The Relevance of Turning a Page: Monotony and Complexity in §25 of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*

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'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. 'Groovy' Bruce Channing attaches a form to a file. Ann Williams turns a page. Anand Singh turns two pages at once by mistake and turns one back which makes a slightly different sound. David Cusk turns a page. Sandra Pounder turns a page. Robert Atkins turns two separate pages of two separate files at the same time. Ken Wax turns a page. Lane Dean Jr. turns a page. Olive Borden turns a page. Chris Acquistipace turns a page. David Cusk turns a page. Rosellen Brown turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. R. Jarvis Brown turns a page. Ann Williams sniffs slightly and turns a page. Meredith Rand does something to a cuticle. 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Kenneth 'Type of Thing' Hindle detaches a Memo 402-C(1) from a file. 'Second-Knuckle' Bob McKenzie looks up briefly while turning a page. David Cusk turns a page. A yawn proceeds across one Chalk's row by unconscious influence. Ryne Hobratschk turns a page. Latrice Theakston turns a page. Rotes Group Room 2 hushed and brightly lit, half a football field in length. Howard Cardwell shifts slightly in his chair and turns a page. Lane Dean Jr. traces his jaw's outline with his ring finger. Ed Shackleford turns a page. Elpidia Carter turns a page. Ken Wax attaches a Memo 20 to a file. Anand Singh turns a page. Jay Landauer and Ann Williams turn a page almost precisely in sync although they are in different rows and cannot see each other. Boris Kratz bobs with a slight Hassidic motion as he crosschecks a page with a column of figures. Ken Wax turns a page. Harriet Candelaria turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. Ambient room temperature 80° F. Sandra Pounder makes a minute adjustment to a file so that the page she is looking at is at a slightly different angle to her. 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle turns a page. David Cusk turns a page. Each Tingle's two-tiered hemisphere of boxes. 'Groovy' Bruce Channing turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Six wigglers per Chalk, four

Chalks per Team, six Teams per group. Latrice Theakston turns a page. Olive Borden turns a page. Plus administration and support. Bob Mc-Kenzie turns a page. Anand Singh turns a page and then almost instantly turns another page. Ken Wax turns a page. Chris 'The Maestro' Acquistipace turns a page. David Cusk turns a page. Harriet Candelaria turns a page. Boris Kratz turns a page. Robert Atkins turns two separate pages. Anand Singh turns a page. R. Jarvis Brown uncrosses his legs and turns a page. Latrice Theakston turns a page. The slow squeak of the cart boy's cart at the back of the room. Ken Wax places a file on top of the stack in the Cart-Out box to his upper right.

(Wallace 2011, 310–311)[1]

Language is able to reveal truths, but also to conceal underlying intentions and purposes. One effective strategy of linguistic concealment, according to David Foster Wallace's posthumous novel *The Pale King* (TPK), consists in hiding issues of import in irrelevant and hence boringly dull masses of data: "one of the great and terrible PR discoveries in modern democracy […] is that if sensitive issues of governance can be made sufficiently dull and arcane, […] no one not directly involved will pay enough attention to cause trouble" (TPK 84, §9). Consequently, the power of a literary text may consist in its capacity to explore the facets of such "monumental dullness" (TPK 84, §9). This essay attempts to show that one chapter — §25 — is an exemplary instance of Wallace's "aesthetic of boredom" (Clare 2012: 442): it seems to mimic the "dull and arcane", yet despite superficial monotony and minimalist narrative means, it provokes rich associations that eventually subvert that neoliberal "politics of boredom" mentioned above (see Clare 2012). I thus concur with Clare that §25 is "an instructive readerly allegory for […] the theme of boredom […] in *The Pale King*" (ibid.: 442). In both content and form, the chapter functions like an exercise against the manipulative threats of numbing monotony, which together with information overload, as discussed in other chapters and exemplified by the whole of the novel, imperil the democratic state at its roots.

Wallace's posthumous novel *The Pale King* centres on the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as "a synecdoche for a wide range of urgent issues" connected to questions of citizenship, economy, government, tax policy, recent history and many other things (Boswell 2014: vii). Wallace's own "Embryonic

1 In the following, all quotations taken from this work will be referenced in the format: TPK, page number, § number if applicable.

outline" of the novel adds the topics of "paying attention, boredom, ADD, Machines vs. People at performing mindless jobs" (TPK 545, "Notes and Asides") to the list. In short, the novel relates historical, economic and political phenomena to individual and subjective experiences in highly complex ways, and thus acquires an "omnivorous, culture-consuming" dimension (Boswell 2014: vii).

The bureaucracy of the IRS — in Wallace's own description a "parallel world, both connected to and independent of this one" (TPK 85, §10) — is not only the novel's theme; it also affects its formal aesthetics. The fifty chapters are labelled with the section marks found in official documents; numerous footnotes (seem to) give instructions about how to use and understand the "disjointed, swappable collection of narratives" which form a "labyrinthine layout", reminiscent of "a tax return form" (Wouters 2012: 462). These fifty "disjointed" chapters make use of a broad range of narrative techniques and discourses, including traditional 3rd-person accounts, dialogues and 1st-person narratives, transcribed audio or video tapes, excerpts from encyclopaedias, historical tracts and academic studies, manuals, lists, excerpts from bureaucratic regulations, and not forgetting the interjections "author here" (TPK 66, §9, and 256, §24). These diverse texts then constitute a gigantic set of data waiting to be processed by readers, similar to the data that need to be processed by the fictional IRS employees. Wallace employs this mimetic technique pervasively. The mimetic effect then adds a further dimension to the book: reader here. True to Wallace's understanding of worthwhile (literary) communication, the "disjointed" structure of the novel reminds readers to "put in [their] own share of the linguistic work" (Wallace in McCaffery 1993: 138). Wallace invites reader participation and thus attempts to turn reading into a collaborative act.

In the middle of all these fragmented text data, §25 sticks out in several ways. For instance, its layout is conspicuous. The chapter is printed in two columns, reminiscent of the aesthetics of many official documents. Granting that official documents tend to be perceived as dry and dull, the impression of an official document is reinforced by a "flood of seemingly irrelevant, repetitious, and boring information" (Clare 2012: 442). Readers are made to observe a group of rote examiners in a large open-floor office who apparently do nothing but turn pages. These observed "wigglers" are explicitly named, e.g., "Ken Wax turns a page. Lane Dean Jr. turns a page. Olive Borden turns a page…" (TPK 310, §25), yet so far most of them are unknown to the reader. A few observations about the room, e.g., "Exterior temperature/humidity 96°/74%"

(TPK 313, §25), and descriptions of involuntary body movements, e.g. "R. Jarvis Brown uncrosses his legs" (TPK 311, §25), interrupt the steady flow of page-turning, subtly adding some "skeletal narratives" (see Hayes-Brady 2016) to the text. The careful reader will also detect two "seeming non-sequiturs" (Clare 2012: 443) within the page-turning, such as "Devils are really angels" (TPK 312, §25). Apparently, the devil of boring monotony and irrelevant data overload may turn into an *angelos*, a messenger of worthy truths. The worthy truths may be revealed, once the *diabolos* — who according to the word's Greek origin is the one who throws things about in order to cause confusion — can be checked by ordering attention. In keeping with C.S. Lewis's observation that "we must attend even to discover that something is not worth attention" (Lewis 1961: 132),[2] Wallace explores "paying attention" (TPK 545, "Notes and Asides") as part of the novel's "broad arcs" (TPK 545, "Notes and Asides") as a remedy against the passivising effects of monotony and irrelevant masses of data (see Boswell 2014, Clare 2012, Hayes-Brady 2016). Among many other things, the short interjection "Devils are really angels" (TPK 312, §25) seems to suggest that §25 is not only spatially but also conceptually a central chapter.

1. Relevance Theory and *The Pale King*

Perceptions of monotony, boredom, dullness and the effects of information overload are related to Wallace's central question of relevance and irrelevance (see Boswell 2014, Wouters 2012). It seems therefore appropriate to relate his writings to Dan Sperber's and Deirdre Wilson's *Relevance Theory* (RT). According to RT, a stimulus becomes relevant if it leads to new, strengthened, revised or abandoned available assumptions; that is, if it creates a positive cognitive effect. A positive cognitive effect as "a worthwhile difference to the individual's representation of the world" (Wilson/Sperber 2002: 47) is the precondition for relevance; by generating feelings of pleasure, it is the motor for human cognition. The greater the positive cognitive effect, the more relevant something appears. However, the degree of relevance to an individual is not exclusively determined by the expected cognitive effect. Relevance depends just as much on the expected processing effort, which in turn depends on the

2 Lewis's views on attentiveness seem to have influenced Wallace's own conception that concentrated dedication is of utmost importance to counter the (post)modern fast-paced, ephemeral way of life (see Burn 2012: 379).

available mental representations at the time of communication. If new data can directly dock on to one's accessible beliefs and assumptions, the expected effort will be small. If, however, those data are difficult to connect to the accessible contexts, the effort will be great. Consequently, the "presumption of relevance" requires that

a) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it.
b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences. (Sperber/Wilson 2007: 270)

In RT, the term "ostension" denotes a "behavior which makes manifest an intention to make something manifest" (ibid.: 49).

The first presumption of relevance recalls, of course, observations by critics like Jonathan Culler who consider the worthiness of one's reading efforts as a precondition for, if not a convention of literature (see Culler 2000: 26). In that sense, the literary discourse, the novel itself and Wallace's renown "as one of the most gifted, important, and influential writers of his generation" (Boswell 2014: viii) provide *a priori* a strong stimulus to start reading this "long thing" (see Boswell 2014) called *The Pale King*. Yet, to convince readers to make the effort to read attentively despite seemingly uninformative chapters like §25, the text must provide further stimuli that strengthen the presumption of relevance; that is, the renown of the author has to be confirmed by his ability to choose and set ostensive stimuli well.

The steady repetition of "turns a page […] turns a page […] turns a page" in §25 renders the text semantically boring, which RT explains as a lack of informativeness: (a) the purpose of page-turning is only vaguely inferable; (b) after the initial statement the iteration does not seem to alter anything further in one's cognitive environment; and (c) the indications of the characters' names who turn pages are confusingly unprocessable. Most of these names have not been mentioned before and thus cannot link up with previously established mental representations — they appear to be irrelevant. As if to mock the reader, the first word of §25 is, indeed, "irrelevant": "'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle turns a page" (TPK 310, §25). "Irrelevant" is, however, set between single quotation marks, signalling non-literal or citational meaning. It is an instance of Wallace's invitation to accept reading as a collaborative act: the tiny, but undoubtedly ostensive stimulus 'inverted comma' is meant to direct

away from the boring surface and to overcome the barrier of effort raised by unwieldy linguistic data. It promises a cognitive effect by opening a path to other layers of potential meaning.

The aforementioned "great and terrible PR discovery" (TPK 84, §9) that "abstruse dullness is actually a much more effective shield" against public interference "than is secrecy", because of the fact that the latter is "interesting" (TPK 83, §9), reveals an abuse of a general principle in human communication according to RT: "Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance" (Sperber/Wilson 2007: 158). Therefore, the narrator of TPK seems to demand of readers, and by analogy of citizens, that they go beyond the level of Sperber/Wilson's "optimal relevance." Optimal relevance is achieved as soon as some plausible interpretation is found through a balanced process of pairing cognitive effort with cognitive effect. In view of the communicative abuse by manipulative and antidemocratic PR strategies, Wallace seems to require that readers accept, *a priori*, a greater cognitive effort in order to save the relevant from disappearance among distractive irrelevance, and thus to protect the individual's mind from easy manipulation.

2. Guiding readers' perception of relevance

To achieve this aim, Wallace often employs a narrative strategy of contrast and multiplicity: the novel's self-declared "shifting p.o.v.s, structural fragmentation, willed incongruities, & c." (TPK 72, §9) hamper the integration of newly read information into a larger context and thus the formation of coherent meaning. Even though the often seemingly unrelated data run the risk of not being processed at all if read only in a cursory manner, the "gaps" of meaning (Iser 1972: 346) opened up by such a non-teleological textual enterprise may increase the reader's interest and invite an active participation in the process of meaning generation, as has been observed by reception theorists and (Russian) formalists alike. The simultaneous use of apparent irrelevance and stimulation seems paradoxical; however, the tension generated between readerly resistance and complicity is a rhetorical strategy which can foreground the relationship between world and text, reader and implied author, and thus "enhanc[e] that real-world collaboration toward realising the potential of any text" (Schechet 2005: 30).

Wallace's "radical realism" (see LeClair 1996) strives for a high degree of mimesis (see Hayes-Brady 2016: 63, 139, 151). Mimesis invites complicity by the representation of the familiar as it is effortlessly processable. At the same time, the familiar can provoke resistance by lacking informativeness. Moreover, resistance is likely against Wallace's apparently unfiltered mimesis of "the noisy, linguistically debased milieu of the turn of the millennium" (ibid.: 63). Unwieldy masses of data require intolerable processing efforts. However, this "logic of juxtaposition" (Burn 2012: 372) itself forms a strong ostensive stimulus. The tension between identification and resistance drives the reader forward, as the contrasts strive for some kind of reconciliation. The novel steadily renews its promise of relevance as an ongoing, never-ending communicative process between "author here" (TPK 66, §9, and 256, §24) and 'reader here' — a dialogue which, according to RT, by default presumes its own assumption of relevance. If readers collaborate, follow the lead and do not shirk the cognitive effort, they will be rewarded by the feelings of pleasure that a positive cognitive effect creates. In other words, the assumption of relevance is what stimulates real-world readers, and also what, on the plot level, makes Wallace's characters persist in their work. From their perspective, the relevance certainly lies in the still-dominant belief in the function of the IRS for the well-being of the Nation, which, however, is represented as under threat in a neoliberal economic system.

Thanks to the multiplicity of ostensive stimuli, ranging from tiny, inverted commas to the novel's overall architecture, attentive readers are in many ways well prepared when they approach "the book's more opaque sections" (Wouters 2012: 461) such as §25. A short interview in §14 provides a conspicuous preparatory stimulus on the plot level. It anticipates the setting of §25 and literally gives instructions about what to make of it. In that interview, employee no. 917229047 recounts a dream about writing "a totally real, true-to-life play" (TPK 106, §14):

> The idea's that a wiggler, a rote examiner, is sitting poring over 1040s and attachments and cross-filed W-2s and 1099s and like that. The setting is very bare and minimalistic — there's nothing to look at except this wiggler, who doesn't move except for every so often turning a page or making a note on his pad. (TPK 106, §14)

The employee further imagines that this radically realistic play will make the audience "bored and restless", so that they "finally […] start leaving, first just a few and then the whole audience, whispering to each other how boring

and terrible the play is" (TPK 106, §14). However, the question of whether the reader is supposed to become as bored by §25 as the imagined audience in §14 is forestalled by the final remark: "once the audience have all left, the real action of the play can start" (TPK 106, §14). The narrator thus raises questions about representation, the function and effect of art, and the role of the real-world audience. The fictional world can have an impact on the real world as soon as the audience stops merely being spectators consuming art, as soon as fiction is understood as a kind of reality and the barriers between fiction and life start to vanish. As if to prevent the reader from missing the message that art is not just for pleasure but ideally has effects on real-world people, a character in §19 explicitly observes: "'Sometimes what's important is dull. Sometimes it's work. Sometimes the important things aren't works of art for your entertainment'" (TPK 138, §19). The continuous turning of pages in §25 epitomises Wallace's "aesthetics of boredom" (see Clare 2012), which seems to convey the realism of the quotidian, including experiences of ongoing, never-ending work at one's desk or in one's search for meaning. Accordingly, in the "Notes and Asides" section, Wallace declares as the "Central Deal" of his novel "Realism, monotony. Plot a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens" (TPK 546, "Notes and Asides").

3. Author–reader collaboration through material stimuli in §25

The ostensive stimuli set by the author address not only the rational mind of readers, but also their sensory experience. As mentioned already, §25, and only §25, is printed in two columns and thus draws attention to its own physical appearance. This visual ostensive stimulus merges readers' real-world experience with their fictional involvement and again draws them into that active author-reader collaboration which seems to be key for Wallace (McCaffery 1993: 138). The layout gives rise to multiple, perhaps contradictory expectations: it may spark interest by its unusualness in a book of fiction, but it also reminds us of the often off-puttingly dry and possibly even boring nature of text types which are typically printed in columns such as terms and conditions, if we remain within the context of the IRS, the explanatory section of a tax form. Columns are generally associated with texts about the factual, not the fictional world. The practice of recurrently disrupting the fictional setting in other chapters by verbal means such as footnotes and "author here" (TPK 66, §9, and 256, §24) comments has here been translated into form. These

ruptures again serve as ostensive stimuli to keep readers aware of their real-world situation; the dialogue between text and reader remains active in the reader's mind and steadily renews assumptions of relevance.

When Wallace's thick book lies open at §25 and one views it from a distance, it recalls another thick book often printed in two columns: The Bible. This association might prime readers towards another sense of what is relevant in factual or fictive discourses: not only what is important and real in the objective sense of general terms, tax declarations and other two-columned official texts, but also what is important and real in the subjective sense of human experiences with the self, the other and the transcendent. Thus, the simple but skilful ostensive stimulus of a two-columned layout raises several expectations which, in the context of the entire book, are equally justifiable and may encourage readers to play with multiplicity and to practice dealing with incoherence in their search for relevance.

Chapter §25 provokes multiple effects, some of which drive the reader-text dialogue forward while others arrest it. The shorter lines of the printed text allow for reduced eye movements and thus increased reading speed. Despite the former signals of relevance by authorial instruction and the unusual layout, speed increases the danger of superficially skimming the text and, possibly, of skipping altogether the irrelevant-seeming reiterations of "turns a page […] turns a page […] turns a page" (TPK §25). In a radical realistic manner, readers are likely to imitate exactly what the wigglers are supposed to do: they have to skim the tax declarations for signals of promising returns (because the IRS is being restructured from a national service into a neoliberal profit–generating institution). The work of the wigglers and the activity of reading seem to fuse; what happens in the fictional world is likely to be performed by the real-world reader, and thus both worlds are able to influence each other. Once such parallels between fictional characters and real-world readers have been noticed, one starts recognising more and more similarities. The wigglers turning pages in §25 seem to mimic the reader's own page turning. This experience has repercussions on the interpretation of both the wigglers' work and the reading process itself. Except for so-called page-turners, skimming is not the conventional way of approaching literature, because sometimes "the important things aren't works of art for your entertainment" (TPK 138, §19). If readers only skim such texts, they will not detect the hidden gems and be rewarded with the feeling of pleasure that a positive cognitive effect provokes. Rather, they will most likely feel that they have wasted their time. Transferring back from the readers' perspective, it may become ar-

guable whether merely skimming forms for promising returns is a justifiable approach to the wigglers' work. On the one hand, this may explain the recurrent theme of boredom at work in the novel — the wigglers feel that they are wasting their time. On the other hand, should tax declarations not be checked carefully for their general soundness or faultiness, so that each citizen contributes the right share to the nation's budget? Would such an approach not make more sense and give the wigglers' work more meaning? The perception is that neoliberal ideas of efficiency, here exemplified by skimming, lead to feelings of dissatisfaction. Through a dialogic transfer between the readers' and the characters' worlds, this becomes an implicit critique of the socio-economic transformations discussed on the novel's plot level.

4. Author–reader collaboration through narrative stimuli in §25

However, sensory perception is not only evoked through the physical book and its layout but, naturally, also through the use of language. The peculiar use of the present tense creates what in a comparable narrative context has been described as a "cinematographic flavour" (Senn 1990: 252). It aligns characters and readers in time and place. While the room's features are stated in tenseless phrases as if they were eternal givens, impossible to change, e.g., "Rotes Group Room 2 hushed and brightly lit, half a football field in length" (TPK 310, §25) or "Ambient room temperature 80° F" (TPK 311, §25), the present tense in "turns a page" transforms readers into observers of the scene. The scene includes a number of details which, even if only half-consciously noticed, will influence readerly perception; the "hushed", rather hot and probably sticky room conveys its own atmosphere. Wallace places the reader in the position of the observer and thus evokes a mimetic experience through his use of language.

If readers take their task of observing people at work seriously, the context may evoke a foreman ticking boxes in a form each time someone "turns a page", an association which fits the motto of the novel: "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed. Frank Bidart, 'Borges and I'." The present tense is then another means of potentially integrating readers into the novel's storyline and the structure of the bureaucratic system depicted. The potential reciprocal effects between text world and readerly world ideally goad readers toward emulating the wigglers' stamina,

so that they keep playing the active, collaborating role Wallace imagines (McCaffery 1993: 138).

The isomorphic page–turning by both the observed IRS employees and the novel's readers raises further questions about relevance, e.g., what is the relevance of the observable? The essential aspect of reading a novel is obviously not the visible act of page–turning; the essential aspect is what happens in the unseen dialogue between the page and the mind, the implied author and the reader. Likewise, one can question whether page–turning at work can be treated as an activity worthy of observation. Page–turning may indicate a continuing process, but whether the work is done with care or negligence, with or without expertise, whether it is useful at all, escapes observation. In the context of the implied author's critique of neoliberalism, readers are invited to assume a critical stance towards forms of evaluating work efficiency based merely on measurable criteria. Such measurements tend to be reductive, as real things are often more complex than their superficial mechanics suggest. If activities, objects or people are reduced to their surface appearance and their invisible characteristics are dismissed, their linguistic representation threatens to become mere noise, e.g., the noise of 107 instances of "turns a page." This is the kind of noise that Wallace condemns elsewhere as essentially dulling and distracting from the important.

On the other hand, perceptions of the dullness and irrelevance of such noise can be a matter of perspective and choice, a possibility which readers are steadily invited to entertain by Wallace's "radical realism" (see LeClair 1996). Just as an observer's gaze will subconsciously absorb a lot of little details of the entire environment, so it is ultimately a matter of choice and attention whether one focuses on the foregrounded (monotonous) action of page–turning, or other matters like the "Baker-Miller pink" of the walls (TPK 312), the order of the desks, the different sound produced by turning two pages instead of one, or the signs of fatigue and concentration in the posture of the wigglers at their desks. As §25 transforms readers into observers, it makes them feel that they can (or should) deliberately choose to process different kinds of data according to their preference and expectation of relevance. Through this narrative technique, readers as observers are made aware that the imagined visual overview enables them to choose whether the issues presented as central or as merely incidental are worthy of their attention. They become able to define their own perspective.

5. The semantics of sound and silence

If one chooses to pay attention to the steady reiteration of the dominant phrase "turns a page", one may become aware of a further potentially instructive sensory dimension: rhythm and sound. As suggested earlier, the rhythmic feel could tie in with a foreman calmly ticking boxes in a form. However, this is only one of several possibilities: the rhythm may also recall a ticking clock, while the monotonous, apparently never-ending activity of page–turning seems to make time stand still. Thus, a tension between the subjectively felt and objectively given is expressed and experienced by wiggler and reader alike. It is also easy to imagine that the dominant phrase "turns a page" with its hard plosives 't' and 'p' creates a machine-like ostinato so that readers are even further pushed forward and succumb to speedy superficiality. Alternatively, a calm iteration of the phrase can be reminiscent of ritualistic incantations to induce states of trance. In fact, the novel supports all of these associations, and the interplay between the effects of sound, silent reading and semantics provokes a complex pragmatic effect: readers' cognitive environments are extended not only by the text's verbal propositions but by drawing attention to the full spectrum of language, including its sensory qualities. Thus, readers are guided to search multiple paths in their pursuit of the relevant among the apparently irrelevant.

For example, the association of "turns a page" with a machine-like, driving force aligns with descriptions of neoliberal transformations at the IRS, which reduce the rote examiners to "data processors" (TPK 340, §27) and which echo Wallace's "Big issue" of "human examiners or machines" (TPK 545, "Notes and Asides"). Paradoxically, in contrast to the rhythmic association with a hammering machine, the inhuman quality of the scene is semantically coded by the absence of noise. The "hushed" atmosphere in the room, where one perceives the "slightly different sound" of "turning two pages by mistake and then back again" (TPK 310, §25) evokes an inaudible force. The setting in "Rotes Group room 2" (TPK 310, §25) does not suggest pleasant calm. Nor does the description of the 144 wigglers "plus administration and support" (TPK 311, §25) who have to sit silently in a large hot room, tied to desks that are orderly arranged according to a bureaucratic rationale, evoke an agreeable workplace. Like manipulative corporate rhetoric, the quietness of the room, and thus Wallace's semantic level of language, demonstrates a widespread euphemistic (ab)use of language. Whether or not the driving hammer is literally audible, whether or not one works in a loud factory or a quiet open-floor office, the

force of machine logic is there, demanding that one never tire but repeat the same thing over and over again.

While the silent reading of §25 feels like an exercise in coping with the dullness of steady repetition, the force of the dominant ostinato becomes especially effective and thus meaningful when the text is read out loud. Semantics alone may prove reductive. Therefore, readers might sense an implicit call to look beyond the typical (silent) way of approaching a text, and instead to draw on the full spectrum of linguistic expression. Readers are thus implicitly enjoined to use all their sensory and cognitive powers in order to appraise the entire picture critically. Searching for the relevant also in the unusual, the hidden, the unsaid, might safeguard them against manipulation. Again, we can observe the effects of Wallace's radical realism that connects the real world with the text world, and vice versa, and thus stimulates readers to develop rather than shirk the necessary processing effort required by the fact that "sometimes what's important is dull, sometimes it's work" (TPK 138, §19).

Nevertheless, the conventional is also worth heeding as it structures perceptions and makes cognition and communication possible in the first place. When (unconventionally) the text is performed orally, the ostinato of "turns the page" tends to drown out any additional and deviating information scattered across the text, such as descriptions of the room ("One Chalk per row, four rows per column, six columns", TPK 312, §25), of the wigglers' fatigue ("A yawn proceeds across one Chalk's row by unconscious influence", TKP 310, §25) and of signs of a high degree of concentration ("Boris Kratz bobs with a slight Hassidic motion as he crosschecks a page with a column of figures", TPK 311, §25), and, of course, the "lyricisms" (see Warren 2012) like "Devils are really angels" (TPK 312, §25). Conventional silent reading, in contrast, tends to foreground these undercurrents of "skeletal narratives" (see Hayes-Brady 2016), so typical of Wallace's work. These "skeletal narratives" tend to counteract the speed-reading impulse, as they require readers to embed this scattered information in their accessible mental representations, which takes time. Thanks to their novelty, these deviations from the dominant schema signal a greater presumption of relevance. However, formally, they are presented like asides which usually denote less relevant information. The confusion of what is supposed to be the main message vs. some negligible deviation through Wallace's technique of "skeletal narrative" again serves as an exercise in critical reading: is the information which is foregrounded really the important part? The "skeletal narratives" thus encourage readers to question ostensibly disinterested communicative conventions. As Hayes-Brady observes,

Wallace thus "bring[s] the reader in as detective […] so that again they 'put in [their] share of the linguistic work,' just as Wallace intended" (ibid.: 138).

While the ostinato of "turns a page" may recall machine logic, the 'skeletal narratives' recall the human: for instance, when "Meredith Rand does something to a cuticle (TPK 310, §25), "Howard Cardwell shifts slightly in his chair" (TPK 311, §25) and "Sandra Pounder […] swings her head in a neck-stretching arc and leans forward again to examine a page" (TPK 312, §25). The bored focus on a body part, and the shifting, stretching, yawning etc. communicate the employees' feelings at work. Readers are likely not to read this information as an objective datum, but rather infer the causes of the movements and understand their meaning from their own bodily experience (helped by human mirror neurons). In phenomenological terms, while the observation of the wigglers' work is an *object* of perception, noticing merely superficial aspects, their individual spontaneous movements are symptoms of the human *essence* which can thereby be grasped. Such universal human reactions to, for instance, fatigue and boredom have the potential to unite readers with the characters as human beings, constituting another instance of a blurred boundary between the fictional and the real, so that "the real action […] can start" (TPK 106, §14).

Still, the sheer number of iterations of the machine-like "turns a page" vs. the occasional attention to the characters turning pages implies the minor role of the individual in a neoliberal economic system. As mentioned earlier, names are listed as mere non-contextualizable data and thus appear irrelevant. As if to prove the irrelevance of such pseudo-personalisations — the attentiveness to names without real interest in the respective human being — other chapters familiarise readers at length with characters whose names are not revealed (or only in a footnote, an aside). The extended context is key to relevance in Sperber/Wilson's theory, not just the linguistic code. Wallace's use or avoidance of names seems to convey a very similar message. The irrelevant listing of names, instead, points out another mechanism by which basic human conceptions of relevance can be abused: in a tradition of *nomen est omen*, the pseudo-attentiveness of caring for names can easily be mistaken as "optimal relevance" (see Sperber/Wilson 2007) while, in fact, irrelevant names hide the *really* relevant: the persons behind them.

6. To conclude — The reward for seeking relevance

Regardless of which association one favours, what will render both the work of the wigglers on the plot level and the reading of §25 in the real world (and of Wallace in general) worthwhile is careful concentration. Utmost attention in search of the important among or in the dull is explicitly celebrated as modern heroism in §22. This "hero" must use "care and scrupulosity about each detail" as a weapon to fight "repetition, tedium, monotony," which are to be "fear[ed] … [f]or they are real" (TPK 231, §22). §25 is the attempt to represent this quiet, heroic endeavour which escapes public applause: "Tracing one's jaw's outline with a ring finger" (TPK 311, §25), "soundlessly moving" lips (TPK 312, §25) and other absent-minded actions recall states of concentration, which revive readers' own experiences by the mimetic nature of representation. The reward for this heroism on the plot level begins to be explored in the following §26, where "concentrated boredom" (TPK 314, § 26) results in bliss and transcendence. On the level of the real world, Wallace explicitly envisages an attentive reader experiencing a "second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious" (TPK 546, "Notes and Asides"). Thanks to Wallace's radical realism, the text-world promise turns into a real-world ostensive stimulus for making the effort and reading on.

The entire novel, and §25 in particular, is an exercise in utmost concentration in order to reach the pleasurable state of discerning the relevant despite the strong cognitive effort required: the novelistic data need to be kept alive in the memory until they can connect to a meaningful context. However, the monotony of "turns a page […] turns a page […] turns a page" (TPK §25) — especially when more than four or five instances are lined up in a row without deviance — also provides relief from that concentrated work. It recalls trance — inducing incantations and thus prepares one — not in an intellectual, but a sensory way — for the wiggler's transcendent experiences to come.

To conclude, §25 strengthens, questions, rectifies and foreshadows the novel's more specific semantic content and concisely epitomises Wallace's "broad arc" and "central deal" of "Paying attention, boredom, ADD, Machines vs. people at performing mindless jobs" (TPK 545, "Notes and Asides"). Despite its minimalism, the reiterated short phrase "turns a page" in conjunction with its context and immediate co-text of the "skeletal narratives", is able to serve multiple narrative functions on the formal, semantic and pragmatic levels of language. Its mechanical recurrence and peculiar syntax turn into a sensory experience which not only imitates the multiple effects and affects that are

evoked but also calls for active persistence in the human search for relevance despite discouraging settings. Wallace's mimetic representation transposes the verbally represented into readerly experience so that the author does not just narrate but also demonstrates the complexity of the human condition. The text's power then consists, in part, in making readers question their status as mere *spectators*, or *consumers* (of art, among many other things), and in reassuring them that "real action" can, should and will indeed "start" (TPK 106, §14).

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