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DAVID FOSTER WALLACE
— *studies* —

ISSUE 4

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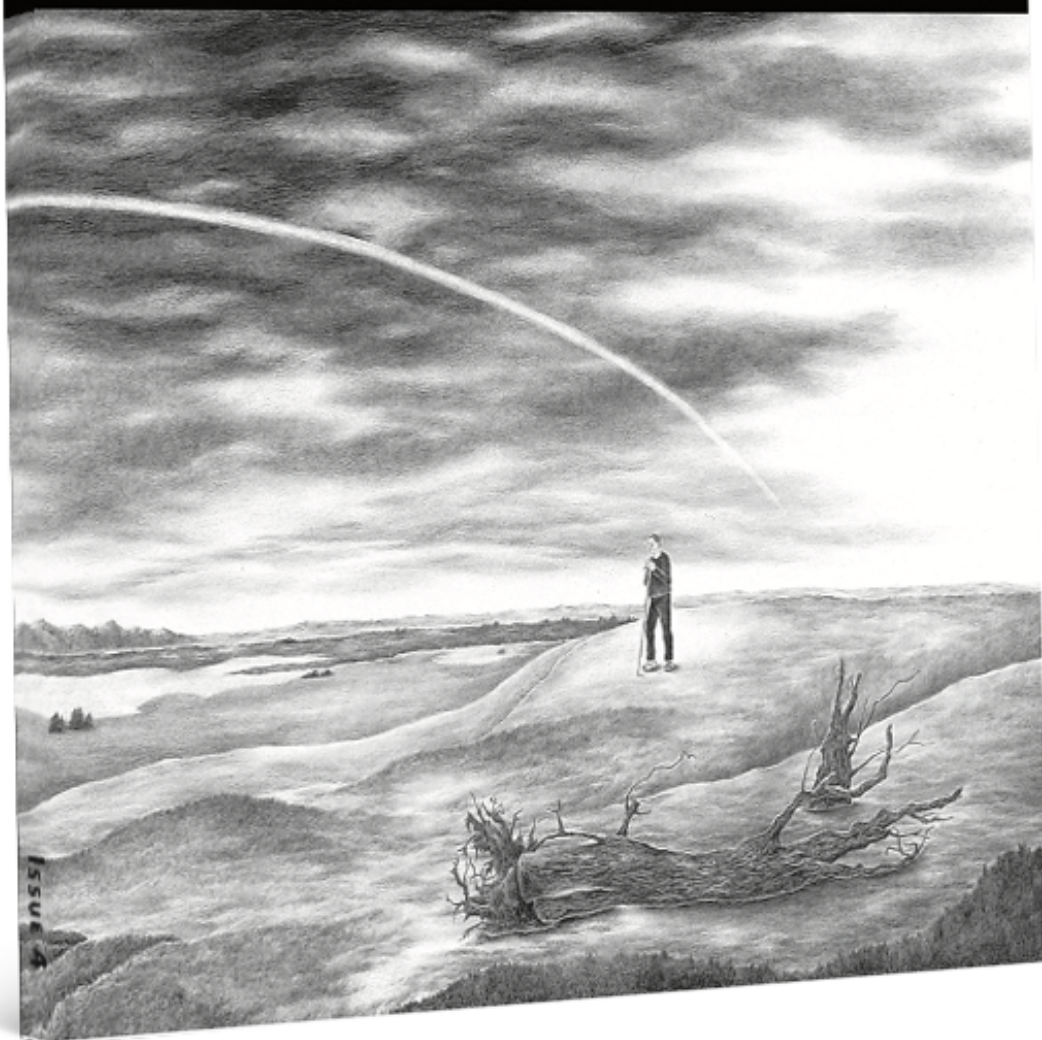Tim Personn
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INTRODUCTION

Michael O'Connell

Welcome to Issue 4 of *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*. As dedicated readers may have noticed, there has been an interruption to our publication schedule. After putting out an issue each year from 2018 through 2020, under the steady guidance of editor Clare Hayes-Brady, the COVID-19 pandemic delayed all aspects of the submission and review process. We apologize for this, but trust that readers and Wallace Society members understand the unusual circumstances of the past few years. Although work on the journal moved slowly, the International David Foster Wallace Society did continue to sponsor annual conferences, most recently in Austin, Texas, in 2022 and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in 2023, both of which featured excellent panel presentations, author readings, and keynote addresses. We hope that you will consider joining us back in Austin in June, 2024. More info on the conference can be found in the pages of this issue.

In any event, after tireless work by a number of editors, peer reviewers, and copyeditors, the International David Foster Wallace Society is pleased to present with you with Issue 4 of the journal, which features a rich collection of critical essays and book reviews, along with remembrances of Illinois State University Professor and Wallace Colleague Robert L. McLaughlin. Our cover art is "The Lost Landscape with Rainbow (based on Caspar David Friedrich)," by Robyn O'Neil, and we are grateful for her permission to use the image. This volume concludes with a crossword created by the Wallace Society's resident crossword expert Matt Luter, featuring a number

of Wallace-centric clues.[1] The range of topics covered in these pages reflects the breadth of ongoing scholarship in Wallace Studies, and we are encouraged by the new directions that both established and emerging scholars are exploring in relation to Wallace's work.

The issue begins with Emilio Englade's tour de force reading of the graveyard scene in *Infinite Jest*. Drawing on comparisons to Freud's primal scene and employing the theories of Wolfgang Iser, Englade argues that the discrepancies in the multiple versions of the scene train the reader to take an active rather than passive role in dissecting the lessons of the text. The essay ultimately concludes, quite persuasively, that "*Infinite Jest* is about the stories we tell ourselves, and about developing a more expansive perspective from which to contemplate what had previously seemed intolerable." From the narrative complexities of *Infinite Jest*, we move to Ryan Kerr's exploration of the socio-political implications of *The Pale King*. Kerr develops the concept of "acid fugitivity," a blend of the work of Mark Fisher, Stefano Harney, and Fred Moten, to show the ideological lack of imagination evident in Wallace's final unfinished novel. Through a series of close readings of key moments in the text, Kerr shows how *The Pale King* reinforces and reproduces the neoliberal imperative to work. Wallace is clearly critical of capitalist bureaucracy, but, Kerr argues, the novel fails to provide a successful model of freedom from the alienation of the neoliberal state. While Kerr's analysis is primarily political, Tim Personn advances a more philosophical reading of Wallace's work. In his essay, which is adapted from his forthcoming book *Fictions of Proximity: Skepticism, Romanticism, and the Wallace Nexus*, Personn argues Wallace was influenced, in both form and content, by the interpretation of Wittgenstein put forth by contemporary American philosopher Stanley Cavell. Personn provides context on the theoretical disagreements between pragmatist

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1. You can find the solution at dfwsociety.org/journal; there is also a solvable version of the puzzle available at matthewluter.com/crosswords.

and romantic readings of Wittgenstein, and then guides us through Cavell's philosophy and Wallace's exposure to it, before pivoting to a textual examination of passages in both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, showing how key scenes in the latter can be read as responses to skepticism in the vein of Cavellian romanticism. Like Personn, David Andrew Tow also explores the philosophical underpinnings of Wallace's writing, although his focus is predominantly on Wallace's nonfiction. Tow reads Wallace's nonfiction through the lens of the sublime in both a Romantic and postmodern sense. After providing a helpful overview of these varied models of the sublime, he applies them to close readings of both "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All" and "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again." Tow's analysis of Wallace's engagement with the tension between aesthetics and politics, or the plight of the individual amidst capitalist alienation, is both compelling in and of itself and a worthwhile interlocutor to the arguments put forth in Ryan Kerr's essay. In our final critical essay, Michelle Martin connects Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* to the 2004 film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.* Drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva, Martin argues that the interviewee in interview #20 and Joel, the protagonist of *Sunshine*, share a sense of melancholy, a mindset that in both instances only leads to greater loneliness. They unsuccessfully seek solace through relationships with women whom they objectify as "talismans"—Martin makes a convincing case for both *Sunshine's* Clementine and Wallace's "Granola Cruncher" as instantiations of the manic pixie dream girl trope—and in turn the lived reality of both women gets subsumed and appropriated by the male gaze. At the same time, both works do offer a way toward healing, found through the centering of the female experience.

As these all too brief notes hopefully make clear, the essays in this volume apply diverse critical approaches to a broad swath of Wallace's oeuvre, from his short fiction to his major novels and his

nonfiction essays, but despite focusing on different texts and utilizing different methodologies, these essays still speak to each other in ways that challenge and invigorate the central themes of each. One of the great joys of editing (or reading) a single author journal is in seeing these kinds of conversations unfold within the pages of an individual issue or across multiple volumes. In the book reviews that close Issue 4—covering Marshall Boswell's revised and expanded edition of his foundational *Understanding David Foster Wallace*; Laurie McRae Andrew's monograph *The Geographies of David Foster Wallace's Novels: Spatial History and Literary Practice*; and the wide-ranging collection *David Foster Wallace in Context*, edited by our former journal editor Clare Hayes-Brady—we get a further glimpse of the rich and varied conversations that are ongoing within the world of Wallace Studies. Even as you are reading this issue we are already hard at work on Issue 5, and we invite you to join in the ongoing conversation, either by submitting to the journal or joining us at DFW24 in Austin (or another future conference). In the meantime though, we hope you enjoy all that Issue 4 has to offer.

IN REMEMBRANCE OF ROBERT L. MCLAUGHLIN

The International David Foster Wallace Society and the *Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* offer their condolences to the family and friends of Professor Robert L. McLaughlin. He passed away on September 5, 2022. This issue of the *Journal* is dedicated to his memory.

In 1997, David Foster Wallace sent Don DeLillo a copy of McLaughlin's review of *Underworld* from the latest issue of *American Book Review*. Wallace wrote, "This guy McLaughlin has an office right across the hall from me at ISU. He's a postmodern-lit scholar, whatever that's supposed to mean. I know for a fact that some of those guys are dim bulbs, but McLaughlin isn't. He's also one of the nicest human beings I've ever seen up-close; it's like sharing a hallway with George Bailey."

Wallace's Capra-esque character assessment matches that of pretty much anyone who encountered Bob McLaughlin. He was a beloved teacher, mentor, husband, and friend. He was also an active participant in DFW Studies and presented scholarly work at the DFW Conferences at Illinois State University.

Wallace and McLaughlin taught many of the same students at ISU, and they both inspired numerous aspiring writers and scholars. We are honored to share two remembrances from former students of Professor McLaughlin here.

Grace Chipperfield

I MET BOB IN 2018, WHEN I lived in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, on a Fulbright scholarship. Bob was my sponsor at Illinois State University, and after meeting him, it was clear he would also be a cheerleader, friend, pen pal, and truly generous host—as, it should be said, is his partner Sally, and their cat Claudia (who less hosts and more "receives" guests).

During the four months that I lived there, Bob and Sally took me to my first homecoming game, had me over for Thanksgiving and Bob's self-proclaimed "best ever" stuffing (it was), and took me places David Foster Wallace lived, worked, and hung out. And Bob read ungainly chapters of my thesis and was always kind and interested and generous with his time and intellect.

Bob was such a character that to describe him pales in comparison to the flesh and blood person. I don't know how to do justice to someone who was fiercely intelligent (and sassy!) but who also wrote in one of his emails that he and Sally were going to travel to Italy in spite of his medical diagnosis because "I figure in whatever time I have left, I don't want to miss out on things because I'm a weenie."

Bob was not a weenie. He was a miracle. The force of his character remained when he got sick. His doctors continually described him as a magical patient. A diagnosis that should have felled him in months did not. Bob lived, and lived well, for years. He and Sally travelled, published, and celebrated their achievements together until the very end. I've never met a stronger team.

We would always close our emails with reviews of what we were reading. The last email Bob wrote to me ended with a recommendation for a book written in Wallace's shadow, and given our audience here, I'll include that the novel was *Blue Rhinoceros* by Jesse Salvo. The Wallace community was lucky to have such a friend.

Bob, you are missed.

Cory Hudson

Whenever Bob introduced me to someone, he would always say something to the effect of: "This is Cory, my last student," and he would often tease me by telling me that I needed to hurry up and finish my dissertation so that he could "officially" retire. The thing is, Bob never did retire. Even after I defended my dissertation, Bob would graciously agree to keep reading the papers I tried to publish as well as my job materials. He was always available to meet with me for lunch or hop on a Zoom session to talk about postmodernism, or the books that we were currently reading, or the job market, or whatever, whether it was his Kansas City Chiefs or my Toronto Maple Leafs.

If the editors of this journal would let me, I could write a full-length article telling you what made Bob such an impactful teacher, influential mentor, and kindhearted friend. What makes this easier for me is the realization that I don't *have* to tell many of you reading this what made Bob so special. Many of you were able to meet Bob at one of the David Foster Wallace conferences when they were held in Normal, IL, or corresponded with him through email. You already know what made him special. His infectious laugh. His intelligence. His grace. His selflessness. And most of all, his willingness to share those qualities with anyone who asked.

For those of you who didn't get the opportunity to take a class with Bob, work with him: I'm sorry you missed out. You missed out on an opportunity to work with and learn from one of, if not the most, gracious and selfless teachers and scholars that I have ever been privileged to work. Bob's grace and his selflessness are what made him so successful. He would *always* put his students, his friends, and his family before himself, and I can personally tell you that he did so up until the very end.

Bob is no longer with us. And though I have the distinction of being Bob's "last student," I find comfort in the fact that I'm not. I,

along with any of his former students who went on to teach or those of you who assign his articles or share his ideas in your classes, will continue to share Bob's advice, his lessons, and his perspectives with students. His impact on us was too great not to. Our students are—in a very real way—Bob's students.

INSIDE J.O.I.'S HEAD: THE ACTIVE READER OF *INFINITE JEST*

Emilio Englade

As I look back on my first experience of *Infinite Jest*, one moment of recognition stands out—the point, halfway through, when I began to see what kind of novel I was reading. Four friends and I had come together for mutual support as we read, gathering around a table each week to share stories and describe our experience with the text. Nearly two months into this effort, one particularly engaged friend read aloud a sentence of Hal's she had rediscovered at the start of the book, just after his breakdown at a college interview: "I think of John N. R. Wayne, who would have won this year's WhataBurger, standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head."[1] As she read, a few ideas suddenly clicked among us—first, that a reenactment of *Hamlet*'s graveyard scene had been buried amidst the sensory overload of those early pages, but more crucially, that the flood of images in that first chapter could mean so much more if read again, in light of all we'd learned subsequently. This was a book that demanded to be reread, even as it was read for the first time.

When initially encountered, John Wayne and Don Gately had been just names—indeed, I had not been sure, in that dreamlike setting, whether this John Wayne might *not* have been the famous

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1. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown, 1996), 16–17.

cowboy, perhaps wearing a Stetson along with his mask. Now I knew those characters, particularly Gately, so much better, along with Hal and his tangled relationship with his father. But more than that, suddenly here was an image of where the story could be *going*: Hal standing with Gately in a graveyard, on the verge of revelation about Hal's father and the secrets buried with him. The story became a little more familiar, and the sense of how it all might fit together was exhilarating.

That image from a graveyard, it turned out, was one of only two glimpses into the "lost year," a large, un-narrated gap between the last and first scenes of *Infinite Jest*. That gap is a product of the book's unusual structure, in which the first scene, set in November of the Year of Glad, is chronologically the last to take place. The next scene jumps back to early in the preceding Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment and proceeds, more or less chronologically, to November of that previous year. The entire novel, one could say, is suspended within the hole of this unnarrated year, framed by a blank territory that the narrative itself frames temporally.

What is interesting about these complexities, however, are the dynamics they introduce for readers, which are both more involving and more crucial to the book's impact than they are often given credit for. Ultimately, I will be inquiring into the mysterious power of this book on its readers: how I and so many others become invested in the story—so invested that we continue to work at its enigmas not just over more than a thousand pages, but even years after we understand that the book provides no resolution to so many of the mysteries it raises.

This project arose from a pair of more specific questions: Why does Wallace systematically undercut all the details associated with Hal's graveyard meeting with Don Gately, as I will soon describe? And why, despite this, have readers so often accepted that meeting as unquestioned fact? I will discuss how the problematic image of

J.O.I.'s head both reflects and helps drive the complex reading dynamics of the lost year. Specifically, the symbol marks the generative work that the reader performs to establish the novel's final shape and meaning. In concert with other aspects of the graveyard encounter, the presence of that image makes the meeting a precise analogue of Freud's primal scene, designed to give the interpreter's lived experience coherence by narrativizing it, through introducing a scene in which the interpreter plays an equivocal role. Using the reader-response theory of Wolfgang Iser, I draw parallels between this primal interpreter and the reader's own activity within a literary narrative, and describe how Wallace developed his technique to bring this activity to the reader's awareness. Finally, by examining the reader's positioning with respect to the graveyard scene, I extend Jon Baskin's argument that *Infinite Jest* is structurally designed to have therapeutic potential for its audience. J.O.I.'s head, you could say, is one of the smaller tools Wallace used to gain access to his reader's head.

"What Exactly Is the Story Here?"

My argument contrasts strongly with previous accounts of the lost year. Put simply, Hal's graveyard meeting with Don Gately has been treated as established fact since at least 2003, although it has rarely received much attention in itself. In particular, few have closely examined how this fact is presented or how solid a fact it is. In Stephen J. Burn's original guide to *Infinite Jest*, he mentions that "we also know that at some point [Hal] digs up his father's head with Gately (whom he has yet to meet) while John Wayne watches."[2] Marshall Boswell relates the incident in greater detail, with a sharper focus on its logical anomalies: Hal and Gately "dig up the exploded head of James Incandenza, in which head perhaps resides the Master Copy of the Entertainment," as Gately later confirms in

2. Stephen Burn, *David Foster Wallace's* Infinite Jest*: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 37.

a prophetic dream from his hospital bed.[3] The description highlights both the scene's physical and temporal incongruities—an exploded head that is seemingly intact, Gately's testimony to an event that has not yet happened for him—but Boswell does not take further note of them. Clare Hayes-Brady greatly expands on the meeting's equivocal details, taking for granted that Hal must have met Gately during Hal's own previous trip to the emergency room, leading to "their eventual relationship and trip to Himself's grave."[4] This argument is plausible—we are told that Hal had been in the emergency room "almost exactly one year" before the opening scene,[5] and we know that Gately was there about that time—but it nonetheless goes well beyond the piecemeal hints the book offers. The most extensive discussion of the meeting comes from Greg Carlisle, who devotes six pages of *Elegant Complexity* (480–85) to the myriad details that might point toward what happens, both at that meeting and elsewhere in the lost year. Yet even this discussion, which raises far more questions than it can answer, never questions whether the meeting itself takes place. I hope to raise precisely this sliver of doubt about what occurs in that graveyard, and even about whether the meeting is real in the same way as Hal's interview or Gately's hospital stay.

I am not entirely alone in my interest in these ambiguities and their effect on readers. In a 1999 dissertation, Toon Theuwis focuses on the ontological uncertainty of the Entertainment (strengthened by its supposed location in J.O.I.'s head) and whether it thus "might be a construction of the characters' (hence also our own) fantasies."[6]

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3. Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 167.

4. Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, Resistance* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 153.

5. *IJ*, 16.

6. Toon Theuwis, "The Quest for *Infinite Jest*: An Inquiry into the Encyclopedic and Postmodernist Nature of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," PhD diss., (Ghent University, 1999), http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/toon.html., sec. 2.1.2.

The blurring of boundaries between the real and imagined, he argues, reflects Wallace's strategy of highlighting the limits of what we can know. Iannis Goerlandt broadens the scope of this uncertainty to the lost year as a whole, arguing even more forcefully than I will for the graveyard's inherent ambiguity. In light of some of the book's narrative details, he concludes that "we know, from page 251 onward, [J.O.I.'s head] is nonexistent," so that "it is by no means certain that the events Hal remembered could have taken place in the textual void."[7] Recently, Dominik Steinhilber has drawn on Goerlandt to argue that the ambiguity of the lost year engenders a redemptive, "non-Euclidean" perspective that allows readers to "surpass postmodern irony."[8] My argument often parallels his reading of Goerlandt, but uses it instead to explore the reader's agency. Where Goerlandt finds that *Infinite Jest* becomes an addictive, "structurally manipulated, enslaving text," from which the reader can escape only because authorized by a design element of the book itself,[9] I argue that the reader's own activity *generates* that seemingly addictive power. This distinction is important because a change in the reader's perspective is necessary but not sufficient for a redemptive outcome. If Wallace's recursive tapping of the mechanisms of reading may be regarded as therapeutic, this could come about only through the reader's active struggle with the raw emotions elicited in the story. By

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7. Iannis Goerlandt, "'Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away': Irony and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47, no. 3 (2006): 323.

8. Dominik Steinhilber, "Modernist Aims with Postmodernist Means: Joycean Parallax and the Doppler Effect in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* 1, no. 3 (2020): 71.

9. Goerlandt, 323, 325. The detail is the quarter circle that decorates the bottom corner of page 981 of the hardcover edition—the final page of the main text. Unfortunately, that detail was absent from paperback copies of the book until the "20th Anniversary Edition," where it looks more like a printing error than an intentional part of the design. It thus seems a questionable choice as an escape hatch for later readers from the novel's "addictive loop."

drawing readers into the process of story creation, the novel helps stimulate an ongoing search for approaches to life that could reduce the pain so abundantly on display among its characters.

"He Dreams He's with a Very Sad Kid"

Hal and Gately each recount a version of the graveyard meeting—near the beginning and end of the book, respectively, so that they create a sort of frame. One aspect that stands out in both portrayals is the dreamlike quality of the scene. Hal's image, with its inscrutable figure of John Wayne in a mask, is recalled as he is being carried to the hospital after a catastrophic college interview. As he lies free-associating on a stretcher, John Wayne's masked figure erupts briefly in his mind, amidst a string of more prosaic memories. In contrast to the isolated details that surround it, the image forms a complete, rather surreal scene. In a novel titled *Infinite Jest*, the momentary re-enactment of one of the most famous scenes in *Hamlet* might cement the image even more firmly in the reader's mind. Much later, Gately has an uncanny premonition of that meeting, as he himself lies delirious in a hospital. This vision also emerges abruptly, among an uneasy welter of half-dreams; this time, the details are much more extensive and are explicitly dreamlike:

> He dreams there's people in his room but he's not one of them. He dreams he's with a very sad kid and they're in a graveyard digging some dead guy's head up and it's really important, like Continental-Emergency important, and Gately's the best digger but he's wicked hungry, like irresistibly hungry, and he's eating with both hands out of huge economy-size bags of corporate snacks so he can't really dig, while it gets later and later and the sad kid is trying to scream at Gately that the important thing was buried in the guy's head and to divert the Continental Emergency to start

digging the guy's head up before it's too late, but the kid moves his mouth but nothing comes out, and Joelle van D. appears with wings and no underwear and asks if they knew him, the dead guy with the head, and Gately starts talking about knowing him even though deep down he feels panic because he's got no idea who they're talking about, while the sad kid holds something terrible up by the hair and makes the face of somebody shouting in panic: *Too Late*.[10]

This version is highlighted more emphatically than Hal's—at the end of a section, where we will be sure not to miss it—and clearly it does not fit comfortably within the narrative. Gately here is in contact with information—Hal's vision from the beginning of the book, the Continental Emergency caused by the Entertainment—to which we know with certainty he's not (yet) been exposed. In fact, his *in*comprehension is the heart of the scene, showcasing as it does his unawareness of the sad kid's name and his panic that "he's got no idea who they're talking about." Both versions of the meeting, in short, float free of the story around them in deliberate and attention-getting ways.

The scenes also are interwoven very deliberately with the novel's structure. If they frame the text itself physically, chronologically they frame the lost year, this time with Gately's vision coming just before, and Hal's just after, that gap. The graveyard encounter must take place sometime during the lost year, a fact that becomes particularly important upon reflection, because that graveyard is the only place where all the major plotlines—in the forms of Hal, Gately, and seemingly the Entertainment—come together. Over the book's last few hundred pages, those strands seem to be converging, but except in this dream, they never do. The meeting thus provides an unusual opportunity for the *reader* to create closure where the text itself does not, by filling in the blank of the lost year with the information

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10. *IJ*, 934.

provided. During an online chat not long after publication, Wallace explained that he intended the novel to work in just this way: "Certain kind of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an 'end' can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book's failed for you."[11] Thus, Wallace believed that this seemingly throwaway scene was crucial to the reader's understanding of the novel as a whole.

At the heart of that scene is the shadowy image of J.O.I.'s head. It is not often noted how little Hal's and Gately's versions of their encounter in the graveyard have in common. Roughly two-thirds of Hal's brief memory is devoted to the figure of John Wayne in a mask, which does not appear in Gately's vision. Likewise, the image of Joelle "in wings and no underwear" that Gately finds so arresting is not mentioned by Hal. Each of them imagines a scene highly personalized to his own concerns and the people most familiar to him—where Hal remembers a scene inflected by his competition with John Wayne and the ongoing attempt to understand his own father, Gately's is colored by a struggle with addiction and his unsettling feelings for Joelle. Only two details are constant: the graveyard setting and a head they need to dig up, which Hal identifies as his father's. These core details are what make the scene so memorably reminiscent of *Hamlet*, giving it a broader resonance that only enhances its difference in feel from the rest of the story.

However, the truly striking aspect of J.O.I.'s head is that it is an object, like Schrödinger's cat, caught in a sort of quantum indeterminacy. This point is captured nicely in the perspectives quoted above, in the contrast between Goerlandt's certainty about the head's *non*existence and the opposite certainty in the rest of the literature, crystallized in Boswell's summary of Gately's dream. Recall how Boswell

11. Live Online with David Foster Wallace, *WORD ezine*, May 17, 1996, http://www.badgerinternet.com/~bobkat/jest11a.html.

seamlessly juxtaposes two conflicting, never reconciled realities for the head: reported by Hal as being exploded like a microwaved potato, yet seemingly also intact and concealing materials that desperately need to be recovered. The final image of Gately's dream even plays with the contradiction, with Hal "holding some*thing* terrible up by the hair" [emphasis added]—the human hair preserved on an object that is no longer really human.[12] The incompatible details lie dormant within the text, gestured at but not resolved, left for readers to make of what they will. By and large, both readers and critics have followed Boswell, accepting the integrity of J.O.I.'s head for purposes of this crucial scene, and generally not acknowledging, much less trying to reconcile, the seeming paradox involved with the image.

But the head is not the only source of discrepancy. J.O.I.'s grave lies in a part of Quebec almost within the Great Convexity, where for years it must have been subject, at least peripherally, to cycle upon cycle of wild growth and desiccation, perhaps even to direct bombardment by overshoots of U.S. waste. The chaotic disruptions in southern Quebec should not be discounted: We are told, for instance, of the grotesque birth defects that run rampant there, seeming products of fallout from the Convexity. Note 116 reveals that the company that made Mario's camera rapidly went out of business when its Quebec manufacturing facility became part of the fallout zone. And both the main text and note 160 describe how even J.O.I.'s funeral was "twice delayed by annular hyperfloration cycles."[13] It seems unlikely that anything buried in such an environment could have remained intact all these years.

Thus, both of the scene's defining elements are sites of ambiguity. On the one hand, stable core elements seem to unite Hal's and Gately's separate impressions of their meeting; on the other, details associated with both those elements cast doubt on how such a meeting

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12. *IJ*, 934.

13. *IJ*, 65.

could have occurred. The apparent solidity of the scene results from a cognitive blurring, a harmonizing of elements not essentially in harmony with each other. In other words, the shifty foundations seem to have been designed so that any certainty the reader has about the graveyard meeting must come from the reader, not from the text itself. The scene asks readers to create closure not just at the narrative level, by bringing together the various plotlines, but at the phenomenological level, by affirming the scene's reality in the first place. It asks that we become very active readers indeed, seemingly in line with the goal Wallace expressed to Larry McCaffery, that readers should be made aware of doing their "share of the linguistic work."[14]

"There's People in His Room but He's Not One of Them"

WALLACE WAS NOT THE FIRST, however, to create such a device for inspiring a self-aware readership, for the graveyard meeting is a precise analogue of the primal scene as imagined by Freud. This is Freud's theory of an early-life trauma—a child witnessing intercourse between the parents—that the child is unable to process, and that thus feeds into a pattern of later neurosis. The concept was developed most fully in the case of the Wolf Man, written up in 1914.[15] According to Freud, early trauma, in common with the graveyard encounter, gains its uncanny effect in part because of the impossibility of "placing" it in the normal world of events. In Linda Belau's words, the primal scene is "the impossibly present scene which functions on the level of a structure rather than as a place or time."[16] The specific

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14. Larry McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 34.

15. Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," *Standard Edition*, Vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 3–123.

16. Linda Belau, "Trauma and the Material Signifier," *Postmodern Culture* 11, no. 2

content of the scene is vital, but the event as a whole is most significant for its relationship to later events, rather than for a where or when that would pin the moment itself down in time. It joins together a seemingly disconnected series of life events to form them into a narrative: the scene itself calls the narrative into being, rather than functioning simply as another event within the narrative.

The Wolf Man's problems emerged when he was three years old, when the originally quiet child began to act out in an extended period of "naughtiness." This naughtiness progressed through a number of seemingly incoherent stages; for instance, the boy initially tortured small animals such as butterflies, but at a certain point a butterfly instead became a source of fear. The perversities seemed to fade by the time the boy was ten, but at eighteen he had a breakdown, and by his mid-twenties he was completely incapacitated. To solve the later problems, Freud came to believe that he would have to get to the roots of the earlier bad behavior.

Early in the analysis, the Wolf Man recalled a dream from just before his fourth birthday—a dream that had initiated years of anxiety attacks and a wolf phobia, and that even 20 years later bore an uncanny sense of reality:

> *I dreamt that it was night and that I was lying in my bed. (My bed stood with its foot towards the window. . . .) Suddenly the window opened of its own accord, and I was terrified to see that some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window. There were six or seven of them. The wolves were quite white, and looked more like foxes or sheep-dogs, for they had big tails like foxes and they had their ears pricked like dogs when they pay attention to something. In great terror, evidently of being eaten up by the wolves, I screamed* and woke up.[17]

Freud explains the dream's externals—the setting, the wolves,

17. Freud, 29, emphasis in original.

their number and odd tails—from stories the Wolf Man had heard as a child, but the sense of fear itself, he argues, derived from a primal scene, witnessed when the Wolf Man had been only a year and a half old. By transforming the vision's most salient points—waking to observe a terrifying scene, the wolves' intense stillness and watchfulness—Freud reconstructed a moment in which the young boy had awoken to witness some vigorous intimacy between his parents while he was in their room recovering from malaria. The father was engaged with the mother "doggie style," their contrasting genitals in clear view. This scene, Freud argued, had dramatized the boy's conflict over which sexual role he should assume, and so had provided an engine that would drive all the subsequent manifestations of his neurosis. The theory provided the vital link for the seemingly erratic transitions between different perversities, as the boy had sought to work through one aspect of the scene or another. The only problem was that the Wolf Man never remembered having witnessed such an episode. Like Hal and Don Gately's graveyard meeting, the primal scene is crucial for the sense of structure it provides, but it remains hypothetical, a moment imagined rather than inhabited.

For this reason, the primal scene could never be completely externalized, never be something the patient had merely witnessed and been affected by. The nature of the original trauma apparently blocked such easy resolution: impossible to recall, the scene could only be reconstructed after the fact, based on the constellation of very real symptoms it had driven. As Freud himself suggested, the patient could never be sure he had not created the primal scene, retrospectively, precisely to provide a context for his own illness. The patient could thus never be entirely separated out of the scene, as perhaps its only real participant.

The similarities to Wallace's graveyard scene are apparent. As noted, the graveyard scene also provides structure, but instead of a common origin, it links the plots of the novel to a common endpoint.

Likewise, the scene dramatizes some of the important themes of *In-finite Jest* in its powerful imagery. Recall how personally relevant both characters' imagery is. On Hal's side, the image of John Wayne wearing a mask both foreshadows the stream of mask imagery the reader will soon encounter and, particularly, is symbolic of Hal's current situation, with his interior rationality shrouded behind a bestial mask, where no one can see it. Gately's imagery, on the other hand, express-es his conflicted attraction to Joelle; his guilt over being distracted from life-threatening issues by compulsive, addictive consumption; and his panic that he might not be capable of understanding those around him. The scene's two defining details themselves—the graveyard and something vitally important in J.O.I.'s head—have their own ranges of association, in a book about characters slowly killing themselves through a "compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking"[18] At a symbolic level, every character's downward trajecto-ry is condensed into those two striking images. Finally, the deliberate ambiguities of the meeting draw the reader into that narrative. Like Gately as he narrates his vision, ambiguously both within and apart from it, the reader unwittingly becomes vital to establishing what hap-pens in the cemetery. Because everything about the graveyard scene is uncertain—from its dreamlike presentation to its paradoxical de-fining elements—the reader must be integral to "realizing" the scene and putting it in relation to the rest of the story. In a real sense, the scene incorporates the reader's activity into the structure of the book; through the repositioning of that scene, the story becomes, quite liter-ally, what the reader makes of it.

"So Yo Then Man What's *Your* Story?"

I BELIEVE THAT WALLACE CAME ORGANICALLY to imagining this un-canny scene, through his abiding interest in the nature of reading

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18. *IJ*, 203.

and in how to structure a narrative to take maximal advantage of what the reader is already doing. This was the focus of my study "The Birth of the Reader," which explores how inextricable were Wallace's practice as a writer and his experience as a reader. Both there and here, I contend that one of Wallace's primary accomplishments was to enlist the processes of reading itself for thematic effect. In *Infinite Jest*, a superficial example is the use of idiosyncratic spellings to suggest not only the speech patterns but the psychology of the characters. For instance, the misspelling of the resort "Crested Beaut" in Gately's stream of consciousness resonates with his insecurity about his education, suggesting that this is how he would actually spell the words.[19] Mary Shapiro details a more complex example from the end of *Brief Interviews*, where the glutinous experience of reading a mere six words—the "blank slack gagged masks' mindless stare"—gives readers a palpable impression of "the tragedy of solipsistic refusal to communicate," thus providing a culmination to one of the book's major themes.[20] To explore the deeper levels at which Wallace put the dynamics of reading to use, I turn now to Wolfgang Iser, whose ideas cast a revealing light on Wallace's techniques.

In his 1978 book *The Act of Reading*, Iser provides an account of what happens in the mind as a reader approaches literature. He argues that reading is a fundamentally dual process, consisting of both active and passive components. Critics, with much encouragement from Wallace,[21] have tended to imagine the reader as engaging only in what Iser dubs "passive syntheses," or the experience of getting

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19. See Emilio Englade, "The Birth of the Reader: Inside the Final Edits to *Infinite Jest*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60, no. 5 (2019): 618.

20. Mary Shapiro, "The Poetic Language of David Foster Wallace," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60, no. 1 (2019): 31.

21. For instance, see Wallace's argument, discussed below, that the pervasiveness of passive consumption in U.S. culture—where "pleasure becomes a value, a teleological end in itself"—has shaped the audience for literary fiction, so that stylistic difficulty is necessary to force readers out of their passivity; *CW*, 23.

swept along by a story.[22] This experience must be supported, however, by the active component, in which the reader *produces* the story under the guidance of the text. Such activity is necessary because literature differs from biography, or any other fact-based narrative genre, in its deliberate isolation from the way things operate in the external world. Instead of having recourse to a common reality that the audience shares with both writer and characters—so that all are parts of the same network, and what happens in the story maintains a link with "actual events"—a novel must establish for the reader how the world between its covers operates. Because nothing in the world of the novel is given, what Iser calls a "fundamental asymmetry between text and reader" exists, in which the text guides, but only the reader can fill in the missing background if communication is to be successful.[23]

In Iser's terms, a novel is constituted by *Leerstelle*, or "blanks," that are filled throughout the course of reading, with the reader creating an ever more detailed "schema" of the story world as more information is gathered. Iser evocatively calls these "the 'unwritten' part of a text," because their shapes are defined by the author, in the relationships between the people and situations described.[24] Gradually, the reader builds and adapts the schema in response to varying perspectives on the world of the story—from the narrator, external description, and different characters—always striving to integrate the different voices into a consistent account of what is going on. Through such "consistency-building," the reader pieces together a unique take on the story and its meaning.

Iser's model invites a number of reflections on Wallace's

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22. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 135ff.

23. Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 167.

24. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 275.

technique. First, the formative presence of blanks that the reader must fill sounds remarkably like Wallace's ever-present use of fragmentation, as Goerlandt notes: "the text [of *Infinite Jest*] seems to thematize Iser's concept of the *Leerstelle*."[25] Note that Iser's discussion of blanks is derived from classical rather than postmodern literature, with examples drawn especially from Henry Fielding. In Wallace's play with fragmentation, he makes overt and conscious the sort of connection-building that readers already must do while reading Fielding or any of his "realist" descendants. In this sense, the unusual "work" of reading Wallace, so apparent to readers and critics alike, is only new in that he obliges us to perform it consciously, by reconstructing a shattered text, as well as automatically, by piecing together characters and incidents into a story mosaic.

The discontinuous nature of Wallace's texts also emphasizes the split between them and the still linear process of reading. No matter how a reader moves between the covers of *Infinite Jest*, the story world is built in the only way it can be—as that world is encountered, sentence by sentence. The fragmented text thus forces a change in the reading process. Where readers may initially have approached this novel like any other, expecting the plot to guide them in step with their developing understanding of its world, they soon learn that this novel operates differently: The Year of Glad and other named years, for instance, are not put in order until page 223. Likewise, the numbered notes sprinkled throughout the text promise more information at the back of the book. Often that information proves not to be relevant to the story (as David Letzler complains),[26] but in many other cases it does. The J.O.I. filmography in note 25, for instance, contains details—especially, the many versions of the film "Infinite Jest"—that resonate with a few scenes already encountered, as well

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25. Goerlandt, "'Put the Book Down,'" 319.

26. David Letzler, "Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction: *Infinite Jest*'s Endnotes," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (2012): 306.

as background that will become relevant to future scenes. Instead of all readers building their models in parallel, each reader must learn to diffuse attention more widely, searching for clues wherever they might appear, whether in forgotten earlier details or incidents that will be encountered only much later. Letzler and others have focused on the information-processing burden this imposes, but a different result is relevant here: because each reader follows a unique path through this de-centered landscape, prioritizing different details based on personal interest and background, the book itself high-lights that no two readers will draw the story's pieces together in quite the same way. This is likely a component of the perception among many readers that Wallace's writing is directed specifically at them; to the extent that he directs attention to the highly personal nature of their takeaway, this is literally true.

By the time readers encounter Gately's vision in *Infinite Jest*, they have been forging their own highly personal understandings of the story for upward of 900 pages. More particularly, they may share keenly in the characters' anxiety for resolution, as the number of pages toward the end dwindles while closure keeps drifting just out of reach. Hal's silent, anguished "*Too Late*" seems addressed as much to readers as to his own situation. Externalizing a reader's responses at this late stage of the book fuels the piquancy of that moment and provides an outlet for all its narrative-generated emotion.

An even more powerful stimulus, however, could be the scene's disturbing quality. The scene promises closure while dramatizing how very separate Hal's and Gately's plotlines remain, and it ends by revealing not an intact solution to the novel's problems, but some-thing too monstrous to bear describing. The disinterred head serves as a fitting emblem for all the novel's *other* horrifying material—from excruciating torment, to sexual abuse, to dead, decaying infants. It is even a *mise en abime* of the fragmented storyline itself, still disintegrat-ed despite all efforts to fit the pieces together. Little of this material

will be resolved by novel's end, but the supercharged emotion in the graveyard makes it portable, provides a visual shorthand to linger in the mind and summarize the effect of all that clamoring, uncontained anguish. In this sense, the scene does follow through on its promise of closure, though not in the expected or desired way: it encapsulates the gruesome realities of the story, offering imagery geared toward potentially reactivating rather than defusing them. The impossible, visionary nature of the scene makes it especially fit for this purpose, dissociated as it already is from the plot.

This disturbing quality is what is lost in the common tendencies, first, to imagine J.O.I.'s head as intact and recoverable and, second, to pigeonhole the scene of its recovery as the resolution to a very open plot. The novel looks very different in my reading—powerful in an unfamiliar way, and irresolvably disturbing. In the final section, I'll draw out a few implications of this disturbance.

"You're Making Me Totally Reorient My Idea of *Disturbed,* Mister"

IN AN EARLY INTERVIEW, WALLACE described narrative art as a potentially countervailing force to the narratives of corporate media and advertising in which we all endlessly swim:

> It seems that one of the things about living now is that *every-thing* presents itself as familiar, so one of the things the artist has to do now is take a lot of this familiarity and remind people that it's strange. . . . I think if you can estrange this stuff, . . . there's a way in which you distance a reader from phenomena that I think he needs to be distanced from.[27]

The difficulty of this task for the writer, explored in the interview

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27. 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. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 19.

with Larry McCaffery and in "E Unibus Pluram," is that it cannot succeed if the reader is passive, merely swept along by the story to a satisfying conclusion. Viewer passivity was the weapon of choice of corporate media, as Wallace saw it: "TV-type art's biggest hook is that it's figured out ways to *reward* passive spectation," by delivering "the facsimile of a relationship without the work of a real relationship."[28]

This is why he put such a premium on disrupting the flow of his text, to make readers aware that their work of decoding was being "mediated through a human consciousness."[29] Frank Louis Cioffi identifies these techniques with Brecht's "alienation effects," in what is still the best analysis of the *performative* experience of reading one of Wallace's texts. The constant work of drawing the story together creates a "quirky, highly performative world with which the reader empathizes but from which she must also withdraw."[30] This alienated engagement is not meant to be comfortable. The focus of Cioffi's essay is the thoroughly disturbing quality of *Infinite Jest*, where "scenes of exquisite horror and pain come in, as it were, under the radar, and hence make an enormous impact."[31] Wallace acknowledged this quality of his writing, justifying it as the way for fiction to become genuinely therapeutic: "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."[32]

This argument that reading Wallace can have therapeutic value

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28. McCaffery, 33–34.

29. McCaffery, 32–33.

30. Frank Louis Cioffi, "An Anguish Become Thing," *Narrative* 8, no. 2 (2000): 162.

31. Cioffi, 162.

32. McCaffery, 32.

echoes much of the critical response to his work,[33] particularly Jon Baskin's recent book *Ordinary Unhappiness*. In one sense, I am building on Baskin's claim that Wallace's writing is structurally therapeutic, designed to lead the reader away from a worldview that can provide no means to reduce unhappiness: "the specific form of Wallace's fiction is related to his ambition as a philosophical therapist, with his 'patient' being both the individual reader and the form of life that has produced that reader's habits of mind."[34] What's new here is the proposal, in line with Cioffi, that discomfort goes hand in hand with the therapy—that the emotional response, in fact, is a sign the medicine is working. As Wallace's comments imply, a novel is therapeutic only to the extent it allows readers to see aspects of the world (particularly, of themselves) that they have resisted seeing—a process that, by its nature, requires a lot of working through. This is why I reject the disempowering trope of the addicted reader, as deployed by, for instance, Goerlandt and Aubry. It is also why, throughout this essay, I have portrayed the reader as an active agent rather than the author's silent partner; if any reader steps away from a book with a changed understanding, this can only happen because that reader, rather than the author, has made the change. In this respect, *Infinite Jest* is about the stories we tell ourselves, and about developing a

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33. The therapeutic effects can be clinical, as in a moving essay from Grace Chipperfield's dissertation, where she considers how reading Wallace helped with learning to manage her eating disorder. More commonly, critics have attributed beneficial cognitive effects to Wallace's writing. Timothy Aubry, for instance, argues—in both the essay "Selfless Cravings" and the later book *Reading as Therapy*—that *Infinite Jest* is designed, through an interplay of its insistence on sincerity with its addictive reflexivity of style, to lead readers away from their default irony and cynicism. Earlier, we saw Steinhilber adopt a similar argument. Hayes-Brady argues that Wallace's project was doubly "redemptive": on the political level, offering "potential liberation of the late-capitalist subject from . . . radical individualism," and on the personal level, "galvanizing readers to engage in this process [of communication] as a way of challenging their own narcissism." Hayes-Brady, 6.

34. Jon Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness: The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 13.

more expansive perspective from which to contemplate what had previously seemed intolerable.

It is also important that the reader's work takes place primarily sentence by sentence, rather than being restricted to the broad, thematic level where Baskin and others have tended to look for it. As Iser reveals, the sentence level is where stories are made, and where any new narratives about ourselves must emanate from.

With these points in mind, we may at last conclude our business in the graveyard. The first thing to note about Gately's fully realized depiction of that encounter is its stagecraft. If we reproduce the scene with dividers to separate its different phases, we can immediately see it is structured as a "dialogue" between, in Iser's terms, two clearly distinct perspectives:

> He dreams there's people in his room but he's not one of them. // He dreams he's with a very sad kid and they're in a graveyard digging some dead guy's head up and it's really important, like Continental-Emergency important, and Gately's the best digger but he's wicked hungry, like irresistibly hungry, and he's eating with both hands out of huge economy-size bags of corporate snacks so he can't really dig, // while it gets later and later and the sad kid is trying to scream at Gately that the important thing was buried in the guy's head and to divert the Continental Emergency to start digging the guy's head up before it's too late, but the kid moves his mouth but nothing comes out, // and Joelle van D. appears with wings and no underwear and asks if they knew him, the dead guy with the head, and Gately starts talking about knowing him even though deep down he feels panic because he's got no idea who they're talking about, // while the sad kid holds something terrible up by the hair and makes the face of somebody shouting in panic: *Too Late*.

Unusually, I have reproduced the introductory sentence both times we have considered this scene, for in theatrical terms it is necessary stage-setting: it separates Gately from half-dreams of his hospital room into a much more vivid dream space, as it transitions the reader from Gately's personal dreams to their shared vision of "a very sad kid." Like Freud's original primal dream, the imagery creates a feeling of presence through its dramatic presentation. In terms of the contrasting perspectives on stage, Gately's sections are far livelier, with many more juxtapositions of content and *much* more imagery. Hal's sections, on the other hand, are monotone and bleak, all their energy focused on the doomed attempt to bring Gately and the head together. It is also significant that, pragmatically, the name "Gately" doesn't need to be there the first two times it's used; we are clearly seeing through his eyes, so another "he" or "him" would have sufficed to show who was meant. Instead, Gately is explicitly watching himself perform in the scene, taking part as both participant and observer—thus assuming the reader's own dual position, for the reader likewise to witness.

In terms of content, the scene is a double nightmare: for Gately, that his weaknesses will always prevent him from doing what is needed, and for Hal, that the connection he seeks with his dead father will prove to be nothing but ashes and fragments. The scene's structure gives a palpable sense of how these limitations thwart the two, with each section ending at some new block to action or communication, building toward the ultimate "*Too Late*." On the surface, only pain and suffering are to be found in this dream. This is why the sutures *between* the perspectives are important: those gaps provide space where both Gately and the reader can contrast the differing viewpoints on offer, and thus develop a broader context than is available to either character within the scene. Gately in fact is given a gift in this dream, not only to see himself from the outside, but to compare his own outwardly focused anxieties with the quite different anxieties produced by Hal's

depressed introversion. Gately here might find direct evidence of how different the world looks from someone else's perspective, and that the anxieties he personally finds so distracting are not universal—that other stories are possible. It is a shame that Baskin does not discuss this scene, for its direct contrast of Hal's and Gately's points of view— for the only time in *Infinite Jest*—reinforces his claim that the book is structured to lead the reader away from Hal's intellectual concerns and toward Gately's pragmatic ones. Gately's openness to the world around him both compares favorably to Hal's introversion—making Gately's portions of the scene much more engaging for readers—and is what might allow new experiences to reduce the dominance of his current anxieties. Disturbing as the scene is in itself, the external view it offers indicates that the horrors on display do not constitute the only possible world.

The same could be said for *Infinite Jest* overall. Certainly it is night-marish: with the fairytale-like exception of Barry Loach, no one in the book has a clear-cut happy ending, and many, many characters come to nasty ends. From time to time, their universe almost seems to be seeking to destroy them, as when, inexplicably, one of Bruce Green's father's legs grows shorter than the other, setting in motion the swift disintegration of the entire family. For Cioffi, though, the most nightmarish aspect of the novel is readers' own "peculiar per-formance of disturbance," emotively caught between identifying with the characters' pain and observing their own responses from a distance: "I felt violated. . . . I felt as trapped as they felt. . . . I felt as though I had been looking at the insides of people's bodies or minds—not really just characters', but people's—and these minds were exploding, or imploding, before me."[35] In these strong terms, Cioffi describes how Wallace's style makes readers particularly sus-ceptible to the novel's horrific content, not least because the horror often seems to erupt from nowhere, out of apparently banal scenes.

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35. Cioffi, 169, 177.

But the power of that experience is not created *ex nihilo*. It emerges from the reader's active participation, where the instinctive pleasure of finding closure at the sentence level mixes with an increasing aversion to the mosaic that effort is piecing together. Cioffi emphasizes the "unmitigated horror" of this dual consciousness,[36] but equally, the experience provides both strong motivation and a vantage from which to imagine other alternatives. The graveyard scene illustrates this point, in that it gives Don Gately an opportunity to witness his mind's power to intensify reality, something he has already decided to resist. Before Gately ever encounters this dream, he has already realized, through the long struggle with the pain of his wound, that "everything unendurable [is] in the head, . . . the head not Abiding in the Present but hopping the wall and doing a recon and then returning with unendurable news you then somehow believe."[37] The pain is real enough, but the only unendurable part is the mind's multiplying of that pain into an indefinite future—"none of it's as of now real."[38] Placed where it is, the vision of the graveyard precisely shows "what his own head could make of it all," transporting both his and Hal's fears to a location that expresses them in all their doom and futility.[39] This externalized viewpoint is what might allow Gately to see the scene for what it is: the mind's unfolding of his current sense of helplessness, as he's already noticed his mind seeking to multiply the physical pain. Though the experience is disturbing, Gately's dual role makes visible how his own fears have helped shape the scene, allowing an opportunity for him to resist those fears' power in shaping his everyday life.

The "alienation effects" and open structure of *Infinite Jest* allow something similar to happen across the book as a whole. On

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36. Cioffi, 170.

37. *IJ*, 861.

38. *IJ*, 860.

39. *IJ*, 860.

the one hand, the self-consciousness embedded in Wallace's style engenders many deeply disturbing moments, but on the other, it gives the story the therapeutic potential for which I have argued. Through encounters with character after character whose perspective has narrowed to an impossibly painful point, and through the search for a context that might redeem all that suffering, the act of reading the book becomes similar to one of the AA meetings it depicts—through Identification and empathy, the reader can gain motivation to live a better alternative.

This project may also be as ongoing as AA membership. Cioffi notes the impossibility of reader attempts to square the book's many stories: "no reader can surround this world with a single fiction, but must sustain dozens of them as she moves through the novel."[40] A reader creates new stories through piecing together the de-centered narrative, while the decenteredness itself ensures that no frame will be adequate to contain the material. Thus, the search for new meanings may never end: it may continue as the reader continues to refine the model of what this story means, in light of new experiences and changing perspectives.

This is why I find it essential, possibly inevitable, that a primal scene would lie at the heart of this particular novel. The scene marks—in part, drives—the experience of reading the book itself, signposting the connection between finding meaning in a fractured text and in our fractured lives. The graveyard scene is existential, woven in not only with Hal's and Gately's deepest anxieties but, through our engagement with those characters, with our own. As Freud noted, living a meaningful life is no less a matter of interpretation than is finding meaning in literature, so tools for the latter purpose may become essential aids to the former. Ned Lukacher has summed up this process in his book-length examination of the primal scene: "The mystery in which both the history of Being and the

40. Cioffi, 169.

primal scene are shrouded is finally synonymous with the mystery of reading, the mystery of how we read and understand."[41]

"It Is Not What's Inside Your Head, It's What Your Head's Inside"

AT THIS POINT, WE MAY propose answers to the questions that motivated this study.

First, why was the scene constructed as it is, based on details that seem irreconcilably in conflict? These details give that meeting its primal character, effectively removing it from the uncomplicated phenomenology of the narrative—the scene *must* happen to provide closure, but the details do not allow it quite to assimilate with the events it seems to resolve. This paradox at the heart of the meeting showcases the role that readers play in shaping this, and indeed any, story, and so points toward the role of storytelling in their lives as a whole. The fact that readers must be implicated in "realizing" the scene helps make the book as a whole therapeutically relevant.

Next, how do so many readers ignore the conflict, accepting the meeting at face value for the closure it offers? In line with the many other ways Wallace highlights his readers' participation in the novel, the opposing large and small scales of the narrative point toward an answer: they incorporate different readings into the structure of the book itself—in not just its spaces, but its bones. Most readers have focused on the large scale, and the utter necessity of a scene that will bring Hal and Gately together. For these readers, as for most critics, the graveyard meeting is simply a fact, and no conflicting details will convince them otherwise. A more bottom-up reading is also possible, however, one that gives the scene's paradoxes their full weight. From this perspective, *Infinite Jest* is not a story moving toward a singular resolution—projected though unrealized—but a

41. Ned Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 43–44.

nexus of many stories whose ultimate shape is set by and becomes realized through the reader.

Some may find that this argument for the reader's power smacks of solipsism: what guarantees that a reader's narrative concoction will genuinely be guided by Wallace? I do not believe this to be the case, as my section headings already suggest. These quotes, backed by the statements above from the interviews, signify how consistently Wallace himself thought along the lines I propose, about the power of stories in our lives and the uncomfortable effort required in changing them.

In addition, the book itself illustrates the nature of solipsism, appropriately enough by using the symbol of J.O.I.'s head. J.O.I. actually describes the contents of his head at one point early in the novel, during his bizarre pose as a Professional Conversationalist interviewing Hal. Note that his words only partially support the assumption that the Entertainment's Master copy must be the "Continental-Emergency"-grade contents buried inside:

> Your quote-unquote 'complimentary' Dunlop widebody tennis racquets' super-secret-formulaic composition materials of high-modulus-graphite-reinforced polycarbonate polybutylene resin are organochemically identical I say again *identical* to the gyroscopic balance sensor and *mise-en-scène* appropriation card and priapistic-entertainment cartridge implanted in your very own towering father's anaplastic cerebrum.[42]

The tightening spiral of J.O.I.'s thoughts only ends at the Entertainment cartridge, incorporating along the way items from his other careers as well. The keynote, however, is the utter lack of differentiation between these materials, even to asserting, with some violence, that what's inside and outside his head is "*identical*." The

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42. *IJ*, 30–31.

presentation is engagingly weird, but the language is that of solipsism, of an addict whose personal hell encompasses his entire world, past and present. This is not a place anyone would aspire to live in, and is what would have driven him to that microwave—in a desperate gambit to physically breach the "one-by-one box of bone," as Wallace called it, that nothing else could penetrate. His head in fact embodies the self-destructive trajectory of solipsism, which inevitably breaches its own self-enclosure.

This is opposite the trajectory I propose, in which a reader struggles to find links to join together the chaos of other people's stories—and hence, potentially, of the reader's own. One of the productive paradoxes of the graveyard scene is that it gains therapeutic value by incorporating an embodiment of solipsism. This may be the most fundamental reason J.O.I.'s head remains ambiguously intact *and* broken: it does not provide a stable foundation on which a reader could erect a fortress of solitude. Hal's meeting with Gately is memorable for the way it highlights the desperation and anxiety of their everyday lives; it becomes most meaningful through the space it opens for the reader's continued learning from their suffering. Ideally, this space may offer glimpses of worlds where their sufferings need not have been as acute as the ones they experience, but those worlds are left for the reader, not the characters themselves, to explore. In this way, perhaps more than any other individual scene of *Infinite Jest*, the graveyard meeting encompasses Wallace's aspirations for what readers could take away from his book.

A final example illustrates how powerful the contrast between the inside and outside of our heads remained to Wallace throughout his career. Long after *Infinite Jest*, as Wallace was writing his popular mathematics book *Everything and More*, he created a sly epigraph, rendered in Greek to give it faux historical weight. In the voice of a pre-Socratic philosopher, he let his most dedicated readers know

that "It is not what's inside your head, it's what your head's inside."[43] Through an elaborate play of identification between characters and reader, this is the trajectory Wallace hoped to lead readers on: out of their own heads, and into a renewed engagement with the world. The vital thing, it turns out, was never what was inside J.O.I.'s head, but the ongoing experience of the journey to recover it.

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43. Caleb Crain, "Approaching Infinity," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 125.

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"SYSTEMIC BUGS AND PROBLEMS": ACID FUGITIVITY, NEOLIBERALISM, AND *THE PALE KING*

Ryan Kerr[1]

Introduction

Jeffrey Severs, in his study *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*, argues that *The Pale King* attempts "to restore the spiritual potency" of labor and to "illustrate work's potential for codifying and sharing values."[2] Moreover, Stephen Shapiro similarly argues that the novel constitutes "an illustrative critique of coherent individual subjectivity."[3] On the other hand, Richard Godden and Michael Szalay argue that the laborers in *The Pale King* gradually "tend towards the abstraction required of them by the form of their labour . . . dissolving into equivalency, . . . abstract and therefore single-bodied."[4] Considering how Wallace's unfinished novel contains

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2. Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 203.

3. Stephen Shapiro, "From Capitalist to Communist Abstraction: *The Pale King*'s Cultural Fix," *Textual Practice* 28, no. 7 (November 2014): 1250.

4. Richard Godden and Michael Szalay, "The Bodies in the Bubble: David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Textual Practice* 28, no. 7 (November 2014): 1299.

several passages that investigate the benefits of being deeply invested in one's labor in spite of the very clear dehumanization that labor causes, *The Pale King* can be considered a call for the restructuring of capitalism rather than the abolition of the oppressive capitalist economic system itself.

Although many studies of *The Pale King* (see below) argue that the novel imagines new, productive futurities in a neoliberal capitalist world, I will argue that the novel fails significantly in its critique of capitalism. While condemning capitalist bureaucracy, Wallace ends up reinforcing the ideology of institutions by endorsing labor itself as a necessary part of life. Indeed, David Graeber, in his book *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, condemns this "paradox of modern work" wherein people living within the neoliberal system are expected to create meaning from something that is actively impeding their fulfillment, stating that "(1) Most people's sense of dignity and self-worth is caught up in working for a living" and "(2) Most people hate their jobs."[5] The double-bind Graeber provides here shows that the worker's search for meaning inevitably reinforces neoliberal ideology.

Using a framework I will call "acid fugitivity," I wish to explore the ways that societal institutions (banks, bureaucracy, the state, etc.) rely upon a diametrical opposition to anti-institutional and anti-labor abolitionist modes of thought. I will specifically engage with the acid communist framework suggested by Mark Fisher and the principles of fugitivity that Stefano Harney and Fred Moten outline in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. *The Pale King*, ostensibly critical of neoliberal institutions, re-solidifies institutional thinking while at the same time revealing its ideological flaws. The bourgeois "collectivity" Wallace's novel seeks to create is still reliant on the organizational principles that push directly back against the acid communist utopia Fisher imagines. Wallace's novel looks to a collectivity that completely misses the point of forging connections

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5. David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 241.

between those suffering from neoliberal alienation. The reader of *The Pale King* is ultimately asked to find relief in new notions of labor rather than to destroy institutions of labor entirely.

Wallace, Neoliberalism, and the '60s

When Marxist critic Mark Fisher took his own life in January 2017, he left behind fragments of a book about the concept of "acid communism." The work was left largely undeveloped (Fisher only finished the book's introduction), and thus the idea of acid communism eludes easy definition. What is clear, however, is that Fisher's introduction to acid communism looks to the 1960s for inspiration about how to build a new collective on the ashes of capitalism. Fisher believes that "what capitalism must always obstruct [is] the collective capacity to produce, care and enjoy."[6] Fisher sees acid communism as a method of replacing the neoliberal pressure to work and to pursue one's own self-interests with a lifestyle that is not defined by labor or by "the systems of valuation which claimed that one's existence is validated by paid employment."[7] To accomplish such an ambitious goal, Fisher argues elsewhere for a universal basic income and an elimination of any unnecessary labor that serves to perpetuate capitalism rather than improving people's quality of life.[8] He differentiates between freedom from labor and neoliberalism's advocacy for "not a freedom from work, but freedom *through* work."[9] Put simply, "Freedom means not having to work," to quote Max Horkheimer.[10]

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6. Mark Fisher, *K-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* (London: Repeater Books, 2018), 753.

7. Fisher, *K-punk*, 760.

8. See Mark Fisher, *Postcapitalist Desire: The Final Lectures*, ed. Matt Colquhoun (London: Repeater Books, 2020).

9. Fisher, *K-punk*, 756.

10. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Towards a New Manifesto* (London:

Acid communism, a concept that is fittingly inchoate due to the difficulty of planning alternatives to capitalism, imagines "the ways that radical political messages could be smuggled into collective consciousness throughout popular culture."[11] In his introduction on acid communism, Fisher suggests that the abolition of the alienation of labor can be found in songs such as The Beatles' "I'm Only Sleeping," The Kinks' "Sunny Afternoon," or The Small Faces' "Lazy Sunday." Fisher writes, "These tracks apprehended the anxiety-dream toil of everyday life from a perspective that floated alongside, above or beyond it."[12] Fisher wants to use the mentality of the '60s and the conditions of possibility found in the era's music to demolish the ideology of capitalist realism, namely "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it."[13]

In a manner similar to acid communism, Stefano Harney's and Fred Moten's concept of "the undercommons" relies on a mode of rebellion acting in direct defiance to the demands of neoliberalism while inhabiting its very structures. The undercommons necessitates an alternative "fugitive" space free from the logic of capital. As Jack Halberstam describes it, the "goal . . . is not to end the troubles but to end the world that created those particular troubles as the ones that must be opposed. Moten and Harney refuse the logic that

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Verso, 2019), 16. The radical tradition of anti-work philosophy that Fisher inherits can be dated back to Marxist manifestos like Paul Lafargue's *The Right to be Lazy* (New York: Radical Reprints, 2020), which maligns the "revolutionary principle [of] the Right to Work" as a means of perpetuating "the miseries of compulsory work" (14). Fisher's contemporary strain of anti-labor politics is rooted in the punk aesthetic about which he wrote extensively.

11. Matt Colquhoun, "No More Miserable Monday Mornings," In *Postcapitalist Desire: The Final Lectures* by Mark Fisher (London: Repeater Books, 2020), 6.

12. Fisher, *K-punk*, 759.

13. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, United Kingdom: Zer0 Books, 2009), 2.

stages refusal as inactivity, as the absence of a plan and as a mode of stalling real politics."[14] Bringing these two ideas together creates a framework of "acid fugitivity," which simultaneously seeks to bring a collective end to labor and to the societal institutions that necessitated the contemporary, omnipresent, all-consuming neoliberal labor in the first place. Harney's and Moten's distaste for the law and legal structures can be productively combined with Fisher's envisioned anti-labor futures.

Such an approach might initially seem to parallel Wallace's own interest in '60s counterculture. As Wallace states in "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," "Irony in sixties art and culture started out the same way youthful rebellion did. It was difficult and painful, and *productive*—a grim diagnosis of a long-denied disease."[15] He also refers to the decade as "by most accounts, a generally cleaner and happier time than now" in "Up, Simba."[16] The statement, "We are all of us brothers" on the first page of *The Pale King* similarly suggests a leftist strategy of social organization, although this line is uncharacteristic of the novel's whole.[17] The rest of the novel's discussion of the temptations of individual self-preservation problematize these seemingly leftist aspects of Wallace's writing and coalesce in a neoliberal ideology.

The characters' ongoing conflicting perspectives on '60s counterculture imply that the revolutionary spirit of the decade is now long gone. During a discussion between the bureaucrats in §42 of *The Pale King*, the character Bondurant tells his younger co-workers that they are unable to conceive of the '60s since they did not

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14. Jack Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons," in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 9.

15. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 183.

16. David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Back Bay, 2006), 226.

17. David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011), 3.

truly experience the decade: "How odd I can have all this inside me and to you it's just words," Bondurant says, "It's not nostalgia. It's a whole set of references you don't even know you don't have." Gaines asks, "Weren't grass and LSD the era's like defining drugs?" "That's what I mean," responds Bondurant, "Acid was the West Coast and a small cell around Boston. Acid wasn't even in Greenwich Village until Kesey's and Leary's thing upstate in '67. By '67 the sixties were over."[18] In conversations such as these, Wallace's characters discuss the 1960s in contrast with the Reagan era. Wallace's notions of the '60s are similar to Fisher's insofar as the decade represents for him a lost era that can help us overcome our contemporary feelings of alienation. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that both Wallace and Fisher rely on the same incomplete vision of the '60s that is merely made up of different cultural signifiers, which theorists of the postmodern such as Fredric Jameson see as part of the experience of being a postmodern subject.[19] Like Fisher, Wallace invokes The Beatles and their "*Sgt. Pepper* psychedelia" when discussing the decade, for example.[20]

The crucial difference between the two is that the conversations throughout *The Pale King* harken back to a nostalgia that signals the very feelings of hopelessness and pessimism that Fisher seeks to combat in his writings on acid communism. In order to understand the true nature of the '60s, Wallace laments, we would have to be equipped with "the nuance or complexity" to which we have no access due to our place in history.[21] All we have are "our own little cultural signposts and cathexes and things that make us feel

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18. *TPK*, 427.

19. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995): "The historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes 'pop history')" (25).

20. *TPK*, 145.

21. *TPK*, 427.

nostalgia."[22] Fisher does not seek to get lost in nostalgia so much as to imagine a new future that uses the '60s utopian modes of thought as points of departure for building a better world. Capitalism, as both Fisher and Wallace are aware, prevents us from imagining new futures and skews our sense of history and time.[23] Wallace excavates strikingly different attitudes and insights from the 1960s than Fisher does, and *The Pale King* ultimately portrays the optimism of the '60s as unrealistic, thereby resolidifying capitalist realism.

In §19, the most overt meditation on Wallace's nostalgia for the '60s takes place. Stuart Nichols, Shane "Mr. X" Drinion, and DeWitt Glendenning, Jr. all take part in a conversation about history while trying to stay sane in a stalled, darkened elevator in the IRS tax office in the year 1980. Wallace uses this chapter to produce a philosophical dialogue about the evils of neoliberal capitalism. Mr. X draws a distinction between the real '60s and the ideology of the '60s that was repurposed into a way of pushing the individualism of consumer capitalism when he says, "corporations got in the game and turned all the genuine principles and aspirations and ideology into a set of fashions and attitudes—they made Rebellion a fashion pose instead of a real impetus."[24] Indeed, Marxist geographer David Harvey argues that the rebellion against the state under neoliberalism was legitimized in no small part due to widespread discontent after the United States government's intervention in Vietnam: "For almost everyone involved," Harvey says, "the intrusive state was the enemy and it had to be reformed. And on that, the neoliberals could

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22. *TPK*, 427.

23. See Mark Hammond, "K-punk at Large," *New Left Review* 118 (July-August 2019): "Repurposing Derrida's notion of hauntology from *Spectres of Marx* to describe the spectral presence of yesterday's tomorrow, he additionally used it in *Ghosts of My Life* to delineate a contemporary genre defined more by impulse than style. In its melancholy textures of crackling loops, echoes and samples, Fisher heard the lost futures of a more hopeful epoch" (58).

24. *TPK*, 140.

easily agree."[25] Genuine rebellion was repurposed into a skepticism of regulation that allowed the worldwide economic disparity to increase. Wallace's against-the-grain reading of the pleasures and the freedoms of neoliberal individualism is also beset by an uncertainty on how to fix these social issues. The stasis of the elevator and the circling, confused dialogue (which is unattributed, making it hard to tell who is speaking) represents the characters' inability to come up with a decent solution to the problematic policies that would worsen over the course of the 1980s.

Despite these strengths, the scene's failed understanding of the ideals of the '60s shows an inability to imagine a world that is not characterized by neoliberal capitalism. Glendenning can only imagine opposition to the war that is determined by "individual moral beliefs."[26] Interestingly, Marshall Bowell shows that Glendenning is "considered a positive figure, the bulk of whose views Wallace appears to advocate." [27] If Glendenning is meant to parallel Wallace's own feelings, then it would appear that Wallace considers '60s collectivity to be underpinned by self-preservation, therefore relying on a cynical capitalist realist perspective. One of the characters states that one owes it to oneself to be selfless and that self-sacrifice combines altruism with a kind of self-interest. Using a metaphor of being trapped on a lifeboat among other people with a limited amount of food, the character says, "You sort of have a duty to the others in the boat. A duty to yourself not to be the sort of person who waits till everybody is asleep and then eats all the food."[28] This moment advocates humanitarian sensibility for the purpose of accomplishing a

25. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 42.

26. *TPK*, 132.

27. Marshall Boswell, "Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 471.

28. *TPK*, 131.

"duty to yourself," thereby misunderstanding the aims of collectivity that acted as a crucial part of the '60s lifestyle. As Shapiro writes on the characters' fraught attitudes toward individualism, "contemporary capitalism *used* structurally generated affective disorders to facilitate neoliberalism's dissolution of the public welfare state."[29] The character's endorsement of individualism is certainly consistent with Wallace's statement that altruism should retain some self-interest: "I would like my generation to realize that it would be way better for us, like inside, in our stomachs, to be willing to pay higher taxes to be able to feed and shelter poor people, not for their sake, but for ours, so that we would be the sort of culture that doesn't let people die."[30]

Conversely, Fisher's description of the mission of abandoning labor speaks more to collective interests. Fisher sees acid communism not only as "a society which could be free" but as a way of producing new futures.[31] Fisher's abstract vision of freedom pushes beyond the idea of the social realm as a mere network of individuals in favor of a free world that contains a type of collectivity that we are currently incapable of envisioning. For Fisher, the need to overcome neoliberalism is not rooted in self-interest but rather in a grand "convergence of class-consciousness, socialist-feminist consciousness-raising and psychedelic consciousness" that extends far beyond the scope of individualism.[32]

One character in the elevator says, "It became fashionable to protest the war," which in turn "opened the door to what's going to bring us down as a country. The end of the democratic experiment."[33] Such a cynical perspective on the "fashionable" trend of

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29. Shapiro, 1251.

30. "David Foster Wallace on Gen X, *Infinite Jest* and a lifetime of writing (1996)." YouTube, 26 June 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qm_u3YoL8s8.

31. Fisher, *K-punk*, 757.

32. Fisher, *K-punk*, 757-758.

33. *TPK*, 132.

protesting the Vietnam War forgets that draft dodgers spoke out not only for their own safety but because of serious conscientious objections to the war. Unlike the figures in §19, Fisher is wary of the connection between the 1960s and the ideology of collectivity transitioning into the ideology of neoliberal individualism. In order to get "far beyond the simple story that the 'Sixties led to neoliberalism,'" Fisher examines the rise of neoliberalism as supporting "an individualism defined against the different forms of collectivity that clamoured out of the Sixties."[34]

Paradoxically, the dialogue in the elevator represents a solution of personal responsibility in order to avoid the ideology of personal responsibility. The characters are seeking to outsmart the impending ideology of Reaganism themselves, rather, than looking to a macro-level solution to neoliberalism, and this short-sighted solution still relies on self-sufficiency. While the figures recognize the evil "of the Reduce Government candidate . . . that [is] financed by the corporations that are the backs government tends to be the most oppressively on the back of," they pride themselves on being able to rise above "the taxpayers' need for the lie, for the surface rhetoric they can keep telling themselves."[35] The ideology of neoliberalism, of course, extends far beyond the rhetoric and policies of the Reagan administration, which are only "systemic bugs and problems" within a larger structure.[36] Neoliberal thinking rather consists of a vast network of social relations that amounts to a "properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole."[37] The strategy that Harney and Moten outline consists of refusing governance entirely, since the role of the neoliberal government is to provide "a

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34. Fisher, *K-punk*, 757.

35. *TPK*, 149; 148.

36. *TPK*, 410.

37. Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester, United Kingdom: Zer0 Books, 2015), 7.

set of protocols of deputisation, where one simultaneously auctions and bids on oneself, where the public and the private submit themselves to post-Fordist production."[38] Tackling individualism, either by way of a different brand of personal responsibility or by way of relying on the state, still uses the master's tools to reconstruct new forms of capitalism.

The collectivity of Fisher's framework of acid communism varies radically from the neoliberal brand of collectivity, which aims to create a collective sense of freedom out of pure unfettered individuality. One of the ways Wallace attempts to reach a state of unity under late capitalism is by instituting a collectivity centered around alienation (in a manner similar to his focus in *Infinite Jest*, which is equally as concerned with combating late capitalist alienation). I will now turn to the proposed solution to overcoming capitalist alienation as Wallace portrays it, and I will show how this strategy only maintains the capitalist order and reinforces the ubiquity of capitalist labor.

Affect, Boredom, and the Reinforcement of Labor

§4 CONSISTS OF A SHORT OBITUARY for "Frederick Blumquist, 53, who had been employed as a tax return examiner with the agency for over thirty years."[39] After his death from a heart attack, Blumquist "had been sitting dead at his desk for four days before anyone asked if he was feeling all right."[40] During this short, morbidly comic moment, Wallace iterates a theme that we see throughout *The Pale King*. Boredom is death, and those occupying the structures of the IRS are inhabiting a state halfway between life and death due to the mind-numbing labor they are asked to perform. Indeed, the very

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38. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 80.

39. *TPK*, 27.

40. *TPK*, 27.

act of reading certain parts of *The Pale King* necessitates enduring a state of boredom due to large sections devoted to inscrutable IRS tax policy. The tedium of reading such a highly technical novel is perhaps best exemplified by the exhausting repetitive syntax of §25, wherein "Ken Wax turns a page. Lane Dean Jr. turns a page. Olive Borden turns a page. Chris Acquistipace turns a page. David Cusk turns a page. Rossellen Brown turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. R. Jarvis Brown turns a page."[41] The collective endless dull bureaucratic life continues into a section discussing the phantom of the late Frederick Blumquist, who haunts the examination rooms while Claude Sylvanshine takes the test to be a certified tax employee. "The sense is ever so slightly sad," the narrator tells us.[42]

The connections between labor and death, then, would seem to condemn neoliberal capitalism. Capitalist labor, however, is only killing Wallace's characters in a metaphorical or symbolic sense. Wallace's statements on labor are so mundane in their focus that they eliminate many of the issues of capitalism that demand full attention. The bureaucrats in Wallace's novel perform labor that is not low-paying or exploitative. Middle-class elite labor is toxic, Wallace says, because it is bad for middle-class elites. I do not wish to downplay the significance of those suffering from unhappiness and a lack of fulfillment. After all, we must not forget that Wallace himself suffered from depression and suicidal ideation despite his privileged position in society. I am rather suggesting that the objects of the reader's sympathy in *The Pale King* are noticeably inadequate. Wallace sympathizes with those who have what we might call the privilege of boredom when he writes, "The underlying bureaucratic key is the ability to deal with boredom. To function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human."[43] Further-

41. *TPK*, 310.

42. *TPK*, 316.

43. *TPK*, 438.

more, as we shall see, Wallace views such boredom as a necessary evil that allows us to gain a greater understanding of our individual identities. Using boredom as the main focus of Wallace's approach to analyzing capitalism, however, ignores more urgent and more effective anti-capitalist strategies. Such a critique of neoliberal capitalism is glaringly incomplete.

The Pale King could be considered a meditation on how boredom paralyzes us when we try to come up with solutions to our own alienation. But, to quote Jameson in his work on postmodernism, "critiques of consumption and commodification can only be truly radical when they specifically include reflection, not merely on the problem of the market itself, but, above all, on the nature of socialism as an alternative decision."[44] Wallace outlines no such socialist solution in *The Pale King*. The alienation of capitalism causes us to look inward in such great detail that the masses instinctively resist solutions of collectivity. The recursive passages in *The Pale King* illustrating Claude Sylvanshine's "internal stress about the prospects of internal stress" or David Cusk's childhood fears of sweating that only cause him to sweat more profusely are indicative of a self-consciousness that overtakes class-consciousness.[45] The neoliberal collective of IRS agents who wallow in the tragedy of neoliberalism is unable to pose an alternative solution. The solution of abolishing the institutions of neoliberal economic systems is so far outside the bounds of the bored, frustrated boundaries of the novel that *The Pale King* can really only be said to be a novel calling for reform rather than abolition.

The "author" character (named David Wallace) who frequently appears in the novel provides us with a possible reason for our aversion to boredom. The true terror of boredom, which is always "about something else, way down," is that "dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough

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44. Jameson, 207.

45. *TPK*, 14.

stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there."[46] Boredom, Wallace implies, might even serve as a handmaiden to capitalism due to the IRS's ability to hide exploitative practices behind dull bureaucratic language and policy. As a result of the incomprehensibility of tax law, "there will be no need for officials to hide or dissemble, because no one not directly involved will pay enough attention to cause trouble."[47] During this moment, such a nuanced explanation of the need to eradicate the tedium of capitalism would seem to question the larger structures of consumer society that make us addicted to stimulation and entertainment, but the novel's solution to this problem remains insufficient due to its refusal to zero in on these problems in greater detail.

In "The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," Ralph Clare contemplates the theme of intense concentration that appears throughout the novel (by citing the recursive thinking of David Cusk, for example) and wonders if this mode of critical thinking contrasts with the paralyzing boredom brought on by neoliberal capitalist labor. Clare asks, "Is it then in the individual's subjective power simply to transform 'devils into angels' by the act of concentration, or is it that attaining the proper state of concentration allows the self to transcend the perceived nihilistic limitlessness to which boredom appears to lay claim? Either way, it is the ability to concentrate that is of paramount importance in solving this crisis."[48] Much has been written about boredom in *The Pale King* and the optimistic implications of awareness in one's own life as a way of combating everyday tedium. Joseph B. Nash, for example, finds connections between the novel and Wallace's interest in Buddhism, and he claims the novel is

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46. *TPK*, 85.

47. *TPK*, 84.

48. Ralph Clare, "The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 443.

"a general prescription for the practice of [Buddhist] awareness."[49] Nash reads the monotonous page-turning of §25 as a call to begin "noticing when we are distracted or bored, forgiving ourselves, and gently guiding our awareness back to the present."[50] Similarly, Robert C. Hamilton argues that the novel's "urgent concern is not to change or escape from the world of boredom, but to embrace it, be *converted to* it, and by means of that conversion, to experience transcendence *through* tedium."[51] Nash and Joseph F. Goeke draw parallels between this technique and Wallace's famous commencement address *This Is Water*, which is a call for consciousness in the midst of the grinding "day-to-day trenches of adult existence."[52]

Clare is likely correct in assuming that concentration on one's labor is Wallace's antidote to the excruciating pain of boredom, but the problem with Wallace's strategy is its proposition that indulging in labor is a way to combat labor. Finding meaning in one's own labor merely strengthens the stifling hold that labor has over the masses and their worldviews. Critical thinking might be an ingredient of rebelling against neoliberalism, but the mode of critical thinking in *The Pale King* that Clare describes involves giving oneself over to the logic of labor and finding relief in the very tasks that neoliberal capitalist labor demands of us. Indeed, the dense sections of tax

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49. Joseph B. Nash, "How to Be: Buddhism, Boredom, and the Practice of Awareness in *The Pale King*," *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* 1, no. 1 (2018): 81.

50. Nash, 81.

51. Robert C. Hamilton, "'Constant Bliss in Every Atom': Tedium and Transcendence in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 70, no. 4 (2014): 170.

52. David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 9. See Nash: "This passage's parallel to Wallace's message in *This Is Water* is obvious" (76). See also Joseph F. Goeke, "'Everyone Knows It's About Something Else, Deep Down': Boredom, Nihilism, and the Search for Meaning in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58, no. 3 (2017): "More than a few details from this passage and, in fact, much of Wallace's speech in general parallel ideas and episodes in *The Pale King*" (197).

code prose in *The Pale King* that center around boredom operate "as a specific historical construction and discourse that can be evidenced both objectively and subjectively" and therefore necessitate an indulgence in what Clare calls an "aesthetic of boredom" that finds comfort in (rather than protests against) neoliberalism.[53] Protesting labor by performing more labor is no protest at all.

The novel's ending further explores this sense of self-awareness through one's individual actions. §50, the final section of *The Pale King*, begins, "The office could be any office."[54] This line reminds us that, under the pretense of efficiency, late capitalism reproduces labor and labor conditions so that all bureaucratic labor becomes homogeneous and all forms of middle-class work resemble one another in terms of their capacity to alienate the masses. This section does not take place in the tax office, however, but rather an area wherein a character is undergoing guided meditation. The reader becomes a stand-in for the section's narrator here, since the chapter is written in the second person. When a voice says, "You do have a body, you know," the reader is reminded of the novel's emphasis on the enclosure of the individual body and how individual consciousness and awareness are Wallace's antidotes to capitalist alienation.[55] This moment, while stuck in the dreaded solipsism that Wallace discusses at length in the novel, might still be useful for the purposes of acid fugitivity since it encourages us to recall the difference between the enclosed ideological reality of Wallace's novel and our own possible futures. The fact that one's self is part of a larger social order can be used for productive ends rather than for the purposes of assembling the singular capitalist abstraction that Godden and Szalay identify. The statement "You do have a body" is inadequate because it ignores the larger masses surrounding the self. Even though we

53. Clare, 433; 442.

54. *TPK*, 537.

55. *TPK*, 537.

are told "to relax and become aware of the body,"[56] we must re-member that *we* have a *collective* body that extends beyond the realm of the limiting second-person mode of the section. Wallace writes, "Since we all breathe, all the time, it is amazing what happens when someone else directs you how and when to breathe. And how vividly someone with no imagination whatsoever can see what he's told is right there."[57] This moment sums up the entire conflict of *The Pale King*'s ideology of individual consciousness: When another person (or system) directs us to a particular set of practices, we must be sus-picious and find a way to resist these directions.

The feelings of boredom and alienation in *The Pale King* coalesce in the supposition that, to quote Conley Wouters, "with the right po-litical-philosophical tools, we might still be able to retain a traditional liberal-humanist selfhood in the face of informational avalanches."[58] In an effort to escape the dehumanizing discourses of neoliberalism that turn characters into "data processors," the characters in *The Pale King* retreat into themselves and become imprisoned by a differ-ent kind of neoliberal power structure, namely the impossibility of collectivity.[59] I will now turn to *The Undercommons* in order to point out how the flawed governmental bureaucratic policy in *The Pale King* resists conceptual understanding both by Wallace's characters and by the reader.

Fugitivity, Economics, and Governance

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MERE ACID communism and the ideal form of acid fugitivity lies in an awareness of the need to inhabit

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56. *TPK*, 538.

57. *TPK*, 538.

58. Conley Wouters, "'What am I, a Machine?': Humans, Information, and Mat-ters of Record in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 449.

59. *TPK*, 340.

alternative social spaces not policed by the machinations of neoliberal capitalism. Fugitive work cannot coexist alongside the bureaucratic work that occurs in the IRS tax office. In order to read *The Pale King* in the context of a fugitive spatiality, we must understand how authority invades the spaces of resistance and controls any form of communist leisure and alternative fugitive planning. Acid fugitivity also differs from acid communism due to its emphasis on the imprisoning actions and ideology enacted by the state. Fisher's imagined futures can be more fully realized if we understand how space and thought are always threatened by the desires and demands of a neoliberal government. While Fisher condemns neoliberalism as an ideology and neoliberalism as a means of reproducing labor, Harney and Moten view the role of the state as a crucial ingredient in the perpetuation of neoliberalism. Institutions invade and influence the fugitive, and the fugitive must be aware of their role in the state hierarchy in order to imagine a better future. As we shall see, the limited affective dimensions of resistance in Wallace's novel that I have mentioned are not merely the product of an incomplete rebellious imagination but the result of discourses of authority. Ironically, the characters who wish to find freedom in their labor do so by abiding by what the state apparatus of the IRS demands of them.

The problematic attempt to carve meaning out of neoliberal existence by way of performing bureaucratic tax labor is most clearly illustrated in §22, the longest chapter in the book. "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle spends nearly one hundred pages recounting his transition in college from, in Fogle's terms, "wastoid" slacker with no ambition to tax bureaucrat.[60] We learn that Fogle's father was "a hundred percent conventional establishment, and totally on the other side of the generation gap," implying that Fogle's eventual transition shows how the rebellious Generation X lifestyle became reinscribed within

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60. *TPK*, 154.

the previous generation's capitalist ideology.[61] Fogle becomes interested in tax law and shifts his interests to more productive pursuits. His epiphany occurs while sitting in his dorm room watching *As the World Turns*. In a moment of recursive thinking, Fogle realizes that he is actually "*watching* As the World Turns."[62] This moment, coupled with an accidental participation in the final exam for an accounting class for which he is not registered, eventually leads him to become an employee for the IRS. Nash sees this moment as the bridge between two kinds of freedom. The "mindful presence" Fogle experiences while watching *As the World Turns* "allows him to get a subjective taste of what he will later realize can be earned through sustained practice and discipline," Nash argues.[63]

However, the two forms of mindfulness and awareness that Wallace portrays here are radically different. The pressure of authority (concretized as the US government and its drive for neoliberal efficiency) is present in Fogle's career as an IRS employee, and such authority is absent in his younger moments of tranquility and self-reflection in the dorm room. Neoliberal ideology haunts Fogle's attempts at mindfulness. The specter of authority arrives in the space of the university and transforms Fogle's fugitive lifestyle. Life as a contemplative "wastoid" student creates a space of possibility that the neoliberal state apparatus seeks to quell. Harney and Moten, in their writings on the neoliberal university, see the student as a threat to the ideology of capitalism that pervades spaces of learning. Their statement, "The student has no interests. The student's interests must be identified, declared, pursued, assessed, counseled, and credited" points to the fact that the student is always incorporated into the logic of capital, especially students who enter fields of study that

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61. *TPK*, 167.

62. *TPK*, 222.

63. Nash, 77.

reinforce the exploitative practices of neoliberalism.[64] Fogle's mind-fulness before his transition to becoming a tax employee acts as a kind of ideal precursor to a future of acid communism. Such reflections are not subject to (or are at least less hindered by) the timetable of labor or the constant threat of precarity under capitalism. Acid communism is a fundamentally *intellectual* project that must resist the invasion of the cold empiricism brought on by authority. As Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson make clear, the boundaries between capitalism and resistance are always shifting, so the spaces of fugitivity can never be completely sealed off from power and authority.[65] We must constantly "surround democracy's false image in order to unsettle it," or else it will enclose us.[66]

How has Fogle come to internalize the values of neoliberalism? Harvey attributes the rise of neoliberalism to a kind of "construction of consent" and explains in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* that massive economic deregulation occurred because the ideology that emphasized consumer freedom and individual liberties was very appealing to the public.[67] It is advantageous for those at the top of the economic hierarchy to emphasize freedom as the most important attribute of modern life, since such an emphasis reinforces capitalism and allows the capitalist class leaders to maintain their economic status. Fogle makes it clear from talks with his parents that "my father was right about money and capitalism being equal to freedom, as buying or selling something doesn't obligate you to anything except what's written on the contract."[68] It is more than a drive for

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64. Harney and Moten, 67.

65. See Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019): "We are not convinced of the stability of the boundaries that circumscribe different spheres or subsystems of capitalism" (66).

66. Harney and Moten, 19.

67. See Harvey, 39-63.

68. *TPK*, 192-193.

freedom that appears to motivate Fogle's neoliberal turn, however. When the substitute teacher of the accounting class addresses his students, he gives a rousing speech likening accountants to heroes who are "today's cowboys . . . . Riding herd on the unending torrent of financial data."[69] The militaristic rhetoric assigned to life in the IRS ("employees nearly always refer to the IRS as 'the Service'") brings a kind of organization and purpose to Fogle's existence.[70] The pressure to conform to society's norms and the stigma of being a "wastoid" have implicitly caused Fogle to believe in the benefit of the more solidly defined structures of neoliberal capitalism.

Fogle soon finds meaning in his work, and his job gives him a sense of purpose that his allegedly nihilistic early life was lacking. "Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is," Fogle says to himself, implying that he wants to embody a kind of "bravery" in his boring life as an accountant.[71] Freedom is bravery for Fogle because he now experiences the existential ennui of neoliberal labor, as evidenced by his statement, "freedom . . . is also very close, on the psychological continuum, to loneliness."[72] If the misery of capitalism represents the courage that Fogle seeks to embody, it is because neoliberalism ironically prizes unfulfillment while economic elites benefit from a kind of proud unhappiness on the part of the masses. As Fred Moten states during the interview section in *The Undercommons*, due to the high premium placed on the endless toil of neoliberal labor, "Enjoyment is suspect, untrustworthy, a mark of illegitimate privilege or of some kind of sissified refusal to look squarely into the fucked-up face of things which is,

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69. *TPK*, 233.

70. *TPK*, 244.

71. *TPK*, 229.

72. *TPK*, 192.

evidently, only something you can do in isolation."[73] Moten refers here to happiness, which is always something we work *toward* in neoliberal life but never actually experience. Neoliberal life necessitates that people isolate themselves and revel in their own difficulties with the precarity and misery of neoliberalism rather than working together to solve it. In reality, the quest for a utopian collective wherein people enjoy their lives fully requires that they "look squarely into the fucked-up face of things" in order to change their social conditions rather than sink further into them.

Fogle now believes that "real authority was not the same as a friend or someone who cared about you, but nevertheless could be good for you, and that the authority relation was not a 'democratic' or equal one and yet could have value for both sides, both people in the relation."[74] Such a perspective ignores the asymmetrical balance of power of bureaucratic labor and how authority, rather than being a benevolent force in society, in reality only exploits the masses. For Fogle, the structure and prestige of capitalism outweigh the Marxist brand of freedom and leisure that he enjoys before neoliberal ideology takes hold. With the arrival of structure in Fogle's life comes the imprisonment of governance. Fogle's transition to the workforce is but another event in the timeline of the constant reproduction of social relations.

The previous generation, represented not only by the substitute teacher but also Fogle's boomer father, implicitly acts as a way of emphasizing capitalist values and making them appealing, thereby "constructing consent" and indoctrinating young people like Fogle.[75] The characters adopt the IRS lifestyle for the purposes of economic

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73. Harney and Moten, 117-118.

74. *TPK*, 227.

75. See Boswell: "Throughout the narrative, Fogle depicts his father as the quintessential 'man in the grey flannel suit,' . . . part and parcel of the novel's extended and self-conscious parody of Hollywood depictions of 1950s corporate culture" (476).

security and social status, even though these characters are, at times, highly suspect of the system itself. When David Wallace recounts his initial arrival at the Peoria, IL tax office, he tells the reader, "In general, my attitude toward bureaucracies was the same as that of most ordinary Americans: I hated and feared them (i.e. bureaucracies) and basically regarded them as large, grinding, impersonal machines—that is, they seemed rigidly literal and rulebound the same way machines are, and just about as dumb."[76] This funneling of alienated figures into the corporate bureaucratic workforce because there is no other realistic alternative is capitalist realism, which "seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable," at work.[77] Wallace's characters imagine no lifestyle outside of the capitalist realism that is enforced by hegemonic governance. Not only do these characters fail to envision alternatives, but the novel itself does not posit a solution apart from relinquishing one's freedom to governance for the sake of avoiding the precarity of neoliberal life. It is precisely the boundaries of realism, the fear of unproductivity, and the value placed on labor that strengthen the power of governance. Acid communism is inextricably linked to fugitivity because the governance that controls fugitivity is "the realisation of universal exchange on the grounds of capitalism."[78]

Spaces of capitalism have the capability to induce silences, and the action of *The Pale King* uses the production of space to enforce this silence. The tension between spaces of capitalism and spaces of fugitivity is shown in a metaphor discussed by one speaker in §14. A tax employee describes his childhood dog who spent his whole life chained to a stake in the yard. The dog "had dignity. What he'd do, he'd never go out to the length of the chain."[79] Instead, the dog

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76. *TPK*, 260.

77. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 8.

78. Harney and Moten, 57.

79. *TPK*, 117

"pretended like he chose this one area to stay in that just happened to be inside the length of the chain."[80] According to this metaphor (as with the "This is Water" metaphor, wherein fish must be mindful of the water that surrounds them), we can only make the most of things once we become aware of our surroundings and our imprisonment.[81] Being aware of the "water" that surrounds us in Wallace's famous speech never involves actually finding a way to *leave* that water or to *drain* it. Fugitives are not content to "do their best" to thrive in undesirable circumstances. Conscious acid fugitives, unlike the figures in *The Pale King* that advocate "Spit[ting] *with* the wind" rather than against it,[82] must use space to imagine a futurity outside of the circumference of imprisonment. Fugitives, as Harney and Moten explain, use critique "not because it might turn inward to damage politics but because it would turn to politics and then turn outward, from the fort to the surround."[83]

The praxis of acid fugitivity must operate in direct opposition to the state. IRS labor bolstered the unsuccessful trickle-down Reagan-era tax laws that only served to widen the income disparity in the globalized neoliberal system, and "[i]t is not possible to speak of a labor that is dedicated to the reproduction of social dispossession as having an ethical dimension."[84] The utopia envisioned in Fisher's writings on acid communism as well as the utopia Harney and Moten devise in *The Undercommons* speak not to the freedom imagined by neoliberalism

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80. *TPK*, 117.

81. See Rob F. Mayo, "*The Pale King*," Google Sites, 2016, https://sites.google.com/site/robfmayo/readers-guides/the-pale-king: "This seems to recall the theme of awareness (or − *shudder* − mindfulness) expounded in Wallace's 'this is water' speech, itself a callback to *Infinite Jest*."

82. *TPK*, 106.

83. Harney and Moten, 19.

84. Harney and Moten, 37. See also Harvey: "[T]he incentive effects of tax cuts would so increase economic activity as to automatically increase tax revenues (Reagan was enamoured of this idea)" (54).

but rather the freedom to live one's life free of the underpinnings of capitalism. The acidity of a socialist utopia will only be able to flourish if it is free from the imprisoning ideological practices and invasive actions that Wallace uncritically depicts in his novel.

Conclusion

*T*HE *P*ALE *K*ING EXEMPLIFIES THE limits of institutional thinking instead of prescribing useful political strategies to move beyond those limits. The tedium of the novel creates exactly what the revolutionary tactics espoused by acid fugitives try to avoid. It is hard to know where Wallace's accurate portrayal of the impossibility of evading neoliberalism ends and his own ideological inability to imagine a new world begins. At times, the novel does make a valiant attempt to depict the alienation of capitalism and to condemn it. For example, we might look to the very clearly deliberate moments wherein Wallace questions the status quo with rather biting portrayals of alienation. The novel contains important lines such as, "The assumption that everyone else is like you. That you are the world. The disease of consumer capitalism. The complacent solipsism."[85] The purpose of the book is to question this status quo and, in fairness to Wallace, it will require extraordinarily complex solutions in order to overcome every single horror of capitalism. Wallace correctly illustrates the inability to conceive of capitalism's vastness is due to the fact that "it [is] a world instead of a thing."[86]

We will never know if the finished novel would have culminated in textual strategies that ultimately condemn the kind of relief and "freedom" that scholars see as central to the novel's themes of boredom and lack of autonomy. What is clear, however, is that Wallace is unable to envision a solution to "[t]he complacent solipsism" and

85. *TPK*, 514.

86. *TPK*, 86.

therefore only attempts to come up with methods to inhabit an existence of solipsism more fully. The alienated characters are only able to question their neoliberal existence because Wallace does not offer answers other than to survive and thrive to the best of our abilities. Such a perspective ignores those outside the middle-class environment of the novel who lack the ability to maintain their survival in the same way as their more privileged overseers. We must read Wallace in conjunction with Fisher, Harney, and Moten in order to understand how ideological products like *The Pale King* act as signposts along the ongoing trajectory of neoliberal thinking.

What measures should be taken to abolish these neoliberal institutions? How does one propose a mode of anti-institutional thinking in the context of Wallace's novel? In the same manner that Wallace's novel remains unfinished and does not give the critical reader any much-needed closure, we might imagine the project of acid fugitivity as one with an unknown, mysterious future. Acid fugitives must look beyond historical thinking that incorrectly assumes revolution can only exist within the boundaries of self-interest. Acid fugitives must look beyond the logic of the "healing" properties of capitalist labor. Acid fugitives must look beyond governance's invasion of the self. Acid fugitives must understand that imagining solutions to capitalism necessitates constant evolutions of thought, and every solution we posit runs the risk of containing ideological flaws that require a new paradigm of thinking. This new future is "not only realistic but inevitable," and acid fugitives should disavow the pessimism and cynicism of the tax agents in *The Pale King* in order to reach this future.[87] We must avoid not only the tedious individualism of Wallace's novel but also the novel's limited imagination of mindfulness that equates to a new form of capitalist realism. It might be too late for Wallace's characters to recognize this problem, but it is not too late for the acid fugitive reader.

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87. Fisher, *K-punk*, 770.

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DAVID FOSTER WALLACE AND STANLEY CAVELL'S ROMANTICISM

Tim Personn[1]

I̅N RECENT YEARS, IT HAS become a bit of a commonplace to attribute to David Foster Wallace a belief in *community* as a way to a stable spiritual, ethical, and political life. Literary critics who make this claim often see Wallace's presentation of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in *Infinite Jest* as endorsing a form of communal authority capable of counteracting the corrosive effects of doubt and skepticism; and they commonly do so based on what they view as Wallace's endorsement of a *pragmatist* reading of the late Ludwig Wittgenstein. Jon Baskin, for instance, speaks for many in Wallace Studies when he writes, "veteran AA members become examples of a sensibility" that "has integrated a set of pragmatic restraints" to "achieve what the book posits as something resembling peace."[2] Robert Chodat, in turn, has argued that Wallace develops what Chodat calls a "sociological" interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as "a straight-forwardly argumentative text" with a pragmatist thesis that allows Wallace to combat skepticism permanently by grounding value in communal agreement.[3]

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2. Jon Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness: The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press 2019), 66-69.

3. Robert Chodat, *The Matter of High Words: Naturalism, Normativity, and the Postwar*

I will refer to these pragmatist readings of Wallace's relationship to institutions such as AA as the "community view" of the problem of skepticism in Wallace Studies. And I want to turn to another possibility, namely that of reading Wallace as a *romantic* thinker who was influenced by the interpretation of Wittgenstein that has been brought forward by the philosopher Stanley Cavell. This connection is particularly apt, because Wallace attended Cavell's seminars during his brief stint in graduate school at Harvard in the late 1980s, and he studied Cavell's texts on romanticism closely during that same era. To be sure, Baskin and Chodat take note of this fact, too, and their versions of the "community view" in confronting skepticism refer to Cavell's work throughout. To draw out a difference to these pragmatist accounts, then, I will make my case by contrasting Cavell's "romantic" reading with an interpretation of Wittgenstein by the neo-pragmatist analytical philosopher Saul Kripke, whose work Cavell engaged critically around the time of Wallace's participation in Cavell's seminars.

In fact, the difference between Kripke and Cavell that will emerge here leads to quite dissimilar views of the late Wittgenstein. Kripke views him as a pragmatist who finds an unshakeable ground of truth and justification in the agreements of speakers in a community. Cavell shifts the focus slightly by describing Wittgenstein as a "romantic" thinker for whom the possibility of a recurrence of skepticism at any moment is part of the human condition. Arguably, this distinction may also be used to distinguish different views of Wallace as a Wittgensteinian thinker. What emerges from that presentation is not just the possibility of turning to Cavell's "romantic" Wittgenstein for an alternative to the pragmatist "community view" Wallace critics have commonly applied to the skeptical challenge. The romantic register in Cavell's philosophy also allows me to explore whether Cavell's Wittgenstein has left some traces in Wallace's reading of Wittgenstein;

Sage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 259.

indeed, it seems that in particular the status of the individual human self is a site for theoretical disagreement between pragmatist and romantic readings of both Wallace and Wittgenstein.

This split becomes all the more relevant in light of the fact that the one Cavell essay Wallace studied most intimately in the run-up to his time in graduate school—"Being Odd, Getting Even"—was initially written for a 1984 Stanford conference on the topic "Reconstructing Individualism." The focus on the recovery of the self after the critique of metaphysics, then, does not only mark the degree to which Wallace approached Cavell in terms of romanticism as "the discovery, or one's rediscovery, of the subjective."[4] It also picks up another recent trend in Wallace Studies that implicitly runs up against the "community view."[5] This countervailing critical position reemphasizes the creative autonomy and reflexivity of the human self as it negotiates the necessary impact of social conventions, i.e., community. The Cavellian philosopher Stephen Mulhall, for example, critiques those in Wallace Studies who have taken Wallace's interest in Wittgensteinian grammar to augur his embrace of a vision of human community that, as Mulhall notes, "is not one in which individual autonomy and self-expression has any apparent room to breathe."[6]

The same desire for individual autonomy is also the diagnostic takeaway of my own reading of skepticism in Cavell. In fact, in his response to what I call the "community view," Mulhall points out that the individual self *transcends* grammar and its strictures: "the

4. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 466.

5. For a challenge to the "community view" as it manifests in *post-secular* readings of Wallace, see my essay "David Foster Wallace and Religion" in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, ed. Clare Hayes-Brady (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2023), 192-202.

6. Stephen Mulhall, *The Self and its Shadows. A Book of Essays on Individuality as Negation in Philosophy and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 290.

structures of language games do not control their own outcomes or dictate the responses of everyone involved."[7] In this article, I assert the significance and longevity of this romantic view of the self in its engagement with skepticism in Wallace's work. This longevity will become especially apparent at the end of the argument, where I turn to key moments in *The Pale King* to show that Wallace's last novel is bookended by scenes that can be read as responses to skepticism in the vein of Cavellian romanticism.

Bedrock or Riverbed

ONE WAY TO BEGIN DELINEATING the difference between pragmatist and romantic readings of the late Wittgenstein is by turning to *Philosophical Investigations* §217. This passage has often been read as an attempt to counteract skeptical arguments about the foundations of language and thought. Indeed, Wittgenstein seems to *silence* a potentially infinite number of skeptical questions here: "When I have exhausted the justifications [for using words the way I do] I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned." And he concludes categorically: "Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'" "What it is we do" is determined, in turn, by our "form of life," which, as Wittgenstein asserts elsewhere in the *Investigations*, "has to be accepted [as] the given."[8] Form of life, or community, thus becomes the unassailable, unquestionable "bedrock" that embeds all our statements about the world, a ground so firm it supposedly turns all skeptical questions away.

But Cavell points out that this answer is only given by philosophers "who understand that passage [§217] to be equivalent to asserting a practice."[9] And he notes that this equivalence has in recent

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7. Mulhall, 295.

8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), II 226.

9. Stanley Cavell, "What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?" in *Emerson's*

years been asserted by a school of thinkers who read Wittgenstein as a pragmatist. In fact, Cavell lists Kripke's 1982 book *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* as the most prominent touchstone from the tradition of analytical philosophy for this pragmatist reading of the late Wittgenstein. In that book, Kripke offers what he, too, calls the "community view." On this view, only an appeal to a consensus of competent speakers can ensure the normativity of a particular way of using language. This position resembles doctrines that follow the "linguistic turn" toward the conventions of a given community of speakers. Rather than holding on to a notion of *correspondence with the world* to make language and thought possible, these conventionalists reverse the direction of the correspondence that should account for linguistic meaning and try to ground meaning only in *correspondence with human conventions*. But this is where the first theoretical problem for the "community view" arises: It loses the world this linguistic meaning was supposed to be *of*, or *about*, and thus it falls prey to external-world skepticism. In fact, Kripke himself saw that his way of grounding linguistic meaning in conventionality never reaches beyond the domain of language, and he called the "community view" a "skeptical solution," rather than a direct refutation of skepticism.[10]

In a series of graduate seminars devoted to Kripke's book in the 1980s—seminars of the kind the members of Wallace's PhD cohort at Harvard would have attended—Cavell made attempts at clarifying his own understanding of skepticism by taking on Kripke's influential account. Cavell agreed with Kripke that there is a conventionalist aspect to Wittgenstein's view of our agreement in judgments, and he even asserted that Wittgenstein himself was already aware of the skeptical consequences of this "community view": "It

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Transcendental Etudes, ed. David Justin Hodge (Redwood City: Stanford University Press 2003), 219.

10. Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 66.

is part of Wittgenstein's vision," he claims in a later essay, "that our very sense of arbitrariness in our language, a certain recurrent suspicion or a certain reactive insistence on the conventionality of language … is itself a manifestation of skepticism as to the existence of the world and of myself and others in it."[11] So, there is in Cavell a concession to the "community view" when he writes: "[t]hat Wittgenstein *can* be taken so is important."[12] But there is in Cavell also always a clear sense of an alternative to conventionalism. This becomes clear when he notes: "no less important is that [Wittgenstein] need not be so taken."[13]

If Wittgenstein need not be taken as a pragmatist, though, what is Cavell's alternative? We get a sense of it in Cavell's own interpretation of *Investigations* §217, which does not read the passage as a pragmatist refusal of skepticism. Rather, Cavell takes §217 to function as a *diagnostic* of a certain kind of human desire and the way such desire is thwarted by the recognition that all available justifications for our use of words seem to have already been given: "The one who has reached bedrock here describes himself as 'inclined to say' something," he writes, "which at the same time implies that he finds the words that occur to him to be unsayable, empty, their time gone."[14] That is why, for Cavell, the passage does not present a "bedrock" of certainty but expresses primarily a "silence" which is being filled by "providing words, for suffering, awaiting, an inevitable crossroads in the act of teaching."[15] Where pragmatists find firm philosophical ground in a felicitous practice, then, Cavell hears only a silence. But what is the nature of this silence?

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11. Stanley Cavell, "Declining Decline," in *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989), 29-75, here 50.

12. Cavell, "Declining Decline," 51.

13. Cavell, "Declining Decline," 51.

14. Cavell, "Emerson a Pragmatist?" 219.

15. Cavell, "Emerson a Pragmatist?" 219.

An episode in Cavell's memoirs may give us a hint. There, Cavell reports that the impetus for his own philosophy had been an overheard debate between his professor Hans Meyerhoff and a teaching assistant at Berkeley in the late 1940s. The TA was under the influence of the philosophy of logical positivism, which had been brought to the United States by a group of Austrian emigrées who had escaped National Socialism. Their strict and austere interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* demanded that every statement be either meaningful or meaningless, which excluded any talk about metaphysics, ethics, or aesthetics: "Whereof thou cannot speak, thou shalt be silent."[16] For Cavell's TA, this prohibition also applied to a "line of Rilke's" poetry that the professor had meant to defend as "cognitively meaningful."[17] The TA's strict rejection of this defense, Cavell recounts in his memoirs, left Meyerhoff speechless. And witnessing the event, Cavell realized "on the spot" that his own investment in philosophy, as he would write later, was to "discover a different mode of response to such an assault."[18] In fact, the response that Cavell would develop over the following decades stipulates that logical positivists aim at a certainty that is irreconcilable with our form of life as finite human beings who are prone to skepticism; to Cavell, this meant that the positivistic demand that we only speak of things we know with certainty amounts to a prohibition of *all* speech, silencing people the way the TA had silenced Meyerhoff at Berkeley.

Surely, then, Cavell's use of "silence" in his reading of §217 cannot refer to the logical positivist kind. And Cavell's early opposition to the logical positivist "assault" on metaphysics becomes all the

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16. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2001), 7.

17. Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2010), 253.

18. Cavell, *Little Did I Know, 253*.

more relevant in the context of his later discussion with the pragmatists when we turn to Cavell's lectures on romanticism, which Wallace studied in 1989, and where Cavell remarks: "Logical positivism found genuine intellectual comradeship with … strains of American pragmatism" in twentieth-century American thought.[19] Part of this "comradeship" was founded upon a mutual attachment to *science* as the indisputable method for uncovering certainties. Indeed, both positivists and pragmatists would presumably try to enlist Wittgenstein in their project by pointing to the Wittgensteinian image of a *bedrock* at the bottom of our language games. This enlistment, however, could only be maintained by sidelining the turn Wittgenstein took in the last years of his life toward a different set of metaphors. In *On Certainty*, a text that responds to skeptical doubts about the external world, we find the image of a *riverbed*, which has been read as a critique of William James's pragmatism, especially of its conflation of science and philosophy.

Wallace echoes this imagery, and relates it directly to questions of communal agreement, in *Signifying Rappers*, the non-fiction book he co-authored during the summer of his closest engagement with Cavell's ideas. In that book, he describes his own "white American mainstream audience" as "dammed up by the very bed it's made itself to flow in."[20] At a first glance, this formulation is beset by the same conventionalism that plagued Kripke's "hyper-skeptical" response to skepticism. In fact, it expresses the conviction—some, including Wallace, have called it a "fall"—that the milieu of this particular community is something "it's made itself to flow in," which has no reference to an external reality independent of human designs. To be sure, under the sign of this theoretical commitment, skeptical

19. Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994), 11.

20. David Foster Wallace and Mark Costello, *Signifying Rappers* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2013), 47.

conclusions would seem to be inevitable. By contrast to a pragmatist response like Kripke's, however, which conceives of the basic agreements of our form of life as akin to a bedrock, the later Wittgensteinian image Wallace references here suggests that even those basic statements we take to be unshakeable are more akin to a riverbed—an ancient, though not eternal, feature of the landscape; one that is not immutable, but may at some point even come to shift again.

This is a far cry from the sense of certainty that issues from the work of a pragmatist like William James, who held that, as the philosopher Russell B. Goodman notes, "not only are our beliefs justified by science, but something similar to science is their source."[21] While a pragmatist like James thus treats our fundamental beliefs as *grounded* in scientific inquiry, Wittgenstein strikes a more skeptical note in *On Certainty*: language games, he writes, are "unpredictable [and] not based on grounds."[22] It is for this reason that Cavell has described the child's entry into language as more akin to an "initiation" than an "explanation." The child, he asserts, is simply trained in the kinds of response patterns that are characteristic of our form of life; importantly, though, Cavell also follows Wittgenstein in conceiving of the same basic response patterns as being *unreasoned* in the sense of having no more reasons to give for their own existence, not even scientific ones. The result is the kind of silence when questioned about one's acts of teaching that Cavell hears in *Investigations* §217. That this silence, moreover, as Cavell adds quickly, is being filled with "words, for suffering," invests Cavellian silence with a *permissiveness* that is irreconcilable with logical positivist, or pragmatist, austerity. Indeed, while these words may relieve our "suffering" in the face of the groundless ground of language, they will not provide

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21. Russell B. Goodman, *Wittgenstein and William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32.

22. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 559.

us with the certainty promised by any kind of scientific foundation-alism, including the one shared by key logical positivist and pragma-tist thinkers.

True Silence

WALLACE WOULD HAVE HAD CLOSE acquaintance with this fusion of logical positivism and pragmatism, as these were the chief ingredients in the kind of mainstream analytical philosophy he en-countered as a philosophy student at Amherst in the 1980s. And we know that Wallace was also aware of the logical positivist reading of Wittgensteinian silence, because around the time of the composition of his undergraduate thesis on modal logic he read Don DeLillo's *End Zone*, where he found a dramatization of the logical positivist reading of silence. His response to this presentation of logical posi-tivism in DeLillo is also on record. Under the brittle paperback cov-er of Wallace's own paperback copy of the novel, we find the equa-tion "SILENCE = HORROR," written in Wallace's characteristic handwriting.[23]

Despite his documented horror, though, there are moments in Wallace's fiction that seem to be informed by this "austere" concep-tion of Wittgensteinian silence, for instance the last chapter of his first novel *Broom of the System*. Written at the time of his philosophy thesis in semantic analysis, the early novel ends abruptly, in silence, halfway through an incomplete sentence: "I'm a man of my."[24] But while Wallace furiously defended the ending to his editor at the

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23. See Mike Miley, "Reading Wallace Reading," *The Smart Set*, August 18, 2014. https://thesmartset.com/article08181401

24. David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (London: Abacus-Little, 1987). For a reading of silence in Wallace's 1989 story collection *Girl with Curious Hair*, see Jef-frey Severs, "'Listen': Wallace's Short Story Endings and The Art of Falling Silent," *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 167-189.

time, he regretted his aesthetic choice later.[25] Arguably, this change of mind came after encountering David Markson's 1988 novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, ostensibly narrated by the last living human being stranded on an empty beach. Why the book was so important to Wallace is explained in his essay "The Empty Plenum," which is prefaced by an epigraph from Cavell and whose title alludes to Cavell's lectures on romanticism.[26] Markson's novel, Wallace argues there, is "really about the plenitude of emptiness, the importance of silence, in terms of speech, on beaches."[27] That this kind of silence is unlike the prohibition of all speech, though, becomes clear when Wallace adds in the same essay, "Markson's novel succeeds in speaking where Wittgenstein is mute."[28] The kind of silence he heard in Markson's prose, then, is paradoxically *in alliance* with the human word, not its opposite. In fact, the book's apparent success in staging such a "plenitude of emptiness" suggests that Wallace believed that there is a more generative and liberating kind of silence—indeed, a *post-positivist* silence—to offset the reading of "silence as horror" he developed by way of *End Zone*.

I suspect that Wallace began to hear this second version of Wittgensteinian silence when he read Cavell's work on romanticism, around the time of his engagement with Markson's novel. Indeed, the concept of silence Cavell arrives at in his most romantic book, *The Senses of Walden*, also forms an unlikely alliance with its other,

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25. D.T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York City: Viking, 2012), 71.

26. In the Preface to *In Quest of the Ordinary*, Cavell claims that "[without] providing an answer to this question of skepticism ['Am I *so much as* alone?'] you do not know whether the world has become a plenum, that is, a statistical crowd, or else a void of others" (xi). Wallace's choice of title, "The Empty Plenum," merges the two options, thus eschewing a simple answer to Cavell's question.

27. David Foster Wallace, "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*," in *Both Flesh and Not* (New York City: Little, Brown, 2012), 73-121, here 116.

28. Wallace, "The Empty Plenum," 96.

the human word: "It is through words that words are to be over-come," Cavell describes this reading of Wittgensteinian mysticism, adding, "Silence may only be the tying of the tongue, not relin-quishing words, but gagging on them. True silence is the untying of the tongue, letting its words go."[29] Cavell's word choice here has far-reaching consequences: that we may "gag" on silence indicates that there is something about this forced suppression of speech that may be inimical to our health. This means that the strict silence of logical positivism cannot be reconciled with some features of what it means to be human: "If we cannot speak," Cavell asserts, "we are inhuman."[30] "True silence," by contrast, suggests that there is an-other response to skepticism, one involving a permissiveness toward speech, even toward all kinds of supposed "nonsense," metaphysical or otherwise, that the "austere" reading of Wittgenstein would seem to prohibit. Notably, this second answer is more humanist than the logical positivist interpretation, which seems to deny key demands of the human condition: our embodiedness, our metaphysical orien-tation toward other human beings, our need to transcend a strictly scientific view of human life.

Cavell makes the same point in "Being Odd, Getting Even," which Wallace read concurrently with his work on *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. As many annotations in his copy of Cavell's essay testify, Wallace recognized a kinship between Cavell's romantic response to skepticism and the discourse of Markson's solipsistic narrator Kate, who tries to fill the emptiness of her world by trying to remember the voices and stories of the entire western canon. In Kate's narra-tion, Wallace may have heard a version of the Cavellian concept of "true silence" as an "untying of the tongue"—a plenitude that was still, as he would suggest in his review, "empty," and therefore, in line with the title of Markson's novel, a continuation of Wittgenstein's

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29. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992), 44.

30. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 141.

philosophy by other means. That is why we may see in the poetic license of Cavellian "true silence" an argument for why the maximalism of Wallace's fiction still expresses a commitment to Wittgensteinian silence, despite, or rather *because* of, its own wordiness.

That this concept of "true silence" first appears in a study of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* indicates the influence of American romanticism on Cavell's interpretation of skepticism. And, if my reading is correct, it also helps identify a romantic streak in Wallace's thought. That Wallace himself read Cavell in a romantic vein becomes clear when we turn to his conversations in the mid-nineties with the journalist David Lipsky, where Wallace mentions Cavell as "kind of a specialist in … Emerson and Thoreau."[31] It is important to note in this regard that what the American influence allowed Cavell to do with Wittgenstein's *Investigations* was cast the book's treatment of skepticism in the romantic vocabulary of *intimacy*, arguing that the main theme in Wittgenstein and Emerson and Thoreau was the experience of "an intimacy with existence, or intimacy lost."[32] In the manifestation and withdrawal of this "intimacy with existence," Cavell glimpsed central features of the human condition; he sketched out a position in contemporary epistemology that diagnoses our sense of finitude and limitation not as a sign of an impossible need to refute skepticism, as the pragmatist anti-skeptic might do, but rather as a marker of a profound "truth of skepticism." In the book on *Walden*, Cavell defines this "truth of skepticism" as "the sense, or fact, that our primary relation to the world is not one of knowing it (understood as achieving certainty of it based upon the senses)."[33] Again, what Cavell challenges here is any attachment to the idea of certainty to "ground" our being-in-the-world; in fact,

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31. David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* (New York City: Broadway Books, 2010), 236.

32. Stanley Cavell, "An Emerson Mood," in *The Senses of Walden*, 139-160, here 145.

33. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 106-7.

instead of silencing metaphysical explorations by forcing the end of the conversation as in the "austere" reading of Wittgenstein, Cavell puts emphasis on a silence that lets itself be filled gradually with words to help us overcome the "horror" of the inhuman and "austere" reading of silence.

That this work of "overcoming" relates to the experience of nature is not surprising given the subject matter of Cavell's book on Thoreau. "Nature is the final teacher powerful enough to show us overcoming," Cavell writes there, referencing perhaps the most famous romantic trope, the world as interlocutor: "She is, the new Romantic might say, my antagonist, whose instruction I must win."[34] The way to restoring this intimacy is also being addressed in the later lectures on American romanticism that Wallace read in 1989. Here, Cavell describes the work of romanticism "as the task of bringing the world back, as to life."[35] It would therefore be of paramount importance for understanding both "old" romantics such as Emerson and Thoreau and "new" romantics like Cavell (and perhaps Wallace) to get a sense of how this return from detachment is to be achieved.

In the *Walden* book, the rebirth of the world is tied up with a comportment toward life Thoreau calls *interestedness*. This concept, Cavell writes, is "one of Thoreau's best strokes," one that signifies "the idea of our distance from words and others and of their presence to us."[36] As such, it implies that the situatedness of the human being is bilateral—*both* toward itself *and* toward something beyond the self—and thus combines a self-consciousness of ourself as a human entity with the capacity to reach out, to be "interested." The term Thoreau has for the same position is "nextness." Cavell claims that the experimental procedure of returning into this new proximity with the world is

34. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 43.

35. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 52-53.

36. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 117; 67.

condensed in the following passage from Thoreau: "You only need to sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all of its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns."[37] In "Being Odd, Getting Even," Cavell reprises this procedure when he writes: "For Emerson and Thoreau, you must learn to sit at home or to sit still in some attractive spot in the woods, as if to marry the world, before, if ever, you take on the burden of others."[38] Wallace underlined this passage as part of the marginalia that testify to his engagement with Cavell's romantic reading of Wittgenstein. And, as I will show in the last part of this article, it preoccupied him throughout his career such that its traces can still be found in his last work, the manuscripts that were compiled as the unfinished novel *The Pale King*.

Bookends of Skepticism

To my mind, Wallace's "romantic" response to skepticism is nowhere more apparent than in *The Pale King*'s lyrical opening paragraph, where the narrator inhabits the position of the Emersonian observer who sits in silence "in some attractive spot" in nature, awaiting the moment when, as Thoreau writes, "all of its inhabitants may exhibit themselves … by turns."

> Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where untilled fields simmer shrilly in the A.M. heat: shattercane, lamb's-quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtain, muscadine, spine-cabbage, goldenrod, creeping charlie, butter-print, nightshade,

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37. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (London: Signet, 2012), 12.11.

38. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 129.

ragweed, wild oat, vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother's soft hand on your cheek. … Ale-colored sunshine and pale sky and whorls of cirrus so high they cast no shadow. Insects all business all the time. Quartz and chert and schist and chondrite iron scabs in granite. Very old land. Look around you. The horizon trembling, shapeless. We are all of us brothers.[39]

The novelist Garth Hallberg has read this beautiful passage as an illustration of Wallace's "ars poetica." It is, Hallberg writes, "an act of long, hard, loving attention," in which we are "called to attention, called out of ourselves."[40] Indeed, the assumption that something like "single-point concentration," which Wallace has at times identified as an antidote to detachment, could help with the supposed excesses of postmodern self-consciousness is common in Wallace Studies. It guides interpretations such as Allard den Dulk's reading of Wallace's work, in which "paying attention," he claims, "means that consciousness is completely 'in' the world, unaware of itself, fully attending to the object of attention."[41]

Yet this possibility of complete self-forgetfulness is antithetical to the spirit of Cavell's work. "You may call this mysticism," Cavell describes Thoreau's experience of bringing the world back to life, and I believe that the same might be said of the lyrical register of Wallace's opening passage in *The Pale King*. Note, however, that the apparent agent of this "mystical" experience—the "you" who is encouraged to "look around"—remains anchored in the passage as

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39. *TPK*, 3.

40. Garth Risk Hallberg, "Death and Taxes," *New York Books*, 1 April 2011. http://nymag.com/arts/books/reviews/david-foster-wallace-2011-4/

41. Allard den Dulk, "Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self," in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels*, ed. Marshall Boswell (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 43-60, here 51.

a site where its various impressions converge. Similarly, Cavell explains, the remainder of the observer in the transcendentalist imaginary implies "a very particular view of the subject; it is not what the inexperienced may imagine as a claim to the union, or absorption in nature."[42] Instead, as I have quoted before from "Being Odd, Getting Even," Cavell figures the relationship between the self and the world on the model of a "marriage." And "marriage," a key term in Cavell's response to skepticism, suggests the joining of two distinct entities, not the kind of dissolution of the one into the other that is insinuated by a critical assessment like the one I cited before— namely, that the self is "completely 'in' the world." For that reason, I prefer Stephen J. Burn's suggestion to call the opening of *The Pale King* a "list poem."[43] After all, poetry has always been concerned with the "double vision" of a speaker in the process of observing; the language the poet uses by necessity is the indispensable medium for this kind of observation to even take place, not the marker of a self-awareness that somehow needs to be overcome.

Parts of the Chris Fogle sequence from *The Pale King* are germane to this exploration of Wallace's thinking on questions of self-awareness and interestedness—a connection that is further insinuated by that fact that the whole section was republished later as the standalone title *Something to Do with Paying Attention*. Indeed, Fogle's transition from directionless teenager to IRS examiner is commonly regarded as the outcome of the character learning how to pay attention. Some critics have also attributed it to Fogle's capacity, or at least desire, for a complete absorption in the world. Wilson Kaiser, for example, writes of Fogle that he "is drawn to accountancy because it is a practice that promises to immerse him fully."[44] What is more, Kai-

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42. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 105-106.

43. Stephen J. Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Readers Guide. Second Edition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 15.

44. Wilson Kaiser, "David Foster Wallace and Proximal Irony," *Studies in American*

ser proposes that we view Fogle as a stand-in for Wallace here, who supposedly saw as the only response to postmodern detachment a turn to "intensive absorption in a delimited world."[45] Leaving aside whether Fogle, or indeed any Wallace character, ever achieves this state the way Kaiser envisions, I have reservations about "full absorption" as a description of Wallace's aesthetic aims.

After all, the novel presents Fogle's "conversion" as following, indeed guided by, the experience of a heightened state of self-awareness Fogle enters when he takes the psychostimulant Obetrol. But his experience after ingesting the drug is less like an immersive "flattening out" and more like a "doubling" into a part of himself that observes and a part that is being observed—a way of "paying attention" to his own dual nature as both subject and object that creates an "awareness of [Fogle's] own part" in his own destiny.[46] "I felt like I actually *owned* myself," Fogle explains, and he takes the "doubling" of the Obetrol experience as "a kind of signpost or directional sign, pointing to what might be possible if I could become more aware and alive in daily life."[47] The results of "Obetrolling," then, do not point Fogle to self-surrender and blunt oblivion; instead, they seem to be more in line with the view of the "self-aware" individual in Mulhall's and Cavell's readings of Wittgenstein and Thoreau, respectively—a self that is autonomous, albeit in a restricted sense, and thus transcends even the agreements of the form of life that make its own capacity for transcendence possible.

Indeed, that this self, as Cavell writes of Thoreau, is *both* close *and* distant from words signifies the remainder of language as the medium of its own "nextness" to the world. Something similar is expressed by Martin Heidegger, another one of Cavell's influences,

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Humor 3, no. 28 (2013), 31-44, here 41.

45. Kaiser, "David Foster Wallace and Proximal Irony," 41.

46. *TPK*, 182.

47. *TPK*, 186.

when he writes in his "Letter on Humanism," "Nearness occurs essentially as language itself."[48] Arguably, this is also the case for the return of proximity to the world that Wallace stages in the "list poem" of *The Pale King* §1. In its disjunctive enumeration of various features of the natural landscape, it is indeed as if, to return to Thoreau, "all of [the world's] inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns." Staying truly silent, then, does not mean moving beyond language by following the "austere" *Tractarian* call for silence. It means attending to the words themselves—not in certainty that they will deliver the world to us without any effort, but rather to enact the kind of "interestedness" that may conflate the difference between words and things into a romantic vision which leaves nothing but poetic *vitality* as an indicator of the self's intimacy with the world. This possibility of "vitality," however, is important. To let us hear this vitality *in* and *through* the act of linguistic evocation—essentially the task of poetry, broadly construed—may in the end be all we have, and *need*, in responding to the skeptical call for certainty.

Wallace's notion of self-consciousness in *The Pale King*, then, avoids the anti-skeptical recoil into permanent fusion with the world that some critics have found in the book; but it also avoids a permanent "loss of the world" in skeptical detachment on the model of the incomplete circles of worm bodies that, in Wallace's own evocative imagery, are baked into the pasture in the last part of §1. In fact, I claim that the foundational tension that emerges at the end of this passage can be captured through Cavell's work on a romantic form of *desire*:

> The pasture's crows standing at angles, turning up patties to get at the worms underneath, the shapes of the worms incised in the overturned dung and baked by the sun all day until hardened, there to stay, tiny vacant lines in rows and inset curls that do not close because head never quite

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48. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1977), 213-266, here 253.

touches tail. Read these.[49]

"Head never quite touches tail" in these circles, just like the skeptical demand for a firm linguistic grasp of the world can never be fulfilled as presented. But this absence of certainty does not lead us into silence here. Instead, Wallace ends the paragraph with an interpellation of the reader and sends us back to the beginning: "Read these," the narrator demands, figuring nature as something readable the same way the whole passage stages an intimacy with the land through nothing but our common language, our shared words. Pragmatist and logical positivist accounts of this scenario might dismiss the evocation of an ontological gap between language and world as metaphysical "nonsense" and call for strict silence on this matter. But in doing so, they would forfeit any purchase on the kind of Emersonian desire for an "intimacy with existence" that this passage, and Cavell's account of skepticism in general, revolves around; this also means they would renounce the prospect that, in circling back to the beginning to read natural features like the "tiny vacant lines" baked into the pasture, we might experience an *aspect change*, perhaps the most important one of all: from a sense of skeptical detachment to a new-found presentness and intimacy, from depression to taking an "interest" in our experience of the world.

This is not the only scene in *The Pale King* that can benefit from a Cavellian reading. In fact, the novel is bookended by responses to two forms of skepticism; it opens with a response to external-world skepticism, and it ends with other-mind skepticism, or rather what a response to that might look like. This is an appropriate sequence for Wallace's romantic treatment of skepticism, wherein any return to community is *prefaced* by the recovery of the self, and the world, in solitude. After all, let's recall Cavell's argument that, after following Emerson and Thoreau in "sit[ting] at home or sit[ting] still in some attractive spot in the woods, as if to marry the world," we can

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49. *TPK*, 3-4.

then "take on the burden of others."[50] This turn to the other is not only previewed in §1 by the interpellation of the reader and by the surprising shift to human community in the statement, "We are all brothers." It is arguably also precisely what happens in §50 of *The Pale King*, its last paragraph, which may be regarded as among Wallace's ultimate statements as a fiction writer.

Not everyone would agree with this characterization. In a 2012 conversation with Wallace's biographer D.T. Max, the writer Tom McCarthy has suggested that Wallace's "solution" to the topic of skepticism, as it was posed by the infinite jesting of his earlier work, comes in the notes to *The Pale King* attached by its editor Michael Pietsch.[51] McCarthy points in particular to the last note, which describes an IRS Personnel person's search for a rare group of silent "immersives." In the note, their "ability to be immersed" is being presented as an antidote to the kind of boredom and depression that has lost what Thoreau would call an "interest" in the world.[52] The immersives have already made an appearance before, though, in the actual body of the novel, when a "David Wallace" catches a glimpse of them in an IRS "Immersives Room":

> The most striking thing about it was the quiet. There were at least 150 men and/or women in that room, all intently occupied and busy, and yet the room was so silent that you could hear an imperfection in the door's hinge…. The silence I remember best of all, because it was both sensuous and incongruous: For obvious reasons, we tend to associate total quiet with emptiness, not with large groups of people.[53]

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50. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 129.

51. "D.T. Max & Tom McCarthy discuss David Foster Wallace," *YouTube*, November 28, 2012. https://youtu.be/Xc_UlODoowU

52. *TPK*, 547.

53. *TPK*, 290.

The duality of silence as "horror" and "plenitude" I have traced across Wallace's career returns here in the narrator's confession that the quiet "frightened and thrilled" him.[54] The thrill he feels seems to derive from the intuition of a "plenitude" of minds behind the silence, while the "horror" accompanying it measures the distance between these monkish examiners and us, normal humans, for whom the immersives' close focus seems like a supernatural ability. Notably, "David Wallace" counts himself among the second group: "sitting still and concentrating on just one task for an extended length of time," he asserts, "is, as a practical matter, impossible."[55] This relegates the idea of complete absorption, immersion to the point of self-forgetfulness, to the status of a cliché found in "television and books."[56]

Indeed, the "ability to be immersed" is hardly the solution to philosophical skepticism that McCarthy and some Wallace scholars see in it. McCarthy is right, though, to detect Wallace's responsiveness to his earlier novel in *The Pale King*, a genealogy that is also on exemplary display in §50, which is not an appended note, but the ending of the book as published. In my reading of the novel's beginning, I took Cavell's romantic reference to a marriage with the world as a steppingstone into the kind of reading that views not something like McCarthy's immersion as an antidote to skeptical detachment but emphasizes a remainder of language and self-consciousness that makes being-in-the-world an experience of renewed "intimacy" and vital "nearness." The same notion of proximity is now also at play in §50, which dramatizes an unnamed narrator's therapy session with a female "facilitator." In a calm and gentle voice, this woman gives instructions for a simple form of meditation: "The way we start is to relax and become aware of the body,"[57] she says, marking a difference to the "immersives," whose rep-

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54. *TPK*, 291.

55. *TPK*, 291.

56. *TPK*, 291.

57. *TPK*, 538.

resentatives, like an Asian student studying at a library,[58] seem to have forgotten that they even have a body. For the meditation in §50, though, the focus on the body is indispensable: "It's at the level of the body that we proceed," the facilitator explains.[59] And the effect of her instructions on the narrator is transformative: "it is amazing what happens," he reports, "when someone else directs you how and when to breathe."[60]

Breath has been regarded as a sign of the soul at least since the ancient Greeks, and Wallace plays on this allegorical connection, too. Only breathing, the protagonist experiences an openness to the world that is quickly being filled with the presence, and voice, of another person. There is a similarity to the return of the world in Emerson's and Thoreau's woods here. In fact, the other person in the office now exhibits herself to the protagonist just like nature's creations reappear to the silent transcendentalist spectator. "She's right there, speaking calmly," the narrator says, "and so are you."[61] The return of the reality of the other person, then, allows the protagonist to experience a sense of his physical reality in this moment, as well—precisely the sense of one's own embodied presence that is lacking in a key Wallace character like *Infinite Jest*'s Hal Incandenza, who suffers from an entrapment in his self that manifests not just in detachment, but also in an occasional inability to communicate.

Wallace's framing of §50 cuts across his novelistic work to establish this connection explicitly. In fact, in his description of the space where the meditation session takes place, he returns us to the opening scene of *Infinite Jest*, which begins with Hal's voice telling us, "I am seated in an office."[62] §50 echoes this line with its own beginning:

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58. *TPK*, 547.

59. *TPK*, 538.

60. *TPK*, 538.

61. *TPK*, 538.

62. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York City: Little, Brown, 1996), 3.

"The office could be any office."[63] The office Wallace writes about later in life, then, is purposefully described as universal; in fact, that it is something like the Platonic form of a late-capitalist office space lends further symbolic weight to the human responses to its sanitized anonymity. What has changed between the two novels, though, is the narrative perspective. In *Infinite Jest*, the solipsism of Hal Incandenza—who can only conceive of himself under the aspect of *subject*—was appropriately encased in a shut-in first-person perspective. Now, the narrative perspective implies the existence of at least two voices: the narrator, addressing a "you" that oscillates ambiguously between himself and the reader, and the facilitator, who speaks to the narrator. Both use the second person, implying a view of the recipients of their speech under the aspect of *object*. As such, the scene already functions as a formal rejoinder to Hal's solipsism. And while Hal in *Infinite Jest* is imprisoned in his own mind, the nameless protagonist in §50 is reminded: "You do have a body, you know."[64] In fact, during this kind of meditation, the narrator notes, even someone with "no imagination" can see their own body "vividly."[65] This is a long way from Hal's anxiety as captured in the lines: "I am in here."[66]

With a look back at the similar office space in *Infinite Jest*, then, we now recognize the significance of this deceptively simple moment that concludes Wallace's published work. In fact, what is being narrated in §50 is another aspect change, similar to the one in §1: from the first to the second person, from subject to object, from the claustrophobic absorption in the self to a closeness in doubleness. In fact, the scene stands out in Wallace's work, which abounds with instances of characters being stuck, and where especially therapeutic conversations are commonly parodied—from Hal's encounters with a "professional

63. *TPK*, 537.

64. *TPK*, 537.

65. *TPK*, 538.

66. *IJ*, 3.

conversationalist," who is his father in disguise, to Neal's failed meetings with his therapist in "Good Old Neon." Scholars have picked up on this pattern, as well. Baskin has argued that no other writer "has ever presented more scenes of failed talk therapy than David Foster Wallace."[67] Áine Mahon has read the same malaise as an allegory of the difficulty of contemporary relationships, which do not "occasion but postpone intimacy."[68] But a depiction of the difficulty of connection is not a final statement on its impossibility; and there is, in my opinion, still some hope for the prospect of human connection in Wallace. To be sure, this hope usually resides outside of Wallace's text, for the reader, who, in turning away from the failures witnessed within it, can achieve the sense of forward motion—toward a better relationship with the world and others—that is impossible for the characters inside the text.

But it seems that here, in §50, Wallace offered even a character a similar sense of hope. The scene's promise of self-transcendence, the subtle wonder that speaks from it, the warmth of its narrative voices—all of this is rare in Wallace's work. And it expresses a deep investment in what may, in light of the often debilitating skepticism we encounter in his fiction, only be called a miracle: the turn toward one's own body leading to the return of the other; the shift away from skeptical detachment and depression resulting in a new proximity with the world. That it is this experience which concludes Wallace's novelistic work, may, for some readers, make it more than a hopeful farewell for the narrator; it may also—our knowledge of the events that precipitated the publication of this unfinished novel notwithstanding—appear like a gift the author granted himself, making David Wallace a part of the elusive community engendered by the scene's second-person address, if only for one fleeting moment.

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67. Jon Baskin, "Untrendy Problems: *The Pale King*'s Philosophical Aspirations," in *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 141-56, here 145.

68. Áine Mahon, "Perfectionism and the Ethics of Failure," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 129-138, here 132.

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"IN EXTREMIS": TOWARDS THE SUBLIME IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S NONFICTION

David Andrew Tow[1]

IN 1996, DAVID FOSTER WALLACE told David Lipsky, "there's this *desperation* to give ourselves away to something….a sort of Wagnerian falling into that I think our culture really encourages" [emphasis in original].[2] Nearly two centuries prior, William Wordsworth expressed a similar sentiment, writing, "The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers...We have given our hearts away."[3] This essay aims to sketch a thematic through-line between the two, between the thoughtless carelessness that troubled Wordsworth and the unhappy imperative Wallace observed in today's world. More specifically, this essay makes the case for reading Wallace through the sublime—both the Romantic variety typical of the 18th

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2. David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* (New York: Broadway, 2010), 157.

3. William Wordsworth, "The World is Too Much With Us," Poetry Foundation, accessed January 15, 2014, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45564/the-world-is-too-much-with-us, lines 1–4.

century and the so-called postmodern sublime, derived from Lyotard's comments on Abstract Expressionism.[4] It then explores the nature of and sustained tension between these two forms, engaging primarily with two seminal nonfiction pieces by Wallace: "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All," about his 1993 visit to the Illinois State Fair, and 1996's "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," the infamous Caribbean cruise essay, both for *Harper's*. The essay also reiterates the overlap between aesthetics and politics for Wallace, and how, more generally, issues of cultural power and individual agency are central to his corpus rather than merely interpretive positions of it. Finally, it hopes to integrate these notes on the sublime into the discourse around Wallace and his literary journalism, as well as sincerity, both New and otherwise.

This essay also hopes to add to what Adam Kelly, in his foundational essay mapping the then-present and future scope of academic studies of Wallace, called the "third wave of Wallace scholarship," proposing that "Wallace's nonfiction need not simply be read in the shadow of his fiction."[5] Christoph Ribbat, similarly, suggests that scholars "connect the field of Wallace studies to ongoing discussions in the scholarship of nonfiction writing" and avoid treating Wallace's journalism as secondary.[6] In the inaugural issue of *Literary Journalism Studies*, Norman Sims, meanwhile, emphasizes the importance of literary journalism as a distinct field of literary studies, arguing that it "seeks to understand feelings, emotions, and expectations—the consciousness behind events that can provide reflective cultural insights

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4. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

5. Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace: the Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline," *Irish Journal of American Studies*, accessed June 19, 2017, http://ijas.iaas.ie/index.php/article-david-foster-wallace-the-death-of-the-author-and-the-birth-of-a-discipline/.

6. Christoph Ribbat, "Seething Static: Notes on Wallace and Journalism," in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 188–189.

into other times and places."[7] Although Joshua Roiland, who was among the first to both deeply engage with Wallace's nonfiction and to correctly classify it as literary journalism, and Ribbat, among others, have considered the essays, either as the sole focus or coequal with the fiction, that kind of critical analysis qua literary journalism remains relatively rare.[8] Alex Engrebretson, in a recent monograph on the essayist (and novelist) Marilynn Robinson, comments on the tendency of culture at large to systemically privilege fiction over nonfiction, suggesting that while reading the nonfiction and fiction comparatively can help reignite interest, it is more important to recognize nonfiction's "independence" from fiction, "for the nonfiction to be an equal and complimentary intellectual discipline."[9]

Consulting the yeoman's work of the David Foster Wallace Research Group's "Bibliography of Secondary Criticism"—which was, as of this writing, last updated in January 2019—most of the listed books, chapters, and articles either deal exclusively with the fiction or else treat the nonfiction as supplemental.[10] This is not a critique of the hardworking scholars who have shared thoughtful and profound

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7. Norman Sims, "The Problem and the Promise of Literary Journalism Studies," *Literary Journalism Studies* 1, no. 1 (2009), 15.

8. Christoph Ribbat, "Seething Static: Notes on Wallace and Journalism"; Joshua Roiland, "Getting Away From It All: The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche's Concept of Oblivion," *Literary Journalism Studies* 1, no. 2 (2009): 89-105; Joshua Roiland, "The Fine Print: Uncovering the True Story of David Foster Wallace and the 'Reality Boundary,'" *Literary Journalism Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2013), 148–161; Joshua Roiland, "Spiritually Midwestern," *Just Words*, last modified August 7, 2015, https://medium.com/just-words/spiritually-midwestern-216d8041f50d; Joshua Roiland, "Derivative Sport: The Journalistic Legacy of David Foster Wallace," *Longreads*, last modified December 2017, https://longreads.com/2017/12/07/derivative-sport/.

9. Alex Engebretson, "The Essays," in *Understanding Marilynn Robinson*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 100.

10. "Bibliography of Secondary Criticism," David Foster Wallace Research Group, the University of Glasgow, accessed April 10, 2023, https://davidfosterwallaceresearch.wordpress.com/.

analyses of these rich works, but rather to describe the opportunity for continuing scholarship. Kelly, in a similar vein, notes that "critics have also begun to explore his journalism in the context of the history of that genre and as a key to understand Wallace's political concerns," concluding that readers must "honour the dialogic quality Wallace strove for by developing new dialogues with his work."[11] In this spirit of new dialogues, this essay hopes to help recenter the nonfiction in Wallace Studies and expand the possibilities for meaningful critical engagement.

Although the sublime does not seem to intuitively align with Wallace's work, and his world seems much removed from that of Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, or William Blake, the pairing is not entirely unreasonable. Indeed, while reading Wallace through a Romantic lens might seem like a generous interpretation of "new dialogues," the best case for this analysis lies in the theories of the sublime itself and what clarity it can lend to Wallace's work. The origins of the sublime lie in classical aesthetics, principally in the 1st-century CE text by Longinus, *On the Sublime*. In it, Longinus explores the nature of the sublime, helpfully summarized by Arensberg:

1. An experience of joy, ecstasy, or other intense emotion in response to power, authority, or authenticity;
2. The perception of this power in a single moment through speech and language;
3. Preceded by a break or interruption in normal consciousness which seeks to be restored;
4. Apparent restoration of equilibrium through identification of or with that power or the repression of such power;
5. Repression and return to equilibrium through making the sublime power the speaker's own.[12]

At the heart of sublime experience is a rift between what an

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11. Kelly, "David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline."

12. Mary Arensberg, "Introduction: The American Sublime," in *The American Sublime*, ed. Mary Arensberg (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 11.

individual perceives or experiences and the waves of signification that come rushing behind it. Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant start with Longinus' template for responses to art, literature, or music and expand it to describe profound emotional experiences beyond merely those categories. For Burke, the sublime was an experience that fused terror and pleasure and was inspired by traditional Romantic landscapes—wild mountaintops, violent seas, crumbling ruins.[13] While the beautiful characterized the aesthetically pleasurable or well-made, the sublime was characterized by terror, power, and the capacity to compel or destroy. Shortly thereafter, Immanuel Kant disagreed with Burke's summary while expanding on his analysis. For Kant, the sublime was "a momentary checking of the vital powers," a kind of psycho-emotional paralysis.[14] He further specified two varieties: first, the mathematically sublime, inspired by that which is infinitely large or vast like oceans or the depths of space; second, the dynamically sublime, caused by the overwhelmingly powerful or dangerous—raging seas or sheer cliff faces.[15] The byproduct of sublime experience, Kant, says, is "a kind of emotional satisfaction."[16] For both Burke and Kant, the sublime is simultaneously a pleasurable and painful experience. We enjoy the feeling of being overwhelmed. For Kant, this pleasure stems from our newfound awareness that the powers of reason and imagination are

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13. Edmund Burke, "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful," Bartleby, accessed June 10, 2015, https://www.bartleby.com/24/2/. For Burke, the sublime was typically an aesthetic response to poetry, for example. For more about this narrow Burkean sublime, see Simon Court, "Edmund Burke and the Sublime," Wordsworth Grasmere, last modified March 2nd, 2015, https://wordsworth.org.uk/blog/2015/03/02/edmund-burke-and-the-sublime/.

14. Immanuel Kant, "The Critique of Judgement," University of Adelaide Library, accessed December 17, 2014, https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/immanuel/k16ju/index.html, sec. 23.

15. Susan L. Feagin, "Sublime," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 886.

16. Kant, "Critique of Judgement."

not strictly dependent on sensation. Indeed, they may exceed sense experience and perception. The mind is "blocked in confrontation," as literary critic Neil Hertz says, "between two elements…that themselves resist integration."[17] The friction of painful yet pleasurable emotion arises from an irreconcilable overflow of meaning, emotion, or imagination. The result may be productive, epiphanic or merely frustrating. In this way, the classical or Romantic sublime is a paradox: we suffer when faced with the limits of sense experience while experiencing pleasure at the power of imagination. This "frame of paradox," as Kelly puts it, most closely parallels discussions of the double-bind in Wallace's work, both by scholars and by Wallace himself.[18]

Postmodern conceptions of the sublime borrow heavily from the Romantic version, rearticulating Kant's formulation as an estranging experience rooted in culture, technology, and capital. We find the first articulation of what could be a postmodern sublime in French theorist Jean-François Lyotard's afterward to *The Postmodern Condition*, where he labels it "unpresentable" and famously defines it as "when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept."[19] Similarly, Fredric Jameson (a thinker with whom a robust philosophical connection to Wallace has already been well documented) offered a theory

17. Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 44. Hertz's treatment of the sublime as a phenomenon containing aesthetic, emotional, and political elements is striking in its sheer number of critical insights and warrants a fuller application to Wallace's nonfiction – and fiction – than is possible here.

18. Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 139; David Foster Wallace, interview by Bookworm, 1996, quoted in Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction"; for more on the double-bind, see: Paul M. Curtis, "'Yo man so what's your story': The Double Bind and Addiction in David Foster Wallace's 'Infinite Jest,'" *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 49, no. 4 (December 2016): 37–52, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44030596

19. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 78.

of the postmodern sublime, observing that "our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism."[20] Jameson and Lyotard share an emphasis on the anthropogenic source of the postmodern sublime. More recently, philosopher Timothy Engström clarified this pivot, summarizing that if the Romantic sublime of Kant is rooted in nature, then the postmodern sublime of Lyotard stems from "man-made technologies and discourses gone wild, beyond rule, exceeding what is presentable."[21] The postmodern sublime raises questions about art, like Longinus, and environment, like Burke and Kant, since unlike beauty, which is defined by its form, the sublime is defined by its formlessness. The paradox present in the Romantic variety remains in the postmodern sublime, though devoid of its transcendental content. In lieu of the wonder, power, and scale of natural phenomena, we are left with the magnificent and imitatively terrible man-made apparatuses of communication, control, and commerce. There's a latent political reading here as well, where beauty's surface appeal is associated with systems, structures, and rules, where the sublime suggests resistance or rejections. Potentially, this critique hidden in the sublime might help scholars who are, as Kelly says, "begin[ning] to derive a politics from the New Sincerity aesthetic."[22] A political reading of the sublime in Wallace

20. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 79; for more on Jameson and Wallace, see: Abdolreza Goudarzi, "Jamesonian Interpretation of Post Postmodernism: David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest and The Pale King," *International Journal of Contemporary Research and Review* 9, no. 2 (February 2018): 20310–20217, https://doi.org/10.15520/ijcrr/2018/9/02/446.

21. Timothy H. Engström, "The Postmodern Sublime? Philosophical Rehabilitations and Pragmatic Evasions," *boundary* 2 20, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 197, https://doi.org/10.2307/303363.

22. Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply

can potentially offer analytical inroads into the fiction and perhaps comparative study between the fiction and nonfiction.

With this summary of the sublime, it is hopefully clear that a Romantic reading of Wallace is warranted, even within the established discourse of Wallace's work. After all, Roiland observes Wallace was "plagued by what he could not let go" and that his reporting "does not simply chronicle who, what, when, and where; rather, it examines the larger cultural assumptions and significances imbued within a topic."[23] The Romantics, meanwhile, try to "revea[l] the depths of the enchantments in which we live," according to Geoffrey Hartman, by "penetrating" the "veils" of "all sensuous experience."[24] Similarly, for Wallace, journalism was not mere reportage, assembling what he calls towards the beginning of "A Supposedly Fun Thing" a "really big experiential postcard."[25] While this is how his journalistic essays start, they ultimately morph into something else through what Roiland calls, in a later essay, Wallace's "ability to imbue a story with larger significance beyond the ostensible subject."[26] Ribbat also notes that Wallace's narrator seems "more interested in the moral issues" than, in the case of "the Big Red Son," the event itself.[27] In a review of the posthumous *The Pale King*, the poet Adam Kirsch described how "Wallace presented himself as a sensitive man at odds with a crass commercial society."[28] Likewise, Jon Baskin, a founding editor

to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts," *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5, no. 2 (2017), 7.

23. Roiland, "Getting Away From It All," 90.

24. Geoffrey Hartman, "The Romance of Nature and the Negative Way," in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1970), 54.

25. David Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (Boston: Back Bay, 1997), 257.

26. Roiland, "The Fine Print," 149.

27. Ribbat, "Seething Static," 192.

28. Adam Kirsch, "The Importance of Being Earnest," *The New Republic*, July 28, 2011,

for *The Point*, wrote in that magazine's first issue that "Wallace became the chronicler of a world where it was 'tough' to be human, but not impossible," and that "Wallace did not shrink from depicting an in-human world in his novels, but he returned to the problem of what it felt like to carry on a human life in such a world."[29] However, among the most compelling cases for using the sublime to read Wallace's work comes from his own diagnosis of the relationship between art, suffering, and humanity. There are two pertinent observations from Wallace's 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery. First, Wallace argues that "part of what we humans come to art for is an experience of suffering" so that we might "more easily conceive of others identifying with our own [suffering]."[30] Second, he claims "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 to first face what's dreadful, what we want to deny."[31] Taken together, these observations suggest a dedication to empathy and receptiveness while also recognizing that pain is not just inexorable from them, but is a vital component of the discovery. While not explicitly sublime in nature, these observations welcome an analysis of the sublime at the very least.

Having offered a brief taxonomy of the sublime and established a case for justifying the application of those theories to Wallace's nonfiction, it is time to turn to the two essays, "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All" and "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again." As each essay opens, a conflict is quickly established: the eponymous narrator, a thinly-veiled version

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https://newrepublic.com/article/92794/david-lipsky-foster-wallace-pale-king.

29 Jon Baskin, "Death is Not the End," *The Point*, March 1, 2009, https://thepoint-mag.com/criticism/death-is-not-the-end/.

30 . David Foster Wallace, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace," interview by Larry McCaffery, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Dalkey Archive Press (Summer 1993), https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-david-foster-wallace-by-larry-mccaffery/.

31. Wallace, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace."

of authorial Wallace, "a little stupider and schmuckier," slowly uncovers a personal struggle with the phenomena he is tasked with reporting on and analyzing, moving through a series of nested critiques and criticisms that become increasingly complicated while also implicating the narrator in these phenomena, ending with a textual implosion as Wallace's investigations lead him less to the heart of the matter than to that of himself.[32] These implosions, I argue, are best understood through the sublime. The Illinois State Fair and the 7-night Caribbean cruise are not actually banal special events merely meant to entertain. They are, instead, aggressive, psychically dangerous, and sinister landscapes, pregnant with meaning, ideology, and hazards to Wallace's agency and subjective stance. At the fair, Wallace explores, as Paul Giles points out, how communities define themselves and discovers that he himself is also always-already subject to larger cultural forces, while during the cruise on the *m.v. Zenith* he recognizes that his desires may not actually be his own.[33] The sublime here functions doubly: once as an emotionally-charged epiphanic moment and again as an escape mechanism by which Wallace (and his narrator) can subvert the experiences' overwhelming over-signification. Like Wordsworth in London (or Coleridge practically anywhere), the experiential slings and arrows that Wallace suffers weaken his psychological defenses for a more fundamental, internal crisis that underlies each essay. With these overall contours in mind, the following pages balance rhetorical analysis with situating these two essays in a particular theoretical conversation, culminating in an extended analysis of the sublime moment that closes each piece, preceded by first an explication of the speaker and his position in relation to the environment and then an analysis of moments in each essay that prefigure the sublime crisis.

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32. Lipsky, *ALT*, 41.

33. Paul Giles, "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace," *Twentieth Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (2005), 337.

In both "Getting Away" and "A Supposedly Fun Thing," Wallace enters as a seemingly objective, journalistic narrator, but also a flawed one who, because of the nature of the environment, is alternately subsumed by, overwhelmed by, or inadequate for his subject. Moreover, these problems with the narrator's critical position have parallels in Romantic scholarship on the sublime. In short, these contexts are the worst places for Wallace's narrator, ultimately inviting a kind of sublime experience.

The first problem with the narrator's critical position stems from the apparent totalizing nature of his task. Within the first page of each piece, Wallace vaguely invokes the "swanky East-Coast magazine" that assigned him the task.[34] He repeatedly emphasizes the ambiguity of his assignment – "a kind of hypnotic sensory collage" and "a directionless essayish thing" with "paucity of direction and angle" – as a sort of sword of Damocles.[35] This vagueness is coupled with a near-ubiquitous worry he will "miss something crucial."[36] In "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," Wallace's narrator seems a blank slate, an empty repository attempting to fill himself with accumulated experience that seems void of meaning. Specifically, the essay's first pages comprise an epic catalog of disembodied empirical research and senses that, while being an approximate summary of facts in the following pages, are as disorienting for the reader as they appear to be for Wallace's narrator. "Is this enough?" he interjects partway through the catalog, "At the time it didn't seem like enough."[37] In reviewing the accumulated experiences from the cruise, Wallace actually looks deep into himself. And, of course, the

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34. David Foster Wallace, "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (Boston: Back Bay, 1997), 83; "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 256.

35. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 256.

36. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 320.

37. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 257.

result is not a good time, because the experiences are empty, instead leaving Wallace in despair. The cruising experience functions in this way as a mirror, reflecting his doubts, weaknesses, and hypocrisy. At the Illinois State Fair, conversely, Wallace juxtaposes his ostensible task to "do pith-helmeted anthropological reporting on something rural and heartlandish," which suggests some journalistic critical distance, with the observation that his "native body readjusts automatically" and the fact that he "grew up around here" (and thus is, as Giles notes, "a compromised observer").[38] The resulting "animating thesis" Wallace identifies at the fair is a synthesis of the two—distance and embeddedness: "the sheer *fact* of the land" [emphasis in original].[39] The fairgoers coalesce to alleviate (and, ironically, celebrate) their shared estrangement from each other, the land, and, by proxy, the products of their labor. Wallace attempts to explore these threads throughout the essay's first half, only to pivot away from a near-realization each time.[40]

The frustrated and ambiguous position in which Wallace finds himself, in relation to his putative assignment, is partially captured by what Roiland calls "anti-credentialing," but it also has a Romantic antecedent.[41] Frederick Pottle, in an article on the difference between "fancy" and "imagination" in Wordsworth's poetry, described the latter as a complex process by which the poet made a sensation more meaningful by distilling, reducing, and concentrating it; while

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38. Wallace, "Getting Away," 83; Giles, "Sentimental Posthumanism," 333.

39. Wallace, "Getting Away," 92. This thesis invites a deeper reading than is appropriate here, but Wallace's reportage suggests a paradoxical isolation even within the opportunity for community provided by the Midwestern spectacle, best captured in the description, "The faces in this sea of faces are like the faces of children released from their rooms" (Wallace, "Getting Away," 109).

40. In some way, Wallace's narrative illustrates his observation that "Something in a Midwesterner *actuates* at a Public Event [emphasis in original]" (Wallace, "Getting Away," 109).

41. Roiland, "The Fine Print," 148–150. Roiland keenly observes that, aside from Romantic effects here, anti-credentialing served both a literary and a journalistic function.

fancy was the mere recitation of phenomena, imagination involved "looking at it steadily to see what it *means*" [emphasis in original].[42] In Pottle's terms, the opening pages of both essays function at the level of fancy. There, Wallace commits to a futile attempt at capturing the totality of these experiences merely through encyclopedic documentation of every section of the fairground or meal eaten onboard the *m.v. Zenith*. However, the reason that labor seems so inadequate is because it is. It is unimaginative, dull and devoid of interest, as well as non-imaginative, lacking in meaning and content. Consider Roiland's diagnosis: "as a journalist, Wallace's job was to collect and organize the noise and agitation of the phenomenal world…to ask and interpret," but that Wallace was also "personally troubled by much of what he encountered."[43] Observations in the mode of fancy proliferate, leading to an overload predictive of the mathematical sublime described above.

The second problem with Wallace's critical position in these essays involves his relationship to the environment he aims to understand. In the case of the Illinois State Fair, at every turn, Wallace finds himself thoroughly entangled in both the midwestern landscape and the midwestern fairgoers.[44] Wallace alternates between recalling his childhood philosophies ("this weird, deluded but unshakable conviction that everything around me existed all and only *For Me*," a "particular neurological makeup" his sister describes as "lifesick") with continued discourteous criticism of the other

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42. Frederick A. Pottle, "Eye and Object in the Poetry of Wordsworth," in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1970), 280–284.

43. Roiland, "Getting Away," 90. While Roiland posits that the best way to "understand that anxiety" is through Nietzsche's oblivion, I propose that reconsidering Wallace's essays in terms of the sublime can be additive, deepening readings like Roiland's and help frame the critical and political stakes more starkly (supra, 90).

44. The fair contains both "A Xanadu of chintzola" and a "Happy Hollow," each with their own paradoxical Romantic echoes of Coleridge's Xanadu in "Kubla Khan" (infra, 122–3).

midwesterners.[45] Roiland, who correctly locates the realization of this section as Wallace's realization that he is not "spiritually Midwestern anymore," has already explored this entanglement in depth.[46] Geoffrey Hartman, meanwhile, describes a similar sense in Book I of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth's crossing of the Alps prefigures a larger realization of his intellectual and spiritual distance from the independence of childhood.[47] He is, frankly, illiterate, unable to interpret the previously-legible landscape. This epiphany explains the need for a "colorful local," a "Native Companion" who both Roiland and Max note is not any real person but a figure equal parts amalgam and invention—a surrogate for Wallace.[48] He simultaneously reports from a safe critical distance while also hamstringing this distance, emphasizing his alienation while also exacerbating his vulnerability to its midwestern allure. Recall the discussion of the postmodern sublime from earlier: Lyotard observes, "no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is much more complex and mobile than ever before."[49] Even if Wallace leans into the critical distance to buffer himself from the excesses of the fair, he will find it an inadequate safeguard. Wallace may be a lapsed midwesterner, but he remains, if nothing else, susceptible. Stand too close to the edge, and the abyss will reach out.

Instead of entanglement, Wallace is on unsteady ground on the cruise, literally decontextualized. The three pages of unsorted sense experiences do not help. He accumulates the laundry list of images not in appreciation or joy, but in his obligation to totality. However,

45. Wallace, "Getting Away," 89, 99. The cruise, meanwhile, is "weirdly reminiscent" of "summer camp" (Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 343).

46. Wallace, "Getting Away," 132; Joshua Roiland, "Spiritually Midwestern," *Just Words*, August 7, 2015, https://medium.com/just-words/spiritually-midwestern-216d8041f50d.

47. Hartman, "The Romance of Nature and the Negative Way," 291.

48. Roiland, "The Fine Print," 153; D. T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking, 2012), 186.

49. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 15.

paradoxically, the cruise's signifiers generally also prove hollow. Life onboard is "a certain subtle unreality": characterized as "a little dreamy" with an "oddly soothing" "kind of spinal throb" but also "demands a slight attention" and "a meditative exercise to stay conscious."[50] The cruise is an artificial landscape encouraging narcotic 'fancy' that supersedes the outside world. But it is also an authoritarian landscape, producing "some kind of marvelous distended moment of transferring control to large automatic forces."[51] Unlike the magnetism of the fair, the cruise is a constructed environment, a Xanadu of a different sort, that serves to enchant and perhaps compel Wallace and the cruisers.

However, while the *m. v. Zenith* and the other ships "blot out most of the sky," the traditional emblem of the ocean remains in the frame, disrupting the placid setting.[52] In a move similar to "Getting Away," "A Supposedly Fun Thing" invokes a sense of the narrator's childhood. In this case, a lifelong obsession with sharks, shark-attack data, and a "marrow-level dread of the oceanic."[53] The figure of a shark or its fin will repeat throughout the essay, seemingly contrasting the cruise but actually symbolizing it. Sharks are, he says, symbols of the ocean's "empty immensity," "cackling tooth-studded things rising toward you at the rate a feather falls."[54] The sharks, as sublime emblems, provide a superficial contrast to the safe white ship. The description contains a strikingly reflective property as well. When Wallace gazes into the ostensibly empty ocean, the shark rises into his own reflection. The "primordial *nada*," an internal as well as original void, stems from this duplication, a monster superimposed

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50. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 271-283.

51. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 284.

52. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 271.

53. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 262.

54. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 262.

on his reflection.[55] The result is a sublime scenario: Wallace peers into the depths which are paradoxically empty (of specific content) but filled (with threats). This dynamic evokes Wordsworth's "The Boy of Winander" episode from Book V of *The Prelude*. The titular boy mimics the hooting owls and dives into the landscape reflected in the mountain lake. Picturing the boy's natural education profoundly affects Wordsworth, who moves from imagining the boy's epiphanies to picturing his grave.[56] Here, Wallace is both poet and boy. The recursion is disorienting.

There are two additional Romantic antecedents Wallace overtly invokes, both of which help illustrate the relationship between the narrator and his (as of now) vaguely threatening environment. First, Stephen Crane's 1987 short story "The Open Boat," about a group of four shipwrecked survivors off the Florida coast. Throughout the story, the characters vacillate between despair, frustration, and dedication to survival. They survive by abandoning the lifeboat and swimming to shore. In the short story, it is only by surrendering the relative safety of the dinghy that they can survive, but not without hazard, trauma, and—at least for Billy the oiler, who ends up dead—sacrifice.[57] Wallace also cites "The Castaway" section of Melville's *Moby Dick*, in which Queequeg describes how Pip, a young steward on the *Pequod*, reflexively leaps into the oceans whenever a whale or other danger appears. He is rescued once but is entangled in the harpoon lines for nearly an hour the second time. He returns, Melville writes, "luridly illuminated by strange wild fires."[58] Togeth-

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55. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 262.

56. William Wordsworth, "There was a boy," Poetry Foundation, accessed July 15, 2020, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45558/there-was-a-boy.

57. Stephen Crane, "The Open Boat," *The Open Boat and Other Stories*, Project Gutenberg, last modified April 28, 2014, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45524/45524-h/45524-h.htm.

58. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 411. Compare Pip's compulsion with the result of Wallace's despair on the cruise: "It's wanting to jump

er, these Romantic antecedents suggest, beyond the physical danger, a positive way: a "sea change," transformation but survival, and not without a high cost. This mode of approaching the ocean's sublimity offers a potential way for Wallace's narrator to interpret the cruise, to see himself in it.

I also want to briefly frame the relationship between the narrator and the environment in terms that clarify the Romantic overlap. We have already borrowed Pottle's analysis of fancy versus imagination and applied it to the environments of these two essays and the narrator's place within them. Another reading that helps locate Wallace's conflict and also helps understand their subsequent crises comes from Harold Bloom's concept of the "quest-romance."[59] For Bloom, this quest, which stems from the classical romance, is a struggle between the poet and "everything in the self that blocks imaginative work."[60] The central conflict in an internalized romance is defined by the speaker's desire to overcome their own psychological and creative limits to achieve reconciliation or transcendence (which then appear, according to Bloom, only in flashes).[61] The political dimension here involves a fusing of Pottle and Bloom's theories: the real opportunity for understanding presents itself through Wallace's introspection, but is repeatedly short-circuited by the temptations and distractions the environments offer. For an example, look to the despair Wallace's narrator feels onboard the cruise; he describes it as, among other things, "a weird yearning for death combined with a crushing sense of my own smallness and futility that presents as

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overboard" (David Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 261).

59. Harold Bloom, "The Internalization of the Quest-Romance" in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1970), 5.

60. Bloom, 8.

61. Bloom, 9.

a fear of death."[62] The compulsion to accumulate experience and enact an absurdly stress-free fantasy on board does not work. Instead it drives him to the margins of the experience, the guardrails of the ship, and towards the traditional emblem of romantic limitlessness.[63]

This position within the narrative resembles Kelly's characterization of Wallace's fiction subjects as "*originally affected*...always already in a highly affective relation to themselves, to others, and to the conditions of their world" [emphasis in original].[64] In both pieces, Wallace's narrator is engaged in a quest for meaning, coherence. The nature of this quest is partially occupational, as his journalistic endeavor, but also compelled toward total understanding by predilection as well. He is, meanwhile, in environments that are similarly two-sided. They are mathematically sublime—their complexity invalidates attempts at a tidy totalized picture—and dynamically sublime—they are loaded with significance, symbolism, and meaning that produces feelings of unease, terror, and smallness in Wallace.

It is important to frame these conflicts as romantic quests and a contrast between the narrator and their environment to better understand the crises that close the essays – the Sky Coaster ride at the end of "Getting Away" and the hypnotist's performance at the close of the cruise in "A Supposedly Fun Thing" – and then analyze how they portray sublime experience. However, it is equally important to understand the ongoing tension between romantic sentiments and

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62. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 261. A word that perhaps better helps describe what Wallace describes here is "consternation."

63. Roiland (2009) analyzes this same passage as leaving Wallace suicidal and within the context of Nietzsche's theory of oblivion; I think both interpretations are probably correct and useful, but that placing the passage within a larger reading of the sublime helps to also understand the material conditions and purpose of the narrative oblivion.

64. Kelly, "David Foster Wallace," 6. Ribbat, meanwhile, characterizes this as a matter of Wallace's subjectivity, a "shaken, frustrated...alienated midwesterner" who speaks with "a voice more baffled than excited" ("Seething Static: Notes on Wallace and Journalism," 190–192).

interpretations of the experience on one hand and intimations of the postmodern sublime on the other. In lieu of a full analysis of this sustained back-and-forth, which these essays do invite, these following paragraphs will instead briefly examine three precursors to the sublime experience.[65]

The first precursor is the Zipper ride at the state fair, where Wallace's narrator experiences something akin to the sublime that also prefigures the essay's end. The narrator refuses to ride the Zipper, is troubled by the "Native Companion's" ride, and wants to look away but does not. Instead, he describes his sense of overwhelm and sickness at watching her ride. His professional compulsion to fully document the fair, coupled with his allegiance to the semi-fictional "Native Companion," makes him both unable and unwilling to look away. However, she is not, as Wallace reveals to David Lipsky, simply "Kimberly": "it's someone else's voice," Wallace says, "if you can get my drift."[66] It may have been Kimberly's body up there in the Zipper, but Wallace was up there in spirit too. Through this episode, she morphs from a Virgilian guide, shepherding him through a dimly hostile landscape mostly defined by its elements of fancy, into a surrogate for Wallace. Hence his courage to watch. If the Zipper evokes a comic version of sublime experience, it is also once removed: not his per se, but terrible nonetheless. But because the Zipper is neither totalizing nor inescapable, he can and does turn away, transitioning from the carnies' pejorative observations to two

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65. The need for a fuller treatment of these essays, and others, as examples of Romantic quests in Bloom's sense with sublime experience at their core come from Paul de Man's influential 1968 article, "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image." In it, he argues that the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin's sustained use of metaphors reveals an ongoing linkage between two types of experience, the everyday material experience and the epiphanic. Moreover, these experiences are not exposed in an instance, but are instead "unveil[ed]" gradually (68).

66. Lipsky, *ALT*, 243. Roiland also notes the composite nature of "Native Companion" ("The Fine Print," 153).

pages of "politico-sexual contrast" and "stoicism" and "indigna-
tion" – overly-wrought intellectual commentary on the mere fact of
the fair – that can efface the Zipper's purely metaphorical violence.[67]

The second prominent precursor at the fair follows Wallace's
general theory of Midwestern communities when he enters the
main zone of the fair, demonstrating how his personal experience
is embedded in the larger processes at work. "In a way," he says,
"we're all here to be swallowed up."[68] The "slow tight-packed mass-
es" enter through "the Main Gate's maw" and "move peristaltically
along," as "a complex system of branching paths" replace intestines,
"complex cash-and-energy transfers" replace digestion, and "exits
designed for heavy flow" euphemistically reveal the end of the line.[69]
Wallace blasons the fair, graphically illustrating the extractive, capi-
talist dimension while also revealing the extent to which the fairgoers
are dehumanized by a system beyond their control or understand-
ing. The crowd is degraded into the inevitable remainder: shit. The
fair's sublime alimentary tracts complete bodily processes, depleting
the crowd of their value and distinctness as they are filled with the
empty calories of social spectacles. However, instead of romantic
terror at the power of nature or feelings of smallness, the experience
reveals to Wallace that the Midwesterners, even those as removed
and jaded as himself, were always already constituent participants,
dormant, waiting to be "actuate[d]."[70]

The narrator, meanwhile, with his razor-thin margin of criti-
cal distance, looks away into the realm of critique (as he had done
previously with the Zipper), only to see the dynamic tessellated

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67. Wallace, "Getting Away," 101.

68. Wallace, "Getting Away," 131.

69. Wallace, "Getting Away," 131.

70. Wallace, "Getting Away," 109. Although beyond the scope of this essay, how
the spectacle functions in Wallace, drawing on, for example, Debord, could be an
interesting avenue for further research.

everywhere. The fair is digestion all the way down: ingestion and defecation repeated, each iteration homologous to the next, a grotesque metonym for the whole fairgoing experience and arguably for the dangers of this mediated collective identity as well.

The episode also mirrors Wordsworth's description of Bartholomew Fair from *The Prelude*'s Book VII. In it, Wordsworth writes of the dizzying masses and overwhelming sensory distractions, resulting in the observation that all these people were "Living amid the same perpetual whirl / Of trivial objects, melted and reduced / To one identity."[71] The conflicts lie in the seeming importance of the narrators' subjective experience with the revelation of its relative insignificance. Wordsworth embraces this "blank confusion," using some connection and memory with the spirit of nature to navigate the threatening scene.[72] Wallace turns his attention inward, back to the critical eye, and retreats to the Happy Hollow to comment again on the carnival rides. While for Wordsworth, this sublime experience verifies the poet's imaginative power as a protective force, for Wallace sublime experience is delayed by compulsive reportage.

The best precursor to sublime experience in "A Supposedly Fun Thing" is one that Wallace is well-equipped to interpret: the promotional essay by Frank Conroy, author and then-director of the famous Iowa Writers' Workshop. In the essay, Conroy describes his experience on a similar cruise, reinforcing the sense of effortless existence that drives Wallace's paranoia and recalling the trite, hollow language of advertising. Wallace regularly returns to Conroy's essay, both as a text itself and as an emblem for the cruise, because it functions as an authoritative (and authoritarian) voice to Wallace's own counter-narrative. There are three primary features of the text

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71. William Wordsworth, "The Prelude – Book Seventh – Residence in London," Bartleby, last updated July 1999, http://www.bartleby.com/br/145.html, lines 725–727.

72. Wordsworth, "The Prelude – Book Seventh – Residence in London," line 696.

that drive Wallace's fascination and discomfort with the essay. First, Conroy's essay is rhetorically effective, threatening to overwrite Wallace's interpretation with a sanctioned and sanitized version of the relationship between cruise and cruiser, between product and consumer. Wallace feels that, in comparison to his self-conscious and uncertain observations, Conroy's essay is "graceful and lapidary and attractive and assuasive" – all adjectives suggesting descriptions of fancy – but it is also "completely sinister and despair-producing and bad."[73] Conroy's essay is a beautiful trap. It is a work of "low art," as Wallace tells Larry McCaffery, because the pleasure it provides is not "a by-product of hard work and discomfort," instead it is "about getting money out of you."[74] The essay offers a master narrative with one hand but stunts the chance for imaginative labor with the other. After Wallace reads the essay, readers find Conroy's language infiltrating Wallace's prose.[75]

The second important feature is the essay's fundamental dishonesty. It "offers a perfect facsimile or simulacrum of goodwill without goodwill's real spirit" that makes him "feel confused and lonely and impotent and angry and scared."[76] For Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, these feelings illustrate the "chastening humiliating power" of the sublime that "decenters the subject into an awesome awareness of its finitude."[77] While it does not produce the same feeling as the seas outside, the essay does undermine Wallace's ability to determine the authenticity of his emotional and intellectual responses. This doubt marks the essay's impact on the narrative. If the cruise is

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73. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 286.

74. Wallace, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace."

75. Guy Debord, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, comments at length on the political implications of having one's interpretations supplied in this way.

76. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 289.

77. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1990), 90.

fundamentally an aesthetic investigation – into the relationship between perception and thought – Conroy's essay-cum-advertisement short-circuits the process.

The third important feature is the essay's hostility towards the customer and reader. The essay "presents itself as for my benefit," he concludes, "It seems to care about me. But it doesn't, not really."[78] This observation encapsulates rudimentary critiques of the cruise throughout the first section: the consequences of the vacuum toilet, his problematic position within the life of the cabin steward, the overwhelmingly thorough service throughout the cruise – they all point to an underlying antipathy towards the customer. The cruiser's presence both demands service while also guaranteeing the service is never complete.

Wallace's response to Conroy's essay also has a Romantic parallel in Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight." The topic of Coleridge's poem is dramatically different – it concerns the speaker's regret for his childhood, his hopes for a childhood more connected to nature for the infant he holds in his arms, and his belief that such a childhood would make the child closer to the Christian God. The similarity emerges from the flickering film of soot on the grate. Unlike the static frost the speaker sees around him, the ash is dynamic: "[t]he sole unquiet thing," the speaker says, "Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling spirit / By its own moods interprets, everywhere / Echo or mirror seeking of itself."[79] In the context of the poem, the ash serves several functions. It demonstrates a responsiveness to the environment. The ash flutters in response to the lightest breeze just as he wishes his child to perceive the subtlest influence of nature. The movement of the ash embodies the mystery of creation. The ash also reminds

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78. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 290.

79. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight," in *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 274, lines 16–22.

Coleridge of the fleeting and delicate nature of memory. Structural-
ly, the poem repeats these three meditative points, resulting in what
Hartman calls "paralysis before the endlessness of introspection."[80]
Just as Coleridge is frozen in place, cradling the sleeping infant, med-
itating on the frozen environment but also watches the fading soot
stirred by a breeze, Wallace finds himself in a frozen and bleached
white environment, finding "mechanisms of service" that never end,
"a deep accretive uneasiness," and the unfulfillable promise of true
endless relaxation.[81]

   Although unlike Coleridge, Wallace's introspection is not a key
to the future but a skeleton key to see the cruise in its true form.
Through Conroy's essay, Wallace translates the "lie at the dark
heart" of the cruise:

> [T]he promise to sate the part of me that always and only
> WANTS—is the central fantasy the brochure is selling. The
> thing to notice here isn't that this promise will be kept, but
> that such a promise is keepable at all.[82]

   The cruise is a vicious cycle. The staff, trying to keep an impossi-
ble promise, endlessly indulge the cruisers, who become acclimated
to this indulgence and expect even more. Wallace's opening catalog
proves not just empty but infinitely insufficient. The impossible de-
mand to fill an infinite void is not a bug in the system but the basic
task of the system. Its success at reproducing within Wallace and ob-
scuring the sublime setting beyond is further evidence it is working as
designed. Furthermore, this imperative lies not with the cruise, but
within the cruiser. It is, alas, human error.

   Thus far, both of Wallace's essays read Romantically: despite

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80. Geoffrey Hartman, "Romanticism and 'Anti-Self-Consciousness,'" in *Romanti-
cism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1970),
54.

81. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 304, 296.

82. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 316.

emotional vulnerability and excessive significance, Wallace's mental flexibility and critical distance allows nominal transcendence. He approximates Bloom's classical Romantic hero who "stands finally, quite alone, upon a tower that is only himself."[83] Wallace can sublimate sublime experience, even when it concerns systems and ideologies rather than just threatening environments, proving imagination's primacy (and himself a clever reporter in the process). However, this is not the end. Each essay culminates in a terminal crisis like the "end of the line" that Hertz describes, an overly signifying and terrifying experience where Wallace cannot extricate himself from the external action, where he cannot stop being psychologically imbricated, and where he cannot critically reason his way out of the experience.[84] The next few paragraphs closely examine these "end of the line" crises, sketching some of the ways sublimity functions in each, before briefly attempting to situate these experiences further within the conversation between Wallace and the Romantics, ending with a return to the contemporary comments on Wallace's work as a whole.

At the State Fair, sublime sentiments erupt from the Sky Coaster, where Wallace both finds a fuller surrogate and has the ideological stakes of the fair more starkly presented. The Sky Coaster's basic outline matches the Zipper. It is another ride that Wallace does not physically take, but that still drives him into a growing – and catastrophic – rift in the narrative. At the fair's margins, Wallace sees the Sky Coaster, essentially a modified crane that lifts a suspended rider over 200 feet and releases them to oscillate at speeds nearly 70 miles per hour.[85] Having teetered on the edge of nausea and overstimulation (and crossed the line at least once), Wallace is disgusted by the ride but also intrigued. However, it's the East Coast rider, who

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83. Bloom, "The Internalization of Quest Romance," 9.

84. Neil Hertz, "The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime," in *The End of the Line* (Aurora, CO: Davies, 1985), 39–58.

85. "Sky Coaster," Accessed June 19th, 2017, http://www.skycoaster.com.

Wallace dubs the "ringer," who compels Wallace to try and watch the Sky Coaster. In the context of the Midwestern identity at play in the article, the ringer is primarily a fraud, but the term also suggests a doppelganger. Considering the Zipper ride from earlier, these other definitions linger. The ringer, the authentic outsider, rides the Sky Coaster for Wallace, the ersatz outsider. He is surrogate and foil.

Following this connection between Wallace and the rider, the narrator's perspective shifts. Unlike the pattern of experience followed by analysis that defined the article thus far, the narrator predicts the ride first. The envisioned tableau is primarily geometric because, like the fair itself, the Sky Coaster's impact mostly has to do with space. The ringer will be carried in concentric arcs – near full-circles – and alternate between a prone position, face-to-face with the fair, and an erect one at the margins. The pose is mock-Romantic, evoking Friedrich's iconic painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, where a faceless explorer stands atop a rocky outcropping as clouds partially obscure the mountains. However, in this version, the community spectacle is mapped on top of the natural landscape. The ringer, furthermore, is never still, instead oscillating back and forth, carried out of the fair only to be drawn back in. The sense is one past seasickness, possibly closer to Wallace's "lifesickness." In this arrangement, the ringer's ride reveals the instability of Wallace's critical position and, in fact, his subordination to the fair and the ideological forces of collective identity and spectacle.

Besides his resemblance to "Native Companion" on the Zipper, the ringer also parallels Wordsworth's blind beggar from Book VII of *The Prelude*. In this section, Wordsworth sees a blind man leaning against a wall wearing a sign that describes his plight and origin. First, Wordsworth realizes the few facts that fit on the beggar's card are all the true knowledge people can obtain. Second, the "steadfast face and sightless eyes" humble Wordsworth, rather than

evoking pity.[86] Both Wordsworth's and Wallace's thinking again resemble Hertz's characterization of the sublime as a "blockage," "the mind not merely challenged and thereby invigorated but thoroughly 'turned around.'"[87] The blind beggar provokes a metaphorical emotional turn, while the ringer's circuit neatly literalizes it. Wallace's mind is indeed blocked imagining and interpreting the predicted interplay between rider and ride, earth and sky, individual and crowd, insider and outsider identities. Hence the carefully considered geometry: when the ringer is released, it is Wallace who will oscillate through the split world.

This imagined experience, however, only marks the first half of the sublime episode that closes the essay. The second half occurs when reality catches up to Wallace's imagination, overwhelming him with over-signification, resulting in a blockage and ultimately a creative annihilation of the narrative. As the ringer is about to be released, the Midwestern crowd returns to share Wallace's perspective. The moment where "the crowd mightily inhales" is where Wallace says, "I lose my nerve."[88] He recognized that the fair was not for him alone, but now, in this moment, even his doppelganger is shared. The scene echoes one from earlier, where Wallace observed a crane lifting one cow and the other cows low in return, partially, Wallace suspects, out of sympathy and partially in fear for their ultimate fate. The literal estrangement from the land is a solitary experience, but also one shared as a spectacle with the community, be they Midwesterners or livestock. Faced with no option other than sharing his unique subjective perspective with the masses, he slams on the narrative's brakes. The Sky Coaster threatens to enact his sublime vision, but simultaneously reveals that the vision belongs to the crowd. Hemmed in by a solitary sublime experience above

86. Wordsworth, "The Prelude – Book Seventh – Residence in London," line 648.

87. Hertz, *The End of the Line*, 47.

88. Wallace, "Getting Away," 137.

and collective sublimity below, he executes the last imperial action he can make. He closes his eyes. A final, obvious connotation of ringer – one who makes a complete circle – clings to the finale: the "serial nightmare," "being whipped in an arc," the malevolent "full circle."[89] The environmental and ideological threats are secondary to the fair's gravitational pull, the irreconcilable both/and of independence and community, of ending up right back where he started.

The Latin phrase Wallace uses in this passage, "in extremis," is more than just hyperbole. Meaning "at the farthest reaches" or "the point of death," it demonstrates both the risk and the only remaining method of revolt. Roiland aptly calls this Wallace's "irrevocable limit" at the fair.[90] For the hero of the internalized quest, Bloom observes, the "fulfilment" of the quest is not to be found within the text, but the poem beyond that is made possible by the apocalypse of imagination."[91] Wallace's annihilation here is both literary and literal. The only way to disentangle himself is to erase the ropes entirely. The ultimate turn away is a nihilistic light switch, killing the scene and its threats but also the narrative itself as well. Put another way, he latches onto a "minimal difference" between himself and the external world, keeping himself, as Hertz says, "from tumbling into his text."[92] Narrative detonation is the only way off the ride.

In the final pages of "A Supposedly Fun Thing," like at the fair, Wallace is presented with a "symbolically microcosmic" experience that encapsulates his crisis and subverts the experience to create an emancipatory escape.[93] Watching the hypnotist Nigel Ellery joke at the cruisers' expense, Wallace notes how the performance reveals the subtextual hostility, making it explicit. Ellery couches it as sarcasm

89. Wallace, "Getting Away," 137.

90. Joshua Roiland, "Spiritually Midwestern."

91. Bloom, "The Internalization of Quest-Romance," 8.

92. Hertz, *End of the Line*, 219, 60.

93. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 351.

and humor, but he is doubly ironic: the derision is funny but also real and deserved. As a result, Wallace finds the antics of the hypnotized cruisers "genuinely funny," while also noting parallels to the cruise's animating thesis, "to construct fantasies so vivid that the subjects do not even know they are fantasies."[94] Hypnotic imperatives, whether Ellery's or the more subtle seductions everywhere else onboard, fill the cruisers' heads, pushing distinctiveness and agency out. They lose the ability to differentiate their desires from manufactured ones.

Recognizing the dangerous allure of Ellery's performance, Wallace instinctively moves inward towards resistance of the type deployed at the fair. The reaction, a single expansive sentence, begins loosely, accumulating images in a filmic rush, starting in the narrator's head and then panning to the ocean beyond. Its sequence shows Wallace using the cruise's method (but not its message) to subvert the performance. He pivots from the blue seats to the seas outside to an imagined external perspective. Although he wants to avoid getting "too deeply involved," that is impossible.[95] He is again, like Pip, entangled, but aware of it.

The move inward, however, does not remove him from the boat and its threats. Instead, it offers a buffer between him and the loss of autonomy that Ellery's hypnosis suggests. The real goal is the elusive (and perhaps imaginary) critical distance – seeing "with the eyes of someone not aboard."[96] The reaction to Ellery reflects a movement from reportage to imagination (or, perhaps, from journalist to novelist), all of which swivels on the temporal hinge of "right at this moment."[97] Once he imagines the ship from outside, it appears luxurious and magnificent at first, but is then surpassed by the greater majesty of the ocean. The sublimity of the ship is terrible,

94. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 351.

95. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 351.

96. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 351.

97. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing," 351.

but it is finite and man-made too. It is like the pleasure dome in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," beautiful and pleasing but built upon a deeper, romantic, and holy foundation. The essay's final phrases direct attention to the "poor soul," "a man overboard" – a nameless surrogate – in a familiar sublime scenario. After withstanding the week of doubt and paranoia, faced with what seems like a direct psychic assault, Wallace makes a great refusal. He instead opts for autobaptism, consternation, submersion in the "sunless sea."[98] The scene is imaginary, of course, so the internal sublime crisis does not remove him from the cruise entirely. However, his productive imaginative turn inward makes his revolt more meaningful. He pits his imagination against Ellery's suggestions. He is surprised by his successful emancipation, "a wondrous flash of self-estrangement," as Eagleton says.[99] Wallace opts for this negative way, floating through the remainder of the cruise rather than attempting to re-establish a critical position. He cannot offer a clear critique or meaningful analysis because he has no stable ground upon which to anchor himself. The only suitable protection is abandoning the pleasure dome. He rehabilitates the Romantic sublime. By willfully entangling himself in Romantic experience, he emphasizes the possibility for freedom even in environments characteristic of the postmodern sublime. Not only does Wallace survive, but he earns a reward. This "true and accidental gift" he receives from Ellery, "a deep and creative visual trance," parallels the "healing function" in Wordsworth's poetry, "performed when the poetry shows the power of the mind over outward sense."[100] Consternation grants Wallace reason, perspective, and real distance, at the cost of criticality. Instead of forcibly

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98. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan," Poetry Foundation, Accessed July 1st, 2018, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43991/kubla-khan.

99. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 65.

100. Wallace, "Supposedly Fun Thing," 352; Bloom, "The Internalization of Quest-Romance," 9.

participating in the remaining onboard luxuries, he stays in bed. The grant experiential postcard, by necessity, remains incomplete.

In his oft-quoted interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace maintained that there is no great revelation in critiquing contemporary materialism and the obstacles to human life it poses. "What's engaging and artistically real," he said,

> is how it is that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price? And can these capacities be made to thrive? And if so, how, and if not why not?[101]

Wallace's nonfiction has value in how it explores these limits, offering first uneasy steps towards a new perspective. Wallace's eponymous narrator in "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All" cannot distance himself from collective identity's attractive pull and is struck by the resulting alienation, which in turn prevents his symbolic absorption through rejection and refusal to remain a complicit observer. In "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," paranoia, fear, and despair lead Wallace's narrator to realize that he is already and unavoidably a willing collaborator in a system that produces a flattening out of human experience. He prevails not through a turn away but a turn inward. Taken together and examined in terms of the sublime and the Romantic context in which it developed, these two pieces illustrate Wallace's recognition that remaining an intact, aware, thoughtful, and complete person comes before challenging and dismantling extractive and oppressive systems. Despite these narrators' professional and personal fascination with the intersection of collective identity, experience, and postmodern and neoliberal systems, there remains a path forward.

This essay aimed to present a case for a more literary treatment

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101. Wallace, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace."

of Wallace's nonfiction, centering the essays within the context of Wallace Studies and suggesting a novel but useful framework to engage with some of the ideas and consequences. Additionally, it hoped to add to the growing list of thinkers, theorists, philosophers, and other writers referenced within or who influenced Wallace's work by adding Kant, Burke, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and others to their ranks.[102] I suggest that, while Wallace is not a Romantic and his nonfiction is not Wordsworth's *Prelude*, there are some parallels between the aesthetic, political, and material conditions that warrant this reading. Furthermore, because the relationship between the individual and systems is prominent throughout his work, and these relationships are explored through a shocking unveiling of some greater truth, both theories of the sublime as well as its later postmodern variety are appropriate. Of course, there are opportunities for critique, either of this analysis or of the politics it suggests.[103] Finally, both these essays deserve a deeper and wider reading than this essay could offer, so it is up to later scholars, if they find these initial analyses useful, to continue this line of inquiry, either returning to these texts, looking for patterns throughout the rest of the nonfiction, or applying this framework to Wallace's work as a whole.

In a 1995 letter to Don DeLillo, Wallace wrote, "Maybe the terror is part of the necessary reverence," continuing,

> but it can't – cannot – be the goal and terminus of that process. In other words there must be some way to turn terror into Respect and dread into a kind of stolidly productive

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102. A good list of these figures appears in: Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace: The Critical Reception," in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. Phillip Coleman (Ipswitch: Salem Press, 2015), 46–62.

103. Baskin comments that "Wallace's reception raises broader questions about the capacity of an American writer who has not lived through a war, endured racial or sexual prejudice, or emigrated from abroad to transcend the authenticity/fraudulence binary" ("Death is Not the End").

humility (emphasis in original).[104]

That must be the thrust of Wallace's critique, that people are more important than systems. The struggle against alienation, dissolution, authoritarian control, thoughtlessness, and blind consumption is difficult, complicated, taxing. People, however, he suggests, have the faculties to triumph, to sublimate suffering. The cost, even if it is only symbolic, may be great and must be willingly paid.

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104. David Foster Wallace, "I don't enjoy this war one bit," Letters of Note, last accessed July 20, 2012, http://www.lettersofnote.com/2012/02/i-dont-enjoy-this-war-one-bit.html.

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"WHEREBY ONE DOES NOT EQUAL TWO": MELANCHOLIC MEN AND THEIR FEMALE TALISMANS IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S "B.I. #20" AND CHARLIE KAUFMAN'S *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND*

Michelle Martin

"I still thought you were going to save my life."
– Charlie Kaufman, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

"I'd fallen in love with her. I believed she could save me."
– David Foster Wallace, "Brief Interview #20"

PROFESSED IN CLIMATIC MOMENTS, THE epigraphs—uttered by Joel Barrish (played by Jim Carrey) in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and the unnamed male subject in "Brief Interview #20" ("B.I. #20")—offer virtually identical sentiments: love saves. How or from what, the epigraphs' originators do not explicitly mention, but salvation is the outcome they so desire. United not only by this dogged,

trite belief in the redemptive power of love, these men, who differ greatly in temperament, both hold positions of privilege; as white, middle-class men who are educated and materially comfortable, Joel and interviewee #20 clearly need saving, not from financial strife or imminent danger, but instead from something much more undefined. Leading cynical, unfulfilling lives before encountering their romantic counterparts, Joel and the unnamed interviewee suffer from what Julia Kristeva calls "melancholy." In the first chapter of her book *Black Sun*, Kristeva describes melancholy as "a living death,"[1] "a sad voluptuousness, a despondent intoxication,"[2] and as the "most archaic expression of an unsymbolizable, unnameable narcissistic wound."[3] Expanding the Freudian understanding, Kristeva does not depict melancholy as solely pathological or as merely reserved for hysterical housewives, but rather she extends it into the realm of philosophy:

> For the speaking being life is a meaningful life; life is even the apogee of meaning. Hence if the meaning of life is lost, life can easily be lost: when meaning shatters, life no longer matters. In his doubtful moments the depressed person is a philosopher, and we owe to Heraclitus, Socrates, and more recently Kierkegaard the most disturbing pages on the meaning or lack of meaning of Being.[4]

Philosophy, for Kristeva, presupposes melancholic meaninglessness; for, without the loss of meaning to shatter his world, the

1. Julia Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis—a Counterdepressant," *Black Sun: Melancholia and Depression* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 4.

2. Kristeva, 5.

3. Kristeva, 12. Interestingly, both Kaufman and Wallace echo Kristeva's diction in speeches they have given; while Kaufman speaks of one's ancient wound in his 2011 BAFTA speech, Wallace discusses what a living death entails in his 2005 commencement address for Kenyon College, which was subsequently published as *This Is Water* in 2009.

4. Kristeva, 6.

philosopher walks through life unexamined. Kristeva even goes as far as to declare melancholy "not a philosopher's disease but his very nature, his ethos."[5] Joel and interviewee #20,[6] as well as the myriad more male melancholics so characteristic of both Wallace's and Kaufman's work, thus, begin to understand themselves in their melancholic states as something akin to the philosopher kings of Plato's *Republic*. No longer seeing the world as shadows of meaning cast on cave walls, these melancholics venture out of the cave and now experience the world in all of its terrible, meaningless vibrancy—their melancholy being the key to their ability to see beyond the shadows. Yet, being a necessary precondition of philosophy does not make melancholy any more palatable for them; along with their knowledge of the meaninglessness of the world comes an immense loneliness.

This loneliness that comes from a melancholic world view is a shared interest for both Wallace and Kaufman—one that they continuously return to and explore throughout their bodies of work. In a review of Kaufman's debut novel *Antkind* for *The New Yorker*, Jon Baskin speaks to similarities between the two artists: "Like his slightly younger peer David Foster Wallace, his writing promised a path between the Scylla of postmodern nihilism and the Charybdis of consumerist kitsch. His films employed postmodern techniques like narrative fragmentation and meta-commentary…but did not employ them toward conventionally postmodern ends."[7] For Baskin, both artists use these postmodern techniques as a means to "work their way, as 'Charlie Kaufman' does in *Adaptation*, to authentic

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5. Kristeva, 7.

6. Henceforth, I will often refer to the interviewee merely by his numerical title #20 for the sake of brevity.

7. Jon Baskin, "Can Charlie Kaufman Get out of His Head?" *The New Yorker*, August 12, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/can-charlie-kaufman-get-out-of-his-head.

expression."[8] Interestingly, Baskin is not the only critic to make this kind of comparison. In his review of *Adaptation*, David Ulin argues for seeing Kaufman not as merely a screenplay writer but as a "great American writer… [with] his mastery of structure, his voice and vision, his recognition of the power of the word to remake the world—he stands with the finest writers of his generation, among them David Foster Wallace, Mona Simpson, [and] Michael Chabon."[9] Similarly, Derek Hill, in his book about American New Wave cinema, describes Kaufman as "our pre-eminent explorer of anxiety-laced inner space, a cross between Franz Kafka and Woody Allen, with a pinch of Larry David, a dollop or two of Philip K. Dick, and a huge slathering of Samuel Beckett sprinkled with Jorge Luis Borges to top it off."[10]

Because of his distinctive style and voice, Kaufman's films align him more closely with writers of literature rather than those for the screen. More specifically, Ulin argues, "when we think of his projects, we think of them as Charlie Kaufman movies, not as movies directed by Micheal Gondry [*sic*] or Spike Jonze or George Clooney. The world is his. So is the vision: a longing for control even as control eludes him, a sense that if he could only peer deeply enough within himself the very core of things might be revealed."[11] The same can be said about Kaufman's melancholic characters who turn inwards in order to seek control over and to understand the meaningless world around them. Baskin identifies this inward turn as a shared journey that characters who inhabit the worlds Kaufman creates have to make, arguing that his "characters come to understand their pain as a

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8. Baskin, "Can Charlie Kaufman Get out of His Head?"

9. David L. Ulin, "Why Charlie Kaufman Is Us," *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 2019, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-may-14-tm-kaufman20-story.html.

10. Derek Hill, *Charlie Kaufman and Hollywood's Merry Band of Pranksters, Fabulists and Dreamers* (London: Kamera Books, 2010), 28.

11. Ulin, "Why Charlie Kaufman Is Us."

condition of self-expression: they emerge from the maze of the inner self intact and, at least for the moment, capable of genuine feeling."[12]

Akin to Kaufman, Wallace uses his distinct voice and stylistic prowess to explore questions of the connection between pain and the self. In his book *Ordinary Unhappiness: The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace*, Baskin remarks how pain goes hand in hand with the way in which Wallace's characters view the world, "correlat[ing] the concrete suffering of his characters with their bewitchment by...a conflation of thinking in general with the form of skeptical, analytical thinking that modern philosophy valorizes above all others."[13] Baskin goes on to explain that "for Wallace, the separation of philosophy from literature—and the crude dichotomies often correlated with that separation: mind/body, theoretical/practical, intellectual/emotional—are *both a cause and a symptom* of a 'dis-ease,' as he calls it in *Infinite Jest*."[14] In *Infinite Jest*, melancholy, or "dis-ease" as the recovering alcoholics from its AA program refer to it, has taken America by siege, causing widespread discontent and addiction. While there are arguably many differences between this emotional dis-ease and bodily pains such as a broken ankle or migraine, Wallace conflates these two types of pain. In *Infinite Jest* for example, Kate Gompert's description of her depression exemplifies Wallace's treatment of mental/bodily pain as a "crude dichotomy." When describing her depression to a doctor, Gompert resists the diagnosis of depression because she understands her pain as extending beyond pure emotion, explaining she feels it "all *over*. My head, my throat, my butt. In my stomach…I don't know what I could call it. It's like I can't get enough outside of it to call it anything.

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12. Baskin, "Can Charlie Kaufman Get out of His Head?"

13. Jon Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness: The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace.* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2019), 4.

14. Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*, 4.

It's like horror more than sadness."[15] Her pain experience high-
lights the artificiality, for Wallace, in making these distinctions, and
this conflation of emotional and physical pain extends to all work
from both artists. This conflation is especially apparent in Wallace's
Brief Interviews collection, which theorist Marshall Boswell calls "a
more accessible and yet also less satisfying treatment of many of
the central concerns at work in *Infinite Jest*" such as "depression,
solipsism, community, self-consciousness...and the impact on our
collective consciousness of therapeutic discourse writ large."[16] In-
evitably, characters in both Wallace's and Kaufman's works experi-
ence the pain of loneliness, feel disconnected from others, and turn
inwards. This failure to connect, Baskin notes, comes from the way
they understand and seek to control the world. In their struggle for
control, these melancholic men seek solace in many forms such as
liquor, drugs, power, and sex, as well as through honing a craft like
screenwriting, playwriting, or accounting.

For Joel and #20, their relief from melancholy comes from the
women whom they imbue with immense transformative power. Em-
ploying both Kristeva's depiction of melancholy and Madeleine
Wood's theory of the female as talisman, I will explore precisely how
Joel and #20 infuse their love interests with talismanic power in their
attempts to confront and resolve their melancholy. In doing so, I will
examine how the pain of a desired "Other" is appropriated by the
desiring gaze of the male protagonists, Joel and #20. Paying partic-
ular attention to how these female narratives of pain are read and
(re)written by their male counterparts, I will illuminate how Wallace
and Kaufman, through their use of female talismans, address prob-
lems of the inexpressibility of pain and limitations of consciousness.

Before I begin examining their female talismans, I must more

15. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996), 73.

16. Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of
South Carolina, 2003), 181, 182.

deeply discuss the conditions of melancholy from which Joel and #20 need their female counterparts to save them. Fundamental to Kristeva's approach to melancholy is the Freudian psychoanalytic understanding of depression[17]—namely that it, "like mourning, conceals an aggressiveness toward the lost object, thus revealing the ambivalence of the depressed person with respect to the object of mourning."[18] Their ambivalent feelings toward the object, then, result in self-loathing because the depressed person subconsciously thinks, "I love that object...but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbed it in myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad."[19] Kristeva takes this conception of depression further when she makes a distinction between the mourner's lost Object and the melancholic's lost Thing; unlike the mourner, "the depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing…[which is] the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated."[20] The Thing, for Kristeva, in other words, retains its ambiguous position in the depressed person's heart, but by making the distinction between the Object and Thing, Kristeva goes beyond classical psychoanalytic theories of object-relations. More specifically, rather than signifying a physical object, Kristeva's conception of the lost Thing is something unspeakable, leaving the depressed person with the pain "of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable, that perhaps only devouring may represent,

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17. In the opening chapter of *Black Sun*, Kristeva uses depression and melancholy almost interchangeably, remarking about "the confusion in terminology that I have kept alive up to now (What is melancholia? What is depression?)"; while she does make some distinctions, she remarks that what she is really referring to is a "composite that might be called melancholy/depressive." Kristeva, 9-10.

18. Kristeva, 11.

19. Kristeva, 11.

20. Kristeva, 13.

or an *invocation* might point out, but no word could signify."[21] Put simply, the body—and mind—in pain replaces an inexplicable sense of loss not tethered to any external object.

Experiencing this inexpressible, insurmountable void, both Joel and #20 exemplify Kristeva's description of melancholy sufferers. For example, when *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* begins, Kaufman introduces the viewer to an unexceptional, lost Joel. Bathed in the grayish light of a winter morning, Joel, upon waking, looks neither well-rested nor happy. Framing Joel's tired face in what is known in film as a Dutch angle,[22] Kaufman immediately, visually foregrounds Joel's unease in the world, his subsequent sighs and grunts as he pulls himself off of his sleeper sofa only further reinforcing his discontent. For Joel, even getting out of bed is a miserable task, echoing Kristeva's depiction of melancholy as "a life unlivable, heavy with daily sorrows" of "an infinite number of misfortunes [that] weigh us down every day."[23] His melancholy becomes even more apparent when he finds his car inexplicably dented. Instead of requesting insurance information or expressing his frustration, Joel scribbles a note that he places on the neighboring car that features only two passive aggressive words: "thank you!" Without the context of his dented car parked as evidence (because he drives away immediately after writing it), the note loses all its power, seeming much more like an expression of gratitude rather than anger. The note's powerlessness mirrors Joel's own; although he finds himself in a "funk" and wishes he could meet someone new, he cynically notes that "the chances of that happening are somewhat diminished seeing that I am incapable

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21. Kristeva, 13.

22. According to the Nashville Film Institute, a Dutch angle is a cinematic term for "a camera shot with a tilt on the camera's roll axis. The point of this tilted perspective is to make viewers feel uneasy. Using a Dutch angle shot signals that something is wrong, unsettled, or disorientating" "Dutch Angle Shot: Everything You Need to Know." NFI, June 21, 2021. https://www.nfi.edu/dutch-angle-shot/.

23. Kristeva, 4.

of making eye contact with a woman I don't know."[24]

Despite breaking out of his normal pattern and skipping work to take a spontaneous train to Montauk, Joel simply cannot enjoy the stark beauty of the frozen beach in winter. Dressed in business-casual with his briefcase in hand, using a stick to fruitlessly dig at the frozen sand, Joel sticks out, seeming as isolated as the deserted, snow-covered beach he finds himself visiting during this spontaneous trip. As the movie progresses, the audience learns that these opening scenes come from neither the chronological beginning nor present of the film's complex temporal structure but are, in fact, from Joel's not-so-fresh start after undergoing his memory-erasing procedure to remove any traces of his ex-girlfriend, Clementine Kruczynski (played by Kate Winslet). In the scenes that paradoxically follow yet precede (in terms of the film's chronology) the opening scenes, Joel learns about Clementine's memory-erasing procedure and decides to do the same; the rest of the film delicately teeters between the past and present of Joel's memory as Joel undergoes, regrets, and tries to stop the procedure. In his chapter for the book *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, Chris Dzialo sums up this intricate structure of time in the film as a "battle against time" in which the "antagonist [i.e. Lacuna Corporation] constructs a time machine of sorts that only operates in the present, on the protagonist's memory."[25] Namely, the audience goes along for the ride in Lacuna Corporation's time machine into Joel's memories, experiencing the romantic rise and fall—or, in terms of the film's structure, fall then rise—of his relationship as his memories of it are being erased. Therefore, while some of his physical and emotional discomfort in the opening scene can be explained by the fact that his

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24. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, directed by Michel Gondry, screenplay by Charlie Kaufman (Focus Features, 2004), 00:03:15.

25. Chris Dzialo, "'Frustrated Time' Narration: The Screenplays of Charlie Kaufman," in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary* Cinema, ed. Warren Buckland (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009), 108.

memories have been erased in his elective brain-damaging proce-
dure,[26] his isolation, as the audience finds out later during the era-
sure process, mirrors the shy temperament he exhibits before he first
meets Clementine at a beach party. Forced to attend by his sister, Joel
aimlessly wanders at the outskirts of the party, avoiding conversation
until his love interest, Clementine, intercedes.

If Joel's melancholy manifests in his bitter loneliness, Wallace's
#20's melancholy takes another form entirely: a cold, predatory
nature. For example, having "worked himself through both college
and two years now of postgraduate school,"[27] Wallace's interviewee
has an above-average intellect with an impressive vocabulary[28] and a
working albeit problematic understanding of feminism. Despite, or
because of this education, #20 feels a restless boredom. As with Joel,
his discomfort does not come from financial strife since both charac-
ters seemingly live alone in relative material comfort, but something
more spiritual, which he attempts to soothe through his sexual con-
quests. In the beginning of his interview with the silenced female
interviewer, he attempts to begin unpacking his romantic epiphany
in which he falls deeply in love with a woman whom he exclusively
refers to as the "Granola Cruncher" only after "she had related the
unbelievably horrifying incident in which she was brutally accosted
and held captive and very nearly killed."[29] In doing so, #20 reveals
this calculating nature. Describing himself as "a reasonably

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26. In fact, Dr. Mierzwiak, the founder of the Lacuna Corporation, admits the
damaging nature of the erasure process to Joel during his consultation: "Techni-
cally speaking the procedure is brain damage, but it's on par with a night of heavy
drinking. Nothing you'll miss." *Eternal Sunshine,* 00:31:32.

27. David Foster Wallace, "Brief Interview #20," *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*
(New York: Back Bay Books, 2007), 289-290.

28. Although obviously trying to illustrate his education and intellectual prowess to
the female interviewer, his casual use of words like "obviate" (293), "decoct" (308),
and "scotopia" (309), for example, illustrate his intellect.

29. *BI,* 287.

experienced, educated man," he admits a carnivorous interest in the Granola Cruncher, whom he had initially seen as "an extraordinarily good-looking girl whose life philosophy is fluffy and unconsidered and when one comes right down to it kind of contemptible."[30] Along with using diction like "fluffy" to describe her, he makes his less-than-sincere interest even more clearly linked to the idea that he thinks of her as prey when he deliberately recounts how his friend Tad jokingly refers to her as "a really sexy duck."[31] Making this dehumanizing comparison between the Granola Cruncher and a duck illustrates his predatory state of mind. #20 clearly sees bedding women as a sport or game like hunting or chess.

While enabling him to avoid any chances of not only getting hurt, his game-like mindset also prevents him from feeling genuine connection. In his survey of Julia Kristeva's work and legacy, John Letche expounds upon her discussion of how to understand Don Juan, who is a figure not unlike Wallace's interviewee #20, in relation to love. Infamous lothario and lover to many, Don Juan, according to Letche's reading of Kristeva, is primarily "in love with an inaccessible ideal woman with whom no real woman can compare."[32] Letche explains that because he can never find his ideal woman "in his flight from one woman to another," Don Juan feels only a "love [which] is a love of conquering, that is, of power. Even more: in his entrances and escapes, in his repeated lack of attachment, Don Juan shows himself to be in love with the *game* of power. The game of course is entirely symbolic, entirely a product of language."[33] For Don Juan and #20, their games of power are like play-acting.[34] Cast-

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30. *BI*, 289.

31. *BI*, 288.

32. John Letche, "Horror, Love, Melancholy," in *Julia Kristeva* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1990), 175.

33. Letche, 175.

34. Play-acting also features significantly in *Infinite Jest*. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace

ing themselves in the role of director as well as the lead actor on the stage, they expertly conduct their epic romances, plotting their "entrances and escapes" while always maintaining a sense of removal from the scene; since, from the comfort of the director's chair, they are in control, they, therefore, cannot truly be affected.

Throughout the interview, #20 consciously takes on roles such as the seasoned hunter and the man who has been irreparably changed, switching between these roles with ease. For example, so completely "moved" and "changed"[35] by the Granola Cruncher, he divulges with self-proclaimed complete honesty how his initial courtship with the Cruncher "was a pick up, plain and simple" and how he had deemed her "a strictly one-night objective."[36] Attempting to be as open as possible to capture the gravity of his romantic transformation, #20 plainly speaks about the "pick up" process. For example, early in the interview, he admits that he classified her in the Granola Cruncher "typology"; this "dictated a tactic of what appeared to be a blend of embarrassed confession and brutal candor" and entailed his deployment of a "rhetorically specific blend of childish diction like *Hi* and *fib* with flaccid abstractions like *nurture* and *energy* and *serene.*"[37] It is important to note here that his descriptions of his tactics to pick up the Granola Cruncher are strikingly similar to those of his approach to the interview process. Constantly inserting commentary meant to assure the interviewer of his sincerity, he injects phrases like "I'm going to admit it at the risk of sounding mercenary"[38] or "I

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attributes this behavior to addicts, portraying the root of many addictive behaviors as the overwhelming impulse to control how one feels internally and is seen externally.

35. *BI*, 317.

36. *BI*, 288.

37. *BI*, 291.

38. *BI*, 288.

know how this sounds"[39] to illustrate that fact that he is being completely transparent even though he runs the risk of sounding foolish. Yet, as with the Granola Cruncher, on whom he admits to using carefully crafted doses of self-humiliation, he strategically editorializes his own story in the attempt to disarm the interviewer from any skepticism and to demonstrate how irrevocably changed he truly is.

Attempting to conceal his hidden woundedness in another instance of calculated confession, #20 concedes to these tactics for controlling the perception of others when he compares his own treatment of women to the horrific actions of the rapist. For example, as he explains to the interviewer that the "primary reason your prototypical sex killer rapes and kills is that he regards rape and murder as his only viable means of establishing some kind of meaningful connection with his victim," #20 expertly unpacks the rapist's psychology, adding that only through torturing and killing is the psychotic in the story "able to forge a sort of quote unquote connection via his ability to make her feel intense fear and pain [with an] exultant sensation of total Godlike control over her."[40] As he reaches the climax of his retelling of Granola Cruncher's story and imparts this analysis, #20, then, explicitly draws comparisons between the rapist's twisted perception of his actions and #20's own predatory nature when he notes, "nor is this of course all that substantively different from a man sizing up an attractive girl and approaching her and artfully deploying just the right rhetoric."[41] Demonstrating his shrewd self-awareness, he continues to meticulously detail his "pick up" process and his equally calculated escape routine in an incredibly complex sentence spanning half a page. After "induc[ing] her to

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39. *BI*, 318.

40. *BI*, 303.

41. *BI*, 303.

come home with him"[42] and "leading her gently and respectfully to his satin-sheeted bed… [to make] exquisitely attentive love to her,"[43] he begins to reveal the extent of his affinity with the rapist:

> …then lighting her cigarettes and engaging in an hour or two of pseudo-intimate postcoital chitchat in his wrecked bed and seeming very close and content when what he really wants is to be in some absolutely antipodal spot from wherever she is from now on and is thinking about how to give her a special disconnected telephone number and never contacting her again. And that an all too obvious part of the reason for his cold and mercenary and maybe somewhat victimizing behavior is that the potential profundity of the very connection he has worked so hard to make her feel terrifies him.[44]

Akin to what he sees as "the primary reason" behind the rapist's insidious behavior, he reveals his own reasons for his carefully crafted courtship tactics; namely, he is afraid of "the very connection" he desires. In particular, his diction not only demonstrates his self-consciousness in terms of his "mercenary" behavior but also reveals a fear of losing control, which is highlighted by his use of third person narration. Like Don Juan, his game of dominance, in which he feigns romance, allows him to feel a semblance of power and connection without the vulnerability that comes with being sincere.

In other words, the elaborate games and play-acting enable #20 to control his world; but, in vying for control, #20 betrays his own inner, uncontrollable fear. In a strategic move, #20 *does* admit to this fear but does so only to illustrate the extent of his ontological transformation. Even as he claims to be changed by the sheer power of

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42. *BI*, 303.

43. *BI*, 304.

44. *BI*, 304.

her story, #20 cannot help but grasp for control of the situation. Directly after revealing that it terrifies him, he reverts to insults in order to regain his command over the conversation, as he adds, "I know I'm not telling you anything you haven't already decided you know. With your slim chilly smile. You're not the only one who can read people, you know."[45] While not as cruel as he is at the end of the interview, he reasserts his dominance in what Mary K. Holland would refer to as a "hirsute" manner. Holland, to encapsulate the hideousness of Wallace's interviewee, employs a term that Wallace himself used to describe David Markson's appropriation of femininity in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. "Connot[ing] beastliness and insinuat[ing] the physical savagery that is always a possible component of male domination of women," the term hirsuteness, for Holland, captures not only the horrific, beastly ways in which #20 treats the interviewer but also the "full-body hairiness, or a kind of animal masking"[46] he dons to hide his own fear and feelings of inferiority. Put another way, #20, too, suffers from a form of melancholia—his lost Thing perhaps being the idealized, supremely good woman who would satiate and appease his immense appetite for connection. Instead of wearing the pain of his loss on his sleeve akin to someone like Joel, #20 compensates for this unnameable, horrific loss in his games for power. Only through asserting his dominance does he feel, if only temporarily, any sort of relief.

Having discussed the ways in which Joel's and #20's melancholy takes shape, I will now turn my attention to their female counterparts and the talismanic power they contain. In her chapter for *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices*, Madeleine Wood examines the roles that female characters inhabit in Victorian literature. Often silenced or

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45. *BI*, 304.

46. Mary K. Holland, "'By Hirsute Author': Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace," in *David Foster Wallace: Presences of the Other*, eds. Beatrice Pire and Pierre-Louis Patoine (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2017), 137.

deemed hysterical, feminine voices, Wood argues, play a particularly important role as "keepers of secrets, objects of desire, and prisms through which all male stories must pass."[47] Focusing on "the disruptive presence of the (potentially hysterical or damaging) female voice within the male narrative, and...the way in which the female figure simultaneously becomes the means for narrative solution," Wood discusses how female voices "become talismanic for both the male authors and male protagonists."[48] Although Wood focuses solely on Victorian literature, her theory of the female talisman readily applies to Wallace's and Kaufman's work because she employs Freudian psychoanalysis to illustrate the manner in which women become "invested objects"[49] for their male counterparts. Influenced by the sexual frigidity of the Victorian era through which he lived, Freud's work on narcissism, object relations, and melancholy focuses heavily on the sexual and familial relationships between men and women; given his interest in these subjects and his popularizing of the talking cure, Freud's work similarly looms large over Wallace's and Kaufman's depictions of their melancholy men with their varying sexual and social neuroses. Adapting Wood's female talisman theory to more contemporary subject matter, I will unpack the ways in which these male protagonists use their female talismans to gain the power and insight necessary to remedy their own traumas.

If women, for Wood, "are the means by which a mourning process can be enabled and...traumas worked through"[50] in Victorian literature, then I argue Joel's and #20's love interests, Clementine and the Granola Cruncher respectively, represent a talismanic

47. Madeline Wood, "Female Narrative Energy in the Writings of Dead White Males: Dickens, Collins and Freud," in *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices: Appropriating, Resisting, Embracing*, eds. Rina Kim and Claire Westall (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 16.

48. Wood, 16, 23.

49. Wood, 22.

50. Wood, 22.

power that Joel and #20 use to resolve their melancholy to vary-ing degrees of success. For example, when Clementine enters Joel's life, she both figuratively and literally brings a pop of color into its muted tones embodied by the dismal, deserted beach where he (re) meets her. With her dyed blue hair and blindingly bright orange sweatshirt, Clementine, in her first moments on screen, is almost as visually disruptive to the gray color palette of Joel's life as she later is to his personal one. Even before they speak, Joel feels both attracted and repulsed by her. When he first spots her coming down the beach towards him, Joel momentarily gazes at her before quick-ly, self-consciously looking away, visually shrinking as he looks back toward the expansive ocean. Seeing her for the first time provokes him into thinking about his love life, or lack thereof, because of his self-proclaimed inability to make eye contact with an unknown member of the opposite sex; this moment, too, spurs on thoughts about getting back together with his ex-fiancée Naomi, whom, un-beknownst to him because of his memory-erasing procedure, he had originally broken up with in order to be with Clementine. Although the only thing of note about Naomi is that she was "nice"[51] and loved him, Joel's loneliness makes his certainty of Naomi's affections sound soothing because having her love him already means he does not have to fear rejection. Actively avoiding any sort of confronta-tion, whether it be negative like with his dented car or positive like speaking with an attractive woman, he protects himself from having to endure any more pain and suffering than he already experiences.

Trapped in this suffering and unable to bear the psychic cost of connection, Joel has seemingly no hope for meaningful redemp-tion—that is, until his talisman infiltrates his life. Unlike the nice Naomi, the decidedly not nice Clementine does not wait for him to approach her; she rather actively disrupts his life and any plans to reconnect with Naomi as she somewhat forcefully insinuates herself

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51. *Eternal Sunshine*, 00:03:27.

in Joel's life (again). In this (re)introduction, Clementine reveals herself to be a version of what film critic Nathan Rabin calls a Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG). In his review of the 2005 film *Elizabethtown*, Rabin conceived of this term to describe the "bubbly, shallow cinematic creature that exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries."[52] Echoing Wood's theory of female talisman, Rabin's MPDG definition considers characters like Clementine as existing solely for their male counterpart's benefit. For instance, despite, as the audience later learns, being the one to erase Joel first, she finds herself inexplicably drawn to the place where they first met in the opening scenes. While part of her compulsion to return to the romantic scene of the crime (i.e., the location of their first meeting) stems from the fact that one of the technicians of the memory-erasing procedure is using stolen items and recorded memories of Joel to woo her, Clementine's impulse to visit the Montauk beach at the very same time as Joel further reinforces her MPDG qualities in that she, for better or worse, seems irreparably linked to him.

As their second meeting scene continues, Clementine's chaotic presence solidifies her in MPDG typology. After they both wander around the deserted beach, visit the same diner, and catch the same train back home, Clementine cannot help but confront Joel. Starting with a quick "hi," Clementine quickly ends up in the seat in front of and then the seat next to him on the train as she launches into a somewhat manic opening salvo, rambling about her dyed hair and job at Barnes and Noble in her disorderly attempt to figure out how she knows him. Although Joel appears visibly uncomfortable conversing with her, Clementine either does not notice or does not care.

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52. Nathan Rabin, "The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown," *The A.V. Club*, August 23, 2017, https://www.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-elizabet-1798210595.

She also seemingly does not care for polite conversation, getting openly annoyed with him at several moments when he mistakenly tries to be nice or calls her nice. She even, in a moment of awkward confession, calls herself a "vindictive little bitch."[53] In these moments, Kaufman shores up Clementine's MPDG status, illustrating many of the traits that Lucía Gloria Vazquez Rodríguez—in an essay about the MPDG stereotype in independent cinema—uses to classify her as one. "Tend[ing] to dye her hair eccentric colors, wear vintage dresses, listen to indie music and engage on spontaneous carpe diem behavior that can range from socially inappropriate...to outright dangerous,"[54] Clementine, in all of her MPDG glory, brings a chaotic power into Joel's life. Seemingly within 24 hours of knowing Joel,[55] Clementine not only induces him to smile incessantly but also convinces him to walk out on the frozen Charles River despite his obvious fear of the ice cracking. Her spontaneity and fearlessness, in these moments, seem to be the exact balm Joel needs to heal his melancholic woundedness.

In addition, just as Clementine embodies the MPDG trope, the Granola Cruncher, too, epitomizes a specific trope, which is an essential qualification for becoming talismanic. Not even given a name, the Granola Cruncher, for #20 and for readers, precisely represents a specific type—one that #20 finds extremely contemptible. From the very outset of the interview, #20 has nothing but derogatory things to say about the kind of woman the Granola Cruncher represents,

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53. *Eternal Sunshine*, 00:07:48.

54. Lucía Gloria Vázquez Rodríguez, "(500) Days of Postfeminism: A Multidisciplinary Analysis of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Stereotype in Its Contexts," *Prisma Social*, no. 2 (September 29, 2017): 167–201, https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/3537/353752825007.pdf, 169.

55. It may be important to highlight that in the complicated time logic of the film at this moment, they have known each other for an entire relationship yet also have only just met; however, for the viewers and the characters themselves, these opening scenes are the first time they meet.

claiming that a large factor of his deeming her as a one-night stand "was due mostly to the grim unimaginability of having to *talk* with a New Age brigadier for more than one night."[56] While #20 presents his interest in her as merely a coincidence in that she just happened to be the woman to capture his eye that night, I contend that this typology was, in fact, what attracted him to her. In order to maintain a perception of control over the situation, he purposefully chooses women he despises in order to minimize the likelihood of him feeling any sort of profound connection that he admits "terrifies him."[57] Like Clementine's MPDG-ness, the "post-Hippie, New Ager" trope, "comprising the prototypical sandals, unrefined fibers, daffy arcana, emotional incontinence," inexplicably fits the precise needs of her male counterpart, in that she represents his opposite, the sincere yin to his cynical yang.[58]

Although undoubtedly these women have their own histories and traumas that do not revolve around their romantic partners, Clementine and the Granola Cruncher are effectively denied them because of their roles as talismans. Despite authoring a life-altering tale of personal strength in the face of pure evil or co-authoring a complex, sometimes problematic epic romance, the Granola Cruncher and Clementine become appropriated and interpolated into the larger narratives of their male counterparts' lives. For Clementine, the interpolation process begins when she and Joel have reached a more solidified point in their relationship. Because the viewer only has access to their romantic history through Joel's eyes and almost exclusively during the memory-erasing procedure, the trajectory of the romance shown by the film is incredibly complex and incomplete; in the moments the viewer sees, though, amongst the cutesy couple moments to which Joel desperately clings, there emerges a glimpse of

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56. *BI* 289.

57. *BI*, 304.

58. *BI*, 288.

their decline. Even before the fight that ends them, Joel attempts to tame Clementine's chaotic ways. Several of their bleaker memories, for instance, take place in a Chinese food restaurant named Kang's that they seem to frequent. Each time as they sit, eating their food, there is a growing sense of boredom and resentment between them. At about the halfway point in the film, Joel's mind relives a memory of a particular dinner at Kang's as the memory technicians work to erase it. Both Clementine and Joel look visibly uncomfortable with each other as Joel's voice narrates, "Are we like those bored couples you feel sorry for in restaurants? Are we the dining dead?"[59] Then, Joel fully enters into the memory as himself and despairs, "I can't stand the idea of us being a couple that people think that about,"[60] as he reaches to brush a strand of hair out of her face. Clementine, however, snubs his attempted intimacy, looking even more resentful at him as she smooths her hair again as if to tell him that she was happy with it before. Because Joel is reliving this memory, he plays a double role in it, playing his part in the scene when he asks, "How's the chicken,"[61] and acting as a narrator when he provides his own commentary, noting, "She's going to be drunk and stupid now"[62] right before she takes a swig of her beer and venomously inquires, "Hey, could you do me a favor and clean your goddamn hair off the soap when you when you're done in the shower? It's really gross."[63] In these moments, Clementine's unhappiness illustrates that they are, or were, the dreaded "dining dead" couple; in other words, she, a once free bird, has become locked away in a stifling cage while he has become a man struggling to rekindle the dying flames of their once burning passion.

59. *Eternal Sunshine*, 00:46:10.

60. *Eternal Sunshine*, 00:46:21.

61. *Eternal Sunshine*, 00:46:34

62. *Eternal Sunshine*, 00:46:45.

63. *Eternal Sunshine*, 00:46:36.

Despite seemingly being more interested in staying together, Joel causes their explosive demise at the precise moment when Clementine threatens to actively change their romantic narrative. More specifically, when Clementine happily announces, "I want to have a baby"[64] at a flea market, Joel shuts the idea down, saying that he does not believe they are ready; and, when she refutes him, insisting that *he* is the one who is not ready, Joel replies with a hint of condescension, "Clem, do you think you could take care of a kid?"[65] Understandably, Clementine becomes incensed, feeling completely betrayed by his lack of faith in her maternal abilities. In this scene, Joel finds himself in what Wood would describe as "a tense and irresolvable conflict between the woman as object of desire, and the woman as subject of desire."[66] Up until this fight that precipitates their breakup, Clementine has ostensibly been, for Joel, a talismanic object of desire that he holds close to him in order to temper the sting of his melancholy; however, in this moment, she shifts into a subject of desire who no longer exists solely to reinvigorate his life and whose needs now diverge from his own, and Joel cannot handle it.

With the introduction of Clementine into his life, Joel's life parallels the trajectory Wood tracks for Arthur in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*: "The nothingness, which defines Arthur's identity from the beginning of the novel, is overwritten by a sentimental narrative, which posits...the figure of the daughter as the true mother."[67] Like Arthur, Joel begins the film in a state of meaninglessness (melancholy) that, in turn, with the introduction of Clementine changes into a "sentimental narrative"—a romance; in contrast, instead of revealing the figure of the daughter as the true mother, it is ironically Clementine, the lover, who ostensibly inhabits the maternal role. Therefore, while

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64. *Eternal Sunshine*, 00:42:07.

65. *Eternal Sunshine*, 00:42:21.

66. Wood, "Female Narrative Energy," 23-24.

67. Wood, 28.

differing greatly because of the near 120-year difference between their publication dates, *Little Dorrit* and *Eternal Sunshine* both participate in the process of triangulation, casting their female characters as mothers, lovers, and/or daughters. For example, in a strange, Freudian moment when Joel is attempting to hide his memory's representation of Clementine from the technician's map of what needs to be erased, Joel's subconscious reveals his conflicting desire when he unintentionally charges her with a maternal role. Stowed away in some of Joel's earliest memories, Clementine becomes a maternal figure to a regressed, childish Joel as she helps him deal with his childhood traumas like being bullied and feeling an overwhelming need to hold his mother's undivided attention and affections. From this brief glimpse into Joel's childhood, Kaufman reveals the early manifestations of Joel as a melancholic male as well as the source of his apprehension around starting a family: his own inner woundedness. Still fixated on and pining for his lost Thing, Joel cannot fathom becoming parents with Clementine because having a child would change the nature of their relationship. No longer would it revolve around him and his needs. In this knee-jerk reaction against parenthood, Joel epitomizes the kind of psychological predicament Wallace speaks about as being the motivation for writing *Infinite Jest*. In an interview with German television program ZDF, Wallace locates part of his impulse for writing a novel set in the future in his theory that, he explains, "to an extent my generation tends to think of itself as children still and as people with parents, and I remember wanting to do something about what would be the situation of our children."[68] Unable or unwilling to grow up and let go of his sense of deprivation of that unnameable supreme good, Joel chooses to continue perpetuating his narrative of meaninglessness and pain rather than forging ahead into the unknown to find new meaning

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68. "David Foster Wallace unedited interview (2003)," interview by Das ZDF Interview, video, 00:14:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGLzWdT7vGc&t=972s.

with Clementine. On one hand, this choice to remain in his pain severs his connection to Clementine, who has become an object of desire too overdetermined with the fear, rejection, and shame as well as goodness and connection outside of himself; on the other, this choice activates the chain of events (i.e. the memory-erasing procedures) that trigger an important change in Joel. Only through reliving his relationship with Clementine does Joel start understanding Clementine as a subject of desire and, thus, truly begin the process of loving her.

In an almost complete inversion of Joel's romantic trajectory, which theorist William Day identifies as a variant of "the narrative genre identified by Stanley Cavell as the Hollywood comedy of re-marriage,"[69] #20 undergoes a life-altering romantic transformation in a single one-night stand. More specifically, readily admitting that up until she began her anecdote about her rape and near-murder he had been "planning right from the outset to give her the special false number when [they] exchanged numbers in the morning,"[70] #20 confesses to viewing her pre-anecdote as only a conquest or something disposable that can be used and then promptly tossed away; yet, unexpectedly, when she tells her story, #20 feels moved. Starting merely as a story about hitchhiking, her narrative quickly intensifies into "the most difficult and important battle of her life,"[71] and with it, #20 begins to feel, he admits, "hint[s] of sadness or melancholy, as I listened with increasing attention to her anecdote, [learning] that the qualities I found myself admiring in her narration of the anecdote were some of the same qualities about her I'd been

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69. William Day, "'I Don't Know, Just Wait': Remembering Remarriage in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," in *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman*, ed. David La-Rocca (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011), 133-134.

70. *BI*, 301.

71. *BI*, 301.

contemptuous of when I'd first picked her up in the park."[72] These qualities that save her from "becom[ing] just another grisly discovery for some amateur botanist"[73] to uncover—namely, her spirituality, sincerity, and seemingly supernatural ability to empathize—become, during her story, a beacon of hope. If she could transform her horrific situation into a spiritual one and empathize with what #20 tastelessly describes as a "weeping psychotic whose knife's butt jabs [her] on every thrust,"[74] then could she not save him too?

In addition, akin to the way Clementine becomes a maternal figure for Joel, the Granola Cruncher, in her ability to love unconditionally, serves a purpose for #20. Although the psychotic rapist receives the care-giving, not #20, the interviewee appreciates and desires her transformative, talismanic power:

> Can you see why there's no way I could let her just go away after this? Why I felt this apical sadness and fear at the thought of her getting her bag and sandals and New Age blanket and leaving and laughing when I clutched her hem and begged her not to leave and said I loved her and closing the door gently and going off barefoot down the hall and never seeing again? Why it didn't matter if she was fluffy or not terribly bright?[75]

Within these questions posed to the interviewer, #20 concedes that the thought of her leaving filled him with "apical sadness and fear." This fear, in turn, triggers his own regression, causing him—a man who evidently prides himself on control over himself and others—to consider clinging on to her hem and begging like a child. Clearly, #20 ascribes to her a certain power to access the unnameable good

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72. *BI*, 297.

73. *BI*, 295.

74. *BI*, 309.

75. *BI*, 317.

often associated with the mother that he, the rapist, Joel, and all the other melancholic men of Wallace's and Kaufman's work so crave.

Critics examining "B.I. #20" have argued about how to interpret this moment of supposed transformation for #20. For example, in his essay about the story, Christoforos Diakoulakis presents it as "a love story—a story about love, to be more precise; the narrative of a love narrative/the narrative that is love, quote unquote."[76] Conversely, Rachel Himmelheber, in her essay "'I Believed She Could Save Me': Rape Culture in David Foster Wallace's 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20,'"disparages the kind of irresponsible reading of the story she identifies Diakoulakis as perpetuating when he depicts the story as "an optimistic tale of love that lacks a social critique of rape culture."[77] "Miss[ing] the complexity of the story's content altogether by locating its meaning in the word 'love' and deeming 'B.I. #20' 'the narrative of a love narrative/the narrative that is love,'"[78] Diakoulakis, Himmelheber posits, fails to appreciate the complexity of the story and the intricacy with which Wallace unravels it. In other words, for Himmelheber, #20 has not fallen in love but instead "has found a woman whose story offers him this type of salvation: her particular rape, and her particular rapist, present [#20 with] an opportunity to acknowledge predatory aspects of himself without having to relinquish control over his presentation of self as a man incapable of 'real' violence."[79] More specifically, the Granola Cruncher's story enables him to illustrate that while he harbors predatory personality traits, he, himself, is not a villain. If even

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76. Christoforos Diakoulakis, "Quote unquote love…a type of scotopia," in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 147.

77. Rachel Haley Himmelheber, "'I Believed She Could Save Me': Rape Culture in David Foster Wallace's 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20,'" *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 55, no. 5 (October 13, 2014): 525.

78. Himmelheber, 525.

79. Himmelheber, 534.

the man who rapes and nearly murders her can be redeemed in the Granola Cruncher's eyes, then so might he. For Himmelheber, the Granola Cruncher represents a ticket to salvation for his villainous ways even if he fails to redeem it. Unless the reader chooses to read it as a love story, "B.I. #20" becomes what Wallace might refer to as "the song of a bird that has come to love its cage."[80] Although Wallace employs this metaphor to discuss impotent forms of irony, his description of how "even though [the bird] sings about not liking the cage, it really likes it in there"[81] applies very well to #20's redemption, or lack thereof. Despite attempting to sing the Granola Cruncher's praises for her ability to change him, #20 maintains his hirsuteness. Even in the last moments of the interview, he resolutely insists, "Nothing else mattered. She had all my attention. I'd fallen in love with her. I believed she could save me"[82] after having continuously insulted her intelligence and beliefs throughout the interview. And so, asserting his dominance up until his final lines with vulgar abusive language, #20 ends his interview with a culminating confrontation: "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."[83] If the litany of incredibly abusive insults fails to raise doubts about the validity of his romantic epiphany alone, then his sentiment "I knew I loved," with its telling absence of the object of his love conclusively illustrates his lingering narcissism.

In summation, both "B.I.#20" and *Eternal Sunshine* end with a plethora of difficult, open-ended questions: does the reader commit an optimistic misreading by clinging to "B.I. #20" as a love story, or do they read it as evidence of the all-too-alluring power of

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80. "David Foster Wallace unedited interview (2003)," 00:03:05.

81. "David Foster Wallace unedited interview (2003)," 00:03:07.

82. *BI*, 317.

83. *BI*, 318.

narcissism? Similarly, should the viewer watch *Eternal Sunshine* as an eccentric romantic comedy or as a modernized epistle mourning the kind of idealized, all-encompassing, unattainable love from which the film gets its name? Significantly, neither Joel nor Clementine utter the lines from "Eloisa to Abelard," the epistolary poem written by Alexander Pope from which the film gets its name, but Mary Svevo, the receptionist at Lacuna Corporation, recites them to her boss for whom she has fallen: "How happy is the blameless vestal's lot! / The world forgetting, by the world forgot. / Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind! / Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd."[84] Like Clementine and Joel, Mary, too, undergoes and subsequently forgets the memory procedure. In fact, she is the one who, after learning of her surgically erased memories of her affair with her married boss Dr. Mierzwiak, anonymously informs both Joel and Clementine of their own memory-erasing procedures. Mirroring Joel and Clementine's cyclical romantic trajectory, Mary's heartbreak after unwittingly developing a crush on her boss again raises questions of whether Joel and Clementine can break the cycle or if they, too, are doomed to repeat their past mistakes.

In *The Language of Pain,* theorist David Biro muses about our impetus to turn inward and succumb to pain: "Pain," he explains, "silences us. So why bother trying to speak? Why not just close one's eyes…and wait for it to pass? And for those who witness pain, why bother trying to break down the wall of private experience and attempt to share what cannot be shared?"[85] In the pain-riddled worlds of Wallace and Kaufman, silence is undoubtedly tempting in the face of insurmountable suffering and loss. Trapped in the pain of their own melancholy, both Joel and #20 fall victim to the mistaken

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84. Alexander Pope. *Eloisa to Abelard: Written by Mr. Pope.* (London: printed for Bernard Lintot, 1720; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011), http://name.umdl.umich.edu/004809172.0001.000.

85. David Biro, *The Language of Pain*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 214.

belief that, as Wallace discusses in his Kenyon College commencement speech, they are "the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence."[86] So entrenched in their own needs and internal narratives about pain, Joel and #20 cannot see others as anything but mere shadows in the face of their own all-encompassing melancholy experience. Thus, both stories depict the limitations of love encapsulated in what #20 calls "pure logic, whereby one does not equal two and cannot."[87] Although, as Jeffrey Severs in *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books* notes, "we subscribe all the time...to a mythology of love relationships that shows two magically becoming one," these stories demonstrate the impossibility of this myth because, no matter how hard we try, no person can ever truly know what it is like to inhabit someone else's mind.[88] All too aware of their inability to breach the barrier into another's mind, Joel, #20, and so many other characters in Wallace's and Kaufman's work, inevitably fail and fall short of connecting, reinforcing Biro's question: why bother? If language and even love fail to break down pain's walls, then what can?

The answer, I argue, may be found in the powerful female voices in these stories. Unlike their male counterparts, these women grow and change. For example, cognizant of the role men tend to assign her in the past, Clementine asserts her agency when Joel—who is at the time still in a long-term relationship—attempts to court her, warning him that "too many guys think I'm a concept or I complete them, or I'm gonna make them feel alive. I'm just a fucked-up girl who's looking for my own peace of mind. Don't assign me yours."[89] Then,

86. David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion about Living a Compassionate Life*, (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 36.

87. *BI*, 314.

88. Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 151.

89. *Eternal Sunshine*, 01:22:17.

unhappy when their relationship goes stale, Clementine rewrites her narrative as she erases him—this act of erasure challenging Joel to see her as a subject rather than object of his desire. The Granola Cruncher, too, chooses to understand her story in her own terms. Refusing to yield to fear during and after a horrific, life-changing experience, she chooses to open herself to others despite the inevitability of pain. Although they face the very real threat of continued emotional and/or physical pain, both women resist the temptation to retreat inwards and remain willing to connect. Similarly, Wallace and Kaufman seek—through their challenging literary and filmic texts that invite multiple readings or viewings—to encourage the reader to do the same: to fight the urge to close one's eyes, as Biro describes, and succumb to the pain of melancholic loneliness. In other words, because and in spite of their challenging style, Wallace and Kaufman embody what Wallace in an interview describes as the role of good art. For Wallace, good art "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."[90] Therefore, even in their most challenging and bleak stories, they invariably leave a space for the kind of illumination Wallace describes; their work, which time and time again exhibits widespread devastation, desperation, and decay, invites its readers to open their eyes to the pain of others. While acknowledging the nearly infinite ways in which pain and its alluring solipsism triumph, Wallace and Kaufman offer empathy as the last refuge in the face of the sheer destructive power of melancholy and pain.

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90. David Foster Wallace, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace" interview by Larry McCaffrey, in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 26.

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REVIEW: MARSHALL BOSWELL – *UNDERSTANDING DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION*

(Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2020)

Tim Personn

When the first edition of *Understanding David Foster Wallace* arrived on bookshelves in the early 2000s, Wallace Studies was in its infancy—"A valuable introduction to Wallace and his first four books," as a reviewer for the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* called it at the time. Marshall Boswell's study quickly became the definitive critical work for anyone working on Wallace two decades ago, and it can be regarded as one of the most important texts in the history of Wallace Studies.[1] Much has happened since then. The first edition could still sound a note of confident hope in the young writer's ability to overcome what Boswell at the time identified as Wallace's "biggest problem at this stage of his career," namely, "overcoming

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1. Robert L. McLaughlin, "Marshall Boswell. *Understanding David Foster Wallace*," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 24, no. 2 (Sommer 2004).

his own immense influence."[2] In 2023, such assessments read both prescient and once more quite tragic in light of Wallace's late-career struggle to complete *The Pale King*. No wonder, then, that the University of South Carolina Press recently asked Boswell to revise and update his study. The new, second edition still contains all the readings that made it such a valuable primer: Boswell's explication of Wallace's signature tone as a form of Lynchian "bothness," the Lacanian and Kierkegaardian notes in the chapter on *Infinite Jest*, the illuminating close readings of the early short fiction, etc. But the second edition also raises more general questions about what it means to be part of a scholarly conversation. In fact, Boswell's frankly stated decision to have "made no effort to account for the deluge of Wallace scholarship that has appeared since the book's original publication" arguably diminishes the value that his book still had in 2003 as a guide to Wallace's work.[3]

After all, serious scholarship on Wallace has gone through some growth spurts since the early aughts—a fact that will not be lost on the reader of this review, who finds it in the pages of a journal devoted solely to the man's work. A look at Boswell's secondary sources, however, reveals the absence of major critical voices in Wallace Studies. Instead, the new edition revises some minor idiosyncrasies of the first, undoing odd capitalizations and cutting stray sentences and paragraphs here and there. This tightening of the original text makes room for two chapters on the fiction that had not yet appeared in 2003. These chapters—a reading of *The Pale King* in light of post-Reagan politics and an interpretation of *Oblivion* as a late contribution to the tradition of literary naturalism—show all the virtues of Boswell's earlier scholarship; notably, though, both have

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2. Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 20.

3. Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace. Revised and Expanded Edition* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2020), ix.

for years been available in other volumes. With these additions, and in a slightly larger format, the second edition now clocks in at 167 pages, a "page count" that, as Boswell notes, is "roughly equivalent" to the first edition but allows him to extend the scope of his study to Wallace's entire oeuvre.[4] The book's achievements as a critical introduction, then, are undeniable, just like its place as a seminal work in Wallace Studies. Influential readings are apt to have responses, however, and in the way this study conceives of its own responsibilities—within a scholarly conversation that it in part helped generate—it is at times difficult to ward off the impression that the second edition feels a bit like a missed opportunity.

The philosopher Stephen Mulhall has identified being part of such a conversation with the Emersonian call to declare oneself in responsiveness to others. This capacity for responsiveness, Mulhall writes, affords the kind of "enhanced understanding" that would manifest itself "in an enhanced ability to converse with others, since it would partly be constituted by a deeper grasp of how different individuals might bring their experience and competence to a particular conversation"—a conception that is surely relevant in the case of a book called *Understanding David Foster Wallace*.[5] In fact, Mulhall puts his own idea of conversation into practice; and that he does so, incidentally, with respect to Boswell's reading of Wallace's first novel *The Broom of the System* hints at the shortcomings of Boswell's second edition. Indeed, Mulhall's presentation of what he calls a "non-Boswellian" reading of the late Wittgenstein is not a bad starting point for evaluating the new volume; after all, Boswell's reading of Wallace's Wittgenstein had been highlighted by the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* as a particularly enlightening

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4. Boswell, *Understanding*, ix.

5. Stephen Mulhall, *The Self and its Shadows. A Book of Essays on Individuality as Negation in Philosophy and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xii.

interpretation at the time. Mulhall, however, now calls it "riddled with confusion and paranoia."[6]

The way this disagreement plays out is over Wallace's protagonist Lenore's grandmother, whom the novel dubs "Gramma," in a Wallacian pun Boswell decodes correctly as a reference to Wittgensteinian grammar. For Boswell, Gramma is "the ghost of [Wallace's] book's machinery," an omnipotent controller in the background of Lenore's life who lays down the only path she can walk in the novel's plot—the same way grammar, in Boswell's interpretation, predetermines and thereby invalidates each speaker's individual agency.[7] Notably, this conclusion is hard to reconcile with Wallace's emphasis on choice in a later text like *This Is Water*. How to make sense of this friction? Either we read a radical rupture into Wallace's oeuvre between the early and the later work, or we question Boswell's reading of Wallace's Wittgenstein. Mulhall takes the second route, calling Boswell's view "a paranoid reading of Wittgensteinian grammar," one that rests on "false choices or oppositions."[8] First and foremost, he claims, the presence of grammatical rules does not preclude the possibility of choice. To illustrate this point, Mulhall takes a cue from Wallace's title and turns to a scene in the novel which shows Gramma vigorously sweeping with a broom while demanding an account for the essence of the object "broom." Mulhall's opposition to Boswell's linguistic idealism comes to the fore most clearly here when he emphasizes how Gramma's lesson indicates the way "the individual user of a broom is capable of determining what is essential to it by choosing for himself what he wants to use it for."[9] Rather than the coercive force that Boswell takes it to be, then, Gramma(r) in Mulhall's reading is a structure that affords autonomy. This would

6. Mulhall, *The Self and its Shadows*, 291.

7. Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace. Revised and Expanded Edition*, 19.

8. Mulhall, *The Self and its Shadows*, 290.

9. Mulhall, *The Self and its Shadows*, 292.

make an "essentially paranoid understanding of literature and re-
ality" like Boswell's the novel's "critical target rather than its raison
d'être," Mulhall reasons; and it turns Lenore, who falls for the same
functionary reading, into a cautionary tale.[10]

Seven years have passed between Mulhall's critique and the pub-
lication of Boswell's revised edition—enough time for the critic to
develop a response. But the new edition has no reference to Mul-
hall's direct engagement. Instead of owning his reading by way of
counterargument or disowning it by way of an about-face, Boswell
refrains from the kind of responsiveness that could have led to an
"enhanced understanding" of Wallace's Wittgenstein. Arguably, the
same could be said of many of the book's enduring critical contri-
butions. Select references to Adam Kelly and Lee Konstantinou, for
example, might have indicated how the conversation on "ironizing
irony" that Boswell helped initiate in 2003 has been developed fur-
ther by Wallace scholars. The chapter on Reaganomics in *The Pale
King* would have benefitted from Jeffrey Severs's account of Wallace
and economics. And Boswell's presentation of the genesis of Wal-
lace's last novel is compromised by the absence of any references
to David Hering's archival reconstruction of the book's evolution.
Omissions like these are pragmatically understandable in light of
the enormity of secondary literature on Wallace today. The decision
not to offer oneself up as a potential conversation partner, however,
contradicts the spirit of Wallace's work itself, which, as Boswell was
one of the first to establish, sees the openness of communication
channels between humans as the only way to counteract the ills of
our time.

In fact, the same *all-or-nothing* logic that Mulhall identifies in Bo-
swell's "paranoid" reading of Wittgenstein also seems to have driven
his decision, in the face of so many new possible interlocutors, to
choose none. It is not, after all, as if Boswell has never engaged any

10. Mulhall, *The Self and its Shadows*, 296.

critical accounts; a reader of the first edition could still take away a solid sense of the literature on Wallace. The same cannot be said of the revised edition, which predominantly references criticism published more than a decade ago. One of the few critics Boswell mentions alongside his more recent work, Stephen J. Burn, is a useful case of comparison here. In the second edition of his *Reader's Guide* to *Infinite Jest*, Burn substantially revised his earlier material to address scholarship that had appeared in the meantime and, as he put it, "counter certain strands of Wallace criticism" with "too narrow a view" of "Wallace's fiction."[11] Boswell's decision not to flag the relationship of his volume to pertinent positions in the conversations around Wallace's work, in turn, suggests an approach to scholarship that views "understanding" literature as the work of solitary critics, rather than as a social and conversational process—a decision that risks running up against the dialogical conception of writing which Wallace, by all accounts, endorsed throughout his life.

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11. Stephen J. Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Readers Guide. Second Edition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), ix.

REVIEW: LAURIE MCRAE ANDREW – *THE GEOGRAPHIES OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S NOVELS: SPATIAL HISTORY AND LITERARY PRACTICE*

(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023)

Edward Jackson

Laurie McRae Andrew's *The Geographies of David Foster Wallace: Spatial History and Literary Practice* is the latest example of what can be called "Wallace and –" criticism. In other words, it is part of the trend to examine Wallace's work in relation to a single, specialist topic. Recent monographs by Jamie Redgate, Peter Sloane, and Mary Shapiro, for example, have focused respectively on Wallace and cognition, Wallace and the body, and Wallace and dialects. The encyclopedic nature of Wallace's writing, whereby he engages with a vast range of expertise, means that single-topic studies like these could be written for years to come. Andrew's "Wallace and geography" book is not only a sophisticated addition to this type of criticism, but a model for how to do it well.

Wallace critics have focused on geography before. However, Andrew argues they have treated the topic "as a secondary expression of apparently deeper and more primary thematic concerns."[1] As an example, he mentions David Hering, "the most consistently space-focused of Wallace's critics."[2] Hering has written about space in Wallace's work as a metaphor for choice, addiction, postmodernism, and the tension between monologic and dialogic writing.[3] In contrast to this approach, Andrew puts geography at the front and center of his analysis. He does so in order to read Wallace's novels "as responses, first and foremost, to the concrete geographical contexts in which they were composed."[4] In this respect, *The Geographies of David Foster Wallace* is part of the "general trajectory from explication to contextualisation"[5] in Wallace scholarship, which is best represented by Clare Hayes-Brady's edited collection, *David Foster Wallace in Context*.

The main context in Andrew's analysis is the development of American capitalism since the 1970s. During this period, "a 'Fordist' regime characterized by relatively static and rigid spatial arrangements"[6] gave way to a post-Fordist system of flexible accumulation. The work of Marxist geographers, particularly David Harvey, is key to Andrew's explanation of this development. As Harvey puts it, in this new mode of capitalism, "intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation"[7] disrupt former

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1. Laurie McRae Andrew, *The Geographies of David Foster Wallace's Novels: Spatial History and Literary Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 3.

2. Andrew, 2.

3. Andrew, 3.

4. Andrew, 3.

5. Andrew, 3.

6. Andrew, 7.

7. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 156, quoted in Andrew, *Geographies*, 8.

relationships between people, place, and capital. For Andrew, Wallace's texts exemplify the "connection between [this] transition in economic geography and change at lived and cultural levels."[8] Put simply, economic developments in the closing decades of the twentieth century have changed how Americans experience and imagine their environment, and Wallace's novels mediate this change.

After establishing this contextual backdrop in his Introduction, Andrew performs close readings of *The Broom of the System*, *Infinite Jest*, and *The Pale King*. In his first chapter, he explores *Broom* in relation to regionality, arguing that Wallace wrote about the Midwest in the knowledge that economic changes were making the region's identity "unstable and unfixed."[9] Andrew supports this claim with bravura readings of the Great Ohio Desert and the novel's real and imagined architecture. Perhaps most fascinating, though, is his analysis of a Penguin promotional poster for the novel. The front of this poster shows a Jasper Johns painting of the United States from his "Maps" series, while the reverse side lists recently published texts by their region of origin. Revealingly, *Broom* appears in this list "under the Southwest (Wallace being based in Tucson at the time of the poster's production, presumably)."[10] In marketing materials as much as in the novel itself, then, *Broom* demonstrates how associations between American literature and regional geography in the 1980s were in a state of flux.

Whereas "region" is Andrew's keyword for his reading of *Broom*, for *Jest* it is "metropolitan," and for *The Pale King*, "post-industrial." Notably, in his chapters on these latter two novels, he also considers the "tensions and limits around questions of both race and gender"[11] in Wallace's depiction of urban environments. For example,

8. Andrew, 9.

9. Andrew, 58.

10. Andrew, 58.

11. Andrew, 19.

in his account of how Joelle Van Dyne's movements in *Jest* make her an example of the *flaneur*, Andrew explains how "the impressionism of her walk, its gendered embodiment and sensuality,"[12] reproduces the traditional "attribution of limited and limiting forms of knowledge to women."[13] When compared to Don Gately's masculine excursions into downtown Boston, "this gendering forms part of the prism through which Wallace attempted to re-orientate the novel in relation to the geography of the late twentieth century city."[14] By embedding these critiques into his analysis, Andrew shows how attention to gender (and elsewhere, race) in Wallace's work can nuance our understanding of seemingly unrelated topics, in this case, *Jest*'s status as a city novel.

For some readers, the fact that Andrew focuses on the novels alone might seem peculiar. It certainly puts him at odds with the many Wallace critics who pay just as much attention to his stories. Andrew acknowledges that his focus "excludes some of Wallace's explicitly geographical short fiction."[15] In turn, although he discusses non-fiction pieces like the essay "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley" and *Signifying Rappers* (co-authored with Mark Costello), he does so in order to support his investigation of the novels. The question of what it is about Wallace's novels that lend themselves to geo-critical readings at the expense of, say, a story like "The Suffering Channel," goes unanswered. Of course, as a way to organize a monograph, examining *Broom*, *Jest*, and *Pale King* in sequence is reasonable enough. Nevertheless, Andrew leaves one wondering how a more inclusive treatment of Wallace's writing, considering not only the novels but the stories and the essays too, might have informed his arguments.

12. Andrew, 89.

13. Andrew, 98.

14. Andrew, 98.

15. Andrew, 20.

Leaving the reader wanting more is no bad thing. *The Geographies of David Foster Wallace* is indeed a stimulus to further thought. Critics could apply Andrew's insights to different examples of Wallace's work, or use his analysis of the novels to think about how Wallace's treatment of geography compares to other writers. (In fact, Andrew begins to do this by comparing *Jest* with William T. Vollmann's *The Rainbow Stories* in Chapter 3.) Meticulously researched and carefully written, *The Geographies of David Foster Wallace* is the seedbed from which future studies of Wallace and geography should grow. As a first book, it also announces the arrival of one of the finest close readers currently working in Wallace Studies.

REVIEW: CLARE HAYES-BRADY (ED) – *DAVID FOSTER WALLACE IN CONTEXT*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023)

Ándrea Laurencell Sheridan

In the past decade, the market has been saturated with companions to David Foster Wallace Studies. Still, this new collection edited by Clare Hayes-Brady—featuring thirty-four essays from a range of international scholars, both established and emerging, spanning ten countries over four continents—brings new perspectives and lenses through which to view Wallace's work. Hayes-Brady divides the book into four parts: Contexts, Ideas, Bodies, and Systems. In the front matter, before even the title and copyright pages, Hayes-Brady introduces the collection by touting it as "an accessible and useable resource which conceptualizes [Wallace's] work within long-standing critical traditions and with a new awareness of his importance for American literary studies. It shows the range of issues and contexts that inform the work and reading of David Foster Wallace, connecting his writing to diverse ideas, periods and themes."[16] Although a bold claim, the collection more than lives up

16. Clare Hayes-Brady, ed. *David Foster Wallace in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), i.

to its editor's assessment. All essays are brief—most no more than ten pages—but detailed and easily consumable on their own or in the context of the collection.

The first part, Contexts, begins with a chapter by Pia Masiero on Wallace and narratology, then continues on to essays on Wallace and other authors or genres: Nabokov, the Literary Brat Pack, literatures of other times and places, and in relation to other art forms. In "A Meeting of Minds: David Foster Wallace, Vladimir Nabokov, and the Ethics of Empathy," Marshall Boswell refers to the "features that puncture the reader's immersion in the text and force a reckoning with the author" in both Wallace and Nabokov's work.[17] Boswell's essay, along with the rest of the collection, similarly "puncture the reader's immersion" in previously accepted scholarship on Wallace and his work. For example, in "Writing in a Material World: David Foster Wallace and 1980s Fiction" Ralph Clare explores Wallace's work's relationship with and aesthetic divergence from the roughly contemporaneous "Brat Pack." Through this well-trodden ground—in particular regarding Wallace's contrast with Bret Easton Ellis—Clare takes it further by arguing that "Wallace pointedly returns to the postmodern past to counter minimalists' naive view of representational language."[18]

The remaining chapters in Part I shift focus to Wallace and genre. Catherine Toal reads Wallace in the context of nineteenth century American literature, in particular Melville. Like Clare, Toal argues the "separation between a popular audience and literary endeavor" in both Wallace and Melville, arguably an experimental writer in his time,[19] establishing Wallace as part of the American literary canon

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17. Marshall Boswell, "A Meeting of Minds: David Foster Wallace, Vladimir Nabokov, and the Ethics of Empathy," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, ed. Clare Hayes-Brady (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 32.

18. Ralph Clare, "Writing in a Material World: David Foster Wallace and 1980s Fiction," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 38.

19. Catherine Toal, "Confidence Man: David Foster Wallace and the American

right alongside Melville. Lucas Thompson similarly establishes Wallace's significance to European Literature in the following chapter, touting him "a complex and conflicted cosmopolitan" in spite of his "aversion to international travel" and his work's very firm roots in the US.[20] Though Wallace did not publish any poetry, Philip Coleman explores how Wallace's "strategic and sustained engagement with modern and contemporary poetry"[21] impacted his own prose. In Chapter 7, Martin Paul Eve looks at "Wallace's 'Non'-Fiction" and grapples with the tenuous relationship with "the strict division between 'fiction' and 'fact' that structures this binary."[22] Matthew Luter's penultimate chapter in Part I looks at Wallace's relationship to popular entertainment, which goes beyond the established scholarship and contends that Wallace is not merely critiquing commercial entertainment, but critiquing the capitalist structures that lead to overconsumption.[23] Likewise, Corrie Baldauf looks to the "distinction between serious and commercial art"[24] so prevalent in Wallace's own criticism and commentary and concludes, "Art is not comfortable. Art is comforting."[25]

Part II, Ideas, gets into some of the established motifs explored in Wallace Studies, but like those featured in Part I, the essays in Part II continually question many unthinkingly accepted approaches to

Nineteenth Century," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 48.

20. Lucas Thompson, "David Foster Wallace and European Literature," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 58.

21. Philip Coleman, "David Foster Wallace and Poetry," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 75.

22. Martin Paul Eve, "David Foster Wallace's 'Non'-Fiction," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 76.

23. Matthew Luter, "'Thanks Everybody and I Hope You Like It': David Foster Wallace and Entertainment," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 87.

24. Corrie Baldauf, "David Foster Wallace and Visual Culture," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 97.

25. Baldauf, 106.

Wallace's work. Bennett's "David Foster Wallace and Attention" challenges the acceptance of attention as a "unified and unifying theme that runs across Wallace's whole career."[26] Jon Baskin finds a new application of Adam Kelly's "New Sincerity," bringing it into our current moment over a decade after Kelly's initial publication. He looks to the ways that Wallace's depictions of "New Sincerity" have impacted contemporary writers since, just as Wallace was influenced by the sincerity of his predecessors. Allard den Dulk's look at "David Foster Wallace and Existentialism," a topic on which he's published extensively, "highlight[s] the structural commonalities of his fiction and the in-betweenness of philosophy and literature in existentialism writing," only realized "by the work of the reader."[27] In "David Foster Wallace and Religion," Tim Personn indirectly agrees with den Dulk in his argument that the "reconciliation" of reason and belief explored by Wallace and "a range of authors, from Thomas Aquinas to Leo Tolstoy…does not come in the form of a ready-made solution to be adopted."[28] Personn and den Dulk's emphasis on the collaborative nature of the discovery of the truths offered by Wallace's work is echoed throughout Hayes-Brady's collection, reemphasizing the importance of interactive, writerly reading. Jamie Redgate's essay to close Part II, "Mr. Consciousness," participates in that discussion, arguing that Wallace "surely" belongs in the literary tradition emphasizing "individual experience" as a path to truth and consciousness.[29]

Part III, Bodies, contains explorations of Wallace and sex, sexuality, gender, masculinity, and disability. Emily Russell points to the

26. Alice Bennett, "David Foster Wallace and Attention," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 109.

27. Allard den Dulk, "David Foster Wallace and Existentialism, in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 181.

28. Tim Personn, "David Foster Wallace and Religion," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 194.

29. Jamie Redgate, "Mr. Consciousness," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 203.

"tension between metaphor and materiality"[30] in Wallace criticism, and refuses to rest on previous notions that Wallace's work depicts "ordinary love,"[31] arguing that Wallace's fiction is notably defined by a lack of sex. Daniela Franca Joffe take an intersectional approach in "Whiteness and the Feminine." Like den Dulk and Personn, Joffe emphasizes the necessarily collaborative nature of reading Wallace and the ways in which the dialogic conversations, in this case the college class, reveals complications in and with the text that a single reader may not notice, including cultural, historical, socioeconomic, and demographic specificities. Joffe suggests Wallace's "troubling behavior"[32] is an important part of the complex conversation his work inspires. Likewise, Edward Jackson's "David Foster Wallace and Masculinity" focuses on the misogyny apparent in Wallace's work, situating it in the larger discussion of "how Wallace recenters patriarchal perspectives despite his awareness of the fact that they are objectionable," notably looking to women scholars Toal, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Hayes-Brady, and Joffe.[33] He closes with an important question, "[H]ow might Wallace's chief virtue of sincerity, 'new' or otherwise, be coded as a masculine overcoming of postmodern irony's indeterminacies?"[34] In the following chapter, Dominik Steinhilber similarly addresses Wallace as "far from an unproblematic author."[35] Like Luter's stance on Wallace's depiction of entertainment, Steinhilber sees Wallace's critiques not of the

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30. Emily Russell, "No Ordinary Love: David Foster Wallace and Sex," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 215.

31. Russell, 215.

32. Daniela Franca Joffe, "'The Limits of His Seductively Fine Mind': Wallace, Whiteness, and the Feminine," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 225.

33. Edward Jackson, "David Foster Wallace and Masculinity," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 236.

34. Jackson, 245.

35. Dominik Steinhilber, "Theorizing the Other," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 246.

concepts of race, gender, and sex themselves, but instead as a means "to further an aesthetic 'therapy' of solipsism."[36] Expanding the conversation of the body from sex and gender to disability, Peter Sloane's chapter surveys Wallace's depictions of "persons who do not sit within the very limited spectrum of neuro- or corporeo-typicality,"[37] and the sometimes problematic nature of Wallace's depiction of physical and cognitive disabilities. Part III closes with Vincent Haddad's "Queering Wallace: On the Queer History of Addiction Fiction," which considers Wallace's often problematic depictions of non-straight characters not as a product of the implicit homophobia of the 1990s, but through a more comprehensive lens of "queer history of addiction narratives," that, like Steinhilber's essay, brings forth the "writer-reader relationship and the therapeutic function if promises."[38] Part III looks not only at the human body, but reinforces the importance of the relationship between the reader and the body of the text to get a new and fuller understand of Wallace's work and the impact on those readers.

The final part, Systems, opens with Alexander Moran's "*Infinite Jest* as Opiate Fiction," a natural progression from Haddad's essay preceding it. Moran invites a look outside of Wallace's own definitions that much of the previous scholarship seems to cling to so desperately. Like Russell in her essay on Wallace and sex, Moran moves beyond the metaphor, looking at opiate addiction in Wallace's work as "reflect[ing] a specific historical moment…part of a long-standing literary tradition regarding drug use."[39] He situates *Infinite Jest* in the very real contemporary moment, calling it a "deeply social

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36. Steinhilber, 246.

37. Peter Sloane, "David Foster Wallace and Disability," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 258.

38. Vincent Haddad, "Queering Wallace: On the Queer History of Addiction Fiction," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 279.

39. Alexander Moran, "*Infinite Jest* as Opiate Fiction," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 284.

novel, which can be plumbed for further insights into how opiates and other drugs have spread throughout contemporary America."[40] Following Moran, Part IV's essays take new looks at Wallace and racial capitalism (Colton Sayer), language (Mary Shapiro), agriculture (Jeffrey Severs), ecology (Laurie McRae Andrew), citizenship (Joel Roberts), politics (David Hering), publishing (Tim Groenland), and biography (Mike Miley). Shapiro, author of *Wallace's Dialects*, looks at dialects in Wallace's fiction and nonfiction, considering the "most salient presentation of ethnic and regional dialects, while also noting salient absences, groups whose speech Wallace chose not to mark."[41] Rather than dismiss all dialectical errors to Wallace, Shapiro urges us to see such instances as "more poignant" when seen as errors on the part of the character, inviting a whole new avenue for reading and understanding Wallace's work and the role of community and connection in language creation and adaptation.[42]

In the following chapter, Severs also looks at connectivity, this time the "myth and system, somehow intertwined, when he looked closely at farmland."[43] Viewing agriculture through the lens of history and community further concretizes Wallace's push to community and connection, even in the midst of "unbridled consumer capitalism."[44] Laurie McRae Andrew extends the sense of community to the "relationship between fiction and the more-than-human sphere" in "David Foster Wallace's Ecologies."[45] Andrew adds to the limited scholarship on Wallace and ecocriticism, reigniting a long overdue

40. Moran, 292.

41. Mary Shapiro, "Language and Creation: David Foster Wallace's Many Ways of Sounding American," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 304.

42. Shapiro, 306.

43. Jeffrey Severs, "Very Old Land: David Foster Wallace and the Myths and Systems of Agriculture," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 314.

44. Severs, 324.

45. Laurie McRae Andrew, "David Foster Wallace's Ecologies," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 325.

discussion. David Hering's "David and Dutch: Wallace, Reagan, and the US Presidency" builds on Clare's and Eve's chapters in Part I, and suggests considering the impact of the Reagan era on Wallace is "crucial" in crafting meaning from the work.[46] Similarly, Tim Groenland reinforces some of the concepts in earlier chapters, particularly Clare's sentiments on the "hegemony of 1980s publishers and the literary market."[47] Groenland looks at the publishing industry during Wallace's career and the "changes impacted upon [his] work, but also that he integrated an awareness of these shifts into his own writing."[48] Groenland intriguingly outlines how the strictures of the publishing industry during Wallace's era informs his work, not only by dictating form and limitations of print publishing at the time, but also the content, as shown in the long and short forms of both his fiction and nonfiction. The essay closes, hopefully, that Wallace's "writing will continue to reach readers in new forms as well as contexts."[49]

Closing out the collection is Mike Miley's "Author Here, There, and Everywhere: David Foster Wallace and Biography." Miley discusses not only Wallace the writer and public persona, but Wallace the person and "heavy hand[ed]" director of readers.[50] In what could be viewed as the collection's summary statement, Miley urges its readers to give up the "impersonal, two-dimensional Saint Dave."[51] He cogently explains that: "After all, writers spend most of their professional lives constructing and shaping narratives both out

46. David Hering, "David and Dutch: Wallace, Reagan, and the US Presidency," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 356.

47. Clare, "Writing in a Material World," 45.

48. Tim Groenland, "David Foster Wallace and Publishing," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 358.

49. Groenland, 367.

50. Mike Miley, "Author Here, There, and Everywhere," in *David Foster Wallace in Context*, 369.

51. Miley, 372.

of whole cloth and the details of their everyday lives. The Wallace of this curated biography has proven to be an enduring—and endearing—figure that many readers and scholars are reluctant to give up."[52] The collection is not an overview of Wallace's work, but a focus on specific and varying contexts from a diversity of voices across genders and geography. None give a pass for Wallace's troubling behavior and work; instead, many essays offer ways to understand the work through them. Each essay stands alone as a new or different approach to Wallace Studies, but it also coheres as a collection, with many essays echoing, expanding on, and replying to each other. Hayes-Brady's meticulously curated volume serves as a hefty and landmark contribution to the field, one that both summarizes what Wallace Studies has been and will help shape what it will become.

52. Miley, 369.

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ACROSS

1 Places for prices
5 1997 MacArthur Fellowship, for one
10 Sault ___ Marie
13 Panache
14 Confronted, as one's fear
15 Surgery souvenir
16 Decision-making files that Pemulis has authored for Eschaton
18 Tortoise rival
19 Initials on a Nutrition Facts label
20 Product (not wieners) that 47-Across discussed with Letterman having just shot a commercial for
21 Part of the name of a 1215 document
22 It ends, "Hello."
26 Join forces
27 Percival Everett satirical novel about African-American literary politics
28 Actress Horne or Dunham
29 Those at the top of the social heap
32 "___ my previous email..."
33 Lyle tells him, "Fame is not the exit from any cage"
36 Natl. Bird-Feeding Mo.
39 Stately dance in 3/4 time
40 Security footage provider: init.
44 Lettuce for a wedge salad
46 Word on Hawaii license plates
47 Sitcom actress whose March 1987 "Letterman" interview found its way into "My Appearance"
51 Some people split them
52 "Flashdance" singer Irene
53 Ennet House director Montesian
54 Picked from a lineup, briefly
55 Make even worse
58 Descriptor for a scrapped rocket launch
59 It can precede "firma" or "cotta"
60 They're mined and refined
61 Test that the U of Arizona MFA program no longer requires
62 Statement of beliefs
63 Yellow character wearing vertical stripes whose orange roommate wears horizontal stripes

DOWN

1 Lachrymose
2 "Finished!"
3 First Soviet cosmonaut Yuri
4 Lead-in to "cone" or "Caps"
5 In flames
6 This is it!
7 "Gesundheit" eliciter
8 Alt-rock band whose "Strange Currencies" Wallace loved
9 Degree to which Schacht aspires
10 Gather, with difficulty
11 Raw beef dish
12 Kindle or Nook
15 Former Mideast rulers
17 Give in to wanderlust
21 Show up uninvited
23 Abbr. similar to 55-Down
24 Calvin Thrust's beloved car, which gets Gately to the ER
25 Upstanding, or to make stand up
29 Leaders in Abu Dhabi and Dubai
30 There's one in "David" but not in "Wallace"
31 Shiba ___ (Japanese dog breed)
34 Shouts of agreement
35 West Coast school with the most undergraduate applications in the US in the 2020s: init.
36 Seeking aggressively, as for compliments
37 South American nation named for a line of latitude that passes through it
38 Surround, as in battle
41 It contrasts with contrast
42 "NONRECORDED MAGNETIC VIDEO SCREENABLE IN ___ VENUE ONLY, NOW UNRELEASED" (description of "The Joke" in the JOI filmography)
43 Most extensive
45 "Lincoln in the ___ " (2017 Booker Prize winner)
46 Slightly open, as a microwave door
48 Short sentence of empathy
49 Mother-of-pearl
50 One does it lightly in a sensitive situation
55 And so on: abbr.
56 One born around 1970
57 Beloved comedian Newhart