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Imperially Alone:  
David Foster Wallace and  
The Role of Fiction  
Thomas Edward Mark Rooney

This thesis explores the life and work of American writer David Foster Wallace. Through examining his fiction and non-fiction, it charts the development of his ideas and also attempts to identify the driving intention and goals behind his writing. Wallace's work is analysed with particular regard to his literary style, recurring themes of entertainment, addiction, loss of self and isolation. His work is also compared with a contemporary writer: Bret Easton Ellis. This thesis has been researched through use of Wallace's body of work, critical writing on Wallace, and Wallace's papers held at the Harry Ransom Archive at the University of Texas in Austin.

# Imperially Alone

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David Foster Wallace and The  
Role of Fiction

Department of English Studies

MA by Research

Durham University

Thomas Edward Mark Rooney

2016

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Ch.1 - ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way’ in *Girl With Curious Hair*, p. 373.

Ch.2 - *Infinite Jest*, p. 880.

Ch.3 - *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, p. 26.

Ch.4 - *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, p. 292.

Ch.5 - *Oblivion*, p. 142.

## Introduction

One of the greatest challenges in approaching the writing of David Foster Wallace is that his body of work offers no easy answers to the initial question of what he is writing 'about'. While we can give answers such as postmodernism (or post-postmodernism), irony, entertainment or the problems of a modern life saturated with all kinds of digital entertainment, none of these are wholly satisfying in the way we would want them to be when recommending Wallace's work to others. To say that *Infinite Jest* is only about entertainment or addiction is grossly reductive and in even his shortest stories and essays the encyclopaedic quality of Wallace's writing tackles much more than just, for example, animal welfare in 'Consider the Lobster'. In the following chapters, I have not tried to answer such a broad question as what Wallace is 'about'. Besides requiring a much longer study than this for a writer of Wallace's complexity, I would argue that that question would perhaps be best addressed later down the line in Wallace studies, which is still in its very early stages. However, I have tried to explore the heart of Wallace's work as it developed throughout his career, and argue why his literary ambitions and achievements are so important to readers today. Already, many critics have leapt on the seemingly endless layers of complexity in the novels and short stories, exploring the various ways Wallace's astonishingly intelligent mind engaged with philosophy, advanced mathematics and logic, history and politics, to name only a few areas.<sup>1</sup> Rather than take this approach, I have focused on the core intention and aim Wallace held for his work and his successes and failures in achieving them. Briefly, this was the conviction Wallace held that there was something deeply difficult or troublesome about modern society from the 1980s through to twenty-first century America, and that literature alone could address this problem. As we will go on to discuss, it is the vagueness of this idea that can make Wallace's work so

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb's collection of essays on Wallace and philosophy, or Marshall Boswell, perhaps the leading Wallace critic, especially in regard to politics.

difficult, but also what makes it incredibly valuable. His refusal to simplify and pin down his artistic ideas to produce the well-crafted, self-contained style of fiction he dismissed as ‘Workshop Hermeticism’ enabled the rich complexity and exploration in his major novels.<sup>2</sup> The ambition to not just confront this intangible phantom pain, the deep sadness he saw affecting so many from all walks of life (‘lawyers, stockbrokers, young promising academics, poets’ he described to an interviewer), but to also find answers and solutions for it is Wallace’s most distinguishing feature as a writer.<sup>3</sup>

In an essay published as his literary career was just beginning, Wallace writes that ‘for a young fiction writer, inclined by disposition and vocation to pay some extra attention to the way life gets lived around him, 1987’s America is not a nice place to be’ (*BFN*, p. 67). We, of course, immediately ask ‘why?’ and beyond a brief mention of the prevalence of cynicism and irony Wallace himself does not offer a comprehensive answer. Nonetheless, this feeling of there being a malaise in modern America is the star Wallace steers by. From *Infinite Jest*’s exhausted addicts and prodigious teenagers who pursue their futures unquestioningly to *The Pale King*’s quietly heroic IRS employees, eking out meaning in their lives with every paper form filled, Wallace is exploring an American wasteland of disappointment, loss of direction and purposelessness.

In taking this approach, it is not my intention to ignore or reduce the many fascinating aspects of Wallace’s work. In an essay on the encyclopaedic aspects of Wallace’s novels, Matt Tresco writes: ‘it is possible for the encyclopedia to no longer imply totalisation and containment, but release and an enlargement of possibilities.’<sup>4</sup> While far from an encyclopaedic work on Wallace’s writing, it is my hope that the following chapters

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<sup>2</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 40. Hereafter referred to as (*BFN*, p. -).

<sup>3</sup> D.T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (London: Granta, 2012), p. 158.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Tresco, “Impervious to U.S. Parsing”: *Encyclopedism, Autism and Infinite Jest* in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 121.

will function in a similar role of releasing and enlarging possibilities, illuminating the driving force behind his work and the context he saw it operating in.

We begin this in the first chapter by examining Wallace's distinctive style of writing, focusing on two notable aspects; his unconventional endings and his tendency to depict individual moments in great detail. Through this, we will see how Wallace's ideas about fiction developed rapidly and intensely, leaping from the self-conscious showmanship of his first novel and short-story collection to the urgent humanism of *Infinite Jest*. This trajectory will also be followed to show how Wallace came to the fiction of his last works, turning further away from the literary acrobatics he excelled in to an interest in mundane and ordinary everyday life. We will also identify how Wallace's style of writing reflected his ideas and attitude towards fiction, depicting life closer to how he saw his own and others' experience as opposed to conventional realist fiction. In this way, we will go on to explore how we can see Wallace himself as a realist, with his long, tangential sentences representing the overwhelming quantity of information and the anxieties of modern life.

With this grounding in Wallace's writing, we will proceed in the next chapter to look at entertainment, perhaps the subject Wallace is most famous for. In particular, we will look at television, and examine why Wallace saw TV as such an important part of modern life. In particular, we will see why Wallace, against the advice of his college professors, maintained that the subject required literary attention. Examining his essay on television and American fiction, 'E Unibus Pluram', we will explore how its ideas apply to the dramatically changed face of television today and its more prestigious place in art and culture. Through this, we will illuminate how Wallace saw the abundance of high-quality, readily available entertainment as such an important, differentiating aspect of modern life that informed *Infinite Jest*. We will also see how Wallace's views on entertainment informed his views on literature, and shaped his belief that literature alone possessed the ability to provide us with something crucial that all other entertainment and art could not.

Moving on, we will next explore Wallace's work alongside one of his most important contemporaries: Bret Easton Ellis. Although rarely discussed together, I will argue that Ellis' work is an important counterweight to Wallace's, and helps to further explore the aims of Wallace's fiction. By comparing Wallace with a contemporary who, instead of broadly sharing his artistic aims pursued their polar opposite, we can come to a better understanding of both writers. In seeing how each represents an alternative to the other, we will illuminate why the pair pursued their respective directions in their fiction. Moreover, we will see how Wallace and Ellis surprisingly share many similarities that have been overlooked by critics and in fact engage with the same literary and cultural questions in different ways. Through this, we will further understand what drove Wallace's writing by examining the different effect those same literary and cultural questions inspired in Ellis. This will also give us the opportunity to examine Wallace's thought more rigorously through Ellis' more sceptical and cynical mode of thinking.

With the basis provided by these three chapters, we will then begin an in-depth analysis of Wallace's major works: the novels *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*. It is in both these novels that Wallace engages with what he sees as the problems and challenges of modern life most explicitly and eloquently. In opposition to the emerging view that *The Pale King* functions as a development of the themes and ideas of *Infinite Jest* (put forward by critics such as Conley Wouters), I will argue that the novels function as two separate explorations, given the focus on entertainment in *Infinite Jest* and boredom in *The Pale King*.<sup>5</sup> Taking these two subjects as twin poles that dominate life as Wallace saw it, we will explore how the novels present entertainment and boredom and why they have such dramatic, powerful impacts on our lives. We will develop this discussion by using the commencement speech Wallace gave, published as *This is Water*, as an expression of his

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<sup>5</sup> The terms entertainment and boredom here are used in their broadest sense, as they are examined in the novel. So, by entertainment, we refer to everything from the film cartridges to drugs used in *Infinite Jest*, and by boredom, we refer to everything from the boredom of being unoccupied to the boredom of arduous, hard work.

mature artistic thinking. In particular, we will use the argument Wallace makes about our need as individuals to dedicate ourselves to something, ‘worship’ to use Wallace’s term. In this context, we will see how the novels depict both entertainment and boredom as ways to escape and destroy the self and its pressures. Maintaining the focus on the real-world effects of his subjects rather than contemplation for its own sake (which, as we will have repeatedly seen, was so crucial to Wallace), we will also examine how the novels show the human consequences of this need to worship.

Finally, we will come as close as we can to identifying what Wallace felt was so troublesome or dangerous about modern life, and to revealing why his characters are compelled to escape themselves in worship by examining his explorations of isolation. Particularly in the short stories, isolation is a recurring theme, and throughout his fiction and non-fiction it is always the worst fate that can befall his characters. By focusing on Wallace’s most direct engagements with a state he depicts as filled with torturous suffering, we will hopefully come to a clearer understanding of what drove and inspired Wallace’s writing, always troublesomely difficult to pin down, yet powerful enough to fuel his astonishing work.

One of the most famous quotes attributed to Wallace is his statement that ‘fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking *human being*’.<sup>6</sup> It is easy for this to form an unfortunate, reductive view of Wallace, taking it as a vague and sentimental statement for a fiction writer. However, it is an example of the same dangers of sincerity he wrote about in essays like ‘E Unibus Pluram’, as well as his willingness to embrace subjects that, although made difficult by vagueness or the risk of embarrassment, were none the less important for it. We may dismiss the above quote as frivolous or naive on first hearing it, but it would be very difficult to argue against its veracity. Especially when so few writers took on the

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<sup>6</sup> Larry McCaffery, ‘An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace’ in Stephen J. Burn (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 26. Original Emphasis.

challenges Wallace did, and perhaps none with as great an urgency, his achievements in his work are all the more valuable to us today.

## Chapter One

### ‘The Silence Behind The Engine’s Noise’

#### Wallace, Style, and The Purpose of Fiction

David Foster Wallace’s style is instantly recognisable. Described by his biographer, D.T. Max, as being marked by ‘its ambition, its length, and a syntax that at time approaches a Gerard Hopkins-like rhythm’, Wallace’s prose reflected a culture of constant information.<sup>7</sup> His long, overwhelming sentences (nonetheless ‘grammatically [...] pristine’ he was keen to remind us) exist in a time where nothing can ever be exhaustively described.<sup>8</sup> The development of technology has increasingly made greater amounts of information more quickly accessible, from VHS tapes to mobile phones to the awe-inspiring capabilities of the internet today. In this world of endless, instantly accessible information any statement can be instantly disputed, challenged, contradicted or expanded upon. Short, tightly written sentences seem at odds with our current experience in a way that Wallace’s prose does not. Matt Tresco points to this idea when he writes: ‘it is possible for the encyclopedia to no longer imply totalization and containment, but release and an enlargement of possibilities.’<sup>9</sup> Take the example Max provides, from Wallace’s famous cruise-ship essay, ‘A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again’

Finally, know that an unshot skeet’s movement against the vast lapis lazuli dome of the open ocean’s sky is sun-like—i.e. orange and parabolic and right-to-left—and that its disappearance into the sea is edge-first and splashless and sad.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. i.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Interview from The Leonard Lopate Show A’ in *David Foster Wallace: In His Own Words* [Disc 1], 2:30-2:35.

<sup>9</sup> Matt Tresco, “Impervious to U.S. Parsing”: *Encyclopedism, Autism and Infinite Jest* in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (1997; London: Abacus, 2012), p. 346. Hereafter referred to as (*SFTNDA*, p. -).

It's easy to understand Max's assessment. The sentence is striving, anxious even, to pin down the experience being described, unpacking the very words it uses with the i.e. clause, much like the footnotes that became Wallace's trademark. In revising and expanding upon the sentence's description within the same sentence, it combines the vast, unending availability of information that has dominated western culture in the last few decades along with the desire for stability, statements that cannot be immediately disproved or said to be lacking some crucial detail.

In his forward to *Best American Essays 2007*, Wallace famously described the accumulation of media such as television and film, the overwhelming presence of advertisements, and the impact of the growing prominence and use of the internet as 'Total Noise' (*BFN*, p. 301). His entire corpus of work cannot be divorced from this idea. All the hallmarks of Total Noise are present throughout his fiction and non-fiction: the crippling self-awareness, the oppressive presence of irony and the lethal amount of pleasure through the entertainment that is always on offer. This makes him an indisputably modern writer, one whose work cannot be imagined to have come from any other time period.

Throughout this chapter we will explore what Wallace calls at the end of his second book, 'the silence behind the engines' noise' (*GCH*, p. 373). By this, we are referring to the intentions and ambitions behind Wallace's writing, what drove him to create his work. Through this, we will come to a better understanding of his corpus as a whole, and be better equipped to examine the novels, short stories and essays in detail. We will do this by analysing Wallace's literary style, how it changes over the course of his career and what makes it so unique. By the end of the chapter, we will have a better idea of what the heart of Wallace's writing is, and what he is trying to accomplish in each of his books.

In investigating how this style engages with western society and culture from the 1980s to the present and how society and culture can be said to differ from the past in

significant ways, it is necessary to examine three things. First, two of the most prominent and recurring aspects of Wallace's style: the difficult unconventionality of the endings he gives his work and the tendency to focus on a single moment and describe it extensively. The third is the question of mimeticism and how we can understand Wallace, with his complex and verbose sentences, to be a realist.

### **The Unsatisfying End**

Wallace's aims for his fiction developed significantly from his early work into his mature period. Already showing the painful self-awareness we will see frequently in Wallace's thinking, his initial approach to fiction was to study and respond to the literature that had come before him. 'He believed that if he was going to write better, he had to study it', engaging with modernism, particularly T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", and postmodern meta-fictionists such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme and Thomas Pynchon.<sup>11</sup> Wallace did not want to repeat the work of modernism or postmodernism, but push beyond it to create the fiction of his own time, 'modernism's third wave' as Marshall Boswell calls it.<sup>12</sup> His first novel, *The Broom of the System*, with its linguistic and stylistic fireworks shows Wallace's raw capability as a writer. He later referred to this approach of his early work as the belief 'that the point of fiction was to show that the writer was really smart'.<sup>13</sup> The book revels in the unconventional possibilities afforded by the establishment of metafiction, yet the ending is still conventionally satisfying despite some comments by critics suggesting otherwise.<sup>14</sup> While it is certainly unconventional in construction, forgoing a neat conclusion where the plot is brought tidily to a close, Claire Hayes-Brudy's description that 'the

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<sup>11</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003; South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> David Foster Wallace and Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*, last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX8bA7XC8aM>>, 5:08-11.

<sup>14</sup> In Wallace's writing, metafiction is written as 'meta fiction', which has been retained in quotes.

characters, and also the readers, are left to construct their own version of what happens' is much more appropriate for his second novel, *Infinite Jest*, than it is for *Broom*.<sup>15</sup>

*Broom's* ending consists of a major climactic scene before a final section of short chapters that serve as a kind of epilogue. This could even be seen as a first attempt of an effect Wallace described for the ending of *Infinite Jest*, 'it's supposed to stop and then kind of hum and project', except in this instance the echoing out of the climax is literally written into the text in this last section.<sup>16</sup> In the climax the protagonist, Lenore Beadsman, is overwhelmed by every plot thread and character descending upon her as she tries to 'clear her personal items' out of her workplace, 'the Frequent and Vigorous/Bombardini Company switchboard cubicle.'<sup>17</sup> All the events of the novel that have been building over four hundred pages are thrown together in a comic crash appropriate for an unashamedly metafictional novel that is playing with the conventions of the mainstream realist fiction Wallace held such distaste for at the start of his career.<sup>18</sup> It also provides an early indication of Wallace's engagement with Total Noise, with Lenore left in a near catatonic state under the assault of every piece of information in the novel at once. However, the major plot threads of the novel are still tied up and any questions the reader has left are answered by the final page.

Firstly, the central mystery, that has driven the novel's plot throughout, is solved. Lenore's great-grandmother, also named Lenore, who disappeared from her nursing home, is discovered to have escaped into the phone tunnel of the Bombardini building

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<sup>15</sup> Claire Hayes-Brudy, 'The Book, the Broom and the Ladder: Philosophical Groundings in the Work of David Foster Wallace' in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Anne Marie Donahue, 'David Foster Wallace Winces at the Suggestion that his Book is Sloppy in Any Sense' in Stephen J. Burn (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (1987; London: Abacus, 2011), p. 444. Hereafter referred to as (*BS*, p -).

<sup>18</sup> Note, for example, Wallace dismissing the criticisms Amherst's visiting writer, Alan Lelchuk, made of his work when he read from his own novel. 'To Wallace, Lelchuk's effort embodied the clumsiness of mainstream realist fiction. He thought he could do better.' [Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 39.]

where Lenore works as a switchboard operator: ‘your particular line tunnel looks like it’s kind of decided it’s a real freakin’ human being or something [...] Your tunnel’s supposed to be around like sixty-some degrees. And instead our test cable shows it’s a perfect ninety-eight point six’ (*BS*, p. 457).<sup>19</sup> Ninety-eight point six degrees here, refers to the temperature of Lenore Sr.’s room at the care home, which was necessary for ‘[keeping] Gramma alive and comfortable’ (*BS*, p. 39). Concluding the novel’s exploration of Wittgensteinian linguistic theory (Lenore Sr. was also a student of Wittgenstein while he was at Cambridge), she has found an existence in pure language by somehow transferring herself into the phone network cables. Through this, she has overcome the fear that one may be ‘nothing but a linguistic construct’ by finding a literal existence as pure language transmitted through the phone network.<sup>20</sup>

The conclusion of this central plot arc also acts as a metaphor to further highlight Wallace’s ideas about fiction when writing his first novel. Lenore Sr.’s abandonment of Lenore and the rest of the world for an existence of pure language is how Wallace saw the position of the writer. There was no commitment or connection to the reader; the writer was isolated and concerned only with the work itself and his own abilities. Communication did not matter, only the writer’s skill and what he could achieve with it. As we will soon see, Wallace came to be intensely dissatisfied with this attitude and regret it.

Admittedly, we do not find out where all the characters ‘end up’ by the last page of *Broom*, but it is never a novel that leads us to expect this (not, for example, in the way *Infinite Jest* might be argued to, with its much stronger emphasis on characters the reader empathises with). The central tension of the novel in the collision of various philosophical ideas has, at least for its core issue, been resolved. Even then, we know that Lenore has

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<sup>19</sup> Lenore the great-grandmother will be referred to as Lenore Sr. from here on.

<sup>20</sup> Larry McCaffery, ‘An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace’ in Stephen J. Burn (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 41. One might also read this as a nod towards the establishment of the internet, where people can, in a sense, exist and lead lives in nothing but transmitted language.

chosen Andy Lang out of the chorus of characters vying for her attention, since he is the only one she speaks to with a quiet, vulnerable 'hey' (*BS*, p. 457). There is also the disturbing implication of the novel reverting back to referring to Andy Lang by his nickname, 'Wang-Dang Lang' in this moment. This is the name we were first introduced to him by as a misogynistic, frat-boy thug in the novel's opening chapter, which describes a dark incident verging on sexual assault. Lang's character arc throughout the novel has dealt with the question of whether he is a different man when he reenters the story after this opening chapter. The last minute use of the nickname, then, at least carries the suggestion that Lenore might not be saved with Lang as her hero in this final scene.

The last sentence of the novel, in another metafictional flourish, is cut off. Rick Vigorous says 'You can trust me [...] I'm a man of my ' with the missing word being 'word' itself. While both Wallace's agent and editor wanted this changed, this is again in keeping with the novel. Not only is it a clever joke to end a comic novel on, it concludes the development of Rick's character in keeping with the book's explorations of language. In scenes such as when Lenore's brother describes his own manipulation of language, 'I call this a lymph node, not a phone. So when Dad asks me do I have a phone, I can in all good conscience say no' the idea of words not being inherent to the things they describe is firmly established (*BS*, p. 214). Rick, who has been shown to be an especially pathetic and unappealing man (who also happens to write bad fiction) is denied by Wallace in this final sentence the ability to even say the word 'word' which would establish his statement. In this, we can see the ending of *Broom* not as a sudden stop as Wallace's agent Bonnie Nadell saw it, recommending it be changed, but as a virtuoso construction appropriate and satisfying to the novel it concludes. You can almost hear the click in the punchline as it closes the novel. Wallace made the case for this reading in a letter to Nadell, warning her 'you're going to have to exert real pressure on me w/r/t this one'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Letter from David Wallace to Bonnie Nadell, dated 31 October.

This ending shows us two things. Firstly, that Wallace could construct a satisfying ending when he wanted to, as we will see again later when we look at the essay collection *Consider The Lobster*. This is important to keep in mind as we continue to look at why he deliberately avoided this in the majority of his work after his debut novel. Secondly, it displays the self-involvement of Wallace's writing during his early period, something he spent the rest of his career reacting against, as we shall also explore later in this chapter. *Broom's* ending is designed more to show off with its formal gymnastics than anything else, as Wallace alluded to in the earlier quote of displaying the writer's cleverness above all else. We have also seen how this was represented by the position the novel leaves Lenore Sr. in. One of the most significant changes during the transition from his early to his mature period was in Wallace's attitude towards the reader. In correspondence with Jonathan Franzen discussing Wallace's second book, *Girl with Curious Hair*, Wallace stated: 'I do not feel even the hint of an obligation to an entity called READER—do not regard it as his favor, rather as his choice, that, duly warned, he has expended capital/time/retinal energy on what I've done.'<sup>22</sup>

This attitude can very much be seen in both *Broom* and *Girl*, books that are, by and large, self-contained and happy for the reader to take them or leave them. Hayes-Brudy also says of the novel that it 'does not reveal any intelligible truth at its close', lacking, as it does, a strong emotional core or, to put it crudely, a point for the reader to think about afterwards.<sup>23</sup> *Girl* shows the beginnings of this gradually changing. For example, while the various stories parody and play with different literary styles, some characters are given more of a genuine emotional element that the reader can invest in, at least compared to the characters in *Broom*.

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<sup>22</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 145.

<sup>23</sup> Hayes-Brudy, *Consider David Foster Wallace*, p. 32.

In the opening story 'Little Expressionless Animals' Julie and Faye are in a relationship. The pair come up with a game of inventing 'explanations' for why Faye is a lesbian that she can tell the people whose reaction she's worried about. The 'explanations' carry the same comic philosophy of *Broom*, but the relationship between Julie and Faye is developed for its own sake rather than solely as a device for Wallace's jokes and parodying. For example, before the events of the story Julie, along with her autistic brother, is abandoned besides a road by their mother, beginning their strange childhood which has ultimately made Julie an unbeatable contestant on the gameshow JEOPARDY! In *Broom*, one could imagine Wallace quickly moving on to play with the ideas he is setting up, but here he explores more of the characters' reactions to the bizarre situations he puts them in:

"I can't believe you don't hate her."

Julie throws a pebble. "Except I don't, Faye."

"She abandoned you by a road because some guy told her to."

Julie looks at the divot where the pebble was. The divot melts [...] "He made her leave *him* [the brother]. I think she left me to look out for him. I'm thankful for that.<sup>24</sup>

Exploring how the two try to come to terms with Julie's past already makes them more fully realised than some of the mostly comic characters in *Broom* such as Bloemker or Bombardini. Faye's insistence on blaming Julie's mother is as understandable as Julie's reluctance to do so and hate a parent she only faintly remembers. They are very human reactions to the strange scenario. When the couple come up with the 'explanations' towards the end of the story, it is also in the context of a male character's dismissal of Julie to his psychiatrist: 'I think she's one of those political lesbians. You know the kind? The kind with the anger?' (*GCH*, p. 20). Julie and Faye's game is a real reaction to pressures

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<sup>24</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989; London: Abacus, 2012), p. 11. Hereafter referred to as (*GCH*, p.-).

they feel, and shows in *Girl's* opening story how rapidly Wallace's talent and skill for writing fiction was developing.

One of the first challenges Wallace faced to his early thinking was from his editor Gerry Howard. While encouraging him to change the ending of *Broom*, Howard, advised him to consider 'the physics of reading', the experience a reader has of a novel, with all the realities of that reader's life.<sup>25</sup>

I think your attentive readers are going to feel cheated the way you end things, and you cheat yourself as well of the opportunity to write a brilliantly theatrical close to the book. All I'd say is, don't deny yourself and your readers some basic satisfactions on an exceedingly abstract principle - - one that I'm sure you could accommodate.<sup>26</sup>

Although Wallace refused to change the ending, the physics of reading became an idea he would engage with as much as Total Noise throughout the rest of his career. In identifying Wallace's artistic ideas and attitudes, critics have often pointed to a small group of texts he wrote towards the end of the 'apprentice' phase of his career.<sup>27</sup> The novella that ends *Girl*, 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way' is read along with the essays 'E Unibus Pluram' and 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young' as a kind of combined manifesto of Wallace's mature artistic beliefs.<sup>28</sup> However, there are problems with this view.

Primarily, it is too simplistic to see these pieces of work as Wallace conclusively defining a single attitude that he would follow for the rest of his career. Wallace's ideas continued to develop significantly with every book he wrote. Even in his mature period, one

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<sup>25</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Gerry Howard to David Wallace, page 5, dated 10 January 1986.

<sup>27</sup> By 'apprentice' phase, we mean the work before Wallace started focusing his attention on *Infinite Jest*, including his first two books, the collaborative book *Signifying Rappers* he wrote with Mark Costello, and a handful of essays.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Kasia Boddy's essay in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*.

can see the changing focus to a Joycean interest in the everyday from *Infinite Jest* to *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*.<sup>29</sup> Wallace also did not trap himself within the ideas he explored at this early stage. Very soon afterwards, his book on hip-hop, *Signifying Rappers*, displays much of the ‘pervasive cultural irony’ he strenuously criticises in ‘E Unibus Pluram’ (*SFTNDA*, p. 67). Finally, the aim of all three of these texts is much more to distance himself from his previous thinking and identify problems than to set out a grand new path his fiction will pursue. It would be more accurate to see them as a statement of intent for an, as yet, unclear direction he wished to proceed in. The ending of ‘Fictional Futures’ does not claim to know what great art should come next, but faith in the fact that ‘if fashion, flux and academy make for thin milk, at least that means the good stuff can’t help but rise’ (*BFN*, p. 68).

Nonetheless, these texts are crucially important, and we can certainly see Wallace’s engagement with the physics of reading, a literal reader on the other side of a relationship with the writer, begin here. Such as, for example, in the hypothetical ‘average U.S. lonely person Joe Briefcase’, who features prominently in Wallace’s discussion of television in ‘E Unibus Pluram’.<sup>30</sup> In D.T. Max’s interpretation, it is also the thought behind the ending of ‘Westward’, which he calls ‘a proffer of peace to the reader’.<sup>31</sup>

Over its one hundred and fifty pages, however, ‘Westward’ looks back, not forward, into Wallace’s work so far. It is aggressively metafictional, pushing the techniques and styles Wallace had used so far to breaking point and beyond. Frequent authorial interruptions are given increasingly maddening titles like ‘I Lied: Three Reasons Why The Above Was Not Really An Interruption’ like a joke constantly repeated and growing sadder every time (*GCH*, p. 334).<sup>32</sup> This effect is exacerbated by statements like ‘if this were a

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<sup>29</sup> We will see this in more detail in chapters four and five.

<sup>30</sup> David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 93.

<sup>32</sup> Incidentally, this is how Jonathan Franzen described *Infinite Jest*.

piece of metafiction, which it's NOT' (*GCH*, p. 264). Franzen's description of the novella in a letter to Wallace is certainly crass, '[it's] as if the reader had walked into a party full of "asshole[s],"' but indicates how it can be an antagonising experience to read.<sup>33</sup> Many parts of it blur the line between Wallace's fiction and non-fiction, so that at times the reader may think it is one of his essays. Take, for example, one of the digressions where Wallace is discussing the many ideas behind the novella: 'the way to make a story a Funhouse is to put the story itself in one. For a lover. Make the reader a lover, who wants to be inside' (*GCH*, p. 331). Whether a contrivance or not, 'Westward' feels like less of a professionally crafted story than the others in *Girl*. We see the writer at work, with all his notes and anxieties present in the text.

Adam Kelly's description of Wallace's later work as 'ask[ing] what happens when the anticipation of others' reception of one's outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self' is fitting for 'Westward' as well, which shows us what happens.<sup>34</sup> As we read through the novel-length story, mostly set in the appropriate venue of an airport as the plot inches forward over tens of pages, there is a strong masochistic feeling in how Wallace drags the reader with him on an attempt to detonate metafiction in his interrogation of John Barth's seminal story, 'Into the Funhouse'.<sup>35</sup> This element seems especially appropriate considering the circumstances of Wallace's writing the story, having to rewrite the entire piece under enormous pressure just a week before the deadline after the original 'manuscript [...] was stolen from the trunk of Wallace's beat-up Nissan.'<sup>36</sup>

This was also a very difficult time in Wallace's life, both personally and for his writing, as he became completely dissatisfied with his work thus far. What the combined

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<sup>33</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 98.

<sup>34</sup> Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction' in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 134.

<sup>35</sup> Even more so when we consider how Barth was one of Wallace's early heroes of fiction writing: 'one of the original stars in Wallace's firmament'. [Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 90.]

<sup>36</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 98.

manifesto shows is Wallace trying to move past all his previous assumptions as a writer towards something else, and Philip Coleman is right to consider 'Westward' as serious 'as anything else Wallace wrote in his desire to get us to think about the relation between literature and the world in which we read it.'<sup>37</sup> While the novella is more about Wallace than any reader, it is the first instance of him engaging very seriously with this relation, and its ending comes as something of a shock, making a promise for the future of his career out of the ashes of its past. The narrative digresses, directly telling the reader not to worry if the characters will ever reach their destination: 'so trust me: we will arrive. Cross my heart. Stick a needle. To tell the truth, we might already be there' (*GCH*, p. 372). Then, in the final sentences, Wallace uses metafiction not for irony or showmanship, but seemingly to make a sincere statement to the reader:

Listen to the silence behind the engines' noise. Jesus, Sweets, *listen*. Hear it? It's a love song.

For whom?

You are loved (*GCH*, p. 373).

What else can 'the silence behind the engines' noise' be but the core of the fiction, its purpose for existing. It is the most explicit statement in all of his writing from this period of development that he has broken away from his previous work and embraced an entirely new driving force for it. Of course, this change was not as clean-cut as the quote might imply. Wallace's statement to Franzen about feeling no obligation to a reader (referred to earlier) was written after *Girl's* publication, and the ending itself is certainly jarring considering the book itself does not show much of the emotional note it ends on, but it is key to the direction Wallace's work heads in afterwards.

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<sup>37</sup> Philip Coleman, 'Consider Berkeley & Co. Reading 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way' in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 63.

A later story, 'Octet', works in many ways as a kind of sequel to 'Westward'. In it, an attempt at 'a cycle of very short belletristic pieces' breaks down into a discussion of the writer attempting them.<sup>38</sup> Wallace even uses the second person, 'you are, unfortunately, a fiction writer', to cast the reader in the role of the writer. Now, as we continue to read the story, we are not learning about the writer's problem but our problem, mixing the relationship between writer and reader. In a charmingly comic way, Wallace describes the anxieties we, as this writer, feel as to whether our work is worth the reader's time, forcing us to break the fourth wall and ask them. The mystique and authority we presumably associated with a prominent literary writer are swept away to reveal the frustrating vagueness of literary ambitions: 'they're [the cycle of pieces] supposed to compose a certain sort of "interrogation" of the person reading them, somehow [...] her sense of something, etc. . . . though what that "something" is remains maddeningly hard to pin down' (*BIHM*, p. 123). By showing the less impressive truth behind the myth of the great literary artist, the writer is left 'almost naked. Worse than naked — more like unarmed. Defenceless' (*BIHM*, p. 131).

This admission here also provides us with an insight into what we discussed briefly in the introduction: the difficulty of articulating what Wallace's ambitions for his work were, despite the urgency with which he felt them. It is no accident that Wallace frequently spoke in later interviews about fiction's ability to discuss things that could only be expressed through narrative. This informed much of his mature view on fiction and we will explore it in depth in chapter five.

Although Wallace's use of the second person in 'Octet' is a brilliantly executed device, it is potentially problematic. The story is asking whether the reader is willing to invest in and trust Wallace's work, when they 'probably [want] to simply come home and put [their] feet up at the end of a long day', ending in the direct challenge, 'so

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<sup>38</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999; London: Abacus, 2013), p. 123. Hereafter referred to as (*BIHM*, p. -).

decide' (*BIHM*, p. 133,136). Incorporating the reader into the world of the writer, making us experience his position and why he needs to ask us this question, is either a communicative device helping us understand the question being asked of us, or an example of the same 'interhuman manipulation and bullshit gamesmanship' that exists in place of simply saying '*Do you like me? Please like me*' (*BIHM*, p. 131 Original Emphasis). However, to understand what Wallace is doing here we need to consider whether the two are necessarily mutually exclusive.

In the story, Wallace is using metafiction in an attempt to solve the issues with metafiction that he found so problematic. Earlier, we saw how he came to the conclusion that metafiction and his own early work existed only to demonstrate how clever the writer was and to force the reader to recognise this in a way that was essentially hostile, as he implied when he reflected on his first two books:

I'll catch myself thinking up gags or trying formal stunt-piloting and see that none of this stuff is really in the service of the story itself; it's serving the rather darker purpose of communicating to the reader "Hey! Look at me! Have a look at what a good writer I am! *Like me!*"<sup>39</sup>

It was entirely self-contained, as Wallace often noted in comments such as 'postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy'.<sup>40</sup> This idea is expressed in 'Westward' when the nature of fiction as seducing the reader is discussed, with postmodernism represented by 'somebody that keeps saying 'here I am, laying you' (*GCH*, p. 330). Instead, 'a story ought to lead you to bed with both hands', embrace the nature of seduction by charming the reader (*GCH*, p. 330). In 'Octet', Wallace is using the possibilities of metafiction for the purpose he identifies metafiction as having discarded. The use of the second person may well be a manipulative tactic, but it is

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<sup>39</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 24-5. Original Emphasis.

<sup>40</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 48.

used to charm and seduce the reader, to make them want to continue reading after the final line challenges them to decide. After all, 'Octet' appears roughly halfway through *Brief Interviews* and if it has succeeded the reader will want to continue through the rest of the collection. Furthermore, in another interview, Wallace comments that with the mass presence of media 'I'm far less trusting of standard narrative techniques'.<sup>41</sup> If standard narrative was tainted and postmodern narrative lead to a dead-end, then creating something new out of both of them was a way to recapture an authentically sincere narrative. Ultimately, this is what Marshall Boswell is talking about when he writes of the development of Wallace's work and thinking:

He [Wallace] does not merely join cynicism and naiveté: rather, he employs cynicism — here figured as sophisticated self-reflexive irony — to recover a learned form of heartfelt naiveté, his work's ultimate mode and what the work "really means" a mode that Wallace equates with the "really human".<sup>42</sup>

The progression across these endings, from *Broom* to 'Westward' to 'Octet', show Wallace's attitude and intentions as a writer changed dramatically as he engaged with the physics of reading. It is also important to make clear that this was not an academic idea where the reader exists in a kind of vacuum. The description in 'Octet' and in other works, particularly his two collections of essays, make clear that he always saw this in terms of the actual person on the other end, someone who had to pay for the book, and read it after working all day and being tired and having an entire world of their own that did not center around appreciating Wallace's fiction. We must keep these ideas in mind as we approach the ending of *Infinite Jest*, which can infuriate readers and has been debated about ever since the novel's publication in 1996.

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<sup>41</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 73.

<sup>42</sup> Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 17.

Matt Tresco writes that for a novel of *Infinite Jest's* magnitude we ask ourselves at the end of it “why did it stop exactly where it did?” and “could it have continued for another thousand pages?” to which second question we may be tempted to reply both yes and that it should have done.<sup>43</sup> If Gerry Howard was worried that the ending of *Broom* would be too antagonizing towards the reader after so many pages, the problem faced by Michael Pietsch, Wallace’s editor for the second novel, was a hundredfold given that it was such a colossal text. While the major questions (will Don Gately survive?<sup>44</sup> will Hal Incandenza survive his hellish withdrawal? will the master copy of the Infinite Jest film be found?) are not answered, the ending has much higher ambitions and artistic functions than that of *Broom*. As mentioned previously, Wallace described the ending as being supposed to ‘hum and project’ past the last sentence, echoing to provide some sense of continuation.<sup>45</sup> This is true, but what the ending seems to be doing more than this is rejecting the idea that these questions need to be answered, and instead remaining true to the novel’s theme of addiction. To understand this, we need to examine our understanding of addiction itself.

Firstly, it is important to make clear that addiction is not solely restricted to alcohol and drugs and that, increasingly, addiction is present in many elements of modern life. In the Journal of Applied Social Science, Jawad Fatayer defines addiction as ‘a pathological love between the person and the addictive object, be it a substance (such as nicotine, food alcohol or heroin, etc.) or an event (such as gambling, work, love, or the internet, etc.)’<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Matt Tresco, “‘Impervious to U.S. Parsing’: Encyclopedism, Autism and *Infinite Jest* in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 121.

<sup>44</sup> However, it could be argued that we are told Gately will survive from the opening chapter set chronologically after he is shot, where Hal mentions ‘Donald Gately and I dig up my father’s head’ (*IJ*, p. 17).

<sup>45</sup> Anne Marie Donahue, ‘David Foster Wallace Winces at the Suggestion that his Book is Sloppy in Any Sense’ in Stephen J. Burn (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 72.

<sup>46</sup> Jawad Fatayer, ‘Addiction Types: A Clinical Sociology Perspective’, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23549240>>.

Not only is addiction disturbingly prevalent in different forms, it also cannot be dismissed as a phase or problem that is overcome and forgotten.<sup>47</sup> In an article on the epidemic of obesity<sup>48</sup> in America in *The American Journal of Nursing*, Judi Daniels points to several studies showing the relatively low success rate of weight loss programs in the long term, with one 'review of 17 studies [finding] that only 15% of dieters had maintained all or a significant portion of their weight loss after five years'.<sup>49</sup> Similar figures can be found for AA, where a study made by the organisation found that only 33% of a group of 8,000 North American members had remained sober for over ten years.<sup>50</sup> These figures are important to bear in mind, as they tell us that those who successfully beat addictions completely are very much in the minority.<sup>51</sup> This is something that both Wallace and *Infinite Jest* are very aware of. To write a novel about addiction that simply ends would be a gross failure, as addiction, whether succumbing to it or resisting it, is really something one lives with for the rest of your life, a fact which contextualises the exhortation that ends support meetings: 'just as in AA, the NA meeting closed with everybody shouting to the air in front of them to Keep Coming Back because It Works.'<sup>52</sup>

Narratively, it seems almost cruel to describe Gately's heroic struggle in the hospital to endure 'emergency-type pain, like scream-and-yank-your-charred-hand-off-the-stove-type pain' without accepting painkillers, before ending the novel on the scene of his lowest

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<sup>47</sup> Food Addiction Research Education (FARE) publishes information on how foods can 'release endorphins and 'feel-good' neurotransmitters that can temporarily relieve emotional discomfort, anxiety and depression' in a 'process similar to drug addiction'. One only has to look at the marketing and position in culture of food, gambling products, mobile games even subscription based entertainment services have moved consumer culture away from one-off purchases to a repetitive model. This does not mean that using any of these products automatically creates addiction, but highlights the large presence of addictive behaviours in modern culture, as well as the increasing relevance of *Infinite Jest*. <<http://foodaddictionresearch.org/question-and-answer/what-is-food-addiction/>>.

<sup>48</sup> As Wallace does, and as is elaborated on in footnote 47, we are including food and obesity as another instance of addiction as much as addiction to alcohol or drugs.

<sup>49</sup> Judi Daniels, 'Obesity: America's Epidemic', <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29745999>>.

<sup>50</sup> Kevin Gray, 'Does AA Really Work? A Round-Up of Recent Studies', last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://www.thefix.com/content/the-real-statistics-of-aa7301>>.

<sup>51</sup> In fact, it may even be death that stops this minority from relapsing themselves if we were to hypothetically follow all addicts in recovery for long enough.

<sup>52</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (1996; London: Abacus, 2013), p. 504. Hereafter referred to as (*IJ*, p.-).

moment, but it shows a clear priority in the book's focus (*IJ*, p. 815). To make the very last sentence the image of Gately literally 'washed up', 'flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand', is to remind the reader that this is the moment that he will always be tied to in his addiction, whether he relapses or not (*IJ*, p. 981). No matter how rehabilitated Gately continues to be, at this moment in the hospital because he defended the residents of Ennet House, he will always have to wrestle and live with the worst consequences of his addiction. The emotional note overwhelms any consideration of plot, even though, like *Broom*, the novel has been moving towards a climax of plot threads and characters converging on the main location of Ennet House and the Enfield Tennis Academy. To bring in another piece of AA belief, this cut-off to over 1000 pages of narrative development functions as an aggressive dismissal of the importance of the political and social drama that has been unfolding, reaffirming that one should surrender themselves to a Higher Power and whatever the circumstances given to them, stay sober.

We can also understand it in terms of the book being structured, as Wallace describes it in an interview, like a 'Sierpinski Gasket'.<sup>53</sup> David Henry interprets this in terms of the trauma of the absences in the structure:

The "absences" in the Sierpinski gasket, in addition to representing the absence of key episodes within the narratives of the protagonists, also relate to the depictions of psychological oblivion, either willed or unwilled, that pervade the novel.<sup>54</sup>

Representative of blocked out or painful memories, either through trauma or substance abuse, absences are prominent in the novel. In this sense, the inconclusive ending becomes a climax that is too painful to be included from any of the characters'

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<sup>53</sup> David Foster Wallace and Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*, last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKCMTHX5WHk>>, 1:53-1:56.

<sup>54</sup> David Henry, 'Infinite Jest: Triangles, Cycles, Choices and Chases' in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 93.

perspectives. This certainly would be understandable considering the direction the story is headed in. Not to mention the suffering Hal and Gately are experiencing towards the end of the novel, there is every indication that there will be a violent clash as Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents (A.F.R) descend on the Enfield Tennis Academy. There is also the potential consequences of the Infinite Jest film being distributed. We are given the macabre hint by Marathe that the master copy of Infinite Jest may have been buried with the director, Hal's father, James Incandenza. In the novel's opening chapter, which is set after the novel's present-day narrative, Hal states: 'Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head' (*IJ*, p. 17).<sup>55</sup>

Both the perspective of representing addiction and the perspective of representing trauma indicate that the conclusion of the plot of the novel simply is not what the reader should be focusing on. The ending acts as something larger in a way that *Broom's* ending does not. Wallace's statement that 'straight narrative feels contrived to me' indicates not just an aesthetic preference but his artistic ambitions for his work and the way in which we can understand Wallace as a realist (that will be discussed further on) who recoiled from fiction being contrived.<sup>56</sup>

To further understand this, we can look at another example. Comparing two essays from his second collection *Consider the Lobster*, 'The View from Mrs. Thompson's' and the title piece, demonstrates again both that Wallace could produce the more conventional, technically adept ending when he wanted to, but also why on so many occasions he did not. We have already discussed how, despite its unconventionality, the ending of *Broom* also shows this ability for a formally satisfying and technically adept ending, but 'The View from Mrs Thompson's' provides an even clearer example. The essay discusses the

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<sup>55</sup> The majority of the novel's plot takes place during the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment. The opening chapter takes place in a later year.

<sup>56</sup> Matthew Gilbert, 'The "Infinite Story" Cult Hero behind 1,079-Page Novel Rise the Hype He Skewered' in Stephen J. Burn (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 78.

reaction to the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. in Wallace's Midwestern town of Bloomington, Illinois. Throughout its twelve pages, it seems to be another one of Wallace's reportage essays, like 'Big Red Son' that opened the collection, describing simply what Wallace saw and felt when the attacks happened. Then in the very last sentence, Wallace reveals the argument that has been quietly building throughout, tying together every detail in a succinct, powerful point:

I'm trying, rather, to explain how some part of the horror of the Horror [9/11] was knowing, deep in my heart, that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more my America, and F—'s [name withheld], and poor old loathsome Duane's, than it was these ladies.<sup>57</sup>

It's a remarkable technical feat of writing on its own, and beautifully fused with a genuine emotional purpose. After describing the older ladies' innocent, wholly sincere reaction to the footage shown on television, contrasted with his own, full of ironic, cynical observations he cannot help but notice, he combines them to make a cultural, political point concerning American society that is all the more powerful for being made in a single sentence.<sup>58</sup>

'Consider the Lobster', on the other hand, has a much more familiar Wallace-style ending. Wallace's coverage of the Maine Lobster Festival quickly gives way to a discussion of the ethics of boiling a lobster alive for a meal (and by extension the ethics of the entire meat industry): 'is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?' (*CL*, p. 243). After an exploration of animal neurology, the utilitarian ethical theory of Peter Singer, and the latest scientific research behind the various 'humane' ways to kill and cook a lobster, Wallace concedes the fact that none of this is going to change

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<sup>57</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster* (2005; London: Abacus, 2013), p. 140. Hereafter referred to as (*CL*, p.-). The 'Horror' is the term Wallace uses for the 9/11 attacks throughout the essay.

<sup>58</sup> Wallace talks and expands on this point in the ZDFmediatek interview in Germany. Last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qYwk37FOPQ>>.

anything about either his readers' or his own eating habits.<sup>59</sup> This may open the essay up to the criticism that its discussion is little more than navel-gazing, but Wallace addresses this too in reference to the title of the magazine that commissioned the article, *Gourmet*: 'after all, isn't being extra aware and attentive and thoughtful about one's food and its overall context part of what distinguishes a real gourmet?' (*CL*, p. 254). The point is not just of interest here, but an essential part of Wallace's late thought concerning the importance of simply paying attention. We will frequently see the importance of this idea throughout Wallace's work; see, for example, its central role in the *This is Water* 2005 Kenyon College graduation speech. Ultimately, while many may share with Wallace real interest and concern in the issue, the reality that nearly all are still going to eat and enjoy meat and lobster is quietly, and somewhat sadly, acknowledged in the final sentence: 'there are limits to what even interested persons can ask of each other (*CS*, p. 254).<sup>60</sup> A neat conclusion is refused because, just as in *Infinite Jest*, it would be false, a contrivance, a lie.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, to enforce this on the text can even be seen as an act of violence towards it, forcing it into an unnatural shape. The type of endings Wallace deployed throughout his work reveal his developing engagement with the reader and the physics of reading; in Paul Jenner's phrase: 'his work is centrally concerned with the question of our attention.'<sup>62</sup> While their unsatisfying nature demanded more from the reader, they created texts more

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<sup>59</sup> Max includes the detail that Wallace 'enjoyed two lobsters for dinner' himself one night at the festival, and describes Wallace's awareness of his exploration having no practical effect in 'there was pleasure in and of itself in expanding the fight against American complacency.' [Max, *Every Ghost Story is a Love Story*, p. 273.].

<sup>60</sup> Another indication of Wallace's very real engagement with a literal reader on the other end of his work is also evident here in the many questions that punctuate the final pages of the essays, necessarily rhetorical but nonetheless imbued with a feeling of sincerity and genuine interest ('That is, is your refusal to think about any of this the product of actual thought, or is it just that you don't want to think about it? And if the latter, then why not?' etc.) (*CS*, p. 254).

<sup>61</sup> Somewhat strangely, Wallace actually received a letter from PETA praising the article, even though he did not especially flatter PETA in it or share their hardline stance against eating lobster. Letter from Corina Wilder of PETA to David Foster Wallace, dated 21 September 2004.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Jenner, 'Don't Compare, Identify: David Foster Wallace on John McCain' in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 200.

worthy of the work s/he had to do in reading Wallace's writing. As will be discussed in the final section of this chapter, Wallace's understanding of himself as a realist was not in a purely mimetic sense, but in a way that also tackled 'the deeper project: what is it to be human?' and offered something by way of an answer.<sup>63</sup> In other words, Wallace offers a conversation rather than a mirror. To contrive a narratively satisfying ending would be to lie and break the trust he asks for in 'Octet'.

Perhaps, in this context, we can also see something tragically appropriate in the unfinished state of *The Pale King*, the product of questions Wallace had not finished grappling with, and a novel that 'hum[s] and project[s]' and echoes past its close with greater power than any other work in Wallace's canon.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Endless Moment**

In the story 'Good Old Neon' from Wallace's last collection, *Oblivion*, the narrator states that: 'what goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant.'<sup>65</sup> In the context of the story, which we later find out is built on the premise of 'David Wallace' trying to imagine how a successful, popular young person from his high school could end up committing suicide, the quotation is referring to the impenetrability of any individual's consciousness to another, making it impossible to truly know someone else simply from observing some of their outward behaviour (*O*, p. 180).<sup>66</sup> However, it is

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<sup>63</sup> Steve Paulson, 'To the Best of Our Knowledge: Interview with David Foster Wallace' in Stephen J. Burn (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 131.

<sup>64</sup> Anne Marie Donahue, 'David Foster Wallace Winces at the Suggestion that his Book is Sloppy in Any Sense' in Stephen J. Burn (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 72.

<sup>65</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion: Stories* (2004; London: Abacus, 2013), p. 151. Hereafter referred to as (*O*, p. -).

<sup>66</sup> We will return both to this point and this story in much greater detail in chapter five.

also interesting in reference to the way Wallace wrote fiction, which very often seems to be fighting this statement as much as possible and do more than barely sketch the outlines.

Often, his fiction seems to exist in a kind of stasis because of the way in which it focuses on and exhaustively describes a single moment or short event. We have already discussed how 'Westward' focuses on a near agonisingly slow wait in an airport and car journey, but, for another example, we can look at the scene in which Gately defends Ennet House from the gangsters who come for Randy Lenz. At its outset, Gately's perspective is described as 'not so much that things slow as break into frames', not only a description of how the few moments play out slowly in the text but setting up the paradoxical reading experience it creates (*IJ*, p. 608).<sup>67</sup> The description itself is evocative of an action movie; one can almost immediately recognise the trope of things 'slowing down' for the hero before the violence takes place. Other moments continue this use of 'thriller' style language, with lines like 'he's pretty sure this thing could put him down with one round' (*IJ*, p. 610). Yet, at the same time, Wallace is neither breaking the prose style of the chapter, nor speeding up the pace to meet the action scene conventions we now expect. The reader's experience of this scene is like being pulled violently forward while at the same time being held back in this slowly unfolding moment, perhaps an accurate representation of Gately's experience.<sup>68</sup>

If the idea of reflecting Total Noise and the fast-paced, ceaseless stream of information that we are subjected to in modern life, seems at odds with the technique of fixating on a moment here, the quote from 'Good Old Neon' is illuminating. In Gately's 'action hero' moment, Wallace is still trying to give us as much as possible of what goes on internally in these tense and violent few seconds, including the mundane but very

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<sup>67</sup> Paradoxes and double-binds are, of course, central to *Infinite Jest*, with one very funny example coming from the Academy's examination on 'The Politics of Contemporary Psychopathological Double-Binds' (*IJ*, p. 307).

<sup>68</sup> Bear this in mind for the final section of this chapter when we discuss Wallace's writing as a kind of experiential realism.

believable detail that ‘it occurs to Gately that if he’d pulled the instant spot-urine he’d wanted on Lenz this whole snafu wouldn’t maybe be happening’ and the darkly funny, ‘it’s impossible, outside choreographed entertainment, to fight two guys together at once; they’ll kill you’ (*IJ*, p. 612-3). By doing this, Wallace’s style can be seen to not just reflect Total Noise, but resist it, refuse to let the vast, complicated internal life that exists in a single moment be swept away without a fight. As Paul Jenner describes, it ‘suggests what we might call a Wittgensteinian therapeutic care to retrieve daily experience from its distortions.’<sup>69</sup> It affirms the meaning of every moment of thought and life in resistance to the popularity of the contemporary nihilist fiction that Wallace set himself in opposition against.<sup>70</sup>

This is also a development of the style of William Faulkner and Toni Morrison. Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Morrison’s later *Beloved*, both address the legacy of slavery in the American South as a story that must be told and retold again and again to have any hope of eventually conveying the truth of it. In both novels, the essential facts of the story, whether it is the history of Thomas Sutpen or Sethe’s murder of her baby to save her from slavery, are given early on. For *Absalom, Abaslom!*, the story the novel is telling is essentially given in one italicised paragraph on the third page:

*Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation [...] married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter [...] they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died*<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Paul Jenner, *Consider David Foster Wallace*, p. 208.

<sup>70</sup> See Wallace’s interview with Larry McCaffery in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* and essay ‘Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young’ in *Both Flesh and Not* for Wallace decidedly setting himself against the contemporary trend of young, nihilist seeming writers.

<sup>71</sup> William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1937; Vintage: London, 2005), p. 9.

In *Beloved*, it is the first chapter that gives us all the details the novel will return to, gradually shedding new light on them. In Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot*, he says of *Absalom, Absalom!* that 'Faulkner's present is a kind of tortured utopia of unending narrative dialogue informed by desire for a "revelatory knowledge." That knowledge never will come, yet that desire never will cease'.<sup>72</sup> The statement applies equally to *Beloved*, both novels returning again to the same key events from different perspectives, voices, memories, circling around that revelatory knowledge that can never quite be reached.

Wallace, of course, does not follow this structure in his fiction, but his focused attention on individual moments and events is a development of it. How he developed it for a different purpose is illuminated by Brooks' statement 'the recovery of the past—which I take to be the aim of all narrative'. Faulkner and Morrison are attempting this recovery of the past, trying to understand it and capture its meaning, but Wallace is firmly set on the recovery of the present. His narrative is an attempt to protect the meaning and importance of the present moment in a culture where irony, complacency, nihilism and an overwhelming amount of information threaten to wash it away.

A moment in *The Pale King* shows the importance of this. In a lengthy chapter on the history of Chris Fogle, one of the young workers at the IRS, Fogle describes a revelation he had in college watching a soap, *As the World Turns*, where the show is reintroduced after every commercial break with the announcement: '*you're watching As the World Turns*'.<sup>73</sup> After countless repetitions of this announcement, Fogle grasps the very literal meaning of it, that he is doing nothing, and watching as the world turns. The purpose of Wallace drawing this moment out is to hammer home the television's announcement not as symbolic, or 'any sort of humanities-type ironic metaphor but the literal thing he was

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<sup>72</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (London: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 312.

<sup>73</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 224. Hereafter referred to as (*PK*, p. -). Original Emphasis.

saying, the simple surface level' (*PK*, p. 224). He is at pains to make clear this scene functions entirely on the 'single-entendre principles' mentioned in 'E Unibus Pluram' as a purely literal experience (*SFTNDA*, p. 81). Even the detail that the narrator is 'still trying to watch *As the World Turns*' while he has his revelation further emphasises a commitment to presenting the moment in its entirety with as little literary contrivance as possible (*PK*, p. 226).<sup>74</sup>

Despite his early writing being strongly influenced by academia, this was the position Wallace moved increasingly towards in the final stages of his career. In interviews he talks less about literary theory and terms and more broadly about life experience and the role of literature. In the graduation ceremony speech, *This is Water*, his argument is to warn against the presumptions and close-mindedness higher education can lead us into rather than the advantages it offers: 'this is what the real, no-shit value of your liberal arts education is supposed to be about: How to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious'.<sup>75</sup> He also discusses in a wide-ranging interview for German television that concerns of postmodernism or large literary questions are not as important as finding 'what feels alive' when the actual writing takes place.<sup>76</sup> *The Pale King* is far from a simple book, but it does show this care to avoid traditional literary contrivance and truly present the lives of its characters as much as possible.

In both these examples from *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, we can see how Wallace's intense explorations of a single moment are essential in how we understand him as a realist. To do it for every experience of his characters would be impossible; the

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<sup>74</sup> Wallace also spoke about how he mostly abandoned writing argumentative essays because of a similar commitment to making sure the point was absolutely understood made them exhausting to write on *Charlie Rose*. Last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hm94gUBCih8>>.

<sup>75</sup> David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (London: Little, Brown, 2009), p. 60.

<sup>76</sup> ZDFmediatek interview in Germany, last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkxUY0kxH80>>.

narrator of 'Good Old Neon' also states 'it could easily take a whole lifetime just to spell out the content of one split-second's flash of thoughts and connections' (*O*, p. 151). But to do it for a few chosen ones was to get as close as possible to representing anyone's experience in the age of Total Noise, while simultaneously fighting the overwhelming flood of information and the culture it created. It is also what Wallace did with his essays, to point to ordinary experiences of life, a state fair, a cruise ship, a sports autobiography, and validate them as objects worthy of our close attention rather than derision, even requiring our close attention. We can see it as well in the closing statements of *This is Water*, asking us not to close our eyes to the flood of an overwhelming life, becoming ironic and dismissive and self-centered and ultimately lonely in a self-contained mind, but to maintain 'simple awareness—awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: "This is water." "This is water."'77

### **Wallace as Realist**

As has been discussed above, despite the unconventionality and verbosity of Wallace's style, one of the best ways to view his work is to understand him as a realist writer, a view he held himself: 'I've always thought of myself as a realist'.78 His distaste for what he called 'big R-realism' mainstream fiction was that it was a contrivance that did not accurately reflect our experience of reality today, as well as being a form that had been co-opted and drained of its meaning and seriousness: 'the big R's form has now been absorbed and suborned by commercial entertainment. The classical Realist form is soothing, familiar and aesthetic; it drops us right into spectatorship'.79 Wallace's realism

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<sup>77</sup> Wallace, *This Is Water*, p. 131-3.

<sup>78</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 60.

<sup>79</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 34.

operated in terms of the reader's experience rather than in a simplified style of prose. This is how the ideas of Total Noise and the physics of reading came together in Wallace's work, providing an experience for the reader that more accurately reflected life in an age of information overload. Kiki Benzon describes this idea:

Its mimeticism exists not on the level of representational "mirroring" – though detailed depictions of the material world are a constitutive element – but rather via the manner in which the texture, structure and tone of the narrative assumes the chaotic properties which pervade physical and cultural spaces.<sup>80</sup>

Although we may still see this manner of assuming the properties of physical and cultural spaces as another kind of mirroring, rather than dismissing the term as Benson does here; yet, as we saw in the previous section, our idea of Wallace as a realist becomes more complex when we examine how his work does not simply mirror reality. For while he dismissed fiction that failed to represent reality while claiming to do so, he was also not satisfied with fiction he saw to be doing nothing else than cold realism. One of his main objections to Bret Easton Ellis' work was exactly this: 'we'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is?'<sup>81</sup> Instead, for Wallace, fiction needed to offer something to the reader: 'art that's alive and urgent is art that's about what it is to be a human being' and, in some way, resists the forces that make it harder.<sup>82</sup> This active element Wallace wanted for his work, for it to truly offer something to the reader, is a crucial one we will continue to return to, particularly in comparison with Bret Easton Ellis in chapter three. While the idea of being a human being may sound vague, it indicates the

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<sup>80</sup> Kiki Benson, "“Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders”: Chaos and Realism in *Infinite Jest*" in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 112.

<sup>81</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 26.

<sup>82</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 130.

enormity and difficulty of Wallace's artistic ambitions, and we can perhaps better see the way Wallace represented and resisted the effects of Total Noise in the story 'The Soul is not a Smithy'.

The title refers to the ironically grand statement of artistic intent that concludes James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: 'I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.'<sup>83</sup> In opening this story with a title that directly states the doomed fate of such grand ambitions, Wallace seems to be showing his hand as to the literary worth of the story the reader is about to experience. He cannot create an alternative cultural conscience for America, one less damaging and difficult to be a human being in, he can only react to the one that exists.

Wallace presents the narrator's remembering of 'the story of how Frank Caldwell, Chris DeMatteis, Mandy Blemm, and I became, in the city newspaper's words, the 4 *Unwitting Hostages*' with frequent reflections on how the event relates to his disappointment with adult life (*O*, p. 67). In the style we should recognise now, these tangents represent the experience of memory and the narrator's daydreaming as a child in class when the event happened. Here we see Wallace's kind of mimeticism. The theme of the story emerges as the childhood 'nightmares about the reality of adult life', along with the disappointment and boredom of an ordinary adult life that in the narrator's father's case consists of spending '30 years of 51 weeks a year [...] sat all day at a metal desk in a silent, fluorescent lit room, reading forms and making calculations and filling out further forms on the results of those calculations' (*O*, pp. 103,105). It is here we find the second component to Wallace's realism in expressing to the reader a shared, universal cultural terror.

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<sup>83</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916; London: Penguin, 2000), p. 275-6.

Dealing with the boredom of ordinary, everyday life was a theme that Wallace grew increasingly interested in towards the end of his career, making it the focus of *The Pale King*, but in this story it is focused on this precise point of childhood dread. Wallace often talks in interviews about how fiction provides the best possible way to overcome the loneliness of being trapped within our single consciousness, and in sharing that he experienced this dread as a child, the story works to alleviate this loneliness for readers.<sup>84</sup> For, as Wallace notes in an interview about the story, ‘none of us talk about it because we all act like it’s just sort of something that we have to get through, which I suppose we do’.<sup>85</sup> It is much more in line with Franzen’s idea that Wallace dismissed in his early career, striving for ‘the nourishment of good fiction’.<sup>86</sup> Alleviating loneliness, sharing intimate fears that we all experience but do not express, these can be seen as contributions to the project of what it is to be a human being.

Another example would be *Infinite Jest* itself. In reference to the titular lethally entertaining tape, Wallace makes the comment that in the next few decades technology will advance to the point where virtual reality pornography will exist and asks, ‘what sort of resources [will we] have to cultivate in ourselves and in our citizenry to keep from, sort of, dying’ when the entertainment available is that powerful.<sup>87</sup> What sets fiction apart from so many other forms of entertainment, as we will examine in chapter two, is that it is not passively consumed and we could see the difficulty of reading *Infinite Jest* as encouraging active engagement with something, developing the kind of resources to resist drowning ourselves with passive entertainment.

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<sup>84</sup> I would also argue that a childhood fear of the boredom and responsibilities of the adult world is something nearly all of us experience to some extent.

<sup>85</sup> To the Best of Our Knowledge, last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAF5OgxN1d0>>, 10:20-10:30.

<sup>86</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 130.

<sup>87</sup> ‘Interview With Judith Strasser A’ in *David Foster Wallace: In His Own Words* [Disc 1], 3:30-3:40.

We may, then, be able to understand Wallace's realism as an experiential realism. Rather than the mirroring of mainstream realist fiction that Kiki Benzon described in the quotation beginning this section, Wallace attempts to portray the total experience, from the effects of the cultural moment to the culmination of one's thoughts, feeling, memories and beliefs in reaction to narrative events. We might compare the difference to mainstream realist fiction being similar to watching a film. We see the events occur as closely to the experience of physically watching them as the writer can achieve. Wallace, on the other hand, wants to portray the experience itself of the characters in the film.<sup>88</sup> If we remember the quote from 'Good Old Neon' earlier ('what goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant'), we know this is ultimately unobtainable, but it is what his fiction is striving towards (*O*, p. 151).

The difficult endings to his work, then, are very much part of this. To return to Peter Brooks, plot is defined as 'the organizing line and intention of narrative [...] a structuring operation' to give meaning and significance to events.<sup>89</sup> Plot or narrative is only present in fiction and does not naturally occur in life unless we impose it ourselves through structuring our memories or storytelling. Wallace's fiction, of course, has narrative and structure, but resists adhering to an artificial plot. In discussing the novel *Le Rouge et Le Noir* by Stendhal, Brooks says of the end 'with the fall of the blade of the guillotine, he puts an end to the artificiality of the plotted story.'<sup>90</sup> Wallace resists both the plot and the violent fall of the guillotine to end his fiction and bring a neat close to events. This is what he

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<sup>88</sup> If we extend the allegory, we could even say that Wallace's goals are in line with the virtual reality technology he warns us about. However the allegory breaks down here as the point is that literature allows us to remain aware of ourselves at the same time, precisely what entertainment like television and, one assumes, virtual reality, does not.

<sup>89</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 37.

<sup>90</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 87.

meant in statements such as ‘straight narrative feels contrived to me, both as a reader and as a writer’.<sup>91</sup>

Returning to ‘The Soul is Not a Smithy’ we can see all these components in play. In the story’s closing pages the mystery of the substitute teacher’s behaviour is not explained but expanded<sup>92</sup>, with the suggestion that his repeatedly writing ‘KILL THEM’ may not ‘HAVE REFERRED TO US AT ALL, THAT IT MIGHT, RATHER, HAVE BEEN [...] SOME OTHER TYPE OR GROUP OF PEOPLE ALTOGETHER’ (*O*, p. 110, original capitals). Nor is the narrator’s anxieties about his childhood fears and adult disappointments resolved. The final scene encapsulates them, with a memory of his father getting ‘permission to leave work early’ to attend his class President’s Day presentation, consisting of the children play-acting as adults (*O*, p. 113). The narrative of the story is simply the ongoing struggles of an ordinary man, similar to ones we perhaps share ourselves as readers.

In Wallace, fiction cannot offer an alternative to the reader, but it can refresh their attention, show them the struggles of another, offer both consolation and encouragement to continue in struggles for meaning or purpose. Understanding Wallace as a realist is a complex concept. It works through representing reality in the reading experience itself rather than through precise observation and description, as well as helping the reader to cope with a difficult reality. Essentially, it was the product of Wallace’s efforts to combine the possibilities offered by contemporary fiction with what he saw as a traditional purpose given to it, to ‘[apply] CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow despite the times’ darkness’ and risk ‘the rolled eyes’ for having such an aim (*SFTNDA*, p. 81).<sup>93</sup> Fiction alone could do this, no other art-form or medium offered the

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<sup>91</sup> Matthew Gilbert, ‘The “Infinite Story” Cult Hero behind 1,079-Page Novel Rise the Hype He Skewered’ in Stephen J. Burn (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 78.

<sup>92</sup> Recall the quote from Matt Tresco at the beginning of this chapter.

<sup>93</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 26.

same. It was more important than ever, for Wallace, that this role of fiction was championed, as other entertainment had never been so available as it now was.

## Chapter Two

### 'More Fun To Watch Than Anything You've Ever Wished On A Star Or Blown Out A Birthday-Cake Candle For'

Wallace and Entertainment

Television was a crucial influence, theme, cultural subject and presence in Wallace's life. It represented the ultimate form of the role and function of entertainment in the modern Western world, a never ending source of pleasure and fun that demanded nothing from its viewers. Moreover, in the cultural discourse of the 1980s/90s, television was perceived as the enemy of U.S. fiction, responsible for either drawing its readers away or eroding their capability to do the work of reading serious, literary fiction. Wallace himself stated:

The problem isn't that today's readership is *dumb* [...] just that TV and the commercial-art culture's trained it to be sort of lazy and childish in its expectations [...] it makes trying to engage today's reader both imaginatively and intellectually unprecedentedly hard.<sup>94</sup>

To show how important television was to Wallace we need to look no further than the the essay, 'E Unibus Pluram', subtitled: 'television and U.S. fiction', setting the two up as giants of American culture in dialogue with each other (*SFTNDA*, p. 21). In a time when alternative entertainments to fiction were so readily available, and, as Wallace often noted, were so much easier to enjoy, it was constantly necessary to defend why fiction was still important. Even as late in his career as his last short story collection, *Oblivion*, Wallace was still wrestling with the question of what literature could do that nothing else could, as we shall see in chapter five.

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<sup>94</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 22.

Entertainment was also one of his great subjects, most notably with *Infinite Jest*. Television has become inextricable from Wallace's image in popular culture. It challenged his very purpose as a fiction writer and was a great influence on him ('his TV watching was intense and extensive enough to worry his parents' Max tells us of Wallace as a child), but also because he saw it as one of the defining aspects of the time he lived in. In one of his first major essays, Wallace writes 'TV's as much a part of reality as Toyotas and gridlock. We quite literally cannot "imagine" life without it' (*BFN*, p. 42). It is another crucial subject we must examine in detail to understand his writing, and what drove his work.

Despite the above quote, Wallace did not go so far as to 'agree with reactionaries who regard TV as some malignancy visited on an innocent populace', and to blame television for a decline in the prominence of literary U.S. fiction (*SFTNDA*, p. 36). In Wallace's understanding, television, or any form of entertainment performs a similar role to fiction, as both are an antidote to loneliness: 'lonely people, at home, alone, still crave sights and scenes, company. Hence television' (*SFTNDA*, p. 23). Fiction may provide a higher, more meaningful remedy for loneliness, ('part of the fun for me was being part of some kind of exchange between consciousnesses' Wallace once said of reading fiction) but both still serve the same function in different ways, rather than being completely separate.<sup>95</sup> The differences, however, are very significant.

Firstly, watching television is, of course, a passive action, whereas reading fiction is an active one. 'Art requires you to *work*', Wallace argues in David Lipsky's book (the transcript of an extensive interview for a magazine article that was then cancelled), the challenge is to make the work worth it, so that the art is 'worth not watching TV for'.<sup>96</sup> Whatever the program, watching television requires little to no focused effort or

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<sup>95</sup> Charlie Rose, last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwfQI2LGhwc>>, 4:40-4:45.

<sup>96</sup> David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip With David Foster Wallace* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 174. Original Emphasis.

concentration. It is the perfect way to 'turn off' our minds, allowing us to solely react to something we have no participation in. Even commercial fiction intended only for entertainment requires our engagement and sustained concentration to consume. The television will keep playing no matter what we do, but if we stop reading, or read without concentrating, the 'program' literally stops. In this way, we can understand watching television to be an ultimately passive experience. However, Sonia Livingstone argues against this idea and instead talks about 'The Active Viewer':

Regarding television programmes as texts rather than stimuli—as multi-layered, subject to conventional and generic constraints, open and incomplete in their meanings, providing multiple yet bounded paths for the reader.<sup>97</sup>

While we can certainly agree that television programmes can be regarded as texts and as worthy of analysis as fiction, this does not necessarily make the process of consuming them active. When we form an opinion, analyse or interpret programmes in different ways as we watch them, this is still automatic reaction, even if we go on to explore the programme in more depth. In T.S. Elliot's famous phrase: 'we might remind ourselves that criticism is as inevitable as breathing', and does not change the fundamentally passive nature of consuming television programmes.<sup>98</sup> Wallace says of it in 'E Unibus Pluram' 'television's greatest minute-by-minute appeal is that it engages without demanding' (*SFTNDA*, p. 37).

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<sup>97</sup> Sonia Livingstone, *Making Sense of Television: The Psychology of Audience Interpretation* (1990; London: Routledge, 1998), p. 171.

<sup>98</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920; London: Methuen, 1960), p. 48.

Secondly, Wallace argues television can provide a substitute for elements of everyday life. Even if we believe fiction can do this as well, than at the very least television provides this substitution in a much more direct way. In a great phrase, Wallace describes this as the decision 'to sit out the enormously stressful U.S. game of appearance poker', whereby one can still enjoy social interaction without having to suffer the anxieties, difficulties and problems of it (*SFTNDA*, p. 23). In his editor's introduction to William S Burroughs' novel *Junky*, Oliver Harris describes how the book appeals to 'the reader hungry for the vicarious thrill of knowledge without the risk of experience.'<sup>99</sup> While we might understand fiction to act as a substitute for experience in this way, Wallace is not talking about anything as thrilling, but rather simple, mundane human relationships without 'the psychic costs of being around other humans' (*SFTNDA*, p. 22). What makes this idea of television as substitute for everyday life and human interaction so interesting is the radical changes that have happened in television in the two decades since 'E Unibus Pluram'.

Wallace's hypothetical everyman Joe Briefcase, 'watch[ing] way more than the average U.S. six hours a day' of scheduled programming still exists, perhaps in larger numbers than we might expect (a Nielsen report in 2014 found that the average American watches five hours of live television a day, with the number increasing as they aged).<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, the mainstream culture of television has transformed beyond recognition into a new model that largely resembles the one Wallace predicted in *Infinite Jest*. Streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, the limitless free availability of online torrent downloads, and the multiplicity of devices that provide home entertainment are the realisation of the 'InterLace Subscription Pulse-Matrix' and posted 'entertainment

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<sup>99</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Junky* (1953; London: Penguin, 2008), p. xviii.

<sup>100</sup> Average American Watches 5 Hours of TV Per Day, Report Shows, last accessed 12th January 2016, <<http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/average-american-watches-5-hours-tv-day-article-1.1711954>>.

cartridges' that provide viewers only with the shows they want to watch, whenever they want to watch them, however much they want to watch (*IJ*, p. 35). This is a radically different model to traditional television broadcasting, significantly cutting out advertisements and placing the scheduling control purely in the viewer's hands. Drawing on research and surveys in the late 1990s, Bob Mullen argued that scheduling was an important part of our experience of television: 'almost three-quarters in total, claimed that they watched the same programmes again and again, so knew their precise timings from repeated experience.'<sup>101</sup> Almost 75% of Mullen's research sample had a relationship with television that was defined by adhering to schedules set by the networks. That relationship has now significantly changed for many people, who are now responsible for their own relationship with television and how they wish to structure it. The purely passive entertainment enjoyed by Joe Briefcase has now become a constant exercise of active choice, similar to being able to choose a film at a multiplex cinema but amplified to a massive scale.

The second major difference is in the programming produced on television. While the vast majority of it is still rests on the same broad appeal 'to ensure as much watching as possible', there are many shows that aspire to be true productions of art in the medium (*SFTNDA*, p. 37). Wallace only had access to few shows of the same ambition at the time of writing the essay, David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* in 1990-1 for example, but what has often been called a television renaissance has produced an entire roster of such shows. Led primarily by HBO, with now famous examples such as *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, such shows completely disregard the principle of attracting as many viewers as possible. Wallace says of television that it 'is the way it is simply because people tend to be extremely similar in their vulgar and prurient and dumb interests and wildly different in their

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<sup>101</sup> Bob Mullan, *Consuming Television: Television and its Audience* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 65.

refined and aesthetic and noble interests', therefore any show that attempts to appeal to these latter interests necessarily limits its audience (*SFTNDA*, p. 37).

This is important because one of the key points that Wallace is making about television in the essay is that it is bound to the commercial principle of maximising viewership, which is directly at odds with any television show becoming art. Jason Mittell writes that from the very beginning of a programme being created, this principle dominates every aspect of the process: 'because of the extreme uncertainty in predicting future successes, producers and distributors focus every decision on maximizing the commercial appeal of programming'.<sup>102</sup> Mittell goes on to point out that great shows that go beyond purely commercial entertainment can come out of this process, but this tension is always present. Wallace addresses this tension in particular in his essay on David Lynch, coming to the conclusion that Lynch is a true artist precisely because he does not bind himself to catering to an audience in the wake of several commercial and critical failures:

A more interesting question ended up being whether David Lynch really gives much of a shit about whether his reputation is rehabilitated or not. The impression I get from rewatching his movies and from hanging around his latest production is that he doesn't, much (*SFTNDA*, p. 150-1).

Arguably, Wallace is paying greater attention to Lynch's filmmaking career than the television show *Twin Peaks*, but the point is still the same. It is Lynch's rejection of the commercial need to maximise viewership that makes him an artist, yet even Wallace admits this 'seems to me to be both admirable and sort of nuts' as it is impossible to separate filmed entertainment from commercial necessities (*SFTNDA*, p. 150). To briefly

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<sup>102</sup> Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 51.

look at a modern example: *The Big Bang Theory* is by far the most popular sitcom in the U.S., frequently dismissed by critics, yet achieving some of the highest viewing figures for any programme, with the season eight finale securing 14.3 million viewers according to Nielsen ratings.<sup>103</sup> It could be argued that whether any television programme is or could be considered art is irrelevant, but in 'E Unibus Pluram' Wallace, more than anything else, is arguing that it is important to consider what this activity we spend so much of lives doing actually is.<sup>104</sup> The question of whether television programmes are or can be art is central to this.

Therefore, with the major changes of how programmes are accessed and what programmes are available, the question is raised of how we can understand 'E Unibus Pluram' today, without condemning it to irrelevance after just twenty years. To do this, we can compare Wallace's thought and work with two of the most popular and culturally important shows of the last decade, the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* and the drama *Breaking Bad*.<sup>105</sup> These shows are especially ideal for this purpose because they are both extremely aware of their own medium, and are constantly playing with its conventions. Just as Wallace's work nearly always displays an alert self-consciousness about his readers, his medium and its perception, so too do these shows explicitly react and engage with both their medium and the shows that have come before them. The sitcom in particular is a quintessential format of television and *HIMYM* provides an excellent example of a major television network reflecting on and playing with it. First, however, we should look at

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<sup>103</sup> Ratings, last accessed 12th January 2016, <<http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/big-bang-theory-finale-ratings-1201490798/>>.

<sup>104</sup> Again, as we saw in chapter one and will continue to find, the idea that mundane aspects of our lives we might grow nearly unconscious of are worth, even demand, our careful attention is a crucial one for Wallace.

<sup>105</sup> To claim any show is one of the most popular or culturally important is obviously a less than objective claim to make. Many arguments could be made against the selection of *How I Met Your Mother* and *Breaking Bad* here, or that others would be more appropriate. However, their viewerships and presence in popular culture hopefully goes far enough that their suitability as examples for our purposes here can be agreed upon.

Wallace's understanding of entertainment in its purest form, expressed in the titular film of *Infinite Jest*, something powerful enough to entertain its viewers to death.

### **Infinite Jest V**

The movie that the A.F.R. seek as their '*samizdat*' is actually, according to the filmography of James Incandenza provided in the endnotes, the fifth version of *Infinite Jest*, (*IJ*, p. 318). What is perhaps surprising to a first time reader of the novel is that the film is not left to act as a MacGuffin, holding the plot in place without receiving much description itself. In two separate scenes, Wallace allows Molly Notkin and Joelle, the star of the movie, to describe some of what takes place in it. Molly's account describes Joelle being presented as

Some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure of Death, sitting naked, corporeally gorgeous, ravishing, hugely pregnant [...] explaining in very simple childlike language to whomever the film's camera represents that death is always female, and that the female is always maternal. I.e. that the woman who kills you is always your next life's mother (*IJ*, p. 788).

On first reading this, we may be inclined to agree with Molly's account of Joelle's reaction, who 'had a hard time believing it was even entertaining, let alone lethally entertaining' (*IJ*, p. 788). Joelle's own account hints to the movie containing more than this idea, 'I was in two scenes. What else is in there I do not know', although this is only a guess. If the movie is not conventionally entertaining, it seems fair to assume that the ideas at work in Joelle's role are what make it lethal (*IJ*, p. 938). The two scenes Joelle describes do not include the events Molly stated were in the film. The first scene involves Joelle and an 'androgynous' male recognising each other in a revolving glass door, endlessly rotating the

door to reach each other, and the second features her apologising endlessly to a camera set up to provide a 'crib's-eye view' (*IJ*, p. 939). The discrepancy between the two accounts forces us to concede we cannot know the complete events of the film, but Wallace is clearly giving us some idea as to what he thinks are the lethal elements of entertainment.

Marshall Boswell reads the events of the film with reference to Lacan, for whom all entertainment and pleasure is an attempt to fill the gap of 'maternal plenitude', making a film that completely satisfies this lack, lethal: 'now she is there for the viewer, providing the very pleasure the viewer has been seeking elsewhere all along. That viewer therefore is done with desire, and done with desiring.'<sup>106</sup> The film serves as a kind of holy grail in this reading, the film for which all other entertainment is an imitation. Once the film is viewed, the viewer has found what they were looking for and are now done with life. Boswell also provides the caveat that Wallace mocks this kind of thinking with the 'Inner Infant' group Hal stumbles upon while looking for an NA meeting (*IJ*, p. 803) In the scene, the Inner Infant support group role play as infants and parents, demanding their needs for constant affection are met. However, just because Wallace is mocking this line of thought does not mean he is dismissing it, and the scene could also be read as an condemnation of those who indulge their desires without restriction, as the *Infinite Jest* film causes its viewers to do.

If the film is not entertaining in the sense of being fun, then the only way we can understand it to be lethally entertaining is in it functioning on the core, foundational appeal of entertainment. Joelle's nickname of P.G.O.A.T (the prettiest girl of all time) is clearly important here, her beauty already having served a role in 'the Medusa-Odalisk thing', a previous film she made with James Incandenza (*IJ*, p. 940). Molly also refers to the

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<sup>106</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 131.

previous, failed attempts at the film featuring ‘actresses of lesser mystique and allure’ (*IJ*, p, 789). Clearly some form of the male gaze and an ancient Greek like idea of a woman as the embodiment of aesthetic beauty is at work here.

In addition to this, Joelle serves as the embodiment of death and motherhood, addressing each viewer as her child. In performing these three roles, we can see the viewer experience this movie creates as the convergence of pleasure, death and infant-like maternal longing. Philip Sayers identifies this as at least one of the essential elements of the film: ‘it is narcissistic identification with an infant that seems to provide one of the keys to the power of the Entertainment’.<sup>107</sup> As with Boswell’s reading, Sayers is arguing that the core of the film’s power comes from how it directly appeals to remnants of our infant selves, from which our desire comes from and all entertainment is an attempt to satiate. The viewer is caught in between death and life, Joelle serving as a figure that ends one life and is mother to the next, with tyrannical infant needs satisfied by a devoted mother, leaving them in perfect stasis.

N. Katherine Hayles reads the film from a different angle when she argues that ‘the film performs the recursive loops entangling mother and child, it offers the seduction of an *apology* for this recursivity, as if it were recursivity that is the problem rather than the deadly illusion of autonomy.’<sup>108</sup> This is fundamentally different from Boswell and Sayer’s interpretations, which essentially view the film as perfectly fulfilling a genuine human need or longing. For Hayles, the film is actually just an excellent production of smoke and mirrors, where the need for human relationships is reduced to that of mother and child (arguably the most fundamental one at it is responsible for an individual’s existence). That

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<sup>107</sup> Philip Sayers, ‘Representing Entertainment in *Infinite Jest*’ in Marshall Boswell (ed.), *David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing”*: *New Essays On the Novels* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 109.

<sup>108</sup> N.Katherine Hayles, ‘The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and “Infinite Jest”’, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057561>>. Original Emphasis.

relationship is itself apologised for. Joelle, as the mother figure apologises for bringing the viewer, who sees from the infant's perspective where the camera is placed, into life and therefore suffering. The viewer's own demands and desires are affirmed as the most important thing. This is the end result of the film as the viewer abandons all relationships with anything so that they can satisfy their desire to watch the film endlessly until they die.

The difference between the Boswell/Sayers and Hayles interpretations of the film raise an important question when considering Wallace and entertainment, is the real world necessarily better than a fictional one? It is hard not to consider, when reading the Boswell/Sayers interpretation, that the only problem with the film is a practical one as it stops its viewers caring about life, rather than the film being intrinsically bad itself. Indeed, when we reach the point where we can create fictional worlds that provide more happiness and fulfilment than reality could ever hope to offer, can we argue that this is a bad thing? With Hayles interpretation we can, and, I believe, this is closer to Wallace's own view. By maintaining that what the film provides is a trick, Hayles is arguing that human relationships are the true need that has to be fulfilled. As we will see in chapter five, Wallace maintains a similar position, seeing isolation as the ultimate suffering.

### **How I Met Your Mother**

Sitcoms make difficult subjects for analysis. Firstly, they work on an episode by episode basis, where overall consistency or themes are simply not their intention. Secondly, sitcoms aim to create stasis, a set up that is comforting in its familiarity and maintains the same sets, characters and relationships for as long as possible. This makes *How I Met Your Mother*, which ran from 2005-2014, fascinating because, although these elements are still present, it explicitly invites the viewer to look at it differently. Its playful use of unreliable narrators and memory, as well as meta-jokes and jokes that function through different

seasons referring to each other all invite the viewer to pay close attention and sets the show up as a new, more intelligent sitcom.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, it explicitly engaged with the sitcom format by sticking to its traditional production mainstays such as being filmed on a soundstage with an accompanying laugh-track. Many other innovative sitcoms such as *The Office* or *Scrubs* made the leap into a much more modern single camera, on location style of production, which has essentially evolved into its own genre now. By keeping with the traditional style of production, *HIMYM*'s aims seemed to be to reinvent the wheel, so to speak, rather than create something wholly new.

However, viewing the show in its entirety, it provides an interesting parallel with Wallace's diagnosis of 'TV's institutionalization of hip irony' and assuming of the radical techniques of postmodern literature (*SFTNDA*, p. 63). Wallace's point is that television's use of irony essentially functions as a smokescreen. By referencing its own crassness, TV shows congratulate the viewer on seeing through the hypocrisies or conventions inherent to the fundamental aim of attracting as many viewers as possible, thereby 'induc[ing] in [Joe Briefcase] precisely the feeling of canny superiority it's taught him to crave, and can keep him dependent on the cynical TV-watching that alone affords this feeling' (*SFTNDA*, p. 63). Whatever technique is used is just another way of achieving maximised viewership, or diffusing what might threaten maximised viewership. The nine-season arc of *HIMYM* presents something of an updated version of what Wallace is talking about here.

The premise of the show is a father telling the story to his two teenage children of how he met their mother. The story he tells takes place in our present, following his life with the classic sitcom group of friends in New York. The twist, and what provides much of

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<sup>109</sup> For example, season two ends in the middle of one character's by now well-established catchphrase. The meaning of the catchphrase changed slightly from a purely comic purpose to cheering up the lead character, Ted, after the events of the second season. The effect is completed by the third season picking up exactly where the final shot of season two ended mid-sentence. While it's not an especially complex joke or device, it does rely on precise continuity and is a good example of the playful boundary pushing that characterised the show.

the narrative drive of the show, is that the pilot episode tells the story of the main character, Ted, falling in love with a woman named Robin, who we learn at the end of the episode isn't the titular mother. In the last three seasons of the show, the story moves towards Robin marrying another of the central cast, Barney, with the last season even set entirely during their wedding.

The finale of the show then takes a huge narrative turn, speeding through major plot events: Robin and Barney's marriage, their divorce after three years, Ted finally meeting the mother, and the mother's death by cancer years into their marriage. These events lead to the reveal that Ted has been telling the story to his children as a way of asking for their approval to attempt another relationship with Robin. What makes this especially interesting is that the footage of Ted's children responding was filmed during the show's second season, before the actors playing them grew to adulthood. Therefore, this ending was planned years in advance while the show seemingly moved in a different direction for many seasons. The final shot of the show mirrors a corresponding shot from the pilot, creating a closed loop where the show returns to its beginning.

This creates the stasis that is fundamental to sitcoms, yet was seemingly challenged by the show. It is not that the show's innovations are invalidated, but that they have not altered the foundation on which sitcoms have always functioned. They become, like the postmodern irony Wallace identified, another way to secure maximised viewership in the comfortable, familiar stasis of sitcoms. For example, the famous episode "Bad News" from the show's sixth season features a device where numbers from fifty to one appear throughout in the background and dialogue. This creates a countdown until the end of the episode, when it takes an unexpected dramatic turn in the reveal that a character's father has died of a heart attack. Undoubtedly a formally inventive device, it is nonetheless arguable that it adds little to the episode and the show as a whole. As it will go unnoticed

by the majority of viewers, its purpose may be primarily to encourage engagement with the show, particularly through the increasingly important role of social media in building audiences.

The restricting conclusion that follows from this is that the limit of artistic development in at least most television shows, or show formats, is creating new ways to bring the viewer back into the same comforting familiarity that ensures the most people watching for as long as possible. We might even compare *HIMYM* in these terms to Wallace's first novel, stylistically innovative and entertaining, but without doing something fundamentally new and closed off into itself. Recall our discussion of *Broom's* ending in chapter one. Again, much of the novel's cleverness and wit, while being very impressive and entertaining, does not have much of a point to it beyond exploring what it can do. Take, for instance, the running joke with Bloemker of his unnecessarily elaborate sentences being punctured by Lenore and translated into much simpler statements: "I didn't understand any of that." "Your great-grandmother was more or less the ringleader around here." "Oh." (*BS*, p. 36). We could compare this to the running joke in *HIMYM* of the 'slap-bet', which continues over many seasons.<sup>110</sup> Both are certainly funny, but neither build to a larger purpose, representative of the novel's and the show's aim to invent new tricks for their own sake without a greater goal in mind.

## **Breaking Bad**

Many of the new wave of cable TV dramas, however, would bear better comparison with Wallace's mature work, as they reject the foundation of maximised viewership. These shows can often make for uncomfortable viewing, such as *Boardwalk Empire*, *Justified*,

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<sup>110</sup> To summarise, briefly, one character wins a bet against another, allowing him five slaps without consequence at any time of his choosing. The slaps take place across the rest of the show's entire run.

*Mad Men* and *Sons of Anarchy*, developing unique and niche tones that necessarily restrict their appeal to viewers. Perhaps no show has sought to discomfort its viewers more than *Breaking Bad*. While many shows have focused on an antihero, *Breaking Bad* sought to bring something new to this trend. Brett Martin, in his book on the production of acclaimed cable shows in the last two decades, describes it as ‘a radical extension of the antihero trend that had by then become the signature of the decade’s TV.’<sup>111</sup> The show achieved this by so deliberately manipulating and confronting the audience in their attitude to Walter White as the character progressed beyond antihero into villain.

The premise of the show is the transformation that begins when a fifty year old high school chemistry teacher, largely unhappy and disappointed with his life, is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. In order to provide money for his family after his death, he begins to manufacture crystal methamphetamine, leading to a gradual moral corruption as Walter experiences power for the first time in his life. At the start of the show, the viewer is very actively invited to sympathise with and support Walter. His motivations are very carefully developed and his empowerment is presented in a very thrilling way that it is easy to take pleasure in ourselves. The show’s first major antagonist, a ruthless and violent cartel boss named Tuco, has few redeeming features that might give us pause in wanting Walter to triumph over him. However, increasingly as the show progresses, moments of Walter’s triumph are juxtaposed with the consequences of his worst actions. We are not just challenged on our view of Walter but aggressively contradicted; in one moment invited to celebrate his growing power, the next, shamed for doing so. The viewing experience this creates constantly jolts us, keeping us awake rather than lulling us into pleasant, easy

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<sup>111</sup> Brett Martin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad* (London: Faber, 2013), p. 267.

viewing. Bob Mullen writes that ‘for much of the time TV is much more a barbiturate than an amphetamine’, yet, in the case of *Breaking Bad*, it is always methamphetamine.<sup>112</sup>

One example would be the conclusion to season four. The murder of Gustavo Fring, a mass scale methamphetamine distributor, is extremely satisfying. The adversarial tension that has built between Fring and Walter for two seasons is finally resolved, and Walter’s triumph is all the more impressive for Fring’s much greater power, resources and experience. Moreover, the bomb that kills Fring in a nursing home also miraculously harms no innocent people. Walter’s victory is intoxicating and entirely without consequence, until the final shot reveals the lily of the valley plant in his garden, the drug used to poison a child which persuaded his partner, Jessie, to side against Fring with Walter. This further creates a parallel with the end of season three, where Fring’s either ordered or complicit involvement in the murder of a child triggered the events that led to the adversarial relationship between Walter and Fring. Just as we celebrate his triumph, a single shot shows both the actions Walter is capable of and reduces him to the same moral level as Fring. We are effectively just supporting the victory of one criminal over another.

In an essay on the show, Neil Connelly calls this technique ‘deliberate disorientation’.<sup>113</sup> Discussing its narrative methods from his perspective as a novelist and creative writing teacher, Connelly emphasises how risky and difficult this technique is, with its danger of simply frustrating the audience so that ‘readers put books down. Viewers reach for the remote control.’<sup>114</sup> His description should remind us of *Infinite Jest*’s efforts to disorientate the reader by disrupting the narrative with its endnotes and difficult structure. The reader’s need to switch between their position in the main text and the endnote text

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<sup>112</sup> Mullan, *Consuming Television*, p. 74.

<sup>113</sup> Neil Connelly, ‘What Writers Can Learn from *Breaking Bad*: The Risks and Rewards of Deliberate Disorientation’ in Jacob Blevins and Dafydd Wood (ed.), *The Methods of Breaking Bad: Essays on Narrative, Character and Ethics* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015), p. 47.

<sup>114</sup> Connelly, *The Methods of Breaking Bad*, p. 49.

prevent them from becoming immersed in the narrative and forgetting that they are reading something written by another person. For *Infinite Jest*, this serves to emphasise the overwhelming presence of information in the prose, as well as keep the reader's attention on the active work required by them to make sense of the novel. In *Breaking Bad* also, the technique prevents a viewer from settling comfortably into passive spectating, so that they must keep reassessing what their opinions of the narratives and characters are. Connelly also elaborates on how this technique is present in many aspects of the show's production, such as 'the signature camera angles where the viewer is seeing the world from an odd perspective or vantage point—the bottom of an industrial vat, the inside of a floor, even from a few feet underground.'<sup>115</sup>

This technique is undeniably exciting, but often extremely uncomfortable for the viewer. This is how shows like *Breaking Bad* and others like it function in an entirely different way to the shows Wallace is talking about. The show even actively resists any feeling of comforting familiarity for the audience with each season having a very different dynamic from the others. Showrunner Vince Gilligan talked about this explicitly: 'TV is about stasis [...] it's hard to have characters on your TV show change when you are trying to provide a safe haven for the viewers [...] from the outset, "Breaking Bad" was very much intended as an experiment in change'.<sup>116</sup> We might even compare the work *Breaking Bad* forces its viewers to do to the work Wallace talks about in reading good literary fiction. However, unlike *Infinite Jest*, which cannot function in any reading as a gentle popular fiction read, *Breaking Bad* is still a television show and at least a portion of its audience seem to have reacted to it in a way we might associate more with a sitcom such as *HIMYM*.

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<sup>115</sup> Connelly, *The Methods of Breaking Bad*, p. 57.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with Vince Gilligan, last accessed 12th January 2016, <[http://www.salon.com/2012/07/23/vince\\_gilligan\\_ive\\_never\\_googled\\_breaking\\_bad/](http://www.salon.com/2012/07/23/vince_gilligan_ive_never_googled_breaking_bad/)>.

It is extremely difficult to talk about audience reaction to a TV show simply because it is extremely difficult to obtain reliable data about it. However, we can identify with certainty that a portion of the audience, instead of being made uncomfortable by the show, in fact drew from it the same comfort of other shows. A Survata survey found that 50% of viewers from their sample wanted the show to end in some kind of outright victory for Walter, albeit even if this only indicates some amount of support remained for the character.<sup>117</sup> The actress who played Walter's wife, Skylar, also wrote an article for the New York Times about the hatred directed towards her character online for frequently criticising Walter for his lies and, upon discovering them, his crimes.<sup>118</sup> Again, this evidence is not perfect for our argument as misogyny and other factors may play into this response, as the actress, Anna Gunn, mentions. However, the response was significant enough that the show itself responded in its final season, parodying the response towards Skylar and a way of interpreting the show through Walter assuming this perspective (violent towards her and dismissive of claims of morality) in a phone call to protect her from legal action for his crimes. From these points, we can at least see that for some *Breaking Bad* was a comforting power fantasy that the show itself never tried to be.

In an essay exploring the audience response to Walter, Meron Wondemaghen draws upon psychology to argue that we all possess elements of a psychopath's mental state. This, along with the relatable circumstances of Walter's life, makes him a powerful fantasy figure rather than a terrifying criminal: 'we have all employed the same behavioural traits (albeit for different reasons) that have ultimately led to his violent expression

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<sup>117</sup> Survata Survey, last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://www.survata.com/blog/what-will-happen-to-walter-white-we-collected-predictions-from-700-breaking-bad-fans/>>.

<sup>118</sup> Anna Gunn, 'I Have a Character Issue', last accessed 12th January, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/opinion/i-have-a-character-issue.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/opinion/i-have-a-character-issue.html?_r=1)>.

following a number of social insults.<sup>119</sup> This essentially combines Wallace's argument about television serving as a substitute for experience with the editor of *Junky's* statement about the viewer/reader seeking more extreme experiences and thrills from the safety of our home. At the very least then, to some viewers or to some extent for all viewers, *Breaking Bad* still serves the essential commercial purposes Wallace identified for television.

What this shows us is that even shows that strive consciously to avoid the blueprint of comforting familiarity to achieve maximised viewership, are still consumed in this way by at least some people. Wallace's theory proves not to be outdated by changes in television, but reaffirmed. Despite a widespread renaissance of television as an art-form, it continues to function on a fundamental level of soothing the audience. As Wallace shows by placing it alongside alcohol and drugs in *Infinite Jest*, entertainment is as much an addictive substance that can both combat loneliness and create an ultimately fatal desire. We will explore this in more depth in chapter four. Ultimately, Wallace's theory holds that fiction remains the best tool we have for addressing loneliness and communicating in ways we cannot in normal conversation. While it may be used as an antidote for loneliness, pursued to its conclusion, entertainment leaves us isolated, lost in a fictionalised world as the *Infinite Jest* film does to its viewers. We will explore this more in chapter five, for chapter three, we will discuss Wallace's context further by analysing how one of his contemporaries reacted to the same cultural environment and questions: Bret Easton Ellis.

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<sup>119</sup> Meron Wondemaghen, 'Walter White: The Psychopath to Whom We Can All Relate?' in Jacob Blevins and Dafydd Wood (ed.), *The Methods of Breaking Bad: Essays on Narrative, Character and Ethics* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015), p. 128.

## Chapter Three

### 'To Depict This Dark World And To Illuminate The Possibilities For Being Alive and Human In It'

Wallace and Bret Easton Ellis

In the development of David Foster Wallace studies so far, little has been explored regarding how his work compares with one of his most high-profile contemporaries: Bret Easton Ellis. This may not be surprising at first. Although they both shared a status as celebrity novelists in the United States, their reputations and literary styles are near polar opposites. While Wallace was generally regarded as a literary writer whose work possessed serious depth, there are still debates over whether Ellis' novels are entirely devoid of value. Naomi Mandel writes '[Ellis] has been hailed as timely and significant and dismissed as substanceless and derivative.'<sup>120</sup> Wallace was rarely less than earnest and sincere about literature and culture in public, whereas Ellis often mocked himself, his work and its reception. At times, criticism often seems close to forming oppositional camps around the two writers, such as prominent Wallace critic Marshall Boswell's damning comment on 'Ellis' preposterously benumbed prose'.<sup>121</sup>

This is unfortunate, however, as the two writers are much more deeply connected than is immediately apparent. Max hints at this with his only statement on the matter, claiming 'the debt to Bret Easton Ellis was one Wallace would never acknowledge.'<sup>122</sup> Max is referring here to the influence of the strong first person voice in *Less Than Zero* on Wallace at the beginning of his career, but the relationship between their work goes deeper

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<sup>120</sup> Naomi Mandel (ed.), *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>121</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 79.

<sup>122</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 73.

than this. Throughout their respective careers they repeatedly engage with the same themes and aspects of contemporary culture that troubled or fascinated them. Rather than compare Wallace with a writer who differed from his thinking by degrees, we can learn much more about him by comparing the entirely different perspective of Ellis. We will see in this chapter how the two essentially offer the either/or choice of 1990s American culture and literature and by extension, in many respects, the culture and literature of today. In its simplest form, this choice is that of either embracing the aspects of modern life that are dark and disturbing, in the case of Ellis, or trying to resist and replace them, in the case of Wallace. In fact, we can best understand the urgency and heart of Wallace's fiction by also understanding the alternative offered by Ellis. Despite how differently they are considered, the main difference between them is revealed to be one of artistic intent and style, exposing many shared paths of thinking in their fiction. Moreover, we can see the extreme differences between them as opposite reactions to the same ideas and questions.

For example, we have already discussed in chapter one Wallace's overarching ambition to move towards a third wave of modernism after modernism and postmodernism. In contrast, Ellis' work is a *destructive* rather than *constructive* response to the question of how literature should continue to develop. Naomi Mandel writes that 'Ellis's work teaches us that literary values [...] merit interrogation and demand, at times, revision', but this is an understatement.<sup>123</sup> They embrace the death of literary norms entirely. Instead of striving to find something to replace them, his novels operate in the absence left after postmodernism, functioning without narrative, conclusion or the values that had previously been upheld in fiction. The beginning of this can be seen in his debut, *Less Than Zero*, but much more so as his fiction developed in *American Psycho* and

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<sup>123</sup> Mandel, *Bret Easton Ellis*, p. 13.

*Glamorama*. This is explicit in Patrick Bateman's climatic monologue towards the end of *American Psycho*:

But even after admitting this—and I have, countless times, in just about every act I've committed—and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing* . . . .<sup>124</sup>

This is not just the expression of Bateman's state of mind, but also of an artistic manifesto of sorts underpinning the novel. *American Psycho* is a novel that functions without traditional framework, without the interior development of its narrator or any kind of value or lesson drawn from the events that occur. The root of this direction can be seen in Clay's desire to 'see the worst', 'see if things like this can actually happen', a feeling that drives much of Ellis' work.<sup>125</sup> Ellis himself indicates this by repeating the line in *Lunar Park*: 'Hadn't you once wanted to "see the worst"? the writer asked me. *Didn't you once write that somewhere?*'<sup>126</sup> Although *Lunar Park* is far from equating its character of Bret Easton Ellis with the real life novelist, the context of this line indicates a genuine reflection on the thought behind his work.<sup>127</sup> In his fiction, Ellis presses on to explore the wasteland at the end of literature, what is left after, in Wallace's phrase, the 'line's end's end' (*SFTNDA*, p. 82).

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<sup>124</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (1991; London: Picador, 1998), p. 377. Original emphasis. Hereafter referred to as (*AP*, p-).

<sup>125</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (1985; London: Picador, 2006), p. 160. Hereafter referred to as (*LZ*, p. -).

<sup>126</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *Lunar Park* (2005; London: Picador, 2011), p. 321. Hereafter referred to as (*LP*, p. -).

<sup>127</sup> At this point in the novel, Ellis has introduced the device of Bret Easton Ellis the character speaking to an inner voice referred to as the writer. These passages constitute the novel's most explicit reflections on Ellis's career and fiction.

There are many instances in Wallace's career where we can also see a drive to 'see the worst' at play. The title stories of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men's* exploration of misogyny and male behaviour are an immediate example, but *Girl with Curious Hair* also shows a revelling in dark themes similar to Ellis's thinking. The stories in *Girl* each parody dominant American literary styles, from the nihilism of writers such as Ellis himself in 'Girl with Curious Hair' to more established figures such as Philip Roth in 'Say Never' and Raymond Carver in 'Everything is Green'. We have also already seen how the concluding novella signalled Wallace's intent to part ways with metafiction. Each story is almost an act of literary patricide by a young writer frustrated by the dominant forms of fiction. While Ellis was exploring the novel in the absence of its conventions, Wallace was exploring the death of those conventions.

Another story in *Girl* shows Wallace too shared some of Ellis' interest in a numb, lifeless American character associated with wealth that has become the trademark for Ellis's fiction. 'Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR' uses geometric imagery and short, sharp clauses to describe cold corporate lives:

The divorced Account Representative, who remarked, silently, alone, as his elevator dropped toward the Executive Garage, that, at a certain unnoticed but never unheeded point in every corporate evening he worked, it became Time To Leave; that this point in the overtime night was a fulcrum on which things basic and unseen tilted, very slightly—a pivot in hours unaware (*GCH*, p. 46).

This was not an avenue Wallace continued to explore however, and the story is even one of the shortest in the collection. He had set himself against the mainstream popularity of young writers, Ellis especially, even in the first letter he sent to his agent, where he

claimed his first manuscript had been called ‘not only entertaining and salable but *genuinely good*, especially for its being the first major project of a very young writer (though no younger than some - - Ellis, Leavitt’.<sup>128</sup> This careerist distinction developed to a more fundamental one of artistic difference as Wallace’s thought matured between *Girl* and *Infinite Jest*. In interviews, Wallace began to indicate much more than a dislike or distaste towards Ellis’ fiction, instead describing it with the air of something genuinely dangerous or toxic: ‘you can see this clearly in something like Ellis’ *American Psycho*: it panders shamelessly to the audience’s sadism for a while, but by the end it’s clear that the sadism’s real object is the reader itself.’<sup>129</sup> This outspoken opposition, which Wallace did not attack any other contemporary writer with, is crucial and exploring the reasons behind it will further clarify Wallace’s own thinking.

Fundamental to Wallace’s mature artistic thinking that would lead to *Infinite Jest* was a deep aversion to conventional mimesis that simply provided a ‘mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything.’<sup>130</sup> To Wallace, Ellis was the apotheosis of this kind of fiction, a fiction that sought to do nothing more except revel in the shallowness and moral depravity of modern society. This assessment of Ellis’ work is certainly an overly simplified perspective, but the key point to take issue here is with the assumption that this artistic goal to “see the worst” is completely without value. Essentially, Wallace offers an optimistic, but perhaps too idealistic response to the world in his literature, whereas Ellis offers a sceptical, but perhaps too reductive and pessimistic response in his own fiction. To begin exploring how and why they take these near mirror opposite perspectives in their writing we will first look at the similarities in their work, before looking at the important ways they differ.

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<sup>128</sup> Letter from David Foster Wallace to Frederick Hill Associates, dated 28 September 1985. Emphasis Added.

<sup>129</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 23.

<sup>130</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 26. By mature thinking, we mean the ideas Wallace developed after his first two books (his ‘apprentice’ period), which we discussed in chapter one.

## Similarities

The most direct engagement Ellis makes with Wallace's work is in the second part of the novel *Glamorama*. This part covers Victor Ward's journey to Europe, and in the structure of the novel its transition into an entirely different second half as Sonia Baelo-Allué notes: 'in fact it seems like two novels in one: Part 1 is written as a novel of manners, whereas Parts 2 to 6 seem to belong to the conspiracy thriller genre.'<sup>131</sup> Strangely, however, the journey is made on a cruise ship instead of a flight, despite the novel's setting in the 1990s.<sup>132</sup> It seems likely that this is in part to create less of a sharp, immediate transition to the second section of the book, but it also brings to mind Wallace's famous cruise ship essay that became the title piece of his first collection, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. Like Wallace in the essay, Victor wanders aimlessly around the ship, indulging in its luxuries without much pleasure: 'I've finished the room service dinner I ordered and *Schindler's List* is playing on the small television set situated above the bed [...] [I] have watched it three times since it takes up an enormous amount of hours'.<sup>133</sup> Like Victor, Wallace describes the overindulgence making him increasingly demanding and disappointed with it all: 'by last night I find myself looking at my watch in real annoyance after fifteen minutes and wondering where the fuck *is* that Cabin Service guy' (*SFTNDA*, p. 316, Original Emphasis). Moreover, despite the company onboard the ship, both Victor and Wallace become increasingly lonely and withdrawn during their time onboard. Michael Silverblatt mentions the similarities in an interview on his radio program Bookworm, which

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<sup>131</sup> Sonia Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing Between High and Low Culture* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 142.

<sup>132</sup> By this point we have already seen John Self from Martin Amis' *Money* in the 1980s spend the duration of the novel on flights back and forth from New York to London, the same route Victor Ward is taking.

<sup>133</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama* (1998; London: Picador, 2011), p. 204. Hereafter referred to as (*G*, p.-).

Ellis passes over without comment.<sup>134</sup> However, given the contrivance of the section and the fame of Wallace's essay when it was published in Harper's, it seems impossible to imagine Ellis intending no parallel.

*Glamorama*, in particular, is a suitable novel for engaging with Wallace's essay because of how Victor Ward differs from Ellis' other protagonists. Without the self-awareness of Patrick Bateman or Clay, Victor is oddly sympathetic, even likeable, in how little he understands the world he moves in. This is established early on when, talking to his troubled girlfriend Chloe, he is simply incapable of comprehending the despair and nihilism that was the staple of *American Psycho* and *Less Than Zero*: "You're not talking to me," Chloe says sternly, with too much emotion. "You're looking at me but you're *not* talking to me." "Baby, I'm your biggest fan," I say' (*G*, p. 38). Similar exchanges take place throughout the novel, even as the plot introduces the violence and danger of a terrorist group. Victor is simply oblivious, as Chloe tells him, repeating the same innocuous punchlines without noticing her depression or the staleness of their relationship. This departure from previous protagonists is further emphasised by Patrick Bateman making a short appearance in the same scene. Whereas Chloe is immediately disturbed by Bateman's presence, Victor, in complete ignorance, describes him as a 'nice guy' (*G*, p. 38). Instead of being complicit in the moral degradation around him, Victor is practically a child set loose in an adult world.

This child-like, even infantile element, is a key one in Wallace's essay. The central thesis of the essay is the infant-like state adults are reduced to by the excessive indulgence offered by the cruise ship: 'it is everywhere on the *Nadir* you look: evidence of a steely determination to indulge the passenger in ways that go far beyond any halfway-sane passenger's own expectations' (*SFTNDA*, p. 292). Victor displays this state of

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<sup>134</sup> Bret Easton Ellis and Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*, last accessed 12th January 2016, <<http://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/bret-easton-ellis-3>>, 00:20:00.

limitless expectation even at the beginning of the ship's journey to England, commenting 'five days is a long time to stay unimpressed' (G, p. 189). In fact, it would seem Ellis is not contradicting or attacking Wallace's take in 'A Supposedly Fun Thing' and instead seems to be competing with him. With Wallace's sudden rise to mainstream fame and becoming the toast of the literary world with 'A Supposedly Fun Thing' and the publication of *Infinite Jest*, there may be an element to which Ellis is defending his title as a celebrity novelist, while also showing that Wallace's thought and his own may not be as different as perceived.

The introduction of the film crew to the narrative of *Glamorama* here highlights again the childlike acting behind Victor's behaviour. His attempts to be a brooding leading man as he makes the journey are bluntly sent up:

The camera would follow me at a discreet distance, shots mainly of Victor on the upper-deck starboard railing, trying to light cigarettes [...] those scenes were scrapped since they really weren't in character anyway (G, p. 192-3).

Victor plainly tells us the scenes were scrapped because they were not in character, he cannot even feign an adult identity for the narrative device of the film crew. The shot described has all the right cinematic elements for a classic male lead actor, Humphrey Bogart comes to mind, but Victor's self-conscious acting of the role (and blunders 'trying to light cigarettes') makes it as infantile as the guests catered to by obsessively attentive towel boys Wallace describes on the cruise ship (G, p. 192).

Wallace also parodies infantilisation towards the end of *Infinite Jest* with the Inner Infant support group Hal mistakenly attends. It is one of the novel's brilliantly sharp scenes of satire:

The energy I feel in the group now is supportively asking Kevin to nurture his Inner Infant by naming and sharing his needs out loud with the group. And I'm feeling how aware we all are how risky and vulnerable need-naming-out-loud must feel for Kevin right now.' Everybody looks deadly serious. (*IJ*, p. 803).<sup>135</sup>

The irony of the short sentence following the group leader's speech punctures its sentimentality to create the comic effect. By the end of the meeting the men attending are reduced to desperately chanting "'Needs, Needs, Needs,' [...] some rhythmically raising their manicured fists in the air' (*IJ*, p. 808). The interesting, almost oxymoronic image of manicured fists, a strange combination of indulgence and aggression, further add to the ridiculousness of the men in the scene, reducing themselves to infants with unsatisfiable needs.

Yet, despite the parody of this scene, the novel's main storyline concerns the troubled relationship between children and parents in the Incandenza family. While parent/child relations are not the central focus of *Less Than Zero*, the sole cry of protest against the state of affairs in the novel is the bathroom stall graffiti that reads: 'Fuck you Mom and Dad [...] You both can die because that's what you did to me. You left me to die' (*LZ*, p. 180-1). Both *Infinite Jest* and *Lunar Park* are also haunted by a dead father that echoes Hamlet's ghost. While neither Wallace nor Ellis embrace anything as cliché as a "blame

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<sup>135</sup> Another fantastic instance of satire in the novel is Wallace's description of the development of video phone calls. The ability to see the person you are speaking with is completely overshadowed by the anxiety of how you yourself appear, something that Wallace has been proved to be right about as the technology has become available.

the parents' attitude for problems in modern American culture, both find much to explore in the parent-child relationship as metaphor.<sup>136</sup> However, their fiction problematises different modes of parenting.

In *Infinite Jest*, the Incandenza family are absurdly neurotic. The mother, Avril, tortures both herself and her children in her paradox of wanting to both protect and nurture them as well as letting them live their lives without interference. Interestingly, when we see the ghost of James Incandenza appear to Gately as the Wraith (whether real or hallucinated), it is contrasted with Gately's father-figure sponsor in AA/NA. Ferocious Francis G., one of the long-standing 'crocodile' members of AA/NA, greets Gately, who is suffering in horrendous pain after saving the other members of Ennet House, with 'well kid at least you're still on this side of the fuckin' sod, I guess there's something to be said for that there' (*IJ*, p. 843). As a parenting style (for lack of a better term), the crocodile's attitude reflects the type of support and help offered by NA/AA. He turns up in support of Gately, but offers him no sympathy or pity, even in a situation where most would certainly judge him to have earned it. Yet, it is Francis whom Gately wishes 'would hobble by' when being visited by other residents of Ennet House earlier (*IJ*, p. 836). In communicating with James, 'Gately's not too agonized and feverish not to recognize gross self-pity when he hears it, wraith or no' (*IJ*, p. 839). Indeed, Gately mostly views James through the thinking of NA/AA: 'pretty hard to believe this wraith could stay sober' (*IJ*, p. 839).

It is this more distant parenting style that the whole core of NA/AA is based on. Unlike the men in the Inner Infant support group, those who attend meetings will not receive sympathy and have their needs tirelessly heard and met. Meetings close with encouragement to keep attending them, but no one will go after those who do not. Gately remains individually responsible for himself during Francis' visit, as all in the Ennet House

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<sup>136</sup> We should not use the term cliché lightly, however, as we will explore in chapter four Wallace was fascinated by the buried truths that clichés held and they are very important in both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*.

program do. Indeed, the list of 'exotic new facts' one will learn at Ennet House that Wallace lists in the early parts of the novel does not cover any solutions or comforts to the problems of addicts and people in general, only affirming that they can be accepted: 'cockroaches can, up to a certain point, be lived with' (*IJ*, p. 204). This attitude may seem cold, even heartless compared to modern ideas of parenting, but it is the one that saves Gately's life.

In contrast, the opposite problem of distant parents rather than overbearing ones is scrutinised in *Lunar Park*. In the novel's opening autobiography, Ellis' father is described as a very damaging parent, 'careless, abusive, alcoholic' (James Incandenza is also an alcoholic) 'vain, angry, paranoid' who is finally escaped when Ellis achieves fame and wealth with his first novel (*LP*, p. 7).<sup>137</sup> Yet, in his absence, the father haunts Ellis throughout his life and the main events of the novel: 'I felt defeated, even though I had gained control through my newfound independence' (*LP*, p. 9). The entire course of events of the haunting, serve to return Ellis to being a child again, back under his father's control, from the house slowly transforming into his childhood home, 'when I touched the wall of the house on Elsinore Lane I finally made the connection [...] the paint that was revealing itself to me was the same color as the house I grew up in', to the monsters he invented as a scared child becoming reality and attacking the family: '*why did you write this story?* Because I was so scared all the time. [...] it looked like what was in our house tonight. It was identical to what I had imagined at twelve' (*LP*, p. 251, 367 Original Emphasis).

In being dragged back to this state, Ellis loses the family he has only briefly tried to settle down with. Robby, Ellis's biological son who has been named after Ellis's own father, becomes the focus of the novel's conclusion and creates a very interesting blending of the father-son relationship. Disappearing after the haunting at Elsinore Lane, Ellis meets

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<sup>137</sup> Unless specified, this discussion concerns the Bret Easton Ellis character in *Lunar Park* rather than the novelist.

Robby years later at a McDonalds. The location already suggests Ellis is in a child-like state and we are given the detail of him ordering ‘a child’s Coke’ (*LP*, p. 447). The wording of their conversation then sounds more like one between Ellis and his father rather than his son: “‘why did you leave?’” I managed to ask in a hoarse voice. “‘Why did you leave us?’” (*LP*, p. 448). It is also suggested that Robby’s escape from his father and family has also included escaping from their issues, unlike Ellis and his own father: ‘his secret life had made him seem less brooding, less sullen. Something had been solved for him’ (*LP*, p. 448). They reverse roles, Ellis becoming the child desperate for his parent’s attention and forgiveness, while Robby provides this for him. In the final paragraph of the novel Ellis acts in both roles of father and son, saying of Robby ‘I know he’s watching over me’ while also ready for him, ‘my arms held out and waiting’ (*LP*, p. 453). This ending especially resonates with an analogy Wallace gave describing the ‘postmodern era’, ‘we start gradually to realize that parents in fact aren’t ever coming back—which means *we’re* going to have to be the parents.’<sup>138</sup>

The result of both *Lunar Park* and *Infinite Jest’s* explorations here is acceptance, the core of Gately’s recovery through NA/AA and what releases Ellis from his father’s haunting. What drives them is the need to communicate. Wallace makes this the opening note of *Infinite Jest*, as Hal attempts to speak and communicate are at extreme odds with how they are perceived: ‘I open my eyes. “Please don’t think I don’t care.” I look out. Directed my way is horror’ (*IJ*, p. 12). While Hal thinks he is speaking normally, those around him react as if he is making grotesque, unintelligible noises. He is locked in complete isolation, unable to communicate. Similar scenes appear throughout Ellis’ novels, especially in *Lunar Park*. At the breakfast table, Ellis tries to tell Robby a story and is met with utter confusion by the family:

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<sup>138</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 52.

An awkward silence filled the kitchen. People had been listening to my story. Jayne was holding a cracked margarita glass and staring at me strangely. I slowly noticed that everyone else—Sarah, Marta, Robby, even Victor—was also staring at me strangely (*LP*, p. 98).

The reaction is not simply misunderstanding on the part of his family, but complete incomprehension as to how Ellis' story makes sense at all within the conversation preceding it. Unlike Hal in *Infinite Jest*, Ellis' actual words are not given, instead we are told the story indirectly through the first-person narrative voice. This might lead us to believe it is Ellis at fault in this scene, whereas, since we read Hal's actual words, we could believe there is something wrong with those Hal is speaking to in his case. Regardless, the effect of being terribly cut off from those around oneself is the same. Indeed, the purpose behind the creation of the *Infinite Jest* film itself was to allow Hal to communicate, to 'make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life' (*JJ*, p. 839).

Finally, both Wallace and Ellis share a core desire to connect and communicate that can be seen in the endings to 'Westward' and *Lunar Park*:

See this thing. See inside what spins without purchase. Close your eyes. Absolutely no salesmen will call. Relax. Lie back. I want nothing from you. Lie back. Relax. Quality soil washes right out. Lie back. Open. 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 (*GCH*, p. 373).

So, if you should see my son, tell him I say hello, be good, that I am thinking of him and that I know he's watching over me somewhere, and not to worry: that he can always find me here, whenever he wants, right here, my arms held out and waiting, in the pages, behind the covers, at the end of *Lunar Park* (LP, p. 453).

Despite their different contexts, these endings clearly share similarities. Ellis is not appealing to the reader in the same way as Wallace, but both are moments where the writers drop the 'façade' of fiction and make a direct appeal outside the scope of the novel or story. Both are moments when each writer hits the limit of what their fiction can do and acknowledges it, in moments that lament the limits of fiction but also celebrates its capabilities. More specifically, both endings acknowledge that the writers have failings in real life, things they can only communicate in their fiction. For Ellis, it is the inability to resolve his difficult relationship with his deceased father, and for Wallace it is a more general inability to truly connect with people. When attempting to situate Wallace among his contemporaries, it is Ellis, for all their differences, who most closely shared his artistic thinking.

### **Differences**

Of course, the differences between the two writers are striking. Before *Glamorama*, Wallace had himself engaged with Ellis' work in the title story of *Girl With Curious Hair*. Unlike Ellis' engagement in *Glamorama*, Wallace is clearly being condemnatory in the story. It is also an especially bizarre story in retrospect. In parodying the style of Ellis and other writers of his fashion, Wallace ends up anticipating Ellis' most famous work *American Psycho*, two years before publication, in the setting he chooses. The protagonist, Sick

Puppy, is another rich, violently psychopathic and detached 'yuppie' like Patrick Bateman, even showing some of the stylistic marks of that novel, such as in referring to a slavish adherence to high fashion and popular culture: 'I saw the fine hairstyle I have in *Gentleman's Quarterly*' (*GCH*, p. 59).

However, Sick Puppy and Patrick Bateman are nonetheless very different characters. Sick Puppy shares many traits with Bateman, traits that indicate a disturbed, numbed and psychopathic mind. He frequently refers to a sexual preference for a woman 'fellating me and letting me burn her, for these are the only two events which make me become happy in matters of the birds and the bees' (*GCH*, p. 72). He also boasts of the complete lack of effect that drugs, alcohol or any psychoactive substances have on him. Yet, despite these similarities, Sick Puppy is not unhappy as Patrick Bateman is. His detachment from the world is not a source of pain, and Cheese, the character so disturbed by him, is shocked by 'the happiness that was exuded by [him] at virtually all moments' (*GCH*, p. 70). Far from Bateman's maddening anxiety to conform ('I say, staring directly at her, "I . . . want . . . to . . . fit . . . in"') Sick Puppy happily moves outside his social circle to make friends with 'punkrockers' who give him his nickname (*AP*, p. 237, *GCH*, p. 56). The focus of 'Girl With Curious Hair' is not depicting Sick Puppy's state of mind but his villainous nature. Once this has been done, Wallace ends the story with Sick Puppy and his group attacking the girl with curious hair who has caught his interest and ends on the line 'And here's what I did' (*GCH*, p. 74).

This concluding line is also the punchline of Wallace's condemnation. Now that the reader has been fully informed of Sick Puppy's horrifying and evil character, there is no need to inform us of whatever he did to the girl with curious hair. We may lack specifics, but we know well enough, and Wallace is making a value judgement that there is no more to be learned or gained by following Sick Puppy's story. If the story can be said to have a

thesis, it is that what Ellis does in his novels can be comprehensively done within a single short story. It is the argument behind his comment that Ellis' work is overblown: 'we already all *know* U.S. culture is materialistic. This diagnosis can be done in about two lines.'<sup>139</sup>

Yet, this is not the purpose of *American Psycho*. What is made even clearer through comparison with *Sick Puppy* is that Patrick Bateman represents not just the moral failings of modern society, but the inevitable failure of success and wealth to satisfy the anxieties driving us in pursuit of them. As we will see in chapter four, Wallace is also exploring this himself in his major novels. *Sick Puppy* serves to show us how horrifying he is; Bateman serves to explore the emptiness at the heart of cultural narratives that are idealised. Like Clay in *Less Than Zero*, he is trapped by both his awareness of the horrors of the world around him and his inability to extricate himself from it. The horror of his character and the narrative serves a purpose beyond simply horrifying the reader.

Moreover, Wallace's problem with Ellis highlights another significant difference in their style and thinking about literature. Ellis's novels function at their strongest when understood in their entirety, in the emotional impact of reading a novel such as *American Psycho* or *Glamorama* as a single experience. For Wallace, even the academic, this is necessarily a problem. While one can easily discuss and examine closely a chapter of *Infinite Jest* for instance, it is harder to pursue this approach with *American Psycho*. There is still much to be gained through close examination of the language and individual scenes, but the essence of it is undoubtedly missing without the context of the whole. For example, looking at the short chapter 'Facial', we can see a comical insight into Bateman's routine and hints towards his disturbed character, but it only works properly within the context of the novel as a whole; the accumulation of endless luxurious routine without

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<sup>139</sup> Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, p. 27.

purpose or meaning, as well as the tension between Bateman's disconnect and anxious longing to belong in the world he despises (*AP*, p. 114). In terms of form, Ellis is every bit a pure novelist.

Wallace, on the other hand, is a short story writer. While the length of many of his stories make describing them as 'short' somewhat comical, this is the format he understands best. At 150 (densely printed) pages, 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way' could easily be considered a short novel in length alone. However, without delving too deeply into difficult areas of classification, it fits the description of novella or short story better because of its singular focus. Despite its frequent authorial interruptions and jumps in scene and setting, it remains centered on a single trip taken by a group of characters and Wallace's interruptions on fiction and postmodernism.

Wallace's major novel *Infinite Jest* is constructed out of chapters that mostly remain around twenty pages long, each of which could be a story in its own right. Wallace said of it 'it's divided into chunks, there are sort of obvious closures or last lines—that make it pretty clear that you're supposed to go have a cigar or something, come back later.'<sup>140</sup> Take, for example, the introduction to Kate Gompert's character (*IJ*, p. 68). On its own, this chapter could constitute a short story exploring depression and the difficulty of articulating what it feels like to a fairly cold doctor who is struggling to empathise. There is even an arc to it, with Kate going to great length to make the doctor understand, only to realise he simply cannot: 'he put her *get me out of this* in quotation marks. He was adding his own post-assessment question, *Then what?*, when Kate Gompert began weeping for real' (*IJ*, p. 78 Original Emphasis). There is the bleak prospect for the future as Kate requests shock treatment, something she at least knows will help her in the short-term, but the story

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<sup>140</sup> Lipsky, *Although*, p. xiv.

would not feel cut off if the novel never returned to her. It still functions as a whole when removed from the novel.

Interestingly, these two techniques somewhat overlap. *Less Than Zero* was also described as being segmented, constructed out of 'short chapters resembling music videos'.<sup>141</sup> But again, these segments (also much shorter than any in *Infinite Jest*) do not work in the same way when taken individually. Even if we attempt to see them as individual instances of flash fiction, they still read as if they have been cut off or left unfinished. They do not indicate or gesture to the world beyond the written text, only highlight their missing context. However, the similarities in their formal styles suggest both writers saw fiction as having to represent reality as fractured. Ellis' fragments may be co-dependent on each other, but he and Wallace build their novels out of individual parts whose relation to each other is often not immediately apparent, rather than chapters that simply follow chronologically. Wallace commented that his editor Michael Pietsch described the first batch of the *Infinite Jest* manuscript as seeming like 'a piece of glass that had been dropped from a great height'.<sup>142</sup> Even in their differences, Wallace and Ellis frequently show similar views and concerns in their fiction, concerns that have simply been approached in different ways.

Perhaps the most immediate difference between the two writers, certainly in their popular images, is the contrast of Wallace's earnest sincerity and Ellis' often cynical or self-deprecating attitude. In interviews and the *This is Water* speech, Wallace embraced the challenge he ended 'E Unibus Pluram' on 'to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of ironists' (*SFTNDA*, p. 81). Ellis' public persona can certainly be refreshing in contrast to the self-serious image many novelists display (take,

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<sup>141</sup> Mandel, *Bret Easton Ellis*, p. 85.

<sup>142</sup> David Foster Wallace and Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*, last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKCMTHX5WHk>>, 7:20-7:23.

for instance, his talk at the Byron Bay Writers festival in Australia), but it also shows the limits Wallace identified and grew tired of, that such cynicism and irony is 'singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks' (*SFTNDA*, p. 67). However, Ellis may lead us to question Wallace's attitude as well. Wallace frequently admits the life he encourages graduates to lead in *This is Water* is extremely difficult. In the audio recording, the audience laugh and some cheer when Wallace is describing the inner monologue that sees everyone else as ignorant, stupid and in one's way, causing him to add 'this is an example of how not to think, though'.<sup>143</sup> The speech is very well-received, nonetheless there is a tension in this moment in how much the audience believes in or understands the point Wallace is making. If what he is encouraging is so difficult, it could be argued that a more obtainable, pragmatic worldview would perhaps be more valuable.

Essentially, this distinction between Wallace and Ellis stems from their completely different fundamental aims. Ellis wants to diagnose and understand his world, but Wallace wants to change his. Ellis' recent venture into podcasting is a great example of this, as his discussions and conversations cast himself in the role of the critic, analysing art and culture, especially in the long monologues that begin each episode. Whether he is praising or lambasting his subject, it is always from the perspective of an observer rather than someone instigating change. Wallace, on the other hand, was always passionate about the role fiction had to play in changing the world: 'if Marx [...] derided the intellectuals of his day for merely interpreting the world when the real imperative was to change it, the derision seems even more apt today when we notice that many of our best-known C.Y. [Conspicuously Young] writers seem content merely to have reduced interpretation to whining' (*BFN*, p. 67).

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<sup>143</sup> 'This Is Water C' in *David Foster Wallace In His Own Words* [Disc 8], 4:15-4:25.

Despite this fundamental difference, we can continue to see shared topics of interest between the two writers. An interesting contrast is found in how they both explore entertainment, specifically movies, from two different sides: the production at the top of society, and the consumption at the bottom of it. While Ellis' novels such as *Less Than Zero* and *Glamorama* engage with the cultural elite involved with making films, entertainment or otherwise being a part of celebrity culture, *Infinite Jest* and several of Wallace's short stories concern themselves with those for whom consuming that entertainment is a large part of their lives.

In *Less Than Zero*, the parents involved in the production of films are only present at arms' length. They maintain a self-imposed distance from their children the novel focuses on, as is evident in Clay's dinner with his father: "you look thin," he says. "Hmmm." "And pale." "It's the drugs," I mumble. "I didn't quite hear that" (*LZ*, p. 35). The conversation is carefully kept to polite formalities and smoothly runs over any point where more substantial and involved topics could become the subject. The industry also creates a gravity to those not in it but close in proximity in the Los Angeles setting. Clay's psychiatrist, a job that, one imagines at least, should be perfectly respectable and rewarding in itself, 'tells [Clay] that he has a new idea for a screenplay' and eagerly tries to enlist his help and connections (*LZ*, p. 98). It becomes an almost extraordinary place with a strong draw to all that nonetheless remains permanently out of reach, exerting its influence but closed off to all but a mostly invisible select few.

However, those so close to it, especially children like Clay of those industry insiders, are already bored with the kind of entertainment films offer by the beginning of the novel. The immediate wealth they have access to is undoubtedly a large part of this as well, but in the novel's Dantean circling of greater and greater depths of nihilism the progression reflects this desire to push beyond conventional entertainment. First, Clay's social circle

purchase a snuff film, becoming annoyed at the suggestion that it might be faked like a standard horror film rather than a recording of a horrific real life event: “I bet it’s real,” Trent says, somewhat defensively [...] “Yeah, I think it’s real too,” the other boy says, easing himself into the jacuzzi. “It’s gotta be’ (LZ, p. 142-3). This then becomes a desire to enact the real thing themselves when Rip arranges the kidnapping and rape of an eleven-year old girl. Crucially, they also film it, ‘Spin puts a tape on and then takes off his shirt and then his jeans’ (LZ, p. 176). They have gone from watching horror films, to seeking out real horror films, to making them themselves. When they become bored of the fiction of entertainment, they turn it into a terrible reality.

The dark plotlines of the novel make the gravity of the film industry akin to that of a black hole. One of the novel’s recurring lines is ‘Disappear Here’ and this is the fate that ultimately awaits the characters (LZ, p. 33). Clay recalls a director having brunch with his family, telling the story of a young stuntman who died on set, only to realise when pressed he cannot remember his name: *‘I wanted very badly for the director to say the name. The director opened his mouth and said, “I forgot’* (LZ, p. 134 Original Emphasis). Just as those who watch entertainment obsessively in *Infinite Jest* (particularly the Infinite Jest Film) are steadily moving towards the destruction of the self, Ellis presents those at the other end of the spectrum as similarly doomed.

In keeping with Ellis’ style, a similar undercurrent of dread runs through *Glamorama*, bursting to the surface in the scenes of terrorist actions. In this novel, however, Victor Ward is an insider in the entertainment industry (broadened to include fashion, modelling etc. rather than film specifically). As a male model, Victor’s identity is a commodity itself. Any idea of Victor himself steadily loses all meaning as he is detached throughout the plot from his value as Victor the model and Victor the politician’s son. Early in the novel, he shrugs as people insist he has been to places he has no memory of because there are

photos showing him there. His ambivalence suggests it does not matter whether he was actually in these places or not, the real meaning is in his presence in paparazzi photos and gossip columns. By the end of the novel, he has been replaced entirely by a doppelganger who can play a more suitable role for his father's political ambitions. Victor himself has been swallowed entirely by the black hole.

Wallace's characters suffer less glamorously doomed fates, but end up in much the same place. In discussing the threat of the *Infinite Jest* film, Steeply tells Marathe the story of his father's gradually all-consuming addiction to the television show *M\*A\*S\*H*. In his more mundane, suburban life, Steeply's father too loses his self over time to the show. As his consumption of the show develops from fun to addiction, his relationship to it is the same as that of an addict towards any substance: 'he got anxious, ugly, if something made him miss even one. Even one episode. And he'd get ugly if you pointed out he'd already seen most of them about seven times before' (*IJ*, p. 640). Then it begins to erode his self, so that 'at some point it was as if he was no longer able to converse or communicate on any topic without bringing it back to the program. The topic' (*IJ*, p. 642). Eventually, he retreats entirely from his life into a den he has created in the house, 'refusing to leave', where he can endless watch, record, categorise and make notes on the show until he dies there 'in his easy chair, set at full Recline' (*IJ*, p. 645-6).<sup>144</sup>

The chapter closes with Marathe and Steeply disagreeing on the word to describe what had happened to Steeply's father. Steeply describes his father's final fate as 'as if there was something he'd forgotten' (*IJ*, p. 647). Marathe, ever critical of what he sees as infantile American culture that demands every desire be fulfilled, adds 'misplaced', while Steeply counters 'lost' (*IJ*, p. 648). Although kinder, Steeply's perspective is more frightening. It indicates the same black hole like pull of entertainment in Ellis' fiction, where

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<sup>144</sup> Note the similarity to the Medical attache upon watching the *Infinite Jest* film.

there is little anyone can do to stop being pulled in and lose themselves completely. As we will explore in the next chapter, it is key to Wallace's thinking that entertainment holds a pull that ultimately leads to the destruction of the self.

Both Wallace and Ellis can be read as reacting to 'the death of the novel', with Ellis making a home in the ashes while Wallace committed himself to charting new lands: the goal of reinventing fiction for the present day and finding an alternative to a culture he saw as heading towards a dark and miserable place of isolation and meaninglessness. In a way, Ellis's fiction depicts part of what Wallace feared so much and found intolerable: a barren landscape of alienation and purposelessness. Wallace's mistake was to ignore the bravery and value of Ellis plumbing these depths, but it is braver still to imagine one can change them. As we return solely to Wallace in the next two chapters, remember that it is what Ellis accepted that Wallace so urgently resisted.

## Chapter Four

### ‘No Pleasure is Enough, No Achievement is Enough’

#### The Loss of Self in The Major Novels

David Foster Wallace’s two major novels are incredibly complex, encyclopaedic works, but they both also focus on a single, unifying subject, entertainment or pleasure in the case of *Infinite Jest*, and boredom in *The Pale King*. Read together, the novels act as complementary explorations of these twin poles of Western life. Critical analysis of *The Pale King*, released posthumously in 2011, is still only just beginning, but there is already a popular trend to read the later novel as a development and continuation of the ideas and themes of *Infinite Jest*. Conley Wouters, for example, writes that her reading of ‘*The Pale King*’ assumes that the unfinished, posthumous novel builds on thematic concerns established in *Infinite Jest*’ and this idea is present throughout other essays.<sup>145</sup> Some critics have also astutely noted that *The Pale King* can serve as a prequel of sorts to *Infinite Jest*, set in ‘the era’s historical roots in the 1970s and [...] 1980s to explore the shifts in American culture that helped form the world of *Infinite Jest*.’<sup>146</sup> However, it is not quite right to see the novels as straightforward steps developing in a single direction. As we explored in chapter one, Wallace’s ideas continued to develop significantly after *Infinite Jest*, moving towards a Joycean interest in the ordinary and everyday. His last two short story collections, *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* and *Oblivion* show clearly that his intentions and subjects of interest had changed in between *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*. Instead, it is much more illuminating to see these works as explorations in different directions; the same ship perhaps, but navigating different waters.

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<sup>145</sup> Conley Wouters, “‘What Am I, a Machine?’: Humans and Information in *The Pale King*’ in Marshall Boswell (ed.), *David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing”: New Essays on the Novels* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 169. See, for example, other essays in the same collection by Adam Kelly, Andrew Warren and Marshall Boswell.

<sup>146</sup> Ralph Clare, ‘The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in *The Pale King*’ in Marshall Boswell (ed.), *David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing”: New Essays on the Novels* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 196.

An immediate indication of the novels' different interests is their cast of characters. *Infinite Jest* unflinchingly delves into the emptiness and pain in the lives of its drug addicts and prodigious students, but these are still very interesting characters, larger-than-life even, who capture our attention. Their rebelliousness and position outside of mainstream society makes them easily imaginable as the kind of characters who would appear in a TV show or film. From Don Gately, a burglar the 'size of a young dinosaur', to Hal's genius level intelligence and athletic ability, to wheelchair-bound assassins and gangsters, not a single member of the novel's cast is dull or boring (*IJ*, p. 55). We could even go so far as to say there is something 'glamorous' about them, in the same way memoirs of difficult, turbulent lives are highly popular.<sup>147</sup> *The Pale King*, on the other hand, has a starkly contrasting cast of characters who are simply ordinary people with an office job. Chris Fogle may have taken drugs as a college student, but only due to an apathetic lack of direction before he grows up and pursues a responsible career: 'I was the worst kind of nihilist—the kind who isn't even aware he's a nihilist' (*PK*, p. 156). Mr Glendenning is 'a taciturn, slightly unapproachable man who took his job very seriously' (*PK*, p. 436). Despite the occasional presences of magical realism or mythologising of the IRS, the cast of *The Pale King* are the kinds of people who would normally be the ones reading a book, not featured in one themselves.

The stark contrast between the novels' characters also highlights the fact that both novels are about extremes. The titular film in *Infinite Jest* is, of course, so entertaining that it is lethal. *The Pale King* concerns the workers and workings of the IRS, an institution that culturally embodies dull and boring work in the American imagination, especially due to the arduous process of filing one's taxes every year. From the outset, Wallace intends to explore his subjects in these novels as much as he can, pushing to the most extreme limit he can reach.

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<sup>147</sup> Think, for example, of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*.

While he never said as much in a crude, direct fashion, dealing with the competing states of entertainment and boredom was a huge presence in Wallace's life, and he saw it in his contemporaries as well. Max notes how he admired those who seemed able to lead a simpler life that did not swing from craving entertainment to the boredom of hard work: 'one member of his [AA] group worked twelve-hour shifts in a tire factory without air-conditioning, his only comfort the Serenity Prayer. "I mean," he wrote a friend, "can you see why I LOVE some of these people?"'<sup>148</sup> Wallace also raises the idea in David Lipsky's book: 'well for me, as an American male, the face I'd put on the terror is the dawning realization that nothing's enough, you know? That no pleasure is enough, that no achievement is enough.'<sup>149</sup> This quote could be taken to reflect the findings of the two novels, hedonism in *Infinite Jest* and enduring boredom to reach achievement in *The Pale King*: 'if you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish' (*PK*, p. 440).

As Marshall Boswell notes, the tension of the plot in *Infinite Jest* surrounding the prospect of the film's distribution comes from the fact that, even knowing it will kill them, people may not be able to resist the temptation to watch something so entertaining: 'were the population simply to refuse to watch the film, the plot would fail, and yet Marathe knows this outcome is unlikely'.<sup>150</sup> Of course, Marathe holds few positive feelings towards any aspect of American society and culture, yet Steeply also does not trust the American people not to watch the film if it were distributed. Recall the quote in chapter one where in an interview with Judith Strasser promoting the novel, Wallace elaborates on the themes of the book by stating 'at some point in the next ten or fifteen years we're going to have

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<sup>148</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 230.

<sup>149</sup> Lipsky, *Although*, p. 292.

<sup>150</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 134-5.

virtual reality pornography, which I would just invite you to think about'.<sup>151</sup> Wallace's point is that, while the film in the book is an exaggeration, we are frequently making fictional worlds that are attractive as a replacement, if not better than, reality, as we discussed in chapter two.<sup>152</sup> In *Infinite Jest* entertainment is an isolating experience, but the choice of the IRS for the setting of *The Pale King* is not just due to its cultural association with boredom but also how essential a role it serves to society. As a wider metaphor, boredom is often a necessary consequence of things that are essential and productive. Yet, even here, we should note the second half of the quote from Lipsky's book, that no achievement is enough either. Through Wallace's eyes, navigating the extremes of boredom and entertainment was an increasingly important challenge in modern life.

This idea is also at play in Wallace's *This is Water* speech, when Wallace warns the graduates 'everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship.'<sup>153</sup> Daniel Turnbull calls Wallace's plea to pay attention and make an active choice rather than an unconscious one the 'Ethics of Attention' and, as we have previously discussed, it is an active idea in much of Wallace's work.<sup>154</sup> What *Infinite Jest* undoubtedly shows is that the worship of entertainment and pleasure is doomed, inevitably leading to the fate of the medical attaché, 'soiled' in his recliner and detached from the world (*IJ*, p. 78). *The Pale King* makes a more difficult and complex case for boredom. It can still be just as dangerous, leading to a miserable, meaningless existence. Take section 25, for example, where the characters do little but 'turn a page' in prose broken into columns to replicate an IRS form (*PK*, p. 312). However it can also be fulfilling. In a note on Drinion, who levitates unknowingly when he is paying complete, rapt attention to something, Wallace writes 'it

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<sup>151</sup> Interview with Judith Strasser A in *David Foster Wallace In His Own Words* [Disc 1], 3:20-3:30.

<sup>152</sup> See, in particular, the section discussing the *Infinite Jest* film.

<sup>153</sup> Wallace, *This Is Water*, p, 100-1. Original Emphasis.

<sup>154</sup> Daniel Turnbull, 'This is Water and the Ethics of Attention: Wallace, Murdoch, and Nussbaum' in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 209. See chapters one and two for instances of this idea throughout Wallace's work.

turns out that bliss – a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious – lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom (*PK*, p. 548). The danger is still present, but *The Pale King* suggests throughout that there is something worthwhile in embracing boredom. Nonetheless, both novels come to the conclusion that the danger of either extremes, entertainment or boredom, is the complete destruction of the self.

### **What to Worship**

The reason for these novels taking their subjects to the extreme is in that idea of choosing what to worship. In Wallace's thought and work, there is no moderate path. His characters have to embrace something completely. As with *AA/NA*, it is not that maintaining a healthy balance is simply difficult; it is not an option at all. Consider the motif in *Infinite Jest* of the ominous associations with a squeak: 'the front door squeaks loudly off the hinge and Lucien recloses it and drives the bolt home: *squeak*. The upper hinge squeaks no matter the oil, as the shop drives Lucien crazy' (*IJ*, p. 482 Original Emphasis). Plot-wise, the squeak signifies death as it heralds the arrival of the wheelchair assassins (who will shortly arrive at Lucien's shop looking for an Infinite Jest cartridge): "To hear the squeak" is itself the very darkest of contemporary Canada's euphemisms for sudden and violent de-mapping [death].' (*IJ*, p. 1034). However, it recurs throughout the novel in various contexts with important implications arising from the dark association given to the word. The noise represents a tiny imperfection, one that can never be fixed and is maddening to the point of torture.

This is dramatised in the scene where a young James Incandenza narrates the moments with his father leading up to his death. His father furiously attempts to fix a squeaking bed before succumbing to an unknown illness:

This miserable cock-sucking bed your mother felt she needed to hang on to and bring with us out here for quote sentimental value has started squeaking [...] He stared darkly down at the bed. 'It's driving us fucking nuts' (*IJ*, p. 492).

The ever-present squeak is the sign of the characters never being able to completely immerse and give themselves to something, the problem the *Infinite Jest* film solves. The novel's descriptions of various characters' drug addictions go into great detail over the difficulty of trying to give yourself entirely to pleasure and your drug of choice. Precise organisation and planning is always necessary to ensure the right circumstances and enough supplies, where the slightest error, or squeak, ruins their attempts to escape themselves through whatever path of entertainment they choose. Hal, for example, has to organise his drug use around the academy's tight schedule, with myriad consequences if this is not possible: 'the other thing that happens if he doesn't do one-hitters sometime before dinner is he feels slightly sick to his stomach, and it's hard to eat enough at dinner, and then later when he does go off and get off he gets ravenous' (*IJ*, p. 114-5). Or Gately's 'Mt. Dilaudid' of drugs needed to keep himself and Fackelmann completely immersed in the narcotic. The difficulties of obtaining the drugs are in fact what leads to Fackelmann's death and Gately's lowest point in the violent final scene of the novel. (*IJ*, p. 974). It is also worth noting that Gately and Fackelmann have soiled themselves during their binge: 'the room smelled like Dilaudid and urine and Gately's vomit and Fackelmann's bowel movement' (*IJ*, p. 976). The first detail we are given when the medical attaché is discovered is his 'soiled condition', a sign of having successfully lost oneself in the entertainment. The driving force for *Infinite Jest's* characters, before they attempt to free themselves of their addictions, is to silence the squeak.

In *The Pale King* as well, there are no half-measures. Chris Fogle's decision to join the IRS is not just a job choice, he is signing himself away to the organisation. The

recruiting station is placed alongside 'a US Air Force recruiting office in the same storefront, separated from the IRS's space only by a large polyvinyl screen or shield' with the Air Force's patriotic music, playing on repeat, serving both stations (*PK*, p. 244). The connotations are clear: Fogle's career demands the same commitment as the military. The effect is also heightened by Wallace's mythologising of the IRS in the novel, including such fictional details like an IRS employee having their social security number forever changed to one beginning with nine, marking them: 'it's like you're born again, ID-wise, when you enter the Service' (*PK*, p. 68). Fogle is making a clear choice to dedicate himself to the IRS here. As he comments on prioritising the IRS materials over his college work 'I simply had to make a choice of what was more important' (*PK*, p. 251). But other characters show the impossibility of trying to maintain different dedications, or keeping control over one.

Hal's drug use is completely at odds with his other commitment as a prodigious tennis athlete and student. The novel reminds us many times of the sheer dedication required to compete at the highest levels of tennis which the academy aims for. One of the commitments eventually has to overwhelm the other, as Hal recognises when he stops his drug use and submits himself to suffer the withdrawal. Another example, which is also crucial to the development of the plot, is Randy Lenz. Lenz's addiction is not pleasure or entertainment, like many of the other characters, but the power and violence that came with his criminal past. At the beginning of his disastrous slide into relapse, this is immediately apparent: 'Lenz has found his own dark way to deal with the well-known Rage and Powerlessness issues that beset the drug addict' (*IJ*, p. 538). The first image of the chapter is even in the language of violence and guns, Lenz's car having 'what look like 12-gauge blasts of rust over the wheelwells' (*IJ*, p. 538).

Lenz's real relapse is indulging his need for violent power, which takes the form of killing and torturing street animals. Even the choice of drug use that accompanies it, 'organic cocaine' from a 'private emergency stash' in Ennet House, is in service to his true

addiction (*IJ*, p. 543). But his attempt to control the violence, just as his deluded attempts to control his cocaine use ‘two or three, maybe half a dozen times tops’ is doomed (*IJ*, p. 543). Disturbingly, it follows the idea in the popular imagination of a serial killer’s development, moving up the street animal food chain: ‘so after vermin started to get a little ho-hum and insignificant [...] Lenz found that if he could get an urban cat up close enough with some outstretched tuna he could pop the Hefty bag over it’ (*IJ*, p. 541). In the act that leads to Gately’s gunshot wound, his accidental companion Green sees him standing over the dog he has killed ‘like you stand over a punished child, at full height and radiating authority’ (*IJ*, p. 588). Even after the disastrous consequences, the last we read of Lenz is him continuing to escalate his violence, robbing two women and thrilling in the idea that ‘he was in total control of this situation’ (*IJ*, p. 719). In Wallace’s fiction, there is no middle ground. Everyone has to worship something, give themselves entirely to something, and the best anyone can hope for is to exercise choice over what that something is.

### **The Choice**

Those who are aware of this dynamic are usually terrified of it. To return to ‘The Soul is Not A Smithy’ from the collection *Oblivion* (discussed in the final section of chapter one), it is the remembered awareness of the narrator as a child that he will have to give himself to a boring job like his father one day that is ever present: ‘I had begun having nightmares about the reality of adult life as early as perhaps age seven’ (*O*, p. 103). Wallace discussed this explicitly in a radio interview about the story, stating of his own memories of his parents as a child ‘when they went into these quiet rooms and had to do things that it wasn’t obvious they wanted to do, I think there was a part of me that felt that something terrible was coming.’<sup>155</sup> Specifically, it is in childhood that we can see this prospect of

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<sup>155</sup> To the Best of Our Knowledge, last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAF5OgxN1d0>>, 11:40-11:53.

having to give ourselves entirely to something, without having to do it yet. This corresponds with Mario Incandenza, the other Incandenza son at the academy.

Mario suffers from physical and mental afflictions due to an extremely premature birth 'in the seventh month' (*IJ*, p. 312).<sup>156</sup> There are also indications that he may be affected by foetal alcohol syndrome due to the pregnancy going undetected: 'Avril Incandenza did not show [...] she threw up some mornings but who didn't in those days?' (*IJ*, p. 312). Whether a result, contribution, or unrelated effect on his character, Mario has a childlike, innocent personality, although he is not unintelligent. He calls Hall 'Booboo' and has a 'smile he puts on each A.M. without fail' (*IJ*, p. 316-7). Because of his special status, he moves throughout all levels of the social life of the academy, contributing to people's personalities and projects. He 'obtained Hal his first copies of the unabridged O.E.D.', a catalyst for Hal's ferocious intelligence, and also, more ominously, kept his father supplied with bottles of Wild Turkey whisky (*IJ*, p. 317). Mario himself continues his father's filmmaking legacy, making his own movies, but this never escalates to a consuming occupation. As a 'listener/observer', he is free of his own obsession or subject of worship (*IJ*, p. 189). Mario does not perceive any looming changes of adulthood, and as such does not show any signs of dread or fear about having to succumb to worshipping something like his brothers Hal and Orin. In fact, he is the only character in *Infinite Jest* who possesses this freedom, except perhaps for Marathe and Steeply (although their characters are two of the least explored, with few scenes beyond the conversation they share).

While the narrator of 'The Soul is Not a Smithy' may have been terrified of dedicating himself to a boring job as an adult, *Infinite Jest* shows that dedicating yourself to pleasure and entertainment is as much of a job itself. Take, for example, the early scene

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<sup>156</sup> There is an echo here of Stonecipher Lavache Beadsman, who gives himself the nickname Antichrist in *The Broom of the System*. He was also the subject of a bizarre and damaging birth, but was only affected physically.

describing Steve Erdedy's preparations for 'what simply had to be his last bulk-quantity of marijuana' (*IJ*, p. 20). Apart from the agonising anxiety over whether the delivery of drugs will come and whether he negotiated the deal properly, his organisations also include a huge array of particulars including obtaining all the right snack foods, 'soda, Oreos, bread, sandwich meat, mayonnaise' etc, and making sure he is not disturbed by 'moving his car away from his condominium' and 'putting different messages on his answering device' (*IJ*, p. 20). The behaviour recalls what Wallace said was the challenge issued by the increasingly massive array of entertainment on offer: 'PROVE YOU'RE CONSUMER ENOUGH' (*SFTNDA*, p. 81. Original Capitals). Again we see that in Wallace's work, whatever his characters choose to or unconsciously worship, they have to worship something and give themselves to it entirely.

### **A Modern Problem**

Wallace saw this concept of having to dedicate oneself to something, most likely entertainment or boredom, as a modern phenomenon. *The Pale King*, which is the only one of his novels to be set in the past rather than the future, deals specifically not just with the idea of boredom but how it has historically been understood. Ralph Clare's essay pairs this with a brief summary of the development of the idea of boredom, identifying that Wallace comes to a broad, all-encompassing concept of it that accounts for all its presences in modern life: '*The Pale King* refuses to privilege one type of boredom over others and, in fact, embraces the common forms of boredom.'<sup>157</sup> Clare's conclusion is perhaps too broad, but nonetheless helpful towards understanding Wallace's thought in his last novel: 'boredom is thus a symptom, in *The Pale King*, of an entire generation's attitude toward the world.'<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Clare, *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*, p. 190.

<sup>158</sup> Clare, *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*, p. 198.

We might question what exactly this attitude is, and whether boring activities are really boring to us simply because of our attitude towards them, but Clare is right to see *The Pale King* identifying the prevalence of boredom as bound up with modern life and our expectations of it. A common argument, one that Wallace hints towards but never makes, is that the sheer increasing amount of entertainment of better and better quality that is available makes us more sensitive to boredom as something we have to experience rather than an ordinary, near unconscious, part of our lives like breathing. Recall the earlier quoted statement of Wallace's about the impending availability of virtual reality pornography. The fact that such a thing will actually exist in 2016 highlights how rapidly previously unimaginable forms of entertainment are becoming available.<sup>159</sup>

One interesting recent trend that may help illuminate this line of thinking is the widespread drop in violent crime in the U.K., U.S., and other Western countries. A paper from the Council of Europe explored this trend and offered several possible theories to explain it.<sup>160</sup> The statistics involved and the conclusions we can draw from them are far from concrete. Many mitigating factors are involved such as the methods used by individual countries to obtain crime statistics. Nonetheless, the fact that some scale of downward trend is happening across many Western countries, as argued in the paper, would suggest some wider societal developments are having an effect. One theory is that the increased availability of entertainment and technology is contributing. Especially among young people, alcohol and drug consumption is falling, and we can at least suggest that the possibility of entertaining oneself at home, as an alternative to forms of social interaction that might lead to various types of crime, is contributing to this.

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<sup>159</sup> Virtual reality headsets such as the Oculus Rift are planning to release sometime in 2016. Although the headset providers themselves obviously have no part in producing pornography for them, it has already been produced for the developer kits that have been available for the last few years.

<sup>160</sup> 'The Curious Case of the Fall in Crime: The Rise of Human Rights?', last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168046fc6c>>.

If, then, the developments of technology allowing entertainment in greater quantities and quality is having an effect on society, we might agree with the explanation for Clare's conclusion about *The Pale King*, that the increasing amount of entertainment in our lives makes boredom less tolerable and seem more present. On the other hand, if entertainment has simply diverted energy away which might otherwise have gone into a social situation which could result in a crime, we have to revise this thinking. As, in both cases, the root cause is solving boredom, which is there whether the technological entertainment is on offer or not.

I would suggest instead that the root of needing something to worship in Wallace's thinking as a modern phenomenon is the fact of living in an economically developed country. Clare also writes that in *The Pale King* 'Wallace immediately links this simple boredom of foot tapping and clock watching to a state of anxiety, which quickly balloons into a second type of boredom, that of full existential dread.'<sup>161</sup> This kind of boredom here is not the difficulty and concentration of hard work, but the foot tapping of being unoccupied. When we are not distracted, we are left only with our selves, which, we have discussed above, is what we get away from by worshipping something and giving ourselves entirely to it. The more time we have without immediate worldly concerns, the more we need something to escape ourselves.

### **The Loss of the Self**

While most of Wallace's characters are trying to escape or destroy their selves, an early chapter in *The Pale King* describes a boy who seems to be desperately trying to find one. The boy in section 5 does literally nothing wrong. He is unfailingly kind and courteous and spends every second of his spare time trying to help other people, whether through carrying out the 'Meals on Wheels breakfast tour of the charity home' or raising 'a Special

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<sup>161</sup> Clare, *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*, p. 191.

Fund of nickels for anyone at lunch who's already spent their milk money but still might for whatever reason want or feel they need more milk' (*PK*, p. 31, 36). It is also important to note that he does not do any of this to feed a sense of self-righteousness, importance or ego, deferring in his small post of power as hall monitor to give 'far more official warnings than actual citations—he's there to serve, he feels, not run people down' (*PK*, p. 32). Yet, for all his efforts, he is almost universally hated in his town and school.

Essentially, the boy is following to the letter every part of an unspoken social contract that encourages us to be charitable, courteous and self-sacrificing, but without any awareness of the context of actual lives:

Everyone hates the boy. It is a complex hatred, one that often causes the haters to feel mean and guilty and to hate themselves for feeling this way about such an accomplished and well-meaning boy, which then tends to make them involuntarily hate the boy even more for arousing such self-hatred. The whole thing is totally confusing and upsetting (*PK*, p. 34).

Even the school, for whom he should be the model pupil, cannot stand him, 'teachers shudder at the sound of even just his name' (*PK*, p. 36). The reason for everyone's discomfort around the boy becomes clearer as throughout events the boy acts and reacts with no personality of his own. When his mother is rushed to hospital in what seems to be a suicide attempt, the boy is 'beside himself with concern' (although even concern seems a strangely cold and formal word), but otherwise reacts with his usual manic streak of responsibility, 'maki[ing] sure the mail and the newspaper are brought in, and [keeping] the home's lights turned on and off in a random sequence at night as Officer Chuck [...] sensibly advises' (*PK*, p. 33). With no discernible self, the boy's only recourse is to religiously follow social rules, but to no avail without understanding how they apply to real life.

There are echoes here of Hal, who worries that he has never had an interior life, and for whom James Incandenza primarily made *Infinite Jest* in an attempt to draw Hal out of himself. Chronologically, it is towards the end of *Infinite Jest's* present that Hal begins to narrate the chapters in which he features, after he has stopped his drug use. This would suggest that he is reclaiming his self, but the matter is complicated by his apparent inability to communicate, perhaps due to having seen the *Infinite Jest* film or consuming the drug DMZ by this point. Reclaiming his self is leaving him unable to communicate and trapped in isolation. Indeed, in that opening scene where the deans of admission react with horror when he tries to speak, Hal is desperately trying to convince them he has a self: 'I'm not a machine. I feel and believe [...] I'm in here' (*IJ*, p. 12, 13).

Whether trying to lose or reclaim it, the self is always associated with severe anxiety and pain in Wallace. Indeed, we should not forget that, although the consequences of watching *Infinite Jest* are horrific, to be free of the self is extremely tempting and pleasurable. The medical attaché may be left with a rictus of a face, but 'nevertheless appeared very positive, ecstatic, even' (*IJ*, p. 79). This is, perhaps, too, where the bliss that 'lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom' comes from, finally freed from the self, 'constant bliss in every atom' (*PK*, p. 548). Refer back to the discussion in chapter two of the *Infinite Jest* film and the question of whether or not reality is necessarily better than a fictional world. Hal's fate is asking this question as well, as he has still found himself isolated, which, as we will explore the next and final chapter, is a terrible fate in Wallace's fiction.

### **Harnessing Worship**

If there is no solution to this compulsion, then *The Pale King* at least suggests that there are ways we can harness it for a good purpose. Wallace, in fact, briefly mentions this in *This is Water*, alluding to how it has been used to create the wealth of American society.

The novel itself is set during a time when ideas in America towards government, community and taxation were changing with the Reagan presidency, all contributing to the birth of the 'New IRS' (*PK*, p. 86). Wallace presents this as not just a matter of lowering tax rates through trickle-down economics but 'fundamental changes in the Service's operational mandate' (*PK*, p. 84). The changes were a move away from the community-oriented view of taxation to one that embraced American individualism, reducing the demand the state made on individuals through taxes. This is also bound up with another key change in the IRS that Wallace depicts, 'an involved intra-Service battle between advocates and opponents of an increasingly automated, computerized tax system' that would to some extent create an IRS 'operated like a for-profit business' (*PK*, p. 84-5).

The implication runs throughout the novel that, no matter how robotic like some employees have to be in the processing of endless amounts of data, ('what am I, a machine?' complains one), something crucially important is lost by replacing them with actual machines (*PK*, p. 372). In Section 19, several IRS workers are trapped in an elevator and have a long conversation about civic responsibility and taxation, with one offering the analogy:

It seems like, suppose you're in a lifeboat with other people and there's only so much food, and you have to share it. You've only got so much and it's got to go around, and everybody's really hungry. Of course you want all the food; you're starving. But so is everybody else (*PK*, p. 133).

Note here that the argument is moral rather than practical. The point is not that the food should be shared as the group will raise the individual's odds of survival, but purely because everyone in the group is starving as much as the individual is. The novel argues that the presence of community is valuable and worth protecting, and offers it as an alternative to the isolating consequences suffered in *Infinite Jest*. This does not mean that the path it offers is necessarily a better one. Section 4 consists of nothing but a newspaper

article covering the death of an IRS worker and asking 'why no one noticed that one of their employees had been sitting dead at his desk for four days before anyone asked if he was feeling all right' (*PK*, p. 29). There are many other warnings like this, suggesting you can just as easily become isolated and alone working hard at your job as you can at home in front of your television.

In its unfinished state, it will always be impossible to fully grasp *The Pale King* and the full extent of what Wallace was trying to achieve with it. But the incomplete text seems to be moving in this direction of channeling our need to worship into something that is unifying rather than isolating, and creates community rather than withdrawing from it. This may be a way to escape the paradox the self inflicts on us, desperately trying to escape or attain it. The fictional details and small bits of magic realism Wallace includes in the novel to mythologise the IRS, (the existence of 'fact psychic's being another great example), suggests there is at least the possibility of it being a noble institution that plays an important role in American society rather than a soul-crushing monolith of data processing and accounting. In the context of Wallace's work this is especially important, as there is no worse fate in his fiction than that of isolation.

## Chapter Five

### 'I Put Up A Very Good Front'

#### The Horror of Isolation

The last book review Wallace published was a scathing attack on three giant figures of American fiction. The very first sentence begins 'Mailer, Updike, Roth — the Great Male Narcissists' (*CL*, p. 51). Wallace was not naturally inclined to launch such attacks or confrontations. Ellis was the only other writer he directly condemned in the same way, and he was a contemporary rather than an established figure. His awkwardness is clear as he reminds us in the review, covering Updike's *Toward the End of Time*, 'of the let's say two dozen Updike books I've read' and his admiration for 'the sheer gorgeousness of his descriptive prose' (*CL*, p. 52). But, despite the guilt he felt afterwards, Wallace was compelled to say something: in Max's telling 'he felt within his rights in this case because of his sense that Updike's flaws had gone beyond the literary to the moral.'<sup>162</sup> Anyone familiar with Wallace's work would immediately see why. As with Ellis, as we saw in chapter three, there was something not just wrong but dangerous about Updike's late work. It was not just the depiction of narcissism and solipsism, but how they seemed to be celebrated in their work, particularly in the Updike novel being reviewed; the fact that the 'very world around them, as gorgeously as they see and describe it, tends to exist for them only insofar as it evokes impressions and associations and emotions and desires inside the great self' (*CL*, p. 54). Wallace concludes the review with a hilarious final line, saying of the novel's protagonist 'it never occurs to him, though, that the reason he's so unhappy is that he's an asshole' (*CL*, p. 59).

Such self-centred isolation is the worst possible state depicted in Wallace's work. After inadvertently flirting with it himself in his first two books as we saw in chapter one, he

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<sup>162</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 243.

recoiled from it with dread for the rest of his career. It became the very thing he saw the purpose of fiction to fight against, although, as we saw in the previous chapter, in Wallace it was often the result of attempting to destroy the self rather than glorifying it. Some of the best examples of Wallace engaging with this state come from his last two short story collections and help us to understand why it was such a state of horror.

‘The Depressed Person’ from the collection *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* is an obvious immediate example. Its title inevitably draws us to make links with Wallace’s own life, especially in the context of his own struggle with depression and eventual tragic suicide.<sup>163</sup> However, this is misleading and should be set aside as it only leads to a misreading of the story. The first paragraph sets up the importance of isolation in the story:

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 (*BIHM*, p. 31).

This is the substance of the story, the core of its maddening prose that loops solipsistically back on itself. The depressed person, despite having a therapist and a supportive network of friends, is completely trapped within herself. The title and referral to her as ‘the depressed person’ is our first indication that she identifies herself completely by her own pain and suffering (*BHIM*, p. 31). In fact, the source of her pain may well be her own obsession with it. A point the depressed person is constantly at pains to repetitively state is how aware she is of the burden she is placing on her network of friends by turning to them for support. What might briefly seem to be a tragic self-awareness and guilt about the

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<sup>163</sup> Understandably, Wallace’s suicide has loomed large over writing on his work. I have tried to avoid framing this thesis with it, partly because it is a reductive view of his great work and also because it would be a disservice to his life and achievement. To quote Michael Silverblatt in a panel discussion tribute to Wallace: ‘David would far rather be remembered as an artist than as a suicide or an addict’. Everything And More: A Tribute To David Foster Wallace, last accessed 12th January 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmlIWhTfmI5g>>, 24:00-24:15.

demands she places on others quickly reveals itself to be bottomless self-pity. Take her reaction when a friend might gently suggest that she be 'a little less hard on herself':

The depressed person often responded by bursting involuntarily into tears and telling them that she knew all too well that she was one of those dreaded types of people of everyone's grim acquaintance who call at inconvenient times and just go on and on about themselves and whom it often takes several increasingly awkward attempts to get off the telephone with. The depressed person said that she was all too horribly aware of what a joyless burden she was to her friends, and during the long-distance phone calls she always made it a point to express the enormous gratitude she felt (*BIHM*, p. 35).

Her fixation here is not at all on the inconvenience or trouble she puts her friends to, but her own feelings of guilt and compulsion to express gratitude. Even while talking about the emotions of others, supposedly close friends, they are only discussed through the lens of her own experience, and how they impact and affect her.

Much of this dynamic seems to have arisen due to the depressed person's need to view everything in hyper-sensitive moral terms. She self-righteously refuses to play 'the "Blame Game"' and attribute any fault to her parents for her current state, similar to the way she ceaselessly apologises to the friends she calls for support (*BIHM*, p. 33). There seems to be a desire or expectation of herself to be above such behaviour, despite her real anger towards her parents often bursting forth in the narration: 'her fucking parents' utterly fucking *sick* inability to communicate and share honestly and work through their own sick, dysfunctional issues with each other' (*BIHM*, p. 40). Again, however, her moral judgements are entirely restricted to how things are perceived by and impact her own life: her own guilt rather than her friends' inconvenience. Other people exist only in their relation to the depressed person, a point emphasised by her therapist's suicide.

In keeping with her reactions so far, the suicide is only described in relation to the depressed person. The first detail is not the tragedy of the death, or the depressed person's own culpability in never having noticed any hint of the therapist's own pain, but the therapist's failure to leave 'any sort of note or cassette or encouraging final words for any of the persons and/or clients in her life who had, despite all their debilitating fear and isolation [...] come to connect intimately with her [...] even though it meant making themselves vulnerable' (*BIHM*, p. 43). There is another echo here of Wallace's association of infantilisation with self-centred isolation (as we saw in our discussions of *Infinite Jest* throughout chapters one-three) in the depressed person's sense of 'abandonment' (*BIHM*, p. 43). The therapist's suicide is never seen as a failure on the depressed person's part to notice warning signs or offer support. Instead, the depressed person feels abandoned by the therapist, like a child abandoned by a parent.

This is the realisation she comes to at the end of the story, but even then the realisation is swallowed in her own solipsism. Her discussion of it is still entirely limited to her own reaction to it (with a friend who happens to be suffering from cancer), so that the story ends with her still 'looking inward and facing herself' and no end in sight to her isolation (*BIHM*, p. 58). There is no question here of the horror of the depressed person's state. Apart from the intense pain she is suffering, the repellent narcissism of her character makes it clear Wallace is far from glorifying her in any way, and is depicting her state as one we should be anxious not to find ourselves in.

This is perhaps an extreme example, but there are other more subtle ones as well. 'Signifying Nothing' is an interesting counterpoint to 'The Depressed Person' in how it handles the theme of isolation differently. In it, a young man about to leave home is suddenly struck by a recovered memory of his father waving his penis in front of his face once when he was a child. The Freudian reading here is obviously explicit, the son remembering his father asserting phallic dominance just before he leaves his care, but for

our purposes it is the impact this memory has on the son's relationship with his family that is important. It is also at least possible that the memory is wholly invented and never happened, but again this is not important; firstly because the son adamantly believes it is 'I know it is totally true', and secondly because it does not change the effect it has on the son and the family (*BIHM*, p. 63).

When the son confronts the father about the memory, the relationship between them is immediately shattered. Crucially, neither of them says a word, the father 'did not say or do anything to respond', and only looks at the son in 'total disbelief, and total disgust' (*BIHM*, p. 65). Any dialogue between them has literally been severed and their contact remains broken for a year in which 'my Mom had no clue why I was not in contact, but I sure was not going to mention a word to her about any of it, and I knew, for fucking-'A' sure, my father was not going to say anything to her about it' (*BIHM*, p. 66). Although the son still talks to his sisters during this year, their contact is also dominated by why he has broken off contact with his parents. In short, he has become completely isolated from his family during this year.

Another important distinction to make is that it is not trauma of the recovered memory that causes the break in the relationship, but his rage at his father's reaction and refusal to communicate. In the revenge fantasy he indulges during this time of violently attacking his father, it is really the opportunity to return the favour and refuse his father communication, rather than the violence itself, that serves his idea of revenge: 'my father would keep asking me why I was doing it, and what it meant, but I would not say anything, nor would my face have any look or emotion on it as I beat the shit out of him' (*BIHM*, p. 66). The act of being isolated and not being able to communicate with his family is what causes the son's intense pain and anger.

Towards the end of the year, the son begins to consider the father may have repressed the memory, as the son believes he himself did, and attempts a reconciliation

resolved to 'never bring any of it up again' (*BIHM*, p. 67). When they meet at a restaurant and the son learns they have ordered chicken for him he says 'but I hate chicken. I always hated it. How could you forget I hate chicken?' (*BIHM*, p. 68). For a moment it seems like the attempt is doomed and the son's isolation from his family will continue, but then the family make a joke of it, the son plays along, and the tension is dissolved. Just as with his recovered memory, the story leaves us unclear as to whether the son does indeed hate chicken and has made this known in the past, but ultimately, just as with the memory, it does not matter. Whatever the context, he makes the choice to rejoin the family and end his isolation, saying only 'we all laughed. It was good' (*BIHM*, p. 68). This is the quiet conclusion the son comes to, that whatever the context, his feelings or thoughts on his father's actions, it is simply better to be with his family again than to remain in isolation. The depressed person was seemingly incapable of making this choice, but offered it, the son does not even hesitate.

Isolation is, of course, built into the very format of the title stories that run throughout the collection. All of the brief interviews follow the same structure, representing the interviewer's questions simply with a 'Q.', so that the men interviewed are left alone on the page. Referred to in headings simply by their interview number as well, their answers are lone voices in a vacuum, so that the stories consist solely of themselves without context or relation to anyone else. Unlike 'The Depressed Person' and 'Signifying Nothing' however, the brief interviews are less about the pain of isolation (although it is certainly present) than the repulsiveness of it. The hideousness comes not just from their behaviour and attitudes, but their narcissism and utter detachment from any other human being.

Interview #40 shows a more malicious version of the hyper-self awareness of emotions featured in 'The Depressed Person'. The interviewee describes how he uses his deformed arm, which he calls 'the Asset', to manipulate women for sex, in a routine he presents as having more or less perfected into a formula (*BIHM*, p. 69). The interesting

question the story poses is how genuine the interviewee is being. He calmly asserts that the arm itself does not bother him at all, 'go ahead and look though. It don't bother me [...] Go on. You think it'll hurt my feelings?' (*BIHM*, p. 69). His attitude towards the women he uses the arm to sleep with is also casually misogynistic, mocking their reaction to it and how easily he can manipulate them: 'shit girl most of these girls around here think Elvis is alive someplace. These are not girl wonders of the brain' (*BIHM*, p. 72). Nonetheless, when he adds in the detail that once the girl is crying 'sometimes they get me crying too', it is ambiguous at best as to whether this is his commitment to the role he is playing or the emergence of genuine repressed shame over his deformity. There is no indication that he is lying to the interviewer about how confident and comfortable he is with the act he plays, but the possibility that he is lying to himself remains.

Nonetheless, it would be difficult to feel sympathy for him even if this were the case. Like the depressed person, the interviewee is so self-aware of ordinary human emotions that he drains them of all value. The women's reactions are just stages of the process that he plays like a poker game: 'in this stage it's like they're committed into a corner and if they quit hanging back with me now why they know I can go It Was Because Of The Arm' (*BIHM*, p. 71). Even more so since the process is such a repeated one, the interactions are meaningless. To bring the repulsiveness to its climax, Wallace gives the interviewee the penultimate line: 'more pussy than a toilet seat, man. I shit you not' (*BIHM*, p. 72). Inserting the scatological element at the end here again sets the tone that this is a state we should not wish to end up in ourselves. The interviewee's isolation drains the meaning from his life and provides a companion piece to Wallace's line in the Updike review, criticising Updike for 'persist[ing] in the bizarre, adolescent belief that getting to have sex with whomever one wants whenever one wants to is a cure for human despair' (*CL*, p. 59).

In the last story collection, *Oblivion*, Wallace engaged with isolation specifically in the context of literature and literature's relation to it. More so than in any of the other fiction, it is the work we see him most directly deal with the purpose of his writing, specifically in terms of isolation. We have already noted in the final section of chapter one how the title of the second story taken from Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, indicated the limits of fiction that Wallace was acknowledging, but the discussion continues in the story 'Good Old Neon'. Despite being narrated from a first-person perspective of how a lonely advertising executive committed suicide, the story is framed by the description at the end of

David Wallace blink[ing] in the midst of idly scanning class photos from his 1980 Aurora West H.S. yearbook and seeing my photo and trying [...] to imagine what all must have happened to lead up to my death in the fiery single-car accident he'd read about in 1991 (*O*, p. 180).

It becomes in its conclusion an exercise by the author, David Wallace, trying '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' (*O*, p. 181). Therefore, the story is not just about the advertising executive's isolation, but Wallace testing the capability and limits of fiction to deal with that isolation.

As in the examples from *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, the advertising executive's isolation comes from a form of narcissism, but here it is the fear of rejection that makes him unable to connect with those around him. It drives him to be very successful, to 'create a certain impression of me in other people', but he cannot truly experience any aspect of his life as 'I wouldn't feel much of anything except maybe fear that I wouldn't be able to get it again' (*O*, p. 141). He says of a high school girlfriend 'I never even really saw her, I couldn't see anything except who I might be in her eyes' (*O*, p. 142). There is also, again, the dizzying self-awareness of human interaction, as he traces

the beginning of his need to project a certain image of himself, along with the fear of being found out as a fraud, to an incident as a child: 'I'd realized somehow right in the middle of his asking me if I'd broken the bowl that if I said I did it but 'confessed' it in a sort of clumsy, implausible way, then he [...] would instead believe that my sister Fern [had broken the bowl] (*O*, p. 147-8). From this moment his attention has become fixed not on what he does, but how it is perceived, and he can never go back.

This makes it appropriate that the career he ends up pursuing is advertising. It may seem ironic that someone who pays so much attention to others thoughts and feelings feels desperately isolated themselves, but a parting letter from an ex-girlfriend offers a good description of the executive's mental process, comparing him to a machine 'that can discern more about you in one quick scan than you could ever know about yourself — but the equipment doesn't care about you, you're just a sequence of processes and codes' (*O*, p. 165). The executive even makes a point of how much the description resonated: 'it penetrated, I never did forget what she said in that letter' (*O*, p. 166). In advertising, he can play to people's reactions for financial success, but just like the subject of interview #40, his playing those reactions like a game has made them meaningless.

The frequent discussions regarding the difference between our interior and exterior selves bring the literary component into the story's engagement with the theme of isolation. When the narrator says 'all the endless inbent fractals of connection and symphonies of different voices, the infinities you can never show another soul. And you think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction anyone else ever sees?' it is literature that is supposed to give us a way to see beyond the tiny external fraction, the argument Wallace had made before (*O*, p. 179).<sup>164</sup> Yet, the narrator goes on to say 'it's why it feels so good to break down and cry in front of others, or to laugh, or speak in tongues, or chant in Bengali

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<sup>164</sup> Recall chapter two's discussions of what Wallace saw literature as being capable of that television and other entertainment was not.

— it's not English anymore' (*O*, p. 179). These modes of communication are all free of language, free of the executive's need to read and anticipate reactions like moves in a game of chess, somehow more purely mediated expressions of our internal selves and all the exact opposite of literature. For the executive, language is necessarily tainted by the game of social interaction and can never be a medium of truly communicating with someone else.

Of course, the executive's words are being written by David Wallace, and the story's final page gives us as good a resolution as we can hope for to the tension in these ideas. We are told how David Wallace, too, spent high school in fear and 'thinking of all the ways he could screw up [...] and reveal his true pathetic essence' just like the executive, despite how confident he seemed at the time (*O*, p. 181). What literature has done through the story is show the reader that in the unknowable infinity of our interior selves it is very possible many others feel exactly the same as the executive (or Wallace), trapped within our own consciousness and terribly afraid of getting right the tiny fraction of ourselves we can present to the world. David Wallace, in this final part of the story, immediately tries to stop 'sending the whole line of thought into the sort of inert spiral that keeps you from ever getting anywhere' at the cliché of it all and concludes 'not another word' (*O*, p. 181). Not 'another' word because the story has reached its limit in what it can achieve. As with the use of the title from Joyce, the story acknowledges a limit of what literature can do, while still pushing to do all it can in understanding and resisting isolation.

The discussion is continued in the collection's title story, 'Oblivion'. In this story, Randall Napier is suffering a gradual mental breakdown due to a marital dispute that seems to be maddeningly unresolvable. His wife has suddenly started aggressively accusing him of snoring during the night, while he believes himself to still be awake. They both begin to suffer serious sleep deprivation as a result and their relationship gradually breaks down. As we saw with Hal in *Infinite Jest* (and also in some of Ellis's work), the

worst aspect of the isolation here is the couple seemingly experiencing two entirely separate realities. Both are convinced that they are the one awake, and it is the other who is sleeping when the snoring, or protests about the snoring, occur: 'she steadfastly avows, in other words, that my putative 'snoring' is a waking reality instead of her own dream' (*O*, p. 200). Despite the catalysts of sleep deprivation and frustration, this is the focal point of their escalating dispute, that their experience is being dismissed as false, as the husband vents to a therapist: 'I know when I am truly asleep and when I am not, and that what I do have a "stake" in is refusing to placate someone who is being not just irrational but blindly stubborn and obtuse in accusing me' (*O*, p. 209). As the different realities they experience cannot be reconciled, the couple become isolated from each other, just as the advertising executive had been his entire life.

What is also evident in Randall's over-articulate narration is that he finds it difficult to communicate. The story is full of two verbal tics Randall often repeats, first using multiple alternative words when describing something, unable to settle on the right way to express himself, and second using quotation marks for figures of speech:

About which there is suddenly something terribly "moving" or poignant, forlorn, melancholic or even foreboding, an endlessly ringing and unanswered public phone, all of which appears or seems to occur both endlessly and in, as it were, "no-time," and is accompanied by an incongruous odor of saffron (*O*, p. 194).

Note the use of the word 'or': Randall is not saying that the sensation includes all of the adjectives he describes, he is trying to find the right one. Linguistically, this is perhaps the equivalent of hedging your bets to accurately convey what you are trying to communicate. Also, the quotation marks make it overly clear that he is not using the literal meaning of a word in a well-known figure of speech. There would surely be few readers who believed that the emotion of the unanswered public phone physically moved him, or that he was

suggesting the concept of time did not exist in that moment. The clarification indicates an anxiety about communicating successfully, perhaps made worse rather than helped by his educated vocabulary. Although not explicitly stated, we are seeing the same fear in the prose of 'Oblivion' that was mentioned in 'Good Old Neon', that of only being able to present a tiny portion of yourself to the exterior world and being anxious to control what you present.

The trouble Randall has with communicating is also clear from the various frustrating emotions he is trying to repress. The story opens with Randall attempting to confide and seek advice from his father-in-law, a dominating figure who clearly dislikes him along with, it is hinted, other members of the family: 'it was clearly evident that "Father" did not "approve of" or like what he currently saw: an, as it were, "second string" son-in-law with a mediocre Handicap [golf] and [...] undistinguished career' (*O*, p. 214). Randall always describes these issues with this measure of calm, but their frequent reoccurrence in his narration show how they are gnawing at him. In particular, Randall feels threatened by what he feels to be a questioning of his masculinity, imagining the father-in-law perceives he 'could not manage to be assertive, assuasive or "man" enough' to resolve his marital issue (*O*, p. 214). This is also present in the sexual frustrations Randall is repressing, now that he finds his wife less attractive and is becoming an older man himself. His awkwardness with his step-daughter's teenage friends as he tries not to sexualise them is another minor source of conflict with his wife: 'she would mock my pained confusion, and would aver that she'd prefer it [...] she would "respect" it more — if I would simply openly ogle or leer' (*O*, p. 194). Worse still, he is developing unintended sexual interest in his step-daughter Audrey herself, or at least noticing her attractiveness.

Despite these issues, it is when he loses his relationship with his wife that Randall begins to buckle under the weight of them. The tension between them becomes aggression, until 'Hope's dry, dark, narrow, increasingly haggard face across the breakfast

nook sometimes becomes nearly unrecognizable to me' and Randall states 'my wife is now no one I know' (*O*, p. 205, 210). It is from this point that he starts experiencing suicidal thoughts, a previous fear of falling asleep while driving evolving to 'consider[ing] intentionally "jumping" the median into oncoming traffic' (*O*, p. 224). He is beginning to reach the same state as the advertising executive. Here the significance of the title comes in for a story where the narrator frequently reminds us of 'the absurdity and irrelevance of the whole conflict' at its center (*O*, p. 207). Suicide would be literal oblivion for Randall, but his isolated state becomes oblivion for him as well. Like the advertising executive, who felt he could not do or say anything that was authentic and not fraudulent, Randall begins to repeatedly refer to not being himself, "beside myself" or needing to 'feel more like "[my]self again"' (*O*, p. 205, 216). Randall's isolation is causing the oblivion of his self.

As with 'Good Old Neon', 'Oblivion's ending brings in a self-referential literary element to the story. Increasingly interested in cliché in the later part of his career, Wallace uses one of the most derided of all, the twist ending revealing it was all a dream. The greater twist, however, is that it was in fact the wife who had dreamed from her husband's point of view ("you are my wife" says the voice waking her up from the dream) (*O*, p. 237). The oblivion never comes and a story about isolation in fact becomes, in its last moments, about connection. Randall's wife's dream was about his suffering and point of view rather than her own. In the short fragments of dialogue that reveal the twist, there are hints in her confused state that she may be reaching a better understanding of what her husband is struggling with, asking 'who's this Audrey?' and 'is that thunder? Did it rain?' (*O*, p. 237). Thunder has been an ominous motif throughout the story, in the context of the golf course where Randall met his father-in-law. It creates the risk of dying alone on the course, struck by lightning, the club acting as a conducting rod, as Randall mentions has happened before: 'my own Father had been in the trio of other golfers who had bravely remained in the open with the stricken lightning victim until a physician could be summoned and

arrive' (*O*, p. 213). Although her last line states 'none of this is real', Randall's tender reassurance that closes the story, 'it's all all right', indicates the nightmare of their isolation from each other will remain only a nightmare. Wallace seems to be suggesting something similar to what he did in 'Good Old Neon', that a story can function like a dream and give us a way of connecting beyond the tiny fraction of our exterior selves.

For Wallace, this is what fiction does that is so important and urgent. In a time when the danger of becoming completely isolated is ever-present, this function of literature is more important than ever. Throughout the stories of *Oblivion* he is charting and pushing the limits of what his fiction can achieve towards this end, free of the irony and cynicism that would mock such a clichéd aim.

## Conclusion

It is my hope that this thesis has improved our understanding of the magnitude of both Wallace's ambition and achievement. We have seen how from the beginning of his writing career he sought to forge a style of fiction that did not imitate previous writers and responded to the times he lived in. From his fascination with entertainment to his insistence on paying careful attention to overlooked or supposedly trivial subjects, Wallace charted areas in his writing that had not yet been explored. More than this, he repeatedly made the case as to why this was important, why anyone should bother to read a novel over 1,000 pages long when practically an infinite amount of other, more easily accessible entertainment and content was available to them. Through his major novels he grappled intensely with the unique demands and pressures of modern life and throughout all his writing he engages with the simple, yet increasingly difficult, need to connect. While he could write beautifully and eloquently about the hell of being utterly alone, he always strived to at least help find a way out. If the years since his death in 2008 are any indication, his work will become increasingly vital in the future.

At this very early stage in David Foster Wallace studies, the debate over the legacy and literary identity of Wallace is beginning to take shape. Marshall Boswell in particular, a leading Wallace critic, can be seen to be nudging the discussion in his work, such as in this comment in a recent essay on *The Pale King* where he refers to:

The unfortunate popular conception of Wallace as a technically dazzling and intellectually sophisticated writer of self-help narratives designed to "save us" from solipsism, loneliness, addiction, and so on<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Marshall Boswell, 'Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in *The Pale King*' in Marshall Boswell (ed.), *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 210.

It is easy to understand Boswell's discomfort here. In the preface to his biography, Max ponders Wallace's unlikely mainstream popularity, which has continued to grow since his tragic death (and many would argue exacerbated by it), 'how had Wallace become the embodiment of a feeling that many people who had never gotten beyond page 70 of *Infinite Jest* shared?'<sup>166</sup> Any critic would be uncomfortable with the prospect of Wallace, with the staggering complexity of his work, coming to be known as a glorified self-help writer. However, the matter is not as simple as this or as Boswell judges, and his broad dismissal of this conception of Wallace is, in fact, very misleading, especially for our overall understanding of Wallace.

Part of this misunderstanding stems from seeing this conception of Wallace as a kind of caricatured preacher rather than a serious literary writer, but, as we discussed in chapter three, a crucial part of Wallace's writing was its intention to have a truly active effect on the reader. This is far from the work of any self-help guru that Boswell fears Wallace is being turned into, but nonetheless writing with the intention of having a real impact on the reader. Boswell himself notes this without making the connection, concluding the same essay in which the comment above is quoted from with '[Wallace's] hopes for the book [*The Pale King*] were not just aesthetic but, in a very real sense of the term, political.'<sup>167</sup> Such political hopes may be more overtly present in *The Pale King*, but they are there in every single one of his books from *Infinite Jest* onwards.<sup>168</sup>

*This is Water* is the text that is almost always blamed for encouraging this conception of Wallace. Some have even suggested or implied that its publication was a mistake, representing a sentimental Wallace lacking the usual substance of his thinking

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<sup>166</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. xiii.

<sup>167</sup> Boswell, *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*, p. 224.

<sup>168</sup> As we saw in chapter one, the hallmarks Wallace's thinking and fiction developed with the writing of *Infinite Jest* after *The Broom of the System* and *Girl With Curious Hair*.

and work.<sup>169</sup> This unease with the text among critics may be in part explained by it being by far the easiest Wallace text to engage with, only intended as a single-occasion speech and therefore without the challenges of his fiction and non-fiction. However, whatever one's opinion of the advice offered by it, *This is Water* is undoubtedly an important expression of Wallace's late thinking and the ideas behind his last pieces of fiction. We constantly see these ideas at work in *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*. Moreover, its format as a speech giving worldly advice to graduates about to begin their adult lives is especially appropriate for the increasingly important active role Wallace intended for his fiction. Max argues this was itself the main obstacle to the completion of *The Pale King*, as offering a solution to the problems Wallace engaged with was nigh on impossible:

While *Oblivion* was descriptive, *The Pale King* was supposed to be prescriptive. It had to convince the reader that there was a way out of the bind. It had to have a commitment to a solution that *Oblivion* lacked.<sup>170</sup>

*This is Water* itself does not so much offer clear prescriptive advice as a plea to remain open-minded and attentive, viewing everything as worthy of our attention, another key facet of Wallace's work that is particularly apparent in the non-fiction.

The recent release of the film *The End of the Tour*, based on Lipsky's book *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, indicated that this problem will probably be a dominant one in Wallace studies over the next few years. The film (showing the first fictional on-screen representation of Wallace himself) appears to present Wallace as a lovable, tragic figure, what has been called by some the 'Saint Dave' character.<sup>171</sup> Even

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<sup>169</sup> The speech is published in a very handsome volume, although pages can cover as little as ten words at a time, with the speech broken up into tiny fragments to fill the book.

<sup>170</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 280.

<sup>171</sup> At the time of writing, the film has not yet been released in the U.K., although it has received plenty of coverage and promotional materials. It has also received widely favourable reviews from critics and, without having access to it, appears to at the very least be an interesting addition to the ever growing amount of work on and surrounding Wallace.

before its public release, many articles have already been written debating the veracity of its portrayal of Wallace. Another quote from Max helps illuminate this problem and shows the error in the dichotomy the argument is already taking shape as: ‘the truth behind banalities always excited and embarrassed Wallace, filling him with the wonder that, as he wrote in *Infinite Jest*, “clichéd directives are a lot more deep and hard to actually do.”’<sup>172</sup>

This was the challenge that Wallace embraced in his late career, walking the tightrope between capturing the urgency and truth that gave clichés and banalities their meaning and wallowing in the staleness and embarrassing sentimentality they had been reduced to over time. His own experience had made him turn away from academics, philosophy and theory in his fiction towards the everyday subject matter of *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* (a phrase that had particularly resonated with him in AA had been ‘my best thinking got me here’).<sup>173</sup> In the same way, the argument over Wallace as either obscure, elite literary novelist or sanctified self-help guru is missing the point. He did want his work to actively engage with and affect the reader in their own lives, to have purpose beyond literature for its own sake, but he was also not a dispenser of easy, feel-good answers that could be packaged into neat little quotations. The balance between the two was one Wallace was striving for in his engagement with clichés, and we must strive for the same balance in our assessment of Wallace’s posthumous identity. Understanding the truth in both exaggerated versions of Wallace is the only way to understand the late fiction and avoid the trap of seeing *Infinite Jest* as the peak of his career.

The writing in *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* is, I would argue, the most powerful he ever produced. In these two books we get to see a ferociously intelligent writer, vastly experienced and with fiercely urgent compassion tackle subjects that, despite their importance, are very easily dismissed as sentimental or trivial. The debate over whether

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<sup>172</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 286.

<sup>173</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 139.

fiction is still relevant in the present day will likely never go away, but Wallace will always be the champion for the argument that literature is ever more relevant, providing us with a way of communicating, examining and understanding new aspects of our lives, and combating the isolation and loneliness that modern life makes ever more prevalent.

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