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TOWARDS AN ETHICAL CULTURE: AMERICAN MYTHOLOGIES AND THE LIMITS OF FREEDOM IN THE WORK OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

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PhD Thesis

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I focus on Wallace's understanding of ethical agency: how it is constituted, how it manifests or fails, and the nature of its contingencies and limits. To this end, I explore ideas of ethics and freedom throughout Wallace's oeuvre from four broad theoretical perspectives. Beginning with a study of Emmanuel Levinas's 'Ethics as First Philosophy', I compare Wallace's and Levinas's writings on ethics to the theories of Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, and Slavoj Žižek. I investigate Levinas's use of the face or the face-to-face encounter as an ethical signifier and read Wallace's own rich depiction of faces through this lens. In the second chapter I depart from postmodern theory and deploy concepts from clinical and biomedical science to re-evaluate Wallace's writings on free will and agency in light of the 'neuroethical'. I show how Wallace's attention to the materiality of the body and the brain disrupts simple notions of an ethical agency founded on free will and personal choice. This leads to the third chapter's consideration of how Wallace positions the biopolitical subject under neoliberal social and cultural frameworks, including his interrogation of mythologies around competition and work in contemporary America. Finally, in the fourth and final chapter I analyse Wallace's oeuvre from the viewpoint of feminist theory, drawing a comparison to Julia Kristeva's writings on heretical ethics and the abject. I discuss the problem of misogyny in Wallace's texts and evaluate more recent criticism that reconsiders his collected writings in light of rapidly changing categories of sex and gender.

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Introduction

The association of David Foster Wallace's oeuvre with ethics and the ethical is a well-accepted, if increasingly contested, topic within contemporary literary criticism. This thesis is an attempt to explore Wallace's ethics from a range of philosophical and theoretical perspectives and to assess how his exposition speaks to broad trends in current day American and Western culture. As the title suggests, Wallace's idea of ethics entails questioning certain 'mythologies' around the meaning and nature of freedom. To this end, Wallace's literary project deploys themes found in moral philosophy and psychology, theology, medical science, and political and economic theory in the service of the re-evaluation of the human subject as ethical agent. In this thesis, I will identify four main categories of ethics that recur and overlap throughout Wallace's work and explore how they question and challenge more traditional understandings of literary-ethical agency. In this respect, my work is situated between different generations or waves of Wallace scholarship and is an attempt to make sense of the many disconnects within his oeuvre, including some of the deeply problematic aspects and ethical failures of his writing.

The field of literary criticism and academic scholarship that has come to be known as Wallace Studies comprises two distinct waves that have largely tracked with public opinion and interest in Wallace's work and life. The first wave of Wallace studies, occurring in the wake of the writer's untimely death, involved a marked effort at literary canonisation. This initial critical framework focused on philosophy, theory, and ethics and self-consciously positioned Wallace as inheritor and disruptor of the postmodern metafiction of his literary forefathers and standard-bearer of literary post-postmodernism and the New Sincerity. Much of this early scholarship responded to Wallace's prolific writings about philosophy and ethics, ranging from the analytic and linguistic philosophical approaches of Ludwig

Wittgenstein to critiques of logical positivism and fatalism to more humanistic considerations of ethics as a form of moral awareness or personal responsibility, as with the ethics of eating meat in *Consider the Lobster* or the ethics of other-directed behaviour and choices in *This is Water*.

Important examples of early scholarship that focus on the literary theoretical, philosophical, and generic aspects of Wallace's oeuvre include Marshall Boswell's collected works, including later works such as *The Wallace Effect: David Foster Wallace and the Contemporary Literary Imagination* (2019), Adam Kelly's 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction' (2010), and the collected works of David Hering and Stephen Burn. Essay compilations such as *Gesturing Towards Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy* (2014) and *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace* (2015) have amalgamated philosophical lines of critique as the basis for academic interpretations of Wallace's work. This first wave also encompasses early biographical studies and interviews, including D.T. Max's *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* (2012) and David Lipsky's *Of Course You Wind up Becoming Yourself* (2010) that focus on Wallace's background in philosophy and writing, considering his family's academic history alongside his own coursework in these subjects, and finally his role as a university professor and writing instructor that occurred in tandem with his writing career.

The second wave of Wallace studies leans into more critical analyses of the writer's life and work that have branched into two distinct but related categories. One line of scholarship takes a more traditional Marxist approach to historicising Wallace's literary output within the framework of neoliberal capitalism, which Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith touch upon in their introduction to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (2017). Jeffery Severs' critical work *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (2017) assesses how Wallace's texts chart the growing disconnect

between disparate value systems defined by money and morality under neoliberalism, and more recently Edward Jackson's *David Foster Wallace's Toxic Sexuality: Hideousness, Neoliberalism, and Spermatics* (2020) offers an incisive and truly novel analysis of Wallace's work as deeply indebted to the values of neoliberalism, locating the sexual toxicity and misogyny of Wallace's work in the ethical impoverishment of neoliberal economies and values.

Jackson's work on Wallace's 'toxic sexuality' imbricates a second category within this second wave of Wallace studies that is informed by questions of identity and difference and centres on gender and sexuality and the problem of misogyny in Wallace's fiction. Clare Hayes-Brady's work *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (2016) spans the first and second waves of literary criticism in its attention to language and philosophy and the communicative, relational, and interpersonal failures that constitute an enormous part of Wallace's subject matter. Finally, as the second wave picks up speed and momentum, Amy Hungerford's and Mary K. Holland's post-me-too essays represent a growing turn against Wallace's work on the basis of the misogyny in his fiction and in his personal life. Hungerford argues for not reading Wallace at all and Mary K. Holland calls for a more thorough accounting of his misogyny (and also declares that she sees no further need to write about or critique his work). This wave includes more recent biographical portraits of Wallace that appear in Adrienne Miller's *In the Land of Men* (2020) and recovers earlier biographical accounts that were largely overlooked and that detail Wallace's abuse of women in his personal life, such as Mary Karr's *Lit* (2009). Beyond sex, gender, and misogyny, scholarship that analyses race and racism, whiteness and regional identity, or that takes a postcolonial approach to critiquing Wallace's work is also part of this new wave, and will no doubt constitute the next one (if there is one) as well. Naturally, there is a wide degree of overlap between successive waves of scholarship on Wallace's work and

life, and so designations of ‘first’ and ‘second’ should be understood as a way to signpost various critical topics, themes, and voices that are in ongoing conversation, as opposed to standalone categories that are inherently or even entirely oppositional in nature.

Certainly, questions of mental health and illness, depression, and suicide are integral to Wallace’s work and critical interest in these topics has been present from the beginning, spanning different eras of Wallace scholarship. Thomas Tracey’s essay ‘Representations of Trauma in David Foster Wallace’s *Oblivion*’ (2010) is an early example, and more recently Jon Baskin’s *Ordinary Unhappiness: The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace* (2019) speaks to the way Wallace’s fiction has been read on different (and indeed ‘non-critical’) levels. Peter Sloane’s *David Foster Wallace and the Body* (2019) drills down to fundamental aspects within Wallace’s work that have not received the full critical attention they deserve, foregrounding the limits of the embodied subject’s control over certain physical and emotional responses, such as in situations of acute anxiety. The attention to this aspect of Wallace’s work has been present both within and outside of the academy. Furthermore, it would not be incorrect to suggest that the popular canonisation of Wallace as a revered public figure centred in no small part on his mental health struggles and suicide, as his close friend and fellow writer Jonathan Franzen discussed in his own biographical account of Wallace’s demise. In at least some respects, this speaks to unmet needs among certain populations and subgroups of Wallace’s readers. In what constitutes a rather remarkable phenomenon, Wallace’s work opened a door or provided a platform for many of his readers (especially men) to talk about emotional pain and vulnerability. While this might not immediately register as ‘academic’, it should not be dismissed as too sentimental or irrelevant to the research that occurs within literature departments and scholarly journals. Whilst I have not explicitly discussed affect theory in my thesis, it is certainly implied here, and relates to Wallace’s exploration of the all too human emotional and psychological fallout from

existential and philosophical problems: paradoxes and double binds, irreconcilable differences and dilemmas (especially between body and mind), and the inevitable compromises and complicities that human life, and human relationships, entail.

To that end, this thesis is an attempt to bridge some of the gaps between the first and second waves of Wallace studies, to reflect upon potential blind spots in the critical literature, and to make some predictions about what subsequent waves of Wallace scholarship might involve. Overall, I am interested in Wallace's investigations of ethical agency: how it is furnished and constituted, how it manifests (or fails to manifest), and the nature of its contingencies and limits. Relevant here is the gap between the theory and practice of 'ethics' and a return to the body and brain as origin points for moral behaviour that have perhaps been hidden in plain sight. In this sense, my thesis maps a turn within Wallace criticism from the ethical to the cognitive, or from the philosophical to the biological, pointing towards a medical humanistic reading of his oeuvre that I expect will be treated in much greater depth and analysis by future scholars of his work. Beyond the conclusions postulated or reached by Wallace, Wallace studies, or literary criticism, issues of ethical agency are universally applicable and cut to the core of what it means to be human (especially the more difficult aspects of our human lives). No doubt diverse fields of scholarship beyond literature and philosophy, from psychology and neuroscience, biomedicine and technology, to arenas of law and criminal justice, will continue to influence the ultimate question of what 'being human' really means. Literature is (as ever) in a unique position to tie all these disparate and seemingly irreconcilable strands together.

In thinking about ethics with respect to Wallace's postmodern pedigree, I decided to begin my study by comparing Wallace's 'postmodern ethics' with the ethical system of Emmanuel Levinas. Writing in the wake of the Second World War, Levinas viewed ethics as fundamental to human subjectivity as well as to the survival of humanity. For Levinas, ethics

is grounded in the priority of the Other and is the condition of possibility for all human interactions and relationships. His work influenced thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, and Slavoj Žižek, whom I discuss with respect to Wallace's writing throughout the first chapter of this thesis. Taking his popular Kenyon commencement speech as a point of departure, I evaluate how Wallace, in line with postmodern thinkers like Bauman, construes morality as 'aporetic', ambivalent, and irrational. I focus on Levinas's use of the face as ethical signifier and explain how faces function as a recurring motif in Wallace's fiction to indicate a spectrum of human ethical ability from states of oblivion to epiphany.

Following this I call attention to the limitations of Levinas's ethical system and highlight the theories of Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida and their consideration of literature, writing, and the work of art as critical spaces for ethical engagement and interaction. I explain how Blanchot's and Derrida's ideas on the purpose or possibility of literature correspond with Wallace's professed views of literature as a space for connection and community that allows both writer and reader to overcome alienation and 'become human'. Derrida demonstrated how literature acts as an ethical intervention by deconstructing hierarchies of thought and belief that are taken for granted in everyday language and discourse. In light of this, I argue that Wallace's literary depictions of moral blindness and oblivion serve to challenge commonly held notions about the nature of human agency and ethics. In an almost theological sense, Wallace and Levinas indicate that ethics and empathy must extend to the morally hideous. In the final section I explore the idea of 'inhuman ethics', which focuses on Žižek's writings (contra Levinas) that consider the other as inhuman or monster. The deconstruction of the human/inhuman binary that figures so prominently throughout Wallace's oeuvre opens a discussion of the neurobiological subject as ethical agent, which is the topic of the following chapter.

In the second chapter I depart from philosophical ideas of ethics and turn to questions of moral psychology, neuroscience, and behaviour, evaluating how Wallace posits human ethical agency as a function of the biological organism, contingent on neurochemistry and mental health, among other things. Wallace's ongoing exploration of various forms of mental illness, especially addiction, psychosis, and suicide, suggests a material grounding for ethical agency that counters traditional philosophical, theological, or legal formulations of ethics. I begin by introducing the concept of 'neuroethics' and its growing relevance among behavioural and cognitive scientists. I discuss how reframing ethical and moral behaviour as brain-based and neurologically contingent problematises traditional views of ethics and agency, specifically with respect to theological and philosophical conceptions of free will. From here, I reference Wallace's early work in philosophy and logic contra determinist or fatalist formulations of agency and call attention to Wallace's recurrent valorisation of choice, or the freedom to choose, as critical to human subjectivity and ethics. In the following section I discuss how Wallace's fiction works against the grain of the philosophical and ethical principles he endorses and aligns more closely with theories in contemporary cognitive science and neuropsychology popularised by figures such as Steven Pinker and Simon Baron-Cohen, who argue for brain-based models of moral behaviour. This leads to a re-evaluation of Wallace's treatment of subjectivity and agency in regard to mental health problems such as clinical depression, anxiety, and suicide, as well as disorders of addiction and attention, that disrupt any stable or accepted notions of freedom or 'personal choice'. I conclude the chapter with a question inspired by Catherine Malabou's writings on the brain as a plastic work of art that can be moulded and shaped throughout the course of a human life: Can we build more ethical brains, and if so, how?

This question leads into the third chapter, where I evaluate Wallace's relationship to neoliberal capitalism and his critique of prevalent mythologies of 'freedom' in the

contemporary US psyche, including American political and economic exceptionalism. The neoliberal framing of the human as biopolitical subject figures agency as a limited and exploitable resource, disrupting the notion of mental illness as a private problem, as Mark Fisher, Will Davies, and others have noted. Wallace dramatises this through dystopian imagery that compels readers to re-imagine what a truly ethical world might look like. To address these themes, I begin by defining neoliberalism and establishing a lexicon of associated terms that recur throughout the Wallacean landscape. Next, I discuss how Wallace critiques, but also capitulates to, neoliberal ideologies and mythologies around competition and the 'work ethic' that function as a mask for exploitation and disciplinary social control. Finally, I consider the tensions between civic duties and civil liberties that arise throughout Wallace's work and relate this to his ideas about art, charity, and the gift.

The fourth and final chapter examines ideas of feminist ethics, including contemporary Western categories of sex and gender, and constitutes a feminist critique of Wallace's work. I begin by addressing the problem of Wallace's 'gender trouble' and consider Amy Hungerford's allegation of misogyny in Wallace's texts as a valid reason for refusing to read and teach his works. I then examine Wallace's own stated views on feminism and misogyny and bring in the work of other writers and feminist critics like Clare Hayes-Brady who see the failures of Wallace's 'hideous men' as a chance to engage with difficult questions about gender, communication, and agency. From here I revisit chapter one's themes of ethics and alterity taking differences in sex and gender into account. I compare Wallace's preoccupation with 'the porousness of certain borders' to Julia Kristeva's writings on the Abject and her own theories of sex, gender, and difference as opening up a space for the practice of a 'heretical ethics'. This leads to a reconsideration of the themes of chapter two with respect to sex differences in the brain and incorporates Wallace's treatment of genius and violence from a gendered perspective. Wallace's on-going suggestion of a link

between masculinity and violence is undeniable and speaks to the difficult and seemingly intractable asymmetry of sex and gender in acts of aggression and brutality. His portrayals of male sexual 'toxicity' elicit the charge of gender essentialism but also prompt a discussion about the embodied origins of various dis/abilities and vulnerabilities (physical, cognitive, and ethical) that gesture towards Wallace's own emergent and heretical 'feminist' ethics.

In many ways Wallace's oeuvre, straddling both sides of the millennium, represents a turning point, signifying the end of one literary era and the beginning of another. If the postmodern 'literature of exhaustion' of the Great Male Narcissists was his starting point, he may have finally laid it to rest by rendering much of his own work, style, and content, obsolete. Whether and how Wallace's literary afterlife will continue to take shape and what new waves of Wallace scholarship will come next remain to be seen, but acknowledging the problematic aspects of his work, life, and ethics will surely be an ongoing part of this conversation. Beyond issues of gender and sexuality, questions of race and ethnic and national identity, including the unmistakeable 'whiteness' of Wallace's texts and his own self-conscious performance of American-ness are ripe for additional scrutiny. In this way, Wallace Studies may herald another shift in literary criticism, away from the dead authors of last century's Barthesian analysis and towards a resurrection of sorts, where the personal life and private affairs of the author are not merely 'political' but very much part of the narrative. I believe that my thesis is in step with this trend, by claiming (at least in part) that the author's own struggles, ethical, medical, and otherwise, are relevant to interpreting his body of work.

Chapter 1: Ethical Labyrinths: Towards and Beyond a Levinasian Reading of Wallace

Introduction -- Postmodern Ethics

The writing of David Foster Wallace explores the paradoxes and contingencies that shape the possibilities and limitations of human life. His attempts to understand the ethical ramifications of human morality represent a significant aim of his oeuvre. By implicating the reader in the conundrums and outcomes of his narratives and characters, he questions the nature of moral awareness while seeking to define the human subject in terms of its ethical potential.

True to Pankaj Mishra's characterisation of Wallace as an 'old-fashioned moralist in postmodern disguise', Wallace's texts, however ironic or absurd at first glance, are ultimately meant to inform and instruct, taking a nuanced approach to the complex intersections between ethics and human emotions.[1] In this sense, Wallace's writings trace the boundary between high postmodern fiction – most notably Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and John Barth – and its post-postmodern literary heirs, of which Wallace is in a group with Jonathan Franzen, Jennifer Egan, Jeffery Eugenides, Gary Shteyngart and many more. Identified by an ethos of what has come to be known as New Sincerity, Wallace's post-postmodernism simultaneously treats irony and 'plain old untrendy troubles and emotions' as valid forms of literary expression.[2] Though his texts expertly employ the linguistic and formal innovations of postmodern metafiction, Wallace's writerly voice manifests an affective register of emotional candour that engages the reader in a process of ethical meaning-making. In drawing out the deep connections between human emotions and other-directed behaviour, Wallace underscores the basis of his ethical project.

As I will go on to show, in Wallace's oeuvre, morality is construed as a function of affective consciousness over which rational choice or control is limited. This 'emotional

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[1] Pankaj Mishra, 'The Postmodern Moralist', *The New York Times*, 12th March 2006

[2] David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 2013) p.81

consciousness' is the substrate for various ethical decision-making processes that presume critical measures of agency and choice, of which human subjectivity is the end product. Neuropsychologically constituted, consciousness is the basis of our mysterious and labyrinthine interiority; socially and communicatively constituted, ethical subjectivity entails the myriad choices one makes with respect to the other that ultimately instantiate one's selfhood. In short, Wallace's ethics is concerned with the complex relationship between affective consciousness and subjectivity in light of its mediation by US culture and society at the turn of the millennium.

Importantly for the argument I will advance here, in *Postmodern Ethics*, the sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman argues that:

> Morality is incurably *aporetic*. Few choices […] are unambiguously good. The moral self moves, feels and acts in the context of ambivalence and is shot through with uncertainty. Hence the ambiguity-free moral situation [is] not a realistic target of ethical practice […] uncertainty is bound to accompany the condition of the moral self forever. Indeed, one can recognise the moral self by its uncertainty. [3]

In addition to its ambiguousness, Bauman also stresses the moral self as inherently irrational, a function of impulse or emotion as opposed to reason.[4] Thus 'ethics' becomes an attempt to manage moral ambivalence rationally, to establish the human subject's agency via responsibility to the other under conditions of an ever present uncertainty. Following Bauman's formulations, Wallace's ethics could be described as a postmodern ethics for its profound thematic engagement with alterity and contingency. Embracing liminality, his

[3] Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1983), p. 11. Italics in original.
[4] Ibid., p. 11.

writing charts the boundaries of the human, deconstructing binaries of reason and emotion, humour and pathos, self and other. Wallace's oeuvre constitutes an ethics of irony and entertainment, advertising and marketing, consumerism and addiction. As a metaethics or neuroethics, his writing invokes strains of naturalism to investigate the origins and neurochemical underpinnings of human moral behaviour.

From the lens of a postmodern ethic, Wallace's fiction can be read as a dialectical bridge between the universal condition of classical humanism and the decentred subject of post-structuralism. Thoroughly influenced by post-structuralist thought, Wallace's texts depict human morality as ambiguous and unstable; in step with his postmodern forebears, irony is one of his primary tools for dramatising humanity's fundamental ambiguities and contingencies. And yet, as I will show, the integrity of the human is a critically important ethical goal for Wallace. Taken together, the various ethics manifested in Wallace's writing suggest that, to use his own oft-cited words, 'what it is to be a fucking human being' is to be infinitely preoccupied with the ethical, to be obsessed by questions of how a person should be.[5] For Wallace, one of the highest manifestations of this interrogation occurs through narrative and literary art. But as we will see, it also encompasses a post-postmodern return to fundamental values of faith and belief, the idea that, as Wallace puts forth in the posthumously released Kenyon commencement address *This is Water*, 'everybody worships', and that basic human kindness and attention are the starting points for any meaningful ethical action.[6]

The idea that we humans are inherently ethical beings, that our ethicality is what constitutes our very being, and ethics are therefore, in a sense, prior to it – forms the core of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who critically departed from the phenomenology of his

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[5] Larry McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', in Stephen Burn, ed., *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), p. 26.
[6] David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little Brown, 2009), p. 100.

philosophical mentors, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, by placing ethics before ontology. As Judith Butler notes, Levinas formulates an 'ethical relation of love for the other' in terms of a basic reality: 'the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world [...]'[7] What Butler draws out here is the way Levinas puts forth that we are fundamentally ethical beings because the other is always already present; there is never a point in being or in time in which consciousness is not affectively constituted by and for the other. In this sense the self, or the subject, is characterised by its belatedness, a product of its other-directed consciousness. Stated another way, Levinasian ethics signifies the demand of one human on another by virtue of a shared humanity. In this chapter I outline the ways in which this understanding of an obligation to the other is fundamental to Wallace's ethical vision as well.

The following sections of this chapter will offer close textual analysis of selections from Wallace's fiction, critical essays, and interviews in an attempt to unpack some of the major ethical themes outlined above. The first and second sections will explore the points of intersection and divergence between Levinasian ethics and what I will be calling Wallacean ethics. The first section maps Levinas' 'Ethics as First Philosophy' (1984) onto Wallace's clearest exposition of his ethical thought, his commencement address *This is Water*. The second section analyses key examples of the ethical relationship as symbolised by the face in Wallace's short fiction, as the face is a central pillar of Levinas's ethical thought. This section interprets Wallace's narratives of interrupted interfaces and fractured subjectivities in terms of a spectrum of human ethical ability. The third section brings in theory from Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, showing how they follow Levinasian ethics up to a point, but then diverge in their consideration of literature, writing, and the work of art as critical spaces

[7] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2006), p. 132.

for ethical engagement and interaction. The final section of this chapter will explore the idea of the other as inhuman or Monster, using Slavoj Žižek's criticism of Levinas as the point from which to open a discussion of the neurobiological subject as ethical agent, the topic of the second chapter.

This is Water & Ethics as First Philosophy

The ethical metaphysics of Emmanuel Levinas offer a productive point of departure for engaging with Wallace's body of work and one that is currently underexplored in the secondary literature. Throughout his oeuvre Levinas prioritises ethics as the primary goal of philosophy, the ground of being that precedes all questions of phenomenology or ontology. For Levinas, the ethical commandment inherent in the face of the other is the condition of possibility for the subject's own being, consciousness, and freedom. Indeed, subjectivity itself is grounded on this non-negotiable responsibility, which Levinas understands as an asymmetrical indebtedness, a debt that can never be repaid or discharged. The radical alterity or ultimate unknowability of the other is transcendent for Levinas; it is the epiphany of the face through which infinity is revealed.

Infinity contra totality, the overarching conceptual framework of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, proclaims the face-to-face encounter as a manifestation of the asymmetry of infinity, a refusal of wholeness or totality, comprehension or containment, appropriation or objectification. Infinity contra totality could also characterise a recurring feature of Wallace's fiction: his first novel, *Broom of the System*, ends in mid-sentence, quite literally refusing the final 'word'; his third and final novel, *The Pale King*, was left unfinished at the time of his

untimely death.[8] Similarly, much of his short fiction and most notably his master work, *Infinite Jest*, conclude inconclusively. In a sense, *Infinite Jest* could be read as a formal enactment of infinity contra totality: as in *Broom* and many of his shorter works, it represents the refusal to tie together loose ends and broken strands, to totalise, to make whole. As Stephen Burn notes, *Infinite Jest* is characterised by 'an antiteleological spirit […] refusing or parodying the notion of resolution or goal-reaching on multiple levels'.[9] This observation can also be made of Wallace's literary journalism, featuring essays that end with questions instead of answers, confusion as opposed to clarity.

Expanding upon the themes in *Totality and Infin*ity, Levinas's second major work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, seeks to re-present the human condition and experience as fundamentally beyond essence or any kind of essentialising principle, reinforcing his claim that a state of pure, transcendent Being is decidedly *not* the key to our humanity. In Levinas's words, 'the ontological condition undoes itself, or is undone, in the human condition or uncondition'.[10] Similarly, for Wallace humanity is not something certain or stable or grounded in any essential ontology; rather, the state of being human is elusive and contingent, involving labyrinthine pursuit and continuous negotiation. For both Wallace and Levinas, freedom from the mazes of totalising ontology or reductive phenomenology involves ethics – specifically the ethics of alterity. It is through the other that the self comes into being, through limitations that freedom becomes possible.

In his popular commencement address, *This Is Water*, Wallace advances his central ethical and metacognitive thesis: learning to think about our own thought processes (especially with respect to others), is the true purpose of a liberal arts education. In learning

[8] For more on Wallace's sense of incompleteness, see Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).
[9] Stephen Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 61.
[10] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Responsibility for the Other', in *Ethics After Poststructuralism: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Lee Olsen, Brendan Johnston, and Ann Keniston (New York: McFarland, 2020), p. 21.

to think about others with compassion, to put the needs of others before the self, we are most fully aware and alive as human beings, thereby achieving freedom from solipsistic encagement. The major obstacle to this freedom is the 'natural, basic self-centeredness' that is 'the same for all of us, deep down […] our default setting, hardwired into our boards at birth'.[11] By acknowledging that certain 'hardwired' demands of the body make it almost impossible *not* to privilege self-interest, Wallace calls attention to the reality of our deeply embodied moral awareness. For this reason, learning how to think is not merely 'a matter of virtue'; it involves something considerably more complicated than simple binaries of good/evil and right/wrong: 'It's a matter of my choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hardwired default setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered, and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self'.[12] This is a key point in linking Wallace's ethical philosophy with that of Levinas: before we can 'be' in the fullest sense, we must learn to navigate the inherent ethical infrastructure that human life consists of and requires. This involves the cognitive 'work', in Wallace's terms, of 'attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort'; the inability 'to care about other people and to sacrifice for them' is actually a form of 'unconsciousness', a lapse in a critical mode of meta-cognitive function.[13]

For Levinas, too, this process takes work. As Zlatan Filipovic points out, Levinas challenges us by inviting us to act *in spite of* ourselves, reminding us in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* of how difficult it is to '[be] good voluntarily'.[14] In *The Ethics of Deconstruction* Simon Critchley explains that, for Levinas, 'moral consciousness is not an experience of values' but an encounter with the 'exteriority' of the other, or that which can

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[11] *This Is Water*, p. 38.
[12] Ibid., p. 44.
[13] Ibid., p. 120.
[14] Zlatan Filipovic, 'Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas: "After You, Sir!"', *Moderna Språk*, 105.1 (2011), 58–73, p. 60.

never be reduced to the easy, convenient sameness of the self and its ego. Exteriority is signified by the Levinasian face and 'defined as "the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the *idea of the other in me*"'.[15] Therefore, in Levinas' words, 'ethics is an optics'; the 'experience of morality' is a 'consummation' of a kind of vision that involves 'the breach of the totality, the possibility of a *signification without a context*'.[16] In other words, the encounter with exteriority involves the rupture of an imaginary self-possession or containment, and this is a moral experience because it compels the self to see beyond itself, to perceive signification without context, or meaning without (self-interested) motive. In addition to evincing a general preoccupation with questions of lenses and optics throughout his fiction (James Incandenza has a PhD in 'optics' in *Infinite Jest*, for example), in *This is Water* Wallace formulates his philosophy in terms of optical-ethical aptitude, explaining that 'you can choose to look differently' at a grotesque or seemingly depraved neighbour, and choose to compassionately consider the myriad potentialities of their interiority.[17] That the other remains unknown, infinitely exterior to the interests of the self, is precisely the point of ethics.

Both Wallace and Levinas argue for the cultivation of a personal ethics that prioritises the suffering of others. Wallace reminds us that this takes 'will and mental effort', that he must 'choose to force' himself 'to consider that some […] people actually have much harder, more tedious or painful lives than [he] does'.[18] In his writings Levinas describes how one is taken 'hostage' by the destitution of the other, 'persecuted' by the other's nakedness and vulnerability. The obverse of this, the painful forcing of the self beyond itself, of the subjection of the hostage who answers the other's call, is real freedom/consciousness, that

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[15] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 5. Italics in original.
[16] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 23. Italics in original.
[17] *This is Water*, p. 89.
[18] Ibid., p. 86.

‘infinite thing’ as Wallace puts it, the loss of which would preclude our subjectivity as such. Thus, both Wallace and Levinas equate the ethical with a self-transcendent shift in perspective, a moment of epiphany that involves responding to the other’s claim upon us; being for the other – as opposed to being for being’s sake – is what brings about our highest humanity.

Wallace contends that the education his audience has received at Kenyon College can help bring about this shift in perspective, ‘the capital-T Truth […] is about the real value of a real education, which has nothing to do with grades or degrees and everything to do with simple awareness […] of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us’.[19] Levinas argues that ethical truth is hidden in plain sight all around us; we can glimpse it in the faces of others. As Michael Morgan clarifies in his comprehensive study of Levinas’s work:

> Neither the face of the other person nor our responsibility to and for the other is unknown or absent in the ordinary everyday world. They are present but in a sense hidden or forgotten or, perhaps better, misunderstood and distorted. To learn about them, then, is not a matter of being introduced to new things or being given a new faculty or capacity; it is to see the old from a new perspective, in a new light. It … [requires] a change of perspective or direction of vision in terms of which something once hidden comes into view.[20]

Wallace and Levinas both outline an ethos of attention and care for others, one that involves the continuous challenging of our perspectives and assumptions. Or, put differently, ethics is

[19] Ibid., pp. 129-131.
[20] Michael Morgan, *Levinas’s Ethical Politics* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2016), p. 64.

about learning to make the often remarkably difficult choice to see things from another's point of view. As the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman puts it: 'We need lifelong education to give us choice. But we need it even more to salvage the conditions that make choice available and within our power'.[21] And in the words of *Infinite Jest*'s Remy Marathe: 'How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose?'[22] In Wallace's view, an important part of this lifelong education occurs through literature and the arts, thus turning to the ethical questions of his fiction and cultural criticism presents a way forward on this path.

The Face as Ethical Signifier

As I discussed in the previous section, *This is Water* demonstrates how ethical behaviour involves choosing to do the work of remaining 'conscious' as opposed to simply existing at one's 'unconscious default setting'. This is especially relevant if one has benefited from social privileges such as higher education, like the Kenyon graduates to whom the speech was originally addressed. However, Wallace's fiction betrays deeper anxieties that disrupt any simple formulations of moral consciousness and ethical agency; his narratives suggest that the extent to which characters can control their own thought processes and decision-making abilities is variable, and in some cases extremely limited. Wallace problematises the relationship between moral consciousness and ethical action through characters who deal with some form of trauma or emotional disorder upon which the ethical quandaries of their stories play out. The psychological suffering of many of these characters unhinges them, pushing them beyond the limits of rational agency. An interesting dialectic emerges from the narrative portrayal of these morally liminal figures. Wallace's primary

[21] Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 193.
[22] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little Brown, 1996), p. 320.

narrators often judge these characters in a harsh and moralistic manner, condemning them for failing to overcome their grotesque narcissism. Yet the moralism of these primary narrative voices is continually belied by a secondary, more passive narrative voice that tends to portray these 'subjects' as prisoners of the 'nightmare' of their own consciousness.

To this end, Wallace's characters exist along a spectrum of moral consciousness and resultant ethical capability. While some attain a form of Levinasian transcendence through discipline and self-sacrifice, the vast majority struggle to overcome moral ambivalence in their confused encounters with others. At the other end of the spectrum are the lost souls who exist in a state of ethical oblivion, those who lack or have lost their moral-cognitive abilities almost entirely. The most extreme cases foreground a character's psychotic break and terrifying scenes of dispossession, violence, and cruelty. Wallace represents these scenes as the result of trauma, addiction, uncontrollable emotional states (anxiety, despair, obsession/compulsion, rage), or sociopathic alienation (often driven by ethically corrupt institutions). As in the labyrinth of antiquity, Wallace's characters must continually confront the 'hard reality' and the 'inevitable eye' of the other while navigating the mazes of human experience. As they probe the limits of humanity, their own and that of others, they encounter the human as beast, machine, thing, or even demon. Ever enjoining the reader to relate, Wallace suggests that the monster in the maze is just another human face reflected through a glass darkly, another potential version of ourselves.

The face as a signifying 'map' is a recurring feature of Wallace's fiction, a means to interpret and chart the emotional and moral interiorities of his characters. Dispossessed characters lapse into states of being that are unmapped and liminal, terrifying in their unknowability, beyond the power of human rationality and ethical agency. His texts pay careful attention to their faces and facial expressions, variously described as checked out, blank, white screens, expressionless, hollow, or empty; many have loose faces, holes instead

of eyes, or they are described as away, not there, lost or absent to themselves. In what I am terming the 'oblivion zone' of the ethical spectrum, characters suffer from extreme moral perversion, apathy, or loss of control. Exemplifying this state of ethical oblivion is a character like Randy Lenz from *Infinite Jest*, a traumatised and hardened drug addict whose compulsive and highly specific patterns of brutality seem almost mechanically programmed. Randy's moral-cognitive 'lens' is severely distorted, leading to extreme moral blindness and a penchant for cruelty that most would simply call evil.

To outline this character type, it may be instructive to focus on the text whose name it refers to, Wallace's 2003 collection, *Oblivion*. In the story 'The Soul is Not A Smithy', Wallace plays on themes of dispossession to portray the ways in which ethically corrupt institutions – whether bureaucratic, military, or corporate – bring about various optical-ethical distortions resulting in moral apathy and violence. The stakes of this story are waged in an introductory description of the faces of two stray dogs, one of which seeks to dominate the other as the narrator looks on from his fourth-grade classroom. The facial expression of the dominant dog 'was blank and at the same time fervid – the same type of expression as on a human being's face when he is doing something that he feels compulsively driven to do and yet does not understand just why he wants to do it'.[23] When the narrator's attention shifts from the fighting dogs back to his civics classroom, it settles on the face of his substitute teacher, Mr. Johnson, which is 'off of normal center' and 'wincing or slightly recoiling' in pain.[24] There is something 'evidently wrong with Mr. Johnson's face and its expression as the lesson moved on to Amendment XIII', significantly, the Amendment detailing the abolition of slavery in the US.[25] Johnson's distorted face indicates a psychotic break as he scrawls KILL THEM ALL in handwriting 'not even human looking', and without even 'seeming to

[23] David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), p. 74.
[24] Ibid., p. 76.
[25] Ibid., p. 89.

realize what he was doing […] like somebody struggling might and main against some terrible type of evil or alien force that had ahold of him at the chalkboard and was compelling his hand to write things against his will'.[26]

In recalling the classroom 'hostage crisis' the adult narrator focuses on his unforgettable memory of Mr. Johnson's face:

> [He] look[ed] simultaneously electrocuted and demonically possessed (there is no other way to describe the way his upturned face was transformed, with its look of both suffering and ghastly exultation, or rather it may have been that the two different expressions alternated so rapidly on his uptilted face that in the mind's perception they became conjoined.[27]

His memories of Mr. Johnson's deranged facial expressions are intercut with a recollection of an early scene in the film *The Exorcist*: 'a brief flash of Father Karras' face, terribly transformed. The face's white, reptilian eyes and extrudent cheekbones and root-white pallor are plainly demonic – it is the face of evil'.[28] Although unsure of what these transfigured faces represent, the narrator obliquely relates them to his experience in the classroom. He notes that 'many schoolchildren labeled as hyperactive or deficient in attention are observed to be not so much unable to pay attention as to have difficulty exercising control or choice over what it is they pay attention to. And yet the same thing happens in adult life'.[29]

The main themes thus far introduced involve the primal and instinctive will to dominate as evidenced by the faces of the fighting dogs, the faces of state power represented by the portraits of the thirty-four US presidents lining the walls of the fourth-grade civics

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[26] Ibid., p. 91.
[27] Ibid., p. 101.
[28] Ibid., p. 96.
[29] Ibid., p. 97.

classroom, and the paternalistic faces of dis/possession (psychotic/demonic) represented by Mr. Johnson and Father Karras, which allude to the limits of control over one's own thoughts and mind. All of these faces represent a complete perversion of the Levinasian face, which symbolises the primary ethical injunction: Do Not Kill, as Levinas writes:

> The first word of the face is the 'Thou shalt not kill.' It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a 'first person,' I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call.[30]

In stark opposition, Wallace's story features a deranged face commanding the killing of others, literally 'effacing' the ethics of the 13th Amendment written on the chalkboard. Critically, the school 'hostage crisis' occurs in the early 1960s, just as the Vietnam War is kicking off (the narrator informs us that several of his classmates will go on to fight overseas once they have left school), and the psychotic teacher shares a name with President Johnson, one of the faces hanging in portrait on the wall, who also ordered mass killings as Commander in Chief. At a future point in the narrative, a former student who served in Vietnam doubts whether the children were ever really in danger that day, suggesting that Mr. Johnson may simply have been ordering the students to go to war and do the killing themselves. In this way, the elementary school is not unlike a factory producing human cogs for the nation's war machine. Both 'Mr. Johnsons' are possessed by the evil spirit of the military-industrial complex.

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[30] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 89.

A final series of faces signifying the ethical crises of a disordered society recur in the narrator's memories of his childhood nightmares. The terrifying dreams involve the 'empty-eyed long-suffering' faces of workers at his father's corporate office, faces 'seamed with adult tension and wear and appearing to hang slightly loose, the way someone's face can go flaccid and loose when he seems to be staring at something without really seeing it'. The climax of the dream occurs when the narrator sees his own face among the mass of grey-faced men; he stares back at himself 'without any sign of recognition on my face, nor of happiness or fight or despair or appeal – the eyes are flat and opaque […] as our eyes meet, it is impossible to know what the adult me is seeing or how I am reacting or if there is anything in there at all'.[31] Through these dream sequences Wallace portrays the modern-day corporate office as an exploitative, even fascist institution that obliterates the sacred alterity of human beings; the loose, absent faces signify dehumanisation by a ruthless machine. The title of the story is therefore intended as a reversal of the famous final line of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*: 'I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race'.[32] Wallace's characters' souls are no longer capable of creating anything, let alone art; the uncreated conscience has become a nightmare.

The vacant faces of the office workers at the end of the story recall the faces of the dogs at the beginning. The animals lack control over their instinctual aggressive behaviours, while the exploited workers have lost a critically human measure of freedom through indoctrination into a brutal military-industrial system. Here, Wallace casts the potential for choice as the condition of possibility for ethical subjectivity. Humans manifest the same animal aggressions as dogs; none of us is immune or exempt from this biological reality. But

[31] *Oblivion*, p. 108.
[32] James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Dover Publications, 1994), p. 185.

unlike dogs, humans have language, an inherently ethical medium that makes self-reflection possible. In Levinas' words, the 'bond between expression and responsibility, this ethical condition or essence of language' allows us to create connections and communities that can mitigate innate impulses of aggression and domination.[33] Collectively we can choose to preserve and protect our precarious humanity, but we must remain awake to the call of the face to meet this challenge.

As Judith Butler discusses in *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*: 'The Levinasian face is not precisely or exclusively a human face, although it communicates what is human, what is precarious, what is injurable'.[34] She goes on to explain that

> Levinas gives us a way of understanding how aggression is *not* eradicated in an ethics of non-violence; aggression forms the incessant matter for ethical struggles. Levinas considers the fear and anxiety that aggression seeks to quell, but argues that ethics is precisely a struggle to keep fear and anxiety from turning into murderous action.[35]

In addition to the characters of 'The Soul is not a Smithy' whose faces are completely closed and unreadable, in other stories Wallace portrays liminal figures who struggle to resist such ethical oblivion, who endure 'the labor pains' of their 'nascent emotional conscience[s]' despite their moral confusion and despair.[36] In 'Mister Squishy', also from *Oblivion*, the failure of this struggle is laid bare. Here, fear and anxiety descend into murderous ideation. The narrative is framed by the unethical machinations of a Midwestern marketing firm. At the start of his career as a market researcher, protagonist Terry Schmidt believed he could 'make a difference' by challenging and ultimately transforming the firm's more unscrupulous

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[33] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 200.
[34] Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. XVIII.
[35] Ibid., p. XVIII. Italics in original.
[36] David Foster Wallace, 'Here and There', *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 2010), p. 165.

and manipulative practices. He volunteers to mentor underprivileged kids in his spare time and bristles at the rampant sexual harassment of female co-workers at the firm. At least initially, Terry Schmidt is truly concerned with the welfare of others; the narrative reveals his moral consciousness at work, detailing the mental processes and internal dialogues of a self-reflective and soul-searching conscience.

However, a decade of employment at the unethical corporation erodes his idealism and ultimately his empathy. Disillusioned and full of self-hatred, he stares at his face in his bathroom mirror, comparing it to the icon for his firm's most aggressively marketed 'corporate snack cake':

> [He] would call himself, directly to his mirrored face, *Mister Squishy*, the name would come unbidden into his mind, and despite his attempts to ignore or resist it the large subsidiary's name and logo had become the dark part of him's latest taunt, so that when he thought of himself now it was as something he called *Mister Squishy*, and his own face and the plump and wholly innocuous icon's face tended to bleed in his mind into one face, crude and line-drawn and clever in a small way, a design that someone might find some small selfish use for but could never love or hate or ever care to truly even know.[37]

Here we see the face of the increasingly alienated man morphing into something mass-produced and empty of meaning: an advertisement's icon. The narration fragments immediately following Schmidt's lament at the image of his dehumanised face in the mirror, sharply cutting to a faceless figure mysteriously scaling the one-way reflective glass windows

[37] *Oblivion*, p. 34.

of the corporate office tower in which he works. The strange figure's face is hidden by a mask:

> [E]xcept for two holes for eyes […] the whole thing appeared too wrinkled and detumesced-looking to be able to make out who or what the shapeless arrangement of micro textured lines on the Mylar was supposed to represent, but even at this distance the mask looked frightening, baggy and hydrocephalic and cartoonishly inhuman.[38]

This inhuman masked creature is an external projection of Schmidt's emerging psychopathy. In this sense 'Mr. Squishy', like 'The Soul is Not a Smithy', is a story about human precariousness. As Bauman and Butler aver, humans are by nature morally ambiguous and constituted by a wide range of traits, from fear, aggression, and greed to empathy and altruism. Terry Schmidt is shown to be deeply conflicted: we see his narcissistic, manipulative, and antisocial traits alongside his compassionate, generous, and hopeful tendencies. By exploiting the morally ambiguous aspects of his nature, the unethical marketing system for which he labours psychologically crushes him to the point of inhumanity. The destruction of the younger Schmidt's moral consciousness and hopeful sincerity points to the mechanisms by which empathy can be dangerously diminished in the collective failure to bring about an ethical culture. Characters like Mr. Johnson and Terry Schmidt are pawns in a social order that seeks to subjugate and exploit them for power and profit. Their growing awareness of this results in a dispossession as they lose control of their thoughts and feelings and ultimately their agency.

One can trace numerous examples of a struggling emotional conscience in Wallace's fiction. For example, in 'John Billy', a story from Wallace's first collection, *Girl With*

[38] Ibid., p. 37.

Curious Hair, the tragic hero of the tale, Chuck Nunn Junior, repeatedly 'los[es] his temper to a nameless despair', offering another example of dispossession through severe emotional states that link back to irreparable trauma.[39] During his uncontrollable 'amoral' rages, Nunn's face goes blank or becomes a 'blank white slate'; his wife must lock herself in a demolition-proof bunker until his rages subside. The narrator refers to Chuck Nunn's 'moral comatosity': 'The major impact and damage from the accident had turned out to be to Nunn's head, mind, and sensibility. How right there in the post-accidental car he suddenly got conscious but evil'.[40] Though Nunn deeply regrets his rages after the fact, once they are triggered, he has no control over them:

> Chuck Junior was just in a moral coma from the accident, is all it was […]. Chuck Nunn Jr. suffered six evil and morally comatose post-damage days, his sense of right and wrong and love and hate smithered to chaotic, but how the subsequent Nunn thankfully remembered none of those six dark and devilish days of screaming and vandalizing.[41]

Nunn's vision has been altered, both literally and figuratively, by the head trauma he suffered at the hands of his small-town enemies. Wallace dramatises this in the manner of a tall tale, where Nunn's eyes literally descend from their sockets like cantaloupes on strings immediately before he flies into a rage. Nunn loses all vestiges of moral agency during these rages; however, his conscience always returns after the fact, inducing extreme guilt and fear. Chuck Nunn 'live[s] in fear of, plus alienation from, his own personal temper'. He has to 'scrutinize and rein in his own emotional self each minute, for fear that upset or anger could

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[39] *Girl with Curious Hair*, p. 121.
[40] Ibid., p. 130.
[41] Ibid., pp. 130-131.

loop him back into a blank white comality of evil and meanness'.[42] The narrator notes that the whole town is frightened of Nunn's 'temper and moral sense', especially the man himself: 'Chuck Junior got scared of hisself. Ever get scared of your own self? Painful'.[43]

Similar issues are raised in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men,* where one of the interviewees details how he begs and pleads to be tied up during his uncontrollable rages: 'Well, my own father was, you might say, a man who was by natural proclivity not a good man but who nevertheless tried diligently to be a good man. Temper and so forth'.[44] Another nameless character of dubious moral fibre, but one who nevertheless possesses a kind of pseudo-conscience, alludes to his moral confusion in a later interview: 'I admit there's a kind of dread at the idea of having a conscience in this area […] it seems as if it's going to take away all room to maneuver, somehow'.[45] He continues:

> Unless I'm some kind of psychopath who can rationalize anything and can't even see the most obvious kinds of evil he's perpetrating, or who doesn't even care but wants to delude himself into believing he cares so that he can continue to see himself as a basically decent guy. The whole thing is incredibly confusing.[46]

This last sentence is important because it affirms that uncertainty is critical for ethics; confusion is a sign of moral consciousness, however primitive. It speaks to something irreducible and anti-essentialising at the heart of ethics – to be morally confused is to inhabit a space of ethical possibility. As Richard Cohen explains in his introduction to *Ethics and Infinity*, ethics has its origins in that which confuses and disturbs:

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[42] Ibid., p. 132.
[43] Ibid., pp. 131-132.
[44] David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2009), p. 15.
[45] Ibid., p. 81.
[46] Ibid., p. 84.

> Ethics does not have an essence, its 'essence,' so to speak, is precisely not to have an essence, to unsettle essences. Its 'identity' is precisely not to have an identity, to undo identities. Its 'being' is not to be but to be better than being. Ethics is precisely ethics by disturbing the complacency of being (or of non-being, being's correlate).[47]

Or as Bauman writes in *Postmodern Ethics*: 'The moral person cannot beat ambivalence; s/he may only learn to live with it. The art of morality […] may be only the art of living with ambivalence – and taking upon oneself the responsibility for that life and its consequences'.[48] In each of the stories discussed in this section, Wallace's narratives task his characters (and by extension, his readers) with the art of morality, an aesthetics of choice and responsibility, via disturbing scenes of emotional struggle and confusion.

Progress along Wallace's ethical spectrum is evidenced by characters who manage to attain a state of moral epiphany, if only fleetingly. As with the oblivion type, this event can be traced throughout Wallace's fiction. These characters answer the call or accept the challenge of the Levinasian face; through their difficult or painful encounters with exteriority their subjectivity is instantiated and transformed. 'Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR' is a story from *Girl With Curious Hair* that echoes Levinas' descriptions of the asymmetrical and irrecusable debt we bear to the other. The narrative features an anonymous office worker 'who [is] most at ease with those he countenanced at a distance of several feet', a man who must 'compos[e] a carefully casual face […] to meet the inevitable eye' of the other.[49] The setting of the piece is a metaphor for the suffocating alienation of this man's life; the action takes place in the stifling darkness of an underground parking garage. However,

[47] Richard A. Cohen, 'Translator's Introduction: Better Than Being', in *Ethics and Infinity*, by Emmanuel Levinas and Philippe Nemo (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), pp. 1–15, p. 10.
[48] Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 182.
[49] *Girl with Curious Hair*, p. 48.

the careful composure of this unnamed character is dramatically ruptured one night during a literally face-to-face encounter with another unnamed man in the midst of a heart attack. Although 'certified' to perform CPR it remains difficult for this character to disrupt his 'composure' and countenance the other's face, which 'bears down' grotesquely upon him with its 'large facial pores […] mouth fishily agape, forehead toad-white and sickly sour, chin lost in a pool of [its] own throat's meat'.[50] Verbs like 'amputate' and 'decapitate' convey fracture and breakage, highlighting the disruption of self-composure demanded by this encounter with exteriority in the form of the mortally suffering neighbour. In typical Wallace fashion, the final sentence serves to disrupt the narrative, refusing any kind of satisfactory completion or fulfilment; the reader never learns if the encounter was successful and the unnamed account representative finally saves the other man's life. But there is an indication of Levinasian epiphany in the final lines. The protagonist accepts the face's claim upon him; taken hostage by the other's pain and need, he substitutes himself for his colleague, whose call for help literally becomes his own: 'empty and bright, dispossessed, autonomous and autonomic. Bent to what two lives required, below everything, he called for help again and again'.[51] The final lines exemplify a Levinasian epiphany of infinity: the encounter with the face reveals our ethical duty to the other to be the very condition of possibility of our own being, an 'autonomic' requirement that exists before and beneath the self-controlled or self-possessed 'subject'.

In 'Adult World', a two-part story found in *Brief Interviews*, the narrator details the life-changing epiphany that allows the protagonist, Jeni Roberts, to 'become, for good or ill, a citizen of reality'.[52] The epiphany this character experiences is defined here in 'secular psychodevelopmental terms' as 'a sudden, life-changing realization, often one that catalyzes

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[50] Ibid., p. 50.
[51] Ibid., p. 52.
[52] *Brief Interviews*, p. 150.

a person's emotional maturation'.[53] For Jeni, it illustrates the epiphany of the face and the asymmetrical nature of her relationship with her husband. In a dream, Jeni encounters 'her husband's familiar and much-loved face distorted and pulsed with red light and wearing a facial expression indescribable as anything other than: Obscene'. The look on his face is highly 'disturbing' and 'both was and was not the face of the husband she loved'.[54] The confusing dream about her husband prompts Jeni to meet with her former lover 'whose own facial asymmetry […] had helped fuel her uncontrollable suspicion that he [also] had a secret, impenetrable part to his character'.[55] Just before the epiphany occurs the narrative breaks down into a numbered list of events and facts: Jeni chances to see her husband's car in the lot of a sex emporium and has the sudden realisation that he is a sex addict. '1b… Epiphany unfolds more or less independently as facially asymmetric F.L. [former lover] responds to J.'s question'.[56] '2b… further networks of misconnection, emotional asymmetry'. '4a(I)… realizes/gradually accepts that hsbnd loves his secret loneliness & "interior deficits" more than he loves {/is able to love} her; accepts her "unalterable powerlessness" over hsbnd's secret cmplsions….realizes that true wellsprings of love, security, gratification must originate within self'.[57]

At first, it would seem a Levinasian reading of this deliberately ambiguous narrative would suggest that the exteriority of the other, that 'secret, impenetrable part', can easily present as the face of the 'obscene'. In other words, the epiphany of the face is often difficult or even painful to countenance, and yet through answering its call we instantiate our humanity in the deepest possible sense. Following from this is an awareness of the futility of appropriating or exploiting others to furnish one's own sense of self; in Jeni's case, she was

[53] Ibid., p. 150.
[54] Ibid., p. 153.
[55] Ibid., p. 153.
[56] Ibid., p. 156.
[57] Ibid., pp. 158-159.

appropriating the men in her life for confirmation of her own self-worth. As Levinas writes: 'the face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp'.[58] Her epiphany occurs when she realises that this kind of appropriation will never be possible, the meaning or answers she seeks in the faces of others will continue to elude her, that she must begin '4a(II(1)) taking "authentic responsibility for self"'.[59] Part of this responsibility for self will involve making difficult choices about her marital obligations to her husband, including dealing with the 'damaged' aspects of his character (his addiction) and the adult reality of the self-sacrifice required in close personal relationships.

For Wallace, humans functioning at the most ethically advanced end of the spectrum are profoundly empathetic, like Mario Incandenza from *Infinite Jest*, as well as characters like *Jest*'s Don Gately, the latter of which emerges from a state of moral blindness through a combination of sheer will and good luck, or perhaps a kind of grace. The difficult transformations characters like Gately undergo involve overcoming the self in all kinds of painful ways: working through emotional traumas, reclaiming agency after years of addiction, and eventually finding meaning by taking responsibility for themselves and the welfare of others. Gately's dedication to the sick and often abusive addicts at Ennet House, who may never be able to reciprocate (or even appreciate) his care, is an example of this. Levinas explains this kind of profound self-sacrifice in terms of 'the hostage' and 'substitution'. We are responsible for the other through and through, not only for the other in pain and need, but for the other's moral blindness. As Richard Cohen explains in his introduction to Levinas' *Otherwise than Being*, 'the moral sensibility of the subject [is]

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[58] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 197.
[59] *Brief Interviews*, p. 160.

awakened by the other', involving a 'unique temporal and moral de-phasing, a fissured self, traumatized, held hostage by the other'.[60] He continues:

> The moral subject arises in subjection, "despite itself," introjected deeper than its own synthetic activities, suffering an "immemorial past" never contracted in the present, the trace of a diachrony, to the point of obsession, substitution for the other, turning the self inside out, hostage to and for the other, for the other's needs, for the other's life, to be sure, but also for the other's responsibility, even for the other's evil, in an an-archic moral inspiration expiating even for the other's persecution. I am my brother's keeper, all the way.[61]

The process whereby the subject realises the truth of its obligation to the other must be, as Wallace explains in *This is Water*, educated, cultivated, and protected – it is precarious, as Levinas and Butler have argued. One way of achieving this is through engaging with literature and the arts, which can assist individuals and communities in acquiring new lenses for perceiving and appreciating difference and enhancing empathy. In this sense, Wallace's entire oeuvre represents a defense of education in humanities: what we pay attention to matters, because it is difficult to remain consciously and actively engaged in the welfare of others, and easy to capitulate to a social order that rewards narcissism and greed (and lose ourselves in the process). Furthermore, no one is above dangerous lapses into ethical oblivion.

In his essay 'Representations of Trauma in David Foster Wallace's *Oblivion*', Thomas Tracey points out that:

[60] Richard Cohen, 'Foreword to Otherwise Than Being', in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, by Emmanuel Levinas (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), pp. xi–xvi, p. xii.
[61] Ibid., p. xii.

> Wallace's aesthetic has from the outset located art's gestation in our acquaintance with painful experience, his conviction being that art's *purpose* is closely tied to its alleviation […]. For Wallace, then, art's raison d'être is intimately bound up with what we might generally term traumatic experience. Stemming from this, his oeuvre seeks to explore whether or how a person can establish any kind of moral ground or ethical philosophy in order to approach the leading of a humane, responsible, and civil life in the context of our relativistic age; that is, how one can be fully, humanly alive despite these uncertain, often dark times.[62]

Tracey argues that a major goal of Wallace's literary project is the ethical transformation of self via art that fosters empathetic connection with the suffering of others. Tracey recalls Wallace's view that: 'A self is [not] something you just have […] the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle'.[63] To this end, Wallace's often horrifying characterisations show the ethical importance of seeing one's self as another, dramatising the contingency, chance, and circumstance that favour or condemn anyone to a certain 'face'. Wallace suggests that our faces are not wholly our own; we never fully possess our own selves, our own bodies, our own minds; we have limited choice over the masks we wear at any moment in time. It is for this reason that we are called upon to bear responsibility for the other, who is just another version of ourselves.

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler suggests the most critical task of the humanities today is to:

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[62] Thomas Tracey, 'Representations of Trauma in David Foster Wallace's *Oblivion*', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media, 2010), pp. 172-178, pp. 172-173. Italics in original.

[63] David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster* (London: Abacus, 2009), p. 64.

> [R]eturn us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense. We would have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense.[64]

Wallace's fictional portrayals of human faces at the frightening limits of what can be known and what makes sense deal precisely with this charge. The next section will engage more directly with Wallace's ideas of literary art as an ethical practice that can awaken the affective consciousness of both writer and reader.

Writing as Ethics: Overcoming Alienation, Becoming Human

Wallace's fiction reveals limitations within the system of Levinasian ethics. As the previous sections have shown, Wallace's ethical manifesto correlates with Levinas's 'first philosophy' up to a point; subjectivity and freedom are inherently ethical and derive from responsibility to the other. In Wallace's narratives, however, the Levinasian ideal is problematised because the face-to-face injunction so often fails. Characters remain encaged in solipsism, subject to 'imprisonment so complete that the prisoner doesn't even know he's locked up'.[65] Why does Wallace continually represent characters so hopelessly unable to 'see', alienated to the point of ethical blindness and oblivion? What is the value of foregrounding such bleak, fractured, and ultimately failed attempts at interface? Is this mere nihilism, or is there something else going on? Perhaps one answer is that Wallace invites his

[64] Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 150.
[65] *This is Water*, p. 44.

readers to engage in some meta-cognitive, meta-ethical work, to 'see' ourselves seeing the critical ethical contexts that evade his characters via our active engagement with the text. In this way Wallace's fictional works subvert the grim relationships between his characters by constructing a more promising ethical interface: the dialogic encounter between writer and reader via the text. In order to explicate this relationship, it is first worth reassessing Wallace's much discussed 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, which serves as his clearest statements about how he approaches fiction writing.

This mutually beneficial relationship between writer and reader diverges in some significant ways from the Levinasian idea of ethical asymmetry; Wallace's outlines to McCaffery that there is a mutuality and symbiosis, an interdependence of sorts, a process-based 'relationship between the writer's consciousness and [the reader's] own', which 'in order for it to be anything like a real full human relationship' will require the reader to put in her share of 'the linguistic work'.[66] The stress here is on the relationship between reader and writer as a community of equals coming into being via the work of literature, each owing the other an equivalent debt of attention and engagement.

However, at other times, Wallace sets the reader up as the writer's radical other, echoing Levinasian asymmetry: 'once I'm done with the thing, I'm basically dead, and probably the text's dead; it becomes simply language, and language lives not just in but *through* the reader. The reader becomes God, for all textual purposes'.[67] This invocation of the other as a kind of sacred transcendent force, the radical alterity of the ineffable or the divine, is distinctly Levinasian. Wallace goes on to further accentuate this point:

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[66] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p. 34.
[67] Ibid., p. 40. Italics in original.

> I've gotten convinced that there's something kind of timelessly vital and sacred about good writing….it seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's heart's purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It's got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved….But it seems like one of the things really great fiction-writers do…is *give* the reader something….All the attention and engagement and work you need to get from the reader can't be for your benefit; it's got to be for hers….Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look banal or melodramatic or naïve or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something.[68]

In this passage Wallace portrays the writer's debt to the reader as one of difficult disclosure to exteriority and risk, a giving away of part of the self that amounts to a kind of sacrifice, indeed a kind of death, for the writer – 'To be willing to sort of die in order to move the reader, somehow'.[69] Yet Wallace contends that ultimately both parties stand to gain from this interaction, and that 'the thing's good because there's extractable value here for both me and the reader'.[70] Throughout this interview, Wallace suggests writing is a process whereby the writer works with the reader to create meaning – an understanding of fiction that clearly relates to Levinas' valorisation of the other as a means to define the self.

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[68] Ibid., pp. 50-51. Italics in original.
[69] Ibid., p. 50.
[70] Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, 'Looking for a Garde of Which to Be Avant: An Interview with David Foster Wallace', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen Burn, (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 11-20, p. 18.

The Levinasian connection is further strengthened when Wallace suggests that there is a profoundly emotional or affective urgency to this exchange, inextricable from the ethical exigency or imperative of learning how to be human:

> What fiction and poetry are doing is what they've been trying to do for two thousand years: affect somebody, make somebody feel a certain way, allow them to enter into relationships with ideas and with characters that are not permitted within the cinctures of the ordinary verbal intercourse we're having here, you know: you don't see me, I don't see you.[71]

Thus a common leitmotif in Wallace's writing – learning how to be a human being, how to 'become' human – figures as a pursuit of the highest ethical order. As with Levinas, the human is a state of being that is attained through affective (self)-disclosure or exposure for the benefit of somebody else. Being human cannot be assumed or taken for granted; the space required for this self-disclosure entails language, education, cultivation, work, and struggle. Crucially, this is an affective or emotional education as much as it is an intellectual one. It is through the emotional work performed in the service of art, according to Wallace, that we can learn to feel and perceive in ways that are not readily available in ordinary day to day discourse. Wallace highlights that the contexts for these lessons are always changing: 'But every two or three generations the world gets vastly different, and the context in which you have to learn how to be a human being, or to have good relationships, or decide whether or not there is a God, or decide whether there's such a thing as love, and whether it's redemptive, become vastly different'.[72] Thus one's humanity is always precarious and in

[71] Ibid., p. 18.
[72] Ibid., p. 18.

process, never permanently attained, although art grants critical access, a way in and through the labyrinths of life.

Levinas himself has limited trust in art and literature as spaces for ethical action; he privileges the face-to-face of speech over writing, the ethical 'saying' over the ontological 'said'.[73] In 'Reality and Its Shadow', Levinas portrays art as 'essentially disengaged, constitut[ing], in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion'.[74] He argues that reading a novel, for example, 'is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy, and action'; instead of ethical interrogation, the artwork lulls us into pleasurable aesthetic stupor, provoking us to 'admire in silence and in peace'.[75] According to Levinas: 'This is not the disinterestedness of contemplation but of irresponsibility. The poet exiles himself from the city […]. There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague'.[76] This formulation recalls Wallace's distinction between art and entertainment; for Wallace, entertainment can operate like a drug that lulls and anesthetises, shutting down the cognitive activity moral consciousness requires by sending consumers into states of passive receptivity.

Yet Wallace adheres to his argument, in contrast with Levinas' rather conservative views, that good/true/high art has ethical value because it forces us to work towards self-transcendence in order to appreciate it. To return to his interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace outlines the importance of (difficult) literary art in an age of (easy) televisual hyper mediation. According to Wallace, good fiction allows readers to 'become less alone inside' through doing the often uncomfortable/difficult work of identifying with another person's consciousness through a literary text.[77] In his own words:

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[73] Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p. 19.
[74] Emanuel Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Sean Hand (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), pp. 129-143, p. 141.
[75] Ibid., p. 141.
[76] Ibid., p. 142.
[77] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p. 22.

> The definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. 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.[78]

Good art, for Wallace, becomes a space of possibility – the possibility of encountering the exteriority of the other, the possibility of encountering oneself as another, and ultimately the possibility of encountering one's own humanity.

Though Levinas remains suspicious of art's ethical possibilities, he presents a way out of this predicament: ultimately it is 'criticism' that will redeem art:

> But all this is true for art separated from the criticism that integrates the inhuman work of the artist into the human world. Criticism already detaches it from its irresponsibility by envisaging its technique. It treats the artist as a man at work. Already in inquiring after the influences he undergoes it links this disengaged and proud man to real history.[79]

There is an important distinction here between the Levinasian work of art as 'inhuman' and the work of art as the essence of what it means to be a human being, as Wallace repeatedly avows. This aside, Levinas raises an important point: 'Criticism, in interpreting, will choose and limit'.[80] In applying an interpretative lens, art manifests meaning, and so the application

[78] Ibid., p. 26.
[79] Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 142.
[80] Ibid., p. 142.

of an ethical hermeneutic (or optic) can reveal an ethical message or truth. Through envisaging the 'technique' of the work of art, 'irresponsibility' may be avoided.[81] This sounds rather like one of the aims of postmodern metafiction, with which Wallace was thoroughly engaged. Postmodern novelists exposed the technique of their writing, laid bare the artwork as a constructed artefact, called attention to their presence (as artists) 'as [men] at work', in order to awake within the reader a higher level of consciousness, attention, and awareness – words that in Wallace's lexicon have strongly ethical implications. By internally applying criticism to their own texts, metafictionists attempt to make explicit something that deconstruction has shown to be always already at play in the work of art. That critical or discursive engagement is not necessarily separate from the work of art, as Levinas argues, but already alive within it, engendered from it, is an important step in understanding Wallace's project of writing as ethics and his treatment of literature as a dialogic ethical space. Two of the major thinkers who have engaged with Levinas on these points are Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, and their theories about the ethics of 'the work' are relevant to Wallace's own ideas on this subject.

Maurice Blanchot, Levinas's friend and philosophical interlocutor, was deeply influenced by Levinas's concept of ethics, particularly the idea of the irreducibility of the other, the exteriority of radical alterity as that which always exceeds our grasp, our ability to comprehend. Levinas and Blanchot regarded language as inherently ethical because words can never be reduced to pure meaning (in contrast to the logical positivism of Wittgenstein's early work, for example). Blanchot took this idea a step further in applying it to literature: literary texts, like language itself, occupy an irreducible space, a space of infinite possibility. Just as 'the other exceeds any designation […] the literary text refuses any reduction to a simple interpretation. Language then becomes the experience of the loss of the mastery of the

[81] Ibid., p. 142.

self'.[82] Following from his concerns with the limits of language and the possibilities and demands of literature, Blanchot draws important connections between literature and death, specifically with respect to the limits of subjectivity. As Hasse and Large explain, 'what interests Blanchot is that the condition of literature is the undoing or dissolution of the human subject; to write is to be exposed to the anonymity of language'.[83] For Blanchot, entering the space of literature (through writing or through reading) is exactly the experience of encountering the other in its infinite alterity; to write is to lose the power to say 'I', the work is inherently desubjectivising. As Alain P. Toumayan points out in *Encountering the Other: The Artwork and the Problem of Difference*, 'Levinas' ethical subjectivity insists upon identity as deriving from the responsibility to the other, while Blanchot constantly returns to the oppositional quality of the encounter, the way the other disrupts the subject in productive fashion'.[84] It is precisely this crisis between subjectivity and its decentring that provides the narrative torsion in many of Wallace's fictional works.

In his introductory note to *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot writes that 'Essays, novels, poems seem only to be […] written in order to allow the labor of literature […] to accomplish itself, and through this labor to allow formulation of the question: "What would be at stake in the fact that something like art or literature exists?"'(xi).[85] Blanchot collapses the distinction between 'literature' and 'criticism', and in doing so suggests that Levinas's claim for the ethical superiority of criticism is in fact illusory. For Blanchot, the ethical value of literature was not in 'broadening our knowledge [or] contributing to our mastery over the world but […] in counteracting the alienation of human existence in a world of utility.'[86] In

[82] Ullrich M. Haase and William Large, *Maurice Blanchot* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 3.
[83] Ibid., p. 3.
[84] Alain P. Toumayan, *Encountering the Other: The Artwork and the Problem of Difference* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), p. 6.
[85] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, Theory and History of Literature, v. 82 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. xi.
[86] Haase and Large, *Maurice Blanchot*, p. 58.

his interview with Laura Miller in 1996, Wallace describes a piece of fiction as a conversation, 'a relationship set up between the reader and the writer' that is uniquely poised among art forms to allow the reader to 'feel human and unalone', part of 'a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness'.[87] Furthermore, Wallace 'strongly suspect[s] a big part of real art-fiction's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny'.[88] For both Wallace and Blanchot 'the work' represents a paradox – it is at once an encounter with the finitude of death and participation in an infinite conversation. To overcome alienation, to become human – herein lies the supreme value of the ethical confrontation inherent in art.

Indeed, the raison d'être of *Infinite Jest* was summed up as much by the ghost of James Incandenza himself. As oft noted in Wallace criticism, *Infinite Jest* begins (or ends, as the case may be), with Hal's inability to communicate with others – with his entrapment within himself. Towards the end of the novel Incandenza's ghost reveals that he only created 'the Entertainment' in the hopes of finding some common ground on which to communicate with his son, Hal, in order to prevent him from becoming closed off, entrapped within himself: 'The wraith … spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*'.[89] Various clever ruses had not worked, so 'his last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life … *Any* conversation or interchange is better than none at all … the worst kind of gut-wrenching intergenerational interface is better than withdrawal or

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[87] Laura Miller, 'The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, pp. 58-66, p. 62.
[88] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p. 32.
[89] *Infinite Jest*, p. 838. Italics in original.

hiddenness on either side'.[90] For Levinas and Blanchot, communication through language is the basis for human community, and ultimately for the ethical encounter that occurs therein – the Levinasian response (Here I am!) to the other's call is literally a form of redemptive responsibility. For his part, in the way he explains his approach to writing to McCaffery, Wallace appears to agree that: 'language and linguistic intercourse is, in and of itself, redeeming, remedy-ing'.[91] Or as he avers in his discussion with Brian Garner on the usage and purpose of language: 'you and I, I think, are essentially … humanists, and we want [language] to vivify and facilitate . . . we want it to help interhuman relationships of various sorts'.[92] Indeed, Hal's tragedy at the beginning/end of *Infinite Jest* is that no one can understand his cry 'I am in here'; he loses access to language and can longer communicate with anyone.[93]

In her essay 'Infinite Summer: Reading, Empathy, and the Social Network', Kathleen Fitzpatrick argues that 'enabling a more authentic human connection, or at least creating its imaginative possibility, was a significant component of Wallace's sense of the role of the novel in contemporary culture'.[94] One of Fitzpatrick's main points is that 'Wallace's work … stand[s] out from much postmodernist writing' because it 'recognizes that affect and political or critical potential are not mutually exclusive but may in fact be mutually dependent'.[95] She argues that Wallace's fiction possesses ethical value via the 'empathic identification' it conjures, in which 'the reader remain[s] open to the otherness of the Other while nonetheless benefiting from the affective connection'.[96] Fitzpatrick continues: 'The tension produced by

[90] Ibid., pp. 838-839. Italics in original.
[91] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p. 33.
[92] Bryan A. Garner and David Foster Wallace, *Quack this Way: David Foster Wallace & Bryan A. Garner Talk Language and Writing* (Dallas: RosePen Books, 2013), p. 106.
[93] *Infinite Jest*, p. 3.
[94] Kathleen Fitzpatrick, 'Infinite Summer: Reading, Empathy, and the Social Network', *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace: Critical and Creative Assessments,* pp. 182-207, p. 183.
[95] Ibid., p. 186.
[96] Ibid., p. 186.

such ethical engagement – the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of achieving some kind of mutual comprehension – was one of Wallace's concerns throughout his career…'[97] Fitzpatrick's reading draws parallels between Wallace's construction of an ethical community through literature and Blanchot's 'descriptions of the basis for ethical community, the obligation that we owe one another, as "an infinite attention to the other …"'.[98]

For Blanchot, literature is – using a definition he borrows from Georges Bataille – the space of 'negative community': 'the anonymity of the book which does not address anybody and which, through its relationship with the unknown is the community of those who have no community'.[99] This negative rendering of community metaphorically invokes Wallace's zany scenarios involving the marginal and the dispossessed, particularly those who exist on the exterior of normative communities: solitary late night public radio listeners (WYYY), the veiled and hidden members of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed (UHID), the damaged denizens of halfway houses, former and current addicts, secret societies of wheelchair assassins, etc. Here, the ethical tension Fitzpatrick writes of with respect to Blanchot becomes clear: Wallace invites us to pay attention to these marginal or even monstrous characters by devoting time and effort to reading their stories, to try to hear and understand the conversations they are having with each other. Readers are invited to identify with their plights, to enter the negative space of their communities. The impossible, fantastical nature of these characters preserves their otherness, while the frank rendering of their all too human weaknesses and failures, their pain and sadness, blended with the humour of their confused and desperate attempts at connection, communication, or mere survival activates an ethics of human empathy.

[97] Ibid., p. 198.
[98] Ibid., p. 199.
[99] Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988), p. 24.

Like Blanchot, Jacques Derrida devoted a great deal of scholarly attention to Levinas' ethics. For Derrida, the work of art, the very 'act' of literature, quite literally becomes a form of ethical engagement. In his own work, Derrida collapses distinctions between literature/criticism/philosophy even further, deconstructing binary oppositions and subverting what he understood as the 'metaphysics of presence' pervasive in Western philosophy. In response to the question 'What is literature?', Derrida argues literature is the means to ethically intervene, to deconstruct hierarchical thinking in order to overturn structures of dominance and oppression that are taken for granted in language and in thought. As Derek Attridge points out in his introduction to *Acts of Literature*:

> Derrida focuses not only on the question "What is literature?" but on the inescapable companion question "Who decides?" And if literature is characterized by a certain structural undecidability, then the act of deciding is not a calculation but an ethical, political act, an act for which we remain responsible since it is not determined in advance by a law we can simply appeal to.[100]

Attridge further explains that 'there has always been an ethico-political dimension to Derrida's writing', one related to what he terms '*responsibility* … particularly in a respect for otherness, be it textual, historical, cultural, or personal … [and] also a responsibility toward the future, since it involves the struggle to create openings within which the other can appear beyond any of our programs and predictions, can come to transform what we know or think we know'.[101] According to Attridge, Derrida's focus on responsibility has a particular resonance, 'Responsibility for Derrida is not something we simply "take": we find ourselves

[100] Derek Attridge, 'Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature', in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 1-33, p. 24.
[101] Ibid., p. 24. Italics in original.

summoned, confronted by an undecidability which is also always an opportunity and a demand, a chance and a risk'.[102] In building upon Levinas's work Derrida formulated his ethico-political position grounded in the recognition of the Other.

In his interview with Attridge, Derrida follows Blanchot in speaking of his interest in the 'possibility of fiction', explaining that 'there is no literature without a *suspended* relation to meaning and reference', and that this implies not just suspense, 'but also dependence, condition, conditionality'.[103] He remarks upon the 'excess of language as literature', which renders literature 'the place or experience of this "trouble" we also have with the essence of language, with truth and with essence, the language of essence in general'.[104] The very question '"What is . . .?" and all the associated regimes of essence or truth' are disrupted via the experience of literature in the 20th century, according to Derrida.[105]

These themes – of community, responsibility, and the ethics of contingency – play out in 'Good Old Neon', Wallace's story from *Oblivion* that deals with emotional alienation, suicide, and the limits of language. The literary subtext of 'Good Old Neon' involves the narrator's struggle to deal with radical contingency and the irreconcilable excess of meaning this implies for human life. Post-suicide, he reflects on his life as a late 20th century white male yuppie, now seemingly hyperaware of his inadequacies and flaws. And yet, even in death, he is unable to reach a final resting place, to come to a conclusion about the meaning of his life, through language. His is the plight of the linguistically decentred subject trying to live – and ultimately trying to die – with the always already failed attempt to nail down meaning in language. Like a work of literature, his life is necessarily incomplete and unfinished, because meaning is infinite. In dying, the narrator becomes narrative and

[102] Ibid., p. 5.
[103] Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature,* ed. by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 48. Italics in original.
[104] Ibid., p. 48.
[105] Ibid., p. 48.

language, (dis)embodying 'the absence of the book' or the 'double death' of which Blanchot writes. The narrator/text is a suicide note, a ghost story, and finally a kind of love letter from the dead writer to the living reader, underscored by second person narration and a prominent rendering of the interiority of a character named David Wallace, who reveals he may be the actual narrator near the end. In this way the story performs the deconstruction of boundaries in the radical manner both Blanchot and Derrida suggest writing always will.

Regarding the paradoxical limiting effects of the infinite potential of language, narrator/David Wallace writes: 'Words and chronological time create all these total misunderstandings of what's really going on at the most basic level. And yet at the same time [they are] all we have to try to understand it and try to form anything larger or more meaningful and true with anybody else, which is yet another paradox'.[106] Contingency and paradox are just things we have to get used to in this life, as well as the destabilising of essences and the ambiguous limits of the human subject: 'What exactly do you think you are? The millions and trillions of thoughts, memories, juxtapositions – even crazy ones like this, you're thinking – that flash through your head and disappear? Some sum or remainder of these? Your *history*?'[107] But they are also the very conditions of possibility of any kind of human redemption, as in the final lines, narrator/Wallace speaks from beyond the grave: 'and David Wallace having emerged from years of literally indescribable war against himself … the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him commanding that other part to be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, "Not another word"'.[108] In this final sentence the face turns inward upon itself in a post-postmodern call to cease the exhaustive battle for linguistic and ontological certainty or wholeness and embrace the

[106] *Oblivion*, p. 151.
[107] Ibid., p. 178. Italics in original.
[108] Ibid., p. 181.

sentimental, thus achieving a form of self-transformation or redemption through abandoning the quest for meaning.

'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' is another story from *Oblivion* that deals with the ethical ramifications surrounding the limits of language. Invoking Richard Rorty's influential pragmatist tract of the same title, the narrative calls attention to the types of 'games' – whether that be linguistic, philosophical, or psychological – that can obviate the attainment of greater ethical truths. Rorty questions the usefulness of the Western tradition's overarching philosophical quest for epistemological truth, which Levinas similarly terms in *Ethics and Infinity* its 'nostalgia for totality'.[109] Rorty suggests that in these ultimately impossible to resolve language games, ethical truths get lost, sacrificing something profoundly human as a result.

In Wallace's story, there is a vicious circularity in the structure of the narrative that serves to formally enact this point. The narrative begins with 'a small product liability settlement' over the surgically botched face of the protagonist's mother, which has left her with a 'chronic mask of terror'.[110] The 'winnings' of the liability suit lead in sinister fashion to further botched surgeries and additional lawsuits. In this way the text dramatises how classical philosophical inquiry misses the basic ethical point in its quest for epistemological truth:

> One could at first not ascertain whether the face's expression was a reaction to what she saw in the mirror or if it itself was what she saw and this was the stimulus causing the noises … Mother herself … could not ascertain at first if the look of insane terror was

[109] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 76.
[110] *Oblivion*, p. 185.

> the response or the stimulus and if it was a response then a response to what in the mirror if the response itself was the expression.[111]

The tortured language seeks to obscure the meaning and truth of the situation and ultimately leads nowhere. Accordingly, the unnamed narrator-subject (another alienated sociopath) seems to lack any real compassion for his mother's pain; she is simply one more human 'specimen' to be observed and manipulated under the cold light of utilitarian interest. The narrative casts doubt on whether this character has any recognizably human conscience at all.

In speaking of his mother and 'the reality of [their] life together', the narrator inadvertently indicates that philosophical truth games can never be prior to the reality of the human interface (or Levinasian face-to-face). This story recalls the familiar Levinasian trope of the ethical truth that inheres in the face of the other and is '*hiding* in *plain sight'*, although the narrator, for all his quick-witted language games, lacks the capacity to see this.[112] The message is both Levinasian and pragmatic: that language games and illusions of epistemic truth (exemplified by the narrator's entanglement in lawsuits and liability settlements) obscure the reality of our existence as necessarily and inextricably with and for 'others'. Furthermore, philosophy and ethics are emptied of meaning when codified as law. Counter to ideologies that prioritise the rights of the 'individual', the 'consumer', or the 'liability claimant/defendant', a sense of care for other beings is what grounds human subjectivity. Or in Blanchot's view, community and the communal (both missing in this story) are the basis of any ethically meaningful vision of truth or reality.

Regarding questions of form and the ethical power of the text, simply engaging with footnotes can constitute an ethical practice for Derrida in that they involve a process of

[111] Ibid., p. 185.
[112] Ibid., p. 187. Italics in original.

decentring, of working against the power of the text. Wallace's own remarkable use of footnotes and endnotes certainly can be read in this way; they force the reader to stop and reconsider, to become aware of the constructed nature of the work, to 'wake up' from the continuous progression of the narrative via creative interruption. In 'Consider the Footnote', Ira Nadel points out that footnotes convey a disrupted reality, 'slow[ing] the reader down […] forcing the reader to refocus again and again, to reconsider what might be important and to think more deeply, even when the endnotes seemed inserted solely for amusement'.[113] And as Wallace has acknowledged in his interviews with David Lipsky (among others), he often placed critical plot information in the endnotes to *Infinite Jest* – keys to the narrative hidden in the margins. In a sense, the footnotes become a kind of ethical device, compelling the reader to stop and (re)consider the value of the marginal. Nadel also speaks of the 'double consciousness' these footnotes come to represent; again, this constitutes a reminder (and a valuing) of secondary voices, plurality and multiplicity, of an exteriority the reader is called to acknowledge, a transgressing or going beyond the limits of the 'essential' narrative.[114] Relatedly, Mary K. Holland notes how Wallace addresses the 'twin problems of irony and narcissism through […] a return to earnestness via ironized irony and self-conscious metafiction' that involves 'formal innovations, such as footnotes, multiple narrative voices, and shifting points of view, which remind the reader at every turn that she and the fiction are constructing empathy together through language'.[115] In other words, Wallace's formal technique compels empathic engagement via his own brand of textual ethics.

To return to Wallace's pronouncements in his interview with McCaffery, he alleges that commercial entertainment can be dangerous because it encourages and rewards 'passive

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[113] Ira Nadel, 'Consider the Footnote', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Lee Konstantinou and Samuel Cohen (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 218-241, p. 220.
[114] Ibid., p. 225.
[115] Mary K. Holland, 'Mediated Immediacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), pp. 107–30, p. 108.

spectation', and that 'a certain amount of the form-conscious stuff I write is trying […] to do the opposite. It's supposed to be uneasy'.[116] Wallace explains that, through various formal techniques (such as footnotes), his writing seeks to have the reader do a good deal of 'narrative arrangement'; 'interrupting flow with digressions and interpolations', for example, means that "the reader has to do the work of connecting [to each other and] to the narrative […] if it works right, the reader has to fight through the mediated voice presenting the material'.[117] In this way, Wallace's and Derrida's literary projects clarify what a moral consciousness, or a human conscience, is and does. The morally conscious human mind encounters vastly different moral viewpoints and works through confusion and indecision to make meaning. The process of literary engagement therefore derives from one of the most critically human cognitive faculties – that of ethical deliberation and decision-making.

The role of the literary text, then, is also one of critical self-reflection – looking oneself directly in the face. Wallace suggests that only through attempting to understand our own complex, troubled, and contingent humanity do we have any hope for acting responsibly or ethically towards others. Anything that can help us to achieve a kind of self-awareness, or moral consciousness, is therefore a vehicle for ethical action. Wallace articulates the value of literature in perhaps his most cited statement from his interview with McCaffery:

> Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we

[116] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p. 33.
[117] Ibid., p. 33.

still are human beings, now. Or can be … I just think that fiction that isn't exploring what it means to be human today isn't good art.[118]

The vulgarity points to Wallace's subtle deconstruction of both the human being and the work of art, not merely as examples of what is (or strives to be) essential, exalted, or exceptional (discourse around 'the human' and 'the artwork' ever bearing the trace of these lofty modifiers), but as that which may be inescapably, even inherently, abject. And yet, the human can become aware of its own abjection and alchemise it into something beautiful and even sacred. Thus for Wallace as for Derrida, 'acts of literature' illuminate a broad spectrum of ethical possibility.

Inhuman Ethics: Neighbours and Monsters

Slavoj Žižek critically engages with the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, interrogating his conception of alterity in ways that can be productively applied to a reading of the other as monster in Wallace's fiction. One of the main points of Žižek's critique is that Levinasian ethics involves a 'fetishistic disavowal' of the 'abyssal dimension of the Neighbor' that 'avoid[s] the inhuman core of being-human'.[119] Calling upon the eclectic mix of the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan and the idea of the neighbour in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Žižek explains that the 'anti-ethics' of psychoanalysis 'focuses precisely on what the standard [Levinasian] ethical enthusiasm excludes, on the traumatic Thing that our Judeo-Christian tradition calls the "Neighbor"'.[120] Žižek avows that the 'ethical domestication' of the Neighbour/Other must be resisted, alleging that Levinas 'obfuscated the

[118] Ibid., p. 26. Italics in original.
[119] Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London; New York: Verso, 2008), p. 16.
[120] Ibid., p. 16.

monstrosity of the Neighbor, the monstrosity on account of which Lacan applied to the neighbor the term Thing (*das Ding*), used by Freud to designate the ultimate object of our desires in its unbearable intensity and impenetrability'.[121] His readings of horror fiction classics like Stephen King's *The Shining* conjure up Wallace's fictional characters discussed in the second section of this chapter; Terry Schmidt, Mr. Johnson, and Chuck Nunn Jr. all represent 'the Neighbor [as] the (Evil) Thing which potentially lurks beneath every homely human face', the affable neighbour 'who gradually turns into a killing beast and, with an evil grin, goes on to slaughter his entire family'.[122]

Žižek explains how the term 'inhuman' takes on new significance in 'contemporary "post-deconstructionist" thought', again exhorting resistance to Levinas' 'ethical prettification' of Neighbour/Other:

> In a properly dialectical paradox, what Levinas, with all his celebration of Otherness, fails to take into account is not some underlying Sameness of all humans but radically 'inhuman' Otherness itself: the Otherness of a human being reduced to inhumanity, the Otherness exemplified by the terrifying figure of the Muselmann, the "living dead" in the concentration camps.[123]

To what extent is this reading of Levinas viable? Has Levinas neglected to engage with 'the inhuman' or is this a somewhat reductionist construal on Žižek's part? As I previously discussed, Levinas's own writings on radical alterity and substitution invoke the trauma of the ethical encounter, the subject as 'hostage' who is persecuted by the other's destitution. Certainly this doesn't read as mere liberal gentrification (to use Žižek's terms) of the other,

[121] Ibid., p. 16.
[122] Ibid., p. 16.
[123] Ibid., p. 165.

nor can the encounter with the Levinasian neighbour be reduced to simple 'tolerance', as Žižek has averred. In *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas construes the face as that which claustrophobically 'presses the neighbor up against me', signifying a desolate emptiness, abandonment. The face represents:

> The empty space of what could not be collected … the trace of a passage which never became present, and which is possibly nothingness. But the surplus over pure nothingness, an infinitesimal difference, is in my non-indifference to the neighbor, where I am obedient as though to an order addressed to me.[124]

For Levinas the face is the 'hollowed out […] trace of an absence'; there is something approaching the level of gothic horror in the way the face calls the subject into being, in the level of responsibility commanded that can never be lived up to or fulfilled.[125] The idea that others are ever reachable is called into question in Wallace's writing, where faces are self-concealing and mask the possibility of absence and abyss. Instead of providing a window onto the soul, encountering the face involves accepting ineradicable contingency, a permanent gap, an incompleteness that can never be overcome, yet nonetheless must be endured and even honoured. Thus many of Wallace's grotesque and horrifying faces represent this 'empty space of what could not be collected', or the ever-present potential for absence or loss of humanity. His use of fictional metaphors like mirrors and self-reflexive, gaze-reversing lenses reveal this radical alterity as an interior encounter as well, a confrontation with an absence or loss of humanity within oneself.

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[124] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 91.
[125] Ibid., p. 93.

Wallace asks us to consider the monster, to encounter and to have empathy for the hideous. As we show compassion for the physically deformed or diseased, those described in *Infinite Jest* as 'the teratoid of overall visage […] the in any way asymmetrical', so too should we muster empathy for the emotionally or 'morally' damaged.[126] As Mary K. Holland puts forth:

> Though it has only begun to receive serious critical attention, its brazen solicitation of empathy for all kinds of mental, physical, and emotional disfigurements through likewise discomforting generic disfigurements represents a powerful development of themes and goals for fiction that […] Wallace had been articulating for several years …[127]

In terms of the inhuman, the psychopath, the monster, Levinas and Wallace indicate that this is precisely where our responsibility for the other becomes most acute – to the point where we must substitute ourselves, becoming responsible for the other's responsibility. In the presence of inhumanity, we become more responsible for the other, not less. We are indeed responsible for the other's evil.

Foreshadowing the main themes in *Oblivion*, in *Brief Interviews* Wallace explores the ethical fallout that occurs in the presence of the abject. In particular, the story 'On His Deathbed, Holding Your Hand' details the disgust and revulsion a father feels towards the face of his infant son:

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[126] *Infinite Jest*, p. 192.
[127] Holland, 'Mediated Immediacy', p. 107.

> No one else even appeared to see it. Him. An essential disorder of character. An absence of whatever we mean by 'human'. A psychosis no one dares diagnose […] even just his face, I did, I detested his face. A small soft moist face, not human. A circle of cheese with features like hasty pinches in some ghastly dough. Am – was I the only one? That an infant's face is not in any way recognizable, not a human face – it's true – then why do all clasp their hands and call it beauty? Why not simply admit to an ugliness that may well be outgrown?[128]

In this case the repellent face of the son is a projection of the father/narrator's weaknesses and moral limitations, but it also serves to remind the reader of his or her own: 'Am – was I the only one?'. In guiding his readers through these ugly (yet human) emotions, Wallace is asking us to 'see' something this blinded character cannot. He asks us to confront that which is hideous and hateful (or simply morally ambiguous or confusing) in ourselves, that which qualifies as the abject – the 'fucking human being' – but illuminates a path to transcendence via awareness. Thus there are two orders of empathy at work in this passage: we feel pity for the infant detested by his father, but even more so for the father himself, a cruelly malevolent yet ultimately ridiculous character, struggling but failing to transcend his hatred, unwilling, or perhaps unable, to manifest any meaningful humanity.

The tension between Levinas' and Žižek's understanding of radical alterity can be read as a deconstruction of the human/inhuman binary that manifests in curious ways throughout Wallace's fiction. Referencing the Levinasian symbolism of the face, Žižek suggests (somewhat problematically) that the 'anxiety' surrounding the veiling of Muslim women in contemporary Western societies is because:

[128] *Brief Interviews*, p. 220.

> […] the face is what makes the Neighbor *le semblable*, a fellow-man with whom we can identify and empathize. […] This, then, is why the covered face causes such anxiety: because it confronts us directly with the abyss of the Other-Thing, with the Neighbor in its uncanny dimension. The very covering-up of the face obliterates a protective shield, so that the Other-Thing stares at us directly.[129]

Žižek's dichotomy between Freudian and Levinasian faces with respect to masks and veils is fruitful to consider with respect to the many examples of hidden and concealed faces in *Infinite Jest*. One explicit example of this is UHID, The Union of Hideously and Improbably Deformed, a fictional 12-step program whose members' faces are so monstrous and grotesque that an entire 'negative community' has formed around permanently veiling them from public view as an act of empowerment against a society that shames and excludes ugliness and deformity. Joelle van Dyne, a member of this group, is also the lead actor in the lethal film cartridge 'Infinite Jest'; 'The Face of the Deep' was her suggestion for the film's title.[130] The ethics of the face and what it reveals and conceals therefore undergirds one of the major strands of the novel's plot.

One of the central metaphors in *Infinite Jest* surrounds the unveiling/epiphanic revelation of Joelle's face in the eponymous film (symbolised by a smiley face), the watching of which activates an inexplicably lethal addictive feedback loop. In the second-hand accounts of the film that are provided within the novel – as no character can watch the film and then speak about it later – upon seeing her face, watchers experience a pleasure so intense that they lose all subjective agency, all ability to do anything other than continue watching. Thus the viewers become zombified, inhuman. As I discussed in the previous

[129] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London; New York: Verso, 2011), p. 2.
[130] *Infinite Jest*, p. 238.

section, Incandenza's point in making this film was precisely the opposite; his aim was to foster communication with his increasingly withdrawn young son, to induce him to 'interface' with his father by way of something funny and entertaining. Somehow the entertainment fails spectacularly; and in a Levinasian twist, the film is co-opted by a radical group bent on taking as many 'hostages' as possible in order to bring down a politically and ethically corrupt US government. Here is the epiphany of the face, mediated through the contemporary entertainment industry, taking fatal hostage of vast multitudes, destroying subjectivity instead of granting it.

In terms of deconstructing the ethical significance of Wallace's monstrous/hidden faces, Žižek's unpacking of Critchley's Lacanian analysis of the ethical debt can be useful. With respect to Levinas, this becomes a question of how the subject can 'respond in infinite responsibility to the other' without extinguishing or obliterating itself under the 'crushing weight of the superego'. Žižek outlines how in Critchley's analysis, Lacan's idea that 'aesthetic sublimation enables the subject to achieve a minimum of happiness', Žižek outlines how 'Critchley adds humor to the list of sublimations as the benevolent aspect of the superego: in contrast to the evil, punishing superego, the severe judge which crushes us with the weight of infinite guilt on account of our failure to live up to its Call …'[131] It is in humour that, in Žižek's words, 'we also observe our finitude and ridiculous failure from the standpoint of the superego – our finitude appears as funny, ridiculous in its failures.' Seeing the humour in these failures can be liberatory, as Žižek concludes: 'Instead of installing anguish and despair, this superego enables us to laugh at our imitations, failures, and false pretensions.'[132] This focus on the importance of humour is something Wallace prioritises throughout his writing, using humour to foreground the ethical limitations of his characters.

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[131] Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, p. 341.
[132] Ibid., p. 341.

Literature (and indeed irony) acts as an aesthetic buffer for human ethical lapses and ineptitude, at once calling attention to the seriousness of these lapses and invoking empathy for characters rendered ridiculous by limitations beyond their control. Wallace's absurd faces signify the comic arbitrariness of living out a human life. In exposing the contingent nature of the masks we wear and the roles we play, art offers us a chance to become more sensitive to the varieties and vagaries of human experience.

In 'Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence', Žižek returns to his political theological critique of Levinasian ethics. Žižek arguably misreads Levinas in this essay, not least because of the levels of gothic horror that the face/neighbour implies in Levinas, the 'inhuman conception' that Levinas argues is always present in the realm of the human. Žižek sets up dichotomies within Judaism, figuring Levinas as representative of the 'good' Judaism (characterised by loving kindness, responsibility for others, neighbourly tolerance, etc.) and Mosaic Law as representative of Jehovah's selfish and genocidal tendencies. These two polarities line up with the active/moralistic and passive/empathetic narrators of Wallace's fictional stories that provide the dialectical tension driving the narratives forward. The impulse of the God of Law is to moralise and judge, to withhold pity and to condemn, which, as Žižek notes, 'cleanses the neighbor of all imaginary lure, of the "inner wealth of a person" displayed through his or her face, reducing him or her to a *pure subject*'.[133] But this is precisely the point of the Levinasian critique – there is no final access to the other's 'inner essence' or being. This issue is raised in 'Good Old Neon' when the protagonist wonders about the possibility of inherent moral defects in his character, that he may have inherited a bad gene from his biological parents that causes him (occasionally) to enjoy engaging in acts of cruelty towards others.[134] However, in the next sentence he realises

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[133] Slavoj Žižek, 'Neighbors and Other Monsters', in *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*, by Žižek, Reinhard, and Santner (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 134-190, p. 185. Italics in original.
[134] *Oblivion*, p. 150.

that it doesn't really matter where his badness or moral weakness might come from. This is the paradox of free will and radical contingency: subjects, like Wallace's characters, may not ultimately be in control of their actions, but they will be judged as if they were. This is the truth of 'blind' justice, of Jehovah's law of dispassionate judgement. But in Wallace's lexicon there are ethical values attached to blindness and sight; sight is ethical because it manages to keep the human in focus despite all its messy contingencies. Levinas' ethics similarly values sight in terms of the epiphany of the face, a widening or expansion of one's capacity to love the other, even when faced with monstrosity or ineradicable difference. Žižek seems to overlook some important nuances in Levinas' philosophy here; for Levinas, and, as I argue, also for Wallace, it is the face's excess of meaning, the potentially inhuman core beneath the veil or mask, that calls us into being. According to Blanchot, Derrida, and Wallace, this critical act of substitution is enhanced via engagement with the literary arts, which celebrate a human life's excess of meaning in all its terror and humour while refusing reduction to a formulaic moralism. Thus reading and critically engaging with literature increases our humanity, as it expands our affective consciousness for the infinite complexities of human life.

Conclusion

Conatus is a term from classical philosophy that signifies effort, endeavour, and striving.[135] Spinoza gives expression to this in Part III of *The Ethics*: 'Everything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its own being.[136] Levinas takes apart Spinoza's concept in his own discussions of *conatus essendi*, which he characterises as the supreme law of being and existence. Ethics is the restrictive or oppositional force to the *conatus*, to being's

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[135] 'Conatus, n.', OED Online (Oxford University Press) <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/38033>
[136] Benedict Spinoza, 'The Project Gutenberg E-Text of *The Ethics*' <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm#chap03> [accessed 20 January 2022]

striving to persist in and for itself. The Levinasian face is the representation and embodiment of this limit. As Simon Critchley points out:

> It is because we, as human, know what suffering is that we can have obligations not to cause needless suffering to other living creatures. Furthermore, as human beings, we do and must act to preserve our own being. But if we act as if we were beings concerned exclusively with our own *conatus essendi*, if we fail to respond to the demands, needs, and suffering of the other, then we are succumbing to 'the law of evil'. […] If I deliberately violate the (ethical) limitation on the *conatus essendi*, if I act as if I were a being whose sole concern is with the preservation of my own being […] then I commit an evil act. It is because I am *human* that I can be good or evil.[137]

Critchley's final point is that (for Levinas) 'to *become* a *human* being is to transcend my own "law of being", and ethically respond to the non-integratable evil that afflicts my neighbor'.[138] This sounds remarkably similar to Wallace's message from *This is Water*, that one is most fully and humanly alive by choosing to overcome the hard-wired and basic self-centeredness that is the same for all of us, deep down. Indeed, one of the major preoccupations of Wallace's fiction involves the emergence of the ethical subject from the limitations of the 'blood-fed' human mind. Choice and freedom are dominant themes for Wallace because responsibility for the other hangs in the balance. To this end, Wallace's fiction can largely be read as an exploration of the ethical failure to limit the *conatus*, daring to ask how and why these failures occur. The attempt at an answer lies in Wallace's suggestion that ethical ability is not uniformly shared by all humans and is best represented

[137] Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 265. Italics in original.
[138] Critchley, *Cambridge Companion to Levinas,* p. 265. Italics in original.

by a kind of spectrum; for reasons of chance, history, varying neurochemistries, trauma, 'damaged' brains, etc., some humans are better able to honour the imperative of the face than others, better able to control thoughts, emotions, and desires and put responsibility to the other before fulfilling the demands of the self. The concurrent preoccupation with brains and neurochemistry in Wallace's fiction – a topic most fully explored by Stephen Burn – indicates a mechanism for a more naturalistic understanding of ethical activity.

Consequent to these dilemmas are concerns about our greater humanity. Wallace dramatises the precariousness of humanity by repeatedly describing humans in terms of animality, neurochemistry, or machinery. In calling the human-ness of his characters into question, Wallace evinces a naturalistic view of ethics that links human behaviour back to material, physiological, and evolutionary forces, echoing the writings of Darwin and Spinoza. For this reason, chains and chaining are prominent metaphors in Wallace's writing; like the face, they represent both the finitude of limitation and the paradoxical condition of possibility for real freedom, as *Infinite Jest*'s Remy Marathe explains:

> I had to face: I had chosen. My choice, this was love. I had chosen I think the way out of the chains of the cage. I needed this woman. Without her to choose over myself, there was only pain and not choosing […]. This is what is hard to tell. To ask any person to see. […] Without the choice of her life there are no other choices […]. It chains me, but the chains are of my choice. The other chains: no. The others were the chains of not choosing.[139]

Humans are constituted by ethical confusion surrounding the choices they must make. Although ethical finitude is a reality of human existence, through work, specifically the work

[139] *Infinite Jest*, pp. 780-781.

of artistic and empathic engagement, limits of ethical ability can be expanded. We can learn to make better choices, but the individual is not entirely a free moral agent in the end – the structures and frameworks surrounding the individual are of ultimate importance in ethical decision-making. The next chapter will explore the various 'chains' of biology and the brain on the human as ethical agent, attempting to read Wallace through contemporary theories at the intersection of neuropsychology and ethics.

In step with current theories in these fields, Wallace's fictional portrayals of serious ethical lapses point towards neurobiological explanations for moral behaviour. This recalls the studies of Simon Baron-Cohen and others that seek to redefine evil as a form of 'empathy erosion', in which patients characterised by sociopathy or behaviour otherwise lacking in regard for ethical norms show decreased or atypical activity in their neural 'empathy circuits'. Interestingly, many of these fMRI type studies use images of human faces as the metric for emotional and empathic processing. In other words, at least some form of empirical measurement aligns with Levinas' philosophical focus on and Wallace's recurring depictions of the ethical primacy of the face. Steven Pinker puts forth similar theories in *The Better Angels of our Nature* (2011), using evolutionary psychological models to explain how innate behavioural traits from violent aggression to empathy and altruism can be greatly enhanced or diminished depending on the prevailing structure and organisation of a given human society.

How would Levinas, the preeminent ethicist of post-war continental Europe, feel about these contemporary developments, or about the very term neuroethics, with all that it implies? Persecuted by the Nazis for his ethnic origins, Levinas might understandably find a conflation of morality and biology to be a very dangerous example of essentialism. However, his main philosophical point is that our ethical debt to the other is asymmetrical and non-negotiable. He insists that our ethical duty is not dependent on what the other may or may not

do for us, that we are in fact taken 'hostage' by our ethical debt to the other, a form of 'substitution' in which we are responsible for the other in every sense, even for the other's evil. Seen in this light, perhaps Levinas is not too far from this way of thinking after all.

Ultimately, we are left with more questions than answers, but by way of conclusion it is helpful to recall Wallace's views on the ethical importance of narrative and the art of fiction, or what it means to be a human being, which prepare us for our inevitable encounters with exteriority by lending us a wide range of optics and lenses, glimpses into radical alterities that might otherwise remain hidden in plain sight.

Chapter 2: Ethical Limits and the Brain: Towards a Neuroethical Reading of Wallace

Introduction -- What do we mean by neuroethics?

In addition to Wallace's engagement with postmodern literary and philosophical themes, his writing abounds with medical and scientific discourses, interweaving the logic of various ethical systems with brain-based imagery, psychopharmacology, and the rhetoric of mental illness and health. As Stephen J. Burn notes in his essay 'Webs of Nerves Pulsing and Firing', Wallace's writing, specifically in *Infinite Jest*, is noteworthy for its 'attention to the essential ways that medical language and especially neural theories, invade and reorder our relationship to ourselves'.[140] Complicating the ethical positions I explored in the previous chapter, in this chapter I will focus on the implications of Wallace's use of neurological and biomedical language and imagery to explain human behaviour in terms of functioning and malfunctioning brains.

[140] Stephen Burn, 'Webs of Nerves Pulsing and Firing: *Infinite Jest* and the Science of Mind', *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.64.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Wallace, like Levinas, was a self-proclaimed humanist who saw artistic expression as a means to explore ethical issues in contemporary America. In attempting to make sense of what it means to live an ethical life, his works consistently return to the limits of the human as moral or ethical agent. His fiction in particular focuses on points at which ethical agency breaks down, which can result in frightening scenes of inhumanity. Many of the narrative struggles are characterised by an opposition between the conservative language of moral choice (the narrator as superego) and secondary narrative voices that reveal the human subject in the process of unravelling, sometimes violently so. Wallace uses literary expression to imagine situations in which the 'blood-fed mind' fails in its efforts to produce a coherent human subject; that is, to understand how and why a subject's ability to 'choose' or 'decide' can be radically diminished or even obliterated.

The philosophical subtext underlying many of Wallace's narratives is that of materialism, and more specifically, the ethical quandary that results when human behaviour is reduced to a collection of autonomous brain functions that precede (and determine) individual, conscious choice. Wallace uses both the deterministic language of neuropsychology as well as the rhetoric of personal choice and free will, and so his narratives often involve ambivalence or 'double bind' scenarios. The implications of a neurobiological or materialist approach to Wallace's ethics are significant with respect to the Levinasian model explored in the previous chapter. A biological or brain-based approach to ethics does not fit with the transcendence of the Levinasian system; though he acknowledged the supreme driving force of *conatus essendi*, ultimately Levinas understood it as that which human subjects must overcome.

As with Wallace and Levinas, the human ability to see and 'read' faces is an important area of research for neuroscientists and psychologists. For example, prosopagnosia

is a medical condition that manifests as the difficulty or inability to recognise faces.[141] Alongside the study of pathologies, neuroscientists seek to understand how 'healthy' or 'normal' brains furnish various kinds of other-directed recognition, such as with mirror neuron systems. These cells are active when we express emotions, engage in activities, or experience sensations (e.g., pain), as well as when we observe another person expressing, performing, or experiencing something similar. The focus of this research (down to the very nomenclature of cellular 'mirroring', or the ability to see oneself as another on a neurological level) adds another layer of depth to Levinas' understanding of the ethical value of the face and Wallace's continual focus on human (and animal) faces and 'interfaces' as key indicators of ethical lapses or breakdowns. It points to the cellular origins of traits that characterise our humanity most deeply, such as empathy, as some neuroscientists have argued.[142] Wallace's work in particular points toward the biological mechanisms behind human behaviour, figuring not merely the subject's psychological state but the very functioning of the subject's brain as a precursor for affective connection and ethical agency.

When referencing medical science within the context of literary criticism it is important to emphasise the distinctions between the goals of literary interpretation and clinical research. Studies in neuroscience can provide linguistic and interpretative frameworks but cannot offer conclusive outcomes or 'diagnoses' of literary characters and texts (let alone their authors). Literary criticism is a more hermeneutic and open-ended process; empirical and reproducible methods leading to unambiguous solutions or 'results' are not the primary motivations for its undertaking, historically speaking. To that end, it is important to be clear as to the ways in which cultural analysis can do something that is very distinct from scientific analysis.

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[141] For more information on this condition see: 'Prosopagnosia Research at Bournemouth University - Home' <https://prosopagnosiaresearch.org/> [accessed 20 January 2022]

[142] Marco Iacoboni, 'Imitation, Empathy, and Mirror Neurons', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60 (2009), 653–70.

Since the turn of the millennium, the 'Cognitive Turn' has entered the discourse of literary criticism through the works of Lisa Zunshine and Patrick Colm Hogan, among others. Hogan's *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts: A Guide for Humanists* (2003) maps the intersectional ground between cognitive sciences and literary theory, exploring themes such as 'art, empathy, and the brain' and 'how literature makes us feel' to 'explanations of art and mind with respect to 'the evolutionary turn'.[143] His subsequent study of literature and emotion 'takes up the increasingly important connection between emotion study and ethics, proposing some general principles for understanding this connection both within and outside literary works'.[144] The growing field of medical humanities is another example of the merging of literary and scientific inquiry in the quest to make sense of human experience; Wallace's body of work is fertile ground for the intersecting discourses between medical science and literary arts.

It is with this background in mind that an introduction to the field of neuroethics might be framed. *The Ethical Brain* by Michael S. Gazzaniga (2006) is one of the early texts to consider ethics in view of recent developments in neuroscience. In the preface to his study, Gazzaniga notes that the term *neuroethics* describes 'the field of philosophy that discusses the rights and wrongs of the treatment of, or enhancement of, the human brain'.[145] Gazzaniga posits his own definition of neuroethics as 'the examination of how we want to deal with the social issues of disease, normality, mortality, lifestyle, and the philosophy of living *informed by our understanding of underlying brain mechanisms*'.[146] He explains that neuroethics is a discipline 'that places personal responsibility in the broadest social and biological context'

[143] Patrick Colm Hogan, *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts: A Guide for Humanists* (New York; London: Routledge, 2003).
[144] Patrick Colm Hogan, *What Literature Teaches Us About Emotion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 1.
[145] Michael Gazzaniga, *The Ethical Brain: The Science of Our Moral Dilemmas* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. xiv.
[146] Ibid., p. xv. Italics in original.

and understands the discipline's aims to be socially progressive.[147] He argues that 'it is the job of neuroethics to use what we know about how the brain works to help better define what it is to be human', specifying that this should prescribe 'how we can and should interact socially'.[148] Following Gazzaniga's definition, I will use the term 'neuroethics' to refer to the ethical implications of contemporary neuro-cognitive research and therapeutic interventions as well as the philosophical implications of understanding human ethical agency in terms of brain function.

Along the lines of Wallace's invocation from *This is Water* that 'everybody worships', Gazzaniga concludes that 'one of the crucial lessons neuroscience teaches us is that the brain wants to believe. We are wired to form beliefs. And we form beliefs based on our cultural influences, our environment: things we are taught by our peers, our elders, our society, our religion […]'[149] He also 'support[s] the idea that there could be a universal set of biological responses to moral dilemmas'; like Chomsky's universal grammar, a sort of universal ethics, 'built into our brains'.[150] There are echoes of Wallace's ethical rhetoric of conscious/unconscious action here, as well the trope of uncovering or rediscovering that which is hidden in plain sight. Gazzaniga concludes: 'My hope is that we soon may be able to uncover those ethics, identify them, and begin to live more fully by them. I believe we live by them largely unconsciously now, but that a lot of suffering, war, and conflict could be eliminated if we could agree to live by them more consciously'.[151] Underlying the naïveté of this statement is a profound sincerity, a desire to believe in the therapeutic or salvific narratives offered by scientific discourse around human brain sciences. This raises questions

[147] Ibid., p. xv.
[148] Ibid., p. xviii.
[149] Ibid., p. xviii.
[150] Ibid., p. xviii.
[151] Ibid., p. xix.

about how a neuroethical reading of Wallace fits with but also problematises and disrupts the characterisation of Wallace as a leading figure of the New Sincerity.

Minds, brains, and behaviour are overarching themes in Wallace's oeuvre. A cursory look at Wallace's use of language and imagery in *Infinite Jest* reveals his preoccupation with all things cerebral. Indeed, several significant sections of the book take place within a structure referred to as 'The Brain', a fictional rendering of MIT's student centre, 'one enormous cerebral cortex of reinforced concrete and polymer compounds […] From the air it looks wrinkled; from the roof's fire door it's an almost nauseous system of serpentine trenches, like water-slides in hell. The Union itself […] is a great hollow brain-frame, an endowed memorial to the North-American seat of Very High Tech'.[152] Wallace portrays the student centre both literally and figuratively as a brain, a physical repository for some of the brightest minds in the world. However, the MIT 'Brain' is also where the mysteriously veiled 'Madam Psychosis' conducts her haunting nightly radio show; 'The Brain' therefore hosts both the heights of human cognitive ability and the lows of nightmarish mental dysfunction. Wallace also uses imagery to represent the human brain as the origin point for written and spoken communication, for language as we know it. Neural network-like tunnels feature in both *Infinite Jest* and *The Broom of the System* in the form of interconnected, branching pathways, beneath Boston's Enfield Tennis Academy and the city of Cleveland's telecommunications system, for example. These subterranean interiorities are meant to aid communication and connection, but in both novels, they become blocked or 'highjacked' for more nefarious purposes.

In this chapter I hope to unpack these ideas in greater detail by exploring the role of the 'diseased' brain in Wallace's fiction. I will evaluate how depictions of mental illness are presented as neuroethical dilemmas throughout his work, especially in situations of addiction,

[152] *Infinite Jest*, p. 186.

depression, and extreme antisocial behaviour. To better establish Wallace's position on materialism, the first section of this chapter will focus on his early academic work on the philosophy of free will. The second section will introduce a few contemporary theorists in neuropsychology and cognitive science, such as Simon Baron-Cohen and Steven Pinker, who largely discount traditional notions of free will and understand 'moral' behaviour as fundamentally brain-based. The third section will evaluate how Wallace frames conditions like depression, anxiety, and suicidality as brain diseases in his fictional works. The fourth section will focus on Wallace's explications of addiction, boredom, and the limits of attention, including a re-evaluation of his ideas on drugs in light of the ethics of 'cognitive enhancement'. Through a 'neuroethical' reading of Wallace I will show how scientific discourse can be useful in the interpretation of literature and the arts and, as Hogan has pointed out, how literature can guide science's attempts to define that perennial question of what it is to be a human being, and what it means to be 'doing ethics' more generally.

Free Will, Moral Choice, and the Brain

One of the central themes of Wallace's longest and most acclaimed work, *Infinite Jest*, is 'the problem' of human agency: that is, under what conditions (neurochemical, environmental, socio-economic) agency is limited or outright eradicated. The focal point of the novel is an 'Entertainment' so addictive that its viewers lose all ability or 'will' to do anything other than continue watching the film, thereby causing a state of total paralysis -- a complete dissolution of subjectivity and agency. To this end, Wallace employs the imagery of the highjacked brain as a framework for exploring the limits of free will and human agency. In this section I will consider how Wallace grapples with the philosophical problem of free

will and suggests that human agency and 'choice', moral or otherwise, are not simple facts or realities of human experience, but far more complicated and contingent constructs.

Wallace shares his preoccupation with free will with countless philosophers, authors, scientists, and legal scholars for whom the question of how the brain furnishes human agency is the central problems of ethics. Cognitive scientist Michael Gazzaniga avows that 'free will is an illusion, and we must revise our concepts of what it means to be personally responsible for our actions'.[153] He maintains that 'the concept of free will was an idea that arose before we knew […] how the brain works, and now we should get rid of it'.[154] Following on from this, he advises that

> Responsibility is a dimension of life that comes from social exchange, and social exchange requires more than one brain. When more than one brain interacts, new and unpredictable things begin to emerge, establishing a new set of rules. Two of the properties that are acquired in this new set of rules that weren't previously present are responsibility and freedom. […] Responsibility and freedom are found […] in the space between brains, in the interactions between people.[155]

In other words, responsibility and freedom can never be thoroughly individualised; they exist at a higher order and are by their very nature social, collective, and networked.

Heidi Ravven is another scholar who explores the intersection of ethics and neuroscience. In *The Self Beyond Itself: An Alternative History of Ethics, the New Brain Sciences, and the Myth of Free Will* (2013), she attempts to understand the problem of free will and human agency with respect to naturalist explanations of ethics. Ravven, like

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[153] Michael Gazzaniga, *Who's in Charge? Free Will and the Science of the Brain* (London: Robinson, 2012), p. 129.
[154] Ibid., p. 129.
[155] Ibid., pp. 135-137. *Brain* (pp. 136-137).

Gazzaniga, argues that free will is a myth or construct that does not hold up to scientific scrutiny; however, she is not interested in pursuing fatalist lines of logic towards reductive conclusions about humanity. Instead, she seeks to shift the focus beyond personal responsibility narratives towards a more communal approach to building an ethical culture grounded in values of empathy, care, and cooperation. She begins her 'book about moral agency' with some basic questions about ethics and decision-making: 'Why are some people ethical and others unethical? How do people become ethical or unethical?'[156] And perhaps most importantly, 'How can we get people to be […] more consistently ethical'?[157] Ravven wants to understand what 'our *experience* of being ethical is all about – especially where our ethical capacity comes from, how it develops, and finally how to strengthen it and put it to best use'[158], concerns that are relevant to Wallace's literary character studies. Ravven argues against the commonly held notion (and one that frequently appears in Wallace's writing) that '*The choice is completely our own*' – that 'being human means that we can freely choose the good over the bad no matter what hand nature or nurture has dealt us'.[159] Increasingly to the contrary, she explains, 'evidence from the new brain sciences is amassing that the free will account of the nature and origin of our ethical capacity, of our moral agency, is in fact false, or at least highly unlikely'.[160] She asserts that 'free will is a cultural assumption' and 'a particularly American and Western way of conceiving human nature'.[161] In his commencement speech, Wallace maintains that individual choice (presumably born of free will) is the basis of ethical behaviour towards others. He continues to affirm, for example, that although humans are 'literally hard-wired' to be self-centered, true freedom can only be

[156] Heidi M. Ravven, *The Self Beyond Itself: An Alternative History of Ethics, the New Brain Sciences, and the Myth of Free Will* (New York: New Press, 2013), p. 1.
[157] Ibid., p. 1.
[158] Ibid., p. 1. Italics in original.
[159] Ibid., p. 2. Italics in original.
[160] Ibid., p. 3.
[161] Ibid., p. 3.

achieved through individual choice and self-sacrifice. In opposing this dominant mode of thinking in her study, Ravven attempts to 'expose the free will account of moral agency' as an example of the 'privatization of morality', a function of neoliberal political and economic agendas characteristic of Western capitalist societies.[162] To this end, she renounces free will and yet affirms an ethical agency that stretches beyond the boundaries of the self as 'individual' subject, which is a topic that I will address in greater detail in the next chapter.

Wallace's senior thesis in philosophy, later published as *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (2010), exemplifies his early scholarly interest in this topic. In this work Wallace refutes philosopher Richard Taylor's essay on fatalism, a paper in which Taylor uses a semantic model to argue that the future is already determined and so free will and human agency are illusory. Wallace's critical response to Taylor's argument, in addition to any purely intellectual or philosophical concerns, is characterised by its unmistakable ethical motivations. He seems particularly concerned with the 'violence' done by fatalist assumptions 'to our belief that parts of the universe enjoy at least some degree of causal contingency and that persons enjoy at least some control over what does and will happen to them'.[163] The language of Wallace's critique evinces moral concern with fatalistic or deterministic lines of thinking, 'which are incompatible with the idea that persons as agents are capable of influencing the course of events in their world', and instead seeks to '[resist] the doctrine of helplessness that Taylor 'force[s] upon us'.[164] Tellingly, one of the primary examples used by both Taylor and Wallace involves a potential act of violence, Aristotle's famous naval battle. Wallace takes issue with the ramifications of Taylor's argument: 'this

[162] Ibid., p. 3.
[163] David Foster Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, ed. by Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p 142.
[164] Ibid., p. 143.

obviously means that whether the battle, characterized as a direct result of my personal choice and order, occurs or not tomorrow is *not* in my control after all'.[165] He goes on to add:

> And not only is some event tomorrow not in my control, my very act of giving an order does not seem to be open to deliberation or choice; it is necessitated by the occurrence or non-occurrence of the battle tomorrow. Hence fatalism: what I do is necessary, what I do not do is impossible, what does and will happen is not at all in my control.[166]

He concludes that Taylor misappropriates what is essentially 'a semantic argument […] to force upon us a strange and unhappy metaphysical doctrine that does violence to some of our most basic intuitions about human freedom'.[167] Part of Wallace's refutation involves a discussion of physical vs. situational constraints. He clarifies the distinction between 'what is just physically possible in general and what is physically possible for a given agent to do in a given set of circumstances',[168] thereby expressing his concern with the ethical gap between the ideal and the actual, a theme that he explores in myriad ways throughout his literary career.[169]

In the essay that serves as an introduction to Wallace's published thesis, 'A Head That Throbbed Heartlike: The Philosophical Mind of David Foster Wallace', James Ryerson notes that Wallace 'was perpetually on guard against the ways that abstract thinking (especially thinking about your own thinking) can draw you away from something more genuine and real'.[170] Ryerson characterises Wallace's 'acutely self-conscious, dialectically fevered

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[165] Ibid., p. 146. Italics in original.
[166] Ibid., p. 146.
[167] Ibid., p. 146.
[168] Ibid., p. 148.
[169] Ibid., p. 151.
[170] James Ryerson, 'A Head That Throbbed Heartlike: The Philosophical Mind of David Foster Wallace', in *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, by David Foster Wallace, ed. by Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 1–36, p. 1.

writing' as an example of 'the agony of cognition: how the twists and turns of thought can hold out the promise of true understanding yet also become a danger to it'.[171] This dialectical tension between thinking – often about the process of thinking itself – and acting, in which a choice is made, is foregrounded in discussions of free will and addiction in *Infinite Jest* and of the cognitive processes governing conscious awareness and attention that underlie the topic of boredom in *The Pale King*. In both texts, meta-level processes around thinking and choosing figure as ultimately ethical activities that define human life and render it meaningful. Ryerson characterises Wallace's refutation of Taylor's argument as a 'moral victory' – 'perhaps our actions are indeed fated […] but if they are […] we are going to learn that fact only through an argument that draws on something more substantive than the arid, purely logical moves Taylor made'.[172] In other words, language has no meaning, moral or otherwise, outside of conscious, embodied reality. Logical reasoning and the thought processes that underlie it are necessarily embedded in webs of human feeling and emotional investment that are integral and essential to any cognitive outcome, decision, or choice. This early technical piece valorising free will and human agency foreshadows the more emotionally charged commencement speech Wallace would deliver twenty years later, though his latter testimonial reads more like a plea; true freedom was never a human birth right, but a vulnerable and elusive state for which we must endlessly struggle.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, *This Is Water* foregrounds the critical role of education to any meaningful experience of freedom; the point of a liberal arts education, Wallace argues, is that it offers the best hope for learning how to do the metacognitive work of thinking about one's own choices in life, specifically choices that involve our relationships with the (sometimes hideous) Other. Wallace continues to treat this topic in several works of

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[171] Ibid., p. 1.
[172] Ibid., p. 13.

non-fiction which, as Ryerson notes, 'penetrate beneath the surface of his own satirical portrait[s] to plumb a set of near-existential issues – freedom of choice, the illusion of freedom, freedom *from* choice – that he saw lurking at the heart of modern [America]'.[173] These existential concerns with freedom arise throughout Wallace's fiction as well, most notably in the on-going dialogue between the American and Quebecois operatives, Hugh Steeply and Remy Marathe, in *Infinite Jest*, and in Chris Fogle's long conversion narrative in *The Pale King*. In an attempt to avoid a slide into apathy and nihilism, Fogle analyses his own thoughts about freedom and choice, including his fear of the fatalistic conclusion that, ultimately, 'no one choice is better than any other'.[174] He worries that:

> I was, in a way, too free, or that this kind of freedom wasn't actually real – I was free to choose 'whatever' because it didn't really matter. But that this, too, was because of something I chose – I had somehow chosen to have nothing matter […] The point was that, through making this choice, I didn't matter, either. I didn't stand for anything. If I wanted to matter – even just to myself – I would have to be less free, by deciding to choose in some kind of definite way. Even if it was nothing more than an act of will.[175]

And thus, the will to choose becomes salvific, taking on immense, life-defining significance. Though the rhetoric is not ostensibly moralising here, making a choice, standing for something, and sacrificing freedom in order to generate meaning all imply certain moral distinctions. Wallace avoids overt moralism in this passage, but given that Fogle chooses to forego the presumably lazy or self-indulgent option to sit at home and 'watch the world turn' on TV in order to undertake a career in one of the most tedious yet critically necessary areas

[173] Ibid., p. 18. Italics in original.
[174] David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 225.
[175] Ibid., pp 225-226.

of public service (tax collection), his 'choice' begins to take on moral undertones. Throughout his oeuvre, Wallace maintains that the freedom to choose is the defining feature of human existence.

This conceptual background is a useful point of departure from which to investigate the treatment of human will in Wallace's narratives. *Infinite Jest* can be read as an ontology of human will with respect to the central question of whether it actually exists. (Indeed, the massive tome requires a significant exercise of willpower simply to finish, which feels like a distinctly Wallacean joke.) The novel's dramatisations of the human will in action are more complex and ambivalent than what we see in *Fate, Time, and Language* and *This is Water*. Wallace's narrators lead with the familiar imperative of moral choice, even in the face of extreme difficulty or pain – the 'situational', as opposed to 'physical', possibility of free will as discussed above. This is most poignantly portrayed by ex-addict Don Gately, who through sheer force of will chooses to forgo medically authorised treatment with opiate-based anaesthetics while hospitalised with excruciating injuries. Although his choice results in immense personal pain and suffering, remaining drug-free is Gately's measure of his ethical agency and moral self-worth, as well as a way to repent for the mortal harm he caused others while under the influence of drugs and alcohol. This formulation recalls the traditional Western/Christian (specifically Augustinian, as Ravven has explained[176]) conception of free will as moral choice, which also assigns moral value to suffering. However *Infinite Jest*'s other narrators demonstrate the antithesis, portraying human will as something much more variable and contingent; this is suggested within the opening chapter of the novel when Hal questions whether the damaged even have wills.[177] Thus, the human capacity for free will and 'choice' seems to exist along a spectrum for Wallace, as in the previous chapter's discussion

[176] Ravven, *The Self Beyond Itself*, pp. 144-164.
[177] *Infinite Jest*, p. 16.

of spectrums of ethical ability and emotional engagement. Accordingly, Wallace's fictional portrayals of free will have both moral and medical significance, echoing neuroscientist Ramon y Cajal's 'diseases of the will' as well as the familiar 12-step exhortations to 'turn your Diseased will over to the direction and love of "God as you understand Him"' that recur throughout *Infinite Jest*.[178] In this sense, traditional Christian connotations of the human will also figure it as a site for disease, an embodied entity that can be weakened or damaged through trauma, stress, or pathology.

In his essay '"The Chains of Not Choosing": Free Will and Faith in William James and David Foster Wallace', David H. Evans offers an astute reading of Wallace's conflicted fictional portrayals of free will in light of William James' writings on the tribulations of the 'palsied will'. Evans argues that the intellectual and personal lives of James and Wallace bear 'remarkable parallels', and his essay focuses on their deep concern with 'the place of free will in a world where the self' is 'reduced to an effect of immense inhuman structures and processes' as well as 'the nature and possibility of religious belief in a culture dominated by scientific and naturalistic assumptions'.[179] Evans notes that 'the anxiety caused by the threat of paralysis appears frequently in James's writing', most notably in a famous passage from the *Varieties of Religious Experience* describing 'panic fear'.[180] *Varieties* figures in *Infinite Jest* in literally hollowed out form – Randy Lenz, a violent addict who is plagued by a host of irrational, panic-inducing fears, cuts out the interior of James' text to use as a hiding place for the illegal drugs he uses to manage his anxiety.

Evans makes the case that both James and Wallace interpret the experience of 'personal distress in terms of […] the question of free will versus determinism'.[181] 'The loss

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[178] Ibid., p. 443.
[179] David H. Evans, '"The Chains of Not Choosing": Free Will and Faith in William James and David Foster Wallace', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), pp. 171–89, p. 172.
[180] Ibid., p. 173.
[181] Ibid., p. 173.

of a sense of agency during James's periods of depression,' writes Evans, 'resembled all too distinctly the condition of human beings in the picture of the world offered by the most advanced scientific theories of the time, a world of inhuman mechanical processes, in which individual free will was a mere sentimental chimera'.[182] Evans records poignant passages of James' struggles with a deep sense of 'moral paralysis' and efforts to overcome the terror of his own determinist beliefs 'that we are Nature through and through, and that we are wholly conditioned, that not a wiggle of our will happens save as a result of physical laws.'[183] For both Wallace and James, 'the affirmation of the possibility of choice […] is central' to coming to terms with these existential and moral struggles – 'A world without choice is a world without agency, and so […] a world without humanity'.[184] The cognitive capacity for human choice is thus critical for both Wallace and James; Evans writes that for James, and ultimately for Wallace, 'it is not the chooser who chooses so much as […] the act of choice that brings into being both the chosen and the chooser, which in this case are one and the same'.[185] The implication here is that 'choice' bears an important soteriological role, aligning with Christian notions of damnation, repentance, and salvation. To this end, Wallace 'appeal[s] to [James'] conception of choice as an act that brings into being the actor, and preserves what it means to be human'.[186] As I discussed in the previous chapter, the aesthetic choices that underlie artistic and literary creation have ethical value for Wallace; in transforming raw experience into meaning, the work of art instantiates the uniquely human potential for self-determination.

Evans establishes that 'choice' is the critical (and ultimately moral) measure of humanity for writers and philosophers like Wallace and James, but this conclusion offers no

[182] Ibid., p. 173.
[183] Ibid., p. 174.
[184] Ibid., p. 174.
[185] Ibid., p. 175.
[186] Ibid., p. 175.

framework for interpreting addicts like Randy Lenz. Lenz is a desperate character whose compulsive lying and brutality (to animals in particular) seems to operate beyond the orbit of 'free will'. He is characterised by his paranoid fear of digital clocks, and yet his own behaviour seems similarly mechanical and programmed or inevitable, like the passage of time itself. Lenz's destruction of the William James book represents the obliteration of the humanising potential of language by the physical demands of addiction (language has no meaning outside of embodied reality). The narrative raises some difficult questions about the extent to which Randy Lenz is actually 'free' from whatever compels him to make such sociopathic and violent choices. The text goes to great lengths to describe Randy's will to commit brutal acts in terms of an extreme desire or need to discharge psychic pain through violence. The narrative exhorts us to condemn Lenz for his grotesque violence towards animals, his extreme narcissism, selfishness, his manipulative behaviour and compulsive lying (not to mention his casual racism and sexism), but also suggests that he is truly sick and 'damaged', perhaps beyond repair. As a reader, it becomes difficult *not* to attempt to diagnose this character; it is impossible to make sense of his behaviour without a psychiatric interpretation of many of his moral failings and crimes. To what extent is Lenz 'free' to control his violent impulses? If he is less free (due to 'damage' or trauma, or mental illness), then what is the appropriate way to deal with his inability to act ethically? Wallace's characterisation of Lenz forces this neuroethical dilemma to the surface of the narrative, and with it, the awareness that there is no satisfactory or humane answer that exists in contemporary American society today.

Evans recalls Hal Incandenza's oft-cited words from the first pages (though chronological end) of *Infinite Jest*: 'I'm not a machine. I feel and believe […]. I'm not just a creatus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for function'.[187] This is, of course, exactly what is at

[187] *Infinite Jest*, p. 12.

stake in Wallace's consideration of the limits of the human will. Hal, a child-prodigy characterised by the exceptional abilities of his mind, is terrified by the possibility of a diseased or inadequately operating brain dragging him into an abyss of apathy, disabling his subjectivity and agency, rendering him little more than a biological machine. Wallace's winking irony is that the 'damaged' or 'diseased' will is not a state of exception after all, but simply the norm, an integral part of being human. This line of thinking foreshadows another passage in *Infinite Jest* that focuses on the childhood of Hal's father, James Incandenza, in which James' alcoholic father tyrannically lectures his son on the nature of the human mind:

> Son, it's just neural spasms, those thoughts in your mind are just the sound of your head revving, and head is still just body, Jim. Commit this to memory. Head is body. Jim, brace yourself against my shoulders here for this hard news, at ten: you're a machine a body an object, Jim, no less than this rutilant Montclair, this coil of hose here or that rake there for the front yard's gravel or sweet Jesus this nasty fat spider flexing in its web over there….[188]

James' father's understanding of the human being as a collection of neural spasms is a source of deep nihilism for him. He advises his son to accept this fact in order to become, 'for better or worse […] a man. A player. A body in commerce with bodies'.[189] Part of this process involves learning to abjure emotion and sensitivity, to confront painful realities: '[Y]ou have to learn to control this sort of oversensitivity to hard truths, this sort of thing, take and exert some goddamn *control* is the whole point'.[190] Incandenza instructs the young James to understand his brain as a computer and his body as machine, even when he feels it 'singing

[188] Ibid., p. 159.
[189] Ibid., p. 160.
[190] Ibid., p. 161. Italics in original.

with nerves and blood'.[191] This embodied emotion is what his grandson Hal struggles to defend when he pleads for his humanity on the very grounds of his feelings and beliefs as opposed to his freedom to choose and to control. At another point Hal narrates in the first person: 'This is your body. They want you to know. You will have it with you always. On this issue there is no counsel; you must make your best guess. For myself, I do not expect ever really to know'.[192] This omnipresent tension around questions of agency pervades Wallace's fiction, producing narrative webs in which characters find themselves trapped between moralistic endorsements of free will and the overbearing nihilism of biological determinism.

Moral Behaviour and the Brain

As I have discussed in the previous section, Wallace's writing both endorses and problematises free will as the condition of possibility for ethical agency. In the following sections, I will argue that many of his key texts are informed by contemporary theories in psychiatry, neuropsychology, and cognitive science that depart from traditional notions of free will and discuss how Wallace aligns with these theories in his literary portrayals of mental illness. As philosopher Kwame Appiah has noted, 'psychology can serve ethics',[193] and indeed contemporary neuropsychology studies are often framed in terms of distinctly ethical outcomes. A dominant trend in these studies is the use of the spectrum as a descriptive and/or diagnostic tool that deconstructs rigid binaries and counters reductive thinking. Initially applied to neurodevelopmental conditions like autism as well as to behavioural expressions of gender and sexuality, spectrum models are now applied across a wide range of

[191] Ibid., p. 162.
[192] Ibid., p. 176.
[193] Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009), p. 124.

traits and qualities, disrupting entrenched notions of ‘normal’ vs. ‘abnormal’ in favour of more fluid and inclusive categories such as ‘neurotypical’ or ‘neurodiverse’. In the previous chapter, I described Wallace’s characters in terms of a spectrum of moral consciousness, from states of moral oblivion to experiences of epiphany and moral enlightenment. In the following sections of this chapter, I will evaluate how Wallace’s characters exist along spectrums of mental health and illness and show how Wallace uses this to comment on the contingent nature of individual agency. For example, many of Wallace’s characters present with symptoms that indicate a personality disorder: they lack the ability to experience and show empathy, to control aggressive or violent behaviour, and to make other-directed sacrifices, all of which come to bear on their decision-making abilities. By applying medical frameworks to traditional philosophies of ethics, Wallace’s texts deconstruct stable notions of human ethical agency and subjectivity.

Popular accounts of neuropsychology studies published within a decade of Wallace’s death, such as Simon Baron-Cohen’s *Zero Degrees of Empathy: A New Theory of Human Cruelty and Kindness* (2011), Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* (2011), and Robert Sapolsky’s *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (2017), attest to broad shifts in how the general public makes sense of human moral behaviour. The theories advanced in these publications are not without their flaws and their critics -- John Gray (among others) has taken Pinker’s statistics to task, questioning his claims of progress with respect to alleged decreases in violence in modern history, while important critiques of Baron-Cohen’s methodologies are addressed in Cordelia Fine’s *Delusions of Gender*. But taken together they indicate a paradigm shift around our understanding of ethical agency in the contemporary Western world, deconstructing ideas about human morality in the process.

Simon Baron-Cohen's 2011 study *Zero Degrees of Empathy* seeks to understand the neurological underpinnings of the extremes of human behaviour. He posits 'evil' as a form of 'empathy erosion' that occurs in the brain due to various physiological and environmental factors and believes that pharmaceutical drugs can (and should) be developed and administered to mitigate this. His research focuses on how neurological circuitry has evolved to enable feelings and expressions of empathy and aggression. This includes determining how to measure individual differences in empathy (what he calls the 'empathy quotient') and, on a cellular level, localizing groups of genes and signalling factors that may contribute to other-directed sentiments and empathic or aggressive emotions.[194] He ultimately understands empathy as a skill for which humans have varying levels of innate aptitude, but which ultimately must be acquired; to this end he differentiates between 'cognitive' and 'affective' empathy.[195] Baron-Cohen laments that 'evil is treated as incomprehensible, a topic that cannot be dealt with because the scale of the horror is so great that nothing can convey its enormity'.[196] He argues that a refusal to understand the neuroscience behind acts of violence and aggression is one of the biggest failures in trying to alleviate or prevent such acts from occurring in the first place.

Steven Pinker's basic argument in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* is that there has been a measurable and significant decrease in human violence over the course of modern history thanks to the continual optimisation of social and political structures. Pinker's work in evolutionary and cognitive psychology aligns with Baron-Cohen's theories and conclusions in several key ways. For Pinker, human moral psychology is co-produced by a host of biological and environmental factors that can exacerbate pro- or anti-social instincts and tendencies. One of Pinker's (rather Hobbesian) viewpoints is that human evolution cannot

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[194] Simon Baron-Cohen, *Zero Degrees of Empathy: A New Theory of Human Cruelty and Kindness* (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2011), p. ix.
[195] Ibid., p. xi.
[196] Ibid., p. 4.

keep pace with our ability to enhance our social and environmental structures; thus, to encourage moral progress, society should construct laws, governments, and social structures that optimise our brain-based limits as ethical agents. The sections of Pinker's study most relevant to Wallace's characterisations include his chapters on 'Inner Demons' and 'Better Angels'. By invoking religious symbolism for internal psychological mechanisms, capabilities, and weaknesses, Pinker calls up theological notions such as original sin and reframes them as neurobiological realities. He refers to certain pathways within the brain as evolved 'organs of violence' (e.g., 'the rage circuit') and categorizes acts of violence such as predation, dominance, revenge, sadism, and ideology according to the brain functions by which they are governed.[197] The opposing 'better angels' include empathy, self-control, moral sense, and reason; like Baron-Cohen, Pinker evokes a scarcity model to frame these more desirable mental and behavioural traits in terms of limited resources.[198] In detailing the 'organs of violence' within the human brain, Pinker also argues that understanding how brains are wired for violence will help prevent acts of aggression.[199] To make their case, these scientists cite graphic examples and case studies that transcend history, culture, and race. Baron-Cohen introduces his study by providing several examples of 'empathy erosion around the globe' (including cold blooded brutality, murder, and rape).[200] Pinker offers similar examples and goes a step further in considering the implications of the wide-scale lust for artistic, literary, and visual portrayals of violent and/or sadistic acts, a topic Wallace discusses in several of his essays and explicitly engages with in his fiction.

Cognitive and behavioural scientists like Pinker, Baron-Cohen, and Sapolsky see extreme acts of aggression and violence as testosterone-linked, and therefore more likely to

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[197] Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 599.
[198] Ibid., pp. 689-693.
[199] Ibid., pp. 599-613.
[200] Baron-Cohen, *Zero Degrees of Empathy*, p. 7.

be committed by men. This offers an interesting parallel with Wallace's 'hideous men' and fictional explorations of problematic or 'toxic' masculinities; his rich literary portrayal of expressions of violent or aggressive acts, usually perpetrated by male protagonists, do not seem incidental. Baron-Cohen highlights the 'trouble with testosterone'[201] not only in his studies on human violence, but also in his research on autism, a neurodevelopmental spectrum condition believed to affect boys more frequently than girls, which links difficulties in communication with the inability to process certain emotional responses. In chronicling breakdowns in communication, Wallace's literary fiction deals both directly and indirectly with autism or autistic characters, who are usually male. James O. Incandenza, the father-ghost that haunts *Infinite Jest*, is an example of a character suffering from a collection of psychological conditions: addiction, depression, suicidality, and quite possibly some kind of autism-spectrum disorder as well: 'Himself was missing the part of the human brain that allowed for being aware enough of other people to disapprove of them, Orin had said – or dislike'.[202] Although I will deal with questions of sex, gender, and violence more directly in the final chapter of this thesis, it is relevant to note the alignments between Wallace and the aforementioned cognitive scientists with respect to their views on sex difference and behaviour.

Wallace's fictional portrayals of mental dysfunction include plot structures and framing devices conjuring medical or psychiatric clinics as well as halfway houses or group or private therapy meetings. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* notably invites readers to step into the role of the psychotherapist who is tasked with evaluating acts of cruelty, violence, and general bad behaviour from a clinical standpoint in addition to a moral one. On a formal level, it also attempts to simulate a kind of metacognition around thinking and

[201] Ibid., p. x.
[202] *Infinite Jest*, p. 736.

decision-making, drawing connections between the self-reflexivity inherent in moral deliberation and the self-reflexivity that torments the disordered or beleaguered psyche. Additionally, *Brief Interviews* dramatises what Pinker calls 'the moralization gap', a kind of moral cognitive bias, or the tendency to justify one's bad behaviour. Pinker writes that 'self-deception is an exotic theory, because it makes the paradoxical claim that something called 'the self' can be both deceiver and deceived.' 'We have to be prepared, when putting on psychological spectacles, to see that evildoers always think they are acting morally'.[203] Layers and levels of self-awareness and self-deception play an important role throughout Wallace's work and in *Brief Interviews* especially, where the plotlines often revolve around the narrative unmasking of the subject's mental machinations and self-justification processes.

Merely a superficial reading of Wallace's fictional works reveals the troubled mind as a thematic cornerstone of his oeuvre. Psychological states of anxiety, depression, neuroticism, mania, paranoia, and psychosis pervade the content of his fiction, manifesting as formal or stylistic tropes. His writing also uses language to convey a variety of moods, such as the verbosity and hyperbole associated with mania, or the obsessive and recursive hyper focus associated with neurosis. His excessive use of footnotes serves to interrupt and distract in the manner of the persistent intrusive thoughts that characterise anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders. To recall Zunshine and Colm Hogan's point that I raised in the introduction to this chapter, Wallace's writing presents an example of literature's ability to do something distinct from clinical science; in this case, by narrating the experience of mental dysfunction (as opposed to clinical science's second-hand descriptions). To this end, the narratives examine the indeterminate boundaries between cultural or collective problems, including public health crises, and the disordered or diseased individual. For example, a great deal of critical attention has been paid to Wallace's treatment of narcissism and solipsism in

[203] Pinker, *Better Angels*, p. 596.

American culture and society, topics he writes and speaks about at length in his interviews and essays. But in his fiction he goes a step further, probing the threshold at which the depressed person's solipsism crosses over into clinical illness or disease. He asks his readers to consider the extent to which the depressed person, or the narcissist or addict, is 'free' to choose their thoughts and actions, and accordingly, whether we should consider them with compassion or contempt.

Clinical Depression, Anxiety, and Suicide

Wallace's writings on depression, anxiety, and suicide are some of his most poignant and profound, not least because his work was informed by his own personal struggles with these issues. Mental health concerns are increasingly recognised as significant public health problems that affect a large proportion of the population globally. Depression is a leading cause of disability[204] and suicide rates have been increasing in many countries worldwide, including in the United States, which saw a thirty percent increase over the past thirty years.[205] Globally, suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among young people aged 15-29 years according to the World Health Organization.[206] Many more people die by suicide each year in the U.S. than homicide, but due to imbalanced media coverage, homicides are mistakenly believed to be more common.[207] Furthermore, there are far more attempts than actual suicide deaths, with ideation representing a significant psychiatric concern.

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[204] For more information see: 'Depression' <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression> [accessed 20 January 2022]

[205] Suicide rates in the U.S. increased 33% from 1999 to 2019 according to the CDC. For more information see: Hedegaard, Holly, Suicide Mortality in the United States, 1999-2019 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2021) <https://doi.org/10.15620/cdc:101761>

[206] World Health Organization, Suicide Worldwide in 2019: Global Health Estimates (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2021) <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/341728> [accessed 20 January 2022]

[207] For example, CDC data for 2019 indicate that 47,511 people died by suicide in 2019, which is roughly twice the number of deaths due to homicide. 'Facts About Suicide', 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/index.html> [accessed 20 January 2022]

Although medical models for understanding the aetiology and expression of mental illnesses have overtaken longstanding judgements of mental dysfunction as a character deficiency, the tendency to equate prolonged mental distress in terms of moral failure lingers. Suicide, for example, was historically considered a mortal sin, resulting in the refusal of Christian burial. Although societal views have moved on considerably over the past century, many still regard it as a profoundly selfish choice; Wallace's own close friend, the writer Jonathan Franzen, expressed it as such in an essay detailing his thoughts on Wallace's own deteriorating mental health in the years leading up to his death.[208]

Wallace's attempts to make sense of the ethical ramifications of mental illness extend to his writings on these topics. As I mentioned earlier, many of Wallace's characterisations read like psychiatric case studies that involve the reader in a quasi-clinical or diagnostic role. His focus on clinical and sub-clinical depressive disorders is present from his earliest fiction to his final unfinished novel. Wallace's first work of semi-autobiographical fiction, 'The Planet Trillaphon as it Relates to the Bad Thing' (1984), was published by the Amherst student press following a severe depressive episode that involved an initial suicide attempt. He explicitly returned to themes of depression and suicide in shorter works of fiction like 'The Depressed Person', 'Suicide as a Sort of Present', and 'Good Old Neon' in addition to their wider narrative exposition in *Infinite Jest.* Taken together, these works can help unpack Wallace's ideas on the nature of mental illness as a physical, embodied reality that alters subjectivity and overrides agency and 'personal choice'.

In 'Planet Trillaphon', one of his earliest published works, Wallace paints a fictional portrait of a young man suffering from 'severe clinical depression'. The piece begins with a direct disclosure: 'I've been on antidepressants for […] about a year now, and I suppose I feel

[208] Jonathan Franzen, *Farther Away: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012), pp. 15-52, pp. 41-42.

as if I'm pretty qualified to tell what they're like'.[209] What follows is ostensibly a literary account of a medical condition. The state of 'severe clinical depression' is described in rich metaphor; it is The Bad Thing, which presents in more or less classic fashion: hallucinations of illness or injury that lead to self-harm, extreme nausea and weight loss, and an uncontrollable 'crying problem'. The narrator understands his malaise in terms of a sickness in his brain; he visualises his neuroses as 'wrinkly gray boils' that cover his cortex and repeatedly stresses the organic and uncontrollable nature of his condition. After a botched suicide attempt and subsequent psychiatric intervention, the narrator begins a new life on Tofranil, a tricyclic anti-depressant. The prescription drugs shift his experience of reality; he feels like he is living in a parallel universe. The planet Trillaphon is similar enough to Earth, but mercifully the Bad Thing doesn't exist there. And yet, were it not for the Bad Thing, the narrator would prefer to remain at home.

What follows is an ontology of depression and mental illness: 'you are the sickness itself'; 'it is what "defines" you'; 'you are the Bad Thing', etc. The narrator understands his illness to pervade every cell of his body, even extending to subcellular and subatomic levels, asking the reader to imagine a condition in which:

> Not just your own cells, even, but the e. coli and lactobacilli in you, too, the mitochondria, basal bodies […] All just *sick* as hell. Now imagine that every single *atom* in every single cell in your body is sick like that, sick, intolerably sick. And every proton and neutron in every atom […] Every electron […] Quarks and neutrinos out of their minds […] Just imagine that, a sickness spread utterly through every bit of you,

[209] David Foster Wallace, 'The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing', *The David Foster Wallace Reader* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 5.

> even the bits of the bits. So that your very […] *essence* is characterized by nothing other than the feature of sickness; you and the sickness are, as they say, "one."[210]

The narrator goes on to explain that when the Bad Thing attacks, it acts like a mental filter: his life on Earth feels intolerable. His very perspective is hijacked by the illness, his ability to think, to reason, to 'change the way [he is] perceiving and sensing and processing stuff':

> It's made you sick in just such a way that you can't get better. And you start thinking about this pretty vicious situation, and you say to yourself, "Boy oh boy, how the heck is the Bad Thing able to do this?" You think about it – really hard, since it's in your best interests to do so – and then all of a sudden it sort of dawns on you. […] The Bad Thing is you. Nothing else: no bacteriological infection or having gotten conked on the head with a board or a mallet when you were a little kid, or any other excuse; you are the sickness yourself.[211]

He describes his potentially terminal illness in terms of an autoimmune disease in which his body and brain attack themselves from within, resulting in a degenerative paralysis that puts him 'out of commission'.

Thus far, the narrator's account reads like a classic psychiatric case study that adheres to the disease model for clinical depression. Curiously, there are knock on effects to his disease, such as hyper-sensitivity to the suffering of others and a super-charged empathic sensibility. In this respect, the narrator raises the possibility that his disease might be a maladaptive consequence of his ability to experience empathy. He questions whether the

[210] Ibid., pp. 10-11. Italics in original.
[211] Ibid., p. 12.

neurologically evolved mechanisms that allow for a normal degree of emotion and sensitivity have somehow gone awry in his physiology; his sickness causes him to feel too much, which ultimately becomes unbearable for him.

Also curious is the relative opacity of the narrator's identity and personal history beyond his disclosure of severe mental illness. We learn that he attended elite schools and possesses exceptional academic abilities; he wins a cash prize from his university for his work in economics. However, he reveals that succeeding in this 'prestigious and expensive' environment seems only to worsen his mental state. He mentions the 'billions of dollars of clothes and electronics equipment' spent by his grandparents to send him to Brown, the hyperbole of which betrays a sense of guilt and unworthiness. He becomes obsessed with worry over a bus driver who may no longer be able to work and support his family following an injury. We finally learn, in a throwaway comment at the end of the piece, that he hopes his 'exile' on the planet Trillaphon will result in his ability to 'lead a Normal and Productive Life as a lawyer or something'.[212] The piece ends mid-sentence a few lines later, as the narrator admits to himself that this outcome is 'just highly silly when you think about what I said before concerning the fact that the Bad Thing is really'.[213] This abrupt ending hints at the narrator's subjective truth: he *is* the Bad Thing, and the Bad Thing is him. He can run, but he cannot hide or escape from himself or his illness, which may well be terminal. While the ontology of mental illness as a neurobiological reality is emphasized throughout the piece, the narrator's allusions to his background and upbringing indicate environmental factors – social class, family expectations, norms of masculinity – that influence or contribute to his experience of his condition. Perhaps his neurochemical constitution precludes a normal life on Earth, but also, and critically, he understands that success on Earth demands adherence to

[212] Ibid., p. 19.
[213] Ibid., p. 19.

strict social norms that would amount to a kind of psychic suicide. Either way, the tension between the neurobiologically discrete individual and the potentially warping structures of the status quo takes on great relevance here, with numerous ethical consequences. The narrator questions whether the real point of the Tofranil is to help him feel less (that is, to empathise less with the pain and struggles of the working class) so that he can capitalise more efficiently on his intelligence and social privileges. He understands that studying economics and law will allow him to become 'Normal and Productive', which he defines as the ability to make money. In this sense, 'Planet Trillaphon' both affirms the neurobiological disease model for clinical depression and implicates the external structures that contribute to its manifestation.

'The Depressed Person', originally published in *Harper's*, offers a different portrayal of the experience of clinical depression from what we see in 'Trillaphon'. This story features a shift in narrative voice from first to third person and from male to female subject/patient. Unlike in 'Trillaphon', the Depressed Person's experience of her condition does not result in an excess of other-directed concern at the expense of the self. Instead, her intense level of self-directed anxiety diminishes her capacity for empathic engagement with others and traps her in a solipsistic cage of her own making. The unnamed narrator of this story questions the aetiology of the depressed person's condition, speculating on whether she truly suffers from an 'endogenous' illness that must be treated with prescription drugs (as her psychiatrist avers), or whether her dysfunctional family dynamic has caused her to develop an alienating sense of narcissistic entitlement. Formally, this story is structured by its recursivity and the circularity of logic around the protagonist's condition; the moniker 'The Depressed Person' is repeated over and over like a self-fulfilling mantra, for example. This structure points to the idea that although her cage may be of her own making, she is trapped nonetheless, spinning

in endless circles, worrying about her inability to worry about others, and missing each chance at genuine connection.

'Good Old Neon', a story from the *Oblivion* collection, is presented as a prolonged suicide note detailing the narrator's decision to end his life after providing a thorough inventory of his personal and psychological history and concluding that he is fundamentally a 'fraud' who is unable to truly love anyone, including himself. As in both 'Trillaphon' and 'The Depressed Person', the narrator is plagued not merely by intense emotional pain but by his inability to express it to anyone else, whether through language or any other medium. As in 'Trillaphon' and 'Depressed Person', the narrator speculates on the origin of his illness, wondering if he inherited a 'bad gene' from his biological parents (he explains that he was adopted and never learned the family or medical history of his birth parents). In the end, he decides that whether his 'fraudulence' is 'biological' or not is irrelevant: 'Of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you… and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will...'[214] After years of constructing elaborate masks to hide his pain from others, the narrator finally decides that choosing to end his own life is the only authentic expression of his subjectivity and agency.

'Suicide as a Sort of Present', another short piece from *Brief Interviews*, queries the origins and heritability of mental illness and ominously doubles as a kind of suicide note. The narrator's mother's mental health struggles manifest as a disappointment with motherhood and reach toxic levels as she projects her own flaws and fears of imperfection upon her son. Her inability to overcome her own feelings of inadequacy leads her to emotionally reject her child. This short text exposes how damaging the effects of a parent's mental health issues can be for their children, but also hints at the fact that mood disorders and mental illnesses, especially suicide, do have genetic components and are often hereditary. Through nature,

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[214] *Oblivion*, p. 179.

nurture, or some combination of both, the mother passes her condition to her son, who eventually decides that his suicide will be a 'sort of present' for her.

In each of these shorter works of fiction, the narratives dissect the interiority of a single character who suffers from an acute case of mental distress. *Infinite Jest* goes further in seeking to portray the complexity of mental illness on a macro level, with the spiritual, psychic, and medical struggles of the characters serving to mirror a nation in crisis. As in the shorter works, there is a great deal of ambivalence about the origin point of conditions like depression and anxiety, although there is a strong suggestion that the most severe cases are 'endogenous', resulting from brain chemistry gone awry. The psychic pain these characters experience manifests as a physical event, an organic entity that not only acts upon them but ontologically defines them and is therefore beyond their ability to change or control. Eugenio M. understands the onset of his depression as a moment in time when 'something happened in his head' and a latent condition was activated. He explains it as 'a large dark billowing shape [that] came billowing out of some corner in my mind […] out of some backwater of my psyche I had not had the slightest inkling was there'.[215] As in 'Trillaphon', he experiences his mental illness as physical thing that surrounds him on all sides: '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'.[216] The black sail does not approach from afar; it is part of the fabric of his being, arising unbidden from within. However, despite the medicalised descriptions indicating malfunctioning brains, nearly all of the characters who suffer from debilitating depression in *Infinite Jest* have experienced significant trauma in their lives, usually in the form of family abuse or dysfunction. These back stories and traumatic histories complicate the function of mental illness within the narrative, exposing

[215] *Infinite Jest*, p. 649.
[216] Ibid., p. 649.

the ways in which society reproduces and propagates trauma on individual and collective levels, literally making people sick.

If one of Wallace's primary themes is fundamentally a question of neuroplasticity, that is, how human neural pathways and brain function are literally shaped by the subject's experience of its environment, a secondary but related theme involves the ambiguous role of the psychiatric establishment and the pharmaceutical industry in mediating this plasticity. Throughout his fiction, Wallace points to ways in which the field of psychiatry has evolved to manage the symptoms while undermining the root causes of mental illness. He also critiques the corporate ethics of pharmaceutical companies that profit off mental illness and dysfunction. In this sense, his writing reveals how the American medical establishment helps to reproduce some of the sickness it seeks to heal. A scene from *Infinite Jest* illustrates this dilemma through a parody of a clinical case study of schizophrenia, deploying irony to highlight the history of dubious medical ethics in a field that has tended to pathologise difference. A character named Fenton is diagnosed as 'a dyed-in-the-wool paranoid schizophrenic who believed that radioactive fluids were invading his skull and that hugely complex high-tech-type machines had been specially designed and programmed to pursue him without cease until they caught him and made brutal sport of him and buried him alive'.[217] The obvious irony is that the diagnostic treatments Fenton is subjected to are not dissimilar to his supposed paranoid delusions. The scientists who conduct these studies in the name of 'advancing science' reduce him to his brain's activity, ignoring his humanity in the process. Their 'thesis was turning out pretty clearly to be SCHIZOPHRENIA: BODY […] poor old Fenton here was more or less hopeless as an extra-institutional functioning unit, but […] on the up-side, science could at least give his existence some sort of meaning by studying him very carefully to help learn how schizophrenia manifested itself in the human

[217] Ibid., p. 47.

body's brain'.[218] The scientists studying Fenton have reduced his subjectivity to a malfunctioning brain and in doing so, stripped him of his agency: 'with the aid of cutting edge Positron-Emission Topography or 'P.E.T.' technology (since supplanted by Invasive Digitals …), they could scan and study how different parts of poor old Fenton's dysfunctional brain emitted positrons in a whole different topography than your average hale and hearty nondelusional God-fearing Albertan's brain'.[219] In this case, the diagnostic and treatment process itself causes harm to the patient: 'you could hear the last surviving bits of his functional dye-permeated mind being screamed out of him for all time as the viewer digitally superimposed an image of Fenton's ember-red and neutron-blue brain in the lower-right corner'.[220] This passage therefore reaches a different conclusion with respect to the origins of mental disorders, suggesting that a significant part of Fenton's dysfunction stems from society's inability to allow for physical, mental, and bodily difference. Fenton's plight also warns of the danger of reducing the complexity of the mind to a neurological processing unit without taking external and environmental structures into account. The medium in which human subjects and their brains function is the ultimate ethical contingency, a point which I will investigate further in the next chapter.

Addiction, Attention, and Boredom

Addiction is a major public health issue in America and around the world, and by all accounts the number of people suffering with it is growing. In addition to the old staples of drugs, alcohol, and gambling, there are more potent addictive agents available today than at any time in history. Increasingly, addictive behaviours are moving online, or mediated

[218] Ibid., p. 48.
[219] Ibid., p. 48.
[220] Ibid., p. 48.

through online platforms, and include categories such as video games, social media, shopping, and pornography, among others. Historically, addiction was understood in moral terms – a weakness of the will or a moral failing. During the 20th century it came to be seen as a potentially heritable disease or deficit within the addict's neuropsychological scaffolding. Currently, many experts understand addiction as a learning disorder that can stem from different kinds of trauma. In Wallace's fictional worlds, the state of addiction is rendered as all three. *Infinite Jest*, Wallace's greatest work, is fundamentally a book about addiction, and it exhaustively explores this state from myriad physical, psychological, existential, ontological, and ethical perspectives. Throughout the novel, mental health problems like anxiety and depression are almost always associated with addictive states, which are likewise explained with respect to neurochemical imbalances, predisposing characters like Kate Gompert, Joelle van Dyne, and James and Hal Incandenza to addictive-depressive personalities. Furthermore, the addicts of *Infinite Jest* are not merely unlucky recipients of a genetic predisposition to substance misuse, mental illness, or brain 'disease'; they are also victims and perpetrators of traumas of all kinds. The condition of addiction generally constitutes a moral category in Wallace's writing, which reflects the dominant cultural views on addiction in America and much of the Western world. This creates a problematic dichotomy: adhering to AA's pathology model, Wallace's narrators posit addiction as a permanent brain disease, albeit one with a confusing moral component involving the addict's presumably free choice to engage with or abstain from the addictive substance in question, which may be illegal, and could result in harm to the user or to others. As I have shown, the ability to freely choose one's actions holds serious ethical value for Wallace. Addiction, however, is a condition that erodes or eradicates the subject's ability to choose, at least with respect to the addictive agent, as his texts also demonstrate. A corollary ethical issue this raises is how society should deal with people who suffer from various forms

of addiction, including deciding how much care and public support they should receive. Wallace's narrators regard addicts with both compassion and contempt, mirroring the ambivalence within the American psyche towards people suffering from addictions and other mental health disorders.

Through the intertwined narratives of *Infinite Jest*'s Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House and Enfield Tennis Academy, Wallace undertakes an in-depth exploration of addictive desire and depletion in late 20th century America. At ETA, the high functioning students use drugs to help manage the stress of the ultra-competitive academic and athletic demands placed on them by their parents and instructors. Like many of the teenage residents, Hal Incandenza experiments with 'recreational' drugs for therapeutic ends, to 'help manage the intrapsychic storms'.[221] The purpose of such drug taking is 'to basically short out the whole motherboard and blow out all the circuits and slowly recover and be almost neurologically reborn and start the gradual cycle all over again'.[222] 'This circular routine, if your basic wiring's OK to begin with, can work surprisingly well throughout adolescence and sometimes into one's like early twenties, before it starts to creep up on you'.[223] Hal's narrative focuses on his struggles with cannabis dependency but is representative of a much broader trend: 'But so some E.T.A.s – not just Hal Incandenza by any means – are involved with recreational substances, is the point. Like who isn't, at some life-stage, in the U.S.A. and Interdependent regions, in these troubled times, for the most part'.[224] It is noteworthy that the narrator poses this as a statement instead of a question, which suggests that the real issue here is not the drugs so much as 'these troubled times.'

To complicate matters, *Infinite Jest* figures addiction as an ontological state that is fundamental to the human experience. Furthermore, this ontology is commercially valuable

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[221] Ibid., p. 53.
[222] Ibid., p. 53.
[223] Ibid., p. 53.
[224] Ibid., p. 53.

because it can be manipulated to certain ends, an act which is both encouraged and exploited by the highest echelons of government and private enterprise. 'Infinite Jest' (the entertainment) is the ultimate addictive agent, the pure distillation of destructive desire, and therefore the ultimate 'supernormal stimulus'. Deirdre Barrett's *Supernormal Stimuli* provides a useful framework for understanding Wallace's portrayals of addiction and emotional disengagement in a postmodern world, creating an analogy between hyperreality and supernormal stimuli with respect to the hypermediated culture of pervasive entertainment and advertising. According to Barrett, 'the essence of the supernormal stimulus is that the exaggerated imitation can exert a stronger pull than the real thing'.[225] Echoing Pinker, she explains that many human behavioural problems exist because the pace of human evolution lags far behind the pace of technological innovation and development. Human drives and 'instincts arose to call attention to rare necessities; now we let them dictate the manufacture of useless attention-grabbers'.[226] Her central thesis, that 'animals and man are […] often harmed by what they desire – especially when encountering new stimuli for which evolution hasn't prepared them'[227] is interesting not only for its quasi-religious/Freudian subtext, but also because it posits capital-E Evolution in a teleological or even theological sense: Evolution is personified as the lame god who can't quite catch up with man's wily schemes to invent newer and more seductive forms of gratification.

On a Brocken-esque outcropping in Arizona secret agents Steeply and Marathe discuss the possibilities and limits of the 'design' of the human brain as they meditate on the Faustian dilemmas facing a millennial North American society confronted with an ever-expanding array of supernormal stimuli. They discuss a 'biomedical experiment' involving neuroelectric stimulation resulting in the discovery of 'stimulatable pleasure-tissue *p*-

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[225] Deirdre Barrett, *Supernormal Stimuli: How Primal Urges Overran Their Evolutionary Purpose*, 1st ed (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2010), p. 3.
[226] Ibid., p. 4.
[227] Ibid., p. 136.

terminals', 'The Department of Euphoria, so to speak, within the human brain'.[228] Steeply outlines the experiment for Marathe:

> Human volunteers [were] lining up literally around the block outside the place, able-bodied […] lining up and literally trampling each other in their desire to sign up as volunteers for p-terminal-electrode implantation and stimulation. […] And of course this eagerness for implantation put a whole new disturbing spin on the study of human pleasure and behavior, and a whole new Brandon Hospital team was hastily assembled to study the psych-profiles of all these people willing to trample one another to undergo invasive brain surgery and foreign-object implantation.[229]

Nearly twenty-five years on, this passage from Wallace's 1996 dystopian masterpiece edges towards prophesy. Two months after Wallace's suicide, hordes of 'Black Friday' shoppers lining up outside a Long Island Wal-Mart literally trampled a Haitian immigrant employee to death in pursuit of a limited number of the latest model flat screen TV.[230] This horrifying perversion of that most American of holidays, Thanksgiving, reveals how easy it is for mostly average, mostly decent people to be lured into lethal frenzy by the promise of consumer gratification and enhanced entertainments. In a similar vein, Steeply details the outcome of the neuropsychology experiment for Marathe: the researchers find all their eager subject-volunteers to be 'chillingly average' and psychologically 'nonabnormal' – in other words, not '*deviants*' – the hyper-addictive state inducible by p-terminal stimulation is indeed an example of one of the brain's best evolved mechanisms for survival and reproduction.[231]

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[228] *Infinite Jest*, pp. 470-471.
[229] Ibid., p. 472.
[230] 'Wal-Mart Worker Killed in Black Friday Shopping Stampede', *The Guardian*, 29 November 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/29/wal-mart-blackfriday-shoppersstampede> [accessed 14 January 2022]
[231] *Infinite Jest*, p. 473. Italics in original.

Steeply explores the implications of such easy access to 'the purest, most refined pleasure imaginable. The neural distillate of […] all possible pleasures refined into pure current and deliverable at the flip of a hand-held lever'.[232]

> Because surely you can see the implications for any industrialized, market-driven, high-discretionary-spending society. […] It was easy to foresee enormous widespread demand bringing it down to where electrodes'd be no more exotic than syringes. […] Picture millions of average nonabnormal North Americans all implanted with Briggs electrodes, all with electronic access to their own personal *p*-terminals, never leaving home, thumbing their personal stimulation levers over and over.[233]

The most dangerously addictive of which is the mysterious 'entertainment', a film known as 'Infinite Jest'. The human brain's capacity for processing and managing pleasurable stimuli fails completely and indeed fatally with 'Infinite Jest', which is what makes it such a lethal weapon in the context of the novel's plot development. The film is a many-layered metaphor, an example of entertaining technology as a potential Trojan horse bearing dark gifts to a hypermediated consumer society. *Infinite Jest* is a dystopian text, set in the future. At the time of its 1996 publication, social media as we know it today did not exist. Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok are examples of platforms that have been deliberately designed and engineered to be endlessly watchable; moreover, they are associated with problematic trends in mental health outcomes amongst 'users', in yet another chilling example of the prophetic nature of Wallace's text. Steeply points out to Marathe that it is not just the 'weak-willed' who are affected by this film, but also people like his colleague, Hank Hoyne, who he

[232] Ibid., p. 473.
[233] Ibid., pp. 473-4.

describes as ‘An American adult of exemplary self-control and discretion’, who is now ‘in four-point restraints’.[234] The Entertainment is the ultimate seduction, and therefore the ultimate supernormal stimulus; it directly targets what Marathe describes as ‘The Department of Euphoria’, so to speak, within the human brain’.[235] Social media companies employ neuropsychologists to create platforms that are maximally addictive, with few to no ethics restraints imposed by the state. They are also easily infiltrated by nefarious parties posing as ‘advertisers’ in order to subliminally influence users’ political beliefs and choices.[236] What happens to free will, or ethical agency for that matter, when the subject/user is unaware of the fact that they are acting ‘under the influence’? Wallace’s dystopian novel asks questions about the limits of the human brain and shows how easily it can be hijacked by addictive agents for unethical or destructive ends. It also suggests that, to whatever extent the origin of the problem is biological, the solution must be collective and political.

Conclusion -- Can we build more ethical brains?

The brain, like any other organ, is constituted by physiological structures and functions that exist in varying states of health and disease. It is also assumed to be the seat of consciousness and thus the primary site at which the human subject is produced, which makes it uniquely self-deconstructing. This chapter aimed to explore the ways in which Wallace’s fictions reflect changing views within the medical community, especially those that use agency as a proxy for brain health or disease. It also looked at the medical ethics of understanding and treating mental health problems from a purely biological standpoint. In doing so, it calls up certain existential questions. To what extent should various forms of bad

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[234] Ibid., p. 507.
[235] Ibid., p. 471.
[236] The 2016 U.K. Brexit Referendum and U.S. Presidential Election are examples of this.

behaviour or criminality be pathologised as mental illness or disorder? How does this reorder our understanding of criminal justice? What is at stake when we read human behaviour, including literary and artistic portrayals of human behaviour, through the lens of cognitive science? By way of conclusion, literary art and scientific thought suggest that it is critical to acknowledge the limits of our bodies and our brains, not merely to capitulate to biological determinism, but to find ways around and beyond it. Wallace asks questions about human limits in order to re-imagine human possibilities and the ethical potential therein – unknown pathways of plasticity and resilience, but also, critically, unexplored points of therapeutic (or harmful) mediation at the interface of self and other, self and screen, self and chemical 'agent', self and (virtual) environment.

Catherine Malabou, protégé of Jacques Derrida, theorises the possibilities of the ethical brain in her work on neuroplasticity: *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* As Marc Jeannerod writes in his foreword to her study, understanding how our brains work is integral to protecting human freedom:

> We clearly have no consciousness of the plastic mechanisms forming our personality and guaranteeing its continuity. Yet by trying to become conscious of them we may […] acquire a new freedom, that of imposing our own organisation on the world rather than submitting to the influences of a milieu. Plasticity, in effect, is not flexibility. Let us not forget that plasticity is a mechanism for adapting, while flexibility is a mechanism for submitting. Adapting is not submitting, and, in this sense, plasticity ought not to serve as an alibi for submitting to the new world order being dreamed up

by capitalism. "Not to replicate the caricature of the world: this is what we should do with our brain".[237]

Contra biological determinism, Malabou makes the point that 'It is precisely because […] the brain is not already made that we must ask what we should do with it, what we should do with this plasticity that makes us, precisely in the sense of a work: sculpture, modeling, architecture. What should we do with this plastic organic art?'[238] In figuring the brain as a work of art, as a sculpture, Malabou reveals how all humans are (or might see themselves as) artists at work, co-creating our brains via the questions we ask, the experiences we have, and the choices we make. From this view, the brain is 'the work', as in Blanchot and Derrida, the text upon which events and histories are written. Or as Malabou would have it: 'It's not just that the brain has a history […] but that it *is* a history'.[239] The brain is an object of work as well as a place of work, of cognitive labour and ethical effort; as Wallace demonstrates, the brain localises the work it takes to continually (re)produce ourselves as human subjects. Our brains are characterised by a profound plasticity; the creation of new pathways and connections allows for a diversity of possibilities and perspectives, growth and rebirth on a cellular and spiritual level. Indeed, Malabou's understanding of the brain as a collection of narratives written into flesh that can be infinitely amended, extended, and revised throughout life, furnishes a possibility for ethical and creative hope in the face of fatalist logic.

Despite his own darkly determinist narratives and portrayals of end-game psychiatric dysfunction, the narrative tensions driving Wallace's work open doors of possibility. His unanswered questions, unfinished endings, and problematic remainders signify the left-over parts of human experience that fail to make sense or add up; they engender a sense of

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[237] Catherine Malabou and Marc Jeannerod, *What Should We Do with Our Brain*?, trans. by Sebastian Rand, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. xiv.
[238] Ibid., p. 7.
[239] Ibid., p. 1. Italics in original.

dialogic plasticity, prompting hermeneutic re-readings and recursive interpretations. As Wallace and Malabou both argue, art-making is at once a pre-requisite and end-product of human experience, signifying the human brain's capacity for wonder. In opposition to entertainment, which primarily serves to distract the subject and reinforce the status quo, art defamiliarises and re-enchants, creating new pathways and uncovering alternative perspectives. Art, therefore, has the potential to transform the brain on a cellular level, by forging new connections and challenging and deepening our understanding of what it means to be human.

In this chapter I have explored how developments in neuroscience and psychiatry can help us read Wallace's fiction; but also, and critically, we need to ask how literary texts can help us to ask better questions of science, and of society. Malabou seeks to understand brain-based states with respect to larger social and political contexts, to investigate the conditions under which brains produce embodied states of critical awareness, activism, and empowerment, as well as states of apathy and resignation, ways in which diverse neuropsychic states might serve to reinforce or disrupt the contemporary neoliberal state. In asking whether brains can be made more ethical, Malabou imagines what neuro-ethical resilience might look like, and what bio-political conditions might confer it. On both formal/aesthetic and thematic/content levels, Wallace's narratives are deeply engaged with these questions. As I have demonstrated in the first two chapters, several of Wallace's mentally or morally unstable characters seek to exercise this kind of ethical resilience, often succeeding up to a point, before capitulating to various social, structural, or biological difficulties; his heroes find a way to sustain this state, often despite great suffering or personal hardship.

To this end, Wallace's narratives suggest a reordering of ethics and ontology. The ethical minefields of mental illness and addiction in Wallace's texts, as well as the spectrums

that underlie them, are especially relevant here. I have argued for a reading of Wallace's texts as evidence of the shifting rhetoric around the ethics of human behaviour from more traditional, moral constructs dealing with free will and individual choice to a medical model that takes brain-based limits into account. Though neuropsychological models can provide an additional degree of nuance and complexity to ethical debates, care must be taken to avoid reducing human agents to empirical constructs that prop up the grand narrative of evolutionary psychology. As Kwame Appiah has argued, 'What matters for our ethical lives is which psychological mechanisms we have, more than any evolutionary story about where they came from; they are what help determine our behavioral possibilities, our individual natures. And the cultural context (including, not least, the identities it provides) matters for the same reason: it helps determine them, too'.[240]

Read in parallel with Wallace's oeuvre, the vast philosophical and scientific output of these thinkers tends to converge on a point that argues against 'the privitisation of human morality', to reiterate Ravven's phrase, along with the reframing of what an 'ethical culture' should entail. Instead of fear-mongering campaigns and imagery detailing 'Your Brain on Drugs', we should seek to understand how exposure to education, literature, and art can change both the structure of a brain and the course of a life. An ethical culture should endeavour to understand our embodied limits in order to create social support structures that enhance community-based ethical choices and decision-making, instead of promoting the hollow fetishisation of 'the individual' who must 'own' his or her 'choices' and go it alone. Neuroethical agency should be grounded on the eradication of poverty and an economic bill of rights, an overhaul of the criminal justice and incarceration systems, guaranteed housing, lifelong education and medical care, and the prioritisation of mental health services and support. The current socio-economic system, which forces citizens to fight against each other

[240] Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, pp. 125-6.

for wages, barely guaranteeing basic survival, should be understood as a serious hindrance to mental health and wellness, let alone ethical agency and ethical culture.

Should we concentrate on changing our brains or on changing the world? This question takes on increasing relevance as we move beyond embodied limits towards disembodied ones. A little over a decade on from Wallace's death, human cognition has become the model for machine-based neural networks, in which computer scientists design 'deep minds' programmed for 'deep learning'. This includes the creation of virtual environments in which amoral algorithms can be taught semantic and sentiment analysis to guess or predict the moods and feelings of humans, as well as the use of virtual realities as technological (as opposed to pharmaceutical) therapeutic agents. Wallace's neuroethics suggests that a synthesis between diverse minds and diverse worlds is the only way forward. Bearing this in mind, I will now turn to questions of political economy, namely the ethical climate of contemporary US society and the ways in which the neoliberal state mediates the psychology of the individual and the cultural experience of ethical agency.

Chapter 3: Wallace's Neoliberal Ethics? Moral Limits and Mythologies of Freedom

In focusing on the contingencies and contradictions surrounding ethical agency and human freedom in Wallace's texts, the previous two chapters of this thesis evaluated subjectivity from the lenses of poststructuralism and cognitive neuroscience, respectively. Chapter one mapped the overlaps and disconnects between Wallace's ethical labyrinths and the ethical system of Emmanuel Levinas and other postmodern theorists. The second chapter moved on from these lines of thinking by examining ethical agency in materialist terms, specifically as a product of the human brain's ability or tendency to engage in different forms of other-directed behaviour. Though Wallace repudiated any foreclosures on free will, and

constructed several of his essays, notably *This Is Water*, as warnings against solipsistic moral indifference, his fictional narratives continually portray characters in self-absorbed states of confusion or breakdown, well beyond the point of rational or free-thinking deliberation, moral or otherwise. His thematic obsession with states of psychic distress and their ethical outcomes, as well as his protracted focus on and ambivalence towards 'mental illness', complicate Wallace's apparent thinking on human agency in a major way.

The philosophical groundwork laid by theorists such as Michel Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari connects the dots between mental health crises and neoliberal capitalism, either through amplification of schizophrenic personality traits or by challenging Enlightenment ideals of the human as a rational, free agent. Foucault's theories on biopower and biopolitics, as the terms suggest, link the biological and the political with respect to concentrations of power – social, cultural, and economic -- signalling a shift in the nature of subjectivity. As I explored in the previous chapter, the reframing of the human subject as a biological agent, as opposed to a rational, moral, or will-driven agent, occurs in tandem with the explosion of research into behavioural and cognitive psychology that was well under way by the time Wallace had taken up his pursuit of writing philosophical literary fiction. Under this new biopolitical paradigm, reason, will and rationality have far less to do with human functioning, decision-making, and choice, than the Enlightenment thinkers and their followers, such as Habermas, have suggested. Thus Wallace's oeuvre reflects what is at stake in the focal shift between Enlightenment-era humanism and postmodern theory as the latter takes an increasingly bio-cognitive turn. Furthermore, as the psychic crises faced by individual characters take on epidemic proportions in his texts, Wallace makes a case for a thorough reassessment of the category of 'mental illness'.

Following Foucault's work on biopolitics, Will Davies explains that 'the framing of neoliberal crises in psychological and neurological terms' is a consequence of the

‘powerlessness of political or moral authorities’ to handle wider social problems under the dominant ideological climate.[241] From this perspective, Wallace’s fiction evokes a different kind of social concern, involving the exploitation of human vulnerabilities as well as the manipulation of biological limits to preserve and extend established power structures. This shifts the framework for agency yet again, from the determinism of cognitive science to the precarity of the neoliberal political economy, from the individual as moral lone ranger to the crisis in values that leads to the dismantling and erosion of ethical cultures. One argument I will make in this chapter is that the wide range of psychic malaise in Wallace’s texts, from depression, mania, psychosis, schizophrenia, and anxiety disorders, up to and including suicide, constitutes a widely shared adverse reaction to contemporary neoliberalism and the failure of Western political economies to provide a coherent or meaningful vision of human freedom. As Mark Fisher writes in *Capitalist Realism*:

> It is necessary to reframe the growing problem of stress (and distress) in capitalist societies. Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast *privatization of stress* that has taken place of the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? The ‘mental health plague’ in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high.[242]

[241] William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition, Theory, Culture & Society*, Revised Edition (Los Angeles; London: SAGE, 2017), p. 5.
[242] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), p. 19. Italics in original.

Fisher's analysis recalls the tension between individual and collective suffering that is at the heart of much of Wallace's work.

For the purposes of this chapter, I am also interested in what Clare Hayes-Brady describes as the 'unifying anti-teleology of Wallace's writing', which amounts to 'a fundamental political response to the cultural condition of neoliberal America'.[243] The narrative recursions, fractures, and double binds that formally constitute this anti-telos point towards vast webs of complicity within and among dominant institutions and establishments, including the literary milieu of which Wallace was very much a part. However, whether Wallace's neoliberal dystopias themselves tend towards dismantling or reinforcing the status quo is problematically ambiguous, as critics like Edward Jackson and others have argued. Meaningful alternatives to traditional hierarchies of power and value rarely emerge from the 'creative destruction' enacted by Wallace's texts. Instead, Wallace foregrounds a variety of unstable subjectivities struggling to maintain homeostasis in a chaotic and highly precarious world. In this way, Wallace's work both highlights and contributes to the ongoing deconstruction of the limits of individual agency in millennial America.

To this end, this chapter will explore the confusion and inconsistencies in Wallace's texts that arise from the continuous oscillation between critical interrogations and affirmations of American neoliberal agendas. This confusion indicates an often sub-conscious crisis in values that pervades Wallace's fiction, presenting as cognitive dissonance and schizoaffective disorders, as well as painful paradoxes and 'skeletal narratives'. Wallace's characters find themselves trapped within amoral or ethically compromised market logics, powerless to establish agency in any meaningful way within the context of their lives under consumer capitalism. The distressing double binds of Wallace's neoliberal worlds result in

[243] Claire Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 22.

physical and behavioural deformities, abnormalities, and imbalances that manifest as textual fractures and deformations of language and narrative, as characters contort themselves beyond recognition in their attempts to attain a mythological and therefore impossible notion of the American Dream, like the child contortionist in *The Pale King*.

As a writer, Wallace channelled the zeitgeist of our neoliberal age, positioned at once in opposition to and conforming with commodified notions of freedom and individual choice. For his sharp critiques of a culture that defines identity in terms of consumer activity and purchasing power and makes (self)-advertising a way of life, Wallace has been seen as a countercultural and alternative figure, especially within left-leaning academic communities. His acerbic takedown of power structures that auction off democratic ideals and political processes to private interests indicate his strong opposition to the values of corporate capitalism. On the other hand, Wallace has been claimed by libertarian and conservative political figures such as David Brooks and Judges Antonin Scalia and Neil Gorsuch, who read into his work an old-fashioned moralism rooted in American ideals of self-reliance and individualism. New scholarship continues to challenge assumptions about Wallace's political and ideological leanings (as his biographer D.T. Max has revealed, Wallace voted for Reagan twice) and more detailed analyses of his fiction have produced contrasting readings. In this chapter I suggest that the duality at the heart of Wallace's life and work is not entirely exceptional; rather, varying degrees of compromise, complicity, and hypocrisy are constitutive of neoliberal Western value systems that maintain their hegemony via the precarity of the subject.

Defining Neoliberalism

What do we mean when we talk about neoliberalism, and what are its defining values and ethos? David Harvey's notable study, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* explains it as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes [to advance] human well-being […] by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'.[244] Harvey demonstrates that the dominant American ideal of freedom has taken on a distinctly economic or market based-meaning over the past half-century. As widespread consumption of goods, services, and entertainment took on primary cultural significance, money, and the ability to acquire and spend it, has become increasingly central to the American experience. Harvey argues that:

> In so far as neoliberalism values market exchange as "an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs", it emphasizes the significance of contractual relations in the marketplace. It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.[245]

In other words, neoliberalism has its own value system and ethical codes; its departure from traditional liberalism is marked by shifts in concentrations of power; its aims are different, and the nature of its ethics should not be conflated with those of 'democracy'. He continues: 'The assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking'.[246] One of Harvey's objectives is to show

[244] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), p. 2.
[245] Ibid., p. 3.
[246] Ibid., p. 7.

how dangerous such an assumption can be. Neoliberalism not only grants economic elites the legal power to run the state like a monopoly board, but justifies, under the aegis of freedom, their co-option of the government, including the right to auction off public goods and services to the highest private bidders. Unlike power-grabs by tyrants and dictators of the past, the ideology of neoliberalism, with a slick sleight-of-hand, grants citizen-consumers the 'freedom' to 'choose' which formerly public goods and services they would like to pay for.

Expanding upon Harvey's definition, Will Davies understands neoliberalism as 'an attempt to replace political judgement with economic evaluation', especially 'the evaluations offered by markets'.[247] In short, it is the disenchantment of politics by economics', using competitive uncertainty as a social driver.[248] Wendy Brown takes a similar stance in *Undoing the Demos*, describing the neoliberal as 'a distinctive mode or form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms'.[249] Brown pays careful attention to the primary subject produced under this mode of reason, or what she labels *homo oeconomicus*. This mode tends toward a colonization of psychic space, a kind of viral-vampirism, in which the host-subject's ways of thinking and being in the world are hijacked by the demands of the neoliberal ethos. Reality itself is reconfigured according to market logics, and histories and futures are rewritten or reimagined through its lens, producing alternative dystopian visions, as Mark Fisher describes in *Capitalist Realism*.

In Jeffery Severs' comprehensive study, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*, he explains that 'at his most political, Wallace chronicles the long-term infiltration of neoliberal ideology into the American and global scene'.[250] Wallace's strange and dystopian fictional worlds exemplify a neoliberal imaginary for their portrayal of the

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[247] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, pp. 5-6
[248] Ibid, pp. 5-6.
[249] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p. 17.
[250] Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 23.

absurd futility of the lone individual's psychic fight for survival in a world that runs on competitive uncertainty. Among other things, his texts detail the ways in which 'success' in American society demands the pursuit of self-preservation and advancement at the expense of civic involvement and the democratic process itself, which shrink in relevance before the drives of the all-powerful market. Wallace's texts expose characters' all-encompassing struggle to justify their solipsism and self-interest or rationalize the alienating loneliness induced by the market-driven, bottom-line worlds in which they live. To this end, varying types of blindness and oblivion operate as political metaphors throughout his texts.

The disenchantment of politics by economics reaches its pinnacle in *Infinite Jest*, in which the US government is reduced to a series of covert operations that disjointedly roll out in the background narrative under a veil of satire and farce. No major civilian character in the novel has much to say about the political climate; resistance becomes the remit of terrorist groups. In the dystopian future of US-ONAN, the Entertainer-President Johnny Gentle advances his neurotic neoliberal agenda, massaging the masses into ethical oblivion, while at the same time scrambling to avert a national security crisis that would result in widespread and literal oblivion, which his government helped usher in. The plot in *Jest* therefore turns on the potentially self-destructive gamble neoliberal governments take, by selling off democratic principles and public space whilst replacing the ethical citizen with the economic client, or individual consumer. This calls to mind Michael Sandel's central thesis in *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (2012) -- when we increasingly see humans in terms of economic value and profit margins, we find it ever more acceptable to buy and sell dignity, security, and even survival on the market. The human fallout from this perspectival shift is visceral; as Wallace shows, it is physically embodied and deforming, and literally makes people sick. There are grave consequences for everyone in the monetization of every last inch of public space and private life; however, as in all high stakes games, there are predictable

winners and losers. Wallace's texts are roadmaps to the hidden and future costs of our current neoliberal reality.

The definitions of neoliberalism thus far invoked have evolved through the union of political economic discourse and Marxist critical theory, explaining the negative weight the term has come to carry as it eclipses 'capitalism' as a critical qualifier. Perhaps more interesting is why a critique of neoliberal political economy has come to function so prominently in literature and the arts, and how, exactly, this interpretive lens or framework functions as a tool through which we read contemporary millennial fiction such as Wallace's. It also raises questions about the possibilities and limitations of art as a form of political and social critique, and the extent to which various institutions and establishments that engage in critique are complicit beneficiaries of the systems they interrogate. Establishing how the values of neoliberal policies and institutions are characterised is therefore essential to literary criticism that seeks to understand how Wallace's writing engages with tensions between private and public space, the needs of the individual within the greater community, and 'American' (vs foreign) ethical systems and ideals of personal vs social responsibilities.

Defining neoliberalism with respect to its dominant ethic involves a lexical and rhetorical investigation into the term's rapid evolution over the past 50-odd years. Linguistically, certain key terms and concepts that were initially appropriated within corporate finance or business and management jargon, have come to indicate neoliberal frameworks and psychologies.[251] The prefix neo- indicates an updated form of the classical liberalism of Hayek and Friedman, especially the application of a free market logic of competitive supply and demand within politics and government. Particularly within the American sphere, this corresponds to values of self-reliance and ideals of universal private ownership. Readers of Wallace will note the overlap between neoliberal rhetoric and his

[251] Matthew Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. xiii-xx.

primary literary and philosophical themes. Three of these mentioned above, freedom, choice, and responsibility, resonate throughout his revered commencement speech, *This is Water*. In addition, there is a focus on continual progress and/or (self)-improvement via change, growth, challenge, and reform in the private lives of individuals as well as in wider communities and marketplaces. At first glance, many of these terms have seemingly positive associations or connotations, such as freedom, choice, and growth, for example. Risk and challenge come across as somewhat more negative, while others remain ambiguous or context-dependent, such as competition and responsibility. The characterization of 'the neoliberal' is noteworthy for the way it reveals the mutable complexity of language and meaning, exposing the shadow side of traditionally positive qualities and assumptions while revaluing negative concepts with positive attributes, which is at the heart of the academic left's critique.[252] However it is understood or defined, 'the neoliberal' has come to encompass the political ideology of the millennial Western world, with its tenets and values now thoroughly absorbed into the English language.

In his erudite study on Wallace's toxic sexuality, Edward Jackson argues that Wallace is indebted to neoliberal 'economic logics of responsibility, risk, contract, property and austerity'.[253] Jackson's critical explication of these terms with respect to Wallace's oeuvre goes against the grain of 'first wave' Wallace studies, functionally refuting the interpretation of Wallace's 'antineoliberal vision' put forth by Jeffrey Severs and others.[254] Jackson's claim that 'Wallace uses neoliberal logics to position sexuality as a type of capital' is extremely compelling, and though his study is more relevant to the following chapter of my thesis, it is worth mentioning here to highlight the expansiveness of the term 'neoliberal' and the multiplicity of ways it can be applied to a literary text or work of art, including its slippery

[252] Ibid., pp. xiii-xx.
[253] Edward Jackson, *David Foster Wallace's Toxic Sexuality: Hideousness, Neoliberalism, Spermatics* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 7.
[254] Ibid., p. 12.

relation to Wallace's own texts.[255] Indeed, that the term can be meaningfully applied to his work in nearly oppositional ways is a confirmation of the critical importance it holds for Wallace studies in particular. Within Wallace's discursively rich lexicon, concepts like responsibility, choice, and freedom take on polymorphic meanings, especially when applied to waged labour and other forms of 'work', which has both disciplinary/punitive and redemptive functions in Wallace's literature.

Competition and the Work Ethic

Like many contemporary Americans, Wallace was obsessed with his work. As discussed in the first chapter, he had much to say in his essays and interviews about the cognitive effort that 'good' (i.e., difficult) literary art requires, as well as the salutary or redemptive benefits it confers on readers. He compared good art's opposite, easy entertainment, to candy or junk food -- pleasurable in the moment but lacking any substantive nutritional value. Wallace's valorisation of work is consistent with the Protestant tradition that understood the 'work ethic' as a moral category; it was a way to prove one's worth, but more importantly, it revealed one's state of grace/salvation. His texts also echo 19th century American Transcendentalist ideals of self-reliance and individualism, revealing how the moral value attached to work became embedded in the national mythos, manifesting in exalted tales of pilgrims, pioneers, and 'self-made' men (and in no small part justifying the economic and military expanses characteristic of American exceptionalism, as Wallace satirizes in his novella 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way'). Though certainly not exclusive to the United States (Germany experienced its own disastrous version with *Arbeit macht Frei*), work and freedom have been linked in the American psyche since the

[255] Ibid., p. 12.

very origins of the country. However, the nostalgic narrative of 'one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all', built upon the blood and sweat of honest, industrious individuals typically excludes the historical reality of the slaughter of Indigenous Americans, the enslavement of Black Africans, and the exclusion from paid work of women and immigrants who were not ethnically white; Wallace's engagement with these alternative histories is at times tenuous, which is relevant to any meaningful critique of his work.

As Karl Marx and Max Weber have shown, capitalism, born and raised alongside the Protestant reformation, makes not only work, but the exploitation of one's labour, a sign of moral virtue. This is perhaps more apt in America today, in which it is not only a sign of virtue but a point of pride (as well as a new kind of mythos), to be exceedingly 'passionate' about one's work, perpetually busy and preoccupied by it, even to the point of exhaustion. Americans are encouraged to display their virtue or worthiness as well as to define their identities via their paid employment, which entails making themselves endlessly available and amenable to the demands of their employers. Rather more disturbingly, corporate culture has appropriated the rhetoric of addiction to reframe the exploitation of labour; the truly devoted employee is thus valorised as a 'workaholic'. Wallace deftly depicts the obsessive work culture and success-at-all-costs mentality in *Infinite Jest*, in which ETA students are indoctrinated into the dominant neoliberal value system of corporate America as well as the multitude of addictions that will enable them to submit to the inevitable exploitation this value system demands. David Graeber sees the current ideology of work as a real impediment to creating any kind of a sane society, noting that 19th century social movements were very successful at inculcating a labour theory of value, and the disciplinary role of work that exists today is a big part of that.[256] These cultural perversions return us to deeper questions about

[256] 'David Graeber on a Fair Future Economy', 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YynqVvgZYI> [accessed 20 January 2022]

the value of work as a function of human labour, which Wallace explored from different angles in each of his texts.

The uneasy relationship between the work required for economic production and the work required for social reproduction is another prominent theme at the centre of any critique of neoliberalism. Wallace portrays a wide cross section of labour and capital relations in society, from 'work' that is essentially coercive and meaningless, to work that involves an art or a skill, or a vocation that entails a civic contribution. He also comments on the grotesquerie of excessive capital accumulation through the farcical figure of Norman Bombardini in *The Broom of the System*, indicating that societies that encourage and even necessitate the pursuit of amassing money for its own sake fundamentally distort the traditional moral valence of 'honest' labour. This last category stands out within the evolving critique of work under neoliberal capitalism, as Wallace and other millennial writers use literature to explore what economists like Thomas Piketty have demonstrated through empirical study: capital always wins over labour, and full employment is as mythical a construct as the self-made man (or the child contortionist or levitating tax accountant in *The Pale King*). As work becomes increasingly precarious, earned income is increasingly insufficient to support contemporary standards of living, especially in the absence of social services and safety nets like universal public health care. Under these conditions, making money is necessarily more compelling than making art, having a family, taking care of one's health, or making any other civic or social contributions, for that matter.

The ambivalence around work in Wallace's texts is therefore an attempt to make sense of the ethical valences of these enormous social and political concerns by way of a philosophical investigation into the ontology of work. Explicitly concerned with the moral value of human suffering, he seeks to portray the distinctions between work that is redemptive (albeit often through painful sacrifice) and work that is torturous in its

meaninglessness, a modern-day form of enslavement. Returning to the philosophical tradition of American Transcendentalism, a 19th century quasi-religious literary movement that grew out of Unitarianism and included literary figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James (one of Wallace's major influences), Wallace's texts refigure the self, the soul, and the psyche as the primary sites where work is performed. Working to transcend the ego-driven needs and desires of the self takes on immense importance for his characters, whether through physical effort (competitive tennis or manual labour) and self-denial (overcoming addiction) in *Infinite Jest*, self-sacrifice for ideals of civic or religious duty in *The Pale King*, or in the pursuit of linguistic self-actualization in *Broom of the System*. Running alongside this is the omnipresent anxiety that 'self-transcendence' has been co-opted and debased by marketing agencies and corporate enterprises as one more way to maximize economic productivity. As such, many attempts at self-transcendence ultimately (and often tragically) result in states of alienation or anxiety for Wallace's characters, revealing how neoliberal values and 'goals' of endless optimisation can corrupt utopian ideals around the dignity of work.

Work is one of the primary themes in *Infinite Jest*, beginning with the eponymous 'masterwork' at the figurative centre of the novel. From this origin point, the narrative splits along three primary plot lines, comprised by the Enfield Tennis Academy, the Ennet House Drug and Rehabilitation facility, and the ongoing battle between AFR (a Canadian political organization) and ONAN (the ironically named US government in 'subsidized time'). The overlaps and linkages among these three narratives serve as points of departure for the deconstruction of the role of work and competition in American culture. The moral value of hard work is one of the key themes in the novel, most notably portrayed by Don Gately, a recovering addict and staff member at Ennet House. Gately embodies the redemptive qualities of labour as a form of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others (especially the

‘undeserving’). He literally cleans up other people’s messes and asks nothing in return, not least because he understands his work as a form of atonement, the ‘price’ he pays for the sins of his past life, as well as a form of insurance paid towards a future of continued sobriety. However, Gately also upholds more distinctly neoliberal values around work: he respects hierarchies, he is a disciplinarian, and he is intolerant of the residents’ failures in recovery. As with Gately, the mythical American ‘work ethic’ is co-opted by neoliberal values for many of the novel’s key characters. It goes awry most notably in workaholic partners James and Avril Incandenza, in neurotic and overworked characters like Hal’s uncle Tavis, with authority figures whose teaching and training ambitions turn sadistic, such as Coach Schtitt, as well as with professional shirkers and cheaters, like student Michael Pemulis, who will go to any lengths to win. Indeed, for many of these characters, work is not merely a source of stress and anxiety that causes addictions and psychic breakdowns in their own lives; it is used to justify their sense of ownership and their exploitation and abuse of others.

Addictions figure throughout the novel as a by-product of coercive or overwhelming work, indicating a perversion or failure of the role of social reproduction, from family structures and functions to public services and institutions of education. Addicts take centre stage in *Jest*, and often refer to their drugs and requisite equipment (e.g., syringes for heroin) as ‘the works’, alluding to the emotional or psychological labour the drug performs. For many characters in the novel, ‘substances’ are the only accessible form of support when the work of reproducing daily life results in exhaustion and distress and becomes unmanageable. And for most of the addicts at Ennet House, who suffer with debilitating physical and/or emotional pain, mere survival is already too big of a job to be performed without chemical aid. In addition to the work of survival, addicts are expected to work for wages, usually in menial jobs, and required to attend AA or NA meetings – in this way, their care is contingent on their ability to perform different forms of work. If they fail at their primary job of

recovery and relapse, they are excluded from the program and ejected from Ennet House, their personal possessions callously discarded on the street in garbage bags. Herein lies one of Wallace's double-binds; figuring recovery as a job and punishing an addict/patient who 'fails' at this work of self-improvement goes against Ennet House's model of addiction, which argues that addicts suffer from a disease that may be progressive and terminal. Under the disease model's logic, a relapsing addict suffers from an acute degree of sickness and therefore would require a more intensive form of intervention as befits their worsening condition. And yet, Wallace's moralizing narrators, who trot out maxims like 'there but for the grace of God go I', punish their fellow sufferers for failing to 'do the work' or get with 'the program'. In this way, the text expresses profound ambivalence about the agency of the addict and reveals its own internal contradictions; the narrative's attempt to adhere to a moralising neoliberal code of linear progression is continually subverted via its own logic, which is symbolised throughout by the use of circles and non-linear forms that structure the text (which in turn recall the cyclical nature of many addictive patterns).

ETA is an elite private school in Boston where intense competition and an obsession with game-playing, risk-taking, hierarchies and winning barely mask a vast collection of psychological pathologies that effect everyone in its orbit. Each player at ETA must 'justify his seed', according to the number of matches he wins relative to his classmates. Failure is met with various forms of punishment, including military-style rank-relegation or expulsion, and so losing becomes a terrifying prospect, something to be avoided at all costs. Students take drastic lengths to avoid failure, a parodic example of which is Eric Clipperton, a deranged boy who holds a gun to his head during tennis competitions, threatening to commit suicide if he loses a match. Like Michael Pemulis, they may also harm others to gain an advantage. Another perhaps more common example of self-harm is narrated by Hal Incandenza, who reaches a point where he would rather injure himself than go on competing:

> Then it occurred to me that I could walk outside and contrive to take a spill, or squeeze out the window on the rear staircase of HmH and fall several meters to the steep embankment below, being sure to land on the bad ankle and hurt it, so I'd not have to play. That I could carefully plan out a fall from the courts' observation transom or the spectators' gallery of whatever club C.T. and the Moms sent us to help raise funds, and fall so carefully badly I'd take out all the ankle's ligaments and never play again. Never have to, never get to. I could be the faultless victim of a freak accident and be knocked from the game while still on the ascendant. Becoming the object of compassionate sorrow rather than disappointed sorrow. I couldn't stay with this fantastic line of thought long enough to parse out whose disappointment I was willing to cripple myself to avoid (or forego).[257]

Though Hal's thinking may seem extreme, the ETA students are constantly reminded of what happens to society's 'losers'. Creeping into their privileged world are the damaged denizens of Ennet House at the bottom of hill, some of whom work part-time at the academy. Wallace twins the elite academy with its other, the halfway house, a place of 'recovery' for addicts and criminals, as well as the sick and disabled. The broken lives within these two communities reveal the human costs of US-ONAN's dysfunctional neoliberal world order.

Even worse, attempting to resist this world order may be a losing battle, which would indicate that no one is above 'incorporation' by ONAN's neoliberal values, in the end. The anti-ONAN 'wheelchair assassins', otherwise known as the AFR, trace their origins to a lethally competitive game, *le jeu de prochain train*, in yet another example of competition to the point of disfigurement and death in order to prove one's worth and maintain one's rank. It

[257] *Infinite Jest*, pp. 954-955.

is unclear how to interpret the value of the AFR members' sacrifice, according to the logic of the text (which again points towards Wallace's own ambivalence). On the one hand, the imminent collapse of ONAN's neoliberal world order suggests that games like these both mirror and contribute to a dysfunctional and toxic society. On the other, the wheelchair assassins (similar to the old, gnarled, and contorted 'crocodiles', or AA-lifers, who perform the lifelong work of sobriety) are figured as symbols of masculine valour, ever prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice to defend their honour and integrity. Both the AFR and the crocodiles demonstrate a seemingly untouchable moral loftiness and are upheld as symbols of stoic strength and heroic endurance. However, the valorisation of the Quebecois AFR (especially when contrasted with their more 'onanistic' American counterparts) is undermined by an ironic and even contemptuous narrative ambivalence towards the sacrifices their honour demands. There is something ridiculous, after all, about winning a game by violently losing the ability to walk. In this way, these men and their disfigurements are products of the same dysfunctional system they are presumably fighting against.

The alienation and anxiety that eclipse the possibility for self-transcendence in many of Wallace's key narratives usually indicate the presence of competitive hierarchies that serve disciplinary functions within the neoliberal dystopias of his texts. In this way, competition serves as a handmaiden to the near thorough privatization of needs and responsibilities throughout the novel. Wallace avoids discussing the consequences of competitive uncertainty in overtly economic terms, preferring to filter the brutal realities of marketized societies through middle class neuroses and children's games like the infamous Eschaton. In this sense, the solipsism of many of the ETA students is a nascent form of the work anxiety that will stalk them for the rest of their lives. A significant part of their elite 'education' involves learning that, one way or another, living in the world will require them to accumulate and consolidate their 'winnings'. Capital accumulation, first in service to the self, and then (in

theory) in order to 'give back' is awarded one of the highest forms of virtue in American society; successfully 'taking responsibility' for one's self and accumulating more than one could ever need makes 'charity' possible. But comparable to the mysterious process of annulation that runs through the novel or the Eschaton game that spirals out of control and turns violent, once started, such 'accumulation' may prove difficult to stop.

When neoliberal societies (inevitably) fail to produce healthy or functional subjectivities, the fallout can be immense. In *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi examines the relationship between capitalism, social and economic competition, and mental health, proposing dystopian irony as a possible remedy from the totalizing logic of the neoliberal apparatus. He explains how the draconian demands of neoliberal capitalism produce violent mental health collapses that spill over from the disturbed private mind to the public arena, of which mass shootings in the US are a horrifyingly prominent example. Berardi argues that psychopathic subjectivities are by-products of neoliberal societies, manifesting in mass murder and suicide -- both of which violently interrupt the whimsicality of Wallace's novel in the form of the lethal cartridge and the horrifying (yet funny) suicide of the father-founder JOI. Perhaps even more troubling is the way such violence itself becomes whimsical and hilarious within the dystopian logic of the text, which, along with its absurd plots and zany characters is stamped with smiley faces throughout. Wallace's point, like Berardi's, is that in neoliberal dystopias, the violence that afflicts society's 'losers' is infectious and contagious, virally propagated and churned out by the media as another form of entertainment. In this sense, it is also highly profitable.

Along the same lines, psychoanalyst Paul Verhaege explains that 'a changed economy reflects changed ethics and brings about changed identity',[258] focusing specifically on how

[258] Paul Verhaeghe, 'Neoliberalism Has Brought out the Worst in Us', *The Guardian*, 2014, section Opinion <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/29/neoliberalism-economic-system-ethics-personality-psychopathicsthic> [accessed 11 January 2022]

the dominant Western economic model rewards psychopathic personality traits, thereby encouraging, even glorifying, an erosion or diminishment of human ethical potential. If neoliberalism brings out the worse in us,[259] as Verhaege argues, then Wallace's three major novels both channel and challenge the neoliberal anti-ethos. Like the Clipperton figure in *Jest*, *Oblivion*'s Terry Schmidt and Mr. Johnson are characters who undergo violent mental breakdowns while engaged in forms of work that are degrading, meaningless, or overwhelming. The litany of desperate characters who 'lose it' at work or in the midst of a work crisis is legion. During the Vietnam War era, substitute teacher Mr. Johnson suffers a psychotic episode inside a suburban Cleveland classroom; outside the classroom window, dogs fight in toxic orange sludge, signifying that both corporate pollution of the environment and the murder of innocents are economically profitable and duly sanctioned by the US government. Terry Schmidt's inability to cope with his demoralizing work induces a psychotic break resulting in his attempt to take down his company by contaminating its mass-produced food items with a toxic poison. Both men were initially engaged in civic pursuits, Johnson as a teacher, Schmidt through volunteering with impoverished youths; the moral breakdown within the psychic interiorities of these characters reflects the moral failures of the external culture.

As in *Infinite Jest*, *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* detail the disillusionment many Americans face when their work and professional achievements fail to provide a satisfactory sense of identity and meaning. The protagonist of 'Good Old Neon', who goes on to commit suicide, admits that despite his success as a business consultant he was deeply unhappy and unfulfilled. This recalls the plight of James Incandenza, who excels in all his creative and professional pursuits yet struggles from a similar despair that ends in suicide. Along these lines, a great deal of the writing in *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* chronicles the torturous

[259] Ibid.

meaninglessness of much American office work. The inherent and coercive violence of the workplace pierces the text of *The Pale King* in the form of intrusive thoughts, as when 'Sylvanshine…received a whole slew of facts about the CTO that he did not wish to know…. Training officer Pam Jensen had a .22 revolver in her purse – she had promised herself a bullet in the roof of her mouth after her 1,500th training presentation, which at current rates would be July 1986'.[260] Nearly every character in the novel suffers from anxiety attacks of all kinds: 'tics, spasms, eccentricities. trembling hands', in addition to angry and malevolent thoughts about their colleagues, hallucinations; headaches and uncontrollable perspiration, and deforming and unmanageable skin conditions.[261] These characters are deeply stressed out and several of them fantasize about suicide. In both later texts, work never provides the redemption that traditional ideologies of labour promise; more often, it figures as a form of enslavement that literally makes people sick and want to die.

The late cultural anthropologist David Graeber argued that, in a perverse way, the uselessness of work became a virtue while enjoyment undercut its disciplinary role,[262] which calls to mind an important formal aspect of Wallace's writing. Large sections of *The Pale King*, especially the descriptions of the Peoria 'processing center', are often frustratingly boring and thus quite unpleasant to read. In this way Wallace invites readers to feel and share the pain of these workers on a more visceral level. The Peoria site is described as 'comatose' and covered in a 'caul of boredom', and workers (including Wallace's readers) are bombarded with useless facts and figures for hours on end. This foregrounding of irrelevant data that makes little sense to characters or readers alike unhinges the relationship between meaning and reality within the text. One character develops the ability to psychically process random data; it is unclear whether readers are meant to take this literally, or whether this shift

[260] *The Pale King*, p. 332.
[261] Ibid., p. 367.
[262] 'David Graeber on a Fair Future Economy', 2015

into magical realism suggests the impossibility of making or finding meaning (or even maintaining sanity) through this kind of work. The narrators continually emphasize the unpleasantness of the workplace itself – the building is institutional like a prison, it's hot and humid, there's no air, the work is excruciatingly dull. There is no colour in the text; as its title suggests, it is largely drained of narrative vibrancy and flair. The worker-characters are glazed and stupefied[263] and their assignments are 'brutal' and 'unpopular'. 'These are shells of men. Some look catatonic'.[264] Their daily workplace, the centre, is 'like a nightmare', and on top of all that, they have nasty commutes.[265]

To make matters worse, the IRS (as with much office work today) is woefully, and deliberately, out of date: 'and the examiners are operating with pencils and NCR adding machines some of which still have I like IKE stickers on them'.[266] 'It's all very ancient and scuzzy and I wouldn't be terribly surprised if there were monkeys with abacuses and string inside'.[267] That such a vital governmental service is so technologically obsolete is revealing. As the narrator hints, there are various incentives to keep the IRS in state of archaic decay. American and multinational corporations and shareholders require major exemptions, and so the antiquated, convoluted processing systems allow the IRS to comply, within the law, with the demands of capital. As *The Pale King* demonstrates, the IRS is also a major nation-wide employer – replacing the majority of its employees with far more efficient computing systems would drastically increase unemployment, which, in the US, means the loss not only of income, but of health care and other 'benefits' that are necessary to survival. This passage ends with a question: 'What am I, a machine?'[268] that recalls Hal's response-statement at the

[263] *The Pale King*, p. 364.
[264] Ibid., p. 368.
[265] Ibid., p. 369.
[266] Ibid., p. 367.
[267] Ibid., p. 369.
[268] Ibid., p. 370.

beginning of *Infinite Jest* ('I am not a machine'.[269]) In this way the narrator (the fictional David Wallace) suggests that, despite the subject's attempt to resist, the logic of neoliberal capitalism will always answer in the affirmative.

The pervasive focus on excessive and unmanageable data in Wallace's final novel is also a nod to the coming machine age and the limits of the subject to process ever increasing quantities of information with the human brain alone. As with genetic engineering and cognitive enhancing drugs and technologies, the ethical implications here are legion. If robots or machines can accomplish tedious and dull work more efficiently than any human could, why should anyone be forced to suffer through it? Herein lies the crux of the issue, which amounts to a critique of the failures of neoliberal economics to adapt to the evolving role of work from moral category to social category. Contemporary theorists like Graeber and Nick Snricek are engaged with how best to manage the growing disconnect between work and wages, as machines increasingly automate the rote tasks, simple calculations, and data processing that constitutes 'work' for vast numbers of Americans. Because neoliberal governments have so tightly tied social welfare to employment, many Americans are trapped, like Wallace's characters, in meaningless jobs simply to survive. Arguments for the right to a basic income and universal health care are not overtly addressed in Wallace's texts; in this respect, he reflects the ambivalence (or even opposition) of many Americans towards such ideas, including those who would most benefit from such programs. Meanwhile rich Americans already have a basic income in the form of corporate welfare and tax loopholes that have been custom designed for the purposes of exploitation. They can afford not to labour for wages because their capital 'works' for them. And yet, an astonishing number of working poor and strapped middle classes adhere to the ideology that paying taxes is an abomination and receiving social benefits from a 'welfare state' is a source of shame. The

[269] *Infinite Jest*, p. 12.

idea that 'real' work is performed for a wage and an employer, even a deeply exploitative one, is thus a very dangerous and out-dated American myth.

The Pale King is shot through with nostalgia for American mythologies of honest labour, however, Wallace's last mournful testament to the fading ideals of a 'simpler time' winds up chronicling the depreciation of this collective fantasy. Furthermore, that the work on this text ended prematurely due to Wallace's suicide (he even named one of the miserable IRS workers 'David Wallace') only serves to underline his comment on capitalism's failure to produce consistently stable subjectivities via an ontology of work. Indeed, by this late stage in his career, Wallace's writing more closely espouses the theories of Davies, Brown, and particularly Berardi, affirming that the current neoliberal framework for labour has become increasingly lethal for far too many Americans. I agree with critics who argue that Wallace himself is not immune to this ideological obsession, but despite his ambivalence, his literary dramatisations unmask the neoliberal mythologies lurking behind it.

Civic Duties and Civil Liberties

One of the most pervasive American mythologies is that, through work and economic 'self-sufficiency', individuals purchase civil liberties in the form of freedom from government interference. Thus, under neoliberal logics money-making becomes a primary civic duty. However, the idea that one's personal profitability should benefit the collective -- neighbours, fellow countrymen, the less fortunate, even 'foreigners' -- is considerably more fraught. Taxation is an unbelievably divisive subject in the US today and *The Pale King* dramatises how the antagonism around taxes reveals profound inconsistencies at the heart of

the American psyche. One of the novel's fictional IRS regional directors[270] states that 'If you know the position someone takes on taxes, you can determine [his] whole philosophy. The tax code, once you get to know it, embodies all the essence of [human] life: greed, politics, power, goodness, charity'.[271] The questions implied here are fundamentally ethical: Why should we care about other people's welfare, and what happens when we live in a society that incentivizes us not to do so? Jokes about the inevitability of death and taxes point to much deeper truths about the inherent and defining features of human existence. If death is (both ontologically and biologically speaking) a condition of possibility for life, then taxes signify our inescapable dependence on, and indebtedness to, the lives of others.

The linking of death and taxes recalls the Christian theological virtue of 'caritas', or charity; within the Christian framework, the salvation of human life is dependent on Christ's ultimate sacrifice, i.e., his death. Through overt religious imagery detailing ritual acts of service, including a Catholic priest who doubles as an Advanced Tax professor, Wallace's extended meditation on the American tax system valorises a moral economy in which freedom is a form of redemption earned through personal sacrifice for the benefit of something or someone beyond the self. Furthermore, caritas implies a gift that is charitably, or freely, given. The Wallace archive at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, TX contains a heavily annotated copy of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift* (1983), a work that explores the importance of 'gift-giving and its relationship to art'.[272] Several of the passages Wallace underlined speak to what is lost in neoliberal capitalist economies that reduce every human interaction to a market exchange value:

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[270] The fictional character, DeWitt Glendenning Jr., is loosely based on a former real-life commissioner of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, Sheldon Cohen, to whom the quote is attributed.
[271] *The Pale King*, p. 84
[272] Margaret Atwood, 'Introduction to The Gift', in *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*, by Lewis Hyde (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2012), pp. vii–xvi, p. vii.

> But where […] the market alone rules, and particularly where its benefits derive from the conversion of gift property to commodities, the fruits of gift exchange are lost. At that point commerce becomes correctly associated with the fragmentation of community and the suppression of liveliness, fertility, and social feeling.[273]

True charity is a gift that is freely given, integral to human connection as well as to human inspiration and creativity. 'It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection.'[274]

Wallace explores the market's distortions of the human impulse for charity and gift giving in several of his works, but perhaps nowhere more succinctly than in a short story from the *Brief Interviews* collection, 'The Devil is a Busy Man'. With pithy humour the story relates the plight of a country farmer who finds that no one wants his used items when given away for free; however, once he lists a nominal price for his old sofa or farm tool, there is suddenly great interest. This brief narrative reveals how buying, selling, and consuming have become major sources of identity in American society and speaks to the perversion of the meaning and purpose of 'charity' under capitalism. It also reminds us that the freedom to 'give it all away' is not equally shared across the class divide; the neoliberalism of supply-side economics and deregulation taxes the poor and working classes while allowing the rich to make gifts of the surplus wealth they hoard. Slavoj Žižek and Paul Mason, among others, argue that philanthropy is often used to assist privatization schemes, exempting wealthy donors from paying taxes that would benefit the public good. Furthermore, economists widely acknowledge that rates of inequality increase along with charitable giving in Western

[273] Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2012), p. 39.
[274] Ibid., p. 58.

democracies, which ultimately contributes to making the majority of citizens less free. At stake here is the battle between opposing views of freedom and the irreconcilable differences they entail.

In his famous essay 'Two Concepts of Liberty' (1958), philosopher Isaiah Berlin argued that there are two types of liberty, negative and positive, and that they are often incompatible. Of negative liberty, Berlin writes:

> I am said to be free to the degree to which no human being interferes with my activity. This is the classical sense of liberty in which the great English philosophers, Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, Paine, and indeed Mill, used it. Political freedom was simply the area within which a man could do what he liked. If I was prevented by other persons from doing what I liked, I was to that degree unfree; and if the area within which I could do what I wished was legally contracted beyond a certain minimum, I could be described as being enslaved.[275]

Negative liberty therefore deals with the absence of constraints on the subject (from other people, regulations, laws, etc.), while positive liberty has to do with possibilities, namely the subject's inherent capacities for self-determination. It can also apply to the collective will of the society or group in question.

> The positive sense of the word 'liberty' derives from the desire on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and my decisions to depend on myself and not on external forces of whatever kind.[276]

[275] Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', *The Isiah Berlin Virtual Library*, 1958, p. 4, <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/tcl/> [accessed 8 January 2022]
[276] Ibid., p. 9.

Wallace allegorises Berlin's argument in one of the integral scenes in *Infinite Jest*, in which rival government agents Marathe and Steeply have an extended conversation in the form of a political-philosophical debate about the meaning and value of freedom within the American cultural psyche.[277] Their discussion centres around issues of personal and collective ethics, including the ethics of citizenship, civic duty, and civil liberties. They debate whether the freedom to pursue individual opportunities without restriction or regulation is greater than the collective freedom from precarity and poverty, for example.

In a nod to Goethe's *Faust*, the meeting between the secret agents occurs on 'Walpurgisnacht', a liminal time between April 30th and May 1st in Germanic folklore during which witches and demons fly free and wreak havoc. Faustian themes loom large throughout Wallace's novel about addiction and lethal pleasure; Faust is, after all, the archetypal addict, never satisfied, always seeking greater pleasures and willing to make deals with the devil to experience ever new highs. The Faust myth warns of the dangers of untamed desires and unchecked increase, which is the subtext and real purpose of Marathe's and Steeply's meeting, as they reluctantly join forces to prevent the uncontrolled proliferation of the lethal cartridge. The temporal significance of this date extends to the modern celebration of International Worker's Day, or Labour Day, on the first of May. This lends credence to Marathe's Franco-Canadian (and rather un-American, in Steeply's view) political values for limiting the civil liberties of the individual in favour of the good of the collective, especially the working classes. That this section is directly followed by the disastrous Eschaton game, an elaborate schoolyard enactment of international nuclear war, is telling. Like the wild and uncontrolled Faustian forces that foreshadow explosive nuclear proliferation, the game quickly spirals out of control, ending in serious physical harm to the younger players. The

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[277] *Infinite Jest*, pp. 317-321.

elder students who are meant to chaperone the event are too high on drugs to fulfil their duty of care for their charges, but the conspicuous absence of any adult teachers or staff points to a laissez-faire approach to health and safety regulations at the school. Like the legend of Faust, the Eschaton scene shows how quickly power can be abused when limits and checks are removed. It also illustrates the conflict between the 'negative liberty' of the individual and the 'positive liberty' of the collective good.

Chapter 4: Sex, Ethics, and Performances of Misogyny: Towards a Feminist Critique of David Foster Wallace

In the previous three chapters of this thesis, I mapped the ethical subtexts that arise in Wallace's literary project across different theoretical lenses. The first chapter traces one of his main themes, involving the ethics of alterity, through the postmodern tradition of Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida. The following two chapters seek to complicate this framework by foregrounding the biological materialism in Wallace's writing, and then by evaluating how his texts problematise the contingent agencies of the biopolitical subject under neoliberal capitalism. In critiquing the structural forces that manipulate, exploit, or undermine human agency, Wallace highlights the ethical failures of institutions and hierarchies that are distinctly patriarchal. His narratives expose the systemic misogyny of contemporary culture and society, and in doing so demand that readers confront and challenge their own role, and perhaps complicity, within it. Making sense of his dystopian or failed narratives, and understanding the questions or problems they present, requires the application of a feminist ethical lens.

The failures of agency that Wallace explores feature subjects, bodies, and cognitive interiorities that are primarily male; women's voices are generally excluded from direct

narrative expression, or they are explicitly silenced. The suppression of female subjectivities in Wallace's narratives is often linked to the misogynistic and pathological mental states of male characters. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* in particular can be read as a collection of contemporary horror stories outlining the consequences of disavowing feminism and illustrating how misogynistic viewpoints are often comorbid with serious mental health crises in male characters. In addition, misogyny manifests as an aesthetic failure that contemporary literature like Wallace's struggles to deal with.

Tracing the thematic path of the previous three chapters, I will explore the ambiguous feminist ethics that emerge in Wallace's writing. In the first section I will address Wallace's own views on literary misogyny, as well as on feminism, through an analysis of selected expository and fictional writings. I will also evaluate the response of female literary critics to his treatment of sex, gender, and misogyny, summarising pro- and anti-Wallace arguments. In the second section, I will return to chapter one's discussion of Levinasian alterity, now refracted through a gendered lens, by focusing on the ethical thought of Julia Kristeva. In this section I will compare Kristeva's ideas on abjection to the 'Wallacean Abject' and discuss how the latter indicates an 'heretical' feminist ethics in Wallace's own work. Following on from this, the third section will summarise the current scientific discourse on sex differences and the brain, focusing on cognition and behaviour and tying these readings together through Wallace's critique of the questionable values of neoliberal patriarchy. In the fourth section I will discuss how Wallace self-consciously employs and deconstructs the male gaze by linking it to increasingly pornographic ways of viewing and seeing. This includes a critique of the expansion of pornography as an industry and the commodification of female bodies this entails, as well as the ever-growing consumer demand for 'torture porn' involving images of violence against women.

The complicated sexual ethics that emerge in Wallace's narratives revolve around dual poles of complicity and critique that define male subjectivity throughout his work. I will argue that Wallace's literary 'performances of misogyny' put patriarchal values on trial and invite the reader to stand in as jury and judge, as when the narrator of "Octet" directly addresses the reader with the concluding phrase 'So Decide.'[278] To this end, this chapter will pose a series of questions about how readers (especially female readers) might approach misogyny and the pornographic gaze in contemporary literature. To what degree is the aestheticized portrayal of graphic sexual violence by hetero/cis/white male artists acceptable today? Is there a case to be made, as Amy Hungerford has argued, to refuse to read writers like Wallace, for whom misogyny is a thematic touchstone? Related to this is the question of how empathy operates within Wallace's texts, or in other words, what is at stake for readers in identifying with the 'hideous men' that populate his narratives? How deeply are the narratives invested in producing an emotional or affective response in readers, either of condemnation and contempt or of compassion, and how might this experience be different for male and female readers? This chapter will aim to show how Wallace critiques misogyny through dystopian imaginaries. Although his writing successfully portrays the profound failures of sexual ethics in Western patriarchal society, it is also aesthetically limited by these portrayals, yet another double bind that marks his work for the defining role it plays within literary post-modernism.

Wallace's Gender Trouble

It seems almost obvious to point out the gender trouble in Wallace's fictional narratives. From his 'parodies of feminism' and narrative performances of misogyny to his

[278] *Brief Interviews*, p.136.

fixation on the pornographic gaze, Wallace devotes a large part of his oeuvre to exploring issues of sex, gender, language, and embodiment in the contemporary age. Not unlike his position within and towards a neoliberal ethics, which I explored in the last chapter, there is a marked divergence in his texts with respect to his positions on feminism as a movement and feminist ethics more broadly.

Amy Hungerford's polemic 'On Not Reading DFW' raises important questions about 'writing, reading, and misogyny', and 'ultimately aim[s] to show how different practices of reading shape literary culture in the present,' as she defends her decision not to put much work into reading or teaching Wallace's texts.[279] She admits the controversial nature of her piece up front, explaining that the sexual ethics of Wallace's personal life are her point of departure for evaluating the literature he produced. Citing the erotics of reading, especially in the textual relationship between male writer and female reader, the thematic focus on misogyny in Wallace's writing, and the revaluation of the labour of reading in an age of 'literary overproduction', Hungerford reaches the conclusion that further attention to Wallace's work (especially *Infinite Jest*) is not worth her time.[280] She defends her choice to selectively ignore narratives about male sexual narcissism and misogyny, especially if the personal life of the author in question involved misuse or abuse of sexual power, asserting that 'we should care about how Wallace treated women because what is at stake in the relationship between writing and misogyny is not sexual morality […] but the quality of the art Wallace produced'.[281] In Hungerford's opinion, Wallace's art suffered as a result of its inherent misogyny, however her own piece misses the opportunity to substantiate this claim.

Instead, she rhetorically questions (without any follow up) whether Wallace's stories about misogyny 'revel in or revile the hideousness of their men', opining that 'Wallace

[279] Amy Hungerford, 'On Not Reading DFW', in *Making Literature Now* (Stanford University Press, 2020), pp. 141–68, p. 141.
[280] Ibid., p. 162.
[281] Ibid., p. 147.

seemed ultimately uninterested in whether his ability to voice misogyny in fiction had anything to do with […] insight into gender dynamics'.[282] Despite the tenuousness of these allegations, Hungerford's refusal to give attention to yet another male writer's narrative portrayals of misogyny and violence against women comes across as a valid point. Giving one's attention to Wallace's Hideous Men, for example, means less time engaging with other narratives and other writers, such as women of colour, whose work has historically been excluded from publishing houses and academe alike. Hungerford's essay is timely and relevant for the debate it opens up, indicative of a new wave of Wallace studies and literary criticism more broadly that revolves around sexual ethics, gendered power dynamics, and misogyny within and beyond the academy. It also gestures towards deeper questions, about whether and how bigotries of all sorts, sexism, racism, classism, and ableism, to name a few, can limit or damage the aesthetic possibilities of a piece of art.

Wallace polemically sets himself over and against the 'Great Male Narcissists' of the generation before him, a direct challenge to the literary misogyny of his forefathers.[283] In his review of John Updike's late work, *Toward the End of Time*, entitled 'Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think', Wallace pillories writers like Norman Mailer, Phillip Roth, and especially Updike for their narcissistic and objectifying portrayals of women that, Wallace suggests, should be outdated by this point, concluding that an overhaul in the sexual ethics of literary prose is at hand. Regarding Updike, Wallace laments that 'his characters seemed to become more and more repellant […] without any corresponding sign that the author understood that they were repellant'.[284] Wallace also comments on divergences between ethics and literary aesthetics by indicating that communication of authorial awareness to the reader is ultimately more important than 'the

[282] Ibid., p. 151.
[283] *Consider the Lobster*, pp. 51-59.
[284] Ibid., p. 52.

sheer gorgeousness of […] descriptive prose', and that 'making misogyny seem literary', like 'making fascism seem funny', is an ethical problem in contemporary fiction that is the author's duty to handle responsibly.[285] He suggests that many male writers fail here (both ethically and aesthetically), explaining that 'the deep reason so many of my generation dislike Updike and the other GMNs has to do with these writers' radical self-absorption, and with their uncritical celebration of this self-absorption both in themselves and in their characters'.[286] Wallace maintains that beautiful prose and satisfying narrative arcs cannot compensate for clichéd objectifications of women masquerading as literary art; uncritical representations of the male subject's entitlement (sexual and otherwise) have become alienating to younger readers.

Wallace provides a fictionalised counterpart to this critique in his short story "Death is Not the End" from *Brief Interviews*, which features a literary portrait of an anonymous GMN. This story, placed at the beginning of the collection, is significant for several reasons. The deliberately boring account of the great male poet's casual solipsism foregrounds a highly unconventional collection that explores variations of extreme misogyny, concluding with a harrowing story of psychopathy and rape. This foregrounding is a reminder that terrible crimes and acts of violence usually begin with repeated instances of banal, inward-looking self-absorption, with the refusal to consider other subjects and alternative narratives.

The text pays careful attention to the dull minutiae of the poet's body, highlighting that, despite his artistic genius, he is still bound and limited by the fleshy realities of life, ageing, and ultimately death. The poet lies reclined and enclosed within his beautiful private garden, as if interred in a mausoleum to his greatness. The stifling silence of the garden, with its absence of intrusions from the world beyond, can signify the intense interiority required

[285] Ibid., p. 52.
[286] Ibid., p. 53.

for certain kinds of artistic creation, as well as the deep solipsism that characterises many of the works of the GMN set. The poet lies 'wholly still and composed and enclosed, not even a hint of a breeze to stir the leaves of the trees and shrubbery, the silent living enclosing flora's motionless green vivid and inescapable and not like anything else in the world in either appearance or suggestion'.[287] However, this idyllic vision is undermined by the final words of the text, which appear in a footnote: 'That is not wholly true'.[288] In calling attention to himself and to his own unreliability, the narrator challenges the uncontested artistic greatness of the poet, his physical, aesthetic, and ethical unassailability, and finally, his uncontested version of the narrative.

As in the aforementioned cases, Wallace's critique of solipsism tends to focus on male narcissism and is related to his greater project of problematising the pornographic gaze and its hazy status as an art form. His work demonstrates the limited scope for female subjects under this dominant cultural lens, although his treatment of feminism as a movement that features its own diverse set of ethics, values and goals is far more ambivalent. Troublingly, Wallace has suggested that 'feminism' can be a narcissistic end in itself. In a letter to a former professor, he describes Brief Interviews with Hideous Men as 'a parody (a feminist parody) of feminism'[289] -- a problematic phrasing considering the content of the stories. This raises the important question of what literary value Wallace found in undertaking a parody of feminism through portrayals of extreme misogyny. This question is further problematised by portrayals of 'feminists' in his texts as ridiculous, hysterical, grotesque, or threatening. In *Infinite Jest*, the words 'feminist' and 'feminism' occur mostly as pejorative referents, signifying militant extremists who advocate separatism and misandry, or second rate intellectual or artistic abilities, such as the 'appropriation artist' who is

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[287] *Brief Interviews*, p. 3.
[288] Ibid., p. 3.
[289] D.T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* (London: GRANTA, 2012), p. 247.

romantically involved with recovering addict Ken Erdedy; her ‘artistic manifesto [involving] radical feminist themes’[290] is dismissed by Erdedy, the male subject, who is only interested in the drugs and occasional sex she procures for him. Mary Esther Thode, a teacher/coach at the elite Enfield Tennis Academy, another of *Jest*’s feminists, is described as ‘rabidly political and not too tightly wrapped’, and her classes at the notoriously rigorous ETA are described as intellectually inferior and unserious ‘joke classes’, e.g., ‘Breast-feeding as sexual assault’ and ‘The Personal Is the Political Is the Psychopathological: The Politics of Contemporary Psychopathological Double-Binds’.[291] Mary Esther Thode ‘is regarded by the upperclassmen as probably insane, by like clinical standards, although her coaching proficiency with the Girls’ 16’s is beyond dispute’.[292] He informs us that Thode was blacklisted from tennis competition for

> trying to organize the circuits’ more politically rabid and unwrapped players into a sort of radical post-feminist grange that would compete only in pro tournaments organised, subsidized, refereed, overseen, and even attended and cartridge-distributed exclusively to not only women or homosexual women, but only by, for, and to registered members of the infamously unpopular early-Interdependence-era Female Objectification Prevention and Protest Phalanx (FN: ‘A Dworkinite heavy-leather organization’).[293]

The Dworkinite F.O.P.P.P.s of *Infinite Jest* are farcical figures embodying the male narrator’s anxiety that feminism is ultimately an ideological war on men. These anxieties occur elsewhere in Wallace’s texts, for example in the block cap references in ‘Datum Centurio’,

[290] *Infinite Jest*, p. 23.
[291] Ibid., pp. 306-307.
[292] Ibid., p. 307.
[293] Ibid., p. 307.

which imagines a historical document from a dystopian future that can offer a scientific or 'technosexual' explanation for the failed state of contemporary gender relations:

> KEY at MISCODINGS, INTERGENDER; Secondary KEYS at Historical Notes for MISOGYNY, OSTENSIBLE PROJECTED FORMS OF; for VICTIMIZATION, CULTURE OF; for FEMINISM, MALEVOLENT SEPARATIST OF EARLY U.S.21C; for SEXUAL REVOLUTION OF LATE 20C, PATHETIC DELUSIONS OF[294]

The biological determinism on which the text hinges suggests that interactions between men and women are neurogenetically programmed and that sexual life, like all other forms of cellular life, encodes its own destruction. The references to the 'pathetic delusions' and 'malevolence' of the women's movement indicate the narrator's belief that the goals of feminism are unnatural and misguided, and therefore doomed. "Datum Centurio" does not portray feminism as a positive historical force or movement of liberation to be embraced; it is merely the next step in humanity's inevitable dystopian progression. Taken together, these examples show how Wallace's texts often evaluate 'feminism' from the point of view of the (rather anti-feminist) male subject, a maladaptation or backlash inflicted upon men as punishment for their misogyny and sexual objectification of women.

Second-wave feminism and the women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s are similarly figured as symptoms of dysfunction in *The Pale King*, when Chris Fogle's mother's coming out and lesbian relationship is written off as a form of hysterical breakdown or female mid-life crisis. The feminist bookstore that Fogle's mother and her partner, Joyce, open together is presented as a frivolous waste of the narrator's father's hard-

[294] *Brief Interviews*, pp. 108-109.

earned money, as well as a precursor to his eventual demise. The self-indulgences of their marijuana smoking and lesbian emotional excesses are played out against the dead father's hard-working decency, seriousness, and self-discipline. However, this section of the novel uses language that deliberately calls attention to the unreliability of the post-adolescent male narrator, prompting the reader to question the accuracy of his characterisations. Chris Fogle repeatedly explains that he has very few memories of that time in his life and by his own admission, his judgement was literally clouded by the great deal of marijuana he was smoking himself. Although many of Wallace's male subjects and narrators encourage contempt or ridicule for female or 'feminist' characters, their own compromised positions undercut their accountability, making for an oblique set of interpretations. These 'skeletal narratives'[295] that rise to the surface in many of Wallace's texts can dramatically alter, or even reverse, the ostensible meaning of the primary male narrative voice.

An ambivalence towards feminism is also voiced in Wallace's non-fiction pieces. At times he seems to rally to feminist perspectives, as for example in 'Authority and American Usage', when he admits that: '… the very language in which today's socialist, feminist, minority, gay and environmental movements frame their sides of political debates is informed by the Descriptivist belief that traditional English is conceived and perpetuated by privileged white males and is thus inherently capitalist, sexist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, elitist: unfair'.[296] In a footnote within the sentence, Wallace avers that this 'is, in fact, true'.[297] But he immediately undercuts that support or alliance in the following paragraph by voicing some highly problematic views on the abortion debate, which he frames as a women's right to make an immoral choice: 'In this reviewer's opinion, the only really coherent position on the abortion issue is one that is both Pro-Life *and* Pro-Choice'.[298] Wallace continues:

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[295] Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p.17.
[296] *Consider the Lobster*, 66-127 p. 81.
[297] Ibid., p. 81.
[298] Ibid., p. 82. Italics in Original.

> This reviewer is thus, as a private citizen and an autonomous agent, both Pro-Life and Pro-Choice. It is not an easy or comfortable position to maintain. Every time someone I know decides to terminate a pregnancy, I am required to believe simultaneously that she is doing the wrong thing and that she has every right to do it.[299]

These statements make a direct claim for the male author's moral authority and superiority, which includes his right to pass judgement on the uniquely female medical condition of pregnancy. His argument culminates with his own chauvinistic discomfort at being forced to capitulate to a pro-choice stance, all of which is thoroughly incompatible with the fundamental principles of feminism.

Despite the obtuseness of his proclamation in the "American Usage" essay, Wallace was not unaware of his own complicated position in the on-going debates around gender and privilege in literary production, and voiced his anxieties about it in a 1996 interview with Charlie Rose, shortly after the publication of *Infinite Jest*:

> Wallace: Feminists are always saying this. Feminists are saying white males say, "Okay, I'm going to sit down and write this enormous book and impose my phallus on the consciousness of the world."
> Rose: And you say?
> Wallace: [I]f that was going on, it was going on on a level of awareness I do not want to have access to.[300]

[299] Ibid., p. 82.
[300] David Foster Wallace Interview on *Charlie Rose* (1997) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GopJ1x7vK2Q> [accessed 11 January 2022]

There is something that feels distinctly misleading about this statement, however, because exploring these dark places and levels of awareness seems to be exactly what Wallace is doing in his fiction; and it is certainly what he attempted three years later with his 1999 publication of *Brief Interviews*, a book that is arguably more of an autocritique of the male subject-author's tendency to impose a phallogocentric consciousness on the reader/female other, than a post-feminist parody of feminism. With this in mind, it is important to note that Wallace often referred to his intended reader with female pronouns, as 'she' or 'her'. He spoke at length about the 'work' necessary for good art, and the 'work' it would take serious readers of his texts, often using language that figured his imaginary reader as female: 'this process is a relationship between the writer's consciousness and her own, and that in order for it to be anything like a real full human relationship, she's going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work'.[301] Whether this is what Pierre Bourdieu would term a 'strategy of condescension' or a genuine attempt at egalitarianism (or some of both), Wallace is referencing the work that must go into any serious engagement with his texts. This work is both cognitive and affective: the reader must first make sense of the text's language and then attempt to understand the psychological and emotional perspectives of the subject or narrator. Since most of Wallace's speaking subjects and narrators are male, understanding their point of view often involves both an encounter with their psychic pain as well as with a variety of sexist and misogynistic views. Is it worth it for women to work through Wallace's difficult texts? For Hungerford, it is not, and in this respect, her position is understandable. But to take this question seriously involves considering the literary critiques of women writers who have sought to interpret the more 'difficult gifts'[302] of Wallace's art.

[301] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p. 34.
[302] Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 257.

Contra Hungerford, there is a real case to be made for reading writers and works that may present disagreeable or even distressing content. As this thesis has endeavoured to show through readings of Wallace, Levinas, and Butler as well as through medical humanistic models, ethical subjectivity entails not merely acknowledging but engaging with – understanding and making sense of – the hideous other. Refusing to read closes us off to the realities of the world. A more productive approach would take the task of feminist critique seriously in order to understand how literary misogyny persists in spite of broader societal changes, how it can lurk beneath seemingly progressive rhetoric about ethics and alterity (including its own self-aware critique), and how it can obscure or reveal its connection to other pressing social issues such as addiction, suicide, and violent crime.

Several of Wallace's female readers and critics have treated the misogyny in his work as an invitation to unpack the links between communication, gender dynamics, and mental health that were largely elided in the first wave of Wallace studies. In her essay: 'By Hirsute Author: Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace' Mary K. Holland argues that issues of sex and gender, of utmost importance for Wallace, have been dramatically understudied and critically ignored by the mostly male literary scholars of his work:

> It would be insufficient and counterproductive to examine gender in Wallace's work without considering how gender has so far played a significant role in the study of that work, and in the ways in which Wallace has been understood, and begins to be codified by academic readings. It is no secret that *Infinite Jest* is not Wallace's only "fairly

> male" book, or that readers, fans, and scholars of his work have tended to be overwhelmingly male.[303]

She also observes that many of the early 'readings and lenses distort themselves in order not to see the implications of gender and power dynamics that Wallace so consistently puts before us,' maintaining that 'this denial of the importance of all sorts of gender issues constitutes a blindness at the heart of the considerable insight thus far gained by Wallace studies'.[304] Her nuanced reading of Wallace's essay on David Markson's novel, *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, demonstrates 'a clear and sustained attention to such feminist concern with male domination of women', as well as calling attention to his own difficult and somewhat compromised position.[305] According to Holland: 'the simultaneous critique of and absorption into oppressive theoretical and cultural systems' is a duality that runs throughout and defines Wallace's work.[306] Attempts to balance these poles 'of critique and complicity occurs in Wallace's work especially in the context of romantic and sexual relationship between (primarily heterosexual) men and women.[307] The limits of 'hirsute' self-awareness defines, to a large extent, his style.

Zadie Smith and Claire Hayes-Brady have both focused on the literary and philosophical value underlying the distinct 'difficulties' and 'failures' that characterise Wallace's literary output. In her essay on Wallace's 'Difficult Gifts', Smith explains that 'if Wallace insists on awareness… [it] must move always in an outward direction, away from the self. Self-awareness and self-investigation are to be treated with suspicion, even horror. In part, this was Wallace's way of critiquing the previous literary generation's emphasis on self-

[303] Mary K. Holland, '"By Hirsute Author": Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58.1 (2017), pp. 64–77, p. 74.
[304] Ibid., p. 75.
[305] Ibid., p. 64.
[306] Ibid., p. 69.
[307] Ibid., p. 69.

reflexive narrative personae'.[308] Smith and Wallace both argue that the misogynistic realism of previous literary generations is simply too anodyne, too pleasurable to read, to portray the horror of what they were describing. Smith avers that Wallace responded to the literary status quo with an aesthetically risky move: by indulging multiple levels of recursion or reflexiveness about the male subject's moral failings, effectively performing or even parodying literary phallogocentrism. Individual readers must decide for themselves whether Wallace's self-critical and meta-cognitive overlays absolve or condemn his fiction to the same radical self-absorption of the GMNs. In this sense, *Brief Interviews* functions primarily to pose a series of symbolic questions rather than to provide resolutions, answers, or even enjoyment. Through narrative recursion and indirect, second person speech, Wallace both addresses and interrogates the reader, giving voice to the more ignoble aspects of the male subject's amoral interiority. The text refuses to make sense as a collection of representational stories. Instead, readers are asked to implicate themselves in the brutality of the narratives, to inhabit the minds of these faceless narrators. As Smith notes in her essay, the 'interrogation turns outwards, towards the reader'.[309] In Smith's reading, *Brief Interviews* becomes almost uncanny as a text; there is a sense of reversal or inversion, as if the text is reading us.

Smith's critique indicates that Wallace's representations of gender and sexuality invite a deconstructive reading right from the start. His familiar themes of alterity and communication are configured with respect to the absent or disembodied voices of women during conversations with male characters and narrators. Wallace's deliberate omission of female voices in *Brief Interviews*, for example, is a stylistic and formal choice that dramatically shapes the structure, and ultimately the meaning, of the text. In a corpus that focuses so closely on linguistic expression, the dearth of female voices, actors, and narrators

[308] Smith, *Changing My Mind*, p. 268.
[309] Ibid., p. 273.

is glaring. The absent female interlocutor, indicated by the letter Q in *Brief Interviews*, queers the male narrator's privileged access to language. His self-awareness is misdirected, turning inwards and away from genuine connection with Q, ultimately collapsing the narrative he seeks to control.

In her enlightening study on 'Gender, Difference, and the Body', Claire Hayes-Brady explains that

> Wallace's encounters with difference allowed him scope to dramatize the complexity of recognizing both the subjective self and the subjective other, along with learning to recognize the self as object. The absence or failure of relationships may be read as a literalization of Wallace's own ideas about the challenges of connection, and the weakness of his female characters speaks strongly to the concerns he expressed about 'access to other selves', and his own authorial inability to gain this kind of access.[310]

Wallace's textual explorations of subjectivity, ethics, and agency begin as 'encounters with difference' that unfold into revelations about the 'porousness' of borders, involving the collapsing of all manner of oppositions, e.g., sex/gender, male/female, self/other, mind/body, reason/madness, strength/weakness, health/illness. To this end, Wallace employs different concepts and modes, such as perversity, monstrosity, and abjection, to dramatise the confusion and terror that can arise when the arbitrariness of traditional or normative categories is exposed. His texts play with and distort language to reveal how subjectivity is constructed vis-a-vis the absence of fixed meaning. Along these lines, his treatment of sex and gender highlights the extent to which male subjectivity is contingent upon its feminine other. Hayes-Brady attributes the narrative struggles of female characters in Wallace's texts

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[310] Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 168.

to a formal choice that underscores the difficulty he faced as a male writer in giving voice to the female experience: ‘What is particularly striking about Wallace’s few female characters is that they are, almost exclusively, engaged in struggles to tell their own stories, recurrently working against narrative appropriation, either because they have difficulty with language or because someone else is trying to tell their story for them’.[311] Hayes-Brady suggests that the ‘masculine perspective’ in Wallace’s work should not be reduced to ‘simple misogyny’: ‘Rather, Wallace was overwhelmed by what he saw as the alterity of the female experience; that is to say, its total alienation from his experience of the world’.[312] This analysis adds another layer to Smith’s and Holland’s readings (and recalls Levinas’s writings on the dangers of attempting to reduce and subsume alterity within self and same) by pointing towards the literary value in working through iterations of moral complexity around ‘difference’, especially when it comes to authorship and representation.

As Adam Kelly questions in his essay on *Brief Interviews*: ‘If we were tempted to follow Wallace in calling the collection a feminist text, what could we possibly mean *by* feminism? And what could the book’s possible feminist categorization mean *for* feminism’?[313] He goes on to explain that ‘whether or not we can legitimately call *Brief Interviews* a feminist text, the effort to understand it as such can allow us to say significant things about it. These include not only the ways the collection extends Wallace’s earlier work but also how its author might have conceived it as responding and even contributing to the aims of contemporary feminism’.[314] Kelly calls attention to the influence ‘the so-called French Feminists [had in] the US academy during the 1980s’: ‘It was these theorists’ interrogation of the question of the feminine – and particularly the question of how the

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[311] Ibid., p. 171.
[312] Ibid., p. 171.
[313] Adam Kelly, ‘Brief Interviews with Hideous Men’, in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 82–96, p. 83. Italics in original.
[314] Ibid., p. 83.

feminine can and should be represented in writing – that provided vital inspiration for the imaginative landscape and storytelling techniques of *Brief Interviews*.'[315] Evaluating Kelly's questions about Wallace's complicated approach to feminism considering the difficulties both Emmanuel Levinas and Julia Kristeva encountered in trying to describe alterity and ethicality with respect to gender and sexual difference will be one of the focal points of the next section. Arguing for the value of a feminist critical reading of Wallace's work (against the views of critics like Amy Hungerford, for example), might therefore be accomplished by returning to the post-structuralist line of thought.

Gender and Alterity: The Porousness of Certain Borders

In this section I will briefly introduce some key points from Julia Kristeva's theoretical work to show how they illuminate Wallace's approach to the gendered other, including the meaning and value of a 'feminist' ethics in Wallace's work. Perhaps surprisingly, there is a significant degree of overlap between Kristeva's and Wallace's thematic interests. For both writers, the physicality of the body and its complex array of needs, drives, and dys/functions is paramount, and this extends to acts of speech. Kristeva's explication of how language signifies on both symbolic and 'semiotic', or embodied, levels is echoed in Wallace's use of language and dialogue to convey information about the exterior physical form and interior mental state of his characters. Furthermore, as with Levinas and Wallace, Kristeva's understanding of subjectivity and ethics foregrounds fundamental asymmetries between subject and object. For Kristeva, the asymmetry of the ethical relationship is reflected by the maternal relationship of mother to child, or more specifically, the primary relationship of pregnancy itself, between the maternal subject and 'the other

[315] Ibid., p. 84.

within'.[316] Kelly Oliver has described Kristeva's 'heretical ethics' as an 'outlaw ethics', in that '[it is] founded on the ambiguity in pregnancy and birth between subject and object positions'.[317] In privileging one of the most primal forms of love as opposed to law, 'it is an ethics that challenges rather than presupposes an autonomous ethical agent'.[318] The Kristevan subject exists in a state of flux; its 'porousness' allows it to incorporate and be changed by the strangeness of the other. In this sense, the subject is not properly 'grounded' in an ontological sense, but rather 'in process' through endless linguistic, physical, and psychic transformations.

In her introduction to *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, Kelly Oliver explains that:

> For Kristeva, ethics operates as an open system. It moves between law and transgression, always in process, on trial, under revision. In this way, even the structure of ethics is open to change. The Law is always interactive, never absolute. In order for people to live together ethically, we must acknowledge transgression. Kristeva suggests that we must encode transgression so that it can be understood by the social.[319]

Oliver's piece points to additional similarities between Levinas' and Kristeva's ethics: both stress 'open systems' (infinity contra totality) and maintain that the experience of 'transgression' is fundamental to the ethical relationship (for Levinas, this is the face-to-face encounter that produces both the urge to kill and the injunction against it). The importance of transgression for Kristeva's system includes the speaking subject 'on trial', which bears

[316] Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 82.
[317] Kelly Oliver, 'Introduction: Julia Kristeva's Outlaw Ethics', in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writings*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 1–22, p. 5.
[318] McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, p. 85.
[319] Oliver, 'Julia Kristeva's Outlaw Ethics', p. 17.

further relevance to Wallace's work, particularly in *Brief Interviews*, where various un-identified male subjects speak as if 'on trial' before an abjected female voice. Ewa Ziarek expands upon some of these links in her enlightening essay "Kristeva and Levinas: Mourning, Ethics, and the Feminine", in which she addresses 'the possibility of [a] feminist ethics':

> What would constitute such ethics and what would it mean in the context of post-structuralism? How would this ethics intersect with feminist politics? Such conjunction of ethics and politics orients us toward a signification of female alterity and to the analysis of violence inherent in thematization of that alterity. The other set of questions concerns the issue of essentialism that seems to reappear on the horizon of numerous feminist debates, especially whenever an inquiry into the specificity of female sexuality is undertaken.[320]

As Ziarek points out in her essay, Levinas' and Kristeva's critics have focused on their controversial or problematic approaches to female alterity and sexuality, both of which are relevant with respect to feminist critiques of Wallace's work. Although Kristeva's critics dismiss her views as essentialist, a consideration of how she links questions of sexual difference to ethics can help make sense of some of the troubling misogyny and ethical 'failures' that run through Wallace's oeuvre.

A key aspect of Kristeva's ethics involves her theory on abjection (*Powers of Horror*, 1980), in which 'the Abject' signifies the state of disgust or horror that ensues when the borders of the subject are challenged or begin to disintegrate. In the presence of the abject,

[320] Ewa Ziarek, 'Kristeva and Levinas: Mourning, Ethics, and the Feminine', in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 62–78, p. 62.

the subject becomes aware of the precariousness or fragility of its identity, of the porousness of the borders that define it as male or female, person, or thing. In this sense, the 'abject' plays a major role in Wallace's work, and so understanding how the 'Wallacean Abject' functions may be critical to deciphering a feminist ethics in his work. For Wallace, as with Kristeva, this begins with the body and the foregrounding of the grotesque, from disfigurements, disabilities, and diseases to states of extreme mental illness, including dissociation and psychosis. Beyond the individual subject, Wallace portrays the social abjection of marginalized groups, from homeless addicts, convicts, and sex workers to the physically and mentally disabled. Furthermore, the Wallacean abject signifies the threat that female and nonheteronormative agency and voice presents to heterosexual male subjects. As an organising principle in Wallace's work, the abject characterizes the response to broad social and cultural shifts in norms of gender and sexuality that are challenging and transforming the borders of heteronormative masculinity. Thus, the relationship between abjection and ethicality points towards an emergent strain of feminist social critique in his work, which includes an autocritique of his role as male author.

'Infinite Jest' (the film) can be seen as a piece of 'abject art' since it disrupts the integrity of the human subject at the most fundamental level. As an aesthetic composition, the Samizdat confuses the borders between the abject and the sublime (as well as the fictional artefact and the text). The chaos it unleashes spreads in viral-like fashion, and any attempts to stop its propagation entail exposure and 'contamination' (another Kristevan theme). This focus on contamination is associated with the novel's fixation on borders and barriers. One example of such a border that occurs at the 'interface' between human subjects is the UHID veil, which shields the faces of the 'Hideously and Improbably Deformed' from others' reactions of shock and disgust. Wallace uses these barrier veils to call attention to the inescapable influence of the other's gaze on the porous borders of the subject. In this way,

Wallace's narratives employ the abject as a tool to unsettle readers and remind them of the precarity of their own subjectivity.

Joelle van Dyne, the 'star' of 'Infinite Jest' (the film), is also a UHID member, though her reasons for joining this group are not entirely clear. However, the narrative ambiguity surrounding Joelle's face centres on the male gaze's ob- and ab-jectification of the female subject, so Joelle's choice to wear the veil may be an attempt to subvert this. Molly Notkin, a friend and film scholar colleague of Joelle's, gives one of the novel's only accounts of the film's contents, which

> features Madame Psychosis as some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure Death, sitting naked, corporeally gorgeous, ravishing, hugely pregnant, her hideously deformed face either veiled or blanked out by undulating computer-generated squares of color or anamorphosized into unrecognizability as any kind of face by the camera's apparently very strange and novel lens, sitting there nude, explaining in very simple childlike language to whomever the film's camera represents that Death is always female, and that the female is always maternal.[321]

A straightforward psychoanalytic reading would suggest that Joelle's character symbolises the maternal abject/sublime in a presumptively Lacanian return to the womb.[322] The lethal and addictive aftereffects of watching the film also recall the Kristevan 'semiotic chora', in which a return to a primal state of foetal enmeshment with the maternal body results in an ego-death, causing viewers to lose access to the symbolic mode of language and meaning (i.e., the ability to speak). In this sense, the subversive power of the Samizdat is grounded in

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[321] *Infinite Jest*, p. 788.

[322] Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2009), p. 160.

a primal (feminine) force that disrupts the male gaze. The history and etymology of the term 'Samizdat' speaks to censorship, usually by a (male-dominated) government power, and the consequent need to self-publish, or to use ruses and disguises to disseminate the material. This raises the possibility that the film was originally authored by Joelle herself, with the 'very strange and novel lens' representing the point of view of the female artiste. In this case, 'Death' (of patriarchal supremacy, especially in the arts) would by necessity be female, or at least privilege women's perspectives, indicating a new era of artistic and cultural heritage stemming from maternal lines and displacing the historical focus on literary and artistic 'forefathers' like James Incandenza (and of course Wallace himself).

Despite the apparent feminine focus of the eponymous film, *Infinite Jest* is a 'fairly male book'[323] (to use Wallace's own words) that centres the male subject's confusion and anxiety around a host of issues, namely sexuality, embodiment (including states of pain), emotions like anger and sadness, and general mental health. Abjection is the mode Wallace uses to indicate the culture's collective failure to deal with this confusion and anxiety and its resultant dark consequences, namely sexism, misogyny, and violence (including acts of self-harm and suicide). Hal Incandenza's cryptic musings on his own adolescent male body exemplify this pervasive cultural failure:

> To send from yourself what you hope will not return. This is your body. They want you to know. You will have it with you, always. On this issue there is no counsel. You must make your best guess. For myself I do not expect ever, really, to know.[324]

[323] David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End up Becoming Yourself* (Broadway Books: New York, 2010), p. 273.
[324] *Infinite Jest*, p. 176.

Hal's issues with his body include anxieties around chronic pain and performance along with his intense drive to escape from himself and his weaknesses (real or imagined). Although he is praised and admired for his superior athleticism and physique, his relationship with his own body is complicated and confusing, and since there is no helpful 'counsel', he must settle for hopeless resignation. This short passage speaks to Western culture's ignorance and fear of the body (oft equated with women, the feminine, and sex/sexuality) and in the greater context of the novel, points toward the widespread trauma this causes. Thus, the complete absence of any reference to Hal's sexuality takes on narrative significance in a coming-of-age story about an adolescent boy that otherwise focuses so attentively on his physicality. In this sense, Hal's sexuality is 'abjected' by the text's misogyny and heterosexism (especially that of his older brother, Orin, who was Joelle's long-term partner, and from whom Hal is estranged). Notably, 'healthy' sexuality does not seem to feature in Wallace's oeuvre at all, which again speaks to the ambivalence and confusion of male subjects in navigating shifts in gender roles and sexual identities. Instead, sex and sexuality are represented via the abject in nearly all of Wallace's works, with a focus on 'aberrations', e.g., various forms of queerness, sex addiction, prostitution, etc. Overall, *Jest*'s largely homosocial and hyper-masculine worlds serve as a platform for exploring heterosexual male anxieties around increasingly fluid norms (porous borders) of sex and gender, as well as the ethical fallout from failing to deal with these anxieties.

Beyond coming to terms with his body and his mental health and addiction issues, a significant part of Hal's quest is to recover the master copy of the lethal cartridge before it falls into the hands of Quebecois 'terrorists', who plot to unleash the film on the US public as punishment for redrawing the border between the US and Canada. The new border has resulted in Canada's unwanted acquisition of a large territory of toxic US waste, the literal abjection of which is one of the major subtexts of the narrative. This is a highly personal

crusade for Hal, since the film was his father's final 'masterpiece' and his mother, who is Quebecois by birth, may be linked to the operatives who seek to cause death and destruction by disseminating it. Like a knight of the grail, Hal's outward search for the 'lethal' cartridge that symbolizes the abjected feminine is also an inward search for the parts of himself that have been figuratively abjected by his own 'forefathers' or father-like figures in his life, e.g., his punishing tennis coaches and his womanizing older brother. The narrative evasion around Hal's character that will run through the novel is set in the first/final scene, where he is trapped in a 'semiotic'/feminine mode, in a room full of men, unable to access the symbolic logos of patriarchal speech. It is unclear whether Hal has seen the film and thus been destabilized by an encounter with a heretofore suppressed feminine subjectivity, or whether he has taken an incredibly rare and powerful psychedelic drug (also known as 'Madame Psychosis', another reference to Joelle's disembodied voice and to the cultural associations between women and mental dysfunction/madness). Either way, Hal's language loss at the beginning/chronological end of the text results in a chaotic, animalistic, 'inhuman' failure of speech, which in Kristevan terms signals a new age of narrative temporality: 'The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth'.[325] The loss of Time (the Father/Paternal i.e., Chronos/Saturn) as a progressive linear construct, most clearly indicated throughout by the circles that head up the different sections of *Infinite Jest*, as well as the circularity and unresolved nature of the narrative arc, speak to this as well.

In the *Oblivion* collection, Wallace further develops his use of the abject as a lens through which to explore the ethical failures that arise at the intersection of 'toxic' masculinity and untreated mental illness. In my previous discussions on *Oblivion*, I evaluated how Wallace links various forms of antisocial or violent behaviour to broader ethical failures

[325] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2010), p. 9.

in society. When looked at in relation to the wider culture's misogyny and abjection of femininity, a new thread begins to emerge that complicates those readings. 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' features an unnamed adult male protagonist/narrator who is disturbingly 'queer' in the traditional sense of the word. Due to legal restrictions resulting from a public or criminal offense (and possibly involving his mental state), he has been court-ordered to be chaperoned by his mother, with whom he lives, each time he leaves his home. As with Hal Incandenza, this character's sexuality is completely obscured by the text, but taken together with his abnormal relationships and preoccupations, the narrative exposes the subject's fear of or disdain for women and female sexuality in general. The maternal abject is again the focal point in this piece, which begins with a description of the narrator's mother's face:

> Then just as I was being released in late 1996 Mother won a small product liability settlement and used the money to promptly go get cosmetic surgery on the crow's feet around her eyes. However the cosmetic surgeon botched it and did something to the musculature of her face which caused her to look *insanely frightened* at all times. […] So then she went and had more cosmetic surgery to try and correct it. But the second surgeon also botched it and the appearance of fright became even worse. Especially around the mouth this time. She asked for my candid reaction and I felt our relation demanded nothing less. Her crow's feet indeed were things of the past but now her face was a *chronic mask of insane terror*.[326]

The mother's face is an expression of Kristeva's 'powers of horror' -- the power inherent in the abject and states of abjection, as well as in the semiotic mode of speech and

[326] *Oblivion*, p. 182. Italics in original.

communication. She is denied the role of 'speaking subject' by her deranged son; it is through her 'chronic mask of terror' that she communicates within the narrative on a purely 'semiotic' level. Her son, the true source of her terror, attempts to control the narrative through the symbolic mode of language, which is underscored by his excessive use of italics. Although he seeks to occupy a position of 'authority' within the narrative, his failure to engage the semiotic mode (signified by the mute, disfigured maternal face beside him) threatens to overwhelm and destabilise him. Wallace again deploys the abject to indicate the serious risk this male character's mental deterioration poses to himself and others. He cultivates and then accidentally/on purpose unleashes grotesque and venomous spiders that threaten the lives of their unsuspecting victims: 'Granted widow bites are a bad way to go because of the potent neurotoxin involved prompting one physician all the way in 1935 to comment, *I do not recall having seen more abject pain manifested in any other medical or surgical condition...*'[327] Releasing the spiders and thereby causing pain to others is the narrator's only way to express his own pain, and possibly to feel anything at all; as such, his feelings are thoroughly abjected by the text, symbolised by the spiders and projected onto his mother and other victims, etc. Furthermore, the 'widows' may symbolise the narrator's fearful obsession with the uncontrolled semiotic register, or the power of female subjectivity and voice.

There are similar themes at play in the 'Mr. Squishy' story, which portrays the psychological unravelling of a mid-level marketing executive named Terry Schmidt. When I first discussed this character in chapter one, I focused on his debilitating guilt for his complicity in unethical business practices that harm innocent people, but there are clear textual indicators that complicate this reading. The narrator of the story invites the reader to sympathise with Schmidt, to focus on his track record of care and concern for others and to

[327] Ibid., p. 185. Italics in original.

see his own self-loathing as the opposite of arrogance, chauvinism, or entitlement. The narrator also indicates that Schmidt's sense of his own masculinity is in crisis throughout the novel. His name, Terry, is gender neutral, lending an additional layer of ambiguousness, or perhaps femininity, to his character, and when he looks at his face in the bathroom mirror he is disgusted by its plump, formless softness, its lack of clearly defined (masculine) identity. He reviles the alpha male corporate bosses who dominate him at work and yet feels frustration and despair when he cannot compel those who are presumably 'beneath' him to bend to his will. He harbours an unhealthy obsession with a married female colleague; despite her rejection of his advances, he has built a small shrine in his basement adorned with photos of her, presumably procured without her knowledge or consent. In this sense, his eventual breakdown stems from an inability to 'be a man' according to society's sexist standards, or perhaps to manage or come to terms with the feminine aspects of his own person and character, which register as 'abject' or unworthy to him. His increasing frustration with himself and his face's image in his bathroom mirror, taken together with his colleague's sexual rejection and his apparent lack of any other romantic relationship, expose his determination to inflict pain and death on innocent people as a form of vengeful and extreme male entitlement, a phenomenon which has come to be known as 'misogynist terrorism'[328] in the years since Wallace first published this story.

Schmidt's ultimate descent (the last scene finds him below ground, in his basement) into psychosis stems from his fear and loathing of the feminine aspects of his own subjectivity. The disturbing, masked, and genderless figure scaling the exterior of the office building in 'Mr. Squishy' therefore has a similar function to the mother's terrifying 'mask' of a face in 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature'; both represent the abjection of the feminine

[328] Jessica Valenti, 'When Misogynists Become Terrorists', *The New York Times*, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/26/opinion/when-misogynists-become-terrorists.html> [accessed 20 January 2022]

to a place of voiceless horror within the male subject. It is significant, then, that the narrator is invested in portraying Schmidt as a victim throughout the text, right up until the sinister denouement in which he plots to contaminate the food supply with a lethal poison. The symbolic meaning of food is maternal, linked with nurturing, sustenance, and care; in attempting to debase this and destroy its nourishing function, Terry Schmidt seeks to 'kill off' what he sees as his own vulnerable nature, his own need for care. This story therefore underscores how the enforcement of rigid gender roles harms men (as well as their innocent victims) and incites them to violence. In rereading this story through a feminist ethical lens, it reveals the insidious ways misogyny functions in the mind of the male subject and within the narrative itself.

The final story in the *Oblivion* collection, "The Suffering Channel", is deeply uncanny in imagery and tone, and foregrounds the links between abject works of art and terror, including the destabilisation of the male gaze at the increasingly disrupted border between desired female object and desiring female subject. Although her husband Brint's defecatory 'art' is the ostensible focal point of the narrative, Amber Moltke's massively grotesque and hypersexualised body is the metaphorical birth canal through which his 'genius' is brought forth into the world. Madame Moltke functions as an abject Madonna, a distillation of misogynistic tropes about women, of which the abject art is ultimately a projection. This piece explores the mysterious and potentially dangerous porousness of borders, between self and other, meaningful art and 'shit', and genius and madness. The unstable or porous borders are symbolised by the Moltke's bathroom wall and the bodies of unknown 'neighbours' on the other side, as well as the Moltke's Midwestern-ness and Skip's own abjected Midwestern identity, which he recalls in his memories of the abusive mother he has fled (and yet fallen into again, through the body of Mrs. Moltke). As Kristeva writes, 'The Abject confronts us… with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity

even before ex-isting outside of her. […] It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of power as securing as it is stifling'.[329] Olivia Banner's study of this story demonstrates the gendered interplay between masculine and feminine in the workings of the abject, taking masculinity as the locus or object for Wallace's figurations on abjection.[330]

In the examples I have evaluated thus far, Wallace uses abjection to imply states of contamination, victimization, and/or feminization that occur through the male subject's encounters with female subjectivity or the body of the symbolic mother. This is relevant with respect to the violence in Wallace's narratives, which is almost entirely perpetrated by male characters. Women and mothers in Wallace's fictional worlds may be deeply irresponsible or cruel, but they generally refrain from engaging in acts of paedophilia, incest, rape, or homicide, unlike many of Wallace's fictional father figures. In this respect, Wallace, like Kristeva, raises questions about innate differences between men and women. Although Kristeva's work has been criticised for its essentialism by Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, and others, she has continued to defend her theories of subjectivity based on sexual difference and maternity. The danger here is that unsubstantiated conjectures about fundamental differences between men and women tend to result in the oppression, exclusion, and silencing of women, especially on the grounds of a claimed inherent intellectual inferiority. In response to this, Kristeva has put forth her own theories about the distinctiveness of female genius as an embodied experience. The extent to which Wallace's work aligns with Kristevan formulations of subjectivity and ethics, or is itself essentialist, remains open for debate, but Wallace clearly figures 'biology', especially neurobiology, as a critical element in the construction of ethical subjectivity, and this includes sexual difference.

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[329] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 13.
[330] Olivia Banner, '"They're Literally Shit": Masculinity and the Work of Art in the Age of Waste Recycling', *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10.1 (2008), pp. 74–90.

Genius, Violence, and the Gendered Brain

Taken together, Wallace's texts suggest a troublingly inherent, and in some cases unavoidable, link between masculinity and violence. In the second chapter of this thesis, I discussed the ways in which Wallace struggles with issues of neuro-materialism, especially with respect to free will, addiction, mental illness, and the 'diseased' brain. I argued that Wallace pushes for an ethical revaluation of these problems, and I linked his fictional works to current research in neuroscience that also questions the origins and limits of ethical agency. Baron-Cohen, Pinker, and Sapolsky, three of the scientists I referenced, attribute the vastly higher incidence of male violence (at least in part) to unique physiological aspects of the male brain, in addition to other 'environmental' factors. Beyond questions of violence, however, establishment figures both within and outside of the scientific community suggest that sex-based brain differences account for essential cognitive and other behavioural differences between men and women. Problematically, this has been used to explain the dearth of women leaders at the highest levels of government, science, and enterprise, as well as the historical lack of female 'geniuses' in music, literature, and the arts.

Cordelia Fine, a philosopher and psychologist, and Gina Rippon, a neuroscientist, are two prominent researchers who study sex, gender, and the brain, independently critiquing the methods and motives of research carried out by cognitive scientists like Baron-Cohen. Fine coined the term 'neurosexism' to indicate how unsubstantiated myths about gender, sex, and the brain can infiltrate and shape scientific enquiry and debate. In her 2010 study, *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference*, Fine argues against

the 'conclusion that there must be hardwired psychological differences between the sexes'.[331] Fine acknowledges certain physical differences between male and female brains, but she maintains that brains are characterised first and foremost by their plasticity. Fine explains that

> The developmental possibilities for an individual are neither infinitely malleable nor solely in the hands of the environment. But the insight that thinking, behavior, and experiences change the brain, directly, or through changes in genetic activity, seems to strip the word 'hardwiring' of much useful meaning.[332]

She also warns that 'women's gains will, in certain quarters, increase demand for essentialist research'.[333] Her most recent study, *Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science, and Society* (2017), is a rebuttal of Baron-Cohen's arguments that sex hormones, notably testosterone, account for most of the behavioural differences between the sexes. She argues that these claims are overblown and largely unsubstantiated, pointing to massive confirmation bias in research around sex differences and the brain. In her 2019 study, *The Gendered Brain: The New Neuroscience that Shatters the Myth of the Female Brain,* Rippon calls attention to 'the evidence of sexist practices with the field of neuroimaging research itself':

> Neuroimaging seemed to be continuing in the psychosexist tradition of scientist-as-explainer-of-the-status-quo, focussing on finding differences between men and women, taking as given the differences in, for example, language and spatial skills, and rooting around in the brain for the supporting evidence.[334]

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[331] Cordelia Fine, *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011), p. xxi.
[332] Ibid., p. 177.
[333] Ibid., p. 186.
[334] Gina Rippon, *The Gendered Brain: The New Neuroscience that Shatters the Myth of the Female Brain* (London: The Bodley Head, 2019), pp. 92-93.

Furthermore, Fine and Rippon both indicate that conservative political groups misappropriate scientific research for harmful ends, including writing off male violence as unavoidable. A contrasting point of view is voiced by Carole Hooven, an evolutionary biologist, in *Testosterone: The Story of the Hormone that Dominates and Divides Us* (2021). Among other things, Hooven argues that higher rates of violence and aggression in male humans (as in nonhuman primates) are at least partly down to the influence of testosterone on the brain. The divisiveness of this debate is deeply relevant to Wallace's work, which both challenges and capitulates to gender essentialism and neurosexism.

Like violence, genius is a significant theme in Wallace's oeuvre. It is worth noting the public recognition of Wallace himself as the quintessential literary genius, named as such by the MacArthur committee, among others. Amy Hungerford points to Dave Eggers' introduction to *Infinite Jest*, citing Wallace's 'genius' and 'brain' as an integral part of the Western canonical tradition of brilliant artists and writers, but in addition to Wallace, every genius on Eggers' list is male,[335] in yet another confirmation of the sexism that is pervasive even in liberal academic and literary circles. Wallace investigates traditional forms of human genius through minds, bodies, and subjectivities that are typically male. Savant-like figures abound in his works, such as James and Hal Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*, Lenore Beadsman's brothers in *The Broom of the System*, and Drinion and Steyck in *The Pale King*. In a body of work that self-consciously performs (and critiques) misogyny and sexual violence, the consistent gendering of the cognitively superior or genius/savant brain as 'male' is not insignificant. In this respect, Wallace seems to affirm notions about sex and gender that veer too close to the neurosexism that Fine and others describe, and that feminist critics as far

[335] Hungerford, 'On Not Reading DFW', pp. 153-4.

back as J.S. Mill identified as dangerous, namely, that men are both better (more intelligent) and worse (more violent, less able to control destructive or aggressive urges) than women.

Wallace uses parody to dramatise certain sexist attitudes towards the 'Female Brain' in *Brief Interviews*. BI #28 begins by reasserting Freud's classic question: 'What does today's woman want. That's the big one. […] Or put another way, what do today's women *think* they want versus what do they really deep down *want*'.[336] The two speaking male characters (plus silenced Q) proceed to discourse on the biological roots of women's lack of agency, explaining how it leads to female sexual and cognitive confusion, including hysteria and madness. Though these two presumptive grad students attempt to intellectualise their discussion, their language is riddled with the logic of sexual assault:

> K: What modern feminists-slash-postfeminists will *say* they want is mutuality and respect of their individual autonomy. If sex is going to happen, they'll say, it has to be by mutual consensus and desire between two autonomous equals who are each equally responsible for their own sexuality and its expression.
>
> E: That's almost word for word what I've heard them say.
>
> K: And it's total horseshit.[337]

What follows is a discussion loaded with tenuous assumptions and myths about essential and biological differences between male and female sexual behaviour. The men use history, evolution, biology, and a warped reading of Foucault to explain why women are naturally lesser intellectual and moral agents than men, incapable of true responsibility and self-determined choices. The logic of the 'just-another-Neanderthal-male-grad-student' continues

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[336] *Brief Interviews*, p. 192. Italics in original.
[337] Ibid., p. 194. Italics in original.

to unravel to the point of farce; the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of 'nature' and 'evolution' is staggering, more so for the implied higher education of the men:

> K: 'I mean, even simply looking at the evolutionary aspect, you have to agree that a certain lack of autonomy-slash-responsibility was an obvious genetic advantage as far as primitive human females went […].'
> E: 'Natural selection favored the ones who found mates instead of going out hunting. I mean, how many cave-paintings of *female* hunters do you ever see?'
> K: What we're talking about here is […] their genetic-slash-historical capacity for autonomy, for as it were *self*-responsibility, in their dealings with males.
> E: Evolution has bred it out of them.[338]

The male students' use of language again veers towards the language of sexual assault and exposes the roots of rape culture:

> E: They all want it. They just can't *say* it.
> K: When they say, "*I am my own person* […] *I am responsible for my own sexuality*," they are actually telling you just what they want you to make them forget.
> E: *No* doesn't mean yes, but it doesn't mean no, either.[339]

The final lines recapitulate misogynistic tropes of the irrational/animalistic woman, while effecting a bizarre kind of ethical condescension/moral absolution: 'I mean, the capacity for logic is what distinguished us from animals to begin with. / 'Which, no offense, but logic's

[338] Ibid., pp. 197-198. Italics in original.
[339] Ibid., pp. 198-199. Italics in original.

not exactly a woman's strong suit'.[340] These 'hideous men' give voice to the logic of neurosexism and its pervasiveness in social discourse, performing the erasure of their female interlocutor in the process. The inclusion of this short piece outlining a seemingly casual or more benign instance of sexism within a collection that ends with an account of violent sexual assault underscores the toxic consequences of allowing sexist ideas and beliefs to go unchallenged.

The sexism and misogyny that silences female voices in Wallace's texts precludes female genius finding expression through the traditional channels of artistic creation, scientific discovery, or athletic performance that are open to his male characters. Instead, female characters of exceptional talent and ability manifest their genius through subversive and radical acts of survival and by claiming and maintaining their subjectivity against all odds. In her analysis of Kristeva's study on female genius, Alison Jasper clarifies that it 'is characterized by the ability to challenge existing assumptions, metaphors, and imaginaries, including feminist ones'.[341] Jasper explains that, for Kristeva, 'the process of becoming a human being or a subject is itself a work of genius'.[342] She also credits Kristeva with acknowledging the 'difficulty women face in achieving their status as subjects in contexts characterized by the normative privileges of men over women and the limitations they impose on her freedom to be creative [in] anything […] she desires to do or to be'.[343] From this perspective, Wallace's fiction dramatises how female genius must work against the grain to find expression in his texts, and this often plays out on the level of names and naming.

The Broom of the System, Wallace's first novel, is unique in his oeuvre as a full-length work that features a young female protagonist, Lenore Beadsman, and her struggle to

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[340] Ibid., p. 199. Italics in original.
[341] Alison E. Jasper, *Because of Beauvoir: Christianity and the Cultivation of Female Genius* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), pp. 45-69.
[342] Ibid., pp. 45-69.
[343] Ibid., pp. 45-69.

come to terms with and establish an identity beyond the patriarchal family and social structures that make up her world. However, as Clare Hayes-Brady points out, Lenore's voice and thoughts are always narrated in and through the men in her life; she is never an independent subject, fully in touch with and in control of her own agency. As the youngest daughter in a family that doubles as a corporate enterprise, Lenore shares a name with her great-grandmother, a former student of Ludwig Wittgenstein and a brilliant philosopher in her own right, whose absence is the focal point of the novel. Like Lenore's disappeared great-grandmother, her mother is conspicuously absent throughout the novel, voicelessly relegated to an 'institution' or asylum for the mentally insane. The entire novel can be read as a study of the crises that ensue because women's names and voices, including female genius, have been written out of Western literature and philosophy. Lenore's search for her missing great-grandmother (her missing foremothers) is also a narrative quest to become a subject -- to find her voice and claim a name for herself in a world dominated by the rule of the father, which includes the male capitalists, publishers, psychiatrists, and partners who all seek to control and silence her. Although she comes close, by the novel's end she yields to one of her erstwhile male harassers and thus capitulates to the patriarchal forces that have banished her foremothers and subsumed her female identity and voice throughout the course of her young life. In this sense, the book portrays the tragic arc of the quest of female genius under patriarchy.

By contrast, *Infinite Jest* sets the stage for a study of male genius right from the start. As many critics have pointed out, the title invokes Shakespeare and the book's structure and content are an homage to Joyce and Dostoyevsky, all widely accepted geniuses of world literature. This monumental text functions as a bildungsroman that revolves around the life and times of an adolescent boy named Hal 'Incandenza', whose very name directly establishes his genius (like his late father's) as a dazzling, shining, fully embodied thing.

Unlike Lenore, Hal's quest is less about proving or establishing his claim to genius, but rather defending it, keeping it intact and preventing it from unravelling and self-destructing (as it did with his father). Hal's mother Avril is also brilliant, mirroring her late husband's intellectual acumen. And like Lenore's great-grandmother she is a guardian of language, a self-proclaimed 'militant grammarian' with an exceptional, even uncanny ability to read the minds and motives of others. Contrary to her late husband, whose sexuality is entirely sublimated into physics, film, and his pedagogic career as founder and director of ETA, Avril is hypersexualized and promiscuous (despite her 'advanced' age). Although she is a linguistic master in her own right, her roles as wife, mother, and 'guardian' are secondary or supportive to her husband's role as auteur or artiste. This plays out on the level of naming: Avril Incandenza is 'the Moms', while James Incandenza is 'Himself'. As such, his identity, including his creative and intellectual work, can stand alone, without being defined in relation to anyone else. Moreover, Avril's initials, AI, evoke 'artificial intelligence', which suggests that her own intelligence is derivative or unoriginal in comparison with her husband's more 'authentic' brand of innovative technological and creative artistic genius. (Of course, any discussion of 'AI' entails the fear that it will eventually beat Man at his own games.) Throughout the course of the novel, Avril's power remains shrouded in mystery, operating from the margins, tempered and filtered through her (female) body, namely her maternity and sexuality. Indeed, she must marshal her tremendous intelligence towards survival – to keeping herself, her family, and the ETA community intact and functional in the wake of her male counterpart's alcoholic self-destruction and suicide.

Joelle van Dyne, the former partner of Orin and the muse and subject for JOI's final work, the infamous film, is another example of 'female genius' in *Infinite Jest*, a High Priestess type figure who plays a quasi-spiritual role throughout the narrative. She is also a recovering drug addict (and most likely a sexual assault survivor) who has attempted suicide

numerous times. Although exceptionally bright, Joelle, like Avril, is sexually objectified by the male characters' phallogocentric naming power. Hailing from 'Shiny Prize', Kentucky, she is often referred to as the 'PGOAT', or Prettiest Girl of All Time, by her many admirers and disappointed suitors, double-edged monikers that figure her as an object of value (as well as a farm animal). By veiling her face Joelle attempts to prioritise her voice, which is projected by radio waves from the depths of an MIT basement, symbolizing her journey through the narrative as one of finding and sharing her voice. ('The Face of the Deep' was Joelle's suggestion for title of Incandenza's final film, in which she starred.)[344] She exists on the periphery of the 'genius' student body at the majority male MIT where she works part-time at the college radio station as an entertainer/caretaker of sorts. Like Avril, Joelle also 'survives' the late James Incandenza and his 'use' of her in his final feat of artistic genius, the eponymous film. Significantly, both Avril and Joelle figure as potential agents of textual destruction. Avril is portrayed as a mind-reader, even a witch, who threatens to outwit the narrator at every turn, and additionally, she may be working behind the scenes to secure the Samizdat for the Quebecois contingent. And Joelle's physical presence and voice as represented in the film threaten not only the integrity of the male gaze, but the symbolic meaning of language and therefore the text itself. In this sense, both women bear tremendous power to unleash catastrophic destruction upon the unifocal, univocal dystopia that is the US of ONAN. However, through a very strange and novel lens, this destruction might well amount to a kind of liberation.

Like *Infinite Jest*, *The Pale King* is a ghost story, a text haunted by the spirits of dead fathers with the very title referring to the waning power of kings. The most highly developed sections of this final novel detail the ways in which men come to terms with, or find a vocational purpose beyond, self-interested needs and ambitions. The male heroes of this text

[344] *Infinite Jest*, p. 238.

are thus figured as other-worldly savants or priests, moral geniuses who have achieved extraordinary levels of self-awareness through incredible focus, renunciation, and sacrifice. In *The Pale King*, true genius involves overcoming pain, boredom, distractions, and other weaknesses of the mind in pursuit of almost supernatural levels of attention and focus.

In this respect, female characters such as Toni Ware and Meredith Rand (both IRS accountants at the Peoria REC) work against the grain of the dominant narratives of male genius. Ware and Rand are twinned as Joelle and Avril are twinned in *Jest*, representing different kinds of female power. Facial appearance, masks, and eyes hold symbolic importance for both women, as does the ability to maintain intense mental focus and equanimity during extremely challenging or even life-threatening experiences and events. Toni Ware's surname (which she shares with a Harvard Divinity School founding father; a figure of historical note for the American Transcendentalists) also indicates her status as an object that may be bought and sold for its use-value. Her eyes bear particular significance to her story, calling attention to the dark vision (an inversion of transcendentalist values) she has acquired through her encounters with violent men, which includes witnessing her mother's murder. Ware's exceptional intelligence, including her ability to hyper focus under pressure, allows her to survive an attack that could easily have ended her life. Toni Ware, 'unlike the mother or bodiless doll […] was free inside her head, an unbound genius, larger than any sum'.[345] Although she knows the value of her own mind, she has learned to hide her true nature, her thoughts and her motives, behind veils of secrecy. A multiplicity of traumas at the hands of men have reduced the entirety of this woman's ambition and genius to a protracted quest for survival.

Meredith Rand is granted a long section at the end of the novel in which she recounts 'her story' to her colleague Shane Drinion, an asexual savant who serves as both therapist

[345] *The Pale King*, p. 60.

and confessor of sorts. Like Joelle, Rand is a woman of great beauty who worries that her worth is entirely contingent on her looks, and so her appearance has become a lifelong source of frustration and insecurity for her. The narrative evasions around her character mask her deeper motive, which is to become the subject of her own story as well as the agent of her own desire, as opposed to the object of someone else's. The text suggests that she was manipulated at a young age, and while hospitalised for severe mental distress, into entering a relationship with the man who would become her husband. Like many of Wallace's female heroines, her great accomplishment is to reclaim her story for herself and survive the men who have sought to control or dominate her agency and voice.

The final female character I will discuss with respect to her exceptional ability is the unnamed subject of the final Interview, otherwise known as 'The Granola Cruncher'. A graphic sexual assault narrative, this story is a literary testament to the pervasiveness of rape culture in patriarchal society. It traces the spectrum of male violence, connecting the dots between commonplace occurrences of sexism and misogyny and the most extreme forms of sexual violence. The central account is once again framed by a discussion that mimics a therapy session. The male narrator is a highly educated and articulate Yale Law student who presumably understands the basics of sexual ethics. He recounts the story of his former partner's sexual assault as a quasi-therapeutic exercise that allows him to work through his own beliefs (and fears) about women, men, and intimate relationships. From the start, the narrator evinces a troubling sense of determinism with respect to sex, as revealed by his account of his initial encounter with this woman: 'The fact is that she had a body that my body found sexually attractive and wanted to have intercourse with and it was not really any more noble or complicated than that'.[346] This mild form of determinism foreshadows the more extreme case, in which the female victim is pulled inexorably forward, indeed fated to

[346] *Brief Interviews*, p. 249.

suffer a sexual assault at the hands of a male sex offender. As if by some cosmic determinacy, the mere fact of her sex means she can no more choose to avoid her fate as victim than the male psychopath can choose to avoid his fate as violent rapist.

Although the narrator initially demeans the Granola Cruncher's intelligence, he admits that she was 'in certain ways, rather a remarkable woman, and that [he] felt a bit sad or wistful that [he] had not noticed this type of remarkability in her when [he] had first been attracted to her in the park'.[347] He admires her for 'what she ha[d] the courage and apparent conviction to actually attempt here'[348] and acknowledges that she 'would almost surely have [been] murdered […] had she not been able to think effectively on her feet under enormous fear and stress'.[349] He thus attributes her survival to a 'tactically ingenious' deployment of her psychic, mental and emotional abilities: instead of 'giving in to hysterical fear', she was able to 'maintai[n] the level-headedness to focus her concentration on the situation and to figure out something ingenious' that allowed her to survive the violent event.[350]

The Granola Cruncher's exceptional ability includes a heightened sense of empathy, which permits her to see her attacker 'as an ensouled and beautiful albeit tormented person in his own right instead of merely as a threat to her or a force of evil or the incarnation of her personal death'.[351] As the narrator tells it, her immense capacity for 'love and focus [could] penetrate even psychosis and evil and establish a […] soul-connection'[352] with the deranged man:

> She wills herself not to weep or plead but merely to use her penetrating focus to attempt to feel and empathize with the sex offender's psychosis and rage and terror and psychic

[347] Ibid., p. 261.
[348] Ibid., p. 256.
[349] Ibid., p. 245.
[350] Ibid., p. 255.
[351] Ibid., p. 256.
[352] Ibid., p. 256.

> torment, and says she visualizes her focus piercing through the mulatto's veil of psychosis and penetrating various strata of rage and terror and delusion to touch the beauty and nobility of the generic human soul beneath all the psychosis, forcing a nascent, compassion-based connection between their souls, and she focuses on the mulatto's profile very intently and quietly tells him what she saw in his soul, which she insisted was the truth.[353]

The repeated mention of the psychotic's face, usually described in profile with its 'dead right eye', fits with Wallace's tendency to use asymmetrical faces as markers for fractured or compromised self-awareness and ethical agency. The assaulter's race also plays a significant role; the (presumably white) narrator refers to him as a mulatto, thus indicating the racial power asymmetries this character embodies. Levinas' ideas about hostage and substitution are particularly relevant here: in substituting oneself for another the subject takes responsibility for the other, including the other's evil. Wallace dramatises a substitution between the victim and her male assaulter in which she 'penetrates' him with her 'female gaze', thereby causing *him* immeasurable pain. The woman's genius is to become 'focus itself', a daring feat of substitution in which she feels terror, 'but not her own'.[354] As the narrator recounts:

> From below in the gravel she subjects the psychotic mulatto to the well-known Female Gaze. And she describes his facial expression during the rape as the most heartbreaking thing of all. That it had been less an expression than a kind of anti-expression, empty of everything as she unpremeditatedly robbed him of the only way he'd ever found to

[353] Ibid., pp. 257-8.
[354] Ibid., p. 263.

> connect. His eyes were holes in the world. She felt almost heartbroken, she said, as she realized that her focus and connection were inflicting far more pain on the psychotic than he could ever have inflicted upon her. This was how she described the division—a hole in the world.[355]

The ironic reference to the 'well known' female gaze, taken together with the suggestion that the victim of this terrifying attack inflicts far greater pain on her attacker than the pain he inflicts on her, do indeed suggest 'a hole in the world' of this story, calling the narrator's reliability into question.

In the final lines the narrator fully exposes himself as the violent – and unstable -- misogynist he is, unleashing a torrent of verbal abuse upon the woman who has just silently endured his harrowing tale:

> I believed she could save me. I know how this sounds, trust me. I know your type and I know what you're bound to ask. […] Ask me now. Say it. I stand here naked before you. Judge me, you chilly cunt. You dyke, you bitch, cooze, cunt, slut, gash. Happy now? All borne out? Be happy. I don't care. I knew she could. I knew I loved. End of story.[356]

And thus, another nameless and voiceless woman is called upon to 'save' a dysfunctional male subject, to absorb his anger and aggression and allow him to dominate the narrative of male violence from the beginning to the end of the story. Disturbingly, the Granola Cruncher must 'do the work' of her own rape since her survival hinges on her ability and willingness to

[355] Ibid., p. 266.
[356] Ibid., p. 271.

perform extreme forms of physical and emotional labour that include empathising with and managing her attacker's psychotic and misogynistic rage. As I have shown with several of Wallace's female characters, this woman's ingenious nature and remarkable abilities are truncated and diverted towards serving, and surviving, men. Wallace therefore acknowledges the reality of female genius and the ways in which it is sabotaged by male violence, which once again raises the spectre of biological determinism, less in the form of the cognitively superior male brain, but rather in the apparent inevitability of male violence.

The Heretical Ethics of Wallace's Gender Essentialism

Stories like the Granola Cruncher that feature graphic depictions of male violence abound in Wallace's oeuvre. Women are often at the receiving end of this violence, although so too are other men (including both gay and straight men) as well as children and animals. In this respect, Wallace is exploring the extremities of the male gaze through his writing and posing questions about the gendered nature of pornographic viewing. Taken together, his works question whether (and under what conditions) sexual violence and the pornographic gaze are inherent features of masculinity. Despite its mostly light and comic tone, Wallace's 1997 essay about the porn industry ('Big Red Son') recounts some of the more sordid, violent, and criminal examples of contemporary pornography, from child rape to gang bangs and snuff films. He acknowledges that extreme pornography 'capitalize[s] on a market-demand that quite clearly exists', namely for deeply misogynistic men 'who have problems with women and want to see them humiliated'.[357] Furthermore, in outlining the links between misogyny and pornographic viewing, Wallace suggests that the exploitation and degradation of women are inescapable features of pornography as a genre. He also points out that

[357] *Consider the Lobster*, p. 27.

pornography can be harmful for the men who consume it, explaining that ‘certain antiporn arguments […] are now centered on adult entertainment’s alleged effects on the men who […] get addicted to video porn in a way that causes grievous psychic harm’.[358] The truism at the heart of his piece is that pornography, especially the more ‘extreme’ forms, is typically produced and consumed by men, and sometimes addictively so. The ‘why’ of this fact is less clear, but Wallace seems to assume that, on some level, it can be explained as a feature (or perhaps a vulnerability) of male sexuality.

In his fascinating study, *David Foster Wallace’s Toxic Sexuality: Hideousness, Neoliberalism, Spermatics*, Edward Jackson argues against what he sees as essentialist ideas of masculinity throughout Wallace’s works. Jackson reiterates his primary argument throughout his book: Wallace figures male sexuality as immutably toxic, which suggests an indebtedness, rather than an opposition, to neoliberal logics (epitomised by Margaret Thatcher’s infamous dictum that ‘there is no alternative’). Jackson writes that ‘[t]oxicity is not a problem that Wallace wants to solve; on the contrary, he courts it as the immutable fact of male sexuality. Men’s sexual hideousness is lamentable, Wallace implies, but it is nevertheless a useful basis upon which to ground masculinity’.[359] I largely agree with Jackson’s arguments and find his scholarship tremendously valuable to the field of Wallace studies. However, I view the toxic sexuality in Wallace’s texts from a slightly different angle. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that Wallace’s consistent coupling of violent and antisocial acts with various forms of mental illness is relevant, which is one point where Jackson and I diverge, since the issue of mental health is noticeably absent from his critique. As Hayes-Brady and others have pointed out, many of Wallace’s stories are characterised by breakdowns in communication or failures within relationships between private individuals.

[358] Ibid., pp. 18-19.
[359] Jackson, *David Foster Wallace’s Toxic Sexuality*, p. 178.

These microcosmic dynamics echo the broader dystopian aspect of Wallace's work, which chronicles the failures of a society that refuses to deal with the complexity of mental health problems (which often involve anger, aggression, and sexual issues and concerns) and systematically displaces the burdens of responsibility and care onto individuals, with predictably disastrous results. Wallace's works explore the pain and misery that arise from complex social problems such as toxic masculinity, mental illness, cycles of poverty and addiction, and a morally bankrupt neoliberal culture. In this sense, rather than a testament to the immutability of male sexual toxicity, his collected works read more like a cry for help.

Wallace's (arguably problematic) move is to focus almost entirely on the vulnerability of male subjectivities; that is, he explores how male sexuality is at risk for 'toxicity' and what the ramifications of failing to deal with this risk mean for society at large. In doing so, he poses complicated questions about the nature of sex and gender, bodies and brains, and states of wellness and illness, which speak to an indebtedness to 'the biological' in Wallace's work that cannot be overlooked. Jackson's text elides a comprehensive discussion about the origins of toxic sexuality and the links it shares with other psychiatric and psychological problems in many of Wallace's male characters, implying instead that it is simply an undesirable by-product of neoliberal patriarchy. Though his text makes excellent points about Wallace's handling of sex and gender, including his misogynistic and neoliberal leanings, it does leave out some important facets that stop the conversation short just where it needs to get started.

In his illuminating work of literary criticism, *David Foster Wallace and The Body* (2019), Peter Sloane argues for the critical importance of Wallace's grounding of human subjectivity in the embodied biological organism. He proposes a thorough re-evaluation of Wallace's work 'that foregrounds the corporeal, the condition of being awkwardly but irredeemably bound to a frequently wayward body […] that see[s] embodiment, deformity, disability, the 'schisms between our physical wills and our actual capacities' […] as his

defining and most persistent literary and personal preoccupation'.[360] Sloane selects a line from *The Pale King* ('It is at the level of the body that we proceed') to illustrate his point, referring to the character David Cusk (who most likely represents Wallace himself). Cusk struggles with a chronic physiological disorder (hyperhidrosis) that causes episodes of uncontrolled and profuse sweating, which he experiences as 'attacks' (i.e., his body attacking his 'self'). In addition to the tremendous anxiety these episodes elicit, they are a source of profound shame for Cusk, not merely because others might find them 'gross', but because of the unwilled loss of control they represent: 'a profound failure of agency in practical terms, and moreover of freedom and free will in the most expansive philosophical sense'.[361] Sloane uses Cusk's disorder to underline the point that for Wallace, all humans exist on a spectrum of dis/ability. This premise aligns with the previous chapters of my thesis, in which I argue that Wallace problematises conventional notions of 'agency' by centering the contingencies that destabilise or limit the subject's 'freedom' to make (ethical) decisions. Sloane's thesis therefore supports my own: 'Wallace sees all bodies as anomalous and as posing manifold manifest and latent insurmountable challenges to free will: for Wallace, being embodied and having free will are necessarily radically incompatible'.[362] To this end, Sloane is advancing a critical shift in the focus of Wallace studies; a reorientation away from the 'intellect/psyche/self, the ontological trinity of Wallace scholarship and the presumed source of his characters' characteristic narcissistic/solipsistic malaise'.[363] Furthermore, he suggests that '[t]he ongoing project of New Sincerity instigated by Wallace might then involve culturally rehabilitating the body and its many often shameful and therefore unrepresented tendencies'.[364] In other words, ''becom[ing] less alone inside' (the skull/body)'[365]

[360] Peter Sloane, *David Foster Wallace and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 3-4.
[361] Ibid., p. 2.
[362] Ibid., p. 7.
[363] Ibid., p. 5.
[364] Ibid., p. 5.
[365] Ibid., p. 5.

necessitates collectively paying attention to 'shameful' or 'abject' categories of human experience, that which we find difficult, disgusting, abhorrent, painful, etc.

The misogyny in Wallace's texts is gratuitous, but it is neither celebratory nor triumphant; instead, it is portrayed as disturbing, desperate, and sad. Wallace centres this unsettling theme to explore complicated issues around masculinity and male sexuality, and in doing so veers into essentialist waters. In a more positive light, Wallace's 'difficult' works thrust towards a transgressive or heretical feminist ethics for ultimately salutary ends, making the case for an overhaul in how our society understands sexual and mental health, including the physical and psychological limitations of diverse bodies. In a more negative light, Wallace merely propagates the sexism and misogyny of the GMNs that he once pitied and ridiculed, taking up space that should rightfully go to more marginalized, more deserving writers in the process. It will be up to his readers to decide whether, on balance, his work ultimately reinforces the patriarchal status quo or disrupts it.

Conclusion – Deliberate Disloyalties, Appropriation Artists, and New Imaginaries

And so, by way of conclusion, we return to readers, especially Wallace's readers and the communicative process they engage in via the text. Much has been said about empathy in connection with Wallace's oeuvre as well as with New Sincerity as a movement. Wallace's texts in particular push a feminist ethics of care to the very limit by asking readers to regard their portrayals of damaged and suffering humans with compassion. bell hooks has written on the subject of empathy for hideous men in her book *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2004). Her main points are that, as a society, we have a duty to try to understand masculinist and misogynistic violence from a place of empathy, as opposed to retributive dismissal. She adheres to the premise that violent misogynistic behaviour is usually the result

of past traumas, and therefore a form of social sickness or stress disorder, and that failing to deal with the issue empathetically will only continue the cycle.[366] Although she has been criticised for her viewpoints on the grounds that she dismisses responsibility for sexism, she maintains her original position. I agree with hooks' premise in general, but I wonder to what extent this applies to art, and whether and how the experience of reading male writers' portrayals of misogyny or sexual assault is functionally different for women. Does the 'work' of reading this kind of material through a lens of generosity, or a hermeneutic of empathy, differ for male readers and female readers? Should writers, such as Wallace, care? Samantha Wallace's insightful paper, presented at the 4th annual DFW conference in Normal, IL, asks why Wallace's female reader is tasked with the work of empathy for the hideous man: 'If works like Brief Interviews are meant to engage in open dialogue with Wallace's most cherished subject, the reader, why, for some, do they fail so radically? And why is it the hideous man we, the reader, must work through in order to engage in empathy'?[367] In her paper, S. Wallace explains that:

> *Brief Interviews* is a book I recommend, not because I want readers to empathize with these men, as Wallace might have wanted, but because reading this book forces readers to be female. Can you, the reader, empathize with the woman reading these stories or the female characters within these stories experiencing these hideous men? "And then you'll have to ask the reader straight out," Wallace writes in "Octet," "whether she feels it, too, this queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness" Instead, I want to ask "Can you feel it, this urgent, inter-human UNsameness?" The inequality of

[366] bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 2005), pp. 55-57.
[367] Samantha Wallace, 'Interviews, Empathy, and Hideous Men: Discussing Feminism and David Foster Wallace', *DFW17: Legacies of Complexity* (presented at the 4th Annual DFW Conference, Illinois State University, 2017)

> power pervading these stories? […] It's an important distinction to make, this acknowledgement of the "sameness" of humankind Wallace puts forward as our challenge, and the undeniable hideousness of the situation, which is that despite our "interhuman sameness" […] we are not all equal.[368]

Samantha Wallace's point about how the text compels readers to occupy the vacant space of female subjectivity is important. In this sense, the text needs its readers to become active participants: to fill in its blanks and 'fight back' against its abuses, and even to begin rewriting it.

As I have discussed throughout, Wallace's writing gestures towards new ethical imaginaries, but this chapter has shown how such vistas can be marred or suppressed by iterations of failed or toxic masculinity. Misogyny often dominates the psychic realities of Wallace's characters, leaving little room for alternative perspectives. Hungerford, Jackson, and others have rightly questioned the value in his portrayals of misogynistic dystopias, especially when engaging with them comes at the expense of reading women writers, queer writers, and writers of colour who have traditionally been excluded from the Western canon. Nearly twenty years on from Wallace declaring that it was 'certainly the end of something or other', chauvinism and misogyny are still normalised by a media and entertainment industry that is more self-aware, self-reflexive, and self-critical than ever. Worse yet, male violence, including self-harm and suicide, shows no signs of abating. In this sense, Hungerford's advice does not apply; Wallace's narratives and their popularity (or notoriety) are not topics that we can responsibly ignore. As Jacqueline Rose writes in her recent study, *On Violence and Violence Against Women* (2021):

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[368] Ibid.

> It is a central argument of this book that violence against women is a crime of the deepest thoughtlessness. It is a sign that the mind has brutally blocked itself. The best way for feminism to counter violence against women, I argue throughout these pages, is to speak of, to stay and reckon with, the extraordinary, often painful and mostly overlooked range of what the human mind is capable of.[369]

I agree with Rose's argument, and yet I find that it represents a conundrum for many of Wallace's readers, and especially for women. When life begins to imitate the most dystopian and depraved fantasies of literary art, where is there left for fiction to go? And how do readers push back against the 'colonisation' of their psychic space with such violent representations? There are no easy answers to these questions, but as the #MeToo movement has shown, a collective reckoning in the form of speaking up about difficult things is essential. Or in the words of Black feminist Audre Lorde, 'your silence will not protect you'.[370]

In *Nomadic Subjects* (2011), Rosi Braidotti argues that

> One of the strengths of feminist theory is the desire to leave behind a linear mode of intellectual thinking, the teleologically ordained style of argumentation most of us have been trained to respect and emulate. In my experience this results in encouraging repetition and dutifulness to a canonical tradition that enforces the sanctimonious sacredness of certain texts: *the* texts of the great philosophical humanistic tradition. I

[369] Jacqueline Rose, *On Violence and on Violence against Women* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), pp. 174-175.
[370] Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (UK: Silver Press, 2017)

> would like to oppose to them a passionate form of posthumanism based on feminist nomadic ethics.[371]

Braidotti seeks to discourage repetition and dutifulness in favour of a measure of disloyalty to the literary and philosophical canon. In this way, a feminist nomadic ethics allows for the repopulation of psychic landscapes, balancing the realities and requirements of one world with visions of possibility for another.

The meandering heretical ethics of Wallace's fictional corpus signals a new materialism of recombined systems that marks a shift in postmodern literature. Though many of his pieces are sombre and frustratingly short on redemption, Wallace left openings everywhere – his non-linear, anti-teleological, deliberately inconclusive narratives almost dare the reader to step in, to erase, rewrite, and reimagine. It should come as no surprise, then, that several of his readers and fans, including other artists, writers, poets, and musicians, have used his texts as platforms for creating parallel story lines and alternative interpretations, as Wallace did with the metafiction of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and others. I like to think that Wallace, a master literary jester, would be open to the continued creative reimagining of his literary afterlife as well. For this is exactly what Karen Green, Wallace's widow, did when she first encountered his work, experiencing a strong need to reimagine it. 'She wanted to rewrite him, to give him the potential for happy endings'.[372] In an interview with Tim Adams (2011), Green explains:

[371] Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 23. Italics in original.
[372] Tim Adams, '*Karen Green: "David Foster Wallace's Suicide Turned Him into a 'Celebrity Writer Dude', Which Would Have Made Him Wince*"', *The Observer*, 9 April 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/10/karen-green-david-foster-wallace-interview> [accessed 17 January 2022]

> I came across his book *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* in a thrift store for a dollar. […] At the time I was doing these art pieces in which I'd take someone's text and chop it up in panels and make it something else, change the story using their words. I read David's story "The Depressed Person" in that book and I thought, my God! And I wanted to make one of these pieces out of it.[373]

'Green was struck by a powerful need to redeem the fiction in some way',[374] to imagine different possibilities, a new narrative for such an abject character. 'I'd really struggled,' she writes. 'There was nothing happy in that story; there was nothing you could turn around and make into something beautiful'.[375] And yet, after she had 'haiku'd the hell out of that thing',[376] a measure of redemption is what she managed to create.

Jenni B. Baker, like Wallace's widow Karen Green, is another artist who is re-imagining *Infinite Jest* via the poetry of erasure. Using Oulipian techniques, her 'Erasing Infinite' web project reconfigures Wallace's masterpiece one page at a time. Ironically, her work is a real-life counterpart to the radical feminist 'appropriation art' in *Infinite Jest*. Through her fascinating project, she uses language as a bridge to create new worlds from old words. The performance art projects of Corrie Baldauf and Jamie Loftus, in addition to Green's and Baker's work, suggest that Wallace's writing has, perhaps accidentally, inspired a host of feminist projects. There is an ethics of appropriation at work here, similar to Derrida's and Braidotti's interventions, in which Wallace's oeuvre, for all its problems, proves to be a productive point of departure for feminist scholarship, activism, and art – an important point that Hungerford's argument overlooks. In any event, it seems that this is only the beginning of feminist critical readings and reimaginings of Wallace's work, and the field

[373] Ibid.
[374] Ibid.
[375] Ibid.
[376] Ibid.

of Wallace Studies, and contemporary literature more broadly, can only stand to gain from this trend.

Conclusion

In his Kenyon College commencement address, delivered in the last few years of his life, David Foster Wallace reminded the graduating class of 2005 that ‘everybody worships’. ‘There is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. […] The only choice we get is what to worship.’ Wallace goes on to say that ‘the compelling reason for […] choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship’ (e.g., Jesus, Allah, or ‘some inviolable set of ethical principles’) ‘is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive’.[377] Beyond the undeniable religiosity of this statement, Wallace’s exhortation reminds us to ‘choose wisely’, to be careful what we wish for.

If the ‘Saint Dave’ moniker of Wallace’s early literary afterlife has not quite held up, perhaps it is more accurate to regard him as both prophet and priest, seeking to uphold and conserve the literary tradition from which he hailed, as well as to predict or prophesy what might come next (and smash some hallowed tablets along the way). Wallace’s collected works put forth a variety of perspectives that are truly encyclopaedic in scope, from the broadest fields of intellectual inquiry to arcane minutiae buried within footnotes upon endnotes. His style is maximalist and intense, hyperreal, ever striving towards something beyond the text and beyond language, a longing for the infinite. One thing Wallace’s texts do not espouse, however, is an atheistic worldview. All manner of spirits and ghosts haunt his works, and his narratives are often deeply uncanny, imbued with a sense of mystery, both sacred and profane. Certainly, his own ghost stalks the pages of his metafictive and self-

[377] *This is Water*, pp. 100-102.

referential texts, embodied in characters that bear his name or share his pain. In addition, Wallace's highly distinct writerly voice merges with the many disembodied voices of his narratives that materialise and then evaporate into thin air, 'both flesh and not'. Ghosts are said to appear in 'liminal' times and places, and for Wallace, the liminality was epochal, writing as he was between two centuries, two millennia, and two vastly different worlds. (The presence of ghosts may also indicate souls held in 'purgatory' whilst they tend to unfinished business, belatedly seeing what they failed to see in life, undertaking the work of repentance.)

Although I have not explicitly discussed the theological dimensions of Wallace's work, it has not gone unnoticed by other scholars and literary critics. In a sense, Wallace's complicated ethics could constitute a (post)-postmodern way of re-thinking very ancient categories such as divinity, theodicy, and original sin. Theodicy, simply put, is the time-worn problem of evil and why it exists, and why an all-powerful and all-loving God would allow it to exist. Theodicy and divinity held different meanings within pre-Abrahamic theologies, such as those in the Greco-Roman world. In addition to their supernatural powers the gods of antiquity were imbued with some of the worst human attributes; they were selfish, vengeful, jealous, and rageful, and they lied, cheated, and raped with abandon. But the dawn of Christianity ushered in a theological paradigm shift; by becoming human (and dying in a sacrificial act of 'substitution') God raised His own standards and compelled us, His human 'children' to comply. Humanists have carried this tradition forward, setting godly expectations for mankind and seeking a utopia of good will here on Earth. And yet, the essential problem of theodicy remains, and artists and writers like Wallace find it both outrageous and irresistible, impossible to ignore.

There is a tacit nod to the theological in my comparison of Wallace with Levinas, who was a Jewish theologian and Talmudic scholar by training, which no doubt influenced his philosophical work on ethics. Levinas believed that we see the face of God through the

faces of other beings and that this signifier of the sacred, the ethical relationship, is strong enough to overcome evil, i.e., the urge to kill. The face reminds us of who we are (like God, made in His image) and of what we must *not* do. It is salvific, if only we can see it. Levinas thus reconfigures God's law as an ethical humanist injunction. In embracing the postmodern, Bauman, Blanchot, and Derrida align more closely with the negative theology of absences and gaps, finding meaning in what we can never truly know. Categories like language, morality, and even reality become more porous; it is through process -- of writing and acts of speech (as opposed to a commandment of divine law), that we continually create beneficent meaning and value in the world. (Indeed, for many secular humanists, literature, art, and poetry are valid ethical substitutes for religion.)

Slavoj Žižek, on the other hand, drags us back down to Earth, with the reminder that 'we are all basically evil, egotistical, disgusting',[378] a view that Wallace seems to endorse more often than not. This Žižekian focus on the fallenness of humankind is nothing new. Augustinian tenets of original sin and free will recur throughout Wallace's oeuvre, as I discussed in chapter two. Enter the cognitive scientists, moral psychologists, and 'new atheists', who have dispensed with much cumbersome religious baggage while managing to hold fast to notions of the inherent fallenness of humanity and original sin. This new generation of prophets and priests believe in the power and possibility of the human brain, attributing to our neurological systems and 'hard-wiring' the keys to our weaknesses and failings as well as to our redemption and salvation. And what better metaphor for 'the book of life' than the human brain, a 'plastic', organic, living text that encodes not just one but countless lifetimes of wisdom, learning, and experience. How tempting to imagine that we can interpret, edit, and even rewrite (or at least rewire) that most ancient and primal of great

[378] Katie Forster, 'Slavoj Žižek: "We Are All Basically Evil, Egotistical, Disgusting"', *The Guardian*, 10 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/dec/10/slavoj-zizek-we-are-all-basically-evil-egotistical-disgusting> [accessed 18 January 2022]

books, a contemporary neurophilology, a secular Midrash for a new age. Wallace's texts warn us that our choices may not be quite as free as we think, but perhaps there is a way out of that age-old bind -- 'better living through (neuro)chemistry', as the saying goes. And quite possibly some of these new interpretations and iterations will shed some light on problems that were heretofore unsolvable, leading us a bit further out of our 'tiny skull-sized kingdoms'.

Marx famously wrote that 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past'.[379] In other words, there are many things in life we do not get to choose; the systems and structures that undergird our language, our lives, and our very reality can be immensely difficult to see, let alone to shift. Around a century after Marx, Noam Chomsky explained that

> It's a fair assumption that every human being, real human beings, flesh and blood ones, not corporations, but every flesh and blood human being is a moral person. You know, we've got the same genes, we're more or less the same, but our nature, the nature of humans, allows all kinds of behaviour. I mean, every one of us under some circumstances could be a gas chamber attendant and a saint'.[380]

Chomsky reiterates Marx's statement and goes a few steps further, recalling Wallace's repeated invocation of 'there but for the grace of god go I' regarding the addicts of *Infinite Jest*. In his anti-neoliberal ethos, Chomsky reminds us that no one holds a monopoly on morality or virtue; 'ethics' can never be bought, sold, traded, or owned; so much comes down

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[379] Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', *Karl Marx: A Reader*, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2008), p. 277.

[380] Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbot, *The Corporation*, (Big Picture Media Corporation, 2004).

to circumstance. But in worshiping the false gods of market shares and capital (What greater golden calf than the bull market?), we risk our own humanity. We become like money itself, without inherent value, subject to the 'endless tension' of commodification --'Is your stock going up or down'?[381] Wallace writes that 'the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self'.[382] His texts explore the various types of 'alienation' that occur in neoliberal societies, in which men with money and power *choose* to exacerbate and exploit human fear, anger, and frustration for private gain. Historically speaking, much of this exploitation was done in the name of 'God' – the horrors of slavery and colonisation, 'the white man's burden', were underwritten as morally indispensable acts of salvation, great works fit for great books.

In her classic feminist theological study, *Beyond God the Father* (1973), Mary Daly declared that 'If God is male, then male is God'.[383] It seems simple, almost too obvious, but the implications run deep: In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God – the Western canon has always been about the sanctity of 'male books'. In generations past, the works and words of great artists and writers (nearly always men, including some real geniuses), were understood to be divinely inspired. Even if the Biblical God is well and truly dead for many contemporary secular folks, the idea of artistic 'creators' as divinely inspired lives on. We may substitute one God for another, but we still worship. In this sense, feminist criticism often seeks to confront, challenge, and even topple, the old gods of our literary and artistic imagination. With respect to Wallace's work, critics like Amy Hungerford and Mary K. Holland align with Mary Daly's central thesis in more ways than

[381] *Infinite Jest*, p. 686.
[382] *This is Water*
[383] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 19.

one. Both scholars assert that aspects of his work are irredeemable, posing a hard limit to what can be revised or reclaimed, even under the most stringent of feminist critiques.

Some readers will see Wallace's misogyny as the ultimate deal breaker, and this is a fair assessment. But misogyny is nothing new; in fact, it is one of the most ancient things out there; it is literally Biblical. It is remarkable that we still don't quite understand it, that we haven't come close to figuring out how to talk about it, let alone what to do about it. If we have finally, belatedly, reached some consensus about what it is, whether we truly understand 'why' it occurs and has persisted over thousands of years of human history is another matter entirely. Like racism, misogyny is a human failure that involves feelings and urges that are visceral and primal such as contempt, disgust, hatred, and aggression. In this way it is related to the Abject, which Julia Kristeva analysed in her own scholarly corpus. The Abject deals with disgust; it reminds us of our inevitable failure to remain pure and uncontaminated, the impossibility of making a clean break from things that are 'dirty', because living borders are too porous and messy. Like the problem of theodicy, it reminds us of what it means to be a 'fucking human being'; and from a heretical (her-ethical?) point of view, maybe it has something to teach us.

Along these lines, I think Wallace's oeuvre has much to teach us, but the lessons that diverse readers take from his texts will be very different. As I have discussed in this thesis, the trope of blindness recurs throughout his work, functioning as an ethical metaphor. As a metaphorical disability, it can indicate narcissism, the inability to see beyond the needs and interests of the self, the failure to 'see' a moral truth. But also, on the other side of blindness (and perhaps this is true of any disability) is a kind of 'second sight', an entirely different perception of truth and reality. Hence the blind prophets of antiquity who cannot physically see the world around them, and yet reveal (wittingly or not) all manner of important truths about the world to come. Wallace's 'blindness' lies somewhere in between, and engaging

with his work requires readers to confront ‘blind spots’ of their own. This is always a choice -- there are so many great writers and books, a near infinite and ever-growing sum. Know thyself, and then, you decide.

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