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The Book as a “Thinking Machine”: Data Processing  
and the Mechanics of Reading in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Information Novel

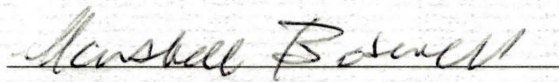
Margaret A. McGowan

Department of English  
Rhodes College  
Memphis, Tennessee

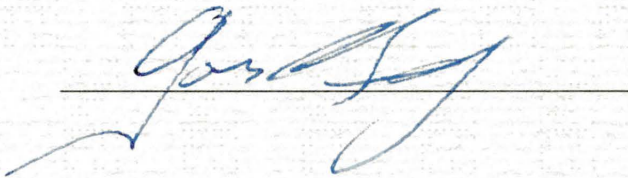
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This Honors paper by Margaret Ann McGowan has been read and approved for Honors in the Department of English.

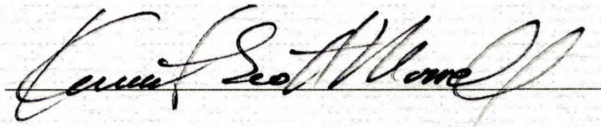
Dr. Marshall Boswell  
Project Advisor

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marshall Boswell" written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Gordon Bigelow  
Second Reader

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gordon Bigelow" written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Kenny Morrell  
Extra-Departmental Reader

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kenny Morrell" written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Marshall Boswell  
Department Chair

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marshall Boswell" written over a horizontal line.

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## ABSTRACT

The Book as a “Thinking Machine”: Data Processing and the Mechanics  
of Reading in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century “Information Novel”

by Margaret Ann McGowan

This project builds on previous theories of the “encyclopedic novel” in order to develop the concept of the 21<sup>st</sup> century “information novel.” Like their encyclopedic predecessors, most notably Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the two information novels examined here—David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King* and Robert Bolaño’s *2666*—often employ multiple and incompatible narratives or logical systems, suffused with excessive detail. These novels invite readers to “process” the text’s data and to construct a “message” from its unresolved narrative. In the case of both *The Pale King* and *2666*, this message is apparently political. Both Wallace and Bolaño use excessive information and chaotic systems to expose the political and ethical implications of literary engagement. In this regard, these texts ask readers to consider the practical value—beyond the entertainment value—of reading literary texts. The information novel, in its relentless “data-dumps,” often risks boring its readers; this consideration of boredom again forces readers to evaluate the value of literary engagement as well as the value of the literary text itself. By directing attention towards the political and ethical dimensions of reading and away from the personal, affective, or even aesthetic dimensions of reading, the information novel challenges the notion of the literary “masterpiece,” and thereby negotiates a new relationship between reader, book, and reality.

### **Introduction: The “Big, Ambitious Novel”**

The works of David Foster Wallace and Roberto Bolaño share a quality which, at first glance, might seem only incidental—their massive size. Both fit the bill for what James Wood calls the “big, ambitious novel” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (178). In the tradition of Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, these novels are sprawling and almost aggressively long, filled with esoteric information and excessive detail. The girth of the two novels I focus on here—Wallace’s *The Pale King* and Bolaño’s *2666*—also announces their ambitious literary project. Critics following Edward Mendelson have referred to such texts as “encyclopedic,” invoking the aspiration towards complete and systematic knowledge. As fruitful as discussions of the encyclopedic novel have been, the term is perhaps not appropriate for the “big novels” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century thus far. The texts I deal with here engage new systems of information and communication that have changed not only the status of the book in relation to knowledge, but the ways in which readers approach the book. These shifting dimensions of the encyclopedic genre seem to call for a new name. Though critics such as Franco Moretti have already offered alternatives, I will suggest the “information novel” as a term descriptive of the genre’s stylistic (perhaps even physical) tendencies, its preoccupation with data and data-sorting, and its situation in an internet-driven age of information overload. I will not, as others have, attempt to provide a kind of program for a genre, nor do I presume that my account constitutes the definition of a genre. Such questions are beyond my intentions, and perhaps contrary to the project the information novel presents. Rather, I intend to demonstrate how the information novel redeploys the stylistic techniques of the encyclopedic to renegotiate the limits of literary engagement.

The information novel builds on the encyclopedic genre formulated by Mendelson and exemplified by Pynchon, as well as on subsequent iterations of this genre. Tom LeClair, John Barth, and Franco Moretti offer other terms to describe the “big, ambitious” novel—namely, the systems novel, the maximalist novel, and the modern epic. For Bolaño, the 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin American “total novel” provides yet another vision of the encyclopedic text, one that will extend the scope of the information novel to encompass global politics. The information novel mirrors strategies employed by all of these generic types, such as their tendency toward excess, accumulation, and non-linearity, but it redirects these strategies in order to address different questions. Encyclopedic novels attempt to reconcile a seemingly disorderly reality with an ordering impulse—to find order where none seems to exist. The information novel, already resigned to the futility of the totalizing or encyclopedic project, instead focuses on the literary engagement the text requires. By calling attention to the limits—both material and semantic—of information, these novels also expose the limits of literary engagement itself, limits which can bear political and ethical implications. The information novel—indeed every novel—can contain only so much data. Whatever orderly narrative it supplies fails to account for and arrange all the disorderly data that falls beyond its narrative scope. Already aware of the limitations of its form, then, the information novel attempts to locate the value of the “big, ambitious novel” outside the encyclopedic project of ordered information and systematic knowledge.

### ***Gravity's Rainbow* and the Encyclopedic Tradition**



The contemporary encyclopedic genre owes its original formalization to Edward Mendelson and his reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Mendelson describes a genre that contains vast amounts of information in order “to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture” (Mendelson 30). His encyclopedic novel acts as a kind of catalogue, and includes, by Mendelson’s standards, a history of language, complete accounts of a technology or science (such as ballistics in the case of *Gravity's Rainbow*), a complete account of an art form outside of fiction (such as film), and a sampling of several literary genres. By collecting these diverse elements, the encyclopedic narrative aspires to a kind of totality; it accumulates and identifies disparate objects as it “merges them in the common texture of a single book” (Mendelson 32). This concept of the encyclopedia as a kind of information storehouse reflects a longstanding tradition identified by Richard Yeo: “In the Western tradition, there has been a conviction that it is possible, and worthwhile, to collate knowledge that is representative of some larger whole. The ideal imagined here is a work that summarizes and organizes the knowledge contained in many books” (2). Mendelson imagines the encyclopedic novel as a consolidation of a nation’s literary history, a summary of the books preceding it and a catalyst for the books succeeding it—a “fulcrum, often, between periods that later readers consider national pre-history and national history” (30). Such an ambitious encyclopedic project has, however, not been undertaken since the Renaissance, when compilers ceased to “seek to cover all knowledge, nor did they provide an exhaustive treatment of any subjects,” but rather selected the most pertinent information from major branches of knowledge (Yeo 6-7). If Mendelson’s definition seems a bit ambitious, it may also be a bit outdated: encyclopedias, much less novels, haven’t attempted complete accounts of

anything in quite some time. Rather, encyclopedia editors have become increasingly more selective, abandoning the medieval attempt “to summarize and record the best of knowledge from what was conceived of as a stable, divinely sanctioned body of knowledge” for the more modest attempt to “take snapshots of a progressive mess of information produced by increasingly specialized disciplines” (Yeo 78). Encyclopedism does not pretend to counteract information overload, but rather to develop strategies of selection and organization.

Even when encyclopedias fail to encompass a full body of knowledge, they attempt to construct a system that both organizes existing information and allows for additions of new information. The first edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, rather than include a comprehensive map of knowledge, arranges “the main sciences in separate treatises, which it called ‘systems,’” a strategy that avoids the presumption of complete knowledge while attempting to retain a level of coherence (Yeo 177). In the preface to the *Britannica*’s second edition, the editors note how “abortive and impotent the attempts of some authors have proved who by references have tried to direct us how we may form a full system from independent topics” (vi). Rather, the editors posit smaller coherent systems “at the level of increasingly autonomous disciplines,” between which connections and distinctions could be made (Yeo 192). The *Britannica* models what its preface calls “systematic” reading, a process of selection and organization within and among discrete systems or disciplines (iv). This model of systematic reading better characterizes encyclopedic novels such as *Gravity’s Rainbow*, even as the encyclopedic and especially the information novel revises the notion of the systematic reader. To make any sense of the vast amount of information presented in the encyclopedic novel, the

reader must develop some method of selecting, connecting, and differentiating important data. Without such a systematic approach, the text “should rather be called a book of shreds and patches” (iv). Unlike the encyclopedia, which provides at least a semblance of order in its alphabetization and a semblance of systematization in its discrete entries, the encyclopedic novel requires the reader to impose an order. It provides raw data that the reader must arrange to make into something coherent; in fact, this systematic process of meaning-making may take precedence over the content of the data itself. As Prentice says to Roger Mexico, “It’s the *system* that matters. How the data arrange themselves inside it” (Pynchon 638). The *Britannica*’s preface could describe the reading process I have in mind: “It is only by thinking in method, by reducing our ideas to a proper and natural order, by observing what they profess in common and what are their relations or differences, that our reasoning faculties are capable of making any progress at all” (iv). In encountering the encyclopedic novel, the reader does not consult a reference text with a map of knowledge already in tact, but rather generates ordered systems to cope with an excess of information.

In determining the saliency of the encyclopedic genre, then, the distinction between “encyclopedism and universalism” can not be, as Ronald Swigger seems to hope, inconsequential (353). A universalizing or totalizing scheme that, as Swigger says, “may plunge straight ahead” offers a much different kind of engagement than the encyclopedic scheme “of ordering and classification,” which retains the potential of reorganization and admits the possibility of omission (353). Mendelson grants that the encyclopedic novel curbs the totalizing impulse by “identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge” (30). It does

not “plunge straight ahead,” but proceeds self-critically, often challenging the assumptions and calling attention to the limits of its own form. Throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*, several possible “plots” vie for legitimacy; at times, a number of different organizations seem to monitor Slothrop, at others everything seems directed by the mysterious “Them,” and at still other times nothing seems connected at all. Like an “amply coded room,” the text generates a tension between “two orders of being, looking identical,” but with incompatible implications—universal order, or universal chaos (Pynchon 202-3). Molly Hite suggests that this layered coding challenges not only notions of order and disorder, but notions of the narrative: “in raising the order/chaos antithesis, Pynchon encourages a habit of thinking that cannot tolerate the instability and complexity of multiple patterns of interrelation. All his books insist that this habit of thinking is analogous to conventional expectations of narrative coherence” (17). If Pynchon tries his readers’ patience, he does so only to expose their expectations of coherence and resolution. Pynchon often satirizes aggrandized images of the text that presume an objective transcendence and a removal from social and cultural systems; the Hereros “assumed—natürlich!—that this holy Text had to be the Rocket” (Pynchon 520). Mendelson’s archetypal encyclopedic novelist cautions that “all the book’s efforts at truth-telling, all its thrusts at the increase of freedom through the revelation of necessity, are infected by the inevitable fact that the book itself must use a language that is, unavoidably, a system shaped by the very powers and order it hopes to reveal” (Mendelson 35). The Rocket Text is perhaps as much the war’s source as its answer: “this War was never political at all [...] secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of

technology”<sup>1</sup> (Pynchon 521). For Mendelson, this self-critical gesture suffices to prevent the encyclopedic novel from falling into its own totalizing trap. Indeed, for Molly Hite, “the fact that the encyclopedic novel aspires to the condition of such a [totalizing] system is consequently to the point. Pynchon exploits the assumptions of his chosen genre only to subvert them” (99). The juxtaposition of the Rocket Text with Pynchon’s own novel emphasizes this disparity between the universalizing goal and the encyclopedic project.

By introducing contradictory narratives into the supposedly “common texture” of the book, encyclopedic and information novels actually resist the kind of systematic reading that the *Britannica* models. As often as Pynchon invokes “the system,” *Gravity’s Rainbow* in fact has no system and can only frustrate the systematic reader in search of one. No matter how the reader arranges the novel’s information, it does not yield a comprehensive and cohesive system, but suggests several simultaneous though inconsistent systems. To the most diligently systematic reader, *Gravity’s Rainbow* might actually seem “a book of shreds and patches.” Nor can the reader rely on conventions of narrative coherence and resolution: the encyclopedic novel may not provide even a fictional system of cause and effect. The encyclopedic and especially the information novel address not a systematic reader, but a reader willing to participate in an occasionally fruitless task of data-processing. This process reader, like the systematic reader, sorts through information and selects the most salient data points, but not in order to either perceive or construct a system. Rather, the process reader engages the novel’s

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<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is still not an answer. As the passage continues, “Yes but Technology only responds...” so, perhaps, does the text only respond (521). To say that the text is infected by the system it exposes does not simply invert this dynamic. The text is not exempt from its surrounding social and cultural structures because it responds to these structures as they manifest themselves in the writer (and the writer’s context) and the reader (and the reader’s context).

variability and understands each interpretive reading as incomplete and mutable. The continual processing and reprocessing of information, rather than the correlation of this information within a system, occupies the process reader, who does not attempt to reassemble the book “of shreds and patches,” but alternately reassembles and disassembles it, never allowing these shreds and patches to cohere in a single systematic interpretation.

The encyclopedic project is not so much a totalizing act as an exercise in sorting and arranging information. By collecting disparate elements and encouraging the reader to draw connections between them, the encyclopedia provides a model of the cognitive process. Hillary Clark, in her essay “Encyclopedic Discourse,” describes this process as a matter of sifting and arranging data:

Due to spatial and temporal limitations, and due to the limitations of human comprehension and memory, knowledge must be organized if it is to be stored and retrieved. The *ordering* of knowledge is as much at the center of the encyclopedic enterprise as is the discovery or retrieval of knowledge. If knowledge is merely heaped up, it cannot be communicated, cannot be used. This mass of data, then, like noise in information theory, is the ground against which complex orders and information become perceptible. (99)

“Due to the spatial and temporal limitations” of the encyclopedia itself (the *Britannica*’s first edition was, after all, only three volumes), this process of accumulating and ordering involves omitting and prioritizing. In the preface to the *Britannica*’s first edition, the editors acknowledge these limitations and propose a method to account for them; from “the best books,” they “extracted the useful parts, and rejected whatever appeared trifling or less interesting” (v). Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as vaster stores of information have become available (producing yet more data for readers to select and order), information overload has become an even more pressing problem requiring more elaborate systems of

data storage and retrieval. This “massive expansion of information,” visible in the extensive cross-references of early encyclopedias and the even more extensive hyperlinks of the internet, prohibits any attempts at containment and comprehension. Perhaps more so than other social conditions, the development of information and communication technologies and the “potentially infinite pool of information within reality” has distinguished the post-Pynchonian encyclopedic genre from its older predecessors (van Ewijk 215). For Petrus van Ewijk, in “Encyclopedia, Network, Database, Hypertext,” “the relevance of the encyclopedic narrative for modern genre criticism can be located in the fact that it tries to reconcile the human urge to totalize and control with the awareness that reality has become too intricate to encompass” (220). In light of the futility of this reconciliation, the information novel forgoes the system-building of the encyclopedic<sup>2</sup> and struggles (perhaps inconclusively) to justify the “big, ambitious novel” without these systems.

In this regard, the information novel parallels the shift in the concept of the book that Jacques Derrida describes in his 1967 *Of Grammatology*. In this text, Derrida dismantles the traditional notion of the book, which represents presence and the aggrandizement of the signified at the cost of the effacement of the signifier. The book comprehends or circumscribes the text<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Neither Wallace nor Bolaño, for instance, humor the reader’s inner conspiracy theorist quite like Pynchon does. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas articulates six possible conspiracies. Wallace and Bolaño’s characters, when confronted with seemingly inexplicable events and unsolvable problems, seem much more inclined to throw up their hands.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida says writing, here, not text, though he does not refer to writing in any colloquial sense. He particularly wants to make the distinction between this “Writing” and writing as the secondary representation of spoken language, and an insufficient and “dangerous” representation at that. Derrida’s writing functions according to the trace, the absence of

within a nature or a natural law, created or not, but first thought within an eternal presence. Comprehended, therefore, within a totality, and enveloped in a volume or a book. The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy. (*OG* 18)

The “end of the book” follows from the reversal of the relationship between the signifier and the signified (*OG* 86). This project begins, unremarked by Mendelson, even in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, with its dissemination of textuality across all varieties of technology, its extensive references to pop culture, and its refusal of coherence and resolution. Tyrone Slothrop, as he begins “to thin, to scatter,” suggests this decentering and diffusion of the book (Pynchon 509). Concepts of the encyclopedic novel allow for temporary stylistic disruptions, but these disruptions fail to dismantle the book itself. Even as the encyclopedic novel exposes the chaos often underlying ordered social systems, it still assumes a rigid order in its own autonomy. As technology advances, the “totality” of the book becomes less tenable: as Derrida says, though “this inadequation [between the book and its referent] is not *modern*,” through digital and virtual texts “it is exposed today better than ever before” (*OG* 87). The information novel confronts this acceleration of the dissolution of the book, even as it remains a book. This duality produces an unsettling

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presence or the non-originary origin. To do full justice to this concept here would require a wealth of hyperlinks and digressions, so I will resort to brief quotation: “Spacing (notice that this word speaks the articulation of space and time, the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space) is always the unperceived, the nonpresent, and the nonconscious....Arche-writing as spacing cannot occur as such within the phenomenological experience of a presence....Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject...And the original absence of the subject of writing is also the absence of the thing or the referent” (*OG* 68-9).



tension within the information novel between its simultaneous rejection and acceptance of its own form. This tension does not, however, invalidate the novel's project; it is possible, as Derrida says, to promote the end of the traditional book "even if, even today, it is within the form of a book that new writings—literary or theoretical—allow themselves to be, for better or for worse, encased" (*OG* 86). In the form of a book, then, the information novel replicates the processes of dissolution that occur elsewhere, outside and in contestation with the book.

Wikipedia perhaps represents one such effect of the development of technology on the traditional notion of the book. As an open-source, community generated encyclopedia, Wikipedia is radically decentered; unlike the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, it has no editorial board, no national affiliation, and in fact no academic agenda. Wikipedia utilizes "wiki" software, a program that the *Britannica* describes as "a machine that would allow users to create virtual 'card stacks' of information with a host of connections, or links, among the various cards" ("Wiki"). The card stack image demonstrates the dynamism of Wikipedia's structure; like the *Britannica*, it offers discrete, coherent articles, but these articles can intersect in a number of ways—they can be shuffled and reshuffled. Perhaps more so than traditional encyclopedias like the *Britannica*, Wikipedia requires process readers to trace connections only suggested by links and to construct orders only suggested by fragments. While Wikipedia's creators recommend that contributors limit articles to a "readable" length, "each Wikipedia article is in a process of evolution and is likely to continue growing," and within longer articles, users are more likely to sort undesirable from desirable information (Wikipedia). David Letzler describes this selective process as a response to "the site's wide-net approach to

gathering and presenting information on a subject,” an approach which often yields “to the introduction of material that almost no one cares about, which often threatens to drown out the more valuable data” (308). This process of selecting and ordering resembles the reading process that van Ewijk finds characteristic of the modern encyclopedic narrative, which similarly combines these contrary impulses towards totalization and open-endedness, order and disorder. In the process of reading such a narrative (or information database), the “realization that both elements are in the encyclopedic text is fully dependent on the reader. Sooner or later he or she will experience the relativism of the attempt to combine all the fragments of the text into a significant whole” (van Ewijk 212). By “relativism,” van Ewijk does not mean that the encyclopedic text supports any interpretation a reader might impose, nor does he mean to discredit systematic reading or knowledge. Rather, this inability to synthesize the text into a “significant whole” indicates that the encyclopedic novel often includes contradictory readings and incommensurable facts. It is heteroglossic in the most expansive sense by including not only an array of different voices but an array of different logical systems and patterns. The text is relative in the sense that it utilizes a number of different codes and systems and resists both reductive and totalizing readings. When encyclopedic texts, as Hite says of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “resist efforts to subordinate some parts to others in the interest of a comprehensible coherence”—when they resist providing the reader a ready-made system—the reader must engage in this process of data-sorting (26).

### **Other Modes of the Encyclopedic: The Systems, Maximalist, and Modern Epic Novels**

Tom LeClair's concept of the "systems novel," though not identical to the encyclopedic as understood by Mendelson, Clark, or van Ewijk, attempts to balance totalizing and destabilizing functions of knowledge and information. In his work on Don DeLillo, LeClair defines the systems novel as a complexly ordered and self-organizing text that tends towards the creation of wholes. Like the encyclopedic novel, the systems novel gathers and arranges information while recognizing the limitations of such a process. But while Mendelson relates the encyclopedic project to the likes of Dante and Cervantes, the systems novel seems specific to contemporary culture. LeClair offers the systems novel as a response to postmodernism and, in some regards, a return to the modernist ideal of the masterpiece. In their systematic approach towards information, these texts provide a "contemporary model for hypothetical formulations of wholes, the finding and creating of homologies and formal equivalents in dense bodies of data" (*IL* 11). If the systems novel acknowledges the fragmentation and dispersion of contemporary knowledge, it still aims towards a kind of textual cohesion; it attempts to "continue the modernist tradition of synthetic masterpieces" while complicating the synthetic masterpiece by "synthesizing ranging abstractions, detailed attention to the world, and a looping self-examination of both theoretical frames and empirical insights" (*IL* 11). Much like the *Britannica* and its systematic reader, the systems novel attempts to incorporate an overwhelming number of data points in one organizational scheme. While the text invites this systematic reading, its stylistic complexity often stalls the process: "viewed from a distance, the novels can be seen as metasystems, even as paradigms, consistent ways of apprehending contemporary life as a whole. But they also pursue innovative and often demanding stylistic strategies in order to imitate living systems" (*IL*

18). While the system novel does tend towards a whole, this whole is not self-evident, but perceived only through a process of reading as sorting and organizing.

Like LeClair's systems novel, John Barth's "maximalist novel" situates the text in a particular cultural moment. For Barth, the maximalist novel responds to the minimalist novels of the late twentieth-century. Contrary to the minimalist novel's impulse to "strip away the superfluous in order to reveal the necessary, the essential," the maximalist novel includes excessive detail in order to complicate notions of the necessary and essential (Barth 67). With its imposing size and ambitious scope, the maximalist novel also responds to late twentieth-century predictions of the "death of the novel." The novel's physicality serves as a "half-ironic monument" to the book, and insists on the form's growth rather than its diminishment (Barth 88). LeClair also considers this material element of size; in the course of accumulating information, systems novels come to "reflect the scale of their subjects and the open system" and "extend themselves to a massive scale, with quantities of pages and information deforming conventional expectations" (*IL* 17). Because these massive novels deform expectations, they require new approaches to reading. This is perhaps their definitive quality, particularly in a technological age with, as Barth fears, "an ever-dwindling readerly attention span" (71). In size and complexity, the maximalist novel presents a unique reading challenge, one that demands a methodical, if self-critical, approach. If in fact "apocalypticism [is] intimately bound up with minimalist aesthetics," the maximalist aesthetic might offer hope for the novel's future; as "the kind of novel to which we bring, or in which we learn, a different way of reading, a different sense of attention and mode of economy," the maximalist novel invigorates contemporary literary culture (Barth 89, 87). By its very

“unreadability,” the maximalist (or encyclopedic) novel generates a process of reading suited for the contemporary information age (Clark 95).

Franco Moretti’s “modern epic” strikes nearer to the project of the information novel. The massive, detail-oriented and information-swelled epics “are not self-sufficient because they do not really work all that well,” because the tradition they evoke is no longer applicable, if indeed it ever has been applicable (Moretti *ME* 5). Moretti traces the lineage of the massive information novel to the Homeric epic, but while “the epic, from Homer on, normally functioned as a veritable encyclopedia of a society’s own a culture,” the “subdivided and specialized” contemporary field of knowledge “renders any such ambition anachronistic and almost unreal” (*ME* 37). For Moretti, however, the difficulty of reconciling order and disorder complicates the concept of the masterpiece as well. The “discrepancy between the totalizing will of the epic and the subdivided reality of the modern world” creates a nearly irresolvable tension within the novel’s form (Moretti *ME* 4). Perhaps due to this internal discrepancy, the modern epic “border[s] on the illegible,” as Massimo Fusillo says (52). Such a novel sets itself the impossible task of creating a synthetic whole from disparate fragments, of finding an all-encompassing system in an ever-expanding realm of information and experience. The failure of such a text, then, seems to Moretti only a testament to the encyclopedic scope of its project: the modern epics’ failure “is the sure sign that they live in history” (*ME* 4). To call the modern epic a failure is not to deny the possibility of systematic knowledge. The epic, much like the encyclopedia, grows through addition and accumulation; it piles episodes on episodes, information on information, in a process of “continuous growth” (Moretti *ME* 94). The text’s meaning, however, cannot be read from this series of additions. The epic is “more

than a sum, [it is] a system, where various parts interact among themselves” (*ME* 118). Again, the book does not model this system. The system grows continually, while the book cannot. The system’s parts intersect at multiple points, in ways a (legible) narrative can only gesture towards. The modern epic places the onus of understanding on the reader, though Moretti has a much different reader in mind than the *Britannica*’s systematic reader. The modern epic’s “ideal reader is no longer the individual, but an entire society,” a reader with an even greater capacity for sorting and ordering, for assimilating and understanding the polyphony of the epic, and for connecting the epic to a system beyond the individual (Moretti *ME* 222).

### **The Information Novel**

For my purposes, these formulations of the encyclopedic novel—or the systems or maximalist novel—serve as useful points of departure, but do not suffice to describe the information novel. Mendelson, LeClair, and Barth all propose ambitious concepts of the “book”—such as Mendelson’s national repository, LeClair’s post-postmodernist masterpiece, and Barth’s monument to the continuing life of the novel. While Moretti’s epics fail to attain the coherence of a masterpiece, they do not necessarily fail as carriers of information. The reader struggles to follow various narrative threads through what often seem like unrelated episodes, all the while keeping track of a host of characters. The encyclopedic novel also presents a number of facts that the reader may or may not be able to fit into a textual scheme. To account for these disorienting narrative and stylistic techniques, writers such as Clark and Katherine Hayles have applied concepts from information theory in studies of the encyclopedic genre. Information theory developed as

an outgrowth of chaos theory, a non-Newtonian physics that looks for recursive patterns in apparently unpredictable phenomenon, or a “structure” within chaos “as rigorous and compelling as order” (Hayles *CB* 158). Claude Shannon related chaos and information theory in *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, where he proposes that information increases with entropy. In thermodynamics, entropy refers to the inevitable loss of heat, and by extension organization within a system. In information theory, entropy refers to a “statistical measure of disorder” or unpredictability, and corresponds to the “probability distribution of the message elements” (*CB* 41, 52). As a message element becomes less probable, the message becomes less predictable, and entropy and information increase. But a productive application of information theory entails more than equating greater linguistic improbability with greater meaning. For Shannon and his colleague Warren Weaver, such an application would seem appropriately ludicrous; in Weaver’s introduction to Shannon’s text, he emphasizes that “information must not be confused with meaning” (8). A reader must decode the message from the transmitted information, and internal patterns or redundancies allow a reader to establish a decoding system. This system allows senders, or “encoders,” and receivers, or “decoders,” to rely on mutually understood patterns when composing and reading a message: “the way they encode a certain symbol of the message depends not only upon this one symbol, but also upon previous symbols of the message and the way they have been decoded” (Shannon 17). To successfully decode a message, then, a reader understands a text’s unpredictable or entropic elements in the context of its systematic or redundant elements. The challenge in reading a highly entropic text lies in distinguishing meaningless information—noise—from meaningful information.

Noise can enter a text at several levels, including the technical and the semantic. Technical errors relate to the method of transmission—such as printers' errors in a book or static on a television screen. Semantic errors relate to the indeterminacy of the text itself, and these errors are of primary interest to the information novel. According to Shannon and Weaver, semantic problems “are concerned with the identity, or satisfactorily close approximation, in the interpretation of meaning by the receiver, as compared with the intended meaning of the sender” (4). When the sender needs to communicate specific information, noise that interferes with the transmission and obscures the message is undesirable. Though “greater uncertainty, greater information go hand in hand,” they do not imply greater meaning, and Weaver warns against the sort of “semantic trap” that leads the “joker” to mistake more entropy and more noise for more meaning (19).

The recipient of a telephone call and the reader of a novel, however, have different expectations. In these instances, information theory applies in different ways and noise has a different value. Jurij Lotman proposes that in the process of reading a literary text, noise can become a meaningful element: “in receiving an artistic message whose text obliges him to work out a code for deciphering that message, the receiver constructs a model. In this way systems arise which will organize the fortuitous elements of a text and give them meaning” (25). In the case of the information novel, which sometimes overloads its reader with seemingly useless information, this meaning might even derive from the cognitive puzzles it offers and systematic solutions it invites. David Letzler refers to textual noise as “cruft,” or detail that is “excessive to no clear purpose” (308). By forcing the reader to sort through this cruft, texts can “test and pressure our



systems for ordering and retrieving data” (Letzler 313). Hayles finds a practical value in noise for the literary critic: “it is the consumers of [the] critical text who matter, and it is in their interest to see message noise increased, for then they are reassured that new and different books can be produced from the same canonized texts” (*CB* 192). Noise makes the information text, or any other literary text for that matter, worth re-reading—in a way that most phone conversations are not worth recording and revisiting.

The information novel, then, implies a reader willing to sort and arrange data. Its meaning resides not in a coherent agenda or cohesive narrative, but in a collection of data of varying, and sometimes dubious, value. The reader constructs one of many possible systems of meaning from this wealth of data, and upon re-reading the text may reshuffle the data to construct a new system of meaning. Because meaning resides not in the book itself but in its decoding, “the quantity of meaningful structural elements may increase in the passage from sender to receiver” (Lotman 25). If this quality affirms the semantic value of noise, it also seems to affirm the semantic value of the supplement, or “the logic that assures to this work or this concept sufficiently surprising resources so that the presumed subject of the sentence might always say, through using the ‘supplement,’ more, less, or something other than what he would mean” (Derrida *OG* 157-8). These information novels, like the encyclopedic and systems novels of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, exceed their textuality, but not by posturing as national monuments or totalizing masterpieces. They do not extend beyond the text towards a transcendental signified, or “transgress the text toward something other than it,” but generate a “message” by processing seemingly useless data (Derrida *OG* 158). They exceed the sum of their parts, but only if the process reader interconnects these parts in a dynamic web of information,

lending each data point value in the context of the whole. The information novel depends on the “signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*” through its engagement with the text, and not on a given system of knowledge (Derrida *OG* 158). In this failure to maintain the boundaries and the integrity of the text, the information novel relinquishes its literary autonomy. As Richard House says, “in presenting autonomy as a property of the act of reading rather than of the object read” these novels “address formalist organicism as a methodological event rather than an ontological property” (35). This is especially the case in unfinished or posthumous novels like *The Pale King* and *2666*, where the gaps and contradictions that invite reader participation are even more glaring than in “finished” works like *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The publisher’s appendix of incomplete and omitted scenes at the end of *The Pale King*, for example, makes the same gesture as Wallace’s footnotes concluding *Infinite Jest*, even if with less subtlety: the text is not “closed” and cannot stand complete on its own.

By relinquishing its literary autonomy, however, the information novel does not yield all of its authority to the reader. In fact, its less reader-friendly techniques—like exhaustive cataloging, esoteric language, and obscure references—insist on the authority of the novel. If I have so far seemed to fall in line with reader-response theory, this insistence on the novel’s authority marks a key point of contention. Though Wolfgang Iser, in *The Act of Reading*, similarly characterizes reading as a sorting process and argues that the text exists only in its actualization through reading, his process aims not at understanding the text itself, but at producing an emotional reaction within the reader. The text’s value seems to arise not from rigorous interpretation but from a passive reception of its affect. Information only has value in so far as the reader can “pick it up,”

and the text itself facilitates this transfer: “Any successful transfer [...] depends on the extent to which this text can activate the individual reader’s faculties of perceiving and processing. Although the text may well incorporate the social norms and values of its possible readers, its function is not merely to *present* such data, but, in fact, to use them in order to secure its uptake” (Iser 107). Far from facilitating its “uptake,” the information novel often obstructs its readers’ “faculties of perceiving and processing,” forcing its readers to engage in interpretation beyond their experience of literary affect. Bolaño’s novel particularly resists Iser’s theory of literary affect, as it forces its readers to approach the text intellectually by refusing to grant emotional access to its characters and their situations. Sometimes this lack of affect even threatens to bore its readers. In the novel’s “boring” passages, readers can no longer rely on affect, but must engage in interpretation to perceive the passage’s value.

Both Wallace and Bolaño will bore their readers to emphasize their political agendas, but this challenge to the reader’s authority also pries at one of reader-response theory’s lingering dilemmas: how to justify literary engagement. For Iser, only the act of reading itself can justify reading, and “it must be borne in mind that fictional texts constitute their own objects and do not copy something already in existence” (24). Fragmented and often contradictory, however, the information novel does not constitute its own object, but directs its readers to other bodies of information outside it—whether these bodies of information reside in experience, popular culture, science and technology, or other literary texts. They are not, as Moretti says of the modern epic, traditional masterpieces, and their value is neither self-evident nor inherent. And while these novels certainly do offer literary pleasure and satisfaction, their almost relentless hostility

suggests that pleasure alone cannot justify the act of reading. This question regarding the value of the “big, ambitious novel”—especially in light of the dissolution of the literary masterpiece and the contemporary onslaught of information—generates the information novel’s central point of tension, but it also formulates a larger question about the value of all literary engagement.

### David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* and the Politics of Data-Processing

David Foster Wallace seems conscious of the encyclopedic genre, a genre that critics only retroactively associated with Thomas Pynchon. Whether or not Wallace drew from Mendelson's definition, *Infinite Jest* fulfills many of his encyclopedic requirements: it includes accounts of optics, avant-garde film, and tennis, a sort of history of metro Boston slang and AA parlance, and even features the "giants" that Mendelson stipulates, in the form of overgrown and skull-less infants wandering the Northeastern wastelands. Stephen Burn, in his essay discussing the legacy of the encyclopedic novelist William Gaddis, notes *Infinite Jest*'s interest in the failure of "encyclopedic data storage" (AG 166). If, as Stephen Burns suggests, "the fundamental process of Wallace's book is to seek exhaustive accounts and to accumulate information," nevertheless "most of these efforts [...] prove empty and futile exercises" (AG 166). The futility of the impulse towards information gathering and organization, however, does not indicate the novel's failure, but rather contributes to the novel's critique of the encyclopedic project as fruitless, if not impossible. Although Wallace's work grows out of the encyclopedic, it also critiques this totalizing impulse towards information gathering. *Infinite Jest* certainly grapples with information theory—both in its opening scene and in its concluding endnotes—but Wallace's unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, foregrounds information, meaning, and their at times mutual exclusivity. One character defines entropy as "a measure of a certain type of information that there was no point in knowing"—information so disordered as to resist meaningful narrative patterns (PK 14). *The Pale King* might provide a reading guide to the information novel, as its fixation on

information overload and data organization repeats the reading process demanded by the information novel itself.

Weighing in at (only) 538 pages, *The Pale King* perhaps falls short of the encyclopedic benchmark; *Infinite Jest* exceeds it by another 500 pages, and densely-printed pages at that. Whatever *The Pale King* lacks in size<sup>4</sup>, however, it more than compensates for in its wealth of information. The novel delves so deeply into the intricacies of tax law that the uninitiated may find it difficult to distinguish factual elements from fictional. What the narrator refers to as “Servicespeak”—a “special jargon and code that seems overwhelming at first”—pervades the novel, and though Servicespeak “gets internalized so quickly and used so often that it becomes almost habitual” for IRS agents, for many readers it remains an obstacle to easy understanding (*PK* 71n3). The character named David Wallace, the self-proclaimed “real author, the living human holding the pencil,” occasionally interrupts the narrative with technical discussions of copyright or tax law, themselves peppered with often esoteric footnotes (*PK* 68). The narrator, however, is not unapologetic, admitting, “I know that’s a pretty involved and confusing data-dump to inflict on you” (*PK* 70n3). These “data-dumps” are intended to overwhelm, and often require extensive outside research for limited narrative pay-off. Wallace—perhaps both the “real author” and the *real* “real author”—provides information he knows most readers will gloss over. At the end of a footnote about the IRS’s internal structure, Wallace says “If that doesn’t make any sense at this point, please

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<sup>4</sup> Size, in the case of the information novel, seems to be metonymic for something more pertinent—the novel’s engagement with a large body of knowledge. Mendelson also notes that, because encyclopedic novels “are product of an era in which the world’s knowledge is vastly greater than any one person can encompass, they necessarily make extensive use of synechdoche” (30). The encyclopedia itself functions this way, using small entries to stand in for complete knowledge.

don't worry about it. I went back and forth on the issue of what to explain here vs. what to let unfold in a more natural, dramatic way in the memoir<sup>5</sup> itself. I finally decided to offer certain quick, potentially confusing explanations, betting that if they're too obscure or baroque right now you just won't pay much attention to them, which, again, I hasten to assure you is totally OK" (82n19). Though *The Pale King* certainly could not include a comprehensive history of US tax law, these "certain quick" explanations function much like encyclopedia entries. They aim at a kind of completeness while acknowledging that few readers will read all of these explanations carefully. They gesture towards a comprehensive if not always cohesive account.

### **Reading Random Facts**

Sometimes—as with *Infinite Jest*—reading *The Pale King* requires a reference text, but perhaps just as often it requires filtering the useless “cruft” from the useful. In fact the narrator invites readers to do so in the midst of a particularly lengthy footnote: “please know that none of this abstract information is all that vital to the mission of this Foreword. So feel free to skip or skim the following if you wish” (*PK* 71n3). Wallace, in an almost deferential gesture, acknowledges his readers’ agency in the constitution of meaning. If, as Hayles suggests, reading requires the application of a series of codes, these “codes are a matter of choice,” or more particularly, selection (*CB* 194). Fiction calls for a different sort of code than a tax form, and Wallace includes devices that direct the reader toward an appropriate code: “The idea, as both sides’ counsels worked it out, it

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<sup>5</sup> “Real author” Wallace insists that *The Pale King* is a non-fictional memoir, marketed as a novel for legal consideration. The blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction is certainly part and parcel of the information novel’s project.

that you will regard features like shifting p.o.v.s, structural fragmentation, willed incongruities, & c. as simply the modern analogs [...] of any of the other traditional devices that signaled the reader that what was under way fiction and should be processed accordingly” (*PK* 74). Such devices may limit the reader’s selection of code, but readers retain the responsibility of applying this code, of processing these devices in a meaningful narrative engagement. *The Pale King*’s inclusion of useful and useless information alike illustrates the exteriority of decoding systems; readers select codes and impose them on the text because they are “not inherent in the message” (Hayles *CB* 194). In other words, the text does not process itself but depends on the participation of its reader.

William Rasch notes that this active relationship between reader and text—or user and data—contradicts Shannon’s model of communication, in which “the intended message is discrete and exists prior to encoding; the code is not constitutive, merely ornamental” (65). Though *The Pale King* includes technical passages that the narrator describes as (and that might at a first encounter appear) “massively, spectacularly dull,” these passages serve a crucial function in the information novel (*PK* 85). They testify to the constitutive power of codes and to their ability to render meaning from excessive and boring information. The allure of this constitutive power perhaps draws Chris Fogle to accounting. When Fogle stumbles into an Advanced Tax class by accident, the substitute professor describes modern heroics as the arranging and interpreting, encoding and decoding of facts. While “yesterday’s society’s heroes generated facts,” today’s society’s surplus of facts relocates “the heroic frontier [...] in the ordering and deployment of those facts. Classification, organization, presentation” (*PK* 234). The “cowboys” of information



resemble the readers of information novels in their commitment not to information itself—or to the message inherent in the information—but to the systematization of information, the constitution of meaning from otherwise meaningless data.

Because readers must supply the codes not inherent in a text, they participate in the construction of the text. Readers—whether this refers to two readers with different interests or agendas, or one reader throughout several re-readings of the text—can deploy data in different ways to produce different results. Jurij Lotman’s concept of the “entropic” literary text implies this potential for personalization; because the novel “transmits different information to different readers in proportion to each one’s comprehension,” it can generate a number of different, while legitimate, interpretations (23). In so far as the information novel has “the ability to order vast data arrays and make them available for different kinds of queries,” it reproduces certain functions that Katherine Hayles identifies with the database (NS 1604). Narrative offers one story, but a narrative like *The Pale King* that evokes elements of the database by including passages readers can choose to incorporate or ignore, offers a number of alternative narratives. It is important, while considering the relationship between the information novel and the database, not to overstate this affinity. A novel is simply *not* a database—in structure, medium, or function. The information novel only resembles the database in that it provides a number of “certain quick, potentially confusing explanations” that a user can combine in any number of ways in a “proliferation of narratives as they transform to accommodate new data and mutate to probe beyond the expanding infosphere” (NS 1607). Narrative can expand to accommodate new data, but this data does not replace the narrative function. *The Pale King*, though it seems to lack a single over-arching narrative,

and certainly lacks any kind of conclusion<sup>6</sup>, still consists of a series of small narrative units. It is perhaps equally important to insist that the porousness of the text does not justify *every* interpretation; Wallace seems to mock this radical openness in Fogle's memory of college "classes where everything was fuzzy and abstract and open to interpretation and then those interpretations were open to still more interpretations" (*PK* 157). Textual porousness does not give readers license to read a novel any way they choose; this license is perhaps beside the point. The information novel remains porous to invite readers to participate in the constitution of meaning by sorting data and withholds resolution to encourage this reader-text interaction.

Claude Sylvanshine—IRS examiner and victim of RFI or Random-Fact Intuition—demonstrates the necessity of modulating attention and glossing over craft. He contends with an incredible onslaught of useless information, for example: "the precise metric weight and speed of a train moving southwest through Presov, Czechoslovakia, at the precise moment he's supposed to be cross-checking 1099-INT receipts with the tax return of Edmund and Willa Kosice, whose home shutters were replaced in 1978 by someone whose wife once won three rounds of bingo in a row" (*PK* 121). This data "intuition," like noise in Shannon's model of information theory, obscures useful information and interferes with Sylvanshine's cognitive processes: "indeed, abundance, together with irrelevance and the interruption of normal thought and attention, composes the essence of the RFI phenomenon" (*PK* 120). In its "abundance" and "irrelevance," these data emissions also resemble the excess of the information novel itself. §25 consists

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<sup>6</sup> Any statements about resolution must be provisional, considering the novel does not necessarily represent a "finished" product. The designations "unfinished" and "finished" deserve a critical consideration of their own, as they presuppose notions of a text completion.

solely of highly detailed tedium, as examiner after examiner simply “turns a page” (*PK* 312). For the reader in the midst of *The Pale King*, this chapter presents an obstacle much like Sylvanshine’s data intuitions—the data is comprehensive and exact, but its relevance to the narrative seems minimal. This chapter illustrates Shannon and Weaver’s distinction between information and meaning; it certainly contains information, but this information distracts rather than communicates. David Letzler identifies a similar tendency towards excess in *Infinite Jest*, particularly in its footnotes, which often “achieve a state of near-objective pointlessness, combining both excess and emptiness, redundancy with wild innovation” (309). *The Pale King*’s §25, like the footnotes, makes use of stylistic innovation by arranging the text in two columns. But as the list of turning pages continues, the lack of meaningful narrative content threatens to become mind-numbing. As Letzler says of *Infinite Jest*’s more unreadable footnotes, this passage “immediately terminate[s] focused attention—which is to say that almost all readers will find [it] boring” (308). Sylvanshine seems to embody one “problem of the novel,” namely “its tendency to be overloaded by the multifarious information that make up other people’s mental lives,” even if this information consists of examining tax return after tax return (Burn LC 383).

In order to derive meaning from information input, then, Sylvanshine finds it necessary to “filter out” much of his intuited and entirely useless data (*PK* 121). An IRS personnel describes “information per se,” much like Shannon and Weaver, as “really just a measure of disorder” (*PK* 344). Sylvanshine handles more information than any other character, but much of this information carries no meaning—it’s almost all archival value. To derive meaning from the mess of information, Sylvanshine must sort data

according to some code or procedure; indeed, as the personnel says, “the point of a procedure is to process and reduce the information in your file to just the information that has value” (*PK* 344). This procedure involves modulating attention—paying attention to information of potential value and skimming information of little value. *The Pale King* forces readers to employ a similar procedure. If a reader doesn’t filter out the repeated page-turnings of §25 and devotes equal attention to each sentence in the passage, the potentially meaningful information—that “every love story is a ghost story<sup>7</sup>”—recedes beneath the passage’s “noise” (*PK* 314). As the narrator says, “there’s only so much complex input the human nervous system can take,” and interpreting input means selecting some data over others (*PK* 264). This sorting and prioritizing requires concentration and direction, an ability to sift through large amounts of information while plucking relevant data from the surrounding craft. In *The Pale King*, concentration increases efficiency but also helps characters to direct their otherwise directionless lives. As Burn notes, Wallace, like Gaddis, “explores the negative impact endlessly proliferating information has upon the lives of his characters,” and the way that characters combat information overload (Burn AG 163). Fogle believes that his turn-around “had something to do with paying attention and the ability to choose what I paid attention to,” the ability to disregard some data in order to prioritize others (*PK* 189). Ralph Clare, in his “Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics,” notes that in *The Pale King* “‘paying attention’ and the ability to concentrate are held up as virtues in an

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<sup>7</sup> A sentence that, unlike nearly all the other sentence in the chapter, one could write many more sentences about. That Wallace embeds such a rich sentence in an otherwise tedious chapter speaks, as I argue here, to the necessity of modulating attention. But it also speaks to what Paul Giles calls the “sentimental posthumanism” of Wallace’s information.

entropic world typified by the endless flow of data and information” (440). If “in a world of proliferating information we can never master enough data,” paying attention enables characters like Chris Fogle to limit their information pool to a manageable size or to weed out the intrusive data generated by RFI (Burn AG 161).

Sylvanshine’s data emissions point to a qualitative distinction between relevant and irrelevant information. Narrator-author David Wallace suggests that “the abortive 1984 Personnel Division motivational/recruitment faux documentary debacle” failed in part because it had only “archival value” (*PK* 259n3). The archive indicates a comprehensive report, a collection of all available data. Thanks to “Irrelevant” Chris Fogle, the film largely fulfills this archival project, but by virtue of its excessive information fails to conform to the coherent project of a documentary. Data such as Wallace’s “example: A 100 percent accurate, comprehensive list of the exact size and shape of every blade of grass in my front lawn,” might have archival value; in the context of the archive, this might communicate “truth,” though “it is not a ‘truth’ that anyone will have any interest in” (*PK* 261). This archival information fails to transmit meaning—as opposed to factual “truth”—because “[w]hat renders a truth meaningful, worthwhile, & c. is its relevance, which in turn requires extraordinary discernment and sensitivity to context, questions of value, and overall point—otherwise we might as well all just be computers downloading raw data to one another” (*PK* 261). Wallace’s notion of meaning as contextual is another version of Hayle’s claim that meaning is “not inherent in the message” but perceived in its presentation and reception. The information novel arranges what Conley Wouters calls “emotionally uninterpretable data,” like the repetitive page-turnings of §25, in a way that renders it meaningful and converts archival value into

emotionally interpretable value (454). Fogle's "immense cluster-fuck" of a documentary interview, "heavily edited and excerpted" in §22, assumes a different kind of information value in the context of *The Pale King* (PK 259n3). The Advanced Tax substitute's call to account leads Fogle towards his career with the IRS, but it also leads the former "wastoid" towards greater personal accountability. Fogle's realization that in a world "already penetrated and formed, the real world's constituent info generated," the "meaningful choice lay in herding, corralling, and organizing that torrential flow of info" has personal as well as professional resonance (PK 242). By collecting data as diverse as the grueling depiction of desk work in §25 and Fogle's "conversion" story, *The Pale King*, according to Wouters, "attempts to tell very human stories in a form we might assume to be hostile to such stories. It shows how human lives and constructed subjectivities are merely data, too, and how, perhaps surprisingly, the two modes of existence are not mutually exclusive" (Wouters 460). Wherever the value lies that distinguishes the archive from human stories, this value assures that Fogle is more than a computer "downloading raw data" to an equally mechanistic reader.

Skimming some of the more technical data-dumps is "totally OK" in part because much of this information is not crucial to a reading (certainly one of many readings) of the novel. Readers can make their way through the text without a thorough understanding of tax policy in the 1980s. Although readers can gloss non-essential data without sacrificing too much meaning, this non-essential data is nevertheless essential to the novel itself; in other words, the inclusion of these data-dumps is not simply the result of sloppy editing. Unnecessary information might in fact function as the lowest common denominator of the information novel, as its inclusion inspires a qualitative evaluation of

different kinds of data and requires a sorting and arranging of data. Data-dumps direct readers to an even more overwhelming (and perhaps tedious and dull) store of information beyond the novel itself. In the midst of one such data-dump, Wallace reminds the reader that his chapter provides only a summary, that there's more data out there: "If you know how to search and parse government archives, you can find voluminous history and theory on just about every side of the debate. It's all in the public record" (*PK* 85). The information novel models the contemporary (specifically the digital) archive to the extent that it requires searching and parsing—it includes more information than a reader can use, or even consider. By including seemingly useless data, the information novel also invites a closer examination of the relationship between archives and novels.

### **“Trivia with Import”**

Wallace includes information already “all in the public record” to assign it a new value. This value stems from its incorporation in a narrative framework. Hayles suggests that digital databases, despite their wealth of information, remain dependent on narrative because “database operations say nothing about how data are to be collected or which data should qualify for collection, nor do they indicate how the data should be parsed and categorized” (*NS* 1605). Interpreting information storehouses like databases, archives, and public records requires a narrative framework that arranges the data into meaningful units and draws connections between these units. Narrative provides a pattern that, as Chris Fogle finds in his encounter with an enthusiastic Christian student, renders information relatable. Fogle says that the girl's story failed to convince because it “was

just data; there was no fact-pattern” (*PK* 216). Without the organizing principle of narrative, information tends towards meaninglessness; “there’s nothing informing about a mess,” no matter how much “information” the mess contains (*PK* 513).

To this extent, *The Pale King* models the cognitive processes of information gathering and retrieval. The narrator fails to “remember every last fact and thing in photorealist detail,” or fails to reproduce sensory input as narrative data, because “the human mind doesn’t work that way” (*PK* 259n3). If Wallace could account for every “fact and thing,” his narrative would read like Sylvanshine’s data emissions—like information overload. Rather, Wallace screens his narrative, editing his information in order to “‘cut consciousness down to size’ and create a dissociative projection of the mind that dramatizes the workings of the adaptive unconscious—with its filtering, and protective strategies” (Burn PC 386). While cognition involves filtering out certain data, it often retains a degree of noise: “One of the quirks of real human memory is that the most vivid, detailed recall doesn’t usually concern the things that are most germane” (*PK* 291). Memory consists largely of “snippets,” only later gathered into coherent narratives. Wallace proposes that “overall relevance and meaning are conceptual, while the experiential bits that get locked down and are easiest, years later, to retrieve tend to be sensory,” and not always relevant (*PK* 291). Hillary Clark also describes the encyclopedic novel as a model for cognition that “lists the conditions enabling individual knowledge acts” (*CB* 103). In the information novel, noise functions as one of these enabling conditions, so that “the goal of understanding, then, becomes not the elimination of noise, but the exploitation of the difference between noise and code” (Rasch 71). Understanding §25 requires not eliminating or forgetting the tedious description of desk



work, but seeing deskwork as the condition for the appearance of ghosts and the realization that “every love story is a ghost story.” Though noise may seem irrelevant, excessive, or dull, it is not unnecessary. What the narrator says of the Service applies also to noise and information overload: “There may, though, I opine, be more to it...as in vastly more, right here before us all, hidden by virtue of its size” (*PK* 87).

Despite the value of information theory thus far, I would like to insist on the information novel’s departure from cybernetics. It seems mistaken to assert, as David Porush does in “Cybernetic Fiction and Postmodern Science,” that “*cybernetics is the quintessential science of narrativity*” provided that “you accept that any exchange of information creates narrative” (379). Some information exchanges do not produce narrative; the public government record is not a narrative because it lacks the ordering principles that *The Pale King* applies to it. To make the distinction between narrative and non-narrative information is not to dismiss the latter, for the two are mutually constitutive. Sylvanshine implies that generating and organizing data are equally essential, if separate tasks when he tells Reynolds to “Boil it down. Reduce to fact-pattern, relevance. My job’s the raw data” (*PK* 362). Hayles also advocates for the mutual cooperation between narrative and the database: “Because database can construct relational juxtapositions but is helpless to interpret or explain them, it needs narrative to make its results meaningful. Narrative, for its part, needs database in the computationally intensive culture of the new millennium to enhance its cultural authority and test the generality of its insights” (NS 1603). The information novel accommodates new methods of data storage and retrieval while still insisting on the relevancy of narrative patterns. This relationship enacts on a smaller scale Michael McKeon’s theory of the development

of the novel as a “dialectical reversal” of the contemporary and the traditional (396). McKeon proposes that new genres arise from a “momentary negation of the present” even as the genre retains “a tendency to dissolve into its antithesis” (396). Franco Moretti suggests a similar relationship between the “modern epic,” or the information novel, and the encyclopedic: “the totalitarian temptation is almost always present in the modernist world text, as a reaction to a complexity that has grown beyond every expectation. But it is just a temptation—which never becomes the dominant presence” (228). While the database offers an intriguing solution for storing and retrieving large amounts of data, the information novel nevertheless continues to employ narrative as its primary organizing principle. Though the information novel draws on the principles of cybernetics and communication theory, it attempts to exceed these categories, to account for some “human element” or “meaningful value” that these paradigms cannot account for.

In the midst of this interplay between noise and code, *The Pale King* tries to get at information’s emotionally interpretable message. This isn’t as simple as injecting an information novel with “human” moments, such as the discussion between Lane A. Dean Jr. and his girlfriend about whether or not to raise a child. Wallace includes these moments as well, but also manages to humanize information itself, an impulse detectable throughout his career. In the story “Little Expressionless Animals,” one *Jeopardy!* contestant “informs trivia with import. She makes it human, something with the power to emote, evoke, induce, cathart” (GC 25). This contestant informs data with meaning by placing it in relationship to her own life—she sends the proceeds from her *Jeopardy!* winnings to her hospitalized brother. The context surrounding the data—not the data itself—allows the “facts to transcend their internal factual limitations and become, in and

of themselves, meaning, feeling” (GC 24-5). Letzler notes a similar strategy at work in *Infinite Jest*’s footnotes, particularly James Incandenza’s filmography. Much of the note’s information is too technical to interest most readers, but some of this information offers insights into the Incandenza family’s dynamics “necessarily incommunicable elsewhere in the novel” (Letzler 315). Even the unreadable technical details illustrate Incandenza’s inability to communicate with his family, as “discovering this portrait of an artist unable to express his emotional intelligence anywhere except in his films requires readers to dig through lots of junk data that does not contribute to it—except, perhaps inasmuch as it demonstrates that failure to communicate on another level” (Letzler 316). A “failure to communicate” seems specifically to entail a failure to inform data with meaning, to communicate meaning via information. Hal’s insistence in the novel’s opening scene that “I’m not a machine” implies this distinction between communication as the relaying of raw data and communication as the relaying of meaning; the latter “transcends the mechanics” of communication and relays something greater than the sum of its data (*IJ* 12).

Wallace links the failure to communicate with depression. Kate Gompert experiences depression as an inability to relate words and information to meaning:

Kate Gompert’s always thought of this anhedonic state as a kind of radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that use to have affective content. Terms the undepressed toss around and take for granted as full and fleshy—*happiness, joie de vivre, preference, love*—are stripped to their skeletons and reduced to abstract ideas. They have, as it were, denotation but no connotation. The anhedonic can still speak about happiness and meaning et al., but she has become incapable of feeling anything in them, of understanding anything about them, of hoping anything about them, or of believing them to exist as anything more than

concepts. Everything becomes an outline of the thing. Objects becomes schemata. The world becomes a map of the world<sup>8</sup>. (*IJ* 693)

Objects, reduced to their data (denotation), cease to suggest any kind of human element or emotion (connotation), and the “anhedonic” comes to resemble a machine, computing data without registering meaning. Hyper self-aware characters like Hal depend on input and sophisticated irony to distract themselves from the absence of meaning. Hal—who has committed the entire OED to memory—consumes data at an alarming rate and perhaps best illustrates Burn’s suggestion that “encyclopedic data storage is, for Wallace, just another of the many potentially dangerous addictions he explores” (AG 166). Like the other addictions *Infinite Jest* addresses, this encyclopedic impulse facilitates a cyclical progression of need (in the diffusion of meaning due to information overload), fulfillment (in distraction from this meaninglessness), and loss (in the vapidness of distracting information)—it raises problems, and then tries to address these problems with the same methods that initiated the cycle.

For many of Wallace’s characters, information seems bound up with some kind of existential dread or despair. Whatever sort of problems information overload causes—and it certainly aggravates many of *The Pale King*’s characters—it perhaps wards off an even greater problem. Wallace wonders whether “the real object of the crippling anxiety in ‘test anxiety’ might well be a fear of the tests’ associated stillness, quiet, and lack of time for distraction. Without distraction, or even the possibility of distraction, certain types of people feel dread” (*PK* 295n47). Marshall Boswell reads this obsessive relationship with information as a kind of Kierkegaardian “aesthetic existence” (138).

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<sup>8</sup> This concept of the map of the world superseding the world itself will return in the third section of this essay, with Jorge Luis Borges’ “Exactitude in Science” and the Map of the Empire.

The aesthete, like Hal, “holds existence at bay by the most subtle of all deceptions, by thinking” and effaces the self by thinking about anything other than the self (qtd. in Boswell 138). However, *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* seem to indicate a slightly different method of self-effacement through a kind of “data existence.” As Burn notes, several characters in *Infinite Jest*—such as Hugh Steeply’s MASH-obsessed father and Don Gately’s alcoholic step-father—cope with existence not by over-thinking, but by simply recording data. This distinction perhaps explains the difference between the wastoid Fogle, who “never did anything but at the same time [...] could normally never sit still and become aware of what was really going on,” and Fogle’s father, for whom “books and intellectual issues were one of his escapes from boredom” (PK 159; 170). So-called information society is, in part, “about” a kind of aesthetic despair—but it also raises the stakes. Wallace “can’t think anyone really believes that today’s so-called ‘information society’ is just about information. Everyone knows it’s about something else, way down” (PK 87). This “something else” is perhaps the desire to avoid boredom that verges on existential terror, the “terror of silence with nothing diverting to do” (PK 87). The despair specific to (and perhaps produced by) the information age threatens to substitute existence not with thinking, but with patently useless data; it threatens to turn the aesthete into a machine.

Lane Dean Jr. struggles with this sort of despair in his first months as an IRS examiner. Hardly an hour into his shift, Dean experiences “boredom beyond any boredom he’d ever felt” (PK 379). This boredom seems to lead Dean to the edge of some existential void, as “unbidden came the thought that *boring* also meant something that drilled in and made a hole” (PK 380). This “hole” suggests the undistracted self, and the

confrontation with this undistracted self causes something of a crisis of the soul in the devotedly-Christian Dean. Though Dean tries to remind himself of his “purpose”—supporting his wife and son—his conviction falters: “for a half a file it helped to have them in mind because they were why, they were what made this worthwhile and the right thing and he had to remember it but it kept sliding away down the hole that fell through him” (*PK* 382). Dean’s “hole” of existential doubt is perhaps the same hole that Kierkegaard’s aesthete continuously tries to fill by thinking, but Dean seems to face an even more reductive mode of existence than an aesthetic one. He resists becoming, like his neighboring examiners, a well-calibrated data-processing machine, to the extent “that some part of him still refused to quite get memorized” his Service ID number (*PK* 379). Faced with an impending data existence, Dean would perhaps welcome Kierkegaard’s aesthetic existence as potentially fulfilling, even if this aesthetic existence already substitutes for an experiential existence of the self. At the peak of desperation, Dean thinks not about “meaning” itself, but “about the word *meaning*” (*PK* 383). He struggles to assign meaning an aesthetic or linguistic value, but what the word meaning calls up—“the heft of a full diaper”—falls laughably short of a satisfactory definition (*PK* 383). So-called information society risks reducing aesthetic terms to mere data, and the information novel must first restore this aesthetic value—a value to the *word* meaning—before it can hope to restore any kind of existential or ordinary value—a value to *meaning itself*.

### **Reading “Monumental Dullness”**

Despite Dean's discomfort with boredom, Wallace insists that readers sometimes have an obligation to wade through boring and redundant information—and this obligation applies to both readers of literature and responsible citizens. Boredom may actually serve as a coping or cloaking mechanism that prevents citizens from considering political and economic issues. The IRS issues its tax reform unnoticed because “if sensitive issues of government can be made sufficiently dull and arcane, there will be no need for officials to hide or dissemble, because no one not directly involved will pay enough attention to cause trouble. No one will pay attention because no one will be interested, because, more or less *a priori*, of these issues' monumental dullness” (*PK* 86). Only by paying attention to patently boring information can people hope to intelligently participate in political and economic processes. Chris Fogle describes his participation in a culture largely inattentive to political developments: “I too had thought it was cool, or at least I believed I thought so—there had seemed to be something almost romantic about flagrant waste and drifting, which Jimmy Carter was ridiculed for calling ‘malaise’ and telling the nation to snap out of it” (*PK* 225). This generation-wide “malaise” results from boredom as “a specific historical construction and discourse that can be evidenced both objectively and subjectively, sociologically as well as psychologically” (Clare 433). Psychologically, boredom and the lack of stimulation threatens to confront the individual with existential doubt. Sociologically, boredom functions as a sanctioned response to political issues, and Wallace seems to suggest that this sociological boredom poses a much greater threat than psychological boredom. As Clare argues, “the more personal existential angst of *Infinite Jest* is subtly critiqued, re-contextualized, and broadened in *The Pale King*. Anxiety and angst are not just privileged, possibly hackneyed, existential

ponderings or even real forms of depression, but are entangled with notions of boredom, which is a concept that Wallace allows to open ‘outward’ onto the world, instead of shrinking ‘inward’ to the individual” (436). There’s more at stake than psychological discomfort when readers dismiss certain information as “boring”: by avoiding the dull, readers potentially avoid political issues they ought to grapple with and shirk their political responsibilities.

This widespread intolerance for psychological boredom seems connected, at least according to the IRS agents stuck in an elevator in §19, to a decline in citizens’ political involvement. Citizens, as one of these interlocutors says, “don’t think of themselves as responsible” (*PK* 140). This denial of responsibility stems from, as yet another interlocutor argues,

the delusion that the individual is the center of the universe, the most important thing—I mean the individual individual, the little guy watching TV or listening to the radio or leafing through a shiny magazine or looking at a billboard or any of the million different daily ways this guy comes into contact with Burson-Marsteller’s or Saachi & Saachi’s big lie, that *he* is the tree, that his first responsibility is to his own happiness, that everyone else is the great gray abstract mass which his life depends on standing apart from, being an individual, being *happy*. (*PK* 146)

The prioritization of personal happiness over civic responsibility seems to justify the dismissal of boring political issues—it allows the individual to “stay home and watch *Charlie’s Angels* instead of going to vote” (*PK* 141). Avoiding psychological boredom takes precedence over wading through information to enable responsible civic participation. Wallace warns his readers against this simultaneous self-entitlement and dread of boredom; as one agent says to who could only be “Irrelevant” Chris Fogle, “Sometimes what’s important is dull. Sometimes it’s work. Sometimes the important things aren’t works of art for your entertainment” (*PK* 140). This has, as Clare points out,



political implications: “It would seem, then, that choosing not to pay attention to such ‘boring’ things as political and economic issues does not mean one will lead a life ‘free’ of constraint, but that one will pay off this debt with the freedoms that were granted long ago” (440). But Wallace’s insistence that “Sometimes what’s important is dull” also encourages the reader to persevere through “boring” parts of the information novel itself. Novels are, of course, “works of art for your entertainment,” but Wallace suggests that they can also be more than this—that sometimes they suspend their goal of providing pleasure to communicate something important, if dull.

The information novel deals not only with the ramifications of the proliferation of information, but with this dread—the dread of a lack of distraction, of the diminishment of information—that drives the information novel itself. This gesture, which places not only the methods of discourse but the origins of discourse at stake, is not simply a gesture of self-reflexivity, but *recursivity*. The self-reflexive encyclopedic novel challenges the limits of the encyclopedic discourse by demonstrating the failure of its discursive methods to encompass a full range of knowledge. The recursive information novel, though it certainly does not take its own methods for granted<sup>9</sup>, challenges the origin of its discourse by failing to locate this origin. *The Pale King* finds “way down,” underlying the proliferation of information, a dread of boredom unimaginable prior to this proliferation. And furthermore, as it searches for this origin—a kind of absence of information—the information novel generates yet more information, producing more distractions to efface the dread origin. The information novel searches for its origin only to find its origin constituted by the novel’s own feverish accumulation; that is, in asking how the

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<sup>9</sup> In fact cannot, if it even hopes to successfully challenge its origin.

proliferation of information seeks to alleviate the dread of silence or boredom, the novel proliferates itself in order to drown out silence and relieve boredom. It is, in fact, self-generating, mutually constitutive with its origin, and perhaps “extensible to infinity” (Lukacs 142).

In the recursive novel, as Katherine Hayles suggests of *Infinite Jest*, “any starting point would be to some extent arbitrary, for no matter where one starts, everything eventually cycles together with everything else” (IA 684). The porousness of the text allows readers several points of entry and invites re-entry. The information novel, then, is also recursive in so far as it develops with each successive rereading and when it comes into wider contact with other texts and social environments. Hayles applies to this function the cybernetic concept “conditionalized knowledge,” which describes how a “system’s output is linked with the agent’s input” (IA 680). These lines of “communication” between the text’s inside and outside, or the “recursive structures connecting parts of the system to one another and the system as a whole to its environment and to the user,” facilitate the development of the textual system (IA 680). This element of porousness, that allows and even demands outside input, seem to justify Moretti’s suspicion that “modern epics” are “not self-sufficient” (4). Moretti calls these texts “failures,” though he does not do so pejoratively. Lack of textual self-sufficiency only constitutes a failure if the artistic autonomy of the “masterpiece” is assumed. The information novel is certainly not the first literary category to challenge this assumption, but its relevancy as a concept depends on its ability to integrate its text with wider stores of information.

This re-allocation of autonomy distances the information novel from early conceptions of the encyclopedic novel as a storehouse of knowledge and, along with it, from the concept of the book as a cohesive totality. This communication between inside and outside, the recursivity of output and input, in fact dissolves boundaries between the outside and inside. As Derrida argues in *Dissemination*, “The text *affirms* the outside, marks the limits of this speculative operation, deconstructs and reduces to the status of ‘effects’ all the predicates through which speculation appropriates the outside. If there is nothing outside the text, this implies, with the transformation of the concept of the text in general, that the text is no longer the snug airtight inside of an interiority or an identity-to-itself” (35-6). Wallace’s own appearances as a character throughout *The Pale King* demonstrate this confusion of outside and inside. When he first appears, he insists that “what follows is, in reality, not fiction as all, but substantially true and accurate. That *The Pale King* is, in point of fact, more like a memoir than any kind of made-up story” (*PK* 69). *The Pale King*’s exterior literally invades the interior, as the novel references itself as a physical book, but not to the extent that there is a one-to-one correspondence between outside and inside. Many of the “facts” Wallace accounts are, in fact, false: David Foster Wallace did not work for the IRS, nor was he suspended from Amherst for academic dishonesty. The confusion of fact and fiction denies the encyclopedic masterpiece’s aspiration to represent a nation’s “full range of knowledge.” House suggests that “we regard the novel’s participation in larger cultural systems as one of citation rather than one of naïve representationalism—as referring to more information rather than to an external reality” (40). This does not, as a close reading of Derrida indicates, yield a simple reduction of the signified to the signifier, which would also risk reducing meaning

to information. Rather, this collapse indicates the dissolution of the distinction between signified and signifier. It renders them, in effect, one and the same: “What ought, however, to prohibit considering writing [...] as the simple empirical husk of the concept is the fact that this husk (for it is not a question of raising it from that condition but of questioning it otherwise) is *coextensive* with the whole life of the discourse” (*DS* 49). This coexistence of the “husk” and its content, of the signifier and its signified, in fact justifies the artistic project of the information novel, in so far as it attributes meaning to writing without content.

The prodigious, and often digressional, information of the novel is not simply ornamentation or, in Condillac’s words, “the art of fattening a book to bore one’s reader” (qtd. in Derrida *DS* 45n41). Excessive text does not necessarily obscure meaning, but can, at least in the case of the information novel, convey meaning. Lotman suggests that the “artistic” text differs from the “non-artistic”<sup>10</sup> text because it requires its reader to employ two codes or “grammars” simultaneously. In the non-artistic text, “as soon as those transmitting and receiving information master the grammar of the communication system, it ceases to be information for them and becomes, not the content of information, but the means for its transmission” (70). In the artistic text, the means of transmission retains the value of information. In other words, the “husk” does not recede behind the content, but in some sense constitutes its content. Noise, even when irrelevant and seemingly without content, continues to transmit information about the text as a system,

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<sup>10</sup> Lotman’s use of “artistic” and “non-artistic” might seem out of place in a discussion of postmodern literature, which largely does not subscribe to the concepts of Russian formalism. Part of the information novel’s project, however, is an examination of these concepts, with the occasional attempt to reinstate the distinction between the artistic and the non-artistic.

about so-called information society, and about the reader's active relationship to the text. Lotman's specification of the "artistic" text implies that not all information can be read this way; as Shannon demonstrates, noise in certain contexts is undoubtedly undesirable. Wallace appeals to this specificity when distinguishing the "contract for nonfiction" from "the one for fiction" (*PK* 75). Describing *The Pale King* as non-fiction memoir, Wallace claims that "any features or semions that might appear to undercut that veracity are in fact protective legal devices, not unlike the boilerplate that accompanies sweepstakes and civil contracts, and thus are not meant to be decoded or 'read' so much as merely acquiesced to as part of the cost of our doing business together" (*PK* 75). Wallace's narrator expects his readers to forgo the codes they might apply to a work of fiction, even though Wallace as "author" can only expect his reader to apply just these codes his narrator disregards, even to this particular passage. Rather than convince readers to approach the novel as non-fiction and to privilege factual content over stylistic "legal protections," Wallace draws attention to the exceptionality of the reader's engagement with fiction. He offers what Clark calls an opportunity to "read ourselves reading" (108).

Narrator-Wallace insists that, as a literary object, his "memoir" demands a different kind of readerly code than, say, a tax return. He reminds his readers that, unlike "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle, "I have no intention of inflicting on you a regurgitation of every last sensation and passing thought I happen to recall. I am about art here, not simple reproduction" (*PK* 261). "Art" implies certain techniques of data-organization, techniques that Wallace constantly draws attention to, such as "artistic compression" (*PK* 278). By foregrounding the artistic construction of the text, Wallace invites readers to engage with his novel's information in a more active sense than they might engage with

the information on a tax return. Boswell identifies a similar function in *Infinite Jest*'s footnotes, which "enhance the reader's intimacy with the text even as they highlight the story's artificiality" (120). This intimacy, Wallace seems to suggest, results from the participatory process of reading and cooperative process of meaning-making. Wallace's text seems to have a particular sense of "reading" in mind. The narrator discusses an experience of reading words on a page without actually having "read" them, "with *read* here meaning internalized, comprehended, or whatever we mean by really reading vs. simply having one's eyes pass over symbols in a certain order" (*PK* 294). Bearing in mind Wallace's debt to Wittgenstein<sup>11</sup>, it is perhaps appropriate to turn to a consideration of reading from the *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein struggles with precisely this difference, the difference between reading and "having one's eyes pass over symbols": "But surely—we'd like to say—reading is quite a particular process! Read a page of print, and you can see that; there is something special going on, something highly characteristic" (165). Wallace might extend this, proposing that something special beyond what is already special to reading occurs when reading "art," even if this is not implied by the text itself but provided by the reader. Henry Staten, in his study of Wittgenstein and Derrida, suggests that "what we call 'reading' is an assemblage of characteristics which in each separate case of reading will be variously reconstituted, and in these different reassemblings there will always be the infection of characteristics of what does not correspond to what we want to think of as really, essentially *reading*" (85). In this sense, reading seems to exceed passing over, even making note of, symbols—it

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exceeds data-processing. Reading is, in short, not the sum of its parts, or not, as the young Chris Fogle sometimes feels, “the same as just counting the words” (*PK* 162).

Wallace’s occasional appearances prompt readers to reconsider “what we call ‘reading.’” Like *Infinite Jest*’s footnotes, they highlight the artificial surface of the text as they invite the reader to participate in the text—they function not only reflexively, but recursively. Wallace assures readers that this is not a typical postmodern authorial intrusion: “Please know I find these sorts of cute, self-referential paradoxes irksome, too—at least now that I’m over thirty I do —and that the very last thing this book is is some kind of clever metafictional titty-pincher” (*PK* 69). The metafictional novel that Wallace refers to exposes literary devices to draw attention to the text as a well-wrought object. Wallace does this as well, but he wants to do something more. By honing in on the process of reading, Wallace asks what goal literary engagement fulfills. The simplest answer, and the answer that seems to generate an underlying anxiety in *The Pale King*, is that reading fiction relieves boredom. It provides, as it provided for Chris Fogle’s father, a kind of aesthetic relief from existential dread. Perhaps the ideal answer would be that reading fiction gives new insight into the meaning of existence. Wallace never gives this answer, though he might want to, because there are too many indefinable terms. Wallace talks about “meaning,” but all he can really get at is the *word meaning*, and Wallace talks about existence—and all the dread that it entails—but all he can really get at is a filtered representation of existence. *The Pale King*, and I would argue every information novel, deals with this dissymmetry between fiction’s ideal purpose and fiction’s practical purpose, between what fiction would like to be and what it is. Information novels resist a reduction to data existence, but perhaps only ward it off by supplementing an aesthetic

existence. Perhaps this indicates a kind of failure, though I suspect it would be difficult to do any better. This failure does not, however, mark the close of the information novel. It rather marks its opening, for the information novel takes this failure as its subject, and generates a text around this question of the text's failure. The information novel proliferates not in spite of but because of its failure to achieve its ideal end.



### Roberto Bolaño's *2666* and the Ethics of Reading as Data-Processing

If *The Pale King* proposes the self-generating failure of the information novel, Roberto Bolaño's *2666* insists on this failure with a nearly hostile urgency. Even more than Wallace's data-dumps, Bolaño's fragmented and often dead-end narrative arcs, his intentionally opaque references, and his nearly 300 page catalogue of a staggering number of murders in Santa Teresa resist readability. In fact, *2666* is just the kind of difficult book that Bolaño's Amalfitano, the Chilean professor of philosophy in Santa Teresa, fears has fallen out of favor. When Amalfitano meets a young pharmacist who "chose *The Metamorphosis* over *The Trial*, [who] chose *A Simple Heart* over *Bouvard and Peuchet*, and *A Christmas Carol* over *A Tale of Two Cities* or *The Pickwick Papers*," he regrets this tendency to select "minor" works over "great" ones: "Now even bookish pharmacists are afraid to take on the great, imperfect, torrential works, books that blaze paths into the unknown" (*2666* 227). Amalfitano seems to describe the information novel itself: massive in scale and scope, overwhelmingly chaotic, and more often than not, flawed. *2666* and *The Pale King*, however, differ from "masterpieces" like *A Tale of Two Cities* by virtue of their uncertain relationship toward the very concept of the masterpiece. Like Amalfitano lamenting the decline of "torrential works," the information novel must negotiate its status as a masterpiece while challenging the authority of this status in a rapidly shifting literary landscape. The "failure" of the information novel perhaps results from this contradiction. Even as the information novel destabilizes the autonomy of the masterpiece, it often appears in the guise of such a total artistic work. It simultaneously affirms and denies its own project of representation as it participates in the encyclopedic tradition while interrogating the practicality and utility of this tradition.

2666 disrupts the continuity of the artistic masterpiece in its division into five “parts.” As Ignacio Echevarría mentions in his note to the first edition, Bolaño originally intended to publish each section independently, presuming that “it would be less of a burden and more profitable, both for his publisher and for his heirs, to deal with five separate novels, short or medium-length, than with a single massive, sprawling work, one not even entirely finished” (2666 895). Published as the “massive, sprawling work,” 2666 poses a greater interpretive challenge than either section could pose on its own, as it seems to invite readers to reassemble a set of narrative fragments. Sharae Deckard notes that each section adopts a different generic style—“The Part about the Critics” and academic satire, “The Part about Amalfitano” and philosophical thriller, “The Part about Fate” and road novel, “The Part about the Crimes” and detective fiction, and “The Part about Archimboldi” and historical fiction (356). By switching from one genre to another, 2666 interferes with its artistic cohesion; its changing tonal registers correspond to changing values and agendas that readers can not easily incorporate into a single artistic “vision.” Amalfitano presents a kind of test case for 2666 from his own book collection: the *Testamento geometrico*, which “was really three books” bound together (2666 186). The book jacket describes the *Tastamento geometrico*’s three parts as “independent, but functionally correlated by the sweep of the whole” (2666 186). Similarly, 2666’s recurring characters and images—and, perhaps more importantly, preconceived notions of artistic autonomy and “completeness”—encourage readers to approach the novel’s separate parts as a coherent whole. Though Bolaño’s five parts intersect in Santa Teresa, they fail to offer a comprehensive image of the North Mexican city or a sufficient account of the city’s series of murders. These intersections function like red herrings,

leading readers to search for a “sweep of the whole,” when in fact none exists. Perhaps Amalfitano’s suspicion of the comprehensive “whole” of a text leads him to hang the *Testamento geometrico* on a clothes line, exposed to the elements. With his experiment—originally an idea of Duchamp’s—Amalfitano disparages “the seriousness of a book full of principles,” and by extension challenges the authority of a coherent, total book (2666 191). Bolaño conducts a similar experiment in 2666, where he challenges the “seriousness” of the total masterpiece.

In challenging the total masterpiece, Bolaño also forces his readers to consider the political implication of their literary engagement. Like Wallace, Bolaño considers literature a solace from boredom; it is, in perhaps the simplest sense, something to do. But by distracting its readers, by occupying them with an aesthetic masterpiece, literature also risks occluding political and ethical issues, or worse, aestheticizing these issues for its readers’ entertainment. The information novel, then, poses a serious critique of the value of literary engagement that the encyclopedic novel does not. David Letzler argues that “An encyclopedia’s value requires that it accountably and accurately represent the real world—this it is unoriginal, referencing something theoretically verifiable elsewhere. By definition, however, fiction’s importance lies in the material that is original and is not contingent upon that type of reference” (306). By mounting a political critique of literary engagement, the information novel attempts to hold itself accountable for the materially verifiable things it represents. It is, in fact, contingent on the things it represents and bears a responsibility towards them. In this regard, the information novel opens the literary masterpiece to traditionally non-aesthetic concerns, using aesthetic techniques to direct its readers to issues outside the realm of the aesthetic. Though it may not provide a

satisfactory answer, it asks how the reader can justify literary engagement beyond questions of aesthetic experience or entertainment.

### **The Total Novel and the Map of the Empire**

For Wallace, much of the critique of the literary masterpiece focuses on the encyclopedic tradition outlined by Edward Mendelson and associated with Thomas Pynchon. Bolaño, while he nods to Pynchon, also contends with another literary tradition, the Latin American “total novel.” The concept of the total novel applies to literature of the late twentieth-century “Boom” period and is often identified with the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Carlos Fuentes. Mark Anderson defines the “total novel” as a “synonym” for the encyclopedic, as both propose to contain a complete system of knowledge (60). In “The Latin American Novel Today,” Vargas Llosa describes the total novelist as operating under the “illusion—naïve, demented, but nevertheless formidable—of wishing to recapture with fantasy and words the total image of a world, of seeking to write novels that express this total reality not only *qualitatively*, but *quantitatively*” (270, emphasis mine). In order to represent reality with qualitative accuracy, the total novel must assume a correspondence between fiction and reality; in order to represent reality with quantitative accuracy, the total novel must incorporate every facet of reality. Vargas Llosa’s ideal total novel resembles Jorge Luis Borges’ “Map of the Empire,” “whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it” (CF 325). Like the Map of Empire, the total novel does not simply evoke reality, but attempts to recreate reality in its entirety. As in the encyclopedic novel, any apparently stylistic techniques—catalogues, baroque language, or numerous references—

function also “to evoke the connection with totality in the mind of the reader” (Anderson 62). The total novel aspires to leave nothing out, and in its comprehensive and cohesive vision of reality presents a definitive masterpiece.

Like the “Map of the Empire,” the total novel attempts to replace its external reality with an inner cohesion of its own. Vargas Llosa describes the novel as a totality unto itself: “The quality of a novel is not measured by the greater or lesser degree of correlation between the story and its real-life model; rather it is measured by the story’s intrinsic power of persuasion, by its ability to impose itself upon the reader as a living and coherent reality *in and of itself*” (266, italics original). In this regard, the total novel sets itself an even greater project than Mendelson’s encyclopedic novel, which functions as a repository for an entire body of knowledge. Vargas Llosa suggests that the total novel arises only from societies in crisis, where political, economic, or social conditions compel writers to posit an alternate total reality within the fictional world of the novel. The novel functions as a sort of surrogate reality when external “reality ceases to have precise meaning” (Vargas Llosa 269). In *Fictions of Totality*, Ryan Long also considers the political role of the total novel in Mexico, and argues that in times of social unrest, the novel “wrestled with the difficulty of projecting unity and coherence onto an historically heterogeneous social space shaped by legacies of colonialism and dependency<sup>12</sup>” (1). This historical contingency makes the total novel a uniquely Latin American phenomenon; as Vargas Llosa notes, “the European or North American

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<sup>12</sup> Despite of the political value of the total novel, they have historically been appropriated by North American and European markets as examples of Latin American exoticism or local color. As Pollock notes, the wide acceptance of works like Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* “offers U.S. readers the ‘illusion of an easy familiarity, the illusion of translatability, and thus creates the illusion of their cultural competence” (351-2).

novelist in our day rarely attempts to write a ‘total’ novel” (270). The development of the encyclopedic genre in Northern America does not disprove Vargas Llosa’s prediction; in fact, the simultaneity of the American “encyclopedic novel” and the Latin American “total novel” only emphasizes the distinction between their respective projects. The North American and European cultures of the encyclopedic genre “affect only the surface or marginal strata of historical reality [and] this reality, which is still thought to be viable, does not awaken the same ‘total’ rejection which compels today’s Latin American novelists to attempt ‘totally’ to replace reality with ‘total’ novels” (Vargas Llosa 270). The encyclopedic novel might represent an exhaustive map, but it does not, like the total novel, represent a “Map of the Empire” so vast and so comprehensive as to replace the empire itself.

For Vargas Llosa and Long, the total novel, by synthesizing often contradictory historical accounts, offers a cohesion that “reality” can not. Stephen Burn and Mendelson similarly imagine the encyclopedic novel as a response to cultural instability. For Burn, the encyclopedic “emerges from a culture’s awareness of its fragility rather than from a sense of national coherence” (51). The encyclopedic novel, in fact, helps to establish a nascent national culture, and the encyclopedic novelist becomes something of a national icon (Mendelson 30). But Burn and Mendelson’s models do not posit the novel as a *replacement* for national reality, nor do they aim to sustain “the illusion of totality within the pages of a novel, of creating a work whose appearance of autonomy and coherence are so convincing that readers will forget that the book in their hands is fiction” (Long 4). The encyclopedic novel remains a “fiction” perhaps due to the “widespread fear about the vulnerability of a society’s information level” that Burn identifies as yet another element

of the encyclopedic impulse; this fear of instability manifests itself as a “pervasive anxiety about the security of ordinary books as safe containers of knowledge” (51). This particular anxiety does not seem to plague the total novel, which Vargas Llosa and Long invest with an affirming stability.

These opposing conceptions of the book correspond to opposing conceptions of the author. Encyclopedic novelists, as Hillary Clark and Tom LeClair note, tend to disappear behind the deluge of information. Clark goes so far as to call these novelists “anti-creative,” and imagines them “returning to the role of medieval scribe, endlessly[...]reading and copying the already-known, the popular as well as the esoteric” (105). The encyclopedic novelist pieces together a work of fiction from pre-existing material—a model to which the fiction never quite matches up. Vargas Llosa attributes more creative power to the total novelist, who occupies not the role of a scribe but the “role as a substitute for God” (270). While the encyclopedic genre often seems to endorse Roland Barthes’ theory of the death of the author, the total novel “privileges the creative power of the author, proclaiming that the successful writer can devise formal devices for containing and ordering the chaotic, infinite world that provides the most ambitious novelists with their source material” (Long 4). The total novel seems to champion notions of the masterpiece and the literary genius, and credits the novel with the power to develop self-contained total worlds.

The total novel thus functions according to a set of presuppositions regarding not only the authority of the literary masterpiece, but the underlying cohesion of reality. Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria and Mark Anderson suggest that the total novel adopts a Hegelian vision of reality that “postulates an ‘absolute’ or ‘universal truth,’ which is at

the same time the underlying essence and irreducible totality of all things” (Anderson 63). This “absolute truth” renders reality rational, and Hegel proposes that the development of historical consciousness ultimately leads towards the comprehension of this truth. The total novel mirrors this progression toward rational comprehension in its model of historic reality. In its “attempt to synthesize history and the self,” the total novel makes history understandable; it provides narrative justification for historic events and imagines a final “goal” for historic progress (Gonzalez Echevarria 273). In *2666*, the young Archimboldi challenges the total novel’s approach to history when he describes history as “a simple whore, [that] has no decisive moments but is a proliferation of instants, brief interludes that vie with each other in monstrousness” (*2666* 794).

The historical vision of the total novel arbitrarily designates certain of these interludes as “decisive moments” in order to construct a sense of order and development. Gonzalez Echevarria emphasizes that the total novel’s ideological underpinnings are, in fact, illusory; in its ambition to create a totality, it “centers around a lack, an absence of organic connectedness, and its mainspring is a desire for communion, or, in a Hegelian sense, for totality through reintegration with a lost unity” (Gonzalez Echevarria 21). In fact, the total novel’s status *as a novel* belies this “lost unity.” The success of the novel depends on the participation of readers, who alone can actualize the “totality” the text presumes to represent. If the total novel itself seems fragmented or incomplete, it is only because “the total, infinite nature of reality [...] can only be inferred through the observation of finite parts” (Anderson 63). Readers supply a context to connect the novel’s finite parts, and this “context, or web of interrelations between the parts, coalesces a meaning that the parts themselves cannot individually signify” (Anderson



64). As with the encyclopedic novel, the “total vision” of reality is not inherent in the text itself, but generated by the participation of the reader<sup>13</sup>. Any claims that the novel makes to “absolute truth” are already compromised by its dependence on the reader: its truth is hardly essential, but only a product of the reader’s engagement with the text.

### **“Fantastic in its Uselessness”: The Thinking Machine**

Though Bolaño does take a critical stance towards the total novel and its “complete” representation of reality, a similar totalizing ambition infects *2666*, if only in the novel’s size and structure. As Ignacio Echavarría says, “the sheer size of *2666* is inseparable from the original conception of all its parts, as well as from the spirit of risk that drives it and its rash totalizing zeal” (*2666* 896). The total novel’s desire for a lost unity or an absolute truth appears in *2666* as Ramon Lull’s “thinking machine”—an utterly useless tool for explaining the workings of the universe. Bolaño refers to the historical Ramon Lull, a philosopher and mystic of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, who did in fact develop a machine to derive truth through a combination of elements. The machine consists of concentric circles, each labeled with attributes—Borges says that in the earliest diagram these attributes included god, goodness, greatness, eternity, power, wisdom, volition, virtue, truth, and glory—along the edge (*NF* 156). As these circles spin, they elucidate the connections between any combination of these objects. In his

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<sup>13</sup> This is perhaps the case in every literary text, whether or not it intends to present a “total” or simple a “partial” vision: all texts must be actualized by their readers. What makes the information novel exceptional is not only the fact that it draws attention to the reader’s role in constituting meaning—many other works have done this as well. The information novel seems to suggest in addition that all “total” visions—literary or otherwise—function much the same way: each totalizing world view derives not from the reality it intends to comprehend, but is in fact actualized by the texts and readers that up hold it.

essay on Lull's machine, Borges emphasizes that it can incorporate any number of attributes into its unity, and that it "embraces a number of combinations far greater than this page can record" (*NF* 156). The thinking machine is something like an encyclopedia: it offers an explanation for everything by way of cross-referencing and mapping. Perhaps more aptly, the machine resembles a process reader in its ability to find order among disparate elements. Amalfitano finds himself sketching crude versions of this thinking machine—polygons labeled at their corners with names such as Whitehead, Vattimo, and Spencer, or Kant, Saint Anselm, Descartes, and Mendelssohn (2666 192-3). While these diagrams seem to mean something, Amalfitano can find no sense in them, and he recalls "Ramon Lull and his fantastic machine. Fantastic in its uselessness" (2666 207).

Amalfitano's comment about the thinking machine could apply to the total novel's Hegelian project of representation: the total novel's ambition to correlate all the disparate elements of historical reality in a unified truth is certainly "fantastic," but also inevitably "useless." As Amalfitano's diagrams demonstrate, some ideas cannot be unified; some things remain incommensurable, and attempting to find a unifying element can lead not to understanding but to greater confusion.

Yet Borges suggests that "uselessness" does not void the thinking machine of its interest; the fact that the relationships the machine posits "are all entirely futile—that fact that, for us, to say that glory is eternal is as rigorously null and void as to say that eternity is glorious—is of only secondary interest" (*NF* 156). Rather, Borges finds the machine itself "interesting," regardless of its failure. Borges suggests that, although "as an instrument of philosophical investigation, the thinking machine is absurd," it may function as a "literary or poetic device" (*NF* 159). Amalfitano's diagrams, for instance,

may not have any meaning as philosophical arguments, as they do not indicate any actual relationship between the philosophers they connect. They do, however, serve a literary function in *2666*; like Amalfitano's *Testamento geometrico*, they seem to mock the seriousness of logic or principles. They juxtapose philosophy and mathematics to produce only nonsense. Wallace's data-processing machine raises the question of meaning versus information, and similarly Bolaño's thinking machine raises the question of philosophic meaning versus literary meaning—or practical value versus literary value. For Wallace, the machine functions as a menacing object, representing the threat of information overload. Bolaño's (and Borge's) thinking machine, however, occupies a more delicate position; it at once illustrates the practical futility of the totalizing impulse to correlate reality into one unity, and yet maintains the potential for this totalizing impulse to create literary value.

Rather than attempt to derive order from scientific principles, like Amalfitano's geometry book, or from historic visions, like the total novel, *2666* builds a kind of provisional order from narrative. While recognizing "order" as ideologically constructed, the novel nevertheless maintains the potential for literature to arrange disordered reality in narrative, justifying a seemingly incomprehensible experience. Amalfitano concedes that his "ideas or feelings or ramblings," unfounded as they may seem, "had their satisfactions" (*2666* 189). His personal theories "turned a brutal story of injustice and abuse, an incoherent howl with no beginning or end, into a neatly structured story"; by turning an incoherent experience into an ordered narrative, Amalfitano's stories "turned chaos into order, even if it was at the cost of what is commonly known as sanity" (*2666* 189). Amalfitano's willingness to sacrifice his "sanity" in exchange for a workable

“order” demonstrates order’s externality from experience; the stories and images Amalfitano uses to make sense of his surroundings seem like wild divergences from reality to his family and colleagues. Those like the clairvoyant Florita Almada, who “knew how to find a meaningful explanation for everything that happened to her,” do not divine a hidden order so much as impose a fabricated one—and one that, quite frequently, strikes others as far-fetched if not simply inaccurate (2666 427). These narratives, however, are not always successful. In “The Part about the Critics,” four scholars of German literature set out to find the “vanished” author Benno von Archimboldi. For a time, Archimboldi’s novels structure their professional and personal lives: on their continuous tour of European academies and conferences, the four friends seem to think about little else. And yet these novels, which provide narrative structure and professional purpose, occasionally appear like little more than a “verbal mass” (2666 83). It becomes clear that the search that should solidify the critics’ professional success and provide their personal satisfaction “could never fill their lives” (2666 29).

The information novel’s particular brand of the ordering narrative involves amassing data from which a structure seems to emerge. Amalfitano’s wife, visiting a sanatorium to speak with a Spanish poet, encounters a young doctor and biographer who seems to articulate the information novel’s relationship to order and chaos:

It’s my duty to collect information, dates, names, confirm stories, some in questionable taste, even damaging, others more picturesque, stories that revolve around a chaotic center of gravity, which is our friend here, or what he’s willing to reveal, the ordered self he presents, ordered verbally, I mean, according to a strategy I think I understand, although its purpose is a mystery to me, an order concealing a verbal disorder that would shake us to the core if ever we were to experience it. (2666 174)

By collecting information, names, and stories, the information novel also offers a “verbal order” that makes the “verbal disorder” of reality or experience approachable. The doctor/biographer implies that the “verbal order” of narrative functions as a kind of bulwark against an overwhelming chaos, as the literary narrative of the information novel seems to provide a comfortably manageable, if still daunting, version of reality. Reiter, hiding from the Red Army in a Ukrainian village, looks for such consolation in the diaries of Boris Abramovich Ansky; even when these diaries “grow chaotic, apparently haphazard,” Reiter “divined a structure and a kind of order” (2666 728). Reiter eventually takes his pseudonym, Benno von Archimboldi, from a reference in Ansky’s notebooks, in which Ansky describes the Italian painter Archimboldi’s work as representing “everything in everything”—a kind of blissful unity (2666 734). Though Ansky’s diaries seem to provide Reiter with a feeling of order or justification, it becomes clear as the diary ends that Reiter’s feeling is only an illusion; Ansky notes that “only in chaos are we conceivable” (2666 736). In his reading of Ansky’s notebooks—at first chaotic, then seemingly structured, and once again chaotic—Reiter attempts to maintain a verbal order, even as disorder continually undermines him.

### **Reading like a Detective**

In his determination to find order in chaos, Reiter resembles the process reader. Bolaño most often evokes this reader—capable of extracting meaning from a mess of information—in the guise of the detective. The literary detective first appears in Bolaño’s work in 1996 as the narrator of *Estrella distante*—Arturo B.—and reappears again two years later in *Los detectives salvajes* as Arturo Belano. Echevarria, quoting from

Bolaño's notes, says that "the narrator of 2666 is Arturo Belano," the same detective from these earlier works and possibly Bolaño's alter ego (2666 898). For Borges, the detective story presents "the idea of literature as an intellectual activity," one that requires readers to collect and sometimes infer clues, and to assemble a cohesive explanation from these clues (NF 492). A detective story reads like a puzzle, and by evoking the detective genre Bolaño suggests his novels read much the same way. In his brief essay "About *The Savage Detectives*," Bolaño says that—while "there are as many ways to read my novel as there are voices in it," "it can also be read as a game" (BP 353). Through this game, the reader creates verbal order from verbal disorder, but this game also allows the reader to negotiate a relationship with the text. Borges, to explain the usefulness of distinctions like literary genres, argues that "literary genres may depend less on texts than on the way texts are read" (NF 491). Because "the aesthetic event requires the conjunction of reader and text," the detective reader can approach nearly any text as a detective story—as a puzzle to piece together (Borges NF 491). The detective story does not designate a marginal "genre" or type of text, but rather illustrates the "general ontology of literature": "what the detective story highlights, [Borges] suggests, is the way in which the reader—any reader—forms the conditions of possibility for this 'aesthetic event'" (Sauri 407). By incorporating elements of the detective story, Bolaño perhaps acknowledges the reader's participatory role in the novel's game. As with any detective story, Bolaño's reader must engage in the "intellectual activity" of finding and parsing clues to reconstruct the "story" itself.

While the "classic" detective novel allows its readers to resolve the mystery, Bolaño refuses this kind of resolution. 2666, then, is not so much a detective novel as a

failed detective novel. Richard Swope, in “Approaching the Threshold(s) in Postmodern Detective Fiction,” describes the modernist detective novel as “a site of ideological containment, reinscribing the positivistic notion that the world, and the self, is known and knowable” (208). Such detective stories always end with the apprehension of the criminal and a thorough explanation of the detective’s deductive process that encompasses all of the story’s details. Borges refers to this type of detective story when he claims that “[the detective story] is safeguarding order in an era of disorder”:

[O]ur literature tends toward the chaotic. It tends toward free verse because free verse appears easier than regular verse, though the truth is that free verse is very difficult. It tends to eliminate character, plot; everything is vague. In this chaotic era of ours, one thing has humbly maintained the classic virtues: the detective story. For a detective story cannot be understood without a beginning, middle, and end. (*NF* 499)

*2666* does not belong to the category of detective stories Borges’ describes: its plot is fragmented and its characters often inscrutable<sup>14</sup>. The main mystery—who is responsible for the Santa Teresa murders—remains unsolved, and the novel’s final section offers not a climax but rather leads the reader back to the novel’s beginning. “The Part about the Crimes” details every murder, but explains only a handful. Instead of “safeguarding order,” *2666* disseminates disorder, and it belongs to a class of postmodern “metaphysical” detective stories discussed by Swope and Michael Holquist. The postmodern detective story “is non-teleological, is not concerned to have a neat ending in which all the questions are answered” (Holquist 153). Rather than counter chaos with “mechanical certainty, the hyper-logic of the classical detective story,” the postmodern

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<sup>14</sup> According to some standards, Bolaño’s characters may even appear underdeveloped. This perhaps reflects the novel’s impulse towards what Deckard calls “world-systems,” and its tendency toward “mapping the incommensurable geographies of global capital from Europe to the Americas” (369).

detective story “use[s] as a foil the assumption of detective fiction that the mind can solve all” (Holquist 155). And rather than allow the reader to solve the story’s mystery, it asks, like the publisher Mrs. Bubis asks of the Archimboldi critics, “how well anyone could really know another person’s work” (2666 26). By inviting an identification of the narrator Arturo Belano with himself, Bolaño seems to ask how much the author can know about his own work. The author appears in 2666 as yet another detective, attempting to interpret the clues but also unable to solve the mystery, as though writer and reader participate in the same game side by side. Bolaño, like other postmodern detective writers, draws from a classical genre that leads his readers to expect resolution and explanation, only to frustrate this expectation. He does not satisfy the desire for order, but exasperates this desire.

Albert Kessler, an American FBI agent who visits Santa Teresa to assist its police department with the crimes, serves as what Holquist calls the detective novel’s “essential metaphor for order” (141). In a restaurant on the Mexican border, Kessler assures a young reporter that “given the means and the time, you can do anything,” such as “establish a pattern of behavior” for even the sloppiest killer (2666 265). Kessler’s confidence promises a resolution, but as the novel progresses through “The Part about the Crimes,” this resolution seems increasingly unlikely. Bolaño’s descriptions of more than a hundred murder victims seem designed to provide the reader with clues—age, height, clothing, occupation. After only a few of these entries, however, it becomes obvious that these “clues” do not point towards a simple solution. Though many of the women remain unidentified, many are found in the desert, many have been raped prior to the death, and many die from strangulation, several others are murdered by family members or



acquaintances and are found in their homes, and others show no evidence of sexual assault. The investigator Epifano Galindo, after conducting a fruitless interview, “decided that no matter how much he thought about it he wasn’t going to come up with a good answer,” and indeed the novel’s readers must eventually reach the same conclusion (2666 425). Even when Epifano arrests Klaus Haas, supposedly the serial killer responsible for the murders, the persistence of crime in Santa Teresa prevents the reader from finding satisfaction in Epifano’s “solution.” Though many of the “clues” tempt some detectives (and some readers) to search for a pattern, Inspector Jose Marquez insists that “the killings don’t all follow the same pattern”; they cannot be explained by a single answer that accounts for all the inconsistencies among the clues (2666 560-1). Marquez tells a reporter from Mexico City, eager to understand the situation in Santa Teresa, that he “shouldn’t try to find a logical explanation for the crimes. It’s fucked up, that’s the only explanation” (2666 561). “The Part about the Crimes” does not present a puzzle to be solved but rather, by “demanding the suspension of [readers’] mastery,” presents a question with no possible answer and a chaos resistant to order (Nguyen 36-7). The information is always insufficient to develop a hypothesis, or even to get a sense of the murders. Bolaño’s detective narrative does not proceed linearly, with each clue leading toward a more sophisticated conclusion, but rather “all these clues end—when put together—in zero, or a circle, the line which has no end” (Holquist 153). 2666 does, in fact, make a complete circle, ending with Archimboldi’s trip to Santa Teresa, the supposed trip that sent the four critics on their journey at the book’s beginning. Though the novel takes its readers back to where they began, it reveals nothing along the way.

### **An Oasis of Boredom in a Desert of Horror**

If the detective story appeals to readers because of its promise of resolution or the satisfaction of completing a puzzle, *2666* sacrifices this appeal. Reiter suggests that literature provides a sense of satisfaction on par with the satisfaction of solving a crime: he views his own books as “a game insofar as he derived pleasure from writing, a pleasure similar to that of the detective on the heels of the killer” (2666 817). Presumably, this sense of pleasure and satisfaction would culminate in the completion of a book or the apprehension of the killer—in a kind of resolution. In his essays Bolaño describes a novel as “structured like a puzzle whose pieces the reader must put together to find the killer—for one thing—but also and above all for the sake of pleasure, since pleasure, pure and simple, is the ultimate goal of any novel” (*BP* 174). It seems that, by these standards, *2666* fails to fulfill this ultimate goal: the killer is never apprehended, and the pieces of the puzzle never fit. Tram Nguyen, in his essay on *2666* and Derrida, describes the novel as hostile towards its reader, as “the logic of the text creates a disconnection between readers and the literary work, compelling readers to make their way through in a provisional way, suspending all their pretension to control and ‘uncovering’ hidden truths” (37). *2666* does not allow readers to “figure it out” or solve the puzzle, but rather leaves them frustrated and unsatisfied. In this regard, Bolaño seems to challenge the notion of the “active reader,” which Amalfitano associates with Julio Cortázar and imagines as a sovereign figure who masters a text: “the active reader—the reader as envisioned by Cortázar—could begin his reading with a kick to the author’s testicles, viewing him from the start as a straw man” (2666 224). Cortázar’s active reader exercises a kind of authority over the text, but Bolaño constantly denies his reader this

authority. In its hostility, *2666* raises the stakes of the reader-text relationship. Certainly, as Borges says, “it is absurd to suppose that a book is much more than a book,” or to suppose that a book is anything at all without a reader (*NF* 491). *The Pale King* demonstrates the extent of the reader’s participation in the construction of a book’s meaning, and by extension the justification of the book itself. But *2666* demonstrates the limits of this participation, “forcing the reader to submit to the book’s sovereignty” (Nguyen 38). The systematic reader attempts to process the novel’s data, but the novel refuses to yield to a thorough processing.

This hostility or textual resistance differentiates the information novel from other data-documents, for the information novel presents “information” that is mostly inaccessible or disorienting, and rarely intended to lead the reader towards a clear conclusion. Like postmodern detective fiction, the information novel “is not a story—it is a process” (Holquist 153). And this process culminates not in the text itself, but in its reader, just as “the solution cannot be had by breaking a seal in a book—the solution must be found in the experience of the reader” (Holquist 151). But this “aesthetic experience,” should not—certainly in the case of the information novel—be collapsed with “aesthetic affect,” as it occasionally is in reader-response and reception theory. Winfried Fluck insists that the reception theory of Wolfgang Iser “is not a theory of meaning but of aesthetic experience,” though it soon becomes clear that by experience Fluck means not an interpretive but an affective experience: “Iser’s theory of reading moves beyond interpretation to text processing, because it is this processing which opens up the possibility of aesthetic effect” (189). This approach seems to stifle the cognitive aspect of “text processing,” and indeed Iser describes the interpretive work of the critic as

a faulty kind of text processing. In the “epic,” Iser argues, some elements of the work are less available than others, or more resistant to interpretation. This is certainly true in the case of the information novel, but while the information novel encourages a cognitive evaluation of these inaccessible elements, Iser describes this interpretation as a projection rather than an evaluation:

[T]he lack of availability is compensated for by the interpolation of habitual and extraneous standards, which ultimately characterize the critic more than they do the work itself. If the availability of the text is increased and the reader is confronted with experiences that render his habitual orientations uninteresting or even irrelevant, then he is obliged to modify these orientations; but a lack of availability serves to heighten the degree to which he will project his own standards. And this confirms the suspicion that the uniform meaning of the text—which is not *formulated* by the text—is the reader’s projection rather than the hidden content. (17)

While Iser rightly claims that a text’s “uniform meaning” is not inherent in the text but projected by the reader, his description of the critic’s interpretation of the “epic” seems to ignore an important intermediary stage. Especially in the information novel, the formulation of a “uniform meaning” need not be the goal of interpretation, and the critic need not resort to “projection” when this meaning seems hesitant to yield itself. Nor must the critic resort to, as Iser suggests, “an analysis of what actually happens when one is reading a text” (19). Rather, the unavailable or hostile elements of the information novel (or epic, for that matter) call for a reevaluation (cognitive, not merely affective) of the “habitual orientations” the reader uses to incorporate or elide these unavailable elements.

“Affective” reading risks missing the information novel’s critique of these habitual orientations. Emilio Sauri takes an “affective” approach to the only “visceral realist” poem in Bolaño’s *The Savage Detectives*. In the first section of *The Savage Detectives*, the Mexican poets Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano set out to find the reclusive

Cesarea Tinajero, the supposed founder of the visceral realist movement. In the second section, Bolaño provides the only example of Tinajero's work, a poem that consists of three lines—the first straight, the second wavy, and the third jagged—each with a small rectangle floating on top. According to Sauri, Tinajero's poem indicates that “meaning—the object of interpretation—is indistinguishable from the effect it has on its reader/beholder” (409). Sauri emphasizes Lima and Belano's questions, “What do you see,” and “what does a straight line suggest to you?” (*SD* 422). But Sauri overlooks other statements the two poets and their third interlocutor make about the poem. Lima and Belano's friend Amadeo says that he knows the poem is a poem “because Cesarea said so” (*SD* 421). And later Lima and Belano say, “The poem is a joke” (*SD* 423). It seems that Sauri emphasizes the poem's affective quality while ignoring its role in the larger narrative of the novel; Cesarea's poem does not simply affirm the poem's affect on the reader, but also seems to reveal the protagonists', and the readers', assumptions about what constitutes a “poem.” By focusing on the aesthetic affect of this episode, then, Sauri risks overlooking its other implications—implications teased out by cognitive interpretation. Yet Sauri and Fluck effectively dismiss interpretation. Ruth Leys, in “The Turn to Affect,” criticizes this method, claiming that the theorist of affect “is not interested in the cognitive content or meaning political or filmic or fictional or artistic representations may have for the audience or viewer but rather in their effects on the subject regardless of signification. The whole point of the turn to affect [...] is thus to shift attention away from considerations of meaning or ‘ideology’ or indeed representation to the subject's subpersonal material-affective responses” (450). As with

Iser's reading of the unavailable parts of the epic, Sauri's reading of Tinajero's poem overlooks Bolaño's critique of readers' habitual orientations toward poetry.

In Bolaño's *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, this shift from meaning towards affect poses a particularly poignant political threat. The final chapter of *Nazi Literature in the Americas* describes the career of the fascist, avant-garde poet Ramirez Hoffman. Hoffman, commissioned to "show that the new regime was interested in avant-garde art," displays a series of "visual poems," photographs of the bodies of women Hoffman has tortured and killed (NL 187). The pieces are supposedly "experimental, quintessential, art for art's sake," and Hoffman justifies the content of the photographs by claiming that "everyone would find it amusing" (NL 187). This final chapter takes to an extreme what all of *Nazi Literature in the Americas* seems to be striking at: even fascist literature can be justified by appealing to "art for art's sake" and aesthetic affect while ignoring "ideology." Bolaño critiques such an approach by confronting his readers with an avant-garde artist they should ethically condemn. If his critique generally remains implicit, he seems to explicitly accuse these fascist authors in the title of the novel's (fictionalized) bibliography: an "Epilogue for Monsters." *Nazi Literature in the Americas* exposes the risk of "affective" reading, and insists that, even in the midst of an aesthetic experience, political and ethical concerns should retain their validity. Although Hoffman's first viewer does experience an emotional reaction—she runs from the room in tears—her reaction depends as much on ethical revulsion as on aesthetic affect, and the latter does not eclipse the former. If the reader mirrors this ethical revulsion, the episode becomes not merely an instance of aesthetic experience, but an instance of ethical reflection. Contrary to certain theorists of reader-response and reception theory, interpretation

allows readers to oppose problematic “habitual orientations”—whether these orientations apply to assumptions regarding the status of literature, or acquiescence to a fascist politics.

“The Part about the Crimes” similarly forces readers to favor cognitive interpretation over aesthetic affect. Bolaño chronicles the murders in a catalogue, a tool that according to McHale has the effect of “evacuating language of presence, leaving only a shell behind” (153). Deckard also notes that Bolaño’s “forensic language” reduces the victims of the crimes to objects or data points, until “all affect has been emptied out” (364). The repetition of the catalogue and the tedium of the forensic style generate more boredom than affective response, as even the most dedicated reader could lose interest in the shoe size and hair color of each victim. The catalogue’s value has little to do with its ability to provoke a response or provide pleasure, and yet “The Part about the Crimes” seems to function as the novel’s centerpiece. Bolaño implies, like Archimboldi’s publisher Bubis, that “just because a novel bores me doesn’t mean its bad” (2666 826). In fact, the reader must wade through some “boring” material in order to mine the novel’s value. In *The Pale King*, Wallace makes the same assertion that reading or learning about important things often entails “boredom.” The information novel takes an interest in questions of aesthetic affect in order to expose how the prioritization of the reader and the reader’s experience might sideline important information because it is “boring” or “arcane.” For Wallace, this attitude seems to interfere with responsible citizenship. Similarly, for Bolaño this attitude becomes an ethical problem. Nguyen attempts to rethink theories about the reader “as an abstract and autonomous being who is granted full license and competencies,” and instead imagines the reader as “an engaged and

ethical wound” (37). The confrontation with 2666’s hostilities provides readers with neither an opportunity to demonstrate their cognitive prowess, nor an opportunity for an emotional connection. Rather, these hostilities force readers to acknowledge the ethical and political dimensions of their aesthetic experience. And if the reader finds “The Part about the Crimes” boring, 2666 asks them to reexamine their presumption of authority.

“The Part about the Crimes” might seem, at first, not as interesting as its subject matter warrants. A Mexican journalist reporting on the crimes, Guadalupe Roncal, says as much: “No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them” (2666 348). But with the catalogue of murders, Bolaño intends to do more than bore his readers; in fact, by tempting his readers to skip ahead or skim over the murders, Bolaño implicates his readers in the economic and political systems that marginalize the victims of these femicides. In her sociological study *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*, Melissa Wright considers how the rapid industrialization of Northern Mexico, driven by the demands of a global market, has rendered female factory workers disposable. Deckard points out that Bolaño’s Santa Teresa is only “a thinly veiled fictionalized version of Ciudad Juarez,” which Wright identifies as the “official ‘birth place’ of the country’s export-processing industries, known as the ‘maquiladoras,’” and in fact the site of hundreds of still unsolved murders (353; 7). These maquiladoras rely on a high rate of employee turn-over, which exempts the factories from providing benefits and prevents them from losing profit during periods of low production. Most workers leave after a little over a year, and are easily replaced by workers moving to Ciudad Juarez from the south. Notably, turn-over rates are highest among the factories’ female workers, as their “intrinsic value never appreciates into skill but instead dissipates



over time” (Wright 73). Wright argues that, from a managerial standpoint, the female worker is disposable, and “as a figure of waste, she represents the possibility of a human existence that is perhaps really worthless” (88). Political authorities respond to the murders of female workers with indifference, particularly if preventing the murders requires measures that could cut into profits. The collaboration between these authorities and the *malquiladora* owners in silencing rather than solving the murders renders the female workers socially worthless: as far as the authorities are concerned, they are no more valuable alive than dead.

Bolaño depicts this attitude of indifference by investigating, still in his forensic language, the corruption of the Santa Teresa police department. In *2666*, the chief of police seems reluctant to delve too deeply into the murders because, as the mayor of Santa Teresa says, “the important thing is not to stir up any shit” (2666 470). Indeed, the Santa Teresa police office loses so many blood tests and reports that it begins to seem complicit in the continuation of the murders. Two police officers’ are willing to “take care of everything” when yet another body appears on a factory’s grounds; four factory executives pay the officers a sum of money, and the case (like so many others) is eventually shelved (2666 359). The wave of murders in Ciudad Juarez, then, is not simply an unhappy coincidence: “the managerial discourses of non-involvement in the serial murders of young female employees are indeed linked to the materialization of turn over as a culturally driven and waste-ridden phenomenon attached to Mexican femininity<sup>15</sup>. The link is the value that the wasting of the Mexican woman—through both

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<sup>15</sup> Wright’s focus here on femininity could spawn another discussion about one of the big, ambitious novel’s problems: its difficulty in successfully incorporating female characters

her literal and her corporate deaths—represents for those invested in the discourse of her as cultural victim immune to any intervention” (Wright 74). By embedding this critique of the maquiladora system in the novel’s most tedious section, Bolaño forces readers to confront their complicity in an economic and political system that discards its marginal members like waste.

The murders of Santa Teresa remain unsolved and continue unchecked because, as Professor Kessler tells a young reporter, “everyone living in that city is outside of society, and everyone, I mean everyone, is like the ancient Christians in the Roman circus” (2666 267). Santa Teresa’s position on the periphery makes it a prime target for systematic exploitation, yet the detectives and reporters working in Santa Teresa fail to connect this exploitation to the crimes. Fixated instead (as all good detective readers should be) on the apprehension of the serial killer or killers, the “juridical, criminological, and media actors fail to perceive the femicides as complex rather than simple phenomena, the products of an assemblage of structures”—among them the “relation between the neoliberal economy and its treatment of women as disposable labor, worth less than the parts they assemble in the maquiladoras” (Deckard 360). Even while the reader may recognize what the detectives fail to see, the novel traps the reader in another ethical bind. While “The Part about the Crimes” exposes the relation between the murders and global capitalism, it also refuses to grant the victims of these murders a certain dignity or individuality. As Andrew McCann notes, in “The Part about the Crimes,” “individual characters have been rendered largely secondary to events that are bigger than anything the rubric of the individual can accommodate” (138). The reader is perhaps as guilty as

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and the surprisingly lack of female authors in the encyclopedic, systems, maximalist, or information genres.

the indifferent detective; although the reader recognizes the socio-structural causes of the crimes, the victims of the crimes remain disposable. None of the victims become characters, and in fact there are too many for readers to even remember their names. *2666* constantly refuses the reader access to the pain of the victims. Without experiencing the effect of the murders, the readers can not participate in (or perhaps even sympathize with) the pain of the other, and so must rely on cognitive interpretation. The “pleasure” that *2666* offers, then, is neither the pleasure of the detective story nor the pleasure of an emotional connection, but rather the pleasure of an intellectual engagement that allows readers to critically examine their own “habitual orientations” toward not only the literary masterpiece, but toward the reality the masterpiece proposes to describe.

While *2666*'s hostility towards its reader does maintain the autonomy of the literary work and even mimics the difficult masterpieces that Amalfitano praises, it “maintains its sovereignty without asserting its finality or mastery” (Nguyen 38). The inaccessibility of the murder victims—and in fact the tedium of the lengthy catalogue—demonstrates that some things always fall outside the scope of the novel, no matter how “total” it claims to be. Long argues, in his reading of Carlos Fuentes' *Where the Air is Clear*, that the brief appearance at the novel's beginning and end of a Mexican prostitute similarly gestures towards the limits of the total novel. Like the female *malquiladora* workers, Fuentes' prostitute represents a disposable or marginal member of society. And like the disposable workers of *2666*, Fuentes' prostitute never becomes a fully realized character; she remains inaccessible, and unknowable, to the reader. For Long, this “failure” to incorporate the margin is “an important type of success, since first, it alludes to a community whose necessary incompleteness and openness to the future can never be

contained, and second, it identifies an important driving force of literary production, namely, the constant reference—either intended or unconscious, explicit or implicit—to something that lies beyond the text’s attempt at narrative closure” (20). While for Bolaño the murders do evoke the inability of the “masterpiece” or the “total novel” to contain a complete vision of reality, this inability does not seem to constitute a success. As Long later says, the image of the disposable woman “trace[s] a constitutive relationship, within which the projection of silence onto the other founds the intellectual’s epistemic privilege” (27). The silence of the Santa Teresa murder victims, then, seems less a positive testament to the variability and openness of reality than a condemnation of the novel’s own intellectualist consumers, whose privilege depends on this very silence.

### **Reading (Ir)responsibly**

For Bolaño, the total masterpiece elides these marginal members of society. His critique of the masterpiece, then, is not only aesthetic or epistemological, but ethical, as the readers risk colluding in the elision of the politically disenfranchised. The four Archimboldi critics—three of them unabashed literary elitists<sup>16</sup>—have a rather myopic view of reality. They assign an almost farcical importance to their critical work; at one German literature conference, the French Pelletier “went on the attack like Napoleon at Jena, assaulting the unsuspecting German Archimboldi scholars” (2666 12). Bolaño suggests that even in their academic work, the four might be avoiding Archimboldi’s more troubling implications; Pelletier presents a “fiery and uncompromising [...]

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<sup>16</sup> These three are perhaps the least sympathetic characters in *2666*, an interesting indictment on Bolaño’s part of the literary institution that has since embraced him. In *Between Parentheses* Bolaño says: “Let’s just say that power, any power, whether left-wing or right-wing, would, if left to its own devices, reward only the clerks” (112).

Dionysian vision of ultimate carnival (or penultimate carnival) exegesis,” and dismisses outright the German scholars who “compared Archimboldi to Heinrich Böll. They spoke of suffering. The compared Archimboldi to Gunter Grass. They spoke of civic duty” (2666 12). Pelletier’s critical tendencies suggest his disregard for his own civic and ethical responsibilities and his problematic immersion instead in the Dionysian carnival of literary pleasure. Bolaño’s critics seem relatively immune to suffering, particularly the suffering of others. Three of the critics visit Santa Teresa in search of Archimboldi; as the crimes continue in the background, mentioned in passing by the three’s guide Amalfitano, the critics sip drinks by their hotel pool and reread Archimboldi. They are unable to pay attention to the crimes perhaps because they feel so out of place in “an environment whose language they refused to recognize, an environment that existed on some parallel plane where they couldn’t make their presence felt” (2666 112). Santa Teresa confuses the critics, as “a world in which their status as first world-intellectuals seems increasingly meaningless and ineffectual against the material realities of poverty and violence” (McCann 137). As if to defend their compromised status, the critics insist all the more on their cultural superiority, such as when they receive a letter from the dean of the University of Santa Teresa: “Dear Colleagues, he had written without a hint of irony. This made them laugh even more, although then they were immediately sad, since the ridiculousness of ‘colleague’ somehow erected bridges of reinforced concrete between Europe and this drifters’ retreat” (2666 112). The European critics insist on the mediocrity of their Mexican “colleagues” in response, McCann suggests, to the unsettling “image of how literary subjectivity founders on its own irrelevance”; while the European institution of academia justifies Pelletier in thinking of his work in Napoleonic terms,

Amalfitano offers a “disturbing vision of literary subjectivity stripped of its institutional justification<sup>17</sup>” (McCann 137).

While Bolaño’s four critics have the luxury of separating literature from concepts such as “civic duty,” in Santa Teresa literature is always, in some sense, about politics. Sergio Gonzalez, a reporter from Mexico City who travels to Santa Teresa to report on the murders, notes that sometimes “being an arts reporter in Mexico was the same as reporting on crime” (2666 464). In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova argues that “the oldest literary fields”—and it is no mistake that Pelletier hails from Paris, perhaps the most powerful literary field of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—are “the most autonomous as well, which is to say the most exclusively devoted to literature as an activity having no need of justification beyond itself. The scale of their resources gives them the means to develop, in opposition to the nation and its strictly political interests, a history and logic of their own that are irreducible to politics” (85). For Casanova, nations on the periphery of the literary world can not devote literature “exclusively” to literature, and the history and logic of literature is always bound up with the history and logic of politics.

Amalfitano describes the Latin American intellectual as a performer on a stage, standing in front of a mine or cave from which issues “unintelligible noises”:

Meanwhile, the shadowless intellectuals are always facing the audience, so unless they have eyes in the backs of their heads, they can’t see anything. They only hear the sounds that come from deep in the mine. And they translate or reinterpret or re-create them. Their work, it goes

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<sup>17</sup> Bolaño is notoriously suspicious of institutional justification. In a scathing review of both Allende and Coelho, he says: “Coelho’s prose, in terms of lexical richness, in terms of the richness of vocabulary, is poor. What are his merits? The same as Isabel Allende’s. He sells books. In other words: he’s a successful author. And here we come to the heart of the matter. Prizes, seats (in the Academy), tables, beds, even golden chamber pots belong, of course, to those who are successful or to those who play the part of loyal and obedient clerks” (*BP* 111-2).

without saying, is of a very low standard. They employ rhetoric where they sense a hurricane, then try to be eloquent where they sense fury unleashed, they strive to maintain the discipline of meter where there's only a deafening and hopeless silence. (2666 122)

The performers translate reality, in the process distorting it, and while Amalfitano's description may seem like a harmless exercise, this translation is always ideological. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, these performers reify the political agenda of the state, and by co-opting these performers the state "exorcises demons, it alters the national climate or at least tries to sway it. It adds layers of lime to a pit that may or may not exist, no one knows for sure" (2666 121). For Deckard, from Amalfitano's description of the performers "an uneasy equation can thus be drawn between the intellectuals' participation in the mystification of social conditions—adding lime to the pit of mass femicides in neoliberal Mexico—and bureaucrats' participation in the fascist machinery of genocide" (359). This participation, notably, is not always active. Bolaño seems to condemn the European critics for contributing to the atmosphere of violence simply by their indifference. And in fact, the three critics can not understand how their work may carry political and ideological implications: when Amalfitano finishes his monologue, the British Liz Norton says, "I don't understand a word you've said" (2666 123).

The tension surrounding Bolaño's critique of the literary institutions that tout "art for art's sake" arises from the acknowledgment that 2666 is a product of this very literary institution. Sarah Pollack notes that, for the North American and European readers who have enthusiastically embraced Bolaño's work, his "masterworks offer new commodified forms of reading Latin America and its literature," particularly in the American branding of *The Savage Detectives* as a kind of Mexican *On the Road* (AB 661). Bolaño in fact

anticipates this cultural commodification. When the critics first arrive in Santa Teresa, they appreciate the “sprawling city in the desert” as “something authentic, something full of local color” (2666 114). Similarly, for North American readers, Latin American literature has typically provided a taste of this exotic “local color” that feeds a “Latin American cultural essentialism” (Pollock LT 351). Pollack notes that this essentialism has often led to superficial (at best) interpretations of Bolaño’s work: “I suspect that the U.S. reader feels little need to avail himself of Bolaño’s ever-lurking irony. This is Latin America, after all, a space in which to satisfy one’s desires for rebellion and adventures of all stripes: political, sexual, spiritual, substance-induced, literary” (LT 359). In 2666, Bolaño directs his “ever-lurking irony” at just this assumption when he describes a “bad Soviet poet” as “possessing the same crass, arrogant ignorance as a Latin American poet speaking about his self, his era, his otherness” (2666 727). And despite Bolaño’s critique of apolitical literature and his insistence on the periphery eclipsed by the center, he also recognizes that his work is, in part, a product of his own collusion with the center. Bolaño acknowledges that he and writers like him can write their “massive, sprawling works” because “now they had more than enough time, which is perhaps what distinguishes a democracy, spare time, surplus time, time to read and time to think” (2666 821). Bolaño finds himself in a seemingly irresolvable contradiction. Deckard argues that “2666 anticipates its own reification via the dialectical understanding that artworks are simultaneously ideological and nonideological and via the formal embedding of the contradiction between the novel’s own commodity status and its aim to produce an ideologically distanced understanding of totality” (372). This commodification does not cancel out the political import of 2666 but asks (again) what purpose the novel serves.



Bolaño, perhaps like Wallace, would like to be able to write a different sort of novel—though he does not seem to suggest what such a novel would look like.

Like Wallace, Bolaño seems ultimately concerned with the purpose of literary engagement. Wallace concedes that the novel's value might rest in its ability to relieve boredom. *2666*'s epigraph—"an oasis of horror in a desert of boredom"—seems to suggest the same. Both novels—even in their most tedious moments—give their readers something to do, and, perhaps more importantly, the feeling that they are doing something. From the novel's beginning Bolaño's epigraph casts doubt on the novel's value, a doubt that strikes a discordant tone with one failed writer's assertions toward the novel's end. After lending the young Archimboldi an old typewriter, the man says he gave up writing because he "knew it was pointless to write. Or that it was worth it only if one was prepared to write a masterpiece" (2666 786). He insists that "there's actually no such thing as a minor work," and that "every minor work has a secret author and every secret author is, by definition, a writer of masterpieces" (2666 785). Literature, for the typewriter salesman, centers around the masterpiece, which not only generates the rest of literature, but is "the book that really matters, the wretched cave of our misfortune, the magic flower of winter" (2666 786). Yet this masterpiece is, as the epigraph suggests and as Borges says, nothing more than a book. If *2666* is a masterpiece, it is also just a book—which, as Bolaño says, people should read primarily for pleasure. It is a political statement, but also a best-selling commodity. The information novel's inability (or refusal) to resolve its central disparity—the disparity between its aspiration and its actuality—constitutes at once its failure and its value.

### The Ghost in the Machine

At the end of 2666, the typewriter salesman tells Reiter he gave up writing once he realized he would never produce a masterpiece. Minor works and their minor writers, the salesman says, are “only the outside. The shell of literature. A semblance” (2666 786). And though the information novelist dismantles the notion of the masterpiece, in some sense this novelist still attempts to become a writer of masterpieces, a major novelist. When the minor writer sits down to write, “There’s *nothing* inside the man who sits there writing. Nothing of himself, I mean [...] His novel or book of poems, decent, adequate, arises not from an exercise of style or will, as the poor unfortunate believes, but as the result of an exercise of *concealment*” (2666 786). The major novelist’s book arises not from concealment but from some kind of revelation—something “important”—and it’s this “book that really matters” (2666 786). Underneath the critique of the literary masterpiece and literary autonomy, the information novelist seems to harbor an ambition towards this kind of “greatness”—as the size, scope, and seriousness of the information novel seem to indicate. It perhaps reflects some degree of pride in the information novelist, channeled in 2666 through the salesman, who says of minor writers and their ambition: “How much better off the poor man would be if he devoted himself to reading. Reading is pleasure and happiness to be alive or sadness to be alive and above all it’s knowledge and questions. Writing, meanwhile, is almost always empty” (2666 786).

Bolaño and Wallace, then, address the question of the value of reading, but even more urgently, the question of the value of writing. This perhaps accounts for the appearance of both Bolaño and Wallace in their respective novels—whether as a character or an alter-ego narrator. Their appearances have the simultaneous effect of

validating and parodying authorial presence. When Wallace and Bolaño appear in their novels, they appear as fallible data-processors rather than autonomous creators, resembling the readers they project: Bolaño appears as the literary detective Arturo Belano and Wallace, as a former IRS agent. To some extent, these author personas are, like their readers, subject to the mechanistic functions of the text; lacking access to the “total vision” of even their own novel, these personas also participate in a process of data-sorting, system-ordering, and projection. Both Wallace and Bolaño seem to consider that “writing is other than the subject, in whatever sense the latter is understood. Writing can never be thought under the category of the subject” (Derrida *OG* 68). By subject, Derrida may simply mean “referent,” but it also seems possible that Derrida here refers to the subject as author, the authorial presence the text implies. Rather than a vehicle of presence, the text perhaps represents a “scientific machine” that “already operated within speech as writing and machine. It is the representer in its pure state, without the represented, or without the order of the represented naturally linked to it” (*OG* 312). The information novel tends to accept this separation of “representer” and represented, or signifier and signified (or even information and meaning), a theoretical approach that often goes hand in hand with the denial of authorial presence.

On the one hand, then, Bolaño’s and Wallace’s cameos undermine the legitimacy of their own presence. But on the other, and more importantly, these cameos remind readers that Bolaño and Wallace are, in fact, the living humans “holding the pencil.” As Wallace argues in his short review of H.L. Hix’s *Morte d’Author*, “critics can try to erase or over-define the author into anonymity for all sorts of technical, political, and philosophical reasons, and ‘this anonymity may mean many things, but one thing which it

cannot mean is that *no one did it*” (SF 145). There may be, as the salesman says, “nothing” inside the writer, but that does not mean there is no writer, and this writer may struggle with the text as much (if not more than) the reader. Wallace and Bolaño seem to highlight this struggle, in order to insist on their own presence underlying the mechanics of the text. This involves not only, as Wallace says in *Girl with Curious Hair*, imbuing “trivia with import,” but also imbuing the machine—and the book as a thinking machine—with meaning.

The information novel marks a transitional period in the relationship of machine and meaning. As Derrida notes, writing now often indicates not the presence of the signified, but a scientific program:

[T]he contemporary biologist speaks of writing and *pro-gram* in relation to the most elementary processes of information within the living cell. And, finally, whether it has essential limits or not, the entire field covered by the cybernetic *program* will be the field of writing. If the theory of cybernetics is by itself to oust all metaphysical concepts—including the concepts of soul, of life, of value, of choice, of memory—which until recently served to separate the machine from man, it must conserve the notion of writing. (OG 9)

If Wallace and Bolaño seem to conflate “man” and “machine,” they do so not to degrade the value of “man” and human experience, but to revise the metaphysical values associated with them. By juxtaposing the human and the machine, and the mechanistic and the “meaningful,” Wallace and Bolaño gesture towards the value of the machine itself. Readers can perhaps identify with some aspect of the mechanistic, data-driven text, and authors may find that the information novel provides a more productive avenue of communication than the masterpiece.

In his essay “The Private Life of a Novelist,” Bolaño imagines this struggle between the writer and the text as a kind of battle: “In my ideal literary kitchen there lives

a warrior, whom some voices (disembodied voices, voices that cast no shadow) call a writer. This warrior is always fighting. He knows that in the end, no matter what he does, he'll be defeated. But he still roams the literary kitchen, which is built of cement, and faces his opponent without begging for mercy or granting it" (*BP* 349). If the failure of the information novel is also, as Bolaño suggests, a defeat for the writer, then the question must arise: why bother? It could certainly be the case that the information novelist desires the reputation of a great or major author, though this may seem a paltry justification for such a massive and ill-fated undertaking. It could also be the case that the writer, like the reader, occasionally needs something to do, something to distract from boredom, though only the most ambitious or the most proud would choose to take up their time with writing rather than reading, which is, as Bolaño says, primarily about pleasure. And it could be the case that the novelist hopes to make a bold political statement, though this statement, if it is successful, will likely be mitigated by its commodification. Whatever the answer—neither novel provides one, and I doubt any ever could—the information novel raises this question not to reinstate the primacy of authorial intention or to discredit the interpretation of the reader. It does not matter too much, one way or the other, whether the reader can or cannot (or will or will not) identify the text's author; the question at hand, rather, is why writers, any writers, engage in literary production and why they expect readers to reciprocate this effort.

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