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'Something Real American': David Foster Wallace and Authenticity

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Declaration

This is to certify that that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. Chapter one has previously been published (in slightly altered form) as '(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace's "Octet"' in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56.3 (2015): 299-314.

Signed:

Lay Summary

It has become something of a truism to contend that David Foster Wallace was concerned with irony; both its challenge to ethical conviction and the ability of the author to enact sincere communication in the millennial United States. However, this privileging of sincerity within Wallace Studies has resulted in neglect being shown to the first half of Polonius' famous dialectic – 'to thine own self be true' – precluding analysis of Wallace that focuses on his relationship with authenticity. Similarly, critics have often sought to argue for Wallace's panhuman universalism, to the detriment of the overtly nationalistic strain in his writing. This thesis aims to address these underrepresented areas within Wallace scholarship, arguing that his writing is fundamentally engaged with a debate over what it means to be 'real American'. The phrase is taken from a 1996 interview with *Salon.com*'s Laura Miller, during which Wallace averred that his intention when writing *Infinite Jest* was to capture 'something real American, about what it's like to live in America around the millenium' (*Conversations with David Foster Wallace* 59). This comment is central to an understanding of Wallace's oeuvre, as it introduces his historical specificity and his pragmatic desire to explore 'what it's like to live', whilst also alluding to his constant negotiation with epistemological and ontological questions over the 'real', all framed within an expressly nationalistic paradigm. The word 'real' is used in this sense both as an adverb to connote something that is authentically or intrinsically 'American', whilst it also serves as an intensifier – to denote something that is *very American* – implying a hierarchy of things that can be more 'American' than others. With regards to his immediate historical context, this entrenches Wallace firmly within the Culture Wars of the 1990s, and yet it also gestures further back in history, situating him within a fundamentally American literary tradition: the American Jeremiad.

Wallace's challenge was to attempt to engage with ideas of the real and the really American, despite the challenges to authenticity (and indeed the idea of a nation) that resulted from the permeation of myriad contemporary discourses into the national psyche, including advertising jargon, postmodern/poststructural 'theory', the language of psychotherapy, the discourse of political correctness, and the partisan rhetoric of politicians. The first two chapters will focus on Wallace's engagement with ostensible challenges to the 'authentic' subject, and the difficulty of authentically representing the self. Chapter one will focus on 'Octet' and Wallace's uneasy place within the so-called 'New Sincerity' paradigm, highlighting Wallace's attempt to counter the discourse of 'postmodern irony' with an 'other-directed' sincerity, and yet exposing his conservative project of self-preservation. Chapter two will examine Wallace's often fraught relationship with psychotherapy; in particular the way that psychotherapeutic discourse has infiltrated American culture, precluding the singularity and authentic representation of individual experience. Chapter three will continue this exploration of the widespread adoption of specialist discourses, although this time focusing on the abstractions of postmodern/poststructural theory, and Wallace's attempt to find 'real American' replacement cultural symbols that could be applied to both individuals and the nation as a collective. Chapter four will be concerned with Wallace's search for an efficacious philosophical model that is suitably 'American'; whilst also capable of incorporating the singularity of individual experience within a national collectivity. Finally, chapter five will focus on Wallace's more explicit engagement with politics, tracing the development of his political ideas. In doing so a picture of Wallace will emerge that highlights some of his contradictions; contradictions that he himself was aware of and drew attention to, as well as contradictions that run to the very heart of 'the idea of America'.

Contents

<u>'Something Real American': David Foster Wallace and Authenticity</u>

On the 6th of July 1995, President Bill Clinton presented some remarks at his alma mater, Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C.:

> I think we have got to move beyond division and resentment to common ground. We've got to go beyond cynicism to a sense of possibility. America is an idea. We're not one race. We're not one ethnic group. We're not one religious group. We do share a common piece of ground here. But you read the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution: This country is an idea. And it is still going now in our 220th year because we all had a sense of possibility. We never thought there was a mountain we couldn't climb, a river we couldn't ford, or a problem we couldn't solve. What's that great line in the wonderful new movie "Apollo 13," "Failure is not an option." You have to believe in possibility. And if you're cynical, you can't believe in possibility.[1]

Here Clinton enumerates many of the key themes that have characterised the United States since its conception, themes that were perhaps even more pertinent by this juncture in the middle of the 1990s: the centrality of diversity to the U.S. imaginary despite its inherent challenge to notions of a national collectivity; a rhetorical and ideological emphasis on belief and possibility; above all, the identification of the nation as an *idea*. The seemingly innocuous mention of Ron Howard's *Apollo 13* (1995) is also prescient, highlighting political figures' increasing willingness to refer to popular culture – in what is simultaneously a cynical condescension to the audience and a reflection of the growing postmodern acceptance of pop culture within the realms of intellectual and public discourse – but also serving as an introduction to the underlying tensions of the decade that begat the term 'Culture Wars'. Considering the immediate context of the Georgetown speech – given two days after the 219th birthday of the nation, barely two months after the Oklahoma City bombing, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union still a fundamental issue (Clinton later emphasises that 'the Soviet Union is no more') – Clinton perhaps invokes the film as a 'nostalgic reminder of a time, not so long ago, when Americans accepted a difficult challenge and saw it through to a

triumphant conclusion' (Crouch 1181). On the contrary, the varying responses that the film provoked illustrate the 'divisions and resentment' that Clinton's speech was ostensibly an attempt to overcome. Juxtaposed with the celebration of U.S. exceptionalism that was resonant in the triumph of Apollo 11, *Apollo 13* implies that the U.S. entered into a period of declension at the turn of the 1960s. Indeed, the film's famous misquotation of the flight's actual transcript – actor Tom Hanks' 'Houston, we have a problem' replaces Jim Lovell's 'Houston, we've had a problem' – reinforces the notion that the United States is in a current state of crisis, a crisis that has reverberated from the late-1960s until the contemporary moment.

In analysing contemporary responses to the film, Tom Crouch notes that 'Howard's vision of the "golden age of Apollo" has enormous appeal for many contemporary Americans who believe that the nation has lost its way in a postmodernist age' (1181), a view echoed in Janet Maslin's identification of a 'wishful, stirring faith in American know-how' (n.p.). On the other hand Crouch highlights John Powers' assertion that the film endorses 'the paradisiacal America invoked by Ronald Reagan and Pat Buchanan – an America where men were men, women were subservient, and people of color kept out of the damned way', whilst still another viewer saw little need to tease out underlying cultural tension at all: 'I thought I was watching a movie about one astronaut's account of *Apollo 13*'s aborted mission to the moon' (qtd. in Crouch 1180).[2] This fracturing of critical opinion along cultural and political lines is similarly refracted within Clinton's speech: his resorting to 'faith in American know-how' as a means to avoid failure – coupled with his belief in possibility – would at first seem to position him alongside Reagan as an advocate of an exceptionalist 'paradisiacal America', and yet his celebration of diversity and his status as arguably the first 'postmodern president' might just as easily result in him being installed in opposition to this idea.[3] Instead of vainly searching for a definitive conclusion as to Clinton's position, however, it is essential to note

that it is this very sense of contradiction and paradox – the blurring between the orthodox and the progressive; the competing impulses of cynicism and belief; the implicit conflict between the rights of the individual and the avowal of 'common ground' – that makes Clinton most representative of U.S. culture and society in the 1990s. As Geoff Ward notes, 'America was invented rather than discovered, its identity subjected to ceaseless redefinition by its new arrivals. Its essence is no essence, but a movement along the spectrum of contradiction' (*Writing of America* 9). Accordingly, this sense of contradiction and paradox is perhaps what makes Clinton most singularly 'American'.

Despite the claims above regarding the 1990s, it is of course impossible to adequately describe an era. As Ward's analysis indicates, the entire history of the United States is characterised by contradiction, which would thus make the 1990s seem unremarkable in this regard. Moreover, it could equally be argued that the 1990s are best thought of as a period of consolidation and continuity within a U.S. context; when the nation as a whole either became more inclusive and tolerant of difference, or when individual citizens were rendered ever more homogenous by the uniformity-imposing expansion of consumer culture. Daniel T. Rodgers, however, suggests that what best encapsulates the 'the last quarter of the century' was the perception that it was 'an era of disaggregation, a great age of fracture' (*Age of Fracture* 3). In contrast to earlier maximalist conceptions of society that 'had encircled the self with wider and wider rings of relations, structures, contexts, and institutions' – reaching an apotheosis in the structuralist sociology of C. Wright Mills' *White Collar* (1951) and David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) – Rodgers contends that in the years since the early 1970s, 'one heard less about society, history, and power and more about individuals, contingency, and choice' (5). Rodgers offers Robert Putnam's seminal 'Bowling Alone' essay (1995) as a paradigmatic example of this sense of fracture, but his chief motive in doing so is not so much to question whether Putnam is correct in claiming that society *is*

indeed fractured, as much as it is with highlighting Putnam's *perception* that it is so; Rodgers is at pains to emphasize that the 'terrain' of disaggregation is in fact 'the field of ideas and perception, not, in the first instance, society itself' (5):

> what characterized the age of fracture was not a literal thinning out of associational life. In an age of Oprah, MTV, and charismatic religious preaching, the agencies of socialization were different from before, but they were not discernibly weaker. Social structures persisted. What changed, across a multitude of fronts were the ideas and metaphors capable of holding in focus the aggregate aspects of human life as opposed to its smaller, fluid, individual ones. (6)

Rodgers notes that opposing 'ideas of society and self' compete with each other, in a debate over which – or more implicitly, whose – 'metaphors' are 'capable' of aggregating a multitude of individuals successfully.

Commenting specifically on Clinton's Georgetown remarks on the United States as an idea, Rodgers acknowledges that

> contests over ideas are, of course, no monopoly of the recent past. Political and social struggles have always turned not simply on the question of who should rule but also, and at least as consequentially, on what ideas of society and the self, morality and justice, should dominate. (2)

As noted above in reference to the Culture Wars, this was particularly prominent during the 1990s. Although Rodgers recognises that 'struggles over the intellectual construction of reality are inherent in all human societies', he also goes on to emphasise that in the U.S. 'they took on new breadth and intensity in the last quarter of the twentieth century' (2). As the excerpt from Clinton's speech and the debate surrounding *Apollo 13* suggests, the 1990s may be taken as the culmination of this 'age of fracture', not only chronologically, but also in terms of magnitude and complexity; a period characterised by deep divisions surrounding discourses of race, gender, and class, as well as diametrically opposed ideologies, and conflicting assessments of a shared historical and cultural inheritance.[4] It is into these debates regarding which 'ideas of society and the self, morality and justice, should dominate', over which metaphors were capable of structuring U.S. society, particularly as it corresponds to a

further 'American idea' – indeed, over this very *idea* of 'America' – that we should situate the author and essayist David Foster Wallace (1962-2008), a writer whose complexity and contradictions perhaps make him the quintessential writer of the U.S. 1990s. As Wallace would write in his notes for his unfinished novel, *The Pale King* (2011), one of his two main concerns for that novel was 'Being individual vs. being part of larger things' (547). This theme not only extends throughout his oeuvre, but connects Wallace to a fundamental dichotomy within U.S. culture, philosophy, and politics: how to reconcile the sovereignty of the individual within the community. As the narrator of Wallace's short story 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy' imparts, there is 'terror' inherent in being 'both individuals and a great anonymous mass' (108). Moreover, by the 1990s – exacerbated by the infiltration of the epistemological and ontological challenges introduced by poststructuralist 'theory' throughout U.S. culture – the question of the stability of the individual is itself fraught; what Wallace would call 'the single great informing conflict of the American psyche': 'the conflict between the subjective centrality of our own lives versus our awareness of its objective insignificance' ('The Suffering Channel' 284). The task that Wallace set himself was to explore these issues. Despite the knowledge that failure would inevitably greet any attempt to provide a definitive solution to these fractures, Wallace nonetheless thought that their investigation was the purpose of art. He sought a language that was capable of representing the contingency of the individual, and metaphors that were capable of aggregating individuals within the nation.

Writing in 1991, James Davidson Hunter claimed that 'the contemporary culture war is ultimately a struggle over national identity – *over the meaning of America*, who we have been in the past, who we are now, and perhaps most important, who we, as a nation, will aspire to become in the new millenium' (*Culture Wars* 50; italics in original). Aligning this with Rodgers' emphasis on capable metaphors, we can see that the Culture Wars may be

framed as essentially a crisis of representation. Indeed, Ward notes that this crisis of representation is foundational to the United States as a nation:

> America's striking out as a separate nation is founded, in a multiple sense that puns on democracy and description, in a crisis of representation. In fact, crises of representation link every significant American development from the abolition of slavery to Abstract Expressionist painting. (*Writing of America* 16)

This succinctly links the fundamental problem of democracy, the efficacy of the 'American Experiment', and indeed the very principles of art: how are we to represent something, whether that means mimetically or politically? We might say that the struggle to achieve representation *is* the struggle of art; that the struggle to achieve representation *is* the struggle of politics. In the context of the United States, however, this process is further complicated by questions surrounding which metaphors represent the national 'idea' not just most successfully, but most faithfully. The notion of authenticity is inextricably linked to the notion of representation, both aesthetically and politically.

Ward suggests that 'America is glimpsed most clearly in the gaps' (14). Wallace is a writer fundamentally committed to exploring those gaps, not in search of resolution, but as a means of fostering better understanding and dialogue between ideas and individuals. In the first monograph devoted to Wallace, Marshall Boswell avers that perhaps 'the essence of Wallace's innovation' could be summed up as his narrative occupation of a position of 'bothness', highlighting that Wallace makes use of both irony and sincerity, can exude both cynicism and naiveté, and that his work is both 'diagnosis and cure' (*Understanding* 16, 17). As a rejoinder to this stress on synthesis, however, we should perhaps exchange a Hegelian dialectic model for a Socratic: Wallace was most interested in the moment of potential that is created when differing ideas meet and compete, rather than the subsequent moment of sublation. Indeed, it is no great surprise that Wallace professed approval for *The Federalist* in interviews and *The Pale King*, perhaps less for the particulars of its politics than for the fact

that political debate was taking place. To resort to the metaphor of a tennis court – so often to be found within Wallace's writing – Wallace's tendency is to occupy the boundary line that marks the edge of the playing area. Not only does this represent the point where inside and outside meet, forcing interaction whilst necessarily maintaining the singular characteristics of each constituent area; the boundary line also serves as a means of limiting the proceedings, paradoxically heightening the beauty of the game going on within. Although often associated with literary excess or maximalism, the measure of Wallace's writing is perhaps best encapsulated by the term 'moderate'.[5] This may be taken as a negative – it accentuates Wallace's noncommittal tendencies – and yet it also summarises his stance as it relates to both politics and aesthetics: that of moderator.

'This is Dave's voice, American': Wallace and the American Tradition

Studying Wallace is prescient, as the quite remarkable outpouring of scholarship devoted to his work in recent years attests. As Adam Kelly notes

> since David Foster Wallace's death in September 2008 at the age of forty-six, his critical reputation as one of the most significant writers of his era has become firmly established. Over the final decade and a half of his life, Wallace's fiction and nonfiction had begun to attract a steady stream of scholarly interest, but more recently that stream has become a torrent. ('Critical Reception' 46)[6]

Remarking on this significance, Adam Kirsch writes that 'Wallace was exceptional in many ways – in the scale of his ambition and achievement, the affection he inspired in readers, the generational significance of his life and death. But the root of this distinction may have been his untimely, unfashionable style of Americanness' ('Importance of Being Earnest' n.p.). In comparing these two comments, it is also 'exceptional' to note that despite the 'torrent' of criticism devoted to Wallace, scholars have so far neglected to focus on his 'untimely' 'Americanness' in any great detail. It thus proves necessary to address that neglect, exploring

Wallace's ideas of 'Americanness' and the contradictions that these entail. Speaking to Laura Miller in the immediate aftermath of the publication of his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996), Wallace intimated that 'I wanted to do something real American, about what it's like to live in America around the millenium' (*Conversations* 58-59). We can see two interrelated strands emerging within Wallace's thought in the phrase 'something real American'. The word 'real' is used in this sense both as an adverb to suggest something that is authentically or intrinsically 'American', whilst also serving as an intensifier – to connote something that is *very American* – implying a hierarchy of things that may be more 'American' than others; that is, that might represent 'America' more authentically. In reference to Archilochus' aphorism that 'the fox knows many things; the hedgehog knows one big thing', Daniel R. Kelly has notes that 'the more familiar one becomes with Wallace's body of work the more difficult it is to escape the feeling that there is something distinctively hedgehog-ish about it' ('Wallace as American Hedgehog' 109). In Kelly's case, he suggests that this might have 'something to do with the challenges and pitfalls of choosing' (111), and a concern with the tensions surrounding the ethical choices that inform our being human is certainly evident throughout Wallace's oeuvre, whether that be probing the conflict between fatalism and free will in his honours thesis, choosing what to 'worship' in *This is Water* (2009), or enumerating contemporary challenges to our ability to choose due to being constantly bombarded by a culture of 'Total Noise' in 'Deciderization 2007'. Indeed, one of the things that Wallace most admired about Fyodor Dostoevsky was that his writing was 'always [examining] what it is to be a human being – that is, how to be an actual *person*, someone whose life is informed by values and principles, instead of just an especially shrewd kind of self-preserving animal' ('Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky' 265; italics in original). However, although Wallace hails Dostoevsky for his universal humanism, it is important to note that Wallace's own focus is more specific to the millennial United States. It is thus necessary to qualify Kelly's claim: we

must recognize that Wallace's context is specifically 'American'; the question of choice is always inextricably linked to the question of what it means to be 'real American'. Alighting on Wallace's own admission that his work is 'very very much about America', Theo Anderson concurs, explaining that Wallace's

> deepest quarrel goes back two centuries and more, to the religious transformations and political imperatives of the Revolutionary era, when Americans cut the Gordian knot of their colonial ancestors by embracing easy grace and claiming the power to begin the world over. Lost in our naïve ideas about freedom and our facile assertions of free will are a respect for limits and a sense of tragedy. It is the productive tension between fatalism and striving, despair and hope, that Wallace aims for. He deplores the notion that grace comes without cost – and that it's guaranteed. ('Puritan's Dilemma n.p.)

Although Anderson's 'revolutionary' emphasis is perhaps overstated – as suggested above, Wallace is anything *but* radical – he is astute in noting that Wallace identifies freedom and free will *and* limit and tragedy – as evident in Wallace's profound sense of sadness – as equally necessary, constituent parts of what it is to be 'real American'.

A nationalistic reading of Wallace may provoke some debate; indeed, the very notion of a national literature has come under welcome scrutiny from scholars who highlight the transnational nature of cultural exchange. In line with these critical developments, some critics – most prominently Paul Giles and Lee Konstantinou – have proffered the argument that Wallace displays a transnational consciousness. Although Giles – in a rare exploration of Wallace's 'Americanness' – correctly identifies that Wallace's writing 'is committed, both intellectually and emotionally, to locations and positions within the American system' ('All Swallowed Up' 15), and that 'Wallace was always conscious of speaking from a place inside his native culture' (18), he nonetheless suggests that Wallace's fiction might 'explore ways in which American identity might be transnationally remapped' (17): 'all of Wallace's fiction turns upon ways in which…spectral forms of globalization have permeated the American domestic mindset in strange and often darkly comic ways' (17). Whilst this may be true with

regards to globalization in an economic sense, barring the reconfiguration of North American international borders and the recasting of the threat of global nuclear war as a game of 'Eschaton' in *Infinite Jest*, globalization in a cultural sense is so spectral as to be barely present at all in Wallace's fiction. Moreover, Wallace's essays only display an international awareness with the occasional foray into the discussion of non-American authors such as Kafka and the aforementioned Dostoevsky, or in the opportunity that a trip on a cruise ship provides to 'realize that the ocean is not one ocean. The water changes' ('A Supposedly Fun Thing' 306). Of course, on one hand this oversight might just be a function of what Mark Fisher has termed 'capitalist realism': 'not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system…it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it' (*Capitalist Realism* 2; italics in original). On the other hand, whilst there may be an implicit assumption that Wallace's writings are set in an economically globalized world, his concerns are predominantly centred on U.S. corporations. As Fisher suggests, it may be that 'the deterritorializing impulses of capitalism have been confined to finance, leaving culture presided over by the forces of reterritorialization' (6). In the case of Wallace this Deleuzian analysis may be extended further: rather than Giles' 'global repositioning of American literature and culture within a wider sphere', Wallace's work demonstrates how the global expansion of U.S. capital has instead repositioned the notion of a wider global sphere within a reterritorialized U.S.

Lee Konstantinou takes up precisely this aspect of Wallace's fiction, suggesting that Wallace's depiction (or lack thereof) of his characters' international awareness in 'The Suffering Channel' in fact signals a 'longing for the international' ('The World of David Foster Wallace' 67). Although Konstantinou acknowledges that 'Wallace's writing simply doesn't fulfill the representational criteria…for worldly or cosmopolitan fiction' (84), his article nonetheless centers on how 'Wallace turns his narrowness of focus into a brilliant

exploration of – indeed, we might say a performance of – the deficit of embodied cultural capital, linguistic capital, and cosmopolitan habitus in the post-postmodern United States' (67-68). Beyond the rather banal claim that Wallace sought to dramatize how U.S. citizens are often lacking in their geographical knowledge, and that this should be remedied through the reform of 'educational, but also media, institutions' (86), Konstantinou's argument is spurious for a number of reasons. If we are to accept his reading, then it is difficult to account for how Wallace's 'brilliant performance' of a lack of international knowledge differs from, for example, Jay Leno's expose of U.S. citizens' limited geography skills in the 'Jaywalking' segment of *The Tonight Show*, barring the presumption of the cultural superiority of literature.[7] Moreover, Konstantinou's insights are based on 'the difference between analyzing *what* a text encodes about the world and *how* it has been made by the world' (66; italics in original), a methodology that precludes the specificity of Wallace's texts to his argument. Apart from a brief glimpse of national stereotypes in 'The Suffering Channel', Konstantinou's argument is predicated on what Wallace does not say; accordingly, Konstantinou's theory could be transplanted to virtually any given topic and any given text. Wallace comes to resemble a 'post-postmodern' (Konstantinou's term) Pierre Menard; his comparative lack of any international context is conceived as being 'infinitely richer' than his contemporaries, despite their willingness to at least attempt to contend with the international ('Pierre Menard' 69).[8]

Instead of looking for an international longing in Wallace, then, it is much more productive to examine Wallace's longing for what may be deemed 'real American'. As with Ward's analysis of Jack Kerouac, there is something of a 'sentimental, sports-watching patriotism' evident within Wallace's writing (*Writing of America* 177). When Wallace does engage with the international, it is to discern how the international at once affirms and problematizes his sense of 'Americanness', rather than an exploration of how 'Americans'

might better interact with the world. In his cruise ship essay, for example, whilst viewing tourists exiting the ship in Cozumel, Mexico, Wallace describes how he is 'suddenly and unpleasantly conscious of being an American, the same way I'm always suddenly conscious of being white every time I'm around a lot of nonwhite people' ('A Supposedly Fun Thing' 310).[9] This does at first seem to express some degree of international longing, and yet Wallace also notes that 'part of the overall despair of this Luxury Cruise is that no matter what I do I cannot escape my own essential and newly unpleasant Americanness' (311). For Wallace, an encounter with an international context merely serves as a mirror with which to interrogate his own 'Americanness'.[10] What is crucial however, is that Wallace's self-awareness rapidly shifts from being conscious of being 'an American', to the inescapability of his 'newly unpleasant Americanness'. Although admittedly only highlighted due to the international context, the implication here is not only that Wallace's 'Americanness' is 'newly unpleasant', but that the United States of America as a whole has recently become unpleasant. It is the explication of the root causes of this unpleasantness, the consequences of it, and the hope of possible restoration that would be the one of the major themes of Wallace's writing.

Giles contends that 'the work of David Foster Wallace meditates self-consciously on what it means to be an "American" writer at the turn of the twenty-first century' ('All Swallowed Up' 4), which necessitates a further examination of what an 'American' writer might be. Ward posits three formal distinctions within the field of U.S. literature: 1) a search for 'direct prose that [can]not be twisted or misunderstood', which he traces from Tom Paine's *Common Sense* and the Constitution through Lincoln's speeches to Ernest Hemingway; 2) a desire to explore the 'spectrum of serious possibilities' for the novel, as displayed by Herman Melville and Henry James; 3) 'the vernacular classic, the dissident reclamation of America through particularities of voice', as epitomised by Mark Twain's

Huckleberry Finn (*Writing of America* 15-16). It might be said that Wallace has a foot in all three of these camps. *Infinite Jest* is itself clear evidence of a desire to explore 'the spectrum of serious possibilities for the novel', but to claim for Wallace a place as a 'vernacular' writer might need more justification. Brian Phillips chides Wallace for his 'negative style', writing that 'no character's mind is aesthetically realized in a way that makes us feel the echo of belief; no character's mind exists positively; instead each weakly reflects an initial thematic idea and the movement of a particular story's form' ('Negative Style' 677). There is some truth to this claim; Adam Kelly suggests that Wallace is a 'novelist of ideas', and notes that – particularly in *The Pale King* – there is a movement 'away from the importance of psychology and toward the primacy of ideas themselves' ('Development Through Dialogue' 277). Accordingly, with such a surfeit of abstract thought at the level of consciousness, there may be detected a concurrent diminution of humanity within Wallace's dialogues. However, Wallace also possesses an enviable knack for representing the rhythms and idiosyncrasies of contemporary dialects on the page. Where a character does sound as if they are merely an ideational *raisonneur*, this signals the degree to which myriad discourses and jargon have permeated the consciousness of the 'average American' and infected the vernacular, rather than Wallace's distorted attempt to achieve mimesis whilst displaying his own erudition. As for Wallace as a writer of 'direct prose'; this might seem initially incompatible with what Ward labels 'one of the traditional aims of America prose': 'to cut through what the fourth President, James Madison, termed the "cloudy medium" of language' (15). Indeed, sprawling, looping, hypotactic sentences have become a Wallace shibboleth, and yet his work actually proves equally reliant on the tradition of 'direct prose'. Wallace's trademark longer sentences are frequently a negative rhetorical strategy designed to highlight the bewildering complexities of contemporary life or pastiche the conventions of a specific discourse, whereas his more direct sentences often hold deeper significance, thinly veiled by their

apparent simplicity.[11] In this mold, stories such as 'Forever Overhead' and 'Incarnations of Burned Children' – despite being two of the most un-Wallace-like offerings in the Wallace canon – might be championed as his most affecting fictions. Similarly, Mario Incandenza from *Infinite Jest* is a rare example of a truly endearing character within Wallace's oeuvre, all the more so for his plain speaking: 'Hal, pretty much all I do is love you and be glad I have an excellent brother in every way, Hal' (772). Identifying Wallace with all three of these traditions within U.S. literature of course introduces *the* 'real American' literary tradition, the 'Great American Novel'; that inevitably-doomed project to encapsulate the spirit and reality of a vast nation at a specific moment in history within a single tome. Acutely aware of this tradition, it is no surprise that *Infinite Jest* contains a meta-referential nod to its own encyclopaedic ambitions, with Wallace styling one of James Incandenza's films as '*The American Century as Seen Through a Brick*' (989 n.24).[12] As Don DeLillo remarked at Wallace's memorial service: 'this is Dave's voice, American' ('Informal Remarks' 24).

David Foster Wallace: American Jeremiah

To feel compelled to write about the state of the nation seems a peculiarly U.S. preoccupation. Of course, the relationship between written documents and the nation has always been intertwined, with its political birth certificates – the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution – only the most famous examples of a long tradition dating back to the nation's ideological Ur-texts: the Mayflower Compact (1620) and John Winthrop's 'A Model of Christian Charity' (1630). As Ward has perceived: 'America has to be thought in order to be lived, but for both to happen, it had to be written' (*Writing of America* 17). The 'age of fracture' saw a revival in the importance of this question; Ward posits that since 1940 the 'political question asked by American literature' is 'the question of who "we" are, and to

what forces we give our allegiance in times of danger' (193). Wallace's work evinces these same concerns, questioning both what is 'real American', at the level of the nation and the individual.

For all Wallace's formal, stylistic, and syntactical idiosyncrasies – not to mention his expansive vocabulary – Giles is correct in observing that 'Wallace can be understood as in some ways quite a traditional American writer' ('Sentimental Posthumanism' 340). Indeed, Wallace himself was prone to claiming in interviews that he was a 'fundamentally fairly traditional conservative kind of writer' ('Frightening Time'). Leaving aside this political qualification for a moment, it is apparent that the tradition that Giles has in mind is that of the American Renaissance, noting (after Stephen Railton) that Emerson, Melville, and Thoreau (and by extension, Wallace), all owe a debt to the 'Protestant sermon' as 'they all embody a performative dimension that situates the author in, as it were, the pulpit' ('All Swallowed Up' 9). Extending this analogy, it would seem reasonable to place Wallace – as Anderson has done – within the context of a U.S. literary tradition that has come to be seen as 'real American': the jeremiad.

In his classic study of the genre, Sacvan Bercovitch distances the American variant from the conventional European 'dark side of the jeremiad', insisting that 'the Puritans' cries of declension and doom were part of a strategy designed to revitalize the errand' (*American Jeremiad* xiv). Bercovitch argues that

> the European jeremiad developed within a static hierarchical order; the lessons it taught, about historical recurrence and the vanity of human wishes, amounted to a massive ritual reinforcement of tradition. Its function was to make social practice conform to a completed and perfected social ideal. The American Puritan jeremiad was the ritual of a culture on an errand – which is to say, a culture based on a faith in process. Substituting teleology for hierarchy, it discarded the Old World ideal of stasis for a New World vision of the future. Its function was to create a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless "progressivist" energies required for the success of the venture….Anxiety was one result of the ritual, its day-by-day aspect. The other aspect, equally crucial to the concept of errand, was direction and purpose. Together,

> these two elements define that ritual import of the jeremiad: to sustain process by imposing control, and to justify control by presenting a certain form of process as the only road to the future kingdom. (23, 24)

Whereas the European jeremiad preserved a traditional order, the American model was forward-looking, not only inspiring the 'restless' 'anxiety' that was necessary to facilitate progress, but allowing for the rhetorical and ideological construction of a community. The Clinton speech that opened this introduction clearly belongs to this tradition, as does much of Wallace's writing. As Adam Kelly pinpoints, 'perhaps the most striking feature of Wallace studies' is the 'implicit agreement among so many critics with Wallace's professed premise that fiction should act as both "diagnosis and cure," that it should be viewed not primarily in terms of aesthetic representation, but of ethical intervention' ('Critical Reception' 49). Indeed, in conversation with Larry McCaffery, Wallace himself questioned 'the purpose of creating fiction': 'it is essentially mimetic, to capture and order a protean reality? Or is it really supposed to be therapeutic in an Aristotelian sense?' (*Conversations* 24). Bercovitch contends that the defining feature of the American jeremiad is 'its unshakable optimism' (7), and whilst this optimism may not prove to be entirely 'unshakable' in Wallace's case – his later writing in particular seems to hold less faith in the continuing promise of the American project – in his desire to offer narratives of both declension and hope, Wallace's status as American Jeremiah seems assured.

Bercovitch identifies in Winthrop's famous speech a foreshadowing of 'the major themes of the colonial pulpit'; those themes that Giles seeks to identify with Wallace: 'false dealing with God, betrayal of covenant promises, the degeneracy of the young, the lure of profits and pleasures, the prospect of God's just, swift and total revenge' (4). Indeed, many of these themes are clearly evident in Wallace's own writing. 'E Unibus Pluram', for example, bemoans the degeneracy of U.S. artistic production, as once-rebellious artistic techniques such as irony have become commodified and are used only for ingratiating comedy purposes.

Moreover, *This is Water* – Wallace's commencement speech to the graduating class of Kenyon College in 2005 – has taken on its own sermon-like significance for the millennial generation, explicitly prompting its audience to choose 'some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship' as an antidote to the 'false dealing' and 'the lure of profit and pleasures' so dominant within millennial U.S. society: 'if you worship money and things…then you will never have enough' (102-103). The question over what to worship or give 'allegiance' to is manifest in Wallace's work as a search for 'authentic' metaphors or an efficacious vocabulary that can represent what is 'real American'. Although writing under the assumption that ideas associated with 'the postmodern'– that art cannot mimetically represent life, that the signifier has no authentic relation to the signified; indeed, that the very categories of nation and subject are nothing more than cultural/linguistic constructs – were correct, Wallace nonetheless displays a concern that these ideas might not provide an efficacious means to live. In a perceptive review of 'Oblivion', Pankaj Mishra identifies 'Wallace's nostalgia for a lost meaningfulness — as distinct from meaning' ('The Postmodern Moralist' n.p.). This insight proves key, as Wallace seeks to reaffirm the validity of 'meaningfulness' – even if it has no correlation to an authentic 'meaning' – as a more pragmatic strategy for day-to-day existence.

Writing of Emerson's commencement address to Tufts College in 1861, Andrew Taylor notes that 'Emerson's lines…assume that the work of the mind is sovereign in its ability to structure selfhood, society and nation: correct thinking leads to successful forms of construction' (*Thinking America* 1). This emphasis on the individual intellect is prescient here with regards to Wallace, just as the notion that the mind is able to construct 'selfhood, society and nation' chimes with Clinton's emphasis on America as an idea. With Wallace these struggles over identity are contingent on Taylor's notion of 'correct thinking'. 'Correct' here does not pertain to the sense of being free from error or corresponding to a singular

truth; instead 'correct thinking' applies to an efficacious mode of intellectual work that will itself give rise to what Taylor terms 'successful…construction'.

Taylor goes on to note that 'if Emerson hymns the restorative virtues of the intellect, he is also concerned to assess the institutional frameworks in which intellectual work might take place - in this instance, the college or university' (2). Wallace too was concerned with the forms of control or limit that would allow for 'correct thinking' within institutions.[13] This places Wallace in dialogue with two prominent – and competing – jeremiads of the late-twentieth century: Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* (1998). Bloom bemoans the 'Nietzscheanization' of the Left, and the growth within the academy of 'openness': 'relativism has extinguished the real motive of education, the search for a good life' (34). Rorty similarly denigrates the 'disengagement' of the academic Left:

> recent attempts to subvert social institutions by problematizing concepts have produced a few very good books. They have also produced many thousands of books which represent scholastic philosophizing at its worst. The authors of these purportedly "subversive" books honestly believe that they are serving human liberty. But it is almost impossible to clamber back down from their books to a level of abstraction on which one might discuss the merits of a law, a treaty, a candidate, or a political strategy. (*Achieving Our Country* 93-94)

These two intellectuals – although with vaguely similar complaints – would surely disagree with their respective solutions – Bloom advocating a return to a 'Great Book' education; Rorty promoting participation in a 'civic religion' – and yet what brings the two together is not only their clamouring for a change at the institutional level, but their highlighting of the paucity of meaning at the level of discourse; the dominant discourse is too abstract to allow for 'correct thinking'. Wallace too, sought to find a discourse in which constructive 'intellectual work' might take place, in which metaphors were available that could aggregate the nation and correspond to 'something real American'. Reflecting the optimistic,

celebratory thrust of the American jeremiad, Rorty is keen to distance himself from the

perceived anti-Americanism of the [New] Left:

> We now have, among many American students and teachers, a spectatorial, disgusted, mocking Left rather than a Left which dreams of achieving our country. This is not the only Left we have, but it is the most prominent and vocal one. Members of this Left find American unforgivable, as Baldwin did, and also unachievable, as he did not. (35)

Wallace similarly searches for a vocabulary that could engage in a reassessment of the U.S.

without merely offering a narrative of declension. Although Wallace would surely not have

agreed with Rorty's own solution of contingency and irony, he strives for positive symbols

that could serve the U.S., even if they might be perceived as reactionary by some.

Kelly notes that Wallace scholars have displayed 'a marked tendency to utilize theory

in a way that emphasize[s] Wallace's *own* assimilation and response to it, with the often

explicit assumption that Wallace was himself versed in all these figures and engaging in

complicit dialogue with them in his fiction' ('Critical Reception' 51). What has received

considerably less attention is the manner in which this assimilation is articulated by Wallace.

Kelly singles out Giles and Dan Tysdal, who have highlighted how 'in many of Wallace's

stories, the dominant linguistic register is drawn from a pre-established discourse, and

Wallace writes from "within" that discourse, shaping his style around its exaggeration,

parody, and dissolution' (57). In other words, the reader 'encounters [a discourse] in the

process of its deconstruction' (57). Indeed, within Wallace's oeuvre, there is a palpable

tension with the prominent literary discourses of his day – the 'abstraction' of poststructural

and psychoanalytic theory. Rorty posits that

> Nations rely on artists and intellectuals to create images of, and to tell stories about, the national past. Competition for political leadership is in part a competition between differing stories about a nation's self-identity, and between differing symbols of its greatness. In America, at the end of the twentieth century, few inspiring images and stories are being proffered. The only version of national pride encouraged by American popular culture is a simpleminded militaristic chauvinism. But such

chauvinism is overshadowed by a widespread sense that national pride is no longer appropriate. (4)

For all his prodigious intellectualism, Wallace avers that recourse to 'theory' could be counter-productive; for all the 'hypocrisies' that poststructuralism exposed, it did not amount to an 'inspiring' image of the nation with which to move forward. As William James wrote of pragmatism, Wallace had 'no objection whatever to the realizing of abstractions' such as those of poststructuralist thought, just 'so long as you get about among particulars with their aid and they actually carry you somewhere' (*Writings* 518).

As early as his first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), Wallace was humorously playing with the conventions of the jeremiad, noting (of Ohio, but by extension, the nation-state) that 'something is not right with our state' (53):

> guys, the state is getting soft. I can feel softness out there. It's getting to be one big suburb and industrial park and mall. Too much development. People are getting complacent. They're forgetting the way this state was historically hewn out of the wilderness. There's no more hewing. (53)

In response to this, the governor proposes 'a wasteland':

> Gentlemen, we need a desert….A point of savage reference for the good people of Ohio. A place to fear and love. A blasted region. Something to remind us of what we hewed out of. A place without malls. An Other for Ohio's Self. Cacti and scorpions and the sun beating down. Desolation. A place for people to wander alone. To reflect. Away from everything. Gentlemen, a desert. (54)

The solution is the 'Great Ohio Desert' or 'G.O.D.' – an obvious pun for those intent on focusing on the linguistic turn in philosophy – but there is sincerity behind the comedy here: a desire for a new *logos* without commercial undertones, a language that can reinscribe the meaning of the nation. Wallace's early work – *Broom* and *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989) – may be afflicted by flawed attempts to engage with and proceed beyond the literary techniques of his postmodern forefathers – what he would call the 'Literature of Last Things' ('Westward' 328) – and yet this anti-intellectual stance would remain a preoccupation of Wallace throughout his career. Indeed, if the literature of this period seemed to Wallace

'apocalyptically cryptic' ('Westward' 328), then the criticism devoted to it proved equally so, giving rise to the 'academese' that he rails against in 'Authority and American Usage'.[14] Wallace recognises the validity of the claims of postmodern discourse, and yet he searches for a linguistic position that is able to reflect the existence of these claims whilst maintaining directness. Of course, despite these pronouncements of anti-intellectualism, Wallace was undoubtedly a public intellectual, and an anxiety with this position is also evident in his work, as discussed in chapter three. Nathan Ballantyne and Justin Tosi suggest that

> Theories refocus our attention and offer answers. Sometimes, we need a helping hand: our natural inclinations are imperfect guides to what matters in life. But following theories is risky. Theories reinscribe values so they'll fit within theories – or, sometimes worse, theories explain particular values away entirely. They turn simple matters, ones we could see through perfectly fine, into intellectual perplexities. We can figure out some things – like the value of relationships or the proper expression of compassion – better without theories. ('The Good Life' 161)

In other words, as Sam Lipsyte has cleverly summarised: 'it wasn't bullshit….It just wasn't not bullshit' (*The Ask* 51). Mary K. Holland has argued that Wallace's writing should 'remind us of the powerful ways in which acts of reading and writing impact the real world' (*Succeeding Postmodernism* 7).[15] In line with this we might frame Wallace as an anti-intellectual intellectual, seeking to reaffirm the nation using language, metaphors, and symbols that allowed for more 'constructive', 'correct thinking'. A brief return to Emerson might prove illuminating here, as his contention that 'life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy' provides a fitting aphorism to keep in mind when reading Wallace ('Experience' 294).

'The New Sincerity' and Authenticity

Of course, the passage quoted above in reference to the G.O.D. highlights how merely enacting a return to traditional symbols and metaphors is not without its problems: Frederick Jackson Turner's 'Frontier Thesis' and traditional narratives of self-reliance are no longer

applicable in late-twentieth-century U.S.A. Indeed, this emphasis on the individual here introduces a second meaning of 'real American': beyond the concept of *what* is 'real American' Wallace also seeks to interrogate *who* might be a 'real American', echoing Crèvecœur's famous question: 'what then is the American, this new man?' (*Letters from an American Farmer* 43-44).[16] Indeed, with the collapse of traditional notions of subjectivity with the advent of poststructuralism, Wallace searches for a way to represent the self more generally; the fracture that the concept of the nation had experienced was equally discernible in the concept of the subject. Clare Hayes-Brady has noted that *Broom* is about the search for Lenore's self, writing that 'Lenore's struggles for self-determination are tied up with her struggles with linguistic self-definition, searching for the words that will frame the space she takes up in the world' ('Wallace and Gender' 65). Hayes-Brady goes on to suggest that this search might be extended to approximate Wallace's 'project for art': 'the simultaneous rupture and reinforcement of the boundaried Self' (74). Similarly, Jon Baskin argues that

> Against what he believed to be the outmoded theoretical commitments of his predecessors and contemporaries, [Wallace] labored to return literary fiction to the deep problems of subjective experience. For those of us who came of age in the 1990s, his fiction was a relief and a gift. Confused, alienated and inauthentic though it might be, subjective consciousness still existed—and it was still the business of the novelist to describe it. ('Death is Not the End' n.p.)

Indeed, characters that are unable to represent the self abound throughout Wallace's oeuvre, from Lenore Beadsman to Hal Incandenza; from Neal of 'Good Old Neon' to 'David Wallace', the narrator of *The Pale King*. It can be inferred that Wallace sought not only to capture what was 'real American', but if a 'real American' – if the self – could still be said to exist, and if it could be represented.

One of the seminal proponents of self-definition within the context of U.S. identity was Benjamin Franklin, and it is notable that one of the thirteen 'moral Virtues' that he associates with an individual is 'sincerity' (*Autobiography* 91-92). Within the field of

Wallace Studies it has become something of a truism to say that Wallace was concerned with this concept of sincerity; Chris Power's article on Wallace's short fiction in *The Guardian* providing a representative example of many critical assessments of Wallace's work:

> [Wallace] believed that a movement that had taken shape to unmask the hypocrisies of mass culture had come to lend them an insidious power: once advertising became knowing and ironic, the postmodernist game was up. Wallace began attempting to move beyond irony towards a new sincerity, although he struggled with how to achieve this. ('David Foster Wallace')

Perhaps more than any other scholar, Adam Kelly has been responsible for this alignment of Wallace with a fledgling movement 'towards a new sincerity', his seminal 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction' (based on his paper from the first academic conference devoted to Wallace's work in Liverpool in 2009) arguing that 'Wallace's project...became primarily about returning to literary narrative a concern with sincerity not seen since modernism shifted the ground so fundamentally almost a century before' (133). Invoking Lionel Trilling, Kelly notes that sincerity – 'which places emphasis on subjective truth and communication with others' (132) – was superseded by a modern ideal of authenticity, and that this in turn has been problematised by 'the rise of poststructuralism in the academy, and of postmodernism in the arts'; a development which blurs 'the surface/depth model of the self assumed by both sincerity and authenticity' due to the 'privilege afforded to the inaugurating powers of capital, technology, culture, and especially language' (133). Kelly argues that ''Wallace found that he could not reject [theory's] insights for older and more naive forms of communication' (134), and yet he faced a paradox in that 'in the age of theory, [the] characteristic split between the inner self and outer performance is further complicated, and even displaced, by the interrogation and reevalution of basic concepts of selfhood, intention, and performativity' (135). For Kelly, Wallace's fiction 'asks what happens when the anticipation of others' reception of one's outward behaviour begins to

take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic' (136).

Kelly, through a reading of Derrida, suggests that what might redeem sincerity is an acknowledgement that it is 'made possible by the impossibility of its certain identification' (140); that it should become 'dialogic in character, always requiring a response from the reader to other to bring it in to play' (141). The defining feature of his formulation of the 'New Sincerity' is that it is 'structured and informed by this dialogic appeal to the reader's attestation and judgment' (145). More recently, he argues that the 'New Sincerity'

> requires a concomitant rejection of an understanding of sincerity as the pure and uninfluenced emanation of the self. In place of this understanding is the embrace of a range of learned behaviors that connect one to one's community, and the adoption of a new set of values that can be held sincerely without that sincerity presuming the rejection of communal and institutional influence in order to maintain oneself as authentic and apart. ('Dialectic of Sincerity' n.p.)

Kelly is astute in rejecting the 'surface/depth model' of sincerity and authenticity.[17] However, in his haste to define a new literary movement he perhaps fails to allow for the possibility of change in the meaning of 'authenticity'. Abigail Cheever, for example, charts the emergence of the 'real phony' in the twentieth century, noting that

> A phony performs social norms that do not represent her authentic identity, while a real person is someone who is all authenticity, for whom there is no difference between a performative and an authentic self. Holly [Golightly], however, is like a phony in that her beliefs are perfectly in accordance with social norms, but she is real insofar as those beliefs are all that she has. There is no discernible authentic self to which her performative character might be compared. Phonies like Haas [from *The Catcher in the Rye*] assume certain beliefs as an exterior cover for an authentic inner nature. Real phonies like Holly are phony all the way down. (*Real Phonies* 15)

Cheever's more nuanced analysis posits that a person may 'embrace a range of learned behaviours' and still be 'authentically' inauthentic.

In an echo of Rodgers' vision of changing 'ideas and metaphors', Cheever notes that the meaning of authenticity mutates throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. In the

1950s 'authenticity required defining oneself against the expectations of society and culture',

she writes,

> yet by the end of the century, authenticity had evolved into a standard of belonging, a means to register the extent to which one successfully embodied an identity – be it racial, cultural, or any other type. (4)

Seen in this light, Kelly's 'New Sincerity' – with its fidelity to institutional values – may just

be a further incarnation of the changing concept of authenticity, rather than a radically 'new'

model of sincerity. Although the subject may be compromised, and Kelly is correct to

sidestep the surface/depth model of authenticity, the expression of sincerity still has to

emanate from somewhere. As Wallace writes regarding debates surrounding the 'death of the

author': 'one thing which it cannot mean is that *no one did it*' ('Greatly Exaggerated' 145).

Rather than accounting for the existence of an authentic subject, however, we might proceed

with a rethinking of the concept of authenticity.

Nathaniel Lewis notes that there are two 'cultures' of authenticity: one 'implies the

notion of a true, inner self', whilst 'a second, related use of *authenticity* evokes the world

outside of the self, the world of cultural production and commodity' (*Unsettling the Literary

West* 3, 4). Whilst Kelly argues for the re-adoption of sincerity due to its capacity for

contingency, it should also be acknowledged that authenticity may possess its own

contingency. Kenneth Millard posits that in the late-twentieth century 'the seemingly

authentic is merely a function of various forms of aesthetic practice by which the very

concept of authenticity is constituted' ('Textual Authenticity' 37). Although concerned with

the articulation of an 'authentic' American West, in identifying a 'critical discourse that has

overturned traditional conceptions of subjectivity and representation', Millard highlights a

challenge to all expressions of authenticity. One of the outgrowths of this methodology has

been that critical reassessments of the West have made it 'more plural, diverse, dynamic,

heterogeneous, multi-vocal, even, in this very synthesis, more "authentic," at least in the

sense of being true to a new(er) sense of how the West can be understood' (38). In order to acknowledge this development, Millard endorses John McPhee's reminder 'that a full and open confession of contingency is integral to value in the current climate; without such self-awareness, criticism is blind to the larger conceptual terrain' (49). Echoing Richard Rorty's emphasis on contingency, there needs to develop a recognition that authenticity need not be tied to a fixed origin, but can itself be fluid, protean, and plural. Instead of thinking of the subject as the locus, it can be conceived of as a receptacle. As Wallace anticipates in 'Good Old Neon': 'of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you' (179); nevertheless, following Giles we can assert that it was Wallace's quest to 'identify some spirit of authenticity even amidst such disheartening narratives of alienation and simulation, that constituted the profound genius of his art' ('All Swallowed Up' 20). Rather than framing Wallace's art as a struggle to represent a sincerity that might be unrepresentable or 'undecidable', we might turn to Wallace's identification of 'the central Kafka joke' as the ultimate statement of his artistic project:

> That the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity in inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless journey toward home is in fact our home. ('Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness' 64-65)

Instead of attempting to remove Wallace from the perennial struggles of art to situate him within a new critical paradigm, it is more productive to emphasise these traditional aspects of his work, accepting his identification of the struggle to define the self as the defining factor of our humanity, and the defining factor of his art.

This need and struggle to express the self is the central theme of 'The Suffering Channel', in which journalist Skip Atwater has to write an article for *Style* magazine detailing the artistic output of Brint Moltke, a Midwestern man whose excrement replicates famous cultural artefacts. For Atwater 'the piece's fulcrum and UBA, the universalizing element that made great soft news go' is:

> The conflict between Moltke's extreme personal shyness and need for privacy on the one hand versus his involuntary need to express what lay inside him through some type of personal expression or art. Everyone experienced this conflict on some level. (271)

For Wallace, however, this contributed to an even bigger conflict. In an interview with Mark Shechner, discussing his collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) – his most underrated book – Wallace explains that 'the one thing that most of these men have in common is an unconscious genius for self-presentation and self-defense' (*Conversations* 107). For Wallace, this mindset was the default setting of many U.S. citizens as the millenium approached; a problematic stance when that genius for 'self-presentation' so often resembled the dishonest techniques of advertising, and when that 'self-defense' so often took the form of an ironic or cynical attitude that encouraged retreat rather than resistance. Moreover, these familiar problems of representation and preservation receive a further challenge in Wallace's moment, with increased levels of self-awareness compounding the problems further. This thesis will examine how Wallace sought to present the self without resorting to invalidated notions of artistic mimesis, or mimicking the corrupt techniques of advertising. It will also probe how he sought to preserve the self, without resorting to reactionary, dismissive tactics that reject outside challenges instead of engaging with them. This project will also be expanded to the nation at large, engaging with Wallace's search for a language that could present and defend what he thought was 'real American'.

Chapter one will focus on 'Octet' and Wallace's uneasy place within the so-called 'New Sincerity' paradigm, highlighting Wallace's attempt to counter the discourse of 'postmodern irony' with an 'other-directed' sincerity, and yet exposing his conservative project of self-preservation. Chapter two will examine Wallace's often fraught relationship with psychotherapy; in particular the way that psychotherapeutic discourse has infiltrated American culture, precluding the singularity and authentic representation of individual experience. Chapter three will continue this exploration of the widespread adoption of

specialist discourses, although this time focusing on the abstractions of postmodern/poststructural theory, and Wallace's attempt to find 'real American' replacement cultural symbols that could be applied to both individuals and the nation as a collective. Chapter four will be concerned with Wallace's search for an efficacious philosophical model that is suitably 'American'; whilst also capable of incorporating the singularity of individual experience within a national collectivity. Finally, chapter five will focus on Wallace's more explicit engagement with politics, tracing the development of his political ideas. In doing so a picture of Wallace will emerge that highlights some of his contradictions; contradictions that he himself was aware of and drew attention to, as well as contradictions that run to the very heart of 'the idea of America'.

Chapter One: 'Octet' and the 'New Sincerity'

On 18 November 2012 the *New York Times* ran an article by Christy Wampole asserting that 'if irony is the ethos of our age — and it is — then the hipster is our archetype of ironic living' ('How to Live Without Irony n.p.). In a scathing attack on irony that makes explicit targets of the modern 'hipster' figure, self-conscious advertising, and the commodification of kitsch and nostalgia, Wampole bemoans the centrality of irony to an understanding of contemporary U.S culture. For Wampole, ironic living is a purposeful commitment to negativity, a defensive lifestyle choice that first and foremost seeks to protect 'hipsters' or other advocates from ridicule, at the expense of expressing any genuine sentiment or emotions: 'irony is the most self-defensive mode, as it allows a person to dodge responsibility for his choices, aesthetic and otherwise. To live ironically is to hide in public' (n.p.). Wampole sees hipsters as paradigmatic of a wider tendency towards ironic living, characterized by a deliberate occlusion of responsibility and a willful surrendering of agency, and in vehement opposition to an "authentic" human existence.[18] For Wampole, the dominance of irony as a critical idiom is problematic because it has created a cultural milieu in which people are *actively choosing* to cultivate and accept insincerity as a valid (and self-protective) ontological stance, a 'self-infantilizing' attitude which both relinquishes 'adult' civic responsibility and places people in a peripheral, malleable position with regards to the influence of commercial and political forces.

Wampole's claims are hardly revelatory: irony has long been a problematic concept where issues of power and dominance are concerned. What makes Wampole's article noteworthy, however, are her dual assertions that irony has resisted recent challenges to its prevalence, and that people are actively choosing to accept this ethos. She suggests that

> attempts to banish irony have come and gone in past decades. The loosely defined New Sincerity movements in the arts that have sprouted since the 1980s positioned themselves as responses to postmodern cynicism, detachment and meta-referentiality. (New Sincerity has recently been associated with the writing of David Foster Wallace, the films of Wes Anderson and the music of Cat Power). But these attempts failed to stick, as evidenced by the new age of Deep Irony. (n.p.)

For Wampole, the failed attempts towards an aesthetic of 'New Sincerity' are troubling because they signal a *return* to ironic living; we cannot now claim to be unaware of irony, and yet we are unwilling or unable to challenge it. The fact that irony is still an accepted mode is indicative of a worrying desire to retreat to an 'infantilized' state of existence: a life with fewer responsibilities where human interrelations are predicated on need and greed rather than empathy.

Wallace – as highlighted by Wampole – is an author often associated with the emergence of a 'New Sincerity'; nearly always regarded as someone who is writing in earnest, mainly due to his famous diatribe against irony in television, 'E Unibus Pluram' (1993). As Adam Kelly notes, there is

> widespread agreement, which has become almost a cliché amongst readers, fans and critics, that David Foster Wallace affirmed and embodied sincerity as a crucial value in his life and work, perhaps even as that work's defining feature. ('New Sincerity' 131)

Indeed, Wallace's work displays a consistent and marked opposition to the consequences of irony as figured by Wampole: the emergence of the 'inner infant' and the weakening of a sense of civic responsibility. Equally, Wallace's antagonistic relationship with 'postmodern cynicism, detachment and meta-referentiality' would seem to align him with Wampole's identification of a 'New Sincerity'. His short story 'Octet' from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is a sustained exploration of these themes, providing a singular example of how Wallace endeavors to negotiate with the ever-present specter of irony and interrogate the efficacy and applicability of sincerity within the millennial zeitgeist. Accordingly, the story may come to be regarded as an Ur-text of the New Sincerity.

'Octet' is nominally concerned with 'interrogating' the possibility of a writer achieving empathy or community with readers; of 'demonstrat[ing] some sort of weird ambient *sameness* in different kinds of human relationships' ('Octet' 131-132; italics in original). What is of more pressing concern, however, is whether the author can express himself sincerely, particularly in the face of the interrelated challenges of irony – our tendency towards a suspicion of sincerity due to the prevalence of irony as an idiom – and the increased general awareness of postmodern techniques and poststructural shibboleths such as metafiction and "the death of the author." The story may be quite profitably read as a representative or microcosmic example of Wallace's entire oeuvre, dramatizing his obsession with empathy and displaying an anxiety over the authority and authenticity of 'the author', all whilst employing a number of postmodern narratological and syntactic techniques, including a liberal dose of his idiosyncratic footnotes. The use of these techniques may initially be seen as problematic; indeed, with its unorthodox structure, recursive and cyclical themes, numerous footnotes, and levels of self-awareness that border on the paralytic, 'Octet' perhaps seems to embody the self-same postmodern or metafictional aesthetic that Wallace is trying to cross-examine, and threatens to distance his readers and preclude empathy. However, Wallace's foregrounding of these techniques represents an innovative methodology that highlights the challenges to sincerity that he perceives within two interrelated paradigms: the continuing legacy of poststructural critical theory, and the cultural and literary scene after the proliferation and commodification of postmodern irony.[19]

In his early essay 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young', Wallace notes that 'the tide of Post-Structuralism, Marxism, Feminism, Freudianism, Deconstruction, Semiotics, Hermeneutics, and attendant –isms and –ics moves through the ("Straight") U.S. academy and into the consciousness of the conscious American adult' ('Fictional Futures' 64). His insight here – that recent literary and theoretical critiques of reality have now

become part of our collective consciousness – informs his decision to employ some of the very techniques – particularly irony and self-referentiality – that he is actually trying to interrogate in 'Octet'. The instances of Wallace using these concepts are there because they must be: he has to accept the ubiquity of poststructuralist techniques and critical theory, not in order to refute them but in order to recognize them as constituents of our contemporary reality. However, he also realizes that simply resisting poststructural theory or amalgamating it into his fiction could result in a 'whirlpool of reduction' (to borrow Milan Kundera's term), a reactionary turn that would fail to acknowledge the wide-ranging impact of 'theory' (*Art of the Novel* 17).[20] Wallace's methodology goes beyond this, highlighting the dialectical relationship between fiction and theory, but also maintaining their separate status instead of conjoining them in synthesis, ensuring that they can be engaged with together or exclusively, all whilst preserving their distinctions. Continuing the whirlpool analogy, William James has noted that 'dialectic thought of the Hegelian type is a whirlpool into which some persons are sucked out of the stream which the straightforward understanding follows' (*Writings* 1296). Accordingly, we might identify Wallace with the Socratic dialectic, rather than the Hegelian. This method also allows Wallace to systematically proceed through many layers of formal and structural artifice to engage with questions of sincerity and irony in an open and direct manner. Significantly, and as with his refusal to simply reject or subsume the influence of critical theory, this technique does not lead to an over-simplified or regressive (re-)affirmation of sincerity that would ignore the prevalence of irony, nor does it present a further synthesis of irony and sincerity, as some critics of Wallace have averred.[21] Instead, Wallace's New Sincerity is predicated on acknowledging the specter of irony whilst employing a quasi-Freudian process of *working through* it, allowing him to achieve a position from which he can express sincerity.

The 'New Sincerity'

There is currently no critical consensus as to what the term 'New Sincerity' means or who belongs under it, but in a literary context it is increasingly being applied to a loose group of 'Generation X' or 'post-baby-boomer' writers – usually including (but not limited to) Junot Diaz, Jennifer Egan, Dave Eggers, Jonathan Franzen, Rick Moody, George Saunders, and Wallace – who are seen to articulate responses to postmodern irony and poststructural theory. The New Sincerity, then, is usually conceived of as either a reactionary turn to or nostalgia for a 'pre-ironic' sincerity, or a 'post-postmodern' hybrid or synthesis of irony and sincerity (or indeed, an amalgamation of these two positions), and postulates a wider cultural shift away from poststructural skepticism over the efficacy of the subject towards a reconstituted ethical humanism.[22] However, if Wallace can be said to achieve the possibility of expressing sincerity through his methodology in 'Octet', then these models of reaction and/or synthesis do not prove to be applicable. A more nuanced theory is posited by Adam Kelly, who contends that the 'New Sincerity' depends upon a Derridean notion of "ethical undecidability" ('Birth of a Discipline' n.p.), claiming that 'it is only by invoking [the] future off the page that dialogue can be engaged, and that both reader and writer can be challenged by the dialogic dimensions of the reading experience' ('New Sincerity' 145). In this reading, ever wary that methods of dealing with 'television's commercialization' of irony could 'become reactionary, [and] fundamentalist' ('E Unibus Pluram' 69), Wallace's expression of sincerity is 'new' because of his acknowledgment *and* preservation of conceptual borders with a simultaneous blurring of them. His sincerity is not reactionary or reductive but progressive, anticipating new forms of cultural expression that could be characterized as complex multiplicities, rather than redundant dichotomies or revisionist syntheses.

Zadie Smith, in her excellent analysis of *Brief Interviews*, avers that

It's my guess that how you feel about 'Octet' will make or break you as a reader of Wallace, because what he's really asking is for you to have faith in something he cannot possibly ever finally determine in language: "the agenda of the consciousness behind the text." His urgency, his sincerity, his apparent desperation to "connect" with his reader in a genuine way – these are things you either believe in or don't. ('Difficult Gifts' 290)

As well as giving 'Octet' a central place in the Wallace canon, Smith pinpoints how this story makes explicit Wallace's 'desperation to "connect"' with readers and create a sincere, empathetic community, despite the presumption of the arbitrariness of language in the wake of poststructuralism that should suggest the impossibility of ever representing sincerity linguistically. Moreover, Wallace has to contend with the proclivity for poststructural reading practices that preclude the very existence of an authentic author – 'meaning the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona' (*The Pale King* 68) – 'behind the text', rendering his goal of achieving direct communication with his readers even more implausible. Wallace nonetheless attempts to do so, foregrounding his structure and methodology to attempt to create a neutral space where we can discuss questions of sincerity and authenticity *alongside* irony and poststructural theory. The piece enacts a dialogue with irony, 'theory', and sincerity, allowing Wallace to explore what he has elsewhere written is 'really important – motive, feeling, belief' ('Dostoevsky' 273) reflecting a shift to less theoretical, more ethical concerns that emphasise the importance of the *meaningful* over meaning, as noted by Pankaj Mishra. Ultimately, Wallace wants to discover if it is possible for an individual to sincerely communicate and empathise with an other.

At this point a caveat must be inserted that recognizes the dangers of taking Wallace – or, of course, any author – at his word, thus avoiding the hagiographic tendencies of many Wallace scholars and critics who tend to accept his claims unchallenged. Although Wallace's style is addictive, and he impressively marries well-informed distillations of complex philosophical and theoretical debates with a keen ear for the rhythms of colloquial syntax, we can never finally shake the feeling that this might all part be of an elaborate joke, an infinite

jest. A useful corollary is fashion designer Tom Ford's 2006 interview with the artist Jeff

Koons, famous for his works of kitsch. Reflecting upon the interview later, Ford realizes that

> He almost talks out of both sides of his mouth, to coin a popular phrase. Sometimes I think that what he's saying is really the most intelligent thing I've heard. And at other times I'm really not sure whether he's just not totally full of sh**. ('So Tell Me Jeff' n.p.)

This seems equally true with regards to Wallace: at times his writing evokes a superlative

intellect that is unwilling to 'talk down' to his readers and is thus intent on presenting them

with interpretive challenges, but at others it seems his grievances with contemporary culture

have provoked him into treating his readers with elitist disdain, entangling them within a

complex web of in-jokes. Ford continues however,

> Only Jeff, by the way, will know in his heart whether he was sincere about what he was doing. But maybe it doesn't matter, because even if this is just a bunch of bullsh**, the fact that we've been challenged enough even to examine it has made his art real. And perhaps that's his idea. (n.p.)

Only Wallace knew if he was ultimately sincere about what *he* was doing. However, as the

steadily increasing volume of academic study willing to engage with Wallace's challenges

testifies, perhaps the most important thing is that we remain compelled to discuss this aspect

of his work.

The Specter of Irony and the Achievement of Sincerity

'Octet' appears to take the form of a Pop Quiz: each short narrative is concluded with

a (loosely connected) question to the reader about an aspect of that preceding section.

However, it quickly becomes apparent that the piece is no such thing: the first section is titled

'Pop Quiz 4'; the second, 'Pop Quiz 6' (which does not feature a question but is instead

abandoned halfway through for seeming 'too shot through with ambiguity to make a very

good Pop Quiz' ('Octet' 113)); we then come to 'Pop Quiz 7' before returning to 'Pop Quiz

6(A)', a reworked version of 'Pop Quiz 6'; intriguingly, the next quiz is entitled 'Pop Quiz 9', and is the last in the cycle.[23] At first glance then, the piece may seem to be a typical example of postmodern trickery, playing with the conventions and expectations of chronology, structure and form. However, 'Pop Quiz 9' is where we begin to be alerted to Wallace's real purpose. It opens with a paragraph that seems to conform to standard conventions of postmodern self-referentiality and authorial interjection:

> You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. You are attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces….How exactly the cycle's short pieces are supposed to work is hard to describe. Maybe say they're supposed to compose a certain sort of "*interrogation*" of the person reading them somehow. (123; italics in original)

Our constant cultural exposure to ironic and metafictional techniques ensures that we are perfectly attuned to what appears to be going on here, and our response is all but preconditioned: we are to question the authority of authorship and the veracity of omniscient narration, as well as the legitimacy and univocacy of the two. Upon further reading, however, we realize that Wallace is embarking on a quite different project.

We quickly apprehend that this is not a simple Jamesonian pastiche of the conventional form of a pop quiz, an ironic stance that would result in a reactionary 'ground-clearing' without 'constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks' ('E Unibus Pluram' 67). Wallace must instead acknowledge the existence of the specters of irony and self-referentiality, and yet *work through* them to expose their vapidity, clearing the way for himself so as to construct the proverbial blank canvas from which to interrogate his readers' empathy and their receptiveness towards sincerity, without the veil of irony. From that base level, Wallace can proceed to an expression of sincerity and claim for authenticity that is so proleptically self-aware of the possible theoretical rebuttals, that we simply must take it at face value or else the entire piece has been the ultimate waste of time and effort for author and readers alike. A lengthy section of 'Pop Quiz 9' details the structural problems that the

'fiction writer' has to face, before it is suggested that the only way to 'salvage' the piece is to be candid:

> So you do an eight-part cycle of these little mortise-and-tenon pieces. And it ends up a total fiasco. Five of the eight pieces don't work at all – meaning they don't interrogate or palpate what you want them to, plus are too contrived or too cartoonish or too annoying or all three – and you have to toss them out. The sixth piece works only after its totally redone in a way that's forbiddingly long and digression-fraught and, you fear, maybe so dense and inbent that nobody'll even *get* to the interrogatory parts at the end; plus then in the dreaded Final Revision Phase you realize that the rewrite of the 6th piece depends so heavily on 6's first version that you have to stick that version back into the octocycle too, even though it (i.e. the first version of the 6th piece) totally falls apart 75% of the way through. You decide to try to salvage the aesthetic disaster of having to stick in the first version of the 6th piece by having that first version be utterly up front about the fact that it falls apart. ('Octet' 124; italics in original)

Here Wallace foregrounds and explains the structural novelty of his piece. The reasons for the discrepancies in chronology and abandonment of 'Pop Quiz 6' are made explicit to try and dissuade the temptation of reading 'Octet' as yet another example of postmodern pastiche. Moreover, it is also made imperative that the failure of 'Pop Quiz 6' be announced 'utterly up front', instantiating a first attempt at authorial sincerity. This initial expression is complemented by a first instance of 'ground-clearing', which represents the annihilation of traditional structural forms of irony and the metafictional practices of early postmodernists such as John Barth. If we take this instance as a first level of authorial intrusion and awareness, that is, the explicit intrusion of the author into the text, as with Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) – 'italics mine'; 'it's these interruptions that make it a story' (*Lost in the Funhouse* 72, 107) – then we might (borrowing terms used in formal systems of logic) characterize this as first-order irony.[24]

In case *this* purported attempt at narrative honesty is taken as just *another* example of ironic authorial intrusion, the 'fiction writer' proleptically second-guesses readers' responses – acknowledging the ubiquity of irony by presupposing that it is our default setting as readers

– and inserts a caveat that discourages us from taking the overt structural exegesis itself as ironic:

> These intranarrative acknowledgements have the additional advantage of slightly diluting the pretentiousness of structuring the little pieces as so-called "Quizzes," but it also has the disadvantage of flirting with meta-fictional self-reference – viz. the having "This Pop Quiz isn't working" and "Here's another stab at #6" within the text itself – which in the late 1990s, when even Wes Craven is cashing in on metafictional self-reference, might come off lame and tired and facile, and also runs the risk of compromising the queer *urgency* about whatever it is you feel you want the pieces to interrogate in whoever's reading them. This is an urgency that you, the fiction writer, feel very…well, urgently, and want the reader to feel too – which is to say that by no means do you want a reader to come away thinking that the cycle is just a cute formal exercise in interrogative structure and S.O.P. metatext. (124)

The second-guessing of readers' responses here instantiates an engagement with second-order irony, referred to by Linda Hutcheon and A. O. Scott as 'meta-irony'. Scott characterizes this 'gambit' as an example of Wallace turning 'irony back on itself, to make…fiction relentlessly conscious of its own self-consciousness, and thus to produce work that will be at once unassailably sophisticated and doggedly down to earth' ('Panic of Influence' n.p.). This, however, collapses the subtle distinctions between orders of irony that Wallace is trying to preserve and interrogate, instead amalgamating irony and self-consciousness into a confusing mess, a reductive 'bothness'. In Hutcheon's more general formulation

> there are certain markers that often accompany an utterance…and whose function is to act as "warning signals"…to the interpreter to be alert for ironic intent….We might be able to speak of a "meta-ironic" function, one that sets up a series of expectations that frame the utterance as potentially ironic. Signals that function meta-ironically, therefore, do not so much constitute irony in themselves as signal the possibility of ironic attribution…and operate as triggers to suggest that the interpreter should be open to other possible meanings. (*Irony's Edge* 154)

For Hutcheon, irony and the awareness of irony do not become conjoined or subsumed into a hybrid tangle; instead, a 'series' of 'meta-ironic' 'triggers' notify readers that an author is hyperaware of both the expectations for and conventions of irony, and that they expect readers to recognize it being deployed. With regards to 'Octet', we can clearly see how Wallace's methodological approach 'sets up a series of expectations' of various levels of

irony, and yet it goes further. Not only does he – through the figure of the 'fiction writer' – insert authorial intrusions *and explicitly announce* that the intrusions will probably be taken as ironic; the 'fiction writer' proceeds to interdict *these* interdictions, anticipating that even the 'intranarrative acknowledgements' might be seen as 'lame and tired and facile', as yet another instance of the 'metawatching' culture and its awareness of irony. The 'fiction writer' is concerned that these intrusions will denigrate the 'queer *urgency*' of what he wants to 'interrogate' in his readers. Although Wallace's verbosity and convoluted syntax might be 'triggers' that imply that this *is* another example of irony, it is vital that we do not take this plea for urgency as insincere. The 'fiction writer' is only as urgent as he can be, for he simply *must* systematically work through each stage of irony (and the attendant awareness of it) to pre-empt the knowing wink of readers. A key facet of both Wallace's and the 'fiction writer''s sincerity, therefore, is that it requires vast amounts of time to contextualize it; in terms of both expressing sincerity and for readers to accept it as such. The constant maelstrom of irony in contemporary culture has fashioned sincerity into a concept that entails a reciprocal investment of time for it to have any semblance of unchallenged efficacy.[25] Whereas the first act of sincerity – at the level of first-order irony – admitted the structural difficulties of the piece on behalf of the 'fiction writer', this more nuanced expression of sincerity engages with second-order irony, and anticipates the terse dismissal of the first narrative intrusion as a standard metafictional gambit infused with the specter of irony. This is a literary enactment of the 'I-know-that-you-know-that-I-know that this is all a construction' cycle of the inauthentic that is seen in TV shows such as the *Late Show with David Letterman*, a favorite target of Wallace's that is pilloried in his story 'My Appearance'. The 'fiction writer' must acknowledge the pre-existing field of awareness regarding irony, and yet still avers that 'by no means do you want a reader to come away thinking that the cycle is just a cute formal exercise in interrogative structure and S.O.P. metatext' (124). The

'fiction writer' thus also precludes theoretical critiques of authorship and reader-response theory by asserting that he is acutely aware of their premises, and yet has chosen to continue regardless, urging readers to join him. At first, 'Octet' might seem structurally anarchic, with cyclical loops of reference that seem to repeat the same point insistently: 'I am being sincere here, but you readers might think that I am being ironic, and yet I am aware of this also, so please accept my sincerity'. However, Wallace's tactic to limit the chaos is to use a method that is profoundly logical; introducing successive instances of irony and rebuttal that add substance to his overall claim for sincerity as each level of irony is negotiated. Although heavily time-dependent, this method leaves very little option for readers other than to take the 'fiction writer''s claims as sincere.

The 'fiction writer' differentiates his own avowal of sincerity from other purported attempts to circumvent the hermeneutics of suspicion by claiming that these are themselves insincere, concluding the previous paragraph with direction to a lengthy footnote. It should be emphasised that this footnote is itself in parenthesis, introducing yet another level of mediation that highlights the myriad possible levels of interpretation:

> (Though it all gets a little complicated, because part of what you want these little Pop Quizzes to do is to break the textual fourth wall and kind of address (or "interrogate") the reader directly, which desire is somehow related to the old "meta"-device desire to puncture some sort of fourth wall of realist pretense, although it seems like the latter is less a puncturing of any sort of real wall and more a puncturing of the veil of impersonality or effacement around the writer himself, i.e. with the now-tired S.O.P. "meta"-stuff it's more the dramatist himself coming onstage from the wings and reminding you that what's going on is artificial and that the artificer is him (the dramatist) and but that he's at least respectful enough of you as the reader/audience to be honest about the fact that he's back there pulling the strings, an "honesty" which personally you've always had the feeling is actually a highly rhetorical sham-honesty that's designed to get you to like him and approve of him (i.e., of the "meta"-type writer) and feel flattered that he apparently thinks you're enough of a grownup to handle being reminded that what you're in the middle of is artificial (like you didn't know that already, like you needed to be reminded of it over and over again as if you were a myopic child who couldn't see what was right in front of you), which more than anything seems to resemble the type of real-world person who tries to manipulate you into liking him by making a big deal of how open and honest and unmanipulative he's being all the time, a type who's even more irritating than the sort of person who

tries to manipulate you by just flat-out lying to you, since at least the latter isn't constantly congratulating himself for not doing precisely what the self-congratulation ends up doing, viz. not interrogating you or have any sort of interchange or even really *talking* to you but rather just *performing* in some highly self-conscious and manipulative way. None of that was very clearly put and might well ought to be cut. It may be that none of this real-narrative-honesty-v.-sham-narrative-honesty stuff can even be talked about up front). (124-125 n.2; italics in original)

As with the earlier fear of losing urgency, the 'fiction writer' recognizes that 'it all gets a little complicated' because of the constant and multivalent interruptions, but these are nonetheless methodologically necessary if the 'fiction writer' is to eventually 'address…the reader directly'. The 'fiction writer' here 'punctures' the 'veil' of second-order ironists, exposing their supposed honesty and candidness as a 'sham' that hides their true purpose: 'to get you to like [them] and approve of [them]'. The 'fiction writer' finds this quest to be liked and to gain approval as one of the fundamentally inauthentic authorial poses that is common in literature, television, and other cultural products tainted by an ironic knowledge of irony; the inference being that this encourages a classification of artistic value predicated on financial, rather than aesthetic, transaction.

Although the 'fiction writer' acknowledges that it may be impossible to discuss 'real-narrative-honesty', this does not stop him from singling out for derision the duplicitous nature of 'sham-narrative-honesty'. Whereas narrative intrusion may on one level be taken as an author stripping the artifice from fiction (as could be argued in the case of John Barth), on another level it can be taken as a dishonest authorial ploy to achieve approval or an empathetic response from readers: to acknowledge and circumvent their suspicion as a means of achieving financial reward for supposed 'honesty'. For Wallace's 'fiction writer', this approach is even more repulsive than simply outright lying, as it is in essence inauthentic. Here Wallace reverses an earlier contention from Lionel Trilling's seminal study, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972):

> The situation in which a person systematically misrepresents himself in order to practice upon the good faith of another does not readily command our interest, scarcely our credence. The deception we best understand and most willingly give our attention to is that which a person works upon himself. (*Sincerity and Authenticity* 16)

For Trilling, writing nearly thirty years prior to Wallace, the most prevalent kind of subterfuge was of self-deception, of breaking the first part of Polonius's famous exhortation, 'to thine own self be true'. This mantra still holds some veracity for the 'fiction writer', but it has been complicated; deliberate liars may be dishonest but they are not deceiving themselves, they are singularly authentic in their intention to be dishonest. Instead, the 'fiction writer' updates Trilling's statement by placing more emphasis on his first point; the 'fiction writer' is most interested in situations whereby a person 'systematically misrepresents himself', particularly to 'be liked' or encourage empathy. With the specter of irony exerting an influence over most major areas of cultural production, the 'fiction writer' suggests that it is nearly impossible for us to be unaware of our own intentions when it comes to being insincere; to pretend to be otherwise – to feign sincerity for our own ends – is thus 'even more irritating' than lying.

In the context of literature more specifically, when an author pre-empts poststructuralist reading techniques – 'punctur[ing] some sort of fourth wall of realist pretence' – solely for the purposes of ingratiating himself to his readers, the radical potential of this once rebellious device is subsumed by the implied commercial pressure 'to be liked'. In the 'fiction writer''s terms, to do so is to become 'just another manipulative pseudopomo Bullshit Artist' ('Octet' 135). It is especially galling for Wallace that the objective of this subterfuge is purportedly to achieve empathy, for how are we to empathize with someone if his intentions are calculated, and thus inauthentic? It is through blunt and unflinching candor that the 'fiction writer' hopes finally to achieve his 'urgent' goal: 'interrogating' whether readers feel some

> weird ambient *sameness* in different kinds of human relationships, some nameless but inescapable *"price"* that all human beings are faced with having to pay at some point if they ever want truly "to be with" another person instead of just using that person somehow. (131-132; italics in original)

This echoes Zadie Smith's assertion that 'Octet' is Wallace's ultimate expression of his 'desperation to "connect" with his reader in a genuine way'. Instead of a financial transaction working in favor of the 'fiction writer' in the form of a monetary reward, the transaction is reversed, resulting in the 'fiction writer' being the one who has to pay the 'price'. The 'fiction writer' claims to be unsure of what that price may be – 'whatever exactly that question is' (133) – but it is implied that this price is twofold: the *willful* shedding of the protective authorial veil that has been engendered by irony, and a readiness to accept ridicule when asserting the efficacy of the author in the wake of poststructuralism, in exchange for authentic dialogue and connection. This is not to suggest that the 'fiction writer' is being inauthentic when he claims not to know what the price is; in fact, the 'fiction writer' is keenly aware of seeming didactic or pedagogical, and wants readers to engage with the text and come to their own conclusions. This – Wallace hopes – will result in making 'heads throb heartlike', a connection between the cerebral and the emotional that Wallace believes is one of the functions of quality affective literature ('Empty Plenum' 74). This link between the corporeal and the intellect introduces the notion of a connection between the body and consciousness, a neo-Cartesian stance that challenges poststructuralism's rebuttal of subjectivity. Moreover, Wallace's focus here on the somatic, affective capacity of language in general and literature in particular, is something that he sought to express throughout his career, being particularly prominent in the performance of information overload in *Infinite Jest*, and the peculiar challenges of writing boredom in *The Pale King*. It is also prevalent throughout *Brief Interviews*: evident in the frustration that is engendered in readers whilst reading about the annoying protagonist of 'The Depressed Person', and the disgust that is affected by the titular interviews with 'hideous' men. Wallace's aesthetic of sincerity, then – the claustrophobic

syntax of prolepsis that anticipates and directs his readers' responses – is an attempt to affect sincerity by ensuring that readers have no option but to believe him, whilst avoiding the affectation of sincerity that characterizes the 'pseudopomo Bullshit Artist'. Although it could be argued that 'Octet' is so coldly cerebral as to fail in its attempt to meaningfully connect, it nevertheless attempts to introduce a de-intellectualised context to promote more direct connection with readers.

As a contrast, it is useful to compare 'Octet' with the depiction of sincerity in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* by Dave Eggers – another author often posited as a writer of the New Sincerity. In the 'Acknowledgements' section of that book – in a fashion similar to the 'fiction writer' of 'Octet' – Eggers announces his own use of ironic techniques: 'the author wishes to acknowledge that because this book is occasionally haha, you are permitted to dismiss it. The author wishes to acknowledge your problems with the title. He too has reservations' (n.p.). However, this acknowledgement of the specter of irony does not go into the labyrinthine delineations of irony that Wallace proceeds through in 'Octet', and as a result, is far easier to dismiss as the second-order irony of the 'pseudopomo Bullshit Artist'. What is more, the jokey pay-off line – of the type that the 'fiction writer' manages to resist in 'Octet' ('that'd kill it outright. Do you see? [131]) – leaves readers doubtful as to whether they can accept Eggers' purported attempt at sincerity. In the upside-down appendix at the back of the book, Eggers bemoans how

> We have reached a point, with a certain group of venally impatient and yet startlingly lazy cultural bystanders, wherein everything in the world falls into two categories: the Earnest and the Ironic. And neither, it seems, is acceptable. Everything is either glib and shallow, or maudlin and boring. (34)

In a similar formulation to Boswell and Scott's synthetic 'bothness', Eggers affirms that 'we know that in each day, we laugh, and we are serious. We do *both*, in the *same* day, *every day*. But in our art, we expect clear distinction between the two' (35). However, simply to assert

that we *can* express both concepts within a single work does not suggest *how* we are to engage in an efficacious exploration or demarcation of each concept, resulting in Kundera's 'whirlpool of reduction', and a failure to offer any 'new' pragmatic potential for either position. Conversely, Wallace's resistance of this synthesis ultimately allows him to maintain the significance and distinctions inherent in both concepts. He acknowledges and preserves the various challenges to his sincerity so as to engage with them, rather than reactively refuting them or subsuming them. This is even more remarkable when we consider that Eggers' book is in fact nonfiction (although 'not pure nonfiction' [ix]); the amalgamation of irony and sincerity, coupled with the ambiguous genre of the book, leaves us feeling confused as to the author's intentions, perhaps suggesting that Eggers wants to keep a foot in both camps to maximize his appeal and earning potential. Wallace's achievement, then, is to tentatively suggest a new form of sincerity that is ostensibly unchallengeable. By requiring of his readers a vast investment of time and concentration, acknowledging and working through the specter of irony whilst proleptically anticipating theoretical rebuttals, and resisting both a retrograde appeal for 'pre-ironic' sincerity and a reductive synthesis of the two concepts, Wallace is able to express his sincerity effectively, having ensured that readers simply have to take the 'fiction writer' at his word.

Wallace's Conclusion: Monomaniacal Monologue

The philosopher Charles Taylor contends that 'however one feels about it, the making and sustaining of our identity, in the absence of a heroic effort to break out of ordinary existence, remains dialogic throughout our lives' (*Ethics of Authenticity* 35). As shown above, the 'dialogic' structure of 'Octet' allows Wallace the possibility of simultaneously engaging with both irony and sincerity *whilst* preserving them as separate and distinct

entities. The final sentence of 'Octet', 'So decide' (136), – a clear example of Wallace's penchant for 'distant, interrogative ending[s]' ('Borges' 290) – cements this notion, as it refuses to privilege one concept over the other, nor does it yield to the temptation to amalgamate the two concepts into a neat, concluding synthesis. This is not to suggest that the 'fiction writer' has found a way to shield himself or resign his authorial responsibility, for his quest to empathize with the readers of the story situates him 'down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us' (136).[26] The conclusion thus at first appears to grant agency to readers. Adam Kelly argues that

> Even though this phrase ['So decide'] is directed, diary-like, at the writer's self, it can only be answered by the reader, the text's true other. In the spiraling search for the truth of intentions, in an era when advertising, self-promotion and irony are endemic, the endpoint to the infinite jest of consciousness can only be the reader's choice whether or not to place trust and Blind Faith. In Wallace's terms, the greatest terror, but also the only true relief, is the passive decision to relinquish the self to the judgment of the other, and the fiction of the New Sincerity is thus structured and informed by this dialogic appeal to the reader's attestation and judgment. ('New Sincerity' 145)

For Kelly, the only way out of the conundrum – 'the only true relief' – is to make a leap of faith and hope that readers will accept the 'fiction writer''s sincerity – outside the text – in a dialogic process predicated on a Derridean 'ethical undecidability'. Indeed, this is a tempting model with which to read 'Octet'. However, although Wallace's methodology and resistance of synthesis allows for a dialogic depiction of his concepts, this does not finally result in a 'dialogic appeal to the reader'. Instead, 'Octet' has more similarities with late-Socratic dialogues – intent on confirming or convincing people of a pre-existing truth – than with a truly open dialogue that would leave the decision up to readers.[27] The apparently ambiguous closing sentence leaves us with little doubt as to which way Wallace is asking us to lean, as he has anticipated readers' responses and shepherded them towards this conclusion. 'Octet' assumes the existence of a universal truth of 'interhuman sameness', with Wallace advocating the virtue of sincerity as a means of engendering this feeling of empathy.

There is, however, doubt as to exactly who is speaking and who is being addressed in the story. Critical readings of 'Octet' have quite rightly focused on the problematic status of the narrator, with Konstantinou claiming that

> Wallace's last quiz invites us to understand that the interpolated fiction writer who is considering addressing the audience is identical to Wallace himself….However, his use of the second person, and his presentation of the final section as yet another pop quiz, interferes with directly conflating the character ("you") with Wallace. ('No Bull' 96)

The tendency, then, is to read the 'you' as a colloquial rendering of someone talking to himself in the second-person, either Wallace himself (Konstantinou) or an imagined 'writer's self' (Kelly). Similarly, Boswell has argued that although 'the self-consciousness is designed paradoxically to seem real', the author is 'a character…a mere device' (*Understanding* 186). To whom then does the second-person singular refer to? Wallace himself? The 'fiction writer'? A further imagined 'character-writer' ('Mediated Immediacy' 122)? The readers? Moreover, this confusion is exacerbated by the conflation of the second-person 'you' with a first-person plural at the end of the story, suggesting a shared human predicament: 'down here quivering in the mud with the rest of us' (136). What is perhaps most perplexing, is who has been added to the 'you' to make up this plurality? In actuality, what Wallace has attempted here is nothing less than the imposition of 'the real author, the living human holding the pencil', onto the page. Accordingly, the seemingly innocuous reference to Milan Kundera in a footnote has central significance for the story: As with Kundera – noted for his tendency to insert himself into his novels – Wallace is striving for direct authorial intervention.

What has gone unnoticed in the scholarship surrounding 'Octet' thus far is the occasional intrusion of a first-person singular into the narrative, first in footnote seven, then again in footnote eighteen at the end of the story. The conclusion thus presents readers with a hierarchy of narrative viewpoints, shifting from the second-person singular – 'you do' – to

the first-person plural – 'rest of us'; 'we imagine' – before, finally, alighting on the first-person singular – ('at least I sure do . . .)', leaving the first-person narrator in a privileged position at the story's conclusion (literally propping up the final page in a footnote). Wallace has attempted what is – in the wake of poststructuralism – almost unthinkable, attempting to carve out a space for the authentic author that lies beyond the page. Although Wallace obviously values some of the developments that resulted from poststructuralism, his writing often displays an underlying suspicion that 'theory' might not have efficacy for everyday, pragmatic use; as Wallace writes regarding debates surrounding the 'death of the author': 'one thing which it cannot mean is that *no one did it*' ('Greatly Exaggerated' 145). 'Octet''s 'us' is formed by Wallace forcing himself into a collective group identity with his readers, who are thus conceived of as the 'you' that the story is directed towards. This may appear to be a bold claim, or indeed one that appears open to accusations of critical naïveté, and yet if we accept the premise that Wallace has introduced a methodology that allows the achievement of sincerity, then the introduction of a first person narrator allows us to equate this level of narration with Wallace himself, rendering the story a monologue. We are then left wondering whether we should accept a sincere depiction of a textually extrinsic author's hopes and fears, or resort to a familiar position of suspicion and render the whole story a complete waste of both Wallace's and our time. 'So decide' becomes the ultimate question for readers; as Wallace highlights earlier in the story: we 'have only so much time at [our] disposal and have to allocate it judiciously' (123).

It must be acknowledged, however, that the present tense lends the story an air of inevitability, imposing a limit on the interpretive work required of readers. Although the earlier 'Pop Quizzes' feature questions that address readers, encouraging us to apply our reasoning powers to the problems of the text, throughout 'Pop Quiz 9' we have been instructed in what we are to think. In alighting on a second-person singular pronoun as the

story's narrative target, Wallace's aim may have been to try and create a more personal, intimate, and immediate form of address between himself and his readers, however, the use of this technique introduces a degree of complication when we consider that it results in 'Pop Quiz 9' being a series of direct commands to readers. Indeed, this may be where Wallace's genius and the success of 'Octet' is most evident: not only has Wallace negotiated himself into an authentic authorial position from which he can be sincere, the present tense and direct address combine to force us to experience exactly what Wallace is describing: '*you*' feel […], '*you*' think […]. Wallace always sought to avoid being dogmatic, and yet here he resorts to authorial direction. The story does not, then, rely on the 'Blind Faith' of the reader 'off the page', but on Wallace's extensively delineated and methodically structured argument *on* the page; the investment of time required by reader, coupled with Wallace's ultimatum, leaves us with no real choice: we have to submit to Wallace's sincerity. The professed hopes for community and 'sameness' that are suggested throughout the story – although sincere – are ultimately thwarted by this deep-rooted privileging of the will of the individual, everywhere visible within Wallace's work. Kelly elsewhere claims that the list of maxims realized by the residents of *Infinite Jest*'s Ennet House are similarly targeted at 'the reader, the person being appealed to (or interpellated by) the novel's narrator, in an unusually direct manner' ('Dialectic of Sincerity' n.p.). However, these maxims also resemble straight-up commands; for example

> That certain persons simply will not like you no matter what you do. That the most nonaddicted adult civilians have already absorbed and accepted this fact, often rather early on.
>
> That no matter how smart you thought you were, you are actually way less smart than that. (*Infinite Jest* 201).

Kelly asserts that these maxims 'are protected by an ironic (and Byronic) awareness of their fictional status' – that there is an 'unillusioned acknowledgement of formula, alongside a barely repressed hope or belief that such formula need not entirely negate the expression of

something genuine and real' – and yet when we consider that they take the form of orders, the claims for Wallace's 'undecidability' look spurious (n.p.).[28]

This is not to suggest that Wallace is being insincere in his manipulation: he is sincere in his belief that sincerity is an ethical virtue that appeals to our 'interhuman sameness'. However, it does infer that Wallace's expression of sincerity is a profoundly conservative position; in both the sense that it seeks to preserve the significance of the concepts that Wallace engages with, and in the political sense, in its privileging of the will of the individual controlling the text. 'Octet' is an attempt to impose limit on the potential chaos of metafiction, to encourage a return to 'real' concerns. Wallace, of course, is all too aware of the problem of individualism within his writing, as evinced by his career long exploration of solipsism, and yet he is finally unwilling – or unable to relinquish his authorial sovereignty. Indeed, this exposes a prominent contradiction within Wallace's philosophical position: an appeal to vague, universal abstracts (such as humanism), coupled with a desire to protect the singularities of the individual.[29] Kelly's optimistic vision of Wallace's 'dialogic appeal' to the other is thus confounded by 'Octet''s status as a monomaniacal monologue, with Wallace's totalitarian prose and logical method preaching to the collective 'you' of his readers of his universalist vision of a prior truth of 'interhuman sameness'.

Despite being conceived with an ethical, empathetic, communitarian goal in mind, Wallace's achievement of sincerity actually exposes a disturbingly right-wing ideology that encapsulates both the universalism of the New Right, and the individualism of the Old Right. In the opening stanza to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Walt Whitman famously proclaims that 'what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you' (2-3). Ward has noted that this is 'a democratic promise, but it is also a provocation…and its rhetoric sutures over trauma, just as the embrace of the word "United" inhibits the wriggling differences of individual "States"' (*Writing of America* 161). In Wallace's case, however,

with no mention of any atoms to be shared, we are left in the uneasy position of having to submit to his universal assumptions. The privileged position of the first-person narrator at the end of 'Octet' suggests that the conservation of the individual and the author is the real concern in Wallace's story – however uneasily this might sit with him – reflecting the need to preserve the self in order to express the self. Moreover, his thoughts on irony and sincerity in 'Octet' represent the province of a relatively elite caste of U.S. society; his proffered universalism only accessible (perhaps even comprehensible) to a select few. Indeed, Wallace's long-winded, maximalist syntax could be criticized for replicating the meandering ruminations of individuals with the luxuries of leisure time and education to invest in these all-consuming and yet ultimately petty concerns. As suggested in the Wampole article that opened this chapter, it is imperative that we recognize that 'ironic living is a first-world problem' (Wampole, n.p.); accordingly, even the very need *for* a New Sincerity might be the preserve of relatively empowered, educated, financially comfortable individuals seeking a lost sense of community through new and efficacious methods. This is achieved through the monomaniacal monologues of its proponents, which simultaneously convince readers of the solution to a problem, as they expose the very existence of that problem. It is not surprising that the authors associated with the New Sincerity are almost all male, white and heterosexual (as usual, Wallace was self-aware of this rebuttal, calling it 'the whole "great white male" deal' in an interview with Laura Miller [63]). This is not to deny the sincerity of Wallace's aims, or disagree when he posits that ironic living is a very real problem for an economically secure, culturally and intellectually under-stimulated swathe of postmodern U.S. society; Wallace is aware that 'this is the sort of shit we waste our lives thinking about' ('Good Old Neon' 177). However, although Wallace is successful in achieving a 'new' possibility of expressing sincerity, it exposes the underlying conservative, elitist, individualistic nature of both Wallace himself, and the concept of the New Sincerity as a whole. This reassertion of

the sovereign power of the author/individual, however, does not entail a move towards a libertarian society. Wallace could try to preserve the singularity of the individual, and yet still search for a model capable of subsuming the individual within the community of the nation, a project that would experience a further challenge from the promulgation of psychotherapy.

Chapter Two: 'A Real American Kind of Sadness': Wallace, Depression and Psychotherapy

In a foundational scene during the pilot episode of the HBO series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), Mafia boss Tony Soprano – in conversation with Dr. Jennifer Melfi after a presumed anxiety attack – decries the increasing popularity of psychoanalytic therapy amongst U.S. citizens: 'nowadays everybody's got to go to shrinks, and counsellors, and go on Sally Jessy Raphael and talk about their problems'. For Tony, the U.S. predisposition towards analysis of the self is particularly galling because it is suggestive of both emasculation and of national declension: being in touch with one's feelings is an anomaly that is somehow un-American and un-masculine, and incompatible with conventional models of identity. Tony wonders 'whatever happened to Gary Cooper? – the strong, silent type – *that* was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings, he just did what he had to do' (emphasis in original). Here Tony reverts to the stereotypical, Hollywood ideals of masculinity that inhere in images such as the cowboy – the taciturn, pragmatic (and violent) male as the paragon of 'real' 'Americanness' – as a corrective to the sensitive, verbose, and implicitly effete contemporary U.S. citizen. Tony's nostalgia for TV cowboys also tacitly attempts to valorise his own subject position – the similarly mediated stereotype of the gangster, with attendant connotations of domestic patriarchal authority due to being 'boss' of a 'family' – as authentically 'American'.

This scene may seem unexceptional as an indictment of contemporary masculinity, yet what is worth noting is that Tony emphasises his (brief) spell in higher education to give his opinions greater intellectual credibility, showing a familiarity with some of the conventions of psychoanalysis: 'I have a semester and a half of college, so I understand Freud, I understand therapy, as a *concept*…[but] in my world, it does not go down' (emphasis

in original). Almost immediately after this, moreover, in a symbolic moment that signals a fundamental shift in the complexity of Tony's character – indeed, a schism in the genre of television programming as a whole – Tony concedes to Dr. Melfi that he has been experiencing symptoms of depression. The all-but-untouchable 'made man' – powerful enough to be practically above the law – is shown to be just as vulnerable as anyone else, and crucially, his affliction is explicitly psychogenic. By season four – in an episode referentially entitled 'The Strong, Silent Type' – Tony has come to realise that it is he – as patient – who has come to embody the representative millennial American. Seated on his uncle's couch in a refraction of his analyst's chair, his uncle's nurse Svetlana provides an outsider's perspective on the 'the trouble with you Americans': 'you expect nothing bad ever to happen....You have everything and still you complain. You lie on couches and bitch to your psychiatrist; you got too much time to think about yourselves'. By this stage of the series, Tony accepts her accusation: 'sounds like me alright'. When even a TV Mafia boss has to attend therapy to contend with his anxiety and depression, then U.S. culture has clearly subsumed a concern with psychogenic ailments.

The Sopranos has become so ubiquitous within discussions of U.S. millennial culture that Gary Shtyengart has claimed that it is 'the definitive *fiction* of the early 21st century' ('The Novel, 2.0'; italics in original). If we combine this central place within the cultural imagination with the programme's overarching focus on psychotherapy, then this may suggest that therapy is one of the most dominant themes of the millennial era. Indeed, taking the period 1987-2004 as a rough timeframe coinciding with the first and last book-length publications of Wallace's fiction within his lifetime, we can quickly discern how prevalent the theme of psychotherapy was throughout U.S. literature, television, and film. Even if we limit ourselves to work by Wallace's acquaintances or those that we know he read, we can muster a fairly eclectic mix of titles to have tackled therapy, at least indirectly: *The Silence of*

the Lambs (1988) by Thomas Harris (featuring the infamous psychiatrist Dr. Lecter as anti-hero, and one of Wallace's favorite books); friend Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001); Wallace's ex-girlfriend, Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* (1994); poet (and another ex-girlfriend) Mary Karr's memoirs *The Liars' Club* (1995), and *Cherry* (2000); Rick Moody's novel *Garden State* (1992) and memoir *The Black Veil* (2002); *A Beautiful Mind* (1998), the biography of mathematician John Forbes Nash, by Sylvia Nasar (referred to in Wallace's essay 'Rhetoric and the Math Melodrama').

Of course, for fiction – indeed, art in general – to display an interest in psychology is in itself unremarkable; it may be that the possibility of glimpsing and identifying with the psyche of an other is one of the most alluring criterion of art. However, what distinguishes these recent texts is the varying degrees to which they engage with therapy itself. Since the 1961 translation of Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, there has been a marked increase in the number of novels willing to directly interrogate and criticize the methods of both diagnosing and treating psychogenic ailments; countercultural favourites *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey (1962) and Luke Rhinehart's *The Dice Man* (1971) being notable early examples. This cultural emphasis on psychogenic diseases is similarly evident in philosophy and critical theory. In particular – thanks to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Fredric Jameson and Jacques Lacan (amongst others) – schizophrenia has perhaps been the most dominant medical-critical term in the contemporary era. Indeed, despite the varying attributes that the aforementioned thinkers ascribe to the disease, schizophrenia is often taken to be a synonym for the stereotypical fragmented postmodern psyche struggling to cope with the loss of faith in language, grand narratives, and subjectivity. This contention is perhaps most evident in Jameson's influential proclamation in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991): 'when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and

unrelated signifiers' (26). However, since at least the mid-1990s, it would appear that depictions of depression and a reformulation of classical melancholia have become far more prominent psychological themes in popular culture, elevating these ailments to a position of prominence when attempting to diagnose a general postmodern psychological malaise, and opposing Deleuze and Guattari's claim that 'manic-depression and paranoia' were only products of the '*despotic* machine' (*Anti-Oedipus* 47; emphasis added). In the *Salon* interview by Laura Miller, Wallace expands upon his claim that *Infinite Jest* is 'real American' by avowing that the defining characteristic of the novel is that it is 'sad': 'the sadness that the book is about, and that I was going through [at the time of writing], was a real American type of sadness' (59). Wallace explicitly links this sadness to his position of privilege: 'I was white, upper-middle-class, obscenely well-educated, had had way more career success than I could have legitimately hoped for, and was sort of adrift' (59). Although aligning himself with the alienated and disaffected, the 'sadness' that Wallace identifies does not of course correspond to a universal American malaise; it would, however, be recognisable to a vast swathe of U.S. society (whether through direct identification or close affiliation): the moderately affluent, moderately educated, and moderately comfortable. Essentially, the 'sadness' that Wallace sees as endemic in the millennial United States is an amalgam of addiction, anhedonia, anomie, depression, melancholia, and solipsism.

As introduced in 'Octet', and inferred in Svetlana's disapproval of Tony having 'too much time' to think about himself, one characteristic of this millennial malaise is that it is specifically linked to the temporal, in this case a surplus amount of leisure time. Indeed, many of the problems that Wallace enumerates may be traced to the collapse of distinctions that Thorstein Veblen memorably theorised in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Rather than a dialectic predicated on a working-class esteem of labour juxtaposed with a leisure class's prominent evasion of it, by the 1990s there was a widespread shift towards an

equalisation of leisure time and the manner in which it was disposed of, realised through changing work practices and the accessibility of television. What is particularly distinctive about this contemporary incarnation of 'conspicuous leisure', however, is that it does not place nearly so much emphasis on performance. By sitting in front of a television and passively absorbing entertainment – as epitomized by the paralyzing effect of the *samizdat* in *Infinite Jest* – Wallace highlights the distinction between productive and non-productive leisure. Whereas the fin de siècle leisure class engaged in a modicum of production in their conspicuous evasion of labor, it is implied that watching television is of no benefit to society whatsoever, as it endorses consumption over production. Moreover, television exposes and conditions the viewer to the trap of ever-more insular and non-productive uses of time, as observed in the recurring spiral of thought that almost paralyses Chris Fogle in *The Pale King*, with his realisation that '*you're watching* As the World Turns' (224; italics in original). Although Wallace also often highlights the more conventional target of the conspicuous consumption of goods as a vapid and ethically abhorrent facet of millennial U.S. life, it is the seduction of leisure time and the potentially debilitating disposal of it that he depicts as truly dangerous. This has dire consequences for both society as a whole – due to social atomisation and the loss of a sense of civic responsibility – and (most pressingly, for Wallace) for the individual, who is left susceptible to addiction and paralysis.

Allard den Dulk proposes that this propensity can be best characterised as 'hyperreflexivity': a form of 'constant self-reflection, which is shown to easily take on excessive form, leading to gradual estrangement from the self and its relations to the world and other people' (*Existential Engagement* 19). Den Dulk suggests that whereas self-analysis following Socrates has often been 'regarded as a good thing, as the philosophical activity *par excellence*, precluding naiveté and forcing us to constantly re-evaluate our assumptions and judgements', contemporary U.S. novelists 'portray it as also potentially *damaging* to the self'

(27; italics in original). Further emphasising that it is an *excess* of reflexivity that is most threatening – it can quickly descend into paralysing, cyclical levels of self-analysis that may complicate interaction with others, and, eventually, functionality more generally – den Dulk posits five factors which have contributed to the rise of this phenomena: 'living in a post-traditional order' (29); the 'pluralisation of life-worlds' (30); the 'contextual nature of warranted beliefs' (31); the 'prevalence of mediated experience' (32); the 'transformation of intimacy' (34). While these socio-cultural transitions have undeniably contributed to the growing proclivity towards hyperreflexivity, den Dulk fails to note that one of the most prominent catalysts – indeed, one of the requirements – of hyperreflexivity is a large amount of disposable leisure time. As shown in the conflation of watching television with a potentially paralyzing moment of self-analysis noted in the example of Chris Fogle, the undemanding, self-referential nature of unproductive leisure time associated with watching television is reflected in the propensity for an excessive amount of self-analysis. What also contributes to hyperreflexivity, is a predisposition towards psychotherapeutic discourse and treatment.

Therapeutic Discourse

Boswell has highlighted that one of Wallace's 'characteristic themes' is 'the impact on our collective consciousness of therapeutic discourse writ large' (*Understanding* 182). Ever-mindful of Wallace's concern for self-preservation, however, it is instead more profitable to examine his exploration of how the reification and commodification of this discourse and its attendant theories have had an impact on the individual, rather than on the 'collective consciousness'. In 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young' (1988), his early essay on the challenges of writing fiction in a marketplace increasingly dominated by

MFA programmes, Wallace makes an explicit target of 'Workshop Hermeticism' for its reliance on 'no character without Freudian trauma in accessible past, without near-diagnostic physical description' (40). In highlighting the influence of Freud (and by extension, Lacan) on contemporary U.S. fiction, Wallace laments the ease with which characters can be aligned with psychoanalytic stereotypes, such as the male who longs for his mother; the male who challenges the authority of his father; barely concealed homoerotic desire, and so on.[30] This argument can easily be levelled at Wallace himself, as many of his characters seem to be thinly veiled manifestations of Freudian personalities. In particular, Rick Vigorous and Andrew 'Wang Dang' Lang from *The Broom of the System* (1987) connote stereotypes of varying degrees of sexual potency, whilst the Incandenza brothers from *Infinite Jest* can be read as manifestations of various stages of psychological development.[31] However, it is important to note that Wallace bemoans contemporary fiction for deliberately creating characters with these specific theories in mind; an unimaginative, unsubtle method of choreographing readers' responses to a character. In Wallace's opinion, this results in two-dimensional, interchangeable characters who then confer an overarching 'sameness' upon different writers' work.

> In a 1993 interview with Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, Wallace claimed that
>
> one of the weaknesses in [*The Broom of the System*] is that a lot of the characters seem to have the same voice: Rick Vigorous sort of sounds like David Bloemker who sort of sounds like Norman Bombardini and even Lenore's father. A lot of that is a parody of intellectual prose. (13)

Read alongside the earlier essay, it would seem naïve to take Wallace at his word regarding his perceived 'weakness' in conflating characters' voices. Instead, Wallace would seem to be dramatizing both a 'parody of intellectual prose' and a pastiche of the prose manufactured in MFA workshops. Moreover, this loss of differentiation implicitly criticises the idea of a discourse permeating the 'collective consciousness…writ large', and is a subtle rejoinder

towards the academic tendency to portray 'theory' as a unified, homogenizing force, instead of a multi-faceted, complex influence on literature. Adam Kelly has perceptively noted that 'in many of Wallace's stories, the dominant linguistic register is drawn from a pre-established discourse, and Wallace writes from "within" that discourse, shaping his style around its exaggeration, parody, and dissolution' ('Critical Reception' 57). On one hand, this tactic may be seen as negative, leaving Wallace's protagonists as little more than mouthpieces for ideas, rather than fully-realised characters. However, in Kelly's opinion, the result of this is that the protagonists are often 'constituted…through the frame of a language that tends towards abstraction and determinism, a language that the reader encounters in the process of its deconstruction' (57). Wallace's satirical employment of discourse, then, is designed to show its inadequacy when meaningfully constructing a subject; the reification of psychotherapeutic discourse has precluded the specificity of individual experience, resulting in a language that can only be applied to a uniform mass.

It is interesting to note then that several scholars have been keen to align Wallace's fiction – particularly *Infinite Jest* – with prominent theories of psychoanalysis. Marshall Boswell, for example, contends that 'a cogent interpretation of *Infinite Jest* first entails a brief encounter with Lacanian theory'; in particular his famous theory of the 'mirror stage' (*Understanding* 128). For Boswell, the influential 'anaclitic infant' section of *Infinite Jest* (692-698) is an indictment of the contemporary tendency to long for a 'pre-mirror-stage' infantile existence as a corrective to adult anhedonia. Similarly, Catherine Toal highlights *Infinite Jest*'s thematic preoccupation with melancholia, citing the novel as part of a recent trend within contemporary U.S. literature alongside works by Franzen and Moody. For Toal, these authors' melancholia is betrayed in the way they criticise and yet concurrently show nostalgia for outmoded forms of cultural authority ('discipline', 'the patriarchal father') in a

double-bind that she suggests is symptomatic of a wider crisis in masculinity. In her reading,

Infinite Jest fails, because

> Wallace's novel repeatedly dramatizes the redundancy of fatherly authority, but nonetheless conceives of human existence as a constricting grid of disciplines. In counterpoising to this grid an utterly shapeless…"humanness," he promotes identification with the kind of creature who would in fact be most susceptible to the imposing force of the technologies and dependencies he delineates. (320)

Wallace is thus framed as hypocritical for exposing the redundancy of a system of authority

and yet failing to suggest an adequate means of progressing from that model; his characters

prove extremely susceptible to the larger socio-cultural, political, and economic forces and

superstructures that Toal suggests he has set out to challenge. Mary K. Holland also sees the

novel as culminating in a desire for an effective parental authority figure ('Art's Heart's

Purpose' 239), but avers that the novel's chief concern is with narcissism rather than

depression. Similar to Boswell, Holland suggests that Wallace is effective at diagnosing the

cause of his characters' malaise, but is unable to finally break free of the conventions that he

has exposed; both Hal Incandenza and Don Gately succumb to the 'image of the abandoned

child full of fear and need' (236) that Wallace is disparaging of, whether through choice

(Hal), or incapacitation (Gately). Holland suggests that

> although the novel argues unmistakably that instinctive desire for infantile fulfilment both contributes to the pathological narcissism that adults fall into and continues to be an unspoiled hope despite the impossibility of its fulfilment, the novel remains ambivalent about how best to treat this problem. (231)

However, where Boswell contends that Wallace does offer the tentative possibility of

transcendence in the figure of Mario Incandenza – 'the one truly human figure in the novel'

(*Understanding* 158) – Holland argues that even he 'inhabits a thoroughly marginalized role

throughout the narrative' due to his 'vast collection of physical deformities' ('Art's Heart's

Purpose' 230).

Mirroring Boswell's somewhat contingent avowal of Mario as a role-model, Elizabeth

Freudenthal suggests that the novel does offer a solution for contemporary psychological

problems, chiefly through the adoption of a position of anti-interiority. This stance rejects

both 'essentialist notion[s] of inner emotional, psychological, and spiritual life' and

'oppressive political, economic, and social forces' in favour of an 'anti-interior selfhood

[that] exists as a paradoxically dynamic thinghood between material and subjective realms'

('Anti-interiority' 192). In Freudenthal's formulation, the thematic concerns of *Infinite Jest* –

solipsism, addiction, and consumption – prompt us to resist the impulse to indulge in interior

modes of thinking, and instead embrace compulsive materialism; it is only through a focus on

corporeal and biomedical subjectivity that we can reconstitute the self in the wake of

poststructuralism. With a similar focus on the corporeal and a rejection of interiority, N.

Katherine Hayles attempts a reading of *Infinite Jest* that seeks to employ Julia Kristeva's

theory of the abject. In a corruption of Kristeva's principle, Hayles conceptualises abjection

as 'an attempt to preserve the autonomy of the self in the face of an unavoidable

confrontation with interconnection' ('Illusion of Autonomy' 685).[32] For Hayles, *Infinite*

Jest's many representations of abjection point to the subject's desire to purge the self of

external influence: 'the self clings to its precious autonomy' (685). Although Hayles is not

advocating a narcissistic or solipsistic existence – 'authenticity in this vision is not about

escaping from the realm of the social, but rather about recognizing the profound

interconnections that bind us all together' (696) – her reading nonetheless unconsciously

mirrors Dr. Jay's parodic 'hygiene anxiety' from *The Broom of the System* in the way that it

seeks to resist outside forces that threaten to 'poke through the membrane' of the self (*Broom*

of the System 136). Although these psychoanalytic readings of Wallace's work are insightful,

and offer compelling and enlightening explorations of his fiction, what unites them is that

they all seek to draw cures from within his texts. These critics are then often frustrated when

they find that there is no explicit panacea on offer, especially when they task themselves with extrapolating heroic fragments of character from Hal Incandenza and Don Gately, with the goal of beatifying them as figures to be idolised. Perhaps most importantly, these critiques are written from *within* the same psychotherapeutic paradigm that Wallace is in fact attempting to criticise, failing to recognise that it is the discourse of psychotherapy that is Wallace's chief target.

'Individual Dramas'

Since Foucault's seminal *Madness and Civilization*, the tendency when investigating the role of psychotherapy in contemporary culture has been to highlight its role in pathologizing difference and encouraging conformity. In particular, the pathologization of mental disorders that were formerly seen as moods or elemental bodily imbalances, and the increase in patients undergoing psychotherapy, are often taken to be manifestations of late-capitalism's homogenizing impulse to figure everyone as consumers. Moreover, to confound matters, psychotherapy itself has become increasingly commodified, echoing Jameson's now ubiquitous assertion that there has been 'a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas' (*Postmodernism* 36). In Franzen's *The Corrections*, for example, one character suggests that

> the structure of the entire culture is flawed….The bureaucracy has arrogated the right to define certain states of mind as "diseased." A lack of desire to spend money becomes a symptom of disease that requires expensive medication….The very definition of mental "health" is the ability to participate in the consumer economy. When you buy into therapy, you're buying into buying. (*The Corrections* 35-36)

Here the act of enforcing standards of mental health mirrors two interrelated objectives of late-capitalist ideology: the stigmatization of difference and corresponding desire for uniformity that is to be ingrained in the consumer; and the commercialization of the

therapeutic process itself. Therapy, it is implied, is ostensibly only implemented to reinvigorate consumers' capacity for consumption (Franzen singles out psychiatric and psychoanalytic therapy for blame here, but his insight is equally applicable to the pharmaceutical industrial complex). To break this down into a more pithy formulation: a patient is convinced to pay money to be rehabilitated as someone who is more likely to spend money on the things that society deems it 'normal' for them to buy, further entrenching the central place that consumption has in our daily lives.

An anxiety over the pervasive economic and cultural reach of late capitalism with regards to psychotherapy is symptomatic of its wider homogenization of forms of cultural production, as evinced by Colin Harrison's discussion of Franzen, who he claims was writing at a time 'when a writer's views no longer had the power to mobilize debate, and when consumerism threatened to annihilate the significance of individual dramas, along with specificities of place' (*American Culture* 43). Whereas Harrison's assessment highlights the macroscopic implications of psychotherapy's prevalence in millennial culture, however, Wallace's focus was on its microscopic effects on 'individual dramas', thereby resisting the large-scale erasure of the particularities of depression. Rather than just emphasizing the economic impact, Wallace instead exposes the detrimental influence that psychotherapy's widespread dissemination has had on subjective consciousness and self-awareness, intensifying the crisis in the notion of an authentic self.

Franzen too, was able to anticipate Harrison's analysis. In his famous *Harper's* essay on the fate of the social novel, he questions the ability of the writer to offer critique:

> the American writer today faces a cultural totalitarianism analogous to the political totalitarianism with which two generations of Eastern bloc writers had to contend. To ignore it is to court nostalgia. To engage with it, however, is to risk writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine.… ('Why Bother?' 69)

Instead Franzen posits a contemporary 'shift from depressive realism to tragic realism – from being immobilized by darkness to being sustained by it' (93), highlighting the importance of engaging with depression. Whereas Harrison's denunciation of a triumphant consumerism suggests nostalgia for a pre-lapsarian literature uncorrupted by commerce, Franzen recognizes that this idealization is false, highlighting the career of Herman Melville as an example of how the production of U.S. literature has in fact always been in conflict with market forces. The subsequent 'realization that my condition was not a disease but a nature. How could I *not* feel estranged? I was a *reader*' (94), reinvigorates Franzen's sense of individuality, and installs within him an optimistic 'surge of hope' (96). Although Franzen attests to the primacy of his subjectivity in his rejection of homogenizing pathologization and his appeal to an essential authenticity, his claims nonetheless resort to the macroscopic in their implicit belief in the sustaining power of a larger community. Franzen here echoes the age-old tension inherent in trying to find a meaningful place for the individual in society, a literary and political conundrum as old as the U.S. itself.

Wallace seeks to interrogate 'the consequences, for persons, of the *practice* of *theory*' ('Empty Plenum' 78; italics in original). However, for Wallace – unlike Franzen – reading (and by extension, knowledge) does not always necessarily represent a cure and allow for empathy, but in many ways ends up complicating the situation further. As one's awareness and knowledge of the conventions of psychotherapy increases, one loses the sense of one's singularity. Additionally, Wallace's depictions of psychogenic dilemmas not only suggest fundamental problems for constructing and/or imagining subjectivity, but have profound implications for aesthetic expressions of authenticity and sincerity. Rather than framing the profusion of depression and melancholia as a consequence of an increasing exposure to and awareness of postmodern epistemological uncertainty, Wallace explores how this awareness interacts with melancholia, resulting in a hybrid, cyclical state of consciousness and

depression that becomes self-sustaining. This, coupled with the widespread adoption of a vapid psychotherapeutic discourse that has only served to highlight the inadequacy of that discourse in representing a subject's depression in a singular, efficacious manner, foregrounds the difficulties of an individual ever achieving true empathy with an other or feeling that they belong to a community.

Moreover, Wallace's elitist tendencies – his propensity for academic foot- or end-notes and insouciant verbiage – further complicate this desire for empathy despite being often excused by scholars; his idiosyncratic style is instead heralded for its mimetic relationship to life in the 'information age' and for encouraging the reader to actively work at the process of reading. Perhaps this argument is compelling with regards to the gratifying and often hilarious task of unpacking his opus, *Infinite Jest*, but when he employs these contrivances within a psychological idiom, the reader is struck by the overt narcissism of his narrators, frequently resulting in disgust (as in 'The Depressed Person', 'Good Old Neon', and the eponymous 'Hideous Men'). Therefore, Wallace's dramatization of narcissism and depression is an example of a peculiarity running through his work – and one that deserves more critical attention: a brave and commendable willingness to undertake examinations of affective psychological states that we find repulsive (see for instance his widely noted engagement with boredom in *The Pale King*). Of course, this results in a perverse challenge for Wallace: how do you depict boredom without boring your readers? Or, in reference to his characters that require therapy: how are readers to emphasize with characters that are antipathetic? In his systematic working through of the problems of authorial sincerity in 'Octet', Wallace alighted on a method that at least suggested the possibility of him being taken as sincere. His myriad layers of self-referentiality and anticipation of readers' responses, structurally reflected in his protracted, cyclical sentences and footnoted explications, instantiated an aesthetics of sincerity that resisted easy synthesis, preserving his

concepts within 'horizons of significance' that encourage us to continue a discussion about them in critical dialogue. Applying this aesthetic of sincerity to a narrator or character consumed with conflicting narcissism and self-doubt, however, is a different matter. Wallace's alienating style narratologically dramatizes a key problem: of what use is a tentative – or even successful – avowal of authenticity if that character appears so repellent that they cannot be empathetically integrated into society?

'The Bad Thing is you': 'The Planet Trillaphon'

It is remarkable, in tracing Wallace's changing depictions of melancholia chronologically, to note the extent that it corresponds to a rough genealogy in the evolution of medical thought. It is almost as if Wallace was methodically trying out different medical discourses to see if any were suitable for authentically representing the subject. Starting with the short story 'The Planet Trillaphon As It Stands In Relation To The Bad Thing' (1984) – Wallace's earliest published piece of work – and his first novel *The Broom of the System*, we can discern a tendency to portray melancholia and depression in physical terms, as materially located in the body. With *Infinite Jest*, Wallace introduces the idea of melancholia as an externally generated phenomenon, with some of the key themes – machines, ghosts, and abjection – echoing a differed or displaced subjectivity. The transition from *Infinite Jest* to *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* – characterized by a more pronounced shift away from perceived technological challenges to humanism (as in Hal's constant anxiety at becoming more machine-like) towards more ethical concerns (such as the difficulty of empathy in 'Octet' and the status of the gift in 'The Devil is a Busy Man') – saw Wallace locating melancholia in the mind, a theme he continued in *Oblivion*. It is here that we can see Wallace's fully realised yet intensely claustrophobic depiction of thought processes, and the

recognition that it might be meditating on the awareness of consciousness that can propound feelings of inescapable melancholy, the divulgence of which meditations can actually distance the sufferer from empathy rather than acting as a cure as conventional perceptions of psychoanalysis would have it. As Wallace writes in 'The Suffering Channel': 'CONSCIOUSNESS IS NATURE'S NIGHTMARE' (282).

'The Planet Trillaphon As It Stands In Relation To The Bad Thing' may be the earliest published example of Wallace's fiction – appearing when he was just twenty-two – but that does not mean it should be dismissed as mere juvenilia. Indeed, the story introduces many of Wallace's key themes and idiosyncrasies, including depression, drugs, educational and medical institutionalization, a keen eye for colloquial syntax, and an inconclusive ending (like *The Broom of the System*, this happens mid-sentence). 'The Planet Trillaphon' takes the form of a first-person monologue from a twenty-one year old narrator, retrospectively informing the reader of a number of events – including a 'highly ridiculous' suicide attempt – leading up to his being prescribed the anti-depressant Tofranil (the narrator prefers the name 'Trillaphon' because it sounds 'more trilly and electrical, and it just sounds more like what it's like to be there' [33]). The narrator's depression is particularly notable for being described in physical terms:

> imagine feeling really sick to your stomach….Imagine your whole body being sick like that….Imagine that every cell in your body, every single cell in your body is as sick as that nauseated stomach….Now imagine that every single *atom* in every single cell in your body is sick like that, intolerably sick. And every proton and neutron in every atom….Just imagine that, a sickness spread utterly through every bit of you, even the bits of the bits. (29; italics in original)

Instead of giving 'a long gory account of all the cute neuroses that more less around that time began to pop up all over the inside of my brain' (27), the narrator chooses to give depression a firmly corporeal locus, each successive layer of atomisation entrenching the implacability of the depression still further. In doing so, the narrator echoes the beliefs of the earliest

physicians, who theorized depression as an excess of black bile that was contained in the body.

Clark Lawlor's history of depression, *From Melancholia to Prozac*, avers that physical metaphors not only applied to depression, but to forms of psychosis: 'the classical "black sun" of depression connected the metaphorical and literal connections of melancholia with the dark innards of the human body and the black bile said to cause general madness, not merely melancholia', instantiating an important link between forms of psychosis and the intestines (28). Lawlor identifies the Greek physician Galen as one of the first to posit a theory of mental illness, predicated on the four 'humours' within the body, of which melancholia was thought to be caused by an excess of black bile. With regards to 'Planet Trillaphon', we can discern how the narrator represents melancholia as a sickness of the stomach, before extending the metaphor to the atomic level. When read alongside Lawlor's explication of an internal 'black bile', it is telling that the narrator rejects the notion of it being an external phenomenon. He describes how

> some people say it's like having always and under you a huge black hole without a bottom, a black, black hole, maybe with vague teeth in it, and then your being part of the hole, so that you fall even when you stay where you are. (28-29)

In contrast to this, the narrator contends that the truly terrifying aspect of depression is the realization that it is inescapable: 'you realize *you're* the hole, nothing else' (29; italics in original). Thus, the narrator frames his depression not only within the body as opposed to the mind, but as something that is an intrinsic part of his own identity – an 'individual drama' – rather than a product of external socio-cultural forces. This affirmation of the singularity of the narrator's depression may constitute a form of resistance to the pathologization of difference.

One of the most famous depictions of contemporary depression is Elizabeth Wurtzel's best-selling memoir *Prozac Nation* (1994). Wurtzel is keen to emphasise the macrocosmic influence of depression, claiming that: 'it has become clear that depression is no longer just a private, psychological matter. It is, in fact, a social problem, and an entire culture of depression has developed around it' (308). Although Wurtzel finds a perverse 'beautiful honesty to [her] depressed state' that somehow seems to authenticate her subjectivity through a 'disregard for convention' (217), a far more common consequence of this 'culture of depression' is that as depression has become pathologised it has also become standardised, acquiring a plethora of cultural expectations and semiotic codes, and a vast critical vocabulary that has become so culturally pervasive as to be rendered banal and devoid of meaning. As Wallace puts it in 'Good Old Neon': it has 'added some useful vocabulary and concepts to the way we all had to talk to each other to fit in and sound a certain way' (142). This notion of 'fitting in' has provoked Elizabeth Freudenthal to advance what she terms 'the medical objectification of subjectivity', which has resulted in a corresponding decline in the significance given to singular experience ('Anti-interiority' 193). The homogenization of an intensely personal and singular disease has had a wider effect on the notion of the authenticity of a subject: if we can identify certain psychogenic processes as somehow abnormal and in need of medical correction, then can we indeed qualify what 'normal' means? Closely related to this theme, Kenneth Millard's analysis of *Prozac Nation* and Peter Kramer's *Listening to Prozac* (1993) wonders whether what is being queried in these texts is 'what the self is, how can we know it, and how we can assess or evaluate departures from what are deemed to be its authentic characteristics. In short, from where does one recover a concept of authentic being?' (*Coming of Age* 169). In 'Planet Trillaphon' at least, Wallace would seem to do so not only by firmly re-establishing depression physically within the subject along classical lines, but by figuring the subject *as* the depression.

At the end of the paragraph in which the narrator describes his depression as a sickness, he goes on to unify depression and himself: 'your very…very *essence* is characterised by nothing other than the feature of sickness; you and the sickness are, as they say, "one"' ('Planet Trillaphon' 29; italics in original). Although not used in a positive sense – the narrator is attempting to show the all-encompassing nature of his depression – in subsuming the disease the narrator achieves a semblance of 'authentic being' by resisting the homogenizing effects of psychopharmaceutical drugs and discourse. The narrator instead guarantees the singularity of both his disease and his subjectivity by framing his depression in ontological terms: '*you're* the Bad Thing yourself! The Bad Thing is you….You are the sickness yourself. It is what "defines" you' (29; italics in original).

Although this synthesis of depression and the subject would at first appear to suggest a recovered corporeal ideal of 'authentic being', this hypothesis becomes problematic when we examine the challenges that are created by attempting to represent the body authentically. In a thought-provoking essay on sincerity and the art of the counter-reformation, June Taylor highlights the case of Protestant heretic John Frith, who 'denied the Eucharist its literal status as body and blood of Christ' (23). For Taylor, this moment not only has huge implications for Christianity, it also has massive repercussions for economics and, most importantly, linguistics. Taylor explains:

> Just as the totemic link between the body and the bread is broken through the renunciation of transubstantiation, so in similar terms there has been a severing of the allegedly natural bond between a word and the thing it represents….A new representational order is coming into being, one that will allow for paper money to stand for gold, and that will distribute the production of value across a system, where integers are reconceived in relational rather than in essential terms. As has been noted by Foucault, signification is being invented' (23)

'Planet Trillaphon' is notable for featuring a number of covert allusions to Christianity, all characterised by a twin-layer of signification: the signification in the text that refers to Christian imagery, and the referents themselves, which are further signifiers for Christian

concepts. Early in the narrative, for example, the narrator imagines a wound on his face which later on becomes a '*real* wound' when doctors have to extract the botched stitches that he has self-administered; an allusion to the phenomenon of the stigmata, itself signifying the wounds that Christ received on the cross ('Planet Trillaphon' 26). Later, the narrator witnesses the driver of his bus dying after they collide with a truck, and claims 'it was like I'd symbolically killed myself or something' (30), before conflating the driver, his depression, and himself as 'all three of us the same thing' in a quasi-Holy Trinity, a reference to the supposed tripartite existence of God (note also the punning homophonic reference to the 'holiday spirit'). This is immediately followed by the narrator's suicide attempt – on Christmas Eve no less – that takes place in the bath, in a farcical rendering of a baptism, itself a symbolic ritual that admits an initiate into the Christian faith. These allusions could all too easily be taken as unsubtle juvenile imagery, and yet they take on added significance when we consider Taylor's 'new representational order', and that the story is concerned with issues of authentic representation or legitimization of the body; the three referents – the stigmata, the Holy Trinity, and the sacrament of baptism – all confer a semblance of holy bodily authenticity. Where Taylor's essay locates the birth of signification in the refusal to take the Eucharist as a literal embodiment of Christ, Wallace makes use of easily-recognisable Christian allusions to highlight the problems of representation: if we successfully identify the Christian signification of the narrator's experiences, we are still left with the existence of those Christian rituals and symbols as mere significations in themselves. The reasons for the narrator locating his depression in his body, indeed defining him, become clear: by situating depression thus, the narrator can escape the problem of having to deal with contaminated means of signification, instead – in a reversal of Descartes' famous formulation – insisting on his own body as guarantor of his subjectivity (indeed, the narrator makes an explicit reference to Descartes on page 28).[33]

At the conclusion of the story the narrator's depression seems to have been temporarily alleviated by his antidepressants: he has become a 'resident of the Planet Trillaphon…too far away to be super-troubled' (33). This does of course introduce questions regarding how in touch with reality he remains. However, the distance that the narrator has put between himself and his depression is of course negated by his earlier identification with the disease: 'being far away sort of helps with respect to the Bad Thing. Except that is just highly silly when you think about what I said before concerning the fact that the Bad Thing is really […]' (33). Far from being just an early example of Wallace's trademark 'distant, interrogative ending[s]' ('Borges' 290), his use of elision here has important ramifications for issues of representation. Perhaps the most prominent example of Wallace's preference for open-ended conclusions is in *The Broom of the System*: '"You can trust me," R.V. says, watching her hand. "I'm a man of my […]' (467). This has prompted some disagreement amongst scholars, with Marshall Boswell on one hand affirming that the conclusion reflects Wallace's borrowing of entropy from Pynchon: 'the novel ends with a blank space. The system remains open' (*Understanding* 63). On the other hand, Adam Kelly contends that 'because there is no real ambiguity concerning the next word in the sentence, the reader's agency is in fact negated. There is thus a gesture toward an open system and a readerly dialogue, rather than an achievement of it' ('Development' 273).[34] With regards to Wallace's ending to 'Planet Trillaphon', we can quickly discern that there is similarly little ambiguity surrounding what the last word might be; it is surely 'me'. This omission is of central importance, however, when we realise that although we know what the narrator is attempting to put across, he is unable to articulate what 'the Bad Thing is really'; he is, in other words, unable to authentically represent himself. Moreover, it is highly significant that it is only after deciding to take pharmaceuticals that the narrator becomes embroiled in therapeutic discourse and subsequently loses his subjectivity; psychotherapy is therefore implicated in the erasure

of singular experience. An attempt to situate depression within the body may shield the narrator's subjectivity from external homogenizing forces for a time, and in doing so guarantee a semblance of individual experience, but he is finally unable to achieve an expression of authentic selfhood. To conflate the previous readings of *Broom*, then, and apply them to 'The Planet Trillaphon'; we can guess what the final word is intended to be, but the failure to render that word results in the textual system (and by extension, the narrator's body system) ultimately remaining open, allowing contamination by external forces.

'The Outside is Getting In': *The Broom of the System*

This concern with the influence of the external versus the internal is also prominent throughout Wallace's first novel – *The Broom of the System* – in the hilarious pastiche of therapy that is purveyed by Dr. Curtis Jay. Jay is a disciple of Olaf Blentner, 'the pioneer of hygiene anxiety research' (120), a branch of analysis that equates hygiene anxiety with identity anxiety. In this comic formulation, the 'Outside' forces penetrate the 'Inside' of the self, resulting in feelings of uncleanliness:

> the Outside is getting in. The heat is the Outside. It's getting in, because the Inside's *broken*….And what does it make you do? You *sweat*. You're hot and you sweat. What does the Outside do? It makes you *unclean*. It coats Self with Other. It pokes at the membrane. And if the membrane is what makes you you and the not-you not you, what does that say about you, when the not-you begins to poke through the membrane? (136; italics in original)

Although framed in terms of entropic heat loss and identity politics, this philosophy has at its root issues of linguistic representation and misunderstanding. As Jay explains: 'it makes *you*, the "you," *nonsecure*, not tightly fastened into your side of the membrane. So what happens? Communications break down….Things don't mean what they mean' (136; italics in original).

This crisis of representation, the potential for misunderstanding, is the central theme of the novel.

Wallace himself notes that 'the entire book is a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida' (*Becoming Yourself* 35), and Marshall Boswell has undertaken valuable analysis of this aspect of the novel, arguing that this particular scene represents Wallace's avowal of his preference for Wittgensteinian 'language games' over Derrida's 'play of differences'. Boswell describes how 'a language-game in Wittgenstein must be played by more than one participant, whereas "play" in Derrida is a dynamic property of language itself' (29), suggesting that language for Derrida can only create meaning through the 'play' between different signifiers – a 'closed system' – whereas with Wittgenstein language remains an 'open system' where meaning is created through the game of (mis)understanding other people.[35] Boswell highlights how

> a break in the closed system causes disorder, that is, the potential for misunderstanding. At the same time, this potential for misunderstanding is also linked to *freedom* and multiplicity of meaning, whereas a closed system provides either order and no potential for work, or disorder and ultimate heat death. (*Understanding* 59-60; italics in original)

According to this reading, the penetration of our 'membrane' – 'permeable via *misunderstanding*' (*Broom* 137) – enables a radical potentiality, a means of overcoming a solipsistic world view by interaction with others. Dr. Jay's identification of the causes of anxiety reflects a wider propensity in the millennial U.S. to resist engaging with others. However, if the penetration is by discourse, then it impinges on the singular construction of the self.

Although this model is applied to semiotic theory, it proves to have equal efficacy for the homogeneity of psychotherapy. Whereas the narrator of 'Planet Trillaphon' sought yet ultimately failed to express authentic subjectivity by amalgamating his depression and

melancholia in the body, in *The Broom of the System* and later works Wallace continued to search for possibilities for individuality despite the ubiquity of psychotherapy. In the homogenization of psychotherapeutic culture the singularity of individual cases is lost, and the concomitant supposition of standards of normalcy for myriad subjects poses profound challenges to expressing an authentic self. To quote the infamous anti-psychiatry of R.D. Laing (a notable influence on Wallace): 'it is just possible… to know…just about everything that can be known about the psychopathology of schizophrenia or of schizophrenia as a disease without being able to understand one single schizophrenic' (*Divided Self* 33). Psychotherapy would claim to penetrate the membrane of the psyche, creating the potential for meaning and a corresponding alleviation or exposition of symptoms. In contemporary literature, however, psychotherapeutic discourse has become so vapid and ubiquitous that it has become devoid of efficacious meaning. Instead, it poses a paradoxical *challenge* to the subject; a challenge that *Infinite Jest*'s Hal attempts to respond to by asserting his individuality at the start of the novel: 'I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex' (11). As Wallace writes in *The Broom of the System*: 'we are helpless and inefficacious as parts of a system…until we recognize the existence of that system' (333), however, speaking from within a discourse of psychotherapy would seem to limit that potential. In the words of Laing: 'as a psychiatrist, I run into a major difficulty at the outset: how can I go straight to the patients if the psychiatric words at my disposal keep the patient at a distance from me?' (18). In terms more germane to this study, how can I achieve empathy with others and embrace the 'Outside' whilst expressing my 'Inside' without exposing my 'Inside' to corruption by the 'Outside'? How can I authentically present and preserve the self?

In *Broom*, Lenore expresses her anxiety that 'all that's happening now is that a thoroughly screwed-up life that's barely hung together is now even less well hung together'

(117). Dr. Jay responds: 'so the woman is worried that her life is not "well hung"', in a clear parody of Freudian symbolisation. Lenore's own retort – 'go suck a rock' – reveals her preconditioned skepticism towards anything that resembles psychoanalysis. Furthermore, her arbitrary choice of metaphorical referent – a rock – cleverly exemplifies the collapse of conventional modes of representation, a break in Derrida's chain of signifiers that privileges Wittgenstein's language game.[36] Similarly, in 'Planet Trillaphon' the narrator cannot authentically represent the self, and yet Wallace's fiction dramatizes how the language of psychotherapy is not a viable option either. Millard has characterised this conundrum as 'meta-depression': 'a conflation of depression and author-anxiety' (178). In Wallace's terms, this feeling arises when the subject is singularly aware of the psychogenic origins and psychotropic results of their depression, but is also aware of the psychotherapeutic methods that are supposed to deal with it. The ensuing cycle of depression, self-diagnosis, anticipation of professional diagnosis, actual diagnosis, and the inadequacy of psychotherapeutic discourse to alleviate these symptoms, creates a spiralling sense of fraudulence and inauthenticity within the subject. In her analysis of Franzen, Moody, and Wallace, Toal criticised the authors for their 'sustained engagements with the popular lexicons of mental health' because they evinced 'an incapacity to claim a robust critical authority – one that might imagine identities which escape the designations of self-help jargon' (306). For Wallace, at least, this is in fact a distillation of his aim, not a failing: his fiction enacts a criticism of the inescapability of psychotherapeutic discourse through its very inescapability. This leaves Wallace to investigate: what happens when the language of psychotherapy becomes co-opted by those it is meant to benefit?

Authentic Subjectivity vs. Fraudulent Subjectivity.

After *Infinite Jest*'s James O. Incandenza improbably commits suicide by placing his head in a microwave oven and switching it on, resulting in his head exploding, his youngest son Hal attends grief counselling at the behest of his mother. Untroubled by shock or trauma, Hal's reaction to his father's death does not 'satisfy' the expectations of his grief counsellor, and so he turns to a library's grief section in an attempt to find strategies to placate the doctor: 'I just could not figure out what the guy wanted' (253). As Hal explains, 'I went in and presented with textbook-perfect symptoms of denial, bargaining, anger, still more denial, depression….I even tried telling him I really didn't feel anything' (253), but to no avail. However, Lyle – the E.T.A.'s resident levitating, sweat-licking guru – offers Hal a 'key insight', prompting the realization that:

> I'd been approaching the issue from the wrong side. I'd gone to the library and acted like a *student* of grief. What I needed to chew through was the section for grief-professionals *themselves*….I needed to emphasize with the grief-therapist. (254-255; italics in original)

After this eureka moment, Hal adopts a different tack: his 'overall demeanour' becomes 'paroxysmic', and he acquires the language of therapy, now 'subtly inserting certain loaded professional-grief-therapy terms like *validate*, *process* as a transitive verb, and *toxic guilt*' into conversation (255; italics in original). Hal's adoption of psychotherapeutic discourse – becoming 'harnessed to a therapeutic jargon' (Toal 316) – proves to be the turning point in his relationship with his counsellor, even though this is achieved in a comical breakthrough: 'it wasn't my fault that my first unconscious thought turned out to be…*that something smelled delicious!*' (256; italics in original). Hal's ironic awareness and use of the expectations and conventions of the therapy aimed at helping him throws into sharp relief the inadequacy of psychotherapy to achieve efficacious results in the wake of the contemporary cultural profusion of psychoanalysis. What makes this already complicated state of affairs even more problematic, however, is Hal's tendency to lie or misrepresent. At the start of the novel he cryptically announces: 'I am not what you see and hear' (13). On one hand, this may

be taken as an affirmation of a deeper essence beyond surface expressions of identity. On the other, it may point towards an Iago-like capacity for subterfuge. In the grief-therapy section, for example, Hal's eldest brother Orin notes that Hal's claim that he 'didn't feel anything' 'was a fiction' (253). Hal replies 'of course it was a fiction', and yet two pages later asserts that 'I told him [the grief-therapist] I'd told him that I didn't feel anything, which was the truth' (255). What the truth 'is', here – whether not feeling anything is the truth, or whether the act of telling is – is ambiguous. This is given even more prominence as a result of Hal's self-comparison with his other brother Mario: 'Mario doesn't lie' (249). Wallace's readers have to contend with the double-bind that not only are his characters aware of and fluent in the language and conventions of psychotherapy, and so able to shape their malady accordingly, but they also tend to be self-aware, unreliable narrators, displaying a wilful desire to misrepresent (Neal, the narrator of 'Good Old Neon' similarly announces 'my whole life I've been a fraud' in his opening sentence [141]). Rather than leaving us with a sense of freedom or contingent possibility, as in Boswell's reading of Wittgenstein, we are instead struck by characters' fraudulence, and are repulsed by them. Toal has argued that 'the ascription of psychological ills to styles, images, etc. expresses a naïve location of causes in representations rather than in the wider social environment (or absence thereof)' (319). However, if we consider that Wallace seems to predominantly favour a prognostic model for his fiction – looking for consequences – then to suggest that Wallace fails by blaming 'representations' is to miss his point entirely. Wallace may not show all the possible causes of depression and melancholia, but instead dramatises the active consequences of living within this zeitgeist. The inability to represent (or in Hal's case the ability to misrepresent) is thus framed as a problem that directly *results from* the 'social environment' – over-exposure to psychotherapy – rather than an expression of a wider postmodern anxiety over the loss of meaning that is itself a cause of depression. Rather than merely trying to identify Hal with an

'inner infant', or holding up the novel's 'anaclitic infant' as 'an ideal of formlessness' (Toal 320), Wallace seeks to dramatize what it means to exist as one of those constructs, and what it entails for authentic being.

If we investigate Hal further, we can see that he is clearly paradigmatic of the modern man as narcissus, as described by Julia Kristeva:

> Held back by his aloofness, modern man is a narcissist – a narcissist who may suffer, but who feels no remorse. He manifests his suffering in his body and he is afflicted with somatic symptoms. His problems serve to justify his refuge in the very problems that his own desire paradoxically solicits. When he is not depressed, he becomes swept away by insignificant and valueless objects that offer a perverse pleasure, but no satisfaction. Living in a piecemeal and accelerated space and time, he often has trouble acknowledging his own physiognomy; left without a sexual, subjective, or moral identity, this amphibian is a being of boundaries, a borderline, or a "false self" – a body that acts, often without even the joys of such performative drunkenness. (*Maladies* 8)

Many of the problems that plague Hal are summed up in this passage: particularly his 'aloofness' and anhedonia. The previously mentioned conversation with Orin where Hal recounts his experience of grief-therapy takes place on the phone, whilst Hal sits 'with one leg up and his chin on its knee, clipping his nails into a wastebasket that sat several meters away' (242). After a while Hal changes feet and freezes at the thought of his good average dropping because of the change of angle. Still later, Hal tells Orin: 'I'm still frozen, by the way. The self-consciousness that kills the magic is getting worse and worse….Suddenly the wastebasket seems small and far away. I've lost the magic by thinking about it instead just of giving in to it' (249). Although framed as a comic comparison with the 'Tightening Up' that his fellow tennis cadets sometimes succumb to on the court, this vignette has added resonance when read alongside Kristeva's definition. Hal has become 'swept away' by a meaningless task that gives him 'a perverse pleasure, but no satisfaction'. This not only figures Hal as a depressed narcissist, but has dire implications for his tennis: if he cannot enjoy the fun of his nail clipping game then he cannot hope to find meaning in his tennis.

Furthermore, it is notable that Hal is plagued by performance anxiety: he is unable even to become a 'body that acts'. Later in the novel – significantly coinciding with the return of Hal speaking in the first person for the first time in 834 pages – this theme is brought up again: 'I couldn't remember ever actively hoping not to have to play before. I couldn't remember feeling strongly one way or the other about playing for quite a long time, in fact' (852). We also learn that Hal has changed his answer machine message to 'this is the disembodied voice of Hal Incandenza, whose body is not now able…' (854), the elision further emphasising the inability of his body to act. Moreover, by this stage in the novel, Hal not only has trouble controlling his own body, he also 'has trouble acknowledging his own physiognomy'. He bumps into Kenkle cleaning the E.T.A. corridors, who asks, 'but why the hilarity?' (875). 'What hilarity?' Hal asks in disbelief. Kenkle responds: 'what hilarity he says. Your face is a hilarity-face. It's working hilariously'. By this stage of the novel it is possible that Hal has inadvertently viewed a segment of 'The Entertainment' which would explain his look of psychotic happiness; yet what is most disturbing is that Hal seems unaware of his own facial expressions, echoing Kristeva's description emphatically.

The correspondence here between Hal's symptoms and Kristeva's description of the modern narcissus is striking. In concordance with the emphasis placed on the 'inner infant' by Boswell, Kristeva delineates the problem of the regressive infant in the contemporary era:

> Unable to use his symbolic, the young *infans* who prolongs his baby stage buries himself in a crypt of unexpressed affect while exasperating those around him, becoming frustrated himself, or becoming accustomed to his hiding-place. He does this, however, without arousing the attention of adults, who remain unaware of the secret signs of a distressed and regressed internal language. (*Maladies* 105)

We are immediately reminded of Hal, who habitually retreats to the underground tunnels of the E.T.A. to smoke marijuana, 'becoming accustomed to his hiding-place'. Where Kristeva's infant 'buries himself in a crypt', Hal, in a comic inversion, possibly exhumes the body of 'Himself' (the Incandenza boys' nickname for their father) from his grave, in the unspecified

time period between the physical end of the book and the end chronologically (the opening section). Moreover, it is only at the chronological end of the novel that adults finally become aware of the extent of Hal's 'regressed internal language'. Hal acknowledges that 'I have become an infantophile' (16), but although his thoughts are coherent – indeed, they are intellectually impressive – he is unable to communicate with his interviewers, who variously describe his responses to their questions as 'undescribable', 'like an animal', or even more akin to '*sub*animalistic noises and sounds' (14). Hal is fundamentally unable to represent himself. As an imagined 'blue-collar' hospital worker asks Hal at the end of his opening monologue (and thus the last moment of the novel, chronologically): 'so yo then man what's *your* story?' (17; emphasis added).

As evinced by Hal's feeling of paralysis during his toenail clipping diversion, one of the important by-products of depression and den Dulk's 'hyperreflexivity' is a feeling of stasis. Indeed, Jeffrey Karnicky has underlined the importance of stasis to a reading of *Infinite Jest*:

> Wallace's work is a catalog: a catalog of programs for breaking down, for achieving stasis, for coming to a complete stop. Less a recursive loop and more of a drunk staggering around a lamppost, *Infinite Jest* does not double back on itself so much as it counterintuitively staggers back to the post again and again. I read *Infinite Jest* not as a mapping of a chaotic system, but rather as a compendium of false steps, movements in any and all directions, leading not toward a goal – *Infinite Jest* famously has no resolution – but toward ways of breaking down, again and again, and then again. ('Kinds of Stasis' 97)

The novel's fragmented structure, exacerbated by the physical act of having to repeatedly flip forwards and backwards from the main narrative to one of the novel's 388 endnotes, clearly mirrors Karnicky's idea of perpetual breakdown. This extrinsic breakdown is then reflected in the multiple psychological breakdowns of characters within the text. Due to the occlusion of a teleological end, Karnicky adopts a mode of analysis that is not interested in etiology; he 'attempt[s] to catalog kinds of stasis in David Foster Wallace, not with the goal of

understanding, but with that of…work[ing] in [a] goalless space' (97). In other words, Karnicky seeks to find a prognosis within *Infinite Jest*, rather than a remedy. Karnicky identifies several different forms of stasis within the novel, including minor examples like Hal being 'frozen' clipping his nails and the obsessive documentation of episodes of *M*A*S*H** by Hugh Steeply's father, but the most important form of stasis occurs when people become paralyzed by double-binding thought processes. These are especially prevalent amongst characters who suffer from addiction or depression.

Wallace offers a detailed exegesis of this mode of thinking, variously termed '*Analysis-Paralysis*' (203; italics in original), or 'Marijuana Thinking' (1048 n.269a). In some senses this is a witty depiction of the inaction characteristic of pot smokers, and yet it has profound implications for the narcissistic or hyper-aware mindsets of the meta-depressed, those who display both depression and an anxiety over who the author of their depression is. It is important to note that Wallace does not characterize this mental stasis as a repetition of the same thought, or indeed an inability to think; instead the stasis encountered by those under the influence of marijuana is figured as a closed system of several thoughts that are recurrent, at the expense of a productive openness to new thoughts: 'the sort of pseudophilosophical mental labyrinth that Bob Hope-smokers are always wandering into and getting trapped in and wasting huge amounts of time inside' (1048 n.269). It is pertinent that these static notions of a 'mental labyrinth', 'getting trapped', and 'wasting huge amounts of time' are all exacerbated by this explication taking place inside a massive endnote over five pages long, and is further highlighted by Wallace's paratactic syntax. Moreover, this endnote represents Marlon K. Bain's response to a list of questions from the journalist Helen Steeply (actually Hugh Steeply in disguise), a list that is figured in the body of the text proper, as 'Q, Q, Q (Q, Q [Q], Q, Q, Q,), Q, Q (Q), Q, Q' (665). The page that features this unwritten list is thus almost completely pointless, apart from its innocuous direction to the endnote, forcing

the reader themselves to waste 'huge amounts of time' flipping back and forth through the novel, when the answers to the questionnaire could have been placed in the main body of the text (the questions themselves also remain unspecified, encouraging the reader to spend even more time trying to conjecture what they were through the information supplied in the answers). In case even this was not enough, Wallace teases us with the knowledge that Bain's company is titled 'Saprogenic Greetings', implying that something will be given life from this death and decay, and yet simultaneously informs us that the company is 'a proud member of the ACME Family of Gags 'N Notions, Pre-Packaged Emotions, Jokes and Surprises and Wacky Disguises' (664, 1047 n.269), suggesting that this whole section is one big joke (a suggestion given even further credence by Bain's less than assertive answers, and the fact that this questionnaire is largely concerned with Orin's own 'mendacious idiocy' [1049 n.269]). The almost literal sense of stasis that the reader experiences, seemingly never able to break out of Wallace's labyrinthine layers of text, is not purely there to alienate us, however, but to textually represent and thus affect the actual consequences of Wallace's concept. The endnote has footnotes of its own, one of which gives us Wallace's definition of 'the tendency to involuted abstraction sometimes called "Marijuana Thinking":

> The so-called "Amotivational Syndrome" consequent to massive Bob Hope-consumption is a misnomer, for it is not that Bob Hope-smokers lose interest in practical functioning, but rather Marijuana-Think themselves into *labyrinths of reflexive abstraction that seem to cast doubt on the very possibility of practical functioning*, and the mental labor of finding one's way out consumes all available attention and makes the Bob Hope-smoker look physically torpid and apathetic and amotivated sitting there, when really he is trying to claw his way out of a labyrinth. (1048 n.269.a; emphasis added)

This concept effectively summarises the looping thought cycle based on the doubtful 'possibility of practical functioning' that afflicts Wallace's principal depressed characters: Hal, *Infinite* Jest's Kate Gompert, the eponymous 'Depressed Person', and Neal from 'Good Old Neon'. Moreover, the reader is made to empathize with sufferers of 'Marijuana Thinking' or 'Analysis-Paralysis' by their forced complicity with this psychogenic concept.

In this way, Wallace's style could be said to present a psychotropic aesthetic; the syntactical or structural aspects of his fiction – even at the level of the physical text – guaranteeing the required affective response of the reader.

The notion of prose style representing an affective mood or cultural symptom is not new. Amongst Wallace's contemporaries, for example, Bret Easton Ellis's bare syntax in novels such as *Less Than Zero* is often heralded as a literal expression of the vapid emotional existence of the 'blank generation' of post-baby-boomers. Where Ellis's style is perhaps a prominent example of a descriptive model in fiction, Wallace's style represents a prognostic model, actively forcing the explored concepts upon the reader and allowing them to experience what the consequences are. On one hand we have the allusions to the 'physically torpid and apathetic and amotivated' which could easily describe Ellis's characters (and indeed the characters in Wallace's pastiche of Ellis, 'Girl with Curious Hair'). For example, when *Less Than Zero*'s Alana says 'something like "I think we've all lost some sort of feeling"' (146), we can discern the vague, undirected ennui and loss of affect that was the object of Ellis's satire. On the other hand, with Wallace's prose we are directed towards the consequences of the malaise that he is trying to explore: the sheer physical size of *Infinite Jest*, coupled with the copious use of endnotes and surplus information, mimetically represents the experience of life in the information age, requiring us to do vast amounts of work to decode and filter what is of importance to the narrative. In *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, our sense of discomfort and unease with characters at the descriptive level is heightened once we realize that the entire book features off-kilter pagination (the even numbered pages are on the right side of a double-page), a subtle device that is profoundly unsettling once we notice it, exposing our habitual, unquestioning acceptance of literary standards and conventions. *The Pale King* features long sections of profoundly boring prose (more than three consecutive pages that consist almost entirely of descriptions of characters

turning pages) that forces us to evaluate our response to boredom. None of these insights are in themselves new, but what has yet to be noted is that they all share an ability to *produce* affect; rather than narratologically exploring a literature of ideas they actualize those ideas. They are affective rather than affected.[37] Returning to the 'Marijuana Thinking' section, we see that Wallace's characters – like his readers – are struggling to get out of mental labyrinths, rather than lying around in a state of 'hip cynical transcendence' akin to Ellis's characters (*Infinite Jest* 694). Wallace is able to identify and situate us within the looping mental processes of his characters, connoting both a description of and a prognostic outlook for this malaise. At the level of diagnosis, it is made explicit that it is the 'doubt [about] the very possibility of practical functioning' that is the reason for our stasis; a fundamental challenge to the notion of meaningful (authentic) existence. Although this is framed in comic terms with regards to 'Marijuana Thinking' – the 'munchies' become a 'natural defense mechanism against this kind of loss of practical function, since there is no more practical function anywhere than foraging for food' (1048 n.269a) – there are much more serious implications for Wallace's related theory of 'Analysis-Paralysis', a stasis that the depressed and melancholic prove extremely susceptible to.

'Analysis-Paralysis' is described in the list of Wittgenstein-esque maxims that one is likely to learn if 'you ever chance to spend a little time around a Substance-recovery halfway facility' (200), in terms that frame how 'unhealthy' it is for the sufferer: 'most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning that they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking' (203). Moreover, although posited as symptoms of addiction, it is interesting to note that many of the other 'facts' that one may learn might also apply to melancholic or depressed people: 'loneliness is not a function of solitude' (202); 'concentrating intently on anything is very hard work' (203); 'no single, individual moment is in and of itself unendurable' (204); 'the cliché "I don't know who I am"

unfortunately turns out to be more than a cliché"' (204). Wallace here makes an explicit connection between many of his key preoccupations: the perils of 'meta-awareness' or the 'self-conscious-self-consciousness loop' (*Signifying Rappers* 113); feelings of loneliness; the hard work inherent in concentration (especially with the ever-increasing levels of distraction in the 'digital age'); the dangers of looking at existence in terms of a series of 'individual moment[s]'; feelings of self-doubt and fraudulence. In *Infinite Jest*, the consequences of these maladies are most clearly illustrated in the figure of Kate Gompert.

When we first encounter her near the start of the novel, Gompert details her experience of depression in a consultation with a 'psych ward' doctor, explaining that her suicidal tendencies are not a consequence of a desire to hurt herself, but rather her will to feel nothing: 'I'd rather feel nothing than this….The feeling is *why* I want to [kill myself]. The feeling is the *reason* I want to die' (72). For Gompert, depression does not equate with a description or diagnosis of a state she is in but is a 'feeling'; a prognostic outcome or consequence of what it means to live with her malaise. Gompert resists the descriptive mode favoured by Ellis, arguing that

> When people call it [depression] I always get pissed off because I always think *depression* sounds like you just get like really sad, you get quiet and melancholy and just like sit quietly by the window sighing or just lying around. A state of not caring about anything….*This*…isn't a state. This is a *feeling*. I feel it all over. In my arms and legs. (73; italics in original)

That is, depression is affective, rather than affected. Once more, as with 'Planet Trillaphon' the patient seems unable to authentically represent what their malaise feels like, again figuring the feeling corporeally. This fact is reflected in Gompert's repeated use of 'like' as a preposition. Although a common verbal inflection amongst post-boomers, Wallace's use of 'like' is not merely an instance of contemporary idiomatic mimesis, but denotes the more widespread anxiety over the efficacy of language to authentically represent in the wake of poststructuralism. This of course could be said for Ellis as well, but what makes it especially

sinister in its usage here are the implications not only for the subject representing her feelings authentically, but the doctor's own unease at the validity of psychotherapeutic discourse. The doctor notes that 'the conversation seemed to have helped her focus. Like most clinically depressed patients, she appeared to function better in focused activity than in stasis. Their normal paralyzed stasis allowed these patients' own minds to chew them apart' (72). Yet the conversation and ensuing revelation of her marijuana habit seem to antagonize Gompert's feelings further, accentuating her feelings of inauthenticity and self-doubt:' I don't know if you'll believe me. I'm worried you'll think I'm crazy' (76). The doctor, although sympathetic, seems unable to determine the authenticity of Gompert's claims: 'the young woman's face and eyes were going through a number of ranges of affective configurations, with all of them seeming inexplicably at gut-level somehow blank and maybe not entirely sincere' (77). Despite the connection here with the historical belief in the intestines as the locus of depression, what is immediately striking is that it is Gompert's body – despite her avowal of the corporeal materiality of her depression – that betrays her: her physical characteristics do not seem to correspond to the anguish she is going through. Gompert is acutely aware of the conventions of psychotherapeutic discourse and so performs the symptoms of depression that she perceives are necessary to express her depression, despite them not being suitable representations of her own singular experience. Moreover, the doctor is in the same predicament; where Gompert second-guesses standard psychotherapeutic diagnoses, he questions whether his own distrust is not a reflection of his own over-familiarity with psychotherapeutic techniques:

> The doctor hadn't even pretended to try to take notes on all this. He couldn't keep himself from trying to determine whether the ambient blank insincerity the patient seemed to project during what appeared, clinically, to be a significant gamble and move toward trust and self-revealing was in fact projected by the patient or was somehow counter-transferred or –projected onto the patient from the doctor's own psyche out of some sort of anxiety over the therapeutic possibilities her revelation of concern over drug use might represent. (78)

Wallace's word choice is noteworthy here, indicating the myriad layers of both interpretation and deception involved: 'pretended', 'seemed to project', 'move toward trust', 'might represent'. Furthermore, the use of psychotherapeutic jargon – 'counter-transferred', 'anxiety', 'psyche' – in a satirical attack on psychotherapy itself, reveals a paradox in the significance of these terms, both heavily loaded and yet somehow empty of meaning. To further condemn the ubiquity of psychotherapy, Gompert attempts to prescribe herself a cure – E.C.T. – using the pop-cultural example of Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* as a precedent: 'Nichols [*sic*] and the big Indian' (78), misrepresenting what is itself an insufficient representation of her own feeling. The inadequacy of psychotherapy is made explicit immediately after this, at the close of this section, with the doctor's written response in his notes: '*Then what?*'. It is at this point that 'Kate Gompert began weeping for real' (78). Like Wallace's critics who favour psychoanalysis, the doctor can only frame his analysis within the discourse that Wallace is trying to attack, and yet the generalized categories fail to allow for Gompert's subjective singularity. The doctor is himself likewise unable to 'claw his way out of [the] labyrinth'.

It is of central importance that Gompert's doctor places so much emphasis on conversation as a means to break the stasis of the depressed, as this is one of the tentative analgesics that is suggested in *Infinite Jest* – predominantly through the A.A. – as a means to alleviate the suffering of both the depressed and the addicted alike. Indeed, the inability to effectively communicate – let alone represent – what it means to be depressed is framed as one of the key constituents of depression. This inability is offered in stark terms in a discussion between Gompert and fellow Ennet House residents Geoffrey Day, Ken Erdedy and Bruce Green. Green lies sleeping on one couch, Erdedy 'sits smoking, joggling one leather slipper' whilst Gompert and Day 'are on the nonleather couch', a distinction that although incongruous serves to distance them from the conventional trope of the analyst's

couch (648). Day relates to Gompert his first (and only) experience of depression, divulging how he became aware of it during violin practice, whilst an electric fan buzzed in the background (in case this is taken as an allusion to entropy Day is keen to point out that 'the direction of flow is beside the point' [649]). Day relates how 'the fan's vibration combined with some certain set of notes I was practicing on the violin, and the two vibrations set up a resonance that made something happen in my head' (649), recalling the 'electrical noise' of 'Planet Trillaphon', whilst also introducing the idea that depression is caused by external forces. Day explains:

> as the two vibrations combined, it was as if a large dark billowing shape came billowing out of some corner in my mind. I can be no more precise than to say *large*, *dark*, *shape,* and *billowing*, what came flapping out of some backwater of my psyche I had not the slightest inkling was there. (649)

Gompert is keen to ascertain – affirming her own experiences – whether 'it was inside you, though', but Day continues:

> Katherine, Kate, it was total horror. It was all horror everywhere, distilled and given form. It rose in me, out of me, summoned somehow by the odd confluence of the fan and those notes. It rose and grew larger and became engulfing and more horrible than I shall ever have the power to convey. (649)

Wallace here complicates his earlier location of depression within the body, instead suggesting that it is an already extant part of the psyche, a state of affairs confounded by the generative influence of external forces and the eventual formation of a depression as a separate entity, a 'cold empty black malevolent lonely voided space' (650). Day's description is confusing and contradictory, his assertion that he can 'be no more precise' highlighting his difficulty in authentically representing his moment of depression, just as he struggles to even name Kate Gompert correctly. In typical Wallace fashion this problem is illustrated comically when 'completely incongruously, Ken Erdedy says, "His head's shaped like a mushroom." Day has no idea what he was referring to or talking about' (650). The completely arbitrary reference and Day's incomprehension is a reminder of the occasionally bizarre system of

referents and representation employed by psychoanalysis. To cement this point further, the section closes with the sleeping Green crying out in his sleep: 'For God's sake no Mr. Ho don't light it!...Not the nuts Jesus God not the *nutsss*' (651) in a satirical allusion to dream theory.

The anxiety with communication is given further expression in Wallace's story 'The Depressed Person'. Just as Hal is unable to articulate the answers to his interview, and Kate Gompert and the narrator of 'Planet Trillaphon' are unable to represent their depression without situating it within their bodies, the narrators of 'The Depressed is preoccupied with authentically representing herself. Similar to Gompert – this takes the form of a specific anxiety with communicating 'pain and emotional isolation' effectively (34). 'The Depressed Person' – apparently a piece of 'revenge fiction' directed at Elizabeth Wurtzel – is the story of an incredibly solipsistic woman who is in 'terrible and unceasing emotional pain'.[38] Significantly, 'the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror' (31), and so the story is largely concerned with her ill-fated attempts to authentically express to her friends – her 'Support System' – the agony of her depression, particularly the 'long-pent-up and festering emotional wounds' that she becomes aware of during an 'Inner-Child-Focused Experiential Therapy Retreat Weekend' (39). Moreover, the depressed person is 'all too horribly aware of what a joyless burden she was to her friends' (35), and yet this itself perpetuates her pain, as she is simultaneously hyper-aware of how 'pathetic' she can seem whilst suffering from the acute monomania of needing to authentically frame and share her depression, which failure to do so leaves her feeling even more pathetic.

The depressed person claims to want to avoid the stereotypical psychoanalytic 'Blame Game' by making 'it a point…never to cite circumstances like her parents' endless battle over her orthodonture as the *cause* of her unceasing adult depression' (33; italics in original),

and yet it is made patently obvious that one of the root causes of her depression is her 'rage' at her parents. Specifically, she feels angry that her parents' therapist Walter D. ('Walt') DeLasandro Jr.

> Had been able to bill her parents $130 an hour plus expenses for playing the role of mediator and absorber of shit from both sides while she (i.e., the depressed person, as a child) had had to perform essentially the same coprophagous services on a more or less daily basis for *free*, for *nothing*. (39-40; italics in original)

What is more, the depressed person then feels 'guilty' that the excessive costs are ostensibly her fault, due to her parents not being able to agree on how to split the costs of raising her. We are here faced with two obvious and unsubtle criticisms of psychotherapy: 1) that it is an intensely commercialized practice that expensively replicates a mode of therapy that is potentially available (albeit in an under-intellectualised form) to everyone that has access to another empathetic person; 2) that it often rehashes the same (parental) model of 'blame' for each individual case of depression. However – in a typical example of Wallace's multi-layered use of irony – it is not only ironic that the depressed person is keen to avoid blaming her parents while at first failing to see that they are the problem (at least according to therapy), but also that this diagnosis itself seems to miss the point: it is instead implied that it is the depressed person's 'own voracious narcissism' that is a major contributing factor to her ongoing depression (*Understanding* 205). The vapidity of psychotherapeutic discourse thus seems once again to be an explicit target for Wallace due to its obfuscation of the singularity of individual cases, and the way it fails to provide an efficacious vocabulary for authentically articulating patients' subjective existence. Moreover, this is figured as a genealogical problem. Mary K. Holland has noted that the stories of *Brief Interviews* represent 'more a short story cycle than a random collection of previously uncollected work' ('Mediated Immediacy' 109), highlighting how 'characters often share oddly specific details' (110). Although 'separated by stories whose plotlines know nothing of each other, these characters through unexplained repeated minutiae occupy the same narrative of maturation and

comment upon and extend each others' journeys in it' (111). Holland pays particular attention to Wallace's psychiatrists' proclivity for 'habitually forming "cagelike" shapes with [their] hands' (110), and yet fails to notice that the depressed person's parents' therapist is himself the subject of the story 'Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (VI)', in which his own parents break up and seem more concerned with who should gain custody of their cars than of him (180). This ironic depiction of successive generations of familial breakdown seems to suggest the inadequacy of applying psychotherapeutic catechisms to 'individual dramas' in a meaningful way, in contradistinction to the criticism of Toal and Holland, who consistently find recourse to narratives of parental strife.[39] In 'Good Old Neon', this is given even clearer exposition, when the narrator – although psychologically troubled – explicitly points out that 'I had been adopted, but it was as a baby, and the stepparents who adopted me were better and nicer than most of the biological parents I knew anything about' (145).

> Indeed, for the depressed person, what is most 'painful and frightening' is
>
> not to feel able to articulate the chronic depression's excruciating pain itself but to have to resort to recounting examples that probably sounded, she always took care to acknowledge, dreary or self-pitying or like one of those people who are narcissistically obsessed with their "painful childhoods" and "painful lives" and wallow in their burdens and insist on recounting them at tiresome length to friends who are trying to be supportive and nurturing, and bore them and repel them. (32)

Wallace here returns to a psychotropic aesthetic, once again making use of parataxis to echo the 'tiresome length' that the protagonist herself is (unsuccessfully) trying to avoid, whilst acknowledging the possibility of boredom and repulsion being readers' responses, despite those being an inevitable consequence of Wallace's syntax. Boswell has noted the negative response that greeted the story's original publication in *Harper's*, with readers taking umbrage at Wallace's 'vicious portrait' of 'an affliction…that is now widely regarded as an illness' (*Understanding* 205). For Boswell, this reading is only possible if the story is 'read in

isolation…and only if that reading fails to account for Wallace's complex ironic method'
(205-206). Wallace's 'method' here is to portray a character who is completely self-aware –
to the point of analysis paralysis – of her inability to effectively represent her depression, the
difficulties of communicative empathy, and the repellent effect of vapid psychotherapeutic
discourse. Yet the irony is that all of the depressed person's concerns are further exacerbated
by her own awareness of them: instead of allowing her to circumvent her problems, her
awareness encourages her to second-guess her friends' responses, resulting in the extremely
long, digressive passages and excessive use of footnotes (so particular to Wallace) that
entrench her narcissism and threaten to repel the listener and reader alike. In Boswell's
reading (and in opposition to D.T. Max) it is not so much the depressed person that is the
object of satire here, but the labyrinthine spiral of meta-depression and narcissism itself. In
'Octet' Wallace used awareness and anticipation to his advantage, allowing him to vouch for
authorial sincerity despite the prevalence of irony and poststructuralist discourse, yet the
depressed person's attempts to imagine her listeners' responses and tailor her discourse
accordingly in order to promote empathy instead result in repulsion, a problem that she is 'all
too horribly aware of' and yet unable to avoid.

One of the main anxieties that the depressed person has regarding communication
arises from a technological source: the necessity for a reciprocal blind faith when
communicating by telephone. The omniscient narrator explains:

> Much of the depressed person's work with the therapist in the first year of her (i.e.,
> the depressed person's) journey toward healing and intrapersonal wholeness had
> concerned her feelings of being uniquely and repulsively boring or convoluted or
> pathetically self-involved, and of not being able to trust that there was genuine interest
> and compassion and caring on the part of the person to whom she was reaching out
> for support. (45 n.4)

More specifically, what the depressed person 'dreaded more than almost anything' was that
she was 'someone you had to appeal silently to someone else in the room to help you contrive

an excuse to get off the telephone with' (37).[40] Ironically, of course, the depressed person's anxiety over being 'repulsively boring or convoluted or pathetically self-involved' is confirmed by her (apparently sincere, although flawed) attempts to avoid just such a response by being '100% hat in hand' ('Octet' 131) and vocalizing her fears at extreme length.

The comparison with 'Octet' is a pertinent one; indeed, both stories are concerned with effectively communicating abstract notions of authenticity, sincerity and empathy. Both stories are also notable for suggesting an aesthetic of sincerity: long, paratactic sentences; myriad digressions, parentheses and footnotes; a requirement for vast amounts of readerly concentration that results in a sense of claustrophobia akin to the labyrinthine thought-processes of Wallace's 'Marijuana Thinking'. Where 'Octet' makes use of this aesthetic to foreground the challenges of irony and poststructural semiotics to sincere authorial expression, however, 'The Depressed Person' does so in order to affectively communicate the position it is trying to satirize. The paragraph quoted above could serve as a microcosm of the entire piece, and yet the story extends to nearly thirty pages, not only describing but *ensuring* a sense of boredom, convolution, and self-absorption. The repeated, irritating clarifications that denote the speaker throughout the story – 'i.e. the depressed person' – exacerbate the reader's sense of annoyance, as the overwhelming narcissism of the protagonist results in her being omnipresent, and yet we are constantly given an extra reminder of her existence, leaving her open to further ridicule and disdain.

Of course, what is even more ironic is that the depressed person is so intent on 'seeming' or 'appearing' to be *not* self-involved or pathetic that she fails to see that she is using her 'Support System' in exactly the same way that her parents used her: as a free form of therapy. It should be noted, however, that the depressed person becomes aware that it is paying for therapy 'which made the therapeutic relationship's simulacrum of friendship so ideally one-sided: i.e. the only expectation or demand the therapist placed on the depressed

person was for the contracted hourly $90; after that one demand was satisfied, everything in the relationship got to be for and about the depressed person' (47). In other words, the depressed person understands that it is emotionally divested economic exchange which allows her to be so narcissistic in her dealings with the therapist. This, however, is 'demeaning and insulting and pathetic' for the depressed person:

> [It] forced her to spend $1,080 a month to purchase what was in many respects a kind of fantasy-friend who could fulfill her childishly narcissistic fantasies of getting her own emotional needs met by another without having to reciprocally meet or empathize with or even consider the other's own emotional needs. (47 n.5)[41]

In reference to *Othello*'s preoccupation 'with what it means to "seem one thing and to be another"', R.D. Laing has theorized the importance of 'seeming' for the schizoid:

> The characters in Shakespeare "seem" in order to further their own purposes. The schizoid individual "seems" because he is frightened not to seem to further what he imagines to be the purpose that someone else has in mind for him. Only in a negative sense is he furthering his own purpose in so far as this outward compliance is to a large extent an attempt to preserve himself from total extinction. (*Divided Self* 99)

With regards to the depressed person, we can see how 'her concern about how some statement or action might "seem" or "appear"' is really directed at preserving a sense of self, free from the influence of others. Her concern at what others may think is actually a self-defence mechanism that entrenches her own narcissistic thoughts. The depressed person is not really worried that her inability to describe her depressed feelings in anything other than facile representations will distance her friends, but is more concerned that her inability to express her inner feelings are somehow a reflection of her own inauthenticity. In a nod to Platonic problems of representation, the depressed person suggests that her malaise is 'like feeling a desperate, life-or-death need to describe the sun in the sky and yet being able or permitted only to point to shadows on the ground' (49 n.5).

Towards the end of the story, in a discussion with a particular 'core' member of her Support System, the depressed person seems to acknowledge that her problems are

increasingly predicated upon narcissism, rather than depression: 'what kind of person could seem to feel nothing – "*nothing*," she emphasized – for anyone but herself? Maybe not *ever*?' (57; italics in original). This moment of 'breakthrough' arrives after the depressed person realizes 'she could locate no real feelings for the therapist as an autonomously valid human being' – even after the therapist's death (which is almost certainly by suicide) – instead focusing on '*herself*, i.e. for *her* loss, *her* abandonment, *her* grief, *her* trauma' (56; italics in original). Significantly, this self-questioning comes *two pages after* the depressed person's avowal that she will try to be concise:

> The depressed person paused here momentarily to insert the additional fact that she had firmly resolved to herself to ask this potentially deeply traumatizing question without the usual pathetic and irritating defense-mechanisms of preamble or apology or interpolated self-criticism. (55)

The irony of course being that the reader is not only faced with two more pages of digression before they reach the 'traumatizing question', but that they have already been subjected to twenty-six pages of 'preamble', 'apology', and 'interpolated self-criticism' to reach this point. Moreover, the other interlocutor is herself receiving 'chemotherapy for a virulent neuroblastoma', ridiculing the depressed person's rebirth as an other-directed person even further. Additionally, this question is itself a vague preliminary question before the more precise questions that conclude the story:

> what words and terms might be applied to describe and assess such a solipsistic, self-consumed, endless emotional vacuum and sponge as she now appeared to be? How was she to decide and describe – even to herself, looking inward and facing herself – what all she'd so painfully learned said about her? (58)

The 'therapist's philosophy of healing' – predicated upon 'the combination of unconditional support and complete honesty about feelings' – was designed to enable 'a productive therapeutic journey toward authenticity and intrapersonal wholeness' (42 n.3), and yet by the end of the story – despite the Herculean efforts of her saintly Support System and a turn to 'complete honesty' – the depressed person is unable to reach a position of 'authenticity' and

'wholeness'. Although at first 'The Depressed Person' might seem to be about the problems of authentically representing depression – 'of feeling truly able to communicate and articulate and express the depression's terrible unceasing agony *itself*' (49) – by the end of the story we are left with the question of whether we can in fact represent the self. In Holland's analysis of the 'The Depressed Person', she frames the story's conclusion in the following terms:

> It once again asks, rather than elucidates, how we are to understand and communicate the self, *and* escape narcissism, all through language, "words and terms." It also recognizes that the problem of literature is the problem of the self, and vice versa: both suffer from the necessity and prison of representation, the self forced to "look inward," to build a separate self, to "face" itself, in some ill-fated, brutally fracturing, and multiplying act of self-recognition. ('Mediated Immediacy' 117)

Her analysis installs Wallace's story as a paradigmatic example of literature bemoaning the 'loss of the real' or the 'prison' (-house) of language and the difficulties of representation.

To read 'The Depressed Person' as just an expose of narcissism is to presume that our default setting as readers is one of irony, a stance that Boswell has elsewhere argued that Wallace is trying to refute. In this reading – especially when combined with the claims of D.T. Max – the story becomes little more than a 'vicious' attack on the narcissistically depressed. What is intriguing, however, is that if we take the story's final questions to be rhetorical questions to the reader instead of the depressed person herself, then they are to some extent hollow; just as the depressed person falsely claims she will not get involved with 'preamble' despite thirty pages to the contrary, the question of how to 'describe' the depressed person has already been answered by those thirty pages of description. This may not be a comprehensive representation that confers a 'wholeness' upon the depressed person, but it nonetheless give us an accurate depiction of her solipsism and self-consumption; by noting these, we can discern her being. If we choose not to read the story ironically, and instead take the person sincerely, with all the negative characteristics that this entails, then Wallace leaves us with a challenge: how are we to empathize with a character that is so

repulsive? What does it mean if a character can finally realize their authentic inner being if that authenticity is antipathetic?

In some ways the titular interviews of *Brief Interviews* might be read as aesthetic challenges that Wallace set for himself: how to depict repulsive characters – including misogynists and rapists – in such a way that readers will not be immediately disgusted and choose not to continue reading. Moreover, this provides a test for the readers, as Boswell has suggested: 'Wallace wants to test the boundaries of our willingness to "empathize," since the men we, as readers, interview are, as they are advertised to be, hideous' (*Understanding* 189). This could equally apply to the depressed person. One of her main obsessions is her fear of others failing to truly empathize with her (just as one of her final realizations is her own failure to empathize with others). If we read the story as an ironic attack then we can merely dismiss the character as a repulsive narcissist. On the other hand, this would clearly situate the reader alongside the depressed person, implicating them with a failure to empathize. Despite all the irritation and exasperation that the reader feels towards the depressed person, we are – as in 'Octet' – being asked to interrogate ourselves and find out if we really can identify and empathize with this repulsive character. Of course, the question remains: of what use is the authentic presentation of the self if it results in repulsion and a failure to empathize? The depressed person's final realization of her authentic nature – her self-absorption – is no ground-breaking realization for the reader. Indeed, Wallace's depiction of her narcissism is so impressive that the achievement of his goal might also be a failure: he has created a character that is repulsive and challenges our empathy, but that feeling of repulsion is so strong that it is ultimately near-impossible for the reader to empathize with her. Nevertheless, it is this struggle to articulate the self that is most human, most literary, and most American.

Chapter Three: 'My America': David Foster Wallace and 'Authentic' U.S. Culture

Born in 1962 and thus part of the post-boomer generation commonly labeled 'Generation X', Wallace – like many of his contemporaries – displays a marked concern with a perceived loss of faith in 'traditional' U.S. values, and a corresponding distaste for the corruption of late-1960s optimism.[42] This position is hardly a new development; indeed, Wallace's stance on the legacy of the 1960s can be illuminated by comparing his approach with that of two important novelists of a previous generation: Saul Bellow (1915-2005) and Thomas Pynchon (b. 1937). Whilst Pynchon displays nostalgia for the 1960s, albeit characterized by a wry awareness of the idealism inherent in that nostalgia and an inclination to portray the end of the decade as a subjunctive drop-off point rather than a utopian beginning, Wallace follows Bellow in criticizing the boomer generation as the progenitors of the narcissistic 'Me Decade' of the 1970s.[43] What is notable, however, is that members of Wallace's generation are by and large too young to have had any meaningful interaction with the countercultural movements of the 1960s, coming of age as they did in the 1970s.[44] Exposed to the excesses and degeneration of those movements' legacies, it is not difficult to account for the deep-seated ambivalence that this generation displays towards the 1960s. Moreover, by the late 1980s and 1990s, when these writers began producing consequential work, many of the tensions inherent in the cultural climate of the 1960s – civil rights, gay liberation, gender equality, and multiculturalism, amongst others – had become firmly entrenched (albeit in slightly altered forms) in the Culture Wars, making this conflict an essential paradigm for analyzing the cultural attitudes propounded in Wallace's writing.

Of course, Pynchon also perceived how the spirit of change in the late-1960s became a 'fantasy handjob' rather than a '*real* revolution', as 'revolution went blending into commerce' (*Vineland* 27, 308), and in highlighting this onanistic, narcissistic, and inauthentic undercurrent of the 1970s – synthesized in the widespread co-option of rebellious 1960s idealism by advertising companies – he echoes the same complaint that Wallace famously directed against irony and postmodern fiction in his essay 'E Unibus Pluram'. Indeed, in that essay Wallace himself explicitly connected 1980s commercials and 1960s rebellion:

> Commercials targeted at the '80s' upscale Boomers…are notorious for using processed version of tunes from the rock culture of the '60s and '70s both to elicit the yearning that accompanies nostalgia and to yoke purchase of products with what for yuppies is a lost era of genuine conviction. ('E Unibus Pluram' 54)

Although Wallace here suggests that the 1960s had a degree of 'genuine conviction' associated with it, this is not a view that he puts much faith in in his writing. Whereas Pynchon retains a nostalgic affection for the potentiality of the 1960s, Wallace and his peers have proven skeptical as to whether the revered image of the '60s ever had any real foundations; as Rick Moody claims: 'it was pretty obvious, actually, that no such time had ever existed' (*The Ice Storm* 136). This suspicion of the authenticity of romantic retrospectives of the 1960s counterculture and an aversion to its commercial legacy was echoed in Wallace's antipathy towards its cultural legacy. In particular, his work displays a reaction towards the perceived disunity caused by the New Left focus on 'micropolitics' in the Culture Wars. Indeed, the ironic refiguring of the U.S. motto in the title of his 'E Unibus Pluram' – 'out of many, one', becomes 'out of one, many' – reflects the contempt that Wallace felt for the collapse of a sense of community in the U.S., a sentiment also mirrored in *Vineland* under the literal and metaphorical shadow of Nixon: 'suddenly no one recognized anyone's face, and each was isolated in a sea of strangers' (244).[45] An investigation into the depictions of culture in Wallace's work would thus appear to suggest three things: 1) that the cultural and societal changes instantiated by countercultural movements were, if not 'un-

American', then certainly less 'American' than preceding generations; 2) that Wallace was culturally conservative, putting faith in traditional U.S. symbols and institutions; 3) that Wallace – despite his inescapable privileging of the individual – was pained by a loss of a shared sense of community in the contemporary U.S.

In his seminal study *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991), James Davidson Hunter defines the conflict as 'political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding' (42). Hunter characterizes the two opposing sides in the dispute as 'progressive' and 'orthodox'; perhaps more prescient terms for the customary Left and Right, as traditional viewpoints generally associated with both factions – universalism and individuality, respectively – have been complicated, if not reversed. In Hunter's formulation of progressivism, 'moral authority tends to be defined by the spirit of the modern age, a spirit of rationalism and subjectivism', ensuring that 'truth tends to be viewed as a process, as a reality that is ever unfolding' (44). Hunter frames this argument largely in religious terms, noting that the label 'progressives' can be applied to many competing factions including secular Jews, progressive Christian leaders, and atheists, but contends that 'what all *progressivist* world views share in common *is the tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life*' (44-45; italics in original). Wallace is usually presumed to espouse a Left-leaning or liberal ideology, and yet although he is unarguably an author deeply concerned with rationalism and subjectivity, his writing actually displays more congruence with Hunter's conception of orthodoxy:[46]

> *The commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority*. Such objective and transcendent authority defines, at least in the abstract, a consistent, unchangeable measure of value, purpose, goodness, and identity, both personal and collective. It tells us what is good, what is true, how we should live, and who we are. It is an authority that is sufficient for all time. (44; italics in original)

With Wallace's own professed belief in an 'interhuman sameness', his well-documented avowal of faith in an unspecified 'higher power', and his numerous appeals to universal

truths, this orthodox conception of moral understanding is a far more prescient framework with which to study Wallace's fiction. For Hunter, the Culture Wars were ultimately 'a struggle over national identity – *over the meaning of America*, who we have been in the past, who we are now, and perhaps most important, who we, as a nation, will aspire to become in the new millennium' (50). In light of this, it proves interesting to analyze what Wallace's writing tells us about his conceptions of the 'meaning of America' and what constitutes 'authentic' U.S. culture.

In an essay originally published in *Rolling Stone* on 25 October 2001 entitled 'The View from Mrs. Thompson's', Wallace articulates his response to the events of 9/11, opening the piece with a stark but dramatic introduction: 'Location: Bloomington, Illinois; Dates: 11-13 September 2001; Subject: Obvious' ('Mrs. Thompson's' 128). In situating the essay in the living room of one of the members of his local church, Wallace conforms to many of the stylistic and thematic felicities that became commonplace in writing that was produced in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks: the retreat to a comforting, domestic setting; the ethical quandaries in comprehending the actions of the jumpers; the importance of television to the event (especially the repeated shots of the second plane's impact and the towers falling); 'how much like a movie it all seems' (138).[47] The core of the essay, however, serves as a continuation of Wallace's tirade against irony and cynicism, with Wallace privileging the attitudes of an older generation of citizens (presumably the generation that begat the baby-boomers): 'what these ladies are, or start to seem to me, is innocent. There is what would strike many Americans as a marked, startling lack of cynicism in the room' (139). Wallace here echoes another common position in the wake of the attacks, aligning himself with commentators proclaiming the death of irony (a quote variously attributed to Graydon Carter of *Vanity Fair* and Roger Rosenblatt of *Time*). Intriguingly, however, Wallace frames himself – along with the other younger members of the makeshift televisual community – in

opposition to the innocence of the older ladies: 'some part of the horror of the Horror was knowing, deep in my heart, that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more *my America*, and F---'s, and poor old loathsome Duane's, than it was these ladies'' (140; emphasis added).[48] Wallace is surely not aligning himself with the irony-soaked culture that he so often railed against in his writing (neither of course, is he suggesting that the 9/11 hijackers were motivated by a dislike for irony), and yet '[his] America' cannot likewise denote collusion with the forces of U.S. cultural, economic, and political hegemony that the attacks were ostensibly a response to. What then, for Wallace, is '[his] America'? How does he portray or engage with this 'meaning of America'? More broadly, in the words of conservative commentator Samuel P. Huntington, 'who are we'?

The Community of the Middle: Anthropology in the Midwest

Although born in New York, Wallace is often portrayed as a Midwesterner, part of a noteworthy, loosely-connected group of writers to emerge from the region in the late-twentieth century, including Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Franzen, and Richard Powers. Accordingly, one might expect Wallace to contextualize 'his America' with reference to his Midwestern upbringing.[49] Having spent most of his childhood in the Champaign-Urbana metropolitan area of Illinois it would even seem accurate to describe Wallace as a native Midwesterner, and yet – as with much of Wallace's life and work – it is difficult to categorize him within only one conceptual framework; in fact, he never felt like he fully belonged in the region. This tension is evident throughout the quasi-autobiographical essay 'Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley' (originally published in 1992), where Wallace attributes his aptitude for mathematics at college to 'a Midwesterner's sickness for home', having 'grown up inside vectors, lines and lines athwart lines, grids' (3).[50] Due to this parceling of land for farming

purposes, Wallace claims that 'my part of the Midwest always looks laid down special, as if planned' (6); yet although Wallace here seems to exalt the Midwest, he makes clear that it is the other children he grew up with who 'were natives, whereas [he] was an infantile transplant' (8). Indeed, despite his success at Midwestern junior tennis, Wallace also points to the region as the progenitor of his first 'initiation into true adult sadness' (12).

The young Wallace is able to anticipate what influence the strong regional winds will have on a ball's flight, allowing him to beat superior players by returning the ball with excessive spin or an unsuspected deviation from its apparent flight path; his own 'private religion of wind' (12). However, with the onset of puberty and a growing awareness of the bureaucratization and institutionalization of the surrounding landscape – 'the land's less an environment than a commodity. The land's basically a factory' ('Getting Away' 92) – Wallace begins to feel alienated 'not just from [his] own recalcitrant glabrous little body, but in a way from the whole elemental exterior I'd come to see as my coconspirator' ('Derivative Sport' 13). Whereas the wind in particular and natural environs in general once allowed him to plot 'a kind of inner boundary, [his] own personal set of lines' within which he could meaningfully constitute himself (15), Wallace's subsequent identification of the homogenizing power of large institutions exacerbates his sense of losing his personal identity; the set of lines become a symbol of the dehumanizing influence of industrial farming, carving up the land for the purposes of commerce.

The Midwest itself occupies a liminal position within the U.S., mocked for a perceived cultural inferiority and superfluousness (as in the jovial yet literal moniker, 'Flyover States'), whilst simultaneously feted for representing something authentic and integral to U.S. identity (the 'American Heartland'). This liminality is mirrored in Wallace's own occupation of a hybrid position, both nurtured by the Midwest and somehow excluded from a more 'authentic', originary identification with it, evoked in his depiction of being

'transplanted'. In fact, Wallace's loss of a sense of identity – of connection with his homeland – is confounded by his feeling of never having belonged in the first place. In a later essay documenting the Illinois state fair, 'Getting Away from Pretty Much Being Away from It All' (originally published in 1994), Wallace suggests that the source of this feeling is the emptiness of the landscape: 'for native's it's different. For me, at least, it got creepy. By the time I left for college the area no longer seemed dull so much as empty, lonely. Middle-of-the-ocean lonely. You can go weeks without seeing a neighbor. It gets to you' ('Getting Away' 84). The vast, flat open plains that enabled the wind that became Wallace's 'private religion' also aggravate his feelings of loneliness and solipsism, suggesting a geographical impediment to creating a sense of community.

The importance of this middle ground – in terms of both the middle of the country and the locus of 'Middle America' – and its relationship to loneliness and community becomes crucial for another Midwesterner of Wallace's generation, Jonathan Franzen. His own 'personal history', *The Discomfort Zone* (2006), neatly encapsulates many of the themes and concerns that are most troubling for Wallace. Franzen announces that he 'grew up in the middle of the country in the middle of the golden age of the American middle class' in a town called Webster Groves, 'the middle of this middle' (13). In highlighting the geographic, economic, and cultural 'middle', Franzen seeks to convey how his family is a prototypical ideal not only of Midwestern families, but of U.S. families as a whole, the proverbial 'average Americans'. An essential component of this formulation of U.S. family life – and in stark contrast to Wallace's personal feeling of isolation – is a sense of community. Franzen describes how his mother 'hated not belonging':

> Anything that tended to divide us from the rest of the community (her unbelief, my father's sense of superiority) had to be countered with some principle that would draw us back to the middle and help us to fit in….The American society of my childhood was shaped by similar ideals. (14)

Although this need to 'fit in' could be taken as evidence of stifling 1950s suburban/middle class uniformity, Franzen is also keen to emphasize that in Webster Groves there was no sense of overt cultural conflict. Although he acknowledges that whereas to liberals, the late-1950s and 1960s were a time of materialism, imperialism, limited civil rights, and environmental exploitation, to conservatives it was a time of 'collapsing cultural traditions', big government and 'socialistic welfare'; yet in Webster Groves – 'in the middle of the middle' – 'there was nothing but family and house and neighborhood and church and school and work' (15).

As a young child and teenager, Franzen finds this position oppressive – 'I was cocooned in cocoons that were themselves cocooned' (15); 'I didn't value what they valued' (27) – but he ultimately comes to realize that the loss of this (admittedly idealized) sense of shared community – of the middle ground where everyone can meet – has been detrimental to U.S. society. As people 'fled the center geographically, ending up on the coasts, so the country as a whole has fled the center economically' (15); this geographic and economic bisection has also been reflected in the entrenchment of the cultural locus of the U.S. in Los Angeles and New York, and in the growth of partisan politics. By the 1990s – the decade that Franzen most closely associates with the 'Me Decade', identifying himself as a 'self-realizing individual in the nineties' (172) – it was clear that 'the old religion was finished', 'the cult of individuality [had]…ultimately won out' (173, 172). The 1990s thus take on central significance, not only due to the waging of the Culture Wars, but as the years in which 'Generation X' reached intellectual maturity. This narrative arc of growing up in the decadent 1970s, coming of age in the greedy 1980s, only to experience isolation, cynicism and cultural anomie in the 1990s – although by now clichéd – is still crucial to a reading of Franzen and Wallace's writing more generally. In terms of showing awareness of the important political issues of the time, Franzen mentions President Clinton (significantly, 'the first boomer

President') and his undermining of the Environmental Protection Agency in the Pacific Northwest, as well as the introduction of the 'environmentally toothless NAFTA' (174-175), and yet what takes precedence in Franzen's narcissistic world is that this was 'the decade when [he] left his wife and took up with a twenty-seven year old and really started having fun' (175).[51] It is only after the death of his mother and his conversion to birdwatching that Franzen comes to realize the importance of environmental conservation, beyond merely making New York 'a very pleasant place to live'. What is more important for our immediate purposes, however, is Franzen's realization of the importance and sustaining power of a sense of community, preserved in his memories of the Midwest of his youth, and antagonistic to the social atomization implied in the elitism of environmentally-conscious East Coast intellectuals. More generally, the post-boomers are thus seen to be even more individualistic and morally repugnant than their parents' generation.

These tensions – Midwest vs. Coast; community vs. individual; average citizen vs. intellectual – have been present in U.S. society since the earliest days of the Republic, if not before, and yet they have an increased relevance in the era of the Culture Wars. They are prevalent throughout Wallace's state fair essay, with Wallace announcing:

> I'm fresh in from the East Coast to go to the Illinois State Fair for a swanky East-Coast magazine. Why exactly a swanky East-Coast magazine is interested in the Illinois State Fair remains unclear to me. I suspect that every so often editors at these magazines slap their foreheads and remember that about 90% of the United States lies between the Coasts and figure they'll engage somebody to do pith-helmeted anthropological reporting on something rural and heartlandish. I think they decided to engage me for this one because I actually grew up around here. ('Getting Away' 83)

Wallace here highlights the liminality of the Midwest, his own uneasy relationship with the region, and his imposed role as East-Coast intellectual/anthropologist. In case this parody was not clear enough, Wallace enlists the aid of a friend to provide a semblance of authenticity to the proceedings: 'no anthropologist worth his helmet would be without the shrewd counsel of a colorful local, and I've brought a Native Companion here for the day' (90). Although the

appearance of a 'colorful local' would seem to point to the conventions of 'local color' journalism, Wallace's article actually comes closer to embodying an aesthetic of 'regionalist' journalism.

Gregory S. Jay has noted the importance of regionalist fiction to the Culture Wars, observing how scholars such as Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse 'see regionalism as doing a particular kind of cultural work in resistance to dominant political and literary norms. "Region" becomes a name for the place inhabited by people whose social existence and subjectivity have been relegated to the margins of cultural geography' (*American Literature* 202). In many ways, Wallace's essay functions as an example of a 'regional text', attempting to provide a sympathetic depiction of the Midwest and its inhabitants. Indeed, in Fetterley and Pryse's formulation of the regional text

> The narrator does not distance herself from the inhabitants of the region, as is the case in "local color" fiction; indeed, she frequently appears to be an inhabitant herself. The regionalist narrator empowers the voice of regional characters, viewing them as agents of their own lives, rather than undermining them with the ironic perspective characteristic of "local color" writing'. (qtd. in Jay, *American Literature* 202)

This could clearly apply to Wallace, to all intents and purposes '*appearing* to be an inhabitant' of the Midwest, and with a great deal of empathy for his journalistic subjects. For instance, Wallace salutes the fairgoers – the 'rare grand mass of Midwest humanity' – for 'a kind of classic Rockwellian U.S. averageness, the products of balanced diets, vigorous labor, and solid GOP upbringings' (103, 105). For Wallace, there is something vital about this 'averageness'; the value placed on manual labor and a traditional Republican upbringing suggesting a kind of authentic 'Americanness' that is not available to the implicitly effete, liberal, coastal regions.[52]

As with Franzen's late adoption of nostalgia for Midwestern community, Wallace also seems to exalt the very the existence of the 'grand mass' at the fair. In fact, the crowd is portrayed as the fair's *raison d'etre*:

> The State Fair here is For-*Us*. Self-consciously so. Not For-Me or −You. The Fair's deliberately *about* the crowds and the jostle, the noise and overload of sight and smell and choice and event. It's Us showing off for Us. (108; italics in original)

The fair is thus portrayed as a counterpoint to the loneliness and isolation of the Midwest that Wallace pinpointed earlier, an opportunity for rural Midwesterners to experience community. In a nod to the essay's title, Wallace contends that 'the vacation-impulse in rural IL is manifested as a flight-*toward*' (108; italics in original), rather than 'getting away from it all', an affirmative choice that is framed in terms of *Infinite Jest*'s positive 'freedom-to', rather than a negative escape and 'freedom-from'. What is more, in a passage reminiscent of Jean Baudrillard, Wallace highlights the crowd's capacity for self-valorization:

> The urge physically to commune, melt, become part of a crowd. To see something besides land and corn and satellite TV and your wife's face. Crowds out here are a kind of adult nightlight. Hence the sacredness out here of Spectacle, Public Event….Something in a Midwesterner sort of *actuates* at a Public Event….The real Spectacle that draws us here is Us. (108-109; italics in original)

As the 'Spectacle' is itself the crowd, the crowd takes on a sacred aspect, further emphasised by the capitalized 'Us'.[53] The self-legitimizing power of the crowd ensures it acquires spiritual resonance for Wallace, conveying a stereotypical, idealized vision of the Midwest as a community of affirmation.

Unfortunately for Wallace himself, however, the idealized Midwestern community of the crowd is not something he can identify with; just as he does not feel himself to be an authentic Midwesterner, he does not fully embrace the crowd, despite postulating its existence as a transcendent ideal:

> I am not spiritually Midwestern anymore…I do not like crowds, screams, loud noise, or heat. I'll endure these things if I have to, but they're no longer my idea of a Special Treat or sacred Community-interval. (132)

Although Wallace experiences a longing to be part of the mass, his inheritance as an East-Coast 1990s intellectual is to feel paradoxically more at home in isolation than in a community. Of course, Wallace is not alone in feeling excluded from the community of the fair, noting that 'one problem with the prenominate theory [of 'Us'] is that there's more than one Us' (109), highlighting the transient workforce − the 'carnies' − as a particularly prominent example of 'the Other'. Significantly, Wallace's identification of himself as an outsider stems not only from his place outwith the crowd, but also from his status as an elite intellectual; he thus feels himself to be doubly 'Other'. Analyzing the crude slogans resplendent on souvenir T-shirts, Wallace realizes that he 'really feel[s] like an East-Coast snob, laying judgments and semiotic theories on these people who ask of life only a Republican in the White House and a black velvet Elvis on the wood-grain mantel of their mobile home' (122). Although this smacks of condescension, the earlier identification of Wallace with a regionalist paradigm alerts us to the possibility that he is actually jealous of this state of semi-oblivion, privileging the 'simple life' over the personal hell of solipsism and 'self-conscious-self-consciousness' that Wallace associates with life on the coasts.

In an earlier passage detailing the carnies' sexist abuse towards his Native Companion and her indifference to it, Wallace theorized:

> This is potentially key….This may be just the sort of regional politico-sexual contrast the swanky East-Coast magazine is keen for. The core value informing a kind of willed politico-sexual stoicism on [the Native Companion's] part is [her] prototypically Midwestern appreciation of fun…whereas on the East Coast, politico-sexual indignation *is* the fun….Personal and political fun merge somewhere just east of Cleveland, for women. (101; italics in original)

In order to counteract the conventional idealization of the Midwest, this hilarious passage is intended to similarly poke fun at the values and expectations associated with 'swanky' East-

Coast journalism, and is a clear parody of anthropological discourse. It also serves to further highlight Wallace's feeling of not belonging. Uncomfortable with the intellectualism and elitism of the East Coast despite his status as a member of the intellectual elite, and yet unable to fully identify with a Midwestern sense of community in spite of his Midwestern upbringing, Wallace is in limbo, somewhere outwith the middle. Wallace thus seeks to find cultural symbols and metaphors that can celebrate the U.S., in the same way that the Midwest can, yet without resorting to idealization and reductiveness. Whilst the elite, intellectual discourse associated with the coasts offers a way to dismiss stereotypes and idealization, it nonetheless fails to provide any meaningful language from which an efficacious community can be constructed.

'Lit Out for the Jungle': Anthropology and the Academy

The discourse of anthropology and the status of intellectual elites are explored again in Wallace's story 'Another Pioneer', from the short story collection *Oblivion*. However, by this late stage in Wallace's career, his shift towards an altogether more bleaker, reactionary stance is revealed. The story – a lengthy monologue (in one paragraph), featuring five layers of narration – opens *in media res*, with a narrator describing to a group of 'gentlemen' a 'lone instance' (of what is never made entirely clear) relayed from 'an acquaintance of a close friend who said that he had himself overheard this *exemplum*' being related from one passenger to another (117). The myriad layers of narration signal a fairly common literary gambit, suggesting doubts as to the veracity of the story narrated, and yet also imply an ongoing oral tradition of story-telling that is integral to the story's anthropological theme. Moreover – in another example of Wallace's proleptic attitude towards metafiction – we are made aware of the challenges that this poses to us as readers: 'the fellow said he missed the

first part of whatever larger conversation it was part of. Meaning that there was no enframing context or deictic antecedent as such surrounding the archetypal narrative as of course there is with all of us together here this afternoon' (118-119). The reader, 'of course', has no such advantage when attempting to discern what the 'enframing context' of the story is; devoid of this contextual reference, the reader is thrust into a position – reminiscent of Allan Bloom – that mocks the dominant critical position of cultural relativism. Although an under-investigated piece within Wallace's canon, Martin Paul Eve has suggested that the story is 'an allegory of epistemological progression from positivism to nihilistic despair' generated by 'postmodern skepticism' ('Problems of "Metamodernism"' 10). Expanding upon this further, the story can more usefully be read as an investigation into the linguistic and narrative conventions of structural anthropology, and the inefficacy of post-structuralist theory in its wake.

On a narrative level, the story focuses on the economic and political development of an unspecified 'paleolithic or perhaps mesolithic' tribe; particularly the effects of proclamations from a semi-miraculous child oracle. After an economic boom engendered by the oracle's advice on how to maximize the tribe's primitive agricultural and hunting output, the oracle – perhaps due to the occult influence of a rival tribe's medicine man – begins to give out answers that complicate the tribe's conception of religious or cultural norms, resulting in the tribe abandoning their village, after setting it alight and leaving the oracle behind. Rather than Boswell's contention that the abandonment of the oracle represents Wallace's ironic look at the role of authors and the trust that readers put into their words, we should instead be alert to the vocabulary that Wallace uses. As Eve has noted, the story resembles a Kafka-esque parable; examining how the mythopoeic has become subsumed and institutionalized by the academy (9). For instance, it is explicitly framed as a 'variant' 'exemplum' of 'recognized elements'; here Wallace's co-option of the vocabulary of

structural anthropology exposes the vapidity and inefficacy of standardized academic conventions and discourse, much as he did with the language of psychotherapy elsewhere. The ambiguous introduction to the story entails that the signifiers do not correspond to any specific 'signified'. Wallace suggests that our over-exposure to academic language and conventions results in us proleptically anticipating the narrative arc and features of the story, rendering the once-enlightening categories of structural anthropology banal and ineffectual. Thus, the narrator continually reminds us of which stage of the conventional mythic narrative we are at (e.g. the 'protasis' or 'catastasis'), or dismissively announces 'then, of course, subsequently, in a rather predictable trial-and-error heuristic evolution', in a pastiche of structural anthropologist jargon (120). In a particularly humorous example, Wallace exposes the cultural conventions of the cannibalistic medicine man trope, and yet also targets the unintentionally comical 'academese' that characterizes the descriptions of rituals in many anthropological studies.[54] The 'tyrannical shaman'

> evidently dwells in a small, austerely appointed lean-to just outside the dominant village's city limits, and spends most of his time conducting private necromantic rituals that involve playing crude musical arrangements with human tibias and femurs on rows of differently sized human skulls like some sort of ghastly paleolithic marimbas, as well as apparently using skulls for both his personal stew pot and his commode. (125-126)

The contrast between technical anthropological discourse ('dominant village'; 'paleolithic'), medical terminology ('tibias and femurs'), and anachronistic or arbitrary details ('city limits'; 'commode') for comic effect mocks the elitist, private language of academia. In particular, Wallace focuses on how the conventions of discourse (whether fictional, academic, anthropological or scientific) preclude the singularity of particular examples. For example, the narrator notes that after the 'climax of the protasis' there are 'at least three main epitatic variants' (126), in one of which

> narratively the malevolent shaman is reduced from the peripeteiac antagonist to a mere vehicle for exposition or foreshadowing, this rather anticipating the function

> which oracles, sorcerers, Attic choruses, Gaelic *coronach*, Senecan dumbshows, Plautian prologues and chatty Victorian narrators perform in various later cycles' *exempla*. (129).

Through the totalizing system of structuralism, the various idiosyncrasies germane to any given culture are rendered moot, and become indicative of a larger, unspecific, shared commonality that fails to acknowledge individual distinctions. This critical assessment may seem to run contrary to Wallace's usual appeals for universalism, but what is being expressly targeted here is the *discourse* of the elites; the 'quotidian and as it were modern *everydayness* of the *narrative circumstances*' (119; second emphasis added).

Moreover, Wallace does not stop at structuralism. It should be noted that the catalyst for the tribe leaving their village is the change in the timbre of the answers being provided by the oracle. In a shift that allegorizes the usurpation of structuralist anthropology by post-colonialism and postmodern identity politics, the oracle comes to understand 'his answers as part of a much larger network or system of questions and answers and further questions instead of being merely discrete self-contained units of information' (131). That is, the oracle no longer sees the world in terms of holistic, contained, grand-narratives, instead recognizing the powerful formative influence of interconnected superstructures. Framed in terms of the post-Reformation loss of control experienced by the clergy after the translation of the Bible from a lingua franca into a vernacular, the tribe's 'consultant caste' lose their hold over the general population once the oracle 'evolves' into 'a new, suppler, more humanistic and less mechanical kind of intelligence or wisdom' that does not require translation (132). The resulting impotence of the 'consultant caste' is portrayed in a positive light, with the implication of this – once an elite cadre of society has lost their need for and control of a private language, then they have lost the power to define reality – being crucially important with regards to the Culture Wars and Wallace's 'America'.

Hunter notes that although the Culture Wars could be conceived of as a 'disagreement over the proper form of ecclesiastical structures or a theoretical argument over doctrinal truths', the conflict has a 'deeper nature': 'a competition to define social reality' (39). Following this, Wallace appears to be making a strong case for defining what 'his America' should be. Although nominally a democratic position that seeks to liberate constitutive powers from certain swathes of U.S. society, this anti-elitist, anti-academic stance bears striking resemblance to the positions adopted by the orthodox faction of the Culture Wars. Wallace appears to be criticizing the privileged position of the intelligentsia when it comes to defining U.S. society, a stance that becomes all the more intriguing when we consider Wallace's status as a member of that very same caste.

Indeed, the sense of anti-intellectualism becomes increasingly heightened throughout the story. In a further development of his powers, the oracle introduces a semblance of cultural relativism combined with a poststructural questioning of grand narratives into his answers: instead of telling a villager how best to please the 'Yam Gods', the oracle 'launches into an entire protodialectical inquiry into just why exactly the interlocutor believes in jealous and temperamental Yam Gods at all' (132), asking the villager if 'he's merely been, as it were culturally conditioned' (133). This anachronistic epiphany may on one level be interpreted as a means to acquire individual freedom, or at the very least, a 'more humanistic' practical philosophy that allows greater individual recognition, liberating people from totalizing systems of definition and control (a claim propounded by the New Left at the beginning of the Culture Wars). Accordingly, this might seem to place more importance on the individual rather than the crowd. Wallace, however, appends this development in thought to the postmodern *collapse* of the notion of a singularly authentic subjectivity, framed – again anachronistically – in computing discourse: 'the dialogues and exchanges often now sending questioners staggering back to their lean-tos to lie curled foetally on their sides with rolling

eyes and high fevers as their primitive CPUs tried frantically to reconfigure themselves' (134). The oracle's evolution in thought – although aimed at helping others – is thus shown to be incapable of providing a workable, practical answer with efficacious meaning for individuals. This is highlighted in the case of one particular warrior when the oracle's answer 'instantly destroys the warrior's higher faculties or spirit or soul and drives him hopelessly insane' (137). What is more, on a larger scale, the village's 'beloved omniscient child has become an agent of disruption and cultural anomie' (135). The change in the oracle's thought is conjectured to be because of the aforementioned rival village's shaman, yet no matter the cause, what is most important is that this change is characterized as a bending of 'the child's cognitive powers back in on themselves…transform[ing] him from messianic to monstrous, and whose lethal involution resonates with malignant self-consciousness themes' (136). The oracle's crippling self-consciousness resonates with the paralyzing meta-awareness of many of Wallace's characters elsewhere in his oeuvre, and echoes the self-absorption of the 'Me Decade'. Here, we might find a reason for the conundrum of Wallace reacting against a force of which he himself was a part; from his position as an insider within the culture of the intelligentsia, he is able to speak more authoritatively against it.

The culprit, we are thus to deduce, is the supposedly liberating but ultimately stultifying nature of 'involuted' poststructural theory, a body of abstract thought that initiates innovative modes of ontological critique, but is incapable of suggesting any workable, practical, solutions for everyday life (recall Wallace's similar complaint about irony in 'E Unibus Pluram': that it is 'singularly unuseful' at constructing anything to replace what it 'debunks'). Indeed, the oracle – in an explicit attack that references stereotypes of both the 1960s countercultural hippy and Generation X's 1990s 'slacker' – is described in terms that evoke a vapid, nihilistic teenager, acting 'increasingly irritable', and responding to questions with 'a rebuke or complaint, appearing almost to berate' the villagers (135). Boswell's

argument that the story represents an ironic examination of the faith that is placed in an author, revolves around this key narrative moment, informed by the question that the rival village's shaman supposedly asked of the oracle – 'surely you have seen that they so revere you precisely because they themselves are too unwise to see your limitations?' (138). Boswell takes this question to be Wallace's narcissistic, solipsistic question to himself. However, if we read the story as an attack on structural anthropology's generalizations, and poststructuralism's inefficacy, then the question becomes a poignant indictment of the ubiquity (at least in Wallace's eyes) of academic 'theory'; as Wallace writes in *Infinite Jest*, 'what looks like the cage's exit is actually the bars of the cage' (222). In essence, 'theory' itself (or academia more generally) has become the problem. This is not to say that Wallace is 'anti-theory', but that he laments that it has become simultaneously widely disseminated (and thus misconstrued and drained of power), whilst also remaining the preserve of an elite 'consultant caste' that fails to address 'real' concerns (like those of the idealized Midwesterners). The search for meaning has taken precedence of the meaningful. Indeed, in the famous 'conversion narrative' chapter of *The Pale King*, 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle questions the relevancy of Humanities departments in a vehement attack on his experience with higher education:

> Everything at that time was very fuzzy and abstract. I took a lot of psychology and political science, literature. Classes where everything was fuzzy and abstract and open to interpretation and then those interpretations were open to still more interpretations….The whole thing was just going through the motions; it didn't mean anything – even the whole point of the classes themselves was that nothing meant anything, that everything was abstract and endlessly interpretable. (*The Pale King* 157)

Significantly, it is a relatively high level of education and privilege that increases Fogle's nihilistic tendencies, epitomized by his adoption of clichéd slacker slogans: 'my essential response to everything was "Whatever"' (156).

'Another Pioneer', then, can be quite profitably read as a critique of the postmodern politics of representation, a position that would seem to place Wallace in the thick of the Culture Wars, but leaning towards the orthodox camp. If we recall Konstantinou's claim that 'Wallace's idea of politics – to the degree that he articulates one – rests within a tradition of symbolic action and countercultural individualism' ('No Bull' 105), we can discern that this proclamation has no substance other than a presumption of a leftist bias on the part of Wallace. Leaving individualism aside for now, the evidence for Wallace being 'countercultural' seems to be lacking. His political position may run 'counter' to the dominant academic theoretical culture (Konstantinou acknowledges this by stating that 'Wallace uses fiction in what can often seem like a last desperate effort to make us believe something, to feel anything', in the wake of the perceived nihilism of postmodern theory [106]), but 'counterculture' immediately connotes the varied movements of the 1960s, which seem to be antithetical to Wallace's fiction, as highlighted in his dismissive portrayal of the oracle as a bratty, rebellious teenager. Conversely, Wallace's ambivalence towards 'post-' theory (poststructuralism, postmodernism, even postcolonialism) and apparent retrograde nostalgia for earlier periods of (imagined) U.S. cultural hegemony displays alarming corollaries with the thinking of Samuel P. Huntington, who describes the 'American soul' as 'defined by the common history, traditions, culture, heroes and villains, victories and defeats, enshrined in its "mystic chords of memory"' (343). 'Another Pioneer' represents a narrative of a cultural 'Fall' that seems to privilege an earlier, 'simpler' or 'primitive' existence that the tribe enjoyed. In light of this, the title can either be read ironically (as an indictment of the apparent – yet inefficacious – 'pioneering' thought of the oracle) or as a very deliberate allusion to the frontier and U.S. exceptionalist ideology. Moreover, the story ends with the 'migrating tribe' who have 'lit out for the jungle' after setting their village alight (the punning phrase invoking Huck Finn's famous decision to head for the territories), the 'great rapacious

fire' following them and 'gaining ground', whilst they search for their next frontier. This image of the tribe amid a jungle set aflame may on some level allude to the purifying aspect of fire, but also conjures up the specter of Vietnam.[55]

Although less optimistic than Bercovitch's vision, in many ways Wallace's narrative seems to echo William Spanos' re-imagining of the 'American Jeremiad' as a recurring confrontation with an 'Other'. Spanos – invoking Frederick Jackson Turner – argues that the Jeremiad is indelibly linked to the frontier, and the formative power of an encounter with an 'Other':

> it was (and continues to be) the frontier – the fluid boundary between "savagery" and "civilization," threatening forest and secure settlement, diabolic enemies and supportive friends, the uncertainty of the strange and confidence of the familiar – the not-at-home and the at-home, as it were – that was foremost in the mind of the Puritan Jeremiahs in their castigations of recidivism in the name of the founding moment. More precisely, I submit, the jeremiad and the frontier were indissolubly related. (*American Exceptionalism* 196)

Spanos goes on to describe how right-wing thinkers such as Huntington saw 9/11 and the possibility of a perpetual 'war on terror' as a means of providing a new enemy, against which the U.S. could define its identity. In the absence of such an enemy after the fall of the Soviet Union, Huntington had suggested that the principles of the U.S. were being diluted, particularly by 'subnational cultures' and 'deconstructionists'. In frighteningly similar terms, these seem to be Wallace's target in 'Another Pioneer', which – although published before 9/11 – appears at the tail end of the 'Long Nineties' at a time when the search for an external enemy was at its height.[56] Wallace is clearly not as extreme as Huntington – and it should be noted that Wallace's pastiche also makes targets of free-market capitalism and organized religion in its depiction of the downfall of the village after the shift to an information economy – but it is significant that the most sympathetic depiction of the village's culture and society is of them at an early agrarian stage. Wallace here appeals to both his idealized vision of the Midwest – particularly in its pre-capitalist phase, reliant on human labor rather than

machines – and a classic U.S. political model, Jeffersonian republicanism, as authentic constituents of what it means to be part of 'America'.

Flags of our Fathers

This identification of Wallace with the necessity of defining the U.S. in martial terms against an 'Other' is not to suggest that Wallace is a warmonger in general, or in favor of the Vietnam War more specifically, but some of his writing does seem to portray war as an 'authenticating' formative experience, especially for U.S. men. In 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy' – another late-period story from *Oblivion* – war plays a central role. The retrospective narrative allows the Vietnam War to be anticipated – a foreshadowing that hangs over the actions of the characters – whilst the memory of WWII looms large in the collective consciousness. Indeed, the problem of subjective or selective memory – particularly hindsight – is a prominent theme of the story, with the narrator often explaining how 'only much later would I understand' (69), or noting that 'the importance of this detail in the narrative I do not remember, though I recall the detail itself very clearly' (101). The story itself revolves around the narrator's recollection of a teacher's breakdown in his childhood civics class, and his ensuing ordeal as a 'hostage' within the classroom. The story takes place on 14 March 1960: 'a time of fervent and somewhat unreflective patriotism. It was a time that is now often referred to as a somewhat more innocent time' (68). Although the teacher's breakdown and the ensuing hostage crisis would seem to contradict this statement, and alludes to numerous high school shootings in more recent times – particularly the Columbine Massacre in 1999 (the story was originally published in 2003) – the events of the story are hardly portrayed as traumatic. Indeed, whilst the events unfold, the narrator is preoccupied by a vivid daydream whilst looking out the classroom window; the detail given to the construction of this dream

narrative serving as a useful explanation for the retrospective difficulty in constructing the narrative proper. In fact, the narrator is so unaware of what is taking place that he and his fellow 'captives' are referred to as the '*4 Unwitting Hostages*' (67; italics in original).

The precise date of the event – the day before the Ides of March – is important thematically, on a personal level suggesting imminent tragedy, whilst on a political level it could also be associated with the fall of the (Roman) Republic, and a corresponding turn to autocratic rule. In a story rich in allusion to U.S. presidents and important formative experiences in U.S. history this becomes crucial, and reflects Wallace's anxiety at the expansion of executive power at the hands of George W. Bush. The setting is the Rutherford B. Hayes Primary School, in Columbus, Ohio (note the nearly homonymous allusion to Columbine here); the reference to a historical reformist president neatly signifying the Culture Wars conflict in the present. The impending tragedy could refer to the experience of the narrator, yet it also reminds us that we are historically situated just before the election of President Kennedy, the assassination of whom is also associated with a Fall from innocence, and an ensuing corruption of executive power in the Johnson and Nixon administrations. Moreover, the story takes place during the Eisenhower administration – significantly, like Kennedy, a war hero – suggesting the continuing relevance of the legacy of WWII. It is explicitly mentioned, for instance, that the narrator's uncle was 'wounded in Salerno, Italy, in World War II' (82), whilst some of the children have 'access to their fathers' helmets and tags' to add a semblance of authenticity to the class's Presidents' Day presentation (112).

In contrast to the authenticating power of military service conferred upon some of the children due to their fathers' involvement in the war, the narrator's father is described in effete, emasculated terms; the recollection of the uncle's injury is juxtaposed with the father's own memory of being 'in knickers and a straw hat' 'circa 1935', suggesting that he was too young to have served in the war (82). Moreover, the narrator depressingly announces that

> Only much later would I understand that the incident at the chalkboard in Civics was likely to be the most dramatic and exciting event I would ever be involved in in my life. As with the case of my father, I think that I am ultimately grateful not to have been aware of this at the time. (69)

Indeed, the events of the story are markedly *un*-dramatic. Although the class teacher apparently has a psychotic breakdown, repeatedly scrawling 'KILL, KILL THEM' on the chalkboard, the narrator is only able to recall 'general, impressionistic memories' of the classroom, including the quantity of desks and tiles on the wall (111), and suspects that something is amiss only when the shock of a particularly violent episode of his daydream distances himself from his own dream, 'enough to be able to be on some level aware that the Civics classroom seemed unusually quiet' (91). As he states, bluntly: 'essentially, I had no idea what was going on' (80).

It is only with hindsight that the narrator can recognize the full importance of the events of that day:

> In the light of the political situation of our later adolescence, one of the most troubling and much discussed aspects of the trauma for those of us of *the 4* was that Mr. Johnson had not appeared to confront, resist, or threaten the armed officers who came forcibly into the room. (99; italics in original)

In fact, it is only 'the perceived threat' of the 'jagged length of chalk, the broad arm motions, and the proximity of Mr. Johnson's briefcase on the desk' that 'justified [his] shooting in the eyes of the C.P.D. board of inquiry' (99). The implied date of the children's 'later adolescence', the number of hostages, and the Ohio setting all allude to yet another school shooting, this time the Kent State massacre. Indeed, in one of the most 'discomforting' moments of the story, the narrator explains that 'to the best of [his] recollection' it was his brother (like the father-uncle dynamic, also to go on to serve in the military, albeit in Vietnam) who 'first suggested that the imperative' *them* may not have referred to us at all, that it might, rather, have been us who Mr. Johnson's disturbed part was exhorting, and the *them* some other type or group of people altogether' (110; italics in original). This ambiguous

hint of possible revolutionary zeal suggests that this story may be the most 'countercultural' and rebellious example in Wallace's entire canon; the implication being that the children should rage against the uniformity represented by the Civics class and its inherent indoctrination, and avoid the mundane existence of suburban life.

Indeed, the most overt 'fear' in the story is the fear of middle-class suburban uniformity and monotony: 'the tedium and despair of…lower level administrative job[s]' (90). The narrator claims that 'I had begun having nightmares about the reality of adult life as early as perhaps age seven' (103), and is aware, even at that age, 'that the dreams involved my father's life and job and the way he looked when he returned home from work at the end of the day' (103). After finishing work, his father's eyes are described as 'lightless and dead' (103); a loss of vitality echoed in the way their suburban street at 'twilight' is characterized as a time 'when all of the houses became the same color', and when it is necessary to put on the porch lights 'like bulwarks against something without name' (104). This lack of singularity and differentiation similarly taints the narrator's dream, which features 'a large room full of men in suits' who 'appeared as both individuals and a great anonymous mass' (108); a terrifying, liminal existence that recalls Sloan Wilson's eponymous 'man in the grey flannel suit' (a character who also appears in Wallace's *The Pale King*). And yet this anxiety also emulates Andrew Hoberek's ideas about the 'twilight' of the middle-class as it became associated with white-collar institutional jobs instead of property-owning entrepreneurs.[57] For the narrator, this is particularly troubling, because – and here the retrospective mode of the narrative is conspicuously reversed – 'the overall feeling was that these colorless, empty-eyed, long suffering faces were the face of some death that awaited me long before I stopped walking around' (109). This motif is taken up in §23 of *The Pale King*, which serves as a companion piece to 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy', the former detailing an anonymous narrator's dreams and school life in similar terms to the latter. In this chapter, however, there is no

suggestion of possible change: 'the idealism that had brought [teachers] to us was no match for the petrified bureaucracy of the Columbus High School System or the listless passivity of children they'd dreamed of inspiring (read, indoctrinating) to a soft liberalism' (257). Instead, the children are described as being 'locked tight inside themselves and an institutional tedium they couldn't name but had already lost their hearts to' (257), a sense of defeatism or futility being all pervasive. Conversely, the reversal of the retrospective narrative in 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy' allows at least the possibility that the present malaise could have been avoided. The depiction of a culture of fear echoes the typical Cold War anxiety over a nuclear threat, but this is instead directed at the break-up of the traditional *nuclear family* (as seen in the horrendous deaths of the parents in the narrator's daydream) and *social atomization* (as seen in the lifeless, isolated suburban houses; despite their proximity, devoid of connection), rather than the possibility of mutually assured destruction, the implication being that the middle class have lost their traditional roles, and accordingly their efficacy. Indeed, a distinction must be made between the critical shibboleth of 1950s 'conformity' and the much more terrifying threat of uniformity.

Although the tragic element of the story arrives when the narrator realizes that his teacher might have been telling him to start resisting the uniformist pressures of middle-class suburban life, in opposition to this countercultural stance the story also affirms traditional U.S. symbols, and ends with the recollection of the class's Presidents' Day re-enactments of some of the United States' definitive historical moments: Jefferson's second inaugural address; Franklin's kite experiment; the Gettysburg Address; the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima.[58] These conspicuously 'American' moments, correspond to some of the 'American' characteristics, institutions, and ideology that Wallace wants to promote: respectively Jefferson's vision of an agrarian republic with limited government, Franklin's ingenuity and entrepreneurialism (threatened by the 'twilight' of the middle class), and not one but two

instances of martial triumphalism. Indeed, it is no accident that Mr. Johnson's breakdown happens during a lesson on the Constitution, resulting in him corrupting the 13th Amendment as he copies it onto the blackboard. The (perceived) threat to the children is thus figured as a literal consequence of someone defacing the Constitution, one of the sacred documents pertaining to U.S. identity.

In case this orthodox position was not clear enough, this peaceful reverie is conjured up as the children flee the classroom, with the narrator placing more importance on listing some of the contents of the classrooms' cabinets than his fellow pupils' distress. Not incidentally, the two objects that are singled out for particular attention are a (fictional) textbook, *From Sea to Shining Sea: The Story of America in Words and Pictures*, and 'over a dozen small, handheld American flags (these latter out of date as they contained only 49 stars in the corner)' (112). The highlighting of a textbook here is pertinent with regards to the Culture Wars, as one of the most protracted areas of conflict continues to be over the school syllabus, particularly the inclusion (or exclusion) of the historical experiences of different races, ethnicities, genders, and cultures, instead of the familiar W.A.S.P.-centric, male-oriented narrative of Manifest Destiny and U.S. exceptionalism. The inclusion of this book might on one level appeal to simple historical verisimilitude; as the narrator notes, *From Sea to Shining Sea: The Story of America in Words and Pictures* 'was the mandated textbook for all primary school Civics classes statewide at that time' (72). On another level, the book serves as a tool to develop the narrator's character: the narrator's inability to 'communicate…what the words and their various combinations were intended to mean' is contrasted with his ability to 'supply a certain amount of specific quantitative information, such as the exact number of words per page' (72), accounting for his later pre-occupation with the amounts of desks and tiles in the classroom instead of the ongoing 'hostage crisis'. However, within the unmistakable context of the civics class and the Culture Wars, this book

takes on added significance, representing the triumphalist, exceptionalist history of the culturally conservative orthodoxy.

In reference to a real-life revisionist, progressive textbook, *America Will Be*, Todd Gitlin has argued that 'the lingering, insistence that America the coherent, the good, and the just, lies in the future – that is to say, that it does not exist – only halfheartedly conceals the revelation that the old firm America was not really there in the past where it was supposed to be and where once, in the textbooks, it was unquestionably assumed to be' (41). Gitlin – like Wallace – bemoans the way that well-intentioned attempts at political correctness and socio-cultural inclusion have become conditions for division, an 'exhaustion of commonality' to use Gitlin's term, that runs contrary to the 'grand mass' of the Midwest. In the retrospective imagination of the narrator of 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy', this past – although not an unchallenged ideal – represents an improvement on the monotony and uniformity of his adult life. Although perhaps enabled by his inability to frame it in a larger historical context, the textbook seems to represent a moment in time that the narrator pines for: 'a time of fervent and somewhat unreflective patriotism' (68); a time when 'America' was 'coherent' rather than devoid of 'common dreams'. Thus, the 'out of date' flags are similarly not only there for verisimilitude purposes, but constitute a poignant reminder of the loss of the 'meaning of America' that the obsolete flag now seems to embody; the inference being that the 1950s represent a more coherent, cohesive, communal 'America'. Indeed, the brief period of time that the forty-nine star flag was in use (1959-1960) may represent a subjunctive window in which the U.S. may have embarked on an alternative course of history, somehow avoiding the malaise of the present. The anxiety between the civics class and the authenticating power of war replicates the tension identified by William James in his famous 'The Moral Equivalent of War', but whereas James advocates a civic 'army' to wage war on nature (by which he means civic undertakings more generally), Wallace seems beholden to the legacy of

war. This is not to suggest that Wallace is a warmonger, but that he seems to mourn the loss of conservative values epitomized by the figure of the military veteran, or the civic unity that the advent of WWII was seen to promote in the 'greatest generation'. Indeed, Wallace's imagined 1950s ideal of U.S. freedom and community is only possible due to the triumph in WWII, personified in re-enactment of the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima.

The gamut of presidential references in this story is continued with Wallace's choice of surname for the teacher – Johnson – and his 'being a sub', resonating with President Lyndon B. Johnson, the subject of an earlier Wallace story, 'Lyndon'.[59] This earlier story locates the moment of the U.S.'s 'Fall' in 1968 with the election of Nixon and the anachronistic death of Johnson, and continues the orthodox attack on the senses of elitist, self-righteous belief and entitlement that were discernible in many of the baby-boomer generation. Again, WWII has an important legacy to play: 'we gave it to them too easy, boy. I mean their Daddies. Men that I was youths with. And these youths today are pissed *off*. They ain't never once had to worry or hurt or suffer in any real way whatsoever. They do not know Great Depression and they do not know desolation' (106; italics in original). The hardships of the previous generation throw into sharp relief the outrage that the baby-boomers feel. In a line that further echoes Wallace's criticism of irony in 'E Unibus Pluram', President Johnson suggests that 'we're taking away folks' suffering here at home through these careful domestic programs [of 'The Great Society', and by extension, The New Deal], boy…without giving them nothing to replace it' (106). In particular, LBJ targets the poststructuralist 'deconstruction' of language – 'to them, right and wrong is *words*, boy' – arguing that they are instead 'feelings. In your guts and intestines and such. Not words' (107; italics in original); that is, not mere signifiers but affective concepts that Wallace has elsewhere averred that he wanted to portray, notions of 'motive, feeling, belief'. Once more,

a sense of civic responsibility is invoked: 'let them sad sorry boys out across there go be *responsible* for something for a second, boy' (107).

In 'Lyndon', the subjunctive moment of the U.S. fall is the rebellion of the boomers in the late-1960s, the progenitors of Wallace's own generation. Whereas a previous generation had to contend with a war that – like 9/11 – was precipitated by an attack on U.S. soil, and the very real (and again, more geographically resonant) hardships of the Depression, the younger generation are more concerned with defending perceived wrongs that are being perpetrated *by* the U.S. on foreign soil, wrongs that themselves have no linguistic validity (or authenticity) within their own discourse of poststructuralism.

By Wallace's later output, the boomers are portrayed in more sympathetic terms, with Wallace differentiating between the fickle idealism of the hippies and the ensuing degenerate 'Me Decade', and the conservative nature of others of that generation, perhaps even the so-called 'Silent Majority'. Not only does Wallace withhold sympathy for the narrator's father in 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy', but by *The Pale King*, Wallace is able to describe Chris Fogle's father as 'a hundred percent conventional establishment' (169), and yet feel sorry for him:

> He had a family to support, this was his job, he got up every day and did it, end of story, everything else is just self-indulgent nonsense….He essentially said "Whatever" to his lot in life, but obviously in a very different way from the way in which the directionless wastoids of my generation said "Whatever." (193-194)

The inference being that this patriarchal (one might say Neanderthal) deference to providing support for one's family is somehow more noble and heroic than the narcissism of Wallace's own generation. Indeed, in a later passage in the novel – written under the pretense of a fictional 'David Wallace' narrator – Wallace writes that 'the view held among certain members of my family [was] that government, government bureaucracy, and government regulation constituted the most wasteful, stupid, and un-American way to do anything' (303). In a footnote to this section, the narrator tellingly concedes that 'I made a point of arguing

with members of my family about their political attitudes', but also that he 'often found [him]self reflexively holding, or at least sympathizing with, those same parental attitudes' (303 n.59). Although ever wary of siding with one side of any debate – especially partisan politics – Wallace appears to have been far more sympathetic towards a traditional, conservative vision of the U.S.

Wallace anachronistically introduces the specter of AIDS into the story, with both the narrator and his husband Duverger falling victim to the disease. When read alongside Wallace's essay on AIDS, 'Back in New Fire' (first published in 1996 the same year as *Infinite Jest*), this can be seen as a bizarre and disturbingly welcome challenge to their cultural inheritance: the sexual and commercial legacy of the sixties, the perceived sexual decadence and high divorce rates of the 1970s, and 'rebellion as fashion' (170):

> If I've got some of this right, then the casual knights of *my own bland generation might well come to regard AIDS as a blessing*, a gift perhaps bestowed by nature to restore some critical balance, or maybe summoned unconsciously out of the collective erotic despair of the post-'60s glut'. (171; emphasis added)

Although Wallace is keen to point out that 'nothing from nature is good or bad. Natural things just are' (171), this worryingly naïve depiction of AIDS as a social and cultural corrective (not, it has to be emphasized, as a religious punishment for sin, as with the Westboro Baptist Church) is a fundamentally conservative position that – although ostensibly directed at the commercialization of rebellion – censures the 'erotic malaise of the '70s' (again, Moody's *The Ice Storm* proves to be a useful corollary here). The story thus appears to invoke a reactionary nostalgia for pre-sixties conservative values, not in an uncritical idealization of the 1950s per se, but as a nonetheless more meaningful alternative to the perceived collapse of meaning and values in the postmodern era.

The question of what is 'authentic' within the context of U.S. politics is given further examination in Wallace's essay detailing John McCain's presidential campaign of 2000, 'Up,

Simba'. Here Wallace wants to interrogate 'whether anyone running for anything can even be "real" anymore – whether what we actually want is something real or something else' (159). Although at pains to point out that 'there are no partisan motives or conservative agenda behind the article even though parts of it…might appear to be pro-McCain' (157), Wallace's largely sympathetic portrayal of McCain is derived from the politician's depiction of himself as 'The Straight Talk Express' (160), and as another example of a military veteran. The article's narrative climax is centered on the 'Chris Duren Incident': a phone call from McCain to a young potential voter assuring him that he should 'believe in something' (220) rather than fall for the negative tactics of George W. Bush, whose campaign is predicated on creating voter apathy rather than actively appealing to new voters. The 'Incident' is 'disturbing' for Wallace because it 'couldn't have worked out better for McCain2000 if it had been…well, like, *scripted*' (223; italics in original); a cynical position that he urges everyone to reject 'since maybe even considering whether it was even *possible* would be so painful that it'd make it impossible to go on' (224; italics in original).

At the heart of the piece is 'a very modern and American type of ambivalence, a sort of interior war between your deep need to believe and your deep belief that the need to believe is bullshit, that there's nothing left anywhere but sales and salesmen' (229). Wallace again insists on his by now familiar complaint that old-fashioned ethics and morals have been corrupted by commerce; however, the article concludes with 'a final paradox':

> The really tiny central one, way down deep inside all the other campaign puzzles' spinning boxes and squares that layer McCain – is that whether he's truly "for real" now depends less on what is in his heart than on what might be in yours. (234)

This question of what is 'real' is intriguing when we continue Wallace's line of questioning to anticipate what he might suggest is 'authentically' 'American'. In accordance with 'Lyndon' and 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy' and the depiction of war as an authenticating U.S. experience, Wallace figures McCain as 'a genuine hero of maybe the only kind Vietnam has

to offer us, a hero because of not what he did but what he suffered – voluntarily, for a Code' (166). Furthermore, this discourse of heroism and codes echoes the terms (albeit in reference to the tax code) used by the Jesuit substitute teacher that prompts Fogle's conversion from 'wastoid' into tax examiner in *The Pale King*. Importantly, the teacher's expression is described as having 'the same burnt, hollow concentration of photos of military veterans who'd been in some kind of *real* war, meaning combat' (220; emphasis added) McCain, for Wallace, transcends vapid clichés, and appeals to 'something old and maybe corny but with a weird achy pull to it like a smell from childhood', forcing us 'to think about whether anything past well-spun self-interest might be real, was ever real, and if so what happened?' (166). Similarly, the other central figure of the piece – Chris's mother Donna – 'appears so iconically prototypical and so thoroughly exudes the special quiet dignity of an average American who knows she's average and just wants a decent, non-cynical life for herself and her family that she can say things like "family values" and "hero" without anybody rolling their eyes' (218). Of course, this desire to reinvigorate tired clichés and 'banal plentitudes' is something that Wallace explicitly strove for throughout his career, and yet these unsettling, exceptionalist portrayals of an under-theorized, essentialist vision of 'America' and 'Americans' do not sit easily with Wallace's nuanced, highly aware and well-read discussions of complicated philosophical and political positions. Indeed, this recalls Wallace's ambiguous claim for 'my America' in 'The View from Mrs. Thompson's'.

In his introduction to the 'Best American Essays 2007', Wallace suggested that due to our contemporary climate of 'Total Noise', 'whatever our founders and framers thought of as a literate, informed citizenry can no longer exist, at least not without a whole new modern degree of subcontracting and dependence packed into what we mean by "informed"'. ('Deciderization' 314-315). According to Wallace, the constant barrage of information in our day-to-day existence – much of it largely unuseful –accounts for the 'seduction of partisan

dogma': 'you don't have to feel confused or inundated or ignorant. You don't even have to think, for you already Know, and whatever you choose to learn confirms what you Know' (315 n.8). Wallace attempts to avoid 'partisan dogma' throughout 'Up, Simba' in particular, and the rest of his oeuvre more generally. Indeed, Wallace could never be accused of simply displaying an outright penchant for one side of a debate – be it philosophical, political, or cultural – and yet his own admission of conservatism with regards to his conception of the conventions of the novel as a genre serves as a useful signpost as to his larger cultural sympathies. In particular, Wallace retains sympathy for those that feel inundated with information and victims of a perceived leftist bias within the media. Although Wallace is surely not *anti*-multiculturalism, he nonetheless has disdain for the elitist, intellectual bent inherent within that paradigm, despite his own complicity with that caste. In a long meditation on talk radio and the resurgence of the conservative movement in the late-1990s and early-2000s (a shift he does not entirely attribute to 9/11), Wallace asks whether

> The US has moved so far and so fast toward cultural permissiveness that we've reached a kind of apsidal point? It might be instructive to try seeing things from the perspective of, say, a God-fearing hard-working rural-Midwestern military vet….Assume for a moment that it's not silly to see things this man's way. What cogent, compelling, relevant message can the center and left offer him? Can we bear to admit that we've actually helped set him up to hear "We're *better* than they are" not as twisted and scary but as refreshing and redemptive and true? If so, then now what? (288-289)

Although Wallace frames himself here alongside his presumed audience of liberal intellectuals, it is clear that his regionalist sympathy for the 'average American' – be it Donna, the crowd at the Illinois State Fair, Chris Fogle's father, or the ladies at Mrs. Thompson's house – ultimately wins out. For Wallace, progressive goals have ultimately diluted the sense of an affirmative, communal 'America'. This ideal may not have had any 'real' foundation, but it *appeared* real enough to foster a widespread shared feeling that it did exist, which for Wallace, seems to be enough to merit its discussion and revival.

Chapter Four: David Foster Wallace and 'Real American' Philosophy

Andrew Warren has suggested that 'it is perhaps now…fair to say that Wallace himself, more than anyone else, has structured the critical reception of his work' ('Narrative Modeling' 398). Sweeping statements of this sort are of course inherently problematic: arguing that Wallace is an important critic of his own work, for example, instantiates comparisons with other noted self-critics – most obviously Henry James – whilst the implication that Wallace 'structures' the responses of his readers is particularly damaging for those scholars who want to claim for Wallace a projection of empathy and undecidability. Nonetheless, we cannot entirely dismiss the central thrust of Warren's assertion; due to the often overt mentions of philosophers and theorists in Wallace's writing, and his erudite displays during interviews, there is an easily-identifiable pre-existing intellectual context that his work is often situated within. Although Wallace displayed operational fluency in myriad different fields including mathematics, mythology, and philosophical logic, amongst others, his work is usually generalized as engaging with postmodern discourse. More specifically, in a philosophical context, critics and scholars have been quick to note Wallace's own admission that *The Broom of the System* 'is a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida' (*Becoming Yourself* 35), and his self-professed familiarity with 'Barthian and Derridean poststructuralism' (*Conversations* 49). This has ensured that scholarly attention has to a large extent focused on Wallace's relationship with Continental philosophers – in particular those associated with existentialism and poststructuralism – and with the Anglo-American analytic tradition.[60]

On the other hand, Paul Giles has averred that Wallace's writing is in fact 'committed, both intellectually and emotionally, to locations and positions *within the American system*'

('All Swallowed Up' 16; emphasis added). Indeed, despite Giles' subsequent optimistic claim that Wallace's fiction might 'explore ways in which American identity might be transnationally remapped' (19), it may be argued that Wallace's writing should be classified as singularly 'American'. In line with this, it is perhaps unsurprising that he divulged to Laura Miller that his motive in writing *Infinite Jest* (1996) was that he 'wanted to do *something real American*, about what it's like to live in America around the millennium' (*Conversations* 59; emphasis added). Giles goes on to note that 'the ethical impulses that help to drive Wallace's narratives are themselves indebted to American intellectual traditions of Transcendentalism and Pragmatism'. It is therefore somewhat surprising that there are relatively few extended analyses of Wallace in relation to these 'real American' branches of philosophy. Although a number of studies of Wallace have referred to the U.S. philosophical tradition more generally, and William James in particular, these have tended to focus on Wallace's engagement with religious experience (usually centred on Alcoholics Anonymous members' submission to a 'Higher Power' in *Infinite Jest* and Chris Fogle's conversion narrative in *The Pale King*), instead of his engagement with pragmatism.[61] Heeding Giles' suggestion that rather than focusing on Wallace's relationship with the Continental tradition we should perhaps read him 'through the historical legacies of American literature and culture, the worlds of Emerson and Lincoln, William James and Richard Rorty' (19), this chapter will analyze Wallace's investigation into what might constitute a 'real American' philosophical tradition. Moreover, in examining Wallace it is imperative to be mindful of his ever-present concern for the status of the individual in his contemporary moment. Echoing the comment made to Miller, Wallace writes in *Infinite Jest* that 'one of the *really American* things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what he really lonely for: this hideous internal self' (695; emphasis added). Accordingly, an analysis of Wallace and philosophy will necessarily explore the efficacy of the individual.

Writing 'After Theory'

A further problem with Warren's statement above – one that he himself notes – is that installing Wallace as his own chief critic may endorse the notion that he maintained a consistent critical position throughout his career, whereas the reality is that 'Wallace's commentary does not always add up to a coherent picture, either in itself or in relation to the fiction' (398). For example, Wallace's infamous clarion call for 'anti-rebels' in 'E Unibus Pluram', coupled with his oft-quoted condemnation of irony – that it is 'singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks' (67) – have received a great deal of critical attention from both scholars and the mainstream literary press. What has received considerably less analysis, however, is precisely what Wallace means by 'irony'. As Warren suggests, Wallace's usage of the term seems anything but coherent. Rather than the conventional definition of irony as a rhetorical strategy of dissimulation, Wallace makes indiscriminate use of the term to refer to one or other of his three main grievances with his contemporary moment: 1) a general societal predisposition towards cynicism and Weltschmerz; 2) the widespread proliferation of metafictional techniques usually associated with postmodernism, *especially in advertising*; 3) the efficacy of poststructuralist discourse in enacting meaningful change. According to Wallace, all three of these developments underwent a period of ever-increasing dissemination during the late-1980s and 1990s, permeating 'the consciousness of the conscious American adult' ('Fictional Futures' 64). Although Wallace recognizes that they are all potentially capable of performing useful – albeit it negative – functions, he is suspicious as to whether this 'ground-clearing' capacity is ever able to provide workable solutions for 'real life', away from the domain of intellectual abstraction. Postmodernist fiction, for example, used irony and self-reference to expose the inherent textuality of writing, but these techniques have been co-opted by

advertising and television; a corruption of what was once subversive in the name of pursuing increased sales. In Wallace's opinion, no adequate literary replacement has emerged to fill the gap exposed by metafiction. Similarly, with society and culture increasingly pervaded by neoliberal globalization, adopting cynicism as a default worldview may protect the individual from ridicule or provide a defence against nefarious advertising techniques, and yet Wallace sees this as a fundamentally negative orientation towards life that leaves the individual with very little grounds for hope, resulting in less empathy towards others.[62] Finally, poststructuralist theory may have exposed language's status as an empty signifier and developed and influenced myriad discourses from postcolonialism to feminism, but Wallace implies that very little positive or revolutionary change has been enacted; the exposure of the vapidity of language has merely left us with an 'empty plenum'. Instead of speaking of Wallace's fractious relationship with irony and/or the postmodern, then, what needs to be acknowledged is that Wallace tends to use these terms as umbrella signifiers for a tripartite development in culture that can be directly attributed to the widespread awareness and adoption of poststructural theory. Indeed, if it were also able to signify the sense of a postmodern malaise, 'poststructuralism' might be a more apposite term for Wallace's perceived milieu than 'irony'.

As Wallace notes in 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young', his survey of the literary field in 1988: 'the demise of Structuralism has changed a world's outlook on language, art, and literary discourse; and the contemporary artist can simply no longer afford to regard the work of critics or theorist or philosophers – no matter how stratospheric – as divorced from his own concerns' (63). Whilst Wallace's assertion that novelists need to embrace theory as a constitutive part of contemporary reality is not particularly original, he displays more astute judgement in his wariness of merely transplanting theory to fiction.[63] For example, writing of Mark Leyner's *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* (1990) and its

pastiche of televisual techniques, Wallace argued that 'Leyner's fictional response to television is less a novel than a piece of witty, erudite, extremely high-quality prose television' ('E Unibus Pluram' 80). Although Wallace's argument here – that Leyner's novel comes to seem indistinguishable from the target of its satire – is specifically directed at the medium of television, it proves to be equally applicable to fiction that tries to merely subsume theory, a development Wallace had previously dismissed as 'Workshop Hermeticism' in 'Fictional Futures' (40).[64] For Wallace's contemporary Jonathan Franzen, as for Wallace himself, there was a suspicion that 'once a literature and its criticism become codependent, the fallacies set in' ('Mr. Difficult' 259).[65] In other words, once a literature becomes codependent with theory, it runs the risk of merely figuring theory in a literary way.

Judith Ryan has identified Wallace as one of a number of recent authors to have emerged who are writing 'after theory'.[66] For Ryan, what is particularly important about the authors that she highlights is that they 'do not simply incorporate theory, they reflect on it, complicate it, and sometimes go beyond it. They engage with problems theory has adopted, but they do so in ways that replace stark abstraction by rich detail' (*The Novel After Theory* 7). For Wallace, the most pertinent method for contending with the synthesis of theory and literature was to focus on its effects. This explains his boundless admiration for David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988), which he described as 'pretty much the high point of experimental fiction in this country', largely due to Markson's 'dramatic rendering of *what it would be like to live* in the sort of universe described by logical atomism' ('Overlooked' 204; emphasis added). Much has been made of Wallace's assertion that 'fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*' (*Conversations* 26; italics in original), with critics focusing on the (conservative?) implications of this statement in relation to debates regarding traditional realism and experimental fiction. Indeed, they are particularly prone to aligning it with Wallace's confessed predisposition towards empathy, sentimentality, and sincerity.

However, what has gone under-appreciated are the pragmatic undertones of Wallace's focus on '*being*'.

In 1990, Wallace contributed a mammoth review-essay of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* to *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, focusing on just this aspect of Markson's engagement with Wittgenstein's philosophy. Wallace – in terms strikingly reminiscent of Warren's claim regarding the structuring of his own critical reception – notes that 'certain novels not only cry out for what we call "critical interpretations" but actually try to help direct them', contending that such novels are hybrid creations, occupying 'an interstice between flat-out fiction and a sort of weird cerebral *roman a clef*' ('Empty Plenum' 74). Although he concedes that 'when they fail they're pretty dreadful', Wallace claims that – if successful (like Markson's) – these novels

> serve the vital and vanishing function of reminding us of fiction's limitless possibilities for reach and grasp, for making heads throb heartlike, and for sanctifying the marriages of cerebration & emotion, abstraction & lived life, transcendent truth-seeking & daily schlepping, marriages that in our happy epoch of technical occlusion and entertainment-marketing seem increasingly consumable only in the imagination. (74-75)

Although critics tend to alight on the 'heads throb heartlike' section of this passage as a synecdochic encapsulation of Wallace's attempts to write affective fiction that is both intellectual and emotive, what is perhaps most intriguing in a philosophical context is the idea of the 'marriage' between 'abstraction & lived life'. This sentence ultimately proves crucial to an understanding of Wallace's literary approach to philosophy, not only in this review, but throughout his oeuvre. As Wallace goes on to explain, in an even more illuminating passage:

> Markson's *WM* succeeds in doing what few philosophers glean and what neither myriad biographical sketches nor [Bruce] Duffy's lurid revisionism succeeds in communicating: the consequences, for persons, of the *practice* of *theory*; the difference, say between espousing "solipsism" as a metaphysical "position" and waking up one fine morning after a personal loss to find your grief apocalyptic, literally millennial, to being the last and only living thing on earth, with only your head, now, for not only company but environment & world, an inclined beach sliding toward a dreadful sea. Put otherwise, Markson's book transcends, for me, its review-

enforced status of "intellectual tour de force" or "experimental achievement": what it limns, as an immediate study of depression & loneliness, is far too moving to be the object of either exercise or exorcism. (78; italics in original)

There are three important points to be taken from this fragment: 1) an overwhelming emphasis on the individual; 2) the challenge posed to the individual as a result of living with Wallace's tripartite meaning of 'irony' in the millennial U.S. (particularly due to the efficacy of poststructuralist theory); 3) a desire that literature should explore the consequences of these problems – in this case an overwhelming sense of sadness and loneliness, an inescapable solipsism – pragmatically. This last concern is discernible throughout Wallace's writing, but is perhaps best summated in the passage above. Writing amidst the maelstrom of 'irony' and poststructural theory, if Wallace's fiction could be said to have one distinct aim, it would be to elucidate 'the consequences, for persons of the *practice* of *theory*'. If we compare this with William James's definition of the pragmatic method – 'the pragmatic method…is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true?' (*Writings* 506) – we can see that in essence Wallace adopts a Jamesian, pragmatic approach to ascertain what the widespread dissemination of poststructural abstract thinking really means for the individual.

'The Map Is Not the Territory': Problems With Abstract Thinking

James provides us with an interesting corollary to Wallace; indeed, Wallace named *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as one of his favourite books (*Conversations* 62), and a hollowed-out copy of that volume is ironically revealed to be the place where Randy Lenz hides his drugs in *Infinite Jest* (543). As David H. Evans suggests,

one might think that, as a thinker and writer, Wallace found himself in a situation that could hardly be more different from that of James. From the perspective of the later

> twentieth century, the positivist conception of science against which the philosopher struggled had come to seem an historical relic as quaint and culturally specific as stovepipe hats and button shoes. ('"The Chains of Not Choosing"' 175)

However, Evans also contends that Wallace faced an 'equally oppressive late twentieth-century counterpart in the image saturated sensorium that comprises the postmodern situation' (175). This claim has some merit: Baudrillard's precession of simulacra questions the relation of the image to reality just as the absolutists in James's era struggled with the contradiction of vouching for the existence of a higher reality whilst contending that it was nevertheless impossible to represent. The historical similarities do not end there: where Wallace produced most of his writing during a decade often characterised as a period of transition and uncertainty – the 1990s – James occupied a similar position in the 1900s. More specifically, both were writing at a time of new-found peace, and amidst questions over what role the United States should play in an increasingly 'globalized' world. However, what is perhaps most pertinent to both James and Wallace is a crisis of faith.

Evans may be correct in highlighting the 'saturation' of images in the 'postmodern situation', but he overstates the importance of 'oppression' in this relation and fails to emphasise the significance of absence; the barrage of images that characterises Wallace's moment is not quite so challenging to the individual as the implied absence that lies behind it. What is most revealing for an examination of James and Wallace is that they were both writing at a time when traditional conceptions of authority had not only been queried, but that this query was beginning to be conceived of as such in the common sense. Wallace's most significant writing appeared approximately thirty years after the challenging – indeed, ground-clearing – emergence of postmodernism and poststructuralism that questioned faith in grand narratives and 'old-fashioned' values. Similarly, James produced his most consequential work some fifty years after Darwin's *Origin of the Species* provoked a religious epistemological crisis, and approximately twenty years after Nietzsche's infamous

proclamation of the death of God. As James suggests in *A Pluralistic Universe,* 'as the authority of past tradition tends more and more to crumble, men naturally turn a wistful ear to the authority of reason or to the evidence of present fact' (773). Leaving aside the polarising consequences of this turn towards rationalism or empiricism for now, what is most apposite for Wallace is the absence of 'the authority of a past tradition', and in particular, what happens when newly emergent loci of 'authority' are either in collusion with the media or corporate interests, if indeed they can be said to be in possession of authority at all.

As with Wallace's focus on the pragmatic consequences of theory, one of James' chief complaints against rationalism was with the inefficacy of abstract thought. As he wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: 'knowledge about life is one thing; effective occupation of a place in life, with its dynamic currents passing through your being, is another' (438). Wallace's love for *Wittgenstein's Mistress* – the way 'the novel does artistic & emotional justice to the politico-ethical implications of Ludwig Wittgenstein's abstract mathematical metaphysics' (78) – is particularly pertinent when we consider that his review of the novel coincides with the writing of *Infinite Jest*. Wallace's own novel strives to examine the ways in which the widespread permeation of poststructuralist theory into myriad facets of our daily lives has made a difference. Indeed, two of Wallace's main themes in the novel – addiction and depression – are often described in terms that frame a struggle between attempting action and succumbing to abstract thinking. Wallace notes that marijuana smokers, for example, 'Marijuana-Think themselves into labyrinths of reflexive abstraction that seem to cast doubt on the very possibility of practical functioning' (1048). Although this instance refers specifically to drug use, if what prompts this predilection is a drive to acquire the maximum amount of pleasure from the minimum amount of work, then Wallace's metaphor can be extended to contemporary U.S. existence more generally. With the luxury of leisure time and the absence of meaningful practical work, it is all too easy for individuals to

fall into the cyclical prison of abstract thinking. The consequences are particularly severe for the depressed:

> Kate Gompert's always thought of this anhedonic state as a kind of radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content. Terms the undepressed toss around and take for granted as full and fleshy – *happiness*, *joie de vivre*, *preference*, *love* – are stripped to their skeletons and reduced to abstract ideas. They have, as it were, denotation but not connotation. The anhedonic can still speak about happiness and meaning et al., but she has become incapable of feeling anything in them, of understanding anything about them, of hoping anything about them, or of believing them to exist as anything more than concepts. Everything becomes an outline of the thing. Objects become schemata. The world becomes a map of the world. (693)

Here many of the dangers that Wallace associates with abstract thinking are listed, with the link between the poststructuralist absence of meaning in language and contemporary Weltschmerz being particularly conspicuous: when words are reduced to signifiers – having 'denotation but not connotation' – one of the consequences is that individuals are more susceptible to postmodern anhedonia. Expanding the list of previously 'full and fleshy' terms that are now absent of meaning to include outmoded conceits like faith, the nation, the individual, and the community, one might ask: how is one to go on living?

James above alluded to the tendency of people to turn to either 'the authority of reason or to the evidence of present fact' – that is, to the rational or the empirical – in times of strife. Anticipating Wallace's own 'Third Way' method, James realised that to merely pick one over the other would result in no workable conclusion, instead condemning people to remain with their own prejudices and preconceptions. Accordingly, he strove for a new method:

> What *you* want is a philosophy that will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will make some positive connexion with this actual world of finite human lives. You want a system that will combine both things, the scientific loyalty to facts and willingness to take account of them, the spirit of adaptation and accommodation, in short, but also the old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity, whether of the religious or of the romantic type. And this then is your dilemma: you find the two parts of your *quaesitum* hopelessly separated. (494-495; italics in original)

The retrieval of the 'old confidence in human values' seems particularly pertinent when compared with Wallace. Wallace did not want to simply ignore the existence of 'theory', and yet he simultaneously wanted to re-assert the efficacy of 'human values'. James too strove for a system of philosophy that would remain open to the possibility of an absolute, but that also allowed for multiplicity and possibility. He continues:

> The actual universe is a thing wide open, but rationalism makes systems, and systems must be closed. For men in practical life perfection is something far off and still in process of achievement. This for rationalism is but the illusion of the finite and relative: the absolute ground of things is a perfection eternally complete. (498)

Wallace was writing in an era where the notion of an absolute was almost entirely dispelled, which might initially seem to corroborate the possibility of the universe being 'wide open'. However, as the efficacy or potential of the individual was rendered moot by the external superstructures exposed by poststructuralism, poststructuralism itself emerged as a new absolute, albeit one that ostensibly could not be challenged. Wallace, nevertheless, sought to articulate an 'old confidence in human values' in the face of this closed system.

There are of course similarities with Pynchon's obsession with entropy here, although where the elder author focused on the gradual loss of energy from within a system, Wallace tended to depict systems as looping indefinitely, as seen in the spiralling, paralyzing thoughts of his depressed or addicted characters; the never-ending narrative loop of *Infinite Jest*; the Möbius strip sentence that closes 'A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life': 'one never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one' (0).[67] Perhaps Wallace's most entertaining and innovative depiction of a closed system is *Infinite Jest*'s Eschaton sequence, describing a game played by the denizens of the Enfield Tennis Academy:

> Every year at E.T.A, maybe a dozen of the kids between maybe like twelve and fifteen – children in the very earliest stages of puberty and really *abstract-capable thought*, when one's allergy to the confining realities of the present is just starting to emerge as a weird kind of nostalgia for stuff you never even knew – maybe a dozen of these kids, mostly male, get fanatically devoted to a homemade Academy game called Eschaton….Its elegant complexity, combined with a dismissive-reenactment frisson

and *a complete disassociation from the realities of the present, composes most of its puerile appeal*. Plus it's almost addictively compelling, and shocks the tall. (321-322; emphasis added)

The game is played on 'four contiguous tennis courts' with players representing different countries; their position on the courts 'corresponding to their location on the planet earth as represented in *The Rand McNally Slightly Rectangular Hanging Map of the World'* (322-323). The game proceeds with the 'combatants' hitting tennis balls (representing ICBMs) at each other under a complex set of rules and conditions issued by the 'gamemaster' – in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, Otis P. Lord – who is aided by a 'teleputer' (TP) to generate casualty numbers and other random events. Taking place on Interdependence Day (celebrating the formation of O.N.A.N.), the Y.D.A.U.'s game progresses smoothly, until – during a crucial moment in the game – it begins to snow. At this moment, the player representing REDCHI fires a ball into INDPAK's area of the court. As Wallace explains:

> it's an uneasy moment: a dispute such as this would never occur in the real God's real world, since the truth would be manifest in the actual size of the actual wienie roast in the actual Karachi. But God here is played by Otis P. Lord. (333)

Already occupied trying to sort out the details of a cease fire between the players representing AMNAT and SOVWAR, Lord's 'lapse of omniscience' results in him being unsure of how to allocate points for casualties. In a critical development, J.J. Penn seizes upon this and

> All of a sudden gets the idea to start claiming that now that it's snowing the snow totally affects blast area and fire area and pulse-intensity and maybe also has fallout implications, and he says Lord has to now completely redo everybody's damage parameters before anybody can form realistic strategies from here on out. (333)

This suggestion provokes spectator Mike Pemulis – who is 'far and away the greatest Eschaton player in E.T.A. history, [and] has a kind of unofficial emeritus power of correction over Lord's calculations and mandate' (322) – to exclaim 'it's snowing on the goddamn *map*, not the *territory*, you *dick!*' (333; italics in original).

The game quickly degenerates into an argument about the map-territory relation – Axford querying Pemulis: 'except is the territory the real world, quote unquote, though!'

(334) – until Evan Ingersoll directly targets Ann Kittenplan with a ball. This last development prompts the game to descend into chaos; tennis balls fly everywhere and multiple injuries are incurred, including Lord ending up with his head through his TP's monitor. However, although the sequence serves as a vehicle for Wallace to show off his knowledge of vectors and trajectories and his prodigious sense of humour in his parody of the map-territory relation, it also contains a more serious analysis of abstract thinking in general, and postmodern theory in particular.

One of Pemulis's outbursts of incredulity at the collapse of the game explicitly references a number of key philosophical points:

> Players themselves can't be valid targets. Players aren't inside the goddamn game. Players are part of the *apparatus* of the game. They're part of the map. It's snowing on the players but not on the territory. They're part of the *map*, not the cluster-fucking *territory*. You can only launch against the *territory*. Not against the map. It's like the one ground-rule boundary that keeps Eschaton from degenerating into chaos. Eschaton gentlemen is about logic and axiom and mathematical probity and discipline and verity and *order*. You do not get points for hitting anybody real. Only the gear that *maps* what's real'. (338; italics in original)

In other words, Pemulis asserts that the game is a closed system. Although the Eschaton sequence is quite rightly heralded for its engagement with the map-territory relation, scholars are perhaps overly eager to compare the game with Jose Louis Borges' 'On Exactitude in Science'. Stephen J. Burn, for example, notes that Borges' parable 'illustrates the complications that emerge from trying to map a larger world' (*Reader's Guide* 23-24). Burn thus invokes Borges to highlight an over-familiar crisis in representation: that language is never an adequate mirror for the world. On the other hand, it proves far more profitable to examine Eschaton alongside Jean Baudrillard's updating of Borges in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994).[68] In Baudrillard's now infamous inversion

> abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. (*Simulacra* 1)

According to this reading, Pemulis – and by extension, Burn – miss the point; to insist on any distinction between the map and the territory in Wallace's moment is no longer feasible. Baudrillard goes on to list the 'successive phases of the image':

> It is the reflection of a profound reality.
> It masks and denatures a profound reality.
> It masks the absence of a profound reality.
> It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (6)

Pemulis's argument about players being 'part of the map' would roughly correspond to the second phase of the image, with the players that had argued for the snow landing on the territory obscuring 'a profound reality'. Baudrillard, on the other hand, would argue that 'it is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other, that constituted the charm of abstraction' (2). The abstract no longer has a referent; it is this challenge of abstract thought – the 'dark prospect of the actual eclipsed by the abstract' ('"Location's Location"' 88) – that is Wallace's main concern, particularly as it pertains to the individual.

> Fest suggests that
>
> When Pemulis rages against the transgression of the limits of the coldly axiomatic Eschaton, the subject of his rage might be said to be less the actions of Penn and Ingersoll than a fundamental realization on his part that even such a formally logical and abstract system as Eschaton defines is incomplete, that there are things that this system simply cannot represent or contain. ('The Inverted Nuke in the Garden' 139)

In this reading, the rational 'closed system' of Eschaton is already shown to be incomplete through its inability to 'represent or contain' reality. However, what is important here is not so much that the abstract system of Eschaton has been breached, but that it has been replaced by an even larger and more abstract system; that of Baudrillard's hyperreality. Although Baudrillard would insist that the opposite is the case – 'it no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measure itself against either an ideal or negative instance' (2) – what

becomes apparent for Wallace is that hyperreality as a theory – rather than showing the vapidity of absolutes – has just become another absolute. As Wallace writes of irony, although it proves equally applicable to his conception of theory: 'you've got to understand that this stuff has permeated the culture. It's become our language….Postmodern irony's become our environment' (*Conversations* 49). Instead of focusing on Pemulis's delineation of the map-territory relation, then, what is most important here is that there is a discussion going on over the practical application of theory. Rather than merely accepting Baudrillard's contention, a philosophical debate of sorts is being dramatized. As William James suggests

> Every difference must *make* a difference, every theoretical difference somewhere issue in a practical difference, and that the best method of discussing points of theory is to begin by ascertaining what practical difference would result from one alternative or the other being true….For what seriousness can possibly remain in debating philosophic prepositions that will never make an appreciable difference to us in action? (398-399).

It is not the merits of competing abstractions are not under debate here, but the very efficacy of the abstract in general. If for Borges the map of the desert has become reality, and Baudrillard has argued that reality is a desert where nothing can be mapped, then Wallace has sought to focus on the people attempting to live in the desert. If we apply James's question to Baudrillard's theory we can ask, 'how will the map-territory relation make an appreciable difference to us in action', or in Wallace's terms, 'what are the consequences for persons'?

Although the debate may focus on abstraction, what *really* happens is that players are injured, with profound consequences for the plot of the novel.[69] When Wallace announces that Eschaton is only played by 'children in the very earliest stages of…really abstract-capable thought' (321) he notes that our reaction to the 'confining realities of the present' is often manifest as a 'weird kind of nostalgia for stuff you never even knew' (321-322).[70] In an endnote to this disclosure Wallace explains that 'this basic phenomenon being what more abstraction-capable post-Hegelian adults call "Historical Consciousness"' (1023 n.120),

setting up a revealing hierarchy of abstraction. Fest has suggested that this nostalgia is for '*something that never happened*' – namely nuclear war – and it could be argued that the enactment of an escalation of the Cold War represents a nostalgic desire for a prior, more easily-definable reality than that of the U.S. in the 1990s after 'the end of history' (135; italics in original). As Don DeLillo tentatively suggests in *Underworld*, the Cold War can be interpreted as something that 'held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction' (76). On the other hand, the specific mention of something that 'you never even *knew*' (emphasis added) implies that this statement is more apposite to the field of knowledge.

Wallace elsewhere notes that 'a level of abstraction and formality (i.e. "play") is probably necessary for a sport to possess true metaphysical beauty' ('Michael Joyce' 235 n.40). Perhaps in the case of Eschaton Wallace is implying that 'a level of abstraction' is permissible as long as it efficacious, to some degree. Thus, instead of a system of abstraction that is too abstract to have any real meaning, the children are nostalgic for abstractions that – in Wallace's opinion – did have meaning for 'real' life. Indeed, Wallace avers that the players

> Become, on court, almost parodically adult – staid, sober, humane, and judicious twelve-year-old leaders, trying their best not to let the awesome weight of their responsibilities – responsibilities to nation, globe, rationality, ideology, conscience and history, to both the living and the unborn – not to let the terrible agony they feel at the arrival of this day – this dark day the leaders've prayed would never come and have taken every conceivable measure rationally consistent with national strategic interest to avoid, to prevent – not to let the agonizing weight of responsibility compromise their resolve to do what they must preserve their people's way of life. (327)

Granted, the tone of this sentence is obviously ironic, and Wallace's caveats and parentheses are a convincing parody of contemporary political rhetoric, and yet the responsibilities listed – 'to nation, globe, rationality, ideology, conscience and history' – correspond to those that have been usurped in the wake of poststructural theory. Wallace's nostalgia for these old-

fashioned values that the children 'never even knew' does not represent historical amnesia or a naïve affirmation of concepts that are inherently problematic, and yet it is suggested that they do offer a more readily-comprehensible route to an efficacious life than the new abstract absolute that replaces them.

Fest's identification of nostalgia for '*something that never happened*' does, however, become useful when we consider it in the context of this postmodern abstract absence, particularly when we recall Baudrillard's infamous tract *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995). Indeed, the participants could be said to be nostalgic for wars that *did* 'take place', or those that could at least be conceptualised and represented in traditional ways. Baudrillard does not of course suggest that the 'real' Gulf War did not take place, but that the levels of mediation involved resulted in our difficulty interpreting it: 'war stripped of its passions, its phantasms, its finery, its veil, its violence, its images' (64).[71] For many, however, the title of this collection became a synecdoche for the overly abstract nature of postmodern/poststructuralist theory, echoing James's question: 'what seriousness can possibly remain in debating philosophic prepositions that will never make an appreciable difference to us in action?' (399). In more extreme terms, what efficacy does intellectual abstract thinking have when it elides the fact that people in the Gulf War were being killed?

In many ways Eschaton stands as a re-assertion of danger in the face of abstract thinking; although just a simulation of war, many of the participants are injured. Most conspicuous is the injury that Otis P. Lord suffers. Running to try and save the computer hardware that has been knocked into the air, Lord trips over LaMont Chu and is sent flying:

> Lord's flight's parabola is less spectacular on the y-axis than the TP's has been. The Yushityu's hard-drive chassis makes an indescribable sound as it hits the earth and its brightly circuited guts come out. The color monitor lands on its back with its screen blinking ERROR at the white sky. Hal and everyone else can project Lord's flight's own terminus an instant before impact. For a brief moment that Hal will later regard as completely and uncomfortably bizarre, Hal feels at his own face to see whether he

is wincing. The distant whistle patweets. Lord does indeed go headfirst down through the monitor's screen, and stays there, his sneakers in the air and his warm-up pants sagging upward to reveal black socks. (342)

This dense passage is rich in allusion. A 'screaming comes across the sky' for Generation X, where *Gravity's Rainbow* asserts that 'there is nothing to compare it to now' (3), *Infinite Jest* can allude to myriad referents that have become so ubiquitous as to be almost devoid of meaning. Alongside Pynchon's opus, we can discern the influence of cartoons in Lord's Looney Tunes-style terminus, of slapstick comedy, of the impact of computer technology on our vocabulary, and in particular, video games. What is perhaps most significant in the passage, however, is that the children can anticipate the angle of Lord's descent. Although the denizens of the E.T.A. would of course be well-versed in the trajectories of objects in flight due to their tennis training, the inevitability of Lord's descent into the teleputer's screen inverts the familiar images of 'surgical' bombing in the so-called 'Video Game War' (*The Gulf War* 62). Additionally, Hal seems increasingly divorced from proceedings. Moreover, Hal's inability to fully comprehend the events in 'real-time' – although possibly linked to his withdrawal from marijuana – can be attributed to his increasing susceptibility to anhedonia. By showing that people can still be hurt in a simulation of war, Wallace alludes to a possible ethical void in the abstract thinking of postmodernism. This is not to suggest that Wallace disagrees with Baudrillard in theory: both writers bemoan the absence of reality in the contemporary era. However, Wallace introduces the concept of pain as a corrective to Baudrillard's abstract thinking, asserting that pain is the 'really real' that can still have efficacy in the postmodern age.

In a particularly telling instance, Don Gately – lying in a hospital bed trying to resist the offer of pain-relieving medication in order to maintain his pledge of sobriety – remembers that one of his greatest attractions to drugs was the realisation

> that pain of all sorts becomes a theory, a news-item in the distant cold climes way below the warm air you hum on, and what you feel is mostly gratitude at our abstract distance from anything that doesn't sit inside concentric circles and love what's happening. (891)

This refusal to accept suffering as part of existence – more specifically the wilful retreat to abstract thinking in order to avoid contending with pain – is thus portrayed as an unethical stance; a refusal of responsibility. In the McCaffery interview Wallace ruminates at length on the status of pain in Western society:

> In most other cultures, if you hurt, if you have a symptom that's causing you to suffer, they view this as basically healthy and natural, a sign that your nervous system knows something's wrong. For these cultures, getting rid of pain without addressing the deeper cause would be like shutting off a fire alarm while the fire's still going. But if you just look at the number of ways we try like hell to alleviate mere symptoms in this country…you see an almost compulsive tendency to regard pain itself as the problem. And so pleasure becomes a value, a teleological end in itself. (*Conversations* 23)

Seen in this light, Wallace's affirmation of pain – or at the very least his refusal to ignore it – becomes a corrective to the 'abstract distance' that is symptomatic of the retreat from meaningful involvement in life and society perpetrated by inhabitants of the contemporary United States. Awareness of pain provides a constant self-reminder of our connection to the immediately real – of our immersion in reality – and it is this that Wallace wants to foster. Anticipating Wallace's 2005 Kenyon commencement speech *This is Water*, it is unsurprising that Gately's reflection on pain is quickly followed by him recalling the story of 'the fish asking about what's water' (891), an injunction to the reader to embrace the totality of the present, both positive and negative. Indeed, this affirmation of the banal platitude to 'seize the day' is also figured as 'AA's real gift'. The key to maintaining sobriety is to focus on how 'no single, individual moment is in and of itself unendurable' (204). Once Gately has realised this, his life becomes

> an endless Now stretching its gull-wings out on either side of his heartbeat. And he'd never before or since felt so excruciatingly alive. Living in the Present between pulses…living completely In The Moment….It's a gift, the Now: it's AA's real gift: it's no accident they call it *The Present*. (860; italics in original)

Wallace here riffs on the word present, alluding to both the idea of temporal simultaneity and the notion of a gift. However, the 'present' can of course also refer to the opposite of the 'absent', thus providing an antidote to a perceived dominance of postmodern absence in the field of metaphysics, an 'anchoring in reality' (*Existential Engagement* 218).

Wallace explored the efficacy of abstract thinking in the face of pain in other stories, with 'B.I. #46' from *Brief Interviews* providing a particularly harrowing example. Like all the interviews from the eponymous collection, the story takes the form of answers to unspecified questions from an anonymous female interviewer to an anonymous male interviewee. The interviewee seems to be suggesting that indefensible acts such as rape and incestuous abuse can 'also have their positive aspects for a human being in the long run' (99). The interviewee defends this extremely challenging position by averring that 'having a knee-jerk attitude about *anything* is a total mistake' (98): 'even the worst things that can happen to you can end up being positive factors in who you are' (99). The interviewee offers the hypothetical example of a woman being raped, invoking Victor Frankl's holocaust memoir *Man's Search for Meaning* to show how heinous acts may be construed into a positive.[72] The interviewee is careful to assert that acts such as this are 'totally terrible and negative and wrong while it's going on, no question', but asks 'what about afterwards?' (99):

> What she knows is that the totally most terrible degrading thing that she ever could have even imagined happening to her has really happened to her now. And she survived. She's still here….Now she knows it won't kill her, she can survive it, it won't obliterate her or make her, like, subhuman. (100)

However, lest the story be taken as a particularly extreme example of Nietzsche's famous aphorism from *Twilight of the Idols*, 'what does not kill me makes me stronger' (33), Wallace provides a number of complications.[73]

At the level of plot, the interviewee subsequently reveals that his wife was the victim of a brutal gang-rape and was violated with a bottle (101-102), which presents an ostensible

riposte to those who would argue that his hypothesis is merely the result of cold abstraction, and would never have efficacy in real life. The interviewee then divulges: 'what if I said I wasn't even married? Then what? Then it's showtime' (104). This, then, introduces a level of personal experience to the story, and is designed to jolt the reader into realizing that they themselves have been guilty of a 'knee-jerk attitude' in presuming that a rape victim is usually female: 'what if I said it happened to me?...Does it have to be a woman?' (105). In trade-mark Wallace fashion, however, there is yet another twist:

> I'm not saying it happened to me or him or my wife or even if it happened but what if it did? What if I did it to you? Right here? Raped you with a bottle? Do you think it'd make any difference? Why? What are you? How do you know? You don't know shit. (105)

This conclusion is extremely significant, as the disgust at that we feel at the 'hideous' man must not preclude the ambiguity surrounding his story, or the importance of his philosophical message.[74]

Essentially what is at stake in this story – like most of Wallace's oeuvre – is self-preservation and humanity. As the interviewee says of Frankl's memoir, it is about 'preserving his human identity in the face of the camp's degradation and violence and suffering totally ripping away his identity' (98). What is particularly important in this story is the matter of choice; perhaps the greatest indicator of essential humanity. Erich Fromm suggests that the ability to choose is both a biological weakness – in that human self-preservation requires the formative influence of instruction rather than relying on mere instinct – and the 'condition of human culture':

> From the beginning of his existence man is confronted with the choice between different courses of action. In the animal there is an uninterrupted chain of reactions starting with a stimulus, like hunger, and ending with a more or less strictly determined course of action, which does away with the tension created by the stimulus. In man that chain is interrupted. The stimulus is there but the kind of satisfaction is "open," that is, he must choose between different courses of action. Instead of a predetermined instinctive action, man has to weigh possible courses of

action in his mind; he starts to think. He changes his role toward nature from that of purely passive adaptation to an active one: he produces. (*The Fear of Freedom* 27)

In the context of Wallace's story, it is crucial that people possess the ability to choose how they think their experiences: instead of being 'just a machine programmed with different reactions' (105) – that is, an instinctive animal – the interviewee asserts that:

What if I told you that…minute by minute if you want you can *choose* to be more if you want, you can *choose* to be a human being and have it *mean* something?...To always deep-down know it's always a choice, that it's you that is making yourself up second by second every second from now on, that the only one that thinks you're even a person every second is you. (104; italics in original)

In terms of asserting individuality amidst the absolute of abstract thinking, this story attempts a return to humanism; like the Eschaton sequence, it is the realisation of pain that ruptures abstract thinking and allows the individual to choose meaning.

The interviewee avers: 'all of us will admit suffering and horror are part of being alive and existing' (100). What is central to the interviewee's argument, however, is that 'this isn't really about politics or feminism or whatever. For you this is all ideas, you think we're talking about ideas' (101). The interviewee wants to foreground 'not just the *idea* of darkness', but the 'genuine Dark Side': 'you might admit you believe it yeah OK the human condition is full of terrible awful human suffering and you can survive almost anything or whatever. Even if you really believe it. You believe it, but what if I said I don't just believe it I *know* it?' (101; italics in original).[75] The important thing is to 'have it *happen* to you, see, and now you really *know*' (102; italics in original). The ambiguity of the interviewee's own experience is reinserted here, but what is more apposite for our concerns is the experiential nature of this knowledge: it '*happens*'. As William James states in a key passage from *Pragmatism*:

The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its veri-*fication*. Its validity is the process of its valid-*ation*. (574; italics in original)

Being able to feel pain and suffering is thus not merely an abstract idea, but a means of access to a 'real' or 'genuine' – that is, authentic – conception of the self. This is not a static conception of an inherent genuine essence, but a self predicated on a process of becoming: a humanistic, protean vision. Thinking abstractly like Baudrillard or other theorists may be useful in revealing ideas – 'hypocrisies' in Wallace's terms – about the world, but it is only useful to 'persons' if it can have actual consequences.

'One Thing It Cannot Mean Is That *No One Did It*': Consequences for the Individual

At one stage of 'B.I. #46' the interviewee asks:

> when everything that has any like connection to the you you think you are gets ripped away and now all that's left is only: what, what's left, is there anything left? You're still so alive so what's left is you? What's that? What does *you* mean now? (103)

This of course has added resonance in the wake of the postmodern disintegration of the subject. Alongside Evans' focus on the over-saturation of images in the contemporary era, he notes that the 'theoretical responses to this degradation of the individual reinforce that degradation by assailing the very category of the individual' ('"The Chains of Not Choosing"' 175). Indeed, Wallace sees the disintegration of the liberal subject as perhaps the central problem of contemporary existence, with poststructuralist theory and philosophy the main culprit. Fredric Jameson memorably theorized that one of the most important developments of postmodernism was 'the fragmented and schizophrenic decentering' of the subject (*Postmodernism* 413):

> The end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual – and the accompanying stress, whether as some new moral ideal or as empirical description, on the decentering of that formerly centered subject or psyche. (15)

Indeed, when Jameson wrote of the 'death of the subject', he identified a number of possible causes:

> The psychoanalytic undermining of experiences of personal identity, the aesthetic attack on originality, genius and modernist private style, the waning of "charisma" in the media age and of "great men" in the age of feminism, the fragmentary, schizophrenic aesthetic. (348)

This passage could almost stand in for a litany of Wallace's gripes with contemporary culture and society. Throughout his oeuvre Wallace engages with this challenge to the notion of the subject, attempting to re-assert the efficacy of – or indeed merely to posit the possibility of the existence of – the sovereign individual; to find out what 'you' means now. *Infinite Jest*'s first word, for example, is the pronoun 'I', with Hal asserting a few sentences later: 'I am in here' (3). Hal's brother Mario – perhaps the likeliest candidate for a hero in Wallace's fiction (and certainly the most ontologically stable, literally anchored to the ground by his police lock) – confers subjectivity on his mother: 'You can be a subject, Moms' (761). Indeed, in this way Mario may offer a corrective to *Gravity's Rainbow*'s Tyrone Slothrop, perhaps the most famous embodiment of postmodern disintegration, ending Pynchon's opus 'scattered all over the Zone' (845).[76] Of course, the assertion of subjectivity is no longer as simple as a straightforward Cartesian declaration, and the characters of Wallace novels and stories often reflect this sense of confusion; or in Neal from 'Good Old Neon''s opening declaration: 'my whole life I've been a fraud' (141).

Perhaps one of Wallace's most important – and yet under-appreciated – moments in relation to this is his short review of H. L. Hix's *Morte d'Author: An Autopsy* for the *Harvard Book Review*, in which Wallace frames Hix's book as an analysis of the 'Death of the Author' debate between 'European theorists (pro-death) and U.S. philosophers (anti-death, mostly)' ('Greatly Exaggerated' 138). Although Wallace is not entirely enamoured with Hix's method – he is guilty of 'accusing all parties of not being nearly *complicated enough* in their understanding of the term "author"'s in- and extensions' (139; emphasis added) – this review offers a revealing glimpse into Wallace's own opinions regarding the debate. It is, for example, possible to detect Wallace's bias against the 'European theorists':

> There's been this long-standing deluded presumption, *they think*, that if there is an utterance then there must exist a unified, efficacious presence that causes and owns that utterance. The poststructuralists attack what they see as a post-Platonic prejudice in favour of presence over absence and speech over writing. (140; emphasis added)

Although Wallace's own sense of antagonism towards abstract theory is discernible here, and his customary interrogation of the efficacy of the subject is also visible, what most impresses Wallace about Hix is that his project is 'a neat example of that modern commissure where Continental theory and analytic practice fuse' (142). More specifically, Wallace appreciates Hix's refusal to merely dismiss one side or the other:

> What Hix offers as a resolution to the debate is a combination of a Derridean metaphysics that rejects assumptions of unified causal presence and a Wittgensteinian analytic method of treating actual habits of discourse as a touchstone for figuring out what certain terms really mean and do. (142)

Hix's achievement is to succeed where Wallace failed in *The Broom of the System*: to find a pragmatic retort to the disintegration of the subject and the vapidity of language. Wallace applauds Hix's preference for 'ordinary-language analysis' in order to find out 'how smart readers really do *use* the term "author"' (143; emphasis added). Although Wallace acknowledges that the question remains an abstract one – 'for those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another, the whole question seems sort of arcane' (144) – he channels William Gass in asserting that despite various answers to the riddle of the death of the author, '"one thing which it cannot mean is that *no one did it*"' (145; italics in original). Following Hix, Wallace points out that perhaps 'the entire post-1968 squabble has been pointless, because the theorists involved haven't bothered to consider what "author" truly means and embraces before they set about interring or resuscitating the patient' (142). Perhaps chief among these elisions is 'what Hix calls "the assumption of homogeneity"; simplistically regarding "author" as referring to "a unitary entity or phenomenon"' (142).

In an interview with Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, Wallace highlighted the fluid nature of influences on the individual in his contemporary era, as engendered by globalization: 'I can get up and watch satellite footage of a riot in Peking while I eat a Tex-Mex breakfast while I listen to Third World music on my CD player' (19). Representing a rare instance of Wallace engaging with the world outside the United States, this does not imply that by subsuming international influences one becomes somehow less authentic, but it does serve to highlight the myriad forces that impact on our daily lives. It suggests that, as our tastes are protean, so should be our conceptions of the authentic self; the idea of the self does not have to correspond to Romantic ideals of unity or coherence. That is, the conception of an authentic self should be predicated on being a locus of multiple – and often competing – experiences and influences, an assertion as 'really American' as Whitman's famous lines in *Leaves of Grass*: 'Do I contradict myself? / Very well then….I contradict myself; / I am large….I contain multitudes' (1314-1316). Indeed, this confusing, pluralistic and reciprocal model for the self is reflected in Wallace's choice of epigraph for *The Pale King*, from Frank Bidart's 'Borges and I': 'We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed'.[77] Andrew Warren is keen to stress that Wallace's lack of coherence – rather than a challenge for critics – should be embraced as a positive; any acknowledgement of Wallace's complexity – including his protean or contradictory tendencies – is undoubtedly preferable to reductive commentaries that seek to define a single Wallace 'project'. As James writes in *A Pluralistic Universe*: 'throughout the whole finite universe each real thing proves to be many differents without undergoing the necessity of breaking into disconnected editions of itself' (749). Indeed, Wallace's fiction often aims to find a way to articulate these 'differents' – the competing and contradictory interior monologues of an individual – as part of a larger goal of re-asserting the efficacy of the authentic subject in the wake of its supposed poststructural disintegration. In a broader, more political sense – as will be

discussed in the following chapter – this struggle takes the form of trying to situate the voice of the individual within a meaningful, efficacious community, without resorting to reductive amalgamation. However, before proceeding, it is necessary to insert a caveat regarding the elitism that inheres in the notion of the disintegrated subject.

For all the humour in Wallace's writing, it is undeniable that most of his fiction is imbued with a sense of sadness, whether due to subject matter pertaining to loss, addiction, or depression, or just a general sense that the American Experiment has failed or gone off course. Wallace avers in interviews that his was a deliberate strategy, explaining that his motivation when writing *Infinite Jest* was that he 'wanted to do a book that was sad' (*Conversations* 55). Indeed, in the aforementioned interview with Laura Miller, Wallace specifically states that 'the sadness that the book is about…[is] a real American type of sadness' (59). By this, Wallace meant a 'stomach-level sadness….It manifests itself as a kind of lostness. Whether it's unique to our generation I really don't know' (59). Although this is in some ways prescient – Wallace is able to recognize that this sense of 'lostness' might not be universal to all – he is mistaken in framing it as generational and 'American'. People of his generation in particular, and Americans in general, may be predisposed to this 'lostness', however, these constituent categories are not guarantors of the feeling. Instead, what is more conducive to this feeling is a privileged, educated upbringing, and the luxury of having leisure time to consider one's condition. Those less well off or less educated can of course still feel sadness, but it is unlikely that they will be experiencing the same existential or metaphysical 'lostness' that Wallace is alluding to. Indeed, Wallace points to these very factors in the context of his own malaise during the interview: 'I was white, upper-middle-class, obscenely well-educated, had way more career success than I could have legitimately hoped for, and was sort of adrift' (59). However, although not as universal as he would

perhaps suppose it, Wallace's exploration of sadness is nevertheless useful in discerning an affliction that affects large swathes of U.S. society.

A possible conduit of this was noted in Wallace's study of infinite, *Everything and More* (2004). In a book fittingly devoted to time and abstract thought, Wallace posits that 'the dreads and dangers of abstract thinking are a big reason why we now all like to stay so busy and bombarded with stimuli all the time. Abstract thinking tends most often to strike during moments of quiet repose' (13). It seems more likely that Wallace has this proposition the wrong way round: instead of trying to stay busy to avoid abstract thinking, we become more prone to abstract thinking when we find ourselves in the position of no longer having to keep busy. This distinction is important, as it announces the prerequisite of a high amount of disposable leisure time, as distinct from work necessary to maintain existence. Accordingly, Wallace's sense of 'lostness' is a problem that is almost exclusively reserved for the first world and neoliberal/late-capitalist economies. Moreover, a subject has to possess a certain degree of freedom to be able to even conceive of themselves as a subject in the first place, before they are then able to theorise their disintegration. Repressed peoples are unlikely to conceive of the postmodern disintegration of the subject as a pressing concern when they are not in possession of enough freedom to think of themselves as a subject.

Wallace saw Wittgenstein as the 'real architect of the postmodern trap', identifying a double bind in his thinking: 'you can either treat language as an infinitely small dense dot [as in the solipsism of the *Tractatus*], or you let it become the world – the exterior and everything in it' (*Conversations* 45). For Wallace, the latter proposition 'seems more promising', for 'if the world is itself a linguistic construct, [then] there's nothing "outside" language for language to have to picture or refer to. This lets you avoid solipsism' (45). On the other hand, this 'leads right to the postmodern, poststructural dilemma of having to deny yourself an existence independent of language' (45). We have seen how Wallace sought to evade this

poststructural denial of existence by asserting the pragmatic importance of pain and the present for the individual, what remains then is to discern how he sought to avoid the problem of solipsism.

Wallace claims that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* offers 'an immediate study of depression & loneliness' ('Empty Plenum' 78). However, it is important to make a distinction between loneliness and the more extreme philosophical position of solipsism. In *Infinite Jest* Wallace averred that 'loneliness is not a function of solitude' (202). On the contrary, Wallace avers that loneliness is a logical consequence of the abstract thinking associated with poststructuralism. Indeed, it is revealing that Wallace recycles the image of 'an inclined beach sliding toward a dreadful sea' from his review of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* in the final sentence of *Infinite Jest*: 'And when he [Don Gately] came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out' (981). This moment may at first give the impression of catharsis; indeed some critics have suggested that the conclusion represents Gately's spiritual and moral rebirth. Referring back to an innocuous passage from earlier in the novel, this reading does appear plausible; we are told that Gately's dreams 'seem to set him under a sort of sea, at terrific depths, the water all around him silent and dim and the same temperature he is' (449); dreams which are thus easy to frame as a desire for the womb and amniotic fluid. However, the end of *Infinite Jest* actually returns us to the impossibility of experiencing empathy or knowing the Other through language; the barren beach and the withdrawal of the tide leave Gately finally exposed and alone.

The ending of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* also explicitly mentions a beach: 'once, I had a dream of fame. Generally, even then, I was lonely. To the castle, a sign must have said. Somebody is living on this beach' (240). We are faced here with a juxtaposition between an assertion of loneliness, and an affirmation of individual existence; a position of solipsism.

Moreover, Markson's ending echoes a similar philosophical position from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*:

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will the see the world alright. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. (89)

The endings of *Infinite Jest*, *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* can thus be construed as taking part in the same philosophical puzzle, as exemplified by Gately figuratively awakening from his coma, yet still unable to fully articulate his subjectivity. It is only by returning to beginning of the novel – as suggested by the partial ellipse at the bottom of the page – that we can see the full extent of this bind. As noted in chapter two, at the end of Kate Gompert's first appearance in the novel her doctor notes her plea: '*get me out of this*'; 'he was adding his own post-assessment question, *Then what*?, when Kate Gompert began weeping for real' (78; italics in original). This brief moment signals Kate's desire to be free from her depression, addiction, and anhedonia (the consequences of living in a poststructural world), and the doctor's acknowledgement of this as an impossibility. Importantly, it is an outburst of Kate's 'real' emotions that jolts the doctor and the reader. If we are to avoid the denial of the self associated with poststructuralism and assert our individuality, then what? We are left with the image of Gately alone in the solipsistic limbo of language. As with so many of Wallace's paradoxes, 'what looks like the cage's exit is actually the bars of the cage' (222).

Comparing Emerson's assertion of the self in 'Self-Reliance' with Descartes' cogito, Stanley Cavell has noted that 'Descartes's discovery [is] that my existence requires, hence permits, proof (you might say authentication) – more particularly, requires that if I am to exist I must name my existence, acknowledge it' (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 106). Cavell describes 'Emerson's progress as his having posed Descartes's question for himself and

provided a fresh line of answer, one you might call a grammatical answer: I am a being who to exist, must say I exist, or must acknowledge my existence – claim it, stake it, enact it' (109). In short, 'what I am is one who to exist enacts his existence' (109). Cavell asserts that 'the beauty of the answer lies in its weakness', of which he specifies two:

> First, it does not prejudge what the I or the self or mind or soul may turn out to be, but only specifies a condition that whatever it is must meet. Second, the proof only works in the moment of its giving, for what I prove is the existence only of a creature who *can* enact its existence, as exemplified in actually giving the proof, not one who at all times does in fact enact it. (109)

This contingent avowal of the self then, predicated on a subjunctive possibility, offers a compelling solution to Wallace's conundrum. Indeed, Hal's assertion of his own subjectivity at the opening of the novel announces this very possibility. Hal explicitly claims, 'I'm not a machine' (12), 'I am not what you see and hear' (13). In other words, Hal asserts that his existence is not purely linguistic; his self may be 'something we cannot speak about' (in Wittgenstein's terms), but he is, nonetheless, 'in here'. With reference to Cavell, Hal '*can*' enact his existence, or at least, theoretically has the potential to. Ultimately, of course, Hal's assertion of his individuality is strictly limited – as he is 'communicatively challenged' by this stage of the narrative (14), he is unable to fully realise his subjectivity – and yet he does represent an improvement over some of the other characters in the novel.

Fromm avers that 'the history of mankind is the history of growing individuation, but it is also the history of growing freedom' (206). Although writing with the growth of fascism specifically in mind, Fromm's analysis resonates with Wallace's own identification of the problems in his contemporary moment. Just as Wallace notes the ever-present threat of solipsism, Fromm highlights 'the powerlessness and insecurity of the isolated individual in modern society who has become free from all bonds that once gave meaning and security to life', concluding that 'the individual cannot bear this isolation' (221). A frequent response to this is that the individual 'chooses to lose his self since he cannot bear to be alone. Thus

freedom – as freedom from – leads into new bondage' (221). In Marathe and Steeply's dialogue in *Infinite Jest* we can see a dramatization of this debate in reference to the contemporary United States, corresponding as it does to a society predicated on negative freedom. However, by 2005 and his Kenyon commencement speech *This is Water*, Wallace had come to the conclusion that everyone gives themselves away to something: 'there is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship' (99-101; italics in original). Wallace here contends that we should worship 'the really important kind of freedom' that 'involves attention, and awareness'; the ability 'truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day' (120). This 'simple awareness' amounts to '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"' (131-132). Wallace's blend of pragmatism and stoicism amounts to a vision of a philosophy that is both 'really American' and efficacious for the individual.

In an article that convincingly criticizes Wallace – 'a Program Man if ever there was one' – for his deference to the institutionalization of literature, Mark McGurl notes that Wallace's attitude results in a de-radicalization of political potential:

> Wallace's commitment is…to a conception of therapeutic community in which what might have become political questions – and, by implication, motives for political contestation – are obediently dissolved into a series of individual ethical choices. ('The Institution of Nothing' 36)

Although McGurl is perhaps a little unfair in suggesting that Wallace completely elides 'political questions', he is astute in noting that Wallace's 'conception of therapeutic community' is decentralised; the rehabilitation of the individual is Wallace's chief concern, and he hopes that improvement of the community will follow. McGurl further suggests that much of Wallace's work is characterized by 'a profound reversal of the usual rhetoric of

liberation': 'what we have here is profound desire to be a tool'; a stance that he likens to a 'Wittgensteinian pragmatism' (38). This position of deference or acquiescence, however, may be more profitably termed – following the libertarian philosopher John Lachs – 'stoic pragmatism'.

Hoping for a revitalization of both the field of philosophy and the role of the public intellectual, Lachs laments the way that 'philosophy has isolated itself in universities':

> It has focused on narrow, and often technical, topics of little interest to the ordinary person. In this process, it has abandoned its traditional tasks of providing moral guidance to individuals and assuming a critical stance toward questionable social practices. (*Stoic Pragmatism* 13).

Invoking Emerson and Thoreau, James and Dewey, Lachs calls for a return to 'the effective involvement of philosophers in their communities' (13), noting that 'philosophers working in the American tradition aim to deal not with technical professional issues but with social problems as they arise in the process of living' (14). Although Lachs is keen to point out that this is a generalization, his petition for the reintegration of the public intellectual resonates with McGurl's own identification of Wallace as a 'moral educator' (33). Indeed, Wallace's pretensions to this mantle are perhaps unsurprising when we consider his reverence of such public intellectual luminaries as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin ('The Soul Is Not a Smithy' 112; 'Just Asking' 322), and *The Federalist* (*The Pale King* 135).

Erich Fromm contends that there is a way out of the 'vicious circle' of growing freedom: 'freedom man can attain by the realization of his self, by being himself' (222):

> We believe that the realization of the self is accomplished not only by an act of thinking but also by the realization of man's total personality, by the active expression of his emotional and intellectual potentialities. These potentialities are present in everybody; they become real only to the extent to which they are expressed. In other words, *positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality*. (222; italics in original)

Although by Wallace's moment this conception of a 'total, integrated personality' is perhaps outdated, Fromm's model still holds some relevancy for Wallace. Indeed, one of Fromm's

ideals of 'spontaneous activity' is love: 'love as spontaneous affirmation of others, as the union of the individual with others on the basis of the preservation of the individual self' (225). This dual process of encouraging the 'affirmation of others' without neglecting 'the preservation of the individual self' closely resembles the sort of moral stance that Wallace sought to inculcate; a pluralistic position that could be achieved through Wallace's adoption of stoic pragmatism.

In an oft-cited chapter of *The Pale King*, there is a long list of tax office employees, all of whom turn pages (recall the novel's epigraph):

> …Rosellen Brown turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Devils are actually angels. Elpdia Carter and Harriet Candelaria reach up to their Cart-In boxes at exactly the same time. R. Jarvis Brown turns a page….Anand Singh turns a page. Ed Shackleford turns a page. Two clocks, two ghosts, one square acre of hidden mirror. Ken Wax turns a page. Jay Landauer feels absently at his face. Every love story is a ghost story. Ryne Hobratschk turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page….'. (*The Pale King* 314)

Critics and scholars have tended to focus on the sentence that reads 'every love story is a ghost story' as evidence of Wallace's exhortation to pay attention. According to this reading, if we miss this key line then we miss the point of the entire passage: we are living in poststructural world of absence; the other is never reconcilable with the individual; we need to pay attention to little details amidst the maelstrom of images and information that bombards us daily. However, it may just be possible that the opposite is true: to focus on that line is to negate the importance of the individuality of every single one of the people listed, therefore turning them into ghosts. To imagine the community, Wallace suggests we need a new brand of pluralism, one that allows for the *possibility* of the efficacious individual, a possibility achieved through the realization of the self. This position does not ignore the widespread permeation of theory, but can still express nostalgia for old-fashioned humanist values.

Of course, this realization of the self is an ideal, and is not open to all. As McGurl contends 'Wallace did not feel empowered to ground his fiction in the cultural capital of ethnically or racially marked experience…[of] high cultural pluralism. Instead, he wrote as what he might have called a "weenie-American"'; 'an identity category produced in and by the culture of the school' (43, 44). Discussing *The Pale King*, McGurl continues

> While it is fair to describe his investment in the institutional order of things as "conservative," and to note that his investment in the symbolic value of ordinary whiteness is very much shared by the Republican Party, a book celebrating the secular culture of IRS bureaucracy could hardly have been more resistant to contemporary right-wing sensibilities. (49)

Again, McGurl is correct in describing Wallace as 'conservative', as well as realising that this conservatism is perhaps incompatible with 'contemporary right-wing sensibilities'. This thus suggests that Wallace's vision here might be more limited or moderate. As Lachs says of stoic pragmatism:

> The fact that the world could be better than it is does not imply that we are obliged to make it better….If world improvement is what we have in mind, it is worth remembering that cleaning up one's little corner of it is a mighty start….Here we see the advantage of the good enough. As affirmation of our finitude, it negates our Faustian tendency to want to have and do everything. It rejects the relevance of the ideal of perfection and strikes at the root of our compulsion to pursue unreachable ideals. It liberates us to the enjoyment of the possible without eliminating standards or moral effort. It enables us to still our will be achieving what we can and celebrating what we do. By no means least, it dissolves the eternal dissatisfaction that permeates Western industrial society and substitutes joy in the immediacies of life for all-encompassing guilt. (114-115)

Of course this libertarian ideal cannot be achieved by everybody, implying a trace of elitism that is consistent with the rest of Wallace's output. It is, however, presented as perhaps the best option for living in Wallace's contemporary era; like the reminder that 'this is water', it offers a limited goal that could provide a pragmatic solution for enduring. Indeed, Wallace himself affirmed his non-radical tendencies in an oft-overlooked interview with David Wiley in 1997: 'I'm not a sociologist, I'm not a politician, I'm not an advocate for cultural change. I'm talking like a private citizen. My stuff is not programmatic, and I don't want to

revolutionize American culture'. It may be naïve to take Wallace entirely at his word here, and yet his un-radical posturing throughout his oeuvre would seem to corroborate his claims.

In what might serve as a riposte to McGurl, Lachs has noted that

Living human beings make the plans of institutions, and other individuals execute the plans, even if each participant contributes but a little. There is no need to postulate any agency beyond what all these individuals do. The act of the institution is fully analysable into the constituent actions of human beings. Therefore, if there is credit or blame, it rests squarely on the shoulders of people, not on some superentity whose actions are undetectable. (136)

Although in our current neoliberal moment this statement may seem compromised by multinational conglomerates that only seem beholden to maximising profit, the strategies of these corporations are still perpetrated by people. In alighting on a philosophy that emphasises individual agency and responsibility, Wallace offers a limited but nonetheless achievable possibility of minor change. Lachs contends that 'the soul of America' (158) is founded on the principles of 'absolute liberty' (162) and 'the language of work' (165). This would seem to provide at least one method of escape: meaningful work. Fromm similarly asserts that work is 'the other component' of his ideal of spontaneity: 'work as creation in which man becomes one with nature in the act of creation' (225). We can see this meaningful act of creation as preferable to the drudgery of the tax office which must be stoically endured; meaningful work provides a pragmatic solution to contemporary problems. As Lachs has pointed out, 'not many philosophers have come out in defense of an existence of comfort and prosperity' (169), for Wallace, however, as long as this comfort is the product of the right sort of work, then it is an ideal to be aimed for.

Chapter Five: 'An Age Between': Wallace and U.S. Politics

McGurl's assessment is a welcome political intervention in the field of Wallace Studies.[78] As noted earlier, there initially seemed to be a curious reluctance to engage in political analyses of Wallace's writing. Where critics have engaged with Wallace's politics, there is a tendency to focus on *The Pale King* as the final – and thus, definitive – expression of his political leanings. Indeed, this may be an outgrowth of the popular yet misguided attempt to position Wallace as a twenty-first century writer. Although it is possible to argue that Wallace may have been in some respects 'ahead of his time', to attribute seer-like foresight to Wallace would be to embark on a reductive critical project that merely seeks to identify the areas in which Wallace was most prescient in his predictions. Moreover, with Wallace's current ubiquity, there is an inclination to frame his writing as a direct mirror of current academic and cultural trends; a stance that underestimates the importance of the 1990s to his writing.[79] Wallace is fundamentally a 1990s writer; despite a career that dovetails both ends of that decade (1987-2008), the 'long' 1990s correspond with Wallace's most productive period in terms of output. Moreover, the cultural, political, and social developments that took place during the decade are crucial to an understanding of his thinking. Indeed, the historical coincidence of the publication of his most critically-acclaimed work with the U.S. assumption of the role of lone global superpower takes on central significance, prompting the probing analysis of the U.S. that is so characteristic of his work.

Much like Eric Hobsbawm's conception of the nineteenth century as a 'long' century spanning the years 1789 to 1914, the 1990s beg to be considered as a 'long' decade, bookended by two 'falls': the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the fall of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in 2001.[80] Although the practice of aligning literary analysis with arbitrary temporal markers such as the century or decade is necessarily reductive and

exclusionary, this timeframe does serve as a useful backdrop with which to frame Wallace's mainstream literary output, and encourages us to cross-reference possible cultural, societal, and political influences. It is key, for example, that the U.S.'s rise to largely unchallenged global dominance during this decade, precipitated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, represented for some commentators and theorists – most famously Francis Fukuyama in 'The End of History' – the triumph of liberal democracy; the corroboration of its inherent superiority over other forms of government. It is not necessarily to endorse that viewpoint to discern how the widespread debate engendered by Fukuyama's article exposes its impact on the collective imaginary – the 'common sense' to borrow a phrase from Antonio Gramsci – and highlights its status as an important influence on cultural production. However, whereas Fukuyama heralds the triumphant closing of a Hegelian dialectic, Wallace reasserts the importance of the Socratic dialectic, calling for closer scrutiny and more meaningful debate within the realm of U.S. political discourse. Indeed, one of Wallace's signal concerns was to conduct a literary interrogation of the efficacy of democratic models of political and societal organisation, probing the assumption of its superiority.

If the twentieth century is taken to be the 'American Century' due to the United States' rise to dominance, then the 1990s – with the realisation of that goal – are surely the most 'American' of decades. Paradoxically, however, as Wegner points out, 'following its ostensible victory over its greatest nemesis, [the U.S.] seemed to have lost its self-proclaimed messianic destiny as the leader of the so-called free world' (*Life Between Two Deaths* 76). Striking a similar note whilst discussing the state of creative writing at the end of the 1980s, Wallace avers that 'we seem, now, to see our literary innocence taken from us without anything substantial to replace it. An age between' ('Fictional Futures' 66). This quip might equally be applied to the state of the nation more generally: the 1990s may be construed as an

'age between' the Cold War and the War on Terror; an age of uncertainty and flux. With the perceived absence of an external political 'Other' against which to define itself, the U.S. was forced into a comparatively introspective period of self-analysis. As Wallace writes of Las Vegas in 'Big Red Son': 'in Caesars Palace is America conceived as a new kind of Rome: conqueror of its own people. An empire of Self' (9-10). This perceived absence of an easily-defined political challenge to the U.S.-led model of democracy after nearly fifty years of Cold War-dominated discourse perhaps goes someway to explaining why political readings of Wallace – whose focus on the domestic sphere implies a further withdrawal from this already compromised field – were largely absent in early attempts at Wallace scholarship.[81]

It is all too easy, when highlighting the inner-directed U.S.A. of the 1990s, to overlook political implications, as expressed in D.T. Max's biography:

> as the 1990s progressed, just what was to be protested grew harder to define. Ronald Reagan had left office at the beginning of 1989, the Berlin Wall had been pulled down the next year, and the Soviet Union had dissolved in 1991. Political worry was replaced by economic abundance. (*Every Love Story* 212)

This assertion – that the period of relative domestic and international prosperity and stability that the 1990s are often taken to represent encouraged the introspective, domestic focus so favoured by Wallace – is compelling, and yet it also fosters the misconception – as highlighted by Marshall Boswell – that Wallace was not 'a political novelist, per se' ('Trickle-Down Citizenship' 466).[82] This view is perhaps best illustrated by analyses of the venerated Eschaton sequence from *Infinite Jest*, which describes a game that recasts the threat of nuclear war and mutually assured destruction as an adolescent variant on tennis; the contextual shift from Cold War geopolitics to a domestic game ensuring that it is often examined in relation to concepts of play and – in comparison with Borges' 'On Exactitude in Science' – metaphysical cartography, at the expense of politics.[83] Although Max goes on to claim that 'in truth politics did not generally matter much to [Wallace]', noting – somewhat derogatorily – how he 'combine[d] midwestern conventionality with girlfriend-pleasing

campus liberalism' and 'did not think who won an election could change what was broken' (259), closer analysis reveals that Wallace was actually a markedly political writer. Indeed, Max's claim looks faintly ridiculous with even the most cursory glance through some of the titles in Wallace's oeuvre: 'Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open'; 'Lyndon'; *McCain's Promise*; a reference to 'Politics and the English Language'. Wallace was everywhere concerned with a political assessment of the U.S., albeit focused – almost exclusively – internally.

In accordance with this theory, Stephen E. Schier has perceived that with the end of the Cold War, 'the public's interest in foreign policy shrank considerably, allowing domestic policy to dominate the presidential elections of the 1990s' ('A Unique Presidency' 5). This had a particularly noticeable effect on cultural production, as the widely heralded end of the conflict between democracy and communism resulted in the culture industry being shorn of a key external political referent. As Baudrillard noted as early as 1986:

> America is certainly suffering less than Europe from the phase of convalescence that grand ideas are going through or from the decline in historical passions, for these are not the motor of its development. It is, however, suffering from the disappearance of ideologies that might contest its power and from the weakening of all the forces that previously opposed it. (*America* 126)

This diminishing focus on the external resulted in a widespread turn towards the internal and the introspective within different cultural arenas. For instance, the mainstream Hollywood action films so beloved of Wallace evinces a discernible shift from a concern with external enemies – international terrorists in *Commando* (1985) and *Die Hard* (1988); the Soviet Union in *Rocky IV* (1985) and *Rambo* (1988) - to a wide range of internal enemies and perceived threats: domestic terrorists in *Die Hard 2* (1990) and *The Rock* (1996); ex-convicts in *Con Air* (1997); immigration, multiculturalism, and compromised masculinity in *Falling Down* (1993); technology in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) and *Jurassic Park* (1993). Even when external threats do appear, they tend to be portrayed as an outmoded anomaly – as

with the Soviet nationalist terrorists in *Air Force One* (1997) – or are defeated by a transnational alliance led conspicuously by the United States, as in *Independence Day* (1996), *Armageddon*, and *Deep Impact* (both 1998). The broad scope of this search *for* an enemy suggests nostalgia for an easy-definable 'Other'. As noted in chapter three, for Wallace the consequences of this vacancy included an invalidated or compromised sense of efficacious masculine identity, and a more widespread acknowledgement of cultural heterogeneity, which disrupted traditional conduits of national identity.[84] However, in a political context, this lack of an Other also brings with it the suggestion of an era of new possibilities: with the collapse of old certainties come opportunities for change, highlighting the necessity of examining the existing political makeup of the United States, whilst also fostering the potential for imagining new forms of organisation and community. For Wallace, the medium of fiction was well placed to explore these opportunities. As he famously remarked to Larry McCaffery in 1993, and further highlighting his alignment with the American Jeremiad tradition: 'really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this dark world *and* to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it' (*Conversations* 26; emphasis in original).

In his call for independence for the Thirteen Colonies, Thomas Paine famously declared that 'we have it in our power to begin the world over again', prompting an internal revolution that would have profound international consequences (*Common Sense* 120). Writing over two hundred years later, Wegner notes that the 1990s possessed a similar moment of potential, 'represent[ing] a moment of heated debate over the direction of the future, and hence of immense historical possibilities for a global left' (1). Although Wegner goes on to expose the contingency of these 'possibilities' in the rest of his study, compellingly arguing that the 1990s were instead an 'unstable and traumatic place between two deaths' (83), it is tempting to concur with his initial assessment and to frame the decade

as a period that at least gestured towards the *possibilities* of change.[85] Appending Paine's call

for revolution to this optimistic claim then, the 1990s might be considered as offering a

'present subjunctive' for Wallace: a jumping-off-point from which he can examine the

political possibilities for the future, or opportunity 'to begin the world over again'.[86] We

should of course always be mindful that this presumes an 'American world' (and a

homogenous 'America' at that), and yet it also introduces a supranational dimension to the

discussion which would seem at odds with Wallace's domestic focus, implying a universal

vision that is summarised in Paul Berman's idealist comparison of the early 1990s with the

late 1960s:

> with the liberal revolutions breaking out in sundry regions from the Baltic Sea to
> South Africa during the entire period from 1989 to 1994, the old hope of reorganizing
> the world on a drastically new and infinitely more democratic basis, the universal
> project, the grand aspiration for the poor and the downtrodden, *that* hope, the
> forbidden utopian dream, once again seemed, in its newly liberal and anti-grandiose
> version - well, thinkable. ('Tale of Two Utopias' 16-17; emphasis in original)

Comparing this with Wallace's essential humanism, then, we discern that the 'universal

project' of democracy remains an apposite concern for Wallace, although always framed

within parameters that correspond to a recognizably U.S. context. Enabled by the subjunctive

potential of the 1990s, Wallace can explore and/or reimagine what an 'authentic' vision of

U.S. democratic politics might look like.

Identifying the Problem: Cynicism, Apathy, and the Partisan

For Wallace, the 'Long Nineties' were a politically troublesome epoch characterised

by complex, interrelated, and somewhat-paradoxical problems pertaining to the involvement

of citizens that were both recurring and self-sustaining: voter apathy, cynicism, and

partisanism. These problems are best summarised in his essay, 'Up, Simba', a repackaged

and extended version of 2000's *Rolling Stone* article, 'The Weasel, Twelve Monkeys and the

Shrub' (subsequently published in a standalone volume in 2008 as the previously mentioned

McCain's Promise), which recounts Wallace's experiences during John McCain's Republican primary campaign. Echoing the prevalent interior- and domestic-orientated narratives of the decade, the essay constitutes an extended exploration of 'a very modern and American kind of ambivalence, a sort of *interior war* between your deep need to believe and your deep belief that the need to believe is bullshit, and there's nothing left anywhere but sales and salesmen' ('Up Simba' 229; emphasis added). Coupled to his usual attack on commodification and marketing here, Wallace highlights the internal conundrum of U.S. citizens torn between political cynicism and an equal yet opposite desire to believe that something can still be real or authentic. Once again, this conflict over authenticity is itself seen as intrinsically linked to what it means to be 'American'. However, the end result, all too often, is voter apathy and non-participation. In a 1996 interview with journalist David Lipsky, Wallace blamed this condition on postmodern attitudes of *weltschmerz* and cynicism:

> I'm talking about the number of privileged, highly intelligent, motivated career-track people that I know, from my high school or college, who are, if you look into their eyes, empty and miserable….And who don't believe in *politics*, and don't believe in religion. And believe that civic movements or political activism are either a farce or some way to get power for the people who are in control of it. Or who just...don't *believe* in anything. Who know fantastic reasons not to believe in stuff, and are *terrific* ironists and pokers of holes. And there's nothing wrong with that, it's just, it doesn't seem to me that there's just a whole lot else. (*Becoming Yourself* 160; emphasis in original)

We are in familiar Wallace territory here, with pointed attacks on irony and a perceived lack of enthusiasm for 'civic movements', closely followed by Wallace blaming these feelings of 'pain' and 'exhaustion' on therapy culture: 'there's the drug therapy, there's the sex therapy, there's the success therapy' (161). Although clearly indebted to the argument made in 1993's anti-irony diatribe 'E Unibus Pluram', what is important in this instance is that this argument is not concerned with the ethical and moral consequences of irony in art, but is instead made in a political context. In 'Up, Simba', Wallace posits that this voter apathy is a 'sort of deep disengagement that is often a defense against pain':

> the likeliest reason why so many of us care so little about politics is that modern politicians make us sad, hurt us deep down in ways that are hard even to name, much less talk about. It's way easier to roll your eyes and not give a shit. (187)

Although Schier has suggested that the lack of voter participation in the 1990s may be accounted for by the relative prosperity of the period – 'the stakes in Washington probably seemed small to many Americans because times were good' ('A Unique Presidency' 4) – Wallace, conversely, sees this as an indication of an ethical or spiritual malaise, an essential fault within U.S. culture more generally that becomes manifest in individuals with profound political consequences. For Wallace, U.S. citizens have become so predisposed to cynicism that it has become a defence mechanism that offers protection from seemingly deceitful politicians.

What is particularly galling for Wallace, however, is that circa 2000 this apathetic attitude is not only a symptom of the cultural zeitgeist but an outcome of a deliberate strategy by the dominant political parties to *cultivate* voter disinterest. Moreover, while the essay focuses on McCain's campaign, Wallace identifies both George W. Bush *and* Al Gore's respective campaigns as being guilty of this disingenuous tactic, noting that it is in each party establishment's 'interests to keep [voters] disgusted and bored and cynical' to ensure that they do not bother to vote, and thus do not threaten the status quo (207). Whilst recognising that there is something intrinsically degenerate about the political system if this can be a successful – indeed preferred – election tactic, it is worth emphasising that Wallace reserves equal derision for both parties, an unusual political stance that seeks to transcend another problem that he perceives within U.S. politics: the partisan schism. Although the essay is ostensibly about the differing campaign tactics of John McCain and George W. Bush in the Republican primary, Wallace is keen to point out (for the benefit of his [presumably Democratic] *Rolling Stone* readers) that he is 'not a Republican…[and that] there are no partisan motives or conservative agenda behind the article' (157).[87] Indeed, Wallace asserts

that the article is about 'how millennial politics and all its packaging and marketing and strategy and media and spin and general sepsis actually makes us US voters feel, inside, and whether what we actually want is something real or something else' (159). That is, Wallace wants to investigate the corruption and cynicism inherent in U.S. political culture as a whole (rather than from a partisan Democratic or Republican viewpoint) and to explore what might constitute a 'real' political system. The magnitude of this task, however, is revealed in the damning revelation that *both* parties resort to underhand tactics that promote disinterest instead of involvement, and yet each party refuses to acknowledge their own culpability, resulting in increased polarization.

In his introduction to *The Best American Essays 2007*, Wallace meditates at length on polarization in his role as guest editor, noting with trademark lexical precision that his function actually has very little to do with editing. He is instead placed in the position of 'Decider', picking which essays are to be included in the collection according to his own criteria ('Deciderization' 303). Wallace proposes that this process of 'deciderization' is also a necessary mechanism for coping with day-to-day life in the contemporary era of mass media and the related phenomena of information and sensory overload – 'Total Noise' as he terms it – as we increasingly have to filter extraneous information from that which is useful (302).[88] However, due to increasingly busy lifestyles (or at least an unwillingness to sacrifice our personal leisure time) we are steadily abnegating our own agency and responsibility in these matters and using other forms of media as a surrogate; the act of choosing becomes deferred. Accordingly, as Wallace points out: 'it may possibly be that acuity and taste in *choosing which Deciders one submits to* is now the real measure of informed adulthood' (305; emphasis added); a Baudrillardian precession of the deferral of personal responsibility. Although this is not an ideal situation, Wallace is resigned to the possibility that this is what contemporary life has come to: 'it's amazing to me that no one much talks about this – about

the fact that whatever our founders and framers thought of as a literate, informed citizenry can no longer exist, at least not without a whole new modern degree of subcontracting and dependence packed into what we mean by "informed"' (314-315).[89] In this instance, Wallace is examining how we arbitrate cultural value (with particular emphasis on the diminutive effects of exchange implied in the term 'subcontracting'), and yet this development has further implications in a political context:

> hence, by the way, the seduction of partisan dogma. You can drown in dogmatism now, too – radio, Internet, cable, commercial and scholarly print – but this kind of drowning is more like sweet release. Whether hard right or new left or whatever, the seduction and sensuality are the same. You don't have to feel confused or inundated or ignorant. You don't even have to think, for you already Know, and whatever you choose to learn confirms what you Know. (315)

Unpacking this passage, it might seem that Wallace is particularly affronted by the media, and yet this is not entirely what Wallace is focusing on here. As Wallace notes in 'Host', in reference to the explosion in the popularity of conservative talk-show radio: 'it is a fallacy that political talk radio is motivated by ideology. It is not. Political talk radio is a business, and it is motivated by revenue' ('Host' 290). What is most troubling for Wallace, is the profit motive: the elevation in importance of capital gain above the necessity of meaningful debate. The consequence of this, then, is that supposedly 'objective' information becomes ever more biased – purveyed on behalf of each of the main political parties – and only serves to confirm audiences' preconceptions. In a trademark Wallace self-perpetuating cycle, people only choose to accept information from sources that feed them the information that they are predisposed to accept.[90] Depressingly, Wallace almost absolves the 'business' side of talk radio from blame. This is not to suggest that he condones the encroachment of business into every facet of daily life, but that he notes that the conditions of analysis are wrong. It is futile to expect a talk radio station (or indeed any other mainstream media outlet) to offer anything other than the opinions their audiences expect when they can ensure they maximise their revenue by simply repeating dogma. The encouragement, provision, and acceptance of

dogma, purveyed by both mainstream parties, the media, and consumers, respectively, results in the entrenchment of the partisan and discourages productive, meaningful debate.

For example, Wallace's 1999 review of Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* entitled 'Authority and American Usage, (or "Politics and the English Language" is Redundant)', seeks to expose the 'seamy underbelly of US lexicography', detailing how even supposedly objective documents such as dictionaries and usage textbooks display partisan ideologies. Wallace notes that dictionaries' ideological underpinnings are exposed by the tendency of compilers to fall into one of two categories: 'Prescriptive' 'SNOOTs' (by which he means the traditional, conservative, 'defenders' of the English language commonly labelled 'Grammar Nazis' or 'Language Police' [69]) and 'Descriptivists' (characterised as 'hard-core academics, mostly linguists or Comp theorists...[with] their ideological roots firmly in the US sixties' [80]). However, it is conjectured that a solution to this problem is not merely to use a dictionary that is ideologically most suited to one's own beliefs, which only reinforces partisanism. Instead, people must put aside differences and attempt to empathize with people to whom they are ideologically opposed.[91] However, Wallace goes on to admit that the achievement of this idealized 'Democratic Spirit' – with notable consonance with the problems detailed in 'Deciderization' – is extremely difficult; 'this kind of stuff is advanced US citizenship' (72):

> a Democratic Spirit's constituent rigor and humility and self-honesty are, in fact, so hard to maintain on certain issues that it's almost irresistibly tempting to fall in with some established dogmatic camp and to follow that camp's line on the issue and to let your position harden within the camp and become inflexible and to believe that the other camps are either evil or insane and to spend all your time and energy trying to shout over them. (72)

In short – and in correspondence with one of Wallace's favourite gripes about U.S. consumers being compelled to watch television because it is so undemanding – for purveyors of information and culture 'it is indisputably easier [read: more profitable] to be Dogmatic than Democratic' (72). Not only is it less work for producers to be dogmatic, it also requires

less interpretive work for consumers to receive dogma. As evinced in his interrogation of irony and sincerity in 'Octet', however, this very attempt to discuss opposite polarities both in isolation and in comparison with each other is something that Wallace sought to achieve at various points throughout his career. His identification of the difficulty of employing a true 'Democratic Spirit' has profound consequences for his own attempts to represent the same textually.

The Dialogic Method as Possible Solution

In a 2003 interview with Dave Eggers, Wallace expressed the difficulty of writing about politics explicitly:

> the reason why doing political writing is so hard right now is probably also the reason why more young...fiction writers ought to be doing it. As of 2003, the rhetoric of the enterprise is fucked. 95 percent of political commentary, whether spoken or written, is now polluted by the very politics it's supposed to be about. Meaning it's become totally ideological and reductive. (74)

For Wallace, the didactic tendencies of most overtly political writing has promulgated the notion that 'opposing viewpoints are not just incorrect but contemptible, corrupt, evil', a literary outgrowth of the partisan allegiances and 'deciderization' that Wallace identifies with the political system:

> there's no more complex, messy, community-wide argument (or 'dialogue'); political discourse is now a formulaic matter of *preaching* to one's own choir and demonizing the opposition. Everything's relentlessly black-and-whitened. Since the truth is way, way more gray and complicated than any one ideology can capture, the whole thing seems to me not just stupid but stupefying. (74-75; emphasis added)[92]

Wallace's desire here – 'to try extra hard to exercise patience, politeness, and imagination on those with whom I disagree' (77) – is something that is evident throughout his work, with the emphasis on 'dialogue' here suggesting a solution reminiscent of the 'dialogic' or 'polyphonic' method of Dostoevsky, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin.[93] In Bakhtin's formulation of the 'polyphonic novel', 'a character's word about himself and his world is just

as fully weighted as the author's word usually is; it is not subordinated to the character's objectified image as merely one of his characteristics, nor does it serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice' (*Problems* 7). Although Wallace is indisposed towards crafting a true polyphonic novel (Bakhtin insists that 'the unity of a Dostoevskian novel...is *above* personal style and *above* personal tone' [15; emphasis in original]; a directive that is beyond Wallace's idiosyncratic style and tone), he nonetheless proffers multiple viewpoints and gives them equal weight, in an admirable attempt to explicate what is 'gray and complicated'.[94] Wallace therefore strives to represent aesthetically that which he deems absent in mainstream political discourse: meaningful debate.

As early as 1996's 'Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open' Wallace attempts to illustrate this point, framing a third round match between Mark Philippoussis and eventual winner Pete Sampras as an epic battle between 'two Greeks neither of whom are in fact from Greece, a kind of postmodern Peloponnesian War' (132). Wallace is particularly enamoured by the two players representing intrinsically different but no less valid approaches to the same game, and by extension to philosophies of being: 'two ethnically agnate and archetypally distinct foes, an opposition not just of styles of play but of fundamental orientations toward life, imagination, the uses of power' (133). Although Wallace is unable to hide his preference for Sampras – Philippoussis is 'malevolent but cyborgian' where Sampras is 'human' (138), the former, 'oligarchic: he has a will and seeks to impose it', the latter, 'more democratic, i.e., more chaotic but also more human: his real job seems to be figuring out what his will exactly *is*' (146; emphasis in original) – what matters most is not where Wallace's sympathies lie, but rather that the two are shown to be able to co-exist whilst being embroiled in competition. As with Wallace's depiction of distinct poles in 'Octet', the two exist in a dialectical relationship, without ever being reduced to synthesis. Additional allusions to the Peloponnesian War and Wagner corroborate Wallace's aim, recalling classical conflict

between Sparta and Athens, Apollo and Dionysus. Moreover, it is of central importance that this competition takes place within the strictly delineated borders of the tennis court, as 'part of the beauty of the tennis here is the way the artistry and energy are bounded by specific lines on court' (159). Bakhtin's theory of polyphony notes that 'the fundamental category in Dostoevsky's mode of artistic visualizing was not evolution, but *coexistence* and *interaction*'; the 'stubborn urge to see everything as coexisting, to perceive and show all things side by side and simultaneous, as if they existed in space and not in time' (*Problems* 28; emphasis in original). Although Wallace was as concerned with temporality as he was with spatiality (as evinced in *Everything and More* and 'Good Old Neon'), it is the inherent spatial limits of the tennis court that allow this meaningful exchange to take place.[95] Extending this spatial metaphor, it is Wallace's belief that only once boundaries are set are conditions conducive to meaningful discussion or conflict, as otherwise debate would degenerate into an unmeaningful free-for-all reminiscent of the collapse of the game of Eschaton once the rules are transgressed in *Infinite Jest* (which significantly also takes place on a tennis court).[96] There is of course a certain amount of 'chaos' necessarily inherent within the democratic system as individuals' desires and beliefs have to be reconciled with those of the collective, but institutional law exists to provide some sense of limit to the proceedings. Indeed, it is the unrealised possibilities of this 'chaotic' multiplicity that is essentially human, for Wallace.

Adam Kelly has suggested that *Infinite Jest* represents Wallace's first engagement with the dialogic method on a fictional level, after the 'overwhelmingly monologic approach' of *Broom* ('Development Through Dialogue' 271). Readers of the novel often focus on the two plot strands that deal with Hal Incandenza and the Enfield Tennis Academy, and Don Gately and the Ennet House residents, ironically overlooking the third strand of the novel that aims to counteract people overlooking politics. If the (at least initially) uninterested Gately and the lacklustre Hal can be said to correspond to attitudes of political apathy and cynicism

respectively, then the mountaintop dialogue between Remy Marathe and Hugh Steeply offers a possible panacea: an explicit discussion about democratic politics and the nature of freedom. Kelly has noted the importance that this narrative arc holds for *Infinite Jest* – and Wallace's work more generally – by comparing Marathe's conceptions of 'freedom from' and 'freedom to' with Isaiah Berlin's concepts of negative and positive liberty. In the most important section of their dialogue, Steeply summarizes his idea of 'your standard old basic American dreams and ideals' as: 'freedom from tyranny, from excessive want, fear, censorship of speech and thought….Relative plenty, meaningful work, adequate leisure-time. The ones you might call corny' (*Infinite Jest* 423). This also resonates with the mystique that surrounds John McCain and lends him his air of nostalgic authenticity in 'Up, Simba': 'something old and maybe corny but with a weird achy pull to it like a smell from childhood' ('Up, Simba' 166). This idea of authentic 'Americanness', then, is couched in 'a sense of efficaciousness and choice' recalling Berlin's 'freedom from' (*Infinite Jest* 423), whereas Marathe, on the other hand, is keen to expose this choice as being enabled by an absence of challenges; it is only Steeply's privileged position as a middle-class, white, heterosexual, male that affords him the opportunity (or illusion) of choice. Marathe instead highlights the importance of positive liberty, of freedom-to. Steeply's position of privilege is undeniable, and Marathe's prolonged denunciation of Steeply's quasi-libertarianism – 'you are entitled to your values of maximum pleasure. So long as you don't fuck with mine' (424) – is to be applauded for exposing the assumed privilege inherent within the concept. Kelly avers that

> the advantage of the novel over the essay form, as Bakhtin would tell us, is that the novel provides a dialogic context in which both sides of the argument can be offered to the reader, without a clear authorial conclusion drawn. Steeply's defense of negative liberty throughout his debate with Marathe is certainly a strong one, and even though Wallace the philosopher or ethicist might not agree with the argument, Wallace the novelist gives it its full due….The importance of giving Steeply's argument its fullest articulation is that the faults readers may find in it as a prescription for the present day only serve to place greater emphasis on the technologically altered world Wallace is depicting throughout the novel. ('Development Through Dialogue' 275)

What Kelly is suggesting here is that Steeply represents an anachronistic viewpoint, that 'a context in which individuals were free to follow a plurality of goals, no longer applies' (275). Although Kelly is correct in pointing out that the context in which Marathe and Steeply frame their debate is 'vaguely cultural rather than specifically historical', this is to overlook the extent to which *Infinite Jest* is influenced by a specific historical moment. Contrary to Kelly's assertion that '*Infinite Jest* is clearly not a historical novel', it could be argued that it is instead fundamentally concerned with historicizing the 1990s. By setting the novel in the future, Wallace is able to figure the preconditions for his future malaise – that is, the present – as history. Rather than 'the End of History', the 1990s are thus shown to be a moment of possibility (albeit negative), with Wallace's (dystopian) future in O.N.A.N. standing as a warning for what may lie ahead.

Although Kelly may highlight the importance of the dialogic method, he errs in hypothesising that Wallace 'the philosopher or ethicist' might be more sympathetic towards Marathe. Indeed, it is important to note – as explicitly stated by Wallace himself – that in this situation, *neither* of the two options is preferable:

> it's a terrible argument because Marathe is basically a fascist. You're talking about a culture that teaches people how to make moral choices, that teeters very easy into a culture...into a totalitarian, authoritarian culture. But a culture that *doesn't*, and that prides itself on *not* - the way sort of ours does, or has recently...I think we're just beginning to see, that on either side of the continuum there are terrible prices to pay. (*Becoming Yourself* 158; emphasis in original)

Instead of an avoidance of the sublation of polarities, in this instance Wallace proceeds to do just that, adopting the very centrism or triangulation that is representative of the dominant neoliberal ethos. On one hand, Wallace is obviously critical of the concept of negative freedom and how it encourages citizens to 'associate the Freedom to Choose and the Right to Be Entertained with all that was U.S. and true', and yet we can also empathise with Steeply when he admonishes Marathe's conception of positive liberty by asserting that the U.S.

educational system is not geared 'to teach what to desire...[but]...to teach how to be free. To teach how to make knowledgeable choices about pleasure and delay' (*Infinite Jest* 412, 429). Equally, we may find Marathe's nationalist zeal and willingness to commit terrorist acts abhorrent, and yet his allegiance to his revolutionary beliefs (if not, finally, the revolutionary movement itself), and his commitment to his severely disabled wife are to be commended.[97] Moreover, it is important that by the end of the novel Marathe ultimately chooses to 'betray...the cause of [his] nation', refusing to divulge to the rest of the A.F.R. that Joelle van Dyne is located at Ennet House (780). Significantly, this revelatory moment takes place shortly after Marathe explains to Kate Gompert the reasons for his impending betrayal:

> it is no choice. It is not choosing Gertraude over the A.F.R., my companions. Over the causes. Choosing Gertraude to love as my wife was necessary for the others, these other choices….This choice, Katherine: I made it. It chains me, but the chains are of my choice. The other chains: no. The others were the chains of not choosing. (781)

Although it is insinuated that Marathe may take Kate from the jazz bar to view the Entertainment, effectively killing her (this is the last appearance of Kate in the novel), the revelation that Marathe does not disclose the whereabouts of Joelle van Dyne suggests that this may be a moment of conversion. It is therefore of crucial importance that the rhetoric that Marathe uses to describe his positive freedom mirrors that used by Steeply to describe his negative freedom: the language of love and affect. Berlin's value pluralism is replaced by moral absolutism. This sentimental approach seems one way of breaking free from political hypocrisy on the level of the individual.

The Challenge of Neoliberalism and 'The Third Way'

Considering Wallace's centrism further, although the dialogic method may allow Wallace to circumvent partisan dogma and analyze opposing viewpoints without reduction, the lack of an 'authorial conclusion' may conversely be taken as a negative; a deliberate strategy to appease and appeal to both parties. It could be argued – alongside Kelly – that this

is Wallace's attempt to represent 'how both sides felt'; his 'appreciation for the struggles of ordinary people who do their duty every day, and a deep skepticism about self-righteous sanctimony on the right or the left'. The words here, however, are Clinton's, not Wallace's (*My Life* 133). Indeed, Wallace's methodology could be said to mirror the 'triangulation' strategy of President Bill Clinton, and his attempt to marry neoliberal fiscal policies with a more traditionally liberal social agenda. Although it would be difficult to make the case for Wallace supporting Clinton's brand of neoliberalism, his method seems to embody the meaningful dialogue that Wallace attempted to incite, free from traditional partisan loyalties.

Closely related, and almost directly opposed to Wallace's identification of an increase in partisanship during the 1990s is the public perception of a gradual erasure of difference between the two political parties. As Joan Didion notes in her study, *Political Fictions*: by 1988 there was 'considerable strain on the basic principle of the democratic exercise' due to the 'decision of the two major parties to obscure any possible perceived distinction between themselves' (9). Accordingly, alongside his delineation of a political/media environment that precluded meaningful debate due to the fundamentally unbridgeable gap between two polarities, Wallace projects a concurrent suspicion that there is actually very little to choose between them: 'there has been this curious kind of liberal centrism. That we're very *nervous* about extremes' (*Becoming Yourself* 159); emphasis in original). President Clinton, of course, was the embodiment of that centrism, and his adoption of a stance that combined a traditionally right-wing deregulation of the market with traditionally left-wing social policies has since become synonymous with the term neoliberalism.[98]

In a vehement attack on the then-President, Christopher Hitchens highlights Clinton's 'affectless equidistance between left and right, Republican and Democrat, white-collar crime and blue-collar crime, true and false, sacred and profane, bought and paid for, public and private, *quid* and *quo*' (*No One Left To Lie To* 5; emphasis in original). This centrist position

- the adoption of both facets of what were previously accepted as political dichotomies, to be synthesised into a middle ground - was famously termed 'triangulation' by Clinton's political advisor Dick Morris. Although triangulation here refers to a political positioning strategy, Hitchens is keen to frame Clinton as the concept's embodiment: 'Clinton is the first modern politician to have assimilated the whole theory and practice of "triangulation," to have internalized it, and to have deployed it against both his own party and the Republicans, as well as against the democratic process itself' (24).

Mindful of Wallace's advice that we should avoid one-sided dogma, however, it is important to note that Clinton had his Republican doppelgänger in the figure of Newt Gingrich. Steven M. Gillon has noted the similarities between Clinton and Gingrich:

> they stood on opposite sides of the Vietnam debate, but they both managed to maintain a healthy distance from the war itself. One was a Republican, the other a Democrat, but neither was entirely comfortable with the direction in which their parties were moving. They both positioned themselves as alternatives to radicalism, and believed in achieving change from within the system. They resented the arrogance of the Left and the stale conformity of the Right. They saw politics as a clash of ideas, not just a battle over turf. (*The Pact* 28)

There are striking parallels here with Wallace: a distrust of radicalism; a 'resentment' of the arrogance of the Left; the depiction of politics as 'a clash of ideas'. Moreover, just as Wallace displays ambivalence over the cultural legacy of the 1960s, but recognises that decade's formative influence over the 1990s, Gillon argues that 'the struggles between Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton, the first representative of the '60s generation to occupy the White House, were a continuation of the bitter generational battles left over from the 1960s' (10). Gillon is particularly keen to stress that 'the ideological battle over the meaning of the 1960s would boil down to a debate over a culture of "choice"' (10). The emphasis here on 'choice' signals an affinity with Wallace's own emphasis on choice, ranging from the conclusion of 'Octet' – 'so decide' – to one of the central tenets of *This is Water*: 'It means being conscious and aware enough to *choose* what you pay attention to and to *choose* how you construct meaning

from experience'(54; emphasis in original). Indeed, the question surrounding the efficacy of our choices is one of the central unifying themes of *Infinite Jest*, reminding us of the Marathe-Steeply debate. However, a problem arises when we consider that Wallace advocates a dialogic method to preclude partisan dogma and represent fully the complexity of political debates, whilst this method of portraying the 'gray' area also seems to correspond to the neoliberal position of centrism that gave rise to the economic and cultural environment that his fiction is ostensibly a rejoinder to.

Aware of the contradiction in denouncing partisanship *and* 'Third Way' politics whilst simultaneously presuming a partisan readership and adopting the triangulating position of Clinton, Wallace found it difficult to reconcile this conflict. In his discussion with Lipsky, Wallace's political thinking can appear not only protean and complex – which he has staked a claim for throughout his fiction – but contradictory. On one hand, he argues that 'I think we're *really* setting ourselves up for repression and fascism', deriding the notion of a 'hunger to have somebody else tell us what to do' (*Becoming Yourself* 158; emphasis in original), whilst on the other, he claims to be '*firmly* a member of my generation', precluding the notion of meaningful change or agency.[99] Similarly, Wallace correctly pinpoints the inequities inherent in traditional patriarchal moral structures, yet bemoans the absence of them in the contemporary era. He claims that the only person to come close to replacing this system of morals was Ronald Reagan, but then bemoans how 'Reagan sold the *past*', which he then goes on invoke by appealing to the spirit of 'the founding fathers and the Federalists' (159, 162). Finally, Wallace questions 'are we going to like look inside our hearts and decide that, things have been fucked up, and we're going to make some rules that are good for everybody?' (162); this, after announcing that 'there aren't any answers because the answers are *individual*, you know? I mean, there's no culture...I mean, the culture's *us*, you know? The country's *us*' (158; emphasis in original). In alighting on the prominence of the

individual, Wallace echoes the claims earlier that the 'chaos' of democracy is all the more 'human' for its inclusion of multiple individuals. This 'chaos' of individual interests, however, is a problematic concept for Wallace, who can echo the exaltation of individualism by such thinkers as Friedrich von Hayek (whose *The Road to Serfdom* is conspicuously name-checked by Wallace in the interview with Lipsky), whilst bemoaning the potential for the 'chaos' of individual interests criticized in Harvey's conception of neoliberalism. Accordingly, it is pertinent to analyse Wallace's direct engagement with neoliberalism and the place of individualism, given its most explicit rendering in the celebrated §19 of *The Pale King*.

Where Wallace's earlier fiction was concerned with 'possibilities' and consequences going forward, by the 2000s he is more focused on the past. Wallace's fiction from the 1980s and 1990s is overwhelmingly situated in the present or the near future, and is thus imbued with the possibility of avoiding a path of declension. In his later fiction, Wallace becomes intent on scouring the past, not only in search of explanation as to how the nation ended up in its contemporary malaise, but with an increasing sense of sentimental nostalgia for older models of being, with the implicit assumption that the U.S. had passed an apsidal point. In the stories of *Oblivion* for example, 'Good Old Neon' retrospectively imagines the protagonist Neal's last moments before his suicide; 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy' pines for the 'somewhat more innocent time' at the turn of the 1950s ('The Soul Is Not a Smithy' 68); 'Another Pioneer' searches for an origin myth free from the homogenizing discourse of structural anthropology. Famously, 'The Suffering Channel' takes place in the World Trade Center two months before 9/11; the discussion as to the aesthetic, economic, ethical, and moral value of art overshadowed and undermined by the characters impending deaths. Continuing in this vein, *The Pale King*, is set in the present (the only one of his novels not set in the future), and yet most of the 'action' – if it can be termed such – takes place

retrospectively, rendering the agency of the characters impotent. As Wallace's satire shifts from the Horatian mode to the Juvenalian, his heretofore career-long discussion of the teleology of art, is replaced by a focus on eschatology.

The Pale King: Individual and Corporate Personhood

When it becomes clear that Mr. Johnson is scrawling 'KILL THEM' on the blackboard during his civics lesson in 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy', it is notable that he does so whilst copying out the text of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Whilst this is significant in itself for the context of the story, prolonged engagement with the Constitution in Wallace's work is usually reserved for the Fourteenth Amendment. Perhaps the single most influential amendment since the abolition of slavery in the Thirteenth Amendment, the Fourteenth Amendment has been invoked in such landmark cases as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896); *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954); the decision regarding *Bush v. Gore* in the 2000 presidential election; and – most importantly for our purposes – was referenced in *Santa Clara County vs. Southern Pacific Railroad* (1886), which first introduced the notion of corporate personhood. It is worth quoting the relevant section of the amendment – known as the Equal Protection Clause – in its entirety, as various aspects of that section prove pertinent to Wallace's work:

> all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. (Amend. XIV, Sec. 1)

This section is an obvious touchstone for Wallace, as it has complex ramifications for two of his central concerns: the individual and the market. The Amendment enshrines the protection of a sovereign individual's rights within the Constitution, allowing for only limited interference from government on a State or Federal level, establishing legal precedence for

the cultural primacy of the individual; developments that sit easily with Wallace's exploration of individualism. On the other hand, however, the 14th Amendment (like the 5th) replaces Jefferson's original 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' with the Lockean 'life, liberty, or property', further entrenching the significance of the market within the U.S. psyche, and something that Wallace would be less tolerant of. Moreover, the consequent development of the doctrine of corporate personhood – after 1886 courts would consider corporations to be individuals, affording them the same legal protections as human citizens – comes to be particularly troubling for Wallace, not only in the literal sense that it benefited corporations in the commercial sphere, but in the reciprocal way that it problematised conceptions of citizenship, and what it means to be human.

Wallace's faith in the importance of self-preservation and the uniqueness of the individual is clearly evident throughout his canon, from Hal's opening declarations in *Infinite Jest* – 'I am in here' (3); 'I'm not a machine' (12) – to Meredith Rand's assertion towards the end of *The Pale King* that 'the real responsibilities are to myself' (508-509). In Hal's case, he is asserting his efficacy as a sovereign individual; that is, a neo-Cartesian, complex human being, especially when compared to his tennis rival John 'No Relation' Wayne, who is dehumanised as a 'grim machine' (438). The similarities here with the 'malevolent but cyborgian' Philippoussis versus the 'human' Sampras, allow us to discern that Hal's argument is made in the context of posthumanism, especially as the concept pertains to the challenges of technology. However, his fear of a perceived absence of recognition also suggests that he is anxious to avoid being taken as part of the faceless, uniform mass characterised by his film director father as 'figurants': 'these surreally mute background presences' (835). Although Wallace had an unfulfilled longing to be part of the communal spirit of a crowd – as previously noted in his discussion of the Midwestern mass - what

frightened him even more was the erasure of individuality. Accordingly, Jim Incandenza (as

the wraith) explains that

> in the entertainments the wraith himself made, he says he goddamn bloody well made
> sure that either the whole entertainment was silent or else if it wasn't silent that you
> could bloody well hear every single performer's voice, no matter how far out on the
> cinematographic or narrative periphery they were; and that it wasn't just the self-
> conscious overlapping dialogue of a poseur like [fictional film director] Schwulst or
> [real-life Robert] Altman, i.e. it wasn't just the crafted imitation of aural chaos: it was
> real life's real egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world's real
> agora, the babble of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate
> protagonist of his own entertainment. (835-836)

Although thus not entirely evading the problem of solipsism against which Wallace was

constantly battling – every person is still the 'central...protagonist of his own entertainment' –

the specter of Jim posits a solution to the 'chaos' of the crowd, advocating that each voice

should be heard. This of course also echoes Wallace's dialogic impulse, as noted earlier.

In a significant but oft-overlooked passage towards the end of *The Pale King*, Toni

Ware (a rarity in Wallace's fiction; a strong, uncliched female character) adopts a strange

voice whilst on the phone to a shop clerk, with the third-person narrator noting that it gives 'a

false impression that was nevertheless concrete and tightly controlled. It felt like art. The

issue was not destruction. Just as total order is dull, so is chaos dull: There's nothing

informing about a mess' (513).[100] Crucially for Toni, adopting the voice of another – that is,

despite her choosing to be insincere or inauthentic – affords her the opportunity of a personal,

affective moment of communion with art, bordering on the religious. Moreover, we once

again see Wallace's preference for a controlling limit here, rather than 'total order'. Toni's

literal embodiment of polyglossia – 'this woman had twenty different voices; all but two were

warm and pleasant' (512) – affords her the most radical political potential of any of

Wallace's other characters; as the novel makes clear: 'do not mess with this girl; this girl is

damaged goods' (445).[101] This seems to perfectly encapsulate and validate Wallace's own

attempts at polyphony, and his belief that it was constituent of authentic art, even if it means

sometimes giving voice to opinions that are not 'warm and pleasant'. Moments later, the reverse is exposed when Toni adopts the voice of the shop clerk that she is speaking with face-to-face. The clerk is oblivious; guilty of 'the assumption that everyone else is like you. That you are the world' (516). This is the epitome of 'the disease of consumer capitalism. The complacent solipsism' (516). Although Wallace often rails against the capitalist system, and it can be inferred that every one of his complaints about a contemporary malaise has consumer capitalism at its core, this represents one of the few times when Wallace explicitly states so. Significantly, this revelation takes place in a gas station convenience store, the consummate heterotopia of the neoliberal era, conveying the centrality of oil to the capitalist economy whilst evoking Baudrillard's hyperreality in its neon lights and unabashed consumerism: 'corporate gauge retail coffee', 'cigarettes and soda pop and junk for Qwik Stop shopping' (515; 514).[102] Accordingly, there is little need for subtlety in one character's designation of them as 'Ramp Tumors' (514). Toni's last act in the novel is to chimerically adapt to her surroundings, adopting 'a plasticized flatness about her reminiscent of processed air, airline food, transistorized sound' whilst wiping a mucul clot on to her lapel, before going to the manager to complain that the shop clerk was the culprit (516). Although this could be conceived of as a senseless act of delinquency, it could also be construed as a small but symbolic act of rebellion in the face of wage capitalism. Indeed, it is conceivable that Toni is actually doing the clerk a favour in getting her fired from her job so that she may begin to live in 'real life', echoing Chuck Palahniuk's 'Project Mayhem' from *Fight Club* (1996) in the way that she encourages a calling for a radical rejection of consumer capitalism and 'wage-slavery' (indeed, it is also suggested that Toni has procured lengths of 'copper tubing', perhaps implying that she intends to make a pipe bomb [512]). Regardless of the size of the ramifications of this moment of rebellion, it nevertheless presents us with a rare moment of

resistance within Wallace's oeuvre, Toni's embodiment of polyglossia allowing her to triumph over the monologic solipsism of capitalism.

The Pale King accommodates this 'egalitarian babble' most vividly in §19; the famous elevator sequence in which Wallace abstains from authorial input or even characterisation, for Kelly signalling 'the primacy of ideas themselves' ('Development Through Dialogue' 277).[103] Kelly has conducted an extended analysis of this scene, noting that there appears to be four main conversants: DeWitt Glendenning, Stuart Nichols, Gaines, and a mysterious figure referred to only as 'X' (Kelly also notes that there is one interdiction from an unattributed 'I') (277).[104] Kelly suggests that the characters correspond to various political positions – Glendenning with republican conservatism; Nichols with liberalism; Gaines and 'X' with 1960s radicalism – but also notes that 'Wallace is not particularly interested in dividing the positions of his characters into traditional liberal/conservative or left/right binaries'. Instead, the conversation 'can be read as Wallace's depiction of what an informed and open conversation about American political and intellectual history might look like' (278). Although Kelly's conclusion is sound, it is worth examining the conversation in more detail to reveal Wallace's conception of and engagement with U.S. politics.

Emily J. Hogg has highlighted the importance of the location for this dialogue, asserting that

> a broken-down elevator is an artificial space, a place which is nowhere, a socially unanchored location. Hung suspended in the air, the elevator in its very unnaturalness and unusualness seems to hint at a distinction between the scene's political debate and the conditions of life as it is normally lived. It is...the separation of subjective life from political conversation which is rendered unusual and unnatural by the insistent abstractness of the setting. ('Subjective Politics' 62)

Although Hogg's reinsertion of affect and the subject into the field of politics is commendable, the elevator may also allow for more possibility. Suspended between two floors, and thus symbolically occupants of a liminal space 'between', the characters are afforded the opportunity of discussing politics absent of any external pressures. Indeed,

Glendenning – the dominant speaker in the dialogue – uses their physical location to figure their historical moment as a 'present subjunctive':

> I suspect what'll happen is that there will be some sort of disaster – depression, hyperinflation – and then it'll be showtime: We'll either wake up and retake our freedom or we'll fall apart utterly. Like Rome – conqueror of its own people. (*The Pale King* 133)

The line here should be familiar from the 'Big Red Son' quote that featured near the opening of this chapter, but in this context the onus is less on the 'empire of Self' than on empire in the conventional sense (and also recalls the augured fall of the Republic in 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy'). Indeed, knowing that by the present moment no-one had successfully emerged to 'retake freedom', the Fall of America seems to be assured.[105] However, although the historical context of the novel would suggest that the portending disaster is indeed the hyperinflation of the Reagan era (the scene takes place before the Republican primary of 1980), reading *The Pale King* from the vantage point of the twenty-first century allows us to discern that this may also refer to the election of George W. Bush. Recalling the 1990s subjunctive location between two falls, the elevator – suspended above a fall – suggests a further moment of possibility that needs to be seized upon.

Ranging in subject matter from the impact of Vietnam and the 1960s on the U.S. psyche to the merits of cultural relativism and personal responsibility, §19 represents a distilled compendium of the themes that would concern Wallace throughout his career. The complex discussion is structured around three intersecting conceptual arcs – the role and responsibility of corporations; the meaning of civics and citizenship; and the historical status and construction of the latter – with the opening paragraph laying the groundwork for the discussion that will follow. From the outset, the subjunctive possibilities are made clear, as Glendenning announces: 'there's something very interesting about civics and selfishness, and we get to ride the crest of it' (132). In particular, the aforementioned problematic status of both individuals and corporations is highlighted: 'it has something to do with liberal

individualism, and something to do with corporations' (132). Additionally, the central themes

of civics and responsibility, and Wallace's bugbear – the deferral of responsibility – are also

soon made clear:

> Americans are in a way crazy. We infantilize ourselves. We don't think of ourselves
> as citizens - parts of something larger to which we have profound responsibilities. We
> think of ourselves as citizens when it comes to our rights and privileges, but not our
> responsibilities. We abdicate our civic responsibilities to the government and expect
> the government, in effect, to legislate morality. (132)

According to Wallace, U.S. citizens only embrace the concept of citizenship when it confers

something that is to their advantage; for example, state benefits or (as in the 14th

Amendment) the right to own property and expect that it be protected. When there is

something that might require work on the part of the citizen – much the same as when readers

have to dissect complicated political or ideological arguments – they are happy to relinquish

the idea of their citizenship. In short, the average U.S. citizen is only interested in citizenship

when the benefits are in inverse proportion to their output; they want to profit. What is

particularly galling for Wallace, as he sees it, is that this is a development perpetrated by

corporations who – presumably through advertising – have 'seduce[d] us into thinking the

way they think – of profits as the *telos* and responsibility as something to be enshrined in

symbol and evaded in reality. Cleverness as opposed to wisdom' (133; emphasis in original).

Rather than the pursuit of traditionally virtuous goals of civic- or self-improvement, then, the

acquisition of more wealth is the only telos that Wallace can see at work in contemporary

society. Although Wallace does not go on to define his abstract terms, it is to be inferred that

'cleverness' denotes the cynicism and one-upmanship inherent in Wallace's conception of

'postmodern irony' and its collusion with marketing strategies, at the expense of efficacious

'wisdom'. This expanding influence of corporate attitudes and the profit motive, however,

intimates a shift beyond Jameson's postmodern 'expansion of capital into hitherto

decommodified areas' to David Harvey's neoliberal 'financialization of *everything*', even to

the level of individuals' thought processes (*Postmodernism* 37; *Neoliberalism* 33; emphasis added).

As with 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy' some of the blame for this malaise lies with the collapse of a sense of civic responsibility and duty, presaged by the eradication of civics classes. Although Glendenning acknowledges the changes made in the 1960s – 'which God love them did a lot for raising people's consciousness in a whole lot of areas, such as race and feminism' – he berates the relativist attitude of X, who censures Glendenning's use of the word 'duty': 'I think it's no accident that civics isn't taught anymore or that a young man like yourself bridles at the word *duty'* (134; emphasis in original).[106] Indeed, the 1960s are predictably singled out for particular blame, especially in relation to Vietnam. As in 'Lyndon' there is a suspicion that those who protested against the war in Vietnam were somehow unpatriotic or 'un-American': 'here was a whole generation where most of them now for the first time questioned authority and said that their individual moral beliefs about war outweighed their duty to go fight' (134). This is not to suggest that Glendenning (or for that matter, Wallace) is necessarily in favour of military involvement, but turning to rebellion highlights an unwillingness to sacrifice one's self for the sake of the collective. As another conversant makes clear: 'in other words…their highest actual duty was to *themselves'* (134; emphasis in original). Once again, the collusion of rebellion with the forces of commerce, as detailed in 'E Unibus Pluram', subverts any notion of authenticity that might have inhered in that spirit of rebellion, prompting Glendenning to ponder whether 'whatever led to it becoming actually fashionable to protest a war opened the door to what's going to bring us down as a country'; even going so far as to proclaim 'the end of the democratic experiment' (134). Beyond merely a corruption of an authentic rebellious spirit by opportunistic capitalists then, Glendenning suggests that the 'ultimate-duty-is-to-self' attitude is detrimental to the fabric of U.S. society (134).

Shifting to a clichéd trope, Glendenning explicitly announces the implications of this loss of community feeling:

> it may sound reactionary, I know. But we can all feel it. We've changed the way we think of ourselves as citizens. We don't think ourselves as citizens in the old sense of being small parts of something larger and infinitely more important to which we have serious responsibilities. We do still think of ourselves as citizens of the sense of being beneficiaries - we're actually conscious of our rights as American citizens and the nation's responsibilities to us and ensuring we get our share of the American pie. We think of ourselves as now as eaters of the pie instead of makers of the pie. (138)

Citizenship, therefore, is no longer a reciprocal process of exchange, but a passive, receptive attitude of entitlement. This is an oft-heard complaint by those who object to the notion of a welfare state (indeed, it is unclear whether this political position could indeed apply here), but in the context of the novel a sense of entitlement is attributed to 'the whole dark genius of corporations' (138). Just as corporations 'allow for individual reward without individual obligation', the contemporary U.S. citizen expects the maximum possible benefit for the minimal possible effort (138).

The comparison of individuals with corporations is an important one, as noted above in reference to the Fourteenth Amendment; indeed it is explicitly referred to during the conversation: 'these were artificial people being created. What was it, the Fourteenth Amendment that gave corporations all the rights and responsibilities of citizens?' (142). The notion of corporations having responsibilities is rightly questioned in the dialogue, and yet this backwards notion of the Fourteenth Amendment being created to confer rights on corporations is not merely a play for laughs. The reversal suggests that complaints about the legal protection that corporations receive are no longer adequate; it is not that corporations are being treated like people, but that people are beginning to behave like corporations, increasingly focusing on transactions and profit instead of meaningful, reciprocal exchange. As Nichols suggests, 'it's easy to blame corporations', but what is most troubling for Glendenning is that 'it seems we as individual citizens have adopted a corporate attitude.

That our ultimate obligation is to ourselves. That unless it's illegal or there are direct practical consequences for ourselves, any activity is OK' (143, 139).[107]

Stuart Nichols then briefly takes control of the conversation, suggesting that instead of just blaming the corporations, the conversants might take a more existential approach: 'it's almost more a matter of metaphysics' (144). Although noting the growth of corporations and advertising, Nichols' suggestion is that these still on some level necessitate 'a team approach whereas being a customer is a solo venture' (148). Anxieties over the nature of our existence have increased as a result of a lost sense of efficacy, intrinsically linked to a sense of meaningful production: 'we're turning into consuming citizens instead of producing citizens' (148). Although this insight is hardly original, what is striking about the final stages of the conversation is that Wallace shifts the onus for this malaise from the corporations − as in his earlier fiction − to *the government*.

Nichols echoes Wallace's own concern about the sometimes contradictory political opinions that can exist within a person, outwith partisan loyalties, arguing that 'I don't think the American nation today [1980] is infantile so much as adolescent − that is, ambivalent in its twin desire for *both* authoritarian structure and the end of parental hegemony' (149; emphasis added). Nichols anticipates the emergence of

> a candidate who can do to the electorate what corporations are learning to do, so Government − or, better, Big Government, Big Brother, Intrusive Government − becomes the image against which this candidate defines himself. Though paradoxically for this persona, to have weight the candidate'll also have to be a creature of government, an Insider, with a flinty-eyed entourage of bureaucrats and implementers who we'll be able to see can actually run the machine. (149)

This disclosure prompts one character to speculate: 'I see a 'Bush-Reagan ticket. Reagan for symbolism, the Cowboy, Bush the quiet insider, doing the unsexy work of actual management' (150). Nichols, however, suggests a far more intriguing solution: that the IRS themselves could fill the 'unsexy' bureaucratic role: 'Reagan'll set us up as the black-hatted rapacious Big Brother he secretly needs. We − the stitch-mouthed accountants in dull suits

and thick specs, punching the keys on our adding machines – *become* the Government: the authority everyone gets to hate' (150; italics in original). The key word here, is 'everyone', as another character realizes: 'you're saying the next president will be able to *continue* to define himself as an Outsider and Renegade when he's actually *in* the White House?' (150; italics in original). The duplicity of Reagan is highlighted, but it may be inferred that the real target of this section is actually situated in the novel's present: George W. Bush. Both Reagan and Bush, that is, were able to represent themselves as anti-government candidates, even – as is most particularly noticeable with Bush – as they expanded governmental power.

The conversation concludes with Nichols summing up the argument of the preceding pages, in many ways providing an adequate summation of Wallace's own diagnosis of the political scene in particular, and the millennial United States more generally. This is worth quoting in its entirety, to elucidate the somewhat confusing mixture of ideas heretofore:

> in other words we'll have for a president a symbolic Rebel against his own power whose election was underwritten by inhuman soulless profit-machines whose takeover of American civic and spiritual life will convince Americans that rebellion against the soulless inhumanity of corporate life will consist in buying products from corporations what do the best job of representing corporate life as empty and soulless. We'll have a tyranny of conformist nonconformity presided over by a symbolic outsider whose very *election* depended on our deep conviction that his persona is utter bullshit. A rule of image, which because it's so empty makes everyone terrified – they're small and going to die after all…and whose terror of not really ever even existing makes them that much more susceptible to the ontological siren song of the corporate buy-to-stand-out-and-so-exist gestalt. (151; emphasis in original)

Although the semi-comic use of hyperbole here might seem to distract from the very serious message that Wallace is trying to convey, the preceding chapter has explicated many of these claims already. What is striking, however, is that many of the charges ostensibly levelled at Reagan here seem to correspond to those that Wallace might have made against George W. Bush: 'the symbolic Rebel' stance of the cowboy; the 'terror' that the populace willingly buy into to blind themselves to their capitulation to the power of corporate capitalism; most of all,

the emphasised *election* that was won – not in spite of – but because of the deep belief in his 'persona [being] utter bullshit'.

<u>What Becomes of the Broken Hearted?</u>

The above quotation is occasioned by one of the conversants asking what the impact of 'a Bush or Reagan' would be for the IRS: 'is this good for us on a District level? What are the implications for a Peoria or a Creve Coeur?' (151). Although this would seem to re-introduce the concern with consequences that Wallace focused on earlier during his career, the sentence actually conceals a multiplicity of meanings. Creve Coeur is indeed a real-life suburb of Peoria, Illinois, appealing to a sense of verisimilitude, but it also recalls the name of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur, the author of *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782)*, which famously asked 'what then is the American, this new man?' (43-44). The implied question, therefore, is less concerned with the implications at the regional level than with what the consequences are for 'the American' more generally. 'Creve Coeur' is also a mistranslation of 'broken hearted' in French, the sentence punning on the famous song 'What Becomes of the Brokenhearted' (continuing the technique of deliberately mistranslating French that was used in *Infinite Jest*), but also alluding to Wallace's career-long desire to 'make heads throb heart like'. Moreover, the idea of a broken heart may be extended to the cardioid-shaped building that houses the Enfield Tennis Academy, and the idea of Illinois – and by extension, the Midwest – as the heartland of the U.S., as projected in his essays. This seemingly innocuous little sentence becomes massively important for Wallace's later work, asking: where do we go now? What is the American now? How do we mend this broken country?

Brian Steele has noted that there is 'a perceived incongruity between the ideal America of the imagination and the reality of current American practice on the ground'

('Inventing Un-America' 894). Instead of imagining a solution to this problem going forward, in *The Pale King* Wallace seems to suggest a return to the past, evoking what Steele has called a 'politics of nostalgia' (894). In particular, Wallace seeks a return to the era of the Founding Fathers, with Glendenning extolling the virtues of the Constitution and *The Federalist Papers*; 'an incredible moral and imaginative achievement' (135). Wallace's appreciation for *The Federalist* has already been noted in its ability to textually represent meaningful political debate, but in his later fiction, it is elevated from an efficacious model for writing to the very embodiment of the 'American idea'.

In a 2007 special issue of *The Atlantic* devoted to the future of the 'American idea', Wallace's contribution is notable for looking backwards to descry a model for going forwards. Although a slight piece (the original rubric was 300 words), this article gives an important insight into Wallace's later beliefs regarding government, particularly in the wake of 9/11. 'The American idea' is a deliberately abstract and challenging term for contributors, but here Wallace supposes that it 'generally' describes 'open society, consent of the governed, enumerated powers, *Federalist* 10, pluralism, due process, transparency...the whole messy democratic roil' ('Just Asking' 321 n.1). Writing with the post-9/11 loss of civil liberties specifically in mind, Wallace bemoans the expansion of executive and governmental power under the Bush administration: 'what are the effects of on the American idea of Guantanamo, Executive Order 13233, corporate contractors performing military functions, the Military Commissions Act, NSPD 51, etc., etc.,?' (322). Wallace – paraphrasing Lincoln – asks the reader to consider the 9/11 dead as 'heroes and martyrs, "sacrifices on the altar of freedom"' (321), framing them as the tragic but essentially unavoidable victims that are sometimes necessary if one is to maintain a free democratic society. Although uncharacteristically defensive in the non-committal title of 'Just Asking', Wallace nonetheless asks 'is this thought experiment monstrous?...Is monstrousness why no serious

public figure will now speak of the delusory trade-off of liberty for safety that Ben Franklin warned of more than 200 years ago?' (322). By using words such as 'delusory', it is clear that Wallace understands individual liberty to be an essential constituent of 'Americanness', and the opposite – government infringement upon freedom – as un-American.

This recourse to Lincoln – and particularly – Franklin, is instructive when we return to *The Pale King* to see Glendenning's representation of the Founding Fathers: 'these Founding Fathers were geniuses of civic virtue. They were heroes. Most of their effort went into restraining the power of government' (135). In keeping with the pretensions to a polyphonic model, X is quick to remind the conversants that these Founding Fathers were only indicative of 'an educated landowning *white male* electorate', with 'Jefferson supposedly boinking his own slaves' (135), but what is important here is the focus on community (not that that should in any way absolve any of the Founding Fathers' transgressions):

> the fact that it was a utopia which for two hundred years actually *worked* makes it beyond priceless – it's literally a miracle. And – and now I'm speaking of Jefferson, Madison, Adams, Franklin, the real church Fathers – what raised the American experiment beyond great imagination and made it very nearly work was not just these men's intelligence but their profound moral enlightenment – their sense of civics. The fact is that they cared more about the nation and the citizens than about themselves. (135)

Not only is there a sense of efficacy here, but successfully negotiating the philosophical problems of the solipsism and ego of the individual is seen to be of political benefit for the community as a whole:

> they were heroes, and like all true heroes they were modest and didn't regard themselves as all that exceptional. They assumed their descendants would be like them – rational honourable, civic-minded. Men with at least as much concern for the common good as for personal advantage. (136)

This seems to affirm Myra Jehlen's suggestion that U.S. citizens are 'highly conscious of their national heritage and, as much as any people, celebrate a gallery of monumental heroes and events; it might be argued...that they are *too* faithful to founding principles that, after two

centuries, remain axiomatic' (*American Incarnation* 7; emphasis in original). Indeed, Glendenning's is an idealistic misreading of at least some of the Founding Fathers: Thomas Jefferson, for instance, anticipated the change and variety that would inevitably occur from generation to generation, warning Samuel Kercheval that they should not 'weakly believe that one generation is not as capable as another of taking care of itself, and of ordering its own affairs….Let us provide in our Constitution for its revision at stated periods' (*Selected Writings* 616). These particulars however, are subservient to the notion that 'the government *is* the people' (*The Pale King* 136), and that what has caused the U.S. fall has been 'inverting the Founding Fathers' device of ceding political power to the people instead of the government' (137). It would appear that Wallace's ultimate vision of what constitutes 'real American' politics, then – whilst always mindful to acknowledge the inherent inequities of any political system – is a 'politics of nostalgia' for a limited republic, along Jeffersonian lines.

The question then becomes, how do we create the people, the body politic? As Wallace writes in his 'embryonic outline' for *The Pale King*, one of the key themes of the novel is the tension between 'being individual vs. being a part of larger things' (547). N. Katherine Hayles, in an early yet important work of Wallace scholarship, notes that traditional U.S. models for creating the subject rely on either the 'paradoxical relation between the liberal subject and market economy' or the 'paradoxical relation between American individualism and wilderness', highlighting that in both models each constituent requires the pre-existence of the other constituent part ('Illusion of Autonomy' 675). In Hayles' formulation, Wallace circumvents this problem by avoiding the 'idea of autonomous liberal subject' altogether:

> authenticity in this vision is not about escaping from the realm of the social, but rather about recognising the profound interconnections that bind us all together, human actors and nonhuman life forms, intelligent machines with intelligent people. We

escape from the Entertainment not by going to the woods but by recognizing our responsibilities to one another. (696)

Although Hayles is correct in highlighting the contingency of both the wilderness and the market in creating an authentic American subject, her conclusion is too eager to prescribe to Wallace that which he sought: meaningful communal relationships. Wallace, as has been shown, was ultimately unable to escape the centrality of the individual in his writing. More importantly, however, is Hayles' equation of 'The Great Concavity' from *Infinite Jest* (and, by extension, the Great Ohio Desert from *The Broom of the System*) with the wilderness; Hayles fails to note that these are instead both human constructs (as indeed is any definition of 'wilderness'). By *The Pale King*, Wallace sees the region with the most potential for constructing authentic U.S. subjectivities as the pastoral idyll. This may seem an outlandish claim when we consider Wallace's reputation as a chronicler of media, technology and the postmodern hubris, but the pastoral – and by extension the midwestern heartland – remains a site of authentic production for Wallace, in terms of manufactures, individuals, and virtue. Wallace was by no means an environmentalist, however; it is the interaction of nature and humanity that he is most concerned with.

The opening section of *The Pale King* encapsulates this perfectly, with a long list of plants bordering on the poetic. Wallace idealises the rural setting, but also the human (working class) presence, highlighting the 'flannel plains and blacktop graphs' (5). There is an ancient sense of communion with the land, heightened by a sense of universality: 'very old land. Look around you. The horizon trembling, shapeless. We are all of us brothers' (5). The injunction to the addressee to pay attention to their surroundings; the agrarian potential implicit in the 'shapeless' horizon that needs to be shaped by human hand; Wallace here seems to be extolling the virtues of a Jeffersonian, agrarian republic. Even the imposition of fencing – so often a symbol of the spoiling of nature – becomes an occasion for praising the human capacity to convey meaning (again this is in terms of anti-chaos limit, as opposed to

the imposition of order): 'rusted wire and titled posts more a symbol of restraint than a fence per se. NO HUNTING' (6). The classic trope of the hunter-gatherer stage has been superseded by a more civilised agrarian period. The passage ends with another direction to the reader to pay attention to the natural order of life; as worms are overturned by ploughing and then eaten by crows, the reader is told to look at the marks they leave on the soil: 'read these' (6). There is something to be read in nature that we cannot access in capitalist production.

Kelly has posited that the 'key transitional moment to contemporary American society' was in 1980 (279), with the shift from a production-based economy to one geared towards consumers. However, although this point is valid, the specific historical moment does not matter. As displayed in the anxieties over the efficacy of middle-class masculinity in 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy' and *The Pale King*, what is most important is that this shift *has* taken place. The inference being that there is something inherently redemptive in productive labour, not just for contemporary masculinity, but for the U.S. national character as a whole. This accounts for Wallace's frequent derisory comments regarding late-capitalist corporations. It also harkens back to Thomas Paine's early warnings regarding the growth of commerce in the fledgling republic: 'commerce diminishes the spirit' (107). Paine is an important correlative for Wallace, as throughout his fiction and essays – for example, in 'Octet' or 'E Unibus Pluram' – Wallace uses the rhetoric of common sense to get his point over. Wallace adheres to the belief that the best way to present politics is not in terms that are radical, but by using the moderate rhetoric of logic and reason to convince the reader that outcomes are practically inevitable.

Of course, *The Pale King* immediately shifts from the pastoral idyll to Claude Sylvanshine (literally) flying over Illinois on a grand symbol of global capitalism, the commercial plane (albeit a rickety example). This shift away from the optimistic opening to

the depressing reality of life as a bureaucratic employee, echoes a statement in *Federalist* 10: 'the inference to which we are brought is that the *causes* of faction cannot be removed and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling *its* effects' (51). For the Federalists, this meant deciding how to control the large body of citizens of the fledgling United States. For Wallace, this meant deciding how to negotiate the perils of contemporary existence. This is why *The Pale King*'s depressingly subservient conclusions are so harrowing. This is not radical resistance, this is bare-minimal survival: 'it is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish' (440).[108] We may do well to remember Paine's injunction: 'ye that oppose independence now, ye know not what ye do; ye are opening a door to eternal tyranny, by keeping vacant the seat of government' (*Common Sense* 99). Wallace's moderate position of acquiescence is itself a political act, one that dooms the perpetrator to their current fate.

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Notes

[1] Source: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=51584&st=&st1=

[2] It should be noted that Crouch's own opinion of film is by contrast ahistorical: 'Howard has given us a universal tale of heroism and determination. A deeper and more profound connection to the times would have transformed it into history' (1182).

[3] See for example, *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton's Legacy in U.S. Politics*. Ed. Steven E. Schier. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000.

[4] For alternative assessments of the 1990s, particularly within the context of literature, see Cohen, *After the End of History*; Collignon, 'USA Murated Nation'; Harrison, *American Culture in the 1990s* (35-64); Kelly, *American Fiction in Transition*; Prosser, *American Fiction of the 1990s*; Wegner, *Life Between Two Deaths*.

[5] In an interview with Ostap Karmodi, Wallace explains that he identifies with a 'very, very mild form of Camus' ('Frightening Time' n.p.). For more on Camus in relation to Wallace, see den Dulk, *Existential Engagement* (229-234).

[6] For an overview of the criticism devoted to Wallace up until 2010, see Kelly, 'The Death of the Author'. For an overview of more recent scholarship, see Kelly, 'Critical Reception'.

[7] The comparison of his work with a late-night talk show would surely rile Wallace, given the disdain he shows for David Letterman in 'My Appearance'. Indeed, there seems little discernible difference between Konstantinou's identification of Wallace's 'performance' of a lack – a negative rhetorical strategy – and the ironic 'ground-clearing' that Wallace railed against in 'E Unibus Pluram' (67).

[8] Jennifer Egan, Dave Eggers, and Jonathan Franzen, for example, all display far more willingness to engage with international contexts .

[9] For the reverse of this, see F. Chahla Neti-Neti in §24 of *The Pale King*, a rare instance of a non-American character within Wallace's oeuvre. Jorge Araya argues that 'Neti-Neti's non-American origins and her corresponding role as an outsider, in political terms, seem to render her an outlier in societal or behavioural terms' ('Why the Whiteness?' 243).

[10] For a fictional allegory of this see *Infinite Jest*'s Quebecois separatist group A.F.R., who have been known to place giant mirrors on northbound highways near the Canadian border. The U.S. driver 'would see impending headlights and believe some like suicidal idiot or Canadian had traversed the median and was coming right for them. They'd flash their high beams, but to all appearances the impending idiot would just flash his high beams right back' (311). This is of course an ironic presentation of U.S. citizens' inability to (literally) see anything but themselves, and yet it also serves to underscore Wallace's focus on the domestic.

[11] Credit here must be given to Simon de Bourcier, who gave a paper on this topic at 'Supposedly Fun Things: A Colloquium on the Writing of David Foster Wallace' at Birkbeck, University of London, 7 February 2015.

[12] In his recent study *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (2014), Lawrence Buell identifies *Infinite Jest* as one of a number of 1990s novels that 'tried to sum up the century, or at least the half-century' (3). These 'meganovels' 'assemble heterogenous cross-sections of characters imagined as social microcosms or vanguards. They are networked loosely or tightly as the case may be, and portrayed as acting and interacting in relation to epoch-defining public events or crises, in such a way as to constitute and image of "democratic" promise or disfunction' (8).

[13] Although Wallace himself criticised creative writing programs in his essay 'Fictional Futures', Mark McGurl argues that what makes Wallace 'most interesting' is his 'relation to institutions, in literary historical terms' ('Institution of Nothing' 30). McGurl suggests that Wallace displays a 'commitment to the necessity of institutions in making and maintaining a "meaning of life"' (34), revealing a conservative 'note of bourgeois propriety' (35). His analysis provides a welcome corrective to the 'institutional sincerity' of Adam Kelly ('Dialectic of Sincerity' n.p.), recognising that Wallace's 'commitment is rather to a conception of therapeutic community in which what might have become political questions – and, by implication, motives for political

contestation – are obediently dissolved into a series of individual ethical choices' (36). Kelly's notion of sincerity will be dealt with in greater detail in chapter one, whilst Wallace's conservatism will emerge in chapter five.

[14] 'The obscurity and pretension of Academic English can be attributed in part to a disruption in the delicate rhetorical balance between language as a vector of meaning and language as a vector of the writer's own resume' ('Authority and American Usage' 115).

[15] See also Robert L. McLaughlin, who argues that a renewed commitment to 'social purpose' might be constituent of what he identifies as 'post-postmodernism' ('Post-postmodern Discontent' 67).

[16] It is significant that Wallace's oeuvre contains a number of literal interrogations as well as metaphoric, including: the interrogation of the Antitoi Brothers and Hal's induction panel in *Infinite Jest*; the titular interviews of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*; numerous grillings by psychoanalysts throughout his oeuvre.

[17] In 'David Lynch Keeps His Head', Wallace applauds the auteur for his blurring of the surface depth/binary:
> As part of an audience, if a movie is structured in such a way that the distinction between surface/Light/good and secret/Dark/evil is messed with…a structure in which Respectable Surfaces and Seamy Undersides are mingled, integrated, literally *mixed up* – I am going to be made acutely uncomfortable. (208)

[18] Wampole may lambast the contemporary hipster's lifestyle choice, yet it is interesting to note that Norman Mailer used the term in a positive sense in his 1959 essay "The White Negro," to denote nonconformists.

[19] This is not to suggest that we should accept Wallace's claims for the wholesale dominance of irony and poststructural theory uncontested. Indeed, R. Jay Magill has suggested that the debate surrounding irony and sincerity has been going on for centuries (see *Sincerity* and 'We've Been Arguing About Irony vs. Sincerity for Millennia'). The aim here, however, is to analyse how Wallace contends with the issues that *he* identifies as inimical to U.S. culture.

[20] The reference to Kundera here is prescient, as he is mentioned in 'Octet' with reference to the concept of 'performing': 'Kundera here would say "*dancing*," and actually he's a perfect example of a belletrist whose intermural honesty is both formally unimpeachable and wholly self-serving: a classic postmodern rhetorician' (125 n.2; italics in original). This description is not only a more than adequate summation of Wallace's own methodology in 'Octet'; by name-checking Kundera, Wallace alludes to his propensity for inserting himself into his novels *as himself*, rather than – as Wallace would describe it elsewhere – an 'abstract narrative persona' (*The Pale King* 66), providing us with clues as to how to contend with the 'fiction writer' of the story.

[21] I am thinking here of the various contentious neologisms that scholars have applied to Wallace's work; in the former reactionary category Lee Konstantinou's 'postirony'; in the latter synthesis category, A.O. Scott's 'metairony' and Marshall Boswell's 'ironic irony'. Indeed, one of the more contentious claims for Wallace is that he displayed a penchant *for* synthesis, as implied by Boswell and Scott's co-option of Wallace's own term 'bothness' or Konstantinou's more theoretical moniker 'Hegelian sublation' ('No Bull' 95). Boswell goes so far as to claim that this 'bothness' is 'the essence of Wallace's innovation' (*Understanding* 16). The source of this claim stems from the numerous references to a dialectic of 'cynicism and naïveté' within Wallace's oeuvre, with particular emphasis given to a line from *Infinite Jest* that denounces 'that queerly persistent myth that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive' (*Infinite Jest* 694). However, just as it would be a mistake to take Wallace's clarion call for 'anti-rebels' from 'E Unibus Pluram' as a blanket mission statement for his own body of work, to read Wallace as simply espousing a reductive 'bothness' of cynicism and naïveté, or their corollaries irony and sincerity, is to do his complex methodology an injustice (See also Holland, 'Mediated Immediacy', who highlights Wallace's 'contradictory impulses' [127]). The term 'bothness' comes from Wallace's essay, 'David Lynch Keeps His Head'. Scott takes this position to be a goal that Wallace is striving towards, and indeed, this attribute is something that Wallace thinks is – whilst profoundly unsettling – unavoidably human:
> I submit that the real reason we criticized and disliked Lynch's Laura's muddy *both*ness is that it required of us an empathetic confrontation with the exact same muddy *both*ness in ourselves and our

intimates that makes the real world of moral selves so tense and uncomfortable, a *both*ness we go to the movies to get a couple hours' fucking relief from. ('Lynch' 211)

As Wallace applauds Lynch for managing to identify and engage with this 'uncomfortable' 'bothness', Scott seems to take this as evidence of his predilection for synthesis or the conjoining of two concepts. In the same essay, however, Wallace approvingly notes that a character from Lynch's *Twin Peaks* is 'both two *and* one' character (203; emphasis added). The increased complexity of this model is far more prescient with regards to Wallace's own work, in that it can both amalgamate two characters into one *and* preserve distinctions instead of collapsing them.

[22] See, for instance, Stephen's Burn's suggestion that novelists of the 'post-postmodern generation' are 'driven by nostalgia for a lost value system' ('Paradigm' 375). What is problematic about Burn's formulation, however, is that it appears to be retrograde and reactionary, predicated on recovering 'lost' ethical virtues in the wake of postmodernism. In this sense, there is little notion of any 'new-ness' in the attempt to define a movement. See also Jesse Thorn, the radio host of *The Sound of Young America* who blogged 'A Manifesto for the New Sincerity', announcing that – in the wake of 9/11 – 'irony was dead'. Thorn heralded the appearance of a 'radical new ethos' of 'New Sincerity': 'think of it as irony and sincerity combined like Voltron, to form a new movement of astonishing power. Or think of it as the absence of irony and sincerity, where less is (obviously) more'. Ignoring the somewhat paradoxical second half of Thorn's formulation, his conception of 'New Sincerity' appears to be yet another appeal for a synthesis of irony and sincerity, like scholarly claims for Wallace's 'bothness'.

[23] It is interesting to note that 'Octet' was originally published with the title 'Pop Quiz', in the short-lived literary magazine *spelunker flophouse*. In that version, the Pop Quizzes are numbered 1, 5, 6, and 5(a). The all-important 9th quiz is completely omitted, changing the tenor of the piece entirely.

[24] My use of various orders of irony here is influenced by Lee Konstantinou, who – in response to Boswell's claim for Wallace's 'ironic irony' – argues that Wallace does not 'sublate irony by means of higher order irony' in 'Octet' ('No Bull' 95). Whilst I agree with this premise, Konstantinou fails to note that Wallace delineates and differentiates successive levels of irony in order to acknowledge them and work through them, avoiding an appeal to a vague 'higher order' 'ironic irony' through his nuanced distinctions.

[25] This may account for why Wallace's most sincere character, and whom we are most inclined to be sympathetic towards – *Infinite Jest*'s Mario Incandenza, 'the least cynical person in the history of Enfield MA', to whom the possibility of lying 'just doesn't occur' (*Infinite Jest* 184; 772) – is characterized by an 'exaggerated slowness that both resembles and permits extremely close slow attention to whatever's being done' (1022 n.115). Moreover, the earlier allusion to Kundera's term 'dancing' is a reference to his novel *Slowness* (1995), further entrenching the importance of 'slowness' to a reading of Wallace's work.

[26] Wallace amends this phrase from Donald Barthelme's short story 'At the End of the Mechanical Age': 'even his socks are ironed, so natty is Ralph, but he is also right down in the mud with the rest of us' (268).

[27] See Kelly ('Development Through Dialogue') for a discussion of Wallace's three novels in relation to Bakhtin's theory of Socratic and Dostoevskian dialogues.

[28] Moreover, in concluding that Wallace 'employs complexity and impurity in the service of his text's sincerity, paradoxically mobilizing the contaminations of the fictional to access the true', Kelly is perhaps guilty of resorting to the 'academese' that Wallace was so wary of ('Dialectic of Sincerity' n.p.).

[29] See also Holland's 'Mediated Immediacy', where she contends that '*Brief Interviews* implies commonality of experience and struggle while also staying true to its fundamental poststructural acknowledgement of the irreducible singularity, particularity, and multiplicity of human experience' (111).

[30] See also Moody's ironic identification of the problems with the contemporary U.S. in *Garden State*: 'a lot of it had to do with dads'; 'there were fathers but there were no dads' (138, 51).

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[31] See Stephen J. Burn's '"Webs of Nerves Pulsing and Firing"' for an analysis of how Paul D. MacLean's 'Triune Brain theory' corresponds to Wallace's characterization of the three Incandenza brothers.

[32] Hayles fails to recognize that it is actually this loss of a sense of 'interconnection' that is the defining moment of abjection. Julia Kristeva explains that 'horror arises when the borders between subject and object collapse, when the edges break down and the body's contents flow out, threatening repulsive engulfment' (*Powers of Horror* 62).

[33] This theme of guaranteeing the self through an affirmation of the body is taken up in *The Broom of the System*, in the giant figure of Norman Bombardini, who 'plan[s] to grow to infinite size' (91). In this extreme caricature of solipsism, Bombardini asserts that 'rather than diminishing Self to entice Other to fill our universe, we may also of course obviously choose to fill the universe with *Self*' (91). He plans to eat so much that he will physically fill the universe, guaranteeing his autonomous authentic self by ensuring that there is no room for anyone else to challenge him. His body thus becomes the guarantor of his subjectivity.

[34] It is interesting to note that this argument runs contra to Kelly's usual reading of Wallace, which praises him for dramatizing a Derridean 'ethics of undecidability'. This unsuccessful attempt at dialogue, Kelly argues, is why Wallace later deemed *Broom* 'a failure'.

[35] It is important to note that Boswell's discussion here only pertains to his reading of Derrida's '*Différance*', and therefore does not engage with any of Derrida's texts that focus on 'undecidable' – and so open – systems.

[36] This phrase may also directly refer to Deleuze and Guattari's hilarious attack on psychotherapy in *Anti-Oedipus*, where they suggest that a mouth 'plays a role as a stone-sucking machine' (13).

[37] On *Infinite Jest* and excess information see Letzler; on *The Pale King* and boredom see Clare. Mary K. Holland merits special recognition for highlighting the odd pagination in *Brief Interviews* ('Mediated Immediacy' 111). My ideas here are influenced by Frank L. Cioffi's conception of *Infinite Jest* as a performance, which 'uses alienation effects to create its quirky, highly performative world with which the reader empathizes but from which she must also withdraw' ('Narrative as Performance' 162). For Cioffi, *Infinite Jest* is a 'disturbing' text in that it 'enacts itself within the consciousness of the reader' (163). This 'pathological quality' results in the reader becoming addicted to a novel about addiction (170). The 'pathological quality' of Wallace's prose that Cioffi identifies has similarities with the idea of a 'psychotropic aesthetic', but where Cioffi tries to show how Wallace 'put[s] the reader in the place of the characters' in performing the text (168), I would argue that Wallace is instead adopting a performative idiom to foreground his style in order to generate the affective qualities of the concepts he is trying to explore.

[38] In his biography of Wallace D.T. Max claims that 'The Depressed Person' was Wallace's 'way of getting even with Wurtzel for treating him as a statue (or, she would say, refusing to have sex with him). Freed from desire, he now saw that her love of the spotlight was just ordinary self-absorption' (*Every Love Story* 241).

[39] We should here be reminded of Wallace's earlier mocking of 'Workshop Hermeticism', with his disdain for 'no character without Freudian trauma in accessible past'. This of course has parallels with Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*:

> Insofar as psychoanalysis cloaks insanity in the mantle of a "parental complex," and regards the patterns of self-punishment resulting from Oedipus as a confession of guilt, its theories are not at all radical or innovative. On the contrary: *it is completing the task begun by nineteenth-century psychology*, namely, to develop a moralized, familial discourse of mental pathology, linking madness to the "half-real, half-imaginary dialectic of the Family," deciphering within it "the unend-ing attempt to murder the father," "the dull thud of instincts hammering at the solidity of the family as an institution and at its most archaic symbols." Hence, instead of participating in an undertaking that will bring about general liberation, psychoanalysis is taking part in the work of bourgeois repression at its most far-reaching level, that is to say, keeping European humanity harnessed to the yoke of daddy-mommy and *making no effort to do away with this problem once and for all*. (65-66; italics in original).

Wallace's prose intersects with Deleuze and Guattari's theories in many interesting ways, particularly in his depiction of psychotherapy. However, it must be noted that whereas Deleuze sought to transcend the concept of

the subject, Wallace is everywhere concerned with re-asserting the importance of the subject after post-structuralism.

[40] The anxiety over this 'mendacious pantomime' (36) and telecommunication is given a hilarious rendering in *Infinite Jest*, when Wallace recounts the short-lived craze for 'video-telephoning' in O.N.A.N. Wallace recounts how the 'bilateral illusion of unilateral attention' inherent in standard 'aural-only conversation' was dispelled when 'video telephony rendered the fantasy insupportable' (146). To circumvent the problem of '*Video-Physiognomic Dysphoria*' (147), a cottage-industry developed whereby people used 'High-Definition Masking' to both improve their physical features and portray 'an earnest, slightly overintense expression of complete attention' to mask their disinterest (148). Eventually people reverted to standard 'aural-only telephoning' when they realized that this masking of emotions is easiest when you simply remove the ability to see your fellow communicant. These developments in telecommunication reflect a wider 'reluctance to leave home and interface personally with people' (149). It is perhaps also interesting to note that Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* features a character in homage to Wallace – Leonard Bankhead – whose 'calls [are] like telephone therapy….He put on no show. He wasn't a fake. He spoke honestly and listened with compassion. At their best, Leonard's phone conversations were a kind of art and a form of ministry' (108).

[41] The figures involved here may be significant: *Infinite Jest* is composed of ninety sections (see Burn, *Reader's Guide* 27), and totals 1,079 pages. Thus, the depressed person's anxiety might mirror Wallace's own regarding his opus: that the novel represented a way of getting his own 'emotional needs met' without showing enough concern for his readers' 'emotional needs'. It may be inherently dangerous and misleading to attempt an autobiographical reading of Wallace's fiction; nonetheless, Wallace's attention to detail and love of numbers suggest that it would be imprudent to dismiss the correlation between these figures as mere coincidence.

[42] See for instance Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994), a virulent attack on the boomer generation as their adolescent rebellion, optimism, and permissiveness descends into middle-class uniformity, hypocrisy, apathy, and sexual depravity:

> None of this, though – not the Watergate Hotel and its palette of hypocrisy, coercion, and surveillance, not Jonathan Livingston Seagull, whose movie had just opened, not transactional analysis or Gestalt therapy – troubled Benjamin Hood's sanguine and rational mind. Hood waited happily for his mistress. In her guest room. In those dark ages. (*The Ice Storm* 4).

[43] Philip Roth's 'American Trilogy' might also prove relevant here, although Roth's position in these novels appears far more ambiguous regarding whether to blame the sixties counterculture or an earlier generation of "weak" liberals for the contemporary malaise. See Anthony Hutchison's excellent analysis of the 'American Trilogy' in *Writing the Republic* (96-168).

[44] Jennifer Egan's *The Invisible Circus* (1995) is a prototypical example, recounting the story of a young girl (born in 1960) trying to retrace the path of her older sister; 'anxious to relive what she'd failed to live even once' (4).

[45] Wallace's maxim could apply to the fragmentation of the individual psyche/collapse of traditional notions of subjectivity (as in Tyrone Slothrop's famous disintegration in *Gravity's Rainbow*), or, equally, to the break-up of an (imagined) homogenous 'American' community (a recurring complaint in the Culture Wars, typically blamed on proponents of identity politics).

[46] No doubt fostered by the popular public image of Wallace as a long-haired, bandanna-wearing bohemian, he is often presumed to be a left-wing or liberal writer. This is perhaps best encapsulated in Lee Konstantinou's claim that Wallace's 'idea of politics – to the degree that he articulates one – rests within a tradition of symbolic action and countercultural individualism' ('No Bull' 105). Even ignoring Konstantinou's unjustified reluctance to see a political dimension in Wallace's work, this pithy formulation proves to be troubling. Konstantinou claims that Wallace is a 'postironist', displaying a 'negative orientation' towards 'overthrowing the rule' of the ironist, rather than 'changing the institutional relations that give rise to this type', a position that is 'liberal and individualist in character' (106). Although I would agree that Wallace's fiction is largely concerned with individualism, I would also contend that he is more hostile to the counterculture than sympathetic towards it, and displays a similar enmity towards institutions. Indeed, in many ways Wallace might be seen to espouse

libertarian sympathies. For a recent debate on Wallace as a conservative/libertarian see Dreher, 'The "Conservative" David Foster Wallace?', and Santel, 'On David Foster Wallace's Conservatism'.

[47] See Richard Gray, who notes that many authors tended to cope with the 9/11 attacks by 'assimilat[ing] the unfamiliar into familiar structures. The crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated….All life here is personal' (*After the Fall* 30).

[48] In the magazine version of the article, this sentence reads: 'part of the horror of the Horror was knowing that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more my own – mine, and F---'s, and poor old loathsome Duane's – than these ladies''.

[49] Indeed, Lee Konstantinou has characterised 'Mrs. Thompson's' as one half of a dichotomy between 'authentic heartland red states and cynical coastal blue states' ('The World of David Foster Wallace' 76). Although Konstantinou is at pains to point out that Wallace does not advocate 'returning to some sort of midwestern authenticity' (76), in constructing the dichotomy he nonetheless contributes to a monolithic imagining of the Midwest. Far more subtly, Josh Roiland avers that 'the Midwest is a place, but it is also a culture. And like all geographies and cultures, it's not monolithic', with the caveat that 'Wallace's Midwest is mostly rural and almost exclusively white' ('Spiritually Midwestern' n.p.).

[50] For more biographical information on Wallace's childhood see D.T. Max, particularly pp.1-14. It is interesting to note that Wallace appeared so ambivalent about his Midwestern upbringing that he falsely claimed in his essay that his hometown was not in Champaign-Urbana but in nearby Philo, Illinois. By re-imagining his upbringing in the context of 'farmland' and 'war-era Levittown homes', juxtaposed with the 'young academics at nearby Champaign-Urbana's university' of which he was really a part ('Derivative Sport' 3), Wallace may have been attempting to appropriate a more traditional or 'authentic' Midwestern origin myth.

[51] This assessment of N.A.F.T.A. is a useful corollary for contextualizing Wallace's parodic Organization of North American Nations and the resulting pollution of New England in *Infinite Jest*.

[52] There are important implications for Wallace alighting on Norman Rockwell's paintings as a suggestion of what it is to be authentically 'U.S.', notorious as he was for depicting an exclusively white, bourgeois vision of U.S. culture (somewhat unfairly, as later works *The Problem We All Live With* [1964], *Southern Justice* [1965], and *New Kids in the Neighborhood* [1967] attest). Wallace's Midwest in particular and 'America' more generally are – like all his writing – largely bereft of any distinctions or hierarchies predicated on race, ethnicity, religion, economic status, or other constituents of identity politics so important to progressives in the Culture Wars. Whilst this may be attributed to his appeal to universalist principles, his repeated adoption of a female pronoun when addressing his readers highlights the degree of awareness and sensitivity that Wallace felt for gender equality (notwithstanding the often stereotypical characterization of females in his fiction). Accordingly, his omission of other constituents of identity suggests a naïve appeal to a generic, homogenous 'American' essentialism, common amongst the orthodox faction in the Culture Wars. Indeed, this quote represents one of the few times that Wallace makes use of 'U.S.' to denote the United States in his entire oeuvre, usually opting for the more ignorant 'America'. For further analysis of Wallace and gender see Hayes-Brady, '"…": Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace', and '"Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point": David Foster Wallace and Gender'. For a discussion of Wallace and race see Araya, 'Why the Whiteness?: Race in *The Pale King*'.

[53] One is reminded here of two passages by Don DeLillo: one, the famous assertion in *Mao II* (1991) that 'the future belongs to crowds' (16); the other a slightly longer passage from *Underworld* (1997):

> When JFK was shot, people went inside. We watched TV in dark rooms and talked on the phone with friends and relatives. We were all separate and alone. But when Thomson hit the homer, people rushed outside. People wanted to be together. Maybe it was the last time people spontaneously went out of their houses for something. (94)

This takes on added resonance when compared with Wallace's 9/11 essay; despite watching a TV broadcast of a national tragedy, the congregation of a small community represents a need to 'be together'.

[54] For more on Wallace's disdain for 'academese', see 'Authority and American Usage', particularly the attack on Fredric Jameson (115 n.67).

[55] This theme of a tribe under threat is repeated in an often-overlooked but disturbing screed that Wallace wrote to Franzen, originally published in the latter's famous "*Harper's* essay," but subsequently supressed when the piece was later collected in *How to Be Alone*:

> It's not an accident that so many of the writers "in the shadows" are straight white males. Tribal writers can feel the loneliness and anger and identify themselves with their subculture about how the mainstream culture's alienated them. White males *are* the mainstream culture. So why shouldn't we angry, confused, lonely white males write *at* and *against* the culture? ('Perchance to Dream' 51)

Kathleen Fitzpatrick quit rightly takes Wallace to task for this statement, contending that 'equating white straight male "loneliness and anger" at not being invited to the party with the harassments and exclusions perpetuated by the dominant culture against the marginalized has the effect, whether intentionally or not, of invalidating the political claims of oppressed groups' (*Anxiety of Obsolescence* 209).

[56] See Spanos' damning critique of Huntington:

> After establishing and memorializing Anglo-Protestantism as the core culture of the American national identity, Huntington, pursuing the logical imperatives of the jeremiad, goes on to identify the errant tendencies within American culture that currently, and in an unprecedented way, threaten its integrity and benign authority – and the safety of the American people in the face of the "rise" to global power of other "civilizations," namely, Chinese Confucianism and, above all, Islam. Rising in the turbulent 1960s and inadvertently abetted by the economic dynamics of a transnationalized capitalism, according to Huntington in a chapter tellingly entitled "Deconstructing America: The Rise of Subnational Identities," these ominous tendencies were embodied in the related denationalizing initiatives of what he contemptuously calls "subnational" cultures, most notably Hispanic and Asian, which, unlike their earlier immigrant counterparts, now increasingly refuse to accommodate (assimilate) themselves to the magnetic Anglo-Protestant core culture, and of the American "deconstructionist" intellectuals, who have appropriated the "destabilizing" thought of radical anti-Western European philosophers into this volatile American cultural context. Identifying himself (falsely), as his ideological forebears, the Puritans and the American Jeremiahs, invariably did, with a "heroic saving remnant" – the mythic bearers of "Relic," or "Seed," or Word" of an eroding or disintegrating civilization – Huntington demonizes these "Deconstructionists" as subversives, whom by encouraging ethnic and racial groups to assert their subjectivities, threaten the traditional stabilizing authority of the Anglo-Protestant "core culture" and the "assimilative" process that previous molded immigrants into patriotic "Americans," a "multitude in Negri and Hardt's terms, into a "people." (228)

The corollaries between this assessment and the narrative details of Wallace's story are striking, particularly in the rejection of 'destabilizing' thought and the departure from the village by the tribe, implicitly carrying a 'heroic saving remnant' of civilization with them.

[57] See, for example, Hoberek's analysis of 'white-collar angst' in *Invisible Man*, *The Fountainhead*, and *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*: 'a man, anxious to find creative and fulfilling mental labor, instead encounters mystified, conformist organizations that threaten to rob him of his individuality, agency, and autonomy' (*Twilight of the Middle Class* 55).

[58] The Gettysburg Address seems to have held a special fascination for Wallace. Asked by *The Atlantic* on the occasion of their 150th anniversary to provide a few words on 'the future of the American idea', Wallace paraphrased Lincoln's speech in reference to those killed on 9/11: 'What if we chose to regard the 2,973 innocents killed in the atrocities of 9/11 not as victims but as democratic martyrs, "sacrifices on the altar of freedom"?' (321). Wallace also went on to invoke Franklin before questioning whether U.S. citizens should give up freedom from government interference in exchange for 'safety'. Although slight in terms of word count, this article contains an important distillation of Wallace's later political beliefs.

[59] Mr. Johnson's middle initial – 'A.' – also recalls President Andrew Johnson, himself a 'sub' President who took office after Lincoln's assassination. Johnson is also notable for being one of two U.S. Presidents to have been impeached along with Bill Clinton, adding another layer of significance for the Culture Wars.

[60] See for example, den Dulk, *Existential Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature*.

[61] For a prolonged study of Wallace and James see Evans, '"The Chains of Not Choosing": Free Will and Faith in William James and David Foster Wallace'. Boswell reads Chris Fogle's conversion in *The Pale King* as a Jamesian 'religious experience' ('Trickle-Down Citizenship' 474-475), and contends that Steeply is a stand-in for James' 'moral philosopher' in *Infinite Jest* (*Understanding* 135-137). For James' and Richard Rorty's influence on *The Broom of the System* see Tracey, 'The Formative Years: David Foster Wallace's Philosophical Influences and *The Broom of the System*'. The other most frequently mentioned U.S. philosophical touchstone for Wallace is Stanley Cavell, whom Wallace briefly studied under at Harvard; see Baskin, 'Untrendy Problems: *The Pale King's* Philosophical Inspirations' (148-153), and Boddy, 'A Fiction of Response: *Girl with Curious Hair* in Context' (37-40). For an examination of Wallace in relation to Cora Diamond see Mahon, 'Difficulties of Reality in Cora Diamond and David Foster Wallace', which also features a brief, nuanced reading of Wallace and Cavell.

[62] Allard den Dulk suggests that Wallace's characterisation of irony here is predicated on Kierkegaard's 'aesthetic' irony, adopting the term 'existential irony' to connote 'an ironic relation to the whole of reality. This also means that no positive content lies behind it, because existential irony places the totality of existence under negation, and, therefore, no possible meaning remains for it' (63).

[63] Philip Roth's anticipation of Baudrillard's hyperreality in 'Writing American Fiction' provides a particularly well-known antecedent:

> The American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents. (120)

[64] For a more nuanced analysis of the impact of MFA programs on contemporary U.S. fiction see Mark McGurl's *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*.

[65] It should be noted that despite the apparent congruence here between Wallace and Franzen on the dangers of theory, the two shared opposing views on how this should be undertaken. Indeed, immediately prior to this quotation, Franzen (in a thinly veiled attack on Wallace) argues that: 'to sign on with the postmodern program, to embrace the notion of formal experimentation as a heroic act of resistance, you have to believe that the emergency that Gaddis and his fellow pioneers were responding to is still an emergency five decades later' (259). Although it is probably an injustice to say that Wallace merely signed on with the 'postmodern program', in targeting his postmodern forefathers – most notably John Barth – in the late-1980s and 1990s, he does seem guilty of the lack of urgency that Franzen identifies.

[66] For a similar assessment see Nichols Dames' article 'On the Theory Generation', in which he looks at novels by Wallace contemporaries and acolytes such as Teju Cole, Jennifer Egan, Jeffrey Eugenides, Ben Lerner, Sam Lipsyte, and Lorrie Moore.

[67] For analysis of Wallace's closed systems in terms of stasis, see Karnicky.

[68] Although Baudrillard would seem an obvious critical touchstone for Wallace, it is remarkable that very little scholarship compares the two. Bradley J. Fest asserts that Wallace alludes to Baudrillard to emphasize the 'construction of the nuclear as textual' ('The Inverted Nuke in the Garden' 138). Allard den Dulk also mentions Baudrillard in relation to the Eschaton sequence, but fails to make any distinction between the philosopher's theory and Borges' parable (150 n.88). Paul Quinn offers a brief engagement with Baudrillard in '"Location's Location"', but chooses to focus on the 'cartographic imaginary' at the expense of what he regards as 'well-rehearsed postmodern debates about simulation and the dreadful fate of the authentic' (89). This latter view is symptomatic of the exclusion of notions of the authentic from Wallace scholarship more generally.

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[69] When Don Gately reappears (after a near-200 page absence) in hospital after being shot, he notes that 'the blurred figure in the next bed' is 'in a sitting position and seemed to have a box on its head', implying that he shares his room with Lord (809). This room is also the scene of the visitation by the wraith of James Incandenza, thus providing a rare occasion where all three plots strands of the novel might intertwine.

[70] It is perhaps worth noting the oxymoron 'really abstract' here; Wallace's punning clue as to the theme of this section, and an example of his fondness for paradoxes. Moreover, the brief switch to the second-person imperative is another example of the persuasive syntactic strategy often used by Wallace to foster empathy in his readers.

[71] It is important to recognize that Baudrillard's 'point is not to rehabilitate other wars, but rather that the recourse to the same pathos is all the more odious when there is no longer even the alibi of war' (*The Gulf War* 76).

[72] Frankl's memoir may also provide the inspiration for Wallace's aforementioned assertion that 'no single, individual moment is in and of itself unendurable'.

[73] Indeed, at one point the interviewee inserts an ironic caveat: 'you think whoever it was that said that was *for* a woman getting raped? No way. He just wasn't being knee-jerk' (99; italics in original).

[74] Charles B. Harris implies that this sentence is designed to substitute the reader for the interviewer, prompting an even more active relationship with the story: 'its sudden directness also shocks the reader into a more personal relationship with the story. This centrifugal reverse thrust counters our tendency to remain outside the text by framing the scene with abstract theories' (109).

[75] Once again, Wallace cleverly antagonises the reader by inserting this important dualism amidst the interviewee's misogynistic comments towards the interviewer:

> You haven't been there. I'm not saying nothing bad ever happened to you, you're not bad looking and I bet there's been some degradation or whatever that came your way in your life. That's not what I'm saying. But we're talking Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*-Holocaust-type total violation and suffering and terror here. The real Dark Side. And baby I can tell just from just looking at you you never. You wouldn't even wear what you're wearing, trust me. (101)

Indeed, the interviewee displays the very same 'knee-jerk reaction' that he had initially warned the interviewer against.

[76] It is perhaps significant that the 'author here' character from *The Pale King* encounters a similar fate to Slothrop. In his notes for the novel, Wallace wrote that 'David Wallace disappears – becomes creature of the system' (548). Although this may at first seem to suggest another instance of the disappearance of the author, it may also represent a triumph of sorts over the authorial intrusion technique so prominent in the first wave of postmodern writing; the supposedly subversive figure of the self-referential author has become so ubiquitous that they have become subsumed by the system (for example MFA programs), and so Wallace clears the way for a re-assertion of subjectivity or the omnipotent author. Indeed, Mike Pietsch chose to end Wallace's novel with a re-affirmation of the body: 'The way we start is to relax and become aware of the body. It is at the level of body that we proceed' (540). The final sentence of the novel guarantees notions of both the Other and the self: 'she's right there, speaking calmly, and so are you' (540).

[77] The epigraph puns on the novel's many mentions of tax 'forms' as well as the 'forms' of the characters, and yet conveys the fluidity of the subject that Wallace sought to capture.

[78] Stephen Shapiro offers another recent political reading of Wallace, arguing that Wallace's 'achievement with *The Pale King* is to have created what an American communist or left front novel in the post-Cold War, post-9/11 period might look like' ('Cultural Fix' 1268). However, Wallace's conservatism and individualism makes this claim spurious at best. Furthermore, Shapiro avers that Wallace 'wants to train the reader to be *in* abstraction, rather than flee from it', a suggestion which seems unlikely given Wallace's engagement with abstraction as noted in the preceding chapter.

[79] It is interesting to note that Wallace's first two novels are predominantly set in the near future, whilst almost all of Wallace's post-9/11 fiction – 'Good Old Neon', 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy', and 'The Suffering Channel' from *Oblivion*, and *The Pale King* – are set in the past, but narrated from the present. This shift signals a change in Wallace's method: a desire to figure out why the country has arrived at where it has, rather than an inquiry into where it is going. It might seem too easy to simply attribute this to a crisis in confidence after 9/11, and yet that possibility remains. In an interview dating from 2006, Wallace averred that: 'for someone like me…whose consciousness was formed by, "we are the good guy and there's one great looming dark enemy and that's the Soviet Union," the idea of waking up to the fact that in today's world very possibly we are the villain…you can imagine how difficult that is for Americans to do' (Frightening Time in America').

[80] See, for example, Philip E. Wegner's excellent monograph *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009).

[81] This is symptomatic of a wider resistance towards analyzing politics in literature as noted by John Whalen-Bridge: 'prose with any social resonance can be read politically, but the kind of story that "gets its hands dirty" with actual political struggle and affiliation, that which is deemed likely to inspire readers to take sides in a political controversy, is frequently given sub-literary status by critics, scholars, and other taste-makers' (2). Moreover, for Whalen-Bridge 'the prejudice against political fiction is stronger in America than in other countries' (23), due to a suspicion of authors' reformist sympathies. We can of course frame this debate in terms of the larger debate over the relative merits of politics and aesthetics, a fundamental constituent of the debate surrounding what constitutes art. Wallace himself, it should be noted claimed that 'I don't know that I agree that my fiction is really all that political' ('Frightening Time in America').

[82] This simplistic overview of the 1990s of course ignores numerous domestic dilemmas, such as the backlash to feminism, the adoption of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell', the Oklahoma City bombing, and the Rodney King riots, as well as international crises such as famine in Sudan, genocide in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, and war in Iraq and Somalia. Indeed, David Harvey suggests that 'the 1990s turned out to be one of the most unpleasant decades in US history' (*New Imperialism* 16). The assertion is thus repeated here to highlight the astonishing extent of introspection and isolationism inherent in both Max's biography and Wallace's own worldview. Recent criticism has attempted to address this dilemma, with Lee Konstantinou claiming that in later stories like 'The Suffering Channel', 'Wallace wants to find a literary form that demonstrates (rather than represents) the limited bounds of his own imagination, an "average, averagely bright" perspective, habituated by US media, which he regards as constitutionally unable to see on a planetary scale' ('World of David Foster Wallace' 84). Similarly, Lucas Thompson argues that 'locating Wallace's fiction within a wider [literary] tradition' might also provide a way of reconciling Wallace with the world ('Programing Literary Influence' 118). Whilst both these points have their merits, I would argue that Wallace's profound erudition and level of self-awareness allow for very little room for apologists seeking to explain away his glaring omissions. This is not to suggest that literature should always deal with worldly themes, but Wallace's unceasing introspection can at times prove wearing.

[83] See for example, Mark Bresnan's 'The Work of Play in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*'. More recently, Bradley J. Fest has addressed this issue, arguing that the game represents 'nostalgia for the nuclear trope itself' ('The Inverted Nuke in the Garden' 135). Interestingly, the passage of *Infinite Jest* cited in relation to Borges – 'it's snowing on the goddamn *map*, not the *territory*' (333; emphasis in original) is refracted in the equally-celebrated 'drooling infant' passage bemoaning the contemporary disposition towards anhedonia: 'the world becomes a map of the world' (693). The external focus of the Cold War is literally superseded by the internal focus of the solipsist, resulting in the external world becoming devoid of referents and meaning.

[84] For a similar claim focused on the impact of 'declining Cold Warrior validation' in reference to the films previously mentioned, see Susan Jeffords, who contends that: 'just as [action heroes] have abandoned the external bodies that defined them in the eighties, these new men of the nineties are turning away from the external concerns of government, law, international drug cartels, militarism, and crime….Their focus now is on the improvements of their 'internal' selves: their health, their emotions, their families, and their homes' ('The Big Switch' 207-208). It is notable that even in films where an external enemy is present, the action is often framed as a threat to the (admittedly, no longer nuclear) family unit, with the hero saving the world whilst simultaneously attempting to rejuvenate his debilitated masculinity through the re-adoption of a paternal role.

[85] For differing assessments to this view of the 1990s as period of theoretical possibility, see Adam Kelly, who contends that 'the decade marked a period of transition', characterised by a literary focus on 'the moment of decision as the "when-it-all-changed," the pure event' (*American Fiction in Transition* 4, 24). For a more nuanced reading of the period see Fabienne Collignon, who argues that *Infinite Jest* 'comments on the prevalence of Cold War-like interior-forming state fantasies that keep structuring whatever comes "after" the "end"' ('USA Murated Nation' 102). What is most important when conceptualising the 1990s is not so much whether meaningful change was in fact enacted, but that the period is seen to at least hold this potential.

[86] I take the phrase 'present subjunctive' from John Miller's analysis of Pynchon's California novels, where he posits that 'Pynchon represents the setting of the California novels as a kind of contested writing surface, on which alternative versions of the future (and the past) are in the process of being inscribed' ('Present Subjunctive' 226). The term is perhaps more commonly associated with Pynchon's retrospective insertion of subjunctive moments at distinct historical junctures – 'could [Wm. Slothrop] have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from?' (*Gravity's Rainbow* 658) – highlighting lost opportunities for establishing what Jeff Baker has called 'a subjunctive, communitarian American that could, or should, exist' ('Politics' 136). The 1990s, however, offer this moment in the present, perhaps encapsulated in the moment Pynchon's own 1990s novel *Mason & Dixon* (1997) volunteers 'yet one more hope in the realm of the Subjunctive' (543). As Kathryn Hume writes of Pynchon's late masterpiece: 'Pynchon's point is that we need to acknowledge the possibilities. Striving to see connections is built into our process of reading *Mason & Dixon*. The other implied worlds or levels of reality are not problems to be solved, but rather possibilities to consider, new ways of conceiving our ontology' (68).

[87] As befits someone who attempted to avoid partisan prejudices, Wallace had a mixed history of political allegiance. Despite his claim that he was 'not a Republican', Max notes that Wallace was 'politically fairly conservative; he'd voted for Ronald Reagan and supported Ross Perot in 1992', intriguingly for economic reasons (259). On the other hand, he was critical of George W. Bush, announcing in 2003: 'I am, at present, partisan. Worse than that: I feel such deep, visceral antipathy that I can't seem to think or speak or write in any kind of fair or nuanced way about the current administration' ('Interview with Dave Eggers' 76).

[88] For more on the filtering of information in relation to *Infinite Jest* see David Letzler, 'Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction'.

[89] Wallace probably has in mind Thomas Jefferson's famous letter to Richard Price, 8 January 1789: 'Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights' (*Selected Writings* 418).

[90] Andrew Warren has claimed that one of *The Pale King*'s 'overtly political concerns' is this illusion of choice: 'the Neo-Liberal myth of the autonomous individual's right to choose' ('Narrative Modeling' 391). On the importance of choice in *Infinite Jest* (albeit referring to the contextualisation of irony), see Allard Den Dulk's persuasively argued 'Beyond Endless "Aesthetic" Irony'.

[91] It should be noted that although Wallace states this as a goal – applauding Garner's *Dictionary* for the way it resists a partisan approach, adopting 'Democratic rhetoric' in its focus on '*establishing...*authority' (122; italics in original) – he is also forthright (and self-effacing) about his own upbringing as a SNOOT (69). Indeed, Wallace reserves additional admonishment for the Descriptivists, in particular their insistence on relativism (84), and 'leftist vanity' (113).

[92] This interview seems to have been a huge (if undocumented) influence on Eggers' own novel *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And The Prophets, Do They Live For Ever?* (2014). Mimicking the interview style of Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, Eggers' protagonist Thomas insists 'I don't want to be preaching. I'm *asking*' (42; emphasis in original). Furthermore, much like the difficult ethical questions posed in *Brief Interviews*, Thomas attempts to empathise with the thinking of a paedophile, who warns against the dangers of 'flawed' polarized thinking (73): 'I know you understand moral choices that are a bit off the beaten path. So I hope you'll understand what I mean when I say that there is a good deal of grey in the world. It's not a popular belief, I know, but most of the world is grey. I know that if a man touches a boy's ass once, he can be labeled a pedophile forever, but that's not fair, either. We've lost all nuance' (68).

[93] For further analysis of Wallace in relation to Bakhtin see Kelly, 'Development Through Dialogue', and Nichols, 'Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival'.

[94] Rick Moody's *Purple America* (1996) provides an important corollary here with its reasonably sympathetic depictions of unlovable characters and willingness to explore their respective consciousness. Towards the end of the novel a character summates the heterogeneity of the United States – 'mall franchises, mercy killings, sudden deaths, white supremacists, antigovernment militias, single mothers, new viruses. It's all here' – before asking, in a plea for empathy: 'who could love the kind of guy who would shoot at his own family? Those with ears will hear' (295). Kenneth Millard has noted that the 'purple' of the title could refer both to Moody's 'purple prose' and 'the colour of hubris, of duplicity, and of death' (*Contemporary American Fiction* 95, 96). The identification of duplicity is especially important here, as 'Purple America' is also the name given to cartographical depictions of the U.S. as politically diverse, instead of divided into red and blue states (see, for example, John Sides, 'Most Americans Live in Purple America'). 'Purple' – like 'gray' – thus stresses the inclusion of complication and diversity, rather than exclusionary polarities.

[95] See the aforementioned 'Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley' for additional evidence of Wallace's passion for borders and boundaries.

[96] After the map-territory relation is called into question during Eschaton, Michael Pemulis is adamant that 'it's like the one ground-rule boundary that keeps Eschaton from degenerating into chaos. Eschaton gentlemen is about logic and axiom and mathematical probity and discipline and verity and *order*' (338; emphasis in original). In an early piece of Wallace scholarship Timothy Jacobs compared him with poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, focusing on their relationship with order. Jacobs argues that *Infinite Jest*'s 'thesis [is] that literature produced without boundaries results in chaotic and solipsistic expression', and that Wallace's fiction displays an often-overlooked preference for order ('American Touchstone' 223). Indeed, the above quote and Wallace's professed love of poetry would seem to corroborate this claim: 'it's nearly always *formal* features that create and convey this poetic urgency' ('Best of the Prose Poem' 254; emphasis in original). However, it is important to make a distinction between order and limit. Whereas order would suggest a more formal scheme than could either be associated with Wallace's writing or meaningful debate, limit would suggest a less strictly delineated internal space (that is, more open to expression) that is enabled by the policing of acceptable boundaries that are deemed too important to transgress. See, for example, Schtitt's coaching nous: 'he, Schtitt. knew real tennis was really about not the blend of statistical order and expansive potential that the game's technicians revered, but in fact the opposite – *not*-order, *limit*, the place where things broke down, fragmented into beauty' (*Infinite Jest* 81; emphasis in original). Although a subtle distinction, Wallace's noted proclivity for lexicographical and mathematical precision suggests that this is an important one.

[97] Indeed, Marathe's surname may be intended to evoke that of Jean-Paul Marat, the famed French Revolutionary martyr.

[98] David Harvey's definition of neoliberalism is precise and succinct: 'neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices….But beyond these tasks the state should not venture' (*Neoliberalism* 2). What is of most concern for Wallace is that due to this lack of interference 'the chaos of individual interests can easily end up prevailing over order' (82).

[99] Philip Wegner takes issue with the 'despairing notion of alternating cycles of social ferment and stasis that is the hallmark of many far more conservative visions of twentieth-century U.S. history, in which the radicalism of the 1920s and 1930s or 1960s is understood to be followed inevitably by periods of conservative retrenchment in the 1950s and the 1980s. Not only does such a vision of historical movement close off any possibility of real change...it effectively takes human agency out of the historical picture, portraying such pendulum swings as an irrevocable law' (*Life Between Two Deaths* 41).

[100] Intriguingly, Stephen Burn has argued that Toni 'seems to represent Bret Easton Ellis's shock-based aesthetic, an approach that Wallace felt was antithetical to his own, which might explain why Toni has a first name that yields the anagram of *NOT I*' ('Paradigm' 382). Burn's view is predicated largely on the novel's

suggestion that Toni is 'concerned entirely' with whether people 'could be affected', and removes any semblance of originality, individuality, and agency that Toni might possess (*The Pale King* 513).

[101] Wallace's incessant need to victimise his female characters, however, remains troubling.

[102] Although she does not agree with Baudrillard unconditionally, Hayles notes that 'when Baudrillard writes that we live in an age of simulacra, he is not wrong. The phenomena he describes can be observed in corner video stores, supermarket aisles, and neighborhood gas stations' ('Borders' 321). It is revealing to note that by the turn of the millenium, gas stations frequently subsumed all three.

[103] For an opposing view see Emily J. Hogg, who argues that 'political concerns are always shaped, transfigured and – sometimes – misshapen by emotion and the vagaries of subjective experience' ('Subjective Politics' 60).

[104] Although 'X' and 'I' may be merely reminders of *The Pale King*'s status as an 'unfinished novel' – discrepancies that would have been corrected in a later edit – it is worth noting that both 'X' and 'David Wallace' make an appearance in one of the four chapters to focus on Toni Ware (442, 443). Shane Drinion is also referred to as 'Mr. X', but as Kelly notes, 'the characters of these two men seem entirely at odds with one another' ('Development' 282).

[105] Interestingly, amongst the drafts and notes for *The Pale King* there is evidence of a projected chapter that was to take place in Ancient Rome. I am grateful to Tim Groenland for alerting me to this information.

[106] X's relativism and fastidious word usage – 'define *violent*, though. Can't it mean vastly different things to different people?' (139; emphasis in original) – suggests that the X may in fact represent Generation X, a claim easily aligned with Wallace's propensity for characterisation that corresponds to a generational model (X is approximately twenty-eight [133], suggesting an early-1960s birth). Indeed, his occasional outbursts of adolescent apathy – 'this whole conversation is dull' (140); 'now this is depressing instead of just boring' (146) – allied to the derision with which his proleptic interruptions are greeted – 'I'll throw you off his elevator, X, I swear to God I will' (139) – suggests an ambivalent view of Generation X that correlates with Wallace's views expressed elsewhere.

[107] This statement serves as a useful rejoinder for those who seek to promote a libertarian agenda for Wallace. Furthermore, Wallace's previously noted predilection for limits actually suggests a desire *for* authority (albeit limited) that is thoroughly at odds with a libertarian position. Interestingly, the narrator – 'David Wallace' – concedes that the narrative is sometimes in the hands of an 'abstract narrative persona...that's mainly a pro forma statutory construct, an entity that exists just for legal and commercial purposes, rather like a corporation' (68).

[108] There is of course an elitist sub-current running through here: one has to be reasonably materially comfortable to be in a position to be bored. This is not existential despair, but coping with modern bureaucracy and over-control (by the government).