

**The Gathering of a Force: David Foster Wallace's Millennial Fictions and the
Literature of Replenishment**

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Abstract

This thesis charts the postmodern *fin de siècle* in North American fiction, through close scrutiny of David Foster Wallace's writing, and his engagement with twentieth-century literary development. Through examination of the 'blank generation' fictions of Douglas Coupland, Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney, and establishing the lineage of Wallace's own influences, such as John Barth and Don DeLillo, this thesis demonstrates that Wallace's writing is distinct from that of his contemporaries and explores his ambition to move American literature beyond its reliance on established tropes of postmodern expression.

In his fiction, Wallace depicts a world where postmodernism has become the default, mainstream mode of expression. Focusing on Wallace's novels, *The Broom of the System* (1987) and *Infinite Jest* (1996), this thesis interrogates his depictions of passivity and addiction through his creative rendering of contemporary consumer culture, going on to evaluate his attempts to develop a new moralism through pragmatic application of philosophical systems of thought. There is particular focus on how his ideas of morality parallel many of Iris Murdoch's writings on the ethics of attention.

This is one of the first theses to make use of the Wallace collection at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, and through archival research and close readings it builds on existing critical material in order to position Wallace's work in the wider American canon, considering its conceptual links to past literary works. Through a critical engagement with Wallace's work, this thesis reassesses the progression of late-twentieth century American literature and also identifies a

systematic attempt to initiate a new direction in novel-writing which defies traditional categorisations and more aptly describes the American millennial experience.

Contents

	<i>page</i>
Acknowledgements	iv
Declaration	v
List of Abbreviations	vi
Introduction	1
1. The Armageddon-Explosion: David Foster Wallace's Literary Contexts	4
2. 'Aww, Gilligan': Entertainment, Popular Culture and Mass Consumption in Wallace's Early Work	49
3. Just Think About Other People: Wallace, Philosophy and Solipsism	85
4. The Gathering of a Force: The Literary Influence in <i>Infinite Jest</i>	122
5. Too Much Fun for Anyone Mortal to Hope to Endure: Popular Culture and Ideas of Consumption in <i>Infinite Jest</i>	161
6. Higher Powers: <i>Infinite Jest</i> and Philosophy	200
Conclusion: Wallace's Millennial Moment	237
Bibliography	249

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Declaration

Parts of Chapter One (David Foster Wallace's Literary Contexts) were originally published in an altered form in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (2010) under the title 'A Blasted Region: David Foster Wallace's Man-made Landscapes'.

List of Abbreviations

References to primary texts by David Foster Wallace will be cited in full on their initial appearance in the thesis. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically within the main text, where relevant in the abbreviated form below (omitted titles require no abbreviation). Full details of each publication can also be found in the bibliography.

Fiction:

Broom – The Broom of the System

‘Animals’ – ‘Little Expressionless Animals’

‘Appearance’ – ‘My Appearance’

‘Westward’ – ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way’

*Jest – Infinite Jest*¹

King – The Pale King

Non-Fiction:

‘Fictional Futures’ – ‘Fictional Forms and the Conspicuously Young’

‘Plenum’ – ‘The Empty Plenum: David Markson’s Wittgenstein’s Mistress’

‘Pluram’ – ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction’

‘Getting Away’ – ‘Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away From it All’

‘Supposedly’ – ‘A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again’

Everything – Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞

¹ A Note on ‘Infinite Jest’, Jim Incandenza’s addictive film: in the novel, the film is referred to by many names, including ‘*samizdat*’, ‘the fatally addictive cartridge’ and ‘Infinite Jest’. To avoid confusion with the title of the novel, I will refer to the film as ‘The Entertainment’ through this thesis.

‘Son’ – ‘Big Red Son’

‘Dostoevsky’ – ‘Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky’

*Water – This is Water: Some Thoughts Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about
Living a Compassionate Life*

‘Modality’ – ‘Richard Taylor’s “Fatalism” and the Semantics of Physical Modality’

Introduction

[W]ho is to blame for the unseriousness of our serious fiction? The culture, the laughers? But they wouldn't (could not) laugh if a piece of morally passionate, passionately moral fiction was also ingenious and radiantly human fiction. But how to make it that? How – for a writer today, even a talented writer today – to even get up the guts to try?²

Throughout his career, David Foster Wallace has tasked himself with trying to find an answer for these questions, and to find a way of expressing an ideology that both challenges established modes of expression, but also describes a possible method of ethical existence. Wallace's intellectual development was inspired by his engagement to myriad sources that crossed the boundaries of generic categorisation. He was born in 1962, the same year Nabokov examined the creative possibilities of endnotes in *Pale Fire*, and his initial literary influences lay in the *avant garde* fiction of the high postmodernists, such as John Barth, William H. Gass, Donald Barthelme and Thomas Pynchon. Yet, through his parallel engagement with philosophy and literary theory, and his interest in forms of popular culture and entertainment, Wallace began to feel that postmodern expression did not adequately diagnose what he felt was wrong with late-twentieth-century experience or work to offer possible solutions for re-establishing the idea of literary art as a 'living transaction between humans'.³

This thesis explores how Wallace began his career in defiance of the literary trends of his peers, so called 'blank generation' writers such as Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney and Douglas Coupland whose work is inextricably linked with

² David Foster Wallace, 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky', in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2007), pp. 255-274. (p. 274).

³ Larry McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Burn, Stephen J. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 21-52. p. 41.

late postmodernism and ironic posturing. Of all the writers of his generation, Wallace is more articulate about his place in the American literary canon, and about how he has attempted to process his influences. The 1993 interview conducted by Larry McCaffery and the essay 'E Unibus Pluram' (1990), both originally published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, are particularly useful for Wallace scholars as they are detailed accounts of his developing opinion of both his own fiction and that of his contemporaries, and show that Wallace is able to articulate his thoughts in a critical framework. As such, references to these two documents pepper this thesis in an attempt to establish a detailed examination of how Wallace interacts with the literary, the social and the pop cultural influences on his work. As his career progresses and his artistic project becomes more refined, there are additional pieces of work in which Wallace articulates his thoughts on both fiction and philosophical systems of thought. For example, *This is Water*, his 2005 commencement speech, helps solidify his views of morality that are established in *Infinite Jest* (1996) and continued in the later works, *Oblivion* (2005) and *The Pale King* (2011).

Yet, despite Wallace's articulation in these documents, much of what he says cannot be taken without question. For example, the famous quotation in the Larry McCaffery interview that 'Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*' strikes the literary scholar as reductive.⁴ This thesis thoroughly interrogates Wallace's statements on both his fiction, and the role of fiction in general, in order to establish a critically rigorous foundation to the analysis of his work.

It has now become critical commonplace to focus on Wallace's view that fiction after postmodernism must 'risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama.

⁴ Ibid. p. 26.

Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law'.⁵ The thesis thoroughly interrogates these critical notions, articulating the possible sources for Wallace's interest in literary sincerity, its philosophical underpinnings and its applications in his own work. This interrogation reveals that Wallace's relationship with sincerity and morality is deeper and much more nuanced than is suggested by the popular critical opinion that Wallace attempted to avoid irony.

This thesis is structured around six thematically focused chapters, the first three examining Wallace's early, pre-*Infinite Jest* career (1987-1995), concentrating on the literary, the pop cultural and the philosophical influences. The remaining three chapters mirror this structure, but examine Wallace's most important work, *Infinite Jest* (1996). This structure has been chosen to emphasise the threads of continuity in his fiction that bolster the more overt developments. The conclusion briefly examines Wallace's unfinished posthumous novel, *The Pale King* (2011), in order to establish Wallace's place in the American canon. This thesis focuses mainly on the novels, as it becomes clear that Wallace's most bold innovations and ideological statements are fortified in their pages, and for the sake of controlled and in-depth criticism the short stories and creative non-fiction are used sparingly as textural accompaniment to the larger critical project.

⁵ David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 1998), pp. 21-82. (pp. 81-82).

Chapter One

The Armageddon-Explosion: David Foster Wallace's Literary Contexts

This chapter will examine the beginnings of David Foster Wallace's career as a writer, charting the literary contexts of his formative works, including *The Broom of the System* (1987) and 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' (1989). The aim of this chapter will be to interrogate Wallace's literary reactions to both late postmodernism and the writing of his immediate peers in order to establish the literary influences of his early work and position him within the American canon. The intention is to compare and contrast his development with that of other young American writers of the 1980s and early 1990s in order to examine how Wallace strives (not always successfully) to defy the emerging conventions of so called 'Generation X' fiction.⁶

Wallace in the 1980s

In the August 1987 edition of *Esquire*, the former fiction editor of the magazine, L. Rust Hills, constructed a chart entitled 'A Guide to the Literary Universe'. It was an update of his 1963 article 'The Structure of the American Literary Establishment' and an effort to show how the world of American fiction had changed in the intervening 24 years. David Foster Wallace appears, shortly after the publication of his debut novel, *The Broom of the System*, on the Universe's distant horizon,

⁶ 'Generation X' is a loose and imprecise label for the fiction of late 1980s and early 1990s American writers. The term itself was re-coined in its new context by the novelist Douglas Coupland, but according to critics such as Elizabeth Young, Douglas Rushkoff and Neil Nehring the group also includes Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz, Mark Leyner and latterly Chuck Palahniuk. This group, characterised by an ironic cultural savvy, nihilism and a lack of affect, has also been called 'Blank Generation Fiction' (Young, 1992).

alongside Vikram Seth, Amy Hempel and the editor who would go on to work on *Infinite Jest*, Michael Pietsch. Hills called the focal point of the Universe 'The Red Hot Center', which is 'a measure of neither merit nor potential. Rather it is a measure of influence – the extent to which the people it embraces can have an effect on others'.⁷ The gravitational pull includes Raymond Carver, John Updike, Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer (along with some influential critics and agents). Writers who are perhaps closest in age to Wallace are dismissed by Hills as 'Media Showers', and include Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz and David Leavitt, the members of a literary group dubbed Generation X, the 'Blank Generation', or 'brat pack'.

In 1987, Wallace could have, at first glance, been seen as another young writer, another member of the literary brat pack who had published a precocious novel that achieved some critical acclaim.⁸ However, in an article published in the Fall 1988 issue of *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Wallace urgently tries to distance himself from what he dubs 'Conspicuously Young' novelists.⁹ In this essay, titled 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young', Wallace lists the 'three dreary camps' that he sees the fiction of his peers falling into:

- (1) Neiman-Marcus nihilism, declaimed via six-figure Uppies and their salon-tanned, morally vacant offspring, none of whom seem to be able to make it from the limo door to the analyst's couch without several grams of chemical encouragement;
- (2) Catatonic Realism, a.k.a. Ultraminimalism, a.k.a. Bad Carver, in which suburbs are wastelands, adults automata, and narrators blank

⁷ L. Rust Hills, 'Esquire's Guide to the Literary Universe', in *Esquire*, August 1987, 51-59. (p. 53).

⁸ Caryn James, in *The New York Times Book Review* (March 1 1987, p. 22), wrote '*The Broom of the System* succeeds as a manic, human, flawed extravaganza', while Michiko Kakutani suggested that 'Mr. Wallace possesses a wealth of talents – a finely-tuned ear for contemporary idioms; an old-fashioned story-telling gift [...] a seemingly endless capacity for invention and an energetic refusal to compromise' (*The New York Times Book Review*, December 27 1986, p. 14).

⁹ David Foster Wallace, 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young', in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), pp. 37-68. (p. 35).

perceptual engines, intoning in run-on monosyllables the artificial ingredients of breakfast cereal and the new human non-soul;

- (3) Workshop Hermeticism, fiction for which the highest praise involves the words “competent,” “finished,” “problem-free,” fiction over which Writing-Program pre- and proscriptions loom with the enclosing force of horizons: no character without Freudian trauma in accessible past, without near-diagnostic physical description; no image undissolved into regulation Updikean metaphor; no overture without a dramatized scene to “show” what’s “told”; no denouement prior to an epiphany whose approach can be charted by any Freitag on any Macintosh (‘Fictional Futures’, pp. 39-40).

Wallace’s view here is extreme (admitting himself that this categorisation is ‘mean, but unfortunately fair’) and does not give credit to the role authors such as Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney played in the evolution of American literature. However, this critique is valuable because it shows Wallace’s literary mindset at an early point in his career, and how he saw himself in relation to the other ‘Conspicuously Young’ novelists of the 1980s. The essay itself reads as a personal mission statement, Wallace’s declaration that, as a young writer himself, he wanted to produce something more than ‘Gold-Card-fear-and-trembling fiction’ or ‘Neiman-Marcus nihilism’. He indicates that he wants to create art, ‘serious, real, conscientious, aware, ambitious art’ that has the power to ‘order chaos, to transform void into floor and debt into treasure’ (‘Fictional Futures’, p. 68).

In order to understand the significance of Wallace’s critique, it is pertinent to explore the literary impact these ‘brat pack’ authors had on 1980s America, and why Wallace attempted to distance himself from many of their shared preoccupations with his own early fiction and non-fiction. In the early fiction of authors such as Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Douglas Coupland and Mark Leyner, there is the depiction of characters who have succumbed to nihilism, and a world where meaning is derived out of ironic interaction with the commercialised

world around them. Daniel Grassian, in his book *Hybrid Fictions*, describes young Americans' 'symbiotic relationship with television and audio media' and notes that 'Ellis, McInerney and Janowitz wrote fiction that made literature relevant once more for a new generation of Americans'. He goes on to say that these novelists show 'a jaded media sensibility and a renewed interest in the modernist search for epistemological certainties'.¹⁰ Elizabeth Young takes a similar approach in her book *Shopping In Space*, describing the work of the literary brat pack as arising 'directly out of [the authors'] own observations and experiences of postmodern culture [...] they are reporting from within a lived reality, not dissecting its constituents from the academic perimeters'. She furthers Grassian's observations by saying 'their writing tends to close the gap between "high" and "low" art forms far more successfully than is ever possible in the more theoretical metafiction, mainly because many of the younger urban writers genuinely cannot see such a gap'.¹¹ David Foster Wallace falls into the 'more theoretical' category, with his extensive knowledge of the literary continuum he is entering into, even at an early stage in his career. Yet his work also fits in with existing preconceptions that the young novelists of the 1980s worked to 'close the gap between "high" and "low" art forms'. He attempts to explain this position: 'It is meant (1) to help create a mood of irony and irreverence, (2) to make us uneasy and so "comment" on the vapidness of U.S. culture, and (3) most important, these days, to be just plain realistic'.¹²

The division between Wallace and his peers becomes evident when the way the authors write about 'high' and 'low' art forms. For an author such as Bret

¹⁰ Daniel Grassian, *Hybrid Fictions: American Literature and Generation X* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2003). p. 12.

¹¹ Elizabeth Young, 'Children of the Revolution: Fiction takes to the streets', in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American "Blank Generation" Fiction*, ed. by Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), pp. 1-20. (p. 14).

¹² David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 1998), pp. 21-82. (pp. 42-43).

Easton Ellis, the ironic and nihilistic connection of his characters to the commercialised world is more ambivalent than openly critical. Young writes that this 'is because many such artists genuinely love aspects of the Disneyfied consumer culture. They do not secretly despise it or feel alienated from it in the manner of older novelists or critical theorists'.¹³ Yet, it is important to note that while this may be the case, their seeming love of consumerism does not lead them to valorise it. This ambivalence can be seen in Ellis's debut novel, *Less Than Zero* (1985). It is the story of a group of shallow Californian teenagers who spend their days engaging in superficial relationships and drug abuse. Their lives are defined by fashion (MTV and ultra-hip fashion bible *The Face* magazine) to the extent that they can only relate to each other on a superficial level. 'People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles', the novel begins, a line that mutates into a mantra for the protagonist, Clay: 'People are afraid to merge'.¹⁴ Wallace, however, is less interested in merely depicting the superficial consumerist world in which he has been raised. Paul Giles writes, 'While most of Wallace's stories take American mass culture as their donnée, therefore, the author completely disowns the method he attributes to Bret Easton Ellis of simply representing characters by listing brand names, of cynically reflecting a banal and cliché-ridden world through narrative clichés'.¹⁵ The commercial world does not take the lead in Wallace's fiction but exists as a framework for larger discussions. Lenore Beadsman, protagonist of *The Broom of the System*, is from a similar background to Ellis's Clay: moneyed, educated and facing existential conundra. Contrary to Clay, Lenore's problems stem from a philosophical dilemma that challenges her own

¹³ Young, 'Children of the Revolution'. p. 14.

¹⁴ Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (London: Picador, 1985). p. 1.

¹⁵ Paul Giles, 'Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 53.3 (2007), 327-344. (p. 335).

solipsism. Clay, on the other hand, suffers from the 'postmodern condition of jaded dissatisfaction', a general malaise that has no real direction or solution.¹⁶ In many ways, Ellis's writing has more of an American context in terms of his use of commercial, consumerist culture. This can be seen in the links his work has with established writers of the twentieth century American canon, such as Fitzgerald, Salinger and the Beats. Young links Ellis and McInerney with Fitzgerald writing that the latter 'recalls the nervous, syncopated pleasures of the twenties and the maddened roller-coaster joyride of the Bright Young Things, the first significant Teen generation'.¹⁷ Despite this, Wallace dwells in the margins of this American context and is very critical of the focus of Ellis's writing:

I think it's a kind of black cynicism about today's world that Ellis and others depend on for their readership. Look, if the contemporary condition is hopelessly shitty, insipid, materialistic, emotionally retarded, sadomasochistic, and stupid, then I (or any writer) can get away with slapping together stories with characters who are stupid, vapid, emotionally retarded, which is easy, because these sorts of characters require no development.¹⁸

'Ellis's teenagers feel themselves to be at the *end* of things', Elizabeth Young writes. 'Excess, experience – the previous generations have run through it all and everything is now worn thin, second-hand'.¹⁹ Ellis concerns himself with representing a postmodern world, full of exhausted images and superficial relationships, but Wallace takes issue with 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

¹⁶ Young, 'Vacant Possession'. p. 36.

¹⁷ Young, 'Children of the Revolution'. p. 17.

¹⁸ Larry McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 21-52. (pp. 25-26).

¹⁹ Young, 'Vacant Possession'. p. 22. Young's emphasis.

everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live despite the times' darkness'.²⁰

While this statement is rather didactic, its wording does illuminate a possible source for his point of view. Wallace seems to be echoing John Barth's statements from his essay 'The Literature of Replenishment' (1980), that 'the aesthetic of high modernism' has been exhausted and literature is in need of replenishment by the '*best next* thing' of postmodernism.²¹ Of course, Wallace believes this 'CPR' is necessary because it is the postmodern literary aesthetic that has become exhausted and cannot address millennial human experience. What this begins to show is that Wallace's intellectual engagement with postmodern ideas is a literary and theoretical one. What makes Ellis's and others' work strange is that its authors have not engaged with postmodernism through intense literary or theoretical study, but rather because postmodern thought, by the 1980s, had exploded into all aspects of the world. As cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg writes:

We are in fact surrounded by signs of this postmodern condition: from the extremely popular post-"Saturday Night Live" movies (whose attitude was, as Bill Murray says in *Meatballs*, "It just doesn't matter"), to the production of comedy (i.e. Andy Kaufman, David Letterman, and Pee Wee Herman) and pleasure (e.g. wrestling) at precisely the point where reality and image collapse into one another'.²²

Unlike Wallace, who approaches literature and writing from a largely academic background, his peers were not academics who studied postmodern theory, but rather artists who were emerging out of a more immediate literary heritage and

²⁰ McCaffery, p. 26.

²¹ John Barth, 'The Literature of Replenishment', in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 193-206. (p. 206). Barth's emphasis.

²² Lawrence Grossberg, 'Rockin' with Reagan, or the Mainstreaming of Postmodernity', *Cultural Critique*, no. 10 (1988), 123-149. (p. 139).

attempting to faithfully depict the world that they lived in. The postmodernism that had so invigorated the post-War fiction of writers such as Barth, Pynchon and Vonnegut had now become problematically mainstream instead of a style of literary rebellion or replenishment. In his essay 'Jigsaw Youth versus Generation X and Postmodernism', Neil Nehring categorises this problem as 'a punk-rock taste for deviances trivialized by postmodern cynicism over the commercialization of rebellion and the cheapening of emotion'.²³ Wallace, writing about how television has adopted 'postmodern cool', notes that 'the extent that TV can ridicule old-fashioned conventions right off the map, it can create an authority vacuum. And guess what fills it. The real authority on a world we now view as constructed and not depicted becomes the medium that constructs our world-view' ('Pluram', p. 62). Novelists were writing postmodern novels because they thought it was the best way to reflect the world in which they were living, but in this world of signifiers and hyperreality it was, Wallace believed, impossible to penetrate surfaces and provide genuine exploration of the inner. Just as Ellis's characters in *Less Than Zero* are only able to relate to each other on a surface level ('I bet you don't even read *The Face*. You've got to.'²⁴), Ellis can only engage with his characters as symbols. I say this not as a derisive criticism of Ellis's work, but to reinforce the notion that his novels completely depict the postmodern experience, both in subject matter and execution. As Umberto Eco writes, 'semiotics is revealed as the new form of cultural anthropology, sociology, criticism of ideas, and aesthetics'.²⁵ In the domain of the postmodern hyperreal, we can only make sense of the world by studying the chaos of signs, simulations and images that are thrust before us. Elizabeth Young

²³ Neil Nehring, 'Jigsaw Youth versus Generation X and Postmodernism', in *GenXegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth (Sub)Culture*, ed. by John M. Ulrich, and Andrea L. Harris (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press/Popular Press, 2003), pp. 59-78. (p. 65).

²⁴ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*. p. 86.

²⁵ Umberto Eco, *Apocalypse Postponed* (London: Flamingo, 1995). p. 179.

writes about Ellis's success in depicting the postmodern experience in *Less Than Zero*, saying 'Ellis manages to present in a very pure form the homogeneity of the modern world and its tendency to reduce people to characterless ciphers, to passive consumers'.²⁶ While she mirrors Eco in saying that Ellis's teenagers are 'awash in a blizzard of ceaselessly circulating codes, clichés and slogans', she also suggests that Ellis's novels contain 'a furious subterranean humanism fully cognizant of the threat posed by all varieties of lack of affect'.²⁷ There is a problem with this analysis, as Ellis's fiction, particularly *Less Than Zero*, is too ambivalent about the signs and signifiers that surround the characters, and the ironic images that they provide, that the 'subterranean humanism' that Young attributes is lost in the postmodern blizzard. This complication of Young's idea comes from Ellis's reluctance to show overt emotion or affect in his novel. His characters show a fear of social engagement ('People are afraid to merge...'), something that also has the affect of alienating the reader. As Georgina Colby writes, 'The failure of Clay to merge with the exterior world also anticipates his failure to narrate'.²⁸ She continues, writing that Clay's fear to join a meaningful society shields him 'from the unsettling reality of subjective life'. Yet in Wallace's view, this failure of narration is also a failure to successfully transcend tired postmodern expression. He says, 'Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look banal or melodramatic or naïve or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something'.²⁹ The ambivalence in Ellis's work stands at odds to Wallace's view. At

²⁶ Young, 'Vacant Possession'. p. 33.

²⁷ Ibid. pp. 34-35.

²⁸ Georgina Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011). p. 32.

²⁹ McCaffery, p. 50.

the end of *Less Than Zero*, Clay remembers a song he had recently heard and comes to his climactic epiphany:

The song was called 'Los Angeles' and the words and images were so harsh and bitter that the song would reverberate in my mind for days. The images, I later found out, were personal and no one I knew shared them. The images I had were of people being driven mad by living in the city. Images of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled they ate their own children. Images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun [...] Images so violent and malicious that they seemed to be my only point of reference for a long time afterwards.³⁰

Clay's epiphany is that he is an individual, a person who could formulate his own ideas and opinions without the influence of his friends, but it is a shallow epiphany, one founded purely on images (albeit not the collective images he is used to). The fact that he finds images as his 'only point of reference' show how little he has evolved during the novel, and how much his own idea of individuality is merely another set of signifiers, rather than a realisation of a 'furious subterranean humanism'. The images are cold and distant, as if Clay is subconsciously bringing to mind those that he has seen in one of his myriad media contacts; images on television, or film, or pictures in a magazine or newspaper. There is also a lack of reaction to these images, and we are only told that they 'reverberate' in his mind – this passage does not suggest any emotional engagement with the images. Clay is merely an observer.

Jay McInerney has a similar engagement with this mainstream postmodernism in his debut novel, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984). The novel itself is similar to *Less Than Zero* in that it depicts a world of symbols and characters that move through the postmodern wilderness with little affect and an unhealthy

³⁰ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*. p. 195.

appetite for chemical stimulation. Yet McInerney has more of a literary engagement with postmodernism than Ellis, and *Bright Lights, Big City* can be viewed as a metafictional novel that comments on the process of fictional reconstruction of the real: the narrator works in the 'Department of Factual Verification', but it is revealed that 'you don't want to be in Fact. You'd much rather be in Fiction'.³¹ Narrative convention is also played with in the novel, from the unusual second-person narrative, to the thoughts of the protagonist: 'You thought of yourself in the third person: *He arrived for his first interview in a navy-blue blazer. He was interviewed for a position in the Department of Factual Verification*'.³² This can be seen as an ironic rendering of a more conventional narrative form, a metafictional device to highlight the construction of the novel. But as with Ellis, this leads to a narrative that reflects the second-hand nature of the postmodern world. Graham Caveney writes, 'McInerney's style is a kind of post-realism (a real-realism?), his characters exist in a world that is *already spoken*, and his meta-fictional pathos suggests that if writing is what helps define us, it is also the thing that confines us'.³³ If, as Caveney suggests, McInerney is charting the limits of representation with his debut novel, he is also furthering Wallace's criticism of late postmodern fiction as being mimetic of a 'narrative world that's clichéd and not recognisably human' by using exhausted postmodern devices.³⁴ For Wallace, McInerney's 'exploration of *motive*' in *Bright Lights, Big City* merits 'neither head-patting nor sneers', yet along with Ellis, it helps illustrate Wallace's problems with postmodern expression.

³¹ Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007). p. 21.

³² Ibid. p. 32. McInerney's emphasis.

³³ Graham Caveney, 'Psychodrama: Qu'est que c'est? Jay McInerney and the Family Saga', in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American "Blank Generation" Fiction*, ed. by Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), pp. 43-74. (p. 49). Caveney's emphasis.

³⁴ McCaffery, p. 26.

Wallace, *The Broom* and Postmodern Fiction

This literary grounding in McInerney's work allows a more complex reading than the novels of Ellis but Wallace, even in the early stages of his career, was suspicious of this reliance on postmodern devices. Writing about metafiction and minimalism as signature postmodern devices of young 1980s writers, he comments:

Both these forms strike me as simple engines of self-reference (Metafiction overtly so, Minimalism a bit sneakier); they are primitive, crude, and seem already to have reached the Clang-Bird-esque horizon of their own possibility – self-reference being just a tiny wrinkle of aboutness ('Fictional Futures', p. 65).³⁵

Wallace's literary anxiety is articulated well in his essay 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young', written the same year as Raymond Williams attempted to offer escape plans from the postmodern trap:

If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of *post*-modernism, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margins of the century, a tradition which may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman rewriting of the past, but for all our sakes, to a modern future in which community may be imagined again.³⁶

Wallace's essay on the 'Conspicuously Young' writers of the 1980s shares these views, but was written after Wallace had published his debut novel. The novel itself, *The Broom of the System* (1987), reveals that Wallace was also trying to

³⁵ *The Clang Birds* is a 1972 novel by John L'Heureux. It bears the description of the fictional Clang Bird: 'The Clang Bird is a rare creature that flies in ever decreasing circles at ever increasing speeds until with a terrible clang it disappears up its own ass. It is only because of the will of God that the Clang Bird is not yet extinct' (p. 161).

³⁶ Raymond Williams, 'When Was Modernism', in *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 48-52. (p. 52).

work through his ideas about the postmodern legacy in fiction, to varying degrees of success. The novel is influenced by the high postmodernists such as John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, in its discussions of the self-referentiality of language and the playfulness of the expression, but Wallace also incorporates the influence authors 'left in the wide margins of the century' such as David Markson and William H. Gass.

In 1967, John Barth wrote his famous essay, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', which was delivered as a lecture at the University of Virginia and also published in *Atlantic*. It is a tentative manifesto about the need for experimental fiction in the face of certain forms of literature that Barth felt had exhausted their artistic possibilities. The essay arises out of Barth's experience of *avant garde* literature of the 1960s, particularly Jorge Luis Borges' short stories and the 'Make-It-New spirit of the Buffalo Sixties'.³⁷ Barth writes in the introduction to this seminal essay, 'what artists feel about the state of the world and the state of their art is less important than what they do with that feeling'.³⁸ With this in mind, it is perhaps relevant to look at *The Broom of the System* as the evolution of what was originally an academic thesis. Wallace himself sheds some light on the somewhat confused agenda of the novel in an interview with Michael Silverblatt's *Bookworm* radio show. He says about postmodernism, '[Barth] was a very big deal for me, and I think I saw myself as coming out of that tradition'. He goes on to say, 'When I was in my twenties, deep down underneath all the bullshit, what I really believed was that the point of fiction was to show that the writer was really smart, and that sounds terrible to say'.³⁹ Speaking in 1996, Wallace also hints that he viewed *The Broom of the System*, at the time of writing and editing, as a book that was

³⁷ Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion'. p. 64.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ 'David Foster Wallace', in *Bookworm*, (Los Angeles: KCRW, 11 April 1996).

entrenched in literary theory. He says, 'sound editorial suggestions were met with a seventeen-page letter about literary theory [...] I had four hundred thousand pages of continental philosophy and lit theory in my head'.⁴⁰

Despite these retrospective misgivings, *The Broom of the System* does stand apart from the writing of other young American novelists in the 1980s not only because it attempts to forge an intertextual, or metatextual, relationship with Wallace's high postmodern influences, but because it also attempts to depict the human consequences of postmodern themes and theoretical thought. Marshall Boswell calls the novel a 'five-hundred-page declaration of independence by a young writer who considered himself [...] the inheritor of a venerable literary tradition stretching back to the William Gaddis of *The Recognitions*'.⁴¹ However, it is perhaps more useful to explore *The Broom of the System* as a formative novel in which the young Wallace was trying to work out what his literary position was in the grand narrative of American fiction, and a novel that is heavily entrenched in the influence of the very people Wallace would spend the rest of his career trying to distance himself from (although there are some notes of discomfort in the novel that reveal he was not perfectly happy with this influence).

The two previously-mentioned essays by John Barth are useful when discussing *The Broom of the System*: 'The Literature of Exhaustion' and 'The Literature of Replenishment', both collected in *The Friday Book* (1984). In the much-contested former essay, Barth attempts to analyse how, at the time of writing, high modernism represented a 'used-upness' in term of literary

⁴⁰ David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip With David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010). pp. 34-35.

⁴¹ Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2003). p. 5.

expression.⁴² Claiming that 'art and its form and techniques live in history and certainly do change', he expresses a desire for artists to work against tradition and do 'things that anyone can dream up and discuss but almost no one can do'.⁴³ Essentially, the essay shows Barth's first tentative steps at articulating a postmodern sensibility and, although he doesn't use the term or try to define it, he calls for artists to move beyond the forms that have been exhausted and try to communicate as artistic virtuosos, exploring new forms of expression. This view is continued in the subsequent essay, which Barth describes as a 'companion and corrective to my 1967 essay'.⁴⁴ This time, he actively tries to define postmodernism, and he attempts to explain why it combats the 'used-upness' of modernist literature:

the proper program for postmodernism is neither a mere extension of the modernist program [...] nor a mere intensification of certain aspects of modernism, nor on the contrary a wholesale subversion or repudiation of either modernism or what I'm calling premodernism: "traditional" bourgeois realism'.⁴⁵

Some of the devices that Barth champions as tools of replenishment may not, at first, seem like devices that Wallace would use, but rather devices that he would actively move away from. Barth describes the use of pastiche and parody as 'intellectual validity', and writes, 'if Beethoven's Sixth were composed today, it might be an embarrassment; but clearly it wouldn't be, necessarily, if done with ironic intent by a composer quite aware of where we've been and where we are'.⁴⁶

The Broom of the System is opposed to Wallace's more mature writing in this

⁴² Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion'. p. 64.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 66.

⁴⁴ Barth, 'The Literature of Replenishment'. p. 193.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 201.

⁴⁶ Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion'. p. 69.

respect, adopting postmodern crutches even as its author is attempting to reconcile his own feelings on the validity of such devices.

A self-confessed disciple of Barth, Wallace clearly adheres to his predecessor's notion that historical generic ideas of how fiction should represent contemporary experience can be used up over time, and his early work, particularly *The Broom of the System*, can be looked at as attempted literatures of replenishment (as described in Barth's essay. Of course, Wallace's entire corpus can be seen as a series of attempts at replenishment, but the fundamental ideas that motivate him change over time and move away from Barth's original thesis). *Broom* is foremost a metafictional novel, and it fits into Barth's declaration that postmodernist fiction should be 'more and more about itself and its processes, less and less about objective reality and life in the world'.⁴⁷ Throughout the novel, Lenore Stonecipher Beadsman becomes increasingly aware that her existence is made up of words (I will discuss the Wittgensteinian implications of this in Chapter Three). Her great epiphany, aided by her Grandmother's teachings, is that she is a fictional being who has been constructed by someone else's words. At one point she asks her therapist, 'Suppose Gramma tells me really convincingly that all that really exists of my life is what can be said about it?'.⁴⁸ Marshall Boswell sees Lenore as a protagonist who recalls the classic postmodern characters 'from the metafictional canon, including Barth's Ambrose Mensch (*Lost in the Funhouse*), Pynchon's Tyrone Slothrop (*Gravity's Rainbow*), and any number of Vladimir Nabokov's magnificently mad heroes and humberts'.⁴⁹ Aside from the philosophical grounding, it highlights Wallace's engagement with postmodern literature and helps position *The Broom of the System* as a novel with traditional

⁴⁷ Barth, 'The Literature of Replenishment'. p. 200.

⁴⁸ David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (London: Abacus, 1997). p. 119.

⁴⁹ Boswell, p. 31.

postmodern leanings. His engagement with postmodern fiction can be seen in other ways, apart from the metafictional nature of Lenore's dilemma. It is here that Wallace's opinions about the future of literature can be seen most clearly, but the articulation of them still falls short of his later work.

A good example of this is with the character Rick Vigorous, a consummate postmodernist in both the stories that he 'writes' and his characterisation. Wallace adopts many of Vladimir Nabokov's tricks when he describes Rick, most obviously the use of the letter V in descriptions that Rick is at the heart of. Nabokov does this most noticeably in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941). The narrator (referred to as 'V') introduces Sebastian Knight's mother (Virginia) as wearing a veil and says:

She put on her gloves and started to tell my mother in bad French a pointless and quite irrelevant story about a Polish woman who had attempted to steal her vanity-bag in the dining car. Then she thrust into Sebastian's hand a small parcel of sugar-coated violets, gave my mother a nervous smile and followed the porter who was carrying her luggage.⁵⁰

In using words such as 'gloves', 'irrelevant', 'vanity-bag', 'violets', and 'nervous', Nabokov is purposefully relating Virginia Knight to the narrator with word games, thus calling into question his true identity. Wallace adopts this technique, but employs it for different reasons, and achieves different results. The Vs surrounding Rick act as a kind of literary graffiti, a possessive signature related to things Rick either does own or desires. In fact, this is made overt when Rick says of Lenore, 'I am possessive. I want to own her sometimes' (*Broom*, p. 72). Aside from his family (Vance and Veronica Vigorous and even the name of the parrot Vlad, which Rick disputes ownership of), the most obvious examples are in his diary entries and

⁵⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (London: Penguin, 2001). pp. 9-10.

stories. The first story we hear Rick tell is about the 'second order vain person', who fights his vanity in order to hide his obsession from his significant other. 'Vanity' in this case can be substituted for Rick's possessiveness, which he is desperately trying to hide from Lenore (*Broom*, p. 25). Similarly his first diary entry relates a dream about Queen Victoria. Rick is enclosed within her 'voluminous skirts' as he tries to pleasure her with a tortoiseshell hairbrush. The only response he wins is 'We are not aroused', a clear indication that his efforts to please and possess (both sexually and otherwise) a woman who he deems above him (i.e. the Queen/Lenore) are futile (*Broom*, p. 44). An even clearer dream is reported by Rick later in the novel: Rick dreams that he and Andrew 'Wang Dang' Lang are naked in his office while Lang draws a picture of Lenore on the back of one of Rick's stories. Lenore is represented as a 'Vargas girl, a V' until Lang signs the picture with a 'deep, wicked W.D.L.'. Troublingly for Rick, Lang's initials bring the picture to life and Lenore is no longer 'a V', but a real person who begins to write her name on Lang's exposed buttocks (*Broom*, pp. 324-325). The depiction of this dream is extremely unsubtle in its intended meaning, that of Lang easily possessing Lenore by branding her with his initials, while Lenore willingly submits by branding Lang in turn. All Rick can offer is urine.

Marshall Boswell also positions the character of Rick as a Nabokovian postmodernist. He writes, 'Rick becomes a pale shadow of Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, transforming his fairly simple, objectifying lust into lilting, languorous language'.⁵¹ Boswell also notes that the possessive Rick makes Lenore 'feel like a butterfly on a board' (*Broom*, p. 287), which he says is a 'clear allusion to Nabokov's lepidoptery'.⁵² In adopting allusions to Nabokov and creating a pastiche

⁵¹ Boswell, p. 42.

⁵² Ibid. p. 42.

of his literary style, Wallace has self-consciously fulfilled one of the requirements of Barth's literature of replenishment, namely emphasising 'the "performing" self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of modernism, in a spirit of cultural subversiveness and anarchy'.⁵³ It is not the performance of modernism that Wallace is adopting in *The Broom of the System*, but the performance of postmodernism. In essence, he is using the techniques of postmodernism to launch a critique on postmodernism. Yet even stating this is problematic, as there are varying definitions of postmodernism. As Brian McHale writes:

there is John Barth's postmodernism, the literature of replenishment; Charles Newman's postmodernism, the literature of inflationary economy; Jean-François Lyotard's postmodernism, a general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informal regime; Ihab Hassan's postmodernism, a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of humankind; and so on.⁵⁴

In establishing what Wallace is actually criticising in his fiction, it is necessary to identify how he is viewing postmodernism in critical terms. As I have indicated above, Wallace's ideas of challenging postmodern expression in his fiction echo Barth's thoughts on exhaustion and replenishment, yet his fiction also challenges the specific postmodern, poststructuralist notion of there being nothing outside language. He says, 'This is the way Barthian and Derridean poststructuralism's helped me the most as a fiction writer: once I'm done with the thing, I'm basically dead, and probably the text's dead; it becomes simply language, and language lives not just in but *through* the reader'.⁵⁵ *The Broom of the System*, as I shall explore more thoroughly in Chapter Three, is an attempt by Wallace to detail the

⁵³ Barth, 'The Literature of Replenishment'. p. 200.

⁵⁴ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987). p. 4.

⁵⁵ McCaffery, p. 40. McCaffery's emphasis.

consequences of these linguistic poststructuralist theories if they are applied to quotidian life.

As I have already mentioned the metafictional nature of Lenore's characterisation highlights the postmodern scaffolding of the book. She has come to realise that she is a creation made up of words or, as Patricia Waugh articulates, 'trapped within someone else's order'.⁵⁶ Lenore shows signs of being aware of this, revealing an intuition that 'her own personal perceptions and actions and volitions are not under her control' (*Broom*, p. 66). Also, Lenore's grandmother is shown to be aware of their fictional environment, and Lenore reveals that 'Gramma says any telling automatically becomes a kind of system, that controls everyone involved' (*Broom*, p. 122). This fits with Waugh's theory of metafiction that describes characters as being 'trapped within language itself, within an arbitrary system of signification which appears to offer no means of escape'. She goes on: 'One common metafictional strategy is to present characters who are aware of this condition, and who thus implicitly draw attention to the fictional creation/description paradox'.⁵⁷ Viveca Fűredy describes this sort of paradox by using the example of M.C. Escher's *Drawing Hands* (1948), where one hand is drawing the other and 'Neither is complete without the other, because neither would exist if it were not drawn by the other and because neither would be a "drawing" hand if it were not drawing the other'.⁵⁸ In other, more Wallace-centric words, Lenore's realisation that she only exists because of the words that describe her directs the reader's attention to her fictional status and reveal her to be caught in Wallace's system of creation and description – her creation warrants

⁵⁶ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1993). p. 119.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 120.

⁵⁸ Viveca Fűredy, 'A Structural Model of Phenomena with Embedding in Literature and Other Arts', *Poetics Today*, 10.4 (1989), 745-769. (p. 756).

description, but it is the description that creates her. Wallace addresses this paradox in his interview with Larry McCaffery, saying:

You're trying to somehow both deny and affirm that the writer is over here with his agenda, while the reader is over there with her agenda, distinct. This paradox is what makes good fiction sort of magical, I think. The paradox can't be resolved, but it can be somehow mediated [...] by the fact that language and linguistic intercourse is, in and of itself, redeeming, remedy-ing.⁵⁹

Aside from Lenore's metafictional conundrum, Wallace relies on many more postmodern devices to construct the framework of his plot. Strikingly, and in opposition to his later work, Wallace sets about destabilising his fictional world so that the events lead towards an implied apocalypse. As Daniel Grassian notes, Wallace hints that 'postmodernism, taken to its limit, leads to essential, unanswerable paradoxes which can lead to ultimate destruction'.⁶⁰ One technique he uses to achieve this is that of *mise-en-abyme*, or 'the paradoxical reproduction ("mirroring" is the metaphor favored by critics) *within* the fictional world *of* the fictional world'.⁶¹ *The Broom of the System* is rife with examples of *mise-en-abyme* and they work to create a near-future world (at least when taking into account the publication date) that can be seen to be in terminal decline. Rick's stories are the most obvious examples of this technique as they reproduce the fictional world of the novel by mirroring Wallace's larger narrative. For example, the story Rick tells about the man 'in whom the instinct to love is as strong and natural and instinctive as can possibly be' is an overt repositioning of Rick's own all-consuming desire for Lenore (*Broom*, p. 180). The lady with the tree toad that lives in her neck, the eventual object of the man's affections, can be seen as an analogue for Lenore,

⁵⁹ McCaffery, pp. 32-33.

⁶⁰ Grassian, p. 85.

⁶¹ Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992). p. 155. McHale's emphasis.

the tree toad being a representation of her strong familial connections which she is unable to break or that control her (as her grandmother is doing throughout the novel). The story's conclusion has apocalyptic themes that mirror the novel's own conclusion to the extent that this story-within-a-story (in combination with Rick's other stories) help expose the novel's structure, thus 'corroding the fictional world's solidity and stability'.⁶²

These examples of the destabilisation of the fictional world, and Rick's final conversation with Mindy Metalman reveal that Wallace has been influenced by the apocalyptic postmodernism of post-Second World War American writers, despite his own reservations. Wallace says that 'Art's reflection of itself is terminal, is one big reason why the art world saw Duchamp as an Antichrist'. He elucidates this point with a pop-culture reference:

I think you can see Cameron's "Terminator" movies as a metaphor for all literary art after Roland Barthes, viz., the movies' premise that the Cyberdyne NORAD computer becomes conscious of itself as "conscious," as having interests and an agenda; the Cyberdyne becomes literally self-referential, and it's no accident that the result of this is nuclear war, Armageddon.⁶³

The end of *The Broom of the System* can be seen as apocalyptic, and brings to mind John Barth's micro-fiction, 'Apocalypse', a story supposedly written by the fictional protagonist of *The Tidewater Tales* (1987). The story, in full, reads:

One drizzly Baltimore November forenoon, as from an upstairs workroom window of our house I mused over the neighbors' lawns – some raked clean, some still leaf-littered – and considered whether⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid. p. 155.

⁶³ McCaffery, p. 30. 'Cameron' being film director James Cameron.

⁶⁴ John Barth, *The Tidewater Tales: a Novel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). p. 142.

The lack of a traditional conclusion, or conventional punctuation, in the story creates an uneasy ending which alerts the reader to its own fictional status. As Barth's fictional writer, Peter Sagamore, says, with reference to the above story, 'When, in a story, nothing happens next, that is the thing that happens next: The nothing becomes the thing'.⁶⁵ Wallace chooses to end *The Broom of the System* in similar way. When talking to Mindy Metalman, the object of his Nabokovian obsession, he pleads with her to trust him, because:

I am a man of my (*Broom*, p. 467).

The most obvious way to end the truncated sentence would be with the word 'word'. Following on from Lenore's pondering of her grandmother's theory that 'all that really exists of my life is what can be said about it', the final sentence is clearly a Wittgensteinian reference to Rick's (and by default all the characters of the book) status as fictional and being made up of the words the reader is processing (*Broom*, p. 119). The missing 'word' therefore can represent an apocalyptic ending; the fictional world described in Wallace's novel disintegrating into a literal nothing. Rick is only a man of his word, because Wallace's words have been used to create him (and the rest of the novel), and when those words are absent he ceases to exist. In Barth's words, 'The nothing becomes the thing' and in Brian McHale's, 'End of story; end of world'.⁶⁶

The influence that Wallace takes from the high-postmodernists in *The Broom of the System*, particularly Barth, can be seen as similar to the other young writers of the 1980s, but Wallace's engagement with the work of the high-

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*. p. 161.

postmodernists is literary (and largely theoretical), rather than from the world of contemporary consumer culture. *The Broom of the System* is better looked at as a book *about* postmodernism, than an effort to depict the effect postmodernism has on the world. While dismissing the novel as merely a work of postmodern fiction does not give it the credit it deserves for Wallace's successes in his debut, it falls short of Marshall Boswell's analysis that it 'charts a bold next step beyond metafiction and self-reflexivity'.⁶⁷ As I have shown, the influence of the high postmodernists prevents Wallace's 'bold next step' from properly taking shape, although there are seeds within the novel that can be seen, in hindsight, to show Wallace's literary ambition.

Boswell astutely recognises that Wallace does attempt to criticise the perceived shortcomings of the high postmodernists, even as he adopts many of their techniques (the conflict of which can be seen to damage the formation of Wallace's 'bold next step'). This criticism can clearly be seen in Wallace's depiction of the Great Ohio Desert, the wilderness space that forms the heart of the novel's fictional world. The desert has long been a postmodern trope in both fiction and critical theory. It appears in postmodern novels such as Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* (1991), and in Ellis' *Less Than Zero* as a location devoid of cultural influence, a space where the protagonists can attempt to construct their own ideas of a culture from fragments of the mass media they have been brought up on. As Jean Baudrillard writes, 'why are the deserts so fascinating? It is because you are delivered from all depth there – a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference-points'.⁶⁸ The desert

⁶⁷ Boswell, p. 22.

⁶⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1988). p. 124.

serves as the perfect postmodern getaway, 'a trope of possibility or salvation, liberation from a corrupt and mercantile civilisation', because of its absence of signs, but it also fits with traditional ideas of American wilderness spaces in fiction.⁶⁹ These traditional ideas depict any untamed space as being devoid of cultural influence and as a location that can provide an escape from the rigours of the modern world. Characters are drawn to rural spaces on voyages of self-discovery, pilgrimages to experience nature in all its unrestricted glory. The 'real' and sublime are available, if the city is fled and the mall is vacated. As Leo Marx writes:

One has only to consider the titles which first come to mind from the classical canon of our literature – the American books admired most nowadays – to recognize that the theme of withdrawal from society into an idealized landscape is central to a remarkably large number of them. Again and again, the imagination of our most respected writers – one thinks of Cooper, Thoreau, Melville, Faulkner, Frost, Hemingway – has been set in motion by this impulse'.⁷⁰

However, the man-made status of the Great Ohio Desert in *The Broom of the System* works to challenge this notion that the desert is a wilderness space offering escape from the postmodern world. It has been constructed by the governor of Ohio in order to be 'a point of savage reference for the good people of Ohio. A place to fear and love. A blasted region. Something to remind us of what we hewed out of' (*Broom*, p. 54). The governor's reasoning for building this desert in his native state chimes with traditional literary ideas about the power of the American landscape. He says:

⁶⁹ Alan Bilton, *An Introduction to American Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002). p. 13.

⁷⁰ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964). p. 10.

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

This quotation brings to mind the lure of the wilderness as a literary theme in novels such as Jack London's *Call of the Wild* or Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The wilderness, to the American people, is an influential and formative national myth that not only represents their historical struggle to tame the landscape and settle, but also provides a provocative counterpoint to the luxuries of modern living, a place with a seductive promise of adventure and escape. As Jonathan Raban writes, 'the true American will not be long content with a life of rubber bones in the doghouse. The unfettered prairie and our wolf-ancestors beckon'.⁷¹ The governor of Ohio's view of the desert is atavistic. He sees a space where the people of the state can be reminded of their pioneer roots, and be inspired to transcend their soft, suburban lives. His very idea is to challenge the success of a state in which, 'unemployment is low, inflation is low, taxes haven't been raised in two years, pollution is way down' (*Broom*, p. 53).

Despite using black sand to increase the 'blastedness aspect' and having 'cacti and scorpions and the sun beating down', the desert does not end up fitting with the governor's atavistic ideals. Later in the novel, Wallace presents the desert as a commercialised space, countering Baudrillard's theory that the American desert has 'a radical lack of culture'.⁷² Baudrillard goes on to describe the American desert as 'void of all meaning, arbitrary and inhuman'.⁷³ In *The Broom of the System*, the desert is constructed from the culture, built on the established

⁷¹ Jonathan Raban, *Bad Land: An American Romance* (London: Picador, 1996). p. 36.

⁷² Baudrillard, *America*. p. 126.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 127.

ideals of the American wilderness yet becoming a postmodern hyper-real version of them. At the climax of the narrative, Lenore and Rick head to the desert, while being followed by Neil Obstat and Andrew Lang, but rather than an escape, the desert is described as having a 'Boat Rental Center' where people can rent a 'Great Ohio Desert Fish License' for a 'truly criminal amount of money' (*Broom*, p. 420). Earlier the desert is described as having 'concession stands at the rim' and it is necessary to purchase a 'Wander Pass' in order to experience what the desert has to offer (*Broom*, p. 46, p. 143). The characters also seem to be disappointed that the desert does not offer an opportunity to experience authentic wilderness. Lenore states that, 'the really desolate areas can get pretty crowded, of course, sometimes, so it's good to get there early, get as much wandering as you can in before noon' (*Broom*, p. 143). Lang is frustrated because 'the whole thing's just gettin' too goddamn commercialized' (*Broom*, p. 421). The desert is no longer 'liberation from a corrupt and mercantile civilisation', but merely another marketing opportunity – the last space that can be sold to the American public.

Far from being a straight commentary on America's use of its wilderness areas, the Great Ohio Desert serves as a metaphor for literary postmodernism. The creators of the G.O.D. have actively destroyed the real wilderness of the Wayne National Forest, a place that is representative of the redemptive powers of wilderness in traditional literature. Instead, there is a postmodern theme park, a simulation that is saturated with the hyper-real signs of late postmodernism. In 'E Unibus Pluram', Wallace writes about the adoption of postmodern devices by the mainstream, saying, 'Television has pulled the old dynamic of reference and redemption inside-out: it is now television that takes elements of the postmodern – the involution, the absurdity, the sardonic fatigue, the iconoclasm and rebellion –

and bends them to the ends of spectation and consumption' ('Pluram', p. 64). The G.O.D. has taken the redemptive and spiritual elements of the real American wilderness and bent them 'to ends of spectation and consumption'. Wallace depicts the G.O.D. as a destructive force, a self-reflexive man-made landscape that dominates everything else, including the natural wilderness that was destroyed to make it. N. Katherine Hayles' comments on American wilderness are relevant to the G.O.D.'s status as a metaphor of postmodernism. She writes, 'wilderness loses its power to authenticate our lives as soon as we try to take advantage of its redemptive potential'.⁷⁴ The power of the G.O.D. is negated by its commercial foundation and exploitation just as postmodernism, in Wallace's view, has become 'not liberating, but enfeebling' ('Pluram', p. 67).

While these critiques are evident in *The Broom of the System*, what is lacking to make the book a 'bold next step' is any suggestion of possible remedies for the dying, and destructive, postmodern condition. The book's use of postmodernist devices, sits uneasily with the more critical passages because Wallace's criticism does not develop into the more sustained and complex writing that can be seen in both his later fiction and non-fiction. It is perhaps for these reasons why Wallace himself became unhappy with *The Broom of the System*, a novel that he calls 'an essentially shitty first book'.⁷⁵ However, Wallace's next book, the story collection *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), contains clearer criticism of his postmodern influences, as well as a clearer manifesto that details possible 'next steps' in creating a new, more urgent form of literature, or a new literature of replenishment.

⁷⁴ N. Katherine Hayles, 'The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, And *Infinite Jest*', *New Literary History*, 30.3 (1999), 675-697. (p. 675).

⁷⁵ Lipsky, p. 22.

Westward to New Ground?

The most important story in *Girl with Curious Hair*, the one that most details Wallace's own opinions of the moribund nature of postmodern devices and possible ways fiction can develop, is 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way'. Of this story, Wallace says, 'I really think that for me just personally, "Westward" was this real seminal thing, like I really felt like I'd killed this huge part of myself doing it'.⁷⁶ This killing of part of himself can also be seen as a kind of metaphorical patricide of his most overt influence: John Barth. 'Westward' deals almost exclusively with the influence of Barth's work on Wallace, specifically the story 'Lost in the Funhouse' (1967), a story that he calls 'the trumpet call of postmodern metafiction'.⁷⁷ If Barth's story is the 'trumpet call', the Wallace works hard for 'Westward' to be the Last Post of postmodern metafiction. At the centre of Wallace's novella is the relationship between the writer-hero, Mark Nechtr, and his creative writing teacher Professor C_____ Ambrose. Ambrose, of course, is the name of Barth's protagonist in 'Lost in the Funhouse' (the 'C_____' recalls Barth's elimination of many proper nouns throughout the story, including place names and character names, but also the fact that it is revealed that Barth's character was called 'Christine' for many weeks after his birth, in the story 'Ambrose His Mark'⁷⁸). Mark Nechtr's name recalls Barth's protagonist in two ways; the story 'Ambrose His Mark', and Nechtr being a similar corruption of a food of the gods (i.e. Ambrose corrupts Ambrosia, and Nechtr corrupts Nectar). The connection

⁷⁶ Ibid. pp. 225-226.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 63.

⁷⁸ John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988). p. 15.

between the two names is important to position the character of Mark as a metaphorical offspring of Ambrose/Barth. Marshall Boswell has also noted this connection: 'whereas Ambrose is Barth's constructed version of his own self-alienated identity as a writer, Wallace makes the fictional construct the object of his patricide, thereby getting back at Barth from inside the very structure in which Barth "lost his way"'.⁷⁹ However, it is important not to merely view 'Westward' as a purely homicidal text, where Wallace is trying to kill off his influences in order to take that 'bold next step'. To do so would be to ignore Barth's own struggles with self-reflexivity and the future of fiction within his collection *Lost in the Funhouse*. Throughout the stories in the book, Barth's author-narrators struggle with the solipsistic effect of metafictional writing, and they make it clear that they feel trapped within self-reflexive narratives, even as they are searching for a release from this state. In 'Life-Story', the terms of this conundrum are laid out thus:

To what conclusion will he come? He'd been about to append to his own tale insamuch as the old analogy between Author and God, novel and world, can no longer be employed unless deliberately as a false analogy, certain things follow: 1) fiction must acknowledge its fictitiousness and metaphoric invalidity or 2) choose to ignore the question or deny its relevance or 3) establish some other, acceptable relation between itself, its author, its reader.⁸⁰

Despite calling 'Westward' an act of patricide, it is clear that Wallace and Barth are both working through the same problems. As Deborah Woolley writes, Barth's desire is to find 'one's way out of the self-reflexive funhouse' and to restore 'the capacity of fiction to speak of something other than itself and liberating the narrator

⁷⁹ Boswell, p. 105.

⁸⁰ Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*. p. 128.

from solipsism'.⁸¹ Rather than 'getting back at Barth' as Boswell posits, Wallace is sharing his goal, and hopes to succeed where Barth, by his own admission in the titular story, fails, his author-narrator lost forever in the workings of the funhouse. In the mirror room, lost in the multiple refractions of his own reflection, he makes a wrong turn: 'Peter and Magda found the right exit; he found one that you weren't supposed to find and strayed off into the works somewhere'.⁸² Barth realises that self-reflexivity will only lead to the wrong exit, yet his narrator remains lost. As Marjorie Worthington writes:

Just as the narrative has become preoccupied by its own workings, Ambrose has become lost in the inner workings of the funhouse [...] It is important to note that the moment Ambrose goes astray into the inner workings of the funhouse is the moment when he is at his most self-reflexive.⁸³

Existing critiques of 'Westward' largely ignore this problematic relationship between Wallace's novella and Barth's collection, seemingly satisfied to read the former as an attack on Barth and his fiction. Boswell sticks to the Bloomian notion of 'patricide', saying that 'Westward' aims to 'arrive at a new direction for narrative art, one that will move past John Barth's literature of exhaustion'.⁸⁴ Daniel Grassian believes 'Westward' is 'a rebellion against postmodernity'.⁸⁵ And Connie Luther says that Wallace believes 'postmodern artists and intellectuals bear responsibility for a betrayal of the generation to whom they initially held out

⁸¹ Deborah A. Woolley, 'Empty "Text," Fecund Voice: Self-Reflexivity in Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*', *Contemporary Literature*, 26.4 (1985), 460-481. (p. 476).

⁸² Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*. p. 85.

⁸³ Marjorie Worthington, 'Done with Mirrors: Restoring the Authority Lost in John Barth's Funhouse', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 47.1 (2001), 114-136. (p. 126).

⁸⁴ Boswell, p. 102.

⁸⁵ Grassian, p. 22.

hope'.⁸⁶ In this reading of 'Westward', we must view Barth as the propagator of narcissistic and cold fiction, something that Wallace aims to kill off by attempting to commune with the reader's emotional core. This argument drifts close to that of Jonathan Franzen, who states that the author necessarily enters into a contract with the reader, that the purpose of fiction is to 'sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness; and so a novel deserves a reader's attention only as long as the author sustains the reader's trust'.⁸⁷ Franzen goes on to state that 'the essence of postmodernism is an adolescent fear of getting taken in, an adolescent conviction that all systems are phony [...] The child grows enormous but never grows up'.⁸⁸ Trust, to Franzen, is disrupted if a writer pushes formal innovation or modes of expression that can be deemed 'difficult', yet Wallace has no such qualms. It is true that Wallace aims for an emotional connection with his reader, but not at the expense of experimenting with modes of expression, just as the postmodernists did a generation before.

Tellingly, Wallace's Mark does not dismiss the teachings of Professor Ambrose. Wallace writes, 'Even when Mark doesn't trust him, he listens to him. Even when he doesn't listen to him, he's consciously reacting against the option of listening, and listens for what not to listen to'.⁸⁹ With this, Wallace reveals his strategy for learning through engagement with the work of his influences. It is through careful attention to Ambrose's (Barth's) fiction that Mark (Wallace) can lay his own blueprint for a new replenishing literature, or fiction that 'stabs you in the heart. That pierces you, makes you think you're going to die' ('Westward', pp. 332-

⁸⁶ Connie Luther, 'David Foster Wallace: Westward with Fredric Jameson', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Austin: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), pp. 49-61. p. 60.

⁸⁷ Jonathan Franzen, 'Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-Read Books', in *The New Yorker*, 30 September 2002, 100-111. (p. 100).

⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 111.

⁸⁹ David Foster Wallace, 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', in *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 1997), pp. 233-373. (p. 293).

333). Wallace contrasts this description of Mark with that of his wife, Drew-Lynn, who sees herself as a postmodernist, but is described by the narrator as looking 'infertile' ('Westward', p. 276), when, according to her childhood friend, Tom Sternberg, she used to seem 'so ... well, *developed*' when now he notes how 'fucking undesirable, how *unlovable* she's turned out, in person, after all this time' ('Westward', p. 281. Wallace's emphasis). While Mark is seen to not trust Ambrose, but he is intent to listen to him, Drew-Lynn tries hard to hate him and acts spiteful of him while, at the same time, copying from him. A good example of this is when she criticises Ambrose's work as being 'Indulgent. Cerebral but infantile. Masturbatory. A sort of look-Dad-no-hands quality' ('Westward', p. 329). This mirrors the earlier criticism Ambrose has of Drew-Lynn's work when 'he told the workshop that Ms. Eberhardt's stories tended "not to work for him" because of what he called a certain "Look-Mom-no-hands quality" that ran through her work' ('Westward', p. 234). Drew-Lynn copies from Ambrose indiscriminately, rather than following Mark's lead and learning from the past struggles of his teacher. She fails to see the depth to Ambrose's writing, as she merely copies the superficial, postmodern techniques.

Wallace paints Drew-Lynn's relationship with Ambrose as destructive and self-consuming, unlike Mark's relationship with his teacher. Ambrose himself, in the guise of his ex-wife, Magda Ambrose-Gatz, sees in Mark 'a boy hotly cocky enough to think that he might someday inherit Ambrose's bald crown and ballpoint scepter, to wish to try and sing to the *next* generation of the very same sad kids' ('Westward', p. 348. Wallace's emphasis). The key word in this quotation is 'inherit', as Mark will not supersede or murder Ambrose, but inherit the problems that his teacher has already struggled with, namely the quest to establish

meaningful artistic expression in a world that has succumbed to postmodernism. In the same way, Wallace has inherited Barth's view that literature periodically needs to be replenished as devices become exhausted. The modes of expression that Barth used to attempt to solve the problems of self-reflexivity in his work no longer have sufficient power for Wallace; they are exhausted. Rather than attempting to perform 'patricide' as Boswell states, he enters into a plea to his peers, suggesting possible techniques for solving Barth's problem of metafictional solipsism. It is clear that through his engagement with Barthian and Derridean poststructuralism, Wallace begins to develop his own ideas about defeating this literary solipsism in 'Westward'. As Adam Kelly writes, Wallace is connected with Derrida, particularly, because of 'their common recognition that the twin problems of narcissism and communicative uncertainty, by the late twentieth century, become endemic in the connected spheres of Western culture and Western philosophy'.⁹⁰ Yet, Wallace combats this American cultural solipsism in a slightly different way to Derrida, who takes 'issue with what he called "the ethico-theoretical decision of metaphysics," a decision at the core of philosophy that "postulates the simple to be before the complex, the pure before the impure, the sincere before the deceitful, and so on"'.⁹¹ On the other hand, Wallace develops a notion that the primary cause of American cultural solipsism is televisual irony that pits the 'nobility of individualism against the warmth of community' ('Pluram', p. 54). I will explore this in more detail in the next chapter, but it is clear that in 'Westward', Wallace is attempting to identify the characters' immersion in the irony-saturated televisual culture as an indicator of their own literary solipsism. The exhausted Drew-Lynn is the

⁹⁰ Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 131-146. (pp. 136-137).

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 137. Kelly is quoting Martin Hagglünd's 'The Necessity of Discrimination: Disjoining Derrida and Levinas' in *Diacritics* 34 (2004).

embodiment of those in Wallace's literary generation who have been seduced by the clever postmodern play of their influences, and are content to superficially copy them. Tom Sternberg, Drew-Lynn's grotesque childhood pen-pal, reinforces this criticism. As a child, he was hopelessly in love with Drew-Lynn, but now finds her repulsive, with a 'whiff of something dead and preserved underneath' ('Westward', p. 282). Sternberg represents the writers of his generation who have fallen into the trap of overt solipsism, and write with a 'naïve pretension' that 'hefts something of a finger at subject and reader alike' ('Fictional Futures', pp. 47-48). Sternberg has an eye that has turned round in his head, so that it permanently looks inward (although it doesn't see anything), he is polluted by poison sumac and spends a large part of the story desperate to void his bowels, suggesting he is irreparably damaged by his relationship with the postmodern world.

Throughout 'Westward', Wallace uses metaphor to expand on the idea that postmodern expression is exhausted. Perhaps the most overt metaphor is that of the funhouse. In the story, Professor Ambrose's funhouse represents postmodern fiction. It also appears as a literal building, something that the advertiser J.D. Steelritter is trying to franchise and sell as the latest trendy discotheque. The actual funhouse in Ocean City, the inspiration for Professor Ambrose's 'Lost in the Funhouse', is now a burnt out wreck. Marshall Boswell claims that Wallace is arguing that 'Barth's postmodernist techniques have not only been appropriated by popular culture but in fact have been turned into a "franchise" of sorts'.⁹² In the image of the constructed funhouse disco, Wallace is extending (and literalising) the final paragraph of Barth's original story:

⁹² Boswell, p. 108.

He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator – though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed.⁹³

Wallace also insinuates that Ambrose was a participant in Steelritter's plans to capitalise on the postmodern aesthetic of his work. Steelritter confesses, 'Never any client trouble over the whole protracted Funhouse process' ('Westward', p. 328). Like Barth's Ambrose, Wallace's version has also submitted to constructing funhouses, and it is this submission that both Mark and Wallace have a problem with. Connie Luther writes, 'the figure of Ambrose in the story also provides a strong indictment of what Wallace sees as an artistic abandonment of social responsibility in postmodernism'.⁹⁴ While this is an astute reading, the final line of Barth's story suggests that Ambrose desperately wants to be a participant in the society that surrounds him, but has abandoned his quest to find his way out of the solipsistic metafictional maze. Wallace's Ambrose is of a similar disposition, as is evident when he reads Drew-Lynn's mean spirited limerick. Ambrose expresses himself in a letter to Steelritter thus: 'Ambrose said he was devastated: there is was, he'd said – when you rendered all the flourishes and allusions and general crap out of his letter – there is was, *criticism*, right there, even when you ought to be able to at least expect it' ('Westward', p. 239. Wallace's emphasis). Wallace's Ambrose is far from being a cold man who has abandoned social responsibility. He is portrayed as being vulnerable and lost in his own solipsistic motivations, but throughout the story he is shown as encouraging his students to move past his own failings in attempting to find solutions for self-reflexivity. Eventually he recognises that Mark's fiction will transcend the boundaries of postmodern

⁹³ Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*. p. 97.

⁹⁴ Luther, p. 59.

metafiction and will be a 'weird blind rearrangement of what's been in plain sight, the whole time, through the moving windows. That its claim to be a lie will itself be a lie' ('Westward', p. 356). This quotation is revealing, showing that there is a futility in attempting to kill off past modes of expression. While Wallace believes that postmodern devices are exhausted, he also realises that he is writing from this foundation, from these influences. As Wallace's contemporary Jonathan Lethem writes:

Books don't kill other books, nor do literary stances or methods kill, or disqualify, differing sorts, and those – stances and methods – don't actually originate from moral positions per se. A given book elaborates its own terms, then succeeds or fails according to them, including on the level of morals.⁹⁵

Barth's submission to and subsequent failure to exit the self-reflexive funhouse is literalised in 'Westward' by the fact that Ambrose is complicit in building the real funhouse, the ultimate totem of postmodern expression. With this image, Wallace is dramatizing both the success of postmodern techniques in pervading mainstream culture, but also what he perceives as the failure of authors such as Barth to solve the problems of self-reflexive postmodern expression and the legacy that this failure has inspired in Wallace's contemporaries (who are personified in the character of Drew-Lynn, a self-confessed postmodernist who is one step away from writing advertisement copy). In contrast to the image of the funhouse representing the labyrinthine closed circles of postmodern fiction, the image that is used to create the kind of fiction Mark wants to write is that of the bow and arrow. Rather than Barth's mirrored house, the image associated with Mark is forward-facing and aimed to 'stab the center, right in the heart, every time'

⁹⁵ Jonathan Lethem, 'Postmodernism as Liberty Valance', in *The Ecstasy of Influence: Nonfictions, etc.* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), pp. 77-83. (pp. 82-83).

(‘Westward’, p. 294). This image has been carefully chosen by Wallace to contrast with Barth’s image of the funhouse, and is much more nuanced than it first appears. In the original story, Barth writes:

In the funhouse mirror-room you can’t see yourself go on forever, because no matter how you stand, your head gets in the way. Even if you had a glass periscope, the image of your eye would cover up the thing you really wanted to see.⁹⁶

Wallace describes archery in similar way:

the point of your arrow, at full draw, is somewhere between three and nine centimeters to the left of the true straight line to the bull’s eye, even though the arrow’s nock, fucked by the string, is on that line. The bow gets in the way, see’ (‘Westward’, p. 293).

Both images concern the obstructions involved in the writing of fiction. For Barth, the writer himself gets in the way of the truth, but for Wallace it is the writer’s tool that obstructs. Wallace continues his image, saying that the ‘straight-aimed and so off-angled target arrow will stab the center, right in the heart, every time’ (‘Westward’, p. 294). Later in the story, the image is continued in even more detail:

The uncentered arrow, launched leftward by the resisting bow, resists that leftward resistance with an equal and opposite rightward shudder and spasm [...] This resisting shudder again prompts a leftward reaction, then a rightward reaction; and in effect the whistling arrow zigzags, moving – almost wriggling, really – alternately left and right, though in ever diminishing amounts (physics, law, gravity, stress, fatigue, exhaustion), until at a certain point the arrow, aimed with all sincerity just West of the lover, is on line with his heart (‘Westward’, p. 333).

⁹⁶ Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*. p. 85.

The words that he uses in the description of the arrow's flight are carefully chosen to reinforce the meaning of the image: in order to achieve accuracy the author must resist 'physics, law, stress, fatigue, exhaustion' and aim 'with all sincerity'. This fits in with Wallace's calls in his non-fiction for an avoidance of the techniques of 'exhausted' literature, such as 'hip irony' and metafiction, and his speculation that this can be facilitated with more sincerity. He articulates his point well in 'E Unibus Pluram':

Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. [...] The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how *banal*." To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness ('Pluram', p. 81. Wallace's emphasis).

Marshall Boswell also notices the connection between Barth and Wallace with this image, saying, 'Whereas Barth sees the mediating writer as an impediment to clear vision, Wallace sees that same writer as the mediator who, though in the way, also allows for the text to "stab the center, right in the heart"'.⁹⁷ Wallace's ideas about the role of the author here can be seen as a reference to, and reaction against, Roland Barthes' seminal essay 'The Death of the Author'. Barthes says that 'to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author', but Wallace views the author and the reader as coexisting lovers, with the author striving to penetrate the reader's heart.⁹⁸ Despite his claims that poststructuralist thinking helped him formulate his fiction, Wallace does not wholly believe in the death of the author.

⁹⁷ Boswell, p. 107.

⁹⁸ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), pp. 142-148. (p. 148).

Despite his claim that 'once I'm done with the thing, I'm basically dead, and probably the text's dead', he also claims his goal is to 'reaffirm the idea of art being a *living* transaction between humans'.⁹⁹

The role of the author is further emphasised in 'Westward' when Sternberg attempts to perform Mark's trick of flicking his arrow up, so the tip stabs the tabletop as it lands. However, Mark's 'esoteric arrow-in-table trick requires that the overhung nock be knocked upward, from *below*, so that the arrow goes forward and up and down into the table', something that Sternberg does not understand as he 'whacks the arrow's overhand from *above*: hence its parabolic transmission backward' ('Westward', 289. Wallace's emphasis). The fact that Sternberg's lack of skill send the arrow backwards fits with the idea that the author is a relevant force in the way fiction is transmitted and that Mark is struggling to move forward beyond what lies behind, 'fouled, soiled, used up, East' ('Westward', p. 355). Again, the language that Wallace uses echoes that of Barth, who is overtly conscious of 'the used-upness of certain forms'.¹⁰⁰ It is also telling that Wallace believes that he fell into the same traps as Barth, as he attempted to solve the problem of recursive metafiction in the story. In his story 'Title', Barth can only come to apocalyptic conclusions when he attempts to move past his overuse of metafiction. He ends the story by writing:

Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness. I despise what we have come to; I loathe our loathsome loathing, our place our time our situation, our loathesome art, this ditto necessary story. The blank of our lives. It's about over. Let the *dénouement* be soon and unexpected, painless if possible, quick at least, above all soon. Now now! How in the world will it ever

101

⁹⁹ McCaffery, pp. 40-41. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion'. p. 64.

¹⁰¹ Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*. p. 113.

Again, the blank stands for the all consuming nothing, the apocalyptic ending. When looking back at 'Westward', Wallace comes to a similarly apocalyptic conclusion, saying:

And maybe "Westward"'s only real value'll be showing the kinds of pretentious loops you fall into now if you fuck around with recursion. My goal in "Westward" was to do with metafiction what Moore's poetry or like DeLillo's *Libra* had done with mediated myths. I wanted to get the Armageddon-explosion [...] I wanted to get it over with and then out of the rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between human beings.¹⁰²

This reinforces the notion that Wallace is not attempting to kill off Barth as an influence, but is struggling with exactly the same dilemmas. The fact that Wallace believes he has fallen into a 'loop' by tackling the problem of self-reflexivity echoes Barth's Ambrose, forever lost in the circuitous funhouse, desperate to be among the lovers, for a 'living transaction'. The similar conclusion can be seen in the fact that Mark enters Ambrose's funhouse to write his story of replenishment. Both Mark and Barth's Ambrose end their respective stories trapped in funhouses.

The story that Mark writes in the funhouse concerns the death of 'L____' (which can be deciphered as Literature) from old age and the narrator's, Dave's, subsequent incarceration for the murder of 'L____'. In prison, Dave's cellmate is Mark, the evil counterfeiter who is intent on escaping his confines. As he constructs a counterfeit key to the prison, he warns Dave 'Don't rat. Do not rat' ('Westward', p. 363). 'Ratting' on Mark's counterfeiting is an allusion to metafiction. If Dave tells the 'truth' about the counterfeiter's activities (or if the author is honest about the process of writing fiction), then he will be 'a late boy. As in zotzed. Klapped. This is a promise'. In other words, metafictional self-reflexivity or an

¹⁰² McCaffery, p. 41.

'honesty' about the processes of writing fiction is destructive, and the author will essentially fall victim to its destructive impulses. However, while the Dave of the story is desperate to retain his honour, Wallace's structuring of this story-within-a-story is problematic to the criticism of metafiction. There are several levels to Mark's story that can be seen as metafictional interactions with the perceived reader. Mark appears both as the grotesque counterfeiter in the story, and as the innocent but guilt-ridden archer. The choice of the archer's name, Dave, adds another self-referential layer that makes the actual author of 'Westward' apparent to the reader. The story could merely have referred back to Mark's dilemma about wanting to write 'a song of tough love for a generation whose eyes have moved fish-like to the sides of its head', but Wallace chooses to make himself apparent in the story risking falling in the same metafictional traps that he is criticising ('Westward', p. 304). Marshall Boswell suggests a reason that Wallace self-consciously introduces himself to the text: 'the way these two figures [Dave and Mark] reverse the reality/fiction dichotomy parallels Wallace's own use of "Ambrose" as the novella's version of the real John Barth. In all four cases, the names create a closed circuit that allows the world outside the text to maintain its integrity'.¹⁰³ Yet this reading fails to take into account Wallace's plea for openness and his derision of the closed circuits of postmodernism throughout the story (for example, the advertiser Steelritter is scared of Illinois' 'disclosed' space, yet is obsessed with 'any wheel without hub or constance' ('Westward', p. 242, p. 245)). Boswell's reading also fails to notice Wallace's comments on the use of names throughout the story. A good example of this lies in the advice that Professor Ambrose gives his class. He says, 'Yes, he, Ambrose, the author, *is* a character in

¹⁰³ Boswell, p. 111.

and object of the seminal *Lost in the Funhouse*; but he is not the main character, the hero or subject, since fictionists who tell the truth aren't able to use real names' ('Westward', p. 261). Mark Nechtr is Wallace's own Ambrose Mensch, his stand-in within the story. In having Mark 'create' a character called Dave, Wallace is intentionally breaking Professor Ambrose's rule, thus opening the story to 'the world outside the text'. It is Wallace's intention to:

use metafiction as a bright smiling disguise, a harmless floppy-shoed costume, because metafiction is safe to read, familiar as syndication; and no victim is as delicious as the one who smiles in relief at your familiar approach. Who sees the sharp aluminium arrow aimed just enough to one side of him to bare himself, open... ('Westward', p. 333).

Wallace uses Dave not to 'reverse the reality/fiction dichotomy', but to blur this dichotomy to act as a 'familiar approach' to facilitate the efficacy of his criticism of metafiction and the traps that come with it. The 'truth' (the goal of fictionists according to Professor Ambrose) to Wallace is an illusion within metafiction, and one of the aims of 'Westward' is to 'expose the illusions of metafiction the same way metafiction had tried to expose the pseudo unmediated realist fiction that came before it'.¹⁰⁴ Yet, even so, he remains within the funhouse, struggling with the notion of self-reflexivity in the same way as Barth, who 'equates introspection with private fear, with inadequacy in all its humiliations reflected through the mirror-maze of consciousness'.¹⁰⁵

Of postmodernism, Barth writes:

My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century

¹⁰⁴ McCaffery, p. 40.

¹⁰⁵ Josephine Hendin, 'John Barth's Fictions for Survival', in *Harper's*, September 1973, 102-106. (p. 104).

under his belt, but not on his back. Without lapsing into moral or artistic simplism, shoddy craftsmanship, Madison Avenue venality, or either false or real naïveté, he nevertheless aspires to fiction more democratic in its appeal than such late-modernist marvels (by my definition) as Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* or Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. [...] He should hope to reach and delight, at least part of the time, beyond the circle of what Mann used to call the Early Christians: professional devotees of high art.¹⁰⁶

I quote Barth at such length here, as his goals for postmodernism are repeated in Wallace's own goals for his fiction. 'Westward' represents an attempt to move past postmodernism without repudiating or imitating. Wallace writes with all of the twentieth century 'under his belt' and hopes to 'reach and delight' his audience. 'Westward' can be viewed as a 'bold next step' precisely because it doesn't perform 'patricide', because it builds on these influences without destroying them. It is because of this engagement with his immediate literary heritage that Wallace's early work stands apart from his contemporaries.

Conclusion

The so-called 'blank fiction' of authors such as Ellis and McInerney has a much narrower focus than Wallace's, as it focuses primarily on reflecting the consumerist culture of the 1980s. While these novelists do mutate the definition of postmodernism to some extent in their creative uses of ironic expression and interrogation of individual identity, they are content to adopt well-established literary tropes to tell their stories. Wallace believes that the rebellious nature of his contemporaries was a 'performative digest of late-eighties social problems'.¹⁰⁷ Rather than reflect, Wallace's early fiction attempts to offer solutions to the world that both postmodern and consumer culture has bequeathed and while not always

¹⁰⁶ Barth, 'The Literature of Replenishment'. p. 203.

¹⁰⁷ McCaffery, p. 26.

successful, it lays a foundation for a new mode of expression that Wallace would continue to explore in his own future fiction.

Chapter Two

‘Aww, Gilligan’: Entertainment, Popular Culture and Mass Consumption in Wallace’s Early Work

Of popular culture, Wallace writes:

It was in post-atomic America that pop influences became something more than technical. About the time television first gasped and sucked air, mass popular U.S. culture seemed to become High-Art-viable as a collection of symbols and myth. The episcopate of this pop-reference movement were the post-Nabokovian Black Humorists, the Metafictionists and assorted franc- and latinophiles only later comprised by “postmodern” (‘Pluram’, p. 45).

In incorporating popular culture into the structure of his fiction, though not in the same narrowly focussed way as his immediate contemporaries, Wallace aims to create a form of literary expression that challenges the mainstream co-optation of postmodernism and televisual irony while attempting to establish sincere literary motives. In 1996, Wallace addressed his interest in entertainment, saying if we, as consumers, fail to discipline ourselves about how much time we spend being passively entertained, ‘then (a) as individuals, we’re gonna die, and (b) the culture’s gonna grind to a halt’.¹ In his early fiction, Wallace uses these ideas about entertainment to expand on his views that the very nature of postmodern irony is an agent of ‘great despair and stasis in US culture’ (‘Pluram’, p. 49). This chapter will examine how Wallace’s writing targets the destructive and alienating nature of entertainment, popular culture and mass communication and how it, in his view, engenders passivity and stasis in the consuming population.

¹ Lipsky, p. 86.

Literary Representations of Popular Culture in the Eighties and Nineties

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Wallace's ideas about entertainment and popular culture were at a formative stage, his peers approached the same themes in very different ways. Bret Easton Ellis moved on from *Less Than Zero* (1985) and *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) to his most overt criticism of popular consumer culture, *American Psycho* (1991). Telling the story of Patrick Bateman, a high-flying but deranged Wall Street banker, the novel both aestheticizes consumer culture, and the violence perpetrated by the protagonist. Bateman's biggest pathology is in how he treats the other people in his life. As Sonia Baelo-Allué notes, 'People become commodified in Bateman's mind, so he uses the same flat tone when describing the two types of "consumption" he performs: the things he owns and the people he kills are equated'.² For example, Ellis writes, 'I'm wearing a Joseph Abboud suit, a tie by Paul Stuart, shoes by J. Crew, a vest by someone Italian and I'm kneeling on the floor beside a corpse, eating the girl's brain, gobbling it down, spreading Grey Poupon over hunks of the pink, fleshy meat'.³ As James Annesley expresses, 'Ellis offers violence as a metaphor for the processes of commodification that are infiltrating, objectifying and cutting up the social body of late twentieth century America'.⁴ In Bateman's world, everything is purchasable and consumable. Yet throughout the novel, Ellis hints that Bateman's gruesome killings are a fantasy, that they have purely been figments of his vivid imagination. He also hints that Bateman himself is a fictional construct and

² Sonia Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing Between High and Low Culture* (London: Continuum, 2011). p. 110.

³ Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991). p. 315.

⁴ James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998). p. 22.

highlights the fictional nature of the novel as a whole (for example, Bateman sexually assaults Alison Poole, the protagonist of Jay McInerney's *Story of My Life* (1988)). This creates a problematic reading of the novel, as Elizabeth Young points out:

What difference does it make whether we believe Patrick committed some, any or all of the murders, or not? We still have to read all the detailed descriptions of the killings and the effect on us is exactly the same. Whether Patrick's murders are fantasies or not, within fiction, they are all fictional. Thus we are forced by the author to confront the definition and function of fictionality itself.⁵

Within the novel, Bateman's characterisation is not fully formed. Aside from his proclivity for murder, there is no distinct description of his human character. He is not described as an individual; he is only the sum of his branded parts, and as such a cipher for Ellis' criticism of contemporary consumer culture. Even Bateman highlights this by saying, 'there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory [...]: *I simply am not there*'.⁶

For Wallace, Bateman's psychological characterisation being an abstract construct of brand names, corporate culture and materialistic insight is problematic in several ways. He directly addresses some of his concerns in the 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, saying *American Psycho* 'panders to the audience's sadism for a while, but it's clear that by the end the sadism's real object is the reader herself'.⁷ Wallace views the novel as emblematic of the problems of late-twentieth century postmodern expression in its critique of consumer culture. He continues:

⁵ Young, 'The Beast in the Jungle'. p. 116.

⁶ Ellis, *American Psycho*. P. 362. Ellis's emphasis.

⁷ McCaffery, p. 25.

When rule-breaking, the mere “form” of renegade avant-gardism, becomes an end in itself, you end up with bad language poetry and *American Psycho*’s nipple-shocks and Alice Cooper eating shit on stage. Shock stops being a by-product of progress and becomes an end in itself. And it’s bullshit.⁸

It is Ellis’s intention to critique the superficial nature of contemporary culture by shocking the reader with graphic scenes, but for Wallace this fails at being an innovative approach. Wallace says:

But we already “know” U.S. culture is materialistic. This diagnosis can be done in about two lines. It doesn’t engage anybody. What’s engaging and artistically real is, taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic, how is it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn’t have a price? And can these capacities thrive? And if so, how, and if not why not?⁹

Young writes that *American Psycho* is a novel that is ‘written from deep within the consumer culture by an author who has never known anything else and who consequently lacks much of the critical ambivalence and political disquiet about popular culture evinced by older novelists and theoreticians’.¹⁰ Wallace dubs this kind of fiction ‘Image Fiction’, precisely because it deals with the ‘further involution of the relations between lit and pop that blossomed with the ‘60s’ postmodernists’ (‘Pluram’, p. 50). According to Wallace, the reason that these writers of Image Fiction are not successful in their critique of contemporary popular culture is because they ‘render their material with the same tone of irony and self-consciousness that their ancestors, the literary insurgents of Beat and postmodernism, used so effectively to rebel against their own world and context’ (‘Pluram’, p. 52). Ellis renders his self-conscious, metafictional creation with irony

⁸ Ibid. pp. 27-28.

⁹ Ibid. p. 27.

¹⁰ Young, ‘The Beast in the Jungle’. p. 121.

that, in the words of John Barth, has become exhausted as a tool for rebellion. According to Wallace, these postmodern devices have been co-opted by television, and as such have entered the mainstream. This leads Wallace to ask the question, 'What do you do when postmodern rebellion becomes a pop-cultural institution?' ('Pluram', p. 68).

Ellis's relation to popular culture is, like that of the Pop Art pioneers of the 1960s, primarily aesthetic, and he manipulates familiar consumerist images to his own specific ends. As Sylvia Harrison defines it, the significant attributes of Pop Art are its 'anonymity, its erosion of boundaries between categorical and cultural realms, as evident in both subject-matter and techniques and its depiction of not "nature", but rather "culture," that is, the illusory, mediate world created by mass communications in their sophisticated post-war form'.¹¹ This closely parallels Elizabeth Young's analysis of the writers of the so-called literary brat pack. She writes:

Their entire lives have been lived out within a milieu wherein art and pop music, advertising, films and fiction have always been inextricably intertwined, inseparable from one another. This does not deny them critical insight but rather denotes an exceptionally sophisticated apprehension of these multifarious semiotic codes.¹²

It is an ironic focus on these 'semiotic codes' that gives Ellis's work a shared aesthetic with Pop Art. Another writer, and one of Ellis's peers, who consciously links his own work to that of the Pop Artists is Douglas Coupland. He writes about how the Pop Art aesthetic impacted upon his work as both an artist and a writer, saying 'it was big and sexy and full of money – Pop! – and best of all, it was

¹¹ Sylvia Harrison, *Pop Art and the Origins of Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). p. 3.

¹² Young, 'Children of the Revolution'. p. 14.

generic. The generic postulates the ideal'.¹³ Andrew Tate also notes Coupland's literary adoption of a Pop Art aesthetic: 'Coupland, similarly ambivalent about the delights and disenchantments of life in an era when consumerist values have become normative, also deploys mundane, too familiar motifs in an aesthetic context'.¹⁴ In *Generation X* (1991), his debut novel, Coupland has an intertextual relationship with visual art, particularly the Pop Art canvasses of Lichtenstein and text-based art of Jenny Holzer. Yet, like Ellis, Coupland also uses this Pop Art sensibility to incorporate televisual devices in his work. According to media theorist Douglas Rushkoff, broadcast stations, such as MTV, were intent on creating 'an aesthetic world rather than a narrative one', where 'meaning' gives way to 'textural experience – a moment to moment appeal to the senses'.¹⁵ Coupland adopts this aesthetic to challenge the results of a loss of narration (and therefore meaning) in contemporary culture. Coupland describes this in a piece from 1996:

Suddenly, around ten years ago, with the deluge of electronic and information media into our lives, these stencils within which we trace our lives began to vanish, almost overnight, particularly on the West Coast. It became possible to be alive yet have no religion, no family connections, no ideology, no sense of class location, no politics and no sense of history. Denarrated.¹⁶

The characters in *Generation X* tell stories to each other in an effort to build a narrative from which they can derive meaning. Taking their cue from entertainment media, the characters' stories are steeped in irony and pop culture references. The friends demand of each other that the stories have 'a dose of celebrity content' and the stories are filled with images that have helped form the characters'

¹³ Douglas Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1996). p. 123.

¹⁴ Andrew Tate, *Douglas Coupland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). p. 11.

¹⁵ Douglas Rushkoff, *Media Virus! Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996). pp. 127-128.

¹⁶ Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead*. p. 180.

worldviews, such as the stories set in 'Texlahoma', a fiction world inspired by nostalgia for 1970s television.¹⁷ Like Ellis's characters, the characters in *Generation X* have an ironic relationship with these images, and they revel in these fictional worlds constructed from collages of pop cultural imagery. Andrew Tate notes that 'Despite the freewheeling irony of his characters [...] the narratives themselves display a considerable anxiety about the implications of embracing an ironic worldview'.¹⁸ However, Coupland's success in his search for depth is compromised by his reluctance to challenge his characters' postmodern reliance on popular culture tropes to describe their experience and, while the climax of the novel is self-consciously sentimental (the protagonist being 'crushed' by the hug of an 'instant family'¹⁹), John M. Ulrich notes that the novel seems to 'epitomize, in many ways (particularly in its form), the postmodern aesthetic of surface play and self-conscious irony'.²⁰ Coupland's climax is concerned with creating an icon of sentimental, unironic connection between human beings, but in engaging with the surface image of the situation, it falls short of being a true interrogation of the nature of the protagonists' dependence on irony. Both Coupland and Ellis are literary Pop Artists, talented manipulators of pop culture imagery and consumerist thought. Wallace, however, attempts to penetrate these themes beyond the 'aesthetic of surface play', and is less interested in the imagery than critical engagement with American culture and the challenging of established aesthetics. Wallace also uses popular culture to add texture to characters and to help orient a reader who is already literate in the language of entertainment. Wallace elucidates this, writing about Octavio Paz's description of the blending of literary and popular

¹⁷ Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (London: Abacus, 1992). p. 59.

¹⁸ Tate, p. 59.

¹⁹ Coupland, *Generation X*. p. 207.

²⁰ John M. Ulrich, 'Generation X: A (Sub)Cultural Genealogy', in *GenXegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth (Sub)Culture*, ed. by John M. Ulrich & Andrea L. Harris (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press/Popular Press, 2003), pp. 3-37. (p. 16).

culture as 'an attempt to reveal that categories we divide into superior/arty and inferior/vulgar are in fact so interdependent as to be coextensive'. He continues:

The use of Low references in a lot of today's High literary fiction, on the other hand, serve a less abstract agenda. It is meant (1) to help create a mood of irony and irreverence, (2) to make us uneasy and so "comment" on the vapidness of U.S. culture, and (3) most important, these days, to be plain realistic ('Pluram', p. 42).

In 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', Wallace's use of popular culture is 'coextensive' with his discussion of postmodern literature. His intention is far from being 'plain realistic', but rather to interrogate how his postmodern influences adopted popular culture for their own uses. The use of *Hawaii 5-0* in the story as '*the symbolic representation of what people already believe*' becomes more important as the characters' reactions to it are revealed ('Westward', p. 271. Wallace's emphasis). For example, in the car on the way to Collision, the passengers begin to discuss the aforementioned show, and all have different perspectives. Mark and Sternberg both see the show as 'Pure entertainment' and 'Fun just for the sake of fun', whereas Steelritter, the older man, has a different view. He says, 'Are we talking about the same show? The show that ran from '65 to '73? That had helicopter imagery in every episode? Helicopters full of wooden-faced, purposeful white guys in the kind of business suits capitalism's all about?' ('Westward', pp. 317-318). As the narrator says, popular culture is '*the symbolic representation of what people already believe*', but what people already believe is not necessarily the same thing, suggesting this symbolic representation is mutable.

Most importantly, *Hawaii 5-0* is given equal weight to the theme of transcending postmodernism and irony in the story, showing that Wallace is not

only aiming his criticism at the metafictionists such as Barth, but also at the increasing role of popular culture in the production of literary fiction. Sternberg and Mark, like Wallace and his contemporaries, live in a world where television is pervasive, yet seemingly benign. Steelritter, a member of the previous generation and a friend/collaborator of the Barth analogue, Ambrose, displays a knowledge of how television is able to promote ideas through more subtle and insidious means. Wallace's writing falls between these two views, positioning him as a consumer who has become both suspicious and disillusioned with what television has to offer, but also as someone who sees the importance in popular culture's role in developing the America he is trying to depict. The aforementioned scene in 'Westward' dramatizes the conflict between the previous generation of fiction writers and Wallace's own generation in terms of the value of popular culture references. In 'E Unibus Pluram' Wallace discusses this conflict:

the derision so many older fictionists heap on a "Brat Pack" generation they see as insufficiently critical of mass culture is at once understandable and misguided' because the younger writers are 'self-defined parts of the great U.S. Audience, and have [their] own aesthetic pleasure-centers; and television has formed and trained [them] ('Pluram', pp. 43-44).

A contemporary of Wallace, Michael Chabon (who also writes books saturated in popular culture, but with an urgency to connect emotionally to the audience), more succinctly describes this impulse to blend high and low culture:

I don't see a whole lot of point or interest in trying to segregate, or to ghettoize one and privilege the other. It all works its way into my work without having to justify its existence, without any sense of guilt or shame over the pop-cultural aspects of things. To me, it's all part of the same entity.²¹

²¹ Graham Foster, 'The Further Adventures of Wonderboy', in *Transmission*, Autumn 2007, 24-27. (p. 27).

Wallace's Relationship with Popular Culture

Writing in the 'Party 2000' edition of *Rolling Stone*, Wallace explains the philosophical history of the battle between sincerity and superficiality:

What's interesting to me is that this isn't all that new. This was the project of the Sophists in Athens, and this is what Socrates and Plato thought was so completely evil. The Sophists had this idea: Forget this idea of what's true or not – what you want to do is rhetoric; you want to be able to persuade the audience and have the audience think you're smart and cool. And Socrates and Plato, basically their whole idea is, "Bullshit. There is such a thing as truth, and it's not all just how to say what you say so that you get a good job or get laid, or whatever it is people think they want."²²

This statement helps illuminate how Wallace's literary use of popular culture differs to that of his peers, such as Ellis and Coupland. While Wallace writes about popular culture, he is not as comfortable with using such imagery as methods of characterization or contextual descriptions of the contemporary world. As Daniel Grassian writes, Wallace 'takes the role of cultural critic, observing but distancing himself from the rampant consumer and consumption ethos he perceives to be governing and increasing American appetites'.²³ In his dealings with popular consumer culture, Wallace is closer to Don DeLillo than any of his immediate peers. Both authors deal with the literal and emotional consequences of a heavily mediated existence, and rather than reveling in pop cultural imagery both attempt to formulate possible solutions to the dehumanizing aspects of contemporary existence. David Cowart claims that DeLillo seeks to at once represent the American images and to sort them out, to discover the historical, social, and

²² David Foster Wallace, '100-word Statement', in *Rolling Stone* 30 December 1999. p. 125.

²³ Grassian, p. 35.

spiritual aberrations they embody or disguise'.²⁴ Wallace's early fiction has similar ideals, and shares DeLillo's emphasis on confronting 'torpid, passionless humanity with the need to seek a more authentic life', rather than adopting the images of American consumption purely for satirical ends (as Ellis does) or manipulating those images into a new iconography of the American experience (as Coupland does).²⁵

In his debut novel, *The Broom of the System*, Wallace begins to establish his own modes of pop culture criticism. While these aspects are not as developed as in his later work, he attempts to depict the American cultural landscape in several ways. This is particularly evident in the scenes involving Reverend Hart Lee Sykes. The preacher's television show is in effect a broadcast sermon, but he has designs on reaching more people through entertainment. His reliance on Lenore's cockatoo's echolalia reveal Wallace's preoccupations with entertainment and the breakdown in communication. As Grassian notes, 'Media forms like television, music, film and the Internet bombard listeners and viewers with information, masquerading as communicative devices when they actually dominate the passive viewer/listener'.²⁶ Wallace dramatizes this notion in *The Broom of the System*, showing the deterioration of in-the-flesh communication and a dominance of forms of entertainment. For example, Lenore's sister's family perform a self-scripted play in front of the television, which has an audience broadcast on the screen. The theme of the family play is the breakdown of the family unit and the restorative power of communication. The television is used by the Spaniard family in order to help with their struggle to communicate with each

²⁴ David Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2002). p. 138.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 137.

²⁶ Grassian, p. 81.

other, or as Grassian calls it, their ‘therapy’ session.²⁷ As the play goes on, the family discard their prized personal possessions and declare that to overcome the problems, ‘They talked with one another, and aired the things they weren’t comfortable with as people right then, and meaningful dialogue and personal interaction was established’ (*Broom*, p. 172). Wallace is not using this scene to present a possible solution to the negative effect television has on communication between individuals. He is showing that television has corrupted the Spaniard family even beyond their own understanding. Grassian also astutely notes this problem in the scene: ‘In practice, the use of television as a therapeutic medium works as more of a division between the family members, who do not talk during or after the “therapy.” Rather, the therapy seems pointless, full of empty television-like clichés – a media ploy by the manufacturer to capitalize on family problems’.²⁸ Baudrillard calls this the ‘dissolution of TV in life, dissolution of life in TV’.²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu also states that television’s division from social reality has become blurred, writing, ‘television, which claims to record reality, creates it instead. We are getting closer and closer to the point where the social world is primarily described – and in a sense prescribed – by television’.³⁰ With the Spaniard family’s play, Wallace is paradoxically showing their performative recovery from the materialistic, consumerist culture they have been affected by, as mediated by the agent of that consumerist culture they seek to escape. Television, in this scene, is pervasive and inescapable, making the Spaniard family’s attempts at therapeutic recovery farcical.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 82.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 82.

²⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994). p. 30.

³⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television and Journalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1998). p. 22.

Television's role in the faltering communication of Wallace's fictional world is also depicted in the transcripts of the Reverend Hart Lee Sykes' evangelical show. Lenore's pineal-dosed cockatiel begins to control Sykes' show with empty repeated phrases. Some of them sound overtly religious, but many are derived from Lenore's roommate's more intimate moments. Near the end of the novel, the show is shown in transcript, with Sykes' message changing as the bird utters more nonsense. For example, he asks the bird '*who* is Jesus?' to which the bird 'replies', 'He is we! We are he!' (*Broom*, p. 459). This answer, despite appearing to make sense, shifts Sykes' sermon to a nonsensical description of what the bird means. He says, 'We are Jesus because Jesus is a *worker*. Like us. And a *partner*. Like us'. Further on, the cockatiel becomes even more nonsensical repeating Lenore's roommate's sexual statements such as, 'You fill me up. You satisfy me like no man did before. I can't deny it. God', and the Reverend himself, 'Has the little turd learned his lines yet?' (*Broom*, p. 461). The only lines that the bird says perfectly are those that request the donation of money: 'Friends, as subscribing members of the Reverend Hart Lee Sykes's Partners with God Club you can expect the entry of the Almighty Lord Jesus into your own personal life in twenty four-hours or less' (*Broom*, p. 460). These lines are clearly in Sykes' own vernacular, showing that he has spent time training the bird in what is important to the television show, the acquiring of money. This backs up Wallace's later remarks in 'E Unibus Pluram', that television 'is awfully good at discerning patterns, processing them, and then re-presenting them as persuasions to watch and buy' ('Pluram', p. 54). The religious message of Sykes' show essentially doesn't matter, and therefore the bird can say anything and Sykes' real message will remain the same: 'become a partner with God by just picking up the telephone and dialing us here at the

Partnership Pledge Center' (*Broom*, p. 460). Like the Spaniard's relationship with television, Sykes' show, under the vague message of healing and partnership and 'coming together', is spurring people not to talk or communicate with each other in a true partnership. This can be seen in Sykes' plea for his audience to use the telephone (another device designed for communication) not to talk to him or one another, but to donate money. Transaction supersedes communication in Sykes' message. As Grassian writes, 'much of contemporary "communication" has become secondary and artificial, not person to person, more like dissemination from machine to person'.³¹

Wallace's critique of popular culture evolves further with the story 'My Appearance', from his first collection *Girl With Curious Hair* (1989), as he attempts to add depth to his on-going discussion of the mainstreaming of the postmodern aesthetic. The story deals with an actress' preparations for an appearance on David Letterman's late night chat show, and deals with the corrosive effect of irony, the role entertainment plays in promoting commercialism, and the problems of recapturing emotional connection within the contemporary experience. Letterman is described as 'the ironic '80s' true Angel of Death' by Wallace and his chat show is used as a crucible to help Wallace interrogate what effect this brand of entertainment is having on American culture ('Pluram', p. 62). In essence, this story is a blueprint for Wallace's later essay, 'E Unibus Pluram', and along with another story in the collection, 'Little Expressionless Animals', helps establish many of the preoccupations of Wallace's later work. As 'My Appearance' begins, the female narrator, Edylin, describes herself: 'I am a woman whose face and attitudes are known to something over half of the measurable population of the

³¹ Grassian, p. 81.

United States, whose name is on lips and covers and screens. And whose heart's heart is invisible, and unapproachably hidden'.³² She also describes herself as 'a woman who simply cries when she's upset; it does not embarrass me' ('My Appearance', p. 178). In trying to prepare her for her interview with David Letterman, her husband, Rudy, warns her that 'Sincerity is out' and that 'the joke is now *on* people who are sincere' ('My Appearance', p. 182. Wallace's emphasis). Wallace efficiently sets up the conflict between Letterman's ironic 'ridiculousness' and Edylin's unself-conscious openness in the early pages of the story. Rudy, who is a product of the television industry's irony, feels the need to combat Letterman, to present a forcefield of irony in order to not reveal anything to either Letterman or the viewing public. Edylin notes in the first lines of the story that her status as superficial image is what will, according to Rudy, 'save me from all this appearance implied' ('My Appearance', p. 175). The title of the story, 'My Appearance', reveals its dual meaning when we realise the story is about both the appearance of Edylin on Letterman's chatshow, but also her general appearance, that of iconic celebrity that conflicts with what is actually in her 'heart's heart'. As Marshall Boswell writes, 'Edylin's central conflict, then, is to reconcile her real self and the content of her "heart's heart" with her fabricated identity as a celebrity'.³³

Boswell's reading is rather simplistic, as there are a number of aspects at work in the story that complicate Edylin's character. Michael Sorkin calls the talk show format 'a structure of occasions for self-simulation, for the invention of a negotiable persona'.³⁴ Edylin's refusal to negotiate with the conventions demanded of her sets her apart from the fictional Letterman as she directly challenges his

³² David Foster Wallace, 'My Appearance' in *Girl With Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 1997) pp. 173-201 (p. 175).

³³ Boswell, p. 94.

³⁴ Michael Sorkin, 'Faking It', in *Watching Television*, ed. by Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon, 1986), pp. 162-182. (p. 179).

mediated identity. Yet, Edylin's honesty in the interview is mediated, and in essence is a structured persona that is being choreographed by Rudy, her husband, over a radio earpiece. Honesty in the televised arena becomes another tactic of self-simulation. Her interview is what Baudrillard would call 'phantom content', something that contains information but no meaning. He writes, 'Rather than producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning. A gigantic process of simulation that is very familiar'.³⁵ This staging of meaning is a *mise-en-scène*, a simulated forum that is constructed to 'avoid the brutal desimulation that would confront us in the face of the obvious reality of a radical loss of meaning'. Umberto Eco also notices that televisual presentations, whether fictional or documentary, operate as *mises-en-scène*, writing 'Television has induced a preconstruction of reality just when it (television) gives the impression of being an objective eye that opens a window onto what is there'.³⁶ Edylin is participating in an inescapable, preconstructed *mise-en-scène* even though she tries to be sincere and honest. Television eats up the sincerity, as evidenced when Edylin admits she volunteered to perform in a sausage commercial. This only results in a chaotic scene of ironic response, with Letterman's bandleader 'pretending to wipe at an eye under his glasses' and Letterman's eyes becoming 'utterly alive' ('My Appearance', p. 197). Edylin's honesty is taken as part of the televisual game, and as such the real meaning is lost to the simulation. As Wallace writes, television 'has become able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or even protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism that television requires of Audience in order to be commercially and psychologically viable' ('Pluram', p. 50). Or as Mark Crispin Miller puts it, 'TV protects itself from criticism or rejection by

³⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. p. 80.

³⁶ Eco, *Apocalypse Postponed*. p. 146.

incorporating our very animus against the spectacle into the spectacle itself'.³⁷

Wallace also uses this story to begin his scrutiny of the permeability of the screen, a subject that he talks about in 'E Unibus Pluram', writing 'It's not paranoid or hysterical to acknowledge that television in enormous doses affects people's values and self-perception in deep ways. Nor that televisual conditioning influences the whole psychology of one's relation to himself, his mirror, his loved ones, and a world of real people and real gazes' ('Pluram', p. 53). In 'My Appearance' Wallace depicts the television as a membrane that allows irony through, infecting normal, unbroadcast life like a virus. Rudy is so influenced by television's hegemony that he continues advising his wife to 'act as if [...] everything is clichéd and hyped and empty and absurd', failing to see the genuine need for compassion and sincerity to make his crumbling marriage work ('My Appearance', p. 183). The story concludes with Edylin asking Rudy 'just what way he thought he and I were', which she admits 'turned out to be a mistake' ('My Appearance', p. 201). Rudy is the ultimate viewer of television, part of an audience that, in Miller's words, is protected by 'the cold thrill of feeling [...] exalted above all concern, all earnestness, all principle, evolved beyond all innocence or credulity, liberated finally out of naïve moralisms and into pure modernity'.³⁸ Yet this state is an illusion, and Rudy's sense of self is fractured by Edylin's insistence on honesty and sincerity. Letterman is able to absorb this anti-ironic posturing because of the hegemonic effects of the televisual *mise-en-scène*, but in her real, unbroadcast life it causes a 'great disturbance from which I, as cause, perfectly encircled, was exempt' ('My Appearance', pp. 200-201). Edylin's eventual failed marriage shows that she has successfully maintained her self-image as 'a woman who speaks her

³⁷ Mark Crispin Miller, 'Deride and Conquer', in *Watching Television*, ed. by Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon, 1986), pp. 183-228. (p. 194).

³⁸ Ibid. p. 225.

mind', but the cost of this is isolation in a world that has 'evolved beyond all innocence or credulity' ('My Appearance', p. 201). As Marshall Boswell writes, Rudy, 'like the broader culture he in some ways represents, is trapped in irony's cage, while Edylin, in her effort to climb out, is as alone outside as she would be inside'.³⁹

In a similar way to some of the other stories in *Girl With Curious Hair*, such as 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', 'My Appearance' helps develop Wallace's ideas about the mainstreaming of the postmodern aesthetic. The studio where the chat show is filmed is depicted as a postmodern funhouse where everything has a sign, but there is no depth. This is first noticeable when the show begins and the camera focuses on the studio's 'APPLAUSE' sign and 'the words flashed on and off as the audience cheered' ('My Appearance', p. 185). It shows the sign and reveals the audience are being cued, but the image also reverses itself. As the description carries on, the sign becomes less of a command and more of a signifier, as if it is saying 'this is applause'. As the story progresses the signs become more ridiculous: Letterman wearing a sign saying 'MAKEUP' on his cheek which was 'left over from an earlier joke' and the bandleader has his head labelled 'BALD SPOT', which is unexplained ('My Appearance', pp. 190, 194). Even Edylin labels herself 'a woman who *acts*', a label that Letterman jumps on and says 'wouldn't that look terrific emblazoned on the T-shirts of women everywhere' ('My Appearance', p. 191. Wallace's emphasis). In Wallace's depiction, Letterman operates in a hyperreal world made up of a tissue of signs that have come to represent postmodern American society as a whole. The visible signs in the story create a superficial simulation where, in Eco's words, 'The

³⁹ Boswell, p. 97.

“completely real” becomes identified with the “completely fake”.”⁴⁰ The Letterman of Wallace’s story, like Ellis and Coupland in their fiction, is a talented manipulator of signs, such that the transparency of these signs reveals the workings of the television show, not to reveal any sort of ‘reality’, but to reinforce the postmodern simulation. As Baudrillard says, ‘The pleasure of an excess of meaning, when the bar of the sign falls below the usual waterline of meaning: the nonsignifier is exalted by the camera angle’.⁴¹ The signs in Letterman’s show cease to convey any real meaning and stand as superficial tokens of a simulated reality. Wallace is not merely reflecting the postmodern uses of signs in his fiction, but is launching a critique against the scarcity of meaning within mainstream postmodernity. Unlike Ellis, for who these sorts of signs provide inspiration for his ambivalent depiction of contemporary society, Wallace uses the signs as a barrier to real human connection. For example, the representation of the audience ceases to be that of a group of human beings, and merely becomes an ‘APPLAUSE’ sign that is filmed by the camera; a ‘nonsignifier exalted by the camera angle’. Rather than reflecting the problem of mainstream postmodernism’s superficial nature, Wallace attempts to dramatize the effect it has on emotional reality. Edylin’s sincerity is absorbed by Letterman’s show, and its power is diluted by the *mise-en-scène* of television. As Baudrillard explains, ‘One must think instead of the media as if they were, in outer orbit, a kind of genetic code that directs the mutation of the real into the hyperreal’.⁴²

⁴⁰ Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Vintage, 1998). p. 7.

⁴¹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. p. 28.

⁴² Ibid. p. 30.

Wallace and Televisual Irony

As authors such as Ellis and Coupland revel in the ironic possibilities of this interplay of postmodern signs, Wallace attempts to critique the scarcity of meaning in postmodern discourse by interrogating how irony is used in such situations. In 'My Appearance', Letterman's show's mechanics are supposedly laid bare by the signs described above but they allow the audience to see through the manipulation of television and, in Wallace's words invite 'a complicity between [television's] own witty irony and [the viewer's] cynical, nobody's-fool appreciation of that irony' ('Pluram', pp. 61-62). Wallace's views should not be seen as an outright dismissal of irony, but rather an understanding of how irony is deployed in the postmodern landscape. Paul de Man writes:

an ironic temper can dissolve everything, in an infinite chain of solvents. It is not irony but the desire to understand irony that brings the chain to a stop. And that is why a rhetoric of irony is required if we are not to be caught, as many men of our time have claimed to be caught, in an infinite regress of negations.⁴³

This quotation both explains and complicates Wallace's approach to televisual irony in his work. While de Man is specifically referring to ironic rhetoric in literature, his discourse can be applied to Wallace's views of televisual irony, and how he approaches a foundation for alternative modes of expression. 'E Unibus Pluram' clearly articulates Wallace's feelings about televisual irony, and the language he uses echoes that of de Man. When Wallace writes that television has 'become able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism' with its ironic rhetoric, he echoes de

⁴³ Paul de Man, 'The Concept of Irony', in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 163-184. (p. 166).

Man's statement that 'an ironic temper can dissolve everything' ('Pluram', p. 50). As de Man continues: 'irony allows one to say dreadful things because it says them by means of aesthetic devices, achieving a distance, a playful aesthetic distance, in relation to what is being said'.⁴⁴ Wallace echoes this in 'E Unibus Pluram', 'The reason why our pervasive cultural irony is at once so powerful and so unsatisfying is that an ironist is *impossible to pin down*. All U.S. irony is based on an implicit "I don't really mean what I'm saying"' ('Pluram', p. 67. Wallace's emphasis). Many of Wallace's views on televisual irony are inspired by Mark Crispin Miller's essay 'Deride and Conquer', which states that, 'The televisual irony, however, has merely enabled TV to regress into a continuous scene of brutal domination, by seeming to obviate all critical reaction (whether moral or aesthetic)'.⁴⁵ Both Miller and Wallace view television as a self-reflexive medium, protecting itself with ironic posturing. Miller writes, 'TV tends now to bring us nothing but TV [...] TV today purports to offer us a world of "choices," but refers us only to itself'.⁴⁶ According to de Man, irony can be seen as a 'dialectic of the self', that sets up 'duplications of a self, specular structures within the self, within which the self looks at itself from a certain distance'.⁴⁷

Just as de Man declares that 'It is not irony but the desire to understand irony' that prevents the negative results of an ironic rhetoric, Wallace uses his writing to attempt to understand how irony is deployed in mainstream postmodernity, particularly in televisual postmodernity. At the heart of Wallace's understanding is a parallel with de Man's idea that irony promotes a necessary self-consciousness, but it also acts as an 'infinite chain of solvents'. In Wallace's

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 169.

⁴⁵ Miller, 'Deride and Conquer'. p. 224.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 192.

⁴⁷ de Man, p. 169.

words, irony is 'critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony is singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks' ('Pluram', p. 67). Irony, as a literary tool, was useful for a sort of rebellion in the 1960s and 1970s, a necessary 'ground-clearing' that was helpful in diagnosing problems with contemporary culture. Wallace sees in television a neutering of the rebellion, and a continual re-presentation that makes self-reflexive and ironic rebellion a cultural norm without the power to truly challenge. Miller believes that televisual irony can only refer to television and not the world outside of the screen, which not only neuters rebellion, but it creates a deindividualisation of the viewer. He writes, 'TV's irony at once discredits any sign of an incipient selfhood, so that the only possible defense against the threat of ridicule would be to have no self at all'.⁴⁸

Wallace deals with the idea of selfhood in relation to the ironic conventions of television in another story from *Girl With Curious Hair*. 'Little Expressionless Animals' tells the story of Julie Smith, a young woman who has developed a winning streak on the game show *Jeopardy!* As with 'My Appearance', it deals with the people backstage, and also how Julie deals with an experience mediated by television's ironic and self-reflexive point of view. It also dramatizes Miller's idea that television 'discredits any sign of incipient selfhood'. Throughout, during Julie's success on the television, Wallace describes her as 'blank-faced' or 'expressionless', indicating that she has in some ways managed to navigate television's ironic terrain by concealing her own individuality.⁴⁹ This idea runs throughout the story, with Wallace emphasising his characters' individual

⁴⁸ Miller, 'Deride and Conquer'. p. 223.

⁴⁹ David Foster Wallace, 'Little Expressionless Animals', in *Girl With Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 1997), pp. 3-42. (pp. 16-17).

relationship with televisual identity. One of the characters, Muffy DeMott, articulates this idea:

You hear stories [...] About these lonely or somehow disturbed people who've had only the TV all their lives, their parents or whomever started them right off by plunking them down in front of the set, and as they get older the TV comes to be their whole emotional world, it's all they have, and it becomes in a way their whole way of defining themselves as existents, with a distinct identity, that they're outside the set, and everything else is inside the set ('Animals', p. 31).

This quotation can be seen as dealing with the same themes as the story 'My Appearance', namely characters using television as a way of 'defining themselves as existents'. Rudy in 'My Appearance' allows television's ironic worldview to become his own and he is unable to reveal his true 'heart's heart', even to his wife. He is 'outside of the set' and his screen, the one-way permeable membrane, has infected his outside life. In 'Little Expressionless Animals', the reverse is true. Julie Smith is a woman who refuses to define herself, and avoids television's ironic traps through this refusal. Miller says that 'The self is an embarrassment on TV, an odd encumbrance, like a hat box or a watch fob', and Julie is so successful at appearing self-less on television that she struggles to define herself as an existent 'outside the set'.⁵⁰ Like her counterpart in 'My Appearance', Edylin, Julie is struggling to reconcile the differences between her televisual image and her own sense of self. When she is inside the television, participating in the game, she 'gives off an odd lambent UHF flicker; her expression, brightly serene, radiates a sort of oneness with the board's data', she has submitted herself to televisual conventions ('Animals', p. 17). Outside the game she struggles to articulate her individuality, and seems to have become infected by televisual irony in a similar

⁵⁰ Miller, 'Deride and Conquer'. p. 223.

way to Rudy in 'My Appearance'. For example, Julie can only define her relationship with Faye with increasingly ridiculous and ironic stories that explain why Julie and Faye are lesbians. Eventually Julie can only reveal her true history to Faye within the boundaries of this game, as another 'made-up' story and when she begins to reveal her true feelings to Faye, she does so in her 'microphone voice', her television persona ('Animals', p. 41).

On the copyright page of *Girl with Curious Hair*, Wallace writes that 'Part of "Little Expressionless Animals" makes use of the third stanza of John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"'.⁵¹ Ashbery's poem, which focuses on Parmigianino's painting of the same name, helps reinforce ideas about the postmodern self in Wallace's work by interrogating how surface, or foreground, dominates in postmodern art. David Herd writes, 'the purpose of the poem is to draw readers away from the self-regarding view of art articulated by the painting, and to encourage them to consider what it appears to exclude'.⁵² Wallace adopts Ashbery's themes in order to develop his ideas about the self in relation to television, the convex mirror substituted for the convex screen. Julie is seen on the television to change: 'Every concavity in that person now looks to have come convex. The camera lingers on her. It seems to ogle' ('Animals', p. 17). Like the Parmigianino portrait of Ashbery's poem, this is a distortion of Julie's true self. The poem opens:

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
And swerving easily away, as though to protect
What it advertises.⁵³

⁵¹ David Foster Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 1997). p. vi.

⁵² David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). p. 164.

⁵³ John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007). p. 68.

Of this opening, Herd writes, 'The problem with Parmigianino's painting from Ashbery's perspective is that because of the manner it is painted it is all foreground'.⁵⁴ In essence, Julie's presentation of herself on the television screen can be viewed as 'all foreground' as she strives to hide her true self from television's ironic landscape. Julie's controlled representation of herself bleeds out into her non-televisual life and complicates her relationships, a situation that echoes Ashbery's idea of the problematic representation of the self in his poem. He writes:

How many people came and stayed a certain time,
Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you
Like light behind windblown fog and sand,
Filtered and influenced by it, until no part
Remains that is surely you.⁵⁵

Here Ashbery is saying that the self is constructed through collaboration with an individual's surroundings and this representation of the self supersedes the true self, which remains irretrievably hidden. Herd writes, 'The self, this passage suggests, like Ashbery's poetry, is a collaboration, so much the product of factors beyond oneself that the individual self, as such, barely exists'.⁵⁶ In Wallace's story, Julie's representation of the self is influenced by the televisual reality she exists in, and she is talented at appearing as if her inner self is exploding outwards on the convex screen. Merv Griffin's lackey notices this and his analysis is revealing. He says of Julie, 'This girl informs trivia with import. She makes it human, something with the power to emote, evoke, induce, cathart. She gives the game the simultaneous transparency and mystery all of us in the industry have groped for,

⁵⁴ Herd, p. 162.

⁵⁵ Ashbery, p. 71.

⁵⁶ Herd, p. 165.

for decades' ('Animals', p. 25). Julie's talent, however, is not to inject the quiz with this humanity, but to give the appearance that she is injecting the quiz with humanity. Lee Edelman writes of Ashbery's poem, 'the secret of all representations of the self – including those acts of consciousness through which the self is represented to itself as itself – lies in the [...] fictionality of any autonomous self'.⁵⁷ Wallace dramatizes this idea as Julie tells numerous fictional stories about her own history, creating a fictional self-portrait even for those people in her personal life. Her televisual image is all surface, the appearance of harmony with nothing behind, and this affects her private life. She tells her lover, Faye:

Say lesbianism is simply one kind of response to Otherness. Say the whole point of love is to try to get your fingers through the holes in the lover's mask. To get some kind of hold on the mask, and who cares how you do it ('Animals', p. 32).

For Julie, love is not about revealing the self, but holding on to the 'mask', the fictionalised self-portraits that represent the self without revealing it. Her televisual self is all surface, and the staff behind the scenes like this because they only need the staged representation of depth. Actual depth, or Julie's emoting of her real inner life through the screen, is unnecessary for television to achieve its goals, as Wallace says, nothing 'more sinister than to appeal to the largest possible audience' ('Pluram', p. 53). Ashbery writes that the distortion of 'objective truth' in this kind of representation of the self 'does not create / A feeling of disharmony.... The forms retain / A strong measure of ideal beauty'.⁵⁸ Julie's successful representation of herself on the convex mirror of the television screen turns her into an icon of the medium, less a person than a pure image. This sort of

⁵⁷ Lee Edelman, 'The Pose of Imposture: Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 32.1 (1986), 95-114. (p. 101).

⁵⁸ Ashbery, p. 73.

iconography is challenged throughout *Girl With Curious Hair*, especially in Wallace's depictions of real life people.

In both 'My Appearance' and 'Little Expressionless Animals', and throughout the *Girl with Curious Hair* collection, Wallace uses fictional depictions of real people, writing on the copyright page that these real names 'are meant to denote figures, images, the stuff of collective dreams'.⁵⁹ These people, like David Letterman and *Jeopardy's* Alex Trebek, are totems of popular culture and recognisable figures for the contemporary audience. They transmit a certain meaning to the 'collective' audience of the book by merely being present in the text. As Marshall Boswell argues:

Pop culture is our new mythos, the source of our contemporary archetypes. This means, in turn, that "David Letterman" is both real person and an emblem of some archetypal idea shared by the culture, the same way mythic characters like Odysseus and Perseus represent, as Joseph Campbell would argue, archetypal ideas stored in the *Spiritus Mundi*.⁶⁰

This is an astute reading to a point, and Letterman is certainly used as an image that inspires a modern sense of the mythic, but it fails to note that Wallace uses these archetypes to subvert the pop culture mythos. By injecting inner lives and depth into his fictionalised versions of these characters he presents them as human, rather than the superficial television images they would otherwise appear to us in our daily relation to them. We can no longer look at Alex Trebek as the well-presented yet sterile host of *Jeopardy!* when we learn that his favourite words are 'moist' and 'induce' and that he feels he is in love with Julie ('Animals', p. 19). His mythic status is compromised by the revelation of his fictional inner life, and he no longer has his emblematic status. Similarly, Lyndon B. Johnson is removed

⁵⁹ Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair*. p. iv.

⁶⁰ Boswell, p. 67.

from his iconic status in the story 'Lyndon' when Wallace projects a depth, including weaknesses and flaws, onto his fictional version of the man.

Popular and Consumer Culture in Wallace's Creative Non-Fiction

Wallace's early creative non-fiction is also preoccupied with how entertainment and leisure dominate Americans' lives, particularly in the essays 'Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All' (1992) and 'A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again' (1995). The former article, about the Illinois State Fair represents American entertainment and leisure as hijacked by corporate sponsors, and playgrounds and toys are branded with the names of companies and businesses. Wallace notes 'All the toys and plastic playground equipment have signs that say COURTESY OF and then a corporate name'.⁶¹ In Wallace's view of the Fair, entertainment and fun are tied inexorably to corporatism and mass consumerism, a view that has been previously evident in the story 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way'. The Illinois State Fair shows a children's 'Help Me Grow tent' (essentially a playground) that is sponsored by McDonalds and a man dressed as corporate spokesperson and advertising icon Ronald McDonald is 'capering around a small plasticky playground area under candy-stripe tenting' ('Getting Away', p. 88). In 'Westward', McDonalds is the sponsor of Ambrose's Funhouse business, the launch of which is coinciding with the making of an extravagant and indulgent television commercial for the burger chain. While an overtly hyperbolic and parodic depiction of American excess, the rhetoric in 'Westward' is remarkably similar to that of 'Getting Away from Already Being Pretty

⁶¹ David Foster Wallace, 'Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All' in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 1998) pp. 83-137 (p. 89).

Much Away from It All'. Moving away from the McDonalds-branded play area, Wallace describes the whole Fair in terms of consumption:

And there is, in this state with its origin and reason in food, a strong digestive subtheme running all through the '93 Fair. In a way, we're all here to be swallowed up. The Main Gate's maw admits us, slow tight-packed masses move peristaltically along complex systems of branching paths, engage in complex cash-and-energy transfers at the villi alongside paths, and are finally – both filled and depleted – expelled out of exits designed for heavy flow. And there are the exhibits of food and of the production of food, the unending food booths and the peripatetic consumption of food. The public Potties and communal urinals. The moist body-temp heat of Fairgrounds. The livestock judged and applauded as future food while animals stand in their own manure, chewing cuds ('Getting Away', p. 131).

The Fair itself is depicted as an embodiment of the consumerist aesthetic, with the punters being processed and expelled in a simulation of the human digestive system.

For Wallace, hedonistic mass consumption is a side effect of a dependence on entertainment and leisure, the mindless pursuit of satisfaction that is catalysed by television shows and mass advertising. Douglas Rushkoff explains that this is the goal of advertisers who aim to become 'the focal point in the mindless feedback loop between production and consumption'.⁶² He goes on to emphasise the blending of entertainment and advertising, explaining the advertisers aim to 'make ads that look like shows, and real life into something like an ad'.⁶³ Pierre Bourdieu also writes about the role of television in dictating how people act:

The political dangers inherent in the ordinary use of television have to do with the fact that images have the peculiar capacity to produce what literary critics call the reality effect. They show things and make people believe in

⁶² Douglas Rushkoff, *Life Inc.* (London: The Bodley Head, 2009). p. 125.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 128.

what they show. This power to show is also the power to mobilize. It can give life to ideas or images, but also to groups.⁶⁴

Much of Wallace's non-fiction addresses the concerns that the sophistication of advertising and branding have become integral to the American experience and aims to establish methods of ethical existence within a consumer culture. It's important to note that his works contain subtle changes as his career as a journalist progresses, and the focus changes.

Daniel Grassian writes of Wallace's creative non-fiction, 'In contemporary America, the desire to satisfy one's self has superseded the desire to be socially aware, largely due to the multiplicity of pleasurable entertainment forms [...]. In essence, Wallace encourages eudemonistic happiness as a morally and personally superior alternative to hedonism'.⁶⁵ While this is correct, there is a distinct difference in the ways Wallace's early journalism and his later non-fiction deal with this theme. In the essay on the Illinois State Fair, Wallace is overtly critical of the American habit of hedonistic consumption, and depicts his fellow Fair-goers as consumers from a distance. For example, he describes many of the shoppers thus:

The special community of shoppers in the Expo Bldg. are a Midwestern subphylum commonly if unkindly known as Kmart People. Farther south they'd be a certain fringe-type of White Trash. Kmart People tend to be overweight, polyestered, grim-faced, toting glazed unhappy children. Toupees are the movingly obvious shiny square-cut kind, and the women's makeup is garish and often asymmetrically applied, giving many of the female faces a demented look ('Getting Away', p. 120).

⁶⁴ Bourdieu, p. 21.

⁶⁵ Grassian, p. 37.

Christoph Ribbat notes that in his early non-fiction, Wallace portrays himself as a 'cynical reporter' reflecting 'on the supposedly naïve throngs of Midwesterners'.⁶⁶ This is at odds with Wallace's later work in which he portrays himself as the naïve one. According to Wallace, consumerist indulgence at the Illinois State Fair is undertaken by a subset of American society, gaudy caricatures that offer easy and cynical criticism in a similar way to writers Wallace has previously tried to distance himself from. Daniel W. Lehman writes of young 'blank fiction' authors' dealing with popular culture:

Whereas their older brothers and sisters (or parents) embraced a politics of engagement and a drive towards standards (on the left or right) of social engineering and moral correctness, the newer agenda played on the margins of culture, waged guerrilla war on the values of its elders, and understood that while media construction may be inevitable, it can be defanged by a subtle dialogic of style.⁶⁷

Wallace can be seen throughout his non-fiction to be returning to 'a politics of engagement', whereas early essays, such as 'Getting Away from Already Pretty Much Being Away From It All', show Wallace on the margins of culture, distanced from those he is criticising. Ribbat sees Wallace's development as a journalist as a larger symptom of American journalism as a whole:

It is a turn towards the "Kmart People," if you will, a turn fully performed in his Kenyon College address, and in many ways a transformation reflecting the larger developments of American literary journalism – from the mercurial subjectivity of the New Journalism to the social conscience of the New New Journalism.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Christoph Ribbat, 'Seething Static: Notes on Wallace and Journalism', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Austin: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), pp. 187-198. (p. 194).

⁶⁷ Daniel W. Lehman, 'You Can See Nathan's From Here: Lobbing Culture at the Boomers', in *GenXegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth (Sub)Culture*, ed. by John M. Ulrich and Andrea L. Harris (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), pp. 105-120. (p. 106).

⁶⁸ Ribbat, 'Seething Static'. p. 194.

It is perhaps the titular essay of Wallace first collection, 'A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again', that shows how he moves towards a greater social conscience in his non-fiction. At the beginning of the article, Wallace makes clear his journalistic angle: the criticism of indulgence. The journalistic mode allows him to be much more direct as to this focus than in his narrative fiction. He writes, 'I have had escargot, duck, Baked Alaska, salmon w/ fennel, a marzipan pelican, and an omelette made with what were alleged to be trace amounts of Etruscan truffle. [...] I have been – thoroughly, professionally, and as promised beforehand – pampered', yet a few lines later this list of luxury gives way to a criticism of his fellow passengers' 'collagen and silicone enhancement, bad tint, hair transplants that have not taken' and a confession that he has 'felt as bleak as [he has] felt since puberty'.⁶⁹ While these criticisms echo Wallace's thoughts on the 'Kmart People' of the Illinois State Fair, this quotation also depicts his unease at his own relationship with luxury and indulgence. As journalist he is both outsider, examining the cruise experience with cynicism and despair, and he is complicit with his fellow passengers' indulgence. He is aware that he has 'that ur-American part of me that craves and responds to pampering and passive pleasure: the Dissatisfied Infant part of me, the part that always and indiscriminately WANTS' ('Supposedly', p. 316). Here, Wallace's description of the 'ur-American' part of himself is really a description of American culture in general, and its ever-strengthening desire for bigger, better and more passive forms of entertainment. Daniel Grassian articulates this when he writes, 'the cruise ship works as a form of tyranny or mental slavery and serves as a microcosm of a greater societal problem

⁶⁹ David Foster Wallace, 'A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again' in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 1998) pp. 256-353 (p. 258).

of the easy accessibility of hedonistic pleasures and the intellectual damage that focusing primarily upon personal pleasures can do'.⁷⁰

The fact that Wallace implicates himself as one of the American pleasure-seekers he writes about is important for the reader. While critical of this indulgence, he intellectually dissects his own tendencies in order to show how insidious and prevalent negative attitudes towards entertainment and pleasure are. It is no accident that Wallace's depiction of the cruise uses language that echoes his earlier diatribe on entertainment, irony and the state of American culture, 'E Unibus Pluram'. In this essay, Wallace writes that 'irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture' ('Pluram', p. 49). In the later essay, he claims that being 'on board the Nadir – especially at night, when all the ship's structured fun and reassurances and gaiety-noise ceased – I felt despair' ('Supposedly', p. 261). Wallace attributes the same result to both the cruise and American culture's use of irony (for example, the 'structured fun and reassurances' of broadcast television and advertising).

In the cruise essay, the effect of luxury and its symptomatic intellectual compromise is personified in the granddaughter of a rich couple who share Wallace's table in the dining room. Mona, the granddaughter, is depicted as brash, greedy and spoiled. Wallace describes her as a 'corrupt doll' and 'an incredibly demanding passenger and diner, [...] her complaints about slight aesthetic and gustatory imperfections at table lacked Trudy and Esther's [Wallace's fellow diners] discernment and integrity and came off as simply churlish' ('Supposedly', p. 282). Mona represents the unselfconscious, yet selfish, pursuer of entertainment

⁷⁰ Grassian, p. 41.

and pleasure, the polar opposite of Wallace himself, who struggles with the implications of the luxury on board the ship. The journalist implies that Mona is the end result of hedonism; a warning about the possible direction American culture could go if the population's preoccupations are not interrogated. These are not new ideas, and can be traced back as far as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1840), in which he writes, 'Democracy encourages a taste for physical gratification: this taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that all is matter only; and materialism, in its turn, hurries them on with mad impatience to these same delights'.⁷¹ Wallace reiterates many of de Tocqueville's concerns about the materialistic nature of American culture, retooling them for his own contemporary experience. His non-fiction begins a critique of such tendencies that would become central to *Infinite Jest's* discourses on social conscience and ethical living.

The essay 'Big Red Son', originally published in *Premier* in 1998, shows Wallace's further development beyond the New Journalism trope of a distanced critique by a cynical reporter. The essay, in Ribbat's words, 'has an (albeit self-consciously) naïve reporter meditate on political and social issues raised by the porn industry's cynicism'.⁷² In the essay, his lack of cynicism allows him to firmly implicate himself as consumer, avoiding positioning himself above or distanced from the events he is depicting. He describes the pornography industry as vulgar and describes many of the negative and bad-taste images he has witnessed but he is quick to expand his use of the word 'vulgar'. He writes, 'At root, *vulgar* just means popular on a mass-scale. It is the semantic opposite of *pretentious* or

⁷¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Cambridge: Sever & Francis, 1863). p. 175.

⁷² Ribbat, 'Seething Static'. p. 194.

snobby'.⁷³ As with the cruise ship, where Wallace partakes in the consumption, and lets it stimulate the 'ur-American' part of himself, he talks about pornography in a way that incriminates him as a viewer. For example, he reveals that he knows the 'precise erectile size, angle, and vasculature' of the male performers he meets and he shows a knowledge of female performer Jenna Jameson's intimate moles and tattoos ('Big Red Son', p. 16). Wallace positions himself as part of the 'carnival' in this essay, unlike his distance from the 'K Mart people' of the Illinois State Fair. It is this engagement with his role as an American consumer that colours his developing fiction and complicates his critiques of popular culture. He uses his position as a consumer in his writing in order to highlight the problems with the mainstreaming of postmodern expression.

Conclusion

In 'E Unibus Pluram' Wallace describes the dual relationship to television 'at once alienated and anacritic' because of its adoption of postmodern self-reflexivity and irony. Yet, his criticisms of popular culture in his early fiction do not simply denigrate it, nor do they come from a place of ambivalence as in the fiction of Ellis and the 'blank generation' writers. Wallace actively engages with popular culture, exploring why certain forms of entertainment have so successfully entered the public consciousness and interrogating his own relationship with it. It is through this engagement that Wallace begins to separate himself from his peers, such as Ellis, Coupland and McInerney, as Wallace is not content to simply depict the mainstream postmodernity of popular culture. In his fiction he strives to establish

⁷³ David Foster Wallace, 'Big Red Son', in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2007), pp. 3-50. (p. 8). Wallace's emphasis.

possible ways of overcoming the negative effects popular culture has on the ego through application of philosophical systems of thought.

Chapter Three

Just Think About Other People: Wallace, Philosophy and Solipsism

Throughout his fiction Wallace strives to question how effective postmodern literary expression is in the face of a mainstream culture that has adopted many of its devices and aesthetics. It is through engagement with philosophical modes of thought that he begins to chart possible methods of escaping superficial postmodernity and establishing a moral structure in his work. This chapter will examine how Wallace's early fiction engages with his roots in analytical philosophy and establishes a moral foundation that he builds on in *Infinite Jest*. Additionally, this chapter will also examine Wallace's engagement with post-war philosophical fiction writers, focussing in particular on his analysis of David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, 'The Empty Plenum', which delineates the foundation of Wallace's view on how philosophy can be incorporated into fiction.

Some very brief biographical information may be useful to help articulate the importance of philosophy to Wallace's intellectual development. His father, James D. Wallace, is Emeritus Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The elder Wallace's philosophical interests lie in ethical theory and its application to practical problems. Despite his father introducing him to philosophy at the age of fourteen with Plato's *Phaedo* dialogue, Wallace moved away from the branches in which his father worked.¹ 'My areas of interest were mathematical logic and semantics and stuff, which my dad thinks is kind of gibberish,' Wallace told interviewer Charlie Rose in 1997. 'In a certain way

¹ James Ryerson, 'A Head That Throbbled Heartlike: The Philosophical Mind of David Foster Wallace', in *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, ed. by Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 1-33. (p. 3).

I'm following in dad's footsteps, and I'm also doing the required thumbing-the-nose-at-father thing. The stuff that I was doing was really more math than philosophy'.² Despite this declaration, much of Wallace's career in fiction is focussed on developing a pragmatic understanding of philosophy, particularly as he attempts to formulate possible ethical modes of existence.

Analytical Philosophy and Wallace's Intellectual Formation

At Amherst College in Massachusetts, Wallace began studying the combined majors of English and Philosophy, beginning work on the creative writing thesis that would become *The Broom of the System*, alongside a critical philosophy thesis.³ Despite being entrenched in the philosophy of logic and semantics, Wallace's philosophy thesis begins to show his concern about how philosophical theory impacts upon quotidian lived experience, a philosophical concept that he develops in his fiction. The thesis attempts to challenge Richard Taylor's notion that through six established philosophical presuppositions it can be proved that, just as we cannot alter states of affairs in the past, we cannot alter states of affairs in the future, and such future states of affairs dictate what occurs in the present. Taylor's theory of fatalism hinges on the proposition known as the law of excluded middle, namely, 'Any proposition is either true or, if not true, then false'.⁴ Taylor attempts to prove that future states of affairs are linked to events in the present in a way that the future can dictate what occurs in the present. To explain this, he imagines an admiral standing on the deck of a battleship preparing to give the

² 'An Interview with David Foster Wallace', *The Charlie Rose Show* (New York: PBS, 27 March 1997).

³ The thesis was completed in 1985 and published in 2010, alongside Richard Taylor's original essay, as *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*.

⁴ Richard Taylor, 'Fatalism', in *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, ed. by Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia, 2010), pp. 41-51. (p. 43). The full list of Taylor's six presuppositions begins on this page. I will not repeat all of them here.

order to go into battle. But the admiral's power to give the order (O) or not give the order (O) depends on whether there is a battle tomorrow (Q) or if there is not a battle tomorrow (Q). Taylor writes his proof thus:

- 1'. If Q is true, then it is not within my power to do O' (for in case Q is true, then there is, or will be, lacking a condition essential for doing O' , the condition, namely, of there being no naval battle tomorrow).
- 2'. But if Q' is true, then it is not within my power to do O (for a similar reason).
- 3'. But either Q is true, or Q' is true.
- ∴ 4'. Either it is not within my power to do O , or it is not within my power to do O' .⁵

For Wallace, the idea that free will is so easily abandoned is troubling. He writes, 'a semantic argument out of six seemingly inoffensive presuppositions appears to force upon us a strange and unhappy metaphysical doctrine that does violence to some of our most basic intuitions about human freedom'.⁶ Wallace's unease at Taylor's belief that fatalism is 'forced upon us by proof from certain basic logical and semantic principles' shows that, while he is a skilled logician, he is concerned about the implications of philosophical theory on the way people live their quotidian lives ('Modality', p. 212). Wallace's intention with his thesis is to combat Taylor's idea that fatalism is forced upon us by established principles by introducing a 'rich and workable formal semantic device', which he dubs 'system J' ('Modality', p. 168). Importantly, system J aims not only to provide 'tools for solving other vexing problems in the semantics of tense and physical modality', but also to capture 'the ways in which we all actually do think and talk about physical possibility and time *in the course of everyday life*' (emphasis added). Taylor's fatalistic argument

⁵ Ibid. pp. 46-47.

⁶ David Foster Wallace, 'Richard Taylor's "Fatalism" and the Semantics of Physical Modality', in *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, ed. by Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 141-216. (p. 146).

adheres to established rules of logical philosophy, as the example of the admiral on the deck of his ship shows, but Wallace finds a problem in his ignoring of the mutability of physical conditions and circumstances. He writes:

what is situationally physically possible and necessary at any given moment is a function both of the general physical laws that characterize and govern the operations of our world, *and* of the particular set of relevant physical conditions and circumstances and considerations [...] that obtains at that moment ('Modality', p. 165).

Despite the fact that Wallace's thesis is grounded in a scientific and logical exactness, Montague grammar and a firm tethering of any abstractions that may muddy his clear criticism of Taylor's original essay, the foundation of his argument rests on a pragmatic understanding of the implications of such logical philosophical thought. This is important when considering his move from analytical philosophy to fiction. While he may be doing the 'thumbing-the-nose-at-father thing' in terms of the branch of philosophy he is studying, his opinions as to what philosophy is for are remarkably similar. James Wallace's discussions of philosophy are rooted in pragmatism, the idea that the truth of a theory depends on the success of its practical application. Writing about his approach to ethics, he says that most English-speaking philosophers of the last few centuries view moral norms as 'independent from the actual practices that make up the lives of human individuals and their communities', yet he views them as 'items of practical knowledge. These items of knowledge are components of practices that make up the lives of people. The practices and their component practical norms, including ethical norms, are the result of the experience over time of many people in dealing

with the problems they encounter in living together and doing things'.⁷ James Wallace allies himself with the American philosophers Richard Rorty and John Dewey, citing Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989) and Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) as two examples of this pragmatic thought. American pragmatism views philosophy as a democratic pursuit, meaning that it objects to the isolation of academic, analytical philosophy. As John J. Stuhr defines it, pragmatism focuses on:

openness, hope and an insistence on embodiment, enactment, and putting theory into practice; a tolerant and pluralistic concern for individuals, their growth, and their differences; an urgent commitment to communities and democracy as a way of life; and a realization that philosophy is criticism and production so is always concerned with values and creation.⁸

American pragmatists, particularly Rorty, are more interested in constructed truths than objective truths, something which Wallace's work in *The Broom of the System* follows. As Clare Hayes-Brady writes, 'Coping with the world of constructed truth is a challenge that Wallace sets his characters. Some succeed and some fail. Those that succeed, as Lenore Beadsman learns to do, meet the criteria set out by Richard Rorty for liberal ironism'.⁹ In becoming an ironist in the Rortian sense, Lenore joins her brother, LaVache, in an ability to navigate the mutable and contingent world of language and how it relates to both reality and their own characters. As Rorty writes, ironists are 'never quite able to take themselves seriously because [they are] always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of

⁷ James D. Wallace, *Norms and Practices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009). pp. 2-3.

⁸ John J. Stuhr, *Pragmatism, Postmodernism and the Future of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2003). p. 1.

⁹ Clare Hayes-Brady, 'The Book, the Broom and the Ladder: Philosophical Groundings in the Work of David Foster Wallace', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 24-36. (p. 32).

their final vocabularies, and thus their selves'.¹⁰ Wallace's pragmatic view extends past Rorty towards his use of Wittgenstein in his debut novel.

As James Ryerson writes in his introduction to *Fate, Time, and Language*, 'Wallace was especially concerned that certain theoretical paradigms [...] too easily discarded what he once called "the very old traditional human verities that have to do with spirituality and emotion and community"'.¹¹ This statement is clarified in Wallace's view of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. While originally 'deeply taken' with the 'cold formal beauty' of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), he became critical of the picture theory of language and how it related to the world.¹² In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein puts forward his view of language with very few practical examples, stating 'The propositions of logic describe the scaffolding of the world, or rather they represent it. They have no "subject matter"'.¹³ In the 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace states that Wittgenstein's early theory 'divides us, metaphysically and forever, from the external world' because we can only experience a mimesis, a picture, of reality.¹⁴ This division from the physical world, according to Wallace, leads to solipsism, something that Wittgenstein also noticed when he began writing *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), specifically the discussion of private language. Wittgenstein's transition from a coldly logical philosopher to one who moved away from scientific exactness impressed Wallace, who says 'One of the things that makes Wittgenstein a real artist to me is that he realized that no conclusion could be more horrible than solipsism' and the *Investigations* are 'the single most

¹⁰ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). pp. 73-74. 'Final vocabulary' is a term Rorty uses to describe the words a person uses to justify their actions, beliefs and lives.

¹¹ Ryerson, pp. 1-2.

¹² Ibid. p. 4.

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge Classics, 2010). p. 76.

¹⁴ McCaffery, p. 44.

comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made'.¹⁵ Wittgenstein himself writes, 'People nowadays think that scientists exist to instruct them [...], poets, musicians, etc. to give them pleasure. The idea that these have something to teach them – that does not occur to them'.¹⁶ Wittgenstein's philosophy came to incorporate the 'traditional human verities' and it is the philosopher's influence that allows Wallace to move from writing academic philosophy to writing philosophical fiction.

From Analytical Philosophy to Fiction: Wallace and Pragmatism

In examining *The Broom of the System* as a work of philosophical fiction, and determining the reasons for Wallace's move from analytical philosophy to fiction, it is necessary to examine how he is using philosophy to aid his literary expression. Derek Attridge recognises that literature stands apart from non-fiction in his book *The Singularity of Literature* (2004). He describes his term 'singularity' in a passage from the book thus:

The singularity of a cultural object consists in its difference from all other such objects, not simply as a particular manifestation of general rules but as a peculiar nexus within the culture that is perceived as resisting or exceeding all pre-existing general determinations. Singularity, that is to say, is generated not by a core of irreducible materiality or vein of sheer contingency but by a configuration of general properties that, in constituting the entity (as it exists in a particular time and place), go beyond the possibilities pre-programmed by culture's norms.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ray Monk, *How to Read Wittgenstein* (London: Granta, 2005). p. 68.

¹⁷ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004). p. 63.

Rather than equating singularity to uniqueness, or 'the quality or fact of being one in number or kind',¹⁸ Attridge describes it as something that is able to challenge existing cultural norms, in order to bring 'about the cultural changes necessary to accommodate it'.¹⁹ Literature, through creativity and inventiveness is able to exist within the culture at the same time as reconfiguring or challenging certain rules and norms. Analytical philosophy, on the other hand, is bound by rules, rigorously tested by propositions and proofs, and claims to seek grand truths about various facets of experience. Jacques Derrida notices the difference between philosophical texts and literature, saying that fiction 'gives in principle the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history'.²⁰

Both Derrida and Attridge note the importance of invention as something that is unique to literature. Invention is, in Attridge's words, 'a mental feat, a step into the unknown, which makes possible the manufacture of a new entity and, perhaps even more importantly, new instances of invention in the culture at large'.²¹ But invention can be a process of 'absorption and transformation' that creates this 'new entity' out of already established elements within the culture.²²

Useful though Attridge's views of literature are in establishing the difference between fiction and other forms of writing, they do not fully discuss one aspect that highlights the role of literature in the culture, namely its ability to connect with a

¹⁸ Oxford English Dictionary Online, 'singularity, n.', (Oxford University Press).

¹⁹ Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*. p. 64. The Oxford English Dictionary states that 'singularity' can mean 'The fact or quality of differing or dissenting from others or from what is generally accepted, esp. in thought or religion; personal, individual or independent action, judgement, etc., esp. in order to render one's self conspicuous or to attract attention or notice'.

²⁰ Derek Attridge, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida", in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-75. (p. 37).

²¹ Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*. p. 42.

²² Ibid. p. 51.

reader on an intimate, emotionally rich level. Wallace famously believes that 'Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*', emphasising the role humanity plays in his fiction.²³ While this declaration can be viewed as overly narrow and dogmatic, ignoring some of the principles of modernism, for example, it is helpful in establishing Wallace's own views on the role of literary expression to engage in a transaction involving human emotion.²⁴

In order to further interrogate this idea, it will be useful to discuss *The Broom of the System* in relation to another philosophical novel from the same period, David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988). Markson's novel is useful to the examination of Wallace's use of philosophy because Wallace engaged with the novel at length in his essay-review 'The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*' (1990), writing about why the book deals with its philosophical arguments in a successful, pragmatic way. Markson's novel, telling the story of a woman who believes she is the last person on Earth, deals with Wittgenstein's theories in a similarly explicit way as Wallace's debut, particularly focussing on the theory of private language. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein theorises that it is conceivable that a person could create a language that expresses inner experience 'for his own use', and 'The words of this language are to refer to what only the speaker can know – to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language'.²⁵ He goes on to say that this cannot be considered a language because 'language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts –

²³ McCaffery, p. 26. McCaffery's emphasis.

²⁴ Many modernist texts challenge definitions of the human and how human beings perceive the world, something articulated by writers such as Virginia Woolf and Samuel Beckett.

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). p. 95.

which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or whatever'.²⁶ Language, even a language created independently still has to function within a set of criteria for meaning to flourish, otherwise there is only incoherence that cannot serve language's one purpose. Markson complicates this idea in his novel, as the eternal solitude of his character means that her criteria for language and naming fluctuate because of her lack of need to communicate or convey meaning to another person.

Wallace writes that novels such as Markson's (and Wallace's own first novel, which he doesn't include) 'serve the vital & vanishing function of reminding us of fiction's limitless possibilities for reach & grasp, for making heads throb heartlike, & for sanctifying marriages of celebration & emotion, abstraction & lived life, transcendent truth-seeking & daily schlepping'.²⁷ Wallace's idea of the role of fiction mirrors Attridge's view that fiction is able to create a 'new entity' out of elements within our culture. In Wallace's case this entity is the dramatisation of abstract philosophical ideas that Markson's novel illustrates. Wallace elucidates his point later in his essay:

Wittgenstein's Mistress, w/r/t its eponymous master, does more than just quote Wittgenstein in weird ways, or allude to his work, or attempt to be some sort of dramatization of the intellectual problems that occupied and oppressed him. Markson's book renders, imaginatively & concretely, the very bleak mathematical world of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* revolutionized philosophy by summoning via abstract argument. [...] *WM* nevertheless succeeds at transposing W's intellectual conundra into the piquant qualia of lived – albeit bizarrely lived – experience ('Plenum', 219).

In both of the above quotations, Wallace mentions the application of abstract ideas to what he dubs 'lived life', a phrase that echoes F.R. Leavis's criticism in *The*

²⁶ Ibid. p. 109.

²⁷ David Foster Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 10.2 (1990), 217-239. (p. 218).

Great Tradition (1948). Leavis believes that the formal or aesthetic quality of a novel can be 'appreciated only in terms of the moral preoccupations that characterize the novelist's peculiar interest in life'.²⁸ R.P. Bilan explains that one of Leavis's 'central criteria for a novel is its adequacy to the complexities of the real, or to life'.²⁹ In this respect, Wallace echoes Leavis, noting that the abstract thought of Wittgenstein can only be made relevant in the fictional form by its relationship to 'the novelist's peculiar interest in life'.

Markson's protagonist, Kate, tries to make sense of her life through her cultural engagement and to analyse her 'lived experience', and in turn allows Markson to enter into a philosophical interrogation of logical atomism and the emotional implications of Wittgenstein's theories. While the original work in the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* is abstract, his theories have implications about how we live our lives. Markson is creating a world that distils Wittgenstein's ideas, bringing them into focus and allowing them to affect his protagonist's quotidian and emotional life. For example, Wittgenstein's propositions 1.1, 'The world is the totality of facts, not of things', and 1.2, 'The world divides into facts' are dealt with by Markson through Kate having an obsessive need to establish facts about her own existence and history, even when displaying the mutability of memory and language when trying to articulate these facts.³⁰ Despite this frequent pedantry, the 'facts' that Kate includes in her narrative begin to fluctuate and fall apart, suggesting that the true end of the world lies in Kate's ability to render it accurately, an ability Kate is painfully aware is slipping more and more each time she sits at her typewriter. The final lines make it

²⁸ F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008). pp. 17-18.

²⁹ R.P. Bilan, 'The Basic Concepts and Criteria of F.R. Leavis's Novel Criticism', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 9.3 (1976), 197-216. (p. 202).

³⁰ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. p. 5.

clear that throughout the novel Markson is using a philosophy that in essence deals with transmission and community to emphasise Kate's solipsism and loneliness. Wittgenstein writes, 'What is true or false is what human beings say; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life'.³¹ Language, according to Wittgenstein, defines our world through social intercourse whereas Kate is alone and the world is defined by her loneliness and solipsism. The lack of social agreement in what she is saying means 'what is true or false' is impossible to define. Her solitude brings her a lack of certainty, her messages she leaves graffitied on roads and scrawled in the sand are cries into the ether, unable to communicate any truth, as there is no one to interpret them. Markson's pragmatic engagement with Wittgenstein (albeit with an anti-quotidian lived experience at its core) not only helps in an understanding of the philosophical theories but also examines the emotional, human implication of them. *Wittgenstein's Mistress* asks (and perhaps answers), according to Wallace, an important question: 'What if somebody really had to live in a *Tractatusized* world?' ('Plenum', 219).

The Broom of the System engages with Wittgenstein in a similar way to Markson's novel. Here Wallace creates a situation populated with characters that have a 'lived experience' through the culture and through their emotional lives. The protagonist, Lenore Beadsman, is struggling with the philosophy of Wittgenstein in much the same way as Markson's Kate. Instead of being trapped in a world without societal interaction, she is concerned with the notion that her existence is reliant on the language that describes her. In a metafictional signpost to Lenore's troubles, Wallace allows her to explicitly consider Wittgenstein's meaning-as-use

³¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. p. 94. Wittgenstein's emphasis.

theory: 'Suppose Gramma tells me really convincingly that all that really exists of my life is what can be said about it' (*Broom*, p. 119). Gramma Beadsman, of course, represents Wittgenstein and his theories in an overt way. She is said to have been a former student of his and has let her life be dictated by the theories of *Philosophical Investigations*. However, it is Lenore who is Kate's analogue, struggling with her grandmother's influence and the theories as they are applied to real, lived experience. Part of Wallace's pragmatic approach in *The Broom of the System* is to blend philosophy with literary theory (particularly postmodern literary theory, much as Markson does when he has Kate describe a memoir she might write as identical to the actual narrative of the novel), so when Lenore frets about her existence, she is also highlighting to the reader that she is actually a fictional construct. She tells her therapist, 'Gramma says she's going to show me how life is words and nothing else. Gramma says words can kill and create. Everything' (*Broom*, p. 119).

A draft of *The Broom of the System* was written at the same time as Wallace's undergraduate philosophy thesis, which is relevant in examining Derrida's claim that fiction has the power to 'break free of the rules'. John Barth, whose influence on Wallace's writing is pervasive, especially in earlier works such as 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', and in the way that *The Broom of the System* echoes Barth's poststructuralist interest in language in novels such as *Chimera* (1972) and *LETTERS* (1979), writes:

The philosopher [...] seems unbecomingly ambitious: He wants to understand the universe; to get behind phenomena and operation and solve the logically prior riddles of being, knowledge, and value. But the artist, and in particular the novelist, in his essence wishes neither to explain nor to control nor to understand the universe: He wants to make one of his own,

and may even aspire to make it more orderly, meaningful, beautiful, and interesting than the one God turned out.³²

This statement reflects Derrida's idea that fiction is not bound by the same rules as philosophy, but it also muddles Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy. Derrida's famous statement 'there is nothing outside the text', challenges the presuppositions that the text refers to a 'real' world that exists outside the text as an origin of the secondary, textual world, and also the notion that a 'real' can exist at all.³³ In Derrida's theory, the 'origin' is also textual as we use language to describe it, seeing the world in a process of what Penelope Deutscher calls 'différance, spacing, relationality, differentiation, deferral, delay'.³⁴ In other words, the material world can only be experienced as a textual entity, through the interplay of signs that rely on the opposition between presence and absence to create meaning. These ideas are integral to understanding *The Broom of the System* and how Wallace attempts to use fiction to show the consequences of such theory on the lived experience of his characters. In his novel, Wallace engages with the philosophy of both Derrida and Wittgenstein, creating a textual world that is not 'orderly, meaningful, beautiful' as Barth suggests it should be, but corrupted by the influence of philosophical thought.

According to Wallace, the main consequence of the language theory of Wittgenstein when applied to lived situations is the promotion of solipsism. While Markson's Kate is forced into her solipsism by situations out of her control and tries to make sense of her solitude by using Wittgensteinian thought, characters in *The Broom of the System* are caught up in their own self-reflexive thinking which

³² John Barth, 'How to Make a Universe', in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 13-25. (p. 17).

³³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997). p. 158.

³⁴ Penelope Deutscher, *How to Read Derrida* (London: Granta Books, 2005). p. 34.

has been forced upon them by the interplay of Derridian and Wittgensteinian theories. He explains this to Larry McCaffery, citing the *Tractatus* as a particular example, thus:

we can know and speak of nothing more than little mimetic pictures. Which divides us, metaphysically and forever, from the external world. If you buy into such a metaphysical schism, you're left with only two options. One is that the individual person with her language is trapped in here, with the world out there, and never the twain shall meet. Which, even if you think language's pictures really are mimetic, is an awful lonely proposition. And there's no guarantee the pictures truly "are" mimetic, which means you're looking at solipsism.³⁵

The Broom of the System contains some of Wallace's first attempts to question some of the tenets of postmodernism and challenge the notion of solipsism, doing so through the application of philosophy. We can see his methods in the depiction of Lenore's brother, the monopodic LaVache, who has moved beyond Wittgenstein's early theories of language to inhabit a space where language is ever-changing. LaVache is an opportunistic pragmatist, using philosophy itself to challenge some of the basic rules of his society, such as calling his telephone by another name so he does not have to admit to his father that he is contactable. Far from philosophy being an abstract and purely cerebral endeavour, he finds a pragmatic use for it within the situations in which he finds himself, and thus he defeats the danger of succumbing to insular solipsism, unlike his sister.

Through its dealing with philosophy, *The Broom of the System*, reveals the beginnings of Wallace's preoccupation with establishing ethical modes of living within a postmodern world made up of signs and superficial imagery. Through his pragmatic dramatization of the philosophical theories of Wittgenstein and Derrida,

³⁵ McCaffery, p. 44.

he begins not only to reinforce his criticisms of the mainstreaming of postmodernity, but also to develop a diagnosis of what he sees as problems to do with the overcoming of the self.

Wallace's Philosophical Development in his Early Fiction

Wallace claimed in 1996 that he had written *The Broom of the System* with 'four hundred thousand pages of continental philosophy' in his head.³⁶ Additionally, he had previously described his motivations to Larry McCaffery three years earlier:

Think of "The Broom of the System" as the sensitive tale of a sensitive young WASP who's just had this mid-life crisis that's moved him from coldly cerebral analytic math to a coldly cerebral take on fiction and Austin-Wittgenstein-Derridean literary theory, which also shifted his existential dread from a fear that he was just a 98.6° calculating machine to a fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct.³⁷

In this section I will evaluate these two quotations, examining *The Broom of the System* in light of the philosophers that Wallace explicitly mentions, further attempting to position the novel as a primarily philosophy-influenced text and revealing Wallace's early philosophical grounding in more detail.

Writing about *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Wallace describes the phenomenon of 'INTERPRET-ME' fiction, or 'fiction [that] clues the critical reader in on what the book's to be seen as on a tertiary level "about"' ('Plenum', p. 218). He continues, saying that one way to 'invite a kind of correspondence-interpretation is to drop the name of a real person like bricks throughout the text'. Examples Wallace gives of this type of fiction include '*Candide*, Witold Gombrowicz's *Cosmos*, Hesse's *The*

³⁶ Lipsky, p. 35.

³⁷ McCaffery, p. 41. 'Austin' being J.L. Austin, a British philosopher of language.

Glass Bead Game, Sartre's *Nausea*, Camus's *Stranger*'. *The Broom of the System* can be seen as an example of this 'INTERPRET-ME' fiction in that it quite clearly engages with the theories of Wittgenstein and drops his name throughout the text. For example, Gramma Beadsman is said to be an alumnus of Wittgenstein's classes and carries with her a copy of *Philosophical Investigations* (she can also be viewed as an analogue of Cora Diamond, Wittgenstein's real-life student and a subsequent philosopher). Much has been written about this engagement (see Boswell, Grassian, Hayes-Brady for more detail about the Wittgensteinian influence on *Broom*), but it would perhaps be more revealing to examine what Wallace calls the 'conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida, and presence and absence'.³⁸

When Wallace talks about the conversation between 'presence and absence', he is explicitly referencing Derrida's theory of *différance* (1963), which is neither a presence nor an absence but an interplay of differentiation (or 'spacing' in Derrida's words) that prevents a sign from having a self-enclosed identity.³⁹ Penelope Deutscher articulates this, writing, '*Différance* is the unresolved deferral of the identity one might have ascribed to a particular term [...] Meaning endlessly "differs", and any original presence of meaning is endlessly "deferred"'.⁴⁰ This creates problems when looking at *The Broom of the System* as purely a novel that can be interpreted through a Wittgensteinian lens, because it creates a conflict within the novel between Derrida's ideas and Wittgenstein's later theories that 'the meaning of a word is its use within language. And the *meaning* of a name is

³⁸ Lipsky, p. 35.

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 1-28. (p. 11).

⁴⁰ Deutscher, p. 31.

sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer*'.⁴¹ To Wittgenstein, meaning is derived not from an interplay of absences, but from the present and the practical. Wallace's 'conversation' between Derrida and Wittgenstein in *The Broom of the System* allows him to interrogate the implications both abstract and practical philosophy have on the lived experience of his characters, and to examine how these philosophies can both affirm and challenge solipsistic modes of living by focussing on the mutability of meaning. While it is not my intention to undertake a strictly Derridean reading of *The Broom of the System* here, it is useful to examine the ways in which Wallace attempts to represent Derridean theory in a fictional context.

An example of this is in the novel's two Lenores, Gramma and the protagonist. The main conflict in the novel is of the protagonist Lenore's struggle to define herself when her identity seems to be inextricably tied to her great-grandmother's. Yet, following her grandmother's own philosophical lead, she struggles with solipsistic conclusions. Gramma's absence from the narrative can be seen to be an attempt by Wallace to embody Derrida's *différance*. While Gramma is physically absent from the events of the novel, her character plays a vital role in understanding the novel. Derrida writes:

Now if *différance* is (and I also cross out the "is") what makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as such. It is never offered to a present. Or to anyone. Reserving itself, not exposing itself, in a regular fashion it exceeds the order of truth at a certain precise point, but without dissimulating itself as something, as a mysterious being, in the occult of a nonknowledge or in a hole with indeterminable borders.⁴²

⁴¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. p. 25. Wittgenstein's emphasis.

⁴² Derrida, 'Différance'. p. 6.

Derrida positions *différance* as an absence within language that creates the illusion, or effect, of presence, where Wallace positions the character of Gramma as an absence within the novel that creates the effect of presence through Lenore's relationship with both her as a person and her philosophical theories of language. Gramma controls the narrative with her absence, yet she does not expose herself or her techniques for instituting such a control. Her machinations are carried out not by her, but by others that surround her. For example, Doctor Jay's therapy is really a subversive tool, and it is implied that Mrs. Yingst dosed Lenore's cockatiel with the baby food. Any meaning that Gramma might bring to the novel is endlessly deferred, even at this final stage when it is merely subtextually hinted that she is hiding in the communication tunnels. This seeming revelation is merely met with Lenore's response, 'Hey' (*Broom*, p. 457).

Throughout the novel, Lenore defines herself through her grandmother's philosophical point of view, but this is only spurred by her grandmother's disappearance. Initially, Wallace describes how Gramma has left her 'notebooks, yellow and old, and her copy of the *Investigations*', suggesting that her absence bequeaths Lenore the apparatus to define meaning (*Broom*, p. 39). Lenore remembers how Gramma 'had the *Investigations* with her all the time', suggesting that it is Gramma's absence, her removal from her home and her identity, that allows Lenore to begin her own investigations into meaning and identity (*Broom*, p. 40). Yet, she is trapped in the hegemony of Gramma's ideas, specifically the idea that 'there is no such thing as extra-linguistic efficacy, extra linguistic *anything*' (*Broom*, p. 121. Wallace's emphasis). Through these ideas, Lenore begins to believe that she is nothing but a construct of language, isolated from anything 'real'.

In her article 'The Book, the Broom and the Ladder', Clare Hayes-Brady comments on the fact that the identities of Lenore and Gramma are intertwined. She writes, 'The doubling of Lenore's name [...] highlights the fact that her identity is undifferentiated, and her great-grandmother's disappearance provides her, in a roundabout way, with the means to assume her name'.⁴³ This reading stands up well in a Wittgensteinian sense, yet it is more complicated if we are to continue our investigation onto the Derridean role of Gramma. Looked at in a Wittgensteinian way, Gramma's absence makes way for Lenore's independent existence, yet looked at through the Derridean lens, both Gramma's shared name and her absence are part of a 'systematic play of differences' that simultaneously defer Gramma's identity and make up Lenore's.⁴⁴ In other words, according to Derrida's theory of *différance*, Lenore (who can be seen as a Derridean 'sign') cannot be autonomous from the network of absent meanings imposed by her great-grandmother. She is caught within the Derridean system and this prompts an inward-looking existential conundrum.

This goes some way in describing some of the influence Derrida had on *The Broom of the System*, and part of the role of 'presence and absence' in the novel, but it does not address Wallace's view that it is a 'conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida'. 'Conversation' is the important word in Wallace's view of the novel, and should be distinguished from 'argument' as many of Wittgenstein's and Derrida's theories can be seen to share a common intellectual space, even though much of their work diverges in focus and conclusion. Simon Glendenning writes that 'the kind of approach pursued by both Wittgenstein and Derrida constitutes a new "kink" in the history of philosophy that separates their

⁴³ Hayes-Brady, p. 26.

⁴⁴ Derrida, 'Différance'. p. 11.

writing from previous Western thought', leading to convergences in the way they deal with both past philosophies and a joint 'ideal of exactness' when attempting to articulate the unitary essence of the world through language and writing.⁴⁵

Both philosophers talk about language operating as a series of signs. For example, the word 'broom' is representative of the object used for sweeping, but cannot be said to be the actual object. Wittgenstein writes about this in the *Tractatus*:

- 2.1 We picture facts to ourselves.
- 2.11 A picture presents a situation in logical space, the existence and non-existence of states of affairs.
- 2.12 A picture is a model of reality.
- 2.13 In a picture objects have the elements of the picture corresponding to them.
- 2.131 In a picture the elements of the picture are the representatives of objects.
- 2.14 What constitutes a picture is that its elements are related to one another in a determinate way.
- 2.141 A picture is a fact.⁴⁶

Where Wittgenstein uses the word 'picture', Derrida takes the lead of Ferdinand de Saussure in using the word 'sign', but their theories show some similarities despite leading to different intellectual conclusions. Derrida writes:

The sign represents the presence in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. We take or give signs. We signal. The sign, in this sense, is a deferred presence.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Simon Glendenning, *On Being With Others: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida* (London: Routledge, 1998). p. 85.

⁴⁶ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. pp. 9-10.

⁴⁷ Derrida, 'Différance'. p. 9.

Initially they appear to share the notion that meaning lies in representation, either through a picture or a sign, and the words we use as signs have no direct relation to the object they are signifying. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida establishes his theory that all signs lead to other signs, caught up in an endless process of deferral and differentiation. Wittgenstein's early writing on solipsism at first appears to be similar to Derrida's notion that 'there is nothing outside the text', as he writes 'The world is *my* world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of *language* (of that language which alone I understand) means the limits of my world'.⁴⁸ Yet, in Derrida's theory, we experience 'reality' as a textual construct, our language reflecting this rather than any 'real' world, and therefore challenging Wittgenstein's notion that language can be the limit of the world at all. In other words, Wittgenstein presupposes that the 'world' is an origin of the secondary nature of language whereas Derrida views these origins as already rendered in rhetoric, and therefore only having the illusion of origin and the illusion of a stand-alone 'world'.

In both theories, the way we experience the world is inherently solipsistic as we can only experience it through the various constructs of language. So when Derrida says 'there is nothing outside the text', the text he refers to is everywhere, making up everything that can be experienced as it is necessarily experienced textually and denying any possibility of a world that can exist independently of the processes of man's rhetoric. Jaakko Hintikka writes that this is a different interpretation of solipsism, noting 'What is usually taken to be the claim of solipsism is the impossibility of getting "beyond the boundaries of myself"'. Wittgenstein's solipsism is based on the exactly opposite claim that all ordinary

⁴⁸ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. p. 68. Wittgenstein's emphasis.

boundaries of myself are completely *contingent* and hence irrelevant “for what is higher”.”⁴⁹ Derrida, on the other hand, attempts to break the solipsistic loop that can be seen in Wittgenstein’s work, and arguably in his own. One of the ways in which he does this is to alter the existing hierarchical relationship between spoken language and writing in an attempt to allow the language to function in the absence of ‘sender’ or ‘receiver’. If, as both Wittgenstein and Derrida say in different ways, for a word to ‘be’ is for it to ‘be used’, then writing can function in ‘the absence of the current presence of its user or its current context of use’.⁵⁰

Wittgenstein’s later work in *Philosophical Investigations* moves away from the idea that these signs only gain their meaning through a complex and unutterable process of representation. He begins to discuss his theory of *Übersicht*, translated as ‘surveyable representation’:

122. A main source of our failure to understand is that we don’t have *an overview* of the use of words. – Our grammar is deficient in surveyability. A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate links*.

The concept of a surveyable representation is of fundamental significance for us. It characterizes the way we represent things, how we look at matters.⁵¹

He goes on to say that ‘whatever may be hidden is of no interest to us’.⁵² For the later Wittgenstein, clarity is vital, and revealing the multiple uses of words and sentences and the clear connections between them is important. Unlike Derrida’s belief that meaning is derived from an invisible, unutterable and endless series of deferring and differentiation, of absence that implies a presence, Wittgenstein

⁴⁹ Jaakko Hintikka, ‘On Wittgenstein’s Solipsism’, *Mind*, 67.265 (1958), 88-91. (p. 91). Hintikka’s emphasis.

⁵⁰ Simon Glendenning, *Derrida: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). p. 72.

⁵¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. pp. 54-55. Wittgenstein’s emphasis.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 55.

believes that meaning is tied to the uses of words, and the connections between those uses. He believes he can illuminate his thoughts through a series of language games, which show the differing uses of words within the language. For Wallace, Wittgenstein's work in the *Philosophical Investigations* highlighted the communicative power of language and represented a different way to escape solipsistic thinking in the theory of language, and unlike both Wittgenstein's and Derrida's theories, Wallace attempts to show his thinking in a different light by applying it to everyday lived, albeit fictional, experience. As Marshall Boswell notes, Wallace does this by using Wittgenstein's theories of language games: 'A language game in Wittgenstein must be played by more than one participant, whereas "play" in Derrida is a dynamic property of language itself'.⁵³ While Boswell's reading is valid, he stops short of offering any clear examples of how Wallace is directly discussing this in the novel. He does so explicitly, when Lenore travels to Amherst to visit her brother, LaVache. It is clear that LaVache is comfortable with the theories in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and he uses them to attempt to combat solipsism. He is at home with the mutable meanings of words depending on how they are used in Wittgensteinian language games. For example, his phone is referred to as a 'lymph node' so he can avoid telling his father that he is contactable and his numerous nicknames help him clarify his own meaning. He says, 'as the Antichrist I just am [...]. As the Antichrist I have a thing, and it's gloriously clear where I leave off and others start' (*Broom*, p. 250). His analysis of the antinomy of the barber who shaves all who do not shave themselves (or, as it's also known, the Russell Paradox, named after Bertrand) is particularly telling. He says, 'Because in this game, the way we're

⁵³ Boswell, p. 30.

playing, the barber drawing means don't think about yourself, in the context of the game, or your head explodes into art deco. Just think about other people if you want to play'. He continues:

You can't think of your own act of thinking-of, any more than a blade can cut itself, right? [...] So, we can't think of ourselves, if all we are is the act of thinking. So we're like the barber. The barber, if I recall, shaves all and only those who do not shave themselves. Here Lenore [i.e. Gramma] thinks we think all and only those things which do not think themselves, which aren't the act of our thought, which are Other (*Broom*, pp. 246-247).

This shows Wallace trying to work out a way to bypass solipsistic abstract thinking by utilising Wittgensteinian language games that demand an outward, collaborative view. James Ryerson notes that Wallace was 'perpetually on guard against the ways that abstract thinking (especially thinking about your own thinking) can draw you away from something more genuine and real'.⁵⁴

Yet, even though LaVache is the novel's anti-solipsist, Wallace's dealing with *Philosophical Investigations* is slightly massaged to fit with his theme of overcoming solipsism. The Wittgensteinian language games that LaVache so skilfully deploys may connect us with each other on a linguistic plane, but these language games also present a problem. As Ryerson articulates:

Because all language and thought take place inside some language game or other, there is no transcendent, non-language-game standpoint from which you could step back, as it were, and see if any language game is better than any other – if one of them, for instance, does a better job of mirroring reality'.⁵⁵

We are once again trapped within language and cannot transcend it to connect with an outside world. Wallace's remedy for this lies in the character of Rick, the

⁵⁴ Ryerson, p. 1.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 30.

only character that Wallace allows to truly transcend such boundaries. The final line has been much discussed as a kind of philosophical joke, but in ending the novel with a silence Wallace frees Rick from Derrida's endless play of deferral and differentiation, and Wittgenstein's linguistic constructs, allowing both the text and Rick to become unenclosed, exposed to what lies outside. The only solution to the solipsism forced upon us by this philosophical thought, Wallace suggests, is silence.

The Broom of the System can be seen as the very first attempt by Wallace to establish a way of thinking that challenges self-reflexivity. As he moves on in his career, he begins blending this philosophical insight with literary and cultural theories, moving away from the logical, abstract theories of Wittgenstein and Derrida, towards a system of thought of his own creating, one that establishes a moral agenda. As such, he departs from writing 'INTERPRET-ME' novels to incorporate his philosophical thinking into more moral-based narratives.

Beyond The Broom: The Beginning of Wallace's Moral Agenda

Just as Wallace's fiction developed from being heavily influenced by postmodern techniques and games, Wallace's dealing with the philosophical implications of solipsism evolved from the semantic- and logic-based inquiry of his early academic work and fiction to establishing moral, socially-based solutions. This shift is key in Wallace's establishing of anti-traditional modes of expression in his fiction.

A good example of the beginnings of this shift lies in the novella 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way', notable for blending literary theory with

philosophy in order to set out a manifesto for the anti-traditional direction Wallace wanted to take his writing. Like *The Broom of the System* it can be considered a work of 'INTERPRET-ME' fiction, and this thesis has already discussed how it uses the influence of John Barth explicitly throughout the text. What I will examine now is not the challenge to literary postmodernism, but the philosophical underpinnings of the novella, and how Wallace deploys them in order to distance himself from writing in established traditions and begin constructing possible ways to challenge solipsism.

In addition to the influence of Barth, there are other ways 'Westward...' can be viewed as a piece of 'INTERPRET-ME' fiction, according to Wallace's own criteria of fiction that:

clues the critical reader in on what the book's to be seen as on a tertiary level to be "about": the title: *Ulysses*' title, its structure as Odyssean/Telemachean map (succeeds); R. Goldstein's *The Mind-Body Problem* (really terrible); Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (succeeds exactly to the extent one ignores the invitation to hop around in it); Burroughs's *Queer* and *Junkie* (fail successfully (?)). W/r/t novels like these it's often hard to see the differences between a title and an epigraph, except for quotidian facts like the latter's longer, overter and attributed ('Plenum', 218).

The title of 'Westward' can fit with what Wallace says here about the similarity between the title and the epigraph. The novella's unattributed epigraph-style title comes from the Irish philosopher George Berkeley's poem 'Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America' (1752). The final stanza of Berkeley's poem reads:

Westward the course of empire takes its way;
The first four acts already past,
A fifth shall close the drama with the day;

Time's noblest Offspring is the last.⁵⁶

The line Wallace uses for his title was also used by the painter Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze in 1891; his famous painting depicting the romantic scene of intrepid settlers crossing a rocky outcrop towards the plains of the west hangs in the Capitol, Washington D.C. Philip Coleman also notices this, writing that Wallace's text can be 'said to parody' Leutze's painting in the fractured and indirect journey the protagonists take towards the town of Collision, but 'Berkeley's poem signals the larger historical backdrop against which the novella is sketched' involving 'a context of ideas about the meaning of "America" and "Americanness" that precedes the representations of the nineteenth century notion of "Manifest Destiny" in Leutze's mural and includes much earlier projections of the American self and its possibilities for future development (if not its demise)'.⁵⁷ In terms of Wallace's use of the title, it can be viewed literally, as the characters move west towards their destination, but also it can be viewed as Wallace's comment on the need for American literature to develop past what 'lies behind us there fouled, soiled, used up, East' and a further comment on the taming of the American frontier with commercial interests ('Westward', p. 355).

Yet, there is more intrigue in Wallace's choice of Berkeley for his epigraph-style title. As a philosopher, Berkeley was an arch empiricist extending his view that all human knowledge comes from sense-experience to his theory of *esse* (to be) is *percipi* (to be perceived), also called immaterialism. Berkeley's theories can be seen to be inextricably tied to the notion of solipsism, something that Wallace

⁵⁶ George Berkeley, 'Verses by the Author, on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America', in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. by Kenneth P. Winkler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 405-406. (p. 405). I am indebted to Philip Coleman and his essay 'Consider Berkeley & Co.: Reading Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way' for pointing me in this direction.

⁵⁷ Philip Coleman, 'Consider Berkeley & Co.: Reading "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way"', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 62-74. (p. 66).

notices in his essay 'Getting Away from Already Pretty Much Being Away from It All' (1993), when he describes his childhood self, with 'radical delusive self-centeredness' and 'the sort of regally innocent solipsism of like Bishop Berkeley's God'. Looking closely at this description of his childhood 'delusive self-centeredness' reveals Wallace's engagement with the philosophical thought of Berkeley. Earlier in the same paragraph, he writes:

Does anybody else identify with this memory? The child leaves the room, and now everything in that room, once he's no longer there to see it, melts away into some void of potential or else (my personal childhood theory) is trundled away by occult adults and stored until the child's reentry into the room recalls it all back into animate service ('Getting Away', p. 89).

This can be seen as a re-appropriation of Berkeley's theory of immaterialism, which states:

That neither our thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by the imagination, exist without the mind, is what everybody will allow. And it seems no less evident that the various sensations or ideas imprinted on the sense, however blended or combined together (that is, whatever objects they compose) cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them [...]. For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.⁵⁸

Wallace's links to Berkeley's theories stretch further than this one passage, and are particularly evident in *Everything and More* (2003), Wallace's history of infinity. He writes of Berkeley's 'critique of classic calc' that it is 'in some ways Christianity's return-raspberry to Galileo and modern science'.⁵⁹ In both his

⁵⁸ George Berkeley, 'A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge', in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Desmond M. Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 67-150. (pp. 83-84).

⁵⁹ David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003). p. 138.

philosophy and his mathematics, Berkeley emphasises the importance of individual faith in the abstract, usually referring back to God. The allusive title of 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' points towards Berkeley, but it is the first of the actual epigraphs that guide us further. It reads, 'As we are all solipsists, and all die, the world dies with us. Only very minor literature aims at apocalypse' ('Westward', p. 232). This is a quotation constructed from two separate sentences in Anthony Burgess' essay 'Endtime' (1986). In the essay, Burgess hints at his own Berkeleyan thinking in the direct continuation of the first sentence of Wallace's epigraph. He writes,

As we are all solipsists, and all die, the world dies with us. Of course, we suspect that our relicts are going to live on, though we have no proof of it, and there is a possibility, again unprovable, that the sun will heartlessly rise the morning after we have become disposable morphology.⁶⁰

This Burgess quotation helps to articulate why Wallace used Berkeley's poetic line as his title, but also points us towards further understanding Wallace's interaction with the philosophical implications of solipsism in his novella. With 'Westward' he further develops some of his ideas that took genesis in *The Broom of the System*. Berkeley is important to this understanding because his theories of immaterialism and idealism force a solipsistic vision on human experience in a way that does not view solipsism as a problem to be solved, but as a necessary viewpoint for experiencing the world. Wallace's general critique of solipsism in 'Westward' is overt, particularly in the depictions of the characters that are tied to postmodernism. D.L., the self-confessed postmodernist, is initially described as having 'a kind of stinginess about how much of herself she'd extend to the space

⁶⁰ Anthony Burgess, 'Endtime', in *Homage to Qwert Yuiop* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), pp. 12-16. (pp.12-13).

around her' and also seeming 'greedy and self-serving' to those around her ('Westward', pp. 233-234). Wallace also launches a direct criticism of the solipsistic nature of postmodern metafiction:

It's the act of a lonely solipsist's self-love, a night-light on the black fifth wall of being a subject, a face in the crowd. It's lovers not being lovers. Kissing their own spine. Fucking themselves. True, there are some gifted old contortionists out there. Ambrose and Robbe-Grillet and McElroy and Barthelme can fuck themselves awfully well ('Westward', p. 332).

For Wallace, solipsism is dangerously tied to the postmodern, particularly the mainstreaming of postmodern ideas in the late-twentieth century.

George Berkeley's theories are classified as solipsistic by all of his critics and commentators, dealing with ideas of role of the human mind in creating the reality that surrounds it. Objects exist because they are perceived by a human mind, and if we are to posit that an object exists independently from this finite human perception, then they must 'subsist in the mind of some eternal spirit: it being perfectly unintelligible and involving all the absurdity of abstraction, to attribute to any single part of them an existence independent of a spirit'.⁶¹ This idea is dramatised in Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as, post-apocalypse, the world only exists through the subjective perception of one person, making street names and the like mutable as they are not being viewed by two or more subjective minds (thus reality itself is mutable in Berkeley's vision). Denis Grey articulates Berkeley's vision that human knowledge is impossible unless 'two minds, A and B, can perceive the same object – i.e. that there shall be a public and neutral object which is accessible to both percipients' and if this cannot be satisfied, then 'A and B are each enclosed in the solipsistic cycle of their own

⁶¹ Berkeley, 'A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge'. p. 85.

ideas'.⁶² Wallace's view of metafiction is that it is a closed circuit, and in order to overcome this, there must be a reaffirmation that fiction is 'a living transaction between humans'.⁶³ Wallace's invocation of Berkeley, however, leads to more complex ground.

Along with immaterialism, Berkeley firmly believed in philosophical idealism, the belief that objects of knowledge are reliant on the activity of the mind. In this way immaterialism and idealism overlap frequently, with their basis on the human mind's importance when it comes to experiencing the sensible world around us.

Throughout the narrative of 'Westward', characters are seen to be digesting rose petals that have been fried in lard. This can be explored in Berkeleyan terms, as his philosophy deals with signs and the abstract nature of imagination. In *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley too uses the image of the rose to explain his theory of abstraction, and the limits of such abstraction to experience 'reality'. He writes:

For my part I might as easily divide a thing from itself. I may indeed divide in my thoughts or conceive apart from each other those things which, perhaps, I never perceived by sense so divided. Thus I imagine the trunk of a human body without the limbs, or conceive the smell of a rose without thinking of the rose itself [...] But my conceiving or imagining power does not extend beyond the possibility of real existence or perception.⁶⁴

The fried rose petals in 'Westward' can be seen as abstractions of the rose in a literal sense. They are unrecognisable as the flower we imagine connected to the name 'rose'. The process of frying 'divides' the roses from their essential form, removing their beauty. That the roses are said to be 'beheaded' also dramatizes this division. Wallace literalises Berkeley's theory of immaterialism as, for the

⁶² Denis Grey, 'The Solipsism of Bishop Berkeley', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 2.9 (1952), 338-349. (p. 342).

⁶³ McCaffery, p. 41.

⁶⁴ Berkeley, 'A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge'. pp. 84-85.

characters, the roses only have real value once they are processed and consumed, much as Berkeley's world only has real value if it is perceived by the individual, or at least imagined. The roses therefore are engines of solipsism, inspiring a desire to bring the exterior world inside. J.D. Steelritter, the inventor of the roses, reveals his opinion of them when he says, 'They're just symbols. They're about as subtle as a brick, for Christ's sake' ('Westward', p. 388). Berkeley has a complex view of signs and symbols, saying that these signs in the language, or 'names' do not always communicate their meaning because of their abstract nature. He writes:

in reading and discourse, names being for the most part used as letters in algebra, in which though a particular quantity be marked by each letter, yet to proceed right it is not requisite that in every step each letter suggests to our thoughts that particular quantity it was appointed to stand for'.⁶⁵

Steelritter, as an advertising executive, wants to overcome abstraction just like Berkeley does. His job is the communication of ideas through imagery and symbols, and the notion that these abstract symbols do not always transmit their 'quantity' to his audience does damage to his firm outlook. He is troubled by Mark eating the roses because the adman's symbol has been rendered powerless, unable to communicate an idea because the digestion of the sign in the gut bypasses the necessary mind-dependent interpretation. As Kenneth P. Winkler writes of Berkeley's philosophy:

ideas of sense are, by nature, not mind-dependent signs, but mind-dependent *objects* of signs. Although they are, by divine appointment, arbitrary signs of other ideas of sense [...] they are not compulsory signs of

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 79.

anything. They are instead, the inevitable *objects* of corresponding ideas of imagination'.⁶⁶

In Berkeley's view, the mind is vital for both perceiving and understanding the world around us, and Steelritter recognises this as his symbols are being processed through the gut rather than the mind. He says, 'You *don't* put what's beautiful inside you, as fuel, when the whole reason it's beautiful is that it's outside you. Supposedly certain things are in the world. To see. Not to chew up and swallow and expel' ('Westward', p. 339). His discomfort may also come from the fact that people have begun to consume the tools that are necessary to stimulate consumption. In advertising, existence relies on being perceived, just as Berkeley's theories suggest. If the tools necessary for the trade (the symbols) are themselves consumed in the wrong way, that perception, and therefore the *raison d'être* of the commercial, is lost.

To puncture this Berkeleyn view of immaterialism in the story, Wallace has created the character of Magda Ambrose-Gatz, who could quite possibly be Ambrose, Mark's teacher and the Barth analogue, in disguise. Wallace describes her, 'Maybe because she's never, never once, been made to be anything other than what other's see, Magda Ambrose-Gatz has vast untapped resources of virtue and smarts and all-around balls' ('Westward', p. 353). Magda's real self is different from the one imposed on her by others' perception, her existence is limited because of the identity people have created in their finite minds. She belies Berkeleyn solipsism, and has the ability to turn her gaze outward, which is something the other characters can't do. Wallace writes, 'She can see. She can

⁶⁶ Kenneth P. Winkler, 'Berkeley and the Doctrine of Signs', in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. by Kenneth P. Winkler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 125-165. (p. 152). Winkler's emphasis.

spread the whole outside flat, inside, throw the kind of colourless cards that reveal what cannot change' ('Westward', p. 353).

Through the motivations of Magda, Mark manages to write a story that attempts to move beyond the self-reflexive nature of postmodern metafiction, but this also leads to a metatextual final paragraph, that seems to move out of the limits of the narrative to address something bigger that could help explain the beginnings of Wallace's system of thought that he develops in later work. He writes:

See this thing. See inside what spins with no purchase. Close your eye. 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 engines' noise. Jesus, Sweets, *listen*. Hear it? It's a love song.

For Whom?

You are loved ('Westward', p. 373).

This can be seen as a first attempt to articulate a system of thought that concentrates on the human goodness in attention and love. It can be seen as a plea to abandon the solipsistic, cerebral nature of abstractism in both philosophy and fiction, to break the cyclical loops that this sort of thinking can impose, to move away from the fiercely logical and analytical approaches to philosophy towards something that attempts to pragmatically articulate moral ways to live within a modern world. In this respect, 'Westward...' can be seen as the work of an author testing the water, drawing a philosophical blue print for what would be his major work, *Infinite Jest*.

Conclusion

It is clear that, in his early work, Wallace was investigating the philosophy of communication and transmission, something which is closely paralleled to his scrutiny of postmodern methods of expression. The language theories of Wittgenstein and Derrida in particular help this interrogation of postmodern literary expression as they help open up a discussion of literary realism. If part of the greater postmodern project was to examine possibilities of realistic expression, such as the honesty about mediated narration that metafiction offers, Wallace attempts to use philosophy in his early fiction to represent reality in a way that avoids self-reflexivity. As Clare Hayes-Brady writes, 'Using the tenets of mutable language, Wallace was able to engineer a new and richer form of realism, a sort of liberal ironist's literature, which was at home with its own limitations. By embracing contingency, Wallace was able to represent the felt reality of the world in a new way'.⁶⁷

Beyond *The Broom of the System*, Wallace's use of philosophy develops to include interrogations of the nature of solipsism, specifically how it applies to fictive expression. While 'Westward' can be seen as a major statement of Wallace's literary intentions, it can also be seen as a developmental stepping-stone to his larger examinations of solipsism as a moral concern in quotidian life in his later fiction. Yet, one thing remains constant in Wallace's use of philosophy; the necessity of such systems of thought, whether analytical or moral, to be used in a pragmatic sense, or to be able to help locate perceived truths about contemporary

⁶⁷ Hayes-Brady, p. 35.

experience. This idea is further strengthened by his work in *Infinite Jest*, and will be interrogated further in Chapter Six.

Chapter Four

The Gathering of a Force: The Literary Influence in *Infinite Jest*

'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' clearly defines the direction Wallace would take for his next major work, and can be seen as a blueprint for many of the thematic ideas in *Infinite Jest*. 'Westward' establishes a theoretical divergence from the work of the high postmodernists, such as Barth, Barthelme and other authors that Wallace has previously designated 'talented old contortionists', while *Infinite Jest* begins to develop a new language of sincerity that Wallace deemed absent from the more *avant garde* postmodern works ('Westward', p. 332). Wallace's second novel uses literary influence and allusion to adopt and mutate established devices and themes (such as metafiction, ironic rhetoric and the language of postmodern play) in order to create what Barth would call a 'literature of replenishment'. The allusions in the novel range from the obvious (the novel can be viewed as a mutated retelling of *Hamlet*, as indicated by its title), to the more covert, from works of European moralism, to the work of Wallace's immediate predecessors. This section will examine how Wallace uses literary allusion and attempt to assess the results of such use. I will be using Wallace's connection with the work of Don DeLillo as a focus of my examinations as DeLillo's fiction provides both thematic and structural foundations to much of *Infinite Jest*.

The Shadow of DeLillo: Literary Allusion in *Infinite Jest*

Infinite Jest can be seen as a novel that is constructed on a tissue of allusions to various different literary (and other cultural) works, and it is important to understand the technical process of allusion in order to determine why Wallace has approached writing his novel in this way. According to Christopher Ricks, to use allusion is:

necessarily to do something about the burden of the past; for to allude to a predecessor is both to acknowledge, in piety, a previous achievement and also is a form of benign appropriation – what was so well said has now become a part of my way of saying, and in advancing the claims of a predecessor (and rotating them so they catch a new light) the poet is advancing his own claims, his own poetry, and even poetry.¹

While Ricks is specifically writing about the poet as heir to a poetic tradition, the same can be applied to the novelist who is operating in the same environment of literary cross-pollination. While in ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way’ Wallace is alluding to the work of his postmodern forefathers, he is doing so in order to critique their work and challenge their ideas. It can be seen in *Infinite Jest* that Wallace is alluding to other literary works for reasons other than to critique. In Ricks’ words, Wallace is ‘advancing the claims’ of some of his predecessors in *Infinite Jest*, adopting their themes and devices through allusion in order to further them with his own creative process. The most prominent example of this is the interplay between Wallace’s novel and the previous work of Don DeLillo.

¹ Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). p. 33.

It is well documented that DeLillo's work has been an influence on Wallace, and the two writers engaged in correspondence for many years. However, the debt that *Infinite Jest* owes to DeLillo's fiction has not been widely or thoroughly explored. It is perhaps not sufficient to merely acknowledge DeLillo's immediate influence on Wallace when there are such strong thematic and structural connections between the two writers' work. In particular, it is useful to note Wallace's use of structural systems in which he echoes DeLillo's interest in the cost of human exposure to a surplus of information, whether recursive systems of language, communication or, in the case of *End Zone* (1972), violence.

End Zone tells the story of Gary Harkness, a college football player who is undergoing an existential crisis, a crisis that has made him drop out of several prestigious colleges and forced him to take a scholarship at the tiny, portentously named Logos College in West Texas. Throughout the novel, Harkness meditates on his obsession with nuclear holocaust until eventually the violent images blend with his discussions of football and its various rules of engagement.

The most overt allusion is the game of 'Eschaton', which reflects chapter 29 of *End Zone* in several ways. DeLillo's chapter involves the protagonist, Gary Harkness, playing a war game with the Air Force ROTC commander, Major Staley. While the chapter is short, much shorter than Wallace's war games section, it can be seen to provide a basis for Wallace's narrative. This is intentional on Wallace's part, and he references *End Zone*'s influence in several unpublished documents. For example, the original coversheet that accompanied the first draft of *Infinite Jest* that Wallace sent to his publisher (titled, 'PRIVATE DOCUMENT: INTENDED ONLY FOR RETINAS OF PEOPLE TO WHOM IT'S EXPLICITLY SENT') contains a detailed bibliography for the Eschaton scene:

(3) Mss. pp.146-167, 'Eschaton,' makes use of the following sources:
 Howard Anton's Calculus With Analytical Geometry (Wiley & Sons, 1980)
 R.B. Braithwaite's Theory of Games as a Tool for the Moral Philosopher
 (Cambridge University Press, 1969)
 Don DeLillo's End Zone (Houghton Mifflin, 1972)
 General Sir John Hackett's The Third World War: August 1985 (Macmillan, 1979)
 John Nash's 'Two Person Cooperative Games' in Econometrica, vol. 21, 1953
 Howard Raiffa's 'Calculus of Collaboration' in Contributions to the Theory of Games, vol. 2, eds. H.W. Kuhn and A.W. Tucker ('Annals of Mathematics Studies,' No. 28, Princeton University Press, 1958).²

Additionally, Wallace notes the importance of *End Zone*'s influence in a letter to DeLillo written during the composition of *Infinite Jest*. He writes, 'it seems rather a lot of your voices and constructions, as with Puig's and Paz's, hang around in my head and get mixed up with other experiences and ideas and voices, etc [...] E.g., part of a long thing I'm in the middle of has a section that I've gone back and seen owes a rather uncomfortable debt to certain exchanges between Gary Harkness and Major Staley in *End Zone*'.³ In a subsequent letter he clarifies that 'The relevant [H&S] exchange is in Chapter 29, which in my old Pocket paperback is pp. 180-185'.⁴

The Major's rules for the game and the jargon he uses mirror *Infinite Jest*'s scenes. For example, each game commences with an imagined situation that in both cases uses the same language. DeLillo writes:

It begins in the sea of Japan. An AMAC destroyer of the Seventh Fleet, on maneuvers, is strafed by two NORKOR MiGs. Damage is light; there are no casualties. Two days later a Polaris submarine in the Eastern Siberian Sea

² Harry Ransom Center, David Foster Wallace: An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center, 'First two sections,' Typescript drafts and Photocopy, fols. 16.1-6.

³ HRC, Don DeLillo: A Preliminary Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Untitled Letter Dated 11/6/92, fol. 101.10

⁴ HRC, Don DeLillo: A Preliminary Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Untitled Letter Dated 15/7/92, fol. 101.10.

is reported missing. In Germany three high-ranking agents defect to the West; unmarked planes drop leaflets over East Berlin, over Prague, over Budapest. There are a dozen explosions of suspicious origin at military bases throughout Spain and Turkey. An unmanned AMAC intelligence plane is downed by COMCHIN missiles in the Formosa Strait.⁵

This carries on in the same vein for another page before the game starts proper.

Wallace's imaginary pre-game situation report is as follows:

A Russo-Chinese border dispute goes tactical over Sinkiang. An AMNAT computracker in the Aleutians misreads a flight of geese as three SOVWAR SS10s on re-entry. Israel moves armored divisions north and east through Jordan after an El Al airbus is bombed in mid-flight by a cell linked to both H'sseins. Black Albertan wackos infiltrate an isolated silo at Ft. Chimo and get two MIRVs through SOUTHAF's defense net. North Korea invades South Korea. Vice versa. AMNAT is within 72 hours of putting an impregnable string of anti missile satellites on line, and the remorseless logic of game theory compels SOVWAR to go SACPOP while it still has the chance.⁶

From here both Wallace's and DeLillo's war games continue, but Wallace's allusion, incorporating many of the aspects from DeLillo, expands and twists the themes for his own use. While Wallace worries that the allusion to *End Zone* may be 'potentially piratical' and writes to DeLillo in order to show 'the Sicilian-type Respect of the prenominate gesture', he avoids any accusations of plagiarism.⁷ Ricks clarifies this difference between plagiarism and allusion, stating 'the alluder hopes that the reader will recognize something, the plagiarist that the reader will not'.⁸ Wallace's uses of *End Zone* in *Infinite Jest* are intended to be seen by the reader for a variety of reasons.

End Zone, DeLillo says, is not 'about football. It's a fairly elusive novel. It seems to me to be about extreme places and extreme states of mind, more than

⁵ Don DeLillo, *End Zone* (London: Picador, 2011). p. 211.

⁶ David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1997). p. 325.

⁷ HRC, DeLillo Inventory, *Untitled Letter Dated 15/7/92*, fol. 101.10.

⁸ Ricks, p. 1.

anything else'.⁹ Indeed, the football players are prone to behaviour that evokes a violent extremism. For example, Harkness describes a time when the players of the football team 'started playing a game called Bang You're Dead', where someone would mimic a gun with their fingers and make the appropriate sound. 'The other person clutches a vital area of his body and then falls, simulating death. (Never mere injury; always death)'.¹⁰ This is the first instance of violence and war being associated with a game, but the examples become more extreme throughout the novel, eventually culminating in the war game Harkness plays with the Major. Football itself becomes warlike and violent in the novel, even as a friendly game of touch football in the snow has its rules redefined again and again so its low-contact nature becomes merely 'primal impact'.¹¹ Despite the cold, the players carry on with an increasingly violent game:

We kept playing, we kept hitting, and we were comforted by the noise and brunt of our bodies in contact, by the simple physical warmth generated through violent action, by the sight of each other, the torn clothing, the bruises and scratches, the wildness of all fourteen, numb, purple, coughing, white heads solemn in the healing snow.¹²

But these brutish athletes do not represent the anti-intellectualism often associated with sport, rather they 'seem to spend all their waking hours in one kind of cerebration or another', not least Harkness himself.¹³ Here, *Infinite Jest* can be seen to allude to, and play out from, many aspects of DeLillo's novel, namely the academic athleticism and the cerebral nature of the players, but also the violence of the associated sports: the brute force of DeLillo's football and the attrition-war of

⁹ Anthony DeCurtis, "'An Outsider in This Society': An Interview with Don DeLillo", in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. by Frank Lentricchia (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 43-66. (p. 57).

¹⁰ DeLillo, *End Zone*. p. 30.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 186.

¹² Ibid. p. 187.

¹³ Cowart, p. 19.

Wallace's tennis. The analogy between sport/games and violence is clear to see in both novels. Even with Wallace's use of the more stately non-contact sport of tennis, the players use violent language when talking about the game. Jim Troeltsch's commentary shows the lurid use of this language:

LaMont Chu disembowelled Charles Pospisilova 6-3, 6-2; Jeff Penn was on Nate Millis-Johnson like a duck on a Junebug 6-4, 6-7,6-0; [...] Idris Arslanian ground his heel into the neck of David Wiere 6-1, 6-4 and P.W.'s 5-man R. Greg Chubb had to just about be carried off over someone's shoulder after Todd Possalthwaite moonballed him into a narcoleptic coma 4-6, 6-4, 7-5 (*Jest*, p. 309).

As Troeltsch's commentary continues, he begins to use warlike imagery, stating 'Felicity Zweig went absolutely SACPOP on P.W.'s Kiki Pfefferblit' (*Jest*, p. 310). In both novels, the violent imagery of the sport eventually leads to analogy between the game and war, in both cases literalised by the depictions of war games being played by the characters. Yet, the violent language used becomes arbitrary, ceasing to refer to the action it describes. In Troeltsch's commentary Todd Possalthwaite seems to have 'moonballed' his opponent, yet the score tells a different story. It's a very close game, with Greg Chubb actually winning a set. Harkness is similarly seduced by the language of violence, particularly that of nuclear war: 'I became fascinated by words and phrases like thermal hurricane, overkill, circular error probability, post attack environment, stark deterrence, dose-rate contours, kill-ratio, spasm war. Pleasure in these words'.¹⁴ Harkness has already admitted that the meaning of certain words has faded for him, saying, 'It was a sinister thing to discover at such an age, that words can escape their meanings'.¹⁵ Harkness has become seduced by the language of violence, but the

¹⁴ DeLillo, *End Zone*. pp. 20-21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 17.

meaning of the words is arbitrary, just as Troeltsch's commentary is preoccupied with violent imagery without any sense of the meaning of the words. There is an implication that violence is inherent in masculine American society in both the novels, and the language of that violence has a dehumanising effect. James R. Giles writes, 'Language is, after all, the essential route to consciousness, and in the male, violence has appropriated language itself, thus blocking any meaningful introspection about the origins and consequences of violence'.¹⁶ In trying to understand violence, both Harkness and the tennis cadets (lead by rule-master Pemulis) try to impose a system of rules on the chaos of war, yet the language used creates a simulation and blocks any understanding of the consequences of the violence to which it refers. Charles Molesworth indicates that this is indicative of the 'systems novel', writing that it is 'a genre in which a surplus of information becomes the chief threat to modern life and the perfectly expressive simulacrum of it. The welter of languages, the collage of scenic juxtapositions, the affectlessness of characters, and the constant use of lists are all stylistic markers of this genre'.¹⁷

The idea of the 'systems novel' was pioneered by Tom LeClair in his books *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1987) and *The Art of Excess* (1989). LeClair's theory uses Ludwig von Bertalanffy's scientific theory that open systems, or abstract mathematical models, rather than mechanistic thinking was more efficacious in analysing the 'problems of order, organization, wholeness, [and] teleology'.¹⁸ In applying this theory to literature, LeClair notes:

¹⁶ James R. Giles, *The Spaces of Violence* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006). p. 95.

¹⁷ Charles Molesworth, 'Don DeLillo's Perfect Starry Night', in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. by Frank Lentricchia (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 143-156. (p. 151).

¹⁸ Tom LeClair, *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989). p. 7. LeClair is quoting Ludwig von Bertalanffy's *General Systems Theory* (1968) here.

It is as systems of information that the [systems] novels master – comprehend, represent, and critique – the world, for the world, as systems theorists recognize, is largely composed of huge systems of information, both ideological and institutional, that exert power over individuals and their groups'.¹⁹

He goes on to say that systems novels attack 'patriarchal mastery, monotheism, instrumental mechanism, statist imperialism and totalitarianism, monopolistic capitalism, consensus politics, industrial growth, and an alienated consumerism of objects, entertainment, and information – a cultural system of waste'.²⁰ Both novelists depict characters who are both entrapped by these systems, but who also try to impose their own systems on the chaos of the world around them. The war games in *End Zone* and *Infinite Jest* are good examples of this.

As I have previously said, Wallace's Eschaton is an allusion to the war game played by Harkness and Major Staley, but Wallace's version of the game leads to a different conclusion, mutating DeLillo's original theme. In *End Zone*, the war game leads to contemplation and a quiet celebration of serious tactics. Harkness notes, 'There were insights, moves, minor revelations that we savoured together. Silences between moves were extremely grave. Talk was brief and pointed. Small personal victories (of tactics, of imagination) were genuinely satisfying. Mythic images raged in my mind'.²¹ Away from the violence of the gridiron, the images of war become stately and theoretical. Earlier in the novel, Staley claims that real nuclear war would be similarly restrained, saying 'You'd practically have a referee and a timekeeper. Then it would be over and you'd make

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 14.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 16.

²¹ DeLillo, *End Zone*. p. 213.

your damage assessment'.²² But DeLillo is using the notion of games to emphasise the destruction of war. As David Cowart writes:

one is played by rules and seldom results in death, the other only deceives itself with rules – and always results in death [...] the conceit of refereed violence misleads: the real thing does not allow for the resumption of “play” on the morrow, the first day of plague and nuclear winter.²³

Infinite Jest's war game begins with similar control. The rules are extremely complex and the aptly named Otis P. Lord referees the action. In a further strengthening of the perceived link between sport and war, the global battlefield is imagined onto actual tennis courts, and tennis equipment plays the part of launchers, warheads and targets. Eschaton transcends its definition as a game as all of the players relinquish the guiding rules and begin to submit to uncontrolled, language-less violence. Wallace's game, as Cowart says, 'only deceives itself with rules' and becomes to more closely represent actual conflict than the war game in DeLillo's book. In a culmination of the violence, the referee, Lord, is symbolically and spectacularly disposed of as he plummets head-first into the computer screen that contains the rules to the game.

Both novels seek to illustrate the duality between the systemic, rational person and the violent human being. As Cowart writes, DeLillo 'denies that human beings are rational creatures who sometimes descend into violence. Rather, he suggests, human beings are violent creatures for whom only exhaustion brings peace'.²⁴ It is heavily implied that part of Harkness' method for escaping his violent nature is an attempted suicide, complete erasure, in the final paragraph of the novel. In Wallace's allusion to *End Zone*, the systemic, academic pursuits of the

²² Ibid. p. 77.

²³ Cowart, p. 23.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 20.

E.T.A. students cannot shield them from the violence that is innate. For Harkness, the war game leads to rational thought and ‘mythic images’ through an adherence to the complex rules, whereas for the students at E.T.A. the war game unleashes their violent selves despite the complex rules of play. DeLillo explains his use of games in his fiction in similar terms:

Most games are carefully structured. They satisfy a sense of order and they even have an element of dignity about them [...] Games provide a frame in which we can try to be perfect. Within sixty-minute limits or one-hundred-yard limits or the limits of the game board, we can look for perfect moments or perfect structures. In my fiction I think this search sometimes turns out to be a cruel delusion.²⁵

Harkness achieves this type of perfection in the war game he plays with Staley, yet he does not seem to be comforted by this. Once the game is over he descends into a hunger strike (against what is uncertain). Wallace takes this idea of the transcendence of games and plays with it in a different way. The rules to Eschaton, similar to Staley’s rules, are complex, almost farcically so, and it takes a long footnote for Pemulis to describe them. They are cerebral rules using equations that are ‘fucking *elegant*’, but this only serves to emphasise Wallace’s mutation of DeLillo’s theme and LeClair’s idea that such systems help ‘master’ the world (*Jest*, n. 123, p. 1024. Wallace’s emphasis). Whereas DeLillo shows that the adherence to the rules leads to an epiphany of sorts for Harkness, Wallace shows that the rules, cerebral and complex though they are, are merely an illusion that cannot prevent humans’ violent nature from revealing itself. In his essay ‘The Work of Play in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*’, Mark Bresnan notes that the simulated game begins to bleed into the real world, despite Pemulis’ desire to

²⁵ Thomas LeClair, ‘An Interview with Don DeLillo’, in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. by Thomas DePietro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), pp. 3-15. (pp. 5-6).

keep the two separate. He writes, 'all sorts of "nonstrategic emotions" are aroused, and ironically, the melee that results is a much more accurate "simulation" of war than the game itself'.²⁶ The real sense of play that satisfies Harkness in the war game is the play of language, imagination and simulation which the complex rules help to facilitate. In this respect, Pemulis feels the same as Harkness: that the boundaries between real and imagined must be constant in order for the sense of play to flourish. When the boundaries break down, as they do in the snowbound football game or on the Eschaton map, play is smothered by the seriousness of real violence. This is emphasised by Coach Creed in *End Zone*, when, following the snowbound game, he says:

People stress the violence. That's the smallest part of it. Football is brutal only from a distance. In the middle of it there's a calm, a tranquillity [...]. There's a sense of order even at the end of a running play with bodies strewn everywhere. When the systems interlock, there's a satisfaction to the game that can't be duplicated. There's a harmony.²⁷

Conversely, the 'systems' in both novels are subject to emotional and violent human beings, for whom the structure of play cannot save them from their primal instincts. The systems of language that attempt to apply elegant order to violence in *End Zone* and *Infinite Jest* can also be viewed as a quest for meaning in a chaotic world, but both Wallace and DeLillo describe this quest as impossible. Both war game scenes end, in Molesworth's words, 'in a recognition that the quest for significance is futile', a trope that is common in many of DeLillo's novels.²⁸

These scenes of violence and simulated war are not the only allusions to *End Zone* in Wallace's novel, and further examination reveals a more complex

²⁶ Mark Bresnan, 'The Work of Play in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Critique*, 50.1 (2008), 51-68. (p. 62).

²⁷ DeLillo, *End Zone*. p. 190.

²⁸ Molesworth, p. 156.

relation between the two books. Wallace's tennis academy can be seen as analogous to Logos College in several ways, be it from the enclosed training grounds with the coach's observation tower, to the student bodies of the two institutions. Many of the characters in *End Zone* seem to leap over the invisible boundary into Wallace's novel, the most obvious example being that of Raymond Toon, the student preparing himself for a career in sports commentary. He spends his spare time 'camped in front of his portable TV set. He'd switch it on, turn down the sound to nothing, and describe the action'.²⁹ In *Infinite Jest*, the character of Jim Troeltsch is a mediocre tennis player, but is preparing himself for a career in sports broadcast in similar ways to Toon. Troeltsch is first seen succumbing to illness while a 'cartridge of a round-of-16 match from September's U.S. Open had been on the small room viewer with the sound all the way down as usual and Troeltsch'd been straightening the straps of his jock, idly calling the match's action into his fist' (*Jest*, p. 60). Also Taft Robinson in *End Zone*, the outsider football prodigy of few words is retooled as John 'No Relation' Wayne, the outsider tennis prodigy of few words, and Hal's philosophising recalls *End Zone*'s narrator, Harkness.

While the allusions to *End Zone* are overtly noticeable in Wallace's novel, the influence of DeLillo impacts upon *Infinite Jest* in other ways. In Wallace's own copy of DeLillo's *Americana* (1971), now in the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, his marginalia reveal more allusions. In his copy of DeLillo's novel, Wallace has singled out the following paragraph:

Soon I was no longer content merely to make love to my wife. I had to seduce her first. These seductions often took their inspiration from cinema. I

²⁹ DeLillo, *End Zone*. p. 23.

liked to get rough with her. I liked to be silent for long periods. The movies were giving difficult meanings to some of the private moments of my life.³⁰

This passage is marked 'Orin', leaving no doubt about the specific allusion in *Infinite Jest*. As Wallace alludes to themes within *Americana*, he also expands and challenges them. Orin, the first Incandenza brother, has a pathological need to seduce his 'subjects', much like David Bell in *Americana*, listing his seduction techniques in his many phone calls to his younger brother, Hal. But Wallace's allusion to David Bell's pathology impacts on the thematic resonance of Wallace's characterisation of Orin. David Bell, DeLillo's damaged narrator, embarks on a quest for truth, leading him to quit his well-paid job and head to the centre of America. The cause of this, according to Cowart, is David's relationship with his mother. He writes, 'Bell's existential distress seems to have an important Oedipal dimension, seen in his troubled memories of his mother and in the relations with other women in his life'.³¹ Indeed, this can be seen in the second part of the novel when Bell's parents throw a party. In the aftermath, Bell finds his mother slumped in the pantry, the description of the scene ripe with meaning:

I felt close to some overwhelming moment. In the dim light her shadow behind her consumed my own. I knew what was happening and I did not care to argue with the doctors of that knowledge. Let it be. Inside her was something splintered and bright, something that might have been left by the spiral passage of my own body. She was before me now, looking up, her hands on my shoulders. The sense of tightness I had felt in my room was beginning to yield to a promise of fantastic release.³²

³⁰ Don DeLillo, *Americana* (London: Penguin, 2011). p. 35. Wallace's copy of this book is the Penguin Contemporary American Classics edition (New York: 1989). The page numbers remain the same as the 2011 Penguin edition.

³¹ Cowart, p. 138.

³² DeLillo, *Americana*. P. 196.

After his mother dies, Bell pursues relationships with many different women who all act as a substitute for maternal love. As Cowart explains, 'he enacts an unconscious search for the one woman forbidden him, at once recapitulating and reversing the tragically imperfect Oedipal model: as he was rejected, so will he reject successive candidates in what occasionally amounts to a literal orgy of philandering and promiscuity'.³³ Eventually, after a lengthy pursuit, Bell manages to seduce Sullivan, the ultimate mother surrogate in the novel. She is a sculptor who creates 'carefully handcrafted afterbirth' and tells the infantilised Bell bedtime stories.³⁴ Even more overtly, after he falls asleep in Sullivan's loft, he awakes to see that 'A shape in the shape of my mother was forming in the doorway'.³⁵ Crucially, she performs the role of Bell's mother even in the rejection, revealing she had been sleeping with Brand as she was involved with Bell. Orin, similarly damaged but seemingly unaware of the extent of this, also has an uncomfortable relationship with his mother. The first signs of this is the description of one of Orin's recurring dreams:

after some interval the dream's Orin struggles up from this kind of visual suffocation to find his mother's head, Mrs. Avril M. T. Incandenza's, the Moms's disconnected head attached face-to-face to his own fine head, strapped tight to his face somehow by a wrap-around system of VS HiPro top-shelf lamb-gut string from his Academy racquet's own face (*Jest*, p. 46).

In a similar way to DeLillo's Bell, Orin's complex relationship with his mother spurs his own behaviour, and his 'subjects' are related to his mother in several ways. For example, during the dream described above, Orin had confused the girl lying next to him with his mother and 'had clutched her head with both hands and tried to sort

³³ Cowart, pp.140-141.

³⁴ DeLillo, *Americana*. p. 106.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 110

of stiff-arm her' (*Jest*, p. 47). Unlike Bell, Orin may have acted on these Oedipal urges. According to Molly Notkin, Joelle's admittedly untrustworthy friend, Avril was:

was engaging in sexual enmeshments with just about everything with a Y-chromosome, and had been for what sounded like many years, including possibly with the Auteur's [Jim's] son and Madame's [Joelle's] craven lover, as a child, seeing as it sounded like the little rotter had enough malcathected issues with his mother to keep all of Vienna humming briskly for quite some time' (*Jest*, p. 791).

Regardless of whether Notkin's statement is true, it certainly solidifies Wallace's Oedipal theme within the novel, and highlights Orin's own state of mind. In alluding to *Americana* in this aspect of the novel, Wallace thematically extends DeLillo's original ideas in the description of Orin and Joelle's relationship. Despite being characterised by Jim as the ultimate mother figure in *The Entertainment* (pregnant and apologising to the simulated crib), she harbours her own complex relationship with a parental figure. In essence, she mirrors Orin, with a kind of stunted Electra complex in which her relationship with her father inspires a breakdown in her mother. Tellingly, Joelle thinks that Orin's parental issues are 'banal and average', mirroring her own experience against his. Her 'own personal Daddy' had always wanted to take her to the cinema alone, leaving the mother behind and stimulating a competition between the female van Dynes (*Jest*, p. 737). The culmination of her father's strange, infantilising relationship with Joelle is her mother's suicide, using a similarly odd kitchen appliance to Jim. Through all these examples of Wallace's allusions to DeLillo we can see Wallace's role as heir, and what Ricks calls the 'parental-filial' relationship that exists between writers of different generations.³⁶

³⁶ Ricks, p. 39.

Allusion may not always result in a dramatic realignment of existing themes and tropes, but there exists a 'likeness-in-difference' that allows Wallace's work to be viewed as a necessary evolution of what has gone before.³⁷ What Wallace's use of allusion in *Infinite Jest* shows is that, as a writer, he is aware of the technical processes of literature, and even alludes to, and parodies, academic literary criticism.

Parodies of Academia: *Infinite Jest* and the Anxiety of Influence

Late in the novel, Wallace alludes to Harold Bloom's seminal literary critique *The Anxiety of Influence*. Hal is reviewing some of his father's films, and he comes to a scene in *Good-Looking Men in Small Clever Rooms That Utilize Every Centimeter of Available Space with Mind-Boggling Efficiency*. As the screen 'bloomed', Wallace describes the scene:

Paul Anthony Heavens reading his lecture to a crowd of dead-eyed kids picking at themselves and drawing vacant airplane- and genitalia-doodles on their college-rule note-pads, reading stupefyingly turgid-sounding shit – "For while *clinamen* and *tessera* strive to revive or revise the dead ancestor, and while *kenosis* and *daemonization* act to repress consciousness and memory of the dead ancestor, it is, finally, artistic *askesis* which represents the contest proper, the battle-to-the-death with the loved dead" (*Jest*, p. 911).

Heavens' filmed lecture clearly adopts Bloom's terminology from his 'Six Revisionary Ratios', namely:

1. *Clinamen*, which is poetic misreading or misprision proper [...]
2. *Tessera*, which is completion and antithesis [...]

³⁷ Ibid. p. 42.

3. *Kenosis*, which is a breaking-device similar to the defence mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions; *kenosis* then is a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor [...]
4. *Daemonization*, or a movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime, in a reaction to the precursor's Sublime [...]
5. *Askesis*, or a movement of self-purgation which intends attainment of a state of solitude [...]
6. *Apophrades*, or the return of the dead.³⁸

As if to leave no doubt to the allusion, Wallace inserts an endnote to the text that reads, 'Sounding rather suspiciously like Professor H. Bloom's turgid studies of artistic *influenza*' (*Jest*, n. 366, p. 1077). While these passages in *Infinite Jest* are derogatory about Bloom's theories ('stupefyingly turgid-sounding shit'), the 'Six Revisionary Ratios' seem to have impacted on Wallace's thematic foundation in the novel. Heavens' Bloom-evoking lecture necessarily points us in the direction of the paternal-filial relationships in *Infinite Jest*, something that can be seen as Wallace's dramatization of Bloom's theories of poetic influence. Yet, in alluding to Bloom's theories, Wallace is also criticising them.

The relationships between the father and sons of the Incandenza family are complex in their allusions to Bloom. When we first see the relationship between Jim and Hal, it is the scene where the ten year-old Hal is sent to see the 'professional conversationalist' who is Jim in disguise. Tellingly the scene opens with the line, 'All I know is my dad said to come here' (*Jest*, p. 27). In the scene, the disguised Jim attempts to converse with his son, but is incapable of hearing Hal's side of the conversation. The two isolated monologues continue side-by-side until the end of the scene. In a reversal of Bloom's theory of influence, it is the father that is anxious about his influence on the son, or the lack thereof. Jim is portrayed as fitting in with Bloom's analysis, and he is desperately trying to see

³⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). pp. 14-15. This is quoted in an abbreviated form.

signs that he has influenced Hal. As Marshall Boswell notes, 'Hal's suicidal father also acts as Wallace's own postmodern father. Incandenza is Pynchon, Barth, and Nabokov all rolled into one. He creates the film *Infinite Jest*, the lethally closed entertainment'.³⁹ Hal (and therefore Wallace in this reading) is not influenced by the father. Bloom's analysis declares that the essential making of the artist and poet lies in an ability to submit to other pieces of artwork. He writes that poets and artists create their work through a combination of 'perfect solipsism' and 'an awareness of *other selves*', saying of the poet, 'The poem is *within* him, yet he experiences the shame and splendour of *being found by* poems – great poems – *outside* him'.⁴⁰ So Jim, the father, is trying to stimulate 'an awareness of other selves' in Hal, the son, when he articulates his desire 'That you [Hal] recognize the occasional vista beyond your own generous Mondragonoid nose's fleshy tip' (*Jest*, p. 31). This is the vital beginning of what Bloom calls a 'strong poet', who will go on to move through the 'Six Revolutionary Ratios', eventually overshadowing the precursor/father so it seems 'as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work'.⁴¹ Of course, Wallace is using Bloom's framework to describe a literal inheritance and not an artistic one, but is ironically having the father anxious about the process rather than the inheritor. This scene evokes Bloom in another way, as the original title as seen in the draft manuscripts available at the Harry Ransom Center is revealed as 'It Was a Great Marvel That They Were in the Father Without Knowing Him'.⁴² This also lives on in the published novel as the title of the fictional film version of the scene, as seen in the Incandenza Filmography (*Jest*, n. 24, p. 992). While this is a quotation from 'The

³⁹ Boswell, p. 164.

⁴⁰ Bloom, p. 26. Bloom's emphasis.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 16.

⁴² HRC, Wallace Inventory, 'First two sections', fols. 16.1-6.

Gospel of Truth' (which is part of *The Gnostic Gospels*, and putatively written by Valentinian Gnostics or by Valentinus himself around 140-180 AD. It depicts the influence of The Father, so far as to say The Son and the Father are one in the same), Bloom uses it as the title for his prologue to *The Anxiety of Influence*. The poem that follows hints at many of the same themes that Wallace is using, particularly in his depiction of the relationship between Jim and Hal. The poem itself, also inspired by 'The Gospel of Truth', sets the thematic tone for Bloom's critique as it involves images of falling 'outwards and downwards, away from the Fullness'.⁴³ If 'Fullness' is taken to mean the father, or the predecessor, then Bloom's theory of misprision and antithesis fits with this line. The poem continues, stating 'He did remember, but found he was silent, and could not tell the others' and 'Sometimes he thought he was about to speak, but the silence continued'. Hal can be seen to be falling 'outwards and downwards' from his father's influence, and from his father's point of view he is silent about his experiences. However, Wallace cuts through the father/son relationship by highlighting the influence of the mother on both of the characters. Jim is paranoid about his wife's liaisons with 'over *thirty* Near Eastern medical attachés', and her lacing of Hal's 'innocent-looking bowl of morning Ralston' with 'esoteric mnemonic steroids', indicating that Avril has an influence over both of the Incandenza men (*Jest*, p. 30). Additionally, Jim refers to Hal's 'Mondragonoid' nose, highlighting the genetic influence of the mother. This also fits in with an interpretation of Bloom's prologue, as he claims that the 'Fullness' is 'strengthless and female fruit'. The female character in Bloom's prologue is also said to have 'leapt farthest forward and fell into a passion apart from his embrace'. Of course, Bloom's imagery is biblical by way of the

⁴³ Bloom, p. 3. All subsequent references to Bloom's prologue are from the same page, and therefore will be uncited.

Gnostics, insinuating that the 'passion apart from his embrace' stems from the Original Sin, but it can also help illuminate Avril's falling out of Jim's, the father's, influence and in turn becoming, as Eve did, influential to the son. But also in 'The Gospel of Truth', the concept of 'Error' is personified in the female form. According to the Gospel, it is 'Error' who seduces followers of the father into the fog of ignorance and eventually crucifies The Son. Ironically, the chapter immediately following this depiction of the fragmented father/son relationship, and the influential power of the mother begins with the lines:

Another way fathers impact sons is that sons, once their voices have changed in puberty, invariably answer the telephone with the same locutions and intonations as their fathers. This holds true regardless of whether the fathers are still alive (*Jest*, p. 32).

These lines also seem to allude to Bloom's theory of literary influence, particularly the *Apophrades* stage. The 'voice' of the son essentially resurrects the father. Bloom writes:

strong poets keep returning from the dead, and only through the quasi-willing mediumship of other strong poets. *How* they return is the decisive matter, for if they return intact, then the return impoverishes the later poets, dooming them to be remembered – if at all – as having ended in poverty, in an imaginative need they could not themselves gratify.⁴⁴

Jim's resurrection proper towards the end of the novel can be seen as damaging to the son, perhaps the reason why Hal begins to disappear into himself, because he has returned 'intact'. Jim returns as a wraith, yet he has the power to literally put his own words inside Don Gately, words that Don 'doesn't know from a divot in the sod' (*Jest*, p. 832). But the wraith does not have the ability to speak to Hal, so

⁴⁴ Ibid. pp. 140-141.

he chooses Gately. In Bloom's terms, we could position Hal as a 'strong poet', a boy who can 'simply master and move on', and Gately could be a 'weak poet' (*Jest*, p. 839). The resurrected father is able to speak through a weak poet using his own words, yet a strong poet will triumph over the influence. As Bloom writes:

The mighty dead return, but they return in our colors, and speaking in our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own. If they return wholly in their own strength, then the triumph is theirs.⁴⁵

The wraith's choosing of Gately is no accident, for he would not be able to control Hal in the same way. Jim is resurrected within Hal through his influence of the way Hal answers the telephone, yet this is in Hal's own voice, and only for a moment. Hal is firmly in control, whereas Gately is passive (both literally and poetically) and allows Jim control. But at the same time as alluding to Bloom's theory of influence, Wallace also corrupts it. Despite Jim's attempts to influence his sons, just as his father has influenced him, it is Mario who most closely follows in his footsteps, actively imitating him with his interest in film, and also in the films he produces, for example the puppet show version of *The ONANtiad* and other 'Himself-influenced conceptual cartridges' (*Jest*, p. 153). On the other hand, Mario's biological parentage is questioned in the novel, with Tavis regarding him as 'the thing it's not entirely impossible he may have fathered' (*Jest*, p. 451). If Wallace is indeed dramatizing Bloom's theory of influence within the Incandenza family, Mario's questioned parentage intentionally disrupts the paternal-filial theme at the core of the reading. Mario has been divested of 'parental' influence and is allowed to pursue a kind of 'poetic' influence, unfettered by the bonds of family, or the

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 141.

complex relationships that connect the other Incandenzas. He has none of the pathologies that his (half-)brothers have picked up from parental influence (addiction, secrecy, Oedipal complexes), or from what Freud called 'the family romance', and can develop artistically and philosophically as a whole person, or a 'strong poet' as Bloom would say, devoid of anxiety or solipsistic isolation.⁴⁶

That Wallace uses Bloom's literary critique in *Infinite Jest* is ironic in itself. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom quotes Nietzsche's essay 'Of the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life', writing:

The echo is heard at once, but always in the form of "criticism," though the critic never dreamed of the work's possibility a moment before. It never comes to have an influence, but only a criticism; and the criticism itself has no influence but only breeds another criticism.⁴⁷

Through Wallace's metatextual use of Bloom, he has allowed his artistic work to be influenced by criticism, yet Wallace is aware of Bloom's theory of misprision which states that poetic influence only vitalises an artistic work through a misreading of the predecessor's work. In David Lipsky's interview, Wallace admits, 'I believe in Harold Bloom's theory of *misprision*', and, following Bloom's theory stated in *The Anxiety of Influence*, it demands that Wallace's allusions must necessarily be misreadings of Bloom.⁴⁸ This seemingly paradoxical situation can be explained by examining Bloom further. He writes that, since the Enlightenment, poetic influence has been 'more of a blight than a blessing', but continues to say, 'Where it has revitalized, it has operated as misprision, as deliberate, even perverse revisionism'.⁴⁹ This is the *clinamen* stage of Bloom's theory, the

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 27.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 49.

⁴⁸ Lipsky, p. 127.

⁴⁹ Bloom, p. 50.

deliberate adopting of misreadings of previous works in order to create something new. Wallace has used Bloom's theories to dramatize the relationships within the Incandenza family, but that does not mean he has taken, wholesale, Bloom's ideas. He has deliberately misread them, revised them and mutated them in order to present his work of fiction, or 'strong poem', and in doing so has ironically allowed literary criticism to influence his work in a way that Nietzsche says could never happen.

Wallace's use of Bloom can also be looked at as something that is indicative of *Infinite Jest's* position as a systems novel. Through his use of literary criticism and the editorial voice of the endnotes, Wallace has created a looping system that both refers to and parodies academia. LeClair describes the systems novelist as 'a collector rather than a creator, an editor rather than an artist, an "orchestrator" (as Barth calls himself) rather than an inventor, a large-minded bricoleur rather than an engineer'.⁵⁰ While applying this to *Infinite Jest* does not give due credit to Wallace's artistic accomplishments, it helps in recognising his use of the academic mode of expression to create another system of information in the novel, entwined with the other information systems such as those of entertainment, politics and sport. The parodic, academic-style endnotes allow the insertion of extra information at points, not necessarily to bludgeon the reader with data, but as a way to guide the reader through the excess. LeClair writes, 'Both framing and self-reference contribute to the system novelists' fundamental artistic accomplishment: the creation of imitative forms [...]. These imitative forms are ways of structuring novelistic information so it reflects the density, homologous structure, and scale of information in life'.⁵¹ Wallace elucidates this in his interview

⁵⁰ LeClair, *The Art of Excess*. p. 23.

⁵¹ Ibid. pp. 23-24.

with David Lipsky, saying 'Life seems to strobe on and off for me, and to barrage me with input. And much of my job is to impose some sort of order, or make some sort of sense of it'.⁵² Yet Wallace's characters are caught in this barrage of input, or the information system it creates, often unable to make sense of it. Wallace's superimposition of a parodic academic structure on the novel, specifically in the depiction of the relationships the Incandenza children have with their parents, imply that the parents are trapped within an information system that does not allow them to direct any true affection or compassion to their sons. Jim attempts to relate to Hal through the medium of his own academic and athletic experience, but the information system becomes distorted and restrictive. Wallace takes a conventional theme, that of a father unable to connect with his son, and applies an increasingly grotesque system of academic parody to it. As LeClair says:

The systems novelist solicits by initially meeting conventional expectations of character portrayal, plot and setting. Gradually or suddenly the usual proportions given these elements are deformed: certain elements hypertrophy, others atrophy. The text exceeds the conventions of presenting information with which it began, thus defamiliarizing its materials and disorientating the reader'.⁵³

Wallace's parody of academia in *Infinite Jest* is also depicted as a system that intertwines with the other systems of commerciality and entertainment that are evident in the novel. In his interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace says:

Academia and commercial culture have somehow become these gigantic mechanisms of commodification that drain the weight and colour out of even the most radical of new advances. It's a surreal inversion of the death-by-neglect that used to kill off prescient art. Now prescient art suffers death-by-acceptance.⁵⁴

⁵² Lipsky, p. 37.

⁵³ LeClair, *The Art of Excess*. p. 22.

⁵⁴ McCaffery, p. 31.

Wallace's use of Bloom is a focal point for his criticism of systemic academic thought, just as he uses the subsidizing of time as a grotesque focal point for his criticism of systemic commercialisation.

Wallace's allusions to Bloom also complicate his allusions to other authors. Previously, I have written about the impact of DeLillo on Wallace's novel, but the intertextuality with Bloom adds a different emphasis on the allusions to fiction within *Infinite Jest*. In 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', Wallace actively wrestles with his influences in a way that follows closely Bloom's 'Six Revisionary Ratios'. For Wallace, 'Westward' was a 'homage and also patricidal killing thing to Barth', something that fits with Bloom's 'Ratios'.⁵⁵ In particular, the goal of 'Westward' can be seen as the *kenosis* stage. The poet who is 'emptying himself of his own afflatus, his imaginative godhood, seems to humble himself as though he were ceasing to be a poet, but this ebbing is so performed in relation to a precursor's poem-of-ebbing that the precursor is emptied out also'.⁵⁶ Essentially, 'Westward' is a story that strives for discontinuity with the father-influence, in this case Barth. *Infinite Jest* does not deal with its influences in the same way. Wallace is in no way trying to facilitate the 'patricidal killing' of DeLillo and others, he is attempting to allow his work to metaphorically and thematically converse with them, and exist along side them in a kind of continuum of influence (or maybe to exist within the canon at the same time as challenging it). To use DeLillo as an example, while Wallace adopts and expands many of DeLillo's literary preoccupations through both allusion and mimesis (especially in terms of the use of systems), there does not seem to be any desire to disconnect from the source.

⁵⁵ Lipsky, p. 63.

⁵⁶ Bloom, pp. 14-15.

It is perhaps what *Infinite Jest* calls ‘the sort of deep-insider’s elegaic tribute no audience could be expected to notice’, a reaffirmation of his attained status of a Bloomian ‘strong poet’ that does not feel the need to distance his own imaginative output from that of his influences (*Jest*, p. 65 [sic]).

***Infinite Jest* and the Larger Literary Canon**

For all of its flourishes and freewheeling rule-breaking, *Infinite Jest* is a novel which is heavily entrenched in literary history. Even though the novel can be seen to be challenging many of the conventions of the past, it does so from its place in the continuum of American fiction. Stephen Burn notes that the encyclopaedic nature of Wallace’s novel shares many of the traits of the postmodern writers. He writes:

It is, after all, notable that it is postmodern encyclopedists like Gaddis that Wallace sees of most value amongst older postmodernists, although Joyce is an unmistakably important influence (not only does the novel twice repeat Buck Mulligan’s word “scrotum-tightening” [pp. 112, 605], and share *Ulysses*’s interest in “telemachry” [p. 249], but the clearest allusion of all is surely that the novel is stalked by the ghost of a tall alcoholic author named Jim).⁵⁷

It is difficult to disagree with this analysis (although the described allusions to Joyce become rather tenuous), and looking at *Infinite Jest* as solely the inheritor of these postmodern encyclopaedists seems an obvious and solid lineage. This reading also ignores an indebtedness that *Infinite Jest* owes to literature from outside the postmodern remit. While Burn hints at this by sensibly noting that, like Pynchon and Gaddis, Wallace is uncomfortable with the implications of such

⁵⁷ Stephen Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2003). p. 20.

encyclopaedism and portrays it in the novel as ‘another potentially dangerous addiction’, he avoids examining how Wallace has blended his postmodern influences with literature from many other different periods.⁵⁸

While I have examined the influence of Don DeLillo’s hard-to-categorise novels (many critics describe DeLillo as a postmodern writer), there is also the strong influence of pre-twentieth century moral fiction to take into account, particularly that of nineteenth century writers such as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. In 1996, the same time he was putting the finish touches to *Infinite Jest*, Wallace wrote a review of Joseph Frank’s *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871*. The review is notable not for Wallace’s critique of Frank’s book, but for his interrogation of Dostoevsky’s fiction, implicitly comparing it to his own. For example, of the Russian author, he writes:

For me, the really striking, inspiring thing about Dostoevsky isn’t just that he was a genius; he was also brave. He never stopped worrying about his literary reputation, but he also never stopped promulgating unfashionable stuff in which he believed. And he did this not by ignoring (now a.k.a. “transcending” or “subverting”) the unfriendly cultural circumstances in which he was writing, but by confronting them, engaging them, specifically and by name.⁵⁹

Tellingly, he lauds Dostoevsky for not ‘ignoring’ or ‘subverting’ the ‘unfriendly cultural circumstances’, which recalls his own plea in ‘E Unibus Pluram’, that writers should be:

willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “Oh how banal.” To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 21.

⁵⁹ David Foster Wallace, ‘Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky’ in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2007) pp. 255-274 (p. 272).

be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law ('Pluram', pp. 81-82).

The 'unfashionable stuff' not only finds its way into *Infinite Jest*, but also becomes a major concern for the characters. Wallace confronts these aspects of American culture instead of 'transcending' or 'subverting' them. But typical to Wallace's own sense of humility, he finishes his essay on Joseph Frank's book with the following paragraph:

But they wouldn't (could not) laugh if a piece of morally passionate, passionately moral fiction was also ingeniously and radiantly human fiction. But how to make it that? How – for a writer today, even a talented writer today – to get up the guts to even try? There are no formulas or guarantees. There are, however, models ('Dostoevsky', p. 274).

These are questions that Wallace tries to answer with his subsequent fiction, and models that he attempts to follow. Noticing this link between Wallace and Dostoevsky, Timothy Jacobs writes, 'in many significant ways, *Infinite Jest* is a rewriting or figurative translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* into the contemporary American idiom and context'.⁶⁰ Jacobs' essay goes on to examine the connections between *Infinite Jest* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, concentrating on the ideological preoccupation that both authors have with belief, and the thematic concentration on relationships between fathers and sons, making clear the impact that Dostoevsky's model had on Wallace's literature. Yet, in translating Dostoevsky's novel to reflect millennial issues, Wallace blends the model with elements more in line with the twentieth century legacy of American fiction. As Jacobs writes, '*Infinite Jest* substitutes *The Brothers Karamazov*'s religious

⁶⁰ Timothy Jacobs, 'The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 49.3 (2007), 265-292. (p. 265).

orthodoxy and nihilism for the more acute problems of millennial American (dis)belief: a jaded, ironic perspective, and solipsistic pursuit of individual “happiness”.⁶¹ I have examined Wallace’s attack on solipsism and irony in a similar vein elsewhere, but this illuminates Wallace’s use of Dostoevsky’s moral model to challenge some of the tenets of postmodern fiction. In attempting to move past his immediate predecessors’ work, he returns to the past, adopting, in Barthian terms, seemingly exhausted methods of literary creation, adapting them to fit within the continuum of American literature and using them as devices for replenishment.

Wallace’s use of Dostoevsky as a model for the moral core of the novel only helps describe a small part of the way Wallace can be seen as an author who attempted to challenge established postmodern devices of his peers, such as ironic posturing and superficial playfulness. While he critiques postmodernism, he also adopts devices that reveal links to his postmodern forefathers. The narrative architecture of the novel is innovative and strange, a continuation of some of the postmodern writers’ experimentations with prose structure. Chief among the devices that Wallace uses is the endnote, or more accurately the 388 endnotes. Much like Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962), *Infinite Jest* introduces a fictional editorial voice into the text that manages to propagate much of what Burn calls the ‘encyclopedia project’ of the novel.⁶² Yet Wallace’s notes, like Nabokov’s, do not simply perform the function of a ‘data retrieval’ system. They contain not only information about fictional drug companies and academic-style references, but also fully formed chapters that would not look out of place in the main text, and long pieces of dialogue, or letters that impact upon the narrative in various ways.

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 276.

⁶² Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest*. p. 20.

Like *Pale Fire*, this gives the events of the novel the impression that they have been assembled by an editor rather than written by a fictionalist. Unlike *Pale Fire* (which uses annotation to create the ambiguity and mystery within the plot of the novel), the effect of this is to make the novel appear heteroglossic and fractured in a strange editorial pursuit of clarity-through-digression. Of his footnotes, Wallace says, 'it seems to me that reality is fractured right now, at least the reality I live in, and the difficulty of writing about that reality is that text is very linear, very unified. I am constantly on the lookout for ways to fracture the text that aren't totally disorienting'.⁶³ But as Kiki Benzon argues, the endnotes also have a different result; that of creating recursion. She writes, 'Unlike the footnote which can be perceived as a simple vertical glance, the endnote requires a physical negotiation of the text and the temporary abandonment of place in the narrative proper, such that the reader becomes embroiled [in] a recursive performance'.⁶⁴ Taking this reading to its logical conclusion, the audience is bound within the recursive system of the novel, the footnotes being in essence simpler versions of the main text that are essential for understanding the novel as a whole. I will explore recursion in *Infinite Jest* in more detail in the next section.

In describing *Infinite Jest* as an encyclopaedic novel, Burn also evokes LeClair's analysis of the systems novel. LeClair writes that the systems novelists are 'advancing against the mass media's thin layer of superficial information their massive novels of thick and profound information'.⁶⁵ Burn argues that *Infinite Jest* 'dramatizes the limitations of this attempt. Its fundamental process is to seek

⁶³ 'An Interview with David Foster Wallace', *The Charlie Rose Show*.

⁶⁴ Kiki Benzon, "'Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders': Chaos and Realism in *Infinite Jest*", in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Austin: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), pp. 101-112. (p. 108).

⁶⁵ LeClair, *The Art of Excess*. p. 16.

exhaustive accounts, and to dramatize the accumulation of information'.⁶⁶ Where LeClair sees novelists, such as Gaddis and Pynchon, who enter into the system of information gathering as a positive reaction against the superficiality of mass media, Burn notes that Wallace is critical of this process, seeing it as another addiction. In Wallace's world, systems of information are much like systems of addiction or of mass media: they are distractions from living the moral life in a human community. In Burn's analysis, encyclopaedism is an attempt at cataloguing a totality of information. Even though he comes to the conclusion that attempting such totality is essentially futile, he maintains that the information in the novel abides by an organisational system, similar to LeClair's idea that the systems novelists are 'master manipulators of reference and opacity, linearity and looping, story and meta-story, miniature effects and maximal models'.⁶⁷ Yet, what Burn does not mention is the fact that Wallace attempts to complicate any organisational structures in the novel by having fragmented and disparate influxes of information in the novel that threaten to overwhelm the action. Explaining the composition of the novel, Wallace says, 'The image in my mind – and I actually had dreams about it all the time – was that this book was really a very pretty pane of glass that had been dropped off the twentieth story of a building'.⁶⁸ This suggests that Wallace is intending much more than to immerse his reader in a system. The variety of the information presented seems to belie any system applied to it, and any notion of traditional hierarchical patterns of dissemination is challenged. Essential parts of narrative sit next to seemingly irrelevant digressions and single world annotations (such as the 'Sic' of note 143). In a sense, the novel

⁶⁶ Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest*. pp. 20-21.

⁶⁷ LeClair, *The Art of Excess*. p. 21.

⁶⁸ Mark Caro, 'The Next Best Thing: Can a Downstate Author Withstand the Sensation over His 1,079-Page Novel?', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 53-57. (p. 57).

that is described as being in the tradition of 'encyclopaedic fiction' complicates the definition by making the information fragmented, and allowing the reader to decide with little guidance what should be deemed as important or not. Matt Tresco relates *Infinite Jest* to Wikipedia, saying that 'It is possible for the encyclopedia to no longer imply totalization and containment, but release an enlargement of possibilities. Structurally, both Wikipedia and *Infinite Jest* are always threatening to overflow, to negate the purpose of their organizing principles'.⁶⁹ The reader is stranded within what Tresco dubs an 'anti-encyclopedia', with no hierarchical structure to aid in the interpretation of the novel's reality. Yet, Tresco's analysis does not acknowledge that the project of encyclopaedic fiction is not necessarily totality of information, but rather excess of information, and that the traditional form of the exhaustive encyclopaedia is *not* the template for encyclopaedic fiction.

Recursion versus Annulation: Literary Systems in *Infinite Jest*

Much like William Gaddis' *JR* (1975), *Infinite Jest*'s distorted and fragmented presentation of information complicates LeClair's definition of the systems novel and disorients the reader with the excess of information presented. Yet, within the seemingly random torrent of information of both novels, there lies a covert system of recursion. Writing about *JR*, LeClair says, 'in Gaddis' heterarchical nest of analogs the smallest and simplest both defines and tangles with the largest and most complex'.⁷⁰ This idea of literary recursion stems from the mathematical idea of the same name. Douglas Hofstadter explains recursion thus:

⁶⁹ Matt Tresco, "'Impervious to U.S. Parsing": Encyclopedism, Autism and *Infinite Jest*', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Austin: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), pp. 113-122. (p. 121).

⁷⁰ LeClair, *The Art of Excess*. p. 94.

nesting, and variations on nesting. The concept is very general. (Stories inside stories, movies inside movies, paintings inside paintings, Russian dolls inside Russian dolls (even parenthetical comments inside parenthetical comments!) – these are just a few of the charms of recursion.)⁷¹

He goes on to explain the complexities of recursion with something called the ‘push-down stack’, which mainly relates to Artificial Intelligence, but is also applicable to the human worlds of language and music. To explain the concept Hofstadter uses the image of cafeteria trays in a stack:

There is usually some sort of spring underneath which tends to keep the topmost tray at a constant height, more or less. So when you push a tray onto the stack, it sinks a little – and when you remove a tray from the stack, the stack pops up a little.⁷²

In terms of information systems, additional pockets of information that are relevant to the task at hand can be introduced to a situation, creating a mental stack where previous pieces of information are pushed down, waiting for their turn to be analysed and used (when they pop back to the top of the stack, so to speak). Like the trays in the cafeteria image, the pieces of information are all self-similar and nested. The most relevant form of recursion may be, in the case of literature, language. The grammatical construction of language, with its adverbs, adjectives and other qualifiers, creates mental push-down stacks, and in Hofstadter’s words, ‘the difficulty of understanding a sentence increases sharply with the number of pushes onto a stack’.⁷³

⁷¹ Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid* (London: Peguin, 2000). p. 127.

⁷² Ibid. p. 128.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 130.

A central component to Wallace's work in *Infinite Jest* is a use of recursive systems in order to structure the torrent of information. The image that Wallace uses to explain his focus on recursion is that of the Sierpinski Gasket, a diagram that is made up of a seemingly infinite regress of self-similar fractals. Not only is there an 'enormous hand-drawn Sierpinski gasket' on Pemulis' bedroom wall, but Wallace also talks about the structure of the novel in these terms (*Jest*, p. 213). In a 1996 interview with Michael Silverblatt's *Bookworm* radio show, Wallace explains the structure of *Infinite Jest*. He says:

It's actually structured like something called a Sierpinski gasket, which is a very primitive pyramidal fractal, although what was structured as a Sierpinski gasket was the first draft that I delivered to Michael [Pietsch] in '94. It went through some mercy cuts, so it's probably kind of a lop-sided Sierpinski gasket. But that's one of the structural ways in which it's supposed to come together'.⁷⁴

This structure in the novel helps order the influx of information into what Hofstadter would call push-down stacks of recursion; information in the novel is introduced in small pockets that help explain larger themes later in the novel. For example, the scene in the first chapter where Hal eats the mould recurs throughout his character development, informing many of the events later in the novel (such as the divorcing of his mind and body, or the ingestion of the DMZ). Yet, perhaps most interestingly, Wallace's focus on recursion can be examined next to the theme of annulation. The character of Jim Incandenza, inventor of 'annular fusion', is often associated with loops and circles, particularly in terms of his filmography. For example, the film *The Joke*:

⁷⁴ 'David Foster Wallace', *Bookworm*.

two Ikegami EC-35 video cameras in theatre record the “film”’s audience and project the resultant raster onto the screen – the theatre audience watching itself watch itself get the obvious “joke” and become increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable and hostile supposedly comprises the film’s involuted “anti-narrative” flow (*Jest*, n. 24, pp. 988-989).

It is important to distinguish between this kind of looping, which theoretically can go on forever (assuming the audience doesn’t see sense and leave), and recursion, which avoids this sort of infinite loop. Hofstadter explains that a recursive definition:

may give the casual viewer the impression that something is being defined in terms of *itself*. That would be circular and lead to infinite regress, if not to paradox proper. Actually a recursive definition (when properly formulated) never leads to infinite regress or paradox. This is because a recursive definition never defines something in terms of itself, but always in terms of *simpler versions* of itself.⁷⁵

In other words, a recursive structure will eventually end, or in Hofstadter’s words, ‘There is always some part of the definition that avoids self-reference, so the action of constructing an object which satisfies the definition will eventually “bottom out”’.⁷⁶ There is a built-in escape from the descent into infinite looping within the process of recursion. In the novel, Wallace seems to present the distinction between recursive and self-reflexive, cyclical structures in both the action and the structure of the narrative.

N. Katherine Hayles writes about recursion and annulation in *Infinite Jest* in her essay ‘The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity’, yet she seems to combine the notion of annulation (or looping) with that of recursion. In the essay, she relates the annular technology invented by Jim to cope with the waste in the

⁷⁵ Hofstadter, p. 127. Hofstadter’s emphasis.

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 133.

Concavity as a recursive system, citing the ‘recursivity of annular fusion’.⁷⁷ Annular fusion is defined by Pemulis as ‘a type of fusion that can produce waste that’s fuel for a process whose waste is fuel for the fusion’ (*Jest*, p. 572). Yet, the humans using this annular fusion have created an infinite loop that constantly has to be maintained by the introduction of waste to the Concavity to prevent the rampant overgrowth of the flora within. There is not an in-built escape within this process, so a recursive definition cannot support it. The nature of recursion means that an end point will be reached, whereas Jim’s annular fusion creates ‘cyclic effects of waste delivery and fusion’, an endless process (*Jest*, p. 573). The novel’s structure ensures that these images of looping are nested together in a recursive pattern, namely the self-similar fractals of the Sierpinski gasket. With the structures of looping and recursion, Wallace is challenging the postmodern preoccupation with self-reference. The loop refers only to itself, while the recursive pattern defines itself through use of simpler versions of itself, escaping total self-reference. The two structures of self-reference and self-definition are entwined in the novel to create what Hofstadter calls a ‘heterarchy’, or a ‘structure which there is no single “highest level”’.⁷⁸ The result of this, as with Gaddis’ *JR*, is what LeClair calls a ‘heterarchical nest of analogs’ in which ‘the smallest and simplest both defines and tangles the largest and most complex’.⁷⁹

In Wallace’s hands these sorts of literary systems of looping and recursion do not only exist to order the information in the novel, as LeClair suggests is the primary *raison d’être* for the application of systems theory to postmodern fiction. Wallace’s systems of self-reference contain thematic import that helps add texture to his on-going preoccupations with solipsism, consumption and waste. As in the

⁷⁷ Hayles, p. 689.

⁷⁸ Hofstadter, p. 134.

⁷⁹ LeClair, *The Art of Excess*, p. 94.

series of Jim's films entitled *Cage I-V*, which all contain images of recursion or looping (such as the use of 'four convex mirrors, two planar mirrors and one actress', to the image of fairground audiences spectating on the degradation of other audience members in a looping process, to the final film subtitled '*Infinite Jim*'), the characters in the novel are trapped within systems of information and consumption that inspire self-reflexivity and solipsism (*Jest*, n. 24, pp. 986-993).

Conclusion

Through its complex relationships with preceding literary devices and movements, *Infinite Jest* attempts to create an anti-traditional mode of expression. While the allusions to works by DeLillo and others (Shakespeare, Dostoevsky) show overt ways in which Wallace is interacting with his influences, his development of such devices as the use of systems theory and the fiction of excess complicate any easy categorisation. Just as he adopts and mutates many postmodern devices (such as the recursive structures of Gaddis, and the self-reflexivity of DeLillo), he similarly distorts the moral themes from older novels (such as Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*). Through the adoption of techniques from myriad points in Western literary history, and through his use of creative intertextuality, Wallace's novel can be seen to sit outside any established traditions of the American Canon.

These literary allusions and devices also mirror the thematic content of *Infinite Jest*, strengthening the novel's dealing with solipsism, morality and addiction, and also making the novel a performative work. The recursive shape of the novel, and its fractal-like structure, makes demands on the reader's attention, much in the same way the action in the novel attempts to create a rhetoric that is

against distraction, and that promotes feats of productive attention as positive opportunities for moral rehabilitation. Just as Wallace's use of literary influence evolved between the composition of 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' and *Infinite Jest*, his writing has evolved further in his post-*Infinite Jest* work. His work to develop a new type of American novel by piecing together different aspects from his literary forebears can also be seen in his last, unfinished novel, *The Pale King* (2011), and his own literary influence can be seen in writers that have begun to follow his lead away from the established American Canon.

Chapter Five

Too Much Fun for Anyone Mortal to Hope to Endure: Popular Culture and Ideas of Consumption in *Infinite Jest*

The narrative of *Infinite Jest* can be seen as a commentary on ideas of popular culture and consumption within contemporary American society. Wallace works to evolve the thesis he first detailed in 'E Unibus Pluram' that popular culture inspires irony and self-reflexivity, and his interrogation of the devices of cultural consumption offers complex results. In setting the events of the novel in a near future, Wallace is able to both parody his contemporary culture, but also develop his speculative ideas beyond the limitations imposed by the technological present. Throughout this chapter, I will examine the way Wallace depicts popular culture in *Infinite Jest*, specifically focusing on the way television is portrayed and how popular culture links with mass consumption. I will examine the ways Wallace deploys his use of popular culture in order to further interrogate how he responds to what he sees as a mainstreaming of postmodern aesthetics.

***Infinite Jest* and the Death of Television**

In his essay 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', Wallace critiques a book called *Life After Television* (1990) by George Gilder. In his book, Gilder attacks television, which he describes as 'a tool of tyrants', for locking Americans in a netherworld of mediocre commercial entertainment.¹ His view of the future of

¹ George Gilder, *Life After Television: The Coming Transformation of Media and American Life (Revised Edition)* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994). p. 49.

media is very similar to the near-future world of *Infinite Jest*: ‘teleputers’ receiving digital information from other similar terminals instead of a ‘top-down’ analogue broadcast system. These ‘teleputers’, in Gilder’s vision, will have numerous possible uses:

Create a school in your home that offers the nation’s best teachers imparting the moral, cultural, and religious values you cherish. Visit your family on the other side of the world with moving pictures hardly distinguishable from real-life images. Have your doctor make a house call without leaving the office. Give a birthday party for Grandma at her nursing home in Florida, bringing her descendants from all over the country to the foot of her bed in vivid living colour. Watch movies or television programs originating from any station or digital database in the world reachable by telephone lines. Order and instantly receive magazines, books, or other publications from almost anywhere in the world.²

Gilder’s vision of the future is an optimistic one, and something he believes will only come about after the death of broadcast television and the ‘dumb terminals’ that he sees in every American living room.³ In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace can be seen to clearly take on, and distort, this vision of the future. In the speculative setting of the novel, the characters use ‘teleputers’ (or ‘TP units’) in much the same way as Gilder depicts. Wallace describes the device:

InterLace Telentertainment, 932/1864 R.I.S.C. power-TPs w/ or w/o console, Pink₂, post-Primestar D.S.S. dissemination, menus and icons, pixel-free Internet Fax, tri- and quad-modems w/ adjustable baud, Dissemination-Grids, screens so high def you might as well be there, cost-effective videophonic conferencing, internal Froxx CD-ROM, electronic couture, all-in-one consoles, Yushityu nanoprocessors, laser chromatography, Virtual-capable media-cards, fibre-optic pulse, digital encoding, killer apps... (*Jest*, p. 60)

² Ibid. p. 55.

³ Ibid. p. 21.

These machines bear an uncanny resemblance to Gilder's vision of an all-in-one device, and the language used mirrors Gilder's closely, but Wallace is using the his 'TP units' in order to critique Gilder's theory about the death of television being vital for the American public to awaken from its media-induced slumber. Wallace's criticism of Gilder begins in 'E Unibus Pluram', when he writes, 'It's worth questioning Gilder's definition of televisual "passivity." His new tech would indeed end "the passivity of mere reception." But the passivity of Audience, the acquiescence inherent in a whole culture of and about watching, looks unaffected by TCs [telecomputers]' ('Pluram', p. 74). Wallace continues this questioning in *Infinite Jest*, portraying the fictional TP units as devices of passivity.

The concept of TP units is first introduced in the chapter dealing with Ken Erdedy's drug-taking routine. The result of Erdedy's preparations for his marijuana binge is to spend 'two straight days of smoking in front of the InterLace viewer in his bedroom' (*Jest*, p. 22). In other words, Erdedy's compulsive behaviour is tied to two things: drugs and entertainment media, the drugs inspiring him to 'stare raptly like an unbright child at entertainment cartridges'. He orders 'InterLace cartridges' at the same time he is acquiring his next batch of marijuana, with the aim of spending days as a passive spectator. This is almost identical to the images of The Entertainment in the novel, albeit on a smaller scale.⁴ Wallace uses The Entertainment as a focus of pure passivity, something that removes choice from the viewer and disables their cognitive function. Wallace depicts this urge to spectate in human psyche as an urge to passively absorb fantasy. This urge, according to Wallace transcends technological advancement, so Gilder's utopian view of television's overthrowing as being 'a major force for freedom and

⁴ I will be referring to the addictive film, 'Infinite Jest', as 'The Entertainment' throughout in order to avoid confusion with the title of the novel.

individuality, culture and morality' ignores this basic human drive.⁵ Wallace addresses this directly in 'E Unibus Pluram', writing:

It's tough to see how Gilder's soteriol vision of having more "control" over the arrangement of high-quality fantasy-bits is going to ease either the dependency that is part of my relation to TV or the impotent irony I must use to pretend I'm not dependent [...] My real dependence is on the fantasies and the images that enable them, and thus on any technology that can make images both available and fantastic ('Pluram', p. 75).

The novel continues this idea by blending depictions of dependence on the futuristic TP units, with accounts of dependence on the broadcast television of the past. Perhaps the most potent of these depictions is that of Steeply's father's addiction to *M*A*S*H*, the television show that ran between 1972 and 1983. Steeply describes his father's desire to watch the show as an 'attachment or habit', that turned into something more sinister (*Jest*, p. 639). Eventually the father begins watching reruns of the show, despite having seen them before, and becomes 'anxious, ugly, if something made him miss even one' episode, something Steeply calls a 'dark shift in his attachment to the program' (*Jest*, p. 640). Wallace depicts this 'attachment' to a farcical extent, the show's all-consuming nature inspiring Steeply's father to write letters to the characters of the show, and eventually dying while watching the show. This is an exaggerated depiction of what Gilder calls 'couch potato TV', a structure that ties the viewer into schedules and the couch.⁶ Gilder believes that a television audience 'lull themselves and their children into a stupor', and that 'PC users exploit their machines to become richer and smarter and more productive', concluding that if television were merged with PC

⁵ Gilder, p. 49.

⁶ Ibid. p. 175.

technology, the audience would discover a new-found motivation.⁷ Wallace's depiction of broadcast television isn't designed to agree with Gilder's view, but to form a platform to launch a critique. Steeply's father at first is stupefied by the television, yet as his obsession becomes manifest, he begins interacting with the show in anti-passive (albeit unhealthily strange) ways. Gilder's great optimistic vision of the future is interaction with a media that traditionally renders the viewer inert, yet Wallace shows that interaction and obsession are not mutually exclusive. In fact, it is in Wallace's depictions of the new viewing technology that Gilder's idea of passivity, or 'couch potato' viewing, is rendered. A particularly good example from *Infinite Jest* is that of The Entertainment. It is disseminated on digital cartridge, and the viewer actively chooses to put the cartridge into the TP unit.⁸ However, the result is one of pure observation, with the victim reconfiguring his machine to play the film on a 'recursive loop' while he 'sits there, attached to a congealed supper, watching' (*Jest*, p. 54). Gilder says 'TV ignores the reality that people are not inherently couch potatoes'.⁹ Wallace counters with, 'Make no mistake: we are dependent on image-technology; and the better the tech, the harder we're hooked' ('Pluram', p. 75).

Wallace challenges Gilder's theory in other ways in the novel. One of Gilder's perceived benefits of the coming era of teleputers is that of the annihilation of broadcast television's top-down, centralised business model. He writes, 'More and more authority will slip from the tops of hierarchies onto the desktops of

⁷ Ibid. pp. 214-215.

⁸ The cartridges in the novel diverge from Gilder's view of content that is disseminated by digital fibre-optic cable (although digital 'pulses' are also evident in the novel). It is clear that this is for reasons of plot. The Entertainment (and the master of The Entertainment) needs a physical presence in order for limitations to be placed on it. A purely digital, fibre-optic-based dissemination would be too easily replicated for Wallace's needs as a writer.

⁹ Gilder, p. 15.

individual entrepreneurs and engineers'.¹⁰ In other words, in Gilder's vision, there will be a democracy of content, produced by active members of a global teleputer community, rather than the broadcasts of a few rich networks. The top-down television system, according to Gilder, is 'an alien and corrosive force in democratic capitalism. Contrary to the rich and variegated promise of new technology proliferating options on every hand, TV squeezes the consciousness of an entire nation through a few score channels'.¹¹ *Infinite Jest's* depiction of this teleputer-rich future world attacks the view that there will be varied content. The teleputer network is dominated by one company, called InterLace, which disseminates cartridges and digital pulses either online or through its own retail outlets (we learn that Erdedy has to order his cartridges from 'the InterLace entertainment outlet' (*Jest*, p. 20)). Wallace's joke in calling his futuristic media company 'InterLace', is that this is a word primarily associated with analogue television broadcasting, specifically with how the analogue image is displayed without flicker. The teleputers of the future, in Wallace's world, are inextricably tied to the television of the past. Gilder seems to suggest that the culture will be enriched by the introduction of teleputers, and that 'Erstwhile couch potatoes will no longer settle for a few lowest-common-denominator programs'.¹² Yet, in Wallace's world *avant garde*, intellectually challenging film is still limited to a very small audience (an academic audience for Jim Incandenza), and the average member of the public still opts for InterLace-branded films where 'a lot of things [blow] up and [crash] into each other' (*Jest*, p. 22). In fact, it is stated that 'the bulk of his [i.e. Jim Incandenza's] stuff didn't make any ILT [InterLace TelEntertainment] menus until after his untimely death' (*Jest*, n. 167, p. 1031).

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 61.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 47.

¹² Ibid. p. 21.

InterLace, through both the branded technology and the dissemination grid, rules the whole entertainment industry. Wallace is very clear about the impossibility of the sort of democratic media that Gilder's vision depicts.

In his interview with David Lipsky, undertaken on the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace talks about democratic ideas of the internet:

This idea that the Internet's gonna become incredibly democratic? I mean, if you've spent time on the Web, you know that it's not gonna be, because that's completely overwhelming. There are four trillion bits coming at you, 99 percent of them are shit, and it's too much work to do triage to decide.¹³

Wallace believes that in place of this 'triage', consumers will return to 'gatekeepers' who direct attention to content that has quality. He continues, saying that 'the actual system dictates' this sort of structure.¹⁴ This is a précis of his work in *Infinite Jest*. Far from the teleputers offering Gilder's true democracy, they rely on InterLace, the company that acts as a gatekeeper that sends consumers to certain sources. In the same interview, he describes InterLace as 'the one publishing house from hell. They decide what you get and what you don't'.¹⁵ I will examine InterLace's role in the novel in more detail in the next section.

Gilder believes that the teleputer revolution will allow pure choice for the consumers, choice of programming, but also choice of exactly when or where to watch visual media and interact with the images they see on the screen. While Wallace agrees with Gilder that contemporary broadcast television negates this kind of choice, his argument is slightly more complex and leads to different conclusions about the future of visual media. In 'E Unibus Pluram' he constructs his argument with much help from an earlier essay by Mark Crispin Miller, titled

¹³ Lipsky, p. 87.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 88.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 87.

'Deride and Conquer'. Miller begins his essay by stating that television 'offers and provides us with an endless range of choices. Indeed, TV can be said to have itself incorporated the American dream of peaceful choice'.¹⁶ There are countless channels, all offering varied selections of programming and different views of the world, and through our remote controls we can choose exactly what to look at. Yet, Miller's depiction of this 'choice' is much more complicated than it first seems, and has influenced both Wallace's writing on television and his depiction of the future world of *Infinite Jest*. According to Miller, the television industry 'purports to give us a world of "choices," but refers only to itself'.¹⁷ Television is its own hermetically sealed world, and the 'choices' we make, such as what channel to watch, or what genre show to watch, are negated by the fact that we are bound into a self-reflexive cycle designed to make us watch more television. In other words, once we start watching we are influenced by television so that we do not make the choice to stop. The variety of programming that television promises is reduced to a uniformity of televisual norms. Miller explains this in detail:

TV now exalts TV spectatorship by preserving a hermetic vision that is uniformly televisual. Like advertising, which no longer tends to evoke realities at variance with the market, TV today shows almost nothing that might somehow clash with its own busy, monolithic style. This new stylistic near integrity is the product of a long process whereby TV has eliminated or subverted whichever of its older styles have threatened to impede the sale of goods; that is, styles that might once have encouraged some nontelevisual type of spectatorship.¹⁸

Pierre Bourdieu expands on this notion by noting how television inspires various different forms of censorship. He explains that television works on a basis of economic censorship, where commercial interests run television channels (such

¹⁶ Miller, 'Deride and Conquer'. p. 184.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 193.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 193.

as ABC being owned by Disney), creating ‘anonymous and invisible mechanisms through which the many kinds of censorship operate to make television a formidable instrument for maintaining the symbolic order’.¹⁹ The ‘symbolic order’ in this case is what Miller describes as the ‘sale of goods’, and broadcast channels owned by certain commercial interests will self-censor themselves in order not to impede or derail this sale of goods.²⁰ Both Miller and Wallace agree that television has accomplished the elimination of these anti-televisual styles by the use of irony and the ‘re-use of postmodern cool’ (‘Pluram’, p. 59). While in his early fiction, Wallace critiques the televisual use of irony, he evolves this discussion with his depiction of visual media in *Infinite Jest*. He primarily does this through discussions of advertising and subsidised forms of media, something that finds its basis in Miller’s essay. Miller describes a Pepsi advertisement in some detail, an advertisement that shows a concessions truck pull up to a crowded beach. In place of any music or advertising jingle, the operator of the truck opens, pours and gulps a bottle of Pepsi into a microphone that broadcasts his actions to the people on the beach. The sounds of the drink are meant to be enough to tempt every person away from their various activities towards the truck in order to buy a bottle of Pepsi.

For Miller, this advertisement illustrates his theory of televisual choice:

‘Despite the ad’s salute to “choice,” what triumphs over all of the free and various

¹⁹ Bourdieu, p. 16.

²⁰ It is interesting to note Wallace’s own television appearances, though there are few. Bourdieu writes that one does not go on television to say anything interesting, but merely to be seen, and he calls the televisual arena ‘a space for narcissistic exhibitionism’ (*On Television*, p. 14). In his most famous television interview on *The Charlie Rose Show* (1997), Wallace seems aware of this notion, with his tortured facial expressions and declarations that ‘coming on a television show stimulates your what-am-I-going-to-look-like gland like no other experience [...] You confront your own vanity when you think about coming on TV’. Reviewing Wallace’s performance on www.salon.com, Vince Passaro writes, ‘Authors are not supposed to act like authors when they’re given the golden seat on a talk show. They are supposed to entertain, to stick to mild and conventional wisdom or similarly mild and conventional provocations’ (<http://www.salon.com/1999/05/28/hideousmen>, 1999). Speaking in 1996 of his experiences with television, Wallace says, ‘If you’re trying to be a writer in a culture where one of our big religions is celebrity – and there’s all kinds of weird emotional and spiritual and philosophical stuff going on about watching and being watched and celebrity and image – then you really need to be outside it a bit. To the extent that you are watched, I think you’re compromised’ (Caro, p. 57).

possibilities of that summer day is the eternal monad: Pepsi, whose taste, sound, and logo you will always recognize, and always “choose,” whether you want to or not’.²¹ The advertisement relies on the same thing that television does: self-reflexivity. Where television sells the act of spectatorship, the advert refers to the success of advertising, making the product irrelevant. Miller clarifies this point: ‘This commercial cannot, for example, be said to tell a lie, since it works precisely by acknowledging the truth about itself: it is a clever ad meant to sell Pepsi, which people buy because it’s advertised so cleverly’.²² Or as Marshall McLuhan writes, ‘The product matters less as the audience participation increases’.²³ Wallace picks up Miller’s criticism and develops it slightly (even as he repeats much of Miller’s own critique in similar detail):

The commercial invites a complicity between its own witty irony and veteran viewer Joe’s cynical, nobody’s-fool appreciation of that irony. It invites Joe into an in-joke the Audience is the butt of. It congratulates Joe Briefcase, in other words, on transcending the very crowd that defines him’ (‘Pluram’, pp. 60-61).

This rising sophistication of adverts provides a foundation for Wallace’s discussion of television and spectatorship in *Infinite Jest*, much of which is based on Miller’s own theories. Miller describes the advance in advertising, from the self-referential adverts such as the Pepsi creation described above, to the phenomenon of ‘non-advertising’. Advertisements are now disguised or camouflaged as informative editorial pieces or high-budget short films in order to snare the viewer’s attention. Advertising is less about revealing the worth and advantages of products than, in Christopher Lasch’s words, manufacturing ‘a product of its own: the consumer,

²¹ Miller, ‘Deride and Conquer’. p. 187.

²² Ibid. p. 188.

²³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 2006). p. 246.

perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored. Advertising serves not so much to advertise products as to promote consumption as a way of life'.²⁴ Lasch call this process the 'propaganda of commodities', something which aims to 'turn alienation itself into a commodity'.²⁵ In other words, advertising institutionalises dissatisfaction in order to promote the palliative effects of excessive consumption. But in order to do this to the most effective degree, without the viewer being aware of the process, Miller says, the actual programming of television has had to change in subtle ways to accommodate the changing state of the adverts. Commercials help set the pace for the programming and the programming in turn helps the viewer become absorbed in the screen enough to also absorb the desired commercial message. Miller writes, 'when we speak about the decline of TV's programming as inextricable from the ascent of TV's ads, we have necessarily raised the possibility of a concomitant stupefaction of the American audience – a mass regression that is continuous with TV's advanced development as an advertising medium'.²⁶ In his book *Inside Prime Time* (1983), Todd Gitlin notes that television writers are encouraged to produce shows that are compatible with the adverts that surround them:

Advertising executives like to say that television shows are the meat in a commercial sandwich. Situation comedies above all are meant to propel the audience from one little crisis to another, each crisis erupting just before the commercial break, each fairly begging for a happy and accessible solution'.²⁷

²⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1991). p. 72.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 73

²⁶ Miller, 'Deride and Conquer'. p. 192.

²⁷ Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time: Revised Edition* (London: Routledge, 1994). p. 92.

Wallace's depiction of the decline of broadcast television is slightly more complex than this. In *Infinite Jest* we learn about the fate of broadcast television in relation to a term paper Hal has written. As Miller notes in his essay, the real concern for advertising executives is 'to prevent the viewer from "zapping," or skipping past, the commercials, an evasive action now made possible by the VCR; and those without VCRs can also zap the ads, by turning down the volume with remote control devices'.²⁸ Wallace continues from this idea, speculating on a future where this viewer behaviour has crippled the television advertising industry to some extent. Using the same language as Miller, Wallace describes 'the rise of the total-viewer-control hand-held remotes known historically as zappers, and VCR-recording advances that used subtle volume- and hysterical-pitch-sensors to edit most commercials out of any program taped' (*Jest*, p. 411). In Wallace's world, this leads to a reduced advertising fee on the major network channels, which leads to advertisers using the newly cheap advertising slots for products that would not have otherwise been advertised, namely those to do with selling products that relieve various gruesome medical conditions or bodily imperfections. These advertisements are 'so violently unpleasing to look at that they awakened from their spectatorial slumbers literally millions of Network-devotees who'd hitherto been so numbed and pacified' (*Jest*, p. 413). In Miller's words, because these advertisements had not 'set the pace for the programming', the viewing experience became disrupted, leading to viewers turning off their television sets, and making it impossible for the networks to acquire any money from advertisers. In other words, the networks could not continue to sell the concept of watching if the adverts did not help pacify the viewership. If, as McLuhan says, adverts are

²⁸ Miller, 'Deride and Conquer'. p. 189.

'carefully designed by the Madison Avenue frogmen-of-the-mind for semiconscious exposure', then these new 'violently unpleasing' commercials inspire fully conscious exposure, defeating their very purpose to inspire desire in the subconscious of the viewer.²⁹ In the example of the advert for tongue scrapers, the product is sold quite successfully by inspiring fear in the viewer, but at the same time crossing 'some kind of psychoaesthetic line' making the viewer wake up and turn off (*Jest*, p. 413). To continue McLuhan's submarine metaphor, the TV viewer is 'a skin-diver, and he no longer likes garish daylight on hard surfaces'.³⁰ N. Katherine Hayles also comments on the nature of the commercials that helped kill broadcast television, writing that adverts highlighting 'Fatty tissue and tongue coating are not innocently chosen examples, for these are parts of the body that the typical consumer wants to reject, to label as undesirable and unclean and cast out from the self'.³¹ The repetitive loop that keeps the viewer hooked to viewing, that keeps the viewer locked within the self, has been broken (I will examine the role of the self and spectatorship in more detail in the next section). So, in the near-future world, the viewer's inability to remain submerged in a state of pure spectatorship gradually kills broadcast television, suggesting that the lack of opportunity for passive watching has taken its toll on the collective psyche, and caused a similar effect to withdrawal from drugs.

InterLace, Choice and Spectatorship

With broadcast television completely deceased in the future world of *Infinite Jest*, the replacement is sold with the ideal of choice at the forefront. As mentioned

²⁹ McLuhan, p. 249.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 253.

³¹ Hayles, p. 686.

briefly in the previous section, InterLace TelEntertainment, the dominant disseminator of visual entertainment, purports to allow the viewer to '*more or less 100% choose what's on at any given time*' (*Jest*, p. 416). However, Wallace uses InterLace to interrogate traditionally American ideas of freedom of choice in contrast with traditionally American ideas of business prosperity and success. Wallace's depiction of the rise of InterLace uses ideas of synergy and monopoly that were prevalent in business in the late-1980s and 1990s. For example, Noreen Lace-Forché, the owner of InterLace, began by managing a video rental chain that had a similar rise as the once omnipresent Blockbuster. Both started as small operations in southern states (Arizona and Texas, respectively), and developed into powerful, national rental distribution chains. This similarity is emphasised by Wallace when he writes that Lace-Forché is called by Wayne Huizenga, real-life Blockbuster CEO, 'The only woman I personally fear' (*Jest*, p. 415). While Blockbuster's fortunes have declined since the rise of digital, online dissemination of entertainment, at the height of its power it was able to dictate how movies were produced. Naomi Klein writes, 'Because of Blockbuster's policy, some major film studios have altogether stopped making films that will be rated NC-17. If a rare exception is made, the studio will cut two versions – one for the theaters, one sliced and diced for Blockbuster'.³² Yet InterLace is not a simple rental outlet, and its power is not limited to the dissemination of visual entertainment. Through a process of consolidation and synergy, InterLace has managed to take over both dissemination and production of entertainment from the major, but ailing, networks. Wallace writes that InterLace owns 'the Networks' production talent and facilities, [...] two major home computer conglomerates, [...] the cutting edge Froxx 2100

³² Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005). p. 167.

CD-ROM licenses of Aapps Inc., [...] RCA's D.S.S. orbiters and hardware-patents, and [...] the digital-compatible patents to the still-needing-to-come-down-in-price-a-little technology of HDTV's visually enhanced color monitor with microprocessed circuitry', all helping with the dissemination of 'extremely high-quality entertainments that viewers would freely desire to choose even more' (*Jest*, p. 417). Bourdieu notes that companies that own broadcast hubs such as television channels dictate a censorship to those hubs, and the information being disseminated is heavily mediated. In short, the information broadcast (via cartridge or pulse) by InterLace would never contain any information that would jeopardise InterLace's commercial interests, which would begin to censor political life so that if politicians said anything negative about InterLace, it would not reach the audience. Bourdieu continues:

Television enjoys a de facto monopoly on what goes into the heads of a significant part of the population and what they think. So much emphasis on headlines and so much filling up of precious time with empty air – with nothing or almost nothing – shunts aside relevant news, that is, the information that all citizens ought to have in order to exercise their democratic rights.³³

InterLace, not just the 'de facto' monopoly, but the actual monopoly, controls information in a much more efficient way than the current broadcast model. Of course, this idea of the gatekeeper censoring its own products can be applied to all forms of media production to different extents, even literature as Wallace plays with in the 'Author Foreword' sections of *The Pale King*, but broadcast media has become the most effective way of reaching the largest audience, so the censorship becomes exaggerated.

³³ Bourdieu, p. 18.

Through merging with the broadcast networks and the technology companies, InterLace is able to create a complete monopoly that sells itself on the concept of choice. Rather tellingly, when Wallace describes the rise of InterLace, the concept of 'choice' is referred to only by the salespeople at Viney and Veals Advertising or within the advertising context. For example, 'What if, Veal's spokeswoman ruminated aloud, what if the viewer could become her/his own programming director; what if s/he could define the very entertainment-happiness it was her/his right to pursue?' (*Jest*, p. 416). InterLace as a company, however, has removed even the choice that the networks offered, as with broadcast television there are at least more than one of the gatekeepers who disseminate content. Like the Pepsi advertisement mentioned above, InterLace's business plan relies on the negation of choice, not the promotion of it. As Klein writes, 'Quite simply, every company with a powerful brand is attempting to develop a relationship with consumers that resonates so completely with their sense of self that they will aspire, or at least consent, to be serfs under these feudal brandlords'.³⁴ To paraphrase Miller, the viewer will always choose InterLace, whether they want to or not.

With all the Gilder-esque description of InterLace as a pro-active form of spectatorship, it is easy to overlook another way in which InterLace is able to remove choice from the viewer. Despite the death of broadcast television in the novel, InterLace does in fact have an option for broadcast 'pulses', which are called 'spontaneous dissemination'. This is first mentioned in the chapter dealing with the near-Eastern medical attaché's hunt for visual entertainment. We are told that his TP unit 'receives also the spontaneous disseminations of the InterLace

³⁴ Klein, p. 149.

Subscription Pulse-Matrix, but the procedures for ordering specific spontaneous pulses from the service are so technologically and cryptographically complex that the attaché has always left the whole business to his wife' (*Jest*, p. 35). In Wallace's view, the pro-active nature that InterLace is sold on is not necessarily what people want, but rather they are content to be choiceless passive viewers. The attaché is so content with the idea of choiceless viewing, he lets his wife choose what he watches. Of course, InterLace's business strategy is to dominate this area too.

This negation of choice, and the efficacy of InterLace's tactic of selling the concept of choice to the viewer, is used by Wallace to examine the relationship of the self to contemporary entertainment media. As I have detailed in previous chapters, solipsism is a central theme to Wallace's writing, and he approaches this in various ways. In terms of visual entertainment media in *Infinite Jest*, we can see that he further develops his themes of solipsism through depiction of various acts of spectatorship. In the novel, the spectator is nearly always alone, or unaware of his surrounding. Take, for example, Steeply's father, immersed in both the television show *M*A*S*H* and his own solitude, or Erdedy's solo session in front of his InterLace TP Unit, thinking both about the cartridges he will view alone and the act of masturbation that these binges inspire in him. The most extreme example of this is the medical attaché's viewing of *The Entertainment*, alone in his apartment and completely isolated. In constructing a system of pure spectatorship, regardless of the content of the programming, InterLace has created 'a society of individuals fixated behind closed doors on machines streaming entertainment designed to fulfill their every desire'.³⁵

³⁵ Mary K. Holland, "'The Art's Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", *Critique*, 47.3 (2006), 218-242. (p. 229).

Wallace's near-future world reflects his own ideas about consumption of contemporary visual media and the problems he sees with so many hours spent sitting in front of a television. Visual media in the novel returns to Wallace's discussion of attention and morality. It is something that distracts the attention, preventing an individual from defeating the solipsistic self. Wallace talks about this subject in his interview with David Lipsky, saying:

one of the things that makes TV seductive, is that it gives the illusion of relationships with people. It's a way to have people in the room talking and being entertaining, but it doesn't require anything of me. [...] I can receive entertainment and stimulation. Without having to give anything back but the most tangential kind of attention.³⁶

This is a problem that is illustrated in the novel, as I have described above. The dissemination system of the visual media in the novel also has the effect of negating choice, which Wallace sees as a moral problem that fits with the philosophical grounding of the novel. Existentially speaking, choice is necessary to lead a good life, and according to Kierkegaard, without choice and individual leads a purely aesthetic existence, a choiceless *aeterno modo*. Yet, in a different view, that of Iris Murdoch, moral change gradually erodes the need for choice as an individual's attention is focussed on goodness. She writes, 'If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at'.³⁷ The passive state of the viewer in the novel can be viewed both existentially and in Murdochian terms. The aesthete allows himself to be seduced by easy pleasure and desires the effortless fulfilment that television offers; he aims to remove choice from his existence. Yet, television also absorbs the attention, removing the chance for the

³⁶ Lipsky, p. 85.

³⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001). p. 38.

moral rehabilitation of the viewer, and encouraging a descent into a solipsistic spiral.³⁸

Interestingly, it is the solutions that Wallace's fictional world offers for the problem of passive, attention-snaring spectatorship that help examine this. As N. Katherine Hayles notes, the problem here lies in 'an ideology that celebrates an autonomous independent subject who is free to engage in the pursuit of happiness, a subject who has the right to grab what pleasure he can without regard for the cost of that pursuit to others'.³⁹ In other words, the American ideology encourages an individual's attention to be focussed on the needs of the self. The solutions that the novel offers, according to Hayles, are, 'tennis and Alcoholics Anonymous' which are 'presented not primarily as sports or organizations, but as technologies of the self. If the problem originates in the presumption of autonomy that is the founding principle of the liberal humanist self, then nothing less than a reconceptualization of subjectivity can offer a solution'.⁴⁰ While Hayles is primarily talking about the self-improvement devices of both AA and the tennis academy, both institutions deal with visual media and entertainment in ways differing from the majority of Wallace's future society. While I will discuss the philosophical implications of AA's regime of reconfiguring the self's attention in Chapter Six, it is useful to see how Wallace uses popular entertainment to reinforce his ideas. As I have mentioned in relation to Erdedy, the passive viewing of entertainment is described in tandem with the ingesting of drugs. Another example of this is near the end of the novel, when Don Gately and Gene Fackelmann are described at length taking drugs in an unfurnished apartment, unfurnished as the two men have sold all of the furniture in order to raise money

³⁸ While these ideas are paraphrased here, they are explored in much more detail in Chapter Six.

³⁹ Hayles, pp. 692-693.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 693.

for the purchase of drugs, in this case a ‘mountain of Dilaudid’ (*Jest*, p. 933). Rather tellingly, the only piece of furniture that the men have kept is the TP unit, which is playing one of Jim Incandenza’s old films, *Various Small Flames* (*Jest*, n. 24, p. 988). This is contrasted with the strict rules about entertainment in Ennet House. Wallace describes these rules:

‘Cartridges are not allowed after 0000h. [...] All the Ennet House viewer gets on Spontaneous Dissemination is basic InterLace, and from 0200 to 0400 InterLace NNE downloads for the next dissemination-day and cuts all transmissions except one line’s four straight redissemms of “The Mr. Bouncety-Bounce Daily Program”’ (*Jest*, p. 648).

The options for viewing are limited by the staff at Ennet House, who also check each cartridge before allowing the residents to watch them. Ennet House can be seen as a place not just to cleanse the addict of drug use, but also to cleanse them of passivity and distracted attentions.

Similarly, Enfield Tennis Academy has a strict regime that is in place to aid the students in ‘a progression towards self-forgetting’ (*Jest*, p. 635). They are also required, at the behest of Jim, to study entertainment in a way that precludes passive viewing, the results of which can be seen in Hal’s essay on heroes in popular television shows, *Hill Street Blues* and *Hawaii 5-0* (*Jest*, pp. 140-142). The philosophy of E.T.A. also bleeds into Jim’s views on creating entertainments, including his addictive masterwork, *Infinite Jest*. We learn from the wraith that it was Jim’s intention that The Entertainment aid in bringing Hal out of himself, to aid him, to reference E.T.A.’s philosophy, in ‘progression towards self-forgetting’. The wraith reports Jim’s intentions thus:

His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse the thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to laugh. To bring him "out of himself," as they say. The womb could be used both ways. A way to say I AM SO VERY, VERY SORRY and have it *heard* (*Jest*, p. 839. Wallace's emphasis).

The fact that Jim thinks that the 'womb could be used both ways' is important. He believes that in utilising a medium that traditionally inspires solipsism and isolation, he can paradoxically reverse such notions and connect, through the screen, with his son. Noticing what can be perceived as Jim's folly, Mary K. Holland writes, 'the film's wake of destruction testifies that, to the adult plagued by longing and loss in this culture of irony, mediation, and narcissism, the chance to remain the blissfully entertained infant is more compelling than hearing that apology and joining the adult community'.⁴¹ When we first meet Hal, a year after the bulk of the narrative, he is literally locked within himself, unable to communicate with the outside world at all. Even the written word would 'look to you like some infant's random stabs on a keyboard' (*Jest*, p. 9). We are left to question whether this is the work of The Entertainment (and thus Jim's intentions have been a total failure) or some other negative influence (the eaten mould? The DMZ-laced toothbrush?). It is clear from the narrative concerning the medical attaché that the film is capable of both infantilisation and locking viewers within themselves. Jim's folly is an ironic one, and it ignores the true solutions for anti-solipsistic enlightenment, the ones that are active in institutions such as AA: the reconfiguring of one's attention, or as Hayles puts it, 'nothing less than a reconceptualization of subjectivity can offer a solution'.⁴² Jim is falling foul of the very traits he is trying to save his son from, namely an unwillingness to connect with his son in a human and adult way.

⁴¹ Holland, p. 238.

⁴² Hayles, p. 693.

Instead his idea is to distract attention with entertainment in order to subconsciously convey his message. As Wallace says:

what the book is supposed to be about is, What happened to *us*, that I'm now willing [...] to derive enormous amounts of my sense of community and awareness of other people, from television? But I'm not willing to undergo the stress and awkwardness and potential *shit* of dealing with other people.⁴³

Jim conveys this unwillingness even as he deplores it in his son. His earlier, pre-Entertainment attempts to connect with Hal take a farcical turn, when Wallace depicts him dressing up as a 'professional conversationalist' (*Jest*, p. 28). The scene details Jim's inability to connect because he doesn't listen to his son; his attention does not focus on the person he is conversing with therefore he 'presents with delusions about people's mouths moving but nothing coming out' (*Jest*, p. 30). He uses his disguise (that gradually melts during the conversation) in much the same way as he uses The Entertainment, as a device for transmitting a desired message without revealing himself, or in Wallace words, without dealing with 'the stress and awkwardness and potential *shit* of dealing with other people'. It is just one of the ways in which Wallace interrogates ideas of communication and isolation in the novel.

One section of the novel focuses on the rise and fall of videophony as a replacement for standard voice-only telephony, a medium which Wallace portrays as dividing attention between the interlocutors and the myriad distractions that surround telephone conversations. In 1964, media theorist Marshall McLuhan wrote, 'The telephone demands complete participation, unlike the written and printed page. Any literate man resents such a heavy demand for his total attention,

⁴³ Lipsky, p. 85. Lipsky's emphasis.

because he has long been accustomed to fragmentary attention'.⁴⁴ Here, McLuhan is referencing his theory that, with new media, a person's sensory ratio shifts. For example, with the printed word, the reader creates an audio soundtrack in his head so it extends his aural sense, and with the radio the listener creates the images, so it extends his sight. However, he theorises that the telephone never inspires this visualisation because it demands full participation of the senses, which Western man finds difficult to contend with. McLuhan continues, 'Many people feel the strong urge to "doodle" while telephoning. This fact is very much related to the characteristic of this medium, namely that it demands participation of our senses and faculties'.⁴⁵ The phone cannot be used as a background to another activity (as with the radio), it demands participation of two people's faculties. Doodling, in McLuhan's eyes, is an attempt to ease the resentment of such heavy demands on an individual's attention. Wallace's writing echoes this sentiment, indicating that such activity during a telephone call is an individual's way of easing the effort of paying attention to another human being.

Early in the novel, there is a chapter dealing with the rise and fall of 'videophony'. This chapter echoes many of McLuhan's comments about telephony, but extends them further. Part of the reason for the failure of videophony in the novel is that of the divided attention of the two interlocutors. Wallace writes:

Good old traditional audio-only phone conversations allowed you to presume that the person on the other end was paying complete attention to you while also permitting you not to have to pay anything even close to complete attention to her. A traditional aural-only conversation [...] let you enter a kind of semi-attentive fugue: while conversing you could look around the room, doodle, fine-groom, peel tiny bits of dead skin away from your

⁴⁴ McLuhan, p. 291.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 292.

cuticles, compose phone-pad haiku, stir things on the stove (*Jest*, pp. 145-146).

As with television, the listener can operate under the illusion that the he is part of a community and connecting with other people while simultaneously avoiding, to quote Wallace, a way to 'figure out how to be together in the same room'.⁴⁶ This, in the over-mediated society of *Infinite Jest*, is not desirable, as revealed in the description of videophony: 'Callers now found they had to compose the same sort of earnest, slightly overintense listener's expression they had to compose for in-person exchanges' which people found 'monstrously stressful' (*Jest*, pp. 146-147).

Christoph Ribbat links this impulse to the other addictions in the book, saying the rejection of videophony leads to the reinforced illusion of 'unilateral attention' that is 'so gratifying that it turns into another addictive force in a novel unfolding countless different sorts of addiction'.⁴⁷ Evoking Mary K. Holland's theory that the various entertainments in the novel lead to an infantilisation of the viewer, Ribbat says that this is also the case with audio-only telephony. He writes of the various attention-snaring fiddles carried out by the individual on the telephone, 'The catalogue of gestures compiled by the narrative voice signifies a childish kind of attention to one's self and to one's self only'.⁴⁸ As with the various forms of entertainment, voice-only telephony keeps the individual from joining the healthy adult community and maintains the solipsistic, vain isolation they are content in which to dwell.

However, throughout the novel, Wallace shows another relationship with media that cannot be interpreted in the same way. Mario Incandenza once again

⁴⁶ Lipsky, p. 85.

⁴⁷ Christoph Ribbat, 'Being "Stresslessly Invisible": The Rise and Fall of Videophony in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30.4 (2010), 252-258. (p. 256).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

becomes the example of anti-solipsism. In the novel, he consumes the archaic radio, rather than dwelling in front of the TP viewer. Timothy Aubry writes that Mario 'becomes attached to a radio show because it offers the only earnest voice he can find in a culture of irony and detachment'.⁴⁹ This may be the case, but Mario's relationship with the radio is a little more complex. Wallace's choice of Mario's chosen medium of consumption is extremely telling. In a world where technological advances mean that any entertainment an individual desires can be there through digital on-demand dissemination, Mario is deeply connected to the archaic form of broadcast radio. The radio station itself, WYYY, is depicted as battling with 'minor-league' ratings and 'the EM-miasma of cellular and interconsole phone transmissions and TP's EM-auras that crown the FM fringes from every side' (*Jest*, p. 184). It is clearly the underdog in the battle for attention, yet Wallace depicts the radio station as a kind of virtuous transmission, emanating from the brain-shaped MIT student's union building that has 'a halo-ish ring at the level of like eaves' that operates as a safety balcony (*Jest*, p. 186). It is revealed that:

Mario's fallen in love with the first Madame Psychosis programs because he felt like he was listening to someone sad read out loud from yellow letters she'd taken out of a shoebox on a rainy P.M., stuff about heartbreak and people you loved dying and U.S. woe, stuff that was real' (*Jest*, p. 592).

This is the opposite of the visual media of the novel because it inspires an attention that is focussed away from the self. It is not about passive pleasure or an infantile satisfaction.

⁴⁹ Timothy Richard Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Fiction Does for Middle Class Americans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011). p. 105.

McLuhan can help understand the complex role of radio within the novel, and its ability to operate as a media that is able to focus the attention in different non-passive ways. He calls the radio 'The Tribal Drum', and details its development as an anti-televisual, socially cohesive medium.⁵⁰ He writes:

One of the many effects of television on radio has been to shift radio from an entertainment medium into a kind of nervous information system. News bulletins, time signals, traffic data, and, above all, weather reports now serve to enhance the native power of radio to involve people in one another.⁵¹

Radio, according to McLuhan, inspires an involvement in community, or a return to archaic tribal impulses, which can be good as well as bad. He attributes Hitler's rise to power on the explosive effects of the medium because it 'comes to us ostensibly with person-to-person directness that is private and intimate, while in more urgent fact, it is really a subliminal echo chamber of magical power to touch remote and forgotten chords'.⁵² TV, on the other hand, is 'a cool medium. It rejects hot figures and hot issues and people from the hot press media', presenting them as 'cartoon characters'. In this reading Hitler, on TV, would have been a clown with the inability of audiences to take him seriously. Paul Levinson elucidates this notion, explaining that radio-age politicians of all political leanings (including Hitler, Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt) 'came into the living room, heretofore the precinct of family, and spoke via a device unable to register any contrary opinion or objection. Listeners, whatever their ages, became children at the feet of these radio fathers'.⁵³ He goes on to say that rather than contributing to the idea of a Global Village, the radio created a national family where 'every citizen within

⁵⁰ McLuhan, p. 324.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 326.

⁵² Ibid. p. 330.

⁵³ Paul Levinson, *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium* (London: Routledge, 2001). p. 67.

earshot of the broadcast was a member without authority, a child'. As Josh Cohen argues, the visual image opens up 'a potentially limitless range of readerly interpretations'.⁵⁴ He goes on to say that the visual spectator has 'a new and powerful acuity' that is not inspired by other media, such as text and radio.⁵⁵ These radio father figures, in McLuhan's words 'hot' characters, slowly gave way to 'cool' politicians, such as John F. Kennedy, subjects that flourished in the participatory arena of the voyeur because of the way they presented themselves.⁵⁶ This is reflected in the novel, as a lounge singer, Johnny Gentle, has become president, and his antics such as swinging his microphone at his inauguration are perfect spectacles for the cool medium of television. Jonathan Miller argues that McLuhan has underestimated television's destructive power. He writes, 'TV *has* enlarged the family of man, it has done so beyond the point where genuine sentiment can be expressed for all its constituent members'.⁵⁷ Yet, even in disagreeing, Miller illuminates McLuhan's theories from a different angle. Television may help create a global community with shared experience, but its great failing as a medium is that it depicts a generic shared experience that cannot contain any *genuine* sincerity or sentimental worth.⁵⁸

But in Wallace's world, the cohesive effects of radio are not felt in the same way as it is a discarded medium that does not have the same power as the divisive visual entertainment. The authoritarian radio family has given way to the

⁵⁴ Josh Cohen, *Spectacular Allegories* (London: Pluto, 1998). p. 74.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 78.

⁵⁶ McLuhan notes that Kennedy defeated Nixon directly because of television, because Nixon's image was too hot. He writes, 'Without TV, Nixon had it made' (McLuhan, p. 360). Levinson extends this idea, noting that Ronald Reagan, a movie star, was the most successful 'televised' president. Televisual voyeurism, according to Levinson, reached its peak with Clinton, when even reports of his bad behaviour could not derail his presidency. The members of the televisual village, with their desire to be entertained, had come to enjoy these scandals (Levinson, p. 69).

⁵⁷ Jonathan Miller, *McLuhan* (London: Fontana, 1971). p. 126. Miller's emphasis.

⁵⁸ It is worth noting that, while Miller's book is among the first sustained critical studies of McLuhan, it largely misunderstands key concepts (even mixing up the 'hot' and 'cool' classifications). Many McLuhanists, including Paul Levinson and W. Terrence Gordon, do not hold Miller's book in very high esteem.

impersonal televisual village. We see Mario, the sole consumer of radio in the novel, feel the intimacy of the medium in its ability to deal with 'stuff that was real'. The irony of television, and its array of 'cartoon characters', gives way to the sincerity of radio. The posture of Mario as he listens to the radio is also important. Wallace describes the scene thus:

And he is a fanatical listener/observer. He treats the lavish Tatsouka fringe-FM-band tuner in the living room of the Headmaster's House like the kids of three generations past, listening the way other kids watch TP, opting for mono and sitting right up close to one of the speakers with his head cocked dog-like, listening, staring into that special pocket of near-middle distance reserved for the serious listener (*Jest*, p. 189).

Mario is seemingly undergoing what McLuhan would call a 'depth experience', something that he reserves for television and its 'familiar and pathetic effect' on the posture of children.⁵⁹ However, this leads to more complex relationships with McLuhan's theories. The 'depth experience' of television, according to McLuhan, 'demands participation and involvement [...] of the whole being'.⁶⁰ Television is a 'cool' medium, meaning there is a smaller amount of information being transmitted and the viewer fills a participatory role in order to interpret the visual information. McLuhan is talking about a sensory participation, and television is something that can absorb all of the senses, thus in Wallace's words, the attention of the viewer is absorbed to the demands television has on the senses, rendering the viewer physically passive and distracted. Radio, on the other hand, a 'hot' medium, does not demand the same sensory participation, as it is information rich. As Andrew Crisell notes, radio has a 'unique combination of suggestiveness and flexibility – from the effect of its messages, whether factual or fictional, on the listener's

⁵⁹ McLuhan, p. 336.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 365.

imagination together with the fact that it can accompany him in a range of other activities he wishes to perform'.⁶¹ This flexibility allows the listener to divide attention between the programme and other activities, thus denying total immersion, yet Mario has a 'depth experience' with radio that McLuhan reserves for television, suggesting his engagement with the 'hot', information-rich medium is a somehow preternatural or evolved feat of attention. It also contradicts McLuhan, whose television is 'cool' and therefore 'involves us in a moving depth, but it does not excite, agitate or arouse. Presumably, this is a feature of all depth experience'.⁶² Not so with Mario, who forges a deep emotional involvement with Madame Psychosis' radio show. Wallace writes, 'One of the reasons Mario's obsessed with her show is that he's somehow sure Madame Psychosis cannot herself sense the compelling beauty and light she projects over the air' (*Jest*, p. 190). In his essay 'Faking It', Michael Sorkin approaches the conundrum of passive watching slightly differently, writing:

The idiosyncrasy of "watching" television (rather than "seeing" it) turns out to be no idiosyncrasy at all. Nothing fashioned from the field of bits is finally any different from any other selection. The uncertainties are merely formal, not substantial. By such deprivations of meaning, the medium renders itself purely aesthetic. Here it touches the fullness of the surrealist ambition, that total suspension of the "critical intellect".⁶³

McLuhan's 'depth experience' of television in Sorkin's eyes lacks the engagement of any critical function, leaving the viewer's brain with no other recourse than to 'sway to its [television's] intoxicating rhythms'. Mario reclaims the 'depth experience', applying it to the medium of radio, which is anti-aesthetic and

⁶¹ Andrew Crisell, *Understanding Radio: Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 1994). p. 14.

⁶² McLuhan, p. 368.

⁶³ Sorkin, 'Faking It'. p. 182.

engages both the critical intellect and the emotional mind, suggesting his active participation is mandatory to understanding.

Mario's relationship with media stretches to other fields in the novel. He is portrayed as an avid producer of film, and is frequently seen with a head-mounted camera as he waddles through the narrative. Yet, he is never portrayed as an avid consumer of visual media, presenting an interesting division at the core of his character. His activity not only reinforces his identity as an active observer (the camera can be seen as his attentive eye, pointing resolutely outward), but it also subverts the notion that a relationship to visual media is by necessity passive. His films are also anti-commercial, constructed for a private audience, and for specific reasons other than to entertain. As Wallace writes:

Mario Incandenza's designated function around Enfield Tennis Academy is filmic: sometimes during A.M. drills or P.M. matches he'll be assigned by Coach Schtitt et al. to set up an old camcorder [...] and record a certain area of the court, video-taping different kids' strokes, footwork, certain tics and hitches in serves or running volleys, so that the staff can show the tapes to the kids instructionally [...]. The reason being it's a lot easier to fix something if you can see it (*Jest*, pp. 54-55).

Many of Mario's films are documentary in nature, and utilitarian in direction, thus avoiding passive consumption, yet he does pursue more artistic endeavours. The most overt of these is the almost-fully-transcribed puppet-show adaptation of his father's *The ONANtiad*. The film is a parody, yet it is based on the rise to power of the President, the creation of ONAN and the Great Concavity, and the subsidisation of the years. It is significant that this film is an adaptation of his father's original, and also significant that we are told that it is 'pretty obvious that somebody else in the Incandenza family had at least an amanuentic hand in the screenplay' (*Jest*, p. 381). If, as McLuhan says, movies are a 'form of statement

without syntax', then Mario has adopted others' statements in order to produce his film.⁶⁴ The film can be seen as an anti-narcissistic tribute to his father, the political satire within being developed by someone other than Mario, or at least filtered through both his father's vision and the Incandenza family member who had a hand in the script, thus diluting the authorship of the film/statement significantly.

Mario's relationship with media in the novel helps bolster the philosophical implications of the character. His consumption of media does not fit with the pattern in the novel as he is not consuming for self-pleasure or entertainment, but to escape the ironic, insincere world he is living in. His film production significantly does not contain his personality and can be seen as anti-entertainment observations of the world around him.

The Rebirth of Advertising and the Growth of Consumerism in *Infinite Jest*

With traditional forms of advertising extinct in Wallace's fictional world, the advertising agencies have been proactive in creating new opportunities for their businesses. The most obvious form of advertising within the novel is the creation of 'Subsidized Time'. After the death of traditional broadcast television advertising, Viney & Veals Advertising Agency was instrumental in the rise of alternate advertising methods, including inspiring companies to 'sponsor' a year, so that time itself became commercialised. Wallace uses the subsidizing of years in the novel to depict many of his themes, particularly those to do with consumption and waste. This is reinforced by the selection of the products being advertised:

⁶⁴ McLuhan, p. 311.

- (1) Year of the Whopper [junk food]
- (2) Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad [haemorrhoid treatment]
- (3) Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar [either soap or choc-ice-style junk food]
- (4) Year of the Purdue Wonderchicken [mass-produced meat product]
- (5) Year of the Whisper-Quiet Maytag Dishmaster [a dishwasher]
- (6) Year of the Yushityu 2007 Mimetic-Resolution-Cartridge-View-Motherboard-Easy-To-Install-Upgrade For Internatron/InterLace TP Systems For Home, Office, Or Mobile (*sic*) [the only fictional product, entertainment]
- (7) Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland [food]
- (8) Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment [adult nappy]
- (9) Year of Glad [trash bags] (*Jest*, p. 223).

All of the products chosen fit into an image of cyclical consumption and waste: the food products evoke mass consumption, the others evoke images of both bodily and societal waste. The only odd one out, number six in the above list, is a fictional product used in the teleputers, but in the context of the novel as a whole, it fits in with both consumption and waste. Wallace views entertainment and junk food in a similar way: waste products disguised as sustenance (literal and cultural). In his engagement with waste culture, Wallace is writing in an established tradition in American fiction, one that is concerned with constructing artistic foundations in a criticism of consumer society's consequences. Perhaps the most relevant author in this tradition is Wallace's immediate influence Don DeLillo, who, as Tom LeClair puts it, 'recycles American waste into art to warn against entropy, both thermodynamic and informational'.⁶⁵ This idea of entropy can be seen in Wallace's dealing with waste culture, as he depicts a society on the edge of chaos, its attempts at waste containment gradually deteriorating and spilling into the bordering landscape. The images of waste in *Infinite Jest* help to position Wallace as a systems novelist, as LeClair defines it in reference to authors such as William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon and DeLillo, specifically in the

⁶⁵ Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987). p. 212.

way he deals with defining concepts such as 'patriarchal mastery, monotheism, instrumental mechanism, statist imperialism and totalitarianism, monopolistic capitalism, consensus politics, industrial growth, and an alienated consumerism of objects, entertainment, and information – a cultural system of waste'.⁶⁶ I have examined *Infinite Jest* as a systems novel to a fuller extent in the previous chapter, but it is useful to establish the context of Wallace's thematic use of waste and images of consumption.

Wallace is using the subsidizing of time in several different ways in the novel, not least to obscure both the novel's setting and chronology. It also furthers the development of the homogenisation of the future-world. As McLuhan writes, 'Any community that wants to expedite and maximize the exchange of goods and services has simply got to homogenize its social life'.⁶⁷ This echoes Francis Fukuyama's writing in *The End of History and The Last Man* (1992), in which he writes that 'economic development encourages liberal democracy [...] because it has a tremendous levelling effect through its need for universal education. Old class barriers are broken down in favor of a general condition of equality and opportunity'.⁶⁸ His vision is one where homogeneity and universality of culture is a good thing, something that leads to equality, where slaves can realise they are human and transcend their positions. In other words, social mobility is made easier once education is made universally available, even as class barriers are established in economic terms. Yet, in terms of McLuhan's vision of the world, slaves remain slaves, their master just changes, becoming the heavily mediated broadcast mouthpiece and the advertisers that use it. Wallace takes this idea to the extreme, removing easily traceable chronology and homogenising the vista of

⁶⁶ LeClair, *The Art of Excess*. p. 16.

⁶⁷ McLuhan, p. 249.

⁶⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992). p. 205.

time. Significantly, this style of advertising disposes of the subtle nuances and tricks of the trade that I have described in the earlier section. Instead, it is a direct approach: naked, unfiltered advertising. In addition to the naming of the years, the products are blended with the American icon of the Statue of Liberty, a Burger King Whopper replacing the torch in the aloft hand of the statue, for example. Gone are the target markets that television pitched to. The advertisers are treating society as a homogenised mass, negating any distinction between different cultures or groups living within the American community (the novel takes this further, homogenising Mexican and Canadian cultures into ONAN). It has become a classless society, not one of opportunity as Fukuyama depicts, but one of passivity. It can be seen as an end of history, not as in Fukuyama's theory of the transcendent liberal democracy trumping what has gone before, but as ruthlessly mercantile and controlling media erasing the once robust and varied cultural foundation of American society.

If, as David Lyon writes, 'identities are constructed through consuming' and we can 'Forget the idea that who we are is given by God or achieved through hard work in a calling or a career', Wallace is presenting a world where advertisers help dictate the identities of the populace through the manufactured temporal landscape that they necessarily live in.⁶⁹ While Wallace's depiction of advertising presents a world where even the years have become tools to inspire thoughtless consumption, it is perhaps more interesting to examine the ways in which he depicts the consequences of consumption, or the 'waste' part of the cycle represented in the products chosen for the names of the years.

⁶⁹ David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000). p. 12.

This idea also shows up in *Underworld* (1997), a novel that was published the same year as *Infinite Jest* and about which Wallace corresponded with Don DeLillo.⁷⁰ DeLillo writes:

Consume or die. That's the mandate of our culture. And it all ends up in the dump. We make stupendous amounts of garbage, then we react to it, not only technologically but in our hearts and minds. We let it shape us. We let it control our thinking. Garbage comes first, then we build a system to deal with it.⁷¹

Wallace's future America is one that has literally been shaped by the system built to deal with garbage. Both its politics and cartography have been altered by the perceived need to deal with the rubbish its citizens are producing. The party in power, the C.U.S.P. or Clean U.S. Party, has created The Great Concavity, a large swathe of land given over to the dumping of waste and promptly coerced Canada into annexing the land. In the novel, this is celebrated as Interdependence, yet N. Katherine Hayles challenges this, writing, 'There is no real "inter" in this version of Interdependence, only a pretense of hygiene created by the refusal to recognize the parts of oneself which are considered unclean, a process that, when it takes place in the psychological realm, is known as abjection'.⁷² Hayles relates the abject to that which is 'cast out from the self [...] yet somehow also unmistakably belongs to the self'.⁷³ The novel is full of characters who want to divest themselves of that which they deem disgusting, or a waste product of their consumption. For

⁷⁰ Wallace writes to DeLillo that *Underworld* 'somehow manages to force us to read structurally and critically without doing the rapid detached scan that connective/thematic reading usually demands. I hope I put that at least halfway clearly, because it seems to me hugely important, for the book and for you and for millennial U.S. letters all at the same time' (HRC, DeLillo Inventory, Untitled Letter Dated 19/1/97, fol. 101.10)

⁷¹ Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1999). pp. 287-288.

⁷² Hayles, p. 685.

⁷³ Julia Kristeva coined the term 'abjection', defining it as 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). p. 4). In Wallace's world, the boundary, or symbolic order, between clean and unclean is threatened by the sheer volume of waste that is creeping out of The Great Concavity.

example, Avril has ‘a violent phobic thing about vermin and waste and insects and overall facility hygiene’ (*Jest*, p. 671). Hayles also notes the example of the E.T.A. student Idris, who has a lengthy conversation about waste and the Concavity with Pemulis while ‘full of what he wants to send away from himself and hopes will not return’.⁷⁴ However, there is an example that reverses this image, that of Lyle, E.T.A.’s resident guru who proffers encouraging and therapeutic wisdom in exchange for the sweat of the students. He is said to live ‘off the sweat of others. Literally. The fluids and salts and fatty acids’ (*Jest*, p. 128). Thus he draws the abject towards himself, recasting it as vital sustenance. Lyle’s need for the waste of the students also runs parallel to the fact that the Concavity needs regular inputs of waste in order to maintain the cycle of growth and decay. The Concavity ‘goes from overgrown to wasteland to overgrown several times a month’, as the toxins in the waste get exhausted by the annular technology at work within the borders (*Jest*, p. 573). Similarly, Lyle is able to process the ‘fluids and salts and fatty acids’ of other people’s excretions, turning them into something useful for his body. Both the Concavity and Lyle can be seen to transcend the American consumption-to-waste continuum by creating a cycle where waste is used in positive ways (albeit grotesquely positive in the Concavity’s borders). The United States of *Infinite Jest* is caught in a cycle of abjection, compulsively sending away waste to the Concavity and covering the ensuing misery with walls and fans to stop any of the toxins seeping into the community as a whole.

The novel’s setting also reinforces the idea that, through this process of consumption and waste, America is reaching breaking point. The ‘Year of Glad’ is said to be ‘the very last year of O.N.A.N.ite Subsidized Time’, indicating that the

⁷⁴ Hayles, p. 688.

subsidised society is eventually breaking down after nine years of naked marketing and consumerism (*Jest*, n. 114, p. 1022). Stephen Burn notes that the novel is moving ‘toward an apocalyptic collision’, suggesting that ‘a feast of the dead is imminent’.⁷⁵ However, the collapse of Subsidised Time mirrors Hal’s succumbing to his own solipsism. Portrayed as a selfish consumer throughout the novel, his attention pointing inward, he finally becomes literally trapped within himself – a self-defeating conclusion that renders him unable to acquire the much-desired scholarship from the University of Arizona. The era of Subsidised Time in the novel represents a societal focus on consumption, easy pleasures and a hiding of consequences, much as Hal has been doing. It is a failed experiment that is coming to its own terminus. Throughout the narrative we can see the ecologically unstable Concavity encroaching on civilisation in the form of feral hamsters and oversized bugs, something that Hayles suggests signifies that ‘the abjected does not disappear but rather returns in magnified form’.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Through his use of popular culture and technology, and through his images of consumption and waste, Wallace attempts to depict his views of *fin de millennium* America. His depictions of entertainment and popular culture in particular run parallel to his philosophical discussions of solipsism and morality which I will explore in the next chapter. In his interview with David Lipsky he says, ‘I’m not saying there’s something sinister or horrible or wrong with entertainment. [...] I’m saying it’s a continuum’, meaning that giving one’s self over to passive pleasure is

⁷⁵ Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest*. p. 65.

⁷⁶ Hayles, p. 692.

a process that will grow and take over one's life, just as drugs are seen to do in the novel.⁷⁷ In the novel, we see characters at various intervals on this 'continuum', from Mario's relatively benign consumption of radio, to the medical attaché's literal incapacitation in his desire to repeatedly watch *The Entertainment*. It would be wrong to say that this indicates that *Infinite Jest* contains a negative portrayal of the actual device of television. As he writes in 'E Unibus Pluram', 'Treating television as evil is just as reductive and silly as treating it like a toaster w/ pictures' ('Pluram', p. 37). What Wallace is criticising in *Infinite Jest* is how the fetishisation of passive watching and spectatorship can be seductive and can lead to a crisis of attention, and ultimately solipsistic immorality. It is the gatekeepers of broadcast information that Wallace positions as the facilitators of this malady, and their techniques for stimulating this seduction and using it to their advantages in the consumerist sphere. Popular culture in Wallace's world is not necessarily an evil concept, and there are indications that the characters can have a nourishing relationship with it if they can control their attentions, and not lapse into a passive state while consuming it. Late in the novel, Hal alludes to the negative effects of something absorbing attention, stating that it's what people want in their lives:

We are all dying to give our lives away to something, maybe. God or Satan, politics or grammar, topology or philately – the object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly. To games or needles, to some other person. Something pathetic about it. A flight-from in the form of a plunging-into. Flight from what exactly? (*Jest*, p. 900).

Yet Wallace's vision is not a purely sceptical one, as he offers possible solutions to combat this descent into mediated solipsism, and to move beyond what he perceives to be the waste products of such an existence. The most overt

⁷⁷ Lipsky, p. 81.

solution is the AA doctrine of focussing the attention away from the easy pleasures, which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter. It is Donald Gately who takes on the role of moral hero in the novel, and through his rehabilitation from entertainment- and drug-fixated addict, Wallace is able to chart possible methods for realigning what he calls the continuum of addiction (which could also be described as a continuum of passivity). In the next chapter I will discuss the philosophical implications of these methods of combatting passivity in more detail.

Chapter Six

Higher Powers: *Infinite Jest* and Philosophy

Infinite Jest marks both a departure from and a continuation of the philosophical engagement in Wallace's earlier work. Gone are the overt, 'INTERPRET-ME'-style references to philosophical influences, such as *The Broom of the System*'s clear invocation of the theories of Wittgenstein and, to a lesser extent, Derrida. Gone also are Wallace's preoccupations with abstract philosophical theory and its application to lived life, replaced by the notion that life can be positively affected by elements of moral philosophy. In many ways, *The Broom of the System* failed to offer a solution to the solipsistic conclusions forced upon the narrative by Wallace's engagement with Wittgenstein and Derrida, but with *Infinite Jest* he focuses on charting possible escapes from the solipsistic behaviour that he believes is forced upon millennial society by myriad sources.

***Infinite Jest*, Lacan and the Problems of The Self**

In his book, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Marshall Boswell introduces the idea that there is a Lacanian motif of the infant running through *Infinite Jest*, writing that the novel 'takes on Lacan's bewilderingly difficult theories about desire, pleasure, subjectivity, and infantile preoccupations with mothers'.¹ Boswell specifically references Lacan's essay 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I / Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' (1949) as an example of

¹ Boswell, p. 128.

Wallace's engagement with the philosopher and psychoanalyst's theories. As Boswell notes, the image of the infant, or the infantilisation of adults, regularly occurs in the novel, from the mythical oversized baby that roams the toxic landscape of *The Great Concavity*, to the brief descriptions of the addictively entertaining film. For Boswell, Lacan's essay on the mirror-stage is a necessary key for understanding Wallace's intentions when he describes the highly addictive film. Lacan's essay deals with the first moment a child recognises himself in a mirror, thus gaining the knowledge that he is an individual, or Self. Lacan describes this process:

the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation – and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an “orthopedic” form of its totality – and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. Thus, the shattering of the *Innenwelt* [the child's inner world] to *Umwelt* [reality] circle gives rise to an inexhaustible squaring of the ego's audits.²

In other words, the child becomes aware of himself as an autonomous and individual being and begins to form an identity that will allow him to operate in the reality or environment that surrounds him. The mirror stage can be seen as the genesis of an awareness of subjectivity, that the world is experienced by an isolated individual empiricism, and thus the subconscious realisation of an innate solipsism. Boswell notes that Wallace is breaking down the 'donned armor an alienating identity' with *The Entertainment's* affect on the viewer. The very few details of the content of *The Entertainment* we discover in the text (which may or may not be accurate, as whoever has seen the film must surely be a gibbering

² Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in *Écrits* (New York: Norton, 2006), pp. 75-81. (p. 78).

wreck) seem to point towards images of a mother figure over the crib of a child. The viewer is placed in the role of the child by the point of view of the camera, facing up to view the mother looking down. Boswell explains the Lacanian subtext to the film, writing 'the fundamental source of the Entertainment's lethal appeal is its ability to give viewers what they think they have wanted all their lives: namely, a return to some state of maternal plenitude'.³ The child who has seen the mirror image is divorced from oneness with the mother, and therefore the film's lethal success is providing a return to what Lacan describes as 'the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other'.⁴ While Boswell's reading points in the right direction, the Lacanian influences on *The Entertainment* seem to be much deeper than its efficacy in returning the viewer to a state of neonatal bliss, and logically leads us to Lacan's writings on human desire, specifically the phenomenon of what he calls the object-cause of desire. Lacanian scholar Slavoj Žižek describes the object-cause of desire as 'the feature on whose account we desire the object, some detail or tic of which we are usually unaware, and sometimes even misperceive it as an obstacle, in spite of which we desire the object'.⁵ He continues, 'the object-cause of desire is something that, viewed from the front is nothing at all: it acquires the contours of something only when viewed at a slant'.⁶ It is interesting that Lacan believes that a person cannot look directly at the cause of his desires, but rather has to approach them from an angle or through some distorted field. This bears relevance to how Wallace describes the finished content of *The Entertainment*. As I have stated, the point of view of the camera is that of a

³ Boswell, p. 131.

⁴ Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage'. p. 76.

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta, 2006). p. 67.

⁶ Ibid. p. 68.

child in a crib, with the mother looking over, but the image is not clear. According to Joelle, the star of the film, 'The camera was fitted with a lens with something Jim called I think an auto-wobble. Ocular wobble, something like that' in order to simulate 'Neonatal nystagmus' (*Jest*, p. 939). In other words, the image that the viewer is seeing, the maternal object of desire, is viewed not directly, but through a distorted field or a phantasmic screen, making the image more potent because 'when we confront the object of desire, more satisfaction is provided by dancing around it than making straight for it'.⁷ This lens also has the effect of 'veiling' Joelle, who according to her is not wearing her U.H.I.D. (Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed) veil in the scenes, although her friend Molly Notkin reports, 'her hideously deformed face [is] either veiled or blanked out by undulating computer generated squares of color or anamorphized into unrecognisability as any kind of face by the camera's apparently very strange and novel lens' (*Jest*, p. 788).⁸ This 'return to some state of maternal plenitude' is also a return to the 'Innenwelt', the solipsistic isolation of the child's mind, which Wallace positions as the subconscious ideal. Steve Nolan writes of the Lacanian function of film: 'in cinematic terms, the specular film star other can be interpreted in terms of the spectator's solipsistic identification with the "Ideal-I", the unconscious content of their own desire'.⁹ The 'Ideal-I' in the case of *The Entertainment* is the viewer's pre-Mirror Stage self, and the solipsistic identification with that self becomes a destructive force for the viewer. Through all of these elements, we can also reach

⁷ Ibid. p. 77.

⁸ This description differs from Joelle's, but it has to be remembered that Molly Notkin has been set up as an untrustworthy narrator of events within the novel, and the impossibility of her viewing the film would render any of her descriptions guess work at best. However, it's suitably similar to Joelle's version that we can extrapolate a working version of the film's contents.

⁹ Steve Nolan, *Film, Lacan and the Subject of Religion: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Religious Film Analysis* (London: Continuum, 2009). p. 129

another Lacanian conclusion about the film. Of the Greek Chorus (specifically Sophocles' *Antigone*), Lacan writes:

When you go to the theatre in the evening, you are preoccupied by the affairs of the day, by the pen you lost, by the cheque that you will have to sign the next day. You shouldn't give yourselves too much credit. Your emotions are taken charge of by the healthy order displayed on the stage. The Chorus takes care of them. The emotional commentary is done for you.¹⁰

While at first glance Lacan's description of how the audience reacts to a play seems straightforward, further inspection reveals some complexity that could help analyse the addictive effects of *The Entertainment*. If we look at the film as a cause of the audience's impassivity and as something which provides an 'emotional commentary', we can begin to understand how Wallace is portraying *The Entertainment*. Like Lacan's Chorus, *The Entertainment* allows the audience to become unresponsive, to be 'taken charge of by the [un]healthy order' displayed on the screen. The victims of the film are described by Steeply as 'empty' (*Jest*, p. 647) and, in another section, as 'not one bit distressed or in any way displeased' (*Jest*, p. 87). Žižek describes this effect by using the canned-laughter trope on contemporary television. He writes, 'Even if I do not laugh, but simply stare at the screen, tired after a hard day's work, I nonetheless feel relieved after the show, as if the soundtrack has done the laughing for me'.¹¹ The emotion that *The Entertainment* seems to be providing for the viewer is that of nostalgic maternal completeness and love, without that viewer having to do any of the emotional heavy lifting. They are impassive, to the point that they, in the words of Steeply, have 'misplaced' their functional selves (*Jest*, p. 648). This 'misplaced' self is

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960* (London: Routledge, 1992). p. 152.

¹¹ Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*. p. 23.

described by Žižek as ‘the interpassive subject’, a subject who projects himself onto an object or person. So the viewer is not simply a passive spectator, but is connected to the events on the screen in a complex way; they are impassively active in their relationship with the screen and the *The Entertainment* is so effective at inspiring this relationship that the self is permanently interpassively tied to it, or ‘misplaced’. While the novel cannot strictly be viewed as an ‘INTERPRET-ME’ novel in Wallace’s definition, he does encourage the Lacanian reading of *The Entertainment* by having the narrator describe the film as ‘the allegedly fatally entertaining and scopophilic thing’ (*Jest*, p. 230). Scopophilia, meaning ‘the love of looking’, is a word that finds its basis in Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis (particularly in writings on the mirror stage), and is often used in film criticism.

There is much evidence to suggest that Wallace was influenced by Lacan in his depiction of *The Entertainment*, but his use of Lacan reveals much about the way he uses philosophical influences in *Infinite Jest*. In a similar way to the use of Wittgenstein and Derrida in his debut novel, Wallace is presenting theoretical work within the parameters of what he calls ‘lived life’. Yet there is a revealing difference in the way he uses theoretical philosophy (and in the case of Lacan, psychoanalysis) in *Infinite Jest*. In *The Broom of the System*, Wallace attempts to reach conclusions about the pragmatic application of philosophy and the consequences of living in the confines of abstract theory, yet in *Infinite Jest* he does not seem to use critical thought to bring about any conclusions, but to aid in his depiction of the modern world. The way he uses the theoretical work of philosophers also mirrors the way people absorb information in contemporary society, in that he picks elements of the theories in order to further his own system of thought. Fragments of Lacan, for example, appear in various locations

throughout the novel, but a simple Lacanian reading does not reveal the whole meaning behind Wallace's writing. A good example of this is the prevalence of masks in the novel. In Lacanian terms, a symbolic mask reveals a gap between a psychological identity and a symbolic identity. The symbolic identity is what a person promotes to the external world, that defines an individual's relationship with the Big Other (Lacan's Big Other is the anonymous controlling force in society, much like Freud's 'superego'. It dictates certain unspoken rules but is also the thing that we subconsciously define ourselves against). The Lacanian idea is that to operate in a community is to participate in a symbolic exchange. As Sean Homer writes, 'what takes place within kinship systems is not the giving and taking of real persons in marriage but a process of symbolic exchange'.¹² He goes on to say that 'The real is a kind of ubiquitous undifferentiated mass from which we must distinguish ourselves, as subjects, through the process of symbolization'.¹³ The masks in *Infinite Jest* appear both literally and symbolically (or perhaps 'non-literally' is a better term in this case), as literary manifestations of this idea; they are the symbolic identities of the characters that differentiate them from the reality of their persons. The most obvious literal example of masks in the novel is the U.H.I.D. movement, where people who deem themselves to be 'hideously deformed' cover their own faces with linen hoods (*Jest*, p. 187). These literal masks also appear outside of the U.H.I.D. movement, with John Wayne appearing in one early in the novel, users of the videophones using latex masks to hide their real faces, and members of the *Assassins des Fauteuils Rollent* (AFR) appear variously in 'some kind of domino-mask' or 'a plastic fleur-de-lis-with-sword-stem mask on his face with a jagged stelliform hole' (*Jest*, p. 245, p. 485). There are

¹² Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2005). p. 36.

¹³ Ibid. p. 83.

also examples of the non-literal mask too, most notably with Hal's secret trips to the Pump Room to smoke marijuana, where he indulges in his addiction to secrecy, which he is 'as attached to [...] as he is to getting high' (*Jest*, p. 49).

Masks, for Lacan, are an important part of how we present ourselves to each other. In the words of Žižek, explaining Lacan's theories, symbolic masks (which we all rely on to present a symbolized view of ourselves to those around us in a Lacanian interpretation of the world) lead to a 'symbolic order' where the 'social mask matters more than the direct reality of the individual who wears it'.¹⁴ This symbolic order is imposed on us by language, according to Lacan, and as soon as we learn to speak we are bound by its laws, laws that in turn help create the social, symbolic order. Lacan writes, 'Man thus speaks, but it is because the symbol has made him man'.¹⁵ The symbol may have made the man, but it has also created the system of laws and conventions in which the man operates. Hal can be seen as addicted to the secrecy of his trips to the Pump Room because the secret is being kept from the Big Other. All of his friends are aware that he smokes marijuana, yet he keeps up the pretence of secrecy as if they do not know. Žižek writes, 'Sometimes, when we inadvertently disturb the appearance, the thing itself behind the appearance falls apart'.¹⁶ While Lacan portrays these masks as a necessary act of functioning within the symbolic order of the world, Wallace uses them as barriers to communication, obstacles that stop the characters from truly knowing (or wanting to know) the 'reality' of those around them. In fact, Mario Incandenza finds that his peers are 'uncomfortable and embarrassed' when he 'brings up real stuff' (*Jest*, p. 592). For Lacan, the real is beyond the symbolic, and when an individual connects with something that causes them to desymbolize, it

¹⁴ Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*. p. 33.

¹⁵ Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech'. p. 229.

¹⁶ Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*. p. 25.

causes trauma. This can be seen in the first chapter as Hal is unable to participate in the symbolic order. It is implied that he has undergone some traumatic event. As Homer writes, 'The idea of trauma implies that there is a certain blockage or fixation in the process of signification. Trauma arrests the movement of symbolization and fixes the subject in an earlier phase of development'.¹⁷ In other words, Hal has come into contact with the 'real' and it has allowed the dramatic desymbolization of the mask he uses to function in the symbolic order. He is thus locked within himself, unable to connect via language and thus cut off from the Lacanian world of signs. This Lacanian reading can only offer solipsistic conclusions, but it is through other aspect of philosophical thought that Wallace attempts to challenge these conclusions and formulate a system of thought that allows an anti-solipsistic social existence. This begins to take shape in the mantra that Don Gately lives by, namely Alcoholics Anonymous' Twelve Step process with its potent clichés of self-correction.

Alcoholics Anonymous and the Problems of Choice

Throughout *Infinite Jest*, Wallace presents Alcoholics Anonymous as a font of edifying philosophy that complicates the other sources of philosophy or theoretical work in the novel. While Wallace has been very clear in interviews that he does not believe that it is fiction's duty to 'edify or teach, or to make us good little Christians or Republicans', it can be seen that what he is working towards in both *Infinite Jest* and his later work is a system of thought that gives his audience access to certain options for living, or that attempts to edify the reader in a way

¹⁷ Homer, p. 84.

that focuses on the morals of contemporary living.¹⁸ Alcoholics Anonymous, as it is presented in *Infinite Jest*, provides a blueprint for this way of thinking that perhaps subverts Wallace's own ideas about what agenda his fiction can be perceived to have. Most importantly, it is with *Infinite Jest* that Wallace moves away from the analytical philosophy of his earlier work, to a heavier focus on ethical and moral philosophy, and most importantly how it can be applied to contemporary life in order to gain effective and positive results, such as thinking of the self as a moral entity.

An important distinction needs to be made between the Alcoholics Anonymous of the novel and the Alcoholics Anonymous of the real, non-fictional world. Wallace is very open about the research he put in to the sections of the novel involving recovering addicts, but he is also clear that it should not be viewed as a depiction of the reality of such a scenario. He says, 'The drug stuff in the book is supposed to be basically a metaphor. [But] I got very assertive research and finagle-wise'.¹⁹ In this section I will examine how Wallace depicts AA in the novel, and investigate the role it has played in the philosophical development of his writing.

In his depictions of AA Wallace can be seen to be engaging directly with theological thought, promoting the value and necessity of god (with a small g) in the recovery process of the addicts. However, Wallace does not simply present a recognised view of a particular religion, he shows the importance of blind belief or at least belief in a focal point for a subject's attention. The phrase 'Fake It Till You Make It' is one of the mantra-style slogans that the attendees of AA live by, one that inspires Gately to continue with his nightly prayers, even though he does not

¹⁸ McCaffery, p. 26.

¹⁹ Lipsky, p. 138.

believe in any specific god (*Jest*, p. 369). In fact, one of the things Gately has learned in his time in AA is that 'AA and NA [Narcotics Anonymous] and CA's [Cocaine Anonymous] "God" does not apparently require that you believe in Him/Her/It before He/She/It will help you' (*Jest*, p. 201). This echoes Blaise Pascal's writing on religion, particularly 'Pascal's Wager' within *Pensées* (1669).

'Pascal's Wager' is a discussion about the individual's choice whether to believe in God or not. Reason, he says, is useless in trying to make that decision (or 'wager' as he calls it) because it is impossible to know either way. Pascal believes that the only positive way to live is to believe in God regardless, and the wager will turn out in the believer's favour. He puts forward the stakes of the wager thus:

Since you have to choose, let us see which interests you the least. You have two things to lose: the truth and the good, and two things to stake: your reason and your will, your knowledge and your beatitude; and your nature has two things to avoid: error and wretchedness.²⁰

His conclusion (which could be viewed as a slightly cynical way to inspire belief) is that it is not a risk simply to believe in God. He writes, 'Let us assess the two cases: if you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager that he exists then, without hesitating!'.²¹ Of course, by winning everything, he is talking about the seductive lure of 'an eternity of life and happiness', and the benefits of following the course of belief mean 'you will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, doing good, a sincere and true friend'.²² In Pascal's eyes, belief is something that one can become accustomed to once the choice to believe is made, and in becoming accustomed to it, genuine faith follows. He writes, 'Custom is natural to

²⁰ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). p. 154.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* p. 156.

us. Anyone who becomes accustomed to faith believes it, and can no longer fear hell, and believes in nothing else'.²³ In other words, 'Fake It Till You Make It'.

At first glance Pascal's Wager seems to fit the AA template, yet Wallace depicts the results of such 'faking' differently. In Pascal's eyes, the benefits of choosing belief in God are numerous and such belief should be chosen because of the gifts the believer will receive ('an eternity of life and happiness', for example). While Wallace's starting point can be seen to echo Pascal, in that the individual must choose to accept a routine of prayer in order for belief to follow, the results do not deal with what is gained. The 'gift' in Wallace version, if 'gift' is the correct word, is a release, an emptying of the psychic burden. Wallace writes, 'as you hunker down for required A.M. and P.M. prayers, you will find yourself beginning to pray to be allowed literally to lose your mind, to be able to wrap it up in old newspaper or something and leave it in an alley to shift for itself, without you' (*Jest*, p. 201). The goal of the prayers in AA is not to acquire an understanding of a god, or a 'Higher Power', but to lose the parts of oneself that have a compulsive need for the substances of addiction. This seems to be a blending of Pascal's ideas with a more Lacanian inflection. Lacan talks about praying as a kind of exorcism of belief. In the same way as the Chorus takes away our need to form our own emotional commentary for a piece of theatre, the interpassive ritual of prayer unburdens our belief onto another (namely god, or some other receiver of the prayers). Don Gately, as a recovering addict, is not unburdening his belief in god through his routine meditation, but his belief in the substance of addiction that oppresses him. The receiver of the prayers does not matter, because there is no ideological goal that will help turn Gately into the model of virtue as in Pascal's

²³ Ibid.

vision. In effect, the receiver of Gately's prayers could be said to be the Lacanian Big Other. As Žižek writes, 'kneel down, act as if you believe, and you will rid yourself of belief – you will no longer have to believe yourself, since your belief will be objectified in your act of praying'.²⁴ This idea relies on belief as filtered through the Lacanian symbolic order, and for this kind of belief to function there needs to be some sort of guarantor. Michel de Certeau explains this notion, writing, 'We have to presume a guarantee from the other, in other words postulate an other (a person, a fact etc.) endowed with power, will and knowledge that can mete out "retribution"'.²⁵ Yet this belief is not simply in this other, according to de Certeau, rather:

The process of belief works not starting from the believer himself but from the indefinite plural (other/others), presumed to be the debtor and the guarantor of the believing relationship. It is because others (or many) believe it that an individual can take his debtor to be faithful and trust him. A plurality guarantees the guarantor [...]. Belief rests upon an anteriority of the other whose delegate and manifestation is the *fact* of a plurality of believers: "Some people believe... some people say..."²⁶

Alcoholics Anonymous works as this sort of plurality, and the group members are promised the guarantee of the efficacy of the required prayers. But this is deferred belief according to Žižek, belief transferred onto a plurality of others. He writes, 'The point, of course, is that, for the belief to be operational, the subject who directly believes need not exist at all: it is enough to presuppose his existence, to *believe* in it'.²⁷ It doesn't matter that Gately does not directly believe in his 'Higher Power', it is enough for him to believe that the nightly prayers have worked for

²⁴ Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*. p. 31.

²⁵ Michel de Certeau, 'What We Do When We Believe', in *On Signs*, ed. by Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 192-201. (p. 199).

²⁶ Ibid. p. 201. de Certeau's emphasis.

²⁷ Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*. p. 30. Žižek's emphasis.

other people, and he presupposes that those other people genuinely believe, and thus his prayers become effective. This idea is known as ‘the subject supposed to believe’.²⁸

The AA sections in *Infinite Jest* are a continuation of Wallace’s criticism of solipsism, positioning the addicts as people who are ‘also addicted to their own thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking’ (*Jest*, p. 203). He continues, ‘99% of compulsive thinkers’ thinking is about themselves’. Also, Hal is prone to ‘Marijuana Thinking’ that inspires a drop into ‘labyrinths of reflexive abstraction that seem to cast doubt on the very possibility of practical functioning, and the mental labour of finding one’s way out consumes all available attention and makes the Bob Hope-smoker look physically torpid and apathetic and amotivated sitting there’ (*Jest*, n. 269a, p. 1048). Interestingly, Pascal says that the need to be accustomed to faith is necessary to attack this kind of thinking. He writes, ‘everything is biased towards itself: this is contrary to all order. The tendency should towards generality, and the leaning towards the self is the beginning of all disorder’.²⁹ While Pascal’s solution to this kind of solipsism is entrenched in theological thought and the acceptance of God in order to construct an outward-looking and moral point of view, Wallace’s approach is to use the rituals of religion, but in a way that is divorced from any theological import. As mentioned above, the impulse to lose one’s mind in the process of prayer could also be read as an attempt to lose the solipsistic cage of the mind’s thoughts, and this could be viewed as the opposite of the usual notion of finding one’s self through prayer.

²⁸ de Certeau, p. 202.

²⁹ Pascal, p. 157.

It is telling that, after Gately's struggles with the existence of a Higher Power (God 'speaks and acts entirely through the vehicle of human beings, if there is a God', a sentiment that echoes 'the subject supposed to believe' (*Jest*, p. 205)), that when a spiritual visitation does happen, it is not by a god or any other religious icon, but by a wraith in the shape of James Incandenza. The wraith presents itself as a 'plain old wraith, one without any sort of grudge or agenda, just a generic garden-variety wraith' (*Jest*, p. 829). The wraith also has the short-comings and bad habits of a human being, such as 'old stained chinos', a 'thatch of nostril hair' and the admission that 'fortitude had never seemed to be his long suit', which seems to emphasise the secular, overtly human nature of the visitation (*Jest*, pp. 829-830). Yet the wraith articulates the necessity to combat solipsism, saying that The Entertainment was made in order to rescue Hal from a 'fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy [...] To bring him "out of himself", as they say' (*Jest*, p. 839). To other viewers, the film has the opposite effect, returning them to a closed solipsism, enslaved by an addiction they cannot overcome in the methods that Gately has been using.

However, the passages dealing with Gately's acceptance of the religious structures of prayer (albeit as a secular crutch to his narcotic and moral rehabilitation) also leads to further examination of the way Wallace incorporates the idea of freedom of choice. Wallace writes about choice frequently, and much of the AA sections of *Infinite Jest* are about the choice to attend meetings (or 'Come In') rather than to carry on using drugs. At first, this may seem like a simple concept, and Wallace treats it as such in his writing, especially the commencement speech he gave to graduating students at Kenyon College in 2005

(published as *This is Water* in 2009), but the idea of a freedom of choice is much more complex. In the speech he says that it is an individual's responsibility to be 'conscious and aware enough to *choose* what you pay attention to and to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience'.³⁰ Žizek writes about the idea that freedom of choice is not 'actual', but 'formal'.³¹ This means that an individual has a freedom of choice 'WITHIN the coordinates of existing power relations, while "actual" freedom designates the site of an intervention which undermines these very coordinates'. Wallace, in both *Infinite Jest* and his other writing, is usually concerned with 'formal' freedom of choice. For example, Gately's choice to 'Come In' to both AA and Ennet House operates within the 'coordinates of existing power relations', particularly considering his run-in with the Revere District Attorney, who, in this case, represents the law of the society that is imposing the parameters. Contrary to this, an example of 'actual' freedom of choice in the novel could be seen as the mysterious mailer of The Entertainment (was it Marathe's colleagues in the AFR, or Orin Incandenza?). This act threatens to destabilise the parameters imposed by society (or the Lacanian 'Big Other'). The way Wallace writes about Gately's experience in AA also reflects Žizek's writing on freedom of choice, particularly in Gately's revelation about the invisible Sergeant At Arms who polices the Boston AA meetings. Wallace writes:

Boston AA's Sergeant At Arms stood *outside* the orderly meeting halls, in that much evoked Out There where exciting clubs full of good cheer throbbed gaily below lit signs with neon bottles endlessly pouring. AA's patient enforcer was always and everywhere Out There: it stood casually checking its cuticles in the astringent fluorescence of pharmacies that took forged Talwin scrips for a hefty surcharge [...] In the home of a snot-strangled Canadian VIP and the office of an implacable Revere A.D.A.

³⁰ David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009). p. 54. Wallace's emphasis.

³¹ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001). p. 122.

whose wife has opted for dentures at thirty-five. AA's disciplinarian looked damn good and smelled even better and dressed to impress and his blank black-on-yellow smile never faltered as he sincerely urged you to have a nice day. Just one more last nice day. Just one (*Jest*, p. 359).

Gately's revelation of the 'disciplinarian' nature of AA inspires him to take up his prayers for the first time, leading him to begin, in earnest, his rehabilitation. Žižek, evoking Jean-Léon Beauvoir, writes about the different impetuses for making a 'formal' choice: authoritarian ('the pure command'), totalitarian (the choice will result in a 'common good which is larger than the subject's perceived interest') and liberal ('the reference to the subject's inner nature itself' or the benefit of self improvement).³² Gately seems to be making his choice under an authoritarian mode, that of the fictional disciplinarian Sergeant At Arms, yet Žižek claims that Beauvoir's theory is wrong. He claims that authoritarianism is almost impossible, as 'even the most oppressive regime publicly legitimizes its reign with the reference to some Higher Good, and the fact that, ultimately, "you have to obey because I say so" reverberates only as its obscene supplement discernable between the lines'.³³ Gately's revelation is that he looks past the 'totalitarian' exterior of AA's processes and sees the authoritarian nature 'between the lines', and it is only when he sees this that he fully engages with the structure of AA. The awareness of his own subordination ironically frees him to pursue his own self-improvement – his subordination to AA replaces his subordination to oral narcotics, and in allowing this to happen Gately has successfully renegotiated his coordinates of existence (just as Kate Gompert and Joelle have in choosing to commit suicide, as I will discuss in the next section).

³² Ibid. p. 118.

³³ Ibid. pp. 118-119.

The problem of freedom of choice is also discussed in the Marathe and Steeply sections. The two government agents discuss whether the population of the United States will be free to choose whether to watch *The Entertainment* or not, or that the pleasure that is offered by the film will nullify that freedom and tempt the prospective viewer. Marathe says:

Perhaps the facts are true, after the first watching: that then there seems to be no choice. But to decide to be this pleasurable entertained in the first place. This is still a choice, no? Sacred to the viewing self, and free? No? Yes?' (*Jest*, p. 430).

As a response, Steeply relates the story of a Canadian experiment that offered test subjects intense, orgasmic pleasure with the danger of insanity. He says:

the neuro-team at Brandon pull in to work one day and find human volunteers lining up literally around the block outside the place, [...] lining up and literally trampling each other in their desire to sign up as volunteers for *p*-terminal-electrode implantation and stimulation' (*Jest*, p. 472).

The freedom of choice here, if it can indeed be called freedom, seems to evade definition in terms of Žižek's three types of freedom. The choice to view *The Entertainment* is a purely selfish choice, one that leads to instant pleasure and removes the need for any more choice exercises. This evokes Žižek's notion of the "postmodern" subject' who is 'the exact opposite of the free subject who experienced himself as ultimately responsible for his fate, namely the subject who grounds the authority of his speech on his status of a victim of circumstances beyond his control'.³⁴ Steeply's idea that the choice to watch *The Entertainment* would not necessarily be that of a free mind fits with this. The people watching the

³⁴ Ibid. p. 124.

film are victims of their circumstance, not responsible for their choice to watch it, in Steeply's mind, whereas Marathe believes that 'if we disseminate the *samizdat*, the choice will be free, no? Free from force, no? Yes? Freely chosen?' (*Jest*, p. 430). The conversation between Marathe and Steeply is a way for Wallace to discuss various philosophical questions in the novel without coming to a firm conclusion, but they are nonetheless important in revealing the philosophical problems Wallace perceives in the postmodern world he is critiquing. While Marathe and Steeply offer two opposing views on the freedom of choice, Wallace is able to discuss the philosophical implications of addiction in a more textured way. I will examine this in more detail throughout this chapter.

***Infinite Jest*, Belief and Moral Philosophy**

The echo of Pascal's Wager can be seen in the structure that underpins the Twelve Step process of AA, and necessarily points towards another philosopher who values spiritual, religious methods of thought. According to Marshall Boswell, Søren Kierkegaard, who was influenced by the work of Pascal, is evoked in much of the description of the group. AA encourages its members to accept as truth the clichéd slogans such as 'Ask For Help and like Turn It Over, the loss and pain, to Keep Coming, show up, pray, Ask For Help' (*Jest*, p. 273). Boswell notes that it is an AA member's duty to see the slogans as a source of truth and 'accept them without irony, without intellectual disdain' and that this is 'the first gesture toward genuine openness, which Kierkegaard identifies as the primary feature of an ethical existence'.³⁵ Superficially, Boswell's Kierkegaardian reading of the AA

³⁵ Boswell, p. 143.

groups in *Infinite Jest* holds up, but on further investigation there is much more complexity here that Boswell largely ignores. It is his contention that AA is used within the novel as ‘a genuine and viable Kierkegaardian religion, one that attempts to solve the problems of irony, aesthetic self-consciousness, and the dread of being’.³⁶ While Kierkegaard can be applied to the AA scenes in the novel, and the notion of the aesthete holds true in this reading, the nature of AA, as it is used in the novel, is more complicated than a device to construct an irony-busting ‘religion’.

An aesthete, according to Kierkegaard, is not only someone who pursues easy self-pleasures and amusement, but also someone who actively avoids making any definite choices. In Kierkegaard’s famous *Either/Or* (1843), the aesthete, A, describes this position thus: ‘true eternity does not lie behind either/or, but before it’.³⁷ It is the aesthete’s choice to avoid the question of choice (either/or) and live in a state of ‘*aeterno modo*’ or ‘the mode of eternity’. The aesthete therefore remains in a self-imposed stasis in order to avoid regret, and in order to reach a position where it is ‘impossible to stop’. Regret, according to A, is the only certainty of choice. Initially, Boswell’s assertion that ‘all of Wallace’s despairing drug addicts’ bear ‘the stamp of Kierkegaardian aesthetic despair’ seems a sound theory, yet it begins to fall apart with further investigation.³⁸ The drug addicts in *Infinite Jest* may have succumbed to despair, but they are not all living in a choiceless stasis. In a particularly apt example of not following his choiceless ‘maxim’, Kierkegaard’s aesthete says ‘Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself,

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). p. 39.

³⁸ Boswell, p.139.

you will regret it either way'.³⁹ In the novel, Kate Gompert tells a doctor of her desire to kill herself. She does not regret the attempt, nor does she particularly regret its failure, yet the important part is that she made the choice to die. Similarly, Joelle makes the same choice in Molly Notkin's bathroom. Joelle's suicide attempt is described in terms of a conscious choice: 'She is now a little under two *deliberate* minutes from Too Much Fun for anyone mortal to hope to endure', and she is described as '*Deliberately* setting about to make her heart explode' (*Jest*, pp. 238-239. Emphasis added). Again, there is no evidence in the novel that Joelle regrets her choice. The addicts in *Infinite Jest* may be, as Boswell says, full of despair and focussed on the easy pleasures of drug addiction (with a few exceptions, such as Gompert, who is miserably addicted because she initially wants to combat her depression), but they are consciously making choices that put them in a situation where it is 'impossible to stop'. This is echoed in Žizek's post-Lacanian notion of the 'modern reflexive society', in which 'all patterns of interaction, from the forms of sexual partnership up to ethnic identity itself, have to be renegotiated/reinvented'.⁴⁰ This renegotiation has to be constant, according to Žizek, the very patterns by which we live are not predetermined, but open to change and reconstruction with the set parameters of a permissive society. Therefore, the choice to commit suicide cannot be viewed as a 'pathological malfunction', but 'an *existential* act, the outcome of a pure decision, irreducible to objective suffering or psychic pathology'.⁴¹ Yet the Kierkegaardian scholar would argue that the philosopher complicates the 'either/or' notion by discussing the way decisive choice actions are executed. As M. Jamie Ferreira states Kierkegaard shows that 'the importance of *qualitative difference* as opposed to a quantitative

³⁹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part I*. p. 38.

⁴⁰ Žizek, *On Belief*. p. 27.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 102. Žizek's emphasis.

difference, lies in the “*how*” rather than the “*what*”; it repeatedly leads us to appreciate the crucial distinction between what we do and the way we do it’.⁴² In short, decisive actions can be good or bad, and should be judged on how they are executed. If this notion is followed further still, Kierkegaard also stresses the importance of interior and exterior, questioning whether the aesthete and the ethicist can appear to be undertaking the same decisions, but with different results. Ferreira writes that Kierkegaard’s letters show varying types of interiority and exteriority which:

present us with different kinds of passion, different kinds of duty, different kinds of openness, different kinds of hiddenness, different kinds of immediacy, and different kinds of reflection. They repeatedly exchange values on these – at times passion is good, at times bad, at times hiddenness is bad, at times good, etc. In short, anything can be good or bad, depending on “how” it is done.⁴³

For Gately, despite entering the group to hide from the law, AA provides a method of renegotiating the qualitative value of his actions, yet in some ways his moral rehabilitation can be seen as a utilitarian one rather than an idealistic one. For Kierkegaard, an ethical philosophy necessarily focuses on the individual’s relationship to God, and can be seen as an attempt to ‘elicit trust in the eternity, immutability and transcendence of God’.⁴⁴ If a Kierkegaardian religion works thusly, AA serves to reintroduce the individual into the social community. Wallace’s motivation here is an attempt to establish ethical modes of living without using established religious focal points.

⁴² M. Jamie Ferreira, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). p. 33. Ferreira’s emphasis.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 30.

⁴⁴ John D. Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard* (London: Granta, 2007). p. 55.

As Boswell notes, however, Hal can be seen as a character that embodies this idea of a Kierkegaardian aesthete, lost as he is in a choiceless '*aeterno modo*' of 'marijuana thinking'. Kierkegaard writes:

The thinker has never existed *qua* human being, that among other things he has not in an eminent sense acted – not, that is, in the way of exploits but of inwardness. But acting in the eminent sense belongs essentially to existing *qua* human being.⁴⁵

In terms of Kierkegaard's theories, Hal has compromised his own existence as a human being by thinking instead of acting, and when we first meet him he has become unable to communicate his thoughts at all, so dwells in a cage of pure thinking, trapped in a stasis of 'inwardness'. Yet, writing as Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard states that religiousness is a 'hidden inwardness' that is necessary to preserve the paradoxical everywhere-and-nowhere of God:

Hidden religiousness is the true religiousness, the hidden inwardness in one who is religious, who even uses all his skill just so no-one will notice anything special about him. For just as God's omnipresence is recognized by not being visible, so true religiousness is recognized by its invisibility.⁴⁶

Boswell writes that Hal depicts an example of 'a quality that Kierkegaard would call "hiddenness"' because Hal is hiding his drug problems from all around him (albeit unsuccessfully), yet Kierkegaard's writing about 'hiddenness' is more complex than this.⁴⁷ Kierkegaard's idea of 'hidden inwardness' has a complex meaning, and does not necessarily refer to the interiority of a subject. As Patrick Stokes writes, this inwardness refers to that 'which cannot be expressed or made

⁴⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). p. 255.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 398.

⁴⁷ Boswell, p. 140.

understandable to another human being'. He continues, 'The apprehension of mortality provides a paradigm case for the inability of language to adequately convey the meaning and existential import of beliefs grasped with inwardness (*inderlighed*, a nontechnical word which actually bears more connotations of "fervour, sincerity, earnestness" than "interiority")'.⁴⁸ Kierkegaard's idea of inwardness in the pseudonymous writings does not refer to self-reflexive thought that can lead to solipsism, but rather an essential part of the development of the self. As C. Stephen Evans writes, 'The Kierkegaardian view is that it is subjectivity, the inward emotions and passions that give shape to human lives and motivate human actions, that makes the difference'.⁴⁹ Yet for Wallace, Hal's inwardness is something that needs to be transcended, or to be cast off, so he can function as a complete human being. Wallace's version of 'inwardness' is prohibitive to the approach of an anti-solipsistic, moral existence, whereas Kierkegaard states that this 'inwardness' is a *process* necessary for a man to approach an understanding of God, and live according to Christian ethics. While Boswell is right in classifying Hal as an aesthete, Wallace's ideas about how to combat such a state differ from Kierkegaard's, and do not fit into Boswell's theory that the AA of the novel is inherently Kierkegaardian. AA's success may hinge around belief, but the structures that help exteriorise the positive impact of maintaining such a belief (whether it is secular or otherwise), do not fit with Kierkegaard's view that such belief must be unsayable, and therefore an inner process of betterment. Hal's descent into emotional imprisonment is precisely because he cannot exteriorise his emotion, and that he keeps it hidden, whereas Gately desperately desires to defeat the 'inwardness' of his drug addiction and share with other human beings.

⁴⁸ Patrick Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors: interest, self and moral vision* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 2009). p. 43.

⁴⁹ C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). p. 61.

In this respect, Gately can be seen as the moral hero of the novel, where Hal is the tragic figure, unable to defeat his own inward nature and gain a better understanding of his position in the world. This is another example of Wallace mining philosophies, selecting useful elements for his own exploration into modes of modern existence while abandoning other elements that do not fit with the moral construction of his own fictional world.

Unlike Pascal's philosophy that a belief in God is necessary to lead a good life, Wallace explores, within the AA sections of the novel in particular, how an unspecific, spiritual-but-secular belief can be the gateway to an ethical existence. In an article for *Speak Magazine*, published in 1996, Wallace details the necessity to believe in something:

You either do or you're a walking dead man, just going through the motions. Concepts like "duty" and "fidelity" may sound quaint but we've inherited the best and worst, and we've got to make it up as we go along. I absolutely believe in something, even though I don't know what it is.⁵⁰

What AA is encouraging in the novel is not a religious belief, but a general anti-nihilistic belief. Gately's belief is not directly in his Higher Power, but in the people who he imagines believe in a specific Higher Power ('the subject supposed to believe'), and the processes that allow him to function without drugs, the prayers to the Higher Power merely being part of that process (or the focusing of these attentions). Where both Pascal and Kierkegaard see belief as a conscious choice on behalf of the individual, Wallace claims that 'believing in something bigger than you is not a choice'.⁵¹ He also notices a trend in modern culture towards an abandoning of belief, writing:

⁵⁰ David Foster Wallace, '1458 Words', in *Speak Magazine*, Spring 1996. p. 42.

⁵¹ Ibid.

That we've abandoned it to fundamentalists whose pitiless rigidity and eagerness to judge show that they're clueless about the "Christian values" they would impose on others. To the rightist militias and conspiracy theorists whose paranoia about the government supposes the government to be just way more organized and efficient than it really is. And, in academia and the arts, to the increasingly absurd and dogmatic Political Correctness movement, whose obsession with the mere forms of utterance and discourse show too well how effete and aestheticized our best liberal instincts have become, how removed from what's really important – motive, feeling, belief ('Dostoevsky', p. 273).

Wallace sees that modern culture's abandoning of belief is reflected in literature, attributing 'our own lit's thematic poverty' to 'The good old modernists [who], among their other accomplishments, elevated aesthetics to the level of ethics – maybe even metaphysics – and Serious Novels after Joyce tend to be valued and studied mainly for their formal ingenuity'. He continues to write that there are 'certain cultural expectations that severely constrain our own novelists' ability to be "serious"' ('Dostoevsky', pp. 271-272). Being 'serious' in Wallace's view is to be able to write about 'motive, feeling, belief' in a way that relates to 'lived life'. Tim Jacobs articulates Wallace's reaction to the literature of his contemporaries by writing, 'Wallace's "foes" are the contemporary literary ironic nihilists, the type that refuses to countenance or confront serious moral issues through art'.⁵² This notion is also explored in *Infinite Jest* itself, during the conversations between Marathe and Steeply, the two government agents. Marathe, a Quebecois terrorist, asks Steeply, 'Are we not all of us fanatics?' meaning that we all believe in something that we are willing to give ourselves to. But Marathe, in a line that mirrors Wallace's own words, demands that the object of belief must be 'something bigger than the self' (*Jest*, p. 107). For Žižek, belief is necessary to exist in modern

⁵² Jacobs, p. 266.

society, and an abandoning of belief is ultimately self-destructive, as one would not have to commit to social involvement. He explains his position:

When we encounter a person who claims he is cured of any beliefs, accepting social reality the way it really is, one should always counter such claims with the question: *OK, but where is the fetish which enables you to (pretend to) accept reality "the way it is"?* "Western Buddhism" is such a fetish: it enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it, that you are well aware how worthless the spectacle is – what really matters to you is the peace of the inner Self to which you know you can always withdraw.⁵³

For the drug addicts of *Infinite Jest*, their own vices can be seen as Žizekian 'fetishes' that allow them to withdraw from 'social reality' into the 'peace of the inner Self' (although in Wallace's world, the inner Self doesn't allow peace, only a circuitous labyrinth of self-reflexive thought). For belief, whether belief in a secular thing or in God, to be efficacious it must inspire a move away from the inner Self to the external, social world.

While Wallace is clear that his literary contemporaries should not be wholly classified as nihilists, it is evident that, with *Infinite Jest*, Wallace has constructed a platform on which these moral issues, that he sees are lacking in others' work, form the core of the novel. Wallace's intentions detailed in much of his non-fiction and strengthened with *This is Water* bear a striking similarity to the philosophical work of Iris Murdoch who, according to Anne Rowe and Avril Horner, believed that it was 'for writers to create "a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life" and "a new vocabulary of attention" rather than retreat into postmodern play'.⁵⁴ Daniel Turnbull also notices the link between Wallace and Murdoch, writing specifically about *This is Water* and its emphasis on attention. He writes, 'it should

⁵³ Žižek, *On Belief*. p. 15. Žižek's emphasis.

⁵⁴ Anne Rowe and Avril Horner, 'Introduction: Art, Morals and "The Discovery of Reality"', in *Iris Murdoch and Morality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 1-16. (p. 4).

be no surprise that Wallace and Murdoch emphasize the role of attention and imagination in moral life, as this is a central part of what, as writers of fiction, they were engaged in doing in their “day jobs”.⁵⁵ In astutely focusing on *This is Water*, however, Turnbull largely neglects the importance of Wallace’s fiction in developing these ideas.

In her book *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), Murdoch details what she believes is a need for a workable moral philosophy that bears relevance to modes of modern living. She writes:

A working philosophical psychology is needed which can at least attempt to connect modern psychological terminology with a terminology concerned with virtue. We need a moral philosophy which can speak significantly of Freud and Marx, and out of which aesthetic and political views can be generated. We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central.⁵⁶

Murdoch’s approach to a new moral philosophy helps explain some of Wallace’s writings on morality in *Infinite Jest*, and helps articulate why a traditional ethical reading, using Kierkegaard or Pascal for example, falls short of accurate analysis. Like Murdoch, Wallace also strives to find a way of removing religious doctrine from the idea of moral living, and he reaches strikingly similar conclusions to Murdoch.

Murdoch’s writing reinforces the notion that this theology-based philosophy does not have the necessary relevance in the modern world. She is particularly suspicious of existentialism as a mode of philosophy, believing that it does not lead to a relevant way of talking about moral philosophy. She writes:

⁵⁵ Daniel Turnbull, ‘*This is Water* and the Ethics of Attention: Wallace, Murdoch and Nussbaum’, in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 209-217. (p. 209)

⁵⁶ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*. p. 45.

Moral philosophy of an existential type is still Cartesian and egocentric. Briefly put, our picture of ourselves has become too grand, we have isolated, and identified ourselves with, an unrealistic conception of will, we have lost the vision of a reality separate from ourselves, and we have no adequate conception of original sin.⁵⁷

The 'unrealistic conception of will' in the above quotation can be levelled at philosophers such as Pascal and Kierkegaard, who both (in different ways) believe that by force of will, one can approach an understanding of God and therefore an ethical mode of existence. It is merely a choice to believe, to cultivate faith through an active force of will. Murdoch has problems with this way of thinking because she believes it replaces the idea of 'goodness' or virtue with the idea of 'rightness', or in other words the idea that one must make a right choice, or one's actions must be right. Murdoch is not concerned with these choices, but with what prepares one for the choices, the 'techniques' of reorienting the egocentric impulse. This idea has its basis in the works of Simone Weil, as Peter Conradi notes: 'Morality depends, for Weil, on the slow attenuation or destruction of the ego, which itself requires a quiet environment. Sudden or violent deracination can mean complete or demonic demoralisation'.⁵⁸ Murdoch expands on this view, noting that such reorientation may be slow and difficult, but it should aim at removing the need for conscious moral choice. She writes:

The place of choice is certainly a different one if we think in terms of a world which is *compulsively* present to the will, and the discernment and exploration of which is a slow business. Moral change and moral achievement are slow; we are not free in the sense of being able suddenly to alter ourselves since we cannot suddenly alter what we can see and ergo what we desire and are compelled by. In a way, explicit choice seems now less important: less decisive (since much of the "decision" lies elsewhere)

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 46.

⁵⁸ Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and Artist* (London: Macmillan, 1989). p. 13.

and less obviously something to be “cultivated”. If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at.⁵⁹

Yet, Murdoch’s discussion of choice and virtue does not discount action, and does not advocate a merely reflective existence. As Cora Diamond writes, ‘While Murdoch was highly critical of the mid-century emphasis on choice and action as virtually definitive of morality, she was hardly putting forward a morality of mere contemplation. It was rather that she took action to come out of pure and just vision’.⁶⁰ She further explains this notion thus:

Moral life is not primarily a matter of choices. The more one has been attentive to reality, the less one will find oneself aware of having to make a choice. Frequently it will simply be clear what needs to be done, and one no more thinks of there being a choice than one takes oneself to be making choices as one drives along a road with numerous roads branching off which do not go where one is heading. This way of thinking does not involve a denial of freedom, but places freedom at a different point, not at the point of choosing.⁶¹

Wallace’s writing in *Infinite Jest*, specifically about AA and the characters in Ennet House, reflects Murdoch’s theory in many ways. As I have already stated, the use of religious structure in AA is not necessarily for the recovering addict to find God, but one of the many tools that AA uses to train the addict’s attention away from what they desire and towards a belief in the ‘goodness’ (in the Murdochian sense). Many of the clichés propagated by ‘The Crocodiles’ help to show this. For example, ‘My Best Thinking Got Me Here’ focuses on the notion that an individual’s thinking, misguided attention and conscious choice is the reason for their fall from leading a moral life (*Jest*, n. 135, p. 1026). As we follow Gately’s journey from addict to rehabilitated citizen, much of Murdoch’s theory

⁵⁹ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*. p. 38. Murdoch’s emphasis.

⁶⁰ Cora Diamond, ‘Murdoch the Explorer’, *Philosophical Topics*, 38.1 (2010), 51-85. (p. 66).

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 71.

provides an apt parallel. Towards the beginning of his journey to sobriety, Gately expresses concern over his lack of religious understanding of his Higher Power. He tells the 'Tough Shit But You Still Can't Drink' AA group that:

when he tries to go beyond the very basic rote automatic get-me-through-this-day-please stuff, when he kneels at other times and prays or meditates or tries to achieve a Big-Picture spiritual understanding of a God as he can understand Him, he feels Nothing – not nothing but *Nothing*' (*Jest*, p. 443. Wallace's emphasis).

For Gately, the religious understanding doesn't come easy because it is not the main goal of the meditation or prayers. Rather the prayers are often referred to as a kind of surrendering of will rather than something that activates choice. The novel states, 'It's suggested in the 3rd of Boston AA's 12 Steps that you *turn your Diseased will over* to the direction and love of 'God *as you understand Him*' (*Jest*, pp. 442-443. Emphasis added). The understanding of a god does not have to be spiritual for the surrendering (the turning over of the Diseased will) to be effective – the most important part is the act of surrendering. Even the way the AA members speak reflects this emphasis. Ferocious Francis, Gately's mentor and sponsor, has to breathe through a mask attached to an oxygen tank, but he talks about the device in such a way that it reflects AA's emphasis on surrendering the will: 'All he'd ever say about the tank and tube is that they were not his personal will but that he'd submitted to advice and now here he was, still sucking air and staying rabidly Active' (*Jest*, p. 445). This turning over of will has the effect of divesting the necessity of conscious choice and, according to Murdoch, approaching a moral existence and the ability to execute moral actions. 'Explicit choice' to an addict is not useful, as that choice has prevented the addict from leading a moral life up to the time they began to surrender their will to mechanisms of AA and the Higher

Power. Looked at in this way, it can be seen that these mechanisms directly oppose the existentialist belief in the efficacy of will (as in Kierkegaard, for example), and lead to something that Murdoch calls 'moral unconscious'.⁶² Murdoch's 'moral unconscious' involves an emptying of egoism and will: 'The idea of negation (void) or surrender of selfish will is to be understood together with the idea of purified desire as purified cognition'.

In Murdoch's view, the road to morality is concerned with a refocusing of attention, and that attention needs something to focus on. Just to say a refocusing of attention leads to a moral existence is only a fraction of both Murdoch and Wallace's ethical writing. Murdoch is very clear that something must replace God as a focus of attention if morals are to be divorced from religion. She writes, 'I shall suggest that God was (or is) *a single perfect transcendent non-representational and necessarily real object of attention*; and I shall go on to suggest that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all these characteristics'.⁶³ She goes on to say that a focus of attention can be 'Good' or 'goodness' itself saying that, like God, 'Good [...] *is transcendent*'.⁶⁴ She goes on to conclude that, 'The background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially un-formulated faith in reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience'.⁶⁵ As with Wallace, belief is an important aspect of leading a moral life, but replacing a traditional religious belief in an abstract god is a belief in an abstract notion of 'goodness'. Conradi helps explain this, writing, 'Both growing up and paying attention for Murdoch are matters of struggling to perceive the world with less preconception, and to

⁶² Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1993). p. 301.

⁶³ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*. p. 54. Murdoch's emphasis.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 68. Murdoch's emphasis.

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 72.

understand the provisionality of life-myths which lead us to repeat roles in emotional systems whose patterns are laid down early'.⁶⁶

Perhaps the character that best helps illustrate this notion in *Infinite Jest* is that of Mario Incandenza, the disabled middle brother who is unburdened with the desperate solipsism of the other characters. Mario fits in with Murdoch's idea that a truly moral person will achieve an existence free of conscious choice, as he can be seen to 'attend properly' to the world around him. Wallace overtly and frequently describes Mario as 'basically a born listener', or a 'fanatical listener/observer' (*Jest*, p. 80, p. 189). Many of the characters, including Hal, view Mario as a transcendent figure, who through the innate suffering of his various disabilities has developed a unique and unselfish view of the world. Hal's attitude towards his brother is described thus:

And his younger and way more externally impressive brother Hal almost idealizes Mario, secretly. God-type issues aside, Mario is a (semi-) walking miracle, Hal believes. People who are somehow burned at birth, withered or ablated way past anything like what might be fair, they either curl up in their fire, or else they rise. Withered saurian homodontic Mario floats, for Hal. He calls him Booboo but fears his opinion more than probably anybody except their Moms's (*Jest*, p. 316).

That Mario exists with a quiet courage and refusal to 'curl up in [his] fire' also echoes Murdoch's writings on morality. She writes, 'Courage, which seemed at first to be something on its own, a sort of specialized daring of the spirit, is now seen to be a particular operation of wisdom and love'.⁶⁷ Mario's deformity also fits with established conventions of literary fools. Dana Heller writes:

⁶⁶ Conradi, p. 83.

⁶⁷ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*. p. 93.

Illness and/or physical deformity is an equally important feature of the American idiot, as in the case with Dostoevski's Prince Myshkin. American culture is very anxious about the body. Our popular culture tells us that American bodies must be styled, disciplined, beautiful, youthful, and sexual [...], and the absence of these traits marks the Idiot as an outsider graced with the possibility of transcending the fetishization of the body.⁶⁸

Heller continues that this allows the American idiot to remain outside of a society that is driven by 'greed, lust, and desire'.

Perhaps the most Murdochian aspect to Mario's character is the story of his inadvertent rescue of Barry Loach, an ex-Jesuit seminary who was having a crisis of faith, specifically his faith in the 'indwelling goodness of men' (*Jest*, p. 968). In order to prove to his brother that 'the basic human character wasn't as unempathetic and necrotic as the brother's present depressed condition was leading him to think', Loach installs himself as a beggar outside the local T-station (*Jest*, p. 969). Instead of begging for money, he begs for someone to 'Touch me, just touch me, *please*'. Just as Loach's 'soul began to sprout little fungal patches of necrotic rot' after being largely ignored by the public, Mario responds to his plea by shaking his hand (*Jest*, pp. 970-971). While this portrays Mario's character as innocent and having an attention that is pointed outward, it also echoes Murdoch's writing on belief, more specifically belief in 'Goodness'. Mario's ideas about belief are very simple, and he vocalises them to Hal as he asks whether his brother believed in God while playing skilful tennis. After Hal says that he has 'administrative bones to pick with God', Mario responds by saying, 'I don't get how you couldn't feel like you believed, today, out there. It was so *right there*. You moved like you totally believed' (*Jest*, pp. 40-41). Belief, in Mario's view is tied to Hal's good performance. Belief and success go hand in hand for him. Importantly,

⁶⁸ Dana Heller and Elena Volkova, 'The Holy Fool in Russian and American Culture: A Dialogue', *American Studies International*, 41.1 & 2 (2003), 152-178. (p. 170).

Wallace surrounds his characterisation of Mario with the idea of belief, describing him as a 'damaged listener' whose withered form inspires 'deep beliefs revealed' (*Jest*, p. 80). He is the centre of the discussion of belief in the novel.

Wallace uses Mario in a traditional literary way, evoking the literature of Victorian Europe. He is presented as the literary fool. Speaking about the Victorian tradition of the fool, Patrick McDonagh writes:

The presence of the fool character guides how we read the fictional world they inhabit [...] and the commentary they provide takes on a moral component. These fools are, after all, innocent – and for this quality to be relevant, it must either be shared with other characters, signifying all of their innocence [...], or juxtaposed against others, thus underscoring their guilt [...]. Of course, they can do both.⁶⁹

While Mario's commentary in the novel provides the moral core, his depiction differs slightly from the Victorian model. He is positioned as an example, juxtaposed against the other characters' self-reflexivity, but this does not 'underscore their guilt', but their inability to overcome the Self. Wallace emphasises this in the section where Gerhardt Schtitt tells Mario about his fundamental beliefs about tennis (although they quite clearly reflect Wallace's ethical themes in the novel). Schtitt's take on successful tennis dictates that:

You seek to vanquish and transcend the limited self whose limits make the game possible in the first place. It's tragic and sad and chaotic and lovely. All life is the same, as citizens of the human State: the animating limits are within, to be killed and mourned over and over again' (*Jest*, p. 84).

Mario doesn't understand Schtitt's theory, responding 'But then is battling and vanquishing the self the same as destroying yourself? Is that like saying life is pro-

⁶⁹ Patrick McDonagh, *Idiocy: A Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008). pp. 152-153.

death?’ Of course, Mario’s confusion illustrates his own success in overcoming the self, transcending his limitations. His innocence makes his transcendence of the self more potent because he does not even have enough self-reflexive thought to realise that he has overcome limitations.

Conclusion

Infinite Jest evolves Wallace’s already established philosophical foundation regarding the need to overcome the self and join the wider external community, but it also shows him processing various philosophical systems of thought through a fictional lens. The novel shows him establishing ideas that he further explores in his later fiction, specifically the need for post-ironic belief structures in order to lead a moral life. Lee Konstantinou connects Wallace’s promotion of belief as central to an ethical existence with his desire to find a way to overcome the self: ‘For Wallace, creating postironic belief was the goal of literary communication. This is why Wallace polemically argued against “death of the author” arguments and constructed his fictions, and especially his epochal *Infinite Jest*, around the unfulfilled desire to communicate’.⁷⁰ As I have shown in this chapter, this communication, or the refocusing of attention to engage with the external community, is central to *Infinite Jest*, but the idea is further explored in Wallace’s later work, and addressed directly in his 2005 commencement speech, published as *This is Water*.

Wallace’s philosophical engagement in *Infinite Jest* helps establish the novel as a work that diverges from other late-twentieth century works, and from the

⁷⁰ Lee Konstantinou, ‘No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief’, in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 83-112. (p. 85).

progression of the postmodern literary aesthetic of the 1980s and 1990s. In many ways, Wallace's focus on morality and community within *Infinite Jest* reveals a traditional pre-modernist streak in his writing that is mixed with his more *avant garde* impulses. In his later work, he develops this blend of literary experimentalism and traditionalism in a way that helps establish a new direction for American fiction after postmodernism.

Conclusion

Wallace's Millennial Moment

Throughout his career Wallace has shown a reluctance to categorise his work, refusing to call it postmodern but also refusing to designate a new descriptive term. In many ways he dramatizes this in 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', when he has his own analogue in the story, Mark Nectr, deliberate on his desire to 'write something that stabs you in the heart. That pierces you, makes you think you're going to die. Maybe it's called metalife. Or metafiction. Or realism. Or gfhrytytu. He doesn't know. He wonders who the hell really cares' ('Westward', p. 333). It is the literary scholar who cares, and has the impulse to categorise, but with Wallace's work this proves a problematic task, because his more *avant garde* flourishes are blended with a deeper traditional foundation. Yet, it would be wrong to categorise his work as either *avant garde* or traditional. As I have explored in the previous chapters, his corpus is dedicated to several traditional themes that are central to the Western canon: the consequences of living in a fragmented community, loneliness and possible ways of connecting ethically with other people through a greater attentiveness. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace details a world where the self's involvement in the outside community (or what Lacan would call 'the symbolic order') is stunted by external forces, such as entertainment media, narcotics and emotional trauma. The characters in the book, in Hal's assessment, are 'dying to give our lives away to something', yet Wallace's later fiction furthers this idea, focussing on the self as obstacle to ethical connection with the symbolic order of the community (*Jest*, p. 900).

These traditional elements of Wallace's work are further fortified in his later work, and his unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011) indicates that he wanted to further explore ideas of the self and the community. Yet categorising Wallace as a traditional writer largely ignores the formal innovation of his work, and its renegotiation of postmodern tropes. One of his later stories that helps illustrate both the focus on the traditional themes mentioned above, and the reassessment of postmodern devices is 'The Soul is not a Smithy' (2004).¹ Thomas Tracey notes that the story's central themes are 'A call for greater attentiveness to our peripheral surroundings, and a recognition that the most important events of our lives often take place on the margins of our quotidian experience'.² Tracey also notes the performative nature of the text, writing that the story is told 'by means of "nesting" significant informational "stimuli" or "stressors" amidst a plethora of innocuous detail'.³ This evokes Tom LeClair's theory of the systems novel, and the 'push-down stack' of recursive information systems in Douglas Hofstadter's work, as he claims 'stories within stories' is one example of 'the charms of recursion'.⁴ 'The Soul is Not a Smithy' is a performative work because of its recursive structure that makes demands on the reader so that full attention is distracted from the central plotline of the story. The reader is distracted in the same way as the narrator, so that the main incident of the teacher's breakdown is on the periphery, yet through the recursive process of the story, the main events are reflected in the

¹ The title of the story gives an indication on how to interpret the main text. 'The Soul is Not a Smithy' refers to a line from James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). In the novel, Joyce writes, 'Welcome, O life! 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' (Joyce, pp. 275-276). Stephen Dedalus' final words in the novel convey the artist's need to process experience through his 'soul' in order to create a work of art that speaks of his Irish heritage and connects with his native community. The narrator of Wallace's story, however, is creating his 'art' in through his imagination, not letting the 'reality of experience' enter his awareness as he largely ignores what is going on in his own immediate community.

² Thomas Tracey, 'Representations of Trauma in David Foster Wallace's *Oblivion*', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 172-186. (p. 177).

³ Ibid. p. 177.

⁴ Hofstadter, p. 127.

narrator's imagined story. In essence, this story is a miniature version of what LeClair calls a 'heterarchical nest of analogs' in which 'the smallest and simplest both defines and tangles with the largest and most complex'.⁵ The imaginary narrative begins to reflect its encasing narrative as the story progresses. The narrator writes, 'I believe that the atmosphere of the classroom may have subconsciously influenced the unhappy events of the period's window's mesh's narrative fantasy'.⁶

Wallace's reassessment of postmodern devices, such as this performative use of recursive cycles usually seen in the systems novel in 'The Soul is Not a Smithy', fits with Stephen J. Burn's assertion that much fiction that has come after postmodernism 'dramatizes its roots within pomo'.⁷ Yet, Wallace's work does not sit easy in the 'post-postmodern' label that critics have designated some of his contemporaries. Despite admitting that the term is 'ungainly', Burn states that authors such as Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers and Wallace can be categorised 'post-postmodern': 'post-postmodern has the benefit of indicating a simultaneous degree of overlap and separation from the practice of earlier postmodernists while it has already been used by numerous critics and several important writers'.⁸ Burn notices that Wallace himself uses the term several times in his own work: in 'E Unibus Pluram' (p. 50), 'Westward' (p. 354) and in *Infinite Jest* (p. 142). Yet, it is hard to gauge whether Wallace is being entirely serious in his usage, and none of the specific mentions of 'post-postmodernism' really indicate that he believes this to be a valid descriptive term for literature after postmodernism (in 'E Unibus Pluram' he also uses the term 'Hyperrealism' before

⁵ LeClair, *The Art of Excess*. p. 94.

⁶ David Foster Wallace, 'The Soul is Not a Smithy', in *Oblivion: Stories* (London: Abacus, 2004), pp. 67-113. (p. 92)

⁷ Stephen J. Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (London: Continuum, 2008). p. 18.

⁸ Ibid. p. 17.

settling more or less on a consistent use of ‘image fiction’). Burn also recognises drawbacks in using the term, stating that it is ‘hard to feel good about the explanatory value of a term whose usage collapses the differences between such different writers and contexts. Its bandwidth is just too broad’.⁹ It could also be said that Wallace’s bandwidth alone is too broad for such a categorisation as his work often simultaneously affirms and denies the ‘post-postmodern’ categorisation. For example, *Infinite Jest* may attempt ‘to reproduce the intellectual range and formal care that characterized the encyclopaedic masterpieces of the older writers’, yet it is not ‘weighed towards plot to much greater degree than in the work of postmodernists’ as Burn attests.¹⁰ James Peacock, writing about Jonathan Lethem and also using Burn as a foundation for the definition of ‘post-postmodernism’, states that it has a ‘tendency to eschew recursivity, metanarrative games, and a sense of an unseen author always in absolute control of his or her world despite “death of the author”-style gestures’.¹¹ Wallace’s fiction both affirms and contests this definition, especially in his final, unfinished novel, *The Pale King*.

As *The Pale King* is unfinished, it is difficult to establish Wallace’s motives within the novel with any certainty yet, when it is paired with *This is Water*, a conceptual arc to the last years of Wallace’s career can be sketched. If *Infinite Jest*’s main focus is the role entertainment plays in the distraction of moral attention, *The Pale King* reinforces Wallace’s developing notion that the way human beings deal with boredom can involve moral choices and is very much a dramatization of the central ideas of *This is Water*. In his speech, he says:

⁹ Ibid. p. 18.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 20.

¹¹ James Peacock, *Jonathan Lethem* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012). p. 163.

But if you've really learned how to think, how to pay attention, then you will know you have other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars – compassion, love, the subsurface unity of all things (*Water*, pp. 92-93).

In the 'Author's Foreword' of *The Pale King*, the narrator (putatively 'David Wallace') writes that there is a 'terror of silence with nothing to do', and that is why there are 'now actual TV in waiting rooms, supermarkets' checkouts, airports' gates, SUVs' backseats. Walkmen, iPods, Blackberries, cell phones that attach to the head'.¹² Yet, instead of concentrating on these devices as distractors that pull focus away from moral attention, Wallace indicates that they exist *because* of boredom, and it is really that 'dullness proves such a powerful impediment to attention' (*King*, p. 87). Here, Wallace is using a different focus in order to revisit many of the themes established in his earlier fiction, and he shows characters in an environment where distraction from this expanse of tedium is impossible, that of a government tax examination centre. What could be called the more traditional focus of the novel is that enduring long stretches of boredom is an act of courage. As an accountancy lecturer says in 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle's long narrative, 'Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is. Such endurance is, as it happens, the distillate of what is, today, in this world neither I nor you have made, heroism. Heroism' (*King*, p. 231). This heroism, according to the lecturer, leads to 'a denomination of joy unequalled by any you men can yet imagine' (*King*, p. 232). The lecturer's speech evokes the philosophy of Iris Murdoch, and her work on the morality of attention. She writes, 'Courage, which

¹² David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (London: Penguin, 2012). p. 87.

seemed at first to be something on its own, a sort of specialized daring of the spirit, is now seen to be a particular operation of wisdom and love'.¹³

These ideas also incorporate Wallace's on-going preoccupation with possible methods of overcoming solipsism. The most obvious example of this in the text is that of David Cusk and his attacks of excess perspiration. These sweating attacks teach him 'the terrible power of attention and what you pay attention to' (*King*, p. 93). Through methods of distraction he is able to control the attacks, but when not distracted by puzzles 'his attention telescoped to where all he could feel was the uncontrolled heat and sweat starting to pop out on his face and back' (*King*, p. 98). Cusk's narrative dramatizes many of the philosophical ideas in Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970). She writes, 'Self is as hard to see justly as other things, and when clear vision has been achieved, self is a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object'.¹⁴ Cusk is a victim of solipsistic and circular thought patterns that prevent him focussing his attention outwards, and can be seen as a revisiting of the thematic characterisation of the drug addicts in *Infinite Jest*, or more specifically the discussion of 'marijuana thinking' where the addicts 'think themselves into labyrinths of reflexive abstraction that seem to cast doubt on the very possibility of practical functioning, and the mental labor of finding one's way out consumes all available attention and makes the Bob Hope-smoker look physically torpid and apathetic' (*Jest*, n. 269a, p. 1048). The difference with Cusk's situation is that it is not inspired by an external force (i.e. marijuana), but by his own internal anxiety, such that 'He thought of them as *attacks*, though not from anything outside of himself but rather from some inner part of himself that was hurting or almost betraying him' (*King*, p. 98. Wallace's

¹³ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*. p. 93.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 66.

emphasis). As Peter J. Conradi writes of Murdoch's (and Simone Weil's) philosophy, a morally viable mode of living depends 'on the slow attenuation or destruction of the ego'.¹⁵

If Wallace's corpus of work has a central idea that runs through everything he has written, it is the idea that overcoming the self and engaging with the larger external community yields morally restorative results, particularly in a time that has lauded the 'nobility of individualism' over 'the warmth of communal belonging' ('Pluram', p. 54). He attributes this to the 'development of the postmodern aesthetic and some deep and serious changes in how Americans chose to view concepts such as authority, sincerity, and passion in terms of our willingness to be pleased' ('Pluram', p. 59). Essentially this is what Paul Giles calls, 'a deliberate exploration in both psychological and theoretical terms of how an isolated self enters into dialogue and conversation with a wider community'.¹⁶ How Wallace dramatizes these ideas in his fiction is one of the reasons it is problematic to use the 'post-postmodern' categorisation. Wallace's suspicion of the efficacy of postmodern expression to denote a sincere truth is complicated by the nuanced ways he uses postmodern literary devices in his later fiction. In 'Good Old Neon', Wallace uses a metafictional ending to complicate the events of the story that is putatively narrated by a character who has committed suicide. It is revealed in the final moments of the story that the real narrator could be Wallace himself, who is looking at a photo of the deceased and 'trying, through the tiny little keyhole of himself, to imagine what all must have happened to lead up to my death in the

¹⁵ Conradi, p. 13.

¹⁶ Paul Giles, 'All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 3-22. (p. 11).

fiery single-car accident he'd read about in 1991'.¹⁷ This has the effect not of revealing the story as a fiction, but revealing it as a constructed effort in which Wallace tries to understand a former classmate's demise. As Lee Konstantinou writes, 'Wallace pulls away the "fourth" wall of the fictional world of his story, revealing that what readers were lead to believe was fiction (and specifically postmodern metafiction) may in fact be a kind of meta-nonfiction. The purpose of this revelation seems to be to cause the reader to experience a form of connection with Wallace as a writer'.¹⁸ This is a device Wallace further experiments with in *The Pale King*.

In 'E Unibus Pluram', he writes, 'Metafictionists may have had aesthetic theories out the bazoo, but they were also sentient citizens of a community that was exchanging an old idea about itself as a nation of doers and be-ers for a new vision of the U.S.A. as an atomised mass of self-conscious watchers and appearers' ('Pluram', p. 34). In *The Pale King*, Wallace interrogates this idea further by parodying the conventions of metafictional aesthetics. For example, Wallace's hand-ringing explanation that the seemingly fictional portrayal of events is merely a legal necessity to stop the publishing company being sued: 'The only bona fide "fiction" here is the copyright page's disclaimer [...] The disclaimer's whole and only purpose is to protect me, the book's publisher, and the publisher's assigned distributors from legal liability' (*King*, p. 70). Unlike the metafictionist of the 1960s, Wallace is interrogating the notion of metafiction within a fictional context. He is no longer a citizen of a community that is 'exchanging an old idea about itself as a nation of doers and be-ers for a new vision of the U.S.A. as an atomised mass of self-conscious watchers and appearers', but rather he is

¹⁷ Wallace, 'Good Old Neon' in *Oblivion: Stories* (London: Abacus, 2004) pp. 141-181 (p. 180).

¹⁸ Konstantinou, p. 98.

interrogating how this mode of expression complicates ideas of authorial truth and honesty. Wallace has interrogated this idea of metafictional honesty before, in the story 'Octet'. The story is constructed as a series of 'pop quizzes' that are directed at the reader, presenting various tricky situations that need to be deciphered. Eventually, the story directly addresses its metafictional concerns, stating 'You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. You are attempting a cycle of short belletristic pieces'.¹⁹ In the story, Wallace states that the trick to overcoming 'tired old S.O.P. metafiction' ('Octet', p. 130) is 'that you'd have to be 100% honest. Meaning not just sincere but almost naked. Worse than naked – more like unarmed. Defenceless' ('Octet', p. 131). This self-conscious deliberation on the notion of fictional honesty reads like a blueprint for the metafictional sections of *The Pale King*, yet the story attempts to clarify the seeming impossibility of a reader accepting as truth anything a fiction writer puts down on paper. Marshall Boswell writes that 'the self-consciousness is designed paradoxically to seem real' and that 'the honesty this narrator employs parallels the desperate self-effacement of a person who goes to a party and actually "goes around at the party and goes up to strangers and asks whether they like him or not"'.²⁰ The ultimate goal of Wallace's story is to position the author as:

more like the reader, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a *Writer* whom we imagine to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence and unwavering conviction as he co-ordinates the whole campaign from back at some gleaming abstract Olympian HQ ('Octet', p. 136. Original emphasis).

¹⁹ David Foster Wallace, 'Octet', in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001), pp. 111-136. (p. 123).

²⁰ Boswell, p. 186. The Wallace quotation is from 'Octet', p. 134. Original emphasis.

Adam Kelly writes that 'in Wallace's fiction the guarantee of the writer's sincere intentions cannot finally lie in representation – sincerity is rather the kind of secret that must always break with representation'.²¹ Essentially, this means that the sincerity, or directness, that Wallace struggles articulating through the metafictional discourse cannot be exposed by the writer and in Kelly's words 'needs a blind response from the reader to legitimate it'.²²

The Pale King helps illustrate the career-long tension between traditional literary impulses, specifically ideas about overcoming solipsism and the ethical connection to a community, and Wallace's engagement with *avant garde*, postmodern techniques that is evident in his fiction. In some ways, this reflects Stephen Burn's hypothesis that 'post-postmodern' works have a 'degree of overlap and separation from the practice of earlier postmodernists'.²³ His ideas established in 'E Unibus Pluram' about the mainstreaming of ironic postmodernism evolved over his career becoming, as Adam Kelly notes, 'primarily about returning to a literary narrative concern with sincerity not seen since modernism shifted the ground so fundamentally almost a century before'.²⁴ Kelly establishes a different categorisation to 'post-postmodernism', stating that Wallace and some of his contemporaries were establishing a 'New Sincerity' in American fiction, which involves a dialogue between reader and writer that happens off the page in which both parties 'can be challenged by the dialogic dimension of the reading experience'.²⁵ This fits with Wallace's idea that art after postmodernism can be 'a living transaction between humans', but again Kelly relies on the term 'post-postmodern' to describe a perceived movement or category that Wallace belongs

²¹ Kelly, p. 143.

²² Ibid. p. 144.

²³ Burn, *Jonathan Franzen*. p. 17.

²⁴ Kelly, p. 133.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 145.

to.²⁶ He positions authors such as Michael Chabon, Dave Eggers, Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers and Jonathan Lethem in this group.

While Wallace shares many commonalities with these writers, it is perhaps more interesting to set him apart from any 'post-postmodern' movement. What makes Wallace different, as the previous chapters have shown, is his ability to talk in theoretical and academic terms about his own fiction's impact in the American canon. But also, Wallace's career has now become a complete moment, where the authors mentioned above continue to develop their literary projects, further mutating any labels that can be applied. As James Peacock writes in his monograph on Jonathan Lethem, 'the fact critical terms, like genres, inevitably emerge after the event has implications for the whole question of periodisation'.²⁷ Looking at Wallace's work retrospectively, it can be seen it occupies a specifically millennial moment that has now become enclosed from the larger debates about the 'post-postmodern', such that his work has begun to influence novels that have already been classified under that term. Novels such as Joshua Ferris' *Then We Came to the End* (2007); Franzen's *Freedom* (2010); Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010); and *The Marriage Plot* (2011) by Jeffrey Eugenides among others.

Wallace's importance comes from his attempts, through his fiction, non-fiction and interviews, to articulate possible methods of moving beyond postmodernism in order to establish a mode of literary expression that has the power to both reflect the millennial world and to connect with the fragmented community he perceives as being created by postmodern disengagement. If a category was to be constructed around his work, I posit that 'Millennial Fictions'

²⁶ McCaffery, p. 41.

²⁷ Peacock, p. 164.

would be more appropriate than 'post-postmodern', as it too suggests a connection to the twentieth century American canon, but also helps emphasise Wallace's attempts to create a literary change in his own work. Additionally, it describes the transitional moment that Wallace's work occupies, from the late-postmodernism of the brat-pack authors, to the 'New Sincerity' of the writers continuing to establish new modes of literary expression in the twenty-first century.

Despite its unfinished status, *The Pale King* can be seen as a culmination of Wallace's two-decade project to actively engage with past literary and philosophical works in order to negotiate modes of expression that resonate in a world that has largely adopted and neutered the last big artistic challenge to the status quo, postmodernism. In doing so, Wallace's fiction has re-established traditional verities of community, sincerity and morality, and repositioned them as vital restorative weapons against the growing cultural norm of postmodern irony and disengagement from ethical society. As the previous chapters have shown, the millennial fictions of David Foster Wallace can be viewed as a manifesto that subsequent writers have taken to heart: 'an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem'.²⁸

²⁸ McCaffery, p. 49.

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