contemporary fiction" (Burn, 'Some Weird Bunch of Anti-Rebels and Millennial Fictions').

[25]   Other writers who are often mentioned in the quoted sources, are Jonathan Franzen and Zadie Smith. However, even though it might seem obvious to affiliate Franzen with Wallace, on account of their friendship and several declarations by Franzen of the similar intent of their fiction, Franzen's work often seems to propose fiction move 'back' in some way, to a more traditional mode of writing, whereas Wallace, and Eggers and Foer, seem to much more incorporate the 'lessons' of preceding, 'postmodernist' fiction and thought but overcoming its problems (cf. Franzen, 'Why Bother?', p. 91); as McLaughlin summarizes it: "Unlike Franzen, [Wallace] doesn't write as if he's above it all" (McLaughlin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World', p. 63). While Smith is perhaps is the most expressed admirer of Wallace's work, she is a British author, bringing with it an additional set of completely different influences that have to be taken into account. Plus, the mentioned central themes simply do not seem quite as prominent in her fiction as in that of Wallace, Eggers and Foer.

[26]   cf. Annesley, 'Review Essay: David Foster Wallace', p. 132; Baskin, 'Death Is Not the End'; Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 19; Burn, 'The Believers'; Burn, *Infinite Jest. A Reader's Guide*, p. 76; Burn, 'Some Weird Bunch of Anti-Rebels and Millennial Fictions'; Grassian, *Hybrid Fictions*, p. 42–49; Harris, 'Infinite Jest', p. 46; Kakutani, 'Critic's Notebook: New Wave of Writers Reinvents Literature'; Kirsch, 'The Importance of Being Earnest'; Mattson, 'Is Dave Eggers a Genius?', p. 81; Myers, 'A Bag of Tired Tricks', p. 115; Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?*, p. 11; Weber, 'David Foster Wallace, Influential Writer, Dies at 46'.

[27]   Burn, 'Some Weird Bunch of Anti-Rebels and Millennial Fictions'; Burn also mentions Franzen.

[28]   Kirsch, 'The Importance of Being Earnest'; Kirsch also mentions Smith.

very real, and the cumulative effect of the book is, you could say, seismic."[29] In an 'In Memoriam' after Wallace's death, Eggers refers to the scene in the film *Dead Poets Society* where the students salute their teacher, "in protest of his premature departure", with the words 'O Captain my captain', from the eponymous poem by Walt Whitman; in doing so, Eggers salutes Wallace in a similar way.[30] And in the interview I did with Eggers, he explicitly professed to the similarity of his and Wallace's views: "I'm on the same page with [Wallace] in a lot of ways".[31] Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* even subtly alludes to *Infinite Jest* through main character Dave's fear that his younger brother Toph "will grow up to kill kittens by putting them in garbage bags and swinging them against brick walls", which is in fact the gruesome habit of *Infinite Jest* character Randy Lenz.[32]

James Annesley describes Foer's novels as a "striking expression" of the "kind of project mapped out by Wallace".[33] In my interview with Foer, he did not speak of Wallace having an explicit influence on his own fiction, but did express an admiration for Wallace's "love for writing": "He really loves language, he really loves ideas. […] I think he is a very brave writer, and a very, very good writer."[34] Looking at Foer's works themselves, we could say that the mangled English of Alex, one of the main narrating characters from Foer's first novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), calls to mind the 'Frenchified' speech of the character Marathe from *Infinite Jest*. Even more so, the sincerity of precocious, nine-year old Oskar, the main character from Foer's second novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), strongly resembles the character Mario from *Infinite Jest* (as I will elaborate further on in this study – see Chapter 6).

We should note that Eggers's and Foer's novels, because they build on the preliminary work done by Wallace, show a less conflicted struggle with, and therefore

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[29]   Eggers, 'Foreword', pp. xiii, xii, xiv.

[30]   Eggers in: Moore et al., 'In Memoriam David Foster Wallace', p. 4.

[31]   Interview with Dave Eggers by Allard den Dulk, dd. 23rd of May 2006.

[32]   Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* [1st edition], p. 256; cf. Burn, *Infinite Jest. A Reader's Guide*, p. 76; IJ, pp. 541–548 ("Randy Lenz found that if he could get an urban cat up close enough with some outstretched tuna he could pop the Hefty bag over it and scoop up from the bottom so the cat was in the air in the bottom of the bag, and then he could tie the bag shut with the complimentary wire twist-tie that comes with each bag. […] After it stopped assuming shapes Lenz would dab his butt with a spitty finger to save the rest for later and get up and untie the twist-tie and look inside the bag and go: '*There*'. The '*There*' turned out to be crucial for the sense of brisance and closure and resolving issues of impotent rage and powerless fear […]. [And then it turned out] issues-resolution was more definitive when Lenz could swing a twisting ten-kilo burden hard against a pole and go: '*There*', and hear a sound" (IJ, pp. 541, 544). About *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* Wallace wrote: "I don't have a history that's as off-the-charts sad and rife with bathos-hazard as yours […] I report here that I was almost as moved by your willingness to risk it as I was impressed by the high-wire skill with which you avoided it" (Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* [1st edition], dust jacket).

[33]   Annesley, 'Review Essay: David Foster Wallace', p. 132.

[34]   Interview with Jonathan Safran Foer by Allard den Dulk, dd. 26th of June 2006.

a perhaps lighter, less laborious portrayal of, the shared themes. We could say that they show us – for lack of a better word – an 'intuitive' adaptation of many of Wallace's ideas (whereas in Wallace' work we witness the more reflective labour to arrive at these ideas).[35] As Marshall Boswell writes, perhaps sounding more negative than intended (given his further remarks on writers like Eggers): "Since *Infinite Jest*, a whole new group of emerging young writers has copied the elusive Wallace 'tone'" (the term 'tone' should not be interpreted as referring solely to certain formal, stylistic aspects of writing, but to the overall view of what fiction 'should do', to use Wallace formulation).[36] At the same time, the worldwide success of Eggers's and Foer's bestselling novels in a sense signifies the success of this new direction in American fiction, and has given Wallace's ideas a far wider exposure than they perhaps would have received solely through his own, more difficult fiction.[37] Including Eggers and Foer in this study also indicates that the analyzed development does not just concern the literary work of one man, but a wider trend. Accordingly, the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer are regarded in this study as the three most determinative instances of this trend.

However, because Wallace is in fact the pioneer and theorist of this new direction in fiction, and Eggers and Foer are regarded as taking on this project, as intuitively adopting it, Wallace's work will function throughout as the primary source of the identified themes, and the philosophical reading thereof. However, in some cases the works of Eggers and Foer might offer – for the sake of clarity – a better, more intuitive place to start the elaboration of these different themes. Similarly, the interpretative arguments based on what Ibsch calls the 'authorial communicative context' will be derived primarily from the context of Wallace's works, on account of being the originary source of the development.

The terms most frequently used to label the development in American literary fiction outlined above are 'post-postmodernism' and 'new sincerity'.[38] I am reluctant, though, to adopt these terms outright. Although, as was already announced above, a desire for sincerity (in response to the problems of hyperreflexivity and endless irony) is an important aspect of the works in question, sincerity is not their only theme. Furthermore, the form of sincerity portrayed amounts to a specific and complicated notion (which will be examined in Chapter 6). It is not a simple form of naïveté which is readily achieved. The term 'new sincerity' (without a clear definition of

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[35] This is probably an important part of its esteemed literary quality, compared to the work of Eggers and Foer.

[36] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 19.

[37] cf. as just one example of a publication offering an overview of this 'success': Vaessens and Van Dijk (ed.), *Reconsidering the Postmodern*.

[38] e.g. McLaughlin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent'; Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction'; cf. Rutten, 'Russian Literature: Reviving Sincerity in the Post-Soviet World', pp. 28, 30–33. In relation to Wallace, Marshall Boswell speaks of "some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnameable) third wave of modernism" (Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 1).

what that sincerity amounts to) does not fully communicate this complexity. The term 'post-postmodernism', in turn, provides us with an ugly label that carries forth the (terminological) unclarity that already surrounds the definitions of 'modernism' and 'postmodernism'. Moreover, the prefix 'post-' suggests too strongly a state of already 'being beyond' or 'having left behind' something, whereas in the case of the novels studied it seems just as much a case of finding a new way of coping with the same thing, namely: contemporary Western existence.[39]

More important, however, than such terminological discussions is the task of mapping out, and thereby deepening our understanding of, the shared dimension of these works. The preceding has already offered a broad impression of the themes and desires that these novels are said to have in common. As the above-quoted sources indicate, a consensus seems to have arisen on the fact that these works are indeed connected and share an interest in certain themes. But these assessments function merely as the starting point for an analysis aimed at a better understanding of these themes and of the connection between the works that portray them.

The contribution of this study to the existing (and rapidly expanding) body of scholarly work on Wallace, Eggers and Foer lies in the elucidation of the philosophical themes that connect the novels in question and of the literary development that these novels embody. Although some of their connections as well as the possible affinities with existentialist philosophy have already been remarked upon in a number of publications on this new group of fiction writers,[40] an extensive, systematic philosophical analysis of the mentioned themes has not yet been undertaken.

As my interpretation of these works is based on a philosophically framed reading of the main story lines and most important characters from the novels, below I will begin by providing a general overview of the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer that this study will focus on.

3 OUTLINE OF PRIMARY LITERARY WORKS

David Foster Wallace

Wallace's most important work, the expansive, vastly rich novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) will form the main literary focal point of this study. The novel has a number of important characters (and countless additional ones), but the two main protagonists are Hal Incandenza and Don Gately. Hal is a hyperintelligent adolescent, an academic and tennis prodigy, enrolled at the Enfield Tennis Academy; Hal is also a marijuana addict. Gately is a former drug addicted criminal, who works as a resident staff member at Ennet House, a halfway facility for recovering drug addicts, and is an active member of 'Addicts Anonymous' (AA). *Infinite Jest* traces the development of these two characters from an initial situation of addiction – symbolizing a certain attitude

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[39]   cf. note 12.
[40]   e.g. Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, pp. 137–140, 143–144.

towards existence –, to a different life-view, which I will call sincerity. Addiction, of all kinds (to alcohol, drugs, and entertainment), is a central motif – almost everybody in the novel is addicted to something – and is directly connected to the problems of hyperreflexivity, endless irony thematized in the novel. In *Infinite Jest*, addiction and the connected philosophical problems are shown to lead, ultimately, to depression; so, in addition to being addicted, most of the novel's characters are also shown to be depressed.

The portrayal of Gately starts at the moment that he has been clean for just over a year, and his old life as an addict and criminal is portrayed through a series of memories and dreams; in Gately's story line, the guidelines of AA are shown to lead him to a new and meaningful life. In the case of Hal, *Infinite Jest* portrays the peak of his marijuana addiction, his subsequent decision to quit drugs, and the first changes in his behaviour. The novel then leaves a gap in Hal's story line. The next descriptions show him a year later, in a scene that forms the opening of the novel, but chronologically is the last episode of the entire story line; these descriptions are ambiguous as to Hal's current state, which requires the reader to fill in what has happened in the meantime.

These two story lines take place in a story-world, situated slightly in the future (in relation to the novel's publication date), in which years are no longer referred to as successive numbers but are subsidized, taking their name from a commercial product or brand (for example, 'Year of the Whopper'). Also the United States has absorbed Mexico and Canada, to become the Organization of North American Nations (ONAN), and the President of the country is a former Las Vegas night club 'crooner'. This already grotesque story world forms the background for a larger plot in which separatist Quebecois wheelchair terrorists and ONAN intelligence services both want to retrieve the master copy of the lethal film 'Infinite Jest', which is so entertaining that it makes its viewers slip into a catatonic state, ignoring even the primary necessities of life, and therefore leads, ultimately, to their death. The film was directed by Hal's father, James Incandenza, who has committed suicide and, as a wraith, visits Gately while the latter is in the hospital.

Other important characters, relevant to this study, are: Remy Marathe, a Quebecois wheelchair terrorist, whose conversation with secret agent Hugh Steeply about the American focus on negative freedom (freedom-from) and the connected inability to choose meaningfully, forms a recurring narrative thread, spread out over the novel, which thereby obtains added significance for the interpretation of the novel; Joelle van Dyne, a recovering drug addict who arrives at Ennet House, becomes a member of AA, and there befriends Gately (her experiences with addiction and getting clean, complement those of Gately, and offer an additional impression of AA, as an alternative to addiction and depression); and Mario Incandenza, Hal's physically deformed older brother, who is about the only character in the novel who is neither addicted nor depressed, but instead friendly, empathetic and happy.

Before *Infinite Jest*, Wallace published two other literary works: the novel *The Broom of the System* (1987) and the story collection *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989).

These works should be regarded as "formative"[41], as uneven attempts that express the desire for a new direction in fiction but do not succeed in realizing it. However, they provide an insight into Wallace's literary ambitions and philosophical affinities. *The Broom of the System* revolves around Lenore Beadsman's search for her grandmother, a former student of Ludwig Wittgenstein who has disappeared from her retirement home.[42] Wallace called the book "a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida".[43] *Girl with Curious Hair* contains the 150-page novella 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', Wallace's (failed) attempt to "explode" postmodernist metafiction (that is: the type of fiction written by John Barth) by means of its own methods.[44] In turn, the title story 'Girl with Curious Hair' is aimed at the other literary trend of which Wallace is critical, namely the postmodernist minimalism of Bret Easton Ellis.[45] In the story collections *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and *Oblivion* (2004), Wallace addresses the same central themes as in *Infinite Jest*; for example, the story 'Octet' (from the former collection) offers an exploration of the dialogue between writer and reader, and of the need for openness and trust to make that relationship work. Finally, Wallace's unfinished, posthumously published novel *The Pale King* (2011), about employees of an IRS tax office, explores the importance of being able to endure boredom and to truly pay attention, to the world and others.

Dave Eggers

Eggers's debut, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), is an autobiographical novel about twenty-something Dave Eggers (in what follows, I will refer to

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[41] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 116.

[42] The title of the novel refers to the later Wittgenstein's contention that the meaning of our words is determined by their use, via a scene in which Grandma Beadsman asks what part of the broom is "more fundamental", "the bristles or the handle", concluding that it depends on whether "you want to *sweep* with the broom", for "if what we wanted a broom for was to break windows, then the handle was clearly the fundamental essence of the broom" (Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, pp. 149–150).

[43] Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, p. 35; cf. "By the time Wallace started writing *Broom*, he had developed a serious interest in Wittgenstein's late philosophy. […] at the simplest level, Lenore just *is* Wallace, and *The Broom of the System* is just a fictionalized retelling – a 'little self-obsessed *bildungsroman*', Wallace called it – of the intellectual struggles he was then undergoing" (Ryerson, 'Introduction: A Head That Throbbed Heartlike', p. 20).

[44] "I wanted to get the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction's always been about, I wanted to get it over with, and then out of the rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans", Wallace said. He added: "maybe 'Westward''s only real value'll be showing the kind of pretentious loops you fall into now if you fuck around with recursion" (McCaffery, 'Interview', p. 142). Boswell calls the novella a "piece of pretentious juvenilia" when taken on its own, but a fascinating "declaration of intent" when seen in relation to *Infinite Jest* (Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 102).

[45] With sentences like "Gimlet allowed me to burn her slightly and I felt that she was an outstanding person", 'Girl with Curious Hair' is a clear parody of Ellis's style and subject matter (Wallace, 'Girl with Curious Hair', *Girl with Curious Hair*, p. 63); Boswell writes: "the story eerily forecasts Ellis's 1991 slasher novel *American Psycho*" (Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 79).

the novel's character as 'Dave', and to the writer as 'Eggers'). Within a period of three months, both of Dave's parents die of cancer, after which he becomes responsible for the upbringing of his younger brother Toph. The novel offers a highly self-reflective portrayal of Dave's attempts to shape his existence, to balance his freedoms and responsibilities, which often amount to a struggle with his own self-reflectivity, his tendency to second-guess every step he takes. In this respect, an important element of the book are the descriptions of *Might*, the magazine that Dave starts, together with a couple of his friends, as these passages offer a critical portrayal of the problems of endless irony.

You Shall Know Our Velocity (2002) is Eggers's second novel. First-person narrator Will has received a large sum of money which he feels he does not deserve. He is also mourning the death of his friend Jack. Will decides to take a trip around the world, in only eight days, together with his other best friend, Hand. During the trip, Will wants to give his money away to people he feels are more deserving, more in need of it. Maybe even more so than Dave from *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Will is plagued by a highly self-reflective mind, paralyzed by his head having constant, overpowering discussions that he cannot control and wants to end. The novel thus portrays Will's search for a way 'out of his head'. This is also connected to Will's inability to choose a certain direction in his life; he has countless far-fetched dreams and ambitions, but has never undertaken anything to start realizing one of them. Willy-nilly, the trip proves to be a cathartic experience, leading Will to insight.

Eggers has also published the story collections *How We Are Hungry* (2004) and *Short Short Stories* (2005), and the biographical nonfiction works *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (2006) – about the experiences of a Sudanese refugee, on the run in Africa, and after he has received asylum in the United States – and *Zeitoun* (2009) – the story of a Syrian immigrant in New Orleans who, in the wake of hurricane Katrina, with his canoe rescues neighbours, cares for abandoned pets, and helps distribute drinking-water, but is arrested and imprisoned, without being charged, for 23 days. I will leave these works largely undiscussed in my philosophical analysis, although it is interesting to note that Eggers's portrayal of the real world, of real events and people, has become increasingly open, honest, realistic, and less self-conscious. This is in line with the desire expressed in his earlier, fictional works.[46]

Jonathan Safran Foer

Foer's first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), consists of two main plot elements: the story of the young American 'Jonathan Safran Foer' (to whom I will refer, in what

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[46] Eggers published a new novel, *A Hologram for the King*, in July 2012, after the current study was completed. Therefore, I was not able to include it in my analysis. My first impression of the novel, however, is that it fits into the development of Eggers's style and subject matter outlined above and in the rest of this study.

follows, as 'Jonathan', while referring to the author as 'Foer'), who visits the Ukraine to search for traces of his Jewish ancestry. He is assisted by a young Ukrainian guide, Alexei Perchov, who also has to come to grips with his own family history, and who narrates this part of the story line in mangled English. The other part offers the reconstruction of Jonathan's heritage, of the Jewish village Trachimbrod, mainly of his great-great-great-great-great-grandmother Brod and his grandfather Safran. Jonathan has had to make up this story almost completely, as his search in the Ukraine yielded very little information, resulting in a highly fantastic, magical rendering of the supposed past; the same reflective flight from reality is mirrored in the life-view of Jonathan's ancestors Brod and Safran. Whereas Jonathan chooses not to focus on the reality of what he and Alex actually did find and experience in the Ukraine, Alex does: their search has yielded an insight into Alex's grandfather's questionable actions during World War II, bringing Alex to the realization of what he feels are his responsibilities in life, which results in him kicking his alcoholic, abusive father out of the house, and taking on the care of his mother and little brother.

Foer's second novel, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) is the story of nine-year old Oskar Schell, whose father Thomas died in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. An important subplot is that of Oskar's grandparents (Thomas's parents). Oskar is precocious and eloquent, but at the same time appropriately naïve for his age, which makes him unabashedly open, kind and trusting. Initially his attempts to cope with the death of his father seem to contain an element of denial, because he interprets random things his father left behind as clues that Oskar now has to decipher, thereby keeping his father present in his life. But Oskar also sets out on a quest throughout New York, which brings him into contact with a host of different people, whose lives he affects with his uncommon straightforwardness and openness. Oskar's grandparents survive the Holocaust and meet again in the United States. The grandfather (also called Thomas) has gradually lost the power of speech, which seems to be connected to his compulsive, constant thinking, as a result of which words simply seem to become disconnected from their meaning, and therefore unutterable. The grandfather leaves the grandmother before their child (Thomas Jr.) is born. After the death of their child in 2001, the grandfather returns, and Oskar strikes up a relationship with him, not knowing that he is his grandfather (to Oskar, the man is just the tenant in his grandmother's house). In the end, together they dig up the empty coffin of Oskar's father and fill it with letters that the grandfather wrote to his son but never sent.

Foer has published a number of short stories, including 'A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease' (2002), also released as part of *The Unabridged Pocketbook of Lightning* (2005). In 2009 Foer published *Eating Animals*, an essay on the food industry and climate change, constituting a heartfelt and extensively argued plea for vegetarianism. However, these publications will not form an integral part of my interpretation.

John Barth

John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) is generally regarded as *the* classic example of postmodernist metafiction – one of the forms of fiction (im- and explicitly) criticized by the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer.[47] Together with writers like Thomas Pynchon, William Gass and Donald Barthelme, Barth stands at the forefront of a new wave of self-conscious, experimental writing that arose in American fiction in the 1960s. The theoretical concerns of this literary trend – namely: the constructed nature of fiction and reality, as well as the relationship between the two – are connected to those of postmodernist philosophy and critical theory, which also emerged around the same time.[48] Metafiction can be defined as fiction that self-consciously exposes and discusses its own constituting, fictional structures. *Lost in the Funhouse* embodies the concerns and methods of postmodernist metafiction in a concise but dense work. The book consists of a series of short stories that, according to the 'Foreword', are nonetheless meant "to be received 'all at once'."[49] The 'author' and sometimes explicit protagonist of the stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* is Ambrose Mensch (all the other protagonists are "masks" of Ambrose), a cripplingly self-conscious writer.[50] More importantly, the connection between the stories lies in their shared metafictional intention, "to acknowledge what I'm doing while I'm doing it is exactly the point", as it is summarized by the authorial voice in the story 'Title'.[51] As a result of this constant self-conscious undercutting, "the idea that there is something to express, gets scrutinized and diminished by Barth", as Stan Fogel and Gordon Slethaug write.[52]

Bret Easton Ellis

Bret Easton Ellis is the most important representative of a wave of fiction that can, to a certain extent, be seen to follow postmodernist metafiction, namely the trend of minimalist fiction, portraying the bleak futureless present of a postmodern world in which self-conscious irony has unmasked every claim to meaning and value. Whereas postmodernist metafiction, by scrutinizing the workings of language and the relation between reality and fiction, is mainly aimed at *problematizing* the formulation of meaning and value, Ellis's postmodernist minimalism seems to have concluded that meaning and value are *impossible*, which results in the complete collapse of fiction as an instrument of expressing anything meaningful about reality. Julian Murphet writes: "If we call Ellis a 'postmodern' author, we probably mean this above all; this flattening and erasure of the texture of his world, manifest

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[47] e.g. Worthington, 'Done with Mirrors', p. 118.
[48] Harris, *Passionate Virtuosity*, p. x.
[49] LF, p. xi.
[50] Kiernan, 'John Barth's Artist in the Fun House', pp. 373–374; cf. Harris, *Passionate Virtuosity*, p. 107.
[51] LF, p. 111.
[52] Fogel and Slethaug, *Understanding John Barth*, p. 13.

above all in the flatness and affectlessness of his prose style".[53] Ellis's 1991 novel *American Psycho* offers the most extreme and consistent elaboration of this fixed style and subject matter.[54] The novel's first-person narrator, Patrick Bateman, is an investment banker, but also a bloodthirsty psychopath (whose acts of torture, rape and murder are described in great detail). Bateman does not accept responsibility for his actions, nor any limitations to them – *everything* should be possible. The violent acts he commits are the most obvious examples of this. The novel offers Bateman's perception of the world, narrated, almost without interruption, in the present tense. In a sense, these descriptions are more real or realistic than the ones offered in Barth's metafiction, as they are relatively unselfconscious; at the same time, they are much more unreal, as they do not attempt to truly constitute any meaning at all, only the impossibility thereof: they just offer endless lists of brand names, restaurant names, et cetera. Patrick Bateman's view of the world – and with that, the whole novel – is an extreme expression of the supposed futility of all attempts at formulating meaning and value.

4 HEURISTIC PERSPECTIVES

The previous sections have already provided, in passing, a first impression of the centrality of the philosophical problems (hyperreflexivity, endless irony) and solutions (sincerity, reality-commitment and community) to the novels in question. They have also indicated some of the implicit and explicit philosophical interests and affinities that underlie these works. As previously mentioned, Wallace's work is regarded in this study as the primary source of the identified themes and the philosophical reading thereof. Below, I will offer a brief, first impression of the affinities between the existentialist heuristic perspectives employed in this study and Wallace's new aesthetic. First, I will point out the explicit connections between Wallace and the individual philosophers used in this study – Sartre, Kierkegaard, Camus and the later Wittgenstein. Then, I will make some very brief remarks on the connection between these philosophers themselves, as exponents of an existentialist line of thought.

In the existentialist view – the view that Kierkegaard, Sartre and Camus (and Wittgenstein also can be said to) share –, an individual is not automatically a self, but has to become one. A human being merely embodies the possibility of becoming a self. According to existentialism, there is no 'true core' that an individual always already 'is' or 'has', and which underlies selfhood. *Becoming* a self is the *task* of human life. A human being has to integrate his individual limitations and possibilities into a unified existence; this is the process of developing a self. If the individual does not assume himself in this way, he does not acquire a self; he is just

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[53] Murphet, *American Psycho. A Reader's Guide*, p. 20.
[54] Young, 'The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet', p. 93.

an immediate, natural being, a thing among the things. Such a human being does not 'exist'; he just 'is'.[55] Throughout this study, we will recognize this view of the self in Wallace's writing.

Of the four philosophers I will examine in this thesis, Sartre is the only one Wallace makes no explicit reference to in either his fiction or in interviews and essays. However, Zadie Smith describes Sartre as a "great favourite" of Wallace, and the former's dicta of being "condemned to be free" and "responsible for that freedom" as characterizing the predicament of Wallace's characters. The connection between Sartre and Wallace follows from their view of consciousness. According to both, consciousness should always be directed outward. It should transcend itself towards the world, to formulate it in Sartrean terms. And, writes Smith: "If Wallace insists on awareness, his particular creed is – to use a Wallacerian word – *extrorse*", which means 'facing outward', "awareness must move always in an outward direction".[56]

Kierkegaard, however, is repeatedly mentioned by Wallace. In *Infinite Jest*, Kierkegaard is referred to in the following ways: in relation to Camus (Hal Incandenza says: "I believe the influence of Kierkegaard on Camus is underestimated"); in the filmography of James Incandenza, one of his movies is called a "Kierkegaard/Lynch (?) parody" (referring to the filmmaker David Lynch, whom Wallace admired very much, thus suggesting an interesting connection between two possibly illuminating figures in the interpretation of Wallace's work); and, in the context of great love as inspiring choice and responsibility, Marathe mentions "Kierkegaard and Regina" (which is interesting, because whereas Marathe, in the end, chooses his wife over everything, including his political ideals – "Without the choice of her life there are no other choices" –, Kierkegaard broke off his engagement with Regine Olsen, a choice that haunted him for the rest of his life).[57] The affinity between Kierkegaard and Wallace is strong and seems to encompass broad aspects of their views on human existence, and the different ways of evading or accepting responsibility for that existence.[58]

As was just mentioned, *Infinite Jest* refers to Camus in connection to Kierkegaard. The connection between Wallace and Camus, which remains largely implicit, seems to lie in their emphasis on the necessarily communal character of meaningful existence. Existentialism is often seen as a school of thought that directs all its attention to the individual, isolating him. This is a misconception, however, especially Camus, who emphasizes the importance of community as a means of bringing an end to loneliness and meaninglessness.[59] In *Infinite Jest* we can recognize

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[55] cf. Taels, *Søren Kierkegaard als filosoof*, pp. 96, 102.

[56] Smith, 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men', pp. 264, 268. This conception of consciousness will be elaborated in Chapter 1.

[57] IJ, pp. 12, 992, 105.

[58] Wallace also compares Kafka's descriptions of the struggle of becoming a self with those of Kierkegaard (Wallace, 'Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness', pp. 64–65).

[59] cf. Van Stralen, who also points out this common misperception of existentialist thought (Van Stralen, *Beschreven keuzes*, pp. 21, 40).

this in AA's communal approach to beating addiction. This comparison is further cemented by a remark that Wallace made in an interview; following his statement "that it is our job as responsible decent spiritual human beings to arrive at sets of principles to guide our conduct in order to keep us from hurting ourselves and other people", Wallace says: "the remedy that I see for it is some very, very mild form of Camus – like existential engagement."[60] The 'mildness' probably refers to the fact that Camus's notion of "rebellion" is quite literal and overtly political, whereas Wallace's version of existential engagement seems to be aimed, above all, at urging individuals away from reflective confinement in the self, towards connection with others.

The relation between Wallace's fiction and Wittgenstein's later philosophy has already been mentioned above. This philosophical connection has been examined by several scholars, most notably and thoroughly by Boswell, who opposes the view shared by Wallace and Wittgenstein, to the postmodernist view connecting Barth and Derrida. He writes: "Wallace uses Wittgenstein's elegant model to escape from what he regards as the dead end of postmodern self-reflexivity", by proposing "a communal approach to communication."[61] On the relation of his own thought to that of Wittgenstein, Wallace writes: "I like to fancy myself a fan of the work of [Wittgenstein]". In the same article Wallace also contrasts this adherence with how he sees the works of Barth and Derrida: "I personally have grown weary of most texts that are narrated self-consciously as *written*, as 'textes' […] [,] the Barthian/post-Derridean self-referential hosts".[62] The connection between Wittgenstein and Wallace lies, to a large extent, in the fact that Wallace wants to free fiction from being turned in on itself, from the highly self-reflective view following from the postmodernist conception of language and literature. Wallace wants fiction to express the world we live in, "to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it."[63] Again, this has to do with breaking with self-reflective tendencies that isolate the individual, and prevent him from expressing anything meaningful about the world (problems which Wallace sometimes refers to as solipsism and skepticism)[64], in this case resulting from a postmodernist view of language. Wittgenstein's thought helps Wallace realize this liberation.

Similar to the connection between the literary works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, the philosophical existentialist works in question also share a number of family resemblances (which were already made apparent in the overview outlined above, of the connection between Wallace and the thinkers in question). As Gordon Marino writes: "the existentialists are linked by their commitment to the common themes of

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60   Karmodi, 'Interview'.
61   Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, pp. 26, 22.
62   Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*', pp. 218, 221.
63   McCaffery, 'Interview', p. 131.
64   e.g. McCaffery, 'Interview', p. 142; Wallace, 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky', p. 272.

freedom, choice, authenticity, alienation, and rebellion" (these are also the themes that will dominate this study, with one slight addition, namely that I regard sincerity and not authenticity as the right label for the existentialist virtue par excellence). Marino adds: "the existential movement is a response to the disenchantment of the world, that is, to the sense that the history and social structure of the world are not God sanctioned."[65] In other words: we have to take up the task of becoming, of developing our selves. Grouping together Sartre, Kierkegaard and Camus as existentialist thinkers whose philosophies display multiple similarities, is a commonly accepted position.

The relation of the later Wittgenstein to these thinkers, however, does require some further explanation.[66] For the purposes of this thesis, the most significant point of contact between Wittgenstein and the existentialist is the similarity in the way they view the relation between consciousness and the world (and, in connection to this: the self and self-knowledge). This connection is strongest and clearest with Sartre: both Sartre and Wittgenstein regard consciousness, and what can properly be called *self*-consciousness, as inextricably tied in with the world outside consciousness, and the common idea of self-consciousness being aimed at something 'inside', as mistaken.[67] Of course, Sartre's argument rests on a phenomenological analysis and Wittgenstein's argument on descriptions of language use. But these methods of analysis might be more closely related than is often thought. Nicholas Gier concludes that "there are significant parallels between Wittgenstein and the so-called 'existentialist' phenomenologists" (Gier also uses these parallels to point out the differences between Wittgenstein and Derridean deconstructivism).[68] Indeed, Wittgenstein equated the term "grammar" (that is: the structures of language use, which form the centre of all the 'linguistic analyses' that Wittgenstein performs) with "phenomenology": a chapter from the "Big Typescript", from 1933, is entitled "Phenomenology is Grammar". He also remarked: "You could say of my work that it is phenomenology".[69]

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65   Marino, 'Introduction', p. xiv.
66   I do not want pass over the differences that exist between their philosophies, although these differences seem to me to have been enhanced, thereby blotting out the interesting affinities, by the affiliation of Wittgenstein with Anglo-American, analytic philosophy, whereas existentialism is regarded as part of continental philosophy; cf. Wider, 'A Nothing About Which Something Can Be Said', p. 324.
67   Both view the tendency to regard thoughts and feelings as objects that we somehow possess 'inside' ourselves, as a crucial mistake in our understanding of ourselves. Self-knowledge, for both Sartre and Wittgenstein, is not a result of consciousness looking at itself, as if it were an object, but of consciousness looking at its own relations to the world.
68   Gier, 'Wittgenstein and Deconstruction', p. 174; cf. Gier, *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology*, p. 3.
69   Wittgenstein to M.O'C. Drury (Drury, M.O'C., 'Conversations with Wittgenstein', p. 116; quoted in: Gier, 'Wittgenstein and Deconstruction', pp. 174–175).

5   OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

On the basis of the foregoing, this book breaks down into two parts: the first on the problematic issues described in the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, and the second on the solutions, the engagement portrayed therein. Both parts consist of, on the one hand, chapters dedicated to the existential level of the story-worlds of the mentioned novels, and on the other hand, chapters on the form that these problems and solutions take in different views of fiction.

Part I is dedicated to the explication and analysis of hyperreflexivity and endless irony. These are the two main problematic issues portrayed in the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer.

Chapter 1 focuses on the first issue: *hyperreflexivity*. Contemporary Western life is portrayed in the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer as requiring constant self-reflection, which is shown to easily take on an excessive form, leading to gradual estrangement from the self and its relations to the world and other people. To analyze the novels' portrayal of this process, I will employ the view of self-consciousness formulated in Sartre's early, phenomenological-existentialist philosophy. This chapter will offer insight into a misconception of self-becoming that will rear its head throughout this study, namely that the contemporary individual tends to regard his self as an object that he can find 'inside', through self-reflection. This tendency will be shown to cut off the individual from (meaningful connections to) the world and others.

In *Chapter 2* the second problematic issue will be addressed: *endless irony*. This problem can be said to follow from that of hyperreflexivity: a person who cannot stop thinking about himself and his possible actions, cannot or can only just come to conclusions and actions, let alone conclusions and actions to which he is fully committed. The attitude that will follow from this is irony. This ironic attitude, too, can take on an excessive, endless form. The portrayal of this attitude in the studied works implies a sharp irony critique. I will use Kierkegaard's analysis of irony and the related distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical life-view, as a heuristic perspective for the interpretation of the irony critique formulated in the novels.

In addition to the critical portrayal of the above-mentioned problems of hyper-reflexivity and endless irony on the (existential) level of their story-worlds, the fictions of Wallace, Eggers and Foer also imply a critique of a similar escalation of self-reflection and irony on the level of the view of fiction underlying Barth's postmodernist metafictional works and Ellis's postmodernist minimalist works.

In *Chapter 3*, I will analyze *Barth's postmodernist metafiction* (specifically his influential work *Lost in the Funhouse*), by comparing it to the deconstructionist philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Whereas deconstruction is aimed at exposing the illusion of 'presence', which – according to Derrida – motivates the whole of Western

thought (that our definitions of concepts connect to an underlying set of pure essences), metafiction is aimed at exposing the illusion of 'reality', which is regarded as an artificial construction, similar to fiction. Both deconstruction and metafiction are aimed, not at the destruction but at the endless 'exhaustion' of these illusions, which are deemed to be inevitable, necessary. This will be described as the (by definition) endless reflexive-ironic strategy of both deconstruction and metafiction. According to Wallace and several scholars, this leads to a noncommittal introversion that is similar to the position analyzed in Chapters 1 and 2 as a phenomenon in the story worlds of the studied novels, but that in Chapter 3 is seen to be characteristic of a literary work itself.

In *Chapter 4*, we will see that, subsequently, this reflexive-ironic consideration of language and reality is, in a sense, taken even further in *Ellis's postmodernist minimalism*, which seems to express, above all, the impossibility of meaning (and of offering any meaningful description of reality): Ellis's novels portray postmodern reality as a grim, hopeless world, filled with shallow, egoistic characters, narrated in a blank, affectless tone. His 1991 novel *American Psycho* offers the most extreme and consistent elaboration of this fixed worldview. In this chapter, I will analyze the novel's first person narrator, Patrick Bateman – whose perspective coincides completely with the perspective of the novel – as the embodiment of the form of irony criticized along Kierkegaardian lines in Chapter 2. I will show that *American Psycho* is not just a *portrayal* of extreme irony but also an *embodiment* of it; in Ellis's postmodernist minimalism it has become impossible to formulate any meaning or value, at all.

Part II of this study offers an explication and analysis of the portrayal, in the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, of the solutions to – the attempts to avoid, answer or overcome – the problems discussed in Part I.

This requires, first of all, that an account is given of the *late-Wittgensteinian view of language and literature*, to which Wallace, as we have seen above, declares his adherence. As an alternative to the postmodernist view, the thought of the later Wittgenstein forms the basis of the ability of Wallace's works, and of Eggers's and Foer's works following in Wallace's footsteps, to speak meaningfully again about sincerity, reality-commitment and community. In *Chapter 5*, I will use Wittgenstein's descriptions to show that the supposed 'illusion' (crucial to deconstruction and metafiction) of the connection between language and reality, is actually irrelevant for the meaningful functioning of language. This will lead to the formulation of a late-Wittgensteinian view of literature, in which literature is understood as a form of 'grammatical' investigation: an investigation of our cultural semantic structures that forms an important foundation for our use of complex, moral concepts; that is: concepts that are tied in with what we regard as human virtue. Here, the term 'virtue' refers to what is needed to 'be' (to be human, a self), to live. Or as André Comte-Sponville writes: "In the

general sense, virtue is capacity; in the particular sense, it is human capacity, the power to be human."[70]

This analysis of the (engaged) view of fiction underlying the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, paves the way for the analysis of the virtues – sincerity, reality-commitment and community – portrayed in the story worlds of those works.

Chapter 6 will offer an analysis of the desire for *sincerity*. I regard sincerity as a basic attitude, forming a sincere, stable self (opposed to the empty fragmentation of hyperreflexive irony). To gain a better understanding of sincerity as such a basic attitude, as a virtue making all other virtues possible, I will again turn to Sartre. I will use the heuristic perspective of Sartre's view of consciousness to rehabilitate sincerity as the basic existentialist virtue of the contemporary individual (thereby showing Sartre's critique of sincerity to be inconsistent with his own descriptions, and thus correcting and reconstructing the Sartrean view). Subsequently, I will analyze the novels in light of this concept of sincerity, via several case studies, which in turn will also serve to underpin this new understanding of sincerity.

In *Chapter 7* I will further elaborate the desire for *reality-commitment*: the need for the individual to connect himself to the world, by making choices. In Kierkegaard's philosophy, 'choice' (as the alternative to endless irony, which implies not-choosing) marks the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical life-view. By means of additional Kierkegaardian notions (such as 'despair', 'passion', 'repetition', and the self as 'gift' and 'task'), I will analyze the novels' portrayal of how individuals come to realize, through the ethical action of choice, a commitment to reality. This will be shown to imply relying on something outside the self, something in the world, something that transcends the individual and does not lie fully within the individual's control.

Chapter 8 will offer an analysis of the need for *community*. In my opinion, Sartre and Kierkegaard fail to sufficiently address the role of other human beings in meaningful self-becoming. Since this social element can be seen to play a very important role in the novels, the analysis offered in this final chapter will take its lead from Camus's descriptions of the rebellious, solidary community. Firstly, Camus's two central notions of absurdity and rebellion will be connected to the other heuristic perspectives employed in the rest of the study. Subsequently, the importance of the other will be shown for Camus to flow from these observations, and the novels will be shown to offer a similar, if perhaps somewhat more tentative movement, through their emphasis on attention and trust. Finally, I will analyze, on the basis of the descriptions offered both in Camus and in the novels, wherein this importance of the other, of community lies.

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[70]   Comte-Sponville, *A Short Treatise on the Great Virtues*, p. 3; cf. Wallace's statement that he wants fiction "to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it" (McCaffery, 'Interview', p. 131).