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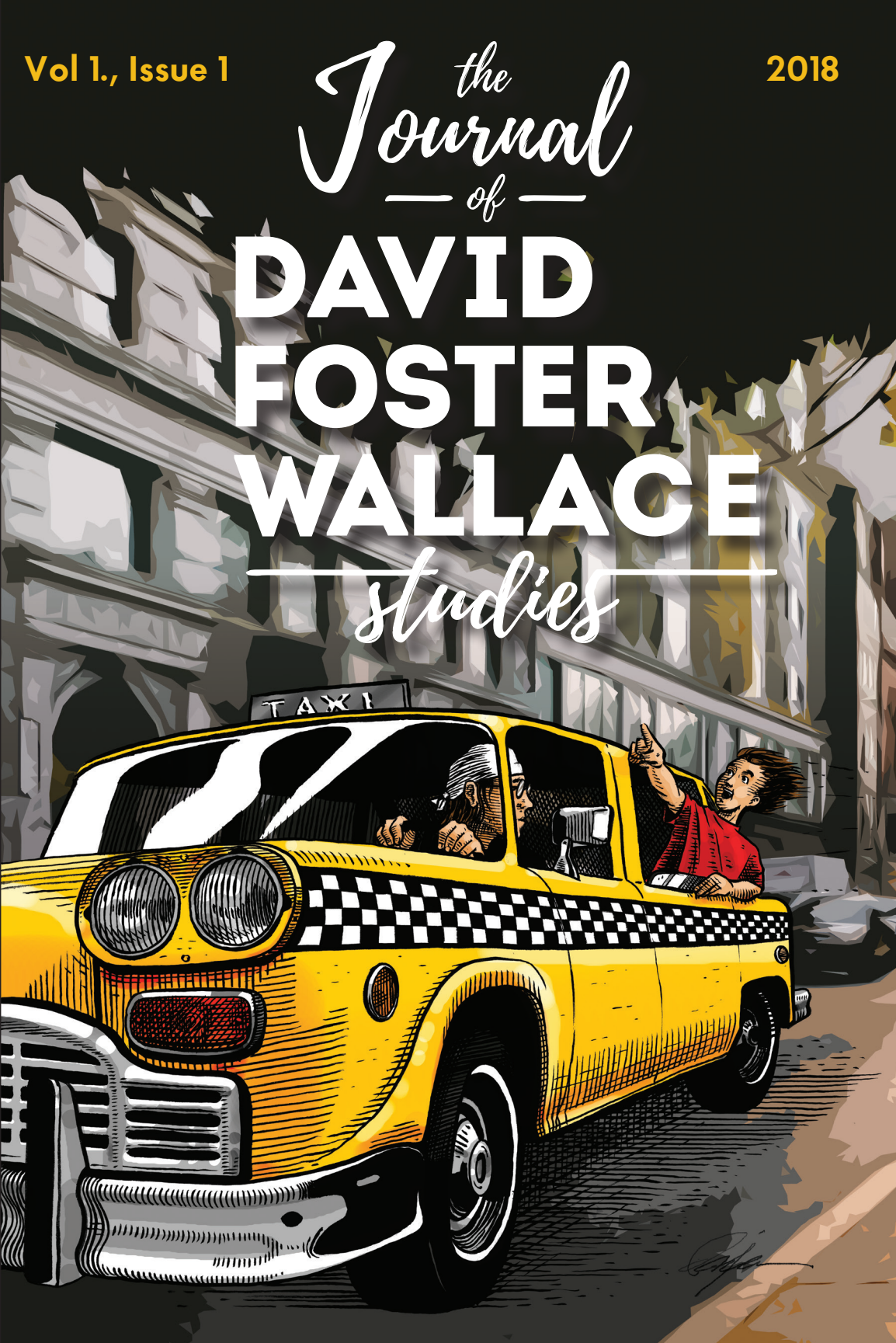

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WHY A WALLACE STUDIES JOURNAL NOW?

As far as I can tell, Greg Carlisle was the first to call publicly for a journal devoted to David Foster Wallace. Carlisle made his case in the 2010 introduction to *Consider David Foster Wallace*, a collection that emerged from the first international academic event devoted solely to Wallace's work—the 2009 Liverpool conference organized by David Hering. Arguing that a dedicated journal would provide both "a regular forum for continuing the critical conversation about Wallace's work" and a "central, structured locus for that formal conversation," Carlisle predicted it would also help cement Wallace's place as "the most important author of the late 20th and early 21st centuries." At the time, many were sympathetic to Carlisle's argument, though I think Stephen J. Burn was right to say, in his 2010 review of this same collection, that beginning such a project would be somewhat premature, given the understandably preliminary understanding of Wallace's work. For Burn, the unbridled enthusiasm of advocates like Carlisle needed to be reined in a little before the sober, dispassionate assessment of the fiction and essays could begin. Moreover, Burn saw the collection as revealing a scholarly field that was only just beginning to find its feet, and identified a prevailing spirit of inquiry that was far too uncritical in its praise for the recently deceased author.

Nearly a decade on, we have witnessed an explosion of interest in Wallace's work, both from lay readers and academics. The intervening years have seen the publication of numerous monographs and edited collections devoted to Wallace, as well as an ever-ballooning number of journal articles and book chapters. (The David Foster Wallace Research Group at the University of Glasgow is heroically tracking these publications, picking up where Nick Maniatis's *Howling Fantods* page on academic work left off.) Burn's 2010 complaint that the field was too saturated with graduate students and early career academics no longer holds. Many prominent professors and other high-profile scholars have since weighed in on aspects of Wallace's work, and while many graduate students are still producing groundbreaking work in dissertation projects, an increasingly diverse collection of scholars (from many career stages, disciplines, and research interests) have also joined the conversation. In fact, the conversation has more interlocutors now than ever before, as interpretive communities in academia and well beyond wrestle with the meaning of Wallace's work and the ways it continues to speak to our contemporary moment.

Now that Wallace Studies has a genuine claim to being viable as a field, the moment feels right for the inauguration of this kind of journal. While scholarly work will of course continue to be published elsewhere, a journal devoted to Wallace opens up a space within which a particular kind of conversation can be extended. It also provides room for new voices to enter the critical discussion and sets out a clearly defined zone of scholarly inquiry where various ideas and questions can be worked through rigorously and collaboratively. Why, for instance, is Wallace's work crucial to the way we understand the trajectory of US literary postmodernism? Is he truly a representative figure of his generation, his cultural moment, and perhaps even his nation? And in the wake of a recent backlash, stemming from charges of misogyny and racism, in what terms can we justify still reading and teaching him?

Significantly, an increasing number of scholars have recently pushed back against certain aspects of Wallace's work, enacting something like what Judith Fetterley characterizes as "resistant readings." Such work casts a critical eye on Wallace's engagement with class, gender, race, politics, and sexuality, and in doing so has unearthed dimensions of his project that had previously been neglected. Other critics have read his work in light of recent theoretical developments and preoccupations, which have also opened up new interpretive possibilities. I am thinking here of approaches from such disparate fields as affect studies, economics, recent analytic philosophy, world literature, whiteness studies, religious studies, and narratology, to name just a few. We will no doubt continue to see many other frameworks and sub-disciplines be brought to bear on his fiction and essays in the years ahead.

There are other pressing questions that will surely also be taken up in the coming years, both in this journal and beyond. How, for instance, might the claims of post-critique scholars alter our approach to Wallace's work? What happens when we stop trying to "see through," "penetrate," and "unmask" and instead attempt more generous and reparative readings? And how might new discoveries in the social sciences concerning emotions, moods, feelings, and affects change the way we account for his fiction? Questions of reception might also prove fruitful. How, for instance, might a richer account of Wallace's readers, who of course comprise many nationalities, genders, classes, etc. allow us to see what is most valuable in his work? By what methods might we gain a more accurate sense of his audience and the myriad ways he is read?

I think we can also look forward to seeing, in the coming years, scholarship on unpublished or little-known work from the archive and elsewhere. Our collective understanding of what exactly is in the voluminous Wallace collection at the Harry Ransom Center is still incomplete, and those prepared to do the heavy lifting of archival research will doubtless unearth many more important discoveries. We

might look forward to seeing treatments of previously unpublished or obscure texts, and perhaps even expanded editions of *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, which would no doubt recalibrate our understanding of these novels. The forthcoming collection of Wallace's correspondence, edited by Burn, will doubtless also inspire new scholarship. We will also see analyses that deploy new theoretical angles or developments, which even Wallace—despite his uncanny intellectual and cultural clairvoyance—could not have foreseen.

The complicated question of Wallace's inheritors is always worth taking up, as his legacy continues to shape the work of younger writers. Likewise, exploring art in other genres that takes inspiration from Wallace might also prove illuminating since it speaks back in intriguing ways to various source texts. We are also likely to see, I expect, more writing that foregrounds the idiosyncrasies of particular critics and writers wrestling with his work. Jane Tompkins's plea, back in the 1980s, for critics to remove the "straitjacket" of faux-objectivity and come clean on their own investments is still a provocation to many fields—including our own. Such writing, done well, could help us understand more clearly why Wallace's work still matters and what kind of things it can allow us to do, see, feel, or know.

These and many other lines of inquiry will doubtless be taken up in the pages of this journal. I'm very much looking forward to seeing how the conversation continues.

Lucas Thompson
The United States Studies Center at the University of Sydney

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR CLARE HAYES-BRADY

With the 1996 publication of *Infinite Jest* and the awarding of a MacArthur "Genius Grant" the following year, David Foster Wallace's reputation as a writer of challenging, vital fiction and non-fiction was firmly established. Over twenty years later and almost a decade after his death, his importance to the development of late twentieth and early twenty-first century literature has only been even more strongly confirmed. Wallace was a relatively little-studied figure at that time, with what critical work there was led by such stalwarts as Marshall Boswell, Stephen Burn and Greg Carlisle. After his death, interest in Wallace predictably began to grow, with the first conference dedicated to Wallace's work taking place in 2009. Between 2009 and 2016, the corpus of critical work addressing Wallace's writing grew exponentially. At a recent conference in Italy, Adam Kelly charted this growth, noting that the first wave of Wallace scholarship, preceding his death, focused on *Infinite Jest* to the exclusion of nearly all else (with the valuable exception of Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace*) and that the second wave, which Kelly situated between 2009 and 2014 or so, worked to establish the grounds within which Wallace Studies might operate, involving the staking and defense of various critical positions that have become the foundations of Wallace Studies today.

Kelly argues further that a third wave of scholarship took root around the beginning of 2015, and with the formation of the International David Foster Wallace Society early in 2017, we are firmly in this third phase of the study of this important author. The establishment of the present journal was an obvious and immediate priority for the operation of the Society, and we are enormously excited to bring you the first issue in the pages that follow. The essays that make up this issue have been chosen to work together to give a sense of the current state of the discipline and to speak both to each other and to broader critical dialogues. We hope that the interventions in this issue will mark the beginnings of conversations both within this issue and across distinct future issues.

Our first issue consists of five essays, two reviews, and an editorial in which Lucas Thompson deftly charts the development of Wallace Studies from Greg Carlisle's prescient call for a journal in 2010 to this inaugural issue. As Thompson points out, scholarship on Wallace's work has developed apace both in volume and in focus, and exciting new forms of appraisal of his work—both positive and challenging—are enriching an already exciting field. Within the rest of the issue, Allard den Dulk and Preben Jordal trace the vestiges of Kierkegaard in *Infinite Jest,* placing it in conversation with Updike's *Rabbit, Run* in its engagement with the philosopher, taking as a point of departure Wallace's "literary patricide" of Updike in 1997. The authors take Updike's explicit engagement with Kierkegaard during the *Rabbit* period as a series of misreadings, intentional or otherwise, arguing that Rabbit in fact constitutes an aesthetic rather than a religious individual in Kierkegaard's model of life views. This is contrasted with what the authors see as a more "accurate" religious subjectivity in *Infinite Jest*, prompting a re-reading of both Updike and Wallace and their views on faith. Issues of faith and religious identity are also taken up in Joseph Nash's essay "How to Be: Buddhism, Boredom, and the Practice of Awareness in *The Pale King,*"

in which Nash explores the lesser-considered influences of Buddhism and mindfulness in Wallace's later work using material from the published version of *The Pale King* as well as archival material from the Ransom Center. Nash's study considers the term "boredom" in its Buddhist context as well as its frequent appearance in *The Pale King*, concluding that the practice of awareness is both thematically and structurally integral to *The Pale King*, with some of the dense sections of the novel encouraging a direct experience of the kind of boredom called for in Buddhist meditation practices. In "Another Lien on Life: David Foster Wallace's Institutional Perspective," Colbert Root also considers *The Pale King*, this time from the angle of an emergent political ideology of the 1980s and the effect of that shift in the lives of citizens. Root's essay draws a thoughtful connection between institutional politics and Wallace's treatments of solipsism, explicitly connecting what he argues have historically been seen as separate and even exclusive endeavours. The essay argues, indeed, that this connection has been present throughout Wallace's work, drawing a path from "Forever Overhead" and *Infinite Jest* through to "Authority and American Usage" and on to *The Pale King*, arguing that Wallace's depiction of solipsism is fundamentally political and that solipsism and citizenship are inextricable in Wallace's work. Colton Saylor's "Loosening the Jar: Contemplating Race in David Foster Wallace's Short Fiction" similarly moves away from the tendency to read Wallace's work apolitically or somehow suprapolitically, working toward an account of Wallace's encounters with the racial other through the lens of his own whiteness. In this essay, Saylor seems to respond directly to Thompson's introductory question, "in the wake of a recent backlash, stemming from charges of misogyny and racism, in what terms can we justify still reading and teaching him?" Saylor connects Wallace's complicated and much-criticized writing of race with his preoccupation with empathy, pointing out that "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" acts

as a response to Flannery O'Connor's 'Everything That Rises Must Converge' and intriguingly offering the public bus as a site of racial negotiation and the use of vision—which we see elsewhere in Wallace in the creation of self-conscious subject-objects—to craft an incomplete "narrative of otherness." Writing on this and other stories, Saylor offers a model for reading Wallace's work that approaches an accommodation between his self-conscious whiteness and his quest for artistic empathy. Difference and visual signifiers also furnish the foundation of Daniela Joffe's tour de force "'The Last Word': David Foster Wallace and Feminist America," which undertakes a reading of Wallace's first novel that takes account of the sexual and political climate of the time. She argues that the novel bears the consistent hallmark of "Wallace's acute gender consciousness in the novel." Joffe's essay invites us to consider the ways in which Wallace's treatment of gender was not only a consideration of ontological difference, but an explicit "important political response to the social and cultural climate in which he was writing." Through the course of her essay, Joffe advances a persuasive reading of *Broom* as a failed engagement with feminism, finally arguing that "tension between Wallace's active masculinity, on the one hand, and his growing attentiveness to the feminist cause" may account for the novel's final gesture of incompleteness, coming together in a provocative reading of Wallace's ambivalent engagements with gender politics early in his career, inviting a radical reimagining of what future feminist readings of Wallace may look like. On the whole, then, the issue asks a number of exciting questions and establishes several points of dialogue across the essays which we hope will be picked up by readers and future contributors for development within the pages of later issues.

A striking feature of Wallace Studies since the beginning has been the mixture of academic and non- or alt-academic critics that engage with his work at every level and its crossover between fan

work and scholarship. The invaluable site thehowlingfantods.com provides a resource for scholars grounded in a rigor and responsiveness that most formal academic institutions can only dream of, an impressive mantle assumed more recently by the University of Glasgow's David Foster Wallace Research Group. Diversity in access, background, gender, and ethnic identities have been watchwords of the Society since its inception, and we are committed to maintaining a breadth of contributors, topics, and readership with the journal. The cover art by David Jensen reflects this hybrid identity and our desire to reach beyond a traditional academic audience while maintaining a commitment to the highest standards of peer review and coverage. In that vein, the excellent essays that make up this issue address a wide range of the most current issues in Wallace Studies, written by a formidable gathering of global voices on Wallace, both established and emerging. As we work toward a partnership with a university press, we pledge to continue our commitment to access and inclusion, and and we welcome thoughts from Society members and readers about how we might expand the practice of this commitment without compromising the exceptional quality of scholorship we publish. We are very proud of issue one of *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies,* and look forward to a long and fruitful scholarly dialogue within and beyond these pages.

Dr. Clare Hayes-Brady
Dublin, 2018

SUBJECTIVITY AND FAITH IN UPDIKE AND WALLACE: A COMPARISON OF THE INTERPRETATION OF KIERKEGAARD IN *RABBIT, RUN* AND *INFINITE JEST*

Allard den Dulk and Preben Jordal

Introduction

In 1997, David Foster Wallace wrote a scathing review of John Updike's novel *Toward the End of Time* (1997). In the article, Wallace names Updike, together with Norman Mailer and Philip Roth, as "the Great Male Narcissists who've dominated postwar realist fiction."[1] Most critics seem to regard Wallace's review as merely a

1. David Foster Wallace, "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?" *The New York Observer*, October 13, 1997; later published in: David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster* as "Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think (Re John Updike's *Toward the End of Time*)," which is the version we will be quoting from.

harsh, vitriolic takedown, since little attention has been paid to its claims in the scholarship on either Updike or Wallace. Moreover, even though the review represents a clear case of literary patricide,[2] to our knowledge no sustained comparison has been conducted of the ideas that inform the fiction of Updike and Wallace,[3] and, by extension, of the literary trends of which they are seen as the main representatives (in Wallace's case, of a literary post-postmodernism or new sincerity). Instead, most scholarship has focused on Wallace's work as a response to its postmodernist forebears—above all, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth—and not to the more modernist, existentialist Updike (despite the influence of existentialism on Wallace and his literary progeny).[4] Wallace's critically under-explored review prompts us to look at the work of Updike and Wallace as different readings of key existentialist ideas.

Updike was an avid reader of the work of Danish existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard when existentialist thinking was in its heyday in the United States, in the 1950s and 60s. Wallace, in turn, might be said to have reintroduced existentialism, and specifically ideas indebted to Kierkegaard, as a philosophical orientation in American fiction in the 1990s, after it had long been out of fashion. And an important part of Wallace's critique of Updike seems to turn on their respective, fundamentally different readings

2. In the review, Wallace declares himself to be "one of the very few actual subforty Updike *fans*" (52); cf. Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 44.

3. The exceptions being: Marshall Boswell, who, in his *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, devotes three pages to the analysis of the Updike parodies in Wallace's debut novel *The Broom of the System* (Boswell, 41-45); Paul Giles briefly discusses Wallace's review of Updike's *Toward the End of Time* in "Sentimental Posthumanism" (333); and Lucas Thompson, in *Global Wallace*, briefly mentions the Updike review in relation to the reception of existentialism in the United States and Wallace's understanding of it (170).

4. A further argument for the influence of existentialism on Wallace is offered in Allard den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer*.

of Kierkegaard's understanding of *subjectivity* and *faith*. At the start of his review, Wallace states that "no U.S. novelist has mapped the solipsist's terrain better than John Updike, whose rise in the 60s and 70s established him as both chronicler and voice of probably the single most self-absorbed generation since Louis XIV."[5] For decades, Updike seems to have been constructing

> protagonists who are basically all the same guy . . . and who are all clearly stand-ins for Updike himself . . . . They are also always incorrigibly narcissistic, philandering, self-contemptuous, self-pitying . . . and deeply alone, alone the way only an emotional solipsist can be alone. They never seem to belong to any sort of larger unit or community or cause. Though usually family men, they never really love anybody—and, though always heterosexual to the point of satyriasis, they especially don't love women. The very world around them, as gorgeously as they see and describe it, tends to exist for them only insofar as it evokes impressions and associations and emotions and desires inside the great self.[6]

Further on in the review, Wallace diagnoses this problem as rooted in a misunderstanding of existentialism and of Kierkegaard: while Updike's protagonist "can quote Pascal and Kierkegaard on angst," he and Updike himself seem to regard the above-described solipsistic subjectivity as a "cure for human despair," for a "textbookish existential dread."[7] In so doing, Wallace also invokes the wider problem of the superficial American reception of existentialism. In his work *Existential America*, George Cotkin describes how existentialism in the United States has often been associated with a fashionable "pose"

5. Wallace, "Certainly the End of *Something*," 51.

6. Ibid., 53-54.

7. Ibid., 58-59.

of detachment (for example, in Mailer's rendering of the "hipster" ideal of individual authenticity and intensity of experience).[8] Lucas Thompson insightfully remarks that Wallace sees Updike's "misuse of existential angst" as part of a "sanitized, superficial American response" to existential thought.[9]

Building on these observations, Updike can be said to misread core Kierkegaardian ideas by focusing exclusively on the personal and the subjective and arriving at solipsism. These core ideas (such as the importance of value-directed choices) *are* expressed in Wallace's fiction. Wallace, in turn, can be said to deviate from Kierkegaard in his emphasis on the value of community with other human beings (expressed in the above quotation as the "belong[ing]" to a "larger unit or community or cause") in achieving subjectivity and faith. These differences are what lies behind Wallace's harsh but ultimately insightful review of Updike, written in 1997, the year after *Infinite Jest* was published.

To support these claims with regard to Updike, we will focus on the novel *Rabbit, Run* (1960) for three reasons. First, it offers the first convincing formulation of Updike's main themes (and, as such, could almost be said to form a blueprint or ur-text for the rest of his *oeuvre*). Second, Updike wrote it in a period during which he claims to have been most directly influenced by Kierkegaard's philosophy. Finally, because Updike originally conceived *Rabbit, Run* as a standalone novel it is therefore the best candidate of the "Rabbit tetralogy" to be analyzed on its own within the limitations of this article.[10] *Rabbit, Run* portrays its main character Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom as a Kierkegaardian, religiously inspired individual. However, this

8. George Cotkin, *Existential America*, 92, 93, 186.

9. Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 170.

10. Only later, when Updike decided to write a second Rabbit novel, did he start to think of a possible tetralogy (George W. Hunt, *Updike & Three Great Secret Things*, 21; Marshall Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy*, 3). Also, Boswell describes *Rabbit, Run* as "one of the most 'Kierkegaardian' of Updike's novels" (8).

portrayal implies a *mis*understanding, integral to the novel itself, of Kierkegaard's conception of religious subjectivity. Now, one might object that it is Updike's (like it is every writer's) prerogative to *deviate* from any source material, that such deviations do not constitute a misreading by Updike and that one might even understand these deviations as signalling the flaws in Rabbit's character. But, despite the fact that the novel does indeed clearly portray Rabbit as a flawed character, those flaws are also portrayed as subservient, rather than contradictory, to Rabbit's religious subjectivity. This latter interpretation takes its cues from the novel itself, but also draws from Updike's explicit expressions of the connection between his work and Kierkegaard's philosophy (e.g. "for a time, I thought of all my fiction as illustrations to Kierkegaard"),[11] and, finally, from the existing scholarship on the relationship between *Rabbit, Run* and the philosophy of Kierkegaard¸ which largely affirms Rabbit as a manifestation of the inalienable rights of religious subjectivity (as argued for by Kierkegaard). This understanding of religious subjectivity, as constituted by Rabbit's subjective, non-communicable intuition of specialness and outward energetic radiance, reveals a misappropriation of Kierkegaardian ideas. In fact, these aspects (in the absence of others) make Rabbit not a religious but an *aesthetic* individual in Kierkegaard's understanding of different possible life-views.

Conversely, Wallace's *Infinite Jest*—on which we focus because of its widely accepted status as Wallace's magnum opus—does portray a religious subjectivity that can be accurately understood along Kierkegaardian lines, especially in the figure of Don Gately and the workings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The novel portrays the AA program as directed against aesthetic, solipsistic self-reflection, and aimed at restoring selfhood and faith. Specifically, through the

11. John Updike, "A Book That Changed Me," 927. Such author comments are an intrinsic (though not sufficient or exhaustive) part of the extra-novelistic context in which every novel is interpreted.

character of Don Gately, the novel describes a Kierkegaardian trajectory of the development of "inwardness," to passionate commitment, and venturing the leap of faith, in the (infinite) struggle to embrace the absurdity of the AA program—a paradoxical embrace that, according to Kierkegaard, is crucial to what might be called religious faith. The difference between the ideas expressed in Wallace's fiction and in Kierkegaard is a re-evaluation of the role of a community of believers in this embrace of paradox. Kierkegaard saw the conventional communal religiosity ("Christendom") of his time as a way for individuals to not have to truly confront the "absurd" paradoxes of faith, but to simply go along with the beliefs of the group. This might seem similar to the initial mindless assent to AA maxims portrayed in *Infinite Jest*: addicts are told to "Just Do It" (e.g. go to meetings, pray to a "Higher Power" even if they do not believe in it). However, this assent does not serve to avoid responsibility and absurdity (as "Christendom" does, in Kierkegaard's eyes), but, conversely, to *confront* it and to encourage a leap of faith. The crucial difference is that *Infinite Jest* thereby shows a community that does not just serve herd-mentality evasion, as Kierkegaard thinks it does, but that can actually foster the deepening of passion and faith, and thereby a religious subjectivity that is very much Kierkegaardian.

1. Updike and Kierkegaard: Subjectivity and Faith in *Rabbit, Run*

The protagonist in Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit Angstrom, is a character who goes against (or frequently runs away from) societal conventions: among other things, he abandons his pregnant wife and their two-year-old son because of his oppressive home environment and later causes a scene and runs away from the funeral of their baby for seemingly similar reasons. As a result, "the issue of Rabbit's likability," as Marshall Boswell writes, has "become something of a

literary hothouse argument."[12] But while the evaluations of Rabbit's likability in light of his behaviour vary widely, the interpretations of what that behaviour itself *signifies* have been very similar. Scholars like Boswell, Joyce B. Markle, George W. Hunt, David Galloway, and John Neary, who have all written monographs on Updike's work, agree that Rabbit chooses to follow his religiously (albeit non-traditionally) inspired subjectivity in rejection of social conformity. Despite employing different heuristic perspectives (for example, Galloway uses Camus to interpret Rabbit's subjective "rebellion", while most others' interpretations rely predominantly on Kierkegaard), Rabbit is interpreted as choosing to free himself from social restriction, and subsequently venturing to find his own individual values, in accordance with his private intuitions of a divine presence.

In the opening scene of the novel, Rabbit comes upon a group of kids playing basketball and joins their game. The scene serves as a first portrayal of Rabbit's "unique" subjectivity, which, as subsequent incidents will show, is suppressed in the rest of his current life situation. As such, the scene introduces Rabbit's need to start anew. After Rabbit quits the game, he "runs," immediately imbuing the image of running, which will recur throughout the novel, with positive meaning (namely, as movement, growth, "becoming").[13] The subsequent scene, in which Rabbit comes home to his apartment and his wife Janice, serves as a clear contrast.[14] Janice is drunk and pregnant, the apartment is cluttered and feels claustrophobic, like something constricting, where "the continual crisscrossing mess—clings to his back like a tightening net." Rabbit "senses he is in a trap."[15]

Markle concludes that the opening scene gives the reader "an

12. Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy*, 41.

13. John Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 5, 7.

14. Joyce B. Markle, *Fighters and Lovers*, 39; cf. *Rabbit, Run,* 7-8.

15. Updike, *Rabbit Run*, 14, 15; cf. Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy*, 34.

emotional point of view" that intends to instil "sympathy with Rabbit's forthcoming desertion of his family."[16] Boswell states that the basketball game "affirms an intrinsic uniqueness" in Rabbit, after which he "starts running in exuberant affirmation of what he all at once recognizes as his special inner blessedness." Therefore, according to Boswell, when Rabbit runs from his home situation, this is not "strictly an act of cowardice" or a "simple celebration of Dionysian energy," but "Rabbit exercis[ing] his freedom," an act of self-becoming (as advocated by Kierkegaard), resulting from the confrontation with his existence, not as given and determined, but as "possibility."[17] The novel explicitly suggests the need for such a positive (re)consideration of Rabbit's actions when he himself reflects that: "There is this quality, in things, of the right way seeming wrong at first." And, somewhat later on: "deeper instincts flood forward, telling him he is right. He feels freedom like oxygen everywhere around him."[18]

That Rabbit is doing something right, that he is entitled, from a religious-existential perspective, to the seemingly selfish choices he makes, is elaborated and strengthened by the contrast between Rabbit and minister Jack Eccles. Eccles represents a social-ethical conception of religion that focuses on the horizontal community of believers and the earthbound care for others,[19] and not on a personal, vertical relationship to a supernatural God beyond one's grasp (which is the conception of religious faith supported by Updike and, for that matter, by Kierkegaard). For example, Eccles dismisses Rabbit's "muddle" as common marriage troubles that can be worked out. In response, Rabbit emphasizes his subjectivity: "All I know is what's inside *me*. That's all I have." Eccles is described as a man who lacks faith: "With his white collar he forges God's name on every

16. Markle, *Fighters and Lovers*, 38.

17. Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy*, 31, 35.

18. Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 32, 45.

19. Note that "Eccles" resounds with the Greek "*ekklesia*," meaning "assembly."

word he speaks. . . . [H]e doesn't believe anything."[20] Markle describes Eccles as the "antagonist" of the novel, purposefully used by Updike "for gaining sympathies which correspond to his intended value system," providing "a solid touchstone in favour of Rabbit's vision and struggle."[21] Boswell, similarly, calls Eccles a "negative character," and adds: "Rabbit's outwardly animalistic and sensuous demeanor conceals an intensely spiritual man, while the minister's ecclesiastical surface conceals an almost pagan unbeliever."[22]

Further on in the novel, the (Episcopal) Eccles is chastised by his (Lutheran) colleague Kruppenbach: "do you think this is your job, to meddle in these people's lives[,] to run around and plug up the holes and make everything smooth"? Instead, according to Kruppenbach, as a believer you should "make yourself an exemplar of faith," "make your faith powerful" and "*burn* them with the force of our belief."[23] In clear contrast to Eccles's self-admitted fraudulence, Kruppenbach's words represent the conception of religious belief that seems to be supported by the novel as such. Hunt states that Kruppenbach's brief appearance "in almost the exact middle of the novel" gives "thematic direction and delineates the issues of the novel's ongoing debate." Updike himself has confirmed that the character represents "the touchstone of the novel as I intended it."[24]

Furthermore, the emphasis on force and energy (heat) connects Kruppenbach's description of faith to Rabbit, whose "specialness'"and "life force" are emphasized throughout the book. His lover Ruth says: "Oh all the world loves you," "What's so special about you?" And Rabbit answers: "I'm lovable," "I give people faith." Mrs. Smith, whose garden Rabbit tends, says: "That's what you have,

20. Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 92, 93, 133.

21. Markle, *Fighters and Lovers*, 5-6.

22. Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy*, 58.

23. Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 146-7.

24. Hunt, *Updike & The Three Great Secret Things*, 42; Updike quoted in Ibid., 43.

Harry: life."[25] In fact, despite their protagonist-antagonist relationship, it is exactly these qualities that Eccles lacks that seem to draw him to Rabbit.[26] It is Eccles who says that Rabbit gives people faith. When the minister questions Rabbit about the latter's "inside," about his religious inspiration, "[i]t hits Rabbit depressingly that [Eccles] really wants to be told." Eccles wants to know what the key is to Rabbit's faith, to his "inwardness"—what "it" *is*. At the same time, Eccles questions Rabbit about what he really knows: "Have you ever seen it? Are you sure it exists?"—a further indication of Eccles's social-ethical misunderstanding of what it means to have *faith*. When Rabbit says, "Well I don't know all this about theology, but . . . there's something that wants me to find it," Eccles replies, "Of course, all vagrants think they're on a quest." Rabbit experiences this as an undeserved "slap": "He supposes this is what ministers need, to cut everybody down to the same miserable size." So, Rabbit keeps relying on what is "inside" of himself: "It's just that, well, it's all there is."[27]

In sum, *Rabbit, Run* portrays its main character as an embodiment of religiously inspired subjectivity. According to its dust jacket, the novel affirms Rabbit's "faith that his inner life—an unstable compound of lust and nostalgia, affection and fear—has an intrinsic, final importance."[28] Kierkegaard revealed this importance to Updike: "[Kierkegaard] has made Christianity intellectually possible for the 20th [century] by giving metaphysical dignity to 'the subjective'."[29] And this idea Updike subsequently inserted in his own work: "Eagerly I took from Kierkegaard the idea that subjectivity

25. Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 124, 192, 133, 180.

26. Eccles says to his own wife that he "loves" Rabbit. This enamoration is clearly more than the minister's normal love of others, as Eccles himself admits: "When I'm with him—it's rather unfortunate, really—I feel so cheerful I quite forget what the point of my seeing him is" (Ibid., 141).

27. Ibid., 124, 115, 110, 108.

28. Quoted in: Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy*, 8.

29. John Updike, "The Fork," 121.

too has its rightful claims . . . for a time, I thought of all my fiction as illustrations to Kierkegaard."[30] Updike explicitly identifies Rabbit as such an illustration when, in the Afterword to *Rabbit, Run*, he describes the character "as a creature of fear and trembling . . . imagined, at a time when I was much taken with Kierkegaard."[31]

As such, the novel, Updike himself, and many critics of his work, suggest that Rabbit should be seen in light of Kierkegaard's famous claim, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), that "subjectivity is truth." When it comes to the question of meaningful existence, Kierkegaard writes, "objective truth" (aspired to in "objective *reflection*") "turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something," while "it is an existing spirit who asks about truth, presumably because he wants to exist in it." Objective reflection tries to find meaning in general, objective truths that hold everywhere, for everyone—thereby placing truth *outside* of the individual, and making that individual accidental, so in a sense *irrelevant*, to the validity of that truth. Kierkegaard sees this as a complete misunderstanding of what is at stake: the truth concerned is exactly the meaningful existence of an individual, so how can that individuality be irrelevant to the truth? Instead, Kierkegaard asserts, the only possible source for such a truth is to be found in "inwardness": a *subjective* reflection that does not constitute truth as some external object but as an immersion in one's own subjectivity.[32] When *Rabbit, Run* is described as a Kierkegaardian novel, it is because this inwardness—the individual living and deciding by his own subjective inspiration—is ascribed to Rabbit. Thus, his flaws—his seeming egoism and abandonment of his family at the start and end of the novel—should be understood as motivated by (and subservient to) what Rabbit has inside of him:

30. John Updike, "A Book That Changed Me," 927.

31. John Updike, "Afterword by the Author," *Rabbit, Run*, 278.

32. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript Vol. 1*, 203, 193, 191, 192.

his "specialness," his energy, his faith.

However, such a conclusion overlooks vital aspects of what constitutes inwardness for Kierkegaard. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard's ethical-religious pseudonym Johannes Climacus states: "At its highest, inwardness in an existing subject is passion." Inwardness is *passionate commitment* and it is exactly the individual's willingness to commit to something that constitutes its subjective truthfulness: "truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty."[33] This is the paradox of subjective truth: that its truthfulness lies in the passionate commitment to something that is uncertain, that is not within the individual's full control or even grasp. So, inwardness implies passion, commitment and risk.

In Rabbit, all these elements are absent. Although Updike and several scholars try to imbue the image of Rabbit's "running" with the positive meaning of movement as "becoming," it can also be understood, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, as a *lack* of exactly such becoming. Whereas, according to Galloway, Rabbit's running is a spiritual rejection of what was imposed on him, and Boswell calls Rabbit's abandonment of his family the "recognition of freedom's possibility," followed by a "leap" to the "attainment of freedom itself";[34] it seems to us that this rejection is not, in fact, a leap *from* possibility to "positive" freedom (as the actuality of a self-chosen, passionate commitment) but rather a flight *into* possibility (into "negative" freedom, which is the *opposite* of the leap, namely the absence of commitment). What continually drives Rabbit are all the *other* possibilities that arise out of the contrast with his everyday existence and that estrange him from that existence.[35] Rabbit does not *choose* in the Kierkegaardian sense: he does not leap, risk or commit (as that would require an "absolute" affirmation that "annuls possibility," a

33. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* 1, 199, 203.

34. David Galloway, *The Absurd Hero*, 31; Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy*, 36-37.

35. Cf. Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy*, 34-35.

mature choice that excludes other opportunities).[36] Instead, his actions seemingly leave all possibilities open: he intuitively runs from his family, drives south, cannot find the right route and drives back, ends up living with Ruth, goes back to his family after his daughter is born, leaves again, returns and attends the funeral of his infant daughter, and runs again.

Consequently, what Rabbit lacks, in Kierkegaardian terms, is "actuality." This goes directly to Updike's misunderstanding in speaking of Rabbit as possessing inwardness. Because, even though Climacus, in the *Postscript*, defines actuality as "not the external action but an interiority," he further defines it as "an interiority in which the individual annuls possibility and identifies himself with what is thought in order to exist in it. This is action."[37] This Kierkegaardian understanding of inwardness as passionate choice, as the becoming of the self, the movement of subjectivity, should be sharply distinguished from Rabbit's references to what is inside of him, as some sort of private, *solipsistic* state of being, a true self that he cannot express without losing it. These references are in fact more suggestive of what Kierkegaard calls "demonic" inwardness or despair.[38]

For Kierkegaard, what Rabbit's preference for possibility, his avoidance of choice, and resulting lack of actuality and thus of inwardness would make him, is an aesthetic and not a religious individual. For the aesthete—the life-view that Kierkegaard criticizes above all—"possibility is superior to actuality."[39] Anticipating the aesthete's response that avoidance of choice and provisional, non-committal choice are also forms of choosing (compare Rabbit's "running" described above), Kierkegaard's ethicist Judge William states in *Either/*

36. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Vol. 1*, 339.

37. Ibid., 339.

38. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 72.

39. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Vol. 1*, 318.

Or: "Your choice is an esthetic choice, but an esthetic choice is no choice."[40]

Updike seems to interpret the aesthetic sphere as standing only for the immediacy imposed by society (embodied, for example, by Eccles), and to overlook that the aesthetic sphere *also* includes the individual who distances himself from this immediacy but does not choose a (new) commitment (a mistaken interpretation brought out but also followed by Boswell).[41] In short, not choosing, either by remaining in immediacy or by remaining in possibility, constitutes an aesthetic attitude: "The esthetic choice is either altogether immediate, and thus no choice, or it loses itself in a great multiplicity," according to Judge William, who adds: "if one does not choose absolutely, one chooses only for the moment and for that reason can choose something else the next moment."[42] And this is exactly what Rabbit does: remaining in multiplicity and thus not choosing.

That Updike seems to have misunderstood this aspect of Kierkegaard's philosophy also becomes clear from his comparison of what he calls the "yes-but" quality of his own work[43] with Kierkegaard's central phrase "either/or": "Both the 'yes-but' and the 'either/or' imply there are two sides to things, don't they? So to that extent it is Kierkegaardian, and no sooner do you look at one side than you see the other again," says Updike in an interview.[44] However, whereas for Updike his "yes-but" indeed expresses ambiguity, a "having it both ways," as he has also called it,[45] in Kierkegaard's work the phrase "either/or" serves to express the exact opposite, namely that in order to "really" exist one needs to choose, one or

40. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part 2*, 166.

41. E.g. Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy*, 8-9, 38.

42. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part 2*, 167.

43. Howard, "Can a Nice Novelist Finish First?", 16.

44. Campbell, "Interview with John Updike," 97.

45. Ibid., 103.

the other, that one cannot have both without remaining in possibility. In the words of Judge William: "that one is faced with a choice, an actual Either/Or"; "there comes a midnight hour when everyone must unmask . . . do you believe that one can sneak away just before midnight in order to avoid it?"[46]

Rabbit's avoidance of choice—or "zig-zag," as the novel's dust jacket calls it[47]—has been mislabelled as an anxious preservation of subjectivity (in the face of objective-societal pressure), while, for Kierkegaard, this constitutes the failure to become a subjective self: as the aesthete "lives in this totally hypothetical and subjunctive way, his life loses all continuity. He succumbs completely to mood." But, Kierkegaard writes, "there always must be a bond that ties these contrasts together," and this prevailing mood that underlies the aesthete's "zig-zag" is "boredom."[48] We can clearly see this, especially in the second half of the novel, in the development of Rabbit's sexual desire: he gets bored with Ruth, claiming that a wall has come between them, and he for that reason demands that she fellate him, and not much later he demands the same of his wife Janice—demands that are experienced as transgressive and humiliating by both women.[49] At the same time, Rabbit also desires a new affair in his fantasies about Lucy Eccles. Rabbit's (sexual) insatiability and demand for novelty, again, are not expressions of subjectivity but a result of his lack of a continuity, of a *self*, subjecting him to boredom. This also sheds an

46. *Either/Or, Part 2*, 162, 160. The judge is in fact addressing the aesthete, here, who *does* exploit the "either/or" to "have it both ways"—he says: "These words Either/Or are a double-edged dagger I carry with me and with which I can assassinate the whole of actuality. I just say: Either/Or. Either it is this or it is that; since nothing in life is either this or that, it does not, of course, exist" (*Either/Or, Part 1*, 527). This is the view under critique in Kierkegaard's philosophy. In the non-pseudonymous *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard confirms "the crucial either/or depends upon the individual's own impassioned desire directed towards acting decisively" (67).

47. Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy*, 8.

48. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 284-285.

49. Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 160, 213.

interesting, additional light on Rabbit's supposedly positive quality of movement. For the aesthete, boredom "is the root of all evil," that which has to be avoided; thus the "magical" effect of this "repulsion," is boredom's "capacity to initiate motion"—but only as a flight, a distraction, a further avoidance.[50]

But what about Rabbit's religious inspiration? *Rabbit, Run* clearly portrays its main character as an example of religious subjectivity, as opposed to Eccles's "faithless," social-ethical conception of religion. Rabbit is labelled a "saint," a "Christian gentleman," a "mystic."[51] As described above, Rabbit is aligned with Kruppenbach's pietist imagery of a mysterious, energizing faith. Markle adds that the colour scheme associated with Rabbit further affirms "his spiritual (heavenly) quality": "Rabbit's colors are blue and white—in the opening scene he becomes a white angel (his arms are 'wings') in a blue sky. He drives a blue car, has blue eyes and a white face."[52] Galloway writes: "There can be no doubt that Updike intends us to look upon Rabbit as a saint and to see his experiences as spiritual."[53] Boswell and Neary even recognize in Rabbit Kierkegaard's "knight of faith," who, after the example of Job, "in renouncing the finite in exchange for the infinite, believes wholly in the return, here on earth, of that renounced finitude": the "knight of faith" is an "ordinary man of subjectivity . . . who, on the outside, seems to belong wholly to the world . . . while inwardly he carries intimate knowledge of infinitude," writes Boswell.[54] Neary states that, with his descriptions of the "knight of faith" in *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard "could almost be describing Harry Angstrom."[55]

50. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part 1*, 285.

51. Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 60, 110, 111.

52. Markle, *Fighters and Lovers*, 9.

53. Galloway, *The Absurd Hero*, 35.

54. Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy*, 45-46.

55. John Neary, *Something and Nothingness*, 72.

But to what extent does Rabbit choose, surrender to infinity, or "renounce" finitude *in the belief* that it will be returned to him, imbued with eternal meaning? Despite the fact that the novel is written very close to Rabbit's perspective, the most concrete allusion to his faith in infinity is Rabbit's intuition that "somewhere behind all this . . . there's something that wants me to find it."[56] Then, toward the end of the novel, at his daughter's funeral, Rabbit experiences a "liberation," as "his heart completes its turn and turns again, a wider turn in a thinning medium to which the outer world bears a decreasing relevance." He declares himself blameless for his daughter's death and then "turns and runs," "[u]phill exultantly."[57] Though the terminology in this whole passage seeks to evoke religious inspiration, we can also—and more accurately—see it as an act of aesthetic zig-zag: Rabbit disowns any responsibility for the actuality of having abandoned his new-born child with his alcoholic wife, and returns himself to the realm of possibility; after running uphill, Rabbit returns to Ruth, and when he learns from her that she has recently undergone an abortion, he runs again. Interestingly, while the name Angstrom most obviously seems to want to evoke "stream of angst" (German: "Angst" and "Strom"),[58] when translated back into Danish, the name Angstrom literally is a combination of angst (dread, anxiety) and "*røm*" (to run away, escape). Rabbit Angstrom is the man whose dread makes him run, who runs away, *flees from* his anxiety—which places him as far from the "knight of faith" as it is possible to come.

In Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*—which, perhaps relevant in this respect, is not mentioned in Updike's listings of works by Kierkegaard he has read[59]—Judge William offers a critique of the "mystic." In

56. Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 110.

57. Ibid., 250.

58. Cf. Hunt, *Updike & Three Great Secret Things*, 41.

59. "Updike stated that he had read *Philosophical Fragments*, *Sickness Unto Death*, *The*

Rabbit, Run, on the other hand, the label "mystic" serves to positively evoke Rabbit's (Kruppenbach-ian) individual, spiritual energy and his disregard for the social-ethical conception of religion. Although we should note that, from Kierkegaard's view of the religious sphere, there are clear limitations to Judge William's ethicist perspective (including his views of the religious), the core of the Judge's critique of the mystic is a clear explanation of the misunderstanding underlying Rabbit's supposedly Kierkegaardian religiousness. First of all, Judge William writes, "the distinctiveness of the mystical is not the religious but the isolation in which the individual, without regard for any relation to the given actuality, wants to place himself in immediate rapport with the eternal." Mysticism is, in a sense, an aesthetic misrelating to the religious:

> The mystic's error, then, is not that he chooses himself, for in so doing he does well, in my opinion, but his error is that he does not choose himself properly. . . . The mystic's error is that in the choice he does not become concrete either to himself or to God; he chooses himself abstractly and therefore lacks transparency. In other words, a person makes a mistake if he believes that abstractions are transparent; the abstract is the dim, the misty. Therefore, his love for God has its highest expression in a feeling, a mood.[60]

In Kierkegaard, this critique of the mystic's lack of concreteness and emphasis on feeling is directed at the romantic conception of Christian religiosity, but we can extend it to Rabbit's (aesthetic) avoidance of choice. Rabbit's belief, his relation to God, remains vague and does not lead him to a passionate commitment that has

Concept of Dread, and parts of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—Kierkegaard's major and most difficult works—as well as a good number of the *Edifying Discourses*" (Hunt, *Updike & Three Great Secret Things*, 216); Updike's article "A Book That Changed Me" is devoted to *Fear and Trembling*.

60. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part 2*, 246-248.

consequences for his thoughts and actions. Emblematic of Updike's writing, Rabbit remains in a "yes-but" ambiguity, while assuming that his solipsistic belief in his inner specialness already constitutes his unique relationship to God. As such, this relation is indeed no more than a feeling, a mood, something that comes and goes, and not an inward passionate commitment. When Rabbit experiences a mystical moment of inspiration—like after the basketball game or at the funeral—this is quickly undone by subsequent choices because Rabbit has not chosen absolutely: he has not made himself concrete, and therefore he can (aesthetically) start anew the next moment, which is what he continues to do.

2. Wallace and Kierkegaard: Subjectivity and Faith in *Infinite Jest*

Wallace's *Infinite Jest* offers a portrayal of Kierkegaardian subjectivity and faith that is radically different from Updike's rendering. The following analysis of these notions in *Infinite Jest* will bring out the differences with *Rabbit, Run* and also help us better understand the critique of Updike in Wallace's review. To facilitate the comparison between their interpretations of Kierkegaard, this section will trace the same Kierkegaardian concepts (or, better said: "existents") in *Infinite Jest* as were analyzed with regard to *Rabbit, Run*: that is, inwardness, passion, actuality, choice, boredom, and faith. The reading of Wallace's novel will be directly combined with the analysis of these concepts (contrary to the previous section, in which this was partly done successively), because the concepts have now already been introduced.

Compared to Updike, Wallace has less explicitly claimed an influence of Kierkegaard's philosophy on his work and there is also significantly less scholarship examining this influence. Still, Kierkegaard is

repeatedly mentioned in *Infinite Jest*.[61] And Wallace himself stated: "I too believe that most of the problems of what might be called 'the tyranny of irony' in today's West can be explained almost perfectly in terms of Kierkegaard's distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical life."[62] Several scholars have picked up on this relevance of Kierkegaard's philosophy in relation to Wallace's writing, and specifically to the portrayal of addiction in *Infinite Jest*.[63]

The relation between addiction and reflection, drawn throughout *Infinite Jest*, provides us with a similar starting point to our analysis of Kierkegaardian "existents" as in the discussion of *Rabbit, Run*, namely the relation between subjectivity and reflection. Kierkegaard's famous claim "subjectivity is truth" asserts that existential truth, as pertaining to the meaningful existence of the individual, can be found only in subjective reflection, in the immersion in one's own subjectivity that Kierkegaard also calls inwardness. In Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, this is rendered—mistakenly, we argued—by Harry Angstrom relying on some sort of core specialness, something that is already inside of him, that constitutes an intuitive attunement to the divine. In *Infinite Jest*, such an interpretation of Kierkegaardian inwardness is criticized through the novel's portrayal of addiction, of which excessive self-reflection is shown to be the essential characteristic: "most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking," and almost all of this thinking is about themselves; the characters in question are described as identifying "their whole selves with their head."[64] This permanent self-reflection leads them to treat their supposed "self" as an object they possess, inside, that

61. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 12, 992, 105.

62. David Foster Wallace, letter to den Dulk, March 20, 2006; also see: den Dulk, "Beyond Endless 'Aesthetic' Irony."

63. E.g. Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 137-40, 143-4; den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer*.

64. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 203, 272.

only they themselves can access, as part of some sort of immanent, inner process, and, as a result, they become convinced of the singularity of their individual experiences, thoughts and feelings. For example, Orin Incandenza regards his thoughts as "exceptional," while they are in fact "banal and average"; and for Kate Gompert "[t]here is no way [she] could ever begin to make someone else understand what clinical depression feels like," as she is convinced "that no one else could hear or understand."[65] Compare this to the descriptions of Rabbit's uniqueness, his reliance on being the only one to know what he *has* inside. Contrary to *Rabbit, Run*, in *Infinite Jest* such thoughts are presented as a solipsistic privacy illusion, as what we could call *false* inwardness, countered in Wallace's novel by the observation, with regard to addicts' excessive self-consciousness, that, in fact, "other people can often see things about you that you yourself cannot see."[66]

For Kierkegaard, inwardness requires passionate commitment. And that is what Rabbit and *Infinite Jest*'s addicts are incapable of: their self-immersion serves to *stave off* any commitment. This is the main characteristic of what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic life-view. Boswell points out that "Wallace's desperate drug addicts are essentially 'aesthetes' in Kierkegaard's famous formulation," and refers to the description of the aesthete, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, as someone who "holds existence at bay by the most subtle of all deceptions, by thinking. He has thought everything possible, and yet he has not existed at all."[67] In *Infinite Jest*, addiction functions

65. Ibid., 737, 75, 696. This is a recurring motif in Wallace's work; for example, in the short story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way", Mark's "solipsistic delusion . . . that he's the only person in the world who feels like the only person in the world" (Wallace, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," *Girl with Curious Hair*, 304-305). These observations are partly derived from Den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer*, 59.

66. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 204.

67. Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 138; Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Vol. 1*, 253.

as a metaphor for the avoidance of taking responsibility for one's life. Don Gately is described as realizing at one point that "a drug addict was at root . . . a thing that basically hides."[68] Similarly, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the aesthetic life-view is described as "hiddenness."[69]

Both Kierkegaard and *Infinite Jest* show this way of living to have disastrous consequences. By remaining in possibility, retaining one's negative freedom from any commitment, the solipsist's existence is gradually emptied out. Kierkegaard writes: "Because reflection was continually reflecting about reflection, thinking went astray, and every step it advanced led further and further, of course, from any content."[70] In Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, the ethicist Judge William diagnoses the consequences for the aesthete A as follows: "You are like a dying person. You die daily, not in the profound, earnest sense . . . but life has lost its reality."[71] In *Infinite Jest*, the addicted characters' avoidance of responsibility is described as leading to "internal emptiness," to losing one's self ("the cliché 'I don't know who I am' unfortunately turns out to be more than a cliché"), a state that the novel also describes as "depression," or "anhedonia, death in life."[72] With these portrayals in *Infinite Jest*, Wallace can be said to diagnose and critique exactly the aesthetic solipsism we find in *Rabbit, Run* (and in Updike's work in general).[73]

68. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 932.

69. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Vol. 1*, 254; cf. Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 140.

70. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 272.

71. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part 2*, 196.

72. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 694, 204. Here we find another terminological connection with Kierkegaard, because he also labels the self-disturbance of refusing the task of becoming "depression" (e.g. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part 2*, 27).

73. The same can be said of many of Wallace's short stories focusing on the disastrous consequences of excessive, solipsistic self-reflection, such as "Good Old Neon" and "The Depressed Person," but including these in the above analysis goes beyond the scope of this article.

Moreover, *Infinite Jest* can be said to offer, not just a critique, but also a positive portrayal of subjectivity and faith, namely in its rendering of AA and of Don Gately specifically, that can be accurately understood as Kierkegaardian.

Here, one might object that *Infinite Jest* seems to describe AA as imposing an *objective* reflection on its members, namely, to follow certain pre-established, general rules and thereby achieve redemption, and thus seems quite opposite to Kierkegaard's view of existential truth as subjective. See for example: "your personal will is the web your Disease sits and spins in"; "So no whys or wherefores allowed. In other words check your head at the door. Though it can't be conventionally enforced, this, Boston AA's real root axiom, is almost classically authoritarian, maybe even proto-Fascist." AA tells recovering addicts to "Just Do It," for example to go to meetings (and to "Keep Coming") and to pray to (and thereby "turn over" their "Diseased will" to) a Higher Power.[74]

However, it is important to discern that the axiomatic elements of AA do not serve to foster an objective religiosity. First of all, we should note that *Infinite Jest* also describes that "[t]here are, by ratified tradition, no 'musts' in Boston AA. No doctrine or dogma or rules"; and that, even though the addicts' lack of viable alternatives ("It's all optional; do it or die") makes AA "sub-rosa dogmatic" in practice, "Boston AA stresses the utter autonomy of the individual member."[75] We should connect AA directives such as "surrender your will" and "check your head at the door" to the above-discussed critique of aesthetic solipsism. In *Infinite Jest*, the AA slogan "My Best Thinking Got Me Here" captures the fact that addicts' excessive self-reflective thinking has served to ignore reality and stave off responsibility, leading to emptiness and depression. It is this type of thinking that Kierkegaard's critique of "objective reflection" is

74. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 355, 466.

75. Ibid., 356-357.

aimed at: a type of reflection that remains in the sphere of "ideality," rationalizing and disregarding existential reality (and in that sense objective), but therefore destructive to (that is, hollowing out) subjective existence. Secondly, and more importantly, AA's general "truths" (whether taken to be "suggestions" or "sub-rosa dogmas") are a matter of form, not of content: they posit structures (meetings, prayer) that encourage individuals to acknowledge and better understand their own situation and actions (that is, through subjective reflection), but they do not posit the content of those insights.

As such, *Infinite Jest* describes these structures as fostering what can be properly called Kierkegaardian inwardness: that is, not an aesthetic solipsism, but an immersion in one's self, in the form of taking stock of one's past and contemplating one's future. We can see this most clearly in Don Gately: large portions of his story line are devoted to recollections of his past as an addict and his experience in AA, getting clean. This process of recollection and contemplation is facilitated by AA meetings—if only through that one sentence, "I am an alcoholic," when a member starts speaking.[76] AA's route to sobriety leads Gately to "start to 'Get In Touch' with why it was that you used Substances in the first place." The long Gately sections toward the end of *Infinite Jest* narrate exactly that experience: "It's like a lot of memories of his youth sank without bubbles when he quit school and then later only in sobriety bubbled back up to where he could Get In Touch with them."[77]

Furthermore, Gately's inwardness constitutes passion (passionate

76. Note that the suggestion to the audience to, in turn, "Identify" with the speaker (including the realization that "all the speakers' stories of decline and fall and surrender are basically alike, and like your own" (Ibid., 345) is not an invitation to objective reflection. On the contrary, it is meant to counter the *self*-objectifying reflection that the addict-characters are prone to, which—as discussed above—convinces the addict of the exceptional, and uncommunicable nature of his or her experiences, thoughts and feelings, and leads to anhedonia, which involves being "incapable of empathy with any other living thing" (696).

77. Ibid., 446, 274.

commitment). This is perhaps clearest in the hospital sections—which might seem paradoxical, because in these scenes Gately is mute and immobile, lying in a hospital bed. But in these seemingly passive qualities, Gately actually resembles the young man from Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, whose acquisition of inwardness (thereby overcoming his aesthetic solipsism) is emphasized by a physical immobility that he himself describes as follows: "I am standing and have been standing *suspenso gradu* [immobilized] for a whole month now, without moving a foot or making one single movement."[78] It is during this period of stillness that he breaks away from his focus on what Kierkegaard calls ideality, from the aestheticizing of existing reality, and develops inwardness. If one were to object that the existentialist notion of commitment surely requires action, and that Gately's immobile ("inactive") state seems to be the opposite of that, we would refer to the discussion in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* of what constitutes "action." There, Kierkegaard's ethicist pseudonym states that the distinction between an abstract idea, or "thought-action" (which remains at the level of possibility, always retractable) and an "actual action" is "recognizable by this, that whereas any further consideration and deliberation with regard to the former must be regarded as welcome, with regard to the latter it must be regarded as temptation."[79] The most obvious example of this in *Infinite Jest* is Gately's refusal of pain medication in the hospital after having been shot. And perhaps the most literal illustration of his commitment in the face of temptation is the moment when a doctor tries to convince him to "[s]urrender [his] courageous fear of dependence and let us do our profession," Gately's hand "shooting out between the bars of the bedside crib-railing and plunging under the M.D.'s lab-coat and fastening onto the guy's balls and bearing down."[80] Similar-

78. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, 214.

79. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Vol. 1*, 340-341.

80. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 888, 889.

ly, Gately's fever dreams of his former drug use while refusing pain medication do not void but *confirm* his commitment, as they show the strength and endurance of the temptation he is faced with.[81] These passages thus illustrate the paradox of subjective truth as the passionate commitment to something that is uncertain.

This makes clear that Gately's existence has what Rabbit's lacks, namely actuality, which we have seen defined as "an interiority in which the individual annuls possibility and identifies himself with what is thought in order to exist in it."[82] This focus on actuality, on what is real (as opposed to the conjurings of solipsistic thought that remain on the level of the ideal, the possible), can be recognized in what is described in *Infinite Jest* as AA's "gift, the Now: it's AA's real gift: it's no accident they call it *The Present*." In the case of Gately, this emphasis on actuality is explicitly contrasted with solipsistic self-reflection: "What's unendurable is what his own head could make of it all. What his head could report to him, looking over and ahead and reporting." And by "Abiding in the Present" Gately is described as "returned to himself."[83]

This relates to Kierkegaard's notion of choice. For Kierkegaard, choice is the individual relating himself to past and future, in the present. And because the present is forever returning, repeating, choice also must be repeated. That is, for commitment to retain actuality, it must constantly be made actual.[84] In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* Climacus emphasizes that choice is not "finished" in "the moment of the decision of passion, where the road swings off from objective knowledge"—which we might recognize in Rabbit's intuitive

81. As suggested, for example, in Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose." For a more elaborate discussion of this point, see: Den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer*, 65.

82. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript Vol. 1*, 339.

83. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 860.

84. For further elaboration, see Den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer*, 215.

running. Instead, choice is "transformed into a striving" that must be "repeatedly refreshed by the decisive passion of the infinite."[85] In *Infinite Jest*, we can recognize this continuous ("infinite") repetition of choice in AA's emphasis that getting clean only works "One Day at a Time," by "Keeping It in the Day." And this is illustrated by Gately's endurance of withdrawal symptoms ("He had to build a wall around each second just to make it"), and in advice given to Joelle van Dyne ("to build a wall around each individual 24-hour period and not look over or back," "I can do this for one endless day"), to which Gately assents: "she could as long as she continued to choose to." It is important to note that, both in Kierkegaard and *Infinite Jest*, this repetition of choice also entails a progressive deepening of passion, as in the case of Gately, who "never before or since felt so excruciatingly alive. Living in the Present between pulses."[86]

Furthermore, the imagery associated in *Infinite Jest* with such passionate choice is also highly reminiscent of Kierkegaard's notion of the "choice" as "leap." For Kierkegaard, the term "leap" expresses the fundamental uncertainty of each commitment to actuality, but also that the individual nevertheless wants (needs) to act, because of the existential urgency experienced in that decision (also see the above description of passion as the rejection of temptation). *Infinite Jest* describes, through Gately, how addict-characters reach "this cliffish nexus of exactly two choices," "like someplace very high and unsupported: you're on the edge of something tall and leaning way out forward," "the jumping-off place for just about every AA you meet."[87] These descriptions make clear that Gately (contrary to Rabbit), realizes that he is facing an absolute "either/or" (and not an ambiguous "yes-but").

85. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript Vol. 1*, 340, 341, 203.

86. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 858, 859-860.

87. Ibid., 272, 204, 347, 349.

The flip-side of the need for an endless repetition of choice, of "One Day at a Time," is boredom. We have seen that for the aesthete (and Rabbit) boredom is the "root of all evil." In *Infinite Jest*, addicts are described as finding AA slogans, such as "One Day At A Time" and "Keep Coming," terribly clichéd and boring. This is another manifestation of the addicts' aesthetic self-reflection: convinced of the uniqueness of their thoughts, they focus on trying to rationally repudiate AA and its "quilted-sampler-type cliché[s]" (for example, one character, upon being confronted with his alcohol addiction, insists on hearing the exact definition of the word alcoholic), to find reasons to resist the above-described type of thinking and the commitment it entails. Kierkegaard regards such recoiling from boredom as the aesthete's refusal to recognize the need for existential commitment, while *enduring* boredom and repetition means attending to that task, to confront the "nothingness" that underlies existence and resist fleeing from it (into the ideality of addiction). In *Infinite Jest*, this existential purpose of boredom is figured by both the extremely repetitive character of AA (cf. the above-quoted slogans, daily meetings) *and* the simple (banal, clichéd) but real insights it produces. Indeed, "every one of the seminal little mini-epiphanies you have in early AA is always polyesterishly banal, Gately admits to residents." But, according to Gately, "the vapider the AA cliché, the sharper the canines of the real truth it covers." And: "the thing is that the clichéd directives are a lot more deep and hard to actually *do*. To try and live by instead of just say."[88] These descriptions function as *Infinite Jest*'s further affirmation of the Kierkegaardian assertion that truth for an "existing spirit" lies in what it means to "exist in" that truth.[89]

Therein, *Infinite Jest* emphasizes the temporality and graduality of the development of such subjective commitment that ultimately

88. Ibid., 273.

89. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript Vol. 1*, 191.

leads to *faith*: not as something that's realized in one decisive moment ("where the road swings off"), but a persistent "striving" that has to be (infinitely) "repeatedly refreshed"—to use Kierkegaard's formulations.[90] This includes hesitance, boredom, uncertainty. For Gately, too, "[t]he idea that AA might actually somehow *work* unnerved him. He suspected some sort of trap." But what unites AA members is a "grudging move toward maybe acknowledging that this unromantic, unhip, clichéd AA thing . . . might really be able to keep the lover's toothy maw at bay."[91] The addicts' "grudging move" shows the same characteristic that Kierkegaard ascribes to all absolute choice: "Objectively he then has only uncertainty, but this is precisely what intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness, and truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite."[92] In the case of *Infinite Jest*'s AA: it is about choosing to stay clean, uncertain as to whether the program will help one achieve that; but subsequently, by *doing* it (after being faced with a "cliffish nexus," requiring a "leap"), experiencing that the program works, and thus becoming more deeply committed, and clean.

This brings us to what faith is, for Kierkegaard: "the definition of truth . . . is a paraphrasing of faith. Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty," according to Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus: "If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith."[93] In *Infinite Jest*, AA instructs its members to choose a Higher Power, a "God As You Understand Him," and pray to that entity each morning and evening, to ask for assistance in substance recovery—even if one does not

90. Ibid., 340-341, 203.

91. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 349-350.

92. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript Vol. 1*, 203.

93. Ibid., 204.

believe in a Higher Power.[94] In Kierkegaard's view, faith in God implies an absurd paradox—that God, in Jesus, existed *as man*—that is impossible to really understand, but that, instead, must be accepted, surrendered to. Albeit an absurdity of a different kind, AA members' acceptance of a Higher Power—especially in our supposedly secular age—also implies a belief that will show itself to work by not trying to understand it. When Gately, like every new member, at the start of his participation in AA voiced his doubts about the program and about the Higher Power he was supposed to pray to but did not believe in, his sponsor Gene M. told Gately to imagine AA as a "box of Betty Crocker Cake Mix" and

> follow the directions on the side of the fucking box. It didn't matter one fuckola whether Gately *believed* a cake would result, or whether he *understood* the like fucking baking-chemistry of *how* a cake would result: if he just followed the motherfucking directions, and had sense enough to get help from slightly more experienced bakers to keep from fucking the directions up if he got confused somehow, but basically the point was if he just followed the childish directions, a cake would result.[95]

Similarly, *Infinite Jest*'s portrayal of AA's more general demand that members assent to its rules (discussed above in the context of objective versus subjective reflection) could in fact be seen as part of AA's emphasis on the need for faith. This even extends to AA's specific recommendation (regarding such faith) to "Fake It Till You Make It." On the face of it, this slogan might seem to suggest the opposite of religious passion—to *fake* one's belief, one's commitment to the program. However, the recommendation actually resounds the advice of Blaise Pascal, who is often regarded as a predecessor to

94. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 466.

95. Ibid., 467.

Kierkegaard[96] (and existentialism more generally): both thinkers emphasize the individual experience of religious faith and both regard God as wholly unknowable, and therefore (because human understanding by definition falls short) the actions and devotions of believers are what make up their relation to God. In his famous *Pensée* often labelled "The Wager," Pascal writes:

> Learn of those who have been bound like you . . . . These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness. "But this is what I am afraid of." And why? What have you to lose?[97]

This takes us back to the start of our discussion of *Infinite Jest*'s portrayal of AA: like Pascal's advice, the recommendation to "Fake It Till You Make It" does not serve to impose any objective content, but rather to provide a structure (holy water and masses, or the rituals of AA) that combats aesthetic self-reflection (the ill cured by deadening one's acuteness, surrendering one's will, checking one's head at the door) and encourages the development of inwardness—which *Infinite Jest* portrays through the figure of Don Gately, who, despite his reluctance about AA and its Higher Power, "beseeched the ceiling and thanked the ceiling," and "after maybe five months . . . all of a sudden realized" that he "didn't feel anything like his old need to get high. He was, in a way, Free."[98] As such, through AA, *Infinite Jest*'s portrayal of a non-rational belief system that fosters

96. Also note that Wallace mentions Kierkegaard and Pascal together in his 1997 review of Updike (58).

97. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 65-70. Nick Levey has also pointed out the affinity of this passage with the portrayal of AA in *Infinite Jest* (see: "'Analysis Paralysis': The Suspicion of Suspicion in the Fiction of David Foster Wallace").

98. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 467.

subjectivity and faith has strong affinities with the philosophy of Kierkegaard. To be sure: the passages in *Infinite Jest* about AA's Higher Power do not imply the same type of *Christian* faith that is advocated by Kierkegaard,[99] but they do share an emphasis on the importance of faith, of passionately committing to an objective uncertainty in order to realize a meaningful existence.

At this point, a critic of such a reading of *Infinite Jest* might counter that the novel as a whole, with its contrast between the seeming genuineness of the AA sections and the self-consciousness and playfulness of so many other parts, implies a certain ironic reservation with regard to the ideas expressed by the AA sections. However, even if one were to accept these different tonalities as an actual contrast, the irony of one section does not necessarily cancel out the sincerity of another. Furthermore, the observation that Wallace's (or *Infinite Jest*'s) own commitment to the ideas expressed in the AA sections might contain a certain amount of reservation in fact constitutes another similarity to Kierkegaard and his work: despite the fact that his works are devoted to advocating a renewed, truthful form of Christian faith, Kierkegaard constantly includes alternatives to it, life-views that disregard religious faith or that, while recognizing its potential importance, still fall short of it. Kierkegaard also believed that he himself always fell short of the religious ideal of his philosophy, and this self-knowledge infuses his descriptions of the different existential stages.

What *does* constitute a substantial difference between Wallace and Kierkegaard is that *Infinite Jest*'s descriptions of the workings of AA imply a clear re-evaluation of the role of a community of believers in the embrace of the uncertainty and absurdity of faith.

99. For the same reason, we do not call Gately a Kierkegaardian "knight of faith": this term simply carries too specifically Christian connotations for it to be meaningfully applied to him. However, it is worth noting that, like the "knight of faith," Gately is very much an ordinary man *and* hero of the novel (sometimes called "knight" and "Sir"), whose acceptance of the repetition of AA can be characterized as an understanding of infinitude.

Kierkegaard saw himself confronted with a society-wide misperception of religion (which he labelled "Christendom") in which easy assent to doctrines and social membership of a church community left so-called Christians secure in their belief that they did not have to truly confront the radical paradoxes of the Christian faith. By contrast, we have seen in the foregoing that *Infinite Jest* portrays the AA community as fostering the *deepening* of passion and faith. But this deepening itself is, again, very much Kierkegaardian, as we have seen: the AA directives and meetings serve to remind its members that they should abandon the constant solipsistic self-reflection that fed their addiction and now balks at AA's objective uncertainty and instead dare to embrace that uncertainty, as the only viable way back to leading a meaningful existence.

Conclusion

In reaction to what he regarded as the complete disregard for the individual in the Hegelianism of his day, Kierkegaard never got tired of pointing out that the existing individual should be given his proper place and due, both in philosophy and in life. But, as Wallace's review makes clear, this existentialist emphasis on the individual is easily misunderstood and in the work of John Updike turns into aesthetic solipsism.

Kierkegaard understood (and was susceptible to) the appeal of aesthetic immersion in sensuous experience, for example in the figure of Don Juan and in Romantic literature. Therefore, the style of Kierkegaard's writings that represent the aesthetic life-view is also purposefully more poetic and captivating than those representing the ethical and religious perspectives. Wallace discerns a similar, sensuous appeal to Updike's writing: in his review, he repeatedly emphasizes the "sheer gorgeousness" and "sheer aesthetic pleasure" of Updike's "descriptive prose." But, just like Kierkegaard notes that the aesthete's sensuous descriptions of the world merely serve the

internal, solipsistic gratification of pleasure, Wallace also notes that Updike's "gorgeous" descriptions merely serve to evoke "impressions and associations and emotions and desires inside the great self."[100]

As Kierkegaard critiqued the Romantics, Wallace associates the aesthetic solipsism in Updike's work with a post-WWII generation eager to embrace the "evection of the libidinous self" that was, erroneously, seen to follow from existentialist philosophies. Wallace points out this connection, between libidinous solipsism and popular conceptions of existentialism, at the end of his review when he observes that Updike's protagonist is able to quote Kierkegaard "on angst" and then expects that angst to be cured by "getting to have sex with whomever one wants whenever one wants." Implied in this solipsism is an inability to connect "to any sort of larger unit or community or cause."[101] Both Kierkegaard and Wallace emphasize the need for community, for connections to what lies beyond the self, as foundational to meaningful existence. We have seen that, here, *Infinite Jest* can be seen to differ from Kierkegaard's philosophy, because of the former's emphasis on the importance of community with other human beings, instead of the latter's focus on communion with God. At the same time, these different forms of communion are both described as fostering the subjectivity and faith of the individual. Wallace's emphasis, against Kierkegaard, on the importance of social community, might be read as an attempt to prevent the common contemporary misunderstanding of passionate, subjective faith as entailing an aesthetic, Rabbit-like solipsism.

The affinity between Kierkegaard's philosophy and Wallace's work is strong and seems to encompass broad aspects of their views on human existence and the different ways of evading or accepting responsibility for that existence. Whereas Updike's *Rabbit, Run* misinterprets Kierkegaard's philosophy of subjective truth, inwardness

100. Wallace, "Certainly the End of *Something*," 52, 53, 54.

101. Ibid., 54, 58, 59, 53.

and faith as internal sensations and moods that somehow exempt the individual from sustained commitments and responsibilities to the world around him, Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, through its portrayal of addiction and AA (and the development of Don Gately specifically), offers a portrayal of subjectivity and the need for faith that *can* be accurately understood along Kierkegaardian lines. As such, *Infinite Jest*'s critique of self-indulgent, aesthetic solipsism in favor of passionate faith goes to the heart of Wallace's scathing critique of Updike's fiction.

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HOW TO BE: BUDDHISM, BOREDOM, AND THE PRACTICE OF AWARENESS IN *THE PALE KING*

Joseph B. Nash[1]

While writing what would become *The Pale King*, David Foster Wallace was deeply interested in Buddhism and meditation practice. This is a statement about influence, not personal identity. Whatever faith Wallace professed to follow (if any) is of less concern to this article than the influences demonstrated by his personal correspondences, his annotations in specific texts, and by the archival materials from which *The Pale King* was assembled and published. During the period of composition, Wallace was reading literature on meditation, corresponding with a Zen Buddhist practitioner, attempting to attend at least one silent meditation retreat, and struggling to maintain a regular meditation practice. All of these

1. I am grateful to Professor Jessica Berman for her thoughtful comments through several drafts of this project and to the Graduate Student Association at the University of Maryland Baltimore County for a travel grant that allowed me to visit Wallace's archive at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, TX.

influences are evident in the published text as well as in archival materials for *The Pale King*. This article explores the Buddhist and meditative influence on Wallace's third novel that has only glancingly been acknowledged in the extant scholarship. His interactions with Buddhism and meditation practice are important to helping us understand how he conceived of suffering, boredom, and awareness, and how these conceptions manifested themselves through his attempts to write *The Pale King*. This engagement with Buddhism permeated his work on the novel, subtly inhabiting and transforming the narratives of major characters and wholly defining the ethos of one particular character, Shane Drinion. Using both character analyses from the published text and archival material from Wallace's collection at the Harry Ransom Center, this article will demonstrate the extent and significance of the influence of Buddhism and meditation practice on Wallace's *The Pale King*.

I.

Most of us spend a majority of our days chasing distractions and avoiding boredom. Rarely are we content sitting with an extended, unstimulated moment. While such a problem may at first appear trivial, its significance is something with which Wallace was deeply concerned. The moment when our distractions have disappeared and boredom's entrance encroaches on our attention reveals a crisis of presence and awareness. In *The Pale King*, Wallace calls this a "terror of silence with nothing diverting to do."[2] Wallace seems to have been attempting to illuminate a kind of universal suffering that makes itself known when one becomes keenly aware of the present moment. This is especially true in the context of workplace drudgery, which is precisely the context Wallace chose for *The Pale King*.

2. David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* ed. Michael Pietsch (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2011), 87. All subsequent references will be cited parenthetically as *PK*.

If this discomfort in the present moment can be called boredom, then it is useful to consider Patricia Spacks' claim, in *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*, that "[b]oredom in all its manifestations implies failure of full attention, as cause or effect of the feeling."[3] More precisely, boredom may imply an aversion to attending to the present moment. In other words, the suffering that appends to boredom is not a result of some dearth of meaning from the objects of attention; instead, it emerges as an inverse to mindful attention. As attention and awareness ebb, boredom, then, emerges from within. This is distinct from what we might call ennui. In *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature*, Reinhard Kuhn claims that "we can tentatively define ennui as the state of emptiness that the soul feels when it is deprived of interest in action, life, and the world . . . a condition that is the immediate consequence of the encounter with nothingness, and has as an immediate effect a disaffection with reality."[4] This all-encompassing weariness is orthogonal to what is meant by boredom.

In *The Pale King*, Wallace's characters experience both ennui and boredom, though their encounters with boredom are more relevant to this article's claims. At the beginning of §22, Chris Fogle's self-proclaimed nihilism echoes Kuhn's description of ennui as "this condition usually characterized by the phenomenon of estrangement. In the state of ennui the world is emptied of its significance."[5] Before Fogle's transformation, nothing in the world seems to matter to him, and the memories he recounts seem not to have any relative significance. He also recalls himself being perpetually distracted, unable to sustain any interests long enough to hold down a job or to follow a degree to completion. He's suffering at once from world-weariness

3. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), xii.

4. Reinhard Clifford Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 13.

5. Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontime*, 12.

and boredom. Lane Dean, Jr., however, in §33 is suffering from what is described above as boredom. In fact, Wallace labeled an early, handwritten draft of this chapter with the heading "**Boredom**."[6] Dean's discomfort is not an existential anxiety about the world, but rather a reactionary aversion to his present-moment environment; more precisely, his unwillingness to engage mindfully with his workplace duties ensures his suffering. The rote behavior of processing tax returns seems boring to Dean, and he reacts to his present-moment by imagining ways out of it, by refusing to attend to it (*PK* 378). Spacks distinguishes between these two conditions by noting that "Ennui implies a judgment of the universe; boredom, a response to the immediate."[7] It's this latter experience, this "response to the immediate," that aligns with rote tax examiners, like Dean, in *The Pale King*, and with which this article aims to engage.

It is supremely difficult to convey the significance of the suffering that lies at the root of boredom. Boredom's significance is hardly clear in *The Pale King*. Moreover, Buddhists (among other contemplatives) have been attempting to communicate the difficulty of low-level, universal suffering for millennia. Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, articulated it in what are now known as the Four Noble Truths: life is suffering, the craving-clinging mind is the cause of suffering, there is a way out of suffering, and the Eightfold Path is the way.[8] In this framework, we are meant to understand that a low-level dissatisfaction pervades the root of all experience. Where this maxim holds true is immediately obvious in the example of Lane Dean's struggle with his duties at the IRS.

6. David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* draft materials, Box 39, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

7. Spacks, 12.

8. Dwight Goddard, ed., *A Buddhist Bible* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 10, 22. The term *suffering*, often the English translation of the Pali word *dukkha*, may carry some unhelpful connotations. *Unsatisfactoriness* or *dissatisfaction* are suitable alternatives.

But what of those moments of apparent joy or pleasant feelings—are those somehow also colored by suffering? Insofar as we can consider craving the root of all suffering, then moments of joy do have the capacity to create and increase suffering. Consider the periodic breaks that IRS examiners like Dean are given in *The Pale King*. Relative to processing returns, these fifteen minute breaks are the epitome of pleasure within the continuum of a day's work. Do these breaks cause or increase suffering?

> Then he looked up despite all best prior intentions. In four minutes it would be another hour, a half hour after that was the fifteen-minute break. Lane Dean imagined himself running around on the break waving his arms and shouting gibberish and holding ten cigarettes at once in his mouth like a panpipe. (*PK* 381).

While Dean enjoys his breaks—the reprieve from his work, the sensations of coffee and cigarettes and fresh air—he clings to these sensations and craves them in their absence. Rick Fields, a scholar of Buddhist literature, argues that "Even moments of happiness have a way of turning into pain when we hold onto them, or, once they have passed into memory, they twist the present as the mind makes an inevitable, hopeless attempt to recreate the past."[9] The breaks themselves are not inherently bad, but rather the way examiners cling to the breaks as objects of their attention causes further suffering. The lack of mindful awareness to pleasant sensations causes Dean to cling to those moments, and to crave them all the more while he is processing tax returns. The asymmetry of these experiences makes Dean struggle to attend to his work while he is performing mental gymnastics to imagine a temporally disjointed better experience. His craving to recreate past sensations only serves to increase his suffering.

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9. Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1981), 7.

Thus, boredom is that flavor of suffering which is strengthened by an awareness of displeasure with the present moment. Moreover, as the Buddhist scholar Gil Fronsdal explains, "boredom is a judgment, an activity of the mind. It can arise when desires and expectations are not satisfied. It can also occur when a situation is thought to have no personal benefit."[10] By paying careful, non-judgmental attention to those objects in the present moment—whether it is the breath and sensations of the body and mind in meditation practice or an endless source of impersonal tax returns to be processed in the IRS's rote examinations center—it is possible not only to diminish or alleviate one's suffering moment to moment but also to inhabit a more profound level of happiness.

Wallace attempted to portray this experience most clearly in *The Pale King* through Shane Drinion:

> Drinion is *happy*. Ability to pay attention. It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom. (*PK* 548)

The language here can be misleading, making it seem as though this bliss is a state to be achieved or the end-goal of working to attend to things that seem boring. It is important to note, however, that earning the bliss on the other side of boredom is both procedural and antiteleological. There is no single moment of salvation beyond which all suffering vanishes and all efforts to maintain mindful awareness are suddenly unnecessary. Rather, real freedom is earned through

10. Gil Fronsdal, *Unhindered: A Mindful Path Through the Five Hindrances* (Redwood City, CA: Tranquil Books, 2013), 57.

a constant, recursive process of striving for awareness in every moment. Wallace depicts this meditative bliss through Drinion's ability to levitate during heightened states of awareness. But his ability to levitate is less important than the fact that Drinion himself is unaware of his own levitation (*PK* 487)—he continues to work, to pay attention, to be happy, even in the midst of his own apparent bliss.

II.

Much has been written about *The Pale King* and boredom, but very little of what's been written engages with Buddhism and the meditation practices with which Wallace himself was involved.[11] Most of the criticism in this domain is undergirded by Wallace's notes that his editor, Michael Pietsch, includes in the "Notes and Asides" section at the end of the novel, which corroborate this fixation with boredom. These passages demonstrate that *boredom* was a term Wallace himself used to connote a common problem of modern life. Yet, more than simply focusing on boredom, the above note on Drinion, for example, implies a deeper message by suggesting that the ability to transcend boredom leads to a more blissful and meaningful experience. Its suggestion echoes Wallace's exhortation from *This is Water* that "[t]he really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort."[12] Still,

11. I should note that there is nothing new about reading Wallace's work alongside religious traditions. Many critics have commented on Wallace's affinity for existentialism in a Christian context. For just two examples, see Michael J. O'Connell's discussion of Lane Dean, Jr.'s boredom and the Christian monastic tradition in "'Your Temple is Self and Sentiment': David Foster Wallace's Diagnostic Novels." *Christianity & Literature*, 64, no. 3 (2015): 266-92; and Lucas Thompson's extensive tracking of Wallace's engagement with existentialist literature and alignment with American Catholic writers in chapter five of *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017): 161-96. My thanks to a reviewer for pointing me toward these readings.

12. David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 120.

some critics seem either confused or surprised by Wallace's suggestion in *The Pale King* that the way to happiness is through, not around, boredom. For example, Allard den Dulk asserts that "Wallace portrays boredom as a state that one can either try to avoid or embrace. Perhaps surprisingly, the novel affirms the latter option as the possible route to a meaningful life."[13] Rather than trying to get us to embrace boredom per se, I argue that Wallace wants us to realize that boredom is symptomatic of our refusal to attend meaningfully to the present. This was one of Wallace's core interests while working on *The Pale King*:

> [T]he really interesting question is why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention. Why we recoil from the dull. . . Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention (*PK* 87).

Why is boredom painful? Why is it that, when we sit alone, quiet and still, with only our own thoughts to keep us company, the low-level discomfort seems to increase overtime? While Wallace's etiological assessment of boredom is apt and interesting in *The Pale King*, for many readers, he fails to follow this up with a sufficiently reassuring prescription. As den Dulk notes, "*The Pale King* suggests that enduring boredom leads to meaning and happiness, but hardly explicates how this works."[14] Ralph Clare has a similar frustration

13. Allard den Dulk, "Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self," in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels*, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 44.

14. den Dulk, 53.

with *The Pale King*'s incomplete message on boredom: "To be able to reach a state of total concentration means gaining the possibility of transcending boredom. It is unclear what this entails exactly, but Wallace perhaps had something mystical in mind."[15] While I share these frustrations, it's worth considering that this lack of explication may be a result of the fact that the book is unfinished rather than an inherent flaw in its argument.

Allard den Dulk summarizes *The Pale King*'s theme of boredom: "By enduring boredom, we . . . *choose* to attend to something. Thereby, we commit ourselves to the world and start to take up our task of self-becoming. In this way boredom leads us back to meaningful, *real* existence . . . Wallace's fiction . . . points out the real world and urges us to pay attention to it, to commit to it, and thereby, to become ourselves."[16] Den Dulk's exploration of the choice to attend to the "real world" as a path toward self-actualization aligns with Wallace's note above about how Drinion's attention and awareness lead to happiness. Moreover, the "real world" here can only mean the present; the past only exists conceptually, and the future is a matter of imagination. Therefore, by paying attention to the "real world," we are necessarily paying attention to the present moment, which often will involve tedium and boredom. As den Dulk's criticism suggests, though, it is difficult to get Wallace's fractured sections in *The Pale King* to cohere in a satisfying way, but this hasn't stopped many critics from trying.

Perhaps the crux of this frustration with *The Pale King* lies more in the *how* of Wallace's sections on boredom than in the *what*. There's no shortage of scholarship that convincingly explores boredom in *The Pale King*. Marshall Boswell sees the book's message as one that

15. Ralph Clare, "The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in *The Pale King*," in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels*, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 201.

16. den Dulk, 58.

requires us to adjust our relationship to the text itself: "As readers, we must pay attention to what is in front of us without the traditional readerly enticements such as resolution of suspense or disclosure of secrets, in much the same way that the novel's ragtag band of IRS agents must locate meaning and fulfillment amid the mind-numbing tedium of their work as tax-return examiners."[17] Focusing on §22 of *The Pale King*, Christopher Michaelson sees the spiritual coloring of tedious work as necessary to finding fulfillment in the modern age, claiming that "What the accounting professor reveals, and what research corroborates, is that we can craft meaningful work by imbuing it with a higher, potentially even heroic, purpose."[18] Joseph G. Goeke asks us to consider Wallace's crafting of Fogle's narrative as a didactic endeavor aimed at "unwitting nihilists," through which Wallace hoped "to help readers develop their own self-awareness, admitting some form of nihilism on their own part."[19] In various ways, these positions describe a compelling version of Wallace's sections on boredom in *The Pale King*, even illuminating the more esoteric aspects for many readers. But if we know what boredom is and where it comes from, how are we supposed to endure it, despite our mind-numbing environments, so as to inhabit a higher plane of being?

To this end, Robert C. Hamilton gestures toward some practical possibilities for unsatisfied readers of *The Pale King*. He foregrounds his analysis by reiterating the common observation that the book "is a profoundly complex text that stages tedium in order to make the higher point that tedium can be endured, and if endured, can

17. Marshall Boswell, "Introduction: David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 369.

18. Christopher Michaelson, "Accounting for meaning: On §22 of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 29 (2015): 58.

19. Joseph F. Goeke, "'Everyone Knows It's About Something Else, Way Down': Boredom, Nihilism, and the Search for Meaning in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58, no. 3 (2017): 207.

be transcended and transcend itself,"[20] before suggesting that "The crucible of boredom itself must become, through close attention, its own reward as a meditative, mantralike exercise in higher awareness."[21] Moreover, Hamilton ultimately sees the book's message as an almost religious call to commit to awareness and attention as such, arguing that this heightened awareness "is the process that *The Pale King* both describes and formally enacts, and it is the process that shows it to be a vital, unified, and, in spirit, complete novel."[22]

While Hamilton's explication narrows the practice of awakening to specific states of mind—namely, awareness and attention—it still leaves much to be desired in the domain of *how*. Even after we have accepted the possibility that "tedium contains in itself an opening or possibility for transcendence"[23] and that "the only meaningful coping strategy involves not just a turn from boredom to "something else" but a transformation of that which is boring through mindfulness and attention,"[24] we are still left wondering how to wield our awareness and attention in such a way as to assuage our dissatisfaction and to imbue all objects of our attention with meaning and value.

Continuing Hamilton's thread, Adam S. Miller, in his work on Wallace, focuses on contemplation, attention, and presence. Miller seems keenly aware of Wallace's point about attention and boredom, claiming that "In attending, even to something that's boring and user-unfriendly, the polarity of the experience can get reversed. Instead of the head supplying the juice and investing objects with attraction, the objects themselves, seen with care and attention, start

20. Robert C. Hamilton, "'Constant Bliss in Every Atom': Tedium and Transcendence in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 70, no. 4 (2014): 169.

21. Hamilton, 185.

22. Hamilton, 187.

23. Hamilton, 173.

24. Hamilton, 186.

to exert a magnetic pull."[25] Shane Drinion makes a similar remark to Meredith Rand in §46 of *The Pale King* when she asks him a question about the relationship between attention and interest: "Well, I would say almost anything you pay close, direct attention to becomes interesting" (458). Of course, this kind of attention requires discipline over long periods of time before the pull toward the objects of attention begins to manifest with little effort. Moreover, the idea that "close, direct attention" can somehow create an external pull, or interest, carries with it the implication that the daunting obstacle of boredom can also be conquered by the same means. The idea of attending to the present so closely that objects of attention become infused with extrinsic magnetism is attractive, but to achieve this state, we must first traverse the maw-like chasm of boredom. And although this trek often appears pointlessly painful, Miller, in a chapter on "Boredom," explains its value:

> You can practice sitting still, staring at a wall or not reading on the toilet. . . . Finding the other side of boredom is empowering. . . . There is something that happens on the other side of boredom, on the far side of transcendence, after the head clears and some silence gathers. And this thing is connected to an awareness of life and consciousness per se, to a recognition of attention as such, rather than just consciousness of idol X, idol Y, or idol Z. And, perhaps most importantly, this thing that happens involves a temporal contraction that shifts the scale of our experience from months and weeks to minutes and seconds.[26]

Here, Miller is beginning to chart new territory with Wallace and boredom, going beyond simply reiterating that mindfulness leads to the other side of boredom, and introducing a practice for just

25. Adam S. Miller, *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace: Boredom and Addiction in an age of Distraction* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 70.

26. Miller, 77-8.

that. He specifically mentions the practice of sitting still during the act of attention—a practice that also takes place in both Buddhist meditation and Wallace's depictions of IRS rote tax examiners. In both contexts, the crucial practice of attention involves sitting relatively still for long periods of time. Moreover, Miller notices that the practice of attention while sitting still does not involve idly drifting thoughts that jump through time and space, but rather that as one's practice develops, one's perception of time converges ever closer upon the elusive present. Our ability to sustain awareness in this way demands a certain quality of attention. While also writing about boredom, the meditation teacher, Joseph Goldstein, claims that

> To realize that boredom does not come from the *object* of our attention but rather from the *quality* of our attention is truly a transforming insight. . . . Instead of wallowing in boredom or complaining about it, we can see it as a friend saying to us, "Pay more attention. Get closer. Listen more carefully." . . . you will see how acuity of attention brings interest and energy. . . . If we are sitting in meditation and feeling uninterested, can we come in closer to the object, not with force but with gentleness and care? What is this experience we call the breath? . . . Can we be with it fully, just once? When we recognize what boredom is, it becomes a great call to awaken.[27]

Conquering boredom then, for both Goldstein and Miller, becomes the key to self-actualization and a meaningful existence. Wallace also suggests a similar formula in §44 of *The Pale King*: "The key is the ability, whether innate or conditioned, to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex. To be, in a word, unborable . . . It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally

27. Joseph Goldstein, *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1993), 80-1.

nothing you cannot accomplish" (440). In a handwritten note about the IRS employee monologues in §14, Wallace writes that the "Guy recording [the employee monologues] wants total portrait of REC. Why. To counter boredom of his job. When bored, the key is to pay more attention, not less."[28] Here, Wallace echoes Goldstein's argument above, suggesting that the remedy to boredom is to recognize boredom itself as an injunction to invest more energy and awareness into the object of attention.

In the world of the novel's IRS rote examiners, this struggle with boredom takes place in the present moment of every working day. In §22, the Jesuit substitute professor tells the Advanced Tax class that "[t]his is the world. Just you and the job, at your desk. You and the return, you and the cash-flow data, you and the inventory protocol, you and the depreciation schedules, you and the numbers" (*PK* 232). This kind of experience requires the examiners to stay contentedly and productively in the present moment with their work. As Miller suggests, the best anchor by which we're able to hold on to the present is the body and its sensations: "Returning to the present, you return to the body. Learning how to live in the space between heartbeats depends on rediscovering you have a heart that beats. It means feeling your lungs contract and expand."[29] The convergence of attention, the present moment, and awareness of the body, as described variously by Miller, Goldstein, and Wallace, begins to approach the other side of boredom.

While an understanding of this convergence is necessary, the more important step is to follow through with the regular practice of attention and mindful awareness. Wallace seems to have been well aware of this crucial distinction between conceptual understanding and experiential wisdom. In many of his typed drafts of *The Pale King*, Wallace left several disjointed notes to himself at the end of

28. Wallace, *The Pale King* draft materials, Box 40, Folder 3.

29. Miller, 95.

sections. At the end of one of his drafts of §22, the Chris Fogle monologue, the following note appears:

> 10-06 This is a deeper level of surrender:
>
> 1. ID a bad feeling. Fear, lack of confidence, despair, jitteriness, urgency/hurry. Observe it. Pay attention to it.
> 2. Realize that it's in me, not in reality. Remind myself of this.
> 3. Realize that it's in "me," not in the real "I." It's in the construct. It feels bad, but I can also observe it feeling bad. I can sit there and pay attention to it and not do anything about it. Can let it 'be as it is.' The "I" is what observes it, without judging or acting.
> 4. Detach from the feeling. Don't identify with it. Whatever "I" is, it's not my body, job, success, prestige, reputation, or what others think of me. It's the part that can pay attention. The part that's so worried about career, reputation, and writing is part of the construct, the 'conditioned self.' The culture teaches me to value what it calls achievement. I've bought into this teaching, deeply—I cannot change this fact, or the way my thorax feels. But I can watch it, try to be aware of it. I cannot change it by force of will. But I can exert will trying not to let it think for me, take me over, make me see reality through its filter.
> 5. Pray for awakening. Awareness is not the same as knowledge. God, please let me wake up. Please let me <u>feel</u> the truth. True-for-me instead of just a proposition I assent to. I want to know it, not just "know" it like a principle of abstract math.[30]

Here, Wallace touches on a few important points for furthering our journey to the other side of boredom. Items one through four

30. Wallace, *The Pale King* draft materials, Box 38, Folder 5.

describe, in his own meticulous words, a practice for mindful awareness and attention. Especially important to note is his emphasis on detaching one's identity from the feelings that happen to arise in consciousness. Rather than identifying with troublesome feelings, he is acknowledging the possibility of observing the feelings themselves as objects of attention. He mentions "fear, lack of confidence, despair, jitteriness, and urgency/hurry," but one could easily imagine boredom among this list. By dislodging one's identity from the state of consciousness in a given moment—boredom, for example—one gains an apotropaic distance and is no longer driven by the momentum of one's thoughts and feelings. Equally as important, though, is Wallace's supplication in item five. He's recognizing that an understanding of this distancing technique is not enough to fully awaken. Reading a book about sailing would not fully prepare one to guide a vessel through a windstorm—only practice can achieve that. Likewise, Wallace is admitting a basic understanding of the process but is also acknowledging the work still to be done before he truly can experience and sustain this awareness he describes.

III.

There is substantial evidence to suggest that much of Wallace's work on *The Pale King* was influenced by Buddhism in general and mindfulness meditation practice in particular.[31] Krzysztof Piekarski's dissertation, "Buddhist Philosophy in the Works of David Foster Wallace," explores how Wallace's entire body of work progressed philosophically along an arc that he argues is best characterized as Buddhist. Yet, even as he traces Buddhism throughout Wallace's corpus, Piekarski argues that "[Wallace's] work . . . is never

31. A reviewer alerted me to an essay that discusses many of these Buddhist influences in relation to Wallace's experimental short story, "Octet," by Mary K. Holland, "David Foster Wallace's 'Octet' and the 'Atthakavagga," *Explicator* 74, no. 3 (2016): 165-69.

more explicitly Buddhist than it is in *The Pale King*."[32] While some sections of the novel lend themselves more readily to a Buddhist interpretation than others, Piekarski sees this influence throughout the book:

> The sequence of these short declarative sentences [in §1] is a miniature version of mindfulness in action: notice; allow your boundaries to be redefined by what Peter Hershock would term 'a relinquishing of the horizon of relevance'; and discover the unity of all of life . . . the dominant major chords in *The Pale King* are various meditations on the kinds and purposes and psychological states of attention.[33]

As Piekarski points out, in the context of meditative practice there is a correlation between the erosion of the perception of boundaries and a feeling of oneness with other beings. Through this lens, the opening section of the novel takes on a deeper meaning: "Very old land. Look around you. The horizon trembling, shapeless. We are all of us brothers" (*PK* 5). Indeed, Piekarski's claim here about "states of attention" better describes Wallace's efforts than the claim that the novel is simply about boredom.

According to David Hering—whose chronological analysis and reconstruction of *The Pale King*'s compositional process is a groundbreaking work for critics of the novel—Wallace's most productive and focused work on his third novel happened during the 2005-2007 period.[34] Most of the more developed characters in the book emerged during this period. It also coincides with Wallace's writing and delivery of *This is Water*, a process that Piekarski argues was "a kind of personal reckoning [for Wallace], maybe a way to clarify

32. Krzysztof Piekarski, "Buddhist Philosophy in the Works of David Foster Wallace" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2013), 254, https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/21822.

33. Piekarski, 245-6.

34. David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 135.

his confusion in the midst of writing *The Pale King*."[35] Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that there was some conceptual cross-pollination between these otherwise distinct projects. Indeed, the two projects are often discussed together, with *This is Water* being treated as perhaps Wallace's most plain-spoken exhortation of moral virtues. The context, then, for this time period can illuminate the influences that might have been at work on Wallace's creative process.

In a postcard sent to Don DeLillo in August of 2001, Wallace remarks that he "spent most of July in France. Paris and the Dordogne river region. Highlights: 1. Went AWOL from Viet-Buddhist monastery's retreat—The food was bad."[36] This suggests that, for at least some brief unknowable amount of time, Wallace was in attendance at what was probably a silent meditation retreat. Piekarski claims that this retreat was led by the famous Vietnamese Zen teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh,[37] whose *Plum Village* meditation center is, in fact, near the Dordogne river. At least as early as 2001, then, Wallace was likely exploring not just a conceptual understanding of meditation, but he was actually trying to learn to meditate himself. It is possible that Wallace was drawing upon his own experience as a novice at a silent meditation retreat while he was composing Lane Dean's initial encounters with the intensity of IRS examinations work. Commenting on Dean's frantic mind, as observed in §33 of *The Pale King*, Piekarski argues that this "is how Buddhist meditators initially feel during an intensive week or month of meditation during which the mind's egoic restlessness exhausts itself and finally learns to relax."[38] Dean is still learning how to relax during his work hours,

35. Piekarski, 274.

36. Wallace, in the Bonnie Nadell Collection of David Foster Wallace at the Harry Ransom Center, Box 1, Folder 2.

37. Piekarski, 33.

38. Piekarski, 273.

and, as a new examiner, is only beginning to fathom the Herculean task of overcoming his boredom and mental habits. Writing about the difficulty of the initial stages of meditation practice, Piekarski notes that "Wallace dramatizes these initial stages of anxiety experienced by the meditator in a scene focusing on Lane Dean Jr."[39] It seems that, through Dean, Wallace was trying to demonstrate the experiential gulf between knowledge and awareness.

Moreover, Wallace's correspondence with Christopher Hamacher (a Zen practitioner) demonstrates his continued search for answers within the framework of Buddhist meditation, even beyond his failure to follow through with a full silent retreat. Hamacher, having recognized something familiar in Wallace's work, initially reached out to him. Wallace replied:

> I do like your letters. I'm not sure why. People send me all kinds of letters—you can imagine. A few get in me. Yours do… Sitting [i.e. meditating] is weird. . . . Some days I sit enthusiastically, enjoy it, am sorry when time's up. Other days I feel a visceral distaste for it, extreme reluctance… If I were to read one book or pamphlet about Z[en], sitting, etc., what one would you recommend?[40]

As late as July 2005, Wallace was still writing to Hamacher with questions that speak to his struggle with meditation practice, asking "Why is 'the key to the universe' in sitting and counting breaths for 30 minutes. Please explain. And why is it the 'ego' that resists the practice? Why not simply the part of me that doesn't want to sit and do nothing (well, almost nothing) for 30 minutes? The part that dislikes boredom in other words. Explain/Persuade?"[41] This correspondence with Hamacher suggests not only Wallace's continued

39. Piekarski, 272.

40. Correspondence between Wallace and Hamacher, quoted from Piekarski, 34-5.

41. Piekarski, 275.

efforts at a regular meditation practice, but also his awareness of the gap between his understanding of the practice and his experience of it. He appears to struggle in that transitional space between a conceptual understanding of the technique and a confident mastery of sustained mindfulness. More importantly, though, his engagement with meditation practice can be seen in his work on *The Pale King*.

Underlined and marked-up passages from his copy of Paramananda's *Practical Guide to Buddhist Meditation* further corroborate the influence of meditation on Wallace's work: "The breath is still there, waiting for your attention. . . . Keep your body relaxed, your face soft . . . Not straining to stay with the breath; just coming back to it whenever you feel your mind moving away."[42] This passage, marked by Wallace, suggests the use of the body and its sensations as an anchor to the present moment so as to build and maintain awareness. Above, Miller also mentions the link between attention and awareness of one's body.[43] §50 of *The Pale King* echoes a similar theme, in which a "facilitator" addresses a second-person narrator (who is reclined comfortably) saying, "You do have a body, you know" (539). The facilitator seems to be instructing the narrator on how to begin a basic meditation session. She says "The way we start is to relax and become aware of the body. It is at the level of the body that we proceed. Do not try to relax" (*PK* 540). This is how most meditation teachers begin any mindfulness practice. Stephen Batchelor begins a guided meditation by saying "Shut your eyes. Rest your hands in your lap or on your knees. Check to see if there are any points of tension in the body: the shoulders, the neck, around the eyes. Relax them. Become aware of your bodily contact with the ground."[44] Joseph Goldstein similarly begins with an

42. Paramananda, *A Practical Guide to Buddhist Meditation* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1996), 42. All quotations from this text will be from passages specifically marked by Wallace in his personal copy, which is available at the Harry Ransom Center.

43. Miller, 95.

44. Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), 23.

emphasis on the body, instructing readers to "Sit comfortably, with your back straight but not stiff or tense. Gently close your eyes and feel the sensations of the breath as the air passes the nostrils or upper lip. The sensations of the in-breath appear simply and naturally. Notice how the out-breath appears."[45] Not only does §50 of *The Pale King* echo the language of guided meditations through the words of the facilitator, but the second-person narrator of this chapter places the reader directly in the receiving position for this instruction. It appears that Wallace wanted to give readers of *The Pale King* both a conceptual understanding of mindfulness and ways to practice it.

To this end, Chris Fogle's long monologue in §22 is an example of mindfulness and a way to convince readers to reflect upon their own nihilism, as Goeke suggests above.[46] The consistent style throughout Fogle's section of *The Pale King* is indicative of what Piekarski claims "was Wallace's wholehearted attempt at prescriptive writing in the mode of 'mindful calmness.'"[47] As Fogle meanders discursively through his backstory—treating mundane, epiphanic, and traumatic details with an equally calm tone—it becomes clear that, as a narrator, he is mindfully attending to each individual detail as it comes. He does not seem to dwell unnecessarily on something already covered, nor does his pace quicken or change as he anticipates getting to a more important detail. For ninety-eight pages, Chris Fogle simply tells his story, one detail at a time, in a calm, even manner (*PK* 156-254).

The content of his story reveals a personal transformation that it seems Wallace wanted to emphasize. As Fogle recounts his history, we see him grow from a state of nihilism to a purpose-driven public servant who vows "to renounce nihilism and make a meaningful, real-world choice" (*PK* 239). Fogle realizes that to maintain

45. Goldstein, 34.

46. Goeke, 207.

47. Piekarski, 249.

awareness entails a life-long dedication to thankless routine. This is a crucial step in the path to the other side of boredom—a step that aligns with another passage Wallace marked in his copy of *A Practical Guide to Buddhist Meditation*: "the conscious decision of the individual to follow the Buddhist path to the exclusion of other ways of life. That is to say, the individual decides that spiritual development is the prime goal of their [sic] life."[48] This also suggests where Wallace might have been in his own contemplative practice: connecting the realization of the existence of the other side with the realization of a commitment to the work that must be sustained to reach the other side. As Piekarski suggests, "Buddhism without meditation practice is like trying to swim without water."[49] For Fogle, the realization of the other side of boredom is his epiphany while watching *As The World Turns* (*PK* 223-4), and his realization that earning the other side of boredom requires a lifetime of practice is the Advanced Tax class he mistakenly attends with the Jesuit professor (*PK* 228-35).

Chris Fogle's realization while watching *As the World Turns* is primed by his experiences while recreationally using the drug Obetrol (an amphetamine precursor to prescription drugs like Adderall). Using Obetrol allows Fogle to connect powerfully with the present, which he particularly enjoys because it lifts him out of a nihilistic haze that he knows is leading him nowhere: "Obetrol and doubling was my first glimmer of the sort of impetus that I believe helped lead me into the Service. . . . It had something to do with paying attention and the ability to choose what I paid attention to, and to be aware of that choice, the fact that it's a choice" (*PK* 189). This passage's parallel to Wallace's message in *This is Water* is obvious: "It means being conscious and aware enough to *choose* what you pay attention to and to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience."[50]

48. Paramananda, 127.

49. Piekarski, 238.

50. Wallace, *This is Water*, 62.

Fogle's pharmacological version of mindful presence allows him to get a subjective taste of what he will later realize can be earned through sustained practice and discipline. Later in the chapter, he has a non-medicated realization while listening to the television announcer say "You're watching *As the World Turns,*" and he's "struck by the bare reality of the statement" (*PK* 224). Now, without the help of recreational drugs, Fogle's awareness comes crashing into the present moment. Moments like this are what make people feel as though they had never understood the meaning of the word *attention*. In the scene above, Fogle is suddenly finding himself attentive to the present moment in a way that epitomizes clarity and presence. This is the moment that he sees the other side of boredom and understands that it is real and that it has been there right in front of him all along. The quality of his realization mirrors another passage from Paramananda that Wallace marked:

> [T]here is no special truth to be found outside of oneself, outside of one's own nature. The finding of this truth does not depend on intelligence or exceptional talent of some kind. It is simply a matter of being aware of oneself in a deeper and deeper way. This is all that we need to do. But to be fully aware of anything we must have a real interest in it, we have to want to understand.[51]

Fogle comes to realize the futility of his nihilism as he's watching *As the World Turns*. This realization creates an existential turn for him in which he decides that the freedom of his nihilistic worldview is a paradise without content. "If I wanted to matter—even just to myself—I would have to be less free, by deciding to choose in some kind of definite way. Even if it was nothing more than an act of will" (*PK* 226). Indeed, Wallace was especially interested in the conversion narratives of individuals who awaken to a higher level of awareness. In an unpublished chapter, he describes an examiner who awakens

51. Paramananda, 53.

suddenly while sitting at a Steak 'n Shake, waiting for another examiner to meet him.[52] There is also the conversion narrative of Fogle's roommate's Christian girlfriend imbedded within §22, and other conversion narratives throughout *The Pale King*. These glimpses of awakening, though, usually lead Wallace's characters to realize the amount of work still to be done. It's like being lost in the woods and finally coming across a path—one still has to walk the path to make it out of the woods.

Fogle develops a commitment to his path after listening to the Jesuit substitute in the Advanced Tax class. As the substitute speaks about "heroism," Fogle recognizes that this heroism is the constant process of striving to maintain awareness—a battle that, by necessity, happens within the confines of one's own skull. Clare Hayes-Brady calls this kind of heroism "a form of continuity—a process rather than a state . . . unrecognized by anyone, and always only without the telos of possible recognition. Wallace's heroism, in fact, is fundamentally anti-teleological; there is no achievement of heroism, only its ongoing repetition and consistent failure."[53] Chris Fogle's monologue describes this realization and the reason for his choosing a lifetime of service at the IRS. He has dedicated himself to the path to the other side of boredom and has chosen to restrict his nihilistic freedom, thereby creating a new freedom in an awareness of every moment. But where does this commitment to striving for awareness lead?

The answer may be exemplified in Shane Drinion. Some of Wallace's unpublished drafts and notes help us understand Drinion's connection to mindfulness and meditation practice. In a few of his notes, Wallace describes Drinion as an "examiner/meditation mystic" and says that "D does not see things as banal, or not banal,"

52. Wallace, *The Pale King* draft materials, Box 38, Folder 7.

53. Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 201.

suggesting that he has overcome the feeling that others, like Lane Dean, experience as boredom.[54] In an unpublished, handwritten chapter, which may have been intended as an introduction for Drinion, Wallace connects him again to meditation:

> On a crisp, primary-color Fall day in 1981, former United States Meditation Champion, Shane R. Drinion, of Charleston, West Virginia, enters the Internal Revenue Service Academy in East Chicago, Indiana for a twenty-six-week Orientation and Testing Period, known in the Service as 'Concentration Camp,' that a third of his class will not complete.[55]

Here, Wallace is directly connecting Drinion to meditation practice and suggesting that his skills as a meditator will make him an exceptional examiner at the IRS.

Near the end of the conversation between Rand and Drinion in §46 of *The Pale King*, Wallace uses Rand's experience to demonstrate a critical part of mindful presence. Rand somehow seems to have been infected by Drinion's mindful presence and later recalls her sensory experience during their conversation: "[S]he'd felt sensuously aroused in a way that had little to do with being excited or nervous, that she'd felt the surface of the chair against her bottom and back and the backs of her legs, and the material of her skirt, and the sides of her shoes against the sides of her feet . . . she felt totally aware and alive" (*PK* 496). In my experience, this is a realistic depiction of mindful presence. In the Vipassana tradition taught by S.N. Goenka,[56] meditators use a body-scanning technique where their awareness passes systematically through the body, noting the

54. Wallace, *The Pale King* draft materials, Box 38, Folder 8.

55. Ibid., Box 40, Folder 7.

56. S.N. Goenka, *Vipassana Meditation: Introduction to the Technique and Code of Discipline for Meditation Courses*. Pamphlet distributed by the Dhamma Dhara Vipassana Meditation Center in Shelburne Falls, MA.

range of sensations and changes. A heightened state of awareness may have a vibratory effect in that meditators often detect even the subtlest physical experiences. Through both Drinion's discussion of awareness and attention, and Rand's experience in conversing with Drinion, this chapter represents Wallace's best attempt to demonstrate the other side of boredom.

More than simply demonstrating the other side of boredom, Wallace seems to want to give his readers the opportunity to practice the path toward it. No opportunity to engage with boredom in *The Pale King* is more obvious than the double-columned monotony of §25. In a note that presumably precedes Wallace's composition of this chapter, he describes his intentions: "Some sections w/ double columns. One column is just mind-bendingly dull catalogue of tax returns data to be input. Goes on in one column for ten pages—there is a backdrop of boredom that reader looks at just to be aware of but only very careful reader will actually 'read.'"[57] There are several drafts of this chapter in the Ransom Center archives, all with subtle variations, although all contain the repetition of present-tense narration of various examiners turning a page. Some earlier versions interpolated this main thread with comments like "*The Pale King*, by David Foster Wallace" and "All rights reserved,"[58] seeming to echo Wallace's direction from §9 when he urges readers to go read the copyright page (*PK* 69). The many drafts of this section suggest that Wallace worked as carefully on its composition as he would have for any other story, and that this double-columned wall of monotonous text was more than some cruel practical joke on his readers. It represents an opportunity for readers of *The Pale King* to bridge the gaps between understanding and experience. While other sections in the novel explore boredom conceptually, §25 represents Wallace's attempt to provide readers with an opportunity to practice it, saying *this is it, just you and the text—now get to work.*

57 Wallace, *The Pale King* draft materials, Box 39, Folder 3.

58 Wallace, *The Pale King* draft materials, Box 36, Folder 1.

My emphasis on the *how* of boredom, as opposed to the *why*, and on the influences of Buddhism in *The Pale King* is an attempt to move the discussion toward a general prescription for the practice of awareness. Like Wallace's IRS examiners, who must be content with and attentive to an endless stream of tax returns, we must carry mindful awareness as a tool into our everyday. After all, there is no shortage of distractions in the twenty-first century, and maintaining awareness requires a perdurable vigilance. In this sense, boredom can become the whetstone of awareness. If you're at all like me, you were probably bored while reading §25 of *The Pale King*. But can we read it differently, in a way that does not inspire boredom but instead brings us a calming pleasure? What happens to our states of mind as we adjust to the cadence and content of §25, attempting to infuse our reading experience with interest and energy? It seems that Wallace, in struggling to write his third novel, was attempting to offer readers something beyond description. By bringing our attention and awareness closer to the text, especially when it evokes in us the feelings of boredom, we might find our experiences aligning more closely with our imagined experiences of those examiners as we all collectively turn pages. While there will always be boredom, distractions, frustrations, and failures, every moment we spend striving for awareness—noticing when we are distracted or bored, forgiving ourselves, and gently guiding our awareness back to the present—is a moment in which we come closer and closer to an understanding of how to be.

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ANOTHER LIEN ON LIFE: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Colbert Root

It is hard to know what to do with David Foster Wallace's unfinished third novel, *The Pale King*. We can see what it is about: The novel describes the lives of employees at a Regional Examination Center of the Internal Revenue Service during Ronald Reagan's presidency. It is set just before a major revision of the United States tax code in 1986, and it depicts an ideologically-charged moment in the operation of the IRS in which different characters espouse competing philosophies about the new administration and its effects on the Service. In this sense, *The Pale King* is about a consequential shift in American politics: it describes relationships between the lives of US citizens while an emergent political rationality saturates and reshapes a branch of the US government that employs them.

What is less clear is how *The Pale King* fits with the rest of Wallace's writing. This is of course due in part to the fact that Wallace died before the novel was completed, which prevents us from knowing not only what its final shape might have been, but also how far

the document we have is from what might have been its completed form. Confusion also comes, though, from the question of how *The Pale King* relates to the rest of Wallace's writing. This is evident in the early critical responses to the novel, in which Marshall Boswell has identified a perplexing lack of discussion about its political themes: "Most of the book's initial reviewers described [it] primarily as an IRS novel about boredom."[1] He also notes that early critics described Wallace's focus on bureaucratic labor but failed to remark on his heavy-handed exploration of questions of US governance. Boswell therefore wonders: how can one read *The Pale King*'s lengthy discussions of civic responsibility and adjusting the marginal tax rate without noticing that Wallace uses Reagan's presidency to not only raise political problems but to mark a significant change in the history of the US government?

According to Boswell, early critics of *The Pale King* fell prey to an interpretive orthodoxy which says that the author's primary concerns were those of Wallace's personal struggles with addiction and depression. Boswell demonstrates this by reading the novel's introduction, written by Wallace's long-time editor, Michael Pietsch, who waded through the voluminous draft materials of *The Pale King* to assemble the novel we have. Boswell notes how Pietsch discusses *The Pale King*'s preoccupation with themes like boredom while ignoring the questions of government the novel also provokes:

> Nowhere in [Pietsch's] introduction does he touch upon… political concerns. Rather, he argues that "David set out to write a novel about some of the hardest subjects in the world—sadness and boredom—and to make that exploration nothing less than dramatic, funny, and deeply moving" (ix-x). [This] description of Wallace's primary purpose limns seamlessly with the unfortunate popular

1. Marshall Boswell, "Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 465.

> conception of Wallace as a technically dazzling and intellectually sophisticated writer of self-help narratives designed to "save us" from solipsism, loneliness, addiction, and so on, an image calcified by the book publication of his Kenyon graduation speech, *This is Water*.[2]

Boswell believes critics understand Wallace's work to be apolitical because a preformed interpretation of his intellectual project shapes our expectations: we take it for granted that Wallace wrote to help self-centered readers escape involution and find purchase in a world of other people. This critical tendency derives from a few sources. As Boswell says, the popular image of Wallace is shaped by his late effort in *This is Water* to compress his thinking about solipsism into a twenty-minute speech that became popular on the internet. Important too, though, is the fact that the standard interpretation of Wallace derives in part from his own writing, particularly in early critical pieces like "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," "The Empty Plenum," and (most popularly) "E Unibus Pluram," where he explicitly ties his literary mission to a struggle against solipsism in US culture. Finally, and most importantly, Wallace's fiction is often read as a collection of "self-help" narratives designed to "save us" from forces like loneliness and addiction because that interpretation is an accurate description of his writing. So while Boswell is right to argue that *The Pale King* is misapprehended when it is seen apolitically, it would be a mistake to ignore Wallace's career-long engagement with the problem of solipsism. For it is in Wallace's struggle to picture the mutual reproduction of both fallen selves and their fallen society that I believe we can find his fiction's deepest value.

To demonstrate that value, this article contends that the questions of solipsism and citizenship provoked by Wallace's work are two parts of the same project, and neglecting either leads to a distorted vision of his writing. As Boswell suggests, if we ignore the

2. Ibid.

political nature of *The Pale King*, we attenuate the novel's power by not acknowledging its presentation of a historically-important political ideology, namely neoliberalism—a presentation that is of special salience now that the ghost of Ronald Reagan's id has ascended the presidency. However, dividing Wallace's political concerns from the solipsism he spent his career interrogating risks emptying *The Pale King* (as well as his earlier fiction) of its originating force and, subsequently, diminishing its potential to help readers access their own personal motivations and critique them.

This latter danger appears in some of the criticism about *The Pale King* that has emerged since the publication of Boswell's essay, particularly that which addresses the economic questions *The Pale King* raises. In the case of Szalay and Godden's "The Bodies in the Bubble," the novel is framed as an almost mechanical expression of specific economic features, namely derivatives.[3] Though their reading is compelling, by merely transferring the analysis of one realm (the economic) to another (the literary), Szalay and Godden obscure the ethical dilemmas Wallace strives to produce in *The Pale King*. Wallace's characters appear as dupes of capitalism because they give their lives to the work of an institution (the IRS) that primarily serves financial power. The problem with seeing *The Pale King*'s characters as deluded is that such a view takes us away from the reality that the novel is about the human tragedy of a governmental rationality (neoliberalism) that bends its citizens' vocational service to destructive ends (signified by the bursting bubble in Szalay and Godden's reading). This is tragic not because the idea of service to the US government is always naïve as Szalay and Godden imply, but because the initial possibility and subsequent reality of neoliberal destruction results from the flawed nature of the characters of *The Pale King* themselves: they share the nascent neoliberalism of their workplace and of the US more generally. Where Szalay and Godden read *The*

3. Richard Godden and Michael Szalay, "The Bodies in the Bubble: David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Textual Practice* 28, no. 7 (2014): 1273-322.

Pale King as depicting helpless characters who are held by the chains of material necessity, I read those characters as complicit in their own fall. The characters express Wallace's sustained anxiety about a tendency toward solipsism he identified at all levels of US culture, including the individual, the institution, and the nation.

Wallace's effort to combine problems of the self with problems of the nation extends back to his earliest writings. This article therefore presents several of his earlier texts as not merely narratives of self-help, as Boswell names them, but politically-engaged interrogations of the self's production in society. What emerges from this work is a developmental view of Wallace's career that has an affinity with Jeffrey Severs' long study, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*, which reads the evolution of concepts of value across Wallace's writing.[4] But where Severs focuses his analysis on recurring motifs in order to translate principles of exchange from one work to the next, showing both consistency and evolution in Wallace's apprehension of value, I focus on how Wallace continually experimented with narrative form in a sustained effort to represent how social structures produce the people who occupy them. This article thereby reveals a common misconception that Boswell displays in "Trickle-Down Citizenship," which is that Wallace's work on solipsism is only about reforming the lives of individuals.

On the contrary, solipsism in Wallace is always a political problem. To demonstrate solipsism's political aspect in Wallace's writing, my examination begins by identifying the political goals and shortcomings in *Infinite Jest*'s design and then reading Wallace's early short story "Forever Overhead" as part of a search for narrative strategies that show self and society to be bound together in a history of mutual production. I address the appearance of solipsism in this relationship in my reading of "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll

4. Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

Never Do Again," where Wallace sought to understand not merely how solipsism operated in him on a luxury cruise, but how it was purposefully produced in passengers throughout the ship. I then argue Wallace's essays and stories about educational environments like "Authority and American Usage" and "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" originate in his hope that well-oriented educational apparatuses might oppose the solipsism-creating forces of capitalist institutions. Taken together, the political power of institutions and the narrative innovations they inspire form what I call Wallace's "institutional perspective," a narrative strategy deployed to help readers see beyond the individuals who populate his stories to the structures they occupy. These structures, concretized in Wallace's writing as swimming pools, cruise ships, public schools, and Regional Examination Centers, are the institutional forms that *The Pale King*'s epigraph calls our attention to: "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed."[5] I argue Wallace's "Institutional Novel," *The Pale King*, is the end of a long effort to promote our engagement with the historical project of transforming the United States (as a cultural form) into a national community that might resist the tendencies toward solipsism Wallace identified throughout capitalist culture.[6]

5. David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Back Bay, 2012), 3.

6. In many ways, my argument inverts that made by Mark McGurl in "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program." McGurl warns of the danger in Wallace's fiction that results from a fearful occupying of institutions. He sees Wallace as an anti-revolutionary whose politics express a crypto white nationalism, as Wallace's institutional project is one of belonging whose success depends on the maintenance of social exclusions. McGurl writes, "*The Pale King* offers a simple and powerful, if implicit, answer to the problem of divestment in the welfare state: *we should pay more taxes*! And if it arguably shows insufficient interest in who 'we' are exactly, beyond the human-American norm, it would be wrong to miss the sheer quixotic glory of this message, as impressive in its way as the whole idea of writing a long novel about a painfully boring institution." On the contrary, my argument is that one of Wallace's central concerns in *The Pale King* and before is precisely who

The Political Failure of *Infinite Jest*

If *The Pale King* promotes its reader's investment in a citizenship that can oppose the work of capitalism, we can understand its design as a response to the political failure of Wallace's prior novel, *Infinite Jest*. *Infinite Jest*'s first object is the explication and defense of community-based redemption, particularly for people who live in a society that attacks communal bonds by promoting self-centered behavior.[7] This can be seen most clearly in the narrative of Don Gately, who escapes his dependence on drugs and alcohol through service at the halfway house where he works. The book's argumentative logic follows Gately's recovery: by decentering himself from his addled understanding of the world, Gately finds a way to escape the crushing nature of his addiction. He thereby offers a sympathetic access point to the community-based message of *Infinite Jest*. Insofar as Wallace's purpose in his second novel was to write inspiring accounts of recovery, the novel is a great success.

Rather than simply identifying traps of addiction individuals fall into, *Infinite Jest* diagnoses an onanism that permeates US culture, which is why Wallace presents the novel's political campaigns, national budgets, and plots of international terrorism through satire. These satirical features perform two tasks: they reflect the self-destructive tendencies of characters like Don Gately before his recovery; and, in their creation of *Infinite Jest*'s political world, they express the magnitude of what Wallace identifies as a peculiarly American illness. Unfortunately, this satire creates a dualism between the world where most of *Infinite Jest*'s characters live and the world where the novel's political events take place. While the halfway house and

"we" can become and how we shape that through the formation of our cultural norms. Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program," *Boundary 2* 41, no. 3 (2014): 27-54.

7. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996).

tennis academy are filled with three-dimensional characters the reader can empathize with, the O.N.A.N. is marked by flat caricatures. We can contrast the America-first President Johnny Gentle with the account of daily recovery we read in Gately's story: Gentle's inexplicable phobias and ridiculous programs ridicule figures of the public sphere, writing them off as irredeemable; yet, despite the acts of turpitude that mar Gately's personal history, Wallace finds the tools for his recovery in the work of AA's twelve-step program. Thus, on a personal level, *Infinite Jest* offers readers access to emotional struggle, growth, and community; but, in Gentle's political sphere, we find only disconnection, caricature, and stasis.

This unevenness softens Wallace's ability to deal with the onanism he decries in *Infinite Jest* because insofar as the novel treats political life through satire, it obscures the political significance of the personal lives it presents and vice versa. It therefore falls prey to Wallace's central criticism of postmodern literature: it ably tears down US culture but fails to offer a realistic means of building something salutary in its place.[8] Yet, we can see Wallace's desire to think about the wellbeing of the nation in the link he establishes between addiction and the political world, which desire leads him after *Infinite Jest* to search for a model that could aid the recovery of the US like that he found for the individual recovery of Don Gately. *Infinite Jest* therefore displays both the structural and generative failures Clare Hayes-Brady describes in her recent *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*.[9] Hayes-Brady marks Wallace's "structural" failures as those that occur when acts of communication fail because the person attempting to communicate is simply not capable of it, as in the cases of Gately's scene in the hospital when he is intubated

8. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction," *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. (New York: Back Bay, 1998).

9. Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 4-7.

and when Wallace is unable to overcome the dualism of the satire he builds into *Infinite Jest*. Hayes-Brady then understands Wallace's "generative" failures to be those that inspire a vigorous effort to find new forms of communication, like those I describe below.

The Abiding Ritual of "Forever Overhead"

Wallace offered a satirical picture of how individual lives affect the political sphere well before *Infinite Jest*. In his debut novel, *The Broom of the System*, he describes the redrawing of Cleveland, Ohio's boundaries and the creation of the Great Ohio Desert to make fun of the disconnect he saw between political initiatives and the wellbeing of the citizens who are invoked to justify them. Thus, in *The Broom of the System*, the Great Ohio Desert is formed because it is argued that Ohioans will benefit from having a desert to survive in. The G.O.D. is meant to teach a self-reliance that serves the state as a collective whole by toughening the individual members of its community. This satire sharpens Wallace's attack on self-centered individualism, but, as suggested above, it also walls off the possibility of the political sphere being remediated through realistic praxis. Thus, *The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest* ironically foreclose our hope that political change in the US could begin anywhere other than the individual self. This generates the narrative problem Wallace sought to answer in *The Pale King*, but to see the power of the answer he envisioned it is useful to look back at his earlier efforts to write about a society that is governed by the same fictional rules as the people who occupy it.

An early and effective attempt at this can be found in "Forever Overhead,"[10] a short story that first appeared between the

10. David Foster Wallace, "Forever Overhead," *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. (New York: Back Bay, 2007), 5-16.

publication of *The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest*. Rather than using the political world as an expression of individual character, "Forever Overhead" presents ritual as a site of negotiation between the individual and the community. This negotiation results in something like a social contract at the end of the story, creating what Wallace will construe as an "adult" relationship between the subject and society. As we will see in subsequent sections, solipsism often attacks this relationship in Wallace's writing, but "Forever Overhead" presents a world in which the main character substantively changes to answer the needs of a community he is obligated to join. In this sense, "Forever Overhead" is an harbinger of themes and narrative strategies that receive increasing attention throughout Wallace's writing.

"Forever Overhead" narrates a boy's visit to his local pool on his thirteenth birthday, when he is determined to make his first jump from the high dive. On his journey to the board, the boy suffers a series of realizations that frame a new self-understanding, as he comes to see that social and biological forces are acting on him at the advent of his 14th year, and he cannot separate his individual reasons for wanting to jump from those he has inherited. The story is one of both epiphany and ritual: as the boy travels to the board, he comes to understand more and more about his place in the world, particularly that this place has been purposefully produced for him by the community he occupies. This can be seen in the opening sentences of "Forever Overhead," which intimate how individuals function within parameters outlined by society. Notice, for example, how passive the first lines of the story make the anonymous boy seem: "Happy birthday. Your thirteenth is important. Maybe your first really public day. Your thirteenth is the chance for people to recognize that important things are happening to you." Wallace here introduces social claims on the boy through both "the chance for people to recognize you" and "things are happening to you," such that the boy becomes an occasion for actions performed on him

rather than by him.[11] The story is also told in the unusual second person, as the narrative moves him around like marionette wires: "You have thought it over. There is the high board. They will want to leave soon. Climb out and do the thing."[12] As the boy travels to the diving board, these narrative choices communicate the role of social prescription in the performance of individual desire.

Such prescription not only directs the boy's behavior at the pool, it also marks the diving board as a ritual the boy's community uses to construct him as a subject. The narrative says, "The pool is a system of movement. Here now there are: laps, splash fights, dives, corner tag, cannonballs, Sharks and Minnows, high fallings, Marco Polo."[13] The present tense of the story communicates urgency, as the now of the boy's 13th birthday will only come to pass this one time. But he is also asked to see that every day some boy or girl has his or her 13th birthday in this "system of movement." Each adult's memory at the pool in Wallace's story shares the day he or she fulfilled society's mandate to jump from the high dive. Seen as ritual, the boy's journey to the diving board in "Forever Overhead" marks society's transition of one of its members into adulthood. At the heart of this ritual is the internal change the boy undergoes through it: he comes to see he is one part of a very large social organism. This change is not simply abstract; rather, Wallace connects the boy's experiences to his apprehension of the world. Atop the board at the story's conclusion, he looks down to the scene below him, and the narrative says, "Look at it. You can see the whole complicated thing. Blue and white and brown and white, soaked in a watery spangle of deepening red. Everybody."[14] This palette of color is the boy's present sense that the pool's environment is comprised of many elements: there

11. Wallace, "Forever Overhead," 5.

12. Wallace, "Forever Overhead," 7.

13. Wallace, "Forever Overhead," 8.

14. Wallace, "Forever Overhead," 15.

are people and objects all around him, but they appear as one complicated thing. That this is a significant change brought about by his journey to the diving board becomes clear if we contrast this mixture of colors with the boy's earlier discriminating vision, as when he describes the people occupying the pool at the story's beginning:

> The pool is crowded for this late. Here are thin children, hairy animal men. Disproportionate boys, all necks and legs and knobby joints, shallow-chested, vaguely birdlike. Like you. Here are old people moving tentatively through shallows on stick legs, feeling at the water with their hands, out of every element at once.[15]

Most of the story's early paragraphs work like this. Thesis: the pool is crowded. Evidence: here are the individuals producing its crowdedness. Because Wallace repeats this movement early in "Forever Overhead," when the passage of the colors' complicated mixture finally arrives, and the strong distinctions between people and objects lose their power over the boy's vision, his altered focus marks a revolution in the boy's thinking that has been created by his new physical and mental position high overhead: the ideas he had on the ground about the people at the pool forming a larger social body are now fundamental to his very sight.

The irony, of course, is that though this way of seeing may represent a radical change in and for the boy, like the physical act of diving from the board, his adult vision is a product of a social normalizing he has undergone, like all the other adults at the pool. Thus, as the story concludes, he admits that he did not come to stand on the board by choice; rather, forces around him conspired to bring him to this place above the water, staring at two spots at the end of the board:

> They are from all the people who've gone before you. Your feet as you stand here are tender and dented, hurt

15. Wallace, "Forever Overhead," 8.

> by the rough wet surface, and you see that the two dark spots are from people's skin. They are skin abraded from feet by the violence of the disappearance of people with real weight. More people than you could count without losing track. The weight and abrasion of their disappearance leaves little bits of soft tender feet behind…. They pile up and get smeared and mixed together. They darken in two circles.[16]

The story's trauma becomes concrete in the young man's realization that the jump from the high dive is real. To be an adult is not to do something brave in an abstract way; it is to be brought to the end of a diving board by social and biological forces and then to be forced, in a moment of present consciousness, to choose to take one's body, recently made vulnerable, and hurl it into the air, leaving skin behind, so that gravity can slam you into the "cold blue sheet" below.[17] Adulthood requires the courage to do this after an unreckonable number of other people, at the end of history, and to be forgotten in that history seconds later, as out of your impact with the water, "blue clean comes up in the middle of the white and spreads like pudding, making [the pool's surface] all new."[18] The next jumper will inscribe the same circle and make the same impact with the water below.

The trauma in "Forever Overhead" is that of a boy being confronted with his historical insignificance and its attendant emotions of alienation. The story lives on the intimate details of a subject who sees that he is stuck in time, a single figure in a long line of figures like him. His anonymity and the second-person narration combine with the present tense to make him a synecdoche for a general movement into adulthood that includes the reader. The boy is both himself and someone else, and, as when we stand between opposing mirrors, he

16. Wallace, "Forever Overhead," 14.

17. Wallace, "Forever Overhead," 15.

18. Wallace, "Forever Overhead," 9.

calls forth our awareness that we are but one person in a long line of people sharing experiences as we share stages of life. Thus, when the last sentence of "Forever Overhead" arrives—"Hello."—we are greeted with a salutation offered to all who enter adulthood. This salutation is a sacrament: an external sign of our realization that the impressions we receive in our lives are constructed and the result of human history.

"Forever Overhead" is a story about a community's obligation to the experiences of its members. It fulfills this obligation in the construction of rituals. And, because the mind that confronts the world is created—figured in the boy forever overhead—each member of that community has a subsequent duty to transfigure the present moment into the terms through which the present tense of the future will be narrated. This mutual responsibility—that of a society's construction of salutary rituals and that of the individual's enlistment in his or her construction—is the threshold of adulthood.

The Self-Destruction of "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again"

In this reading of "Forever Overhead," we have good reasons to see Wallace's understanding of the individuals as shaped by the norms and rituals that structure their lives. In *The Pale King*, Wallace will imagine the rationality of neoliberalism as a way of thinking that reshapes institutions that harbor US rituals and norms to produce subjects who see themselves first and foremost as self-interested economic agents. Wallace anticipates that work in an essay he published within a month of *Infinite Jest*, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again."[19] The intellectual goals of this experiential essay about a seven-night Caribbean cruise fit comfortably with those of

19. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction," *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. (New York: Back Bay, 1998), Kindle edition.

his second novel. Where *Infinite Jest* explores substance abuse and hints at solipsism's outcome in the light dystopia of its near-future setting, "A Supposedly Fun Thing" uses Wallace's experience aboard the cruise to mark the dangers he sees in consumerism. As with the process of addiction in *Infinite Jest*, Wallace adapts to life aboard the ship and becomes more and more dependent on its many comforts. The cruise then exploits Wallace's addiction for profit, leaving him to feel that what he has been enjoying is actually the result of what are hollow relationships with both the ship's other passengers and its staff. This cycle mirrors the cycles of substance abuse characters in *Infinite Jest* struggle with to such an extent that the various dependencies that show up in both pieces run together.

Yet, there is an important difference between *Infinite Jest* and the cruise essay: whereas the novel's satire represents the prevalence of solipsism in the United States as a given, obscuring its origin as a cultural phenomenon, "A Supposedly Fun Thing" depicts Wallace's alienation from both the ship's other passengers and its servants as a cultivated product. Solipsism is what Wallace paid for the ship to let him pursue, and it is what the ship rewards. The cruise thereby teaches him to live by a perverted social contract in which he tends his immediate desires and the ship's staff orders his world for that self-indulgence. Read against the backdrop of the earlier "Forever Overhead," Wallace's diagnosis of US culture is one in which the social structures that capitalist institutions create reverse those adult rituals that are designed to enlist individuals in the production of abiding communities that teach their members how to live healthy lives, like that of the boy's journey to the diving board.

How the cruise's training of Wallace reverses the process described in "Forever Overhead" becomes most evident in the relationship Wallace describes between himself and his cleaning lady, Petra, who he has a crush on and who is required to clean his cabin whenever he leaves it for more than half an hour. Wallace describes

how Petra's incessant cleaning delights him at first, and he plays games with himself by leaving his cabin for 29 minutes before rushing back to find it uncleaned; Wallace then leaves his cabin for 31 minutes and finds that Petra has come and gone and that his cabin has been wonderfully renewed. Wallace is able to enjoy this phenomenon of the ship's service culture until he begins comparing Petra's motives for cleaning his cabin to the motives of a mother who cleans up after her child:

> Pace the guilt and nagging, etc. a mom cleans up after you largely because she loves you—you are the point, the object of the cleaning somehow. On the [ship], though, once the novelty [has] worn off, I begin to see that the phenomenal cleaning really has nothing to do with me.… If pampering and radical kindness don't seem motivated by strong affection and thus don't somehow affirm one[,] of what final and significant value is all this indulgence and cleaning?[20]

While from Petra's perspective the cleaning does not have anything to do with Wallace as a unique person—because she must clean the room regardless of who dirtied it—the ship would not exist without him, or at least without a substantial reserve of people like him. The same is true about her. The cruise would not be possible without the servants who staff the ship, but Petra in her particularity is unimportant to the experience Wallace is supposed to have. In this way, Petra and Wallace are divided from each other by their respective statuses, and it is only when Wallace's delight at his self-refreshing cabin wears away that he sees that his crush on Petra is perverse.

As the pressure on such relationships increases in "A Supposedly Fun Thing," Wallace produces a tirade against "professionalism," and he details his fraught relationships with the other members of

20. Ibid.

what he calls the "hierarchy of non-US servants," some of whom, like Petra, he greatly admires. Through his incessant cataloging of how the cruise's many pleasures make these relationships uncomfortable, "A Supposedly Fun Thing" turns out to be a study of the ethical quagmires of globalization. The essay gains power through the affection Wallace displays for Petra. Because of her professionalism and his status as a consumer, they cannot have a genuine relationship. He seeks human fellowship with her and finds nothing between them but the commercial duty of a payment exchanged. This unbridgeable divide, despite globalism's success at bringing them face to face, becomes symbolic of the many divisions that the culture of the ship produces between people as it isolates them, one by one, into the unique cabins of pleasure and service that solipsism creates more generally in Wallace's writing.

As these divisions become more powerful, the passengers are drained of their purpose in such a way that their shared solipsism results in a ship-sized culture of nihilism. Wallace marks this by structuring "A Supposedly Fun Thing" to carry the reader through the cruise's process as well. The essay begins with a litany of experiences that Wallace has had, and he questions whether they have been enough to justify the money spent on his Caribbean cruise: "I now know the precise mixological difference between a Slippery Nipple and a Fuzzy Navel. I know what a Coco Loco is. I have in one week been the object of over 1500 Professional Smiles. I have shot skeet at sea. Is this enough?"[21] This list of experiences is carried over the first several pages of the essay, and the question of sufficiency deepens in each succeeding section as Wallace wonders what the product of a Caribbean cruise actually is or should be. The reader is then subjected to meditations on the relationship between the sea and death, and Wallace thinks about the promises and demands of capitalist culture. Eventually though, reason breaks down,

21. Ibid.

and at the essay's end we are carried through a penultimate day aboard the ship, as Wallace narrates a manic series of experiences in which he loses a game of chess to a nine-year-old, attends a Catholic mass, tries caviar, dances in a conga line, etc. This self-directed and isolating activity collapses into itself, and Wallace suffers the total devastation of self that the ship's apparatus has been designed to effect in him: he imagines himself as a man overboard, treading water, and looking up at the ship he is aboard, a palatial, imperial, white monstrosity churning away from him, which is an image that both makes the cruise symbolic of US culture and that recalls an earlier citation of Pip's going mad in *Moby Dick*.

That section of Melville's novel, at the beginning of "A Supposedly Fun Thing," helped Wallace express his dread of the particular death that the ocean represents, one of immense nothingness, what he calls "primordial nada."[22] By essay's end, however, the image is no longer associated with dread. The cruise ship comes to represent not simply death but a meaningless form of death, even from Wallace's perspective on his own life. It is a death of waste, which ends a life unredeemed by anyone either within or outside it, where purpose has been stripped from the subject of the cruise's production by its hedonistic isolation from the interests of others. Ironically, this loss of purpose creates a sense of wellness in Wallace:

> This…trance…lasted all through the next day and night, which period I spent entirely in Cabin 1009, in bed, mostly looking out the spotless portholes, with trays and various rinds all around me, feeling maybe a little bit glassy-eyed but mostly good—good to be on the [ship] and good soon to be off, good that I had survived (in a way) being pampered to death (in a way)—and so I stayed in bed.[23]

Wallace loses his capacity to distinguish the qualities of his environment, which is a reversal of the boy's ability to see the complicated

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

wholeness of his environment from the top of the diving board in "Forever Overhead." It is not that the world or Wallace's faculties resist giving him a sense of the space he occupies aboard the ship; rather, the cruise has dissolved his interest in seeing difference, and, like an infant, he is happy to be satisfied by the ship and its apparatuses of pleasure. Thus, if the terminus of "Forever Overhead" was a growth signified by the boy's fall into adult responsibility, then Wallace in "A Supposedly Fun Thing" regresses into a perverse kind of ascension, where adulthood and its many demands recede from the self along with any desire to feel them.

Returning then to the relationship between *Infinite Jest* and "A Supposedly Fun Thing," the differences between the characterizations of solipsism that occupy the essay and those that appear in the novel result from the different problems that each piece of writing seeks to understand. While in *Infinite Jest*, solipsism appears on a national level, the force of the book is directed at individual recuperation. How do we bring Don Gately back to life? What alternatives to the self might the reader dedicate themselves to in the creation of a salutary way of living for others? In "A Supposedly Fun Thing," the reader's recuperation from solipsism goes undiscussed. This is because Wallace wants to communicate the feeling of infantile desire that the cruise produced in him as a product, and he wants the reader to see that this feeling is being produced in each passenger aboard the ship and throughout US culture. The questions then become: What does it mean if so many people are learning that their most fundamental needs can be met by their activities as consumers? And, given the danger Wallace sees in this situation, what should we be doing as a society to address it?

These questions remain unanswered in "A Supposedly Fun Thing," but the essay's role here is to reframe the problems of solipsism that *Infinite Jest* raises and see them as created by the work that institutions of capitalism perform on American consumers in aggregate. Thus,

by describing the production of an unsatisfiable yearning aboard the ship and explicating its operation in him as one consumer among many, Wallace turns his focus to something more difficult than the alcohol and drug addictions that fill so much of *Infinite Jest*: he turns to an addiction to pleasure in the United States generally, which is to say that "A Supposedly Fun Thing" identifies the large-scale production of a pleasure-based ideology in US consumers as a national crisis for our methods of subject formation. This crisis forced Wallace to see that he needed to imagine a political means of countering solipsism at the level of the social institution, where capitalism works. As we will see in the next section, an outline of this counter first appeared in his essay "Authority and American Usage."

The State Institution in "Authority and American Usage"

"Authority and American Usage" is a difficult and sometimes tedious essay because Wallace directs it to so many purposes.[24] Putatively a review of Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, its first purpose is to show how Garner navigates what Wallace calls the "Usage Wars"[25] between prescriptive and descriptive linguists by synthesizing the two camps. Wallace then uses these debates to read the American political landscape. He suggests that linguistic descriptivism emerged from the radical permissiveness of leftist politics in the 1960s: by attacking the idea that language usage is anything but arbitrary, the left seeks to dismantle dialects of power—like Standard Written English—because they exclude already disempowered groups of people, e.g. minorities, women, and the lower classes. Prescriptivists, on the other hand, represent a more conservative line of thinking: language is not arbitrary (at

24. Wallace, "Authority and American Usage," *Consider the Lobster*, (New York: Back Bay, 2007), 66-127.

25. Wallace, "Authority and American Usage," 74.

least not in the sense descriptivists mean); rather, it is a tool, and its cultivation is not only possible but a moral responsibility for those who use language; Standard Written English, as a national dialect, therefore reflects a form of community building. Taking these positions together, Wallace sees the conflict between descriptivism and prescriptivism as symptomatic of a general and "protracted crisis of authority"[26] in American society that Garner's dictionary offers an answer to by modeling what Wallace calls a "Democratic Spirit,"[27] which "combines" "passionate conviction" with "a sedulous respect for the convictions of others."[28]

Yet, Wallace has a more urgent project in this essay than calling for civility in US discourse. "Authority and American Usage" attacks the permissiveness of the American left's political program as it appears in institutions of education because Wallace reads that permissiveness as abetting the capitalist institutions he attacks in "A Supposedly Fun Thing." This is because Wallace understands the process of learning usage rules in the same way he depicts the boy's journey to the diving board in "Forever Overhead," where the social world prescribes a boy's movements in a ritual of subject formation. The opposite of this process, and the result of the permissive left's abnegation of its authority over what kinds of subjects US education should produce, is the way in which capitalist institutions develop their own rituals to divest consumers of both their independence and their solidarity with those around them. Thus, if Wallace saw the cruise ship as indicative of a national crisis of subject formation, the danger of descriptivism lies in its claims that groups of people cannot or should not develop language rules to address shared needs. "Authority and American Usage" is an argument for the left's engagement with prescriptivism as symbolic of a larger need to engage state institutions throughout US culture so that they might become tools for

26. Wallace, "Authority and American Usage," 75.

27. Wallace, "Authority and American Usage," 72.

28. Ibid.

forming subjects who can resist the debilitating work of capitalist institutions and instead enrich our national community. Wallace therefore frames language education as a social ritual that establishes a contract between student and society.

The danger Wallace sees in the permissiveness of the American left in "Authority and American Usage" is most evident in his attack on "Politically Correct English." Framing Politically Correct English as a dialect, Wallace argues that instead of cultivating words and phrases for community empowerment, the left uses political correctness to elide harsh realities and make people feel better about themselves because of the sympathies they hold. This self-satisfying mindset, according to Wallace, is self-defeating:

> The basic hypocrisy about usages like "economically disadvantaged" and "differently abled" is that [Politically Correct English] advocates believe the beneficiaries of these terms' compassion and generosity to be poor people and people in wheelchairs [but in actuality] PCE functions primarily to signal and congratulate certain virtues in the speaker…and so serves the self-regarding interests of the PC far more than it serves any of the persons or groups renamed.[29]

Wallace's approach here is indicative: "PCE functions primarily to signal and congratulate certain virtues of the speaker." It is solipsistic: political correctness makes the speaker feel good about the language he uses, while conservatives get help in hiding the reality of poverty behind abstraction. Thus, Politically Correct English fragments community by breaking down solidarity between the speakers and the object of their language in the same way that the abstraction of wealth breaks down solidarity aboard the cruise. This prevents the left from using better arguments for its political goals:

> Progressive liberals seem incapable of stating the obvious

29. Wallace, "Authority and American Usage," 113.

> truth: that we who are well off should be willing to share more of what we have with poor people not for the poor people's sake but for our own; i.e., we should share what we have in order to become less narrow and frightened and lonely and self-centered people. No one ever seems willing to acknowledge aloud the thoroughgoing self-interest that underlies all impulses toward economic equality—especially not US progressives, who seem so invested in an image of themselves…that they allow the conservatives to frame the debate in terms of charity and utility, terms under which redistribution seems far less obviously a good thing.[30]

Concerns for economic equality are an occasion to escape solipsism into the work of building something like a more democratic community, which is self-interested in the sense of mutual self-improvement. The self Wallace describes here is a national we, and the argument the left fails to make is that an individual's fate in the US is tied to the fate of all. On the level of a single person, this thinking echoes the redemptive pathway of *Infinite Jest*: Don Gately uses the halfway house where he works to pull himself out of his spiral of addictive solipsism. At the level of the community though, Wallace is here trying to raise questions about how we can cultivate better citizens by placing ourselves in relationships of responsibility for one another.

This sense of the political value of a willed national community appears through the establishment of a standard language usage, which grounds Wallace's challenge to the solipsism of US culture in educational institutions. For example, he believes English teachers should hold themselves responsible for helping all US students learn Standard English because it is the dialect of power in the US. Wallace reasons that when those not traditionally represented by the dialect of power are brought into it, two things happen: 1) the individuals

30. Ibid.

become empowered in a discourse community that previously excluded them and 2) that discourse community expands through the force of their inclusion, making it more democratic. This reasoning is what Wallace uses to justify the controversial speech he claims he gave as an English teacher to African American students he saw as deficient in Standard Written English:

> In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is just How It Is. You can believe it's racist and unfair and decide right here and now to spend every waking minute of your adult life arguing against it, and maybe you should, but I'll tell you something—if you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you're going to have to communicate them in SWE, because SWE is the dialect our nation uses to talk to itself.[31]

Wallace then says, "you're going to learn to use it, too, because I'm going to make you."[32] What makes this example productive for understanding what Wallace is trying to do in "Authority and American Usage" is how confrontational it is. Wallace's purpose is to counter the squeamishness of Politically Correct English because he feels his duty as a teacher is not only to teach his students Standard Written English but to also model the fulfillment of his social responsibilities to his students. Thus, even though he comes to regret this speech, unchanged throughout "Authority and American Usage" is the duty Wallace feels teachers have to continue the fashioning of a ritual of generational inheritance with respect to the English language: they create the terms through which students come to see Standard

31. Wallace, "Authority and American Usage," 108-109.

32. Ibid., 109

Written English as part of a collective project of social justice.

Finally, these duties are communicated through the relationship Wallace and his student share as members of an institution of education. His role as a teacher creates his specific responsibilities, and the same is true for his student. The cultivation and fulfillment of such institutional duties births what Wallace sees as a potential challenge to the solipsism of capitalist institutions. His argument against the permissiveness of the left demands awareness of our desires and the cultural forces that promote them in collectives of people. Two authors of such forces in US culture are apparent to Wallace: the institutions of capitalism that abet immediacy in our thinking and Wallace's vision of state institutions that might orient our desires beyond the self. Both seek to shape subjects. The question for Wallace is: do we want to be consumers or citizens? Citizenship would require that we reflect on our individual finitude and see that we subsist in rituals of subject formation.

The Institutional Perspective of "The Soul Is Not a Smithy"

"The Soul Is Not a Smithy" is one of Wallace's longest and most difficult short stories.[33] Told from the perspective of a single, unnamed narrator, it is an act of remembrance that weaves together a bewildering array of storylines, some of which have clear beginnings and endings while others have only implied trajectories. It is the unarticulated storylines of "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" that make it a difficult and rewarding piece of fiction because, though these stories remain untold, they shape the narrative's drama from off-stage. One character's shrouded past creates the vista of another character's unseen future, and both are crucial to the narrator's

33. Wallace, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," *Oblivion: Stories*. (New York: Back Bay, 2005), 67-113.

self-understanding when it emerges at the end of the story. Thus, the challenge of reading "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" lies not in the difficulty of Wallace's prose, which he uses to craft the voice of an emphatically average, if digressive, narrator; rather, the challenge of reading this story lies in figuring out what exactly it is that the narrator is trying to say.

"The Soul Is Not a Smithy" is a story about a shooting that takes place in a Civics classroom on March 14th, 1960, when a group of policemen kill an unarmed substitute teacher while he is standing at his classroom's chalkboard. Though narrated by a pupil who witnessed the shooting, what transpires in the classroom makes up only part of what we are told, as the narrator also shares a range of other memories from his past. These include moments from his early home life, his childhood nightmares and daydreams, and his recollection of a President's Day presentation that his father attended at his school. As these memories emerge and mix together, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" becomes less about what the narrator witnessed in the classroom and more about how the memory of his teacher's death has fused with other memories from his entrance into adult life.

"The Soul Is Not a Smithy" combines a depiction of the rituals of adulthood, like that of "Forever Overhead," with Wallace's effort to address problems of self-construction in US society. I have framed these problems as a tension between Wallace's critique of capitalist institutions in "A Supposedly Fun Thing" and his vision of state institutions in "Authority and American Usage." Bringing together an impulse to fictionalize society's training of individual subjects with Wallace's institutional critiques, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" is a unique effort to create a propaedeutic that anticipates *The Pale King* in imagining how state institutions in the US create American subjects. The story (and the novel after it) thereby offers an answer to challenges that emerge from *Infinite Jest*'s failure as a political novel:

How does one write a piece of fiction not primarily focused on individual experience? And how would one use that writing to help readers see beyond the individual in their thinking about the political life of the United States? Wallace sought to address these questions by joining his fiction to an educational process that appears in much of his later fiction: by forcing the reader to make sense of the many storylines of "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," he presents the narrative of a community (rather than an individual) undergoing profound change, requiring readers to adopt an "institutional perspective" for the story: an awareness that 1) we are bound to and by our membership in the social structures that produce us and 2) those structures are simultaneously conditioned by their history.

This institutional perspective operates in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" through the drama of the narrator's effort to understand how the shooting of his substitute teacher affected his classmates. As the story begins, the unnamed narrator introduces characters and provides background information about their lives. The large number of characters makes reading difficult, a problem compounded by the fact that the narrator is not a very concise storyteller. He begins his story by providing information about a classmate who plays only a marginal role in the events he describes:

> TERENCE VELAN WOULD LATER BE DECORATED IN COMBAT IN THE WAR IN INDOCHINA, AND HAD HIS PHOTOGRAPH AND A DRAMATIC AND FLATTERING STORY ABOUT HIM IN THE DISPATCH, ALTHOUGH HIS WHEREABOUTS AFTER DISCHARGE AND RETURNING TO AMERICAN LIFE WERE NEVER ESTABLISHED BY ANYONE [MY WIFE] OR I EVER KNEW OF.[34]

At this point, the reader does not know that Terence Velan is one of the narrator's classmates, and immediately after this passage

34. Wallace, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," 65.

he begins describing the 4th grade Civics classroom and the killing of Mr. Johnson. Initially disorienting, after being confronted with several more seemingly random pieces of information about other classmates, we see that the narrator is trying to understand how the substitute's death affected his classmates in later life. Thus, he begins with Terence Velan's service because he believes it to be a product of Mr. Johnson's death. Such connections between the events in the classroom and the students' subsequent lives gradually add up until we see that "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" is a kind of community history that takes a traumatic event as its inflection point.

As the narrator struggles to create this history, the story's priorities change: the narrator's impulse to understand his classmates' adult lives shifts his focus from the violence of Mr. Johnson's killing to reflections on his own childhood. In the penultimate section of "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," the narrator says, "For my own part, I had begun having nightmares about the reality of adult life as early as perhaps age seven."[35] These nightmares were caused by the narrator's learning that his father performed "actuarial" work, which inspired him to dream about being trapped in a large institutional space of never-ending labor. Though these nightmares were inspired by his father, they were also influenced by his experiences at school. The desks at which the bureaucrats labored in his dreams were placed in precise rows in the same way as those in his classroom, reflecting a fear of adulthood as a continuation of school:

> As I can recall it now, in the dream I look neither like my father nor my real self…and my face…looks like it has spent the last 20 years pressed hard against something unyielding. And at a certain point …I look up and into the lens of the dream's perspective and stare back at myself, but without any sign of recognition on my face, nor of

35. Wallace, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," 103.

happiness or fright or despair or appeal.[36]

The nightmares are part of his childhood recognition of being groomed, both at home and at school, to fulfill a social function. Projecting this fear onto the fragmented descriptions of his classroom community, as in the case of Terence Velan's eventual service in Vietnam, and combining it with the fact that the narrator becomes a bureaucrat, we can see the story's focus on the process of subject formation in US culture. Its institutional perspective thereby communicates the sense that neither the narrator nor his classmates make or direct themselves independent of the social milieu from which they emerge. Rather, the specific events of their educations help shape their outcomes as adults.

Wallace also historicizes the narrator's reflections on how his childhood shaped him. In the narrator's descriptions of his 4th grade Civics classroom's design, he reports that portraits of "all 34 US presidents" were hung "evenly spaced around all four walls just below the ceiling." And there were "pulldown relief maps of the thirteen original colonies, the Union and Confederate states circa 1861, and the present United States, including the Hawaiian islands."[37] The portraits hung around the ceiling mark a succession of leaders representing not a static form of authority but a legacy of governance. The relief maps offer cartographic snapshots of successive forms of the United States that, when viewed in order, call attention to the creation of the narrator's country through its movement in history. This is because Wallace sought to place the subjective experiences of his unnamed narrator's grooming for adulthood within the long history of the United States. Wallace thereby communicates the historical source of the institutions that forged the narrator into a US citizen.

Yet, by saying that Wallace recognizes this process is not to say he is uncritical of it. On the contrary, the terror of Mr. Johnson's mental

36. Wallace, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," 110.

37. Wallace, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," 70.

break, his execution by the local constabulary, and the traumatic impact those events have on his students signal the incredible violence of US history. This violence is echoed in the narrator's nightmares and Wallace also offers images of history's transference in the classroom itself. What precipitates the traumatic event of the substitute's death is that in teaching a unit on the US Constitution Mr. Johnson suddenly begins writing violent exhortations on the chalkboard: he scrawls "KILL," "THEM," and "KILL THEM ALL" in front of the students, over and over, so that hundreds of repetitions accrue on the board. The authorities soon respond to Mr. Johnson by shooting him. The narrator recounts how before the police arrived, Mr. Johnson was writing "due process of law" on the board, and "Ellen Morrison, Sanjay Rabindranath, and some other of the class's more diligent pupils, copying down word for word what Mr. Johnson was putting up on the chalkboard, discovered that they had written due process KILL of law and that that, too, was what was on the chalkboard."[38] The children, taking notes, copy the unconscious scribbling of Mr. Johnson. These students are not merely aping their teacher, they are learning to inscribe the traumatic violence of their past, present, and future into themselves. What "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" presents us with, then, is the inescapability of social ritual and the violence that inheres in the history it creates. There is no way to fly by the nets of tradition in this story because they are not nets at all. They are the forces that shape US subjects. The inescapability of this reality creates in Wallace's thinking a social duty: we owe ourselves to the historical amelioration of these violent rituals. The determination of our vocations to that amelioration, within the roles that society produces us to fill, is the proper direction for our reflections on our place within the collective life of a violent and institutionalized American culture. Wallace's deployment of his institutional perspective in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" is designed to

38. Wallace, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," 86.

aid in those reflections, and it is a narrative strategy he deepens in his institutional novel, *The Pale King*.

An Institutional Novel

This article began by discussing Boswell's sense that an interpretive orthodoxy has limited our understanding of Wallace's writing. Boswell helpfully urges us to recognize that *The Pale King* provides clear evidence Wallace was concerned not only with the personal struggles of his characters, as in their depression, addiction, and consumerism, but he was also concerned with the fate of the United States as a country, which led him to put questions of politics and government at the center of his third novel. My purpose has been to not only affirm Boswell's claim but to take it further and suggest an interest in politics and governmental practice permeates Wallace's writing, even affecting those works whose primary purpose is to depict individual struggle.

For Wallace, the makeup of the contemporary US subject is conditioned by the social structures he or she occupies. The significance of this claim is that when he writes characters who are hobbled by addiction or depression, he also writes about the failures of the culture from which they emerge. Often, Wallace's writing and the criticism that has followed have framed this as Wallace's concern with the growing tendency toward solipsism in US culture. Contra those who grow weary of this term, I believe solipsism is a useful concept for thinking about Wallace because it captures so many of the struggles he depicted: alcoholism, depression, consumerism, etc.; in Wallace's thought, the significance of solipsism is that the subject lacks the ability to acknowledge that the thoughts and feelings of others are as valuable as his own.

Where an individual's solipsism becomes political is in its purposeful manufacture. As we saw in "A Supposedly Fun Thing," this problem is not incidental to US culture; rather, it is cultivated by the

capitalist institutions US subjects interact with daily, which realization highlights the inadequacy of the individualized approach of an anarchist organization like Alcoholics Anonymous for Wallace's goals. This is why he makes the awkward argument he does in "Authority and American Usage," where he applies a responsibility for subject formation to the work of English education. Wallace argues we have a national interest in forcing students to share a national dialect, which is to also say we have a national interest in building subjects who can resist the self-destructive lessons of capitalist institutions. This interest inspires Wallace's use of what I call an institutional perspective in his later fiction, including "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" and *The Pale King*. We are confronted with a disorienting array of individual narratives that cannot center these stories; instead, Wallace presents collectives that must be grasped through the reader's organization of individual characters into dynamic groups. This fictional demand urges readers to look beyond the self to the collectives they help constitute. In this sense, *The Pale King* can be understood as an "institutional novel" that ties the daily lives of workers in a governing apparatus (the IRS) to the shared fate of all US citizens.

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LOOSENING THE JAR: CONTEMPLATING RACE IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S SHORT FICTION

Colton Saylor

Introduction

How do white authors negotiate the encounter with the other? What do these negotiations reveal about the construction and maintenance of whiteness?[1] In his attempt to write an encounter with rap, David Foster Wallace, along with Mark Costello, is forced into just such a confrontation with the barriers of racial difference. In the opening section of *Signifying Rappers* (1990), in a

1 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Editor's Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn, 1985), 15. "Loosening the Jar" takes up the crucial field of inquiry that Gates's article posits: "We must, I believe, analyze the ways in which writing relates to race, how attitudes toward racial differences generate and structure literary texts by us and about us. We must determine how critical methods can effectively disclose the traces of ethnic differences in literature. But we must also understand how certain forms of difference and the languages we employ to define those supposed differences not only reinforce each other but tend to create and maintain each other."

passage attributed to Wallace: "Rap's highly self- and history-conscious unfamiliarity, its image of inaccessibility to established markets or truly teeming mass appeal, is often reduced by critics to the kind of 'surly musical hostility' that…can become for Us like little more than looking at something poisonous in a tightly closed jar."[2] The "self- and history-conscious unfamiliarity" that Wallace references entails rap's project to capture the singular experience of the black community, to interrogate and represent black subjectivity in forms unrecognizable and menacing to the discourse of power. Just as significant as the "something poisonous," however, is the capital "Us" that exposes the authors' whiteness in opposition to the jar as a receptacle for racial otherness. In interrogating the deeper cultural and theoretical forces at work behind rap as a cultural product, *Signifying Rappers* takes this "Us" for granted as a stable category placed in tight opposition to the racialized other. Any white critic's analysis of rap as an expressive form originates from this positionality and, in fact, aids in positioning the unfamiliarity of the musical genre as alien and inaccessible. Wallace and Costello's encounter, in other words, re-affirms whiteness even as it seeks new roads of empathy towards the black artist.

This article traces how the white normativity of *Signifying Rappers*' "Us"[3] continues to shape Wallace's later attempts to close the

2. Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, *Signifying Rappers.* (New York, Boston, London: Back Bay Books, 1990), 31.

3. Indeed the binary construct "Us"/"Them" reoccurs throughout Wallace's bibliography, most notably in his journalistic piece "Getting Away from Already Pretty Much Being Away from It All," which sets the "Us" of the white fair-goers against the "Them" of the absent black attendees and the carnival workers, and "Authority and American Usage," Wallace's essay on standard language use, in which he depicts the binary of grammar snobs (i.e. "SNOOTs") and those outside of that elitist group as "Us" and "Them." This is all to say that it is unfair to accuse Wallace of being unaware of the social forces through which identity categories are formed and policed. That being said, this article argues for how this same self-awareness fails to emerge in Wallace's literary encounters with racial others. More specifically, his peering over into other racial or ethnic communities remains untroubled by how

gap of racial subjectivity in his short fiction. My analysis does not seek to expose and therefore dismiss Wallace as racist; rather, I propose a new reading practice sensitive to how the author's efforts to write from within racial difference—in ways disguised as distinctly non-racial—instead become contemplations of his own whiteness.[4] Samuel Cohen's "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace" provides an overview of how the author's anxiety over his white identity surges into his writing. Cohen's argument focuses mainly on the author's direct mentioning of race, from his description of the all-white Illinois state fair in "Getting Away from Already Pretty Much Being Away from It All" to the clumsily produced and situated "black-dialect" of *Infinite Jest*.[5] While Cohen's discussion of Wallace and racial difference is invaluable, it is necessary to track how this same white anxiety plays out in the rest of his writing, mainly in those literary scenarios seemingly disinterested in issues of race. Wallace re-creates encounters with the racialized other in ways that avoid the mentioning of racial discourse but are, in fact, always already inundated with his own white male positionality.[6]

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his own inclusion in the "Us" of *Signifying Rappers* contributes to the black community's ongoing racialized subjugation.

4. See: Tara Morrissey and Lucas Thompson, "'The Rare White at the Window': A Reappraisal of Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace's *Signifying Rappers*," *Journal of American Studies* 49, no. 1 (2015): 77-97. As Morrissey and Thompson note in their instructive article, little scholarship has surfaced regarding Wallace's fiction in connection to critical race studies. "Loosening the Jar," in response to this emerging field of inquiry, seeks to bridge already present studies into Wallace's whiteness with critical race scholarship to show how the two are intrinsically connected to one another.

5. Samuel Cohen, "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace," in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, ed. Len Platt and Sara Upstone (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 228-246.

6. Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts, "White Guys: Questioning *Infinite Jest*'s New Sincerity," *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5, no.1 (2017), DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.182. Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts remind us in their critique of *Infinite Jest* that the Wallace's bibliography "presents as universal an

When read through a critical race framework, his attempts to write from within the "jar," to empathize with the "something poisonous" of racial difference, become less about using empathy as a way of inhabiting the minds of others and more about coming to grips with his white male subjectivity's role in creating that same chasm of experience he wishes to bridge. At stake is the development of a new analytical technique better equipped to register the assemblage of racial identities under the dominant and, at times, obscure language of the late-capitalist racial order.

Late capitalism, as Fredric Jameson defines it, makes up the economic and cultural condition of postmodernity, a transnational, hyper-consumerist, highly automated, and all-together ubiquitous hegemonic system. The "late" of late capitalism refers to "the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all-pervasive."[7] This "less-perceptible" structure of capitalism breeds iterations of power so far-reaching that their mechanisms appear invisible. Of interest for this article is how the study of racialization, the process by which power constructs and polices race, consistently contradicts the notion of universal experience under this late-capitalist order. Beginning in the late twentieth century, race scholars have in numerous ways mapped out the mechanisms of late-capitalist white supremacy that manipulate the spatial, economic, and cultural conditions for people of color.[8] Critical race

experience that it in fact implicitly codes as white and male."

7. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press*, 1991), xxi.

8. See: Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: Univ. of

studies itself derives from legal scholarship determined to problematize the myth of universal protection under the rule of law.[9] Scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, George Lipsitz, and Paula Ioanide have gone on to apply this critical framework to a variety of disciplines; in each case, the focus remains on how race continues to influence discourse in ways that designate communities of color as other-ed and non-normative entities.[10] As such, the otherness I refer to in this piece is based on the ongoing efforts by the US hegemony to police the borders of whiteness as distinct from other racialized identities.

This article first seeks to complicate Wallace's writings on empathy as a literary project by reading them through a critical race framework. I draw from these critical race discussions as a way of presenting the intellectual complications that race as a societal construction presents to Wallace's fiction and, more so, his conceptualization of empathy. Next, I conduct readings of two of Wallace's short fictional pieces: "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature," from *Oblivion* (2005) and "Backbone," a stand-alone excerpt from the unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011). Both stories contain literary attempts at stepping inside of racial otherness under systems of difference that avoid the direct mention of race; however, despite these camouflaged attempts at crafting non-normative subjectivities, Wallace's writing gradually slides back into tried and true racial

Minnesota Press, 2011).

9. See, generally: Derrick Bell, *Race, Racism, and American Law* (Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Law & Business, 2000); Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995); Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993), 1707-91.

10. See Eduardo Bonilla-Silva: *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America, Fourth Edition* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2014); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Paula Ioanide, *The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Colorblindness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

ideologies that re-affirm whiteness by re-enacting the imperial gaze.

Reading racial difference into Wallace's work provides a look into the construction and maintenance of "Us" and the "jar," a troubling dichotomy that continues to dictate the accessibility to protection and resources within the United States. This article's radical reading practice desires to take the emerging field of whiteness studies out of the dangerous territory of racial "navel-gazing" and into the realm of political impact. It is not enough to examine the white subject in and of himself for how he enacts privilege and alienates himself from individuals of color. We must turn a far more critical eye onto how the construction and performance of that same whiteness contributes to racist discourse and injustice.

Wallace and the Power/ Problem of Empathy

The inestimable divide that is race's "tightly closed jar" offers an intriguing complication to Wallace's larger fictional project: using literature as a way of inhabiting other minds, to use empathy as a way of better understanding the increasingly complex late-capitalist forces at work in alienating and controlling the human subject.[11] Great fiction, for Wallace, should be able to travail this divide. For example, in a 2000 interview with Mark Schechner, Wallace says of writer Cynthia Ozick: "In reading her I felt an utter erasure of difference, which does not happen to me with a lot of other writers from different cultural backgrounds. I can appreciate the peering across the chasm at another culture, but with Ozick that chasm just vanishes" (109).[12] Wallace praises Ozick's writing for how it crosses

11. Toon Staes, "Rewriting the Author: A Narrative Approach to Empathy in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*" *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 44 no. 4, 2012, pp. 409-427. Staes' article provides a useful explanation for how Wallace enacted this empathetic project in his longer novels.

12. Mark Schechner, "Behind the Watchful Eyes of Author David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University

the "chasm" of cultural subjectivity. His comments reflect a belief that empathy, when deployed correctly in fiction, can invoke this "erasure of difference." Wallace scholars have sought to explain how his fiction itself meets these same criteria in ways unique from other postmodern literature. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, for example, applauds *Infinite Jest* for how that novel "promote[s] a mode of identification that transcends essentialist notions of identity, producing instead more thoughtful forms of empathy."[13] Particularly key to this transcendence, Fitzpatrick argues, is how that book "stands out from much postmodernist writing that disavows the affective, as it recognizes that affect and political or critical potential are not mutually exclusive, but may in fact be mutually dependent."[14] In effect, Wallace's willingness to reach out beyond the lonesome terrain of postmodern irony and late-capitalist isolation via affect breeds new paths of empathy capable of uniting readers across experiential divides.

Wallace himself expands on this empathic argument elsewhere in his writing, particularly in his 2005 Kenyon College commencement address later published as *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life* (2009). He conceives of a humanities education as a critical tool through which students can become more capable of controlling how they draw significance from the day-to-day minutiae of post-graduate life. To

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Press of Mississippi, 2012), 104-9. Lucas Thompson refers to this same quote in "African-American Appropriations: Race, Hip Hop, and Popular Anthropology," perhaps the most direct exploration of Wallace and race. In that piece, Thompson frames Wallace's racial project—with specific focus on African American culture—as reimagining the "alien qualities of Africa in relation to the commodifying cycles of American popular culture, fusing a popular anthropological discourse with a strategic mode of artistic appropriation" [Lucas Thompson, "African-American Appropriations: Race, Hip-Hop, and Popular Anthropology," *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 197-236.]

13. Katherine Fitzpatrick, "Infinite Summer: Reading, Empathy, and the Social Network" in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 186.

14. Ibid., 186.

demonstrate these benefits, Wallace paints a scene of nine-to-five mundanity, in which the students finds themselves at a grocery store after a long day at the office and surrounded by other seemingly mindless automatons. The impulse to place oneself at the center of such a situation points to the fact that "other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real."[15] The ability to open one's experience of his or her surroundings to include the perspectives of others offers a liberal arts graduate power over the anaesthetizing experience that is post-capitalist consumer culture. Imagine, for example, Wallace's advice playing out in the sterile, product-worshipping temple that is the grocery store of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). Controlling how and what you think about, for Wallace, serves as a way of combating DeLillo's "dull and inaudible roar"[16] that is capitalism on the postmodern stage. Or, as Wallace summarizes: "And I submit that this is what the real, no bullshit value of your liberal arts education is supposed to be about: how to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out."[17]

And yet, the scenario that Wallace presents to graduates of a high-ranking, majority-white liberal arts institution is decidedly raced in its depiction of white-collar, office-worker life. His advice to his audience to avoid its "default setting" and reach out, albeit psychically, to others resonates with the formation of the white neoliberal subject as described by Jodi Melamed in *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. For Melamed, the

15. David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life. (New York: Little Brown, 2009),* 41.

16. Don DeLillo, *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, Ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 36.

17. Wallace, *This is Water*, 60.

university's role in post-World War II identity politics is to provide white students with *race* literature that takes the place of actual integration, ensuring an emerging class of global citizens well versed in multi-cultural discourse without ever having to integrate themselves within communities of color. Wallace's grocery store scenario, similarly, implores these majority-white students to take time out of their "challenging" white collar, upper-middle class schedules to think of the others that inhabit the spaces around them.[18] While well intended in its construction, Wallace's advice to Kenyon's graduates slips into a white neoliberal tactic of engaging with others by never truly engaging.

This same oversight of the racial implications of empathy arises in Wallace's discussion of literature as communal experience. For Wallace, part of the mission of literary pursuits is the task of combating the instincts of alienation in favor for a collective understanding of the world. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace expounds, "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."[19] This imaginative link between subjects—made possible by literary empathy—asserts a societal value of fiction that connects individuals by a shared experience of

18. See also: Steve Martinot, "The Structures of Racialization" in *The Machinery of Whiteness: Studies in the Structure of Racialization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010) 171-86. Like Melamed's neoliberal citizen, Martinot's conceptualization of an "ethical whiteness" demonstrates a hopeful but paradoxical construction of white subjectivity that "accepts[s] the purity condition that is the foundation for whiteness and not have it be exclusionary (although it is by definition)." Like Melamed, Martinot argues for how this particular vision of anti-racist whiteness, which wishes to accept its privilege while at the same time invoke progressive identity politics, merely functions as a way of perpetuating white racial hegemony by other means.

19. Larry McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 22.

pain. Outside of the possibility of "true empathy," Wallace finds value in the exercise of imagination that literature grants readers. To connect to a character's pain allows readers to place themselves in a shared network of experience, to confirm to them that their own suffering is both legible and meaningful to others.

Wallace's conceptions of pain and empathy put through a critical race framework meet certain complications. Saidiya Hartman, for example, critiques empathy for its problematic usage in the rhetoric of the anti-slavery movement. In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997), Hartman identifies the empathetic gesture of white abolitionists placing themselves in the bodies of subjugated black slaves as a form of obliteration. Hartman defines empathy as "a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other."[20] In discussing the letters of abolitionist John Rankin, Hartman explains that empathy "confounds Rankin's efforts to identify with the enslaved because in making the slave's suffering his own, Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach."[21] The empathetic gaze, in other words, is a destructive one that, no matter the intent, results in the substitution of the slave's body for the white sympathizer. Whereas Rankin utilizes pain as a universal experience accessible to anyone on either side of the color line, the result is a rendering of black subjectivity that can only be imagined through the white subject. As Hartman concludes, "the effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and legible."[22]

Hartman gives us crucial language to understand where Wallace's

20. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

21. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.

22. Ibid., 19.

theorizing of empathetic literary gestures and pain fail to breach the issue of racial subjectivity. For Hartman, to use the moment of pain as a portal to unlocking the subjectivity of the racialized other only serves to further objectify that same other. Wallace, on the other hand, envisions a unifying moment of recognition taking place on the level of the imagination and in a way that assuages the sense of isolation. Missing from his assessment of pain's empathizing capacity is the systemic mechanism set in place to control and manipulate experience for subjects of color. Even after emancipation, Hartman's book continues to map the system of slavery as it evolved into wage labor, the argument being that even after Jubilee, the African American experience of slavery persisted under other names, including wage labor and the prison system. Racialized subjectivity, in other words, denotes a skewered experience of the world made to fit the rationale of white hegemony. Wallace and Costello make mention of their awareness of these racist machinations by including a passage from the Massachusetts court case *Morgan v. Hennigan* that states: "the schools in a portion of Boston stretching from just south of South Boston through Roxbury and into Dorchester are districted with a similar effect: the predominantly black areas are cut away from the predominantly white areas."[23] Here, Wallace and Costello acknowledge the legislative means by which space becomes racialized.[24] They use this legalized urban segregation as a way of entering into the cultural and racial chasms at work in the pleasure derived from rap.

And yet, this awareness of the legal ramifications of racism in action fails to reach Wallace's conception of empathy as it pertains to a so-called "shared" experience. The issue, in part, lies in Wallace's conceptualization of space as a universal experience, rather than one marked by racialized difference. Turning off one's

23. Costello and Wallace, *Signifying Rappers*, 3.

24. For a more detailed look at how space becomes racialized, see: George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

"default setting," in other words, requires one to recognize that we are all subject to an equal amount of pressure from modern, hyper-consumerist forces. Wallace enacts this equation of space with narratives that bridge plural locations and events with the shared experience of capitalist manipulation. "Mister Squishy," the first story in *Oblivion*, strings together an advertising focus group with the spectacle of a man climbing a skyscraper outside; *Infinite Jest* links a variety of seemingly disparate places—a tennis academy, a halfway house, a mountainside in Tucson, Arizona—under the larger network of alienation that is late-capitalist culture. The latter takes this spatial equity to new heights by presenting a world where the United States, Mexico, and Canada have united to form the Organization of North American Nations and calendar years have corporate sponsors. Through all of these examples, recognizing the manipulative role of consumer capitalism helps make the world smaller. Empathy is comprehending how all individuals struggle under the same calculating forces. Indeed, a portion of the humanities' imparted value to students, per *This is Water*, consists of the ability to engage critically with others and, in turn, gain full awareness of one's surroundings. The commencement speech ends with the championing of "awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, that we have to keep reminding ourselves, over and over: 'This is water, this is water.'"[25] The "water" that Wallace mentions symbolizes the prospect of a shared plane of experience on which all subjects must brave the mundane abyss that is post-graduation, hyper-consumerist life. Rather than a metaphor for a larger utopian vision, Wallace's use of water embodies what he sees as the possibility of imagination in re-considering how one navigates the world around them.

Wallace's "water," a realm of possibly shared affective registers, echoes the work of Nigel Thrift, whose non-representational theory seeks a focus on the act of being in space rather than the representation

25. Wallace, *This is Water*, 131-133.

of that space. Thrift explains non-representational theory as a centering of "practices, mundane everyday practices that shape the conduct of human beings towards others and themselves in particular sites."[26] Focusing on practice embodies the same sense of self-awareness that exemplifies the mantra of *This is Water.* Both Thrift and Wallace, perhaps correctly, view affect as the way forward in the midst of a consumer-capitalism bent on dividing the subject from a meaningful experience of his or her environment. But, as geographer Divya P. Tolia-Kelly explains, this attention to affective registers in the city-space ignores the reality of Euro-centrism as the dominant mode of being. On the subject of "Intensities of Feeling," Tolia-Kelly remarks, "This new 'politics of affect' encourages us to proceed with an orientation through which the world can be felt, known, and understood and expressed, inevitably through text.… One problematic of this textual encounter is that the pivotal cornerstones of this theory are based on a Westnocentric literary and sensory palette."[27] Tolia-Kelly's main critique of Thrift lies in the lens through which he places his analysis of experience. Conceiving of affect as a cohesive unifier under which all subjects can be placed overlooks the ways that power manipulates space and disenfranchises communities as forms of subjugation. Indeed a number of critical race scholars have described part of white supremacy's subjugation of peoples of color as a geographic one.[28] Under these forms of spatial discrimination, subjects of color are confined to particular maps and restricted from entering spaces of

26. Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect.* (London: Routledge, 2007), 142.

27. Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, "Affect: An Ethnocentric Encounter? Exploring the 'Universalist' Imperative of Emotional/Affectual Geographies." *Area*, 38, no. 2 (2006), 214.

28. Two recent and significant examples of this kind of work are Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) and Mishuana Goeman, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

privilege. These practices, in turn, impact how subjects of color experience the space around them, a sometimes-antagonistic relationship that invokes what Édouard Glissant calls "various kinds of madness"[29] within the minority subject.

As Cohen so plainly states, the "water" of *This is Water* is white.[30] As such, complicating Wallace's empathic project, itself reliant on a shared affective plane of experience, also means complicating the white subject position into which his writing tends to slip. Invoking the history of systemic racism and its impact on experience and the formation of the racialized subject troubles the universal and instead alerts us to the constructed-ness of our own racial identities. Reading the politics of racial difference back into Wallace's fiction of empathy, in turn, allows us to observe how the white subject so prominent in his work comes into formation. That is, in attempting to step inside of otherness via empathy, the white subject only reproduces a system of racial otherness meant to affirm the hierarchy of whiteness. It is here then that I now turn to Wallace's short fiction to see how his coded narratives of racial difference re-produce this white/racial-other binary.

"Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" and Observing the Other

At the center of "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" is a narrative about *looking* and *hiding*. Wallace's story attempts to capture the sensation of the gaze from the perspective of the one being watched; however, as his character study continues, the narrative reveals its inability to see past the narrator's other-ing signifiers.

29. Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989) 160.

30. Cohen, "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace," 240.

Taking place ostensibly on a public bus, the main plot follows the nameless narrator accompanying his mother on her way to an appointment with an attorney. Both mother and son dread the bus as a space of constant surveillance, a reaction derived from both characters' non-normative appearances. A plastic surgery mishap has left the mother's face frozen into a look of extreme horror, making the pair's trips to the appointment an exercise in avoiding the various stares and gasps that come with leaving the safety of their home. The narrator only adds to their conspicuousness: he describes himself as a "large specimen" with "distinctive coloration."[31] In addition, he constantly wears goggles and "specially constructed gloves for field work."[32] This "field work" involves the other source of the narrator's peculiarity: an obsession with the study and cultivation of black widow spiders, a box of which he carries around him.

Scholarship on "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" often revolves around its connection to the philosophical text of the same name by Richard Rorty, who famously problematized the conception of an epistemological truth capable of being verified through representations of nature. Paul Giles, for example, found in Wallace's story an enactment of Rorty's argument where the freedom of truth-bearing signifiers leaves character at the mercy of what the critic refers to as "a fallen world of false appearances and 'special effects'" and the forces of "America's corporate marketplace as a theater of gothic masquerade."[33] But beyond the story's philosophical ties to Rorty's text, "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" recalls narratives of racial surveillance and integration that make it difficult

31. David Foster Wallace, "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature," in *Oblivion: Stories* (New York/Boston: Back Bay Books, 2004), 183.

32. Wallace, "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature," 183.

33. Paul Giles, "All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press, 2012), 14.

to deny the piece's larger goals toward addressing race. As Lucas Thompson confirms in "French Existentialism's Afterlives: Wallace and the Fiction of the U.S. South,"[34] "Philosophy" rather blatantly mirrors the plot, setting, characters, and even seating arrangements of Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge." Thompson even includes a quote by Wallace during a letter to editor Michael Pietsch that reads, "I had this whole thing in my head about it being a complicated parody/homage to 'Everything That Rises Must Converge'—was any of that agenda discernable to you."[35] Thompson goes on to argue for how Wallace's story, given its use of overly self-aware-to-the-point-of-paralysis characters and fragmented narrative, "implies that certain aspects of postmodern culture function in obstructing the visceral encounters with divine grace that O'Connor's characters routinely encounter."[36]

Aside from Thompson's focus on the postmodern self-aware narrator, Wallace's allusions to O'Connor's story also include the racial components of "Everything that Rises," from the use of the public bus as a site of racial negotiation to the power of the white gaze in subjugating the racialized other into categorical identities legible to power. The inherent tension behind O'Connor's mother and son comes from conflicting ideas regarding the white southerner's response to growing integration: defensive anxiety or self-satisfied liberalism. Both ideologies, over the course of the narrative, prove to be complicit in objectifying the story's black characters as walking modules of difference. In that way, the seating choice by the mother and son from "Everything That Rises"—the two seats parallel to

34. Lucas Thompson, "French Existentialism's Afterlives: Wallace and the Fiction of the U.S. South," in *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

35. David Foster Wallace, Letter to Michael Pietsch (October 10, 2004), Container 1.10, Little Brown & Co. David Foster Wallace Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

36. Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 190.

the sides of the vehicle rather than facing the front—offers an opportunity for the two characters to observe and evaluate their fellow passengers.

By contrast, Wallace's narrator justifies his and his mother's seating choice by explaining, "Our customary habitat now is the lateral seat that is on the same side as the bus's door minimizing any likelihood that someone boarding will have a sudden frontal view of her expression."[37] While the seating and character makeups remain the same, the roles of Wallace and O'Connor's mother and son duos are quite different: rather than reflect on the position of observers, Wallace's characters navigate the experience of *being observed*. The narrator's descriptions of the bus revolve around the issue of visuality, including the observation:

> We had learned through experimental method to not sit further back in the rows of more regular seats which face frontally because of the way certain fellow passengers would visibly react when they board and perform the seemingly reflexive action as they start moving down the aisle to a seat of briefly scanning the faces facing them from the narrow rows of seats extended backward through the bus and would suddenly see Mother's distended and soundlessly screaming face appearing to gaze back at them in *mindless terror*.[38]

Visuality threatens the son and mother because of its role in placing them in differentiated, non-normative categories of being. The passengers' affective responses to the narrator and his mother make present the act of gazing in cringe-inducing ways. The narrator himself asserts, "I have primarily immunized myself to Mother's chronic expression of horror but am even so capable of being made

37. Wallace, "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature," 184.

38. Ibid., 183.

uncomfortable by some's reaction to us visually."[39] At other moments in the story, the narrator makes comments alluding to his reservations over how he is perceived by others. In describing himself, he explains, "to look at me you would never know I have such a studious bend."[40] Likewise, towards the end of the narrative, he confesses, "And on select occasions such a specimen will, if predisposed by environmental conditioning or instinctive temperament, appear to assume that the stimulus causing her expression is me. That with my size and distinctive mark that I have kidnapped this horror-stricken middle-aged female or behaved in a somehow threatening manner toward her."[41] This last example derives from instances where other passengers choose the seats facing directly across from the mother and son, giving the passengers "the vantage of gazing frontally at us throughout the ride."[42] Visuality creates instances of immediate articulation based on what the narrator refers to as "incomplete data"[43]; as a result, these stares strike away the narrator's ability to define himself. Instead, they subject him to what Robyn Wiegman refers to as the *economies of the visible*. Wiegman writes, "the visible has a long, contested, and highly contradictory role as the primary vehicle for making race 'real' in the United States. Its function, to cite the body as the inevitable locus of 'being,' depends on a series of bodily fictions assumed to unproblematically reflect the natural meaning of flesh."[44] Similarly, Wallace uses visuality to craft a narrative of otherness. The narrator's bus ride becomes a matter of avoiding moments of categorization. Wallace's narrator muses over how his

39. Ibid., 184.

40. Ibid., 183.

41. Ibid., 189.

42. Ibid., 189.

43. Ibid., 189.

44. Robyn Wiegman. *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 21.

physical attributes contribute to the narratives that other passengers create about him. To this point, "Philosophy" leaves out a holistic description of the character so as to avoid visual scrutiny from the readers themselves. Aside from his hulking size, gloves, and goggles, the narrator's mentioning of his "distinctive coloration"[45] signals a trait of conspicuity without fully detailing the narrator's skin tone or ethnic background. The story's fragmented narrative, which interweaves the pair's bus trip habits with retellings of his mother's accident, the death of a nine-year-old child who fell into a habitat of his spiders, and other various pieces of trivia (e.g. spider factoids and Hollywood cinema history), itself serves as a type of textual camouflage. By splicing these various threads together, "Philosophy" allows the narrator to avoid the scrutinizing gaze of the reader, to be "*hidden in plain sight*,"[46] a phrase he uses to describe black widow spider's abilities to go undetected in public places. At work throughout the story, then, is a sensitivity to being watched, a constantly active awareness of the stares of others that motivates how the narrator interacts with his surroundings.

While the story's attention to visuality and surveillance mark Wallace's attempts to recreate a racialized subject navigating public space, "Philosophy" cannot help but also observe and gaze. As such, what appears to be a narrative about inhabiting the other transforms into story written from the perspective of the alienated gazing—read as white—subject. Wallace's attempts to write from within the "jar" rely on a subjugating gaze that essentializes as it contemplates. The narrator's odd outward appearance, complete with gloves and field goggles, converges with how he observes and describes the world. Beyond referring to those around him as "specimens," the narrator's structuring of social interactions always comes in the lexicon of arachnology, such as when he relates, "I also carry a briefcase at all

45. Wallace, "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature," 183.

46. Ibid., 187.

times since my own case. One today would call a briefcase a *sematic accessory* to warn off potential predators."[47] His likening of his briefcase to the red hourglass marking of the black widow spider denotes an essentialism that ties the son's abnormal outward appearance to his inner monologue. That we later discover that he has filled the briefcase with black widows further demonstrates that the narrator's other-ing traits spread beyond the visual. This tendency to depict the world through the lens of arachnology extends to how he describes his mother: "Sitting at home in dark glasses as ever knitting while monitoring my activities her *mouth parts working idly*."[48] The narrator paints his mother as a spider observing him while spinning a web and slowly working her *chelicerae*. Elsewhere, he likens them both to spiders in their search for the proper "right angle"[49] to hide from gazing passengers on the bus. In thinking through Wiegman, these conflations work towards underscoring the narrator's body as the "locus of being," the key through which to understand his narration. By trying to write from the inside of otherness, "Philosophy" assumes the perspective of the outward observer who can only inhabit the son's subjectivity by way of his appearance.

The story concludes with the son's re-assurance to himself that his mother believes that he can protect her and that he rightly fulfills the role of her "sematic accessory."[50] The narrator's final equation of himself as sign serves as a fitting culmination of the narrative's tension between observing and being observed. He states, "with my impossible size and goggles one can tell beneath the gaping rictus she believes I can protect her which is good."[51] Here, the external signifiers that made the son a public oddity instead function as a

47. Ibid., 184.

48. Ibid., (emphasis the author's) 188.

49. Ibid., 187.

50. Ibid., 189.

51. Ibid., 189.

kind of self-validation. The story's conclusion reiterates the story's larger tendency to affirm rather than complicate the *economies of the visual* that make up the white gaze. In attempting to speak from the perspective of the other, the narrative ends up confirming those other-ing traits as signifiers of a deeper alien subjectivity.

"Backbone" and Touching the Void

While first published in *The New Yorker*, Wallace's short piece "Backbone" makes up one of the later episodes of the unfinished *The Pale King*, a fractured examination of white-collar boredom and Reagan-era neoliberalism told mainly through the prism of white male workers in the offices of the Internal Revenue Service. *The Pale King*, per Cohen, is a "white book—that is, a book not just practically devoid of traces of African Americans but also interested in whiteness itself."[52] The white-collar workers within its pages reflect the office-job holding graduates that make up the audience of *This is Water*—white, college-educated individuals seeking new roads of empathy and connection in an increasingly isolated late-capitalist environment.

If "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" represents an attempt by Wallace to write from both within and outside of racialized subjectivity, "Backbone" (2011) exemplifies an effort to de-familiarize the white subject in order to erase the boundaries of racial difference. In a book filled with white characters confronting what Lee Konstantinou refers to as the meaningless and terrifying pressures of modern life,[53] "Backbone" strives to escape the confines of white anxiety by writing the white body as an other-ed entity. The story details the efforts of a young boy driven to accomplish an abnormal

52. Cohen, "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace," 239.

53. Lee Konstantinou, "Unfinished Form," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2011), https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/unfinished-form/#!

feat: "Every whole person has ambitions, objectives, initiatives, goals. This one particular boy's goal was to be able to press his lips to every square inch of his own body."[54] "Backbone" begins as a narrative hoping to reach out to the other by making the white body itself strange; thus, the boy's body is presented as a fragmented and other-ed entity with which he must reconcile. However, in seeking to other the white body, "Backbone" relies on discourse of racial otherness that merely re-affirms the "purity" of whiteness. The narrative's inclusion of non-Western spitirualism and body contortionism—exotic cultural examples only presented to the reader through Western, white observers—results in a story that leans into the white identity from which it intends to escape. Other-ing the boy's body fails to deconstruct whiteness: it confirms it as a potential totalizing category.

Part of how "Backbone" endeavors to re-write the boy's body outside of the white anxiety of the rest of *The Pale King* derives from the boy's own relaxed demeanor. His self-assured nature and serenity to the point of near detachment conspires to create a space untouched by the perceived limits of empathy and racialized experience. In explaining the boy's reasoning for his unusual goal, Wallace strikes a tone far different from the overly conscious language that opens *Signifying Rappers*. As was the case in "Philosophy"—not to mention a number of Wallace characters from both his short fiction and novels—Wallace's self-aware characters often serve as commentary for the self-aware isolation induced and solicited by late capitalism. In contrast, the boy protagonist exhumes a calming nonchalance that extends to how he describes the task of kissing himself. He refrains from calling the goal "an achievement"[55] or "stunt"[56] or instilling it with any kind of spiritual significance. As the narrative relates, "the

54. David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011), 394.

55. Wallace, *The Pale King*, 400.

56. Ibid., 400.

boy had no conscious wish to 'transcend' anything."[57] Indeed, in an almost self-effacing gesture, Wallace hints at other, far more anxious readings of the boy's project:

> Insights into or conceptions of his own physical "inaccessibility" to himself (as we are all of us self-inaccessible and can, for example, touch parts of one another in ways that we could not even dream of touching our own bodies) or of his complete determination, apparently, to pierce that veil of inaccessibility—to be, in some childish way, self-contained and -sufficient—these were beyond his conscious awareness.[58]

Wallace utilizes the boy's lack of self-consciousness over the "inaccessibility" of himself as the perfect space through which to explore literary ways of exploring otherness outside the fraught system of racial difference. The passage's parenthetical aside, by comparison, echoes past over-anxious Wallace narrators from which the boy is meant to stand apart. His lack of neuroticism provides a narrative voice disinterested in having to navigate the complex social forces of the bus in "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" or the grocery store of *This is Water*. Instead, the child protagonist of "Backbone" allows for a way to explore the limits of inhabiting otherness without the need to address the very real mechanisms behind how that difference is created and maintained.

In exchange for an actual separate entity, "Backbone" offers the boy's physical self as the impregnable, other-ed subject. Wallace creates this sense of corporeal alien-ness in part by over-imbuing his descriptions of the boy's body with byzantine, anatomical terms:

> The insides of the small boy's thighs up to the medial fork of his groin took months even to prepare for, daily hours spent cross-legged and bowed, slowly and incrementally

57. Ibid., 400.

58. Ibid., 401.

> stretching the long vertical fasciae of his back and neck, the spinalis thoracis and levator scapulae, the iliocostalis lumborum all the way to the sacrum, and the interior thigh's dense and intransigent gracilis, pectineus, and adductor longus.[59]

Only the more pedestrian language (e.g. thighs, back, neck), coupled with the narrative's bodily context, give any indication of where these terms are located. The passage induces a picture of the body composed of unknown signs with long, convoluted names. In addition to this linguistic de-familiarization, the "Backbone" stresses how the boy's project leaves him disfigured. Teachers comment on "changes in his posture and gait"[60] and his lips become "markedly large and protrusive"[61] due to exercises meant to maximize their length, a distortion that results in a custodian describing his smile as "like nothing in this round world."[62] Bending his body out of shape —quite literally bending over backwards at times—serves to displace him from the story's unspoken by ever-present white normativity.

Touch serves as the vehicle through which the boy encounters his imagined other. As the narrative reveals, "The boy's tendency was to forget each site once he had pressed his lips to it, as if the establishment of its accessibility made the site henceforth unreal for him and the site now in some sense 'existed' only on the four-faced chart."[63] Following the moment of touch, the body part in question loses its momentary significance. This "unreal" state coincides with the parts becoming a written sign on the boy's chart. That act of touch, in other words, strives to envision the body outside of dominant racial language, or as Erin Manning explains, "Touch is one of the

59. Ibid., 397.

60. Ibid., 398.

61. Ibid., 401.

62. Ibid., 398.

63. Ibid., 401.

mediums through which the body can resist the state since the language of touch in most cases exceeds that of the nation-state. In these instances, touch reminds us that we cannot know the body as the state claims we do, for no body is so thoroughly articulated. Every body moves differently, (in)different to the state."[64] Through touch, Manning envisions a resistance to the alienation of post-capitalism that eludes the complexity of language and representation. Her articulation of touch's radical possibilities lends itself to how "Backbone" uses touching as a way to defy the fixed categories defined by the state, thereby erasing the "chasm of difference."

Despite these moves to displace the boy from the fold of whiteness, "Backbone" cannot help but re-write the state back into its narrative. This re-insertion of dominant racial discourse comes by way of the historical non-sequiturs scattered throughout the story entailing recorded evidence of supernatural or otherwise mystic bodily contortionism. The implanted episodes re-confirm the white, Western eye that hovers over "Backbone" and decides its rationale for otherness. One such example, near the story's opening, reads, "In 1932, a pre-adolescent Ceylonese female was documented by British scholars of Tamil mysticism as capable of inserting into her mouth and down her esophagus both arms to the shoulder, one leg to the groin, and the other leg to just above the patella, and as thereupon able to spin unaided on the orally protrusive knee at rates in excess of 300 rpm."[65] Elsewhere, the narration includes a description of "A Bengali holy man known to followers as 'Prahansatha the Second'" who:

> underwent periods of meditative chanting during which his eyes exited their sockets and ascended to float above his head, connected only by their dura mater cords, and thereupon underwent (i.e., the floating eyes did)

64. Erin Manning, "Negotiating Influence: Argentine Tango and a Politics of Touch" *borderlands: e-journal.* (2.1. 2003), para. 30.

65. Wallace, *The Pale King*, 397.

> rhythmically stylized rotary movements described by Western witnesses as evocative of dancing four-faced Shivas, of charmed snakes, of interwoven genetic helices, of the counterpointed figure-eight orbits of the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies around each other at the perimeter of the Local Group, or of all four (supposedly) at once.[66]

Both of these dispatches, located amongst other descriptions of witnessed stigmata, serve to enfold the boy into a larger global tapestry of bodily phenomena. Like these alleged acts of fantastical physical distortions, the boy's project looks beyond the normative body into a category of unknown possibility, a space beyond the state's language. And yet, within these non-sequiturs lies the same colonial orientalism that underlies conceptions of normativity and whiteness.[67] Both dispatches, for example, only come to the narrative by way of Western observers: "British scholars of Tamil mysticism" and "Western witnesses." The latter, in particular, describe the Bengali holy man's bodily feat in a series of increasingly scientific terms ("interwoven genetic helices"; "the counterpointed figure-eight orbits of the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies around each other at the perimeter of the Local Group"). These unifying, global elements only cohere through a dominant Western grammar; just as with the narrator of "Philosophy," the reader is forced into the white gaze. As such, while meant to aide in locating the boy's body outside of the state's purview and within a larger tradition of global bodily contortionism, these narrative asides bring the dominant boundaries of racial difference back into the fold.

That "Backbone" itself eschews first-person narrative and opts for, instead, an omniscient narrator mirrors these Western narratives of exoticism: the story can never truly access the boy's subjectivity

66. Ibid., 402.

67. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

and thus can only comment upon his alien nature with the help of historic racial discourse. This lack of access to its own protagonist shows in the narrative's attempt to explain the reasons behind the boy's project: his ready explanation for his objective entails "that he'd decided he wanted to press his lips to every last micrometre of his own individual body. He would not have been able to say more than this."[68] The tautology speaks to more than the simplicity of the boy's project. His inability to explain his reasons are the story's as well: the child's otherness, constructed in the hopes of finding a common plane on which white and non-white subjects experience similar forms of alterity, can only find coherence through the white, Euro-American narrative voice.

Conclusion

"Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" and "Backbone" are by no means the only points of interest in Wallace's bibliography in regards to racialized difference. If anything, this article implores further examination into Wallace's work that pulls out issues of race where at first there appears to be little signs of it. Furthermore, enacting similar projects on postmodern authors of the American canon is crucial to unpacking race's ongoing influence on the literary and cultural landscape under the abstracting, mythically post-racial order of late capitalism. The emergence of whiteness studies has helped to open new dialogues regarding the construction and policing of identity categories; however, better reading practices are needed to track the ever-present role that racialization plays in our public discourse. Wallace's own difficulty in navigating these social forces within his literature points to the embedded nature that racism enjoys within post-capitalism; to wit, as he sought to uncover the distancing energies at work in the postmodern subject,

68. Ibid., 401.

the ever-present reality of racialization always integrated itself into his literary considerations. Reading Wallace as a critic of neoliberal consumer capitalism then means taking seriously what he has to say—and what he avoids saying—about race. Likewise, examining other mainstream critiques of the late-twentieth century and its literature requires attention to how popular modes of expression contribute to existing racial orders. Rather than seeking to find ways into the "jar" of racialized subjectivity, we must seek out new critical pathways capable of disrupting the process by which that chasm of difference is constructed in the first place.

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NO MAN'S LAND: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE AND FEMINIST AMERICA

Daniela Franca Joffe

Wallace's debut novel, *The Broom of the System*, was first submitted as a creative writing thesis in 1985, during the author's senior year at Amherst College. It was published two years later. The book received almost no scholarly attention until the late 1990s when *Infinite Jest* put Wallace firmly on the literary map and readers began to mine his earlier work for insights.[1] If the dazzling success of its successor has circumscribed interpretations of *The Broom of the System*, Wallace's own comments about the novel have, for better or worse, played an equal role in setting the heuristic tone.[2]

1. I am grateful to Marshall Boswell for his overview of the scholarly lifespan of *The Broom of the System*, provided in his comments on an earlier version of this article (part of a doctoral dissertation he reviewed). I am also grateful to the reviewers of *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*, whose insights helped make this a stronger piece of scholarship.

2. Before the burgeoning of Wallace scholarship in the wake of *Infinite Jest*, the only published commentary on *The Broom of the System* was Lance Olsen's essay "Termite Art, or Wallace's Wittgenstein" and Wallace's iconic interview with Larry McCaffery, both of which appeared in the summer 1993 issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. This peculiarity of the critical archive surrounding the debut novel

When asked about the book in his interviews with Larry McCaffery and later David Lipsky, Wallace was by turns cryptic, conflicted, embarrassed, and smug, which is part of what makes Wallace a difficult authority on Wallace (in this case as well as others).[3] Nonetheless, the brief snippets of self-interpretation that Wallace provided are quite consistent in their message about what the novel is about. He seemed to want it understood as an intellectual memoir of his time at Amherst, and of his first engagement with poststructuralism in particular.[4] His creation of a protagonist "who's terribly afraid that she's really nothing more than a character in a story," he explained to McCaffery, was a way for him to pull off a "funny little post-structural gag" while rehearsing the metafictional possibilities of Wittgensteinian and Derridean thought.[5] His "coded autobio" could pass as fiction precisely because the protagonist was female—because of his literary "sex-change," as he called it.[6] Lenore Beadsman is David Foster Wallace in disguise.

It is certainly true that *The Broom of the System* is preoccupied with poststructuralism. In its very architecture, the book positions itself as a sort of prototypical poststructuralist text. Jane Caplan has written that "the poststructuralist," by definition, "can never have 'the last word'"

means that Wallace was one of the very first official commentators on his own novel, making him somewhat of an authority on the book for later readers. See Lance Olsen, "Termite Art, or Wallace's Wittgenstein," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 199-215; Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 142-143.

3. He variously described the novel as "self-obsessed," "the sensitive tale of a sensitive young WASP," and "way too clever" for its own good. See McCaffery, ibid.; David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Conversation with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 35-36.

4. Specifically, the *Tractatus*, in which Wittgenstein developed his theory that language constrains reality, or that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world." See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, 1922), §5.6, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5740/5740-pdf.pdf.

5. McCaffery, 142.

6. Ibid.

and that Derrida, for example, "constantly acknowledges the provisional nature of his readings . . . and subverts his own authority as a reader."[7] Wallace, ever the diligent student, has his debut novel end in mid-sentence, ceremoniously depriving himself of the last word: "You can trust me," says the character Rick Vigorous at the end of the book; "I'm a man of my[.]"[8] The circuitry of the book remains open,[9] and the reader writes the ending, creating the *scriptible* ('writerly') text that Roland Barthes envisioned in the 1970s.[10] Cleverly, the missing word in Rick's sentence is also "word": the self-conscious absent presence of *logos* neatly rounds off the book's status as "a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida," as Wallace characterized it to Lipsky.[11]

The opening scene of the novel subverts such easy conflations of the novel with language theory and intellectual abstraction. Set in 1981, nine years before the main, language-themed drama, the opening scene appears so anomalous against strictly theoretical interpretations of the novel that it is often simply ignored altogether. In it, a fifteen-year-old Lenore Beadsman is visiting her older sister Clarice at Mount Holyoke, Amherst's all-women sister school, when she, her sister, and her sister's roommates get sexually harassed and assaulted in their dorm room. The culprits? Two frat boys from none other than Amherst College. Lenore, in her resistance to the intruders, comes to embody empowered womanhood. Before they have

7. Jane Caplan, "Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians," *Central European History* 22, nos. 3-4 (1989): 268.

8. David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (New York: Penguin, 2016): 467. Subsequent references to *The Broom of the System* are cited parenthetically as *BS*.

9. See Marshall Boswell, "*The Broom of the System*: Wittgenstein and the Rules of the Game," *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 22.

10. See Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (*The Pleasure of the Text*) (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973).

11. Lipsky, 35.

even entered the room, she has distinguished herself from the older, more desensitized group of college women through her reaction to the topic of campus rape. When Clarice admits that someone in a neighboring dorm has started dating women because "she sort of got assaulted right before Thanksgiving . . . Well, raped, I guess, really," and that she actually knows of "about ten women" who have been raped at Mount Holyoke recently, Lenore is visibly outraged while the others brush the subject off (*BS*, 8). When Andrew "Wang Dang" Lang and his Amherst sidekick force their way into the room moments later, only Lenore takes a real stand against them, refusing to submit to the men's lewd demands. While Clarice argues, Sue cries, Mindy masks her fear with a display of seduction, and all the college women eventually acquiesce, our heroine Lenore removes a stiletto, throws it at the men's heads, and makes her escape through the front door.

Lenore, then, is not merely a disguise for verisimilitude but also an opportunity for Wallace to privilege the female perspective and create a clear repository for feminism early on in his novel—a reaction to the political energy of the 1980s, as we will see. Through Lenore, the author is able to issue both a critique and a rejection of the forms of masculinity being produced at his own university at the time. Beyond Wittgenstein and Derrida, the novel's more immediate frame involves such politically charged themes as gender inequality, sexual violence, college rape culture, fraternity culture, radical lesbianism, and patriarchal attitudes. Even the lighter with which Mindy lights up her joint in the scene bears the mark of Wallace's acute gender consciousness in this novel, emblazoned as it is with the slogan "When God Made Man She Was Only Joking" (*BS*, 17). In fact, if we acknowledge the novel's direct engagement with gender politics, Rick Vigorous's unfinished sentence at the end of the novel becomes as much an attempt to reassert his crumbling masculinity ("I am a man") as a poststructuralist *jeu de mot*. At the very least, the

gendered inflections of the novel should not be elided, even if Wallace himself sometimes diminished their importance in his necessarily incomplete epitextual statements.[12]

This essay seeks to map these gendered inflections and takes a first step in reading *The Broom of the System* against the particular historical circumstances surrounding its production (rather than by way of Wallace's interview notes or the broader literary project of *Infinite Jest*). It argues that Wallace's framing of the novel in terms of empowered femininity and crumbling masculinity reflects the rapid institutionalization of second-wave feminism in the 1980s, both on Wallace's own campus of Amherst College and in America more generally. Ultimately, though, the novel's attempt to reimagine the gender order fails, as the focus moves away from Lenore and her empowerment and settles instead on "Wang Dang" Lang's sexual exploits, Rick's sexual fiascos, and the author's own metafictional performance. In this failure, which is in many ways a failure of empathy, the limits or the relative infancy of Wallace's personal political progress is revealed. Approaching *The Broom of the System* through the lens of its political antecedents builds on the important work done by other scholars in recent years to decouple Wallace's writing from the largely ahistorical, universalist discourse that has surrounded the author since his death.[13]

12. "Epitext" refers to the discourse and commentary relating to a published work but not "materially appended" to it (for example, interviews, online forums, book reviews, and so on). For more on its role in molding textual interpretations, see Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 344.

13. Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program," *Boundary 2* 41, no. 3 (2014): 27-54; Emily Russell, "Some Assembly Required: The Embodied Politics of *Infinite Jest*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 66, no. 3 (2010): 147-169; Olivia Banner, "'They're literally shit': Masculinity and the Work of Art in an Age of Waste Recycling," *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 11 (2009): 74-91; Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006); Samuel Cohen, "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace,"

No man's land

Liberal or "equality" feminism was in many ways the most influential expression of second-wave feminism.[14] By mapping its institutionalization in the 1980s, and in particular the transformative effect it had on Wallace's own institution, Amherst College, at the very time when he was writing *The Broom of the System*, I hope to illustrate the notable influence of feminist thinking on the novel—an influence equal to, if not greater than, that of poststructuralist thinking. Liberal feminism centered on legal and financial equality for women. As scholar Johanna Brenner puts it, it aimed to "make women fully free sellers of our own labor power, by substantially dismantling the legal and normative edifice which had mandated women's subservience in marriage, denied us rights in our bodies and reproductive capacity, and legitimated our economic marginalization."[15] The victories of liberal feminism are by now well-known. Despite the libertarian tide of the Bush-Reagan 1980s and a rising anti-feminist backlash within government, mass media, and even Hollywood,[16] women's calls for workplace and domestic equality

Postmodern Literature and Race, eds. Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 228-243; Tara Morrissey and Lucas Thompson, "'The Rare White at the Window': A Reappraisal of Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace's *Signifying Rappers*," *Journal of American Studies* 49, no. 1 (2015): 77-97; D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2012).

14. Fred Pfeil, *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (New York: Verso, 1995), 37. Subsequent references to *White Guys* are cited parenthetically as Pfeil.

15. Johanna Brenner, "The Best of Times, The Worst of Times: US Feminism Today," *New Left Review*, no. 200 (1993): 104. Quoted in Pfeil.

16. See Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) (New York: Broadway Books, 2006). As I discovered during my visit to the Wallace archive at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, Wallace had Faludi's book on his bookshelf when he died. See also Nancy Gibbs, "The War Against Feminism," *Time*, 24 June 2001, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,159157,00.html.

became "institutionalized and culturally incorporated" in this decade at a greater rate than ever before.[17] Resistance to the liberal feminism movement did not only come from the Right, however. Black, lesbian, and radical feminists challenged the movement for its white, heterosexual, middle-class biases and for its preference for bureaucracy over activism, pointing to the way mainstream feminism itself perpetuated various forms of oppression.[18] As Fred Pfeil notes, the benefits of liberal feminism were "unequally distributed amongst women of different races and classes," and the movement's dependence on *average* wage figures for men and women tended to obscure "the gains middle-class, college-educated white women have been able to make in the professions, both absolutely and in relation to the stagnation and/or outright decline in poor and non-white women's income" (Pfeil, 57). These internal contradictions did not hinder the march of liberal feminism: by the 1980s, it had succeeded in becoming mainstream, and America would never be quite the same again.

One of the most significant consequences of liberal feminism, in addition to the paradoxically unequal division of its spoils, was the "decline of the male breadwinner," as gender sociologist Kathleen Gerson observes in her 1993 book *No Man's Land: Men's Changing Commitments to Family and Work*.[19] According to Gerson, the "expansion of women's legal rights, employment opportunities, sources of economic support, and capacity to live independently"—and the concomitant collapse of traditional gender roles—"undermined

17. Brenner, 102. Quoted in Pfeil.

18. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-660; Ann Ducille, "On Canons: Anxious History and the Rise of Black Feminist Literary Studies," *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 29-52; Ellen Willis, "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism," *Social Text*, nos. 9-10 (1984): 91-118.

19. Kathleen Gerson, *No Man's Land: Men's Changing Commitments to Family and Work* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). Quoted in Pfeil.

men's ability to control them, as wives or as workers."[20] Moreover, it "prompted confusion and discomfort because it call[ed] into question many of our most deeply held beliefs about manhood and masculinity." What is a man, Gerson asks, if both his elevated role as economic provider and the "special rights and privileges" affixed to that role are stripped away? What kinds of familial relationships are available to him once his status as patriarch is eroded?[21] Gerson's research reveals that, in the 1980s, domesticity was not yet a real option for men—partly because women's increasing flight from child-care had positioned it as a socially "undervalued, isolating, and largely invisible accomplishment."[22] Without a clear social role, men in the 1980s found themselves experiencing "ambivalence, regret and, at times, thinly veiled resistance" (Pfeil, 58). Masculinity fell into an identity crisis of sorts. The responses to this crisis were, and still are, manifold: some men empathized fully and joined pro-feminist efforts, others sought to aggressively reestablish their machismo and control, and still others positioned themselves as victims and campaigned for their own liberation. A splinter group turned to comforting mythologies and rituals involving "ancient" expressions of manhood (and, in the process, inadvertently reasserted their dominance in the form of cultural appropriation).[23]

Of all liberal feminism's successes in the 1980s, perhaps the most relevant to campus culture was the changing legislation around sexual harassment and sexual violence. In 1979, feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon published her ground-breaking study *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*, which introduced the term "sexual

20. Ibid., 266.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 248.

23. See Alastair Bonnett, "The New Primitives: Identity, Landscape and Cultural Appropriation in the Mythopoetic Men's Movement," *Antipode* 28, no. 3 (1996): 273-291.

harassment" into mainstream discourse for the first time, defining it as a violation of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act for its interference with one gender's ability to work.[24] In 1980, under the Carter administration, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission incorporated MacKinnon's terminology into its regulations surrounding gender discrimination. This decision paved the way for a landmark Supreme Court victory in 1986 for Mechelle Vinson against her employer, Sidney Taylor of Meritor Savings Bank, as well as legal recognition of sexual harassment as a *civil* violation.[25]

Against this backdrop of growing legal recognition for sexual violence, the first Take Back the Night marches took place in the 1970s, and in the 1980s they had spread to the streets of Massachusetts (where Wallace was based), drawing crowds of thousands of women.[26] The marches spread to local campuses, too, with hundreds of Harvard and Radcliffe students marching after the rape of a Radcliffe student on campus.[27] The unique vulnerabilities of college women became the focus of intense media and academic attention during this period. In 1982, the feminist *Ms.* magazine published an article entitled "Date Rape: A Campus Epidemic?," which was the first major piece of journalism to report on the largely taboo phenomenon of campus date rape. The article drew on Mary Koss's research at Kent State University, which found that one in eight of the women students interviewed had been victims of rape, one in

24. "U.S. Legal History of Sexual Harassment: Statutory and Case Law as It Relates to Teens," *The Schuster Institute of Investigative Journalism* (https://www.brandeis.edu/investigate/teen-sexual-harassment/timeline.html). See also Catherine MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

25. Catherine MacKinnon, "The Logic of Experience: Reflections on the Development of Sexual Harassment Law," *Georgetown Law Journal* 90, no. 3 (2002): 824-825.

26. Kathryn Tolbert and Richard Higgins, "Thousands of Women Take Back the Night," *The Boston Globe*, 30 August 1981.

27. John E. Yang, "Three Thousand Women March to Protest Violence," *The Boston Globe*, 10 August 1980.

four had been victims of attempted rape, and "at least ten times more rapes occur among college students than are reflected in official crime statistics."[28] As a new vocabulary and sensibility regarding sexual violence on campus took root, fraternity culture also came under attack. Research into fraternity houses found that a disproportionate number of rapes occurred on fraternity property and that rape culture was facilitated by the homosocial living arrangements characteristic of college fraternities.[29]

Amherst College was initially slow in implementing structural changes to its traditional all-white, all-male model. Once the wheels of change were in motion, however, they accelerated at a rapid pace. Amherst was home to the oldest college fraternity house in the United States (Alpha Delta House, founded in 1875) and was in many ways the embodiment of elite WASP education.[30] The college graduated its first African American student, Edward Jones, in 1826, but it was another 130 or so years before it hired a woman professor and set up a black studies department, and another 150 years before it opened its doors to women students for the first time.[31] In 1980, Amherst graduated its first group of women students—the same year

28. See Ellen Sweet, "Date Rape: Naming, Publicizing, and Fighting a Pandemic," presented at "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s," conference organized by the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University, Boston, MA, 27-29 March 2014 (http://www.bu.edu/wgs/files/2013/10/Sweet-Date-Rape-Naming-Publicizing-and-Fighting-a-Pandemic.pdf).

29. See especially Walter S. DeKeseredy, "Male Peer Support and Woman Abuse: The Current State of Knowledge," *Sociological Focus* 23, no. 2 (1990): 129-139; Martin D. Schwartz and Walter DeKeseredy, *Sexual Assault on the College Campus: The Role of Male Peer Support* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997).

30. "Amherst's History: An Amherst Timeline," Amherst College (https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/history/timeline).

31. "Amherst's History: 'Firsts' at Amherst College," Amherst College (https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/history/firsts). "Half a Century of Women Teaching at Amherst College: The Pioneer Women of Amherst College, 1962-83," Amherst College (https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/colloquia/women_teaching/early_bios).

Wallace enrolled as a freshman.[32] In fact, some of the most drastic and historic structural changes would occur during Wallace's time at the institution.

In 1982, after a six-foot phallic ice sculpture was discovered on the lawns of one of Amherst's fraternity houses, the college disbanded the organization and called for a review of fraternity culture as a whole.[33] By late 1983, women constituted a significant portion of fraternity membership, having been welcomed in after the college became co-educational, but roughly one out of three women fraternity members "eventually quit their clubs because of male sexist behavior."[34] Indeed, as media interest in campus violence and fraternity culture grew, Amherst did not escape scrutiny, and a paper trail of "bad press" can be found in the local and national newspaper archives from the period.[35] On 26 February 1984, the college board of trustees voted unanimously to permanently ban all fraternities on campus.[36] It was one of the first colleges in the country to do so, earning itself a much-needed reputation as an inclusive and progressive school (despite the fact that its student body in the 1980s

32. Chris Black, "Amherst Graduates Its First 129 Women," *The Boston Globe*, 26 May 1980.

33. Associated Press, "Fraternity at Amherst Disbanded by Officials," *The New York Times*, 1 February 1982, http://www.nytimes.com/1982/02/02/us/around-the-nation-fraternity-at-amherst-disbanded-by-officials.html; Associated Press, "Alumni Vote on the Fate of Amherst Fraternities," *The Boston Globe*, 18 December 1983.

34. Gary McMillan, "Colby Abolishes Fraternities, and Amherst May Be Next," *The Boston Globe*, 29 January 1984.

35. See examples in the footnotes above. Amherst's neighbor college, UMass Amherst, had been the site of a gang rape in 1981, which presumably did not help the college's public image. See "Six Held in Amherst Rape," *The Boston Globe*, 19 May 1981.

36. Associated Press, "Amherst Students Hold Sit-In," *The New York Times*, 21 February 1984, http://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/21/us/amherst-students-hold-sit-in.html; Associated Press, "Amherst Trustees Vote to Close Fraternities," *The New York Times*, 26 February 1984, http://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/26/us/around-the-nation-amherst-trustees-vote-to-close-fraternities.html.

remained overwhelmingly white).[37] Within the space of a few years, then, second-wave feminism had permanently transformed the institution: first by making co-education a reality, and then by making fraternity culture an outlawed relic of the past. Wallace, whose Amherst career corresponds exactly with this local transformation, which was playing out simultaneously at institutions across the country, absorbs the various impulses, energies, anxieties, and tensions that sprung from it into the novel he wrote in his senior year.

Perhaps the defining image in the novel of the uncertain state of white masculinity in the 1980s comes in the opening dorm room scene, right after Lenore has learned about the "ten women" who have been raped at Mount Holyoke in recent months. Her gaze immediately wafts to a poster on the wall of "a really muscular guy, without a shirt on . . . his back all shiny and bulging every which way" (*BS*, 8). Lenore's sister Clarice has had this poster since she was a teenager, we learn. Crucially, it is "old and ripped at the edges," and the man's face is not visible, since the reflective light from the ceiling "hides it in white" (*BS*, 8). Through this erasure, the blanched, faceless male becomes a stand-in for white heterosexual masculinity in general, as it is traditionally conceived and performed: big, virile, strong. That the picture is fraying and worn-out, however, and that Lenore sees it right after she hears the word "rape," hints at the damaged and untenable state of gender norms in the 1980s and at the darker side of the ideal or posterized forms of masculinity on display in the dorm room. (Mindy's corner, we are told, boasts posters of James Dean and Richard Gere.) Indeed, the women will, minutes later, experience the darker side of masculinity first hand,

37. Zach Schonfeld, "Inside the Colleges That Killed Frats for Good," *Newsweek*, 10 March 2014, http://www.newsweek.com/inside-colleges-killed-frats-good-231346. And see Associated Press, "Amherst, as Stipulated, Hires a Black Professor," *The New York Times*, 22 January 1982, http://www.nytimes.com/1982/01/22/us/around-the-nation-amherst-as-stipulated-hires-a-black-professor.html, for an overview of the college's demographics in the 1980s.

as "Wang Dang" Lang barges into the room and has his way with them. And only Lenore, who notices the poster and is alarmed by the mention of rape, will do anything to stop him. Although seemingly a straightforward critique of hegemonic masculinity, the opening scene is complicated in the rest of the novel by Wallace's growing empathy with Lang, by the limits he places on Lenore's power and her resistance to Lang, and finally by Wallace's own displays of authorial dominance and control over Lenore.

"A PENIS WITH A THESAURUS"

DESPITE THE GENDER DYNAMICS OF *The Broom of the System* being unavoidably right there, in the opening scene, Clare Hayes-Brady is one of the only scholars who has paid attention to them. In her essay on the novel, she protests that "[w]omen are conspicuous in [Wallace's] writing either by their absence or their lack of development."[38] Nonetheless, her overall objective is to offer a "more nuanced vision of Wallace's (admittedly frustrating) engagement with femininity and femaleness."[39] To this end, she points to Wallace's "almost-pathological consciousness of gender politics," which she finds present in his consistent use of the feminine second-person pronoun whenever he talks about the reader (whom he refers to as "she" rather than "he").[40] Hayes-Brady makes the argument that Wallace's "distancing" or erasure of women in his work was not the result of "dislike" or even "fear" but a reflection of his "hyperaware[ness] of gender difference"—of his keen sense of the "alterity" and "mystery" of femininity.[41] In other words, Wallace kept

38. Clare Hayes-Brady, "'. . .': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace," *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 131.

39. Hayes-Brady, "Language, Gender," 133.

40. Ibid., 132.

41. Ibid.

women at a distance in order to honor their difference from him. In this article, I am more interested in the moments when Wallace brings women close and speaks for them, as he does in the opening scene of *The Broom of the System*. I argue that Wallace's "hyperawareness," his "almost-pathological consciousness," of gender was not simply a point of ontological intrigue, as Hayes-Brady presents it, but also an important political response to the social and cultural climate in which he was writing.

Although Wallace is by no means a reliable authority on Wallace, his various non-fictional statements suggest a deep ambivalence about the postmodernist tradition to which he belonged and an eagerness to align himself with the progressive feminism with which the tradition sometimes clashed. A 1998 review that Wallace wrote of John Updike's novel *Towards the End of Time* is particularly telling in this regard. In the review, Wallace makes his dislike of Updike known, calling the author a "phallocrat" (male supremacist) and, along with Philip Roth and Norman Mailer, one of the "Great Male Narcissists who've dominated postwar realist fiction" in America.[42] In a footnote to the phrase "Great Male Narcissists," Wallace sarcastically qualifies his harsh appraisal: "Unless, of course, you consider constructing long encomiums to a woman's 'sacred several-lipped gateway' or saying things like 'It is true, the sight of her plump lips obediently distended around my swollen member, her eyelids lowered demurely, afflicts me with a religious peace' to be the same as loving her."[43] Wallace implies that anyone with a modicum of decency would consider such encomiums the markers not of love but of sexism and gross disrespect. Wallace's critique is a distancing move, an act of self-definition by an artist writing in the

42. Wallace, "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One: Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?" *The New York Observer*, 13 October 1997, http://www.badgerinternet.com/~bobkat/observer1.html.

43. Ibid.

same general aesthetic tradition as Updike and company: I am not them, he declares.

At one point in the review, Wallace itemizes the number of pages devoted to different chauvinist themes in Updike's latest novel: "Total number of pages about Ben Turnbull's penis and his various feelings about it: 7.5; Total number of pages about the prostitute's body, with particular attention to sexual loci: 8.75"; and so on.[44] He also includes three "actual—trust me—quotations" about Updike from women he knows:

> "Just a penis with a thesaurus."
>
> "Has the son of a bitch ever had one unpublished thought?"
>
> "Makes misogyny seem literary the same way [Rush] Limbaugh makes fascism seem funny."[45]

By offering himself as a mouthpiece for these women readers and their frustrations about misogyny in the postmodernist genre, Wallace sides with them against the male-dominated literary establishment.

Elaine Blair has suggested that, for all its feminist name-calling, Wallace's Updike review in fact betrays anxiety about his female readership: "No one," after all, "wants to be called a penis with a thesaurus."[46] She notes that, unlike Updike and the other "Great Male Narcissists," Wallace's generation of male postmodernist writers had to contend with a generation of women readers who were "not only children of divorce, but children of a feminist movement that had an especially profound influence on cultural criticism." Women, now, were a cultural and literary force to be reckoned with. Being cut off or "unloved" by this major readership contingent would constitute a "crisis" for the contemporary writer, who now had to write with this

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Elaine Blair, "Great American Losers," *New York Review of Books*, 9 March 2012, http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2012/03/09/great-american-losers/.

contingent firmly in mind.[47] The creative solution to this conundrum is what Blair calls the "loser-figure," a sex-obsessed but perennially defeated character whose "humiliation" and "self-loathing" saturate the novel as much as his perverted thoughts do. The loser-figure is constantly putting himself down, or else the author's "ironizing impulse" is beating him to it.[48] Unlike Updike, who, in Wallace's account, mourns his "narrator's impotence as catastrophic, the ultimate symbol of death itself,"[49] the new generation of male writers make fun of their narrators' impaired manhood, exaggerating their failures with the opposite sex. And so the loser-figure functions as a kind of embedded apology to the hypothetical woman reader, preempting her scrutinizing gaze by mocking the perverted hero before she can.

This move is an ambivalent one, though, because an undeniable affinity exists between the author and his pervert-hero—both demographic and intellectual. In Blair's analysis, this affinity ends up overpowering the narrative and overtaking its original pro-feminist intentions. "Female characters get to remind the hero that he's a navel-gazing jerk," she observes, "but most of the good lines, and certainly the brilliant social and psychological observations, still go to the hero." In fact, it is almost as if "the hero is entitled to the spotlight *because* he has been appropriately self-critical—it's his novel, bought and paid for with all those jokes at his own expense."[50] The author's feminist solidarity only goes so far, in other words, and the writer's agenda is less progressive than it first appears. As Blair concludes: "The male novelists performing elaborate genuflections toward female readers are perhaps not exactly bargaining so much as trying to draw us into a new contract: I, the author, promise always

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Wallace, "John Updike."

50. Blair, "Great American Losers."

to acknowledge my characters' narcissism, and you, in return, will continue to take an interest in it."[51] The new generation of male writers makes a point of attacking androcentrism while still, perhaps involuntarily, creating androcentric texts. A similar sort of pattern is actually already evident in Wallace's Updike review: Even as he catalogues women's complaints about the author, he subtly undermines them, saying that they are partly a result of the "P.C. backlash" and that "they're usually accompanied by the sort of facial expressions where you can tell there's not going to be any profit in appealing to the intentional fallacy or talking about the sheer aesthetic pleasure of Updike's prose."[52] Almost simultaneously, Wallace wholeheartedly affirms and rejects feminist objections to Updike's literature. This simultaneity becomes less confusing if we follow Blair in seeing the doubleness of Wallace's generation of white male writers, who were working hard to respond to the rapidly evolving political landscape but who still very much inhabited a particular set of concerns and perspectives.

In his book *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Dominance and Difference*, Pfeil identifies the same doubleness and ambivalence in mainstream films emerging in the early 1990s. His argument is helpful in confirming Blair's diagnosis of a certain generation of American cultural producers. Pfeil discusses five films released in 1991 (*City Slickers*, *Regarding Henry*, *The Doctor*, *The Fisher King*, and *Hook*), giving them the collective name of "sensitive-guy films" because of the similar way in which they all construct masculinity: attuned to the changing times, but only to a point. The films all portray "the redemption and conversion of their white male protagonists from one or another variant of closed-down, alienated boor to an opened-up, sensitive guy," writes Pfeil (Pfeil, 37). The protagonists are uniformly corrupted, arrogant, macho, emotionally distant highfliers of the

51. Ibid.

52. Wallace, "John Updike."

professional-managerial class who, through some major "life-changing" event, end up spiritually reformed and renewed: more sensitive, more emotionally connected, more authentic, more "feminine."

Despite their spiritual softening, however, these men do not relinquish any of their social privileges. As Pfeil puts it, the films must figure out "how the born-again, sensitized White Guy can keep the wisdom of his new-found or reborn childishness without dropping the reins of his power" (Pfeil, 42). This negotiation works itself out mainly in these men's spousal relationships, which are left unchanged in terms of normative gender roles and patriarchal control: the wives remain demure and submissive throughout their husbands' transformation. In the end, these films "enact a critique of the callous selfishness of dominant modes of white straight masculinity, and endorse the traditionally feminine attributes of sensitivity, compassion, nurturance and emotional fluency," yet they ultimately "leave their women characters short of power and their male protagonists reinvigorated in their predominance" (Pfeil, 60-61). Racial nodes of power also remain intact, with black characters routinely employed as one-dimensional, good-natured sidekicks whose role is to affirm the hero's progress and usher in "a new kind of White Man" (Pfeil, 40-41). Nothing has really changed, except for the way that white masculinity *presents* itself. Feminism is used in these films as a softening and sensitizing narrative tool—one that does not necessarily result in social reform.

Interestingly, Wallace's own film criticism suggests that he, too, supported feminism but only to a point. In a review article on *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, another 1991 film, Wallace makes a case for why the original *Terminator* movie is superior, citing the second movie's over-reliance on special effects at the expense of plot and character depth. Beneath this claim, though, is a complaint about the main woman character, Sarah Connor, played by Linda Hamilton. Wallace is put off by Connor's butch physique in the second

film, and by the fact that she is constantly "snarling and baring her teeth and saying stuff like 'Don't fuck with me!' and 'Men like you know nothing about really creating something!'"[53] He compares her to the original Sarah Connor, whom he considers to be "the first of [director James] Cameron's two great action heroines," the other being Ellen Ripley of the 1986 film *Aliens*.[54] In a footnote, he explains his admiration for these heroines:

> It is a complete mystery why feminist film scholars haven't paid more attention to Cameron and his early collaborator Gale Anne Hurd [producer of *The Terminator* and *Aliens*]. *The Terminator* and *Aliens* were both violent action films with tough, competent female protagonists (incredibly rare) whose toughness and competence in no way diminished their "femininity" (even more rare, unheard of), a femininity that is rooted (along with both films' thematics) in notions of *maternity* rather than just sexuality. For example, compare Cameron's Ellen Ripley [in the later *Aliens*] with the panty-and-tank-top Ripley of [Ridley Scott's 1979] *Alien.*[55]

Wallace is politically aware enough to applaud the "toughness and competence" of these female protagonists, which replaces the typical sexualization and objectification of women in cinema. He even suggests that he has outdone feminist critics by noticing these characters and their virtues. But Wallace apparently draws the line at versions of womanhood that are unfeminine, or that muddy the boundary between masculinity and femininity in comfortable ways (i.e., Sarah Connor's fierceness and vulgarity in the second film, her more aggressive expression of her "maternity").

53. Wallace, "The (As It Were) Seminal Importance of *Terminator 2*" (1998), *Both Flesh and Not* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), 187.

54. Ibid., 180.

55. Ibid.

In Pfeil's appraisal of the second *Terminator* film, he actually celebrates its "buff warrior-mom Sarah Connor" as an image of "literally empowered womanhood" (Pfeil, 53). However, like the string of sensitive-guy films that emerged the same year, *Terminator 2* "places limits on the effectivity of women's newfound power": Sarah Connor is unable to defeat the evil T-1000 Terminator without Arnold Schwarzenegger's help, rendering the film dissatisfying for Pfeil (Pfeil, 53). Wallace, by contrast, seems to have the opposite complaint: the version of womanhood on display is too empowered, too masculine. In Wallace's preference for one *Terminator* over the next, we find a kind of model for Lenore Beadsman, who takes a stand against sexual harassment and machismo in the opening scene and elsewhere, but who then finds all sorts of limits and constraints placed on her power—mainly by Wallace himself.

"Playing pimp"

While Blair does not mention Wallace's fiction in her analysis, and while *The Broom of the System* was written some years before Pfeil's "sensitive-guy" movies came out, the novel is an uncanny illustration of the cultural genuflection to feminism described by these scholars. Of course, the most conspicuous instance of the novel's hyperawareness of the woman reader is the opening scene, and Wallace's portrayal there of Lenore as a kind of kick-ass proto-feminist. But Wallace also creates his own "loser-figure" in the form of Rick Vigorous, Lenore's boss-turned-boyfriend of several years—and another alumnus of Amherst College. Rick is the physical embodiment of sham hypermasculinity and of the general crisis of masculinity emerging in the 1980s, as men's identity as breadwinner, provider, protector, patriarch became increasingly tenuous. Rick is "Vigorous" in name alone: by his own admission, he is "vaguely effeminate . . . [l]argely without chin, neither tall nor strong, balding badly" (*BS*, 286). (Another character puts it more strongly, referring to Rick as

"the little fruit fly in the beret and double chin" [*BS*, 126].) Most strikingly, though, he is endowed with a "freakishly small penis," which is the cause of endless nightmares, panic attacks, and fits of debilitating envy, and which renders him physically unable to have sex with Lenore (*BS*, 151).

To compensate for his effective impotence, his almost inter-sex physiology, Rick gets into the habit of telling Lenore quirky, elaborate stories while they are in bed, paraphrased versions of the short story submissions he receives at the literary journal that he runs (with Lenore's help). These submissions, he tells Lenore, are almost always "troubled-college-student material," notable for their tendency to be "hideously self-conscious . . . mordantly cynical, then simperingly naïve . . . consistently, off-puttingly pretentious . . . not even potentially literature" (*BS*, 307). This self-conscious description is an obvious reference to *The Broom of the System*'s own status as "troubled-college-student material," creating an associative link between Wallace-as-storyteller and Rick-as-storyteller: Wallace-type college writers produce the inadequate material that Rick uses to cover up his inadequacies in the bedroom. Instead of falling into grief about his character's failed manhood, as a writer such as Updike is wont to do, Wallace turns it into a source of not only caricature but also self-critique. He makes himself complicit in Rick's inadequacies, effectively shielding himself from the very ridicule he would later heap on Updike and his writerly ilk. After all, no one can call you "a penis with a thesaurus" if your fiction is all about foregrounding the shortcomings (as it were) of American men, including their literary output.

But Blair's thesis proves correct in the end. The text really belongs to Rick, who takes up much more narrative space than Lenore, the official protagonist, does. The novel is filled with Rick's first-person journals and reveries, the "Fieldbender" stories he tries to write, the stories he tells Lenore at night, and his sex-fueled dreams, which he

describes to the psychologist he shares with Lenore. (She cannot even claim that space for herself.) Indeed, much of the content generated by Rick's persona is sex-fueled: his dreams involve urinating from an enormous penis in front of Lenore and performing oral sex on the Queen of England, for example, and the Fieldbender collection turns on a perverted man who spies on little boys in the next-door house for his pleasure (*BS*, 325, 44, 336). According to Blair's theory, the female reader will tolerate these bizarre perversions because Rick himself is such a pathetic and laughable figure: "it's his novel, bought and paid for with all those jokes at his own expense."[56] In the same way, the "troubled-college-student material" that Rick reads to Lenore is constantly derided for its pretentiousness and naivety, but it still takes up dozens of pages at a time. There is a curious way in which Wallace's concessions to feminism enable him to keep white masculinity center stage.

The real loser in all of this is, of course, Lenore, who is kept at a third-person distance throughout the novel, and who is more often than not the direct object of Rick's fantasies and Wallace's metafictional gags (rather than a free-standing subject and protagonist in her own right). When we meet Lenore again in 1990, nine years after the opening ordeal, her circumstances are not especially favorable. Her experience at Mount Holyoke as a teenager appears to have left its mark on her: she avoids men her own age and has instead coupled with the much older Rick, who does not pose any kind of sexual threat but who compensates for his diminished sexuality by being possessive, controlling, and "schizophrenically narcissistic" (*BS*, 58). Toward the end of the novel, Rick goes so far as to lure Lenore into the fictional man-made desert outside their town and handcuff her wrist to his own. While perhaps a statement about the economic and social realities facing women in the late 1980s, even after all the institutional advances wrought by second-wave feminism, or about

56. Blair, "Great American Losers."

the lingering effects of sexual violence, Wallace's positioning of the older Lenore very quickly descends into the realm of caricature and pubescent humor. For example, Rick's partner at the literary journal is named Monroe Frequent and the journal itself is named Frequent and Vigorous, which means that Lenore spends all day (and many lines of text) saying "Frequent and Vigorous" into the phone. She also lives in the fictional city of East Corinth, Ohio, which her father owns and her grandfather built, planning it in such a way that the aerial view of the city is an exact replica of 1950s sex symbol Jane Mansfield. The house where Lenore rents a room is located in the "trim lower" suburb of the Mansfield grid: in her vagina, in other words. It might be possible, again, to read this plot detail as a feminist commentary on Lenore's literal embeddedness within a system of patriarchy and sexual objectification, but it is just as much a silly sex joke at her expense ("paid for," to use Blair's terminology, by all the references to patriarchy in the novel, and by Wallace's portrayal of both the father and the grandfather as cruel megalomaniacs). The portrayal of black characters remains equally stagnant, as it did in the "sensitive-guy" films that Pfeil discusses. Rick tells us that Walinda Peahen, Lenore's black supervisor, "dislikes Lenore for her privileged background" and that she keeps threatening to fire her, but rather than acknowledge his and Lenore's relative privilege Rick simply points out, "I am Walinda's supervisor," a statement meant to reassert the power dynamic, silence Walinda's complaints, and keep Lenore comfortably employed (*BS*, 69). When Walinda is called a "charming negress" by Lenore's father towards the end of the novel, no one so much as utters a word (*BS*, 454).

Lenore's economic security may remain intact for the duration of the novel (illustrating black feminism's major critique of liberal feminism, incidentally), but her gender power is definitively erased at the end, when she is paired up with Andrew "Wang Dang" Lang. Lang, the grotesquely virile fraternity pledge who forced his way into the

women's dorm room in the opening scene, makes a comeback in the later part of the novel as a strapping thirty-something womanizer. It emerges that he has been married to Clarice's seductive roommate Mindy since the fateful Mount Holyoke incident during which they met—the beneficiary of a clear case of Stockholm syndrome. In the intervening years, Lang's misogynistic tendencies have only intensified. In the scene in which Lang decides to leave his wife, Wallace offers us a full display of Lang's cruelty, which is ratcheted up to the point of parody. Lang tells Mindy that he has "run out of holes" in her body and "things to stick in them" ("My pecker, my finger, my tongue, my toes . . . My hair, my nose. My wallet. My car keys") (*BS*, 176). He tells her he has "blasted over a dozen women" since their wedding and betrayed her "hundreds of times" (*BS*, 177). When Mindy begs him to stay, he calls her a "very very dumb woman," tells her to "fuck off," and assures her that his growing erection during the scene is "purely perverse excitement at seein' [her] upset" (*BS*, 176-178). Later in the novel, we see Lang calling patrons of a gay bar "faggots," making inappropriate comments about a flight attendant ("Lord, though, look at that. That's a first-rate pooper, under that skirt"), and sleeping with Lenore's best friend Candy in an attempt to get closer to Lenore (*BS*, 225, 258). Indeed, through a Dickensian sequence of events, Wallace brings Lang to East Corinth, has him seduce Lenore, and finally has him rescue her from Rick's handcuffed grip and carry her off into the proverbial distance. Marshall Boswell, citing the Updike review, has argued that Wallace's portrayal of Lang in the book is an extended parody of Updike's fiction, and especially of his *Rabbit, Run* series, the first novel of which features the protagonist leaving his wife in much the same way that Lang leaves Mindy.[57] He reads *The Broom of the System* as, among other things, a "large-scale feminist critique of literary misogyny writ large," in line with Wallace's critical Updike review.[58]

57. Boswell, 44.

58. Ibid., 41.

But if Lang is a straightforward Updike caricature, why have Lenore end up with him? And what are we to make of Lenore's Mindy-like submission to Lang, given her stiletto-throwing proto-feminist antics in the opening scene?

Boswell admits that Lang's transformation into the "good guy" at the end of the novel is carried out "somewhat unconvincingly," but he does not interrogate this failure on Wallace's part.[59] Hayes-Brady, for her part, is convinced by Lang's "good guy" status, arguing that Lenore's "later, better relationship" with Lang is an improvement on her earlier relationship with Rick because there is greater equality between Lenore and Lang, and therefore greater communication between them.[60] Of course, such a reading neglects the obvious inequality that exists between man and woman in this partnership, beginning with the opening scene of sexual harassment (hardly mentioned in Hayes-Brady's analysis) and continuing right to the end of the novel. Lenore herself emphasizes her powerlessness in relation to Lang right before she first sleeps with him, in terms that should make the opening scene impossible to ignore:

> [H]ow come I feel like the whole universe is playing pimp for me with you? . . . When I didn't even ask for it at *all*? . . . When I didn't even *like* you? I didn't *want* you . . . I *hated* you . . . You came in that time, and terrorized us, and were drunk, and that guy's stupid bottom, and Sue Shaw was so scared . . . And I say I don't want you, that I'm mad, and have a right to be, and everybody just winks, and nudges, and gets a tone, and pushes, pushes, pushes . . . I've just felt so *dirty*. So out of control. (*BS*, 405)

Articulating her position in distinctly gendered terms, Lenore declares that she feels prostituted, "dirty," and, most importantly, "out of control." Is this bold declaration of what Lang did to her back

59. Ibid., 48.

60. Hayes-Brady, 144.

at Mount Holyoke ("terrorized" her), and how she feels about it ("mad," with the "right to be"), simply another expression of the "large-scale feminist critique of literary misogyny writ large" that Boswell associates with *The Broom of the System*? Is Wallace here simply calling out the various systems of control that trap and subjugate women against their will? Possibly. In this reading, Lenore's final union with Lang would be a statement about the ongoing pervasiveness of patriarchal structures and about the important work that still needs to be done in dismantling them.

At this point, we should bear in mind Blair's caution about how writerly attempts to incorporate feminism often create the appearance of inclusivity while maintaining the status quo: that is, androcentric texts. Following Blair, I would counter the above reading by emphasizing the endless stream of penis jokes that "Wang Dang" Lang allows Wallace to introduce into the narrative and, more seriously, the way Wallace gradually humanizes, softens, and sensitizes Lang as the narrative wears on. We see Lang move from harassing college women and verbally abusing his wife to displaying genuine tenderness and patience towards Lenore, at one point even recounting stories of his ailing grandmother (*BS*, 416-417). The effect of softening the novel's aggressive alpha male is that he gets to have it both ways: he becomes a more sympathetic character without relinquishing any of his power over women, in much the same vein as the "sensitive-guy" films that Pfeil describes. After all, Lenore's fundamental resistance to Lang ("I say I don't want you") is never acknowledged, and once Lang has "rescued" her from Rick he tells her, "You're mine now" (*BS*, 442)—a phrase that, however cute, does not exactly bode well for her empowerment. The feminist critique staged by the novel exhausts itself and becomes something else when the supposed object of its reproach transforms into the "good guy" and gets the girl against her will.

If these limitations speak to Wallace's ongoing affinity with the

flawed male characters he is meant to be calling out, it is worth considering how deep the affinity really goes. In a sense, the authorial dominance implicit in the metafictional project underpinning this debut novel amounts to a kind of patriarchal system of control, weirdly analogous to the kind upheld by Rick and Lang. When Lenore claims, "I've just felt so *dirty*. So out of control," her statement is meant to have metafictional significance, too. Throughout the novel, Lenore frets over her lack of agency in shaping her reality. The basis for this anxiety is, ostensibly, Wittgenstein's early philosophy of language, fed to her by her great-grandmother and namesake (Lenore Beadsman Senior, or simply, and punningly, "Gramma") (*BS*, 75). Rick sums up Lenore's situation to her like this: "Lenore [Senior] has you believing . . . that you're not really real, or that you're only real insofar as you're told about, so that to the extent that you're real you're controlled, and thus not in control, so that you're more like a sort of character than a person, really—and of course Lenore [Senior] would say the two are the same, now, wouldn't she?" (*BS*, 250). In the context of the novel, this abstract description of Lenore's philosophical conundrum becomes an exact description of her literary status: in books, all "persons" are merely "characters," including Lenore. The implication of this clever metafictional layering is that the real puppet master who manipulates and controls Lenore is not another player in the world of the novel but the writer of her story, the creator of her character: Wallace himself.

When Lenore asks Lang the question, "[H]ow come I feel like the whole universe is playing pimp for me with you?," the metafictional subtext is that Lenore's "whole universe" is this novel, of which Wallace is master. By this logic, it is Wallace-as-author as much as Rick-as-boyfriend or Lang-as-seductor who prostitutes Lenore and effects her subjugation. Hayes-Brady has suggested that "Lenore represents the passivity of the feminine [in Wallace's fiction], which contrasts strongly with the active male—the tennis player, the criminal, the

maker of objects, and doer of things."[61] It might be necessary to consider Wallace's own active masculinity in *The Broom of the System*, as it is expressed through his desire as a young college writer for total mastery and control—his desire to have the novel's "last word," as it were. The tension between Wallace's active masculinity, on the one hand, and his growing attentiveness to the feminist cause, on the other, may account for the book's ultimate inability to sustain the vision of empowered womanhood laid out in the opening pages.

Conclusion

It is possible, finally, that Wallace's desire for mastery extends further than his characters, touching even his readers. At least, Adam Kelly has suggested as much. Whereas critics such as Boswell see *The Broom of the System*'s incomplete last sentence ("I'm a man of my") as a "blank space," leaving the system fully "open" to the reader, Kelly argues that "because there is no real ambiguity concerning the next word in the sentence, the reader's agency is in fact negated."[62] The last word (and so, too, "word" and *logos* itself) belongs to Wallace: even though he leaves the space blank, the reader can only finish it in one way. The ending of the novel is "a *gesture* toward an open system and a readerly dialogue, rather than an achievement of it," writes Kelly. Wallace ends up imitating "the elaborate authorial mastery he associates with the postmodern metafictionists."[63] Kelly has proposed that Wallace's grand authorial aspirations in *The Broom of the System* were what "most encouraged Wallace later to dismiss the book as a failure."[64] But perhaps Wallace's dismissal (if we take it at face value) also had something to do with the book's failure to really

61. Hayes-Brady, 135.

62. Adam Kelly, "Development through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (2012): 273.

63. Ibid., 273, 282.

64. Ibid., 273.

pursue the progressive equality it paid lip service to—at the level of character and plot development, but also possibly at the level of the writer-reader relationship. In the end, the novel seems a missed opportunity to join the "political practice of coalition-building" that Brenner mentions and to truly embrace an attitude of feminism, defined by Jackie Brookner as "a commitment to the full humanity of all women *and* all men, and a dismantling of the patriarchal values that inhibit this."[65]

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65. Jackie Brookner, "Feminism and Students of the '80s and '90s: The Lady and the Raging Bitch; Or, How Feminism Got a Bad Name," *Art Journal* 50, no. 2 (1991): 11-13. My emphasis.

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REVIEW OF ADAM S. MILLER'S *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO DAVID FOSTER WALLACE: BOREDOM AND ADDICTION IN AN AGE OF DISTRACTION* (BLOOMSBURY, 2016)

by Grace Chipperfield

The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace is a provocative title for all it connotes. Was Wallace religious? If so, how so? Should we read his works as religious texts? Adam S. Miller is aware "of the temptation to treat Wallace as some brand of postmodern saint, wrecked and hallowed by his mental illness" and that "Perhaps inevitably, a compensatory impulse to hagiography followed his suicide" (1). But Miller is not preoccupied with the "'Saint David' meme" (1). He is more interested in what Wallace's works "have to say in a religious vein—because, with Wallace, . . . life's questions have little to do with sainthood" and more to do with what it means to be human (2). So leaving contemporary criticisms aside, Miller tries to get to the religious truth of Wallace's writing.

The Gospel is structured as thirty short chapters, each chapter

headed by one word that denotes the topic for that section (e.g. 'Maps,' 'Addiction,' 'Irony'). In these chapters, Miller refers closely to Wallace's works to tease out their titular focus. A Preface and an Afterword bracket the book, and go some way to synthesize its sprawling content.

Miller's starting point is the "moment of disappointment" that occurs when our idols "can't bear the weight of [our] devotion" (xi). Miller says that in this moment, faith usually goes in one of two directions: the vindication or condemnation of worship and the religious project. But in *The Gospel*, Miller suggests a third reading, one that he finds in Wallace's writing—disappointment is "a feature (not a bug) of religion itself. In fact . . . one main goal of religion is to induce this disappointment" (xii). Wallace's gospel, according to Miller, is all about how to be reconciled with this disappointment. Reading disappointment into the religious project positions Miller's book alongside Clare Hayes-Brady's *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* (2016) as part of a broader conversation in Wallace Studies regarding failure and disappointment in Wallace's works.

Miller's book is one entry in Bloomsbury Academic's "New Directions in Religion and Literature," a series written by scholars who investigate the ways the fields of literature and religion intersect. But Miller's book does not read as a scholarly interrogation of Wallace's works. He very rarely engages with broader arguments within Wallace Studies, such as the failure/disappointment theme mentioned above, let alone wider debates around contemporary fiction (or, for that matter, theology). Miller only refers to five non-Wallace sources, and of these only Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly's *All Things Shining* engages with Wallace's works in a critical way. Miller's interrogation of Dreyfus and Kelly in the Afterword is astute, lively, and thoughtful, but also left me wanting more instances of such critical engagement throughout the book.

In the place of specific and detailed critical analysis, Miller

over-relies on quoting from Wallace directly. One extreme example of this is in Chapter 18, "Size." Of this short section's approximately 43 lines, 28 of them are quotations from *The Pale King*, connected by a sentence or two from Miller that do not make for substantial analysis. To varying degrees this happens throughout the book, and this lack of focused discussion is thrown into relief by a great number of hyperflexible segues and mixed or over-extended metaphors that point to the lack of conversation between disparate topics. This is especially evident in the way he develops the metaphor of bodies and heads, which is used throughout all chapters and meant to act as a connector for the whole book but is often contorted to apply where it does not.

This book's generality is one part of a bigger problem—who does Miller imagine his reader to be? He's undecided on what level of familiarity with Wallace's works he expects from his readers. Plots are summarized at needless length or not at all. Miller also engages in allusive wordplay, in one chapter referring to "funhouses for heads" and moods that are "eschatological" (7). Even for those who can pick up on these references it is not clear why they are made (except as a wink to Wallace devotees) or what they add to the reader's understanding. These things combine to mean the reader is at once both over- and under-supported. Miller's indecision about readership is emblematic of a tension within Wallace Studies more broadly. In a field that tries to cater to readers of Wallace both academic and outside the academy, this tension can create books that please neither audience. Though this is not Miller's problem to solve, it is a problem for *The Gospel*.

But Miller does do some things very well. The Preface is strong. Its self-consciousness and honesty are inclusive and disarming in a good way, especially when Miller writes about his religious devotion to television and how he looks to it for transcendence from reality. Throughout the book there are sentences that got me on a gut

level. In Chapter 16, "Deskwork," Miller writes about Lane Dean Jr. and his work for the IRS: "The job doesn't ever finish, it just takes breaks. Coffee breaks, lunch breaks, night breaks, weekend breaks" (55). Another example from the same chapter: "Life passes, from the very start, as the work of dying" (58). Finally, as mentioned, the Afterword offers exactly the kind of cogent and thoughtful analysis that is lacking earlier in the text.

If there is a religious truth in Wallace's writing, that is where it will be found: in his writing. Miller summarizes, rewords, and restates what is already present in Wallace's works; in that sense, I'm not sure this book adds much to Wallace's original words. If you're looking for the gospel according to David Foster Wallace, you'd be better off going to the source.

REVIEW OF LUCAS THOMPSON'S *GLOBAL WALLACE: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE AND WORLD LITERATURE* (BLOOMSBURY, 2017)

by Matthew Luter

Dave Eggers may have described *Infinite Jest* as "*sui generis*" in his introduction to that novel's tenth anniversary edition, but amidst the great quantity of critical work on David Foster Wallace since, numerous scholars have fruitfully questioned that characterization of Wallace as unprecedentedly unique. Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature*, the first publication in Bloomsbury's new Wallace Studies series, is the most substantial of the lot thus far.

Thompson begins with a highly accessible distillation of two contrasting attitudes toward the idea of world literature, indebted to world-lit theorist David Damrosch's definitions of "exoticism and assimilation" (13). The former views the writing of other transitions largely in terms of foreign, spectacular other-ness; the latter, equally problematic in its extreme form, erases cultural specificity by

asserting that the writing of all global traditions concerns itself with the same essential, universal questions and truths. Thompson argues that Wallace never fully aligns himself with either perspective, instead viewing his international influences with greater pragmatism—"far from idealistic about the broader aims of reading across cultures" (30)— mining each to see what he could most effectively borrow for his own fiction.

As a result, the book effectively expands the scope of how Wallace studies has been thinking about influences. Thompson does not spend substantial time on the relatively well-worn ground of the tradition of American postmodernism (Pynchon, Gaddis, DeLillo), nor does he limit his focus to those non-American writers about whom Wallace has written directly (Kafka, Borges, Dostoevsky). Instead, Thompson illuminates under-discussed points of influence and recontextualization. One notable passage of *Infinite Jest*, in Thompson's explanation, borrows heavily from Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," while "Good Old Neon" becomes (quite convincingly) a retelling of Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

Most useful of all, though, is Thompson's substantial use of archival material from the Harry Ransom Center in Austin. Here Thompson's critical methodology is particularly valuable: where many critics have noted the marginalia of reaction in the heavily-annotated books from Wallace's personal library, Thompson focuses on more generative marginalia. That is to say, he elucidates points in which Wallace appears to work out aspects of his fiction in direct response to the earlier literary work at hand. Wallace's marginalia in his copy of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, for example, are not just reactions to Percy's novel, but contain direct references to "The Suffering Channel" when still a work in progress—including character names and plot points—thus making *The Moviegoer* an undeniable intertext for the later Wallace story.

Perhaps the most illuminating piece of archival writing Thompson

has located might be a personal improvement list, titled "What Balance Would Look Like," which lists Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and church attendance as separate items (184). Thompson discusses the list in a chapter on Wallace's relationship to Catholic writers of the U.S. South, like Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, and uses it to question the assertion, voiced in the D.T. Max biography, that Wallace's references to church are generally encoded references to AA.

Some may quibble with certain aspects of Thompson's organization; the chapter on Wallace and Southern fiction effectively positions the region as a separate, possibly non-American (or at least distinctly quasi-American) space with a separate, circumscribed literary tradition. And the chapter that claims to be about race is largely about *Signifying Rappers* and Wallace's depictions of people of color throughout his body of work. Where earlier chapters focused more on Wallace's use of Latin American *literature*, Eastern European *literature*, and so on, this chapter's focus remains more on how Wallace appeared to think about racial difference on the page, with little reference to influential literary texts. Perhaps the uncomfortably revealing truth, this chapter implies, is that Wallace did not substantially engage African and African-American literary traditions in his fiction, thought Thompson leaves that avenue open for future exploration.

Each of Thompson's central chapters posits a different mode of pragmatic reuse of influential intertexts: the re-encoding of the software programr, the palimpsest-like "hologram," the "touchstone," the "*tessera*" (borrowed from Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*), and hip-hop-influenced sampling. These taxonomic distinctions could be sharper; it's tough to tell how the programr's "meshing together [of] diverse influences" varies from the sampler's "building *bricolage*-like narratives from a variety of cultural sources" (or vice versa) (44, 45). That said, this weakness is a small one to be sure,

and it only points out how seriously Thompson takes the project of explicating the ways that influence actually takes place—the book is never content to point out vague resemblances of a Wallace text to an earlier text and leave it at that. As a result of its broad literary and theoretical scope, its perceptive close readings of Wallace, and its substantial and original archival work, *Global Wallace* is an excellent and much-needed first step toward an essential expansion of the scope of Wallace studies.

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