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Cutting to the chase : microfictions, empathy and the new sincerity

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Abstract

It has become a critical consensus that microfictions (or flash fictions) are particularly suited to the age of social media. In his attempt to theorise the genre, William Nelles (2012) allows for a wide range of narrative and thematic possibilities but maintains that, because of their radical brevity, flash fictions need to renounce characterisation, reader empathy and identification. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that the generic limitations specified by Nelles can be transcended. By examining a selection of microfictions by David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers, the article argues that flash fictions can evoke projective empathy and become a successful vehicle for a "two-way conversation" between the author and the reader – in line with Adam Kelly's notion of the postironic new sincerity. Textual analysis of the stories is supplemented by the results of a reader-response survey conducted among the students and staff of the University of Wrocław.

Keywords

Microfiction; flash fiction; narrative; David Foster Wallace; Dave Eggers; postirony

Character delineation, emotional resonance and empathetic identification are not among microfiction's most likely bedfellows. Although the genre is broadly regarded as very accommodating in terms of both form and content, the word limit does not seem to offer enough space for psychological exploration. However, as I will seek to demonstrate, microfictions are capable of offering insight into character and eliciting reader's empathy and therefore they can be a successful vehicle for the new sincerity movement – a literary phenomenon diagnosed by

Adam Kelly in his article on the influence of David Foster Wallace on contemporary American fiction, which, in his view, veers away from postmodern distance and irony towards sincerity, understood, after Lionel Trilling, as "a congruence of avowal and actual feeling" (Kelly 2010: 132). After reviewing the most common definitions and the historical development of the genre, I will turn to William Nelles's article "Microfiction: What Makes a Very Short Story Very Short?" for an examination of the possibilities and limitations of the genre. While accepting some of Nelles's conclusions, I will dispute his points that microfictions need to be driven by plot development while renouncing characterisation and empathetic response owing to their restricted length. My argument will be based on a close reading of very short fictions by Wallace and Dave Eggers, both identified with the new sincerity, as well as on the results of a reader-response survey conducted at the University of Wrocław.

Definitions, origins and generic characteristics of microfiction

In *The Cambridge Companion to the English Short Story*, Marc Botha defines microfictions as "small literary forms, either historical or contemporary, which are suited to representing a wide range of subjects while remaining responsive to the shifting contexts of literary production and reception" (2016: 202). That non-restrictive definition could also be applied to a number of other synonymous labels in circulation, such as flash fictions, sudden fictions, quick fictions and short-short stories, to list only the most popular ones.[1] Whereas the thematic freedom of the genre is a given, there is no critical consensus as regards its maximum length, which may range from 2,500 words (in Irving and Ilana Wiener Howe's *Short Shorts* [1982]) to 140 characters (Twitterfiction) or six words (six-word stories). Over the last decades, one may observe the tendency to set increasingly lower limits. The most common one appears to be 750 words, as adopted by the editors of *Flash Fiction* (1992), *Flash Fiction Forward* (2005) and *Flash Fiction International* (2015). That is also the limit that I shall adopt for the purpose of my study – the length of the examples to be discussed here ranges from 249 to 717 words.[2]

Critics often stress the ancient lineage of microfictions and trace the origins of the genre to Biblical parables, beast fables and jokes (Stern 1996: 16, Howitt-Dring 2011: 50). Antiquity, according to Nelles, is also when the "stigmatization" of short works begins with Aristotle's provision that "beauty is a matter of size and order, and therefore impossible […] in a very minute creature" (2012: 87). Ziegler's much shorter "genealogy of influence" begins with Edgar Allan Poe, who also had reservations about the potential of "too brief" works, which are by definition incapable of moving the "soul' of the reader or even having "any effect at all" (Ziegler 2014: xxvi, Nelles 2012: 87). Botha, in turn, argues that in spite of its qualified degree of popularity in modernism "microfiction takes root in the public literary imagination as an independent genre only in the wake of

the experimentalism of the 1950s and 1960s" (2016: 203). Among the notable representatives of very short fiction in English in the succeeding decades of the twentieth century were Robert Coover (the editor of the pioneering "Minute Stories" special issue of *TriQuarterly* in 1976), Donald Barthelme, Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel and Tobias Wolff – authors mostly from the US.[3] Some of the best-known twenty-first-century microfictionists have been Lydia Davis, Dave Eggers, Robert Olen Butler, Michael Martone and Dan Rhodes. Today flash fictions have come to be seen as a "professional genre" – an obligatory addition to creative writing curricula and an increasingly common category in literary competitions (Botha 2016: 205).

Critics give various answers to the question what it is about microfictions that taps into the current Zeitgeist. A common hypothesis points to their brevity being perfectly suited to the apparently dramatically short attention spans of the contemporary audience. Botha concedes that flash fiction may be "in some sense an opportunistic genre increasingly framed by commercial and utilitarian concerns", but emphasises that its link with the spirit of the times is much stronger – it "respond[s] proactively to the pace of the contemporary condition". Since it operates on a "minimal scale", it needs to infuse it with "maximal intensity" and, as such, it enables the impatient twenty-first-century reader to "see fast but dwell long"[4] (Botha 2016: 217). The rise of microfictions has also been attributed to the development of digital technology and the new media, to which – according to Botha – it has an "intuitive connection" (216). Nelles locates the popularity of microfictions in the broader context of modern culture's particular preference for "miniature art forms", a capacious category in which he includes "pop songs (and their accompanying videos), television commercials, and bumper stickers" (2012: 87).

The congruence between radically short literary forms and the spirit of the times has been most forcefully asserted in David Shields and Elizabeth Cooperman's manifesto *Life Is Short, Art Is Shorter: In Praise of Brevity* (2014). In the collage-like introduction, the authors weave a spirited apology for all things short[5] out of appropriated excerpts from other critics, thinkers and fiction writers. The dominant theme of the essay is the age-old misconception that "length is synonymous with profundity". Hence the recent privileging of the novel as the supreme literary genre – a convention that springs from the ideologies of "expansionism" and "empire-building", and the "writer's interest in domination" (Shields and Cooperman 2014: 22). Since crowding has come to define contemporary experience, literature should, Shields and Cooperman believe, accommodate that change by moving out of an estate mansion to "an efficiency on the twenty-third floor" (23). By renouncing the Byzantine apparatus of the meticulously plotted novel, short forms "cut to the chase" (26), often "cut[ting] to the quick"[6] (23). This emphasis on direct communication and emotional resonance is an important overlap between the rationale of microfictions and that of the new sincerity. The need for absolute compression and precision – imposed by the stringent space limit – is a considerable challenge: "I didn't have time to write a short letter",

noted Pascal, "so I wrote a long one instead" (22). The desired effect of a success-ful microfiction – in line with Botha's postulate of "minimal scale" and "maxi-mum intensity" – is inversely proportionate to its length: "when you dip a single toe in cold water, a shiver runs through your entire body" (Shields and Cooper-man 2014: 27).

The poetics of microfiction

Whereas *Life Is Short* is a manifesto aiming to assert the politics of very short forms, Nelles's "Microfiction: What Makes a Very Short Story Very Short?" of-fers the most comprehensive analysis of the poetics of the genre. The structural model for the article, and the source of the intertextual reference contained in the title, is Norman Friedman's seminal essay "What Makes a Short Story Short?" (1958). Nelles examines the same set of "six key narrative elements: action, char-acter, setting, temporality […] intertextuality, and closure" with regard to mi-crofictions (2012: 88). His paradoxical conclusion is that the poetics of the short story and microfiction vary considerably in most aspects: the latter is "not just shorter than the short story, but different: if it's not a different genre, then at least a different species" (97).

Unlike the short story, which, according to Friedman, displays a strong reli-ance on the omniscient narrator, microfiction offers a greater variety of internal and external perspectives, including first-person narration (90). As for the plot, Nelles argues that flash fiction usually concentrates on "a single scene or speech", which is not, however, limited to "small static actions"; rather, the action tends to be "large, with major changes and reversals", "more palpable and extreme" than in regular short stories (90–91). Whereas Botha agrees that microfictions are generally constructed around a "single exceptional event or epiphanic mo-ment" (2016: 210), Adam Rovner states that they aspire to meeting the "minimal condition of narrative", which requires an account of "at least two events" with a "causal connection" between them (2015: 113). Nelles goes on to argue that the chronology of microfictions tends to be linear, with analepsis and prolepsis being used less frequently than in short stories. The time it takes to read a microfiction "closely corresponds", in Nelles's view, to "the duration of the story events de-scribed" (2012: 93–94). That observation appears to be disputed by Rovner, who analyses the temporal structure of microfictions through Gérard Genette's "four basic forms of narrative movement": summary, scene, ellipse and pause. Rovner maintains that while in longer fictional texts summary tends to be used rarely and its function is restricted to binding disparate elements, in microfiction it is "not merely connective tissue, but the essential tissue that comprises the narrative form itself" (2015: 115). Summary, which tends to cover a long period in a short space, is incompatible with Nelles's argument about microfiction's preference for a short duration of the reported event(s), which is rather the domain of the Genettian scene.

The last important statement that Nelles makes about the plot of microfiction is the assertion of the need for a closed ending, frequently with a strong element of surprise. In support, he quotes Trentwell Mason White's remark that "the brief yarn always concludes with a surprise, a sting, a turning of the tables" and Paul Zumthor's observation (made in the context of medieval short forms) that "in extreme cases the whole story seems determined by its final moment" (qtd. in Nelles 2012: 97).[7] An example of such a microfiction is Jeffrey Whitmore's "Bedtime Story":

> "Careful, honey, it's loaded," he said, re-entering the bedroom. Her back rested against the headboard. "This for your wife?"
> "No. Too chancy. I'm hiring a professional."
> "How about me?"
> He smirked. "Cute. But who'd be dumb enough to hire a lady hit man?"
> She wet her lips, sighting along the barrel.
> "Your wife." (Whitmore 1995: 13)

An excessive reliance on a "punch line twist", as exemplified above, is seen by Holly Howitt-Dring as a weakness in some microfictions (2011: 55). Shields and Cooperman speak of the desired effect of the ending as "retrospective redefinition" – compelling the reader to reassess the entire text in view of the information discovered in the closing sentence (2014: 28). The most common "plot twists" rely on confounding the reader's expectations about the protagonist's or narrator's age, gender, sexual orientation or species (if the character is disclosed to be non-human) (Nelles 2012: 97). The surprise quality of microfictions does not, according to Nelles, apply to their setting, which is, in most cases, "familiar", "generic" and "blank" (93).

Another element which Nelles sees as impossible to retain in microfictions is characterisation. Whereas in the short story character is "precisely delineated", in flash fiction the word limit prevents the construction of "psychologically nuanced three-dimensional characters with individual histories", who need to be replaced with "anonymous adults of unspecified age". According to Nelles, the characters populating microfictions tend to be not only "nameless" but also devoid of any "individualized identities or personalities". The "flattening out" of character leaves room for greater attention to be paid to "circumstance" (2012: 92). The critic cites Jeffrey Whitmore's 53-word "Bedtime Story" as an exemplary microfiction in that respect. Its three unnamed characters – husband, wife and female lover – are involved in a murder plot with a twist at the end. Despite addressing such potentially engaging subjects as infidelity and revenge and offering dramatic action, the story does not aim to elicit any emotional response or empathetic identification – "the nuances of individual perception and psychology have become irrelevant" (92).

The last quality shared by microfictions to be indicated in Nelles's article is their strong reliance on "explicit or implicit intertextual reference". Hinting at

another work – most often in the title of the piece (for instance, "The Britches of Madison County") – is a very effective and economical way of suggesting a wider context of interpretation without increasing the number of words (2012: 95–96). One of Nelles's illustrations of microfiction's capacity for context expansion by intertextual means is Amy Hempel's 43-word-long "Housewife":

> She would always sleep with her husband and with another man in the course of the same day, and then the rest of the day, for whatever was left to her of that day, she would exploit by incanting, "*French* film, *French* film." (Hempel 1996: 101)

In conclusion, the critic ventures that while literary impressionism has been particularly suited to the poetics of the short story, microfiction displays an affinity with expressionist fiction, which Brian Richardson defines as marked by a preference for "extreme events" and protagonists deprived of "personal history" or a life outside the recounted event (Nelles 2012: 97–98).

Microfictions and empathy: David Foster Wallace

In the remaining part of this article I wish to examine a selection of microfictions from David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and Dave Eggers's *Guardian* column anthologised in *Short Short Stories* (2005) and *How We Are Hungry* (2005) in order to demonstrate that the generic limitations specified in Nelles's article can be transcended. I shall argue that in Wallace's and Eggers's flash fictions only two out of six critical observations can be said to apply – the lack of a precise delineation of the setting and a short duration of the recounted scene. In my analysis I will concentrate on the absence of a dramatic plot culminating in a surprise ending and the presence of a complex engagement with character. The latter will then be related to the tenets – particularly the emphasis on empathy – of the new sincerity.

The point of departure for my analysis is the following remark by Nelles, in which the incompatibility between his generic observations and the poetics of Wallace's and Eggers's very short stories is most striking:

> One might […] write microstories in which nothing significant happens, but as far as I can tell, no one does, probably because stories in which "nothing" happens depend so strongly upon our intimate knowledge of, and emotional investment in, that particular character to whom that particular nothing happens. Compelling the reader to react to these characters with such a high degree of empathy and identification may require more than just the page or two of a microstory. (Nelles 2012: 91–92)

The above statement appears in the context of Nelles's observation that "subtle adjustments in attitude or alterations in perception" are not the domain of microfictions, which favour more "palpable and extreme" developments (91). Wallace's "Think" (719 words) is one of the best illustrations of flash fiction's capacity for representing static scenes that focus on the nuances of character at the expense of plot. Characteristically for the genre,[8] the story begins *in medias res* – a woman has undone her bra, making the man who is standing next to her think immediately about his family. The narrator explains that the scene is taking place in the man's house while his wife and son along with the woman's husband have "gone to the mall" (Wallace 1999: 73). The woman's gesture, preceded by "certain comments, looks, distended moments over the week-end he'd thought were his vanity", does not lead to adultery but rather initiates the man's intense consideration of her character – her readiness to "keep her heels on if he asked her to", her look "from Page 18 of the Victoria's Secret catalogue" and her wish to make the moment accord with a "scene from some movie she loves" (73). Suddenly, he finds himself kneeling; when he clasps his hands, it becomes evident that he is praying. Her initial expression conveying "slight amusement" and "sophistication" gives way to confusion and self-consciousness about her nudity. She breaks the silence by asking a "three-word question", to which he reacts with a wince and answers, "It's not what you think" (73). The story concludes with the narrator imagining her next – possible but unlikely – move: "And what if she joined him on the floor, just like this, clasped in supplication: just this way" (74).

The event, or non-event, described in "Think" is in no obvious way "palpable". Rather than exploit the narrative potential of an adultery scene, it chooses to delve into the subtleties of thought and feeling of its two actors. The suspense generated by the man's apparent procrastination is not used to maximise the surprise effect of an unexpected resolution. If the ending is indeed surprising, it is so because of the lack of a *dénouement*. What is offered instead is an intrusion from without – the narrator's what-if remark, pointing to the story's preoccupation with empathy. Despite its brevity, "Think" manages to sketch its two characters in such a way as to transcend their default anonymity. They may remain nameless but the insights into their intimate thoughts provoked by a moment of crisis lend them a sufficient degree of roundedness to make the reader shed their programmatic indifference to the otherwise flat characters of microfictions. The Forsterian categories could here be more helpfully replaced by Paul Pickrel's notions of essentialist and existential characters. Whereas the former elicit "detachment", the latter seek "understanding" and evoke the reader's "sympathy". While the essentialist character is meant to be "looked at", the existential "is to be felt with" (1988: 183). "Think" establishes the space for empathy with the characters – particularly with the man, who remains the focaliser for the most part – in two ways: by granting access to their thoughts via omniscient narration and by placing them in a situation from the range of common human experience (being tempted to infidelity). It employs what Suzanne Keen calls "perspective-taking" and what she considers the foundation of narrative empathy (Pettersson Peeker 2015: 10) – a means for the reader

to transcend their default self-centredness and view, if only for a moment, the world through another pair of eyes.

In "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XI)," Wallace achieves a similar effect using similar methods despite having only 412 words at his disposal. Its first-person narrator begins by recounting an anxiety dream in which his companion makes him realise that he has become blind. His "incredibl[e] sad[ness]" gives way to an outburst of tears despite the companion's warning that crying will only aggravate his condition. He wakes up crying "so hard [he] can't really see anything" (Wallace 1999: 35). It takes him some time to recover with the help of his girlfriend, who is "concerned" and willing to discuss it with him. The next day the narrator cannot function normally at work: he keeps thinking about the fragility of eyesight and about blind people, with whom he has never sufficiently empathised. As the sense of guilt mixes with relief, he is constantly on the brink of "tearing up again". He ultimately leaves work early and goes home. Feeling utterly exhausted, both physically and emotionally, he collapses on his bed and "pass[es] out" at 4 in the afternoon (36).

"Yet Another Example…" is at odds with Nelles's theoretical pronouncements in most aspects. Its plot, although more developed than in "Think", does not meet the critic's requirement of featuring an "extreme" event. The epiphanic moment in the story – the realisation what a "lucky coincidence" it is that the narrator can see – does not fulfil that expectation, as the "major change" described by Nelles cannot be confined to the mind of the character. The story also refuses any narrative twist or surprise ending; on the contrary, the image of the narrator going to sleep in the afternoon could – outside the context of the story – be considered anticlimactic, although here it is consistent with the restrained poetics of the piece. The detachment typical of the essentialist character is overcome by similar means to the ones used in "Think". Instead of an omniscient narrator with internal focalisation, in "Yet Another Example…" Wallace adopts a first-person narrator, which arguably makes it even easier for the reader to "feel with" them. The "emotional investment" on the part of the reader, which Nelles considers beyond the capacity of microfiction, is made possible here through, once again, placing the character in a situation to which most readers can relate as well as through exposing his extreme vulnerability. As many as 79% of the readers who participated in my survey admitted to feeling empathy for the main character (46% empathised "to a large extent"). Among the most commonly stated reasons for self-identification were the experience of being strongly affected by a dream, the fear of losing eyesight and the fear of losing what one takes for granted.

The survey, to which I shall also refer in the next section, was carried out on 1–12 May 2017 via Google Forms. The surveyed were students, graduates and staff of the Institute of English Studies at the University of Wrocław. Each of the 24 respondents was asked to read five microfictions by Wallace and Eggers and answer two questions about each story: "To what extent do you feel empathy for the main character of the story?" and "If you do, can you identify with them a little? What is it that you feel you have in common with them?" The first question

required a multiple-choice response ("to a large extent", "a little" or "not at all"); the second was an optional open question. The respondents were also asked to state their age and gender.

Microfictions and empathy: Dave Eggers

The narrator's admission of weakness or emotional vulnerability as a way of eliciting an empathetic response from the reader is a strategy also used in a number of microfictions by Dave Eggers. The insecure second-person narratee of "Accident" (421 words) has just caused a serious collision, as a result of which the other car, with three teenagers in it, is wrecked. He (or she, as the gender remains undetermined) is aware that the blame is entirely theirs and is bracing themselves for a violent outburst of the three men. However, when the driver manages to come out through the passenger door, he says, with a sigh, that he "has only bought [the car] today". The narratee finds themselves instantly overpowered with relief and gratitude. They reassure the teenagers that they will cover all the costs and they behave in a very friendly way. They admit to feeling an intimate connection with the driver (compared to "sharing a heart"), whom they almost killed several minutes ago: "you want to fall on him, weeping, because you are so lonely, so lonely always, and all contact is contact, and all contact makes us so grateful we want to cry and dance and cry and cry". The story concludes with the narratee contemplating gratitude for a "moment of peace", which helps them understand how boxers, right after a brutal fight, can "rest their heads on the shoulders of their opponents".

 As regards conformity to Nelles's generic statements, "Accident" can also be situated far from the microfictional mainstream. Its interest is inward and hence there is little plot development. Eggers chooses to begin the story in the aftermath of what Nelles might regard as a "palpable" event – the car crash. The non-occurrence of the passengers' expected eruption of anger, like the suspension of the adultery scene in "Think", deprives the story of a sharp closure. Instead of external action, as Timothy W. Galow argues, Eggers's microfictions concentrate on "small revelation[s]" and "heightened states of emotion" (2014: 86). The fact that the entire text of "Accident" is an account of the shifting emotional attitude of the narratee – from apprehension to relief to gratitude – turns them into an unequivocally existential, or rounded, character.

 What further strengthens the reader's relationship with the narratee is the adoption of the second-person perspective, which, as has been indicated by Brian McHale, Monika Fludernik, Brian Richardson and others, is occasionally used by writers as a vehicle for inviting the reader to project themselves onto the "you". As James Phelan argues, readers of second-person narratives constantly oscillate between the detached position of the observer and the involved one of the addressee. "The fuller the characterization of the 'you'", maintains Phelan, "the more aware actual readers will be of their differences from that 'you', and thus, the

more fully they will move into the observer role" (1996: 137). Therefore, in order to encourage the reader to identify themselves with the narratee, their distinctive characteristics should not be given, thus enabling the widest possible common ground. That might be the reason why Eggers concentrates on the thoughts and feelings of his narratee that, in the outlined situation, could be shared by many, and does not hint at anything that might prevent reader identification – such as their gender or age. The same strategy is used in "You Know How to Spell Elijah" (435 words), whose narratee is waiting for their flight and cannot help being increasingly irritated by an overheard exchange between a teenage girl and her parents, who are offering her incorrect spelling versions of the eponymous name. Until the last sentence, in which the narratee is said to be on their way to a spa in Palm Desert, no information is given other than their capacity for annoyance when faced with smug ignorance. Their dilemma whether to intervene and correct strangers is very easy for the reader to relate to.

Of the five stories included in the survey, "Accident" and "You Know How…" both achieve the highest levels of empathetic response – 87% and 92%, with the levels of strong empathy reaching 33% and 79%, respectively. It is possible that the choice of second-person narration has contributed to those results, but, as with "Think", the most important reason seems to be the construction of a scene capable of evoking reader identification. In the case of "Accident", most readers pointed to their experiences with traffic collisions, the general anxiety about a confrontation with strangers and the hunger for connection with strangers as the basis for an empathetic response. Among the many grounds for identification listed in the context of "You Know How…" was the dilemma whether to intervene when overhearing an uneducated stranger, the frustration or impotence when confronted with ignorance or stupidity and the irritation about others' disregard for language correctness. Two respondents stated that the reason why "You Know How…" is successful in arousing empathy is that "everyone has felt like this at some point of their life". This remark suggests that reader identification in second-person narratives may depend less on the overlap between the personality, behaviour or beliefs of the narratee and the reader than on having experienced a similar situation or emotion. This is evidenced by the fact that the flash fiction with the highest empathy rate is the one which confronts the reader with a scenario they know best from experience – as many as eight surveyed participants volunteered descriptions of similar situations in which they were involved (e.g. a fellow passenger misinforming his son about the difference between a cannon and a howitzer and two lovers confusing a satellite with a comet).

Eggers often manages to make the reader identify with his characters by observing their mundane, fleeting realisations – so intangible and apparently insignificant that they do not merit the status of epiphanies. Yet it is precisely their ephemeral and trivial character that can make the recognition of oneself in the speaking voice all the more striking. The man in "On Wanting to Have At Least Three Walls Up Before She Gets Home" (247 words) realises he wants to please and impress his wife by assembling "at least three walls" of a little wooden house

for their child to play in by the time she returns from work (Eggers 2005b: 55). The focaliser of "A Whispered Hello" (516 words) becomes apprehensive about not having responded loud enough to a warm hello from a stranger in the bathroom, who may have misinterpreted his quiet response as indifference. A similar social insecurity underlies the anxiety of the protagonist of "When He Started Saying 'I Appreciate It' After 'Thank You'" (339 words), who, similarly to the narratee of "Accident", is overcome with relief and gratitude whenever an interaction with a stranger takes place "without rancour" (Eggers 2005d: 40). In "The Definition of Reg" (616 words), the eponymous character, otherwise unambiguously heterosexual, experiences a momentary homoerotic infatuation with his male colleague, who has just made an appreciative remark about his looks.

Stephanie, the focaliser of "Naveed" (520 words), is also made to grapple with a realisation of a sexual nature. She has found herself alone in her bedroom with a friend with whom she would like to have sex but is suddenly alarmed by the thought that going to bed with James would increase her number of sexual partners to thirteen. That, she is worried, will seem "excessive" to her future husband and, worse still, it may lead to him making a joke about a "baker's dozen" (Eggers 2005a: 126). "Naveed" elicited the lowest, but still not insubstantial, level of empathetic response out of the five texts included in the survey – 50%, with no indications of strong empathy. Those who did admit to a degree of self-identification attributed it to their fear of being perceived as promiscuous and their anxiety about the future partner's judgement on their sexual history. The explicit or implicit reason for the lack of identification on the part of many of the remaining respondents was their outlook on sexual mores – more conservative than that of Stephanie's. In "A No on Debussy" (346 words) another female character, this time middle-aged, is struck with an "enormously gratifying" feeling when, on hearing a piece by Claude Debussy on a classical radio station, she decides that she does not like him. That realisation gives her the comfort of "checking off" one of the "too many dead geniuses she knew nothing about". Most of the 67% of respondents who declared some degree of empathy for this character could identify with her insecurity about her knowledge and erudition, her sense that there is "too much to know in general" and her pleasant confidence about discovering what she likes and dislikes. In "Naveed" and "A No on Debussy" – as well as in "Yet Another Example…" – the focaliser's gender is specified, which appears to have a certain bearing on the results. In each ease the level of identification is higher among the readers of the same gender, with the disparity ranging from 8% to 26%.

Suzanne Keen argues in *Empathy and the Novel* that the reader may empathise with literary characters even if they "differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways" (2007: 70). But whereas novels have enough room to create fully delineated characters and may evoke identification through the prolonged exposure to the characters' thoughts and predicaments, microfictions can at most sketch a character out of a momentary insight into their mind. In order for the reader of microfiction to exhibit empathy, the text needs to succeed in anchoring

the focaliser's position in the reader's experience. The difference in the capacity of novels (together with short stories) and microfictions to evoke empathy can be pinpointed by Patrick Colm Hogan's distinction between allocentric empathy, which relies on "imagining some other person's experience as such", and projective empathy, which "involves imagining oneself in the position of the other person" (2011: 284). It is only the latter type which remains within microfiction's reach. The minimal space that flash fictions have at their disposal can be expanded by inviting the reader to invest their own experience into it. The mechanism of context expansion has been examined by Nelles under the heading of intertextuality. Whereas Nelles claims that microfictions can increase their interpretive scope by referring to other cultural artifacts, Wallace's and Eggers's stories show that it can also be done by appealing to the reader's repository of experiences.

Microfictions and the new sincerity

In the flash fictions by Wallace and Eggers, empathy is more than a mere means to an end (such as involving the reader in the story or increasing its appeal through identification) but it is both: a narrative strategy and an attitude advocated by the text. Wallace comes close to articulating the rationale for his empathy-inducing works in a much-quoted interview for *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*:

> I guess a big part of serious fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull […] imaginative access to other selves. Since an ineluctable part of being a human self is suffering, part of what we humans come to art for is an experience of suffering, necessarily a vicarious experience, more like a sort of "generalization" of suffering […]. We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character's pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside. It might just be that simple. (Wallace 1993b)

Wallace sees literature as an opportunity for renouncing solipsism, or what he calls in "This Is Water" the "deep belief that I am the absolute centre of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence". By means of perspective-taking, that foundation of narrative empathy according to Keen, the reader is offered the opportunity to inhabit the mind of a different person and thus to recognise themselves in them. Aili Pettersson Peeker argues that "empathetic reading experiences" enable readers "to acknowledge an affinity between themselves and (fictional) others and, as a consequence, to feel less isolated as they recognize an idea of human commonality" (2015: 12–13). In *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*, Nicoline Timmer also indicates "a desire for some form of com-

munity" and an emphasis on "sameness" rather than difference as some of the defining qualities of the writings of, among others, Wallace and Eggers (2010: 359).

Perhaps the loudest call for empathy can be traced in "Think". According to Pettersson Peeker, its two characters, the man and the woman, have "diametrically opposite capabilities of empathy" (2010: 22). Despite being absorbed in soul-searching, the man keeps considering also the woman's thoughts and anticipating her reactions ("he knows what she might think if he kneels"). She, on the other hand, appears unable to acknowledge his point of view. His reaction to her "three-word question" suggests it is not "of the understanding kind" (23). Even when she does ultimately succeed in considering another perspective – when she becomes "aware of just how she's standing, how silly it might look through a window", it is a selfish one, concerned with how she may appear to a passing stranger. Her incapacity is precisely pinpointed, and bemoaned, by the narrator: "She could try, for just a moment, to imagine what is happening in his head […]. Even for an instant, to try putting herself in his place". The earlier quoted closing remark – "And what if she joined him on the floor, just like this, clasped in supplication: just this way" – reads like the narrator's gesture of indulgence, a utopian Lennonesque reverie about the possibility of a world populated by individuals able to suspend their own perspective and adopt that of another individual. Wallace's statement from the interview – "It might just be that simple" – could as well have been stated by the narrator of "Think".

The addressee of the what-if remark is the reader, who is meant to "consider the invitation" – to use Pettersson Peeker's phrase – to empathise with the characters of Wallace's fiction as well as with people off the page.[9] It is the acknowledgement of that second motivation which can be regarded as a distinctive quality of what Adam Kelly has dubbed the new sincerity. Its followers have the – hopelessly old-fashioned, as the previous literary generation would say – wish, or ambition, to convey something to the reader which would be of use to them. As Lukas Hoffmann argues in *Postirony: The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers*, their major concern is with "the effects [their works] have on their audience" while their "most urgent characteristic" is the "attempt to communicate with the reader" (2016: 9). Wallace's and Eggers's aspiration to "speak meaningfully" to their readers about "sincerity, reality-commitment, and community" makes Allard Den Dulk classify them (alongside Jonathan Safran Foer) as representatives of "engaged fiction" (2015: 131).

In the article "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction", Kelly traces in Wallace, Eggers, Joshua Ferris and Benjamin Kunkel a "reconfiguration of the writer-reader relationship" and a "call for a two-way conversation" (2010: 146). In order for such a conversation to begin, the author needs to prove their sincerity, which Kelly defines after Lionel Trilling as a "congruence of avowal and actual feeling", marked by "emphasis on intersubjective truth" (132). They also need to establish the reader's trust and reassure them of their "basic decency and fairness and sensitivity" (144). What Kelly understands by "avowal"

is the author's statement of what they feel, think or believe in, a statement devoid of irony – the quintessential tool of much postmodern writing.

Wallace expressed his attitude towards irony in his most quoted essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993). While its emergence in the American culture of the 1960s was rebellious, "idealistic" at heart and "productive", thirty years later, Wallace observed, it was still the "dominant mode of hip expression" but its role had devalued. It had come to resemble – in the words of Lewis Hyde – "the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage". Irony could still be "entertaining" but it was incapable of serving any positive function. That symptom of "trendy sardonic exhaustion" relied on the tacit author-reader understanding that "I don't really mean what I say" (1993a: 183–84). Wallace concludes the article by calling for "new rebels" to mean what they say and take the risk of "the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile […] the 'Oh how banal'" (194). However, as Lee Konstantinou stresses, Wallace does not postulate a return to naivety or even a renunciation of metafiction – that key device of postmodern ironists. Rather, he argues, postironists "accept the theses of their postmodernist forefathers" but are aware of the "serious problems with their patrimony" (Konstantinou 2009: 12). Whereas postmodernists used metafiction as a means of undermining belief in realism and belief as such, postironists practise it "as a way of reconnecting form and content […] [and] of strengthening belief" (Konstantinou 2012: 90). Konstantinou argues that the postironic belief has no specific object – it is an "ethos of belief in and of itself", a stance of "nonnaïve noncynicism" (91).

If, however, an object of the belief advocated in the microfictions of Wallace and Eggers were to be indicated, it could be a belief in the possibility of a human connection, of peaceful coexistence and of selfless kindness. The echoes of that "oh-how-banal" sounding hope to connect with the other can be found, among other passages, in the wishful closing question of "Think", in the narratee of "Accident"'s impulse "to fall on [the driver], weeping, because you are so lonely, so lonely always, and all contact is contact", in the sensation of "soaring" felt by the narrator of "When He Started Saying 'I Appreciate It' After 'Thank You'" each time he is "extended the most basic human courtesy" (Eggers 2005d: 42) and in Reg's sudden infatuation with his colleague. All of those little epiphanies and moments of human connection could not be contained in a microfiction if its generic limitations were such as Nelles argues in his essay. Neither anonymous nor flat, the focalisers of the stories discussed here are characters with whom readers are invited to empathise and identify. Sacrificing plot twists for the sake of psychological examination, Wallace's and Egger's flash fictions prove capable of giving readers "a moment of immediate insight and of immanent access" (Botha 2016: 216). They also succeed in "cutting to the chase", which is an aspiration harboured by microfiction and the new sincerity alike.

Notes

[1]   Botha lists eleven competing names while Alan Ziegler enumerates as many as fifty (including "drabbles", "espresso stories" and "microcosmography") (2014: xxvii).

[2]   The maximum length criterion has also been formulated with regard to the time required to read the text. Nelles cites the following propositions: "four-minute fictions" (Robley Wilson), "a few minutes as they sit in the bathroom" stories (Charles Johnson), "minute stories" (Robert Coover and Elliott Anderson) and "over a quick cup of coffee" stories (Irene Zahava) (2012: 89).

[3]   Nelles speaks about the emerging "academic canon of miniature stories", in which he includes works by such international writers as Julio Cortázar and Carolyn Forché (2012: 88). Botha also credits such non-English language authors as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jorge Luis Borges (2016: 204).

[4]   Nicholas Royle argues that quick fiction – in the words of Hélène Cixous – "finds the slowness inside the speed" and, paradoxically, requires a "slowing down", rather than a quickening, of perception, which is occasioned by the strategy of defamiliarisation (2014: 29).

[5]   The opening section of the introduction takes the form of a list of "short stuff", which includes "baby carrots, myopia, life flashing before eyes, gummy bears, the loser's straw", as well as "quickies, some penises", "Tom Cruise", and "dachshunds" (2014: 1).

[6]   Royle articulates the same insight: "Quick fictions [are] never trivial: they take us to the very quick of things" (2014: 27).

[7]   In her definition of microfiction, Howitt-Dring insists on it having "a story, and a beginning, middle and end" (2011: 51).

[8]   Howitt-Dring argues that "microfictions usually start in the middle of an action" (2011: 53).

[9]   In her analysis of what she labels the post-postmodern novel, Nicoline Timmer discusses the multiple levels of empathy constructed in the works of Wallace, Eggers and Mark Z. Danielewski: "between characters, between narrators and characters, between narrators or characters and narratee, between fictional figures and the flesh and blood 'real' reader" (2010: 360–361).

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