In her recent found poetry project called *Erasing Infinite*, the poet Jenni B. Baker has created – or should I say found – a number of poems by deleting words from the pages of *Infinite Jest*. Baker herself calls the poems erasure poems, and some of them are surprisingly, well, poetical. You can see a couple of examples on the slide behind me, and I’ll just quote a few of them:

Everywhere the air is hollow, inflated with the heat of living.

or:

I feel the warm silver threads singing,

all feeling a fluttery little moth in a widow web

and:

Here is how to be sorry: Be sure you are.

Nice, right? Anyway, I was inspired by Baker’s project to create some found poetry of my own. But I didn’t just want to plagiarize her project, and since she had already thought of using the text of *Infinite Jest* as her reservoir of words, I thought I’d do something else. So I decided to use the paratexts of *Infinite Jest* as my reservoir text. Here’s a poem I came up with by erasing words from the paratexts of the first edition of *Infinite Jest*:

Pynchon, Pynchon, Thomas Pynchon.

And here’s another poem I created by erasing words from the paratexts of the first paperback edition of the novel:

Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon

And for my final performance this morning, a poem derived from the paratexts of the current paperback edition of the novel – the one that looks like a box of detergent:

Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon, Thomas Pynchon.

Thank you. And I guess that’s enough poetry for now. The point, I hope, is clear: By far the most frequently invoked author in the paratexts of *Infinite Jest*, apart from Wallace himself, is Thomas Pynchon.

And so what, we might ask. Isn’t the name Pynchon just an empty bit of marketing, an easy way to tell prospective readers that Wallace has written a long and complex novel? The easy answer to this question is yes: The literary text itself is what matters, we might argue, and readers can safely disregard the publishers’ cheap attempt at riding on the back of previous literary triumphs. *Infinite Jest* can fend for itself, and Little Brown could surely have refrained from smothering the cover of Wallace’s novel with the name of another author.

The hard answer to the question is a bit more complex. Yes, the literary text itself is indeed what matters, and *Infinite Jest* has surely proven strong enough to fend for itself; BUT, as critics like Jerome McGann and Gérard Genette have forcefully reminded us, the idea of “the text itself” as some autonomous entity is highly problematic. To find an audience a text has to be embodied in a medium, and this embodiment always inflicts a certain body language on the text that interferes with its meaning.

Jerome McGann describes this inherent trait of literary communication in terms borrowed from information theory. Literary communication is not, he suggests, a question of sending and receiving messages through channels free from noise, or even of subtracting original messages from noisy channels. The very act of transmitting a poetic message (usually by embodying a text as a book) adds a significant amount of noise, but rather than thinking of this distortion as something exterior to the work of art, McGann suggests that we see it as an integral aspect of the meaning of the work. The medium may not be the message, as McLuhan claimed, but the medium certainly affects the message, and in reality the two become inseparable in the distorted transmissions we know as art. As McGann puts it: “the verbal text and the documentary materials operate together to a single literary result.”

As a consequence of the noisy materiality of literature, the dominant hermeneutic approach to the interpretation of literature should be supplemented with an increased awareness of material matters and their co-authoring function. An important and very visible part of these material matters are the so-called paratexts, a term originally introduced by Gérard Genette. In the opening pages of his classic book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Genette provides a good description of the function of paratexts:

For us, the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, *a threshold*, or [...] a “vestibule” that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an “undefined zone” between the inside and the outside, or a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text.

Génette argues that paratexts often steer the reception into certain predetermined grooves and help decide how the text is perceived by readers and critics. We therefore ignore paratexts at our own peril. Or more precisely: we cannot ignore them, even if we want to. Paratexts form a set of blinkers, pointing our vision in certain directions, and the decision to invoke Pynchon so often in the paratexts therefore has a number of consequences. In the rest of my presentation, I’ll take a closer look at some of these consequences.

One consequence of the repeated appearance of the signifier Pynchon on the first edition of *Infinite Jest* is that the novel was widely hailed by reviewers as the second coming of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Most of the early reviews took their cue from the paratexts and compared Wallace’s novel to Pynchon’s 1973 novel, and this comparison recurred so many times that, in Bruno Latour’s term, it became more or less blackboxed. If you read something often enough, it becomes true. Therefore it was only natural that the first academic essay to deal with *Infinite Jest*, Tom LeClair’s “The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann and David Foster Wallace” from 1996, had as its main agenda to show that Wallace and his contemporaries were the true heirs of Pynchon. LeClair’s argument was very convincing at the time, and much of it remains so, but I’d argue that the publishers’ own marketing of Wallace as Pynchon reincarnated made it even more convincing: We, both ordinary readers and academics, already knew from the paratexts of *Infinite Jest* that Pynchon and Wallace were alike; LeClair’s only job consisted in telling us exactly how they were similar.

The comparisons with Thomas Pynchon not only appeared on *Infinite Jest*, but followed Wallace throughout his entire writing career. The back cover of the first edition of *Girl With Curious Hair* quotes four different reviews of Wallace’s debut novel, and two of the quotes mention Pynchon. Furthermore, the publisher of *Girl With Curious Hair* (W. W. Norton) begin their own description of the book’s contents by stating that “David Foster Wallace’s debut novel *the Broom of the System*, provoked comparisons to Pynchon”. Once again, the prospective buyer who picks up *Girl With Curious Hair* is provided with a ready-made literary context for the work in her hand.

It is not just empty talk when Norton claims that Wallace’s debut novel provoked comparisons to Pynchon. More specifically, many reviewers compared *The Broom of the System* to Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). For instance, America’s probably most influential reviewer, Michiko Kakutani, said in her review of the novel, and I quote: “From its opening pages onward through its enigmatic ending, *The Broom of the System* will remind readers of *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon.”

And as we heard earlier this morning, the comparison between *The Broom of the System* and *The Crying of Lot 49* does seem apt. Both novels tell the story of a young, lonely woman who searches for truth in a textual wilderness of conspiracies and codes, both novels examine the impact of media on our lives, and both contain their fair share of zany humor. And, well, both Lenore Stonecipher Beadsman and Oedipa Maas apparently like to dance, as you can see behind me. What’s more, we’ve learned from D. T. Max’s biography that Wallace did read *The Crying of Lot 49* in his first years at Amherst College. According to Max its »effect on Wallace cannot be overstated«, and he quotes Mark Costello who says that “Wallace reading Pynchon was like Bob Dylan finding Woody Guthrie”. So there seems no doubt that *The Crying of Lot 49* had a huge impact on the young Wallace; an impact which is readily felt in *The Broom of the System*. In fact, the influence of Pynchon’s novel on Wallace’s first novel was so pronounced as to embarass Wallace and cause him to lie about it later. In a letter to Steven Moore from 1988 he claimed not to’ve read Pynchon’s novel, and in an interview with David Wiley following the publication of *Infinite Jest* he repeated this claim: He said: “The first book that I wrote, *The Broom of the System*, some reviewer for the *New York Times* [and we know that’s Kakutani] said it was a rip-off of *The Crying of Lot 49*, that I hadn’t read yet. So I got all pissed”. Again, not entirely truthful.

So on the one hand there can be no doubt that *The Broom of the System* was to some extent influenced by *The Crying of Lot 49*. On the other hand, I would argue that the many comparisons in the early reviews between *The Broom of the System* and *The Crying of Lot 49* had less to do with any inherent qualities of the two works than with the paratexts on the first edition of *The Broom of the System*. The editor of the novel, Gerald Howard, wrote the book description on the dust-jacket, and he chose to close the book description with the following statement: “The inventiveness, reach, and fine disdain for ‘reality’ of this novel will remind many readers of the work of John Irving, Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, and especially the Thomas Pynchon of *The Crying of Lot 49*.” Compare this with Kakutani’s statement: “From its opening pages onward through its enigmatic ending, *The Broom of the System* will remind readers of *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon.” Right down to the verbal tense, Kakutani’s comparison seems to take its cue not from the novel itself, but from its paratexts. Wallace’s publishers were right when they claimed that *The Broom of the System* provoked comparisons to Pynchon, but we should consider the fact that it was not the text itself as much as the paratexts that did the provoking. Another reviewer of the novel, Rudy Rucker, seemed to acknowledge this as he wrote: “The publishers are talking Pynchon, and there are definite similarities.”

At any rate, the damage was done, and from then on Wallace was hounded by comparisons to Pynchon. Early in his career, Wallace bore these frequent comparisons with equanimity. In the McCaffery interview, Wallace called Pynchon one of our “really great fiction writers”, and in his “E Unibus Pluram” essay he praised Pynchon’s “oracular foresight” and called his novels “seminal”. The comparisons kept coming, however, and after the publication of *Infinite Jest* Wallace seemed to grow increasingly annoyed. In 1997 he said: “I bristle sometimes at getting compared to some older – like some of these classic postmodern guys. The – the – the “P” guy comes into mind. I won’t even say his name.”

Wallace’s frustration is understandable. Among other things his work can be construed as an extended critique of postmodernism, yet this aesthetic agenda did nothing to curb the countless comparisons to Pynchon, whom he once described as “a patriarch for my patricide.” In spite of Wallace’s growing wish to distance himself from this particular postmodern patriarch, Wallace’s publishers kept invoking the P-guy on most of his new books, right from *The Broom of the System* and up to and including *Consider the Lobster*. In that sense, the dreaded comparison gradually became inevitable: Not so much because of any inherent traits of Wallace’s writings, but more as a result of the way in which Wallace’s different publishers chose to present his work to the public, leaving us no choice but to consider Wallace in light of Pynchon. Wallace’s fate, then, was to be covered in P, and one gets the sense that his dust-jackets gradually came to function as straight-jackets that he continually struggled to wrestle free of.

Before this story turns into a tragedy, however, it should be pointed out that Wallace himself saw certain advantages to being covered in P. Wallace once wrote to Jonathan Franzen that he was glad everyone focused on his debt in *The Broom of the System* to Pynchon, because it meant they didn’t see how much he had taken from DeLillo. And in hindsight, Don DeLillo does seem to have been a much more important influence on Wallace than Pynchon. Through many years, Wallace kept up an elaborate correspondence with DeLillo. Furthermore, Mike Miley’s recent article “Reading Wallace Reading” analyzes Wallace’s marginal writings in his copies of some of DeLillo’s novels, and Miley’s findings make it clear just how much Wallace identified with and learned from DeLillo’s fiction. Some of the episodes in *Infinite Jest* are clearly modelled on DeLillo’s *End Zone*, just as the dysfunctional Incandenza family seems to have a lot in common with the Gladney family in *White Noise* – a novel which is reverentially treated by Wallace in the E Unibus Pluram-essay. Come to think of it, the polluted, media-saturated and slightly futuristic America of *Infinite Jest* would seem to have much more in common with *White Noise* than with *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

Nevertheless, the connections between DeLillo and Wallace take up much less space in the Wallace reception than the connections between Wallace and Pynchon. DeLillo was rarely mentioned in the early reviews of *Infinite Jest*, perhaps because the name DeLillo does not appear at all in the paratexts of that novel, neither in the first edition nor in any of the subsequent paperback editions. Wallace was not covered in D, he was covered in P, and I would argue that this has made a significant difference in the reception of Wallace. This is not to say, of course, that the similarities between DeLillo and Wallace haven’t already been noted by many other critics. They certainly have, and only just this morning we heard a couple of excellent examples. But I would argue that the DeLillo comparisons have been impeded, or at least delayed, by Pynchon’s massive presence in the paratexts.

As I hope to have made clear, I do believe that the comparisons to Pynchon make a lot of sense, and I have argued elsewhere what can be gained by studying some of the affinities between Pynchon and Wallace. Those affinities are numerous, and I think that in order to understand Wallace’s complex relationship with postmodernism, it is necessary to map some of the areas where Wallace and Pynchon do overlap. I also believe, however, that the ubiquity of Pynchon in the paratexts to Wallace’s work has blackboxed the connection between the two writers and has impeded other, possibly more fruitful, comparisons to other writers, such as Don DeLillo or Cormac McCarthy, for that matter.

For as long as he lived, Wallace’s publishers insisted on covering his books in P, but as a coda to my presentation I’d like to point to the curious fact that Pynchon’s name has not appeared on any of the Wallace books published by Little, Brown since his death in 2008. Neither the paratexts of *This is Water*, *The Pale King* or *Both Flesh and Not* have deigned to mention Pynchon. In fact, they don’t mention any other authors at all, focusing instead on Wallace’s own qualities. The paratexts of *The Pale King* focus on Wallace’s originality, and the paratexts of *Both Flesh and Not* mention his “inimitable voice”. Wallace’s posthumous work has thus been allowed to met its readers unencumbered with comparisons to other authors. Apparently, it has taken death to cleanse Wallace’s dust-jackets of P and turn him into a writer beyond compare.