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WALLACE AND I

Cognition, Consciousness, and Dualism in
David Foster Wallace's Fiction

Jamie Peter Redgate

<u>Abstract</u>

Though David Foster Wallace is well known for declaring that "Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (*Conversations* 26), what he actually meant by the term "human being" has been quite forgotten. It is a truism in Wallace studies that Wallace is a posthuman writer whose characters are devoid of any kind of inner interiority or soul. This is a misreading of Wallace's work.

My argument is that Wallace's work and his characters—though they are much neglected in Wallace studies—are animated by the tension between materialism and essentialism, and this dualism is one of the major ways in which Wallace bridges postmodern fiction with something new. My project is itself part of this post-postmodern turn, a contribution to the emerging field of cognitive literary studies which has tried to move beyond postmodernism by bringing a renewed focus on the sciences of mind to literary criticism. As yet, this field has largely focused on fiction published before the twentieth century. I expand the purview of cognitive literary studies and give a rigorous and necessary account of Wallace's humanism.

In each chapter I discuss a particular concern that Wallace shares with his predecessors (authorship; selfhood; therapy; free will), and explore how Wallace's dualism informs his departure from postmodernism. I begin by setting out the key scientific sources for Wallace, and the embodied model of mind that was foundational to his writing and his understanding, especially after Barthes's "Death of the Author," of the writing process. In chapter 2, I unravel the unexamined but hugely significant influence of René Descartes on Wallace's ghost stories, showing that Wallace's work is not as posthuman as it is supposed to be. In chapter 3, I discuss the dualist metaphors that Wallace consistently uses to describe an individual's experience of sickness. Focusing on the interior lives of both therapist and patient in Wallace's work, I show that Wallace's therapy fictions are a critical response to postmodern anti-psychiatry. Finally, in chapter 4, I reconcile Wallace's dualist account of material body and essential mind by setting his work against both the history of the philosophy of free will and postmodern paranoid fiction.

If Wallace's fiction is about what it is to be a human being, this thesis is about the human 'I' at the heart of Wallace's work.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

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Introduction

"[An] alarmed call to arms": Cognitive Science, the Humanities, and the End of Postmodernism

> There is a spectacle greater than the sea, and that is the sky; there is a spectacle greater than the sky, and that is the human soul.
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> To write the poem of the human conscience, were it only that of a single man, were it only that of the most insignificant man, would be to meld all epics into one superior epic, the epic to end all. . . . What a sombre thing is this infinity that each man carries with him.
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> —Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (184)

Wallace's Humanist Fiction

David Foster Wallace was a profoundly humanist writer. This is not to say simply that Wallace's work is meaningful and moving, but that it is these things *because* Wallace was a humanist in the traditional sense, a writer whose subject, from the beginning of his career to its end, was the spectacle of the human soul and the "infinity," as Victor Hugo puts it, "that each man carries with him" (184). Though Wallace is well known for his declaration that "Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (*Conversations* 26), what Wallace actually meant by the term 'human being' has been quite forgotten. It is a truism in Wallace studies that Wallace was a *post*humanist writer, one who was too theoretically sophisticated to write about human beings who have, as is traditional, some kind of inner essence or soul.[1] I will challenge this prevailing view. Though questions about the nature of human beings and the relationship between body and soul go largely undiscussed in Wallace studies, they are at the very centre of Wallace's project and should not go ignored.

What is a human being? Denis Diderot's entry on "Man" in the *Encyclopédie* says that "Man is composed of two substances, one known as soul, the other known as body." Yet the relationship between these substances, between what Wallace calls "bodies, minds, and spirits" (*Infinite Jest* 503), has been debated for millennia, and there is no easy definition for

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[1] Posthumanism is a loaded theoretical term, and one which I will discuss and define in much more detail in chapter 2. Very loosely, posthumanism is a critique of humanism and the view that human beings have an autonomous, indivisible essence (a soul, a self, an 'I') that inhabits a body.

any of these terms. Plato thought of the soul as "a long-lived thing" and the "body [a]s relatively feeble and short-lived" (*Last Days* 159), but the history of philosophy is, as George Makari puts it, the history of "the eternal soul" losing "ground to the fallible," biological "mind" (Makari 135). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the belief that human beings possessed some immortal, immaterial essence came up against Newton's clockwork universe and the increasingly undeniable idea that human beings might be made entirely of matter. Though René Descartes understood that all life, including the human body and brain, were mechanical, he did deny that the important bit—the soul, the 'I,' the thinking part of 'Man'—was part of the material universe. But it only got worse for the soul from there. John Locke reconceptualised humans as beings with bodies and "mind[s]" (Makari 150). For Locke it was no longer the soul that constituted a human being's identity but the *mind* (though the soul was still tacked onto most models of mind for the sake of propriety).[2] Locke's mind is not divine and divorced from the machine-body, as the 'I' was for Descartes, but a fallible, material entity. As Voltaire puts it, in his essay "On Mr Locke," "I am a body and I think. I know no more than that" (*Letters* 65).

Wallace came to prominence alongside the emergence of what Fernando Vidal and Francisco Ortega have called the "neurocultural world," a world in which these debates are in the air, and the "belief that human beings are essentially their brains" has "become extremely powerful" in popular consciousness (7). Yet despite Wallace's status as perhaps the most well-regarded American novelist to emerge in the last few decades, and despite his work being the focus of considerable, and ever-increasing, attention, so little of that attention has been paid to Wallace's treatment of character, the "fucking *human being*[*s*]" that his fiction is supposed to be about (*Conversations* 26). Are Wallace's characters "essentially their brains" (Vidal and Ortega 7)? What is the nature of consciousness in Wallace's work? What does Wallace have to say about the relationship between mind, body and soul, between madness and materialism, between free will and determinism? Though we know from Wallace's writing and his archive that he had a deep interest in the philosophy of mind and

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[2] In the philosophical melting pot that was Enlightenment Europe, these terms became all the more confusing because they often could not be translated. As Makari explains, the "Latin *mentis* from the Greek *menos*, was 'mind' in English," but this term "had no equivalent in French" (27). French writers translated 'mind' to 'soul' and confused Locke's distinction between the two.

contemporary cognitive science, very little has been said about the body and brain in Wallace's work, and almost nothing at all has been said about the soul.

Yet the human soul is absolutely central to Wallace's project. Wallace's declaration about the purpose of fiction always appears in the shortened form above, but Wallace continues:

> We've got all this 'literary' fiction that simply monotones that we're all becoming less and less human, that presents *characters without souls or love*, characters who really are exhaustively describable in terms of what brands of stuff they wear. . . . 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? (26-27, my emphasis)

This idea that characters should have the "capacity" for souls, for "stuff that doesn't have a price," was not just a throwaway metaphor. In an interview near the end of his career, in 2005, Wallace mirrored this language, explaining that he "envied and coveted" the "capacities of spirit" of "writers like St. Paul, Rousseau, Dostoevsky, and Camus," who had, for Wallace, an ability to "render so fully, passionately, the spiritual urgencies they felt" (*Conversations* 157). Again Wallace talks about people as if the very "qualit[y]" that make them "human" (157) is this "capacit[y] of spirit," some space inside them for "souls" and "love." Wallace studies have given no account of the capacity for spirit in Wallace's writing, yet it is literally central. At the exact halfway point of Wallace's enormous masterpiece, *Infinite Jest* (1996), the character Lucien flies out of his own body when he is assassinated. Wallace writes that as

> Lucien finally dies, rather a while after he's quit shuddering like a clubbed muskie and seemed to them to die, as he finally sheds his body's suit, Lucien finds his gut and throat again and newly whole, clean and unimpeded, and is free, catapulted home over fans and the Convexity's glass palisades at desperate speeds, soaring north, sounding a bell-clear and nearly maternal alarmed call-to-arms in all the world's well-known tongues. (488-89)

Lucien's body is a "suit," a literal container of the spirit inside it. Wallace detaches soul from body, essence from matter, as the ghost of Lucien, no longer trapped inside what Plato calls the "mortal . . . dissoluble" vessel (*Last Days* 149), is free of earthly limits and flies home.

It is a peculiarity of Wallace studies that no one has discussed what the many ghosts in Wallace's works might tell us about his understanding of character. Though critics such as N. Katherine Hayles ("Illusion"), Paul Giles ("Sentimental"), Elizabeth Freudenthal, Conley Wouters, and Simon De Bourcier focus on the nature of Wallace's characters, they do not discuss the ghosts at all, assuming that Wallace's fiction shares their theoretical position on the absence of an interior self. Other critics, such as Christopher Bartlett, Marshall Boswell (*Understanding*), Vincent Haddad, David Hering, Brian McHale ("*Pale King*"), and Toon Staes ("Work in Process") read the ghosts as stand-ins—in the spirit of Roland Barthes—for Wallace himself. These two narrow approaches betray the complicated relationship that Wallace criticism has with Wallace. The former critics ignore Wallace's ghosts as they ignore Wallace's own conservativism, because both pose a challenge to their theoretical framework, while the latter critics do not ignore Wallace at all, but pay too close attention to his authorly ghost at the expense of all the others across his work. If Wallace's ghosts are talked about at all, no one has suggested that they might tell us something about what Wallace thought of human beings other than himself.

It is no coincidence that both Wallace's characters and his ghosts (which are literally the essence of a character) receive equally little attention. It is often Wallace the person who is the subject of criticism, both as an individual and in terms of the relationship that he created with his readers.[3] Criticism that does focus on Wallace's work is often organised around

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[3] A lot of recent work has focused on the complicated genesis of Wallace's final, posthumously published novel *The Pale King*, in which Wallace himself appears as a character (Di Leo; Marsh; Miley; Staes, "Work in Process";). Critics have explored the impact Wallace's life and death have had on criticism of his work (Benzon; Bustillos; Adam Kelly; Roache; Thomas), and have taken a more critical view of Wallace the person, interrogating his personal politics and his problematic treatment of gender and race (Hayes-Brady, "Personally"; Himmelheber; Holland, "Hirsute"; Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts; Morrissey and Thompson; Santel). Different characters in Wallace's fiction have been read as stand-ins for their creator: a way for the author to address, and build a relationship with, the reader (Bartlett; Haddad; Hering). In this vein, critics have also discussed the formal means by which Wallace forces the reader to work at this relationship (Cioffi; Gerdes; Jacobs, "American Touchstone"; Levey; Nadel; Staes, "Only Artists"; Williams), and how those

Wallace's relationship with other writers.[4] For the most part, however, the discussion centres around Wallace's engagement with a body of thought or philosophy: Wallace was, as he put it, "obscenely well-educated" (*Conversations* 59), and there is a wealth of material for scholars to untangle.[5] Though Wallace's characters are of course mentioned across the board, they are treated as ciphers that Wallace uses to dramatize some larger argument or idea. Those critics that do focus on character share the posthumanist position that Wallace's characters are hollow objects, devoid of any essential humanity, soul, or interiority (De Bourcier; Dulk; Freudenthal; Giles, "Sentimental"; Hayles, "Illusion"; Kaiser; Moran; Resar; Wouters). My argument is with these critics in particular.

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readers have developed into a community and an audience (Fitzpatrick; Warren). Recently, one critic has argued that we should not waste our time reading Wallace at all (Hungerford).

[4] The early narrative of Wallace's career was that he had an antagonistic relationship with postmodern literature and its predominantly ironic mode, from which he sought to distance himself (Boswell, *Understanding*; McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent"; Cohen; Konstantinou). This standard narrative has since been complicated by critics who demonstrate that Wallace actually has a lot more in common with his postmodern predecessors than he liked to let on (Andersen; Foster; Harris; McHale "*Pale King*"; McLaughlin, "After the Revolution"; O'Donnell; Rando; Winningham). Other critics have situated Wallace's works in contexts beyond American postmodern fiction, including the contemporary MFA Creative Writing program (Boddy; McGurl), poetry (Coleman; Jacobs "American Touchstone"), literary journalism (Roiland), and world literature (Thompson). Critics are now also starting to discuss Wallace's influence on other writers (Boswell, "The Rival Lover"; Hoberek), a branch of Wallace studies that is sure to keep growing.

[5] Critics have focused on Wallace's engagement with poststructuralist and postmodern philosophy and theory (Jon Baskin; Bresnan; Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable*; Holland, "Mediated"), with the philosophy of free will and choice (Cahn and Eckert; Durantaye; Evans), and with philosophy more generally (Dulk; David Morris; Mullins; Ramal; Tracey; Vermeule). Critics have studied Wallace's engagement with masculinity (Banner), place (Giles, "All Swallowed Up"; Houser; Nichols; Quinn), postmodern technology and entertainment (Ercolino; Frost; Sayers), therapy culture, pain, and illness (Bleakley and Jolly; Goerlandt, "Still Steaming"; Jones; Mortenson; Nash; Russel; Toal) information overload (Letzler), capitalism, politics, and boredom (Andrew Bennett; Boswell, "Trickle-Down Citizenship"; Clare; Collignon; Hamilton; Shapiro). Recently Wallace's interest in religion has started to receive more sustained attention (Brick; O'Connell), as has his interest in maths (Natalini), while there have been articles and a monograph detailing Wallace's informed engagement with taxation and economics (Godden and Szalay; Severs).

Toon Staes is critical of Wallace's argument that "fiction that isn't exploring what it means to be human today isn't good art" (qtd. in Staes, "Wallace and Empathy" 40n. 5), suggesting that critics have so regularly "decried a lack of humanism in fiction . . . that the argument has lost all meaning" (40n. 5). I disagree. The distinction that Wallace makes between humanist and non-humanist writing matters, and is vital to our understanding of Wallace's own work because it governs his construction of the characters that his work is about. Though, as Stephen J. Burn and Robert L. McLaughlin have both argued, we should be careful about setting Wallace's work against a strawman postmodernist fiction that we might imagine is insincere, devoid of character, and deliberately inhumane, there *is* a clear shift from the work of Wallace's postmodern predecessors to his own "post-postmodern" fiction (Burn, *Jonathan Franzen* 23-24; McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern" 66). Previously this post-postmodern shift has been characterised as a turn towards a "New Sincerity" (Adam Kelly, "New Sincerity" 136) or to "postironic belief" (Konstantinou 83). These frameworks follow Wallace's cue in his essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1990), in which he argued that fiction needed to rebel against "TV's ironic, totalitarian grip" on U.S. culture by treating "plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (*Supposedly* 73; 81). Jeffrey Severs has suggested that Wallace studies needs a new, "synthetic reading, based in his whole career and archive," of Wallace's post-postmodern project (3). Where Severs looks at "value" in Wallace's work, both economic and otherwise (3), my view—which complements Severs's—is that Wallace's antagonistic relationship with postmodernism can, in large part, be understood as a conflict concerning the nature of human beings and character.

In the "E Unibus Pluram" essay itself, part of Wallace's problem with contemporary fiction is that it is "hollow" (81), devoid of "enduring character" (80) because its characters are flat, ironic parodies of humans as they appear on television. This problem is keenly felt by Hal in *Infinite Jest*. The moment when Hal reflects on the contemporary US arts is much discussed in studies of Wallace's post-postmodernism (Rando 575; Staes, "Wallace and Empathy" 39; Jacobs, "Order" 219; Toal 318-19), but the focus is always on irony, not on the passage's humanism. Hal is said to be a product of postmodern culture not just because of his ironic pose, but because of what this does to him: it makes him feel empty inside, not "in there, inside his own hull, as *a human being*" (694, my emphasis). Later in the novel, Hal uses

Wallace's exact phrasing when he tells his brother Mario to "'Be a fucking human *being* for once, Boo'," by which he means "'Are you *in* there?'" (784). To be human is to have a capacity for spirit, yet posthuman theory—a thriving member of the "lively arts of the millennial U.S.A." (694) that so unsettle Hal—sets out to dismantle the idea that anyone is "*in* there." Wallace is actively writing against this position. I will show that Wallace's subject was always the soul, the 'I,' the interior self (terms that will become clear in the following chapters), and his career-long engagement with the relationship between the soul and the body is one of the main drivers of his critique of postmodernism.

"Theory after 'Theory'"

Wallace engaged seriously with the philosophy of body, brain, and mind, and during his lifetime the field moved beneath his feet. In 1992, Gerald M. Edelman wrote that "We are at the beginning of the neuroscientific revolution" (xiii). Neuroscience, which showed that the "mind is a special kind of process depending on special arrangements of matter" (7), promised to reveal not just the nature of the brain but of the mind and the self as well.[6] The rise of our neuroculture coincided with a tumultuous period in the arts and humanities as they struggled to defend their own value (both economic and otherwise) as the sciences started to encroach upon what had previously been sacred territory. Yet for some critics in the humanities, such as those involved with the emerging fields of literary Darwinism and cognitive literary studies, this scientific revolution was a blessing. For critics who were frustrated with the extreme relativism, ontological uncertainty, and the denial of shared human nature that many felt

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[6] As Makari notes, "By 1815, all of these positions" on the various extents to which the mind was or was not material "had been established" (503). Until the late twentieth century, however, it was still only the "body or the material part of man" that had, as Diderot puts it, "been studied a great deal." The mind remained a mystery: by the middle of the eighteenth century, the study of the brain's "gray, wrinkled flesh" seemed to have revealed no secrets about its origins (Makari 452); near the beginning of the twentieth, Freud abandoned attempts at "mind-brain integration," deciding that the "contribution from the brain on psychic states" was "unknowable" (509). In the latter half of the twentieth century, cognitive science seemed to offer a bridge, finally, between the study of mind and brain.

characterised postmodern theory, the study of the brain offered what seemed like stable ground to which they might escape.

This uneasy negotiation between what C. P. Snow famously called "the two cultures" (4) is not a new struggle, but remains one of the primary concerns for literature and criticism at the turn of the millennium.[7] Hard problems have emerged. What is the role of literary criticism if cognitive science has more to say about human beings? What is the role of fiction if what we think of as the internal, soulful self no longer exists? The emergence of Darwinist and cognitive literary studies, which aim to reconcile the humanities with the new sciences of life and mind, coincides with the corresponding 'post-postmodernist' movement in American literature that was instigated by writers such as Richard Powers, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace. It is useful to map out these new fields in literary studies, partly because this will set out the theoretical ground for my own approach to Wallace, but also because it forms part of the cultural backdrop against which Wallace's career plays out. These new kinds of literary study and Wallace's writing are all part of this post-postmodern turn, and both turn to the brain as a way to challenge and address postmodern theory.

There was a growing sense at the end of the twentieth century that postmodernism had, as Wallace put it, "to a large extent run its course" ("Interview by Charlie Rose" 22:05-22:12). In Steven Pinker's bestseller, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002), for instance, Pinker claims that that the postmodern arts are coming to a long overdue end. He suggests that the go-to techniques and theories of twentieth-century artists and critics from modernism onwards—such as the "freakish distortion of shape and color" in visual art; literature's replacement of "general readability" with "stream of consciousness,

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[7] In 1959, C. P. Snow argued in a lecture titled "The Two Cultures" that there was a "gulf of mutual incomprehension" between "literary intellectuals at one pole" and scientists at the other (4). T. J. Lustig and James Peacock note that, though Snow's lecture "continues to frame current discussions of the encounter between literature and science" (1), the division has a longer history still, between T. H. Huxley and Matthew Arnold, for example, or the Romantics and the Utilitarians, and so on (3). As early as 1605, in *Of the Proficience and Advancement of Learning Divine and Human* (1605), Francis Bacon wrote that there are two books, "the book of God's word," and "the book of God's works": studying God's works can be done through scientific observation, but God's word (like the soul and the arts) are matters of a different sort.

events presented out of order, baffling characters . . . [and] difficult prose"; and the metafiction, "irony," and "self-referential allusions" that characterise postmodernism in particular (410-11)—are borne from the incorrect view that the minds of human beings are blank slates, shaped entirely by culture and therefore by rules that can be broken. According to Pinker, the postmodern humanities were an iconoclastic, reactionary academic phenomenon, one which grew increasingly obscurantist and anti-scientific in order to privilege nurture and ignore nature altogether.[8] As a consequence, the humanities have grown out of touch with the real world because they claim that we should not value *naïve* ideas such as "beauty," since these are thought to be entirely unobjective, culturally contingent, and not rooted in our shared biology at all (412). In Pinker's view, the cognitive revolution is the answer, a means by which to re-bridge the arts with the sciences (31). However blinkered Pinker's perspective of the last hundred years of artistic innovation undoubtedly is, his frustration with postmodern theory's denial of human nature, and his optimism about the benefits that a scientific perspective would bring to the humanities, are in no way isolated.

In a series of manifestos published between 1999 and 2002, Alan Richardson, Mary Thomas Crane, and Francis F. Steen, who could note the now "routine" calls to move beyond "the more bleakly relativistic and antihumanist strands" of postmodernism, offer an alternative: cognitive literary studies (Richardson, "Cognitive Science" 157; Richardson and Steen, "Literature" 2). It is baffling, notes Richardson, that contemporary literary theory, which takes so many of cognitive science's findings for granted—the "fragmented self," the

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[8] The now infamous 'Sokal affair' brought the conflict between the sciences and the postmodern humanities into sharp focus. In 1996, Alan D. Sokal successfully published a deliberately nonsensical paper, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," in the postmodern cultural studies journal *Social Text*. In a later article discussing the hoax, Sokal admonishes the "currently fashionable postmodernist/poststructuralist/social-constructivist discourse" (339), arguing that postmodern theory which rejects the scientist's "naïv[e]" belief in an "external world" (339) necessarily fails to "produc[e] any impact upon [that] world" (340). The novelist William T. Vollmann makes a similar argument about the state of the contemporary arts, filled as they are with a "structuralist smog . . . permitting only games of stifling breathlessness." The solution? According to Vollmann: "We should portray important human problems. . . . We should believe that truth exists. *We should aim to benefit others in addition to ourselves*."

"irresolvably problematic" concept of "individual agency," and the privileging of "unconscious processes in mental life"—has "entirely ignore[d] that most interesting three pounds of matter inside the skull, showing no interest in the human brain and surprisingly little in the rest of the body" ("Cognitive Science" 159). As Tony E. Jackson puts it:

> If literature is a special expression of mind and culture, then can literary (or, really, any humanistic) study afford to keep itself separate from the area of research that is establishing itself as the scientific explainer of at least a certain level of mind and culture? ("Questioning Interdisciplinarity" 321)

By the end of 1990s—proclaimed "the Decade of the Brain" by President George W. Bush—literary scholars had started to reconcile the scientific maps of body and mind with their own practices in order to move beyond postmodernism.

Such studies include Ellen Spolsky's *Gaps in Nature: Literary Interpretation and the Modular Mind* (1993), in which Spolsky argues that because there are "gaps" in the "human cognitive structure . . . vacancies between fragments of understanding" (2), this shows that cognitive theory can provide a "productive, materialist explanation" (12) for precisely the sort of subjects that literary scholars are well used to discussing. In *Shakespeare's Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory* (2001), Mary Thomas Crane adopts a similarly nuanced position with regard to cognitive science and literary theory. Though Crane suggests, like Spolsky, that cognitive science "shares" many of the "assumptions" of postmodern theory—such as the human subject being shaped by culture and ideology (20)—it also challenges and updates these ideas, "insist[ing]," for instance, "that there is an interaction between the biological subject and its culture" (21). Crane's radical project is to "reintroduce into serious critical discourse a consideration of Shakespeare's brain as one material site for the production of the dramatic works attributed to him" (3), rather than conceive of the author as a "conduit or space within which rival cultural structures collided" (35). Similarly, Lisa Zunshine, in both *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006) and the *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* (2010), aims to revivify literary studies by regrounding its theories in the biological models of mind that have long been "absent from the conceptual horizon" (*Introduction* 7).

Cognitive literary studies is not without its limitations. In his survey of twentieth-century theory, Peter Barry acknowledges—in a chapter on "Theory after 'Theory'" (287)—the existence of cognitive literary studies, but notes that "cognitive readings" tend to "focus, not on the content as such of the work . . . but on the cognitive processes" of the reader, often at the expense of literary history and "matters of *interpretation*" (312-14). Though the cognitive literary critics surveyed above go some way towards regrounding literary theory in cognition and biology—which is itself a useful project—what they actually contribute to the interpretation of texts is, so far, quite limited. For example, Zunshine's argument that the Theory of Mind (the means by which we interpret the minds of other people) is what makes fictional characters so interesting to human readers, is a useful, believable way to restore the human brain to the discussion of what, and why, we read. It is also, however, quite a commonsensical conclusion, and a rather less beautiful way of stating what writers have always known (e.g. "fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves" [Wallace, *Conversations* 22]). Likewise, Crane's revolutionary statement that Shakespeare, who had a forehead and a hairline, "must have had a brain" (14), perhaps says more about the weaknesses of poststructuralist theory than the strengths of cognitive literary studies, though it is at least a promising start.[9]

Though it is perhaps too early to say just how widespread or useful the revolution will be (especially as the cognitive sciences themselves continue to develop), it is already clear that literary studies becomes very lacklustre whenever it abandons its remit and tries to do science. To some extent, cognitive literary critics have avoided this problem by engaging with

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[9] Hans Adler and Sabine Gross published an article in 2002 challenging the optimistic claims made by Richardson and Steen, arguing that they run the risk of literary study becoming a "subdiscipline of the study of the human mind" (199), one which "obviate[s] any need to familiarize oneself with much of what has gone before in literary scholarship and history" (203). Richardson and Steen deny the charges, of course, and in an article in response they suggest that "there is ample opportunity for a constructive and mutually illuminating engagement" between the humanities and the sciences ("Reframing the Adjustment" 155), and that they "do not promote a scientific criticism that would seek to 'determine' literary meanings and deny the 'openness' of literary texts" (158). Whether or not one agrees that cognitive literary studies has so far succeeded in this, the criticism raised by Adler and Gross is important, if only for having marked out the pitfalls that a scientific literary study is always going to have to negotiate.

theory and staying literary, a move that was driven, in part, by the failures of its sister-subject, literary Darwinism. Emerging alongside cognitive literary studies in the 1990s, literary Darwinism is another major branch of scientific literary study that tries to "groun[d]" literary theory "in the large facts of human evolution and human biology, facts much larger and more robust than the conceptions that characterize the various branches of postmodern theory" (Carroll 103). Literary Darwinism has become, for many, an example of what not to do.[10]

Characterised by a very close relationship with science (and popularisers of science, such as E. O. Wilson and Pinker), and by an unsurprising hostility, therefore, towards postmodern literary theory, literary Darwinism views literature through an evolutionary lens. One of the keystones of the field is an interdisciplinary collection of essays, edited by Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson, titled *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative* (2005). The book is endorsed by E. O. Wilson himself, who, in the "Foreword from the Scientific Side," writes optimistically that if "literary productions can be solidly connected to biological roots, it will be one of the great events of intellectual history. *Science and the humanities united!*" (vii). Wilson raises a familiar cry about the "confusion we have now in the realm of literary criticism," and the "unbeatable strategy" that the literary Darwinists have to "replace it," a method that will provide answers which "can be empirically proved to be either right or wrong or, at worst," prove that the problem is "unsolvable" (vii). Noting that the last two and a half millennia of philosophical enquiry are simply wrong ("much of the history of

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[10] One of the earlier examples of cognitive literary studies was Mark Turner's *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (1991), which Turner hoped would spark a complete rewriting of "our conception of the humanities . . . by grounding it in the study of human cognition" (viii). Turner shared the literary Darwinist's hostility towards postmodern theory—calling contemporary literary criticism "ungrounded and fragmented," like "chess about chess, a game about the concept of games" (3-4)—and saw similar promise in a consilient project that would give the central areas of study in the humanities a firmer footing. For instance, Turner argues that we, who are "organisms in the world," "often conceive of time metaphorically as something that moves forward along a path, . . . [And] because we read in time, text inherits this metaphoric linear structure" (92; 76). In his early map of the field in 1999, Richardson distanced himself from Turner's "studied indifference to recent literary theory," seeing a more productive approach in those cognitive literary studies that did engage with theory, "allow[ing] them to speak to their colleagues in a familiar language, while offering to extend and indeed reground the poststructuralist program" ("Cognitive Science" 166-67).

philosophy up to present day has consisted of failed models of the brain"), Wilson looks forward to a consilient literary studies that employs a scientific "understanding of mind" (viii) to bolster its assault on empirically false theory.[11]

Though *The Literary Animal* has the admirable goal of challenging the "fear and mistrust of evolution in literary studies [that] is frequently accompanied by an even greater fear and mistrust of science in general" (Gottschall and Wilson, "Introduction" xxv), the literary studies within suffers from the frustrating lack of nuance that characterises Wilson's and Pinker's own summaries of the humanities. Though Boyd argues that an "evolutionary approach to literature can encourage literary scholars to learn from the strengths of science [empiricism, fact-checking, etc.] without abandoning their own expertise" (386), the readings actually offered are so reductive they evoke every cliché about the cold-heartedness of scientists. Daniel Nettle explains, to take one example, why dramatic dialogue is in a higher register than everyday speech:

> Given that dramatic characters are mostly strangers to us, then, the conversation will have to be unusually interesting to hold our attention. . . . One is reminded of the "supernormal" stimulus effect in animal behaviour. An egg elicits nesting behaviour from a female gull; a football elicits an abnormally strong nesting reaction. (66)

Jonathan Kramnick argues that the literary Darwinists ultimately have nothing to say about literary texts, "apart from what it would extract elsewhere from the evolutionary psychological edifice" ("Against Literary Darwinism" 327).[12] The problem with literary

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[11] Note that Wilson expects literary Darwinism will *replace* a failed literary theory altogether, not update or challenge it. Another landmark study is Brian Boyd's *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (2010), which sees "Evocriticism" as the solution to the "dilettantish smorgasbord (a dash of chaos theory here or Lacanian pseudopsychology there) exposed in the Sokal hoax" (386). Boyd prefers the term "evolutionary critic[ism]" over literary Darwinism because, "unlike those who have over the years labelled themselves as Marxist or Freudian," he feels evolutionary criticism "should appeal not to a founding father but to a live and empirically accountable research program" (387-88).

[12] Kramnick takes particular issue with the science that the literary Darwinists use as a starting point: the idea that literature is an evolutionary adaption, and so can be proved to be useful for our survival. Because the literary Darwinists have failed to prove which features of our stories are innate, or why those innate

Darwinism, as many commentators have pointed out, is that it reads more like (arguably quite interesting) "anthropology and psychology than . . . criticism per se" (Crews xiv). Having adopted a wholly scientific methodology, literary Darwinism reductively treats literature as "an ecologically valid source of data" (Pinker, "Toward a Consilient Study" 163), sacrificing the very essence of literature that makes literary study an independent and interesting field in the first place.[13]

This new kind of literary study has raised the ire of many, both within and without the academy. Jonathan Gottschall is the subject of a 2015 article in *The Chronicle Review*, which has the subheading "Jonathan Gottschall tried to save literary studies. Instead he ruined his career" (Wescott 6). In a scathing review in the *New Republic*, William Deresiewicz condemns Michael Suk-Young Chwe's *Jane Austen, Game Theorist* (2014): "This, apparently, is how you achieve consilience: by pretending that artists are scientists in disguise." In a 2014 editorial, *Point Magazine* laments the shift towards a scientific literary study that seems to have abandoned its old project of "enrich[ing] our sense of what is going on" in works of art: "English graduates are encouraged to gather in a 'literature lab' where the only required language is computer code ('In this class there will be 1,200 books assigned,' boasts one course description, 'but students won't read any of them')." At some point, says Barry, "you do have to decide which you most want to spend your time studying, great literature, or the cognitive processes of the human mind" (317).

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features are useful for the survival of stone-age minds (325), it therefore fails to answer the very questions it sets for itself.

[13] Tony E. Jackson has suggested that the problem with consilient literary scholarship is that it tends to privilege scientific knowledge over literary knowledge, a hierarchical distinction that has only been exacerbated by the anti-scientific relativism of some postmodern theory; there is a dangerous expectation that literary studies should "produce knowledge on some kind of par with the sciences" to prove their worth ("Literary Interpretation" 196). To be fair to Pinker, he himself recognises in a review of *The Literary Animal* that "It's conceivable that evolutionary thinking will raise, and eventually solve, the scientific question of why we enjoy fiction without offering anything to the field of literary criticism" ("Toward a Consilient Study" 175).

How to Read Wallace's Mind

My intention is to study great literature. With that in mind, one of the most exciting branches of cognitive literary studies is cognitive historicism, because it does not impose modern scientific concepts onto older texts, nor use texts as evidence in a more scientific study, but rather it focuses on those texts that were explicitly interested in the debates about the mind and brain from their own time. Critics who have commented on the field from outside its own circle of participants, as Hans Adler and Sabine Gross have done, tend to point to Alan Richardson as the cognitive-scholar doing the most interesting, and most literary, work, and it is from his example in particular that I draw inspiration. Where Adler and Gross critique Steen's article in the *Poetics Today* special issue for reading "like a somewhat dysfunctional conversation in which each of the two partners [the literary and the scientific] offers useful insights without referring much to what the other has to say" (201), they point to Richardson's essay in the same issue as "easily the most stylistically polished and intellectually mature" (202). Though their point, ultimately, is that this is because Richardson is the least attached to what they see as the ailing cognitive movement—"his analysis is the least 'cognitive' in that it fits most comfortably within the framework of 'traditional' sociohistorical literary analysis" (202)—they allow that a specifically *literary* analysis, albeit one which foregrounds the sciences of mind, can be beneficial and illuminating.

In his major study, *British Romanticism and the Science of Mind* (2001), Richardson's aim is to challenge the simplistic "caricature" that people (including, significantly, scientists such as Pinker and Antonio Damasio [182-83]) have of the Romantics as a group who rejected Enlightenment thought, rather than a group who, in Richardson's updated history, "fundamentally revised that postulate, looking to the body with its nervous system, brain, and 'organic' mind rather than to a disembodied Reason as the ground for human uniformity and equality" (177). By bringing a focus on cognition to his own field, Richardson is able to "restor[e] a certain cultural weight—one certainly felt widely at the time—to figures and ideas" related to mind and brain in Romantic literature, which previous literary critics have neglected as being "of antiquarian interest at best" (3).[14]

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[14] Neil Vickers has argued that Richardson "reconstructs the science of the romantic era in a partial, one-sided way, giving undue prominence to materialism" (147). Vickers suggests that this is, in part, because

David Foster Wallace's deep and formative engagement with scientific models of mind and brain has been similarly neglected, despite the fact that they are threaded throughout his entire body of work. To give a few examples: in "The Planet Trillaphon As It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing" (1984), the narrator describes "all the cute neuroses that more or less around that time began to pop up all over the inside of my brain" (7), while in the uncollected story "The Enema Bandit and the Cosmic Buzzer," Mary's "old instinctive Encino brain cells fired for a second" (HRC 27.9, 5). In *The Broom of the System* (1987), Rick recounts a story about children's "hearts and brains . . . disposed to swell and bleed" (108), and another about a man who is moved by "the back part of his brain, the part that deals with basic self-preservation" to take a therapist's advice (184). Wallace opens *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989) with a "sky" that "looks cerebral" with its "gray clouds . . . bulbous and wrinkled and shiny" (3). Later he refers to the "smoothness of the brain" (139), and to habits that should be "a deep autonomic wrinkle in DeHaven's brain by now" (326). "The human brain is very dense," says Marathe in *Infinite Jest* (1996), and the novel itself is dense with neurological injuries and abnormalities, with references to the "brain-meat behind" the eyes (230), the "operant limbic system" (373), and "sheer cerebral stress" (843). In Wallace's first essay collection, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997), he writes about "the lizardy part of my brain" (8), "neurological dysfunction" (240), "Some evolutionary retrograde reptile-brain part of the C[entral] N[ervous] S[ystem]" (283), and David Lynch as a creator whose films tap into "a set of allusive codes and contexts in the viewer's deep-brain core" (164). In *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), Wallace refers to "brain-warmed water" (6), "neural plug[s]" (106), "brain damage" (172), and "horrendous neural resonance" (255). Wallace's third story collection, *Oblivion* (2004), has many "intricate exploded views of the human brain" (285): in "Mister Squishy," the limbic portions of Schmidt's brain" are said to "pursu[e] [a] line of thinking" (31) while others' "individual neocortices worked to process the visual information and to scan their memories" (38); the narrator of "Good Old Neon" tries "hypnosis . . . the Landmark Forum, the Course in Miracles, a right-brain drawing workshop," etc., to fix himself (142-43); and the narrator of "Oblivion" refers to his wife's "and myself's brains' respective wave patterns" (225). Wallace's second essay collection, *Consider the Lobster* (2005), takes

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Richardson is trying to sell his new approach to literature, meaning he is trying to find "parallels between eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century medicine and the cognitive science of our own day" (147).

its title from the essay on the "neurology" of lobsters and "Pain reception . . . known to be part of a much older and more primitive system of nociceptors and prostaglandins that are managed by the brain stem and thalamus" (245). In other essays in this collection, Wallace refers to the "neural resonances" of American audiences (62), to "rules of language . . . already hardwired into people's neocortex" (92), and to a "cortex-withering" sixteenth-century Latin English-usage guide (100n. 50). In *The Pale King* (2011), Chris Fogle explains that working in an IRS office "might actually change your brain" (156), while Meredith Rand says the same of mental health institutions, "because the structure of the brain gets changed" (481). Wallace himself enters the novel to explain that "a quirk of temporal memory" is that "one tends to fill in gaps with data acquired only later, sort of the same way the brain automatically works to fill in the visual gap caused by the optical cord" (298). In one of Wallace's last essays, on the tennis player Roger Federer, he writes that "For promising junior players, refining the kinaesthetic sense is the main goal. . . . The training here is both muscular and neurological" (23-24).

Wallace had an interesting and complicated relationship with materialist accounts of the self. The biological brain is clearly a key thread through all of Wallace's writing, but there is another thread entangled with it. In an interview with Laura Miller in the year that *Infinite Jest* was published, Wallace listed a number of works and writers who make him "feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness" (62), including the poetry of John Donne, Richard Crashaw, Philip Larkin, and W. H. Auden (*Conversations* 62-63). There is a line of continuity through these writers, from Donne ("Our bodies . . . are ours, though they are not we, we are / The intelligences, they the sphere" [34]) to Crashaw ("Go, smiling souls, your new-built cages break" [468]), through Auden ("And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom" [1473]) and Larkin ("for which was built / This special shell?" [59]), with which it is not difficult to imagine Wallace ("Joelle van Dyne is excruciatingly alive and encaged" [*Infinite Jest* 222]) feeling considerable affinity. It is significant that the philosophers Wallace also gives in this list—Socrates, Schopenhauer, Descartes, Kant, and William James (*Conversations* 62)—all affirm the existence of something like the soul, something numinous in the otherwise material universe. As Antonio Damasio puts it, philosophy of the self is split down two paths: where materialists such as "David Hume . . . pulverised the self to the point of doing away with it," others such as "William James . . .

affirm the existence of the self" (*Self Comes to Mind* 11). The philosophers Wallace lists as making him "feel human" are, significantly, not materialists in the tradition of Hobbes and Hume, but rather more in the tradition of the counter-enlightenment, with the same "capacities of spirit" as St. Paul, Rousseau, Dostoevsky, and Camus, who Wallace lists in a later interview (157). This line of continuity becomes especially clear once we accept that for Wallace to "feel human" (*Conversations* 62) there has to be something "*in* there" (*Infinite Jest* 784).[15]

Lucas Thompson has recently argued that Wallace "was a highly unorthodox reader of world literature, invariably engaging with transnational texts in ways that are at odds with contemporary scholars' accounts of appropriate reading practices" (13). Because Wallace makes "assumptions of commonality and comparable experience" (13), he might be accused of appropriating others' literary devices or thematic concerns "for use within an American context" (155) in a way that "blithely erase[s] [the] cultural particularities" of the source (214). Though it does not necessarily excuse this practice, perhaps one way to explain Wallace's appropriation of an enormous range of different sources is Wallace's conception of human beings as having some basic, shared nature. Patrick Colm Hogan has recently argued that

> Today, there is little enthusiasm among humanists for the study of universals. Indeed, it is barely even a concept within the humanities, where the focus of both theory and practice tends to be on "difference," "cultural and historical specificity," and so on. (37)

Like most other cognitive literary scholars, Hogan is at pains to point out that "All reasonable students of literature—including those engaged in universalist projects—recognize that particularist research and interpretation are extremely valuable" (40). A healthy "universalist" approach to literature would only recognise that this particularity is built upon the "background of commonality" (40) that all human cultures share. Hogan gives an example

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[15] As Paul Giles points out, Wallace was clearly "more enthusiastic about" the "metaphysical propensities" of the British poets than the "ossified emphasis on social class and hierarchy in traditional English novels" ("All Swallowed Up" 15). Wallace is not alone in the view that literature can, and should, be a source of humanity: in "Modern Fiction" (1921), Virginia Woolf makes a similar point about British fiction, arguing that it should abandon trivial "materialis[m]" for the sake of its "soul" (158).

from the "influential volume" in postcolonial studies, *The Empire Writes Back* (1989)*,* in which "Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin maintain that the notion of universality is 'a hegemonic European critical tool'" (37). Hogan argues that

> no racist ever justified the enslavement of Africans or colonial rule in India on the basis of a claim that whites and nonwhites share universal human properties. Rather, they based their justifications on presumed differences among Europeans, Africans, and Indians, usually biological differences, but often cultural differences as well. (38)

As Kwame Anthony Appiah puts it, "What they truly object to—and who would not?—is Eurocentric hegemony *posing* as univeralism" (qtd. in Hogan 38).

Wallace's great subject is what it is to be conscious, what it is to be human, and he is able to read and understand and engage with Dostoevsky or Descartes because there is an underlying commonality between human writers from different times that precedes cultural particularity. As Richardson argues, "there is every reason to believe (again in keeping with a basic scientific worldview) that minds were no less dependent on brains in [other eras] than they are now" (*Neural Sublime* 12). Though there is "no reason to think" that people in previous eras "held this to be the case" (Richardson *Neural Sublime* 12), we can accept that brains in the past were basically the same as they are now, without ignoring an individual text's context. Obviously, Wallace was in every sense an American, and tied up with his cultural moment, but if his work was only about what it means to live in America then it would be boring at best and unintelligible at worst to those of us who do not have that privilege. Perhaps it is Wallace's intention to speak to what it is to be human across the board that found him a large audience.[16]

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[16] In the original version of his essay, "Perchance to Dream" (1996), Jonathan Franzen addressed what he understood to be the increasing "ghettoiz[ation]" among young writers who have been "discouraged from speaking across boundaries" by a literary culture in which marginalisation is a badge of honour: anything published in the "Dark Ages before 1950" was the "Symptoms of Disease," while the work of "women and of people from non-white or non-hetero cultures" was "Medicine for a Happier and Healthier World" (47). Franzen quotes a letter from Wallace, in which Wallace argued: "Tribal writers can feel the loneliness and anger and identify themselves with their subculture. . . . White males *are* the mainstream culture. So why

The question is: what is it to be human, for Wallace? There is no simple answer. Wallace seems to reject scientific accounts of the mind as often as he draws on them, and all of his work is animated by the tension between materialism on the one hand and essentialism on the other. Taking a cognitive historicist approach to Wallace's writing is an ideal way to explore this problem. It brings a much needed focus on the cognitive sciences that directly inform so much of Wallace's work, while allowing that Wallace himself was not a passive reader—a mere transmitter of ideas—but a writer engaged in the debate taking place during his lifetime.

It is surprising that cognitive historicism has limited its reach to literature published before the twentieth century, because the fiction written during "the Decade of the Brain" is necessarily going to be shaped by the very discussions from which cognitive literary studies itself emerged.[17] To take one small example, we have undiscussed landmarks in the contemporary landscape such as Tom Stoppard's *The Hard Problem* (2015), a play set at a brain-science institute, and steeped in these debates about arts and cognition and the nature of the "three pounds of grey matter wired up in your head" (7). Just like the turn towards a cognitive literary studies, *The Hard Problem* marks an interesting turn from Stoppard's earlier works, such as the postmodern, metafictional *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967),

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shouldn't we angry, confused, lonely white males write *at* and *against* the culture?" Wallace adds: "Just about everybody with any sensitivity feels like there's a party going on that they haven't been invited to— we're *all* alienated" (51). Neither Wallace nor Franzen is so naïve that they ignore cultural difference, but perhaps both writers engage with cognitive science because it is uncovers a shared bedrock beneath all human cultures, and offers a way to try and "spea[k] across boundaries" (48).

[17] In the *Poetics Today* special issue, one which is devoted specifically to "rethinking the history of literature and culture from a cognitive standpoint" (Richardson and Steen, "Literature" 2), the discussion ranges from Steen's essay on Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1687), to Zunshine on Anna Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), and finally to Richardson on Austen's *Persuasion* (1817). Though collected together in a 'historicist' special issue, Steen and Zunshine apply contemporary models of mind to much older texts (Steen 115-16; Zunshine, "Rhetoric, Cognition, and Ideology" 131). Unlike Richardson, whose cognitive perspective is warranted by Austen's own "unprecedented emphasis on head injury" (Richardson and Steen, "Literature" 6), Steen and Zunshine thus invite the critique of Adler and Gross who accuse Zunshine of "reductionism" and suggest that Steen's essay reads like a "dysfunctional conversation" (201-02).

in which "Words, words [were] all we ha[d] to go on" (31). If the foundational premise of cognitive literary studies is that literary study should not isolate itself, the field should include a focus on recent fiction about exactly the same debates its critics are trying to untangle.

There have been some studies in this direction. A small number of critics have begun to discuss an emerging subgenre of contemporary fiction that is explicitly engaged with the neuroculture and the sciences of mind. This subgenre has been variously called "neuronarratives" (Johnson), the "neuronovel" (Roth, "Rise of the Neuronovel"), the "neurological novel" (Gennero 311), and the "neo-phenomenological novel" (Waugh 25), and tends to be viewed as marking a shift from the novel about "the workings of a mind" to novels "wherein the mind becomes the brain" (Roth). Though the classifications are somewhat varied, the studies themselves are narrow, limited to all of three novels—Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1997), David Lodge's *Thinks…* (2001), and, occasionally, Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2* (1995)—all of which have a humanist and a scientist character playing their part in the two cultures debate, and all of which come to much the same conclusion: that these novels are borne out of an anxiety about the value of literature in the neurocultural world.[18]

Marco Roth's term "neuronovel" has gathered the most steam.[19] For Roth, writing in the neuronovel genre is a way for contemporary novelists to "engage in the kind of stylistic experimentation habitual to modernist novelists," an experimental impulse that has apparently been marginalised to such an extent that novelists need to sneak it into their work. Roth sees the project as a failure because, where modernism described the stream-of-consciousness of the everyman, the neuronovel tries (and necessarily fails) to take a strange

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[18] According to Jonathan Greenberg, both McEwan and the central character in his novel *Enduring Love* (1997) are converts to a wholly scientific worldview (McEwan himself contributed an essay to Gottschall and Wilson's *The Literary Animal*, arguing that "Literature must be our anthropology" [18]). Greenberg argues that *Enduring Love*'s ultimate defence of the arts is quite "in spite of" McEwan's authorial intentions (119-20n. 20).

[19] Roth divides the "neuronovel" into a further two categories: "hard" neuronovels such as McEwan's *Enduring Love*, in which a "neurologically abnormal" character is employed as a "foi[l]" against which other "normals," like the reader and the narrator, are contrasted, and "soft" neuronovels such as Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), in which "the author inhabits a cognitively anomalous or abnormal person and makes this character's inner life the focus of the novel, soliciting our sympathies."

neurological condition as its subject and, with it, "combine the pathological and the universal." Like those who are frustrated by the lack of literary nuance in emerging fields of cognitive literary studies, Johnson and Roth take a negative view of the neuronovel, seeing it as an attempt by novelists to be scientists themselves, to contribute 'valuable,' empirical knowledge to scientific study, as opposed to their old job of being literary.[20] This pessimism about the state of the novel in a neuroscientific age is perhaps a result of the field's extremely limited purview. When Roth, for instance, suggests that the neuronovel only emerged in 1997 with the publication of McEwan's *Enduring Love*—one year after Wallace's neuroscientifically-informed *Infinite Jest*, to name one obvious exclusion—and then goes on to lament that neuronovels lack everything that *Infinite Jest* has—"society . . . different classes . . . individuals interacting . . . development either alongside or against historical forces and expectations" ("Rise of the Neuronovel")—his pessimism seems like a foregone conclusion given the extremely narrow range of novels he has chosen to consider.[21]

To categorise *Infinite Jest* as one of Roth's "neuronovels" would be to do it a disservice. Wallace did not, as Roth says of the neuronovelists, draw on neuroscience in order to cherry pick odd neurological disorders, nor is his novel about the "brain" only, but about the very

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[20] Gennero and Andrew Gaedtke are also critical of the encroachment of science but come to slightly more optimistic conclusions about the role of literature. Where Gennero suggests that Powers "manages to build a bridge across the two cultures by introducing the concept of storytelling as an instrument of truth" (323), Gaedtke suggests (in an essay also on McEwan and Lodge) that the "neuronovel" turns "toward cognitive science to renew its techniques for representing consciousness," while also "reassert[ing] the centrality of narrative as a core cognitive operation through which consciousness is forged" (196).

[21] In *Cognitive Fictions* (2002), Joseph Tabbi is one of the few critics to discuss authors outside of the McEwan-Powers-Lodge triumvirate. However, Tabbi pays little attention to the ongoing discussion about cognitive literary studies, and, though he looks at some novels which are specifically interested in the sciences of mind, Tabbi's main goal is to adopt the contemporary model of cognition and the mind and apply it as a metaphor to literature's role as a "mind within the new medial ecology" (xi). Tabbi takes only a cursory glance at Wallace in order to reject the "retro-realist attitudes" that Wallace is said to represent (79), and suggests that a new "cognitive realism" is emerging that is "based on notation and reportability rather than representation" (xxv). Hence Tabbi's suggestion that "today's socially engaged fiction is likely to read more like a writer's journal" (82): a category which includes works like David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988), but excludes an enormous number of contemporary works of literature which are deeply "socially engaged" and, in ways beyond the narrow confines of Tabbi's definition, cognitively engaged as well.

"workings of [the] mind" that Roth says are absent from the neuronovel. Part of the problem with Roth's category is that it seems closed off from the history of literature. As David Lodge puts it, "literature is a record of human consciousness, the richest and most comprehensive we have" (10). For Wallace, the contemporary sciences of mind are not some passing fad, but the tail-end of a millennia-long dialogue about what it is to be human, and his work is much better served if we situate it—as he himself did—as part of a much larger philosophical and humanist tradition. In an essay near the beginning of his career, in 1988, when Wallace was beginning to lay down his own artistic ambitions, he condemned the kind of writing produced by students who went into writing programs to avoid any kind of broader humanist education (49). This is not to say that Wallace is naïve or old-fashioned, or that he revels in what he disparagingly calls the "humanistic syrup of *Howard's End*" (*Both Flesh* 89). Wallace's work is not gooey and saccharine but humanistic in the sense that is about the horrifying fact that we are all trapped inside "the sixteen-inch diameter of bone that both births & imprisons" us (82).

The only work on Wallace and the brain, and the groundwork for my own study, has been Stephen J. Burn's. Burn has discussed the neuroscientific sources Wallace drew upon in his writing of *The Pale King* ("Paradigm"), and Wallace's earlier engagement with writers such as René Descartes and Gilbert Ryle in *Infinite Jest* (*Reader's Guide*). Though Burn is not alone in characterising Wallace's work as part of the post-postmodern turn in literature—there are other excellent studies such as Marshall Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), which describes Wallace work as a negotiation between naïveté and postmodern cynicism (16), and Mary K Holland's *Succeeding Postmodernism* (2013), which frames Wallace and others as having a "new faith in language" and "the novel's ability to engage in humanist pursuits" as a result (1)—my project draws in particular on Burn's formulation of post-postmodern literature as that which gives more weight to "genetic inheritance" and the science and philosophy of the mind, brain, and body (*Jonathan Franzen* 25). Though fiction about the brain is not new, nor would neuroscience necessarily be a foreign concept to a postmodern novelist, I will explore the extent to which Wallace and his contemporaries mark out a new kind of fiction through their engagement with contemporary models of the brain

and self.[22] Other critics have noted the central role that consciousness plays in Wallace's work (Boswell, "Constant Monologue"; *Understanding*; Roiland; Woods), as well as the importance of the body (Banner; Nichols; Russell), and of the self more generally (Dulk; Elderon; Hayes-Brady; Henry; Hogg; Jansen; Timmer), but none of them discuss the soul, nor the relationship between soul and body, which is central to Wallace's construction of character.[23] By bringing a new focus on the relationship between soul and body to Wallace's work, I will bring these disparate discussions of the self into clearer focus, and build on Burn's work in particular by focusing more on the matters of spirit.

Each of my four chapters will be organised around my interpretation of a sustained metaphor that Wallace builds up across his work. These metaphors are, in order, the human form, the ghost, glass, fire, and water. In each chapter I explore a problem in Wallace's work that he shares with his predecessors (authorship; selfhood; therapy; free will), and use each metaphor to illuminate how Wallace's humanistic, dualist treatment of that problem marks his departure from postmodernism. Part of the reason for a thematic, rather than a chronological, approach is that Wallace's greatest works, those which best express his multifaceted, complicated approach to human nature, and those which most deserve our

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[22] Burn in particular has worked to correct the strawman notion that postmodern fiction had no interest in the brain, noting that "nature persists in much postmodern fiction through the movement's often-overlooked negotiations with the mind's biological substrate" ("Webs" 66). As Burn argues, we should understand the difference between Wallace and his predecessors as the difference between the "different cultural matrixes" to which they belong and within which new generations of writers have "each give[n] a different inflection to the concept of character" (*Jonathan Franzen* 23). With this in mind, I will discuss Wallace's engagement with postmodern theories of the body in more detail in chapter 2. Burn has also discussed the "heightened resonance [of] the word *soul*" in post-postmodern fiction ("Mapping" 46), though he sees the soul in Wallace's work as being shot through with scientific language. I will be in dialogue with Burn throughout the following chapters, as I take a different, more soul-focused approach to Wallace's work.

[23] Beyond the body of published criticism, Peter Sloane has argued that "the central concern and theme of all of [Wallace's] fiction" is embodiment (48). While I agree that the body is important, Sloane's focus on the body at the expense of the mind neglects half of the picture; more than the body itself, Wallace's central concern is with the 'I' inside that body. Though Sloane very briefly acknowledges Wallace's ghosts, he concludes with Wallace's other critics that they are merely "illusion[s] of dis-incarnation" (176). I will both demonstrate that Wallace's treatment of the self is more nuanced than this, and show that Wallace's engagement with the body is part of his critique of postmodernism, which Sloane does not discuss.

attention, are his novels, *Infinite Jest* and the unfinished *The Pale King*. Though I will take into account the whole range of Wallace's writing, from his collected and uncollected stories to his reviews, essays, interviews, and archival materials, I will ultimately build to a sustained reading of one of these metaphors in one of Wallace's major novels.

The other reason for a thematic approach is that Wallace's treatment of human nature is remarkably consistent across his career. Though *Infinite Jest* marks a turning point for Wallace's work in a number of ways, after which the soul and the ghost become more explicit in his writing, it is a change in emphasis rather than in ideas. This is, in part, because Wallace worked on many of his projects simultaneously (sections of *The Pale King* and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* were written during the period when *Infinite Jest* was getting published, for example), yet even in the early stories, long before *Jest*, there is the same preoccupation with interiority and human nature. Lastly, though this is a single-author study, Wallace did not write in isolation, and each of my chapters will draw on a number of different texts, both scientific and literary, to contextualise Wallace's own work. Often these texts will have been undiscussed in Wallace studies, and will shed new light on his fiction.

In chapter 1, I set out the key scientific sources for Wallace, and explain the embodied model of mind that informed both Wallace's fiction and his accounts of himself as a writer. Drawing on the epigraph to *The Pale King* from the poet Frank Bidart, we will see that Wallace and Bidart each developed a poetics of embodiment with which to critique postmodern theories about the death of the author and the dissolution of the self. Wallace takes the metaphor of the human "form" from Bidart both to articulate the relationship between mind and body in his characters, and to describe the model of literary influence that informs his writing process. We can illuminate significant aspects of Wallace's fiction if we allow that, like his characters, Wallace had a brain, that he read things, and that he held certain beliefs when he sat down to write.

Having established the fundamental importance of the body to Wallace, we will look in chapter 2 to the ghosts that populate his fiction. Here we will see that Wallace was not the posthumanist that everyone takes him to be. From his very early stories, Wallace always wrote about human beings as having interiority, a ghost-like, soul-like self inside their body. René Descartes's major influence on Wallace is much neglected in Wallace studies, and in this chapter I will discuss the Cartesian philosophy that runs throughout Wallace's work. My

argument is that all of Wallace's characters are governed by the metaphor of the ghost in the machine. Setting Wallace's work against a backdrop of postmodern and posthumanist theory, we will see that Wallace's treatment of the soul marks him apart from an earlier generation who viewed the body as posthuman, malleable, and hollowed out. I suggest in this chapter that Wallace's work is better understood if we situate it in the context of science fiction, which often has a more conservative approach to posthumanism, insofar as it sees posthumanism as a *bad* thing.

Where the first half of my project considers the nature of human beings more generally, the second half will be more focused on contemporary issues around selfhood such as therapy and addiction, and will therefore largely revolve around *Infinite Jest*. In chapter 3 I challenge the notion in Wallace studies that all of Wallace's therapist characters are caricatures. Typically, when it comes to therapy, Wallace is considered to be yet another male postmodernist writing in a male, postmodern, parodic tradition. By broadening our understanding of Wallace's influences to include a number of new writers, including Vladimir Nabokov, A. M. Homes, J. G. Ballard, Ken Kesey, and, most importantly, Sylvia Plath—who has a significant presence across a surprising amount of Wallace's work—we will see that Wallace's therapists and his treatment of illness are not as narrow as critics have assumed. There is a central metaphor of the glass jar or wall that runs through Wallace's therapy fictions, which Wallace uses to articulate concerns about entrapment, subjectivity, and materialist medical science. This glass metaphor is complemented by a fire metaphor that Wallace uses throughout *Infinite Jest* to connote pain, a metaphor he draws from much older, anti-materialist texts by writers such as William Blake, William James, Shakespeare, and Milton. Exploring how these two metaphors work together will reveal that Wallace's treatment of therapy and illness is in fact far more nuanced than has previously been suggested, and has much to do with his understanding of the soul's role in a materialist universe.

In the final chapter I will reconcile Wallace's dualist accounts of body and mind. Wallace was drawing throughout his work on a specific model of the embodied mind but, as we have seen, his work is also emphatically dualistic, driven throughout by the tension between that model and more traditional accounts of selfhood. To write about the soul and body in this way raises the problems that philosophers have tackled for centuries: to what

extent do human beings have free will? Is the essential soul or the deterministic body in charge? What does Wallace mean, ultimately, by the self? Setting Wallace's work against a range of postmodern paranoid fiction, in particular by Joseph Heller and Don DeLillo, we will see that Wallace's treatment of determinism marks a significant shift away from postmodernism. The body is not a boundless, malleable text in Wallace's fiction, but a stubbornly material entity in which the interior self is contained. In this chapter I will unpack the central water metaphor that Wallace uses to describe addiction and its effects on people. Tracing this metaphor through *Infinite Jest* will clarify the nature of the self and the role of free will in Wallace's fiction.

Chapter 1

"It's much more boneheaded and practical than that": Authorship and the Body

> This page was once plant material, crushed and sluiced and pressed
> through a machine in a warehouse, the process overseen by a man
> plagued with a skin infection. . . . Naturally the pages, which told the
> story of an uneventful journey, became infected with his particulate
> matter.
>
> —Amelia Gray, "Viscera" (*Gutshot* 143-44)

The Death of David Foster Wallace

Over the course of David Foster Wallace's life our model of the mind was dramatically redrawn. We now understand that our consciousness, which seems to us to play such a central role in our lives, is in fact a very small, and not particularly powerful, part of the whole mind-body system. Most of the mind's activity, which is to say most of the brain's activity, is unconscious, out of our control and outside of our awareness. The "mind is what the brain does" (Pinker, *How the Mind Works* 21), and the brain's job is to regulate the body with which it is intimately connected. This marks a stark departure from earlier accounts of the human mind in the twentieth century, where the brain was thought to be "essentially the same thing as a general-purpose 'universal computer' that just happened to be connected to a body" (Ramachandran 143). To try and draw a line between brain and body, or to go even further and separate mind from matter altogether, is to neglect the fundamentally interdependent relationship between the two. By the end of the twentieth century, in popular accounts such as Antonio Damasio's *Descartes Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994), the mind is understood to be "embodied, in the full sense of the term, not just embrained" (118).

As David Hillman and Ulrika Maude explain, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (2015), the "body has always been a contested site" (1) and "approaches to the body . . . tend to display an eclectic theoretical pluralism" (2). For Arthur Kroker, for instance, "Nothing is as imaginary as the material body. Circulating, fluid, borderless, with no certain boundaries or predetermined history": we should not think of ourselves as "inhabit[ing] . . . a solitary body of flesh and bone but [as] the intersection of a multiplicity of bodies, with life itself as a fluid intersection of humans and plants and animals and minerals" (3; 15). For Judith

Halberstam and Ira Livingston, our "bodies were never in the womb. Bodies are determined and operated by systems whose reproduction is . . . asexual: capitalism, culture, professions, and institutions" (17). We have to be careful about our terms, then, when discussing the mind, brain, and body in Wallace's work. While I do not wish to be reductive, in this chapter I will show that Wallace was reading and relying on a very specific, scientific model of the body and brain throughout his work, and when I use these terms I am referring to the evolved human organism that came out of a womb and is made of skin and bone and synapse. Though I will address Wallace's engagement with the above kind of theory in chapter 2, my use of a biological model of the material body in this chapter will set the precedent for my whole project.

The relationship between mind and body is at the heart of Wallace's final, unfinished novel, *The Pale King*. Ostensibly "more like a memoir than any kind of made-up story" (69), *The Pale King* is apparently based on Wallace's own experiences in the IRS's Midwest Regional Examination Centre in Peoria, Illinois, and Wallace himself appears both as a character within a body within the novel, who observes and interacts with the other characters, and as the memoirist in the metafictive 'Author Here' chapters: "Author here. Meaning the real author, the living human holding the pencil. . . . All of this is true. This book is really true" (68-69). Though the book is *not* really true—Wallace did not work at the IRS, for instance—the narrative conceit that *The Pale King* is a factual account signals Wallace's intention to explore what it might entail if one *were* to be wholly factual, to actually write a narrative that accurately represents the experience of living inside a human body. In one memoirist footnote, Wallace explains that

> I'm not going to be one of those memoirists who pretends to remember every last fact and thing in photorealist detail. The human mind doesn't work that way, and everyone knows it; it's an insulting bit of artifice in a genre that purports to be 100 percent 'realistic.' (259)

Wallace makes a distinction between reality and "artifice," between the reality of "living human" beings—like the author "holding the pencil"—who are constrained by the limitations of their own physical bodies, and the artifice of a mind that can see and access everything, a mind that would have to be detached from its bodily constraints in order to do so. Wallace

rejects this fantasy of the bodiless mind and the bodiless narrator, and suggests that doing so is a necessary step in writing a narrative that represents how the mind really *does* work.[24]

As Chris Fogle, one of *The Pale King*'s better-read characters (who knows about theories of the mind, about "type A personalit[ies]" and the "dominant superego" [176]), explains:

> For myself, I tend to do my most important thinking in incidental, accidental, almost daydreamy ways. . . . I think this experience . . . is common, if perhaps not universal, although it's not something that you can ever really talk to anyone else about because it ends up being so abstract and hard to explain. (192-93)

The problem for Wallace is that Fogle's (and our) primarily *un*conscious, subliminal experience, is "hard to explain" and dramatize because it frustrates both our commonsense conception of ourselves and the fundamental artifice that underlies what Wallace calls "capital-R Realism" (*Conversations* 129): the idea that fiction can be narrated by a single, unified, reliable consciousness.[25] So when Wallace claims that *The Pale King* "is really true"

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[24] Though the narration in *The Pale King* shifts into the third person at times to access the thoughts of other characters, in some ways transcending the boundaries of the author's head, the narration in each individual scene always, as Wallace put it in an early interview, "antagonize[s] the reader's sense that what she's experiencing as she reads is mediated through a human consciousness" (*Conversations* 34). This is true across Wallace's writing. In *Infinite Jest*, for instance, what seems like a distanced third person narration will turn out, after many hundreds of words, to have been from one person's perspective after all: "And then the palsied newcomers . . . Don Gately's found, then get united" (349). Wallace can imagine himself into many different minds, but each is "marooned in [their] own skull" (*Conversations* 22), just as Wallace himself, as we shall see, is ultimately limited to the boundaries of his own head when he is writing.

[25] Wallace talks a lot about Realism without ever giving a particularly satisfying definition of the term. Wallace's frustration with what he calls "capital-R Realism" (*Conversations* 129) seems to stem from his conflict with the standard model of fiction in the MFA program he attended at the University of Arizona, a 'Realism' which was canonised by "older professors" who "scorned" Wallace and his contemporaries for writing about "pop culture or advertizing or television" (130). In a similar vein, in conversation with David Lipsky, Wallace characterises Realism as an out-dated relic of the age of Tolstoy: to write in such a way now, he suggests, would be to "impos[e] an order and sense and ease of interpretation on experience that's never there in real life" (37). Wallace's definition surely lacks some historical nuance (were Tolstoy's life and

(69), though on one level he's playfully pointing to the statement's untruth, he is at the same time setting up *The Pale King* as a self-conscious interrogation of exactly what having a mind really entails. How does one write about consciousness, authorship, and the world, when the "epoch of the *I*"—of the reliable observer—"is drawing to a close" (Nørretranders ix)? This problem is keenly felt by Wallace because authors themselves, as he knew only too well, have bodies too.

The "Author Here" sections of *The Pale King* have received a lot of critical attention, perhaps because one of the key areas of interest in Wallace studies has been Wallace's metafiction, and the "Author Here" sections bookend a line of Wallace's metafictive stories: "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way," "Octet," and "Good Old Neon." Yet despite a considerable volume of work on Wallace the writer, Wallace's consistent descriptions of the author's body, and of the embodied relationship between author and their work, has been almost entirely undiscussed. Because the Wallace character in *The Pale King* "disappears," as Wallace put it in one of his notes, to become a "creature of the system" (548), critics such as Mark McGurl, Jeffrey R. Di Leo, Mike Miley, Stephen Taylor Marsh, and Toon Staes do not comment on the author's body, but have instead interpreted the novel as enacting, in different ways, what Barthes famously called "the death of the Author" (*Image* 148).

The critical consensus is that Wallace appears in the novel only to die and leave his work in the hands of the reader and the reading public (a move that has been "profoundly ironized," as McGurl writes, by Wallace's actual death [48]). For McGurl, the author-character's "disappearing from the novel is tantamount to disappearing into the system it represents," which in Wallace's case is "the contemporary institution of literature" itself (48). Mike Miley has argued that the disappearance of the author-character in *The Pale King* is a way for 'David Wallace' to try and kill 'David Foster Wallace,' the "persona" which, with his rising fame, had overshadowed the real man (202). Like McGurl, Miley argues that Wallace can never really kill the version of himself that is "a creature of the literary system" (203).

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writing so simple?), though this can perhaps be put down to Wallace's need to carve a space in the contemporary book market for his own brand of difficult, innovative fiction that rejects 'Realist' linearity in order to more *realistically* represent what it feels like to live amidst the "barrage" of "input" that assaults modern brains (Lipsky 37). This line of thinking is once again picked up in *The Pale King*.

Jeffrey R. Di Leo—for whom a theoretical "resurrection of the author is simply not acceptable" (123)—claims that Wallace never wanted *The Pale King* published, and that his intentions and presence as an author have been manufactured by his publishers for cynical reasons: "Funny how the sovereignty of the dead conveniently emerges when there is an opportunity for corporate profit." (132). Like Miley, Di Leo says that the persona of 'David Foster Wallace' is the only one the reader can ever know. Stephen Taylor Marsh and Toon Staes trace a similar line, making a distinction between the fleshy David Wallace, who is necessarily absent from the text, and the paper David Foster Wallace, to whom we have access. For Marsh, *The Pale King* enacts the death of the author. He argues that "Wallace, the physical one, cannot be found in" *The Pale King* (115), just as we should not try to find "the *flesh-and-blood*" author in Wallace's other works: "Wallace's background . . . does not alter the underlying creative labor or final artistic drive of the novel, arising out of the implied author David Foster Wallace" (117, my emphasis). Staes uses the same language as Marsh in his essay on *The Pale King*, arguing that "Readers construct an image of the author while they read that in all likelihood differs widely from the *flesh-and-blood* person" ("Work in Process" 81, my emphasis).

Each of these critics explicitly rehearses the same Barthesian paradigm about the death of the author and the birth of the reader (McGurl 48; Di Leo 124; Miley 196; Marsh 122; Staes, "Work in Process" 81). Though the death of the author is, unfortunately, a fact for Wallace studies following Wallace's suicide, and while I share the view of these critics that we should not chase crude biographical readings of Wallace's work, what I will argue in this chapter is that we are wrong to ignore the flesh-and-blood author completely. When Wallace writes about the act of writing he describes, very specifically, an embodied self, an authorial consciousness that writes from inside a body and brain. As Wallace puts it in one interview: talking about the work after the fact is "very different than what it's like to actually do things" (*Conversations* 135). "[S]itting in a bright, quiet room in front of the paper it's much more, uhhh does this make me want to throw up? . . . It's much more boneheaded and practical than" the "critical discourse" that happens in interviews after-the-fact (135). However we want to frame the work, it emerges in the first place from inside a *bone head*.

All of Wallace's fiction, from his first published story "The Planet Trillaphon As it Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing" (1984) to *The Pale King*, is animated by the problematic relationship between mind and body, and his essays and reflections on authorship are no

different. As Seán Burke puts it in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern* (1995), "Authorship, like cosmology, remains a source of fascination for believers and non-believers alike since the issues which it raises reflect any given society's sense of being in the world" (xv). Wallace's understanding of the nature of authorship comes from the same place as his understanding of the self more generally. Once we recognise how central a role the sciences of the brain and embodied mind play in the work that Wallace has produced, then we can understand how central a role embodiment plays, for Wallace, in the process of production itself. Where Wallace studies have until now tread familiar ground regarding the death of the author, in this chapter I will argue that Wallace's model of the embodied author is best understood as part of a society-wide shift in what Burke calls our "sense of being in the world," a shift that challenges Barthes in particular, and postmodern theories of authorship and selfhood more broadly. Lee Konstantinou is the only critic to suggest that Wallace explicitly rejects Barthes, arguing that Wallace transforms the "sham honesty" of postmodern metafiction into a tool that tries to genuinely "cause the reader to experience a form of connection with Wallace as a writer . . . *not 'Dave Wallace' the character, but the author*" (98, my emphasis). While I will also argue in this chapter that Wallace rejects Barthes, my focus in this chapter will be on the embodied author and the bodied relationship between Wallace and his work, not on the relationship between author and reader, and not on the problem of irony, "postironic belief" or "nonnaïve noncynicism" which are the basis of Konstantinou's article (85).[26]

While some critics have discussed the significance of the body in Wallace's work, only Jeffrey Severs and Stephen J. Burn have (briefly) discussed the connection in Wallace's writing between the body and the authorial self. Severs, drawing on Wallace's biography,

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[26] Adam Kelly does also gesture away from Barthes when he argues that in Wallace studies (because of Wallace's influential statements about his own ambitions as a writer) "Barthes's dead author" has been supplanted by "intention . . . co-exist[ing] with theory, resulting in fresh forms of critical engagement." Stephen J. Burn has argued, however, that "a willingness to consider Wallace's statements more critically will strengthen future Wallace studies": "Surely Wallace—who was educated while Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault reigned in the humanities—would not have expected his claims to be so rigidly legitimated by his authorial signature" (467). Though I am primarily concerned in this chapter with the importance of embodiment for Wallace, both as a writer and in his fiction, I will return to the problem of authorial intention.

persuasively argues that the John Keats poem about "This living hand, now warm and capable" (qtd. in Severs 20) was Wallace's "standard for a text's ability to offer an embodied relationship to the reader" (20), though this is a small point in Severs's larger argument that the authorial hand is markedly different from the "'Invisible Hand' of self-correcting capitalist markets" (20). Burn is the only critic to emphasise the centrality of the material brain in Wallace's work, and argued in "'A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness': Closing Time in *The Pale King*" (2012) that, in the light of Wallace's own reading in contemporary neuroscience, the novel can be read as a "dissociative projection of the mind that dramatizes the unconscious, rather than the conscious" (386). Neither critic dwells on the role of Wallace's own body and brain in the writing process. In this chapter I want to build upon Burn's work on the neuroscientific sources for *The Pale King*, and explore the undiscussed but significant connection between the body and authorship for Wallace both in that novel and throughout his work.[27] To understand Wallace's role as a bodied author-character in *The Pale King*, we first have to understand how Wallace engaged with the contemporary model of the embodied mind throughout his career.

The Mind behind Wallace's Work

The contemporary model of the material, embrained mind governs all of Wallace's writing. This is the case even at the level of setting: each of Wallace's three novels is literally set inside

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[27] The body in Wallace's work has received some attention in other contexts. Clare Hayes-Brady, for instance, sees the "question of embodiment" as being "critical to a reading of Wallace's gender politics," with his "bodies tend[ing] to conform to the physical, active male and the ethereal, passive female" ("Personally" 71). Similarly, Olivia Banner argues that Wallace's story "The Suffering Channel" "demonstrates . . . just how fragile . . . 'solidly masculine bodies and [their] texts' feel at the turn of the century" (89). Catherine Nichols takes a different view of the body, arguing that through *Infinite Jest*'s grotesque bodies Wallace rejects the postmodern carnival, that celebrated space where rules and order breakdown. Wallace's carnival is quite different, a "troubling" place (6) where characters' selves are not liberated by masks but "suppress[ed] . . . beneath" their masks' "deliberate artifice" (13). Emily Russell argues that Nichols treats Wallace's disabled characters as "a means to an end" (168n. 7), and instead reads Wallace's work as "destabilizing dominant norms" about the body (166), seeing parallels between the "freakish textual for[m]" of Wallace's novels and "the bodies of the characters" within: "unusual physical bodies provide a model for reading the textual body and vice versa" (147).

the human head. Firstly, most of the action in *The Broom of the System* takes place in "East Corinth, Ohio," which has the "luxuriant and not unpopular shape" of the "profile of Jayne Mansfield" (45). Wallace explains that if one looks down onto the town from "Shaker Heights," one sees "a nimbus of winding road-networks," "a sinuous . . . curve of . . . highway," and "a huge, swollen development of factories" (45). Like the underlying veins and musculature of a human face, the complicated road "networks," "sinuous" (we might also read: sinew-ous) highways, and swollen developments are all very bodied descriptions of the constituent bits and pieces that go together to make up the whole town. Just as our individual cells and neurons have no knowledge of the larger system in which they play a part, the constituents of the town—the roads and residents that make it up—are "unaware of the shape of their town" (46) from the inside. Though from the outside one sees the shape of the head, it is the sum of its parts, as the human head is the sum of its internal workings.

As Wallace writes later in the novel, the "head" is

> positively dominated and defined by the shape of the skull underneath. The skin stretched tight over that skull. A skull that seems to me perhaps to threaten to burst through and end the whole charade. Yecch. (300)

The human face is mere "charade," another artifice. The reality that we try to avoid seeing is that we are all boneheaded biology underneath. For Wallace to set the action of his first novel inside an enormous human head emphasises both how central boneheadedness is to his aesthetic, and the extent to which the contemporary model of the embodied mind is in the zeitgeist: the idea that the mind is skull-bound is literally what Wallace's characters live inside. As Wallace would later write, as the epigraph to *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞* (2003), "It is not what's inside your head, it's what your head's inside" (ix). Just as Wallace's head was inside an intellectual climate where it was understood that the mind is embodied, so too are the characters and settings inside Wallace's head necessarily shaped by what Wallace's head was inside: it's bone heads all the way down.[28]

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[28] The *Everything and More* epigraph is actually written in "esoteric ancient Greek," and I have quoted Wallace's translation of it from his interview with Caleb Crain (*Conversations* 125).

Though Wallace hints at something more ethereal inside East Corinth's head with the word "nimbus," which can mean a "halo" (OED), we can also read the description of a "nimbus of winding road-networks" as one that roots that nimbus to the ground. The interconnecting highways do not make a single circle—a "halo"—but instead wind together to make up a kind of cloud, a complex weather system comprising discrete, interflowing parts. This mind/weather metaphor is one that Wallace picks up again and again throughout his writing. In "Little Expressionless Animals" Wallace sets the scene with the "gray clouds" that look brainlike, "bulbous and wrinkled and shiny. The sky looks cerebral" (*Girl* 3). We see it again in Wallace's essay, "Getting Away from Already Pretty Much Being Away from it All," in which he charts his cognitive experience—given his "basic neurological makeup" (*Supposedly* 132)— of the Illinois State Fair. The essay's overarching subject (Wallace's cognitive experience) is foregrounded by Wallace's description of the "fog," on the essay's second page, "hang[ing] just over the fields like the land's mind" (84). What this sustained metaphor tells us is that Wallace views the mind as being *land-dependent*: like a road network and a weather system it is messy and hard to pin down, but necessarily shaped by the ridges and folds of the ground over which it flows.[29]

Though a go-to move in Wallace's fiction, we can see something similar going on in other fiction from this period. Compare Wallace's bulbous grey clouds, for instance, to Denis Johnson's description in *Jesus' Son* (1993) of the "clouds like great grey brains," a simile that gestures towards the drug- and violence-induced "storm" to come in the narrator's own brain (5). The brain is dotted throughout Johnson's collection. In "Work" he describes the narrator and Wayne pulling "copper wire" from an old building (58), which, following the brain imagery at the beginning of the collection, reads like an empty skull being stripped of its brain-wiring.

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[29] Wallace would pick this up again in his later stories. In *Infinite Jest*, when Hal and Stice are in a "moment of total mentation" and unconsciously focused on their tennis, the "air" around them matches their mental state: "now so clear it seemed washed, after the clouds" (653). This calmness is in contrast to "Oblivion," a story about a sleep-deprived character's "disorientation" (*Oblivion* 191), which significantly opens with that character on a golf course "when the thunderstorm broke" (190). The grey brain-clouds snap open, foregrounding the narrator's more local cerebral problems. Similarly, we have Sylvanshine's description in *The Pale King* of mind-like clouds that are "disappointing" once "you were inside them . . . It just got really foggy" (16).

This kind of patterning takes place in Wallace's work too, such as in *Infinite Jest*, where he describes the hospital building for strung out addicts as being "stripped of equipment and copper wire" (193). However, where *Broom* and Wallace's early stories make brief references to brains and heads in the way that Johnson also does around this time, in *Infinite Jest* the bodied setting is constant and explicit.

As Paul Quinn explains, *Infinite Jest*'s

> metro Boston is not so much a Body Public, or Body Politic, as a Body Institutional. MIT's "cerebral rooftop," complete with "convolutions," (*IJ* 950) provides the brain; the Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.) is shaped like a heart, and boasts an inflatable lung; many-institutioned Enfield is itself positioned as an extended "arm" of the city. (89)[30]

As with *Broom*'s skull-shaped town, *Infinite Jest* is governed—though much more consistently than the first novel—by a pattern of physical containment and entrapment. This pattern stretches to the scale of the whole country, with the novel's citizens living trapped inside the "walled nation" (127) of "Experial[ist] America" (421); it continues at the scale of buildings, as Quinn has noted; and it goes right the way down to the scale of characters such as Hal, who "lace[s]" fingers "behind his upraised head . . . cupping his own skull" (110). The small head-shaped setting in *Broom* becomes a central, sustained metaphor in *Infinite Jest*, where the citizens of the Organization of North American Nations are, on all scales and in every sense, "excruciatingly alive and encaged" (222).

Along with this expansion from a town's head-shaped map in *Broom* to the map of the entire North American continent in *Infinite Jest*, the word "map" itself takes on a whole new significance for Wallace. In the argot of *Infinite Jest*'s future Boston, characters talk about their addiction to various forms of pain-relief as something that threatens to "eliminate their own map[s] for keeps" (220), just as, on a much larger scale, the novel's Organization of North

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[30] Stephen J. Burn calls this the "bodily gestalt" that governs Wallace's fiction from *Broom* onwards ("Webs" 64). Tom LeClair noted as early as 1996 that the world of *Infinite Jest* "resemble[s] a prodigious human body" (35), while Heather Houser also pays particular attention to the bodied landscape in *Infinite Jest*, arguing that Wallace "imbricates the body in [the novel's] environments" to induce disgust and therefore empathy for the environment in the reader (131).

American Nations is willing to reconfigure its own map to relieve itself of the responsibility of dealing with its own waste (407). This term "map" is not just, as Clare Hayes-Brady argues, a synonym for "identity" (*Unspeakable* 72), but it also very specifically articulates the relationship between mind and matter. Like Wallace's description of the fog as the "land's mind" (*Supposedly* 84), a map is separate to, but dependent on, the geography that it represents. The word "map" is a mainstay in the sciences of mind, which Wallace significantly defines in *Infinite Jest* as the study of the "*topography*" of the "human body's brain" (48, my emphasis). The neurologist A. R. Luria, who gives his name to the character "Luria P." in the novel (1030n. 156), describes the dark age of brain cartography, when "the textbooks . . . were filled with vague suppositions and fantastic conjectures that made maps of the brain scarcely more reliable than medieval geographers' maps of the world" (23). In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985), which Wallace had also read (*Conversations* 118), Oliver Sacks describes the beginnings of "cerebral neurology, which made it possible, over the decades, to 'map' the human brain, ascribing specific powers—linguistic, intellectual, perceptual, etc.—to equally specific 'centres' in the brain" (3). In *The Language Instinct* (1994), Steven Pinker, to whom Wallace also alludes in *Jest* (987n. 24), explains that the "brain is divided into maps of visual, auditory, and motor space that literally reproduce the structure of real space" (303). Wallace was clearly aware of the word's use in this context: in one of the interviews in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, he describes "entire psychological maps . . . being redrawn" (91). In *Infinite Jest* Wallace does occasionally use the term to refer to what seems to be the face—"Gately likes Green because he seems to have got sense enough to keep his map shut when he's got nothing important to say" (276)—but it is mostly used in instances where 'face' would make no sense: "She hung herself . . . as in eliminated her own map" (848). I suggest that where 'face' is an appropriate interpretation we might still read the term as being about the mind and brain *beneath* that face. Almost all uses of the word "map" in *Infinite Jest* (except when discussing an actual map) might be read in this way, with facial expressions and body language being expressions of the brain topography underneath.[31]

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[31] When the term "map" is used to describe the character Lenz "Demapping rats" (*Infinite Jest* 541), this suggests either that it applies to any form of life with a brain and some level of mind, or that Lenz is unable to imagine what it is like to be anything other than his own relentless self.

Though Wallace would not read Tor Nørretranders's *The User Illusion* (1998) until after the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Nørretranders sums this idea up best. "Consciousness," he explains, "is one's very own map of oneself and one's possibilities of intervening in the world" (292). Consciousness is a map of the body and brain's terrain, a simulation of the real world that we have no direct, 1:1 access to. I suggest that *Infinite Jest*'s "map" comes from the sciences of mind that formed so much of the foundation of Wallace's work. The word reminds us that Wallace's characters exist in a world in which they think about themselves in neuroscientific terms, as people whose maps are chained to the matter those maps describe.

We can see then that when, in his final novel, Wallace describes the IRS as a large scale version of a human skull and brain, this is the endpoint of a long pattern of such imagery in his fiction.[32] In *The Pale King*'s second chapter, when Claude Sylvanshine stresses about "what you gave attention to vs. what you willed yourself to not," his reflections on one individual mind's problems segue into the problem of "organization structure[s]" (14) more generally. The problem for small structures such as Sylvanshine's brain and large ones such as the IRS are the same: "information and the filtering and dissemination of information" (14). Wallace's later description of the "administrative structure and organization of the IRS" as being "so complicated, and consist[ing] of so many branches, sub-branches, divisions, and coordinating offices and sub-offices . . . that it appeared impossible to comprehend" (247-48) continues this pattern, recalling once again the language that scientists use to describe the brain. The sub- and sub-sub pathways and divisions, all of which are co-ordinating simultaneously, mirror the structure of the brain's seemingly incomprehensible matrix of neural pathways. Later still, the IRS's computer system is said to be so complex that its structure of pathways cannot be completely upgraded, because one cannot "divert all that traffic" while the old "freeway[s]" are replaced (412n. 1). Hence why

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[32] The pattern of imagery is not fully worked out in *The Pale King* because elsewhere in the novel the IRS is described as the "nation's beating heart" (103). In one of the cut scenes included in the paperback edition, an unnamed narrator reflects that "It is also possible to see the federal government as the people's heart as a People—as the Constitution is Our brain—and the Service as the forceful contractions of that heart" (551). Wallace typically resists simplicity, but perhaps this pattern would have been made more consistent in later drafts of the novel.

> many of the fixes and upgrades were temporary and partial and, in retrospect, wildly inefficient, e.g. trying to increase processing power by altering antiquated equipment to accommodate slightly less antiquated computer cards . . . requiring all kinds of violent alterations for Fornix equipment that was already old and fragile. (412n. 1)

This alludes, too, to the "wildly inefficient" evolution of the human brain, in which newer systems are built on top of the pre-existing, "antiquated" equipment that belonged to the species from which human beings evolved. As Damasio puts it, "Nature appears to have built the apparatus of rationality not just on top of the apparatus of biological regulation, but also *from* it and *with* it" (*Descartes' Error* 128). The problem for *The Pale King*'s characters is that in this model they, who are described in one instance as "some long gray line of faceless supplicants" (262), effectively make up the IRS's anonymous grey matter. Like the characters in Wallace's previous two novels, they are largely unaware of the enormous complexity in which they play a very small part. The working of their own brains is alien to them, as they are alienated by their work in an enormous, brain-shaped office.

Though the model of the embodied, embrained mind is clearly central through all of Wallace's writing, we know that he was drawing on a very specific contemporary model when he wrote *The Pale King*. This model is articulated in Tor Nørretranders's *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size* (1998), Timothy D. Wilson's *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (2002), and, to a lesser extent, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness* (1990) and Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (2005), all of which were in Wallace's working library.[33] Though the minds of Wallace's characters in his earlier fiction were clearly the product of their bodies and brains, in *The Pale King* he draws specifically on the model of

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[33] Burn briefly mentions Nørretranders, and focuses in some detail on Wilson, in his article "'A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness': Closing Time in *The Pale King*." Where Burn focuses on Wilson's model of the unconscious mind, in particular with regard to the character Claude Sylvanshine and his "sensory overload" (384), I will draw primarily on Nørretranders and a little on Wilson to look at questions of embodiment and the self. Staes and Severs also briefly mention Nørretranders's *The User Illusion*, but use it to refer only to information overload, which I will not be doing here ("Work in Process" 75; *Balancing Books* 171; 242).

mind as it is articulated in these four works, a model that has a primary focus on the small role that consciousness plays within the whole mind-body system.

In *The User Illusion*, for example, Nørretranders explains that the last decade of the twentieth century saw the "breakthrough in the scientific acknowledgement that man is not transparent to himself" (161), that the conscious self is mostly blind and plays a very small role in all that makes up the human being. A wide acceptance of this idea was delayed in the middle of the century by the hysteria in the 1950s concerning subliminal advertising, but by the last decades of the twentieth century, the fact that "most of the information that passes through a person is not picked up by consciousness, even when this information has a demonstrable effect on behaviour" was becoming increasingly widespread and accepted (161).[34]

Nørretranders's argument is that

> There is a difference between the *I* and the person as a whole. . . . The *I* is the conscious player. The *Me* is the person in general. . . . The term *Me* embraces the subject of all the bodily actions and mental processes that are not initiated or carried out by the *I*, the conscious *I*. (257-58)

Like a computer's user interface, which masks the complex machinery and code that are the real language of computer systems, our consciousness is simply the human mind's "User Illusion" (291-92). The illusion we all have is that the conscious self, the 'I,' is aware of—and in charge of—everything, when actually it is just a small part of the whole person, the 'Me,'

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[34] As widespread as it was, indeed, in the beginning of the century, when Sigmund Freud wrote that "the research of the present time . . . seeks to prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind" (qtd. in Tallis 71). Nørretranders acknowledges Freud and the dominance of the unconscious at either end of the century, noting the change in attitude by those in the natural sciences who previously "looked down on the psychoanalytical tradition, with all its talk of unconscious drives," only now to criticize the psychoanalysts for not taking the unconscious "seriously enough!" (166). Wilson does explain, however, that there is a difference between what he calls the adaptive unconsciousness and the Freudian unconscious, with the former being a description of the many nonconscious, inaccessible systems that make a healthy mind function, and the latter a "bubbling cauldron below" that one could access if you could only "remov[e] repression" (219).

which takes into account the hugely complex matrix of *non*conscious processes going on between mind, brain, and body. Nørretranders's book is, in part, a history of information theory, and so he gives the example that "every single second, millions of bits of information flood in through our senses. But our consciousness processes only perhaps forty bits a second—at most" (125). It would be impossible (and nightmarish) if we needed to consciously sort through all this information, or to consciously regulate our myriad bodily processes. By the time those small forty bits reach our consciousness, all the processing has already been done by something other than what we think of as ourselves.

Wilson equates the adaptive unconscious (a term "meant to convey that nonconscious thinking is an evolutionary adaption" [23]) to a "collection of city-states," which function below consciousness and account for most of the activity in the mind and body (7). Like the Jayne Mansfield-shaped city in *Broom*, a healthy, functioning brain is a complex community of different interconnected systems that, together, produce a map—a representation of those systems—that is the conscious self. Because consciousness is just the map of this terrain and effectively—to paraphrase Wilson's title—a stranger to itself, it is a mere observer of the consequences of most of the 'Me''s activity that goes on "outside [its] purview" (48). The slow, "conscious verbal self," explains Wilson, "often does not know why we do what we do and thus creates an explanation that makes the most sense," with "no realization that [its] explanations are works of fiction" (97). The remarkable consequence of this is that other people therefore understand our own behaviour better than we can, and that we must be perceptive self-biographers of our own strange actions in order to understand ourselves. As Csikszentmihalyi explains, our capacity for conscious thought is limited by the mechanics of the brain: the "nervous system has definite limits on how much information it can process" (28). The key to happiness, then, is to embrace that fact, to try not to control everything but simply "achiev[e] control over the contents of our consciousness" (2).[35]

Gladwell's *Blink* is an effectively secondary or tertiary source that summarises the more expert works of both Damasio (59) and Wilson (11), an approach that has raised the ire of experts in the fields he condenses. Steven Pinker, for example, criticises Gladwell for

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[35] "Csikszentmihalyi" is the uncommon name given to one of the students at E.T.A. in *Infinite Jest* (1072n. 324), suggesting Wallace read his book much earlier than Nørretranders's or Wilson's.

"unwittingly demonstrat[ing] the hazards of statistical reasoning and . . . occasionally blunder[ing] into spectacular failures" ("Malcolm Gladwell"). *Blink* will play a smaller role in this chapter, therefore, but I include it for a number of reasons. Wallace certainly admired Gladwell's capacity for "plainness, lucidity, and the sort of magical compression that enriches instead of vitiates" enough to include Gladwell's essay, "What the Dog Saw," in *The Best American Essays 2007* collection that he guest-edited ("Deciderization").[36] It is also a very useful source in the context of a much broader neuroculture, because Gladwell's bestseller status demonstrates that the contemporary model of our largely unconscious minds is increasingly part of what Jonathan Lethem calls the "world-mind": the "collective brain" that we can excavate from different generations' bookshelves (*Ecstasy of Influence* 13-14). The powerful unconscious, which has us, as Gladwell's subtitle puts it, "Thinking without Thinking," is increasingly part of our collective consciousness and the way we view ourselves in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

It is this model of the mind and selfhood that Wallace draws on to construct his characters, and which his characters draw on to understand themselves, throughout *The Pale King*. From Wallace's archival notes we can see that he was reading and quoting from Nørretranders a great deal (at least four separate times in one notebook, HRC 40.8b), and that he had absorbed this model into his own thinking. In one collection of notes about Wallace's "Fear, lack of confidence," he writes: "Realize that it's in 'me,' not in the real 'I.' . . . It feels bad, but I can also observe it feeling bad. . . . The 'I' is what observes it" (HRC 36.1). There are numerous examples of this model filtering into the novel itself. One group of characters are said to "all ha[ve] unconscious habits of which maybe only Hurd, as the new one, was fully aware" (353-54), an echo of Wilson's point that "other people might know us better than we know ourselves" because they "form impressions from our automatic, uncontrolled actions" (84), and Nørretranders's point that through our unconscious habits "others have access to a knowledge of the millions of bits in our brains that never reach our consciousness" (151). Similarly, Nørretranders's and Gladwell's summary of research into

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[36] In what might be a minor coincidence, Wallace's editor since *Infinite Jest*, Michael Pietsch, is also thanked in Gladwell's acknowledgements in *Blink* for being one of a number of people who "guided this manuscript from nonsense to sense" (264). Wallace also had Gladwell's *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (2002) in his library.

'priming,' the understanding that we are primed to understand things a certain way because the unconscious mind can pick up on "a stimulus that is so brief" (Nørretranders 170) that it stays "behind that locked door of our unconscious" (Gladwell 53), is adopted by Chris Fogle, who explains a born-again Christian's experience with this exact language:

> It's hard to explain. What the girl with the meadow on her boots had left out of the story was why she was feeling so especially desolate and lost right then, and thus why she was so psychologically 'primed' to hear the pastor's general, anonymous comment in that personal way. (216)

Throughout the novel the characters are tormented by the feeling that they are indeed strangers to themselves, an 'I' inside a 'Me,' a consciousness living inside a foreign, unconscious body and brain. The first character-focused chapter traces the panicked mental circuitry of Claude Sylvanshine, who is struggling to revise for his exam because "studying any one thing would set off a storm in his head about all the other things he hadn't studied" (11). The analogy Sylvanshine thinks of is that "It was like trying to build a model in a high wind" (11): that is, the conscious, apparently autonomous part of him is trying to build something and structure his knowledge, but the "high wind," an inexorable natural force beyond his conscious control, blows the pieces away. Sylvanshine's stress about his mind's inability to focus applies more generally to his sense of himself. He "view[s] himself as weak or defective in the area of will" (14), the possessor of "at most one marginal talent whose connection to him was itself marginal" (9). Sylvanshine is a stranger to himself, a character once-removed, someone who merely observes his own abilities that are to the side of him, and to which he cannot really lay any claim. He is weak in will because he does not get to choose what to think, nor how the "cyclone" (26) of his mind copes with thinking. Wallace carefully frames his characters' 'I''s as sitting on the edges of their dominating 'Me''s. For example, thoughts "occur" to Sylvanshine as if out of nowhere: "*Yaw* was *way* in a mirror, it occurred for no reason" (16). Note that the sentence does not read 'it occurred *to him*,' the implication being that the thought occurs elsewhere, to somebody else, and he merely watches it happen. Though Sylvanshine is peculiar—what Wallace calls a "fact psychic" (120)—his way of thinking is not unique to him but true across the board. Lane Dean Jr., for instance, reflects that he has an ID number that "some part of him still refused to quite get memorized" (379), alluding to the fact that the character's memory is a subsystem inside of himself, a process he can

observe but cannot control. The systems below consciousness can "refuse" the conscious controller, who, as it turns out, controls very little.

Though the model becomes more precise between Wallace's first novel and his last, the same understanding that the mind is fundamentally embodied is at the core of all of his work. How then does this model inform Wallace's ideas about authorship? How does this embodied model of selfhood complicate the theories of authorship that dominated in the postmodern period from which Wallace emerged? *The Pale King* is the first of Wallace's novels in which he himself appears as a named character, and it is the first of his novels prefaced by an epigraph. That the epigraph itself raises questions about authorship and embodiment, thereby *priming* the reader for the contents of the novel to come, suggests that Wallace chose it carefully.

"Cognitive Questions"

The Pale King's epigraph reads: "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed." This line is taken from Frank Bidart's prose poem "Borges and I," which is collected in *Desire* (1997). There has been a surprising lack of critical interest in Wallace's relationship with Bidart's work, despite the careers of both writers being "animated" by the "'mind-body' relation" (Bidart, "Interview with Halliday" 239) and by their critiques of postmodernism. When Bidart has been discussed in Wallace studies, critics have treated either the poem, "Borges and I," or just the epigraph to Wallace's novel, in complete isolation. Severs reads the epigraph as a description of the way the characters spend their time filling "the blank tax forms that make up" their "work" (55). David Hering, Daniel R. Kelly, and Shannon Elderon interpret the epigraph quite vaguely, either as a gesture towards the debate about authorship and authorial intention (Hering 165n. 3), or to mean that "our culture's options" regarding identity construction "do not even seem to be fixed" (Kelly 129), or to suggest that "narratives" have the power to "change their narrators" (515). Marsh's reading is clearer, as he suggests that the "forms" in Bidart's poem mean, for Wallace, the form of the autobiographical genre that he plays with in the novel. For Marsh, the Wallace character is as much a product of the "tropes of autobiography" as he is in charge of them: he is altered by the genre form he fills (121). Though Philip Coleman recognises that Wallace's

choice of epigraph signals his wider interest and engagement with poetry, Coleman similarly treats it as a statement about genre, and reads the word "forms" to mean both the novel form that 'kills' the author-character, and the non-novelistic forms that Wallace crosses into: "The 'novel,' then, acts as a kind of 'pre-existing form' for Wallace, but the 'filling in' of that 'form' is a process engaged in by author and reader alike" (15).

Though Bidart's poem is of course about filling literary forms—it shares Borges's story's title, and part of the poem is about filling the form of Borges's story and changing it into something new—I suggest that the "forms" of Bidart's poem are in fact a metaphor for the embodied experience of human beings. Stephen J. Burn is the only critic to recognise that Bidart's poem is, in part, about "a paradigm for the life of consciousness," something that resonates with Wallace's "career-long fascination with consciousness" ("Paradigm" 372-73). It is certainly possible that Wallace only read Bidart's poem when it was first published in the collection of responses to Borges, *Who's Writing This? Notations on the Authorial I with Self-Portraits* (1995), and viewed the poem in isolation in the way his critics have. However, contrary to Marsh's suggestion that "the final inclusion of the quote as an epigraph seems to be attributable to Pietsch" (125n. 19), there are multiple notes in Wallace's archive that confirm the epigraph was his own choice, and suggest that Wallace had read the whole collection of which the poem was a part.[37]

We cannot know for certain if Wallace read more of Bidart than just this poem, but it seems likely that he, at the very least, owned the collection. As Paul Giles points out, Wallace always gravitated towards poets with "metaphysical propensities" ("All Swallowed Up" 15), and Bidart and Wallace share deep roots in the philosophical tradition and a frustration with postmodernism.[38] Bidart's poem, "Borges and I," does not emerge out of nowhere, but rather

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[37] One of Wallace's notes reads: "EPIGRAPH Frank Bidart, *Desire*, FSG 1997, p. 9: 'Borges and I': 'We fill pre-existing forms . . .'" (HRC 36.3), suggesting it was in fact his decision. A second note that gives the full citation of "*Desire*" again (HRC 36.4) is printed on Illinois State University paper, indicating that Wallace's choice of epigraph may have taken place between 1997 (*Desire*'s publication) and 2002, when he left his teaching position there (Max, *Every Love Story* 266-68).

[38] Where Wallace is somewhat unique among his contemporaries for having an academic training in philosophy, Bidart originally intended to become a philosophy major himself, and his critique of postmodernism is in

as part of a long career of writing about embodiment and selfhood, and it is important to understand the poem in that context. Once we recognise that the poem belongs to a larger collection, in which the line "we fill pre-existing forms . . ." appears elsewhere, in a context which emphasises that the word "forms" does not necessarily mean paper forms (Severs, *Balancing Books* 236) or genre forms (Marsh 121; Coleman 15) but very specifically the *human form*, we will see that Bidart may have been a more important source for Wallace's novel than has previously been suggested. Given that the epigraph effectively articulates Nørretranders's model of the 'I' and the 'Me,' a model of selfhood in which the 'I' fills the 'Me' and is changed by it, it is easy to imagine how this meaning of the poem would have resonated with Wallace in the writing of his final novel. These affinities, not to mention Wallace's confession that he "rip[s] poetry off a lot" (*Conversations* 38-39), suggest that it is likely he read on.

"Borges and I," first of all, is a response to Jorge Luis Borges's story of the same name (1960). In Borges's postmodern parable, the narrative speaker, the 'I,' describes himself as a separate entity to Borges the writer, "the one things happen to" (282). Jorge, the 'I,' is "destined to perish, definitively," because it is 'Borges' who readers know, and 'Borges' who is immortalised in language and literature. Jorge will not be remembered because everything about him is "giv[en] over" to Borges. Like 'David Wallace' and 'David Foster Wallace,' the persona of the writer overshadows the real man. Though Jorge tries to retain some weight, imagining new things and topics in order to "free myself from him," these new thoughts are likewise taken up by the worldly writer Borges, and cut away from the 'I.' It is inevitable, then, that Jorge increasingly "recognize[s]" himself "less in [Borges's] books" (282), and even this last imagining—the text that makes up the parable we are reading—is like a suicide on the page under the name Borges. "I do not know which of us has written this page" (283), reads the narrative's last line, but the tragic irony is that, having been written, the 'I''s last attempt at self-definition has become just another "game" for Borges (282), and the 'I' now has nothing left.

Borges's story is quintessentially postmodern, charting as it does the dissolution of the self into language and oblivion. The story dramatizes a view of authorship that would later be

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part motivated by his early frustration with academic philosophy's turn to postmodern "linguistic scepticism" and the "desolation of positivism" ("Interview with Halliday" 226).

described by Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes in two of the seminal postmodern formulations of authorship: Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1969) and Barthes's two essays, "The Death of the Author" (1967) and "From Work to Text" (1977). For Foucault, writing is not a way for someone to "express" the "deepest" parts of their "self" (*Aesthetics* 222) but a way of a "creating a space into which the *writing subject constantly disappears*," just as Jorge vanishes in Borges's story (206, my emphasis). For Barthes, the author is, famously, dead, and "writing" is understood to be "the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (*Image* 142). In "Work to Text" Barthes returned to this problem, arguing that the Author "becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work . . . the 'I' which writes the text, it too, is never more than a paper-*I*" (*Image* 161). Borges enacts this death of the author. The self who writes, the originator of the work, vanishes into the text it produces to become nothing more than a "paper-*I*." Borges's real self—the "living human holding the pencil," as Wallace puts it (*Pale King* 68)—dissolves throughout his brief "flight" through time, untouched by the world and losing everything to 'Borges' (283).

In a talk describing the genesis of his own poem and his "poetics of embodiment" ("Pre-existing Forms" 118), Bidart explains that he "felt almost violently that [Borges's story] did not reflect my own writing life. It did not reflect my own relation to my writing self" (109).[39] In his prose poem, Bidart calls the "desolating landscape" in Borges's story "seductive and even oddly comforting, but, I think, false" (*Desire* 9). Borges's model is a "Sweet fiction" (10) because it imagines a "magic space" where the 'I' is completely separate from the life of the writer (9). Bidart rejects this "paradigm for the life of consciousness," because it imagines that there is a "disparity" between the self and the body, between the "essential self and [the] worldly second self" (9). For Bidart, the conscious 'I' is not separate and dissolving, but *fundamentally embodied*, tied to the world and changed in the act of writing. In other words,

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[39] This talk was given at the University of Chicago and as the Ben Belitt Lecture at Bennington College, and later published in *Salmagundi*. The poem itself, Bidart explains, was commissioned by Dan Halpern, who had "asked many writers to respond to Borges's "Borges and I," by writing something of approximately the same length, using it as a springboard" (109). The responses were published by The Ecco Press as *Who's Writing This? Notations on the Authorial I with Self-Portraits* (1995), and recently republished by Harper Perennial as *Who's Writing This? Fifty-five Writers on Humor, Courage, Self-Loathing, and the Creative Process* (2009).

when Bidart the writer makes his poems and the 'I' is "changed in making them" (10), the 'I' is not dissolved but brought to life. The author is not absent at all.

Wallace was interested in Borges's significant place in twentieth-century literature.[40] In "Borges on the Couch," a review of Edwin Williamson's *Borges: A Life* (2004), Wallace claims that Borges is

> arguably the great bridge between modernism and postmodernism in world literature. . . . He is modernist in that his fiction shows a first-rate human mind stripped of all foundations in religious or ideological certainty. . . . And the [postmodern] mind of those stories is nearly always a mind that lives in and through books. (*Both Flesh* 293)[41]

Wallace's model of the relationship between the modern and the postmodern is strikingly similar to how other literary critics have categorised literary periods in the twentieth century. In *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes Towards a Theory of the New Arts* (1978), Dick Higgins argues that "something strange happened in our cultural life around 1958" (3). Where, in the first half of the twentieth century, "the common denominator among most of the typical innovative arts and philosophy . . . are a concern, an obsession even, with the process of cognition" (7), since 1958 "the focus has come off the individual and his identity. . . . It came to be, instead, on the object *qua* object, the poem within the poem, the word within the

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[40] Lucas Thompson is the only critic to discuss the relationship between Wallace's and Borges's work in detail, persuasively arguing that Wallace's "B.I. #59" is a rewriting of, among other sources, Borges's "The Writing of the God" (72). Thompson notes that Wallace "had little or no interest in the particular cultural context within which Borges's work was written, since his overriding concern is with the broader thematic, metaphysical content of Borges's stories" (87).

[41] Wallace's scathing review takes issue with Williamson's focus on Borges's biography and authorial intent, especially given that Borges himself, in 'Borges and I,' "anticipates and refutes the whole idea of a literary biography" (285n. 1). Of course, in his review of Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoevsky, Wallace also wrote that "a comprehensive reading of Dostoevsky's fiction is impossible without a detailed understanding of the cultural circumstances in which the books were conceived" (*Consider* 258), which quite contradicts the later review. As William H. Gass puts it in his own essay on authorship, "Many and sharp are the philosophical rocks in this apparently calm cool pool" (285). In the rest of this chapter I will bring some clarity to Wallace's complicated position on authorship and intention.

word" (8). Higgins characterises this as the shift from asking "Cognitive Questions" to asking "Postcognitive Questions" (1). This definition is used by Brian McHale to preface his influential *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), in which he argues that the "dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*" because it tends to foreground 'cognitive questions' about knowledge and the human mind: "What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?" (9). In contrast, the dominant of postmodernist fiction is "*ontological,*" because it foregrounds 'postcognitive questions' about the nature of reality and existence itself: "Which world is this? . . . What is a world? . . . Which of my selves is to [do something in this world]?" (10). As Wallace says in his review, first the modernists were "stripped of all foundations," then the postmodernists had only text to go on (*Both Flesh* 293).

Bidart is a forerunner of what Peter Boxall has called the "rapid expiry of postmodern orthodoxies" and twenty-first-century literature's return to a new dominant, that of the "stubborn materiality of the body" (16).[42] As our maps of the mind have been redrawn, writers such as Bidart and Wallace have bridged the postmodern, post-cognitive "mind that lives in and through" text (Wallace, *Both Flesh* 293) with a new "paradigm for the life of consciousness" (Bidart, *Desire* 9), one that understands consciousness to be fundamentally embodied within a physical form. Just as Borges, for Wallace, bridges the modern self and the postmodern self, Bidart bridges postmodernism's paper I with a bodied I. Keeping in mind Stephen J. Burn's point that "post-postmodernism explicitly looks back to, or dramatizes its roots within, postmodernism. . . . [A] development from, rather than an explicit rejection of, the preceding movement" (*Jonathan Franzen* 19), it is important to recognise that Bidart does not completely reject the Borgesian truth that the author is figuratively divided between private and public self. As Bidart writes in "Homo Faber," "Whatever lies still uncarried from the abyss within me as I die dies with me" (*Desire* 12). Yet Bidart is distinctly *post*-postmodern because he takes Borges's parable of selfhood and ontological doubt and re-embodies its

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[42] McHale takes the term "dominant" from Roman Jakobson, who says it "may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure" (41). My view, that the dominant of post-postmodern literature is cognitive questions (in the literal sense) and a renewed focus on the body and brain, complements other takes on Wallace's work, such as Severs's argument that Wallace's post-postmodern characters are in a "quest for balance and ground" (50).

central questions. The line "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed" (9) is a model of consciousness that recognises that the 'I' is embodied and intertwined with whatever it creates. Unlike Borges's 'I,' which is truly separate and desolated by 'Borges's' parasitic texts, Bidart's 'I' is in a relationship with the work in which one changes the other. In Bidart's "Borges and I," Borges's post-cognitive questions are still raised, but they are chained back to the body and brain.[43]

Though we cannot know if Wallace read all of Bidart's work, he certainly read and admired the poet Zbigniew Herbert, whose collection *Mr Cogito* (1974) Wallace discussed in an early review in almost precisely the same terms as Jeffrey Gray uses to characterise Bidart's work.[44] In this review, Wallace names Herbert as one of the few living poets in the postmodern era who has found a way to "marr[y] the stuff of spirit and human feeling to the parodic detachment the postmodern experience seems to require" (*Both Flesh* 122). Herbert

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[43] In a 1993 article in *Contemporary Literature* discussing Bidart's place in late twentieth-century poetry, Jeffrey Gray argues that Bidart's poetry challenges the postmodern "view of the author as absence—or, at most, as effect, not cause, of the signifier" (714). Gray argues that Bidart manages to situate himself in a nuanced place between the two extreme poles of late twentieth-century poetry: between postmodern theory at the one end, especially theory of the deconstructive sort which "attempts to purge poetry of origin, narrative voice, and affect," and, at the other extreme, an earnest—arguably naïve—lyricism, which privileges emotional expression and rejects postmodern theory altogether (714). This description of Bidart's project fits quite strikingly with descriptions of Wallace's—by critics such as Charles B. Harris—as that which tries to "develop a literary form that accepts human reality as defined by poststructuralist thought while moving away from the strain of antihumanism in such thought" (116). Just as the clumsy term *post-postmodernist* is rather more descriptive and useful than if we were to classify such literature—which is doing many pre-postmodern things—as *modernist*, it would probably be more accurate to say here as well that Bidart and Wallace are not asking *cognitive* but post-*post-cognitive* questions: i.e., they do not naively reject postmodernism's post-cognitive problems, but are a development on from them that returns in many ways to what we would have to call, in hindsight, the pre-post-cognitive. As soon as something is introduced as being 'post-' anything else, it gets very messy.

[44] Wallace's "Cogito" review has received little attention. Coleman refers to the review as part of a larger discussion of Wallace and poetry, though he explains that "It would take another essay to work out the precise ways in which Wallace's work was informed by his enthusiastic appraisal of Herbert's" (12). Lucas Thompson briefly considers Wallace's appraisal of Herbert, and uses it as a starting point in considering Wallace's interest in Eastern European literature more generally (123).

stands out to Wallace as a postmodernist who "grapples with the Big Questions of human existence," a feat that makes most contemporary American poetry—which ironically "renders" such things "facile or banal"—"loo[k] sick" in comparison (121-22). *Mr Cogito*, which was originally published just three years before Bidart's *The Book of the Body* (1977), has many parallels with Bidart's poetry. As the title makes clear, Herbert is interested in cognition and thought, and the poem that opens the collection, "Mr Cogito Studies His Face in the Mirror," might be read, like Bidart's "Borges and I," as a bridge between postmodern and post-postmodern conceptions of self.

In Jacques Lacan's description of the mirror-stage of child development, the image a child sees in the mirror is said to be "found empty" (2): the child has no essential, internal self to discover, but must begin to conceive of itself through language. Lacan rejects Descartes's cogito, that thinking thing that says 'I think therefore I am,' because what "one ought to say [instead] is: I am not, wherever I am the plaything of my thought" (183). The conscious, essential, Cartesian cogito is absent from Lacan's view.[45] When Mr Cogito studies his face in the mirror, he does not see absence but the "whole soul" marked by the weight of thousands of generations: "the ears that protrude two fleshy seashells / no doubt left me by an ancestor who strained for an echo / of the thunderous march of mammoths across the steppes" (271). Rather than a lack, Mr Cogito's reflections prove that he exists: in Descartes's famous phrase, *cogito ergo sum*. The mirror-stage is equally unsettling, the self he discovers equally estranged from our everyday sense of self, but here it is not made in language but emphatically embodied, "locked into the chain of the species" (271) and what Wallace calls, elsewhere, "the whole evolution from hunting-gathering nomadism to cultivation and community" (*Girl* 268).[46]

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[45] I will discuss and clarify Descartes's terms and his model of mind in chapter 2.

[46] Marshall Boswell has argued that in *Infinite Jest* "Wallace also seems to have Lacan in his sights when he characterizes 'the internal self'" (*Understanding* 155) not as a Lacanian "product of a lack" (130) but as a "'not-quite-right-looking infant . . . with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull . . .'" (155). Though there are interesting parallels between Wallace and Lacan, given their shared interest in the complex unconsciousness, my argument is similar to Boswell's: the central importance of interiority and the conscious 'I' in Wallace's writing marks him apart from Lacan, in whose view there is only an "abyss" (Lacan 188).

Wallace was clearly interested in how particular authors bridged one literary period and another, and seemed to find in writers such as Borges and Herbert a model for his own critique of postmodernism. This suggests that Wallace may have also found, in Bidart, a valuable source for his own project. To understand the full importance of the Bidart epigraph that Wallace chose for *The Pale King*, we need to look beyond "Borges and I" to the poem that takes up more than half of the collection *Desire*. "The Second Hour of the Night" is a retelling of what "Ovid tells us that / Orpheus sang": the tale of Myrrha, who was cursed and transformed into the myrrh tree after sleeping with her father, Cinyras.[47] The poem is about the appetites of the body that torture the person inside that body. Bidart describes Myrrha's torment as she is consumed by a desire for her father that cannot be satisfied without awful consequences. She tries to kill herself, because "*What she wants she does not want*" (34), but her attempt is frustrated. Eventually she plots to sleep with her father, and succeeds, but is cursed for the act.

As the poem comes to its close, Bidart repeats the line from "Borges and I": "*We fill pre-existing forms, and when / we fill them, change them and are changed*" (56). The metaphor, in this context, is explicitly about selfhood. Myrrha and her child are born into "pre-existing form[s]" and locked, therefore, into whatever "fate" is "embedded in the lineaments" of those forms (33). Throughout the story, Myrrha's desire for her father is her fate, because she is "not free not to desire" (46) that which is deeply rooted in the "lineaments"—the very material—of the form into which she was born. Myrrha loathes her own innate, pre-existing "'nature'" (53), loathes her body and her brain because she is "damned" if she tries to satisfy her defining (and immoral) desire, and damned if she tries to

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[47] Bidart's "The Second Hour of the Night" is the second in an ongoing sequence of epic poems. Their titles are taken from the myth of the Egyptian "'Book of Gates,' [in which] Each night during the twelve hours of the night the sun must pass through twelve territories of the underworld before it can rise again at dawn" ("Interview with Travis" 85). The Russian-doll layers that open the poem (Bidart tells what Ovid told that Orpheus told) is a good example of the way Bidart turns a postmodern technique towards different ends. Where Bidart describes a line of inheritance through which a story is passed down from writer to writer, John Barth's "Menelaiad," for instance, is a retelling of a story from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that actively defies the reader to pin down a source. The story begins with "Menelaus here, more or less," and the sentences are gradually buried beneath more layers of retelling and quotation: "" ' " ' " 'By Zeus out of Leda,' I commenced" (*Lost in the Funhouse* 153).

"deny" it, because it "is not in [her] / power to deny" (54). As Bidart puts it in another poem, "Guilty of Dust":

> WHETHER YOU LOVE WHAT YOU LOVE
>
> OR LIVE IN DIVIDED CEASELESS
> REVOLT AGAINST IT
>
> WHAT YOU LOVE IS YOUR FATE (*In the Western Night* 15)

Whether or not 'you' (your conscious 'I') love what *you* (your material form: your body and brain) loves, what your form loves is your fate. The epigraph, then, "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed," describes what it is to be an 'I' that fills a 'Me,' to be a small self trapped inside a body *and* a brain.

Bidart's "Borges and I" is about the life of a writer, of course, but it is about the life of a writer whose entire work is governed by metaphors of embodiment and by his critique of postmodern disembodiment. For Wallace to frame his third novel with Bidart's poem suggests that he was making a statement about his own position, and his novel's position, in a much larger shift towards a literature beyond the postmodern. I suggest that the word "forms" in the epigraph does not just refer, as others have suggested, to paper forms or genre forms, but to the *human form*. Wallace never uses Nørretranders's terms for the 'I' and the 'Me' explicitly, though this model of mind clearly informed Wallace's writing. Wallace does, however, consistently use the language of Bidart's epigraph to put Nørretranders's model into more 'poetic' terms. The 'I' does not fill the 'Me' in *The Pale King*, but the self fills its form.

Compare Myrrha to Wallace's character Claude Sylvanshine, for instance, who thinks himself "ill-suited" to deal with terror and stress,

> the way some people are born without limbs or certain organs. . . . The neurology of failure. What if he was simply born and destined to live in the shadow of Total Fear and Despair, and all his so-called activities were pathetic attempts to distract him from the inevitable? (16)

The phrase "ill-suited" is linked to both the mind and nervous system ("neurology") and the body ("limbs [and] organs"), implying that the phrase can be taken at face-value: that is,

Sylvanshine is not cut out to deal with terror and stress because he is literally *wearing the wrong suit*, the wrong physical body and brain that have his destiny—"to live in the shadow of Total Fear"—built in. Sylvanshine's "so-called activities," the actions that other people might imagine originated from his 'I,' are actually going on outside of his conscious awareness: he is merely the passive observer of his own behaviour. We see Bidart's "form" throughout the novel. The author-character explains that as a child he understood his "problems with sustained concentration as evidence that [he] was an unusually dilute or disorganized *form* of human being" (294, my emphasis). The man in the "suit and gray hat" in the park "look[s] across at the opposite side where little *forms* on camp chairs sat there in a row" (43, my emphasis). Children in Toni Ware's trailer park are said to make "strange agnate *forms* on pallets" (55, my emphasis), where the word "agnate" means "relat[ed] through the male line" (OED) and describes, therefore, the pre-existence of the children's forms in a shared father's genes. The novel's author explains that he is not allowed to include "a certain unnamed relative" in the book, nor "any likeness thereof in any capacity, setting, *form*, or guise" (81, my emphasis). Chris Fogle describes himself as a "'rebel' who really just sponged off of society in the *form* of his parents" (167, my emphasis). This means, of course, that he sponges off society *through* his parents, but it also suggests that Fogle literally shares his parents' forms: he sponges off of society from inside the "form of his parents." Note that this line is prefaced by his realisation that he feels about his roommate "probably the way my father felt about me" (167), because his father and himself share the same body, blood, and therefore—to some extent—the same thoughts.

The metaphor of the self filling a pre-existing form fits exactly with Wallace's intuitive understanding of the self as he described it in an interview in 1993. As he put it then, human beings are "trapped inside a self (a psychic self, not just a physical self)" (*Conversations* 32). In other words, to be conscious is to wake up inside a pre-existing form and realise that you are trapped, chained to a body, brain, and mind that rule your existence so long as you occupy them. *The Pale King* is of course about paper forms too. It is a novel about boredom and deskwork, and the most action-packed chapter is in the book's middle, §25, which contains three full pages of "Brown turns a page. Ann Williams sniffs slightly and turns a page. Meredith Rand does something to a cuticle. 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page" (312). What the characters spend most of their time doing, as the Wallace character notes

when he is moving through the centre, is "reading files or filling out forms that might conceivably have had something to do with their assigned work, but most of them were staring vacantly into space" (302). Though this description (and the novel's epigraph) have the neat, literal meaning that the characters' jobs in bureaucratic America are to fill out countless paper forms, with the full context of the epigraph in mind we can read this sentence quite differently, to mean that as they are doing paperwork they are at the same time filling out their physical forms (which "might conceivably have . . . something to do with their assigned work," but only if they're lucky). The characters in §25, and throughout the novel, are uncomfortably embodied in their physical forms, forms which define them but from which they are unhappily estranged. As Wallace writes: "suffering takes many forms" (439).[48]

"The Nature of the Fun"

How does the poetics of embodiment that governs all of Wallace's fiction also shape his understanding of himself as writer? Like Bidart, who dramatizes his disagreement with Borges by adapting, and engaging with, Borges's story, Wallace read and engaged with postmodern theory. He acknowledges, for instance, that "Barthian and Derridean poststructuralism's helped me" to understand that "once I'm done with the thing, I'm basically dead, and probably the text's dead . . . language lives not just in but *through* the reader" (*Conversations* 40). Yet at the same time, in the same interview, Wallace stresses that he wants to "reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans" (41). Wallace's theoretical sophistication continually clashes with his more conservative ideas about the role of

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[48] At the end of the "Second Hour" Myrrha is turned into the tree that bleeds myrrh, a "resin" which is both "sweet" and "bitter" (55) to match Myrrha's fate (bitter despite the sweetness of her desire for her father). *The Pale King*'s §6, about two young Christians dealing with an unwanted pregnancy, was originally published in *The New Yorker* under the title "Good People," though Wallace's agent, Bonnie Nadell, on a panel discussing Wallace after his death, quotes from an email in which Wallace explained that he originally wanted to title the story "Sap": "I'd originally had one or two sentences about trees filled with sap in the park . . . and the piece's title was 'Sap'" (qtd. in Nadell, "Editors on Wallace" 35:40-38:40). Though he eventually turned from the title, I wonder if the central importance of the tree's "sap" might not have been an echo of the bitter "sap" (*Desire* 55) of the myrrh tree and Myrrha's own struggle with her fate and her unplanned child which is so similar.

literature. This idea of the transaction between living humans occurs again and again in Wallace's interviews. He talks about trying to create something "like a real full human relationship" between "the writer's consciousness" and the reader's (34), and about "communicating with a reader who cares something about that feeling in the stomach which is why we read" (61). He argues that what "fiction and poetry are doing is what they've been trying to do for two thousand years: affect somebody, make somebody *feel a certain way*, allow them to enter into relationships with ideas and with characters" (18, my emphasis). In the same interview, Wallace declares that he's the only "'postmodernist' you'll ever meet who absolutely worships Leo Tolstoy" (19). For Tolstoy, art is

> not, as the metaphysicians say, the manifestation of some mysterious idea . . . it is a means of human communion, necessary for life and for the movement towards the good of the individual man and of mankind, uniting them in the same feelings. (40)

How can feelings be shared in a relationship between the living reader and the "living human holding the pencil" (*Pale King* 68) if the latter is a bodiless, originless, abstracted dead entity entirely absent from the text?

Wallace seemed torn on this problem, and interested in the issue enough to devote two essays to it—"Greatly Exaggerated" (1992) and "The Nature of the Fun" (1998). In both essays, Wallace's use of bodied language to describe the writer-reader relationship is of central importance. In "Greatly Exaggerated," a review of H. L. Hix's *Morte d'Author: An Autopsy* (1990), Wallace attempts to untangle the academic debate about "authorial vital signs" (*Supposedly* 141), only to conclude that "For those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another, the whole question seems sort of arcane" (144). Wallace frames himself as a civilian, not an academic: someone who gets to trust his "gut" feelings instead of abstractions. It seems so obvious to a civilian that the academic "cultivation of absence rather than presence . . . the erasure of consciousness" (140) flies in the face of common sense. Whether or not we care about the author after the fact, it cannot be the case, as Wallace concludes, that "*no one did it*" (145).

Wallace's concluding point is taken from William H. Gass's *Habitations of the Word* (1985), specifically the essay that shares Barthes's title: "The Death of the Author." In this essay, Gass writes that the

> death of the author is not an ordinary demise, . . . [it] signifies a decline in authority, in theological power, as if Zeus were stripped of his thunderbolts and swans, perhaps residing on Olympus still, but now living in a camper and cooking with propane. He *is*, but he is no longer a god. (265)

Killing the authority of the author is a useful theoretical move that critics make, but the text, for Gass, still has a source. Whether or not we allow that an author is an authority on their own work, their work always has to have come *from them*. Gass describes the author's composition as follows, in significantly intimate, bodied language:

> it is a thing whose modulated surfaces betray the consciousness it contains, and which we read, as we read words, to find the hand, the arm, the head, the voice, the self which is shaping them, which is arranging those surfaces—this second skin—to reflect an inside sun, and reveal the climate of an inner life. (267)

Though the author may be dead theoretically, in boneheaded practice they exist: they have hands that "shap[ed]" the text, and, as Bidart also recognised, are "profoundly alter[ed], sometimes" by their own work (284). The author necessarily exists in the world inside a body, and therefore the text itself is a kind of body that contains some remnants of them. The text is not a papery "tissue of quotations" (Barthes, *Image* 145), but fleshy tissue that betrays the self from which it originated.

Wallace's second essay on authorship, "The Nature of the Fun," was written soon after the publication of *Infinite Jest* and is ostensibly more about himself as a writer at a particular point in his career. Like "Greatly Exaggerated" before it, "The Nature of the Fun" owes a debt to another author, Don DeLillo, and Wallace builds the essay around the "best metaphor [he] know[s]" for a fiction writer and their work, from DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991). Wallace writes:

> A book-in-progress [is] a kind of hideously damaged infant that follows the writer around, forever crawling after the writer . . ., hideously defective,

> hydrocephalic and noseless and flipper-armed and incontinent and retarded
> and dribbling cerebrospinal fluid of its mouth as it mewls and blurbles and cries
> out to the writer, wanting love, wanting the very thing its hideousness
> guarantees it'll get: the writer's complete attention. (*Both Flesh* 193)

This bodied metaphor captures for Wallace the complicated love-hate relationship that a writer has with their own work. The work is imperfect and horrible, "because its deformity is *your* deformity" (194), because its body is a product of the author's own body. Wallace writes that something "happen[s] to [the work] in the parturition from head to page" (194), where the word "parturition" means, significantly, the "action of giving birth to young" (OED). To create a work is to give birth, to produce a body through your own body. This central metaphor, not to mention Wallace's description of the "whole thing" as a "genuine *relationship*, of a sort" (194) is strikingly similar to Bidart's formulation of authorship in "Borges and I," where the author is said to have a bodied relationship with their own work that changes them as much as they change it. Where Wallace differs to Bidart is in his concerns about the audience. "Being read on the AM subway by a pretty girl" is at first really fun for Wallace, but the pursuit of attention is dangerous (197). The way to keep making good art is to write not for attention (which produces writing no one would want to pay attention to) but to

> go deep inside yourself and illuminate precisely the stuff you don't want to see
> . . . this stuff usually turns out (paradoxically) to be precisely the stuff all writers
> and readers share and respond to, feel. (198)

There is a *person* who is writing here, one who is wrestling with their own vanity and their hatred and love of what they have created. Contrary to the postmodern view that writing is not for the expression of the self—that an author's "life is no longer the origin of his fictions" (Barthes *Image* 161)—Wallace suggests that to write is to constantly struggle with what is "deep inside yourself."

It is significant that in this essay Wallace uses the phrase "It has something to do with Work as Play" (198) to describe his epiphany about writing only for himself. This, I suggest, is an allusion to Barthes's essay "From Work to Text," in which Barthes makes the distinction between the "work," which is a crude, limited material (a "substance, occupying a part of the

space of books" [*Image* 156-57]), and "the Text," which is abstract and ethereal, a "methodological field" that "is experienced only in an activity of production" (157). For Barthes, the work is static, but the Text (which he capitalises) comes to life through the *play* of the reader: "the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game" (162). Wallace inverts Barthes's model. For Wallace, the Work itself—Wallace notably capitalises the word that Barthes keeps uncapitalised—is what's fun. If there was no "play" at this point in the process, if it was all about the play of the reader, then we would have nothing to read.[49]

A consequence of this embodied metaphor is that the author's consciousness, their 'I,' plays a somewhat insignificant role in the creative process. The 'I,' we have seen, is a stranger to itself, filling a human form that has its own desires and processes. If someone creates something then, is it the 'I' or the 'Me' who made it? When we create children it is an entirely unconscious process, the work and play of ancient biological processes going on below our conscious awareness. Wallace allows with his metaphor in "The Nature of the Fun" that he is barely in control of his own literary children because they are produced by his body, unconsciously. As he puts it, creation is not abstract and conscious but instead "It's usually a tummy thing: does this feel real? Does this make me want to puke?" (*Conversations* 146). The 'Author' is still dead in this sense because the 'I' is not in charge of what the author makes. Wallace cannot be an authority on his own work, because consciousness itself is not authoritative.

This problem is explored in Wallace's story "The Suffering Channel," a spiritual (or, rather, a bodily) sequel to "The Nature of the Fun." Discussion of this story has tended to

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[49] We can see from Wallace's archive that he would often annotate the introductions and forwards to books (such as Borges's *Labyrinths* [1962] and Kafka's *The Complete Stories of Kafka*, introduced by John Updike [1995]) more than the contents themselves. Wallace was clearly interested, as an author, in other authors and in how authors are perceived. Where Barthes's essay famously ends with the birth of the reader being dependent upon the death of the author, both Gass's essay and Wallace's "The Nature of the Fun" end by stubbornly inverting this idea, telling their readers that readers are not as all-important as Barthes makes them out to be. With tongues in their cheeks, Gass shrugs off the 'Reader': ". . . readers . . . readers simply comprise the public" (288), while Wallace decides that compared to the fun of writing "the reward of strangers' affection is as dust, lint" (*Both Flesh* 199).

revolve around its take on 9/11 and American life at the turn of the millennium.[50] I suggest, however, that "The Nature of the Fun" and the embodied metaphors we have seen so far are absolutely central to this story about a man who shits art: "they come out that way. Already fully formed. Hence the term incredible" (*Oblivion* 239). Lucas Thompson has suggested that this story is a reflection on theories of appropriation and influence, because the artist's art is, like Wallace's own writing, the "literal product of what he ingests" (38). This is the poetics of embodiment at work. Not only are the artworks shaped by what is ingested, but they are also produced unconsciously, through a bodily process. This raises problems for the art's critics. The "pieces" are said to be "arresting in their extraordinary realism and the detail of their craftsmanship," but the story asks "whether a word like craftsmanship really applied in such a case" (*Oblivion* 254). The artworks are not made consciously. They are produced by the 'Me,' not the 'I' (in Nørretranders's terms), so the problem is how much credit you give the artist from whom they emerged.

Characters have "queer twin" responses to the artworks, feeling that they "both [want] to bend and get them" and "run as fast as [they] could from the cubicle complex" (301). This mixed reaction recalls Wallace's point in "The Nature of the Fun" that you both love and hate your work. But why are the characters so repulsed by embodied art? Much of the story revolves around various characters' debates about their discomfort with the fact of their own bodies. Shit or the hideous baby are not repulsive while they are inside the artist, but "the minute it's outside of [you] . . . it becomes gross" (307). To allow that we are embodied, and that our art, therefore, is also embodied and not wholly produced by careful, conscious craft, seems to violate the fantasy we have of ourselves as luminous conscious beings. As one character asks, if the artist does not work consciously,

> '. . . it's some kind of, what, a miracle? Idiot savantry? Divine intervention?'

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[50] Olivia Banner notes that the story is "haunted by the foreknowledge that the events of September 11 will affect its characters by literally turning them into so much waste" (75), while Annie McClanahan argues that "Wallace's story also shows that while it is wrong to call 9/11 constitutively unforeseeable, it is equally mistaken to view such events as easily, materially predictable" (59). Staes notes that the "references to the terrorist attacks in the novella are sparse," but argues that Wallace uses 9/11 to interrogate the status of American art at the end of the century before and after the tragedy ("Only Artists" 475).

'Or else some kind of extremely sick fraud.' (*Oblivion* 320)

Wallace's statements about authorship suggest he thinks about his own creative process this way, though it seemed like he had made peace with the idea in his earlier essays. The act of writing in "The Suffering Channel" is still all tummy and gut, not abstract reason, but the metaphor has changed from "Fun" to "Suffering," from reproduction and the birth of something alive (albeit deformed) to the fraudulent defecation of waste. Either way, the embodied artist has no control over what his body produces.

This a different kind of death to the one that Barthes and Foucault describe, however. The author is 'dead' only insofar as our fantasy of the 'I' as the dominant force in a person is dead: it is the author's whole person, the 'I' and the 'Me,' the self and the form they fill, that produces the work, not just the 'I' alone. Wallace's contemporary George Saunders describes his perspective in a recent essay titled "What Writers Really Do" (2017). While Saunders accepts the postmodern position that it is not as easy as saying a writer "had something he 'wanted to express'. And then he just, you know . . . expressed it," at the same time his consciousness, his 'I,' is there watching what the rest of him produces, and controls it with a reader in mind: "When I pull on this rope here, you lurch forward over there." Though Saunders is well aware that, as far as the reader is concerned, "one of us is dead," the fact that authors and readers are embodied alike means there is still some possibility of a "a living transaction between humans" (Wallace, *Conversations* 41): Saunders is able to maintain that "hopeful notion" because author's and readers' "minds are built on common architecture . . . whatever is present in me might also be present in you." Restoring the author's body revitalises the possibility that reader and author can be "unit[ed] . . . in the same feelings" (Tolstoy 40). Though Wallace and Saunders are both theoretically sophisticated enough to accept that they are not necessarily an authority on what they have produced, they do not kill themselves off completely. We may or may not value their intentions, but we cannot say that they were not there to have any.

When Wallace introduces himself in his final novel as "Author here. Meaning the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona" (68), we would have to ignore all his other writings on authorship to simply shrug this off as untrue. Indeed, we would have to ignore how the author appears throughout *The Pale King* itself. The Wallace-character explains in later "Author here" sections that he had "a severe

dermatological condition during this period" (269). Seeming to anticipate the criticism of his work, he notes that as a result, he "was more or less used to not being looked at or acknowledged" (269). Known by a roommate as "'the young man carbuncular'" (288n. 40), the author is emphatically bodied, his living skin there to see, but no one wants to look. We try to erase Wallace's body from our minds: "most people . . . looked . . . repelled, then could be seen struggling with themselves to superimpose on that expression another one that signified they either didn't see the bad skin or weren't especially bothered by it" (288). Of course, this is not to deny that the author does eventually disappear into the system, that Wallace's "old Social Security number . . . simply disappeared, from an identification standpoint" (300) and he is confused with another persona: "his file had been deleted, or absorbed into, that of David F. Wallace" (413). But we cannot ignore that the body was there in the beginning. Authors exist in forms in the world, and the forms they make are shaped by that fact. To erase the body from our readings altogether is to erase that which brings the things we read into existence in the first place.

I do not think those critics who have read the 'forms' epigraph as a statement about paper forms, genre forms, and the artist disappearing into his novel, are wrong. I would only add that to fill artistic forms *is to fill a human form*: for both Bidart and Wallace they are one and the same. Lucas Thompson has recently argued that we need new models of influence to understand Wallace's relationship with other writers, because Harold Bloom's famous "conception of influence . . . cannot properly account for the presence of multiple and overlapping artistic influences" that characterise Wallace's writing (85). Thompson argues that the implicit model of influence in Wallace's work is "based on a far more playful recontextualization of sources" than the Bloomian model of "writers' relationships to previous specters of influences as combative" (85-86), and he suggests that

> The most apposite metaphor for Wallace's practice is that of a software engineer. . . . In the same way that software innovations often arise from technical advances in neighboring fields, so Wallace's texts are innovative in their amalgamation of diverse philosophical, cultural, and literary influences. (85)

In the spirit of Thompson's argument, I would add that this engineering takes place specifically inside the body and the bodied brain. To fill a human form is to live inside the hardware of

body and brain that have preferences, that absorb other works and stitch them together, *unconsciously*, into something new. As Jonathan Lethem writes,

> Neurological study has lately shown that memory, imagination, and consciousness itself is stitched, quilted, pastiched. If we cut-and-paste our selves, might we not forgive it of our artworks? ("The Ecstasy of Influence" 68)[51]

"We live inside bodies, after all," writes Wallace (*Pale King* 291), and the artist who lives in and through the body is necessarily filling a form that has, throughout its life, been absorbing and engineering an endless array of 'plagiarised' sources from which the conscious mind can draw. Wallace's various allusions to "appropriation art"—in the Erdedy chapter in *Infinite Jest* (23); in the endnotes, when one critic asks "'Has James O. Incandenza Ever Even Once Produced One Genuinely Original or Unappropriated or Nonderivative Thing?'" (990n. 24); in "Westward" with the description of "'art' [as] nothing more than the closet of a klepto with really good taste" (*Girl* 293)—suggests this was much on Wallace's mind. The conscious artist can choose to resist this fact, but ultimately, as Wallace wrote in *Infinite Jest*, "You are what you love. No?" (107).[52]

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[51] Lethem's essay about replacing the "wearisome killing-the-father imperatives" with an "ecstasy of influence" is itself patchworked together with quotations from other writers. Lethem reveals his sources at the end (including a couple from Wallace himself), and notes that the phrase "ecstasy of influence" is "lifted from spoken remarks by Professor Richard Dienst of Rutgers" (68). Lethem uses similar language to Thompson when he explains that "Blues and jazz musicians have long been enabled by a kind of 'open source' culture" (60), and he asks his readers to "consider" some of history's plagiarisms that are the product of such a culture: "Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra, copied nearly verbatim from Plutarch's life of Mark Antony and also later nicked by T. S. Eliot for *The Waste Land*. If these are examples of plagiarism, then we want more plagiarism" (61). Samuel Cohen refers to this essay in his discussion of Wallace's own anxiety about his "postmodern inheritance" (76), and suggests that Wallace's relationship with his influences is both anxious and ecstatic, despairing and hopeful (75-76).

[52] Another complementary model of literary influence that Thompson uses to describe Wallace's work is that of the hologram, whereby a writer's work does not "eras[e]" its influences, but is "*overlaid* onto" them, "superimposed images that rework the original material and find new thematic inflections" (112). To support his argument, Thompson quotes Wallace in conversation with Bryan Garner, explaining writing "Exercises as boneheaded as you take a book you really like, you read a page of it three, four times, put it

In her study of artistic inspiration, *Touched with Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (1993), Kay Redfield Jamison notes that

> From virtually all perspectives—early Greek philosopher to twentieth-century specialist—there is agreement that artistic creativity and inspiration involve, indeed require, a dipping into pre-rational or irrational sources while maintaining ongoing contact with reality and 'life at the surface.' (104)

In the postmodern period, language and Text replaced the gods and muses in the authorship equation (Burke xvii). Now, in the post-postmodern period, artists such as Wallace and Bidart re-embody the whole problem. They still understand, as the postmodernists did, that the 'I' has little authority, but this is not because it is absent. The 'I' is embodied in a body that is present every step of the way. In the following chapters I will not read Wallace's works to try and discover things about the life of the man who wrote them, but it is important to recognise from the beginning that Wallace existed, that he read things and inevitably drew on them in his own writing, and that our readings of his work can be enriched if we allow that his works have origins. We should not chain ourselves to Wallace's statements about what fiction is supposed to do, but neither should we demap Wallace entirely. As we will see in chapter 2, if we try, in spite of what we know about Wallace's life and beliefs, to stubbornly fit his work into the narrow bounds of a specific theoretical framework that cannot account for those beliefs, we run the risk of ignoring hugely significant aspects of his fiction.

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down, and then try to imitate it . . . so that you can feel your own muscles trying to achieve some of [its] effects" (qtd. in Thompson 113). Thompson's "holographic metaphor" (113) still begins with Wallace's body. This "boneheaded" exercise is all about the writer's "muscles" mimicking the muscle movements of previous writers. The texts become holographic once they leave Wallace's hands but until then they are in the firm grip of a writer's muscle and bone.

Chapter 2

"He's a ghost haunting his own body": Cartesian Dualism in Wallace's Ghost Stories

> . . . More than once you asked
>
> that I breathe into your lungs like the soprano in the opera
>
> I loved so my ghost might inhabit you and you ingest my belief
>
> in your otherwise-only-probable soul.
>
> —Mary Karr, "Suicide's Note: An Annual" (2012)

Wallace the Posthumanist

It is no coincidence that one of the first articles on Wallace's work was written by N. Katherine Hayles, whose landmark study *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999) is perhaps the most cited work on posthumanism. In Hayles's article on Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, notably published in the same year as her larger study, she characterised Wallace's project as a posthuman one, and introduced the theoretical framework that has influenced the debate about Wallace ever since, notably in criticism by Elizabeth Freudenthal and Paul Giles. It remains an unchallenged truism in Wallace studies that Wallace was a posthuman writer.

Like 'humanism' before it, 'posthumanism' means different things to different critics. Posthumanism is, loosely, a critique of humanism, and it dismantles in many different ways the traditional concept of 'Man' that we see in the work of philosophers such as René Descartes: that is, 'Man' as a uniquely spiritual being in possession of a temporary, mechanical body. Though Descartes's dualist model of the self has since become synonymous with traditional humanism, and is often the primary point of reference for posthumanist studies, it is part of a very long philosophical tradition. Plato, for instance, thought of 'Man' as a rational, reasonable soul that exists inside a burdensome body: "if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything," he writes, "we must get rid of the body and contemplate things in isolation with the soul in isolation" (*Last Days* 127). Aristotle defined 'Man' as that which is elevated up the chain of being by its "intellect," above the souls of animals (defined by "movement and . . . senses") and even further above "the plant or vegetative soul" (defined by "the principle of growth and nutrition"). This understanding of 'Man' as something distinct

from the animal and plant kingdoms later influenced the thirteenth-century philosopher Thomas Aquinas, who read and annotated Aristotle's theory (Aquinas 427-28). According to George Makari, Descartes did away with Artistotle's view when he argued that *all* of the natural world, including 'Man,' was equally mechanical, and that only "man's Cogito stood outside of" nature (29). In the eighteenth century, in Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man" (1734), 'Man' still has his place on the "great chain of being," between the beasts (with which he shares an animal body) and the angels above (with which he shares a rational, divine, spirit):

> Now upward will he soar,
>
> And little less than angel, would be more;
>
> Now looking downwards, just as grieved appears
>
> To want the strength of bulls, the fur of bears. (277)

This understanding of 'Man' as having a rarefied place in the natural order, distinguished from the crude animal kingdom by his divine soul, is what posthumanism, in its many forms, attempts to dismantle. Cybernetic posthumanism, for example, treats humans as patterns of information, reproducible in genetic or digital code. For posthuman theorists such as Donna Haraway, in her landmark essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1984), the boundaries between human, animal, and machine have been breached (*Simians* 151). Human beings are no longer distinguished from either animal or machine by a "spirit . . . self-moving" and "autonomous" (152). This has its literal counterpart in what Paul Sheehan calls "Technological posthumanism," which has a utopian vision of humanity actually merging with technology, a "bio-mechanical hybridity of the techno-body" (251). Both Sheehan and Haraway share the view that 'Man' is not a stable category, but something that is, and should be, kept in flux. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler argues that "the essence or identity" that human beings "purport to express," the idea that they have an "internal core or substance," is a "fabricatio[n]" (Butler 173). The human body is not a "bounded corporeality endowed with an origin, interiority and depth" (Fraser and Greco 44), but a hollow text, endlessly rewriteable: the "posthuman body is a technology, a screen, a projected image" (Halberstam and Livingston 3) with no internal, stable self hidden beneath. Roland Barthes shares these views, arguing for a posthumanism that eradicates the idea of "The Great Family of Man"

(*Mythologies* 100), an end to the naïve notion that all human beings are fundamentally the same. For Barthes, "Nature is itself Historical" (101)—there is no "solid rock of a universal human nature" (101)—and 'Man' is just a fiction (with an ugly imperialist history) that should be dismantled and rewritten.

Though scientists studying the brain would disagree with the view that different cultures are not built upon the same "solid rock" of biology, the sciences of mind are posthumanist in their own way because they, too, dismantle the idea that human beings have some internal, soulful essence. As David Lodge puts it, there is

> a certain affinity between the poststructuralist literary theory that maintains that the human subject is entirely constructed by the discourses in which it is situated, and the cognitive science view that regards human self-consciousness as an epiphenomenon of brain activity. (89)

This anti-essentialist account of selfhood is perhaps best expressed by Daniel C. Dennett, who writes that "the various phenomena that compose what we call consciousness . . . are all physical effects of the brain's activities" (16): "*there's nobody home*" (29).[53] In each of these theoretical frameworks, 'Man' is an unstable category threatened by technology, scientific accounts of selfhood, and both cultural and physical mutation. There is no such thing as a rational soul or essence that distinguishes thinking man from animal. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this view is typical of the postmodern fiction that was written in the same period in which posthuman theory flourished. In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), for instance, Thomas Pynchon describes Slothrop's family history, "his blood's avalanche" (29), coming to an end when Slothrop is "broken down . . . and scattered" (875), no longer held "together, even as a concept" (878). One of Robert Coover's characters is also literally dismantled. In *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* (2002), Pierre receives a flatpack woman in the mail, and puts together her "scraps, spare parts" and sexual organs into what barely resembles a human

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[53] As Peter Carruthers notes, "Many have alleged that Dennett's book," *Consciousness Explained*, "should really have been entitled *Consciousness Explained Away*" (32). Not all scientists of mind share this view, of course. As we have seen, Antonio Damasio is quite comfortable "privileg[ing] the self" (*Self Comes to Mind* 8) and argues that "nothing is gained by dismissing it as an illusion" (24). Damasio would not argue, however, that the self is immaterial or somehow separate to the evolutionary process: only that it exists.

being (her vagina, for instance, is installed in her armpit), though she continues to function: "You'll get useta me after a while, and we can have some pretty weird ol' flops together!" (109; 111). 'Man' is no longer a stable concept. The human being is hollow, rewriteable, and not as special as we used to think.[54]

Hayles situates Wallace's work in this tradition. For Hayles, posthumanism is "characterised" by the assumption that consciousness is neither uniquely divine nor the "seat of human identity" (*How We Became* 2). It is, in other words, an anti-Cartesian position, which rejects the notion that the mind is the immaterial master of the body it possesses and controls. Hayles celebrates this anti-Cartesianism, and the deconstruction of the (white, male, imperial) liberal humanist subject that has been achieved by feminist, postcolonial, and many other theorists.[55] Posthumanism as Hayles defines it does not mean "the end of humanity" but the "end of a certain conception of the human" (286); it is not an attempt to take 'Man' down from his pedestal, but rather the recognition that 'Man' never had a pedestal to begin with.

As we saw in chapter 1, the posthuman model of mind as embodied, embrained, and out of conscious control is clearly central to Wallace's work. Though I will argue in this chapter

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[54] Though posthuman theory has been particularly dominant in the postmodern period, Ulrika Maude notes that its roots grow deep. In the nineteenth century, for instance, we had learned that "consciousness differed rather drastically from the Cartesian dictum, 'I think therefore I am', which had seen the rational mind as the defining attribute, the *sine qua non*, of the human. Darwin's work declared mental consciousness a mere by-product of the body and its various functions" (200). Though there is what we might call a posthumanist strand through all of Western philosophy—one which challenges the view that humans are unique, divine, or immaterial—twentieth-century posthumanism is distinguished from these earlier positions by its association with postmodern and poststructuralist theory ('Man' is a text to be rewritten); our modern understanding of DNA, genetics, and the biological codes that make us up; and the hybridisation of Man and technology that dissolves the clear-cut boundaries between the two.

[55] In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles's argument is specifically with the cybernetics movement, from whom, she argues, we need to reclaim the term 'posthuman.' Because the cybernetics movement understands human beings as "information-processing entities who are *essentially* similar to intelligent machines" (7), Hayles argues that it falls, therefore, into precisely the same Cartesian trap as liberal humanism. Like the humanism it supposedly challenges, cybernetic posthumanism still privileges consciousness and the dominant "rational mind" which it views as "*possess*[*ing*] a body" rather than "*being* a body" (4).

that by miscategorising Wallace as a posthumanist we bind ourselves to a theoretical framework that neglects major aspects of his work, my aim is not to oversimply Wallace's obviously complicated treatment of his characters. Throughout his career Wallace writes about posthuman beings, and is all too aware that we are driven by "the deep and involuntary stuff of man" (*Supposedly* 279). He describes the "limbic system[s]" of his editors (*Consider* 158n.), the "individual neocortices" at work inside his characters (*Oblivion* 38), and describes puberty as "adolescent glands firing all over the place" (*Infinite Jest* 450), an emotionless, mechanical description that is divorced from the individual selves who are caught in the crossfire. Wallace's early, uncollected short story, "Order and Flux in Northampton" (1991), is quintessentially posthuman in its description of the involuntary love that drives the character Barry Dingle:

> through the miraculous manipulations of primal human ontemes too primal and too human even to be contemplated, probably, it gives birth to life: from the clotted silt of the uninterestingness at the center of Barry Dingle there emerges the salamanderial zygote of a robust, animate thing, a life, Barry Dingle's immoderate homunculoid love, conceived out of the impossibly distant refracted epiphany of Myrnaloy Trask, demure in her now-not-fallen socks, a Myrnaloy who is as unaware as carbon itself that she has effected the manufacture of life through her role in the interplay of forces probably beyond the comprehension of everything and everyone involved.

The characters hidden somewhere beneath this frustrating prose are as "unaware" and as out of conscious control "as carbon itself," the material stuff of which they are made, stuff that is unconscious and bound to the laws of the natural world. The scientific jargon seeded through this passage—"zygote," a "body of living protoplasm" (OED), and "ontemes," which seems to be an invention of Wallace's—turns what is a simple, classical moment—falling into love—into a dense, expansive passage that ostensibly cannot contain all the chemical and involuntary movements that drive the people inside it.

It is entirely appropriate, then, that Hayles would establish, in one of the first scholarly articles on Wallace's work, the terms of the debate for a significant strand of Wallace studies. Her 1999 article "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*" brings the ideas in her larger study, *How We Became*

Posthuman, to bear on Wallace's novel. *Infinite Jest* is framed, Hayles argues, by two Bottoms: Hal's "disastrous failure to communicate" and Gately's "failing to intervene in Fackelman's torture and death," both of which "displa[y]" the disastrous "end results of believing in autonomy" ("Illusion" 695). According to Hayles, Wallace's cast of characters suffer from the "presumption of autonomy" that is the "founding principle for the liberal humanist self" (693) and the founding philosophy of the United States. The only way out for these characters is to abandon their assumption that they are free to pursue happiness in all its forms (chemical or otherwise), and instead radically "restructure the autonomous liberal subject" (694). This restructuring is made possible by the novel's Alcoholics Anonymous program, because it runs counter to the philosophy of the individual pursuit of happiness, teaching instead that "citizenship" only works when individuals are not solipsistic (i.e., focused on their individual pleasure) but "connected with everything else" (694). In Hayles's reading, *Infinite Jest* portrays autonomous selfhood as a dangerous delusion that needs a "cure" (694).

Hayles's work on Wallace has been further developed in particular by Elizabeth Freudenthal (2010), who also reads *Infinite Jest* as dismantling the liberal humanist self. According to Freudenthal's reading, which is rooted in Butlerian theory, characters such as Gately use their "own bod[ies]" as "instrument[s] of free-floating, originless well-being" (192). Wallace's characters do not have a core essential self (they are "originless"), and they perform "rituals" of "'anti-interiority'" to maintain an identity that is "divested from an essentialist notion of inner emotional, psychological, and spiritual life. . . . [A] subjectivity generated . . . not in the ideal realm of interiority," but in a "continuous reestablishment of selfhood contingent on external material reality" (192). Like Hayles's reading of the novel as a challenge to the "presumption of autonomy" (693), Freudenthal reads the novel as a challenge to neo-Cartesian models of the self that separate the body and brain from the so-called "'self'" (193). Drawing explicitly on Hayles (196), Freudenthal argues that "embodiment" is key to our understanding of Wallace's "depiction of selfhood" (196), and she reads the body in the novel as connecting "exterior political-social structures and *ostensibly* interior subjective experiences" (196, my emphasis).

Alexander Resar, Simon de Bourcier, Alexander Moran, Lucas Thompson, Mark Bresnan, Allard den Dulk, Wilson Kaiser, and Brian Douglas Jansen read Wallace along these lines. Where Resar argues that *Infinite Jest* "performs the production of the subject in

process/on trial, . . . structuring the production of subjectivity, while simultaneously annihilating the subject's signification" (Resar 144), De Bourcier makes the same point that "the 'self'" in Wallace's work, "whether it be text, artificial consciousness, or the human subject—is always grounded on absence" (57). Moran argues that Meredith Rand, in *The Pale King*, is "shown to be a product of her environment," rather than having a "'substantive soul or ego'" (16). Lucas Thompson reads one of Wallace's Kafka-inspired story sketches about a "cockroach . . . who perceives himself as a human does, as 'the center' of the world," as a posthumanist story about how "evolutionary biology obviates the possibility of an individual perspective" (135). Both Bresnan and Dulk reiterate Hayles's point, arguing that the novel's Alcoholics Anonymous program requires that characters "relinquish any conception of [themselves] as . . . integrated and autonomous subject[s]" (Bresnan 66), and that in Wallace's writing the self has "no 'true core' that . . . underlies selfhood" (Dulk 16). Though Kaiser's reading of "recursive network[s]" in the novel differs from Hayles's (58), he shares with her and Freudenthal the view that Wallace is writing against "sweeping claims about self and other" and "the 'humanity of man'" (54-55). Finally, Jansen argues that Wallace's fiction "celebrat[es] . . . the human subject who is turned outward . . . aware of our roles in a large, complex, interconnected system" (57). For Hayles, Freudenthal, and others, Wallace's characters are emphatically *posthuman*: they are "without any inner essence" (Freudenthal 205-06).

Interiority in the Early Stories

These posthuman readings misrepresent Wallace's fiction. According to Freudenthal and Hayles, Wallace's cast of characters in *Infinite Jest* suffer from the illusion that they possess an "inner essence" (Freudenthal 205-06) and "autonomy" (Hayles, "Illusion" 693), yet the entire project of the AA community in Wallace's novel is one that, to quote it directly, "stresses the utter autonomy of the individual member" (356). Gately tells us that what AA teaches is precisely the opposite of what Hayles and Freudenthal suggest: "Newcomers come in so whacked out" they make the mistake of wanting "desperate[ly] to escape their own interior, to lay responsibility for themselves at the feet of something" outside themselves, such as the "Substance" to which they are addicted (863). The point of AA is not to be anti-interior but to take personal, interior responsibility for your own actions.

One speaker at the AA meeting tells the horrifying story of her father's incestuous sexual abuse, but the reason her story makes the others in the room uncomfortable is not because of its content but because it is riddled with blame and excuses that locate the cause of her drug problem outside of herself: "she'd had to become a stripper at sixteen *because* she'd had to run away from home *because* . . ." (370). The woman takes what we might call a posthuman view of her experience: she is, appropriately, a stripper, who bares her body to the AA audience, blaming it for everything that has happened to her. By arguing that "anybody with an operant limbic system" would be "force[d]" to run away (373), she pushes the blame away from her conscious mind and onto her unconscious form—her body and brain—that is posthumanly driven by chemicals, instinct, and mood. In doing so, she suggests that she had no part in it, because anyone with a body would have acted similarly. This creation of "cause[s]" is dangerous because it leads to "Self-Pity and Denial," the opposite of what AA wants to instil. What AA emphasises is not anti-interiority and anti-autonomy but the exact opposite: the importance of the "In Here" instead of the "Out There" (374). Taking personal, conscious responsibility for your actions is what saves you. Autonomy is not the dangerous delusion that needs a "cure" (Hayles, "Illusion" 694). It is the desire to give one's own autonomy up to a Substance that destroys you.

Unlike Hayles and Freudenthal, I have the benefit of hindsight and more of Wallace's work to draw on. Yet Wallace's emphasis in *Infinite Jest* on the interior self inhabiting the body as the "soul" (218) inhabits its "vessel" (231), does not come out of nowhere. Wallace's earlier fiction is filled with references to the interior self. In *Broom*, for instance, the Snapiard family undergo a ritual to "preserve individual identity and efficacy of will" (169). This is an apt description of Lenore's arc through the novel, too, as she tries to remain an autonomous individual while two men, Vigorous and Lang, try to possess her.

In the first story in *Girl with Curious Hair*, "Little Expressionless Animals," the character Julie, a *Jeopardy!* savant, is haunted by an episode from her past that did violence to her sense of interiority. As a child, she was left by her mother and one of her mother's many partners ("one after the other. . . . These blank silent men" [10]) by the road, where a dead-eyed, expressionless cow "watche[d]" her "the same way it watches anything" (40). This is such a haunting episode for Julie because she does not feel alive unless she is in the gaze of something with an expression that registers her own existence. She seems to come alive on

the *Jeopardy!* show because the "audience flicker[s]" (4) with whatever light hits them, and Julie "best likes . . . faces whose expressions change by the second" (10). Where Judith Butler denies the existence of an "internal core or substance" that can be "express[ed] or reveal[ed]" (173), Wallace takes a contrary view. Trying to explain herself to her lover Faye, Julie explains that

> Oceans are only oceans when they move. . . . Waves are what keep oceans from just being very big puddles. Oceans are just their waves. And every wave in the ocean is finally going to meet what it moves toward, and break. . . . Your own face, moving into expression. A wave, breaking on a rock, giving up its shape in a gesture that *expresses* that shape. See? (42)

What Julie implies here is that humans only seem human (that is, conscious and having an interior, unlike the dead-eyed cow or her mother's blank men) when they *express*: when there is some continuity between the emotional inner self and the outer expression of that self. This is not a Butlerian performance belying the absence beneath, but a metaphor that stresses the presence of something *inside*. Like the story's other TV personality, Bob Eubanks, who is "inside of the set, and I'm on the outside" (30-31), so Wallace's characters are inside their bodies, their expressions projected out onto their faces.

This metaphor is not isolated to one collection, but appears throughout Wallace's later work. In his AVN awards essay, for instance, Wallace describes the way pornographic actors "preserv[e] some sense of dignity and autonomy" by "lock[ing]" their "self . . . someplace far behind the eyes" (17n. 14). When that "hidden self appears," it is the opposite of acting: "moans" change "from automatic to *expressive*" (17n. 14, my emphasis), and the interior self is expressed outward. In "Mister Squishy," the facilitator of a taste-testing focus group has a "vision of [the participants] in the conference room as like icebergs and/or floes, only the sharp caps showing," the rest of them buried deep beneath the surface (31), again stressing that there is much more going on beneath the surface, inside the person, than an outsider can see. In *The Pale King*, Cusk feels there is a "literal spotlight" on him in his anxiety-nightmares, emphasising his discomfort with the idea that "his secret inner self" was "leak[ing] out" and becoming visible to others (101). For Wallace, there is always an infinitely complex "inner self" that can only be glimpsed by an outsider (under a wave; as a genuine moan; as the tip of iceberg; or through a leak). Dennett argues that the idea that we have a

"'unity of consciousness'," a Cartesian observer inside the head, "impresses on us the distinction between 'in here' and 'out there'" (108). This "naïve boundary"—as Dennett puts it (108)—is a consistent metaphor that governs the whole of Wallace's first story collection and the philosophy of *Infinite Jest*'s AA. Wallace does not advocate anti-interiority, but rather the importance of the "'In Here' that protects against a return to 'Out There'" (374).

Paul Giles is the only critic who acknowledges that though the world Wallace writes about might be undeniably posthuman, Wallace views this world as hostile. In his 2007 article, "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace," Giles concurs with Hayles that Wallace's writing "developed under the intellectual sign of posthumanism" (329), and that Wallace shares the posthumanists' "intellectual scepticism about the efficacy of the liberal imagination and humanist centers of gravity" (329). Giles also allows, however, that despite his clear engagement with the posthuman condition there is "nostalgia" in Wallace's work "for more traditional forms of identity" (335). Wallace is a posthumanist of course, but a "sentimental" one, "for whom the legacies of human spirit still carry a cathectic charge" despite their being outdated (341).[56] Charles B. Harris makes a similar point when he suggests that Wallace's "formidable task" was

> to develop a literary form that accepts human reality as defined by poststructuralist thought while moving away from the strain of antihumanism in such thought. That recuperates the priorities and beliefs of humanism without retreating to prestructuralist notions of essentialism and universalism. (116)

Giles's and Harris's gestures in this direction are still couched in Hayles's early framework. Though they recognise that Wallace's work is nostalgic for "more traditional forms of identity," Giles still sees no room in "Wallace's texts [for] unfractured consciousness" ("Sentimental" 341), and Harris no room for "notions of essentialism" (116). Where

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[56] Kaiser rejects this view, arguing that "Wallace's worlds do not secretly harken back to normative humanist models" (67). Conley Wouters, on the other hand, takes up a similar line to Giles. Wouters argues that *The Pale King* complexly portrays posthumanism as a threat to old-fashioned subjectivity, but a threat which cannot be avoided or denied. For Wouters, like Giles, Wallace "attempts to tell very human stories in a form we might assume to be hostile to such stories" (460).

Cartesianism exists in Wallace studies—the traditional humanist view that 'Man' has an essential, thinking soul that makes it human—it is as something that Wallace is continually rejecting. Yet none of these critics, who take as their foundation the view that Descartes was wrong about the nature of the human mind, account for the recurring idea in Wallace's work that his characters have a core essential self that is the origin of what they are able to express, nor, indeed, for the many ghosts that literally walk and talk through Wallace's stories.[57]

It is remarkable that there has not been a single significant mention of souls or ghosts in any of these articles, despite these symbols of the *essential*, Cartesian self being an absolutely central thread through all of Wallace's writing, especially *Infinite Jest* (which is the focus of most critics). Freudenthal mentions the "soul" once in a brief discussion of the character Ortho Stice when she argues that he does not have one: Stice apparently embodies the novel's "anti-interior agenda" because there is "no soul or mind separate from and superior to his cog-and-gear-filled head" (204). Both Freudenthal and Conley Wouters briefly mention that ghosts appear in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, though Freudenthal reads the ghost as an affirmation of materiality ("If [James's ghost] is moving them, he trusts these objects to speak for themselves and for him . . . materiality insists on itself" [204]), and

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[57] Nicoline Timmer is one of the few critics to acknowledge that the "self, experiencing real feelings, is not absent at all" in Wallace's work, as it was in the postmodern fiction that preceded it (44). While I share Timmer's view that post-postmodern fiction can be characterised by its "incentive to move beyond" the "postmodern perspective on subjectivity" (13), I disagree with her conclusion that Wallace's fiction "does not signal a return to some form of 'universal' humanism" (117) and that the "self in these texts feels empty inside" (331). Samuel Cohen's description of Hal as "a soul trapped inside a body" (67) seems closer to how Wallace actually wrote him, but Cohen does not linger on these dualistic terms, nor on what they might mean for Wallace's take on character or humanism. Casey Michael Henry and Emily J. Hogg both note that *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, respectively, contain "a new sort of three-dimensional postmodern figure" who suffers "piercing bouts of interiority" (Henry 485-96), and "inner worlds [that] are expressed through, but also darkly undermine, political commitment and public service" (Hogg 69), but they do not explain this interiority in the context of Wallace's other works or in terms of humanism and characterisation. Edmund Waldstein argues that Wallace "makes faltering steps toward recovering" human characters that have some "soul-body unity" (209), but does not explain what this means or how Wallace goes about it. Traditional humanist models of the self are literally at the core of Wallace's characters, and while there are some small gestures in this direction, they have to be more rigorously accounted for when we discuss the self in Wallace's work.

Wouters as representing the IRS's dehumanising (posthuman) effects. Giles at least refers to Wallace's nostalgia for "the legacies of human spirit" ("Sentimental" 341), though the term "spirit" is not defined. I will show that Wallace's work is far more Cartesian than his critics allow.

"People are often surprised," said Wallace, that he's a "fairly traditional, conservative kind of writer. I tend to think of fiction as being mainly about characters and human beings and *inner experience*" ("Interview by Karmodi," my emphasis).[58] Perhaps this surprise arises because, as Lisa Ruddick has argued, in the academy today

> those who think little of interiority can reject this concept outright, with decades of theoretical opinion behind them. They can say, for example, without spending time defending their views, that 'the truth of inner life' is a construct of 'enlightenment thinking about selfhood' and an extension of 'humanist' and 'Christian' ideology. ("When Nothing is Cool")

It is undeniable that disembodiment, essentialism, and the human soul are key ideas that run throughout Wallace's writing. The word "soul" appears no less than forty times in *Infinite Jest*, and "spirit" or "spiritually" no less than sixty (the word "brain" is used around one hundred times). This is not to mention the two ghosts who appear in the novel: Lucien, briefly, and one of the main characters, James Incandenza, for a considerable length of time. There is another ghost in Wallace's later story "Incarnations of Burned Children" that leaves its body to escape terrible pain. The word "incarnations" from the title literally means a "body, person, or form in which a soul, spirit, or deity is incarnated" (OED), yet those who have discussed this story—

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[58] Increasingly, critics have noted that Wallace held rather more conservative views than had been previously assumed. Maria Bustillos, for instance, suggests that the lack of attention paid to the religious qualities of Wallace's writing is a problem with "the ingrained secularist character of modern literary analysis" that has "skewed readings of Wallace; there's almost a deliberate refusal to see what is right before us" (134). Recently, Michael J. O'Connell and Martin Brick have begun to situate Wallace's work in a Christian context, though both articles are limited by their authors' attempts to prove that Wallace himself was a particular kind of Christian. Neither critic engages with the theoretical category of humanism or posthumanism. While James Santel argues that Wallace was quite conservative, he argues that Wallace's conservativism is "trag[ic]" (632) because Wallace's desire to "plac[e] his faith . . . in other human beings" (627) was always "severely curbed by his bedrock belief that true empathy is impossible" (626).

Paul Giles ("All Swallowed Up" 16), Iannis Goerlandt ("Still Steaming"), and Jaroslav Kušnír—make no mention at all of Wallace's description of the child's "self's soul" like "so much vapor aloft," "leav[ing] himself [to] watch the whole rest unfold from a point overhead . . . the child's body . . . liv[ing] its life untenanted" (*Oblivion* 116). That *Infinite Jest*'s Gately is also said to "fal[l] back and up inside himself, like vapor up a chimney" (895) suggests that this image was significant for Wallace and worth exploring. Finally, there are two ghosts in Wallace's final novel, *The Pale King*, who haunt the IRS office.

Though *Infinite Jest* definitely marks a shift (there are no ghosts in *Broom* or *Girl*), in 1992, one year after the publication of the very posthuman "Order and Flux," Wallace published a short story in *Harper's* titled "Rabbit Resurrected," which features another ghost. In this imagined sequel to John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), Wallace describes the eponymous character rising out of his body at death—"He is not his body" (39)—to arrive at a kind of heaven, "a solipsist's haven" [41], filled with the "pale wisps of images," the "ghosts" of those he had brought to life by "minutely describ[ing]" them while he was alive (41). Ghosts are clearly a rich image for Wallace, given their number and various forms across his career. In his review of John Updike's *Toward the End of Time* (1997), Wallace famously named Updike one of the "Great Male Narcissists who've dominated postwar American fiction" (*Consider* 51), and it is notable—and perhaps unsurprising to readers of Wallace's work—that all of Wallace's ghosts, including the ghost of Rabbit/Updike, are men.[59] A generous interpretation of this fact is that Wallace was engaging directly with the traditional concept of 'Man' as it appears throughout Western philosophy, and his ghosts are a way to think about not gender or masculinity necessarily but humanity's "Cartesian nightmare" (*Both Flesh* 93). Though there are far fewer female characters in Wallace's work than male, we will see in chapter 3 that they clearly suffer the same nightmare, become addicted to the same substances, and have the same kind of interiority as Wallace's men. For now we will focus on the ghosts as a direct engagement with Cartesian models of mind.

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[59] Lenore Sr. is central to *Broom*'s plot but never actually appears, and is in this sense ghostlike (a "presence-in-absence," as Wallace put it in his film treatment of the novel [qtd. in Thompson 114]). It would be disingenuous to suggest, however, that the ghosts who appear in Wallace's fiction are not uniformly men.

The only critic to draw attention to the continuum in Wallace's fiction between embodiment at the one end and the ghost (a symbol of "pure mind") at the other is Stephen J. Burn ("Webs" 73). In this chapter I will expand Burn's discussion of *Infinite Jest* across Wallace's fiction. I will also argue that what Burn sees as a symptom of "schizophrenia" (73)—the way in which the novel's characters feel that their minds are separate from their bodies—is not necessarily a symptom of mental illness in Wallace's worlds but true of all human life as he portrays it.[60] Ultimately, I will begin to uncover in this chapter what Wallace really means when he says that "Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (*Conversations* 26). What does Wallace mean by "human being"? What does he mean when he refers, as he so often does, to the self and the soul? We will see that though Wallace is in many ways a posthumanist who draws upon the embodied model of mind, Descartes's outdated model is the foundation upon which all of Wallace's characters are built.

"I am soul"

The embodied model of mind that Wallace draws upon across his fiction emerges out of an argument with what Antonio Damasio calls, in his book's title, *Descartes' Error*. Descartes's error is to assume that the mind is separate to the body, that it is an immaterial, reasonable, autonomous entity inhabiting a material form.[61] Descartes's model rests upon the foundational fact of *cogito ergo sum*: that though the body may be an illusion, a trick played upon the soul, the soul cannot be an illusion: Descartes knows at least that "I am, therefore, precisely only a thinking thing, that is, a mind, soul, intellect or reason" (*Meditations* 25). According to Russell Shorto, it was Descartes who, with the publication of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* in 1641, "reorientat[ed] . . . knowledge so that it was no longer based on collective authority . . . but on a newly empowered *self*—the individual mind and its 'good

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[60] Burn draws on R. D. Laing's description of schizophrenia in *The Divided Self* (1960), a book that Wallace had read in considerable detail, which describes how a patient "experiences himself . . . as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body" (qtd. in Burn, "Webs" 73).

[61] Wallace himself used the phrase "Descartes' error" in a chatroom conversation with *Word*, to describe the problem with one of the room's participants "deducing Agent from Event." Descartes's error is assuming the existence of an Agent.

sense'" (xviii). Because the soul is not made of matter, it distinguishes human beings from "the beast[s]" with which they share their clockwork bodies.

We do not have to be interested in Wallace's portrayal of ghosts and souls to recognise that Descartes is a hugely formative figure for Wallace, and it is remarkable that the relationship between the two writers has received so little attention. Other than in Stephen J. Burn's work (*Reader's Guide* 72-74), Wallace's relationship with Descartes's writings is absent from Wallace studies, except in the implicit assumption that Descartes's model was wrong.[62] Yet Descartes is named in Wallace's very first published story, "The Planet Trillaphon As it Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing," as a source for the narrator who is trying to describe his experience of depression and of the world falling out from beneath his feet: "Imagine how you'd feel at that exact moment, like Descartes at the start of his second thing" (10). Descartes's description of being "tossed about, as if I had fallen suddenly into a deep whirlpool, that I can neither put my foot on the bottom nor swim to the surface" (*Meditations* 23) is not a philosophical abstraction for Wallace, but something he seemed to feel at a very personal level.[63]

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[62] In his unpublished thesis, Jonathan Baskin is one of the few critics to discuss Wallace's significant relationship with Descartes's work. Baskin's focus is not on the mind-body problem, however, but on the failure of Descartes's way of thinking, and he argues that Wallace makes a "case against dualism" as an "ineffective framework for addressing the kinds of problems by which his characters tend to be afflicted" (35). Baskin does not account for the Cartesian ghosts in Wallace's fiction, nor the Cartesian metaphors that, as we shall see, govern all of Wallace's characters independently of how they conceive of themselves.

[63] Wallace expresses this sentiment in his most undisguisedly philosophical piece, "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*," where he describes himself as one of "the impotent unlucky sort whose beliefs inform his stomach's daily state" (*Both Flesh* 79). Wallace tackles Descartes head on in this review, and it fits what we have seen so far across Wallace's fiction. Though Wallace is aware of the debates around the logical problems with Descartes's *Cogito*—"the truth of 'I think' entails only the existence of thinking," not existence itself (84)—Wallace shares with Descartes a deeply felt doubt about what we can know is true "outside the sixteen-inch diameter of bone that both births & imprisons" us and our thoughts (82). In a roundabout way, and perhaps with a little more doubt, Wallace comes to a version of Descartes's conclusion: "'I EXIST' is the signal that throbs under most voluntary writing" (83). Whether the "Empty Plenum" in Wallace's title refers to the emptiness of the world outside the self, or the hollowness of the skull, is unclear, but given the essay's content the former interpretation seems more appropriate.

Descartes is also an important source for Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, in which the central plot device is a baby food that can "significantly speed up development of powers of speech and comprehension" (149). This baby food is made with "pineal gland" extract, which is the name of the place, "suspended" in "the innermost part of the brain," where Descartes located the connection between body and soul (*Passions* 230). According to George Makari, even by the 1670s, theories about the pineal gland as the house of the soul "provoked only ridicule and disgust" (96), yet it plays a significant role here. The pineal gland, Wallace writes, is where "Descartes thought [. . .] mind met body, [. . .] where the body's hydraulics were adjusted and operated according to the . . . ?" (148). The conspicuous ellipsis in this sentence, when Stonecipher has to name the *essence* that operates the "body's hydraulics," suggests that he feels uncomfortable introducing metaphysics into his monologue about more grounded topics such as "revenue-loss" and the "market year" (152).[64] The reader has to fill in the word for themselves, in spite of Stonecipher. Interestingly, this reader-input has to take place over the course of the chapter as a whole, because Stonecipher is talking at Lenore and we have to infer *her* presence too because he never gives her room to speak: "Meaning as use. Excuse me? You're asking me why? Lenore, please. What do you talk about all the time, then, 'why'?" (150).

The explicit Descartes reference in *Infinite Jest* is similarly put into the mouth of another dominant male figure who spends his scene monologuing and leaving no room for the person to whom he is talking. Harking back to Stonecipher, Wallace uses the same narrative method in the chapter with James Incandenza and his father in *Infinite Jest*, where the father monologues to his son about the importance of being a body, a "machine" (158-59), and of being the "helmsman at your own vessel's tiller. A machine in the ghost, to quote a phrase" (160). James Sr's phrase alludes to Gilbert Ryle's argument that the Cartesian model of mind, which Ryle derides as "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine," is "entirely false . . . in principle" (17). Both of these father-figures, then, are anti-Cartesians and thoroughly posthuman: the first is only interested in the pineal gland as a means to interfere in the "mental development" of children (149), the second is a makeshift sports scientist who wants

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[64] The same ellipsis happens in "Trillaphon," suggesting that Wallace was more uncomfortable with the word 'soul' in his early career. For a more detailed discussion of this and the "Trillaphon" story, see chapter 3.

to mould his son into the shape of a tennis player. As Burn puts it, James Sr.'s method "leaves little space for traditional conceptions of selfhood" (*Reader's Guide* 49).

It is significant that these allusions to Descartes are put into the mouths of characters who have no interest in the interior lives of the people to whom they are talking. The interior lives of their addressees are absent as far as they are concerned—their interiority has to be inferred by the reader—just as Descartes's interior self is absent from their philosophy. Since the two addressees are major characters in the two novels, and the reader presumably does care about their interior lives, the speakers' anti-Cartesianism is, I suggest, designed to frustrate the reader.

Perhaps Wallace repeats the narrative technique (one senior figure talking over the younger protagonist) across two novels to suggest that he is the inheritor of an anti-Cartesian legacy. We have seen that Wallace "developed under the intellectual sign of posthumanism" (Giles, "Sentimental" 329), and with regard to Wallace's literary inheritance, Burn has argued that

> Outside his own body of work, [Don] DeLillo's pioneering incorporation of emerging neuroscientific research may have influenced younger writers. David Foster Wallace, for example, seems to have patterned his massive encyclopaedic novel, *Infinite Jest*, on *Great Jones Street*. ("Don DeLillo's" 362).

Yet where DeLillo refers to the dominance of the brain ("Four ounces on the meat scale. That's all I'm told I weigh" [*Great Jones* 231]) and souls as a dead waste product, akin to pollution in the air ("They get emitted from jet aircraft along with the well-known noxious chemicals" [53]), Wallace seems to challenge this with a more overt concern with soulful interiority. The two father-figures in Wallace's novels scoff at the soul and signal the dominance of scientific and theoretical models which run roughshod over old-fashioned Cartesianism, but throughout the rest of the novel Wallace challenges this paradigm.

For a clear example of how Wallace's larger project runs counter to these two scenes, we can look at Wallace's allusions to two of the more significant nails in the coffin of the Cartesian model: the case of Phineas P. Gage, and the philosopher Gilbert Ryle who coined the phrase 'the ghost in the machine' in *The Concept of Mind* (1949). Gage was a nineteenth-century railroad worker whose brain was impaled by a yard-long spike, and whose story is

now a common example in books popularising cognitive science. As Steven Pinker explains, Gage survived with his "perception, memory, language, and motor functions intact," but

> 'Gage was no longer Gage.' A piece of iron had literally turned him into a different person, from courteous, responsible, and ambitious to rude, unreliable, and shiftless. It did this by impaling his ventromedial prefrontal cortex, the region of the brain above the eyes now known to be involved in reasoning about other people. (*The Blank Slate* 42)

Damasio also opens his study with this story, and explains that "it was difficult to accept the view that something as close to the human soul as ethical judgement, or as culture-bound as social conduct, might depend significantly on a specific region of the brain" (*Descartes' Error* 21). To try to cling on to the Cartesian model in the face of this evidence, however, is to arrive at the absurd notion that "Gage's body may [have been] alive and well, but there [was] a new spirit animating it" (7). Wallace was aware of Gage and this problem. Burn notes that *Infinite Jest* contains a reference to the story ("Webs" 77) when one of the Antitoi brothers is killed by the wheelchair assassins who shove a "railroad spike [through] his eye" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 485). Wallace also wrote an entire story that seems to be based on Gage: "John Billy," collected in *Girl with Curious Hair*. In this story, Chuck Nunn Junior, a "handsome and semi-divine" figure living in "Minogue Oklahoma" (*Girl* 121), is injured in a car crash so badly his head is described as being "minus a jaw, consciousness, and two healthy eyes" (129). Like Gage, who was "pronounced cured in less than two months" (Damasio, *Descartes' Error* 7), Chuck heals in "just weeks, . . . a sharper shot, . . . and nearer to handsome than before," but only afterwards is it discovered that the injury to his "consciousness" (129) was long-lasting: the "major impact and damage from the accident had turned out to be to Nunn's head, mind, and sensibility" (130). Though Chuck's external "handsome[ness]" is intact, "something interior" had gone "askew" (131). Like Gage, Chuck is now prone to fits of what the narrator can only call "evil" (130): he develops a "scary" temper, a "state of nameless and potential eternal rage and evil ever time he but stub his toe or some such shit" (132). Given the story's mythic register, the fact that Chuck's eyes were knocked out of his head during the accident and now "rattl[e] in the sockets, insecure" (134), seems to symbolically stand in for the unsettling of his soul. The eyes are no longer the window onto the person the other characters once knew.

Wallace's allusions to Gage demonstrate his knowledge of the posthuman understanding of life (the narrator of "John Billy" declares that this story ends with "meadowphysics": a metaphysics rooted in material, the "dirt . . . and soil" [143] and the body), yet Wallace also dismantles that view in the same scenes. "John Billy" ends bizarrely with all the characters "levitat[ing]," looking down onto "the tops of trees of meat" (145) and having visions of the "webs and dust and creak" (144) of the land and the spiritual cycle of the people who live on it. The story lives up to the initial promise of Chuck Nunn Junior being "more God than not" (123); though there is a central tension between embodiment and the soul, the last moments suggest he is more soul than body. Similarly, the Gage allusion in *Infinite Jest*—the death of Bertraund which proves the gruesome finality of brain injury—also precedes a moment of out-and-out essentialism, in this case the unambiguous soul-flight of Bertraund's brother Lucien. With a broom handle stabbed down his throat and through his body, Lucien, after a while, "finally dies" and

> sheds his body's suit, . . . find[ing] his gut and throat again and newly whole, clean and unimpeded, and is free, catapulted home . . . at desperate speeds, soaring north, sounding a bell-clear and nearly maternal alarmed call-to-arms in all the world's well-known tongues. (488-89)

Just as Wallace puts Descartes into the mouths of those who have little patience with his theories, so allusions to Gage are set up by Wallace only to be countered by moments of clear-cut essentialism. This moment has more in common with Plato's definition of the soul as that which "is a long-lived thing, whereas body is relatively feeble and short-lived" (*Last Days* 159), or Donne's description of the "soul . . . tak[ing] flight, / And earth-born body, in the earth shall dwell" (71), than it does with any neuroscientific or posthuman account of human nature. Wallace takes what Dennett calls the "fundamentally antiscientific stance of dualism" (37) and describes Lucien's soul as free at last. Clare Hayes-Brady suggests that the unbounded self in Wallace's work is just as scary as the solipsistic self (*Unspeakable* 111-12), yet Lucien's soul-flight is perhaps the freest moment in the whole novel.[65] Lucien is killed, in part, because

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[65] Peter Sloane notes, incorrectly, that the "key feature of all of Wallace's ghosts . . . is that they are the result of death by suicide" (213), and reads the ghosts as presenting a "nightmarish scenario" wherein characters

he cannot understand his assailants' French. He lacks his brothers "brains" (480) and is "mute" (481), failing to find "Words that are not and can never be words" (487) to save himself. When he dies, Lucien's soul is released from the limitations of his own brain: he casts off his fleshy suit, and finds he has access to "all the world's well-known tongues" (489) as he flies home.

This is not to say that Wallace's moments of posthumanism are red herrings and that moments of essentialism mark the true Wallace, only that a rigid posthuman view fails to account for half of what is going on in his fiction. We see this problem again with Wallace's allusions to Ryle, and Ryle's argument that Descartes made a "category-mistake" (17). For Ryle, Descartes incorrectly states that "Minds are things, but different sorts of things from bodies; mental processes are causes and effects, but different sorts of causes and effects from bodily movements" (20). Ryle argues that the ghost in the machine has been an "escape-route" for philosophers from Descartes onwards who "could not accept . . . that human nature differs only in degree of complexity from clockwork. [That] [t]he mental could not be just a variety of the mechanical" (20). Burn, again, has noted that Wallace explicitly points to Ryle in *Infinite Jest* (*Reader's Guide* 71-75): he is the source of Hal's grandfather's understanding of the self ("a machine in the ghost" [160]), and he also gives the name to "Ryle's Inman Square Club of Jazz" (775), where Marathe and Kate discuss being "chained in a cage of the self" (777). Again, however, this Ryle allusion is set up in tension with the Cartesian containment that seems to be encoded in the scene. Marathe (read 'Ma-' or 'My-Wraith') is "Inman" while he and Kate talk of cages: his wraith is contained *inman*, or inside the form of a man. "Inman Square" is also, significantly, the next place we visit right after James Sr.'s materialist monologue (169), which suggests that there might be something *inside* 'Man''s material body after all. Indeed, the tennis academy that James Sr.'s son establishes seems to fly in the face of James Sr.'s philosophy that "head is still just body" (159). The students are told they have to "*occur*, playing," to live inside the "Different world *in*side" (459), to "Be *here* in total. . . . You are not arms. . . . Not engine" (461), but an occurring, present self *inside* the "second world inside" the "head" (459; 461). We might even suggest that James Sr.'s inaccurate version of the phrase—machine in the ghost, not ghost in the machine—is itself a

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cannot choose the moment of their death. Sloane does not explain how these dualist moments fit with his larger argument about embodiment.

joke at the expense of James Sr., and a nod to Descartes. That the machine is inside the ghost suggests that the body (the machine) only exists for certain inside the mind (the ghost) that can think about it.

The fact that Ma-wraith is an amputee and feels, on rare occasions, "phantom pains" (530) also gestures to the mind-body debate. The phenomenon of phantom limbs lead Descartes to conclude that, because the mind stays "whole" when the body is severed, "the mind is completely different from the body" (*Meditations* 67-68). Recently, phantom limbs have become a staple example in contemporary neuroscientific studies to demonstrate that, on the contrary, the mind's map of the body is not "limitlessly plastic" and culturally malleable: rather, the stubbornly material brain has built into it a map of the whole body to which it is so fundamentally connected, a map which culture and upbringing (i.e. amputation) cannot alter (Pinker, *The Blank Slate* 98). Amputees often feature in Wallace's work. Lenore's brother has an artificial leg (*Broom* 219), and one of Wallace's early unpublished stories was titled "Quoth the Amputee," and featured "an amputee from the right shoulder down" (HRC 38.7). Other than Lenore's brother, Marathe and the wheelchair assassins are the most fleshed out amputee characters. Described as "one of the rare types who did not examine the hankie after he blew" (426), Marathe, like the other assassins, is seemingly uninterested in his own body. The assassins literally have their bodies cut in half, in contrast to the poorly disguised American Steeply who is doubled in size by his enormous fake breasts. Where the Americans are solipsistic and obsessed with their pursuit of self-pleasure, the assassins are all about self-transcendence and self-sacrifice in service of some larger political goal. The fact that Marathe is said to have a "part" of him that "floated off and hovered somewhere just above him, crossing its legs, nibbling at his consciousness as does a spectator at corn" (418), suggests that Marathe is perhaps more Cartesian wraith than embodied mind. The Cartesian language here works to emphasise their political positions: either they privilege bodily pleasure or the ethereal will. Where Wallace turns the Gage story into one of mythical proportions, he layers his allusions to Ryle with Cartesian double-meanings and metaphor. Even "Order and Flux," Wallace's most obviously posthuman story, is governed by a Cartesian metaphor. The character Dingle is literally driven around by the "homunculoid" love which sits inside him. Though Dingle is ruled in this case by his unconscious passion and not by his

own will, Wallace is still flirting with the idea that we have some internal, Cartesian driver: especially if we read the humunculoid love as the real protagonist of the story.

The most significant advocate for Cartesianism in *Infinite Jest* is James Incandenza himself, who—despite his father's materialist, Rylean philosophy—appears late in the novel as a "ghostly figure . . . a plain old wraith" (829). The wraith is not a material entity. Like Lucien, he has been released from its body and, consequently, the restrictive laws of the physical universe. The wraith can "whiz around at the invisible speed of quanta" (831), faster than Gately's still-bodied mind can process, so its movements look "segmented" to him (829). This quantum speed would become the subject of Wallace's later story, "Good Old Neon" (2001), in which Wallace describes the moment of death:

> many of the most important impressions and thoughts in a person's life are ones that flash through your head so fast that *fast* isn't even the right word, they seem totally different from or outside of the regular sequential clock time we all live by, and they have so little relation to the sort of linear, one-word-after-another-word English we all communicate with each other with that it could easily take a whole lifetime just to spell out the contents of one split-second's flash of thoughts and connections, etc.
>
> . . .
>
> The internal head-speed or whatever of these ideas, memories, realizations, emotions and so on is even faster, by the way—exponentially faster, unimaginably faster—when you're dying, meaning during that vanishingly tiny nanosecond between when you technically die and when the next thing happens. (*Oblivion* 150-51)

The thinking thing thinks so quickly that it seems to be "totally different from or outside of" time as we experience it when we are inside bodies in the physical world. Mind is faster than the limitations of matter, and what goes on inside the head is so much faster than what goes on outside it. James himself is what Burn calls "pure mind" ("Webs" 73): he is the speed of

thought, freed from the shackles of the body, and a literal manifestation of Descartes's model of mind.[66]

For Wallace's posthuman critics, *Infinite Jest* is full of hollow skulls. Fabienne Collignon argues, for instance, that the MIT building in *Infinite Jest*—that "cerebral cortex of reinforced concrete" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 184)—is "lobotomized," a symbol of "subjectivity as vacuity, essentially aligning the interiority" of the characters with "'empty space'" (Collignon 105). While James is proof that this is not true for the novel as a whole, the pattern of ghostly consciousnesses haunting their physical forms is not limited to the novel's two ghost figures. We have seen, for instance, how this applies to AA's philosophy of the 'In Here,' and it is significant that the second paragraph of the whole novel is: "I am in here" (3). The MIT building itself, a symbol for Collignon of the novel's hollow self, is described as "ghostly-clean" (182), suggesting that the inanimate form of the building is haunted, not hollow at all but

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[66] James has not been discussed by any posthuman critic except Freudenthal, who sees him as proof that "materiality insists on itself" (204). This is a remarkable omission from Wallace studies. Where he has been discussed he has been interpreted solely as a stand-in for the author of the novel. Marshall Boswell and Christopher Bartlett argue that James is a "spokesman for Wallace himself" (Boswell, *Understanding* 170; Bartlett 376). Staes suggests that though it would be "unwise to conflate Incandenza with the real author of *Infinite Jest* . . . these pages do function as a self-conscious reminder that the words in the novel are ultimately the writer's own" ("Work in Process" 81). Brian McHale and Lucas Thompson suggest that Wallace's ghosts are symbols of his literary influences ("*Pale King*" 207; 114). Jorge Araya reads Wallace's ghosts as a reflection of the author's whiteness and *The Pale King*'s "racial monotony" (247). Vincent Haddad reads the ghosts as a "conceptual metaphor for how Wallace conceives of each novel as a relational mode between the author figure and his readership" (2), a relationship that Haddad argues is especially "intimate . . . bodily, and even potentially erotic, (male) author/(male) reader relationship" (4). David Hering also argues that Wallace's ghosts "foregroun[d] the 'writer's consciousness'" (15). Hering fits Wallace's ghosts into his larger argument about Wallace's struggle between monologism and dialogism. He argues that the monologic tendencies of Wallace's earlier work—in which Wallace is an "absent possessor" of other literary styles (32)—are replaced by "companion ghost[s]" (32) such as Neal in "Good Old Neon," signalling Wallace's turn to dialogism. In her book on *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction* (2012), Alice Bennett focuses only on the "evidence for the wraith . . . as the dead narrator of Wallace's novel" (139). Despite Nicoline Timmer's focus on subjectivity and interiority in Wallace's work, she too suggests that James's ghost "does not seem to fit in this novel" except as "a manifestation of the *narrator voice*" (169; 170). None of these critics discuss Wallace's ghosts as characters, nor what these ghosts might tell us about Wallace's understanding of human beings other than himself.

inhabited by James's muse, Joelle, who sits there to do her radio show. Collignon does not mention Joelle's presence—she is, after all, "hidden from all view" (*Infinite Jest* 183)—but she is *there*, visible as a "silhouette" (183) and a "shadow" (185) with a "halo" of light above her head (187). Though the skull might look empty, it is inhabited by a shadowy consciousness that has the qualities of something divine, whose "monologues seem both free-associative and intricately structured, not unlike nightmares" (185) and not unlike consciousness itself.[67]

Infinite Jest was a turning point in Wallace's career for a number of reasons. According to Steven Moore, the novel was written at a time when Wallace, "the son of atheists, got religion" ("First Draft"). *Jest* also seems to mark the moment when Wallace began to radically break away from the theory that he had read and engaged with in his earlier writing. Wallace described his first novel, *Broom*, as being "essentially a dialogue between Hegel and Wittgenstein on one hand and Heidegger and a contemporary French thinker-duo named Paul DeMan [*sic*] and Jacques Derrida on the other" (qtd. in Max, *Every Love Story* 69). In the same year that *Broom* was published, Wallace defended theory in a letter he wrote to the *New York Times*. In response to Jacques Barzun's essay "A Little Matter of Sense," Wallace defends literary criticism and theory from the charge that they are "trying to erect walls of impenetrability around the very stuff they're trying to penetrate" ("Matters of Sense and Opacity"). Though Wallace allows that some criticism and theory puts "demands on readers' patience and dictionaries . . . out of all proportion to reward," he concludes that "There's babies in that bathwater, dude." This defence continued one year later in Wallace's essay, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (1988), in which he argued that "the contemporary artist can simply no longer afford to regard the work of critics or theorists or philosophers—no matter how stratospheric—as divorced from his own concerns" (50). D. T. Max notes Wallace's reverence as a student for theorists such as Derrida (*Every Love Story* 38), and Wallace's view during his MFA that "theory was what separated the serious novelist from the others" (74). Max also charts Wallace's turn from theory later in life, however: his development into the kind of teacher he had previously "found so irksome" (188), one who

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[67] Madame Psychosis does disappear later, but this unsettles her listeners, who much preferred the "Silence of [her] presence" to the "silence of absence" (625). The point being that she was emphatically "presen[t]" *in* there, a conscious voice inside the head. When Joelle leaves the building, she does not leave the novel altogether: in fact we see even more of her.

is not interested in intellectual, theory-heavy stories by "budding literary theorists" (270) but in stories that "connect reader and writer" emotionally (188). Thompson quotes a note Wallace made when writing his Dostoevsky review (published in 1996) about the way theorists eviscerate art: "One shudders to think what a Terry Eagleton or Gayatri Spivak would make a Dost[oevsky] text into—probably they wouldn't talk about the text at all" (qtd. in Thompson 33). If we approach Wallace's work expecting it to support our own theoretical assumptions then we are set up to miss whatever that theory cannot account for.

Just after the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace worked on what would eventually become his final, never completed, novel, *The Pale King*. What Wallace wrote at this time is even more explicitly built upon the same Cartesian foundation as *Infinite Jest*, and continues to challenge posthuman assumptions. One of the novel's original titles was *Sir John Feelgood or, The Genesis of a Great Lover*, and it was originally about a porn star who is "unnaturally pale" and "unusually easy to erase from shot," which allowed the viewer to experience what is happening on screen in the place of the invisible actor (HRC 37.4). There are fragments of this early version in documents dated between 1997 and 1999 in Wallace's archive. One of these fragments is a short three-paragraph introduction to a story with the above title, narrated by "FNE'S SOUL/'GHOST'," and reads as follows:

> If you are angry and yet are somehow able objectively to be aware of the fact that you are angry, have you stopped to ask what part this is? . . .
>
> Your mind and capacity for thought are the enemy of your ghost. Your ghost is essentially you. . . . You are not your possessions, or your body, or the parts of your body, nor your neural net, nor your brain. Nor your mind. . . . I don't want to go on and on about this. I am soul. The mind is the Enemy. . . . It is your identification with your think/feel/mind that keeps you from knowing soul." (HRC 40.6).

What does Wallace mean by the "ghost" and the "soul" here? He describes it as being "*essentially* you" (my emphasis); that is, the *essence* of a person. It is nothing physical, not the "body" or "parts of the body" or the "neural net" or the "brain." Nor is it even the "mind," because most of the mind, as we know from chapter 1, is below the level of "aware[ness]." What the "soul/ghost" is, then, is that which can be "aware," that which is self-reflective.

Where Descartes thought of the soul as the whole "mind . . . intellect or reason" (*Meditations* 25) we now understand that most of our mind's activity is unconscious and fundamentally tied up with the material body, brain, and senses that Descartes thought so unreliable. Wallace's ghost is the "enemy" of the "mind," therefore, because the ghost is immaterial while the mind is not. The mind, as Wallace knew, is itself embodied, and therefore not part of the soul, the self, the conscious I that we think of as ourselves. By framing the conscious 'I' as a "SOUL/GHOST," Wallace elevates the very small part of the mind that is conscious out of the body altogether. Though this is a Cartesian metaphor that prioritises conscious experience, the metaphor is still rooted in the posthuman understanding of the body and the mind, because the "soul" here does not refer to the mind in its entirety but rather to the small part of the mind's activities that are conscious. Because we now understand that most of what the brain does is unconscious, the Cartesian soul is much smaller than it used to be. But, for Wallace, it is still *in* there.[68]

The metaphor that Wallace is setting up here is that of a ghost inside a machine. Though this is Ryle's phrase, used to discredit Descartes's model of mind, Wallace takes it at face value in his fiction. The pre-existing form, the machine, the unconscious body and brain, is haunted by a ghost that is separate to that body. Another fragment from this early version of the story reads: "He's a ghost haunting his own fucking body" (HRC 41.6). A third, which appears above the three-paragraph intro (HRC 40.6) and in the novel's "very rough outline" (HRC 37.4), and was published in both *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (209) and *The Pale King* (314), is "Every love story is a ghost story." Max, who uses this phrase as his biography's title, has tried to trace its "ghostly" origins, but does not reflect on its meaning in Wallace's

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[68] To be fair to Descartes, his position on the mind-body problem was much more complex than his critics allow. Descartes recognised, for example, that, the body operates "without any contribution from our will – as often happens when we breathe, walk, eat and, indeed, when we perform any action which is common to us and the beasts" (*Passions* 225), and that it often acts upon the soul: "the principal effect of all the human passions is that they move and dispose the soul to want the things for which they prepare the body" (233). Descartes's position is effectively a prototype of the modern model of the small consciousness inside a complex, bodied system. As Dennett explains, Descartes held the view that "Human bodies, and even human brains, were also just machines. . . . This was actually a subtle view, most of which would be readily defended by zoologists today" (43). Where Descartes differs from the zoologists is in his insistence that the soul is some different sort of thing to the matter it inhabits.

larger body of work.[69] I suggest that we might read this phrase as one which encapsulates the nature of human beings as Wallace wrote about them. Any love story in Wallace's work is literally a ghost story, because human beings are ghosts haunting their bodies: small, powerless, ethereal consciousnesses trapped inside unconscious machines.

Though this metaphor is most clearly articulated in the seeds of *The Pale King*, it encapsulates how Wallace wrote about human beings across all of his fiction. *Infinite Jest* is itself a ghost story, which significantly takes its title and central ghost character from *Hamlet* (c.1600). An under-discussed source for *Infinite Jest*, and all the more significant for being Western literature's most famous story about the mind-body problem, *Hamlet* is shaped by a central tension between materialism and essentialism.[70] Interestingly, Shakespeare uses the same language that Descartes would come to use to describe the body's "configuration of . . . wheels" (*Passions* 225). Hamlet writes in his letter to Ophelia, "Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine to him" (246), devoting his soul to Ophelia but his lesser, machine-body elsewhere. Significantly, Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor note that this phrase is "Shakespeare's only use of the word *machine* (and *OED*'s first use of the word in a metaphorical sense)" (246n. 121). The extended metaphor throughout *Infinite Jest* of the ghost in the machine seems to take some of its energy from Shakespeare's play. Hamlet's anxiety about his body—"this quintessence of dust" (257)—is shared by Hal, who feels like "an odd forked stalk of stuff and blood" (902) and contemplates the size of the rooms that could contain all the food he would consume in his life, and "the rising mass of the excrement I'd produce" (897). The centrality of consciousness in *Hamlet* is also absolutely present in Wallace's novel. The chapter in which Joelle is ready to commit suicide begins with what reads

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[69] Max notes that Wallace's crediting the phrase to Virginia Woolf is probably incorrect ("Tracing"), and suggests it may come from Christina Stead instead, author of *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940), "a favourite, as it happens, of Wallace's friend Jonathan Franzen." The trail meets a dead end, however, at just how Wallace would have found it in a letter Stead wrote in the 1970s.

[70] Where Burn discusses *Jest* and *Hamlet*, it is primarily around the association with the "skull that's been separated from a body" in both, and *Jest*'s "continuum of embodiment" ("Webs" 73). In the *Reader's Guide*, Burn argues that "Hal finds little support in Cartesian foundations," and suggests that Hal's "ontological doubt" "finds its boundaries in a reading of *Hamlet*," which concludes that "'the rest is silence'" (73-74). My reading of *Hamlet* as a source for *Jest* concerns mind more than matter.

like a version of Hamlet's famous soliloquy: "You can be at certain parties and not really be there" (219). Later in the novel, this phrasing is echoed when Gately fights to defend Joelle and the other members of Ennet House from three Canadians. When Gately is spurred to violence the "situation becomes even more automatic and Gately feels adrenaline's warmth spread through him as his subdural hardware clicks deeper into a worn familiar long-past track" (612). Like experiencing a drug-high, Gately becomes unconscious, machine-like, and, as Wallace writes in a carefully arranged sentence: he "is part of this whether he wants to be or not" (612). Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" (Shakespeare 284), his hesitant, conscious ideation, shuts down in Gately when he operates like a machine, just a body and nothing else. The model of selfhood, here and throughout the novel, is that of a "mind . . . in possession of your body" (464), of a ghostly Cartesian consciousness inhabiting its machine.[71]

"Forever Overhead"

Wallace's posthuman critics do not account for the significance of this metaphor in his fiction, and I suggest that Wallace's work can be more productively understood as part of a conservative tradition that sees posthumanism as a threat to some basic, essential humanity. As Neil Badmington explains, posthumanism in this sense is at home not in the academy, but in popular science fiction film and literature (8). Wallace showed a considerable interest in the genre. In his reviews of James Cameron's *Terminator 2* and of two maths novels, Wallace makes references across a century of science fiction, from Fritz Lang to Stanley Kubrick and Paul Verhoeven (*Both Flesh* 179-80), and from Isaac Asimov to Larry Niven, Robert A. Heinlein, and William Gibson (222-24; 211). In Wallace's reviews of J. G. Ballard's *War Fever* (1990) and David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988), Wallace classifies the former as "Psy-Fi" and the latter as "a kind of philosophical sci-fi" (*Both Flesh* 85), demonstrating that science fiction was clearly a point of reference for Wallace's thinking about art.[72] This interest is not just

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[71] For Marshall Boswell, this inner self is not a ghost but a "deformed, stillborn infant," a gooey emotional core that the characters "smothe[r]" with "hip irony" and "narcotics" (*Understanding* 158). My interpretation complements Boswell's, because I suggest the characters' ghosts cannot get in touch with their gooey, bodily emotions if they are narcotised or detached from them.

[72] For a more in-depth discussion of Ballard and what Wallace calls "Psy-Fi," see chapter 3.

limited to Wallace's reading, as science fiction elements appear in his writing as well, from the "vague genetic engineering enterprises" in *Broom* (47) and the alternate future America in *Infinite Jest*, to smaller examples such as Wallace's short story "DATUM CENTURIO," which is ostensibly made up of extracts from a dictionary published in 2096 (*Brief Interviews* 106). Simon de Bourcier is the only critic to situate Wallace's work in a science fiction context, though it is to argue that the characters in *The Pale King*, like Philip K. Dick's androids, are all machine, "ensembles of surface phenomena with 'nowhere' or 'nothing' inside" (56). We have seen that this reading does not fit with Wallace's actual treatment of his characters. The metaphor of the ghost in the machine has an important history in science fiction, and Wallace's use of it shares significant affinities with what has been called post-cyberpunk literature in particular.

In "Towards a Poetics of Cyberpunk," Brian McHale describes the symbiotic relationship between postmodern and cyberpunk fiction. Cyberpunk, he argues, "tends to 'literalize' or 'actualize' what in postmodernist fiction occurs as metaphor" (6). Cyberpunk's off-planet worlds and cultures literalize postmodern fiction's ontological concerns (7); its warzones and urban sprawls literalize postmodernism's fragmented, chaotic spaces (9), and its portrayal of cyberspace literalizes what postmodernists understood to be the simulated nature of reality (12).[73] Both postmodern and cyberpunk fiction treat the self as dissolute, malleable, and merged with information and machine to such an extent that it is no longer possible to tell where the 'human' begins or ends. McHale points, for example, to characters in Walter Jon Williams's *Hardwired* (1986) and Pat Cadigan's *Synners* (1991) who, in different ways, "abando[n] [their] ravaged bod[ies]" to become "diffused" and "spread" across information systems (16). Though cyberpunk fiction shares with postmodern fiction an anxiety about the fragile, divisible self, it still maintains a nostalgic Cartesian view that consciousness is all-important, that it can somehow transcend the "meat" (16) of the body to become pure information.

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[73] See McHale's "POSTcyberMODERNpunkISM" for a map of the complicated routes of influence between postmodern and late-twentieth-century science fiction, where he argues that science fiction motifs eventually come back to science fiction through a postmodern intermediary.

Richard Morgan's futuristic noir *Altered Carbon* (2002) is to the post-cyberpunks what William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) was to the cyberpunks, and it radically updates the cyberpunk model of mind. In his article "The Return of the Human in Richard K. Morgan's Takeshi Kovacs Trilogy," Pawel Frelik argues that Morgan updates cyberpunk's "vision of near-future (post)humanity," which was based upon the cybernetic notion of the "digitization of human consciousness" (173), by reinstating the central importance of the body. As Morgan writes, a "digitised mind is only a snapshot. You don't capture individual thoughts any more than a satellite image captures an individual life" (*Altered Carbon* 153). Central to Morgan's trilogy is the "cortical stack," a

> small chip implanted in the upper spine at birth, which contains an accreting sum of personality, memories, and experience. As a container of everything that is permanent about individual subjectivity and that can be carried between subsequent sleeves, the stack becomes the metaphor of the subject and effectively the subject itself. (Frelik 174)

Though this is a kind of Cartesianism that separates mind and body, Frelik argues that Morgan complicates the dualism "to the point where the body is reinstated as equally essential as the mind" (185). The characters are only really alive when they are placed inside a body or "sleeve" (Morgan, *Altered Carbon* 135), and they are slaves to these sleeves that can "carry over [the] physical habits or acquired traits of [their] previous owner[s]" (Frelik 186). In Morgan's universe people can be stored digitally, but they have no existence outside of embodied existence. Though they can be interacted with (i.e. tortured) in a virtual reality, they have to be given a virtual body there as well. Morgan is writing post-Hayles and updates, as she does, cybernetic posthumanism to acknowledge the importance of the body in the formation of identity and the self. Where Morgan differs from Hayles's position on embodiment is in his preservation of the 'I,' the singular, continuous consciousness of his characters that is maintained across sleeves. Morgan is posthumanist in the sense that he recognises that "Conscious thought doesn't have much to do with this stuff. Doesn't have much to do with the way we live our lives, full stop, if you believe the psychologists" (*Altered Carbon* 314), but he is humanist insofar as he elevates that small consciousness above all else. In Nørretranders's terms, the conscious 'I' in Morgan's work becomes synonymous with the soul (the stacks of soldiers are sold at the "Soul Market" [*Broken Angels* 98]), and with it

Morgan preserves some essential identity that exists separate to the material mind, brain, and body—the sleeve, the 'Me,' the form, or the machine—that it lives through.

This is, in other words, a science fiction version of the model we have seen at work in Wallace's fiction. Where Hayles's critical posthumanism celebrates the deconstruction of the liberal humanist self, this popular posthumanism decries it. As Badmington puts it, "whereas the intellectuals were celebrating the demise [of Man], popular culture was committed to a defence of humanism (the aliens were always defeated, frequently by a uniquely 'human' quality)" (8). Badmington is, like Hayles, an academic, and he takes the position that popular culture is merely taking "refuge in denial" from its "anxiety about the loss of human sovereignty," betraying its awareness that "[h]umanism" is in fact "in trouble" (8). We have seen that Wallace dramatizes 'Man''s lack of sovereignty and the diminished role of consciousness, yet his fiction is far more complicated and nuanced than critics allow when they argue that he just rehearses the critical posthumanist worldview. By talking about consciousness as a ghost and a soul, Wallace elevates that consciousness—however small it might be—above the meat of the body. Like Morgan's stacks and sleeves, Wallace's metaphor of the ghost in the machine emphasises that though his characters have posthuman bodies, there is still something like a soul that haunts them.

Though we cannot know if Wallace read *Altered Carbon*, he certainly read its predecessor, *Neuromancer* (*Both Flesh* 211), and he was enamoured with another seminal post-cyberpunk work: the Wachowski siblings' *The Matrix* (1999).[74] In correspondence with Don DeLillo, Wallace sang the praises of *The Matrix*, calling it "the single best movie I've seen in the last year." While Wallace ostensibly "cringe[s] to admit" this to DeLillo (because DeLillo "feed[s]" Wallace more sophisticated "tips on serious subtitled art movies"), and though he is aware that the film is "commercial postmodernism with a capital C, and yes has Keanu Reeves, . . . and yes uses archetypal names and Campbell-grade mythopoeia in ways that are

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[74] We know Wallace was interested in the genre, since as well as reading *Neuromancer* he read Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992), published ten years before Morgan's novel but also hailed as a key post-cyberpunk text ("Letter to Avoledo"). He had also seen *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), a cyberpunk film starring Keanu Reeves (Lipsky 134) that is based on one of Gibson's early short stories about a man who had "spent most of [his] life as a blind receptacle to be filled with other people's knowledge" (*Burning Chrome* 32).

about as subtle as a croquet mallet," he nevertheless writes that the film is "an incredible evocation of what's creepy and powerful in Descartes' first two *Meditations on First Philosophy* (no kidding) and Hilary Putnam's 'Brains in a Vat'" ("Letter to DeLillo").[75]

It is difficult to guess what Wallace found "creepy and powerful" about these three very different texts. What they seem to share is the philosophical position that it is impossible to have access to an objective reality outside of our conception of that reality. Descartes concluded from this that the only thing that is certain is that the mind exists. Putnam's conclusion is more complicated. In his thought experiment he makes the point that were the "science fiction" (4) to come true that we could remove a brain from its body and "plac[e] [it] in a vat of nutrients which kee[p] the brain alive," and manipulate the nerve endings so the brain experiences a reality filled with other "people, objects, the sky, etc.; but really all the [brain] is experiencing is the result of electronic impulses" (6), the brain could never, as a result, *refer* to the real world, only "produc[e] the illusion of reference, meaning, intelligence" (11). Putnam argues, therefore, that it is not possible that we are disembodied brains in a vat because to be able to refer to the fact that we are brains in a vat is a self-refuting statement, like Descartes's "'I do not exist'" (Putnam 8). Even if those brains were to think "*we are brains in a vat*," it cannot mean what it would mean if those outside the vat were to think the same thing. Putnam concludes that, contrary to the "doctrine that has been with us since the

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[75] Despite his defensiveness, there is evidence that Wallace's interest in the film was long-lasting. In his essay on tennis player Roger Federer—with the significantly Cartesian title of "Federer Both Flesh and Not" (2006)—Wallace refers to one of Federer's winners as being "impossible. It was like something out of *The Matrix*" (*Both Flesh* 6). Molly Schwartzburg, in her "Observations on the Archive at the Harry Ransom Center," recounts Jackqueline Muñoz's discovery: "one of her favourite items was a book whose annotations seemed to reveal more about Wallace the person than any specific project: it contained quotes from the film *The Matrix* (including, she recalled, [Mouse's] line 'His neurokinetics are way about normal'). These annotations seemed to have nothing to do with the book they were in" (253-54). Lastly, in early drafts of the commencement speech that was later published as *This is Water*, Wallace originally opened by saying "the temptation has been overwhelming to get up, say simply 'There is no spoon,' and sit back down" (HRC 28.10-11), a reference to an iconic scene in the film when Neo starts to use his conscious mind to bend the illusory reality in which he finds himself. Notably, each of these three references to the film share an interest in the relationship between mind and body: how can Federer be at one with his body? How do the mind and body interact (neurokinetically)? What choices can we consciously make about what to believe?

seventeenth century, *meanings just aren't in the head*" (19). Putnam's essay tells us that while we still cannot have access to any objective truth, we know at least that we are not just a mind: the mind and its meanings cannot exist independently from the world. Both Descartes and Putnam arrive at a view of consciousness as being the lonely place in which we are all isolated. For Descartes, in the seventeenth century, we know at least that we are a consciousness, a divine entity separate from a body that need not necessarily exist. For Putnam, in the twentieth, we know at least that we are isolated inside bodies in the world.

What, then, does this tell us about what *The Matrix* meant to Wallace? I suggest that *The Matrix* dramatizes Putnam's argument. Though the characters in *The Matrix* cannot trust what their own minds tell them about the world, we know at least that in order to think at all, they have to have a body somewhere in the world with which to do the thinking. Most of the human race in the film are born and live out their lives as brains (or, more accurately, bodies) in vats, while their minds operate in the virtual cyberspace of the matrix. For all but the messianic Neo, death in the matrix (the death of the mind) equals the death of the body, because mind and body are fundamentally interconnected: as Morpheus explains, "the mind has trouble letting go" of the body (41:30), just as "the body cannot live without the mind" (52:40). What *The Matrix* portrays, then, is a 'creepy' world in which all the mind can know for certain is that it is trapped inside the prison of the body. Where cyberpunk literature was cybernetic and, in a roundabout way, Cartesian, assuming as Descartes did that the mind could exist separately from the body, *Altered Carbon* and *The Matrix* are post-cyberpunk because they recognise that human beings are fundamentally embodied. All three texts seem to be "creepy and powerful" for Wallace because they evoke what it is like to be a thinking thing, absolutely *present* but, in one way or another, isolated and encaged.

The Matrix is an interesting source for Wallace because, like *Altered Carbon*, it preserves some essential humanity despite its posthuman premise. In a significant parallel with Wallace studies, criticism of *The Matrix* tends to take it as read that the film presents a postmodern, posthuman view of human identity and the world, both of which are thought to be unstable, simulated, and emptied of origin. These posthuman critics struggle, therefore, with the fact that the films are actually very conservative in their portrayal of humanity. In the collection of essays on *The Matrix* and its sequels, *The Matrix Trilogy*: *Cyberpunk Reloaded* (2005), for example, Baudrillard and his argument about the simulated, mediated world in

which we live features in no less than five of the essays (Shail 24; Gillis 81; Pamela Church Gibson 116; Nakamura 131; Constable 151). Only Catherine Constable argues that the film is in knowing conversation with Baudrillard, however, allowing that the Wachowskis arrive at a different—more hopeful—conclusion than Baudrillard's view that "change or revolution is utterly impossible within a pre-programmed system" (160). More common is the condescending view, such as that of Pamela Church Gibson, that the Wachowskis' differences with Baudrillard show they have "misuse[d], or misinterpret[ed]" him. Gibson, for example, struggles to reconcile the fact that Baudrillard was an influence on the Wachowskis with the film's *incorrect* suggestion "that there is, in fact, a 'real' world" (116) outside of the Matrix's simulated one. Anne Cranny-Francis takes a similarly rigid posthuman view, noting that the film—which presents the human protagonists in a battle with artificial machines—fails to "problematise the notion that humanity is inherently superior to all other life-forms" (109). Instead the film *naively* represents the machines as "the forces of evil" (109), which is why, according to Cranny-Francis, "the story seems dated" (110).

The Wachowskis' film has obvious roots in postmodern and cyberpunk culture, and the directors have pointed to a number of influences that bear this out, such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), the film (aptly titled with an allusion to Descartes and Ryle) based on the manga by Masamune Shirow.[76] I suggest, however, that *The Matrix* is best understood as a post-cyberpunk film that both privileges the body *and* the human essence trapped inside that body. On the one hand, *The Matrix* follows the map set out by theorists such as Hayles and Putnam towards the sort of posthumanism which rejects the view that humans are not bodies but just information. Unlike William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, which ends with a construct of the protagonist and his dead girlfriend immortally preserved in "the nonspace of the matrix" (81), transcendent disembodiment is

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[76] The Wachowskis note that *Ghost in the Shell* is one of the anime that inspired them the most and that they're "big fans of William Gibson's work" ("Interview"). Again, we cannot be sure if Wallace ever read or saw *Ghost in the Shell*. Wallace did show some interest in Japanese fiction—he had a copy of Yukio Mishima's *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea* (1963)—and descriptions from the manga resonate with Wallace's writing: "What you witness here is my will. As a self-aware life-form—a ghost—I formally request political asylum" (Shirow 248). The metaphor of "ghosts," here, for the souls that exist inside the "shells" of people, cyborgs, and robots, is similar to Wallace's first fragments of *Sir John Feelgood*.

not an option in the Wachowskis' world because the body and the mind are fundamentally co-dependent. On the other hand, like *Altered Carbon*, *The Matrix* films present a posthuman world that is an unambiguously terrible threat to some essential human spirit. The film's antagonistic machines—who live a life without cosy human qualities such as love—are the enemy of the protagonists' human spirit. Humans are an elevated lifeform in the film, distinguished by their soulful self, their free will, and their ability to make conscious choices.[77] Like *Altered Carbon*, *The Matrix* is ultimately posthuman *and* Cartesian: though it allows that most of the human being is embodied, unconscious, and posthuman, it takes what little role consciousness and the human spirit play in that model and elevate them above all else.

By recognising that Wallace's work might belong in such unfamiliar, less theoretically sophisticated company, we can better appreciate the Cartesian model that governs Wallace's construction of character. It gives us a useful way in to "Forever Overhead," for example, though this earlier story has no science fiction elements at all. This story is written in the second person, addressing a boy on his thirteenth birthday who is paralysed by anxiety at the top of a diving board. At the cusp of puberty and adult life, the boy's body is beginning to alter around him and he is discovering "an inside deeper than you knew you had" (4). His voice deepens, and he begins to notice girls in a new way, girls who are also in a state of transition that Wallace matches at the sentence level: "And girl-women, women" (*Brief Interviews* 6). Against this backdrop of bodily change, Wallace describes the boy's ascent up a diving board. Like the loaded phrases dotted throughout the story that refer both to a changing body and to personal character—"you are not without spine," for instance (6)—the physical ascent up to the board takes on metaphorical significance. Those before him move up to the ladder, controlled not by their will but by their bodies: their movement is "spaced by the beat of hearts," and "their legs take them to the end" where the board "throw[s] them up and out"

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[77] When Morpheus asks Neo if he believes in fate, Neo responds: "No. . . . I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my life" (23:38). It is true that in *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) we learn that the prophecy of Neo-as-saviour is in fact just another way in which the machines control their human slaves, undermining the notion that Neo has free will. Yet by the end of the film Neo *chooses* (and talks often about the importance of *choice*, an irrational human feature with which the machines struggle to cope) to save the single human he loves, apparently dooming the entire human race to extinction in the process. In the final film, *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), humanity is saved by Neo's final choice to sacrifice himself for the greater good.

(7). In this vein, the "big" woman in front of him is comfortably adult, "part of a rhythm that excludes thinking. . . . Like a machine" (10). That the woman's "suit is full of her" (9) has an interesting double meaning. It refers to her swimming suit, but also to her body, the suit that her self inhabits, the "machine that moves only forward" (11).

The boy, on the other hand, is all mind, separate from the strangeness of his own machine. About to enter a grown up world, the boy has "decided being scared is caused mostly by thinking" (7). To be "overhead" and above the "ground [that] wants you back" (9) is to be, in other words, all-too-conscious, a mind that operates over and above the meaty machine-stuff of the head and brain. Like the wraith in *Infinite Jest*, an entity for whom disembodiment and "death was just everything outside you getting really slow" (883), or the ghost of Neal in "Good Old Neon," who explains that at the moment of death one realises that life is not a "sequential thing" (*Oblivion* 151), when the boy is "overhead," "No time is passing outside you at all" (*Brief Interviews* 12). While the body is an ever present threat in this story, it is always separate to the second-person "You" that controls the narrative. "You" are trapped *in* there, and separate to the strange processes that operate below your awareness. If we recognise that the metaphor of the ghost and the machine governs this story then the title "Forever Overhead" seems to suggest—contrary to the views held by Clare Hayes-Brady and Marshall Boswell that this story is about the emergence of a more balanced self (*Unspeakable* 184) that is "safe from the self-consciousness that would displace it" (*Understanding* 203)—that the boy's ghost, his conscious self, is and always will be at odds with the machine in which he finds himself. Like the child in "Incarnations of Burned Children," whose "self's soul" floats "overhead" (*Oblivion* 116), or the child in "The Soul is Not a Smithy" who fears an adult life spent "gazing down" onto forms "as if [he] were at some terrible height" (108), Wallace's characters are ghosts, stuck in their own thinking, hovering forever over the bone heads of their bodies.[78]

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[78] This metaphor, where the ghost or soul represents consciousness, and the machine represents the unconscious brain and body, is consistent across Wallace's writing. The only reference that does not fit is in Wallace's "Remarks on Kafka's Funniness," a speech he made at a PEN event where he says that "'unconscious'"—not conscious—is "just a fancy word for soul" (*Consider* 64). As Lucas Thompson notes, "Wallace stresses that he wanted all '[i]diosyncracies [*sic*] of ital, punctuation, and syntax' left unchanged" in order to "'preserve an oralish, out-loud feel to the remarks so as to protect me from people's ire at stuff

Dualism in *The Pale King*

Given that the subject of Wallace's final novel was (relatively) normal American citizens in a 1980s IRS office, it perhaps seems odd to associate him with fantastical science fiction that literally disembodies its characters and sets them against killing machines. Yet the metaphor of the ghost in the machine—a model of the essential self chained to a meaty body that is central to works such as *Altered Carbon* and *The Matrix*—cuts across Wallace's entire corpus, and forms the thematic backbone of *The Pale King*.

One of the novel's major plot threads (insofar as they exist at all in this unfinished work) is the "enormous internal struggle and soul-searching" of the IRS (72) as it decided whether or not to "put automation in place" (15). According to the novel, there was a push in the 1980s to change the IRS from a system primarily powered by human beings doing incredibly boring rote work to an "increasingly automated, computerised tax system" (84): an IRS with a soul, and an IRS without. Should it struggle to keep its "intuiti[ve]" (346) human component, or should it kill that human part and become an unconscious, automated system designed simply to process "millions and millions of bits" (Nørretranders 125)? This question translates down the scales to the novel's "soul-searching" (72) characters. Chris Fogle, for instance, describes the moment he matured from "being an unmotivated lump" (223)—just inanimate flesh—to being more like "a machine that suddenly realized it was a human being and didn't have to just go through the motions it was programmed to perform over and over" (184). Turning the IRS into an automated system is a seductive option, at least in terms of productivity and the mitigation of human boredom, but it implies a discomfiting solution to the characters' own struggles. By paralleling their struggle with that of the IRS, the novel implies that they could be free of pain too, if only they could remove the soul and "proceed

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that isn't expanded on more'" (226). Perhaps with expansion, Wallace's break with the pattern of the soul being the conscious, rather than unconscious, would be clearer. What this does tell us, though, is that Wallace affected far more interest in writing about the *soul* than about the "fancy" names that philosophers and neuroscientists have come up with for what is basically the same thing. As Tiny Ewell puts it in *Infinite Jest*: "'My wife's personal term for soul is *personality*. As in "There's something incorrigibly dark in your personality, Eldred Ewell"'" (810). The word "soul" just means more.

on autopilot" (193). The part of them that makes them more than just a "lump" of meat needs to be taken out of the equation.

Conley Wouters has argued that *The Pale King* depicts human characters who are basically "machines," whose "lives and constructed subjectivities are merely data" (460). For Wouters, the IRS employees are turned into posthumanist subjects by their work in a bureaucratic system that is "hostil[e] toward coherent, intelligible selfhood" (455). Though the IRS certainly has a dehumanising effect on the novel's characters, Wouters's reading is complicated by the explicit presence of "ghosts" in the novel—suggesting that intelligible selfhood is still quite possible—not to mention that *The Pale King* grew from those early seeds about *Sir John Feelgood* and the ghost haunting its body. Though the wraith in *Infinite Jest* is, arguably, a figment of Gately's fevered imagination (though there are plenty of moving objects in the novel to suggest that the wraith does exist), Wallace very explicitly distinguishes *The Pale King*'s ghosts from the "hallucinations" that examiners also experience. The hallucinations are known as "phantom[s]," a term which, like 'phantom limbs,' connects them to the brain of the beholder. "Not so true ghosts," Wallace explains: "The truth is that there are two actual, non-hallucinatory ghosts haunting Post 047's wiggle room" (317). One of these ghosts is Blumquist, who "is a very bland, dull, efficient rote examiner who died at his desk" but was not noticed for "four days" given his incredible work ethic (317; 29). The other is Garrity, who in the "mid-twentieth century" had the job of examining "each one of a certain model of decorative mirror that came off the final production line, for flaws" (317). After doing this every day for eighteen years, Garrity hanged himself. It is significant that these two men, whose jobs involved paying very careful conscious attention to boring things—of being *mindful*, in other words—turn into ghosts, a symbol, as we saw with James Incandenza, of pure, Cartesian mind. Indeed, for Blumquist the difference between being mindful inside his alive body and mindful outside his dead one is so negligible that no one notices a difference.

These two ghosts are the tip of an iceberg of metaphors relating to the ghost and the machine that inform the whole novel. While I agree with Wouters that Wallace "attempts to tell very human stories in a form we might assume to be hostile to such stories," the metaphor of the ghost in the machine throughout the novel suggests, contrary to Wouters's argument, that Wallace does not represent human subjectivity "a[s] merely data, too" (460). Wallace's language is rather more traditional and Cartesian. For example, Wallace describes work at the

IRS as "soul-murdering" (383). Characters reflect that in this line of work "Something goes out of you" (118), and as the soul is slowly murdered the characters become hollow, pale "shells of men" with eyes with that "milky spooky anybody-home quality" (370). When Lane Dean is "unmanned" by the boring work (380), the description suggests that he is both perturbed, and that some fundamental essence of 'Man' is threatened by the work. In Wallace's story "The Soul is Not a Smithy," which began as a chapter for *The Pale King* (Pietsch 1:02:50-1:04:00), the narrator describes his father suffering the same "soul-level boredom of his job" (*Oblivion* 105), coming home looking "dispirited" (77), his "eyes . . . lightless and dead, empty of everything we associated with his real persona" (103-04). Wallace describes this death of the soul, this un-Manning and de-spiriting, as a consequence of the increasingly bureaucratised nature of American institutions in the twentieth century. One of his characters has a haunting dream of "regiment[ed]" school life, with clocks ticking away time on the walls as the children perform rote "memorization and regurgitation" (*Pale King* 257). The "idealism" of the teacher, appropriately named "Mr. Goodnature," is "no match for the petrified bureaucracy of the Columbus School System or the listless passivity of children [he]'d dreamed of inspiring" (257). In a bureaucratic system, the adventurous spirit of the 'first' Americans—such as "Columbus," after whom the school is named—is turned to stone. The teacher's desire to "inspire," to—in the Biblical sense of the word—"breathe (life, a soul, etc.) *in* or *into*" (OED) the children, is negated by a system that petrifies them, literally emptying them of spirit and turning them into inanimate lumps of matter. In the *Bible*, "the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7). *The Pale King* portrays a world that destroys the soul, that "precludes everything vital and human": a world in which one has to "breathe, so to speak," without "air" or *inspiration* (440). It is not the case that these characters are "merely data, too" (Wouters 460). They are emphatically soulful, full of some essential humanist spirit that separates them from mere machine. If they had no soul, then nothing would be under threat. A posthuman framework that sees no difference between man, machine, and animal, cannot account for the way that Wallace actually writes about his characters.

The metaphor of the ghost in the machine not only animates Chris Fogle's arc from lump to consciousness, or Lane Dean's unmanning, but the other central characters in *The Pale King* as well. The metaphor provides a useful way, for instance, to think about the

differences between David Cusk and Shane Drinion. David Cusk suffers from an anxiety disorder which both causes, and is triggered by, prodigious sweating. When he becomes anxious about getting overly warm, the "heat of the fear of the heat spread[s] through him" (96), thus making him warmer, which thus makes him more anxious. Discovering this process within himself, Cusk learns the "terrible" consequences of what you consciously "pay attention to" (93). He finds himself "imagin[ing] what his sweating might look like" to others (94), and he can feel his temperature rising as he does so, "unwilled, even against his will" (94), as he becomes fixated on the smallest changes inside his body but outside his control. His body and unconscious mind (the 'form' or 'machine' he fills) betray his conscious "will" (his 'I,' his soul, his ghost) by doing what they evolved to do: operate very efficiently outside of Cusk's conscious control. Cusk's machine detects his anxiety and sets off an automatic, fight-or-flight response (sweating cools the body in preparation to flee) that, of course, only makes the conscious Cusk more anxious. His body's most basic animal instinct is put on a torturous, infinite loop by the brilliant, complexly self-reflective consciousness that fills it.

Again, Wallace's construction of this character is at odds with Wouters's posthuman argument that "we might begin to see [Cusk's disorder] not as some psychological or physiological impairment, but rather a mechanical malfunction, something that cannot be understood in terms of human breakdown" (179). Wouters suggests, somewhat offensively, that Cusk's anxiety disorder "is not directly or logically influenced by either [his thoughts or emotions]," that it is an "inhuman" condition, a sign that Cusk, like the novel's other characters, is not human in the traditional sense (Wouters 179; 180) but, as De Bourcier puts it, "comically" empty "inside" (De Bourcier 56). Though I agree that Cusk might be seen as suffering from a "malfunction" in his unconscious, "mechanical" body, Cusk's condition is, as we have seen, *directly* influenced by his conscious thoughts. Wallace explains that Cusk does "not truly begin to suffer" until he learns that the "fear of it could bring it on" (95): like the boy in "Forever Overhead," Cusk learns that "being scared is caused mostly by thinking" (*Brief Interviews* 7). The real source of dread for Cusk is that he understands that he is, however unwillingly, the cause of his own suffering. Once triggered, his anxiety grows with a precise and relentless logic that is both utterly inexorable and yet (Cusk knows all too well) completely avoidable. The problem would vanish if he could just stop imagining it.

Cusk's experience as Wallace portrays it emphatically complicates the notion that his characters are merely posthuman. When Cusk feels that he "would have traded his very soul not to have" others around him become aware of his sweating (97), it is not mere hyperbole. The human "soul" is the problem, and it is not fragile but all too present. Like Bidart's anorexic subject Ellen West, who feels "force[d]" by her own "mind . . . always to think of eating" (*In the Western Night* 113), Cusk's soul fills an antiquated, pre-existing animal form (with useful drives to eat, sweat, and survive), but by filling it changes it into "an endless funhouse hall of mirrors of fear" (*Pale King* 98). If Cusk could rid himself of his soul—if, in other words, the conscious self could be "traded" away—his animal form would no longer house the prime mover of the anxious, automatic responses that torture him. The tragic irony for Cusk, of course, is that the soul *cannot* be separated from the machine except in death. Cusk's soul is forever overhead, but it is still chained to an animal body. And what could be more *humanist* than the idea that 'Man' has his place on the "great chain of being" (Pope 277), a tragic, "exquisite hybrid," as Wallace puts it, "of animal and angel" (*Consider* 143)?[79]

The polar opposite of Cusk is Shane Drinion, who, during his long conversation with Meredith Rand, is able to focus so intently on others that he fails to notice he is levitating. Unlike Cusk and most of the novel's other characters, Drinion is unused to considering his own "inward reaction[s]": when he is asked to consider his own emotional state, for instance, he has the strange mechanical look of an "optical reader scanning a stack of cards very fast and efficiently" (455). His focus is intent in whatever direction it is pointed, to the occlusion of all else. I would not argue, however, that Drinion is particularly posthuman either. He is not a machine without a conscious self or soul. If anything, his conscious self is not absent but extremely present. Drinion is similar to what Wallace calls, in his essay on athletes and the tennis player Michael Joyce, "our culture's holy men: they give themselves over to a pursuit . . . and enjoy a relationship to perfection that we admire and reward . . . even though we have

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[79] Aengus Woods is the only critic to suggest that "Cusk is in the throes of the anxiety induced by abstract thought" (282). As part of a larger argument that anxiety and abstraction are central to Wallace's work, Woods suggests that "We can always alleviate the anxiety of abstraction by not thinking, but then, without thought, what is truly left to us?" (283). Peter Sloane suggests that "Cusk's realising that he [is] 'an object, a body among other bodies' is traumatic" (199), but the opposite is true. The problem begins, for Cusk, not with the body, but with the thinking thing inside that body.

no inclination to walk that road ourselves" (*Supposedly* 237n. 42). It is significant that the levitating Drinion is very similar to the guru Lyle in *Infinite Jest*, who also "hovers cross-legged just a couple mm. above the top of the towel dispenser" (700) at the tennis academy. From this elevated position, Lyle is able to "completely engag[e]" (395) with the students' many troubles because "Everything he sees hits him and sinks without bubbles" (128). The "bubbles" imply that, because Lyle can pay the utmost attention to the students' words, their problems do not cause distracting, self-conscious ripples when they enter him, but sink straight to the core. Drinion also echoes the holiest of characters in *Infinite Jest*, Mario Incandenza, who has the same "Data-Search Face" (764). Paying total conscious attention to unentertaining things is made strange in Wallace's work, an achievement on the level of mysticism.

The boy in *The Pale King*'s §36, who is moved to "press his lips to every square inch of his own body," is one striking example of this (396). Significantly linked to historical Saints and mystics and their rituals of religious purification—such as "The Umbrian St. Veronica Giuliani," who "permitted pilgrims to insert special keys in her hands' wounds" (401), the boy, like Giuliani, is literally *in touch* with himself. Contrary to Hering's and Staes's view that this section is not compatible with the rest of the novel's plot (137; "Work in Process" 82), the boy's short narrative arc is governed by exactly the same Cartesian metaphor that governs the lives of the other characters. He is distinct from them only because, unlike most of the rest of the novel's cast, all of whom want desperately to escape the forms which contain them, the boy's self is at ease with its own embodiment. He has the extraordinary ability to dutifully focus on and perform the painful, monotonous stretches required to complete his project. This makes him appear very "'calm'" and, in a particularly significant phrase, "'self-containing'" (402): he does not want to escape his form but get in touch with it. Chris Fogle has his own moment of self-containment when he discovers that he has "the ability to choose what I paid attention to, and to be aware of that choice" (189). Learning to be calmly "aware of [his] awareness," conscious of the fact that he is a conscious self in a body in a room (185), makes Fogle feel like he "actually *owned* [him]self. Instead of renting or whatever" (188). In these moments of focused consciousness, Drinion, Fogle, and the boy are not strangers to themselves, merely renting space, but rather—like holy men—they feel unified with, and in full possession of, their own bodies.

As far as Wallace's cast of characters goes, this is a rare gift. Drinion's own levitation is prefigured by the malfunctioning air hockey table in the bar, which has air that "blow[s] too hard," making it "next to impossible to keep [the puck] from flying off the table altogether" (460). The implication of this is that Drinion, who keeps "flying off" his chair, has an anomalous design, one which makes him too full of air (i.e., of spirit, or consciousness). The controlling metaphor of containment and soulfulness through all these scenes suggests that Wallace is bringing a critical posthuman model of human life constantly into dialogue with a much more classical humanism. In *The Pale King*, Wallace is drawing on Nørretranders and a very specific model of mind, but uses that model to articulate a traditional view of human beings. His characters are literally souls filling their forms, ghosts filling their machines, and these metaphors inform, in a very significant way, the novel's central themes of attention and boredom. A solely posthuman reading of the novel cannot account for the fact that its characters' souls matter.

"I desire to believe"

Wallace's dualist metaphors for his characters are not unique to him but seem to be a defining characteristic of the work of his contemporaries. Sven Birkerts, whom Wallace knew (Max, *Every Love Story* 190-91), tries to define what he means by the soul in *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994):

> *Soul*—a vast, elusive word [. . .]. What do I mean by it? Although I don't want to rule out its religious sense, I am not using it, as believers have for centuries, to designate the part of ourselves that is held to be immortal. My use of soul is secular. I mean it to stand for inwardness, for that awareness we carry of ourselves as mysterious creatures at large in the universe. The soul is the part of us that smelts meaning [. . .]. It is the *I* that speaks when we say, 'I've always believed . . .' as opposed to the *I* we refer to when we say 'I went to get the car fixed this morning.' (212)

There is no heaven in Wallace's work, no God, and no sense of a heaven or afterlife that exists, except where some ghosts linger on earth. In a draft of *This is Water* (2009), Wallace wrote that "wisdom . . . can be supplied only by the spirit" (qtd. in Brick 68), and Martin Brick reads

this as an explicit reference to "the Holy Spirit" (68), but I disagree. When Wallace uses the word "spirit" it is always rooted to humanity, and to human minds: "as far as [*Infinite Jest*'s] Schacht can see," "*spiritual*" and "*mental*" are "the same thing" (269).[80] Wallace's 'soul' seems to be "secular" like Birkerts's, a word that "stand[s] for inwardness," for the "*I* that speaks," for the "stuff that," as Wallace puts it, "doesn't have a price" (*Conversations* 27). Wallace's short story title "The Soul is Not a Smithy" suggests, however, that he might disagree with Birkerts's view that the "soul is the part of us that smelts meaning" (212). The soul is present, for Wallace, but it is not in charge, not the master of its destiny nor "the forge" for "the uncreated conscience of my race," as James Joyce—the source of the phrase— suggests (*Portrait* 276). As Wallace knew from his reading of the contemporary sciences of mind, consciousness is a very small part of the whole mind-body system. What art he forged was as much a product of his unconscious mind as it was his conscious. This does not mean that the soul does not matter, however. Though Wallace, according to Mary Karr's poem "Suicide's Note: An Annual" (2012), could not believe in the "only-probable soul," his entire body of work is haunted by the idea. Though he may not have believed in an immortal soul, it seems to be very clear that he shares with David Lodge the view that "the words 'soul' and 'spirit' [are] useful, if not indispensable, to signify some uniquely valuable quality in human life and human awareness" (5).

Wallace is not alone as a fiction writer in his insistence that there is, still, some basic human spirit worth defending.[81] George Saunders's science-fiction story "Escape from Spiderhead" (2010) portrays a posthuman, dystopian research facility, in which human

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[80] Though Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly's interpretation of Wallace as someone who champions the incredible power of the human mind to "treat melancholy as happiness, boredom as bliss" (51) is simplistic and problematically dependent on *This is Water*, they are right that "the sacred in Wallace . . . is something *we impose* upon experience; there is nothing *given* about it at all" (47).

[81] My focus here is on contemporary novelists, but there is obviously some historical precedent for the kind of fiction that is written in response to the advance of scientific materialism. In *The Evolutionary Self* (1982), for instance, Roger Ebbatson notes that writers such as Thomas Hardy, E. M. Forster, and D. H. Lawrence were "imaginatively quickened by scientific rationalism whilst simultaneously refuting the literalism which that tradition posits." Lawrence's "entire imaginative strategy," for example, "may be read as an endeavour to redeem and preserve the mysteries of human character from the causation of science" (xiv-xv).

emotions—from the blackest depression to the truest love—are mere chemical reactions, induced in the subjects during the facility's materialist experiments. Yet the story ends with the narrator committing suicide and, like Wallace's Lucien, "sail[ing] right out through the roof," escaping the material confines of his body and "brain chemistry" (*Tenth of December* 79-80). David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), which also crosses genres into science fiction, rides the line between materialism on the one hand ("it voyages through the host's blood-vessels to the brain's *cerebellum anterior*" [36]) and essentialism on the other. Indeed, the novel's title refers to the nature of "Souls" that "cross the skies o' time . . . like clouds crossin' skies o'the world" (318). Mitchell has said in interviews that he "*desire*[*s*] to believe in the continuity of the soul" ("Interview" 26:40, my emphasis), and one of his most recent publications is ostensibly an autobiographical short story under the title "A Possibly True Ghost Story from David Mitchell" (2015). He writes: "that night is the closest I have to a real-life ghost story, and turned a ghost-disbeliever into a ghost-agnostic, at least."[82] Chris Adrian, the novelist and paediatrician whose work draws on 'genre writers' such as H. P. Lovecraft and Ursula Le Guin, negotiates this dualism in his novel *Gob's Grief* (2001), which is haunted throughout its pages by ghosts who long to have bodies, those "perfect machine[s]," again (165). Richard Powers's *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), whose characters work to crack the genetic code, ends with the character Ressler's ghost playing a last musical message over an ATM, a song with "something of divinity in it" (631). The narrator in Jennifer Egan's gothic novel *The Keep* (2006) is haunted by the man he killed, and has to tell his victim's story. When in prison, the narrator is aided by a radio made out of dust and an old cardboard box that, its owner claims, picks up the "voices of the dead": "All that love, all that pain, all the stuff people feel. . . . It can't disappear," for it is "too . . . permanent" (98).

Egan's device is knowingly ridiculous, but isn't the disembodied soul also ridiculous? All these writers seem to share a general understanding and interest in the science of the brain that has become increasingly a part of popular consciousness. Yet they all also write against the posthuman view that the soul, or any basic human interiority, does not exist. Stephen J. Burn has suggested that Wallace and Saunders write "ghost-haunted texts"

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[82] Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* was turned into a film in 2012 directed by Tom Tykwer and The Wachowskis, who presumably saw some affinity between this rather traditionally humanist work and *The Matrix*. The producer of *The Matrix*, Joel Silver, also, significantly, bought the rights to Morgan's *Altered Carbon*.

because they share a "metaphysical ache for some kind of meaningful knowledge that lies beyond mortal beings" (*Reader's Guide* 9). I suggest that the *ghost*, specifically, has become such a significant symbol in the post-postmodern novel because post-postmodern writers, in the aftermath of posthuman theories of all sorts, understand that the soul is a dead idea (as Gately puts it: "like a ghost, as in dead?" [*Infinite Jest* 833]). To keep investing in some basic human essence requires, therefore, a leap of faith, to believe in the ghost of that which has been killed. By taking Ryle's criticism of Descartes—the ghost in the machine—at face value, Wallace at once acknowledges that the soul is not scientifically viable and carries on regardless.[83]

In *Infinite Jest*, Hal's problem is that he is a posthumanist who knows too much to be able to do this. As he says, "It's always seemed a little preposterous that Hamlet, for all his paralyzing doubt about everything, never once doubts the reality of the ghost" (900). Hal recognises that ghosts are not real, just as he recognises that he, like everyone else, has nothing so significant as a soul: he is "hydrochloric acid and bilirubin and glucose and glycogen and gloconol produced and absorbed" (897). Gately, on the other hand, "doesn't want to know his body even fucking *has* something with six syllables in it" (921). Gately survives because he is humanist: he learns to be "In Here" instead of "Out There" (374), to take personal responsibility for his machine's unconscious actions. Hal's posthuman reality, the idea that he "just never quite occurred," or existed, inside himself, "chills [him] to the root" (686). Yet like the rest of the E.T.A. students, Hal treats the "annual celebration of Interdependence Day"—significantly shortened in the novel to "I.Day"—"ironic[ally]" (380). The students are too clever to take their own selves seriously.[84] It is not, as Hayles suggests,

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[83] My argument sits inside a larger, ongoing discussion about contemporary fiction and the afterlife. For Peter Boxall, "posthumousness is, I think, a characteristic of the contemporary novel more broadly" (31), while Alice Bennett suggests that "contemporary existence can be characterised by its post-consciousness – its consciousness of its status as after. Every reminder of post-modernity, of the post-historical, the post-human . . . is a reminder of the presence, already, now, of our own afterlives" (3).

[84] As Pemulis says to Hal, "that shit's not going to work for you because you're too sharp to ever buy the God-Squad shit" (1066n. 321). It is worth noting that in Wallace's next book, it is the "hideous men" who ironize the word "'souls'" with quotation marks (*Brief Interviews* 19), and they who treat women as coercible automatons whose "natura[l] programm[ing]" the hideous men can use to their advantage (195).

a veneration of the self that dooms Wallace's characters; what dooms them is the very "irony and contempt for selves" (530) that characterises posthuman theory. Hal's lack of respect for ghosts has terrible consequences for his own.

We have seen in chapter 1 that Wallace was coming from a posthumanist, materialist perspective, writing fiction that is grounded in an understanding of the embodied mind. Why, then, is the soul such an important metaphor for Wallace, and was it ever more than just a metaphor for the conscious 'I'? We have seen that traditional humanism is at the very centre of Wallace's work, but how can Wallace reconcile this with his posthumanism and his critique of solipsism (the narcissistic belief that there is *nothing but* the self)? In chapter 3 we will focus on mental illness and the relationship between patient and therapist in Wallace's work, which will reveal what is at stake in Wallace's representation of his characters as ghosts trapped inside their machines, and why it matters that they are not just matter after all.

Chapter 3

"The heat just past the glass doors": Therapy, Madness, and Metaphor

> Think of it this way. Two people are screaming in pain.
>
> —David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (696)

"A very glib guy"?

The idea that consciousness is, as Wallace writes in one of his late stories, "nature's nightmare" (*Oblivion* 282), is such a central thread throughout all of his writing that most studies of his work have, if not explicitly, implicitly acknowledged it. There has been surprisingly little attention paid, however, to the actual nature of this nightmare, and the means by which the nightmare is treated, despite the central role that mental illness and therapy plays across Wallace's fiction. Indeed, there are therapist characters who play significant roles in each of Wallace's three novels; therapists, or characters who refer to their history of therapy, in no less than nine short stories across all three of his collections; and as many different kinds of therapy in his work as there are characters to practice them and sicknesses to treat.[85] Wallace's representation of illness and the therapeutic structures

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[85] *The Broom of the System* features a dramatic family therapy session called "family theater" (160) and the "drooling" Dr. Curtis Jay, who has a "membrane" theory about "Self and Other" (136). *Infinite Jest* revolves around numerous support groups and therapeutic philosophies, though the central therapist character is Dr. Dolores Rusk, a Freudian who teaches at the tennis academy and is obsessed with "the Oedipal phase's desire to . . . 'win' the mother" (550). In *The Pale King* there are different kinds of "psychotherapy" (256), a mental health hospital with psychiatrists like "computer[s]" so "you can't proceed until you give the properly formatted answer" (471), and Meredith Rand's husband, who works as an attendant at the hospital and is a "natural therapist" (482). There are many more examples outside of the novels. In "The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing," a doctor prescribes anti-depressant medication to the narrator (5). Alex Trebek talks about his dreams with a "psychiatrist" in the story "Little Expressionless Animals" (*Girl* 19), Bruce tries "fiction therapy" in "Here and There" (153), and Mark writes a story about a "psychologist" who treats phobias in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way" (278). "The Depressed Person" analyses her "therapist" in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (37), while "Church Not Made with Hands" in the same collection features a kind of therapy "through artistic acts" (170). Finally, Schmidt has had "several years of psychotherapy" in "Mister Squishy" (*Oblivion* 25), Neal thinks he is

designed to help the ill is clearly one of the major threads that ties together all of his fiction. I will not try to encompass this enormous range of therapies and illnesses but focus in on what they all share: the moment of interaction between patient and therapist, which raises important questions about how we understand, describe, and treat human beings. Exploring Wallace's approach to these problems will give us an insight into both how he understood the relationship between materialist and essentialist accounts of the self, and why interiority is ultimately so important in his fiction.

Those studies that have considered Wallace's treatment of illness and therapy in some detail tend to take a very narrow view of Wallace as the writer of just *Infinite Jest* and "The Depressed Person" (1999).[86] The approach to these two texts has been divided. On the one hand, critics such as Kiki Benzon (2007) and Eric A. Thomas (2013) focus primarily on Wallace's representation of illness. They do not focus on Wallace's therapists or his literary context, but elucidate the pathology of the characters (and the author) within. On the other hand, critics such as Alan Bleakley, Margaretta Jolly (2012), and Catherine Toal (2003) pay little attention to Wallace's representation of illness, instead taking these two texts as proof that Wallace's work—like Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), Rick Moody's *The Black Veil* (2002), and Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park* (2005)—is yet another contemptuous, "drawling satir[e]" of "'therapeutic culture'" (Bleakley and Jolly 783; Toal 312). It is significant that Bleakley, Jolly, and Toal identify this literary trend as being distinctly male in character. Bleakley and Jolly set up these works in opposition to the "very different handbook for women's health and sexuality *Our Bodies*, *Ourselves*" which, though similarly critical, has more "humane

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cleverer than his "psychoanalys[t]" in "Good Old Neon" (143), and Randall thinks his "counsellor" is not "thoughtfu[l]" in "Oblivion" (209).

[86] Marshall Boswell broadens the field a little by identifying a central "trilogy of pieces" in Wallace's work—"The Depressed Person" from *Brief Interviews*, "Good Old Neon" from *Oblivion*, and the Chris Fogle chapter from *The Pale King* ("Constant Monologue" 156)–each of which presents a dominant monologue from a narcissistic, depressive, deeply self-conscious character. Boswell notes several significant links between them, including the fact that in the first two the therapist character "die[s] mid story" (156). Though Boswell is unique in Wallace studies in looking at the treatment of therapy in any of Wallace's fiction published after "The Depressed Person," this is quite a specifically defined trilogy. Wallace's treatment of the relationship between therapist and patient is by no means limited to these three stories.

intention[s]" (788). Similarly, Catherine Toal argues that Franzen, Moody, and Wallace use the term 'depression'—which Toal defines as a "commodified subjectivity" popularised by bestselling memoirs—to pathologize a "crisis in masculinity" (305-06). The prevailing view of Wallace, particularly when it comes to his writing about therapy, is that of a male writer among other male writers who extend and champion the (predominantly male) postmodern, anti-psychiatric tradition that had prominence in the 1960s.[87]

In this chapter I will considerably broaden and enrich our understanding of how Wallace approaches illness and therapy by recognising that his approach to them is neither divided nor narrow: illness and medicine, in Wallace's fiction, are vital halves of the same picture, and Wallace is indebted to a wide range of literary sources when he writes about them across his whole career. This becomes especially clear as soon as we expand our selection of his works beyond *Infinite Jest* and "The Depressed Person." Indeed, Wallace's first story "The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing" (1984) is about precisely this problem, and it gives us an early map of Wallace's approach to illness and the inherent problems with illness-writing. In the story an unnamed narrator describes his experiences on

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[87] Appignanesi explains that in the 1960s, when "many asylums were little better than prisons," the "anti-psychiatry movement was launched from a variety of sites" (*Mad, Bad and Sad* 396). Michel Foucault described the "language of psychiatry" as a "monologue of reason *about* madness" (x-xi), a singular, dominating voice designed to silence dissenting views and perspectives. In the United States, Thomas Szasz famously decried what he called *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1961), arguing that "psychiatric diagnoses are stigmatizing labels" and "involuntary psychiatric therapy is not treatment but torture" (12). In the United Kingdom, R. D. Laing—the "'psychedelic psychiatrist' who thought of schizophrenia as a kind of epiphany" and "became a prophet of [the] counterculture" (Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad* 410)—wrote that a "'normal' 'adjusted' state is too often the abdication of ecstasy, the betrayal of our true potentialities" (Laing 18). Wallace was aware of this critical tradition, especially in the form of the anti-psychiatric novel. He lists Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) among other examples of great hypocrisy-puncturing postmodernist works—"Kesey's black parody of asylums suggested that our arbiters of sanity were often crazier than their patients" (*Supposedly* 66)—and he also read and annotated Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), which similarly exemplifies the view that the authoritative medical establishment subjugates the *so-called* insane. Much of Lessing's novel comprises lengthy prose passages describing her patient-protagonist's visionary experiences, intercut with the terse dialogue of two feckless doctors. As one of the doctors explains, "I believe you could snap out of this any time you want" (28), or, at least, "Try Tofronil? Marplan? Tryptazol? Either that or shock" (17).

the planet Trillaphon, the alternate world in which he finds himself when he takes anti-depressant medication (specifically, "Tofranil," which the narrator thinks of as "Trillaphon" because "it just sounds more like what it's like to be there" [18]). The narrator is given the medication to escape what he calls the "Bad Thing," which his doctor, "Dr. Kablumbus," explains to him is "'severe clinical depression'" (9). The narrator feels uncomfortable with the doctor's language because it fails to denote his experience; he had always "thought that depression was just sort of really intense sadness" (9-10). As Andrew Solomon explains,

> It's a strange poverty of the English language, and indeed of many other languages, that we use the same word 'depression' to describe how a kid feels when it rains on his birthday and to describe how somebody feels the minute before they commit suicide. ("Depression" 24:17-24:33)

Wallace's narrator discovers the poverty of not only the medical term for his "so-called 'depression'" (*Infinite Jest* 692), but of the ability of any writer to put their experience of mental illness into words.

In a long paragraph he tests a number of descriptions of his condition, beginning with a "very glib guy on the television [who] said some people liken it to being underwater" ("Planet Trillaphon" 10). In parenthesis the narrator quietly writes in the margins of this description, explaining which part of it most aptly describes the Bad Thing to him:

> (I don't know how apt it is to say it's like being underwater, but maybe imagine the moment in which you realize, at which it hits you that there is *no surface for you*, . . .; imagine how you'd feel at that exact moment, like Descartes at the start of his second thing, then imagine that feeling in all its really delightful choking intensity spread out over hours, days, months . . . that would maybe be more apt.) (10)

One particular part of the glib guy's description feels apt (not being underwater exactly but the *moment* you discover there is no surface), and this part leads the narrator to another writer, Descartes, who at the start of his "second thing" was unsettled by his understanding that the world outside him might not exist. Descartes writes that he feels "tossed about" by this assumption, "as if I had fallen suddenly into a deep whirlpool, that I can neither put my foot on the bottom nor swim to the surface" (*Meditations* 23). We move from one annotation

to the next, and the narrator reframes the water metaphor through Descartes as a model not just of directionlessness but of profound ontological uncertainty.

From Descartes's *Meditations* the narrator moves to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963):

> A really lovely poet named Sylvia Plath, who unfortunately isn't living anymore, said that it's like having a jar covering you and having all the air pumped out of the jar, so you can't breathe any good air (and imagine the moment when your movement is invisibly stopped by the glass and you realize you're *under glass…*). (10)

The surface of the water becomes here the surface of the bell jar's glass. The sentence structure mimics what came above with the glib guy and Descartes, with the narrator again annotating someone else's metaphor to pull out the part that is most apt for him. In this one paragraph we can see, in microcosm, an early example of Wallace's method when it comes to writing about both mental illness and the therapeutic structures surrounding the illness. Through someone on television, to a philosopher, to a poet, the narrator moves from one metaphor to the next, stitching together the insight of different works into a "kind of" accurate description of what depression, and subsequently his anti-depressant medication, feels like (11). The narrator adds his own definition—like "every single cell in your body is . . . sick" (10)—but makes a point of recognising that this is what the Bad Thing feels like "to me" (10), not to everyone. The formal structure of this paragraph, its long sentences intercut with the narrator's parenthesis, enacts the fact that the narrator can only skirt around the edges of the Bad Thing. "It can be described only in metaphor and allegory" (Solomon, *Noonday* 16), but no one metaphor can ever really communicate what it is like, especially to someone who has not felt it for themselves.

Taking Wallace's early map of his method in "Trillaphon" as a starting point, my aim is to trace how Wallace consciously writes in the margins of a number of different literary traditions when he writes about illness and therapy.[88] One of my central claims is that

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[88] Though I will be drawing on Wallace's working library and some of his private notes, my literary approach in this chapter is grounded in a rejection of Thomas's argument that Wallace's characters "deman[d] to be read" (283) as "mouthpiece[s]" (277) for Wallace himself.

Wallace's therapists are not "caricatures" (Thomas 288), and that therapy is not something Wallace merely shrugs off as a nuisance in the lives of the ill. Across his fiction, like "Trillaphon"'s long paragraph on a larger scale, Wallace pieces together two central, sustained, complementary metaphors for illness and therapy: a metaphor of hellfire within the ill person, and a metaphor of the glass wall between therapist and patient which means that fire cannot be directly accessed. As I will make clear, these metaphors work together because illness and therapy are part of the same picture for Wallace.

"Trillaphon" is also a useful starting point because, in one paragraph, it poses a number of significant challenges to our currently narrow understanding of Wallace's work. Firstly, the fact that Plath is the only author Wallace names in the story other than Descartes (whose significant influence on Wallace's work we have seen in chapter 2) challenges Bleakley, Jolly, and Toal's argument that Wallace is writing in a solely male, anti-psychiatric tradition. By exploring Wallace's sustained allusions to Plath throughout his work, we will see that Wallace's treatment of therapy was far more nuanced than has been suggested. Likewise, the reference to Descartes himself demonstrates that Wallace is explicitly engaged with writing much older than that of his contemporaries Franzen, Moody, and Ellis, who, despite all being born in the space of five years, are the only writers that Wallace's critics use to contextualise his therapy fictions.

"Looking at stuff under glass"

This is not to say that postmodern, anti-psychiatric writers have not been a significant influence on Wallace's therapy fictions. It is not difficult to see, especially if we look no further than a couple of scenes in *Infinite Jest*, why critics view therapy in Wallace's fiction as a useless endeavour and his therapists as "caricatures" (Thomas 288). In terms of literary allusion and form, Wallace does seem to have some of his most playful moments when it comes to *Infinite Jest*'s therapists. Half way through the novel, for example, we read of a *Lolita* (1955)-inspired episode involving "coach R. Bill ('Touchy') Phiely," who took a "thirteen-year-old" player "into the Humboldt County" (an allusion to Humbert Humbert, the name of *Lolita*'s narrator), after which the academy employs "Dr. Dolores Rusk" ("Dolores" being Lolita's real name [Nabokov 9]) to protect the other "potential diddlees" (510-11). Naming your child-therapist after

literature's most well-known victim of paedophilia makes a black joke of how effective Rusk's services are likely to be. The playful literary allusion, not to mention the comic moniker "Touchy Phiely," distracts entirely from the seriousness of the man's crime and the traumatic experience of his "diddlee."

Dr. Rusk appears in another scene when she has a session with Ortho Stice. Here her voice dominates the proceedings as she theorises about Stice's "counterphobia . . . the delusion of some special agency or control to compensate for some repressed wounded inner trauma," ultimately suggesting—seemingly out of nowhere—that this might manifest itself in lust for "the Barbie . . . the most obviously reductive and phallocentric reduction of the mother to an archetype of sexual function and availability" (550). Stice's objection that he does not "want to X no Goddamn Barbiedoll" (550) is again an allusion, this time to A. M. Homes's story "A Real Doll" (1990), which Wallace taught at Illinois State University (*Conversations* 63), and in which a boy has a sexual affair with a (seemingly sentient) Barbie doll: "I imagined a million Barbies and having to have them all. I pictured fucking one, discarding it, immediately grabbing a fresh one . . . I saw myself becoming a slave to Barbie" (*The Safety of Objects* 163). Again, Wallace's literary playfulness and the dense, redundant psycho-jargon (Rusk's phrase "obviously reductive and phallocentric reduction" ironically says very little) make any serious point in the scene hard to see.

Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, also seems to support the view that Wallace only caricatures his therapists. One chapter is made up entirely of an "*EXCERPT FROM DUTY LOG OF DR. DANIEL JOY, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES, CHICAGO DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH*" (197). This excerpt details the arrival, at 10:40am, of Lenore's brother, his delusion that he is a contestant on a television show (199), his inevitable "screams" (200), his sedation, and, fifty short minutes after arrival, his departure from the medical centre at 11:30am (200). The novel's psychiatrist Dr. Curtis Jay keeps his appointments similarly (as his name suggests) *curt*: his paying customers sit on impersonal "mechanical chair[s] on [a] track" (61) and are moved into his room one after the other. *Broom* is closest in tone and style to Wallace's postmodernist predecessors, particularly Thomas Pynchon, and Dr. Curtis Jay clearly echoes the paranoid (and parodically named) "Dr Hilarius" from Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965). Both characters, from their names onwards, are caricatures of unethical therapists. Where Dr. Curtis Jay does not hesitate to tell

Rick Vigorous everything that Lenore tells him in confidence, Dr. Hilarius has armed and barricaded himself in his office, and it is said that if you "'Start telling him your troubles . . . he'll probably shoot you'" (92). It is significant that Wallace characterises Pynchon as one of the "post-Nabokovians," the name he gives to the "black-humourists who came along in the 1960s" ("Interview by Charlie Rose" 21:40-21:50): to write about therapy, for Wallace, is to write in the margins of Nabokov and Pynchon's irreverent tradition.

If we expand our selection of Wallace's writing and reading, however, the picture becomes more complicated. Early in his career, Wallace drew on a number of influences from beyond the boundaries of the North American novel. Especially in terms of narrative structure and formal technique, the influence of the British writer J. G. Ballard—whose collection of stories, *War Fever* (1990), Wallace reviewed in 1991—and the Argentinian writer Manuel Puig—to whom, in 1987, Wallace said he felt "indebted" (*Conversations* 10)—is present in the background of all his therapy fictions yet remains unexplored.[89]

Puig's novel *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1979) is made up of the dialogue between two men in a prison cell, Molina and Valentin, who briefly become lovers.[90] On eight occasions throughout the novel, extensive academic footnotes intrude upon the narrative to define

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[89] Stephen J. Burn was the first to suggest that Wallace "owes much" of his "treatment of dialogue" to Puig, particularly the way Wallace represents a moment of silence in conversation with "…" (*Reader's Guide* 30). Lucas Thompson discusses Puig's influence on Wallace in considerable detail, arguing that Wallace drew five stylistic tropes from Puig (60-65). Thompson does not discuss Puig's use of the footnote, however, which will be my focus here. While Thompson briefly refers to Ballard and Wallace's *War Fever* review (72), and Fabienne Collignon to Ballardian "geometries of buildings and geographies of apocalypse" in *Infinite Jest* (116), Mary K. Holland's statement that "Ballard's influence on Wallace has yet to receive critical attention" ("Mediated" 128n. 5) effectively still stands. Holland herself very briefly suggests that the structure of Wallace's short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* "seems akin to that of Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which resists readerly attempts to connect and order its pieces" (109), but Wallace's interest in Ballard remains unexplored.

[90] Puig's novel is likely the inspiration for *Cage II*, a film in James Incandenza's filmography in the endnotes to *Infinite Jest*, suggesting that Wallace's debt to Puig was longstanding. *Cage II* is also about two men who are imprisoned, in more ways than one: "Sadistic penal authorities place a blind convict (Watt) and a deaf-mute convict (Leith) together in 'solitary confinement,' and the two men attempt to devise ways of communication with each other" (*Infinite Jest* 987n. 24).

homosexuality, treating it at best as an academic curiosity and at worst as a threat to the running of a state: "While those societies in which freedom of sexual relations is tolerated . . . remain in an almost animal state of underdevelopment" (168n.). These footnotes are visually juxtaposed against the main narrative and literally undercut its emotional content. Indeed, on three occasions, the footnotes override the narrative completely when they require a final page to accommodate them and thereby conclude the chapter (132; 154; 196). They are also juxtaposed against the main narrative in terms of their language, an abstract psycho-jargon that clashes with the emotional intimacy of the text's body. Each of the footnotes opens in the following manner: "After having classified the various theories on the physical origins of homosexuality . . ." (97n.); "Anna Freud, in *The Psychoanalysis of the Child* . . ." (129n.); "As a variation on the concept of repression . . ." (163n.). The academic study of the characters' 'condition' reads like a black satire of a disturbing, ridiculous state that subjugates its prisoners by categorising them as sexual deviants.

Though Benzon's argument that the "footnote, as a paratextual device, is particularly apt for the rendering of affective disorders" ("Darkness Legible" 191) could apply convincingly to other works of fiction that employ footnotes, it neglects the fact that Wallace's foot- and end-notes are most often used in the manner of Puig to give voice to the analyst, not the patient.[91] In *The Pale King*'s §13, for example, Wallace uses footnotes in the style of Puig not to render Cusk's anxiety disorder but the scholarly, emotionless discussion of it. While the main narrative describes Cusk's experience in terms of his "terror and frustration and inner suffering" (96)—the *body* of the text contains, in other words, how the experience *feels*—the academic footnotes are abstracted from Cusk's emotions as they discuss anxiety disorders with precisely the same disinterest that characterised Puig's footnotes: Wallace writes, for example, that "Pyschodynamically, he was, as a subject . . ." (94n. 1); "In clinical terms, he was fighting to re-repress . . ." (95n. 2); "Under any reputable Depth-based interpretation . . ." (101n. 5). The footnotes are marked apart from the narrative in both their visual arrangement on the page and the obscure, jargonistic mode in which they are written. The

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[91] In her article "Consider the Footnote," Ira B. Nadel similarly focuses on the footnotes as a means by which Wallace represents his own "fractured consciousness" (218). Though I think this is true of Wallace's style as a whole, it does not account for how Wallace's footnotes inform individual scenes. Wallace's therapy fictions, specifically, seem to be fractured in a careful, meaningful way.

last footnote in the chapter is attached to the story's last line, a moving description of Cusk looking at himself in the mirror and seeing that "none of all this was visible to him in the bathroom's glass, whose reflection seemed oblivious to all that he felt as he searched it" (101). If Cusk himself cannot see in his own image the torment that is "felt" inside him, even when he knows it is there, how could the voice in the footnote—which can only ever be as close as the reflection in the glass—offer any better understanding?

Detached, academic footnotes also feature prominently in Ballard's story "Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown," which Wallace drew particular attention to in his review of *War Fever*. In the review Wallace categorises Ballard as a "Psy-Fi" writer, someone who "seeks to explore the psychopathology of post-atomic life." Wallace characterises the genre as "postmodern to the quick, [it] seems to demand this flat, scholarly narrative voice, an air of lab technicians looking at stuff under glass." Where in Puig's novel there is a clear distinction between those under the glass and those above it, in Ballard's story "Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown," in which each word in a one-sentence-long fragment about a man's breakdown is footnoted by an academic discussing the case, the distinction between one side of the glass and the other completely breaks down. We discover, ultimately, that the story's apparently cogent analyst is actually just another of the patient's "complex annotations" in "medical textbook[s]," a "complete fictio[n]" that exists in an "endlessly unravelling web of imaginary research work." We discover that the story's title "Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown" is to be taken literally: with each additional note, the 'doctor' moves further towards the unravelling of his "maze of lies" and the revelation that he is in fact the broken man about whom he is writing. The patient's reasoned, above-glass analysis of his own condition is itself proof that he is mad.

In *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (1999), Ann Hunsaker Hawkins provides useful terms with which to think about the relationship between the footnote and the body of the text in both Ballard's story and Wallace's fiction. Hawkins makes a distinction between two kinds of texts about illness: the scientific "case report," the subject of which is a "particular biomedical condition . . . the disease in the body in the bed" (12), and the "pathography," which she defines as "a form of autobiography or biography that describes personal experience of illness" (1). As David B. Morris explains, "Contemporary medical textbooks define *disease* as an objectively verified disorder of bodily functions or systems. . .

. *Illness*, by contrast, is used inside medicine to indicate the patient's subjective experience" (37). Hawkins suggests that one way to explain the sudden popularity of the pathography in the last half-century "is to see it as a reaction to our contemporary medical model, one so dominated by a biophysical understanding of illness that its experiential aspects are virtually ignored" (11). Wallace's term "Psy-Fi" for Ballard's work clearly plays on the homonymous "Sci-Fi," suggesting that Ballard can be understood as portraying a kind of fictionalised reality shaped not by sci-fi technology but by the "contemporary medical model" that Hawkins describes. As we saw in chapter 2, Wallace similarly characterises David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988) as a "kind of philosophical sci-fi" (*Both Flesh* 85). Where Markson creates an "imaginative portrait of what it would be like actually to live in the sort of world the logic and metaphysics of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* posit" (86), Ballard's imaginative portrait is of a medicalised world that is equally cold and disturbing. Ballard's fictional worlds are characterised not by travel to outer space but, as Wallace's review-title puts it, into an "Inner Space" that has been abstracted through the lens of an emotionless, scholarly industry of psycho-pathologisation that redefines how the post-atomic subject thinks about themselves. So much so, indeed, that the patient in Ballard's story has no way to articulate his *own* pathography: he is pathology only, and can only talk about himself in the mode of the case report. The "lab technicians"' glass (Wallace, "Exploring Inner Space") becomes the lens through which Ballard's characters necessarily see the world and themselves, and it is all-distorting.

Ballard's detached, scholarly tone is most closely resembled in Wallace's story "The Depressed Person," and his influence poses a significant challenge to Benzon's claim that the footnotes in this story "formally enac[t]" the experience of depression ("A Dark Web" 154n. 4). Firstly, it is important to stress that the depressed person, known originally in Wallace's early drafts as "The Devil" (HRC 27.6), does not suffer from depression. She is a narcissist and a hideous woman who sits comfortably alongside the cast of hideous men who give the collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, its title.[92] Though the footnotes in this story,

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[92] Marshall Boswell explains that when the story was published in *Harper's* it was "greeted with a flood of letters from readers, many of them expressing anger at what some regarded as Wallace's vicious portrait of the woman's psychological affliction" (*Understanding* 205). Both Boswell and Holland note, however, that if the story is read with Wallace's larger body of work in mind, it is unlikely one would come to this conclusion:

unlike Cusk's chapter, *are* closely focalised through the depressed person, they nevertheless maintain the stilted, jargonistic language of the analyst which she has imbibed in order to think about, and emphasise, her 'pain.' It is not insignificant that the first footnote in the story is attached to the word "therapist" (*Brief Interviews* 37), signalling that, as in Ballard's story, the usual operation of the medical footnote, whereby an academic annotates a patient's case report, has been reversed. The depressed person thinks of herself as 'the depressed person' and we never learn her name because the only thing she is interested in—as a disinterested case reporter would be—is her 'condition.' Indeed, her narration reads like a case report precisely because she has no pathography; she has no real, felt experience of the "indescribable hell" she describes at length (34) because it is as much an abstraction to *her* as it would be to a medical observer. From pp.44-50, the footnotes dominate most of each page, but unlike the Cusk story in which the footnotes embody the split between experience and the case report, in "The Depressed Person" they show that the hideous woman is firmly on the academic side of the glass. Wallace's footnotes do not intimately render the experience of mental disorders but rather the detachment that people who are not ill have—either willingly or not—from the reality of others' conditions. Ballard's "Psy-Fi" mode, with which he describes a world where people see themselves and others as if through glass, is realised in "The Depressed Person" in particular, but articulates a central, cynical fact that is apparent in all Wallace's therapy stories: for those looking at mental illness from the outside, there is no way through that glass wall.[93]

"The Depressed Person" was not written in isolation, and we see a similar technique in the "structure of lies" (158) that is Wallace's early therapy story in *Girl with Curious Hair*,

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the woman "is a victim of her own reliance on quick fixes for her narcissism, which she has mistakenly, and self-aggrandizingly, diagnosed as depression" (Boswell 206); "more accurately the woman is suffering narcissism" (Holland, "Mediated" 116).

[93] Stephen J. Burn notes that Descartes once defined madness as feeling one "ha[d] a body of glass" (qtd. in Burn, *Reader's Guide* 73). Burn links this to the title of one of Hal's essays "that adopts Descartes' metaphor . . .: '*A Man Who Began to Suspect He Was Made of Glass*'" (74), and suggests this gives us some clue as to Hal's own mental state. The essay title also suggests, perhaps, that Hal is the ultimate Ballardian subject, so much a product of a posthuman, medicalised culture, and so out of touch with his own emotions, that he feels himself to be transparent, nothing more than what science might observe.

"Here and There." Much of this story comprises a conversation between a therapist (whose speech is denoted by "" marks) and the two halves of a separated couple (denoted by '' marks). Boswell argues that the "fiction therapy" (*Girl* 153) the therapist encourages in the story is a way for Wallace to point to the fact that his own story is a fiction: an "apprentice fiction" at that, about a "banal" college breakup, but one which is run through the mill of Wallace's self-conscious innovation (Boswell, *Understanding* 90). For Clare Hayes-Brady and Boswell, the story "unfolds during a therapy session in which the breakdown of the couple's relationship is discussed by both parties," with an "offstage therapist who, near the end, begins breaking into the story and offering her own observations" (*Unspeakable* 181; *Understanding* 91). I suggest that we might read the story's "fiction therapy" not as a metafiction about therapy but as a therapy session filled with fictions. The story is a "structure of lies" (158) because Bruce voices *both* parts of the couple's story. Bruce has pared down the emotional content of their relationship into a "well-formed formul[a]" (152) and has no trouble, therefore, playing his partner's part in the 'dialogue': he is both "Here and There." This interpretation makes the story especially unsettling when Bruce takes her early statements about him ("It felt right to be with him" [159]) and we read them from his mouth. The therapy session is a joke. There is a wall of glass between Bruce and both his partner and his therapist, and he learns nothing from the 'dialogue' with his partner because it is really a monologue: an unemotional case report of the relationship in which he coolly records both parts.

Wallace's Treatment of Doctors

It is clear that to write about therapy, for Wallace, is to write in the margins of the irreverent, postmodern, male literary tradition with which he is most often associated. In Wallace's work there is a glass barrier between patient and therapist that is seemingly insurmountable. Those studies that have focused on Wallace's representation of illness and medicine tend to be limited to a couple of his texts and go no further than this conclusion. Though it is certainly the case that Wallace's therapy fictions do poke some fun at their therapists, in the rest of this chapter I will broaden and challenge the narrow view that this is all that Wallace is doing. We will see that Wallace's therapists emerge as part of his critique of postmodernism because the glass wall in his fiction has two sides.

To write about mental illness, for Wallace, is also to write through other works. It is remarkable that Sylvia Plath's influence on Wallace, for example, has never been discussed, despite his clear engagement with her work and Plath's obviousness as a reference point in any discussion of American fiction and depression.[94] To be the only author named in Wallace's first story other than Descartes (who is an enormous figure in the background of Wallace's work) suggests that Plath is of considerable importance, and Wallace's sustained line of allusions to her work throughout his own bears this out: Plath informs not just "Trillaphon"'s project but Wallace's career-long effort to articulate his characters' experience of illnesses such as the Bad Thing. Though her work has not been discussed in relation to Wallace's, after Wallace's death in 2008 their suicides are morbidly linked all the time, of course. In his review article in the *Journal of American Studies*, for instance, James Annesley suggests that "just as it is hard to read Sylvia Plath or Virginia Woolf without thinking about the way they ended their lives, so too is it difficult not to look for . . . evidence in Wallace's work" (133). Wallace himself was aware of the cult of personality around Plath—one of the characters in "The Suffering Channel" has a complicated self-harm ritual involving a "special numerical key code that was totally unbreakable unless you knew exactly which page of *The Bell Jar* the code's numbers were keyed to" (*Oblivion* 319)—and it is ironic that the same thing has happened to Wallace. Jeff Jarot argues, for example, that stories such as "The Depressed Person" are expressions of Wallace's own "personal struggles" (108) and a means for Wallace to find a "Support System" in the form of his readers: a system with "an unlimited supply of potential members" (110).[95]

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[94] Philip Coleman briefly notes a reference to Plath in *Infinite Jest* (11), and Jeffrey Severs sees a link between James Incandenza's death—"How much must a person want out, to put his head in a microwave oven? (*Infinite Jest* 230)—and Plath's own suicide (Severs 270n. 33).

[95] Andrew Solomon reflects on this problematic approach in a *New York Times* blog titled "The Lure of a Birthright: Why the Plath Legacy Lives." Solomon writes about Plath's "literary suicide"—a "sorry chain" of loss in which "David Foster Wallace is the latest link"—and notes that, "For a long time, all of Plath's work (as Virginia Woolf's) was read through the lens of her suicide." I will proceed with Solomon's conclusion in mind: "[Plath] is in fact a remarkable poet, whose writing would warrant our attention even if she had lived her days out happily."

Wallace was aware of Plath and *The Bell Jar* at least as early as 1984, with the publication of "Trillaphon," and some of his allusions to Plath's novel do seem as irreverent as the Pynchonesque characters in his early work. In *The Bell Jar*, for example, Plath's narrator Esther dreams of a useful therapist who would "lean back in his chair and match the tips of his fingers together in a little steeple and tell me why I couldn't sleep and why I couldn't read and why I couldn't eat" (136). Wallace seems to nod to this description in a number of his therapy scenes. In the earliest example, in the story "Little Expressionless Animals," Alex Trebek's therapist matches it exactly, "mak[ing] a church steeple with his fingers and contemplat[ing] the steeple" (*Girl* 19). In *Infinite Jest*, according to the students at the tennis academy, all Dolores Rusk does when they come to her "with an Issue" is

> make a cage of her hands and look abstractly over the cage at you and take the last dependent clause of whatever you say and repeat it back to you with an interrogative lilt — 'Possible homosexual attraction to your doubles partner?'
> . . . 'Drives you bats when people just parrot you instead of responding?' (437)

Similarly, in "The Depressed Person," the depressed person is often distracted by the encaging shapes that her therapist makes with her hands. This is a "habit" that

> consists of placing the tips of all her fingers together in her lap as she listened attentively to the depressed person and manipulating the fingers idly so that her mated hands formed various enclosing shapes — e.g., cube, sphere, pyramid, right cylinder — and then appearing to study or contemplate them. (*Brief Interviews* 36)

Since Esther's all-clarifying therapist is just a fantasy, Wallace's pattern of allusions is arguably in keeping with the black jokes discussed in the beginning of this chapter; Wallace updates Plath's image as if to suggest that even when the fantasy of the steeple-fingered therapist does come true, the steeple-making is encaging, not a sign of sagacity.

There are other allusions to Plath and *The Bell Jar* in Wallace's work that complicate this picture, however. Wallace explicitly alludes to Plath's novel a couple of times in *Infinite Jest*. When the academic Molly Notkin is interrogated she describes the "bell-jar" of Joelle's mother's "denial" (794), while the less well-read Don Gately notices that "Kate G." is "reading

somebody called Sylvia Plate" (593).[96] The link between Plath and Kate is not a throwaway one but a guide to understanding Kate's character. When Kate is first introduced as a suicidal patient, for example, her relationship with the doctor in the scene is governed by further allusions to *The Bell Jar*. Kate tries to explain to the doctor her "*feeling . . .* like every sound you hear all of a sudden has teeth" (73). She describes it more like "horror" than "sadness," and says "*Lurid* is the word. Doctor Garton said *lurid*, one time" (73). "Lurid" is an unusual word, but one that appears a significant number of times in both *The Bell Jar* (22; 43; 68) and Plath's poetry (*Collected Poems* 115; 179), suggesting that this may have been the source of the word for Wallace. Interestingly, "Doctor Garton," who gives the word to Kate, is only a couple of letters away from *The Bell Jar*'s "Doctor Gordon" (135), and the characters are similar. Just as Esther "hate[s]" Doctor Gordon because instead of steepling his fingers wisely he spends their time "tapp[ing] his pencil" on his pad (135), Kates "face writhe[s]" while her doctor spends too much time "writing" (73). For Wallace to allude so closely to Plath's character suggests that he was giving some credit where it was due: just as Doctor Garton is the source of the word "lurid" for Kate, so Doctor Gordon (and Plath) were important sources for Wallace in this scene.

The most significant allusion to *The Bell Jar* is in the description of Kate's doctor. Throughout the scene Wallace avoids focalising through Kate; for the most part we are close to the mind of the doctor as he tries to record her status, and we are therefore as abstracted from her experience as he is. Appropriately, then, his eyes are said to look

> severely magnified behind his attractive but thick glasses. . . . Patients on other floors during other rotations had sometimes complained that they sometimes felt like something in a jar he was studying intently through all that thick glass. (72)

The title for *The Bell Jar* comes from Esther's description of depression: "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream" (250). It is a

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[96] Later, Joelle sees "a copy of some yellow paperback called *Feeling Good*" on Kate's bed, a reference to David D. Burns's *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* (1980), the book that popularised cognitive behavioural therapy. Given Kate's fate, this is, perhaps, Wallace's subtle jab at the unhelpfulness of certain therapeutic techniques.

metaphor that captures the suffocating, distorting quality of mental illness, and the fear that comes with knowing the bell jar can always "descend again" (254) over its victim. Wallace adopts this metaphor and changes it to suggest not only that Kate is depressed, but that the "thick glass" around her is a total, ever-present barrier between her and her doctor, a distorting lens that isolates anyone looking for help behind a transparent wall. This is not the fault of the doctor, necessarily; indeed, the glass metaphor stresses that the barrier is see-through, that the doctor wants to (and, to a greater extent than Ballard's or Puig's characters, can) see his patient, and yet despite this cannot really feel or understand her pain. Seeing and hearing her description is not enough, because the pain *cannot* be described. For Kate, lost on the wrong side of the glass wall, the situation feels all the lonelier with a doctor on the other side trying earnestly to peer through.

Though *The Bell Jar* was published in 1963, Baker et al. do not associate it with this period but see it as a forerunner of the "newer wave" of fiction in the 2000s that features "psychiatrists who provide a listening ear, rather than physical control" (Baker 78; 84-85). As Lisa Appignanesi puts it, *The Bell Jar* is a rare example of a novel from the 1960s in which the "fictional psychiatrist, Dr Nolan" is "something of a guardian angel amid the horror of asylum life" ("All"). It is significant that the word "psychiatrist" in *The Bell Jar* (ignoring one other minor instance when Esther has an unvoiced thought about someone else's career [75]) is first used to end a chapter at the exact half way point through the novel (133). Though that first psychiatrist is not much help, the word marks a literal turning point in a narrative that ends in Esther's ultimate freedom (255). The institution is still a place of parody and paranoia in Plath's novel—a place where the "lawn is white with doctors" (189) who ask clichéd Freudian questions about "toilet training" (215), and where you cannot say anything without a doctor standing "at [your] elbow taking notes on a tiny, almost invisible pad" (190)—but the effect of *The Bell Jar* is profoundly different to other parodic, paranoid, anti-psychiatric works that were published around the same time. There is little sense in Plath's novel of the countercultural notion that madness and mental illness are socially constructed, "an ideology designed to control and punish social dissidents" (Beilke 33). Unlike Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent Into Hell* (1971)—to take an example that Wallace had also read—in which a visionary patient has to remind his doctors that he is "not depressed, Doctor. I am not" (241), there is no doubt that Esther has lost her hold on her sanity and desperately wants help.

Though the institution itself could do with reformation, Esther is sick and ultimately rescued by her relationship with a medical professional.[97]

The Bell Jar's rather more sympathetic treatment of therapy does not fit into our current understanding of Wallace's influences. This is not to say that by alluding to Plath's novel Wallace necessarily adopts its argument, but his sustained allusions to Plath seem to continually point to her sympathetic position. Though Wallace read anti-psychiatric works such as Laing's *The Divided Self* (1960) in detail, and drew heavily on Laing's definition of schizophrenia in *Infinite Jest* (Burn 73), there is not any sense in Wallace's work that madness is liberating or epiphanic.[98] Wallace's use of the bell jar metaphor in Kate Gompert's introductory scene, for instance, seems all the more important when we recognise that other allusions to countercultural texts in the same scene are turned on their head. Kate refers to Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, but she disagrees with its conclusion. Referring to the film based on Kesey's novel—"That old cartridge, Nichols and the big Indian" (78)—Kate reveals that she does not interpret the infamous "LOBOTOMY" scene (Kesey 277) at the end as "that bad," because she would "go willingly," just as she would gladly have "ECT again" (74). ECT is not a source of horror for Kate but a means of escaping *from* horror.[99] Plath is a more vital source for this scene because, like Esther, Kate needs help, and the doctors are

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[97] Mark McGurl suggests that the "institution in Wallace is not a place of gothic entrapment and abuse, as it had been in" *Cuckoo's* or *The Bell Jar*, with "their harrowing tales of shock therapy 'punishment'" (37). While I agree that Wallace's institution is not gothic like Kesey's, this is a narrow reading of *The Bell Jar*. As Gavin Francis points out, in his discussion of the changing reputation of ECT, the procedure in *The Bell Jar* is "alternately terrifying and transcendental – terrifying when administered by an uncaring doctor, and transcendental when delivered by someone more compassionate" (26).

[98] Though Bleakley and Jolly argue that Wallace only parodies therapy (785), they recognise that Wallace does "not romanticise mental instability as an alternative to prescribed drugs" (783).

[99] In her memoir about depression, Elizabeth Wurtzel writes about her argument with her doctor: "'I want shock therapy,' I say, 'I've read about it recently, and apparently it works quite well on people who are beyond hope'" (267). Though D. T. Max's suggestion that "The Depressed Person" is a revenge fiction against Wurtzel is illuminating (*Every Love Story* 241), Wurtzel's self-portrait was perhaps not entirely at odds with Wallace's own understanding of how depression affects people.

trying to offer it. Wallace's characters are not countercultural prisoners of an evil system or a Nurse Ratched, but the victims of their own sickness.

Though *The Pale King*'s Meredith Rand takes a different view of the "horror-movie stuff . . . electroshock treatments like in that one movie" (*Pale King* 473), it is significant that Wallace's treatment of therapy in his final novel is also put into the mouth of its most central female character. I suggest that Meredith Rand, who cut herself as a 17 year old and consequently spent three and a half weeks in a "psych hospital" (470), is another character who is shaped by Plath's influence. Her chapter notably begins with an obscure reference to "The Bell Shaped Men" (446), and Rand marries (though no longer loves) a dying man called "Ed" (full name: Edward) who suffers from "cardiomyopathy" (489; 468), echoing Plath's own husband, the poet Ted Hughes (full name: Edward Hughes), who eventually died of a myocardial infarction.[100]

Rand's portrait of the mental health institution is similar to Plath's in many ways. She loathes what she calls the "nut ward" she is sent to (470), as Esther hates "the house . . . chock-full of crazy people" (*Bell Jar* 148). The phrase "mental health *system*" is itself a contradiction for Rand (504), because doctors in a system treat patients like "piece[s] of machinery" instead of as "human being[s]" (473). Wallace adopted and altered Plath's jar metaphor in the scenes with Kate, and it evolves again here: Rand thinks the doctors see

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[100] It may not be coincidental that Meredith Rand and Sylvia Plath share the same three-syllable forename (Mer-e-dith and Syl-vi-a) and the same monosyllabic surname (with the "a" sound in the middle). Rand has a friend who takes her to the bar called "Beth Rath," who perhaps picked up the remaining "ath" sound from Plath's surname (462). That Rand is also defined by her status as a "fox" (474; 485), meaning someone very beautiful, gestures towards Ted Hughes's "most famous poem" (Heather L. Clark 102), "The Thought-Fox." The poem is, significantly, about hunting down literary inspiration, about having ideas "ente[r] the dark hole of the head" (1811), so it likely appealed to Wallace who was interested in the problems of influence. Given his interest in Plath, he was surely familiar with the complicated literary marriage between Plath and Hughes, and perhaps too with Plath's "Burning the Letters," a poem that she wrote "on the other side of the page upon which she had typed Hughes's" poem (Clark 102), and which responds to "The Thought-Fox" quite explicitly: "the dogs are tearing a fox" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 205). In *Birthday Letters* (1998)—the collection that Susan R. Van Dyne calls Hughes's "anguished memoir of their marriage" (4)—Hughes writes, in what could be an epitaph for Meredith's own ailing marriage, "If I had grasped that whatever comes with a fox / Is what tests a marriage . . . / I would not have failed the test. . . . / But I failed." (115).

"everybody through this professional lens that was about half an inch across—whatever didn't fit in the lens they either didn't see or twisted it or squished it in so it fit" (477). Yet Rand also recognises, as Plath does, that it was "not the doctor's fault or that they were stupid": this is just the way that institutions, unfortunately, work (491).

Plath's significant influence does not override the influences that have already been discussed, but casts them in a different light. Wallace's specific engagement with the metaphor of the bell jar demonstrates that his adoption of Puig's and Ballard's style and his references to glass are not atomistic but part of a sustained vision, one which does not support the argument that Wallace's therapists are one-dimensional caricatures. Though "Good Old Neon" is not indebted to Plath in the same way, it is perhaps the clearest instance in which Wallace is generous to a therapist character. In the beginning, it seems considerably anti-psychiatric: a forty page long monologue by a narcissistic man who spends all his time with his "pliable and credulous" therapist Dr. Gustafson (154) "fencing" with him rather than honestly opening up (143). Wallace writes at the end of the story, however, that inside you is

> the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes. (*Oblivion* 178)[101]

Here we are told the reason that therapy and the therapeutic cliché of 'opening up' is so difficult: the "soul" is trapped inside the body, and you can neither see "another soul" nor "show" your soul to others because "English" and language is too slow and inaccurate. The infinite "universes inside you" can only be glimpsed in "tiny fraction[s]" through the keyhole (179). It is from this metaphor that "Good Old Neon" takes its title. We learn on the penultimate page about the "neon aura" around Neal, an aura that the 'character' David Wallace sees in a yearbook photo, and which is really the faint glow of the soul inside each individual that everyone struggles to project outwards (180). Implicit here, of course, is the fact that Dr. Gustafson has a soul too. As Neal says, "Dr. Gustafson and I both had a good laugh over this one after we'd both died and were outside linear time" (163). The problem,

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[101] Perhaps this is a nod to Esther's description of "see[ing], as if through the keyhole of a door I couldn't open, [a memory of] myself and my younger brother" (*Bell Jar* 145).

for therapy, is embodiment and the walls that exist during life. Wallace's therapists, though they may be on the wrong side of the glass or the locked door, are like everyone else literally infinite in size, and far more interesting than their seemingly one-dimensional surface, if we care to imagine what we might find behind it.[102]

Wallace's work seems to align with Bracken and P. Thomas's view that though the anti-psychiatry movement was important in its day, the criticism of the 60s has, as Wallace said of postmodern fiction, "to a large extent run its course" ("Interview by Charlie Rose" 22:05-22:12). As Bracken and P. Thomas put it:

> we are also unhappy with the anti-psychiatry response in so far as it simply understands psychiatry as some sort of repressive force. This . . . fails to do justice to the complex reality of contemporary mental health care. (90)

Siri Hustvedt suggests that the same can be said of fiction about therapy. She argues that earlier novels such as Nabokov's *Lolita*, J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) all misrepresent therapeutic practice:

> These books are essentially bracketed monologues. There is no back-and-forth, no dialogue, no world made between therapist and patient. They are not fictional versions of therapeutic practice but narratives that employ psychoanalysis as a literary device to unleash an uncensored first-person confession. (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 156-57)

Though it is true that there is no constructive "back-and-forth" between therapist and patient in any of Wallace's monologic therapy fictions, his therapists are present in his fiction and *trying* to make some connection through the walls around them and their patients.

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[102] In an article in the *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, Woods Nash gestures towards the two-sided nature of medicine in his discussion of Wallace's early story "Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR." Nash argues that medical practice (in this case, the act of giving CPR) is as important to the person who delivers it as the person who receives it (103). Nash uses Wallace's story as a means to address the current model of medical ethics that privileges "impersona[l]" delivery of care (97), arguing that, for Wallace, the Account Representative's act is a "personal" one that "builds a bridge of continuity with his past, an act through which he might revive the more affectionate and spontaneous person he once was" (103).

From the glimpses we get of the therapist in "The Depressed Person," for example, we learn that she is perceptive and presumably quite earnest: she notes, for example, that the depressed person's use of the word 'pathetic' "felt to her like a defence-mechanism the depressed person used to protect herself" (*Brief Interviews* 41), which is surely true. The other therapist-figure in the story, the "Conflict-Resolution Specialist named Walter D. ("Walt") DeLasandro Jr." (38) who is enlisted to help the depressed person's separated parents provide for her many needs, appears again in the story "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (VI)" (a title which hints at the fact that characters have significance beyond the boundaries of their short story). In this later story, ostensibly a transcript of Walt's own "Parents' Marriage's End," we learn that his parents callously tossed a coin to decide who would keep their son (180). This information invites us to fill in the blank about what he— whose parents treated him so poorly—might have thought of the narcissistic child who felt her parents did not provide enough. This information is for the reader alone (and, given that the name is used 140 pages apart, is easy to miss), but it reminds us that the therapist is a real person with a rich interior life. Though the depressed person's therapist is largely absent from the depressed person's point of view, even when that therapist commits suicide, the story is written so that the absence is felt by an attentive reader. The therapist is the saddest and least one-dimensional character in that room.[103]

Unlike the so-called "depressed person," the depressed people in "Trillaphon" and *Infinite Jest* are sick. Both share the same illness—described in "Trillaphon" as the feeling "that every single cell in your body is . . . sick" (10), and in *Infinite Jest* as the feeling that "every cell and every atom . . . was so nauseous it wanted to throw up" (74)—and both dislike the insipid "authoritative term[s]" for their condition (696). In "Trillaphon," Wallace writes that "'severe clinical depression'" ("Trillaphon" 9) sounds like it just means "really intense

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[103] D. T. Max suggests that "The Depressed Person" was a "revenge fiction" for Wallace, a "way of getting even with [Elizabeth] Wurtzel for treating him as a statue (or, she would say, refusing to have sex with him)" (*Every Love Story* 241). There are certainly commonalities between Wallace's depressed person and Wurtzel, who says of her parents, in her memoir *Prozac Nation: Young & Depressed in America* (1994), "When they started doing battle night after night, I remember thinking that something was really wrong here because last I checked, *I* was the one who was supposed to have the problems" (59). Whether unfairly or not, Wallace does seem to sympathise with those who have to suffer the sufferer.

sadness" (10). In *Infinite Jest*, "*psychotic depression*" (696) suggests not only that "you just get like really sad, you get quiet and melancholy" (73), but that the pain is not even real. Yet it is significant that the reason they dislike the word depression is not because it is their doctors' oppressive fiction, but because the word does no justice to what they *are* actually feeling. It is not the case, as it is in Puig's and Lessing's novels, that the patient's emotional, spiritual experience is under threat from cold hearted doctors who want to categorise and anaesthetise it. Wallace's critics interpret the scene with Hal and his grief therapist as a postmodern parody of medical nomenclature in exactly this way, arguing that Hal is forced to come up with the right answers to satisfy the therapist's rigid clinical definitions of grief (Thomas 288; Toal 316-17). Yet the sad irony in this scene is that if anyone needs help feeling and processing grief, it is Hal. It *is* a bad thing that Hal feels a complete lack of emotion when he discovers his father's head exploded in a microwave, and the therapist is not oppressive for recognising this. Wallace's literary showmanship in this scene is as clever as always, but it emphasises the fact that Hal is the one with the problem. We learn about his episode with the grief therapist when Hal re-performs his performance for his brother Orin over the phone—note that this abstracts us away from Hal's body and feelings and focuses, like the medical footnote, only on the academic, detached voice. Orin's responses to Hal's story are often "just what the grief-therapist said," so the reader effectively experiences the grief-performance as if for the first time (256), and both the performance to the therapist and the performance to his brother have exactly the same emotional weight for Hal, which is to say none at all. As is the case in "The Depressed Person," however, this is not the case for an empathetic reader. When Orin interrupts Hal's retelling of the story to say "'Lyle said all that? That doesn't sound like Lyle'" (255), it is a reminder that Hal is lying to his older brother, feigning his cool emotionlessness just as well as he feigned his grief for the therapist. We learn much later on that Hal is "empty," afraid "of being really human," and is "really lonely for" the emotions that he "despises" in himself (694-95). Perhaps the grief therapist—who encourages Hal to get in touch with "how . . . it feels" (252)—is onto something?

Wallace's doctors seem to be, for the most part, earnest. Unfortunately, if the therapists do manage to make some cracks in the glass, their success is always mitigated. Dr. Curtis Jay is the only character in *Broom* to explain to Rick why his desire to possess Lenore is dangerous and abusive: "Are we mature? Do we love truly? . . . have we the wherewithal to

allow that Other to be a Self?" (347). He also insightfully explains the state of the novel's affairs to Lenore, warning her in one sentence how she might deal with both Rick and the conspiracy that is building up around her: "We are helpless and inefficacious as parts of a system until we recognize the existence of that system" (333). Because he is an unethical buffoon for the rest of the novel, however, they do not listen.

Meredith Rand has more success. Though it is not a professional psychiatrist who helps her, her husband Ed, an attendant at the mental health hospital and a "natural therapist" (482) gets her to stop cutting herself because he is "blunt" (488) and "said . . . basically that I needed to grow up" (498). Though this would not help everyone, it is what she needs to hear. Rand's chapter in *The Pale King* is itself a kind of therapy session in action. She tells her story to the character Drinion who, unlike other people who only see her beauty, pays attention to her words. That Drinion's name begins with "Dr." suggests that a genuine dialogue is possible, even with a doctor, if they can abandon their "professional lens" and the glass wall that comes with it (477). Except, of course, Rand also says that Ed was basically "just like a mirror"—another glass wall—and "he just showed you what was there" (482). The patient is only ever on one side of the glass, can never be sure if the connection with those on the other side is genuine (507), and ultimately has to help themselves. The end of Rand's conversation with Drinion is as abrupt as the revelation that she probably no longer loves her husband (508). Though there seems to be some small connection made with both men through the glass, both relationships are severed, if they ever genuinely existed in the first place. For Kate and the narrator in "Trillaphon," who don't suffer what Kate calls the "self-pity bullshit" (*Infinite Jest* 72) but the "Great White Shark of pain" (695), and cannot be saved no matter how caring the therapist, the glass wall of the bell jar remains hopelessly impenetrable.

We can sympathise—as I suggest Wallace's work also does—with Hal's grief therapist and Kate's ineffectual doctor. While the latter is of little help to Kate, Wallace reminds us that he is a "young mental health staffer" (69), that he is beholden to "strict methodological limits" that are designed to try and help helpless patients (71), and that he is not even "an M.D. yet but a resident" (71) and too young to be dealing with "hell" itself (651). He relies on the textbook definition of her illness because he literally has no other option. This does not make the medical language in *Infinite Jest* evil or incorrect. There are two versions of Poor Tony's

seizure, for example. In the body of the novel the seizure scene is full of rich imagery, of pain like "the sharp end of a hammer," the "squeak and rush of release inside his skull," the way he "flopped around" like a "gaffed fish" (305). In the endnotes, however, there is a rather less affecting, academic definition of a seizure as a, "quote 'episode of excessive neuronal discharge manifested by motor, sensory and/or [psychic] dysfunction, with or without unconsciousness . . .'" (1004n. 103). This description is not *wrong*. Like the patchwork anatomy of the Bad Thing in "Trillaphon," the main, emotional narrative is not supposed to be a completely accurate account of illness but a description of what it feels like to Poor Tony specifically. The same can be said of Cusk and his anxiety disorder in *The Pale King*. As Hawkins puts it, the "drama in pathography . . . is no worse a distortion of reality than is the biomedical myopia of the case report" (13). The glass wall works both ways. The therapists in Wallace's stories are not one-dimensional but *in* there, trying to peer through the wall and failing. The patients on the other side are suffering for real, and want to be helped. Each half of the story is valid, and Wallace's work—which allows that "sitting there at the foot of a bed looking at somebody who was in so much psychic pain she wanted to commit suicide was incredibly depressing and boring and unpleasant" (69)—has as much sympathy for the doctor as it does for the patient in this situation. Therapy is not an evil in Wallace's work, it simply throws a spotlight on how universally difficult it is for one soul to ever know another.[104]

In an interview around the time that *Broom* was published, when it was suggested to Wallace that he "seems to impale modern psychotherapy," Wallace's response was that "I tend only to be able to have people say stuff that I think is serious if I'm simultaneously making fun of the character. I think that's a weakness" (*Conversations* 9-10). This "weakness," as Wallace saw it, is evident throughout his career, beginning as early as "Trillaphon" with the doctor named "Kablumbus" (5). The name reads like the combination of Columbus and blundering, implying that we should not expect the doctor to be a helpful guide on the narrator's journey—on his anti-depressants—to his new world. The doctor in this story is by no means useless or incompetent, however. It is patient's personal experience of illness and

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[104] Wallace's glass walls are isolating whenever they appear. The tennis students in *Infinite Jest* play, for example, in a hollowed out area where any outside noise is "muffled" by the "spectators' glass panel" (261). This glass is "like an aquarium's glass," so "thick and clean" that it makes the spectators' sound "like the trapped survivors of something" and the players like they're in "total silence" (261).

his medication that are entirely idiomatic and therefore unknown. The sad fact is that mental illness is ultimately suffered alone, and that the doctor, who can send the narrator to an arguably better place, cannot be anything but a bad guide because he necessarily has no access to the narrator's interior. As the narrator writes, the true horror is the "realiz[ation] you're *under glass*" (10): the realization that you are trapped in a place where whoever looks at you will not see what you need them to see.

"A hell for one"

The Sylvia Plate joke in *Infinite Jest* comes just one page after Mario reflects that it is "increasingly hard to find valid art that is about stuff that is real" (592). Mario is referring specifically to Joelle's radio show that has gone off the air, yet the proximity of these allusions to two absent female artists (Joelle and Plath) is striking. Plath seems to have been a similarly valid, vital source for Wallace, especially when it came to writing *Infinite Jest*'s and *The Pale King*'s three most central female characters—Joelle, Kate, and Meredith. This poses a significant challenge to Toal's argument that Wallace uses his female characters as mere "cipher[s]," a means to fleetingly define the illness that besets the novel's more important men (317).[105] Though all three are depthful enough without Plath's help, the connection deepens their characters and informs their complicated relationship with therapy and therapists. While it is true that, as Janet Badia points out, reading *The Bell Jar* has become something of a "rite of passage" for young women (132) and therefore a cliché much mocked on television shows such as *Family Guy* (125), Wallace's project in *Infinite Jest* is in part about recognising that there is "weight to yet another cliché" (610). There is nothing narrowly gendered or shallow about the way that Wallace represents depression: it is not some "empty but fixed diagnostic frame for selfhood" (Toal 305), nor a means to pathologize a contemporary "crisis in masculinity" (306), but a purposeful evil and a living nightmare for anyone who suffers it.

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[105] Toal also suggests that Wallace's portrayal of depression in "The Depressed Person" as a "selfish and banal" condition is a consequence of the "difference of gender" of the story's central character (322). Following on from my discussion of "The Depressed Person" above, my discussion in the rest of this chapter will make it doubly clear that unlike Kate, this 'depressed' character has no idea what depression actually feels like.

Having established the metaphorical divide between patient and therapist across Wallace's therapy fictions, we can turn now to the other half of the picture: mental illness itself, and the language Wallace uses to describe the self that suffers it. In this final section, I will reveal how the metaphor of glass and the bell jar works alongside the heightened, religious metaphors of fire and hell that Wallace uses to describe pain. In *Infinite Jest* in particular, the metaphors of glass and fire are intimately linked. Wallace establishes this pattern early on, in the first Orin Incandenza chapter. Orin, Joelle's ex-partner and Hal's brother, is beset in his first chapter by the "heat just past the glass doors" coming from a sun that was "like a sneaky keyhole view of hell" (43). In the other direction, behind the door of Orin's self, he is experiencing a private kind of hell, "entombed" as he is on this morning in "psychic darkness" (42). We have a hell within, largely invisible to those outside of Orin, and a hell without, just about kept at bay by the glass door. Plath's metaphors are coded throughout this scene. It is here that we learn, for instance, about Orin's technique of suffocating cockroaches with glass tumblers (like mini bell jars), which foreshadows Orin's eventual demise at the end of the book when he is trapped in a giant "inverted glass . . . the size of a cage," through which he is unable to get his captors to "acknowledge anything he said" (971-72). Whether we read this "surreal and bizarre" (972) event as a literal encagement or a metaphor for depression catching up with Orin—which no therapist can "acknowledge" through the glass—Plath's influence on Orin's beginning and end seem clear. Inside the glass cage the fire inside you cannot be seen or communicated, because the "heat" is kept "just past the glass" (43).[106] *Infinite Jest* is Wallace's most sustained study of depression and mental illness, and in the rest of this chapter I will focus on it and Kate Gompert, the novel's most severely depressed character, in particular.

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[106] This image occurs throughout the novel, such as when Wallace describes the "sun" having "the attenuated autumn quality of seeming to be behind several panes of glass" (623). The combination of fire and glass appears in *The Pale King*, too. A short chapter begins: "Dream: I saw rows of foreshortened faces over which faint emotions played like the light of distant fire" (255). The narrator explains that this dream was "my psyche teaching me about" terrible, haunting "boredom," and he recalls his anxiety as a child about the ill-defined boredom of adulthood on the horizon: "it was an anxiety whose lack of a proper object is what made it horrible, free-floating. I'd look out the window and see the glass instead of anything past it" (256-57). The fire inside the adults, the pain they experience when they suffer endless boredom, is as yet an abstraction to the child, who cannot get past the glass to really feel it.

Depression in both Wallace's and Plath's work is not just an absence of "vitality" (Solomon, *Noonday* 443) but a present and malign horror. Wallace clearly understood that the mind is not separate from the body, yet he consistently describes the soul as if it is somewhat separate to the mental and physical illness it suffers. In order to understand Wallace's approach to illness we need to expand our picture of his influences once more. I will return to Plath again at the end of this chapter, but first we must look beyond the boundaries of twentieth-century literature. Like Andrew Solomon's *The Noonday Demon* (2001) and William Styron's *Darkness Visible* (1989), two of the better known memoirs about depression published around the turn of the millennium, Wallace's *Infinite Jest* borrows from great works out of the Western canon that are preoccupied with the soul and hell. As Styron writes, when we describe the "veritable howling tempest in the brain" with the "innocuou[s]" word 'depression,' it warrants from others a reaction "akin to . . . 'You'll pull out of it' or 'We all have bad days'" (36-37). Thus, where Solomon takes his term for depression from the *Bible*'s Psalm 91:6 ("*nor* for the destruction *that* wasteth at noonday"), Styron takes his from Milton's description of Hell in *Paradise Lost* (1674), in which "darkness" is not just the absence of light but the *presence* of shadow:

> A dungeon horrible, on all sides round
>
> As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames
>
> No light, but rather darkness visible
>
> Served only to discover sights of woe,
>
> . . .
>
> . . . torture without end (1.61-67)

We saw in the introduction that the writers who make Wallace "feel human and unalone" (*Conversations* 62) all seem to fall, significantly, into what might loosely be called a counter-enlightenment tradition. It is not the materialism of Hobbes and Hume that gives Wallace comfort, but the soulfulness (in the literal sense that their writing is full of the spirit and the soul) of writers such as Socrates, St. Paul, Rousseau, and John Donne. Keeping this and Wallace's early map of his method in "Trillaphon" in mind, it is enlightening to note that *Infinite Jest* is informed by three key sources that describe human beings in essentialist terms: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c.1600), William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1794), and

William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).[107] In their own ways, each of these texts rejects what James calls "Medical materialism" (19), the mode of thought that gleefully diagnoses "our own more exalted soul-flights by calling them 'nothing but' expressions of our organic disposition" (19). Though James was much "bemoaned" at the time for his "personal credulousness" (Bradley x), he does not deny that the "mental machinery" (the biological material) is the primary source of human behaviour. He only argues with the medical materialist assumption that "explaining th[e] origin" of our "soul's vital secrets . . . simultaneously explain[s] away their significance" (17). Blake, in a similar vein, challenges the empirical zeal of his own time, writing that though our senses are "ever so acute," "Man's perceptions are not bound by organs of perception; he perceives more than sense . . . can discover ("There is No Natural Religion" 8).[108] As we saw in "Good Old Neon," all of Wallace's characters have interior lives that are "clos'd" to others' "senses five" (Blake, *Marriage* [Plate 6-7]). Each of these three sources is animated by the tension between materialism ("this quintessence of dust" [*Hamlet* 257]) and essentialism ("infinite in faculties . . . how like a god" [257]). In each of them there is more to human beings than meets the eye.

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[107] As David H. Evans argues, James's *Principles of Psychology and The Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*—later published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)—is a key source for Wallace in *Infinite Jest*. Evans notes that when Wallace first describes Kate Gompert he draws explicitly on James's description of his own depression (187-88), further expanding the network of influences in that early scene. William Blake's *Marriage*, a religious epic about the conflict between good and evil, is the source for one of James Incandenza's films: "*Pre-Nuptial Agreement of Heaven and Hell*. . . . Animated w/ uncredited voices; 35 mm.; . . . God and Satan play poker with Tarot cards for the soul of an alcoholic sandwich-bag salesman" (988n. 24). Not only does *Infinite Jest*, in its penultimate chapter, flash back to when this fictional film was being made (971), but the novel was originally intended to open with a reference to "Blake's *Marriage* . . .—followed by various definitions of addict and addiction" (Moore). Blake ties a loose thread through the novel. Finally, *Hamlet*'s plot structure, family dynamic, and its concern with mortality and madness—what Polonius calls the "flash and outbreak of a fiery mind" (230)—clearly maps onto Wallace's novel, as we saw in chapter 2.

[108] As Matthew J. A. Green explains in *Visionary Materialism in the Early Works of William Blake* (2005), Blake was "far from rejecting empiricism entirely" (14). Green suggests that Blake is best understood *as* a materialist, Enlightenment writer, who shared with Locke a commitment to "mental liberty . . . and even to free enquiry over institutional authority and public opinion" (17), but who ultimately objects to the "narrow bounds within which Locke confines" the self (18).

Wallace's work is part of the same spiritual tradition championed by the three Williams. Though James was a scientist and not a fiction writer, he understood that it made absolute sense to write about depression as a force of evil and its victims as "Sick Soul[s]" (104). In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace matches his description of depression to James's exactly. Just as James moves through the different types of depression, from "mere passive joylessness and dreariness, discouragement . . . *anhedonia*" (117) to, on the next page, "A much worse form . . . positive and active anguish, a sort of physical neuralgia wholly unknown to healthy life" (118-19), Wallace uses the same terms to describe Hal's "*anhedonia* . . . a kind of spiritual torpor" (692) before describing, over the next couple of pages, "the Great White Shark of pain. . . . *It* is a level of psychic pain wholly incompatible with human life as we know it. *It* is a sense of radical and thoroughgoing evil" (695). Wallace uses the same heightened, religious, entirely appropriate language to describe depression: it is a manifest "evil," something "incompatible" with the human soul that suffers it. Siri Hustvedt argues that we "continue to live in a world of medical materialism" (*Living, Thinking, Looking* 29), one in which we expect easy answers about illness from "fMRI or PET scans with their colored highlights" (26). No scan of our brain matter can tell us much about an individual's mental illness, however, because illness is "too mixed up with external stimuli and the personality of the sufferer" (26). In *Infinite Jest*, "*personality*" is just one character's "personal term for soul" (810). As we know from chapter 2, in Wallace's work there is always someone *in* there, and someone, therefore, who is suffering.

Wallace uses the language of hell throughout *Infinite Jest*, especially when he writes about Kate Gompert. Like Plath's Esther, who "had to live in hell before [she] died, to make up for missing out on it after death" (*Bell Jar* 214), Kate lives inside a "hell for one" (696). The "authoritative," medical materialist term for her condition, "*psychotic depression*" (696), pales in comparison to her felt reality:

> The person in whom *Its* invisible agony reaches a certain unendurable level will kill herself the same way a trapped person will eventually jump from the window of a burning high-rise. Make no mistake about people who leap from burning windows. Their terror of falling from a great height is still just as great as it would be for you or me standing speculatively at the same window just checking out the view; i.e. the fear of falling remains a constant. . . . falling to

death becomes the slightly less terrible of two terrors. It's not desiring the fall; it's terror of the flames. And yet nobody down on the sidewalk, looking up and yelling 'Don't!' and 'Hang on!', can understand the jump. Not really. You'd have to have personally been trapped and felt flames to really understand a terror way beyond falling. (696-97)

Wallace makes the point here that the depressed person is not insane, only acting precisely as a sane person would if they were surrounded by flames: the terror is as "great as it would be for you or me." Though Wallace stresses the invisibility of the pain by pointing to observers "on the sidewalk" too far away to see and understand the internal experience of the person at the edge of the jump, the distinction between the person within the building and the people without is one of circumstance only. The argument on these pages is very clear. Wallace uses the language of maths and logic—"fear of falling remains a *constant*" (696, my emphasis)—to communicate the fact that for the suicidal person, though their actions look to a sane observer like insanity, their choice to jump is a *sane* response to pain. Using a similar rhetorical mode, Wallace writes:

Think of it this way. Two people are screaming in pain. One of them is being tortured with electric current. The other is not. The screamer who's being tortured with electric current is not psychotic: her screams are circumstantially appropriate. The screaming person who's not being tortured, however, is psychotic, since the outside parties making the diagnoses can see no electrodes or measurable amperage. One of the least pleasant things about being psychotically depressed on a ward full of psychotically depressed patients is coming to see that none of them is really psychotic, that their screams are entirely appropriate. . . . Thus the loneliness: it's a closed circuit: the current is both applied and received from within. (696)

Kate's private interior identity is erased by the clumsy definition of her as the "psychotically depressed on a ward full of psychotically depressed," while phrases like "outside parties" and "circumstantially appropriate" read like a kind of legalese, demonstrating just how far removed those parties are from Kate's felt reality, because, absurdly, they rely on "see[ing] . . . measurable" evidence for pain that's only "within." As Hustvedt writes, the "notion that degrees of pain can be charted by numbers is ludicrous but routine. The attempt to avoid

ambiguity only increases it" (*Shaking Woman* 181). It is a "different world *in*side" (*Infinite Jest* 459), so Wallace flips the sane and insane parties on their heads, turning the logical argument in favour of the sufferers themselves. The insane person's reasoning follows simple cause and effect, as the last sentence makes clear: loneliness is a certainty: there is no escape: the sufferer is alone with the pain. Wallace gives space to the arguments of both parties on both sides of the glass wall, which are at complete odds but equally reasonable as far as each party is concerned. The doctors diagnose Kate as psychotic (there is no circuit in reality), but from her perspective there is nothing more real.

Though Kate's is the worst of all worlds, the fire and hell imagery that Wallace uses to describe the experience of the "so-called 'psychotically depressed' person" (696) is part of a pattern of imagery that runs throughout the entire novel. For example: when Hal breaks down in the first chapter, and the university admissions team try to describe the horrific sounds he had made, one says his face looked "As if he was strangling. Burning. I believe I've seen a vision of hell" (14). This idea that hell is privately contained is emphasised when Hal is taken to the hospital on a gurney, with the sun so bright he is "forced to roll [his] closed eyes either up or to the side to keep the red cave from bursting into flames" (16).[109] The eyes as a window onto the soul trapped in hell is later echoed when Joelle, who is "knelt vomiting" following her attempt to commit suicide, sees "searchlit helicopters" in the night "against the fire of her closed lids' blood" (240). Poor Tony, during a terrible period of Withdrawal, is raped by the personification of the passing of "Time," which, like a Miltonic demon, "spread him and entered him roughly and had its way and left him again" (302-03). The consequence of Poor Tony's poor choices in withdrawal is that he has a "seizure—a kind of synaptic firefight in [his] desiccated temporal lobes" (304). This "firefight" lights his descent into a private underworld (when he has his seizure he is literally on an *underground* train) where he sees "the fiery violet aura around the heads of the respectables who'd quietly retreated . . . each inside a hood of violet flame" (304). Like the description of Kate in a building on fire, Poor Tony is inside a private hell that only he can see. Just before Poor Tony is killed at the end of the novel, as he flees from Ruth van Cleve, his "breaths" are said to feel "flamish" (721). Addicts in AA are

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[109] Severs notes, interestingly, that Hal's initials, HI, are in Japanese Buddhism the character for "fire, one of the five elements and associated physically with body heat and mentally with passion" (112).

themselves described as being "like Hindenburg-*survivors*" (349, my emphasis), escapees from flames of a different sort, and it seems significant that Gately, a recovering addict, has a smoking spot at Ennet House "on the fire escape" (194). Gately has memories of his mother trying to "ward off the blows" from her abusive partner "with a fluttered downward motion of her arms and hands, as if she were beating out flames" (447). His mother also sank into a depression when she would inevitably fail to stay sober, and "After a few weeks of this she'd spend a whole day weeping, beating at herself as if on fire" (449).[110]

These images perhaps occur and reoccur in Gately's mind because, for much of the novel's second half, after he is shot in the shoulder, his "shoulder blooms with colorless fire" (619). It is significant that the fire is "colorless," because this implies that it does not register on the visible spectrum and is therefore invisible to anyone except Gately. This does not mean, of course, that the pain does not exist: in hospital with his whole "right side . . . on fire," Gately feels the pain is "like scream-and-yank-your-charred-hand-off-the-stove-type pain" (815). The pattern of fire imagery in *Infinite Jest* is clearly sustained and substantial. Just as an outside observer cannot see the colourless, invisible fire inside the minds of Gately and Kate Gompert, neither can they hear the "inaudible scream" that "resound[s]" inside the anxious Cusk (*Pale King* 335), nor the "soundless interior scream" of Poor Tony (*Infinite Jest* 304). *In*visible, *in*audible, colour*less*, sound*less*: each characters' private experience of pain is inaccessible to anyone outside them, especially to doctors on the other side of the glass.

As Esther says in *The Bell Jar*, "I hated the very idea of the eighteenth century, with all those smug men writing tight little couplets and being so dead keen on reason" (131). Depression cannot be enlightened by language or the senses, and the case report is too "tight" and "reasonable" to articulate hell itself. When Esther plans her suicide, she describes "what [she] wanted to kill" as something that does not reside in the "skin" or the "pulse" (the material stuff of the body) but "somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at" (156). Similarly, in her poem "Elm," Plath's speaker says she is "inhabited by a cry.

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[110] This metaphor appears to have been much on Wallace's mind at this time: in his interview with Larry McAffery, a few years before *Infinite Jest* was finally published, he notes that in healthier, non-"Western-industrial" cultures, "getting rid of the pain without addressing the deeper cause would be like shutting off a fire alarm while the fire's still going" (*Conversations* 23).

/ Nightly it flaps out / Looking, with its hooks, for something to love. / I am terrified by this dark thing / That sleeps in me" (*Ariel* 18). The "dark thing" is manifest, separate to the self it hooks into and "inhabit[s]." Depression, in *Infinite Jest*, is similarly malign. Wallace describes James Incandenza Sr.'s moods as "surround[ing] him like a field" (498), an idea that is echoed in the next section when Ken Erdedy sees that depression "seemed, though unmentioned, to hang fog-like just over the room's heads" (504). By the end of the novel, when Hal is in serious withdrawal and heading towards his breakdown, he feels as though "Something like a shadow flanked the vividness and lucidity of the world" (896). These three scenes might be read figuratively, but alongside Wallace's other descriptions of illness we are invited, I suggest, to take them literally. Geoffrey Day and Kate Gompert, for instance, seem to echo Plath's descriptions very closely when they describe depression as a "total horror. . . . It rose in me, out of me. . . . I can say and mean only *shape*, *dark*, and either *billowing* or *flapping* . . . the shadow of the wing of the thing" (649; 651). Plath and Wallace do not portray depression as some vapid, "commodified subjectivity" (Toal 305). Like Plath's winged, hooking creature, the shadowy monsters in Wallace are all too real.[111]

Perhaps one reason Wallace is so critical of Elizabeth Wurtzel in "The Depressed Person" is that Wurtzel "imagines that depression *is* the self—fundamentally and essentially. Neither a condition to be cleared up nor a means to be employed, depression is and always will be a constitutive part of who she is" (Cheever 360). Debra Beilke traces two very different approaches to the representation of mental illness in literature. Looking in particular at Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (1995) and Kate Millett's *The Loony-Bin Trip* (1990), Beilke argues that the two writers' different approaches to the self in relation to illness have drastic consequences. Millett, on the one hand, is an "antipsychiatr[ic]" (33) and defensive writer, whose "lash[ing] out at psychiatry" and at the "diagnosis of mental illness" is a consequence of the fact that Millett (like Wurtzel)

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[111] Tom Shippey argues that when J. R. R. Tolkien describes Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings* (1955) as the place "where the shadows *are*" (qtd. in Shippey 129), he is making a metaphysical point about the nature of evil. Evil, in Tolkien's work, appears to be both the absence of good and the presence of a malign force: "absence can take on a kind of life, can become presence – as it does for instance in Milton's presentation of Death in *Paradise Lost* (129). Like Milton's (and Styron's) "darkness visible" (*Paradise Lost* 1.63), depression, in Wallace's work, is not just the absence of light but the presence of darkness.

"conceptualizes her mind and her self as identical. . . . Therefore, psychiatric professionals who label her as 'sick' are dismissing her core self, her basic identity" (32). Jamison, on the other hand,

> separates her 'real self'—or at least her idea of her real self—from the extremes in moods and behaviour she experiences cyclically. Statements such as . . . 'a feeling as foreign to my *natural self* as being bored or indifferent to life'—all imply that mood extremes are not an expression of the real self, but of something else. (36)

Like William James, Jamison is a scientist who "consistently and insistently refers to manic depression as an illness of biological origin," but she also maintains some sense of a "core self—whatever that is, wherever it is located"—which is separate from her mind and body (36). Beilke argues that Millett's "project can be counterproductive" (37). Though the idea that you are being attacked by some malign force is not as *factual* as the idea that the force is part of you, it is nevertheless "empowering" (37) and can feel *true* for the person with the illness.[112]

Wallace's work directly addresses this problem. In his 1987 story, "Solomon Silverfish," for example, the character Sophie Silverfish is "cage[d]" inside a body with cancer (HRC 29.13, 7). Sophie feels "remote . . . unconnected" from her "shrinking" body (8), and she is saved, in some of Wallace's most moving pages, by her husband's stubborn Cartesianism. Unlike her doctors, Solomon Silverfish "knows that a sick Sophie is still in every important way a Sophie, not a collection of sticks and tubes" (10). This rock hard belief makes him "a magic person" to her, and the reason she is able to have "such a love for him in her *soul* that it was saving her even in very mortal sickness" (11, my emphasis). Solomon reminds his wife that "she is sick, instead of sickness. That what she is is not just what is in her" (11). As Wallace

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[112] This view runs somewhat counter to Susan Sontag's argument, in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), that illnesses such as cancer should be "de-mythicized," because so "long as a particular disease is treated as an evil . . . not just a disease, most people with cancer will indeed be demoralized by learning what disease they have" (7). Though David B. Morris acknowledges the importance of Sontag's landmark essay, he argues that "the effort to cleanse illness of *all* meaning discounts the therapeutic benefit that positive myths and meaning can supply" (270).

puts it in a later essay, "It's your body that dies, after all" (*Both Flesh* 8). Sophie's body is mortal but her soul is not.

Mental illness is more complicated because it does not just attack the body but the thinking thing itself. Wallace consistently describes the horror of depression, what he simply calls "*It*," as something that is both separate to the soul and absolutely bound up with it:

> *It* is a nausea of the cells and soul. *It* is . . . thoroughly painful and malignant and antagonistic to the self, which depressed self *It* billows on and coagulates around and wraps in *Its* black folds and absorbs into *Itself*. (*Infinite Jest* 696)

Is the soul itself sick? Or is it imprisoned within a sick body and brain? "All of a sudden it sort of dawns on you," says "Trillaphon"'s narrator, "that the Bad Thing is able to do this to you because *you're* the Bad Thing yourself! The Bad Thing is you" (12). The narrator recognises the biological origin of his disease. He refers to his neuroses as "pop[ping] up all over the inside of my brain, sort of like wrinkly gray boils" (7), a description that locates a psychological problem explicitly within the brain's grey matter and the physicality of the mind. The narrator is also uncomfortable with words like self and essence: he italicises "your *self*" (12) and hesitates when he refers to "your very . . . very *essence*" (11). At the same time, despite his ostensible hesitation the narrator does still use these terms, and describes the Bad Thing as "attack[ing] you" (11), as an antagonistic threat.

Abigail Cheever argues that questions about the "relation between depression and its sufferer . . . prove more striking for what they suggest about *selfhood* than about *depression*" (350). Wallace's story suggests that what the Bad Thing does to a person is enough to override the debate. As Hawkins puts it, sceptical criticism and theory about the "self" is made to "seem artificial, mandarin, and contrived" in pathographical writing where the self is "confronted with serious and life-threatening illness" (17): those "fictions, metaphors, and versions of self are contracted into a 'hard' defensive ontological reality—primed for action" (17). Wallace's story revolves around this problem, ending—as so many of his fictions do— with what seems at first to be an unsettling lack of closure. When the narrator hopes that he has escaped from the Bad Thing, he realises that this thought "is just highly silly when you think about what I said before concerning the fact that the Bad Thing is really" (19), at which point the story suddenly ends. The last word is, of course, some version of *me*, my *self*, my

essence. One interpretation of the ending is that the absence of the word suggests that the essence itself does not exist: the word, like the soul, is literally absent from the story. At the same time, we might read the severed ending as Wallace refusing to acknowledge this fact, a way to make the soul something the reader has to fill in for themselves, that we have to believe is there.[113] Myths about illness—metaphors such as the soul, evil, hell, and "illness as a battle between two opposed forces" (Hawkins 21)—are in many ways untrue but also "the way illness *is* actually experienced by a surprisingly large number of people" (21). Wallace puts to the side the fact that depression has nowhere to come from but within the self. By talking about his characters as souls trapped inside their sick bodies, Wallace distinguishes them from the illness that emerges from those bodies. This both stresses that depression is no one's fault and honours the struggle and suffering of those who have it. As far as Wallace's characters are concerned, and even though they might wish otherwise, their souls are all too present.[114]

Is a greater appreciation of metaphor the answer for Wallace's doctors? We like to think that therapy is always improving. In a talk given in 1958, Carl R. Rogers could look back with "anger" at the "primitive" treatment of Ellen West—the famous anorexic patient of Dr. Ludwig Binswanger (165)—confident that if she were alive today the treatment would have been better. In West's own words, she felt trapped "in a glass ball, I see people through a glass wall. I scream, but they do not hear me" (175). Rogers is optimistic that with a more empathetic approach, that "glass wall would have dissolved" (178). Wallace is never so optimistic. Where Rogers advocated "empathy . . . perceiv[ing] the internal frame of reference of another" (140), and Bracken and P. Thomas advocate a kind of "diagnosis" that is

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[113] We saw in chapter 2 that Stonecipher did the same thing, eliding the soul from his discussion—"where the body's hydraulics were adjusted and operated according to the . . . ?" (148)—and, again, forcing the reader to fill it in for themselves.

[114] Marshall Boswell has compared the treatment of depression in Wallace's work to Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot* (2011), a novel in which Wallace stars—according to Boswell—as the character Leonard. As Boswell puts it, "Eugenides depicts Leonard's manic depression as a purely chemical phenomenon managed by mood stabilizers and antidepressants," and Eugenides does not see, as Wallace did, a dependence on anti-depressants as a bad thing: "Eugenides depicts Leonard's various attempts to wean himself from his drugs not as acts of heroism but as the source of his trouble" ("The Rival Lover" 510).

"something other than the doctor defining the patient's world from the point of view of a detached expertise" (133), these seem like impossible dreams in Wallace's work, especially for those characters who suffer most. Kate's doctor can never put Kate at centre-stage. It is not that he chooses to ignore or does not care about her subjective experience, but that he is all too aware he will never really understand it. As Wallace puts it, he "was compassionate but was not, of course, feeling what she was feeling, and . . . honored her subjective feelings by not even trying to pretend that he was" (74). He favours 'objective' evidence because he literally has no other option. However much Wallace's therapists are trying—and they *are* trying—the glass wall will always be up.[115]

Since Wallace describes the experience of illness so well, do his readers get a better understanding of Kate's experience than her doctor does? Describing the role of fiction, Wallace said: "I don't know what you're thinking or what it's like inside you . . . In fiction I think we can leap over that wall itself in a certain way" (*Conversations* 62). In "Think!," one of Isaac Asimov's stories, a character cheerily predicts that "telepathy" could be put to great "use in psychiatry and in the treatment of mental disease" (67), but we can probably be thankful that fiction does not work this way. The "intimacy with a character is," Wallace admits, "a delusion" (62). Reading a description of pain is nothing like feeling the pain, and even if it was, feeling the pain—at least in our universe—would not enable a therapist to flip a switch and make it stop. Even when two people have the same metaphors for the sick soul, it does not save them. Kate, for example, has a single moment of respite in the novel, which comes in a very short chapter, set at "0245h," when she sits and talks with Geoffrey Day.[116] In this scene, Kate sits with her "head all the way forward so her forehead touches her foot" (648), her body twisted into the "closed circuit" of pain that characterises the psychotically depressed person (696) (when Kate is introduced, she also "touche[s] one bare foot with the toes of the other foot," making another closed circuit [72]). Geoffrey explains his own

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[115] Ellen West is the subject of one of Frank Bidart's most famous poems, "Ellen West." Bidart and Rogers both refer to the same source text, Rollo May's *Existence* (1958), and Bidart quotes directly from West's journals. Briefly mentioned in chapter 2, Bidart's poem is, like Wallace's work, profoundly dualist, describing West as someone who is "obliterated by her body, / buried in flesh" (*In the Western Night* 113).

[116] At another point in the novel Kate is comforted by alcohol—which she calls "*novocaine of the soul*" (775)—but in a world full of suffering alcoholics this moment is foreboding, not a relief.

experience of the "horror everywhere, distilled and given form. It rose in me, out of me" (649). Over the course of the chapter's few pages and Geoffrey's description, Kate's head slowly rises from her foot as she begins to see that Geoffrey's experience gets some way towards the feeling of her own horror: "I understood the term *hell* as of that summer day . . . I understood what people meant by *hell*" (651). Though he cannot "articulate it satisfactorily," it is enough to get Kate to "loo[k] at him" (651); though she is normally warped in on herself, Geoffrey's story resonates with her enough to break the closed circuit of pain between her head and foot. This does not save her or stop her pain, of course, but it is still important: though it is unhappy and unhopeful, it is the single moment in which Kate feels that someone else understands what she is going through.

Ultimately, for both therapists and patients in Wallace's fiction, the sad fact is that you ultimately suffer alone.[117] Thomas is clearly right that therapy is "'useless'" in *Infinite Jest* (288). However, Wallace's continued engagement with Plath's work throughout his career shows us that he had much more than parody in mind, and we do a disservice to his writing when we assume that he only makes fun of therapeutic practice. Wallace's therapists are not postmodern and parodic, but emerge as part of his critique of postmodernism. Though therapy never works in Wallace's world, what readers can get from reading his fiction is an appreciation that the glass wall has two sides. The mental health institutions in Wallace's fiction are not evil prisons but houses for the genuinely sick, and the therapists and doctors who work in them are not caricatures. To suggest that they are belittles the tragedy that underlies Wallace's therapy fictions. Though Wallace's characters are not able to develop the constructive relationship that Esther and her therapist do, Wallace's cynicism is less about the

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[117] In *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (2011), Timothy Aubry takes Wallace at his word, arguing that his fiction's "pragmatic aspiration to alleviate loneliness" is "therapeutic" (126). In my view, the glass wall is also a useful metaphor for the relationship between writer and reader. Wallace may have a therapeutic effect on a reader, but neither has direct access to the other: we ultimately read and write alone. Aubry does not mention Wallace's therapists, but he builds his argument about *Infinite Jest* on the Alcoholics Anonymous groups in the novel that also "promot[e] empathy" (107). Though AA clearly helps some of Wallace's characters—and is, in this sense, a working therapeutic model—it is still a community of individuals who are trapped inside their own heads, who have to focus on the "'In Here' that protects against a return to 'Out There'" in order to survive (374). I will discuss AA in more detail in chapter 4.

therapists themselves and more about the horror they are expected, somehow, to alleviate. It is not that his therapists are mere failures. The fact that Wallace's therapists are unable to help but keep trying anyway makes them far more tragic and meaningful than if they weren't bothering to try at all.

Wallace is not suggesting that the conscious self should be the solipsistic centre of our lives. He's saying that it is, whether we like it or not. The existence of the private, subjective, interior self is axiomatic in Wallace's work. The problem is not how you dispel this naïve humanist fantasy, but how you survive the "Cartesian nightmare" we all live in (*Both Flesh* 93).[118] The neuroscientific or posthuman explanation of the interior self (i.e. that it simply does not exist) does not help people who are reminded of their entrapment on a daily basis, whether by illness or addiction or simply by being alive. As Solomon says of himself: "I have discovered what I would have to call a soul, a part of myself I could never have imagined until one day, seven years ago, when hell came to pay me a surprise visit" (*Noonday* 443). We can see then that the soul is a vital and complicated metaphor for Wallace. Wallace's souls are trapped within the walls of their machines, and behind the glass walls that are automatically raised between therapist and patient. By using the metaphor of the soul, Wallace honours patient and therapist alike: both are alive and encaged and tragically unable to connect with one another. Wallace of course understands that mental illness and the mind are material, yet he also rejects the medical materialist model of selfhood, recognising that however untrue it is that human beings literally have a core self that suffers from their illness, it does no service to the people suffering to pretend that they are not *in* there to suffer. In chapter 4, we will consider Wallace's America in more detail, and the role the soul plays in a society driven by

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[118] Rachel Greenwald Smith argues that literary critics' "privileging of the 'single human being' as the location of feeling" in contemporary fiction "dramatically coincide[s] with the prevailing focus on the individual in contemporary society" (425-26). She argues that novelists such as Richard Powers should not be talked about as "humanist-realists" because that kind of reading has no "critical edge," and suggests that if we ignore contemporary fiction's postmodernist innovation in order to emphasise its "affirm[ation]" of "the individual human" instead, our critical readings will simply "naturaliz[e]" the "neoliberal ideology" that plagues us (439). My view is that Wallace's experimental energies are in service of his own affirmation of the individual: these are not mutually exclusive. To affirm the existence of the thinking thing does not necessarily mean you advocate neoliberal selfishness or solipsism. Wallace's souls are sick, not imperious. Their existence is a tragic fact, not a political statement.

technology that encourages its surrender. In this final chapter, we will also explore further the relationship between soul and body in Wallace's work, and how their conflict makes a self.

Chapter 4

<u>Chapter 4</u>

"(At Least) Three Cheers for Cause and Effect": Free Will, Addiction, and the Self

> Thus strangely are our souls constructed, and by such slight ligaments are we bound to prosperity or ruin.
>
> —Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (33)

"Both flesh and not"

In his essay on the filmmaker David Lynch, Wallace argues that the "*both*ness" in Lynch's films—an inherent ambiguity that frustrates the audience—is a marker of serious art: "we hate this '*both*' shit," he writes, it is what "we go to the movies to get a couple hours' fucking relief from" (*Supposedly* 211). From his severed, ambiguous endings to the "second voice" that speaks in his footnotes ("Charlie Rose" 18:13-18:14), Wallace's fiction thrives on bothness. This is especially true of Wallace's characters, constructed as they are out of both body and soul. Consider Wallace's ambiguous response when asked in an interview about his philosophical and mathematical beliefs:

> Personally, yeah, I'm a Platonist. I think that God has particular languages, and one of them is music and one of them is mathematics. That's not something I can defend. It's just something I've felt in my tummy since I was a little kid. (*Conversations* 123)

How do we reconcile Wallace's gut feeling (i.e., a *material* sense) that *immaterial* truths exist? His response is contradictory, because he bases a belief in essentialism on bodied feelings: feelings which, by their very materiality, make the immaterial indefensible. This is not just a muddled, off-the-cuff metaphor given in an interview, but a consistent bothness that shapes Wallace's characters through all of his work. In *Girl* a character says he was "kicked roundly in the psychic groin" (153), alluding to a mind (the "psych[e]") that is embodied and can therefore be wounded. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace describes the "grip on [Orin's] soul's throat" (46) and "a kind of peritontitis of the soul" (346), both of which embody that soul, giving it a throat and a peritoneum to hurt. In *Oblivion* he refers to "blood-fed minds" (17), firmly attaching the mind to the bodied brain, yet in his essay on Roger Federer he refers to the tennis player as being "both flesh and not" (*Both* 5), implying there is more to the mind than

that which is blood-fed. Wallace's ghosts, though dramatically detached from their bodies, still take corporeal shape: James Incandenza and Blumquist look like they did in life (they are clothed and appear to walk around), just as Lucien dies and "finds his gut and throat again and newly whole" (*Infinite Jest* 488).

Wallace clearly, consistently, links the soul to the body, yet also allows that it can exist outside of that body. How do we reconcile Wallace's exacting, scientific portrayal of his characters as evolved material beings with his and his characters' lingering attachment to their souls? The two models of mind that we have seen Wallace portray in the previous chapters contradict each other: the Cartesian, wilful soul—the ghost sitting in charge of the machine it occupies—comes up hard against our contemporary posthuman understanding of consciousness as mere illusion, something which operates under the *delusion* that it is in control of the body and brain. In chapter 3 we have seen that the soul is an important metaphor for Wallace, one which honours the sick souls who are, as William James puts it, "congenitally fated to suffer from [the] presence" of "evil" (108). One of the major philosophical problems that Wallace raises with his bothness of body and soul is that of free will. Are Wallace's characters autonomous? Do they have power over the own fate? Is the unconscious machine or the wilful ghost who haunts it in charge?

This problem has profoundly deep roots, with much of the history of Western philosophy revolving around the question of free will. According to Robert Kane, free will is usually defined as being in opposition to a deterministic understanding of the natural world, which holds that people's "actions might be determined or necessitated by factors unknown to them and beyond their control" (5). Kane and other contemporary philosophers organise the many nuanced positions on this problem into one of two categories, depending on whether the position places more emphasis on free will, on the one side of the equation, or determinism on the other.[119] *Compatibilism*, or soft determinism, is the argument that there is no conflict between determinism and free will. We obviously cannot choose our own

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[119] Complicating these categories is the argument that the universe is not determinist but indeterminist. As Kane points out, however, an indeterminist universe is not much use for people looking to prove the existence of free will: a universe in which events are governed entirely by chance and randomness does not leave much room for choice (23).

design, but the universe is such that, even if a choice does not appeal to our inbuilt nature, we can still make that choice. Freedom is defined by compatibilists as the "absence of constraints" (14), and determinism is not a constraint in this view because we are free to make choices in spite of it. *Incompatibilism*, on the other hand, is the argument that free will and determinism cannot be reconciled. To keep things simple, incompatibilists take two basic forms. Those incompatibilists who reject free will completely are *hard determinists* who would argue that the choices we make are as much a product of determinism as anything else. Libertarians (distinct from the political position), on the other hand, are incompatibilists who believe in free will and therefore reject the idea that our lives are determined. This is the harder position to defend since it requires an "extra factor or other to explain how free will is possible" (39), usually in the shape of an immaterial soul.

The problem of free will is fundamentally tied up with the problem of mind-body dualism: the more the mind or soul is connected to the body (which is governed by the same deterministic physical laws as any other material object), the less free it seems to be. Throughout the history of Western philosophy, free will is often explored in terms of the relationship between body and soul. Plato famously described the soul as a charioteer pulled in different directions by two horses, one representing good, lawful reason and the other base (bodily) desires. All humans are susceptible to becoming a "slave of irrational passion" (*Phaedrus* 41), but someone with mindful self-discipline can wrestle into balance the temptations of the body. For a middle ages philosopher such as Thomas Aquinas, the problem of free will was understood from a Christian perspective: if God has foreknowledge, since He knows everything that is to happen, do humans have any free will at all? For Aquinas, God is responsible for "mov[ing]" the will, but it is still the "will that acts": humans can still will themselves to sin, "though God does not want the will to do this" (561). In the Renaissance and with the emergence of modern science the problem of fate or God's foreknowledge was reframed once again, now as the problem of free will in a coldly deterministic, Newtonian universe. For Descartes, who allowed that the body is a purely mechanical object, the way to preserve free will was to elevate consciousness, the thinking thing, out of and above this new worldview. Descartes's use of mind-body dualism to keep free will intact is a crystallising point in the debate, and he has become the figure that modern accounts still build their argument around. In the centuries following what Antonio Damasio calls *Descartes Error*, Cartesian

mind-body dualism requires more and more of a leap, and free will, along with the soul, has less and less hold. The deterministic nature of the material universe is such a keenly felt problem because if we are made of matter then we are necessarily governed by those same laws. This is all too clear in a neuroculture in which we understand ourselves to be "essentially [our] brains" (Vidal and Ortega 7). Either we invest in a completely immaterial, wilful soul, or we have to play down how free the will really is.

The problem of free will was clearly very important to Wallace. From the letter he wrote to the *Amherst Student* in 1984 about another student's "selfish (and so warped) idea of [his] freedom" to play loud music ("Letter to *Amherst*"), to Marathe and Steeply's hilltop debate in *Infinite Jest* about all things American and free—"'Freedom! Freedom!' . . . Your freedom is the freedom-*from*" (320)—to Wallace's portrait, published the year before his death, of two young Christians struggling with "what love commands of" them in the story "Good People" (2007), it is a problem that animated Wallace across his entire career.

Where critics have explored this problem in Wallace's work the focus has largely been on Wallace's honours thesis on fatalism that he submitted to Amherst College's Department of Philosophy in 1985. Fatalism, briefly, is a hard incompatibilist position, and not to be confused with determinism itself: as Kane puts it, determinism does not rule out the possibility of human beings making choices, but fatalism rules out the possibility of free will altogether. Wallace's thesis has since been re-packaged and -published as *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (2011), signalling the turn in Wallace studies towards what Adam Kelly has called its third wave and a renewed focus on "Wallace's philosophical output" ("Death of the Author"). The first two major studies in this vein—*Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy* (2014) and *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace* (2015)—aim to recognise the importance of Wallace's philosophical training and his continued, learned engagement with philosophy throughout his writing.[120] *Freedom* in particular is a rigorous assessment of Wallace's early thesis and its

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[120] Adam Kelly sees this treatment of Wallace's philosophy as a development on from the second wave of Wallace studies, which had itself tried to move beyond the problem of postmodern irony in order to focus instead on "Wallace's relation to philosophers and theorists" ("Death of the Author"). At this stage, however, Kelly argues that the emphasis was not on the philosophical debates themselves but on "Wallace's own assimilation and response to" a particular theorist or philosopher, "with the often explicit

contribution to the philosophical field. Though it was not the book's aim, Wallace's body of fiction receives little attention, addressed only via a quotation or two from *Infinite Jest*, *The Pale King*, and one or two short stories. Where free will is briefly raised in *Gesturing*, the discussion also tends to revolve around the thesis and, additionally, Wallace's commencement speech, *This is Water*, with no more than brief references to the fiction in between (Durantaye 27; Vermeule 117).

My aim in this chapter is to expand the discussion about free will in Wallace's work to his sustained engagement with the problem throughout his fiction, where it is felt directly by his characters. Though the early thesis is clearly worth our attention, to focus on it alone as we interrogate Wallace's position is problematic, not only because it was written so early in the career of someone who came to "think of [him]self as a fiction writer" (*Conversations* 83), but because the thesis does so little to illuminate Wallace's own position on the problem. The aim of the thesis was to address Richard Taylor's fatalist argument, the idea "that it is not in our power to do anything other than what we actually end up doing," a conclusion Taylor arrived at through "a small handful of bland assumptions about logic" (Ryerson 7; 8). Wallace's response is an exercise in semantics, in which he uses Taylor's own language to "make each step of Taylor's argument perspicuous and explicit so that a fatalist couldn't find any wiggle room" (12), thereby arriving at exactly the sort of "humdrum conclusion" that Taylor's "humdrum assumptions" warranted (13). Wallace himself concludes:

> This essay's semantic analysis has shown that Taylor's proof doesn't "force" fatalism on us at all. We should now recall that Taylor was offering a very curious sort of argument: a semantic argument for a metaphysical conclusion. In light of what we've seen about the semantics of physical modality, I hold that Taylor's semantic argument does not in fact yield his metaphysical conclusion. And now the fact that it appears as though he can get his metaphysical conclusion from his semantic argument only by positing at the outset the truth of a doctrine thoroughly metaphysical, seems to warrant the following conclusion of our own: if Taylor and the fatalists want to force upon

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assumption that Wallace was himself versed in all these figures and engaging in implicit dialogue with them in his fiction."

us a metaphysical conclusion, they must do metaphysics, not semantics. And
this seems entirely appropriate. ("Richard Taylor's 'Fatalism'" 212-13)

Wallace's conclusion points us away from his own thesis: he merely reset the board that
Taylor unsettled, and there is everything still to play for in the metaphysical question of free
will. Though *Gesturing*'s narrow focus on the later work, *This is Water*, is arguably more
appropriate, since it is Wallace's attempt to distil a career's worth of work, to neglect to
engage with that entire career in favour of a short text designed to be easily communicable
does a disservice to the complexity of the problem and Wallace's engagement with it. For his
take on these complex metaphysical questions, we need to look to his fiction.

Daniel R. Kelly and David H. Evans have begun this project. Kelly argues that the "'one
big thing' [Wallace] knew [about] had something to do with the challenges and pitfalls of
choosing" (111), and he surveys how the problem of free will manifests itself in Wallace's
different works: from the problem of addiction in *Infinite Jest*, to the problem of paying
attention in *The Pale King*. David H. Evans's discussion of free will in *Infinite Jest* is much more
focused. Evans argues that the American philosopher William James is a "crucial figure for
Wallace, a figure with whom he could recognize remarkable parallels" (172), and he points to
two related concerns that the writers share: "the place of free will in a world where the self
seemed to have been reduced to an effect of immense inhuman structures and processes"
and the "possibility of religious belief in a culture dominated by scientific and naturalistic
assumptions" (172). For James, a "world without choice is a world without agency, and so for
James a world without humanity" (174). James's solution, therefore, is to believe in free will
against all the evidence: "My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will" (qtd. in Evans
174). Evans argues that Wallace seeks to preserve the same basic humanity in the face of his
own "postmodern situation," a society of spectacle and anti-interior postmodern theory that
"assail[s] the very category of the individual" (175). Though Kelly and Evans do not put their
position into the terms that Kane describes, both seem to argue that Wallace is a
compatibilist. Kelly argues that Wallace is someone for whom "life seem[s] to be shot through
with opportunities for choice" that "can be made well or poorly" (127), while Evans argues
that his characters come to a point where they can make a "critical choice" to "assert control
over their own lives" (181), even if that choice is to surrender their free will to a support
programme.

Neither Evans nor Kelly discuss free will in Wallace's work in terms of consciousness, the soul, and embodiment.[121] Indeed, Evans implies that Wallace would reject a "Cartesian subject or agent that precedes . . . action, something secure from the molestations of 'physical laws'" (175). Yet we know that the Cartesian subject has considerable weight for Wallace. My aim in this chapter is to reconsider free will in Wallace's work in terms of the relationship between body and soul. In the vein of the previous chapters, we will also see that Wallace's engagement with the problem of free will forms a significant part of his critique of postmodernism. Where postmodern fiction is characterised by indeterminist worlds and will-less characters, Wallace's post-postmodern fiction reinvests in deterministic laws and addresses the place of free will in that new worldview. One of Wallace's great themes is addiction, and while this has been much discussed, the governing metaphors that Wallace uses to describe what addiction does to people, what it does to their *souls*, have been completely neglected. In order to better understand Wallace's metaphorical treatment of addiction, we will start by clearly setting out the nature of the relationship between souls and bodies in his work.

Free Will vs. the Body

Deterministic laws are a problem for individual persons because they govern the material stuff of the body. Following the cognitive revolution this is all the more problematic, since we now understand that human beings are entirely made of matter. We have seen in chapter 1 that Wallace's novels were set inside this worldview. *Broom*'s city, *Infinite Jest*'s Boston buildings and the United States, and *Pale King*'s IRS and other civic institutions are models of large-scale heads: complex, mechanical systems filled with corridors and wires. §10 of *The Pale King* is one page long and extends this idea. Wallace reflects on the view that a "government bureaucracy" is a "'parasite'" (88), arguing instead that a

> bureaucracy is really much more a parallel world, both connected to and
> independent of this one, operating under its own physics and imperatives of

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[121] Neither does Michael J. O'Connell, who does argue briefly that Wallace gestures towards some "reality beyond biological determinism" (280). Though this, too, is a compatibilist reading of Wallace, it a loosely defined point in a broader attempt to situate Wallace's work in the context of Christianity.

cause. One might envisage a large and intricately branching system of jointed rods, pulleys, gears, and levers radiating out from a central operator such that tiny movements of that operator's finger are transmitted through that system to become the gross kinetic changes in the rods at the periphery. It is at this periphery that the bureaucracy's world acts upon this one. (88)

Like Wallace's phrase "both flesh and not" (*Both Flesh* 5), the description here of something being "both connected to and independent of" is, I suggest, Cartesian in origin. Descartes knew that the 'I' was "not present to my body only in the way that a pilot is present to a ship, but that I am very closely joined to it and almost merged with it" (*Meditations* 64). Recognising that the body and mind were connected, Descartes located the point of interaction between them in the pineal gland, describing the process as follows: all "movements" and "sensations," he writes, "depend on the nerves, which are like little threads or tubes coming from the brain" (*Passions* 220). The influence goes both ways. Just as the pilot directs the body, the body sends its "animal spirits" (220) to the pilot—the prime mover, the soul—to have it act in order to keep the body alive. Wallace's passage describes this same process. The "operator" is at the "centr[e]" of this system (like Descartes' pineal gland, which is "situated in the middle of the brain's substance" [*Passions* 230]) and causes the physical ("kinetic") movement that ultimately results at the system's outside edge. The soul "acts upon" the world *through* the mechanistic body, though that body, like a bureaucratic system, can go through the motions on its own until it receives orders from on high (which, as in any bureaucracy, take a frustratingly long time to filter through).

Wallace complicates this Cartesian picture of agent and cause, however, in the chapter's second and last paragraph. He writes: "The crucial part of the analogy is that the elaborate system's operator is not himself uncaused. The bureaucracy is not a closed system; it is this that makes it a world instead of a thing" (88). With this he writes against Descartes. The soul or operator is no longer immaterial, a divine substance that is ultimately separate to the whole system. The sequence of cause and effect that *seems* to originate with the operator and move through the body does not in fact begin with him. As Frank Bidart puts it, "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed" (*Desire* 9). Wallace's soul is not a divine, unworldly substance, but is part of the world.

If we look to the closing chapter, which continues the analogy of the self as a world and institution, we can clarify this further. The closing chapter of the novel is a sparse, symbolic sequence set in a timeless space: "The office could be any office" (539). Written in an inclusive second person, which suggests that this is a universal experience recognisable to any human reader, the narrator tells the reader/addressee that we are "trained observer[s] and there is nothing to observe" (539). In this empty space, the addressee is only loosely attached to the ground (they recline into their seat until they do "not feel [their] own weight" (539)) and they are told that "'The way we start is to relax and become aware of the body. / It is at the level of body that we proceed'" (540). Echoing Burn's argument that *Infinite Jest*'s severed ending seems to be designed to "break the closed circle and direct the reader outside of the book" (*Reader's Guide* 29), this final sequence is, on one level, an invitation to the reader (a "trained observer") to close the book (since "there is nothing [more] to observe") and shift their consciousness from the page to their own bodies and the real world they inhabit. The strangeness of the abstracted office setting and the ethereal dialogue, however, suggests that this chapter should also be read as a model of something universal and timeless. The scene, I suggest, can be read as a kind of limbo before birth, with the addressee being a consciousness waiting to exist. They are an abstracted, bodiless entity to begin with, without weight, and the only way to exist is to enter a body, to fill a form that allows them to "proceed" (540) into life ("It is at the level of body that we proceed" [540]). Like all evolved creatures, we are embodied in the world through physical forms and our "fate," as Bidart writes, "is to make something—if nothing else, the shape cut by the arc of our lives" (*Star Dust* 10). What the closing sequence tells us is that, metaphorically, we—the soul, the thinking thing—can only exist if we are placed inside a body (the machine that houses the ghost; the form that houses a soul). This does not bode well for the free will, if it can only exist in a vessel that is deterministic and emphatically unfree.

As Antonio Damasio argues, Descartes's famous dictum—I think, therefore I am—is wrong. Rather, "in the beginning [life] was being, and only later was it thinking. And for us now, as we come into the world and develop, we still begin with being, and only later do we think" (*Descartes' Error* 248). Wallace's closing scene, I suggest, is a portrayal of how the human 'I' evolved. The experience, reflects Wallace's addressee, "is nothing like sleeping" (540) because once it fills a form, that form is no longer just a 'dreaming' animal (i.e. an

unconscious, machine-like being) driven by instinct and impulse, but a form that is filled and changed by human consciousness. Wallace recognises that on a grand evolutionary scale, the body comes first and the human 'soul' comes later, produced by that body and by the evolutionary process. This, I suggest, is why Wallace's ghosts take corporeal shape. Wallace's floating souls still have organs and clothes, because consciousness is a product of the body. Wallace's souls are, paradoxically, *bodied* souls.

The soul is traditionally understood as being a separate entity from the material body, and is therefore what Kane calls the most "obvious extra-factor strategy" for libertarians trying to save free will from the deterministic universe (40). Is Wallace a libertarian? His metaphorical presentation of human beings is certainly dualist, insofar as he portrays consciousness as something at odds with the body in which it is encaged. However, Wallace also continually undercuts the essentialism of his ghosts because the shape they take is literally determined by the bodies from which they escape. I suggest that Wallace is a dualist, but not a dualist in the traditional sense. He does not separate mind completely from body, nor suggest that the mind is literally divine. What he does is metaphorically separate the small I, the observer, from the rest of the material body as a way to acknowledge that it still *feels* to people like there is some continuous core part of them that exists, that can think, that can be unhappy with the bodies they suffer to live in. The tragedy of human experience has not been altered by the cognitive revolution and, as we have seen throughout Wallace's work, to be conscious is to still feel "trapped inside" both a "physical self" and a "psychic self" (*Conversations* 32). Wallace's souls are "both connected . . . and independent" (*Pale King* 88), both flesh and not: they are a meaningful, historically weighted metaphor for an 'I' that, though it may not be in charge, is nevertheless the part of the person that has to come to terms with the gods or with fate or with the body in which it finds itself.

Free Will after Postmodernism

In each chapter so far we have explored different ways in which Wallace bridges the postmodern with the post-postmodern. Wallace re-instates the writer's body and brain, writing against a portrait of the artist as nothing more than a paper entity, an originless thing that stitches together tissues of citations. At the same time, Wallace is putting some faith in

the soul, writing against a view of the human being as an amorphous cultural category rather than as something unique and distinct from the rest of the animal kingdom. Wallace rewrites the relationship between patient and therapist—a relationship often parodied in postmodernism—as two souls trying hopelessly to communicate their experience from inside the body's walls. In this final chapter I will bring these ideas together, arguing that Wallace's reinstatement of the stubbornly material body and brain, unlike postmodernism's boundless, textual bodies, paradoxically creates a space—literally, a vessel—for the soul in Wallace's fiction.

Wallace's dualistic, humanist conception of character is a direct challenge to a key theoretical underpinning of postmodern fiction: the absence of cause, effect, and agency in the indeterminist postmodern worldview. In *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction* (2005), Samuel Chase Coale puts forward a model of the twentieth century's literary movements that takes into account the scientific narratives that were being told alongside them. Coale argues that modernism, for example, is built upon a kind of Einsteinian relativity. As a movement it "assaulted" the ailing "Enlightenment values of rationality, logic, analysis, and conscious control" that had dominated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The determinism of William James's era no longer ruled, because such stable "metanarratives" were replaced with the more unsettling explanatory theories of Freud and Einstein. Yet no matter how "fragmented and scattered" the reality portrayed in modernist literature might be, there is ultimately, "beneath [the] linguistic and structural pyrotechnics" associated with individual, relativistic points of view, an "'author'-ized and recognizable world" that remains constant (2).

Postmodernism, according to Coales, is built upon Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and the fundamental, indeterminist uncertainty that is a consequence of the quantum universe. Postmodernism "extends" modernism's "basic assault," and "dismantle[s] and undermines those authorized concepts" yet further, "question[ing] every form of authority, including that of language itself" (2). The postmodern world is one in which, as Pynchon puts it in *Gravity's Rainbow*, "cause-and-effect may have been taken as far as it will go" (105). For Coale, postmodernist literature "posits no bottom line. It demolishes any notion of origins" (3). There is no underlying constant. It is not the observer's relativistic point of view but reality itself that is unreliable. This is an indeterminist universe, one that operates randomly and

chaotically. Consequently, postmodern fiction is dominated by a prevailing sense of paranoia. In a world (and in novels, such as *Gravity's Rainbow*, about that world) that actively resists decoding, "Conspiracy, whether actual or theoretical, provides an antidote . . .: everything becomes a sign, a clue, a piece of a larger puzzle" (4).

As Drew-Lynn puts it in Wallace's story "Westward": "Postmodernism doesn't stress the efficacy of will, as you know" (*Girl* 249). Critics such as Peter Boxall and Stephen J. Burn have argued that post-postmodern literature breaks with the indeterminist postmodern universe in its return to history, family, the body, and causality. In *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (2013), Boxall argues that theorists are "develop[ing] a new theoretical language with which to rethink . . . the stubborn materiality of the body" (16). Where postmodern literature and theory portray the 'human' as text, a culturally constructed and therefore unstable category, post-postmodern writers portray the 'human' as a somewhat stable, material entity with a shared nature across cultures. This coincides with a change in how writers portray their characters. Burn notes that that

> [w]here the emphasis on character seems to differ between postmodern and post-postmodern fiction . . . is in the degree of personal history dramatized by the author. . . . In, say, William Gaddis's *JR* (1975), Coover's *Lucky Pierre*, DeLillo's *Great Jones Street* (1973), or *White Noise* (1985), the central characters—JR Vansant, Pierre, Bucky Wunderlick, Jack Gladney—may largely seem to be psychologically credible, but they do, however, seem to have emerged more or less out of nowhere. (24)

Keeping in mind Burn's argument that "Post-postmodernism explicitly looks back to, or dramatizes its roots within, postmodernism" (19), we can see a shift in the work of a number of Wallace's contemporaries from postmodernism's lack of causality to the central importance of "shaping influence[s]" (24).

The writers discussed in previous chapters—Bidart, Egan, Mitchell, Adrian, Hustvedt, Gray—all seem to be part of this shift, recognising, as Jonathan Lethem puts it, that "Your parents are the first memo to come across your desk, on a page so large you can't see past its edges" (*The Ecstasy of Influence* 3). Two friends of Wallace, Jonathan Franzen and Jeffrey Eugenides, engage with postmodern indeterminism quite explicitly. Franzen talks about how

he "internalized and tried to build on" the way in which Pynchon, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, "creat[es] an immensely complex world in which conspiracy is the organizing principle" ("Art of Fiction"). Franzen explains, however, that in his first novel *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) he wanted to "go beyond the unseen conspiracy to *a seen conspiracy*" (my emphasis). Where Pynchon's novel actively resists clear patterns of cause and effect, Franzen moves away from that lack of causality in the family sagas *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010), in which children are very much the product of their parents. The conspiracy is seen. The characters know about genetic influence and recognise the forces that have shaped their own identities: "Her granddad had once been a true athlete . . . which was probably where her height and reflexes came from" (*Freedom* 37). They are *caused*, and they know, to some extent, the causes.

Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2002)—narrated by "the most famous hermaphrodite in history," a character with a "male brain" who "was raised as a girl" (19)—is about this same seen conspiracy, about coming to terms with one's own "genetics . . . this map of ourselves . . . [that] dictates our destiny" (37). The novel is an epic "Homeric" song of the narrator's journey to reconcile how he feels *inside* with how the world sees him. He ultimately has to come to terms with the "recessive mutation on [his] fifth chromosome" (4), his stubborn genetic destiny that pre-determined his life before it started: a sequence of cause and effect that cannot be ignored or overridden. Significantly, *Middlesex* seems to take its structure from Salman Rushdie's seminal postmodern novel *Midnight's Children* (1981). Each is arranged into "Books" with named chapters, a way for the narrators to organise sprawling narratives that begin with a comic amount of space given to the story of the grandparents, then the parents, of the narrator who turns up late to his own story.[122] *Midnight's Children* is organised, in part, around the leitmotif of "1,001," the "number of night, of magic, of alternative realities" (300). Saleem says, for example, that there are 1,001 arrests (498) or 1,001 marriage proposals a

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[122] This narrative structure originates with Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristam Shandy, Gentleman* (1767), an influence that Eugenides acknowledges in an interview with *3:AM Magazine*: "Of greater importance to me" was "the line from *Tristram Shandy* that runs through Kafka, Günter Grass and Rushdie." In the spirit of chapter 1, Eugenides adds, in an interview with *BOMB*, that "Literary influence is like genetics, too. Rushdie got some of his fireworks from Günter Grass and Gabriel García Márquez. . . . But some of my stuff bears no relation to these writers. Different gene pool entirely."

week (271) (see also: 177; 436; 441; 540; 569), and the allusion to the *Arabian Nights* is a constant reminder that Saleem's narrative is a fabrication, an unreliable history built out of other texts. *Middlesex*, on the other hand, is organised in part around the leitmotif of the number "twenty-three": there are twenty-three predictions made about the gender of unborn children (17), or twenty-three pairs of eyes in a room (148) (see also: 147; 403). Eugenides's leitmotif is not a metafictive comment on his narrator's artificiality but a reminder of his biological reality, of the "twenty-three paired chromosomes . . . which complicat[e] my life" (16). This is, as Boxall puts it, "past as material history rather than as narrative invention" (77). The character's biology and his history are not just narrative and text but are (ostensibly) material facts. Obviously, the character itself is a work of fiction, but the novel is built on the idea that material sequences of cause and effect do exist and determine the character's own existence. No longer describing an indeterminist, chaotic universe with no possibility for human agency and choice, the post-postmodernists reinvest in deterministic laws that create a space for a human agent. If the universe follows determinist laws, then human beings are both changed by the world, and, most importantly, can make changes to that world.

We can see how Wallace fits into this shift by setting *The Pale King* against another illuminating predecessor text from Wallace's library, one which has so far been undiscussed: Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974). *Something Happened* is the unreliable, first-person account of Bob Slocum, who, like Wallace's IRS agents, works in a boring office. Wallace signals the importance of Heller's novel in the background of *The Pale King* when Chris Fogle recounts an episode from his past when his father's arm was caught in a subway train's closing doors: "my father was being forced to trot with gradually increasing speed alongside it" (203). This is a direct allusion to the "inconvenienc[e]" in *Something Happened* when

> a man my age was killed in a subway station nearby . . . his arm caught in the closing doors as he tried to push his way on, but the train started anyway . . . and dragged him along the station platform until he smashed against pillars and the stone and metal walls of the tunnel into which the subway train roared. (345)

By matching Fogle's story so closely to Slocum's, Wallace implies that Slocum may well have seen Fogle's father die. By filling out the life of Slocum's "inconvenience," Wallace performs an act of writerly empathy that is beyond Slocum himself, who is a true postmodern subject and a perfect example of what Wallace called, elsewhere, the "Great Male Narcissists who've dominated postwar American fiction" (*Consider* 51).[123]

Slocum lives and works in a network of paranoia and uncertainty. At his office, each of the "one hundred and twenty people is afraid of the other one hundred and nineteen" (13), and Slocum's paranoia extends to more foreboding American institutions such as the CIA, FBI, and even the IRS, which he worries might have "been investigating [him] surreptitiously for years" (15). The novel's title itself becomes a paranoid motif, as Slocum often points to some vague conspiracy of uncertain circumstances that have dictated his selfhood and experiences: "Something must have happened to me sometime" (3); "I don't know what finally became of Marie Jencks. I never even found out what happened to me" (98). Slocum is, like many of the characters in *The Pale King*, a stranger to his own nature ("I often wonder what my own true nature is" [73]), but *unlike* Wallace's characters Slocum has no nature to uncover. There is no causal relationship between Slocum's parents and himself: he has, rather, a "wretched habit . . . of acquiring the characteristics of other people" (72), a mess of cultural traits out of which he builds a sort-of self, only to wonder "who or what I really am" (74). Slocum is thus not one self but, like Rushdie's Saleem Sinai, "1,000 me's": a diffuse, paranoid subject, who wishes he could "wiretap" those many selves (a conspiracy-theorist's impulse, if ever there was one) to try and understand himself (399). This is, as we might expect, a vain hope that yields no real answers or meaning for Slocum or the reader.

Slocum is estranged from himself because he is a tissue of citations, dissolute and absent to begin with. Where Heller's novel begins with a descent into the "underworld[s]" of the office storage room (95), filled with "file cabinets," paper, and the "dead records" of long-deceased people (20), Wallace's novel opens by excavating some "Very old land": an underworld of body and soil, not paper and text. It is significant that Slocum's father is erased

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[123] Slocum, who at one point imagines that he might "scratch eyeballs, molest teen-age girls and younger ones with trim figures" (455), is eerily similar to another Great Male Narrator: Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, although Slocum lacks Humbert's charm.

from existence altogether because Slocum does not remember him ("I didn't miss him, since I didn't remember him" [77]), while Fogle, on the other hand, though still self-conscious like Slocum, is shaped entirely by his "developmental wiring" (162) and his difficult relationship with his father. Because Slocum is so diffuse there is no possibility for heroism or any felt tragedy in his life. Paranoid to a fault, the novel ends with him railing against the conspiratorial forces that (he believes) move against him, resulting in him killing his own son. His attempt to preserve his life is, ironically, self-obliterating: the black joke is that by removing his son to prevent his own oblivion, Slocum secures it.[124] Marshall Boswell argues that the postmodernist's job was to "yank the ground from underneath the writers of [the] era, to produce . . . anxiety (the recognition that nothing is beneath us) and create a new zone of pure possibility" (*Understanding* 13). Bob Slocum has no solid ground beneath his feet: all the rules are broken, the staid limitations of biology and the material are buried, and he can be anyone. The irony, of course, is that he is *no one*. There is no pathos in this final scene, no 'tragedy' in the classical sense. Slocum will not "at all costs find a shroud worthy of his valour, though Zeus be arrayed against him" (Longinus 152). As Slocum says, with ironic double meaning: "I just don't have the character" (41).[125]

Wallace's characters are quite different. Hal can accurately introduce himself by saying that "I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex" (11). Unlike Slocum, Wallace's characters are sharply defined by their limitations, and one of Wallace's most consistent themes (from his head-shaped settings to

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[124] As Kurt Vonnegut put it in his review of the novel, "This is black humor indeed—with the humor removed." Slocum does have a daughter and another, brain damaged, son, but since he is a misogynist and a horrible father we can assume they will not be taking up the murdered son's mantle.

[125] Coale suggests that the "postmodern victim, like Thomas Pynchon's caricatures, Don DeLillo's diffuse and anxious characters . . . feels only that bitter sense of absence, loss, and impotence" (11). Timothy Melley, who also writes about conspiracy in American fiction, is somewhat more optimistic. Melley suggests that paranoid fiction is not devoid of individuality and human agency, but rather that it suffers from "agency panic" (12): it "conserves its individualism by continually imagining it to be in imminent peril" (6). While I agree with Melley that postmodern fiction "rarely seem[s] to *celebrate* the fragmentation of the self" (15) as poststructuralist and postmodernist theory do, there is an important difference between writers such as Wallace and his contemporaries, who actively reinstate the self, and their postmodern predecessors. Heller, Pynchon, and DeLillo may not celebrate the death of the soul, but they don't argue otherwise.

the characters' skulls) is how human beings are shaped by and against those limits. Wallace seems to share with James Incandenza the view, as one of the titles of his films puts it, that we should give "*(At Least) Three Cheers for Cause and Effect*" (991n. 24). Though Wallace is often characterised, like James, as an unflinchingly modern, televisual American artist—"so modern he's in a different space-time continuum to the rest of us" (Zadie Smith, "Best Books")—part of what sets his work apart from something like *Something Happened* is his constant awareness of "the truth . . . that the world is incredibly, incredibly, unbelievably old" (*Infinite Jest* 389). Wallace often sets his very modern register against the ancientness of the world, particularly in his essays. In the State Fair essay Wallace describes "the old ice" that shaped the Midwestern landscape (*Supposedly* 84), and in the Cruise Ship essay he reflects existentially on the sea, towards which "there's no way to know ahead of time how you'll react. A test of the deep involuntary stuff of a man" (279). The conspiracy against which Wallace's characters struggle, the "deep involuntary stuff" in their character, is literally ancient.[126] This bothness of register is something he admired in other writers such as Kafka, who, while having a "thoroughly modern complexity" (*Consider* 64), are important because they somehow evoke "unconscious" truths, "the primordial little-kid stuff from which myths derive" (62). The place where Wallace most clearly expressed his views about the tragic, ancient limits that govern human lives is in his essays on tennis.

In an autobiographical essay in 1990, Wallace described playing tennis as his "initiation into true adult sadness" (*Supposedly* 12). Where Wallace as a younger player was able to "play around" the limitations on the court provided by the "wind and bugs and chuckholes," his own personal, bodily limitations were too great. Anticipating his phrase in the Kafka essay ("primordial little-kid stuff") he writes that he "began to experience the same resentment toward whatever children abstract as nature" (13), coming to a deep resentment of "my physical place in the great schema" (13). This failure sets him apart from the great tennis

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[126] In *Broom* the conspiracy is rather more postmodern: Lenore feels her life is "determined" not by an impersonal universe (which she feels she could cope with) but by shady forces and people in her modern world that seem to be "us[ing]" her (66). *Infinite Jest* has a postmodern McGuffin—the "post-industrial capitalist mechanism" (792) that is the Entertainment—but Wallace portrays the film as being so dangerous precisely because it taps into some very old, primal need for pleasure and escape. The Entertainment would not be a problem if human beings had not evolved to enjoy pleasure.

players who would (at least ostensibly) be the subject of his future essays. In 1994 Wallace wrote about Tracy Austin's memoir, describing her as the kind of athlete who "carv[es] out exemptions from physical laws . . . mak[ing] manifest God in man. . . . that exquisite hybrid of animal and angel that we average unbeautiful watchers have such a hard time seeing in ourselves" (*Consider* 143). Wallace appeals here to a humanist account of the divine nature of the human soul being at odds with the animal, mechanical body. Though the angelic Austin is, for a time, completely at one with her body, Wallace sees in this account of human life a necessary tragedy. He describes Austin's life as "almost classically tragic" (148), her career arc "nearly Greek" (149), because the very thing that makes her immortally great, "a relentless workaholic perfectionism" (149), is also "her flaw and bane": her body's ability to push itself with "uncompromising effort in every last match" is what ultimately destroys that body (149). Wallace reflects again on human limitations in his 1995 essay on tennis player Michael Joyce, who was thrust into a life his parents choose *for* him (*Supposedly* 228n. 24). Wallace writes that the "restrictions" on Joyce's life have been "grotesque," but Joyce is said to be great because he has taken ownership of those limitations: he is a "complete man (though in a grotesquely limited way)" (254). Like Austin and *unlike Wallace*, Joyce is complete in the sense that he is able to work within his limitations. He lives as if what had been pre-determined (by parents, by the universe, by luck) was chosen by himself, meaning his limitations no longer look like limitations to him. For Wallace, such athletes prove that he himself is forever limited by nature's conspiracy against him. Wallace, like other mere mortals, is not complete but divided, at odds with nature's grand schema.

In his final essay on Roger Federer, Wallace argues that the athlete is a spiritual being, and the beauty of sports something "to do with . . . human beings' reconciliation with the fact of having a body" (8).[127] Note the word "fact" here: embodiment is the hard reality. Wallace's metaphysical argument in all his sports writing is that great athletes can reconcile themselves to that "fact," to the "great schema" (*Supposedly* 13), to unforgiving "physical laws" (*Consider* 143), to the "restrictions" inherent in human life (*Supposedly* 254). Wallace spends a lot of the essay on the mechanics of Federer's technique, but concludes that there is something

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[127] I have skipped over Wallace's 1996 essay on "Democracy and Commerce and the U.S. Open," which is, as the title suggests, more concerned with the business of the sport than in existential self-reflection.

"*within*" that the "neural account leaves out" (31). Federer is "inspired" (33) in the classical sense—a soul breathed into the body—and Wallace finds beauty in the idea that the soul can own its body, can reconcile itself to the fact that it exists in a mortal, animal form. One of the threads through the Federer essay is the capriciousness of fate, that Federer can be gifted while the sick child who flips the coin at the start of the match is not. These limitations absolutely define Wallace's subjects, and there is both tragedy and beauty in the fact that, as Wallace puts it in *Infinite Jest*, "WE ARE WHAT WE WALK BETWEEN" (81).

In his 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace described the postmodern revolt as being like a "wild disgusting fabulous party" that broke down all limits and restrictions:

> For a while it's great, free and freeing, parental authority gone and overthrown . . . [but] you gradually start wishing your parents would come back and restore some fucking order in your house. . . . And of course we're uneasy about the fact that we wish they'd come back—I mean, what's wrong with us? Are we total pussies? Is there something about authority and limits we actually *need*? And then the uneasiest feeling of all, as we start gradually to realize that parents in fact aren't ever coming back—which means *we're* going to have to be the parents. (*Conversations* 52)

This is quite the opposite of tennis, which is essentially about limitations, and therefore also

> an essentially tragic enterprise. . . . You seek to vanquish and transcend the limited self whose limits make the game possible in the first place. It is tragic and sad and chaotic and lovely. (84)

If there is "Nothing to contain and give the meaning" (*Infinite Jest* 83), then there can be no meaning. Real tragedy and pathos can only exist when they push against limits. When there are no rules and everything goes, characters such as Bob Slocum are diffuse and emptied. Where the paranoid Tyrone Slothrop is manipulated and ultimately disintegrated by conspiring shady forces in *Gravity's Rainbow*, or where the flat, numb, hollow character Michelle in DeLillo's *Great Jones Street* says that the "body is an illusion" (225), Wallace's characters are different. When David Cusk, for example, reflects that his anxiety attacks felt as though they came "not from anything outside of him but rather from some inner part of himself that was hurting or almost betraying him, as in heart attack" (*Pale King* 98), he knows

only too well that it is his own nature that torments him. There is no unsolvable global puzzle to try and solve in Wallace's fiction (or, if there is, his characters are too busy with their own internal struggles to worry much about it).[128]

Wallace's subjects are, as he says of Kafka's, locked into the grand schema's big joke, living out a comedy that is also tragedy because their lives are constrained by the very limitations that are necessary for them to exist in the first place. As Wallace put it in his interview with David Lipsky, "Although of course you end up becoming yourself" (52). You are your brain, and you cannot be anything other than what your bodily limits allow. The tragic fact is that one has absolutely no choice in "the hand you're dealt" (*Pale King* 209), but for post-postmodern writers you can know what the hand is and know your limits. There is even some hope that you—the 'you' that is so present and sharply defined by those limits—might reconcile yourself to them. Unlike the irreverent postmodernists who dismantled authoritative narratives, the post-postmodernists clearly put stock in the large-scale narrative about the evolution of the human body and brain. Unlike the postmodernist hero, who is dissolved in a meaningless world, the post-postmodern hero may be equally powerless but they are still *in* there, tragically and meaningfully encaged.

Post-postmodern literature is marked by a turn towards both determinism and compatibilism. This literary turn is marked out by authors such as Jeffrey Eugenides, who writes that "free will is making a comeback. Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind"

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[128] This is not to say that postmodern characters are not tormented by their own internal workings. Burn has argued that Don DeLillo's "pioneering incorporation of emerging neuroscientific research" in his novel *Great Jones Street* (1973) "may have influenced" Wallace ("Don DeLillo's" 362). Burn shows that DeLillo drew in particular on Paul D. MacLean's theory of the triune brain, in which "the reptilian cerebral chassis interrupts ordinary cortical cognition to inspire paranoid fears" (354). That is, the older animal brain—upon which man's more advanced functions were built—is a persistent cause of paranoia and fear in the modern mind. DeLillo in some ways bridges postmodern themes (paranoia about systems that assault the human subject) with biology, though it is more that he biologizes postmodern paranoia, rather than bridging it with something distinctly post-postmodern, as I argue Wallace does. Tom Robbins's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976) also plays with contemporary brain models, referring variously to the "limbic system" (31), the brain's "wad of wrinkles" (103), and "Blood bunched in [the] head" (159), but Robbins also writes about the comfort one takes in the idea that conspiratorial systems are in charge (50). The brain is just another conspiratorial figure for Robbins, "messing around with stuff it cannot or *will* not comprehend" (68).

(479). The acceptance of cognitive science and evolution gives characters weight because they are caused by their history, both as a member of the species and their families. As Wallace puts it, "Darwin's tagline still fit" (*Oblivion* 65): the "bug-eyed native's lurking just under the surface, we know" (*Infinite Jest* 243). But Wallace's contemporaries do not simply turn towards scientific materialism at the expense of the humanity of their characters. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Here I Am* (2016) opens with the "dividing" cells in a mother's "brain" and the "roots" of a "family tree" (3), but it is also about the "soul" (4) trying to "fe[el] at home in [its] body" and all that it inherits (65). In Richard Powers's *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), the characters are the products of the same genetic destiny, who "all derive from the same four notes" (25), but they spend the novel uncovering the meaning in "this process [that] is taking place all over [their] bod[ies] at this instant" (248). *Middlesex*, too, is about the journey of a self inside a body who comes to terms with his biological "destiny" (37). Where Wallace is set apart from his contemporaries is in how little hope there is of this actually happening in his work.

"An individual person's basic personal powerlessness"

When critics such as Daniel R. Kelly and David H. Evans have discussed the problem of free will in Wallace's work, they conclude that Wallace is a compatibilist who, without invoking a Cartesian agency, affirms the power of conscious choice and our ability to control the way we think. This is the philosophy Wallace avowed in *This is Water*. Wallace's fiction, however, seems to be at times both for choice and against it, and seems rather less secure in its position than Wallace was in the commencement speech.

Infinite Jest is Wallace's tennis novel and, as in his essays, tennis becomes a means for Wallace to reflect on much greater things than the sport itself.[129] The novel portrays an

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[129] Three of Wallace's tennis essays were written in the three years that *Infinite Jest* was edited between 1994 and 1996, and we can see themes and specific ideas and phrases being repeated across the novel and essays. In his 1996 and 2006 essays Wallace characterises the relationship between Pete Sampras and Mark Philoppoussis, and Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, as being like the war between Athenian democracy and Spartan aggression (*Both Flesh* 146; 10). Ancient civilisation is evoked again in Wallace's description of Sampras leaving the court "bearing his shield and the Australian carried out upon his own (as it were)" (*Both*

emphatically deterministic universe in which "fathers impact sons" (32), and the tennis players' lives—like Tracey Austin's or Michael Joyce's—are predetermined before the question of conscious adult choice would even make sense ("Like most sports academies, E.T.A. maintains the gentle fiction that 100% of its students are enrolled at their own ambitious volition and not that of, say for instance, their parents" [984n. 10]). The characters in Wallace's novel are the products of complex histories of cause and effect. At the elite tennis academy, these histories are obscure and technical. Hal and Orin, for instance, are the products of an "all-out chromosomatic war": where Hal looks vaguely "ethnic" like his father, "Hal's eldest brother Orin had got the Mom's Anglo-Nordo-Canadian phenotype" (101), a mishmash of genetic influences that speaks to the migratory patterns of his ancestor's organisms. The residents of Ennet Recovery House, who mirror the E.T.A. students in many ways (note that 'Ennet' can be loosely read as 'tennis' backwards), have less obscure histories printed on the surface of their bodies in the form of scars and tattoos. Erdedy reflects that the other residents' tattoos stand in for the problem of addiction generally: tattoos, like drugs, are profoundly permanent, because they are acquired on a whim but removing them is just trading "one kind of disfigurement for another" (208). For both groups of characters, causes, whether they are conscious of them or not, have clear effects: past events literally shape the post-postmodern individual.

Structurally, *Infinite Jest* continually undermines the characters' free will and emphasises that they have no control over the direction of their lives. The pivotal moment in Gately's story is when he is shot. It happens near the midpoint of the book, and triggers his journey to the hospital where he will spend the rest of the novel trying to resist pain medication. The shooting is the end result of a very clear causal sequence that takes place in one long chapter from pp.538-619. This contained story, one of the few chapters in the novel where there is a considerable amount of forward movement, condenses the themes and metaphors of the whole novel, including the central question of free will. Briefly, it plays out

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Flesh 155-56), a phrase which he repeats in *Infinite Jest*: "They returned from Long Island bearing their shields rather than upon them, as they say" (281). Both are an allusion to Plutarch's *Moralia* (c.100), in which it is said that Spartan women would tell their sons "Either this or upon this" (241). Wallace's evocation of classical culture again shows that he views tennis as tapping into something ancient and universal.

as follows: Randy Lenz and Bruce Green are walking together; Green is distracted, allowing Lenz to slip away and find an animal to kill (to satisfy his addiction to cruelty); when Lenz kills a dog, he is chased back to Ennet House by some Canadians; Gately becomes involved in the fight to defend the residents, and is ultimately shot. The chapter is really the story of Lenz's addiction. It begins with his "consciously discover[ing]" that he has a deep unconscious desire in himself to kill rats and say "'*There*'" (a word that "turned out to be crucial for the sense of brisance and closure" [541]), follows him as he pursues a greater and greater fix, and ends at the top of the food chain, with Lenz relentlessly beating an unconscious man "and going 'There, *there*'" (615): the ultimate, awful endpoint of his addiction to violence. By tracing the ways in which Wallace constructs Lenz's addiction, and the pattern of symbols and metaphors that Wallace weaves throughout this chapter, we can begin to illuminate Wallace's complicated position on free will.

Wallace significantly intercuts this Lenz chapter with a short, three-page Orin scene, in which Orin falls for a new woman and feels this is "clear evidence of a kind of benign fate or world-spirit" (565). This recalls Orin's other love in the novel, Joelle, and the chapter in which he meets her, where Wallace also writes about destiny. In this earlier chapter, Orin, who has "become exactly as fine a tennis player as he was ever destined to be," tries to switch from college tennis to college football (289) in order to get to the cheerleader, Joelle, for whom he has a "schoolboy-grade crush" (289). It is only by a chance punt and another chance injury (of the previous punter) that Orin is able to join the team. Wallace writes:

> destiny's kisses and its dope-slaps illustrate an individual person's basic personal powerlessness over the really meaningful events in his life: i.e., almost nothing important that ever happens to you happens because you engineer it. Destiny has no beeper; destiny always leans trenchcoated out of an alley with some sort of *Psst* that you usually can't even hear because you're in such a rush to or from something important you've tried to engineer. (291)

This earlier scene primes us to think about "destiny's kisses" in the novel, and it is significant that we are reminded of it again in the middle of Lenz's chapter, where a number of destinies

begin to intertwine.[130] The Orin-intercut also primes us to read Randy Lenz, who opens the chapter walking through "Low-rent-dumpster-strewn residential streets . . . that become alleys, gritty passages," and his distinctive, "billowing tall-collared topcoat" (539), as a manifestation of the kind of destiny that "leans trenchcoated out of . . . alley[s]" (291). According to Sven Raphael Schneider at the *Gentleman's Gazette*, a topcoat is a kind of trenchcoat, and this one is significant enough for Wallace to mention it once per page for the next three pages that introduce this chapter. With each description the repeated details become more redundant and uninteresting, which ironically brings more attention to them as Lenz leans in and out of alleys: from "billowing tall-collared topcoat" to "Polo topcoat" to "open coat flared wide" to, finally, "billowing top-collared Lauren-Polo model he loves and uses a daily lint-roller on" (539; 539; 540; 541). The first key symbol in this chapter is Lenz's billowing coat. Later in the chapter "his open coat fill[s] like a sail" (588), suggesting that the wind, an unconscious natural force, is propelling him along down some pre-determined path.

At the beginning of this chapter Lenz's routine has been frustrated by another resident, Bruce Green, who has taken to walking with him. When Lenz and Green hear some Polynesian music from a nearby party, Green's face turns into a "flat mask of psychic pain he doesn't even feel is there" (577). To explain this change, Wallace describes the "searing facts" of Green's parents' deaths, which are "so deeply repressed inside Green" that he cannot remember either that his mother had a heart attack when he gave her a can of Polynesian nuts as a Christmas present with a springed cloth snake inside (578), or that his father, as a consequence, also "cave[d] psycho-spiritually" (580), became a terrorist, and was sentenced to death. This repressed childhood horror becomes an adult scar: Green has a horror "about all things even remotely Polynesian" (581), and just as Lenz is pulled along by his unconscious desires, Green is pulled unconsciously, uncontrollably, towards the Polynesian music. When Green comes upon Lenz again, he sees that the "Polynesian-music speakers" are playing

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[130] I discussed "priming" in chapter 1. The idea that we can pick up on "a stimulus that is so brief" (Nørretranders 170) that it can enter our minds without us being conscious of it is something that Wallace seemed to play with throughout his writing. We might use it to explain, for example, how Wallace's fractured narratives slowly being to cohere as we read them.

music "from someplace up near where he sees the back of Lenz's coat" (583): both destinies merge, the trenchcoat that pulls Lenz and the music that drives Green's body forward.

Significantly, the action in this chapter takes place on and around "Brainerd Road" (581). Though this is an actual road in Boston, its name suggests that Wallace is foregrounding the deterministic, material brain in this chapter. It is also perhaps as an allusion to the poet Joe Brainard, whose famous collection *I Remember* (1975) is, as Siri Hustvedt puts it, a "catalog of the author's memories" (*Shaking Woman* 62). Hustvedt describes using the book in her "writing work with psychiatric patients," and the remarkable way in which "inscribing the words *I remember* generates memories . . . often ones we hadn't thought about for many years" (62-63). This is an exercise from which Green has clearly not benefitted. Green's childhood trauma is said to have sunk into him, leaving "only an oily slick that catches the light in distorted ways" (581-82). This image of the oily substance inside him—a substance on which his conscious life slips—recurs when Wallace describes the "zithery drifting Polynesian" music as being like a "plasm" of sound (577) that has "the quality of a type of: *ointment*" (587). These two descriptions seem to draw on the phrase 'a fly in the ointment,' implying that Green is literally stuck, snagged on some unconsciously remembered horror that drives his behaviour.[131]

At the sharp end of all of these events is Gately. With Lenz's coat still "billowing" (609) as he riles up the Canadians, Gately fights them in an "automatic," "adrenaline" fuelled, unconscious state (612) and is ultimately shot. Now Wallace uses a third and final pattern of images to close the chapter: stars and the laws of motion. Wallace emphasises the weight of his fleshy characters by consistently showing that they are governed by what the philosopher Meghan Griffith calls the "laws of gravity, motion, energy. . . . Laws [that] are often understood as 'exceptionless regularities'" (17). Earlier in the novel Avril Incandenza, for example, is described as a "black hole" who, when she enters a room, turns "any sort of pacing . . . to orbiting" (521). This also explains why the members of her incandescent family all "inclin[e] very subtly toward Avril" at the dining table (745), like stars towards a black hole.

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[131] Wallace seemed to like playing with this phrase. In "Westward" there is the "fly in every fucking machine's perfect *lubricant*" (*Girl* 246, my emphasis). Elsewhere in *Infinite Jest*, Joelle's "Daddy'd warned her the sweetest *syrup* draws the nastiest flies" (739, my emphasis).

The academy's tennis players are described as "Stars, shooting stars, falling stars" (1052), and are, significantly, members of an academy which is accredited by the "North American Sports Academy Association," or *NASAA* (8). This pattern is picked up at the end of the Lenz chapter. Amidst all the chaos, characters are still governed by forces they cannot see. Residents stare "Copernicanly up [Joelle's] flapping robe" (615), with as little choice about where to look as they had about avoiding the violence that has come their way. When he is on his back at the end of the chapter's violence, Gately sees the stars "shine right through people's heads" (617). Gately's destiny is written in the stars, but he can only read it clearly here once all is over. His wound is the unavoidable consequence of an intricate, tangled web of causes and effects that he cannot untie. The same invisible laws that govern the movement of the stars also govern Gately, and they penetrated all the people around him as easily as bullets.

For first-time readers, like the characters themselves, it is impossible to know what the ultimate consequence of Lenz's small actions will be, and impossible to recognise the significance of these symbols (the coat, the oil, the stars) until, at the very least, a second reading. On that second reading, because the novel does not change, the chapter begins to feel very fatalist: from the moment Lenz kills his first rat, Gately is as good as shot. As a result, the entire chapter is full of dramatic irony. The reader knows what drives the characters, and what is coming for them, though they themselves are clueless. Though Lenz believes he belongs at the top of the food chain, he is as much a clockwork machine as the animals he kills: he may "cloc[k]" animals with a "hammer," making a sound like a "pocketwatch" being smashed (540), but he does not notice that he himself is "tightly wound" (547), as clockwork as they are. As Wallace puts it in this chapter, only fools believe they are "exempt from the laws of physics and statistics that ironly govern everybody else" (604). He also makes the ironic joke that those same fools are "constitutionally unable to learn from anybody else's experience" (604). In other words, fools like Lenz are pre-determined (by the constitution of their bodies and brains) to not believe that they are pre-determined. This chapter proves him quite wrong.

"Pre-Nuptial Agreement of Heaven and Hell"

As we see with Lenz in this chapter, addiction follows a hard determinist path because an addict's behaviour is ruled primarily by the unconscious wants of the clockwork body and mind. Consciousness—the 'I,' the soul, the observer inside that body—has no choice but to follow suit. This is a pattern into which almost all of *Infinite Jest*'s characters, in one way or another, fall. Yet because of the presence of the AA and other recovery communities in the novel, *Infinite Jest* is often regarded (particularly by critics writing post-*This is Water*, who see the commencement speech as the "skeleton key to [Wallace's] entire body of work" [Daniel R. Kelly 124]), as a novel about characters who take some control of their own destiny.[132] Critics who view Wallace as a compatibilist might argue that Lenz is obviously a bad example of a twelve-step program member, since he makes no effort to reform. While it is true that some characters find their way to recovery, we cannot ignore the fact that the object around which the entire novel revolves—the addictive Entertainment—completely undermines the hopeful consciousness-raising of the AA anyway, whether the twelve-step program helps people or not. Wallace's championing of hope and choice is usually framed as a challenge to his postmodern predecessors, to writers such as Don DeLillo who are predominantly ironic in their outlook. D. T. Max, for instance, writes that in *Infinite Jest* Wallace "was proposing to wash Pynchonian excess in the chilling waters of DeLillo's prose and then heat it up again in Dostoevsky's redemptive fire" (*Every Love Story* 214). Yet the Entertainment is lifted right out of one of DeLillo's books to perform exactly the same hope-killing, will-negating, world-ending function. We have seen that *Infinite Jest* portrays a world that is emphatically deterministic. To understand where free will fits into this picture, if at all, we first have to understand the Entertainment, a symbol of self-escape and the biggest threat to free will in the novel.

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[132] For Timothy Aubry, *Infinite Jest* overloads its readers with entertaining postmodern tricks and irony in order to "bring readers into a state of dazzled intellectual fatigue, a state which might make them ready to embrace the salutary simplicity offered by addiction's potential antidote, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)" ("Selfless" 210). Daniel R. Kelly, writing post-*This is Water*, understands Wallace's work as an incentive for readers to "*wake up*" and "pay more and better attention to choosing" (124). Likewise, Daniel Turnbull has argued that *Infinite Jest*'s "central focus" is, like *This is Water*'s, on "how we choose to attend to the world" (213).

Though critics often acknowledge Wallace's literary relationship with DeLillo—a writer with whom Wallace corresponded, and who Wallace called one of the "stars [he] steer[s] by" (*Conversations* 62)—there has been a surprising lack of discussion of *Infinite Jest*'s relationship to DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) in particular.[133] Only Timothy Jacobs has noted any connection, briefly gesturing to the similarity between *Infinite Jest*'s Entertainment and *White Noise*'s Dylar, a much sought-after drug that alleviates the fear of death ("Brothers" 291n. 10). In fact, this connection has very significant ramifications for how we understand *Infinite Jest*'s (actually rather unhopeful) position on free will. The Entertainment and Dylar are both symbols of the ultimate self-escape, and they are both the epitome of a pattern of metaphors that runs throughout each authors' fiction: the metaphor of information and input as water that floods the conscious mind.

Where DeLillo describes, for instance, the "layers of oceanic sound" in the supermarket (*White Noise* 331), Wallace refers to the same "oceanic sound" in the E.T.A. cafeteria (*Infinite Jest* 627) and the "Atlantic surf" of a radio's static in "Westward" (*Girl* 301). Where DeLillo describes, in one of his early and little known short stories, "Total Loss Weekend" (1972), the character CJ sitting in front of two "TV sets," becoming submerged "like a diver" in the data in the room, Wallace uses the same metaphor of a diver in both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*. Orin is said to have a "stance" that is "not unlike a diver's" when he surrenders himself to "the crowd's noise" (299). In *The Pale King*, the "fact-psychic" Claude Sylvanshine is overwhelmed by intrusive data, and Wallace significantly ends one paragraph's long list of disparate facts with the "year of death for undersea explorer William Beebe" (123), suggesting that Sylvanshine himself is one such explorer. Wallace would use the water metaphor again in his introduction to *The Best American Essays 2007* to describe his struggle with the "*tsunami* of available fact, context, and perspective that constitutes" the "Total Noise" of contemporary American culture ("Introduction: Deciderization" xx, my emphasis). Todd Gitlin, one of the key sources for Wallace in his theory-of-fiction essay in 1993

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[133] Critics such as Stephen J. Burn and Graham Foster, who have studied Wallace's debts to DeLillo's *Players* (1977), *Amazons* (1980), *Ratner's Star* (1976), *Great Jones Street* (1973), *End Zone* (1972) (Burn, *Reader's Guide* 26; 26; 35; 69; 70), *Americana* (1971) and *Underworld* (1997) (Foster 7), do not mention *White Noise*. Ralph Clare notes that Wallace's description of existential angst in *The Pale King* in terms of noise is "akin to Don DeLillo's description of death in *White Noise*" (190), but does not develop this connection.

(*Supposedly* 58n. 23; 74n. 34) calls this the "torrent" of information: that "seamless" stream of "everyday noise" in which "a collage of back-to-back stories, talk show banter, fragments of ads, soundtracks of musical snippets" all flow together into a conglomerate roar in the background of everyday life that "we are, by and large, not free not to choose" (8-9). This torrent is consciousness-killing throughout both Wallace's and DeLillo's writing.

Recognising the shared role of both the Entertainment and DeLillo's Dylar will reveal just how much *White Noise* informs Wallace's novel. In the third part of *White Noise*, titled "Dylarama" (191), DeLillo's protagonist Jack Gladney searches for Dylar, a drug that is said to "*floo*[*d*] the fear-of-death part of [the] brain" (243, my emphasis). In the penultimate chapter, which like the Dylar itself distils the noise of the whole novel into a single scene, Jack confronts the inventor of the drug, Willie Mink, who sits in front of a television screen surrounded by "auditory scraps, tatters, whirling specks" (353), data so dense it can only be caught as fragments in the conscious mind. As Mink swallows handfuls of Dylar, he merges with the room's torrent, reciting meaningless trivia such as the conversion rate of "Fahrenheit to Celsius" (355). Drowned by the Dylar, Mink sits "misplaced" (355), fully merged with the room's "white noise" (356)—he is himself "very white" (356)—and fully escaped from his consciousness of death.

That Willie Mink appears in Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, only two years after *White Noise* was published, suggests that Wallace was drawn to the character.[134] Addictive substances in *Infinite Jest*, whether they are narcotics, alcohol, or entertainment, have precisely the same effect as the Dylar, represented metaphorically as the conscious mind being subsumed by a torrent of information. When Joelle overdoses, for instance, *White Noise* is both figuratively and literally in the background. Mimicking DeLillo's own phrasing ("you are the sum total of your data" [*White Noise* 165]), Wallace describes Joelle becoming hyperaware of details: "This room in this apartment is the sum of very many specific facts and

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[134] In *Broom*, Lenore tells her grandmother, Concarnadine Beadsman, a story called "'Billy Mink Goes Dinnerless'" (363). While on one level this title echoes Thornton Burgess's classic children's story, a number of parallels also gesture towards DeLillo's novel. Concarnadine, like DeLillo's Mink, is "senile" (365) and confuses words for reality. Where DeLillo's Mink hears "'Plunging aircraft'" and expects real danger, (356), Concarnadine can only say the word "Roughage," without "probably . . . hav[ing] any idea what the word stands for" (368).

ideas" (239). As the effects of the overdose get worse, so does the information overload in the room: Joelle becomes increasingly aware of the overwhelming "white- party-noise" in the background (240) while she "Breathes in and out like a savvy diver" (240), ready to submerge herself in the oblivion of total noise. Wallace describes another addict as "misplaced" (648), using exactly the same word as DeLillo (*White Noise* 355). When Gately is in the hospital and in terrible pain while awake, his consciousness is misplaced when he slips in and out of sleep, a process described as being like "coming up for air and then being pushed below the surface of something" (809), "like a big wooden spoon keeps pushing him just under the surface of sleep and then spooning him up for something huge to taste him, again and again" (845). To "escap[e] [your]self" (295), to be plunged into unconsciousness, is to be plunged into "tidal, amniotic" white noise: noise that is so dense and meaningless and loud that it cancels out the soul, the thinking thing, because you "literally [can] not hear [yourself] think" inside it (295). In *Infinite Jest*, it is into this roaring water that the addicts escape from the nightmare of their own conscious thinking: what Hal significantly calls the addicts' "flight-from in the form of a *plunging-into*" (900, my emphasis).

Wallace's water metaphor is clearly set up in direct contrast to the fire metaphor that we saw in chapter 3. As Sylvia Plath writes, "drowning must be the kindest way to die, and burning the worst" (*Bell Jar* 166).[135] If Wallace's characters' souls are surrounded by flames, it is only reasonable that they would plunge into water to save themselves from those flames. It is significant that when Poor Tony enters withdrawal, he has a seizure on the "Gray Line train from Watertown to Inman Square" (299). No longer on drugs, Tony is also no longer a resident of *water* town, no longer submerged, but is instead painfully *Inman*. He has been forced to have a "spiritual awakening" (137), and his soul has woken up again inside himself, *Inman*, returned to its entrapment. Tiny Ewell, too, begins his downward spiral in the "East

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[135] In *The Bell Jar*, when Esther takes pills in a suicide attempt, she describes "at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep" (179). Later in the novel, Esther wakes after her ECT treatment "out of a deep, drenched sleep" (227). Plath's use of this water metaphor is perhaps another source for Wallace, though it goes back further still. In Thomas De Quincey's early account of addiction, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), De Quincey begins the book by wondering aloud how he became an opium-eater: "Was it gradually, tentatively, mistrustingly, as one goes down a shelving beach into a deepening sea . . . ?" (13).

Watertown projects" (810), eventually taking to alcohol to "submerge" his woes "in an amber sea" (815). When Gately and Fackelmann overdose at the end of the novel, they are said to be "moving like men deep under water" (934), their "chins fall[ing] and ris[ing] at slightly different underwater rates" (935). When Gately is in hospital and reliving this memory, the fire in his shoulder is no longer mentioned. Instead there are only "serial shots of flames" in the memory that he sees on a television "reflected in [a] spreading puddle" (935-36). Going "underwater" (935) into the overdose-memory makes the flames of pain feel twice-removed, through the puddle and a screen, rendering them distant, electronic, and without their heat.

A number of critics have discussed Wallace's Entertainment but none has mentioned that addiction, either to the film or to drugs, is governed throughout *Infinite Jest* by this central water metaphor.[136] The Entertainment itself is the ultimate addictive substance, and an exact replica of DeLillo's Dylar.[137] Wallace's Dylar is perhaps even worse than DeLillo's,

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[136] Stefano Ercolino discusses the Entertainment in the context of debates about modernity, the image, and "anti-ocularcentrism" (33). Kendall Gerdes argues that it is, in fact, "language" that is "a drug" in *Infinite Jest* (351), while David Morris reads addiction in Wallace's novel in the context of "Hegel's point that pure reason fails as a guide of human life" (1). Erik R. Mortenson compares *Infinite Jest* to William S. Burrough's fiction, arguing that where "Burroughs' tales are meant to shock us out of our preconceptions" about addicts, "Wallace's piece does something more subtle: it creates an empathy that forces us to relate to the addict yrstruly" (45). Laura Catherine Frost puts Wallace's Entertainment in historical context, and suggests that earlier, modernist metaphors of hedonism, intoxication, and hypnosis are now, in *Infinite Jest*, absolutely fatal (240). Casey Michael Henry is the only critic to discuss "Tides and oceanic shift" as symbols of the "inevitable forces against which [Gately] must struggle" (493), but he does not connect the water metaphor to drugs and input.

[137] In fact there are two Dylars in Wallace's novel: the Entertainment, made by Hal's father, which is so addictive that it renders its viewers "lost" and "empty of intent" (508), and the DMZ, the ultimate drug that has unsettling "ontological" effects on those who consume it (170). The two are closely linked. The DMZ is known as "*Madame Psychosis*" (170), also the name of Joelle's alter-ego who stars in the Entertainment. Where Joelle's role in the film is as an infantilising "Mother figure inclined" over the camera, "talking *down* to [the viewer] in both senses of the word" (789), the DMZ is said to cause effects in the "*Tibetan-Dead-Book* vein" (996n. 57). This is an allusion that Wallace significantly shares with DeLillo, who calls the "*Tibetan Book of the Dead* . . . a guide to dying and being reborn" (*White Noise* 85), suggesting that Wallace's DMZ, like the addictive film and DeLillo's Dylar, destroys the conscious mind and infantilises the "reborn" user. That the Entertainment and DMZ are so closely linked in both name and effect suggests that for all intents and purposes they are, thematically, one and the same. The source for both Wallace and DeLillo is perhaps

since he makes it clear that it is literally impossible to resist the Entertainment. Whether the character is an entertainment-obsessed American or an anti-American Quebecois terrorist, anyone who "eventually and naturally" turns, with simple human curiosity, to see what is on the screen will be fatally hooked by it (79). There is no place for free will in this equation. Indeed, the soul and the will are precisely what the Entertainment annihilates. Characters are made "blank" by it, empty, "pithed" on "some deep reptile-brain level" (548). In other words, anyone with an evolved brain that enjoys, like a lab-experiment rat, "*p*-terminal stimulation," will without exception "Giv[e] away their souls and lives" for it (474). Technology that is designed to tap directly into the body and brain's desires can overpower even a "will of steel" (507).

The release of such a film into America can only lead to an apocalypse, and the novel points us in that direction. *Infinite Jest* takes its apocalyptic structure straight from DeLillo's novel, which moves inexorably towards Mink's room of white noise. As Wallace's novel draws to its end, the incoming snowstorm, the "worst blizzard to hit the region since B.S. 1998" (947) grows "increasingly heavy" (846). Recalling the "white buzz" of "snowball[ing]" sound in Mink's room (*White Noise* 359), the overwhelming, "days"-long "churn[ing]" blizzard in *Infinite Jest* (949) is symbolic of the gathering white noise—the total overload—towards which the characters all plunge. There is a clear relationship, of course, between the blizzard and the water metaphor we have seen (when Lenz is high on cocaine he is taken "into regions of almost interstellar cold" [716] while his memories "tear as[s] across his mind's arctic horizon" [557]; Ruth van Cleve is also addicted to "Ice," the street name for methedrine [698]). Emphasising this pattern is the "WYYY" radio station, which Hal says "was apparently doing its weather-report via mimesis, broadcasting raw static," a blizzard of noise (949). The novel pulls us towards blankness and misplacement on a national scale. As we dive into Gately's memories in the later chapters, note that some of the main characters from his past

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Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954), in which *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is said to describe the "departed soul . . . shrinking in agony from the Clear Light of the Void . . . in order to rush headlong into the comforting darkness of self-hood as a reborn human being . . . Anything rather than the burning brightness of unmitigated Reality" (34).

are named "Mrs. Waite" (i.e. Mrs *White*; 847) and Whitey Sorkin (976).[138] In the opening chapter, which, chronologically, describes the last events in the story, the coach who wants to recruit Hal to the University of Arizona is also named "Coach White" (4). The novel is framed on both sides by whiteness: it begins with the foreboding breakdown of an individual mind, and it ends by fulfilling that promise with a terrible blizzard: an America completely overloaded. *Infinite Jest* seems to be built in part upon the foundation DeLillo laid in *White Noise*.

Yet there are differences between the two. A useful way to think about the effects of the Entertainment and Dylar is to consider Timothy D. Wilson's description of the 'Zone.' "Perhaps the best use of consciousness," writes Wilson,

> is to put ourselves in situations in which our adaptive unconscious can work smoothly. . . . There is a term for this in athletics: when a player is 'unconscious,' she is performing at an optimal level without any awareness of exactly *what* she is doing. She is in the zone. (52)

In his tennis essays Wallace describes the zone's erasure of consciousness as the height of human achievement, something on the level of the divine. Yet in *Infinite Jest* it is more like a nightmare. John Wayne, one of the best young tennis players in the novel, appears "less alive than undead" (263), while Hal plays tennis to actively "avoid thinking," "practising and playing until everything runs on autopilot and talent's unconscious exercise becomes a way to escape yourself, a long waking dream" (173). Hal finds it difficult to shut off his ghost and just play, machinelike. As DeLint says of him, "Some days you can almost see Hal like flit in and out of a match, like some part of him leaves and hovers and then comes back" (682). What is the difference between Wallace's characters and Roger Federer? I suggest that, where Federer is great in Wallace's view because he is so perfectly reconciled to his own limits, Wallace's characters' limits are irreconcilable. Wallace's characters are predisposed to pain, horror, dread, and, of course, a deep desire to escape. They therefore have to find the zone not

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[138] As with Billy Mink, Wallace's allusions often point in different directions, both to other books and to the real world. Whitey Sorkin is perhaps an allusion both to the notorious Boston gangster Whitey Bulger, and—in keeping with the theme of white noise—to Michael Sorkin, another academic whom Wallace cites alongside Gitlin and DeLillo in his essay on fiction and television, "E Unibus Pluram" (*Supposedly* 23n. 1).

through reconciliation (how do you reconcile yourself to horror or flames?) but by the erasure of the conscious self altogether.[139]

The effects of DeLillo's Dylar and Wallace's Entertainment are precisely the same. Where Wallace's fiction differs from DeLillo's is in the much greater feeling for what is lost. The metaphors of water and fire—of heaven and hell—work together throughout the whole novel, reminding us that Wallace's characters are in pain, and have every reason to want to wash the pain away (by which I mean: flood their *awareness* of the pain away). Indeed, for most of the characters, their childhoods are so terrible and scarring that they seem literally driven to substances, pulled down a pre-determined path to eventual addiction. Given what we know of the characters' souls' experiences of hell, for them to make a "*Pre-Nuptial Agreement of Heaven and Hell*" (988n. 24)—a contract to sell their souls to end their pain— seems perfectly reasonable, and completely unavoidable. In Wallace's fiction, however, though drugs and the Entertainment are exactly as dangerous and will-negating as the Dylar, we still get the sense that there is someone inside the person that is suffering. DeLillo's characters are flat, self-less, already dead. Jack Gladney calls himself "the false character that follows the name around" (20), suggesting that his name has more weight than the human being behind the word. In Wallace's fiction, there is someone truly *in* there to be misplaced. Contrary to the popular view discussed in chapter 2, that Wallace's addicts are without internal selves and they recover from addiction by being anti-interior, it is their very need to submerge themselves and "escape their own interior" (863) that prevents their recovery.

Wallace's fiction is built on an emphatically determinist worldview, but just as the Entertainment's killing of the self emphasises that there is an interior self to be killed, so Wallace's determinism continually emphasises that there is someone inside the body to be determined. The question is: does that interior self have any free will at all? Fogle's epiphany in *The Pale King* is that he has the "ability to choose what I paid attention to, and to be aware

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[139] Escaping the self is both terrible and terribly appealing in Wallace's writing. In his cruise ship essay, for instance, published the year before *Infinite Jest* and dealing with the same themes, he describes the harrowing ways that the cruise will erase "Your troublesome capacities for choice, error, regret, dissatisfaction, and despair . . . you will *have no choice* but to have a good time" (267). It is significant that the essay ends with Wallace visiting a hypnotist's show, something he views with equal horror for the way it makes your head "no longer [your] own" (351).

of that choice, the fact that it's a choice" (189). It is clear, however, that though you can choose what you pay attention to, what you pay attention to is really the only choice that you have. The will in this equation is not a motivator, only the observer of what is already going on beneath the level of consciousness. Yet by your attitude alone you can make a difference. Wilson explains that the reason the Alcoholics Anonymous dictum, "'Fake it until you make it'" (214), is so successful, is because it requires that addicts consciously adhere to a "meaningful, adaptive narrative" with which they can move forward and beyond their unconscious addictive patterns, as opposed to the "repetitive, spiralling kind of thought whereby people can't stop thinking about things in a negative light" (178). As Wallace puts it in *Infinite Jest*: "Do like your [sic] TOLD / If you want to get OLD" (375).

But is it a choice if the only other option is your own death? The AA survivors are able to stick with AA because they have been driven to a "cliff's edge" (348) and they either "do it or die" (357). Even their sticking with it is said to be out of their control: "*GET BETTER A DAY AT A TIME ASSUMING THAT'S GOD'S WILL*" (826). It's up to God or the universe if you survive. There are no easy answers to this problem, least of all in Wallace's novel. Though there is some validity to the idea that Wallace is, as *This is Water* suggests, a compatibilist, one who venerates the power of choice and our ability to choose how we think, this view does not account for the Entertainment, nor for the souls that are destroyed by it. As both Zadie Smith and John Jeremiah Sullivan put it: "Wallace was the opposite of an aphorist" (Smith, "*Brief Interviews*" 267); "In his books, so fluffy an idea would never survive the withering storm of panoptical analysis" (Sullivan). I suggest that Wallace is perhaps better understood as an *incompatibilist*, someone who does not think determinism and free will are compatible. The existence of the Entertainment curtails any notion that characters can learn to resist the ultimate high, just as the characters themselves are so obviously driven, in every instance, by their unconscious drives.

This leaves us two options. Either Wallace is a hard determinist who believes there is no choice at all, or he is a libertarian, who believes in that special extra factor, a soul, which transcends the laws of the physical universe. I suggest that Wallace is both. These contradict each other, of course, but then Wallace's work *is* so often characterised by this "'*both*' shit" (*Supposedly* 211). In Wallace's fiction, hard determinism is a hard fact, consciousness and the will are as much a product of deterministic forces as the body, and the only choice, if you can

call it that, is what to think about what your body does without you. As one AA veteran puts it,

> 99.9% of what goes on in one's life is actually none of one's business, with the .1% under one's control consisting mostly of the option to accept or deny one's inevitable powerlessness over the other 99.9%. (1004n. 100)

The human soul, that tiny 0.1% of the person, has no choice but to accept or deny its lack of choice. In a sense this is a libertarian view: there is a soul in Wallace's work, the "extra factor" necessary for free will (Kane 39), but in Wallace's work the soul is basically powerless.

In Wallace's work, the soul is really just a metaphor for the embodied 'I,' but it is a profound metaphor. To write about human beings as souls trapped inside their bodies is to write about lives that are meaningfully tragic. Wallace's characters all have to suffer what he calls "Corporeal Punishment," the terror of "having a body" (*Girl* 262). Yet to acknowledge that someone is *in* there, that there is someone struggling to reconcile themselves to their own body and their own fate, is to honour the fundamental tragedy of human life: that though we have souls they can never be uncaged. There may not be any free will, but in Wallace's fiction there is a person to suffer that fact. It is a losing battle but it is also a meaningful one.

Mary K. Holland argues that in Gately's final scene, his regression into memories of being obscenely high ironically "void any notion of heroic transformation" ("Art's Heart's" 236). Holland sees Gately's failure to resist as emblematic of the novel as a whole, arguing that Wallace, by relentlessly "locking [his] characters in endless loops of infantile desire" from which they are unable and unwilling to escape (239), ironically undercuts any possibility for recovery and hope, and thereby "fails to deliver on the agenda" that he "set for it" (218) in the "E Unibus Pluram" essay. During his hospital bed nightmares, Gately sinks into memories of his abused mother being "pulled spinning up into [a] tornado's vortex" (816), imagining himself as a child running to the sea to hide by submerging himself in "deep warm water" (816). Holland suggests (without discussing the fire or water metaphor) that the novel's final line—"he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out" (*Infinite Jest* 981)—is an "image of fear and need" (Holland, "Art's Heart's" 236). The water metaphor suggests she is right: Gately's submersion in the sea suggests that he was flooded by drugs in the end. There is another potential source for this

final water metaphor, however, that is perhaps more hopeful. In *Bill W. and Dr. Bob* (1987), a play depicting the founding of the AA, the character Bill says that "The tide's gone out, and I'm staring at a lot of wreckage. And without booze, it's a helluva lot worse!" (76). The fact that the tide is "way out" at the end of *Infinite Jest* suggests, in an echo of the play's line, that Gately perhaps managed to avoid the torrent, to remain a recovering addict and not a lapsed one, at least for now.[140] To be fair to Gately, even if he did decide (or a doctor decided for him) to take pain medication after being shot this would hardly be a failure. It is only because of his terrible bad luck to exist in the same deterministic universe as Lenz that puts him into the worst of all possible positions. This does not undermine Gately's struggle to abide through pain, to keep on living: indeed it only heightens it, making it more tragic, because the only choice you have is to keep on not surrendering.

Unlike the recovering Gately, Hal is a posthumanist who believes, as Wallace's critics do, that he is devoid of interiority. He is wrong. Elizabeth Freudenthal incorrectly suggests that the opening chapter is "the novel's only instance of first-person narration" (203). Hal's first-person narration actually begins on p.851 ("I'd felt for almost a week as if I needed to cry" [851]) as his withdrawal gets steadily worse. We literally see his interior self wake up as the narcotising flood recedes: he turns out to be *in* there after all. The problem is that Hal does not know how to be a human being. This is not because he has no interior self: he emphatically does have one, he just doesn't know how to treat it with anything more than ironic contempt. Gately recovers, in part, because AA teaches you how to be *in* there, how to respect and take responsibility for the machine you are stuck inside.[141] One of the reasons AA succeeds is that it teaches addicts to deal with the causes, not the symptoms, of their addiction. When Gately goes sober and the flood recedes, he rediscovers long-submerged

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[140] Gately refers to the "AA founder Bill W." in the novel (833), and we know that Wallace was given the book long before *Infinite Jest* was published: it is in his library, with the message "To David, Congratulations on year 1. . . . 11/6/90" (HRC).

[141] Gregory Bateson argues that "Bill W.'s stroke of genius was to" dismantle the alcoholic's Cartesian view of themselves as individuals and encourage the surrender of the will to a recovery system (3). In *Infinite Jest* the group encourages the same surrender, but it is a long and arduous surrender *because* of the Cartesian self inside the addict: the interior self is always at war with itself, and has to work hard to keep praying and surrendering every day.

memories of times in his life that cause him great shame, and from which he wanted to flee into the flood. Hal, on the other hand, thinks in terms of symptoms only: he is just a machine, after all, and should be easily fixed. Hal does not understand that recovery is a long, arduous, *spiritual* process: he wants clear-cut "data on how long one might expect the wretchedness of giving up drugs to continue" (801). Hal's posthumanist friend Pemulis advises him to find a different, better drug that suits his "machine": "What happens if you try and go without something the machine *needs*?" (1065n. 321). Neither Hal nor Pemulis dare to think about why they might have needed to flood their interior selves and escape into drugs in the first place. The child of a narcissistic mother and a father who committed suicide, Hal bizarrely "finds he rather envies a man who feels he has something to explain his being fucked up, parents to blame it on" (805). Pemulis, who spent his childhood pretending to sleep while his father raped his brother, also does not "blam[e] his late father" because he doesn't "consider himself fucked up or unfree w/r/t Substances" (805). They are oblivious.

In his Kafka essay, Wallace wrote that young Americans cannot understand that "the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (64). The self is forged, for Wallace, out of the "horrific struggle" between soul and body, between the interior 'I' and the 'Me' in which it is trapped.[142] A self is something you have to honour and respect, but Hal and Pemulis see no reason: as far as they are concerned, they are nothing more than machines with "switch[es]" and "wiring" (1065n. 321). They treat their own interior self, their souls, their "humanity," with contempt. As a consequence, they do not understand that they are killing something when they take drugs. When Hal and Pemulis flood away their soul they give up on this struggle, surrendering their humanity in order to exist neatly, passively, as mere posthuman machines. Hal still has

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[142] Allard Den Dulk argues persuasively that Wallace's work is profoundly existential, because in it "*Becoming* a self is the *task* of human life" (16). I disagree, however, that "there is no 'true core' that an individual always already 'is' or 'has'" in Wallace's work. It is true that souls are not "pre-made" in Wallace's work (*Consider* 64), but there *is* always a core interior 'I' that's *in* there to do the making. For it to be shaped by its (often antagonistic) relationship with its body and brain, the core self has to exist in the first place. In Wallace's work, it is everything in the "world" outside of consciousness (Dulk 16) that is in doubt. The thinking thing is emphatically present.

a self inside him, and he might believe it too if he did not live in the care of posthumanists. Hal might still recover his humanity, but the hard work is ahead.

Though Wallace's characters ultimately lack any control over their own destiny, Wallace does not write about them as soulless automatons. The soul might not be in charge but it is emphatically present *in* there, and their suffering is meaningful as a result. By reinvesting in the evolved, deterministic body, the selves within those bodies are made more coherent, more sharply defined by their limits than the diffuse postmodern characters who had none. Throughout his career Wallace was engaged with cognitive science, posthuman theory, and the philosophy of mind, but ultimately his fiction is about the human soul, about what it is like to live trapped inside the clockwork body and brain. He is not as optimistic as *This is Water* makes him seem. To quote Wallace quoting Kafka: "There is hope, but not for us" (*Consider* 64). There is hope in the post-postmodern novel, but little of it in Wallace's.

But Wallace also says that Kafka's "gallows humor" is not all that Kafka's stories "have got going on" (63-64), because Kafka's tragedy "always also [has] an immense and reverent joy" (63). Wallace's characters are encaged in their bodies, absolutely ill and will-less, doomed to suffer and die, but because Wallace celebrates the 'I' that is *in* there, they are, as a result, both meaningful and moving. Human beings will never be free of the fire in Wallace's world, but by investing in something like the soul Wallace honours the struggle of those who have both the best and worst luck to be alive inside it.

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