**UNIVERZITA KARLOVA - FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA**

**ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR**

# WALLACE AMONG THE MACHINES: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE SELF

WALLACE MEZI STROJI: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, TECHNOLOGIE, A JÁSTVÍ

## DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE


Vedoucí diplomové práce (supervisor):
doc. Erik Sherman Roraback, D. Phil (Oxon)

Zpracoval (author):
Alex Russell

Studijní obor (subject):
Anglofonní literatury a kultury



Praha, srpen, 2019

**DECLARATION**

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracoval samostatně, že jsem řádně citoval všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného či stejného titulu.

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

V Praze dne ……………………………

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor doc. Erik Roraback, D. Phil (Oxon) for his valuable comments, suggestions and guidance during the writing of this thesis.

My gratitude also goes to Mme Leblanc, M. Guédon, and Mlle Guédon, whose hospitality and kindness during my last weeks of composing this thesis made producing a final copy far less stressful than it otherwise would have been.

And most of all, my thanks and love to my parents, whose general air of quiet confidence that I would get this done "because it needed done" provided just the right kind of example, and was especially encouraging during the times when getting it done did not always look so straightforward.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to this MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used when referencing the works of David Foster Wallace throughout this thesis:

| | |
|---|---|
| *BI* | *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001). |
| *BS* | *The Broom of the System* (London: Abacus, 1997). |
| *CL* | *Consider the Lobster, and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005). |
| *IJ* | *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1997). |
| *PK* | *The Pale King* (London: Penguin, 2012). |
| *SFT* | *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (London: Abacus, 1998). |
| *TW* | *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009). |

**Abstract**

This thesis is concerned with an analysis of how David Foster Wallace's treatment of technology defines his understanding of the self in late 20th-century and early 21st-century America. With a primary focus on how this understanding evolved between the publication of his major novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) and his posthumously published unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011), this thesis also takes into consideration Wallace's ideas as expressed through his many short stories, non-fiction works, and critical essays, most prominently "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993). This thesis first briefly places Wallace in the context of contemporary literary scholarship, evaluating the state and extent of the nascent field of Wallace Studies. It then proceeds to examine and map out the philosophical underpinnings to Wallace's conception of the self, emphasising the importance of existential thought and the notion that the self is to be created rather than pre-existing in the individual. Technology as it is presented in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* is then examined in relation to this philosophical understanding of the self, proving itself consistently to be an impediment to the existential self-becoming valorised in the novels. Wallace's early interest in entertainment technology as defining the contemporary relationship to selfhood grows, in the later works, to a concern that machines assuming the roles of humans may erase the possibility of attaining that selfhood entirely. His novels evince a strong belief in the supremacy of an unmediated self and offer his readers "philosophical tools" to disentangle themselves from the technologically saturated reality of contemporary America. This thesis brings into consideration relevant criticism from the recent abundance of Wallace scholarship, occasionally challenging previous conclusions in light of its findings - for example, in posthumanist readings of Wallace's work. It also offers a new reading of the implications of Wallace's political engagement, questioning to what extent the self-enriching civic life of *The Pale King* is compatible with autonomous choice in a democratic society.

**Abstrakt**

Tato práce se zabývá analýzou toho, jak David Foster Wallace zachází s technologií a definuje tak své chápání jáství v Americe pozdního dvacátého a raného jednadvacátého století. Primární zaměření pak spočívá ve vývoji tohoto chápání mezi vydáním Wallacova stěžejního románu *Infinite Jest* (1996) a jeho posmrtně vydaném nedokončeném románu *The Pale King* (2011). Zároveň tato studie zváží Wallacovy myšlenky tak jak je vyjádřil skrz své mnohé povídky, literaturu faktu a kritické eseje, zvláště pak ‚E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' (1993). Tato práce nejprve krátce umístí Wallace do kontextu soudobé akademické literatury za účelem zvážení stavu a rozsahu vznikajícího oboru „Wallace Studies". Následně se tato práce bude zabývat rozborem a rozvržením filozofických základů Wallaceova pojetí jáství a zdůrazní tak důležitost existenciálního myšlení a názoru o tvořeném spíše než přednastaveném individuálním já. Technologie, tak jak je představena ve *Infinite Jest* a *The Pale King*, je pak zkoumána ve vztahu k tomuto filozofickému chápání jáství, což z ní činí neustálou překážku pro existenciální sebepoznání, které je tolik zhodnocováno ve Wallaceově románech. Wallaceovův raný zájem o zábavní technologii jakožto udávajícího prvku soudobého vztahu k já se postupně v pozdějších dílech vyvine v obavu, že stroje převezmou lidskou roli a zcela tak znemožní možnost utváření já. Jeho romány dávají najevo silné přesvědčení v nadřazenost nezprostředkovaného já a nabízí tak svým čtenářům „filozofické nástroje" k oproštění se od technologicky přesycené reality soudobé Ameriky. Tato práce zváží relevantní kritiku ze současného nadbytku akademické literatury věnované Wallaceovi a příležitostně zpochybní předešlé závěry ve světle nových poznatků – například v posthumanistickém pojetí Wallaceova díla. Zároveň tato studie nabízí nové pojetí náznaků Wallaceova politické zapojení a táže se do jaké míry je sebeobohaťující občanský život v *Pale King* slučitelný s autonomní volbou v demokratické společnosti.

**Table of Contents**

**1. Introduction** ........ **8**

**2. Wallace and His Self** ........ **16**
2.1. To Begin With, Man is Nothing: Diving toward the Self ........ 17
2.2. The Freedom of the Aesthetes ........ 23
2.3. *To Be* is *To Be Of*: The Role of Community in Forming the Self ........ 28

**3. Entertainment Technology in *Infinite Jest*** ........ **34**
3.1. In Thrall to the Screen ........ 34
3.2. *Infinite Jest*: A Failed Entertainment ........ 40
3.3. David Foster Wallace, Posthuman ........ 50
3.4. Cold Turkey: The Response to Entertainment Technology ........ 58

**4. *The Pale King*: Technology and Technologies of the Self** ........ **62**
4.1. These Fragments: Assembling *The Pale King* ........ 62
4.2. Technologies of the Self ........ 64
4.3. A Church without a Congregation: The Mechanisation of the Service ........ 72
4.4. “Creature of the System”: What it Means to Disappear in *The Pale King* ........ 75
4.5. The Cost of the Self: Auditing Wallace's Existentialism ........ 80

**5. Conclusion: Illusions *Ad Inf*** ........ **87**

**Bibliography** ........ **96**

## 1. Introduction

Since his death in 2008, the work of David Foster Wallace has increasingly been a site of critical interest for scholars working on contemporary narrative. The scattered critical engagement with his writing throughout his lifetime, evident in a few isolated works, has now burgeoned and cohered under the rubric of "Wallace Studies", a field first explicitly defined in the year after the author's suicide. As the prominent Wallace scholar Clare Hayes-Brady has said, the once "aspirational" designation, which aimed to cement Wallace "as important a writer as Woolf, as Joyce, as Eliot, as Austen", has now made significant progress in "clearing the critical ground [and] establishing Wallace Studies as a legitimate field".[1] Those researchers around whom the nascent criticism was growing were keenly aware of the need for Wallace Studies to establish new perspectives on the author's work and move past the initial insular focus on irony, sincerity, and Wallace's self-proclaimed mission statement of moving contemporary literature beyond postmodernism - kill the "real enemy, [the] patriarch [of] my patriarch", as he put it in his influential interview with Larry McCaffrey in 1993.[2] In the words of those organising the 2009 City University of New York conference on Wallace Studies - the second ever international conference devoted to the writer - the field sought to expand "beyond the author's own articulation of his project" and incorporate numerous "Interdisciplinary Approaches to Wallace".[3]

In the decade following this call, there has undoubtedly been a marked broadening of the critical horizon in Wallace Studies. Within the past four years alone, book-length monographs have been published that read the author in the contexts of world literature,

---

[1] Steve Paulson, "David Foster Wallace in the #MeToo Era: A Conversation with Clare Hayes-Brady", *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Sept. 10, 2018 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/david-foster-wallace-in-the-metoo-era-a-conversation-with-clare-hayes-brady/> Jan. 8, 2019.

[2] Larry McCaffrey, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace" in *Conversations with David Foster* Wallace, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2012), p.48.

[3] Matt Bucher, "Footnotes: New Directions in David Foster Wallace Studies", *Las Obras de Roberto Bolaño*, Mar. 26, 2009 <http://www.bolanobolano.com/2009/03/26/footnotes-cfp/> Jan. 15, 2019.

religion, and neoliberalism (to name only a few), accompanied by important and overdue articles framing Wallace in the previously ignored terms of gender and race.[4] And with the advent of the #MeToo movement, the field has had to grapple not just with Wallace, the author, but Wallace, the man, and how his troubling biography affects our reading of his work in this new cultural moment. It is a point of examination especially pertinent for a field in which the cultural image of its subject looms so large, and in which there has been little distinction, to use Ralph Clare's phrase, "between the corporeal and the corpus".[5] Few writers are consumed by fictionalising and myth to the same degree as Wallace has been, occasionally during his life and particularly after his death. Jason Ponsoldt's *The End of the Tour* (2015) is a prime example: those literary fields that have to contend with a cinematic avatar of their subject at all rarely have to do so this early into their project, as Wallace Studies must in the wake of Jason Segel's DFW, cringing his way through the *Infinite Jest* book tour. (In a point of comparison, Woolf had to wait 60 years after her death to go through this process of Hollywood mythologization in *The Hours* (2002), while, for Wallace, it took less than a decade.) It remains important to move past these entertaining but inevitably reductive representations. Serious consideration of Wallace and his legacy should concern itself with challenging rather than ratifying "the canonisation of St Dave", the popular image of the writer as wise and benign sage of Generation X.[6] Even within Wallace Studies one can at times spot the persistence of casual and unhelpful myth. There is an assumption at times evident, for example, that having been worked on for over a decade and still being left unfinished, *The Pale King* in some way defeated Wallace and contributed, if not

[4] See Lucas Thompson, *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Adam S. Miller, *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Mary K. Holland, "'By Hirsute Author': Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace", *Critique*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (2017), pp.1-14; Samuel Cohen, "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace" in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, Len Platt, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp.228-244; Lucas Thompson, "Wallace and Race" in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, Ralph Clare, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp.204-219.
[5] Ralph Clare, "Introduction: An Exquisite Corpus: Assembling a Wallace without Organs" in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster* Wallace, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p.1.
[6] D. T. Max, "Why David Foster Wallace Should Not Be Worshipped as a Secular Saint", *The Guardian*, Oct. 9, 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/09/david-foster-wallace-worshipped-secular-saint> 22 July, 2019.

led outright, to his suicide.[7] Casting the author as the Tortured Genius is a dangerous romanticisation, and one that obscures the decidedly un-literary reality that changes in the medication Wallace had been taking for 22 years severely worsened his depression in the last 12 months of his life.[8]

Certainly, surveying the field today, Wallace Studies is ridding itself of the rather understandable tendency to sacralise the author after his suicide. This is especially difficult given that the manner and suddenness of his death in many ways brought about the formalisation of the field itself, with early conferences taking on the tone of mournful memorials. This tendency toward the panegyric is perhaps best typified by D. T. Max's biography of Wallace, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* (2012). Well-researched and invaluable for those with an interest in studying or simply better understanding Wallace and his work, it is a biography that nevertheless, at times, lapses into hagiography. As the author's suicide and the outpouring of praise that followed was itself the impetus for the work (as detailed by Max in his preface to the British edition), one may be better placed viewing the biography as something akin to a funeral oration, in which Max attempts to affix Wallace's star in the literary firmament and capture a sense of the "remarkable being in the process of becoming".[9] While the author's sexual involvement with several of his students and his abusive behaviour to the writer Mary Karr during their relationship - pushing her from a moving vehicle, for one - are briefly referenced,[10] these details fail to detract from the glowing portrait of Wallace, the moralist, that Max ultimately paints. The author's aborted attempt to buy a gun and murder Karr's husband is notably presented as an aberrant, one-day affair.[11] And in any case, that too is a source of admiration: on turning up an apology Wallace wrote after the event, Max's main take-away is

---

[7] Mark Costello, Wallace's friend and college roommate with whom he co-authored a study of rap music titled *Signifying Rappers* (1990), has posited that the author's suicide was a result of the writing "drying up". See "Cobain Factor: Why David Foster Wallace Killed Himself", *FORA.tv*, Oct. 15, 2012 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpCoY-mCGZs> Aug. 10, 2019.

[8] D. T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (London: Granta, 2012), pp.297-301.

[9] Max, *Every Love Story*, p.xiv.

[10] Max, *Every Love Story*, p.175.

[11] Max, *Every Love Story*, p.163.

that "the craftsmanship of [the] letter is quite remarkable".[12] For all its value to later scholarship, the biography stands as a prime example of one of the many post-2009 texts David Hering categorised as "mak[ing] the case for Wallace's canonicity".[13]

Now over a decade after Wallace's death, his place within the literary canon seems relatively secure and the study of his work is developing into a more rigorous discipline: as Hayes-Brady has pointedly noted, "you can't simply spend a critical lifetime talking about how great someone is".[14] The field is moving beyond uncritical praise and into what Adam Kelly describes as an "engagement with Wallace's literary ethics".[15] The interdisciplinary approach to Wallace that has resulted from this has clearly proved fruitful. Just at the beginning of this year, The David Foster Wallace Society, founded in 2016, published the first volume of the first double-blind, peer-reviewed journal devoted wholly to the writer, *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*, edited by Hayes-Brady. It is clear from the contents, with essays on race in Wallace's short fiction, second-wave feminism in *The Broom of the System*, and the influence of Buddhism on Wallace's ethics, that the journal aims to consolidate the recent trends emerging in the field. From rather limited concerns, it is evident that the critical scholarship of David Foster Wallace continues to encourage - and has achieved much of - the widened scope called for by the initiators of the field in 2009.

Yet despite these new areas of research in Wallace Studies, the writer's engagement with technology remains noticeably under-examined. Too often has the field fallen foul of Neil Postman's warning that "because of its lengthy, intimate, and inevitable relationship with culture, technology does not invite a close examination of its own consequences".[16] In Wallace's work, the consequences of technology's integration into the culture are most evident and, in the context of Wallace's ethical concerns, most pressing in his examination of selfhood at the end of

---

[12] Eric Been, "David Foster Wallace: Genius, Fabulist, Would-Be Murderer: A Conversation with Wallace Biographer D. T. Max", *The Atlantic*, Sept. 6, 2012 <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive /2012/09/david-foster-wallace-genius-fabulist-would-be-murderer/261997/> Aug. 2, 2019.
[13] David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), p.1.
[14] Paulson, "A Conversation with Clare Hayes-Brady".
[15] Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline", *IJAS Online*, No.2 (2010), p.55.
[16] Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p.xii.

the 20th century. It is largely accepted that at the centre of the author's body of work, as Allard den Dulk succinctly summarises, there is an exploration of "the challenges to becoming a coherent self and realizing a meaningful existence amid the fragmented plurality of the contemporary Western world".[17] Yet while few critics would disagree with this statement, too few have sufficiently explored the ideological underpinnings of the self as understood by Wallace that make it true, as well as the factors determining the disjointed material reality of contemporary America which threatens that self's coherence. As has been said, although many have identified and analysed postmodern irony as a key factor in the "fragmented plurality" of the contemporary sense of self in Wallace's fiction, the fact of this being fundamentally dependent on new technology's integration into the culture is seldom considered. The topic is frequently elided in a way that positions Wallace, voracious reader that we know he was, as a purely literary entity. "Wallace and his World", the opening section of Hayes-Brady's *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, for example, delimits Wallace's world as one firmly embedded, almost exclusively, in the written word. While Hayes-Brady importantly develops the writer's literary influences outside the obvious postmodern aegis of authors such as Thomas Pynchon and John Barth by bringing into consideration his reading of British Romanticism, among others, her brief mention of technology mischaracterises it as simply "offer[ing] a perspective from which Wallace's writing approached the shifting landscape of contemporary American life".[18] I intend to show in this thesis that Wallace did not view technology as passively as Hayes-Brady proposes, but instead used it in his work as that force most actively shifting the landscape of life at the turn of the millennium. Wallace himself warns in his foundational essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993) against the

---

[17] Allard den Dulk, "Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self" in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the* Novels, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.43.
[18] Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p.47.

temptation not to take television "seriously enough as both a disseminator and a *definer* of the cultural atmosphere we breathe and process".[19]

Before examining technology's influence on the self in Wallace's work, we must define what constitutes, for Wallace, the "coherent self", as den Dulk terms it. Given the prominence in Wallace's writing of a character's relationship to their own consciousness and those of others around them, it is surprising how rarely the nature of individual selfhood and the underlying philosophical framework defining this for Wallace is engaged with in critical study of the author. In this sense, den Dulk's research into the influence of existentialist philosophy on Wallace's conception of the self is invaluable and hence forms the starting point of the second chapter of this thesis. Once Wallace's conception of the self is established I will begin to examine in the succeeding chapters how technology fundamentally mediates and alters the individual's experiences of that self in the author's work.

Following the recognised need in Wallace Studies to critically connect his texts, forcefully put by Kelly, who writes that the field "has tended either to treat an individual work [...] in isolation, or to reduce Wallace's ideas to a set of tenets",[20] this thesis will examine Wallace's treatment of technology in relation to the self as it evolved between the publication of what are now considered by most Wallace scholars to be his two most important fictional works: the novels *Infinite Jest* (1996) and *The Pale King* (2011). While the former has long been at the centre of Wallace scholarship, the status of the latter - unfinished, subsequently compiled from drafts and published posthumously by Wallace's long-time editor, Michael Pietsch - is less certain, and the inevitable problems of critically examining an unfinished work will be addressed in the final chapter.

One may reasonably ask why Wallace's novels, which constitute only one quarter of the author's extant work, should be taken by this thesis - and Wallace Studies in general - as the keystones of his critical afterlife. Wallace published more collections of short stories - *Girl with*

---

[19] David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (London: Abacus, 1998), p.27; emphasis added. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text.
[20] Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas" in *The Long Thing*, p.4.

*Curious Hair* (1989), *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), and *Oblivion* (2004) - than he did novels during his lifetime. One could easily assume that it was in these collections Wallace managed to express his ideas most fully, especially given that he would later denigrate and disown his first novel - *The Broom of the System* (1987), an expanded version of his undergraduate honours thesis - as juvenilia. Or, if not his short stories, why not frame Wallace Studies around his non-fiction? Although his contemporary literary reputation was largely established solely on the basis of that latter behemoth, *Infinite Jest*, Wallace was a prolific and in-demand writer of articles and essays, which he produced consistently throughout his career. Now as highly regarded as his fiction, these non-fiction pieces command the widest general readership of any of his works, thanks mainly to their (relatively) easy accessibility.

Despite these facts, I agree with those critics who maintain the primacy of the novels in Wallace's *oeuvre* as the fullest expressions of his artistic and moral concerns, not least because, as Marshall Boswell notes, the author "regard[ed] himself first and foremost as a novelist".[21] At any given time, his novelistic project, often referred to by Wallace elusively as the eponymous "Long Thing" of Boswell's collection of essays, formed the thematic undercoat of almost all that he wrote. Concerns most extensively dealt with in the novels, for example, crop up as points of consideration in the non-fiction; pieces intended for inclusion in any given "Long Thing" end up published as stand-alone short stories. One may look to the fact that the majority of Wallace's output from the post-*Infinite Jest* period of his career, during which time he was continually working on versions of *The Pale King*, stems from the same set of preoccupations informing the unfinished novel, and can be viewed as supplementing the ideas he attempted to capture in it. Stephen J. Burn has argued all these "compositions [are] enlivened by creative cross-fertilization",[22] while Hering, after extensive study of the Wallace archives, argues that the

[21] Marshall Boswell, "Preface: David Foster Wallace and 'The Long Thing'" in *The Long Thing*, p.vii. Given *Infinite Jest*'s cultural impact and the effect of its publication on Wallace's career and reputation, it is conceived of in much Wallace criticism as the natural centrepiece in his body of work. Boswell's preface provides, however, a compelling argument for placing *Infinite Jest*, along with *The Broom of the System* and *The Pale King*, at the centre of the Wallace canon not just because of their cultural and literary significance, but also due to their centrality in Wallace's own view of his artistic "mission".
[22] Stephen J. Burn, "'A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness': *The Pale King*" in *The Long Thing*, p.166.

relationship should be considered even closer than that. In his mind, one can view the post-1996 writing as "arguably [...] one huge linear 'discrete project' that shed or engendered other projects during its process".[23] A "significant number of the post-1996 fictions", he writes, "most notably the stories in *Oblivion*, come into existence *because* Wallace is trying to write his third novel".[24] In light of this, although the present thesis will focus primarily on *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, the numerous short stories, essays, and journalistic pieces that Wallace composed throughout the periods he spent constructing these novels will be brought in to further illuminate Wallace's treatment of the self in relation to technology between the two works.

Through a study of these novels, I aim to show how Wallace complicated his view of technology as *defining* the contemporary relationship to selfhood in the wake of postmodernism - evidenced in "E Unibus Pluram" and, in particular, *Infinite Jest* - to a view of technology in *The Pale King* as potentially *erasing* the possibility of working toward a meaningful self in the first place. In the earlier novel, we are presented with an opportunity to change our approach to living in the face of pervasive and dangerous entertainment technologies, epitomised by the fatally captivating "Infinite Jest" film cartridge.[25] There are routes of recovery, represented in the addict Don Gately's journey through Alcoholics Anonymous, available as a way out of the ontologically deadening atmosphere of the novel's America. In *The Pale King*, even these routes have been mechanised and, therefore, in Wallace's understanding, sterilised. Information technologies in general, symbolised most significantly by the less visible but nonetheless portentous data processors, threaten not just the jobs and livelihoods of the IRS agents in *The Pale King*, but their opportunity to enact the processes by which Wallace contends we achieve a meaningful, true self in the world. In both works, this thesis hopes to show, technology is presented as encouraging us to shirk the responsibility of crafting a self, ultimately working to obfuscate what Wallace believes it means to be a human being.

---

[23] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p.126.
[24] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p.126; emphasis in original.
[25] Following standard practice in Wallace Studies, and to avoid confusion, I shall refer to the novel *Infinite Jest* in italics and the film-within-the-novel "Infinite Jest" in quotation marks.

## 2. Wallace and His Self

Before an examination of how the self is mediated and affected by technology in Wallace's work, it is first necessary to interrogate what is meant by that term, "self". What is a "self" to Wallace? How does he conceive of one, and what is its nature in his work? It is only by understanding the ontological ground on which we are standing that we can begin to measure and understand the seismic forces of technology acting upon that ground. Indeed, for a novelist who double-majored in English Literature and Philosophy as an undergraduate, and whose work exhibits such a pre-occupation with the individual's ability or inability to, as he has said, "leap over that wall" of "existential loneliness" that separates them from others,[1] too seldom has an attempt been made to map out the philosophical terrain on which Wallace builds his conception of that individual self. Allard den Dulk is one notable exception, having in recent years provided the valuable critical framework for - as he titles one essay from 2014 - "Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self". Although den Dulk rightly acknowledges Marshall Boswell's early study *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003) as the first critical work to connect Kierkegaard to Wallace, Boswell only does so to compare Wallace's drug addicts in *Infinite Jest* with Kierkegaard's "aesthetes", examining AA as a "viable Kierkegaardian religion" in the novel.[2] While certainly illuminating, the study does not probe the larger implications of how the philosopher's existentialism influences Wallace's understanding of the workings of the self in general, and so leaves space for further investigation. Given, as will be examined, the extent of this influence, the absence of this from much Wallace scholarship is a critical oversight. Even studies specifically analysing Wallace in the context of philosophy continue to miss den Dulk's valuable contribution: for example, none of the essays from the collection *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace* (2015) make reference to Kierkegaard or

---

[1] Laura Miller, "The *Salon* Interview: David Foster Wallace" in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, p.62.

[2] Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p.143

existentialism's vast influence on the writer.[3] Discussion of the author's philosophy within Wallace Studies, particularly evinced in this collection, has a tendency to frame itself around his undergraduate philosophy thesis, certainly his most overtly philosophical work, published posthumously as *Fate, Time, and Language* in 2010. As an examination of free will and an argument against Richard Taylor's fatalism, the essay has coloured the study of Wallace in the context of philosophy in the sense that, following on from his thesis, works have expounded on Wallace's refutation of certain philosophical concepts rather than providing an extensive critical understanding of which concepts did in fact constitute Wallace's philosophy. As this thesis intends to show, it is the specific existential understanding of selfhood that accounts for Wallace's response to the new technological advances in America and informs the diagnoses he offers for the ills plaguing contemporary life throughout his work.

### 2.1. To Begin With, Man Is Nothing: Diving toward the Self

Allard den Dulk summarises the basic principles of an existentialist conception of selfhood as follows:

> the existentialist view [holds] there is no true core that an individual always already is or has, and which underlies selfhood. Becoming a self is the task of human life: a human being has to integrate his individual limitations and possibilities into a unified existence that he regards as his responsibility - this is the process of developing a self.[4]

Without that "core", one must actively set about constructing the self. Although this understanding of the self can be read implicitly throughout Wallace's work, it is a belief explicitly evinced in his short speech, "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness". In the address he bemoans the contemporary American tendency to teach it's children "that a self is something

---

[3] Steven M. Cahn & Maureen Eckert, eds., *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[4] Allard den Dulk, "Good Faith and Sincerity: Sartrean Virtues of Self-Becoming in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" in *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, eds. Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.201.

you just *have*".[5] Instead, as he argues can be seen in Kafka, there is no inherent, pre-existing self, only "the horrific struggle to establish a human self [that] results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (*CL*, p.64). Thus, understanding the absence of a pre-existing self, Wallace exhibits a clear dependence on the language of existentialism.

In his fiction, this notion of existential "self-becoming" is represented most fully and most overtly in the short story "Forever Overhead", from the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. The story, narrated in the second person, details a boy's trip to a public swimming pool on his thirteenth birthday and the anxieties that arrest him on the diving board before he finally, for the first time, jumps into the water. It is a story, above all, about transitions: from the solid board to the water of the pool; from the stasis of the wait to the dynamism of the dive; and from the afternoon into night, as the sun sets and the horizon blares red like an "EKG of the dying day".[6] On one level, the story can be viewed as a simple metaphorical representation of puberty, the transition from adolescence into adulthood. When viewed in the context of Wallace's existentialism, the transition is framed as the recognition of the demands of self-becoming. Adulthood, for Wallace, is not simply a biological state toward which one will inexorably drive. The boy, "you", must make the conscious decision to jump and accept that new status of adulthood, claiming responsibility for that decision. With the sense of the nebulous and undefined religious spirituality that is latent in much of Wallace's work, there are echoes of St Paul from the First Epistle: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things".[7] There is the obligation of the individual actively to effect that change and put away the juvenilia of their past life. It is not a natural process resulting in adulthood, but one that must be consciously set in motion. Wallace himself, very pointedly, attempted to do just that, by putting away what he saw as the

---

[5] David Foster Wallace, "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed" in *Consider the Lobster, and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), p.64; emphasis in original. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text.
[6] David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001), p.5. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text.
[7] King James Version, 1 Corinthians 13:11, *Bible Gateway* <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+13&version=KJV> Jan. 28, 2019.

juvenile dependence on postmodernism in his own writing; in a letter to Jonathan Franzen, he dismissed *The Broom of the System*, published when he was 24 and by every criteria an "adult", as being the work of "a very smart fourteen-year-old".[8] As Wallace was not forced to re-examine his own literary position, the boy in "Forever Overhead", similarly, is not forced to take the leap. "You" can just as easily push your way back down the ladder. But refusing to jump is a refusal to take a place in the world as a human being.

The "leap" at the heart of "Forever Overhead" is, itself, a concept integral to existential thought, as Wallace would have been well aware. Kierkegaard holds it to be an essential condition for achieving true selfhood: "the real 'self'", he writes in *The Concept of Anxiety*, "is posited only by the qualitative leap".[9] It is an image picked up by Sartre as one key to his existentialism, as can be seen in his explanation of the concept of "existence preceding essence":

> We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and *defines himself afterwards*. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because *to begin with he is nothing*. He will not be anything until later, and then he will *be what he makes of himself* [... H]e conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be *after that leap towards existence*.[10]

On closer reading, "Forever Overhead" abounds in this language of existentialism. The leap from the board is that "leap toward existence". The boy's incipient adulthood is figured as a fully-realised, responsible self - but one that he must claim. The jump, the moment at which the boy reaches out, is described as "Step[ping] into the skin" (p.13). Not just exhibiting a sense of the biological change of puberty, there is one of attaining this sense of "essence", becoming a true substantial being in the world. The leap, significantly, is one into a void, like "a stone down a well", the boy imagines (p.10). In terms of Sartrean existentialism, "Freedom is precisely the nothingness which [...] forces human-reality *to make itself* instead of *to be*".[11] The nothingness

[8] David Foster Wallace, quoted in D. T. Max, "The Unfinished", *The New Yorker*, Feb. 28, 2009 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/09/the-unfinished> Mar. 6, 2019.
[9] Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings, Volume 8: The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, eds. & trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.79.
[10] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism", trans. Philip Mairet in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman (London: Penguin, 1975), p.349; emphasis added.
[11] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), p.440.

with which the boy is faced at the moment of the jump must be countenanced and overcome. The questions posed to the boy at this point in the story, the moments before his feet touch the edge of the board, may not even be decipherable, let alone answered: "So which is the lie? Hard or soft? Silence or time?" (p.13). As Zadie Smith writes, the boy must throw himself from the board despite this unknowing, "into the world, condemned to be free - and hideously responsible for that freedom".[12] No answers come pre-determined, but he must grasp them for himself as he moves from the single-file line to the dynamic system of the pool below, where the true essence of existence really lies.

It is this movement from the isolated to the integrated that is perhaps the most significant transition of "Forever Overhead". Wallace characterises the leap of becoming as a leap from a monologic to a dialogic relation to the world, portrayed as moving out of one's head and engaging with the other. Pre-jump, in an image of self-effected isolation, each one in the single-file line up to the board "seems by himself", where "[f]ew talk" and most "look bored" (p.8). But to jump is an act described as necessarily requiring one to exclude their thinking - or so it seems to the boy, for whom "being scared is caused mostly by thinking" (p.7). The woman who dives effortlessly and apparently without fear before him appears as "part of a rhythm that excludes thinking" (p.10), a condition to which he tries to steel himself at the moment he must leap: "No more time for thinking" (p.12). This characterisation of thought recalls one wry slogan of AA in *Infinite Jest*, who similarly view this obsessive internal analysis as having dubious value: "My Best Thinking Got Me Here", the addicts like to remind each other.[13] Perched on the end of the board, the moments of anxious decision before the jump heighten the tension between this inner world and the outer reality. Having suddenly decided that the jump "needs to be thought about [...] after all" (p.10), the boy retreats into himself so that it appears as if "[n]o time is passing outside [him] at all" (p.12). This, of course, is a fallacy, and the external world calls to him to face the reality of his situation: "Hey kid", a voice says from behind him in the line, "Do

---

[12] Zadie Smith, "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace" in *Changing My Mind, Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), p.264.
[13] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1997), p.1026. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text.

your plans up here involve the whole day or what exactly is the story. Hey kid are you okay" (p.12). The leap itself constitutes the boy's reply. It is at this moment that he opens up to a dialogue with the world, encapsulated by the final word of the story: "Hello" (p.13).

Particularly evident in "Forever Overhead", Adam Kelly is right to highlight the immense importance Wallace "places on the redeeming value of dialogue itself" throughout all his work.[14] In his piece on the "Dialogic dialogue" of Wallace's fiction, Kelly quotes Mikhail Bakhtin's study of Dostoevsky - a novelist whom Wallace greatly admired and, as has been examined, in many ways closely emulated[15] - when ascertaining the function of dialogue in Wallace's fiction: "at the centre of Dostoevsky's artistic world must lie dialogue, and dialogue not as a means, but as an end in itself" (*CL*, p.265). While Kelly writes of dialogue in relation to "truth-seeking" in Wallace's fiction, it is equally true that the author uses dialogue in fiction as the basis of "self-seeking", too, similarly "not as a means, but as an end in itself". As Wallace himself wrote of Dostoevsky in his 1996 review of Joseph Frank's new biography of the Russian author, his "concern was always what it is to be a human being — that is, how to be an actual *person,* someone whose life is informed by values and principles, instead of just an especially shrewd kind of self-preserving animal".[16] One cannot help but read in this statement Wallace's own much-quoted determination laid out in 1993 that serious "[f]iction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*".[17] For all his engagement with postmodernism and frequent dependence on its stylistic flourishes, Wallace took his ethical approach to fiction (certainly by the time of *Infinite Jest*) more from the 1860s than the 1960s. As T. S. Eliot abjured Milton to return to Donne, so does Wallace bypass Pynchon, Barth, and Barthelme to get back to Dostoevsky's realism, in his concerns if not in his style. In a response to his postmodern patriarchs, Wallace takes what he saw as the Russian's literary manifesto for his own, and "the shrewd kind of self-preserving animal" of which he warns against reveals his own acceptance of an existential

[14] Kelly, "Novel of Ideas", p.7.
[15] For an extended comparison of the two authors, see Timothy Jacobs, "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's 'The Brothers Karamazov' and David Foster Wallace's 'Infinite Jest'", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol.49, No.3 (Fall, 2007), pp.265-292.
[16] Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, p.265.
[17] McCaffrey, "Expanded Interview", p.26; emphasis in original.

doctrine that holds, to return to Sartre, that "to begin with [man] is nothing". Dialogue and engagement with the other is for Wallace the way in which that self is assembled out of this nothingness.

The importance of dialogue in the service to becoming is clear in "Forever Overhead". As Smith notes, "Wallace disliked [the story], thinking it juvenilia"[18] - a view that provides another example of what denoted "adulthood" for Wallace, being 37 when he chose to publish it in *Brief Interviews*. Smith posits that "maybe it was its very openness he suspected. So many of [his] dense themes [...] are here laid out with an unexpected directness".[19] Certainly, much can be gleaned about Wallace's conception of the self and its obligations from this brief story and its minimal, simple plot. These can be expressed in two constituent parts: first, that selfhood is not inherent and fundamental, but must be obtained through willed action on the part of the individual; and second, that true selfhood necessarily subsists through dialogue with the world around it, characterised by constant outward gestures. We can see this repeating itself in various iterations throughout Wallace's work. In *Infinite Jest* it is most clear in the character progression of Hal Incandenza, which I would argue is in the same mould of existential self-becoming as the subject of "Forever Overhead". For most of the novel, Hal's existence is largely described as one of non-being, a total lack of Sartrean essence. He is under what Wallace calls "standard U.S. anhedonia", a state in which he "hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny" (*IJ*, p.694). Instead, Hal "can manipulate [emotions] well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's *in there, inside his own hull*, as a human being" (p.694; emphasis added). Mirroring the association of existential non-being and childhood expanded upon in "Forever Overhead", Hal's father refers to his son's condition as "the womb of solipsism" (p.839). It is clear from descriptions like these that Hal does not possess anything approaching meaningful selfhood for much of the novel. Yet by the time of the novel's opening chapter (sequentially first but chronologically last) he can definitively state, in a direct inversion of his previous statements, "I am in here" (p.3). Importantly, this stepping into the skin - to take

[18] Smith, "Difficult Gifts", p.262.
[19] Smith, "Difficult Gifts", p.262.

the phrase from "Forever Overhead" - is effected after Hal cooperates with Don Gately and Joelle van Dyne and addresses, albeit in convoluted circumstances, his obligations and responsibilities to the world outside his solipsistic reflections: the three, along with the Québecois double-agent John Wayne, go to "dig up [Hal's] father's head" in order to recover the master-copy of "Infinite Jest" (p.17), in a matter that Gately describes in a premonition as "Continental-Emergency important" (p.934).[20] Regardless of the surreal and exaggerated elements surrounding the situation, the fundamental process of Hal's self-becoming is present: a transition from a complete lack of self, perpetuated by his marijuana addiction and resulting in the anhedonic state Boston AAs tellingly term "Unable To Identify" (p.692), toward a sense of himself *as* a self, and the necessary obligations to those around him that attend this sense.

## 2.2. The Freedom of the Aesthetes

Allard den Dulk connects the dialogic need to engage found in Wallace's work back to Kierkegaard's existentialism. Both writers, den Dulk argues, understand the self as something to be achieved only through a conscious and active engagement with the world. From this basis stems Wallace's much-discussed criticism of irony in his "E Unibus Pluram" essay on television and culture, as well as, in large part, *Infinite Jest*. Irony, as he writes in his essay, is only "a ground-clearing", good for distancing the individual from what may well be hypocritical or harmful in the culture, but "singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (*SFT*, p.67). The persistent practitioner of irony cannot help but be disconnected from the world, as "[a]nyone with the heretical gall to ask an ironist what

[20] The events described here are only obliquely referenced in the text, and the reader is never given an explicit explanation as to their relation with the rest of the novel. Instead, one must infer the narrative trajectory in a way that would connect *Infinite Jest*'s final pages with its opening section (the significance of this will be discussed in the following chapter of this thesis). This being so, it is perhaps natural that there is no critical consensus on how to read Hal's altered condition in the Year of Glad, in which he seems to have a rich sense of himself and yet unable to communicate, only being able to make '*Sub*animalistic noises and sounds' (*IJ*, p.14; emphasis in original). For a brief overview of how different critics have read Hal's state and the overall tone of the novel implied by how one reads it, see Mary K. Holland, "Infinite Jest" in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp.136-137.

he *actually stands for* ends up looking like an hysteric or a prig" (p.68; emphasis added). Wallace's contention, den Dulk argues, is almost identical to that of Kierkegaard, who similarly "values irony's initial, liberating potential". He writes:

> Through irony the individual obtains a negative freedom, a freedom-from. As such, irony constitutes an indispensible step toward freely choosing a personal interpretation of one's moral life, a positive freedom, or a freedom-to. However, irony cannot be the source of that "positivity", because it is pure negation.[21]

In fact, the hip ironists that Wallace saw as populating late 20th-century America appear as updated versions of Kierkegaard's hypothetical aesthete with his aesthetic way of life, set against the ethicist in *Either/Or*. The aesthetic way of life is based on the primacy of the individual desire, in which commitment to the outside world - in the form of friendships, relationships, civic responsibilities - is eschewed for selfish pleasure. Importantly, the long-term result of this fidelity to individual wants, Kierkegaard contends, is depression and despair. As the aesthete writes, it "beckons to me, calls me aside [...] depression is the most faithful mistress I have known".[22] Seeing this way of life being encouraged by the technology of his age, Wallace, like Kierkegaard, saw the aesthetic way of life - now propagated as the ironic way of life - as the source of the disaffection and ennui that appeared to him to be sweeping America.

Although den Dulk does not directly make reference to it, his distinction between "freedom-from" and "freedom-to" in explanation of Kierkegaard's treatment of irony is taken from Isaiah Berlin's 1958 lecture "Two Concepts of Liberty". In his lecture, Berlin distinguishes between these two forms of freedom: negative freedom, a "freedom-from", captured by the sense of the question, "What am I free to do or be?"; and positive freedom, a "freedom-to", established by the question, "By whom am I ruled?" or "Who is to say what I am, and what I am not, to be or do?"[23] When read in connection with existentialism, one can argue that it is Berlin's idea of negative freedom that is the sole freedom of Kierkegaard's aesthete and Wallace's ironist, lying at the heart of their disaffection. By refusing to relinquish their negative freedom,

---

[21] den Dulk, "Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety", p.47.
[22] Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writing, Volume 3: Either/Or, Part I*, eds. & trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p.20.
[23] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.130.

Kierkegaard and Wallace contend that their respective aesthete and ironist cannot help but fall into depression and despair, as, by maintaining the freedom of endless opportunity - free to do or be anything they wish - the individual has failed to do or be anything, not having engaged with the world around them. As Kierkegaard writes: "He has thought everything possible and yet not existed at all".[24] An over-attachment to negative freedom, Wallace maintains, is a failure to achieve a meaningful self and to remain an underdeveloped and unfulfilled being.

The distinction between the two freedoms is itself the central point of contention in the Marathe-Steeply debate that runs throughout *Infinite Jest*. The freedom-from is a brand of freedom Wallace was aware is foundational in the American concept of liberty and selfhood, as the US special agent Hugh Steeply is at pains to stress to the Québecois separatist Rémy Marathe. "The United States", Steeply announces: "a community of sacred individuals which reveres the sacredness of the individual choice. The individual's right to pursue his own vision of the best ratio of pleasure to pain: utterly sacrosanct" (p.424). Wallace is well-aware, of course, of the potential threats such a conception of democracy has for America, and *Infinite Jest* resonates with the observations made by Alexis de Tocqueville on the latent despotism in a free society with such an obsession over the sanctity of the individual. The America of Wallace's novel is just such a place where "an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavo[r] to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives", where each "exists only in himself and for himself alone".[25] The end result, as predicted by de Tocqueville, is a totalitarianism of the kind Steeply accuses Marathe of advocating, a way of life that "does not tyrannize, but [...] compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd".[26] What kind of freedom, in the end, does the kind of shrewd, self-preserving animal of which both de Tocqueville and Wallace are wary

---

[24] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.212.
[25] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, Vol. 2*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: J. & H. G. Langley, 1840), p.318.
[26] de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p.319.

possess? What ability does the animal in the hands of the shepherd have to choose the course of its life? It is just such a fragmented, disconnected society that would, as it does in *Infinite Jest*, threaten to ends its own existence, with each individual willingly giving themselves over to the fatal pleasures of a film, simply because there was the opportunity to do so.

In *Infinite Jest*, Marathe tries to explain this to Steeply. He, of all the characters in the novel, is most aware that there is a distinction to be made between the ability to choose from any and all options and the ability to make a choice:

> Always with you this freedom! For your walled-up country, always to shout "Freedom! Freedom!" as if it were obvious to all people what it wants to mean, this word. But look: it is not so simple as that. Your freedom is the freedom-*from*: no one tells your precious individual U.S.A. selves what they must do. It is this meaning only, this freedom from constraint and forced duress [...] But what of the freedom-*to*? Not just free-*from*. Not all compulsion comes from without. You pretend you do not see this. What of freedom-*to*. How for the person to freely choose? [...] How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose? (p.320; emphasis in original).

Wallace maintains throughout his work that the position of the ironist, or Kierkegaard's aesthete, is ultimately one of delusion. A refusal to make a choice to engage with the world is effectively a form of self-denial - and in a more literal sense than with which that term is usually used. We are already placed in a society. The choice for Wallace is whether we accept the responsibility and engage with that society or not. As one of Wallace's characters comments, invoking a simile deployed by de Tocqueville, "it's in the democratic citizen's nature to be like a leaf that doesn't believe in the tree it's part of" (*PK*, p.143). One can compare the "ground-clearing" of the ironist that severs the leaf from the tree - albeit only in their mind - to non-voters as described in Wallace's 2000 profile of then-Republican presidential primary candidate John McCain. He reminds his readers:

> By all means stay home if you want, but don't bullshit yourself that you're not voting. In reality, there is *no such thing as not voting:* you either vote by voting, or you vote by staying home and tacitly doubling the value of some Diehard's vote. (*CL*, p.207; emphasis in original).

One still makes a choice, but by not voting all one does is fail to bring oneself into account within the system of government that in reality bestows the individual's freedom-to. To extend the

comparison further, the non-voter is in essence defined through their absence: through their physical absence at the polling station and failure to be numbered in the total ballots cast, they refuse to take up the mantel of an identity within that community. Like "Irrelevant" Chris Fogel, the prototypical "wastoid" ironist of *The Pale King*, they refuse to meaningfully engage and are therefore outside a meaningful existence, watching "as the world turns" (*PK*, p.223). Just as the non-voter is still essentially casting his vote, so too does the irony of Fogel or - to use Wallace's example from "E Unibus Pluram" - the archly ironic fiction of his contemporary Mark Leyner become "all too easily subsumed" into the dominant culture it purports to subvert (*SFT*, p.81). Despite the belief that one is standing back and embodying the type of negative freedom described by Berlin, one cannot help but reinforce the power of the structures which delimit that freedom - denying themselves the positive freedom that for Wallace is the basis of self-becoming.

Wallace expresses this clearly in the parable with which he beings his 2005 Kenyon College commencement address, later published as *This Is Water*:

> There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys, how's the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?”[27]

As Wilson Kaiser writes, "Wallace's point is that we are embedded, like the fish, in a multivalent environment that is experiential and perspectival rather than an object for distanced contemplation".[28] One cannot extricate oneself by ironic distance from the environment in which one swims every day; one can only choose whether or not to acknowledge and take responsibility for one's relationship with that environment. Echoing his assertion on the fallacy of "not voting", Wallace declares in *This Is Water* that "[t]here is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship" (pp.99-101; emphasis in original). We can read this clearly in terms of Berlin's "Two Concepts": one cannot

---

[27] David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), pp.3-4. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text.
[28] Wilson Kaiser, "David Foster Wallace and the Ethical Challenge of Posthumanism", *Mosaic*, Vol.47, No.1 (September, 2014), p.56.

achieve a state of total negative freedom - freedom from all obligation - without a sizeable measure of delusion and lack of self-awareness. All that is truly imperative in human existence, Wallace contends, is positive freedom, the freedom-to, which requires active engagement and choice. As he says, "[y]ou get to *consciously* decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship" (pp.95-6; emphasis added). It is clear from this speech that this act of choosing and engagement with the world around oneself effectively constitutes the process of self-becoming. It is the process by which the graduating students of Kenyon College can, as he tells them, "keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead" (p.60). To be dead here is, of course, to be dead in the sense that Hal is deadened by "standard U.S. anhedonia" for the majority of *Infinite Jest*: it is a failure to fulfil the existential ideal of achieving a self. It is with this ideal that Wallace closes his address, saying, "It is unimaginably hard to do this, to stay conscious and alive, day in and day out" (p.135). The difficulty of becoming "conscious" put forth here echoes the "horrific struggle to establish a human self" from Wallace's Kafka speech. It is a fundamentally existential view of selfhood that requires an active engagement, even if just in thought, with what is around you. It requires you choose, as the aesthete refuses to, what structures will determine what you can be and do with your life and under whose aegis you will allow yourself to work.

### 2.3. *To Be* is *To Be Of*: The Role of Community in Forming the Self

The choices involved in fulfilling a positive freedom necessarily require an engagement with the world and, as has been seen, this engagement is intricately entwined with Wallace's notion of self-becoming. Selfhood for Wallace, therefore, has a fundamentally outward-facing quality and is at least in some degree conditional on an external presence. Ultimately, as Hayes-Brady writes, "Wallace's work depends on the persistence of alterity and the ongoing dynamic exchange between self and untouchable other".[29] In this regard, as den Dulk argues, the

[29] Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p.6.

sincerity of expression and engagement that for Wallace was the basis of his break from postmodernism and the key prerequisite in this process of self-becoming "has an undeniably public character", yet, den Dulk contends, "the fact that sincerity [...] is always public and (partly) aimed at the other, does not mean that it amounts to merely fulfilling a public role and therefore cannot be undertaken for the self".[30]

This need to obtain a self through communion with another comes close to invoking the principle of existence held by the philosopher George Berkeley: *esse est percipi*. "To be is to be perceived". Wallace was certainly familiar with Berkeley and his work: by way of Emanuel Leutze's mural on the theme of Manifest Destiny that hangs in the US Capitol, Wallace had taken the title of his novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" from Berkeley's poetry. Though this connection has been long established in Wallace Studies, there has yet to be an attempt to examine Wallace's own philosophical understanding of existence in relation to the Irish philosopher's. One can see the influence of Berkeley's principle perhaps most explicitly in the character of Drinion in *The Pale King*, who possesses the supernatural talent of levitation when he achieves a level of complete concentration. The one caveat to this power is that Drinion himself is unaware of his talent, seeing as how to notice he were levitating would necessarily mean he were not *fully* focussed on the object of his attention, thus rendering him unable to levitate. With such a power, he embodies almost a complete absence of self-awareness or understanding of himself as a human subject at all. The reason he gives for this to his colleague Meredith Rand is that, as he says, "the truth is that no one paid enough attention to me to even wonder what was going on inside me, much less to worry about it" (*PK*, p.464). For this reason, as he tells Rand, "I don't think I'm really anything" (p.464). While David Hering reads this scene and particular exchange in terms of the Lacanian Symbolic, his explanation can be equally characterised as expressing Berkeleyan principles of being as being seen: "by not being 'seen' by

[30] den Dulk, "Good Faith and Sincerity", p.201.

his family, [Drinion] has no real perception of himself as an object in the world, and thus no propensity for self-consciousness".[31]

An important distinction to make, however, is what constitutes "being" for Wallace and for Berkeley. In the philosopher's understanding, to be seen is to be made existent in the Sartrean sense of "existence"; for Wallace, it is to be made in essence. Holding that to be is to be perceived, Bishop Berkeley could affirm his own existence with the conviction that he was perceived at all times by God. For Wallace, who grew up in a "family of skeptics", and for whom it was believed that to "go to church [...] would contaminate the rigor of [his] thought",[32] it is not as easy to so readily conceive of this higher source of perception in such literal terms. Like Don Gately in *Infinite Jest*, the Higher Power around which life is structured is ill-defined, "merely spiritual instead of dogmatically religious" (*IJ*, p.366). With the absence of religious certainty in Wallace's work, far more emphasis is subsequently placed on the community as the object of one's engagement. At this point of divergence from Berkeley, here, too, as Boswell suggests, may be the "crucial difference" between Wallace and Kierkegaard's understanding of the self: "Kierkegaard focuses always on subjectivity in isolation [...] in private contact with God".[33] For Wallace, it is the community that must supplant that relationship in a far more religiously skeptic society. One effectively achieves selfhood in a manner fulfilling Berkeley's dictum, *esse est percipi,* through engagement with a community - with the slight variation on Berkeley that *to be* is *to be of*. It is in this way that, as will be argued later, Drinion being *of* the IRS in *The Pale King* defers on him the selfhood that did not develop in his neglected childhood.

In *Infinite Jest* this reciprocal structure is symbolically reflected in tennis. By the very nature of the game, it requires an Other with which to engage in order to give the sport any meaning at all. Enfield Tennis Academy's Head Coach Schtitt is keen to instil the philosophical implications of this in his charges: "The competing boy on the net's other side: he is not the foe: he is more the partner in the dance. He is what is the word the *excuse* or *occasion* for meeting

---

[31] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p.159.
[32] Max, *Every Love Story*, p.114.
[33] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p.145.

the self. As you are his occasion" (*IJ*, p.84). One can only meet the self - which is to say achieve a self - only when active in a system which confirms that selfhood. It is in this way, as N. Katherine Hayles argues, that Wallace uses tennis "to smash the illusion of autonomous selfhood".[34] Schtitt sees tennis as the embodiment of the "horrific struggle" toward selfhood: "All life is the same, as citizens of the human State: the animating limits are within, to be killed and mourned, over and over again" (p.84). Mario Incandenza, with whom Schtitt is discussing this, recognises how the way in which one can "[d]isappear inside the game" is no different from "suicide, life and death, the game and its own end" (p.84). To this Schtitt replies: "No different, maybe [...] except the chance to play" (p.84). To play, after all, is what gives the game meaning. In Wallace's work, it is only by rejecting an obsession with absolute autonomous selfhood that one can approach the form of play that makes the game meaningful in the first place.

That is not to say that engagement and the struggle toward a self is a necessarily moral act. As Wallace is at pains to impart on his audience in *This Is Water*, "[n]one of this is about morality" (p.128). The author is acutely aware that the obligation to become a self is no guarantee of a moral self: the ideals behind Schtitt's conception of tennis, as the narrator concedes, "may, admittedly, have a whiff of proto-fascist potential about them" (*IJ*, p.82). And it is no coincidence that Marathe, the character in *Infinite Jest* who expounds a belief closest to that which Wallace expresses in "E Unibus Pluram", is the member of an ultra-nationalist terrorist group. There is truth in Steeply's mocking characterisation of Marathe's ideal nation as "The National Socialist Neofacist State of Separate Québec [...] Totalitarity. Cuba with snow" (p.320). The difference between Steeply and Marathe, Wallace makes clear, is that the latter has *consciously chosen* to give himself to his ideology. Steeply, on the other hand, was born into a culture suffused with American individualism and has accepted that ideology wholesale, becoming an unthinking mouthpiece who has failed to challenge or examine even once the ideology he parrots. If everybody worships and can choose what to worship, as Wallace says in *This Is Water*, then that is a fact of which only Marathe seems particularly aware. Indeed,

[34] N. Katherine Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*", *New Literary History*, Vol.30, No.3 (Summer, 1999), p.694.

throughout Wallace's work, it is often characters with aims of questionable morality that appreciate the individual's need to worship and to define themselves in their relation to the world, whether that individual realises this or not. In *Infinite Jest* the creation of the toxic Great Concavity by Johnny Gentle's government establishes this Other, as Marathe explains: "There is the villain he saw you needed, all of you [...] To keep you together, the hating some other. Gentle is crazy in his head, but in this '*fault of someone*' he was correct in saying it" (p.319). The Great Concavity is itself a thematic evolution of the Great Ohio Desert - or G.O.D., for short - from *The Broom of the System*. In that novel, as explained by the discontented governor of Ohio advocating for the man-made wasteland, the reasoning behind its creation is largely the same as Gentle's. The state wishes to manufacture a "point of savage reference for the good people of Ohio. A place to fear and love. A blasted region. Something to remind [them] of what [they were] hewed out of [...] An Other for Ohio's Self".[35] The governor's G.O.D. is essentially an artificially constructed replica of Berkeley's own God, an entity that can confer a sense of oneself by one's relation to it. That such a construction is essentially hollow and spiritually unhealthy speaks to the necessity, in Wallace's mind, of a deeper understanding of what we worship. To do so we must, in turn, understand how we construct our selves in the first place.

What is important to stress for the purposes of this thesis is that Wallace's essentially existential conception of the self - a self that must be obtained, and obtained through sustained engagement with the world - persisted almost undisturbed throughout his career. While Adam Kelly is certainly correct that, as I hope this study will demonstrate with regards to Wallace's engagement with technology, "the particular sets of ideas that underpin Wallace's novels changed and developed over the course of his career",[36] the writer remained remarkably consistent in his conviction of the responsibility and the necessity of each individual to *become* a self. In the last years of his life, at a time when progress on *The Pale King* was "more rapid and

---

[35] David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (London: Abacus, 1997), p.54. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text.
[36] Kelly, "Novel of Ideas", p.4.

assured than it had been" at any time in its then decade-long gestation,[37] he still maintained that the ontological threat from "'the tyranny of irony' in today's West" could be "explained almost perfectly in terms of Kierkegaard's distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical life".[38] The wording is nearly identical (and, surely, intentionally so) to the assertion Wallace made in "E Unibus Pluram", over 15 years previously, that "irony tyrannizes us" (*SFT*, p.67). Wallace clearly conceived of the philosophical underpinnings of the self as unchanging throughout this period. In terms of examining his work, the consistency Wallace showed gives this thesis stable ground for investigating how the self and the individual's prospects of attaining one are mediated by, and interact with, technology in his work. Wallace's writing evinces throughout his career a belief that the self subsists in communities, regardless of their nature or purpose, which allow one to define the essence of oneself. But it is in the technology pervading America that the author finds the greatest threat to the integrity of those communities and our desire to enter into them. By extension, it is in technology that Wallace finds the greatest threat to the possibility of constructing a meaningful self at the dawn of the 21st century.

[37] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p.136.
[38] David Foster Wallace in a private letter to den Dulk, quoted in Allard den Dulk, "Beyond Endless 'Aesthetic' Irony: A Comparison of the Irony Critique of Søren Kierkegaard and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", *Studies in the Novel*, Vol.44, No.3 (Fall, 2012), p.325.

# 3. Entertainment Technology in *Infinite Jest*

## 3.1. In Thrall to the Screen

In 1975, Roland Barthes goes to the movies. The whole environment of the screening, he writes, seems to encourage the "audience [to] slide down into their seats as if into a bed, coats or feet thrown over the row in front".[1] Afterwards, he leaves "a little dazed, wrapped up in himself, [...] *sopitive*, soft, limp", as, "obviously, he's coming out of hypnosis".[2] One can see in this description the beginnings of a captivation that David Foster Wallace envisions as reaching its zenith in *Infinite Jest*. The eponymous film that forms the connective thread through the encyclopaedic novel affects its audience in the manner of Barthes's movie screening, only multiplied to the *n*th degree. Viewers expire enraptured by the screen, unaware of the world outside and unresponsive to its stimuli - as Barthes is, they are wrapped up in themselves without a thought free for those around them. All they desire is to consume the entertainment that comes to be known, within the newly-formed superstate of O.N.A.N.,[3] simply as the capital-E Entertainment.

The critic Philip Sayers, in his essay "Representing Entertainment", is the first to draw out the important connections between Barthes's short article and Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Both works, as he points out, emphasise the consumption of cinematic or televisual entertainment as a form of sleep. In *Infinite Jest*, "even normal entertainment (as opposed to *the* Entertainment) brings about sleep".[4] The novel's first diegetic victim of the film, a Canadian-Saudi medical attaché, sits for nightly doses in front of the television screen, which allow him to "ease effortlessly from unwound spectation into a fully relaxed night's sleep" no matter what he is viewing (*IJ*, p.34). Barthes, too, makes no reference to the content of what is projected on the

---

[1] Roland Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theater" in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), p.346.
[2] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p.345.
[3] In the near-future of the novel, set in and around what would be 2009, the United States, Mexico and Canada have combined to form the Organisation of North American Nations, or O.N.A.N. for short.
[4] Philip Sayers, "Representing Entertainment in *Infinite Jest*" in *The Long Thing*, p.108.

screen. The movie is surplus. The theatre performs its hypnosis regardless. Entertainment as a whole works to nullify the individual's critical capacities in a way that disengages the individual from the world around them: in a state of sleep, the reality around oneself is of little immediate concern.

Given that Wallace's entire conception of meaningful selfhood is grounded on awareness of the world and a fundamental need to engage with that world, it is unsurprising that he viewed the greatest ontological threat in America at the end of the twentieth century as a commercial culture that promoted passive and uncritical spectation. That culture, as he saw it, was unavoidably centred on television, a piece of entertainment technology whose "chief job", he wrote, was "to make you so riveted by it that you can't tear your eyes away".[5] The ever-closer relationship of television to irony, Wallace maintains, is a result of this need for attention. Television becomes its own critic, with a slyly-positioned ironic distance from itself that pre-empts whatever concerns a viewer may have about the value of the entertainment to which they are giving such vast amounts of their time to view.[6] The act of watching becomes a closed system, in which, as Wallace argued was the case with contemporary literature, "[p]ostmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and [...] savvy".[7] It is in this way that "television has become immune to charges that it lacks any meaningful connection to the world outside it. It's not that charges of nonconnection have become untrue but that they've become deeply irrelevant. It's that any such connection has become otiose" (*SFT*, p.33).

In his essay on the work of David Lynch, published the same year as *Infinite Jest*, Wallace lays out what he sees as the primary function of the kind of entertainment that has inundated the commercial market. Again, as he does in the novel, he figures this as a kind of sleep:

---

[5] David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway, 2010), p.79.
[6] Consider, for example, the title of the short-lived MTV sketch-comedy series *The Idiot Box* (1990-91), exemplary of the kind of knowing irony that dominated the airwaves at the time Wallace penned "E Unibus Pluram".
[7] McCaffrey, "Expanded Interview", p.48.

> [Entertainment] usually means enabling various fantasies that allow the moviegoer to *pretend he's somebody else* and that life is somehow bigger and more coherent and more compelling and attractive and in general just more entertaining than a moviegoer's life really is [...] You could say that a commercial movie *doesn't try to wake people up* but rather to make their sleep so comfortable and their dreams so pleasant that they will fork over money to experience it - this seduction, a fantasy-for-money transaction, is a commercial movie's basic point (*SFT*, p.170; emphasis added).

Despite James Incandenza, the director of "Infinite Jest", being entrenched in the community of art film - being often referred to throughout the novel as simply the "Auteur" - his goals, at least with regards to the "Infinite Jest" project, are described as his "attempt at commercial entertainment" (*IJ*, p.986). These goals are necessarily antithetical to art film, which Wallace distinguished as requiring "some interpretive work to get" (*SFT*, p.170), and as good as unintelligible to its practitioners. For all the attention given to Incandenza's *oeuvre* in the O.N.A.N.ite critical scene, the "scholars and Foundations and disseminators never saw that his most serious wish was: *to entertain*" (p.839; emphasis in original). "Infinite Jest", the film cartridge, represents entertainment in its "perfected" form: perfect because it seduces the individual into a state under which he or she cannot countenance anything other than watching, thereby fulfilling the function of commercial entertainment to encourage more viewing above all else. But allowing oneself to be "seduced", as Wallace puts it in his essay, by the delusional self offered by commercial entertainment is effectively abdicating the responsibility of achieving a meaningful self in the real world.

Both Barthes's essay and *Infinite Jest* are, then, ultimately concerned with how to change our excessively passive and increasingly dependent relationship with entertainment and the forms of technology that serve it up to us - or, as Barthes writes, “[h]ow to come unglued from the mirror” that is the screen.[8] By framing his visit to the cinema as a Lacanian *stade du miroir*, Barthes “figure[s] the spectator not so much as a child but as an infant”.[9] Although Sayers importantly illuminates the influence of Barthes on Wallace, his essay does not draw out the implications of the philosopher's comparison to their fullest: the reversion to infancy and the

---

[8] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p.348.
[9] Sayers, "Representing Entertainment", p.109.

responsibilities of adulthood, as has been shown in relation to Wallace's story “Forever Overhead”, hold important ontological consequences for the author. The infantilisation of America is presented in the novel, significantly, as ubiquitous. After all, by the future of *Infinite Jest*, television and its fictional successor, the teleputer, have been invited into the centre of American homes to an even greater extent than they were in Wallace's own present, at which time, as he claimed in “E Unibus Pluram”, “[s]tatisticians report that television is watched over six hours a day in the average American household” (SFT, p.22). Such exposure to the ironic glare of the tube has the efficacy, Wallace argues, to supplant the most substantive human relationships and coax the audience toward an enervated, dependent state. The viewer is not just hollowed-out and depressed as Kierkegaard's aesthete, but stuck in a loop of recursivity, like the addict, to that which hollows out, with all the will and agency of a newborn. This infantilsation lies at the heart of the Québec separatist Marathe's belief that should his terrorist cell disseminate the Entertainment, Americans no longer possess the will-power to resist its deadly temptation, despite knowing the danger. As the American agent Hugh Steeply puts back at him: “You say [...] that we *are* children, not human adults like the noble Québecers, we are children, bullies but still children inside” (p.321; emphasis in original). As this infantilisation poses dangerous implications, so too does the feeling with which Barthes leaves the movie theatre. His natural response to the hypnosis, he writes, is that he “feels a little disjointed, even [...] *irresponsible*”.[10] Responsibility, as outlined, is key to crafting a self for Wallace. That entertainment, and specifically entertainment determined by the technology of its medium, fosters this kind of irresponsible and unresponsive state of being speaks to the obstacles it poses to the task of every individual in forming a self.

It is in this sense that the greatest danger of "Infinite Jest" is not its eventually lethal nature. The fact that its viewers physically expire because they cannot tear themselves from the screen is rather a corollary to the Entertainment's primary threat. We may compare this to another popular representation of death-by-bliss, found in the Monty Python sketch “The

[10] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p.345; emphasis added.

Funniest Joke in the World".[11] The premise of the sketch, as has not gone unnoticed,[12] in many ways mirrors the conceit of *Infinite Jest*: an artist accidentally writes a joke so hilarious it kills anyone who hears it (the artist included), whereupon British forces during World War Two proceed to weaponise it for the war effort, losing many of their own men in the process. Accidentally created, fatally enjoyable, and at the centre of a plan to unleash it on an unsuspecting populace, is, of course, the trajectory of the "Infinite Jest" cartridge, too. An important distinction nevertheless should be made between the two pieces of killer entertainment, and it is a distinction that nicely illustrates just how Wallace's "Infinite Jest" functions and the real danger it poses to society. While Monty Python's "Killer Joke" kills its audience instantly - appearing to physically overwhelm those with whom it comes into contact - the Entertainment overwhelms its audience's mind, operating wholly on their mental capacities. As such, physical deterioration is simply an off-shoot of mental captivation (e.g. the film does not make one soil oneself, it makes one forget the world outside the film for long enough so that one *inevitable* soils oneself). Before expiring physically, the audience of "Infinite Jest" has already ceased existing in what is, in Wallace's mind, a far more profound way. They have voluntarily given up their opportunity of becoming a fully-realised self in the outside world, and thus suffer the end of meaningful existence that precedes the end of existence in itself. Those that willingly view "Infinite Jest" with full knowledge of the risks are, in effect, committing a prolonged form of suicide, and what Wallace says of suicides elsewhere equally applies: "the truth is that most [...] are actually dead long before they pull the trigger" (*TW*, p.59). Certainly, throughout *Infinite Jest*, Wallace emphasises the viewing of the Entertainment as a form of suicide. With the exception of those who unwittingly view the cartridge, such as the Canadian-Saudi medical attaché, the author makes pains to stress the voluntariness with which the majority of Americans would place themselves in the thrall of the Entertainment. Those that glimpse the film succumb entirely, with no "desire or even basic survival-type will for anything

---

[11] Monty Python, "The Funniest Joke in the World", *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9FzUI8998U > Apr. 1, 2019.
[12] Infinitedetox, "Lethal Entertainment in Infinite Jest and Monty Python", *Infinite Summer*, July 15, 2009 <http://infinitesummer.org/forums/viewtopic.php?f=12&t=307> Apr. 1, 2019.

other than more viewing" (p.507). As Steeply says of one fellow agent, whom the Secret Service managed to extract alive from his viewing of the film: "His world's as if it has collapsed into one small bright point. *Inner world*" (p.508; emphasis added). This purely inner world, as established in the previous chapter, is for Wallace essentially an absence of selfhood, here in *Infinite Jest* rendered explicit by the catatonia of those exposed to the Entertainment. The reader is left to ponder what is left of a person once every interaction is reduced only to "[b]egging for just even a few seconds [more of the film] - a trailer, a snatch of soundtrack, anything" (p.507); or what is left when the individual's need to fulfil their own internal desires is all-consuming to the extent that they will, as is revealed later in the novel, sever their own digits on the promise of more screen-time (p.845).

As it was for Barthes in the movie theatre, being reduced to this total self-absorption is significantly associated throughout the novel as returning to infancy. James Incandenza, the creator of "Infinite Jest", says he specifically designed the film as a "magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive" in his son, the anhedonic Hal (p.839). What little that can be gathered about the film's contents over the course of the novel suggests that its lethally captivating quality has something to do with how the film positions the viewer as an infant: at least part of the film is said to feature a pregnant Joelle van Dyne as "some kind of maternal instantiation", delivering a "lalating monologue to the viewer" (p.788), with the camera positioned so that Joelle is "inclined over it, parturient and nude, talking *down* to it - in both senses of the word" (p.789; emphasis in original). There is an attempt in the film at the total encapsulation of viewer-as-infant, with the viewer's physical position as a baby in a crib, and the psychological experience of an infant being spoken to by its mother. Although the information offered to the reader is inescapably and intentionally contradictory or ambiguous - for example, Molly Notkins, through whom the reader discovers these details, is relaying the information second-hand and cannot even be certain which version the "lethally entertaining *Infinite Jest*" is: "*V* or *VI*" (p.788) - what is clear is Wallace's insistence on the appeal of the Entertainment being linked to infancy. As a time of near-total passivity, infancy is Wallace's metaphor for an

entertainment-consuming America in which each individual is wholly subsistent on their own individual needs, without the desire or mental capability to fulfil these needs themselves. Not only does the pseudo-infancy induced in the audience of "Infinite Jest" capture that same sense of the lack of responsibility that childhood holds in "Forever Overhead", it suggests a fundamental inability to communicate with those around oneself. In a profound way, as Wilson Kaiser is right to state, the Entertainment "strips its viewers of their humanity".[13] In terms of Wallace's treatment of the self, as the screen beguiles its audience to the status of newborns, so does it render that audience ontologically dead.

3.2. *Infinite Jest*: A Failed Entertainment

It should be stressed that Wallace's criticism in *Infinite Jest* is not of entertainment in and of itself, but rather the way in which contemporary culture fosters an unhealthy relationship to that entertainment. As he told David Lipsky shortly after the novel's publication, "if the book comes off as some kind of indictment of entertainment, then it fails".[14] Like the liberating nature of irony, it is only through our obsessive over-use that it is rendered harmful. Even for Barthes, the irresponsibility felt upon leaving the movie theatre provided momentary relief from "a moral organization".[15] To illustrate this, in "E Unibus Pluram", Wallace uses the analogy of commercial entertainment as "Special Treats (e.g. candy, liquor)":

> i.e. treats that are basically fine and fun in small amounts but bad for us in large amounts and *really* bad for us if consumed in the massive regular amounts reserved for nutritive staples. One can only guess at what volume of gin or poundage of Toblerone six hours of [television-watching] a day would convert to (*SFT*, p.37).

Sayers is right to assert that "Entertainment, for Wallace, lies on one side of a 'continuum,' at the other side of which is art" and that "excess in either direction can be dangerous".[16] Rather than continually castigate commercial art, Wallace was more often particularly critical of what he

[13] Wilson Kaiser, "Ethical Challenge of Posthumanism", p.57.
[14] Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p.80.
[15] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p.345.
[16] Sayers, "Representing Entertainment", pp.108, 110.

saw as the abdication of much serious literary fiction from its obligations to the audience, as he explained in a 1996 interview with Charlie Rose:

> One of my complaints right now is that, because I think commercial entertainment has conditioned readers to want kind of more easy fun, I think avant-garde and art fiction has sort of relinquished the field [...] Basically I don't read much contemporary avant-garde stuff because it's hellaciously unfun [...] These days a lot of it is very academic and cloistered and basically written for critics.[17]

With *Infinite Jest*, Wallace attempts to take to the field once again, finding some middle ground in the continuum of art and entertainment that would make his work "seductive enough so that you're willing to do the work to go through [it]".[18]

In an effort to walk this middle ground, Wallace simultaneously courts and undermines the conventions of commercial entertainment throughout *Infinite Jest*. What is ostensibly the "main plot" - as much as we can pick it out from a thousand-page, chronologically-disrupted novel - is classic fodder for Hollywood blockbusters: a teenager and his family caught up in a race against time between the US government and a foreign terrorist organisation to get their hands on a videotape so lethal it poses the threat of human extinction. It is a story replete with espionage and assassination and international intrigue. Seeing that the central premise of the highly successful blockbuster horror *The Ring* (the 2002 Hollywood remake of the Japanese original) similarly features a "killer tape" and a high-stakes quest to uncover its shadowy origins, one can safely say that the plot of *Infinite Jest* is anything but esoteric. In many ways, as Hayes-Brady points out, the novel is dependent on the classic "quest narrative with the Entertainment as its always-deferred goal".[19] The novel takes as its starting point a narrative convention that is instantly and, more important for Wallace, comfortingly familiar.

The fact that this goal remains forever deferred is key. The comfort of the familiar is made disquieting: Wallace, throughout his career, repeatedly quoted one influential teacher who told him that "good fiction's job was to comfort the disturbed and disturb the

---

[17] David Foster Wallace on Charlie Rose, "Future of American Fiction", *Charlie Rose*, May 17, 1996 <https://charlierose.com/videos/15361> Feb. 14, 2019.
[18] Charlie Rose, "Future of American Fiction".
[19] Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p.61.

comfortable”.[20] If *the* Entertainment represents the perfection of commercial entertainment's appeal (of which the central plot of the novel is a manifestation), then Wallace purposefully seeks to disrupt the passivity and eventual catatonia that such an entertainment induces in its audience. *Infinite Jest* intends to be, as its original subtitle declared, "A Failed Entertainment". (The novel's publishers were less keen to advertise “a book people were supposed to buy” as a failure, as Max documents in his biography, so the subtitle “quietly disappeared from the manuscript”.)[21] These disruptions that constitute a failure of entertainment occur on almost all levels of the reader's interaction with the text. After all, Wallace throughout his career made sure to “emphasiz[e] the visual and physical nature of [...] texts”, refusing to see them as semiotically "pure".[22] On a solely superficial level, approaching a book that can as effectively be described in weight as in number of pages,[23] and which pages themselves are so thick with words as to render the margins razor-thin, requires an adjustment in expectation. Gratification from the novel, clearly, will not be instant. On a technical level, Wallace's characteristic frequent use of endnotes (in *Infinite Jest*, 388 notes over 97 pages in even lower point size than the main text) deliberately breaks up the reading experience, to the extent that it has become a hallmark of guides to the novel to recommend the use of two or more bookmarks, as a way of easing the frustration one may feel at jumping from page to page hundreds of times while reading.[24] This technical feature was introduced specifically to enact the novel's thematic concerns, as Mary K. Holland explains: “Wallace wanted reading the book to be a laborious, embodied endeavor [...] thereby accomplishing through its physical burden part of the agenda he set out”, namely to prevent “exactly the kind of absorption that was to him the direst threat of passive (and

[20] McCaffrey, “Expanded Interview”, p.21
[21] Max, *Every Love Story*, p.200
[22] Sayers, “Representing Entertainment”, p.122.
[23] This was a notable feature of contemporary reviews of the novel: Mark Caro gives a figure of 4lb. Leonard Lopate, however, weighs it in at a mere 3lb. 3oz. See Mark Caro, “The Next Big Thing: Can a Downstate Author Withstand the Sensation over His 1,079-Page Novel?” in *Conversations*, p.53; Leonard Lopate, “David Foster Wallace”, *The Leonard Lopate Show*, *WNYC*, Mar. 4, 1996 <https://www.wnyc.org/story/56878-david-foster-wallace/> Apr. 22, 2019.
[24] See Nick Maniatas, Matt Bucher, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, “How to Read *Infinite Jest*”, *Infinite Summer*, June 17, 2009 <http://infinitesummer.org/archives/215> May 5, 2019.

electronic) entertainment”.[25] With this in mind, David Letzler's comment that within the endnotes of *Infinite Jest* “many are basically pointless”, is only a half-truth.[26] True in the textual sense, for those endnotes that divulge what even the most charitable reader would have to concede is useless or purely superfluous information; but untrue in the technical sense, in that their "point" consists of merely discomfiting the reader by seeking out that endnote in the first place, regardless of its subsequent textual worth - or, as the case may be, its lack thereof.

With that said, on a textual level itself we encounter numerous aporia with which we, as readers, have no chance of resolving. Within the endnotes, ostensibly there for explication, lie many dead-ends. Note 216, for example, simply reads “No clue” (p.1036), in annotated response to one character's neologism (p.516). Other aporia invite the reader to engage more actively in the construction of textual meaning. One prominent example of this, first developed in *Infinite Jest* but more recognisable as the central feature of the “Brief Interviews” of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, is the use of “Q” to denote questions posed but not printed in the text. Take, for example, this exchange from the actress Joelle van Dyne's interrogation:

> “Q.”
> “I never saw it. I've got no idea.”
> “Q.”
> “They were buried with him. The Masters of everything unreleased. At least that was in his will.”
> “Q.”
> “It had nothing to do with killing himself.” (p.940)

While, given the context, one can derive that the questions concern the creation and location of the original "Infinite Jest" cartridge, the sections written in this manner do not invite passive reading. The reader is supplied with the answer, but has to retroactively and, what is more significant, consciously construct the possible question to which it is a reply. The same can be said of the novel's overall structure, in which many of the crucial plot points necessary for understanding the text occur "off-stage", or, as Wallace put it in cinematic terms, “an 'end' can

[25] Mary K. Holland, “Infinite Jest” in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp.135-6.
[26] David Letzler, “Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction” in *The Long Thing*, p.130.

be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame" of the novel's diegetic action.[27] Having to project an ending, the reader takes an active role in his or her interaction with the text, becoming the site at which meaning is created.

Through these methods, Wallace attempts to engage with his audience in ways that film and television, simply by the nature of their medium, cannot. The technological make-up of filmic media determines how that media impresses itself upon its audience and subsequently how that audience engages. Although Wallace suggests the possibility for "seriously engaged art" in cinema, he also acknowledges that there is "stuff that TV and movies - although they're great at certain things - cannot give us".[28] Passivity to a certain degree - a passivity that for Wallace is irreconcilable with a meaningful self - appears fundamental to the medium. Walter Benjamin, comparing the static canvas to the moving image, writes that the "painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame *he cannot do so*. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. *It cannot be arrested*".[29] The relationship between viewer and the moving image precludes, at least in some manner, serious contemplation. The audience is acted upon rather than capable or encouraged to act; it is not the image that is "arrested", to use Benjamin's wording, but the audience. As outlined above, the medium itself is not necessarily problematic for Wallace, rather it is our relationship to that medium, particularly once that medium has diffused through the culture to account for consumption of an "astounding average per-household dose of six hours a day" (*SFT*, p.37). For the culture of the United States to be so geared toward this particular - and particularly passive - medium means that, as Wallace said in an interview with German television station ZDF, it "becomes more and more difficult to ask people to read or to look at a piece of art for an hour", as individuals become, in a sense, ontologically underdeveloped: we "don't feed the part of ourselves that [...] can live in quiet, that

---

[27] "Live Online with David Foster Wallace", *WORD e-zine*, May 17, 1996 <http://www.badgerinternet.com/~bobkat/jest11a.html> June 12, 2019.
[28] Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p.71.
[29] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 2007), p.238.

can live without any kind of stimulation".[30] This is significant in terms of the self because "seriously engaged art", art in a form that the medium of television and film cannot effectively represent because of their technological set-up, has the capacity to engage us in a way that encourages us to engage reciprocally with the world around us.

Far from Marshall McLuhan's notion of new electronic media heralding the inception of a "global village", Wallace sees the medium of television as an intrinsically alienating force. His concept of "E Unibus Pluram" - what he believed as the organising principle of nationally broadcast television - attests to this: "Out of one, many". The allure of the screen does not give forth onto a larger community in a spirit of "collective watching"; the individual is merely isolated, physically and emotionally, from those around them. In this, Wallace is more in line with Guy Debord's concept of the "Society of the Spectacle", in which the technology of such a society "is based on isolation, and the technical process isolates in turn. From the automobile to the television, all the *goods selected* by the spectacular system are also its weapons for a constant reinforcement of the conditions of isolation of 'lonely crowds'".[31] The future that Wallace invites us to imagine, one in which the freely disseminated "Infinite Jest" has transfixed the majority of America to their teleputers, conjures up exactly the image of Debord's "lonely crowds".

Danger lies in the fact that film and television, as media, appear more potent. If not more effecting on the human psyche, these media are at least perceived in the world of the novel to be able to affect the individual in a totalizing way with much more ease than the written word or other media requiring a more active participation from the individual encountering it. Although Sayers concedes the impossibility of quantifying it in any scientific way, he attempts to explain why films appear "capable of provoking far more intense reactions in their audiences than written words are in theirs", writing:

---

[30] Miriam Böttger, "Interview with David Foster Wallace", *Zweites Deutsche Fernsehen*, 2003 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGLzWdT7vGc> Jan. 6, 2019.
[31] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Fredy Perlman (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), n.28; emphasis in original.

> the filmic image (or, more to the point, the filmic stream of images and sounds), unlike the arbitrary sign-system of language, seems to be so natural [...] Given that the film, more than the still image, takes in [...] both movement and sound, it is reasonable to suggest that the potential [viewer] might be even more easily taken in by the deceptive cinematic sign.[32]

Wallace himself understands the ease with which these technologically enhanced media can appear to the viewer as natural and, therefore, more engaging than print media. As he said in an interview from 1996, the development of new technology underpinning these media is crucial to our relationship to them:

> When you think about how first HDTV's going to come, then there's going to be virtual reality, and then there's the prospect of things like virtual reality porn. We're going to have to come to some sort of understanding about how much we're going to allow ourselves, because it's probably going to get a lot more fun than real life [...] And the better the images get, the more tempting it's going to be to interact with images rather than other people, and I think the emptier it's going to get.[33]

One can assume that the "it" to which Wallace refers as getting emptier is our experience of life itself, the hollowing out of what makes one a "fucking *human being*".[34] Instead of accepting defeat, the reconfiguration of contemporary existence simply poses new challenges and opportunities: as Wallace told David Lipsky, this new artistic landscape, technologically determined, had simply given writers "the really precious gift of making [their] job harder".[35] Literature, or, for that matter, any art that requires more concerted awareness, must adapt itself to compete for the individual's time, although not by fashioning a facsimile of television and giving in to what he saw as the medium's worst instincts. This was a worrying trend Wallace identified in a whole host of his contemporaries in general and in Mark Leyner in particular, whose then-latest novel Wallace singled out for particular censure in "E Unibus Pluram" as "less a novel than a piece of witty, erudite, extremely high-quality prose television" (*SFT*, p.80). Artists must tread that median ground, on which they can compete with the seductive power of television and film, not by reproducing television on the page, but by highlighting what the

---

[32] Sayers, "Representing Entertainment", p.115.
[33] Christopher Lydon, "A Lost 1996 Interview with David Foster Wallace", *Radio Open Source*, June 25, 2014 <http://radioopensource.org/david-foster-wallace-chris-lydon/#> Dec. 17, 2018.
[34] McCaffrey, "Expanded Interview", p.26; emphasis in original.
[35] Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p.71.

specific medium of the written word can achieve that filmic media cannot. Importantly, this must be done without compromising on an artistic goal that urges an engagement with the world outside its own medium. Television, Wallace claims, "used to point beyond itself", but "[t]oday's mega-Audience is way better trained, and TV has discarded what's not needed. A dog, if you point at something, will look only at your finger" (*SFT*, p.33). In such an atmosphere, Wallace attempts to capture the same sense of what books should be at the end of the century as E. M. Forster attempted in *Howards End* at the beginning: they should be the sign-posts, not the destination.

It is in the importance and necessity of "seriously engaged art" in Wallace's work that one can compare his literary ethos to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's critique of the "Culture Industry" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Both make the distinction between "High Art" and "Low Art" forms, as Wallace terms them - paring down the somewhat elitist language of Horkheimer and Adorno in their classification of "[a]esthetic barbarism" in the case of film, radio, and jazz, compared to the "intellectual formations" of more rarefied artistic ventures.[36] "Low Art", for Wallace, isn't essentially "vulgar or prurient or dumb", but rather it is "Low" in the sense that its "one goal [...] is to ensure as much watching as possible" - hence it is "the sort of art that has to please people" (*SFT*, p.37). Both *Infinite Jest* and the "Culture Industry" see in their respective contemporary cultures the elision of "High Art" - whose ontological importance to Wallace has been discussed - in favour of artistic products as mere commodities. As Horkheimer and Adorno write, "Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art [...] They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors' incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products".[37] Such social necessity lay at the heart of Wallace's own self-declared artistic vision at the beginning of his post-*Broom of the System* career, when he called for the "next real literary 'rebels' [...] who dare somehow to back away" from the totalizing culture of television (*SFT*, p.81). In many respects, Wallace's

[36] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p.104.
[37] Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Culture Industry", p.95.

understanding of contemporary culture aligns with Horkheimer's and Adorno's. The Frankfurt School theorists prefigure Wallace's own belief in the fundamental passivity of contemporary artistic interaction. Modern technical media, they write, "especially the most characteristic, the sound film, cripple [imaginative] faculties through their objective makeup. They are so constructed that their adequate comprehension [...] positively debars the spectator from thinking, if he is not to miss the fleeting facts".[38] An understanding of how "profit motive determines the nature of cultural forms" in the modern world, as Dominic Strinati writes of the Culture Industry,[39] similarly resonates in Wallace's own work. What lies at the heart of "the economics of nationally broadcast, advertiser-subsidized entertainment", he writes, is a need "to please people in order to get their money" (*SFT*, p.37).

When tracing the relationship between the two texts, where Wallace deviates from Horkheimer and Adorno's conclusions offers a more enlightening view on how he perceives the individual's relationship and responsibilities to the culture. The Frankfurt theorists saw the Culture Industry as "equally conformist and mind numbing" in service of "the general acceptance of the capitalist order", and by constructing "false needs and false solutions, rather than real needs and real solutions", the current system sustained itself through an artificial necessity.[40] Although *Infinite Jest* accepts the artificiality and manipulation embedded into our relationship with television - after all, televisual content is predicated on "what all ads are supposed to do: create an anxiety relievable by purchase" (*IJ*, p.414) - Wallace, at least throughout the 1990s, eschews critiquing culture in terms of overarching, structural principles or, even, in terms of politics at all. As Marshall Boswell points out, Wallace first formed his cultural outlook largely between the fall of the Soviet Union and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, "during a rare, brief, and, as these kinds of things always turn out to be, false period of relative historical complacency".[41] In his 2000 article following McCain's primary bid, he described the political atmosphere as the "post-Watergate-post-Iran-Contra-post-Whitewater-post-Lewinsky

[38] Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Culture Industry", p.100.
[39] Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.62.
[40] Strinati, *Theories of Popular Culture*, p.63.
[41] Marshall Boswell, "Slacker Redemption: Wallace and Generation X" in *The Cambridge Companion*, p.23.

era [...] in which politicians' statements of principle or vision are understood as self-serving ad copy”.[42] Politics is just another show in the schedule, of little import outside the television cycle. With a critical backdrop of Francis Fukuyama, “[w]hether or not [Wallace] imagined himself writing fiction after the End of History, [...] it is nevertheless true that he tended to view both history and politics as theatre, and, even more important, as something *manufactured* in the absence of real historical change, real historical exigencies”.[43]

As a result, the sustained criticism of capitalism's erasure of human agency that forms the crux of Horkheimer and Adorno's essay is noticeably absent from Wallace's understanding of contemporary American culture. In Adorno's “Culture Industry Reconsidered”, first published in 1975, he reaffirms his original position and elucidates, arguing that “the masses are not primary but secondary, they are an object of calculation, an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object”.[44] Wallace, in “E Unibus Pluram”, specifically takes issue with this kind of characterisation of the impotent masses: “I do not agree with reactionaries who regard TV as some malignancy visited on an innocent populace, sapping IQs and compromising SAT scores [...] *We are responsible* basically because nobody is holding any weapons on us forcing us to spend amounts of time second only to sleep doing something that is, when you come right down to it, not good for us” (*SFT*, pp.36-7; emphasis added). Wallace's emphasis on the potency of the individual will and the absence of any literal force surely neglects serious consideration of the manipulative force of capitalism, but it is an emphasis borne from his conception of selfhood as an inherent struggle dependent on individual responsibility. The individual throughout Wallace's body of work, however strongly coerced or sweetly seduced, is still responsible for their own actions and their own self.

[42] Wallace, *Consider The Lobster*, p.161.
[43] Boswell, “Slacker Redemption”, p.24; emphasis in original.
[44] Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Berstein (London: Routledge, 2001), p.99.

3.3. David Foster Wallace, Posthuman

The technological reality of *Infinite Jest*, of course, is not limited to the screens of the teleputers on which one may waste away enjoying the Entertainment. O.N.A.N.ite America already exhibits many of the ever-multiplying ways computer technology mediates the experience of life in the 21st century - technology at the bleeding edge in Wallace's time, now quotidian in our own. The teleputer itself is a hybrid, as the name suggests, television and computer, a Smart TV as imagined in the 90s. Americans in the novel no longer need to wait for content that entertains, or even move from their chairs to shop around in search of it, now that their teleputer's InterLace system allows for a kind of Netflix-style proto-streaming service. (The irony of a service sketched roughly in *Infinite Jest* - a novel whose central metaphor is entertainment-as-drug-addiction - becoming known in real life for the phenomenon of "binge-watching" has not been lost on Wallace Studies.) On top of this, human interaction has become increasingly digitized and, as a result, less human. Videophony briefly rushes into fashion, replacing voice-only telephone. Bringing a heightened wave of appearance anxiety through the “monstrous aesthetic pressures” that attend being seen on camera (*IJ*, p.150), the new technology leads to the ubiquity of electronic facemasks that hang by the receiver, ready to be applied should one want to augment the image they present, in a physical version of the filters offered by most video-calling apps today. Wallace details how the electronic facial manipulations become so elaborate, it reaches the point at which both callers present completely artificial avatars to the videophone's camera, so that, in the end, there is a *de facto* reversion to “good old Bell-era blind aural-only telephoning”, the only difference being that “now these expensive silly unreal stylized Tableaux were being transmitted” instead of people (p.150).

Wallace's portrayal of the individual navigating life within this technologically inundated reality has perhaps inevitably led to numerous posthumanist readings of his work. These readings propose, as that offered by N. Katherine Hayles does, that the world Wallace

portrays "smash[es] the illusion of autonomous selfhood", therefore smashing the concept of the "liberal humanist subject" and heralding a posthumanist existence.[45] It would be useful, first, to define those terms. Liberal humanism, as exaplined by Catherine Belsey, "proposes that the subject is the free, unconstrained author of meaning and action [...] Unified, knowing, and autonomous".[46] The posthuman view, according to Hayles, deconstructs this sovereignty. Posthumanism, she writes, "configures [the] human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals".[47] Posthumanist readings of Wallace's work, however, often mistake prognosis for prescription. They correctly recognise that Wallace's characters are placed in fictional worlds that exhibit, to use the words of Wilson Kaiser - who, like Hayles, offers a posthumanist reading of the novel – "a striking enworldedness, an enmeshment in a complex web of experiences that extends beyond the horizon of subjectivity".[48] But this representation is taken as evidence of Wallace's evident posthuman sympathies, framing the author as having accepted the diffusion of subjectivity from an idealised liberal humanist perspective. Kaiser concludes his argument by stating that "[t]he frequency of non-normative perceptual frameworks in Wallace's writing thus specifically challenges the legibility of the human-centred model".[49] While there is certainly an "enmeshment" of "non-normative perceptual frameworks" in *Infinite Jest*, I would argue that Wallace's fiction strives to *re-assert* the same kind of liberal humanist subject that the contemporary "enmeshment" threatens to dismantle. The author told David Lipsky:

> it's more as if - Life seems to strobe on and off for me, and to barrage me with input. And that so much of my job [as a human being] is to *impose some sort of order* [...] I

[45] Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy", p.694.
[46] Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (New York: Routledge, 1985), p.8.
[47] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p.3
[48] Kaiser, "Ethical Challenge of Posthumanism", p.55.
[49] Kaiser, "Ethical Challenge of Posthumanism", p.55.

> received five hundred thousand discrete bits of information today, of which maybe twenty-five are important. And how am I going to sort those out, you know?[50]

*Infinite Jest* urges the creation of the self outside the complex informational patterns it presents. Selfhood must be defined *in spite* of the individual's enmeshment, not *through* it.

What Kaiser's argument does not bring to bear is the specifically existential nature of Wallace's self, appearing to make that error which the author decried in his speech on Kafka, in believing that "a self is something you just *have*". Even though contemporary culture naturally places the individual in diffused networks of information, that is not to say Wallace accepted these networks as the location of the self or even conducive to constructing one. The misunderstanding lies in the difference in the value of this "construction". For posthumanists, understanding that the liberal subject is constructed from "conceptual foundations", as Hayles puts it, renders it an artificiality whose persistent myth holds potentially dangerous implications.[51] But in the context of Wallace's existentialism, as Allard den Dulk explains, "the fact that the self is something "made" does not imply that it is a fiction, in the sense of an imperfect artificiality that corrupts the diversity of the individual. What exactly is it that is corrupted when there is no preexisting self?".[52]

That this constructed self also exists in engagement with a community can similarly be misread in a posthumanist context. The problem of what Hayles terms "possessive individualism" is certainly present in Wallace, yet while the attachment to possessive individualism forms the impetus of much of the depression and addiction throughout the novel, being, as it is, the characteristic trait of the ironist and the aesthete, Wallace's "puncturing [of] the illusion of autonomous selfhood" does not straightforwardly amount to the deconstruction of the liberal subject, as Hayles claims.[53] In some regards, possessive individualism is a pre-requisite in Wallace's work to the responsibility of achieving an existential self: one must, to some extent, have a degree of autonomy if one is to make the conscious choice to struggle

---

[50] Lipsky, *Although of Course*, pp.37-8; emphasis added.
[51] Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy", p.675.
[52] Dulk, "Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety", p.45.
[53] Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy", p.695.

toward that self. We can recall the unnamed boy in "Forever Overhead", whose own personal choice to make the leap or not rests solely in his will to act. In *Infinite Jest*, Gately may have to surrender his will to recover both physically and existentially, but, as he says, "[y]ou have *to want* to surrender your will" (p.357; emphasis added). Paradoxically, then, Wallace dismantles the illusion of autonomous selfhood by first affirming the autonomy needed to dismantle it. It is this autonomy that speaks to the responsibility of the individual in crafting a self; without it, there would be no "horrific struggle" of which the individual is the sole owner**.** If we return, then, to Belsey's definition of the liberal humanist subject, Wallace does presuppose that the individual is the free author of meaning and action. Hayles mistakes relinquishing that autonomous selfhood in *Infinite Jest* for relinquishing the liberal subject altogether, whereas, by arguing for the illusion of autonomous selfhood in the context of achieving an existential self, Wallace simultaneously reaffirms the possessive individualism of the liberal subject that makes achieving that self possible in the first place. Wallace presents the dangers of autonomous selfhood due to the necessarily outward-facing nature of his conception of what it means to be a self, all the while still within a liberal humanist structure.

Hayles is certainly right to state Wallace's novel suggests that "nothing less than a reconceptualization of subjectivity can offer a solution" to the pernicious tendencies in the American individual at the end of the 20th century.[54] For Wallace, unlike for Hayles, that reconceptualization does not extend to the dismantling of all the previously held notions of what it means to be human. The sovereignty of the human subject is, if anything, strengthened. Although Hayles finds in Wallace "the profound interconnections that bind [...] human actors and nonhuman life forms, intelligent machines and intelligent people", we must question how far these interconnections actually go.[55] There is an abundance of evidence from throughout Wallace's career, such as this interview from 1996, that he still held on to the supremacy of an idealised human self unmediated and unarticulated by technology: despite the "amount of hope about the internet democratizing people and activating them", he said, "it seems to me, if you've

[54] Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy", p.693.
[55] Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy", p.696.

still got a nation of people sitting in front of screens interacting with images rather than each other, feeling lonely and so needing more and more images, you're going to have the same basic problem" as in a television-driven culture.[56] With this in mind, it is unsurprising that those characters most intimately tied to media technologies in *Infinite Jest* are frequently damaged by the interaction. In its most extreme depiction, there is the young Enfield student Otis P. Lord, who, during the chaotic fallout from the math- and tennis-based Eschaton game, lands head-first through a Hitachi desktop monitor and spends the rest of the novel uncommunicative in hospital, "with all the sharp teeth of the broken screen's glass pointing at key parts of [his] throat" (*IJ*, p.456). The symbolism of the image is clear. More subtle is the portrayal of Joelle van Dyne, whose eyes, thanks to the veil she wears throughout the novel, is "figured as the lens of a camera, her veil a filter over it".[57] As such, what she sees of the world she views as a film, most prominently in the moments before her attempted suicide, during which she watches "the absolute end of her life and beauty running in a kind of stuttered old hand-held 16mm before her eyes" (p.221). At this point, her passive spectation, framed in the language of film, is tied to her suicidal impulse. Significantly, again through the language of technological integration, Joelle is driven to this point by "her legs on autopilot, she a perpetual engine" (p.221). While Hayles is right to point out the numerous interconnections of human and non-human actors in *Infinite Jest*, Wallace more often than not presents these as a corruption of the human, an integration with a non-thinking machine that dulls the individual's own awareness and ability to connect with other human beings. The suicidal and addicted Joelle van Dyne, viewing life as a film through her veil, is a warning, not an ideal. There is a reason she spends the majority of the novel in recovery, altering an approach to life that brought her to that state.

When looking closely at the interconnections of person and machine, they do not appear as profound as Hayles suggests in her study. Despite an unquestionable enmeshment in new modes of information transfer, Wallace maintains the integrity of the human subjectivity as a thing pointedly separate in those transfers. As Holland notes, "*Infinite Jest* is grounded in a

---

[56] Lydon, "A Lost 1996 Interview".
[57] Sayers, "Representing Entertainment", p.125.

*technological materialism* that shapes the novel as more of an artifact of the 1990s than a harbinger of the digital age”.[58] Whatever interactions with non-human actors occur throughout the novel, there is always the possibility - the opportunity, more to the point - for the human to extract themselves to some "purer" form, in which they can fashion a real self. Hayles herself points out that the "technologies of the self" - the Foucauldian concept that will be discussed in the following chapter - with which Wallace rejects the myth of possessive individualism are tennis and Alcoholics Anonymous.[59] Instead of “open[ing] onto *new* possibilities of action and interaction”, as Kaiser claims,[60] these technologies of the self are decidedly antiquated modes of interaction in terms of the technologically saturated world of O.N.A.N.ite America. One can find the thematic origins of the earnest AA members of *Infinite Jest* in the “anti-rebels” invoked in “E Unibus Pluram”, who Wallace writes “would be outdated, of course, before they even started [...] Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic” (*SFT*, p.80). Some have taken these words to heart. Andrew Hoberek goes so far as to read *Infinite Jest* not as a novelistic experiment “moving beyond postmodernism”, but as employing a “renewed maximalism [that] returns [...] to the premodernist novel - sprawling, multicharacter, unafraid of mass culture”.[61] The reconceptualization of subjectivity found in *Infinite Jest* is, for Wallace, more restoration than re-configuration: re-establishing the responsibility required for selfhood that the solipsistic tendencies of America's television culture worked to erode.

Paul Giles, in his essay “Sentimental Posthumanism”, seeks to reconcile this seemingly posthuman environment in *Infinite Jest* with the author's evident ambivalence for a posthuman aesthetic. He argues that Wallace:

> takes the psychological fragmentation endemic to posthumanist cultural landscapes as a *fait accompli*, but chooses to traverse this terrain with a wide variety of philosophical references, thereby expanding the posthumanist idea beyond the narrow technocratic

[58] Holland, “Infinite Jest”, p.135; emphasis added.
[59] Hayles, “The Illusion of Autonomy”, p.693.
[60] Kaiser, “Ethical Challenge of Posthumanism”, p.67.
[61] Andrew Hoberek, “The Novel After David Foster Wallace” in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, eds. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.224.

> circle of the cyborg manifesto and showing how, at the turn of the twenty-first century, a posthumanist sensibility has filtered into the everyday consciousness of American life.[62]

Although one can find little in this with which to disagree, Giles's conclusion that *Infinite Jest* therefore amounts to a "rejection of liberal humanism" rings hollow.[63] There appears to be a reluctance to brand Wallace, virtuoso literary experimenter couched in the avant-garde, with such an old-fashioned and conservative title as Liberal Humanist. By labelling Wallace a "sentimental posthumanist", Giles performs some verbal contortions to arrive circuitously at just that point, despite claiming otherwise. He accepts that the novel, to use the words of Holland, "diagnoses and disturbs" rather than endorses the sensibility it presents on the page,[64] and that Wallace attempts, as Giles himself writes, to "reconven[e] *traditional forms* of American cultural idealism in a radically alien technological environment".[65] In many ways, *Infinite Jest* sets about re-establishing what Wallace calls the "ordered and disciplined structure" that the postmodernist turn in American fiction dismantled, "appreciating limits" that have previously been transgressed.[66] The problem posed, therefore, is how to reinstate those limits on a radically disrupted landscape.

One disruption to the landscape in the novel is quite literal, and illustrates the problems posed to those who would reassert traditional boundaries. The Great Concavity is a toxic dump across the whole of northern New England, a space purposefully demarcated and ceded to Canada by the government of the newly dominant Clean United States Party in an act of aggressive "experialism". In order to spuriously maintain the illusion of a pure America and herald "the renewal of a tight and considerably tidier Experialist U.S. of A." (*IJ*, p.391), "spectacular block-long catapults [...] fling great twine-bundled waste-vehicles" filled with the country's garbage into this designated wasteland (p.241). But the ecological horror that results from consumption cannot be separated so cleanly: "Filth by its very nature [...] is a thing that is

---

[62] Paul Giles, "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace", *Twentieth-Century Literature*, Vol.53, No.3 (Fall, 2007), p.330.
[63] Giles, "Sentimental Posthumanism", p.333.
[64] Holland, "Infinite Jest", p.138.
[65] Giles, "Sentimental Posthumanism", p.332; emphasis added.
[66] McCaffrey, "Expanded Interview", pp.51-52.

always creeping back in", one character points out (p.233). In an age when American consumption and its abundant refuse ravage the landscape, visions of an traditional American pastoral as conceived by the C.U.S.P. cannot help but be destroyed by the creeping filth. But, importantly, to say that Wallace presents an American pastoral as impossible in the modern world is not to say that he views the concept of the pastoral itself or its function in society as necessarily a fabrication. Simply, he accepts that to conceive of an American pastoral in *contemporary* America would be an artificial construction. The existence of an idealised space to where the individual can remove him- or herself in order to create and define their own identity, uninfluenced by external mediators, is something he takes more as a feature of nineteenth-century life, lost to the modern world. Comparing his own creative process to that of Tolstoy, Wallace outlined what he saw as this difference of the centuries to Lipsky: "maybe I'm very naïve - I imagine Leo getting up in the morning, pulling on his homemade boots, going out to chat with the serfs whom he's freed [...] Sitting down in his *silent* room, overlooking some very well-tended gardens, pulling out his quill and... in deep tranquillity, recollecting emotion".[67] Therefore, although it is certainly true that Wallace does "reject such a notion of [pastoral] retreat and attempt[s] instead to render a more complex version of contemporary life", as Giles writes,[68] he does so not because it has always been fantasy, but rather because the technological environment determining the individual's experience of life at the end of the 20th century means it cannot help but be fantasy now. There is no longer a silent room, disconnected, in which we can meditate on life.

Yet what the notion of the pastoral allowed the individual to do - namely, sustained reflection and interaction with specifically *human* emotion outside the confines of everyday life - Wallace seeks to achieve in *Infinite Jest* without the luxury of a demarcated space in which to do so. One important mantra of AA is "just to build a wall around each individual 24-hour period and not look over or back" (*IJ*, p.858). In other words, one is to build that silent room of contemplation within oneself. Without the old means, still the goal remains to find some way of

[67] Lipsky, *Although of Course*, pp.37-38; emphasis in original.
[68] Giles, "Sentimental Posthumanism", p.341.

stepping back from the great complex swarm of modern life and, as Wallace says, "open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways", connecting with the human self.[69] The very act of doing so is to attempt to cut out the human from its enmeshment in the posthuman O.N.A.N.ite landscape. Giles may be correct when it comes to Wallace's sentimentalism, but he is no posthumanist. The human is the goal; our technologically saturated existence is the reality out of which we must carve it.

3.4. Cold Turkey: The Response to Entertainment Technology

Barthes's proposed solution in "Leaving the Movie Theater" to opening oneself up and countering the passivity induced by the technologies of the filmic medium is, in principle, the same as that which Wallace would argue throughout his career: an active effort at awareness. "[T]here is another way of going to the movies", Barthes wrote, "by letting oneself be fascinated *twice over*, by the image and by its surrounding [...] the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of other bodies".[70] Yet if that were a reasonable form of defence in 1975, then by the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment in the America of O.N.A.N. it is no longer tenable. Wallace's future is one in which the technologies that enrapture us will advance to become too potent to resist. Place yourself in front of the Entertainment and the surroundings, the theatre, the sounds, the bodies of those around you will all dissolve into a meaningless nothing, existing outside the world of simple pleasure in which you now live. It is no longer enough to urge, as Barthes did, awareness of the trappings and situation of viewing instead of simply viewing as an act in itself. We must be aware beforehand, knowing the situations into which we are placing ourselves.

Neil Postman, foreshadowing the threat of "Infinite Jest" in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, his study of television culture, similarly argues that we cannot rely on a simple heightened awareness of what we are watching while we are watching, nor even go so far as to alter the

[69] McCaffrey, "Expanded Interview", p.50.
[70] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p.349; emphasis in original.

content of what we consume. “The nonsensical answer” to the problems caused by television, he writes,

> is to create television programs whose intent would be, not to get people to stop watching television but to demonstrate how television ought to be viewed, to show how television recreates and degrades our conception of news, political debate, religious thought, etc. [...] But, naturally, television would have the last laugh. In order to command an audience large enough to make a difference, one would have to make the programs vastly amusing, in the television style. Thus, the act of criticism itself would, in the end, be co-opted by television.[71]

There appears to be no exit from the loop. Television is a medium that does not allow for contemplation of its own effects. Postman's conclusion pre-empts Wallace's own, in his conviction that the citizenry should “learn how to distance themselves from their forms of information”.[72] There comes a point at which the malignancy cannot be lived with but must instead be removed. As Wallace himself learned from his own experiences in recovery, the addict, at least for a time, cannot co-habit with his substance, and only “[p]ulling him out of his old life and keeping him away from its temptations and habits helped”.[73]

Of course, it is not enough to Just Say No. Wallace attempts to understand the factors behind why so many Americans would Just Say Yes to deadly temptation in the form of "Infinite Jest", the ultimate drug. It comes down to circumstance. In a memorable passage from the novel, Wallace contemplates why those trapped in burning buildings so often choose to jump from the window to their deaths: “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 the view [...] The variable here is the other terror, the fire's flames: when the flames get close enough, falling to death becomes the slightly less terrible of two terrors” (p.696). In the America presented by Wallace in the novel, the only difference is the motivating factor. Pleasure rather than terror. When their experience of everyday life is increasingly geared around meaningless and innutritious pleasure, why would someone refrain from taking the leap out the window toward

[71] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), pp.161-2.
[72] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, p.163.
[73] Max, *Every Love Story*, p.136.

the Entertainment, whose pleasure cannot be matched? The only substantive course of action is to change the experience of life on the right side of the glass, putting out the fires tearing through spiritual life in the United States. Wallace attempts in the novel to point American culture away from the fundamental message of commercial television that the maximum amount of personal gratification is the apotheosis of human existence.

*Infinite Jest* ultimately exhibits a strong aversion toward the media technologies that permeate it's near-future setting. But, at the same time, Wallace understands that these technologies are disseminated by human actors and that human actors can still choose to navigate their technologically-diffuse world in ways that remain ontologically viable. AA, in particular, is a model of how to live "clean" in the modern world. Don Gately's narrative arc from his drug-addicted "bottom" through the program is a model of existential self-becoming, framed as a resilient heroism characterised by his awareness of the real world outside him and, through his determination to refuse painkillers even when recovering from a gunshot wound, the horrific struggle to maintain that awareness. The way in which this is presented harks back to the idealised figure of the human self as detached and unmediated - as much by the distortions of the screen as by addictive drugs. In the novel, this idealised figure of the self is constantly threatened by the distractions of media and technology influx, to which more media and technology is never the answer. As Wallace said in 1996, the notion “that improved technology is going to solve the problems that the technology has caused seems [...] to be a bit quixotic”.[74] In many respects, despite the novel's experimental aesthetics, Wallace remains a staunch traditionalist, keen to re-assert the boundaries scrubbed out by the postmodernist turn not just in literature but, thanks to its absorption through these media technologies, in the culture as a whole. He writes in “E Unibus Pluram” that “when all experience can be deconstructed and reconfigured, there become simply too many choices” (*SFT*, p.79). Human beings, he contends, need the imposed limits that give existence direction and meaning.

[74] Lydon, “A Lost 1996 Interview”; emphasis added.

One can consider, as illustration of this, the fictional game of Eschaton. A favourite of the Enfield Academy students, the game requires skill at both maths and lobbing as the participants act out an imagined nuclear apocalypse with tennis-ball warheads. While "addictively compelling" when played by the rules (*IJ*, p.322), the entire game descends into violent chaos once the players decide to disregard the formal distinctions between the map (the four tennis courts that compose the world on which the game is played) and the territory (the imagined landscapes which the map denotes) that make the game playable in the first place. As the inventor of the game, Pemulis, rages at one player he sees transgressing these boundaries, when it snows, it snows "on the goddamn *map*, not the *territory*, you *dick!*" (p.333; emphasis in original). Understanding the difference is paramount. Too many in his time, Wallace suggests, confuse the map with the territory, the sign-post for the destination, the existence of life for its essence. Failing to recognise these distinctions, the whole structure collapses and the whole game loses its meaning. The reassertion of boundaries within *Infinite Jest* includes at its core the reassertion of the human self against the corrupting posthumanist backdrop of O.N.A.N.ite America. As the existential self must be crafted, so too must the defining limits of the liberal human be reinstated. Despite the technological dystopia imagined by Wallace, there remains the possibility, slim though it may be, of carving out a genuine self in the contemporary world, something free from the influence of the screen and, above all, something profoundly human. By the time *The Pale King* is published posthumously, Wallace's outlook is decidedly more pessimistic.

## 4. ***The Pale King***: Technology and Technologies of the Self

### 4.1. These Fragments: Assembling *The Pale King*

The question naturally arises when reading and critically examining *The Pale King*, as with any unfinished posthumous novel: how closely does the published text represents what its author intended? Give the circumstances around its arrival on the market, to what extent can we even term *The Pale King* a David Foster Wallace novel? Is it, instead, to use the words of Jonathan Raban from a contemporary review, just "a book that reads a lot like a David Foster Wallace novel"?[1] Michael Pietsch, Wallace's long-time editor who compiled the version of *The Pale King* with which the vast majority of readers are familiar, describes in the "Editor's Note" prefacing the work how he was faced with "hundreds and hundreds of pages of [a] novel in progress", written over a decade (p.x). Significantly, he writes, "[n]owhere in all these pages was there an outline or other indication of what order David intended", only "a few broad notes about the novel's trajectory" (p.x-xi). Given that Pietsch has stated the draft material left by Wallace amounted to "more than 1000 pages of manuscript, in 150 unique chapters",[2] and seeing as how the 2011 first edition of the novel features 50 of those chapters, it is not an overstatement to say that our understanding of the text comes as much from Pietsch's editing process as from Wallace's writing. A subsequent edition, published in 2012, contains four additional chapters - these are not, however, incorporated into the main body of the novel, but rather feature as distinct and unconnected scenes placed at the end, each prefaced with a short explanatory introduction by Pietsch. The irreconcilability of these pieces with the rest of the book speaks to the difficulty the editor faced in constructing a coherent novel, as well as to the very different form that novel could have taken. With all this in mind, I agree with Patrick Thomas Henry's

[1] Jonathan Raban, "Divine Drudgery", *The New York Review of Books*, May 11, 2011, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/05/12/divine-drudgery/> June 1, 2019.
[2] Kathleen Fitzpatrick, "The Legacy of David Foster Wallace", *Kathleen Fitzpatrick*, Dec. 30, 2009 <https://kfitz.info/the-legacy-of-david-foster-wallace/> June 3, 2019.

assessment that it is "Pietsch [who] occupies the seat of power and directs the movement of the novel", so that "[w]ithout David Foster Wallace, we would not have met the beleaguered staff of the Peoria REC in *The Pale King*. Without Michael Pietsch, we would not have *The Pale King*".[3] Of course, as culturally dominant as it may be to laud the genius of the individual talent - and, undeniably, in Wallace Studies there is little shortage of that - what Henry says of *The Pale King* could be said, albeit to a lesser extent, of Pietsch's work on *Infinite Jest*. Wallace at one time estimated he had, extremely bitterly, "cut [the novel] by 600 pages" on the insistence of that "fucker", Pietsch.[4] Certainly, had Wallace been given his way on every editorial decision we now know shaped *Infinite Jest*, it would have been a very different (which is to say, vastly more unwieldy) beast. The name "David Foster Wallace" may be printed on the cover, but that belies the collective responsibility for the entirety of what is contained in the following pages.

Now that Wallace's papers have been made available to researchers at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, *The Pale King* exists less as one coherent text than it ever did when shakily aspiring to such coherence on first publication. Scholars can, in effect, construct their own variations on Pietsch's assembly from the decade's worth of draft pages Wallace left behind. Of course, as is to be expected, gaping holes and irresolvable conflicts nevertheless persist. There are things, however, we know for sure: the novel focuses on a regional tax office in the mid-1980s, following the IRS employees as they navigate the boredom of their jobs. But above this, constructing anything other than what ultimately remains an unfinished novel is a painful impossibility. With that said, from the brief notes that Wallace made during the composition, we can infer features of the text that were integral to his vision. It seems clear from these notes that the lack of conclusion that is, coincidentally, inherent in the process of assembling and publishing an unfinished novel was in fact intended to be a primary feature of the narrative. "[S]omething big *threatens* to happen", Wallace wrote in a note to

---

[3] Patrick Thomas Henry, "*The Pale King* by David Foster Wallace and Michael Pietsch", *Modern Language Studies*, Vol.42, No.1 (Summer, 2012), p.92.
[4] Max, *Every Love Story*, p.212.

himself, “but doesn't actually happen” (p.546; emphasis in original).[5] In other notes in the draft, Wallace refers to the structure as “tornadic”, “a series of setups for things to happen but nothing ever happens” (p.xii).

One such event around which the novel appears to be structured but at which it never arrives is a staged auditing contest between Drinion, the Service's most productive human examiner, and a mechanical processor. Lurking behind the narrative is a scheme by some of those in the Service to test “the computer [...] against the very finest rote examiners they can get... so that when the A/NADA crushes them, the test'll be all that much more definitive” (*PK*, p.545). Despite the idea of this contest featuring prominently in Wallace's notes, it does not feature to any significant degree in the published version of novel. This is regrettably unavoidable. It would seem Wallace never wrote a scene in which the contest takes place or its results or aftermath are discussed. Here, perhaps, we reach the most pressing problem for critical study of a novel in which, as Wallace's notes repeatedly make clear, the “[b]ig issue is human examiners or machines” (p.547), and yet the surviving narrative makes only oblique reference to this central theme. One must necessarily infer the significance of the opposition of human and machine from what is extant. It is when viewing the IRS Wallace constructed in the novel as his pre-eminent technology of the self that I believe this significance becomes clear.

## 4.2. Technologies of the Self

Michel Foucault defined technologies of the self as “permit[ting] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and

---

[5] Published editions of *The Pale King* come with 8 pages of “Notes and Asides”, in the hope they will “allow a fuller understanding of the ideas” in the novel (*PK*, p.541). While these are greatly illuminating and offer important glimpses into aspects of *The Pale King* Wallace clearly intended to incorporate but was unable to write, they must be read with caution. Given that Wallace drafted his unfinished novel for over a decade and - as David Hering has shown in *Fiction and Form* - the form of that novel and its ideas evolved considerably over that time, many of the undated notes published along with the novel may have been superseded in Wallace's own mind by new directions. Certainly many openly contradict each other and, as Pietsch concedes, overall they convey a sense of “how much a work in progress the novel still was” at the time of Wallace's death (p.541).

souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality”.[6] In *The Pale King*, this technology is epitomised in the institution of the IRS itself. Although the operations performed on the souls of individual characters in the Service may appear painful - or, put better, painfully dull - Wallace, like Foucault, envisages an almost transcendental state as a result of these tedious operations: “Constant bliss in every atom”, Wallace writes, is the outcome of their work (*PK*, p.548). One may consider chapter 25 as Wallace attempting to enact this process in narrative form. The chapter consists of one long paragraph, almost entirely a description of the employees turning pages: “"Irrelevant" Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Regate turns a page” (p.312). This continues, with slight variations, for the rest of the chapter. No one speaks, interacts; the names of characters we recognise appear alongside those never mentioned again; whatever plot there is in the novel, this description of page-turning does not advance it. Undoubtedly, this section is boring. Yet surely intentionally so. Hidden among this literary cruft, one is given glimpses of a possible breakthrough. The presence of “two ghost” at the corner of the scene becomes apparent, and we are unexpectedly told, in the enigmatic phrase that Max took for his biography of Wallace, “Every love story is a ghost story” (p.314). While the meaning of the aphorism remains obscure, both in the context of the chapter and the larger work as a whole,[7] the very act of coming across a phrase - in the context of the IRS, one may be better placed terming it a piece of data - worthy of interpretive work nestled among bare descriptions of page-turning demonstrates Wallace's central themes of dedication, attention to the task, and the nourishing fruits of that difficult, seemingly pointless labour. In this case, reading: skim-read the chapter and you'll miss it. As *Infinite Jest* attempts to enact in its composition the subversion of the type of entertainment of

---

[6] Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock, 1988), p.18.

[7] D. T. Max traces the possible meanings and origins of the phrase (one that occurs throughout Wallace's entire career, and that he at one time playfully attributed to Virginia Woolf on *The Merv Griffin Show*) in “D.F.W.: Tracing the Ghostly Origins of a Phrase”, *The New Yorker*, Dec. 11, 2012 <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/d-f-w-tracing-the-ghostly-origins-of-a-phrase> May 20, 2019.

which it is so critical, so too does *The Pale King* enact the boredom of rote work, while at the same time suggesting its possible transcendence. Technologies of the self allow for, and demand, this kind of attention. Francisco Valera, expanding on Foucault, writes that the "skillful approach to living is based on a pragmatics of transformation that demands nothing less *than a moment-to-moment awareness* of the virtual nature of our selves".[8] Wallace, in *The Pale King*, hints at what that awareness can bring.

Although Alcoholics Anonymous and the Enfield Tennis Academy are, as N. Katherine Hayles wrote, the main technologies of the self in *Infinite Jest*, they are technologies fundamentally removed from other aspects of society. In many regards, they offer an escape from the unliveable life of Wallace's imagined future. The AA of *Infinite Jest* makes an explicit distinction between "Out There, where the Disease is" (p.1002) and the relative safety of "Com[ing] In" (p.349). With *The Pale King*, Wallace attempts to make concrete what is abstract in the earlier novel; selfhood no longer exists outside the realities of contemporary American social life in the hypertrophied O.N.A.N. Clare Hayes-Brady rightly points out that the unfinished novel is "a movement past the fundamentally adolescent concerns of *Jest* [...] articulating a less extreme vision of life, engaging with the realities of adulthood and the challenges of navigating [...] the real world in its naked, tangible tedium".[9] One useful point of comparison between the two novels is chapter 19 of *The Pale King*, in which various characters debate (in unattributed speech) the state of American democracy while, it slowly becomes clear, they are trapped in an elevator. The debate is presented as a kind of Platonic dialogue in the vein of the *Symposium* and performs much the same function in the text as Marathe and Steeply's hill-top debate from *Infinite Jest*. In *The Pale King*, the abstract discussion about freedom based on Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" has become highly specific and highly political, grounded in "the Constitution and *Federalist Papers*" (p.135), "Vietnam" (p.134), and the theory of corporations possessing "all the rights and responsibilities of citizens" (p.142). The novel itself is immediately

---

[8] Francisco J. Varela, *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.75; emphasis added.
[9] Clare Hayes-Brady, ""Palely Loitering": On Not Finishing (in) *The Pale King*", in *The Cambridge Companion*, p.142.

noticeable for being Wallace's only major work that does not extrapolate a near-future setting from current trends, instead placing the reader in the heart of the Reagan years. Specifically, *The Pale King*, as set in a regional tax office, dissects the effects of Reaganomics, focussing on the tax cuts of 1981 and the debate within the Service in the years that follow. Alongside this, replicating the fashion for neoliberal policy, is the run-up to the implementation in the IRS of the "Spackman Initiative", a fictitious reorganisation of the Service in its "institutional sense of itself and its role in policy" (p.114). In its simplest terms, the Spackman Initiative sees the Service change its own relationship to tax compliance, de-emphasising tax as a moral obligation and instead focussing the institution on maximising tax revenue, inevitably raising the question: is the IRS "to be essentially a corporate entity or a *moral* one" (p.545; emphasis in original).

One can understand the larger ontological threat the Spackman Initiative poses when viewing the IRS as Wallace's grand, over-arching technology of the self. By entering into the Service, the individual is necessarily giving themself over to an organisation bigger than their immediate concerns. Wallace uses both the IRS and Americans's relationship to the tax system as synecdoche for the same persistent and, in Wallace's view, corrosive individualism that lay behind the allure of the Entertainment in *Infinite Jest*. The idealist Glendenning, *de jure* if not *de facto* head of the Peoria REC, claims that no longer do American citizens consider themselves "parts of something larger to which [they] have profound responsibilities" (p.132). The concept of citizenship becomes central to Wallace's thinking as an effective means of constituting a self. Where the AA program in *Infinite Jest* offered addicts a greater organisation to which they could submit their will and pull themselves from solipsism, Wallace in *The Pale King* stresses that Americans already exist within such an organisation, if only they would recognise it. The political reality becomes, in this novel, the water of *This Is Water*: the basis of the environment through which all Americans swim as they go about their daily lives. Throughout the novel, especially in the "Author's Foreword", Wallace's language emphasises the reader as citizen, writing, for example, that "ordinary citizens almost never read disclaimers" (p.69). One can see in the progression of Wallace's drafts this emphasis being sharpened, "regular people" evolving

into “regular citizens”, as we are repeatedly reminded of our own place within a larger system of government.[10] In this sense, the setting of a tax office is pertinent. As Joseph Goeke writes, “the IRS, as one of the biggest bureaucracies in the world, provides a setting broad enough to symbolize this abstract, bureaucratic 'world of men'”.[11] And as one unnamed narrator says near the novel's close, ignorance of the fact that “the world of men as it exists today is a bureaucracy [...] causes great suffering” (p.439).

The most thorough examination in *The Pale King* of the IRS as technology of the self comes in the form of "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle's 100-page monologue, which Pietsch astutely places as the centrepiece of the novel. Told to “explain how [he] arrived at this career” in the IRS for a recruitment video (p.156), Fogle goes on to give a lengthy account of his young adulthood as nihilistic and drug-dependent “wastoid” (p.160), who, after accidentally stumbling into an accounting class, undergoes something of a religious conversion and enters into the Service. Indeed, Marshall Boswell has shown how the entire monologue functions as a conversion narrative “grounded in the work of American pragmatist William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*”.[12] Wallace makes the Jamesian connection explicit by placing on an A/V screen in the lecture hall a quote from “The Moral Equivalent of War”. Playing up the religious overtones, Fogle mistakes the attributed author of the quote - simply “James” - for the apostle (p.222). To avoid any doubt as to the nature of the experience, the Advanced Tax class that Fogle has mistakenly entered is substituted that day by “one of DePaul's few remaining Jesuit professors” (p.192). Significantly, Foucault identifies monastic life as a “new technology of the self”, developed with the emergence of Christian culture.[13] In keeping with the requirements of Wallace's existential view of self-becoming, Foucault writes of how the monasteries demand both intense awareness and an outward turn, in which the individual gives themself over to

---

[10] David Foster Wallace, “Draft 4: Typed, with Wallace's Edits”, *The Harry Ransom Center* <https://hrc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15878coll20/id/37/rec/4> June 10, 2019.
[11] Joseph F. Goeke, “"Everyone Knows It's About Something Else, Way Down": Boredom, Nihilism, and the Search for Meaning in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol.57, No.3 (2017), p.199.
[12] Marshall Boswell, “Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in *The Pale King*” in *The Long Thing*, p.210.
[13] Foucault, “Technologies of the Self”, p.45.

something larger: “obedience and contemplation [...] It is a sacrifice of the self, of the subjects own will”.[14] From such a description, it is obvious why the language of religious dedication so appealed to Wallace's sense of selfhood. It should be noted, too, that Wallace described the rigours of professional athletics training, such as those practised at the Enfield Tennis Academy in *Infinite Jest*, as requiring the dedication of monks.[15] The existential expediency of a religious organisation is why, as James Santel notes, his writing began “echoing with increasing frequency the rhetoric of Christian brotherhood”.[16]

Certainly, while the monologue is framed as a conversion narrative, it is also presented clearly in the terms of existential self-becoming that appear throughout Wallace's work. At the beginning of his narrative, Fogle is cast as the archetypical Kierkegaardian aesthete and, by extension, Wallace's “hip ironist”. Becoming an adult in the early 1970s, Fogle effects the image of 60s rebellion without the ideological substance behind it. “I had a metal peace-sign pendant that weighed half a pound”, he says, “Docksiders and yellow Timberlands [...] The commercial psychedelia” (p.159). Fogle's aesthetic recalls Glendenning's criticism during the elevator debate of an age when it simply “became fashionable” to protest those in power (p.134). In true Kierkegaardian fashion, Fogle's aesthetic nihilism, he himself realises with horror, may be no pose. He explains to the camera how he had

> the dawning realization that all of the directionless drifting and laziness and being a "wastoid" which so many of us in that era pretended to have raised to a nihilistic art form, and believed was cool and funny [...] was, in reality, not funny, not one bit funny, but rather frightening [...] I might be a real nihilist, that it wasn't always just a hip pose. That I drifted and quit because nothing meant anything (p.225).

This drifting is characterised by an absence of a thinking, feeling self. Recalling the language that surrounds Incandenza's "Infinite Jest", Fogle, in retrospect, acknowledges that he was experiencing life “like I was dead or asleep without even being aware of it” (p.160). His moment of realisation comes, significantly, in front of the TV, binging on the soap opera *As the World*

---

[14] Foucault, “Technologies of the Self”, pp.44-45.
[15] Lopate, “David Foster Wallace”.
[16] James Santel, “On David Foster Wallace's Conservatism”, *The Hudson Review*, Vol.66, No.4 (Winter, 2014), p.626.

*Turns*. Hearing the name of the show announced again and again reveals its inherent pun to Fogle: “the announcer was actually saying over and over what I was doing” - only then does he hear “the obvious double entendre of "*You're watching* As the World Turns"” (p.224). He is merely a spectator to life, detached. Visually paralleling the image of those captivated by "Infinite Jest", Fogle's total disconnect from life itself, sat blankly staring at the television screen, is obvious. His Jesuit lecturer, knowing Fogle's type well, frames it as existence without essence, as only “a crude approximation of a human life you have heretofore called a life” (p.229).

Contrast this with life dedicated to the Service, which the priest declares to be “[t]rue heroism” in the modern world (p.232). “Often tedious? Perhaps. But brave? Worthy? Fitting, sweet? Romantic? Chivalric? Heroic? [...] Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is” (p.231). Life in the IRS is presented as an opportunity of achieving that absent meaningful self. It is, once again echoing language found throughout Wallace's treatment of the self, presented as a chance for “latter adolescents who aspire to manhood” to achieve that adult status (p.231), complete with the responsibilities it naturally entails. Moreover, it is presented as a transition from passivity to attention, as even during the lecture “every detail in the classroom appeared [to Fogle] very vivid and distinct, as though painstakingly drawn” (p.232). The Service allows one to escape a solipsistic existential death, committing oneself to interests other than their own, through “[e]ffacement. Sacrifice. Service" (p.233). Those familiar with AA will know that these principles are the foundation of the 12 Steps, as well.[17] “To give oneself to the care of others' money”, the Jesuit declares to his class, “this is [...] honor” (p.233). By framing Fogle's journey into the Service as both a religious conversion and existential self-becoming, Wallace presents the IRS as the redemptive technology of the self in modern America, one of the few ways an individual can escape from the nihilism and narcissism of contemporary culture into a realm of genuine meaning.

[17] For example: “5. [We a]dmitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs”; “12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs”. “The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous”, *Alcoholics Anonymous Great Britain* <https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/About-AA/The-12-Steps-of-AA> July 28, 2019.

The narcissism, Wallace is keen to point out, is both pervasive and costly. One of the more crippling effects of excessive self-focus is portrayed in the character of David Cusk, who "[a]t age sixteen and a half [...] started to have attacks of shattering public sweats" (p.93). The attacks are the result of an acute level of self-consciousness, when Cusk came to a "traumatic understanding of himself as [...] an object" at the time of puberty (p.94). Wilson Kaiser is certainly right to say that "Cusk's experience of sweating makes him extraordinarily aware of his specific enworldedness",[18] but it should also be noted that Cusk's extreme sensitivity to his own physicality in the world at the same time effects a solipsism that bars him from communicating with that world of which he has lately and traumatically realised himself to be a part. The fear of sweat means that to think of others naturally forces him to think back on "himself as [...] an object-for-others" (p.94). In an image of this self-absorption, the chapter detailing the development of Cusk's condition ends with him facing himself in a bathroom mirror, trying to start a sweat attack so he can objectively study the effects, "instead of driving down with [his parents] to Easter dinner at his grandparents'" (p.101). The fear of what others might think of his sweating works to isolate him from others entirely. Like the Depressed Person of Wallace's story of the same name, Cusk is portrayed as little more than "a solipsistic, self-consumed, endless emotional vacuum and sponge" (*BI*, p.58). Suffering from *"Analysis-Paralysis*" (*IJ*, p.1002), it is clear that Cusk would benefit from one of the "exotic new facts" that is bestowed upon entering AA, that other exemplar technology of the self in Wallace's work (p.200): "That you will become way less concerned with what other people think of you when you realize how seldom they do" (p.203). The IRS, like AA, provides the opportunity to break out of the solipsistic cycle that forms the basis of addiction - and, certainly, Cusk's obsession with his own sweating and appearance is a form of addiction, just as Fogle's adolescence wasted on ironic detachment is presented as a story of addiction. Later in the novel, at a training session for new recruits to the Service, Cusk is seen "fighting desperately to attend to every last syllable enunciated at the podium" (p.331). Although referring to the specific moment in that specific

[18] Kaiser, "Ethical Challenge of Posthumanism", p.63.

room, the acknowledgement that his sustained attention is “his one chance not to begin dwelling on his core temperature” can be taken as a metaphor for the task of joining and training itself (p.331). To join the Service is to transcend the narrow bounds of the individual and break the vicious cycle of self-conscious anxiety.

### 4.3. A Church without a Congregation: The Mechanisation of the Service

Regardless of where Wallace would have placed Fogle's lengthy tale of conversion if he himself had ordered the novel, it is by far the *The Pale King*'s longest section and was clearly intended to serve as a thematic focal point. Therefore, by giving the existential function of the Service such a prominent place in the novel, we are left to consider what becomes of our opportunities of service and sacrifice once the IRS becomes a mechanised operation. With the bureaucracy so often framed as a religious institution - with its own Holy Trinity, “the Three-Personed God” being the “term for the top triad” of the Service (p.110) - then the move to mechanisation bars from the congregation all but unthinking, amoral processors. James Dorson writes that “[i]f the garden of nature was destroyed by the appearance of the industrial machine, now the bureaucratic garden in the New Economy is being upset by the quintessential post-industrial machine”.[19] There is no opportunity in Wallace's novel for a cyborg hybridity. There is only the either/or decision: either humans or machines, and the displacement that follows. The data processors play a similar, and yet more sinister, role as "Infinite Jest" in Wallace's previous novel. Whereas the captivating cartridge attested to Americans's willingness to end their lives blissfully entertained, the auditing machines lurking behind the text of *The Pale King* prevent one from giving oneself over in an act of self-becoming even with the desire to do so. The machines do not rob individuals of their selfhood, as "Infinite Jest" threatens to do; they preclude the individual from ever achieving that selfhood in the first place.

---

[19] James Dorson, “The Neoliberal Machine in the Bureaucratic Garden: Pastoral States of Mind in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*” in *Rereading the Machine in the Garden: Nature and Technology in American Culture*, eds. Eric Erbacher, Nicole Maruo-Schröder, Florian Sedlmeier (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2014), p.224.

Early in his career, Wallace did, in fact, dramatise the kind of existence faced by the IRS workers in his piece of "flash fiction" that opens *Brief Interviews*, “A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life”, worth reproducing here in full:

> When they were introduced, he made a witticism, hoping to be liked. She laughed extremely hard, hoping to be liked. Then each drove home alone, staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to their faces.
>
> The man who'd introduced them didn't much like either of them, though he acted as if he did, anxious as he was to preserve good relations at all times. One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one (*BI*, p.0).

The story speaks to the kind of solipsistic and endlessly recursive thinking that the postindustrial life promises. Human relationships are predicated on selfish wants. Each character thinks only of their own self and position, with the suggestion that good relations are a commodity to be traded, if the need arises. One hopes to be liked because there is a utilitarian value in having friends. The twisted faces offer a symbol of the psychological torment inherent to this life and the necessary manipulations required to keep it running. The story mirrors the pre-Service trauma of Cusk, similarly obsessive and marked by chronic self-awareness, so concerned with his own self that he fails to register or comprehend the world outside him. The “Radically Condensed History” offers a glimpse of the kind of inward, directionless consciousness that can result from a mechanised Service, shorn of its moral and civic duty in society and emptied of the people that dedicate themselves to discharge that duty.

In this sense, while many aspects of IRS work-life may appear dehumanising, I argue that Wallace presents them as part of a larger process of self-becoming. The personal identities of the employees, for example, are frequently expunged from the text and the Service in general. Recording testimonials for an upcoming documentary, *Your IRS Today*, the workers are introduced solely by their social security numbers, as “928874551”, “973876118”, etc. (pp.105-119), without any other identifying tags. Later in the novel, we learn that even the names on the examiners's desks are “Name[s] de Gear”, as the anonymous narrator informs someone “Off-camera” (p.130) - ostensibly in place so that there's “[n]o more worrying some burger whose shoes you maybe have to squeeze a little bit knows your name, [and] maybe they find out where

you and your family live" (p.130). The change literalises the abdication of the workers's pre-Service and pre-essence identities. We may also consider the prominent character, David Wallace, "the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona", as he informs the reader in the "Author's Foreword" (p.68). Despite the clear attempt to stamp his narrative authority on the text - both chapters 9 and 24 begin with the declaration, "Author here" (pp.68, 258) - it is clear from Wallace's notes (that is to say, the *real* flesh-and-blood Wallace) that his authorial avatar was, at least at some stage in the novel's composition, intended to vanish from the text without ceremony or explanation. "David Wallace disappears 100 pp in", he writes in one brief note on the novel's trajectory; and in another: "David Wallace disappears - becomes creature of the system" (p.548). It should be taken into account, despite these notes, that in Pietsch's structuring of the novel the intention of the former note is not represented in the text: the three chapters identifiably narrated by "David Wallace" are spread throughout. It should also be noted that David Hering stresses the "risks [of] an inexact analysis" when dealing with these notes, as they pre-date by several years the composition of the "David Wallace" sections that feature prominently in the 2011 edition.[20] With that said, in the last of these chapters (pp.412-416), the opening "Author here" pronouncement and the first-person narration have been noticeably abandoned, so that the only signifying markers of Wallace, the author, are the copious footnotes that Wallace, the man, was acutely aware were regarded as his literary "trademark". In this sense, then, the authority of "David Wallace" has been diluted by the time of his final chapter and he does indeed become a "creature of the system", albeit perhaps not to the same extent as was intended at one stage of the novel's composition.

By presenting *The Pale King* as "more like a memoir than any kind of made-up story" (p.69), and then by having this memoir's supposed author and subject substantially disappear from his own story within the bureaucratic structure of the IRS may at first be taken as a comment on the corruption of the individual by the faceless, inhuman entity for which David Wallace must work. However, once placed in the context of existential self-becoming and, in

[20] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, pp.181-2.

particular, the Jesuit's exhortation to Fogle, one can read Wallace's disappearance, along with the other "dehumanising" elements of work-life for the employees of the IRS as, perhaps counterintuitively, part of the composition of selfhood that is conditional on bonds that extend outside the self. To have anonymous characters, as well as characters stripped of their names, and an author whose own identity is lost in a bureaucratic system, may appear to be corruption, but we must consider, as Wallace persistently does throughout his writing, the relationship between reader and text. It is, at its heart, performance. From the reader's perspective, the text is, in some form, a play by the writer presented for their benefit. Yet, as the Jesuit stresses, in

> the world of reality - there is no audience. No one to applaud, to admire. *No one to see you* [...] Here is the truth - actual heroism receives no ovation, entertains no one [...] True heroism is you, alone, in a designated work space. True heroism is minutes, hours, weeks, year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care - with no one there to see or cheer (pp.231-2; emphasis added).

The elision of personal identity that occurs so often throughout *The Pale King* can be seen as Wallace enacting this version of heroism. We, the audience, do not see so many of these characters as fully-formed people, as to do so would turn their work into the kind of “theatre” that the Jesuit declares antithetical to the “grand gesture” of meaning (p.231). There is a tension in *The Pale King*, as it can be said there is in all of Wallace's work, between a desire for virtuosic literary performance and an acknowledgement that such performance may be part of the problem in the first place: is it just hollow aesthetics obscuring meaningful substance? In *The Pale King*, the meaningful work is done off-stage. To have it strut and fret for our benefit would be to undermine its importance.

### 4.4. “Creature of the System”: What it Means to Disappear in *The Pale King*

On first reading, to become a creature of the system in the depths of the Service may not sound particularly appealing or, indeed, spiritually fulfilling. Bureaucracy, certainly within the United States, has an image-problem. The IRS in particular, being the country's pre-eminent bureaucratic institution, is seen as unnecessarily complex. A loose baggy monster that has

overgrown its limits, the labyrinthine innards threaten to obscure personal identity, to chew up and dehumanise those that fall into its maw in a way that is anathema to the country's founding principles and valorisation of individualism - or so its popular image contends. So settled in the culture is this perception, the Service has become the butt of both gentle jokes and vitriolic hate that take its sprawling esotericism for granted.[21] There is a collective baulking at the idea of having to be swallowed up by a system of forms, procedures, and protocols; like Patrick McGoohan in *The Prisoner*, it seems the natural response of Americans to shout in the face of all this that they are not a number, they are free men and women. But while the popular cultural perception of bureaucracy has conditioned us to read the character David Wallace's disappearance in the terms of Kafka's bankers, who sink without a trace “back into the huge bureaucracy of the bank” in a kind of silent horror,[22] one is better to compare Wallace dissolving his own literary persona into the vast system of the IRS as analogous to Kurt Vonnegut's similarly constructed avatar vanishing at the end of *Breakfast of Champions.* Vonnegut, in his final act of the novel, dematerialises “pleasantly through the void”.[23] He, too, "frees" his characters from the reader's gaze, vowing not “to put on any more puppet shows”.[24] Both instances of the authorial subjectivity assembled on the page dissolving should not be viewed as the loss of the self, but as that subjectivity ceasing to perform for the reader, and thus ridding itself of the artificiality inherently laden in that act. In the case of “David Wallace, age forty, SS no. 975-04-2012” (p.68), he stops the “sorts of cute, self-referential paradoxes” he claims to find “irksome” (p.69), and relinquishes the narrative control exerted so forcefully in the first “Author

---

[21] See John Swartzwelder and Bob Kushell, “Bart the Fink”, *The Simpsons*, Season 7, Episode 15, Feb. 11, 1996, in which a popular fast-food chain is repossessed by the Service and rebranded “IRS Burger”. True to form, customers must fill out their order on “Schedule B” and will receive their meal in “6 to 8 weeks”. For a less playful reaction to the opacity of the bureaucracy, see Patrick Temple-West and Karl Plume, “Threats Made to Figures at Center of IRS Controversy: Sources”, *Reuters*, June 15, 2013 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-irs-threats/threats-made-to-figures-at-center-of-irs-controversy-sources-idUSBRE95E08520130615> July 8, 2019. Following a minor scandal at the Service in 2013, members of the far-right Tea Party were quick to decry the IRS and its actions as traitorous and “Un-American”.
[22] Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Idris Parry (London: Penguin, 1994), p.14.
[23] Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday* (New York: Dial Press, 2011), pp.301.
[24] Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, p.5.

Here" section. By the end of the novel he has become, as the Jesuit lecturer describes, an anonymous cowboy on the "heroic frontier" of the Service's work (p.234).

To illustrate the point, we can compare this subsumption of identity into the bureaucracy with another kind of identity-erasure in the novel: the confusion surrounding "author" David F. Wallace, lowly GS-9 employee, with David F. Wallace, high-ranking GS-13, that forms one of the more fleshed out plotlines. Due to a bug in the "Personnel and Training Division's COBOL-based systems" (p.412), these two David Wallaces are collapsed into one, "recogniz[ing] only the [Wallace] of higher GS grade", so that our author "[i]n effect [...] did not exist" (p.413). There is an important distinction to be made in the two forms of "non-existence" that David Wallace undergoes in the text. Once the computer's mistake has been recognised and amended, so that David Wallace enters into the Service, his disappearance from the novel is an absence from the stage, rather than a lack of existence in itself. With regards to the computer system, however, David Wallace being made "non-existent" bars his entry - albeit temporarily - from the Service in its entirety. This comprises a far more profound state of non-existence in the context of Wallace's ethics. The author significantly refers to the computer bug that caused the confusion as the "'ghost redundancy' problem" (p.416), hitning at the sense of existential death it incurs. The source of this "death" is unequivocally digital, as he makes clear: "The problem was not [...] that no one in the Midwest Regional Examination Center's Personnel and Training office noticed that two separate David F. Wallaces were scheduled for intake [...] The problem was [...] the office's computer system" (p.414).

As with *Infinite Jest*, Wallace attempts to replicate the thematic concerns of *The Pale King* in its intended structure. Hayes-Brady reads the anti-climactic structure of the novel in terms of the open-endedness of the heroism defined throughout, a kind that "is necessarily incomplete, a process of attention rather than its product".[25] Although this reading is convincingly supported in the text and fits nicely with the idea of the process of self-becoming as a continual struggle that does not end - as Foucault wrote of the monastic technologies of the self, its goal is "not a

[25] Hayes-Brady, "Palely Loitering", p.143.

final autonomous state"[26] - we may also read the structure in light of the symbolic significance of the processors. As they prevent breakthrough, so too does the novel. The intended "tornadic" structure mirrors, in some ways, the self-reflexive tendencies of the solipsists, like Cusk, whose every thought directed outside of himself swirls back and returns to himself as a point of focus. The presence of the processors in effect blocks the existential path provided by the IRS out of these destructively recursive loops, so that the novel, in its structure, enacts the obstruction the machines pose. As Wallace writes, the plot is "a series of set-ups" that break down (*PK*, p.548): as the employees of the IRS face expulsion from the path toward selfhood that the Service provided, so too does the novel refuse the reader a narrative path through the text. Both have been self-destructively terminated.

Perhaps understandably, it may be hard for the reader to accept the often unresponsive, "boring" and bored characters in *The Pale King* as exhibiting humanity in the daily life of the IRS. One should bear in mind, however, Wallace's contention (albeit made in his notes and not as fleshed-out in the extant novel) that "[i]t turns out that bliss - a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious - lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom" (p.548). Conley Wouters, in his article "What Am I, a Machine?", takes it for granted that Wallace's depictions of humans effectively working as machines in the IRS constitutes a lack of selfhood. Therefore, the "larger significance of the human/machine dichotomy" that Wouters rightly acknowledges, he takes to mean humans becoming machines and corrupting their humanity, rather than, as I believe is clear when viewing the IRS as a technology of the self, machines *replacing* humans and their capacity for selfhood. While I agree with Wouters that "*The Pale King* [is] a kind of technological prequel to *Infinite Jest*, one that suggests that with the right political philosophical tools, we might still be able to retain a traditional, liberal-humanist selfhood in the face of informational avalanches",[27] I do not agree that the "rote tasks and machine-like existence that many of the characters begin to take on are an instance of the

[26] Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", p.45.
[27] Wouters, "What Am I, a Machine?", p.449; I agree, at least, up to the point at which the processors are introduced and render the ability to retain selfhood impossible.

agents giving themselves to such self-ish existences".[28] (Wouters's use of "self-ish", incidentally, comes from his insightful reading of the elevator debate, in which he contends that Glendenning's emphasis on Americans's "selfishness" is in fact a pun: they are both "selfish", in the most common sense, and "self-ish", in an ontological sense.) In regards to the overabundance of information dealt with by the Service, Wouters maintains that in *The Pale King* "the capacity to ethically engage in situations is what might barely rescue humans from mechanization".[29] What I believe Wouters misreads is that engaging with that information *in the first place* is itself an ethical engagement. Despite the belief of some workers, like Lane Dean, who view the data they process as "almost unbelievably meaningless" (p.383) - an assessment that Wouters accepts at face-value - Wallace instead presents the tedium of the office as intimately tied up in a value system of civic and personal responsibility. The meaning of each form, each column, each discreet piece of tax data on the page vastly extends beyond the immediate mundane referent to which it refers, and this meaning is present whether acknowledged or not. Wallace encourages us to see beyond the boredom and into the system of interconnected lives of which the bureaucracy of the IRS is a symbol. These connections are there, like constellations waiting to be drawn. What looks unbelievably meaningless at first glance reveals a meaning that is at once expansive and profound.

Despite their importance, there is a significant strand of the IRS that would actively abdicate responsibility to the preservation and promotion of these meaningful connections by introducing the data processors. As with television, Wallace is sure to insist that this is done willingly. The machines do not descend maliciously on an unsuspecting populace; they are invited in. As a result, technology is presented as both the cause of, and the manifestation of, ontological damage in the contemporary United States. To render human IRS examiners redundant is to dismantle the central technology of the self in modern America, but the act also speaks to the ontological malnourishment that informs the choice to do so in the first place. The very act of gearing the Service toward strict maximisation of tax revenue at the expense of the

---

[28] Wouters, "What Am I, a Machine?", p.452.
[29] Wouters, "What Am I, a Machine?", p.452.

morality of the tax code enunciates little fidelity to the kind of outward-facing, mutually-responsible community that forms the basis of Wallace's existential conception of the self. The technology through which this neoliberal moment is spoken only works to exacerbate the problem. Against some of those in the Service, Wallace's main thrust in *The Pale King* is to emphasise the necessity of our obligation to the government, it being indicative of the largest and most extensive community, above AA, above the Enfield Academy, around which everyday lives are structured. Yet while the rewards of such engagement - namely, Wallace's certainty in the profound meaning it bestows on each life - have been long-established in Wallace Studies, the problematic costs have heretofore been under-examined. What do we truly give up, once life and selfhood is framed around the Service?

### 4.5. The Cost of the Self: Auditing Wallace's Existentialism

It seems clear that the data processors, by making the "Examiners' jobs otiose" (*PK*, p.546), thus bar the way for those who embark upon the existential self-becoming that those jobs allow. But with such a strong emphasis on civic responsibility, there are problematic implications of the conditions in which Wallace suggests that process of self-becoming can be undertaken. If the office-head Glendenning is to be accepted, as Boswell suggests, as "overall, a positive figure [...] whose views Wallace appears to advocate",[30] one must examine closer the suggestion within the novel of selfhood existing largely, if not wholly, in relation to the state. On a continuum - that structural metaphor so often deployed by Wallace[31] - between anarchism and a kind of Hobbesian authoritarianism, the civic ethos of *The Pale King* lies distinctly closer to the Leviathan. Glendenning bemoans the trajectory of US politics and culture since the Vietnam war and the protests of "a whole generation [... who] said that their individual moral beliefs about the war outweighed their duty to go fight if their duly elected representatives told them to"

[30] Boswell, "Civic Responsibility", p.216.
[31] Lipsky notes this tendency in Wallace: "continuum" is "[o]ne of his words". See Lipsky, *Although Of Course*, p.131.

(p.134). The fact that Glendenning, and, by proxy, Wallace himself, sees this "ultimate-duty-is-to-self element" as "what's going to bring us down as a country" and heralding the "end of the democratic experiment" (p.134), suggests a strong advocacy for obedience to, rather than critique of, government rule. Looking closer at the politics of *The Pale King*, we can begin to see the truth of what Hal says in *Infinite Jest*: "I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror" (p.12).

Wallace, like Hobbes, seems to accept that the inherent state of human nature is chaotic. Yet rather than a "war of every man against every man", as Hobbes has it,[32] Wallace seems to suggest more a war of every man against his self. His work continually evinces a belief that without the presence of strong limits in place, human beings exist in a self-destructive state with the potential only for ruin, ludic and enjoyable though that destruction may be in the beginning. In the McCaffrey interview, he likens the postmodern era to an out-of-control house-party:

> You get all your friends over and throw this wild disgusting fabulous party. For a while it's great, free and freeing, parental authority gone and overthrown, a cat's-away-let's-play Dionysian revel. But then time passes, and the party gets louder and louder, and you run out of drugs, and nobody's got any money for more drugs, and things get broken and spilled, and there's a cigarette burn on the couch, and you're the host and it's your house too, and you gradually start wishing your parents would come back and restore some fucking order in your house.[33]

Wallace's language, incidentally, mirrors that of Gilles Deleuze in his essay "Bartleby; or, The Formula", published the same year as the influential McCaffrey interview and "E Unibus Pluram". Despite the use of the same parental metaphor, Deleuze draws entirely contrary conclusions. "The dangers of a 'society without fathers' have often been pointed out", he writes, "but the only real danger is the return of the father"; for Deleuze, the deconstructive force of Bartleby's formula was threatened by "the restoration of the nation-state - and the monstrous fathers com[ing] galloping back in".[34] In contemporary, postmodern America, Wallace sees Bartlebys everywhere, preferring not to do anything at all. In such a situation, the formula itself

---

[32] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiatical and Civill* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.150.
[33] McCaffrey, "Expanded Interview", p.52.
[34] Gilles Deleuze, "Bartleby; or, The Formula", *Essays: Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.88.

loses its efficacy and meaning. For him, it is clear - especially from *The Pale King* and from his other politically engaged work - that he wishes to restore and strengthen a dedication to civic-mindedness *in the service* of the nation-state and the structures of power that Bartleby's formula holds the potential to otherwise dismantle.

Such an implication is particularly troubling if we are to accept Drinion, in a novel so concerned with modern instantiations of heroism, as *The Pale King*'s "hero". Certainly, this appears to be Wallace's intention: by the criteria of the novel's definition of heroism - a capacity to withstand crushing boredom and an almost complete lack of self-awareness - Drinion is quite clearly the most heroic. The nickname bestowed on him by his colleagues, "Mr. X", mocks his near-total lack of personality and individuality, but it is indeed, as Ralph Clare notes, "ironic; for although he appears unexciting to others, he holds the elusive X factor in terms of paying attention and being interested in the world".[35] The results of this are, we discover in Wallace's notes, something approaching a state of enlightenment. His "[a]bility to pay attention" means that, where so many other characters struggle with their roles and responsibilities, "Drinion is *happy*" (p.548; emphasis in original). But, as Hayes-Brady notes, "[t]he heroism of Drinion's ability to focus is that he allows his subjectivity to be displaced by the agency of another subject".[36] In the context of the IRS as a fundamentally moral institution, this dedication is admirable. But, as is clear from the novel, the possibility of that morality being subverted is constantly present, so that Drinion faces the prospect of his subjectivity being displaced by immoral actors for immoral means. It is at this point that giving one's self over entirely to an institution is dangerous, and the extent to which Wallace advocates dedication in this circumstance is unclear. Should the individual wage an unjust war like Vietnam because those in charge command it? Returning to Wallace's contention in *This Is Water* that "[n]one of this is about morality" (*TW*, p.128), it appears that the responsibility of working toward a self noticeably supersedes the morality of that self. Certainly, if we are to take Wallace's IRS as a

---

[35] Ralph Clare, "The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in *The Pale King*" in *The Long Thing*, p.204.

[36] Hayes-Brady, "Palely Loitering", p.153.

quasi-religious body and Drinion as a devout acolyte, then his heroism takes the form of pure subservience, as Foucault makes clear is inherent of monastic life: "There is no element in the life of the monk which may escape from this fundamental and permanent relation of total obedience to the master [...] Here obedience is complete control of behavior by the master."[37]

Less explicit than the religious comparisons in the text, but nevertheless present as an undercurrent, is the framing of ideal civic life as military life. Wallace's reference to James's "The Moral Equivalent of War" during the Jesuit's exhortation brings this into consideration. If we are to take Fogle's conversion as the moral centre of the novel - and certainly, the case for viewing the monologue as the centrepiece is strong - then James's suggestion that "[w]e should be *owned*, as soldiers are by the army, and our pride would rise accordingly", is problematically reflected in Wallace.[38] The implication that we, as citizens, should view our responsibilities to the state as those of a soldier to the army is troubling not least because, in essence, military life is structured as more or less an authoritarian regime. It is an organisation of life that brooks no dissent and, indeed, allows for no space dedicated to critical thinking on the value of the structure itself. When introduced as a guiding principle for the IRS, Drinion's dedication and immersion - a dedication and immersion that are, I think rightly, taken by critics as laudable in the ethical world of the novel - can be seen as simply the internalisation of an authoritarian principle. After the Dionysian house-party, as Wallace said, the "parents in fact aren't ever coming back - which means *we're* going to have to be the parents".[39] There is a recognition throughout Wallace's work that the former limits and, more importantly, the structures that imposed those limits are gone. We, as citizens, must now impose those limits ourselves. The danger is what type of society we are imposing internally. To valorise a version of the IRS in which one can attain selfhood, but only in the context of a strict religious or military organisation, does not square easily with achieving that same level of selfhood in a life outside these essentially undemocratic institutions.

---

[37] Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", pp.44-45.
[38] William James, "The Moral Equivalent of War" in *The Moral Equivalent of War and Other Essays*, ed. John K. Roth (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), p.14.
[39] McCaffrey, "Expanded Interview", p.52; emphasis in original.

There is a tendency in Wallace Studies to acknowledge in *The Pale King* the clear redemptive quality of attention and social engagement, while stopping short of critically examining what kind of society Wallace envisages as the outcome of that engagement. Ralph Clare is certainly right to say that at the heart of the novel is an argument "that American citizens must pay [attention] toward civic duty and maintaining their freedoms", but the slippery nature of what those "freedoms" mean in practice is not as clearly defined.[40] In the IRS, Drinion is "free" to struggle toward selfhood as he would not have been in the unstructured existence of postmodern America, but this freedom must be set against the "freedoms-from" that constitute the contemporary American understanding of the term. Although Clare claims that "cynically withdrawing from the world is a choice to cede one's opportunity and *freedom to change that world*",[41] I believe he misconstrues the direction of change. Far from changing the world, Wallace's focus is consistent in its emphasis on *inner* change - rather pessimistically, this is the only arena of life that Wallace seems sure people have the ability to change in any meaningful way. Our engagement with the world facilitates a restructuring of the self, rather than of the outside structures that govern it. We may once again consider the "hero" Drinion, whose attentiveness and engagement Wallace at no stage suggests constitute an ability to change the world around him, merely his own relationship to it. He is, in many ways, the "hero of *non*-action" that Hal predicts succeeding postmodern heroes: "the catatonic hero, the one beyond calm, divorced from all stimulus" (*IJ*, p.142; emphasis in original). To return to Wallace's much-quoted advice from *This Is Water*, the "only choice we get is *what* to worship" (p.101) - it would seem we do not, in Wallace's understanding, get to change the nature of what it is we are worshipping. By equating Wallace's exhortation for social engagement with an ability for social change, Clare misrepresents the role of the individual in that society. We are, like Drinion, in service of something larger than ourselves. From Wallace's critique of postmodernism alone, it is clear he wishes to move beyond the subversion of the social structure and enact its reconfiguration and reinforcement.

---

[40] Clare, "Politics of Boredom", p.204.
[41] Clare, "Politics of Boredom", p.204; emphasis added.

By the time he started work on *The Pale King*, Wallace had, as discussed previously, already hinted at the dangerous implications of aligning selfhood so closely with citizenship. This is done, in particular, through the character of Schtitt in *Infinite Jest*, a caricature of German authoritarianism notorious to the pupils at Enfield for his penchant for leather dress and an "unfortunate incident involving a riding crop" (p.79). The coach is described as approaching the sport "under the rather Kanto-Hegelian idea that jr. athletics was basically just training for citizenship, that jr. athletics was about learning to sacrifice the hot narrow imperatives of the Self - the needs, the desires, the fears, the multiform cravings of the individual appetitive will - to the larger imperatives of a team (OK, the State) and a set of delimiting rules (OK, the Law)" (*IJ*, pp.82-3). It is perhaps not too simplistic to say that, for Wallace and, subsequently, for Wallace Studies as a whole, the "whiff of proto-fascist potential" in this perspective dissipates when not voiced in his work by a German accent (*IJ*, p.82). Both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*'s ethical thrust certainly seem to argue just as Schtitt does, for submission to "[a]ny something. The *what*: this is more unimportant than that there is *something*" (p.83; emphasis in original). If this is a tendency yet to be fully drawn out in Wallace Studies, it is one that Wallace appears to have seen in himself, penning in the margin of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift* a note on, as Lucas Thompson has discovered, the "bit of the old Fascist in DFW".[42] But where the directives to submit one's will to a dominant power are qualified in *Infinite Jest* with the ludicrous caricature of Schtitt, there is not a similar recognition of the possible paths this submission may take in *The Pale King*. But, as ever, one cannot be sure if such a qualification would have appeared in the novel if finished.

This is not to say, of course, that in *The Pale King* as it exists today Wallace gives a wholehearted endorsement of the IRS as an entirely moral institution and a perfect model of virtuous living. As ever, the author reels at the thought of straightforward didacticism. Even in his Kenyon College commencement address, whose very format encourages the offering of sage

---

[42] David Foster Wallace's handwritten note in Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*, p.228, housed in the Harry Ransom Center, quoted in Lucas Thompson, "David Foster Wallace's Germany", *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol.56. No.1 (2019), p.22.

counsel, “Wallace cringes at the possibility that his audience might think he's dispensing wisdom”.[43] “Again”, Wallace announces at his most moralizing, “please don't think that I'm giving you moral advice” (*TW*, p.88). There are numerous instances in *The Pale King* when Wallace seeks to subvert the (quite literal) sermonizing of some sections of the novel. Fogle's lengthy conversion monologue is later dubbed by the "author" David Wallace as “logorrheic” and “self-indulgen[t]” (p.261), and it is suggested from the notes that this same author “favours upgrading IRS computer systems” and replacing human examiners (p.546), undermining the supposed moral concerns of the flesh-and-blood Wallace. Glendenning, whose belief in the moral work of the Service guides the IRS's Old Guard and reflects Wallace's own concerns, is described as “ineffectual - lost in a mist of civic idealism” (p.543). One can see this undermining of the supposed ethical stance of the novel as an extension of the Platonic dialogue of those trapped in the elevator: Wallace's work, particularly his novels, strives for the dialogic mode. To slip too far into a monologic, single-minded advocacy of an idea is to slip too far into the vein of the passive entertainment Wallace abhors, in which the audience is fed narratives without being prompted to consider the content of what they are being fed. Wallace's reader, in contrast, is asked to take part in the dialogue and critically examine all points offered. With that said, from the concerns that occupied Wallace throughout his career, the moral sympathies of *The Pale King* clearly lie closer to Glendenning's idealism and the Jesuit's view of the institution as redemptive and heroic. We are merely invited to examine the responsibilities, assess the benefits and cost, and then, as Wallace writes at the end of “E Unibus Pluram”, “we all get to draw our own conclusions” (*SFT*, p.82).

[43] Santel, “Wallace's Conservatism”, p.628.

**Conclusion: Illusions *Ad Inf***

In 1863, a letter appeared in *The Press*, the daily newspaper of Christchurch, New Zealand, arguing that "the time will come when [...] machines will hold the real supremacy over the world and its inhabitants".[1] Published anonymously by the English writer Samuel Butler and given the title "Darwin Among the Machines", the letter considers what will be the likely outcome of the rapid mechanical evolution its author saw taking place at the time. As the technology with which we surround ourselves becomes faster, more powerful, less cumbersome, and more intimately integrated with every aspect of our lives, we will reach the point at which, Butler contends, "man will have become to the machine what the horse and the dog are to man".[2] In the novels of David Foster Wallace, this relationship has already asserted itself, although in less explicit terms. It is less explicit because, as he presents it, technology has no need to exert forcefully the control it has over our lives. There is no need for the leash or the reins. Considering the dichotomy Neil Postman outlined between the dystopian visions of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, Wallace's outlook is indisputably Huxleyan:

> Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture [...] In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.[3]

For Wallace, Americans were on the cusp of becoming the "patient slaves" to technology of which Butler warned for the simple reason that the technology they had invented offered them an unending stream of the easy and disposable pleasures that their culture had taught them to

---

[1] Samuel Butler, "Darwin Among the Machines - [To The Editor of *The Press*, Christchurch, New Zealand, 13 June, 1863.]" in *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement, With Other Early Essays*, ed. R. A. Streatfield (London: A. C. Fifield, 1914), p.185.
[2] Butler, "Darwin Among the Machines", p.183.
[3] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, pp.xix-xx.

love.[4] Initially in Wallace's career, television was the soma readily available in a society for which personal enjoyment and easy distraction were the apogee of human development and the *telos* of the American Dream. In *Infinite Jest*, wasting away alone in front of the Entertainment is suggested as the natural end of this sacralisation of selfish pleasure. In *The Pale King*, the mechanisation of the IRS poses a subtler, but more devastating threat. The processors do not offer the immediate pleasure of "Infinite Jest", but instead remove those aspects of life that are seen as unpleasurable. By allowing Americans to ignore what is difficult, what is tedious and what is, Wallace strongly argues, meaningful, the unhealthy gratification offered by entertainment technology becomes the singular path Americans can follow. Wallace's career, in effect, worked backwards, in that what ends in "Infinite Jest" starts with the data processors of *The Pale King*. The earlier point is the more significant for Wallace. It is then that America decided that the work of crafting a self, based on an interconnected community of selves, was not worth preserving.

Samuel Butler, foreseeing this kind of meaningless, unfulfilling servitude to machines, concluded "that war to the death should be instantly proclaimed against them. Every machine of every sort should be destroyed by the well-wisher of his species".[5] In many ways, one could be forgiven for taking Wallace as this kind of Luddite. While not as extreme as Butler's tongue-in-cheek proposition, Wallace's personal response to what he saw as the dangers posed by technology was simply to turn his back: "To be perfectly honest with you", he conceded to an interviewer in 2000, "I haven't owned a television now for probably ten years".[6] Had he not had such an aversion to didacticism, he may have advocated that those around him do the same; not expressed in so many words, this is nevertheless the implied solution throughout his work. In some ways surprisingly, in some ways not at all, his abstinence from the defining technology of his age covers the period during which he published both "E Unibus Pluram" and *Infinite Jest*, those works most deeply imbedded in the questions of television culture. But it was not just TV

[4] Butler, "Darwin Among the Machines", p.183.
[5] Butler, "Darwin Among the Machines", p.185.
[6] Eduardo Lago, "A Brand New Interview with David Foster Wallace", *Electric Lit*, Nov. 16, 2018 <https://electricliterature.com/a-brand-new-interview-with-david-foster-wallace/> June 20, 2019.

that drew Wallace's ire. When some reviewers of his masterwork took the abundant endnoting and the inevitable back-and-forth it added to the reading experience as a literary representation of surfing the web, he baulked. On first conceiving of the technique, he had written to Michael Pietsch, "pray[ing] this is nothing like hypertext".[7] In fact, as he was happy to tell interviewers at the time, he wouldn't even know, "he had never been online".[8] And when he finally took his first forays into cyberspace, he did so sparingly, writing to one of his students that he could "allow [him]self to Webulize only once a week".[9] An (as yet) unpublished and forever unfinished short story housed in the Wallace archive - the only one extant that takes internet culture as its main theme - reveals his sense of the nascent technology: it is, for him, "the bathroom wall of the U.S. psyche".[10]

But if Wallace is a Luddite then he is a Luddite in the truest sense, not suspicious of technology for its own sake, but suspicious of technology as it threatens our livelihood, inviting us on a race to the bottom. Our engagement with technology is never amoral in Wallace's fictional worlds. It always speaks to our state of mind, as a barometer of our psychological well-being. New technology develops, and our willingness to throw ourselves at the mercy of its pleasures and install it in place of those around us is, in Wallace's mind, the greatest indictment on the state of our contemporary world and our relationship to it.

This comes, ultimately, from Wallace's belief in a sovereign human subject and a selfhood that is formed in the space between that subject and others. Our relationship with technology mediates and, therefore, in Wallace's view, corrupts that subjectivity. In many ways, he, like Butler, advocates that we "at once go back to the primeval condition of the race", in which life does not undergo such strong technological manipulations.[11] In the case of television, the people with which we surround ourselves are "ultimately [...] not even people: it's EM-

---

[7] Max, "The Unfinished".
[8] D. T. Max, "In the D.F.W. Archives: An Unfinished Story About the Internet", *The New Yorker*, Oct. 11, 2012 <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/in-the-d-f-w-archives-an-unfinished-story-about-the-internet> May 12, 2019.
[9] Max, *Every Love Story*, p.286.
[10] David Foster Wallace, "Wickedness", quoted in Max, "An Unfinished Story About the Internet".
[11] Butler, "Darwin Among the Machines", p.185.

propelled analog waves and ion streams and rear-screen chemical reactions throwing off phosphenes in grids of dots" (*SFT*, p.24). As for the internet, it seemed to Wallace an inherently unreal, disconnected plane of existence. In a 1996 online question-and-answer session hosted in promotion of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace was generally flippant and dismissive of the whole internet experience. Asked by one user where he is writing from, his answer is characteristically wry: "I'm not sure where I am. How does one denote locations in cyberland or whatever this is?".[12] With the session drawing to a close, again he jokes: "How do I get out of here? Will I retain corporeal form? [...] Or will I be one of thosse [sic] smooth shiny metallic crash-dummyish things you see in popular depictions of people in cyberlaand [sic]?".[13] If anything, Wallace viewed this new technology as a distraction from, rather than a platform of, human expression and connectivity. One can assume that the anarchic and cacophonous nature of that particular online experience, which seems like a less-disciplined ancestor of Reddit's "Ask Me Anything" forum, did nothing to persuade Wallace of the internet's suitability for genuine and meaningful connection with another human. Nevertheless, the author could not ignore the fact of such technology's existence. While posthumanist critics of Wallace are right to argue that he portrays life at the turn of the millennium as cut through by exactly these types of endlessly recursive technological and informational networks, it remains the task of each individual human being to navigate these networks in order to approach something like a meaningful self in an increasingly inhospitable world.

Today, one does not have to look far to find those that share in Wallace's pessimism. A general recognition that it is harder for humans to be humane in our internet culture has entered into the mainstream. Especially after the apparent ease with which social media drew forth the wave of far-right populism on which, among other political events, the Trump campaign captured the presidency, there has been renewed focus in American popular discourse on all the ways, to use Joel Stein's words, the internet "strip[s] away the mores society

[12] "Live Online with David Foster Wallace".
[13] "Live Online with David Foster Wallace".

spent millennia building".[14] We appear to be suffering a collective internet hangover, after the initial exciting sugar-high at the technology's apparent democratising potential. Just this year, 30 years on from his first proposal for an information management system based on hypertext at CERN, Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, addressed the "[u]nintended negative consequences of benevolent design', recognising the internet's role in 'the outraged and polarised tone and quality of online discourse".[15] Certainly, the level of interaction found in many spaces dedicated to public colloquy across the internet at times appears little different from what one can find scrawled on the "bathroom wall" Wallace imagined it to be. Although Berners-Lee is ever optimistic for "a more mature, responsible and inclusive future", his comparison of the current need for a "Contract for the Web" to the post-war need for the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" reveals an understanding of the psychic damage that seems to have been self-inflicted through our ever-closer integration with the internet.[16] Unlike in 1948, the guns are still blaring and show little signs of ceasing. The prospect of a moment of revelation that unifies and sanitises the whole structure of internet discourse still seems a distant hope.

At the same time, even within Wallace Studies the existence of sites like *The Howling Fantods* and *Infinite Summer* dedicated to the communal reading and study of the author's work attest to the positive democratising and connective potential of the internet, of which Wallace himself was so sceptical. It should be stressed that serious study and discussion of Wallace's work did not begin in the pages of journals, but on the online forums set up by his passionate readers. Indeed, these non-academic projects established by admirers of Wallace's writing lay much of the interpretive groundwork on which the current field of Wallace Studies is based, and continue to form and direct the course of debate. The questions posed, readings offered, and influences traced by users of these forums from within and without the academic institution are,

---

[14] Joel Stein, "How Trolls Are Ruining the Internet", *Time*, Aug. 18, 2016 <https://time.com/4457110/internet-trolls/> May 28, 2019.
[15] Sir Tim Berners-Lee, "30 Years On, What's Next #ForTheWeb?", *World Wide Web Foundation*, Mar. 12, 2019 <https://webfoundation.org/2019/03/web-birthday-30/> May 27, 2019.
[16] Berners-Lee, "What's Next #ForTheWeb?".

as Kelly attests, "still the key online resource for Wallace fans and scholars"[17] (which is to say, given our internet culture, the key resource, full stop). It may be one of the arch ironies for the legacy of a writer so concerned with ridding ourselves of technological mediators that his enduring popularity and cultural importance for casual readers and dedicated scholars alike is fuelled by the very technology whose promise he regarded as, at best, a bromide and, at worst, a contributor to the ills of society. In his mind, these images could not replace genuine connection. Where one made the attempt, it amounted to shirking the responsibility of crafting a self through that genuine connection.

In truth, Wallace's understanding of our relationship to technology has not aged well. However viable it was to follow his advice and disconnect from all the electronic mediators at the end of the 20th and dawn of the 21st centuries, the possibility to do so in our own time seems remarkably fainter. Now that *Infinite Jest* closes in on its 25th anniversary, Mary Holland rightly highlights the recent assessments of the novel in Wallace Studies as "less a contemporary or futuristic American novel and more a historical one".[18] Wallace's treatment of technology in *Infinite Jest* (set in 2009, the furthest in the future of any of his major works) is already long-outdated and even, as Holland writes, "quaint":

> The book's central, horrifying image of individuals glued to their chairs in dark rooms, TV images flickering on their faces, alone and dying in their own excrement, becomes strange, even comical, for readers who are likely to have spent more time in conversation with others on headsets while playing massively multiplayer online games, or running around town in phone-wielding pursuit of Pokemon, than they do sitting alone and silent in front of a TV.[19]

Reality today is far more integrated with the virtual than Wallace ever imagined in his writing. For the majority of Americans, the experience of life is technologically hybrid in ever-increasing ways: one can move on- and off-line seamlessly hundreds of times a day, flicking between the material and the virtual without ceremony or even much thought. No longer is it a simple case of turning off the TV and getting up from the chair. For many, the TV stays in their pocket - a TV

[17] Kelly, "The Birth of a Discipline", p.48.
[18] Holland, "Infinite Jest", p.133.
[19] Holland, "Infinite Jest", p.134.

that is also a computer, a games console, a camera, a library, a radio, a music player, a supermarket, a newspaper, a notepad, and (perhaps least of all) a telephone. Most importantly, this technology is not just distraction, as television was for Wallace. We increasingly live *through* digital technology in ways that were only just beginning to show themselves in the author's lifetime. To suggest in the America of 2019 of going through daily life without a smartphone and a decent internet connection would be like suggesting one live without an oven; the thought is, to many, as ridiculous as that of hungry bellies rubbing sticks together in the garden, praying for a flash of flame. While communication through e-mail in 1996 was still relatively rare, in 2019 an entire branch of the internet is now dedicated to social media platforms that ostensibly facilitate human relationships and communication. Of course, the way in which social media has warped how we communicate with those around us would provide an excellent case study for how technology not only affords new avenues for human expression, but fundamentally alters what we choose to express. One can only imagine the horror with which Wallace would have reacted to the Potemkin selves projected onto Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram - platforms on which it is far too easy to fall into solipsistic narcissism. One thinks of Hal Incandenza, with his anhedonic ability to manipulate emotions and convince others, but not himself, that he is actually a human being. Most damningly, these platforms offer the opportunity to manufacture a self in the pretence of a community without any of the struggle Wallace maintains is at the heart of the existential, meaningful self. The task of crafting a self is meant to be a difficult, concerted effort, not the work of a few taps on the screen.

In the context of Wallace Studies, given that this task is the sole responsibility of each individual, Wallace's work evinces a still under-examined "small-c conservatism", testified by the way in which he is, as James Santel rightly argues, "unequivocal in [his] assignment of ultimate responsibility to individual agency".[20] Such an understanding of Wallace runs counter to what Elaine Blair calls the "streak of small-c communism" that appears to lie behind the

[20] Santel, "Wallace's Conservatism", p.627.

author's ethical concerns and still constitutes the popular cultural image of Wallace,[21] mainly thanks to "what is probably [his] most widely-read piece of writing", *This Is Water*.[22] Although never considered for publication by Wallace, or even typed up after it was delivered, the decision to (somewhat cynically) publish this twenty-minute speech in its own volume a year after his suicide, in which each sentence is given its own page so as to imbue them with a sense of aphoristic wisdom, has been met, it is safe to say, with much eye-rolling from those studying Wallace's work. Zadie Smith has bemoaned the fact of the speech being "repackaged as a *Chicken Soup for the Soul*-style toilet book".[23] "Hard to think of a less appropriate portrait of this writer", she says, "than as a dispenser of convenient pearls of wisdom, placed in your palm, so that you needn't go through any struggle yourself".[24] The complexity of Wallace's work invites the reader through the struggle that ended at what he saw as actual living. For this reason does he disavow the didactic. There are no easy answers offered here. What is the material result of this struggle, in light of the IRS in *The Pale King* as Wallace's exemplar technology of the self, also requires further study to draw out its political implications. Mechanisation may threaten our fight toward selfhood, but to what kind of institutions did Wallace imagine we had to give ourselves in the first place? Under what conditions and principles could Wallace's idea of the self exist and flourish? Of course, so out of step with this era of hyper-partisan American politics, Wallace was sceptical about the usefulness and signification of such labels as "conservative", anyway. They are ultimately malleable things. As the Republican idealist Glendenning says in *The Pale King*: "There are all kinds of conservatives depending on what it is they want to conserve" (p.134).

What Wallace himself sought to conserve was an idea of human existence that was, for him, real. In his mind, the technological advancements disrupting the American landscape during his lifetime obscured the real and threatened the essence of "what it is to be a fucking

---

[21] Elaine Blair, "A New Brilliant Start", *The New York Review of Books*, Dec. 6, 2012 <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/12/06/new-brilliant-start/> June 2, 2019.
[22] Santel, "Wallace's Conservatism", p.627.
[23] Smith, *Changing My Mind*, p.267.
[24] Smith, *Changing My Mind*, p.267.

*human being*".[25] As he wrote in "E Unibus Pluram", the technologies dominating the lives of contemporary Americans were the disseminators of little more than "illusions ad inf" (*SFT*, p.24). That Americans were so enamoured of these illusions posed, for Wallace, the threat of existential death, so he made it his literary mission to pull his readers back to reality. "Try to stay awake", he wrote as the final words of his essay on political engagement (*CL*, p.234). But it is important that we do not take for granted what Wallace meant by "waking". For him, it was to inhabit a subjectivity unmediated by the technology of his time, in profound connection between one person and another, with the electronic white-noise that dominated (and increasingly dominates) contemporary existence stripped away. In "waking", for Wallace, there was the ardent belief in the way back to a simpler, purer form of the self.

[25] McCaffrey, "Expanded Interview", p.26; emphasis in original.

## Bibliography

### By Wallace

Wallace, David Foster, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001).

——————————, *The Broom of the System* (London: Abacus, 1997).

——————————, *Consider the Lobster, and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005).

——————————, "Draft 4: Typed, with Wallace's Edits", *The Harry Ransom Center* <https://hrc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15878coll20/id/37/rec/4> June 10, 2019.

——————————, *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1997).

——————————, *The Pale King* (London: Penguin, 2012).

——————————, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (London: Abacus, 1998).

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

### Secondary Sources

Adorno, Theodor, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Berstein (London: Routledge, 2001).

Barthes, Roland, *The Rustle of Language*, Richard Howard, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

Been, Eric, "David Foster Wallace: Genius, Fabulist, Would-Be Murderer: A Conversation with Wallace Biographer D. T. Max", *The Atlantic*, Sept. 6, 2012 <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/09/david-foster-wallace-genius-fabulist-would-be-murderer/261997/> Aug. 2, 2019.

Belsey, Catherine, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (New York: Routledge, 1985).

Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 2007), pp.217-252.

Berlin, Isaiah, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.118-172.

Berners-Lee, Sir Tim, "30 Years On, What's Next #ForTheWeb?", *World Wide Web Foundation*, Mar. 12, 2019 <https://webfoundation.org/2019/03/web-birthday-30/> May 27, 2019.

Blair, Elaine, "A New Brilliant Start", *The New York Review of Books*, Dec. 6, 2012 <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/12/06/new-brilliant-start/> June 2, 2019.

Boswell, Marshall, "Preface: David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"" in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the* Novels, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.vi-xii.

————————, "Slacker Redemption: Wallace and Generation X" in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp.19-32.

————————, "Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in *The Pale King*" in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the* Novels, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.209-228.

————————, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

Böttger, Miriam, "Interview with David Foster Wallace", *Zweites Deutsche Fernsehen*, 2003 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGLzWdT7vGc> Jan. 6, 2019.

Bucher, Matt, "Footnotes: New Directions in David Foster Wallace Studies", *Las Obras de Roberto Bolaño*, Mar. 26, 2009 <http://www.bolanobolano.com/2009/03/26/footnotes-cfp/> Jan. 15, 2019.

Burn, Stephen J., ""A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness": *The Pale King*" in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the* Novels, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.149-168.

Butler, Samuel, "Darwin Among the Machines - [To The Editor of *The Press*, Christchurch, New Zealand, 13 June, 1863.]" in *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement, With Other Early Essays*, ed. R. A. Streatfield (London: A. C. Fifield, 1914), pp.179-185.

Cahn, Steven M. & Eckert, Maureen, eds., *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

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

"Cobain Factor: Why David Foster Wallace Killed Himself", *FORA.tv*, Oct. 15, 2012 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpCoY-mCGZs> Aug. 10, 2019.

Clare, Ralph, "Introduction: An Exquisite Corpus: Assembling a Wallace without Organs" in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster* Wallace, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp.1-18.

————————, "The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in *The Pale King*" in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the* Novels, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.187-208.

de Tocqueville, Alexis, *Democracy in America, Vol. 2*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: J. & H. G. Langley, 1840).

Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Fredy Perlman (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983).

Deleuze, Gilles, "Bartleby; or, The Formula" in *Essays: Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp.68-90.

den Dulk, Allard, "Beyond Endless "Aesthetic" Irony: A Comparison of the Irony Critique of Søren Kierkegaard and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", *Studies in the Novel*, Vol.44, No.3 (Fall, 2012), pp.325-345.

———————— , "Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self" in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the* Novels, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.43-60.

———, "Good Faith and Sincerity: Sartrean Virtues of Self-Becoming in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" in *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, eds. Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.199-220.

Dorson, James, "The Neoliberal Machine in the Bureaucratic Garden: Pastoral States of Mind in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*" in *Rereading the Machine in the Garden: Nature and Technology in American Culture*, eds. Eric Erbacher, Nicole Maruo-Schröder, Florian Sedlmeier (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2014), pp.211-230.

Fitzpatrick, Kathleen, "The Legacy of David Foster Wallace", *Kathleen Fitzpatrick*, Dec. 30, 2009 <https://kfitz.info/the-legacy-of-david-foster-wallace/> June 3, 2019.

Foucault, Michel, "Technologies of the Self" in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock, 1988), pp.16-49.

Giles, Paul, "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace", *Twentieth-Century Literature*, Vol.53, No.3 (Fall, 2007), pp.327-344.

Goeke, Joseph F., ""Everyone Knows It's About Something Else, Way Down": Boredom, Nihilism, and the Search for Meaning in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol.57, No.3 (2017), pp.193-213.

Hayes-Brady, Clare, ""Palely Loitering": On Not Finishing (in) *The Pale King*" in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster* Wallace, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp.142-158.

———, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

Hayles, N. Katherine, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

———, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*", *New Literary History*, Vol.30, No.3 (Summer, 1999), pp.675-697.

Henry, Patrick Thomas, "*The Pale King* by David Foster Wallace and Michael Pietsch", *Modern Language Studies*, Vol.42, No.1 (Summer, 2012), pp.86-95.

Hering, David, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

Hoberek, Andrew, "The Novel After David Foster Wallace" in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, eds. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp.211-228.

Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiatical and Civill* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

Holland, Mary K., "Infinite Jest" in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp.127-141.

Horkheimer, Max, and Adorno, Theodor W., "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp.94-136.

Infinitedetox, "Lethal Entertainment in Infinite Jest and Monty Python", *Infinite Summer*, July 15, 2009 <http://infinitesummer.org/forums/viewtopic.php?f=12&t=307> Apr. 1, 2019.

James, William, *The Moral Equivalent of War and Other Essays*, ed. John K. Roth (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971).

Kafka, Franz, *The Trial*, trans. Idris Parry (London: Penguin, 1994).

Kaiser, Wilson, "David Foster Wallace and the Ethical Challenge of Posthumanism", *Mosaic*, Vol.47, No.1 (Spring, 2014), pp.53-68.

Kelly, Adam, "David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline", *IJAS Online*, No.2 (2010), pp.47-59.

——————, "David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas" in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the* Novels, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.3-22.

Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. & trans. Alastair Hannay, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

——————, *Kierkegaard's Writing, Volume 3: Either/Or*, *Part I*, eds. & trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

——————, *Kierkegaard's Writings, Volume 8: The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, eds. & trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

King James Bible, *Bible Gateway* <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+13&version=KJV> Jan. 28, 2019.

Lago, Eduardo, "A Brand New Interview with David Foster Wallace", *Electric Lit*, Nov. 16, 2018 <https://electricliterature.com/a-brand-new-interview-with-david-foster-wallace/> June 20, 2019.

Letzler, David, "Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction" in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the* Novels, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.127-148.

Lipsky, David, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway, 2010).

"Live Online with David Foster Wallace", *WORD e-zine*, May 17, 1996 <http://www.badgerinternet.com/~bobkat/jest11a.html> June 12, 2019.

Lopate, Leonard, "David Foster Wallace", *The Leonard Lopate Show*, *WNYC*, Mar. 4, 1996 <https://www.wnyc.org/story/56878-david-foster-wallace/> Apr. 22, 2019.

Lydon, Christopher, "A Lost 1996 Interview with David Foster Wallace", *Radio Open Source*, June 25, 2014 <http://radioopensource.org/david-foster-wallace-chris-lydon/#> Dec. 17, 2018.

Maniatas, Nick, Bucher, Matt, and Fitzpatrick, Kathleen, "How to Read *Infinite Jest*", *Infinite Summer*, June 17, 2009, <http://infinitesummer.org/archives/215> May 5, 2019.

Max, D. T., "D.F.W.: Tracing the Ghostly Origins of a Phrase", *The New Yorker*, Dec. 11, 2012 <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/d-f-w-tracing-the-ghostly-origins-of-a-phrase> May 20, 2019.

——————, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (London: Granta, 2012).

——————, "In the D.F.W. Archives: An Unfinished Story About the Internet", *The New Yorker*, Oct. 11, 2012 <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/in-the-d-f-w-archives-an-unfinished-story-about-the-internet> May 12, 2019.

——————,"The Unfinished", *The New Yorker*, Feb. 28, 2009 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/09/the-unfinished> Mar. 6, 2019.

——————, "Why David Foster Wallace Should Not Be Worshipped as a Secular Saint", *The Guardian*, Oct. 9, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/09/david-foster-wallace- worshipped-secular-saint> 22 July, 2019.

McCaffrey, Larry, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace" in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2012), pp.21-52.

Miller, Laura, "The *Salon* Interview: David Foster Wallace" in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2012), pp.58-65.

Monty Python, "The Funniest Joke in the World", *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9FzUI8998U> Apr. 1, 2019.

Paulson, Steve, "David Foster Wallace in the #MeToo Era: A Conversation with Clare Hayes-Brady", *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Sept. 10, 2018 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/david-foster-wallace-in-the-metoo-era-a-conversation-with-clare-hayes-brady/> Jan. 8, 2019.

Postman, Neil, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

———————, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

Raban, Jonathan, "Divine Drudgery", *The New York Review of Books*, May 11, 2011, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/05/12/divine-drudgery/> June 1, 2019.

Rose, Charlie, "Future of American Fiction", *Charlie Rose*, May 17, 1996 <https://charlierose.com/videos/15361> Feb. 14, 2019

Santel, James, "On David Foster Wallace's Conservatism", *The Hudson Review*, Vol.66, No.4 (Winter, 2014), pp.625-634.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992).

——————— , "Existentialism is a Humanism", trans. Philip Mairet, in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman (London: Penguin, 1975), pp.345-369.

Sayers, Philip, "Representing Entertainment in *Infinite Jest*" in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the* Novels, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.107-126.

Smith, Zadie, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009).

Stein, Joel, "How Trolls Are Ruining the Internet", *Time*, Aug. 18, 2016 <https://time.com/4457110/internet-trolls/> May 28, 2019.

Strinati, Dominic, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Swartzwelder, John, and Kushell, Bob, "Bart the Fink", *The Simpsons*, Season 7, Episode 15, Feb. 11, 1996.

Temple-West, Patrick, and Plume, Karl, "Threats Made to Figures at Center of IRS Controversy: Sources", *Reuters*, June 15, 2013 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-irs-threats/threats-made-to-figures-at-center-of-irs-controversy-sources-idUSBRE95E08520130615> July 8, 2019.

Thompson, Lucas, "David Foster Wallace's Germany", *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol.56. No.1 (2019), pp.1-30.

"The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous", *Alcoholics Anonymous Great Britain* <https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/About-AA/The-12-Steps-of-AA> July 28, 2019.

Varela, Francisco J., *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

Vonnegut, Kurt, *Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday* (New York: Dial Press, 2011).