

The work of David Foster Wallace and post-postmodernism

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis uses the work of David Foster Wallace to exemplify two definitions of the term 'post-postmodernism'. I examine the literary connotation of 'post-postmodernism' – thus far, its predominant critical application – identifying the key characteristics of its form and addressing the centrality of Wallace's writing to its study. I extend this by showing how the term post-postmodern identifies a clear historical period and its cultural practices. Through detailed analyses of Wallace's work, I show the overlaps between post-postmodernist literature and the historical and cultural logic from which it emerged. This detailed argument not only allows me to establish the significance of Wallace's writing as both reflection of and critical intervention into the contemporary period, it also allows me to establish a contextualized significance for the study of 'post-postmodernism' in a variety of contexts and forms. My study takes in a variety of literary genres from Wallace's corpus, in order to produce a comprehensive reading of the implications of his work. It is organized around the central thematic strands of post-postmodernist literature, complemented by briefer discussions of the style and form such literature takes. These are all presented such that they establish that Wallace's writing is a primary exemplar of post-postmodernist literature; but also that his writing demonstrates a broader critical understanding of the term. Each set of readings is carefully contextualized to allow me to show the contiguous nature of the multiple uses of the term post-postmodernism. In my conclusion, I turn to address the broader significance of the detailed and multivalent definition of post-postmodernism that this thesis produces.

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Introduction: The work of David Foster Wallace and post-postmodernism

0.1 Introduction: Defining the post-postmodern

The work of David Foster Wallace and the term 'post-postmodernism' are inter-related. In order to scrutinize that importance, this thesis will investigate the bifurcation in the meaning of 'post-postmodernism'. Literary scholars of Wallace's writing like Nicoline Timmer and Stephen Burn have applied 'post-postmodernism' to elucidate certain key features of his work; it has become a generic term for traits common among Wallace's literary generation, whose influence peaked during the mid-to-late 1990s.¹ However, beyond this purely literary definition, Jeffrey Nealon has demonstrated that 'post-postmodernism' can be usefully applied as a description of the cultural, political and economic conditions during this period.² In Nealon's analysis, it becomes a historical rather than literary designator.

This bifurcation of the meaning of post-postmodernism reflects a central principle of my analysis of Wallace's work. This analysis will itself be bisected. I will present Wallace's fiction, in common with established critical practice, as definitive of the elements of 'post-postmodernist literature'. Complementary to this reading, I will examine his writing as representing a critical interpretation of the features of the post-postmodernist era. In this, it simultaneously reflects the conditions it imposes, and is resistant to them. This is the central original contribution this thesis will make: finding

¹ Stephen Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (London, New York: Continuum, 2008); Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2010).

² Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012).

coherence between the two definitions of 'post-postmodern' through Wallace's work. This develops and expands the existent criticism of both Wallace's work, and our literary and cultural understanding of the recent past. This provides an original and vital contextualization of an increasingly significant figure.

Wallace will be demonstrated to be an influential figure both in style and thought. But part of the originality of this research will be my efforts to take an increasingly skeptical perspective on his work. The critical analysis of Wallace undertaken thus far has focused almost exclusively on his influence and importance. My intervention in the field of Wallace studies is both timely and significant because it both periodizes his work and in doing so provides an original broader perspective on its thematic unities.

0.2 The term 'post-postmodern'

Prior to my direct analysis of Wallace's work, I must elucidate the two conceptions of the post-postmodern that are central to my argument. 'Post-postmodern' is an increasingly established part of critical vocabularies despite being undeniably unwieldy. Both Nealon and Burn have reluctantly defended the use of 'post-postmodernism' as a central critical term.³ Burn's longer apologia is important because of the critical history of its deployment he draws upon: the introduction to *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* outlines previous examples of its use in some detail in order to justify its re-use. (pp. 17-26) This defense is predicated on a sense that the term 'postmodern' is outdated, as attested both by the litany of critical pronouncements of its death, and the scholarly turning away from its

³ Nealon qualifies his definition by saying 'strictly speaking, nothing can come after or "post-" postmodernism, which ushered in the never-ending end of everything'. (p. viii) Burn also couches his use of the term in near-apologies: 'Nobody sensible can feel happy about promoting a new term in a discipline that so often involves itself in hermetic discussion, especially when the term is as ungainly as post-postmodern. Yet, out of the available terminological options, post-postmodern has the benefit of indicating a simultaneous degree of overlap and separation from the practice of earlier postmodernists'. (p. 17)

deployment.⁴ In spite of this apparent turning away, we can see that echoes of the forms that were once termed 'postmodernist' remain detectable in the literature of this period of waning. Burn and others have elucidated the ways in which these forms have evolved. They nevertheless fit a generic definition of 'postmodernism' as a descriptor of textual effects. Hence the desire to address the dubious line between postmodernism and a sense of its afterwards.

What draws both Nealon and Burn to 'post-postmodern' is the sense of simultaneous continuity and disruption the additional prefix of 'post-' provides. Nealon states that 'post-postmodernism marks an intensification and mutation within postmodernism (which in its turn was of course a historical mutation and intensification of certain tendencies within modernism)', and in this claim he follows the definitions and defenses of the term postmodernism that appeared as it gained prominence. (p. viii) For example, Linda Hutcheon claimed that 'the "post" of "postmodernism" [...] suggest[s] not "after", so much as an extension of modernism and a reaction to it'.⁵

The bifurcated definition of post-postmodern upon which this thesis lies is directly predicated on the bifurcation of the term postmodern. As Burn's defense of the term 'post-postmodernism' demonstrates, certain literary traits are clearly held to be 'postmodernist' in nature. However, the use of the term has been broadly and nebulously tied to a multitude of cultural, political, ethical, and philosophical trends that, arguably, Burn's

⁴ Many of these pronouncements are listed by Burn, who compellingly describes the critical desire to declare the term dead. Among the most significant examples of more recent scholarship on this theme is Josh Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), which constructs a detailed argument about the philosophical effects of the contemporary desire to move beyond postmodernist ideas.

⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (New York and London: Methuen, 1984), p. 2.

justification for retaining the use of the term does not address. The process of evolution that both Burn and Nealon observe is thus simultaneous and apparently unrecognized by these two critics in their discrete analyses. This is a critical division that limits the potential use of either definition. The formal analysis Burn produces and the cultural and theoretical work of Nealon should complement each other as they examine the effects of a particular historical period with a similar methodology using similar terminology.

This thesis will, by drawing not only on the literary but also the broader inflections of the term post-postmodern, provide a much more extensive definition and defense of 'post-postmodernism' as a critical term than either Burn or Nealon individually provide. I will ground the analysis of literary effects in a particular cultural moment, and so avoid assuming a culturally isolated reading of literary production. This prevents the analysis of 'post-postmodernism' becoming simply a method of extending the analysis of postmodernist literature after the announcement of its death. Rather, this thesis as a whole will provide the best justification yet produced for the deployment of 'post-postmodern' as an important critical term.

0.3 The post-postmodern era

In this section I will define the post-postmodern within a certain historical period and describe the cultural and political contours of that era. The period of the post-postmodern overlaps with what Phillip Wegner describes as the 'long '90s', which ranges from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the fall of the World Trade Centre just short of twelve years later.⁶ Wegner describes an era without a culturally dominant political apparatus. The long '90s begins with an event symbolizing the end of the Cold War and its logic – a logic one can explicitly tie to postmodernism – and ends with the beginning of the

⁶ Phillip E. Wegner, *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 2009).

global war on terror.⁷ Wegner's cultural analysis thus demonstrates a formless sense of possibilities that operated during this period of history, a period between two hegemonic political narratives in which notions of potential and expansion were foregrounded. He describes this period as 'between two deaths [...] strictly speaking "non-historical" precisely because it is open to any number of possible "symbolizations/historicizations," all of which by their very nature are retroactive [...] Such an "empty place" is experienced in its lived reality [...]' (p. 28)

In many ways, Wegner's description of ideological emptiness mirrors the definition of post-postmodernism that this thesis will construct. However, in his cycling through various retrospective theoretical apparatuses that could be applied to the period, his demarcation fails completely to account for the experience of the 'empty place' as a consistent quality in quite the same way that post-postmodernist ideas allow us to formulate. 'Post-postmodernism' is not opened or closed by the two endings he formulates. Rather, its logic is intensified at the moment of each: what Nealon calls 'Just-In-Time Capitalism', the dominance of economic responses at the moment of crisis.

Nealon's depiction of a post-postmodern era, while appreciative of Wegner's work, proposes an alternative 'long '80s.' Where Wegner uses the absence of a dominant political logic to explicate his cultural analysis, Nealon replaces it with an economic logic. For Nealon:

[...] the '80s, that period of market-mad privatization, began in the mid- to late '70s, with the global reorganization of production. Fuelled by the evisceration of unions and government regulation, the

⁷ This periodization closes off postmodernism at the point at which the paranoia that the experience of the Cold War foregrounds begins to shift. Ian Gregson describes the paranoia of postmodern literature: 'The historical experience of the postmodern constantly imposes the knowledge that we are surrounded by representations rather than truth, that what we are told has been pre-packaged by ideological distortion – this makes acts of deconstruction a constant and inevitable mental habit.' The state Wegner describes, therefore, has the vestiges of paranoia without the necessary conditions for it. The effect of this is to open up endless-interpretation as a narrative force without the rhetoric of suspicion that postmodernist fiction holds. This is a central way to explain post-postmodernist literature. Ian Gregson, *Postmodern Literature* (London: Arnold, 2004), p. 20.

beginning of the leveraged buyout years in the US, and the unprecedented run-up of the equity markets, the Reagan '80s had quite a run through the Clinton go-go '90s. (p. 10)

Rather than representing an 'ending', for Nealon the events of September 11th produced a political shift toward globally interventionist government action, whilst simultaneously enhancing the economic logic of globalized and deregulated capitalism that led inexorably to the economic crisis of 2008.

Nealon finds a correlative of the 'long '80s' in the conceptualization of the '60s as 'a kind of shorthand for resistance and revolution of all kinds', while "the '80s" most immediately signifies the increasing power and ubiquity of markets and privatized corporations in everyday life. And the '90s were clearly the years of the full bloom for the conservative fiscal agenda hatched in the '80s.' (p. 10)

While I consider the conditions for post-postmodernism to be rooted in the social and political conditions Nealon describes, I do not often consider his analysis of post-postmodernist cultural production to be wholly convincing.⁸ Wegner's description of the condition of cultural possibility between two dominant political realities is useful when taken in conjunction with Nealon's economic analysis of the same period. For, as Nealon describes it, while the domestic and/or foreign policy differences across the presidencies of Reagan, George Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama seem relatively clear, the differences in economic policy are much less obvious. This mirrors the cultural products of this era, in which cultural

⁸ Nealon figures a return to 'a new set of everyday concerns regarding how one manages language overload' in which language is decontextualized, and thereby concentrates his analysis on a poetics that 'sculpt[s] [...] linguistic identity out of a vast sea of available, iterable text.' (p. 167) This highly specific definition of post-postmodernist cultural production ignores the value of the understanding, representation and resistances to be found in a more broadly defined post-postmodernist culture. It is part of the project of this thesis to make these broader claims, primarily through Wallace's post-postmodernist literature.

diversity and engagement seems to broaden, as Wegner describes.⁹ But even in these circumstances, the economic logic of post-postmodernism in its broadest sense remains consistently present, making Nealon's analysis not a contradiction of Wegner's, but rather a more extensive depiction of a significant self-similarity that straddles the period that Wegner fails to emphasize.

The coherence between Wegner and Nealon's thought can be elucidated through the analysis Slavoj Žižek has performed on the logic of 'liberal democracy'. This is the political expression of the economic logic Nealon foregrounds, and of Wegner's understanding of cultural 'freedom' during this period. Žižek's foregrounding of the internal inconsistencies between the two implicit explications of a 'post-postmodernism' demonstrate the relevance to this post-postmodernist theory of David Foster Wallace's writing. In Wallace's novels *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* there are lengthy discussions of U.S. political philosophy that mirror Žižek's claim that the 'innermost "truth" about liberalism' is contained in the contradiction between economic and cultural conceptions of 'freedom'.¹⁰ The opposition of such conceptions are dramatically staged between different interest groups in Wallace's novels in significantly uncompleted ways.¹¹ It is between the temporal logic of Nealon, the cultural analysis of Wegner and the philosophical understanding of Žižek that I will locate my analysis of Wallace's writing. Each figure adds to our understanding of Wallace's writing as an articulation of the 'long '80s' post-postmodern era.

⁹ See Wegner's expressions of the 'figuration of the multitude' as being given access to 'utopian collective experience' through intellectual, scholarly, and research communities' in allegorical readings of his 'long '90s', but only because such communities maintain 'noninstrumentalized activity [and] noncommercial exchanges'. (p. 191) In contrast, Nealon sees intellectual spaces as increasingly corporatized in the same period. (pp. 66-76)

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London, New York: Verso, 2010), p. 37.

¹¹ E.g. In the unresolved confrontation between the U.S. and Canadian spies Steeply and Marathe in *Infinite Jest*, in which the latter extensively describes and attacks the formulation: 'Maximize pleasure, minimize displeasure: result: what is good. This is the U.S.A. of you'; and Chapter 19 of *The Pale King*, which opens with the line 'there is something very interesting about civics and selfishness', and produces a debate on that topic. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1998), p. 423; David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011), p. 130.

The post-postmodernist era should be understood through two central and overlapping aspects: intensification and hollowness. Both follow from the economic logic Nealon describes. Both are reflected in Wallace's writing, in either resistant, explicatory or unconscious ways: one of the central projects of this thesis will be to articulate these.

The seminal aspect of the post-postmodernist era is that the spread of global capitalism is 'complete'. It represents a time in which there is no 'outside' to capitalism. For Hardt and Negri, this is the period in which 'capitalism no longer looks outside but rather inside its domain, and its expansion is thus intensive rather than extensive.'¹² In turn, Nealon describes this as the most significant factor that transforms the economic realities of post-postmodernism into a totalized cultural logic.

The comparison with Jameson's articulation of postmodernism as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' can help us to understand the shift from postmodernism to post-postmodernism. For, in Jameson's crucial definition of postmodernism, it is the equalizing spread of capitalist expansion that produces a cultural practice of absolute equalization of space and surface; it is 'what you have when the modernization process is complete and Nature is gone for good'.¹³ However, Jameson claims that this opens up the potential for 'the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.' (p. x) In turn, this second process is 'completed' (both on the level of the general acceptance of this postmodernist logic, and in terms of the completion of the

¹² Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 255.

¹³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. ix.

globalized spread of capitalism) in the logic Hardt, Negri and Nealon describe. This is the post-postmodernist derivative of Jameson's ideas. In the condition of totally globalized capitalism, it is the intensification of already existing surfaces that matters.¹⁴ This logic requires the increasing capitalization of what is existent: through branding, through the production of excess value, through the multiplication of meanings rather than surfaces.¹⁵ Nealon's economic description of this holds that 'the intensities of finance (how do you squeeze more profits out of the stuff you already have?) become the linchpin practices of this risky new economy.' (p. 26) Just as the economic realities of late capitalism have their correlatives in the cultural productions of postmodernism Jameson described, so too does the logic of intensification play itself out in the cultural production of the period of globalized capitalism.

It is the central logic of intensification (replacing postmodernism's expansion) that informs the tenets of post-postmodernist forms. We can approach this in two ways. Either by showing that post-postmodernism functions as an intensification of the principles of postmodernism, or that it is always informed by a desire for or movement towards the intensified. The

¹⁴ By describing *Infinite Jest* as a 'world historical expression' in an article reading the linkages between globalization and fiction, Jameson unconsciously implies the linkages between his own earlier interpretation of the postmodern and Wallace's post-postmodernist fiction. Fredric Jameson, 'Fear and Loathing in Globalization', *New Left Review* 23 (2003), p. 108.

¹⁵ This drive to increase profit from what cannot be expanded informs the 'subsidized time' of Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, in which the years, as they pass, are 'branded' by the post-U.S. government of that novel. (p. 223)

example of the production and representation of identity, a central theme for postmodernist critics, and a vital space of interest for post-postmodernism, provides an example of both processes.

0.4 Post-postmodern identity

The concept of identity represents a crucial example of the historical split between postmodern and post-postmodern ideas. These inform post-postmodernist art in central ways. Jameson's analysis of postmodernism suggested that 'one of the key themes of postmodernism is 'the "death" of the subject itself – the end of the bourgeois monad or ego or individual.' (p. 15) The trope of a dispersed, fragmented, and malleable sense of identity is one of the relatively undisputed claims of postmodernist criticism.¹⁶ The narrative of post-postmodernism suggests that such claims about identity have increasingly assigned this analysis an indisputable quality. A single

¹⁶ This still might be defined in different ways. Stuart Sim states that for 'postmodernists, the subject is a fragmented being who has no essential core of identity, and is to be regarded as a process in a continual state of dissolution rather than a fixed identity or self that endures unchanged over time'. This is the condition to which Wallace's writing directly responds. Conversely, Wallace's writing demonstrates Jacques Lacan's conception of identity, itself related to Sim's and influential on what should be called postmodernism: 'I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think [...] I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think'. This is, in some respects, the concept of subjectivity that has the most significance for the oppositional readings of Wallace's work in this thesis. Finally, for post-postmodernism more generally, the most significant concept of the subject is the one Madan Sarup derives from Zygmunt Bauman, 'under postmodern conditions, there is the exhilarating experience of ever-new needs rather than the satisfaction of the still-existing ones', and so these conditions fabricate a 'society of consumers', in which individual 'freedom' is now interpreted as freedom of the market'. None of these three conceptions are contradictory, and each add to the conception of postmodern identity that Wallace's writing intensifies. Stuart Sim, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. by Stuart Sim (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 312; Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977), p. 166; Madan Sarup, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), p. 128.

central monad is now subsumed to a sense of identity as a constructed collation of singular, individual choices. The motivation behind these choices matters less than the intensity of one's commitment to them. It is the experience of the 'death' Jameson formulated that concerns post-postmodernism: the ways the lack of a subject can be understood and described, rather than the death itself. Post-postmodernism is concerned with the results of postmodernism, not the facts of postmodernism in Jameson's terms.

This leads to my central definition of post-postmodernist art, which is reliant on these definitions of identity. Post-postmodernism relies on the sense of a fundamentally 'hollow-centre'. This formation has an interesting effect. It changes the focus from a seeking of understanding onto an endless process of interpretation, which it is assumed will never have a conclusion. In terms of identity, this means that one seeks not to understand oneself or others, but instead to analyse and refine what specific choices mean and how they might be interpreted. Just as formations of identity now are wholly reliant on notions of performativity, this emphasis on the multiple interpretability of everything suggests that Derrida's statement that 'there is nothing outside the text' has become an everyday concept. It is the intensification of this to the experience that 'and there is nothing but the endless interpretation of text' that has become its post-postmodernist reality.¹⁷ Nealon has a description of this condition: 'reading-as-interpretation [...] lives on in fact even more strongly, in its newfound assurance that the

text will never be totalized. Meaning remains the impossible lure, the absent center, the lack or excess that continues to drive the critical enterprise.'¹⁷ (pp. 129-30)

There is another way to articulate the complementary nature of these post-postmodernist notions of identity and interpretation. One that does not rely on notions of postmodernism, or any other critical theory, but instead reflects the political and economic discourse of the post-postmodern period. As such, it lies closer to the economic foundations of my discussion of the term. One might consider both the hollow-centred nature of post-postmodernist identity, and the reliance of notions of critical interpretation, to be a product of the generalized insistence that each individual is primarily defined and treated as a consumer.

This consumer understanding of identity has the implication that it is through the choices we make – the products we buy – that we are self-consciously defining our selves. That the logic of this consumer focus is intensified seems self-evident, as each choice we make is increasingly defined in those terms. Government-directed services are predicated on a consumerist, choice-led principle. But equally, the branding of almost every aspect of life, from scientific experimentation, to news, to sports and leisure activities, marks each as replications of consumerism as they are choices that are essential formations of one's identity.

The central argument of Wallace's 'E Unibus Pluram' reflects this analysis of consumerist culture: that it has incorporated all counter-cultural responses and thus is predicated on the value of 'difference' and 'individuality', encouraging consumption as the fulfilment of these terms. Wallace identifies the idea of "Choice" that flatters the average 'Joe

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology: Corrected Edition*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 159.

'Briefcase' into believing that he 'transcends the very crowd that defines him'; while Nealon's analysis describes 'today's cutting-edge capitalism celebrat[ing] and reward[ing] singularity, difference, and openness'.¹⁸ Wallace's essay responds to this in a conservative way. He suggests a need to 'treat [...] plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction [and] eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue'. (p.81) This response to the conditions of post-postmodernism is a fundamental aspect of post-postmodernist literature.¹⁹ Wallace's fiction is as self-conscious as any contemporary literature except, crucially, in how it promotes traditional and conservative values. In this way, his and all post-postmodernist fiction has certain generic and formal qualities that have already been outlined by a small cadre of critics. But this discussion has been produced in isolation from the kind of broader cultural analysis that Wallace was engaged in elaborating. It is in this vital overlap between literary values and cultural values that Wallace's writing is at its most difficult, contradictory, and valuable for a study of its increasingly recognized significance.

As I move through Wallace's work as a discussion, demonstration, and articulation of post-postmodernism, I will return most often to two articulations of post-postmodernism. Firstly, identity as marked by a distinctively hollow-centre, around which intensifications of certain performative aspects replace any attempt to understand a central core. Secondly, interpretation as the process not of discovery, but of an articulation of the identity of self and other, and as the practice of endless play and paradox that defines the post-postmodernist moment. The temporal

¹⁸ David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007), pp. 60-1; Nealon, p. 118.

¹⁹ For this, reason Toth and Brooks have described such literature as 'renewalist', emphasizing a 'neo-realism' that discounts postmodernist qualities. Josh Toth, and Neil Brooks, *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, ed. by Brooks and Toth (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 2007), p. 7; p. 5. While I have some sympathy for this characterization, I argue in this thesis that the rejection Toth and Brooks envision is undermined by the fully-realized logic of postmodernism Wallace's writing, in particular, unconsciously reflects. One essential quality of post-postmodernist fiction is therefore that it is postmodernist in spite of its putative intentions.

and critical background to the term 'post-postmodernism' that I have invoked in this short introduction, however, is separate from the parallel literary use of the term. In the next section of this introduction, I will briefly outline the qualities of this genre to which Wallace's work is central, and sketch its distinction from the temporal designation of the post-postmodern.

0.5 Post-postmodernist literature

More commonly than Nealon's use of 'post-postmodern' to describe a historical period, 'post-postmodernism' has been employed in a literary context. The analysis of post-postmodernist literature has a temporal overlap with Nealon's nevertheless distinct study of the term. It describes a cadre of authors emergent in the early '80s, and at their commercial peak through the '90s. Primarily, studies of post-postmodernist literature present David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, Mark Danielewski, Dave Eggers and William Vollman as the form's central figures.²⁰ Amongst these authors, the earliest novel is published in 1985 (Powers' *You Bright and Risen Angels*), followed by Wallace, Vollman and Franzen's respective debuts, each separated by a year. They generally publish their most recognized works between 1996 and 2001. *Infinite Jest*'s 1996 publication – marketed as a huge event within U.S. literary fiction – therefore marks the opening of post-postmodernist literature's heyday and the publication of *The*

²⁰ These figures are the subjects of the attempts to define a post-postmodernist literary aesthetic undertaken by Burn, Timmer, McLaughlin and LeClair. Robert L. McLaughlin, 'Post-postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World', *Symploke* 21.1/2 (2004), pp. 53-68; Tom LeClair, 'The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 38.1 (1996), pp. 12-37.

Corrections in 2001 marks the zenith of the form within the popular consciousness.²¹

Burn's explication of the term 'post-postmodernism' makes clear that it is necessary in order to periodize these authors' fictions. This writing is no longer 'postmodern' and so this generation demand a new critical frame. He states that 'their novels can be viewed as what biologists call homologous forms [...] [Franzen, Powers and Wallace] all emerge from the same origin, having been immersed in the fiction of American postmodernism.' (p. 16) Their grouping together under the term is therefore a retrospective move to find commonalities out of temporal and logical coherences, rather than an explicit and revolutionary genre-foundation on their part.

The production of post-postmodernist literature as a generic moment in the '90s can be explained by and contextualized within Mark McGurl's description of a 'Program Era' in U.S. fiction. His thesis is stated in his first sentence: 'the rise of the creative writing program stands as the most important event in postwar American literary history, and [...] paying attention to the increasingly intimate relation between literary production and the practices of higher education is the key to understanding the originality of postwar American literature'.²² McGurl's study is more extensive temporally than mine, but it provides a crucial frame of reference for the idea of post-

²¹ Wallace talked to David Lipsky about the 'hype' his publishers created around *Infinite Jest* through an extended and deliberately mysterious marketing campaign, and his discomfort with it, in an extended interview that often revolves around the commercial and critical success of that novel. David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2010), p. 28; p. 250. Franzen famously addressed a similar discomfort with the marketing and subsequent popularity of *The Corrections* in the essay 'Meet Me in St. Louis', where he links the publicity being featured on the Oprah Winfrey show to 'the meaning [of his life] being emptied out'. Jonathan Franzen, 'Meet Me in St. Louis', in *How To Be Alone* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), p. 266.

²² Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. ix.

postmodernist literature that my study will describe, particularly in my presentation of Wallace as its ultimate exemplar.

Firstly, Wallace and his writing are products of a program similar to those on which McGurl predicates his argument, and these studies were undertaken at a crucial moment not only in Wallace's career, but also in the expansion of such programs. Secondly, McGurl's study provides me with a way of explaining the 'family resemblance' between the forms of postmodernist and post-postmodernist literature, as Burn describes the relationship. McGurl sketches 'technomodernist' as a 'more useful' descriptor than 'postmodernist' for a form of writing more suited to the 'Cold War laboratory' than the workshop. (p. 42) This enables him not only to redefine postmodernist writing as a discourse influenced by science and tertiary-education, and thus equivalent to other identifiable discourses of the postwar era, but also to ground it in a particular group of writers with specific, coherent literary approaches. Thus, the coherences between postmodernism and post-postmodernism in literature can be explained as a continuation of this 'technomodernist' discourse; and the differences can be adduced to differences in theme and analysis that are applied by the inheritors of this lexical group. This is an essential part of my definition of a post-postmodernist literature. There are examples also of Wallace producing an analysis of fiction that coheres with McGurl's: in interviews, essays and fiction.²³ This suggests that his fiction reflects aspects of McGurl's analysis in much the same way that it reflects Nealon's, and that the thoughts of these

²³ Hugh Kennedy, and Geoffrey Polk, 'Looking for a Garde of Which to be Avant: an Interview with David Foster Wallace', *Whiskey Island Magazine* (Spring 1993), p. 52; p. 54; David Foster Wallace, 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young', in *Both Flesh and Not* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), p. 55; David Foster Wallace, 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', in *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 1997), p. 234; p. 265.

critics are both timely and complementary with each other and an analysis of Wallace.

Between Burn and McGurl's analysis, then, we have a clear explication of the literary conditions in which post-postmodernist literature emerges, as a necessary contiguous form of the postmodernist literature that it echoes in both form and program era discourse. These more specific conditions for its emergence are not contradictions of the broader conditions of the post-postmodernist era. Indeed, in understanding postmodernist forms as a specific discourse entering into competitive public relationship with other discourses, this reading presents literature in the post-postmodernist period as a reflection of the post-postmodern conditions I have described. One can find this diagnosis emergent in various places in Wallace's writing, such as his discussion of discourse in 'Authority and American Usage';²⁴ and his first-person, satirical take on the publishing industry in sections of *The Pale King*.²⁵

My explication of these ideas in Wallace's writing will not be to suggest that he is against or not fully embracing post-postmodernism. Rather, I will show that in such critical interventions Wallace is simultaneously reflecting something about post-postmodernist literature as a reactionary form, and also resisting post-postmodernism indirectly by

²⁴ In which Wallace states, in a 'baldly elitist' manner, that 'a class [such as his English class] composed partly of minorities whose primarily dialects are different from [Standard Written English] [...] requires the teacher to come up with [...] compelling arguments for [...] [Standard Written English]'; in other words, both demonstrating and justifying the continuation of a dominant technical, postmodernist discourse in the way McGurl describes. David Foster Wallace, 'Authority and American Usage', in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2007), p. 107.

²⁵ Such as Chapter 9 of *The Pale King*, in which Wallace describes the motivations for writing the novel autobiographically as seeing 'all sorts of U.S. writers [...] hit it big with memoirs'. (p. 81)

opening the paradoxical arguments upon which it relies. In this latter, this thesis will see Wallace as a much more contradictory figure than he has previously been presented, and I will not shy away from criticisms of the absences and wilful blindness found within his writing. I will, however, be able to produce a reading of his work that better elucidates him as simultaneously a critic of post-postmodernism and an author of post-postmodernist literature. I will use the coherence of these two conceptualizations to demonstrate his important and influential contribution to the nascent study of post-postmodernism in its bifurcated form.

0.6 The characteristics of post-postmodernist literature

Before moving to my analysis of Wallace's work I will briefly outline the main characteristics of post-postmodern literature as they are generally understood. These are significant features critics have used to group Wallace and his peers together, and I will re-consider them throughout this thesis. Wallace's literary post-postmodernism may well reproduce the formal features that these critics outline, but I will suggest a broader insight can be constructed from them by re-assessing their significance within Wallace's writing.

Primarily, as Timmer and Burn both state, post-postmodernist literature is focussed on the position of the subject.²⁶ Given the list of authors Timmer uses as exemplars (Eggers, Wallace, Danielewski), we can see this as primarily a focus on white, masculine subjectivity, or a universalized liberal-humanist subjectivity. In this, the analysis of post-postmodernist literature is one of white masculine identities within a broader field in which difference is foregrounded. This response might be categorized as a re-

²⁶ Timmer states explicitly in the first paragraph of her book, post-postmodernist texts 'perform a complicit and complicated critique on certain aspects of postmodern subjectivity'. (p. 13) Burn (2008:23), likewise, makes subjectivity central to the distinction between post-postmodernist fiction and postmodernist: 'Post-postmodernism is more obviously preoccupied with notions of character than postmodernism', although he qualifies, 'this development is not as straightforward as it may seem'.

assertion of the centrality of dominant forms of identity, or at least a re-orientation of this subject. For Timmer, this focus leads to a literary form that deals with a 'failure to construct a meaningful sense of self', and thus produces 'new narrative strategies to replace it.' (pp. 359-60) This echoes my conception of the 'hollow-centre' in which subjectivity is observably emptied. For Timmer, the response to this is to find new methods of identifying within fiction: this is emblemized by the role of Alcoholics Anonymous in *Infinite Jest*, or the Internal Revenue Service in *The Pale King*; I discuss the former at length in Chapter Six.²⁷

Post-postmodernist literature therefore places emphasis on the structural aspects of identity and community, in opposition to the solipsistic feeling that the culture generates. McLaughlin sees this as the foundational aspect of post-postmodernism, and it can be observed operating in the many failed projects and broken communications in Franzen's last two novels, *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, which are formulated on desperate attempts to join broader communities as internal family structures and conservative ideas of identity breakdown.²⁸ Wallace's emphasis on the solipsistic aspects of post-postmodernist identity is well discussed, and I argue that this is an expression of the 'hollow-centre' in Chapter One.²⁹

The features of post-postmodernist literature that draw directly from postmodernist literature – such as the use of metafictional techniques, or the

²⁷ 'Identifying' is the central form of the post-postmodern narrative in order to 'restore some faith and legitimacy of one's [...] feelings' and therefore 'construct an identity' according to Timmer. (p. 359) *Infinite Jest*'s AA emphasizes the way 'newcomers identify their whole selves with their head' instead of with others, and so 'the Disease makes its headquarters in the head'. (p. 272) In *The Pale King*, each of the talents the new processors of tax returns demonstrates an ability to 'identify those that should be audited', in other words, to understand the humanity of other's story at a distance. (p. 175) By this final novel, the process of identifying with others is both in the service of communal good (as in *Infinite Jest* and Timmer's conception of the ambitions of post-postmodernist literature), but also a marketized and profit-motivated process. (p. 333)

²⁸ McLaughlin, p. 65; Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002); Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011).

²⁹ Timmer presents Wallace interest in solipsism as central to post-postmodernist literature generally, claiming that such fiction deals with a 'perceived solipsistic quality of the postmodern experience world'. (p. 13) Wallace's writing addresses this aspect most directly in his review of David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, although it is a central trope throughout his work, as Mary Holland has described. David Foster Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum: David Markson's Wittgenstein's Mistress', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10.2 (1990), p. 236; Mary K. Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose": Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Critique* 47.3 (Spring 2006), pp. 218-42.

tendency to produce 'encyclopaedic' novels – is described by both Timmer and Burn as a 'realist' approach. In particular, Wallace's focus on the self-reflexive aspects of postmodernism is an explication of the post-postmodernist condition, presenting a formal intensification of those features. When Burn claims that '[p]ost-postmodern novels are informed by the postmodernist critique of the naïve realist belief that language can be a true mirror of reality, and yet they are suspicious of the logical climax to this critique', he is describing the way that post-postmodernist fiction presents us with a 'realist' portrait of a world in which postmodernist suspicions are dominant. (p. 20) The approach to postmodernist ideas reflects a desire to approach them through the lens of realist portrayal. This is the central stylistic marker of the post-postmodernist novel.

My project is to highlight the failure of post-postmodernist literature's attempts at resistance. By showing how it is implicated within a post-postmodernist world and unconsciously describes that world, I will demonstrate that its radical intentions fail at the moment they are expressed. However, as my analysis of Wallace's fiction will conclude, it is in these moments of paradoxical self-contradiction, where post-postmodernism's emphasis on self-reflection demonstrably falls apart, that we can find the potential for resistance to the totalization of post-postmodernist logic. It is through these unconscious traces of contradiction and excess that post-postmodernist literature best reveals itself as a critical form, even if these moments are the unintentional products of a form that is obsessed with the rectitude of its own intentions. In these moments of contradiction will demonstrate the value of a post-postmodernist literature that I largely approach skeptically in this thesis.

0.7 Chapter summary

After this Introduction, my thesis will follow a pattern in which two different kinds of analysis are presented. There are three broadly thematic chapters, in which key topics of Wallace's writing are discussed at length, using examples from across a variety of genres and moments in his career. These chapters articulate a comprehensive argument about Wallace's concerns, and they cohere with the broader argument about the dual-nature of post-postmodernism that I have outlined in this Introduction.

Interspersed between these thematic chapters will be three shorter chapters that focus on the form and technique Wallace's prose employs. Each of these will extend the analysis of the preceding thematic chapter in important ways, showing how the principles I have applied to analyzing Wallace's writing carry into the formal qualities of his prose. Together these sections produce a consistent and broad analysis of Wallace's work. They form a logical argument about the qualities of his prose that mirrors and extends the reading of post-postmodernism that my thesis as a whole performs. This dual-strand approach allows me to develop readings of different aspects of Wallace's writing that are cumulatively more resonant, and integrate close textual analysis with a thematic approach in a rigorous and structured way.

Chapter One describes three things in Wallace's work: his commitment to a conception of writing as the production of an empathetic relationship between the author-figure and the reader, an examination of the representation of depression as a key personal theme in his work, and the concept of post-postmodernist literature and identity that can be formulated from these aspects of his writing. It traces the author's own stated ambitions and intentions for his writing as a method of expanding the understanding of his position as an 'author-figure'. I look in detail at Wallace's first published story, 'The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing', a story from the middle of his career, 'The Depressed Person', and a story

from the end of his career, 'Good Old Neon'. Alongside these narratives – each of which features a central protagonist manifesting symptoms of depression and having suicidal tendencies – I address moments in which depression is foregrounded in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*.³⁰

Chapter Two is the first of the shorter explorations of the forms and techniques of Wallace's writing. It focuses on the smallest units of meaning, looking at lexical choices and sentence structure. In Chapter One I detail Wallace's use of recursive figures in multiple ways.³¹ Chapter Two develops this analysis by showing how the details of these figures are always self-cancelling. They elide their own meaning by foregrounding the paradoxical relationship to ideas of 'truth' that are central to post-postmodernism.

The features I analyze in Chapter Two are typical of Wallace's style. They include mixed lexical registers, hyper-specific vocabulary and extreme length and digressiveness. By examining these as part of a particular approach to information across a variety of texts – I examine extracts from a novel, a short story, and a piece of non-fiction – this chapter provides a theoretical explanation for these qualities of Wallace's prose in all its different manifestations.

Chapter Three returns to my thematic analysis by considering the multiple ways in which Wallace's prose approaches ethical topics. There are examples of such material across Wallace's whole oeuvre and this is a feature that marks the ambitions of post-postmodernist literature as a critical form in relationship to its generational era: one central 'correction' post-postmodernism makes of postmodernism is to consider the effects of the latter as deleterious because of the lack of consideration to 'human

³⁰ David Foster Wallace, 'The Planet Trillaphon as it Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing', *The Amherst Review* 12 (1984), pp. 26-33; David Foster Wallace, 'The Depressed Person', in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007), pp. 37-69; David Foster Wallace, 'Good Old Neon', in *Oblivion: Stories* (London: Abacus, 2004), pp. 141-183.

³¹ In this, I rely particularly on the work of N. Katherine Hayles. N. Katherine Hayles, 'The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*', *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999), pp. 675-697.

'experience' it implies.³² Paul Giles's explication of Wallace's 'hortatory idiom', and the consequent quality of his work as self-conscious about its own extra-literary ambition is a significant feature from his first novel *The Broom of the System*.³³ This desire to consider the ethical dimension of literature marks a development from the empathetic concerns discussed in Chapter One. In this chapter, I will turn to consider the separation of post-postmodernist literature from the logic of the period in which it emerges, seeing a primarily conservative formulation of the world as central to its literary construction.

In Chapter Four, I again provide a close analysis of a spectrum of Wallace's work. Here, I present an examination of his use of footnotes and endnotes – features that have come to exemplify his style – and consider their effect, particularly on how Wallace's writing presents information. I also observe similar functions assigned to other typographical material in writing where footnoting is not present.

The analysis produced in this chapter develops three key themes from earlier sections of the thesis. It invokes the self-cancelling approach to meaning presented by Wallace's sentences described in Chapter Two. In turn, this represents a development of the conclusion of Chapter Three, that Wallace's approach to the ethical indirectly produces a reading of the post-postmodernist era that is less reactionary than it would seem at first sight. It foregrounds the inevitability of maintaining paradoxes in an era in which information is produced at overwhelming levels. Finally, analyzing the techniques by which Wallace presents information demonstrates the values of author-reader communication described in Chapter One, as the need for exacting attention to the text's focus becomes increasingly apparent as Wallace's post-postmodernist style is refined through his career. Chapter Four draws on a range of Wallace's writing: 'academic' writing, non-fiction, and both long and short fiction.

³² Burn's study of Franzen concludes by suggesting that post-postmodernist fiction like Franzen, Powers, and Wallace's, 'suggest not a rejection of postmodernism, but a gradual correction': a relationship based on a critical regard for what has gone before. (p. 128)

³³ Paul Giles, 'All Swallowed Up', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 6.

Chapter Five provides an resistant take on Wallace's demonstration of the conservative aspects of post-postmodernist literature. Throughout his writing, one can observe an unusual relationship to female figures, and I take the various depictions of women across Wallace's novels as a starting point for observing the negative implications of the logic post-postmodern literature manifests more generally. I contextualize this material by examining its relationship to feminist responses to postmodernism at the moment of post-postmodernism's rise in the early '90s. By presenting contradictory responses to the waning of postmodernist theory, I argue that post-postmodernist literature, in contrast to contemporary feminisms, presents us with a potentially regressive response to the political and social changes that typify the era. This formulation simultaneously echoes Wegner's conception of the 'long '90s' as a period containing 'a multiplicity of possible futures', (p. 4) and Žižek's demonstration of the contradictions of contemporary liberalism. (e.g. *Living in End Times*, p. 37)

Finally, Chapter Six interprets two of Wallace's major pieces of fiction at length, to analyze how his post-postmodernist fictions are structured through their plots and characters. It is a commonplace of Wallace scholarship, following Marshall Boswell, to see 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' to be Wallace's literary manifesto set out in fictional terms, and to see *Infinite Jest* as the only full expression of the ambitions set out in that story.³⁴ Acting as a mirror-image of Chapter One, this chapter will again set out to reveal some of the intentions of Wallace's project. However, I focus on the contradictions and paradoxes inherent within it, as these are the logical structures that underpin the analytical project of the whole thesis.

In the plots of Wallace's work, the post-postmodernist project will be shown to be an endlessly digressive meta-metafiction, in which postmodernist forms are inescapably dominant structures that leave reader and author self-consciously stuck in the play of detail: information and its contexts. Ultimately, the regressive means by which 'Westward' and *Infinite*

³⁴ Boswell claims that the story reveals 'the heart – literally and figuratively – of Wallace's method', and 'declares [Wallace] ready to [...] rival his predecessors and assuage, rather than re-present loneliness [...] [through] *Infinite Jest*'. Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 112; p. 115.

Jest propose to escape such claims are demonstrable failures. This analysis makes these fictions the ultimate exemplars of post-postmodernist fiction, although to very different ends than those described by Boswell.

Wallace's depiction of the post-postmodern as a critical and cultural understanding comes in the ways he presents characters, most particularly in *Infinite Jest*. My analysis of the ways addiction and depression, and communication and solipsism, are figured through Hal Incandenza and Don Gately in that novel ultimately enables me to claim that Wallace's fiction, for all the failures I identify, represents a fruitful and detailed depiction of the post-postmodernist era.

In my Conclusion, then, I reprise my argument by demonstrating the influence Wallace's writing has had. I describe how the aspects of his fiction that I have analyzed have come to characterize more recent fiction. This enables me to find multiple examples of a post-postmodernist literature that emerges during and after the 'first wave' of post-postmodernism that Wallace represents. Ultimately, this is the project my thesis undertakes: defining Wallace as an articulator of 'post-postmodernism' in multiple respects, whose critical insights and influential position we can use to find an understanding of the broad and important applications of that term.

0.8 Conclusion: Ambitions

This thesis represents a timely and significant intervention in U.S. literary studies. It describes the legacy of an important literary figure, David Foster Wallace, through a detached and overarching schema. It outlines the significance of his current academic popularity and contextualizes it within its historical period. It also ties together a significant strand of recent literary theory in its multiple forms to clarify what we should mean by 'post-postmodern'. This serves as a demonstration of the usefulness of a study of Wallace's work and the application of 'post-postmodernism' for a variety of critical projects.

In sketching a broad portrait of Wallace's writing, taking in analysis of minor and major texts, interviews and biographies, fiction and non-fiction, my project represents a major addition to the understanding of his work. What it lacks in systematically addressing each piece in turn, its thematic and formal analysis compensates for by producing a coherent response to both some of the most recognized and some otherwise critically-ignored aspects of his writing. Likewise, I have approached the existent scholarship on Wallace in a non-chronological way. I find value in a wide range of the critical work that has already introduced his significance as a post-postmodernist author. But I have consciously extended this body of work into a project that both usefully synthesizes them and finds hitherto unacknowledged problems within the corpus of Wallace criticism.

It is my intention that this project should present future critics with a starting point for further study of Wallace and his peers' writing; this thesis uses relatively extended readings of a sample of texts by a single author to demonstrate in full the importance of the structural and thematic ideas that those pieces contain. This thesis makes no claims to be a completely comprehensive study of every aspect and example even of Wallace's writing, let alone of those peers and successors he consciously or unconsciously influenced. But I contend that the thematic and formal aspects of Wallace's writing that I describe should, as I begin to present in my Conclusion, allow a more detailed picture of post-postmodernist forms to begin to be constructed.

This thesis has a focused-breadth, a carefully derived originality, and both a specific and broader set of further implications. In demonstrating and questioning the intellectual insight and importance to be found within David

Foster Wallace's writing, it responds directly to the challenges for literary work that can be found there: after postmodernism, what can writing do? I will show how Wallace's post-postmodernism reveals the logic, character and limits of his era in vital and significant ways.

Chapter One: David Foster Wallace's figures of depression

1.1 Introduction: Suicide and the author

David Foster Wallace's death by suicide in 2008 changed the discourse around his writing. It is inevitable that the work of an author who repeatedly described the experience of depression in his fiction while suffering from that disease should be re-evaluated in this context after such a premature death. The response to his suicide among his literary peers has been well-documented.¹ Literary criticism of Wallace's career has also reflected the significance of his death, with one prominent collection of critical essays on his work framed directly around transcripts taken from memorial services.²

This chapter will show that this extended desire to respond to Wallace's death by critics and peers, while reflecting his importance as a literary figure, can also be explained in two other ways. Firstly, Wallace's writing is prefigured on the idea of placing the 'reader' into relationship with an 'author-figure' to be associated with Wallace himself as closely as possible. This has been described by different critics, but should be associated with a tendency within his writing to address the reader directly at certain points, and to emphasize the idea of central, universal, 'human' truths by means other than realist techniques. Between these features, Wallace's writing attempts to produce a rhetorical empathy in the reader that results in

¹ For example, online journal *Five Dials* produced a special edition with reflections on Wallace's life by family and acquaintances, alongside literary figures such as Zadie Smith and Don DeLillo. 'Five Dials: Celebrating the Life and Work of David Foster Wallace, 1962-2008', *Five Dials*, 10 (2009) <http://fivedials.com/files/fivedials_no10.pdf> [accessed 13 September 2013]; Jonathan Franzen commented on the implications of Wallace's death in *The New Yorker*. Jonathan Franzen, 'Farther Away: "Robinson Crusoe", David Foster Wallace, and the island of solitude', *The New Yorker*, 18 April 2011, pp. 80-95.

² *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012). This collection intersperses critical essays with remembrances from literary figures like Don DeLillo, George Saunders, Jonathan Franzen and Rick Moody.

the kinds of personal responses to his death that have been written by a variety of figures. It is my contention that these human truths primarily rely on a sense of the 'intensification' of experience that Nealon would recognize to be post-postmodernist.

Secondly, there are implications of this foregrounding of the author and of the necessity for the empathetic reading of fiction for the definition of post-postmodernist literature. By concentrating on his descriptions of the experience of depression, it becomes clear that the ultimate point of the empathy that his writing produces is both logically structured and contradictory.³ It is also formulated as an intensification of experience. This pattern of irreducible logic figures throughout Wallace's writing. I will show how this acts as a synecdoche for the logic of fiction after postmodernism, foregrounding the contradictions implicit in the desire to return to 'human' values. Wallace's presentation of depression should therefore be understood as a depiction of the post-postmodernist condition, in which absence is both logical and fundamental. In this respect, Wallace expresses depression as the experience of the 'hollow centre' of subjectivity that I described in this thesis's introduction.

The fundamental claim of this thesis is that an analysis of Wallace's writing amounts to an analysis of post-postmodernist writing – a form for which it is exemplary - while presenting how the products of Wallace's thought can separately but complementarily present him as a leading critic of the post-postmodern condition. By examining his claims about the role of an author-figure and 'human truths' in his writing, alongside the implications of the writing that results, this chapter will have clear implications for this larger project. It will outline the apparent self-perception of the role of post-postmodernist literature as a cultural intervention through the writing of one of its central figures. It will also demonstrate the unconscious influence of the broader structures of post-postmodernism that I have outlined on that writing.

³ Frank Cioffi finds that the essence of Wallace's art simultaneously 'stimulates [...] "empathy" and [...] "estrangement".' Frank Louis Cioffi, "An Anguish Become Thing": Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, *Narrative* 8.2 (2000), p. 162.

The chapter will start by exploring the idea of a return to the figure of the author, with an emphasis on the relationship between that figure and the notion of autobiographical truths that are fundamental to Wallace's writing on depression. I will then consider three shorter pieces from across his career, 'The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing', 'The Depressed Person', and 'Good Old Neon'. Each of these presents the internal monologue of a depressed protagonist. Finally, in the conclusion to this chapter I will discuss how Wallace's final novel re-writes these figures of depression in a way that flirts most directly with autobiographical writing. Throughout, reference will be made to other pertinent sections of Wallace's writing, particular sections of *Infinite Jest*, and to the claims about the function of the author and literary writing made in his non-fiction.

1.2 Undoing the death of the author

David Foster Wallace stated that when reading or writing, he considered the idea of the author figure to be essential.⁴ In expressing the indispensability of this figure, Wallace claims a suspicion of 'postmodernism's easy adoption of poststructuralist philosophy',⁵ as has been described by Jim McGuigan.⁶ In particular, Wallace rebuts the theories expressed in Roland Barthes'

⁴ David Foster Wallace, 'Greatly Exaggerated', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007), p. 144.

⁵ Jim McGuigan, *Modernity and Postmodern Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), p. 2.

⁶ I will treat McGuigan's claim uncritically, here, in order to aid the concision of my argument. It is difficult to either distinguish the claims of post-structuralist philosophy from definitions of postmodernism, or to directly associate them. However, the interlinking of the two – between Barthes, Derrida and Foucault directly cited here, and a postmodernist literary aesthetic that is more broadly implied – is the thing that Wallace's claims respond to and, as such, needs little elaboration for this argument about Wallace – rather than the philosophical connections – to hold.

essay 'The Death of the Author'⁷ and Michel Foucault's 'What is an Author?'.⁸ In these essays, the philosophers challenge the primacy of the author-figure's control over the production of meaning in a text. Such a conception of the relationship between author and text was vital to the ways poststructuralist theory and so postmodernism came to understand the notion of authorship. However, the dismissal of the 'author-figure' that is often assigned to these essays has been contested, for example by Seán Burke.⁹

Wallace addresses these issues directly in a review of H.L. Hix's *Morte d'Author: An Autopsy*. He elucidates some of his ideas regarding post-structural theory's emphasis on the 'writer' over the 'author', following Barthes and Foucault in his terminology. He states: '[...] to appreciate why the metaphysical viability of an author is a big deal you have to recognize the difference between a writer – the person whose choices and actions account for a text's features – and an author – the entity whose intentions are taken to be responsible for a text's meaning.' ('Greatly Exaggerated', p. 139.)

Hix's book, according to Wallace, attempts to reconcile these elements by emphasizing the complexities of how a reader perceives the writer or author in the act of reading. Wallace finally dismisses the book's project due to its irrelevance to '[...] those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and

⁷ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-9.

⁸ Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?*, ed. by William Irwin (Westport, CT; London: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 9-22.

another, [for whom] the whole question seems sort of arcane.' ('Greatly Exaggerated', p. 144.)

The review itself shows Wallace to be well-versed in the sorts of theoretical work Hix is describing. He is able to consider Hix's argument as it relates to contemporary theory, and allude to some of the gaps and absences in his study. Nevertheless, for Wallace, the questions that 'Death of the Author'-type studies raise are ultimately answered by a 'gut knowledge' that writing is an 'act of communication' between writer and reader.

Wallace's consideration of the role of the author is directly contradictory to the underpinnings of postmodernist literature. His suggestion is that writing has a directness of message and intentionality, just as 'communication' implies a passing from one to the other. It also implies a kind of presence. His claim therefore directly contradicts, for example, Jacques Derrida's conclusion that writing be valued for its implied absence, when opposed to speech.¹⁰ Taken as a transmission from author to reader, Wallace suggests that in his writing his position is *as important* as his reader's, and that it represents something of himself and his intentions. Indeed, Wallace's belief is that the same is true for all creative writing (both fictional and probably non-fictional). Such a belief can be deduced from his statement that, in the process of reading he is [...] also getting access to the mind of the author, in a way that we don't have access to each other talking

⁹ Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Envois", in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf, trans. by Alan Bass (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 486-515.

this way.¹¹ As in the deconstruction tradition, but in an almost perverse reversal, Wallace values writing above speaking, *because* it can more closely reflect the consciousness of the author, or present characters that are refractions of this consciousness.

But Wallace also recognizes the limits of the formulation he has made. He demonstrates such imperfections, for example, in the moment of 'Good Old Neon' in which the temporality of the reading process presents a limitation on writing's ability to reproduce an actual thought process, a limitation directly addressed in the text.¹² The 'communion' Wallace suggests occurs during the reading of 'stream of consciousness' passages - between a triangulation of writer, character and author - need not be limited to such devices. Pieces that reproduce rhetorical arguments, which reoccur throughout Wallace's work, are equally predicated on understanding the position of the author from which they are made. Paul Giles has made the case that such writing can be considered part of Wallace's 'hortatory idiom'. Rhetoric, whether passed 'through' a character, or seemingly provided by Wallace-as-author directly, is always a challenge to the reader, asking them to formulate conclusions explicitly about who is writing and why. This is an implication of what Giles calls Wallace's 'intense capacity for self-interrogation' throughout his career. ('All Swallowed Up', p. 6)

Wallace's writing places self-conscious concerns at its centre, and it is in the interplay between self-interrogation, self-consciousness, and rhetorical

¹¹ 'David Foster Wallace im Interview (2003)', *ZDFmediathek*, <<http://www.zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/beitrag/video/823228/David-Foster-Wallace-im-Interview-%25282003%2529>> [Accessed 1 December 2009]. Online video.

¹² [...] the point is that all of this and more was passing through my head just in the interval of the small, dramatic pause [...]', 'Good Old Neon', p. 150.

hortatory, that it demands we locate an author figure. One clear example of Wallace's use of such a direct rhetoric is the story 'Octet', which presents itself as a series of direct challenges to the values and morality of its readers, expanding eventually to consider the process of reading and writing itself as an ethical act.¹³

1.3 The inferring of the author

Susan S. Lanser suggests that '[...] authors can be known only through their "personations"; what they represent is what represents them.' She continues, '[i]f the implied author exists "in" a text, it exists as inferred and imagined: the implied author is a reading effect. This effect cannot be guaranteed, for the implied author is essentially a matter of belief, existing only when and where readers construct it.' Thus, '[w]e can never settle the question of an implied author's existence because that existence is the effect of particular reading practices in which some but not all readers believe and engage.'¹⁴ Lanser argues that, for some readers, the process of 'implying' an author occurs alongside the 'interpretive processes Barthes described in *S/Z*', and is produced by:

[...] infer[ring] a sense of the author who could have produced this text, and through accretion and revision I attach to that image certain (moral, political, social, aesthetic, and/or personal) values, norms, perspectives, concerns. Any knowledge I may possess about the historical author and the cultural context operates in tandem or in

¹³ David Foster Wallace, 'Octet', in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007), pp. 131-60.

¹⁴ Susan S. Lanser, '(Im)plying the Author', *Narrative* 9.2 (2001), pp. 154-5.

tension with my reading, colluding, and colliding to produce my sense of the text's producer. (p. 155)

Rather than blindly insisting on a strict partition between author and text, one which the multivalency of postmodernist fiction thrusts upon the reader, Wallace's rhetorical devices, and his use of personal material, confronts us with his implied presence at the centre of the act of reading. This presence is only heightened by Wallace's self-consciousness of the act of writing that he draws from metafiction; his implied authorship is intensified by his rejection of realism and its presumed transparency.

This questioning of the limits of postmodernism and representation aligns Wallace's fiction with what T.V. Reed calls 'the fiction of postmodern realism', an 'oxymoron [that is] a challenge to all monolithic conceptions of the postmodern'.¹⁵ However, Wallace's fiction places postmodernist conceptions, monolithic and total, as prior to and framing the experience that any impulse to realism his fiction might contain. He stated that realism 'imposes an order and sense and ease of interpretation on experience that's never there in real life'. (Lipsky, p. 37) His acknowledgement of the status of that imposition of order relies on the presenting the knowledge that what we read is lifted directly from the author's own experience. Wallace's fiction thereby uses metafictional techniques to highlight the 'frame' of his fiction. By describing precisely particular experiences, it attempts to reproduce specific aspects of transparent realism within that frame, so making the

¹⁵ T.V. Reed, *Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers: Literary Politics and the Poetics of American Social Movements* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA; Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), p. 20.

reader aware of its mediation through his experience. Wallace's writing is therefore predicated on a metafiction of experience.

Wallace's fiction does not deny the validity of the questions postmodernism raises about the status of authorship, ontology or relativity. His writing does not re-assume a sense of transparency. Instead, Wallace (it can be deduced) retains an awareness of and manipulates his 'implied authorhood', intensifying that position through trust-building empathy rather than demonstrations of skill. This being the case, it becomes even more necessary to treat his work as a series of texts that Lanser describes as 'manipulat[ing] – ply[ing] and imply[ing] - a range of strategies that may evoke different notions of authorship.' (p. 155) Wallace's writing thereby is an intensification of the self-consciousness of postmodernist fiction, in which not just affect, but also the implications of that affect, is manipulated.

1.4 Reading 'David Foster Wallace'

There are four primary sources from which we might examine the author-figure 'David Foster Wallace'. Primarily, his fiction; more directly, because of Wallace's habitual use of the first-person, the many non-fictional pieces of writing he produced which maintain a consistent authorial presence;¹⁶ thirdly, the interviews he gave;¹⁷ and finally, the biographical information that has

¹⁶ Christoph Ribbat has analyzed Wallace's 'presence' in his journalism: Christoph Ribbat, 'Seething Static: Notes on Wallace and Journalism', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles, CA; Austin, TX: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 187-98.

¹⁷ There are presently two overlapping collections of interviews with Wallace, indicating a significant interest in such material. *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2012); *David Foster Wallace The Last Interview: And Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2012).

accumulated about him since his death.¹⁸ In the interaction of these four groups of information, the way Wallace's work operates on the level of the 'implied author' can be reconstructed.

An article by Jakki Spicer provides further insight into the ways the construction of an authorial figure interacts with the reading process. Following Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis, she states that: '[...] in thinking of fantasy's relation to the autobiography – or the author, or the individual self – we should not be thinking in terms of objects (such as the author or the individual) but in terms of *scénarios* through which these might be brought into being.'¹⁹ In this way, Spicer distinguishes the implied author from a fantasy of an author. Similarly to Lancer, Spicer finds '[...] a *desire* for the author, the complete self, the transparency of language [...] remains a reality. [...] The fantasy has not died, even if the author has.' (p. 391, emphasis retained) To follow this logic to its conclusion, to accept uncritically the declaration of the death of the author is at best irrelevant, and at worst damaging to the process of reading, as it denies how people actually read. Indeed, Gregson points out that Raymond Carver produces postmodernist fiction imbued with examples of 'lived experience', producing a kind of 'fictive double-take' that means 'self-reflexivity multiplies'. (p. 141) It is this effect

¹⁸ D.T. Max has written a biography of Wallace. D.T., Max, *Every Love Story Is A Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (London: Granta Books, 2012). Biographical articles also abound, many of which draw connections between Wallace's life and his art in the wake of his death. Particularly useful is Maria Bustillos, 'Inside David Foster Wallace's Self-Help Library', *The Awl*, 5th April 2011, <<http://www.theawl.com/2011/04/inside-david-foster-wallaces-private-self-help-library>> [Accessed 6 April 2011]. Lipsky connected these last two notes by producing a book-length interview with Wallace that was marketed as a biography; unfortunately, Lipsky's editing of the material excises much of Wallace's critical or literary thought in favour of speculations about his life, a fact that emphasizes the significance many have placed on valuing the biography of Wallace above his role as a thinker.

¹⁹ Jakki Spicer, 'The Author Is Dead, Long Live the Author: Autobiography and the Fantasy of the Individual', *Criticism* 47.3 (2005), p. 390.

that Wallace's use of depression as *scénario* that I will consider to be a central post-postmodernist gesture in this chapter.

Wallace's assertions follow Spicer's suspicions of the easy critical acceptance of Barthes's assertion in ready definitions of postmodernism, as far as they can be made. He proposes a double self-consciousness, as Boswell finds him doing elsewhere, suggesting that we accept our desire and acknowledge the fantasy of the author. (Boswell, p. 17) These fantasies are what he describes as 'know[ing] in his gut' that reading is a communication between two individuals. So, in Wallace's manipulation of the authorial presence in his work, we can see him manipulating these readerly desires and fantasies. He foregrounds their status as fantasy in order to highlight the self-consciousness of his status as author. There is a break here with postmodernism's ontological uncertainty as defined by McHale.²⁰ This is a manifestation of the figure of the hollow centre. Wallace's claim is that we should understand the emptiness of the authorial position, but examine its partial manifestations as if they represent the completed figure we know to be absent. That this amounts to an acknowledgement of the 'traditional human verities' that make writing and reading to be at least a facsimile of communication is a conservative twist on what is, fundamentally, a post-postmodernist intensification of the postmodern position of the author.²¹ Wallace's 'author-figure' is a manifestation of what happens to the author after postmodernism's logic is absolutely dominant.

²⁰ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 9-11.

²¹ David Foster Wallace, 'Le Conversazioni 2006: David Foster Wallace: "Generation", *Youtube.com*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsziSppMUS4&feature=related>> [Accessed 9 August 2009].

Spicer's piece fundamentally pertains to autobiography. However, David Foster Wallace was suspicious of purely autobiographical material, as he showed when discussing the status of non-fictional essays:

I don't much care for abreactive or confessional memoirs. [...] I think the real reason is that I just don't trust them. Memoirs/Confessional, I mean. Not so much their factual truth as their agenda. [...] I find most of them sad in a way that I don't think their authors intend.²²

This description aligns both Lanser and Spicer's conflation of the autobiographical with a fantasy of individuality. It also corresponds closely to how Wallace describes the kind of writing-for-fun that metafictional self-consciousness encourages.²³ Material that simply represents an individual life is found by Wallace to be suspicious in terms of motivation. It is not art, but promotion. Instead, Wallace continues that he approves of such material if it 'use[s] the confessional stuff as part of a larger and (to me) much richer scheme or story.' (p. xviii) The overlap between Wallace's critique of self-conscious and naively unself-conscious writing implies that it is in the conflation of the two that writing is successful. There is a correspondence between Wallace's valuation of confessional material and the 'collisions' Lanser finds between the actual author figure and the implied author as inscribed in individual texts. The increasing 'richness' Wallace describes, of structure, individuality and personification, can be seen across the three texts under discussion later in this chapter.

Presented chronologically, the stories I will discuss move away from the more purely autobiographical details of Wallace's earliest piece, to become self-consciously imaginative in 'Good Old Neon', the final story

²² David Foster Wallace, 'Deciderization 2007 – a Special Report', in *The Best American Essays 2007* (Boston: Mariner, 2007), p. xviii.

²³ The essay 'The Nature of Fun' presents an example of Wallace's critique of dishonest self-consciousness, one that echoes that of the memoirist here. David Foster Wallace, 'The Nature of Fun', in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), pp. 193-99.

examined.²⁴ Indeed, this last text produces a partial description of the imaginative process itself. Despite this steady decline in autobiographical elements, each story demonstrates what Spicer calls 'a perverse version of body snatchers'. Spicer elucidates this phrase as:

[...] rather than evacuating the individuality of individuals, autobiography infects its victims *with* individuality, with both the desire and the demand for a scriptable individuality. (p. 398, emphasis retained)

Spicer's claim comes very close to David Foster Wallace's description of fiction. He describes its ability to give insight into the lives of others, and to help combat loneliness by showing the similarities between individuals. ('David Foster Wallace im Interview (2003)') Wallace's view of the potential of literature, and its overlaps with Spicer's argument, indicates that the personal and autobiographical is not necessarily material to be shunned or distorted. Rather, Wallace's suggestion is that such material is integrated as much as possible, to allow this 'perverse body snatching' as much scope as possible to fulfil literature's potential ethical dimension. This being the case, delineating such aspects of Wallace's fiction helps to demonstrate the ways his writing operates, both on and with the reader.

Spicer notes that Walter Benjamin related storytelling not to a 'complete subject' but rather to a communication of experiences: 'With storytelling, it is not the "self" that is transmitted, but *experiences*.' (p. 395, emphasis retained) These experiences form the *scénarios* through which the fantasy of the author might be created.²⁵ Autobiographical essays, like those

²⁴ For example, the description of the protagonist of the first story crying can be compared to the perspiration problems of Wallace as a teenager described by D.T Max's 'The Unfinished'. 'Trillaphon', p. 27; D.T. Max, 'The Unfinished: David Foster Wallace's Struggle to Surpass *Infinite Jest*', *The New Yorker*, March 9 2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/09/090309fa_fact_max>, [Accessed 23 April 2013] (para. 14 of 98).

²⁵ Benjamin asks whether it is the storyteller's [...] task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way'. Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Observations on the Work of Nikolai Leskov', *Selected Writings*, 3 vols, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), III (1935-1938), p. 162.

to be discussed in this chapter, provide us with an opportunity to produce more detailed 'fantasies' by allowing the comparison of our own subjectivity to a 'real' autobiographical subject.

The central strategy of post-postmodernist fiction, as Wallace performs it, is to examine the paradox of how the particular and hyper-specific – the language of the *scénario* – can retain any broader meaning after the hermeneutics of suspicion adopted by postmodernist and poststructuralist theory. This applies not only to the fictional or autobiographical rendering of those experiences, but also to the experiences themselves. By placing the figure of direct communication between reader and author figure in the depiction of the emotional content of such experience at the centre of such writing, Wallace's strategies rely centrally on *scénarios* rather than autobiography, and this develops into the form of phenomenologically-inflected writing that I will examine in Chapter Three. The remainder of this chapter will centre on the importance of the concept of the *scénario* for post-postmodernist writing.

It is possible to view Wallace's use of such *scénarios* in his non-fiction. His strategy in such writing is to propose that the reader compare and contrast their received knowledge with his presentation of his own explicitly subjective experience of them. These networks of information produce not a real "self" for Wallace, but a simulacrum of communication with his authorial presence. This presence, following Lanser's argument discussed earlier, is often reflected in the way we read the authorial presence in Wallace's fiction. In presenting a mutually recognizable figure across fiction and non-fiction, one dependent on an intellectual project of informal but informative logical regression of observation, the author figure is a deliberately dominant and

consistent force in his writing. Both types of writing are constructed in different ways, but in their consistencies, they are mutually informative.²⁶ The implied author of Wallace's work provides therefore a useful tool to analyze a wide cross-section of his writing. The variety of writing he produced adds significant complexity to that figure. This also strengthens the sense of relationship with the author-figure that he discussed, and that readers have described feeling.²⁷

Following his death by suicide, 'depression' is an important means of connecting Wallace's work to the conditions of his life, one dealt with in some depth from his earliest writing. Descriptions of depression are thereby the most obvious examples of *scénarios* in Spicer's terms. This theme is important in reconstructing Wallace's biography to better understand a body of work over which he, as an authorial figure, stands heavily. But it is even more crucial to examine this theme to discover what depression comes to represent for Wallace and how it affects his relation to the world and his readers. This examination is the project of the remainder of this chapter. Through the analysis of three short stories, taken from different stages in Wallace's career, the theme of depression will be looked at as an evolving literary and social critique. Relevant details from both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* will also be explicated, in order to show the pervasive nature of these ideas throughout his work.

²⁶ I discuss these features of Wallace's writing more in Chapters Two and Four.

²⁷ Wallace makes the argument for literature as a medium for the personal communication of something 'real' in 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young'. (pp. 37-68) For an example of the sense of attachment this gave his audience, see this from Bustillos: 'I have a friend, C., who has suffered from depression for many years; she is a fellow-admirer of Wallace. C. used to have a photograph of him on the wall of her very pretty, comforting red-walled Midtown office, and she would tell people that he was either her son or her boyfriend, depending on her mood.'

1.5 'The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing'

Wallace's first published story - 'The Planet Trillaphon as it Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing' - is a remarkably fully-formed version of Wallace's voice. It echoes quite precisely many of the themes re-visited in his later work. This adds to a sense that 'Trillaphon' represents a map of certain fundamental interests that would be returned to throughout his career. In particular, the character of David Cusk in Chapter 13 of *The Pale King* should be considered almost a direct re-writing of the protagonist of 'Trillaphon', and echoes of the same figure are found in *Infinite Jest*'s Marlon Bain.²⁸

The temptation to read Wallace's depressed or addicted characters as directly autobiographical must be tempered.²⁹ This is not only because of the dangers Spicer has described of confusing the experiences of the author with his or her self in autobiographical work, but also because of Wallace's

²⁸ [...] Marlon Bain is the single sweatiest human being you'd ever want to get within a click of. I think the O.C.D. might have started as a result of the compulsive sweat, which the sweat itself started after his parents were killed in a grotesque freak accident, Bain's. Unless the strain of the constant rituals and fussing itself exaculates the perspiring.' *Infinite Jest*, p. 1039n234. The last sentence's neologism 'exaculates' suggests that the compulsive distraction of obsessive compulsion represents an unconscious diversion from the process by which perspiration starts, implying that Bain's sweating is similar to M.A.'s; it also relates both characters' problem to their sexuality, with its visual echo of 'ejaculation'. This theme is not picked up on anywhere else in this discussion or in any direct way in Wallace's work, but this subtle reference to sexuality as pathology, which links depression to obsession and unconscious transference in a very minimal way, and through an extremely specific piece of language, is a moment that links many of the themes of this thesis together.

²⁹ Samuel Cohen directly addresses autobiography somewhat successfully, using the 'interrelated contexts of Wallace's life' to discuss *Infinite Jest*. This chapter relies on readings like Cohen's, but I wish to determine the significance of the interrelation between such autobiographical readings and Wallace's framing of depression as an experience. Samuel Cohen, 'To Wish To Try', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 61.

own stated determination to present an ethical dimension to his writing.³⁰

Reading the work as an attempt to find such a dimension within an autobiographical framework reflects his desire that even the most apparently confessional sections of his work form part of a 'richer scheme or story'. ('Deciderization 2007', p. xviii) The duality of personal and ethical is therefore a thematic reflection of the difficulty Wallace expects his readers to have with his fiction, both in terms of understanding and identifying with it.³¹ 'Trillaphon' rehearses all these themes. Its narrative is structured around a potent authorial substitute. Autobiographical detail is incorporated largely at only a single remove. It demonstrates something that Wallace appears to hold true about the way depression works as a mental and emotional state. In combining these aspects, though, the piece also reveals something further about Wallace's writing: that the attempt to re-insert the evidence of lived experience and the self-conscious reflection upon that experience lends his writing the quality of cultural critique.

In 'Trillaphon' David Foster Wallace describes the experiences of a college student who, having suffered from depression since high school, attempts suicide and is prescribed anti-depressant drugs. Wallace details the experience of both the depression and its 'cure' in significant detail. The narrative arc follows his protagonist from first symptoms to his conclusion that treatment cannot work indefinitely.

³⁰ 'The big thing that makes Dostoevsky invaluable for American readers and writers is that he appears to possess degrees of passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral issues that we – here, today – cannot or do not permit ourselves.' - David Foster Wallace, 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky', in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2007), p. 271.

³¹ Wyatt Mason has provided the best outlining of the ways Wallace engages his readers: Wyatt Mason, 'Don't Like It? You Don't Have to Play', *London Review of Books*, 18 November 2004, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n22/maso02_.html> [Accessed 1 December 2009].

In many respects, there are parallels with the details of Wallace's own life, with certain specifics slightly altered. For example, Max (2009) relates that Wallace, while on a hiatus from college caused by his depression, spent some time driving a bus: in Wallace's story, the protagonist identifies closely with his depression with a bus driver badly injured in an accident. (para. 16 of 98) In 'Trillaphon': '[...] the Bad Thing [i.e. depression], [...] the bus driver [...] we were all three of us the same thing in the respects that mattered at all.'

(p. 31) The difficulty the protagonist has in separating his own experience from the driver's leads directly to his suicide attempt. The act is described as a reflection of the idea that he has already 'killed' the driver. This 'killing' is a result of his emotional state after a bungled attempt to alleviate the suffering he believes the driver is experiencing. We are therefore presented with a complex structure that blurs the boundaries between Wallace as author and two of his story's characters who are reflections of both himself and each other in the ways they are presented. It is an early formulation of the recursive structures that define Wallace's approach to both depression and postmodernity.

One direct overlap between this fiction and the details of Wallace's life, Max (2009) describes Wallace walking the halls of his high school with a towel and tennis racket. (para. 14 of 98) The towel allowed him to hide his anxiety-induced over-perspiration, while the racket 'explained' the towel. This perspiration finds its analogue in 'Trillaphon' in crying:

Also, there was this business of crying for no reason, which wasn't painful but was very embarrassing and also quite scary because I couldn't control it. What would happen is that I'd cry for no reason, and then I'd get sort of scared that I'd cry or that once I started to cry I wouldn't be able to stop, and this state of being scared would very

kindly activate this other white switch on the tube between my brain with its boils and my hot eyes, and off I'd go even worse [...]. It was very embarrassing at school, and incredibly embarrassing with my family, because they would think it was their fault [...] When I was around other people and my eyes got all hot and full of burning salt-water I would pretend to sneeze, or even more often to yawn, because both these things can explain someone's having tears in his eyes. People at school must have thought I was just about the sleepiest person in the world. But, really, yawning doesn't exactly explain the fact that tears are just running down your cheeks and raining down on your lap or your desk or making little wet star-puckers on your exam papers and stuff, and not too many people get super-red eyes just from yawning, so the tricks probably weren't too effective. It's weird but even now, here on the planet Trillaphon, when I think about it at all, I can hear the snap of the switch and my eyes more or less start to fill up and my throat aches.³²

Here, a fear of crying induces actual crying. The initial fear is therefore legitimized, while equally justifying a future fear. The protagonist, 'M.A.' is thus trapped in a destructive cycle. The description of tears as 'boils' and 'hot' suggests a relation to Wallace's own problem with perspiration. His protagonist's behaviour induces feelings of self-consciousness, which directly relates this *scénario* to metafictional self-reference. The experience of self-consciousness in all the examples of depression I will discuss in this chapter becomes a kind of 'meta-experience'; an experience of the experience from various external positions at once. So, rather than examining the reasons for his crying beyond its position as self-fulfilling prophecy, M.A. worries about its effect on other people, his family especially.

³² 'Trillaphon', p. 27. I will quote very extensively from this story here and elsewhere in this section due to its relative unavailability – it has never been republished – and in order to highlight the way its prose style is remarkably fully-formed. The length of this quotation is particularly useful when considered in comparison with the extracts in section 7 of this chapter from 'Good Old Neon', which are very stylistically similar to the first part of the extract, and in section 8 from *The Pale King*, whose contents are close to identical in many respects.

The fear that his uncontrollable emotions are negatively affecting other people is damaging in itself to this character.³³ This is a logic more fully articulated in the later story 'The Depressed Person'. It also emphasizes that the character's problem is fully internalized, and any outside influence will produce a further negative feedback-loop, causing more harm to his emotional state. What's missing is a central 'controlling' aspect of the emotional cycle, a stable sense of self, out with the automatic 'white switch' function of self-consciousness. Identity is instead equated to a system without a central core: a hollowness that 'cannot explain' the self.

The recursive loop of behaviour and emotion demonstrated in this extract, and more abstractly in the relationship between the protagonist and the bus driver, foreshadows a narrative device used in *Infinite Jest*. There, such recursion reverberates through the plot, structure, and detail of the novel. It even exists in the process of reading itself, as the reader is bounced from main text to end-note, without ever escaping the book itself. Hayles has discussed various other ways in which recursive loops are presented by Wallace in *Infinite Jest*. They range from the energy generation system James Incandenza invents, which powers the novel's fictional world, both technically and politically, to the logic of Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous, who present the solution to addiction to be ceaselessly accepting and examining that addiction. Here, recursion is used to describe the mental state of a depressive, but Wallace's later expansion of the theme suggests that such logic has a symbolic value beyond mimetic representation. Self-consciousness is already, at the beginning of Wallace's career, an extension of metafiction into the way direct experience is understood and represented.

Hayles suggests a negative link between recursivity and autonomy, as Wallace's structures proscribe any real action. (p. 678) This argument can

³³ This overlaps with my discussion of R.D. Laing's definition of an 'ontologically insecure' person, for whom self-consciousness is all-consuming, discussed in Chapter Three. It also relates to Wallace's discussion of metafiction as a literature of self-consciousness in 'E Unibus Pluram'. (p. 21)

be extended to form part of Wallace's more general critique of postmodernity. Thus, this style and theme is essential to the larger project of his fiction. Recursivity as a theme can then be seen to connect depression, among other factors with, for example, both Stuart Hall and Slavoj Žižek's thoughts regarding the functioning of ideology in the postmodern age.³⁴ Both theorists argue that, once a single ideology dominates discourse, defining the limits of what is 'right' and 'wrong' – far from 'dying', as 'end of history' advocates such as Francis Fukuyama suggest – ideology has simply become recursive. In this way, Wallace's fictional project overlaps with his social analysis. The limitation that recursivity imposes is thus the hegemonic ideology of the market that Nealon has described. The *scénarios* of this early fiction are an anticipation of the failure of reference produced by the conditions of post-postmodernity.

Wallace's career opens with a quasi-autobiography in which Wallace's character is 'on another planet' (p. 26) after beginning his treatment by anti-depressants. Both depression and its treatment divorce the subject from itself by preventing an extension beyond self-referentiality. M.A.'s depression merely reflects the conditions in which he lives. Thus, it is no surprise that he 'didn't have very many friends', (p. 27) nor that these negative loops survive after his treatment for depression. His symptoms are as much part of the conditions of post-postmodernity as they are of his

³⁴ Žižek points to this when he discusses the political 'Third Way' as a social-democratic movement constantly pushed to the right because it excludes 'Right-ist populists, who in turn pull Left-ists into this recursive ideology by drawing on anti-capitalist rhetoric framed with the nationalistic, racist or religious.' Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London, New York, NY: Verso, 2002), p. 242; Stuart Hall, 'The rediscovery of 'ideology': return of the repressed in media studies', in *Subjectivity and Social Relations*, ed. by Veronica Beechey and James Donald (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), pp. 23-55.

depression. The logic of the passages in which depression is described enact the spiralling logic of the 'hollow centre' of such subjectivity, as they formally reproduce Wallace's *scénarios*, failing to distinguish the qualities of subjectivity from self-reference.

The passage above contains a self-referential description of the thought process behind M.A.'s 'covering' for his tears. The experience is described with deliberate emphasis on words connoting heat and running water. This lends the passage an emotional resonance: we can view this as a particularly significant example of a *scénario*. As the passage continues, its affective quality is made explicit as it self-reflexively operates on its author: 'even now, here on the planet Trillaphon'. The self-distancing of the author-figure from the prose in service of heightening its affective quality, rather than producing an irony, is uniquely naïve in Wallace's corpus. Generally, the approach to metafictional forms taken in such fiction heightens the ironic purposes of such distance, to invoke a kind of automatic self-deception, as the remainder of texts discussed in this chapter show. However, the direct simplicity of the affective quality of this passage resonates throughout Wallace's work, as elements of over-self-consciousness, authorial presence and *scénarios* work to combine such affect with a broader intellectual project.

Later in the story, Wallace describes or recreates the internal struggling produced by depression:

The way to fight against or get away from the Bad Thing is clearly just to think differently, to reason and argue with yourself, just to change the way you're perceiving and sensing and processing stuff. But you

need your mind to do this, your brain cells with their atoms and your mental powers and all that, your self, and that's exactly what the Bad Thing has made too sick to work right. That's exactly what it has made sick. It's made you sick in just such a way that you can't get better. [...] the Bad Thing is able to do this to you because you're the Bad Thing yourself! The Bad Thing is you. [...] It is what "defines" you, especially after a little while has gone by. You realize all this, here. And that, I guess, is when if you're all glib you realize that there is no surface to the water, [...] or when you look at the black hole and it's wearing your face. That's when the Bad Thing just absolutely eats you up, or rather when you just eat yourself up. When you kill yourself. All this business about people committing suicide when they're "severely depressed;" we say, "Holy cow, we must do something to stop them from killing themselves!" That's wrong. Because all these people have, you see, by this time already killed themselves, where it really counts. [...] When they "commit suicide," they're just being orderly. They're just giving external form to an event the substance of which already exists and has existed in them over time. Once you realize what's going on, the event of self-destruction for all practical purposes exists. There's not much a person is apt to do in this situation, except "formalize" it, or, if you don't quite want to do that, maybe "E.C.T." or a trip away from the Earth to some other planet, or something.³⁵

Wallace's description of the logic that leads from depression to suicide is clear. It is the culmination of the recursivity of experience he describes. His

³⁵ 'Trillaphon', pp. 29-30. Again, quoted at length due to the unavailability of the text.

characters' inability to change anything, including themselves, leads inexorably to feelings that they may as well not exist. In this way, in attempting to produce a non-self-referential truth, his figures of depression butt up against their hollow centre.

This passage has both emotional and theoretical resonance. The image of the 'black hole [...] wearing your face' is recycled by the characters Hal Incandenza and Kate Gompert in *Infinite Jest*, as they each struggle with various stages of depression. (pp. 62-3; pp. 649-5) This repetition suggests that even that more textually playful work is concerned with a wider, more emotive scale as much as with its own existence as text. The status of the individual as defined by the condition, so that both self-understanding and perceptions of the external world are filtered through its sickness, is emotionally resonant in light of Wallace's death. It also explains why depression became such a symbolic key throughout his writing. In a way, the disease's ability to pre-empt self-consciousness, to exist prior to and distort an individual's self-perception, reflects the way Wallace sees contemporary Western culture working. This totalized effect, with its logic of intensification to the point of suicide, means this writing shows its lived-effect and forms a comment on post-postmodernity.

Wallace's thoughts are in line not just with contemporary views of the post-postmodern. His ultimate expression of its pre-emption by totalized capitalist ideology, *Infinite Jest*'s 'the Entertainment', neuters all self-perception. It is able to enter and short-circuit consciousness by reproducing the Lacanian 'mirror-stage' and thus disrupt the individual's consciousness. Similarly, Žižek relates the psychoanalysis of Lacan with the culture of postmodernity. He explained this using satirical terms that are perhaps not

dissimilar to the harshest critiques we might derive from Wallace's image of the catatonically-entertained: 'I am convinced of my proper grasp of some Lacanian concept only when I can translate it successfully into the inherent imbecility of popular culture. Therein – in this full acceptance of the externalization in an imbecilic medium, in this radical refusal of any initiating secrecy – resides the ethics of finding the proper word.'³⁶ In interviews and essays, like Nealon, Wallace has suggested a link between the figure of depression he constructs and the American-capitalist impulse towards consumerism.³⁷ Each individual is programmed to believe that the fulfilment of their whims and desires is both a fundamental right, and the key to their feelings of self-worth, representing a weaker form of the same symbolic structure.

For Wallace, depression is structured like the consumerist impulse, and somewhat like an addiction. However, while depression is internally motivated – 'you're the Bad Thing yourself' – the entire culture surrounding Wallace seems structured to reproduce the consumerism, for its own economic benefit. Thus, just as he concludes here that suicide, for a depressive, is an 'orderly' act, so Wallace might suggest that any attempt to live beyond the ideological limits of capitalist culture is potentially self-destructive. As depression is produced as a sequential, recursive, and self-

³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: on Women and Causality* (London, New York, NY: Verso, 2005), p. 175.

³⁷ The clearest example of Wallace's thoughts is given in 'David Foster Wallace im Interview (2003)': 'So, if you're talking about the more general allure of drugs, to the extent that I understand it, which is about as specifically as I'm going to talk about it, it seems to me to be – and this isn't a really original thing for me to say – it's a pretty natural extension of corporate capitalist logic, which is 'I wanna feel exactly the way I wanna feel, which is good, for exactly this long. So, I will exchange a certain amount of cash for this substance, and I will do it.' But it's all of course a lie, because the control gradually goes away, and it stops being that I want to do it, and it becomes that I feel that I need to do it, and that shift from I want to do it to I feel I need to do it is a big one, yes? I mean, most of the problems in my life have to do with my confusing what I want and what I need.'

conscious logic, its ability to indicate the hollowed identities formulated by totalized late-capitalist structures marks it as outside the system only its ability to provoke self-annihilation.

Important examples of characters symbolically 'self-destructing' by escaping ideological structures are found in *Infinite Jest*. The inability to live outside the structures of contemporary society is presented through Hal Incandenza's inability to communicate at the embedded narrative 'end' of *Infinite Jest*, (pp. 3-16) as well as Don Gately's similar predicament at the linear end of that novel. (pp. 809- 981) Max (2009) suggests that Gately's final condition makes him 'the hero of *Infinite Jest*'. (para. 89 of 98) However, the novel's conclusion leaves Gately located outside the community, trapped by pain. Gately's refusal to accept medication in order to rejoin society, even if that might be as a relapsed addict, must be considered a betrayal of Wallace's emphasis on refusing 'solipsism'.³⁸ Rather, Hal's determination to end his isolation by telling his story seems to hold truly redemptive potential, as Max has described.³⁹ Most significant for this chapter is to understand that both Hal and Gately's communicative difficulties are reflections of M.A.'s self-perceived location 'on another planet'. (p. 26) They are divorced from the world of the rest of the novel, and this is expressed in an inability to communicate coherently. The importance of the different kinds of solipsism that self-consciousness leads to in *Infinite Jest* is discussed in much more

³⁸ (On Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*) ' [...] the very idea of language depends on some sort of communicative community [...] this is about the most powerful philosophical attack on skeptic-/solipsism's basic coherence since the Descartes whose Cogito Wittgenstein had helped to skewer.' 'The Empty Plenum' p. 236. The importance of this idea is unpicked by James Ryerson, 'Introduction: A Head that Throbbed Heartlike: The Philosophical Mind of David Foster Wallace', in David Foster Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 24-7.

³⁹ Chronologically sequencing *Infinite Jest* makes the following the novel's final line: ' [...] who will, looking down in the middle of some kind of hustled task, catch what he sees as my eye and ask So yo man what's your story?'. (p. 17) Max (2009: para. 44 of 98).

depth in Chapter Six. This straightforward demonstration though shows that the ideas expressed in 'Trillaphon' have a huge resonance for Wallace's longer and more significant work.

1.6 'The Depressed Person'

Wallace produced a clearer and more developed depiction of the self-reflexive, recursive logic of depression in the story 'The Depressed Person'. The story is also much less inclined toward empathy for its protagonist: one mooted title for the story was 'The Devil'. Its first title in Wallace's papers was 'Provenience, or, The Depressed Person'.⁴⁰ In the interplay of these two rejected titles we can determine that the story both describes something both seminal and pessimistic. This indicates both an attention to the kind of reliance on *scénarios* together with a more skeptical desire to assess critically the origins of depression, rather than inducing empathy in the way that 'Trillaphon' intended.

The story gives us another character 'made [...] sick in just such a way that [she] can't get better'.⁴¹ It is again through this figure of depression that we are given a combination of the autobiographical and the metafictional. Both elements are clear from its opening lines:

The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror.

⁴⁰ I visited the Harry Ransom Center in the University of Texas, Austin in 2011 to study Wallace's archive. Where I make use of this material, I will provide a reference to where evidence can be found within the collection. E.g., the alternative titles for 'The Depressed Person' are found in: Wallace collection in the Harry Ransom Center, Box 27, File 3.

⁴¹ (Paraphrase) 'Trillaphon', p. 29.

Despairing, then, of describing the emotional pain or expressing its utterness to those around her, the depressed person instead described circumstances, both past and ongoing, which were somehow related to the pain, to its etiology and cause, hoping at least to be able to express to others something of the pain's context, its – as it were – shape and texture. (p. 37)

The depressed person has a first person narrator who is an author-figure that the reader is invited to fantasize or imply. The details of the depressed person's life are more significantly removed than those of the protagonist of 'Trillaphon' from those of Wallace's life. However, it is inevitable that, as a character defined and named by the disease from which her author also suffered, readers will consider her to reflect some aspects of Wallace's own character. Both M.A. and the depressed person's emotional well-being and subjectivity are dependent on their self-expression. Insecurity and self-consciousness are destructive to this character-as-author. The consequence of the way Wallace chooses to present these characters and their insecurities is to dispel the illusion that the individual-as-projected is an actual reflection of the individual, of a 'true self'. Instead, the implication of predication self-identification upon a self-referential disease is that there is no centre of selfhood.

Wallace's presentation of the depressed person thus relates to the non-essentialist credo of postmodern theory - which states that 'the subject is a fragmented being who has no essential core of identity'⁴² – and especially as postmodern theory relates to the psychoanalytic theory of

⁴² Sim, p. 367.

Lacan.⁴³ But, rather than reassert the theoretical aspects of the dispersal of identity such philosophy describes, Wallace's imbrication of that understanding of identity with the *scénarios* of his own experience shifts diagnosis to definition. The difference in the definition of identity that 'The Depressed Person' produces is not that she has 'no essential core of identity', but that she is experiencing the loss of that core: she is approaching the nature of her hollow centre. The story demonstrates the destructive effects of postmodernist theories of identity as they refract through this character's depression.

As in 'Trillaphon', depression is a 'black hole wearing your face', so that like that story's closing ellipsis, the implication is that 'the Bad Thing is [...] *you*'. (p. 33, emphasis retained) To follow Lacan's logic, *you* are not where you think, but rather something inaccessible before thought can be formed. For these two characters then, this 'self' is presented as depression. Neither something essential prior to depression, nor the thoughts they have which are not '*you*'; there is nothing accessible to them or about them that is not predicated on their depression. Thus, the 'depressed person' is identifiable only through her depression, at least from the subjective vantage point from which Wallace presents her. Her explanations, similes, metaphors – the language out of which she constructs herself, or is constructed to herself – are not enough to make her 'real', or to make herself understandable to others. From this inability, in another recursive loop,

⁴³ Exemplified by the quotation: 'I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think [...] I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think'. *Écrits*, p. 166.

emerges her depression, but also her status as 'black hole', non-existent, a fiction.

The depiction of the depressed person therefore forms an example of Wallace re-thinking postmodernist theory as lived experience, filling theory's playful gaps with 'human verities', as the shallowness demonstrated by postmodernism's theory of language is reproduced in the condition of living with depression. Thus, the 'depressed person' exists not just as an example of that type, but at the nexus of poststructural and postmodern theory. As Nealon has stated, post-postmodernism is the intensification of postmodernist theory. (p. viii) The act of placing authorial *scénarios* within the theoretical framework of postmodernism acts as that intensification. Wallace is not providing a straightforward demonstration of the theory in literary practice, but rather showing the damage it causes when transmitted to the conditions of living, to the understanding of one's identity and experience. This intensification is paradoxically both an acceptance of and challenge to postmodernism, marking it as an example of Wallace's post-postmodernism.

Instead of examining the experience of depression, 'The Depressed Person' contemplates the social implications of depression figured as self-consciousness-as-disease. For the protagonist, the potential talking-cure left open to Hal Incandenza in *Infinite Jest* is made illusory. The failure is produced by an intensification of self-consciousness, and relates to the cynical and ironical stance of contemporary society that Wallace diagnosed in his essay 'E Unibus Pluram'. There, he asked 'U.S. writers' [...] how to rebel against TV's aesthetic of rebellion, how to snap readers awake to the

fact that our televisual culture has become a cynical, narcissistic, essentially empty phenomenon, when television regularly *celebrates* just these features in itself and its viewers?' (p. 69, emphasis retained) We can see the cynicism and narcissism Wallace diagnoses in this passage reflected in the depressed person's inability to accept that her friends might unconditionally want to help her:

The depressed person admitted to the therapist that whenever she (i.e., the depressed person) reached out long-distance to a member of her Support System she almost always visualized the friend's face, on the telephone, assuming a combined expression of boredom and pity and repulsion and abstract guilt, and almost always imagined she (i.e., the depressed person) could detect, in the friend's increasingly long silences and/or tedious repetitions of encouraging clichés, the boredom and frustration people always feel when someone is clinging to them and being a burden.⁴⁴

Like M.A., the depressed person's feelings of guilt over her impact on others outweighs any potential positive impact she might gain from expressing her emotions, or any sense of release. Ultimately, the full weight of the emotion she feels, her depression, prevents her from truly sympathizing with anyone else's emotions. She demonstrates a self-awareness that has become exaggerated into extreme cynicism. The depiction of her self-awareness typifies Wallace's response to contemporary culture as briefly presented in the extract from 'E Unibus Pluram' quoted above. Her awareness of her own fragile state automatically overrides any understanding of how her friends

and therapist might possibly feel both about her and even about themselves.

The fundamental selfishness of this condition is another reflection of the effect of 'the Entertainment' in *Infinite Jest*, another example of extreme solipsism culturally induced. Such self-absorption is emphasized by the depressed person's lack of reaction to her therapist's death.

Wallace, during an interview with German television in 2003, appeared to be physically uncomfortable discussing 'The Depressed Person'. The video shows him grimacing and shifting in his seat almost as soon as the story is mentioned. He described the protagonist as a rare example of a character he had imagined into being whom he did not like.⁴⁵ His distaste is made clearer in the story, when the depressed person asks a question of her closest friend, a character suffering from cancer. The depressed person confesses that:

[...] all her agonized pain and despair since the therapist's suicide had in fact been all for and only for herself, i.e., for her loss, her abandonment, her grief, her trauma and pain and primal affective survival. [...] She was asking sincerely, the depressed person said, honestly, desperately: what kind of person could seem to feel nothing – "Nothing," she emphasized – for anyone but herself? Maybe not ever? (p. 68)

Wallace's apparent personal distaste for his creation resonates with claims he repeatedly made about the nature of writing. Especially in the later parts of his career, Wallace was concerned that writing fiction amounted to an attempt, deceitful in nature, to make people like him. This is the same claim he made about memoirs. One direct example of this is given in an interview

⁴⁴ 'The Depressed Person', pp. 42-3. This passage is one of the most autobiographical moments in 'The Depressed Person', as Max's biography reveals.

⁴⁵ 'David Foster Wallace im Interview'.

with Larry McCaffery.⁴⁶ Just as the character of the depressed person's self-consciousness reduces to cynicism, so Wallace's own self-consciousness is presented as recursive in nature. One either writes deceitfully and is 'liked', or else one's awareness of this desire causes a self-conscious desire to produce something different; at which point, questions of honesty and intention are fatally undermined.

'The Depressed Person' represents Wallace's return to a figure similar to M.A. of 'Trillaphon'. But his re-construction is deliberately, perhaps excessively, unlikeable. Wallace pushes away from such motives as sympathy and understanding for his protagonist as potential responses to his story. In a more sophisticated way, 'The Depressed Person' makes readers aware of the destructive impact of the intensified self-consciousness that characterizes depression. In this way, Wallace is allegorizing the totalized status of postmodernist thought in his culture.⁴⁷ Rather than employing the figurative language of 'Trillaphon', with its image of 'every cell in your body, every single cell in your body [...] as sick as [a] nauseated stomach', (p. 29) 'The Depressed Person' induces a depressive mind-set in his readers. The 'communion' of the reading process becomes much more grounded in the author's imposition of the character upon his readers. His writing is therefore increasingly less descriptive. Instead it is mimetic of a

⁴⁶ '[...] there's an unignorable line between demonstrating skill and charm to gain trust for the story vs. simple showing off. It can become an exercise in trying to get the reader to like and admire you instead of an exercise in creative art.' Wallace also suggests that the desire to be liked by the reader also leads to an antipathy towards the audience: 'this desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader.' Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace", *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993), p. 130.

⁴⁷ I follow Nealon in his suggestion that '[...] our contemporary masters (corporations, media conglomerates, spin doctors, finance capitalists, post-Fordist outsourcers of all kinds) no longer dream of a kind of exclusionary, binary totalization [...] Rather, today's cutting-edge capitalism celebrates and rewards singularity, difference, and openness to new markets and products.' Nealon, p. 118. For Nealon, the operation of capitalist logic functions through and as self-consciousness, making an awareness of the self as singular, different and open an expression of post-postmodernism's intensification of global capitalism. So, when M.A. and the depressed person fail to see themselves except as trapped and recursive layerings of self-consciousness, a null logic of hollowness, it is because their self-consciousness reflects the influence of post-postmodernist ideology, a figure that their sense of identity embodies rather than escapes. Romantic formations of self-identity become depressive, hollow closed circuits.

cultural and psychological reality. The depressed person is the post-postmodernist subject, as they approach their own hollow-centre.

1.7 'Good Old Neon'

The story 'Good Old Neon' from *Oblivion: Stories* provides a compromise between the sympathetic portrait of depression in 'Trillaphon' and the more iconoclastic 'The Depressed Person'. 'Good Old Neon' is a metafictional portrait of a school-age classmate of Wallace's as he suffers from the depression that leads to his suicide. The story presents itself at a single remove from Wallace's autobiography through its direct reference to its authored-status and oblique reference to the reality of its protagonist. After Wallace's death, the demarcation of protagonist, narrator, and author-figure – all liminalities played with and hinted at in the text – are more difficult to unpick, as readers inevitably assign a quality of the *scénario* to the description of experiencing depression. This makes this story the most complex extrapolation of the effect of metafiction on the ability to express 'human verities' in Wallace's oeuvre.

The disconnection between author-figure and protagonist emphasized on the story's final page highlights how the logic of depression here is qualitatively different to that found in the earlier stories discussed in this chapter. In 'Good Old Neon' the protagonist's identity crisis seems motivated more by an exaggerated sense of self-worth than the feelings of inferiority demonstrated by the other depressive characters in Wallace's fiction. The hint at the real identity of the story's protagonist provides the initials, graduation year and baseball batting average of 'Neal':

N[eal].M.N.[19]80.[0.]418'. (p. 181) That the key to his identity is his sporting ability overlaps with Wallace's representation of Neal as a figure of success. Rather than abstractly conceived as a self-fulfilling spiral predicated upon the fact of depression, for Neal, depression is located in the space between

what he achieves and his sense of fulfilment at these externally-imposed 'achievements'.

As in the earlier stories, depression is manifested as a gap that produces a paradox, and this gap is again between the socially produced expectation of some essential quality and the inability of the protagonist to find evidence of this essential identity. 'Good Old Neon' therefore presents the hollow-centre not as the experience of being outside the totalized logic of late capitalism.⁴⁸ Depression is presented rather as produced by the 'grand narrative' of capitalist consumerism and material success failing in its own status as ideology. It is through the pathology of depression that the experience of post-postmodernism is mapped, which is why all the stories I have discussed rely on the conception of the *scénario*. The differences between Neal and the other protagonists' experiences of depression merely highlight the ways that hollowness can be experienced. 'Good Old Neon' reveals the fundamental overlap between the experience of totalized capitalist discourse and the logic of depression.⁴⁹

The fact that 'Good Old Neon' is presented as directly-but-obliquely biographical means that it demands a more respectful understanding of its protagonist. That the story takes its main protagonist to his death is a unique event in Wallace's fiction. Using real events gives Wallace the license to examine what it means to be completely 'orderly', in the understanding of suicide provided in 'Trillaphon'. The story more directly addresses the

⁴⁸ One might argue that this is the case for the two previous protagonists, who are somewhat 'marginal': M.A. as a teenager with apparently pre-existing mental health problems, the depressed person as a woman with similar, long-standing problems.

connection between the specificities of depression and the cultural logic of the hollow-centre than either of the earlier stories. The tone is therefore one of political or cultural engagement, even as it presents us with many more personal details and direct attempts at self-understanding. This is clear from the opening sentences:

My whole life I've been a fraud. I'm not exaggerating. Pretty much all I've ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired. (p. 141)

While the leap from a desire to be liked to terminal depression seems initially difficult to make, the story's protagonist goes on to elaborate on the logic of his extension. Inspired by mathematical logic, he suggests a 'fraudulence paradox', whereby:

[...] the more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside – you were a fraud. And the more of a fraud you felt like, the harder you tried to convey an impressive or likable image of yourself so that other people wouldn't find out what a hollow, fraudulent person you really were. Logically, you would think that the moment a supposedly intelligent nineteen-year-old became aware of this paradox, he'd stop being a fraud and just settle for being himself (whatever that was) because he'd figured out that being a fraud was a vicious infinite regress [...] But here was the other, higher-order

⁴⁹ Most clearly exemplified by the failure of the protagonist's material success (surely the grand narrative of capitalism) to produce a sense of fulfilment or self-worth. 'Good Old Neon', p. 162. This is discussed in more detail below.

paradox, which didn't even have a form or name – I didn't, I couldn't.
(p. 147)

Wanting to be liked becomes a regressive loop. This is similar to the logic of depression outlined in 'Trillaphon'. However, here we find a much more subtle recreation of the thought process. While retaining an inescapable sense of a self-centered manner of being common to the other stories, 'Good Old Neon' does not present a character directly trying to evoke sympathy in the reader. The narrator neither solicits the reader's understanding, nor adopts an authorial tone that mocks the selfishness of such attempts.

Instead, this later story presents the thought process as consuming its protagonist's character without assuming that readers might necessarily understand or identify with that process, and so imagine it happening to them. We are invited to see the protagonist's logic as a puzzle, to see depression as it effects someone and the way they might explain it to us, not to experience it with them. The *scénarios* of the earlier stories are in this way presented much more analytically, seemingly as a frame for producing the kinds of insight directly in the prose that were, in the earlier stories, the intended implications of such material. The author-figure thus becomes rather more like the reader-figure – the role of David Wallace at the story's end is thus interpreter – while the more 'real' Neal, whose *scénarios* are imagined, is an imagined author-figure.

Whereas in previous stories, the self-consciousness of the author-figure and narrative produced a demonstration of the logic of depression through prose-style, in 'Good Old Neon' it reflects a sense of analytical

detachment from the logic. This refinement represents an engagement on a different level with the representation of depression, in that it can be differentiated from the pure experiences of an individual, and instead be seen as an experience apart from and masking the presence of identity. We can see this detachment in the section proceeding from the last quotation. There, Neal recounts an event from his childhood in which he lied and manipulated his parents in order to make himself look good. It demonstrates the way that the logic of depression obliterates even his sense of prior selfhood, accounting for memories and self-perception through a desire to recant any action – positive or negative – as the articulation of depression causing excessive self-aggrandizement. (p. 147-8)

That the protagonist's perceivable symptoms basically amount to feelings of low self-worth - in contrast with the sickness and desperation that Wallace's other depressive characters feel – the story also shows that such relatively minor distortion of the way we see the world can be equally damaging. Indeed, Neal submits to 'EST', electro-shock therapy, a detail noted only by its initials at the head of a list of potential treatments, self- and professionally-prescribed, that also includes cocaine and religion. (pp. 142-3) Even the apparently more desperate M.A. refused such treatment. (p. 26) The implication is that, despite Neal's appearance, both to the outside world of his story, and to the reader via his narrative, Neal's pain is at least equal to the characters of the earlier stories.

This relatively glossed over but important detail suggests how this protagonist is qualitatively different to these other characters. He is willing to downplay his emotional state to the reader in a way that the more

confessional statements of M.A. and the depressed person did not. This difference may be explained by the ending's emphasis that the story is a 're-imagining' of the character of Neal. The presence of 'David Wallace' as the imagining force explaining the figure of Neal makes the telling of Neal's story itself even more obviously fictional. As such, the narrator has no actual imaginary experience of Neal's pain, unlike the earlier stories, that are presented at only a single fictional remove. This highlights Wallace's implorations to attempting to understand other people, and as such it reflects the process of reading as communication.⁵⁰ ('Greatly Exaggerated', p. 144)

'Good Old Neon' provides a more prominent example of the way Wallace's fiction intensifies the self-consciousness of metafiction. It presents an example of the completely self-conscious nature of contemporary society by examining the constrictions and limits that such self-consciousness places upon both writing and the ways people are able to act within such it. In effect, this is a fictional articulation of the effects of the culture Wallace observed in 'E Unibus Pluram', which I have drawn upon in outlining some of the symptomatic definitions of post-postmodernist culture.⁵¹ The product of intensified self-consciousness is exemplified by the way Neal reacts to his analyst's diagnosis of his depression. The passage highlights the way that all signifiers are explained internal, as the recursive logic of self-awareness

⁵⁰ One should also consider the following passage: 'This, I submit, is the freedom of real education, of learning how to be well-adjusted: You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't.' David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), p. 95.

⁵¹ Wallace describes the effects of watching six hours of television per day (the then U.S. average), but which we might now extend to conceptualizing post-postmodern culture more generally: 'How human beings who absorb such high doses understand themselves will naturally change, become vastly more spectatorial, self-conscious. Because the practice of "watching" is expansive. Exponential. We spend enough time watching, pretty soon we start watching ourselves watching. Pretty soon we start to "feel" ourselves feeling, yearn to experience "experiences."' 'E Unibus Pluram', p. 34.

confuses identity with ideology, permitting nothing outside those limits of existence. This produces the conviction for Neal that he has deliberately induced his doctor to produce that specific diagnosis:

So it turned out I'd been right in predicting what his big logical insight was going to be. And although I played along with him for a while so as not to prick his bubble, inside I felt pretty bleak indeed, because now I knew that he was going to be just as pliable and credulous as everyone else, he didn't appear to have anything close to the firepower I'd need to give me any hope of getting helped out of the trap of fraudulence and unhappiness I'd constructed for myself.

Because the real truth was that my confession of being a fraud and of having wasted time sparring with him over the previous weeks in order to manipulate him into seeing me as exceptional and insightful had itself been kind of manipulative. (pp. 153-4)

In fact, Neal's depression prevents him from seeing his own truthful statements as legitimate. His expression of the truths he feels about his identity – what is in his guts – do not match adequately with anything *because* he has described them, *because* they have had an effect. Understanding has become absolutely divorced from the 'real' of his identity, reducing confession to another of the signifiers self-consciously encircling a hollow-centre. What his analyst tries to get him to understand - his 'big insight' - is that Neal can in fact tell the truth about himself. However, Neal's self-consciousness makes the revelation of his honesty hollow. He has reduced truth to manipulation. This echoes the way that his four-year-old 'confession' was re-made as a manipulation. Over-self-consciousness, or irony, means everything must be disdained, and so the 'firepower' his

analyst needs is simply to overcome Neal's reduction of the truth to hollow ironies. The 'falseness trap' he has self-diagnosed also now includes any truth he might use to understand himself.

The effect of the over-self-consciousness that this story outlines is a useful way to relate Wallace's thoughts as a theorist of the post-postmodern with the definitions that this thesis is constructing. In 'Good Old Neon', Wallace's writing comes closest to matching directly the conceptions we can construct through it. It is a fictional reflection of the Wallace's suggestion that postmodern irony denies us access to 'real human verities', or that contemporary American culture causes us to mock such honest emotional responses.⁵² All these factors are at work beneath the layer of confident self-analysis that Wallace's narrator presents to us, rather than worked through explicitly at surface level in the way it might be in 'Trillaphon'.

Another section of 'Good Old Neon' highlights the way in which the pressures of modern living overlap with and emphasize the depression and malaise Wallace's characters experience.

I'll spare you any more examples, for instance I'll spare you the literally countless examples of my fraudulence with girls – with the ladies as they say – in just about every dating relationship I ever had, or the almost unbelievable amount of fraudulence and calculation involved in my career – not just in terms of manipulating the consumer and manipulating the client into trusting that your agency's ideas are the best way to manipulate the consumer, but in the inter-

⁵² 'It's not one bit accidental that postmodern fiction aimed its ironic crosshairs at the banal, the naïve, the sentimental and simplistic and conservative, for these qualities were just what '60s TV seemed to celebrate as distinctively American.' 'E Unibus Pluram', p. 66.

office politics of the agency itself, like for example in sizing up what sorts of things your superiors want to believe (including the belief that they're smarter than you and that's why they're your superior) and then giving them what they want but doing it just subtly enough that they never get a chance to view you as a sycophant or a yes-man (which they believe they do not really want) but instead see you as a tough-minded independent thinker who from time to time bows to the weight of their superior intelligence and creative firepower, etc. (p. 162)

This list of examples of fraudulence – the assigned cause of depression – is an example of the logic of competition overcoming a more 'human' form of decision-making. In other words, it identifies the total nature of the logic of the market in Neal's life. It also has echoes of Wallace's writing in other areas, implying a consistency of thought throughout. The first example references *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, a collection constructed around numbered transcriptions of men, in the presence of a woman, describing an element of their relationship with the opposite sex, and concerned with the 'fraudulence' of such relationships. The discussion of workplace politics, on the other hand, is almost directly drawn from the clichés of 'getting ahead' manuals that Wallace utilized in writing *The Pale King*. The self-awareness displayed here by Neal makes him extremely successful in his career, but his success is inversely-proportional to his sense of well-being, as his capitalist success intensifies itself into further 'success' in more diverse areas. The variation on anhedonia this results in aligns him with other characters in Wallace's fiction unable to feel a sense of

satisfaction, most particularly *Infinite Jest*'s hyper-masculine but affectless John Wayne.⁵³

This overlap of self-consciousness between the writing of fiction and the experience of depression demonstrates a fundamentally metafictional quality to Wallace's diagnosis of the post-postmodern world. Concerns about the inauthentic construction at the centre of any consideration of meaning or value, that the contradictory nature of such terms figures them as always-already empty, are the central diagnosis of his writing. The self-similarity between his discussion of writing and depression highlights the crucial value of this idea to Wallace's writing. It provides a key to my reading of depression and metafiction as parallel themes in this chapter.

In the description of Neal's preparations for the story's climactic suicide, he reveals another way in which consciousness and culture have overlapped:

A part of me was still calculating, performing – and this was part of the ceremonial quality of that last afternoon. Even as I wrote my note to Fern, for instance, expressing sentiments and regrets that were real, a part of me was noticing what a fine and sincere note it was, and anticipating the effect on Fern of this or that heartfelt phrase, while yet another part was observing the whole scene of a man in a dress shirt and no tie sitting at his breakfast nook writing a heartfelt note on his last afternoon alive [...] I even now was watching and gauging my supposed performance's quality and probable effects, and thus was in the final analysis the very same manipulative fraud

⁵³ There are various examples of the character John Wayne's successful hyper-masculinity, and the implied lack of humanity that goes with it. *Infinite Jest*, p. 988; pp. 260-3; p. 552. Another figure with similar characteristics is *The Broom of the System*'s Andrew Lang, who de-masculinizes his voice in order to seduce the protagonist Lenore Beadsman, a section that provides bitter contrast to his earlier treatment of his wife. David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (New York: Penguin, 2004), pp. 392-406, pp. 408-17; pp. 175-9.

writing to Fern that I had been throughout the life that had brought me to this climactic scene of writing and signing it and putting it in my shirt pocket [...] planning to drop it in a mailbox on the way out to Lily Cache Rd. and the bridge abutment into which I planned to drive my car at speeds sufficient to displace the whole front and impale me on the steering wheel and instantly kill me. (pp. 175-6)

This very long and intricate sentence develops two of the story's concerns. It highlights the way consciousness cannot be differentiated from the procession of images through which we develop our understanding of the world. This represents a significant repeated claim of Wallace's work; this failure to distinguish between inside and outside represents one of postmodernism's tenets that he most uncritically accepts throughout his work. Through the repetition of images, the expression of truth and genuine emotion is reduced to cliché. This paradox is acknowledged in this passage. He wishes he could at least identify with his experiences, rather than his 'life's drama's supposed audience'.

Fundamentally, this important description aligns the insight of this story with the notion of the hollow-centre, as by adopting self-consciousness as the single, defining characteristic of the post-postmodern, one essentially becomes an audience to a selfhood that is audience to itself; this is self-consciousness as recursive, intensified, and the lived effect of the hollow centre as depression.

By inculcating this section with information about the author, we can discover how significant this analysis of contemporary culture was to Wallace. It was suggested to him during the video interview with ZDF

television that obliviousness to a theoretical audience is impossible. This fact is made especially ironic when the audience's actual 'presence' at the other side of the camera is pointed out to him. The 'voice', which becomes physically manifest in his distorted features and uncomfortable laughter, undermines those answers he gives which he considers either especially profound-seeming or clichéd.⁵⁴ This also mirrors the depressed person's guilt when talking with her 'Support Group', unable to imagine them taking her words at face value, without cynicism. (p. 42) In espousing the 'American' quality of such feelings, Wallace suggests that the depression afflicting Neal in his story is not particular to this character. Rather, it is a cultural problem, rather like the problems of masculinity Neal's therapist outlines to him, but Neal swiftly dismisses. (p. 163)

Integrated into the way the above passage operates as cultural critique, there is also an embedded textual self-referentiality. This comments on Wallace's worries that in realizing his depiction of the last moments of his suicide victim he is working with and exaggerating just those clichéd images that run through his character's mind. This implies an author-figure of a different order to the embedded Wallace-narrator of the text, whose relation to the writing is one mimetic of imagining. Rather, to be concerned self-reflexively with the clichés within a text is to align Wallace-as-author-figure with the content of the description, recursively concerned with his characters

⁵⁴ 'Because saying all this sounds to me like an older person saying this, like a person lecturing which, in American culture, sets me up to be ridiculed. It would be very easy to make fun of what I'm saying. And I can hear, in my head, a voice making fun of me for saying this stuff as I'm saying it. And this is the kind of paradox, I think, of what it is to be a halfway intelligent American right now, and probably also a Western European, is that, there are things that we know are right, and good, and would be better for us to do, but constantly it's like 'yeah, but, y'know, it's so much funnier and nicer to go do something else. Who cares?' and, 'It's all bullshit anyway.' - 'David Foster Wallace im Interview (2003)'.

concern about seeming cliché. Thus, in the light of the ZDF interview comments, there is also something inherently intensifying in the depicting of experience in prose, as it undermines notions of 'truth' by always being self-conscious. In this we have a link between metafiction, postmodernism, and the intensified effects of post-postmodernism.

Like the 'hall of mirrors' that Neal describes working in, (p. 162) this passage operates by demonstrating that Wallace's own author-figure maintains a self-consciousness exactly parallel to that of his character. This pre-empts the appearance of 'David Wallace' at the story's end. As the story introduces such textual self-reference, it begins to mimic Neal's thought processes on a secondary level.⁵⁵ However, for all the levels of reference at play here, 'Good Old Neon' remains faithful to a central conception of character that is not undermined in the way either of these metafictional stories would. Instead, Wallace highlights the story's fictional status as a necessary concession to the postmodern. Thus, when the image of Neal at story's end turns out to be Wallace's projection (which declaration only seems to be necessary in a metafictional text, as a kind of undermining-of-transparency-through-over-sharing) the reader is nevertheless expected not to consider it a stylistic exercise or a puncturing of the conventions of fiction, those elements metafiction aims to reveal. Rather, accepting Neal as a fiction is related to how Lanser suggests we accept the status of the author, as referenced in the first section of this piece – as a necessary fantasy. (p. 390) Thus, the ethical issues that representing the 'real' Neal represents for

⁵⁵ One should also note the invocation of John Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse' – a key text in Wallace's conception of the metafictional – in the story's reference to the 'virtual hall of mirrors' that Neal is adept at traversing. 'Good Old Neon', p. 162.

Wallace, the richness layered over the confessional detail, is not deniable, but is recognized as fantasy and explicit valued for more than this. It is rejuvenated by the acceptance of the fantasy of Wallace as author, presenting us with a conception of the empathetic sharing in which we have become involved. The kinds of empathy 'Trillaphon' invoked, with its autobiographical detail are at the close of 'Good Old Neon' made to operate in a metafictional way, suggesting an acceptance of the mediating role of the author figure.

Another kind of ironic self-reference is found in the way Neal's suicide, the climax of the narrative, actually 'occurs' in the story's only footnote. The single footnote does not comment on something in the text, but rather advances the narrative at a much faster rate than the main body. This references both Wallace's own work, adding another level of self-awareness to the reading of the story. But it also recalls the closed circuit of consciousness from footnote to main body of text as presented in 'The Depressed Person'. Wallace manages to point to the fictionality and textuality of his story, but in doing so, actually presents the reader with the only verifiable 'facts' upon which his whole imaginative project has been based: that an individual, called Neal, committed suicide in a certain manner in a particular time and place. These details are revealed to the reader in the story's footnote. Reality and action are thus made to stand apart from his attempt to understand another person, so that the way we think precludes the things we do.

The tension between Wallace's textual concerns and his character's torment demonstrates one of the most important ways Wallace works. The

overlap between the fictional and the 'real' here is found at multiple levels: potentially, Wallace's own psychology, his re-imagining of a schoolmate, his thoughts on this process of articulation, and entirely fictional characters are all locatable within the last quoted passage. Some of these represent *scénarios*, some more standard concerns of metafiction, some can be located as general concerns and critiques across Wallace's fiction, while some constitute an attempt at more transparent realism. No single element can exclude any of the others. Thereby, Wallace demonstrates the ways that fictionality and textuality can both shape and reflect consciousness, and that it has become impossible to understand one without the other. Fiction does not merely reflect reality, rather the relationship is two-way, influencing and reflecting. Neal, like the image of an uncomfortable Wallace explaining himself on camera, is able to understand but not escape this.

'Good Old Neon' closes by moving us even closer to its author's thoughts. Introducing the figure 'David Wallace' on its final page allows Wallace to express apparently directly some of his intentions for the story:

[...] in other words David Wallace trying, if only in the second his lids are down, to somehow reconcile what this luminous guy had seemed like from the outside with whatever on the interior must have driven him to kill himself in such a dramatic and doubtlessly painful way – with David Wallace also fully aware that the cliché that you can't ever truly know what's going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid and yet at the same time trying very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt or sending the whole line of

thought into the sort of inbent spiral that keeps you from ever getting anywhere [...] (p. 181)

The introduction of 'David Wallace' deliberately undermines the 'reality' of Neal, exposing him as both entirely fictional, and yet an extension of someone 'real'. As well as being a manifestation of the hollow-centred figure of post-postmodernism, the 'hollowness' Neal feels through the story reflects upon the author's own lack of understanding of his subject, and his awareness of the limits on understanding other people's interior. But, as Wallace points out here, that need not, in fact should not, prohibit such attempted examinations. For Cioffi, it is the 'obsessiveness' with which Wallace imbues his attempts at understanding that produces an equal 'obsessiveness' in his readers 'that reminds us how small the distance between ourselves and the characters.' (p. 173) This is at the heart of the empathetic ambition's of Wallace's art.

'Good Old Neon' stands as Wallace's most coherent attempt to understand another person's interior, because it is so explicit about its purpose, and because it aligns so many of Wallace's techniques, concerns and best qualities. In the ways it echoes 'Trillaphon', but opens itself up to another person so explicitly, it consciously attempts to overcome the cultural logic of American society, and the internal logic of depression, in order to produce and provide an understanding for both Wallace and his readers.

This last section also exposes the way that the story is an attempt to recreate the mental state of 'David Wallace', rather than of its protagonist, explaining that it occurs 'only in the second his lids are down', recognizing the projected nature of the story by nesting it in another projection, that of an actual authorial fantasy – David Wallace. This suggests that, in

reconstructing his own thoughts in an intelligible narrative, we, as readers might do the same, and in attempting to understand others, better understand ourselves. That this is a key conclusion of Wallace's life's work is explained in his essay *This is Water*, which might be interpreted as a plea to do just this, as often as possible.⁵⁶ Wallace here follows many of the forms and ideas of postmodernism, but challenges their effect. At this stage in my analysis of his work, we can observe this as the positive claim of his version of post-postmodernism. Rather than exposing the solipsism produced by ontological uncertainties, Wallace's re-imagining of them allows deeper identification, and a sense of communication between author and reader that (for Wallace's post-postmodernist peers) postmodern theory seems to disallow. However, as I move through my analysis of his work, it will become increasingly necessary to challenge the assumptions and functions of this way of understanding post-postmodernist fiction as a critical project.

1.8 Conclusion: Depression and *The Pale King*

This reading of depression across examples of David Foster Wallace's short fiction has, as far as possible, articulated how such writing is aligned with my definition of the post-postmodern. In particular, I have shown how similar his conceptualization of depression is to the 'hollow-centre' of identity I have produced. I have traced relatively uncritically Wallace's ideas in making this analysis, and my reading of 'Good Old Neon' concluded with a positive assessment of the ambition of Wallace's late fiction. In examining more explicitly the gaps within metafictional forms and introducing a self-consciousness about the reading process, Wallace's post-postmodernist fiction offers a form suited to both reflecting and reflecting upon post-postmodernity's various aspects. By introducing the implication of lived experience to his writing, Wallace's metafiction is post-postmodernist in

⁵⁶ 'The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, everyday.' *This Is Water*, p. 120.

form, simultaneously implying a 'real' and its absence; this is the function depression plays as a corollary of his overall form.

In this conclusion, I will briefly examine the three aspects of my definition of the post-postmodern through examples from *The Pale King*. I will then consider why it is necessary, despite the insights of these fictions, to take a more detached approach as I discuss Wallace's work in the remainder of this thesis.

There are three aspects to the definition of post-postmodernism that I am producing. Firstly, it reflects a totalized ideology of the market as a logic that over-rides any other intellectual or social force. Secondly, following this logic means that change is felt as accumulating intensifications. Finally, the human agents within this system experience themselves as having a 'hollow-centre', a fundamental lack around which the intensified choices of market forces align but necessarily fail to define adequately. These features were all reflected in the stories discussed in this chapter, as each reflects in some way the logic of depression as expressed in Wallace's writing.

The Pale King replicates multiple aspects of the stories I have discussed in this chapter. The novel re-assesses the position of the author-figure as it might be intensified beyond the claims of metafiction, and describes the experience of depression. The links between protagonist, author-figure, metafiction and *scénario* of depression are crucial to reading post-postmodernism in this context. Analyzing sections of this novel allows me to re-emphasize the claims of this chapter.

Chapter 9 of *The Pale King* has the sub-title 'AUTHOR'S FOREWORD'. It is narrated by 'David Wallace' and presents itself as an

explication of the writing of the novel despite appearing 66 pages into the text. The 'Wallace' of this section takes exaggerated care to imbue the prose with a sense of the fantasy of the author. I argue in Chapter Four that many of the formal effects of the chapter – in particular the overly-discursive footnotes – amount to a parody of Wallace's typical style. The chapter's opening lines are: 'Author here. Meaning the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona.' (p. 66) While it is not conducive to my argument to discuss the chapter's parodic effects, we can establish from the difference between these lines and the 'David Wallace' section of 'Good Old Neon' quoted above, that *The Pale King's* David Wallace is a more typically ironized metafictional construct. This is the direct effect of the denial of its status as 'abstract narrative persona'.

The chapter's first undertaking is to question its own motives through an authorial *scénario* that corresponds with an anecdote in Max's biography. The novel describes how 'Wallace' sustained himself through college: '[...] there were certain pieces of prose I produced for certain students, [...] these pieces were fictional in the sense of having styles, theses, scholarly personas, and authorial names that were not my own.' (p. 74) The chapter describes this as: 'good apprentice training for someone interested in so-called 'creative writing'' (p. 75) Drawn from the author's life, the motivation for and development of the skill of writing is thus depicted as springing from an ethically- and intellectually-dubious profit motive. Not only this, but the sense of writing as a communicative act, in which the imagining of another subject allows a sense of communion is disallowed by the motivations this passage reveals. This directly contradicts the ambitions Wallace expressed throughout his career, as I have shown repeatedly in this chapter. Instead,

both the figure of the author and the act of writing are produced through the logic of the market.

Secondly, the act of writing the text in particular is also related directly to market forces. After referencing 'the volatile economy of the last few years', the text relates how:

[...] all sorts of US writers – some of whom I know personally; including one I actually had to lend money to for basic living expenses as late as spring 2001 – have recently hit it big with memoirs, and I would be a rank hypocrite if I pretended that I was less attuned and receptive to market forces than anyone else. (p. 81)

This section underlines not only that for this author-figure the motivations for writing are mostly economic, but also that this is the environment in which literary writing is produced. The reduction in ambition that this and the previous passage describe is satirical in intent. However the force of the satire is aimed at both 'David Wallace' as an author, and the act of writing itself, and this combination is self-reflexive and cynical in the manner of the protagonist of 'Good Old Neon'. This chapter aspires to a brutal honesty, as it is the direct expression of 'the living human holding the pencil'. This implies that any ambition beyond writing-for-profit is at some level an act of self-deception: 'I would be a rank hypocrite if I pretended otherwise'.

Finally, this chapter of *The Pale King* places the notion of fiction within the logic of the market, too. It suggests that, where sections of the text 'undercut' the 'veracity' of the author-figure, such passages:

[...] are in fact protective legal structures, not unlike the boilerplate that accompanies sweepstakes and civil contracts, and thus are not

meant to be decoded or 'read' so much as merely acquiesced to as part of the cost of our doing business together, so to speak, in today's commercial climate. (p. 73)

Connected to the end of this sentence is a footnote that states it expresses 'the product of much haggling and compromise with the publisher's legal team.' Taken together, the passage and footnote describe a form of writing in which the creative or imagined are the result of a market driven process. The 'real' qualities of a text are those granted the 'veracity' of the author's own life – *scénarios* – while anything beyond this is created out of commercial obligation. The act of fictionalizing is, in essence, the act of making the experience of life marketable.

The emphasis the passage places on the legal aspects of this process, the use of the term 'boilerplate' and highlighting of 'haggling and compromise' each act to reduce the concept of authorial control. They mark the art of literary fiction as derived impersonally from a pre-drawn schema of what is legally acceptable to the market into which it will enter. The conception of fiction it draws is one in which the author-figure is the only significant aspect of the text, as a representation of 'human truths' within a larger system of market forces. The implication that the author only enters that realm in order to profit thus reduces writing entirely to the act of entering the market and following its 'boilerplate' logic. Authorial *scénarios* are as subject to this logic – are indeed demanded by it – as any act of writing, with the implication that subjectivity itself is now subject to the control of market logics. This is the first aspect of post-postmodernism that *The Pale King* foregrounds.

I have already highlighted the overlaps between 'Trillaphon' and Chapter 13 of *The Pale King* above. Outlining these overlaps in more detail now will allow me to expand the significance of the logic of intensification for Wallace's writing. It will also demonstrate the marked increase in pessimism about this aspect of the post-postmodern, just as Chapter 9 expresses pessimism about the author-figure and the art of fiction.

Chapter 13 describes the conscious thoughts of David Cusk, in much the same way that 'Trillaphon' described those of M.A.. Cusk has 'attacks of shattering public sweats'. (p. 91) In analyzing 'Trillaphon', I noted the similarities between M.A.'s crying fits and the bouts of sweating Max described Wallace suffering, in order to examine the story as an extended scénario. The chapters of *The Pale King* in which Cusk is the protagonist are a more direct repetition of this. The problematic aspect is described not as the physical sensation of sweating – 'he couldn't remember anyone ever saying anything about it [...] it's not like he stank' – but instead Cusk's difficulty derives from the moment 'he became self-conscious about the sweating thing'. (p. 91)

The 'self-consciousness' opens a feedback-loop, or recursive logic, so that Cusk's sweating is produced by a fear of sweating, and the fact of real sweating being produced by this fear hardens and accelerates the process itself, making more fear and more sweating inevitable. This repeats nearly exactly the pattern of M.A.'s thoughts in 'Trillaphon', and one would struggle to determine whether the following long sentence were taken from that first story or Wallace's final novel, were the terminology of sweat replaced with that of tears:

What if I all of a sudden start sweating? And on that one day this thought, which presented mostly as a terrible fear that washed through him like a hot tide, made him break instantly into a heavy, unstoppable sweat, which the secondary thought that it must look even creepier to be sweating when it wasn't even hot in here to anyone else made worse and worse as he sat very still with his head down and face soon running with palpable rivulets of sweat, not moving at all, torn between the desire to wipe the sweat from his face before it actually began to drip and someone saw it dripping and the fear that any kind of wiping movement would draw people's attention and cause those in the desks on either side of him to see what was happening, that he was sweating for crazy for no reason.⁵⁷

We can draw the same conclusions from this passage as were drawn from similar parts of 'Trillaphon': it engenders a sympathy for its protagonist through its use of *scénario*; it draws its central logic from the idea of over-emphasized self-consciousness to the point of bodily reaction; it is an example of intensification operating around a single figure, logically expressed in words, and inflicted by the social construction of identity. The repetition Cusk represents makes this depiction important for my larger argument about Wallace's writing defining the post-postmodern through intensification. It demonstrates that exactly the same forms are central throughout his career.

The hollow-centre is the third part of my definition of the post-postmodern. It is the interpretive product of closely examining both 'Wallace' and Cusk in *The Pale King*. Cusk, at the moment in which he analyzes his own sweating, feels 'sad', 'relieved', 'guilty' and 'also lonely and a bit tragic'. (p. 99) His situation is extremely similar to that of M.A.'s suicide attempt in

⁵⁷ pp. 93-4, emphasis retained. Quoted at length to demonstrate the similarities with the long passages from 'Trillaphon' quoted above.

'Trillaphon', and Wallace's own attempted suicides.⁵⁸ However, Cusk merely observes himself in a mirror, looking 'like someone outside a window looking in, but also creepy and disgusting'. This image leads to the conclusion that 'his inner self was creepy and the attacks were just a symptom, his true self trying to literally leak out'. (p. 99) The distance he feels in this moment of self-analysis, able to identify only with the 'creepy and disgusting' – descriptors applicable to an overly sweaty person – mark his inner-self as identical to his 'symptoms', accessible only in their self-conscious leaking-out.

Just as the 'depressed person' is marked only in terms of her symptoms, which operate as her 'pointing to shadow on the ground' as they replace any sense of herself as more than her disease,⁵⁹ so Cusk at this moment has so fully identified with his symptom as to be replaced by it. The process through which his sweating is triggered – any self-centred thought, any social interaction, any reminder of his own existence – are exactly those moments in which he is made aware of his own existence. The symptom indicates the hollow space where this might be: one can assign this to a form of depression, but the symptom's consistency indicates that it is a general, non-medical, condition of his existence. The sadness and loneliness this makes him feel is the result of this condition. It is also the pre-eminent emotion across Wallace's fiction.

There is a repetition in a later chapter of *The Pale King* of the idea from 'Greatly Exaggerated' that the ideas of post-structuralism deny certain

⁵⁸ For example: 'When it was over, Wallace's sister [...] told David that she had to drive back to Virginia. David asked her not to go. After she went, he tried to commit suicide with pills.' Max (2009: para. 24 of 98); 'Antidepressants were prescribed for me by a very nice doctor named Dr. Kablumbus at a hospital to which I was sent ever so briefly following a really highly ridiculous incident involving electrical appliances in the bathtub about which I really don't wish to say a whole lot.' 'Trillaphon', p. 26.

qualitative aspects of writing that Wallace knows 'in his gut' still remain.

'Wallace' claims: 'I can't think anyone really believes that today's so-called 'information society' is just about information. Everyone knows it's about something else, way down.' (A footnote, anchored on 'knows', reads '(again, whether consciously or not)').⁶⁰ This 'way down' 'conscious or not' aspect of experience that repeated descriptions of depression attempt to reach, and that broaden here into the state of boredom, are always aspects of the same recursive logic.

Wallace's writing consistently outlines the logic of the hollow-centre and his depictions of depression show this in operation. The hollow-centre is a crucial figure in explaining the post-postmodern, and the writing analyzed in this chapter both gives us an insight into the logic by which it can be said to have been formed – through the writer's own experiences of it – and the formal features of post-postmodernist writing – recursive logic, gestures at empathetic writing, digressive structures, personal symbolic networks – that result from it. Wallace shows that 'way down' 'in our guts' experience means self-reflexive emptiness and post-postmodernism is both the cause and the product of this.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that Wallace's writing is not only post-postmodernist fiction, in the sense that Burn and Timmer have constructed, but also that it allows us to develop a definition of post-postmodernism that is more generally applicable. What I have only begun to show here is the self-contradiction and paradox upon which both ways of seeing post-postmodernism rely. In the next chapter, I will deal with the formal expressions and implications of post-postmodernism's reliance on paradox.

⁵⁹ 'The Depressed Person', p. 59n4.

⁶⁰ All citations from *The Pale King*, p. 87.

Chapter Two: Wallace at the level of the sentence

2.1 Introduction: Zeno's Paradox

This chapter is the first of three in which I examine the style and formal features of David Foster Wallace's writing.⁶¹ Across these three shorter chapters I will examine the implications of a figure that is recurrent in Wallace's writing in different ways, that of 'Zeno's Paradox'. We can use Wallace's description of the paradox to begin this investigation of its significance.⁶²

In *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞* , Wallace outlines one version of Zeno's Paradox:

You're standing at a corner and the light changes and you try to cross the street. Note the operative 'try to'. Because before you can get all the way across the street, you obviously have to get halfway across. And before you can get halfway across, you have to get halfway to that halfway point. This is just common sense. And before you can get to the halfway-to-the-halfway point, you have to get halfway to the halfway-to-the-halfway point point, and so on. And on. Put a little more sexily, the paradox is that a pedestrian cannot move from point A to point B without traversing all successive subintervals of AB, each subinterval equalling $\frac{AB}{2^n}$ where n's values compose the sequence (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, ...), with the '...' of course meaning the sequence has no finite end. Goes on forever. This is the dreaded *regressus in infinitum*, a.k.a. the Vicious Infinite Regress or VIR. What makes it vicious here

⁶¹ As described in the Introduction, these chapters will alternate with longer chapters exploring broader themes in Wallace's work.

⁶² Boswell mentions this form, though I believe it is much more much more important than his description maintains. (p. 113)

is that you're required to complete an infinite number of actions before attaining your goal, which – since the whole point of 'infinite' is that there's no end to the number of these actions – renders the goal logically impossible. Meaning you can't cross the street.⁶³

This is a description of logical impossibility impeding a straightforward action that is not in any way nonviable. With its description the result of endless logical digressiveness, the passage in many respects typifies Wallace's style. It encapsulates digression that is logical but gets us nowhere, on playing out a thought to its paradoxical end products. Wallace examines aspects of human experience that are mostly ignored, and uses the language of mathematics to the purpose of a logical rather than linguistic abstruseness. Zeno's paradox is thus an excellent description of how Wallace's style and methods operate.

This description of Zeno's paradox extends to a problem that is much larger than it first seems. Wallace's use of variations on this paradox throughout his work demonstrates the importance he places on this larger problem. He states:

The trouble with college math classes – which classes consist almost entirely in the rhythmic ingestion and regurgitation of abstract information, and are paced in such a way as to maximise this reciprocal data-flow – is that their sheer surface-level difficulty can fool us into thinking we really know something when all we really 'know' is abstract formulas and rules for their deployment. Rarely do math classes ever tell us whether a certain formula is truly significant, or why, or where it came from, or what was at stake.* There's clearly a difference between being able to use a formula correctly and really knowing how to solve a problem, knowing why a problem is an actual mathematical *problem* and not just an exercise.

⁶³ David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞* (London: Phoenix, 2005), p. 49. Quoted in full because this passage is important for the rest of the argument of this thesis. Emphasis retained.

And in the footnote anchored to the asterisk in this passage:

*And, of course, rarely do students think to ask – the formulas alone take so much work to 'understand' (i.e., to be able to solve problems correctly with), we often aren't aware that we don't understand them at all. That we end up not even knowing that we don't know is the really insidious part of most math classes. (p. 52, emphasis retained)

Post-postmodern society is one in which access to information and data has exploded. The values of postmodernism have levelled so much of it into blocks of consumable data, from cultural values, to aesthetics, to knowledge, to ethics. This passage suggests how these features could be presented like Zeno's paradox – they are abstract problems that are therefore solvable in the abstract – but that this misses the point. Rather, we should examine why or how these abstract forms pertain to the ways lives are lived. In the same way, we should see how the abstractions of information pertain to us, and thus see how their logical solutions give that information value.

Wallace's writing repeatedly features characters failing to get any closer to the end of an idea, becoming trapped in recursive, helical thought processes that cripple their ability to act. Such figures are examples of what is at stake both in the relationship between the abstract and the lived – in what he claims Zeno's paradox really means – but also in the ways contemporary culture produces the inability to consider properly and overcome such problems. In this way, Zeno's Paradox maps the hollow centre of post-postmodernism, as its endless intensification – always reaching halfway points – maps the circulation of all information within that culture.

Kyle McCarthy validates this reading of Wallace's approach when he discusses the fractal forms around which *Infinite Jest* was based. He finds that:

Wallace was drawn to paradoxes, to infinite recursions and eternal loops. He was drawn to fractals - shapes infinitely self-similar, "objects and concepts at the very farthest reaches of abstractions, things we literally cannot imagine." But it mattered to him that these impossibilities are real, as Platonists believe, because he wanted a reason to get out of bed in the morning and figure them out.⁶⁴

My discussion of the elements of Wallace's writing will look for these 'self-similar objects' as a way of elucidating its post-postmodernist qualities.

McCarthy connects the notions of abstraction and the real, mathematical patterns and the 'reason to get out of bed'. These dualities are central to the pattern of this thesis.

Chapter One elucidated the link between recursive structures and the experience of depression in a way that relates to McCarthy's implicit binaries. In this chapter I will invert this relationship, using the patterns of Wallace's prose to find how they inform and reflect his larger ideas about the experience of the post-postmodern. By analyzing examples of non-fiction, long- and short-form fiction I will show how the abstracted recursive form his sentences take produces a 'Zeno's paradox of meaning'. The post-postmodernist form of the hollow-centre of experience is therefore embedded within the structuring of the smallest units of information.

2.2 'Authority and American Usage' – paratexts

The essay 'Tense Present', first published in 2001, and collected in *Consider the Lobster* under the internally-footnoted title 'Authority and American

⁶⁴ Kyle McCarthy, 'Infinite Proofs: The Effects of Mathematics on David Foster Wallace', *LA Review of Books*, 27 November 2011, <<http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/infinite-proofs-the-effects-of-mathematics-on-david-foster-wallace/>> [accessed 13 September 2013] (para. 30 of 31).

Usage* *or "Politics and the English Language" is Redundant' is not discussed here for any particularly striking facet of the sentences it contains.⁶⁵ Stylistically, it is typical of Wallace's long non-fiction work. This is useful because there is a general consistency of voice to Wallace's non-fiction that is not always observable in his fiction.

Christoph Ribbat finds that one central distinction between Wallace's fiction and non-fiction is that the latter foregrounds '[...] subjectivity – not the subjectivity of a common-sense reporter hero, but the shaken, frustrated, disorientated kind'; in other words, the features that imply an author-figure of non-objective dimension, representing primarily the subject of Wallace. (p. 191) This produces a consistent, personal and recognizable figure and form across such writing. So, while the two pieces of fiction discussed later in this chapter display different aspects of Wallace's prose, 'Authority and American Usage' is a good place to start because it allows us to examine prose of a typically Wallace-ian type. This is useful before we move on to see similar features manifested in more disparate forms.

The paratextual material that is provided for the republished 'Authority and American Usage' is extensive and significant to an examination of the care Wallace takes over small units of meaning.⁶⁶ The essay's title is presented on a separate page and split into a large-type, capitalized and bolded central title, with the footnoted sub-title below.⁶⁷ The remainder of the

⁶⁵ All references here are to 'AUTHORITY AND AMERICAN USAGE* *(or, "POLITICS AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE" IS REDUNDANT)'. 'Tense Present' was originally published in *Harper's Magazine*, April 2001, pp. 39-58.

⁶⁶ Paratextual material, everything that makes up the physical presentation of a text beyond the specific text itself, is defined in Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁶⁷ Neither title nor sub-title reproduces the original essay's name, 'Tense Present', suggesting that this extended version has markedly different interests.

title page is filled with common examples of mistakes in grammar, spelling, and punctuation, printed less-than-half the size of the central title. The list begins "Save up to 50%, and More!" Between you and I. On accident. Somewhat of a.' (p. 65) This represents half of one line from the 70 lines of examples provided on this page.

Following the title page, the essay is preceded by an epigraph from Augustus: '*Dilige et quod vis fac.*' This has a dual significance. Firstly, it is often misquoted as '*ama et fac quod vis.*' This marks it as a high-minded reference to the common mistakes on the title page of the essay. Secondly, while in epigraphic form it is translated as 'Love, and do what thou wilt', it forms the introduction to a longer exhortation, in which appears the more relevant 'whether thou correct, through love correct', a statement more in keeping with the theme of mistake and correction found in 'Authority and American Usage'.⁶⁸

This paratextual material is a useful place to start thinking about the form and meaning of Wallace's work. We can find embedded within it the themes of self-cancellation and intensification of meaning that are present at many different levels of his work. Firstly, the conjoined titles split the theme of the essay immediately and hierarchically, as the secondary theme is reduced to a footnote.⁶⁹ The dual-layered titles internally accumulate meanings. The primary title is split in two, across the 'and' in 'Authority and American Usage', with the punning of the former term belied by the last

⁶⁸ See *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopaedia*, ed. by Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 310-11.

⁶⁹ That neither title replicates any aspect of the essay's original title, which is provided on the collection's legal disclaimer page (paratext at a further remove), adds a third, concealed level to the meanings the multiplications of titling produces. That this shrouded title has several punning implications, particularly through the word 'tense', resonates with the essay's overall theme of the struggle to control and mediate meaning, and the tensions and work that requires.

word, which democratizes meaning by creating the assumption that 'authority' consists in the neutral recording of practical 'usage'. In choosing to surround this title with a vast array of examples of 'authority' that leave meaning either unclear or paradoxical, the page invalidates both the idea of 'authority' as the act of writing or 'usage' as an arbiter of meaning. It thereby undermines the idea that these are things to be privileged.

The addition of the footnoted secondary title completes this process of the undermining of the primary title by including a reference to the 'English Language'. This suggests an invalidity to the 'American' of the main title, reducing it to a subset of a larger form, to which both the 'authority' and 'usage' are subordinate. Secondly, the introduction of the concept of 'politics' introduces the idea that either way of understanding, judging, or recording language is subject to ideological concerns that do not rely on neutral considerations of how meaning is formed. Finally, this self-cancellation is also exercised internally to the secondary title, as its first two terms 'Politics and the English Language' are refuted by the term 'redundant'; each term makes the other unnecessary, just as the second title makes the first unnecessary.

Redundancy is among the most common of the mistakes in the phrases printed around the titles. Each of these pieces of language is a 'self-cancelling' failure of communication, as the internal problem highlighted in each prevents them from successfully making meaning. Taken together with the effects within the titles, this title page presents the reader with a succession of smaller units of meaning, which are cancelled before meaning can be obtained. Each moves through an increasingly smaller chain towards meaning without ever fully generating an idea, as they are foreclosed by the

logical implications of the smaller units of meaning within themselves.⁷⁰ That the essay's epigraph highlights both mistake and correction indicates how the theme will be approached throughout the essay – and across Wallace's writing, I suggest – but its forbidding Latin and need for context suggests the work that will be required for correction of these problems to be achieved.

2.3 'Authority and American Usage' – sentences

After an opening paragraph in which a sequence of logically undermining questions follow each other,⁷¹ 'Authority and American Usage' is reset, with a new paragraph separated by the space of a line from these questions. This second introduction mirrors the dual titles of the piece. It is at once more specific in outlining the exact details of the project at hand, but also more general, in that it is descriptive of what is to come in the essay. It has two paragraphs, the first of which sets out the fact that the piece has been commissioned as a review, and as such 'is informed by a question that's too crass ever to mention upfront: "Should you buy this book?"' (p. 68)⁷² By nevertheless mentioning this upfront, Wallace demonstrates a determination that the rules of marketing or consumerist etiquette will not be upheld with the rigorousness with which linguistic or grammatical rules are. It stakes a claim to be outside the boundaries of the 'review' process, even as it proclaims itself to be within them, making this question another example of apparent redundancy.

⁷⁰ This is an echo of Zeno's Paradox, with the movement across the street in Wallace's exemplification of the paradox replaced with a reader's movement through language to generate meaning.

⁷¹ For example, the penultimate: 'Did you know that probing the seamy underbelly of US lexicography reveals ideological strife and controversy and intrigue[...]? is annulled by the final 'Did you know that US lexicography even *had* a seamy underbelly?'. (p. 67)

⁷² Wallace recognized the profit-making motivation for writing, for example when talking about his first novel ["My great horror for the last year is that *Viking* is going to take a bath on me," says Wallace. He lights the first of a seemingly endless succession of cigarettes. "They picked up *The Broom of the System* at an auction for \$20,000. I thought it was going to be the *Heaven's Gate* of the publishing industry." He corrects himself. "Well, at the time, it seemed like a lot of money to me." William, R. Kartovsky, 'David Foster Wallace: A Profile', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), pp. 5-6.

By stating upfront exactly what a review must not state upfront, this sentence does not cancel the piece's status as review: ultimately, it will be expected to assess some aspect of the book under consideration, informing the reader as to its worth. While answering the question might be the aim of the review, its approach will be to pay particular attention to each of the aspects that inform its assessment of the text. Because the book under examination is a dictionary, it is expected to have a use-value, rather than an aesthetic worth. This means exploring the book as a functional product, which in turn means investigating the functions it can perform, and the various qualitative assessments that must follow should describe how well the book performs each function. This assessment of the text as highly specific functional object disallows the typical shorthand that characterizes the marketing of books. The sentence implicitly claims this is a positive thing because, as the many examples of marketing-speak in the title page's litany of linguistic mistakes shows, that lexical group seems inherently to lack the ability successfully to produce meaning.

Effectively, the sentence begins the re-definition of the term 'review' by showing how its scope is necessarily expanded by this piece. The approach taken to reviewing will be a logical and necessary intensification of the logic of the review within a capitalist system, producing more information than would normally be provided: hence, its extended length. This redefinition is not only an intensification of the form of the review; it also invalidates more typical review forms and language structures. This begs the question, if reviews are typically meaningless, why should this review, extended in every direction, not provide simply the same cancellation on a grander scale? In producing more specific information about the author's

functional relationship to a dictionary, the review produces a hyper-specificity that invalidates the meaning of the text as 'review' by adding too much irrelevant information to its structure. This review is relevant to someone exactly like its author; increasingly so, as it expands into further detail and specificity. This is a function of all Wallace's writing, one that is emphasized in this essay.

The second paragraph of this section features two sentences that are relevant to discussing the hyper-specificity of Wallace's writing. The second of these deserves attention here, as it carries many of the markers of his style:

But the really salient and ingenious features of *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* involve issues of rhetoric and ideology and style, and it is impossible to describe why these issues are important and why Garner's management of them borders on genius without talking about the historical context [long footnote, including secondary interpolation, excised here] in which *ADMAU* appears, and this context turns out to be a veritable hurricane of controversies involving everything from technical linguistics and public education to political ideology, [shorter footnote excised here] and these controversies take a certain amount of time to unpack even before their relation to what makes Garner's dictionary so eminently worth your hard-earned reference-book dollar can even be established; and in fact there's no way even to begin the whole harrowing polymeric discussion without

first taking a moment to establish and define the highly colloquial term *SNOOT*. (pp. 68-9, emphasis retained)⁷³

This 146-word sentence incorporates many of what have come to be thought of as Wallace's standard stylistic markers. Not least among these its maintaining and ordering of a single thought across a series of clauses that make continuous and grammatically correct sense, to the extent that it is not difficult to comprehend even on a first pass. Secondly, and perhaps contributing to this first, is its ability to cohere various registers of language successfully. The language ranges from the two compound words 'hard-earned reference-book', which echo contemporary discourse's rhythms and clichés, to 'polymeric', a highly specialized term usually associated with chemistry. Usefully, 'polymeric' acts as a synecdoche for the whole sentence, describing how the sentence operates. This single extended unit of language moves through a series of thoughts bonded at multiple points, molecularly interconnected in various ways. The sentence conjoins itself in the same way to two long footnotes, the first of which contains an 'interpolation', marked as such, that splits that single idea into two parts. Thus, a sentence that in straightforward terms should express a single idea is allowed to reflect upon itself through these parallel pieces of text, one of which is itself paralleled by a further subsection.

The form of this sentence demonstrates the endless divisibility typical of Wallace's prose. A single idea is divided and stratified into associated and covalent subsections. Such writing represents the structure and application of Zeno's paradox: a single idea cannot be encapsulated without each sub-

⁷³ Quoted in full to provide an example of Wallace's digressiveness.

point first being fully obtained. Structurally, this sentence is typical because its flowing logical sense belies the undercutting its endless digressiveness performs on it.

Just as this sentence belies important aspects of the style and structure of Wallace's writing at the smallest levels, its content also provides us with evidence of how these stylistic traits reflect both the insights his work produces, and some of the conclusions we can draw from them as part of the analysis of this thesis. Firstly, it is important to notice that the sentence revolves around the phrase 'turns out to be'. The sentence describes why the author came to write a 'review' in such an elongated and commercially atypical style, one which is at once denser with information and reliant on much more contextual material than is generally felt either necessary or appropriate for such a piece of writing. In presenting this claim, the phrase 'turns out to be' suggests a sense of discovery in the process of writing. This suggests an understanding of the structure of language as related to higher mathematics; the solution to problems of form and logic are singularly and objectively 'solvable', and so the mathematician's process is one of successive refinement of his approach until the pre-existing solution is demonstrably 'found'. The solution to this problem 'turns out to be' what the sentence, or essay, describes; the sentence or essay is presented as a demonstration of the only possible solution. The technical and linguistic acrobatics of this sentence are thus depersonalized by its central phrase, made to appear as if they are a logical construction that 'solves the problem' of the review, and thereby this piece should be considered a much more reliable basis upon which to decide whether or not to buy the dictionary.

However the second thing to note about this sentence is the way its pretence of logical objectivity is finally undercut by its hyper-specificity. The sentence ends with the term 'SNOOT', which is described as 'a highly colloquial term'. 'SNOOT', the essay goes on to explain, is an acronym whose meaning has been lost, but is used to describe a certain variety of extreme grammar snob: the sort of person who would be able to produce a list of grammatical mistakes such as that found on the essay's title page, and justify precisely each example's inclusion. The 'highly colloquial' descriptor of 'SNOOT', though, is exaggeratedly diminishing, given the essay explicitly states that the term has a usage group of 'one family of four individuals' – Wallace's own direct relatives. 'SNOOT', a term on whose definition the remainder of the essay is predicated – in the sense that the dictionary under review is evaluated for its usefulness to a 'SNOOT' – is thus a term specific almost to meaninglessness, a fact emphasized by the essay's unsuccessful attempts to unpack definitively its acronymic.⁷⁴

The hyper-specificity that 'SNOOT' implies does confer the essay with a sense of authority, through the way the term is outlined as an ironic designator of a certain kind of expertise. It determines that ever more particular information is necessary to complete the broadest of logical claims. So, the implication of objective correctness that this 'turns out to be' implies is belied by the implication that this logical process relies on information to which no reader could have access. In fact, it is of such

⁷⁴ Later in the essay, this hyper-specificity is ironized by an expansion of the claim that 'there is no such thing as a private language' through a two-page-long, interpolated and internally-footnoted footnote. (pp. 87-8) This note is emblematic of the way Wallace's writing plays with specificity and context as recursive structures of meaning.

vanishing scope that it falls into the logic of Zeno's paradox, requiring the impossible navigation of ever more microscopic logical distances.⁷⁵

Michael Goetzman discussed the connection between hyper-specificity and Wallace's broader themes in discussion-format article for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*:

In a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace mentions finding solace in Wittgenstein's idea that "for language to even be possible it must be a function of relationships between persons". His investment in this idea as a way out of solipsism [...] explains Wallace's obsession with esoteric words (and not only the words, but every word's root, usage note, obsolete meaning, etcetera). If you, like Wittgenstein or Wallace, believe that language marks the limits of what we can think or be, then every word is critical, and the dictionary — vocabulary lists — our most precious documents.⁷⁶

'Authority and American Usage' broadly requires one to identify with 'SNOOT' values, in effect turning the essay from an evaluation of a text into a proclamation of the significance of grammatical hyper-awareness. Identification with this cause, and with the features of writing which follow from it, lead the essay into long autobiographical passages. The review becomes an assessment of the author's relationship to language more than

⁷⁵ Jonathan Goodwin has shown the importance of looking for specific etymological sources for successfully interpreting *Infinite Jest*, an essay that requires us to ask where interpretation of the specificity and context of that vast novel should stop. Jonathan Goodwin, 'Wallace's *INFINITE JEST*', *The Explicator* 61.2 (2003), pp. 122-4.

⁷⁶ Eric Been, Maria Bustillos and Mike Goetzman, 'What Would DFW Do: Maria Bustillos, Eric Been and Mike Goetzman on *Both Flesh and Not* and All Things Foster Wallace', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 25 November 2012, <<http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/what-would-dfw-do-maria-bustillos-eric-been-and-mike-goetzman-on-both-flesh-and-not-and-all-things-foster-wallace/>> [accessed 13 September 2012] (part 3 of 5).

anything else, as the need to bore down into the finest detail that I have observed in the features of the writing draws in increasing amount of personal information. The essay, like all of Wallace's writing, becomes self-reflexive to the point of emptiness, its structures reflecting nothing but the paradoxical expansion of writing into the conditions of its own meaning. Goetzman's point, that Wallace's love of vocabulary – his 'SNOOT' qualities – draw us to the 'limits of what we can think or be' are on one level an attempt to share as much of his self-understanding as possible, to communicate with as much precision as language can hold. This formed part of my understanding of his work in Chapter One. However, the consequential recursive self-consciousness, even self-obsession, means the excessive detail voids meaning, as the specificity of language neither makes concessions to other people's understanding, nor ever reaches beyond this endless self-consciousness.

2.4 *The Broom of the System*

Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, was preceded by the publication in amateur student collections of two short pieces of fiction, as well as selections for his college newspaper.⁷⁷ As such, the 467-page novel represents his first piece of writing of significant length, and with any sense of a broader audience. Wallace commented on the effect of his immaturity

⁷⁷ The stories 'The Planet Trillaphon as it Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing' and 'The Piano in the Pantechnicon' were published prior to the novel, as well as short pieces in *Sabrina: The Humor Magazine of Amherst College*. See 'David Foster Wallace: An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center', *Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin: Research, Finding Aids* <<http://research.hrc.utexas.edu:8080/hrcxtf/view?docId=ead/00503.xml>> [Accessed 23 April 2013].

on the final text.⁷⁸ This places the novel in an interesting context, considered by its author to be written without the due care for craft that later work would demonstrate. The combination of ambition and immature inelegance marks it as a text in which the stylistic features that typify Wallace's work are untempered, and thus more easily recognizable, even as it seems to disallow any analysis that relies on the kinds of sophisticated techniques that his later writing employs.⁷⁹

In general my analysis of Wallace's writing finds that it deliberately produces incoherence in both theme and narrative that is replicated in smaller units of meaning that fail to cohere through constant internal paradoxes and over-signification. These paradoxes echo not an irreconcilable complexity in the information-era, but a self-conscious complexity that is reconciled to its own emptiness; I have conceptualized this as a hollow-centre. These paradoxical formulations on large and small scales replicate Zeno's paradox by presenting broader systemic failures as

⁷⁸ In particular the editing process, undertaken with Gerry Howard: 'I learned some stuff from Gerry, but I didn't listen to him, and *Girl [with Curious Hair]* was my comeuppance.' Loris Stein, 'David Foster Wallace: in the Company of Creeps', Publishers' Weekly, 3 May 1999, p. 53. He also stated that 'when [philosophical novels] fail, as my own first thing did, they are pretty dreadful', 'The Empty Plenum', p. 220. And that *The Broom of the System* 'was in many ways a fuck-off enterprise. It was written very quickly, rewritten sloppily, sound editorial suggestions were met with a seventeen-page letter about literary theory that was really a not-very-interesting way [...] really a way for me to avoid doing hard work. [...] I was arrogant, and missed a chance to make that book better.' Lipsky, p. 34.

⁷⁹ Boswell's reading of *The Broom of the System* sums up the sense that the complexity of Wallace's writing is perhaps too present in that novel, making too much of a virtue of leading its readers ambitiously nowhere: '[In *The Broom of the System* the] story comes alive when there is a puncture in the closed system; this puncture creates disorder, which here might be understood as conflict or drama. The larger implication is that the story gets transmitted to the reader, who is outside the story. Although the interaction of reader and text is a relationship fraught with ambiguity and misunderstanding, since there are so many choices for interpretation, it is nevertheless the vital energizing force that keeps the story alive. Interpretation is open and never complete, yet that is also the very source of its vitality.' Boswell, p. 19. One could compare this to the relatively straightforward and unambiguous reading Burn is able to produce of *Infinite Jest* in his guide to that novel. Stephen J. Burn, *A Reader's Guide to Infinite Jest* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003).

always present in a minute-level logic that fails to obtain meaning from point-to-point.

However, *The Broom of the System* does not produce this same symbolic system. Instead, while its language does occasionally fetishize the paradoxical, its general theme about the failure to make meaning is not a logical consequence of its internal patterns in the same way as later work. Boswell's reading of the novel suggests that its systematic complexity is intended to produce a text reliant on free-interpretation; this differs from my conception of Wallace's writing producing explicitly *no* interpretation through paradoxical form.⁸⁰

There is an absence of a dominant narratorial voice in *The Broom of the System*, but the words of two figures in particular usually directly reproduce the features of Wallace's writing that I have identified. Sections that focus on main protagonist Lenore Beadsman are more likely to be written in a kind of free indirect discourse, so that the narrative voice, such as it exists, is hers; the opening chapter is a good example of this style. Rick Vigorous, Beadsman's boyfriend, is almost entirely produced from his direct speech, but his speaking style also mimics some of the facets typical of Wallace's writing.⁸¹

⁸⁰ See the quotation from Boswell in note 79. In turn, my concept of Wallace's writing as always self-cancelling is different from the idea of it represent a complexity that does not cohere into meaning; my interpretation of Wallace's self-cancelling prose is that it functions as a representation of hollow or empty meaningfulness.

⁸¹ There is no space to go into the presentation of Vigorous's style in this chapter. However, the most significant aspect is the combination of the sort extended sentences that are discussed above with regard to 'Authority and American Usage' with a relatively straightforward meaning. Unlike the narrative voice analyzed in this section, Vigorous's voice lacks a sense of linguistic irony, although the stories he tells are directly ironic on the level above the sentence. This feature is discussed in the Chapter Three of this thesis. For an example of Vigorous's discursive but non-ironic style, see pp. 257-71.

The novel's opening chapter is relatively unusual for the text, in that it contains some of the long, loosely strung-together sentences that are typical of Wallace's later work. The opening of the second paragraph sets the scene with one example, locating the chapter temporally as being several years prior to the rest of the narrative, although it features several of the characters and themes that will be the focus throughout:

What's going on is that Lenore Beadsman, who's fifteen, has just come all the way from home in Shaker Heights, Ohio, right near Cleveland, to visit her big sister, Clarice Beadsman, who's a freshman staying at this women's college, called, Mount Holyoke; and Lenore's staying with her sleeping bag in this room on the second floor of Rumpus Hall that Clarice shares with her roommates, Mindy Metalman and Sue Shaw. (p. 3)

This sentence presents us with information cumulatively, providing both detail and characterization through a rhythmic extension into more and more clauses. The opening 'what's going on is that', with its shifting of the main verb to precede the sentence's subject, which in turn allows the inclusion of the colloquial 'what's going on', as if presaging a question from the reader that has been unconsciously asked, sets up the description as informed by the presence of Lenore. As the narrative develops, the fact that her subjectivity would always be placed after the main action of the sentence will become significant, as the novel's narrative is often driven, unseen, by forces acting prior to Lenore's appearance in a location. The insertion of 'home in' in the first part of the sentence adds to the feeling that this sentence is to be read as an aspect of the character Lenore. However, the

remainder of the sentence is simply a statement of the facts, and the extended length merely gives the impression of breathless eagerness, as if the information is conveyed conversationally by the excited fifteen-year-old girl being described. On the next page, though, a comparable sentence also in Lenore's voice introduces a more complex element to this form.

The first passage containing the kind of broader observation that is a significant feature of Wallace's later writing is found on the novel's second page:

Lenore can at this point divide all the girls she's known neatly into girls who think deep down they're pretty and girls who deep down think they're really not. Girls who think they're pretty don't care much about their bathrobes being undone and are good at makeup and like to walk when people are watching, and they act different when there are boys around; and girls like Lenore, who don't think they're too pretty, tend not to wear makeup, and run track, and wear black Converse sneakers, and keep their bathrobes pretty well fastened at all times. (p. 4)

My analysis of the third sentence here draws upon my discussion of features of the 'what's going on', above, and the longer sentences found in 'Authority and American Usage' from parts 2 and 3 of this chapter. It continues the contradictory construction and self-negation of the character of Lenore Beadsman through language as in the former, and echoes the self-reflexive employment of such paradoxes that lend the latter its hollow intellectual weight.

This sentence juxtaposes 'girls who think deep down they're pretty' with 'girls who deep down think they're really not'. The shifting of the modifier 'deep down' from 'think' to 'girls' has the subtle effect of marking the first group as having spent time considering their attractiveness, so that their thinking has reached 'deep down' to this conclusion, indicating a confidence about it. The second group of 'girls', however, have a 'deep down' knowledge of themselves that they are 'really not'; the sort of in-built conclusion that the phrasing suggests the earlier group have overcome, with the addition of the word 'really' indicating, as with the 'what's going on' above it, that this is a conversational declaration of modesty on Lenore's part – she is not pretty – 'really'. This contemplation of the relationship between modesty and prettiness, ignoring the troubling way attractiveness and self-confidence are conceptually linked, is another example of the contradictory nature of self-reflexivity. Modesty is presupposed to be a feature that adds to the attractiveness of the narrator, and the self-conscious manipulation of the modifying phrase in the sentence allows her to be immodest in claiming that characteristic, through the indication of the limits of her own self-knowledge. The essential point is ironic, a reversal of the idea that Lenore is less attractive than the figure to whom she is compared.

The final sentence builds on this statement by using a relatively complex structure that implies Lenore's sense of modesty without ever undermining her claims to attractiveness. Just as the positioning of the phrase 'deep down' acted to give Mindy's sense of confidence a studied or artificial aspect, so the third sentence highlights the unstudied way in which Lenore presents herself, as the unassuming nature of her self-description flatters her in its modesty. For example, Mindy's attractiveness is predicated on visible and constructed gestures, such as 'being good at make up', while

descriptions of Lenore's comparative lack of 'prettiness' are always undercut, so she is presented as not 'thinking' that she is 'too' pretty.

The comparison between Mindy and Lenore is thus set up as one of self-perception, and even false modesty, as the factors this internal narrative sets up as dividing the two emphasizes their equivalence in 'prettiness' while demonstrating that the former's is constructed and posed by comparison to the latter's lack of self-consciousness. In particular, the phrase 'when boys are around' highlights a sexual element, the corresponding sense of intimidation, that Mindy possesses but the younger Lenore does not. The significance of this difference is ultimately responsible for driving one central element of the text, as the two major male-female relationships of the book switch, and the hyper-sexual couple Mindy forms with Andrew Lang is replaced by a partnership with the sexually insecure Rick Vigorous.⁸² At the same time, Lenore forms a relationship with Lang, a choice beyond her control, as she states she feels that: 'the whole universe is playing pimp for me with you'. (p. 404)

Thus, two failing relationships are replaced with more balanced ones, a situation set-up in the characterization found in this sentence. However, the comparison between the self-consciously artificial sexuality of Mindy with the unconscious, modest beauty of Lenore, as well as repeating archaic tropes about the nature of female identity, is relatively unsophisticated as it plays out across the novel. One can compare the lack of control Lenore feels about her seduction with Rick's characterization of consummating his relationship with her – 'Tomorrow Lenore and I are going to melt into the blackness, united in discipline and negation' (p. 406), and Mindy's seduction of him in response: 'This is ... going to hurt me more than it hurts you. Is that what I should say, Rick? ... Daddy used to say I knew ... everything from the

⁸² As Mindy is presented in terms of her sexual characteristics, Lang is often described through a heightened masculinity. Comparatively, the text makes a running joke of Vigorous's impotence, making his name somewhat ironic. E.g. the dream described on pp. 324-5.

... beginning ... of time. A ... witch in a tartan skirt, is ... what he said.' (p. 408)

The irony of Lenore's attractiveness as presented in this early scene is that it is more constructed through the attention to detail of the language in which it is described. She understands herself 'as a literary sensibility'. (p. 400) Lenore's language suggests a level of control and understanding over her presentation that Mindy exercises corporally and through dubious experience: note the correspondence of 'Daddy', 'witch' and 'tartan skirt', with the implications of incest, manipulation, and sexually-precocious youth in the last quoted description of her. The control over identity Lenore represents, though, is fundamentally undermined by the novel's denouement, in which it is revealed that the events of the novel have been directly manipulated.⁸³ Wallace's use of paradox in the relationship between modesty and attractiveness, and self-conscious versus unconscious sexuality therefore are undermined by their implications of a direct correlation with identity and self-reflexivity. Lenore is in control of her identity through language, but out of its control through the action of the novel. This is an unresolved paradox in the novel, which presents a significant problem for the coherence of the implications of its plot and protagonist. By declaring herself in control of the linguistic paradoxes she creates, Lenore is forming an identity through language that the rest of the novel fails to sustain.

2.5 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy'

'The Soul Is Not a Smithy' is a 46-page story written in the first person. While its opening pages outline the context of the narrative, it also

⁸³ See my analysis of the novel in Chapter Three.

plays with the idea that it is part of a larger framing structure that is absent.⁸⁴ For example, the use of proper names for characters throughout, with the narrator's insertion of facts about his and their lives beyond the events of the story, indicates to the reader that this is a partial insight into a fuller ontological world, completed somewhere else.⁸⁵ In addition, the story is interspersed with sentences separated from the main body of text, in block capitals, a generic indicator that the text is taken from newspaper or magazine headlines.⁸⁶ This assumption is reinforced by the story's opening declaration that: 'This is a story of how Frank Caldwell, Chris DeMatteis, Mandy Blemm, and I became, in the city newspaper's words, the *4 Unwitting Hostages* [...]', and the next sentence's reference to 'the repeated thrust of the *Dispatch* articles'. (p. 67, emphasis retained) Together, these allusions to the press build the expectation that the embedded block capital text is extracted from multiple articles written about the incident being described. However, the supposed 'headlines' are in fact slight parodies of the establishment of facts in newspaper articles, and are often explicitly written in the narrator's first person voice.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Evidence in the Harry Ransom Center collection suggests that much of the material collected in *Oblivion: Stories* was written as part of *The Pale King*, or possibly another abandoned novel-length project. The story's concern with the nature and limits of attention is certainly one of the key themes of *The Pale King*, as demonstrated in the scenes featuring David Cusk, described in Chapter One of this thesis.

⁸⁵ Proper names are used throughout the story, and memories from the protagonists childhood are increasingly interspersed with descriptions of the events of the main narrative, e.g. David Foster Wallace, 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy', in *Oblivion: Stories* (London: Abacus, 2004), pp. 111-3.

⁸⁶ The most obvious parallel use of this formal device is in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in the 'Aeolus' episode. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. by Danis Rose (London and Basingstoke: Picador, 1997), pp. 112-43.

⁸⁷ For example, the 'headline' preceding the main body of the text at first seems to be a unwieldy but plausible newspaper sub-heading, before establishing itself as entirely generated by the story's narrator, even mentioning the kind of stories to which it visually refers: 'TERENCE VELAN WOULD LATER BE DECORATED IN COMBAT IN THE WAR IN INDOCHINA, AND HAD HIS PHOTOGRAPH AND A DRAMATIC AND FLATTERING STORY ABOUT HIM IN THE DISPATCH, ALTHOUGH HIS WHEREABOUTS AFTER DISCHARGE AND RETURNING TO AMERICAN LIFE WERE NEVER ESTABLISHED BY ANYONE MIRANDA OR I EVER KNEW OF'. (p. 67)

The block capital sentences both increase in length and become more tenuously related to the action described in the main body as the story continues. However, they are also often the most reliable part of the text in recounting the details of the events being described, and the specific emotions of the characters involved. By contrast, the main body of the story meanders and provides much seemingly irrelevant detail. Thus, the story is predicated on the idea of self-cancellation. The elements that seem most directly described are presented as incapable of fully articulating any truth or conclusion, while the elements that are artificially set-up as more objective are always infected with the same consciousness's personal narrative, and are thus presented as a compromised or reconstructed set of truths. The story is travelling towards neither a partial nor objective compilation of the 'truth' of its events, but instead a questioning of the different kind of partialities that are involved in the construction of such truths. As such, the language used is also engaged in an exploration of its own partiality and failure to hold an objective meaning. An analysis of two key sections will help articulate how this theme relates to all Wallace's writing, and thus is a key to his stylistics, directly expressed through the construction of this story.

'The Soul is Not a Smithy' is synecdochally summarized in a sentence that is found a little less than half-way through: 'It was thus that I did not literally see or know what began to unfold during the Civics class, although I received the full story so many times from classmates and authorities and the *Dispatch* that in memory it nearly feels as if I were present as a full witness from the beginning.' (p. 85) This idea is expanded 12 pages later: 'In testing, many schoolchildren labelled as hyperactive or deficient in attention are observed to be not so much unable to pay attention as to have difficulty exercising control or choice over what it is they pay attention to.' (p. 97) The information that is contained in the central character's memory of the day

described is distinct from the facts of the day's events that he later learns.

This is explained directly in the text: 'Dr. Biron-Maint, the administrative psychologist, gave his professional opinion that I was a full witness, but had been too traumatized [...] to be able to acknowledge the memory of it.' (p. 85) There are thus two counterpointed narratives, that of the hostage situation in which the boy is involved, and an image-based narrative the boy constructs discursively and methodically, using the squares within a window's mesh as the literal 'frame' of each image that makes up this parallel story. It is not coincidental that I have described this secondary tale as discursive and methodical, adjectives that might easily be applied to the style of Wallace's writing that I am analyzing.

For reasons of concision I will neither quote nor analyze extensively from the framed story's narrative in the main body of this text. The sentences that make up that narrative are increasingly excessively lengthy (up to more than a page) as it progresses, and yet formally dull, merely representing the constant unveiling of some of the clichés of emotive narrative traumas (disability, orphaning, vulnerable small children and animals, poverty, and so on). An example of this clichéd language is this short declaration: 'The dog's illustrated facial expression said it all.' (p. 83) It is important to note the contrast in these sentences between the piling up of emotive narrative details, with tragic-scene-upon-tragic-scene, and the 'main' narrative's use of factual information with which it is interspersed. For example: 'The ceiling itself was an institutional drop unit comprised of white asbestos tile, numbering 96 total plus 12 fractional tiles at the south end (the tiles' dimensions did not divide evenly into the classroom's length, which I would estimate at 25 feet). (p. 111) The segregation of the two narratives is

therefore a representation of the divorcing of personal, emotional response from the facts and reality of the situation: separate strands of information gathered, explicitly in this story, in different ways.

The story concerns, then, the inability of one individual to make different kinds of information – the factual and the emotional – cohere. This is directly expressed in the parallel forms that the story employs. Furthermore, this distinction directly corresponds to the problem of Zeno's Paradox, in which the abstracted 'fact' that one 'cannot' traverse a distance contradicts the concrete 'experience' of such a traversing taking place. In the moment that the two narrative threads of the story appear to approach each other, Wallace's self-contradictory sentence structure allows him to deal with this paradox directly:

My shock and alarm over what was happening to Ruth Simmons' father, whom I liked, and felt for, created a sense of shock and numbness that distanced me from the panels' scene somewhat, and I remember being distanced enough to be able to be on some level aware that the Civics classroom seemed unusually quiet, with not even the little sounds of whispering or coughing that usually made up the room's ambient noise when the teacher was writing on the chalkboard. (p. 91)

It is necessary to provide some context for this sentence. 'Ruth Simmons' is a character from the imaginary second narrative the protagonist constructs. Her father figures increasingly prominently within that story, although he is presented as a 'backstory' to the more central figure of his daughter, who herself provides a context for 'Cuffie', the dog around whom the story revolves. (p. 79) Starting with 'Cuffie', each figure is progressively nested

within the other, allowing the addition of further levels of detail that are successively further away from the story's primary narrative. Thus, Simmons' father is at three narrative removes from the central 'reality' of the main narrative [Classroom – Dog – Girl – Father].⁸⁸

The sentence blurs the relationship between the opening 'shock and alarm' and the 'writing on the chalkboard' at its end. The emotional impact is described as being the result of a single emotional path, in which traumatic events have discursively piled up in the imaginary narrative that the story has produced. Simultaneously, though, the story has related the increasing anxiety of this narrative with the external circumstances whose specific details are presented and yet not properly acknowledged. So the context of these external conditions is presented as having a direct impact on the increasingly stressful content of the distracted narrative, as it moves through several layers of nested distancing.

The 'writing on the chalkboard' is thus the indirect causation of the 'shock and alarm'. The sentence itself reverses this ordering of reality by making the more 'real' situation the endpoint of the character's 'distancing' from the narrative he is constructing. The middle of the sentence presents an increasing awareness of the situation in the classroom, with the repetition of the term 'shock' with its implications of suddenness implying that the character has both been 'shocked' by his own imaginative construct and by the situation he finds himself in once his awareness is raised. This presentation implies that he had no understanding of that situation prior to this exiting of the imaginary story. This is correlated with my understanding of the form of Zeno's paradox as it applies to writing: each level of digressive information that is added to the internal narrative, as he adds further levels of framing device, merely impedes the process of understanding the

⁸⁸ Inside the nested narrative, the action that produces the distancing is a violent depiction of the father losing his arm inside a malfunctioning snow blower; the teacher in the classroom is writing on the chalkboard 'KILL THEM KILL THEM ALL' simultaneously to this imaginative process in the 'real' classroom.

meaning of his situation. It is only in a single leap of understanding without a continuous logical system that vital information can be transmitted.

My analysis of Wallace's writing at the level of the sentence shows that his work presents ever-deepening layers of understanding, through increased information, as a barrier to the communication of meaning, which may be represented as a presentation of 'reality' or 'truth'. The sentence that I have analyzed from 'The Soul is Not a Smithy' reproduces this dynamic by showing the correlation between the deepening and expanding imaginative construct within the story and the concrete reality of the world the central narrative creates.⁸⁹ The protagonist, as the story describes him, is undergoing a trauma from which he distances himself by failing to create any direct memories. The distance from both self – in terms of one's past reality – and other – in terms of the boy's inability mutually to experience directly the events that his classmates are more directly involved in – is a figuring of the boy's identity that relates to my conception of the 'hollow centre'.

The story is thus, in this sentence, shown to be a more effective representation of Wallace's central concerns than either 'Authority and American Usage' or *The Broom of the System*. Where my earlier analyses demonstrated the internal contradictions and ironies Wallace's prose relies on to demonstrate the limitations of notions of meaning and truth in a post-postmodernist era, 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy' represents a linguistic and

⁸⁹ Matt Tresco explored the figure of autism as a partial explication of both Hal Incandenza's character, and the encyclopaedic form of *Infinite Jest* more generally, calling it a 'narrative form', distinguished from 'clinical autism', typified by complexity and communicative difficulty. Tresco's reading is persuasive, though I would argue that the explication of 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy' I am conducting here produces a narrative figure even more crucially 'autistic', in Tresco's term, than we might derive from *Infinite Jest*. Tresco, Matt, "'Impervious to U.S. Parsing": Encyclopaedism, Autism, and *Infinite Jest*', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles, CA; Austin, TX: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 114.

mimetic revelation about the experience of that reality. Its protagonist's necessary hollowness, in the face of both data and emotion, is a representation of the state of post-postmodernist identity that the forms of both other pieces approach, but neither fully describe; this theme is identifiable in all of Wallace's work, but it is mostly in this later writing that it is approached most directly.

In the sentence that I examined at the end of this section, by presenting the 'real' of the story in terms of the elements of which we are usually unconscious ('the little sounds of whispering or coughing that usually made up the room's ambient noise') the world is made up through effects of which consciousness cannot fail to miss. This formally parallels its depiction of trauma, which reverses the idea that trauma is imposed by external forces, depicting it instead as an unconscious re-construction of subjectivity. The significance of the impact of these 'traces' of the real provides a link between the operation of language here and the ethical reading of Wallace's writing I conduct in Chapter Three: it echoes Emmanuel Lévinas's construction of the 'other' from 'the glow of the trace [that is] enigmatic, equivocal' as a fundamental explication of the condition of ethical subjectivity.⁹⁰ This formulation will be highly significant to my discussion of post-postmodernist ethics in Chapter Three.

Representation in this story is closer to the truth as it moves further away from reality, and memory is more accurate than information in presenting this. The conclusion we can reach from this is that it is in such

⁹⁰ Lévinas, Emmanuel, 'Essence and Disinterestedness (1974)', in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 118.

errors of attention and understanding that meaning is partially transmitted. This is at once hopeful that missed details and mistaken memories might add up to something beyond hollowness; and simultaneously, paradoxically not, as the world reveals itself to the protagonist in the absences, failures and gaps of his attention.

2.6 Conclusion: Paradoxes

My analysis of Wallace's sentences has demonstrated that deep-irony and self-cancellation, which leads to a recursive spiral around meaning are key structures in the patterning of his writing. There are several lessons we can take from studying this smallest level of writing for my definition of the post-postmodern. Firstly, despite claims to the opposite, irony is deeply embedded in Wallace's writing.⁹¹ This does not mean the doubling or ironizing of irony into meta-irony, but a deep-level understanding of the paradoxical nature of language when the concept of the 'real' has been evacuated.⁹²

⁹¹ This is a different claim to that made by Boswell: "Wallace uses irony to disclose what irony has been hiding [...] a learned form of heartfelt naïveté, his work's ultimate mode and what the work "really means" [...] the "really human." The work is both as diagnosis and cure.' (p. 17) Konstantinou makes a similarly hyperbolic claim, that Wallace's 'postironic aspirations' are 'a last desperate effort to make us believe something, to feel anything.' Konstantinou, Lee, 'No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 106. Both critics describe Wallace's elaborate extensions of ironic forms as a kind of final undermining gesture. This invokes a teleology that Wallace appealed to in interviews. (McCaffery, p. 142) But, in the final analysis, the hollow structures that Wallace's language plays with leads us to see irony as intensified not to the point of dissolution, but to become even more the totalized form in which Wallace's writing is produced. Just as post-postmodernism intensifies and totalizes postmodernism in various ways, Wallace's use of irony precisely exemplifies this effect. In the same interview, he states 'postmodern irony's become our environment', and this is the facet his prose truly reveals. (McCaffery, p. 148) His writing exemplifies the final victory of deep-irony, and is thus a representation of the post-postmodernist world.

⁹² Meta-irony is a term used by A.O. Scott, 'The Panic of Influence', *The New York Review of Books* 47.2 (2000), p. 40, and adopted by Boswell, p. 15.

Secondly, this deep-level irony I have demonstrated means that Wallace's language inevitably falls into a kind of self-cancellation, so that the inescapability of irony denies all literal meaningfulness to his texts. This is not necessarily a criticism of his writing, but this is such a deliberate and repeated trope that it is necessarily a central object of his – and therefore post-postmodernist literature's – general condition of understanding. This ties Wallace's writing to my central concept of the hollow-centre at a fundamental level. It circles around opposite and equally valid meanings, the ultimate product of these gestures being hollowness.

Finally, I have shown that Wallace's sentences intensify to an absurd degree the amount of information they contain. They are often structured around an attempt at absolute specificity, whether this is through the use of personal data, or highly technical vocabulary, or a reliance on the unpicking of complex grammatical structures. This internalized logic of intensification both contributes to the spiralling around a vacated meaning that I have already outlined and echoes Nealon's categorization of the logic of post-postmodernism.⁹³ It is through this logical structure, of an infinite internal depth of meaning – a Zeno's paradox of meaning – that I find Wallace's writing to demonstrate most clearly its post-postmodernist qualities.

In my investigation of Wallace's work on larger scales in subsequent chapters of this thesis, I will find the same structure working to inform how his writing is organized into textual techniques, plots and characters. This will develop the significance of the ideas of self-cancelling meaning both for Wallace's writing, post-postmodernist fiction, and an analysis of the post-

postmodern as a temporal period. Each of the analyses I construct in the remainder of this thesis will therefore rely upon the analytical structures I have built in this chapter, placing central importance on the paradox as a signifier of the post-postmodern in its multiple aspects.

⁹³ '[...] difference in the postmodern world isn't there to be overcome; it's there to be intensified.' Nealon, p. 41.

Chapter Three: Metafiction, post-postmodernism and ethics

3.1 Introduction: The ethical turn

Thus far, this thesis has used David Foster Wallace's writing to exemplify and analyze the condition and logic of the post-postmodern. I have appropriated elements of Wallace's writing as tools for examining my own definition of post-postmodernism, figured through the totalized logic of capitalism, the idea of intensification – both drawn from Nealon – and my own characterization of subjectivity as 'hollow-centred'. In this chapter, I wish to turn to an alternative view of the post-postmodern, one that defines it as an 'ethical turn' philosophically and culturally, and see how that conceptualization works with both Wallace's work and the broader definition of the post-postmodern that I am producing.

Wallace's writing demonstrates an undeniable interest in ethical subjects. His concern not only reflects a broad understanding of philosophical ethics, but is also subject to constant revision throughout his career.⁹⁴ More than any other theme or interest in his writing, one can observe an evolution in Wallace's approach to ethical material. It is important to examine this material because the turn to the ethical is one way in which post-postmodernism is an explicit move away from postmodernism.⁹⁵ To see post-postmodernism as a critique of postmodernism is often, as I will show,

⁹⁴ See the philosophy texts listed in 'David Foster Wallace: An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center'.

⁹⁵ Other critics have made a great deal of this connection, e.g. Paul Giles, 'Sentimental Posthumanism', *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.3 (2007), pp. 327-344; Holland; McLaughlin; Timothy Aubry, 'Selfless Cravings: Addiction and Recovery in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', in *American Fiction of the 1990s: Reflections of History and Culture*, ed. by Jay Prosser (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 206-19; Konstantinou; Heather Houser, 'Infinite Jest's Environmental Case for Disgust', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 118-142; Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles, CA; Austin, TX: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 131-46; Daniel Turnbull, 'This is Water and the Ethics of Attention: Wallace, Murdoch and Nussbaum', *Ibid.*, pp. 209-17.

reduced to examining the ethical conclusions of theory or writing that has been termed 'postmodernist'. Wallace's writing on the theme of ethics produces a tension between his use of metafictional techniques – typically associated with 'postmodernism' – and his subject, with its assumed anti-postmodernist values. Typically, the critics who have written about ethical material in Wallace's writing, such as Kelly and Giles, have come to the conclusion that his foregrounding of ethical discussion is centrally an attack on postmodernism. In this chapter I will complicate this reading by examining how Wallace's approach to ethics changes over time, and how much it remains – as does all post-postmodernist literature – necessarily inculpated in the ideas of postmodernism. It simply intensifies them.

This chapter will produce a thematic study of Wallace's writing as it concerns the ethical. It will examine this material in order to show not only how the attraction to ethical material characterizes his work, but also how the broader turn to the ethical is consistent with the definition of post-postmodernism that this thesis is concerned with producing.

This chapter will consider the relationship between post-postmodernism and a purported 'ethical turn' as a critical response to the claims of postmodernism. As Chapter One presented Wallace's response to depression as an exemplification of his turn to a 'real' in response to the totalization of postmodernist claims, so this chapter will examine the prominence of the ethical material in his work.

The ethical turn, figured as a move against a putative 'postmodernism', is an embodiment of a post-postmodernist position. Broadly, it relates postmodernism's anti-hierarchical positions to an unassailable relativist ethics as Beverly R. Voloshin, for example, has

shown.⁹⁶ This is the opening claim through which I analyze the ethical position of Wallace's work. Firstly, I will demonstrate the significance of his ethical claims, before seeking to establish that they reflect central aspects of my definition of post-postmodernism: that it intensifies rather than rejects postmodernism's claims. Thus, I come to see Wallace's ethical material as constructing a positive ethics out of the totalization of relativism. In this, he reflects the claim that Bruce Henricksen makes when considering the possibility of a purely postmodernist ethics: Wallace's post-postmodernism attempts to produce an 'ethics of criticism without seeing the literary work as an ethical and therefore intentional act'.⁹⁷ Rather than representing an 'ethical turn', this chapter will show that Wallace's writing constructs an ethics out of the lived reality of an intensified, post-postmodernist world.

3.2 The importance of the ethical claims of Wallace's work

There are two ways in which making claims about the ethical in Wallace's writing can enhance our understanding of his work. There is an observable process of revision throughout his writing as to how the ethical should be approached. This constant emendation, which marks the theme of ethics as different from Wallace's approach to form, depression, or gender (the topics of the remainder of this thesis), indicates that it is both an important and unstable theme in his work. This being the case, this chapter will place heavy focus on a particular interpretation of Wallace's final work, *The Pale King*, presenting that novel as something of a revision and conclusion of the

⁹⁶ Beverly R. Voloshin, 'The Ethical Turn in French Postmodern Philosophy', *Pacific Coast Philology* 33.1 (1998), pp. 69-86.

ethical study performed throughout his career. Examining the ethics of his work gives us an opportunity to see Wallace as a thinker of post-postmodernism, and an exemplification of the kinds of logic produced by the culture of the long-nineties that I have described. This chapter rehearses a complete argument about the nature and logic of the post-postmodern through its exemplification in Wallace's ethical material.

It is my contention that in the various characters and interlocking but separate sections of *The Pale King*, Wallace performed a revision and re-assessment of aspects of his earlier writing. He also established a pedagogical-ethical pattern, in the most direct example of what Giles has called Wallace's 'hortatory idiom'. ('All Swallowed Up', p. 6) The central trope of *The Pale King* is that of concentration and communication. Its characters, as far as a coherent plot can be reconstructed from what is an incomplete novel, are 'selected' for duties within the Internal Revenue Service on the basis of their ability patiently to absorb large amounts of data from other people.⁹⁸ Their rigorous determination, which allows them to both 'process' and empathize with other people at a prodigious rate, marks them as both talented readers *and* writers. It is their concentration that figures them as substitute authors, and their empathy that places them in the role of readers.

By incorporating details of his biography and his previous writing in this work, Wallace creates with *The Pale King* the strongest argument for

⁹⁷ Bruce Henricksen, "'The Real Thing": Criticism and the Ethical Turn', *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature* 27.4 (1991), pp. 489-90.

⁹⁸ One of the notes printed at the end of the novel hints at this element of the plot, commenting on Chapter 15: 'It's Sylvanshine who's the fact psychic, and Lehrl, who believes in the occult, has sent him to find and place the very finest GS-7 wigglers he can in a given group, so that when the A/NADA outperforms them on revenue, it'll be convincing to Triple 6.' *The Pale King*, p. 540.

literary values in his work. Generally, my reading of his writing thus far has framed it as a representation of a deep or assumed irony, as exploring a world in which the paradoxes that a constantly ironic world-view – through the totalized logic of capitalism – produces in its denial of fixed meanings. This has stood in opposition to critics who term his work 'meta-metafiction', or second-order irony. However, in addressing the forms and ideas of his own previous work in *The Pale King*, his revisions of previous patterns makes this final novel the only true example of such 'meta-metafiction' in his corpus; it is my contention that his use of this form has an ethical implication.

Examining the approach to ethics in *The Pale King* thus not only allows us to see how this 'meta-metafiction' operates, as the novel openly re-writes the ethical implications of earlier texts, but also allows us to see Wallace's writing as productive philosophical thought.⁹⁹ It is necessary, though, to put this in the context of some of the approaches to the ethical across his career.

Wallace approached ethical material in various ways and contexts.¹⁰⁰ Most directly, 'Consider the Lobster' questioned the unthinking response to lobsters he found in an arena where that creature was being consumed by

⁹⁹ Many critics have made such claims for Wallace's writing, such as Hayes-Brody, Coleman, and Ryerson. In general, I have suggested that Wallace's role has been as a cultural critic. For example, in Chapter Six of this thesis I will unpick the idea that the approach to Alcoholics' Anonymous represents a positive ethical claim, as suggested by Aubry, but instead is merely a reformulation of the logic of post-postmodernism. However, in *The Pale King*, this chapter will deduce a positive ethical project, albeit one that conforms to and thus is undermined by my broader claims about the post-postmodern. Clare Hayes-Brody, 'The Book, The Broom, and The Ladder: Philosophical Groundings in the Work of David Foster Wallace', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles, CA; Austin, TX: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 24-36; Philip Coleman, 'Consider Berkley & Co.: Reading "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way"', *Ibid.*, pp. 62-74; James Ryerson, 'Consider the Philosopher: After the Death of David Foster Wallace', *The New York Times*, 14 December 2008, p. MM34; Aubry.

¹⁰⁰ Inserted into Wallace's review of a biography of Dostoyevsky are the questions he thinks great literature should ask. The first is: '**Am I a good person? Deep down, do I even really want to be a good person, or do I only want to seem like a good person so that people (including myself) will approve of me? Is there a difference? How do I ever actually know whether I'm bullshitting myself, morally speaking?**' 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky', p. 257. Wallace's engagement with literature sees it as a deeply ethical act, and also in the 'seem' and '(including myself)' of this quotation, sees the challenge of this engagement to be explicitly related to postmodernism.

the tens of thousands. A standard quality of Wallace's writing is the ability to introduce what Žižek would call a parallax view on an event or feature of society, setting up an internal debate by adopting a position that critiques through a kind of over-empathy with the standard view of the individuals involved (in Wallace's case, an author-figure of himself), thus revealing a fundamental hollowness of subjectivity through orientating the informational with the subjective.¹⁰¹

In 'Consider the Lobster', Wallace's approach is ethical in the way he highlights the deliberate blindspots he sees all around him, opening up the historical, biological, and neurological narratives of an event that has become subject to a collective suspension of knowledge. This pattern both intensifies the empathetic nature of his texts, but also opens it up to the endless stream of data that disallows final conclusions, preferring the paradoxical to the final. Thus, Wallace's ethical approach in 'Consider the Lobster' reflects his ideas about post-postmodernism: that a culture overloaded with information cannot possibly understand or pick out the most pertinent aspects of that information, and thus information produces a kind of ethical ignorance. The famous lobster scene in *Annie Hall* – Hall's horror at the violence she has to perform reflected in the terrifying visage of the creature she wishes to consume – thus becomes repressed as the information surrounding lobsters and their neurology and history becomes

¹⁰¹ Žižek describes this thus: '[...] in contrast to the commonplace that we are dealing with a subject the moment an entity displays signs of 'inner life', i.e., of a fantastic self-experience that cannot be reduced to external behaviour, one should claim that what characterizes human subjectivity proper is rather the gap that separates the two, i.e., the fact that fantasy, at its most elementary, becomes inaccessible to the subject; it is this inaccessibility that makes the subject 'empty'. We thus obtain a relationship that totally subverts the standard notion of the subject who directly experiences himself, his 'inner states': an 'impossible' relationship between the empty, non-phenomenal subject and the phenomena that remain inaccessible to the subject.' Slavoj Žižek, 'Afterword: Where do we stand today?', in *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings*, 2 vols., ed. by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London, New York, NY: Continuum, 2006), II, pp. 317-8.

too vast and complex to be contained.¹⁰² Large amounts of information, badly organized, this essay suggests, make the presence of a living being that much easier to ignore.

Wallace's approach to the ethical is not always so direct. His short stories, likely because the format leads so neatly to the self-consciously allegorical or epiphanic-style, often revolve around an ethical questions in a much more oblique way. There are examples of this throughout the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. The story 'Think' encapsulates this form. It revolves around a central figure who, while in the process of consummating an adulterous relationship, breaks away from the woman in order to pray. In its closing line - 'And what if she joined him on the floor, just like this, clasped in supplication: just this way' – the sexual tone of the story is perverted by the insertion of religion.¹⁰³ The act of betraying his wife is disrupted by an overwhelming moral force; the act of praying functions as a kind of ethical epiphany, which thereby links a formal literary technique with a practical application.

This story is a demonstration of Wallace's ambitions for his writing. However, as part of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, it fits with the ambivalent tone of the rest of that collection, in which most stories are explicitly uncomfortable to read, and disruptive events such as the praying in 'Think' foreclose straightforward ethical conclusions. By *The Pale King*, Wallace's writing is much more comfortable in allowing the reader to make

¹⁰² *Annie Hall*, dir. by Woody Allen (MGM, 1977).

¹⁰³ David Foster Wallace, 'Think', in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007), p. 75.

judgments about characters, and this is one way his writing moves beyond the relativism of postmodernist theory and writing.

While much of Wallace's shorter writing presents a concern for the ethical questions of contemporary existence to the reader, the rest of this chapter will concentrate on his longer fiction. This is partly because of the neatness of the argument that can be built from a comparison between Wallace's first and last novel. *The Broom of the System* is explicitly relativistic in its use of the standard forms of ethical discourse, most particularly the allegory. It also features amorality as a central theme. These features neatly contrast with the more sophisticated networks of interacting belief systems in *The Pale King*. However, before this analysis can be undertaken, it is important to spend a short amount of time exploring the links between postmodernist literature and relativism that underpins this argument.

3.3 Postmodernist (meta)fiction and ethics

There is a tripartite relationship between postmodernism, post-postmodernism and ethics, and defining the interaction between them is a crucial part of this thesis. My discussion will deliberately elide the term 'postmodernism' with the more specific referent 'postmodernist literature'. I am, after all, fundamentally concerned with literature, forming an investigation of post-postmodernism through the analysis of a literary figure and his work. The relationship of postmodernist literature to ethics is a more definable point of comparison to that found in Wallace's writing, and thus more useful to discuss as I build a description of post-postmodernist ethics out of Wallace's approach.

One of the features of postmodernist literature, as defined by Ian Gregson, is that it 'move[s] very much away from representation'. Therefore, he concludes, 'humanizing narratives are anti-postmodernist.'¹⁰⁴ The illusions that postmodernist literature (so far as we can generalize within this term) considered itself to be shattering, were those of prior fiction's stable subject positions and coherent narrative structures.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, Jerry Varsava considers this to be the central ethical message of metafictional writing, marking its ability to dismiss the critiques of Jameson as it demonstrates 'an implicit recognition that the social totality can no longer be written, that postmodern American society is a *non-totalizable totality*'.¹⁰⁶ For Raymond Carver, this led to the declaration that, in postmodernist literature: 'There is a feeling that anything goes [...] that is, nothing in the story has to make sense, or has any more pertinence, value or weight than anything else. The world is on the skids, man, so everything is relative, you know.'¹⁰⁷ The relativism Carver observed represents for Varsava a demonstration that 'positions of power are now multiple'. (p. 187) Wallace's ethical project, as I will show, balances the implications of both these interpretations, ultimately

¹⁰⁴ Gregson, pp. 2-3, emphasis retained. Although Alfonso counters that the ethical importance of metafiction lies in its representation of [...] our apprehension of the real, and it affects a multiplicity of subjective and interpersonal structures which configure our relation to ourselves and political engagement. The ethical engagement figured by Wallace's writing uses this idea as a means to counter Gregson's argument, as I will demonstrate. Ricardo Miguel Alfonso, 'Introduction: Ethics and Contemporary Fiction', in *Powerless Fictions? Ethics, Cultural Critique, and American Fiction in the Age of Postmodernism*, ed. by Ricardo Miguel Alfonso (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996), p. iv.

¹⁰⁵ See Ihab Hassan's table contrasting of the qualities of Modernism versus Postmodernism for a self-consciously straightforward articulation of this difference; for example, he compares Modernism's 'Centering', 'Origin' and 'Determinancy' with Postmodernism's 'Dispersal', 'Difference-Difference' and 'Indeterminacy'. The distinctions he draws indicate a dissipating of meaning and identity as characteristic of the latter form, an exculpation of Modernism's naivety that post-postmodernism in turn performs on Postmodernist assumptions. Ihab Hassan, 'Toward a Concept of the Postmodern', *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1987), pp. 91-2.

¹⁰⁶ Jerry A. Varsava, 'Totality Lost; Or, Fredric Jameson and the Social Site of American Postmodern Fiction', in *Powerless Fictions? Ethics, Cultural Critique, and American Fiction in the Age of Postmodernism*, ed. by Ricardo Miguel Alfonso (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996), p. 187, emphasis retained.

¹⁰⁷ Raymond Carver, 'Barthelme's Inhuman Comedies', in *No Heroics, Please: Uncollected Writings*, ed. by William L. Stull (London: Harvill, 1991), pp. 167-8.

demonstrating the totalization of difference that Varsava's interpretation implies but misses.

That 'everything is relative' for postmodernist authors is reflected in the key formal characteristics of postmodernist literature. The 'paranoid style' of such literature, whether expressed through the open-ended incorporation of character, detail, plot, and significance of a Thomas Pynchon novel, or the gradual collapsing of meanings into each other of a Don DeLillo text, is one reflection of this.¹⁰⁸ When the reality of self becomes relative to an unstable set of referents, the paranoid aspect of these fictions reflect the endless uncertainty of what might be relevant in producing constructions of self. Carver, referring to Barthelme, shows that by granting equal potential significance to all detail, it is the idea of significance itself that is lost.

In this chapter, 'metafiction' will be used as a term to stand for 'postmodernist literature'. While the two terms are not completely interchangeable, the features of metafiction closely align with many of the formal techniques Wallace uses and extends in his writing, and it is useful for the purposes of this argument not to draw too wide a distinction between them. Indeed, in 'E Unibus Pluram' Wallace chooses to focus his attention on metafiction as the literature of the postmodern culture he critiques.¹⁰⁹ This

¹⁰⁸ The 'paranoid style' is a phrase formulated by Richard Hofstadter with reference to U.S. politics through the 1950s and '60s. He states: 'We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well.' This has become an influential way of thinking about the postmodernist fiction that originated during the same period. As Michael Wood puts it, marking the beginning of the period as Pynchon's *V*, and the end as DeLillo's *Underworld*: 'Those were the days when we knew the score: it was whatever the authorities were not telling us. Conspiracy theory wasn't even a theory, it was a basic interpretative procedure, a way of getting through the week. There was 'a world inside the world', as Lee Harvey Oswald kept saying in *Libra*.' Richard Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 2008), pp. 3-40; Michael Wood, 'The Paranoid Elite', *London Review of Books* 32.8, 22 April 2010, p. 39.

¹⁰⁹ p. 33. Pointedly, his attack in that essay is on a form he calls 'image-fiction', which in itself should be seen as an intensification of the metafictional forms discussed earlier in the piece; Wallace says that 'image-fiction [...] has been called by some editors post-postmodernism', lending credence to my argument that the extension of metafiction both represents and, paradoxically, should be critiqued as 'post-postmodernism'. (p. 50)

chapter will present the suspicion of metafiction inherent in Wallace's writing alongside his related suspicion of the relativistic ethics such fiction implies.

Wallace's writing is an intensification of metafiction because it not only accrues more hermeneutic suspicion (a paranoid form applied to a paranoid form), but also because this ethical dimension to Wallace's work implies a consideration of metafiction as a broader, deeply ironic form of rhetoric, one that reflects principles of society. In exploring metafiction as a formal representation of an ethical problem, Wallace's writing demonstrates criticisms that parallel Carver's. This makes his writing post-postmodernist in the sense that it explicitly moves beyond prior postmodernist forms. But this also suggests a broader ambition to such writing, whose implications I will briefly observe.¹¹⁰

It is the evacuation of the subject position's implications for ethical action that troubles post-postmodernist readings of ethics. For, if we see Wallace and others as attempting to rewrite postmodernist forms by correcting the general problems of postmodernism, this seems to be at the heart of the issue.¹¹¹ The problem for post-postmodernism is thus to re-inscribe a subject position in such a way that ethical values can be determined without disregarding the postmodernist concern that the subject position itself has been evacuated in some way.

In this way, metafiction infers an absolute relativism, conflating the ethical with the aesthetic. This leaves metafiction - assessed ethically - open to the critique that it is a form that reinforces privilege. This is a standard

¹¹⁰ For a longer analysis of this understanding of postmodernism and relativist ethics, see Henricksen. Also Horace L. Fairlamb, 'Postmodern Critique: Between Relativism and Reduction', *Philosophy and Literature* 21.2 (1997), pp. 405-13.

¹¹¹ Toth and Brooks reject descriptions of Wallace's writing as postmodernist, for this reason. (pp. 5-7)

response to postmodernism, and one to which post-postmodernist authors have responded.¹¹² I will examine how post-postmodernism fits into this argument in more detail in Chapter Five.

One fundamental claim this thesis makes is that post-postmodernism is an intensification of postmodernism. It does not reject the claims of postmodernism (as an acceptance of the claims of identity politics might demand), but instead internalizes and remakes them in stronger terms. Wallace's ethics therefore represent an attempt to make the claims of absolute relativism of postmodernism operate on a much deeper level, rescuing them from the implications of solipsism, and using them as the basis for a new ethical relationship. Wallace's fiction intensifies metafiction, and his approach to ethics reflects this in examining a central issue with metafiction's form – that it implies total relativism – to produce a better or deeper ethical product. I will characterize this study of the ethics within metafiction as Wallace producing a meta-ethics; intensifying metafiction through its ethics.

Metafiction is a fiction that is always about fiction and is therefore as much an intervention into the act of writing as it is writing itself. When such writing turns to ethics, this has the implication that writing about ethics is in

¹¹² The most famous expression of this being Franzen's essay 'Perchance to Dream', in which he decried the fact that 'more is not made of the resemblance that multiculturalism and the new politics of identity bear to corporate speciality-marketing' (p. 34) and that the 'current flourishing of novels by women and cultural minorities may in part represent a movement, in the face of a hyperkinetic televised reality, to anchor fiction in the only ground that doesn't shift every six months: the author's membership in a tribe'. (p. 47) The equating of the politics of writing with that of marketing, which essentially reduces identity to a capital effect, is a (rather simplistic) post-postmodern analysis. But in his claim that 'white men are a tribe too, of course' (p. 52), Franzen seems to be arguing that the 'brand' of privilege to which his writing is attached is undeservedly undervalued, turning his criticisms of the politicized nature of identity and the marketplace into a self-defeating message that does not acknowledge the problems with his 'brand', or why they might now be being recognized. Post-postmodernism as a critical operation usually undertaken by white male authors often falls down at this point, something I will assess in more detail in Chapter Five; here, however, the broader political implications of Franzen's claims as they are reinforced by Wallace's writing will be put aside, to see how the latter examines the infinitesimal detail of the ethical ambiguities of metafiction and the post-postmodern. Jonathan Franzen, 'Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels', *Harper's Magazine*, April 1996, pp. 35-54.

itself an ethical act; the 'act' metafiction foregrounds is less the act of writing, and more the ethical implications of that act. Thus, when Wallace's writing turns the form of metafiction on itself to consider the ethical implications of such writing, his writing necessarily concerns the ethical implications of writing itself. By considering Wallace's writing as metafiction about metafiction (meta-metafiction), Wallace's fiction becomes ethical writing about ethics: a meta-ethics.¹¹³

3.4 *The Pale King's Leonard Stencyk and his ethics*

It is my contention that *The Pale King* presents us with a pointed revision of material from Wallace's earlier career, marking it as both a new kind of meta-metafiction – a form he had used since at least the story 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' – and also as a statement of intent for his fiction and its purpose. Much of the novel performs a revision of themes and characterizations of earlier writing, and in tracing these back and observing the changes we can produce an analysis of the novel that is both self-reflexively metafictional and directly meta-ethical.

My argument about *The Pale King* focuses primarily on the fifth and sixth chapters.¹¹⁴ The first of these performs two functions. It metafictionally comments on Wallace's previous writing, and the compulsions that drove that writing. The chapter simultaneously forms a direct critique of the postmodernist relativism discussed above.

¹¹³ Meta-metafiction: see Burn (2008: 21).

¹¹⁴ Assembled by Michael Pietsch, the novel's editor, it may be wiser to call the sections of *The Pale King* 'sub-sections', as this is how they are listed in the text. However, his note at the end of the novel refers to 'chapters', and so I will appropriate this terminology. *The Pale King*, p. 539.

Chapter 5 of *The Pale King* introduces us to the character of 'the boy', who is later named as Leonard Stecyk. Although he is not one of the 'wrigglers' – the group of characters who are central to most of the novel – 'Stecyk' is the name found most often in Wallace's research material for *The Pale King*. There are several notes that directly name him, and speculate about his character and biography.

An example from Wallace's notes provides insight into Stecyk's character. On the inside back cover of an unbound copy of Thomas de Zengotita's *Mediated: The Hidden Effects of Media on People, Places, and Things*, Wallace wrote 'Stecyk – Parents disappeared – he feared they'd left, left him. He prayed – told God he'd be nice, a good person, if they came back. Huge rage underneath the niceness.'¹¹⁵ The fact that Pietsch deemed it necessary to include a selection of Wallace's working notes in an appendix to the text, and has publicly encouraged readers to examine Wallace's extended notes in the Ransom Center, suggests that such material can be considered an extension of the unfinished but published work.¹¹⁶

Stecyk represents the detaching of 'niceness', which can be read in the chapter as ethical behaviour, from the motivation to be ethical. This makes Stecyk's actions predicated entirely on the aesthetics of ethical performance, rather than a desire to do good, a fact that Chapter 5 of *The Pale King* critiques. In this chapter, the aestheticization of ethics is critiqued through a form of self-reflexive metafiction that raises questions that have

¹¹⁵ Wallace collection in the Harry Ransom Center, Box 27, File 6.

¹¹⁶ Pietsch's 'Notes and Asides' to the novel states that he includes such material in '[t]he hope that [...] they allow a fuller understanding of the ideas David was exploring in *The Pale King*', and my discussion of similar material (here and elsewhere) operates in the same spirit. *The Pale King*, p. 539.

implications for both an explicitly post-postmodernist writing-style and the meta-ethical form it must take.

The image of the formation of the character of Stecyk, together with a careful reading of the sections of the novel in which he is described, suggest that this character is representative of two things. Wallace was an author who returned repeatedly to ethical problems through his writing, as I have described. He was also an author who accepted that after the postmodernist fiction to which his own writing owed a huge debt, relativism is really the only appropriate response to ethical problems. This acceptance means that the prose through which ethical dilemmas are depicted necessarily becomes a reflection of this relativism. And in its apparent geniality, its linguistic frankness, its determination to carry readers along its author's line of thought, and to be considerate of the complexities to which it addressed itself, Wallace's writing is marked by a reflection of relativism. This makes it a kind of relativistic prose.

In Stecyk, we have a character who represents a literalization of this style. Not only is Stecyk visually, lexically, and in action amenable, considerate and genial, his every act centres on an aesthetic understanding of the 'good' or 'nice' thing to do. This description of him is almost exactly applicable to the prose style for which Wallace is best known:

He is healthy and scrubbed and always groomed just well enough to project basic courtesy and respect for the community of which he is a part, and he politely raises his hand in class for every question, but only if he's sure he knows not only the correct answer but the formulation of that answer that the teacher's looking for that will help advance the discussion of the overall topic that they're covering that

day, often staying after class to double-check with the teacher that his take on her general objectives is sound and to ask whether there was any way his in-class answers could have been better or more helpful.
(p. 31)

The 'double-checking' of answers here could almost be a reference to the footnotes and endnotes that were ubiquitous in Wallace's middle-period. The sense of self-parody that should be observed here is only heightened by the more direct self-parody to be found in *The Pale King*'s ninth chapter, which is centred around 'David Wallace', and is hyperbolically digression-filled, and presents multiple, irrelevant footnotes.¹¹⁷ And the sense of digression and irrelevance is again echoed in sections on other characters, who are formed around their continuous irrelevance or digressive conversational style, or knowledge of obscure and pointless information.¹¹⁸ All these factors combine to make *The Pale King* a novel of self-parody, but in the figure of Leonard Stencyk, Wallace's self-focus is on a more oblique level, which allows this section to present an analysis of his own previous approach to ethical material.

As this description of Stencyk makes clear, the criticism the text implies is that an apparent attentiveness to the world both in general and in the abstract masks the character's ability to understand the other in specific. This means that, for example, the obsession he has with his appearance within his community is not a reflection of any of the lived relationships that he has formed. This mirrors the position of the writer to his audience. The

¹¹⁷ *The Pale King*, pp. 66-85. I discuss this chapter further in Chapter Four.

¹¹⁸ For example, the novel contains a character nicknamed 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle for his inability to communicate without excessive digression; however, significantly, it is in Chapter 22, the most fully realized and absorbing piece of writing in *The Pale King*, that his story is expounded. The quality of the prose in this chapter is in stark and deliberate contrast to those directly narrated by author-figure 'David Wallace'. This fact highlights the parodic nature of the novel, as David Wallace's writing is deliberately digressive and dull by contrast to a character named 'irrelevant', whose narration is comparatively gripping, with many of the emotional and narrative hooks that Wallace's narratives deliberately lack. Examples of these styles are placed almost back-to-back. *The Pale King*, pp. 154-252; pp. 256-309. There is a more detailed discussion of 'Irrelevant Chris Fogle' in section 7 of this chapter.

contention that Wallace and other post-postmodernists have made, that writing can overcome loneliness, and produce a deeper connection between artist and audience than any other form, is deeply undermined by the abstraction of this relationship.¹¹⁹ So, in Wallace's most popular writing, which seems to have met the aims of forming a connection between an author figure and his audience, the prose style is at its most 'Stecyk-ian': this style is found most prominently in 'Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All' and 'A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again', both published to wide acclaim in *Harper's* magazine prior to the publication of *Infinite Jest*.

The prose style found in the Harper's essays should be understood as showing absolute courtesy to an abstracted reader, a courtesy demonstrated by the filling in of innumerable blanks and gaps in the text through an extensive use of footnotes, and through a determined lack of pretension encapsulated by the use of a kind of folksy charm. These are the aspects of Wallace's style that were critiqued in a *New York Times* blog by Maud

¹¹⁹ In comparing Richard Powers and William Vollman to Wallace, LeClair claims that *Infinite Jest* is 'like an A.A. meeting: multifarious and multivocal, engaging in its verisimilitude, and possibly rescuing because it depicts mysterious, even miraculous recoveries from addiction and anhedonia'. (p. 34) This proclamation of the qualities of the novel, marking it as the fulfilment of a project in which LeClair suggests Powers and Vollman are also engaged, treats the highly personal and yet broadly accessible nature of an A.A. meeting as its symbolic structure. The idea that redemption from post-postmodern pressures is assured by hearing and identifying with the multiple different figures Wallace imagines into verisimilitude echoes the idea that the purpose of this fiction is to overcome a central loneliness. As discussed in Chapter One, Wallace identified this as his artistic purpose. But the confessions of an A.A. meeting are necessarily qualitatively different from this fictional purpose, as their intent is of a kind of release in a self-interested fashion, in order to overcome addiction. Placing the logic LeClair produces alongside the self-interest involved in A.A.'s confession, and the figure of Stecyk we can see something of the ethical model of self-reference that character creates. I argue that this is one in which the formulations of confessional self and 'good' behavior are self-motivated, without a consideration for the other. To attend an A.A. meeting, and confess oneself in that sphere appropriately, is to act to save oneself, just as the act of writing fiction can be considered self-interested and 'show-off-ish', as Wallace also described in 'The Nature of Fun'. Stecyk makes this literal, and *The Pale King* provides us with a response to this dilemma.

Newton, which claims that such devices flatter readers, and are thus a kind of disarmament of critical faculties, which leads to false claims and an ironic deceptiveness of the putative relationship between author and reader.¹²⁰

This is the opposite of the aims of such a style, and reflects the way Stecyk's 'nice' behaviour undermines his relationship with the people with whom he interacts. I argue therefore that Stecyk therefore encodes Wallace's anticipation of Newton's criticisms. This intertwines the ethical and metafictional aspects of this section in a unique way, in which form, content, and extra-textual information combine to produce a multi-level investigation of the way fiction forms relationships between authors and readers.

Chapter 5 continues by detailing the response of other people to Stecyk's behaviour. The description already quoted, for example, continues immediately on to describe his mother's apparent suicide attempt, which is euphemistically described as 'a terrible accident while cleaning the oven'.¹²¹ Stecyk's presence produces acts of violence, directed towards the self or others, or very openly repressed, near universally in the chapter.

By examining the climax of the chapter, we can begin to come to some conclusions about why Stecyk's behaviour produces the reactions it does. However, we should first note that his actions are not seen as universally negative, as is demonstrated by his return in Chapter 39. There,

¹²⁰ Newton states that: 'Wallace's rhetoric is mannered and limited in its own way, as manipulative in its recursive self-second-guessing as any more straightforward effort to persuade.' Maud Newton, 'Really Pretty Much the Only One That, Um, You Know, Got It', *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 21 August 2011, p. MM44.

¹²¹ p. 31. I read the implications of 'a terrible accident while cleaning the oven' as referring to a suicide attempt, because it is difficult to imagine a literally accidental action that would lead to a comatose state; the use of the oven as an instrument of suicide is well-documented; and the chapter continues by emphasizing the violence-against-the-self Stecyk's behaviour seems to cause. This detail serves little purpose if it does not add to this accumulation of examples.

his ability to consider objectively other people, and thus make decisions beyond an emotional response, is deemed heroic. (pp. 415-22) But it is important that this applies only in the most extreme of circumstances.

In everyday life, Stecyk's aestheticization of ethics is inappropriate to the point of being maddening. At the climax of Chapter 5, after he offers to maximize break-time efficiency through a re-organization of his classes seating and storage arrangements, his:

[...] tenured and highly respected veteran teacher ends up brandishing blunt scissors and threatening to kill first the boy and then herself, and is put on Medical Leave, during which she receives thrice-weekly Get Well cards, with neatly typed summaries of the classes' activities and progress in her absence sprinkled with glitter and folded in perfect diamond shapes that open with just a squeeze of the two long facets inside (i.e., inside the cards), until the teacher's doctors order her mail to be withheld until improvement in her condition warrants. (p. 34)

As with so much of the understanding of the world expressed through Wallace's writing, the reactions that Stecyk produces can be explained by the character's over-abundance of self-consciousness. His ethical patterns are determined by a solipsistic perspective, in which the abstracted truths he extrapolates from his own central position completely determine his actions. These actions he takes to be the only significant features of this world, isolated from the impact they actually have. This abstraction reveals that what at first seem to be ethically motivated acts on his part are in fact predicated on a system of aesthetics, to be judged on how much he finds

them internal coherent and thus pleasing, rather than for their consequences. By replacing a system of ethics with one of aesthetics, Stecyk replicates a typically postmodernist response to the ethical, in which the collapse of the subject position and of the status of 'grand narratives' makes such a transposition unavoidable. Ethical actions, in such an interpretation, are assessed for their intrinsic, untransferable beauty, as they can have no abstracted value.

The boy's behaviour is not 'wrong' because it reflects a universal belief that is necessarily untrue. Rather, the boy is so conscious of the validity of his own thoughts that he is unable to comprehend the sentience of others: he is solipsistic, a term that has implications throughout Wallace's career, as I delineate below. The fact that the protagonist of this chapter operates from a set of unimpeachable motives, in ways that it seems very difficult to see as poorly executed or maliciously intended, marks the chapter not as a criticism of universal truths, but of the kind of relativism under which the boy's behaviour is in fact ethically perfect.

Chapter 5 of *The Pale King* forms a post-postmodernist attack on the relativism of postmodernist ethics. It achieves this through a typically metafictional form, in which the self-consciousness of David Foster Wallace's writing is marked as an attack on that very self-consciousness. It should be noted that, in both of the examples from the text I have provided, the extension of sentences with subordinate clauses has the effect of creating a self-cancelling prose style, as I described occurring in Chapter Two of this thesis. Thus, in describing Stecyk, Wallace proceeds from a description of his courtesy to an action that, while 'nice', is nevertheless

exceedingly discourteous in its lack of respect for others. Similarly, each extension of the sentence at the chapter's climax functions to push Stecyk's behaviour beyond the norms of a concern for another, into an oblivious concern for his own internal aesthetic of ethics. This prose, as I have already highlighted, is at the very least close to being a parody of Wallace's earlier syntactical tics. As such, the self-cancelling nature of each sentence here reflects a self-conscious sense of the problems Wallace's earlier fiction reproduced thanks to its postmodernist inheritance.

This reading of Stecyk produces a critical appraisal of both metafiction and the ethics we can imply from it, through a meta-ethics, and at the same time intensifies this by being directly applicable (in a metafictional way) to Wallace's own writing. In personifying the ethical problem, and presenting an exploration of an unselfconscious solipsism on Stecyk's part, Wallace figures a character unaware of his 'hollow' subjectivity as the problem with metafiction; it is not yet self-reflexive enough, not yet intensified in the way it will become. This establishes Wallace's critique as an example of how I have defined post-postmodernism, and this is an important chapter for opening up those implications. Before I discuss the positive ethical conclusions that I deduce from *The Pale King*, I wish to move backwards to the start of Wallace's career, and find examples of material working to paradoxical purposes in his first novel.

3.5 *The Broom of the System* and ethics

I have begun to develop the idea that *The Pale King* is a self-critical text and should be read as a reflexive commentary on Wallace's older writing. One of

the ways that this functions is on a stylistic level, and I have outlined some of the ways this functions above and elsewhere in this thesis.

This auto-critique also operates on the ways earlier texts approached ethical material. As the oldest extended piece of writing by Wallace, it is instructive to examine how *The Broom of the System* approaches the relativism I have described as central to the postmodernist system of ethical response. In turn, this reading will reveal a trajectory in Wallace's work that leads, ultimately, to a positive expression of ethics in sections of *Oblivion: Stories* and *The Pale King*. Wallace described his approach to *The Broom of the System* as being dependent on the work of Wittgenstein and Derrida, while I will argue that sections of *The Pale King* lean just as directly on Lévinas. The shift from the philosophy of language to a more abstract consideration of philosophical ethics indicated by the changing intellectual influence makes the overlap between the two novels useful to understanding Wallace's development of a post-postmodernist ethics.

In section 4, I examined how the character Stecyk produces an overlapping reflection on both ethics and self-focused metafiction. In creating a relationship between these three – ethics, personal history, and metafiction – the text's self-referential loops produce an intensification of each. Metafiction (acknowledging the fictionality and authorship of the text) is intensified by moments of acknowledged autobiography, and incorporating ethical ideas (how we can relate to one another) gives the autobiographical more general application. Metafiction is itself enhanced by the ethical because of the relativism it otherwise implies, as I discussed in section 3. By employing the form of metafiction in his discussion of ethics and a direct conception of 'the self', such writing undermines the relativist conclusions of postmodernism. However, as deployed in *The Broom of the System*, this technique fails to conceptualize adequately this conceit. It instead relies

uncritically on the same theory that Wallace's later work would implicitly criticize. This is a very familiar treatment of literary theory by post-postmodernist authors, and mirrors closely the career arc of Franzen, for example, as Burn has outlined it.¹²²

The novel centres on the conceit that its protagonist's identity is fully manipulated by direct or indirect controlling forces, in particular Rick Vigorous's allegorical stories and Andrew Lang's environmentally-supported seductions. Vigorous's stories represent a postmodernist understanding of the role of narrative; Lang exemplifies a more totalized post-postmodernist manipulation.¹²³ In both cases, Lenore is denied a sense of self because her responses are always anticipated: of her emerging relationship with Andrew Lang, she states: 'I feel like the whole universe is playing pimp for me with you'. (p. 404)

One source for the *The Broom of the System* is the writing of the experimental psychoanalyst R.D. Laing. The novel hints at this through the name of 'Wang Dang' Lang, who replaces Vigorous as Lenore's romantic interest. Lang represents a version of Laing's 'ontologically secure person':

[...] a basically ontologically secure person will encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity. It is often difficult for a person with such a sense of his integral selfhood and

¹²² Burn (2008) describes how Franzen's earlier novels are written as literary expressions of what might be considered 'postmodernist' theory, and are formally experimental, if not metafictional. However, Burn describes Franzen's disillusion with theory as he retreats into formal realism, although this is peppered with moments of metafictional experimentation: 'The realist dimension to his novels is designed to elicit the traditional effects of fiction – understanding, empathy with another's perspective – while the metafictional element hopes to draw the reader's attention outside the book, to recognize the way her own life is constructed and narrated.' (p. 128) This rejection of theory is literalized in *The Corrections*, through the character of Chip and his exit from academia, '[...] he piled his Foucault and Greenblatt and Hooks and Poovey into shopping bags and sold them all for \$115'. (p. 107, capitalized 'hooks' is *sic.*)

¹²³ Postmodernist narrative theory relies on the claim that 'narrative is one of the ways in which identity, the ideological subject, is founded' and 'the manufacture of identity is not a single originary occurrence but a process of repetition' through exposure to different narrative and non-narrative structures and oppositions. Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (London: Palgrave, 1998), p. 32.

personal identity, of the permanency of things, of the reliability of natural processes, of the substantiality of natural processes, of the substantiality of others, to transpose himself into the world of an individual whose experiences may be utterly lacking in any unquestionable self-validating certainties.¹²⁴

This depiction corresponds with the description of Lang as 'validating' Lenore throughout the novel, so that he can 'penetrate her network with his Self' until 'she becomes real': all potentially references to her status as an ontologically insecure person discussed further below (as well as double-entendres). (p. 345; p. 349; p. 344) This comparison suggests that the manipulation of Lenore throughout the text is an attempt to address her ontologically insecurity; this is one function of the narrative that drives her and Lang together.

By contrast, Vigorous's stories are formally and thematically similar to the case studies found in Laing's *The Divided Self*. His adoption of Laing's vocabulary role extends to both betraying Lenore's trust by questioning her analyst, and redeploying the doctor's terminology in ways that both mirror Laing's anti-psychiatry, and exploit Lenore's position as 'ontologically-insecure'.¹²⁵ Between Lang and Vigorous, then, we have a portrait of two manipulative male power-holders. Where Lang presents the force of an 'ontologically secure' person in the novel, able to manipulate through his direct contact with Lenore, Vigorous presents a more conceptual version of

¹²⁴ R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 39.

¹²⁵ Lenore's psychiatrist Dr. Jay is, himself, attempting to manipulate Lenore, as part of the overall plot's attempt to show that she lacks control over her own meaning. Vigorous questioning of Jay about Lenore; (pp. 340-9) Vigorous uses this terminology with Lenore, with suggestions of anti-psychiatry; (pp. 421-34) Dr. Jay involved in a conspiracy to manipulate Lenore. (pp. 309-11)

elements derived from Laing. One of these is the self-conscious ontologically insecure figure, which Laing describes as a figure for whom 'the identification of the self with the phantasy of the person by whom one is being seen' is a crucial symptom. Thus, in the self-containing narratives Vigorous produces to manipulate Lenore's conception of him – generally unsuccessfully – he is overly identifying himself with the figuration of self he creates.

The copy of *The Divided Self* in the Harry Ransom Center provides evidence for Wallace's knowledge of Laing's text. It is heavily annotated, and Maria Bustillos provides a reading of Wallace's annotations that highlight the autobiographical themes operating within them; she characterizes Laing's text as part of his 'self-help archive'.¹²⁶

Laing's writing concerns the difficulties produced by and within relationships, particularly family relationships. He states that: 'We are concerned with persons, the relationships between persons, and the characteristics of the family as a system composed of a multiplicity of persons.'¹²⁷ Laing's analysis is of the many ways relationships can be damaging to a coherent sense of self, and warns of the dangers that people inflict on each other on an unconscious level. His writing values self-revelation and communication as ways through these problems, and books such as *The Divided Self* were intended to instil a sense of self-awareness in their readers. Wallace's notes on his copy of the text – adding his name or initials next to various aspects of Laing's diagnoses (some instances of which are noted in Bustillos' article) – show how seriously Wallace took Laing's anti-psychiatric thought. This makes it an important co-text for the suspicion of psychiatry, the picture of Laing-style schizophrenia, and the

¹²⁶ Bustillos draws mostly on Wallace's annotations of the conception of the 'performer', and relates it to his relationship with his mother, quoting the note: 'Becoming what narcissistically-deprived Mom wants you to be – performer'. (p. 1)

¹²⁷ R.D. Laing, *Sanity, Madness, and the Family, Volume I: Families of Schizophrenics* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1964), p. 5.

network of family connections (a term that resonates in Wittgenstein's work, too) in *The Broom of the System*.

The portrait of Laing's ideas produced through *The Broom of the System* is complex, and interlocks with the use of Wittgenstein that Clare Hayes-Brody's work has discussed.¹²⁸ One of the most common themes critics have seen in Wallace's work is solipsism.¹²⁹ It is a term he often returned to throughout his career, and the analysis of Wittgenstein and Laing produced by his first novel opens up this theme in multiple ways.

Wallace's most direct interaction with Wittgenstein comes in 'The Empty Plenum' in which he describes the philosopher's *Tracatus Logico-Philosophicus* as leading inevitably to a solipsistic conclusion, and that his teaching career and posthumous publication of the *Philosophical Investigations* was an attempt to escape these constrictions. 'The Empty Plenum' is a review of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* by David Markson. It suggests that Wallace felt a commonality of purpose with its author. This is made clear in this assessment of Markson's text: '[...] for me, the novel does artistic & emotional justice to the politico-ethical implications of Ludwig Wittgenstein's abstract mathematical metaphysics, makes what is designed to be a mechanism pulse, breathe, suffer, live, etc.' (p. 219) There is a direct connection to the narrative of Wallace's novel. In *The Broom of the System*, alongside the direct influence of the two versions of Laing, Lenore Beadsman's progress is manipulated by the invisible presence of her grandmother (also Lenore Beadsman) who is a student of Wittgenstein's after the publication of the *Tracatus*.

¹²⁸ Hayes-Brody, pp. 26-7.

¹²⁹ Two examples: 'In [Infinite Jest], the extreme opposite of autonomy does not lie in healthy, life enhancing relationships with the world and others, but in the crippling, utterly solipsistic trap of dependence [...] virtually every attempt to resist externally mediating forces – whether drugs, coaching, or screaming cultural productions such as entertainment and advertising – result only in further dependence.' Holland, p. 225; 'When he wasn't worrying about the traps of self-consciousness, solipsism, and radical skepticism, he was worrying about irony, slickness, or seduction.' Gideon Lewis-Kraus, 'Viewer Discretion: The trajectory of writer-worrier David Foster Wallace', *Bookforum*, September/October/November 2012, <http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/019_03/10012> [Accessed 6 May 2013]. See also Boswell, p. 18.

The Broom of the System's two key influences, then, advocate a close attention to the results of relationships, and suggest that a consideration of the use of language and of self-analysis are important to building healthy collaborative relationships. From these principles, Wallace builds a text that presents the principles of metafiction – which is inherently self-regarding – as close to solipsistic, but he fails to build a non-relativistic ethical structure. Instead, Wittgenstein and Laing present Wallace with a method of intensifying metafiction, by playing an even closer attention to the lived meanings of language as they allow his characters to relate to and formulate themselves through networks of meaning.

This is inherently a critique of postmodernist forms, as it attempts to show the operation of language at a second-level from the stricter author-text-reader of metafiction. Wittgenstein allows the revelation of the mutability of meaning and its construction; Laing demonstrates how language can manipulate identities as it is used. However, Wallace's figuration of this through metafictional forms does not present such ideas as a negation of metafiction, but rather necessarily conforms to the same logics. So, as Wittgenstein and Laing allow the text to be ethically critical of the inherent manipulations involved in the use of language, the text itself never advances beyond another version of relativism through these voices. As in the chapter of *The Pale King* in which the very sentences used to describe Leonard Stecyk act as a self-negation, Wallace's theoretical critique is negated by the failure of his writing to move beyond postmodernist ethics. This is because the logic of intensification he enacts does not entail negation.

A key way to see this failure in operation is through an analysis of the various narratives Rick Vigorous controls in the text. *The Broom of the System* is made up of many characters and scenarios, which act like failed allegorical devices right from the level of their names.¹³⁰ Vigorous's stories are always self-cancelling because of their assumed irony. Their motivations are always clearly directed at manipulating Lenore in a particular way; they contain obvious first-order allegorical interpretations, aimed specifically at Lenore. However, Wallace underlays these with second-order interpretations, of which Vigorous is unconscious, that are much more similar to Laing's interpretations of the power-games within relationships. Indeed, in both first- and second-order interpretation, Vigorous's stories always reflect his desire for control of Lenore, but it is only on the second level, which cancels the sympathy of the first, that Vigorous's intentions are hostile or passive-aggressive. In the first order, he is presented as a victim or sympathetic figure. Vigorous's narratives also act as reversals of those found in Laing's writing, in that they attempt to influence and even hide, rather than reveal, Lenore's 'self' through metaphor. However, in their use of emotive themes and disturbed relationships, there is enough overlap

¹³⁰ Examples are the chapter in which Lenore visits her sister's family, who perform a bizarre play in front of video of an audience on their television, described as 'family theatre', which allows them as 'family-members' to 'grow and see themselves clearly both as selves and members, and so come to a fuller and happier sense of self.' (p. 172) This can be compared to Laing's 'Defensive Function of the Family' in which 'each family member incarnates a structure derived from relations between members'. R.D. Laing, 'The Family and the 'Family'', *The Politics of the Family and Other Essays* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), p. 13. Bombardini, whose response to Laing's concept that 'we are by nature without exception aware of the fact that the universe is so divided, into Self, on one hand, and Other, on the other' is to attempt to 'grow to infinite size', pp. 90-1. This parallels the description of the schizophrenic's response to the 'false self' on *The Divided Self*, pp. 160-2. Finally, names like Biff Diggerence, Rick Vigorous and Wang Dang Lang all suggest a level of symbolism that the characters seem to undermine. See Wallace's comment that the novel is about 'a cast of characters who are afraid their names don't denote, word and referent are united in absence'. Lipsky, p. 35.

between Laing and Vigorous to suggest that the repetition of the formal qualities of Laing's work represents a cynicism toward the former.

Vigorous's narratives are thus ethically dubious because of their formal qualities. However, this capitulates to a standard postmodernist reading of the overlap between aesthetics and ethics; Vigorous's stories are ethically dubious because they are aesthetically bad, to a certain extent. A close reading of one of these narratives will highlight this.

The first of Vigorous's narrative interpellations into the novel concerns what is called 'second-order vanity', explained as 'a vain person who's also vain about appearing to have an utter lack of vanity.' (p. 23) The story is told in the form of a dialogue, in which Vigorous provides a kind of synopsis to Lenore, describing the supposed original author's description of events. This means that Vigorous can maintain a distance not just from the auto-metaphorical characters in his narrative, but even from the facts and details surrounding them. The principle protagonist of this first story allows his 'second-order vanity' to overwhelm the healthy relationship to his own body that is necessary to sustain a healthy relationship with both it and the outside world. Thus, when he begins to suffer from what appears to be a severe, disfiguring illness, he elects to hide it rather than seek treatment, for fear of demonstrating that he is in fact vain about his appearance, and wishes to protect it. When Lenore asks, "What is this disease? Is this supposed to be leprosy?" Vigorous replies, "Something like leprosy, was my impression." (p. 24) The story concludes with the protagonist losing his girlfriend because the paradoxical relationship between his vanity and second-order vanity forces

him to neither treat his disfigurement, nor expose his disfigurement to her.

Instead, he becomes increasingly distant in order to protect his dual secret.

The story Vigorous tells here can be read as resulting from a similar paradoxical relationship in his own personality, and one he observes in Lenore. Vigorous wishes to communicate openly with his girlfriend, but feels that doing so involves too much risk of sentimentality, which would be off-putting in the context of deep irony in which he lives. This marks the form of second-order vanity as an indication of the post-postmodernist nature of the text, and the cynical employment of it by Vigorous is one of his most unsympathetic characteristics. The compulsion both to communicate and to deny the need to communicate is reflective of the theme of the story – Vigorous suffers from something like a 'second-order desire to divulge'.

The sense that Vigorous's failed attempt at communication is the result of a self-obsession, rather than resulting from an actual desire to engage with Lenore as an equal is revealed by the description of his story's protagonist: '[...] only when she's gone will he get out of bed and stand in front of the full-length mirror in their bathroom, for hours, gazing at himself in horror, and gently sponging the gray flakes off his increasingly twisted body.'

(p. 25) The complex sense of self-disgust this portrays, in which disgust is figured at the feeling of disgust (one should either accept or seek treatment for one's problems), rather than the object of disgust (the body), presents us with an analogy for the inability of Vigorous to hold adequately and express outwardly motivated desires. It also prefigures the idea of the hollow centre, as the idea of a second-order of vanity and a second-order of desire that displace vanity and desire of the self are perfectly matched to a conception

of an idea of selfhood that accepts an emptiness at its core; it is, finally, this lack of an ability to identify directly with oneself that causes the second-order characteristics to become, first, necessary, and then inescapable.

We can add to this by reading the multiple distancing effects Vigorous puts between himself and his allegory of failed communication - the text describes him as not the author,¹³¹ and he later claims that the stories he receives reveal the 'sadness' of 'the youth of America', something that he finds 'disturbing' (pp. 104-5) - as Vigorous being at a distance from himself, rather than either his story or his audience. The story can thus be read as an early manipulation of the techniques of metafiction as a kind of indirect communication with a reader through exposing self-misunderstanding, as my reading of the character of Lenore in Chapter Two exemplified. However, the reader understands that the reason Vigorous needs to use such indirect methods to 'reach' Lenore is not because Lenore is cynically predisposed to mistrust direct communication by the postmodern environment in which she 'exists', but rather because such manipulations are themselves cynical. Vigorous is desirous of producing a sympathetic effect in Lenore through these stories, rather than presenting her with something about himself with which she can truly sympathize. The double-bind of distancing through metafiction is that it must, at some level, demonstrate its own intent even more than more realist forms, and this immediately presents it as a cynical form, with barely suppressed ulterior motivations.

This complex admixture, in which sympathy for any of the multiple figures Wallace presents us with is constantly undermined by the suspicions

generated by his chosen form, is appropriate to describe his almost neurotic obsession with the revealing elements of truth through literature. Metafiction, as a form, encapsulates Wallace's dictum that 'cynicism and naivety are not mutually exclusive', as it compels both a cynical expounding of its nature as a motivated text (one which Vigorous's narratives explore through their even-more-cynical distancing effects), while assuming a certain naivety that exposing such cynicism does not necessarily undermine these same effects. In exploring these exaggerated compulsions in an ethical mode, *The Broom of the System* demonstrates that metafiction is, undoubtedly, contradictory and self-cancelling; such objection to it as a form demonstrate (taking into account the establishment of my interest in metafiction as a formal synecdoche for 'postmodernism' more generally to the significance of Wallace's work) how Wallace's fiction presents itself as post-postmodernist.

Vigorous's narratives have deliberate echoes of techniques employed by Laing, and they are demonstrated to be an unethical gesture in this text.¹³¹ This is reinforced by scenes in which a Vigorous uses an anti-psychiatric language with Lenore in order to perform more directly the manipulations these narratives also aim to produce.¹³² Laing's central conception that it is in the formation of relationships with others that our sense of selfhood becomes divided and damaged echoes, broadly, both postmodernist attitudes to the non-fixed nature of the self, and the principles

¹³¹ Vigorous says he receives all his stories as unsolicited submissions, for example: 'Did get a rather interesting one today'. (p. 22)

¹³² See the different figurings of the practice of psychiatry in R.D. Laing, *The Self and Others: Further Studies in Sanity and Madness* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1961).

¹³³ See footnote 125, above.

of Jacques Lacan that Marshall Boswell suggests that Wallace would later critique through *Infinite Jest*.¹³⁴

A meta-metafiction, like a meta-ethics, cannot but repeat the failures of the system on which it is based. Wallace's description of the 'book [as] a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida, and presence versus absence' presents us with an analysis of both the novel's failure and ambition. He explains this elliptically as meaning it has 'a cast of characters who are afraid their names don't denote, word and referent are united in absence, which means Derrida...' (Lipsky, p. 35, ellipsis retained) Lenore is the protagonist of the novel, and the most direct articulation of this nominal absence, as she shares her name with multiple other characters.

There is an overlap between the ideas Wallace suggests he derives from Derrida and the 'ontologically insecure' subject of Laing's *The Divided Self*, which captures some of the characteristics of Lenore in the same way that the 'ontologically secure' person captures Andrew Lang:

The individual in the ordinary circumstances may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that identity and autonomy are always in question. He may lack the experience of his own temporal continuity. He may not possess an over-riding sense of personal consistency or cohesiveness. He may feel more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good, valuable. (p. 42)

These characteristics directly apply to Lenore, who shares maintains no control over her identity or reality, and is constantly manipulated by several of the novel's other figures, as I have shown. Lenore's subjectivity, if we are to take Wallace at his word that her characterization should be considered post-Derridean, mirrors Nealon's concept of post-postmodern subjectivity.

¹³⁴ [...] *Infinite Jest* demonstrates that Lacan's model of the psychological subject is a seductive but ultimately alienating and harmful idea that can and should be overcome.' Boswell, p. 128.

He draws on the central prominence of Derrida's deconstructive thought to state that in 'the workings of the unconscious and subjective identity [...] a Saussurean version of language (the socially constructed place where there are no positive terms, only differences) was the postmodern paradigm that overcoded all the others', out of which the post-postmodern 'hollow-cantered' subject, which I have described, emerges. (p. 147) The symptomatic experience of selfhood Laing describes, 'more insubstantial than substantial' is a product of the fact that postmodern theory has become 'dominant' for both Wallace and Nealon, the symptoms of which align with the ontological insecurity Laing describes; not least because if postmodernism asks fundamentally 'ontological questions', in McHale's terms, then ontological insecurity is very much the 'air that we breathe' in post-postmodernism.

(Nealon, p. 64; McHale, p. 11)

The first page of *The Divided Self*, though, sets out a solution to the ontologically insecure state. Appropriately, this matches closely with Wallace's descriptions of his understanding of Wittgenstein:

Existential phenomenology attempts to characterize the nature of a person's experience of his world and himself. It is not so much an attempt to describe particular objects of his experience as to set all particular experiences within the context of his whole being-in-his-world. (p. 17)

Within this claim for the products of 'existential phenomenology', one can see the opening of the ways the textual can be made ethical. Wallace's fiction, as I will describe in section 6 of this chapter, is marked by a consideration of just such phenomenology. In this first novel, while his ethical strategies have steered close to the parable forms of Laing's case-studies, Wallace's writing presents us with a demonstration of the concerns that would continue to influence his literary project.

In the overlap between Wittgenstein and Laing that I have observed, a schema that dominates much of *The Broom of the System*, there is a demonstration that the symbolic and practical value of language agreed within a community is not necessarily an escape from the solipsistic conclusions Wittgenstein initially drew; because notions of the self and notions created by the community are inherently different, and there is an ethical deception when these are forced to become identical. The text remains stubbornly postmodernist on this level, making the claim that each person must fashion an individual sense of self and ethics appropriate to themselves that is acceptable to but not received from their conditions.

As Žižek has described, this postmodernist relativism becomes a new, solipsistic total ideology as critiques like Wallace's found a post-postmodernism, in which a sense of community and inter-relationship is considered secondary to a realization of selfhood, a concept that can only make sense within these larger structures. So '[...] as soon as we enter culture, man becomes [...] retroactively responsible for his own nature', which leads to a sense of 'everything depends on me, but for all that, I can do nothing'.¹³⁵ Žižek's conception of identity within culture, drawn from Hegel and Lacan, produces a paradoxical powerlessness as the product of either recognizing or rejecting postmodern relativism. *The Broom of the System* expresses this on multiple levels, from the grand scale of Lenore's various imposed self-revelations, and the various power centres of the novel, to the internal manipulations of Vigorous's narratives, and the understanding of deconstruction that it demonstrates. *The Broom of the System* is a text that

is deeply concerned with contradiction and lack, and the sense of self-cancellation that is expressed much more concisely in *The Pale King* is equally important here.

Leonard Stencyk and Lenore Beadsman both try, and fail, to construct a sense of selfhood from generally applicable ethical rules. In *The Broom of the System* we see the failure of these concepts because of the ways they are imposed by a community onto an individual, in a way that does not cohere with a sense of selfhood. In *The Pale King*, the reverse is true, so Leonard Stencyk's ethical rules are too broad for the community of which he is a part. Lenore Beadsman fails to be constructed because no logical system can 'complete' her character; Stencyk fails to cohere because logical conclusions are all he can construct. Both characters represent a relativism that has no outside, a kind of ethics that is not universally applicable. The critique of postmodernist relativism that is produced by both texts is one founded on the principle that postmodernist selfhood is necessarily empty or hollow; this is the intensification of metafiction that is performed, as Vigorous's narratives and Stencyk's character shows. In the next section, I will show that *The Pale King* offers a potential answer to these post-postmodernist questions; one which manages to ground itself in something beyond the principles of postmodernism at which Wallace's ethical critiques constantly pick.

¹³⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, New York: Verso, 2008), p. 249; p. 252.

3.6 Lane Dean Jr and ethics

Chapter 5 of *The Pale King*, through the character of Leonard Stencyk, produces a discussion of the relationship between postmodernism and ethics through a metafictional form. The next chapter introduces a potential solution to the ethical and formal difficulties represented by Stencyk. Similarly, if Wallace's approach to the ethical nature of the act of writing was always informed by a compulsion to relativism, as demonstrated by some of the features of *The Broom of the System*, the sixth chapter of *The Pale King* opens a new possibility for the ethical relationship between author and reader to precede the inevitability of relativism.

Throughout this chapter I have argued that Wallace presents ethical dilemmas through a metafictional frame as a means of intensifying the impulses and assumptions of metafiction. The ethics of such writing tends towards the relativistic and solipsistic in the same way that Wallace claims postmodernism more broadly does.¹³⁶ In Chapter 6 of *The Pale King*, placed in direct opposition to the individualized and isolated ethics of Leonard Stencyk, Wallace presents us with an outward-facing version of self-reflexivity; an approach to metafiction that re-asserts the ethical relationship as potentially prior to a conception of the self. In doing so, he draws on the ideas of Lévinas, placing them as centrally in *The Pale King* as were Laing, Wittgenstein and Derrida's thought in *The Broom of the System*.¹³⁷ This

¹³⁶ See, for example, his description of the broader effects of postmodernism in 'E Unibus Pluram': 'U.S. pop culture is just like U.S. serious culture in that its central tension has always set the nobility of individualism against the warmth of communal belonging. [...] (Television commercials always make their appeals to individuals, not groups, a fact that seems curious in light of the unprecedented size of TV's Audience, until one hears gifted salesmen explain how people are always most vulnerable, hence frightened, hence persuadable, when they are approached solo.)' (pp. 54-5)

¹³⁷ Van Ewijk also claims a potential influence of Lévinas' thought on *Infinite Jest*: Petrus van Ewijk, "'I' and the 'Other': The relevance of Wittgenstein, Buber and Levinas for an understanding of AA's Recovery Program in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" *English Text Construction* 2.1 (2009), pp. 132-45

influence makes the final novel a much clearer attempt to produce an ethics of post-postmodernism distinct from the damaging implications of relativism.

The chapter introduces the character of Lane Dean Jr. As if to emphasize the ethical nature of its content, it was published in *The New Yorker* under the title 'Good People'.¹³⁸ The style of this chapter is characteristic of several of Wallace's later stories. The two closest relatives are 'Forever Overhead' collected in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and 'Incarnations of Burned Children' collected in *Oblivion: Stories*.¹³⁹ The prose style found in those stories I will describe as 'phenomenologically-inflected', meaning that the direct and indirect experiences of the protagonist of each story is central to both the form and the content of the narrative. This style is the best fit for what has been called Wallace's 'metafiction of consciousness', and it fits with the concept of 'existential phenomenology' from Laing, cited above.¹⁴⁰ There is a way in which it reflects the hyperconsciousness that Wallace noted in Fyodor Dostoevsky's writing.¹⁴¹ Equally, it can be considered a metafictional re-imagining of a stream-of-consciousness style, but with significant differences in directness and self-awareness. Experience

¹³⁸ Many of the pieces in *The Pale King* are likely to have stand-alone titles as they were drafted, as there are references to various examples in the Ransom Center Archive. Therefore, even though it was posthumously published, it is probable that 'Good People' is Wallace's own title.

¹³⁹ Compare the sentence quoted from page 36 of *The Pale King*, below, with this from 'Forever Overhead': The pool has a strong clear blue smell, though you know the smell is never as strong when you are actually in the blue water, as you are now, all swum out, resting back along the shallow end, the hip-high water lapping at where it's all changed'; or this, from 'Incarnations of Burned Children': 'The Daddy was around the side of the house hanging a door for the tenant when he heard the child's screams and the Mommy's voice gone high between them.' David Foster Wallace, 'Forever Overhead', in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007), p. 6; David Foster Wallace, 'Incarnations of Burned Children', in *Oblivion: Stories* (London: Abacus, 2004), p. 114.

¹⁴⁰ Wallace's writing as a 'metafiction of consciousness' was elaborated in radio programme *Endnotes: Endnotes*, BBC Radio 4, 6 February 2011.

¹⁴¹ Wallace described *Notes from Underground*'s protagonist as having a 'self-diagnosed "disease" – a blend of grandiosity and self-contempt, of rage and cowardice, of ideological fervor and a self-conscious inability to act on his convictions: his whole paradoxical and self-negating character – [which] makes him a universal figure in whom we can all see parts of ourselves [...]. In his notes towards the article, he described this as 'hyperconsciousness'. The 'self-negating' quality he describes coheres with my description of Wallace's writing; intensifying this to the level found in *The Pale King*'s sixth chapter and elsewhere mark such sections as Wallace's most ambitious literary legacy in some respects. 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky', p. 256; Wallace collection in the Harry Ransom Center, Box 4, File 12.

is not reflected directly in the prose of these stories; rather, experience presents itself as an unconscious filter on the prose itself, so that the data we are given is a second-order reflection of the direct or indirect experience of the protagonist.

To make my description of phenomenologically-inflected writing clearer, here is a short example from the opening of the Dean chapter: 'They sat up on the table's top portion and had their shoes on the bench part that people sat on and picnicked in carefree times.' (p. 36) Dean and his girlfriend's physical aspect is set up not as if externally-described but as internally-experienced, and inflected with, one assumes, Dean's own understanding of the significance of their position: the 'carefree times' his location suggests is recalled because of its contrast with his present emotional state. This is what I mean by phenomenological: the prose here places experience as an essential filter to the descriptive content.

In a way, this form is a development of the kinds of prose I described in Chapter Two, where contradictions within sentences produced indirect information about character. It also reflects my discussion of Vigorous's narratives in *The Broom of the System*, where the essential meaning of the narratives is determined by the character-based implications of their secondary allegorical implications. These phenomenologically-inflected passages present the selection and reproduction of any information as the means by which character is produced, so that each word has an ironic inference about the protagonist of the section. It is its neutrality – the assumption that irony is always encoded in discourse and so now exists without comment – that marks such late writing differently. The presentations of Lenore or Vigorous that I have described, for example, uses such irony negatively, while here the irony produces much greater sympathy with the protagonist. It also mirrors aspects of post-postmodernism: it intensifies metafiction's ironic distancing, it presents irony as a completely totalized system and, in producing a conception of character through the attention to

the external, it evokes a hollow-centre, in which identity is externalized to the interpretation of anything but the direct-self.

As the chapter progresses, Dean is shown to be a reflection of the protagonist of *The Broom of the System*. The phenomenologically-inflected prose of the chapter reveals how reliant Dean's own character is on the relationships of power that have coalesced around him. For example, in thinking about his girlfriend, his thoughts reflect his mother's: 'His mother had put it that *she knew what it was she wanted*, which was nursing and not an easy program at Peoria College, and plus she worked hostessing at the Embers and had bought her own car.' (p. 38, emphasis retained) The prose style employed here contradicts the values of the Stecyk chapter, by placing lived understanding at its centre. As with Lenore Beadsman, Dean is revealed to be something of an empty vessel, upon which his community's ideas are loaded. He seems to have no opinion of his girlfriend of his own. However, in the chapter's conclusion, it is revealed that this hollowness does not necessarily lead to the solipsistic conclusions that *The Broom of the System* seemed to draw, that a finding a place within a language community does not necessarily destroy the possibility of self-expression and understanding.

This section is directly ethical in its content. Its formal qualities, in opposition to the Stecyk chapter that precedes it, emphasize the fact that ethical decisions are both personal and made within communities as an essential pre-requisite. This section concerns Dean and his girlfriend coming to a decision about her pregnancy, deciding whether or not she should have an abortion. Dean's consideration of this question is demonstrated to be an oblique process, rather than one with a pre-existing inevitable conclusion.

Dean is presented as being capable of failure through misrecognition, not of conclusions, but of explanations. This is brought out in the following section:

He hated himself for sitting so frozen. [...] He knew it was wrong, he knew something was required of him and knew it was not this terrible frozen care and caution, but he pretended to himself he did not know what it was that was required. [...] He pretended that not saying aloud what he knew to be right and true was for her sake, was for the sake of her needs and feelings. (p. 38)

Dean's 'pretending to himself' is an attempt to impose a Stecyk-style logic on the dilemma he is facing, using a self-motivated justification to excuse his own lack of action as a form of consideration for the other.

There is a consistency between the philosophy of Lévinas and this section of *The Pale King*. The single most important of Lévinas's concepts for this connection is the idea that the ethical pre-exists the ontological: he states that 'Ontology is not accomplished in the triumph of human beings over their condition, but in the very tension where this condition is assumed'.¹⁴² So, our relationship to the eternal and indefinable other exists prior to our conception of our selves or the world.

There are two reasons why this idea resonates within Wallace's work. Firstly, Samuel Moyn points out that Lévinas built this conception as a response to the solipsistic conclusions drawn by Martin Heidegger, a near

¹⁴² Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental? (1951)', in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 3.

contemporary.¹⁴³ While both developed a philosophy from the principles of phenomenology, Heidegger's conclusions led to an isolating sense of self and a relativistic and apolitical ethics that Lévinas was compelled to oppose. Moyn describes this as Lévinas's desire to 'transcend loneliness' – a desire that echoes Wallace's own words on the importance of fiction.¹⁴⁴ The attraction Wallace felt to the purportedly similar project undertaken by Wittgenstein,¹⁴⁵ and the constant struggle with both solipsism and relativism found throughout his writing, make Wallace's work a close parallel to Lévinas's project.

Secondly, Richard A. Cohen describes how, in Lévinas's philosophy, ethics necessarily pre-exists concepts, because the latter can be used to rationalize bad as well as good behaviour. It is not knowledge that leads to 'good' decision-making, but an acceptance of the unknowable.¹⁴⁶ This echoes the way Alcoholics Anonymous is described in *Infinite Jest*, where any attempt to understand the method through which it operates, or to intellectualize its process, is considered both taboo and an inherent undermining of the process, described as 'Analysis-Paralysis'.¹⁴⁷ It is considered centrally important not to consider, or know, how AA works. I discuss some of the implications of this for an author whose writing seems to desire the ability to explain everything in Chapters Four and Six, but already we can see the self-recognition of this trait in my reading of Stecyk. Through Stecyk, Wallace presents a figure who tries to operate ethically by following

¹⁴³ Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Lévinas Between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 111-2.

¹⁴⁴ Expressed most directly in 'David Foster Wallace im Interview (2003)'.

¹⁴⁵ See McCaffery, p. 144.

¹⁴⁶ Richard A. Cohen, *Face to Face with Lévinas*, ed. by Richard A. Cohen (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 5.

a set of rules that logically interconnect with each other instead of approaching each decision with a sense of its unknowability. Stecyk is a depiction of the absolute rationalization of behaviour, with his ethics involving the ontological sphere of total logic and knowledge.

Following an understanding of why Wallace's writing might come to echo or reflect on Lévinas's philosophy, it should be noted that these concepts also produce a response to the ideas of postmodernism that Wallace's work constantly brought into question. Most pertinently, this philosophy presents an opportunity to move beyond McHale's definition of postmodernist literature as asking 'ontological questions' as the logical deduction from the epistemological questions presented by Modernist literature.¹⁴⁸

Accepting that there could or should be a precursor to the ontological level of existence, and that this level is founded absolutely on the presence of the 'other', and of the ethical concerns that seem so valueless to postmodernism, is a significant simultaneous extension and undermining of postmodernist thought. Similarly, while Lévinas's philosophy does not necessarily produce a re-integration of a sense of unified selfhood, and is thereby not contradictory of many of the principles of postmodernity, it provides a sense in which the disunity of self is irrelevant in the face of an

¹⁴⁷ A significant concept discussed further in Chapter Six. *Infinite Jest*, p. 1002n90.

¹⁴⁸ 'Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they "tip-over" into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip-over into epistemological questions – the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible'. McHale, p. 11.

other whose demands are absolute and infinite.¹⁴⁹ These demands overwhelm the need for a sense of wholeness, as there is a constant necessity, which pre-exists all knowledge of a sense of self, to 'abdicate a position of centrality, in favor of the vulnerable other'.¹⁵⁰ The concerns of postmodernism are therefore made irrelevant, replaced by a sense of, in Derrida's term, 'unconditional hospitality'.¹⁵¹

To return to the novel then, we can analyze the climax of the sixth chapter using Lévinas's principles, as well as a metafictional understanding of how literary forms overlap with their expression of an author's thoughts and a history of that form. As this chapter has demonstrated, the deceptiveness of all fictional forms overlaps with its ethical concerns in every case. In the last extract from *The Pale King*, Dean was presented as 'pretending to himself' that his behaviour was correct or 'good'. This echoes the post-facto justification of an act that is produced if the ontological is thought to precede the ethical. But in moving beyond his pretending after this point, Dean begins to take responsibility for his duty to the other.

It is through the literary trope of epiphany that Dean's passivity is broken and he comes to a decision to act. This echoes the structure of many

¹⁴⁹ Lévinas's definition of ethical subjectivity could be summarized in the following description: 'Subjectivity, prior to or beyond the free and the nonfree, obliged with regard to the neighbor, is the breaking point where essence is exceeded by the Infinite. It is the point of rupture but also of connection; the glow of the trace is enigmatic, equivocal. It is so in still another sense, which distinguishes it from the appearing of phenomena. It cannot serve as the point of departure for a demonstration, which inexorably would bring it into immanence and essence. The trace is sketched out and effaced in the face of equivocation of a saying. In this way it modulates the modality of the Transcendent. The infinite then cannot be tracked down like game by a hunter. The trace left by the Infinite is not the residue of a presence; its very glow is ambiguous. Otherwise its positivity would not preserve the infinity of the infinite any more than negativity would.', 'Essence and Disinterestedness (1974)', pp. 118-9.

¹⁵⁰ *Face to Face*, p. 27.

of Wallace's ethically-themed fictions, particularly in the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Dean's epiphany is produced as a movement toward the other, understanding of his responsibilities towards her over himself or his understanding of the world. Indeed, it is in coming to an understanding of her specific conception of their situation that Dean feels compelled to act.

It will be a terrible, make-or-break gamble born out of the desperation in Sheri Fisher's soul, the knowledge that she can neither do this thing today nor carry a child alone and shame her family. Her values block the way either way, Lane can see, and she has no other options or choice, [...] She is gambling that he is good. There on the table, neither frozen nor yet moving, Lane Dean Jr. sees all this, and is moved with pity and with also something more, something without any name he knows, that is given to him to feel in the form of a question that never once in all the long week's thinking and division had even so much as occurred – why is he so sure he doesn't love her? Why is one kind of love any different? What if he has no earthly idea what love is? (pp. 42-3)

Dean's decision isn't based on his own self-understanding, as he cannot answer the questions about love for himself. Nor is it based on abstract notions of what he 'should' do in a hypothetical situation; never does he consider what the best course of action would be, or what would reflect best on himself. His ethical behaviour is predicated entirely on the particular and unknowable other he is facing, and any other consequences are ignored.

¹⁵¹ Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Lévinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 274.

Cohen describes the four elements of Lévinas's ethics to be '1) the alterity of the other person and 2) the passivity of the self, and their "relations": 3) the other's command and 4) my responsibility to respond.'¹⁵² These all find correspondence in Lévinas's claim that 'ontological difference' '[...] signifies my responsibility for the other [...] an ethical meaning of the relation to the other, answering, in the form of responsibility before the face, to the *invisible that requires me*; answering to a demand that puts me in question and comes to me from *I know not where*, nor when, nor why.'¹⁵³ We can see each aspect of this thesis demonstrated in this chapter of *The Pale King*. Dean accepts that he knows nothing of his girlfriend, and indeed that there is nothing to know, because of the paradox in her 'soul', that she can neither do one thing nor the other. He is absolutely passive, and the constant repetition of his inability to move or speak emphasizes this. It is only once he understands her command, that his actions might undo the contradiction, that he takes absolute responsibility for her and responds.

The remainder of *The Pale King* presents Dean as committed beyond all reason to his wife and daughter. He is the 'wiggler' who suffers most from the conditions in which they work, but equally he is the most dedicated. The boredom of the experience of existence, which each character suffers through, weighs most oppressively on Dean, but it is his sense of total responsibility that provides a method of coping. (pp. 376-85) Each of the 'wrigglers' of the novel is shown to have a unique ability to do that job, which is described as the pinnacle of numb tedium. In Dean's case, it is purely this

¹⁵² *Face to Face*, p. 6, emphasis retained.

¹⁵³ Lévinas, Emmanuel, *Outside the Subject*, trans. by Michael B. Smith (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p. 92.

extreme sense of responsibility to the other, what Derrida calls 'the absolute other in me, of the other as the absolute that decides about me in me'.¹⁵⁴ Dean never falls into the traps of self-analysis or regressive self-conscious loops that almost every other significant figure in Wallace's writing does. Rather, he is the figure most dedicated to an absolute commitment to the other beyond any conception of the self. He forms a near-absolute opposite to the figure of Leonard Stecyk, and in this way produces a positive version of what a post-postmodernist ethics can look like.

3.7 Conclusion: Implications for the post-postmodern

Throughout this discussion of the ethical material found in Wallace's fiction I have discussed the central forms of post-postmodernism (intensification, totalization, hollow-centeredness) only tangentially. This has allowed a positive picture of Wallace's ethics to emerge, one in which his negotiations with the implied ethics of metafiction build, eventually, to a coherent articulation of an ethical system in his final novel; a system that operates through the centrally anti-relativistic critique in his fiction, but that only coheres in the commitment to meta-metafiction and meta-ethics we can find operating there. However, this thesis is not intended to be a hagiography of Wallace, nor the outlining of a manifesto of post-postmodernism that sees Wallace's fiction as its *encliridion*. This should be clear from the not-wholly-sympathetic terms in which I have defined post-postmodernism as a frame for understanding aspects of contemporary Western history.

¹⁵⁴ Derrida, Jacques, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. by George Collins (London, New York, NY: Verso, 1997), p. 68.

It is necessary here to make more explicit the ways in which the picture of Wallace's ethics of reading are marked by a coherence to the broader aspects of post-postmodernism that I have outlined. Throughout this chapter I have made clear that producing an ethical reading of metafiction – figuring metafiction as formally emblematic of the values of postmodernism¹⁵⁵ – produced something that is literally post-postmodern: such a text reflects on and revises postmodernist forms, and in revising them, produces an intensified version of postmodernism that must be considered post-postmodern. Nealon's definition helps us to understand this, and demonstrates that Wallace's writing stands in the same relation to postmodernism that authors of postmodernist fiction (broadly defined) stand toward Modernists.¹⁵⁶ But in coming to the conclusions I have about the specific project and intentions of *The Pale King*, it is necessary now to articulate why its ethics are the ethics of the post-postmodernism I describe, and the significance this has for Wallace as both author and critic of post-postmodernism.

I wish to end my reading of *The Pale King* by turning briefly to the character of Chris Fogle. If Lane Dean Jr, as I have analyzed his depiction in 'Good People', has the most ethical force in the novel, the transition we see Fogle undergoing in his central chapter of the novel represents a more broadly-drawn and politically-significant depiction of the 'ethical turn' in Wallace's fiction.

Fogle is described as archetypal of 'Generation Y':

¹⁵⁵ Following Wallace's 'E Unibus Pluram', as cited in section 3.

I was by myself, wearing nylon warm-up pants and a black Pink Floyd tee shirt, trying to spin a soccer ball on my finger, and watching the CBS soap opera *As the World Turns* on the rooms little black-and-white Zenith - not Obetrolling or blowing off anything in particular but essentially still just being an unmotivated lump. (p. 221)

There are several things to note about this description. Firstly, it is at the beginning of a long, repetitive section of prose in which multiple aspects of the sentence are repeated. In particular, the title *As the World Turns*, with its inference of wasted time, becomes dramatically over-emphasized. The drawn-out process of the extension of Fogle's awareness partially mirrors the phenomenologically-inflected prose I noted earlier in this chapter, but it is also has a deliberate rhetorical and pedagogical effect on the reader: it literally slows down the reading process to refuse a passive engagement with the symbolic title. The reader thereby forced to repeat either Fogle's awareness of the title's significance, or become passive in their interpretation of the text, skipping past the accumulating meaning altogether. This is a formulation many of the text's driest sections repeat, although with the more abstract intention of testing and focusing readerly attention.¹⁵⁷

Secondly, the description provides another example of Wallace's recycling of previous forms to be found in his writing. Most pertinently, it presents a recursive image. The ball that Fogle tries to spin reflects the smaller ball turning on the television screen, which in turn reflects the larger

¹⁵⁶ '[...]post-postmodernism marks an intensification and mutation within postmodernism (which in its turn was of course a historical mutation and intensification of certain tendencies within modernism).' Nealon, p. viii.

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, chapter 25, which consists almost entirely of various characters' names followed by [...] turns a page'. *The Pale King*, p. 310-3.

spinning planet on which he sits. This image can be interpreted as Fogle's life stalling because of his obsession with fictional or image-based representations of life, and thus his failing to acknowledge the larger structures of the world of which he should be a part. As it does with its ethics, *The Pale King* uses this image of recursion in a more direct way than Wallace's previous work, which Hayles correctly identified as crucially important. Here, though, they require less interpretation to understand than the larger scale structures of previous work. The reference to Pink Floyd even connects the description to an image of recursion in popular culture: the cover of the album *Ummagumma*.¹⁵⁸

Thirdly, the description refers to the drug Obetrol. This is a drug prescribed for Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder-type conditions. Mentioning it here suggests another echo of *Infinite Jest* and its pharmacological vocabulary, and *The Pale King*'s own exploration of heightened attention. It also, in conjunction with its explication earlier in the chapter and the reference to Pink Floyd here, produces a reading of Fogle as an example of Nealon's post-postmodernist 'prosumer'. The effect of Obetrolling is to allow a 'doubling': being able to both 'listen to Floyd' and 'not only hear the music and each note and bar and key change' but also 'know, with the same kind of awareness and discrimination, that I was doing this, meaning really listening'.¹⁵⁹ (p. 183.) The drug produces a state of heightened 'self-awareness' rather than 'self-consciousness'. (p. 181) This description has echoes of metafiction, although in its awareness of the act of

¹⁵⁸ Pink Floyd, *Ummagumma* (Harvest, SHDW 1/2, 1969).

¹⁵⁹ 'Doubling' is a significant concept for Wallace's writing that I will be discussing at length in Chapter Four.

consumption rather than production – placing a self-awareness over self-consciousness – the drug replicates Wallace's meta-metafiction as it places interpretation at its centre.

The description of Fogle locating his identity within the act of interpretation of particular music echoes Nealon's 'prosumer' (who is described as consuming older rock music, much as Fogle is), in that he 'produces him- or herself through consumption' of a cultural product with which he identifies (rather than producing an identity out of which he or she can produce identifications with certain consumer products). (p. 64) Indeed, Obetrol has the effect of intensifying this sense of identification, of being aware of its process, thereby conforming exactly to the logic of post-postmodernism.

This is all to say that Fogle is potentially a central figure of post-postmodernism and of Wallace's fiction, echoing features from throughout Nealon's text, *The Pale King*, and Wallace's other fictions, as well as essential features of the generation he describes. In addition to this, one should note that Fogle is orphaned in this chapter, a fact that echoes Wallace's claim that post-postmodernists have been 'orphaned' by the logic of their postmodernist forebears. (McCaffery, p. 150) Fogle's apparent ethical awakening also comes as a response to a 'hortation', a synecdochic version of Wallace's favoured rhetorical device. (p. 229) The whole chapter is thus an extended metafictional parable of post-postmodernist ethics.

The problems for an ethical system after postmodernism are related to the image of the hollow centre. Post-postmodern figures must produce an ethics that is non-arbitrary, and non-relativistic, as this is the 'correction'

postmodernism seems to require. Meta-ethics also requires the formulation of ethics to be presented as a choice, following the skeptical nature of postmodernist knowledge, and replicating the importance of 'difference' to post-postmodernism. So, in analyzing Fogle's ethical awakening, we need to see how it is instigated (whether or not this is 'meta-ethically'), whether it denies or overlaps with the construction of identity as 'hollow-centred', and how closely it mirrors the ethical engagement Dean represents.

Viewing the 'substitute' lecturer whose hortation 'changes' Fogle as a metafictional author-figure requires us to consider whether the value system he explicitly constructs matches that of the novel as a whole, and then whether his position is an appropriate one for the ethical system the novel creates. There are three things to note about the description of the substitute. Firstly, his effect on Fogle, which echoes the effects of Obetrol: '[...] however alert and aware I felt, I was probably more aware of the effects the lecture seemed to be having on me than of the lecture itself, [...] and yet was almost impossible to look away from or not feel stirred by.' Secondly, the substitute's delivery, which reflects 'people who know that what they are saying is too valuable in its own right to cheapen with concerns about delivery or '*connecting*', and 'had a kind of zealous integrity that manifested not as style but as the lack of it'. Thirdly, the appropriate response to the lecture, which is somewhat different from Fogle's: 'the class's students all took notes, which in accounting classes means that one has to internalize and write [...] while at the same time still listening intently enough to the next point to be able to write it down next'. (p. 219, emphasis retained)

Between these three sections, we have some evidence for the substitute's lecture as descriptive of the novel's intent. The lecture bypasses the information-gathering part of Fogle's mind, to have an impact beyond details, and affect his sense of identity prior to any concept of learning. The delivery of the lecture strengthens my claim, made in section 4, that *The Pale King* represents Wallace's rejection of elements of a style that aims to 'connect'. Taken together, the 'phenomenologically-inflected' style I found Wallace developing in section 6, and the sorts of attention-concentrating passages I noted above produce this implication.

Taken together, though, these brief analyses do not produce a response to postmodernist ethics that in Henrichsen's terms produces an 'ethics of criticism without seeing the literary work as an ethical and therefore intentional act'. (p. 490) Indeed, the substitute is described as a 'substitute father' to Fogle, one who 'calls him to account'. (p. 176) There are direct expressions of Wallace's ethics in the expansion of the characters of *The Broom of the System* and their relationship to the ideas of R.D. Laing; the hortation of *This Is Water*, whose concern for attention and the other mirrors some of the things I described in section 6;¹⁶⁰ and as Aubry has suggested, in the structures of AA as presented in *Infinite Jest*, to which I will return in Chapter Six. The substitute's lecture conforms to the structures of each of these, presenting Fogle with an ethical system from a position of authoritative and responsible objectivity in a persuasive manner. However, this presents a Wallace-ian paradox: it places the authorly function ahead of the readerly, and fails to re-inscribe difference. It responds to the 'relativism'

¹⁶⁰ For another explication of the ethical system espoused in *This Is Water*, see Turnbull.

of endless choice by presenting an essentialist version of ethics that does not acknowledge difference, merely maintains the illusion of it.

The 'call to account' it places on Fogle is to join a network dedicated to controlling the operation of money within the economy. Ultimately, the substitute's ethics is one of subsuming difference to the global economic flows of data, presented as a resistance to it. This echoes Nealon's claim that in post-postmodernism 'resistance to the global flow of fleeting images [...] can be found only in the intensive authenticity of your own private experience' which are determined by your subsequent consumerist choices. Similarly, Fogle is called to escape the Generation Y, prosumer, identity he constructs by following the ethical arm of the exact same system, the arm that balances and allows consumption to continue unabated: the varnish on this is not its consumerist '*connecting*' to his individuality of the speech, but the anti-branding aesthetic that allows the system of which he is a part to exist in the first place, and to which, in his rejection, he must affix himself.

Fogle's choice does not confer him with any more of a sense of an authentic self. Just as Stecyk is described as shunned by the 'marginal and infirm' (p. 35), so Fogle is denigrated as 'Irrelevant Chris Fogle' by his co-workers, acting in the same service, but without the righteous lack of irony he brings to the job. Wallace's notes state that he 'ends up in the IRS as the insufferable do-gooder that Stecyk was as a child'. (p. 541) In this final position, the ethics Wallace attempts to describe directly end up producing an unsuccessful post-postmodernist, rigorously irrelevant to those around him, and simply another part of the larger post-postmodernist system. His

attempt to produce a system of meaning beyond post-postmodernism is inevitably an intensification of the post-postmodernism he observes.

Finally, we might compare Fogle and Dean, whose Lévinasian ethics are much more sophisticated in their drawing. However, Dean's later appearances in the text, such as in chapter 33, seem little more hopeful than Fogle's. There Dean contemplates suicide very directly, 'imagining different places to jump off', in an echo of 'Good Old Neon'. Acting ethically, for the other, as Dean does in chapter 6, seems no guarantee of happiness or reward. Rather, the 'rote tasks just tricky enough to make him think' that place him within an awareness of the passing of time that Fogle's attention seems to validate, become for Dean a 'hell'. (p. 379)

Each of the ethical figures of *The Pale King* ends up unable to understand the communities of which they are part. However, they are part of the politics Derrida derived from the ethical system Lévinas drew up: Critchley describes this as 'every day, there is a responsibility to invent democracy', and this is what Wallace's characters do. (p. 240) Another thinker of the post-postmodern, Žižek has described doing this as the only logical response to the conditions of post-postmodernism.¹⁶¹ *The Pale King* definitively maintains the struggles and paradoxes of the ethical we find throughout Wallace's writing. Finally, rather than any grander positive ethical project, this is how we should understand post-postmodernist ethics: they

¹⁶¹ Butler and Stephens summarize Žižek's thought in a way that reflects this maintaining of a thinking space of paradoxes and questions: 'True thinking is based not on something outside the world, producing a split between the *ought* and the *is*, but only on the world itself, producing a split between the *is* and the *is*. It is a split that is the very time and place of thought itself.' Rex Butler, and Scott Stephens, 'Editor's introduction: Slavoj Žižek's 'third way', in *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings, Volume Two*, ed. by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London, New York, NY: Continuum, 2006), p. 9, emphasis retained.

are a reminder that retaining the desire to find an ethics is itself an ethical decision. This coheres with the totalized logic of capitalist choice, the intensification, and the hollow-centre of self that I have described; yet it remains a validation of Wallace's work as a central post-postmodernist critic of these conditions.

Chapter Four: Footnotes and interpolations

4.1 Introduction: Doubling

At the conclusion of the last chapter, I noted the effect that the drug Obetrol has on Chris Fogle in *The Pale King*. He calls it 'doubling', a state of heightened 'self-awareness' rather than 'self-consciousness'. (p. 181) This mental state allows Fogle to be hyper-aware not only of the information he is absorbing, but also of the conditions and process of that information absorption. (p. 183) I argue that the structures and forms of David Foster Wallace's prose present us with a similar doubling.

'Doubling' means presenting information and the context for that information at the same time. It also means an awareness of the deep irony of post-postmodernism that I have referred to occasionally in this thesis, as a correction to the idea that Wallace's prose formulates a kind of 'meta-irony': 'doubling' creates an awareness that meaning is not just unstable, as in descriptions of postmodernism, but paradoxical.¹⁶² This awareness of the absorption of information as process distinguishes it from metafiction's presentation of the production of information. In this chapter I will relate this intensification of metafiction to the trope of Zeno's paradox.

I will primarily discuss the use of footnotes and endnotes. Alongside long and digressive sentences, these have become seen as a hallmark of Wallace's writing. Footnoting primarily allows the stratification of information,

¹⁶² 'Meta-irony': Scott, p. 40; Boswell, p. 15. 'Unstable meaning': see the importance of 'indeterminacy' to postmodernist critique, e.g. Hassan, p. 92. One might also note Derrida's (1997: 159) conception of the 'supplement' as a formulation of the concept of 'doubling': 'there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations, which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc'. Just as post-postmodernism reflects the experience of the lived experience of postmodernism, 'doubling', reflected through the conscious experience of Fogle, represents the lived experience of the 'supplement'. This experience is heightened by the pharmacological, educational, and cultural position Fogle finds himself in; in other words, it is the totalized experience of the post-postmodern.

classifying different kinds of knowledge. They comment or expand upon the main body of the text, so highlighting a digressive form of narrative expansion. The same qualities that define Wallace's sentences therefore define his most readily apparent formal technique. His many pages of footnotes present visible evidence of the insignificance of narrative thrust in the face of the multiple qualifications, expansions and references that post-postmodernist narratives incorporate.

I will also examine other techniques that mirror the effects of footnoting. This means examining devices that produce parallel levels of information within or alongside the central narrative. This comparison will allow me to determine why such formal qualities are essential to the construction of a post-postmodernist text.¹⁶³

This discussion will approach a broader spread of Wallace's corpus than my other chapters. I will consider different kinds of text in order to develop a confluent reading of how Wallace produces 'doubling' across styles, genres, formats and topics.

I will begin with a discussion of his 'academic writing', pieces written with a specific technical audience in mind. I will then discuss *Infinite Jest*'s endnoting at length, before examining the mutation of non-fictional footnotes in the essay 'Host'. After this, I will discuss the relative absence of footnoting in *Oblivion: Stories*, and then briefly discuss the self-referential application of the technique in *The Pale King*. I will use this analysis to build on my idea that these late texts form a kind of self-parody.

¹⁶³ My reading draws upon other critics' discussion of Wallace's footnoting: Ira B. Nadel provides a history of their use in Wallace's writing, seeing them 'opening unexpected angles and "proofs"' for the reader. Iannis Goerlandt's reading of shorter writing is closer to my own, finding a shift from a focus on 'self-referentiality' to 'intransparency' across his career. My more negative interpretation of the explanation and effects of Wallace's footnotes, while acknowledging the work these critics have done, is distinguishable from their ideas. Ira B. Nadel, 'Consider the Footnote', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 236; Iannis Goerlandt, "'That Is Not Wholly True': Notes on Annotation in David Foster Wallace's Shorter Fiction (and Non-Fiction)", in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles, CA; Austin, TX: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 170.

Overall in this chapter I will demonstrate the operation of digressive and framing networks on the level of the transmission of information. This will enhance my depiction of Wallace's writing as influenced by the structure of Zeno's paradox, as it shows the necessity for the transmission of meaning to be always relayed within a context of deeper or broader sets of meanings. These notes ask who is relaying the information, to what purpose, what information is missing from their narrative, and why, for example. Answering each of these questions is as much a necessity for the 'correct' transfer of information as reaching endless halfway points is to Zeno's Paradox. Wallace's techniques allow him to reproduce the proliferation of information necessary for meaning, but also demonstrate the ways that post-postmodernist fiction relies on paradox to demonstrate the anxious effects of intensified differences.

4.2 Wallace's 'academic' writing

There are two pieces of significant length in Wallace's corpus that can be loosely considered 'academic' writing.¹⁶⁴ The first is his undergraduate philosophy thesis, published in *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*. The second is *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞*. It is useful to start with these texts, because footnoting is an academic tool to

¹⁶⁴ There are other shorter pieces that might be considered 'academic', but only these two were intended for a primarily academic audience. Even within my selection, *Everything and More* is explicitly aimed at a general readership, although it has an academic theme and, broadly, style.

allow extra information to be appended to the text without it becoming unwieldy.¹⁶⁵

The expounding of a theory of modal logic in 'Richard Taylor's "Fatalism" and the Semantics of Physical Modality' echoes the discussion of Zeno's paradox in the later text *Everything and More*. The two share an interest in rehabilitating a 'common-sense' truth from the over-exact interpretation of logical forms. Zeno's paradox resolves the act of crossing the road from the formal difficulties imposed by infinite divisibility. In 'Richard Taylor's "Fatalism"', Wallace examines how free will can be saved from the deterministic 'fatalism' that Taylor theorized is pre-existent in the English language.¹⁶⁶

There are two ways in which 'Richard Taylor's "Fatalism"' anticipates central aspects of Wallace's writing. Firstly, the endnotes allow the presentation of two separate levels of thought, so that the text can anticipate itself, and an idealized reader, to provide a parallel dismissal of its own shortcomings.¹⁶⁷ The second feature is the mixture of semantic groups with which the argument is presented. These not only add colour to the text with

¹⁶⁵ Other examples of texts that produce multiplies meaning by the inclusion of footnotes are 'The Waste Land', *Pale Fire*, and *House of Leaves*. The footnotes in 'The Waste Land' add a sense of authority and studiousness to a high Modernist text, in *Pale Fire* they comment on the nature of interpretation and contribute to the characterization of the disintegrating academic, and in *House of Leaves* do both, while also allowing the interpolation of two narrative voices. T.S. Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006); Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (London: Penguin, 2011); Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000). Sir Walter Scott's use of footnotes in his historical novels adds a directly studious legitimacy to otherwise romantic texts, as in *Ivanhoe*. Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (London, New York, Toronto, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1912).

¹⁶⁶ It is beyond the scope of my argument to determine the success or failure of Wallace's effort; for this assessment, see Maureen Eckert, 'Renewing the Fatalist Conversation' in Wallace, David Foster, *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 135-9.

¹⁶⁷ See Newton on this 'self-second-guessing' style, p. MM44.

pop-cultural references and colloquialisms, but are also reflected in the essay's hybrid formal logic. This applies the same loose and allusive generative effects with which the writing approaches language to formal logic.

The thirty-first endnote stands-out from the other forty-six (which are often of a standard academic type):

³¹ The especially observant and picky reader might eventually notice that many of the formal and semi-formal "propositions" presented up to page 52 turn out strictly speaking to be ill-formed under the rules of system J, because of the stipulation that all wffs in the language must begin with a temporal operator specifying the index of temporal evaluation. This problem could have been avoided had I simply introduced system J at the beginning of the essay and gone from there, making sure each formula followed every rule. But since system J is itself so very new, and potentially weird-looking, I have elected to build up to its introduction gradually, in order both to show clearly the motivation behind the system, and to keep the whole project within the context that renders the system relevant to the essay's goals (this is the context of the Taylor problem). That this involves calling some things propositions that turn out later not technically to be real wffs seems to me an acceptable price to pay. (p. 215n31)

This note states that the opening passages of the essay constitute something of a deliberate mistake. Those things that were presented as 'wffs' [well-formed formulas] were in fact deceptions, now contradicted by,

and therefore superseded by, the establishment of the new logical pattern 'system J'.

One might compare the central effect of this endnote to the sentence structures I noted as typical of Wallace's writing; it neuters the partial meaning of earlier thoughts. By assigning this observation to 'the especially observant and picky reader', the text implies that the practical reasoning for the apparently wasted passages should be clear to a reader who, paradoxically, is less observant: as the passage goes on to say, they served a purpose in contextualizing the later argument that did not require holistic logical agreement. Thus on further reflection, this whole note becomes as self-negating as the point it makes. Rather than allowing for the meaning of those earlier formulas to be negated, the endnote makes the case that only in applying later, not-yet-even-invented-by-the-essay systems to them, do they become negated. The endnote explains, therefore, its own lack of necessity.

In fact, it is the quality of system J as 'weird-looking', of existing outside the normal frames of philosophical logic (like the phrase weird-looking itself) that necessitates the stunted logic of the opening formulas, and thus the existence of endnote 31. The essay presents an argument for the a priori existence of system J as underpinning the logic of the fatalism Taylor's essay has found within language structures. It is an unconscious lived-reality, implied when fatalism seems to be invoked. The logical dead-ends that Wallace reaches in the self-cancellation of his early examples and in endnote 31 are therefore necessary halfway points to reach this conclusion convincingly. Their status as self-cancelling is assigned to the

demands of an 'especially observant and picky reader', who is a pre-emptive construction of the author himself. This is an early example of how self-cancelling logic is observable in both form and intellectual interest of Wallace's writing. The less-than-straightforward way that this endnote contributes to the patterning of Wallace's work is symptomatic of how similar structures will be used, down to the linguistic contrast invoked by the role 'weird-looking' plays.

Everything and More was explicitly written for 'the interested layman', but it is acknowledged that the educational background of its readers will potentially be much higher than this. (pp. 1-2) Thus, a hierarchy of readership is invoked and addressed. Some passages explicitly address those with no formal understanding of maths, while others are marked as appealing only to those with a familiarity with mathematical formulae. This reverses the typical relationship between reader and author. The reader is expected to formulate a text that they can understand from material presented to a range of potential audiences. This stratification is accomplished through specifically marked footnotes.

In the opening section of *Everything and More* there is an explanation of how footnoted material is designated, and the reasoning behind it:

In the following document, the boldface 'IYI' designates bits of material that can be perused, glanced at, or skipped altogether if the reader wants. Meaning skipped without serious loss. Over half the document's footnotes are probably IYI, as well as several different ¶s and even a couple of subsections of the main text. Some of the optional bits are digressions or bits of historical ephemera¹; some are

definitions or explanations that a math-savvy reader won't need to waste time on. Most **IYI**-chunks, though, are designed for readers with strong technical backgrounds, or unusual interest in actual math, or preternatural patience, or all three [...] (pp. 2-3)

The footnote anchored by the ¹ is a useful example of how footnoting works in this text:

¹ **IYI** Here's a good example of an **IYI** factoid. Your author here is someone with a medium-strong amateur interest in math and formal systems. He is also someone who disliked and did poorly in every math course he ever took, save one, which wasn't even in college, but which was taught by one of those rare specialists who can make the abstract alive and urgent, and who really talks to you when he's lecturing, and of whom anything that's good about this booklet is a pale and well-meant imitation. (p. 2n1)

In the explanation of the designation **IYI** there is an overlap with the endnote that I extracted from 'Richard Taylor's "Fatalism)": the mention of 'preternatural patience' as a quality such sections require echoes the earlier text's 'especially observant and picky reader'. Both phrases' implication is that there is something less-than-worthwhile in doing the work that this extension of the text does.

IYI sections are divided into three categories, but the 'good example of an **IYI** factoid' provided in the first footnote aligns with none of these. It is an introduction to the figure of the author, which in effect undermines the validity of the rest of the text: its claim that this figure 'disliked and did poorly' in math means that there is little reason not to seek out a more expert

reading, and so the footnote operates as a kind of self-cancellation of the text.

The variety of categories of **IYI** interpolations leaves readers with the question of how to decide into which category a given note falls. Only in reading them can they know if the information contained within is too simplistic for them, or whether they lack the patience to attempt to decipher its complexities. What distinguishes 60 or more of the footnotes from those that are unlabelled is that some section of the presumed audience will find them neither interesting nor useful. Unlabelled footnotes are implicitly essential to all readers' understanding of the text. One might also wonder, if **IYI** designates something like 'of limited interest and it is up to you to decide whether or not you are an interested party', why those paragraphs or subsections marked **IYI** could not have been placed in footnotes. Perhaps, given the above, even why there is a need to distinguish such information in the first place.

The designation of two sets of footnoting, and of parallel sections of text within the main body that are determined to be of partial interest, means that the system operates to undercut the overall meaning of the text. Separating levels of information acts as a kind of 'halfway' marker, revealing the way transmitting specific detail from within a system that contains such a large variety of information is fruitless. This system acts as an inflection of Zeno's paradox, constantly cancelling the text's own claims.

The footnote quoted above reveals the intentions behind this attempt to define and describe the infinite. It states that 'this booklet is a pale and

'well-meant imitation' of 'one of those rare specialists who can make the abstract alive and urgent' and 'who really talks to you when he's lecturing'.¹⁶⁸ The relatively dry subject matter of *Everything and More* highlights the ways in which Wallace's writing is concerned with self-cancellation in its various forms, both as a kind of self-obsessive nit picking (as the 'especially observant' or 'preternaturally patient' reader is a projected version of the author himself), and as a form of false modesty, of justifying the failings of logic in the text by pointing out that the author figure has risen above them by seeing them, and even been modest enough to highlight them. These concerns are present, too, in his fiction, and the formal structures he uses there to present them echo those employed in this text. From Wallace's two 'academic' texts we can take the idea that such forms are concerned with communicating directly the importance of mapping vital abstract truths onto concrete realities, but also of the impossibility of this ever being a successful project.

4.3 Information and endnotes in *Infinite Jest*

Infinite Jest owes much of its fame to its length, which is compounded by the fact that the last 96 of its closely-typed pages consist of 388 even-more-closely-typed endnotes (some of which are themselves internally footnoted).¹⁶⁹ These features seem to promise an extension of the logic of the encyclopaedic novel, with the endnotes signifying an academic claim to research, reference and citation. The novel's scope and scale is therefore

¹⁶⁸ Which echoes the description of the substitute professor of accountancy in *The Pale King* that I discussed in Chapter Three. This implies a metafictional representation of Wallace's intentions for the text.

¹⁶⁹ Burn (2003: 66-71) summarizes the critical reception of *Infinite Jest*, pointing out Sven Birkerts' sense that 'the narrative structure [...] [reflects] an altered cultural sensibility' and Michiko Kakutani's 'reservations about [...] the size of the work'; Sven Birkerts, 'The Alchemist's Retort', *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1996, p. 113; Michiko Kakutani, 'A Country Dying of Laughter. In 1,079 Pages', *New York Times*, 13 February 1996, p. B2. At its 10-year anniversary, Dave Eggers' foreword to the novel updated this thinking, meditating on its reputation for difficulty, and hesitantly assigned a 'duty' to read it. Dave Eggers, 'Foreword to the Tenth Anniversary Edition of *Infinite Jes*', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 147.

reinforced by the formal devices it employs. However, the endnotes actually often represent a negation of the central themes of the writing, undercutting this ambition.

Several different kinds of material appear in the endnotes of *Infinite Jest*. Some provide explanations of esoteric material in the main body of the text, for example, expanding acronyms. This material may be entirely fictional or the product of genuine research. Most often, for example in regards to pharmacology, it presents itself as the latter.¹⁷⁰

A related strain of endnote provides historical detail about the text's world, either narrative or as baldly 'factual-historical' material. This is all evidently fictional material, describing occurrences between the publication of *Infinite Jest* in 1996 and the 2010 of its setting.¹⁷¹ Many of these endnotes take the form of apparently 'found' documents, articles and essays, sometimes written by the characters in the novel. There is also reproduced correspondence and transcripts of conversations, films and plays.¹⁷² Some documents are also used to flesh out the fictional world; others are apparently personal and private in nature, although the fact that the central characters are involved in espionage means that such documentation may be evidence of the plot against them.

¹⁷⁰ E.g. p. 1056n387, an endnote that is internally footnoted, and combines information about the commercial and chemical properties of drugs with knowledge of their street use and reputation, with a vocabulary that invokes both varieties of knowledge.

¹⁷¹ Burn (2003: 26) demonstrates that the novel's setting is 2010. One way in which the effect of the endnotes on the fictional world-building is complicated is in the connection between the information on page 223, which lists the names of years after the 'subsidization', or sponsorship, of them, and the linked endnote, 78, which marks the name of the upcoming year (i.e. 2011) as conditional on final approval, in legal contractual terms. This both locates some of the information in the text's main body to an exact temporal moment, and suggests that it is a spontaneous product of that moment (or else the period of time that would elapse between writing and publication would render such a note irrelevant), and also brings into question the controlling force behind the inclusion of this material in the text. It introduces a sense of official control, and therefore the potential for censorship, over the text's contents.

¹⁷² The text implies that some of this material is collated by Mario Incandenza. (p. 1005)

The endnotes also contain 'chapters' of the text: long sections that are formatted like the main body and exiled to endnotes without explanation.¹⁷³ Some of the main body of the text is also made up of the kinds of found documents and transcripts that might also be found in the endnotes, so that the delineation of a specific pattern is difficult to formalize.¹⁷⁴ Finally, some endnotes expand or comment on elements of the text directly, implying a controlling authorial voice.¹⁷⁵ This list of categorizations is not exhaustive, and alternative sub-divisions are possible.

I will use the run of endnotes labelled 107-110 as emblematic of how this material operates to both enhance and undermine the validity of the main text. Note 107 reads: ¹⁰⁷E.g. the WhataBurger Invitational will allegedly be recorded for fringe-market, order-only viewing, later this month.' (p. 1004n107) This is anchored to a description of 'pathetic Troeltsch who shamelessly kiss-asses the Interlace/SPN sportscasters' when a junior tennis event is filmed. (p. 308) Neither text nor endnote explains the acronymic 'SPN', although its probable derivation from ESPN's 'Entertainment and Sports Programming Network' makes such an explanation redundant. Instead, the note confuses the information held in the main text. Its use of the word 'allegedly' implies a rumour to which the narrator is privy.¹⁷⁶ This both suggests that the figure responsible for the text

¹⁷³ Note 324 is presented in the same format as a 'chapter' of the text, while pp. 663-5 present 'letters' of the kind that are otherwise placed in endnotes, such as note 269.

¹⁷⁴ Much of the material that is contained in the endnotes was originally paginated as part of the main text, and the addition of the extensive endnotes occurred only during the final drafting of the novel. They were not a part of the novel's initial structuring, as per the drafts in the Harry Ransom Center.

¹⁷⁵ For example, the excuses made for French-speaking character Marathe's English in certain notes, like 264: 'Sic, but it's pretty obvious what Marathe means here.' (p. 1046n264)

¹⁷⁶ Or the 'constructor of the text', because endnotes are not exactly equal to the narrative of a text, instead implying a distanced extension of it.

has the same basic level of information as the characters within it, and access to the level of conversation in which allegations might be made. This suggests that he or she is therefore a junior tennis player. But it makes little sense that neither these players nor their apparent peer-narrator would be unaware of the eventual broadcast of a film in which they appear.

Endnote 107 is therefore fatally self-cancelling, acting to undermine the validity of a text-construction process in which the constructor knows more than the narrative's actors, and cannot objectively or impartially extend or advance the knowledge of the text. It serves instead to highlight a compromised knowledge. The only further point this note might add is to the sense of paranoia, in which the novel's central figures are constantly observed by the terrorist actors of the plot.

The next note (p. 1004n108) demands less analysis. Its basic implication is that the text's constructor has insight into the operation of the ETA. Because of this, it operates like a more traditional endnote, providing information that would otherwise break the flow of the main narrative. However, placing this not very insightful addendum on a separate page almost 700 pages away from its reference point (on p. 308) has the effect of breaking the reader's sense of narrative flow more forcefully than placing that information in the text would have, undermining this purpose of the endnoting process.

This endnote's phrasing of 'some competitive thing', which implies a casualness and so familiarity with the experience of life in the Tennis Academy, and the use of the acronymic 'Mrs A.M.I.', which again undermines the idea that these endnotes are provided to help the reader

make sense of the text. Instead, the shorthand implies a more personal account of the world, recorded by someone who is part of it, and to which the reader is granted access. The note therefore represents a way of delineating exactly what the text-constructor knows, rather than explaining something that full knowledge of the main text requires; it limits, rather than expands, the text's field of information.

The next note is shorter: '¹⁰⁹Apparently the Parti Q. is provincial, intra-Québecois; the Bloc's its federal counter-part, w/ members in Parliament, and so on and so forth.' (p. 1004n109) This is anchored to the continuation of a description of a history class at the ETA. (p. 310) Where the endnote seems to expand upon information in the main text to provide further detail, this appearance is fatally undercut. Firstly, opening with 'apparently' suggests that the note is made of received information, and taken together with the shorthand 'w/' indicates that the note is made up from a figure taking the class being discussed. This marks it as information from an unreliable source, and its dismissive 'and so on and so forth' ending leads the reader to question its significance. The note therefore has the effect of developing a hinterland, political history, and set of terms in French that at once seem like they are developed within the novel's world and simultaneously barely accessible to the reader. Finally, the obfuscation of political history that the note sets up marks the Québécois independence movement as significant to the novel's narrative, whilst also noting its apparent irrelevance to figures in the story.

Note 110 runs over 18 pages, and employs various textual effects. (pp. 1004-22n110) It includes a transcript of a telephone conversation and

reproductions of two letters. The second letter employs graphic effects so as to echo in appearance an 'original'. The note is introduced by a section that is very close to the main body of text, which moves into the other forms without explicit explanation. Finally, this long note seems to be anchored almost at random, to the middle of a sentence in which Hal's attitude towards the political situation in the novel is described. It is positioned thus:

[...] Hal, finding the stuff rather more high-concept and less dull than he'd expected — seeing himself as at his innermost core apolitical — nevertheless found the Québécois-Separatism mentality almost impossibly convolved and confused and impervious to U.S. parsing,¹¹⁰ plus was both com- and repelled by the fact that the contemporary-anti-O.N.A.N.-insurgence stuff provoked in him a queasy feeling [...] as if someone had been reading mail of Hal's that he thought he'd thrown away. (pp. 310-1)

The note evolves out of the claim that the Separatist mentality is impossible to parse, indicating that its contents will expand by explaining why this might be the case. This sentence ends with Hal's suspicion that someone is reading his mail. The note contains communication between his brother and mother, and a transcript of a conversation Hal has with the former.

The introductory section of the note makes no reference to the imperviousness of the 'U.S. mind' mentioned in the text, despite starting 'q.v.'. It mentions that Hal is 'riffling through [...] postal correspondence Mario's rescued from wastebaskets', but given that the first letter was sent to Orin care of his football team and is presented as 'unread', the collection and reproduction of the letters within the text remains suspect. (p. 1005n110)

Hal's examination of the letters is concurrent with his receiving a phone call; we can assume that this is the telephone conversation presented in the note. The endnote therefore undermines the sense of authorial control by seeming to disperse it across two figures: the protagonist and a figure collecting information about him. It both adds to our understanding of the Incandenzzas and hints that information is being gathered about them.

The 'existence' of the endnote's transcript and its presentation alongside the letters also suggests that there is some form of surveillance and documentation occurring. The positioning of the marker of the endnote plays with this suspicion, as the most likely moment to read the endnote is after completing the main text's sentence and so with the suspicions raised by its closing thought. However, were the claim to be read in the context of the exact point of the endnote marker, these suspicions are themselves based upon a U.S.-centric paranoia about 'Québecois-Separatism' that is the subject of this initial clause. Therefore, the inclusion of 'thrown-away' mail is either textual evidence of the collection and consumption of this mail by a third party or evidence of suspicion that it might occur in these circumstances.

The conversation between Hal and Orin presents the reader with elements of both the history of O.N.A.N.¹⁷⁷ and the Incandenza family through the impressions of those characters. Orin's seduction strategies are outlined, and then he questions Hal about O.N.A.N. history in order to develop his relationship with a reporter, ending the transcript section:

¹⁷⁷ 'The Organization of North American Nations', the central governmental organization of *Infinite Jest*.

What, this ascapartic bathroom-mag journalist is going to give you like an SAT entrance-test on Francophone extremism? Like a gyno-entrance exam? (p. 1016n110)

Hal's use of the neologism 'ascapartic' - meaning extremely large after ascapart, a mythic English (male) giant - raises the suspicion for the reader that the character Orin is trying to seduce is a transvestite Québécois agent, only attractive because of her similarities to their mother. This implication is raised etymologically, and so probably requires the kind of endnoting that *Infinite Jest* pointedly does not always include. The suspicion is heightened in the way Orin needs to give the woman information in order to seduce her. This implies either that he needs to prove that he follows his mother's loyalty to Québec, or that the seduction is in fact reversed: that the journalist is holding out the carrot of sex in order to advance her surveillance of the Incandenza family.

This is ultimately the point of the endnotes in *Infinite Jest*: to demonstrate through suspicion and misdirection that information and knowledge are often discrete. The endnotes encourage the opening of a readerly 'doubling': not between information and information, but between information and the context that the act of interpretation requires.

Infinite Jest and its endnotes conform to my reading of Zeno's paradox in Wallace's work by producing a constant deferral of context and meaning. Each of the fairly arbitrary notes I have discussed raises questions not only about the need for constant interpretation within the novel; they raise suspicions about the nature of information, addressing paranoia, partiality, and ontological depth simultaneously. They do not confuse the

reader, in the manner of a traditional narrative of 'ontological uncertainty'.¹⁷⁸

The endnotes do fill out our understanding of the novel's world, and their metatextual effects emphasize an internal rather than self-referential textuality (i.e. a potential plot within the novel of which the text is evidence). Rather, they act as a foreclosing on certainty, making clear that meaning and context operate in recursive relationship, mutually informing, but preventing either from being finally determined.

Post-postmodernism, as I have described it, relies on presenting uncertainty and paradox as fundamental to understanding the world; the questions that postmodernism raises about the insecurity of meaning are now dominant. (Nealon, p. 64) We should understand these endnotes as a provocative method of opening relational meaning central to the text. These layers of information are both necessary to and reflective of a post-postmodernist world. They make closed meaning impossible without suggesting that this process therefore becomes worthless. This is the central post-postmodernist effect of *Infinite Jest*'s endnotes.

4.4 Footnotes and the author-figure in 'Host'

In the essay 'Host' the form of notations appended to the text is no longer standard. While the form of the foot- or endnote form from is mostly removed at this point in his career, the functionality of such notes is retained.

¹⁷⁸ Their effect is different to Thomas Docherty's articulation of postmodernist characterization as 'incoherent', therefore, creating a kind of determinate indeterminacy. Through this, epistemological questions of the kind Docherty rejects are once again relevant precisely because they are made central, even if they remain unanswerable. For Docherty and McHale, postmodernist fiction's suggestion is that their indeterminacy makes them irrelevant. I discuss this further in Chapter Six. Thomas Docherty, 'Postmodern Characterization: The Ethics of Alterity', in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Literature*, ed. by Edmund J. Smyth (London: B.T. Batsford, 1991), p. 176; p. 183; McHale, p. 27.

In the version of 'Host' published in *Consider the Lobster*, the superscript numbers that would mark notes at the foot of the page or at the end of the text are replaced by lines leading from the middle of words. The lines lead to boxes of text on the same page, around which the main body of text is indented. Some of the boxes have boxed material within them, comparable to previous examples of Wallace using footnoted material in footnotes.

There are different categories of material within the boxes that can be distinguished. Some are introduced by underlined sub-headings. Some boxes contain brief authorial interpolations, entirely placed within brackets. Some provide factual information, while others are more like marginal notes, placed on the page to add a sense of the author-as-reader, highlighting and doodling on his page as he writes: the clearest example is the use of an exclamation and question mark only in one box: '!?'.¹⁷⁹

The three boxes found on page 310 provide an example of the variety of tone in this boxed information. The first two append temporally discontinuous, private, anecdotal information about the essay's protagonist to the main text's more neutral take. For example, they add to the sense of his vulgarity, quoting: "My ass is sore from being fucked by so many stations". (p. 310) This preserves a professional discourse for the body of the text, and emphasize the 'private access' to the author that the boxed notes provide for the reader.

¹⁷⁹ David Foster Wallace, 'Host', in *Consider the Lobster And Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2007), p. 319.

The third note produces a different effect. It runs from the word 'description' here: 'Respecting Ms. Bertolucci's on-record description of KFI's typical listener—"An information-seeking person that [...] wants to be communicated to in an interesting, entertaining, stimulating sort of way"[...]' (pp. 310-1) The note itself reads: '(= part of the same mid-May Q&A in which Ms. B. batted her interlocuter [sic] around like a pet's toy mouse w/r/t the meaning of "stimulating)". The essay as a whole takes as its theme the concept of 'stimulation', and this note combines highlighting the term and the role of the author in the discussion. The use of the equals sign and 'w/r/t' present this note as the author's own spontaneous insertion onto his text. Its effect, as well as pointing to the use of the term 'stimulating', is to highlight the author's control, or lack of it, over the ways that language is manipulated by the forces of industrial control.

As in *Everything and More* the essay explicitly stratifies the different categories of information included in its notes with headings. The headed boxes are marked, in non-consistent ways, as containing either 'editorial' or 'informative' content.¹⁸⁰ The markers become more frequent as the essay continues, and their tone shifts to present the idea that the more 'editorial' content provides its genuine argumentative centre, as the term itself suggests.

The function of the essay is thereby enacted within the information appended to it rather than the main body of text. The boxed notes, codified by their capitalized headings so as to be seen as important, and presented by their context as a more direct expression of and communication with the author, produce a parallel depiction of the author's logic. In this, they reflect how Wallace's use of levels of text works: they complete the communication

¹⁸⁰ Some boxes are also marked **IYI**, repeating the device from *Everything and More*. Headers indicating 'editorial' content are found on e.g. p. 300; p. 313; p. 314; p. 322. Similar headers in footnotes appear in 'Authority and American Usage', e.g. p. 104n55; the argument I make here applies equally to them.

of a piece of text by undercutting counter-argument, clarifying misunderstandings, and producing a direct communication between reader and author.

The logical nature of the notes in 'Host' is made most apparent on the essay's final page. After questioning in one note whether 'there parts of ourselves that are just better left unfed?' a secondary arrow leads us to a sub-note, with the header 'JUST THE SORT OF PARALYTIC DITHERING THAT MAKES THE MORAL CLARITY OF "WE'RE BETTER THAN THEY ARE" SO APPEALING'. This moves into two further boxed notes linked by an arrow:

Is this not a crucial part of Minow's old distinction between what interests us and what's truly in our interests – that there are parts of people that we should choose, as a community, not to cater to and gratify and strengthen?

→

But what if it's good sound business to cater to those parts? Then what? Government regulation? Of which industries, by whom, and based on what criteria? And what about the First Amendment? (p. 343, emphasis retained)

Here, the logical system that the author has tried to create breaks down. Each attempt to codify the thoughts presented by the essay on the explanation for and desirability of 'stimulation' as the defining principle behind supposedly informative broadcasting fails. This is because the answer requires finding a way to calculate a community's desires by a method other than the operation of the free-market. The first box asks what

a community should choose, the second demonstrates the best ways that society has come up with to determine those choices. The final note in 'Host' reads '(It goes without saying that this is just one person's opinion.)' The author is present and excluded from this system, the note makes clear, below the level of his text, but unable to control the systems it describes.

'Host' provides clear examples of the textual structures of Wallace's work. It presents structures that produce the effect of his footnotes while being divorced from their exact implications, and it deals thematically with the inter-relation of information, context and argumentative rhetoric that his footnotes formally express. This foregrounds the implications of the structure of Wallace's writing: it regulates the relationship between author and reader, and prevent the foreclosure of meaning by placing context and information into a recursive relationship. The implication for my interpretation of post-postmodernism for this reading is that the paradoxical status of meaning in this context is maintained: meaning is neither closed nor open, but centrally presented as a contradictory choice through these formal effects.

'Host' reflects post-postmodernism in other ways. Its central point is that there can be no 'outside' to the logic that the market creates in post-postmodernity. But the profusion of 'choice' we are offered simply reflects the contradictory nature of this logic; the essay's theme therefore reflects its form. Additionally, Wallace's notes allow him to present a variety of textual levels that give us a greater simulacrum of his authorial position; however, the construction of this personal relationship fails to be anything but identical to the political system it recognizes itself as operating within. The 'paralytic dithering' he describes his conclusion as, textually placed as far away from

the world the essay describes as possible, is the ultimate political position diagnosed by post-postmodernism. This is the moment when 'there is nothing outside the text' becomes the general truth, when recognition of that fact denies the conclusion that 'we're better than they are', because we all reflect and produce the same logical systems.¹⁸¹

4.5 Ontology and epistemology in 'Oblivion'

Goerlandt has discussed the relative absence of footnoting in the collection *Oblivion: Stories*. ('That Is Not Wholly True', p. 169) He argues that in his later career Wallace deliberately undercut the footnoting form as he moved away from stylistic 'tics'. However, the 'doubling' I will observe in 'Oblivion' demonstrates that this central facet is retained even as Wallace moves beyond footnoting as a textual habit. I will show how this consistency is central to defining his work as post-postmodernist. Because the story's multiple commenting and overlapping voices appear simultaneously, it demonstrates the internalized difference of post-postmodernism in its narrative form.¹⁸²

'Oblivion' takes as its primary themes the experience of sleep and memory for an exploration of temporal and empirical uncertainty. It effectively blurs the line between being a fiction that asks ontological questions and one that asks epistemological questions: we reach the latter

¹⁸¹ Because, as Nealon suggests, '[...] today's cutting-edge capitalism celebrates and rewards singularity, difference, and openness to new markets and products.' (p. 118)

¹⁸² Nealon claims that one of the crucial aspects of post-postmodernism is that 'there are no positive terms, only differences', a 'postmodern paradigm that overcoded all the others', which has become 'intensified' to become an uncontested assumption. (p. 147; p. 41) This is structurally resonant with my reading of 'Oblivion'.

through the former. Effectively, 'Oblivion' is a story that directly explicates this feature of post-postmodernist literature.

'Oblivion' is characterized by shifts in narrative level or the introduction of contradictory or parallel information presented by a figure with a different perspective. This means that it formally imitates many of the conceits that operate through footnotes in Wallace's earlier work. The failure effectively to categorize and separate such information on the page makes this story much more challenging to recapitulate into a single clear narrative. The reader is again given the task of filtering as well as interpreting information.

The final passage of the story is crucial to its interpretation. In its long penultimate sentence, we are provided with a significant image of the story's putative protagonist. It is a view that is both refracted and recursive, splitting his self-understanding into multiple contradictory perspectives. He is viewing 'the room's Monitor', on which is displayed 'a diptych or 'Split screen' image' of 'Hope and myself 's darkened Sleep chamber in a low amber light which was evidently distinctive of the appearance of low light film'.¹⁸³ This perspective, as the story comes to its conclusion, is of a man looking from within a darkened room, back onto himself in that room, as well as simultaneously into an exactly similar room, in which his wife is placed in replicated pose. This image is complicated as it is revealed that the 'right hand side of the video display [is] comprised of [...] myself in the bed, deeply asleep, supine on my back with my hands on my chest, and — far more unsettlingly — of my own face, asleep.' (p. 235)

¹⁸³ David Foster Wallace, 'Oblivion', in *Oblivion: Stories* (London: Abacus, 2004), p. 235.

The story uses the present tense from its opening passages as the protagonist begins to recount his marital- and sleep-based troubles in the bar of a golf club. The image of his sleeping form, therefore, calls into question the reality of the story up to this point. The image of seeing himself asleep raises the possibility that the character does not know when he is asleep. Thus, his complaints earlier in the story that 'I know when I'm hallucinating and when I'm not, just as I also quite obviously know when I'm asleep or not' raise a contrast between the act of hallucination and the act of sleeping. (p. 212)

An unconscious person is beyond the control of their body, and is thus most truly 'naked', or uncomposed, to a viewer. The vision of himself unconscious, therefore, is the presentation of himself to himself prior to the controlling and hiding effects of conscious thought, expressed in the story by words. In a text about the various levels of meaning that language and consciousness hides, the images that follow are revelatory.

The description of the unconscious body triggers a horror and misidentification of self, showing 'not a face I in any way recognized or 'knew,' with its slack jaw and protrusive jowls, hands on my chest spiderishly twitching, lips fishily loose or agape'. (p. 236) Simultaneous with this description are additions in round brackets that present the perspective of the 'technicians' in the lab on what they are seeing, or clarifying comments on the prose from the protagonist's perspective,¹⁸⁴ or descriptions of what is occurring in the other half of the video monitor, so to his wife. It is in the latter of these that examples that the story's central narrative driver begins to

¹⁸⁴ '(from our perspective)'. (p. 235)

become clear: '(Hope, gazing in rigid fascination or horror at the dextral display right along-side myself, herself was silently 'frozen' [or, 'paralyzed' ("or hurt you if ")] in mid gesture, her pupils quite large and liquidly black'). (p. 236, emphasis retained) While the information in the first set of round brackets provides information presumably about Hope's position as viewed on the monitor, this reflects in the protagonist's unconscious mind the detail in the square brackets within, a helpless female figure 'paralyzed' at the sight of him; an image already described in horrific terms. Further to this is the next level down these layers of consciousness: a second pair of round brackets encloses a fragment of speech placed in italics. This fragment could be either a threat or reassurance.

'Oblivion' parallels the story of the protagonist's linked sleep- and marital-difficulties with uncomfortable details about his relationship with his step-daughter Audrey. The use of italicized speech fragments in brackets also occurs before this last section.¹⁸⁵ But it is at this point in the text that these insertions gain clarity of purpose. The typographical distance of the phrase 'or hurt you if' from the central strand of the text, by two pairs of brackets, quotation marks, italicization, and a fragmentary nature, presents it as the most indirect level of the narrative, and thus the least filtered through the process of narrativization. Thus, in the section that follows, the references to 'masturbating with a saffron scented under-garment' contained within a similarly bracketed segment is a more controlled echo of the same

¹⁸⁵ E.g. '(or, "...up!")'; (p. 232) '("not start this again my"). (p. 233)

idea: the narrator has a sexually-abusive relationship with his step-daughter.¹⁸⁶

Alongside the references to abuse, 'Oblivion' repeats images of the face and mouth. This is first introduced with a description of Hope's step-father, who 'had apparently suffered a number of tiny, highly localized strokes over the previous several years'. (p. 195) Following this, his 'mouth had developed the habit of continuing to move slightly after he had ceased speaking'; this description is interspersed with details of his relationship with Audrey. (pp. 195-7) The assumed narrator is his son-in-law, who has 'lips fishily loose or agape', blurring the distinction between the two men. The long passage that ends 'Oblivion' contains more examples of facial distortion through which this mirroring is extended, as the narrator views his own physiognomy in a video monitor. These descriptions are written at the 'top' level of the narrative, and they form the focus of the passage's second half, interrupted by the various interpolations within brackets and dashes. It includes 'variably changing shapes and contortions of my unconsciously open mouth' which 'signified undeniably that sounds and noises of which I had no conscious or 'voluntary' awareness were in fact escaping my throat and mouth'. (p. 236) The speech without sound echoes the description of his father-in-law's movements.¹⁸⁷

The final section of 'Oblivion' presents us with a 21-line dialogue in which no line is explicitly assigned to any character. The preceding long prose section ends with a final description of a 'wet mouth and slack, soft

¹⁸⁶ p. 236. Audrey's association with saffron is established on p. 194, p. 220 and p. 231.

and spreading cheeks now begin to distend in a 'grinningly' familiar and sensual or even predatory facial ex' [sic], ending at the prefix to the word 'expression'. The sentence is thus finally interrupted at the point at which the protagonist's identity might be revealed.

The dialogue opens with an italicized 'up', presumably a cut-off exclamation of 'wake up' that rouses the protagonist, who is thus not located in the sleep clinic as has been described. After an opening exchange, it continues: 'I was beginning to really worry. Hope, this cannot go on. When are we going to make that appointment?' Thus, the sleeping figure is revealed to be Hope, who has been suffering from difficulties sleeping. The dialogue continues with the confusion between her husband and her father remaining – she asks 'am I even married?' and addresses her interlocutor as 'Daddy', before asking 'What's wrong with your mouth?' She also asks 'And who's this Audrey?' calling into question the existence of her daughter. (p. 237) The final three lines of the story state 'You are my wife.' 'None of this is real.' 'It's all alright.' The switches of identification throughout the story require careful attention to unpack, but this final conversation reveals that almost every figure has been a construct of Hope's mind, and that this has created the conflation between her step-father and her husband, who is represented as step-father to an imagined daughter.

In its obscuring of its central subject position and its stratification of levels of information, 'Oblivion' performs some of the functions usually assigned to Wallace's footnotes within the body of its text. The questions this

¹⁸⁷ There is also an interpolated description of the sleep lab's staff 'peel[ing] their respective faces off' in front of Hope. (p. 236) This element symbolically connects the secrets that figures of authority hold with the inability of the face to cover it any longer.

raises about the need for interpretive contextualization are familiar from my earlier analyses. In 'Oblivion', though, one requires a slower, more careful interpretive practice. Fundamentally, not only does this approach 'get the [footnote] monkey off [his] back', as Wallace described it, moving to a more integrated manner of raising epistemological questions, it also makes this story a much more integrated expression of the features of post-postmodernism that I have been describing.¹⁸⁸ Its replication of so many tropes of Wallace's writing – personal symbolic systems, recursion, facial trauma and uncertain parentage, for example – mean that it plays a significant role in understanding his work. It contrasts an internal coherence with ultimate undecidability, and presents information and its context as mutually cancelling. These features display post-postmodernism's relationship to narrative and decidability in ways that are similar to the implications of my analysis of Wallace's footnotes generally. 'Oblivion' demonstrates the conclusion of the intensified, lived experience of post-postmodernism's blurring of ontological and epistemological uncertainties.

4.6 Conclusion: Parodying footnotes in *The Pale King*

I will conclude this chapter by examining how footnotes are used in *The Pale King*. It is my contention that they act as parodic signifiers of Wallace's previous forms: a more directly auto-metatextual gesture, but one that is similar to my analysis of the figure of Stecyk in Chapter Three. This self-referential quality means this analysis summarizes many of the arguments I have made across this chapter.

¹⁸⁸ Caleb Crain, 'Approaching Infinity', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), p. 126.

In *The Pale King*, the use of footnotes echoes and subverts the way that they are employed in Wallace's non-fiction, rather than functioning as they commonly do in his fiction. They are largely dependent on the interaction of the creation of an 'authentic' author figure, as opposed to the multifariously 'world-building' function of *Infinite Jest*'s endnotes that I discussed in section 3.

The Pale King's first footnote presents us with a 'fact': that IRS employees are issued with a new social security number upon entry to the service, so that 'it's like you're born again, ID-wise'. (p. 66n1) This is, however, untrue, as are many of the other 'facts' in these purportedly non-fictional notes. As Eliot Caroom has stated and my own research found, Wallace's research for the novel was as much into fictional depictions of the IRS by ex- and serving employees – especially satirical or critical depictions – as into the specifics of the culture itself.¹⁸⁹ Thus, the novel's production of information draws upon the credibility of Wallace's non-fiction writing in parodic ways, using false sources to base the claims of fictional 'lived' experience, and placing the sincerity of the author-figure and his personal narrative between the text and such 'facts'.

The next note intensifies credulity by stating that 'everything that surrounds this Foreword is essentially true'. (p. 67n2) A further manipulation of the credibility of the text occurs when the next note refers to the name of the book's publisher, which 'at the advice of its corporate counsel [...] [is not] identified by name in this Author's Foreword, despite the fact that anyone who looks at the book's spine or title page will know immediately who the

¹⁸⁹ Eliot Caroom, '*The Pale King*'s Depiction of IRS Gets Fact Checked', *The Daily Beast*, 17 April 2012, <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/04/17/the-pale-king-s-depiction-of-irs-gets-fact-checked.html>> [Accessed 22 May 2013] (para. 11 of 26).

company is.' (p. 68n3) This note apparently compromises the irrationalities of corporate fiction-creation by allowing readers to produce the information for themselves; where the status of fiction creates a necessity to lie, the narrator allows the reader to discover the 'truth' that is hidden in plain sight.

This passage concerns itself entirely with building a credible and authentic author-figure. This lends the writing the sense that these are the same claims and techniques of Wallace's non-fiction, taken to an exaggerated degree. This is in the service of fictionalizing fictionalizations of the IRS, at least in the first note. One must also see the use of these metafictional techniques as Wallace directly addressing John Barth's work. The earlier story 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' foregrounds its cynical extension Barth's metafiction to its conclusions by placing the figure of both authors into its structure, thus highlighting the older version of metafiction's shallow nature. Here, the playfulness is more naïve, simplistically employing techniques that are undercut more by the overall parodic effect than any 'meta-metafictionality'.¹⁹⁰ This part of *The Pale King* therefore serves as a reference to Wallace's previous commentary on metafiction. One should read it as a parody of 'David Wallace' as author, and it is the simplicity of its form that marks it out as such.

The simultaneous foregrounding and parodying of the figure 'David Wallace' in *The Pale King* compares to the previous ambition Wallace seemed to have for the use of autobiographical material in his work for overwriting the problematic nature of metafiction. This is an important refinement of the argument I have been making about the forms found in his writing.¹⁹¹ Wallace rejects certain conceptions of himself as author through the footnotes he adduces to 'autobiographical' chapters of *The Pale King*. He figures them as irrelevant, in the same way that many of the characters in

¹⁹⁰ Boswell and Luther highlight the relationship to Barth. Boswell, pp. 102-115; Connie Luther, 'David Foster Wallace: Westward with Fredric Jameson', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles, CA; Austin, TX: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 59-61.

¹⁹¹ See Boswell, p. 106; 'To Wish To Try', p. 70, and Chapter One and Six for a discussion of the significance of the autobiographical in his work.

the novel are obsessed with the minor and irrelevant details of their world.¹⁹² *The Pale King's* parody of self-obsession represents an understanding of the failures to mean that Wallace's previous writing foregrounded in its footnotes. These failures are highlighted further, demonstrating a shift in the understanding of the conditions of post-postmodernism – as I argue is visible throughout the novel – rather than an overcoming of them.

Footnotes have persistently provided a way for Wallace to present the paradoxical oppositions between context and information in his texts. This has prevented the foreclosure of meaning without necessarily replicating the condition of ontological uncertainty characteristic of postmodernist forms. (McHale, p. xii) Instead, the recursive relationship between information and its context reflects a post-postmodernist acceptance that all knowledge is conditional and paradoxical. This highlights the conditions caused by the radically larger frame of available information.¹⁹³ This is the point at which Wallace's post-postmodernist fiction most closely figures Žižek's use of Hegel and Lacan to consider a constantly shifting 'Knowledge' as endlessly modifying a contingent and inaccessible 'Truth'. Wallace's textual manipulations consistently produce not an 'Absolute Knowledge' through this relationship, but chart the movements and modifications within that changing

¹⁹² Not only the eponymous 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle, but virtually all the characters in *The Pale King* struggle in some way with the filtering and expressing of different kinds of information. This is a problem for David Cusk, Leonard Stecyk and Lane Dean Jr. in different ways: these are figures discussed in detail in different sections of this thesis. Another, clearer, example is the 'fact psychic' Claude Sylvanshine, who has 'flashes of insight' into the 'tedious and quotidian'. (p. 118) That one must 'forget the idea that information is good' is one of the novel's repeated messages. (p. 340)

¹⁹³ This closely aligns with Nealon's claim that: '[...] the taken-for-grantedness of literary interpretation's centrality, rather than a wholesale disciplinary rejection of something called theory, that separates our post-postmodern present from the era of postmodernism, the era of the hermeneutics of suspicion.' (p. 133)

relationship – the paradoxes and coincidences themselves – as a means of indicating 'a lack, an insufficiency at the heart of the truth itself'.¹⁹⁴

The Pale King parodies and distances the habits of a 'David Wallace' author-figure by rejecting the form of the footnote and considering more centrally the idea of 'irrelevant information'. The novel is thus marked by an attempt to produce a logical overcoming of the Zeno's paradox of meaning; just as it points to the publisher's name on its spine, it points readers through the irrelevances of Wallace's career to see the structural hollows they create in defining their post-postmodernist moment. Such structures of information always serve to indicate the 'lack' upon which post-postmodernist fiction and culture is precariously balanced: it represents not the radical rejection of theory and interpretation, but indicates their absolute triumph. The post-postmodernism here therefore intensifies postmodernist forms by revealing their 'hollow-centre', and the subtle modulations in Wallace's use of footnotes demonstrate the usefulness of my definition of this term for reading both his work and its cultural significance.

¹⁹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, "The Most Sublime of Hysterics": Hegel with Lacan', in *Interrogating the Real*, ed. by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London, New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 37.

Chapter Five: Representative gaps

5.1 Introduction: Literary post-postmodernism and women

Literary post-postmodernism, as its major critics have articulated it, is a form both dependent upon and formulated in opposition to key principles of a generic postmodernism.¹⁹⁵ It is a prominent cultural representation of a historical moment in which the claims of 'postmodernism' – theoretical, philosophical and cultural – have been absorbed to the point that they have become almost irrelevant.¹⁹⁶ Those figures who have emerged as post-postmodernist (at least in literary terms) are almost exclusively male, educated and white. The exploration of postmodernism such authors make relies precisely on the cultural apparatus that allowed postmodernism to emerge in the first place: McGurl calls this an 'autopoetics', or 'technoromanticism' in which an exploration of the conditions of their production becomes the reflexive and self-allegorizing genre. (p. 49) In many ways the post-postmodernists represent similar figures exploring similar conditions to those that were explored by their postmodernist forbears.

This repetition means that viewing post-postmodernism as a critical form appears to be fatally hypocritical. Its claim to produce a conscious evolution from postmodernist forms is undermined by its repetition of the facets it criticizes: primarily, that postmodernism was wilfully blind to 'human

¹⁹⁵ The definitions of literary post-postmodernism produced by Timmer and Burn bear this out in different ways, as shown in the Introduction to this thesis.

¹⁹⁶ Burn (2008) historicizes the 'death' of postmodernism and the birth of 'post-postmodernism': pp. 10-26; Nealon claims this represents an 'intensification', rather than a 'coming after', p. viii.

'truths', as such authors describe it. As postmodernism is marked by its failure to incorporate marginal figures, this chapter will test Wallace's attitude towards the marginal in relationship to his reconfiguration of postmodernist forms. It will examine the political and social limits of post-postmodernist literature, and place this into the wider concept of post-postmodernity. This will allow me to distinguish the postmodern from the post-postmodern more clearly. It will allow me to show the covalent relationship between post-postmodernity and its literature in more practical terms. It will also allow me to show more clearly the limitations of such literature as either a critically self-aware form (as it claims to be) or a form that represents its generational moment by repeating broader unconscious partialities.

As Timmer puts it, post-postmodernist texts [...] perform a complicit and complicated critique on [...] postmodern subjectivity, [...] and envision a possible reconfiguration of subjectivity that can no longer be framed, I believe, as 'postmodern'.' (p. 13) The reticence indicated by her 'I believe' reveals how post-postmodern literature establishes itself between a repudiation of the problems of postmodernism it observes and a conscious correction of them. This is in keeping with describing it as an intensification. This analysis leads me to question whether literary post-postmodernists are effective in one of their fundamental critiques of postmodernism: its attitudes to gender and sexuality, as the fundamentally male¹⁹⁷ corpus of post-postmodernist authors respond in negative ways to the aggrandizing male sexuality depicted in postmodernist literature and its relations.

¹⁹⁷ All of the first-wave of post-postmodernist authors included in for example Burn and Timmer's studies are white men. This chapter addresses the implications of this, while in my conclusion I will broaden the inclusivity of the term.

In this chapter, I will discuss the parallel between the literary work post-postmodernist texts did - recalibrating their relationship with the metafictional texts as a reflection of the broader saturation of postmodernist forms in the culture - with the feminist response to postmodernism. As the 1980s moved into the early 1990s critics began to theorize about the interplay of feminism and postmodernism. A division emerged between those critics who understood postmodernism's denial of essentialized subjectivity as a violence on the feminist understanding of the interplay between identity and gender, and others who believed that a more critical contemplation of the construction of subjectivity allowed a new focus on the cultural and material meanings of sexual difference. This split echoes the need for a literary response to postmodernism's simultaneous hegemonic status and waning intellectual force, and the divisible nature of the response that emerged: this is something David Foster Wallace's work evokes.

Literary post-postmodernism is a form that has certain sympathies with feminist beliefs both in its resistances to and re-articulations of 'postmodernism'. It articulates a world in which difference 'isn't there to be overcome, it's there to be intensified', as Nealon puts it. (p. 41) However, the implications of post-postmodernism that I have been drawing out in this thesis demonstrate that the end products of this logic of absolute difference are counter-intuitive. This chapter will discuss the frames of postmodernism in which Wallace was working, and how his female characters and attitudes towards sexuality – a frequent topic in his work – operate. In doing so, I will describe how post-postmodernism's formal representations of gender difference present us with direct examples of the symbolic gaps that allow us to understand the conflicted, paradoxical and sometimes reactionary nature

of post-postmodernism. Unlike previous chapters, my conclusions about these paradoxes will be that they are neither intentional nor liberational, and that they demonstrate why an intensification of postmodernism cannot be a correction of postmodernism.

5.2 Who does 'the post-postmodern' include?

In order to produce conclusions about Wallace's depictions of women I will locate three contexts for this discussion in this section. The first is that of the postmodernist approach to marginal figures outlined by Phillip Brian Harper in *Framing the Margins: the Social Logic of Postmodern Culture*. The second, introduced briefly above, is the feminist response to postmodernist theory at the time Wallace's ideas were formulated. Finally, it is necessary to understand Wallace's work as representative of a certain aspect of post-postmodernism that is thrown into relief by the writing of his peers. I will make this comparison more implicitly throughout this chapter. By seeing Wallace's writing about women through these different challenges to 'postmodernist theory' in the broadest sense, we can use this very specific part of his work as a tool to understand the principles behind his development of a post-postmodernist form. This will allow the latter half of this chapter to present a detailed examination of more challenging parts of his corpus. There I will examine how a desire to address the problematic nature of postmodernism conflicts with the way post-postmodernism is permeated with intensified versions of those issues.

Harper provides us with a re-examination of the cultural meaning of postmodernist theory. He demonstrates how postmodernist forms can be interpreted as an appropriation of the experience of marginality. Figures he

identifies as 'marginal' act as pre-cursors to formal gestures and theories that are now standard tropes of postmodernist discourse.

In his discussion of Fredric Jameson's articulation of postmodernism in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Harper coherently demonstrates the way postmodernist theory structures itself on the curious adoption of the position of the marginal, while refusing to accept marginal figures themselves within its imagined sphere. He states that: 'It seems to me that it is the specific import of different constituencies' fragmented experience in the postmodern context that has been elided in most general theoretical considerations of postmodernism. Which don't take into account social identity as a pertinent micro-level contingency.'¹⁹⁸ He goes further in claiming that in Jameson's conception of postmodernism the '[...] positing of the historicist perspective as fundamentally opposed to a conception of the centered subject as never having existed indicates a deep fault in the theory of the postmodern subject, an oblivion into which the experiences of marginalized populations have been cast, effectively untheorized.' (p. 11)

Crucially, ideas that were generative of our understanding of the state of postmodernity are somehow considered to be universal in their application while they are simultaneously demonstrably partial. They are limited to the experience of a set of a post-industrial, Western consumer class, isolated from the variety of experience that their postmodernist-theorized forms unconsciously reflect. Harper finds that those figures beyond this centre of postmodernist discourse effectively disappear within the theorization and

articulation of postmodernism, even as their experiences are a crucial method by which postmodernity must be understood. Nealon counters this claim in his suggestion that one of the key movements in post-postmodernism – indeed, one of the signifiers of the change from a postmodernist to post-postmodernist era – is that the differences Harper finds are either elided or excluded by postmodernist conceptions are made central in the capitalist hegemony of post-postmodernist thought: difference is the new universal, to be celebrated and rewarded. (p. 118)

This response to Harper's claim is seductive. It is also reflected in elements of Wallace's fiction. In particular, Wallace metafictionally claims that his work is inclusive of the marginal at various key points: indeed, LeClair declares that Wallace's post-postmodernism is founded on radically inclusive claims.¹⁹⁹ This chapter will address the potential claims that are at stake here. For Nealon's version of post-postmodernism to hold, Wallace's depiction of the 'marginal' should be qualitatively identical to his depictions of the non-marginal; for LeClair's version, it should at least be equally inclusive and expressive; for Harper, if Wallace's writing is functionally postmodernist, it should exclude yet replicate the voices of marginal figures.

My understanding of post-postmodernist fiction through Wallace uses gender difference as a functioning example of the modulation of these three. As I have declared, post-postmodernist literature as a form is functionally

¹⁹⁸ Phillip Brian Harper, *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 10-11.

¹⁹⁹ LeClair suggests that Wallace's most pertinent claim to provide the marginal with a voice comes by finding a mise-en-abyme in *Infinite Jest*: James Incandenza's claims to have developed a genre of 'radical realism'. [...] it wasn't just the crafted imitation of aural chaos: it was real life's real egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world's real agora, the babble of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment.' *Infinite Jest*, pp. 835-6; LeClair, p. 33.

different from the post-postmodernist era that Nealon has described, and as such is reflective of and critical of the temporal form in different respects. Thus Wallace's female figures present certain aspects of 'hollow-centeredness' as I have described it. But there is a way in which, as LeClair and Harper would both perhaps expect, these same characters are denied the same experience of that post-postmodernist nature. This reflects Wallace's reaction to the criticisms and responses to postmodernism that critics like Harper and contemporary feminist thought about postmodernism would produce. In other respects, this characterization seems an unconscious rejection of LeClair's radical openness, in which the voices of marginal figures who do appear are voiceless and featureless rather than hollow. I will investigate this antipathy towards difference further in the second half of the chapter.

One way in which I wish to contextualize this discussion is to present some of the contemporary feminist ideas about postmodernism to which Wallace's writing can be considered a response. My primary source for these ideas will be a special issue of the journal *boundary 2*, produced in 1992, and entitled 'Feminism and Postmodernism'.²⁰⁰ Over a series of articles embracing a number of topics, several critics who identify themselves with a feminist ideology attempt to outline how feminist theory should seek to define itself in relation to a broadly described postmodernist theory.

²⁰⁰ 1992 was the year in which Wallace started serious work on *Infinite Jest* and Franzen published *Strong Motion*, which began to move closer to the tropes of realist fiction. Burn (2008) identifies 'the very start of the 1990s' as the moment in which critics and authors hoped to 'draw a line under the postmodern era', p. 10. Jonathan Franzen, *Strong Motion* (London and New York: Fourth Estate, 2003).

There is a diversity of field represented in the articles, from philosophy to legal studies to psychology. Generally there is a sense that feminist critics of all backgrounds are by 1992 in the position of having either to decry the central tenets of postmodernism as anti-feminist, or else seeking to incorporate themselves within a postmodernist discourse that can then be bent to feminist ends. It is my contention that the struggles with and around the term 'postmodernism' that *boundary 2* collated are close corollaries of thinking that Wallace's (and his peers') contemporaneous writing demonstrates. Thus, by examining that writing within this context, one can get a sense of the arguments such feminism lent to Wallace's writing. The reflection of these ideas and, more crucially, the divergence from them in Wallace's writing represents an important method or defining the term post-postmodernism in a vital historical and theoretical context. In doing so, the dissimilarity between the extrapolated thought behind post-postmodernist literature and Nealon's contention that post-postmodernism holds feminist-postmodernist theory as its 'dominant phenomena' can be elaborated. (p. 64)

An article by Jennifer Wicke repeats some of Harper's analysis of Jameson's conception of the postmodern. Wicke states: 'It is precisely the gendering of this consumer consciousness that Jameson's essay tends to veer away from, however, and that gap leaves us with a continued fissure in our understanding: How is it that the multiplicity and fragmentedness of identity are celebrated by postmodern theory and also denigrated by it as a

"female" consciousness?²⁰¹ This claim coheres with Nealon's designation of capitalism 'rewarding difference'. Wicke's claim regards the value of the postmodernist breakdown of coherent identity, arguing that it re-articulates a "female" trope while excluding the figure of the female from this articulation. So, to find this postmodernist fracturing as a negative is to present the feminizing of consciousness as negative, by definition. To the extent that post-postmodernist literature is a critique of postmodernism, then, the implication of this argument is that its criticism is of the 'feminizing' nature of the postmodern. Examining the representation of the feminine in such work thus reveals the marginalization that occurs as an inherent part of the logic of a critical post-postmodernism: this is one feature that I will reflect upon when examining Wallace's writing in this chapter.

In another essay, Mary Poovey develops Wicke's argument, by finding within postmodernism's disintegration of coherent subjectivity an illusory new inclusivity. She describes the process thus:

On the one hand, since the late eighteenth century, women have been excluded from the humanist subject position and have been defined by their reproductive capacity; on the other hand, as the crisis of late capitalism becomes more pressing in the West, the humanist subject position has opened to those who were previously excluded from it. [...] those who have enjoyed the benefits of humanism - largely white men – have begun to blame its increasingly obvious liabilities on those late-comers who have been admitted only because

²⁰¹ Jennifer Wicke, 'Postmodern Identities and the Politics of the (Legal) Subject', *boundary 2* 19.2 (1992), p. 15.

capitalism's demand for cheap and flexible labor knows, but does not respect, the "barrier" of sex.²⁰²

This again accords with Nealon's reading of post-postmodernism: Poovey is articulating the expansion by intensification that Nealon derives from Hardt and Negri. (p. 25) Poovey's argument, though, leaves open the question of responding to this intensification. By re-defining gender equality as a symbolic representation of capitalist intensification, post-postmodernism encourages the re-statement of difference; and hostility towards the process will overlap with hostility towards the newly included. She diagnoses a loss of marginality that begs a re-statement of that marginality on behalf of those authors who belong to newly (slightly) disenfranchised 'white men'. This at least accords with a desire to restate the principles of 'liberal humanism' as it was prior to the changes wrought by intensified capitalism: a temptation we can see clearly demonstrated in the claims and manifestos of post-postmodernist authors and their critics.

Other essays in the collection have different perspectives on the potential for overlaps between feminism and postmodernism. One example of this is found in Kathryn Bond Stockton's essay, in which she ties the postmodernist collapsing of the essential into the specific with feminist theory's desire to do something analogous, by collapsing social qualities of gender into a reified 'body'. She determines that both represent a return to the spiritual, with the theoretical basis of both postmodernism and feminism reliant on definitively ungraspable concepts. We can see overlaps in this with the spiritual return evidenced in Wallace's work, one example being the Lévinasian ethics in *The Pale King* that I have identified; another being the 'totalized' in post-postmodernism; that its logic is now one of intensifying itself on every level, including selfhood. Stockton's claim to separate 'good' and 'bad' mystification on the basis of commodification does not fit this logic. One way we might view Wallace's depiction of women and more particularly

²⁰² Mary Poovey, 'Feminism and Postmodernism: Another View', *boundary 2* 19.2 (1992), p. 37.

his apparent mystification of the intimacies of sexuality is that they embrace similar ideas to Stockton – that such figures might enable a conception of an outside to capitalism to emerge – while also unconsciously demonstrating the impossibility of this mystification within post-postmodernity.

By dissecting Wallace's approach to drawing female characters over longer narratives, and explicating the similarities to be found between these two texts, I will in the next section be able to produce a concrete formulation of how gender affects depiction in Wallace's post-postmodernist fiction. With this analysis in mind, the second half of the chapter will turn to Wallace's shorter work and his non-fiction, to tackle the more complex issues raised by the interaction of sexual identities, a common thread in such work. Finally, between these two interpretations, I will be able to return to examine how Wallace's examination of gender reinforces or contradicts the claims made about gender and marginality by the figures I have used as contexts here, and thus make claims about post-postmodernism and marginality, about post-postmodernism and the interplay of feminist and postmodernist theory, and about how Wallace's writing interacts with the highly conservative form of post-postmodernism articulated by Franzen.²⁰³

²⁰³ McLaughlin (p. 55) and Burn (2008: 16) both link Franzen's and Wallace's work; Burn calls their writing 'homologous'. They are connected in their desire to appeal to a 'general reader' while the academic background in McGurl's 'technomodernist' discourse means that they simultaneously acknowledge that such a putative universalist reader has been subsumed within debates about the structures which inform, control, and marginalize subject positions. Franzen's response to this is fundamentally conservative, placing male characters in positions of power that are critically undermined by forces of globalized capitalism, as represented by the increasing influence of women through narratives. His male protagonists are often humiliated by this change in fortune, while women are aggressively marginalized in his text, often the victims of violence. See, for example, the 'disappearing' of the self-declared 'fellow man' Martin Probst in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, whose fall from the position of representing his stands for the collapse of generalized subjective identities through white masculinity; or the marginal status of Walter Berglund in *Freedom* that is treated much more sympathetically than the actual violences visited on his wife, Patty. This latter novel emphasizes the apocalypticism of its anti-feminism in the Malthusian ideas Walter propagates. The centrally conservative message of Franzen's fiction stands as a more direct relative of the ideas I will find at play in Wallace's writing, and so represents clearly the inherent problems of post-postmodernist literature standing as a critical form. Jonathan Franzen, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), p. 217; p. 296.

opening of paradoxes I have identified throughout his work. Stockton concludes by stating:

[...] before deconstruction alienation was a concept that marked a conflict with one's real body or self; but since deconstruction, with its break from any notion of authentic selves or bodies, we have found it less possible to use any determinate sense of original selves or bodies by which we might mark our alienations. We are left with conceiving alienation, then, as alienation from *new* possibilities, not from original ones. [...] This is an alienation *from whatever exists outside of (for Irigaray, "ekstatic" to) capitalism*. This alienation can best be marked, then, by positing, *as a form of belief*, what must exist below, behind, or inside the bodies that commodities are currently required to wear. This is real-bodies mysticism Marxist-style, wherein one can only hope to split the good mystical stuff (real bodies and their uses) from bad mysticism (commodification of the bodies we know to masculine capitalist ends).²⁰⁴

This claim is analogous to the reading of Wallace through Nealon's post-postmodernism in two ways, which implies that to a certain extent, the potential for anti-feminist readings of Wallace's writing might be tempered by examining the ideological openings that Stockton – contemporaneously to the development of Wallace's thought – makes, here.

Firstly, Stockton's diagnosis of an 'alienation from new possibilities' accords with the multiple examples of 'loneliness' as central to conceptions of selfhood in Wallace's writing.²⁰⁵ Potentially, the hollow-centre that I have theorized is an expression of this state; the individual created by choice in an environment of endless choice can never be 'completed'. Secondly,

²⁰⁴ Kathryn Bond Stockton, 'Bodies and God: Poststructuralist Feminists Return to the Fold of Spiritual Materialism', *boundary 2* 19.2 (1992), p. 146, emphasis retained.

²⁰⁵ I discuss this further in Chapter Six.

though, I have followed Nealon in arguing that capitalism has become 5.3

Depictions of women in Wallace's longer fictions

Beyond the female protagonist of *The Broom of the System*, women play a diminishing role in Wallace's novels. That first novel has an abstract and theoretical theme that lends Lenore Beadsman a metaphysical character; indeed, the inability of this protagonist to characterize herself is the novel's major theme, and one which makes this text the most directly reminiscent of postmodernism in Wallace's oeuvre. But in the differences between the post-postmodernist male characters of Wallace's second and third novels and his hostile and detached depictions of women in those novels, Wallace's movement away from postmodernist forms signals a change that is significant for my reading of post-postmodernism more broadly.

In *Infinite Jest*, Joelle van Dyne is the most indistinctly drawn of the novel's major characters.²⁰⁶ She is literally hidden from view by a sheet that covers her face, a face that has itself been dissolved into blankness by an acid attack. She appears in other guises in the novel, too: as the disembodied voice of Madam Psychosis the radio host, as the pre-veil 'prettiest girl of all time', and as the digitally-blurred protagonist of the film 'Infinite Jest'. (p. 183; p. 290; p. 788) These images all reference her apparent distance from the reality of the textual world and characters within it.

The transcript of her radio show is an analogue of the effect she has as pure image in the film. She intones a welcome to a litany of the

²⁰⁶ The novel circulates around Hal Incandenza and Don Gately primarily. After them, Joelle van Dyne is the most significant figure, and the details of her narrative are accorded the space this second-order prominence indicates.

disfigured, from 'The multiple amputee' to the 'snaggle-toothed' to 'the xanthodantic'. After her long list of such figures, she takes a call in which, symbolically, she reminds us that 'the moon, which of course as any sot knows revolves around the earth, does not itself revolve. [...] it just stays there, hidden and disclosed by our round shadow's rhythms [...] it never turns its face away.'²⁰⁷ Thus, the Madame Psychosis radio show is figured, like the 'Infinite Jest' film, as an endless and unconditional granting of attention, facing-outwards to whoever might hear it. This echoes the end of 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', with its command to 'face directions', and claim 'you are loved'. (p. 373) Joelle's role in the novel is to attempt to allow those marginalized by post-postmodernism to feel unconditionally accepted. However, like her role in the 'Infinite Jest' film, this is a functional and objectifying position, rather than one of power or positivity.

Avril Incandenza is the novel's only other substantially outlined female character. Each description of Avril presents a supremely self-interested figure, whose attention to others only extends to an interest in their feelings towards her. This is symbolically represented in her first mention in the text, in a dream that her son Orin has. There he sees her: 'As if the Moms's head was some sort of overtight helmet Orin can't wrestle his way out of.' (p. 46) Her children dub her 'The Black Hole of Human Attention', a title that implies a gravitational pull which is completely overwhelming to those around her,

²⁰⁷ Madame Psychosis's incantation of and to the malformed is dispersed through pp. 183-193.

and that is applied because of the emotional pressure she asserts on them.²⁰⁸

An analysis of *The Pale King* shows that it has two semi-central female characters who echo those in *Infinite Jest* in significant ways. Toni Ware, like Joelle, is presented as a damaged character, although this is a psychological remnant of her difficult childhood. But, as with Joelle, this has resulted in her maintaining a distance from the world of the novel. Where Joelle's distance is physically manifested in her face-covering, Toni's is figured by her ability to feign death, putting up a psychological boundary between herself and the living world around her. The narrative's emphasis on the quality of her eyes, and eye-contact in particular, emphasizes the connection between Toni's internal state and the way she connects with the world of the novel. This description is therefore a less overt manifestation of the principles behind Joelle's veil. The description of Toni's eyes states that she:

[...] was creepy because, even though she wasn't shy or evasive and would maintain eye contact, she seemed to be staring *at* your eyes rather than *into* them; [...] it was unsettling because it wasn't anything like the way a human being seems aware of you when he meets your gaze. (p. 441, emphasis retained)

A second woman, Meredith Rand, bears comparison with Avril Incandenza. Meredith is emotionally manipulative and apparently lacks awareness of the

²⁰⁸ *Infinite Jest*, p. 521. James Incandenza, the father, is also described as a 'black hole' by Orin, but in the sense that he seems a centre of absence. (p. 737) The re-use of the descriptor for both parents, one seeking and one deflecting attention, gives the impression of the ultimate examples of each gender in the novel, both incapable of forming relationships because they are emotionally alienated from the world of the text.

selfish nature of her actions. Her self-consciousness, like Avril's, is motivated by self-interest. Where Avril concerns herself with giving the appearance of being a good mother, to the extent that she fails to be one, Meredith is concerned with not appearing shallow, to the extent that she absolutely seems to be so.

All four female characters I have mentioned thus far can be described as 'mystics of attention', to extend Stockton's use of the concept of mysticism. They are solely defined in terms of how they are observed, and manipulate this observation in ways that figures them as mystics: they have inexplicable, supernormal effects on those (men) around them. The physically attractive Meredith draws all attention in, and the damaged Toni deflects it all. Avril and Joelle maintain the same pattern. All four reference something extra-normal about their bodies in doing so.

In particular, Meredith is a figure of helpless and deliberate attraction. She is symbolically a source of endless desire beyond the sexual, as her relation with Drinion exposes. In this way, she represents the Other that Žižek suggests is at the centre of the violence and exclusion at the centre of liberal-democracy: she 'radiates an impenetrable desire that seems to encroach upon [...] my 'way of life.' (*Metastases*, p. 216) The desire both Meredith and Avril encapsulate and attract simultaneously present us with a way of seeing Wallace's writing as a formulation of Žižek's diagnosis of the 'Other' as primarily a desiring object, following Lacan: this being the case, we can see such women as this post-postmodernist fiction coming into accord with the politics of liberal- (humanist-) democracy, and the extensive capitalist system that is its economic reflection. The uncritical depiction of

this form (on Wallace's part; i.e. apparently un-self-critical about the motives for this configuration of women) suggest an alignment with Lacanian thought that contradicts Boswell's ideas about Wallace and Lacan, as I will discuss further later in this chapter. (Boswell, p. 128)

Drawing similarities between Joelle and Toni and between Avril and Meredith will provide us with an idea of some of the most detailed archetypes of Wallace's women. Further elucidation will show that the fact that the application of postmodernist tropes that they represent, as Harper shows, are reliant on formulations of identity that are taken from marginal identities. This means that just as the marginal were therefore unable to 'become' postmodernist because they already were so, in Wallace's post-postmodernism, these same figures are now unable to produce themselves as post-postmodernist, due to the same alienation and fragmentation. The difference in post-postmodernism is that as such figures are already imbued with postmodernism, postmodernism's completion cannot act upon them, as it can for the non-marginal.

Joelle's addiction mirrors a tendency towards obsessive and secretive behaviour, linked during a time when '[...] after taking the veil, for a while she liked to get really high and clean'. (p. 225) This compulsive behaviour mirrors Avril Incandenza's 'Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder'; Avril's 'traversion' of these issues – her ability to 'function' despite their intensity – is in direct opposition to the related problems found in Wallace's depressed characters. (p. 1039n234) Both characters' compulsions are marked by a sense of control. Unlike the novel's male addicts, whose addiction is characterized by loneliness and desire, Joelle and Avril demonstrate little reflection on their

own impulses, a lack of self-interrogation that, in the larger context of Wallace's fiction, could be represented as a successful overcoming of narcissistic recursion, or – more likely – a shallow disregard for truly human characteristics. In some respects, both figures 'traverse' the implications of what it seems to mean to be a 'fucking human being' in Wallace's fiction.

(McCaffery, p. 131)

Toni Ware's role in *The Pale King* is much slighter, but she also represents a sense of agency as a function of control and distance. In this she also represents a figure who recapitulates a fundamentally postmodernist agency, as I will show, rather than performing the disruption of such an identity that post-postmodernist figures represent.

Toni's 'scams' potentially perform a similar function to the Madame Psychosis' radio shows. (pp. 510-6) They undermine the values of trust in society, and exploit an ability to be dishonest within a system that it is incapable of distinguishing truth-values. This is particularly significant given the symbolic value of her position within the I.R.S., as a figure whose employment is based on evaluating the honesty of people's interaction with their government. Indeed, the central Chris Fogle chapter of *The Pale King* posits public responsibility, accountability and honesty as the central virtues of the text.²⁰⁹ Toni's acts are the explicit undermining of these values, just as the Madame Psychosis transcript is an explicit attack on the cultural values of the dominant systems of the world of *Infinite Jest*. Fundamentally less

²⁰⁹ This makes the text broadly an interpretation of the long '90s. The research Wallace undertook and the general narrative momentum of the novel indicates that its primary concern is with describing the damaging effects of the increasing use of market-logic, internal competition and systemization within the I.R.S., and U.S. culture more generally, during the Reagan presidency.

public, Toni's actions nevertheless comprise an important challenge to the values of the text. Joelle and Toni present a subversive challenge therefore to the dominant modes of culture in their novels.

Joelle and Toni can be read as figures of hidden and inaccessible personalities, who reflect their inability to integrate with society because of the damage that has been inflicted on them by taking subversive action against society. After she keeps her eyes open for a period that 'no living human can sit [...] without blinking' while her mother is murdered, Toni 'is damaged goods'. (pp. 442-3) Both seem to have figured larger in Wallace's original intentions for the novels, which suggests that there is a symbolic value to their trajectory that has been lost.²¹⁰ But their psychologically marginalized status reflects a kind of political and feminist gesture, at least. Their active provocations of power provide a sense that their hidden quality is rationalized beyond their author's lack of ambition to understand or portray women. However, it is difficult to find an equivalent male figure who Wallace depicts as similarly distanced from the reader's understanding. Wallace uses their marginal status to deploy them as figures in opposition to a post-postmodernist culture, but he fails to overcome the marginalization of female characters within his own text.

Avril and Meredith are comparable in the impression they give of shallowness, so that their actions and words deflect any desire for greater self-understanding. Rather, they both try to match their identity with the external impressions they give.

²¹⁰ Based on research in the Ransom Center archive.

Avril is primarily concerned with other's perceptions as the basis of her self-understanding. One example of the relationship with her children that this creates is found in her correspondence with her son, Orin; her impression of herself as a 'good mother' is more significant than her actually having a positive influence on her children. (p. 1051n269) This feature overlaps with the influence of Laing on *The Broom of the System*.²¹¹ Given the text's emphasis on the mother-child relationship – through the 'Inner-Infant Support Group', Don Gately's formative experiences of abandonment by his mother, and the *Infinite Jest* film – the attitude of Avril to herself and her children is certainly a key to understanding the ways personalities have broken down in the world the novel describes.²¹²

Reading this in parallel with the characters of Joelle and Toni, it seems that women in the world Wallace describes are essentially part of the cause of the post-postmodern, able to effect a change on those characters who are central to Wallace's vision, rather than being subject to those issues themselves. The importance of the mother, therefore, is further evidence of the objective rather than subjective quality of Wallace's writing on women.

²¹¹ In *The Broom of the System*, certain passages bear both structural and thematic comparison to Laing's writing, evidence for which I provided in Chapter Three. The relationship between Avril and her children also echoes Laing. For example, Laing discusses a conversation between mother and daughter which ends with the former proclaiming 'only one who loves you as I do will ever tell you the truth about yourself no matter what it is.' Thus the daughter 'realized how wrong she had been not to be grateful for having a mother who so loved her that she would tell the truth about herself. Whatever it might be.' Laing says that the inductional structure of this relationship is the same whether the mother states her daughter is 'evil' or 'pretty': in both cases, it comes down to reducing the daughter's self identity in favour of the declaration of lovingness and goodness on behalf of the mother. In this way, the daughter's identity is swept aside. Avril Incandenza represents just the same kind of mother on a much larger scale in *Infinite Jest*. R.D. Laing, 'Mapping', in *The Politics of the Family and Other Essays* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), p. 122.

²¹² These references to mothers are grouped together in *Infinite Jest*, p. 800; p. 809; p. 788.

Boswell claims that 'Lacanian concepts permeate [*Infinite Jest*] [...] demonstrat[ing] that Lacan's model of the psychological subject is a seductive but ultimately alienating and harmful idea that can and should be overcome'. (p. 128) His two central pieces of evidence for this are the *Infinite Jest* film – with its claim to make the viewer 'done with desire' through a 'return to maternal plenitude' – and the 'Inner Infant Support Group', in which 'everyone [...] is a grownup baby in diapers in search of [...] maternal plenitude [and thus] wholeness'. (pp.130-1) The characteristics Boswell observes in emphasizing this universal desire for wholeness is an articulation of Lacan that avoids dealing with the concept of 'lack', which is the 'Real' Lacan suggests subjects find through sexual experiences that are fundamentally 'Oedipal'.²¹³ In this way, it is more persuasive for this argument to view the engagement with Lacan that Boswell observes as a foregrounding of Lacanian 'lack' in various aspects that reflect on the 'hollowness' of post-postmodernist experience; Lacan's concepts become, in this way, the application of the influence of postmodernism to subjectivity directly.²¹⁴ They function as an allegory of the post-postmodern, rather than a critical intervention at the theoretical level, as Boswell suggests.²¹⁵

Boswell's conception of the novel's approach to Lacan could therefore more accurately be portrayed as representing the novel's function as post-postmodernist critique. But to take these aspects of the novel as purely operating in this way, as Boswell and this reading might tempt one to do, ignores the absolute binarization of male and female characters it elicits. Even if we take the novel to be an allegorical response to Lacanian theory

²¹³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. by Jacques Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 204-5.

²¹⁴ Hence the influence of Žižek throughout this thesis, as a critic of what I call the post-postmodern who explicitly uses Lacan to understand the cultural, economic and political era I denote by that term.

²¹⁵ Boswell is correct, therefore, to compare their presence to the echoes of Derrida and ideas of presence in *The Broom of the System*. (pp. 126-7) In both novels, though, I have argued that the use of such theoretical material represents the totalized acceptance of 'deconstruction', 'post-structural theory' and so on into the dominant discourse; such concepts are now hegemonic, and Wallace's 'critique' amounts to a cultural rather than a theoretical intervention.

on Wallace's part, it fundamentally fits in with his schema of 'blaming' female figures – universally either bad or apologetic (hence guilty) mothers – for the problems male characters experience; indeed, it is only the experience of the male figures that it is necessary to represent. This schema surely underlies both the film and support group that Boswell flags up and is worthy of comment by itself, whether as part of an interpretation that figures some response to Lacan or not. This is particularly the case as we begin to see a pattern of the regular suppression, diminution and pathologization of the female experience across multiple works. We could see Wallace's writing on the feminine, especially as it comes through references to Lacan, as performing at tak similar to the anti-feminist philosopher Otto Weininger's, at least in the Lacanian Žižek depiction. Weininger and Wallace both '[...] haul into the light of day the 'sexist' phantasmic support of the dominant ideology'. Indeed, Weininger's depiction of women as 'passive, impressionable objects' and 'thoroughly dominated by sexuality' accords with Wallace's fictional characterizations. (*Metastases*, pp. 137-9)

In their own way, Avril and Meredith characters are as blank to the reader as Joelle or Toni; where Joelle and Toni seek to display their internal mystifying emptiness to the reader physically, Avril and Meredith's characters are built on the focusing of attention on characteristics they are demonstrated not to have. Avril is no mother at all to her sons, she described as a 'black hole of attention' and emotion. Similarly, Meredith the attention Meredith draws from other people is the primary aspect of her characterization. This is true whether the attention is linked to sexual attraction or not, as is the case in the significant relationships she draws with her husband and Drinion.²¹⁶ More than reflecting an image of a person, these portraits are the character equivalents of the 'Infinite Jest' film, causing damage by the validity they find in the attention of others.

²¹⁶ Male characters in *The Pale King* are apparently helplessly attracted to the 'POTEX' – according to Rand herself - with the explicit exception of her husband and Drinion: p. 447; p. 480; p. 484.

Meredith Rand's husband is defined by a wasting 'inflammation' of the heart that makes him 'a dead man' in his wife's reporting of his words. (p. 492; p. 495) These claims cannot be taken literally, as he survives well-enough to collect her from the bar. (p. 446) The husband, though, seems fully aware of his position as the point of attention that Meredith requires, almost to survive, as is indicated by his analysis of the love songs she listens to:

[...] the only way they can think of it and why they're feeling so dead and sad is to think of it as needing somebody else and not being able to live without them, this other person—which by some coincidence is the exact situation of a teeny baby, that without somebody to hold it and feed it and take care of it, it'll die, literally, which he said is not such a coincidence at all, really. (p. 508)

For Meredith, her husband's insight seems to be about himself, and his illness; placed in the context of the character of Avril in *Infinite Jest*, and her need for attention, and Meredith's self-harm prior to meeting her husband, (p. 491) and her apparent need to exaggerate the symptoms of his illness, this comment presents us with an analysis of her entirely dependent character. Both Avril and Meredith present a narcissistic, rather than recursive, demonstration of female characteristics within Wallace's writing.

The portraits of Avril and Meredith are therefore much more obviously sexist than those of Joelle and Toni. Whereas the more sympathetic characters are encoded as always deflecting attention, Avril and Meredith seem only to exist at the point of other people's attention. The pairs of characters are best described as resisting-objectification and encoded-by-

objectification. In the former, the novels create a sense that to fail to conform to patterns of male attention is a virtue, and so the damage done to those characters creates a 'real', if mysterious, person. But it is only in the attempts to resist femininity that this interest lays. Avril and Meredith, however, are treated with hostility because they are defined by the men whose attention they command. This suggests that, while both pairs of women are equally distanced from the reader's perspective, it is only in refusing to define themselves in terms of gender relations that they can become respectable figures. This demonstrates a hostility towards women, in its symbolism that no matter what, there is an inherent diminished quality in comparison with men that marks all of Wallace's writing on gender.

In the end, all four major female characters I have described in this section differ from the central male figures of *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* in that they demonstrate a comparative excess of agency. They are able to capitulate to postmodernist forms of disturbed and disrupted identity because of their status as marginal and therefore already fragmented. Their difference has already been intensified, and rewarded, in some respects, by post-postmodernist capitalization. But, as Harper has shown, this very same already-postmodernist characteristic that left such figures excluded from the narrative and theorizing of postmodernism now leaves marginal figures like women excluded from the process of becoming post-postmodern.

Wallace's female characters are less central and less interesting in his texts because they have no need to demonstrate the post-postmodernist theorizing that his male characters do: postmodernism did not act upon them, and so they cannot and need not 'recover' from it. Indeed, the guilt or

responsibility that they exemplify in Wallace's narratives, as mothers, objects of desire, narcissists and figurants, comes as they are identified with the postmodernism his fiction stands in opposition to. Post-postmodernist literature excludes them because they are part of the dominant culture as Nealon describes it, and such literature is interested in exploring alternative to that; the fact that such alternatives fail to materialize in a logic that is totalized explains the hostility towards such marginal figures that we find in these characters. Women, in this explanation of the post-postmodern, are responsible for the experience of the hollow centre, structurally, figuratively and by dint of their difference, as I have explored their formulation in Wallace's writing.

Potentially more complex is an examination of Wallace's depictions of the relationship between women and men. It is a theme that is returned to often in his fiction, and forms the basis of some of his most complex articulations of the problems of post-postmodernism, particularly as such concerns only function to highlight the gender divide in Wallace's fiction. The next section of this chapter will analyze some of Wallace's non-fiction and shorter fiction, in order to develop an understanding of some of the practical effects of Wallace's theorizing of the post-postmodern.

5.4 'Back in New Fire' as post-postmodernist failure

It is plausible to characterize Wallace's post-postmodernist writing as an attempt to make coherent a traditional conservative impulse towards literary value and a postmodernist understanding of the limitations of both language and the concept of unified selfhood. This attempt is made in a cultural-political era in which both elements are tainted by assumptions about the

centrality of a particular understanding of the world that has been undermined by an increasing and important desire to highlight those figures who have been marginalized by both tradition and postmodernist cultural forms. So, Wallace's project can be seen as a resurrection of the liberal humanist subject, with the exclusionist assumptions that invokes;²¹⁷ or as a masculine re-assertion of difference, which decries the postmodernist analysis of subjectivity as implicitly degrading to culture in the way it feminizes masculine subjectivity.²¹⁸

The anti-feminist message of the mid-period essay 'Back in New Fire' finds a relevant analogue in Franzen's comment that the rise of 'identity politics' on 'college campuses' resembles 'corporate specialty marketing' that 'anchor[s] fiction' in 'the author's membership in a tribe'. By reminding his readers that 'white men are a tribe, too', Franzen's claims misidentify the cultural significance of the marginal with the political context in which it is rooted. ('Perchance', p. 47) His reading matches, to a certain extent, Nealon's characterization of the incorporation of difference within the capitalist economy. (p. 118)

²¹⁷ The liberal-humanist subject's 'freedoms' are exemplified exactly in the market logic by which post-postmodernist society is organized. Their compulsion for the individual to follow egotistic needs at the expense of any concept of the 'greater good' is the central way in which post-postmodernism's capitalist totalitarianism is reflected in its literary reflection's apparent ease with reinforcing traditional social hierarchies. As Žižek points out, the opposition of cultural and economic forms of liberalism – their apparent contradiction on this point – 'signals the innermost "truth" about liberalism', in that the pulling in various directions it signals highlights the essential lack of such a point, beyond the constant reinforcement of the logic of capitalism itself. Wallace's writing on women demonstrates this contradiction particularly well. *End Times*, p. 37.

²¹⁸ One articulation of this is the prevalence of Male-Female transvestism in Wallace's writing. In 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', the protagonist's muse is potentially a cross-dressing version of the story's substitute for John Barth, therefore representing the inflection of metafiction with 'human verities': not necessarily negative in the story's context. (p. 346) However, the portrayals of multiple similar figures in *Infinite Jest* are more hostile, raising questions about Wallace's relationship to homosexuality, difference and masculinity that will be addressed briefly below.

The post-postmodernist reading of Wallace and Franzen's position is that their monopolistic control of a particular market has been opened to competition. The anti-feminist position that they seem to take should be figured as a negative marketing campaign on behalf of the white man; but when both authors' focus seems to be so often on the degradation of entering into discussions of sexual difference, this should be understood more as a decrying of post-postmodernity more generally through the necessity of entering into such a discourse. The hostility towards women felt in both men's texts, at some level, equates femininity and the conditions of post-postmodernity as a signifier of change, and in their assumed function as critics leads to this logical path.

Wallace's writing entered contemporary political debates to an increasing extent though his career, ending with the explicitly partisan political material in *The Pale King*.²¹⁹ This political inclination, consistently liberal in inclination, suggests an identification with progressive attitudes on social issues. In addressing the more explicitly political aspects of gender difference, then, we would expect Wallace writing to push back against the reification of liberal humanism to a certain extent, even if a certain aspect of post-postmodernism will always, in its reaction against fragmented subjectivities, be a re-inscription of difference. This is because to push against the absolutely diffuse individualism of postmodernist theories of

²¹⁹ See the novel's 19th chapter, with its discussion on 'civics and selflessness'. This discussion mirrors Žižek's interpretation of 'liberalism' and its necessary opposition to forms of social responsibility, through the market logic of 'the Cunning of Reason': 'a fully self-conscious liberal should intentional limit his altruistic readiness to sacrifice his own good for the good of others, aware that the most effective way to promote the common good is to follow one's private egoism'. This is one potential moral logic of post-postmodernism under debate at its emergence as the political dominant in *The Pale King*. *The Pale King*, pp. 130-9; *End Times*, p. 36.

subjectivity – and thereby to push against the culture of post-postmodernism itself, in which ideas of 'difference' have been so fully incorporated within capitalist logic - is to resort to binary differences which, as Poovey states are 'not only binary and relational; [but] also differential and hierarchical (as each term of the binary opposition of gender is also both differential and hierarchical).' (p. 47)

The essay 'Back in New Fire' is a crucial part of understanding Wallace's cultural and political position. In many ways it reveals his approach to the issue of reconciling disillusionment with postmodernist theory, a desire for a return to more traditional values such as those espoused by Franzen, and how these theoretical issues have an impact on lived political conditions. Unfortunately, this professed statement of belief is unexpectedly naïve, particularly for such an apparently careful thinker and articulator of those thoughts. But the complicated space between post-postmodernism and feminism make Wallace's work on the issues around 'Back in New Fire' some of the most troubling of his career. Thus the essay is an important starting point for elucidating some of the conservative and anti-feminist rhetoric that can be seen throughout Wallace's writing.

Wallace sees his [...] generation as inheritors of the Sixties', and particularly the cultural, formal and political ruptures of that decade. (Kennedy and Polk, p. 17) 'Back in New Fire' therefore takes one product of the Sixties, the sexual revolution, and starts to think how and to what purpose it might be undone. The essay explicitly defines the sexual revolution in terms of the licensing of casual sex it enacted. It figures the pre-revolution world as one in which 'dragons' reigned: those moral and social pressures that prevented pre-marital sex. The Sixties slay these 'dragons', once and for all, eliminating the 'narrative' of sexual contest. This thereby

renders sexuality somehow unpleasurable. Wallace finds that 'the hangover that followed – the erotic malaise of the 70s, as sex, divorced from most price and consequence, reached a kind of saturation-point in the culture', so that 'I realize that I came of sexual age in a culture that was starting to miss the very dragons whose deaths had supposedly freed it'.²²⁰ For Wallace, the exposure of the self-contradictions and oppression of traditional values, figured in terms of narrative, becomes the destruction of enjoyment. It is plain that the enjoyment that has been lost is that of the dominant white male – cultural proscriptions removed in the sexual revolution were against women, against homosexuals, against interracial relationships – and even these were lifted reluctantly and slowly by the culture at large.

Worse than Wallace's insistence that, in granting of new freedoms to minorities to which he does not belong his own status has been somehow undermined, is the second main theme of this essay. Not only does he mourn the loss of old 'dragons', he also perversely celebrates the rise of the new: the 'new fire' of his title is the AIDS pandemic. This is part of his justification for this position:

If I've got some of this right, then the casual knights of my own bland generation might well come to regard AIDS as a blessing, a gift perhaps bestowed by nature to restore some critical balance, or maybe summoned unconsciously out of the collective erotic despair of the post-60s glut. [...] I mean no offense. [...] But our own history shows that – for whatever reasons – an erotically charged human existence requires impediments to passion, prices for choices. (p. 171)

This piece wilfully ignores the disproportionate impact of HIV on the gay community; indeed, Wallace's argument for the end of 'casual' sex reads

²²⁰ David Foster Wallace, 'Back in New Fire', in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 2012), pp. 167-72.

ominously like a castigation of popular understandings of gay lifestyles.²²¹

He summarizes: 'AIDS' gift to us lies in its loud reminder that there's nothing casual about sex at all.' (p. 171)

Even if 'Back in New Fire' is practically indefensible as a statement of moral philosophy, it is interesting to read as a somewhat allegorical statement of the general beliefs of literary post-postmodernism. It marks the point at which the idea of post-postmodernism as a social and historical logic touches a cultural and critical expression that appears to be in direct contradiction. However, the rhetoric of narrative that Wallace employs and the similarity of the form of this argument with his various attacks on the coldness of the remnants of postmodernism and their relativistic morality allow an interpretative coherence.

One significant clue to this is the echo of Wallace's definition of great literature in his statement that 'trite though it (used to) sound, real sexuality is about our struggles to connect with one another, to erect bridges across the chasms that separate selves.' (p. 172) Even his slight apologia for triteness echoes his other statements about finding the basis of truth in hollow clichés.²²² Contemporary sexuality, in 'Back in New Fire' is described as hollow; the elaborate contradictions that the essay throws up, both internally and with Wallace's other work – see the sympathy for the marginal expressed in the Ennett House scenes in *Infinite Jest*, or the ethical project I

²²¹

There are occasional suggestions of homophobia in Wallace's writing: he refers to Andre Agassi as 'faggy', and he originally called his hostile portrait of *Infinite Jest*'s male prostitute and drug-addict 'Queer Tony', for example. David Foster Wallace, 'Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Limitation, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007), p. 250; Wallace collection in the Harry Ransom Center, Box 16, File 7.

outlined in Chapter Three – provide an example of the struggle against this hollow centre of identity. To say that this essay is controversial suggests that its content is tendentious, its argument spurious, and its claims misguided. It therefore provides an insight into the post-postmodernist period as much in how it misses the mark as it is in its aims; it is a post-postmodernist failure.

5.5 'Back in New Fire' and sexuality as a theme in Wallace's writing

The social and political ramifications of the exclusionary and conservative rhetoric played out in 'Back in New Fire' are often reflected in the themes and forms of Wallace's fiction. One way of considering the form of the hollow-centre in a way that accords with critics' views of Wallace's writing is that it represents a kind of identification with solipsism. This description overlaps with the depiction of Hal Incandenza, with the characterization of Wallace's work produced by Boswell and Burn, and with idea that a hollow centred form of identity is necessarily and self-consciously impermeable.²²³ Developing outwards from this, then, we can imagine Wallace's construction of sexualities in his work as an expression of a relational affirmation of solipsism, marked by its foregrounding of hollowed-out identities. This accords with the reactionary hostility of 'Back in New Fire'.

This discussion will therefore examine whether this approach to sexuality is a necessary articulation of post-postmodernism in literature, as expressed through Wallace's work: is this relational affirmation of solipsism a deliberate effect presented as a result of a post-postmodernist culture? The

²²² This is repeatedly emphasized in the Alcoholics Anonymous sections of *Infinite Jest*, e.g. 'I came here to learn to live by clichés'. (p. 270)

alternative is that Wallace's presentation of solipsism represents the kind of unenlightened viewpoint in which the concerns of gender, race, class and sexuality – all of which appear in his work to greater or lesser extents – are subsumed to a conservative argument about the lost hegemony of liberal masculinity. Arguably, even if we can detect an irony to Wallace's nihilistic portrayal of such issues, any double meaning is invalidated by its uniform presence across all his writing: such sustained post-postmodernist critique must in some ways be fundamentally reactionary. However, by examining issues of representation across Wallace's writing, the effort of the remainder of this chapter will be to examine the commonalities between the 'hollow-centre' and the marginal, in Harper's terms, such that we can find out if post-postmodernism is, as Nealon and this thesis have claimed, a necessarily totalized logic.²²⁴

One significant claim about literary post-postmodernism has been made by Katie Roiphe, and is impacted directly by the argument Wallace produced in 'Back in New Fire'. That is, that this generation of authors is, to a significant degree, asexual; that their fictions have 'repudiated the aggressive virility of their predecessors'.²²⁵ This is consistent with Wallace's argument that sex has a greater and more intimate charge if it is proscribed, rather than open, undertaken solemnly rather than casually. It pertains, then, that, for those who hold these beliefs, sexuality should be somewhat cloistered in their fictions.

²²³ See *Infinite Jest*, pp. 53-4 and pp. 694-5; Boswell, p. 140; Burn (2003: 39).

²²⁴ E.g. Nealon, pp. 121-2.

²²⁵ Katie Roiphe, 'The Naked and the Conflicted', *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, 3 January 2010, p. BR1.

Combining Roiphe's charge with the claims made in 'Back in New Fire', we might construct an argument that Wallace's post-postmodernism is prudish or even anti-sex in the service of a challenge to the apparent consumerization of intimacy; that Wallace's criticisms are against the consumerist logic of post-postmodernism. Wallace equates sex outside of committed relationships with a casualness that is emblematic of postmodernist fiction's relation to qualities of truth: as 'art' is to real intimacy, so metafiction's pastiche is to 'prostitution'.²²⁶ To treat the expression of sexuality as merely a physical act is reductive of the possibility of that act to have a deeper charge. The various representations of either chaste or deeply unhealthy relationships between men and women in Wallace's work therefore are as reflective of Wallace's diagnosis of post-postmodernist society as his portrayals of depression or addiction, presenting allegorical representations of the effect of post-postmodernity on his literary figures. His fictional relationships, however, are never consummated with the intimacy 'Back in New Fire' demands.

Ultimately, 'Back in New Fire' presents us with an echo of figures like Meredith Rand and Avril Incandenza: women whose desire is absolute and identical to their 'Otherness' and, as Žižek puts it, thus a final representation of the threat to Wallace's 'way of life' that the logic of liberal-democracy relies upon. (*Metastases*, p. 216) The contradictions of wanting to 'respect' women and at the same time finding in their desire a cause for absolute terror, and wishing to 'enjoy' sexuality while denying the potential for the Other's enjoyment, and the need to represent the humanity of and fear caused by

²²⁶ 'Fictional Futures', p. 54.

sexuality simultaneously marks this post-postmodernist literature as a true reflection of the political system of totalized liberal democracy out of which it emerges. Its contradictions, therefore, represent the 'Truth' as Žižek would put it, of that system. (*Living*, p. 37)

Roiphe's article makes some claims about the quasi-feminist origins of the post-postmodernist rejection of sex. As 'Back in New Fire' suggests, there is very little unconditionally anti-feminist rhetoric or argument within any post-postmodernist's work: the distinction between 'casual' sex and 'intimacy' in that essay deliberately seeks a 'highly charged sex' that moves away from 'copulation', and thus retains 'respect', thus couching its move in nominally pro-feminist terms. (p. 172) Its fault lies in wilfully ignoring the criticisms this argument invokes of the contextual imperatives of the historical change, and failing to address the desires of those who would therefore inevitably lose out in other, non-specified ways, from these regressive conclusions. It would be culturally unacceptable to state these implicit premises.

Post-postmodernist literature's relative chasteness consequently reflects as much a literary judgment on a previous generation as a moral prudishness, despite Wallace's essayic claims. The figure of John Updike figures large in Wallace's literary imagination as a representation of these literary judgements. Boswell points out the oblique reference to the older author in the thuggish figure of *The Broom of the System*'s Biff Diggerence. (p. 43) Unlike his friend 'Wang Dang' Lang, who exploits an understanding of the voice and feelings of his female conquests, Diggerence is uninterested in anything beyond his basest desires and bodily functions: asking a fifteen-

year-old girl if it is the first time she has 'ever seen a man naked' while exposing himself to her, and 'violently pounding his head against the wall' to keep down his excessive alcohol intake. (*Broom*, p. 20; p. 16) He ultimately ends up 'screwed up' and reclusive, 'never seein' anybody'. (p. 410) This provides a metafictional insight into Wallace's critical regard for Biff's neighbour as overtly sexist, uncouth and exhibitionistic, and eventually isolated from any semblance of the outside world; it summarizes Wallace's reading of Updike and his brutish peers.

The figure of Updike also haunts a story collected in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, in which an older, prize-winning author, described prominently through his almost-exposed manhood. The story loops back through a single set of terms to display the inability of this older author to move beyond a few simple tropes about his sense of self: of his own importance, his monetary value and his sexuality.²²⁷ A sample sentence extract is: '[...] the poet's forehead dotted with perspiration, his tan deep and rich, the insides of his upper legs nearly hairless, his penis curled tightly on itself in the tight swimsuit, [...]' (p. 3)

The implicit attack of both of these versions of Updike is on the over-emphasized male sexuality of his generation of authors. This facet is in Wallace's allegories at once base, narcissistic and artistically and culturally stunted. However, Wallace's writing is as overtly self-obsessed as he typifies Updike's and its depictions of relationships that focus unerringly on the negative produce no more recognition of psychological health than do

²²⁷ 'Death is Not the End' in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Zadie Smith's essay on Wallace deals with this story's elliptical qualities. Zadie Smith, 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace', in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), p. 292.

Updike's more self-aggrandizing portraits, as I will go on to demonstrate. Wallace rather relies on similar deliberate blindnesses, which are not mitigated by being couched in expressions of detached sympathy. Post-postmodern literature in this way stands in the same relation to the sexual politics of the authors of the Sixties as it does to the formal techniques of the same period: intensifying the features it claims to reject.

The nervous sexism of Wallace's attitude – his second-guessing of his repetition of Updike-ean qualities – is demonstrated most openly in non-fiction.²²⁸ For example, a passage from 'Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All' describes Wallace's platonic female companion being treated in a sexist manner by figures described in terms of near total disgust. The woman in question is slowly inverted by and for the pleasure of two male carnival workers, such that she can be displayed and 'ogled', while Wallace, in the story, stands by in a state of 'dissociation' because he is a 'sensitive neurological specimen'. (p. 99) His response is described in terms of panic; hers, by contrast, is a kind of joyful and wilful ignorance of the way she has been apparently defiled. The narrative voice asks: 'Am I the only one who was in touch with the manifestly overt sexual-harassment element in the whole episode?', after quoting the companion's response to the carnival workers: "'You sons bitches that was fucking great. Assholes.'" (p. 100) The impression is given that for any woman to take pleasure in her own sexuality, a similar perspective to the author-figure's is necessary: a distance from the always invasive attentions of any male presence, the narrator's own included.

Later, as the author again struggles not to ogle a young team of female baton-twirlers ('Starting with the twelve-year-olds [...] there is, I'm

²²⁸ This second-guessing is most evident in the multiple drafts of the opening of his review of Updike's *Toward the End of Time*, Wallace collection in the Harry Ransom Center, Box 28, File 8. For example, one calls Updike 'what you get when you cross a penis with a thesaurus'; another: 'he's one of those awful men who hate women and go around talking about how much they love women'.

afraid, a frank sexuality that begins to get uncomfortable'), another male member of the audience is symbolically castrated by a baton ('A dad standing up near the stands' top [...] takes a tomahawking baton directly in the groin [...] during which I decamp – steering way clear of the sixteen-year-olds [...]'). (p. 137) This moment again represents a judgment on the male gaze; that it can never be innocent, and enjoyment entails guilt or punishment.

Another piece of non-fiction examines male sexuality and the voyeuristic male gaze even more directly, and presents a view of sexuality in which women are allowed even less of a voice. 'Big Red Son' is an account of attending the Adult Video News awards – described as the 'Oscars of pornography'. The piece's opening is interesting for the way it relates to the themes I have been discussing. Firstly, the story invokes men who deal with an addiction to pornography through auto-castration. Its second paragraph states that: 'It is to the 30+ testeronically afflicted males whose cases have been documented in the past two years that your correspondents wish to dedicate this article.' (p. 3) The proceeding citation of statistics relating to this phenomenon implies both a shock and a kind of admiration for those who divorce themselves from the damaging psychological impact of their sexuality in this way.

Later, 'Big Red Son' mounts a kind of defence of the use of pornography in similar terms to those found in 'Back in New Fire', and in Wallace's descriptions of literary worth. This device is removed from the narrative voice on a number of levels. It is placed in a footnote, related as a story told to the narrator by a male pornographic actor, as the story of yet

another person. It describes an LAPD detective who seeks an escape from loneliness through a sense of connection with images of women experiencing and demonstrating a 'real' emotion at the moment of orgasm.²²⁹ This is expressed in this supposed direct quotation: "'Sometimes – and you'll never know when, is the thing – sometimes all of a sudden they'll kind of reveal themselves'" was the detective's way of putting it. "Their, what-do-you-call [...] humanness."²³⁰ (p. 16n14)

Sexuality here again is something either to be physically prevented, expressly rejected, or else to be overcome through a heightened sense of communion and respect – at least on the part of the male – and the control of these phenomena is always exclusively masculine. But this conception of the revelation of 'humanness' – echoing as it does Wallace's description of writing being about 'what it means to be a *fucking* human being', and his repetition of the idea that images of human suffering, particularly of the face, can provide insights into an individual's soul²³¹ – both of these facets suggests that Wallace's is very much concerned with returning to an 'essential' conception of existence. Thus, if even the most constructed forms of non-connected intercourse can reveal this connection in the consumption of pornography, there is a potential for the heterosexual relationship to perform some post-postmodernist function.

²²⁹ One might compare the 'reality' of this moment with the contrast between intimacy and prostitution to be found in 'Fictional Futures' (p. 54) and the central argument of 'Back in New Fire'.

²³⁰ David Foster Wallace, 'Big Red Son', in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2007), p. 16n14, emphasis retained.

²³¹ McCaffery interview, p. 131; *Infinite Jest* p. 412 onwards presents the use of images of facial pain in advertising; 'The Suffering Channel' uses the same trope. David Foster Wallace, 'The Suffering Channel', in *Oblivion: Stories* (London: Abacus, 2004), pp. 238-329.

The contradiction with Wallace's earlier arguments, though, highlights the potential alienation involved in the act of revelation. Not only does the purported detective control the interpretation of this moment of 'humanness', he is not required to communicate with it in any way. The 'reality' of the orgasm he observes reveals the inability of this addict to overcome his addictive behaviour through appeals to 'humanity'. Wallace's argument is therefore self-cancelling, not only about constructions of gender and sexuality as facets of identity, but also about character and post-postmodernism's structure as a kind of addiction.

The essay continues with an examination of the pornography industry in which male pornographers, like the invasive males of *The Broom of the System* and the carnival workers of 'Getting Away' before them, are routinely described as or implied to be base, controlled by degrading instincts, uncouth and apparently unaware of the impact they are having on the more upstanding Wallace (in excess of the women themselves, it is implied).²³² But again, and even more recognizably in this essay, these figures of outré masculinity are derided for the characteristics which seem to remind the author of himself, more than anything else. The acts Wallace describes are perpetrated against women, and yet the essay's condemnation never appears to consider a woman's perspective at all. It devalues a female perspective almost as much as do the pornographers Wallace describes: their understanding of what they do is an irrelevance compared to the obvious humiliation imposed on them by the men who do it. At best, these women are from Wallace's perspective ignorant, because as no sexual act

can be empowering, so no woman involved in this process seems capable of having a perspective worth sharing. Wallace's deliberate ignorance about their role therefore reveals the depth of his consideration of them.²³³

These pieces of non-fiction portray a reversed feminism, in which, rather than equality, post-postmodernism's response to the sexual revolution is 'because women have less power, we can only prevent ourselves from exploiting them'. By failing to concern himself with a feminine perspective, Wallace is at least as patronizing as figures like Updike whose sexual politics he professes to abhor, politics that find their reflection in all of Wallace's male characters. The attitude Wallace espouses is one of repression, and rather than reinstating an intimacy in the relationship between the sexes, the result of this attitude seems to express itself in a reaffirmation of the power and potency of men. The implications of the asexuality Roiphe describes is a hesitant and emasculated chauvinism, in which auto-castration is far preferable to trying to engage with a feminine perspective on sexuality.

5.6 *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and post-postmodernist approaches to heterosexual relationships

The collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* presents a near total focus, as implied in the title, on the conception that male sexuality is somehow hideous. The cumulative impact of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*'s narratives presents, as in Wallace's non-fiction, a picture of the gender

²³² See the description of authorly 'complex erotic tension' in the face of 'starlets' on pp. 24-5.

²³³ Only male 'performers' are interviewed in the essay; the one declarative statement from a woman (referred to mostly as 'starlets') is the reproduction of the sentence 'I'm a little fuckhole' as written, according to a male interviewee, with a 'Magic Marker [held] up her asshole', p. 31.

divide that is non-traversable, and so heterosexuality itself is a reflection of Wallace's deployment of the trope of solipsism.²³⁴ It contains various deliberately failed attempts to present a feminine perspective, which begins to distinguish this material from Wallace's other writing. Where generally Wallace's focus is generally entirely male-orientated, there is more interest in this collection in the interaction between genders, and therefore in a female perspective on the figures the narratives present.

The central thread of the collection is a series of interviews conducted by an unnamed and voiceless female interviewer. She is represented in a series of dialogues by a 'Q,' which stands in place of each of her questions to the titular hideous men. This has a similar effect to Wallace's use of the feminine third person address in his non-fiction writing, [i.e. references to the reader as 'she' and 'her'] forcing a consideration of the gendering of the space toward which he is writing, the space in which the reader interacts with the work.²³⁵ The blankness enforces an agency onto a female listener and reader, as theirs is a space to be actively filled. But, in common with the depiction of women throughout Wallace's work, the textual empty space that he provides instead of the female presence presents us with a failure to depict women, an admission of that failure, and as the stories reveal the qualities of their subjects, the empty 'Q's' become nothing but a judgment on the men of the title. Q's sole characteristic is her ability to reveal that men are different from women, and that they reveal themselves endlessly to be so, but she deliberately retains no qualities herself. Indeed, her success in bringing to light various negative aspects of her interviewees, motivated by

²³⁴ Boswell states that *Brief Interview*'s characters [...] feel alienated not only from sexuality but also from their own response to their sexual alienation', p. 183.

²³⁵ See in particular 'Authority and American Usage', in which the argument against writers assuming a 'universal truth' that is equally applicable to an implicitly female reader is made: [...]conceive the reader as a separate human being [with] preferences and beliefs and confusions of her own[...]', p. 106n59. One irony of this is revealed in the essay itself, with the presumably partial anecdote about treating a female African-American student's writing without – according to 'more than one' of his colleagues – this due care for the other; pp. 107-9.

confession, seduction, braggadocio, or a hostile desire to shock,²³⁶ further reinforces her position as malleable to the point of non-existence; fundamentally, she is simply a space into which the excess personality of men is dispensed.

Timmer finds that post-postmodernist literature attempts to rescue subjectivity from solipsism (p. 14) and Nealon's diagnosis of post-postmodernism is that difference is the postmodern 'paradigm that overcodes all the others' (p. 154). In Wallace's writing, one entails the other, so that his fiction represents a resuscitation of subjectivity through the rejuvenation of hierarchies of binaries over multiple differences, as Stockton might put it. (p. 47) This act of resuscitation merely 'intensifies' what is already postmodernist: it conforms to the marketing-style logic of difference that Franzen described, making a case for the masculine as a primary experience that cannot help but be second-guessed by the ways the operation of masculinity is, as the collection describes it, hideous. ('Perchance', p. 47)

One bifurcated story in the collection presents a female protagonist confronted with an excessive male sexuality. In 'Adult World (I)' and '(II)' a newly married woman feels incapable of fulfilling her husband's sexual needs until, in the gap between the two parts, she discovers that he is addicted to pornography. It is implied through a series of dream sequences that she unconsciously always had this information. The intra-text revelation functions as an epiphany, leading to a second section that is formatted as the author's notes. This second section acts as a commentary on the realist

²³⁶ For examples of each of these, see the brief interviews numbered 42 (pp. 86-91), 15 (pp. 18-19), 28 (pp. 226-34), and 46 (pp. 116-24) respectively.

style of the first part, highlighting the various ways its effects were deliberate and pre-meditated in their portrayal of character. That the ability effectively to maintain this portrayal breaks down after the revelatory ending of the first section suggests an inability, in common with other female protagonists in Wallace, to maintain an identity except in the face of male objectification.

The tone of 'Adult World (I)' contains only a 'realist' sense of self-reflection, atypically for any of Wallace's work. For example, on viewing a pornographic video alone for educational purposes, the as-yet-naïve protagonist 'was relieved that she had no worries about being less attractive or sexual than the actresses in the X-rated video tape', a description of dry self-appreciation.²³⁷ This form gives way to the less encoded notes of 'Adult World (II)', which highlights the authorial deliberate use of realist effects, including for example references to a desire to echo 'Dostoevsky's Natasya F.'²³⁸

The epiphany of 'Adult World' is a literary device supported by other realist techniques, in particular, the first section of the story's interjections such as 'the wife thought now',²³⁹ in which the apparently sexist portrayal of the naivety of the protagonist is excused by the narrative voice's call forward to a post-epiphany 'experienced' version, who can point out these failings. The epiphany causes the protagonist, first referred to as 'the wife', to be named as the first part ends. At first, she is given her married name, Jeni

²³⁷ Wallace, David Foster, 'Adult World (I)', in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007), p. 168.

²³⁸ p. 185. All quotes from 'Adult World (II)' are Sic. I refer to both (I) and (II) as 'Adult World' within this chapter; if the distinction between the two impacts on my reading, I will make clear to which half I refer.

²³⁹ The 'now' referring to a time after the writing of the second section of the story, at a time when the post-epiphany protagonist has the experience to distance herself from the naivety of her past self.

Roberts, but the second section of the story adds her maiden name, Jeni Orzolek Roberts, as she becomes more independent of her husband – who is not named, but becomes referred to as 'the Secret Compulsive Masturbator' in parallel with the naming of his wife.²⁴⁰ The story concludes by replacing the failing sexual relationship of its opening with a marriage in which both partners independently fulfil their own sexual needs, with no concern for the pleasure of the other. The text claims at this point 'Hsbdn mastrbtes secretly, J.O.R. openly. [...] -> 'They were now truly married, cleaved.' (pp. 188-9) The closing note indicates that they are preparing to have children, something that the novel's opening made clear that they were in no way ready for when their relationship was more consummated. They move from 'sometimes they talked about having children' on the story's second page, to being '[...] ready thus to begin, in a calm and mutually respectful way, to discuss having children.' (p. 162; p. 189)

'Adult World' therefore implies that experience and maturity depend on a moving beyond the sexual relationship between men and women. The stories rely on a constant detachment of descriptive prose from any replication of the sensuousness of experience. Their reliance on the undermining of the literary and use of a naïve narrator denies the relevance of the pleasure of sex. Only in withdrawing from the focus on this, and simultaneous undermining of this focus, can the story satisfactorily conclude. The healthiest conclusion one can imagine comes in the form of a mutually-accepted and supported focus on masturbation, so that genuine sexual contact between the sexes is replaced by a focus on the pleasures of the

²⁴⁰ From p. 186.

self. Again, this implies the deep unease with sexual contact that Wallace's writing often depicts.

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men is Wallace's most experimental work, a catalogue of post-metafictional techniques. But their employment in 'Adult World' undermines the human sympathy Wallace's fiction aims toward. His writing here unconsciously plays out the feminist critiques of postmodernist fiction in general, rather than exposing them, and as such, is tied to his explicitly sexist essay 'Back in New Fire'. In paralleling the ways Wallace's writing approaches postmodernist fiction through other tropes, the potential inconsistencies and contradictions of his writing on women and heterosexual relationships open up the space for a questioning of the claims of post-postmodernism. Are the central tropes of post-postmodernism a conservative response to earlier forms, regressive in their attempt to suppress the more progressive potentials of such fiction? In his partial deployment of sexual politics, Wallace's writing makes the case that post-postmodernist fiction more broadly is on questionable ground.

5.7 A final hideous man

One final analysis of a piece of fiction will connect the formal complexity that I have been interested in throughout this thesis with the depiction of gender and sexuality that this chapter has discussed. It will show Wallace's style operating as an intensification of the uncomfortable structures of power that post-postmodernist literature relies upon.

The last of the stories presented as transcribed interviews in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is among the most problematic pieces in

Wallace's career. As a 'brief interview', it is filtered through the empty female presence of Q. Uniquely amongst the book's interviewees, its male subject is mostly re-narrating another character's experience. He relates the story of the rape of a young woman he attempted to seduce. The story is therefore shaped by two female presences, but neither character is directly presented to the reader: both are mediated through the male interviewee as well as Wallace's authorial presence.

This final interview rewards and confuses the close reader in almost equal measure. It anticipates the stories from the later collection *Oblivion: Stories* in its reliance on embedded call-backs and call-forwards, in which details are inserted that undermine the main narrative thrust. The clearest example is the way that the interviewee buys Q. drinks in multiple narrative insertions. This suggests that the interview itself is made up of an attempted seduction. These insertions culminate in the bragging: 'Do not think you are getting out of me things or admissions I'm unaware of. Just consider the possibility that I understand more than you think. Though if you'd like another I'll buy you another.'²⁴¹ His story of a brutal rape is undermined by his repeated casual offers to Q. They thematically and contextually counteract the value of his narrative.

His description of the attack eventually involves a passage of long, uninterrupted monologue. It is conversational enough to give the impression that he is providing near-reported speech. This near page-long sentence, with many run-on clauses, is followed by the explanation that there is a 'rhetorically specific blend of childish diction like *Hi* and *fib* with flaccid

²⁴¹ E.g. 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: B.I. #20', p. 291; p. 296; p. 305.

abstractions like *nurture* and *energy* and *serene'* in the language he has just 'quoted'. (p. 291, emphasis retained) The language he employs is consciously designed to aid a successful seduction. In combination, the reported monologue and the calculated rhetorical strategies explained *post hoc*, and indeed the third layer of openly explaining these strategies make this section one in which the 'hideous man' and the story's author figure become closely associated.

The digressive sentence style, deliberate mixing of tone, and metafictional self-awareness of these features makes this passage 'Wallaceian' in voice. The combination of suspicions raised by the drink-offer interjections – which also add a suggestion of inebriation in the narrative's actors – and by the calculating nature of the interviewee, and the deliberately echoing of typical authorial strategies in his narrative voice; all work to suggest that the 'story' he tells is unreliable. The implication is that his manipulation of control by nudges and off-hand asides is performed both by the interviewee on his interviewer and by the author on the reader: in both cases, close engagement with the most insignificant contextual detail is necessary to decode the manipulation.

The woman at the centre of the described seduction is aware throughout of his seduction attempt, and therefore of the implied violence in the act. This is a violence that the interviewee admits to parallel with that of the rapist. He states that: 'I classified her as strictly a one-night objective' and that 'the whole thing' was 'almost criminally easy'. (p. 288) The declared criminality and the dishonest ease of the act are parallel, if not at all equal to,

the physical appropriation of her body that later occurs. The implicit amorality of this figure is always apparent in the text.

After the act, the original 'objective' of this seduction tells the story of her rape. This acts as a reverse-seduction, affecting the interviewee to the point that he breaks down in tears, and into a sexualized verbal violence as he recounts it. The story closes with the words:

I know how this sounds, trust me. I know your type and I know what you're bound to ask. Ask it now. This is your chance. I felt she could save me I said. Ask me now. Say it. I stand here naked before you.

Judge me, you chilly cunt. You dyke, you bitch, cooze, cunt, slut, gash. Happy now? All borne out? Be happy. I don't care. I knew she could. I knew I loved. End of story. (p. 318)

This final passage has many implications. The shocking language is contained within markers that suggest that it is a defensive outburst, motivated by an apparent lack of trust. This resonates with an earlier passage in which the interviewee claimed that there is a 'psychological need to believe that others take you as seriously as you take yourself.' (p. 292)

Because there are indications that in fact the narrative he has produced is some sort of convoluted seduction attempt, the interviewer and reader have taken the story as less serious, or less true, than the interviewee would wish. But the encapsulation of such aggressively sexualized language within a defensive outburst also parallels the description of the rape that forms the centre of the narrative, as it is described as the product of the rapist's '*grotesque shyness* [...] the terror that any conventional, soul-exposing connection with another human being will threaten him with engulfment

and/or obliteration, in other words that *he* will become the victim.' (p. 303, emphasis retained)

Reading the violent act and the violent language as consistently 'justified' in this way, as an act of appropriation that can only be reversed by a sense of connection or trust, is troubling. The direct implication of this perception of victimhood maintains that only the male aggressors have the ability to have a defined identity capable of needs: the damage that their actions do is missing from the justification that is proposed. There is a history of victimhood invoked in the sexualized words of the story's end. Danielle Tyson observes that cultural representations of women depicting any 'reinscription of [...] subjectivity in the discourse of others' is akin to 'asking for it': women, in Wallace's fiction, are able to act only with the sort of passivity that will not provoke such 'justifications'.²⁴²

It is plausible to read the story as internally genuine and sincere, as the interviewee describes himself finding the story of the original seductee: 'she seemed, quote, *sincere*', he states, although the 'quote' presents us with an odd distancing from the conviction he is trying to demonstrate. (p. 297) In this passage, in which he describes her ability to recount the story of her attack, she also comes to parallel the author-figure, just as the interviewee had earlier. So, she is able to make him 'imagine just what it must have *felt* like for her, for anyone, finding yourself in the company of a dark man [...] who says he is your own death incarnate [...] it was tribute to the – her odd affectless sincerity that I found myself hearing expressions like *fear gripping her soul*, unquote, as less as televisual clichés or melodrama

but as sincere if not particularly artful attempts to describe what it must have felt like [...]”²⁴³

The combination of sincerity with the idea that post-televisual clichés can become re-imbued with meaning through a sufficiently truthful application contains very significant echoes of the project Wallace describes in his various manifestos for fiction.²⁴⁴ In this description the woman is neatly echoing those elements of Wallace's prose that were not contained in her seducer's self-aware description of his own abilities. Where he is cold, metafictional, and postmodernist, she is emotionally affecting (rather than emotional) and realist; but both are very much constructed as authors. The question this raises is one about the inherent manipulative quality of narrative and the authors who create them.

This story is extremely difficult to unpick successfully. The use of the theme of sexual violence, though, and its position at the climax of the Brief Interviews series dealing with gender relationships, mark it as highly

²⁴² Danielle Tyson, *Sex, Culpability and the Defence of Provocation* (London, New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 61.

²⁴³ p. 297, emphasis retained. The descriptor 'black man', and the story's consistent use of the racial epithet 'the mulatto' to describe the rapist throughout this story (indeed, 'mulatto' is always preferred 'rapist' or 'murderer' or 'attacker', highlighting his racial heritage over his actions). The significant use of this controversial term is important as a relayer of the character of the interviewee and, by implication and potentially, the rape victim of this story. Adding such a complex racial term so casually into the narrative, without comment, adds an ironic casualness to the interviewee's claims about his own rhetorical prowess, and perhaps undermines the claims of universal love of the rape victim. However, concentrating the analysis of this story on the politics of gender that can be unpicked here leaves me with no room to fully analyze the implications of the use of this term. This issue is raised directly within the text, too, again marking the interviewee as highly self-referential and aware of the constructed nature of the language he uses. Without addressing the complexities of the term, then, we can nevertheless use it as another example of the interviewee being presented as a metafictional author, in comparison to the realism of the woman whose story he recounts, and who is credited with the original use of the word; its transmission between them therefore adding to this complex of literary processes. (p. 300)

²⁴⁴ See for example previous references in this thesis to 'E Unibus Pluram' and 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young', particularly in Chapter One.

significant to Wallace's approach to gender.²⁴⁵ In order to draw some conclusions from it, remembering that I am trying to draw the distinctions and inter-relations between Wallace's response to postmodernism and that of feminist criticism, it is appropriate to turn to an essay by Judith Butler in which similar issues are approached.

In Butler's 'Contingent Foundations' – an explicit response to postmodernism and the political from a feminist perspective - she sees the categorical breakdown of universalized notions of identity – and thus generalized notions of 'femininity' – as a positive force for advancing the cause of women. The thrust of Wallace's post-postmodernism, as I have articulated it, has been to explore the psychological and social damage this same feature causes. Where Butler's analysis usefully overlaps with this Brief Interview is in her examination of the practical effects of non-fragmentary conceptions of identity: she associates such conceptions with the act of rape. Reading my analysis of Wallace's story alongside Butler's essay will produce a system of meaning in which Wallace's relation of postmodernism and gender relationships diverge from those Butler produces. This will show how far Wallace's response to postmodernist theory marks his work as anti-feminist.

Butler's claims about identity before the conceptions of postmodernism are established late in her essay:

I would argue that any effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women, presuming that that guarantee of solidarity is required in advance, will necessarily produce factionalization, and that "identity" as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement. Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary.

²⁴⁵ Its significance is similar to 'Oblivion', analyzed in Chapter Four, as a summation of a set of ideas and themes in Wallace's work. 'Oblivion' also features implications of sexual assault.

This is not to say that the term "women" ought not to be used, or that we ought to announce the death of the category. On the contrary, if feminism presupposes that "women" designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability.²⁴⁶

For Butler, then, a necessary product of postmodernist theory for feminism is the acceptance of the 'resignifiability' of the term women, such that it is constantly questioned and challenged, and no single definition is allowed to take hold. Her explanation flows very definitely from the ways in which identity, in the more specific, is theorized by postmodernism. What makes this relevant to the discussion here is the way Butler continues her line of thought to the consequences of presuming a fixed identity category for "women" as a term and as a group, in real life, as political subjects. The basis for Butler's discussion here is the comment made within a court case that she refers to as the "New Bedford gang rape case", in which the defence attorney made the comment: "If you're living with a man, what are you doing running around getting raped?" She states:

Since becoming the property of a man is the objective of her "sex," articulated in and through her sexual desire, and rape is the way in which that appropriation occurs "on the street" [a logic that implies that rape is to marriage as the streets are to the home, that is, that "rape" is street marriage, a marriage without a home, a marriage for homeless girls, and that marriage is domesticated rape], then "rape" is the logical consequence of the enactment of her sex and sexuality

²⁴⁶ Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"', in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York, London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 15-6.

outside domesticity. Never mind that this rape took place in a bar, for the "bar" is, within this imaginary, but an extension of the "street," or perhaps its exemplary moment, for there is no enclosure, that is, no protection, other than the home as domestic marital space. In any case, the single cause of her violation is here figured as her "sex" which, given its natural propensity to seek expropriation, once dislocated from domestic propriety, naturally pursues its rape and is thus responsible for it. (pp. 18-9)

Butler's suggestion is that the normalizing of the role of the woman is accountable for the act of rape, in that it establishes the equivalence of sexual desire with the right of men figuratively to possess that woman, so that she can be 'claimed' by the rapist so long as she is out with the protection of her rightful domestic sphere.

Butler's conception of 'rape' is comparable to that found in Wallace's story. Most pertinent is the way Wallace suggests that the victim in his story deals with the situation. She is described as performing 'incredible feats of compassion and connection', and it is stated that if she 'can somehow choose to *give* herself, sincerely and compassionately, she cannot be truly violated or raped, no?'²⁴⁷ The power of the story – and this refers to both the meaning of the Brief Interview as a whole, and the effect of the rape narrative internally, within that interview – is derived from the intensity of the connection apparently established in the moments leading up to the rape. But, in effect, and in Butler's terms, one might suggest that the intensity and compassion of the victim's focus is merely the basis by which she establishes a meaningful relationship with the rapist, thereby forming a more normative 'marriage', even in the confines of the 'street' in which she finds herself. In its dependence on the establishment of deep-lying 'soul'-type

²⁴⁷ p. 310, emphasis retained. Although this statement is qualified further down the page: 'I am not suggesting that this was the same as her asking for it or deciding she wanted it unquote, and no this does not keep the rape itself from being a crime.'

connections, Wallace's story therefore seems to undermine the meaninglessness of postmodernist identity in established ways, down to its references to the ability of the woman to establish a Realist narrative that reinvigorates clichés. This reading also ties the story to my earlier analysis of 'Adult World'. In its central action, Wallace establishes nothing new with this Brief Interview, nothing beyond what we might expect from a Franzen-esque reactionary attack on postmodernism.

However, the complexity of the story works to undo some of this simplicity. On its own terms, Butler's account of 'rape' within a normative gender structure incorporates any female sexual act outwith the established domestic sphere. Wallace's story equates the serial seductions of the interviewee with the actions of the rapist, which conforms to Butler's analysis, and presents an equally critical version of constructed gender roles in which men are able to assert ownership over women's bodies. It is only by accepting the possibility that the rape victim's story is a radical reverse-seduction, in which her intent was both to pursue the sexual act, and then to commit the same emotional rejection upon the seducer that he had intended to perform on her, that we can see the story as a message about the positive dimensions of postmodernist identity.

This reading of the story, though, relies on performing a postmodernist reading of her realist story, understanding that narratives are partial and motivated, much as we are shown that the interviewee's always are. Thus, because this is a re-telling of the story, we might infer that the interviewee's version is the source of the partiality and motivation, that he is constructing a believable realist subject in order to perform another act of seduction on the final layer of the story, the interviewer Q.. In other words,

he exploits the desire of Q., established by Butler's terms, for a 'street marriage' – in this case a seduction – that can conform to more acceptable standards of compassion and love, and thus the story is an establishment of the terms in which this might work. The inclusion of multiple rounds of drinks confirms this reading to some extent.

Ultimately, Wallace's story of gender relations largely conforms to Butler's, in his exploration of the cynical need for men to exploit constructions of gender identities that do not necessarily exist. However, it is only in allowing for the possibility of a naïve move away from this cynicism – in believing that the original rape victim could be both real and able to manipulate narratives in a way that reverses gender roles – that we can see the women of the story as moving beyond constructed gender roles. Wallace's story is playing with the breakdown of gender identities in complex and interesting ways, but by failing to voice either the rape victim or Q., his women are mysteries and it is impossible to draw clear conclusions about them.

Examining the relationship between men and women in Wallace's work demonstrates that it reflects the conflicts inherent within post-postmodernism as I have described it. The depictions I have looked at show a simultaneous desire to resurrect a universalist character and to represent the collapsed subjectivities of postmodernism that undermine them. The only absolute that is therefore able to pertain is an absolute difference, a set of contradictions and paradoxes in which the experience of marginality and excavated power represents the condition of post-postmodernist hollowness. That is why Wallace's work is finally incapable of examining the real

conditions of women and feminism, and what distinguishes it from feminist responses to postmodernism such as those produced by Butler. Women represent one marginality in a period that is represented by a totalized experience of marginality. The experience of marginality in this form is neither the collapse into anarchy that Franzen's fiction figures, nor a radical opening of absolute equality. Rather, it is a representation of the cynical approach to identity-as-choice that an acceptance of postmodernist ideas allows, which is potentially available to all.²⁴⁸ While neither politically-correct nor even politically-aware, understanding this feature of Wallace's writing helps us to understand the central conceptions of post-postmodernist literature more generally.

5.8 Conclusion: Seeing marginality everywhere

Post-postmodernism, as the name implies, must be defined in part as a reaction to postmodernism. Its emergence coincided with a similar reaction amongst feminist critics to the same set of ideas. In this chapter, I assessed the role of women in Wallace's longer fiction and demonstrated the ways he represents relationships between the genders. In doing so I have opened the question of the contrasting response to postmodernism his writing represents, asking whether all attempts to move beyond its ideas are complementary. Central to this analysis has been to ask whether post-postmodernism is a regressive form, and repeats the process of reinforcing marginalizations that Harper finds at work in postmodernist forms. I have

²⁴⁸ See 'B.I. #28' for an articulation of the potential for cynicism inherent in post-postmodernist relationships. David Foster Wallace, 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: B.I. #28', in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007), pp. 226-34.

also considered whether Wallace's work might harmonize with feminist critiques of postmodernism to produce more progressive ideas.

Typically, the answers I have found are complex and contradictory. Wallace's fiction is representative of post-postmodernism in its desire to represent and express the lived experience of postmodernist ideas. I have shown in this chapter its representation of the implications of 'the end of the bourgeois monad or ego or individual', as Jameson puts it. (*Postmodernism*, p. 15) As the very start of this chapter demonstrated, this acceptance is not necessarily counter to the aims of feminist theory; critics like Wicke have attacked the fragmentation of identity that Wallace discusses as an example of the negative feminization of identity, and thus postmodernism in these terms can be viewed as late-capitalism's response to the progress feminism has made in establishing more equality for women.

However, Wallace's fiction often seeks to respond to the difficulties of establishing identity after postmodernism by seeming to revere versions of the liberal humanist subject. His fiction constantly reminds the reader of older, Realist fictional forms, suggesting them as panacea for the problems his more metafictional constructs inspire. Among the stories discussed here, 'Adult World (II)' in particular adheres to this pattern. It is one that has been applied, in Burn's view, by the three major authors of post-postmodernist fiction: Powers, Franzen and Wallace.²⁴⁹ But by seeming to revert to this exclusionary version of subjectivity, many of the progressive and

²⁴⁹ They all achieve a 'synthesis' of 'the supposedly realist and the self-reflexive' so that they 'elicit the traditional effects of fiction – understanding, empathy with another's perspective – while the metafictional element hopes to [enable the reader to] recognize the way her own life is constructed and narrated.' Burn (2008: 127).

sophisticated features of postmodernism, including those identified by feminist critics like Butler and Poovey, must be denied.

The multiple distancing effects through which Wallace places his reification of humanism, such as framing devices and formal playfulness, display a suspicion about the conclusions one might otherwise reach about the values that underpin this approach to postmodernism. This chapter has shown that post-postmodernism is always aware of the claims postmodernism has made about the liberal humanist subject, and aware of the claims feminism has made about postmodernist subjectivity.²⁵⁰ Instead of taking these claims seriously, it complicates, obscures, and distances itself from them. Wallace's non-fiction takes pains to show that its protagonist is politically correct, aware of the faults inherent in social power relations, but without offering a corrective to these faults. This is the status of his fiction, too. Post-postmodernist political gestures are shown by this writing to retain the sense of hollow, aesthetic values of postmodernism that Wallace's more personal ethics seems to abhor, as I demonstrated in Chapter Three. In this, Wallace's writing conforms to Anthony Easthope's criticism of Žižek's understanding of marginality: it '[...] is good on the psychic lining for racism and ethnic prejudice, but does not address the specific ideological, historical and institutional situation in which similar racisms have developed'.²⁵¹ For Easthope, this is because 'Žižek's "social imaginary" appears to function perfectly for everyone'. (p. 123) Post-

²⁵⁰ See the – putatively ironic – sexism of the discussion of the 'postfeminist era' in 'B.I. #28' for a demonstration of potential cynicism in the face of feminist perspectives in Wallace's work. (p. 228)

²⁵¹ Anthony Easthope, *Privileging Difference*, ed. by Catherine Belsey (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 123.

postmodernism's acceptance of the totalization of postmodernism means that this is a central implication and fault; whether read with a conservative or potentially progressive intent.

This is in part due to the fact that Wallace's emphasis on the personal connection writing can engender is inherently incapable of reaching beyond the establishment of this relationship requires in order to evoke broader concerns; this is the central fact and failure of his version of post-postmodernism. It also repeats the problems of postmodernism Harper revealed, but foregrounds an explicit blindness in the post-postmodernist generation, rather than a vaguer cultural insensitivity. Because, unlike the postmodernism Harper analyzed, post-postmodernism foregrounds the marginal status of the women it represents. It attempts to demonstrate the difference between that status and the self-marginalization undergone by its male figures. The women in Wallace's longer fiction suffer related but different issues to his central male characters. Their marginalization is much more direct and a result of external factors to themselves, in contrast with the male problems of psychological reflexivity.

We must conclude that Wallace's writing is likely not wholly reactionary: it does not re-establish a centralized subjectivity and undo postmodernism in that way, even if it does hint at the attractiveness of such claims. Nor does Wallace's writing repeat postmodernism's blindness towards marginalized figures, at least not exactly. Wallace's women have specific and different traits to his men, traits that expose a certain complexity of thought, even as they are pushed to the sides of his narratives, and depicted as hidden, not-understandable, or blank. As in Žižek, as Easthope

explains, for Wallace in practice 'in principle the subject is of no account, for although the whole epic is played out on the terrain of subjectivity, what matters most [...] is the real in which the subject vanishes, which overwhelms it, sets it at nothing.' (p. 136) Ultimately, all difference reduces to an exemplification of the hollow-centre.

We must finally read this a demonstration of the dominance of difference in post-postmodernism. Women are different to men in their marginality, but both present the same set of ideas. It is in the relationship between them that we see this play out in irreducible hollow-centeredness, as a cynical consideration of the ways that people interact and use each other to define the outline of themselves reveals the cynicism at the heart of any response to subjectivity after postmodernism. The conditions that Wallace's writing invokes are, therefore, realistically post-postmodernist, rather than hopelessly reactionary. They do afford equal potential, if not equal power, space and detail, to his female characters, even if they maintain echoes of patriarchy.

Ultimately, though, the depressing depiction of the power relationships that Wallace's fiction builds is more realistic than either Franzen's realist conservatism or a more idealistically inclined experimentalist might construct. Its wilful partialities accurately reflect the structures of his post-postmodernist era, and his focus on the paradoxes this engenders, lends – as this thesis has begun to show – some slight hope for future progress. In this, Wallace's post-postmodernist literature is a genuine reflection of the paradoxical era of post-postmodernism.

Chapter Six: Gaps, skips and loops in stories and characters

6.1 Introduction: Presence and absence

In this chapter, I will examine the larger structures of David Foster Wallace's writing: its narratives and the construction of its central characters. This coheres with my reading of sentences and textual structures through images of gaps and hollows. I have demonstrated that Wallace's most common formulations of language involve a digressiveness that produces a cancellation of meaning. Similarly, the forms in which his writing is presented, by stratifying levels of meaning and context, produce irreducible loops of information that foreground paradox and foreclosure. These figures, in their closed nature, differ from postmodernism's formal paranoia, which foregrounds extensive knowledge over contradictive intensification.²⁵²

We can see examples of Zeno's paradox at work within the structures of Wallace's narratives. In 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', the action of the second half of the story is a figuration of a journey along a

²⁵² Gregson describes DeLillo's *White Noise*, for example, demonstrating, in its '[...] constantly impos[ing] the knowledge that we are surrounded by representations rather than truth, that what we are told has been pre-packaged by ideological distortion – this makes acts of deconstruction a constant and inevitable mental habit.' (p. 20) He describes this as 'depthlessness'. (p. 139) This echoes John Johnston's determination that postmodernist literature reflects 'information multiplicity', where authors make 'uncertainty of information the most important issue'. John Johnston, *Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation* (Baltimore, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 12. Wallace's writing echoes more closely Žižek's contentions about the value of paradox to the 'truth' – 'once knowledge no longer corresponds to truth, we must not merely adjust knowledge accordingly but rather transform both poles – the insufficiency of knowledge, its lack apropos of the truth, radically indicates a lack, a non-achievement at the heart of truth itself – demonstrating that the now boundless nature of informational paradoxes has become a new stability, out of which new identities are formulated. 'The Most Sublime', p. 37. Wallace's post-postmodernist fiction is concerned with the effects of totalized postmodernist conditions on truth and knowledge as shifting poles, rather than the particular operation of either.

spiral, so that the centre point must be circled an infinite number of times, never reached.²⁵³ *Infinite Jest* has a structure that also invokes the paradox, through the figure of Sierpinski Gasket. This is a fractal image in which the triangle with its corners at the mid-point of the sides of a larger triangle is 'removed', thus forming three smaller triangles within the largest.²⁵⁴ In each of these new triangles the process is repeated, forming a further nine shapes in addition to the blank 'removed' triangle at their centre. The process is repeated upon them, and so on. The correlation between this image, in which an absence repeated an infinite number of times both produces the image and removes the possibility of a stable or bounded centre or endpoint, has echoes of Zeno's paradox, where the possibility of inserting (rather than removing) a new point between two apparently stable points means that a process cannot be completed. Not only does the image of Sierpinski Gasket appear in *Infinite Jest*, it potentially functions as the key to the novel's form.²⁵⁵

This chapter will focus on these two texts, both significantly longer than comparative work in Wallace's corpus.²⁵⁶ The narratological insight that can be gained by examining the structure of Zeno's Paradox will provide a

²⁵³ Luther makes the comparison between this movement and Jameson's definition of postmodernism as 'directionless and disorienting'. Jameson states that in postmodernism 'distance [...] has very precisely been abolished'. Luther, p. 53; Jameson (1991: 48).

²⁵⁴ It is described during the plot to get the drug DMZ is hatched: a major driving force in the narrative, p. 213.

²⁵⁵ Greg Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity: a Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* (Los Angeles, Austin: Sideshow Media Group, 2007), pp. 20-1. He cites the *Bookworm* radio interview with Michael Silverblatt, in which Wallace claimed that the Sierpinski Gasket informed the structure of the novel. By contrast, McCarthy claims that editor Michael Pietsch 'convinced the author to abandon his design' for a 'fractal' narrative at an early stage. He suggests that the gasket remains an organising presence in the text, even if it is not reconstructable. McCarthy, para. 29 of 29.

²⁵⁶ 'Westward' is the longest of Wallace's short fiction at 144-pages; the next longest is 'The Suffering Channel', at 91-pages. *Infinite Jest* is the longest of his novels at 1079-pages (including endnotes).

point of comparison for examining the construction of characters in the two texts. The narrative purpose of an unending journey or a novel in which the apparently central action goes unrecorded influence the way the central figures of those texts should be understood. In *Infinite Jest*, not only does Hal Incandenza understand himself as incomplete and hollow, the radical change in character he undergoes during the novel's absent year is a deliberately inexplicable act of re-characterization. A similar act of interpretive reconsideration occurs during 'Westward', as the novella's explicit use of metafictional constructs invites us to re-assess the protagonist Mark Nechtr by recapitulating a story he has written.

By synthesizing traditional literary effects with self-reflexion, as Burn (2008: 127) describes, or writing 'renewalist' fiction, as Toth and Brooks state (p. 7), Wallace's post-postmodernism reveals its central organizing principle in its plots and characters. It produces narratives that, rather than ending in apocalypse, or failing to end at all, in fact have no centre. They are organized around the principle of paradox that is not reducible to a central organizing meaning, despite their echoes of realism; they show self-reflexivity 'realistically' described events. Similarly, the characters in Wallace's fiction are shown as experiencing themselves as hollow: the idea that there might be a central organizing principle to their sense of self beyond a sense of emptiness is dismissed, as they are 'realist' portraits immersed in the fragmented and empty subjectivities of postmodernism. In this way, the analyses in this chapter are a final demonstration of the logic of post-postmodernism as articulated throughout my thesis.

6.2 Heading 'Westward'

This section will examine the structure and characters of 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' as seminal post-postmodernist figures; in this I will extend existent critical approaches to the story. 'Westward' has a crucial position in Wallace's fiction. It represents a direct response to the canon of metafiction that Wallace critiques throughout his career.²⁵⁷ It also deals directly with the issues raised in McGurl's *The Program Era*, taking as a central theme the effect of MFA programs in Creative Writing on the work of a group of writers. (McGurl, p. 104) Boswell also claims it is valuable as an anticipation of the values of *Infinite Jest*. (p. 115)

'Westward' represents a consideration of the purpose and value of fiction, and hinges on Wallace's conservative conceptions about the worth of human truths opposed to the more shallow and commercially exploitable merits of technique. It is an explicit discussion of many of the topics that dominate post-postmodernist writing. Significantly, they are presented in an excessively metafictional story in which layers of reference accumulate to produce a story that is 'a permanent migraine'. (McCaffery, p. 139) Thus, in a story in which Wallace approaches 'human verities' through the most anti-realist writing of his career, the central image is Zeno's paradox: the figure of endlessly stalled progression.²⁵⁸

33-pages into 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', the bold and capitalized sub-heading 'A REALLY BLATANT AND INTRUSIVE INTERRUPTION' introduces a section that opens with a 542-word,

²⁵⁷ It directly relates to John Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse': David Foster Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 1997), p. vi.

²⁵⁸ As Boswell notes. (p. 113)

extremely digressive sentence. Nested within a straightforward recapitulation of the story's central narrative conceit ('As mentioned before [...] there's to be, today, a Reunion of everyone who has ever appeared in any of the 6,658 McDonald's commercials [...]') is a lengthy and polemical assessment of the state of fiction in the late 1980s.²⁵⁹ The statement proposes 'Westward' be read as an elongated metaphor on the state of contemporary fiction.

The passage points out that in 'countless obscure graduate writing workshops across the U.S. of A', metafiction is shown to be '*naïve* baloney-laced shit, resting on just as many "undisclosed assumptions" as 'the "realistic" fiction metafiction would try to "debunk"'. Specifically, metafiction is '[...] a slap in the faces of History and History's not-to-be-fucked-with henchman Induction, and opens the door to a fetid closet full of gratuitous cleverness, jazzing around, self-indulgence, no-hands-ism'. The implication is that 'New Realism' and minimalism have debunked the ideas of metafiction because the latter has inadequate regard for the status and value of narrative, both as mediator of history, and means of determining truth through 'induction'. Instead, it makes narrative into self-indulgent 'jazzing around', something even 'Ambrose' (the pseudonymous John Barth) now admits is 'an ultimate odium'.

The conclusion of the most directly meta-metafictional passage of Wallace's writing thus advocates a 'New Realism' in which texts are directly tied to their social conditions. Yet 'Westward' continues as a text of 'jazzing around', filled with non-Realist narrative interpolations, unrealistic and

²⁵⁹ The following citations are from pp. 264-7.

unmotivated figures,²⁶⁰ and extensive metafictional narrative digressions. Its only concession to minimalism would seem to be its failed narrative drive, although its ambiguous epiphany anticipates the anti-postmodernist gestures of Wallace's later fictions.²⁶¹

'Westward' embeds a version of this 'New Realism' in its ending, in a paraphrased piece by protagonist Mark Nechtr. At its outset it is stated that this embedded story '[...] will not be any type of recognized classified fiction, but simply a weird blind rearrangement of what's been in plain sight, the whole time'. (p. 356) While the remainder of Mark's story does replicate the 'watch-me-be-clever' formal techniques that the description appears to distance itself from, this holdover from metafiction is therefore purportedly in the service of a positivist revelation of truth rather than a sceptical attack on truth-values.

Descriptions of the story-within-the-story hold the idea of 'something real,' so that fiction's 'claim to be a lie will itself be a lie.' (p. 356) The consequence of this aim is a piece of surrealist autobiography, placing a figure called 'Dave', who is a mediated version of Wallace, at its centre. 'Dave' is placed within a narrative in which many of the tropes from 'Westward' are repeated, so that the impression is given that the 'real' to be

²⁶⁰ Significantly, Wood's diagnosis of post-postmodernist fiction describes a 'hysterical realism': [...] evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself'. James Wood, 'Human, All Too Inhuman', *The New Republic* (24 July 2000) <<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/human-all-too-inhuman>> [Accessed 29 May 2013].

²⁶¹ Epiphanies are particularly crucial in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Patrick O'Donnell describes minimalism as 'chart[ing] minute, evocative variations in the lives of "ordinary" subjects', figures who 'graph the margins and extremes of contemporary American existence'; in other words, not the kind of character we find in 'Westward', although their minimally changing experiences do resonate. Patrick O'Donnell, *The American Novel Now: Reading Contemporary American Fiction Since 1980* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 35; p. 47.

located in Mark's narrative is Wallace's 'real', and that this same 'real' has been symbolically in action throughout the larger narrative. For example, the actor Jack Lord, a lover's threat to scald her partner, and the figure of the archer-as-symbolic-author all appear in both the main narrative and Mark's story.²⁶² Meanwhile these details, plus the story's end finding 'Dave' trapped in a prison with a drug-obsessed 'room-mate' named Mark, tie neatly with Wallace's living situation at the time it was written: living with Mark Costello, and close to being hospitalized for depression and addiction for a second time.²⁶³

'Westward' ends with this passage:

Hold rapt for that impossible delay, that best interruption: that moment in all radial time when something unseen inside the blur of spokes seems to sputter, catch, and spin against the spin, inside.

See this thing. See inside what spins without purchase. Close your eye. [...] Face directions. Look. Listen. Use ears I'd be proud to call our own. Listen to the silence behind the engines' noise. Jesus, Sweets, *listen*. Hear it? It's a love song.

For whom?

You are loved. (p. 373, emphasis retained)

The last two lines refer to earlier sections of the story. 'For whom' invokes the opening line of Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse': 'For whom is the fun

²⁶² Jack Lord: p. 235; p. 364. Scalding threat: p. 283; p. 370. Archer: p. 333; p. 356.

²⁶³ See Cohen's analysis: 'To Wish To Try', p. 70.

house fun?²⁶⁴ DeWitt Steelritter repeats the phrase throughout 'Westward', although it is often either mispronounced or misheard as 'va-room'. (p. 322)

The onomatopoeic motor sound indicates the way that Barth's story drives forward Wallace's. But the phrase also reflects on the solipsistic nature of Barth's metafiction and Wallace's response to it.

Barth's story figures a world out of the distorted perceptions of an author-figure. 'Westward' marks an evolution of this in its closing section: the fragmented and distorted analogues of Wallace's biography intensify its hermetic quality. So, as Barth's story stands as a zenith of postmodernism through metafiction, 'Westward' presents its intensification into post-postmodernism.²⁶⁵ Both fictions rely on the inescapable quality of the representation of the author for their significance, asking repeatedly 'for whom' is the story written. The spiralling course they chart reaches inwards, so that the only possible answer is the author himself. Wallace's conclusion simply pushes past Barth's, into the hyper-specific, evidencing the paradoxes of communication that recur throughout his career.

The final 'for whom' is immediately answered with the line 'you are loved'. Again, this calls back to earlier sections of the story. Nechtr is, we are told, 'universally loved'. (p. 320) The unnamed lover of the climactic narrative 'L—', [...] 'wishes Dave to tell her, instead of that he loves her, that she is loved.' (p. 357) The difference between the direct address of 'I love you', to

²⁶⁴ John Barth, 'Lost in the Funhouse', in *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (New York, London: Doubleday, 1988), p. 72.

²⁶⁵ Heide Ziegler finds that the story makes a 'conscious acceptance of [Barth's] postmodernist condition, dependent on and yet a step beyond the modernism that Joyce had been so influential in making' (which marks Wallace's story as a similar gesture toward post-postmodernism). Ziegler also figures the creation of the postmodern artist as a movement towards 'isolation' and 'loss of identity', themes that resonate with Wallace's interpretation of postmodernism generally, as well as my own take on the condition of post-postmodernity. Heide Ziegler, *John Barth* (London, New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 50-1; p. 53.

the passive construction of 'you are loved' is described as the result of the fact that 'there is something self-obsessed about L——'s love'. (p. 357) The closing pair of lines produces an opposition between the self-obsessed author-figure marking his concern about the ability of his text to connect to an audience, with a passive and non-specific claim that has previously been associated with self-obsession. Both statements are made in a climax apparently voiced by the story's own author figure, who has generally been described as 'loved' passively rather than directly or actively, and is thus associated with a similar self-obsession. This network of references makes clear the inability of 'the New Realism' to overcome the qualities of metafiction and produce writing that makes a connection between author and audience beyond the passive and self-obsessed.

The last two lines of the 'Westward' therefore undermine many of the claims that are made within it and have been made for it. In closing this section, I will demonstrate the ironic distance Wallace maintains from the artistic ambitions of its characters.²⁶⁶ First, in the introduction to the final sentences, 'Westward's direct address to the reader adjusts how we should read these echoes of self-obsession. The use of personal symbols, which can therefore be only unconsciously productive of meaningful to a third-party, suggests an attempt to reproduce the affective qualities of David Lynch's films.²⁶⁷ The abstraction of much of the symbolic content of the story

²⁶⁶ It is significant that autobiographical traits can be found in at least three of the story's characters: Nechtr, Sternberg, and D.L.. For example, the latter's father 'read her *Moby-Dick*', which accords with Max's biography of Wallace. The portrait of the father is similar to Lenore Beadsman's father in *The Broom of the System* and James Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*; all of these are absent fathers in autobiographical narratives. 'Westward', p. 319; Max (2009).

²⁶⁷ For Wallace, Lynch's films contain an 'irony of the banal', equivalent to a 'grotesque facial expression [...] held for several moments longer than the circumstances could even possibly warrant [...] until it starts to signify about seventeen different things at once'. David Foster Wallace, 'David Lynch Keeps His Head', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007), pp. 162-3. Žižek describes similar effects in Lynch's *The Elephant Man*, with its 'pulse that does not imitate or symbolize anything, but that "seizes" us immediately, "renders" immediately the thing. [...] The sole function of [the film's redundant and incomprehensible shots] is to visualize the pulse of the real'. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, London: The M.I.T. Press, 1992), p. 41. In the case of the ending of 'Westward', I believe the interpretation of Lynch they both come to describes Wallace's intent.

should, this final section implies, be read as divorced from anything but the kind of internally coherent logic that the reversed spin of the wheel provides. In this way, the wheel's reversed and imagined spin functions in this story as Barth's fun house mirrors, replacing the distortion of the true image that Barth relies with Wallace's reliance on an entirely imagined truth-image distortion. Figuring this as the text's key image thus undermines the more obviously Barth-ian image of the archer's hand distorting the path of the arrow that is central to Boswell's reading of the text. (Boswell, p. 107)

The image of the reversed spin has other implications. As the plot of the story traces a spinning course around a centre that is never reached, the ability to undo this course is crucial. The story's final sentences, with their implications of self-obsession, can be undone by seeing the story as a travelling outwards from the centre. The journey itself might then be refigured as productive, and self-obsessive behaviour can be refigured as other-focused. The penultimate paragraph's impelling to 'Face directions' and 'Use ears I'd be proud to call our own' makes sense in this context. While an inward spiral suggests a concentration around a single point, an outward spiral requires a facing of all outward points as it progresses along its curve. The conjunction between author and reader function implied by 'our own' ears listening 'behind the engines' noise' combines a shift in the focal point of attention from a central organizing consciousness and an equivalent shift from the idea of movement (the engine) to the broader context of that movement.

The plot of 'Westward' can be presented as a literary manifesto, proclaiming the need to rejuvenate the literary scene of the 1980s by inserting an autobiographical '*asur*' and old-fashioned assumption of induction into its generic forms, ultimately coming ever-closer to a contiguous symbolic-personal address by an author-figure to embrace the

non-specific meaning in the blur between information and context.²⁶⁸

However, across its breadth, alternative symbolic structures are built.

For example, the figure of D.L., the 'probably-pregnant' wife of Nechtr, a 'postmodernist', is presented as his 'non-fertile' seductress. (p. 234; p. 262; p. 350) Where Nechtr 'was loved', the portrayal of D.L. is hostile, foreshadowing *Infinite Jest's* Avril. (p. 233) However, D.L. 'produced much' writing by comparison to Nechtr, is destined to be successful, and connects with J.D. Steelritter, the powerful advertising man whose project brings the characters together; she appeared in the 1970 advert that Steelritter is reuniting. (p. 233; p. 354; p. 339; p. 251) She rejects the consumption of deep-fried roses that every other character indulges in, a metaphor for 'the eating of symbols' that runs through the story, because they are 'obscene' and 'clumsy symbols' for the 'swallow[ing] and expel[ling]' of art. (p. 338) This reflects her 'hate' of 'premodern realism'. (p. 303) Eventually, these factors mean that D.L. has the ability to 'divine a post-postmodern nation's economic future': she is, in many ways, more the post-postmodernist than her husband. (p. 354)

As well as the autobiographical elements of Nechtr's story that Cohen has examined, Nechtr echoes Wallace in that 'solipsism affects him like Ambrosian meta-fiction affects him. It's the high siren's song of the wrist's big razor.' (p. 303) The echoing of the central themes of Wallace's writing – solipsism, a move away from metafiction – as well as the pre-echo of suicide in this description leads Boswell and Cohen to read his version of fiction as Wallace's post-postmodernism, and his character as a reflection of Wallace's. However, D.L. also echoes Wallace in her understanding of

²⁶⁸ This interpretation extends Boswell's. (p. 102)

metafiction as 'ripped off' (unoriginal and plagiaristic: her position on postmodernism comes to be that it is stale, or used up) and rejection of minimalism, which accord with Wallace's own views, and her prodigious productivity, the latter of which compares with the speed and size of the production of *Infinite Jest*.²⁶⁹

D.L. presents us with a less direct formulation of a self-mirroring author-figure; her commitment to the forms of postmodernism makes her as relevant to the excessive 'jazzing around' quality of 'Westward' and *Infinite Jest* as Nechtr's imbrication of the autobiographical and inductively realist. When she is described as 'post-postmodernist', this a statement of prediction, unlike the manifesto for post-postmodernist art we can divine from Nechtr's statements. D.L.'s post-postmodernism is economically-founded, refuses to distinguish between advertising and art, and rejects the symbolic as hollow and clumsy, preferring symbols that are 'in the world', external to the self, 'that you see'. (p. 339)

This alternative post-postmodernist character in the story therefore conforms to the ideas of the hollow centre and of the economic logic at the centre of post-postmodernism that this thesis has been elucidating. Nechtr and his narrative produce a hollow replication of Wallace's career, one that is shown to be self-cancelling and unable to cohere. D.L. represents an alternative vision of the functioning of post-postmodernism, through her character and her plot. Between the two, we have Wallace's post-postmodern art and its post-postmodernist context: it is crucial to note that they are relational, that one critiques the other,²⁷⁰ and that Wallace's writing recognizes the paradoxes that these relationships produce.

²⁶⁹ See footnote 266 above; p. 293; p. 305 [which compares with the parodic minimalism of David Foster Wallace, 'Little Expressionless Animals', in *Girl With Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 1997), pp. 3-42]; and Max (2009), for a description of Wallace 'producing anywhere', as D.L. is described on p. 302.

²⁷⁰ Nechtr is embarrassed of D.L.; (p. 328) D.L. is the one figure who does not love Nechtr. (p. 237)

6.3 Toward the *Infinite*

Infinite Jest presents us with both a hollowed-out narrative, in which the central events on which the plot rests are absent, and two protagonists whose self-understanding is formulated on a conceptual hollowness. I will address the plot in this section before moving on to the characterization of the protagonists in the next.

As in 'Westward', the plot of *Infinite Jest* is framed around an ending whose parameters the reader is immediately made aware of: in 'Westward' it is the filming of a television advert, while in *Infinite Jest* it is the condition of Hal presented in the text's first 14 pages.²⁷¹ Like Zeno's paradox, both narratives therefore reduce to a representation of ways to make progress – or fail to progress – rather than producing that development outright. *Infinite Jest* is at least partially structured as a fractal object, Sierpinski's Gasket. This means that the narrative reduces not to a linear pattern – or even a spiral like 'Westward' – but to an iterative process. Understood as a fractal, the narrative of *Infinite Jest* necessarily has no 'ending', simply a sequence of increasing specificity of points, between which 'gaps' take up an increasing amount of space, until eventually the 'points' are indistinguishable from the 'gaps' they encase. This narrative reliance on both specificity and gaps or hollows reflects the state of post-postmodernity as I have described it. *Infinite Jest*'s formal qualities therefore explain its centrality to existing conceptions of post-postmodernist literature.²⁷²

²⁷¹ "Westward", p. 264; *Infinite Jest*, pp. 3-17.

²⁷² *Infinite Jest* is a central object of McLaughlin, Timmer and Burn's separate articulations of post-postmodernism as a literary form.

The Sierpinski gasket contains a central triangular 'space' formed by the infinitely multiplied repetitions of this space around it. Hering's study of this form reveals some of its implications; Hayles draws more obliquely on its geographical instantiation.²⁷³ Following these critics, the wasteland of the novel's 'Great Concavity' represents this central spatial 'absence made present'. In narrative and chronological terms, this gap is the central missing year.

The draft manuscripts and notes for the novel confirm that this missing narrative space is a deliberate hole at its centre. There, evidence shows that Wallace did complete a manuscript with the events of the missing year included, no draft of which remains, only traces. This material, then, is both central to and erased from the novel's plot.²⁷⁴ It can be described as a triangular form because it is outlined by one larger 'side' – the novel's description of the events leading up to it – one smaller side – the novel's description of its 'end' in the opening scene – and one yet smaller 'side' – the novel's premonitions of events from within it.²⁷⁵

One can repeat this pattern in some of the novel's symbolic figures. For example, there are three mentions of a 'knife in the mirror' as a figure denoting horror for the Incandenza family. In another excised section, Hal recounts tracing the word knife in the steam on a bathroom mirror as an infant without knowing its meaning, only for it subsequently to reappear

²⁷³ David Hering, '*Infinite Jest: Triangles, Cycles, Choices, & Chases*', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles, CA; Austin, TX: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 92; Hayles, pp. 687-8.

²⁷⁴ Evidence for this is found in the Wallace collection at the Harry Ransom Center.

²⁷⁵ Respectively, pp. 1-17; the remainder of the novel; and p. 17 and p. 934 with their parallax images of Don and Hal exhuming James Incandenza, an event that takes place during the 'missing year'.

when his father was shaving.²⁷⁶ The horror and mystery the image evokes for the Incandenza's remains in its three mentions, but without its seminal context, the content of its horror can only be traced through the erasure Wallace has chosen to enact on this narrative.²⁷⁷

There is a supposition in the form of the narrative, with its multiplicity of narrative voices and styles, its fragmentation of data, and its excessive length, that *Infinite Jest* is a text of the Modernist/Postmodernist encyclopaedic style.²⁷⁸ This predicates a reading of the text on the idea that it requires a detailed exegesis in order to make complete sense. Yet, I argue that beyond the patterned erasure of certain elements of information, *Infinite Jest*'s complexity is of a different order to those novels in whose lineage it has been placed; *Ulysses*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Recognitions* (Boswell, p. 118), for example. Instead, the complexity of *Infinite Jest*'s plot is an extension of the operation of Wallace's sentences and other forms, a reflection of post-postmodernism's expansion as not extensive but intensive; referring not to an outward scale, but relying on the increased specificity of ever-smaller scales.²⁷⁹

The deliberate excisions of information, so that the process of reading *Infinite Jest* means using the data and systems Wallace has put in place to establish what the missing plot elements are, creates a system of plotting similar to Zeno's paradox. The novel presents us with the first half of

²⁷⁶ Wallace collection in the Harry Ransom Center, Box 16, File 6.

²⁷⁷ The image of a knife in a mirror is found at p. 16 and p. 951, and the 'Infinite Jest' film significantly features a knife, p. 788.

²⁷⁸ Implied in LeClair and Catherine Nichols' respective readings of the novel. Catherine Nichols, 'Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Critique* 43.1 (2001), pp. 3-16.

²⁷⁹ '[...] in every "gap" there's not meaning waiting to burst forth (or not), but a kind of hinge, linkage, movement, intensification [...]'] Nealon, p. 165.

its plot, chronologically, and an end-point. This reflects the way Zeno's paradox describes a lateral movement only ever successfully reaching a halfway-point, instead intensively mapping each point beyond this halfway, while maintaining the goal of an endpoint. The novel's solution to this narrative reflection of a paradox is to use a fractal form to allow the careful reader to exhume some of the connections between the halfway- and end-points.

6.4 *Infinite* wants

Throughout the shorter chapters of this thesis I have deployed Zeno's paradox as the archetype of both post-postmodernist forms and a potential analysis of them. The paradox relies on producing an ever-more-specific description of a fissure that reduces to infinity, and thus can never be fully completed, except in the abstracted meta-language of mathematical formulae. This section will transpose this form onto the figures of Hal Incandenza and Don Gately.

Don's addiction is fundamentally a gap. Ingesting drugs temporarily fills that gap, but (representing Zeno's paradox) it requires ever-increasing amounts. Addiction as a path to wholeness can be described as a paradox, endlessly reaching halfway to a tantalizing ultimate goal.²⁸⁰ Aubry suggests that, in battling addiction, Don represents a spiritually mature ability to overcome the problems afflicting Hal.²⁸¹ Despite the contrast between the two figures, though, one should read Don as a post-postmodernist figure. He suffers from a different set of intensifications to Hal, zeroing in on a different hollow-centre through a different set of measurements. Both figures are part

²⁸⁰ Aubry therefore figures AA as a 'vehemently anticapitalist' force in *Infinite Jest*, allowing Don to stand apart from addiction's figuring of endless consumerist logic. (p. 212)

²⁸¹ Aubry suggests that Don has a 'means to maneuver skillfully between' an 'ironic detached cynicism' and 'an uncritical, sincere display of sentiment', as he mitigates the former postmodernist characteristics displayed by Hal with a sense of the effectiveness of the latter, exemplified by AA. (p. 218)

of the post-postmodernist world from which Wallace's writing is formed; Don's description and defense of 'analysis-paralysis' is a direct acceptance of the hollow centre of AA treatment's logic, a displacement rather than overcoming of the hollow-centred state of post-postmodernism. (p. 1002n90)

The gap that is produced by Don's recovery from Demerol addiction is filled by his reliance on the AA twelve-step treatment program. In his response to the program, though, we can find an equal sense of the absence of selfhood that we find in his reaction to Demerol. His reliance on the treatment is emphasized throughout the novel, and is central to his standard self-introduction: 'He tells the newer residents right up front that AA's somehow gotten him by the mental curlies: he'll now go to literally Any Lengths to stay clean.' (p. 464) This description of his relationship to AA reverses the expected logic. Rather acting as a method to stay off drugs, the treatment coerces him into 'staying clean'. His emphasis on 'mental curlies' indicates that AA is now essential to his unconscious programming, and it is the motivation for going to 'Any Lengths', rather than being the 'lengths' itself. It is depicted, therefore, as a replacement impulse, prefiguring a series of behaviours, rather than either end or treatment in itself. It is effectively a change in the status and understanding of the self.

In the novel's final third, after Don has been shot, his response to this trauma makes clear that the effect of AA has been to replace the principle of self-preservation with the preservation of the logic of AA: 'Gately's only conscious concern was Asking For Help to refuse Demerol. He kept trying to say addict.' (p. 973) At this point Don's essential internal narrative has been replaced with a significantly capitalized AA idiom. The value of this cliché is reinforced by the following sentence, in which Don does not ask for 'Help',

but instead is primarily concerned with defining himself as an 'addict' to those around him. The discourse of 'Asking For Help' prioritizes the fundamental acceptance that one's identity is that of an addict who must refuse. This is true even when requiring professional 'help', such as major physical trauma. The apparently oxymoronic nature of these two sentences therefore confers a meaninglessness, or hollowness, on Don's predication of his sense of self on the AA program. This contradiction shows how it represents an equal abdication of self as the addiction it forces Don to abandon.

The long sections in which Don deals with the gunshot trauma revolve around his inexpressible desire to refuse painkilling medication. This allows the text to investigate the relationship between the necessity for the AA process to become a pre-conscious logic, as I have described it, and the emphasis in the program on relying on a 'Higher Power'. This investigation takes place through a fantastical and non-physical interaction between a 'wraith' – apparently Hal's deceased father, James Incandenza – and the semi-conscious Don.

Don communicates with the wraith on a level prior to his own self-understanding, and questions its motivations: 'Gately feels somehow too self-conscious or stupid to ask the wraith if it's here on behalf of the Higher Power or maybe the Disease'. (p. 840) The wraith's verbosity enables the text to maintain his separateness from Don, producing an identity through a vocabulary to which Don does not have access.²⁸² Don's desire to associate it with either a 'Higher Power' or 'the Disease', both of which have become

²⁸² p. 832. See Goodwin's discussion of etymology. (pp. 122-4)

displaced centres of identity for him, indicate that Gately desires to associate his centre of consciousness with an externally identifiable figure. Equally, his inexpressible question is an explicit recognition both that AA and addiction are confusable phenomena, and that they present a logical structure of consciousness that interferes with, or is disrupted by, self-consciousness.²⁸³

The fact that a 'representative' of the Higher Power might be mis-recognized indicates its peripheral function to the self-identifying addict. That a higher power exists is only confirmation that addiction is an equal and opposite power that must be treated by the logical cancellation the 'Higher Power' provides. The maintenance of an identity in the space between the two is central to the logic of AA, so that it produces a sense of identity through and as self-cancellation.

In spite of this, the apparent presence of James as the wraith complicates the question of negative identity with which Don presents us. The section in which Don, a figure with a hollow-centre, is placed in direct communication with James, a figure with no outward extension from a core centrality in language, produces a contradiction that illustrates much of my analysis. In many ways, Don represents the kind of central 'truths' to which Wallace's writing explicitly aspires. His self-understanding is reduced to that of 'addict', and thus his decision-making operates solely through the prism of this addiction. In turn, this leads to moments of clear understanding and compassion for those with whom he comes into contact, as Aubrey and

²⁸³ Cioffi points out that reading *Infinite Jest* itself 'has a kind of pathological quality to it, however: it resembles addiction.' (p. 170) Wallace as author-figure is also implicit in this logical structure, with the act of reading representing both an addiction and a subsuming of consciousness to a verbose 'Higher Power'.

Morris, in different ways, have revealed.²⁸⁴ Thus, Don is a character who avoids the annulling recursivity of post-postmodernist self-consciousness, fulfilling the desire to produce real, outwardly-orientated understanding. By contrast, the radically reduced figure of James is expressed as a manifestation of Wallace's writing, in excessive verbosity and an extreme sense of isolation and inability to connect or empathize with others.

Despite allowing Don access to the hyper-specific technical language in which he expresses himself, James's inability to communicate in the emotional language of generalities, such as those provided by AA, leaves him unable to connect emotionally. Don refers to feeling 'too self-conscious' in his confrontation with James. He cannot apply straightforward 'truths', that the wraith must be definable through AA's Higher Power, or else 'the Disease'. Instead, language and thus the self in James and Wallace's terms, contradicts the reductive logic, never allowing a central core of self-understanding to be fully incorporated or enclosed.

The sections in which the wraith interacts with Don are thus a version of 'Analysis-Paralysis', and show how we can connect Don's conception of selfhood to Hal's. In discussion with the academic, Geoffrey Day, Don states:

'The slogan I've heard that might work here is the slogan *Analysis-Paralysis*.'

²⁸⁴ Aubry, that AA provides Don with 'agency' by teaching him 'how to narrate his own life'; (p. 211) Morris, that the success of AA for Don depends on the shift to a community-centred identification of self. David Morris, 'Lived Time and Absolute Knowing: Habit and Addiction from *Infinite Jest* to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*', CLIO 30.4 (2001), pp. 394.

'Oh lovely. Oh very nice. By all means don't think about the validity of what they're claiming your life hinges on. Oh do not ask what is it. Do not ask not whether it's not insane. Simply open wide for the spoon.'

(p. 1002n90, emphasis retained)

'Analysis-Paralysis' is a direct relative of Zeno's paradox. It suggests that a reliance on the need to explain a particular effect stalls that effect: in particular, trying to understand the effectiveness of AA prevents the program from being effective. In the interactions between the wraith and Don we see the interpolation of the wraith's analytics into Don's learned incuriousness. Don's physical paralysis becomes mirrored in a mental 'analysis-paralysis'. Similarly the wraith, despite existing outside of time and physical form, replicates this failure to function. The self-cancelling nature of language reduces his need for analysis-through-language to paralysis.²⁸⁵

In Hal Incandenza, we have a figure who is manifestly depressed and addicted to marijuana,²⁸⁶ and who is figured through a typology of 'analysis-paralysis'. If Don represents a failed struggle against post-postmodernist characteristics, through his acceptance of the AA tenets, the representation of Hal is the typification of the post-postmodernist figure.

Hal's addiction to marijuana is described in the same terms as his depression, and so the symptoms of addiction and depression are almost completely intertwined. I have characterized depression as a post-

²⁸⁵ [...] it took incredible discipline and fortitude and patient effort to stay stock-still in one place for long enough for an animate man actually to see and be in any way affected by a wraith'. (p. 831) In other words, the wraith as an expression of pure language is paralyzed in order to come into contact with Don; this links language and logic with a lack of motion, in the same way that analysis-paralysis and Zeno's paradox do.

postmodernist disease because of the way it pre-empts and empties out a sense of identity, producing a self-recognizable 'hollow-centre'. What we can see through Hal is that addiction and depression are two potential routes to a diagnosis of 'hollow-centeredness'. This is the central implication the character of Hal figures: post-postmodernism functions within identities through any number of routes, but always produces identical symptoms.

One of the clearest correlations between depression and addiction comes near the end of the novel. Hal states that: 'if it came down to a choice between continuing to play competitive tennis and continuing to be able to get high, it would be a nearly impossible choice to make. The distant way in which this fact appalled me itself appalled me.' (p. 898) This statement clarifies the way in which addiction and depression make claims on an individual's identity. Hal's addiction replaces his previous passion for tennis, without seeming to involve any new sense of enthusiasm. The addiction has thus morphed itself into the anhedonia that is the central early signifier of depression in *Infinite Jest*. This self-identified addiction is then directly attributed to a recursive logic that reproduces the sense of distancing from a centre of true selfhood that I am describing as hollowness. Three facets of addiction and depression are conflated here. Firstly, they produce the same symptoms. Secondly, they distance oneself from one's passions, which were previously identified as a centre of selfhood. Thirdly, they both invoke a recursive logic, which reinforces the previous factors and prevents the possibility of escape.

²⁸⁶ At a central point in the narrative, he 'find himself [...] smoking dope' without 'having consciously decided to go ahead'. (p. 332) After this point, his use of drugs becomes a source of worry, leading him to seek N.A. treatment on pp. 795-808.

Very early in *Infinite Jest*, the symptoms that Hal expresses, whether of depression or addiction, are presented as a generational condition:

Like most North Americans of his generation, Hal tends to know way less about why he feels certain ways about the objects and pursuits he's devoted to than he does about the objects and pursuits themselves. It's hard to say for sure whether this is even exceptionally bad, this tendency. (p. 54)

This demonstrates the stability of Hal's character across the novel, presenting a similar dichotomy between self-understanding and desire. The confusion between desire and devotion and a self-definition based on that desire echoes Don's understanding of addiction. Motivation should be identical with self, but by excising this element, self and thing are impossibly intertwined. This leaves a selfhood overly identified with the thing, and therefore an absence at the centre of self. This is equivalent to Žižek's articulation of the difference between the 'subject supposed to know' and the 'subject supposed to believe' from Lacan; both figures emerge from a 'transference' to the Other, such that for Žižek 'I do not really believe in it, it is just part of my culture' is the 'predominant status of beliefs today'.²⁸⁷ Hal's growing recognition of this – his coming to know what he is supposed to know – exposes him to the 'Real', the 'lack', the 'hollow-centre' of post-postmodernist identity.

The structure of identity here is a weak form of the novel's structure of addiction. Hal's abrupt transition into depression is comparable to the experience of 'addiction' and 'recovery' that mutates Don into a 'hollow'

addict. Equally, though, the absence of motivation or explanation for desires, when subject to Hal's analysis itself leads to the de-motivation that we see emergent in the first quotation. By recognizing that he has no awareness of the reasons for his desires, Hal begins to lose those desires without being able to replace them. This is identical to the state of anhedonia he later describes experiencing.²⁸⁸ Anhedonia is the neurological suppression of pleasure or desire; in other words, the pre-conscious suppression of the ability to produce an identity.

Hal's use of drugs is introduced as a predominantly private activity: 'Hal likes to get high in secret, but a bigger secret is that he's as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high.' (p. 49) The figuration of secrecy, of addiction presenting an opportunity for the self to be defined by separation and independence from observation, contrasts with the way Hal repeatedly describes himself as 'lonely'. This is both in relation to his mother, and as an aspect of representing a generational malaise, two varieties of loneliness expounded on pages 694-5. The emphasis on secrecy, with its equivalence through the term 'attached' to his addiction, is another indication of the inter-relation between depression, addiction, and identity. In one respect, the desire for secrecy when committing an illegal activity has a clear motivation; it minimizes the chances of being prevented from performing the activity again. However, as with Hal's devotion to pursuits absent of an understanding of their motivation, his desire for secrecy has become divorced from the sense of self-preservation that initially motivated it.

²⁸⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta, 2006), p. 30.

²⁸⁸ Defined on p. 1053n280.

By disturbing the logical patterning, Hal's behaviour shows that it is somewhat confusingly his addictive personality, rather than his addiction, that is being presented. Hal is addicted to having an addiction, and the fact that this manifests itself in a need to enter a completely self-contained space, through total secrecy, compounds this second-order addiction. The repeated emphasis on secrecy reveals the inter-relation of addiction and identity. This interaction manifests itself as both a depressive anhedonia and sense of loneliness, as Hal fails to self-identify with either his real addiction or any sense of motivation. In this respect, Hal's condition is a compounded variation on Don's, in which 'being an addict' is more significant than his addiction. This is because it exposes the hollow-centre he finds at the base of his self-understanding.

The sense of anhedonia that follows from this secretive logic of addiction is investigated more thoroughly in a section describing his loneliness. This directly relates those feelings and Hal's relationship with his mother:

Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarefied equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being – but in fact he's far more robotic than John Wayne. One of his troubles with his Moms is the fact that Avril Incandenza believes she knows him inside and out as a human being, and an internally worthy one at that, when in fact inside Hal there's pretty much nothing at all, he knows. His Moms Avril hears her

own echoes inside him and thinks what she hears is him, and this makes Hal feel the one thing he feels to the limit, lately: he is lonely.

(p. 694)

One of the immediately striking things about this passage is the way Hal reduces his sense of identity to a mathematical problem. He can manipulate 'interior-life-type' variables so as to 'satisfy everyone [...] that he's in there', just as a paradox can be logically overcome. However, logical equations have an abstracted quality that do not reduce to something 'real'; they are the opposite of the '*joie and value*' that Hal feels he is missing. By solving the paradox, a new one is formed, that to act logically is not identical to acting from a central sense of reality. In fact, by reducing identity to a set of equations, Hal finds himself feeling 'more robotic'. Logical reduction simply exposes a different kind of gap at the centre of Zeno's paradox when it applies to identity, demonstrating that externally coherent proofs do not internally convince.

The second half of this passage presents a different example of the breakdown of Hal's sense of identity. Hal's mother understands Hal through the manipulations of identity he has enacted. We know from the previously cited passage that Hal's own self-conception is based most readily on secrecy, to which his addiction and depression are tied. So, by identifying Hal more closely with his public deceptions, and assigning to them more value than Hal does, his mother affirms Hal's internal hollowness. The term echo, an effect that is clearest in the largest empty space, emphasizes this. Finally, the result of Hal's sense that he is fabulating rather than created by his 'interior-life' is to reduce that life to a single emotion: loneliness.

There is another long passage in which Hal's loneliness is discussed. Here are Hal's internal reflections on the relationship between this broader topic and his identity:

Hal usually gets secretly high so regularly these days this year that if by dinnertime he hasn't gotten high yet that day his mouth begins to fill with spit — some rebound effect from B. Hope's desiccating action — and his eyes start to water as if he's just yawned. The smokeless tobacco started almost as an excuse to spit, sometimes. Hal's struck by the fact that he really for the most part believes what he's said about loneliness and the structured need for a we here; and this, together with the Ingersoll-repulsion and spit-flood, makes him uncomfortable again, brooding uncomfortably for a moment on why he gets off on the secrecy of getting high in secret more than on the getting high itself, possibly. He always gets the feeling there's some clue to it on the tip of his tongue, some mute and inaccessible part of the cortex, and then he always feels vaguely sick, scanning for it. (p. 114)

This passage makes the links between addiction and depression in the move from drug abuse to loneliness. It associates that loneliness with a particular generational quality, that is present across Hal's peer group, in the reference to 'a structural need for a we'. Finally, the ending relates each of these factors to an internalized sense of absence or emptiness. The implication of his feeling 'sick' when 'scanning' for 'some mute and inaccessible part of the cortex' suggests an awareness of absence, the fact

that the part through which Hal might explain the failed construction of his identity is, rather than inaccessible, simply absent.

This passage therefore strongly demonstrates that Hal is a character self-aware of his 'hollow-centre'. However, the connecting details of the passage show how this formulation relates to other figures in Wallace's writing, both in *Infinite Jest* and elsewhere.

Primarily, the 'spit-flood' described as occurring because of Hal's miniature withdrawal from marijuana is intended to foreshadow the novel's closing passages, in which the same effect is exaggerated. There, we have repeated descriptions of Hal's excess saliva production, which implies that he is more fully withdrawing from marijuana use.²⁸⁹ Taken in conjunction with the character Kate Gompert, whose withdrawal from marijuana use is directly implicated in causing the most extreme depression found in the novel,²⁹⁰ the association drawn here leads us to conclude that the effects we see Hal undergoing at the novel's end are a result of an intensification of his depressive illness.

The relation of this involuntary bodily excretion with tobacco once again confuses Hal's sense of identity with addiction.²⁹¹ Rather than choosing to smoke marijuana, he uses it to excuse his need to be alone and secretive, so that his addiction stands for his sense of self. Similarly, the excess of bodily fluid that is associated with depression is formally replaced by another addiction here, to chewing tobacco. To Hal, there is a failure of

²⁸⁹ E.g. p. 851.

²⁹⁰ 'Instead of just an incapacity for feeling, a deadening of soul, the predator-grade depression Kate Gompert always feels as she withdraws from secret marijuana is *itself* a feeling. It goes by many names — *anguish*, *despair*, *torment*, or q.v. Burton's *melancholia* or Yevtuschenko's more authoritative *psychotic depression*[...]' (pp. 695-6, emphasis retained)

²⁹¹ One should note the echo of the sweating and crying as symbols of depression in Wallace's earlier work, as I discussed in Chapter One.

cause and effect to his chewing tobacco; excess saliva is either caused by an addiction to one substance, or to another substance, or to a desire for privacy, or reflects the need to cover up literal outpourings that are closely related to his internal emotions. In each of these cases the chewing tobacco represents Hal's failure to identify accurately with a sense of self.

Infinite Jest concludes with its two major characters barely able to communicate. Don Gately, in a near-coma, is haunted by images of his addiction, converses unconsciously in a hyper-specific language with a dead person in a way that undermines the empathetic figure he has been described as throughout the text. Although the novel hints at a recovery from this situation, there is a symbolic function to the extended narrative that suggests that Don's interweaving with both the wraith and the central plot denies his prior logical simplicity. Hal Incandenza is found in the novel's opening chapter – and the consecutively last event of the novel - in a similar state of unconsciously-motivated miscommunication. Hal is described as increasingly unable to shield internal mental- and emotional-states from external expression, which makes his facial expression like those depicted in his father's film 'Kinds of Pain',²⁹² and reduces his voice to 'subanimalistic noises and sounds'. (p. 14)

Both characters regress from successfully negotiating the novel's post-postmodern world to becoming increasingly beyond its wit. What does this mean for my assertion that these figures represent the most significant literary examples of post-postmodernist character? In answering this

²⁹² 'Kinds of Pain. [...] 2,222 still-frame close-ups of middle-aged white males suffering from almost every conceivable type of pain, from an ingrown toenail to cranio-facial neuralgia to inoperable colo-rectal neoplasia.'. p. 987n24. The expressive and uncontrollable qualities of faces, particularly in pain, are a recurrent theme in Wallace's writing: see Chapter Four's discussion of 'Oblivion', the analysis of Lynch's films in footnote 267, above, and 'The Suffering Channel'. It is the failure of Hal's face to match his idea of self that is among the first signifiers of his degeneration: '[...] she too had seen something in my expression I hadn't known was there'. (p. 899) The figure of the face as an unself-conscious reflection of the 'hideous, internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pulses and writhes just under the hip empty mask' (p. 695) reflects an important quality of post-postmodernism: that it has completely divorced the idea of an internal self- that can be unconsciously identified with, and evacuated the idea of pre-realist 'humanity' from notions of self-identity. Hal's self-cancelling attempt to reconcile himself to this leads to his bifurcated final state, the mirror of the description of Ken Erdedy in the novel's second chapter.

question, it is necessary to repeat two of the claims of this thesis as a whole.

Firstly, Wallace is a post-postmodern artist, and yet also a critic of post-postmodernism; this is one of the features post-postmodernism intensifies from its nominal predecessor, postmodernism.²⁹³ Don and Hal represent and criticize the nature of post-postmodernist character simultaneously.

Secondly, the structure of post-postmodernism as a set of ideas is reducible at every level in Wallace's work to a system of increasing specificity or intensification. This system is always, inevitably, one which breaks down when language cannot fully represent the next level of exactitude to itself.

6.5 Conclusion: Post-postmodernists

In my discussion of David Foster Wallace's plots I paid little attention to their general failure successfully to 'end'. This is implicit in my description, following Carlisle, Hering and others, of their fractal nature: they tend towards an ending, and demonstrate the limits of their narratives. These endpoints are hardly desirable. 'Westward' has its final destination – Steelritter's 'Collision' – that it impels us to turn away from; *Infinite Jest* traps its protagonists 'inside their own skulls' at its end.²⁹⁴

My analysis is concordant with Goerlandt's, who states that *Infinite Jest's* narrative gaps render [...] any ironic interpretation obsolete.

Foregoing the addictive projection in the recursive loop, readers can finally

²⁹³ Michael Greaney's analysis of *House of Leaves* demonstrates this intensified feature of post-postmodernism. He explains that the novel's endless academic reference demonstrates that 'criticism is not contaminated but *constituted* by the fictive' so that it is 'an exhaustive analysis of itself': in these forms, 'to be' is demonstrably 'to be interpreted'. Hal and Don figure this interpretation of the conditions of post-modernity on a more oblique level than do Danielewski's references, but their very characters figure this structural need to interpret as much as does the logic of 'analysis-paralysis'. Michael Greaney, *Contemporary Fiction and the Uses of Theory: The Novel From Structuralism to Postmodernism* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), p. 155, emphasis retained.

²⁹⁴ According to Wallace, 'all of us' are 'marooned inside [our] own skulls', thus 'a big part of serious fiction's purpose is [...] to give [...] imaginative access to other people's selves', McCaffery, p. 127. Images of soft or non-existent skulls abound in *Infinite Jest*: among the disabled and sick, such as Marathe's wife, (p. 753) the victims of the Great Concavity, (p. 399) a blind tennis prodigy, (p. 518) and Hal's 'hideous internal self'. (p. 695)

acknowledge that the novel's ambiguity (emerging from the passages on the burial of the cartridge, for instance) cannot be resolved on the level of narration'.²⁹⁵ However, my conclusions are just the opposite: the lack of resolution means Wallace's texts maintain the absolute dominance of irony. They mean that any single instantiation of meaning impels a competing perspective, a paradox, an ironic cancellation.

The point of this analysis is that secreted within these interpretive paths is the state of post-postmodernism itself, placed inside an analysis of how and why we are heading there. The characters in these narratives are self-consciously hollow. Even in their most literal state, like Don Gately, they conform to the figure of the 'hollow-centre'. The world in which they live presents the recursive logic of total capital, intensified to the point that time itself – the years – are subsidized by the capitalist economy, or renewed by capitalism's nostalgia for itself.²⁹⁶

These narratives do come to portray distinct versions of post-postmodernism. In one, the character who 'goes around calling herself a postmodernist', the 'pompous and dumb' D.L. 'will become J.D. Steelritter Advertising', the massive corporation that stands in for the whole capitalist economy. (p. 234; p. 354, emphasis retained) She is able to do so because she can 'divine a nation's post-postmodern future'. (p. 354) More than her husband Mark Nechtr's post-postmodernist fiction, with its intentions of reviving metafictional forms with highly specific autobiographical narratives, D.L. represents Wallace's real premonition. Between these interpretations of

²⁹⁵ Iannis Goerlandt, "Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away": Irony and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47.3 (2006), p. 325.

²⁹⁶ *Infinite Jest*, p. 223; 'Westward', p. 235.

Nechtr and D.L. is where one of this thesis's central claims is made: post-postmodernist fiction is a feature of, rather than direct representation of, post-postmodernity in general.

Nechtr's ambition, seen by Boswell as a reflection of Wallace's own, in fact gives him the same status as Hal Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*. Hal's need to demonstrate increasingly specific things about himself requires him first to find them within a post-postmodernist construction of identity that has dispensed with the idea of a fixed 'himself' altogether. Thus, his and Gately's main struggle is with the loneliness for this lost self, one that refigures the anxieties Nechtr finds in writing a metafiction without a sense of real humanity. ('Westward', p. 332) However, the conclusions that the novel reaches, in which neither Hal nor Don can express anything at all, is Wallace's pathetic premonition of the implication of post-postmodernism: ultimately, there's no way to 'face directions'. ('Westward', p. 373) One can only place one's self in the recursive paradox between information and context, vacillating endlessly like Ken Erdedy between reaching for his phone and his door. (*Infinite Jest*, p. 27)

This is the conclusion I reach by analyzing two of Wallace's most important works. In the conclusion to this thesis, I will re-articulate the central strands of this analysis in a way that brings together the arguments I have been making throughout. I will then orientate these conceptions in literary production of the period beyond Wallace's writing. This will demonstrate not only the breadth and influence of Wallace's ideas, but also how they have come to exemplify the multiple characteristics of varieties of post-postmodernist literature. Central to the overlap between my analysis of the

post-postmodernism and its literary instantiations are the hollow plots and subjectivities that I have outlined in this chapter; these are characteristic of much of the significant literature of the post-postmodernist period, as I will go on to show.

Conclusion: David Foster Wallace and post-postmodernisms

7.1 Introduction: The tasks of this thesis

In this thesis I have performed three important, original and interrelated tasks. Primarily, I have investigated a broad selection of David Foster Wallace's writing, to produce an integrated analysis of both key themes and stylistic tropes. Wallace has emerged as one of the most important authors of his period both intellectually and culturally. This thesis has gone some way to explain how this position has emerged. More importantly, I have shown what this position signifies about the period. In doing so, I have extended and challenged existent readings of Wallace. I have presented and evaluated the repressed claim that Wallace's position, culturally and politically, makes him an unworthy subject for study in some ways, as irrelevant to the present as would be a study of the postmodernist fiction his writing so often echoes. To take either an entirely positive or negative perspective on Wallace would be neither ideal nor complete; this thesis reconciles critical perspectives in a way that has not been attempted before.

The second task of this thesis has been to use Wallace's writing to understand two closely-related emergent ideas: that Wallace and his peers write 'post-postmodernist literature', and that the historical period in which they write is the 'post-postmodernist era'. I have been mindful throughout to distinguish between my historical and literary analysis and thereby to demonstrate that Wallace's literature is revelatory about both conceptions. Firstly, his intentions for his writing, so often foregrounded by his meta-

metafictional style and extra-literary writing, I have shown to be concordant with – even paradigmatic of – what should be termed 'post-postmodernist literature'. Simultaneously, though, I have demonstrated that many of the facets of this writing are unconscious articulations of the dominant logics of the post-postmodernist era, which it *prima facie* seems to critique. It is this paradoxical relation and separation that the 'and' of my thesis title entails: Wallace's work stands as a representation both of a type of literary and cultural product, but also as a deeper reflection of a broader cultural logic that it often represses. He is explicitly part of, writing against, and ultimately an exemplary illustration of the multiple nuances of 'post-postmodernism' that this thesis has described.

The final task of this thesis has been to attend to the term 'post-postmodernism' in a way that brings together Wallace's work and its historical background in complementary ways. This suggests that his emblematic position is a reflection of certain ideas that the U.S.A. had about itself in that period. This final strand has been below the surface in my analysis of Wallace's work, and the inter-relations between post-postmodernist literature and the post-postmodernist era in which it emerged. This conclusion will elucidate it further and more directly by turning to the question of Wallace's influence on and reflections of a broader extended literary field. The themes and styles that my analysis of Wallace's work has relied on will provide the building blocks for a survey of broader literary movements upon which further analysis of literary 'post-postmodernism', instigated by my approaches, should be founded.

7.2 Chapter review

Before turning to extend my claims beyond Wallace's writing, I will briefly recapitulate the main arguments made across this thesis. In the Introduction, I outlined the body of critical work that was my starting point in turning to David Foster Wallace's significance. There, I relied on the analysis of Jeffrey Nealon in particular to understand how the term 'post-postmodern' has a cultural and political resonance for our recent past. By placing this in the context of other historical thinkers, I outlined in general the characteristics of the period as I see them. I then turned to Stephen Burn, who has described very clearly the history of the term 'post-postmodern' as it applies specifically to literature, and I placed his work in the context of several broadly compatible ideas about literary post-postmodernism. Significantly, all of these literary studies presented Wallace as a foundational author. This context, and the contrasts between literary and more broadly-attuned thinkers, provided the skeletal structures for the analysis of Wallace that the thesis performed.

In Chapter One, I discussed aspects of Wallace's writing more directly. In particular, I examined the overlaps between Wallace's repeated emphasis on the role of literary fiction as a 'communication' between author and reader, and the significance of the figure of the author that idea envisions. From this, I drew on the direct reference to the autobiographical in his work as an allusion to a 'real', particularly as it presented itself in various figures suffering from depression through his career. I argued that the figure of depression therefore manifested fundamental concepts of literary post-postmodernism as a rejection of aspects of postmodernism. Furthermore, I described how it acted as a representation of the logic of post-

postmodernism more generally, in its recursive depiction of subjectivity. Chapter Two reflected on these qualities by seeing the stylistic tropes that are emblematic of Wallace's writing – mixed lexical registers, hyper-specific vocabulary, extreme length and digressiveness, 'self-cancellation' – as related to the concepts Chapter One elucidated. Each of these features makes Wallace's writing 'recursive', spiralling around a central point that will never be reached, and places an over-significance on the transmission of exact information that it implies will never be fully encapsulated in language. Together, these chapters demonstrate the ambition and limitations of 'post-postmodernist literature' as a style designed as a critique of 'post-postmodernism' as a historical moment.

Chapter Three developed this argument by examining the ethical engagement undertaken in Wallace's writing. This facet is pervasive and self-consciously repeated and revised throughout Wallace's career. It therefore bears as much attention as the more personal pieces on depression studied in Chapter One. I concluded, however, that in its final emphasis on the maintaining of the paradoxical Wallace's ethics are thoroughly post-postmodernist and consistent with his use of autobiographical material. Chapter Four demonstrated that the textual techniques that are commonly associated with his writing are reflections of this maintenance of paradoxes. It explored the use of footnotes and endnotes, and equivalent structures, to show how they play a role in undermining the value of information, which can neither be understood in isolation nor its context ever be fully expounded. This relationship to information is also intimately related to the idea of Wallace's authorial figure as a mediating presence in his writing. This draws together strands of my

argument about the meta-metafictional and meta-ethical nature of his writing.

Chapter Five took a more critical look at post-postmodernist literature by examining it in its context as a direct successor to postmodernist literature; what McGurl calls writing in the 'technomodernist discourse' of the educated, white male. (p. 42) In examining how Wallace depicts his female characters, and the absent or negative portrayal of heterosexual relationships in his writing, I described the reactionary nature of this literature's critical relationship to post-postmodernism. On this level, Wallace's writing embeds a self-critique, demonstrating that it is not enough to be critically aware of pathologized nature of the male gaze, but that imaginative depiction requires a sympathetic effort that is never observable in his deliberately self-focussed writing. This is true at both the argumentative and creative level. If Wallace's writing around the topic of gender produces a critique of post-postmodernism, it is that an attention to the lack of the self is not a successful way of approaching the understanding of the other; it merely intensifies, in fact, that hollowness. My final chapter brought this analysis to bear on two significant pieces, examining how the plots and characterizations to be found within are ultimately manifestations of the facets of post-postmodernism I have described. Each of the figures and symbolic structures found throughout Wallace's writing map onto a consideration of contemporary, post-postmodern life as one of intensification, of capitalist logic applied to a total and exclusive degree, and of subjectivity experienced as hollow.

I will now bring both the individual parts of this analysis, and the conception of post-postmodernism that they amount to, to writing contemporaneous with and influenced by Wallace. This will demonstrate the potential for extending this research more broadly, as well as making the case for the role of Wallace's writing as a hinge point in the foundation, analysis, and illustration of post-postmodernist literature in a variety of forms.

7.3 Literature after Wallace: Autobiographic (meta-) metafiction; Hollow-centred post-postmodernism; Post-racial fiction/Post-marginal fiction; Encyclopaedic post-postmodernism; Realist post-postmodernism; Global post-postmodernism

I made the case for Wallace's influence in the Introduction. In particular, I described his preeminent position amongst those authors to whom academic attention has been paid for their 'post-postmodernist' qualities: Franzen, Powers, Danielewski, Eggers. In this section, I intend to demonstrate the ways in which my analysis of Wallace might be successfully turned to viewing a much broader scope of representational value and influence. I will produce various potential extensions of my study of Wallace's writing into other contemporary literary forms. Each represents a specific articulation of aspects of post-postmodernist literature as I have described it, and following my definition should produce additional insight into the networks of meaning that they create.

Andrew Hoberek describes a contemporary period after postmodernist literature's heyday [...] in which postmodernism in the strong sense constitutes just one, no longer particularly privileged stylistic option among many – in fact resembles nothing so much as the state that followed

the triumphant years of modernism'.²⁹⁷ He, like Wegner, sees the literary world of the '90s as an open field of competing discourses, amongst which none is dominant. But in the same breath, Hoberek shows that '[...] the heterogeneity of contemporary fiction has its own analogues in the postmodern era', listing contemporary authors and potential equivalents amongst their predecessors, and how their divergences operate to mean that 'either fiction was never postmodern [...] or it remains postmodern'. (p. 236) This section will demonstrate that just as the divergences Hoberek notes within the postmodern era of fiction do not disallow the idea of any kind of unity among the authors he identifies, so post-postmodernism can operate as a general concept. My analysis has shown how it can be primarily enlightened by authors like David Foster Wallace. This analysis will help us to understand and identify a broader post-postmodernist literary world, which converges at certain crucial points that I, and future criticism, might identify.

One example of this is the changed reliance of a network of autobiographical references, and their corresponding reliance on a constructed author-figure and a recursive, introverted sense of identity. Rivka Galchen's *Atmospheric Disturbances* exemplifies this form. It presents artefacts from her life that directly function in similar ways to the personal symbolism of Wallace's 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' or *The Broom of the System*. They imply an access to an authorial *scénario* or

²⁹⁷ Andrew Hoberek, 'After Postmodernism', *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.3 (2007), p. 234.

'Real' whilst simultaneously demonstrating the hollowness of such ideas.²⁹⁸

It depicts the breakdown of a sense of self, in a manner that directly draws on another post-postmodernist author's work, *The Echo-Maker* by Richard Powers.²⁹⁹ British author Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* also features similar themes in more experimental style, demonstrating further an interest in themes of identity and mental and subjective instability in post-postmodernist fiction.³⁰⁰

These fictions all dramatize a concept of the hollow-centre, as they reveal the effects of the evidence of lack of knowledge of self. The post-postmodernist application of autobiography represents an exploration of the highly-specific as a representation of unknowability (as I described in Chapter One); it applies Žižek's articulation of the difference between knowledge and the truth; 'the insufficiency of knowledge, its lack apropos of the truth, radically indicates a lack, a non-achievement at the heart of truth itself'. (*Interrogating*, p. 37)

Galchen, by producing a text that builds multiple corresponding articulations of the symbolism of the personal intensifies Wallace's version of this strategy, creating an ambiguous text that plays with the idea of the hollow centre in more abstract ways. Her description of self-reflexiveness leading to self-alienation is described in scientific terminology that relates

²⁹⁸ The novel concludes with the protagonist in 'ignorance' about the 'real' that has been lost, except for his consideration of an image of Galchen's own 'real' father, holding her as an infant, in which 'at least I'll know the purpose of the rest of my life'. This confusion of the protagonist's sense of absolute unknowability of the idea of 'the real' and the actual personal effects of his author and her father is the text's main theme. Rivka Galchen, *Atmospheric Disturbances* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), p. 240.

²⁹⁹ *The Echo-Maker*, like *Atmospheric Disturbances*, has a protagonist suffering from a 'misidentification delusion'. Richard Powers, *The Echo Maker* (London: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 75.

³⁰⁰ Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (London: Alma Books, 2006).

closely to Wallace's ideas, such as that of doubling. She describes the Doppler effect – 'being aware of this distortion in perception allows scientists to take advantage of the distortion itself to gather accurate data about the real, and not just perceived, world' – leading to a 'Doppler-Ganger effect', an increasing sense of the non-reality of the self, or hollowness. (pp. 45-6) The novel is structured around information and ephemera from the author's own life, and her 'evidence' of her father, such as the family snapshot of the two on p. 147. This information is at once entirely personal and alienating, producing an expression with the reader of the mental state of the novel's protagonist.

Intensifying Wallace's approach to the autobiographical, Galchen produces what could be called, after Hutcheon, 'autobiographic (meta-) metafiction', a post-postmodernist form that foregrounds the *personal experience* of postmodern ambiguity in a similar way to Hutcheon's description of 'historiographic metafiction'. She notes that traditional historical fiction 'incorporates and assimilates' data from the past 'in order to lend a feeling of verifiability', whereas historiographic metafiction 'incorporates but rarely assimilates such data' and thereby 'acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its *textualised accessibility* to us today'.³⁰¹ In Galchen's text, the direct presence of the artefacts of autobiography operate in the same way, producing a relationship to text and author that replicates the experience of post-postmodernist identity. Intensifying this depiction through the lens of medicalization produces a link with McGurl's idea of a technomodernism, and Powers' earlier take on post-

postmodernism thorough Burns' (2008: 120) claims about the post-postmodernist trope of exploring the deep structures and chemistry of the brain. It also relates Galchen's text to Wallace's depictions of mental illness that I described in Chapter One, themselves depicted within deep autobiographical terms. Taken together, Galchen's autobiographic meta-metfiction provides a clear contemporary extension of one of the central forms of post-postmodernism.

Jonathan Lethem's writing foregrounds autobiographical detail much less obviously than Galchen, though it demonstrates some of the qualities I describe as autobiographic meta-metfiction. Its primary effect is to meld genre fiction with a sense of the personal, and so in later works it presents a hybrid of speculative fiction and autobiographically-inflected history. It also follows Wallace's writing by nesting more avant-garde variations on itself and its authorship as synecdoche within its narratives: the films of *Infinite Jest*'s James Incandenza are mirrored, for example, in the experimental animations of Abraham Ebdus in *The Fortress of Solitude*, providing an abstract analogue to the themes of the novel and its author's ambitions.³⁰²

Lethem's sense of detail and description is the real basis for his foregrounding of the personal, and his novels contain passages of real refinement that none of the central post-postmodernist authors seem able to approach, such as *The Fortress of Solitude*'s opening:

It was between Dylan and himself to consider forever whether to
grasp that he'd felt a yearning preference already the, that before the

³⁰¹ Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York, London: Routledge, 1988), p. 114, emphasis retained.

years of seasons, the years of hours to come on the street, before Robert Woolfolk or Mingus Rude, before "Play That Funky Music, White Boy," before Intermediate School 293 or anything else, he'd wished, against his mother's vision, for the Solver girls to sweep him away into an ecstasy of blondness and matching outfits, tightened laces, their wheels barely touching the slate, or only marking it with arrows pointing elsewhere, jet trails of escape. (p. 7)

By melding the highly personal with the speculative, Lethem's writing mirrors aspects of Wallace's that I have examined throughout this thesis, providing a very different example of autobiographic meta-metafiction. In *Chronic City* this influence is literalized, as its protagonist struggles with the influence of a book that very much echoes *Infinite Jest*.³⁰³

One final example of another variation of autobiographical meta-metafiction is John Edgar Wideman's fiction. Wideman fictionalizes in oblique style events and details from his life. He particularly focuses on his relationships with his family, fulfilling one of the characteristics of post-postmodernist fiction, foregrounding personal experience through and within experimental forms. This writing, exemplified in novels such as *Philadelphia Fire*, splits the difference between Galchen's foregrounding of personal artefacts of her life in entirely new structural settings, and Lethem's evocations of the personal within the tropes of genre fiction.³⁰⁴ Unlike the other two authors I have highlighted, however, Wideman is a near

³⁰² Jonathan Lethem, *The Fortress of Solitude: A Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 265-7.

³⁰³ [...] a gigantic novel entitled *Obstinate City*'. Jonathan Lethem, *Chronic City* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 51.

contemporary of Wallace, and so his explorations of autobiographic meta-metafiction can be considered parallel mutations of forms Wallace also investigated.

The sense of 'self-cancellation' that I found in Wallace's writing, its constant self-second-guessing in order to foreground an inability to either progress or attain meaning, has also had a significant impact on fiction that follows his influence. For example, Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision*, as the title implies, takes this form as its central conceit.³⁰⁵ It takes its epigraph from Wittgenstein, a self-conscious gesture of Wallace's influence, and might be summarized by the line: '[...] it was introspection above all that proved the reality of chronic indecision'. (p. 59) This is reminiscent of the second 'chapter' of *Infinite Jest*, and Ken Erdedy's physically manifested inability to decide. (p. 27)

Then We Came to the End by Joshua Ferris presents a kind of extension of Wallace's story 'Mister Squishy', with its depiction of the rhythms of office life underpinned with evocations of disease and violence. The novel presents '[...] a forestalled sense of urgency [and] [...] the anticipation of [its] end'.³⁰⁶ Gary Shteyngart's writing also presents us with a depiction of what it calls 'The bonfire and the self-denunciation contest [...]' that is 'Postmodern Man'.³⁰⁷ This description of its central character foregrounds the effects of post-postmodernist depictions of identity as a self-conscious experience of absence, which is a central lesson of these author's

³⁰⁴ John Edgar Wideman, *Philadelphia Fire: A Novel* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990).

³⁰⁵ Benjamin Kunkel, *Indecision* (London: Picador, 2006).

³⁰⁶ Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End: A Novel* (London: Viking, 2007), p. 52.

Wallace-influenced fictions. Like the other two, Shteyngart places his protagonists within capitalist systems extended to universality, and observes their collapse into a quiet inability to identify successfully.

These three authors echo in tone, style, and analysis of the world Wallace's writing, placing characters who consider themselves to be isolated from themselves (in similar terms to Wallace's *Hal Incandenza*) within larger structures of globalized capitalism. In other words, in taking on formal and tonal influence from Wallace, their fictions also represent analogues to his post-postmodernist analysis of the world. These fictions should be called the 'hollow-centred post-postmodernism'. They reflect most closely the aspects of Wallace's writing that emphasize the boredom, violence and meaningless emptiness of post-postmodernist life.

One can find aspects of 'hollow-centred post-postmodernism' in Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which additionally employs a similar approach to information and context that I observed in Chapter Four, down to the form of its footnotes.³⁰⁸ These generally provide one effect of the several I identified as characteristic of Wallace's notes, providing not just information about the text, but also producing a limitation on and context for the information held by the protagonist. For example, the first describes Dominican dictator Trujillo as 'famous for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic', reducing his history to the kind of factoid that appeals to the narrator, and thus is revelatory for contextual rather than factual value. (p. 2n1) But one might also consider Díaz's take on a post-postmodernist literary style to present a

³⁰⁷ Gary Shteyngart, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (London: Riverhead Books, 2007), p. 357.

³⁰⁸ Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

kind of post-racial fiction of the kind that Ramón Saldívar describes.³⁰⁹ In this respect, the issues that concerned Chapter Five, about the role for marginal figures in Wallace's writing, pertain. Saldívar's description of a 'new world fantasy' that 'might well be quintessentially postmagical, post-postmodern and postracial' raises questions about the absent focus on the marginal that I observed in Wallace's writing. He provides an example of a version of post-postmodernist fiction apart from Wallace, Franzen, Powers *et al* and their intensification of technomodernism. Instead, he refocuses on the potential for marginal figures to present their emergence into a world that places difference and specificity at its centre. (p. 596) This is a much less critical take on the experience of post-postmodernism than first-wave post-postmodernists might make, but one that was implicit in my analysis of Wallace's writing in Chapter Five.

As in Lethem's fictions, Saldívar highlights the 'outsized love of genre' in Díaz's writing as providing a structure through which the protagonist of his novel can cope with the 'recurring motif of doom' that comes from inhabiting 'two incommensurable worlds'. (p. 587) Saldívar's point is that the opening of a 'post-race' era – a more specific designator for the era that I describe as post-postmodernist – produces a central focus on the individual. This leads to a much more general acceptance of the condition of 'double consciousness' and both an opening of 'fantasy', or the potential of endless choice represented through genre, and an irreconcilable hollowness. In these terms, an analysis of post-racial fiction is entirely coherent with my definition of post-postmodernist literature. The conditions of post-postmodernism, through echoes of the terminology of Nealon and Wegner, can in Saldívar's analysis produce a more positive literary form, despite its foregrounding of the hollowness that I have also described.

³⁰⁹ Ramón Saldívar, 'Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction', *American Literary History* 23.3 (2011), p. 575.

African-American authors like Touré, Colson Whitehead and Percival Everett all work within the generic boundaries of this form, be it described as post-racial or post-postmodernist literature. They centre their fictions on the experience of extended consumer-culture on their conception of identity: their narratives often revolve around the loss of and subsequent re-affirmation of a sense of selfhood, in a manner that coheres with Wallace's characters such as *The Broom of the System*'s Lenore Beadsman.³¹⁰

These authors, even more clearly than those more regularly described as post-postmodernist, rely on postmodernist forms to deliver these investigations. They thereby foreground the realism of 'postmodernist' devices in a less self-conscious way than Wallace or Franzen: rather, these three men intensify postmodernist fiction as a means of accessing, rather than foreclosing, human verities. For them, the fantasy elements of postmodernist discourse and the *scénarios* that I found embedded in Wallace's work in Chapter One are complementary, and describing them opens up a space for the real effects of living that Wallace's fiction, in forcing it to its limits, shuts down in paradoxes and cancellations. Authors of this post-racial, or post-marginal, fiction describe these paradoxes as the world-in-which-they-live, rather than the world-they-have-come-to-live-in, illustrating the difference between their work and first-wave post-postmodernism, and its comfort with the formal features of postmodernism. This difference exists even though they both sets of authors describe the same set of conditions.

³¹⁰ This is a broad description of the narratives of: Touré, *Soul City* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004); Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999); Percival Everett, *Wounded* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2005).

I wish to extend Saldivar's terminology from 'post-racial', to the broader 'post-marginal fiction'. This allows me to introduce another complementary example of a similar form. Jennifer Egan's writing is among the most successful instantiations of a post-postmodernist aesthetic in the period after Wallace, and she takes as her subject issues an explicit focus on the female experience of the contemporary world. She deals with issues of identity from a different position to Wallace, for example in *Look at Me* foregrounding body image and fashion.

This novel directly, perhaps intentionally, overlaps with *Infinite Jest* and its facially-blurred women, but provides an empathetic character within a more positively postmodernist framework. This produces a correction of the implications of Wallace's blankness through the effects of post-racial, or post-marginal, fiction. It opens with this concept: 'After the accident, I became less visible'.³¹¹ My argument about the role of women in Wallace's writing – that it is the expression of the agency of marginal figures that often produces an instability that reflects the effects of post-postmodernity on previously dominant figures – is ironically reflected in post-marginal fiction. Its celebration of potentialities of post-postmodernism is implicit in Nealon's conception and in my analysis of Wallace.³¹²

There are two distinctions between such post-marginal fiction and the Wallace-ian forms of post-postmodernism that I have described. Firstly, post-marginal fiction lacks the tendency toward the encyclopaedic, in

³¹¹ Jennifer Egan, *Look at Me* (Picador: London, 2002), p. 3.

³¹² Post-postmodernism 'celebrates and rewards singularity, difference, and openness to new markets'. Nealon, p. 118.

general.³¹³ It pertains to a more enclosed scale, rather than impelling paradoxical universalities. Secondly, it is less likely to embody the kinds of cultural critique that are present in first-wave post-postmodernist fiction: it is much more likely to be directly political in nature. The overlaps between post-postmodernist and post-marginal fiction are a fruitful area for discussion in future studies of this period, the contrasts and similarities are likely to produce a more detailed understanding of the influence of post-postmodern culture on literary production. In respect to this thesis, we can consider post-racial fiction as a strand of post-postmodernism that Wallace's fiction struggles to repress, as I described in Chapter Five.

The digressive quality of Wallace's writing, manifested in the length of sentences and in the public perception of the massive scale of *Infinite Jest*, acts as a precursor to novels like Joshua Cohen's *Witz* and Adam Levin's *The Instructions*.³¹⁴ These younger authors openly display the ambition of Wallace's earlier fiction, but their approaches to size are more experimental than that of their forebear. Firstly, Cohen and Levin's novels make confusion and disorientation a central effect; where *Infinite Jest*, as I described in Chapter Three, underpins a fairly straightforward narrative form with foregrounded absences and paradoxes, these younger authors present us with a more obscure narrative logic with a less direct contemplation of its effects. In this, their narratives look back to the more difficult work of Pynchon and Gaddis, working against the necessity for post-postmodernist literature to be 'attractive and imperative' as Franzen proclaimed in 'The Reader in Exile'.³¹⁵ Secondly, though, Cohen and Levin both foreground

³¹³ Burn (2008) states that this is one of the aspects that defines the first-generation of post-postmodernist authors: 'the continuity of the kind of ambition to produce an encyclopaedic master-work that [is] a characteristic impulse within postmodernism'. (pp. 19-20)

³¹⁴ Joshua Cohen, *Witz* (Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive, 2010); Adam Levin, *The Instructions* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2011).

³¹⁵ Franzen, Jonathan, 'The Reader in Exile', *How To Be Alone* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), p. 176.

their Jewish-American identities, crafting difficult novels out of the complexities the personal significance race, religion, and culture has on their experience of the post-postmodern.

The unpunctuated ending of *Witz* highlights this struggle with identity and history (invoking also a sense of metafiction): '[...] he's a nothing also Cohen it's like this: my father was a Cohen and his father was a Cohen and his father before that was a Cohen it's steady work'. (p. 817) The ambition of their novels is to insert the sense of history that their Jewish heritage gives them into a lived experience of the post-postmodernist notion of – not the break down of the sense of history, epistemology, and grand narrative – but the experience of being *after* that breakdown. In melding autobiographic, post-marginal, and post-history forms of the post-postmodern, these authors necessarily create a fiction that is encyclopaedic. They look for ways to intensify the explicitly intellectual project of post-postmodernism by rejuvenating experimental forms in a way Wallace's work touched on, for example in his use of Sierpinski's Gasket in *Infinite Jest*. Such fictions should be termed 'Encyclopaedic post-postmodernism'.

Other authors have elucidated the post-postmodernist literary tendency to imbue realist forms with echoes and lessons of postmodernism, demonstrating not only Wallace's, but also Franzen's repeated manifestos' effects, as Burn described them. Authors like Michael Chabon and Chad Harback seem very much engaged with the post-postmodernist scene, even as their fictions aim towards traditional values. Chabon also investigates his Jewish-American identity, but both authors are more concerned with examining ideas about the nature of America through inculcating a sense of both realism and post-postmodernism (in Burn's conception) into the tropes of genre fiction. So, Chabon places American-ness, both in terms of identity and history, into focus using both comic and superhero genre (like Lethem), whilst never straying far from a literary-history mode – even if that mode remain fantastical, like Diaz's – in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier &*

Clay. Its ambition is clear from its first page, as its author-figure places American icons Harry Houdini and Clark Kent into triangulation with himself claiming that 'his account of his role [...] like all of his best fabulations, rang true'.³¹⁶

Harback's take on American mythologizing uses a near-cliché baseball narrative as its centre in his first novel, *The Art of Fielding*.³¹⁷ But it is in the paratextual material, the high-profile telling of the story of the novel's production by Keith Gessen and Graydon Carter, that its post-postmodernist claims are fully realized.³¹⁸ Gessen and Carter reveal the narrative behind the book to parallel Burn's claims for Franzen's *The Corrections*, showing Harback stepping back from experimental forms to produce a 'palimpsest' text, in which realism overwrites technical ambitions. (Burn 2003: 96) In contextualizing the material in this way, the paradox of the post-postmodernist suspicion of anti-humanism is revealed again. Similar to much of the writing that claims to place human verities at its heart through its traditional use of form, Harback's text and the one that surrounds it show an author moving to create a conservative fictional world. The novel's complexities are only introduced at the moment its mono-cultural take on America starts to expose itself. In Chabon's text, the theme of homosexuality foregrounds this; but in Harback's novel, the diminishingly small role women play, as in more prominent post-postmodernist texts, produces its own, internal and repressed self-critique.

³¹⁶ Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 3.

³¹⁷ Chad Harback, *The Art of Fielding: A Novel* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011).

³¹⁸ Keith Gessen, and Graydon Carter, *Vanity Fair's How A Book Is Born: The Art of Fielding* (New York: Vanity Fair, 2011). Ebook.

Near-peers of Wallace and Franzen like Zadie Smith and Jeffery Eugenides have also produced work more and more in this vein over the last decade.³¹⁹ In many ways, this writing is the direct result of Wallace's influence as I have described it, although by going back to Wallace as a seminal figure, this thesis has elucidated much more clearly the intellectual and cultural project that underlines his thoughts and therefore influence. In taking the lesson from Wallace's work about the value of re-approaching traditional narrative forms, even in the post-postmodernist terms Burn (2008: 127) describes as 'a synthesis of two apparently opposed modes of rendering the world: the supposedly realist and the self-reflexive', these authors all intensify post-postmodernism in uncomfortable ways. An examination of this project in the more critical terms I have opened up would be another potential useful extension of my project. I would term fiction in this tradition 'Realist post-postmodernism'.

As I have demonstrated, terms such as 'the hollow-centre' and post-postmodernist intensification still apply to realist post-postmodernism: they can be observed in Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* and its approach to spirituality, and Harback's portrait of self-doubt, for example. But such fictions are most identifiable by their formal conservatism, which places tradition and the excavation of older forms of consciousness at its centre. They often describe the failure of efforts to reconstruct quasi-realist portraits, which distinguishes them from fictions that play closer attention to the sculpting of new experiences out of the formlessness of post-postmodernist identity: my analysis of Wallace's writing gives an insight into the operation of both kind of form.

³¹⁹ Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005); Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011).

Throughout this thesis I have concentrated on a U.S.-centric charting of post-postmodernist literature, repeating its characterization by other major critics. But in describing the importance of the form, it is appropriate to suggest its international equivalents, too. For example, the writing of Japan's Haruki Murakami, and the Chilean Roberto Bolaño both demonstrate the barely-submerged influence of postmodernist forms, the combination of literary and cultural (and occasional political) analysis, and the mixture of technical innovation with certain repressed conservatisms that I have found to be common in post-postmodernist literature. The themes they take as significant, while different from those found in Wallace, bear comparison with the interests I have demonstrated in this thesis: the influence of global capital and its logics on subjectivity, a dispersed sense of loneliness, a generalized complexity and an interest in the ethics of literature, reading and writing are all present. The atmosphere of repressed, normalized, or magicalized violence and the spectre of it that often haunts their work is more to the surface than similar traits to be found in Wallace's three novels.

Taken in sum, these ideas represent the effects of the various sections that make up Bolaño's posthumous novel *2666*. In particular, the clinical and detached way in which women are sacrificed to the abstracted global system in 'The Part About the Crimes' – 'From then on, the bodies started to be counted' – and its mirroring of authors and detectives, philosophers and murderers, terrorists and journalists, produce a post-postmodernist world-view.³²⁰ The overlap between language, violence and capitalism presents us with a world in which all three are inescapable parts of the same central logic, in the same that Wallace's writing does. Murakami's various explorations of post-postmodernist identities are also filled with abstract and personal mysteries, often concerning language and

³²⁰ Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, trans. by Natasha Wimmer (London: Picador, 2009), p. 353.

the economy, such as *Kafka on the Shore*, in which a murder occurs systemically, as neither murderer nor victim is granted a clear identity.³²¹

These writers also share an attachment to essay-writing and longer form non-fiction. They have produced ambitious, lengthy pieces of prose that combine certain formal difficulties with an overall sense of self-interpretation that distinguishes them from prior encyclopaedic fiction, as I described *Infinite Jest* also doing. One should consider these figures authors of 'global post-postmodernism'.

In this section, I have distinguished various strains and mutations of the central post-postmodernist literature I have theorized from Wallace's writing. These both allow an idea of the spread and influence of ideas that are confluent with his, demonstrate their contemporary relevance to a recent generation of authors, and show some of the broader significance of my analysis. They also each present potential routes of further study, pointing at ways to extend the analysis of the term post-postmodernism down a broad range of paths, allowing us to come to a better general understanding of our time through literature.

7.4 Conclusion: Post-postmodernist potential

In this thesis I have presented David Foster Wallace's writing as a primary example of 'post-postmodernist literature', and I have contextualized and theorized this analysis to understand the broader implications of the term 'post-postmodern'.

³²¹ Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, trans. by Philip Gabriel (London: Vintage, 2005).

Centrally, I have produced a detailed and critical assessment of a broad sweep of the writing of David Foster Wallace. This has incorporated discussion of short and long texts, obscure and famous pieces, fiction and non-fiction, archive drafts and original research, interviews and biographical material. It has involved both attempts to reconstruct the conditions and intentions of his writing process and critical evaluations of the value and validity of his thought. The insight this has produced is original not only in its depth and breadth, which goes further than any other single study of Wallace's work, but also in applying consistently a single concept through which his significance can be articulated.

The importance of Wallace's work has become clear in the years after his death, a death that coincided with my beginning work on this project. Articulating that significance is itself useful for future critical studies, and therefore has its own value. In the years I have worked on this thesis the understanding of his influence has been established as a range of scholars have increasingly turned their attention to Wallace and his writing. However, by presenting this extended analysis within the frame of the term 'post-postmodern', the scholarly value of my study is considerably more than simply tying together understandings of the importance of Wallace's work. I have demonstrated how much of the importance that has been attached to Wallace's work can be tied to his exemplifications of post-postmodernism in its various guises, and made the case that these should be considered a significant frame for understanding the decades either side of the millennium. This conclusion has particularly emphasized the literary case for this.

I have suggested throughout that to understand Wallace at such a detailed level is to understand the concepts and rationales for a 'post-postmodernist literature', and many of the critics I have cited have prepared the ground for this assessment. But, as well as the breadth of my study, the originality of this work is predicated on expanding the understanding of 'post-postmodernism' as a term applicable beyond its literary function. Post-postmodernist literature is a specific genre, and my argument has developed an understanding of how it operates, its importance and its influence. By extending the logic of post-postmodernism, and seeing it at play in the unconscious gestures of Wallace's writing, my contribution to broader study has been the opening up of the potential use of the term. Just as postmodernist literature exemplified aspects of what the term 'postmodernism' came to mean in larger cultural contexts, so I believe post-postmodernist literature presents a narrow aspect of the broader potential of 'post-postmodernism' in specific and important ways.

Going forward, I believe that these aspects of my research will be a fruitful context for future scholars. Studies of Wallace's writing will benefit from my extended thematic and formal analyses of his writing. I have demonstrated the necessity of assessing a range of his work in order to find the crucial consistencies and foregrounded paradoxes that make it a central contribution to our understanding of his era. I have also widened this analysis to begin to extend the idea of post-postmodernist literature. There is a great potential for various sub-categorizations and tangential strains of this in post-Wallace literature that can be further developed. This thesis should therefore provide future critics with ideas of how to explicate and group the concerns of a broad swathe of contemporary literature.

The formulation of post-postmodernism is predicated on the collapse of the distinction between economics and politics, and future scholars in fields which overlap with these terms may find a use for it. I argue that studies of U.S. culture in particular could and should apply the concept of the post-postmodern as a central way to understand the recent past.

David Foster Wallace's fiction does not just provide us with a detailed assessment of the state of American fiction and culture at a time when the influence and intellectual grasp of postmodernism was on the wane. Analyzing it carefully and within a detailed conceptual framework, we can see that it unconsciously reflects the drivers of the changes produced within that period. Wallace's writing reveals – consciously and unconsciously – the historical frame that has dominated the three-decade period in which he was an active literary presence. In my study of his forms, textual choices, narratives and plots, and his approaches to subjectivity, ethics and sexual difference, I have shown how his writing is dominated by its response to post-postmodernism. This response, articulated both directly and indirectly, through paradox and precise argument, through insightful self-consciousness and callous wilful blindness, provides us with the best assessment of what the post-postmodern era is, was and could be.

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