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Wallace and Wittgenstein: Literature as Dialogue Concerning the Real World

I. Introduction

The past ten to fifteen years have seen the emergence of a new group of American fiction writers, whose works have had a profound impact on American literary fiction. These works share a clear philosophical dimension that signals a rethinking of how literature functions and what its purpose is. The current article will focus on the work of David Foster Wallace (1962–2008), who is generally regarded as the most important, pioneering member of this new literary 'movement'[1].

Although Wallace made his literary debut in 1987 (with the novel *The Broom of the System*), it was his 1996 magnum opus *Infinite Jest* that marked the outset of a new direction in American literary fiction, inspiring other novelists to explore similar paths in their own writing. An important aspect of this new direction is a change in the way language and literature are viewed philosophically – the rejection of a previously dominant view, and adherence to a new one. Wallace's works can be regarded, in this sense, as written partly in opposition to so-called postmodernist 'metafiction', especially that of American author John Barth (1930–). Literary theorist Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as follows: "*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact". In itself, this literary technique – the self-conscious unveiling of the artificiality of a narrative – is as old as literature itself. But in certain texts, mainly from the American 1960s and '70s, the use of metafictional techniques became so prominent that the term 'metafiction' also came to designate these texts as a specific literary trend or genre, namely *postmodernist* metafiction[2].

The strategies and purposes behind postmodernist metafiction's unveiling of artificiality can be said to be similar to those of Jacques Derrida's (1930–2004) postmodernist philosophy of deconstruction. Having said this, I would first of all like to emphasize that, throughout this article, I will be referring to the notion of deconstruction as it was interpreted mainly in the United States, based on Derrida's earlier, highly language-focused writings, and not taking into account, for example, the so-called 'ethical turn' of Derrida's later works. With this specification in mind, we can say that in both postmodernist metafiction and deconstruction the impossibility of connecting language to reality leads to the conclusion that language must fail.

According to Wallace, this 'deconstructivist' view of language and literature ultimately leads to solipsism and scepticism. This critique and the alternative offered in Wallace's own works can best be understood as grounded in Ludwig Wittgenstein's

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[1] Other important representatives of this new literary 'generation', as it has sometimes been called, include, in my opinion, Dave Eggers (1970–) and Jonathan Safran Foer (1977–).
[2] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London: Methuen, 1984, pp. 2, 5.

(1889–1951) later philosophy[3]. In contrast to Derrida and Barth, the later Wittgenstein views the impossibility of connecting language to reality as *irrelevant* for language to function meaningfully. He replaces the referential picture with a view of language as part of a 'life-form', as embedded in the communal structures of groups of individuals. The Wittgensteinian view of language also results in a credible view of literature that avoids the problems that are inextricably bound up with both the traditional (referential) view of literature as well as the postmodernist one (for example, the 'problem' that literary texts do not refer to 'anything').

In what follows, I will first elaborate shortly on the idea that postmodernist metafiction is based on a deconstructivist view of language. After that, I will contrast this deconstructivist view with the later Wittgenstein's descriptions of how language functions. This comparison will perforce have to be very concise and will focus only on the aspects crucial to my argument. Subsequently, I will offer the outlines of a Wittgensteinian view of literature. Where the referential picture of language, which underlies both the 'traditional' and the deconstructivist view of literature, necessarily entails a view of literature as describing something 'unreal', unable to convey truths about the world, a Wittgensteinian approach acknowledges literature as a fundamental activity within language use: literary texts offer detailed depictions of concepts that are essential to our understanding of reality. In closing, I will briefly sketch out how Wallace's works offer a clear example of this approach to literature.

II. Deconstruction and Metafiction

Deconstruction can be said to take aim at the ideal of *presence*: all western philosophy, according to Derrida, strives to reach a fundamental level where truth and meaning are fully *present*. All philosophical attempts at definition, at indicating the determining grounds for something, the 'principle' on which something is based – all these attempts imply the ideal of presence. They all imply that, if one could only go (back) deep or far enough, one could clearly determine the essence, the 'pure' meaning of something. However, this ideal of metaphysical essences expressed in perfect, 'pure' definitions is an illusion, an impossible dream, according to Derrida. But at the same time, he says, it is an impossible dream from which we cannot free ourselves, without which our language would not be able to function[4]. In *Writing and Difference* Derrida states:

> There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake
> metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign
> to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has

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[3] The relation between Wallace's fiction and Wittgenstein's later philosophy has already been pointed out in several publications, most notably and thoroughly by Marshall Boswell, in his book *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. Boswell also opposes the view that Wallace shares with Wittgenstein to that of Barth and Derrida: "Wallace uses Wittgenstein's elegant model to escape from what he regards as the dead end of postmodern self-reflexivity, particularly as practised by John Barth"; Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003, p. 26. In the current article, I hope to provide a further exploration of Boswell's suggestion.
[4] Cf. note 15 and 16.

not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest[5].

Therefore, deconstruction – as a "strategy"[6] of unveiling the illusion of presence – always works within the terms of what it 'deconstructs', showing how a system undermines itself, showing its 'contradictory', 'illusory' grounds. As Jonathan Culler writes: "The practitioner of deconstruction works within the terms of the system but in order to breach it"[7]. But, although deconstruction 'breaches' the system in question, it does not destroy it, and it does not replace it with something new. Deconstruction always remains *within* the system that it 'deconstructs', retaining it, showing at the same time its necessity and its impossibility.

Postmodernist metafiction – with the work of John Barth figuring, at least for Wallace, as its most important manifestation – can be described as carrying out a similar deconstructive 'strategy'[8]. The main target, in the case of these 'postmodernist metafictions', is the notion of 'reality', which of course has strong connections with that of 'presence'. When something is said to be a reality, it means that it is really there, that it is really *present*. For the writers of postmodernist metafiction the notion of reality as something apparent and unequivocal has become problematic. Prompted by the circumstances of their time, they have come to speak of the "unreality of reality", to quote Raymond Federman[9]. They regard reality as constructed, ambiguous, fake[10].

According to these writers, fiction is based on maintaining the illusion of 'reality'. They hold that reading fiction entails (temporarily) *believing* what we read. Postmodernist metafictional writing wants to *pierce* this illusory reality by revealing the artificial structures that underlie a piece of fiction: "it systematically disturbs the air of reality by foregrounding the ontological structure of texts and of fictional worlds", as Brian McHale writes[11]. These texts do so, for example, by letting the authorial voice intrude into the narrative and declare the fictionality of the story so far. Other

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[5] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass (trans.), London: Routledge, 2001, p. 354.

[6] Derrida in some places explicitly denies that deconstruction is a method, while in others he speaks of "a kind of *general strategy of deconstruction*", and says, for example: "What pushed me onto this route was the conviction that if one does not elaborate a general, theoretical, and systematic strategy of philosophical deconstruction, then textual irruptions always risk falling by the wayside into excess or empirical experimentation, and, sometimes simultaneously, into classical metaphysics"; Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Alan Bass (trans.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 41, 68 (in subsequent citations, abbreviated as P). See also, for example: Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bass (trans.), Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982, p. 246.

[7] Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 86.

[8] Cf.: "These traits have come to be called deconstructive – taking apart the structures, patterns and expectations of text, context, author, and reader. […] Deconstruction […] can be understood as a vital postmodern practice akin to the experimentation and focuses of Barth's literary practice"; Stan Fogel & Gordon Slethaug, *Understanding John Barth,* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990, p. 14.

[9] Raymond Federman, "Self-reflexive Fiction", *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, Emory Elliott (ed.), New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 1156.

[10] Cf. Patricia Waugh: "The historical period we are living through has been singularly uncertain, insecure, self-questioning and culturally pluralistic. Contemporary fiction clearly reflects this dissatisfaction with, and breakdown of, traditional values. […] Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures"; Waugh, *Metafiction*, pp. 6-7.

[11] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York: Methuen, 1987, p. 221.

techniques include the use of excessively difficult language to describe simple events, or a strange lay-out, thereby stressing the linguistic or material character of the story. By showing how fiction works, these authors want to make clear that, similarly, the reality we live in is turned into an orderly, unequivocal whole by omitting inevitable elements of disorder and unclarity. In other words, reality is fictionalized in order to become how we expect it to be. So, analogous with deconstruction, metafiction "functions through the problematization rather than the destruction of the concept of 'reality'," Waugh writes: "It depends on the regular construction and subversion of rules and systems"[12]. Both deconstruction and postmodernist metafiction are dependent on the frameworks they try to subvert.

It is this dynamic of simultaneous affirmation and undermining that is at the root of what Wallace calls the scepticism and solipsism of both deconstruction and metafiction. Complete presence is impossible: there is always an element of 'absence', and that 'impurity' justifies an endless postponing of definite judgment. Similarly, in postmodernist metafiction, descriptions of reality are constantly "crossed out"[13], because they inevitably contain 'fictional' elements, resulting gradually – according to Wallace – in a felt inability to express *anything* truthful about reality, except for its absence, its *un*reality, its fictionality. This "scepticism", as Wallace calls it, is tied in with what he calls the "solipsistic" effect of postmodernist metafiction: constantly 'crossing out' my own words requires constant self-consciousness. Thereby, my own thoughts are turned into the sole place where meaning is decided. However, just as I am unable to describe the reality outside me, I am equally incapable of giving a 'real', pure description of my interior life.

III. Language: Derrida versus Wittgenstein

According to philosopher and Wittgenstein scholar P.M.S. Hacker, this impossibility of bridging the gap between language and world, and between language and thinking, is the inevitable flip side of maintaining (as Derrida does) the indispensability of the ideal of pure essences for language to function meaningfully[14].

Derrida says that we regard a sign as a supplement for something else, as *referring* to something – to a thing in the world, or a thought in my head. Without that connection, the sign would be dead, meaningless. According to Derrida, this connection has to be pure and unequivocal, if a sign is to have meaning at all – because any remaining ambiguity would be contrary to the whole idea of meaning: "Every concept that lays claim to any rigor whatsoever implies the alternative of 'all or nothing'," Derrida writes in *Limited Inc*[15]. So, a set of pure, transcendental essences –

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[12] Waugh, *Metafiction*, pp. 40-41.
[13] Compare, in this respect, Derrida's practice of writing "under erasure" with the metafictional projection of a (realistic, apparently 'present') world followed by the undermining of that world, its 'un-projection' as McHale calls it; McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 100.
[14] P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: An Analytical Commentary on the* Philosophical Investigations. *Volume 3: Meaning and Mind*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, pp. 25-26.
[15] Also: "when a concept is to be treated as a concept I believe that one has to accept the logic of all or nothing, I always try to do this and I believe it always has to be done, at any rate, in a theoretical-philosophical discussion of concepts or of things conceptualizable"; Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*,

the "all or nothing", the "pure realization of self-presence" Derrida speaks of – is the only possible foundation for meaningful language use. Nevertheless, Derrida judges this whole idea of pure presence to be an impossible dream, finding absence to be just as fundamental to language as the dream of presence itself:

> what indeed I try to deconstruct, seems to me, insofar as it is desire or need, to be indestructible, or, I would even venture to say, 'immortal', and moreover, for the same reasons, mortal, or rather, deadly, in the sense of death-bearing. Is not the 'pure realization of self-presence' itself also death?[16]

But this does not place Derrida outside the referential picture of language. The notion of absence *presupposes* a system that is motivated by a striving towards presence. One can only speak, as Derrida does, of a gap between language and world, and between language and thought, if one assumes that language acquires (or tries to acquire) meaning by referring to world or thought (by attempting to bridge that gap). To be sure, for Derrida this is not just a problem of metaphysical, philosophical or scientific language use, as opposed to 'ordinary', 'everyday' language use, because this limitation would itself imply a 'pure' distinction that cannot be made: "everyday language", according to Derrida always "is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system"[17].

Derrida says that we cannot free ourselves from this referential picture of language, since this impossible ideal is indispensable for the meaningful functioning of our language:

> to determine language as representation is not the effect of an accidental prejudice, a theoretical fault or a manner of thinking, a limit or closure among others, a form of representation, precisely which came about one day and of which we could rid ourselves by a decision when the time comes[18].

Wittgenstein, however, *does* regard the referential picture as a *remediable* misunderstanding of how language actually functions. This surely is one of the most decisive differences between Derrida and Wittgenstein: Derrida sees words as always having a "metaphysical appurtenance" – to use the formulation of Mireille Truong Rootham –, an inescapable metaphysical 'belonging', whereas Wittgenstein only sees a "metaphysical use" (or perhaps we should say: *mis*use) of words; words do not carry with them an inevitable metaphysical element[19]. In Wittgenstein's view, language does not strive to acquire meaning by referring (or *trying* to refer) to something outside itself, to something that 'accompanies' it. Therefore the supposed *failure* of such attempted

Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988, pp. 116-117. (in subsequent citations, abbreviated as LI).

[16] LI, p. 116.

[17] P, p. 19.

[18] Jacques Derrida, "Envoi [Sending: On Representation]", *Psyche. Inventions of the Other: Volume 1*, Peggy Kamuf & Elizabeth Rottenberg (eds.), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 102.

[19] Mireille M. Truong Rootham, "Wittgenstein's Metaphysical Use and Derrida's Metaphysical Appurtenance", *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 22, 1996, p. 35.

connections, so crucial to deconstruction, can, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, be regarded as *irrelevant* for the meaningful functioning of language.

The irrelevance of, broadly, the two main exponents of such a view, namely meaning through reference to reality and meaning through reference to an accompanying mental intention, is shown by what Wittgenstein writes about ostensive definition and private language, respectively.

Ostensive Definition

Through ostensive definition – that is, "giving the meaning of a word by pointing to an exemplar", to quote the phrasing of Marie McGinn[20] – "we seem to pass beyond the limits of language and to establish a connection with reality itself", Wittgenstein writes[21]. Ostensive definitions seem like "pointers" that connect our words to a certain part of reality, which consequently 'fills' them with their meaning[22]. But Wittgenstein says this is mistaken. For a word that is pronounced while pointing at something can, in itself, be thought to mean a lot of things:

> Now one can ostensively define a proper name, the name of a colour, the name of a material, a numeral, the name of a point of the compass and so on. The definition of the number two, "That is called 'two'" – pointing to two nuts – is perfectly exact. – But how can two be defined like that? The person one gives the definition to doesn't know what one wants to call "two"; he will suppose that "two" is the name given to *this* group of nuts! – He *may* suppose this; but perhaps he does not. He might make the opposite mistake; when I want to assign a name to this group of nuts, he might understand it as a numeral. And he might equally well take the name of a person, of which I give an ostensive definition, as that of a colour, of a race, or even of a point of the compass. That is to say: an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case[23].

I have to know *how* a word is being *used*, what the – to use Wittgenstein's term – *grammatical* structures are that 'surround' the word, because these structures are responsible for the word acquiring its specific meaning. An ostensive definition, then, remains *within* language. When I say 'This is brown' while pointing at a desk, my words, my pointing finger and the desk I am pointing at, have all become symbols in a linguistic utterance, and there they have to behave according to the rules of grammar[24].

So, it is not reference to something 'in the world', but grammar that gives meaning to our words. And in doing so, grammar is autonomous: its workings cannot be justified by referring to reality, because that justification itself would have to be expressed using the grammar that one is trying to justify.

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[20] Marie McGinn, *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 42.

[21] Quoted in: G.P. Baker & P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: An Analytical Commentary on the* Philosophical Investigations. *Volume 1: Understanding and Meaning*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, p. 36.

[22] Hacker, *Meaning and Mind*, p. 99.

[23] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations. The German Text, with a Revised English Translation*, G.E.M. Anscombe (trans.), Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, pp. 11e-12e [§28]. (in subsequent citations, abbreviated as PI)

[24] Cf. Peter Winch, "Introduction: The Unity of Wittgenstein's Philosophy", *Studies in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Peter Winch (ed.), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, p. 13; P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: An Analytical Commentary on the* Philosophical Investigations. *Volume 4: Mind and Will*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, pp. 220-221.

Private Language

But we still have the other option left: meaning through reference *to an accompanying mental intention*. Even if I cannot unequivocally point out something in the world to someone else, do I not, *for* myself, have a clear idea in my head of what I am saying, of what I am pointing at? And could we not say, then, that the meaning of my words is anchored in the thoughts, the intentions that I have while speaking? But Wittgenstein, by means of his 'private language arguments', shows that this is not possible. He illustrates this impossibility with his thought experiment of the 'beetle in a box':

> If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word "pain" means – must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalize the *one* case so irresponsibly?
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> Now someone tells me that *he* knows what pain is only from his own case! – Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a "beetle". No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle. – Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. – But suppose the word "beetle" had a use in these people's language? – If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a *something*: for the box might even be empty. – No, one can "divide through" by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is[25].

This thought experiment illustrates that, if we regard the meaning of a word as being determined by essentially private images, then everyone could have very different images 'in their head' (for how am I to know whether others have the same 'thing', the same image in their heads as I do?), while the word in question continues to have a specific use (meaning) in language. So, these private images simply appear to cancel each other out in the way language actually functions. But Wittgenstein's point extends further. It would not only be impossible for us to understand *each other* if private images determined the meaning of our words. According to Wittgenstein, it would also be impossible for *me* to have a consistent understanding of *my own* images, and therefore of my own words. For I would not be able to uphold a criterion of correctness with respect to my own words. Against what would I test my definition? Judging whether 'this', the feeling I have right now, is 'pain', is left to the whims of memory. Wittgenstein writes: "whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right'"[26].

Again, Wittgenstein shows that the meaning of a word (for example, 'pain') is not 'caused' by the thing I am referring to – in this case, the feeling I am 'pointing' at in myself – but by the grammatical structures that surround my use of the word ('pain'), and that determine what counts as a meaningful use thereof. This does not mean that what a person feels does not matter, but rather that it is grammar that determines what we mean by the word 'pain' and therefore what we recognize in ourselves *as* 'pain'.

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[25] PI, p. 85e [§293].
[26] PI, p. 78e [§258]. Cf. Hacker, *Meaning and Mind*, pp. 97, 101.

Language as Life-Form: Wittgenstein's 'Games' versus Derrida's 'Play'

Wittgenstein writes: "to imagine a language means to imagine a life-form"[27]. This idea of the life-form applies "to historical groups of individuals who are bound together into a community by a shared set of complex, language-involving practices", writes McGinn[28]. The rules of language are not determined by reality but result from the communal structures of groups of individuals. A language-game presupposes a group of people who relate to each other and to the world in a certain way. And although the grammar of a language-game is 'autonomous' (in the sense that it cannot be justified by referring to reality or to mental images), that does not mean that language on the one hand, and 'reality' and 'thought' on the other, are completely unrelated. On the contrary: the structures of life-form and language-game *determine* the meaning we confer upon 'reality', and how we relate to it. The grammar of the word 'pain' determines what I can and cannot meaningfully describe as pain.

The difference between this Wittgensteinian account and the Derridean one is strikingly summarized by the opposition between the Wittgensteinian notion of 'games' (*Spiele*) and the Derridean notion of 'play' (*jeu*). For Derrida, play is an activity of language itself, the uncontrollability of meaning: "One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence"[29]. The play of language means that language always escapes man's grasp. As Marjorie Grene writes: "[play] is the game *of* the world (*le jeu du monde*), it plays with us. As flies are to wanton boys, we could almost say, are we to our words"[30]. This uncontrollability, this ambiguity forms the 'seed-bed' of deconstruction, which is not a process resulting from (or controllable by) choices and decisions, but something that is 'at work' in language itself. As Truong Rootham writes: "deconstruction is what language does of itself"[31]. For Wittgenstein, on the other hand, the notion of language-*games* stresses that language always functions within structures shared by a certain group of language users[32]. Marshall Boswell summarizes the difference as follows:

> A language-game in Wittgenstein must be played by more than one participant, whereas 'play' in Derrida is a dynamic property of language itself. […] Derrida argues that there is no way to shut down the play of meanings. […] the text in Derrida's vision remains always shut off and alienated, helplessly incapable of saying what it intends or of intending what it says. […] [F]or Wittgenstein, language does not displace us from the world but rather takes place 'in' that world, specifically among people in language-game situations. Far from alienating

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[27] PI, p. 7e [§19].

[28] McGinn, *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations*, p. 51.

[29] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (trans.), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 50.

[30] Marjorie Grene, "Life, Death and Language: Some Thoughts on Wittgenstein and Derrida", *Partisan Review* 43, 1976, p. 269.

[31] Truong Rootham, "Wittgenstein's Metaphysical Use and Derrida's Metaphysical Appurtenance", p. 42.

[32] Cf.: "the term 'language-*game*' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form"; PI, p. 10e [§23].

us from others, language can only exist as a product of communal agreement between others[33].

Whereas for Derrida the play of language results in the impossibility to express ourselves or the world, Wittgenstein's descriptions of language-games show that community and reality are always implied when language is being used. A language-game always presupposes a limit to possible doubt, a limit that is set by the life-form shared by a group of people.

IV. A Wittgensteinian View of Literature

The referential picture of language necessarily entails a view of literature that runs counter to many of the reasons why most of us read literature. For if the meaning of an utterance is determined by what it refers to outside language, then literature must be said to describe something 'unreal', and unable to tell us anything about the world we live in. In this view, literature becomes a form of linguistic pretence, an aberrant form of language use which cannot directly express anything about reality. This also applies to the deconstructivist view, which, as stated above, can be regarded as 'parasitic' on the 'realist' view. Only, in the deconstructivist view, the 'unreality' that according to traditional realism typifies literature, 'contaminates' reality as well, and consequently, "language and fiction are irrevocably cut off from the world", as David Schalkwyk summarizes[34]. Therefore, the only thing literature can be said to show is the artificial, constructed character of our (descriptions of) reality.

By contrast, the Wittgensteinian view of language enables us to see literature as most of us experience it: as directly concerned with our form of life, with the world we live in. We have already seen that, according to Wittgenstein, an utterance does not derive its meaning from the object or intention it refers to; the rules of language are determined by the communal structures of language users. When I want to define the colour brown and say 'This is brown', while pointing at a brown object, what happens is not the world (in this case the brown object) transferring meaning onto my utterance, but the world being transferred *in*to the grammatical structures of language. This 'appropriation' of the world by language is logically prior to truthful or untruthful descriptions of the world by means of these 'appropriated' terms. So, before literary texts can present us with fictional descriptions (which perhaps do not *refer* to anything that *exists* in the world), the world has already been 'absorbed' into language. As David Schalkwyk writes: "in terms of its *sense* […] a work of fiction is no less beholden to the world than a factual report may be: each depends in the same way on prior appropriations of the world"[35]. Therefore, there is no gap between literature and the world; rather, literary texts are, in the words of Wolfgang Huemer, "well grounded in our actual world"[36].

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[33] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, pp. 28-30.

[34] David Schalkwyk, "Fiction as 'Grammatical' Investigation: A Wittgensteinian Account", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 53, 1995, pp. 287-288.

[35] Schalkwyk, "Fiction as 'Grammatical' Investigation", p. 289.

[36] Wolfgang Huemer, "Introduction: Wittgenstein, Language and Philosophy of Literature", *The Literary Wittgenstein*, John Gibson & Wolfgang Huemer (eds.), London: Routledge, 2004, p. 5.

In *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein writes: "Nothing is more important though than the construction of fictional concepts, which will teach us at last to understand our own"[37]. And elsewhere we read: "The contexts of a sentence are best portrayed in a play. Therefore, the best example for a sentence with a particular meaning is a quotation from a play. And whoever asks a person in a play what he's experiencing when he's speaking?"[38] Wittgenstein wants to free us from the misleading thought that meaning must be determined by something that lies 'behind' our words – by something that our words 'refer' to (a thing, a thought) –, and to show us that, instead, meaning "lies open to view", namely in the words and the structures within which these words are used[39]. We have to concentrate on what "is already in plain view", and that is precisely what a work of art forces us to do[40]. Because, when we try to understand a work of art, we are limited to what it shows us. We cannot ask the characters of a novel for more information about how they actually feel when they say something; this we have to discern from the text, from what is 'there'. A work of art forces us to look *purely* at what is 'on hand', at – in the case of literature – the words, in the context of that specific literary text. That is all we have (and all we *need*) to determine its meaning.

So even if one were to define literature in a formalistic way, as 'language occupied solely with itself', it might, as Bernard Harrison writes, "just in virtue of doing that, be occupied with exploring reality"[41]. Perhaps, then, we could regard literature as a form of 'grammatical' investigation, as showing and exploring the structures of our form of life. But as John Gibson suggests, this investigation should not be regarded as purely "reportive" but also, or perhaps *rather*, as "foundational". I have no difficulty explaining to somebody what I mean by the word 'brown'. But how do I explain other, more complex concepts? Gibson writes:

> Consider those words that are crucial to our more cultural – our more 'humanistic' – renderings of our world. […] Think, for example, of 'love' or 'suffering', of 'exploitation' or 'devotion'. Consider our ability to cast ourselves as in possession of this or that sort of self, of our ability to depict others in very precise shades of moral, political and cultural identity. How is it that we can represent reality in *these* hues, that we can describe features of our world as expressive of or otherwise falling under *these* concepts?[42]

Gibson's suggestion is that our use of these concepts cannot take place without their being "founded" by what we could call "paradigmatic cases": examples that are common knowledge within a certain life-form. Literature and other cultural products could be seen as important suppliers of these paradigmatic examples.

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[37] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, p. 85e.
[38] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology. Volume 1: Preliminary Studies for Part II of* Philosophical Investigations, Oxford: Blackwell, 1982, p. 38.
[39] PI, p. 43e [§126].
[40] PI, p. 36e [§89].
[41] Bernard Harrison, "Imagined Worlds and The Real One. Plato, Wittgenstein, and Mimesis", *The Literary Wittgenstein*, John Gibson & Wolfgang Huemer (eds.), London: Routledge, 2004, p. 102.
[42] John Gibson, "Reading for Life", *The Literary Wittgenstein*, John Gibson & Wolfgang Huemer (eds.), London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 122, 120-121.

V. The Wittgensteinian Fiction of David Foster Wallace

The fiction of David Foster Wallace actively re-assumes this function of literature; a function that was discredited by deconstruction and metafiction, which saw language and fiction as cut off from the world – a view that, according to Wallace, lead to solipsism and scepticism. Conversely, Wallace's own works emphasize a deep concern with the notions of 'reality' and 'community', in an 'accord' with Wittgenstein that is of course largely implicit in Wallace's fiction itself, but that I try to explicate and analyse in my research, and of which I will give provide the outlines below[43].

Reality
Wallace agrees with postmodernist metafictionalists that contemporary western reality is very diverse and confusing. But according to him, good fiction cannot limit itself to revealing 'artificiality' and 'unreality', because, to Wallace, the conclusion that "all experience can be deconstructed and reconfigured […] is about as 'liberating' as a bad acid trip"[44]. It can make us lose sight of what it means "to be a real human being"[45], as has happened to a lot of the characters in Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*:

> [Everyone] finds stuff that's really real [, stuff about heartbreak and people you loved dying and U.S. woe,] uncomfortable and they get embarrassed. It's like there's some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy[46].

According to Wallace, good fiction should counter this tendency and "dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now"[47].

Wallace's own work is clearly motivated by this concern. Catherine Nichols describes Wallace's works as "attempting to engage the dynamism of reality, rather than professing its fictionality"[48]. In the novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" – one of Wallace's earliest attempts at finding a new direction for literary fiction – one of the characters writes a story that "has the unnameable but stomach-punching quality of something real, a welcome relief from those dread watch-me-be-clever

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[43] On the relation of his own thought to that of Wittgenstein, Wallace himself has written: "I like to fancy myself a fan of the work of [Wittgenstein]". In the same article Wallace contrasts this 'adherence' with his view of 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" (David Foster Wallace, "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*", *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 10, 1990, pp. 218, 221).

[44] David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. fiction", *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, London: Abacus, 2002, p. 65.

[45] Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace", *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13, 1993, p. 131.

[46] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1996, p. 592. (in subsequent citations, abbreviated as IJ)

[47] McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace", p. 131.

[48] Catherine Nichols, "Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", *Critique*, 43, 2001, p. 4.

pieces", which can be read as a clear declaration of intent of what Wallace wants from his own fiction[49]. But how to achieve this 'quality of something real'?

For one, the characters that populate Wallace's novels – and *Infinite Jest*, for example, contains more than 300 characters – are all portrayed empathetically, and with a caring attention to detail. In postmodernist metafictional novels the use of an abundance of perspectives, coupled with contradictory information, effects an 'overload' that constantly puts the reader off the track, pointing out to her that she is reading something fictional, something unreal. In *Infinite Jest* the abundance of characters and information, on the contrary, draws the reader *into* the story world, and convinces her of its reality. Wallace's fictions make very clear that what they speak of is 'real' pain, 'real' confusion; they speak about 'real' life. As Frank Louis Cioffi writes about Wallace's fiction: "actuality and artwork have fully merged […]; the artwork affects [the reader] in the same way as do 'real' objects; it has a truth that deeply stirs [her]. It is in fact not art, but life"[50].

Wallace's works show plurality and confusion, not as aspects of an 'unreality' that has to be exposed, but as something that already lies in open sight, as the reality of our life-form. Fiction can help us see this: the reality of what is already in plain view. In *This Is Water*, Wallace expresses this Wittgensteinian view, by means of the following "didactic little parable-ish" story:

> There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"
>
> […] The immediate point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. […] It is about the […] awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: "This is water." "This is water."[51]

Community

I already mentioned above that the aim of Wallace's writing is not, as in John Barth's postmodernist metafiction, to constantly 'push' the reader out of the story (by constantly pointing out the 'unreality' of what she is reading), but rather the other way around: to draw the reader in. Wallace sees fiction as a dialogue between writer and reader, so the reader should be constantly involved in the story:

> a piece of fiction is a conversation. There's a relationship set up between the reader and the writer […]. Somebody at least for a moment feels about

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[49] David Foster Wallace, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way", *Girl with Curious Hair*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989, p. 359. (in subsequent citations, abbreviated as WW)

[50] Frank Louis Cioffi, "'An Anguish Become Thing': Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", *Narrative*, 8, 2000, p. 175.

[51] David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water. Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*, New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2009, pp. 5, 3-4, 8, 131-133.

something or sees something the way that I do. […] I feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness[52].

This aspect of Wallace's writing should be seen in the light of Wittgenstein's philosophy too. Wallace assentingly refers to Wittgenstein by writing "that for language even to be possible, it must always be a function of relationships between persons […] dependent on human community"[53].

In 'Westward', fiction is compared to love and to sex (both are forms of 'community'): "Stories are basically […] like getting laid […]. 'Let me inside you,' they say". Metafiction, however, is not aimed at 'love', at establishing community: "[metafiction] does not love. […] [it] is untrue, as a lover. […]. It can only reveal. Itself is its only object. It's the act of a lonely solipsist's self-love"[54]. In *Infinite Jest*, the model of 'Addicts Anonymous' (AA) can be regarded as an example of how fiction *should* work, as forging community: "Empathy, in Boston AA, is called Identification. […] [Identifying] isn't very hard to do, here. Because if you sit up front and listen hard, all the speakers' stories of decline and fall and surrender are basically alike, and like your own"[55].

For Wallace, the purpose of fiction is to "reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans", to establish "a relationship between the writer's consciousness and [the reader's], and that in order for it to be anything like a real full human relationship, [the reader]'s going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work"[56]. As mentioned above, *Infinite Jest* forces the reader to 'put in work' in many ways: the abundance of information, the countless characters all have to be processed and aligned, resulting in a story world that for the reader becomes all the more 'credible' because of its comprehensiveness. Boswell writes that "[i]n doing that 'linguistic work', Wallace and his reader become a community where meaning is made, in Wittgenstein's sense"[57]. Perhaps we could say that Wallace's works affirm that a novel is at heart a language-game: it is a dialogue between writer and reader, grounded in the communal structures of the life-form. And by showing this, Wallace's fiction supplies complex concepts like 'reality', 'community' and 'humanity' with meaning.

VI. Conclusion

To summarize: according to Wallace, the fiction of his postmodernist predecessors ends up in solipsism and scepticism, as the result of a deconstruction-like strategy. Deconstruction and postmodernist metafiction can be said to be comparable in their attack on the (related) notions of 'presence' and 'reality', respectively. The deconstructive strategy of showing that these concepts can never meet their own standards (that there is always an element of absence in every striving towards

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[52] Laura Miller, "Interview – David Foster Wallace", www.salon.com/09/features/wallace1.html, accessed May 14 2010.

[53] McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace", p. 143.

[54] WW, pp. 330-332.

[55] IJ, p. 345.

[56] McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace", pp. 138, 142.

[57] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 121.

presence), implies a referential picture of language (one can only speak of a gap between language and world, and between language and thought, if one assumes that language tries to acquire meaning by referring to world or thought, by attempting to bridge that gap). Wittgenstein, on the other hand, holds that language does not acquire meaning by referring to something (a thing in the world, or a thought in my head). Instead, he views language as a form of life, as embedded in the communal structures of groups of individuals. This Wittgensteinian approach to the functioning of language entails a view of literature that does not regard fictional texts as expressing something 'unreal', but as a fundamental activity within a community of language users: literary texts offer detailed depictions of concepts that are essential to our collective understanding of reality. This Wittgensteinian 'base' can be said to 'enable' Wallace's fictions to, once again, speak sincerely and meaningfully, in a dialogue between writer and reader, of our common world, of the reality that we share and live in, and showing this to be simply indispensable for human life and communication.