A SEARCH FOR BELONGING:
DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S FICTIONAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

As a writer popularly known for his fervent self-interrogations and encyclopedic second novel *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace's most apparent significance in US literary history lies in his explicit response to his postmodern predecessors, such as John Barth and Thomas Pynchon. In his now infamous essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction," Wallace argued that postmodern authors had over-invested in the literary tools of irony and self-reference to such a degree that they became complicit in the erosion of the same communal principles that broadcast television attacks in its bid for increasing consumer dependency and profit. In search of a way beyond this complicity, Wallace called for a brand of "anti-rebels" who would discard irony for earnest principles and teach us how to resist the temptations of the United States' consumer culture.

This call was heard by literary critics. "E Unibus Pluram" is the center for arguments over Wallace's fiction, as critics discuss whether that essay expresses the literary project Wallace actually pursued and to what extent it should guide our reading practices. One problem this dissertation identifies in these discussions is an overemphasis on specific devices like irony that Wallace analyzes in "E Unibus Pluram." Though important for understanding his argument, this overemphasis comes at the expense of our seeing the deeper problem that Wallace identifies in "E Unibus Pluram," which is the atomization of US culture that is fueled by our addiction to pleasure-based commodities like television. The loss of focus on this central problem has led to confusion in readings of Wallace that fail to see the abiding concerns that he carried from his first work to his last. This dissertation seeks to remedy this problem by reading Wallace's mature fiction as a developing struggle against the atomization of US culture.

In this struggle, Wallace launched a series of increasingly complex narrative strategies for promoting a communal way of life to his readers. This dissertation reads several of these strategies to reveal two developments in Wallace's thought: his diagnosis of the problems facing US culture as created by an unmitigated individualism and his understanding of the best way to respond to individualism by emphasizing the great importance of social institutions. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that Wallace pictured fictional communities throughout his career as a means of critiquing the atomized space of the contemporary United States. He built these communities to help readers see that there are different ways to occupy the world than those promoted by consumer capitalism, but he also structured his narratives to teach readers how to see and think in the ways he thought necessary for realizing such alternatives.

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For Brittany and Corrina

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> It's entirely possible that my plangent noises about the impossibility of rebelling against an aura that promotes and vitiates all rebellion say more about my residency inside that aura, my own lack of vision, than they do about any exhaustion of US fiction's possibilities.
>
> -David Foster Wallace
> "E Unibus Pluram:
> Television and US Fiction"

Since his death in 2008, David Foster Wallace's work has inspired a flurry of publication. His unfinished novel *The Pale King* was released in 2011. A collection of essays entitled *Both Flesh and Not* came out in 2012. In 2014, Little, Brown published *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, a selection of texts that tries to package Wallace's work for easy canonization. Most recently, 2016 saw the release of *String Theory: David Foster Wallace on Tennis*, a collection of already-published essays that Wallace wrote about the sport.

Commentaries and remembrances of Wallace have also come from well-known writers who knew him or admired his work, from Jonathan Franzen, to Zadie Smith, to John Jeremiah Sullivan. Wallace's widow, the artist Karen Green, published a beautiful and poetic book about her struggle with his suicide titled *Bough Down* in 2013. And, two books marketed as biographies appeared around the time of *The Pale King*'s publication: D.T. Max's *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* and David Lipsky's *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, which is actually an interview Lipsky did with Wallace after *Infinite Jest*'s publication that never turned into an article. Somewhat incredibly, the conversation transcribed in this last book has been reimagined by James Ponsoldt into a movie titled *The End of the Tour*, which stars Jason Segel as Wallace.

Unsurprisingly, a still more profound outpouring has taken place in the world of academic publishing, as a constellation of works has gradually formed under the name "Wallace Studies." Early critical projects, both from 2003, include Stephen J. Burn's *Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* and Marshall Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. Greg Carlisle's *Elegant Complexity* appeared in 2007, which maps *Infinite Jest*'s structures and themes. Ten years on from Carlisle's book, the number of scholarly articles published about Wallace each year only seems to increase. These analyze all aspects of his writing: Wallace's philosophical interests, his literary influences, and his depictions of women, race, and disability. More recently, now that there has been time to examine *The Pale King* and its relationship to Wallace's later essays, critics have also come to explore more fully the spectrum of his political views and the influence that economic thought had on his writing. This critical energy has led to the publication of more whole volumes dedicated to Wallace's writing. Bloomsbury Press alone has released six texts dedicated to Wallace since 2014, including edited collections and single-author monographs.

The question about Wallace's work that has drawn the most sustained critical interest though is his relationship with American postmodernism, as there is now a tentative consensus that he represents a break with the lineage of writers that moves through Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Don DeLillo. The striking thing about this view, as well as the dissent from it, is that in Wallace's emergence as a major figure of American literature we can see a struggle to define a new tradition that expresses a different way of rationalizing our relationship to the world in fiction, one specifically that grows out of a dissatisfaction with the ironic method of critique that

characterizes postmodern literature. Wallace is an important figure in this discussion because he is a popular author and because he used his nonfiction to explicitly distance himself from his postmodern predecessors. Thus, Wallace is perhaps the most acclaimed representative of whatever may be taking shape as a post-postmodern literary movement.

The most popular term for this new group of writers so far has been "The New Sincerity," which name was partially inspired by one of Wallace's essays, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction," where he expresses dissatisfaction with the over-use of irony in postmodern works of the 1980s. As has been discussed in many places, Wallace felt that postmodernism's overreliance on cynicism and ironic self-reference had devolved into a trap in which authors ridiculed the capitalist culture of the United States in a way that actually abetted the target of its ridicule because postmodern artists indiscriminately corroded values and principles that stood in opposition to capitalist culture. Thus, the notion of sincerity appears in "E Unibus Pluram" as a way to oppose the absorption of serious fiction by capitalist culture, even though capitalist institutions like broadcast television had successfully absorbed irony: by writing sincerely about the urgent need for principles in US culture, and eschewing the cynicism that permeates popular culture, we might find a way out of what appeared to Wallace as an increasingly valueless space.

One of the problems with using the name The New Sincerity to describe Wallace's work though is that it focuses too heavily on his criticism of irony in "E Unibus Pluram." Part of this is the fault of Wallace's essay, as it is a long and difficult text that devotes tremendous energy to pinning irony down and describing it as a culprit. Nevertheless, it is important to see that Wallace's true target in "E Unibus Pluram" is

what he sees as a dangerous permeation of skepticism in the United States' intellectual life that tears at not only the hypocrisy of capitalist culture but also principles of human community. That is, for Wallace, what irony functions as is a device of skepticism that, in the 1950s and '60s, when postmodernism developed, helped writers explode the hypocrisy of the culture around them. Archetypally in Wallace's thought: popular culture of the mid-century presented an image of US culture as a place of clean, principled living, and then postmodern artists used irony to rip the mask off that lie. This was healthy, from Wallace's perspective, but the current problem is that contemporary US culture does not sell itself through the lie of clean, principled living anymore; rather, the new lie that popular culture pushes is that the consumer's needs and desires are the only values that should matter to us as individuals. That is contemporary popular culture trades in a skepticism that attacks extra-individual values.

This change threatens the viability of postmodern artists because, in Wallace's diagnosis, they failed to pick up on the fact that both their *avant garde* fiction and the programs on broadcast television, through their respective uses of skeptical tools like irony, had become allies in the struggle against principles that could create coherent communities. Obviously, this is fine from the perspective of broadcast television, but Wallace believed that *avant garde* fiction's duty in this moment was to help individuals see that they are less important than the historical social whole that they are born into. Thus, Wallace's diagnosis of US culture runs: if both popular culture and artists in the US invest in fundamentally skeptical projects of individualism, and that individualism is used by capitalist culture to enslave US citizens to base desires, then the long-term prognosis of the American ideology that postmodern artists are helping to train their readers to

accept is a national solipsism. Hence, the essay's title: "E Unibus Pluram," from one, many; i.e. Wallace saw the future of US culture as one in which its citizens learn to become an atomized herd that is driven by desires manufactured by what they pay to consume.

The upshot for the country's *avant garde* writers, which is what "E Unibus Pluram" is at particular pains to isolate, is that it is their responsibility to help avoid such a fate. Thus, suggesting a way out of this trap, "E Unibus Pluram" ends by declaring that the next generation of literary "rebels" might appear in an unexpected shape:

> The next literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of "anti-rebels"…who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in US life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started…The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "How banal." (Wallace *A Supposedly*)

This hyperbole served as a rhetorical counter to the postmodern straw man that Wallace set up in "E Unibus Pluram" in order to carve out his own aesthetic mission, which is to promote a movement away from the atomization of US culture, and the line that Wallace laid down in this essay has stuck. This is why terms like The New Sincerity and post-postmodernism have been applied to Wallace, because he explicitly diagnosed and worked against what he saw as the debilitating skepticism of US culture by refusing to abet its narrative tendencies, as he claimed the minor ironists of the late postmodern period did.

The power of this self-created framework for understanding Wallace's fiction is evidenced by critics who would like to escape it. Jeffrey Severs for instance, in his recent

monograph *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books, Fictions of Value*, writes, "Wallace stands, the dominant argument goes, as the paragon of literary sincerity and, by virtue of that, herald of a movement beyond postmodern irony and metafiction's self-consciousness" (17). For Severs, the standard post-postmodern reading of Wallace is accurate as applied to the work he published in the 1990s, but Severs argues that a full survey of Wallace's career, particularly one that includes *The Pale King*, makes the various readings of Wallace's "post-postmodernism" feel thin: "Essential versions of Wallace tend to go missing in this critical attention to ideas voiced by the author as rhetorician" (18). That is, Wallace's persuasive essays exert too great a power over Wallace's critics. Severs then calls for scholars to read "the tales against the teller's precepts" (18). He therefore argues that overinvesting in a narrative about Wallace that sees him as inextricably tied to postmodernism threatens to distract us from the other elements of Wallace's fiction that are less explored, such as the political economy that Severs examines in his monograph.

This weariness with the standard critical line is understandable, if wrongheaded. While locating specific elements of postmodern fiction that Wallace reacted to has been productive, as in the case of Timothy Jacobs's work on how Wallace's fiction specifically refuses postmodern apocalypse,[1] efforts to corral Wallace into convincing post-postmodern camps are frustrating because, formally, his writing most resembles what he separated himself from, i.e. the ironic metafiction of the postmodern authors that he revered before turning against them, authors like John Barth and Thomas Pynchon. On

[1] See "Then Out of the Rubble: The Apocalypse in David Foster Wallace's Early Fiction" and "The Inverted Nuke in the Garden: Archival Emergence and anti-eschatology in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." I will return to these texts in Chapter 2's reading of Wallace's refusal of apocalypse in his fiction.

the other hand, whatever the formal congruities between postmodernism and Wallace's work, it is hard to doubt that his active and prescriptive moral engagement with what he felt postmodernism had left behind distances him from that periodization, regardless of whether we look at the work he published around the time of "E Unibus Pluram" or that of his later career.[2] That is to say that I think Severs, in complaining specifically about our focus on irony and self-consciousness in discussions of Wallace makes the same mistake as The New Sincerity: he sees the temporary formal concerns of Wallace's argumentation in the 1990s as what "E Unibus Pluram" is about and then reads Wallace's career-long struggle against the individualism of US culture as a separate issue from his concerns about irony and self-reference. Clare Hayes-Brady's formulation of Wallace's relationship to his forebears in *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* is therefore useful:

> Arriving on the late-postmodern scene, Wallace represents one of the first writers of a generation that straddled postmodernism and what would succeed it. The term "late," used here in reference to both capitalism and postmodernism, has the same meaning in both cases, and refers to the point in the development of a sociopolitical or artistic system at which it is hegemonic and tending toward decadence, but has not reached the point of breakdown (27).

The work of defining himself both positively and negatively through the postmodern has made it hard for Wallace's critics, like Severs, to break free of this discussion and

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[2] For example, in his "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," Wallace quotes an earnest speech about the value of charity that is given by a character in *The Idiot* and asks his readers if we can imagine a character making such a speech in a novel today. He answers that we cannot, and it is because no writer would risk the embarrassment of ridicule:

> Given this (and it is a given), who is to blame for the unseriousness of our serious fiction? The culture, the laughers? But they wouldn't (could not) laugh if a piece of morally passionate, passionately moral fiction was also ingenious and radiantly human fiction. But how to make it that? How—for a writer today, even a talented writer today—to get up the guts to even try? There are no formulas or guarantees. There are, however, models. Frank's books make one of them concrete and alive and terribly instructive.

independently explore other facets of his work without at least explaining why they ignore the question of Wallace's relationship to a literary tradition he explicitly disowned. This situation seems unlikely to change, and I think it is important that it does not. For, as this dissertation will try to show, Wallace's attack on postmodern fiction was not his primary undertaking as a novelist; rather, it was a single part of his more important effort, as Hayes-Brady suggests, to promote extra-individual values, principles for a communal challenge to late capitalism, through his fiction. Severs is right when he argues that the texts of the '90s (the decade of "E Unibus Pluram" and *Infinite Jest*, the latter taken as the former's artistic fulfillment) have too great a gravitational pull on readings of Wallace's work, which leads to a situation in which his later fiction receives short shrift. But the reason Severs cannot escape the question of postmodernism is that though Wallace moved on from his fight against his predecessors in the 2000s, insofar as postmodern literature can be construed as an anarchic force in US culture, which is how Wallace read it, his fiction's abiding resistance to the atomization of US culture will by necessity always also function as a counter to the postmodern.

In response to this situation, this dissertation seeks to account for Wallace's response to atomization in both his fiction from the '90s and his later works by reading his career as not an affective response to postmodernism (as with critics of The New Sincerity) but as a response that appears more concretely in Wallace's design of narrative devices that urge readers to see the value of building communal relationships in the contemporary United States. To this end, this dissertation describes the development that occurs between what I see as the two most important moments of Wallace's career, the publication of *Infinite Jest* in 1996 and then the posthumous publication of his unfinished

novel *The Pale King* in 2011. Each succeeding work of fiction I analyze in this dissertation appears to me as an exciting advance in both Wallace's thinking about the problems of atomization in US culture and his development of different fictional strategies that address his changing understanding of those problems. For instance, I read Chris Fogle in *The Pale King* as a character who uses the IRS to escape solipsism in the same way that I read Don Gately from Wallace's earlier *Infinite Jest* using Alcoholics Anonymous in his recovery from addiction. But, though these characters have strong similarities in the forms their narratives take, I argue Wallace's design of *The Pale King* is directed toward a project that is several stages advanced from that of *Infinite Jest*, even though the former was never completed. In *Infinite Jest*, Don Gately stands at the heart of the novel's narrative and the community-centered project I interpret it as pursuing; meanwhile, in *The Pale King*, I argue the novel's main character is not Chris Fogle or any other individual character but the Regional Examination Center where Fogle and the other characters work. In this later novel, each individual is just a bit player in a much larger drama about changes that take place at the level of US culture and the federal government that operates within it. Thus, the abiding question I show Wallace pursuing throughout his writing is how to use his fiction to develop healthier communities in an atomized United States, even as I also try to show how his narrative strategies for creating such a fiction evolves as he matures.

This dissertation therefore traces a series of innovations in Wallace's fiction that helps him communicate his complex understanding of the relationships between individuals and the social structures they occupy. At the thematic heart of my reading are two questions: how can subjects use social organizations as sites of self-construction to

recover from a solipsism that capitalist institutions teach; and, later, how can state institutions be used to produce subjects who identify first as members of their national community (the United States) and then, only secondarily, as individuals? As is apparent in my formulation of these questions, I read a clear doctrinal content in Wallace's writing. In a society disoriented by solipsistic behaviors justified through an ideology of individualism, Wallace developed fictional practices to help readers find alternative models for human life oriented by the needs of the communities they occupy. Thus, I read his mature fiction as an extended effort to raise his readers' awareness of the fact that their roles in US society and the beliefs they use to make sense of those roles are constructed through learned behaviors.

Perhaps though the greatest challenge to such a reading of Wallace at this point is a growing consensus that his intellectual commitments are too ambivalent to be prescriptive. This tendency appears, for example, in the now common effort to label Wallace's writing as dialogic and polyphonic, terms drawn from the theorizations of Mikhail Bakhtin, which mark what critics see as the many-voiced discord that Wallace's fiction produces. The value of Bakhtin for such critics is that his theories outline an anti-authoritarian function for Wallace's novels. For instance, critics claim Wallace's characters can outrun his authorial intention by, say, espousing convincing viewpoints that the writer disagrees with. This is why, for example, Adam Kelly[3] insists on the ambivalence of Wallace's fiction in an argument that he has with Edwin Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts, [4] where they accuse him (Kelly) of using a positive reading of

[3] Kelly discusses dialogism in several places, but his fullest articulation of his argument appears in "Development Through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas."
[4] See "White Guys: Questioning *Infinite Jest*'s New Sincerity." This article and Kelly's response to it will be discussed at more length in Chapter 3.

Wallace's *Infinite Jest* to support what they see as the novel's idealization of white males. For Kelly, using Bakhtin to read Wallace as polyphonic offers a way to challenge Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts' claim because they have built that claim on a reading that understands *Infinite Jest* to have a clear prescriptive content that trades in the elitisms of misogyny and white supremacy. For example, Kelly writes,

> But what would [Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts] do with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose celebration of the carnivalesque…is one of the most famous anti-elitist arguments in the history of literary criticism, but who nonetheless thought that the novel represented a special case of discourse? Indeed, the dialogism and polyphony specific to the novel were precisely where the form's anti-elitism lay for Bakhtin, since the novel was a place where discourses could enter into dialogue with one another on a level plane, and a character could even, as Bakhtin argued in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, gain enough autonomy to challenge the all-knowing and potentially tyrannical power of the author. (Kelly "David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics")

This is the popular refrain of arguments that use Bakhtin to make Wallace's fiction more ambiguous: his writing somehow interrupts the monologism of its own doctrinal content. For critics like Kelly and Hayes-Brady, [5] for example, this happens in a couple specific ways: one, as in the quotation above, Wallace uses substantial amounts of dialogue in his

[5] See, for instance, the first footnote in Hayes-Brady's *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*:

> The term dialogic here, and elsewhere in this study, is intentionally ambiguous. It refers both to Bakhtinian dialogism–that is, pertaining to double-voicedness, either narrative or linguistic–and to the state of being in dialogue. Bakhtinian dialogism is an integral characteristic of Wallace's philosophy of communication, insofar as the writer and the reader(s) provide the voices or sense-making apparatus of each utterance, but it is also remarkable how many of Wallace's narrative fragments are structured as dialogue, or even more strikingly, half-dialogue. This structural tendency highlights the Bakhtinian dialogism inherent in Wallace's vision of the unfinished exchange at the heart of communication. (1)

For Hayes-Brady (and to some extent Kelly), Wallace's fiction is incomplete, both intentionally and unintentionally (which is part of the motif of failure in her study). This incompleteness involves the reader in the writing of Wallace's fiction to an unusual degree, thereby creating a kind of dialogism between reader and writer that mirrors the dialogism Wallace creates within the text between his characters. As shown in Chapter 1, I read the incompleteness of Wallace's first two novels not as a freedom granted to the reader by Wallace but as an expectation that they will finish the novels on Wallace's terms. I discuss the problem with reading Wallace's characters as evidence of the dialogism in his writing below.

texts so that he surrenders his authority to characters who do not share his beliefs; and second, it is argued that Wallace designs his novels to invite readers to take an active role in the creation of the text's meaning, thereby foregoing his authority through structural design, as when he ends his first two novels in a state of incompletion.[6] Admittedly, if Kelly is right about the polyphonic nature of Wallace's fiction, these approaches offer the prospect of a vibrant and democratic reading experience, as characters disagree among themselves, then drawing the reader in among them as an active participant in the construction of the text's meaning.

The plausibility of such arguments slips though when David Hering wants to frame Wallace as a dialogic writer in his long study *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* but is ultimately compelled to admit that he cannot "entirely rescue *Infinite Jest* from monologic tendencies." The strength of the directedness of Wallace's text overpowers its resources for ideological conflict. Hering nevertheless reads the appearance of ghosts in Wallace's fiction as a "critique" of monologism (36), such that Wallace's work appears to him as a monologue that is constantly under threat. To me, such attempts to "rescue" *Infinite Jest*, at best, cloud our interpretation of Wallace's fiction and, at worst, take an ideological position that critics currently find comfortable

[6] For example, in the reading of "The Devil Is a Busy Man" mentioned in footnote 7 above, Kelly argues that the exploration of sincerity's possibility in Wallace's fiction is an incomplete process that draws the reader into a situation where they become responsible for the written text because of its undecidability:

> In New Sincerity fiction, the writer articulates a desire for contamination–"the very desire for a gift is a desire for contamination"–by invoking a reader who can acknowledge and even co-produce the gift of writing. The key split in the authorial consciousness dramatised in these texts is therefore not between artist and agent, but between writer and reader…This is a highly affective process, and the undecidability of the gift—its haunting by debt and indebtedness—accounts for the fraught psychodynamics of the writer/reader relationship staged in New Sincerity fiction. The reader is consistently imagined to represent a future beyond what the writer can anticipate, and thus to offer the only possible relief from solipsistic self-consciousness and neoliberal autonomy.

(such as the pluralism of a favored artist's work) and apply it to a design that actively resists ambiguity. To be clear, I am not arguing we cannot question Wallace's authority over his texts or recognize his failure to achieve goals when such readings are appropriate; rather, I am saying we should acknowledge that when Wallace wrote novels, he exercised his not insignificant rhetorical power to advance an ideological agenda. Thus, the problem with "rescue" operations is that in making Wallace's writing more ambiguous than it actually is, we risk hiding Wallace from potentially valuable criticisms, such as the fact that his writing, despite some serious effort on his part,[7] often failed to successfully incorporate the voices of women and minorities. This critique is important because if we combine it with a reading of what he was forcefully trying to promote, i.e. a national community that thought of its wellbeing in terms of collectives, then such critiques can be used to build on Wallace's thinking toward a more substantial pluralism. On the other hand, if we seek to save Wallace from his own assertions, we risk losing our perspective on both his weaknesses and strengths as a thinker.

To more specifically demonstrate the problem with misreading Wallace as a dialogic writer, we can look at a scene from *The Pale King* that Kelly identifies as the culmination of Wallace's dialogic arts. This is §19 of the novel, which takes place in an elevator in the Peoria Regional Examination Center of the IRS that serves as *The Pale King*'s setting. In this section, Wallace depicts a long conversation between several IRS workers who, through their dialogue, develop a diagnosis of the major threats they believe the United States faces as a political community in 1980. Crucially for Kelly, particularly at the beginning of this section, these characters all agree that there is

[7] For a recent discussion of Wallace's complex relationship with feminism, see Mary K. Holland's "'By Hirsute Author:' Gender and Communication in the Work and Study David Foster Wallace."

something wrong with the United States but disagree about what that something is. For instance, one character claims the United States' founding fathers were men of great moral courage and that the current political climate has been caused by a loss of civic-mindedness in the 1960s. This loss, in his analysis, resulted from the government's betrayal of the American people in Vietnam, which led to an increasing national emphasis on individual conscience in the 1960s (Wallace *The Pale* 132-135). Pointing to the hypocrisy of the founding fathers who only extended their gifts to landowning white males, a second character replies to the first by reminding the group that Thomas Jefferson had children by Sally Hemings, implying that the United States was never the bastion of civic-mindedness that the first character imagines (132-135). A third voice then argues that in his view it is not so much that Americans intentionally betrayed the country; rather, he attributes the nation's decline to the effects of both television and corporate advertising, which promote an individualism that terminates in image and material desire (146). In short, each of these men has their own ideological commitments that generate from what we assume to be their own life stories and choices in interpreting the world they occupy. In Bakhtin's terms, each character appears as an independent self-consciousness. Kelly therefore writes,

> This is vintage Wallace[:] as a writer at home in virtually every discourse imaginable, he understood the specific resonances of each one [discourse], and utilized [*The Pale King*] as what Bakhtin would call a heteroglossic space in which those discourses could productively collide. There is therefore no bottom line in Wallace's novels, no master discourse, whether logic, culture, politics, or history: there are instead a plurality of ways to approach the problem Wallace is addressing[. He] is genuinely addressing a single question by thinking it through a plurality of languages, discourses, and dialogues. ("David Foster Wallace")

There is no question that Wallace was talented at mimicking certain forms of discourse, but the suggestion here that he "was at home in virtually every discourse imaginable" invites criticism. Not only is it incoherent to see Wallace as a master of discourse and then claim that his writing has "no master discourse," such thinking places a benevolent god-figure in the place of an author. While simply presenting a series of perspectives in a novel that arrays them around a single question may be someone's idea of art, it does not sound much like Wallace's idea of art.[8]

Further, Kelly's commitment to seeing Wallace as creating characters who fundamentally disagree with him leads him to misread §19. If the argument were that Wallace's fidelity to the world around him drove him to produce characters who, despite his best efforts to defeat them in the whole of his novel's representation, nevertheless embodied ideologies that were unassailably valid for those characters, that would be one thing, and we could mark a dialogism in Wallace's work that attested to Bakhtin's best hopes for the novel form; but if we are going to see Bakhtin's criticism as announcing a real possibility for the novel as a genre, we have to protect it and not use his terminology where it does not fit. For, it was not as if Bakhtin believed all novelists achieved the

[8] The greyness of Kelly's comments here reminds me of Wallace's conclusion to his first literary manifesto, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," where he attacks realism as insufficient to creating fiction that is responsive to 80s culture:

> The last cohesive literary generation came to consciousness during the comparatively black-and-white era of Vietnam. We, though, are Watergate's children, television's audience, Reagan's draft-pool, and everyone's market. We've reached our majority in a truly bizarre period in which "Wrong is right," "Greed is good," and "It's better to look good than to feel good"–and when the poor old issue of trying to *be* good no longer even merits a straight face. It seems like a big echo of Mayer the fifties' ad-man: "In a world where private gratification seems the supreme value, all cats are grey." *Except art*, is the thing. Serious, real, conscientious, aware, ambitious art is not a grey thing. This is why fiction in a grey time *may not be grey*. (Wallace *Both* 67-68)

dialogism of Dostoevsky; rather, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* emerges from Bakhtin's sense of Dostoevsky's historical uniqueness. He writes,

> Self-consciousness, as the artistic dominant in the construction of the hero's image, is by itself sufficient to break down the Monologic unity of an artistic world–but only on condition that the hero, as self-consciousness, is really represented and not merely expressed, that is, does not fuse with the author, does not become the mouthpiece for his voice; only on condition, consequently, that accents of the hero's self-consciousness are really objectified and that the work itself observes a distance between the hero and the author. If the umbilical cord uniting the hero to his creator is not cut, then what we have is not a work of art but a personal document. (Bakhtin)

While I disagree with Bakhtin's claim that they are not works of art, my understanding of Wallace as an artist is that he produced, by and large, "personal documents." This, I think, is evident in §19 of *The Pale King*. And it seems Kelly himself senses it. When one of the characters says, "politics is about consensus, and the advertising legacy of the sixties is that consensus is repression," Kelly admits that this "is an argument Wallace's readers have been familiar with since 'E Unibus Pluram'" ("Development"), and there are more connections between what the characters say in §19 and the claims Wallace makes in his arguments outside his fiction. For example, the nostalgic character described above, the one who believes the American people have betrayed their patrimony, is named Dewitt Glendenning, and one of the specific mistakes that he thinks led to the betrayal of our founding fathers was the abandonment of Civics classes in public school curricula. When a character sneers at Glendenning, "You're talking like a Civics class," he replies, "Which you never had, I'm betting. What are you, twenty-eight? Did your school have Civics when you were a boy? Do you even know what Civics is" (133)? Glendenning goes on to define Civics as "the branch of political science that quote

concerns itself with citizenship and the rights and duties of US citizens" (ibid.). Similarly, in an interview for a German TV station in 2003, Wallace says,

> When I was a little boy, there was a class called Citizenship: here are certain things about America and America's history; here is why it is important to vote; here is why it's important to not just vote for who the best-looking candidate is. [Changing tones:] Here's what's really interesting. Talking about this now, I feel ashamed. Because my saying all this sounds to me like an older person saying this, like a person lecturing, which in American culture sets me up to be ridiculed. It would be very easy to make fun of what I'm saying…And I can hear in my head a voice making fun of this stuff, and this is the kind of paradox of what it is to be a halfway intelligent American now. (ZDF 22:05-23:00)

I am loath to line these things up like this because it paints an overly-simplified picture of Wallace's work. §19 is actually a beautiful orchestration of Wallace's dialectical way of thinking, as he builds what starts out as a mundane and pedantic discussion of Civics into a multi-voiced choir, slowly adjusting each of the men's contributions to the argument until they are tuned to the same key and create a multi-faceted feeling of US culture at the end of the 1970s. To understand this though, we have to acknowledge that the scene is not dialogic in the sense Bakhtin means. On the contrary, it produces a consensus, and that consensus is the enunciation of Wallace's reading of recent US history as one of atomization and the anxiety that creates in his characters. The voice of Wallace's central thesis in the interview quoted from above is obviously personified by Glendenning, while the snide rebuttal of the other voice in his head can be paired with the character who points out Thomas Jefferson's hypocrisy. The scene therefore represents the complex relationship between ideological impulses that Wallace held: his interest in the mythology of the United States' founding, the ironic cynicism of the postmodern culture he grew up in, and the critique of the individualism of US media that marked his emergence as a mature writer in "E Unibus Pluram," as Kelly himself noted above.

That Wallace was committed to advancing his particular diagnoses of and prescriptions for US culture matters here because this dissertation explores how his fiction is acutely conscious of a fight for the orientation of human subjects that is staged in his fiction. If his writing is so polyphonic that we cannot isolate his flaws and strengths as a thinker, the cumulative work that I seek to carry out in my analysis of his engagement with the atomism of US culture becomes impossible. For instance, in Chapter 3 I will argue that where capitalist institutions prioritize self-interested individualism, Wallace uses Alcoholics Anonymous in *Infinite Jest* as an organization that promises to teach the addicted another way of orienting their daily behavior. That is, my reading of the novel insists that Wallace was attempting to advocate for a peculiar kind of freedom: not the freedom to change one's actions but the freedom to pledge allegiance to an organization that can change one's actions through prescriptions for behavior. To return again to the question of dialogism, here with respect to *Infinite Jest*, the fulfillment of Bakhtin's terms would require a character who offers a compelling case for the liberating power of autonomy over and against the case that the rest of the novel makes for binding one's self to organizations like AA. The question is not, do such arguments exist in the novel; rather, does Wallace let that argument into his magnum opus in a way that has narrative force? From my perspective, he does not. The closest we come to such an argument is the enlightened individualism advanced by the character Hugh Steeply, but, as I will show in Chapter 3, I believe Steeply's philosophy functions in the novel as a rationalization for the solipsism that permeates *Infinite Jest*, and I think it would be hard to argue that any character the novel shows in crisis could be said to benefit from their autonomy. My reading in Chapter 3 of course depends on this claim, as

does my understanding of Wallace's later work as new efforts to address the same fundamental problem that *Infinite Jest* addresses, albeit through narrative strategies that are unique to those works.

In my subsequent chapters' arguments, for example, the realization of the individual's power to orient one's life through allegiance to organizations like AA in *Infinite Jest* leads to Wallace's later effort to convince readers they should engage state institutions and change them from inside to instill community- or state-centered ideologies in US subjects, which is to say that institutions come to appear for Wallace as sites where a destiny for the United States that is different from that promoted by capitalist institutions might be produced. My argument that Wallace's career can be read as a development through which he came to see investment in state institutions as a solution for his literary project of addressing the problem of atomization in US culture is a position that has already been forcefully argued in negative terms by Mark McGurl in his article "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program." Like Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts, one of McGurl's criticisms of Wallace is that he displays a callous disregard for those who do not match the established ideal of the white male "post-enlightenment subject."[9] Where Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts accuse Wallace of trying to recover his lost status though, McGurl sees Wallace as "practicing an existentialism of institutions–which is to say, Wallace commits to the necessity of institutions in making and maintaining a 'meaning of life'" ("The Institution" 34). McGurl argues that because Wallace's readership[10] and the majority of the characters in

[9] Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts take this terminology from Denise Ferreira da Silva's *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.

[10] One of the major premises of McGurl's argument is that Wallace develops an intense, institutionalizing relationship with his readers, a claim he supports with Kathleen Fitzpatrick's examination of a summer-

The Pale King are white, Wallace's existentialism of institutions is marked for the already-included. Further, McGurl argues Wallace's conception of community is founded on what the individual owes the US, which is why he chooses the Internal Revenue Service as the setting of his last novel. The IRS assimilates individuals through their growing financial burdens to a merciless economy, creating a high-walled nation of debt that lacks positive content. McGurl in fact goes so far as to conflate the civic obligations Wallace promotes in his late writing with student loans and credit card debt, eventually concluding that "decoding the novel is not that hard: Wallace admires the IRS as the mechanism by which the indebtedness of individuals to the nation-state is measured and periodically discharged" (49), such that the politics of *The Pale King* terminate in an admonition to raise taxes. This, and McGurl's reading of its exclusionary politics, leads him to argue we should refuse to engage in Wallace's literary project.

My position in this dissertation is therefore ironic in the current moment of Wallace criticism. While I agree with Jackson, Nicholson-Roberts, and McGurl that Wallace's career has a clear prescriptive design and effect, unlike them I read his fiction in a positive light – as a serious and valuable effort to develop a body of writing that not only argues but works, through the effects of Wallace's narrative designs, against the individualism of US culture. While I will address the inadequacy of Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts' reading in Chapter 3, rehearsing the problem of McGurl's reading is useful here because his analysis of Wallace is actually at odds with McGurl's larger project of studying connections between literature and educational institutions. By identifying the conflict in McGurl's reading, I hope to clarify what I see as Wallace's

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long reading of *Infinite Jest* in 2009 in her article "Infinite Summer: Reading, Empathy, and the Social Network."

significance as a writer who came to invest in institutions as the best means of addressing the challenges of US culture.

The problem McGurl's analysis creates can be seen when he frames Wallace's career at the beginning of "The Institution of Nothing" through the same terms of self-reflexivity that he uses in his long analysis of the development of Creative Writing programs in the United States, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Wallace's work, McGurl says, is characterized by an "autopoetics" ("Institution" 32), which is to say that it falls into a lineage of literary production that passes from James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* to Barth's *Giles Goat Boy* and, finally, to Wallace himself. According to McGurl, these artists are unique because of their performances of self-reflexivity (autopoetics), which is not a surprising reading. The provocative thing about McGurl's work in *The Program Era* is that this self-reflexivity is not an expression of the individual writer but their society:

> we might understand…acts of authorial self-making not—or not merely—as the feats of radical individuation they often represent themselves to be, nor as evidence of a final dispersal of subjectivity in and across social institutions and the mediasphere, but as moments in the operation, the autopoiesis, of a larger cultural system geared for the production of self-expressive originality (*The Program* 49).

That is, we might read Wallace's work as an expression of the institutions he occupied; and, indeed, McGurl acknowledges in "The Institution of Nothing" that Wallace had an unusually deep connection to institutional life ("The Institution" 31-32). The reason this matters is that, like Wallace, McGurl is a promoter of the potential for a positive relationship between institutions and literature. In *The Program Era*, for example, he shows the value of the Creative Writing program as a unique institution that has formalized expression to produce a rich and textured postwar literature. That is, he sees

the Creative Writing program as part of a successful effort to create a more expressive society through the work of a social apparatus, the modern university. Applied to Wallace, this would be to say that the value of his autopoetics is not its expression of Wallace as an individual subject; rather, his art is valuable because it is an expression of institutions. That Wallace came to write what I will describe as a literature that evokes in his readers a feeling of the value of institutions that culminates in an imperative to help steer them toward the creation of community health makes him a particularly compelling case for thinking about autopoetics because he would seem, in McGurl's framework, to be an embodied self-justification of the institutions that produced him.

When not writing about Wallace, McGurl is on a similar page. For example, in "Ordinary Doom: Literary Studies in the Waste Land of the Present," he argues that the investments literary scholars make in institutions should extend beyond their work at the university and into their readings of literature. Specifically, McGurl claims scholars of literature can find tools for defending their discipline (and the institutions that employ them in that work) by altering their acts of reading: "At a time when the institutions inhabited by literary scholars and their students are under various forms of existential threat, and absent the likelihood of an anticapitalist revolution, [a] focus on liberation now seems much less urgent than the need to safeguard a stable institutional home" ("Ordinary" 337). Rather than demonizing institutions in our readings of literature, McGurl urges literary scholars to appreciate what can provide safe harbor to alternative voices in our decidedly nonrevolutionary present. He therefore calls us to see that the modern university offers sanctuary to a tradition of other ways of seeing the world through the English department. Thus, in reading the value of institutions, rather than

radical individualism, in works of literature, McGurl argues that scholars might make themselves mouthpieces of the institutions they occupy and that need to defend themselves in what he describes as a deteriorating Western culture, which is the work that he obviously carries out in *The Program Era*.

My interpretation of *The Pale King* in Chapter 5 of this dissertation takes Wallace to be an ally of McGurl's project. This novel, which I read as the culmination of Wallace's community-developing work, represents the changing self-consciousness of a state institution that is subjected to the neoliberal mandates of a fictional Reagan administration in the 1980s. As I will show, the institutional reflexivity Wallace promotes in *The Pale King* was part of a larger effort to depict institutions as capable of a kind of knowledge-based self-transformation. That this does not happen in the positive direction of strengthening the IRS as a governmental community that serves the larger national community of the United States in *The Pale King* makes it a tragic novel, but in its tragedy *The Pale King* cannot help but trace the shadow of an institution that might have been. In "Ordinary Doom," McGurl is trying to make us aware of a similar institutional self-reflexivity in universities, specifically in English departments. By using scholarly work to find the value of institutions in literature, we might help find the resources for defending a repository for the various voices of our literary past, which McGurl understands to be under threat in the contemporary United States. In this way, the critical work of McGurl and Wallace's writing resonate with each other, as each urges readers to see the collective deliberation that takes place not beyond the walls of the worlds we occupy but within them. They then urge us to take responsibility for the nature of this

institutional deliberation and to direct our works toward it, which, absent revolution, is toward the work of creating the world we want to imagine.

All of this makes McGurl's attack on Wallace in "The Institution of Nothing" frustrating: he reads an artist whose fictional design forces a directive nearly identical to his own–that we should turn to institutions, in the absence of productive alternatives, to find safeguards for community values–and then he accuses Wallace of being a coward,

> Not for [Wallace] Sartre's eventual gymnastic efforts to ally his version of existentialism with revolutionary Marxism. Clinging to the new institutional order, clinging for dear life, Wallace's commitment is rather to a conception of therapeutic community in which what might have become political questions–and by implication, motives for political contestation–are obediently dissolved into a series of individual ethical choices. If one believes that a more permanent and pervasive improvement of our spirits can come only as the result of a thoroughgoing transformation of the social order, this should mark a limit to one's sympathy with Wallace's existentialism of institutions as a whole. ("The Institution" 35-36)

One wonders what happened to McGurl's reading of autopoetics that saw the writer as an expression of the institutions they occupy. McGurl drops all such complexities in his reading and drives to his conclusion that Wallace's political endgame is higher taxes. This leads him to miss the fact that, as in "Ordinary Doom," the hope for a "more permanent and pervasive improvement of our spirits" that arrives in *The Pale King* must derive from our ability to see ourselves as members of institutions. These institutions, implied in Wallace's treatment of the REC in Peoria IL, serve a variety of functions for the characters in the novel, not the least of which are as social structures that sacrifice efficiency and profit to the material support of their workers and offer themselves as sites of national employment that corral individual labor into a productive function for US culture generally. Wallace's wider investment in state institutions is about creating a site

in US culture that can promote principles different from those promoted by the capitalist institutions of US culture. The reason this investment is not made in the individual is that Wallace understood institutions as responsible for individual subjects, which is to say that to address the individual subject is to address the symptom and not the cause of the problems he diagnosed. In its turn to the IRS of the 1980s, *The Pale King* clearly uses Wallace's nostalgia about a more civic-minded past to reveal the shortcomings of our present commitments. This world is indeed centered on the white male subject, and this deserves attention, but it seems to me that our resources are too few to be dismissive of Wallace's project in the way McGurl is dismissive. Wallace's work, as McGurl himself insists, is a product of the institutions and culture he occupied.

The Chapters

This dissertation studies the specific designs that appear in Wallace's fiction. It examines how they emerge from his diagnosis of US culture. And then it seeks to understand their import as part of Wallace's development of an aesthetic that promotes community investment. As we will see, this work reveals Wallace's abiding effort to help readers find new ways to think of themselves as responsible for the past, present, and future of the world they occupy, which, Wallace believed, would provide those readers with good reasons to invest in their communities.

This dissertation is broken into four chapters that mark four distinct phases of Wallace's development in becoming the institutional novelist I describe in my reading of *The Pale King*. Chapter 1 begins by aligning Wallace's fiction with the criticism of Fredric Jameson, as both writers respond to the false warnings of apocalypse that arrived

with postmodernism. Where Jameson describes apocalyptic thought as the result of postmodernism's inability to imagine a different way of life because of our historical blindness, Wallace refuses postmodernism's pessimism about the value of finding a role in one's society. I therefore argue that Wallace's fiction urges readers to see their self-construction as dependent on their ability to assimilate to the demands of socially-produced roles through what I will describe as Wallace's "Novel of Tendency," a term that gives purpose to the incomplete endings of both of his first two novels, *The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest*. Ultimately, I describe Wallace's fiction as more hopeful than Jameson's criticism about the possibility of imagining a non-postmodern subject.

In my second chapter, I read *Infinite Jest* as a novel that urges readers to see that the freedom they should pursue in US culture is not that of autonomy but the freedom to choose to align one's self with an institution that promotes community as its ultimate end. This reading of the novel draws on Louis Althusser's account of ideology to show how *Infinite Jest* represents the daily habits of its characters as producing their perspectives on the world. To demonstrate this, Chapter 3 treats each of the novel's major narratives in different sections: first, I read Hal Incandenza's narrative of decline as Wallace's representation of the self-destructive tendencies that inhere in individualistic ideologies; second, I read the novel's political satire as an extension of the logic that Wallace displays in Hal's narrative, except here the narrative is about the United States as a national community that destroys itself through its solipsistic behavior; and, third, in Don Gately's narrative I read Wallace's account of the power that a communal ideology, like that promoted by Alcoholics Anonymous, has for redeeming Gately's life.

In Chapter 4, I argue that the problem *Infinite Jest* cannot solve is that of cultural institutions, which I read as fictionalized by Wallace in stories that appear in the two collections of fiction he published after *Infinite Jest*, specifically the stories "Forever Overhead" from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" from *Oblivion*. This chapter also draws heavily on essays Wallace published in this period to understand the political stakes of his institutional thinking. This third chapter specifically suggests that Wallace came to understand the problem of solipsism that appears in *Infinite Jest*'s portrayal of US culture as produced on a mass scale by institutions of capitalism ("A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again"). To respond to this diagnosis, I argue he turned to state institutions as sites that could help produce an alternative ideology in American subjects, which Wallace hoped might lead Americans to see themselves as members of a national community before seeing themselves as individuals ("Authority and American Usage"). I then show how Wallace models this view in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" in his deployment of what I call an "Institutional Perspective." Ultimately, this chapter claims that Wallace came to understand state apparatuses, particularly those of education, to be our best means of countering the atomizing effects of capitalist institutions.

Finally, in *The Pale King*, I read Wallace's last novel as an intellectual project that attempts to teach readers to understand institutions through their status as historically-produced forms of social interaction. Specifically, the novel describes a moment of profound change for the IRS in the 1980s, as it shifts from being a service-oriented institution to one that is profit-driven. I argue the specific institutional changes that the IRS undergoes in *The Pale King* originate from a neoliberal rationality that seeks

to reorient institutions of the US government. By depicting how these changes affect the operation of the Regional Examination Center of the IRS that Wallace uses as his setting, I claim the novel shows him radicalizing the institutional perspective I describe in Chapter 3, making *The Pale King* an "Institutional Novel" in which the REC, rather than an individual, is the main character. Thus, I read Wallace's unfinished last novel as marking the outline of what would have become a tragedy, had he finished the novel, about the loss of the REC and the (nation it represents) as a vocation, employer, and site for the development of national community.

CHAPTER 2: THE END OF EXHAUSTION: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, FREDRIC JAMESON, AND THE TRAP OF POSTMODERN HISTORY

> It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.
>
> -Fredric Jameson
> *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

> If I have a real enemy, a patriarch for my patricide, it's probably Barth and Coover and Burroughs, even Nabokov and Pynchon. Because, even though their self-consciousness and irony and anarchism served valuable purposes, were indispensable for their times, their aesthetic's absorption by the US commercial culture has had appalling consequences for writers and everyone else.
>
> -David Foster Wallace
> In an Interview with
> Larry McCaffery

Something has failed to occur in the last 50 years of our political and intellectual histories in the United States that we should not call an event–because it has not happened–but that has, in its absence, changed the way we see and think about the world. In fact, this non-event continues to change us through its deferral, not so much because it refuses to arrive but because of the supplicatory posture we assume in waiting.

In 1966, Jacques Derrida gave his famous lecture at Johns Hopkins University, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in which he delivered the discouraging news that the metaphysical structures of Western culture were still in place. Despite a hundred years of destructive effort, such Titans as Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, and Claude Levi-Strauss had failed to do away with our orthodoxies of violence and oppression. Derrida therefore argues that as long as the West is content to see itself as the center of the world, these thinkers will serve as reminders of the strength of the ideological prison that holds us.

But if the West needed a reminder that we are not free, where would we look for liberation? On this question, "Structure, Sign, and Play" is hopeful, as Derrida suggests that perhaps the advent of structuralism signals the beginning of a new capacity to think what he calls the "structurality of structure"–the structurality of metaphysics–and see that it is the authorizing centers of thought (God, Essence, Being) that limit the freedom we seek (Derrida 278). His characteristically messianic hope is that armed with this new consciousness, some new-Nietzschean mind capable of living joyously without the sanction of truth was already being born in 1966, and the decade might serve as an inflection point in history, when the light in the house of metaphysics would be overwhelmed by a new light from without that revealed alternatives in the study of language, the work of thought, and the orientation of life.

Then, as if on cue, the American novelist and academic John Barth published "The Literature of Exhaustion" in 1967, an essay written amidst bullhorns and teargas (if the author is to be believed), in which he argues that good art is art of its moment, and in his moment of the sixties, the West's best authors–Nabokov, Beckett, and (the very best) Borges–were writing a literature of exhaustion: these authors used a feeling of apocalypse to "turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for [their] work and [thereby transcended] what had appeared to be [their] refutation" (Barth 71). This, as Barth pointed out, did not mean that narrative art was necessarily coming to an end in the 1960s; rather, the best artists of that moment were using the pervasive feeling of literature's exhaustion to make art that expressed the sense of an ending.

Perhaps it was the chaos of the time, Barth reasoned, the Vietnam War, the exploding academic scene, or the vogue of self-expression as an intellectual pastime.

Regardless, the clear critical objects of "The Literature of Exhaustion" are to differentiate the virtuoso (Borges) from the dabblers of artistic experimentation and to demonstrate how the former used the rumors of his death to rise from the ashes of his predecessors. Barth's sense of something imminent, whether it is to be the death of the novelist, metaphysics, or Western civilization itself, reads like the flip-side of Nietzschean affirmation, what Derrida, describing Levi-Strauss, calls a sad, Rousseauistic nostalgia for a prelapsarian humanism to which Barth longs to return.

Taken together, Derrida and Barth's essays signal an eagerness and anxiety for and about something that is about to happen, though what that something is remains unclear. Whether it is to be a shift in the world of arts and letters or something more dire, the momentous feelings they communicate characterize the high relief of the first part of what's come to be called the postmodern era. That the unachieved ends of the 1960s have shaped our felt narrative realities is where my understanding of David Foster Wallace begins. We might say that his is a literature that reacts to exhaustion, what Bradley Fest calls an "exhaustion with exhaustion" ("Then Out" 285), [11] a self-willed tirelessness in seeking an art that can counter the individualism that Wallace believes endings authorize.

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[11] See "'Then Out of the Rubble': The Apocalypse in David Foster Wallace's Early Fiction" and "The Inverted Nuke in the Garden: Archival Emergence and Anti-Eschatology in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." In the former, Fest also considers the relationship between Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" and Wallace's early fiction, including both *The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair*. Fest sees an oversight in the standard reading of how Wallace's desire to move through apocalypse affects his relationship to irony because he assigns irony an ambivalent status in Wallace's work: it is not that Wallace seeks to transcend irony, as has been repeatedly argued; rather, he seeks to move away from a specific, apocalyptic function of irony that Wallace associates with advertising:

> It is nothing new that the end of the world as revelatory fulfillment, as a sublimation of the anxieties associated with inevitable subjective death, is often presented as something to be desired, a goal toward which to strive. Wallace's irony transforms this apocalyptic desire into not merely a cultural telos but the goal of advertising itself. If postmodern advertising, as he is so aware, works first and foremost through the creation of anxieties that produce consumer desire to relieve those anxieties, then the "course of Empire," or rather, the pursuit of capital/advertising's goal must be the production of a desire for death. ("Then Out" 299)

The Political Impasse of the Postmodern Mind

In this opening chapter, I will stage a discussion about how to respond to this non-event through readings of Fredric Jameson and David Foster Wallace, two figures who agree that much of the augury that took place in the early postmodern period either forecasted an event that is not particularly imminent or was simply the styled imaginings of false prophets. From this discussion, I will then argue that in the study and writing of literature, Jameson and Wallace are best read in continuity, despite their disagreements, because they together provide an argument for how to move forward on problems that have distracted our thinking about narrative over the last half-century. In particular, I am interested in two of these problems: 1) what is literature's role in the history of capitalism and the culture it has produced; and 2) how can we use our understanding of that role to develop strategies for reading and writing that perform meaningful political work? I will therefore begin my argument in this section by providing accounts of Jameson's and Wallace's respective views on the trap that has been the postmodern era, a period we still find ourselves in, and show how the critic and the novelist can be read in concert, as Jameson describes how capitalist culture prevents us from seeing our political reality and Wallace imagines ways to reverse its blinding effects.

The central problem of capitalism for Jameson is that its narratives of progress deceive us in such a way that we conceive of lost capacities as cultural advancements. For example, in the "Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," he argues that the postmodern is

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This account of Wallace's early work precedes my own reading of Wallace's portrayal of US culture as suffering through an addicted spiral in *Infinite Jest* that Wallace seeks to answer with the counterculture of Alcoholics Anonymous.

an attempt to think historically when we have forgotten how to think about historical experiences of subjectivity as radically different from our own. Thus, in our fiction, we presume to share the perspectives and agential reasonings of historical figures from Thomas Cromwell to Henry Ford. This imagined ability, which is actually a loss of discriminating judgment, uses the informational wealth of contemporary culture to create the sense that we can readily access the deep texture of the experiences, desires, and feelings of such figures. A Marxist critic, Jameson's argument frames this hubris as a problem created by capitalist production, which has birthed a culture of image that commodifies the objects of human consciousness. These objects, through our consumption of them, then shape contemporary (i.e. postmodern) subjects into sites of a kind of pre-processed understanding that is not capable of valuably parsing or historicizing what they see. The result is that we now use fiction to tour fantasies about the past without acknowledging that we have been produced by capitalist forces that become still more powerful in the operation of our shallow memories.

The most serious consequence of our forgetfulness in Jameson's analysis is that without the capacity to see the radical shifts between the subjectivities of our past, we cannot imagine the possibility or the means of forging new subjectivities for the future, which is to say that for Jameson the defining problem that postmodern culture creates is political impotence. For example, he might argue that the ultimacies that haunted and inspired Barth and Derrida were symptoms of late capitalism: what those writers mistook for the feeling of an ending or an imminent event was actually the sense that their lives were similar to those lived in the various historical moments of the past. Thus, the

coming event, for good or ill, promised to sever us from the what-had-always-been of human history.

Barth in fact claims in "The Literature of Exhaustion" that one of Borges's great features is that he repeats what fiction has always done, at least since Cervantes, which is to create an extension of life out of its contemplation. Writing from the chaotic ambience of SUNY-Buffalo, Barth feared that if those who saw the arts as sites of easy experimentation got their way, the lineage of virtuosity, seemingly so well grounded and recognizable in humanist history, would be buried in the unmarked tomb of the capital-A-author of the West. For Jameson, then, Barth misunderstands the radical ways that the human mind has changed as it has moved through the modern era, which is shaped by the history of society's productive forces. That the belief in the connectedness of the present to the past survives long after the cord has been cut is one of the truly substantial effects of late capitalism. As the postmodern era has ground on, as we have been borne back into this historical blindness, our anticipation of the ultimate has become normal, even as time has worn down the edges of both eagerness and anxiety, leaving us lonely, desirous of continuity, and regretful about the end of human time as we have always known it, much like, to name characters from another of Barth's favorite end-time writers, Beckett's Estragon and Vladimir.

Jameson's analysis of postmodernism lays the groundwork for my reading of Wallace's first two novels because Wallace designed his fictional environments to show how US culture appropriates techniques of thought in order to control the ways we think about the world around us, particularly how we feel and direct our desires. For Wallace, the temporal wasteland we currently occupy could only truly be periodized if we had a

sense of movement, of history, that made sense of our relationship to the past and its future. As with Jameson's criticism, Wallace's fiction shows how the loss of our sense of history, understood as a narrative of changes in subjectivity, results from a logic of globalized capital where commodification shapes the faculties we use to apprehend the world. The most obvious example of this in *Infinite Jest* is the disorienting effect that "Subsidized Time" has in the reading of his second novel.[12] That is, one of the true struggles in understanding this book is gaining a proper sense of the amount of time that passes between events, because even when we have mapped out the years between, say, "The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment" and "The Year of the Whopper," their non-numeric nature requires a translation to the "Before Subsidized" numbering of years that we are familiar with and then a retranslation back into the novel's commodified framework. The effect of this, combined with *Infinite Jest*'s near-future setting, is that the already circular nature of the text feels pulled out of history, so that the novel becomes a carousel narrative divorced from the actual world we occupy.

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[12] In an interview with the journal *Social Text* in June 2016, Jameson himself talked about this facet of *Infinite Jest*, describing the novel as a diagnosis that serves an interpretive function. The question the interviewers ask is about the continuing value of "categories such as interpretation, historicization, and critique." Jameson replies,

> It's paradoxical, because after all, let's say you want to think very crudely of art as somehow reflecting the real. Okay. And let's say that the real has become ahistorical, has been reduced to the present, has lost its historicity, and so on. Well then, the art that reflects it is also going to be reduced to the present, ahistorical, and all the rest of it. We can only take an ambiguous relationship to this. In order for contemporary art to have some profound relationship to lived reality—David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest, for example—it has to reflect that reality. The mode of interpretation required for a representation like that necessarily changes. When years ago I talked about surface, lack of depth, and so on, well then, in order to be a proper reflection of social reality, the art has to be a surface art without depth, and therefore the older hermeneutics of depth analysis—whether they're of a Freudian or Marxian kind—are no longer appropriate. But I do think that one can interpret this art in another way as a kind of diagnosis whose form can be described, and whose description is then itself a kind of clue to the weirdness of contemporary social reality. I consider that still a form of interpretation. Does a diagnosis still find some deeper meaning behind the surface? Or does it simply register a new reality? (Jameson "Revisiting Postmodernism" 148)

This experience of time in *Infinite Jest* mirrors the altered reality of escape that Wallace criticizes in television's representation of life.[13] Thus, like many of the novel's other features, the treatment of time in *Infinite Jest* is a temptation the reader is supposed to learn to resist in order to maintain the ability to differentiate the consumer-based values of US culture from the values of community that Wallace seeks to promote. This same fear of a growing inability to make positive differentiations is what is at stake in Wallace's infamous discussion of irony as well. He believes that irony's appropriation by television–both in its programming and advertising–has had a substantive effect on how US consumers understand image, value, and choice as functions of their judgment. For example, if early postmodern writers used irony to explode hypocrisy and thereby protect themselves from being made complicit in the false values of popular US culture, TV's adoption of irony led to its overabsorption by US consumers so that Americans learned to be skeptical not just of the commodified values that postmodern ironists attacked but of value in general. That is, Wallace fears that TV promotes an ideology of skepticism in the United States, a process he believes must terminate in the nihilistic solipsism of his analysis.

Yet, it is important to see that irony in Wallace's thinking, like the commodified time of *Infinite Jest*, is only one among many tools that capitalist culture has arrogated to itself in the postmodern era. The full picture of capitalism's infiltration of culture in Wallace's work appears in *Infinite Jest*'s satirized United States of course, where the mind of a nation is represented as in crisis. Projected into a future North America where the work of government is not to address the challenges of citizens' lived realities but

[13] See "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction."

rather to supply pleasure in a now that lacks the discomforts of self-recognition and self-development, Wallace uses his second novel to direct our attention to the deep changes we undergo in our constant use of an addicting and pervasive wealth of entertainments. As in Jameson's criticism, we are not aware of these changes, yet they affect us nonetheless. Thus, the central thread that holds *Infinite Jest*'s major stories together is a terrorist plot to disseminate a video that creates a fatal addiction in its viewers. The movie, also named *Infinite Jest*, is a figure for how addiction threatens not just individuals in this book but the whole of the United States, as addiction's extreme instances in the novel, which appear predominantly through the stories of members of Alcoholics Anonymous, serve as harbingers for the nation, canaries in the coal mine of US culture. The struggles of the addicted in *Infinite Jest* warn readers about a general solipsism in US culture that arrives through our unconscious absorption of the commodified values that produce the objects we consume.

The identification of this problem in the United States is *Infinite Jest*'s negative function, but it has a positive one as well, which is modeled on the recuperative philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous. The novel's primary conflict in fact takes place between the poles of total dependency on gratification and the freedom of other-directed service that AA prescribes to its members. Wallace's placement of these opposed forces in *Infinite Jest*'s US culture–that of TV and that of AA–echoes his construal of the rivalry between television and fiction in essays like "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" and "E Unibus Pluram." For instance, what was particularly frightening to him about US culture resulted from two major changes TV has wrought: 1) the radical decoupling of delight from instruction, in the sense that TV mainlines pleasure into

homes throughout the United States without any concern for the wellbeing of its viewers; and 2) television's growing ability to raze all cultural values as it has evolved from a medium that promoted hypocritical notions of community in the fifties, to one that promoted an unmoored individualism in the seventies, and, finally, to one that promotes a Pavlovian need to live amidst a herd of other unthinking solipsists in the early nineties. The power and pervasiveness of television in Wallace's analysis leads him to doubt the efficacy of the negating works of the early postmodern period, as they seem inadequate to the urgent project of creating alternative models of subjectivity in the US, which is why in "E Unibus Pluram" Wallace calls for a band of principled "anti-rebels" and sets the ideological boot camp of AA at the heart of *Infinite Jest*.

Countering the undiscriminating and self-centered habits of mind in postmodern culture has to be the calling of serious art at the end of the 20th century, Wallace reasons. Thus, in his fiction, he uses his understanding of narrative technologies to engineer attacks on our impulses for comfort and directs our attention to the underlying realities that cause us to choose immediate sources of happiness at the expense of our collective well-beings. Perhaps ironically then, like television producers and advertisers, Wallace develops and uses tools of mind, like irony and addiction, to steer the function of our faculties. If the battle is over the structure of the mind, then to counter the debilitating work of capitalist culture we need not only to develop community-based models for human society, which AA serves as an example of in *Infinite Jest*, we also need to develop tools that can help subjects reconceive their selves as parts of such social formations.

For his part, Jameson, as recently as 2014's *Antinomies of Realism*, remains skeptical of the novel's capacity to do the work Wallace felt called to, even if he is sympathetic to the desire. While narrative is as important as philosophical thought for marking how ideology produces fantastic resolutions to social problems, it cannot reach beyond the contradictions of any moment. A dualism therefore consistently obtains in capitalist society for Jameson: in the modern era, the growth and development of production carry us into the future while aesthetic objects both exhibit the contradictions capitalism creates in our lives and compensate us for our unsatisfied desires for a more communal existence. While the utopia of a shared mind, since at least *The Political Unconscious*, is, for Jameson, what human history has torn us from and, at the same time, pushes us toward, the aesthetic designs of our fiction only summon remnants of our lost past.

Mauvaise Foi and Community Directives

The tension between Wallace's attempt to use his fiction as a political response to his historical moment and Jameson's skepticism about literature's ability to function in that way is, we might say, the state of play in the late postmodern era. We have little consensus about narrative's role in society and a preponderance of not just histories but historical models. This situation is exacerbated when Jameson relegates the function of aesthetic design to the status of a symptom that lacks the power to shape subjectivity. Arguing against Jameson's narrow view of literature's political capacity, this section will begin by describing Wallace's nascent move away from the anarchism he saw in early works of postmodernism through his first novel *The Broom of the System*. I will then

outline Jameson's critical method, which I use to frame his reading of what he calls George Eliot's *avant la lettre* representation of *mauvaise foi* in 2014's *Antinomies of Realism*. Doing so will allow me to return to Wallace's work with a more robust understanding of his depictions of both good and bad faith in *Infinite Jest*, which Wallace uses to urge readers to reconstrue their relationships to external authorities. This is the same process that AA models in *Infinite Jest*, as the fellowship's training begins with accepting the value of group prescription. My broader claim will therefore be that Jameson's criticism helps us see Wallace's political project: by softening his reader's resistance to authority in *Infinite Jest* through his depictions of good and bad faith, Wallace hopes to prepare community-based alternatives to the individualism of US culture.

For Wallace, the feelings of ultimacy and impotence that emerge from early postmodern narratives are connected to the self-centered perspectives promoted by consumer culture in the United States. As he says in the epigraph to this chapter, both authorize a destructive anarchism. Wallace's thematic mission in his first two novels is therefore to get beyond the literature of exhaustion and its use of apocalypse because Wallace seeks a form of narrative that can bind subjects together rather than justifying their atomization. In his first novel, for example, *The Broom of the System*, Wallace actually stages a scenario from Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" in his plot. Barth wrote,

> Whether historically the novel expires or persists as a major art form seems immaterial to me; if enough writers and critics *feel* apocalyptical about it, their feeling becomes a considerable cultural fact, like the *feeling* that Western civilization, or the world, is going to end rather soon. If you took a bunch of people out into the desert and the world didn't end, you'd come home shamefaced, I imagine, but the persistence of an art form

> doesn't invalidate work created in the comparable apocalyptic ambiance (72).

Barth understands the use of apocalypse in postmodern fiction as largely harmless. The greatest risk he sees in describing an end that never arrives is some embarrassment about having cried "Wolf!" when there was no wolf, which is to say that for Barth artists should not feel constrained by the potential errors of judgment created by one's cultural ambience; rather, the use of feelings that are honestly felt is the artist's primary responsibility, and if one is in error, the biggest consequence will be the difficulty of looking in the mirror. Wallace, as we will see, disagrees with this, and in his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, he literalizes Barth's metaphor of an escape into the desert and then uses his narrative to challenge Barth's claims.

Wallace initiates the series of events that lead to this Barthian journey into the wilderness in the novel's opening scene. The heroine, Lenore Beadsman, visits her older sister at college, and, as she talks to her sister's roommates, Lenore is astonished to learn about the frequency of sexual assault on campus and the culture of fear that her sister and the other women at the college occupy. The sense of foreboding this conversation creates in Lenore is then given flesh when two fraternity brothers from another college enter the women's dorm room uninvited, preventing anyone from leaving until each of the women sign their bottoms for a fraternity hazing ritual. Lenore eventually negotiates her escape, but when we meet her again she is not in college. Instead, she is working as a switchboard operator for one of Cleveland Ohio's most powerful capitalists, Norman Bombardini. Thus, Lenore's visit to college derails the path she assumed she would take after high school, and the rest of *The Broom of the System* describes her quest for self-

recovery. Like in *Infinite Jest*, that recovery will depend on Lenore finding her unique role in the world.

As David Hering points out, Lenore operates as a figure of resistance to the acquisitiveness of the males in *The Broom of the System*.[14] This resistance at the beginning of the novel, after her encounter with the men at her sister's college, appears as a kind of dropping out of "the system" by not going to school and taking a low-wage job, which is the stasis Wallace disrupts when Lenore's grandmother, also named Lenore Beadsman, decides to force her granddaughter into an alternative way of life by staging an escape from her nursing home. In fulfillment of her grandmother's design, Lenore's search becomes a search for herself, which requires that she learn to distinguish herself from the grandmother who shares her name. It is in fact Lenore's quest that inspires several of the novel's characters to track her missing grandmother into the novel's fictional Great Ohio Desert (God), enacting the scenario from "The Literature of Exhaustion." After some confusion and a minor altercation, the characters do in fact come home, though they are not particularly shame-faced. Lenore ultimately sees that her attempt to follow her grandmother into the wasteland was an abnegation of her duty to find her own place in the world, or what the novel's Wittgenstein-inspired language would call a function.[15]

The apocalypse that does not come in *The Broom of the System* does not validate Lenore's journey into the desert; rather, Wallace uses the novel to signal a view that

[14] See the third section of "Come to Work: Capitalist Fantasies and the Quest for Balance in *The Broom of the System*," in Herings *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form*

[15] For an extended reading of the influences of Wittgenstein on this novel, see Chapter 2 of Marshall Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, "*The Broom of the System*: Wittgenstein and the Rules of the Game."

concerns the artist's responsibility to those around them, particularly with respect to the foreboding that pervades *The Broom of the System*. Lenore realizes that her mistake was in trying to follow her grandmother into the false promise of immanence that she (the younger Lenore) thought the desert symbolized. For her part, we can imagine Gramma Lenore choosing to disappear because she sees her granddaughter's dependence on her as leading to self-cancellation. Thus, for the reader, Gramma Lenore serves as an always-absent cause for the story's quest, while the journey into the Great Ohio Desert symbolizes the stasis of postmodern fiction's bid for radical freedom. Wallace himself supported this view in his interview with Larry McCaffery for *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1993 when he compared the search for radical freedom that began with the American mid-century in literature to a party that has gone on too long:

> The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years. We're kind of wishing some parents would come back. And of course we're uneasy about the fact that we wish they'd come back–I mean, what's wrong with us? Are we total pussies? Is there something about authority and limits we actually need? (McCaffery)

Again, we have the feeling that the event never came; it was an empty revolution, and, for Wallace, the false promises that emerged from artists' feelings of apocalypse matter because our paying lip service to a revolution that did not establish a new authority for teaching a better way of life has, in this analysis, divested the American people of their rights and responsibilities, as the false promises of the '60s combined with travesties of US governance like Vietnam and Watergate to lead artists and intellectuals to turn their backs on the formative guidance they owed American society. Contrary to Barth's predictions, Wallace implies intellectuals were not chastened by their poor judgment as

they should have been; rather, we chose to ignore our political reality and build self-indulgent fictions that celebrate the divorce between literature and the lives of most people living in the United States. This view of the previous generation leads Wallace to direct his career against individualism, because he understands it as tacitly sanctioning both an unaccountability for the political implications of fiction and the solipsistic atomization that US consumer culture promotes.

Though Jameson rejects Wallace's notion that art could challenge or even extricate itself from something like individualism, his criticism can nevertheless help us understand Wallace's narrative as a strategic ideological response to his perception of his place in history. This is due to the totalizing effort of Jameson's analysis, which is an effort that Wallace made as well. Both thinkers seek to account for both the minutia of literary experience and the history that produces them. Thus, by rehearsing the literary method Jameson is quite explicit about, I think we can gain insight into the methods of analysis that Wallace uses to build his fictional worlds.

Jameson's work uses a broad range of methods to trace the substrate of what he calls the political unconscious in human history. This unconscious is the remnant of the original community we have been torn from by the productive forces of society. To reach a text's expression of what Jameson calls its concept–a measure of alienation from a lost communal subjectivity–he says we must understand that text's meaning not as an authored object but as a collection of elements that appear from beyond the author's control and express the lived contradictions of a place and time. In outlining this method, the first chapter of *The Political Unconscious*, "On Interpretation," draws heavily from Louis Althusser's understanding of "structural causality, which reads the object of

analysis as pointing toward a "History" that we cannot apprehend directly but that we can read the shape of through the history of ideology that literary texts express. Thus, Jameson writes about Althusser's method,

> the interpretive mission…will…find its privileged content in rifts and discontinuities within the [single literary] work, and ultimately in a conception of the former "work of art" as heterogeneous…In the case of Althusserian literary criticism proper, then, the appropriate object of study emerges only when the appearance of formal unification is unmasked as a failure or an ideological mirage. The authentic function of the cultural text is then staged rather as an *interference*…the privileged form of this disunity or dissonance is the objectification of the ideological by the work of aesthetic production (Jameson *Political* 56).

The works of both Jameson and Althusser are grounded in the writing of Benedict de Spinoza, who outlined his peculiar understanding of God or Nature (which, in Jameson, becomes History) in *The Ethics*. In that work, Spinoza shows how the necessity of what he reasons about Nature should determine our claims about what the world we perceive must really be like. Though it is unseen, the whole of Nature is primary for Spinoza. He therefore uses what he reasons to be its necessary structure to limit the inductive significance of the observed particulars of human experience. In so doing, Spinoza carries out a preemptive strike against empiricism that has been adopted by the particular lineage of Marxism that Jameson occupies and that sees empiricism as complicit in the perpetuation of bourgeois ideology.[16] Thus, when Jameson insists that "the appropriate

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[16] In reference to Spinoza's dismissal of empirical reasoning, see particularly "Proposition 10" of *Book II*, *Of the Mind* in *The Ethics*:

> But in the meantime many say that [any essence of thing pertains to the nature of the thing [in question]. And so they believe either that the nature of God pertains to the essence of created things, or that created things can be or be conceived without God – or what is more certain, they are sufficiently consistent…The cause of this…was that [these people] did not observe the [proper] order of philosophizing. For they believed that the divine nature, which they should have contemplated before all else…is last in the order of knowledge, and that the things which are called objects of the senses are prior to all. That is why, when they contemplated natural things, they thought of nothing less than they did of the divine nature; and when afterwards they directed their minds to contemplating the

object of study emerges only when the appearance of formal unification is unmasked as a failure or ideological mirage" (Jameson *Political* 56), he attacks our habit in literary analysis of seeing the singular text as the ultimate horizon of interpretation. By focusing on such discrete empirical phenomena, this thinking runs, we limit ourselves to a form of induction that makes us defenseless against the same ideology that produced the text in the first place. The search for unity we carry into our interpretations of art is therefore just the work of reaffirmation and does nothing to help us see the actual nature of History. Thus, for Jameson, the meaning of a text, whether construed as intrinsic to it or originating in the mind of the author, can never be its value in actual analysis; rather, these early horizons of interpretation prepare the critic's work by presenting the reader with the mask that must be removed. By mediating between history, the author, and the text itself, and then reading backwards to an unseen structure that is History (or the ultimate container from which all texts emerge), Jameson's method offers a vision of an evolving historical substrate that not only changes the formal features of narrative but that also accounts for how the terms of interpretation change in different periods of history as well.[17]

> divine nature, they could think of nothing less than their first fictions, on which they had built the knowledge of natural things, because these could not assist knowledge of the divine nature. So it is not wonder that they have generally contradicted themselves. (Spinoza 122)

[17] See, in particular, Jameson's reading of the historical development of psychoanalysis as determined by the necessity of History in *The Political Unconscious*. For my purposes here, William C. Dowling puts it will in his primer, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx: An introduction to the Political Unconscious*:

> What, then, does it mean to see both Freudian theory and the human psyche as necessarily determined by history? On an immediately obvious level, Jameson wants us to see that the system of family relations on which much of Freud's theory depends (the Oedipus complex, childhood trauma, etc.) is not itself timeless or eternal, that the bourgeois nuclear family that emerges as a private space under an emergent capitalism is inseparable from the workings of the capitalist system. It would make little sense to look for the dynamics of the Freudian family romance in, say, a collective or tribal situation where children existed in a much different relation to a social system within which the parents played a much different role. It is only when the collectivity has disintegrated, in

Given this background to what has been Jameson's consistent project over the last several decades, I want to turn to his more recent *Antinomies of Realism* (2014), particularly his description of a narrative strategy that he describes as an *avant la lettre* representation of *mauvaise foi*, to outline a strategy of representing consciousness that anticipates Wallace's depictions of consciousness in *Infinite Jest*. As a whole, *Antinomies of Realism* describes several narrative features that when read together help us see the contradictions Jameson believes create the structural possibility of realism in the 19th century novel. In his introduction, for instance, Jameson outlines both a negative function of realism, in its early stages, and a positive function, as it nears the turn into modernism. In the negative case, Jameson sees the marks of enlightenment and secularization in the early realist novel as demythologizing past belief systems; then, "later on, when the realistic novel begins to discover (or if you prefer, to construct) altogether new kinds of subjective experiences (from Dostoevsky to Henry James), the negative social function begins to weaken, and demystification finds itself transformed into defamiliarization and the renewal of perception" (Jameson *Antinomies* 4). Jameson's subsequent analyses of particular moments in realism's history then model this structure of simultaneous negation and assertion in specific works of realism. For example, in his sixth chapter, "George Eliot and the *Mauvaise Foi*," the reading that is of significance for my account of Wallace's fiction, Jameson finds a negation of melodramatic evil in Eliot's novels– that is, a negation of evil in the sense of an extra-human cause for bad deeds. Eliot

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> afact, when myth and ritual and the other tokens of a lived community have died out, that the nuclear family is born to mediate the levels of the private or individual (the newborn child) and the public or social (society as a whole). (Dowling 31-32)

Dowling acknowledges that this "is to historicize Freud at a quite superficial level," but for the purposes of seeing our terms of analysis as they are produced from History as changing frameworks of human understanding, this provides a clear example.

replaces this mystical force with a more psychological way of accounting for the bad behavior of her morally compromised characters without resorting to what Jameson calls the evil of the other.

Though he says Eliot's representation of *mauvaise foi* anticipates Jean-Paul Sartre's elaboration of the concept, its deeper significance in Jameson's history has less to do with Sartre than with an ideological turn away from ethics in the 19th century–a demystification of the binary between self and other–that echoes the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. That Eliot and Nietzsche are, at least on the surface, such different-seeming figures in our understanding of the second half of the 19th century is important for Jameson's project and consistent with the structural analysis described above, i.e. Jameson is able to unite Eliot and Nietzsche in an ideological project by a process of deduction that moves from the primary narrative of his Marxist history to the specificity of this one feature of Eliot's art. In Jameson's history, morality becomes more individuated, as a consequence of capitalism's development, which then puts pressure on the development of individual responsibility because of the demystification of Europe's older ethical systems.

In "George Eliot and the *Mauvaise Foi*," Jameson most carefully examines the historical novel *Romola*, which Eliot stages against the backdrop of the rise and fall of Catholic reformer Girolamo Savonarola in 15th century Florence. Jameson claims, "the moralizing style with which [Eliot] renders and represents inner movements and reactions…can be identified as a strategy for weakening the hold of ethical systems and values as such, and ultimately as a move consistent with modern denunciations of the ethical binary very much in the spirit of Nietzsche or Sartre" (*Antinomies* 184). Eliot's

novel, according to Jameson, moves beyond good and evil, as the thought of the famous existentialists did. This occurs in part through her narrative rendering of *mauvaise foi*, which depicts how her characters think themselves into committing bad deeds. The figure who embodies this most clearly in *Romola* is Tito Melema, though Jameson says his analysis of this character anticipates Eliot's fuller deployment of *mauvaise foi* in her characterizations of *Middlemarch*'s Casaubon and Bulstrode.

In Tito, the rationalizing power of bad faith directs his mind toward the removal of good action as a viable choice. Shipwrecked and travelling through Italy as the novel opens, we meet Tito overrun by his circumstances and sleeping against a building in Florence. Tito's physical beauty and wit soon win him a place in the best society of Florence, and he trades on his status to move between the two major political currents of that moment: Savonarola's populist movement for religious and political reform and the aristocratic desires of the Medici and their allies. The fly in the ointment of Tito's prospects is the survival of his similarly shipwrecked father, Baldassare, who, unknown to Tito, arrives in Florence as a captive-turned-slave months after Tito's own arrival. His father's escape brings Baldassare directly into Tito's path, who, terrified, denies his father and declares him an unknown madman. Afterwards, thinking over his reaction and his future behavior, as well as trying to think of a way to avoid the revenge that he knows his father will seek, Tito convinces himself that the denial of his father was 1) unconscious and 2) that it necessitates his investment in the lie:

> But to have told that falsehood [intentionally] would have required perfect self-command in the moment of a compulsive shock: [in the moment, Tito] seemed to have spoken without preconception: the words had leaped forth like a sudden birth that had been begotten and nourished in the darkness. [Now, after the fact,] Tito was experiencing that inexorable law of human souls, that we prepare ourselves for sudden deeds by the

> reiterated choices of good or evil which gradually determines character. [Thus, Tito decided that] there was but one chance for him now; the chance of Baldassare's failure in finding his revenge. (Eliot 222-223)

Tito is not innately evil; rather, he makes choices in thought that place his own interests and welfare before others. Over time, this predilection sets the circuitry of his mind to make ever more self-centered choices. Tito's purposeful advancement in Florentine society thereby prepares him for the renunciation of his father in the shocking moment of his appearance; that renunciation then creates a set of consequences for retraction that Tito cannot face. The sedimentation of Tito's choices, in Jameson's reading of Eliot, represents an "infection" that works against the health of the social whole that she represents in her novels. Placed within the larger disorder of Florence in this period, history becomes a space to give expression to the contradictions of Eliot's moment, as she must account for poisonous behavior in her world without resorting to a mythological evil that she has strove to demystify.

Thus, in Jameson's account, Eliot's development of *mauvaise foi* ups the stakes for seeing ethics as a historically-produced framework, and it represents a decrease in the hold of orthodox notions of right and wrong in the intellectual history of 19th century Europe. By construing Eliot as replacing the narrative form of fundamental evil in the realist novel with *mauvaise foi*, what appears as the obsessive morality of her fiction turns out to be an important step in the overthrow of "structures of power and domination." Jameson therefore reconsiders Nietzsche's comment about Eliot being a "little moralistic female" whose thought was overpowered by a tendency in English culture.[18] The Christianity of the English, in Nietzsche's understanding, was a defunct

[18] In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche wrote about the compensatory attitude that the English, in general, and Eliot, in particular, display in their loss of religion: "they are rid of the Christian God and now believe all

ethical system, and he saw Eliot's fiction as governed by its remnant morality. Jameson does not so much disagree with this assessment as conflate Nietzsche's historical significance with Eliot's. Jameson writes,

> [Eliot's fiction] is the moment at which the question of evil and the form-problem of villains must fatally return. For it is no longer with the centrality of heroes and heroines that we need be concerned here, but rather with Eliot's other moralizing project (in fact identical with Nietzsche's anti-moralizing one), namely her intent to persuade us that there are no villains and that evil does not exist. (*Antinomies* 121-122)

What Jameson does here is suggest that as it develops, realism's viability as a vehicle for storytelling depends on the concept of evil to counterbalance (and antagonize) the struggle of its heroes and heroines. Thus, if Eliot is to remove the conception of evil from her fiction's world, a compensatory mechanism for accounting for why there are bad people in her fiction becomes necessary. This is *mauvaise foi*, of course, with its self-deceiving enslavement of reason and its representation of the individual's corruption.

Like Jameson, Wallace uses something like a method of structural analysis in his critique of US culture. Each specific feature of his thinking fits into a larger account of our fall into solipsism. The commodification of time in *Infinite Jest* makes us feel lost, outside of any historical narrative. The commodification of irony in "E Unibus Pluram" unmoors fiction writers in a valueless ocean. In this way, the particulars of Wallace's fiction are deduced from a sense of decline from the moment of postmodern disengagement that Wallace criticizes above, when artists and intellectuals ignored their responsibility to serve as authority figures for their culture. My argument in the rest of

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the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality. That is an English consistency; we do not wish to hold it against little moralistic females a la Eliot. In England one must rehabilitate oneself after every little emancipation from theology by showing in a veritably awe-inspiring manner what a moral fanatic one is. That is the penance they pay there. (Nietzsche).

this section is that Wallace therefore tries to make his reader feel the need for a cultural authority that operates outside the self. He does this, for instance, through the coordinated depictions of bad and good faith described below. For example, though bad faith operates as a form of self-deception in *Infinite Jest*, as in *Romola*, Wallace depicts it as learned from the culture that his characters occupy. There is corruption in all of the novel's society's levels. The political class's power depends on caricatured acts chosen through petty and ridiculous thought processes. The upper-middle class is stymied by the contradiction between their professional success and the disorder of their personal lives. And those who have fallen to the bottom of the social order are completely hobbled by addiction and try, to greater and lesser degrees of success, to rehabilitate themselves through 12 Step programs. *Infinite Jest*'s society thereby appears to be determinative of the individuals who occupy it: those who exhibit bad faith are simply behaving according to social norms.

Thus, if Eliot sought a way to represent immorality in her storytelling without resorting to evil, and if bad faith is the norm in the society Wallace portrays, his narrative challenge in *Infinite Jest* was finding a way to represent sources of goodness in a corrupt society. There are, in fact, two such sources in the novel. First, there is the simpler and seemingly innate goodness of Mario Incandenza, modeled on Alyosha from *The Brothers Karamazov*, who enjoys a profound and loving disposition toward the world.[19] The second source of goodness in *Infinite Jest* is more common but harder won; it is that

[19] For a reading of the ways Wallace structured *Infinite Jest* on *The Brothers Karamazov*, see Timothy Jacobs' "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." In his reading, Jacobs also incorporates Joseph Frank's multi-volume analysis of Dostoevsky, which Wallace reviewed in an essay that appears in his second collection of essays, *Consider the Lobster*, as "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky."

which is produced by the fellowship of AA, which functions in the novel as a community whose primary purpose is to teach members the value of community.[20] In Wallace's rendering, long-term members of AA teach newcomers to dedicate their lives to the fellowship through a number of strategies centered on the 12 Steps. Thus, one of the primary practices of this educational process occurs through sponsorships. Sponsors offer both stories about their personal struggles and access to the standard formula for recovery that AA prescribes. For instance, when one of the novel's main characters, Don Gately, first joins AA, his sponsor is a character named Eugenio Martinez. Martinez counsels Gately on the need for those in recovery to genuinely want to take the advice of the fellowship:

> The bitch of the thing is you have to *want* to [do what you are told]. If you don't *want* to do as you're told…it means that your own personal will is still in control, and Eugenio Martinez over at Ennet House never tires of pointing out that your personal will is the web your Disease sits and spins in, still. The will you call your own ceased to be yours as of who knows how many Substance-drenched years ago. It's shot through with the spidered fibrosis of your Disease. [Martinez's] own experience's term for the Disease is: *The Spider*. you have to Starve The Spider: you have to want to take the suggestions, want to abide by the traditions of anonymity, humility, surrender to the Group conscience. (Wallace *Infinite* 357)

Martinez's metaphor for the "Disease" of addiction establishes AA's understanding of the addict's consciousness, as even in the best case scenario, divided. As Martinez says, the self-centered desire of the addict (and the broader US culture of *Infinite Jest*) is

[20] The contrast between these forms of goodness is instructive. Mario appears as an ideal who Wallace meticulously describes but offers no real understanding of, opting instead to treat him as a sanctified figure. Mario is granted the ability to heal people suffering from disillusionment. Then, all parts of the worldlier addicts who recover their lives through AA are described in great detail. We get an intimate sense not only of what choices they make but why they make those choices and what amount of their psychic reserves they needed to do so. This contrast shows up in other places too. For instance, in a description of a student who does not feel a need to drink or take drugs but who will try them as a unique experience, the narrative of *Infinite Jest* claims that it simply cannot explain why some people are like this. The effect of this contrast, at the level of the novel, is that the book pulses with the question, "In a world like this, how could you not be fallen?"

always there, but what AA offers is the guidance of a second voice not grounded in the individual but the community. The key to sobriety, Martinez implies, is a vigilance about which voice is in control in any moment. This advice dovetails with the larger principles of AA that appear in the famous 12 Steps, particularly those that call for the addict to admit their powerlessness over their addictions. Pairing this internal struggle of the divided self with Wallace's larger depiction of the novel's US society as fundamentally solipsistic, it becomes clear that AA operates in *Infinite Jest* as a counter culture that resists the solipsism of the nation by practicing intense forms of community investment. The opening gambit of this strategy is the establishment of the community's authority as a site of valuable advice, which work we see Martinez carrying out through his advice to Gately.

Now that we can see that AA nominates itself as a reliable authority for finding sobriety that addicts should elect to follow, it becomes apparent that Wallace's coordinated use of good and bad faith in *Infinite Jest* shows the success and failure of AA's efforts to enter the will of its new members. Success here is predicated on AA's ability to convince the addict to be honest about their powerlessness and submit to the fellowship's guidance. Thus, by first examining Wallace's representation of the bad faith of *Infinite Jest*'s most loathsome character, we will see how self-deception appears as a kind of mental slavery in the novel. Then, turning to Wallace's representation of good faith in Don Gately's storyline, I will argue that Wallace's object in these representations of consciousness was to heroize an internal struggle to place the voice of the group before the voice of the self in one's consciousness.

In the first case, Wallace uses bad faith to stage the consciousness of Randy Lenz, a cocaine addict whose need to "resolve" the tension of his anxiety leads him to murder animals in the area around the halfway house where he temporarily lives. Addicted to the violence of this killing, Lenz's acts grow more and more extreme as he moves to larger and larger animals, progressing from rats, to cats, and finally to dogs, murdering them in increasingly baroque ways. As anticipated in Martinez's account of the addict's two-voiced consciousness, Wallace uses the pairing of Lenz's self-justification for his drug use and AA's advocacy for sobriety to create his narrative of Lenz's consciousness:

> Lenz has gotten high on organic cocaine two or three, maybe half a dozen times tops, secretly, since he came into Ennet House in the summer, just enough times to keep him from going totally out of his fucking mind, utilizing lines from the private emergency stash he kept in…Bill James's gargantuan Large-Print *Principles of Psychology and the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*. Such…cocaine-ingestion this occasional and last resort is such a marked reduction of Use & Abuse for Lenz that it's a bonerfied miracle and clearly constitutes as much miraculous sobriety as total abstinence would be for another person without Lenz's unique sensitivities and psychological makeup and fucking intolerable daily stresses and difficulty unwinding, and he accepts his monthly chips with a clear conscience and a head unmuddled by doubting: he knows he's sober. (543)

The reader is continually reminded by characters who are not Lenz that AA militates against the assumption that any one person or instance of addiction is unique. By making all addictions equal in the eyes of its members, AA seeks to interrupt the process whereby we build exceptions for ourselves out of our individuality, as when Lenz claims to have "unique sensitivities and psychological makeup." Further, the two-part consciousness that Eugenio Martinez describes above is apparent here, as Wallace shows both Lenz's desire for cocaine and his internally-professed desire for sobriety, but it is significant that the voice of Lenz's addiction is not in conflict with the voice of AA. The two have worked

out a compromise in Lenz's mind ("he accepts his monthly chips with a clear conscience and a head unmuddled by doubting"), which is to say that Lenz has appropriated the voice of AA for his self-deception. This appropriation mirrors the appropriations of irony and time discussed in the previous section. We can therefore see how Wallace frames Lenz and the other unrecovered addicts of his novel as microcosms of the disordered society they occupy. The consequences of this bad faith in Lenz's story include his need to kill larger and larger animals and Don Gately's being shot in his effort to protect Lenz. Ultimately, in *Infinite Jest*'s plot, Lenz becomes a victim of *Infinite Jest* the movie, destroyed by an addiction stronger still than his need for cocaine.

Unlike in his representations of bad faith, Wallace's representations of good faith are much more conflicted. This conflict appears as a torturous sliding back and forth between desire and resistance to desire. For instance, Gately entered AA as a Demerol addict, and after he is shot defending Lenz, he feels sustained spikes of desire for Demerol that vie with his internalization of AA's prescriptions for control over his will. Thus, in his hospital bed after refusing pain medication, Gately's consciousness stages this struggle:

> He heard the singsong voice [of his doctor] promising about increasing discomfort. His shoulder beat like a big heart, and the pain was sickeninger than ever. No single second was past standing. Memories of good old Demerol rose up, clamoring to be Entertained. The thing in Boston AA is they try to teach you to accept occasional cravings, the sudden thoughts of the Substance; they tell you that sudden Substance-cravings will rise unbidden in a true addict's mind like bubbles in a toddler's bath…The thing about Demerol wasn't just the womb-warm buzz of a serious narcotic. It was more like the, what, the aesthetics of the buzz. (890)

Each of these sentences arrives from a unique source in Gately's experience. The singsong voice is that of his doctor who keeps encouraging him to take something

for his pain. The shoulder is where Gately was shot. The Demerol memories come from his past as an addict. Etc. What is significant here is that, unlike in Lenz's consciousness, Gately's desire does not colonize his mind and create an interior monologue as it does in Lenz's head; rather, Gately retains the desire to discriminate between the different voices in his head, which is part of the directive he was given by Eugenio Martinez for keeping "The Spider" at bay. Thus, the heroism of Gately is of a unique sort, as Wallace designs *Infinite Jest* to valorize his desire to do as he is told and to remain conscious of the distinction between what he wants and the prescriptions of the "Group conscience" that AA has taught him to adopt.

It is significant for Wallace that AA practices such an invasive method on its members, drilling into the bedrock of how they see and think about the world and convincing them to accept strong limits on how they will allow themselves to think in the future. The extremity of AA's method gave Wallace a hopeful insight into a positive role for narrative, if he could turn *Infinite Jest* to the same task, that of creating a defense in the reader against postmodern US culture. As we saw in the previous section, one of the novel's global parallels to these interventions into the reader's consciousness appears in the case of subsidized time, where we are challenged not to fall into the trap of timelessness that Wallace lays. In this light, we can see why representations of good and bad faith would interest him: bad faith in Wallace's work is a self-deceived individualism that is actually a permutation of US culture; and good faith gives Wallace a way to valorize AA's effort to govern members by teaching them to want to behave according to

the operation of a tradition that has been designed to hold a community together, in a society that has forgotten the value of community.

A Novel of Tendency

One of the problems Jameson sees in novels that claim to offer a means toward political change is that the world they portray does not match the fate they promise. This section will begin by looking at an attack on aesthetic claims that Jameson makes in the last chapter of *Antinomies of Realism*. He grounds this attack on a reading of the historical novel *Cloud Atlas*, where he sees an inconsistency between the novel's depiction of the violence of history and its elision of that violence in an ending that grants freedom to its characters. I will respond to Jameson's attack by arguing that the problems he raises are actually problems of narrative design and not representative of a necessary aesthetic limit. I will then argue Wallace addresses those same problems in *Infinite Jest* through his attention to the details of his narrativization of consciousness, as we saw in the last section's depictions of good and bad faith, which work toward the goal of rejuvenating our faith in community-based forms of authority. Finally, in the last step of this chapter, I will show how Wallace refuses to conclude the narrative that *Infinite Jest* begins, choosing instead to move backwards in time, showing neither that the United States of the novel collapses into the solipsism it diagnoses nor that its prescriptions create a better, alternative future. That is, instead of the certainty of an ending that would tie *Infinite Jest* to a political outcome it cannot create in the reader's world, Wallace forces us to interpret *Infinite Jest*'s meaning through trajectories of consciousness and behavior. Thus, I will argue that *Infinite Jest* can be considered a Novel of Tendency that,

though it prescribes both a collective response to the culture it diagnoses and a softening of our resistance to the notion of a "Group conscience," also gives the reader the choice of whether to honor those prescriptions or not.

In the last chapter of *Antinomies of Realism*, "The Historical Novel Today, Or, Is It Still Possible?," Jameson specifically addresses the problem that our inability to see beyond our moment in postmodernism creates for the historical novel. Using *Cloud Atlas* as his final text of the chapter, he argues that despite telling six stories that are set in six different historical periods, *Cloud Atlas* ultimately only recreates our sense of the present and its inability to imagine potential futures. Thus, each is a valuable tale because they all describe the imprisonment of history, but then each inconceivably ends happily in freedom for its main character. Though there is much Jameson likes about *Cloud Atlas*, such as its representation of the history of writing materials that connects the stories, this contradiction between the novel's philosophies of history reveals the novel to be trapped in our postmodern moment, like any other work of historical fiction. Thus, Jameson says, one of the novel's philosophies tells the truth about human history (i.e. it is a history of suffering), while the other looks beyond the veil of the near-future to end in an unaccountable resolution of the novel's animating struggles. This contradiction elicits Jameson's conclusion to *Antinomies of Realism*, in which he writes that fiction cannot do anything but remind us of our impulses and the imaginative worlds they create:

> The aestheticians return again and again to the problem of the extra-artistic and referential dimensions of art, in its shabby ideological messages and its altogether insufficient and rather pitiful calls to this or that action, this or that indignation…this or that coming to consciousness. But the moment of the aesthetic is not that call but rather its reminder that all those impulses exist: the revolutionary Utopian one full as much as the immense disgust with human evil, Brecht's "temptation of the good," the will to escape and to be free, the delight in craftsmanship and production

> [etc.] Art has no function but to reawaken all these differences at once in an ephemeral instance; and the historical novel no function save to resurrect for one more brief moment their multitudinous coexistence in History itself. (Jameson *Antinomies* 313)

This claim that art reminds us of buried impulses is Jameson's steady refrain. Literature's content cannot be a means to the reinvention of the subject because aesthetics is not the call for "coming to consciousness." Artists can give expression to both the experienced contradictions of living a life that is subject to history and the impulse to freedom, but they cannot create freedom themselves.

In light of this proposed aesthetic limit, I want to return to a moment near the end of "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," when Jameson raises a challenge he says has been passed down to us from Marx:

> We are somehow to lift our minds to a point at which it is possible to understand that capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst. The lapse from this austere dialectical imperative into the more comfortable stance of the taking of moral positions is inveterate and all too human: still, the urgency of the subject demands that we make at least some effort to think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together. (Jameson *Postmodernism* 47)

For Jameson, as he outlines in "On Interpretation," it is the political unconscious that creates both moral and artistic expression in compensation for our loss of true human community. Thus, the forward march of history is not so much immune to art and morality as they are epiphenomenal to the structure of the evolving means of production under capitalism. We can only say that artists intimate to their audiences the submerged desires and impulses that remain unfulfilled by this moment of capitalist hegemony. Thus, as the historical development that the postmodern period represents flattens our historical understanding, we can access a wealth of knowledge about other times and

places, but that knowledge is of little use in the project of creating alternative forms of life because we cannot see how historical subjectivities were substantively different from our own. Jameson therefore writes at the end of *Antinomies of Realism* that apart from the freedom that *Cloud Atlas* imagines for its main characters, the future social orders it can conjure are only two:

> Dystopia and regression, the world dictatorship and the reversion to savagery, *1984* and *Road Warrior*…*Cloud Atlas* thereby fulfills one of the great indispensable functions of ideological analysis: namely to show the contradictions in which we are ourselves imprisoned, the opposition beyond which we cannot think. These alternatives [of dystopia and regression] are today and for the moment the only ways in which we can imagine our future, the future of late capitalism; and it is only by shattering their twin dominion that we might conceivably be able again to think politically and productively, to envision a condition of genuine revolutionary difference, to begin once again to think Utopia. (*Antinomies* 308-309)

Jameson argues here that all of our imaginings about the future tend toward a libertarian state of all against all or a dystopian state that dominates its subjects. The properly revolutionary goal then would be to come up with something else, a different end of political work (a Utopia) that would, according to Jameson's structural way of thinking, order the particulars of society around a radically different principal than the individuation of our postmodern present. Thus, Jameson's prescription for our thinking is to work toward another vision of subjectivity that he has argued we cannot think because of the historical blindness of our moment. The result of this is that Jameson's historical analysis produces a genuflection toward a future we can neither help create nor forecast; in fact, the stasis Jameson's analysis seems to produce is more profound than the apocalyptic thought of Derrida and Barth at this chapter's beginning.

As in Jameson's powerful analysis of the limits of what we can see and think, Wallace understands his postmodern moment as at an impasse. But rather than accepting a disconnection between his fiction and political work, Wallace sought to intertwine narrative, history, and politics in a process of social revision that begins in the manipulation of his reader's mind through narrative. That is, I understand the coordination of *Infinite Jest*'s elements, such as its representations of good and bad faith, as, like all media, productive of changes in the mind that interacts with them. Raising his consciousness of this process through his analysis of first postmodern fiction and second broadcast television, Wallace understood the question of political futures to be one that begins in practices, such as those of reading and writing. This is not to discount the structural analysis of Jameson's criticism. Wallace uses a structural method in his reading of US culture. But when he sees how parts work within the framework of a commodified capitalist culture, Wallace tries to to create new structural possibilities in the US by changing the functions of its particular elements in his fiction. Thus, Wallace's rendering of Alcoholics Anonymous in *Infinite Jest* models a process in which the whole of a person's life (Don Gately's) takes on a new meaning not because he reconceives of himself as a utopian, drug-free whole; on the contrary, Gately's character always feels lost in the forest of his potential choices and is forced to put his faith in the group directives of AA. Thus, by small prescribed changes to his daily life, such as his cultivation of a desire to follow Martinez's advice to cultivate a desire to follow AA's guidance, Wallace creates a method for the development of a

community-based way of life that provides an alternative to the solipsism of US culture that he complains so loudly about.

Finally, whether an evolving sense of community-based morality can historically underwrite the political engagement of novelists is an open question. More important for my interests here is the way that we structure the relationship between quotidian experiences and their extension in our political history so that novelists and critics avoid the contradiction of the mimetic account of human suffering in history that is magically resolved in the sudden arrival of freedom that Jameson criticizes in *Cloud Atlas*. This contradiction is what Wallace attempted to work out between the endings of his first two novels, and I want to offer *Infinite Jest*'s ending as a narrative innovation that I identify as Wallace's "Novel of Tendency." We will see that this narrative innovation seeks a way past the problem ending of *Cloud Atlas* that Jameson identifies.

Wallace's development of his Novel of Tendency begins with *The Broom of the System*. Recalling our previous discussion of that novel: after the characters return from the abortive trip into the desert, a comedic gathering takes place at Lenore Beadsman's workplace, the lobby of the Bombardini Building, where Lenore is a telephone operator who routes incoming calls. Throughout the novel, errant calls intended for places not in the building have been fielded by Lenore and her coworkers, and in this final scene in the lobby, a repairman discovers what is causing the confusion: the "lines are bleeding calls into each other because somehow your tunnel's ninety-eight point six goddamn degrees" (*The Broom* 457). This human heat is the same heat that Gramma Lenore needs her environment to be at all times because she cannot moderate her body temperature. Upon this discovery, the perplexing chapter ends and Wallace immediately cuts to four, quick,

alternating scenes, two of which feature a televangelist program hosted by a talking parrot, while the other two are a dialogue between Lenore's spurned lover and his former neighbor who he has had a crush on since her childhood. The novel ends mid-sentence, with her touching his leg, light coming out of the space between her fingers, and the spurned lover saying, "I'm a man of my" (*467)*. Though we know "word" is the last word of the novel, it goes unsaid, and the interpretation of this moment has been a site of attention for Wallace's critics. Boswell, for instance, argues that *The Broom of the System* is a work of metafiction and the novel's ending holds the "system" of language open, refusing closure (*Understanding* 63). As Claire Hayes-Brady contends though, the metafiction of the novel "is superseded by a much more pressing concern: how to actually live in a linguistically unstable world…*Broom* is more a work that interrogates metafiction [and] finds it wanting. [The] whole function of the novel is to blow open closed communication systems" (88). Thus, Hayes-Brady expands Boswell's reading by taking *The Broom of the System* as not simply a work of metafiction but a critique of its separation from the world, though both critics agree that the novel promotes opening systems of communication (in particular, as a response to the logical positivism of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*). On the other hand, Fest offers two views of this last line of the novel, the first of which is that we know what the last word of the novel is. We therefore read the last line of the book and finish it as Wallace wants us to (Fest "Then Out" 289).

It is to this latter reading that I am most sympathetic. That is, *The Broom of the System* provides the momentum for readers to finish the novel for themselves, and I find the certainty of that conclusion more provocative than the idea that not finishing a cliché

represents the opening of the system of language. This sense is strengthened by the non-ending of *Infinite Jest*. Asked to explain why the novel does not have a traditional ending in an online chat, Wallace claimed, "There is an ending as far as I'm concerned. Certain kinds of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an 'end' can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book's failed for you" ("Live"). Thus, the difference for me between Wallace's ending in *Infinite Jest* and the end of *The Broom of the System* is one of stakes. While you can work out what is happening with Gramma Lenore's disappearance, what role Lenore now needs to play in the creation of her own meaning in the world, and what the last word in the novel is supposed to be, the novel lacks the gravity of life and death that *Infinite Jest* accesses. In this sense, I understand *The Broom of the System* to precede *Infinite Jest* in Wallace's career as a Novel of Tendency, which is to say the second novel is like the first in that it is designed to carry itself to a completion that is prescribed by its narrative trajectories.

For example, *Infinite Jest* ends with the novel's main character, Don Gately, awaking on a beach. This moment, it turns out, is part of a flashback in the storyline of Don Gately's development through Alcoholics Anonymous. Before becoming sober, Gately lived a malicious existence that relied on the weaknesses of others to satisfy his addictions. After a traumatic incident that led to the violent death of his friend, Gately joined AA, which helped him change his life by militating against the self-rationalization that his addiction abetted. By ending the novel at Gately's moment of crisis, Wallace shows him reliving (i.e. facing) his greatest failure in addiction, which is to say that Wallace fictionalizes Gately's recovery process as the work of taking responsibility for

his personal history, which requires Gately to relive the ongoing catastrophe that was his pre-sober life. Succeeding flashbacks therefore structure a second narrative in the last sections of the novel: as Gately accrues more and more sober time in the present-day of the narrative, he confronts more and more difficult (and therefore more repressed) memories of his addiction as it originates in his childhood. In these flashbacks, Gately recalls his mother's relationship with a physically abusive military policeman; he remembers drinking the remains of his mom's nightly bottle of Stolichnaya; he recalls losing his chances for a football career beyond high school because of his drunkenness, his spiraling addiction to narcotics, and his mother being taken away after aspirating blood in their living room. Finally, Gately remembers his role in the torturous death of his friend, and it is this moment that he wakes up from on the beach. Thus, the novel's conclusion is the attainment of what AA would call Gately's bottom, in which he relives his greatest betrayal of his former community as the price he has to pay for the violence of his history. This reliving through sober good faith in the hospital room recovering from his gunshot wound validates Gately's entrance into AA as a community, as it means that he has faced the extremity of his solipsistic past and survived it thanks to the voice of Group conscience that speaks in his head. Within the context of an individualistic society like the United States that uses disengagement from politics as a tool for the further disempowerment of its citizens, which is the society Wallace provides in *Infinite Jest*, Gately's recovery becomes an act of political rebellion.

As we will further explore in the next chapter through what I will describe as Wallace's representation of the promise of ideology, recovery from addiction in *Infinite Jest*'s AA is made possible by a long-term, day-to-day project of changing the structure

of an addicted person's mind. Thus, Wallace highlights those aspects of AA that pertain specifically to attacking solipsism or the self-centered ways addicts see the world. By extending the novel out against the political backdrop of an international apocalypse, the green shoots of Gately's recovery show up in the difference between choices directed toward self-interest and those directed toward community, as Gately's near-death in addiction melts into his role as a hero that *Infinite Jest* valorizes for his ability to acquiesce to the authority of AA. Thus, Gately's capacity to make choices by the prescriptions of a "Group conscience," to face his past, and to shape his future in relation to those around him is real and practical political work. To disassociate the social diagnosis of *Infinite Jest* from the individual actions of the novel's characters is to attack the heart of the novel.

CHAPTER 3: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, *INFINITE JEST*, AND THE PROMISE OF IDEOLOGY

> A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside of it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.
>
> -Ludwig Wittgenstein
> *Philosophical Investigations*

David Foster Wallace's second novel, *Infinite Jest*, begins by depicting the isolation of one protagonist and ends by depicting the isolation of another. In its first scene, Hal Incandenza sits in an office of the University of Arizona and fails to answer questions about his academic integrity because he is trapped within himself. Then, in the novel's conclusion, Don Gately awakes on a beach after failing to prevent his friend's murder because he was too high on narcotics to help. Borrowing its closing as a metaphor, these are the low tides that the rest of *Infinite Jest*'s narrative flows and ebbs between, and the success of the novel depends on whether our response to these scenes of isolation changes in the interval of its pages.

The source of our change is travelling through the world of *Infinite Jest*, which is a United States plagued by addiction, depression, and terrorism. Wallace uses this world to show how the isolation its protagonists suffer results from the training of their daily behaviors. Hal Incandenza's inability to speak comes from the work of his education and the US popular culture he is immersed in. Don Gately's addiction results from the alcoholism of his early family life, his experiments with drugs in high school, and the combined regimen of self-medication these experiences create. The difference between the two narratives is that while Hal's story is one of deepening isolation, through which he falls into the solipsism of the particular US culture *Infinite Jest* describes, Gately's

story is about how he escapes addiction through the community-based prescriptions offered by Alcoholics Anonymous.

In the previous chapter, I argued *Infinite Jest* uses Gately's membership in AA to model a way of turning an addict's mind away from the dependency-enabling individualism of US culture. To this end, I analyzed two features of the novel: first, I showed how Gately's recovery in AA demonstrates the value of softening one's resistance to collective forms of authority; second, I described how the non-ending of *Infinite Jest* tests the reader's openness to such prescriptions by their willingness to interpret the novel's conclusion according to the trajectories of its storylines. As a Novel of Tendency, then, I argued *Infinite Jest* leaves readers to follow or ignore Wallace's prescription to find active and constructive means for responding to the atomizing forces of a capitalist US culture.

In this chapter, I build out from these claims to describe how Wallace rooted the trajectories of his characters' narratives in a meticulous account of their daily habits. Specifically, this chapter will show how Wallace uses descriptions of his characters' daily lives to model the production of what I will later describe as an Althusserian form of ideology. For instance, in the case of Hal, his enrollment at the Enfield Tennis Academy that his family runs structures his life for individual achievement in such a way that the academy's emphasis on continual self-transcendence not only isolates Hal from the people around him, but it also teaches him a skeptical ideology that attacks options for the reorganization of his life. On the other hand, Gately's narrative is broken in two: the story of his past describes how his childhood in a violent and alcoholic family leads to a career as a tough in Boston MA's underworld of sports betting; the second half of his

story then describes his time in AA, where he learns to reorient his life as a staff member at a halfway house for addiction recovery. Reading these narratives against one another, I will argue in this chapter that Wallace uses Hal's and Gately's storylines to show not only how ideology can destroy individuals (as in the case of Hal) but how it can also be used for the productive restructuring of habit (as in the case of Gately's membership in AA). It is particularly to the realization of this latter possibility, I argue, that *Infinite Jest* highlights a promise of ideology for its reader, which is the hope that changes in daily behavior can offer relief from the solipsistic despair that permeates Wallace's second novel.

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Suggesting that *Infinite Jest* responds to the individualism of US culture by promoting a community alternative modelled on AA places my reading in a fraught critical space. This is nowhere more evident than in the current literary dustup being staged in *Orbit*, an online journal dedicated to American literature. In a recent special issue focused exclusively on Wallace's work, *Orbit* published an article by Edwin Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts that accuses him of using the idea of sincerity in his writing as a cover for reestablishing the authority of white males at the center of US culture.[21] This accusation is intended to undermine the status of Wallace's literary project by impugning the motivations of his infamous call for a new group of American writers bold enough to become "anti-rebels" and "endorse single-entendre principles," like sincerity (*A Supposedly*).[22] Thus, read against the account I provided above, what I describe as Wallace's sincere turn to ideology as a tool of community building would be

[21] See "White Guys: Questioning *Infinite Jest*'s New Sincerity."
[22] See Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction."

read by Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts as a veiled bid for the reestablishment of white male hegemony in US culture. Beyond its attack on *Infinite Jest*, their reading also seeks to shame a popular vein of literary criticism that reads Wallace and certain of his contemporaries as part of a movement called the "New Sincerity." In particular, Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts try to dismantle the arguments of Adam Kelly, the critic who has been most vocal about Wallace's place in the New Sincerity, because they see Kelly as shoring up Wallace's commitment to exclusionary politics through an unambiguous endorsement of the fictional project in "E Unibus Pluram."

In response, this August, Kelly himself took to the online space of *Orbit* to defend his work, arguing Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts oversimplify what both he and Wallace are trying to do.[23] In Kelly's assessment, the disagreement between him and Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts is over whether or not we should read Wallace's second novel as his manifesto "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction" suggests, to be a demonstration of how principled fiction can serve as a literary response to the crisis of atomization Wallace diagnosed in US culture. Essentially, Kelly defends his work by showing how Wallace's fiction is more ambiguous than his nonfiction, and what he (Kelly) is interested in is how Wallace's fiction problematizes sincerity as a response to the commodification of US culture. The question runs: in a capitalist society that everywhere teaches subjects to doubt the motives of what they see and read, can literature establish itself as a repository of trust from which we might build an alternative, less suspicious, form of social organization? For their part, Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts think such a commitment is farcical, or at least they believe it is farcical to claim that this is the course

[23] See "David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts."

Wallace actually pursues in his fiction because the center of *Infinite Jest*'s narrative is governed by white male protagonists. By therefore using a reading of *Infinite Jest* to reveal what they see as Wallace's complicity in misogyny and white supremacy, Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts hope to place positive accounts of his writing beyond ethical readership and stop the beating heart of Wallace's intellectual project.[24]

The irony of this situation is that Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts' reading of *Infinite Jest* relies heavily on assumptions that come directly from Wallace's work as a literary critic, particularly from his essay "E Unibus Pluram," which was published in 1993. That essay's attacks on postmodern irony and television, as well as its call for single-entendre principles, provide the terms that Wallace is often credited with fulfilling through *Infinite Jest*'s publication in 1996. Thus, for each of the essay's specific arguments, we can read corollary elements in the novel. For example, the addictive power of television Wallace explores in "E Unibus Pluram" appears in *Infinite Jest* as the film that gives the novel its title, which is a movie so entertaining that once a character has viewed it they can never again be satisfied while not watching it. Likewise, Hal Incandenza is seduced by the skeptical power that irony exercises in US culture and falls into a state of anhedonia that echoes the predicament of *avant garde* writers in "E Unibus Pluram." Finally, Don Gately uses the simple clichés of Alcohol Anonymous to escape addiction in the same way Wallace hopes single-entendre principles, sincerely promoted, might counter the ethical ambiguity capitalism cultivates in American society. Taken together, we can call Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts' use of "E Unibus Pluram" to

[24] For an earlier and, I think, more persuasive version of a similar argument about the exclusionary aspects of Wallace's writing, see Mark McGurl's "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program."

understand *Infinite Jest*'s design the standard reading of the novel. When they then claim that *Infinite Jest* idealizes Don Gately as a white male subject, their attack is premised on the belief that they are seeing through the well-meaning veneer of that reading.[25]

From my perspective, this is an uncharitable reading. Wallace's inability or unwillingness to open his fiction to a diverse range of voices is a failing, but it is also a consequence of the fact that he was one person engaging a broader national discourse. Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts's deeper point though is that Wallace wrongly assumes it is acceptable to use his limited perspective to ground a universal call for his principles. Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts then extend their indictment of Wallace to critics of the New Sincerity for abetting "violence." My concern with Kelly's decision to rebut Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts by complicating both the concept of sincerity in Wallace's fiction and the connection between "E Unibus Pluram" and *Infinite Jest* is that

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[25] Which is not to say that their claims are not grounded. Wallace, particularly in *Infinite Jest*, makes very clear the anxieties of white male authorship, and those anxieties are felt by readers. As we will see, one of Mark McGurl's problems with Wallace's third novel, *The Pale King*, is the whiteness of the IRS in Peoria IL that Wallace uses as his setting ("The Institution" 43-48); on the other hand, Wallace's attempts at writing in an African American vernacular in the "Las Meninas" section of *Infinite Jest* is often seen by readers as a crude form of blackface (*Infinite* 37-38). Here, for instance, is a recent comment on this scene from the Wallace-l listserv, an e-mail chain dedicated to Wallace's work from 15 August 2017:

> I've just been thinking about this scene, and how we in the community deal with it. Generally, it's thought of as, at best, an embarrassing failed exercise in dialect. At worst, it reveals Wallace's white privilege, even…the R word [racism], because there is only horror, ignorance, violence and abuse in the African-American world depicted, a scary world of otherness. As someone said on a Reddit thread, "Has DFW actually ever met a black person?" Another, maybe more charitable way, is to ignore the dialect, and consider the story. On those terms, it's a heartbreaking, tragic and empathetic tale– Clenette, Wardine and Reggie all with good impulses tragically trapped by the evil and dysfunction around them.

For a full discussion of the "Las Meninas" scene, see the third chapter of David Hering's *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form*, "'Seeing by Mirror-Light:' Wallace on Reflection" (79-121). Relatedly, Wallace wrote a book about 80s rap with Mark Costello called *Signifying Rappers* that explicitly discusses the anxiety Wallace feels when writing about African American music as a white man. That McGurl could complain two decades later about the total whiteness of Wallace's last novel, while Wallace's earlier readers had complained about his depictions of black culture, can be explained by the fact that Wallace became more and more reserved in his attempts at writing across gender and race as he aged, either through maturity or through the changing ways such writing is viewed–or both.

this argument threatens to create a binary situation where Wallace's nonfiction either explains his fiction or does not.

I think our arguments would be better served by reading Wallace's discrete writings as experiments in a search for ways to address his rhetorical goals. For instance, my sense is that the relationship between "E Unibus Pluram" and *Infinite Jest* should not be read as raising the question of whether or not Wallace's writings fit seamlessly together; rather, we should see both texts as part of an evolving series of attempts to imagine how literature might be used to suture the wounds of US culture. In this view, the call for sincerity in "E Unibus Pluram" can be an effort to promote a stronger sense of connection between people in US culture, which I also see as the fundamental task of *Infinite Jest*. We do not need to claim though that the two works are of the same document. Instead, we can see them as part of an iterative process Wallace directs at the problem of atomization he diagnosed in US culture. This strategy, which I have tried to follow in this chapter, allows us to hold faith with some of the ambiguity that Kelly identifies in Wallace's fiction while not ignoring the fact that that fiction is directed at the same literary project as the nonfiction.

A different problem is created when we measure *Infinite Jest* by the prescriptions of "E Unibus Pluram," such that judgments of the novel's value too easily hinge on the perceived success or failure of Wallace's attempt to offer something beyond the ironic self-reference he condemns in the essay. For example, in Mary K. Holland's "The Art's Heart's Purpose: Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," she takes Wallace's diagnosis of the inadequacy of postmodern irony in "E Unibus Pluram" as accurate, but she also argues that Wallace fails, first, to transcend the ironic

self-reference he condemns, and, then, accuses him of recapitulating the problems of fiction and culture that make his diagnosis prescient. For Holland, the problem is that Wallace fails to imagine a plausible way for his characters to escape their particular forms of involution in the novel's plot. For instance, *Infinite Jest*'s standard bearer for ironic self-reference, James O. Incandenza (Hal's father), kills himself by cooking his own head in a microwave oven. This is good, in Holland's estimation, because it enacts the patricide that Wallace demanded in his interview with Larry McCaffery in 1993, in the same journal that published "E Unibus Pluram;"[26] but then Holland develops a tendentious reading of *Infinite Jest* in which she claims Wallace fails to do better than his predecessors because she assumes that the novel wants us to believe that Don Gately succumbs to his desire for narcotics while hospitalized and in extreme pain.[27] If Gately does fail to escape his addiction, as Holland wants him to, she can argue James Incandenza becomes not only the object of Wallace's attack in *Infinite Jest* but also the

[26] See the interview with McCaffery, particularly this quote from Wallace: "If I have a real enemy, a patriarch for my patricide, it's probably Barth and Coover and Burroughs, even Nabokov and Pynchon. Because, even though their self-consciousness and irony and anarchism served valuable purposes, were indispensable for their times, their aesthetic's absorption by the U.S. commercial culture has had appalling consequences for writers and everyone else. The TV essay's ["E Unibus Pluram"] really about how poisonous postmodern irony's become. You see it in David Letterman and Gary Shandling and rap. But you also see it in fucking Rush Limbaugh, who may well be the Antichrist. You see it in T. C. Boyle and Bill Vollmann and Lorrie Moore. It's pretty much all there is to see in your pal Mark Leyner. Leyner and Limbaugh are the nineties' twin towers of postmodern irony, hip cynicism, a hatred that winks and nudges you and pretends it's just kidding."

[27] That this is an assumption is one of the more difficult parts of interpreting *Infinite Jest*. Because Wallace relies on the reader's interpretation to complete the novel–that is, because we are supposed to trace its plotlines beyond the final page (see Chapter One of this dissertation)–its interpretation becomes a matter of finding evidence in the text not merely for meaning but for the events of the story. This is one reason why I think the novel is so concerned with ideology, or how we construct the world we perceived based on our expectations, which is visible, for instance, between Holland's reading that Gately succumbs to his desire for painkillers in the hospital and my reading, as we will see, that he does not. My assertion that the events that Holland claims for her interpretation do not actually happen in the novel quickly devolves into a case of "He said; she said" because we are both writing the events of the story from our interpretation of its meaning. More immediately important though is that here Holland wants us to assume that Gately relapses because, if he does, it leads the novel back into impossible involution, so that the scorn James O. Incandenza (the novel's great failure) heaps on self-help programs forecasts Gately's (the novel's great success) failure. Behavior determines belief, which determines interpretation.

horizon of his achievement, as the novel's hero, Gately, falls to the same internal forces as the novel's postmodern stand-in:

> Wallace has managed in *Infinite Jest* the patricidal liberation of eliminating one key purveyor of self-reflexive schlock, Jim Incandenza, but has left in his place…an ill-guided and failed attempt [read: Gately's failure to fulfill AA's prescriptions] at healing [that] only begets more solipsistic mess. It still remains for Wallace to create a new paternal head to right the transgressions of the one that he has exploded" (Holland 239).

The two parts of the narcissistic loop Holland sees in the novel therefore remain unchanged: *Infinite Jest* still deploys irony in its execution; and the struggle against narcissism's various shapes proves insurmountable for even Wallace's strongest characters. Holland therefore accuses Wallace of creating a novel that runs, like his postmodern predecessors, into the same trap of irony. As such, she judges the project of forming a new criterion for serious fiction as successfully established by Wallace but also deferred by him in the same moment.

Though "E Unibus Pluram" certainly makes clear what Wallace did not want to do in *Infinite Jest*, i.e. to recreate the directionless ironies he saw in TV and certain examples of metafiction, Holland's reading of the essay offers few clues as to what the novel's positive fictional developments are. My claim is that instead of thinking about *Infinite Jest* in terms of success or failure, we should shift the conversation about the relationship between his aesthetic mission and the literature he produced to one that examines how Wallace did in fact engage in the struggle for healthy ideological living. Doing so, I argue, provides good reasons for *Infinite Jest*'s recapitulation of the narrative techniques he criticizes in "E Unibus Pluram" that Holland identifies, as it becomes clear those techniques are meant to carry the reader into the isolation of individualistic ideologies to make us feel their danger. Likewise, we can avoid making Don Gately's

narrative into a messianic test case for the novel's success if we see that it is not Alcoholics Anonymous as a program that gives Gately value; nor is his abstention from drugs to be judged as a 100% success or failure; rather, Wallace is interested in the revolution in Gately's way of seeing the world that is effected by changes in his daily habits. That is, the novel is designed to both show us the created nature of ideology and the long-term changes that can be made to the destiny of a human life through ideology's imaginative work.

The specific way I understand Wallace's representation of ideology in *Infinite Jest* is through Louis Althusser's essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," where Althusser outlines how our training as subjects creates our sense of where we belong within social wholes. Specifically, Althusser describes how we are taught from a young age to behave in ways that inspire imaginative responses to our social conditions to justify those conditions. For example, if we would normally say a religious person prays because they have faith, Althusser argues that the person of faith learns to believe through religious ritual. He delights in a quote from Pascal: "Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe" (qtd in Althusser 114). This inversion of our common understanding of how belief and behavior interact is part of Althusser's larger interrogation of how society reproduces itself. That is, he seeks to answer the question of why workers, bureaucrats, and bosses all accept their roles in capitalist society. The answer is ideology: they have produced an "imaginary relationship" to the world that hides their "real conditions of existence" (109).

Importantly, my suggestion here is not that Wallace is a Marxist or that his depictions of institutional life are entirely consistent with Althusser's thinking about

Ideological State Apparatuses; rather, my claim is that Wallace's representation of how his characters' worldviews are shaped and directed by their behaviors echoes the fundamental inversion that appears in Althusser's essay. For example, in a scene we will return to later in this chapter, Gately is told that in order to become sober he must turn his will over to a higher power, even though he does not believe in God. Gately then goes through the "ritualistic *Please* and *Thank You* prayers" each day that AA prescribes for achieving this step, and, after months of practicing this behavior, the narrative says his desire is "removed" (Wallace *Infinite* 432-434). A similar training recurs in stories throughout the novel, both in the recovery efforts of AA and in the formation of new addictions. Thus, the value of Althusser for my argument is his elucidation of a core insight that governs Wallace's portrayal of his characters, which is that it is behavior that produces what they believe.

The particular significance of ideology in *Infinite Jest*'s treatment of US culture lies in a battle against solipsism that the novel stages. That is, the United States Wallace presents is shot through with a cancerous ideology that arrives from a pervasive doubt that characters have about the relevance of other people to their lives. As we will see, this skepticism is produced by daily behaviors driven by internal problems like serious addiction. The particular shape, import, and response to solipsism on which *Infinite Jest* depends comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose work Wallace uses in a number of ways in *Infinite Jest* to support his ambition of offering a diagnosis of the problem of solipsism in US culture and then a prescription for getting beyond it.

Infinite Jest depends on Wittgenstein's work in a variety of ways. First, Wallace takes thematic inspiration from the specific tenets of Wittgenstein's early and late

philosophies, reading them, respectively, as expressions of metaphysical solipsism and its refusal. Second, he takes as the object of his narrative the kind of transformation he read in Wittgenstein's life story, which is that of a person who makes a catastrophic intellectual investment and then recovers from it. Third, he takes as a guide for his narrative representations of the experience of solipsism the work of another novelist, David Markson, whose *Wittgenstein's Mistress* fictionalizes what it would be like for the world to function through the dictates of Wittgenstein's first book of philosophy, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In short, *Infinite Jest* can be seen as a product of Wallace's sustained engagement with Wittgenstein's thought. I therefore agree with Gavin Cobb's claim that Wallace's reading of Markson's novel in "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*" [28] is a far more powerful touchstone for understanding the ideological goals of *Infinite Jest* than the more commonly sourced "E Unibus Pluram."

In particular, the essay is valuable because it reveals Wallace's impulse to apply a universal diagnosis to US culture. This becomes apparent when Wallace describes *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as a tragedy that is not about an individual's fall into solipsism but about a national ideology of solipsism that unites people who live in the United States. Wallace identifies this trait in Markson's novel through a complaint about moments where the cause of the main character's solipsism is provided by the text. This way of particularizing the novel's protagonist, Wallace believes, weakens the novel's diagnostic force:

> As a…writer I like how the novel inverts received formulae for successful fiction by succeeding least where it conforms to them most: to the precise

[28] See Cobb's *Alcoholics Polyphonous: Wittgenstein's Linguistic Philosophy in David Foster Wallace's* Infinite Jest.

> extent that [its protagonist] is presented here as circumstantially and historically unique, to just that extent is the novel's monstrous power is attenuated…For…to the extent that [the narrator] is not motivationally unique, she can be all of us, and the empty diffraction of [her] world can map or picture the desacralized and paradoxical solipsism of U.S. persons in a cattle-herd culture that worships only the Transparent I, of guiltily passive solipsists and skeptics trying to warm soft hands at the computer-enhanced fire of data in an Information Age where received image & enforced eros replace active countenance & sacral mystery as ends, value, meaning. (*Both* 107-108)

What Wallace describes here is a problem he sees in fiction that makes its characters circumstantially unique: it does not implicate the reader in the ideological problems its characters suffer. Wallace therefore argues the best parts of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* are those where Markson refuses to give his narrator a reason for her solipsism. This is because Wallace believes when solipsism is not the result of a character's particularity it can capture what it means to be born into a fallen time and place, like the contemporary United States. This is why the addiction and depression of *Infinite Jest* touch nearly every character in the novel, and those it does not touch become curiosities of the text in the same way that circus performers strike their audiences as otherworldly. If Wallace understands US culture to be plagued by an intellectual temptation Wittgenstein faced almost a century ago, it is not surprising that Wallace admires him precisely because of what he interprets in Wittgenstein's development as a thinker: Wittgenstein moved from the logical positivism (which Wallace reads as the solipsism) of the *Tractatus* to the community-establishing powers of language that appear in the *Philosophical Investigations*. And, as he moved, Wittgenstein created what Wallace sees as a heroic attack on the solipsism that had dominated the thinking of his youth. It is exactly this kind of change, fueled by the loneliness *Infinite Jest* makes its readers to feel, that

Wallace hoped his novel could guide people to, thereby making *Infinite Jest* a cipher for the ideological focus of Wittgenstein's later work. As Wallace told McCaffery,

> There's a kind of tragic fall Wittgenstein's obsessed with all the way from the *Tractatus* in '22 to the *Philosophical Investigations* in his last years. I mean a real Book-of-Genesis type tragic fall. [And] one of the things that makes Wittgenstein a real artist to me is that he realized that no conclusion could be more horrible than solipsism. And so he trashed everything he'd been lauded for in the *Tractatus* and wrote the *Philosophical Investigations*, which is the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made. (McCaffery)

Wittgenstein's tragic fall becomes the solipsistic ideology of *Infinite Jest*'s United States, and as Cobb has pointed out, *Infinite Jest*'s narrative design communicates what Wallace took to be the lived analogs to philosophical dilemmas in both Wittgenstein's early and late work. Thus, moments of deep addiction and depression–moments of solipsism–share in the same *Tractatus*-ized language that appears in *Wittgenstein*'s *Mistress*; meanwhile, moments of intersubjective communication, created by the ideological reformation of Alcoholics Anonymous, appear as the kind of linguistic community Wallace understood the *Philosophical Investigations* to promote. Thus, I see *Infinite Jest* as having two duties to its reader, that of an ideological diagnosis in Hal's narrative and a proposal for individual recovery through the reformed ideology of Gately's narrative.

The challenge of Wallace's project is exactly his admiration for what he understood as Markson's near-accomplishment in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*: that if we in the United States are truly fallen into an ideology of solipsism, what means for developing a different perspective on the world could find purchase in a culture that so often feels like a black hole of meaning and value? My suggestion is that Wallace's answer lies in the building of an alternative ideology not through argument but through habits of thought and action. The intuition here is that solipsism's power derives not from

its status as an imposed form of thought but from choices in thinking we are trained to see as exercises of free will but are actually products of a long-term cultural development. Thus, the ability for Gately to change in Alcoholics Anonymous is laudable not because of the specific beliefs of the program he follows but because of its recognition that an interruption in problems created by US culture has to occur in daily life to be successful. In its size, depth, and narrative complexity, Wallace therefore offers *Infinite Jest* as a tool for identifying what he saw as solipsistic tendencies in the reader's thought, recognizing the coherence of alternative ways of thinking, and building new, community-based ideologies from the choices we make in our minute-by-minute interpretations of the world we perceive.

The rest of this chapter is broken into three sections. Each section thematizes one facet of the argument I have laid out and then offers an account of how Wallace uses specific narrative strategies to communicate those thematics to his reader's sensibility. The first section analyzes the destruction of the novel's first protagonist, Hal Incandenza, as he falls prey to a solipsism he inherits from the structure of his daily life in childhood. I then analyze Wallace's borrowing of the *Tractatus*-ized language of David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* to communicate the individual self-destruction solipsism encourages in subjects. The second section describes Wallace's presentation of the international politics of *Infinite Jest* as symptomatic of the individual lives that appear in section one. In the ideological contrast between the United States and its neighbors, he uses distinct national cultures to present the reader with fictional antinomies designed to awaken us both to the pervasiveness of solipsism in the novel's United States and show the existence and internal coherence of alternative ideologies. Finally, section three

analyzes the narrative of Don Gately, particularly how the prescriptions of Alcoholics Anonymous force him into new daily habits that eventually produce a different, healthier ideology. At the level of narrative, Gately's story adopts the techniques described in the previous two sections–the *Tractatus*-ized language of section one and the fictional antinomies of section two–to model the effects of the ideological change Gately undergoes in recovery.

Hal Incandenza and the Atomization of US Culture

In his article "The Detective and the Boundary," William V. Spanos argues the value of postmodern literature lies in its atomizing effects. That is, postmodernism is a literary effort to refuse two imaginative impulses to totality. The first of these totalities appears in the form of an early modernist aesthetic that is best exemplified by the Byzantium of W.B. Yeats, an ideal empire that is not befouled with the utilitarianism of modern society. The second, less beautiful totality postmodernism attacks is the narrative of "Western man" that crops up in popular fiction and newspaper articles to support the compartmentalized and well-scheduled needs of contemporary life. Though very different in their specifics, Spanos believes postmodernism responds to a connection that World Wars I and II revealed between these totalities, which, taken together, offer a compelling clarity about the state of our Western consciousness in the twentieth century. Spanos writes,

> What I am suggesting is that it was the recognition of the ultimately "totalitarian" implications of the Western structure of consciousness…that compelled the postmodern imagination to undertake the deliberate and systematic subversion of plot–the beginning, middle, and end structure–which has enjoyed virtually unchallenged supremacy in the Western literary imagination…In the familiar language of Aristotle's Poetics then,

> the postmodern strategy of decomposition exists to generate rather than to purge pity and terror; to disintegrate, to atomize rather than to create a community. (Spanos 155)

What the postmodern imagination does for Spanos is make the reader feel existentially unmoored or "unhomed" so that we can "discover the ontological and aesthetic possibility of generosity" in our literature (168), which he sees as the capacity to celebrate the "'messiness' of existence" (166). This messiness can be understood as standing in contrast to both the timelessly-shaped gold figures of Yeats's "Byzantium" and the bureaucrat's exclusive focus on catching his train on time. In combat with these efforts to hide from the world's reality, Spanos's controlling metaphor for what the postmodern imagination produces is the detective story in which nothing is discovered, where clues do not connect with one another or lead to large and meaningful truths. Spanos argues the value of postmodern narratives lies in their effort to undermine our impulse to accept the dishonesty of totalization by pushing us into "the existential realm of history, where Nothing is certain" (167).

The value of this account for understanding *Infinite Jest* is that it highlights the extent to which Wallace was a student of postmodernism. In both *Infinite Jest*'s first and second storylines, those centered on Hal Incandenza and the political environment he occupies, we can see that Wallace designs these parts of his novel in the way Spanos describes: they push the reader into the "existential realm" of uncertainty. As we will therefore see in this section, the protagonist Hal Incandenza's eventual acquaintance with the existential baselessness of society results in part from the undermining of the rituals of Hal's trust in his education at

the tennis academy, as Wallace sheers away both Hal's and the reader's faith in the academy-endorsed ideology of individual achievement. That is, Wallace's narrative describes how Hal sees through the totalizing narratives of his educational environment and finds himself in a terrible isolation that his story communicates to the reader. The narrative of *Infinite Jest*'s political environment then deepens this work by satirizing the individualism that justifies the political choices of the novel's fictional United States. In these ways, I understand Wallace to deploy the tools of atomization that are fundamental to Spanos's analysis, but, as I argued in the last chapter, Wallace came to be unsatisfied by postmodernism's willingness to pause, in this instance, before existential terror. This is why my chapter uses Hal's narrative and the narrative of the United States as prologue to the story of Don Gately, whose narrative challenges atomization through the community-based ideology of AA.

The first goal of *Infinite Jest*, then, is to communicate the profound isolation of the solipsism that haunts US culture. This section will therefore analyze the fullest textual account of a fall into solipsism that the novel offers, which is Hal's narrative arc. Because I read solipsism as an ideological problem, I will begin my analysis by trying to show how the routines Hal learns from his world lead to an ideological crisis. Wallace provides the opening to this strategy by making our introduction to Hal the novel's most historically-advanced point: we meet Hal in a moment of crisis that the rest of the novel explains. We will therefore start with a short analysis of Hal's opening scene and then travel back in time with his narrative to understand that crisis as, at least in part, an ideological product of the educational forces in his life. What I will eventually suggest is

that Wallace's unsympathetic treatment of Hal in this narrative, emphasized by the inescapable circularity of his narrative's structure, distances this protagonist from the reader in the same way Hal's loneliness distances him from the world around him.

The first scene of *Infinite Jest* takes place in the Year of Glad (2010),[29] when Hal is visiting the University of Arizona:

> I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies. My posture is consciously congruent to the shape of my hard chair. This is a cold room in University Administration, wood-walled, Remington-hung, double-windowed against the November heat, insulated from Administrative sounds by the reception area outside, at which, Uncle Charles, Mr. deLint and I were lately received.
>
> I am in here. (Wallace *Infinite* 3)

The opening pages of *Infinite Jest* are disorienting because details arrive through Hal's perception that are not tailored for understanding; rather, they rush at the reader so we can only discern what is happening through induction. For instance, we will eventually figure out that Hal's "posture is consciously congruent" to his chair because he is anxious about the way he will be perceived by administration. This is a meeting to establish Hal's credibility as a potential matriculant to the university, and though he recently demonstrated his talent on the tennis court, there are eccentricities in the academic portion of his application. Further, his family (including his Uncle Charles mentioned in the passage above) run the Enfield Tennis Academy where he is finishing high school, and the university administrators are concerned that Hal's marks have been doctored. These administrators would therefore like to know if Hal truly wrote the advanced papers

[29] *Infinite Jest* was published in 1996, but the last calendar year it describes would be 2010. Instead of traditional years though, Wallace uses the conceit of "Subsidized Time" in *Infinite Jest*, in which companies bid annually to brand the coming year. The year that most of the novel's narrative takes place in is The Year of the Depends Adult Undergarment (2009). By setting his novel in the future like this Wallace communicates the tendency of U.S. culture toward a social order in which we would accept the subsidization of something like time.

he submitted in his application packet, which feature titles like "Montague Grammar and the Semantics of Physical Modality" (7).

As the scene progresses, Wallace uses Hal's interior monologue to convince the reader that he in fact could author the papers in question, but a narrative tension develops between the intelligence of Hal's thoughts and his refusal to respond to the administrators. This tension increases as his uncle continually steps in when Hal is asked a question. Finally, Hal asserts, "I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions…I believe the influence of Kierkegaard on Camus is underestimated…I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror…I'm not just a creātus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function" (12). Having externalized what the reader has heard in his thoughts, the narrative's tension relaxes until we see the administrators' response to Hal's speech: they stare at him in disbelief before wrestling him to the ground, complaining about the horrible sounds and movements Hal makes as he imagines that he is crying for help. The disjunction between Hal's perception of his own speech and the way the administrators hear it is what launches his narrative, and, in the fullness of *Infinite Jest*'s circular structure, this narrative betrays its purpose to the reader: Hal is a product of American socialization. Thus, as we read *Infinite Jest*, we come to understand that his backstory explains this opening crisis and marks it as a catastrophe created by the world of the novel.

If Hal's first scene serves as the terminus of his narrative in *Infinite Jest*, his second can be read as an account of its origin–yet, the two are much the same. It is April Fool's Day in the Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad (2003): Hal is ten years old and his father, James O. Incandenza, has dressed up in a disguise, has rented an office, and now

is pretending to be a professional who Hal's parents have hired to draw Hal out of himself through conversation. Again, Wallace presents a situation where his protagonist is opposite an authority figure who insists he cannot understand him, except in this scene it is not that Hal cannot speak but James cannot hear, which becomes clear as the so-called conversationalist tries to engage his son and complains about his relationship with his own father, Hal's grandfather, even as Hal tries to honor his request to talk about the esoteric topics James raises, e.g. byzantine erotica and entries in the Oxford English Dictionary. As it ends, Hal is leaving the elder Incandenza in the rented office as James rants about his life's failures. Thus, taking these first two scenes of noncommunication together, Wallace places both the beginning and the end of Hal's narrative arc at his novel's opening and asks what transformed Hal from the lexically-confident ten-year-old of 2003 into the frighteningly inarticulate high schooler of 2010? Deceptively, *Infinite Jest* offers a range of direct answers to this question, from Hal's drug use, to his father's suicide, to Hal's ingestion of a strange mold when he was a young boy. These simple causes turn out to be mirages though. In reality, they distract readers from the creative forces of long-term education that Wallace is interested in: the power that daily habit exerts in the production of ideology.

Many of Hal's habits appear in the course of *Infinite Jest*. I understand the majority of them to fit into three distinct categories: his formal education and tennis training at E.T.A., his changing relationship with drugs and alcohol, and his absorption of the cynicism of popular US culture. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on his tennis training here. My object is both to show the substantive role that Hal's training plays in producing the tragically isolated subject I have just described and to make explicit how

Wallace uses Hal's tennis training to make his reader feel a sense of disillusionment about the training Hal undergoes. Both of these efforts will begin with a description of the novelty of the training itself, as I will show how the academy's daily routines feed an enlightenment ideology that the school's administrators use to justify their training regimen. I will then tie that enlightenment ideology to the suicide of Hal's father, the founding patriarch of E.T.A., whose sad pursuit of individual achievement is continued by his son after his death. My argument is that despite the obviousness of the relationship between the Incandenzas' pursuits of happiness and James's death, Hal sees no way out of the trajectory that his routines have created. Thus, the terror that Hal's narrative confronts both the reader and Hal himself with is that neither of us can find an alternative in Hal's world that could teach him how to live differently.

Broadly, the Enfield Tennis Academy that Hal attends as a teenager is designed to serve two functions with respect to its students: the first is the production of academically viable candidates for Ivy League institutions; the second is the production of tennis prospects with the potential to become professional players who can survive the demands of life in The Show, the novel's argot for the celebrity that attends professional tennis. Hal, who has the talent to fulfill both mandates and is the son of the Academy's deceased founder, is one of E.T.A.'s star pupils, and part of Wallace's art in relaying his backstory is finding ways to communicate the grueling processes and fantastic expectations Hal and his fellow classmates are subjected to in the school's effort to teach them to fulfill their promise as tennis players and students. For instance, in one section of the novel, we are given the voice-over narrative of a film that Hal's brother Mario created about Hal's tennis training, *Tennis and the Feral Prodigy*, that is voiced by Hal himself. This film

develops over several pages as Hal describes his training in a voice of firm but caring pedagogy whose instruction becomes progressively more invasive and more complicated as it develops: "Here is how to carry a tennis ball around in your stick-hand, squeezing it over and over for long stretches of time–in class, on the phone, in lab, in front of the [TV], a wet ball for the shower, ideally squeezing it at all times except during meals. See the Academy dining hall, where tennis balls sit beside every plate" (173). What Wallace communicates here is the eccentricity of a certain physical training developed to answer the particular needs of the sport the students play. This training does two things: it prepares students for the physical demands of their craft at the same time that it deforms them as children. We can see this, on one hand, in the athletic excellence that Hal and his fellow students demonstrate and, on the other, in the jokes Wallace peppers throughout the novel about the absurd size of the students' racket arms. The irony of this two-sided view of E.T.A.'s various regimens is created by the fact that it is Hal who narrates this "training video," which estranges his daily routines from him through, for example, his vision of a cafeteria of students with tennis balls beside their trays. Wallace thereby uses Hal's narration of Mario's movie to help the reader see the profundity of the endeavor both E.T.A. and its students are engaged in while also raising our awareness of the sacrifice that that endeavor demands.

This two-sided awareness of E.T.A.'s methods of training is part of the Academy's effort to prepare the students mentally as well, of course, and Hal and Mario's film gives voice to those methods by parroting E.T.A.'s expectations for how students should think. One of the key tenets of E.T.A.'s training is that students must learn to be impervious to distractions that might interrupt their focus on the game. For

example, in one passage, Hal describes the strategies he has been taught for dealing with cheating in unrefereed matches:

> This is how to play with personal integrity in a tournament's early rounds, when there is no umpire. Any ball that lands on your side and is too close to call: call it fair. Here is how to be invulnerable to gamesmanship. To keep your attention's aperture tight. Here is how to teach yourself, when an opponent maybe cheats on the line-calls, to remind yourself that what goes around comes around. That a poor sport's punishment is always self-inflicted. (174)

The truth about whether or not "what goes around comes around" is not immediately important here; rather, what is at stake is the student's ability to learn to not be bogged down by a sense of injustice and lose their control over their game. Thus, students learn to ignore their sexual interests, gamesmanship, the weather, etc., all in an effort to exercise control in each passing moment. The challenge is to be impervious to distraction and constantly present in the match.

This imperviousness is part of a philosophy that is peculiar to the Academy and comes principally from its head coach, a German expat named Gerhardt Schtitt, who trains his athletes through a concept of citizenship. As he tells his students, "This world inside is the same, always, if you stay there. This is what we are making, no? New type of citizen. Not of cold and wind outside…Be *here*. Not in bed or shower…Be *here* in total" (459-461). Schtitt believes in the importance of developing a capacity to keep one's interior life directed toward a vocation. His notion of presence ("*here*") is part of a program to develop tennis players, of course, but Schtitt and James Incandenza had broader ambitions when they imagined the purpose of their tennis academy. As Schtitt tells Hal's brother, Mario, the tennis regimen he oversees is grounded in a particular interpretation of German Idealism:

> Schtitt was educated in pre-Unification *Gymnasium* 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, 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)…By learning…the virtues that pay off directly in competitive games, the well-disciplined boy begins assembling the more abstract gratification-delaying skills necessary for being a 'team player' in a larger arena: the even more subtly diffracted moral chaos of full-service citizenship in a State. (82-83)

That is, Hal and the other students are learning to live and play the game of tennis from inside themselves so that they can seek their infinite possibility in the ordered space of the court. This lawful pursuit of self-transcendence is, for Schtitt and Incandenza, the pursuit of citizenship, or a beautiful way of life. It is to be a subject of constant innovation (a citizen) who understands their purpose as created by a larger social apparatus (a State) and its sphere of operation as clearly defined by the rules of the game (a Law).

Importantly, for the students, none of this ideological structure is discussed on a day-to-day basis. Instead, what they experience is the stress of their daily lives, though the structure of E.T.A. does offer some rationalization for its design, as in the guidance of advanced players like Hal who serve as "Big Buddies" to younger students. For example, in an early series of scenes, Wallace presents several upperclassmen counseling younger E.T.A.s. In this scene, Hal urges his pupils to consider *why* their lives are ordered as they are, with periods of intense training and then spare moments of respite from the surveillance of authority figures:

> 'The point…is that it's not about the physical anymore, men. The physical stuff's just pro forma. It's the heads they're working on here, boys. Day and year in and out. A Whole program. It'll help your attitude to look for evidence of design. They always give us something to hate, really hate together…A common enemy…Schtitt's men, the double matches on top

> of runs…The loneliness. But we get together and bitch, all of a sudden we're giving something group expression. A community voice…Accident? Random happenstance?' (114)

Hal's sense of the Academy's design demonstrates his internalization of his father's purpose in founding E.T.A, and Wallace fragments clues to both the institution's ideology and Hal's internalization of that ideology so that these various pieces appear incrementally over the first half of the novel. What is clear when they are brought together is that in designing the appearance of the Academy for *Infinite Jest*, Wallace sought to picture an institution that instills an ideology of citizenship not through instruction and argument but through the physical and mental training that it subjects the students to on a daily basis.

The particular goal of this training demands an extreme method used to produce singular results, results that offer students the potential for excellence in their pursuits at great sacrifice. Again, this trade-off comes from the founder of the Enfield Tennis Academy, Hal's father, James Incandenza, who, like his son after him, was a successful jr. tennis player who also went on to excel in optical engineering before becoming an *avant garde* filmmaker. Despite this success, Hal remembers James as sadly isolated from his family, and as James neared the end of his life, Hal remembers that his father, as we saw in the Conversationalist scene described above, began to imagine Hal could not speak. The story of James's gradual breakdown and his eventual suicide calls attention to the life and death danger of the ideology that the tennis academy promotes in its students: a vocational thinking that disrupts one's capacity to relate to others for an opportunity to surpass individual limits. One of Hal's Little Buddies actually describes the Academy's competitive nature in terms of the ideology it promotes: "'I think alienation,' [the

student] says…'Existential individuality, frequently referred to in the West. Solipsism'" (113). Hal replies, "'In a nutshell, what we're talking about here is loneliness" (ibid.). That this perspective has been adopted by Hal is readily apparent in his interview at the University of Arizona. And it produces results: when someone asks the Arizona tennis coach why he thought Hal was healthy enough to attend college, the coach responds, "I'd only seen him play. On court he's gorgeous. Possibly a genius. We had no idea…We watched him through [a whole tournament] last fall. Not a waggle or a noise. We were watching ballet out there, a mate remarked, after" (14). This is the fulfillment of the Academy's training that Hal works toward under the school's guidance. Hal's father, through the design of his son's education, has passed on both his gift for single-minded pursuits and his inability to relate to others.

The ideology Hal has fallen into at the University of Arizona is the solipsism that so often appears in Wallace's writing. Wallace uses solipsism to mark a subject's inability to believe that objects and people in the outside world have significance independent of their own perspective. The term is urgent for him because it describes not an occasional vice, as we might read in a novel about a drunk who destroys their life; rather, solipsism for Wallace marks a way of thinking that he represents as permeating the US culture of *Infinite Jest*, a society where subjects are taught to see their own thoughts, feelings, comforts, and ambitions as inelastic demands that the world should honor. It is also important to point out that solipsism in Wallace's representation is not meant to be understood as a philosophy the way that Kant and Hegel's idealism is a philosophy consciously held and pursued by Gerhardt Schtitt; rather, as I have tried to

show, solipsism appears in the novel as an ideology that accrues in the daily choices we learn to make from the culture we are born into.

The judgment that solipsism is an ideology and not a philosophy is important because it changes the goals we can attribute to Wallace's writing. If solipsism were consciously chosen by the novel's characters, *Infinite Jest* would be a battle between good and evil, or, at least, would stage a conflict between selfish and unselfish characters. Through ideology though, another fictional possibility appears that Wallace saw in Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, which, as we discussed in the introduction, Wallace admires because it offers almost no explicable reasons for its main character's solipsism:

> to the extent that [the main character of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*] is not motivationally unique, she can be all of us, and the empty diffraction of [her] world can map or picture the desacralized and paradoxical solipsism of U.S. persons in a cattle-herd culture that worships only the Transparent I, of guiltily passive solipsists and skeptics trying to warm soft hands at the computer-enhanced fire of data in an Information Age where received image & enforced eros replace active countenance & sacral mystery as ends, value, meaning. (*Both* 107-108)

This quote appeared earlier in this chapter, but here we can notice that what Wallace says he admires about *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is that it comes close to "mythologizing" its main character's struggles in a way that is similar to how the story of the Garden of Eden mythologizes its characters in *Genesis* (108). As characters, Adam and Eve are not real people with unique motivations and plausible reasons for their choices; on the contrary, they describe universal human features and themes, like a will-to-conscience and the fall that the claim to individual authority demands.

This difference is significant because Wallace believes myth is better equipped to address the solipsism of U.S. culture than the realism he often complains about in his early nonfiction. Realism, particularly in a culture trained to understand narrative as

entertainment, can become a form of voyeurism that leaves the reader unimplicated in the problems of choice and action that it portrays.[30] Myth, on the other hand, posits its problems as inescapable in the same way that Wallace believes solipsism in the United States is inescapable. Thus, in Wallace's effort to capture the pervasive effects of solipsism in US culture, he tries to implicate both his characters and his readers in a general diagnosis of solipsism that attains to the feature of myth that drives toward universality. One of the consequences of this is the feeling that neither Hal nor the reader can find any way out of Hal's solipsism because in a society like the United States of *Infinite Jest*, the resources simply are not present. This sense is intensified in instances where getting Hal help is the primary focus of the text. For instance, in a scene late in the novel, Hal shows up at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (where Gately works) and asks for help finding an NA meeting. The person who answers the door resents Hal for the wealth that his appearance betrays and gives him bad advice, which leads to comic results. Likewise, both Hal's brother Mario and his mother Avril worry about him throughout much of the novel, even having a long conversation between themselves about how one can know whether or not someone (Hal) is sad or not, but the proceeds of this conversation evaporate somewhere off stage. Thus, the prevailing sense that Wallace creates in Hal's narrative is that ideology arrives through the way we structure our lives, but the solipsism of US culture is so powerful and pervasive that even if one has the desire to seek new daily routines, there is no one available from whom to learn them. To recall Spanos's suggestion that the postmodern imagination drives us to terror, the terror that I have been trying to describe in Hal's narrative is twofold: first, we

[30] See "E Unibus Pluram" and "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young"

undergo the unmasking of the individualistic ideology that leads to Hal's father's suicide; second, we recognize that once learned, this now hated ideology is ineradicable from our minds.

Yet, to say that Wallace's representation of ideology is the same as *Genesis*'s representation of fallenness would also miss the work that Wallace seeks to do in *Infinite Jest*, which is identify not permanent aspects of subjectivity but long-term trends in the evolution of subjectivity. This is one of the merits of the novel's size, as Wallace is able to build a world with enough levels of culture and enough history to justify, for instance, my argument that Hal's struggles appear insurmountable even while, in other parts of the text, characters are surmounting similar difficulties. In this sense, Wallace sought to marry the engaging particularity of contemporary fiction to the inclusive power of myth that he describes in "The Empty Plenum" so that he could both present the reader with unique case after unique case of the various forms of solipsism he saw in U.S. culture and create the sense that there are alternatives to it.

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The tragedy of Hal's first scene in *Infinite Jest* is communicated thematically in the circular nature of his narrative, as I have described above, but it is also communicated at the level of the sentence. The question that remains about Hal's portion of *Infinite Jest* is how his story connects with the other stories of solipsistic crisis in the novel. My argument is that Wallace makes this connection narratively, through a strategy he borrows from *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, which he calls the main character's "*Tractatus*-ized" way of thinking. Wallace then adopts this narrative strategy for himself in *Infinite Jest* when he wants to portray the interior crisis of one of his characters, turning

Markson's *Tractatus*-ized thought into a trope that recurs in the different storylines of *Infinite Jest* to signal the recurrence of solipsism in US culture. By examining how Markson uses this *Tractatus*-ized narrative in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, then describing how Wallace adapted it to his novel, I will argue that the trope functions in *Infinite Jest* as a way for Wallace to tie his characters together in their suffering of the same self-destructive ideology.

Markson bases the fictional world of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* on a specific interpretation of the *Tractatus* in which the young Wittgenstein advanced an argument for metaphysical solipsism, which is a radical form of skepticism. For example, Markson places his only character, Kate, in a world that is empty of other people because metaphysical solipsism argues that we cannot validate perspectives on the world other than our own. As readers first coming to the novel, our task will therefore be to move through Kate's log of experiences of this empty world. For example, we read about the different museums she stays in for shelter, the art she burns for heat, and the major cities she wanders through as if they were her neighborhood. She can do all these things because she does not think anyone else is alive. The novel's tension lies in the ambiguity of whether we should believe the world that Kate experiences is truly empty or whether Kate merely experiences it that way.

As a signal of the stakes of a world in which a single mind equals the world of experience, the novel echoes the book of *Genesis* with its opening words:

> In the beginning, sometimes I left messages in the street.
> Somebody is living in the Louvre, certain of the messages would say. Or in the National Gallery.
> Naturally, they could only say that when I was in Paris or in London. Somebody is living in the Metropolitan Museum, being what they would say when I was still in New York.

> Nobody came, of course. Eventually I stopped leaving the messages. (Markson 1; formatting original)

A former painter, Kate spends the majority of her time thinking about Western culture, particularly its art, history, and literature; and because the novel consists mostly of thoughts passing through Kate's mind, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* blends the personal and the historical in a poignant way. For instance, Kate likes cats. Thus, when she recalls a story in which Rembrandt's students painted coins on their studio's floor to trick their master into picking them up, Kate thinks, "if Rembrandt had had a cat, it would have strolled right past the coins without so much as a glance" (Markson 59). This is funny, and the novel is filled with such aphoristic thoughts about truth and illusion, like Wittgenstein's own writing. But the deeper importance of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* for Wallace comes from entertaining Kate's belief that she is actually the last person alive in the world.

As Kate writes about Western thought in her diary, she leaves a trail of ideas that, if we are willing to buy into her solipsism, represent the last living conceptions of Western history. The last fact of Rembrandt's life that will ever be conceived will be some odd speculation about a cat. The Trojan War will have been fought over money because Kate believes it. Facts in her head become historical truths simply because no other person will ever be alive again to gainsay her. This makes Kate the full extent of world culture and the end of its evolution. She embodies human extinction. The effect of this is a feeling of profound sadness. If no one else will ever be alive after Kate dies, culture is fully hers, fully doomed, and fully useless. By showing us a Kate at the end of human history, Markson aesthetically connects the despair of isolation to metaphysical solipsism.

Wallace uses Markson's fictionalization of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to characterize solipsistic ideology in *Infinite Jest*. He therefore renders the solipsist's view of the world as a perspective whose fragmentation of everything around them is authorized by the belief that truth resides in connections one's discrete mind makes between objects because, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein argued the world is made coherent for people by the claims we make about it. For instance, I might claim, "The wheelbarrow sits in the garden." For Wittgenstein, the wheelbarrow is a thing and the garden is a thing. The relationship I construe between the wheelbarrow and the garden is a fact. I might also claim, "My cat is sitting on my book." The relationship between the cat and the book is another fact. The problem Wallace believes Wittgenstein creates in the *Tractatus*, and which we feel when we wonder whether Kate's fictional world is actual or simply created by her in her mind, is that there is no possibility of checking my fact-based world against the fact-based world of someone else. There is no novel outside Kate's novel to check the truth of her experience against. Because I am trapped in my own mind, I have no philosophical means to argue with someone who wants to claim that my cat is in the garden and the wheelbarrow is on my book.

Such radical disconnections between the facts and ideas of other people in Kate's mind inspire the rendering of solipsism that appears in *Infinite Jest*. Unlike in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* though, Wallace emphasizes how this ideology appears in a world of other people. For example, in the novel's opening scene, Hal's inability to communicate leads him into an emotional crisis. Recall for instance his being asked to defend his work and replying that he believes "Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror." The response of the school's administrators is to tackle Hal and complain about the

horrible noises and movements that he makes. As Cobb points out, this is a fictional enactment of Wittgenstein's demonstration that private language is impossible in the *Philosophical Investigations* and that all language usage is irreducibly public (iv). This is because language, by its very nature, requires agreement and criteria for validating successful usage. By giving readers access to Hal's inner thoughts in the interview–his private language–and then showing that language as mute in the actual world of language usage that Hal occupies, Wallace actually denies Hal's thoughts validity. If Hal cannot communicate, he cannot be any of the things he claims to be in his head. The sadness of this condition increases as Hal repeatedly asserts his depth as a person to the administrators: he claims that he is more than just an athlete, that he wrote the papers in his application, that he is "in here." But they cannot hear him.

Hal's anhedonia in the novel is only one form of the solipsism that *Infinite Jest* portrays as a crisis. For instance, in the description of the suicide attempt of Joelle van Dyne, Wallace provides us with a miniature version of Hal's narrative structure. That is, Wallace provides us with an account of Joelle's daily life and then describes the nature of the crisis that that routine brings her to. Thus, we learn that in college she began a romantic relationship with Hal's brother Orin. During that time, she began taking cocaine on an occasional basis and studying film as a vocational pursuit. She also began working on movies with Hal and Orin's father, James Incandenza. As time wore on, her relationship with Orin soured, her cocaine usage increased, and her aesthetic sense matured. Eventually, the narrative says that Joelle has tied so many of her daily habits to cocaine usage that she begins to feel her addiction is insurmountable, which leads her to attempt suicide.

In its relationship to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Wallace's narration of Joelle's suicide experience is consciously fact-based in the same way that someone claiming that the wheelbarrow is on my book is fact-based. That is, her addiction manifests as an experience of metaphysical solipsism. In its account of her suicide attempt, the narrative describes Joelle's journey to a party at her friend Molly Notkin's apartment, which is the same apartment Joelle shared with her former lover, Orin. After she arrives, everything around Joelle affirms her feeling of isolation. The room is filled with narcissistic graduate students. Notkin has just performed her oral examinations for a PhD in "Film cartridge theory." And Notkin is dressed as Karl Marx, having just answered her committee's questions through a Marxist lens. Meanwhile, students dance a "Minimal Mambo:" "this autumn's East Coast anticraze [where] the dancers appear…to be just this side of standing still, the subtlest possible hints of fingers snapping under right-angled elbows" (229). The conversations between grad students echo the tiresome banter of William Gaddis' *The Recognitions*, as each of the party's characters appear, in Joelle's perspective, isolated from each other. Their goal is not to communicate.

To escape this party and her life, Joelle locks herself in the apartment's bathroom, where Wallace uses Markson's *Tractatus*-ized language to narrate the moments leading up to her suicide. Thus, Joelle understands the bathroom's disparate elements as a series of facts:

> The idea of what she's about in here contains all other ideas and makes them banal. Her glass of juice is on the back of the toilet, half-empty. The back of the toilet is lightly sheened with condensation of unknown origin. These are facts. This room in this apartment is the sum of very many specific facts and ideas. There is nothing more to it than that. Deliberately setting about to make her heart explode has assumed the status of just one of these facts. It was an idea but now is about to become a fact. The closer it comes to becoming concrete the more abstract it seems. Things get very

> abstract. The concrete room was the sum of abstract facts. Are facts abstract, or are they just abstract representations of concrete things? Molly Notkin's middle name is Cantrell. Joelle puts two more matches together and prepares to strike them, breathing rapidly in and out like a diver preparing for a long descent. (239)

The power of Wallace's description in this scene is not a condemnation of Joelle for her solipsism; rather, through Joelle's enumeration of the facts she creates in the bathroom, Wallace communicates the negligible feeling she has when she thinks about the end of her life. She is simply here, about to die, in the bathroom she shared with her former lover. These facts become heavier in the shadow of a philosopher who was skeptical of our ability to speak to one another about purpose in a fact-based universe.

This particular narrative strategy, where the connective tissue between objects in the world is torn within the consciousness of the characters that *Infinite Jest* describes, reappears several times throughout the novel: here in Joelle's suicide, Hal's opening scene, Ken Erdedy's anticipation of his drug dealer, Poor Tony's withdrawal from alcohol and heroin, and twice in Don Gately's story–once in the hospital when his fever spikes and once when 'C' injects him with Sunshine. The recursion of this trope becomes a way for Wallace to mark the fate of solipsism, where it grows so strong as an ideology that it tears the world apart, first, at the level of the individual character's consciousness, then, at the level of the novel's national culture. Thus, the recursion of this narrative trope in *Infinite Jest* signals the pervasiveness of solipsism as a cultural condition. That is, Wallace uses Markson's fictionalization of the *Tractatus* to communicate his fear of a country of Kates who all live next door to each other and use tools like television, drugs, and work to pretend they are isolated from one another.

The Dissolution of National Culture

If the first goal of *Infinite Jest* is to represent how individuals fall into solipsistic ideology and how it then leads to profound self-destruction, the novel's second goal is to show the United States, as a collective, falling into that same trap. This section will therefore analyze the political environment of *Infinite Jest* by describing how Wallace's satirical treatment of the novel's international plot extends the narrative work of the *Tractatus*-ized individual crises we examined in the section above. In doing so, I will outline two goals of Wallace's political endeavor: first, he seeks to depict a tendency toward cultural solipsism in US thought that parallels the novel's individual narratives; and, second, he places fictional antinomies modeled on Wittgenstein's philosophy throughout *Infinite Jest* to help readers recognize and arrest those tendencies. In outlining the first goal, we will begin as we did with Hal's narrative, by describing the trajectory of the novel's international plot, noting particularly that while the source of Hal's ideology was his daily habits, the collective ideology that drives the political action of the novel arrives from the voting tendencies of a fictional U.S. electorate. Having thus outlined the source of the international crisis Wallace presents, we will examine how he stages competing ideologies to create antinomies in *Infinite Jest* from the national perspectives of Canada and the United States to reprise the thematics of the novel's satirized political narrative and translate them back into the individual terms of solipsistic ideology discussed above. Ultimately, this section will argue that the pervasiveness of solipsism in Wallace's national diagnosis led him to create an international foil to the ideology of U.S. culture that functions as a tool for readerly self-recognition–a way for us to implicate ourselves in Wallace's diagnosis.

Before addressing the specific shape of *Infinite Jest*'s political satire though, it is important to note the method of its creation because Wallace does not use his satire to simply ridicule U.S. culture. Rather, he consciously extends tendencies of our reality to create a sense of futurity in the text. As Dowling and Bell argue, this strategy simultaneously estranges us from *Infinite Jest*'s future while also forcing us to recognize its core similarities to our present reality.[31] For example, that the novel is set in a period of "subsidized time," so that specific years are named after products (e.g. "The Year of the Whopper"), seems both profane and reminiscent of our tendency to, say, subsidize the stadium names of professional sports teams. Wallace repeats this kind of extension over and over in *Infinite Jest*, which makes the novel's world feel distorted but not foreign.

For my argument in this section, the most important site of such extension is political action. Specifically, Wallace centers his satire on the formation of The Great Concavity/Convexity, a national landfill that covers much of New England and parts of Quebec. The creation of this landfill is inspired by actual events in the history of Massachusetts. For example, the neighborhood of Enfield, where the Enfield Tennis Academy and the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House are both located, is not actually in Boston as the narrative describes; rather, it was a town near Amherst (where Wallace was an undergrad[32]) that was disincorporated to create the Quabbin Water Reservoir in 1938 that now supplies Boston and other parts of Eastern Massachusetts with water.[33] This historic displacement of Enfield's citizens inspires the

[31] See Chapter 2 of *A Reader's Companion to Infinite Jest*.
[32] See Chapter 2 of D.T. Max's *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*.
[33] See J.R. Greene's *Creation of Quabbin Reservoir: Death of the Swift River Valley*; also, Hal visits a fictional building called "Quabbin Recovery Systems" in his search for an AA meeting late in *Infinite Jest* (797).

larger displacement required for the Concavity/Convexity in the New England of *Infinite Jest*, and such exaggeration allows Wallace to represent the distorting power that the novel's solipsistic ideology exerts on acts of governance so that a seemingly reasonable instance of immanent domain in U.S. history reappears in *Infinite Jest* as an act of international hostility. By outlining the crisis that this hostility creates and then its origin, Wallace's political narrative appears as a symptom of the solipsistic choices in thought that lead to the actions of the novel's elected officials.

Like Hal's narrative, the international story of *Infinite Jest* begins by hinting at a state of crisis that the rest of the novel explains. In this case, the crisis is an armed conflict between the U.S. and Quebec. At the end of Hal's opening scene, which, again, is the novel's most historically-advanced point, Hal is strapped to a gurney and being carried to a waiting ambulance as he leaves the University of Arizona when he sees that "some sort of ultra-mach fighter too high overhead to hear slices the sky from South to North" (16). The reader gets no information about how to interpret this until much later, but clues about a misshapen U.S. culture slowly accrue in the first pages of the novel: in the next scene with Ken Erdedy, we hear "the sound of a dumpster being emptied into an [Empire Waste Disposal] land barge," as garbage from Boston is transported to a new national landfill that covers much of New England; three scenes later, a doctor laughs at the Statue of Liberty, "wearing some type of enormous adult-design diaper" (33), which serves as an example of how the U.S. has come to subsidize national resources; and, several scenes later still, without context, the narrative describes "a herd of feral hamsters, a major herd, thundering across the yellow plains of the Southern reaches of the Great Concavity in what used to be Vermont" (93), which is a visualization of the effects

that the country's new waste disposal methods are having on wildlife in New England. What the reader sees is that while the individual characters of *Infinite Jest* live and behave much like people in the contemporary United States, the future of the novel's political setting has changed drastically in response to problems that, though contemporary for the novel's readers, have in the present of its setting become historical. That is, contemporary problems have made way for new crises, such as the armed conflict with Quebec that the fighter jet signifies. These thematic extensions, like the subsidization of time, make the future that *Infinite Jest* describes work like a window that looks out onto the undesirable fate that the United States will suffer unless its citizens realize a fundamental change in their behavior.

Direr still, it is not until we have finished *Infinite Jest* and returned to the opening scene through the novel's circular structure that we understand that this crisis was purposefully created by the United States government and is justified through the political ideology of the fictional President of the United States, Johnny Gentle, a former Vegas lounge singer. Gentle is an important figure in the novel because he catalyzes a cultural realignment of political power that Wallace signifies in *Infinite Jest*'s history through the rise of Gentle's third party, the Clean U.S. Party (C.U.S.P.), that unites citizens of both the right and the left to create a new political majority in the United States. The account Wallace offers of Gentle's ascent appears in the form of a satirical film by Mario Incandenza, Hal's brother, which both fills out the why of the novel's recent history and then comments on it. Specifically, Mario's film presents Gentle and his cabinet's response to problems that result from a territorial reconfiguration of North America that joins Mexico, Canada, and the United States into a super state (the

Organization of North American Nations or O.N.A.N.) that primarily serves US interests. In the film's backstory, we learn,

> the [Clean U.S. Party] swept to…victory in an angry reactionary voter-spasm that made the…LaRouchers and Libertarians chew their hands in envy as the…two established mainstream parties split open along tired philosophical lines in a dark time when all landfills got full and all grapes were raisins…, and also, recall, a post-Soviet and -Jihad era when–somehow even worse–there was no real Foreign Menace of any real unified potency to hate and fear, and the U.S. sort of turned on itself and its own philosophical fatigue and hideous redolent wastes with a spasm of panicked rage that in retrospect seems possible only in a time of geopolitical supremacy and consequent silence, the loss of any external Menace to hate and fear. (382)

What Wallace does in this passage is outline two fundamental needs that he structures the narrative of Gentle's presidency to answer: the need to literally clean up the United States and the need to find an enemy for the U.S. to organize itself against. In Mario's analysis, the formation of The Great Concavity/Convexity achieves both of these goals by establishing a space where the United States can deposit its waste and then "gifting" that space to Canada through an act of "experialism." These political acts particularly impact the province of Quebec, and its people respond by forming an assortment of terrorist organizations that militate against the international arrogance of the United States, thereby providing the national enemy that Gentle promised. The significant questions Mario's film raises are why the U.S. needs to be cleaned up and why it needs a shared enemy? The answer to both is what Wallace depicts as a desire in U.S. citizens for a political expression of their solipsism, which is what Gentle understands and why he was elected. U.S. citizens neither want to be faced with the destruction of the environment they occupy, nor do they want to make their behavior preserve that environment. Thus, Gentle campaigned on a promise: "he wasn't going to stand here and ask us to make

some tough choices because he was standing here promising he was going to make them for us. [He] asked us simply to sit back and enjoy the show" (383). Gentle's "tough choices" function as a screen that protects the U.S. electorate from the consequences of their habits in thought and behavior.

As Gentle's administration justifies its politics through its willingness to exercise an agency whose consequences never touch its constituents, the political narrative of *Infinite Jest* is shaped around the President's increasingly absurd ideas for navigating the output of a wasteful, self-destructive United States. This reason of governance solidifies into an operational philosophy that adheres to three axioms Gentle articulates in Mario's movie: that there shall be no decrease in government programs, no new taxes, and the executive shall retain the ability to respond to emergent national needs (439-442). Wallace thereby uses his satire of contemporary U.S. culture to echo the circular relationship he represents in Hal's narrative between behavior, belief, and action, except here it is an interpersonal negotiation, where U.S. behavior teaches Gentle the ideology to adopt, which then leads to a plan to defile Quebecois territory so that Quebec will respond with violence and fill the role of hated Other that the U.S. needs for a coherent self-understanding.

Narratively, the satirical representation of these events, appearing as they do in Mario's film (and in different ways throughout the novel), presents a form of experiential chaos in the culture's awareness of itself that mirrors the chaos of the *Tractatus*-ized experience we discussed in section one.[34] For example, Mario's film is performed by

[34] Another significant parallel between the individual solipsism of section one and the political narrative described here is that between what Wallace describes as the slavery of addiction and what Wallace describes as Gentle's fascism, so that he frames the U.S. electorate as so afraid of their agency and the responsibility it entails that they vote to have their democratic power removed by their government.

hand puppets and the major events that lead to the international crisis the novel culminates in are communicated through pages and pages of outrageous newspaper headlines:

> FREAK STATUE OF LIBERTY ACCIDENT KILLS FED ENGINEER – Header; BRAVE MAN ON CRANE CRUSHED BY 5 TON CAST IRON BURGER – 12-point Subheader;
> GENTLE PROMISES SKEPTICAL CUB SCOUT CONVENTION 'YOU'LL BE ABLE TO EAT RIGHT OFF' TERRITORIAL U.S. BY END OF TERM'S FIRST YEAR' – Header; (398)

It would be tedious to enumerate all the features of the chaos in *Infinite Jest*'s political narrative. What is significant here is that the political story, both at the level of its structure and at the level of narrative, echoes the ubiquity of the solipsism we described in section one. That is, Wallace presents the broader culture of *Infinite Jest* as an extension of the habits in thought and behavior that he diagnoses in so many of the novel's characters. Thus, between his individual and national narratives, Wallace attempts to create the feeling that identifying a cause for a character's solipsism in the United States is as futile as trying to identify a simple cause for the fall of man, as he felt *Wittgenstein's Mistress* nearly captured. Thus, if Wallace argued Markson's novel created a character, Kate, who could serve as a touchstone for a fundamental truth about what it means to live in a millennial United States, in *Infinite Jest* he fashioned the same experience through exhaustion, enumerating solipsism's shapes in many walks of life and on several cultural levels.

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Yet, Wallace also structured the international narrative of *Infinite Jest* to move beyond diagnosis and into prescription, the first stage of which, in both Alcoholics Anonymous and the novel, is self-recognition. One of the primary themes *Infinite Jest*

explores in its treatment of addiction, for example, is the avoidance of culpability that inheres in the minds of people who fall prey to substance abuse. Wallace therefore presents a long scene in which we see AA members struggle to take responsibility for their actions and other members condemn those who would blame their addictions on, say, the fact that they were subjected to childhood abuses.[35] The use of external causes to explain behavior is shunned in AA because the fellowship believes that excuses short circuit the subject's motivation to change by diminishing their sense of responsibility for their ideology. Wallace adopts this idea for *Infinite Jest* and seeks to apply it to national politics by creating a feeling of moral culpability for the state of U.S. culture. That is, by making solipsism ubiquitous, he sought to prevent the reader from demonizing particular characters and saying, "I am not like them." This is why the inescapability of solipsism in the US culture of *Infinite Jest* is so important to the novel's design.

The question this raises is how does one use a novel to create the kind of self-recognition that could inspire a sense of responsibility within this total and atomized vision of U.S. culture? My argument is that Wallace seeks to do this in his political narrative in two ways. First, he presents a coherent perspective from outside the country as an alternative to the individualistic thinking that he bemoans in U.S. culture. Second, he builds narrative antinomies into his text to inspire moments of aporia in the reader that function as opportunities for puncturing the enveloping solipsism that *Infinite Jest* urges its reader to acknowledge.

Toward the first goal of offering an alternative perspective to that which permeates U.S. culture, Wallace presents the Quebecois figure of Remy Marathe, a

[35] See Gately's experience at a meeting with the White Flag Group (367-379).

member of a terrorist organization who has a long conversation that is broken up over the course of the novel with Hugh Steeply, a U.S. intelligence officer. Together, these characters form a kind of two-person chorus that reprises many of *Infinite Jest*'s themes. What is valuable about their conversation is that it provides two coherent perspectives on the novel's content without, at least in the space of their discussion, resolving which perspective has more value. The two men's views come from their respective places of origin, with Marathe growing up in Quebec and Steeply in the United States. The object Steeply and Marathe have met to discuss is *Infinite Jest*'s McGuffin, a film directed by James Incandenza (Hal's father) that is rumored to be so entertaining that once a person has viewed it they can never be satisfied again unless they are watching it. This movie is called *Infinite Jest*, and Marathe's organization hopes to make copies of it and distribute them throughout the United States in an act of terrorism, an effort Steeply's intelligence agency hopes to stop. Thus, Steeply and Marathe's conversation is both about and expressive of the different perspectives of Canadians and U.S. citizens in the moment of the novel's setting. Marathe thinks that attacking the United States with a film of pleasure is both apposite and likely to be unusually effective in a country with such addictive tendencies. Steeply, who continually promotes the individual's right to pursue pleasure, thinks the U.S. government should simply destroy the movie. Though Wallace strives to make both of their views defensible, Steeply's promotion of individualism in the context of *Infinite Jest* is placed on a slippery slope. In addition, Marathe's criticisms of US culture are very much the same as Wallace's. For instance, Marathe argues that the problem is not the movie but the particular susceptibility US citizens have to the movie because we do not teach our citizens how to value things beyond the self.

As Marathe provides a thematic interruption to the political narrative of *Infinite Jest*, he has a role that is not unlike the fictional antinomies that appear throughout the novel to inspire moments of aporia in the reader. These antinomies call attention to our entrenchment in ideology. The antinomy in fact plays a significant role throughout Wallace's writing. In his 1987 essay "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," for example, Wallace describes the particular power of broadcast television and defines an antinomy as "a phenomenon whose strength lies in its contradiction" (*Both* 48-49).[36] As a narrative device, we can see Steeply and Marathe's conversation as a kind of antinomy, as its power develops through their contradicting political ideologies as the novel wears on. Beyond this, Wallace's use of the antinomy is grounded in his personal history as a writer. That history begins in his first novel, *The Broom of the System*. I will therefore look back at his use of an antinomy in that novel, discuss a similar usage of parable in his 2005 commencement address, and then analyze an antinomy that sits at the heart of *Infinite Jest*. Doing so, we will see that, as narrative devices, antinomies in Wallace's second novel reflect back at the reader as occasions for self-recognition–they are opportunities to acknowledge one's responsibility for one's solipsism and the solipsism of the culture they occupy.

The Broom of the System imitates post-structural fictions like *The Crying of Lot 49*. Wallace uses the antinomy that sits at the heart of that novel to raise the reader's anxiety about the ambiguity of meaning that is created by authorial absence.[37] To this end, *The Broom of the System* literalizes a character's search for her author: the

[36] See Wallace's "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young."
[37] For an exhaustive account of Wallace's thinking about the debate about authorial presence, see "Greatly Exaggerated" in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*.

protagonist is Lenore Beadsman, and the problem she faces is that her grandmother, who shares her same name and was responsible for her upbringing, disappears at the beginning of the novel. Thus, *The Broom of the System* is a quest narrative that follows Lenore's search for her elderly relative and, as it turns out, for herself. What complicates Lenore's problem is that Gramma Lenore studied under Ludwig Wittgenstein as a young woman, sought to teach her grandchildren to see and interpret the world through his philosophy, and left some Wittgensteinian clues in her absence for Lenore to contemplate. For example, near the center of the novel, Lenore visits her brother at his college to find out if he has heard anything from their grandmother. The brother admits that Gramma Lenore has in fact sent him two sketches, one of which is a picture of an old man with a cane who is walking up a hill. This image matches the description of an image Wittgenstein describes in section 139 (b) of his *Philosophical Investigations*: "I see a picture; it represents an old man walking up a steep path leaning on a stick. –How? Might it not have looked just the same if he had been sliding downhill in that position? Perhaps a Martian would describe the picture so. I do not need to explain why we do not describe it so" (Wittgenstein *Philosophical* 54). Lenore's brother calls such images antinomies, and he interprets their significance as commentaries on how we create meaning. When Lenore asks him about the old man, he says, Wittgenstein was trying to goad the reader into drawing "all these totally fecal conclusions about why we just automatically assume from just looking at the picture that the guy's climbing and not sliding" (Wallace *Broom* 245). These "fecal conclusions" will develop in Wallace's subsequent thinking until they take on profound significance, though in *The Broom of the*

System the antinomy is actually about itself: the object that one looks at and the assumptions one makes when "reading" the world.

What will be retained in Wallace's later fiction is the way that Lenore's brother identifies how desire affects the assumptions we make about what we see, i.e. we see the man as climbing because we prefer to see him as progressing upward rather than sliding backward, even if we do not realize we prefer that or understand why. In his 2005 commencement speech to Kenyon College, for instance, Wallace used a parable to dilate this problem: "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?'" (Wallace *This* 3-4). Wallace tells the graduates, "The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about" (Wallace *This* 8). Wallace takes this claim (again) from section 139 of the *Investigations*, where Wittgenstein writes,

> The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. One is unable to notice something– because it is always before one's eyes. The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck him– And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful. (Wittgenstein *Philosophical* 50)

Wittgenstein's claim is that the most significant aspect of our experience is that its foundations are unfelt. The fish do not feel the water that immerses them and Wittgenstein was not aware of his assumption in the example above that the man was climbing. In Wallace's parable, the water signifies the conceptual world that silently defines the nature of experience, just as the fish remain unconscious of the major premise

of their existence. Our choices in thinking fill our lives with unconsidered inferences comprised of our expectations and our histories, and they build the structure of ideology that *Infinite Jest* calls our attention to. That the development of this ideology in Wallace's thought is tied in his commencement speech to the same part of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* that inspired his use of fictional antinomies in *The Broom of the System* is not an accident, and their relationship is made manifest in *Infinite Jest*.

That is, Wallace understood the fictional antinomy as a tool for exposing our immersion in a body of assumptions that we spend most of our time unconscious of. Thus, in *Infinite Jest*, characters suffer because they are trapped within a prison of self and cannot become conscious of the ways they translate experience into meaning. Their failure renders them powerless to change their lives. For example, Joelle van Dyne's inability to free herself from her cocaine usage narrows her choices to one ultimate choice, to have "Too Much Fun" in her and her former lover's bathroom. On a national level, that U.S. citizens desire to not be confronted with the consequences of their desire leads to a political situation that inflicts violence on an international stage and leads to the armed conflict with Quebec that is hinted at in the novel's opening. Running these narratives into crisis is an inability to recognize the force of ideology in our lives.

As I have shown, these narratives arrive amidst a diagnosis of U.S. culture as atomized by individualism. In his discussion with Steeply, Marathe ties individualistic pursuits of happiness to a vulnerability to the movie *Infinite Jest*: "'Why make a simple Entertainment, no matter how seducing its pleasures, a *samizdat* and forbidden in the first place, if you do not fear so many U.S.A.s cannot make the enlightened choices'" (*Infinite* 430)? What Marathe is saying is that the US has failed to protect its citizens by refusing

to give them the education that would make them value things beyond the self enough to say no to the availability of the film. He is condemning what the nation has done to subjectivity. Then, shortly after, at the heart of the novel, a Canadian insurgent, Lucien Antitoi, thinks about an advertising display that his brother came across in downtown Boston. The ad offers the figure of a man in a wheelchair ecstatically watching the movie *Infinite Jest* while extending cartridges to passersby. On the spine of these cartridges is written, "IL NE FAUT PLUS QU'ON PURSUIVE LE BONHEUR" (483). This is bad French that can be translated as either "You no longer need to pursue happiness" or "You must not pursue happiness any longer." The message has contradicting meanings: while one commands the reader to stop pursuing happiness, the other assures them that the object in their hands will provide what they desire. When Lucien tries to watch the film though, it will not play. The cartridge is blank and the displays turn out to be an elaborate joke played by one Quebecois terrorist organization on another. More bizarrely, Lucien cannot read French, despite being from the Gaspé region of Quebec. Instead, the cartridge's writing, which functions as an antinomy, directs itself to the reader consuming *Infinite Jest*. The questions Wallace asks, in tying this moment of interpretation to U.S. ideology, is what do you see written here and why? These questions, if Wallace has convinced the reader of their responsibility for the culture around them, become an opportunity for self-recognition and, consequently, self-implication.

The Recovery of Don Gately

More than a declaration of the need for sincere writing or a disavowal of self-conscious irony, Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram" is an overwrought attack on authors

who fail to take up the work of building healthy ways of life in US culture through their fiction. My argument in this chapter is that Wallace sought to engage this work in *Infinite Jest* through his representation of ideology. Thus, this third part of my analysis focuses on the narrative of Don Gately, which operates as a counterpoint to the atomization of US culture discussed in sections one and two. Specifically, Gately's recovery from drug addiction results from radical changes in his daily habits that produce a new subjectivity through the purposeful training of AA. I will therefore argue in this section that Gately's narrative is presented to the reader as a story of self-recognition and community-based recovery that models the claims I made in my introduction: Wallace believes that though ideology must play a determinative role in our thought and behavior, it can be reshaped into a force for a healthier, community-based way of living.

As we saw in the last chapter, the work of realizing this promise of ideology begins in a willingness to accept certain forms of prescriptive authority. Thus, the reason Wallace offers such a thorough account of Gately's recovery in *Infinite Jest* is the same reason he offers an account of Hal's training at the tennis academy: Wallace uses Gately to communicate the power of AA's rituals for producing a way out of the addictive solipsism that threatens Gately's life. In this sense, Gately's narrative in *Infinite Jest* is not so much about him but about the institution that he uses to reform himself, which Wallace dramatizes by sympathizing with Gately as a character in his narrative. To connect this story to the ideological goals I have claimed for *Infinite Jest*, I will show how the narrative strategies discussed in sections one and two reappear in Gately's story to mark how AA changes him. Specifically, I will begin by analyzing a scene of self-recognition that occurs at an AA meeting. This moment is occasioned by Gately's

encounter with something like the antinomies I described in section two, which makes Gately feel a sense of responsibility for his destructive past as an addict. I will then describe this moment of recognition as a hinge that bifurcates Gately's narrative into two storylines that run in different directions, with one following Gately's struggle into the future and the other working backward into his violent past. Ultimately, both stories will terminate in crisis, signaling the beginning and end of Gately's narrative in *Infinite Jest*. As in section one, these crises will feature the *Tractatus*-ized narrative that Wallace uses to reveal a character's solipsism, but as they are used in Gately's narrative I will argue that the different causes of his crises make them mean different things for the novel, such that these moments of despair ironically measure the growth that AA effects in Gately's life. Finally, I will turn to a brief example of the interpersonal possibility such change creates through the fellowship of AA in *Infinite Jest* by reading a scene near the end of the novel that hints at the value Wallace saw in cultivating prescriptive communities like AA in the broader culture of the United Sates. Thus, if we recall Spanos's argument from the beginning of section one, where he argued that the postmodern imagination attacks the totalizing narratives of what he calls "Western man," *Infinite Jest* shows Wallace using the postmodern narratives of Hal and Johnny Gentle to attack the pervasive individualism of US culture. Yet, Gately's narrative reveals Wallace's inability or unwillingness to relegate his work as an author to atomization, so that once he has attacked the "totalitarian" narrative of individualism that is symbolized by the search for personal achievement at the Enfield Tennis Academy, he immediately begins building a new community in its place, through the tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous. Regardless of

whether we construe this as cowardice[38] or bravery,[39] this choice to work back from the existential cliff that Wallace communicates as solipsistic despair develops throughout the rest of his career.

As I have suggested, then, the community-based response to addiction that AA offers its members in *Infinite Jest* begins in its members' willingness to practice the habits that the fellowship prescribes for behavior. That is, AA's method originates in a distrust of the individual's self-knowledge. Wallace dramatizes this in a conflict between new members who do not want to act on prescriptions they do not understand and those with more time in the fellowship who try and combat the suspicions of new members. For instance, one of Gately's reflections on AA in *Infinite Jest* recalls a moment early in his time at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House when Gately's sponsor tells him to see AA's prescriptions through the metaphor of a cake recipe:

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[38] See, for instance, Mark McGurl's "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program," where he reads Wallace's existentialism as a maximalist revision of Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place:"

> Much changes in the move from Hemingway to Wallace, whose stylistic managements of the "nothing" can seem perfectly opposed, the terseness of one (highly influential on the early existentialist fiction of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus) countered by the incessant talkiness of the other. And yet, that surprising note of bourgeois propriety encountered in Hemingway's formulation—clean, well-lighted—persists in Wallace's updated version, bespeaking the conservatism they share. Not for them Sartre's eventual gymnastic efforts to ally his version of existentialism with revolutionary Marxism. Clinging to the institutional order, clinging for dear life, Wallace's commitment is rather to a conception of therapeutic community in which what might have become political questions—and, by implication, motives for political contestation—are obediently dissolved into a series of individual ethical choices. If one believes that a more permanent and pervasive improvement of our spirits can come only as the result of a thoroughgoing transformation of the social order, this should mark a limit to one's sympathy with Wallace's existentialism of institutions as a whole. (35-36)

[39] See Wallace's own characterization of such a literature in "E Unibus Pluram:"

> Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk things. Risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. The new rebels might be the ones to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "How banal." Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity. Willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. (Wallace *A Supposedly*)

> he invited Gately to think of Boston AA as a box of Betty Crocker Cake Mix…The box came with directions on the side any eight-year-old could read. [He] said all Gately had to do was…follow the directions on the…box. It didn't matter one fuckola whether Gately like *believed* a cake would result, or whether he *understood* the like baking-chemistry of *how* a cake would result: if he just followed the motherfucking directions…a cake would result. (467, emphasis original)

The novel describes Gately following the directions he is given: he finds a job; he stays active in AA by going to nightly meetings and counseling newcomers; he works on the 12 Steps; and he tries to honor and live the fellowship's various clichés. That these routines are emphatically not unique to Gately and that he is not expected to understand why they are effective minimizes his importance relative to the process he undergoes. Thus, we see that Gately's willingness to surrender his authority over his own choices marks a fundamental distrust of himself that AA encourages because the fellowship grounds its authority for guiding its membership's behavior on the value of tradition and non-individualized forms of knowledge.

The minimizing of Gately's importance appears in many of the specific habits he adopts, and Wallace ties those habits to the work of knitting AA's members together into a community. The less autonomy each member has, the tighter the social unit AA can fashion. The effect of this is that individualized choice-making is viewed with great suspicion because of each member's personal memories of the destruction that addiction caused in their past. Wallace presents these memories as a byproduct of sobriety that becomes entwined with the work of the 12 Steps. For example, Wallace ties the daily practice of prayer to the production of painful memories in Gately's narrative. In the 3rd Step, Gately is expected to surrender his will to a higher power. To this end, he follows AA's suggestion that he adopt a routine of getting on his knees and praying each morning

and evening, even though he does not believe in god. Speaking at an AA meeting, Gately confesses to the audience that he feels like a hypocrite when he does this:

> His sole experience so far is that he takes one of AA's suggestions…and hits the knees in the A.M. and asks for Help and then hits the knees again at bedtime and says Thank You, whether he believes he's talking to anything/body or not, and he somehow gets through that day clean. This, after ten months of ear-smoking concentration and reflection, is still all he feels like he understands about the 'God' angle. [H]e feels like a rat that's learned one route in the maze to the cheese and travels that route in a ratty-type fashion and whatnot (443).

Gately feels guilty because he does not believe in god, yet he uses the actions of belief to relinquish his sense of control over his will. Despite his feelings of dishonesty, this prescribed ritual brings him into rapport with the community around him, which becomes apparent when AA members surprise Gately by commending him for being honest about the fact that he is just going through the motions: "It seems like every time he forgets himself and publicizes how he's fucking-up in sobriety, Boston AAs fall over themselves to tell him how good it was to hear him and to for God's sake Keep Coming, for them if not for himself, whatever the fuck that means" (444). The other AA members use Gately as a point of "identification," to see themselves in his thoughts and actions. In this way, the AA of *Infinite Jest* becomes a community through the shared work of honesty and mutual recognition. Thus, when Gately says he feels like a hypocrite in the meeting's group setting, he gives voice to a common feeling created by the 3rd Step, and the image Wallace creates for his reader is of a community of petitioners striving to see themselves in each other–a community whose members struggle to unite through their fundamental sameness.

This binding of community, which is intensified by the other AA members identifying with Gately, creates a sense of mutual responsibility that leads another

member to confront Gately with the antinomy that will cause him to recognize the violence of his past. Thus, after this meeting in which Gately admits to struggling with his understanding of God, a biker pulls his motorcycle up to Gately and tells him, "it was good to hear somebody new share from the heart about his struggles with the God component" (445). The biker then tells Gately a version of the fish parable from section two that Wallace later repurposes for his speech to Kenyon College. On the way home from the meeting, Gately finds himself in emotional pain as he thinks about this antinomy, and the narrative editorializes about why:

> Something they seem to omit to mention in Boston AA when you're new and out of your skull with desperation and ready to eliminate your map and they tell you how it'll all get better and better as you abstain and recover: they somehow omit to mention that the way it gets better and you get better is through pain. Not around pain, or in spite of it. They leave this out, talking instead about Gratitude and Release from Compulsion. There's serious pain in being sober, though, you find out, after time. Then now that you're clean and don't even much want Substances and feeling like you want to both cry and stomp somebody into goo with pain, these Boston AAs start in on telling you you're right where you're supposed to be and telling you to remember the pointless pain of active addiction and telling you that at least this sober pain now has a purpose. At least this pain means you're going somewhere, they say, instead of the repetitive gerbil-wheel of addictive pain. (446)

This scene is important because it coordinates several elements of Gately's narrative to represent the operation of AA as a collective. Gately's blind following of the prescriptions of the 3rd Step does not produce for him a concept of God as he expects; rather, what it produces, in conjunction with his willingness to talk about his struggles at the AA meeting, is an image of struggle that other members of the fellowship can identify with. This identification then triggers the intersubjective component of AA that makes each of its members responsible for every other member, thereby compelling the biker to tell Gately the fish parable.

This parable, which Gately does not understand, then triggers a profound pain, which is yet another betrayal of Gately's expectations about what it means to be sober, as he unexpectedly finds that the work of sobriety is the work of suffering. Thus, we see why AA believes the individual is not to be trusted in the work of recovery by the fellowship, as the individual is too close to their own experiences of suffering to face down the long-term purposes of the group's prescriptions. Rather, the individual member is to follow the recipe on the box. Because of the design of this inwardly-facing community of mutual recognition that AA seeks to build in the novel, the prescriptions that members follow not only affect them internally but they also cause a complex response from the community. Thus, Wallace uses our identification with Gately to point to the large network that he is enmeshed in as a participant in the 12 Step program.

What the 3rd Step specifically produces in Gately is memory, and that memory is what creates the pain of recovery that fuels the movement Wallace describes when he writes, "this pain means you're going somewhere." The somewhere Gately goes is backwards into his addicted past, the experience of which changes his understanding of the present, as his suffering gradually shapes him into a different person. Thus, at the level of *Infinite Jest*'s narrative structure, the release of memory that is triggered by the fish parable fissures the second half of Gately's narrative into two storylines: the continuation of Gately's time in recovery and the backstory of his addiction. As I suggested above, both of these lines terminate in *Tractatus*-ized crises, like those described in section one, though there is a fundamental difference between them, as one occurs in Gately's pre-sober life and the other during his membership in AA. By tracing

Gately's movement to these crises, we will see the change that AA creates in him as one of its members. We will also see how the pain these crises produces is interpreted as purposeful by the fellowship of AA.

The storyline of Gately's present leads to what is the novel's most exciting scene: Gately gets in a fight with a group of insurgent Canadians and offers his life in defense of one of the residents of the halfway house where he works. The significance of this scene is two-fold: first, it makes the already sympathetic character of Gately admirable; second, it gives a concrete example of how the triumph of Gately's adoption of the ideology of Alcoholics Anonymous has affected the way that he lives in the world. This is explicitly stated in the novel. Coming upon the scene where one of his residents is being threatened by the three Canadians, Gately confronts the situation directly. When he is told that he does not need to get involved, that the Canadians have no problems with Gately, he replies that he is responsible for his residents at Ennet House. Gately thereby locks himself into what the narrative describes as a mechanism larger than him: "Having no choice no now not to fight…things simplify radically, divisions collapse. Gately's just one part of something bigger he cannot control" (612). This is the work of his altered ideology, as Gately is compelled by his place in the community of AA to bind himself to the fates of those around him. The depth of this change will become clear later in the novel, when the description of Gately's earlier abandonment of a friend leads to his narrative's second crisis. Ultimately, Gately is shot in the shoulder during the fight.

The image of Gately's behavior that Wallace fashions is one of modern heroism that honors what the narrative clearly presents as Gately's social value. Wallace then extends this heroism to the hospital where Gately lies in bed after being shot. As he

describes this, Wallace slows the narrative to a crawl and moves between a series of scenes that trace Gately's earliest memories and his consciousness of what is happening around him in the hospital room. Much of his thinking in this portion of the narrative concerns the pain that he is in and his struggle to continually refuse the painkillers that the medical staff keeps offering him. Following prescriptions still, he practices sustaining himself through long bouts of pain: "No one single instant of it was unendurable. Here was a second right here: he endured it." (860). Finally, Gately's physical pain culminates in the last scene of his sober narrative, as his fever spikes and Wallace renders his thoughts in a stream of consciousness that echoes the *Tractatus*-ized narratives discussed in section one:

> It was impossible to imagine a world without himself in it. He remembered two of his Beverly High teammates beating up a so-called homosexual kid while Gately walked away, wanting no part of either side. Disgusted by both sides of the conflict. He imagined having to become a homosexual [in a nearby prison]. He imagined going to one [AA] meeting a week and having a shepherd's crook and parrot and playing cribbage for a cigarette a point and lying on his side in his bunk in his cell facing the wall, jacking off to the memory of tits. (973).

Pain here narrows Gately's consciousness to his own experience, which narrows the logic of Wallace's narrative world. Though there are medical personnel all around Gately, like Kate in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and Joelle van Dyne in her suicide attempt, the facts of Gately's mind become the world he occupies. He remembers a gay kid getting beat up. This makes him think of being raped in prison. The idea of being raped makes him remember a dream of a shepherd's crook that pulls addicts back to addiction. Addiction connects to masturbation, etc. In short, Gately's world in this moment of suffering is an atomized mess.

On a superficial level, it might seem then that Gately's struggle through AA ends in the same nightmare consciousness Hal suffers at the beginning of his narrative, but Wallace sets up a difference between their storylines, which is that through the community-centered ideology of AA Gately has been taught to transfigure his pain. To recall the narrative's editorial we discussed earlier, "At least this pain means you're going somewhere…instead of the repetitive gerbil-wheel of addictive pain" (446). This crisis ends Gately's narrative in the present, and as we discussed in the last chapter, the outcome of the novel is determined by the reader's following of the novel's trajectories past the last page, such that one can project that this last crisis becomes too much for Gately, as Holland claims, and he relapses into addiction. This seems unlikely to me, if only because Wallace clearly uses fate in his novels to reinforce what his narratives communicate, as we saw in Hal's total isolation in the novel's opening scene. Regardless of whether he relapses or not though, Gately's actions clearly strengthen the community of AA that produced the change in him that led to his bravery. His sponsor Ferocious Francis shows up to support him. Admiring residents from Ennet House visit. Joelle van Dyne appears to tell him about a revelation that she had in her own recovery. It is therefore only in terms that Gately is seen as an individual whose particular fate can determine the status of a community that we would judge what AA has done to him as a failure, and the whole of Gately's narrative, as Wallace designs it, militates against such a reading. On the contrary, what the novel asks is what is the status of the community as a whole, and how can individuals be taught to enrich it further?

This sense is deepened by Gately's last scene, which represents the culmination of his movement into his personal history that was triggered by the fish parable. Wallace

structures Gately's memories in this backward-looking narrative as short vignettes that begin when Gately is a little boy and gradually move forward into his twenties. Eventually, Gately remembers his relationship with Gene Fackelmann, when both he and Gately worked for a local bookie as his muscle. Gately recalls that Fackelmann stole a large amount of money from their boss in a moment of confusion and used it to buy drugs that he then planned to move to another town with and sell. This fell through, and Fackelmann responds by using the drugs instead of selling them. When Gately learns what happened, he empathizes with Fackelmann because he knows that he would have done the same thing, deciding that "a drug addict [is] at root a craven and pathetic creature: a thing that basically hides" (932). Providing evidence for this conclusion, Gately joins Fackelmann in his binge rather than helping him find a way out of his predicament. As days of drug use wear on, Gately's narrative *Tractatus*-izes again, even as he makes a token effort at convincing Fackelmann to leave town before he gets caught:

> 'Serious fucking stash you managed to come by somehow right here, Fa-'
>
> 'That's a goddamn lie.'
>
> …
>
> After every exchange like this they laughed and laughed…When the phone rang it was just a fact. The ringing was like an environment, not a signal. The fact of its ringing got more and more abstract. (935-936)

As in Joelle van Dyne's overdose, the world fragments in this scene into abstract facts, as what Fackelmann and Gately should hear as the phone's ominous ringing is, in their experience, just a feature of the world that has no connection to anything else accept that Gately can hear it. Eventually, their boss learns what happened and sends people to torture Fackelmann in front of Gately until Gately loses consciousness. He then wakes up on a beach on the novel's last page. Gately's failure to help his friend in this disturbing

scene obviously provides meaningful depth to his later decision to stand up to the Canadians when he is a staff member at Ennet House. Further, the contrast between how Gately comes to experience the two crises that bookend his narrative, that of the hospital and that of the binge, marks the significance of the change that the rituals of AA have created in Gately's life.

Having worked through the three major narratives of *Infinite Jest*, it is useful to look back at a claim Wallace makes about *Wittgenstein's Mistress* in "The Empty Plenum" and compare it to the novel's last line. *Infinite Jest* ends by describing Gately waking up on the beach after Fackelmann's death: "And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out" (981). As a completion of his novel's investigation of solipsism, this last moment of Gately's narrative echoes the apocalyptic language Wallace uses in his account of the power of Markson's novel:

> That is, Markson's *WM* succeeds in [communicating] what few philosophers glean[:] the consequences for persons of the practice of theory; the difference, say, between espousing 'solipsism' as a 'metaphysical position' and waking up one fine morning after a personal loss to find your grief apocalyptic, literally millennial, leaving you the last and only living thing on earth, with only your head, now, for not only company but environment and world, an inclined beach sliding toward a dreadful sea. (Wallace *Both* 78)

What Wallace is doing in this quote is creating a kind of inner circle of those like himself, Markson, and Wittgenstein who bridge the gap between the lives they experience and the thoughts that they think. Thus, we find Gately waking up to solipsism as a "metaphysical position." The thought is not that Gately is a philosopher but that what philosophers do not glean is that Wittgenstein's philosophy expresses something like the isolation that Gately feels when he wakes up after being injected with powerful drugs after a multi-day

binge that ends with his watching the slow, torturous death of his friend. Gately wakes up to find the concept of a shared world destroyed. But unlike what we earlier described as the postmodern narrative of Hal, apocalypse is not the end of Gately's story. It is its beginning. From here, he will travel the narrative we have just traced: Gately will be arrested, join AA, and learn how to live differently from the fellowship. What Wallace means when he describes "the consequences for persons of the practice of theory" is that properly used theory expresses a way of life.

Wallace, like Wittgenstein, turned away from the life solipsism expresses in his writing, choosing instead to fictionalize models of community that he first represents in Gately's narrative. As we have already suggested in discussing Spanos and the work of the previous chapter, this also meant a turn away from the atomization of his postmodern predecessors. We will seek to capture the fullness of where Wallace goes after *Infinite Jest*'s break with his intellectual past in the following chapters, but I want to point to one more detail about Wallace's representation of community in *Infinite Jest* that, at least in part, goes beyond Gately's narrative. This is important because though I have paid close attention to Gately's story in order to describe its effects, his significance for the novel is not as an infallible model. Rather, both Gately and the representation of AA in *Infinite Jest* are experiments in Wallace's broader effort to create images of functioning communities through his writing in the same way that the sincerity of "E Unibus Pluram" is an experiment towards the same end.

Wallace hints at this future fictional work in a relationship of Gately's that begins in the first scene of his narrative, which describes Gately's pre-sober life as a burglar. Wallace begins this scene by telling us about Gately's addiction to narcotics and his

particular talents as a burglar, but the narrative then quickly moves on to describe his antagonistic relationship with an Assistant District Attorney of Revere, Massachusetts who prosecuted Gately on what he (Gately) thinks of as a "circumstantial suspicion" that led to "a nasty impromptu detox on the floor of [Gately's] little holding cell" (*Infinite* 55). In revenge, Gately breaks into the A.D.A.'s home with his friend Trent Kite and takes pictures that he, a month later, mails to the A.D.A. and his wife: "two high-pixel Polaroid snapshots, one of big Don Gately and one of his associate…each with his pants down and bent over and each with the enhanced-focus handle of one of the couple's toothbrushes protruding from his bottom" (56). These photos create long-term damage in the A.D.A.'s domestic life, as his "wife now need[s] Valium even just to floss" (59), and her condition worsens throughout the time *Infinite Jest* describes. Shortly after this, Gately and his friend accidentally kill one of their victims, and we are told Gately's particular methods of breaking into a home were known to the A.D.A., such that Gately finds himself in what the narrative describes as the kind of "deep-shit mess that can turn a man's life right around" (60). Thus, like the description of Hal in his opening scene at the University of Arizona, which launched the narrative account of how he ended up in solipsism, Gately's opening scene frames the rest of his narrative as an explanation of how he became sober.

Though most of our exposure to Gately comes after he is already in recovery, he is still haunted by the seemingly always-imminent repercussions of his pre-sober life, which are represented by his fear of the Assistant District Attorney's revenge. This tension thickens late in the novel when Gately is shot and lying in the hospital. From his bed, he repeatedly notices the shadow of a man he imagines to be the A.D.A. in the

hallway outside his room. It turns out that Gately is right, as we learn when the man shows up at Ennet House to talk with Gately's supervisor. Surprisingly, he is not there for the reasons we expect; rather, he confesses to the supervisor that he is active in a "Phob-Comp-Anon"[40] program and working the Ninth Step, which requires him to "make direct amends to whosoever… [he has] harmed" (961). He tells Gately's supervisor:

> If I want the growth that promises real relief, I have to make direct amends, put out my hand and say that I'm sorry and ask the man's forgiveness for my own failure to forgive. This is the only way I'll be able to forgive him. And I can't detach with love from [my wife's] phobic compulsion until I've forgiven…the man I've blamed in my heart" (963).

Thus, Wallace surprisingly removes the tension of Gately's relationship with the A.D.A. without resolving it. That is, where two men's inclinations for revenge seemed to be carrying them to violence, Wallace uses AA to divert them from one another. In terms of this moment's explanation in the story, Wallace represents this as a result of the cultural permeation of support groups based on AA in Boston, MA.

What is significant here is how the spread of these groups represents the spread of a different social logic in *Infinite Jest* than that which we saw in the previous sections of this chapter, where ideologies of solipsism drive so many instances of involution that grow more and more intense until they eliminate the subjects involved. We can think for instance of the violent and intensifying conflict between the U.S. and Quebec that we discussed in section two. In the case of Gately and the A.D.A., this destructive current is short-circuited on both sides, first by Gately's recovery, then through the A.D.A.'s effort to support his wife. Wallace thereby uses both Gately's opening scene at the beginning of the novel and the A.D.A.'s visit to Ennet House at its end to hint at not just the individual

[40] The text defines Phob-Comp-Anon as "a decade-old 12-Step splinter from Al-Anon, for codependency-issues surrounding loved ones who were cripplingly phobic or compulsive, or both" (961).

healing power of Alcoholics Anonymous but the potential social benefits of AA as an ideological counterpoint to the solipsism of U.S. culture. This broader social possibility places Gately's ideological recovery within a larger social good, giving both it and our analysis of his recovery roles in the community-based counter to solipsism that Wallace designed this narrative in *Infinite Jest* to promote. This broader perspective, which seeks to understand community not as an individual's investment but an investment that must be made by groups of people living in relation with one another will be the goal of my next chapter's analysis of what I call Wallace's "institutional perspective."

CHAPTER 4: ANOTHER LIEN ON LIFE: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

> It's not that students don't "get" Kafka's humor but that we've taught them to see humor as something you get–in the same way we've taught them that a self is something you just have. No wonder they cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke–that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle.
>
> -David Foster Wallace
> "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness"

> If I read the temper of our people correctly, we now realize as we have never realized before our interdependence on each other; that we cannot merely take but we must give as well; that if we are to go forward, we must move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline, because without such discipline no progress is made, no leadership becomes effective.
>
> -Franklin Delano Roosevelt
> 1933 Inaugural Address

In the previous two chapters I focused on what I believe is the most important aspect of David Foster Wallace's second novel, *Infinite Jest*: its explication and defense of community-based redemption, particularly for individuals who live in a society that attacks the bonds between people by promoting self-centered behavior. Loneliness and self-destruction occupy two sides of the same coin, the novel insists; so, as an escape from the ambit of solipsism and the cultural forces that promote it, service to others takes on a salvational aspect in *Infinite Jest*.

Wallace created his second novel's directive to service by framing reconciliation to community as the best means of living a valuable life in the contemporary United States. To this end, he urged readers to see that the form of freedom U.S. citizens most need to cultivate is not that of what we are allowed to do but that of what we have the power to surrender. By learning to give up individual autonomy in exchange for roles in

our communities, Wallace believed we might avoid being used as objects for profit and find meaningful vocations grounded in the communities we occupy.

Thus, in the last chapter, I argued Wallace designed *Infinite Jest* to help readers resist the solipsism he diagnosed as pervasive in U.S. culture by finding roles in their communities to structure their lives. The problem with this prescription is that its focus on the individual is inadequate to Wallace's ambitions in *Infinite Jest*. If the novel were simply designed, say, describe an individual's path of return from alcohol or drug addiction, *Infinite Jest* would be a great success; but as a response to the cultural solipsism that plagues the United States in Wallace's analysis, the individualized spirituality of Alcoholics Anonymous that supplies *Infinite Jest*'s redemptive framework is wholly insufficient. This chapter therefore seeks to define the nature of two failures in *Infinite Jest*, a failure of Wallace's political imagination and a consequent failure in the design of his second novel. I will then explicate the solution he developed to address these failures in his later writings.

To begin simply, the political inadequacy of *Infinite Jest* derives from a dualism Wallace built into the novel's structure. *Infinite Jest* contains stories that fall into two distinct narrative categories–personal and political–and both categories function by different rules and tend to divergent ends. To see this, we merely need to contrast two of the novel's characters who fall into different categories. For instance, compare the satire and parody to which Wallace subjects the America-first President Johnny Gentle with the grounded daily recovery we read in Don Gately's story. With his inexplicable phobias and ridiculous programmes, Gentle exists in the novel to shame and ridicule figures of the public sphere. His absurd gambits and the divergent ways he is presented to the

reader, as well as the lack of any narrative access to his rationality, remove Gentle from the problems of internal deliberation that *Infinite Jest* seeks to reform on a personal level. With Don Gately, on the other hand, Wallace carefully explains both his addiction and his personality, and he offers Gately a path of return from the acts of incredible violence that mar his personal history. Thus, through Gately Wallace offers his reader access to emotional struggle, growth, and community, while in Gentle's political sphere we find only disconnection, caricature, and stasis.

This unevenness softens the novel's power to deal with the solipsism it presents as pervasive in U.S. culture because insofar as *Infinite Jest* treats political life through satire, Wallace obscures the political significance of the personal lives he presents, and vice versa. The result is that he offered what he understood to be an individual path beyond solipsism, through the reformatting of Don Gately's daily life, but failed to imagine a political means of addressing our tendencies toward solipsism nationally. As a novel, then, *Infinite Jest* renders Wallace's diagnosis of the United States well, but because it resorts to satire, as we see in the case of Johnny Gentle, any serious answer to solipsism offered in the novel's political narrative would be hard for readers to swallow. Realistic solutions applied to satirized worlds become satirical in their application. This is why Wallace leaves us with only the purposive non-ending of the Novel of Tendency I discussed in the first chapter. That is, if Wallace's second novel produces political solutions, they result from the reader's deliberation in this world; they are not in the pages of *Infinite Jest*.

But how does one write a novel about the redemption of a national character? In his continual insistence on attacking solipsism as a national problem, Wallace not only

assigned himself a thorny political problem, he also assigned himself a challenging problem of fictional representation. For example, how does one picture the consciousness of a collective as large as the United States in a piece of fiction? To imagine that the spiritual work of an individual's recuperation could be an adequate means of addressing a culture of solipsism, as *Infinite Jest* does, appears quixotic, as does using a novel about a handful of lost individuals to tell a story of national rehabilitation. My contention in these next two chapters therefore is that Wallace, in the last decade of his life, understood these problems of politics and fictional representation to be related. How could he write a novel that was not primarily focused on individual experience? And could he help readers think beyond the individual in the politics of their national life?

In this chapter, I present the beginning of Wallace's answer to these questions by marking the development of his thinking about cultural habits–how American institutions shape large groups of people into agents of a purposeful design. I argue Wallace focused his attention on American institutions of both capitalism and the state in the last decade of his life because he saw them as productive of our social rituals, the ways we bring whole groups of people into an evolving way of life. For example, in a critique of the U.S. cruise industry that Wallace offers his essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again", he details how the ship and its staff offer a variety of entertainments designed to turn him and his fellow passengers into needy consumers. The cruise, as a for-profit institution, was built to infiltrate his consciousness and train him to depend on the entertainment offered aboard the ship. This orientation of desire turns subjects into objects for profit through a process that institutions of capitalism engage throughout the United States. Thus, While *Infinite Jest* went to great lengths to model how solipsism was

abetted in individual lives by U.S. culture, in the texts I analyze in this chapter Wallace seeks to analyze how institutions work on aggregates of people at the same time. Thus, thinking again of the cruise essay, Wallace asks what it means for consumer dependency on for-profit institutions to be promoted in so many lives across the country at once? What does it mean for the next ten years of United States history? What does it mean for the long-term health of its national community? This chapter considers these questions and asks two more. Is there an imaginable national solution to this tendency in U.S. culture? And how can this problematic be depicted in a piece of fiction?

This chapter is broken into three sections. The first discusses the aestheticizing of adolescence that Wallace carries out in an early short story titled "Forever Overhead," where he connects the personal desires we feel in adolescence to the biological and cultural forces that turn us into adults. A sentimental story, "Forever Overhead" transforms a boy's desire to jump off a high dive at his local pool for the first time into a realization that his desire does not originate or end in himself; rather, he recognizes that his decision to jump from the high dive is a rite of passage his body and culture lead him to undergo. In relation to the ultimate goal of this chapter, "Forever Overhead'"s unflinching aestheticizing of the boy's loss of innocence, figured in this story as the loss of his historical uniqueness, lays an early groundwork for Wallace's thinking about social structures and their production of individuals through ritual.

In the second section of this chapter, I frame Wallace's understanding of our relationship to society through Immanuel Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?," where Kant argues that the self-willed binding of the individual to the duties of their citizenship– when carried out in a social practice–has a liberatory power that creates the progress of

human history. My reading of Kant provides a very specific model for how Wallace counters the solipsism he diagnoses in US culture with an emplacement of civic desire in the subject of state education. To demonstrate this, I read two of Wallace's essays in this section: "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," which describes his experiences aboard a luxury cruise, and "Authority and American Usage," in which Wallace defends the teaching of Standard Written English in U.S. education. Together, these essays argue Americans should resist capitalist institutions that train us to seek autonomy by designing collectively our state institutions to teach citizens to sacrifice autonomy for the production of national community. Wallace thereby connects our lives not to ourselves, or even one another, but to a hypothetical posterity fixed on the future's horizon.

Finally, what brings these two movements together in Wallace's thought–the aestheticizing of adolescent trauma and Wallace's promotion of the duties of enlightenment–is the figure of adulthood, a complex symbol that appears throughout Wallace's work to mark the internal moral demand that says we should give our lives to the same society that has taught us to feel that demand. In the final section of this chapter, I read "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" as a story that binds the unavoidable call of adulthood to the trauma it guarantees, the trauma no longer of an individual boy like the one in "Forever Overhead" but of a cultural heritage received and passed on. Wallace's narrative strategies in this story, I will argue, seek an appearance of national oneness that recalls the organicism of something like Walt Whitman's national poetics, but with a far more mechanized and ideologically-scripted feeling. Ultimately, Wallace's vision of oneness in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" becomes an experiential nightmare for the individual, but for him it is not a nightmare of past history; rather, it is a nightmare that

adults are called to willfully suffer in the today of their lives for an always-emergent history of national freedom.

This chapter's final goal is to work with the last chapter of this dissertation to show a change in Wallace's fictional project after *Infinite Jest*: he moved beyond the recuperative work on the individual that sought to fold them back into community, such that in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" Wallace appears to be more skeptical of the importance of individual agency and its humble return than he was in that earlier novel. His thickened skepticism, I argue, drove him to find a way to apprehend not the challenges and growth of discrete characters but institutional communities as characters. This ambition inspires the narrative innovations that appear in later stories like "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," "Mister Squishee," and, Wallace's last novel, *The Pale King*.

"Forever Overhead"

Wallace originally published "Forever Overhead" in the Spring 1991 issue of *Fiction International*; it was then included in the 1992 publication of the *Best American Short Stories* series; and it finally appeared in Wallace's second story collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, in 1999. "Forever Overhead" narrates the feelings of a maturing young man on his 13th birthday who wants to jump from the high dive at his local pool for the first time. As the boy makes his way to the top of the diving board, Wallace presents a series of realizations in the emergence of a new framework for the boy's understanding, as he comes to see that the social and biological forces acting on him determine the reality of his life.

My interest in "Forever Overhead" lies in Wallace's use of the trip to the diving board as a marker of ritual. The boy wants to reach the board because today is his 13th birthday and he is now a young man. Because only adults are brave enough to jump from high dives, his jumping from the board is a symbol of his maturity. Yet, the story is not as much about the boy's fulfillment of his desire as it is about his gradual recognition of the ways that both his body and his social world shape that desire: as the story progresses, he comes to see that he desires to reach the diving board because his community also sees today, his 13th birthday, as transformative. The boy is not only allowed to climb to the top of the diving board but the people around him actually prescribe his path on the way because they see his journey as fundamental to his entrance into their community. In this reading, I outline how Wallace's narration of the boy's eventual jump in "Forever Overhead" gives fictional form to the general formation of children into adult members of society.

The boy's jump from the high dive in "Forever Overhead" requires a courage from him that arrives by social prescription. It thus functions like a religious sacrament in his understanding of his world: it is an external sign of a socially-defined and -cultivated internal growth; and because the boy's entrance into adulthood is marked by the ritual of this jump, Wallace designs the narrative to attack the reader's sense of the boy as a self-directed agent. Notice, for example, how passive the first lines of the story make the anonymous main character seem. "Forever Overhead" begins, "Happy birthday. Your thirteenth is important. Maybe your first really public day. Your thirteenth is the chance for people to recognize that important things are happening to you" (Wallace *Brief* 5). Wallace here introduces social claims that are being made on the boy in both "the chance

for people to recognize you" and "things are happening to you." He is an occasion for actions that are not his to perform. "Forever Overhead" is also told in the unusual second person, as the narrator moves the boy through the story like marionettist: "You have thought it over. There is the high board. They will want to leave soon. Climb out and do the thing" (7). Finally, the boy's observations in "Forever Overhead" intimate a new understanding of the world in which he is but a single part of something very large, as when he sees the divers disappear into the water while he waits in line for the board, and he contemplates his place in a cycle of swimmers who join the line and then fall into the pool, as if they were products passing through a machine. The story's features communicate the boy's growing sense of his pre-formed and temporary place in the world amid a host of others.

This feeling is enhanced by Wallace's use of the present tense in "Forever Overhead" as a marker of cultural habit, a use he borrowed from a reading of Katherine Anne Porter's "Flowering Judas," which appears in an essay by William Gass.[41] We can see this by comparing the narration of "Forever Overhead" to Porter's very specific use of the present tense to describe the nature of her main character's, Laura's, daily habits. Every evening in "Flowering Judas," Laura goes to meet and spend time with an aging revolutionary named Braggioni. The present tense in Porter's story is built out of the durability of this routine, as when Laura is every night told that Braggioni "waits."

[41] Wallace adopts this usage, I believe, from Gass's 1987 essay, "A Failing Grade for the Present Tense," which appeared in *The New York Times*. In this essay, Gass bemoans the fact that the literary establishment in the United States has failed to produce a generation of authors worthy of the tradition of literature they will carry on. Thus, over the course of the essay, Gass grouses about young writers and their gimmicky uses of narrative devices, particularly the present tense. Wallace, of course, was a young writer in 1987, and though he responded directly to Gass in an essay of his own that same year, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," his more important rebuttal to Gass's challenge, from my perspective, is "Forever Overhead"'s deployment of the present tense in a way that goes beyond the terms that Gass describes in his reading of Porter's story.

Hearing that "He waits," and then climbing the stairs to his room so she can sit there while he plucks at his guitar is Laura's life, and it is only to describe some future event that might change her routine or some past event that has helped create this life that Porter will change the tense of her story. That which happens in each day of our present life is, in this way, held by Porter in a kind of recursive present in "Flowering Judas."

In "Forever Overhead," Wallace adopts this idea and develops it. Instead of narrating an individual's routine though, Wallace uses the present tense to communicate a cultural custom that brings children into adulthood. For example, unlike in Porter's story, Wallace keeps unique events that will only occur once in a person's life in the present tense: the now of the boy's 13th birthday that "Forever Overhead" describes will only come to pass this one time. Wallace makes this choice because the present tense of his story describes not an individual habit but a cultural one: every day some boy or girl has their 13th birthday, and as each of Laura's days share in common her evenings with Braggioni, so each adult's memory in Wallace's story shares the day that they fulfilled their society's mandate to jump from the high dive for the first time. Such moments of courage may be profound for individual persons, but, from the perspective of society, each jump is just another instantiation of a purposefully-designed ritual.

As sacrament, then, the boy's journey to the diving board in "Forever Overhead" marks society's transition of one of its members into adulthood, evidenced by that person's exhibition of courage. At the same time, Wallace also uses the present tense to describe the internal changes the boy undergoes in that transition. For example, at the end of the story, Wallace connects the epiphanies the boy has experienced over the course of "Forever Overhead" to his apprehension of the world. Atop the board at the story's

conclusion, he looks down to the scene below. The narrative says, “Look at it. You can see the whole complicated thing. Blue and white and brown and white, soaked in a watery spangle of deepening red. Everybody” (15). This palette of color is the boy’s present sense that the pool’s environment is comprised of indistinguishable elements. There are people and objects all around him, but they appear as one mass. That this is a significant change becomes clear if we contrast this mixture of colors with the boy’s earlier perspicuity, as when he describes the people he sees occupying the pool at the story’s beginning: “The pool is crowded for this late. Here are thin children, hairy animal men. Disproportionate boys, all necks and legs and knobby joints, shallow-chested, vaguely birdlike. Like you. Here are old people moving tentatively through shallows on stick legs, feeling at the water with their hands, out of every element at once” (8). Most of the story’s early paragraphs work as if they are short essays written for school. Thesis: the pool is crowded. Evidence: here are several types of people producing the pool’s crowdedness. And Wallace repeats this over and over in “Forever Overhead,” so that when the passage of mixed colors finally arrives, and the discreteness of the people and objects comprising this image loses its power over the boy’s vision, the significance of this loss of discreteness, caused by the boy’s altered focus, becomes a revolutionary perception in his present moment. The indistinguishable appearance of the people and objects literalizes how the boy’s thinking or philosophizing has reformatted his faculties of perception, and what was thematized in his contemplations back on the ground–for example, in his earlier observation that the people falling from the diving board into the pool were trapped in a kind of cultural machine that he is a part of–is made fundamental to his very sight on top of the diving board.

These changes are not merely caused by the boy's recognition of the social forces that operate on him. He also sees how he is shaped by the biological processes operating on him at the advent of his 14th year. Early in the story, for example, the narrative tells the boy,

> Things have been happening to you. You have seven hairs in your left armpit now…Your voice is rich and scratchy and moves between octaves without any warning…And two weeks of a deep and frightening ache this past spring left you with something dropped down from inside: your sack is now full and vulnerable, a commodity to be protected…You have grown into a new fragility. (5)

No longer ageless, the boy's growth makes him feel vulnerable and scared, and he becomes aware of others around him. The smell of the pool's chlorinated water correlates with the smell of his semen after wet dreams, and the second-person narration pulls us through succeeding realizations: the boy comes to see that the pool is both a social and physical occasion. He is connected to those around him by his body's place in the water among other bodies. The boy is thus part of a "system of movement" that includes "laps, splash fights, dives, corner tag, cannonballs, Sharks and Minnows, high fallings, Marco Polo" (8), and his waiting in line for the high dive is just another part of this system, which is somehow both social and biological:

> There is a rhythm to it. Like breathing. Like a machine. The line for the board curves back from the tower's ladder. The line moves in its curve, straightens as it nears the ladder. One by one, people reach the ladder and climb. One by one, spaced by the beat of hearts, they reach the tongue of the board at the top. And once on the board, they pause, each exactly the same tiny heartbeat pause. And their legs take them to the end, where they all give the same sort of stomping hop, arms curving out as if to describe something circular, total; they come down heavy on the edge of the board and make it throw them up and out. (9)

The boy realizes that the forces changing his body and the social forces directing him to ascend to the high dive are connected. He is trapped by both in the board's line's

movement, which is just one of many coordinated movements in the pool's total environment.

Finally, as the story concludes, the boy admits that he did not come to stand on the board by choice; rather, forces within him and without conspired to bring him to this place above the pool, staring at two spots at the end of the board:

> They are from all the people who've gone before you. Your feet as you stand here are tender and dented, hurt by the rough wet surface, and you see that the two dark spots are from people's skin. They are skin abraded from feet by the violence of the disappearance of people with real weight. More people than you could count without losing track. The weight and abrasion of their disappearance leaves little bits of soft tender feet behind …They pile up and get smeared and mixed together. They darken in two circles. (14)

The story's trauma becomes concrete in the young man's realization that the jump from the high dive is actually real. To be an adult is not to do something brave in an abstract way; it is to be brought to the end of a diving board by social and biological forces and then to be forced, in a moment of present consciousness, to choose to take one's body, recently made vulnerable, and hurl it into the air, leaving skin and blood behind, so that gravity can slam you into the "cold blue sheet" below (15). Adulthood requires the courage to do this after an unreckonable number of other people, at the end of history, and to be forgotten in that history seconds later, as out of your impact with the water, "blue clean comes up in the middle of the white and spreads like pudding, making [the pool's surface] all new" (9). The next jumper will inscribe the same circle and make the same impact with the water below.

The trauma in "Forever Overhead" is that of the boy being confronted with his historical insignificance and its attendant emotions of alienation. The story lives on the intimate details of a boy seeing for the first time that he is stuck in time, a single figure in

a long line of figures like him. The step from the board's rough surface to the boy's insignificance in human history is indeed precarious, but "Forever Overhead" works because Wallace's narrative does not abstract from the pool's environment. Its themes arrive through sensual experience: his place in the pool's larger "system of movement" is given to the reader in such a way that the line for the board binds the boy's life's possibilities, and the pool's blue surface becomes the wall of time that he must finally disappear into. Thus, the diving board's inevitability comes to mark the boy's growing sense that he is actually entombed by time–first in the discrete seconds of awareness that make up his present sense, and then in the long bend of generations who fall into the wake of the generation before them. The present tense communicates both of these receptacles of time at the same time, and the story thereby makes the boy's literal fall from innocence the realization of his metaphysical fragility and the death it implies. The sacrament of the diving board therefore comes to represent a social command that the boy cannot disobey: he must see that life does not belong to him. This is because nothing can ever, uniquely, belong to any of us, which realization is the final turn in my reading.

The boy's anonymity in "Forever Overhead" and the story's second-person narration combine to make him a vessel of experience who operates as a synecdoche of a general movement into adulthood that includes the reader. In this sense, the boy is both the reader and someone else, and, as when we stand between opposing mirrors, the story calls forth our awareness that we are but one person standing in a long line of people such that we share the boy's experiences as we share stages of life. Thus, when the last sentence of "Forever Overhead" arrives – "Hello" (16) – we are greeted with a salutation offered to all who enter the present consciousness of adulthood. This salutation is a

sacrament: a sign of our realization that all the impressions that we receive in the course of our lives are biologically and socially constructed. In this sense, the present tense, which Gass read as the recursion of habit in "Flowering Judas," reappears in Wallace's story as the accretion of life's experience in human history: this is how a boy came to stand on a diving board and how a society of children can become adults.

Thus, "Forever Overhead" appears to me as a story about a community's obligation to the present moment of awareness in each individual who makes up that community. Because the mind that confronts the world is created–figured in the boy forever overhead–we, like him, have a duty to transfigure our present moment into the terms through which the present tense of the future will be narrated. This responsibility, for Wallace, was the threshold of adulthood, and as we will see in the next section, he believed that the cultural solipsism that institutions of capitalism promote in U.S. culture retards our movement through that threshold. I will therefore show in this chapter's second section that Wallace wanted to overcome the barrier to adulthood that solipsism creates by institutionalizing an enlightenment ideology throughout U.S. culture. That is, Wallace believed we should design our state apparatuses to operate like the ritual of the diving board in "Forever Overhead" and teach U.S. citizens the courage to apprehend and fulfill the mandates of an enlightened adulthood.

"What Is Enlightenment?"

In January 1996, *Harper's Magazine* published an experiential essay by Wallace about his time aboard a luxury Caribbean cruise titled "Shipping Out;" a longer version of the same essay was then given a new name, which also titled Wallace's first volume of

essays, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. In "A Supposedly Fun Thing," Wallace makes both the luxury cruise and its passengers markers of American wealth and willful ignorance. The essay self-consciously echoes Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in these terms, as it moves between the rights to luxury that U.S. consumers presume and Wallace's sense of that luxury's effects on both the workers who staff the ship and the residents of the islands it visits. Where *Heart of Darkness* reveals the violence of a greed cloaked in Christian ideals though, "A Supposedly Fun Thing" analyzes the operation of a poisonous ideology of pleasure that Wallace saw the cruise producing in the ship's passengers.

Though a common topic in his writing, "A Supposedly Fun Thing" offers Wallace's most powerful critique of the role he believed capitalism plays in American life. Specifically, the essay describes how the cruise institutionalizes its passengers: as they adapt to life aboard the ship, they become addicted to its luxury and thus needier consumers, a situation the cruise then exploits. Wallace's criticisms of this make "A Supposedly Fun Thing" an attack on the cruise industry, of course, but it also focuses the essay on the primary political problem he sought to address in his late writing, which was the mass-production of solipsism in U.S. consumers. As we saw in "Forever Overhead," and as we will see again in the next section, Wallace understood the production of new members of a community to require instilling both an understanding of societal expectations and the courage to fulfill them. This in "A Supposedly Fun Thing," when Wallace attacks the production of solipsism on the cruise, he attacks what appears to him as a catastrophic intervention into the rituals of subject formation. Solipsists are ripe for profiteers because they cannot see or acknowledge the authority through which social

expectations are fulfilled, which inability, if generalized, threatens the foundations of free society. That Wallace believes this is particularly apparent in his descriptions of the "infantilizing" nature of life on the ship: the cruise, rather than maturing passengers – as happened in the boy's journey to the diving board–causes regression, and this regression is being promoted throughout U.S. culture. Thus, in marking the cruise's production of solipsism in both him and his fellow passengers, Wallace seeks to warn his readers about the dangerous work such institutions do throughout the United States.

This section will develop this problem and outline Wallace's answer to it. To outline this, I offer three readings in this section. First, I analyze "A Supposedly Fun Thing," which figures solipsism as a product that the Caribbean cruise industry cultivates in whole aggregates of people at the same time. Having laid out this work on U.S. consumers as an emphatically *national* problem for Wallace, I then turn to Immanuel Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" and claim that the driving force of Wallace's understanding of adulthood is grounded in enlightenment thinking, which demands that individuals sacrifice personal interests for the sake of community empowerment. Finally, I read Wallace's "Authority and American Usage" and its defense of Standard Written English as an argument for using government institutions as rhetorical tools for spreading a state-centered ideology. Ultimately, in the next section, these readings will provide the civic framework for what I see as Wallace's retelling of "Forever Overhead" in his later story, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy."

"A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" is the second of three experiential essays Wallace published in his lifetime about United States tourism. Collectively, these essays mark a tension he felt between his choices as a common

American and the danger those choices represent to our collective wellbeing. For example, in the first of these, "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All," Wallace uses a visit to the Illinois State Fair as an occasion to meditate on differences between life on the coasts and life in the Midwest. The result of this meditation is that Wallace comes to feel a sense of alienation from Illinois, the state in which he was raised, because he feels disconnected from both the community he finds there and the East Coast where he now lives. Later, in his "Consider the Lobster," Wallace travels to the Maine Lobster Festival and is disturbed by the mass boiling of animals on the fairgrounds. His discomfort leads him to establish connections between individual suffering and mass behavior, specifically as those problems arise in the industries of tourism and food production. What unites all three essays, from my perspective, is stated most clearly in a footnote that appears in "Consider the Lobster," where Wallace complains about the discomfort he feels when he travels for pleasure:

> My personal experience has not been that travelling around the country is broadening or relaxing, or that radical changes in place and context have a salutary effect, but rather that intranational tourism is radically constricting, and humbling in the hardest way–hostile to my fantasy of being a true individual, of living somehow outside and above it all…To be a mass tourist, for me, is to become a pure late-date American: alien, ignorant, greedy for something you cannot ever have, disappointed in a way you can never admit. It is to spoil, by way of sheer ontology, the very unspoiledness you are there to experience. It is to impose yourself on places that in all non-economic ways would be better, realer, without you. It is, in lines and gridlock and transaction after transaction, to confront a dimension of yourself that is as inescapable as it is painful: As a tourist, you become economically significant but existentially loathsome, an insect on a dead thing. (Wallace *A Supposedly*)

The counterintuitive feature of each of his essays on U.S. Tourism then is that Wallace uses the idiosyncratic nature of his writing to confront his fundamental sameness to the people around him. He visits himself as an alien person to make himself representative of

an American normality. Such self-distancing allows Wallace to focus each essay on his cultural production as an American.

In "A Supposedly Fun Thing," this production is more intensely felt than in Wallace's other essays about tourism. This is due to the confined nature of the ship. Wallace cannot escape this space, which has been conceived, designed, and built to tgrow his appetite for consumption, and so the essay functions as a travelogue for Wallace's increasing neediness, as the ship and its mechanisms of pleasure turn him into the consumer the cruise has been designed to produce. The ironic thing about the cruise's work though is that what it seeks to effect is not alien to Wallace–the cruise creates a dependency in him that parallels an infant's relationship with its mother. Wallace comes to this by seizing on a repeated verb in the ship's brochure to pamper and uses it to associate the constant pleasure the brochure promises to the destruction Wallace feels the cruise carrying out inside him:

> For this–the promise to sate the part of me that always and only WANTS–is the central fantasy the brochure is selling. The thing to notice is that the real fantasy here isn't that this promise will be kept, but that such a promise is keepable at all…And of course I want to believe it–fuck the Buddha–I want to believe that maybe this Ultimate Fantasy Vacation will be *enough* pampering…But the Infantile part of me is insatiable–in fact its whole essence or *dasein* or whatever lies in in it's a priori insatiability. In response to any environment of…pampering, the Insatiable Infant…will simply adjust its desires upward until it once again levels out at its homeostasis of terrible dissatisfaction. (*A Supposedly*)

For Wallace, the development of this "Insatiable Infant" over the length of the cruise is a for-profit endeavor, and as passengers adjust to the deep levels of comfort offered by the ship's many amenities, they find they need still more pampering to quell their desire, which leads to still more vigorous economic activity aboard the ship and in the ports of the various Caribbean locales it visits. Wallace's tantrum-like "fuck the Buddha" comes

from his inability to make his desire sit still, and it signals the deep immaturity that the cruise produces in its passengers.

The perniciousness of Wallace's desire lies in its literally self-destructive operation. As he loses power over the "Insatiable Infant" that the cruise seeks to nurse and comfort, a space for the authoritarianism of capitalist desire is opened. The cruise uses the carrot and stick of pleasure and its absence to tightly govern Wallace and the other passengers. Which Wallace communicates by describing the ship's brochure in terms that recall the previous section's discussion of the second-person narration of "Forever Overhead." For example, Wallace notes that the language of the brochure is designed to elide the passengers' agency:

> The near imperative use of the second person, the specificity of detail that extends to even what you will say (*you will say* "I couldn't agree more" and "Let's do it all!"). In the cruise brochure's ad, you are excused from doing the work of constructing the fantasy…The ads, therefore, don't flatter your adult agency, or even ignore it–they supplant it…Your troublesome capacities for choice, error, regret, dissatisfaction, and despair will be removed from the equation. (*A Supposedly*)

Wallace describes experience after experience aboard the cruise ship in which his most basic desires are thoughtfully fulfilled before he has had time to become cognizant of those desires. The brochure helps him see that this thoughtfulness is actually designed to rob him of his ability to make choices. Ironically, then, the second-person narration of the brochure turns out to serve the opposite goal of what I read as Wallace's reasons for moving us through "Forever Overhead." While that story's second-person narration made the boy see that he did not have ownership of his life's experiences, it did not mitigate his responsibility for the world he occupied. The insistent directions of the ship's brochure on the other hand, unburden the reader of their agency: by tearing down self-awareness,

untraining the reader's relation to others, and urging them to forget the finitude that gave "Forever Overhead" its animating drama.

This view of the world promoted in the ship's brochure is not merely violent to abstract notions of agency and deliberation for Wallace. He goes to great lengths to show how it inflicts violence on people directly connected to the passengers as well. For example, in a footnoted diatribe that condemns what he calls the "Professional Smile," Wallace argues that by requiring employees to model the appearance of good will to customers, U.S. companies in general have trained him, as a consumer, to expect service workers to submerge their true feelings for him. Wallace sees this as a critical lie and uses the feelings he has when a service worker is honest with him as evidence of the lie's danger:

> Anybody who's ever bought a pack of gum in a Manhattan cigar store…knows well…the humiliation and resentment of being denied the Professional Smile. And the Professional Smile has by now skewed even my resentment at the dreaded Professional Scowl: I walk away…resenting not the counterman's character or absence of goodwill but his lack of *professionalism* in denying me the Smile. (*A Supposedly*)

Professionalism, in this footnote, is offered in deference to an economic transaction. Wallace's daily life in the U.S. has led him to expect people who serve him to paper over their indifference, or even their hostility, towards him. Blaming himself for his desire to feel liked at the expense of the tobacconist's honesty, Wallace finds in himself a solipsistic skepticism: in the interaction that his purchase of a pack of gum creates, he does not believe in the value or personal relevance to him of the tobacconist's life. His immersion in the United States's service culture feeds that skepticism and teaches Wallace it is not only acceptable but right. He is trained, through his experiences as a U.S. consumer, to see the world as responsible for his happiness, and he is allowed to

enjoy this view of the world so long as he remains complicit in the expectation that service workers behave as professionals when he interacts with them.

This problem becomes more severe aboard the cruise, particularly in the relationships Wallace has with what he calls the hierarchy of non-U.S. servants who work on the ship. In particular, Wallace spends a significant amount of time dissecting his dependence on his cleaning lady, Petra, whom Wallace has a crush on and who is required to clean his room whenever he leaves it for more than half an hour. Comparing Petra's motives for cleaning his room to the motives of a mother who cleans up after her child, Wallace uses his relationship with Petra to point to the specific ways that professionalism dehumanizes both he and the ship's staff:

> Because…its' not…like having a mom. *Pace* the guilt and nagging, etc. a mom cleans up after you largely because she loves you – you are the point, the object of the cleaning somehow. On the [ship], though, once the novelty [has] worn off, I begin to see that the phenomenal cleaning really has nothing to do with me…If pampering and radical kindness don't seem motivated by strong affection and thus don't somehow affirm one…of what final and significant value is all this indulgence and leaning? (*A Supposedly*)

While from Petra's perspective the cleaning does not have anything to do with Wallace as a unique person–because she has to clean the room regardless of who dirtied it–the ship would not exist without him, or at least without a substantial reserve of people like him. The same is true about her. The cruise would not be possible without the hierarchy of non-U.S. servants who staff the ship, but Petra in her particularity is unimportant to the experience Wallace is supposed to have.

Through his incessant cataloging of how the cruise's many pleasure's make Wallace uncomfortable, "A Supposedly Fun Thing" turns out to be a study of the ethical quagmires of globalization, and the essay gains power through the affection Wallace

displays for Petra. Because of her professionalism and his status as a consumer, they cannot have a genuine relationship. Despite her kindness to him, Wallace finds himself alienated from her in the same way that he was alienated from the tobacconist, except on the ship he seeks genuine human fellowship with her and finds nothing between them but the commercial duty of a payment exchanged. The unbridgeable divide between Wallace and Petra, despite globalism's success at bringing them face to face, becomes symbolic of the many divisions that the culture of the ship produces between people, as it isolates them, one by one, into the unique cabins of pleasure and service that solipsism creates more generally in Wallace's writing.

Wallace marks the progress of this division by structuring "A Supposedly Fun Thing" to have an isolating force. The essay begins with a litany of experiences that Wallace has had, and he questions whether they have been enough to justify the money spent on his Caribbean cruise: "I now know the precise mixological difference between a Slippery Nipple and a Fuzzy Navel. I know what a Coco Loco is. I have in one week been the object of over 1500 Professional Smiles. I have shot skeet at sea. Is this enough?" (*A Supposedly*). This list of experiences is carried over the first several pages of the essay, and the question of sufficiency deepens in each succeeding section as Wallace wonders what the product of a Caribbean cruise actually is or should be. He meditates on the relationship between the sea and death. He thinks about the promises and demands of capitalist culture. Eventually though, reason breaks down, and at the essay's end we are carried through a penultimate day aboard the ship, as Wallace narrates a manic series of experiences in which he loses a game of chess to a nine-year-old, attends a Catholic mass, tries caviar, dances in a conga line, etc. This activity collapses into itself, and

Wallace suffers the total devastation of self that the ship's apparatus has been designed to effect in him: he imagines himself as a man overboard, treading water and looking up at the ship he is actually aboard, a palatial, imperial, white monstrosity churning away from him, which is an image that recalls an earlier citation of Pip's going mad in *Moby Dick*.

That section of Melville's novel, at the beginning of "A Supposedly Fun Thing," symbolized for Wallace his dread of the particular death that the ocean represents, one of immense nothingness, what he calls "primordial *nada*." By essay's end, however, the image is no longer associated with dread. The cruise ship comes to represent not simply death but a meaningless form of death, even from Wallace's perspective on his own life. It is a death of waste, which ends a life unredeemed by anything either within or outside itself, where purpose has been stripped from the subject of the cruise's production. Ironically, this loss of purpose at the end of the essay manifests itself in Wallace as a sense of wellness:

> This…trance…lasted all through the next day and night, which period I spent entirely in Cabin 1009, in bed, mostly looking out the spotless portholes, with trays and various rinds all around me, feeling maybe a little bit glassy-eyed but mostly good–good to be on the [ship] and good soon to be off, good that I had survived (in a way) being pampered to death (in a way)–and so I stayed in bed. (*A Supposedly*)

Wallace has lost his capacity to distinguish the particulars of his environment, again like the boy in "Forever Overhead;" except here it is not that the world or his faculties resist giving him a sense of the space he occupies; rather, the cruise has dissolved his interest in seeing difference, and the character Wallace has constructed is just happy to be satisfied by the ship and its apparatuses of pleasure. Thus, if "Forever Overhead"'s terminus was a growth signified by the boy's fall into adult responsibility, then Wallace in "A Supposedly Fun Thing" regresses into a perverse kind of ascension, where adulthood and

its many demands recede from the self, along with any desire to return to them. The cruise succeeds in rendering Wallace docile through the rigors of pleasure it provides.

Like *Infinite Jest*, "A Supposedly Fun Thing" is fundamentally about solipsism. The differences between the characterizations of solipsism that occupy "A Supposedly Fun Thing" and those that occupy *Infinite Jest* though appear in the different problems that each piece of writing seeks to understand. While in *Infinite Jest*, solipsism does appear on a national level, as was discussed above in the appearance of Johnny Gentle, the force of the book is directed at individual recuperation. How do we bring Don Gately back to life? What alternatives to the self might the reader dedicate themselves to? In "A Supposedly Fun thing," the piece is not about Wallace, and the reader's recuperation from solipsism goes undiscussed. This is because Wallace wants to communicate the feeling the cruise produced in him as a product, and he wants the reader to see that this feeling is being produced in each passenger aboard the ship and throughout U.S. culture. The questions become: What does it mean if so many people are learning that their most fundamental needs can be met by their activities as consumers? And, given the danger Wallace sees in this situation, what should we be doing as a society to address it?

These questions remain unanswered in "A Supposedly Fun Thing," but the essay's role here is to reframe the problems of solipsism and see them as created by the work institutions of capitalism do on American consumers as an aggregate. In marking the production of an unsatisfiable yearning aboard the ship and explicating its operation in him as one consumer among many, Wallace turns his focus to something more difficult than the alcohol and drug addictions that fill so much of *Infinite Jest*; he turns to an addiction to pleasure in the United States generally. The large-scale production of the

pleasure-based ideology that appears in "A Supposedly Fun Thing" marks a national crisis for our methods of subject formation. The rest of this section therefore explicates Wallace's answer to this problem, specifically as it appears in his essay on American grammar, "Authority and American Usage."

"Authority and American Usage" is putatively a glowing review of Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* and an argument for the value of Standard Written English for U.S. culture. I am going to argue though that the central goal of the essay has less to do with grammar and more to do with urging readers to accept a particular civic burden: Wallace wants us to surrender our autonomy as individuals and accept roles that have been outlined for us by society. This abstract argument can be hard to see in "Authority and American Usage," both because of the many tangents Wallace takes in the essay and because of the controversial claims he makes, particularly his claim that we should use our system of education to forcefully confront students of color who are deficient in Standard Written English. Though I begin my analysis with a detour through Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?," my goal is not to avoid Wallace's controversial claims. On the contrary, I face them directly, but only after outlining the beliefs that originate those claims. I hope that this approach will sharpen our sense of the radicalness of Wallace's mature thought and provide a powerful tool for reading the late fiction discussed in the next section.

The specific value of "What Is Enlightenment?" for "Authority and American Usage" lies in the constrictions Kant believed society's future should place on its individual members. These constrictions appear to Kant as necessary for the guarantee of public order, and their need justifies the force of law; but his goal in "What Is

Enlightenment?" was not to argue for external laws; rather, he sought the emplacement of an internal duty that his readers would feel to conform their private lives to their roles as citizens. If this duty were internalized by all individuals–if enlightenment were universalized–Kant believed laws would no longer be necessary because citizens would orient their lives by society's needs. In this sense, "What Is Enlightenment?" is an argument about history. It places the prospect of universal freedom in the unseen future of the human race and argues we should use it as the guiding principle of self-government. My argument then is that Wallace adopted the constrictions Kant outlines in his essay as consistent with a duty that is, for Wallace, the touchstone of good citizenship.

"What Is Enlightenment?" works by a kind of circular reasoning: enlightenment, Kant says, is "man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage" (Kant "What") The immaturity of this nonage is a figural childhood in which our lives are ruled by guardians who direct our behavior independent of the consent of our reason. Examples of guardians include physicians, tax collectors, and the clergy. Kant believes society has placed these figures in positions of authority because of the knowledge they are said to have in their respective fields. The problem is that their positions of authority promote a general ignorance as lay people choose to surrender the responsibility of knowing to experts: long-term effect of this is a culture that has enslaved itself through laziness and cowardice, which is a great evil for Kant because he believes the proper destiny of human life is universal self-government. He therefore offers "What Is Enlightenment?" to readers as a wake-up call: each and every member of society, he says, has a duty to "Dare to know!"

Audacity is needed from all members of society because it is only in our mutual cooperation that enlightenment can be generalized. The regular citizen must be prepared to learn and to fail in their pursuit of knowledge. The guardian must be ready to suspend their authority and let laypeople struggle in their field. And the sovereign must be willing to let the organism of society reflect freely in all areas of human knowledge–in the arts, the sciences, and, most crucially, in theology. These different forms of courage to grant and enjoy a culture of intellectual freedom would allow us, in the fullness of time, to see man's proper dignity, both as an individual and as a species. Thus, enlightenment signifies a social capacity for reconciling ourselves to what Kant understood to be the fundamentally emergent nature of the true and proper form of human life.

Unfortunately, the creation of this true and proper form will not be easy. As Wallace did not believe that simply having the autonomy to pursue pleasure could constitute a meaningful form of human freedom, Kant's investment in his present moment was not in the private freedom of my personal behavior but the productive freedom of my contribution to social discourse. He created this distinction between types of interest by describing two forms of reason that operate in human thought, one private and the other public. Where private reason operates in my daily life, in the decisions I make with regards to my work and my routines, public reason is speculative and is made manifest in the realms of society's discourse. Kant's refrain throughout "What Is Enlightenment?" is "Argue as much as you please, but obey!" As a soldier, for instance, society has a need for me to restrict the private use of my reason to my duties as a soldier, which means determining the best way to effect the orders of my superiors. If the Captain tells me to take a particular hill, dithering about the wisdom of his command tears at the

structure that gives society its functioning order, and so I should pursue the realization of his orders with diligence and haste. But, if my speculative reason disagrees with the Captain's orders, I also have a public responsibility to make my disagreement known. I should publish my sense of the wastefulness of spending human lives on a hill that offers no military advantage. Taken together, the general expectation that we fulfill both our public and private duties, to argue and obey, creates a mechanism within society for a progress that is fueled by the subsumption of personal liberty.

The work of reconciling myself to society's demand in private at the same time I give public form to the speculations of my reason is the central tension of enlightenment thinking because it demands the unification of a diverse people into one body. When Kant urged his readers to "Dare to know!," to assume responsibility for their choices, he promoted not an audacity that ends in the individual's empowerment but a courage to work together amidst the clamor of meaningful argument, which argument, if sustained in a society turned toward justice and equality, would fuel the mechanisms of social change toward the empowerment of all people in the eventuality of society's future. Thus, Kant's division of a person's interest into public and private provides a social structure that makes the betterment of the common weal both possible and practical.

For Kant, and I will argue this is true of Wallace in "Authority and American Usage" as well, enlightenment thinking functions as a moral framework for judging the obligation that we, as individuals, have not merely to ourselves or our society but to the future prospects of human life. The individual's present moment thereby becomes a debt to the future. If we recall the boy in "Forever Overhead," I argued that the story captures what society owes the present moment of his consciousness, which it provides in the

rituals that give his life narrative structure. This obligation was reciprocal: as the boy enters adulthood, his duty to his society's rituals dwarfs his individual significance in human history. This reciprocity also sits at the hearts of both "What Is Enlightenment?" and "Authority and American Usage:" no individual, however much they may feel themselves to be enlightened, can be independent of their milieu, as we see when Kant declares a limit on our ability to cultivate knowledge that transcends our moment:

> One age cannot enter into an alliance on oath to put the next age in a position where it would be impossible for it to extend and correct its knowledge, particularly on…important matters, or to make any progress whatsoever in enlightenment. This would be a crime against human nature, whose original destiny lies precisely in such progress. (Kant)

The obedience of each generation to the process of enlightenment Kant demands extends his argument into both the past and the future. The fundamentally social nature of his understanding of progress means all knowledge must be mediated by the incremental nature of history's emergence, even when one individual or a group of individuals may feel themselves to know more than their contemporaries. Applied to Wallace's analysis of US culture, solipsism hides the limits of the self from the solipsist, and the distance that an individual or group perceives between their enlightenment and that of the general population hobbles them. Even the priest must genuflect before history; to do otherwise, Kant says, "means trampling underfoot the sacred rights of mankind."

Here then we have three fundamental constrictions that I mean to carry into my reading of "Authority and American Usage:" the constriction of private interest to public duty, the constriction of individual autonomy to social order, and the constriction of each generation to the emergent nature of the historical project of enlightenment. By using these to read "Authority and American Usage," I argue Wallace's claim that all U.S.

citizens should learn Standard Written English is actually part of a much larger argument for instilling a state ideology in US citizens as a means of countering the general promotion of solipsism in US consumers by institutions of capitalism. By apprehending an emergent national purpose, through reflection on the potential good of U.S. culture, Wallace wanted all Americans to orient their lives toward Kant's project of human enlightenment. Thus, he prescribes in "Authority and American Usage" the cultivation of what he calls a "Democratic Spirit," which, like Kant's demand for unity amidst the clamor of argument, asks us to see that our individual views are necessarily limited by the narrow perspectives on the world that inheres in the subjective nature of human life. Our fundamental narrowness demands we struggle always against the limits of what we can see. And because the social government Wallace envisioned needs to be one of equality and justice, the intersubjective function of rhetoric creates an obligation for all citizens to learn the shared national dialect of the United States, namely Standard Written English.

Originally published under the title "Tense Present" in the April, 2001 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, "Authority and American Usage" reappeared under its current title, and in a much expanded form, with the publication of Wallace's second collection of nonfiction, 2005's *Consider the Lobster*. It is a difficult and sometimes tedious essay because Wallace uses "Authority and American Usage" to work to so many purposes and to dredge up so many problems. "Authority and American Usage" is centrally about what Wallace calls a "Democratic Spirit," a term he defines as the capacity to occupy a rhetorical position in discourse in a way that is both passionate and respectful of others.

The occasion for Wallace's argument in "Authority and American Usage" is the publication of Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, which he

sees as a rhetorically powerful entry in a long-standing argument about language usage. The dispute Garner enters, as Wallace perceives it, is between people who believe Standard Written English is a tool of empowerment for people who need to write effectively and those who see standardized dialects as tools of oppression. Though Wallace spends significant energy drawing out the views and histories of both sides–respectively named prescriptivists and descriptivists–his goal is to show how–by what authority–Garner presumes to offer language advice to his readers in a climate of profound discord. Thus, "Authority and American Usage" is an analysis of Garner's rhetorical strategy and an explanation of why Wallace believes a general pursuit of Garner's strategy in US public discourse might help us maintain a purposeful national culture in the 21st century.

Wallace says the timing of Garner's dictionary is fortuitous because he believes that the United States is in the midst of what he calls a "protracted crisis of authority." Our political discourse, he claims, has been perverted by self-interested arguments. As in the debate over language education, camps and dogmatisms have emerged throughout our political discourse that hold inflexible and unreasonable views on everything from abortion, to Monica Lewinsky, to wealth redistribution, and the extremity of our polarization damages principles that should be shared by all citizens. This has occurred because those who engage in political debate prefer seeing themselves as right or morally superior to the more productive work of compromising with those with whom they disagree. Thus, Garner's demonstrated ability in his dictionary to synthesize the two sides of the language debate, to absorb the descriptivist critique of his prescriptivist position, and then to step forward with his authority to prescribe language usage not only intact but

enhanced, inspires Wallace to write "Authority and American Usage" not as an apology for Standard Written English but as an apology for authority itself.

The type of authority that Wallace values then is rhetorical. It is the ability to offer one's beliefs and one's reasons for those beliefs based on demonstrated deliberation. Thus, what Wallace claims to find so striking about Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* is the rhetorical posture Garner assumes throughout his dictionary. Wallace dubs this posture Garner's "Democratic Spirit," which, Wallace says,

> combines rigor and humility, i.e., passionate conviction plus a sedulous respect for the convictions of others. As any American knows, this is a difficult spirit to cultivate and maintain, particularly when it comes to issues you feel strongly about. Equally tough is a [Democratic Spirit's] criterion of 100 percent intellectual integrity – you have to be willing to look honestly at yourself and at your motives for believing what you believe, and to do it more or less continuously. (*Consider* 72)

My contention is that "Authority and American Usage" functions as a wake-up call to the urgency of cultivating this Democratic Spirit in US culture in the same terms that Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" functions as a wake-up call to our duty to "Dare to know!" The audacity of Kant's essay, in Wallace's hands becomes not a demand that we discover the courage to escape the dogmatism of religious institution though rather, it calls us to find a way beyond our skepticism of other people's ability to reflect on their own experiences, to make their own judgments, and then to offer their valid arguments in the space of public discourse: Wallace's argument is a reminder that arguments in good faith require the full acknowledgment of both those we disagree with and the arguments they produce Thus the mutual recognition that a generally held Democratic Spirit would demand in Wallace's thought arrives by the general acceptance of an authority that

connects people in a political sphere and thereby transcends any one person's belief system.

The implications of Wallace's demand for mutual recognition and the specific ways Garner taps into the authority of that demand require reflection not only on what we believe but our reasons for choosing our political priorities. This becomes clear if we first look back to "What Is Enlightenment?" and consider the nature of the cultural solipsism that Wallace diagnosed in "A Supposedly Fun Thing." Knowledge in Kant's essay did not simply mean the production of knowledge for its own sake; rather, it signified a particular posture he believed individuals of his time needed to take in relation to the functioning of knowledge in their society. Kant believed we should take responsibility for the consequences both of what we think and for what we still do not know. Thus, enlightenment signified for him an ability to move through, say, the Copernican Turn with a dignity born from both humility and hard work. He lso marked the responsibility that we take when we obey an order that tells us to charge up a hill in what we believe is an ill-advised situation. For Wallace, this courage to know, in the contemporary United States, becomes something more concerned with interests and our ability to look honestly at *why* we have the desires that we do and then to submit those desires to the judgment and curtailment of society's authority. For example, in "A Supposedly Fun Thing," it was clear to Wallace that the passengers' desire to be infantilized on the cruise authorized a whole mechanism of capitalist exploitation, and he believed no honest reflection on the origin of those desires could be justified in the political sphere. Thus, the mindfulness of finding the proper rapport between ourselves, our political space, and the world that our political desire will ultimately produce is what a Democratic Spirit signifies for Wallace,

and as he says, "is advanced U.S. citizenship:" "A true Democratic Spirit is up there with religious faith and emotional maturity and all those other top-of-the-Maslow-Pyramid-type qualities that people spend their whole lives working on (72).

Thus, "Authority and American Usage" is an essay dedicated to the problem of how to produce a Democratic Spirit in American subjects, an electorate of citizens conscious of their need to be conscious of how their desire affects their political beliefs. At last, then, we are in a position to clarify what I set out to argue at the beginning of this chapter, which is that in "Authority and American Usage" we have an outline of the political answer to the general promotion of solipsism in U.S. culture that Wallace diagnosed in both *Infinite Jest* and "A Supposedly Fun thing," but which he, until this essay, lacked a properly national counter for. My claim is that Wallace came to believe that state institutions should be built to function as institutions of enlightenment and that it is institutions of the state, and their work on an individual's ideological commitments to political community, that Wallace ultimately hoped might oppose capitalism in the United States. The distinction between the state institution and the capitalist institution lies in the purpose that we find in their respective operations: where the capitalist institution, exemplified in Wallace's experience aboard the cruise, seeks to manufacture a feeling of purposelessness in consumers that makes them dependent on its services and thereby objects for profit, state institutions should empower subjects to bind themselves to an overriding national purpose that orients their lives toward the improvement of a shared national community. It is from this responsibility that Wallace believes the obligation to require students in the United States to learn Standard Written English descends to both our system of education and the teachers it employs.

The success of Wallace's argument for Standard Written English in "Authority and American Usage" depends on his ability to indict what he sees as an irresponsible permissiveness in figures of authority in US culture at the turn of the 21st century. The specific permissiveness Wallace uses to symbolize a broader political permissiveness is that of linguistic descriptivism in debates against prescriptivism over the proper form of language education. Wallace's claim is that Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* is a remarkable synthesis of the two sides of this debate, even though Garner and Wallace both firmly place themselves in the prescriptivist camp. To make clear the importance he sees in Garner's book, Wallace walks the reader through a dialectic of linguistic history in the second half of the 20th century. Prescriptive forces do show a mixed record, he admits: while prescriptivism, in its best moments, promotes clarity and power in language, it also sometimes empowers pedants who abuse their power to the detriment of the language users they encounter. Descriptivists attack the assumptions prescriptivists rely on to establish themselves as authorities. They claim the words that constitute language are arbitrary, that the shape of discourse follows the way language is actually used (and not the rules that prescriptivists set down), and that what prescriptivism does politically is create a communities that are exclusive of large groups of people, including women, the lower classes, and people of color. Thus, Wallace says, descriptivists promote a linguistic permissiveness as consistent with political principles that say it is good to attack illegitimate forms of authority and allow the fundamental equality of all people to appear.

Standard Written English, the bailiwick of prescriptivism, functions in the descriptivist view then as a site of authority that governs US culture in a way that is anti-

egalitarian, and the elimination of these authorities of usage would produce a more democratic society. The genius of *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, from Wallace's perspective, lies in Garner's pragmatic rebuttal to these claims. Wallace says that Garner realizes the proper authority of prescriptivism comes from its rhetorical power–that he can be an authority on the best ways to engage US public discourse only if he elicits that authority democratically. Thus, Garner, like Wallace in "Authority and American Usage," makes clear why one would want to become proficient in Standard Written English: because it grants one greater authority as an agent in the primary discourse community of civic power in the United States. In this view, descriptivists appear irresponsibly idealistic: they ignore established ways of distributing power in discourse at the peril of those who were not born into them. In so doing, descriptivists abnegate their responsibility to make the U.S. more democratic by bringing more people into its public sphere. If the reader buys Garner and Wallace's arguments, then Garner gets to move into the space he needs to write his dictionary, a space that allows him to do his work of making case-by-case judgments of how one should respond to particular usage problems.

Wallace is less concerned with judgments about different problems of usage; rather, he is interested in the larger political problem of democratic participation in the United States that Garner's dictionary has led him to consider. This is apparent in his prolonged discussion of dialect. One's facility in a dialect functions as a gatekeeper to power in the community that uses that dialect, according to Wallace. Thus, as Garner argued, it is only through a facility with Standard Written English that citizens in the United States are granted recognition in public discourse. At the same time, though,

Wallace points out that it is only through, say, a facility with slang and swear words that a kid at recess becomes accepted by his peers. Because language facility in different dialects is necessary to life we continually find ourselves occupying different positions in different forms of human community. Wallace then goes to great lengths to demonstrate that he sees and values the sophistication of several dialects in U.S. culture, mentioning as he does "Black English, Latino English, Rural Southern" (98), etc. He says that each discourse community we occupy offers important and unique rewards. The problem we face as citizens is the simultaneous unity and diversity of the United States as a nation-state. If our reality is that the community of power that governs the United States' political organization uses Standard Written English as a gatekeeper, it is in the fundamental interest of all individuals *and* U.S. culture generally, assuming a perspective that values greater inclusion in democratic processes, that all people living in this country learn Standard Written English. Thus, Wallace acknowledges a political reality, creates a national imperative for prescriptivism in language education, and then calls descriptivists fundamentally irresponsible. If those who understand language and dialect and the power they exert on people's lives allow their poorly-considered notions of egalitarianism to disempower the educational function of prescriptivism–for that is what admonitions of usage are about for Wallace, education–those not born into dialects of power, such as Standard Written English, will be disenfranchised by a toxic permissiveness that masquerades as liberation.

We can see this same reasoning in other areas where Wallace believes permissiveness threatens the well-being of US culture, particularly in Wallace's savage attack on Politically Correct English. Political correctness signals for him the very real

peril of descriptivism's implicit claim that we do not need to govern our usage as a community. Despite its proponents' claims that political correctness is about creating equality in US culture, Wallace argues that political correctness comes from a place of selfishness. It is therefore counterproductive to the political goals its users claim to seek and that Wallace shares:

> The basic hypocrisy about usages like "economically disadvantaged" and "differently abled" is that [Politically Correct English] advocates believe the beneficiaries of these terms' compassion and generosity to be poor people and people in wheelchairs, which again omits something that everyone knows bout nobody…ever mentions–that part of any speaker's motive for using a certain vocabulary is always the desire to communicate stuff about himself…PCE functions primarily to signal and congratulate certain virtues in the speaker–scrupulous egalitarianism, concern for the dignity of all people, sophistication about the political implications of language–and so serves the self-regarding interests of the PC far more than it serves any of the persons or groups renamed. (113).

The specific approach Wallace uses here is indicative: "PCE functions primarily to signal and congratulate certain virtues of the speaker." The problem Wallace has with political correctness is not that one communicates information about themselves through usage, which he takes to be always-already given; rather, his problem is that political correctness causes us to lie about the kind of self our usage actually promotes. Politically Correct English communicates generosity on the part of the speaker–i.e. it makes an ethical appeal to its audience on behalf of the person talking–but that appearance of generosity comes at the lived expense of the people the speaker is talking about: poor people and people in wheelchairs. Their political realities are elided in the abstraction of Politically Correct English, which makes the already difficult work of addressing their needs on a social level even more unlikely. Politically Correct English thereby originates in selfishness in the same way that Wallace's relationship with Petra aboard the ship in "A

Supposedly Fun Thing" originated in selfishness. Wallace's joy in their relationship came at the cost of the person at the other end of the transaction, which reality was preemptively occluded by the abstraction of money in a way that is similar to how the term "economically disadvantaged" occludes the ravages of poverty by softening our way of naming people who are broke. Thus, language usage has real political implications, and, for Wallace, the central tenet of his version of prescriptivism is that we should acknowledge those implications and our responsibility, as language users, for the effects on other people that our discomfort with words can have.

Wallace uses the self-centered construction of Politically Correct English to signal a broader self-satisfaction he believes the Left indulges in US politics, which satisfaction comes at the expense of stronger arguments for liberal initiatives like wealth redistribution that should originate, in his view, in an understanding of the United States as a national community. What is crucial to notice in trying to understand Wallace's thinking in this moment is the notion of self he uses to critique the Left's political program. Where the examples of Politically Correct English above prioritized the self as singular, the self Wallace uses to attack the US Left is collective. We can see this clearly in an interpolation Wallace provides in which he explains how and why he believes liberals disempower themselves as political authorities when they do not think through the rhetorical impact of their usage:

> The mistake here lies in both [the Right and Left's] assumption that the real motives for redistributing wealth are charitable or unselfish. The conservatives' mistake (if it is a mistake) is wholly conceptual, but for the Left the assumption is also a serious tactical error. Progressive liberals seem incapable of stating the obvious truth: that we who are well off should be willing to share more of what we have with poor people not for the poor people's sake but for our own; i.e., we should share what we have in order to become less narrow and frightened and lonely and self-centered

> people. No one ever seems willing to acknowledge aloud the thoroughgoing *self-interest* that underlies all impulses toward economic equality – especially not U.S. progressives, who seem so invested in an image of themselves as Uniquely Generous… that they allow the conservatives to frame the debate in terms of charity and utility, terms under which redistribution seems far less obviously a good thing. (113)

For Wallace, concerns for economic equality are an occasion to escape solipsism into something like a more democratic community, which is self-interested in the sense of mutual self-improvement. The self here though is really a national *we*. For Wallace, the argument the Left needs to make is that each individual's fate in the United States is tied to the fate of all. Looked at on the level of a single person, this echoes the solution of *Infinite Jest*: Gately uses the halfway house he works for to pull himself out of the spiral of addictive solipsism that has done so much damage to him and those around him. In the process, he improves the community of the halfway house and saves the life of one of its members. Here, though, in attacking Politically Correct English, Wallace is interested in a national problem which is the political project of persuading his reader that training ourselves, as a culture, to use the fundamentally selfish phrases of Politically Correct English in our discourse threatens to have a profoundly negative impact on the way we see and think about our world as individuals. Through political correctness, we train ourselves to elide honesty for vanity when we speak and so diminish our ability to address, through the arguments we create, the very real threats that problems like poverty present to our communities.

The answer to this problem in "Authority and American Usage" is for us to come to a fuller recognition of our societal need for sites of authority that operate on our desires. Because the essay is about language usage, institutions of education lend themselves readily to Wallace's argument. We need teachers to function as authorities

who can help students understand what participation in democracy demands and why it is valuable. This, of course, is crucial in matters of language usage for Wallace, but it is also important that teachers model citizenship in the broad spectrum of ways our lives as individuals operate in relation to our collective life as a nation. For example, teachers can help produce a more democratic society by training students how to become recognized agents in political discourse by making a public case to their students for Standard Written English and then helping them achieve that political recognition without presumption and arrogance they often bring to their pedagogy. This responsibility falls on both sides of the usage debate. Prescriptivist teachers, according to Wallace, have a tendency to value proper English for the wrong reasons–for instance, because it is proper–or they use bad rhetorical strategies and never make it clear to students where their authority as teachers comes from. Descriptivists, on the other hand, cede their authority to an unthoughtful belief that we do not shape the language we use and thereby abnegate their responsibility to their students. In both cases, Wallace argues teachers should recognize their vital function in US culture and fill it. In terms of what is by this point the secondary importance of the debate over linguistics, Wallace claims the field and implies, "Argue as much as you please, but obey!"

This demand in "Authority and American Usage" filters down from teacher to student. We can see this in Wallace's example of a speech he claims to have given certain of his African American students who he says were deficient in Standard Written English. For me, this moment of "Authority and American Usage" betrays two radical features of Wallace's thought: 1) the authority Wallace believes state institutions should have in guiding individual behavior and 2) the rhetorical power he thinks teachers have in

eliciting the agreement of their students about guiding principles. Wallace begins his speech by telling one of his African American students that, whether or not they are aware of it, "in a college English class you're basically studying a foreign dialect" (108). Wallace then explains to the student that there are differences between what he calls the Standard Written English required in the classroom and the Standard Black English the student speaks. Wallace then concedes many professors don't understand "SWE and SBE" are different dialects and that that is unfair, but he nevertheless tells his student that, in his class, Standard Written English is required:

> In class–in my English class–you will have to master and write in Standard Written English, which we might just as well call "Standard White English" because it was developed by white people and is used by white people, especially educated, powerful white people…In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is just How It Is. You can believe it's racist and unfair and decide right here and now to spend every waking minute of your adult life arguing against it, and maybe you should, but I'll tell you something–if you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you're going to have to communicate them in SWE, because SWE is the dialect our nation uses to talk to itself. (108-109)

Wallace then lists examples of famous black authors who have written speeches and novels in Standard Written English to great effect. Finally, he tells his student, "you're going to learn to use it, too, because I'm going to make you" (Ibid). In terms of Wallace's thinking about dialect and authority, there is not much new in this speech. What makes the example productive for his essay is how confrontational it is. Given what would be the descriptivist claim that there is no value-based difference between Standard Written English and Standard Black English, Wallace's speech becomes baldly racist. He is arbitrarily prioritizing one dialect–and one group's history of hegemony and violence–

over another. But, of course, he thinks understanding the arbitrariness of language in that way is stupid; his purpose is to elicit this response because he wants the example to serve as a counter to the Politically Correct English that seeks to gratify the speaker at the expense of the person they are talking about. As he says, "This reviewer's own humble opinion is that some of the cultural and political realities of American life are themselves racially insensitive and elitist and offensive and unfair, and that pussyfooting around these realities with euphemistic doublespeak is not only hypocritical but toxic to the project of ever changing them" (ibid).

Wallace believes that his duty as a teacher is not only to teach his students Standard Written English but also to teach them to feel their duties as citizens of the United States, which is where the historical component of enlightenment thinking in "Authority and American Usage" becomes visible. Wallace has a duty to help his students become agents of change in a culture that is "racially insensitive and elitist and offensive and unfair." The generational nature of the teacher and the student's mutual duties to command and obey in a collective project of social justice, then, brings Wallace's argument in line with Kant's argument for his historical project, in which the present moment of our lives is not actually ours: it is a debt we owe to the gradual and authentic liberation of our posterity. If, in Wallace's thinking, his black student refuses Wallace's demand, then the future political field of the United States becomes that much more unjust. This future possibility makes Wallace not only responsible for teaching his student Standard Written English but it also makes him responsible for crafting a rhetorically effective argument for why his student should learn it.

With respect to the general problem Wallace identifies in the Left's political strategies in the United States, then, he reverses the logic he sees liberals bringing to problems of social justice. That Wallace has facility in Standard Written English, and that he agrees with the descriptivist claim that it is a historically unjust dialect, does not mean that he should seek to undermine the authority of teachers who try to help their students learn the dialect; on the contrary, he has a duty to become better at teaching it to his students, especially those who are deficient in Standard Written English. Thus, Wallace thinks descriptivism and the Left in general correctly identify the injustices of US society, but they respond to them in the wrong way. Their constant and selfish search for acknowledgment of their goodness leads them to a rhetoric that exacerbates entrenched social problems.

The moral demand that the project of enlightenment gives us is therefore one of self-sacrifice. This sacrifice entails an awareness about our desires and the cultural forces that promote those desires. In the dialectic I have offered in this section, two authors of such forces are apparent: the institutions of capitalism that abet immediacy in our thinking and Wallace's vision of institutions of enlightenment that have the potential to teach us to orient our desires beyond the self. Both institutions seek to shape subjects. The question for Wallace is: do we want to be consumers or do we want to be citizens? His vote was for citizenship because he believed that if we want to live in a society that offers the prospect of an authentic and universal human freedom, we need to learn to sacrifice ourselves to the best operation we can effect in the social structures we occupy. To do so, we must reflect on the reality of our individual finitude and understand it is only in the rituals of subject formation that we subsist. To give oneself to the historical

subsistence promised by enlightenment requires the maturity of an adult consciousness, which, against the temptations of life in the contemporary United States, only state institutions can prepare. In the next section, we will see Wallace's attempt to picture the drama of both this formation of subjects by a state institution and the sacrifice that that formation demands in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy."

"The Soul Is Not a Smithy"

Wallace's "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" is one of his longest and most difficult short stories. Told entirely from the perspective of a single, unnamed, narrator, it is an act of remembrance that weaves together a bewildering array of storylines, some of which have clear beginnings and endings and some of which have only implied trajectories. In this section, I will argue that it is the unarticulated storylines of "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" that make it a difficult and rewarding piece of fiction. This is because, though these stories remain untold, they nevertheless shape the narrative's drama from off-stage. One character's shrouded past, for instance, will create the vista of another character's unseen future, and both will be crucial to the narrator's self-understanding when it emerges at the end of the story. Thus, the challenge of reading "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" lies not in the difficulty of Wallace's prose, which he uses to craft the voice of an emphatically average, if digressive, narrator; rather, the challenge of reading this story lies in figuring out what exactly it is that the narrator is trying to say.

"The Soul Is Not a Smithy" was originally published in the literary magazine *AGNI*, in 2003; Wallace then included it in his third short story collection, *Oblivion*, in 2004. Seemingly, this is a story about a shooting that takes place in a Civics classroom on

March 14th, 1960, when a group of policemen kill an unarmed substitute teacher while he is standing at his classroom's chalkboard. Narrated by a pupil who witnessed the shooting though, what transpires in the classroom makes up only part of what we are told, as the narrator also shares a range of other memories from his past. These include moments from his early home life, his childhood nightmares and daydreams, and his recollection of a President's Day presentation that his father attended at his school. As these memories emerge and mix together, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" becomes less about what the narrator witnessed in the classroom and more about how the memory of his teacher's death has fused with other memories from his entrance into adult life.

This chapter culminates with a reading of "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" because the narrator's act of remembrance in the story combines a depiction of the rituals of adulthood, like that I read in "Forever Overhead," with Wallace's effort to address problems of self-construction in U.S. society. I have framed these problems specifically through a tension between Wallace's critique of capitalist institutions in "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" and his vision of state institutions in "Authority and American Usage." By combining Wallace's early impulse to fictionalize society's role in building individual subjectivities with his interest in how different institutions work to create different subjects, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" represents a unique effort to use fiction as a propaedeutic for how we use institutions in the United States to create ourselves, as a national collective, over time. In this sense, the story represents an answer to the challenge I described as emergent from *Infinite Jest*'s failure as a political novel in this chapter's introduction. How does one write a piece of fiction not primarily focused

on individual experience? And how would one use that writing to help readers see beyond the individual in their thinking about the political life of the United States?

As I have tried to show, these questions originate from a crisis of subject formation in Wallace's diagnosis of U.S. culture. In the previous analysis of "A Supposedly Fun Thing," for example, I showed how Wallace depicted capitalist institutions as responsible for infantilizing U.S. consumers by teaching us to be preoccupied with our immediate desires. Such lessons of capitalism, in prizing individual experience, rob from our ability to reflect on the long-term interests of our communities. In these terms, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," like *Infinite Jest*, is another entry in Wallace's prolonged effort to use the tradition of serious fiction to interrupt our self-centered tendencies. As in "Authority and American Usage" though, where Wallace's institutional role as a teacher led him to construe what he saw as an impersonal duty to help his students face the injustices of U.S. history, in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" Wallace presents the determining power that an institution of education exercises on the subjects who pass through it because his object is not to present individualized narratives about discrete characters, like those that fill *Infinite Jest*, but to write a story about the cultural apparatuses we use to produce subjects for American society. This shift in perspective–from focusing on individual recuperation to focusing on the operation of institutions that produce American subjects–helped Wallace carry his sustained attack on the individualism of U.S. culture into the structure of his fiction.

Specifically, Wallace builds the problem of how we relate to social institutions into "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" by dramatizing the narrator's effort to understand the impact that the shooting of his substitute teacher, Mr. Johnson, had on him and his fellow

students. In recounting the story, the narrator continually feels compelled to introduce new characters and provide background information about their lives. He then uses them to measure the impact of their shared experience. For example, in a section heading at the story's outset, he describes his classmate Terence Velan:

> TERENCE VELAN WOULD LATER BE DECORATED IN COMBAT IN THE WAR IN INDOCHINA, AND HAD HIS PHOTOGRAPH AND A DRAMATIC AND FLATTERING STORY ABOUT HIM IN THE *DISPATCH*, ALTHOUGH HIS WHEREABOUTS AFTER DISCHARGE AND RETURNING TO AMERICAN LIFE WERE NEVER ESTABLISHED BY ANYONE [MY WIFE] OR I EVER KNEW OF. (Wallace *Oblivion* 65)

"The Soul Is Not a Smithy" is divided by ten such headings, which function as puzzling keynotes throughout the story. This section heading is puzzling, for instance, because the reader does not know who Terence Velan is when this description appears, and the narrator does not seem particularly interested in talking about him. Instead, we get a description of the 4th grade Civics classroom and the events that take place there, which most significantly include the killing of Mr. Johnson, the class's substitute teacher. Mr. Johnson's death then becomes the center around which the disparate narratives of "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" appear.

By moving between Mr. Johnson's killing and his knowledge of his classmates' lives outside it, the narrator seeks to specifically understand the educational power the classroom tragedy had for him and the other students. This method of narration forces the reader to cull details from the narrator's telling and then coordinate them into a coherent sense of what the narrator is trying to say. For example, as the story progresses, we learn that the substitute teacher was shot by the local police because he lost self-control in the middle of a lesson on the U.S. constitution. Specifically, the narrator tells how, while

writing the XIVth amendment on the chalkboard, Mr. Johnson suddenly began scrawling "KILL THEM KILL THEM ALL" in front of his students (91). This written outburst is what eventually led to his killing, of course, but in the meantime, it also precipitated an environment of terror for his students, one of whom was Terence Velan:

> What…witnesses…recall… was the classroom's resultant confusion and fear–Emily-Ann Barr and Elizabeth Frazier were both crying out…and several other pupils were whipping themselves back and forth in their bolted seats…and Terence Velan was calling for his *Stepmutti*, and Mandy Blemm was…staring with an intently concentrated expression at the back of Mr. Johnson's head as it cocked further and further to the side. (92)

The narrator reasonably believes this terror had a traumatic effect on the students in the classroom. Thus, the reason why the story's first section heading discusses Velan's service is because the narrator sees a specific connection between Velan's "calling for his *Stepmutti*" and his later enlistment in the Army. This sense of causation is too strong to rely on, of course, but the narrator's effort to see how Velan's service emerged from his time at R.B. Hayes is crucial to Wallace's effort to focus on the work institutions of education perform on U.S. culture. Thus, as the narrator foregrounds Velan's adult life and then uses Mr. Johnson's killing as an at least partial explanation for that outcome, the narrator also imagines strong causal relationships between the substitute's death and the adult lives of many of the other students as well. In piecing these connections together, the reader comes to see that the "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" is a community history. That community is centered on the classroom, so that Mr. Johnson's death becomes an inflection point in R.B. Hayes's project of forming its students into adults.

Yet, as we saw in the case of Terence Velan, the connections the narrator makes between the events in the classroom that led to Mr. Johnson's death and his descriptions of his classmates outside of school are haphazard. To make matters worse, the narrator

describes how Velan cried out for his stepmother almost thirty pages after he tells us about his time in Vietnam. This might imply the two points are coincidental, except that the erratic mentioning of such details goes well beyond the narrator's description of Terence Velan. Wallace in fact sprinkles random descriptions of different students throughout "The Soul Is Not a Smithy." Fellow classmate Mandy Blemm, for instance, appears on pages 67, 69, 75, 86, 87, 92, 100, and 102.[42] These pages offer one-off details about Blemm's behavior in the classroom, her and her sister's difficult home life, and the fact that both she and the narrator were seen by their teachers as deficient readers. In refusing to unify these stories about the students, Wallace forces us to see, in piecing them together, that the narrator's hindsight is impaired. In the case of Mandy Blemm, we do not receive any clues about who she became as an adult, despite the narrator's insistence that he wants us to understand what impact witnessing Mr. Johnson's killing had on her life (67). "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" thereby offers a community history marked by the narrator's inability to see how the details of his memory should fit together. In this sense, Wallace places both the narrator and the reader in the same position of trying to grasp the import of Mr. Johnson's killing without the information necessary to do so. The challenge of reading the story therefore becomes figuring out what the narrator is trying to find in the relationships he creates between the classroom trauma and its lingering effects on his classmates' lives.

The key to this work appears after the narrator has finished describing the events in the classroom and Wallace transitions "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" into an account of the narrator's childhood experiences at home. Wallace offers these experiences as a way

[42] In the first paperback edition of *Oblivion*.

of interpreting the events in the classroom. After describing Mr. Johnson's death, for example, the narrator says, "For my own part, I had begun having nightmares about the reality of adult life as early as perhaps age seven" (103). The narrator then describes his early fear that he was destined to assume the work of his father when he grew up: he tells us that he learned that his father performed "actuarial" work in the second grade because he and his classmates were required to give a presentation about what their parents did for a living (105); afterwards, the narrator began having nightmares about rooms filled with bureaucrats who worked silently in large institutional spaces of never-ending labor. These dreams, the narrator says, were inspired by his father's enervated appearance after work, but we can see that they were also influenced by his experiences at school. For instance, the desks at which the bureaucrats labored in his dreams were placed in precise rows in the same way as the desks at R.B. Hayes (67 and 109), and the narrator eventually admits that these nightmares were not so much about his father as the narrator's own trepidations about adult life:

> As I can recall it now, in the dream I look neither like my father nor my real self…and my face…looks like it has spent the last 20 years pressed hard against something unyielding. And at a certain point …I look up and into the lens of the dream's perspective and stare back at myself, but without any sign of recognition on my face, nor of happiness or fright or despair or appeal. (110)

The narrator's fear is that he will become his father, a man who lost himself to his "actuarial" job. What the nightmares signify, then, is the narrator's childhood recognition, unconscious as it may have been, that he was being groomed, both at home and at school, to fulfill a social function that would rob him of his defining features as an individual. Projecting this fear onto the fragmented descriptions of his classroom community then, as in the case of Terence Velan's fear and his subsequent military

service, we can see that the narrator's effort to connect the formative experiences of his class's collective childhood to who they became as adults is inspired by his personal self-understanding, which is built on the belief that the trauma of witnessing his father's self-sacrifice helped shape the narrator into the bureaucrat that he was supposed to become.

Though I have selected just a few stories from "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" to show the complexity of the narrator's undertaking, it should be clear that Wallace set out to write a story about the narrator's frustration in trying to understand a social event–to create a community history–from the limited vantage of his individual perspective. As readers, our frustration is like the narrator's because for this story to have any coherence we must also struggle through the narrator's fragmented memory to piece together not simply the history he is trying to tell but what purpose he has in telling it. My argument, then, is that by using the narrator's formative experiences to understand the impact Mr. Johnson's killing had on his classmates, Wallace presents the narrator as attempting to adopt–and challenges the reader to adopt–what I will call an "institutional perspective" in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy." This phrase signals for me how the narrator focuses his story on the idea that neither he nor his classmates make or direct themselves independent of the social milieu from which they emerge. Rather, the specific events of their educations they receive (the most powerful of which being Mr. Johnson's killing) created the specific nature that they emerged from those educations with. In this sense, both the narrator's and the reader's struggles to understand "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" parallel the personal struggle that Wallace portrayed in "Authority and American Usage," where he sought to determine his role as a college English teacher by reflecting on the social purpose of his educational institution.

We can see why this is important in the story when the narrator offers us brief glimpses at the products of R.B. Hayes. For example, as the narrator's training for bureaucracy led him to adopt his father's line of work, despite his profound fear of that work (105), so the narrator believes his classmates' experiences at R.B. Hayes helped create them as members of society. As we have seen, R.B. Hayes Primary helped produce soldiers for Vietnam, bureaucrats like the narrator's father, and, in one instance, a shop steward for Precision Tool & Die (86). Seeing the school as productive of these outcomes, the narrator makes his story about how institutional forces shape citizens. Yet, as we have discussed, his efforts to understand these forces is frustrated by his lack of knowledge about the lives that radiate from the story he tells. Recall for instance that though he connects the terror of the classroom to Terence Velan's military service, the narrator admitted in the story's first section heading that he knows nothing about Velan after his return from war. Similarly, though he empathizes with his father, the man died when the narrator was only 16, and so he has no direct knowledge of his work or how his father felt about it (106). Thus, the institutional perspective of "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" allows Wallace to answer two challenges that he faced in his efforts to focus his reader's attention on R.B. Hayes as an institution of education: it allows him to raise questions about how the narrator and his classmates were produced by their school environment; and, as importantly, it also allows him to display the limits of the narrator's ability (i.e. his individual ability) to apprehend the myriad stories that make up that history.

The rest of this section will focus on the limits of the narrator's knowledge and how he responds to those limits through the powerful work of his imagination. Thus,

while the institutional perspective that Wallace deploys in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" organizes the relationships between his characters in time and space, Wallace also dedicates significant energy to describing the narrator's subjective experiences and how he responds to them. This, in fact, is the narrator's primary purpose: to give voice to his experience as a witness to the events of March 14th, 1960, the day of Mr. Johnson's killing. Yet, while describing those events, he suddenly informs us that he was not actively conscious of them when they occurred (80). This is because the narrator was staring out of one of the classroom's windows and daydreaming. We then learn that the story of Mr. Johnson's mental break has actually been cobbled together from different conversations the narrator had with his classmates and stories he read in the local newspaper after the fact. As a supplement to this researched description, the narrator then recounts his personal memories, which are of his daydream. We will see that as Wallace offered the narrator's recurring nightmare about his father's work to represent the power of his fear of adult life, here he uses the daydream to represent the interior trauma Mr. Johnson's behavior inflicted on his students. As this subjective experience then combines with the story's institutional perspective, we will see how the interior violence the narrator describes raises questions about the formative role R.B. Hayes, as an institution of education, played not only in the life of the narrator but in the lives of all its students.

As an imaginative recreation of the classroom's terror, the interpretative challenge of the narrator's daydream functions as another key to "The Soul Is Not a Smithy." For example, as the narrator's real-life accounts revolve around the loss of parental figures– apparent in the narrator's preoccupations with Mr. Johnson and his father–so his daydream revolves around a young girl's loss of her parents. As he stares out of his

classroom's window onto a nearby ballfield, the narrator sees two dogs come into view, and he imagines a story about the owner of one of these dogs, a blind girl named Ruth Simmons, who loses both of her parents to terrible accidents. As with the desks in his nightmares, details from the narrator's life create specific parallels and contrasts in the daydream. For example, he renders Ruth's family as working class: "Mr. Simmons [is the] kind of poor but honest father who makes his living with physical labor rather than poring over facts and figures all day" (80). Ruth's father lives a different life from that of the narrator's father, who works with such "facts and figures," because the narrator is struggling to understand both the nature of his father's life and its social status. In this way, Wallace uses the daydream to represent how the narrator understands and navigates his social world through such imaginative efforts as his nightmares about his father and his daydream in class.

The daydream also carries on the theme of lost illusions that permeates "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," as the relationships between the narrator's experiences at school and his sense of who he is destined to become in adulthood affect his daydream. For instance, the imminent life of bureaucracy that the narrator sees in his future is reflected in the sense of loss Ruth's mother feels when she thinks about her marriage:

> Ruth Simmons' mother, whose name was Marjorie and had grown up admiring herself in different dresses in the mirror [and] dreaming of marrying a wealthy doctor and hosting elaborate dinner parties…at their mansion's beautiful burled walnut dining room table[43]…now, as an adult, looked puffy and dull-eyed and had a perpetually downturned mouth as she drove the battered car. (81)

[43] This table was also owned by the narrator's family before he was old enough to see it. The narrator's brother, who is given to telling fantastic stories, offers the table's loss as a reason for their father's apparent unhappiness when he comes home from work in the evening (76-77).

Already in the fourth grade and having this daydream, the narrator makes early, if unconscious, imaginative use of both the failures that infuse adult life and their inescapabilty. Thus, as Marjorie failed to marry a wealthy doctor and now is forced to drive her battered car around looking for the dog of a daughter she dislikes, Mr. Johnson, a man in his thirties, finds himself trapped in the life of a substitute teacher who is writing the amendments to the U.S. constitution on a chalkboard in front of 4th graders. Similarly, as the narrator's father was forced to give himself to the death-bound labor of his actuarial work, the narrator sees that he will spend his life bolted to the ground in the same way as the desks that he hates at R.B. Hayes Primary. Wallace thus uses the fantastic interior experiences of the narrator's life to give shape to his premonitions of his limited future.

Yet, though the narrator's nightmare and daydream offer glimpses into his personal subjectivity, their importance in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" is pegged to experiences the narrator shares with those around him. For example, his father, who stands as a representative of those who have already suffered the fate that the narrator and his classmates now face, is the product of the passage into adulthood that all bureaucrats must make. Likewise, the daydream the narrator has during the events of March 14th gives expression to the real-life terror his classmates felt as witnesses to Mr. Johnson's breakdown. Thus, when the substitute begins scrawling "KILL THEM" on the chalkboard, the narrator's task in his imaginative work is to follow his teacher's directive and give his daydream a fatal turn. Ruth's father tries to unclog a snow blower he is using and his hands are severed by the blades in its undercarriage. He eventually bleeds out while stuck upside down in a mound of snow (91). At the same time, Ruth's mother,

driving around searching for the family's lost dog, does not realize the exhaust pipe of her car is plugged and she asphyxiates (93). In committing these killings in his daydream, the narrator uses the orphaning of the fictional Ruth Simmons to express the actual orphaning that the 4th Grade Civics class suffers when the police show up and execute their teacher.

Pulling away from these specifics and thinking about the narrator's story as a public telling performed by an adult many years after the fact, the narrator's rendering of his childhood daydream and nightmare function as cultural objects that give expression to the experiences of his community. Combining the narrator's fantastic remembrances–seen here as cultural expressions–with the story's institutional perspective, then, my claim is that in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" Wallace sought to evoke a feeling in his reader of the formative power that cultural institutions exert on our lives as individuals. In this sense, I believe that he was following a narrative method he identified in a speech he gave in 1998 on the short stories of Franz Kafka, titled "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness."[44] In this speech, Wallace uses a term from communication theory, "exformation," to examine why American students have a difficult time understanding Kafka's humor. In short, Wallace claims Kafka removed "vital information" from his stories to evoke an "explosion of associative connections" in his reader. For example, in "A Hunger Artist," Kafka literalizes figural expressions like "starved for attention" and "self-denial" to evoke the nature of asceticism. As we read "A Hunger Artist," we wonder: What made this artist so particularly good? What has he done to develop such

[44] As it appears in 2003's *Consider the Lobster*, the speech's full title is "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed," which, after considering its content, turns out to be a joke.

self-control? By refusing to answer these questions, Kafka creates a vacuum that the reader fills with thoughts about the artist's heroism or absurdity. Then, at the story's conclusion, Kafka delivers a punchline: The Hunger Artist did not eat because, throughout his whole life, he never discovered food that he enjoyed! Wallace argues students in the U.S. do not find this funny because they look in the wrong place for Kafka's humor: they look outside themselves for a referent to give the story meaning, but Kafka is pointing inside. In this sense, it seems to me that what Wallace is trying to evoke in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" is a sense that our heritage in the United States is not carried by individual people, as when we mistakenly think of fathers passing who they are to their sons, but by the institutions that shape our daily lives. Think of the negligible training that the narrator's father actually passes to his son, who admits,

> IN CHILDHOOD, I HAD NO INSIGHT WHATSOEVER INTO MY FATHER'S CONSCIOUSNESS, NOR ANY AWARENESS OF WHAT IT MIGHT HAVE FELT LIKE, INSIDE, TO DO WHAT HE HAD TO SIT THERE AT HIS DESK AND DO EVERY DAY. IN THIS RESPECT, IT WAS NOT UNTIL MANY YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH THAT I FELT I TRULY KNEW HIM. (89)

Similarly, Mr. Johnson is a substitute teacher who is only filling in for Mrs. Roseman, the normal 4th grade Civics teacher, who is out on maternity leave (anachronistically speaking). The punchline here is that the narrator is struggling to understand the formative traumas of his childhood by looking at dead parental figures, but it is institutions like R.B. Hayes Primary that raised him.

This problem of seeing how we collectively shape ourselves as a culture into the human collective at the hearts of both Wallace's reading of Kafka and "The Soul Is Not a Smithy." At the end of "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness," for example, he claims the primary reason American students do not find a story like "A Hunger Artist" funny is

not because they "don't "get" Kafka's humor because that we've taught them to see humor as something you *get*–the same way we've taught them that a self is something you just *have*. No wonder [American students] cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke: that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (Wallace *Consider* 63). To *get* humor in Wallace's speech means finding the source of laughter's incongruity in a knowledge that is built on what we assume to be exterior to the self, which is not only an impediment to appreciating Kafka's short stories but also an impediment to self-understanding. Notice here the condemning "we taught" that is so typical of Wallace's thinking, as he frames the students' problem with feeling Kafka's humor as a product of a United States culture that teaches us to be ignorant of the fact that our subjectivity develops from our daily lives. As this reasoning is applied to "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," it is incumbent on the reader, through Wallace's use of the story's institutional perspective and the evocative nature of the narrator's accounts of his interior life to see that our daily lives are shaped by the formative experiences we have in childhood, which experiences are determined by our relationships with the institutions that society uses to produce its subjects. Thus, in reading "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," we might revise Wallace's claim about Kafka's short stories: the horrific struggle to establish a human society results in a society whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle.

This horrific struggle is represented in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" by the lessons of United States history that are built into the Civics class's 4th grade curriculum. To make the significance of this clear, I want to return one last time to Wallace's speech on Kafka's short stories, where he draws not not only on the exformative strategies of Franz

Kafka but he also discusses those of James Joyce, which are the same strategies of humor Wallace has just said American subjects are more likely to *get*. Wallace writes, "Another handicap, even for gifted students, is that–unlike, say, Joyce's or Pound's–the exformative associations Kafka's work creates are not intertextual or even historical." Reading against Wallace's intent for a moment, he is here suggesting that in a story like James Joyce's "The Dead" the weight of history is powerfully evoked but not explained. For instance, when Miss Ivors invites Gabriel Conroy to the Aran Isles in "The Dead," students must look outside the story to see that Gabriel's preference for vacationing in Europe marks him as unpatriotic in Miss Ivors's eyes, which is why Gabriel becomes so awkward in their conversation. Wallace then implies that Joyce uses his unique relationship with Irish history to create the comedy of Gabriel's alienation from the other characters who occupy "The Dead."

My claim here is that Wallace attempts a similar strategy to communicate his narrator's relationship with the history of the United States in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy." This is evident in the narrator's descriptions of his 4th grade Civics classroom's design. He tells us, for example, that portraits of "all 34 US presidents" were hung "evenly spaced around all four walls just below the ceiling." And there were "pulldown relief maps of the thirteen original colonies, the Union and Confederate states circa 1861, and the present United States, including the Hawaiian islands" (*Oblivion* 70). Exformatively speaking, the presidential portraits mark a succession of leaders who represent not a static form of authority but a legacy of governance. Similarly, the relief maps offer cartographic snapshots of successive forms of the United States that, when viewed in order, call attention to the creation of the narrator's country through its

movement in history. Thus, in adopting Joyce's strategies, Wallace sought to place the subjective experiences of his unnamed narrator's grooming for adulthood within the long history of the United States. Perhaps ironically though, this use of Joyce's exformative move does not seek to validate the narrator's desire to escape his vocation. As the story's title says, the soul, for Wallace, is not a smithy. Instead, Wallace uses the story to communicate and validate the institutional processes that carry the narrator into the adulthood of both US citizenship and the historically-evolving social rituals that give state-sanctioned subjectivities their shape.

Yet, by saying Wallace wants to validate these rituals in his story is not to say he is uncritical of them or their history. On the contrary, the terror of Mr. Johnson's mental break, his execution by the local constabulary, and the traumatic impact that those events had on his students signal the incredible violence of U.S. history that is also marked by the succession of relief maps the narrator describes. This violence is, of course, echoed in the narrator's nightmares and daydreams, but Wallace also offers images of this history's direct transference in the classroom itself. For example, as discussed above, what precipitates the traumatic event of the substitute's death is that in teaching a unit on the U.S. constitution he suddenly begins writing violent exhortations on the chalkboard: he scrawls "KILL," "THEM," and "KILL THEM ALL" in front of the students, over and over, so that hundreds of repetitions accrue on the board. That the authorities soon respond to Mr. Johnson by shooting him, while unarmed and still at the room's chalkboard, offers another fulfillment of his vague demands, a fulfillment preceded by the narrator's killing of Ruth Simmons's parents in his daydream. Before the police arrive though, the narrator recounts how as Mr. Johnson was writing "due process of law" on

the board, “Ellen Morrison, Sanjay Rabindranath, and some other of the class’s more diligent pupils, copying down word for word what Mr. Johnson was putting up on the chalkboard, discovered that they had written *due process KILL of law* and that that, too, was what was on the chalkboard” (86). The children, taking notes without thinking, unconsciously copy the unconscious scribbling of Mr. Johnson. These students are not merely aping their teacher though; rather, they are learning to inscribe the traumatic violence of their past, present, and future into themselves. What “The Soul Is Not a Smithy” presents us with, then, is the inescapability of social ritual and the violence that inheres in the history that creates it. There is no way to fly by the nets of tradition in this story because we are always already caught by those nets in the same way Wallace described his African American students as preemptively caught by the nets of Standard Written English in “Authority and American Usage.” The inescapability of such problems with our social constitution, as I described in my readings of both “What Is Enlightenment” and “Authority and American Usage,” create in Wallace’s thinking a social duty: we owe ourselves to the historical amelioration of these violent rituals. The determination of our vocations to that amelioration, within the roles that society produces us to fill, is the proper direction for our reflections on our place within the collective life of a violent and institutionalized American culture.

CHAPTER 5: AN INSTITUTIONAL NOVEL: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S *THE PALE KING*

> I learned that the world of men as it exists today is a bureaucracy. This is an obvious truth, of course, though it is also one the ignorance of which causes great suffering.
>
> -David Foster Wallace
> *The Pale King*

> For where there is conflict between the social heritage and the manner in which men must earn their living, there will be disorder in their affairs and division in their spirits.
>
> -Walter Lippmann
> *An Inquiry into the Principles of a Good Society*

It is difficult to know what to do with David Foster Wallace's unfinished third novel, *The Pale King*. We can see what it is about: the novel describes the lives of employees at a Regional Examination Center of the Internal Revenue Service during a fictional Ronald Reagan presidency. It is set just before a major revision of the United States tax code in 1986, and it depicts an ideologically-charged moment in the operation of the IRS in which different characters espouse competing philosophies about the new administration and the effects it has on the Service. In this sense, *The Pale King* is a novel about the consequences of a shift in American politics: it describes relationships between the lives of US citizens, an emergent political ideology in the 1980s, and a branch of the US government that responds to that ideology. What is less clear though is how *The Pale King* fits with the rest of Wallace's writing.

For instance, it is somewhat surprising that in his 2012 article, "Trickle-Down Citizenship," Marshall Boswell could accurately identify a lack of political discussion in the early reception of *The Pale King*. As he says, "Most of the book's initial reviewers described [it] primarily as an IRS novel about boredom" (Boswell "Trickle-Down" 465).

That is, after its publication, critics immediately remarked on the novel's preoccupation with bureaucratic labor but failed to discuss the political problems it raises. Thus, Boswell wonders, how can one read *The Pale King*'s lengthy discussions of issues like civic responsibility and adjusting the marginal tax rate without noticing the fact that Wallace uses Reagan's presidency in *The Pale King* to not only raise political problems but to mark a significant change in the history of US governance?

> Some of this blindness to one of the book's central concerns may be inadvertently credited to Michael Pietsch [Wallace's long-time editor:] Nowhere in Pietsch's intro [to *The Pale King*] does he touch upon…political concerns. Rather, he argues that "David set out to write a novel about some of the hardest subjects in the world – sadness and boredom – and to make that exploration nothing less than dramatic, funny, and deeply moving" (Wallace *The Pale* ix-x)…This description of Wallace's primary purpose limns seamlessly with the unfortunate popular conception of Wallace as a technically dazzling and intellectually sophisticated writer of self-help narratives designed to "save us" from solipsism, loneliness, addiction, and so on, an image calcified by the book publication of his Kenyon graduation speech, *This Is Water*. (Boswell "Trickle-Down" 465)

Boswell believes critics understand Wallace's work to be apolitical because a preformed interpretation of his intellectual project shapes their expectations: we take it for granted that Wallace wrote to help self-centered readers escape involution and find purchase in a world of other people. This critical tendency derives from a few sources, of course. As Boswell says, the popular image that has formed of Wallace is abetted by his own late effort in *This Is Water* to compress his thinking about solipsism into a twenty-minute speech that became popular on the internet. Important too though is the fact that the standard interpretation of Wallace derives, in part, from his own writing, particularly in early pieces like "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," "The Empty Plenum," and (most popularly) "E Unibus Pluram," where he explicitly ties his literary

mission to a struggle against solipsism in US culture. Finally, and most importantly, Wallace's fiction is often read as a collection of "self-help" narratives designed to "save us" from solipsism, loneliness, and addiction because that interpretation fits so much of his writing. Which is to say that Boswell is right in arguing that *The Pale King* is misapprehended when it is seen apolitically, but I think it is a mistake to invest in a reading of Wallace's unfinished novel that abandons his career-long engagement with the problems of solipsism (a.k.a. the problems of "self-help") that give his political vision its depth.

I showed in the previous chapter how solipsism and citizenship can be read as two parts of the same project throughout Wallace's career. I therefore agree with Boswell when he suggests that if we ignore the political nature of *The Pale King*, we attenuate the novel's power by not acknowledging its presentation of a historically-important political ideology, namely neoliberalism[45]–a presentation that is of special salience now that the ghost of Ronald Reagan's Id has ascended to the presidency. On the other hand, dividing Wallace's political concerns from the solipsism he spent his career interrogating risks

[45] I will explain my use of neoliberalism more clearly in the next section, but the distinction between ideology and rationality in this chapter is a distinction between how ideology leads subjects to interpret the world into a particular form of coherence, while rationality marks an economic strategy of reasoning that operates by principles determined by economic and ideological goals. One problem characters in *The Pale King* face is the changing status of the IRS in the eyes of the public. Against an older tendency to see The Service as what its name signifies, a service to citizens, characters argue that the fictional Reagan administration builds aggressive collection methods into the Service's operation in order to demonize the entire federal government through synecdoche. Dividing the IRS from the public weal in this way fits the larger economic rationality that emerges in the novel, as the Service's newfound profitability justifies it as an individual institution (according to neoliberal rationality) while also decreasing the taxpayer's sense of solidarity (through ideological training) with The Service as part of the taxpayer's national community. As taxpayers learn to see the IRS as a threat to their individual welfare in *The Pale King*, the novel provides an instance of what I am calling ideology–a way of seeing objects in the world that subjects learn from the culture they occupy; on the other hand, when the government's various institutions (as a whole) are revised to function by a logic of profitability that reduces antagonisms both between themselves and the constituents with whom they interact in order to achieve the goal of making citizens more desirable market actors (by increasing their distrust of the government), this reflects the operation of neoliberal rationality in *The Pale King*.

emptying *The Pale King* of its originating force and, subsequently, dispelling its potential to help reader's access their personal motivations and critique them. This latter danger crops up in some of the criticism that has appeared since the publication of Boswell's article, particularly that which addresses the economic questions *The Pale King* raises. For example, in the case of Szalay and Gooden's "The Bodies in the Bubble," they frame the novel as an almost mechanical expression of specific economic features like derivatives. Though compelling in itself, their reading, in transferring the analysis of one realm (the economic) to another (the literary), obscures the ethical dilemmas Wallace strives to produce in *The Pale King*. Thus, rather than, say, exploring the sacrifices inherent to accepting a vocation in one's society, which is a serious concern for the novel's characters, in Szalay and Gooden's analysis such characters appear as dupes of capital because they give their lives to the work of an institution (the IRS) amidst neoliberal transformation. In the light of Wallace's lifelong work towards the ability to find a healthy rapport between the individual and the culture they occupy, this appears to me to be a poor approach to discovering *The Pale King*'s significance within the context of his thought as a whole.

Not dismissing either *The Pale King*'s political concerns or its characters' personal struggles, then, my method here continues the work I began in Chapter 4: that of holding together Wallace's evolving diagnosis of egoism in US culture and his promotion of national community through citizenship. In the last chapter I analyzed certain of Wallace's short stories and essays to describe the development of an "institutional perspective" that he deploys in his long short story "The Soul Is Not a Smithy." I suggested Wallace designed that story to help readers see and think about the historical

and ritualized production of US subjects through our apparatuses of education. I further argued that Wallace's interest in state institutions and their fashioning of subjects arrived through his diagnosis of the large-scale work of capitalist institutions, which teach consumers to live by solipsistic ideologies. Engagement with the United States' means and principles of ideological education therefore became a fundamental priority for Wallace in the last decade of his career. This is why I see the institutional perspective of "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" as part of Wallace's larger effort to minimize the importance of individuals in his fiction and present them in a constellation of others who populate the same institutions. This chapter carries on that work by arguing that *The Pale King* radicalizes Wallace's institutional perspective in "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" by abandoning altogether the idea of an individual main character and making a Regional Examination Center (an REC) of the IRS in Peoria, IL its central figure.

This distinction is not merely semantic. The REC in *The Pale King* meets adversity, changes, and, in the novel's implied afterstory, dies. As an institution, it is both large enough to govern the lives of a community, and it is small enough to be subject to the economic, political, and cultural currents of US life. I therefore use Wallace's fictionalization of a government workplace to argue *The Pale King* represents how the ascension of neoliberal rationality in the 1980s changed the fabric of US life through changes to government institutions. More specifically, *The Pale King* uses Reagan's political agenda to intimate stages in an ideological movement toward a more and more individualistic US culture, steps taken through changes made to the IRS's mandates as a government agency. By therefore showing the operation of the IRS as an institution directed toward a new governmental telos, Wallace helps us see how our political

visions–such as organizing our society around the enterprising individual–create the people of a future not yet visible. By tying the daily lives of workers in a governing apparatus (the IRS) to the processes by which collective self-government creates our shared fate, Wallace urges readers to engage apparatuses like the IRS that help determine the fates of US citizens.

Change in Service

Since Boswell's article, many critics have addressed the political concerns "Trickle-Down Citizenship" raises. Several of these focus on *The Pale King*'s depiction of neoliberalism. For example, how contradictions of capital find expression in the characters of *The Pale King* is extensively explored in Szalay and Gooden's article mentioned above, "The Bodies in the Bubble."[46] More expansively, in his monograph, Jeffrey Severs reaches back to Wallace's earliest works to trace an engagement with different forms of value in Wallace's fiction, identifying his depictions of the "intertwining of utilitarianism, consumerism, and neoliberalism" that appear throughout Wallace's writing career (27).[47] In *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, Clare Hayes-Brady reads Wallace's refusal to resolve the endings of so many of his

[46] Their central contention is that Wallace found he could not contain the contradictions of the neoliberal market in *The Pale King*, which is why he could never complete it. Both the book and Wallace's suicide therefore become symbols:

> It will be our contention that *The Pale King*, rather than simply addressing an historical transformation in the nature of money and the state, itself functions as a meta-commodity, performing an analogue of the work that derivatives do, and in the process accentuating contradictions in that work, in order to stand as a text that embodies the state of a troubled nation…His IRS workers read tax forms that are representations of money. At a second remove, his readers read not simply accounts of workers who read representations of money, but a representation that itself assumes the form of its content, becoming in the process a literary version of derivative money. (Szalay and Gooden 1275)

[47] See *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books, Fictions of Value*.

stories and novels as a purposefully anti-teleological challenge to the neoliberalism of US culture (22).[48] In this chapter, I rely on the Foucauldian analysis of Christian Dardot and Pierre Laval's *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* to frame the appearance of neoliberalism in *The Pale King* as a justification for the production of subjects who think and behave in terms outlined by the market. Dardot and Laval write,

> The thesis defended in this book is precisely that neo-liberalism, far from being an ideology or economic policy is firstly and fundamentally a *rationality*, and as such tends to structure and organize not only the action of rulers, but also the conduct of the ruled. The principal characteristic of neo-liberal rationality is the generalization of competition as a behavioral norm and of the enterprise as a model of subjectivation. (Dardot and Laval; emphasis original)

My claim is that the changes to the IRS described in this chapter emerge as products of this "generalization of competition as a behavioral norm" in *The Pale King*. Not only does the effort to create a more efficient government agency threaten the existence of the REC that serves as this novel's main character, it also threatens the concept of vocation held by the Service's individual employees. I will therefore argue in this section that the rise of neoliberalism in *The Pale King* destroys the institution that it uses as its main character, which is tragic because the REC's death represents the death of an earlier, more community-based understanding of the IRS as an institution. Thus, what this section describes is Wallace's depiction of a changing political environment that leads to the loss of an institution that promoted the wellbeing of the United States.

The value of the concept of neoliberalism in my reading lies in specific losses in *The Pale King* that result from the IRS's inability to continue operating according to what Dardot and Laval frame as the rationality of classic liberalism, which appears in the novel

[48] See *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*.

as what I call the service-oriented model of the IRS. For Dardot and Laval, though classic economic liberalism is market-centered, it differentiates itself from neoliberalism because it 1) assumes both the sanctity of *laissez-faire* in the government's relationship with the market and 2) recognizes civil society as a cultural division that should shield individuals from full exposure to the market's logic. In Dardot and Laval's account, as neoliberal rationality discards *laissez-faire*, insisting instead on the government's active role in creating competitive subjects, so the IRS of the novel adopts a competitive ambition like that which Dardot and Laval identify in the neoliberal subject. Likewise, as neoliberalism penetrates the educational functions of civil society, so *The Pale King* portrays a new understanding of citizens as market actors whose first responsibility is to their self-construction as profitable enterprises. Thus, when Dardot and Laval argue neoliberalism is a rationality, rather than an ideology, they argue it is a structuring principle that arrives before ideology and seeks to determine the individual's shape so that a formal homogeneity appears between subjects at all levels of society. I therefore understand neoliberalism in *The Pale King* not as an interpretive horizon for the world Wallace fashions; rather, it is his beginning point: the IRS must learn to advance the neoliberal project of creating a field of enterprising economic actors to preserve its functionality in a new world, and the REC of the service-oriented model of the IRS fades into the past.

If we can characterize the adaptability of the IRS in *The Pale King* as an institution's entrance into the competitive field of the market, the value of the concept of neoliberal rationality for analyzing the novel is threefold: 1) neoliberalism offers a framework for thinking about how *The Pale King* speaks to problems of governmental design and macroeconomics; 2) it provides an intelligibility for the directives that are

credited to the novel's Reagan administration without placing sole responsibility for them on a single character; and 3) at the level of narrative, the political changes neoliberalism justifies in the novel create the experiential crises that the REC must face as a character. Perhaps most important though is how neoliberalism justifies changes to how the IRS relates to the individuals with whom it deals. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault argues that the most fundamental change to government that neoliberalism justifies is turning it into a handmaiden for the market's social dictates. For instance, according to Foucault, neoliberal government must not,

> correct the destructive effects of the market on society, and it is this that differentiates it from…welfare or suchlike policies…Government must not form a counterpoint or a screen…between society and economic processes…Basically, [government] has to intervene on society so that competitive mechanisms can play a regulatory role at every moment and at every point in society and by intervening in this way its objective will become possible, that is to say, a general regulation of society by the market. (145)

Neoliberalism directs government to open its subjects to the market's formation, which Dardot and Laval call subjectivation. My interest in this analysis lies in the way Wallace adds another dimension to this understanding in *The Pale King*: as government "has to intervene on society so that competitive mechanisms...play a regulatory role" on subjects, he describes a regulatory institution (the IRS) that is transformed into a competitive mechanism. This transformation creates losses for the project of developing the United States as a national community in a range of ways. *The Pale King* seeks to capture this by using the REC's death to communicate a feeling of loss, as its old status, which Foucault describes as a "counterpoint or a screen" between the market and US citizens under classic liberalism, is thrown away. The rest of this section therefore describes Wallace's effort to create a feeling of national fraternity that the IRS of the novel is essential to. It

will then analyze how the REC's transformation from a public service to a profitable enterprise provides the context for the more localized narratives I discuss in this chapter's subsequent sections.

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Wallace's project of depicting the United States as a historical project of creating a national community begins with *The Pale King*'s epigraph: "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed" (4). This quotation comes from a prose poem by Frank Bidart titled "Borges and I" and opens Wallace's novel with a web of allusion. For example, Bidart takes the title of his poem from a sketch by Jorge Luis Borges of the same name, which is about the anxiety Borges feels as he loses his identity to his vocation of authorship. In his sketch, Borges describes how the public nature of his writing creates a second self that lives apart from him. Borges says, "It is no effort for me to confess that [the public Borges] has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition" (Borges). As Borges passes through the world, the pages he has written are absorbed by his culture so that eventually nothing belongs to the Borges who lived. This is because the public Borges finally consumes everything, leaving only his name to mark a piece of the tradition Borges pursued.

Addressing what he calls the "falsity" in Borges' sketch, Bidart begins his "Borges and I" by confronting Borges' narrative voice, arguing against the dichotomy it places between the creator and what they make. Bidart insists that one cannot know one's self independent of what one creates. In making, we are changed; to divide the self into two selves, one that fashions and one that lives, represents a lie about the nature of creation. Despite their disagreement, Borges and Bidart are united by the fact that they

are both concerned about what happens to the individual who lives in pursuit of their vocation: Borges through his anxiety, and Bidart through his thoughts about Borges. In his allusion to these pieces, on the other hand, Wallace focuses our attention on the "forms" in Bidart's thought: "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed." Within the context of *The Pale King*, a novel about the IRS, the epigraph offers a pun on the forms US tax payers fill out each year. These forms signify an evolving relationship between US citizens and their government, and, in my reading of the REC as a character, his use of this epigraph signals Wallace's interest in the structures of society that mediate between an individual's labors or vocation and the mechanisms by which their community absorbs them.

The Pale King's opening subsection, §1, then begins by enumerating forms in nature:

> Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where untilled fields simmer shrilly in the A.M. heat: shattercane, lamb's-quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtail, muscadine, spine-cabbage, goldenrod, creeping Charlie, butter-print, nightshade, ragweed, wild oat, vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother's soft hand on your cheek" (Wallace *The Pale* 5).

It is initially surprising that the first paragraph of Wallace's novel, which takes place almost entirely within an institutional space, begins with a poetic description of nature and lists different types of grass. By invoking Walt Whitman though, this passage actually uses those types of grass to figure different types of people who nod their heads in a breeze that moves them together as one. The paragraph then ends, "We are all of us brothers" (5), calling the reader into an organic national community. Wallace uses the

contrast between this transcendental imagery and the rest of the novel's descriptions of the IRS's aggregation of bureaucratic labor to highlight the great historical distance between the worlds that Whitman and Wallace describe, a disjunction that is made profound by the epigraph's insistence that the United States that inspired *The Pale King* evolved from the same United States that inspired *Leaves of Grass*. That is, Wallace suggests that the IRS is the historically-evolved cultural form of brotherhood that US history has produced.

Of course, descriptions of the natural world do not last long in *The Pale King*. In the next paragraph, a shoe print appears in the grass, as does a "NO HUNTING" sign, and then the section is over (6). At the beginning of §2, we find ourselves flying over what seems to be the same land Wallace has just been describing, listening to the thoughts of an IRS employee who is on his way to the REC in Peoria, IL for a new work assignment. Many of the transitions between sections in *The Pale King* are abrupt in this way, as each focuses on different characters and is written in its own style. This makes it difficult to piece *The Pale King*'s narrative together, but it also allows Wallace to represent the activity of the REC from many perspectives. In §25, for instance, Wallace describes what we might call a field of citizens processing tax returns in a large workroom of the REC. Formatted in the double rows of a ledger that divides debits and credits, the room's activity appears through a very different kind of enumeration than that which we saw in the novel's opening:

> 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. 'Groovy' Bruce Channing attaches a form to a file. Ann Williams turns a page. Anand Singh turns two pages at once by mistake and turns one back which makes a slightly different sound. David Cusk turns a page. (312)

These are the constituents of *The Pale King*, performing the activity that provides the novel's background. The characterizations of this sedentary labor in other sections of the novel vacillate between seeing this work as a profound way of living[49] and an intolerable form of torture,[50] but here it is simply described through the physical activities of a room full of people working on a project that unites them. This vision of unity, an extension of the natural brotherhood invoked in §1, functions as a synecdoche in the novel for a much larger purpose: in *The Pale King*, Wallace cultivates a feeling of community in relation to images of labor to establish ethical stakes for what happens to the REC as a national institution. Thus, as the object of the Service's operation changes, Wallace pictures that change as threatening the labor of these workers in the Peoria REC, which allows him to raise questions about what kinds of ends good government should pursue and invite answers that honor the vocational sacrifices of this brotherhood of government employees.

This is an ingenuous view of a missed opportunity for US governance that Wallace communicates most clearly in §14 of the novel. This is because §14 describes the specific changes that the fictional Reagan administration makes to the IRS that then trigger changes on all levels of the REC that the novel describes. One of the characters in §14 gives an in-depth account of the Spackman Initiative, which is Wallace's concrete metaphor in *The Pale King* for the changes neoliberal rationality justifies in the Service's reorientation in US culture and, subsequently, in its operation as a bureaucratic institution. By first analyzing §14's use of irony and cliché to portray the pre-Reaganite,

[49] For a reading of the promise of boredom in *The Pale King*, see Robert Hamilton's "Constant Bliss in Every Atom," in which boredom serves as a waypoint to transcendent experience.
[50] See, in particular, the third stage of Lane Dean's narrative, §33.

community-based understanding of the IRS as naïve, and then examining the account of the Service's new profit-based priorities after the implementation of the so-called Spackman Initiative, we will establish a framework for what Wallace portrays as the tragic elimination of the REC (and the entire Examinations Division of the IRS) in this chapter's next section.

§14 begins then by describing a scene in which employees at the REC in Peoria, IL are asked to sit in front of a camera and share their thoughts about the IRS as an institution. They are told their interviews will be used for a Public Relations video about the Service titled *Your IRS Today*. The communicated purpose of this video is to "humanize, demystify the Service, help citizens understand how hard and important [an IRS worker's] job is. How much at stake. That they're not hostile machines" (102). The narrative then describes how excited the interviewees are to talk about their jobs in positive terms. We also learn that the video is actually some kind of experiment or exercise that the workers are not aware of: "There's something about the prospect of attention, the project's real purpose. It's [Director of Personnel Richard] Tate's baby, conceptually, though [Leonard] Stecyk did all the work" (103). That is, the Peoria REC's Director of Personnel has set up a fake scenario so that he can study the interviewees' reactions to being flattered when asked to contribute to this PR video. In the "Notes and Asides" addendum at the end of the novel,[51] Wallace planned that Tate would promote his employees to other higher ups at the REC because he is the Director of Personnel and "wants power, control–no power if fewer…personnel" (543). Thus, we can see the video as an intra-REC piece of propaganda masquerading as an extra-IRS piece of Public

[51] Wallace's editor Michael Pietsch included this addendum to help readers construct more of what Wallace was trying to do in *The Pale King* (541).

Relations, though my interest in the video lies in the employees' accounts of the changing environment of the IRS as a workplace.

The specific product of the interviews Stecyk carries out is influenced by the manipulation of their emotions before they speak on camera. For example, before the workers are interviewed, they are required to view what they are told is the video's opening monologue, which uses voiceover narration to extol the national importance of the IRS. This narration is set against the backdrop of a video montage in which Service employees interact with their fellow citizens. Part of the irony here is that though the employees are led to believe these words and images are directed at the general public, for Tate's purposes the video is actually rhetorically directed at the workers themselves, which is to say that the opening monologue is a tool for monitoring how they respond to a civic-minded justification of the work that they do. It begins,

> 'The Internal Revenue Service is the branch of the United States Treasury Department charged with the timely collection of all federal taxes due under current statute. With over one hundred thousand employees in more than one thousand regional, district, and local offices, your IRS is the largest law enforcement agency in the nation. But it is more. In the body politic of the United States of America, many have likened your IRS to the nation's beating heart, receiving and distributing the resources which allow your federal government to operate effectively in the service and defense of all Americans.' (103)

While the video connects the dutiful labors of IRS workers to the United States' wellbeing as a nation, this positive message is undercut by the narrating voice, which we are told lacks inflection, such that it seems that what Tate is measuring is the workers' reactions to a positive account of their work that is immediately undermined by an ironizing, flat-voiced narration of that account. To compensate for this effect,

interviewees are asked to "use their imagination" and add the inflection for themselves (103).

The ambiguity of the film's meaning deepens as it continues. One way this happens is that as the narration goes on it becomes clear that Wallace has made up a number of the "facts" about the IRS that are featured in the monologue, and these facts further advance his representation of the IRS as a place of profound labor. For instance, the monologue says, "Just like the nation's *E pluribus unum*, our Service's founding motto, *alicui tamen faciendum est*, says it all–this difficult, complex task must be performed, and it is your IRS who roll up their sleeves and do it" (104). As is often the case when Wallace brings non-English phrases into his fiction, this motto is fabricated, and, in translation, it hammers what is fundamentally true about the IRS worker in *The Pale King*: "He is the one doing a difficult, unpopular job."[52] Claims that the work of IRS employees is unpleasant and that its performance marks a form of heroism or stupidity appear repeatedly in the novel. Here, though, Wallace's ambivalent video raises questions about whether or not the IRS worker is a civil servant or whether civil servants have value. These questions become more significant through the monologue's place in *The Pale King*'s structure, as, whether ironic or earnest, it foregrounds the understanding of the IRS that says the Service is essential to the United States' national community.

This understanding of national community is the target of the Spackman Initiative, a neoliberal effort to reform the IRS into a for-profit institution, which is described in one of a series of transcripts that Tate collects from his project in §14. Many of these interviews are comical. In one, a character emphasizes the impossibility of

[52] This translation comes from Jonathan Raban's review of *The Pale King* in the May 12, 2011 issue of *The New York Review of Books*.

understanding how difficult life at the REC is if one has never worked there (105-106). Another describes the importance of using enough sugar when baking a cake (107). Yet another character describes an idea for a play in which the only action is that of an IRS worker sitting at a desk who occasionally turns a page (as in §25 above), until "the audience have all left, [when] the real action of the play can start" (108). The most significant of these transcripts though is that of Kenneth "Type of Thing" Hindle who describes not only the major changes that have occurred in the IRS but the political context in which the Spackman Initiative was implemented.

In short, the institutional changes the IRS of *The Pale King* undergoes in the mid-80s result from Reagan's lowering of the marginal tax rate early in his presidency. As Voodoo Economics fail to increase the IRS's collected revenue, the Reagan administration needs money for both increased defense spending and a base level of social outlays. Thus, higher ups at the IRS of the novel cast about for ways to offset the losses sustained by the Reagan tax cuts, which leads to the discovery of a policy paper that was generated at the end of the 1960s called the Spackman Memo:

> As we understood it, the Spackman paper's root observation was that increasing the efficiency with which the Service enforced the extant code could provably increase net revenues to the US Treasury without any corresponding change in the code or a raising in marginal rates. Type of thing. Meaning it directed attention to Compliance and the tax gap. (111-112)

The tax gap is the difference between the amount of money taxpayers owe the federal government each year and the money paid that same year. What the Spackman Initiative does is orient the Service more "aggressively" toward compliance, which increases the Compliance Branch's importance relative to the IRS's other parts. This makes the public face of the IRS fundamentally more antagonistic, which perception ironically dovetails

with the image that Reagan's political persona diagnoses as the fundamental obstacle to America's new morning. As a character says in §19, a scene that chronologically precedes both §14 and the implementation of the Spackman Initiative, Reagan's election means,

> A quiet reduction in the constraints on our auditing and collection mechanisms. Reagan'll set us up as the black-hatted rapacious Big Brother he secretly needs. We–the stitch-mouthed accountants in dull suits and thick specks, punching the keys on our adding machines–*become* the Government: the authority everyone gets to hate…The Service's more aggressive treatment of [taxpayers], especially if it's high-profile, would seem to keep in the electorate's mind a fresh and eminently disposable image of Big Government that the Rebel Outsider President could continue to define himself against and decry as just the sort of government intrusion into the private lives and wallets of hardworking Americans he ran for the office to fight against. (150)

Thus, the Spackman Initiative is seen as congruent with the Reagan administration's goal of creating an ever more rapacious government by using his powers as an elected official to shape the government he leads into the caricature he was elected for attacking.[53]

What is also significant here is the disjunction between the appearance of the IRS in this description, with its "stitch-mouthed accountants," and that of §14's opening monologue, which calls the Service the "nation's beating heart." It is in the seriousness of Wallace's diagnosis of the threat that Reagan represents to the United States that we see that the positive image of the Service from the beginning of this section, which uses

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[53] For a contemporary example of this kind of political effort to shape the IRS's operations, see Greenstein and Wancheck's "House Budget Committee Proposal to Verify Incomes of All EITC Filers Would Delay Refunds, Raise Administrative Costs, and Divert IRS Resources" at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. In short, Republicans in congress want to verify income on all Earned Income Tax Credit recipients, which would discourage citizens from applying for the credit and tax the energies of the IRS, decreasing their ability to pursue the more profitable audits of high income earners. (cbpp.org)

Tate's video to picture the federal government as a site of national community that Ronald Reagan's election threatens.

Thus, after Reagan's election, the increased rapaciousness of the IRS becomes not merely a cosmetic or outwardly-directed premonition; on the contrary, it leads to a fundamental restructuring of how the IRS as an institution understands itself. The directive to increase the profitability of the IRS inspires a philosophy of decentralized innovation to meet the administration's demands for a more adaptive, responsive institution that must become something other than a bureaucracy. According to Hindle's transcript,

> A federal agency is, by definition, an institution. A bureaucracy. But the Service was also the only agency in the federal apparatus whose function was revenue. Income. Meaning whose mandate was to maximize the legal return on each dollar invested in its annual budget. Type of thing. More than any other, then, according to the resurrected Spackman, there was compelling reason to conceive, constitute, and operate the IRS as a business–a going, for-profit concern type of thing–rather than as an institutional bureaucracy. (115)

It is therefore the business-centered philosophy of the Spackman Initiative that drives the IRS's focus on the adaptive power of regionalization. The effort to increase the earnings from the Compliance Branch opens a period in the IRS's institutional history when regions (as opposed to the districts that contain them) become more and more autonomous so that different locations can pursue unique means for increasing revenues, which is why Wallace places the Peoria REC at the heart of *The Pale King* and describes an innovation that leads to the closing of that REC in the newly competitive environment of the broader IRS. In this way, the neoliberalism discussed at the opening of this section creates government directives that drive fundamental changes in how the United States government and its constituent institutions understand themselves, as they answer the call

to become more profitable forces for the US Treasury. By portraying government structures as social forms, Wallace imagines changes to government as tantamount to changes in how US citizens live among one another. As we will see in the next section, the specific changes to the IRS that are inaugurated by the Spackman Initiative create an environment that teaches the Peoria REC's individual characters to be as rapacious as the institution where they work.

Glendenning Versus Lehrl

As the REC that functions as *The Pale King*'s main character is a social structure that is both designed by the figures at the upper levels of the IRS and filled by the characters who come to work there, the institutional deliberation Wallace represents as taking place in the REC is a complex negotiation between the directives of leaders in the federal government and the employees who respond to the environment those directives create. In the previous section, I described the neoliberal context of the Reagan Administration's specific principles, which justify a more efficient and profitable IRS's displacement of an older, community-based model of the Service. Now, by returning to the concept of the form through which we saw the organic field of Whitman's leaves of grass give way to Wallace's field of bureaucrats we can characterize the REC in *The Pale King* as a social form that is born in what I will call the Service Era of the IRS and that changes with the new directives of the Profit Era. Then, shortly after this transformation, the REC dies in the emergent paradigm it helps create. Situated therefore between the changing environment of a new governmentality and the specific individuals who fill the REC as a social form, this section describes how the REC's death arrives and then

reverberates on all the levels of the US society that *The Pale King* describes: at the level of the individual, as a workplace; at the level of the community, as an employer; at the level of the government institution, as an operational Division; and within the culture of the United States, as a site of critique.

The REC's death in *The Pale King* results from the outcome of a conflict that takes place in its upper management, as a Profit Era representative, Merril Lehrl, transfers to Peoria and ousts a Service Era representative who runs the REC, Dewitt Glendenning. My analysis in this section will therefore follow the narrative of Lehrl's displacement of Glendenning that *The Pale King* provides, beginning with the arrival of one of Lehrl's aides, Claude Sylvanshine in §2, and ending with Lehrl's occupation of Glendenning's office at the REC in §49. Importantly, though I place their conflict at the heart of my reading, Lehrl and Glendenning do not center *The Pale King*'s descriptions of the REC: though Glendenning does appear in the novel several times, Lehrl remains an absent presence throughout the book. This means that Lehrl's desires and goals, even though they determine the fate of the REC, are submerged in the novel. For example, it is only in a footnote to the fictional David Wallace's opening section[54] that we realize that Lehrl's purpose in coming to the REC is to find a way to eliminate the Examinations Division of the IRS as part of the Service-wide implementation of the Spackman Initiative.[55] The

[54] For a reading of the implications of Wallace's placement of himself in the novel as a fictional character, see Boswell's "Author Here: The Legal Fiction of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*.

[55] Describing the uniqueness of his place as a short-term employee of the IRS, the fictional David Wallace writes of himself and his coworkers,

> we were not only employed by the Compliance Branch but posted at the REC that ended up figuring so prominently in the run-up to what came to be known variously as 'the New IRS,' 'the Spackman Initiative,' or just 'the Initiative,' which was ostensibly created by the Tax Reform Act of 1986 but was actually the result of a long, very complicated bureaucratic catfight between the Compliance Branch and the Technical Branch over Examinations and the Exam function in IRS operations. (71 FN 3)

specific tool Lehrl comes to the REC to find, and which he then uses to accomplish this task, is called the ANADA (the "Audit-No Audit Discriminant Algorithm"), which enables computers to determine which tax returns would be profitable to audit.[56] The discovery of this algorithm eliminates the need for most of the human examiners who work at the IRS and leads to the closing of both the Peoria REC and the rest of the Examinations Division of the IRS shortly after *The Pale King*'s period of narration, a revelation that is also buried in the same long, tangential footnote to the fictional David Wallace's opening section as the ANADA (70-71 FN 3).[57] My contention as to why Wallace makes what I claim to be *The Pale King*'s main action so difficult to identify is

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Here, Wallace provides a similar framework to that which I provided in the previous section, where a conflict within the IRS precedes the emergence of what he here calls the "New IRS." The ideological differences between the combatants in this conflict is what I am using the figures of Lehrl (Profit Era IRS) and Glendenning (Service Era IRS) to mark.

[56] In this footnote in *The Pale King*, the fictional David Wallace, who is writing a memoir about his period of employment at the REC, explains why his publishing company does not want to be mentioned in the "Author's Foreword" of a memoir that he is writing, which is because the publishing company fears angering the IRS by being seen as helping the fictional David Wallace violate a "Nondisclosure Covenant:"

> the version of the Nondisclosure Covenant that's binding on *all* Treasury employees…was instituted in 1987, which happens to be the year that computers and a high-powered statistical formula known as the ANADA…were first used in the examination of nearly all individual US tax returns…The crux here is that it is the ANADA, and the constituents of its formula for determining which tax returns are most apt to yield additional revenue under audit, that the Service is concerned to protect, and that that was why the Nondisclosure Covenant was suddenly extended to IRS employees in 1987. (70 FN 3)

That is, Lehrl discovers or develops this algorithm during his time in Peoria, and Wallace's publishing company believes that the IRS fears that a memoir about this period of change in the IRS might lead to the publication of what they view as a valuable trade secret.

[57] My claim that the REC dies in the afterstory of the novel comes from one of the fictional David Wallace's descriptions of his posting to the Peoria REC, in which he writes,

> And I was posted to Peoria IL, which is about as far from Triple-Six [the head of the IRS in DC] and the Martinsburg Center as anyone could imagine. Admittedly, at the same time…Peoria was a REC, one of seven hubs of the IRS's Examination Division, which was precisely the division that got eliminated or, more accurately (though this is arguable), transferred from the Compliance Branch to the newly expanded Technical Branch, by the advent of the ANADA and a digital Fornix network. (70 FN 3)

My claim that the REC is eliminated (or dies) in the afterstory of *The Pale King* is supported by both the suggestion here that the entire Examinations division was either eliminated or absorbed, depending on one's interpretation, and Wallace's use of the past tense when he says that "Peoria was a REC," as if he is explaining the existence of a setting that no longer exists to an audience unfamiliar with this particular history.

that his aesthetic goal was to construct a novel whose decipherment modeled the same kind of investigation necessary for negotiating the institutional complexities of contemporary life in the United States.

The narrative of Glendenning's displacement begins in §2, as one of Lehrl's aides, Claude Sylvanshine, flies into Peoria to do advance work for Lehrl's eventual arrival at the REC. A frustrated GS-9 who has struggled to pass his CPA exam (11), Sylvanshine lives in a contested relationship with both his roommate, Reynolds, who outranks him, and Lehrl himself, who Sylvanshine and Reynolds serve together in a range of capacities as Lehrl tries to gain rank in the IRS (§30). During his flight to Peoria, when we have access to Sylvanshine's stream of consciousness, we learn that his relationship with Lehrl originates from a debacle that took place at Sylvanshine's prior posting to the REC in Rome, NY that involved efforts to hide tax returns because of a system breakdown. Sylvanshine was only saved from being fired in this SNAFU because he is what the novel calls a "fact psychic" who can discover information about people without them telling him that information (120). Lehrl, who is interested in the occult and its uses for his advancement (542), rescued Sylvanshine from the meltdown at the REC in Rome and now uses him (and his extrasensory fact-finding skill) as a tool for gaining advantages on those he determines to be his enemies, such as Glendenning at the Peoria REC. How Lehrl specifically uses Sylvanshine becomes clear in the opening part of §39, where Sylvanshine engages in two intensive sessions with his occult power to discover facts about Glendenning that might be used against him. In these sessions, Sylvanshine learns that Glendenning has a number of irrational fears, including one of mosquitos and another that his "genitals were somehow malformed" (417), both of which reappear in

what seems to be a scene of interrogation-under-torture that is carried out on Glendenning by Sylvanshine and Reynolds in §48. When the disparate parts of Sylvanshine's narrative are pieced together, it becomes clear that his purpose throughout the novel is to aid his boss, Lehrl, in the overthrow of Glendenning, which makes §2 a scene that foreshadows both the end of Glendenning's directorship in Peoria and the end of the REC itself. It is for this reason that I understand the novel to be, from its opening to its close, a narrative about the end of an institution's life.

As I outlined in the previous section, the death of the REC in *The Pale King* is justified institutionally by the neoliberal rationality that inspires several significant changes to the IRS. Lehrl, Reynolds, and Sylvanshine help effect these changes by undermining the Peoria REC's Service Era philosophy, which is embodied by its Director, DeWitt Glendenning. One character describes Glendenning as a "man who took his job very seriously and required his subordinates to do the same, but he took [his subordinates] seriously as well, and listened to them, and thought about them both as human beings and as parts of a larger mechanism whose efficient function was his responsibility" (436). This perception of Glendenning results from the Director's performed investment in the enduring value of Civics for US culture, an ideological position he espouses to various characters in the novel. For example, in a scene where the character Chris Fogle reflects on the need for a freedom other than that offered by "money and capitalism," Fogle reasons that "there's also the social contract, which is where the obligation to pay one's fair share of taxes comes in, and I think my father would have agreed with Mr. Glendenning's statement that 'Real freedom is freedom to obey the law" (195). Here and elsewhere in *The Pale King*, such obedience is a spirit

Glendenning cultivates in the REC. As we will see below, Fogle is a convert to the Service, both in the sense of the IRS as a workplace and in the sense of a vocational belief that one should give one's life to the service of other people. This calling, in the Service Era's understanding of human vocation, occurs within and for a collective order that results from the successful discovery of each person's place within a larger system of life, of which the REC provides an example through Glendenning's leadership. Thus, Glendenning's ability to respect people and their capacities makes him an ideal Director of the REC in the Service Era of the IRS. The efficacy of Glendenning's methods becomes statistically apparent in §30, when Sylvanshine, digging around the Peoria REC for information about Glendenning to use against him, reports to Reynolds that Glendenning has managed to make the REC's throughput of returns exactly average for several months in a row, not by cooking the books, but by managing personnel (368-369). The temptation that immediately appears to Reynolds and Sylvanshine, as disciples of the New IRS, is the power of maximizing the REC's throughput at their whim, but for Glendenning the goal is to find a healthy rapport between the IRS, the REC, and the individuals who work there.

Thus, when Lehrl displaces Glendenning, there are several implications for the REC and its workers who lose the organizational benefits of his bureaucratic vision, not the least of which is his critique of the growing individualism of US culture from the REC's institutional consciousness. I showed above how Glendenning both espouses and is seen by his employees to live a dedicated civic ideology. We also discussed how those beliefs facilitate a healthy and efficient REC. But in a long conversation with several other IRS personnel in §19, Glendenning confesses to fearing the endangerment of his

beliefs in the contemporary United States.[58] This confession and the conversation it begins is important in the novel for two reasons: 1) it offers a critique of an atomizing US culture that gains nuance, power, and complexity (the critique does) through the dialogue of several characters offering their perspectives on the problems that the United States faces in 1979;[59] and 2) it shows how Glendenning's political allegiance to the Republican party, which is articulated through the prism of what the participants in the conversation label "conservatism," is betrayed by the party's acceptance of the neoliberal rationality that leads to Glendenning's displacement from the REC. Taking these reasons together, I read the conversation featured in §19 as providing the novel with a rehearsal of the fears that motivates Wallace's writing of the novel: the conversation suggests that the United States is losing its power to critique atomism from within itself, both because of the gradual elision of community-based perspectives from the novel's public sphere and because of a simultaneous demonizing of daily practices that are grounded in communal life.[6061] The REC's loss of Glendenning gives form to this fear and symbolizes the loss of

[58] For a Bakhtinian reading of this scene, see Adam Kelly's "Development Through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas."

[59] We know this scene takes place during the 1980 Republican primaries because Glendenning says, "I voted for Ford and I'll likely vote for Bush or maybe Reagan and I'll feel solid about my vote" (136). It is also interesting to note that according to DT Max's biography of Wallace, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, Wallace voted for Reagan at least once in the 1980s and then voted for Perot in 1992 (259). In his introduction to the electronic edition of "Up, Simba," his experiential narrative about travelling with the McCain campaign in the 2000 primaries, Wallace says he voted for Bill Bradley in the Democratic primary (ibid.). Considering this shift in political allegiance, *The Pale King*'s plot becomes interesting as a kind of biographical revenge, as the government initiatives of the Reagan administration appear in the novel as a betrayal of ideals.

[60] For a longer discussion of this problem, see my first chapter's discussion of Jameson and Wallace's similar diagnoses of postmodern culture and reflections and the potential of escape.

[61] Within the world of the REC, the work of processing examinations functions as an example of this form of life, which is part of the IRS's "service" to United States citizens and the target of Lehrl's attack in his discovery of the ANADA.

a healthy strain of American thought that could offer a counterpoint to the individualistic urging of for-profit institutions and the political ideologies that abet them.[62]

The specific character of the ideology that is described in §19's conversation and symbolically eliminated by Glendenning's displacement is a diagnosis of individualism that arrives through Glendenning's conservatism, which he understands to be a defense of civic beliefs that place social structures before individual desires. For example, one of the origins of his conservatism is Glendenning's reaction to what he sees as the dangerous individualism of the 1960s. Thus, early in §19, when a character balks at the word duty, complaining that it sounds "harsh," Glendenning replies:

> I think it's no accident that civics isn't taught anymore or that a young man like yourself bridles at the word *duty*…I'm saying that [in the sixties there] was a whole generation where most [people]…for the first time questioned authority and said that their individual moral beliefs about the war outweighed their duty to go fight if their duly elected representatives told them to. (134)

It is important to notice that Glendenning does not blame the individuals who questioned authority; rather, he blames the cultural circumstances that led that generation to deny the federal government's authority over their lives. This might seem a small distinction, but as we saw in the last chapter, Wallace understands culture and its apparatuses to be productive of the individuals who come to fill them. That Glendenning does indeed see this as not the individual's betrayal of the culture but vice versa becomes more clear as his speech sets off a series of questions that refine the group's sense of what Glendenning is trying to diagnose:

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[62] For a sustained discussion of Wallace's understanding of how capitalist institutions produce cultural solipsism in the United States and how Wallace saw civic institutions, such as the US system of education, as counters to cultural solipsism that worked at the level of the institutions, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

> ‘In other words that [young people in the sixties came to believe that] their highest actual duty was to *themselves*?’
>
> ‘Well, but to themselves as *what*?’
>
> […]
>
> ‘Neither the ultimate-duty-is-to-self element nor the [fashionableness of protesting on TV] element is irrelevant.’
>
> ‘You’re saying that protesting Vietnam led to tax cheating?
>
> ‘No, he’s saying it led to the sort of selfishness that has us all trying to eat all the boat’s food.’
>
> ‘No, but I think whatever led to it becoming actually fashionable to protest a war opened the door to what’s going to bring us down as a country. The end of the democratic experiment. (134)

This last line is Glendenning again, and through the refinement of dialogue, we see that his understanding of recent US history holds that Vietnam was a fundamental betrayal of the nation’s citizens, which betrayal taught Americans to see themselves as responsible for determining their actions with respect to ethical behavior for themselves because they could no longer trust their government. The result is a generation that neither accepts the authority of human collectives nor seeks to establish an authority over others (this latter derogation of responsibility is what the unwillingness to teach civics in the above quote represents). These are both bad outcomes from Glendenning’s perspective because they disestablish the cohering sense that allows the United States to be a form of government committed both to its own wellbeing as a collective and the wellbeing of the international community of which it is a part.

That Wallace agrees with or shares Glendenning’s view of US culture is apparent in his essays and interviews, some of which are discussed in previous chapters of this dissertation,[63] but the design of the novel also marks Glendenning out as a lost hero for

[63] For an interview that was given during *The Pale King*’s composition, see the uncut version of Wallace’s long interview with the German television station ZDF in 2003. Most of that discussion is relevant, but this quote offers a marker of the proximity between Glendenning’s civic ideology and Wallace’s own work on the problems of solipsism in US culture:

the REC. We can see the significance of this in the fact that Wallace chose to make Glendenning's prediction of the end of the "democratic experiment" speak to Glendenning and his REC's shared fate as well as the US culture it occupies. Importantly, Glendenning's premonition of national collapse is not actually his (though it echoes his antipathy for the 1960s); rather, it comes from a reading of US history he takes from de Tocqueville:

> It was in the 1830s and '40s that states started granting charters of incorporation to larger and regulated companies. And it was 1840 or '41 that de Tocqueville published his book about Americans, and he says somewhere that one thing about democracies and their individualism is that they by their very nature corrode the citizen's sense of true community, of having real true fellow citizens whose interests and concerns were the same as his. This is a kind of ghastly irony, if you think about it, since a form of government engineered to produce equality makes its citizens so individualistic and self-absorbed they end up as solipsists, navel-gazers. (143)

Notice again where Glendenning reads individualism's source: "a form of government engineered to produce equality makes its citizens…solipsists." The transference of moral authority here is not a product of the 1960s; it is much older, born at the same moment, it would seem, as the modern republic itself. The inevitable self-destruction of this civic vision is then made poignant in the novel by the fact that Glendenning's own political choices bring about his end as the Director of the Peoria REC. That is, Glendenning vows in §19 that he will vote for Reagan in the 1980 presidential election because he sees the

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> The American economic and cultural systems work very well in terms of selling people products and keeping the economy thriving do not work as well when it comes to comes to educating children or helping us help each other know how to live and to be happy…And [self-interested behavior] works very well as a system for running an economy and keeping goods produced and sold, it works wonderfully…The ways in which it doesn't work are much more difficult to talk about…One's reduced to talking, I think, about general terms like being grown up or, a term that's rarely used here anymore…but the word citizen. The idea of being a citizen would be to understand your country's history and the things about it that are good and not that good and how the system works. (ZDF 18:30-21:20)

Republicans as a counter to the normalization of the sixties counterculture that he diagnosed before, but he also acknowledges that both of the major political ideologies in the US campaign on ideas that threaten the IRS and the government to which it is attached: "We're [the IRS] the government, its worst face – the rapacious creditor, the stern parent" (136). As we saw in the previous section's discussion of the Spackman Memo, this stereotype becomes more intense after Reagan is sworn in in 1980, so *The Pale King* becomes a novel about Glendenning's inevitable failure to protect his REC (and the civic ideology it represents) from the prevailing winds of individualism that we marked on a national level with the Initiative. For my reading, then, the death of Glendenning's REC signifies the disappearance of a community-based ideology that no longer has abiding social structures–such as the lost civics classrooms that Glendenning longs for[64]–to inculcate itself in new subjects. Instead, institutions of individualism attack Glendenning and the beliefs he stands for from two sides in the novel's culture: he is attacked from one side by the for-profit imperatives of the growing alliance between government and business; and he is attacked from the other side by individualized arrogations of moral authority that masquerade as liberation in a post-60s US culture.

The fatal attack on Glendenning's Service Era comes from his own REC, and it arrives with Sylvanshine, Reynolds, and Lehrl. What is significant about the relationship between these characters is that not only are they carrying out the directives of the Spackman Initiative but their actions are unfailingly self-interested, even between one another. We saw an inkling of this in the description of Sylvanshine above: Lehrl rescued Sylvanshine from the debacle at the Rome REC because Lehrl could use his occult

[64]Recall that "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," analyzed in the previous chapter, is set in a civics classroom.

powers of fact finding to help himself advance in the Service; Sylvanshine, on the other hand, works for Lehrl because he not only guarantees Sylvanshine's job but also promises advancement if he can pass his CPA exam (§2). Wallace shows the professional greed of these characters in several other sections as well. In a comic scene, Sylvanshine reports to Reynolds that he scouted Lehrl's new office and, though he could not get inside the room itself, he measured what he imagines to be its size by his paces in the hall outside (363). He asks Reynolds to assure Lehrl that it seems almost as big as his office in Rome, NY. Sylvanshine then thinks with gratitude that he has already measured the rooms in the new apartment that he and Reynold's share and their living spaces are the same size (364). The clearest depiction of their self-interest appears in their reason for coming to Peoria: as the trio's alliance results from their mutual desire for the radical advancement of Lehrl, they have come to the REC trying to find what they call "the éclat:" "The éclat means the sudden, extraordinary idea or innovation that brings you to the notice of those at high levels. Even national levels" (530). As Sylvanshine and Reynolds explain it, Lehrl has already seen the éclat in his career, by helping prevent taxpayers from misrepresenting their dependents on their 1040s. The problem Lehrl solved was that the 1040 only required the taxpayer to put down names of dependents, and the Service lacked the will or manpower to make the dishonesty risky. Lehrl's idea therefore was to require filers to also include a social security number with the names of dependents. The effect was immediate, according to Sylvanshine and Reynolds, who contend that in 1977 "phantom dependents" were costing the federal government $1.2 billion a year (532). After Lehrl's idea was implemented, however, "Six-point-nine million dependents disappear" (533). This led to a radical elevation of Lehrl, who was a

GS-9 at the time, and within the plot of *The Pale King*, this early éclat prefigures the next, which is the ANADA that will eliminate the IRS's need for running its seven Regional Examination Centers in the future of the novel's narrative (71 FN 3).

Unlike Glendenning's careful management of the REC, Lehrl, Sylvanshine, and Reynolds are not concerned with the consequences of their work, except insofar as it leads to their advancement in the Service. This careerism conflicts with the older philosophy that understands the IRS not only as a public servant but also as a valuable employer to the workers who staff his REC. Thus, in §49, Wallace shows both the displacement of Glendenning and the firing of one of his most dedicated employees, Chris Fogle. Fogle is the narrator of a novella-sized story that will be discussed in the next section. Suffice it to say here that part of his narrative describes his learning how to focus during his twenties–to focus his attention, his priorities, etc.–by experimenting with Obetrol, a weight loss amphetamine from the 1950s and '60s. §49 begins with Fogle sitting in the reception area outside Glendenning's office. At first, he believes Glendenning "is up at region" (529), but then Fogle notices that Glendenning's secretary is gone. He then wonders why Lehrl is inside Glendenning's office. In this reading, I am claiming Glendenning has already been displaced by Lehrl at this point. Sylvanshine and Reynolds therefore sit in the reception area with Fogle and harass him, trying to make him nervous. Based on a footnote in §24 by the fictional David Wallace, we can also assume Fogle has been summoned to what is now Lehrl's office to be fired:

> [Fogle] was unpopular out of all proportion to his character, which was actually decent and well-meaning to a fault; he was one of the low-level True Believers on whom the Service depended so heavily for so much of the inglorious gruntwork and heavy lifting of day-to-day operations, and what eventually happened to him was a great injustice, I've always thought, since in his case he really did need the drugs and took them

> entirely for professional reasons; it wasn't recreational by any means. (273)

While here the fictional Wallace suggests that Fogle was fired for cause, we can also wonder, given Fogle's status as what David Wallace calls a "True Believer" and his closeness to Glendenning, if his removal is actually part of a larger purging of those Lehrl sees as loyal to Glendenning. Such a reading would understand the Spackman Initiative to carry its ideological purification to the lowest levels of the REC, stripping it of its essence before killing it off.

Called In

The third level of *The Pale King* in this analysis concerns the specific individuals who work at the Peoria REC. This section therefore focuses on two tax examiners named Chris Fogle and Lane Dean Jr. whose fates are tied to that of the REC by their employment. In analyzing these particular characters, my object is to show both how Fogle and Dean take jobs with the IRS to solve personal problems and then how the IRS absorbs their differences in its institutional work. The significance of this for my reading is that Fogle and Dean's eventual dependence on the IRS makes them victims of a chain of events that the neoliberal rationality we discussed in the first section of this chapter justifies. As we have seen, this chain in *The Pale King* travels from the Spackman Initiative, through the ambition of Lehrl, to the closing of the REC of which Fogle and Dean are parts. I will therefore conclude this chapter by recalling the understanding of the IRS as a changing social form that Wallace invokes in *The Pale King*'s epigraph in order to characterize Wallace's unfinished third novel as a tragedy about the destruction of a social form that binds people together in service to their national community.

The story of Fogle's decision to join the IRS in §22 is a conversion narrative that responds to the same atomization of US culture that Glendenning diagnoses in §19. Placed within the larger context of the REC as a doomed institution, I will read this portion of the novel as a depiction of a wasted conversion to the life of the IRS, recalling that Fogle is fired in the wake of Glendenning's ouster. Thus, Wallace uses Fogle (as well as the next character I will discuss, Lane Dean Jr.) as a marker for the larger loss of the REC as a workplace. More than this, as he did with the conversation in §19, Fogle espouses the cultural critique of the late 1970s that Wallace predicates the fall of the IRS on in *The Pale King*.

In §22, Fogle describes how he came to escape what he sees as the "nihilism" of his time as an unsuccessful college student in the early-to-mid 1970s. The key to his conversion, in Fogle's telling, is his realization that the drug use and political posturing that he and his fellow students took part in during that time was, despite their claims to the contrary, a form of conformity to the self-interested individualism of US culture. For example, describing both himself and one of his college roommates, Fogle says,

> Looking back, I doubt it ever occurred to me that the way I felt towards this roommate was probably the way my father felt about me–that I was just as much a conformist as he was, plus a hypocrite, a 'rebel' who really just sponged off of society in the form of his parents. I wish I could say I was aware enough for this contradiction to sink in at the time, although I probably would have just turned it into some kind of hip, nihilistic joke. (134)

This is an example of the atomizing force that Fogle understands to have plagued his generation's youth. As Fogle says, he suffered from a strange hypocrisy during this time in which he judged both his roommate and the broader culture as being hypocritical, but that judgment did not penetrate his sense of himself. The

further assumption here is that Fogle's view of himself as uniquely untouched by his culture's hypocrisy is a delusion that was shared by the rest of his culture. Thus, what Fogle is describing is a case where the fundamental way that people engage with each other is through doubt about the integrity of other people, such that the image Wallace creates through Fogle is that of a generation of students trapped within their own pursuits of a consumption-based rebellion. The important irony here is that Fogle can see the lived contradictions of the people around him, as well as that of the broader culture, but he cannot see that he is also a product of his environment.

What enables Fogle's emergence from what he calls the "fuzziness" of this period is his realization of the value of conformity as a tool for individual development, which he comes to by thinking about his father's disappointment in him. Fogle's father receives significant attention in §22, and one of the things about his life that Fogle emphasizes is that his father never enjoyed the kind of radical freedom that Fogle had in college. His father married young, served in Korea, returned home to take a job with the local government, and raised his family. Thus, when he saw his son waste his chance to go to college, his father suffered a sense of failure. Fogle tells about one instance when his father walked in on Fogle and his friends drinking beer and smoking marijuana in his living room. His father just stared at them for a minute and said the last lines of Shelly's "Ozymandias:" "*'Look on my works, ye might, and despair!'*" (172). The invocation of "Ozymandias" expresses the father's sense of a ruined legacy, but it has a deeper sense too, as applying to the ruin of US culture. For example, Fogle

also remembers how his father "sometimes referred to the so-called younger generation…as 'This thing America hath wrought" (170). Eventually, it is this idea that he was "wrought" that Fogle uses to recognize the conformist hypocrisy that unites him, his roommate, and his generation in their pretense of "rebellion."

The surprising lesson that Fogle learns from this revelation though is not that he should avoid conformity but that he should be more conscious of what he conforms to. That is to say, Fogle comes to believe that his father's generation's failure was a failure of permissiveness: they did not understand their children's need to be taught the kind of discipline necessary for pursuing a vocation in a free society. For example, when Fogle thinks about his time as a student, he repeatedly complains about his political science and humanities courses because they did not demand the kind of clarity, purpose, and precision that he associates with the memory of his father. Fogle says,

> Essentially, I had no motivation, which my father referred to as 'initiative.' Also, I remember that everything at that time was very fuzzy and abstract. I took a lot of psychology and political science, literature. Classes where everything was fuzzy and abstract and open to interpretation and then those interpretations were open to still more interpretations. I used to write my class papers on the typewriter the day they were due, and usually I got some type of B with 'Interesting in places' or Not too bad!' written underneath the grade as an instructional comment. The whole thing was just going through the motions; it didn't mean anything–even the whole point of the classes themselves was that nothing meant anything, that everything was abstract and endlessly interpretable. (126)

The first indictment here is of a permissiveness in thought that Fogle was not mature enough to make use of. The second is of a generation of teachers whose indifference to their students' work taught the students to be indifferent about work itself. And the third indictment is one of a broader cultural irresponsibility,

which perhaps belongs more to Wallace himself than to Fogle. That is, in a culture that is being atomized by nihilism, it would be the teacher's responsibility to see that directionless abstraction and endless interpretability do not represent a healthy resistance to culture's evolution. On the contrary, these teachers are abetting the forces of atomization tearing their national community apart. Thus, when Fogle walks into an accounting classroom filled with sharply-dressed and attentive students, and a Jesuit accounting professor tells him that he is "called to account" (143), Fogle is primed to recognize the value of the purposeful work and culture that he sees in the classroom and that he will eventually dedicate his life to through the IRS. Thus, if we recall that at the beginning of this section I argued that both Fogle and Dean use the IRS to solve a problem in their personal lives, we can see here that Fogle uses the IRS to learn how to become what he recognizes as a useful member of society and escape his "wastoid" past.

The reasons that lead Lane Dean Jr. to join the IRS are more practical than Fogle's and are not driven by anything like his cultural critique. On the contrary, his value for my analysis lies in the flatly material needs that drive him to join the IRS, as Wallace depicts Dean as a character who is forced to change his life because he starts a family. We learn this in the first of three scenes that provide us with three distinct pictures of Dean's interior life. The first of these scenes appears early in the novel, before he has joined the IRS: Dean sits on a picnic table and has a serious conversation with his soon-to-be wife, Sheri, about whether they should terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Dean and Sheri are devout

Christians, and she tells him that she plans to have the baby but is not asking him to be involved. Dean responds to this by thinking,

> She is gambling that he is good...he sees...and is moved with pity and with also something more, something without any name he knows, that is given to him to feel in the form of a question…Why is he so sure he doesn't love her? Why is one kind of love any different? What if he has no earthly idea what love is? (40)

Sheri's decision not to have the abortion causes Dean to see his personal feelings as fallible, which leads him to respond to her with a gamble of his own. This is how he ends up at the IRS, and, as we see in Dean's next two scenes, his gamble does not pay off in terms of work satisfaction. The next time he appears he is on a break at the REC. He stands outside, unsure of how to spend his time away from his desk, anxious about how quickly the break is passing. Then, when we meet Dean for the last time in the novel, in §33, he is processing tax returns, which he experiences as a kind of torture that he thinks might eventually destroy him:

> Lock a fellow in a windowless room to perform rote tasks just tricky enough to make him have to think, but still rote, tasks involving numbers that connect to nothing he'd ever see or care about, a stack of tasks that never went down, and nail a clock to the wall where he can see it, and just leave the man there to his mind's own devices. (381)

The work becomes so difficult for Dean that he begins hallucinating, imagining that the faces in the family photos on his desk are melting before him. Thus, between Dean's three scenes, Wallace offers a narrative of a character who uses the IRS as a way to support a family. Much like Fogle's account of his father's life, Dean's choice is to allow himself to be compelled by his circumstances to perform a job that will allow him to meet his responsibilities.

As the stories of Fogle and Dean are presented in *The Pale King*, their individual experiences, though offered in great detail, are minimized within the larger narrative of the REC that Wallace describes. This is a strategy he deploys to show how despite the different reasons that workers at the REC might have for joining the IRS, it is the collective project they undertake that justifies the institution's operation. This notion recalls the image of the field of workers from §25:

> 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. 'Groovy' Bruce Channing attaches a form to a file. Ann Williams turns a page. Anand Singh turns two pages at once by mistake and turns one back which makes a slightly different sound. David Cusk turns a page. (312)

Thus, despite his dedication to the Service, Fogle's examination of a tax form becomes indistinguishable from Dean's, except perhaps in the amount of throughput each employee produces. In this way, Wallace directs the reader to see that the work of the institution has an anonymizing affect, so that Fogle and Dean disappear behind the work that the REC does. This homogenization is the flavorless brotherhood that Wallace uses his novel's opening to connect back to the organicism of Wallace's poetry and the evolving understanding of social forms he evokes through the epigraph from Bidart's poem.

The Pale King though is about major changes that take place in the IRS during a fictional Ronald Reagan Presidency. Thus, the value of Fogle and Dean's stories lies in what they reveal about the loss of the REC and much of the Service's examinations division. Dean, with the pictures of his family on his desk, calls attention to the material needs of the IRS's employees and the communities they help support; meanwhile, Fogle's story points toward the loss of access to a vocation, which is a way to take part in

a tradition that functions by a different logic than the profit-based thinking of Lehrl, Sylvanshine, and Reynolds, who have taken control of the REC in the novel. Thus, my contention is that Wallace attempted to write an institutional novel that communicates the destruction of a community as the consequence of the neoliberal rationality described in section one. As we saw in §25, in the list of characters turning pages, the bureaucratic field of life that Wallace describes is a social form with a history. Shortly after the end of the novel, the Peoria REC will close as Lehrl uses the ANADA to eliminate the IRS's need for human examiners. The novel thereby raises questions. Why do we have social institutions? What is the object of efficiency? And what do we gain by profit? As the last image from Wallace's vision of the United States, *The Pale King* is not a promising ending. Yet, the novel insists over and over on both the inescapability and malleability of social forms. Perhaps they can be changed again, if we are willing to fill them. This is what *The Pale King* prescribes.

CHAPTER 6: CODA

This dissertation has analyzed David Foster Wallace's fiction by tracing his evolving responses to what he saw as the destructive atomization of US culture. This focus has allowed me to frame Wallace's career through a progress narrative. In Chapter 2, I connected Wallace's fear of solipsism to his fictionalization of the need for community-based forms of authority in *Infinite Jest*. In Chapter 3, I argued that the freedom to accept the authority of communities in that novel amounts to an assertion that only collectives can train individuals to live healthy lives in our contemporary US culture. This reality led Wallace to picture a world in which freedom is not expressed through an individual's pursuit of happiness but through their commitment to others, a commitment that is mediated by the acceptance of collective forms of authority. Then, in Chapter 4, I argued that certain of Wallace's short stories and essays published after *Infinite Jest* communicate an inadequacy in that novel that derives from its overreliance on the individual subject's conversion to collective life. Therefore, by analyzing Wallace's representations of both the education of fictional subjects and his struggle to describe the cultural solipsism of the United States in his nonfiction, I argued Wallace's response to *Infinite Jest*'s failure was to evoke in readers an awareness that they are products and parts of educational apparatuses the Unites States uses, as a national community, to reproduce itself. Finally, in Chapter 5, I described *The Pale King* as an institutional novel that offers a paradoxical vision of the individual in his last fiction: on one hand, the novel highlights the individual's insignificance in the larger structures we occupy; on the other, it shows the determinative power that institutions have on individuals. Wallace's last novel, I argued, uses this paradox to challenge readers to join their lives to institutions in shaping healthier communities in the United States.

Taken together, I understand the trajectory of Wallace's fictional project to be one of increasing difficulty as he struggled to find narrative strategies for representing individuals situated ever more deeply within their social structures. What is unique about this project though is not Wallace's formal problem but his career-long effort to discover a way to invert the tendency in American culture to frame institutions as threats to the individual. Wallace's effort to challenge this tendency surfaces several times in his nonfiction, perhaps most evidently in "Up, Simba," his article about John McCain's failed primary bid in the run-up to the 2000 elections. Originally published in *Rolling Stone*, Wallace tailors this essay to address an audience of what he calls young voters, using a characterization of *Rolling Stone* readers as unengaged to argue that disengagement is a naïve posture in US culture–that whatever one's disgust with American politics, it is impossible to escape implication in the actions of government. The essay's ostensible argument then is that one always votes, even if that vote is a nonvote that gives others more power over the country's political decisions.

The more important aspect of the essay though is Wallace's attack on his own search for something to have faith in in the American political system. That is, the function Wallace gives McCain in "Up, Simba" is not that of a figure we should trust but that of someone who challenges the legitimacy of our search for an object of faith through Wallace's ambivalence about McCain. For example, Wallace says he wants to trust McCain because he seems to have acted so honorably when he was shot down and tortured in Vietnam and refused to accept release, but, as Wallace exhaustively describes, McCain is bound up in the same machine of representation that all national politicians are

bound up in. By virtue of his dual status as a recovered POW and national politician, McCain becomes a compelling problem for interpretation. Wallace writes,

> Salesman or leader or neither or both, the final paradox—the really tiny central one, way down deep inside all the other campaign puzzles' spinning boxes and squares that layer McCain—is that whether he's truly "for real" now depends less on what is in his heart than on what might be in yours. (*Consider* 234)

What Wallace suggests in "Up, Simba" is that even if McCain turns out to be a salesman rather than a leader, the vital problem we must confront is not how our disenchantment was created by a political system that betrays its voters; rather, the object should be to ameliorate a political system that is under siege by indifference and paranoia, which feelings are prevalent in US culture because of a fetishization of the individual. The unengaged voter, pleading a broken or malevolent system, prioritizes their personal disappointment or fear over the wellbeing of a social structure that is determinative of a vast number of lives. Likewise, Wallace's performed search for a politician worthy of his faith is a perversion of what he actually thinks should be the way we conceive of our relationships with society, which is that we should see the institution as in search of constituents, rather than the other way around. Thus, Wallace argues in "Up, Simba" that the reality of American politics depends, more than anything else, on the ideological commitments of its members.

This inversion of social priorities, which sees the individual as a threat to the social institution, not only speaks to Wallace's treatment of US culture generally, but it also accounts, I think, for what we should see as his ultimate response to his postmodern predecessors, even if he never made this response explicit. In his essay on *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, "The Empty Plenum," Wallace writes that Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's*

Rainbow depicts an argument that we should connect with other people, even if that connection is dependent upon choosing to be paranoid that the world is against you. In this moment of his essay, Wallace uses the conspiring environment of *Gravity's Rainbow* to clarify what he sees as the opposite, and still more undesirable world of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, where the main character's solipsism isolates her from any interhuman meaning. Wallace prefers the world of *Gravity's Rainbow* to this because the connective tissue that paranoia creates between an individual and their social world may be terrible but it cannot compare to the nightmare that is the total disconnection of solipsism. Wallace writes,

> Mr. T. Pynchon, who has done in literature for paranoia what Sacher-Masoch did for whips, argues in his *Gravity's Rainbow* for why the paranoid delusion of complete & malevolent connection, wacko & unpleasant though it be, is preferable at least to its opposite–the conviction that *nothing* is connected to anything else & that *nothing* has *anything* intrinsically to do with you. Please see that this Pynchonian contraparanoia would be the appropriate metaphysic for any resident of the sort of world the *Tractatus* describes. (*Both* 88, emphases original)

Here, in addition to an account of the worlds described in these two novels, we can see the distinct drives of US culture that Wallace originally criticized in "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction." First, as I showed in Chapter 3, Wallace associated the logical positivism of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* with the cultural solipsism promoted by broadcast television in the United States. Second, Wallace saw in Pynchon's paranoia another tendency of postmodern literature: paranoia uses the individual as a point of identification and sympathy in an unhealthy world, which, Wallace interprets as expressing a political anarchism.

My suggestion, in outlining Wallace's development of an institutional literature, is that he sought a way beyond, of course, the solipsism of the broadcast television he

repeatedly attacked but also beyond this anarchic paranoia. The path he pursued was to represent the individual, as understood through the ideology of individualism, to be the primary threat that social institutions face, rather than vice versa. Thus, for example, *The Pale King* represents a Regional Examination Center as a community form under attack by a neoliberal rationality that promotes the enterprising individual as the organizing unit of society. Attacks on the IRS come from both within and without the REC, as new political mandates and new employees work against the institution's older social form. Like *Infinite Jest* then, with its near-future fall into dystopia, *The Pale King* offers a narrative of loss, in which old social forms are corroded in an ocean of individualists who become ever more virulently self-involved. In repeatedly telling these stories of loss that picture individuals as embedded in social structures that are more important than they are, Wallace sought to warn readers of the threat that we pose to the future of the United States because of how we have been taught to think and live. In other words, Wallace saw the contemporary subject of US culture as an agent of decline.

It is because of the intractability he saw in the problem of the disordered subjectivity the United States both suffers and promotes that Wallace came to develop his backward-looking worldview. Moving through the major narratives discussed here–*The Pale King*, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," and *Infinite Jest*–we can see that each communicates the sense of a fall, not from an ideal but an earlier moment of social organization less imperiled. Some critics, like Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts, see this as a simple nostalgia for old hierarchies, but it seems to me that Wallace's interest in the past was more in the examples it can provide for different logics of social organization. For example, the reason *Infinite Jest* is set in the future is because it allows Wallace to,

say, subsidize time in the novel's fictional space. But the important part of this narrative choice is that it highlights the fact that we live in a moment in which the notion of unsubsidized time is a vestige or remnant of an earlier social logic that the novel argues is under attack. Wallace thereby uses the past in an atomizing present as a site from which to criticize our present moment.

What I have therefore analyzed in this dissertation are Wallace's representations of communities that function by different logics than the capitalist culture he criticized. Wallace's fiction not only displays alternative communities, but he also developed narrative strategies to help readers think about themselves in relation to their society in new ways. Taken together, as in the case of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace often models an alternative social structure in his fiction (Alcoholics Anonymous) and designs his narrative to help the reader's thinking come in tune with its alternative logic (as when we judge the thoughts of *Infinite Jest*'s characters through AA's terms). This attunement is ultimately what I understand to be the work of Wallace's fiction, where alternatives to US culture are prescribed by the communities that he imagined, and his narratives then train readers how to see the society around them through the logic of that alternative community. This is why his criticisms of US culture, including his specific arguments about TV and postmodernism, remain relevant to Wallace's entire body of work. His diagnosis of solipsism not only provides the primary foil to the communities he imagined, but, more significantly, his understanding of the operation of US culture on subjects, how it separates them from one another, helped him design his narratives to cultivate the opposite.

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