



# The Progression of Postmodern Irony: Jennifer Egan, David Foster Wallace and the Rise of Post-Postmodern Authenticity

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The Progression of Postmodern Irony:

Jennifer Egan, David Foster Wallace and the Rise of Post-Postmodern Authenticity

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## Abstract

Responding directly to David Foster Wallace's call for a "new sincerity," Jennifer Egan in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, finds a way to avoid the detrimental postmodern irony identified by Wallace and replace it with sincerity and authenticity in post-postmodern literature. This study looks at the connection between David Foster Wallace's influential 20<sup>th</sup> century essay "E Unibus Pluram", its co-published "Interview with Larry McCaffery" and its greater connection to Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. In her novel, Egan uses Wallace's observations on late postmodern irony and television's influence on fiction to craft a world that overcomes the ironic quagmire left by its predecessor. She connects herself with Wallace by creating the character of Jules Jones, a magazine writer who parodies his writing style and is searching for authenticity. At the end of the novel, she creates a linguistic dystopia which is able to cast off Wallace's "E Unibus" notions of screen time and uses smartphone like devices to create a touchstone moment for a generation. These two scenes, Jules' quest for authenticity and Scotty's concert, are set many years apart to show the progression out of ironic looping into a post-postmodern authenticity. By understanding the mistakes in postmodernism, Egan can avoid incorporating them into post-postmodern literature and thus move fiction further past irony.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

As humanity approached the end of the 20th century, our perceptions of fiction changed. Postmodern fiction, the literary movement that spanned from the end of World War II to the 21st century, gave the world literature featuring government paranoia, disruption of language and narration, and a distrust of authority. It used irony to satirically undermine authority but by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century this tactic was overused and no longer effective. As Rachel Adams explains in “The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism,” “its depiction of the sharp polarization of the globe, fears of looming nuclear apocalypse, and newfound distrust of a government enmeshed in secrecy and conspiratorial activity represent the concerns of an earlier generation” (249). In short, as postmodernism waned, post-postmodernism waxed. Post-postmodernism maintains postmodernism’s experiment with disruptions of language, narration and absurdist sense of humor but rather than paranoia, it now focuses on globalization and interconnectivity using technology. Post-postmodernism was influenced by the legacy of its predecessor and “the internet’s polyvocality and time-space compression” (Adams 249). Reflecting the instantaneousness of digital communication, post-postmodern narration compresses and disorders the functionality of time more extensively than postmodernism.

Postmodernism’s concept of time stemmed from the need to disrupt storytelling

and was influenced by the one-way communication of television. Post-postmodernism, on the other hand, is influenced by web-based two-way communication, which can simultaneously tell the same story from multiple points of view. Because of this shift in perspective, other aspects of postmodernism have shifted as well. The most innovative change in post-postmodernism is its abandoning irony as a storytelling device.

Robert McLaughlin, in his article “After the Revolution: US Postmodernism in the Twenty-First Century,” gives multiple reasons behind postmodernism’s death: “the general pendulum swung to the right, marking a pervasive political and cultural conservatism inimical to the formal experimentation iconoclasm and countercultural ideology of most postmodern fiction” (285). Citing David Foster Wallace as an example of shifting cultural attitudes towards postmodernism: “the sense that the usefulness of irony as a means of engaging the culture was exhausted” (ibid). He cites Akbar S. Ahmed who claims 9/11 “blasted the US cultural mood from contingency, relativity, and situationalism into a revival of “‘Grand Narratives’ about West and East”<sup>1</sup> and lastly, “the process of globalization” (285-286). In contrast McLaughlin theorizes that:

Post-postmodernism seeks not to reify the cynicism, the disconnect, the atomized privacy of our society nor to escape or mask it...but by engaging the language based nature of its operations, to make us newly aware of the reality that has been made for us (McLaughlin 67).

Post-postmodernism also works towards reinserting authenticity and sincerity into literature, but much like postmodernists engaged with irony in various ways, 21<sup>st</sup> century authors use different techniques to reinsert authenticity. The continued use of humor in these texts helps maintain their appeal to audiences brought up with postmodern irony

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<sup>1</sup> After all, if you are paranoid about your country being attacked and then it is, the logic moves from speculation to reality.



making the authenticity and sincerity easier to stomach. This shift away from postmodern irony occurred because of a very influential essay which emerged at the cusp between postmodernism and post-postmodernism, “E Unibus Pluram”.

In the late 20th century, no one understood how detrimental irony was to culture better than David Foster Wallace. His article “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” deals with television’s usurpation of irony into its narration, advertising and ultimately its effect on literature. What had started out as an undermining critique of authority had, through cyclical intensification between media, reached a critical mass and now was preventing communication between authors and their readers. “E Unibus” acts as a starting point when discussing post-postmodernism because of Wallace’s intensive retrospective of irony in U.S. culture and his continued influence on literature in the 21st century. Being at the cusp between postmodern and post-postmodern worlds gave Wallace’s essay a real advantage. He looks at the postmodern world through the exploratory lens of post-postmodernism, describing the state of the world like a 21<sup>st</sup> century critic.<sup>2</sup>

Co-published with his “Interview with Larry McCaffery,” “E Unibus Pluram” discusses the different types of irony, (dramatic, situational, verbal) at play in television and postmodern fiction as well as the problems it caused. Wallace reflects on fiction being representative of our humanity and as such, what does it mean when we are incapable of sincere human communication?

At the end of “E Unibus,” Wallace famously called for “the new rebels might be

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<sup>2</sup> It should also be noted that the influence can go the other way as well, the style of post-postmodern texts could also have been influenced by Wallace’s essays.

the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the ‘How banal!’” (193). It’s this mindset of moving irony to the background and a willingness to “risk the yawn” that reflects Wallace’s continued influence on literature. It’s only through breaking down the barriers of ironic communication and reinserting the “single entendre values” of authenticity and sincerity that communication can be reestablished between people (ibid).

In “David Foster Wallace was Right: Irony is Ruining our Culture,” Matt Ashby and Brendan Carroll point out, “Wallace called for art that redeems rather than simply ridicules, but he didn’t look widely enough. Mostly, he fixed his gaze within a limited tradition of white, male novelists” (Ashby and Carroll). Wallace was expecting an heir in the continued tradition of postmodernism “fiction—written almost exclusively by young white males” mistakenly thinking the new breed of postmodernists would resemble the old and be able to challenge the old guard (182). Lee Konstantinou theorized that “Wallace wanted to discover or invent a viable postironic ethos for U.S. literature and culture at the End of History,<sup>3</sup> that is, for an America in the thrall of full-blown postmodernism” (85). A heady debate could be had about Wallace’s success or failure of this feat in his masterpiece *Infinite Jest*. However, the writer who does manage to commit to a “postironic ethos” is Jennifer Egan.

Though Jennifer Egan and David Foster Wallace are often grouped together in post-postmodernism, I could not find a formal study linking these two authors. Both Wallace and Egan employ similar tactics in their fiction to bring authenticity and

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<sup>3</sup> A term philosophers use to describe the end of human political, social and economic governance, which many saw as existing at the end of the 20th century, coinciding with the death of postmodernism.

sincerity to their work by using external forces to make their characters conform to the cultural norms in their work. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace uses Alcoholics Anonymous, which forces its members to be sincere when speaking at meetings. Egan sets her book, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, in the music industry, which, as Bernardo Alexander Attias points out in “Authenticity and Artifice in Rock and Roll,” “even at its most commercial and contrived, has always foregrounded its relationship to authenticity” (132). Much like Wallace situated her characters in the sincerity of AA, Egan foregrounds hers in the authenticity of the music industry. While both apply the theories laid out in “E Unibus” to their fiction, Wallace postmodern novel and Egan’s post-postmodern novel resolve the problem of irony in different ways.

The most direct connection, however, is Egan’s character Jules Jones, the Wallace doppelganger that guides the reader from ironic postmodernism through authentic post-postmodernism. Egan took the critique of irony and its culture laid out by Wallace in “E Unibus” and his “Interview” and framed her novel as a response to his call for new rebels. Her novel begins in the mid 1970s, the height of postmodern influence, and goes into about 2020—well into post-postmodernism. With Jules, she shows how Wallace’s philosophy can progress from late postmodern observation to post-postmodern action. She does this twice, with Jules and with the characters in her last chapter, Lulu, Alex and Scotty, tracing a direct line from their world in postmodernism into the early 21st century.

To solidify Wallace’s influence on her writing, Egan’s last chapter contains a media-driven and meaningless dystopia that she manipulates to create a post-postmodern cultural touchstone via the use of the screens Wallace so despised. Due to Wallace’s

concern with irony, Egan hinges her last chapter on ironic uses of language, leaving her characters lost in a world where language has lost much of its traditional ability to mean. Simultaneously, she integrates Wallace's worst fears regarding a media-obsessed culture, by making communication through smartphone-like devices ubiquitous.

Responding directly to David Foster Wallace's call for a "new sincerity," in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan finds a way to reinsert sincerity and authenticity into post-postmodern fiction that avoids detrimental postmodern irony identified by Wallace and replaces it with sincerity and authenticity. In doing so she creates a new way forward for post-postmodern literature.

This thesis will examine David Foster Wallace's discussion of irony in his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Culture" and the "Interview with Larry McCaffery" that was published with it. First, I'll more closely examine Wallace's discussion of the overuse of irony and its effects on culture. Then I will discuss Bosco and Jules Jones, the stand-in for David Foster Wallace that Egan created in her novel. Finally, I will discuss Egan's last chapter where her characters are lost in a Wallacian dystopia of meaningless language and overcome its ironic culture.

## Chapter II

### Wallace and Irony

First published in 1993, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” explores the connection between television and mid-century fiction alongside their exploitation and expansion of irony in American culture. Wallace’s thesis, is that irony—the act of conveying one thing but meaning another—once used to undermine authority and to force us to confront our assumptions and reveal hidden absurdities in society, has become American culture’s dominant and now problematic voice. Matt Ashby and Brendan Carroll eloquently summarize Wallace’s article, saying “television adopted a self-deprecating, ironic attitude to make viewers feel smarter than the naïve public, and to flatter them into continued watching. Fiction responded by absorbing pop culture to ‘help create a mood of irony and irreverence, to make us uneasy and to ‘comment’ on the vapidness of U.S. culture, and most important, these days, to be just plain realistic” (Ashby and Carroll).

#### The Problem with Irony

Wallace sees two problems with television’s adaptation of irony. First, he claims the “average American household consumes over six hours a day”<sup>4</sup> (“E Unibus” 151) of

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<sup>4</sup> Personally, I find this claim dubious, and in his essay, he has no source for this number.

television which leaves the American viewing public, who he refers to as “Joe Briefcase,” oversaturated with its style of ironic storytelling.<sup>5</sup> Given the amount of consumption, not to mention competition for attention between shows/channels, television has to constantly reinvent itself to keep the viewers engaged. As viewers became accustomed to one form of irony, that “self-deprecating, ironic attitude” (Ashby and Carroll) is intensified to continually engage the audience. This led to TV’s incorporation of other such literary tactics as meta-irony, where the audience was in on the joke and the characters were not, and self-referential humor, where the show references other parts of itself or other aspects of pop culture. The latter is particularly detrimental because it substitutes products, brands, and existing pop culture for the kind of fully developed identity authors once used to cultivate a relationship with the reader.

To compete with television and meet the expectations of a new television-watching generation, literature began incorporating the levels of irony and irreverence used by its electronic competitor. Growing up in a postmodern and irony-saturated society, the reader/watcher develops certain entertainment expectations. Irony in all its forms, (dramatic, situational and verbal), became widespread throughout the culture to keep its audience engaged. These in-jokes become intoxicating to the viewer and create a continued expectation of the entertainment they are viewing. It makes the audience feel like they are in on the joke while also making them feel as though they’re standing up to authority.<sup>6</sup> Irony began showing up in advertising as well as storytelling mediums to get

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<sup>5</sup> Whether this is an accurate statistic or not is up for debate, but this is the number Wallace uses to drive home his point about over-exposure.

<sup>6</sup> In *Infinite Jest*, the example Wallace uses to illustrate this is Hugh Steeply’s father who became obsessed with the 1970’s show’s M\*A\*S\*H, which used in jokes and irony to undermine U.S. military authority. Steeply’s father eventually went crazy and began writing letters to the actors as if they were the characters

an audience entrenched in irony interested in its product. However, fiction had maintained widespread use of irony in the 1960s and 1970s, the heyday of postmodernism, and began to discover the old forms were no longer enough and began an irony arms race with television. No one jumped on this bandwagon faster than popular literature, which, due to the denigration of high and low culture in postmodernism, began to sneak into the realm of serious fiction. In turn, serious and experimental literature had to compete not only with TV, but also with popular literature for their readers' attention. Wallace thought this led to a downgrade in literary fiction where authors

can get away with slapping together stories with characters who are stupid, vapid, emotionally retarded, which is easy, because these sorts of characters require no development. With descriptions that are simply lists of brand-name consumer products. Where stupid people say insipid stuff to each other. ("Interview" 131)

By adapting the tactic used by pop authors, writers of serious literature have allowed the widespread use of name dropping and irony in late 20th century American fiction.

Name-dropping causes the reader to feel smart and engaged with the text, despite its content and the connection being superficial.

Second, the long-term exposure to irony prevents readers from using the work to connect to anything beyond themselves and the in-jokes they share. Wallace theorizes, "I guess a big part of serious fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves" ("Interview" 127). At the end of this process of irony intensification by television and fiction, the medium no longer gives that "imaginative access" to characters. We cannot connect with them on an emotional level because they communicate through superficial

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they portrayed. He was no longer able to differentiate fiction from reality because for him, the show had become his reality.

content, irony or both. Can you really have a relationship with a character whose most memorable trait is that they like Pepsi? Essentially, where literature used to create pathways of understanding, irony creates either feedback loops of meta-narrative, self-reference, and in-jokes, or punchlines that completely isolate the work from both the risk of ridicule and the opportunity for connection. Without any sort of depth, the reader cannot learn and grow from fiction, which Wallace contended might be the entire point of the medium; “if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters’ pain, we might then also more easily convince others identifying with our own” (ibid).

As it turns out, Wallace’s theory of literature creating social intelligence was right. A 2013 study by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano looked at the effects exposure to literature had on empathy. In turn empathy allows the “successful navigation of complex social relationships and helps to support the empathic responses that maintain them.” The researchers found that “although readerly texts—such as most popular genre fiction—are intended to entertain their most passive readers, writerly or literary texts engage their readers creatively” (377). They theorize that “readers of literary fiction must draw on more flexible interpretive resources to infer the feelings and thoughts of characters” (378). The readers of literary fiction must utilize and employ their empathy when working to understand the text. In contrast, pop culture, genre novels, and the serious literature more heavily influenced by TV’s irony and self-referential nature don’t demand that same working empathy and thus demonstrate the dehumanization of the reader through exposure to irony.

Irony disavows the empathic connection between the reader and character: “it can train viewers to laugh at characters’ unending putdowns of one another, to view ridicule



as both the mode of social intercourse and the ultimate art form” (Wallace "E Unibus" 180-1). This empathic disconnection has lasting consequences as literature and art evolves. Decades of social conditioning have created “the most frightening prospect... leaving oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying past expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability” (ibid). When the reader tries to interact with other people, they refrain from expressing their true emotions, hiding them behind irony and sarcasm. This double blind has become our primary mode of communication in the 21st century. On top of that, the lazy character descriptions based on branding lead to judgements about characterization of a person, furthering a problem of stereotypes in a global age. If, as Wallace points out, “fiction is what it means to be a fucking human being” ("Interview" 131), the exclusively ironic literature of the late 20th century has failed us. Irony is no longer used to lampoon authority; it has become the authority forcing us to communicate through its use. At best, exclusively ironic literature is what it means to be a fucking smart shopper.

Wallace’s solution to this, as he states at the very end of “E Unibus Pluram,” is to leave “oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying past expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability.” He argues “The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might as well emerge as some weird bunch of ‘anti-rebels,’ born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values” (192-193).

Yet, Wallace admits that he has problems with adhering to this in his own writing: “when I look at my own stuff I feel like I absorbed too much of the *raison*. I’ll catch myself thinking up gags or trying formal stunt-piloting...it’s serving the rather darker

purpose of communicating to the reader “Hey! Look at me!... *Like me!*” [emphasis in original] (“Interview” 130). So where does that leave us when the originator of the theory cannot “risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs the parody of the gifted ironists, the ‘How banal!’” (“E Unibus” 193)?

### Jennifer Egan and Post-Postmodernism

Jennifer Egan’s 2010 novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, was received into a slightly different 21<sup>st</sup>-century world than Wallace had imagined. Wallace imagined his new rebels to exist within a postmodern and irony saturated culture, to appear like flowers growing from cracks in the sidewalk. Instead the post-9/11 world declared postmodernism dead as the country transitioned from government paranoia to wartime government support.

The accelerated post-postmodernism carries over into *A Visit from the Goon Squad* which, given its simultaneously interconnected and deconstructed methods of storytelling, looks like postmodernism on steroids. As Wolfgang Funk points out in *The Literature of Reconstruction*, in the 13 chapters in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* Egan

offers a variety of different points of view—from rather traditional authorial narrator figures (Chapters 2, 4, 7) to first-person narrations (3, 5, 6), from personal reflection (1, 8, 11, 13) to the rather less common form of second-person narration (10). She also includes presumably non-literary genres like a newspaper report and a slide show. (172-173)

According to Funk, this narrative technique allows the book to take place from sometime in the mid-1970s through the 2020s. Characters that appear as children in one story reappear as adults in the next, some characters only show up in one section, and one character, Benny, connects in some way to each story in the book. In his “Interview,” Wallace claims that “there's some weird, delicate, I-trust-you-not-to-fuck-up-on-me

relationship between the reader and writer, and both have to sustain it. But there's an unignorable line between demonstrating skill and charm to gain trust for the story vs. simple showing off" (130). Funk claims Egan balances the skill/charm and showmanship in her book and it "generates a necessity of reconstruction, which transfers the responsibility of establishing consistency to the readers" (172). This creates a relationship of trust between the reader and author in that the author trusts the reader to be able to fill in the blanks in the story. In order to accomplish this, the author must communicate to the reader their sincerity in order to gain the reader's trust. Funk views "reconstruction" as a way to repair the damage done by postmodernism, injecting new ways of communicating between the author and the reader.

By forcing the readers to be equal partners in building the world of the novel, Egan does two things: First, by creating complex narration she gets the readers to reinsert empathy as described in Kidd and Castano's study. Second, according to Funk, she creates "an authentic literary exchange" by creating a partnership between the reader and author: "an authentic literary exchange cannot be formally and categorically inscribed in a text or prescribed by an author to a reader but depends on their joint and reciprocal interplay and emerges in a state of oscillation in between them" (172).

Martin Moling creates his own term for "Egan's attempt to bridge the past and the future, or modernism and postmodernism" (53). He explains in "'No Future': Time, Punk Rock and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*," "the novel's artistic project responds to the contemporary fragmentation and sterile digitalization by invoking 'punk time' as a means to access literature's potential for slowing down time" (53). He explains that the chapters hang together like fragmented yet cohesive song lyrics and

chooses “punk” as the signifier because Egan’s work primarily deals with the punk scene and because, as Ryan Moore points out, punk is a “‘culture of deconstruction’ in response to the condition of postmodernity, the practice of appropriating the symbols and media which have become the foundation of political economy and social order in order to undermine their dominant meanings and parody the power behind them” (“Postmodernism and Punk Subculture” 311). In effect, the genre of music deconstructs postmodernism just like Egan deconstructs time.

### Authenticity and Sincerity

In “David Foster Wallace and the New sincerity in American Fiction” Adam Kelly dubs Wallace’s work “New Sincerity” and claims “Wallace’s project ended up even more far reaching than he claimed it would be in that early key essay [“E Unibus Pluram”]...it became primarily about returning to literary narrative a concern with sincerity” (133). In Wallace’s works, authenticity and sincerity are the opposing forces of irony. To justify this, Kelly looks at one of the few authors on the subject, Lionel Trilling and his 1972 work *Sincerity and Authenticity*, who he links to Wallace through an article titled “Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace.”<sup>7</sup> Kelly relies on Trilling’s definitions to understand Wallace’s work, seeing sincerity is “a congruence of avowal and actual feeling” (Trilling 2) while authenticity is an “exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man’s place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life” (ibid 11). In layman’s terms, sincerity is the public expression of

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<sup>7</sup> Kelly links the two scholars through a note Wallace “made in a book from his personal library held at the Harry Ransom Center” (Dialectic). Wallace famously took few notes, so Kelly reasoned that finding Trilling’s name and book title means that Wallace must have sought out a copy of his book.

authenticity but authenticity is really being true to one's self. Using *Infinite Jest* as his text for examining Wallace, Kelly discusses how the late author exploits the conflicts that can arise between authenticity and sincerity.

Kelly sees Wallace's work as "returning to literary narrative a concern with sincerity" (ibid). Labeling a movement of "New Sincerity" he focuses in on sincerity and authenticity and the complex relationship they foster for each other within Wallace's work. Kelly sees Wallace's fiction as asking "what happens when the anticipation of others' reception of one's outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self, so that the inner states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic" (136). That is how the conflict between the external reception of one's sincerity creates changes to their authenticity. This conflict between the interior life of the character and their external reality means that when the character acts, they are not being authentic. The outward pressure is put on the character to conform to the sincerity society deems appropriate.<sup>8</sup>

#### Philosophy of Egan and Wallace

Egan, however, takes Wallace's theory of the reader writer relationship to heart and in her narration "transfers the responsibility of establishing consistency to the readers" (Funk 172). Egan sets up her book to create an authentic experience between the reader and text, but she also sets up the characters and plot in a way that adheres to Wallace's ideology of removing irony and risking the banal eye roll. To do this, Egan creates two characters, Jules Jones and Lulu, who act as guides for the other characters bringing them out of the ironic trap. Jules Jones is a stand in for David Foster Wallace

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<sup>8</sup> This is the struggle the former addicts and members of the Ennet House deal with in *Infinite Jest*.

and he narrates a first-person magazine piece in Wallace's style. By showing Jules as Wallace championing Bosco who is trying to escape irony, Egan links him to the beginning of the movement back into authenticity. Lulu is a representation of a post-postmodern character existing within ironic dystopia.

By maintaining the postmodern experiment in style and through the two guide characters who exist on different points in the postmodernism and post-postmodernism spectrum Egan succeeds where Wallace failed in breaking the ironic feedback loop and reinserting authenticity and sincerity into literature.

### Chapter III

#### Jules Jones: The Authenticity Expert

Through the character of Jules Jones, Jennifer Egan formally links her work with David Foster Wallace. Jules is a magazine writer whose prose so closely resembles Wallace's that the 2012 edition of *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's*

*Guide* singles it out as a mark of Wallace's continued influence contemporary writers "Egan recreates Wallace's elastic vocabulary—running in this short section from the slangy 'creepazoid' (132) to the remorseless medical precision that classifies a man as 'eczematous' (126). At the same time, she rehearses Wallace's cantilevered descriptions, where languages' insufficient code requires a simple statement to be bolstered from below by several clarifying clauses" (Burns). Critics also took note of the similarity when the book was released. Sarah Churchwell, book reviewer for *The Guardian*, points out "when Jules Jones writes (from prison) his account of his assault on Kitty Jackson during an interview, it becomes an uproarious parody of David Foster Wallace" (03/12/2011). Jules is more than just a "parody" of Wallace; instead he is a guide that demonstrates the way out of postmodern irony through his interaction with a rock star with a death wish. That Egan's prose so closely matches what Wallace scholars and literary writers expect from the late author's works speaks to her deep understanding of his writing.

Jules and Wallace initially connect through prose style, but their real connection is through sincerity and authenticity. Wallace's prose is detached, and as Wilson Kaiser points out in "Humor After Postmodernism: David Foster Wallace and Proximal Irony," "Wallace sought to reimagine the boundaries of postmodern fiction, dispensing with the sense of superior detachment he saw as the major problem with ironic distance" (32). To shorten that distance, much of his humor "depends on more than the reader's ability to relate to the Wallacian narrator; it requires an involvement in Wallace's microcosm of quirks" (33). The reader has to connect with the narrator and identify with him despite, or maybe because of, his strange behavior and thoughts. Egan duplicates this Wallacian

“I-trust-you-not-to-fuck-this-up” (Wallace “Interview” 130) relationship when she mirrors his writing in Jules’ piece “Forty-Minute Lunch: Kitty Jackson Opens Up About Love, Fame, and Nixon!” but adds one unsettling change—having Jules attempt to rape the subject of his interview.

Jules’ assignment was to write a fluff piece on 19-year-old starlet Kitty Jackson. In the course of the interview, Jules has a nervous breakdown and progresses from being enchanted by the woman (“Kitty’s skin—that smooth, plump, sweetly fragrant sac upon which life scrawls the record of our failures and exhaustion—is perfect” (180)) to obsessing about her core being (“what else could account for my longing to slit Kitty open like a fish and let her guts slip out, or my separate corollary desire to break her in half and plunge my arms into whatever pure, perfumed liquid swirls within her” (182)) to trying to rape her in Central Park: “Let us return for a moment: one hand covering Kitty’s mouth and doing its best to anchor her rather spirited head, the other fumbling with my zipper” (183).

Wolfgang Funk explains Jules’ “sexual harassment of the girl is retrospectively explained as a quest for the inalienable core of her existence” (175) which is why Jules envisions not just gutting her but accessing “whatever pure, perfumed liquid swirls within her” (Egan 182): his desire is to gain access to the unobtainable. Jules had spent the earlier 30 minutes with Kitty being subjected to performed sincerity, the public display of her authenticity, but keeps returning to the idea that she is “nice” and that public state is not her true self. “Stars in the nice category act as if they’re just like you (i.e., me) so that you will like them and write flattering things about them” (Egan 167). At one point, he describes the layering of her personality like a sandwich. Kitty



has some sort of bottom bread that is, presumably, 'her,' or the way Kitty Jackson once behaved in suburban Des Moines... On top of that is her extraordinary and possibly slightly psychotic reaction to her new-found fame—the middle of the sandwich—and on top of that is her own attempt to approximate layer number one with a simulation of her normal, former self. (Egan 171)

Jules is looking to somehow cut through and examine each layer of Kitty. Does Kitty's attempt to simulate the Des Moines version of herself come close to being sincere or is her construction based on something else? Unless he can access her inner life he can never know, hence his gambit.

In his analysis of post-postmodernism, Robert L. McLaughlin points out that post-postmodern authors "seek in general to acknowledge but penetrate through the layers, aiming, perhaps quixotically, to reconnect with something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real" (213). As a post-postmodern writing pioneer, this was in some ways what Wallace was searching for, the authentic behind the public face.

Unfortunately, Jules believes that somewhere in there is the Platonic version of Kitty, and he forces himself on her and tries to rape her. No longer after the representation of her, he tries to access Kitty's authenticity through her physical being. During the attack he admits to the audience, "What I have no interest in doing is killing her and then fucking her, because it's her life—the inner life of Kitty Jackson—that I so desperately long to reach" (Egan 182). But Jules can't reach her authenticity, because no one can burrow into another person's authentic self. Funk claims "that Jules' attempt at rape misfires so spectacularly demonstrates that authenticity is not something that can be willed into being. Neither self-revelation nor the inner life of other people can be accessed by means of force" (176). Access must be granted and force of any kind voids

the objective.

Since authenticity and sincerity are opposed to irony, Jules could be read as an example of how a Wallacian quest for another's authenticity is doomed to fail. It can also be seen as slander against Wallace, but Jules' attempted assault is part of how Wallace sees fiction. In his "Interview with Larry McCaffery" he says, "really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this dark world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it" (131). That is the essence of Jules' function. Egan uses him as the character with the dark past who can push through it and help another person escape postmodern irony and reclaim authenticity.

#### Enter Bosco

Returning from prison after his attack on Kitty, Jules finds himself marooned at his sister's gated community in upstate New York. After "ominous stasis had set in" (119), Jules tags along with his sister Stephanie Salazar to meet Bosco, former frontman of the band The Conduits, and former "scrawny, stovepipe-panted practitioner of a late-eighties sound... a hive of redheaded mania who had made Iggy Pop look indolent" (125). When Stephanie and Jules meet him, a few things have changed: "Nowadays he was huge—from medications, he claimed, both postcancer and antidepressant... An unsuccessful hip replacement had left him with the lurching, belly-hoisting walk of a refrigerator on a hand truck" (125).

When Bosco first meets Jules, Egan's description reveals how hyper-aware he is of the irony in his situation, and it's a little awkward:

'It's an honor,' Jules said gravely.

Bosco scrutinized him for signs of irony before shaking his hand. (Egan 126)

Bosco, knowing what he is about to propose, is leery of anyone who would undercut his future plans. What Bosco doesn't realize is that the doubter would be his PR agent, Stephanie.

Bosco had originally called the meeting with Stephanie to announce his plans to go on a suicide tour with his new ukulele solo album *A to B*.<sup>9</sup> "I want to tour," Bosco said. "Like I used to, doing all the same stuff onstage. I'm going to move like I moved before, only more so" (127-8). When Stephanie is skeptical given his physical shape and health, he exclaims, "'Don't you get it, Steph?'...That's the whole point. We know the outcome, but we don't know when, or where or who will be there when it finally happens. It's a Suicide Tour" (129).

Jules, however, in his quest for authenticity, and perhaps because of his catastrophic failure in his previous attempt at authenticity, understands Bosco's goal even before he spells it out for Stephanie. In her list of obstacles of Bosco's tour, Stephanie mentions that "getting a writer interested in this is going to be tough" (128), whereas Jules pipes up and says, "I'm interested... and I'm a writer" (ibid), volunteering for the chance to witness what he thinks will be an authentic artistic expression of death. He volunteers because as he learned from his interaction with Kitty, authenticity cannot be forced but it can be given freely. Here, Jules has an opportunity for full access to someone else's authenticity within the confines of a project he can make his own.

Bosco has spent the last twenty years, give or take, according to Egan's general timeline, struggling to maintain his younger authentic self. This creates a weird paradox:

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<sup>9</sup> Which is also the title of Bosco's chapter.

by trying to preserve his younger self, he has neglected to grow as a person and understand his older authentic self. He has become an old poser. “Time’s a goon, right? Isn’t that the expression?” Bosco asks Jules (Egan 127). Bosco has been beaten up by the thuggish ravages of time. This gives him two choices: to reinvent himself as so many other artists have done, trying to maintain some connection to his former self, or to destroy his former self all together. Because he is both sincere and authentic, Bosco believes that destroying his stage persona will result in his physical death. By mocking and putting together this quasi-ironic act, he will no longer be sincere and it will cause his own death. Bosco cannot conceive of having multiple layers of authenticity. He originally thinks that destroying his former self would kill him, but instead it allows him to reinvent himself. He has forgotten the cry of Walt Whitman: “I contain multitudes.”

Funk points out that “Heidegger, Levinas and Baudrillard have variously argued that authentic expression can ultimately only be inspired by the conscious integration of one’s own eventual non-existence” (176). Since Egan has already created her expression of authenticity with the reader by creating the temporal space between the stories, the reader experiences Bosco’s death as real for the next 100 pages. It layers his death even more when the reader brings to the table the death by rock and roll clichés.<sup>10</sup> So you have a rocker who is trying to be authentic to his younger self, who wants to demonstrate his sincerity by going on a suicide tour, but is ignoring his older authentic self, with Jules documenting it all in his quest for authenticity. And you have the reader who, according to Funk, creates the “authentic literary exchange” (172) with Egan’s prose. Each of these

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<sup>10</sup> David Bowie’s “Rock and Roll Suicide,” The Rolling Stones’ “It’s Only Rock and Roll (But I Like It),” Lou Reed’s “Rock and Roll,” to name a few.

adds a layer to Egan's works decreasing the irony and reinserting sincerity and authenticity in literature.

In his article, "Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction," Ryan Moore points out

The culture of deconstruction has allowed some punk performers to enact dramatic refusals and parodies of power, periodically capturing the media spotlight and inspiring further acts of defiance...but these gestures of resistance have typically proven to be as fleeting and ephemeral as postmodern culture at large. Moreover, punk's spirit of negation lacks a utopian counterpart, and as a consequence its aggressive nihilism occasionally expresses itself as an attack upon the powerless rather than the powerful. (308)

Bosco's suicide tour is a part of this culture of destruction, looking to annihilate himself but in this equation, as the person committing suicide, Bosco is both the powerful and the powerless victim of an attack of his own making. He is powerful because he controls the tour but powerless because he is no longer the center of media attention. Much like The Sex Pistols, the iconic 1970's punk band whose U.S. tour Nevermind the Bollocks—Here's the Sex Pistols self-destructed after two weeks, Bosco is following in the punk tradition of destruction. However, the Sex Pistols and punk in general are a postmodern phenomenon: "Suffused with self-reflexive irony, these punks have recycled cultural images and fragments for purposes of parody and shocking juxtaposition, thereby deconstructing the dominant meanings and simulations which saturate social space" (Moore 307). In embarking on this tour, Bosco is recycling the cultural images of his younger self for the "parody and shocking juxtaposition" against his old, graying, overweight self.

Wallace points out the postmodernists "found pop images valid *referents* and *symbols* in fiction, and if in the seventies and early eighties this appeal to the features of

mass culture shifted from *use* to *mention*” [emphasis in original] (171). Of course, Wallace is talking about the appropriation of images in fiction, but the same appropriation is being used by Bosco. Just like Wallace suggests, we only see Bosco’s tour in mention. We know from this chapter that Bosco is going on tour with Jules, who is tasked with recording his deconstruction, but we only see one other mention of him in the novel.

In Egan’s PowerPoint presentation chapter, “Great Rock and Roll Pauses,” Alison Blake, the adolescent girl narrating the chapter, includes a slide about Jules Jones’ book, *Conduit: A Rock-and-Roll Suicide* where she casually mentions, “It’s about a fat rock star who wants to die onstage, but ends up recovering and owning a dairy farm” (257). Because of this note, in the most praised chapter of Egan’s book, we know Bosco survives and creates another authentic self.

#### Stephanie

The one character that Bosco thinks he needs to but ultimately can’t convince of his plan is Stephanie, his publicist. He tells her “The album’s called *A to B*, right?... And that’s the question I want to hit straight on: how did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about?” (Egan 127). But Stephanie does not know how to respond. His honesty about his position in life is one that exhibits self-reflection and acceptance of his own mortality. But Stephanie is a postmodern character who has very little relation and emotional connection to her place in the world because she can only communicate through the language of irony undercutting all actions. She reminisces about her past,

premarriage, preparenthood, premoney, pre-hard drug renunciation, preresponsibility of any kind, going to bed after sunrise, turning up at strangers’ apartments, having sex in quasi public, engaging in daring acts that had more than

once included (for her) shooting heroin, because none of it was serious” (131).

That heroin didn’t qualify as serious means she either had William Burroughs’ tolerance, or she was so heavily influenced by irony in media that nothing seemed real. When everything is a copy of a fiction from another media, what is real? That is ultimately the danger Wallace saw in the widespread use of irony, that we would be so warped by it we would no longer be able to connect with each other on any meaningful level. Irony “has permeated the culture. It’s become our language; we’re so in it we don’t even see that it’s one perspective, one among many possible ways of seeing. Postmodern irony’s become our environment” (“Interview” 147-8).

To be fair to Stephanie, Bosco’s tour does not help her ironic perception either. Moore describes the New York City band the Ramones as a group “who most personified the culture of deconstruction by lifting freely from past images of popular culture in ways that were neither ironic or sincere, but instead impaired the ability to distinguish between the two” (313). When Stephanie becomes skeptical of Bosco’s proposed adventure, it is because irony has marred her so she can no longer distinguish between irony and sincerity.<sup>11</sup> They become blurred together which leaves her unsure how to react to the tour proposal. Every aspect of Stephanie’s life sits on this line. It’s part of her dual nature of wanting to belong while wanting to critique. Unfortunately, by responding to the irony, not the sincerity of Bosco’s proposed tour, Stephanie misses out.

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<sup>11</sup> Being the bastion of pop-culture reference, *The Simpsons*, actually critiques this attitude in an episode about the rock tour Lollapalooza. In “Homerpalooza” S7:E24 two concert going background characters have the following conversation:

“He’s cool.”

“Are you being sarcastic, dude?”

“I don’t even know anymore.” (13:50)

This pop cultural commentary is a perfect example of how the ironic use of language warps effective communication.

Stephanie Salazar is a character marred by life in the postmodern era living in a gated WASPy community where she lives with her husband and son. The family sticks out like a sore thumb due to Bennie's Middle Eastern heritage and Stephanie's appearance. When playing tennis, "She'd noticed one or two blond heads pausing by the court to watch and had been proud of how different she looked from these women: her cropped dark hair and tattoo of her Minoan octopus encompassing one calf, her several chunky rings" (113). Stephanie lives the paradox of belonging, by virtue of owning a house in the community and being incongruous in her appearance.

When discussing the problems of irony and television advertising in "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace points out, "The crowd is now, paradoxically, both the "herd" in contrast to which the viewer's distinct identity is to be defined, *and* the impassive witnesses whose sight alone can confer distinctive identity" [emphasis in original] (176). This is true for Stephanie, who "lived in Crandale a year before they were invited to a party," which "wore on Stephanie more than she'd expected" (111). The aforementioned blond women who, according to the narrator, make up the clear majority of women in the community, act as the crowd, pointing out her difference through their sameness. Yet much like Joe Briefcase, Wallace's "everyman," she achieves the individuality promised to her by advertisers and yet she simultaneously wants to fit in: "it was also true that she'd bought a tennis dress for the occasion, slim and white, tiny white shorts underneath: the first white garment Stephanie had owned in her adult life" (113-114). It's a personification of irony: Stephanie wants to be part of the crowd and simultaneously independent of it. She wants to stand out enough that she can mock and dismiss others, but blend in enough so no one will mock or dismiss her. This leaves her untrue to her



authentic self.

The duality of inclusion and exclusion is something Wallace describes at length as the language of advertising. Since the eighties, Wallace noticed “the individualist side of the great U.S. conversation has held sway in TV advertising” (175). Into the 90s, it continually stressed standing out from the rest of the herd while simultaneously sending signals about the importance of being included. Wallace writes and talks at length about the ironic loop of advertising and how it wants you to get off the couch, buy their product, but it also wants you to sit there and keep consuming television. In turn, all of this plays with how television watchers view of themselves and their world. The television watcher “knows himself as a viewer to be guilty of the two big sins the ads decry: being a passive watcher (of TV) and being part of the great herd (of watchers and stand-apart-product-buyers). How odd” (176).

Embodying this aspect of postmodernism prevents Stephanie from taking Bosco seriously when he mentions he wants to go on tour. At first “Stephanie assumed he was joking” (126) and was “too startled to respond” (127). When she finally does, she tries to undercut his plans because irony can only critique events, it can’t understand them. By only being able to criticize, it removes the emotional connection two characters would use to connect.

Because Bosco is moving beyond postmodernism in his attempt to go on tour, he sees right through Stephanie. In turn, Stephanie later confesses to Jules, “I feel like everything is ending” (Egan 131), echoing the philosophy of the End of History that punk so desperately longed to reach. Jules responds, however, with, “sure, everything is ending, but not yet,” signaling a partial continuation of postmodernism experiment as the

century ends (132). The postmodern project isn't entirely ending; instead it is changing into something new.

### Jules Becomes Bosco's Biographer

Unable to connect with Stephanie to convince her of the endeavor, Bosco makes one last plea:

'I'm old, I'm sad—that's on a good day. I want out of this mess. But I don't want to fade away, I want to flame away—I want my death to be an attraction, a spectacle, a mystery. A work of art... you try to tell me no one's going to be interested in that. Reality TV, hell—it doesn't get any realer than this. Suicide is a weapon; that we all know. But what about an art?'

He watched Stephanie anxiously: a big, ailing man with one bold idea left, ablaze with hope that she would like it. There was a long pause while Stephanie tried to assemble her thoughts.

Jules spoke first: 'It's genius.' (Egan 129)

Jules understands what Bosco is doing because as the Wallace stand-in, he can see

What's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem. (Wallace "Interview" 147-8)

Like the child pointing out the naked Emperor, Wallace could see that irony had no redemptive power. Since Jules acts in his stead, he understands the importance of the raw sincerity Bosco is expressing. We could mock Bosco, we could ridicule him, we could dismiss his desperation, but Jules and Wallace see an opportunity for trust, sincerity and, for all its risks, authenticity. Furthermore, Jules knows about the perils of forcing authenticity because of the incident with Kitty, but Bosco is only asking him to witness and document the sincerity. Jules is not taking, Bosco is giving. Their contract is as follows: "I, Bosco, of sound mind and body, hereby grant to you, Jules Jones, sole and exclusive media rights to cover the story of my decline and Suicide Tour" (Egan

130).

As a construction, Bosco's story points to one of the critical problems of post-postmodern writers: "being a post-postmodernist of Wallace's generation means never quite being sure whether you are one, whether you have really managed to escape narcissism, solipsism, irony and insincerity" ("New Sincerity" Kelly 145). On one hand, trying to commit suicide and it ultimately saving your life looks like situational irony, until you consider how character sincerity and authenticity play a role in the event. The reinsertion of agency is one of the defining characteristics of post-postmodernism, and the intention of the character plays as big of a role in the event as the outcome.

Egan bypasses this by having her Wallacian character have direct access to watch a real human being. After all, Wallace's jumping off point for "E Unibus Pluram" is that writers watch TV to get their reality, but "what young writers are scanning for data on some reality to fictionalize is *already* composed of fictional characters in highly ritualized narratives" [emphasis in original] (153). This creates the postmodern ironic loop that moves between television and fiction and has been damaging to our culture. But Egan uses Jules to break the cycle. Bosco grants Jules "total access. You can watch me take a shit if you want to... I'm just saying, there are no limits" (Egan 128). Jules' raw material from his writing is not being influenced by scripted TV dripping with irony. Instead he is going to document "every fucking humiliation" (127) suffered by Bosco on his suicide tour. By cutting out the middleman, Egan allows Jules as the Wallace stand in to break the ironic loop. Jules acts as an enabler, allowing Bosco to create a reason and monetary backing for his suicide tour by volunteering to document it.

## Chapter IV

### Lulu, Scotty and Language

Setting the final chapter of her book in the near future, Egan delves into a Wallacian dystopia of New York in 2020. By then, the irony-rich culture has taken a toll on the English language. There are “word casings... words that no longer had meaning

outside quotation marks” (323). Examples of these words are “‘friend’ and ‘real’ and ‘story’ and ‘change’” and when “had ‘American’ become an ironic term” (324)? Word casings are words whose meaning has been removed, and a new one needs to be supplied by the reader or listener in a conversation. The idea of words losing power and changing meaning is not all that new: after all, language is an ever-evolving medium.<sup>12</sup> But the word casings are a symptom of the continual problem Wallace found with irony,

The problem is...what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem...it permeates every part of our culture. This stuff has permeated the culture. It's become our language...Postmodern irony's become our environment. (“Interview” 147-8)

Considering television, fiction, and later the internet, amplified American culture’s use of irony to communicate, Egan restructures language to reflect a society where irony has thoroughly permeated the culture. This widespread use of double-entendre meaning has created a communication breakdown across multiple platforms. Looking at word casings in text is easy, the quotations around the word signify the use of an ironic definition. However, the characters using spoken language have to decode the duality of ironic meaning when the marks aren’t present or use awkward air quotes to signal the shift. In a spoken conversation, invisible quotation marks could exist around several words at once, and the speakers must simultaneously translate which words are being used ironically, which ones at face value, and reconstruct the sentence in real time. When two of the characters, Lulu and Alex, are talking about the Scotty Hausmann concert they are organizing, Lulu abruptly asks to text instead because “I just get tired of

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<sup>12</sup> Never mind that in the 1990s we had a sitting president ask for the definition of “is” under oath.

talking” (Egan 321). Navigating the duality of language can be exhausting, even for native speakers. This affirms Wallace’s worst fears about the continued permeation of irony through society: it starts to break down the means of communication.

In order for language both to be meaningful and to have some connection to reality, words like *tree* and *house* have to be like little pictures, representations of real trees and houses. Mimesis. But nothing more. Which means we can know and speak of nothing more than little mimetic pictures. (“Interview” 143)

But by using double entendres to describe everyday things, mimesis doesn’t occur. For example, if you were going to go to your “house”, the quotes indicate that the word in no way represents a picture of a house, but what it represents is unknown. It is merely a stand in for the opposite of the mimetic image. The fundamental method by which we say anything with words has completely broken down and the words no longer represent what they are supposed to. At times, it seems that words do not represent anything at all.

The quoted word “friend,” for example, gives ironic meaning to the word friend. Reading the word, with the knowledge of the quotations, we would interpret what it means from the context clues and that could be anything from a bare acquaintance to an actual enemy. There are many different definitions that could replace the quoted word friend and the listener in the conversation cannot be sure which one it is unless they have prior knowledge of the speaker. The definition relies on the same in-jokes and situational irony to communicate as television did in Wallace’s day. What was once a technique to engage viewers by making them feel in on the joke is now a vital part of all communication.

By using word casings, Egan’s language becomes a representation of representing. They aren’t inverted language or meta language, instead they’re reflective

of an instant communication culture where “reach isn’t described in terms of cause and effect anymore; it’s simultaneous” (Egan 317). If meaning is lost, however, it is nothing more than reach, not an actual connection. It stretches communication but misses its mark.

Having the quotes signifying the word is also equally important. By giving them their own space between quotation marks, Egan gives the ironic meaning in language its own space, secluding it from the rest of language. While this makes communication difficult it also allows it to be more focused by actively showing when ironic meaning is present in written text. Of course, all of this is a moot point when in a conversation with someone, as word casings rely almost exclusively on written language to communicate.

As if the disintegration of meaning in word casings isn’t detrimental enough to language, Egan also drops into this world a new way of communicating via text. Called “T-ing” words in this language are spelled and capitalized by their stressed syllables. So, when two of the chapter’s main characters, Lulu, the college aged post-postmodern character and Alex, the 30ish postmodernist character, discuss compiling a marketing plan for Scotty Hausmann’s concert, Lulu asks, “U hav sum nAms 4 me?” (321). The language here is still understandable but requires the reader to know verbal pronunciation to understand the shortened words, much like reading a historical text before standardized spelling. In this example, for instance, the reader of the “T” would have to know the proper spelling for “names” as well as the stress on the “A” in the pronunciation.

Halfway through their conversation Lulu asks Alex if they can T to each other instead of talk because it’s exhausting and “All we’ve got are metaphors, and they’re never exactly right. You can’t ever just *Say. The. Thing.*” [emphasis in original] (Egan

321). Face-to-face communication has become riddled with the hazards of ironic usage when its speakers trying to navigate meaning, but Lulu claims that the language of “T-ing” is “pure—no philosophy, no metaphors, no judgements” (321). However, later on in the text when communicating to Alex again, she demonstrates how this is not always the case. When Alex explains via T-ing that there is a building going up next to his apartment blocking out the sun Lulu asks:

*“cn u stp it?”*

*Tryd*

*Cn u move?*

*Stuk*

*Nyc*, Lulu wrote, which confused Alex at first; the sarcasm seemed unlike her.

Then he realized that she wasn’t saying “nice.” She was saying “New York City.” [italics in original] (Egan 327)

Wallace says, “Wittgenstein argues that for language even to be possible, it must always be a function of relationships between persons” (“Interview” 143). Both T-ing and word casing take this one step further where the listener in a conversation must reinterpret every word due to its potential ironic tilt. For language to work at all, we need to understand social cues surrounding it, but once irony has permeated culture it always has the potential to change words’ meaning. Context doesn’t just clarify potentially ambiguous statements or add depth and clarity, it is vital to understanding even the most basic and otherwise straightforward statements. The participants in the conversation then have to anticipate the answers given by the speaker. It becomes a simultaneous translation of different meanings, while trying to construct a logical sentence.

When communicating across generations in T-ing, Egan shows the miscommunication because while the textual language itself may be pure, the humans



interpreting it aren't. All language requires some level of context to be understood, but T-ing takes that to an extreme. "Nyc" above is a cypher that needs both familiarity with the general T-ing language, and a specific contextual understanding of building development in New York City. The fact is, pure language requires total knowledge to be understood, which no human has. On one hand, Lulu's claim that this language is "true" only holds when compared against the word casings. T-ing must be taken at face value in order for the reader to understand the meaning of the word, but quotation marks would also be used if the T-ing word because a word casing, making its ironic meaning easier to understand. Martin Moling points out that "this incident of ambiguity, of the possibility of a misunderstanding, opens up a space for artistic expression even within such a confined system as T-ing" (66). By allowing multiple interpretations you can take something as "pure" as language and change its meaning. Demonstrating that nothing can be totally pure, everything can be created and interpreted by people. To put this another way, even if the system is perfectly "pure," if it does not communicate meaning, is it even a language at all?

Wolfgang Funk claims the breakdown of language Egan shows the use of technology is an attempt to "disinvest itself of the tools to make sense of the world" (178). In contrast, Wallace thought that the tool which Americans used to make sense of the world is television. Wallace saw television's damage to language and culture through irony, but reasoned that because it's a one-way communication device it can't respond to viewer feedback. If it could, it would self-correct. Yet Egan demonstrates that waiting for user feedback is a moot point. In the post-postmodern digital age, everything has some component of viewer feedback, yet irony still rules the day.

## The Rise of the Handset

The rise of computer-enabled television and binge-watching would have been abhorrent to the Wallace who wrote “E Unibus,” since the computer now represents a two-way communication device that we watch without break for multiple hours. In *Infinite Jest*, the cartridge everyone is looking for is a video so compelling that it’s viewers lose the ability to do anything else but watch and starve to death in front of what essentially amounts to their TV sets. It is with this mindset that Egan creates a 2010 version of Wallace’s dystopia, where people are constantly plugged into their devices and prefer communicating that way rather than face to face.

Egan’s future contains late stage capitalism component with her use of music marketing. In the chapter “Pure Language,” she creates a world of people wrapped up in their own handheld gadgets known as handsets. Much like smartphones, these allow people to communicate via text, surf the web, and download music. While handsets are marketed to adults, there are also children’s handsets, known as “Starfish,” so “any child who could point was able download music” to the device (Egan 313). This meant the music industry could remake itself for preverbal children with “the youngest buyer on record being a three-month-old in Atlanta, who’d purchased a song by Nine Inch Nails called ‘Ga-ga’” (ibid). Nine Inch Nails, a heavily censored hard rock band, creating music for babies makes just as much sense as Egan’s other musical example of “yet another posthumous album whose song title was a remix of a Biggie standard, ‘Fuck You, Bitch,’ to sound like ‘You’re Big, Chief!’” (Egan 313). In order to market to an ever-younger audience musicians cleaned up their act and reinvented themselves. As preverbal infants, it’s not the children who need convincing that the new music is okay,

it's their parents who have memories of these artists as not child-friendly. So, the musicians take Bosco's route of redefining their authenticity. "Fifteen years of war had ended with a baby boom, and these babies had not only revived a dead industry but become the arbiters of musical success. Bands had no choice but to redefine themselves for the preverbal" (313).

The slang for these prelanguage music aficionados is "pointers," from the physical motion they use to purchase music. This term takes on a different and complex meaning when considered in light of one of Wallace's key images of television: "Those of us born in like the sixties were trained to look where it pointed, usually at versions of 'real life' made prettier, sweeter, better by succumbing to a product or temptation. Today's Audience is way better trained, and TV has discarded what's not needed. A dog, if you point at something, will look only at your finger (160)." What Wallace doesn't understand but what Egan grapples with is television was "person who points" aka the finger, but with the internet and mobile devices the viewer points where television should look as much as television points where the viewer should look. One of the shifts Wallace noticed in "E Unibus" was from television projecting images of the outside world to only projecting images about itself. This is how the ironic loop was born, out of televisions need to navel gaze and the easy engagement of the in-joke. Before new technology, TV had to guess where we were looking and influence us to look in a certain direction. With the new technology, we can point to exactly what we want to see.

While the "pointers" can, well, point to what they want to listen to, their grasp of language is such that they may not really be sure of what they are listening to. Nor can they express exactly why they are pointing at this Nine Inch Nails song or that Biggie

remix. In this way, Egan parodies the music industry, which is constantly marking to younger and younger audiences. You can't go any younger than toddlers who, in making a basic hand motion, control the economy of an entire industry.

Changing your image to market to children could be seen as "selling out" on the part of adult music fans, but Egan brings several different points to counter this idea. First, by setting up the earlier chapter about Bosco redefining himself via a Suicide Tour, he essentially kills his former self. The death of the self, being a pure form of authenticity allows the musicians to move on to new things. The second comes from Lulu, who believes that authentic self-justification is more important than the perceived sincerity gained from strangers. Under that logic, musicians' authenticity is only beholden to themselves. Much like Bosco had no one to please but himself, neither do these musicians. Jeffrey Nealon concedes that "what you might call the 'way cool/sold out' dialectic of authenticity is, in my view, the least helpful... way to begin and end a discussion about popular music" (49). In short, it can be overrated.

All of Egan's future imaginings are to create a backdrop for a concert being put on by two of the recurring characters in the book, Bennie Salazar, the music producer, and his childhood friend, musician Scotty Hausmann. In the build-up for the big scene, the concert is advertised through the handset, by Lulu and Alex. Alex, however, has a problem. He views his job as a version of selling out and "promised Bennie fifty parrots [paid bloggers who mimic corporate opinions] to create 'authentic' word of mouth for Scotty Hausmann's first live concert" (315). For Alex, what was authentic has now been given an ironic meaning. It's become a simulacrum, a representation of the formulary genuine article that has, like the word casings, been hollowed out and replaced with a

different meaning. The irony in language and action prevents the proper communication of meaning, so much so that even the concept of the authentic can be corrupted.

### Music and Youth

There is also a correlation between the music marketing and the way the younger generation looks. Lulu is described as “‘clean’: no piercings, tattoos or scarifications. All the kids were now” (317). In the postmodern era, music is an inseparable part of youth culture, where “youth” generally meant anyone in their teens through twenties. Aging rock stars and fans alike spend their time trying to maintain their youthful appearance. But with music now being marketed to babies, the once powerful age demographic is trying to keep its infant looks. While Alex thinks of their choice in terms of getting older, “who could blame them... after watching generations of flaccid tattoos droop like moth-eaten upholstery over poorly stuff biceps and saggy asses,” he misses the fact that, to the prime demographic, teenagers are already the old people trying to hang on to their youth (Egan 317-8).

When talking about the staying power of classic rock, youth culture and commodification, Jeffrey T. Nealon points out in *Post-Postmodernism or the Logic of Just in Time Capitalism* “classic rock’s ubiquity is a sign of white suburban baby boomers stubbornly hanging on to the authenticity of their youth” (55). Gerard Moorey points out in “Aging, Death, and Revival: Representations of the Music Industry in Two Contemporary Novels,” through Egan’s use of satire to undercut the music industry “first, she is satirizing the original baby boomer generation...who were able to exert enormous cultural influence,” and “second, she is satirizing our culture’s obsession with youth in which tastes and fashions are routinely kowtowed to” (81). Rather than get the tattoo to

feel young, they keep themselves age free and closest to their prenatal state. While tattoos were once a symbol of adulthood, now they are an expiration date of youth. This also reflects another of Nealon's observations, "people who grew up during the last decade or two in the US have no 'authentic' or common cultural identity to speak of, other than as a consumer" (58). The lack of identity on the part of youth culture, leaves Egan's youth both literally and figuratively blank slates.

Funk claims that in this last chapter is "a dystopian vision of a near future which Egan envisions as the consequence of a way of life which has lost the ideal of self-reflection and authenticity as a guiding metaphor" (177). I disagree with Funk's assessment that Egan's future has lost the idea of "self-reflection and authenticity." On the contrary, their expression of both of these notions are more developed here than elsewhere in the novel. But when Alex confronts Lulu about the problem of working on a blind team with her, recruiting parrots to hype up Scotty's concert. Lulu claims parrots only work because:

"Older people are more resistant to...' she seemed to falter.  
'Being bought?'" (Egan 319)

Alex sees marketing as inauthentic and masks the selling out nature of the exchange. As the term implies, by only parroting the hype, the paid advertisers don't understand the language of what they are selling: they are only mimicking. The product could be bad, which is Alex's underlying fear of selling out his friends for a shoddy musician. But as Lulu counters with her own logic, "that's what we call a disingenuous metaphor... DM's look like descriptions, but they're really judgements. I mean, is a person who sells oranges *being bought?* Is the person who repairs appliances *selling out?*" (Egan 319).

For Lulu, the justification given by the individual committing the action is the most important thing, true meaning can only come from the self and cannot be derived through an individual's actions.<sup>13</sup> She tells Alex, "If I believe, I believe. Who are you to judge my reasons?" (Egan 320) For Lulu, there is only authenticity, not culturally tempered sincerity. There is only a "true" demonstration of one's authenticity, not the private expression of the self, but also as a public reaction, untampered by cultural reaction to the display. That is, Lulu bypasses sincerity. You can force people to adhere to certain types of sincerity, but you cannot do the same with authenticity, since it is beholden to the self. On top of which, authenticity has to be given and cannot be coerced.

Another interesting trait that Egan's establishes in her up and coming generation, is a lack of swearing. Lulu winces when Alex says "bullshit." Egan explains, "Alex had actually heard teenagers say things like 'shucks' and 'golly' without apparent irony" (ibid). They're using the exact language postmodernists mocked in previous generations. To the postmodern ironist "shucks" was just a way to say "shit" when you were afraid of authority. Yet at the same time, Lulu engages in the broken T-ing speak and abbreviates all the marketing terms she uses in conversations with Alex, such as the aforementioned "disingenuous metaphor... DM" (ibid). For Lulu, complex terms and concepts can be shortened into two or three letters, typed communications that can be so fragmented the reader needs a frame of reference for them. Conveying meaning to swear words (which have cultural constructs) is out, since like irony, it assigns culturally frowned upon definitions to harmless words. Swear words however, are only signifiers with no

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<sup>13</sup> For Lulu, marketing music is no different than oranges. A commodity is a commodity and art exists on the same level as every other human endeavor.

meaning. And yet the fragmentation of language is an irony unto itself because of the mixed messages it conveys.

If Lulu is the future, a pure post-postmodernist, then Alex is the character stuck between both worlds. In his mid-thirties in 2020, he would be a millennial with memories of life both pre- and post-computers and influenced by the end of postmodernism and the beginning of post-postmodernism. Or as Egan might T: Stephanie:Jules, Alex:Lulu.

### Scotty and the Human Moment

Scotty Hausmann, the musician giving the concert, is the exact opposite of Lulu. The reader sees Scotty at three different points in his life, as a teenage punk in a band named the Flaming Dildos with Bennie Salazar sometime in the 1970s, as an underemployed man who fishes in the East River around the height of Bennie's career as a music producer, and in this last chapter as an old children's singer. When Bennie first plays Scotty's music for Alex, Bennie describes him as "absolutely pure... untouched" (Egan 313). Yet what Scotty is untouched by is the commercialization of the digital age; he was someone "who never had a page or a profile or a handle or a handset, who was part of no one's data" (336). By 21<sup>st</sup>-century logic, Scotty is a nobody, not part of a demographic or marketing scheme, someone who exists outside the realm of pop culture and music. However, because he exists this way, he is simultaneously pure and has no essence. Alex describes him as "word casing in human form: a shell whose essence has vanished" (332).

What really makes Scotty pure is not just ignoring the media but using it to create something else. He tells us in an earlier chapter about his nightly routine of eating large



quantities of Hunan string beans and drinking Jägermeister while watching “weird cable shows, most of which I couldn’t identify and didn’t watch much of. You might say I created my own show out of all those other shows, which I suspect was actually better than the shows themselves. In fact, I was sure of it” (96). Rather than blindly accepting TV at face value, like Wallace’s “E Unibus” everyman, Joe Briefcase, Scotty uses what he sees as a creative tool to imagine other stories. As Moling points out, “The notion of creating art from emptiness, or the bleak basic materials of a post-apocalyptic culture, mirrors the punks’ ‘Do-It-Yourself’ ethos” (66). To Scotty, television is not a finished product but a provider of raw material he can sculpt into his own creations. He is, essentially, a writer and producer of his own television show. This is a very postmodern venture, looking to take and rework preexisting pieces of others’ art. That confiscation of symbols is a holdover from punk as well. Moore paraphrases a study from Hebdidge that shows “the meaning of punk style did not reside in any one of its objects or poses, but rather in the way that such combinations of clothing and behavior were used to deflate the transparency of meaning and the ideological ‘common sense’ it supports” (312). By reimagining collages of TV shows, he avoids the self-referential irony and changes the meaning conveyed in the shows. Since he also can’t identify what he’s watching, he misses the ironic self-looping references that plague postmodernism. In many ways, this makes him similar to the pointers he is going to entertain, as they are also untouched by the issues of irony. Scotty has, despite spending his six hours a day in front of it, removed himself from the influence of postmodernism’s irony through television. In terms of the digital age, his paranoia about computers— “real computers scared me; if you can find Them, then They can find you, and I didn’t want to be found”—has rendered

him a Luddite (Egan 97). With no handset or profile, he is completely removed from post-postmodern life. In Scotty, we see a possible positive side to the emptiness of the word casing; you can fill an empty vessel with anything, when you are nowhere you can go anywhere, and when you—in the eyes of society at least—are no one, you can become anyone. Moling points out that Egan “ridicules the vapid purity of her T-language and criticizes the 2020s’ trend towards insipid childishness, she simultaneously returns to a kind of Romantic idealism. Egan contrasts the false purity of T-ing with Scotty’s authenticity” (68). When Alex first sees Scotty, he describes him as “A guy with gutted checks and hands so red and gnarled he looked like he’d have trouble playing a hand of poker” and “a word casing in human form: a shell whose essence has vanished” (332). What Alex doesn’t yet realize is that Scotty isn’t empty, he’s authentic and true to himself. Scotty is essentially a new modernist, leery of new technology despite its omnipresence, but maintaining a belief in the value of creating art. Scotty may be at the End of History, but it’s not over yet.

When we see Scotty before his show he is holed up in his trailer refusing to go on stage: “It’s too late. I’m too old. I just—I can’t” (Egan 334). When the reader first sees Scotty, it is at a riot at his band’s show, so we know he is comfortable being onstage. Now, it’s not his capability or fear, but his age that prevents him from getting onstage. In echoing a central theme in Egan’s work, Scotty bemoans the passage of time. Bennie reminds him, “Time’s a goon right? You gonna let that goon push you around?” (Egan 332), echoing both the title and the previous chapter with Bosco, the only other time in the book that we see the quote. But here “Scotty shock his head. ‘The goon won’” (333). Unlike Bosco, who was ready to embrace his mortality and willing to risk death for the

sake of one last chance at art, Scotty is the reluctant musician. This makes him the anti-hero, the postmodern hero who takes up the mantle despite his qualms to and differentiates him from Bosco, the willing and classical hero who accidentally survived his quest. For Moling, “Scotty represents the quintessence of the grand narratives of unequivocal truth and absolute purity” (68).

Scotty winds up being trapped in the trailer, causing a physical altercation with both Bennie and Alex. Then:

Scotty kicked aside and threw open the door.  
'Hello,' came a voice from outside. A high, clear voice, distinctly familiar. 'I'm Lulu.' (Egan 334)

Because of Lulu being “clean,” not swearing and an authentic person, she is able to tame Scotty in a way Alex and Bennie are not. Since Scotty managed to bypass the influence of postmodern irony, and is both an authentic and sincere person—he isn't influenced by outside sources. When Lulu blocks his path, he could have easily knocked her over and run off, but instead he hesitates: “looking down for an extra second at this lovely girl blocking his way, Scotty lost.” That extra second transfers his authority over the situation to Lulu who asks, not “Where are you going?” or “Are you going to play?” or any other phrase that might express doubt or mar the purity of the moment, but “Can I walk with you?” (ibid)

Companionship is the key to Lulu's hook and her sentence construction conveys the belief that he is going to perform. Alex and Bennie try to force him, and as Egan as shown earlier authenticity cannot be forced. Earlier in the book, Scotty discusses standing outside the New York Public Library heart disease gala:

one key ingredient of so-called experience is the delusional faith that it is unique

and special, that those included in it are privileged and those excluded from it are missing out. And I... through *sheer physical proximity*, had been infected by that same delusion and... had come to believe I was Excluded. [emphasis in original] (98)

But with Lulu's intervention and invitation to accompany him, Scotty is no longer excluded but invited by the gate keeper of the event. In contrast, when Bennie is trying to coach him out of the trailer his language isolates Scotty ("*You* can do this," Bennie said. "I'm telling *you*" [emphasis mine] (332)) as opposed to the welcoming comradery Lulu offers him.

"Lulu twined her arm through Scotty's... the addled young geezer... and the young woman who might have been his daughter" (334). Lulu is the catalyst that guides Scotty up on stage. This is partly because she is a regal-looking young woman, and partly because Scotty recognizes her as an authentic character.

'Lulu,' Alex said to Bennie, and shook his head.  
'She's going to run the world,' Bennie said (335).

Not only is she capable of wrangling in the star where Bennie and Alex are not, but as the youngest person involved in promoting the concert she is going to inherit the world. She is, in essence, the future of the music industry. Much like Bennie's music industry mentor Lou Kline<sup>14</sup>, Bennie is poised to pass to Lulu the torch of cultural curating across generations. As a postmodern character who grew up with Scotty, Bennie is able pass this strange musician, who didn't fit in with the irony of postmodernism, to the authentic post-postmodern music producer. Only post-postmodernism, which allows the possibility of unbridled earnestness, can embrace an authentic artist like Scotty. In

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<sup>14</sup> Hence her name, a doubling of Lou as the second generation of inheritors of his industry.

turn, Lulu's act of getting Scotty on stage changes the world.

Scotty begins playing the songs that he had sold to the pointers and then

a swell of approval palpable as rain lifted from the center of the crowd and rolled out toward its, edges where it crashed against buildings and water wall and rolled back to Scotty with redoubled force, lifting him off his stool, onto his feet... exploding the quavering husk Scotty had appeared to be just moments before and unleashing something strong charismatic and fierce. Anyone who was there that day will tell you the concert really started when Scotty stood up. (335)

This crescendo of a touchstone moment is not televised. However, it involves all-encompassing technology, in the form of the handsets, to get people there, but what it created in exchange is a human moment, something that for the past 30 years has only happened on television. "During the concert, however, Scotty—propelled by the thrust of his music—reverses the very definition of this contemporary version of 'purity' and replaces it with a kind of punk authenticity" (Moling 69). This authenticity is recognized by the crowd who see "Lulu, who was now holding hands with a statuesque black man, both of them gazing at Scotty Hausmann with the rhapsodic joy of a generation finally desecrating someone worthy of its veneration" (336). Since Lulu, as reflection of her generation, believes in unfettered demonstrations of authenticity, Scotty is the first person she has seen display it. As Moorey concludes "Once onstage, Scotty's music combines a strength, honesty, and purity of purpose that unites the crowd, giving them a meaningful collective experience of the kind, it is suggested, they had been hungering for" (82-83).

Egan focuses on the potential of the invasive handset technology to bring people together, something Wallace never considered when staring at the old television. The handsets in Egan's world are used as much for advertising as in Wallace's, both for selling false promises and trying to get viewers to buy while simultaneously keeping

them staring at the device. But in the end only Egan thought to use the mass communication devices to convene “a crowd at a particular moment in history [with] the object to justify its gathering, as it did at the first Human Be-In and Monterey Pop and Woodstock”<sup>15</sup> (335).

It is only through an event of this scale; can Egan reintroduce authenticity into a culture scarred by postmodern irony. The handsets were what facilitated the concert, but without showing a truly authentic performer, the whole event would have fallen apart. It’s this leap forward in time, while still constructing a human to human moment, that Egan brings authenticity in fiction back into the limelight.

## Chapter V

## Conclusion

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad* Jennifer Egan commits to what Lee Konstantinou calls David Foster Wallace’s “postironic ethos” (85). Wallace wrestled with the problem

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<sup>15</sup> When Egan was writing *Goon Squad* social media was not used for organizing at the scale it has been in the past seven years. Egan saw in online communication the potential for something greater than flash mobs, human-to-human connection.

of irony in “E Unibus Pluram” noticing how it was detrimental to fiction, culture and language but did not have a good solution on how to get rid of irony. He famously ends his essay with the hope that the “new literary rebels” will be the ones to risk the disappointment of the ironists and calls for new authors to cast of irony and embrace “single entendre values”. Egan answers this call, by linking her work to Wallace via Jules Jones, Egan takes on Wallace’s critique of irony’s effect on culture, and uses it to ensure the same misuse of cultural meaning doesn’t occur in post-postmodernism. Responding directly to David Foster Wallace's call for a "new sincerity," in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan finds a way to insert sincerity and authenticity into post-postmodern fiction that avoids the detrimental postmodern irony identified by Wallace and replaces it with sincerity and authenticity. In doing so she creates a new way forward for post-postmodern literature.

Starting with postmodernism and leading through post-postmodernism, Egan takes the reader on a journey incorporating evolving technologies to show Wallace’s suspicion of screened media and observing one’s furniture is now unfounded. Chronologically, she begins this process with Scotty when he is younger, watching television, but not really paying attention to the characters and plot, instead using them to create his own story. This is a very postmodern project, compiling new art out of preexisting one but it allows him to by-pass the influence of irony heavy culture. That does not mean Egan expects the same thing of her readers who are not able to erase years of television watching. Instead she uses the merits of post-postmodernism to “make us newly aware of the reality” of coming out the other side of detrimental ironic culture

(McLaughlin 67). By linking herself to Wallace's theory of irony she brings to the table his work on getting rid of irony and welcoming sincerity in fiction.

To drive this point home, when we see Scotty before the concert, irony has not just moved from TV to fiction but saturated the culture. Egan creates a screen obsessed dystopia and plays with logical syntax. She creates two languages, the first one, "T-ing", revolves around the need to maintain sincerity at all times in order to be understood. The second, "word casings" are word marked by quotation marks to indicate an ironic meaning.

Egan's use of T-ing reflects Wallace's comment on the need to move back to a single entendre language. Lulu, a college student who prefers to type instead of talk sees the language as pure. It allows her to say exactly what she means by keeping the definition of the word at face value. When T-ing with an older character, Alex, she types "nyc" New York City, and for a moment before he remembers that T-ing is a pure language, he thinks she was being sarcastic and meant "nice". This actively demonstrates that there is still a duality of meaning in language, but, it can be avoided by always speaking sincerely and not using ironic meanings. If Alex was forced to both decode the words and the meaning in while T-ing communication would break down between the characters. Because he only has to decode the word and not the meaning, communication is preserved.

To contrast the pure T-ing language, Egan also creates the text language of word casings, where words mean anything except their original meaning. Marked with quotation marks to indicate the shift in definition, word casings demonstrate the inherent irony in language. Yet, because the quotations are needed to convey the switch, they are



primarily a written language, or one indicated by awkward air quotes. By being mostly written, they cannot be transmitted through the poisoner of fiction, television. Because the words need this indicator, it difficult for television to appropriate. This in turn, reducing linguistic irony on television and stops it from spreading to other fascists of culture.

More importantly, Egan uses the quotes to quarantine the ironic use of language. By indicating the switched meaning though quotes, both the writer/speaker and reader/listener are notified of the change in meaning. This takes away some of the rampant use of double entendre language and by diminishing its usage restores power back to irony as a tool for lampooning authority. Egan restores its critiquing power by bringing authentic meaning and sincerity back to language outside of the word casing construct.

Somewhere between the rise of cell phones and domination of smart phones, Jules, as the stand in for Wallace, searches for authenticity. Jules' reaction to people becoming screen zombies mimic's Wallace's reaction to television. Egan takes their dislike of the screen interface and brings it forward into post-postmodernism so that the next time the reader encounters Bosco it is in the midst of a digital only media, a Power Point presentation. By using this format, Egan shows the expanse of acceptable screen time as the narrator, a teenage girl, had to develop page after page of the screen-bound work. The shift from screens being unacceptable to just another interactive human tool is something Wallace didn't fully anticipate in "E Unibus Pluram" and this is where Egan's post-postmodern mindset makes all the difference. She uses the devices to facilitate a human event. This is something Wallace couldn't see possible even with television,

despite the commonality of advertising for an event.

It only here, in the final chapter, that Egan can bring all of these elements together. Egan's screened devices, the handsets, rely on all communicated language being pure unless otherwise indicated by the quotation marks. This lessens the chance of miscommunication between parties and means that anything typed must be true. This is what keeps Alex up when he worries about selling out for Scotty's concert. His parrots have to be sincere and authentic for an artist they have never seen. For Alex, it can quickly become an unsettling shift in meaning, to a language that is supposed to be earnest. Egan even lets us know that Alex is aware of the name of ironic and authentic language because his wife, Rebecca is the star academic writing a book on the topic. He winds up being caught in the middle between Lulu, who believes T-ing is pure and Rebecca who only looks at irony in language.

Post-postmodernism looks to cast off the shackles of irony and the only way for this to happen is to have Scotty's concert be a success, thus making the language used by the parrots, authentic. The moment at the concert when Scotty stood up reflects a critical change in authenticity in literature that would not have been possible without the influence of Wallace and "E Unibus Pluram". What Egan does, that Wallace missed was use those much maligned screens to create a human moment. To do this, she first had to get irony out of language and then utilize the changing post-postmodern attitude about screen time to use it as a communication device to get people to attend the concert.

Because Scotty is untouched by both TV and computers, he is the perfect authentic character, he does not have any meta data that needs to be hidden. Everything about him is presented in the moment he stood up at the concert. He is as Benny says,

“He’s absolutely pure...untouched” (Egan 313). As Moling points out “By infusing her narrative with punk purity, Egan radically distances herself from postmodern simulation and a digital culture which propagates sterility in the name of an artificial notion of purity (73). The younger generation at the concert that has no tattoos or piercings is the false notion of purity. They think they are untouched by the world because like newborn babes they bear no marks, yet Scotty, who is Alex sees as a “decrepit roadie”, is pure because of who he is (Egan 332). “A guy with gutted cheeks and hands so red and gnarled he looked like he’d have trouble playing a hand of poker” (ibid). He is pure because of his true authenticity can shine through despite him being surrounded by false purity. He reestablishes it as an acceptable means of expression in a culture searching for a way to communicate.

Primed by the two-ways screens, by Scotty’s authenticity, by the new texting languages, and the audience at the concert, including the reader, is ready to appreciate a moment outside the realm of irony. When Scotty stands up, we all believe it. It is a pure note of authenticity completely devoid of irony. By setting up Scotty’s concert as this sincere touchstone moment, Egan reaches out to post-postmodern American culture. Through Wallace’s observations on irony, Jennifer Egan constructs a book that gives back to writers, readers, musicians, promoters and other creative professions the power to say, do, create or play something and mean it.



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