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The Existentialist Contradiction

The Necessary Unbearable Suffering of Free Will in David Foster Wallace

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Abstract (English)

The Existentialist Contradiction:

The Necessary Unbearable Suffering of Free Will in David Foster Wallace

The will to overcome unbearable suffering is the essence of Wallace's work. Wallace could never find an answer, and this is why his works remains bleak to the end. Wallace's entrapment is the entrapment of our entire culture, and here resides the great value of his work: the depth of his failed investigation may move us to reconsider our interpretation of the world, because Wallace wanted to overcome the unbearable sufferings of solipsism and antagonism, but his Existentialism – specifically: his fundamental belief in free will – made these unbearable sufferings inescapable and non-relievable. To prove these claims, the thesis analyzes "the Existentialist Contradiction" (the impossibility of affirming free will *and* an ethics of compassion) that infuses Wallace's works with reference to other great Existentialists (Heidegger, Camus, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky…). It argues that Existentialism belongs to the essence of neoliberalism (Giddens, Bauman…); that Existentialism is a manifestation of the *lógos* of *téchne*—the logic that leads our entire civilization and entails unbearable suffering (Severino…); that Wallace belongs to the millenary history of writers who believe in literary truth (Aeschylus, Tolstoy, Sartre…), and that such belief still remains unrefuted despite all attempts to debunk it (Russell and Goodman, Lamarque and Olsen…). The final aim is to confront our most fundamental beliefs with Wallace, and to question them. This research is still in progress.

Abstract (Italiano)

La contraddizione Esistenzialista:

La necessaria insopportabile sofferenza del libero arbitrio in David Foster Wallace

L'essenza dell'opera di Wallace è la volontà di superare l'insopportabile sofferenza della vita. Ma Wallace non riuscì mai a trovare la risposta che cercava. Ciò che imprigionò Wallace imprigiona l'intera nostra cultura, ed è questo il grande valore della sua opera: la profondità del suo fallimento ci spinge a riconsiderare la nostra interpretazione del mondo. In Wallace vediamo che l'Esistenzialismo – nello specifico: la fede nel libero arbitrio – rende le insopportabili sofferenze del solipsismo e dell'antagonismo necessarie e non alleviabili. Per dimostrare ciò, la tesi analizza "la Contraddizione Esistenzialista" (l'impossibilità di affermare il libero arbitrio *e* un'etica della compassione) che pervade l'opera di Wallace, riferendosi ai grandi Esistenzialisti del passato (Heidegger, Camus, Nietzsche, Dostoevskij…); affermando che l'Esistenzialismo appartiene all'essenza del Neoliberismo (Giddens, Bauman…); che l'Esistenzialismo è una manifestazione della tecnica – la logica che guida la nostra civiltà ed esige che l'insopportabile sofferenza (Severino…); che Wallace appartiene a una storia millenaria di artisti che considerano la letteratura come via della verità (Eschilo, Tolstoj, Sartre…), e che tale ipotesi non è mai stata smentita, nonostante i molteplici tentativi al riguardo (Russell e Goodman, Lamarque e Olsen…). L'obiettivo finale è affrontare le nostre convinzioni fondamentali, insieme a Wallace, e metterle in discussione. Questa ricerca è ancora in corso.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Der existentialistische Widerspruch:

Das notwendig unerträgliche Leid des freien Willens bei David Foster Wallace

Zentral für Wallaces Werk ist der Wille, das unerträgliche Leid zu überwinden. Wallace selbst konnte nie eine Antwort finden und so bleiben seine Werke bis zum Ende ohne Trost. Wallaces Gefangenschaft ist die Gefangenschaft unserer gesamten Kultur und hier findet sich der große Wert seiner Arbeit: Die Tiefe seiner gescheiterten Untersuchung vermag uns dazu bewegen, die eigene Interpretation der Welt zu überdenken, denn Wallace wünschte zwar das unerträgliche Leid von Solipsismus und Antagonismus zu überwinden, aber sein Existenzialismus – insbesondere sein fundamentaler Glaube an den freien Willen – ließ dieses unerträgliche Leid unausweichlich und unauflösbar werden. Um diese Aussagen zu belegen, unternimmt die vorliegende Arbeit eine Analyse des „existentialistischen Widerspruchs" (der Unmöglichkeit, den freien Willen *und* eine Ethik des Mitgefühls zu behaupten), der Wallaces Werke durchzieht, und nimmt dabei Bezug auf andere große Existentialisten (Heidegger, Camus, Nietzsche, Dostojewski…). Es wird argumentiert, dass der Existenzialismus zum Wesen des Neoliberalismus gehört (Giddens, Bauman…); dass der Existenzialismus eine Manifestation des *Lógos* der *Téchne* ist – der Logik, die unserer gesamten Zivilisation vorausgeht und unerträgliches Leid mit sich bringt (Severino…); dass Wallace zur jahrtausendealten Geschichte von Schriftstellern gehört, die an die literarische Wahrheit glauben (Aischylos, Tolstoi, Sartre…) und dass dieser Glaube immer noch unwiderlegt ist, trotz aller Versuche, ihn als falsch zu überführen (Russell und Goodman, Lamarque und Olsen…). Schließlich liegt ein letztes Bestreben darin, unseren grundsätzlichen Ansichten zu Wallace entgegenzutreten und sie in Frage zu stellen. Diese Forschung ist noch im Gange.

Introduction

In his work, David Foster Wallace faces the undeniable, absolute evidence of unbearable suffering. He tries to find meaning in life because only meaning can make suffering *bearable*. This is why his fiction is populated by people depressed and paralyzed, by drug addicts who throw their lives away, by young men and women who are absolutely terrified by everyone. The essence of Wallace's work is the attempt to find *a reason* to overcome unbearable suffering – that is, a meaning to life that can make the suffering bearable – without trying to escape its tragic truth. In this sense, all of his work instantiates the great millenary ideal that the chorus of Aeschylus sings in the *Agamemnon* (458 BC) at the very dawn of Greek tragedy: πάθει μάθος (*páthei máthos*), "through suffering, wisdom."

This research attempts to gaze into Wallace's response to suffering, in the belief that here is where the elemental meaning of his work resides. Wallace unveiled the deepest truth of suffering, looking for an answer he could never find. This is why his works remains bleak to the end. Wallace remained trapped, but his entrapment is the existential condition of our entire culture and history. This condition comes to light through his work, which thus exhibits its most profound value: Wallace's powerful, in-depth diagnosis of human suffering may move us to reconsider our most fundamental beliefs about ourselves and the world. But this may happen only if we recognize why he failed.

Wallace saw the deep truth of loneliness, solipsism, and the unbearable burden of total individual responsibility and the constant self-judgment and hyper-reflexivity and self-contempt they entail. He saw the deep feeling of worthlessness that is the default situation driving our actions and our attempts to assuage the feeling of personal meaninglessness. He saw the truth of the *bellum omnium contra omnes* that infuses life everywhere and surfaces in the fear, self-absorption, self-interest, egotism, and narcissism that constitute the structure of our daily lives, and he saw that "hell is other people," as Sartre had written in *No Exit* as well. Wallace saw a world of loneliness and antagonism and unbearable suffering, for which he proposed a redemption that could never work.

The central argument of this research is that Wallace remained trapped in unbearable suffering because he searched for meaning in free will, the core of his most fundamental beliefs about human nature. Wallace could never abandon free will, and free will entails

solipsism and enmity, thus making unbearable suffering inescapable and non-relievable. This is the essential disease of his existentialism. Wallace was an existentialist thinker because (like Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Sartre, Camus and countless others) he believed in free will, and that a person's redemption from meaninglessness could only come through that person's free choice to accept full responsibility for herself and construct her own meaning for life.

The present research argues that this existentialist redemption is impossible, and that Wallace remained trapped in unbearable suffering because his thought is pervaded by "the Existentialist Contradiction": the impossible affirmation of both free will and an ethics of meaningfulness and compassion. This affirmation is impossible because free will entails an ontology that makes solipsism, war and meaninglessness necessary, incontrovertible, and inescapable. Free will entails everything Wallace knew to be intolerable. The existential paralysis that affects Wallace's characters is the most coherent form of awareness of the truth of free will. Wallace's first-ever work "The Planet Trillaphon" (1984) describes depression as "really bad pain and paralysis and all-around agony" ("PT" 29). This dissertation submits that this is the proper consequence of the interpretation of the world to which free will belongs.

Wallace could never renounce his belief in free will because this is fundamental not only in existentialism but in the ideology of our entire civilization: it is what we consider to be the unquestionable truth. In Wallace's work, free will sometimes appears as belonging to the essence of unbearable suffering, but most of the time it takes on the opposite meaning: the characters' inability to properly exercise free will causes their suffering, and thus the proper exercise of free will becomes the only possible path to redemption. This is the fictional concretization of Wallace's existentialism. In his work, as in existentialist philosophy, free will is the origin of human anguish, but it is also what makes us humans and meaningful. Reading David Foster Wallace reveals the tragic truth behind this conception of humanity, the impossibility of its positive affirmations. Unbearable suffering always prevails in Wallace's work, and this occurs because Wallace's worldview does not allow for redemption.

The Centrality of Free Will in David Foster Wallace

In using the term "free will," this research adopts its most basic incompatibilist definition as "the ability to choose, and do, otherwise." For example, the ability to determine to be a

vegetarian when I could determine to eat meat. Not only is this the only definition of free will that makes sense to me, but it is also the definition on which our civilization is built: our ideals of merit, moral worth, retribution, justice, etc. all depend on our belief in this kind of free will.

Before introducing the reader to the structural principles of this research, I shall here provide a brief overview of the centrality of free will in Wallace's work. This constitutes preliminary proof for the proposition that free will is the most fundamental concept in Wallace's exploration of the existential plights of human beings, and it serves well in accompanying the reader into what follows. In addition, this section allows me to insist on the essentiality of free will in Wallace's *fiction*, and thus gives me a chance to, at least partially, atone for the very limited exploration of this most important category of Wallace's production in the (unfinished) final section of this dissertation. This should also indicate the direction the research will pursue in the future to demonstrate that the dynamics explored here do apply to Wallace's entire production.

That free will is dominant in Wallace becomes clear right away in his double-major undergraduate theses in English and Philosophy. In these two early texts, free will already appears as the undeniable essence of human beings, as well as the only possible source of meaning in existence. In his Philosophy thesis, entitled "Richard Taylor's 'Fatalism' and the Semantics of Physical Modality" (1985), Wallace attempts to defend free will – "freedom of choice" ("RTF" 198), i.e. the fact "that persons enjoy at least some control over what does and will happen to them" (ibid. 142) – from Richard Taylor's argument for fatalism: an "obviously unattractive and anti-intuitive" ("RTF" 151), "strange and unhappy metaphysical doctrine that does violence to some of our most basic intuitions about human freedom" (ibid. 146). This thesis proves that free will was always of focal importance for Wallace and for his sense of morality and of life's meaningfulness. This centrality will also structure the parallel English thesis that would become his first novel.

The Broom of the System (1987) is the literary transposition of the same philosophical anxiety that informs Wallace's thesis against Taylor. In the novel, the protagonist Lenore Beadsman struggles with the idea that her identity is only a function of other people's narratives, that she's a character in a story, that she's "not really real" (*Broom* 249). These struggles ultimately all boil down to the fundamental problem of free will. Lenore fears being "controlled, and thus not in control" (ibid.), being a slave to outside forces and thus not the master of her own life, being the object of determinism and thus not the one who *decides*.

"Control" is constantly referred to in the novel, and Wittgenstein's "meaning as use" haunts Lenore because it entails the danger of *being used by someone*, i.e. the danger of acquiring meaning only through the use someone else makes of her within his or her narrative.

The centrality of free will as the essence of humanity, its only source of meaning, and the positive against the negative of determinism that these two first long works attest will remain with Wallace for the rest of his career. The novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way," collected in *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), contains an obvious prefiguration of the most explicit late existentialism of *This Is Water* (2005) and *The Pale King* (2011). The story makes clear that "what unlocks you, even today, is what you *want* to want. In what you value. […] And here's a cliché that's earned its status as a cliché: whether you're free or locked up depends, all and only, on what you want" ("Westward" 349). Here, again, free will appears as the path to redemption from suffering ("what you *want* to want…unlocks you"), and as the unquestionable evidence of human existence ("a cliché that's earned its status as a cliché"). As a result, the story presents the existentialist ethics that will become most famous with *This Is Water*. This indicates that Wallace's beliefs and concerns always remained the same throughout his career. Moreover, by using the formula "what you *want* to want," in this novella, Wallace defines the ontological essence of free will by directly reversing the famous deterministic maxim that Albert Einstein attributed to Arthur Schopenhauer in his "The World as I See It" (1934): "in human freedom in the philosophical sense I am definitely a disbeliever. Everybody acts not only under external compulsion but also in accordance with inner necessity. Schopenhauer's saying, that 'a man can do as he wants, but not want what he wants,' has been an inspiration to me since my youth" (Einstein 8).[1]

Years later, Wallace will have the plot of *Infinite Jest* (1996) constantly interrupted by the conversation on the meaning of freedom between Remy Marathe and Hugh Steeply. Here, Marathe voices the existentialist solution to suffering that Wallace will later make his own in *This Is Water* and that we've seen was already there in "Westward." Marathe says that

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[1] The novella also manifests how Wallace's care for free will was always a fundamental reason for his rejection of postmodernism (a fact that critics have generally not seen). The protagonist Mark Nechtr (Wallace's alter ego) states: "I'm bad at will, I've decided. Postmodernism doesn't stress the efficacy of will, as you know" (ibid. 249). Here, Nechtr judges postmodernism negatively for its debilitation of free will, and he also anticipates the character Claude Sylvanshine of *The Pale King* in his attribution of suffering to his own incapacity to exercise free will – Sylvanshine will say that he is "weak or defective in the area of will" (*TPK* 14) –, which fact further proves that Wallace's beliefs and concerns always remained the same.

to "choose your attachments carefully" (*IJ* 107) is "the choice of the most supreme importance" (ibid.). In opposition, Steeply represents the libertarianism of which the novel shows the dire consequences. But Steeply is the one who most exposes the fundamental ontology of free will: "one cannot be human without freedom" (ibid. 320) because "there are no choices without personal freedom" (ibid.). And he also discloses some of the necessary consequences of free will, which Marathe (and Wallace) contradictorily refuses to accept, when he states that "enlightened self-interest" (ibid. 428) and everything it entails – full burden of responsibility upon the self, egotism, individualism, utilitarianism, etc. – follow from believing in free will.

In 1996, Wallace published other works that manifest his existentialism. A lesser-known short essay entitled "Back in New Fire" contains his most direct affirmation of the unquestionable truth of free will: "only the human will can defy, transgress, overcome, love: *choose*" (ibid. 169); "nothing from nature is good or bad. Natural things just *are*; the only good and bad things are people's various choices in the face of what is" (ibid. 171). Here, Wallace reiterates that humans are the only beings endowed with free will and that free will is the only possible source of value within our interpretation of the world, a theory he makes again concrete in his most famous essay (of the same year) "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," which reiterates his existentialist ethics that goes from "Westward" to *TIW*.

On the cruise, Wallace insists that adulthood means learning that "I have to make choices and regret foreclosures and try to live with them" (ASFT 268). This means that adulthood equates knowing that my free will endows me with the responsibility to construct meaning by making free choices. Wallace knows that this "is dreadful" (ibid.), it fills the individual with angst, but it is also the only way to overcome the "*despair*" (ibid.) that inheres in the attempt to escape the responsibility that free will entails. The denial of free will means absolute meaninglessness, the meaninglessness that "this authoritarian" (ibid. 267) cruise ship symbolizes. On the cruise, you "pay for the privilege of handing over to trained professionals responsibility not just for my experience but for my *interpretation* of that experience" (ibid. 268). This amounts to saying that you attempt to escape the angst of your responsibility to construct meaning from experience. The cruise promises you that "you will *have no choice*" (ibid. 267) and thus feel no burden. But this leaves you empty, in "dread or angst" (ibid. 261), "wanting to jump overboard" (ibid.).

The short-story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), which Wallace knew to be altogether dark, shows some of the most terrifying consequences of free will. In "The

Depressed Person," the therapist cannot even "suggest that the depressed person had in any way consciously *chosen* or *chosen to cling to* a chronic depression whose agony made her (i.e., the depressed person's) every waking hour feel like more than any person could possibly endure" (TDP 50). The tone of the story, Wallace's statements about it, and its general context tell us that the therapist is right: the depressed person *has chosen* her entrapment in depression. But the therapist cannot say that because this would demonstrate to the depressed person that other people have the right "to judge or blame" (ibid.) her for her own depression. Nothing is more terrifying and depressing than feeling that one's suffering is one's own fault, but in the ontology of free will this is the truth. This is why the depressed person becomes entrapped in self-deception beyond all hope: because her awareness of her own free will entails the unbearable burden of knowing that her suffering is ultimately her own choice, her fault and responsibility. This is what really crushes her beyond redemption.

But the most revealing piece of the collection may be "B.I. #46." This snippet gives voice to the hideous man who argues that there may be good in "getting incested or abused or violated" (*BI* 117). It is easy to be disgusted by his words, but such reaction ignores the real problem of the story, which is once again free will. This hideous man actually argues for an ethics that is the necessary result of Wallace's most fundamental beliefs. Not coincidentally, he continuously refers to the existentialism of Viktor Frankl's *Man Search for Meaning* (1946), an obvious inspiration for Wallace. The hideous man argues that events like rape teach you that you are "just a thing" (ibid. 122) until you choose to be a person. They teach you that "there's nothing that […] just automatically *means*" (ibid.), including yourself. Viktor Frankl knows what it means to be a thing because he was a prisoner in concentration camps. This is why he learned "that every minute from then on minute by minute if you want you can *choose* to be more if you want, you can *choose* to be a human being and have it *mean* something" (ibid. 123). You can choose to be a human being regardless all external circumstances. Meaning is within. This is proper existentialism, and it is the ethics of Wallace's work. The hideous man says that rape teaches you "Frankl's thing of learning it's not automatic, how it's a matter of choice to be a human being with sacred rights instead of a thing or a rat" (ibid.). Rape teaches you "to always deep-down know it's always a choice" (ibid.). These words foreshadow Wallace's warning in *TIW* that being a human being is a matter of choice, the choice of freeing oneself from one's hard-wired, automatic default setting (which entraps us into being mere things). The hideous man says that "you don't automatically have a name, it's not something you just have" (ibid.), and that "you even have

to choose to even have a name or to be more than just a machine programmed with different reactions when they do different things to you" (ibid.). These words express what Wallace writes in "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness" (1999), i.e. that a self is not "something you just *have*" ("SRKF" 64). This hideous man is a coherent follower of Wallace's existentialism.[2]

The stories in Wallace's next work *Oblivion* (2004) were originally meant to be part of *The Pale King*[3] and are therefore infused with the same opposition between being a meaningless machine and a human being endowed of free will. "Mister Squishy" presents the protagonist Terry Schimdt as yet another character who engages in the existentialist interpretation of the self that ties Wallace's characters from Lenore Beadsman and Mark Nechtr to Claude Sylvanshine and Chris Fogle. Schimdt believes his possessing free will is the hallmark of his humanity, and this *causes* the self-absorption and self-contempt that trap him in existential solipsism. Like the depressed person and Claude Sylvanshine, among many others, Schimdt looks at his own shortcomings and sees that – since he possesses free will – they are his own fault. He looks at "his apparent inability to enforce his preferences even in fantasy" (ibid. 55) and this "ma[kes] him wonder if he even had what convention called a Free Will at all deep down" (ibid.). This wondering is not a questioning of free will but the voicing of self-hatred. Schimdt looks at his failures and sees that their cause is his inability to exercise the free will he is endowed with. He is blaming and hating himself for his own weakness. He knows that his suffering results from his failure to take on his responsibility to choose to become a person. He remains a thing, a mere machine, without meaning nor humanity, deserving of no respect nor compassion, and this is entirely his fault.

In "Good Old Neon" too free will is explicitly addressed: "of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock" ("GON" 179). The ironic "Sherlock" here highlights how unquestionable free will is to the protagonist of the story, who's non-coincidentally called "David Wallace" (Neal is

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[2] This hideous man also makes another fundamental step in the ethics of free will. He states: "do you think anybody cared about Victor Frankl or admired his humanity until he gave them *Man's Search for Meaning*?" (*BI* 123). An individual is a thing until he freely chooses to be a person, and only then does he or she acquire value, only when he or she demonstrates value through action that is worthy of respect. Therefore, only the few are worthy of respect.

[3] See David Hering's *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form*.

David Wallace's projection). The essence of Neal's impostor syndrome is free will. The impostor syndrome is possible only because we believe in free will. You can be an impostor only if you are the one who freely chooses how to frame your existence in this world. Only if you dominate yourself and your surroundings can you be charged with the fault of being a fraud. In the story, the contextual meaning of the sentence "of course you're a fraud…it's called free will, Sherlock" is supposed to be comforting, as if knowing that everyone is a fraud because everyone is endowed with free will could be redemptive. But Neal kills himself and this is his rational response to suffering, because even this supposedly comforting knowledge hides what Wallace always thought to be the greatest danger: existential solipsism, itself inextricably tied to free will. If everyone is a fraud because everyone is endowed with free will, then no one can ever truly know anyone else, and existential solipsism is true. This thought was an endless source of suffering for Wallace, and he tried to overcome it in all his work, but he never succeeded.

In his last works the centrality of free will becomes even more explicit. *The Pale King* (2011) is a direct fictionalization of *This Is Water*, and so it once again presents the fundamental opposition between determinism and free will that grounds all of Wallace's work. In the novel, the opposition is presented as one between being a machine, merely subject to one's natural meaningless impulses vs. being capable of free choice and therefore meaningful. All of the novel's characters struggle with existential predicaments that belong to this opposition. Sylvanshine feels "Total Terror and Disqualification" (*TPK* 26) because he believes that his suffering results from his being "weak or defective in the area of will" (ibid. 14). Fogle claims to have redeemed himself from nihilism when he realized "that it's a choice" (ibid. 189) not to be "a machine" (ibid. 184), but his redemption is negated by the novel itself (as we'll see in the dedicated chapter). Other characters (Lane Dean Jr., David Cusk, David Wallace, Shane Drinion, Meredith Rand, and Stuart Nichols) all struggle with the terror of "the look" as defined by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), and with feelings of boredom and dread. These themselves depend on the ontology of free will. The terror of "the look" is impossible without belief in free will (there is no reason for pride and shame without free will), and boredom and dread are the most powerful manifestations of absolute nothingness, which is itself the essence of free will.

This is the ontology that pervades the essence of *This Is Water* (2005). Here, Wallace explicitly states that free will is the only capital-T Truth: "the only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to *decide* how you're going to try to see it" (ibid. 94), that "you get to consciously

decide what has meaning and what doesn't" (ibid. 95). From this foundation, he derives the existentialist ethics that all of his work espouses: if you don't want to live a meaningless life that is the product of your deterministic natural impulses, you have to learn to be free, to learn "to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience" (ibid. 54), to learn to become a human being, and the only way to do this is to learn to *choose* good ideals to worship, to learn to *choose* to commit to the well-being of other people. The foundation of this thought is free will, and its goal is compassion. But such goal is incompatible with the foundation. The conclusion doesn't follow from the premises. Wallace's thought is trapped in its Existentialist Contradiction, as we will see in the chapter bearing this title, and thus to the imprisonment in unbearable suffering that belief in free will entails.

The Meaning of Technology

To demonstrate that Wallace's Existentialist Contradiction is actually the entrapment of our entire culture and its history, a first ancillary analysis is needed. The section dedicated to "The Meaning of Technology" attempts to answer this need. Wallace saw the deep truth of suffering that inheres in our interpretation of the world, but he couldn't overcome it because of his unshakeable belief in free will, which belongs essentially to our interpretation of the world. This is the great value of his work: its failure shows us the terrifying consequences our beliefs lead to, and so it moves us to reconsider what we take for granted.

This section attempts to indicate why this is the case; that is, why it is impossible to affirm free will and an ethics of compassion and why this entails fearsome repercussions for our lives. It does so by focusing on the philosophy of contemporary Italian thinker Emanuele Severino in opposition to Martin Heidegger's. The goal is to reflect upon the meaning of "technology" which, properly understood, is the ontology within which free will can arise. The choice of these thinkers is not arbitrary. One may ask why Severino, Heidegger, and "technology" and not, for example, Derrida. Besides the fact that the connection between Derrida and Wallace has already been extensively explored by other scholars, the most important justifications for this choice are: (1) as we will see, Heidegger and Wallace share the same contradictory relationship with free will. This hasn't been shown before, and it contributes to a deeper understanding of Wallace's work; (2) Severino provides an absolutely new framework – unavailable anywhere else – through which to interpret Wallace's work and

grasp its existentialist contradiction, which is the main objective of this research. In Severino, we find a coherent treatment of free will which sees that free will belongs to the essence of technology, and that today's criticisms of technology are technological themselves, because they still conceive humans as beings capable of altering the course of events, i.e. as beings endowed with free will.

Heidegger and Severino are the two greatest thinkers of technology in contemporary history and delving into their works will enable us to understand the relationship between technology, free will, and our daily lives. Today, we know that Heidegger considered Severino to be the only contemporary thinker capable of questioning his philosophy.[4] We also know that Wallace was familiar with Heidegger's work because his oeuvre contains various references to the German philosopher.[5] This research aims to demonstrate that Wallace followed Heidegger's footsteps with regards to free will. Heidegger was aware of the existential danger and the unbearable suffering that technology entails, and yet he hoped to find salvation from technology in technology. This is precisely the same contradiction that infuses Wallace's works and, in this sense, one could hypothesize that Wallace was directly inspired by Heidegger. Severino's work is necessary to expose Heidegger's contradiction, with an argument that in the later sections will apply to Wallace as well: both Heidegger and Wallace hoped "to will non-willing," but this kind of redemption is impossible, and this contradiction entrapped them into the domain of suffering because they couldn't conceive of any other truth but free willing.

The philosophy of Emanuele Severino challenges the very foundations of technology and thus helps us understand the general implications of the Existentialist Contradiction that infuses Heidegger's and Wallace's thought. This is why we present it at the beginning. It provides a brand-new perspective from which to examine Wallace's relationship with

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[4] We know this after last year's findings in Heidegger's archives of annotations on Severino's early work *Heidegger e la metafisica* (*Heidegger and Metaphysics*, 1950). In relation to these findings, Reverend Heinrich Heidegger (Martin's nephew) and Friedrich-Wilhelm Von Hermann (Martin Heidegger's last pupil and custodian of his unpublished work) have also testified to the constant presence of Severino's name in Heidegger's philosophical conversations with his fellows.

[5] Wallace mentions Heidegger in *at least*: a letter to his editor about the composition of *The Broom of the System* (in Max 69), the essays "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (1988), "The Empty Plenum" (1990), and "Greatly Exaggerated" (1992), the famous McCaffery interview (1993), the novel *Infinite Jest* (1996), and the work on mathematical infinity *Everything and More* (2003). But there are probably more.

suffering, as well as existentialism in general. Through Severino's philosophy, we rediscover the meaning of "technology" as the *lógos* of *téchne*: that is, the interpretation of Being that thinks "the world" as becoming, "things" as wavering between Being and Nothingness and as therefore available for domination, and "human beings" as the beings who are capable of such domination. We see that, in our common interpretation of the world, human beings are technological beings, capable of deciding upon things and transforming them in accordance with their free will. But for Severino, this conceptualization of human beings as technological beings, endowed with free will, entails unbearable suffering. That Severino's philosophy lives in direct opposition to Wallace's offer of Existentialist salvation is therefore clear. Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* and Wallace's existentialist redemption are doomed to unbearable suffering because they are affirmations of free will. Heidegger and Wallace both saw the unbearable suffering of free will but couldn't free themselves from believing in its truth. In an essay about tennis player Michael Joyce – entitled "Tennis Players Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquery, and Human Completeness" (1996) –, Wallace wrote, in a footnote, wondering about Joyce's love for the game, that "whether there's '*choice*' involved is, at a certain point, of no interest…since it's the very surrender of choice and self that informs the love in the first place" ("MJ" 228). In that brief moment, Wallace saw that love and choice, redemption and free will, are mutually exclusive. But the Existentialist Contradiction that infuses his work testifies to his inability to remain true to that brief intuition, to believe in that gut feeling.

Reflections on Literary Truth

Our argument needs a second ancillary investigation to have stable foundations. What we want to say about Wallace's work implies literature's ability to bear the truth and to reveal the deep meaning of our daily lives. If literature didn't have this capacity, there would be no sense in talking about Wallace's work as the carrier of the Existentialist Contradiction that pervades our civilization and guides our lives. This is a problem, especially today, because in contemporary philosophy of literature and literary theory the denial of literary truth is widespread. This is why this second ancillary section is necessary: to defend the idea of literary truth. This defense is imperative if we are to continue to treat literature as a meaningful, worthwhile practice, and if we are to read works like Wallace's as relevant for

our own lives. Wallace himself knew this and devoted great energy into studying contemporary literary theory and argue against its denials of literary truth. This is, for example, the foundation of his quarrel with the contemporary fashionable and superficial applications of postmodernism and deconstruction to literary theory. Wallace argues against them because they deny that literature is "about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (McCaffery 26), that there is intentionality in writing and that "writing is an act of communication between one human being and another" ("Greatly Exaggerated" 144), and finally that this conversation is "deep, significant" (Miller 62) because it "addresses the concern[s]" (Kennedy and Polk 16) that are dearest to us, and it "move[s] people to countenance" their suffering (McCaffery 32), thus possibly helping them take a first step toward "human redemption" (ibid.).

At the heart of Wallace's literary project is the negation of all these unfavorable literary interpretations. The motive of this second section is to align with Wallace's negation by arguing in favor of literary truth. With this goal in mind, our investigation on literary truth centers on contemporary literary theory so as to call into question some of the common contentions that emerge within the field today. The theoretical argument develops as a "Commentary on *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (1994) by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen." This is our main theoretical text of reference for two reasons: one, it presents its own denial of literary truth, two, and most importantly, it provides an authoritative overview of the history of literary theory, thus allowing us to establish a valid confrontation with multiple theories of literature. Thus, the "Commentary" enables us to accomplish multiple goals. We will: expose the contradiction of L&O's no-truth theory of literature and of their idea of no-truth literary value; highlight the inconsistencies in L&O's – nonetheless profound and revealing – criticism of past pro-truth theories in order to invite scholars to reconsider and redefine the notion of literary truth; question L&O's interpretation of contemporary literary history and argue that modernism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism seek to represent the truth in literature just as traditional realism did; propose a reformulation of literature's moral value as a means of conversation between reader and writer; offer an interpretation of fiction's general statements as performing both a characterizing function within the fiction and a propositional function in relation to the real world; indicate that L&O fail in criticizing Rorty's theory of The Ubiquity of Fiction because of their refusal to do metaphysics and that Rorty can indeed be disproved by doing metaphysics; argue that doing metaphysics is necessary to define fiction and literature; and

finally suggest a new ontological starting point from which to theorize the nature of fictional objects, which we should recognize as things that both are and exist, like everything else,. We submit that this could solve the problems of Russell's, Goodman's, and Meinong's ontologies of fictional objects as well as dissolve many of the obscure issues that have confounded literary theory and philosophy of literature for a long time, and which have led to many misguided denials of literary truth.

After our theoretical argument, we close this section with two chapters on Wallace's own conception of the writer's duty to literary truth. These chapters bring to light Wallace's philosophy of literature by making evident his direct appropriation of the work of, respectively, Leo Tolstoy and Jean-Paul Sartre, in chronological order. The first chapter shows the certain direct influence of Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* (1897) on Wallace's literary project by also referring to our findings on Wallace's own annotated copy of the text at the Wallace archive at the Harry Ransom Center. The second chapter manifests the striking extent of Wallace's alignment with Sartre's great literary manifesto "What Is Literature?" (1947), arguing that there are strong reasons for hypothesizing direct influence in this case as well. The fundamental truth that emerges through these chapters is that these great writers of the Western literary tradition believe in literary truth, and also that literary value is rooted in literary truth. Wallace belongs to this millenary tradition, and these beliefs are exactly what led him to become a writer. He chose to write literature because he thought that, through literature, he could explore the deepest truths of our being and bring readers along into the conversation. We submit that this is exactly what he did, and that there is no reason to think otherwise. In light of this, we proceed to confront Wallace's work, in the knowledge that this confrontation will bring us face to face with the most important problems of our lives.

The Sociology of David Foster Wallace

In this section, we begin to address Wallace's work directly, starting from the non-fiction. It is here that Wallace explicitly reveals the reasoning – i.e. the causes, means, and ends – that sustains his literary project – it is here that he sets down the ethical foundation of his literary commitment. This foundation is a sociology. It is of central importance to understand and confront this sociology not only because it founds Wallace's project but also because critics have mostly taken it for granted, moving on to evaluate the fiction on the basis of Wallace's

social criticism. Here, instead, we submit that we need to confront the foundation of Wallace's project before reading his fiction, and to do that we will contrast Wallace's sociology with the work of other great contemporary sociologists like Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Christopher Lasch, and more, to question it and to see whether it can withstand criticism.

The first chapter of this section is entitled "The System of Wallace's Sociology" and begins with a theoretical argument in defense of interpreting Wallace's non-fiction as a sociology. The essence of Wallace's non-fiction is a specific diagnosis of the disease of our society, and this is why the non-fiction is a sociology. The diagnosis is the foundation of Wallace's project, the reason why he writes literature as an anodyne against loneliness. Thus, the chapter highlights how Wallace's sociology is the basis for his fiction, showing that Wallace structures his literary project in the same terms of the "INTERPRET-ME fiction" that he praises in the early essay "The Empty Plenum" (1990). Finally, the chapter demonstrates that Wallace's sociology has a systematic structure that covers the entirety of his career, and it explains the content and nuances of this structure. I would here argue that the nexus between "E Unibus Pluram" and the McCaffery interview (both 1993) that critics have always foregrounded is properly understood only when enlarged to include multiple essays and interviews that cover the entire period from "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (1988) to *This Is Water* (2005). The diagnosis of Wallace's sociology remains the same throughout Wallace's career, and so does the content of his fiction. The dread is always solipsism and antagonism, the diagnosis of our society that it nurtures solipsism and antagonism, and Wallace's proposed solution is always existentialism through literary fiction. This means that the Existentialist Contradiction pervades Wallace's work since its very beginning, and this is what our comparative analysis with the works of Lasch, Bauman, Beck, and Giddens will show.

In "On Narcissism: David Foster Wallace and Christopher Lasch," our comparative analysis begins with the contention that Wallace directly appropriated Lasch's analysis in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) to establish the diagnosis that founds his criticism of contemporary society. We also look at the influence Lasch has had on Wallace's postulation of the opposition between communicative and expressive writing, his criticism of contemporary American literature and specifically of metafiction and literary narcissism, and his condemnation of the pleasure principle and offer of worship as the ideal that can restore meaningfulness. All of these find their precedent in Lasch. Yet, Lasch provides a first

questioning of Wallace's sociology, beginning with the consideration of the possibility that Wallace may perfectly fit Lasch's description of "the psychological man" as a new kind of contemporary narcissist and "the final product of bourgeois individualism" (*CN* xvi). Lasch's later work *The Minimal Self* (1984) allows us to delve deeper into the philosophical presumptions that guide Wallace's sociology, and it enhances our grasp of the implications of the Existentialist Contradiction in relation to free will. As we will see, both Lasch and Wallace affirm this contradiction.

In "The Project of Life: David Foster Wallace and Zygmunt Bauman," we begin with a preliminary view of Wallace and Bauman's agreement in their Existentialist criticism of contemporary society. We specifically highlight their concurrence in prescribing the same solution to the predicaments of our time: the necessity for the "I" to realize his absolute need for the Other, conceived in existentialist terms. We argue that proper understanding of the nature of this prescription reveals its essential contradiction (that Wallace and Bauman share). In exploring this contradiction, we introduce Kierkegaard and Sartre as two great influences on both Wallace and Bauman, and we unpack the ethical message of *This Is Water*. Subsequently, we attempt to demonstrate that Existentialism belongs to the essence of our time. On this basis, we submit that it is impossible to offer existentialism as a solution to the predicaments of neoliberalism, as Wallace and Bauman attempt to do. Finally, we dwell on the necessary consequences of the contradiction inherent to the redemption Wallace and Bauman propose, arguing that existentialism, when coherently thought to its end, entails the affirmation of the will to power and despair, concretized in solipsism (self-absorption, individualism, narcissism, etc.) and the feeling that hell is other people.

In "Neoliberalism is Existentialism: David Foster Wallace and *Individualization*," we insist on the fundamental equivalence of existentialism and neoliberalism by introducing the work of sociologists Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck. We exhibit their disagreement with Wallace's analysis of contemporary society by showing how, to them, neoliberalism does not lead our society, on the contrary, we live in the most desirable social configuration ever established: "*institutionalized individualism*" (*I* xxi), a concretization of existentialism. But we argue that Wallace's criticism of contemporary society is comparatively correct because the Becks' individualization is only a reiteration of what Adam Smith had set down and therefore constitutes no advancement from neoliberalism. Nonetheless, comparative analysis of Wallace's sociology and *Individualization* is useful to properly understand the uniformity of existentialism and neoliberalism, which moves us to realize why the "cultural pessimism"

that the Becks attribute to Wallace's point of view is, in truth, a realism.

Finally, in "Rational Insanity: David Foster Wallace and Anthony Giddens," we explore the existential and psychological suffering of individuals as it relates to Wallace's belief in free will. The central dread of solipsism in Wallace's work regains prominence in this chapter, as we explore the dangers of rational thinking within our interpretation of the world. In this sense, here, we discuss the problem of induction (Hume, Russell), for which our interest originates in Wallace's treatment of its consequences in *Everything and More* (2003). We set for ourselves the difficult task of indicating the rationality of madness; i.e. how, given our rationality (our belief in technology), the existential paralysis and despair that affect Wallace's characters and are the central concern of his work are *rational* responses to the truth of existence—as well as necessary consequences of his Existentialist Contradiction. As we proceed in our analysis, the extent and depth of the uniformity of thought between Wallace and Giddens becomes ever more striking. Our investigation leads us to realize the profound insight in their feeling for the necessary faithfulness of life and unbearable despair of rationality, but finally to conclude that they both remain trapped in the Existentialist Contradiction. We close this chapter with brief readings from Wallace's fictional works to show the actual implications of this entrapment embodied in his characters. This ending achieves a two-fold function: it reminds us of the inextricable connection between Wallace's non-fiction and fiction, thus introducing the final section of this work, and it also reconnects us to our premise about the meaning of technology: in *Infinite Jest*, we see the Existentialist Contradiction play itself out exactly as it does in Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*.

Fyodor Dostoevsky and David Foster Wallace

Finally, in the last section of our research, I approach Wallace's fiction and understand, in light of all of our premises, the meaning of the Existentialist Contradiction that is its essence. This section provides only one example of what can be done with Wallace's fiction, in this sense. The choice of Dostoevsky as a first comparison is not arbitrary. Both Dostoevsky and Wallace are existentialists whose central concern is to resolve the problem of evil and whose hopes remain frustrated by the Existentialist Contradiction.

In the first chapter, we provide an overview of the history of the philosophical criticism on Dostoevsky and Wallace. We argue that the fundamental unity of Dostoevsky

and Wallace resides precisely in the Existentialist Contradiction that they share in relation to their treatment of the conflict between reason and faith, that Bakhtinian readings lose sight of the most important monologism that pervades Dostoevsky's and Wallace's works, and that understanding this monologism is indispensable if one is to properly interpret these works, because what both Dostoevsky and Wallace try to achieve in their fiction is the communication of their monologic existentialist ideal of redemption.

Thus, the second chapter critiques Bakhtin's interpretation of Dostoevsky. It is crucial for us to disclose the inconsistencies in Bakhtin's interpretation because pure polyphony would negate the very premises of our thesis. That is, if Wallace's and Dostoevsky's works were truly purely polyphonic, we could not affirm that they embody definite ontological and ethical propositions that constitute their Existentialist Contradiction,. We must therefore not lose sight of the elemental monologism of Dostoevsky's and Wallace's works. This is why we argue that Bakhtin neglected this fundamental aspect of Dostoevsky's works, presenting the partial truth of polyphony as the absolute truth of Dostoevsky's works, and that Wallace scholars who followed Bakhtin did the same. Particularly, we insist on a passage of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* where Bakhtin admits that there is a "*completedness*" and a "*conventionally monologic* ending" to Dostoevsky's works, only to then say that "we cannot go deeply into this difficult problem here" (*Problems* 39-40). We insist that this problem cannot be overlooked, and we propose a rereading whereby, in Dostoevsky and Wallace, monologism coexists with polyphony; or more precisely, polyphony is part and parcel of the monologic meaning these authors want to communicate. Thus, polyphony cannot be pure, it is an ideal worth pursuing but unreachable. In the second part of the chapter, we read Wallace's essay "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" (1996) as Wallace's own indirect criticism of Bakhtin's interpretation, exhibiting how Wallace himself sees Dostoevsky's monologism and finds in it the highest value.

In the third, we focus on showing that Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and Wallace are all united in existentialism. In this sense, we argue that if Wallace had known more about Bakhtin's work, he would have found in him great inspiration, because so many of his ideals (ontological, moral, and artistic) find their prior expression in Bakhtin, who in many senses anticipated Wittgenstein. We see that the peculiarity in the existentialism of Bakhtin, Dostoevsky, and Wallace is their insistence on the need of the Other for the Self. We submit that this makes the Existentialist Contradiction apparent in their works, which bestows high value upon them as revealers of a deep truth that would otherwise remain hidden. Dialogism

here is shown to be itself an existentialism, as can be seen not only in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* but also *Rabelais and his World* (1940), *Art and Answerability* (1919), and most of all in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1919-21).

In the final chapter, I finally give an exemplary reading of Wallace's fiction, a comparative interpretation of *The Pale King* with Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment,* along the critical lines here presented. The choice of these two novels as first examples finds its *raison d'être* in their most explicit monologic existentialism, which makes them ideal points of entry into our interpretation. My reading reveals the darkness of these works, and explains *why* they remain trapped in obscurity despite their clear positive intentionality. The analysis begins by clarifying both the superficial divergence between Dostoevsky's Christian Existentialism and Wallace's Secular Existentialism and the ultimate uniformity of their view: ultimately, Dostoevsky and Wallace offer the same existentialist redemption, one must freely choose to worship in order to free oneself from the annihilating power of unbearable suffering. Our reading aims to prove the impossibility of this existentialist redemption by unveiling the entrapment to which Dostoevsky's and Wallace's characters are destined. The first step in our investigation is to subvert the cause-effect relationship between loneliness and nihilism that Dostoevsky and Wallace attempt to establish in their works. Their argument is that loneliness leads to abstraction, which leads to nihilism. While this can of course be true, we want to show how and why there is a subversion in this cause-effect relationship in their works. This is indispensable to appreciate the true profundity of their characters: at their best, figures like Raskolnikov, Claude Sylvanshine, and Chris Fogle emerge as deep philosophical thinkers who, precisely in their existential paralysis, prove their ability to think Western rationality to its end. That is, with these characters, nihilism comes forth as the proper consequence of rational thinking. Raskolnikov explodes the hypocrisy of all rational defenses of compassion, caring, and value. Wallace's characters show that the feeling of the nothingness of all things is the fundamental origin of unbearable suffering. The root of these characters' suffering is always the same feeling: that I am worth nothing unless I manage to prove otherwise, that *I am nothing* unless I demonstrate othwerwise, that I do not deserve to live until I "justify my seed," as the mantra at the Enfield Tennis Academy in *Infinite Jest* recites. Wallace and Dostoevsky offer existentialism as the solution to the feeling of this nothingness, but we argue that this kind of salvation is impossible. In *The Pale King*, Claude Sylvanshine is bound to forever experience the "Total Terror and Disqualification" (*TPK* 26) that he seeks refuge from for exactly the same reasons that condemn Raskolnikov to

unbearable suffering. In the ontology of free will, there can be no escape from self-contempt, and as Leopardi writes in the *Zibaldone*, "there is perhaps nothing more conductive to suicide than self-contempt" (*Z* 74). Sylvanshine will never free himself from suicidal thoughts. Correspondingly, Chris Fogle too will not escape existential suffering. Sylvanshine and Fogle, like Neal in "Good Old Neon," share the same inability to impose order upon the flux of chaos, and so they are crushed by the feeling of being impostors. These feelings are inescapable in the ontology of free will, and *TPK* testifies to this entrapment. There is no escape from suffering even in *The Pale King*, the one fictional work that Wallace supposedly wanted to be prescriptive. The reasons of this all-comprehensive darkness appear clear and inevitable in our interpretation.

We conclude by indicating what the continuation of this work could be, and we do this through a final interpretation of the story of Lane Dean Jr., another character in *The Pale King*. Lane Dean's story is a story about the other's look as Sartre studies it in *Being and Nothingness*, with its subsequent danger of hell being other people. This danger is absolutely central in all of Wallace's work, and it too finds its fictional precedent in Dostoevsky (in *Notes from Underground*). In this final reading, we exhibit how the problem of the look belongs to technology, and thus to the ontology of free will. Once again, believing in free will and hoping to find reasons to escape the unbearable suffering of the other's look constitutes an Existentialist Contradiction. The story of Lane Dean Jr. represents how the fear of the other's look can generate unbearable suffering, how this fear can completely control one's life, how fear and love are mutually exclusive, and how fear is destined to win over love in technology. There is no redemption for Lane Dean either, in *The Pale King*. Redemption is impossible because, ultimately, Wallace could never have faith in grace, the one idea he felt could save us, but which he could never accept because of its intrinsic denial of free will.

Note to the Reader

This work is in progress. I hope to have justified and explained well enough why the sections that seem not to be directly related to Wallace are necessary, and that the significance of those sections manifests itself through the internal dialectics of the research. I apologize if there are deficiencies in form and tone and pray these won't compromise your engagement with the content of the work, as well as your willingness to engage in charitable interpretation.

There could have been more references to the secondary literature on Wallace; this does not mean I am not familiar with them, but I wanted to focus on the primary sources and the argument. Most of all, I regret that there isn't much more interpretation of Wallace's fiction here. In its present state, this study accomplishes the establishment of its premises, as well as the presentation of the first examples of how to read Wallace's fiction accordingly. I am nonetheless confident that these first examples demonstrate how promising such a line of inquiry is.

28

THE MEANING OF TECHNOLOGY

Emanuele Severino Contra Martin Heidegger
on the Meaning of Technology

What can oppose the decline of the west is not a resurrected culture
but the utopia silently contained in the image of its decline.
- Theodor Adorno, "Spengler after the Decline"

Introduction

Martin Heidegger and Emanuele Severino are arguably the two contemporary thinkers who, more than any other, have reflected upon the meaning of technology Their philosophies are irreconcilable, but they converge in recognizing that technoscience dominates our time. Their interpretation of this domination, though, is *itself* irreconcilable. and exploring this fundamental disagreement within their agreement (about the domination of technology) helps us understand the leading dynamics of our time. In "*L'etica della scienza*" ("The Ethics of Science," 1988), Severino writes that "ours is the time that has faith in the power of science" ("ES" 82),[6] and in "The Question Concerning Technology" (1954), Heidegger writes that technology is where "there is *danger* in the highest sense" ("QCT" 28). They, each in his own entirely distinct way, both insist that technoscience is the most coherent logical consequence of the entire history of Western metaphysics, and that this is why technoscience is the destiny of Western civilization: because Western civilization has been edified upon one fundamental ideology: "technology," i.e. the *lógos* of *téchne*, i.e. the idea that man is the technological (intelligent, powerful, free) being who is capable of supremacy over the things of the world, which themselves exist as available to his domination.

The concrete facts of our history originate in this fundamental ideology, which must

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[6] As of today, only one of Severino's books has been fully translated in English – *The Essence of Nihilism* (2016). All the citations from his works that appear in this dissertation are therefore our own translations. We always indicate the original title of the work and provide its translation in parenthesis. We present the citations directly in English, while their references point to their original location in the Italian editions. Accordingly, Severino's works are listed in the bibliography by their Italian title. This means that if the reader wants to confirm the accuracy of the translations for herself, she must go to their original source. This choice may seem controversial, but it was made to facilitate the reading, which would have been too taxing otherwise.

culminate in the advent of the age of technology as it frees itself from its historical contradictions. The *lógos* of *téchne* establishes the availability of the things of the world to human domination and man's ability to dominate them. This fundamental belief has always been our core faith. The birth of philosophy – which is the birth of Western rationality – is the beginning of man's attempt at a rational defense of this core faith. Technoscience is the most radical and coherent actualization of this core faith, and this is why Heidegger and Severino exhibit it as the culmination of Western philosophy and the destiny of our civilization.

The term "technoscience" indicates that the essence of science is technology, and in Heidegger and Severino "technology" means much more than the daily use we make of the term today, when we indicate the "machinery and equipment developed from the application of scientific knowledge" (*OED*). In its true essence, "technology" means the *lógos* of *téchne*, i.e. the logic and discourse of being able to dominate things, transform them, create and destroy them. Technology is "techno-logy": the discourse, logic, and rationality of *téchne*. Science is the concrete application of technology. The technological apparatus is the concrete consequence of technology and its concretization through science.

When Heidegger is translated into English, his German word "*technik*" becomes "technology." Severino himself uses the term "*tecnica*" which is the Italian equivalent of "*technik*." In their common usage, "*technik*" and "*tecnica*" indicate what in English is perhaps best translated with the term "technique": that is, "a way of carrying out a particular task" or "a way of carrying out the execution of a scientific procedure"; or also "skill or ability" or "a skillful or efficient way of doing something" (*OED*). Technique is a byproduct of technology. We believe in technique because we believe in technology. Technique is a way of dominating the things of the world. To truly understand technology, we must keep in mind its essential meaning: technology is the ideology of domination, and it permeates all the specific concretizations (and so also all techniques) of this ideology.

Thus, technology is the logic that leads human life and so all human actions. Technology is humankind's original relationship to Being. It is the belief that man's power to transform the world is unquestionable. It is the affirmation of the unquestionable evidence of *becoming*. Becoming is the theory that the things of the world waver between Being and Nothingness in their transformation. Becoming is what allows human domination. Without becoming, our organizing of means toward the realization of ends would be impossible, because the world would be static in necessity.

The origin of "technology" is the Ancient Greek word "*téchne*," which indicates every human activity geared toward production and operated through reason (*lógos*), and therefore every activity that entails the belief that man is transformative, creative, destructive, rational, and free. *Téchne* is production according to rational principles and is therefore the essence of "man" as he's always been understood. Therefore, within Western ideology, the advent of the age of technology is the true realization of true humanism (contrary to what we still claim in our daily discourse).

But both Heidegger and Severino centrally insist that *téchne* is the root of all violence (meaning also that "man" is the root of violence). Technology belongs to the essence of the violence that pervades our relationship to Being and therefore our entire history and all of our actions. This is why the history of Western metaphysics – as the history of technology and so of our civilization – is itself the history of violence.

Heidegger and Severino agree that technology is violence, but they offer opposite and irreconcilable interpretations of what the true essence of technology is. Heidegger indicates the letting-be of beings in their freedom as the possible solution to the danger of technology. Severino sees that the very idea of freedom already belongs to the essence of the violence of technology, and so he argues that Heidegger's own thought belongs to technology (i.e. to the violence of our civilization that Heidegger tried but failed to overcome). Confronting their philosophies will help us grasp the true meaning of technology, whether technology is actually violence, whether there's a way out of violence, and where this way out may lead. This will in turn illuminate the meaning of the Existentialist Contradiction in David Foster Wallace by indicating the sense of the inextricable relationship between unbearable suffering and freedom.

The meaning of Technology According to Emanuele Severino

In *Il destino della tecnica* (*The Destiny of Technology*, 1998), Severino analyzes contemporary civilization, starting off from the common knowledge that "today we commonly believe that scientific knowledge is the highest form of human knowledge (a conviction that itself expresses the dominating character of technology)" (*DT* 9). Severino thus unites science and technology from the beginning, but the unity he indicates is far more essential than that we commonly acknowledge. That we think of science as the highest form of human knowledge

is one of the consequences of the realization of the *lógos* of *téchne* in our civilization. Science is the means by which technology brings forth its age. In this sense, Severino writes in *La tendenza fondamentale del nostro tempo* (*The Fundamental Tendency of Our Time*, 1988) that "by means of technology, scientific prediction by now guides the entire existence of man on earth" ("*TF* 179).

Technology by now dominates our civilization, in the sense that we all now think of ourselves as the dominators of our environment and live accordingly. This is the thought that scientific rationality expresses. The fundamental tendency of our time is to develop human civilization along the lines dictated by technology. The age of technology will be the time when what we think of ourselves and the world will finally, truly, fully cohere with what we do. Technology has always been humanity's most fundamental belief, establishing that human beings can dominate the things of the world, which are in turn available for domination. The age of technology will be the time when we'll take this thought to its end, without remorse.

But in many senses the age of technology is here already and has always been here. The *lógos* of *téchne* is the foundation of our relationship with the world ever since the dawn of human thought. Yet, the most salient event in the history of technology is the birth of philosophy, by which the West begins his *rational* defense of technology to establish its Truth. Western rationality establishes itself as the argument of technology, and it founds Western civilization, which is now global civilization. Severino shows that technology is "a Greek faith," because the Greeks were the first to establish its rationality and so its Right to lead our relationship with Being. He writes that "it is on the foundation of this Greek faith that, for the first time, 'man' comes to light as he is understood by Western culture, i.e. as the fundamental origin of action, i.e. of production and destruction" (ibid. 16).

In Ancient Greece, man is for the first time rationally theorized as a technological being who is capable of exerting will and power over the things of the world, and so can decide and act upon them, transforming, producing, and destroying them. This means that in Ancient Greece man is for the first time theorized as a techno-scientific being whose true fulfilment is the techno-scientific domination of the world. Essential to this interpretation of reality is the postulation of the original ontological opposition between Being and Nothingness, which allows for the coming to life of the thought of *Becoming*, and so of the ideas of birth and death, creation and destruction, decision and action, transformation and domination. Only by *inventing* nothingness could we come to think that things are available

to our domination, because only if nothingness is true can transformation, creation, destruction, birth, and death be true. All this can *be* only if all the things of the world (ourselves included) waver between being and nothingness. This is why in *Téchne: le radici della violenza* (*Téchne: The Roots of Violence*, 2002) Severino writes that

> The technological project of unlimited production-destruction of things necessitates that the "thing" be an absolute availability to being-produced and being-destroyed. In this project, the "thing" does not present itself as available up to a certain point, beyond which it refuses to let itself be handled, but as entirely available. And indeed, for the first time in human history, Greek metaphysics has brought to light the meaning of this absolute availability of the "thing" precisely when it tied the meaning of the "thing" to *being* and *nothingness* (*T* 222).

The meaning of "thing" already contains the essence of all violence and domination. Technology establishes that the things of the world are at man's disposal. They therefore have no meaning in themselves except their availability. Their meaning is their being-tools, and so human beings have the right to use them and manipulate them according to their will. Therefore, human beings can choose to assign to things the meaning they want in accordance with their project. This is what in modern Existentialism is called *constructing* the meaning of the world. Everyone can recognize that this thought expresses today's common sense: that the universe and its things have no meaning in themselves and that human beings construct their meaning. Thus, the meaning of a hurricane is the danger it brings. The meaning of wind is the energy it provides. The meaning of another human being is the joy or despair he or she brings in your life (human beings are dominators, but they're also dominated things).

In technology the things of the world become meaningful in their service to humanity's project. But the project is never actually humanity's: it is always a specific individual's. I am entitled to using the world as I see fit, in accordance with my will. By dominating the world, I treat it according to its nature, since its nature is to be available to my domination. There's the problem of the other's freedom. This needs solving. But certainly there's no problem of the plant's, the wind's, or anything else's freedom. The true realization of technology comes when civilization recognizes that no limitations can be applied to domination, i.e. that all limitations are unjust, that traditional ethics is unjust. All limitations

must be overcome, because the only truth is that the world is available to domination, and there is no other Absolute (no God) that can impose limits on this domination. There's thus also no reason to limit a specific individual's domination over things and other individuals (who are also themselves things). The ethics of technology is already the ethics of our civilization, except we tend not to realize it. And the ethics of technology establishes that power is good and the good is power: in technology, power and the good are one and the same.

But power is violence, because it constitutes itself as the domination of the thing (which is thus not let-be in its nature) and as the weakening of both things and other human beings. Power is a social construct that needs witnessing. There are no masters without slaves, and no mastering without the mastered. The availability of the thing is the necessary precondition for the existence of "man" and "life" as we know them. The birth of Western ontology is the birth of rationality and it establishes this necessary precondition of the availability of the thing. Severino writes that "at the core of the will […] to produce and destroy resides the *faith* that the world is historical, temporal, becoming, i.e. that reality is a continuous coming out of nothingness and returning to nothingness. One can want to dominate the world – that is, to control the power to produce and destroy it – only if first of all one wants the subduable to exist, i.e. only if one has faith that the subduable exists" (*TF* 16).

The origin of all violence is therefore our belief in becoming. And becoming is the most fundamental belief of technology. Becoming establishes that things waver between being and nothingness and are therefore available to human domination. Western rationality is the argument for this belief. To practice techno-science without limitations is to respect Greek metaphysics to the fullest. Pure domination is the highest respect of metaphysics and the realization of true humanism. To dominate is to assume responsibility for the power we're endowed with. Our ability to control, transform, and dominate is the essence of power. As technological beings, therefore, our moral obligation is to infinitely increase our power, because this means truly realizing our essence.

Power is quite simply "the ability or capacity to do something or act in a particular way" (*OED*). It is "the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events" (*OED*). Power is the essence of every decision and action, of every organization of means toward the realization of ends. If technology is the true interpretation of the world, then we must recognize that power is our moral obligation. If technology is

true, power is the good. And if technology is true, then our civilization must pursue power in itself. These are the true ethics of technology and techno-science—technology's most powerful concretization. The pursuit of indefinite power is the realization of mankind, and movement toward this end constitutes the entire history of our civilization. In *Téchne: The Roots of Violence*, Severino writes that

> The history of the West is the progressive seizing of things; that is, the progressive exploitation of their absolute availability and of their infinite oscillation between being and nothingness. The technological project of unlimited production-destruction of all things dissolves every limitation regarding that availability and, therefore, within it endures the celebration of the triumph of metaphysics" (*T* 222-3).

The ethos of our civilization is the ethos of power. Nietzsche and Leopardi stand at the culmination of our civilization because they know what we'll come to fully understand only in time: that our fundamental beliefs *entail* that there can be no truth nor meaning besides *becoming*, no morality nor sense of the world besides domination, separation, isolation, and nothingness. The universe is inherently meaningless, and Existentialism doesn't realize that therefore even man's arbitrary creation of meaning must be meaningless. Leopardi is actually the only true angel of death, because he knows the final truth of technology, that "all is nothing" (*Zibaldone* 85), and so abandons the hope that still remains latent even in Nietzsche.[7]

The world is a juxtaposition of meaningless things whose only meaning is their availability to mankind's meaningless projects. Every single one of these meaningless things is destined to annihilation. This is the final Truth of technology: the only Truth of becoming is that there is no Truth except becoming itself, and so fragmentation and final annihilation. Becoming is incompatible with all Gods and therefore all Absolutes. This means that it is incompatible with all the ethics and morality of our history. And since becoming *is* and has always been our most fundamental belief (what everyone has always agreed upon), then it is destined to overcome all Gods. The exhibition of this truth is Nietzsche's immeasurable

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[7] This is why Severino dedicates three works to the genius of Leopardi, entitled *Il nulla e la poesia: alla fine dell'età della tecnica, Leopardi* (*Nothingness and Poetry: At the End of the Age of Technology, Leopardi*, 1990), *Cosa arcana e stupenda: l'occidente e Leopardi* (*Mysterious and Wonderful Thing: The West and Leopardi*, 1997), *In viaggio con Leopardi: la partita sul destino dell'uomo* (*On the Road with Leopardi: The Final Match on the Fate of Mankind*, 2015)

contribution to our civilization.

Since becoming is true, then man is a technological being and no moral absolute can limit man's will and power. There is no Truth, no God, no Law that can limit man's desire to create and destroy. The infinite pursuit of power is thus justified, that is, considered right and the belief in limitation becomes wrong. This is what Nietzsche metaphorically expresses in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-5) when Zarathustra says "But to reveal my entire heart to you, my friends: *if* there were gods, how could I stand not to be a god! *Therefore* there are no gods (*TSZ* 65), and "Away from God and gods this will lured me; what would there be to create, after all, if there were gods?" (ibid. 67).

What would there be to create, if there were gods? Nothing. Because every creation would be dominated by the gods. But we do create. This is the unquestionable evidence of technology. Therefore there are no gods. If there were a God (an Absolute Truth, a Principle of Necessity), then this God would establish the Eternal Law to which all Being is subject. God could never be surprised by any worldly outcome, because every worldly outcome would come into Being in accordance with the Eternal Law of God. Therefore, under the Necessity of God, there would be no open space for becoming, contingency, freedom, decision, action, creation, and destruction. God leaves no space for individual action (despite what great myths say), Yet, we all believe that our individual action is the unquestionable truth of reality. Therefore, since the truth of the *lógos* of *téchne* is unquestionable, there can be no God. There can be no God because freedom, decision, and action are real.

Coherently thought, technology entails the fall of every Absolute. Severino insists that our civilization is now in a time of transition: we still haven't realized this truth of illimitation, but we've begun to leave behind the Absolutes of our traditions. In due time, the age of technology will come and our actions will truly cohere with our fundamental beliefs. There can be no Moral Law without a God that imposes the Right of the prohibition. Without a Law that is beyond and above humanity, there are no actions that are violent, deplorable, or condemnable. If it is all within us, then we can do whatever we want and choose to do. Violence is to do what is prohibited, to exceed limitations. But if there are no prohibitions and limitations then there can be no violence. Everything is permitted, as Dostoevsky's nihilists would say. *This* is the ethics of technology, which brings forth the project of the techno-scientific production-destruction of all the things of the world. This is the ethics toward which our civilization is moving. In *Téchne* (2013), Severino writes that

technology is "the last God," just as God was "the first technician." Whereas ethics used to ally itself with God because God was the most powerful power, now that technology presents itself as the most powerful power, ethics cannot but ally itself with technology. And one can imagine what this alliance will mean, what events will unfold, in all contexts: moral, political, bioethical, etc. The old ethics will be surpassed by the new ethics, where *the* value will be to espouse – as far as possible, and with the greatest coherence –, through law and custom, the only real reigning criterion: the limitless increase of power" (*T* 22-3).

As technological beings we seek to increase our power to dominate the world. This is why "the fundamental tendency now underway on earth is the transition from the ideological organization of existence to the technological organization of existence, in the sense that the progressive reduction of the ideological obstructions to scientific rationality is an observable, and by now amply observed, phenomenon," as Severino writes in "*La tendenza fondamentale del nostro tempo e il senso del futuro*" ("The Fundamental Tendency of Our Time and the Meaning of the Future," 1988, p. 52).

In the age of technology, technology is destined to become the new God, also in the sense that man will give himself up to Its will. Severino indicates the process whereby this overturning occurs in *Nascere: e altri problemi della coscienza religiosa* (*Being Born: And Other Problems of Religious Conscience*, 2005), when he writes that "Today man appeals to technology for salvation. When he turns to the savior – God or technology –, man's goal is his own salvation, and he uses the savior as the means. But then man realizes that, if the savior is only a means that man owns, then the savior is weak, because the weakness of the person who wants to be saved is reflected upon him. In that moment, man assumes as his new end the power of the savior himself, and thus man's will becomes subordinate to the desire that the will of the savior be done. This will cannot be the will of God anymore. It can only be the will of technology" (*N* 263).

Our contemporary denigration of the term "ideology" is itself a symptom of the advent of the age of technology and of our leaving behind traditional ethics. The original meaning of "ideology" is simply "a system of ideas and ideals" (*OED*). The term originates as the unification of the Greek *idéa* and *lógos* (ideo-logy), in the sense of "the speech, discourse, reasoning" (*lógos*) regarding "the form, notion, pattern one sees (*idéa*)." "Ideology" is the set of ideas by which someone relates to existence. In this sense, ideology is essential

to life. No human being can live without ideology. In *Oltre il linguaggio* (*Beyond Language*, 1992), Severino writes that "language reveals the meaning that man confers to the world" (*OL* 59). And if this is so, then, the fact that today "ideology" is given pejorative connotations which equate it with unfounded belief, fanaticism, doctrine, and dogma, in opposition to techno-scientific rationality, speaks precisely of the domination of technology on our time.[8]

About "ideology," Severino writes "by now with this term we indicate every human behavior that diverges, more or less significantly, from techno-scientific rationality ("FTTMF" 41). Our linguistic behavior speaks of our technological ethos. Technology has established its dominion on our civilization so firmly that it now presents itself to us as if it were not an ideology, i.e. as if it were *above* ideology. But technology can present itself as neutral (i.e. as the unquestionable, non-ideological truth) only because it is the ideology that we all believe in. But this doesn't change the fact that it *is* an ideology, a system of ideas, a theory of reality that *could* be wrong and that *can* be put into question.

The fall of ideology is the fall of God. It is the fall of absolute Truth and of all thoughts beside pure technology. It is the affirmation of the reality of becoming. It is the fall of all traditional morality and the affirmation of power. It is the fall of Islam, Communism, Monarchy, and Nazism, and also of Christianity, Capitalism, Democracy, Free Speech, and Human Rights.[9] In "The Ethics of Science," Severino writes that "the ethics that inheres in

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[8] Karl Marx may be the strongest voice to give rise to this pejorative connotation of "ideology." This coheres with Marx's being one of the strongest contemporary voices of technology, with his insistence on automation and production. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* testifies to this with its entry on "ideology," indicating that the term is now "generally a disparaging term used to describe someone else's political views which one regards as unsound. This use derives from Marx's employment of the term to signify a false consciousness shared by the members of a particular social class" (*CDP* 360). On the other hand, the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*'s definition of the term is purely technological: "ideology: any wide-ranging system of beliefs, ways of thought, and categories that provide the foundation of programmes of political and social action: an ideology is a conceptual scheme with a practical application. Derogatorily, another person's ideology may be thought of as spectacles that distort and disguise the real status quo. Promises that political philosophy and morality can be freed from ideology are apt to be vain, since allegedly cleansed and pure programmes depend, for instance, upon particular views of human nature, what counts as human flourishing, and the conditions under which it is found" (*ODP* 178). The agenda, partiality, and self-interest that the *ODP* attributes to "ideology" imply the purity of the rationality of science, seen as the only objective human practice. This is a pure affirmation of technology.

[9] "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" establishes that "everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person" and that "all are equal before the law…." These rights are *postulates* founded upon a certain

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science – the will to ever more power – is imposing itself on all other ethical forces" ("ES" 71). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche adds that "in order for the creator to be, suffering is needed and much transformation" (*TSZ* 66). We want to create, but creation needs destruction. The freeing of technology is the freeing of creation, and it entails the freeing of destruction and the suffering that's related to it. In the name of the power to create, everything else must be sacrificed. *This* is the ethics of technology. In *Téchne*, Severino specifies that the essence of technology is the "'the will to strengthen, infinitely and unconditionally, the capacity to realize ends.' 'Capacity to realize ends' means capacity to bridge the gaps, solve problems, eliminate needs" (*T* 15).

"Capacity" means "the ability or power to do something" (*OED*), and so it is a synonym of "power." To say that the ethos of technology is power is to say that the ethos of technology is to realize ever more ends, to solve ever more problems. It is our goal as a civilization to solve ever more problems. And the individuals we value are those who solve these problems. But to achieve the power to solve ever more problems, we must get rid of all limitations, and these limitations are what we call ethics. Human rights and respect for the other are two of these kinds of limitations.

In this sense, Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) already saw the essence of technology in its analysis of the state of nature. For Hobbes too, technology is the unquestionable truth, and his analysis of the state of nature is the necessary development of this fundamental belief. In the state of nature, mankind has the "right to everything" (*ius in omnia*). In the sense, though, that *each individual* has the right to everything (*ius omnium in omnia*). And this truth entails that life be "the war of all against all" (*bellum omnium contra omnes*), because where everyone has the right to everything what determines who gets what is the power of individuals. In the war of all against all, violence and suffering are pervasive, as every individual exerts power to dominate over as much as he can, to exert his right to everything as much as he can.

This is the ethics of technology, because even just to solve as many problems as you can you must dominate as much as you can. And of course, the problems that you want to

theory of being that is an ideology. That "everyone has the right" and that "all are equal before the law" are ideological postulates. That "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood" is a claim that hides an entire ontology. The Declaration depends on the belief in the absolute Truths of Equality and Dignity for All. To leave behind absolute Truth and ideology is to live behind human rights.

solve are the problems that *you* want to solve. This is why the end of technology, as Severino writes in *Téchne* (2013), is "one unique end: the indeterminate strengthening of power. *Without any limitation* (*T* 16): because "technology wants to infinitely strengthen the power of man, i.e. to eliminate every state of scarcity, shortage, deficiency, poverty, destitution" (ibid.). The fundamental tendency of our time is to come to grips with the truth of technology by leaving behind the contradictions that technology itself instantiated in our traditional ideologies and their ethics. To realize this new freedom, we must pursue our concrete alliance with the ethos of power. In this process, the role of science is to provide the means to achieve the ends of technology. It is in "The Ethics of Science" that Severino explains this most clearly:

> The ethics intrinsic to science is indeed science's will to realize the supreme end that science possesses *in and of itself: that is, the infinite increase* of its own power, the capacity to realize ever wider and differentiated sets of ends. Precisely because the Apparatus wants to dominate reality, in principle it sees no inviolable boundary to power and domination. No level of power is final and insurmountable. And if the supreme end of the Apparatus is the overcoming of every limitation, i.e. the infinite growth of its own power, then the Apparatus is bound only to its need to be the supreme form of the will to power; that is, to its will to sever every limitation (ibid. 71).

Téchne is the root of violence. Technology entails domination and suffering. Techno-scientific rationality enacts this ethos in the most coherent and powerful way. At the end of this ethos, all ethical limitations must fall, the war of all against all must ensue, and power becomes god. We still lie to ourselves about the pervasiveness of violence and suffering in our thoughts and actions. But violence and suffering are everywhere, because technology reigns everywhere. To close, in *Il muro di pietra* (*The Stone Wall*, 2005) Severino looks at our future:

> the philosophy of our time opens and paves the way to technology. If every truth and every God that aspire to tower over becoming are impossible, then man's acting – and first and foremost that extreme form of acting that is technology – cannot be submitted to any limitations anymore. To technology – to which belongs the supreme capacity to bring into being what was nothingness and to lead back into nothingness what is – we also entrust the task of establishing what

must come into being and what must remain in nothingness, what deserves being and what doesn't. Thought and technology can thus arouse in man a sense of liberation and a form of enthusiasm never before felt. Said liberation and enthusiasm, though, are salvific formations that conceal the underground fire of anguish, which is destined to shatter them sooner or later. This is because, in the end, the meaning of the world that comes to light with technology is that everything and every state of the world, and therefore every human being, are all ephemeral events that emerge without reason from nothingness and which are destined to return to nothingness. In the end – of every life, of every conquest of the world, of every development of man, of all pleasures and of happiness –, nothingness (*MP* 26-7).

The Meaning of Technology According to Martin Heidegger

In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger postulates that man is *Dasein*, the only being who is conscious of existence and its meaning, and so the only being who can give meaning to the things in the world. *Dasein* is the being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) whose existence comprises relation to the things of the world. This relation grants ontological priority to *Dasein*, who therefore establishes the meaning of everything else. This is why *Dasein* alone *exists* and everything else *is*. Within the meaningfulness that *Dasein* constructs, though, most of the time, existence constitutes itself as inauthentic, and everything is interpreted as present-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) and ready-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*).

But it's nonetheless true that *Dasein* is, in his fundamental essence: contingency, possibility, project. *Dasein* is the being who always lives in relation to his essential possibility. He is always designing, planning, creating, destroying. "Da-sein always understands itself in terms of its existence, in terms of its possibility to be itself or not to be itself" (*B&T* 10). Human existence is a project, and it is only within the projects of *Dasein* that the things of the world acquire the meaning that *Dasein* bestows upon them. Man is a being among beings, but he's the being who can decide and so choose itself. Man is the being who possesses consciousness and so creates meaning. Existence is always a *can be*, always possibility, and therefore *Dasein* is history, temporality, becoming: an *ex-sistere* that is a constant bringing oneself out of oneself, a transcending that always moves beyond what one is, toward

something that is not yet real but is always possible and radically new.

The life of *Dasein* is therefore a self-project of which *Dasein* creates the meaning through his designs. *Dasein* can choose to live authentically or inauthentically. He can choose to conquer himself or he can lose himself. Authentic existence is the ability to choose oneself, conquer oneself, realize oneself in one's historical becoming. This is what Heidegger calls the ability to exist as an opening to Being. This means that authentic existence is always the existence of an *individual* who is responsible for choosing himself. Inauthentic existence, on the contrary, is where *Dasein* loses himself and the things of the world appear to him only as tools. This is why *Dasein* intends things as "objects" and therefore as *scientific* objects. In inauthentic existence, the universe appears meaninglessness-in-itself except for its being a tool-for-domination.

Dasein lives the vast majority of his existence in inauthenticity. And yet *Dasein* is always responsible for choosing himself, and so for choosing authenticity and assigning meaning to the world. In this picture, though, the world remains *subordinate* to the project of *Dasein* (this construction of the meaning of the world is the essence of Existentialism). But what remains unexplained is why Heidegger's "authenticity" should be any more authentic than the inauthenticity he finds fault in. Within Heidegger's Existential analytic, authenticity too is a project, and therefore it too must necessarily treat things as *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit*, because the existence of things as such is the necessary precondition for their being-available to the projectuality of *Dasein*. Authentic existence too, then, appears to constitute itself as the objectification and domination of the things of the world within the project of *Dasein*. How is Heidegger's existential analytic, then, not itself a mode of inauthenticity? Isn't Heidegger's fundamental philosophy itself technological? Isn't *Dasein* a being who organizes means to realize ends?

After *Being and Time*, Heidegger's thought begins to set aside the analysis of the existential analytic in order to focus on the proper understanding of the meaning of the history of metaphysics. But the turn in his thought is still directly connected to its origins. Heidegger himself said as much in his "Letter on Humanism" (1947), writing that "the turn" (*die Kehre*) in his thought "is not a change of standpoint from *Being and Time*" ("LH" 232). As we've seen, *Being and Time* does analyze the two basic modes of the inauthentic existence of *Dasein*: to see the things of the world either as objective simple-presence (*Vorhandenheit*) – and this is, e.g., the fundamental form of being-in-the-world of the scientist – and as ready-to-hand

(*Zuhandenheit*); that is, as a tool-for-something and therefore as available to human domination – this is, e.g., the essence of all work.

Therefore, ever since he begins philosophizing, Heidegger defines the "thing" as inert *res*, simple-presence, and tool-available-for-domination. It's unclear to what extent Heidegger himself thinks that this is the meaning of the "thing" or whether he just recognizes that human beings have always given this meaning to the "thing" and have treated the "thing" accordingly. Whether these definitions in *Being and Time* amount to a criticism (after all, these are defined as modes of inauthentic existence) remains ambiguous, both because Heidegger generally refuses to criticize any form of being-in-the-world, and most importantly because Heidegger himself conceptualizes *Dasein* as a being-in-the-world whose essence is his opening toward the potentiality-for-being and projectuality.

Further doubt arises, then, because projectuality necessarily needs to treat things as simple-presences available to domination, and so as we've seen, all projectuality belongs to technology. Heidegger's philosophy is ambiguous from the beginning, because even when it seems to explicitly criticize technology, its fundamental beliefs remain technological. When Heidegger shifts his focus onto the essence of the history of metaphysics, which he regards as unchanged from Parmenides to Nietzsche (included), he begins to analyze the history of the oblivion of the ontological difference between "being" and "Being", by which Western civilization has treated *everything* as a "thing" (*res*), a simple-presence before us, available as a tool-for-domination.

We've always interpreted Being as an object (*ob-jectum*), separate from, and seen by, consciousness. From this ancient dualism, modern thought has produced the idea of the subject. Now the subject is no longer conceived as a simple substratum (*hypokeimenon, sub-stantia, sub-jectum*) but as the knowing and thinking I (*ego cogitans*): the subjective consciousness to which the world appears. The subject thus becomes the foundation of truth, because it is the only place where the truth can manifest itself—because his is the consciousness that allows manifestation. Ever since Descartes, *my* ego is the only certainty. The result of the history of metaphysics is this opposition between subject and object, within which "truth" becomes the conformity between language, thought, and being (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*).

For Heidegger, the origin of this mistake is the oblivion of the ontological difference, which entails the oblivion of Being. This forgetting is what Heidegger calls nihilism. The result is the treatment of the world as object, which entails the domination of technology. In the writings of the 1930s, Heidegger focuses on the history of metaphysics by concentrating

on the Ancient Greeks and on the modern figures of Descartes, Leibniz, and Nietzsche, and through these analyses he comes to his explicit concern with the advent of the domination of technology over the world in the writings of the '50s.

It's in these late years that Heidegger finally comes to see the advent of the age of technology as the time when Being is finally, coherently comprehended (in the framework of the error of Western metaphysics) as the instrument that must be subordinated to the will of the subject. In the world of technology, thought itself is a means to the project of the domination of Being (just think of how we measure IQ today). *This* is what Heidegger sees as the greatest danger. The response, for him, must come from a radical rejection of the metaphysics that govern our civilization.

In "The Question Concerning Technology" (1954), Heidegger begins by analyzing the two historical meanings of "technology":

> One says: Technology is a means to an end. The other says: Technology is a human activity. The two definitions of technology belong together. For to posit ends and procure and utilize the means to them is a human activity. The manufacture and utilization of equipment, tools, and machines, the manufactured and used things themselves, and the needs and ends that they serve, all belong to what technology is. The whole complex of these contrivances is technology. Technology itself is a contrivance, or, in Latin, an *instrumentum* ("QT" 4-5).

Clearly, he agrees with Severino that technology is to utilize means toward the realization of ends and that technology belongs to the essence of humanity. Heidegger sees in the Latin *instrumentum* the simultaneous presence of the two meanings of technology: technology as tool and equipment and technology as the activity of positing ends and utilizing means in order to achieve them. This latter meaning implies that technology is every human activity. Therefore, man is essentially a technological being. This is the truth according to the entire history of Western metaphysics, which Heidegger calls the history of violence precisely for this reason. But the problem remains: Heidegger himself, ever since the existential analytic of *Being and Time*, defines man as the technological being *par excellence*, and therefore he too belongs to the history of violence.

This ambiguity resides in the fact that while Heidegger's Existential analytic aligns with technology, Heidegger's later works realize (more and more as time goes on) that the history of Western metaphysics is the history of technology and the history of violence. That is: in a sense, Heidegger knows that Western thought, technology, and violence are one and the same, and yet he doesn't seem to realize that his own existential analytic belongs to technology. This essential ambiguity explains why Heidegger calls the history of metaphysics the history of violence but is never ready to actually condemn metaphysics, why he calls technology the greatest danger but also the solution to the danger, why he seems to lead to the refusal of God only to finally state—in his famous interview with *Der Spiegel* which appeared five days after his death: "*Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten*": "Only a God can save us."

In short, Heidegger's essential ambiguity explains his infinite wavering between opposite positions, his unwillingness to express definitive thoughts, and the actual contradictions that end up pervading his thinking. Heidegger's late realization that the entire history of Western metaphysics constitutes the foundation of the essence of technology and violence should entail a fierce and final condemnation of metaphysics, technology, and of *Being and Time* as well. And yet it never does, even when after *Die Kehre* Heidegger becomes really concerned with technology.

This concern begins with *Nietzsche*, the collection of texts written between 1936 and 1946 where Heidegger defines Nietzsche's will to power as the necessary culmination of metaphysics and as the essence of technology, which becomes concrete in the history of Western civilization and its will to domination and violence. The framework of this collection determines all of Heidegger's later writings. What Heidegger will say on science, technology, and the "thing" follows from his interpretation of the history of metaphysics as the history of technology and violence, where the essential origin of violence is mankind's original interpretation of the "thing" as that which is available for domination—an interpretation which in today's world of techno-scientific rationality only begins to manifest its concrete consequences.

In "The Thing" (1950), Heidegger calls attention precisely to the interpretation of the thing as the origin of violence. He begins with a rhetorical move of great impact by focusing on what's entirely concrete and contemporary: the atom bomb and the trauma of World War II. Yet, he immediately warns the audience that what's entirely concrete and contemporary is in truth abstract, theoretical, and ancient to the core. We do not realize it

but matters of life and death are matters of Greek metaphysics: "Man stares at what the explosion of the atom bomb could bring with it. He does not see that the atom bomb and its explosion are the mere final emission of what has long since taken place, has already happened" ("Thing" 164).

The violence that becomes concrete today has begun at the dawn of rationality. What has long since taken place is the annihilation of the things of the world. Western metaphysics is the annihilation of the thing. Technology is the annihilation of the thing. The *lógos* of *téchne* has always been humanity's most fundamental belief, and it establishes that things are available to human domination and remain meaningless-in-themselves. Things are tools for man, this is their meaning. This meaning is the annihilation of the thing, because it treats the thing as nothing in-itself. The thing-in-itself is nothing and it means nothing.

This is why the atom bomb has exploded thousands of years ago. This is why Heidegger says that in our civilization "the thingness of the thing remains concealed, forgotten" (ibid. 168). Technology has killed things when it started to relate to them as slaves to the master. That is, ever since the dawn of man. Techno-scientific rationality is only the culmination of the domination of the *lógos* of *téchne* over being. The explosion of the atom bomb is nothing but the mere final emission of technology. And in fact today we know that the atom bomb may be nothing in comparison to what we'll witness in the future.

What happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki is only one of the necessary concrete consequences of our ancient interpretation of the world. Science is only the means by which the *lógos* of *téchne* establishes its concrete dominion over being today. Techno-scientific rationality realizes the truth of Western metaphysics. Therefore, techno-scientific rationality realizes the culmination of violence. In this sense, Heidegger writes that "science's knowledge [...] already had annihilated things as things long before the atom bomb exploded. The bomb's explosion is only the grossest of all gross confirmations of the long-since-accomplished annihilation of the thing: the confirmation that the thing as a thing remains nil" (ibid.). Technology annihilates things and science is its most powerful means. Our civilization is moving toward the advent of the pure concretization of technology, and that will be the time when violence reigns entirely free. Violence over all of Being. The pure reign of the will to power.

In "The Question Concerning Technology" (1954), to which we now go back, Heidegger reiterates the essential thought he expressed in "The Thing." Here's where he writes that "the essence of technology [...] is the danger" ("QCT" 28). This means, again,

that the real original danger lies within the original interpretation of Being established by the metaphysics of the *lógos* of *téchne*. All of the single violent outcomes we decry in our daily lives are nothing but the necessary consequences of the ethos *we all* contribute to, which construes reality as the scene that is available to mankind's technological domination.

The essay's other famous line — "where Enframing reigns, there is *danger* in the highest sense" (ibid.)— too must be understood in relation to Heidegger's exploration of the consequences of the history of metaphysics. "Enframing" (*Gestell*) belongs to the essence of the will, of willful thought and action, in accordance with technology. Enframing belongs to the essence of technology. All of our technological actions Enframe the things of the world: this means that in controlling things in order to use them as means toward the realization of our ends we choke them up, we impede their freedom, we take their lives away from them and Enframe them in the function we want them to have for us. Enframing is our technological desire to set upon things, secure things, make things *objects* and thus tools-for-use. In Enframing we interpret things as *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit*. Enframing is the relationship to Being enacted by "man," the technological being *par excellence*. Enframing is "the *danger*."

This is why Heidegger writes that "the threat to man does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology. The actual threat has already affected man in his essence" (ibid.). Because the *danger* resides, and has always resided, within the heart of man, because technology is the essence of man, and therefore *man is the greatest danger*—as Sophocles said in *Antigone* long before Heidegger: man is *to deinotaton*, the most violent being. And science is the most powerful means by which man enacts the *danger*; that is, his violence; that is, his essence.

Techno-scientific rationality is the concretization of Enframing. In "Science and Reflection" (1954), Heidegger writes that "science sets upon the real. It orders it into place to the end that at any given time the real will exhibit itself as an interacting network, i.e., in surveyable series of related causes. The real thus becomes surveyable and capable of being followed out in its sequences. The real becomes secured in its objectness. From this there result spheres or areas of objects that scientific observation can entrap after its fashion" ("SR" 167-8).

Science Enframes, and in so doing it objectifies the real and makes it available to the techno-scientific project of surveillance, control, ordering, and securing. Science is therefore the means of technology, and it truly realizes the essence of "man": that is, the technological

project of the domination of being. Thus, science actualizes man's will to dominate over the things of the world, and in this sense Heidegger often quotes Max Planck (theoretical physicist, Nobel Prize winner) to prove his point: "an oft-cited statement of Max Planck reads: 'That is real which can be measured'" (ibid. 169).

Science treats reality as measurable and controllable, transformable and dominatable. Techno-science is the concretization of technology and therefore of metaphysics, which means that it is the culmination of the ancient annihilation of the thing and the oblivion of Being. It is within the technological interpretation of the world that the annihilation of the thing, the advent of the age of technology, the dominion of violence on existence, and the essential equation of life and the will to power are necessary consequences, together with the delusions that science is the highest form of knowledge and that science knows the truth. About these delusions and the annihilation of the thing, Heidegger writes:

> That annihilation is so weird because it carries before it a twofold delusion: first, the notion that science is superior to all other experience in reaching the real in its reality, and second, the illusion that, notwithstanding the scientific investigation of reality, things could still be things, which would presuppose that they had once been in full possession of their thinghood. But if things ever had already shown themselves *qua* things in their thingness, then the thing's thingness would have become manifest and would have laid claim to thought. In truth, however, the thing as thing remains proscribed, nil, and in that sense annihilated. This has happened and continues to happen so essentially that not only are things no longer admitted as things, but they have never yet at all been able to appear to thinking as things (ibid.).

After "*die Kehre*," Heidegger's philosophy unveils some of the necessary consequences of technology: the reign of the will to power and the annihilation of the thing, pursued to maintain the idea that man is a technological being who organizes means toward the pursuit of ends, and who therefore has power over the world and can decide over the world. The *lógos* of *téchne* entails domination, power, and violence, realized through science. The future of human civilization is the age of technology, when the explicit ethos of humanity will fully cohere with the *lógos* of *téchne* and establish that indefinite power is the ultimate good, without any limitations.

The will to power is the will to organize means toward the realization of ends, the will to create and destruct, the will to assign to the things of the world their meaning in accordance with a given project. Techno-scientific rationality is the most powerful manifestation of the will to power. It's the most coherent consequence of the history of metaphysics and of our most fundamental beliefs. The advent of the age of technology and its unbounded exploitation of things is the concrete realization of the truest essence of "man." This is why the history of the West is the history of violence. Our future awaits the pure enactment of the will to power on a global scale, namely, global Enframing and cognitive and operational supremacy over everything. This is what our civilization dreams of. What we value most of all is still the annihilation of the thing. Sophocles saw the truth, and Heidegger clearly agrees with Severino, in this respect.

Heidegger's Contradiction

Similarly to Severino, Heidegger unveils how technology, the entire history of metaphysics, and the will to power are one and the same. But Heidegger's thinking on technology is ambiguous to the core: he sees in technology both the *danger* and the saving power. This is the sense of his continuous citing Hölderlin's poem "Patmos (For the Landgrave of Homburg)" (1803): "*But where the danger is, grows / The saving power also.*"[10]

Severino sees that Heidegger envisions a salvific relationship to technology *because he cannot envision a humanity whose essence is not technology*; that is, since Heidegger cannot imagine any other truth but technology, he is forced to hope that there may be salvation in technology. This is the source of his ultimate contradiction. For Heidegger, man is *Dasein* and *Dasein* is a technological being. Therefore, for Heidegger *man is téchne*, and this traps him into either recognizing that there's no hope for salvation or hoping that there can be salvation in *téchne*. But Heidegger himself knows that *téchne* is the essence of the will to power and violence. He's then trapped into looking for salvation from violence in violence, stuck in

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[10] From Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology," p. 28, emphasis in the original. Alternative translations of the poem's passage are "But where the danger threatens / That which saves from it also grows" (trans. by M. Hamburger: Continuum, 1990; p. 245), and "But where there is danger some / Salvation grows there too" (trans. by D. Constantine: Bloodaxe Books, 1996; p. 54).

turning to the will to power to be saved from the will to power. In short, Heidegger tries to cure poison with poison. This is the ultimate contradiction in his thought that condemns him to despair and which Severino brings to light.

In "*Interpretazione fenomenologica dell'*epistéme *greca e 'differenza ontologica'*" ("Phenomenological Interpretation of the Greek *Epistéme* and 'Ontological Difference,'" 1989), Severino writes that Heidegger's general approach to past philosophies is ultimately not refutative: Heidegger's goal is not to demonstrate that past philosophies are wrong but to show that past philosophies weren't aware of their deepest roots. Therefore, even when Heidegger states that the history of metaphysics is the history of violence, he's not refuting nor condemning the history of metaphysics. He maintains this ambiguous attitude throughout his work, and this ambiguity pervades his relationship with technology as well. In this sense, Heidegger even "attempts to criticize the explicit condemnation of technology – even if he then glimpses the 'danger' in it and alludes to the 'salvation from it'" ("IF" 313). Heidegger sees the *danger* in technology and hopes for salvation from technology, and yet he criticizes the condemnations of technology and hopes to find salvation *in* technology. In this sense, he ends up refusing to see technology as the danger and as something from which salvation is needed. The contradiction has thus come full circle.

Heidegger's unwillingness to refute and condemn technology entails his final inability to refute or condemn any concrete configurations of Being that result from technology. Heidegger is thus unable even to present authenticity as preferable to inauthenticity. His desire to suspend judgment and do pure phenomenology entails that he presents authenticity and inauthenticity as equally valuable modes of being-in-the-world. Which means that throwing the atom bomb is an act whose value is equal to any other: to refuse to condemn metaphysics and technology is to refuse to condemn the atom bomb. But of course, Heidegger on the other hand does want to present a hierarchy of values, and so here he contradicts himself again.

Severino sees that the root of Heidegger's contradictions is his technological ontology. Heidegger's Existentialism is essentially a philosophy of technology, and in this sense Severino writes that, "for Heidegger, Plato's definition of *poíesis* (production) is not mistaken; on the contrary, it must be the point of departure for a deeper reflection on the meaning of 'being'" (ibid. 314). Plato's *poíesis* remains the foundation of truth, for Heidegger: Being discloses itself through production. But *poíesis* is the essence of technology and the most powerful *téchne*: it is the *téchne* that can turn nothingness into being and being into

nothingness. *Poíesis* is the atom bomb.

In *Symposium* 205 b-c, Plato writes that "every cause (*aitía*) by which anything is made to pass from not-being an entity (*ek tou me ontos*) to being an entity (*eis to on*) is production (*poíesis*)." Severino insists that this belief in *poíesis* is the essence of all metaphysics, technology, and of mankind and its history: everything we do and think depends on technology, i.e. on our belief that we can transform, create, and destroy. Like Severino, Heidegger sees that technology is the *danger*, but he cannot think of any other truth but technology, and so he remains trapped within it and in its suffering and violence.

In the end, then, Heidegger's philosophy is essentially a profound affirmation of technology. In *La filosofia dai greci al nostro tempo: la filosofia contemporanea* (*Philosophy from the Greeks to Our Time: Contemporary Philosophy*, 1996), Severino writes that the foundation of Heidegger's philosophy is the "will to bring to light the authentic meaning of becoming" (ibid. 362). And the affirmation of becoming is the deepest truth of technology. Heidegger sees the temporal-historic existence of man as the original form of becoming. In this sense, he sees the technological character of man – his always being in relation to his own possibilities, his always being historical, temporal, *becoming* – as the original truth of being. For Heidegger, the unveiling of the truth (*alétheia*) shows that man *is* a technological being, a project of pure possibility, and so always a decision—and decision belongs to the essence of violence.

Still, we shouldn't forget that Heidegger sees in technology the *danger*. This is the value that we should retain from his philosophy: to think of inauthenticity as the living affirmation of the instrumentality and objectivity of the world, to see in the technological, global organization of the world the greatest danger, to see in it the will to power's attempt at the absolute domination of the world. Severino writes that for Heidegger the globalization of the Apparatus is the "inevitable consequence of the metaphysical concept of Being as form and objective presence" (ibid.) and the "extreme negation of the freedom and historicity of existence" (ibid. 367). Techno-science works through "the principle of organization and unification" (ibid.), and it seeks to become ever more able to control the organization, production, and destruction of the world. This power "is incompatible with the historicity of the existence of man" (ibid. 366), which for Heidegger is the history of the *freedom* of becoming of all things, things which shouldn't be Enframed.

Thus, Heidegger doesn't see techno-science as the knowledge that can safeguard the

development of mankind. On the contrary, "Heidegger sees in the absolute organization of technology the most radical form of the metaphysical *epistéme*: the Apparatus that makes the historical becoming of existence impossible" (ibid. 372). This means that, for Heidegger, metaphysics and technology are falsifications of being because they impede "the pure randomness and precariousness of being" (ibid. 369). In short, because they impede *becoming*. And *here* resides the essence of Heidegger's contradiction. Severino argues that Heidegger's philosophy belongs to one of the two main conceptions that today oppose one another and compete for supremacy: on the one hand, there's historicity understood as the set of techno-scientific organizations and productions of existence (this is the position of neo-positivism, pragmatism, and certain forms of neo-Marxism); on the other hand, there's historicity understood as the free play of the becoming of things, which should be *let be* beyond all organization and planning (which is Heidegger's position). Therefore, Heidegger's opposition to technology wants to constitute itself as a fundamental affirmation of the freedom, contingency, randomness, and historicity of *becoming*, which should be let be in the unveiling of its truth. This is how Severino summarizes Heidegger's view:

> So that historical becoming be; that is, so that the "soil" be not stolen—the soil on which "every great epoch of humanity, every pioneering spirit, every historical characterization of the essence of man can be born and grow"—one must not only think that Being is the powerless letting-be of beings (which, as opposed to the power of God, opens the free space wherein historical development can play) but also that Being is itself a pure historical occurrence, a pure fact (ibid. 369).

Heidegger's fundamental contradiction resides *here* because becoming is the precondition which not only allows for the existence of technology but also makes it necessary. The fundamental contradiction is therefore to see technology as in opposition to becoming. Heidegger condemns technology because he sees it as the not-letting-Being-be in its truth, where this truth is interpreted as pure contingency, randomness, and freedom. And while Heidegger's intentions are surely laudable (even sacred, perhaps), his solutions aren't viable, because, as we have seen, Severino shows that it is precisely the idea that Being-is-becoming that is the essence of technology. The idea that becoming is the truth is the origin of all violence and domination: if man is freedom then he is a project and a project is always

technological, and if things are contingent then they are available as tools for the technological project of man. If this is how we see the world, then our attempt at global domination is inevitable. And this is how Heidegger fundamentally sees the world, and therefore even his concepts of authenticity and *Gelassenheit* must be technological, even if their intention is to overcome technology.

The answer to technology *is* to let beings be what they are. But this letting-be must be conceived in non-technological terms. That is, it must not be a decision but rather the self-unveiling of the truth of the impossibility of man's decision and action, and therefore the self-unveiling of the truth of man's non-transcendable erring. The only possibility for salvation lies in the acting that necessarily follows from the self-unveiling of the truth of the impossibility of domination. Finally, that salvation from power, domination, violence, and suffering is impossible as long as we remain within the technological interpretation of Being becomes most clear if we look at Heidegger's conception of truth and of *Gelassenheit*, which should offer his ultimate idea for salvation.

Heidegger most clearly expresses his conception of truth-as-freedom in "On the Essence of Truth" (1943), where he also presents an ethics that follows from his conception. In this essay, he writes of "the essential connection between truth and freedom" ("ET" 143) and defines freedom as what "reveals itself as letting beings be" (ibid. 144). The individual who lives in accordance with the truth is one who "lets beings be the beings they are" (ibid.). This individual "withdraws in the face of beings in order that they might reveal themselves with respect to what and how they are" (ibid.). In this sense, freedom is the essence of truth because

> Freedom is not merely what common sense is content to let pass under this name: the caprice, turning up occasionally in our choosing, of inclining in this or that direction. Freedom is not mere absence of constraint with respect to what we can or cannot do. Nor is it on the other hand mere readiness for what is required and necessary (and so somehow a being). Prior to all this ("negative" and "positive" freedom), freedom is engagement in the disclosure of beings as such (ibid. 145).

To let beings be what they are in how they disclose themselves is, for Heidegger, the authentic

mode of being-in-the-world, which respects the truth of freedom and doesn't constitute itself as violence. But if to adopt this mode is a choice, a management of things, then even this choice is domination, because it itself *imposes* a mode-of-being upon the being that *Dasein* wants to let-be. The contradiction is especially clear in the concept of *Gelassenheit*: Heidegger's greatest and final attempt to overcome technology.

Gelassenheit means "releasement," abandonment, will-less thinking. It is the concretization of the letting-be of beings. It's supposed to be the kind of human relationship to beings that can overcome the dominating nature of technology. *Gelassenheit* is what should let beings-in-themselves be what they truly are. This is what Heidegger wants *Gelassenheit* to be. But *Gelassenheit* fails to be all that because it is a decision of *Dasein*, and a decision is always a dominating, technological, willful, violent act. Every decision constitutes a configuration of the domination of Being enacted in technology, *Gelassenheit* included.

Heidegger introduces *Gelassenheit* in his "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking" (1959). This concept begins Heidegger's late attempt to overcome technology, concretized in willful thinking and subjectivism. That Heidegger introduces this concept testifies once again to his recognition that technology and the will are the source of domination, suffering, and violence. He sets up this "Conversation" between a Scholar, a Teacher, and a Scientist in order to face the problem of man's will:

> *Scholar*: "thinking […] is a kind of willing. […] To think is to will, and to will is to think." […]
> *Teacher*: "And that is why, in answer to your question as to what I really wanted from our meditation on the nature of thinking, I replied: I want non-willing" ("CCPT" 58-9).

As you can see, the "Conversation" immediately identifies the will as the source of suffering. Willing is what we need to be saved from, and non-willing is the salvation we hope for. One cannot but think of Schopenhauer here. Yet, the "Conversation" is tainted from the beginning. Because the Teacher identifies the *danger* in willing, but his solution, to "want non-willing," is contradictory and therefore impossible: to want non-willing is to *will* non-willing, and to will non-willing is to will and so to remain within willing. The Teacher remains trapped within the will, the source of suffering from which he is seeking liberation. And with him so does Heidegger.

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Heidegger has the Scientist see the Teacher's ambiguity, whom he admonishes: "this formulation has proved ambiguous" (ibid. 59). But here the Scholar answers for the Teacher that: "Non-willing, for one thing, means a willing in such a way as to involve negation, be it even in the sense of a negation which is directed at willing and renounces it. Non-willing means, therefore: willingly to renounce willing" (ibid.). But this answer tautologically repeats exactly what was ambiguous in the first place. It therefore seems incredible that Heidegger lets the Scientist concede the point to the Scholar. The truth is that the Scholar's answer directly re-proposes the ambiguity of the Teacher's original affirmation. The Scientist points out the ambiguity of "I want non-willing" and the Scholar answers that "I want non-willing" means "willingly to renounce willing." And of course, "willingly to renounce willing" is as contradictory and impossible as "I want non-willing": "willingly to renounce willing" means to will non-willing, and therefore to remain trapped within the will that the "Conversation" seeks salvation from.

The "Conversation" now introduces *Gelassenheit* as the way out of willing, the "releasement" of will-less thinking, the letting-be of being. *Gelassenheit* is salvation from the will. It is the true relationship to Being that man should desire. Heidegger hopes *Gelassenheit* doesn't belong to willful living, and for this purpose he has his Scholar state that "*Gelassenheit* does *not* belong to the domain of the will" (ibid. 62), that it "remains absolutely outside any kind of will" (ibid. 59). On the same note, the Scientist states that *Gelassenheit* "can never be carried out or reached by any willing" (ibid.) and that *Gelassenheit* must therefore come "from somewhere else" (ibid. 61), outside of man's will, decision, and action.

Yet, *Gelassenheit* remains contradictory and impossible because Heidegger maintains that man must *move* closer to *Gelassenheit* by willing-not-to-will so as to *allow Gelassenheit* to "wake up" [*Erwachen*] in himself. And that man must perform a certain action so that he *allows Gelassenheit* to wake up shows Heidegger's inability to emancipate himself from technology. Heidegger's insistence on man's action dooms *Gelassenheit* to contradiction and impossibility: this *allowing* to wake up constitutes yet another expression of willful, technological, dominating, "re-presenting" thinking, as if things, in order to be, needed human allowance.

This once again becomes manifest when Heidegger rewrites that in *Gelassenheit* "you want a non-willing in the sense of a renouncing of willing, so that through this we may release, or at least prepare to release, ourselves to the sought-for essence of a thinking that is not a willing" (ibid. 59-60). It is thus clear that the contradiction we've brought to light pervades the entire conception of *Gelassenheit*. Ultimately, Heidegger thinks of *Gelassenheit* as a non-

willing that you will. Therefore, *Gelassenheit* too is a technological project, and it remains trapped within the suffering and violence of willing. Heidegger envisions *Gelassenheit* as a state that you achieve through the acts of renunciation and preparation (the means you organize), which are the acts you practice to obtain what you seek, namely, the state of liberation from the will (the end toward which you organize your means). The organization of means toward the realization of ends is what we call technology and willing. Therefore, *Gelassenheit* fully belongs to this kind of living, even while it should represent the ultimate recognition of its violence and the way out of it. Finally, Heidegger hopes for *Gelassenheit* to constitute itself as a "higher acting [which] is yet no activity" (ibid. 61), but every acting is and must remain an activity, there is no act that is not an act, and since every act is technological, then so is *Gelassenheit*. Heidegger's hope is sacred, but the results he comes to are devastating.

The further elucidations of the "Conversation" cannot save Heidegger's thinking. When the Scientist hypothesizes that "*Gelassenheit* is effected from somewhere else," the Teacher immediately corrects him: "Not effected, but let in" (ibid. 61). With this exchange, Heidegger wants to establish a key difference between effecting and letting in: i.e. that *Gelassenheit* depends on the second because to effect is to dominate and to let in is to let beings be. But what Heidegger doesn't see is that there's no difference between effecting, letting in, or any other action, if our desire is to transcend the willfulness of technology, because every action – merely by virtue of its being an action (a decision) – belongs to technology.

Both to effect and to let in are actions enacted by *Dasein*, and so they presuppose an original decision which is, by nature and in its essence, technological, dominating, willful. To let in *Gelassenheit* is to *will* releasement from willing just as much as effecting *Gelassenheit* is to will releasement from willing. In this sense, when the Scientist and the Scholar ask "But then, what in the world am I do to?" (ibid. 62) in order to let in *Gelassenheit*, and the Teacher answers that "We are to do nothing but wait [*Wir sollen nichts tun sondern warten*]" (ibid.)—even here, all three characters finally give voice to the contradiction that irremediably consigns *Gelassenheit* to the realm of willful technology.

Because the entire logical framework of the question "what am I to do?" pertains to the willful thinking of technology. "What am I to do?" means "what means should I organize to realize my ends?". And "to wait" *doesn't* mean "to do nothing." It means to do *something*, which is waiting. There's no such thing as doing nothing: that is a contradiction and an impossibility. To wait is to act and to act is to decide and organize means to realize ends. To

act is to willfully dominate. To wait to let-in the sought-for salvation of *Gelassenheit* is to pursue one's technological project. It is to exercise a technological domination of being in accordance with one's will.[11]

Heidegger doesn't realize it, but *Gelassenheit*, his ultimate way out of technology and the will, remains technological, dominating, and willful to the core, and so does his philosophy. To believe that man can decide and transform the world is to affirm technology and its ethos of power. Severino sees that Heidegger is one of the great voices of the *lógos* of *téchne*. Even if he sees the danger, violence, suffering, and injustice of this *lógos*, Heidegger cannot but reaffirm his belief in its truth. This belief ultimately reaffirms the righteousness of the technological domination of the world, with all the concrete consequences that this affirmation entails. The only possibility for salvation lies in the possibility that the truth of the world is non-technological. In the possibility that the self-unveiling of the truth reveals the impossibility of "man" and "things" as we think of them. The impossibility of all forms of power, control, domination, violence, and transformation. In due time, we will see that Wallace's Existentialist Contradiction equates Heidegger's. Wallace too saw the unbearable suffering inherent to our interpretation of the world, but he too couldn't help but reaffirm its truth because of his attachment to free will. For this reason, Wallace shares with Heidegger entrapment in the willful suffering of technology. Wallace's hopes resemble *Gelassenheit*, and this is why they are destined to ruin.

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[11] In *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (1990), John Caputo writes that waiting for the let-in of *Gelassenheit* constitutes the "preparation for the final stage of releasement where we have left the sphere of willing behind altogether, where man, as with Eckhart, has no will at all" (*MEHT* 171). Not only is Caputo mistaken that *Gelassenheit* can work; he's doubly wrong because he assigns to *Gelassenheit* a positivity that he also sees in Meister Eckhart, when Heidegger himself in the "Conversation" criticizes Eckhart for having become trapped in willful thinking. On this point, Heidegger writes: "*Scientist*: 'The transition from willing into releasement is what seems difficult to me.' […] *Scholar*: 'Especially so because even releasement can still be thought of as within the domain of will, as is the case with old masters of thought such as Meister Eckhart'" ("CCPT" 61). Here, it's remarkable to see that Heidegger *is* aware that "releasement can still be thought of as within the domain of the will." It thus becomes even more striking to see that he *doesn't* see that his own conception of *Gelassenheit* falls into the same contradiction that he himself can see in Meister Eckhart.

Conclusion

In *Destino della necessità* (*The Destiny of Necessity*, 1980), Severino writes that "freedom belongs to the essence of nihilism" (*DN* 19). Freedom is nihilism because it belongs to technology, and technology gives birth to the human will to dominate Being. Only in technology can human beings believe they transform the world. Only in technology they can begin to want "to annihilate the state of things (ibid. 32) in order to create new ones according to their will. The project of complete domination of earth can arise only in technology; it is the most coherent concretization of its ontology. In it, freedom is always the freedom to choose what to create and what to destroy, the freedom "to decide what to assign to Being and to Nothingness" (ibid. 36). For Severino, "this project is the *extreme* form of the will to power" (ibid.); that is, free will is the extreme form of the will to power, human technology (ανθρώπινη τέχνη, *anthropíne téchne* – Plato, *Sophist* 265 b-e) is the *concretization* of the will to power, and the original idea of ontological freedom (to simplify: contingency) is "the *originary* expression of the will to power" (ibid. 37), as well as "the foundation of all control and domination" (ibid. 40).

By now, "this thesis has become the only reality and the only evidence" (ibid. 37) for our civilization. Everything we do on both the individual and societal level is guided by this originary interpretation of Being. On the individual level, though, the feeling of being an annihilator brings with it an unprecedented and overwhelming "sense of guilt" (ibid.), which is why Severino can say that Greek thought (the original inventor of technology) is not just the foundation of our civilization, but "also the foundation of new kinds of mental disorders" (ibid.) that affect our civilization. Here is where the connection between Severino and Wallace becomes most evident: the mental disorders Severino refers to are those that affect Wallace's characters. These mental disorders originate in our belief in freedom. Non-coincidentally, Severino constantly refers to Freud's work but most of all to R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1960), a strongly philosophical psychiatric work influenced by Existentialism that was of great inspiration to Wallace too (his annotated copy of the book is available at the HRC). Laing's patients consider themselves and their surroundings as nothing, or they feel they are treated as nothing by other people. Laing and Wallace look at these patients and see reasonable disorders, Severino takes one step further and argues that these sick people, in their madness, actually make the necessary consequences of our rationality explicit. They treat themselves and everything around them

as nothing because this is the final, most coherent outcome of our interpretation of the world: "in the mentally disturbed, science attempts to combat the illness that has complete mastery over science itself, and of which science is entirely ignorant" (ibid. 38).

Science is the final expression of the ontology of technology, i.e. of the rationality that possesses our entire civilization (within which free will appears), and therefore it too leads to the necessary affirmation of the nothingness of all things. Technology is the foundation of everything we believe, say, and do, and its *unconscious* is the feeling of the nothingness of all things. This feeling is the terrifying consequence the impossibility of the Existentialist Contradiction must lead to. Leopardi had already seen in the *Zibaldone* (1817-32) that the final truth of our rationality is that "all is nothing, solid nothing" (*Z* 85). For Severino, we can become *conscious* of our unconscious only when we realize that the future age of technology will be the most rigorous concretization of Greek ontology. Not because – as Heidegger thought – technology "enframes" becoming, but because "the age of technology will be the complete final expression of the will to domination that is founded upon the will to interpret Being as freedom" (ibid. 41).

REFLECTIONS ON LITERARY TRUTH

Commentary on

Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective
by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen

Introduction

Everyone who holds that philosophy can illuminate the truth, and even that literature can do the same, must face the problem of contemporary literary theory. Today, the rejection of the value of philosophy is widespread, and the rejection of literary value even more so. What's most at stake, here, are the notions of philosophical and literary truth. Presently, the sciences hold the monopoly of the truth, and even the defenders of philosophy and literature insist that these two disciplines have a value that isn't connected to the notion of truth at all. In this context, today's intellectuals are struggling to justify the value of philosophical and literary studies while the idea of trying to illuminate the truth through philosophy and literature begins to seem preposterous.

Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective (1994) by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen presents one of the most authoritative voices of the logic of our time, and in this sense, confronting their work provides the possibility of discovering whether there are gaps or faults in contemporary reasoning that may open the prospect for the affirmation of a connection between literature, philosophy, and truth. Lamarque and Olsen focus chiefly on "how works of literature relate to works with paradigmatically truth-seeking aims" (*Truth* 2), and so their project provides the most useful confrontation (in contemporary literary theory) for anyone who wishes to study the relationship between literature and the truth, and so between literature and philosophy, as philosophy has always been regarded as the truth-seeking practice *par excellence.*

The ancient discord between philosophy and literature, though, forces any theoretical discourse that wishes to unite the two subjects in a common search for truth, not only to look at the commonalities between them, but also confront their irreconcilable differences, and their respective, problematic relations to the truth. In this sense, L&O's work is a useful

confrontation precisely because it *insists* upon this ancient discord. The authors construct "a 'no-truth' theory of literature" by which they "argue, *inter alia*, that the concept of truth has no central or ineliminable role in critical practice" (ibid. 1), and so their work confronts anyone whose words rely on the ideal of literary truth. But while – they say – "the rejection of truth as an essential facet of literature is hardly original" (ibid.), L&O dismiss *all* past no-truth theories of literature as "radically misconceived" (ibid. 2), and they claim to offer a no-truth theory that also provides "a vigorous defense of the humanistic conception" (ibid.) of literature.

Here, then, is the intended originality of their work: their rejection of all previous theories of literature and their offering of a new theory defending literary value *without* truth. With this theory, L&O seek to overcome the dichotomy that pervades the history of literary theory. They themselves state that humanist defenses of literary value have always been supported by pro-truth theories, while anti-humanist denunciations of the worthlessness of literature have always been supported by no-truth theories. They, instead, aim to present a theory that seeks to reject all notions of literary truth while preserving the humanist affirmation of literary value.[12]

Their theory thus seeks to dissolve an ancient theoretical chasm, but it immediately raises three difficulties. *First*, it is controversial whether the idea of conceptual value can stand independently from truth: ever since rationality was born, truth has been regarded as what is most valuable, and even what is false is of value because it teaches us what is true. *Second*, whether the correct theory of literature is "pro-truth" or "no-truth" depends, first and foremost, on the meaning of "truth," and so L&O should do proper philosophy and define and demonstrate what the "truth" is, before they can establish their "no-truth" theory of literature. *Third*, when L&O state that they aim to establish a theory that exhibits "that the concept of truth has no central or ineliminable role in critical practice," they at once trigger a source of confusion: one matter is whether there's any relation between literature and truth; another is what literary criticism should do. The two affairs must be kept separate, especially because such kinds of confusion pervade the history of literary theory.

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[12] In this sense, L&O follow Colin Lyas's "The Semantic Definition of Literature" (1969) and Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* (1983) in defining "literature" as an evaluative term. But if Lyas intends "literature" purely in terms of aesthetic value, L&O insist that literary value also includes literature's capacity to contribute to the understanding and development of the deepest conceptions of a culture.

On L&O's Rejection of All Pro-Truth Theories of Literature

On the Theory of Novelistic Truth

L&O reject all pro-truth theories of literature, and within these they indicate that the Theory of Novelistic Truth is the most traditional, the classic humanist interpretation of literature. The Theory of Novelistic Truth comprises all those arguments that establish that "the *mimetic* value of a literary work consists in the most general terms in its having a humanly interesting content" (*Truth* 289).

L&O acknowledge that "since the very beginning of the novel, novelists have been concerned that their stories should be read with the same seriousness as history because their novels were as instructive as history" (ibid.): famous quotes such as Henry James's "the novel is history" ("Art" 5) demonstrate the widespread acceptance of The Theory of Novelistic Truth even among the literary creators themselves, who believe that their works refer to the truth and to the world. To reject this theory is thus to reject what novelists themselves say about their own artwork, which of course for L&O is problematic. Specifically, L&O recognize that the power of the Theory of Novelistic gives an intuitively acceptable explanation of why literature has been valued throughout human history: literature tells the truth, and human beings find the truth interesting and valuable, hence they keep on reading and writing.

Yet, L&O reject this theory's postulates and argue that the notion of literary truth is indefensible, because it denies the obvious and essential distinction between literature and those practices that explicitly seek the truth (psychology, history, the natural sciences, etc.), and because literary truth always amounts to something less than actual truth. In this sense, they argue that the mimetic value of a literary work cannot be assessed in accordance with its "truth-telling or 'faithfulness' to the facts" (ibid. 311), and so that the value of literary realism "is better accounted for in non-referential terms" (ibid. 315). In so doing, they treat the Theory of Novelistic Truth as a theory of *mimetic truth*, and in this sense their argument presents a valid criticism.[13]

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[13] In *Myth, Truth and Literature: Towards a True Postmodernism* (1989), Colin Falck states that "literature […] gives us our purest and most essential way of grasping reality or truth" (xii) and that "the connection between art and ontological truth [is] a necessary and definitional one" (74). Falck is the kind of intellectual enemy L&O really

But for us two problems remain: whether literary truth is actually to be defined as "'faithfulness' to the facts," and what does it mean to be faithful to the facts and what exactly is a fact? When L&O affirm that *since* the Theory of Novelistic Truth is indefensible *therefore* there is no literary truth, they remain inscribed within a logic that can conceptualize literary truth only as mimetic truth, and fictional objects only as non-existing objects which, owing to their non-existence, are incapable of referring to external reality. Once you show that all theories of mimetic truth are fallible, then the following question should be: do we really have to define literary truth as mimetic? And, as always: what exactly does "mimetic" mean? In other words: it doesn't follow from their premise that all notions of literary truth are false.

If mimesis means imitation or verisimilitude, then of course mimetic truth is always something less than actual truth. The imitation of the truth always differs from the truth, and so it must always be to some extent false. It's thus true that the idea of mimetic truth is unsatisfactory, but this doesn't prove L&O's larger claim to literary non-truth, because a proper ontology of fictional objects may show them not to be mimetic at all, and this ontological shift may also provide us with a more coherent understanding of the history of literary fiction, an history which, we submit, L&O interpret erroneously. The story they tell is the common story that literary realism was the form that aspired to represent the truth, while subsequent literary forms (modernism, postmodernism, etc.) have abandoned the ideal of truth-telling. This, L&O say, was because of the rise of the social sciences: "realism declined *because* it became obvious that the social sciences performed so much better descriptive and explanatory tasks which the realist authors tended to see themselves as performing" (ibid. 318).

But while the development of literary forms is certainly inextricably tied with the development of human civilization, literary writers have *never* abandoned the ideal of truth-telling, and so it's not true that the social sciences forced literature into giving up its truth-telling ideal. The modernists and postmodernists have *not* abandoned the truth: what they did was adopt new forms to express their new conception of the truth (the new conception of the truth that always comes with a shift in cognitive paradigms). The disagreement between realism, modernism, and postmodernism is not about truth and non-truth; it's about the nature of the actual truth. In this sense: the truth about literary history is that the

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want to fight against, and in specific cases like these, they are right: Falck doesn't ground his propositions, and his major statement that "literature gives us *our purest and most essential* way to truth" is entirely unfounded.

evolution of humanity's conception of the truth is the engine of the evolution of literary forms (we will see this in "The Intimacy Between Literature and Philosophy in Modernity").

Literature always remains realist in the larger sense of the term, because its goal is always to express the truth, as literary authors themselves explicitly state throughout history. In this sense, L&O's mistake in taking for granted a specific ontology, and therefore in taking for granted that disproving pro-truth theories proves their non-truth theory, also results in their too easy acceptance of an erroneous interpretation of literary history.

On Metaphorical Truth and on the Subjective Knowledge Theory of Cognitive Value
It's easy to grasp at once that metaphorical truth too, by definition, is something less than the actual truth, and L&O's criticism of this notion too is inscribed within their basic ontological assumptions. L&O grant that conveying "a determinate propositional content" (*Truth* 363) expressing truth may be a "context-specific aim of a metaphor" (ibid.), but, they say, the expression of the truth still isn't the "constitutive aim of speaking metaphorically" (ibid.), and this "inevitably distances metaphor from truth-telling" (ibid.), and it renders any metaphorical, context-specific truth "likely to be a low-key truth" (ibid.). Finally, the constitutive aspect of metaphor resides within its "special cognitive powers" (ibid.), by which metaphor "involves a process of thought not a grasp of content" (ibid.), which fact too, for L&O, speaks of the distance between metaphor and truth.

Let us suppose that L&O are right in the rejection of literary truth as metaphorical truth. This – again – does not prove that their ontology of literature and their no-truth theory are correct. But, in truth, the foundation of the premises of their criticism of metaphorical truth is unclear. Why do L&O take for granted that a metaphorical truth is context-specific? It seems quite possible for a metaphor to express a general truth. Also: why should context-specificity necessarily distance a notion from the truth? It again appears quite easy to conceptualize myriad context-specific truths. Isn't the context-specificity of truth precisely the notion on which all of our sciences (and so our civilization) are founded? L&O say that the context-specificity of metaphor makes metaphorical truth likely to be a low-key truth, but the very worldview they support (the worldview that says that the realm of truth belongs to the sciences) says the exact opposite: that context-specificity is the necessary precondition for truth (only a physicist can know the truth about a very specific realm of physics).

Finally, even if we grant that the special cognitive powers of metaphor lie not in truth-expression but in its fostering of thought, it still remains unclear how exactly this should

problematize the notion of metaphorical truth. For one thing, fostering thought seems to be a rather necessary means toward the goal of knowing the truth. Secondly, when L&O affirm that "truth (or falsity) is not part of the definition of either fiction, literature, or metaphor. Yet truth (or falsity) can arise in connection with all three, in unproblematic ways. The *sentences* used in fictive utterances and which appear in literary works, like those in metaphorical utterances, can have truth-values" (ibid. 366), they admit that a practice need not have truth as its ultimate aim for it to be able to express it, and so they contradict their own statement that metaphor's diverging constitutive aim distances it from the truth.

For L&O, under the heading Subjective Knowledge Theory of Cognitive Value fall all theories that make "the *subjective experience* central" to the notion of literary truth, and which present "a traditional humanistic view of literature as an instrument for training and extending our sympathetic understanding of other people" (ibid. 370-1). This kind of theories argue that literature provides knowledge of "what it is like." Dorothy Walsh most famously voices this thesis in *Literature and Knowledge* (1969), writing that literature provides "knowing in the sense of realizing by living through" (*L&K* 104), of "*realizing* what this might be like as a lived experience" (ibid. 101).

L&O say that these theories argue that literature provides not knowledge of facts but knowledge of how facts relate to subjective experience. In this sense, they concede that this theory "provides a strong justification for the claim that subjective experience represents knowledge" (*Truth* 380), and that the theory "makes the relationship between the literary work and the imaginative participation in the subjective experience a logical one and thus ensures that the knowledge yielded by a literary work is specific to it as literature" (ibid.), but on the other hand they argue that this theory presents no viable defense of literary truth.

Their argument rests on their separation of "truth" and "authenticity": literature, they say, can provide an authentic experience of "what it is like," but this doesn't amount to knowledge of the truth. However, separating authenticity from truth is contradictory. There is no way in which the concept of authenticity can be separated from the truth, as a cursory search in any dictionary makes clear. You cannot tell what is authentic or inauthentic if you do not know the truth. When we talk about authenticity and inauthenticity in literature, we say that the authentic literary work *veritably* accompanies the reader through a possible lived experience, while the inauthentic literary work *falsely* does so. L&O's rejection of the Subjective Knowledge Theory of Cognitive Value depends upon their separation of truth

and authenticity, but this separation is contradictory and therefore impossible. As a result, by conceding that literary works can provide authentic expressions of life, L&O actually concede that *there is* such a thing as literary truth.

On Literature as Moral Philosophy

There are philosophers who have developed a view of literature as moral philosophy. Chief among these are Martha Nussbaum and Hilary Putnam. In *Love's Knowledge* (1990), Nussbaum writes of Henry James's works that they are "moral achievements on behalf of our community" (*LK* 165), and that, for example, "there are candidates for moral truth which the plainness of traditional moral philosophy lacks the power to express, and which *The Golden Bowl* expresses wonderfully" (ibid. 142). On the same note, Hilary Putnam writes in "Literature, Science, and Reflection" (1976) that: "I want to suggest that if moral reasoning, at the reflective level, is the conscious criticism of ways of life, then the sensitive appreciation in the imagination of predicaments and perplexities must be essential to sensitive moral reasoning. Novels and plays do not set moral knowledge before us, that is true. But they do (frequently) something for us that must be done for us if we are to gain any moral knowledge" ("LSR" 486).

L&O take issue with these theories of Literature as Moral Philosophy because, they say, said theories turn literature's end into the *education* of readers to moral reasoning, as if literary value were determined by the extent to which a book can turn its readers into good people. If this were true, then L&O would be totally right in their rejection: the idea that literature can educate people into being good is as naïve as it is indefensible, in spite of the existence of a number of scholars who argue otherwise.[14]

Literature and philosophy have no pedestal to stand upon, morally speaking, and in this sense, they have nothing to teach. But what they can do is provide a space where we can converse about our deepest moral concerns, a space of a kind that no other means can offer.

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[14] For example, Berys Gaut in "The Ethical Criticism of Art" (1998), who argues for "literary ethicism," i.e. the idea that literary value is a matter of "ethical assessment" – "if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious" (Gaut 182). Gaut's theory turns Nabokov's *Lolita* into a bad literary work, and this exhibits its untenability. But even widely agreed upon theories of literary value as fostering empathy are problematic. In *Against Empathy* (2016), for example, Paul Bloom makes an ethical argument against empathy's utility. Perhaps, if there is a moral value in literature, we should intend it not as education but as *conversation*.

In this *deepest* sense, literature *is* like moral philosophy, and L&O fail to consider this central aspect of literature's morality. The great canonical works of literary history all provide this space. There's no great work of literature that doesn't *also* constitute itself as a conversation around moral questions, and here lies the essential, true connection between literature's moral and aesthetic value. Especially today, when conversing around deep moral questions is becoming ever more difficult, literature increasingly presents itself as one of the few spaces in which you can converse and reflect about the meaning of life, and in the process perhaps feel a little less alone, because at least you *are* conversing (about the stuff that really matters) by means of an artifact made by another consciousness, by a person who had precisely this purpose in mind.

Notable scholars have put forth this thesis in the past. In *The Company We Keep* (1988), Wayne Booth writes that in reading we always respond to "the inferable voice of the flesh-and-blood person" (Booth 125-6) behind the artwork, and that so we "accept the responsibility to enter into serious dialogue with the author" (ibid. 135). Noël Carroll expresses a similar point of view in "Art, Intention, and Conversation" (1992), writing that we turn to art to "enter a relationship with [the] creator that is roughly analogous to a conversation" (Carroll 117), and that in it we seek "serious conversations" (ibid. 118) by which to establish "the prospect of community" (ibid.).

Carroll's views on art, intention, and conversation are Wittgensteinian, like F.R. Leavis' in *The Living Principle* (1975), where he writes that "words 'mean' because individual human beings have meant the meaning, and that there is no meaning unless individual human beings can meet in it" (*TLP* 58). David Foster Wallace too was a Wittgensteinian himself, and he too recalled this essential and originary feature of language, then turning it into a literary principle: language is essentially conversation, and literature must do justice to the truth of language by functioning as a means for conversation between human beings – author and reader –, a conversation ideally about the most important matters of our lives, what we cannot talk about in daily routine, because *serious* conversations are what establishes a real sense of community. Perhaps, *this* is the true morality of literature.[15]

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[15] This process also appears to entail a reading dynamic of the kind suggested by Roman Ingarden in *The Literary Work of Art* (1931). In what is perhaps the most famous work of literary phenomenology, Ingarden presents the literary text as an intentional object, in the dual sense that both the author's intention to create its meaning and the reader's intention to decode its meaning collaborate in the establishment of the literary text's "final" meaning (which is never actually final).

On Truth and Verisimilitude and on the Propositional Theory of Literary Truth

L&O grant that literature can be "true to life." For them: the confusion arises when humanism confuses literature's ability to be true to life with literature's ability to tell the truth. Verisimilitude is one thing, and the truth is another thing entirely. This is the crux of L&O's argument. And in a sense, they are right: truth and verisimilitude *are* distinct concepts. When L&O reject literary truth and affirm literary verisimilitude, they mean to say that what literature does is construct an appearance of the truth which isn't the truth itself nor has anything to do with it.

But this argument rests on a misunderstanding of the concept of verisimilitude. There can be no verisimilitude that doesn't relate to the truth, just as there can be no understanding that isn't an understanding of the truth. Even etymologically, verisimilitude means being similar to the truth (verity), which concept necessarily entails an inextricable relationship between that something that is similar and the truth. Also: if verisimilitude didn't have any relation to the truth then it couldn't be of any value at all, especially if literary value resides, as L&O claim, in literature's ability to contribute to the development and understanding of the most fundamental conceptions of a culture. L&O's idea of non-true verisimilitude thus contradicts their own affirmation of literary value. Falsehood and manipulation surely cannot contribute to the development and understanding of the most fundamental conceptions of a culture. On the contrary, they can only hinder it. Verisimilitude can be of value only if it tells the truth.

But this still leaves us with the problems that verisimilitude is something less than actual truth and that literature doesn't seek to rationally demonstrate its truth-claims as do other practices. On the first point, regarding literature, the question is: who says that the point of literature is actually verisimilitude? In fact, even though we cannot explore this here, the idea of literary verisimilitude is strongly connected to the idea that art is mimesis (intended as imitation), but there are very good reasons to argue that literature (and art in general) is not imitation but creation of something new, a new proposition. On the second point, as we've said in the section on Metaphorical Truth, even if it's true that literature doesn't seek to rationally demonstrate the truth-value of its propositions (and that this *does* constitute an essential difference between literature and other practices), this doesn't entail that it cannot embody the truth.

Suppose it to be true that literature's central aim isn't to demonstrate its truth, this

doesn't mean that truth doesn't constitute a fundamental part of literary value. And yet: are we even so sure that literature's central aim isn't to demonstrate its truth? Sure, literature aims to tell a story, to create an image of life, to entertain, to create a communal environment, to overcome loneliness and suffering, but still can't all these goals coexist with the aim of expressing the truth, and even of somehow *demonstrating* the truth of its propositions by means that differ from rational argument? Literature has indeed always been a *téchne*, a *poíesis* seeking to establish an image of life powerful enough to bestow meaningfulness upon the world so as to raise humanity above suffering, and surely this is why human beings have always produced and valued literature. But how can this salvific meaningfulness arise if not through our belief in the truth of the literary image?

L&O define the Propositional Theory of Literary Truth as affirming that "*the literary work contains or implies general statements about the world which the reader as part of an appreciation of the work has to assess as true or false*" (*Truth* 325), and specifically that the truth-value of such general statements is "what makes literature valuable" (ibid. 321). For L&O, this theory presents the strongest defense of literary truth: "if literary works present interpretations of general statements about human life, then, in so far as these statements are true and important, literature is valuable. […] And because literature as a body of works has this truth-telling function, it is, as are activities like philosophy and science, held in high regard" (ibid. 325-326). This is the value of the Propositional Theory of Literary Truth, by which the integral part of literary value becomes stating consequential truths rather than trivialities or falsities; consequently, one of the fundamental roles of criticism becomes that of enlightening and evaluating the propositional statements of literary works. For L&O, in this sense, the theory has "many advantageous *consequences*" (ibid. 326) for literary studies. The only problem, for them, is that it cannot stand up to close examination.

L&O argue that the Propositional Theory "gets into trouble" (ibid. 328) not when it affirms that literature possesses claims that can be true or false, but when it states that their truth-value determines its literary value. L&O's thesis is that literary fiction does contain true propositions, but that their truth-value has nothing to do with literary value. In this sense, in response to the Propositional Theory, they say that "judgments about interest are made with regard to content and are independent of judgments concerning truth" (ibid. 329). But the problem here, for us, becomes: can a judgment about propositional literary content not be also (and foremost) a judgment about its truth? Immediately, L&O's statement appears to

violate one of our most basic human assumptions, and one which L&O themselves recognize: namely, that "truth is a precondition of a humanly interesting content" (ibid. 296).

Unfortunately, L&O just treat this as a common but mistaken assumption and provide no argument for their refusal of it. Yet, the idea that judgments about interest can be independent of judgments about truth runs counter the history of humanity which can easily be interpreted as the history of our shifts of interest in consequence to the shifts in our belief about the truth. It's hard to see what *propositional* content could be of interest for without relating to the truth, and certainly such content (even if it could be of interest) would be of *secondary* interest at best. To use L&O's own words: it would always be something less than truly interesting content. Which undermines L&O's project of doing justice to literary value and save it from relegation into inconsequence. The fact is that the content that most interests humans is the truth, and if there's no truth to be valued in literature, then people would be better advised to turn somewhere else.

This problem with L&O's treatment of literary propositions can also be seen in their concrete treatment of specific examples. Let us turn to an example which is especially relevant for this dissertation. They write, e.g., that George Eliot's *Middlemarch* implies the proposition that "'the best human hopes and aspirations are always thwarted by forces beyond human control'" (ibid. 336), and then they argue that the value of the novel is untouched by whatever conclusions the human community may come to with regards to the nature of being, free will, determinism, etc., conclusions that pertain to the sciences and perhaps to philosophy. Yet, (1) this is not at all entirely the case, and (2) this argument implies too narrow a view of what "literary truth" can mean.

Middlemarch's implied proposition does contribute to the novel's literary value, because it discusses a possible and consequential truth that is of great interest to humanity. Whether and to what extent we decide over our lives or otherwise is what most interests us, and if *Middlemarch* can spark an in-depth conversation about it, then its literary value increases substantially. In addition, the problem of free will vs determinism is bound to remain of central importance throughout human history, thus making *Middlemarch* a text of eternal value. And if a future were to occur when humanity knows the definitive truth about this riddle and begins to regard it as an absolute triviality, then the novel *will* lose literary value in an important sense, but it will also retain value in myriad other ways, including the fact that it deeply explored a riddle that in its time was unsolved and fundamental to humanity.

This hypothetical future is a future when *Middlemarch* will be recognized as a great

work of genius from the past but fewer people will find it worth reading, because their interest will lie in brand new questions, and so they will turn to literature to converse about what will interest them in *their* here and now. It's thus clearly false that judgments about interest (and specifically: about literary value) are independent of judgments about truth. L&O, in their effort to disprove all pro-truth theories of literature, ignore the fundamental fact that we humans find trivialities and falsities uninteresting and worthless unless they illuminate the truth by virtue of their opposition to it.

On L&O's idea of Literary Value without Truth

To conclude: L&O argue that literary value must be affirmed by doing away with literary truth. They insist that their no-truth theory of literature doesn't commit them "to an arid aestheticism or to 'cutting literature off from the world' (a notion virtually incomprehensible)" (*Truth* 22), and they hold that their theory does justice to the real value of literature by not reducing it to the truth-values of subjects like history, philosophy, and science (a project that they think is bound to fail). In this sense, they explicitly state that their no-truth theory has the goal of providing a strong response to the denial of literary value perpetrated by post-structuralism, anti-humanism, and reductionism, that response that literary humanism was never able to provide.

For L&O, the traditional defenses of literary value have always insisted on "the point where the humanistic conception is at its weakest" (ibid. 23). That is, they have always based themselves on a pro-truth theory stating that "literary works are true—*but not in the sense in which statements, hypotheses, historical treatises, etc. are true*" (ibid. 11), and as we've seen, for L&O this can result only in weak defenses of literary value, whereby literary truth always turns out to be something less that actual truth. In this sense, they write that "inasmuch as literature needs 'defending' for its fictionality it is pointless to try and do so in terms of truth; the hopelessness, and counter-productiveness, of this move is soon evident in the inevitable fudging of the idea of truth. 'Imaginative' or 'literary' truth always turns out to be something less than truth itself and the case falters from then on" (ibid. 21).

L&O are right in the sense that if "literary" truth is to be conceived in terms of a truth that is something less than actual truth (i.e. a truth that is "imaginative" or "metaphorical" or "verisimilitude" etc.) then this can result only in weak defenses of literary value. But then they move on to say that their "principal debate is with those who want a 'stronger' sense of 'truth' and 'falsity' applied to literature; i.e. those who see the aim of

literature as conveying or teaching or embodying universal truths about human nature, the human condition, and so on, in a sense at least *analogous* to that in which scientific, or psychological, or historical hypotheses can express general truths" (ibid. 6). Here their discourse shifts, and their debate becomes one against both those who want a weaker sense of literary truth and those who want a stronger sense of it. L&O's discourse thus becomes a denial of all notions of literary truth after which comes a consequential affirmation of a no-truth theory by which, nonetheless (i.e. without truth), "literary works can contribute to the development and understanding of the deepest, most revered or a culture's conceptions without advancing propositions, statements, or hypotheses about them" (ibid. 22).

This is L&O's final defense of literary value: that literature contributes to the development and understanding of our most fundamental conceptions without saying anything about them that's to be approached in terms of truth-value. But how could that be? How could you contribute to the development and understanding of a conception without advancing any propositions or statements or hypotheses about it? The contradiction here is that you cannot "understand" *anything* without a relationship with the truth. When you understand something, you comprehend the "intended meaning" and "significance, explanation, or cause of" it, and you become "knowledgeably aware of the character or nature of" it (*OED*). Understanding, comprehension, knowledge, and awareness: all these terms refer to the truth. L&O's conception of literary value is thus contradictory and impossible. The most fundamental conceptions of a culture are *real*, and they all refer to that culture's idea of the truth. If something (like literature in L&O's eyes) has nothing to do with the truth, then it also can't have anything to do with the fundamental conceptions of a culture. It's therefore impossible to defend the idea of literary value without truth.[16]

In this section we've problematized L&O's rejections of pro-truth theories of literature, showing their inaccuracy. Our countering had no intention of defending these past pro-truth theories (of which L&O do show the shortcomings, in a critical effort that is of great value); the goal here was to show that the argument on which L&O build their no-truth theory of literature falters from the beginning. L&O's no-truth theory is constructed on the

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[16] In this sense, in "What Isn't Literature?" (1978), E.D. Hirsch writes that "to regard literature as primarily aesthetic is not only a mistake; it is also a very unfortunate narrowing of our responses to literature, and our perceptions of its breadth and possibilities" ("WIL?" 28). To think of literary value without truth is precisely to run the risk of aestheticizing literature, even though L&O try to avoid this conclusion.

premise that L&O have been able to coherently disprove all pro-truth theories, but this is not the case. This in turn undermines their proposal of their no-truth theory, of which we've also seen the essential contradiction. We thus now turn to other concerns that their work raises.

Confusing the Ontology of Literature with Matters of Literary Criticism

L&O tend to mix their discourse on the ontology of literature and fiction with a normative discussion on matters of literary criticism. For example, they state that "metaphysical worries about the nature of objects, reality, the world, truth, and so forth, arise in connection with fiction but […] can be dispelled—often shown to be irrelevant—in the context of literary criticism or theory" (*Truth* 14-5). Within their general argument, a statement of this kind can generate confusion. First, even literary criticism and literary theory are two distinct (and connected) practices. Literary criticism is the analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of literature. Literary theory is the systematic study of the nature of literature and of the methods of its analysis (including literary criticism).

Thus, if literary theory is the study of the *nature* of literature, then all the ontological worries that arise in connection with fiction are central – and *not* irrelevant – to literary theory (the nature of something is an ontological matter). Second, what is to be done "in the context of literary criticism" is yet another matter that differs from whether a correct theory of literature is pro-truth or no-truth (it perhaps depends upon this, but it remains a distinct matter). Therefore, L&O's wish to "avoid dragging metaphysical questions into literary criticism" (ibid. 19) cannot be confused with their wish to avoid dragging metaphysical questions into literary theory. We may have a conversation about whether ontology should enter literary criticism, but a literary theory that is not ontological is no *theory* at all. Perhaps a literary critic can proceed in the analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of works of literature without addressing ontological questions (where this non-addressing means the taking for granted of an ontology established by some literary theorist), but a literary theorist cannot establish a theory of literature without addressing ontological questions. To give an obvious example, whether the correct theory of literature is pro-truth or no-truth depends (among other things) on the meaning of "truth," and this meaning can only be defined by a metaphysical-ontological-epistemological-scientific (depending what beliefs you hold)

discourse to which the literary theorist must commit him/herself.[17] Literary criticism, like all other practices, depends on pervading metaphysical premises that you must either take for granted (in faith) or explore for yourself. There's thus no room for freedom from ontology in literature.[18]

L&O affirm that literary fiction contributes to the development and understanding of the fundamental conceptions of a culture without possessing truth-value, and they claim that this proposition is free from metaphysical premises of any kind. L&O don't realize that this definition of literary value is necessarily bound to the ideal of literary truth. When a writer chooses to represent a certain literary world, his choice embodies the structuring of a certain hierarchy of values which testifies to the work's affirmation of certain ideals as both meaningful and true. And when a community values a certain literary work, this testifies to the community's acceptance of the meaningfulness and truth of the hierarchy of values represented in the work. This dynamic constitutes the process of the development of a culture, and of its self-awareness through literature. Throughout history, literary writers have always believed that their works could embody truth.

Recently, David Foster Wallace, as we will see in greater detail in the pages that follow, argued that the aim of literature is "to countenance and render real aspects of real experiences" (McCaffery 36), where of course "real" means "true." For Wallace, literary fiction must force us to *face the truth* in order to make us less lonely: "a big part of real art-fiction's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny" (ibid. 32). Human redemption can occur only when we face the truth, and so if literary fiction ought to try to offer redemption, then what it certainly must offer is the truth. What's dreadful, what we want to deny, what literature must force us to confront, is exactly this greatest enemy of ours that can also become our

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[17] I am here using the terms metaphysics and ontology indifferently to indicate the study of the fundamental nature of things as things.

[18] The twentieth century has seen many theories of literature that are more coherent than L&O's in their respect for ontology. Among these are Richard Wollheim's *Art and its Objects* (1968), Monroe Beardsley's "The Concept of Literature" (1973), John Searle' "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" (1975), J.O. Urmson's "Literature" (1977), and Gregory Currie "What is Fiction?" (1985).

best friend: *the truth*. Wallace's magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996), in this sense, offers a significant adaptation of Jesus's maxim in John 8:31-32: "The Truth will set you free, but not until it's done with you" (*IJ* 973).

But of course L&O maintain that truth-related and metaphysical concerns have nothing to do with literary studies also because they believe that literary value has nothing to do with truth-value. It's in this sense that they write that "debate about the truth and falsity of the propositions implied by a literary work is absent from literary criticism since it does not enter into *the appreciation of the work as a literary work*" (*Truth* 334). L&O's claim appears inexplicably naïve considering that throughout history, the vast majority of literary criticism has always been concerned with the truth-value of literary propositions.[19]

Second, here L&O again confuse their normative proposition concerning literary criticism with their ontological argument about the nature of literature and literary value. Whether or not it's desirable for literary criticism to enter the debate about the truth-value of literary propositions does not entail *any* conclusions about the ontology of literature. If we once again use *Middlemarch*'s implied thematic statement that "the best human hopes and aspirations are always thwarted by forces beyond human control" as an example, then, while it's certainly true that "a debate about the substance of this thematic statement will be a debate about the possibility of free will and this is central in philosophy" (*Truth* 336), and while it *may* be true that "the critic is free to join this debate, of course, but when he does he has moved on from literary appreciation of *Middlemarch*" (ibid.), nonetheless, this says nothing about the nature of the novel, and about whether or not its general proposition holds truth-value or not, and about whether this general proposition is fundamental or not to its literary value

Also, the debate on *Middlemarch*'s thematic statement doesn't amount only to the philosophical evaluation – entirely distanced from the novel's other literary qualities (form,

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[19] Numerous scholars argue against L&O's claim that truth is absent from literary criticism. Some examples of critics who read literature in terms of truth-value are Lionel Trilling in "The Poet as Hero; Keats in his Letters" (1951), M.W. Rowe in "Lamarque and Olsen on Literature and Truth" (1997), and Piero Boitani in *Letteratura e verità* (*Literature and Truth*, 2013). Even writers themselves criticize their own work in terms of truth-value. About the famous line "We must love one another or die" in his poem entitled "September 1, 1939," W.H. Auden wrote: "I said to myself 'That's a damned lie! We must die anyway.' So, in the next edition, I altered it to 'We must love one another and die.' This didn't do either, so I cut the stanza. Still no good! The whole poem, I realized, was infected with an incurable dishonesty and must be scrapped" (Mendelson 326-7).

plot, characterization, etc.) – of whether free will is true or false. Rather, this debate involves reflection on the quality of the development of this theme *within* the novel; that is, reflection on whether the novel, within its own boundaries, explores the consequences of this possible truth in deep, coherent, and insightful ways. This reflection is thus thematic, and it's about truth, logic, coherence of reason and feeling *within* the novel, and so the judgment of the quality of the novelistic development of the theme is in many ways (but not in *all* ways) independent of whether free will finally ends up being true or false. Thus, reflection on the truth-value of the thematic statements of literary works is bound to remain a fundamental part of literary appreciation and literary criticism, as it has always been. Contrary to what L&O argue, then, this approach still exhibits itself as that which does justice to the true value of literature.

On Richard Rorty's Pragmatism and the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction

L&O against Richard Rorty

Throughout *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, L&O take issue with Richard Rorty's pragmatism, which represents the most popular line of thought in contemporary theory. Rorty is famous for his attacks on the correspondence theory of truth and on the distinction between non-fiction and fiction. These are the two foundational principles of L&O's no-truth theory of literature, which depends on the claims that "the truth per se exists" and that "literature differs from explicitly truth-seeking subjects like philosophy, history, psychology, science, etc.," – claims that are founded on the correspondence theory of truth and on the distinction between non-fiction and fiction –, and so L&O *must* argue against Rorty.

The Rortian argument can be summarized as follows: (1) the distinction between fact-stating and fictional discourse depends on a correspondence conception of truth: fact-stating discourse refers to what is out there (objects and facts) while fiction makes things up; (2) the correspondence theory of truth is untenable, as shown by anti-realist and pragmatist philosophy of language and Kantian-type epistemology; (3) therefore, the distinction between fact-stating and fictional discourse is itself untenable. The consequences of this argument are extreme. The idea of the untenability of the correspondence theory of truth mandates that the entirety of human discourse is fictional: since we can't refer to the world

out there, then everything we think and say is made up.

The Rortian argument thus entails the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction, which L&O schematize as "(1) Fiction is whatever is 'made up' conceptually or linguistically. (2) Truth is man-made conceptually or linguistically. (3) Therefore, truth is just a species of fiction" (*Truth* 174). L&O concede that this theory presents "a powerful argument" (ibid. 190) that even foregrounds "the presence of fictions and constructions in science" (ibid.) and supports the compelling positions of "metaphysical anti-realism" (ibid.) and of skepticism about "the idea of a 'privileged' discourse" (ibid.). But they reject the idea that "we should abandon altogether the distinction between fiction-making and truth-telling" (ibid.), and they claim that their work "exposes as a myth the alleged 'ubiquity of fiction'" (ibid. 191).

First, L&O argue that it is possible to accept anti-realism, constructivism, or pragmatism *and* to retain the notion of truth and of the objective world. In this sense, they write that "even if philosophical anti-realism is true, even if we accept constructivist theories of knowledge or pragmatist or coherentist theories of truth, we still need to retain some conception of an objective world, some distinction between a fictional invention and a real object, some distinction between different ends of discourse" (ibid. 190-1). This proposition, though, is once again contradictory. Anti-realism, constructivism, and pragmatism, when properly developed, necessarily result in the rejection of the ideals of truth and objectivity. It's impossible to accept any of these philosophies and reject the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction. The denial of the correspondence theory of truth entails the impossibility of knowing what is out there and hence of knowing the truth of what is out there. In this sense, Rorty's argument is way more coherent than L&O's. You either *know* the truth that's out there or you *invent* it (as Nietzsche well knew). You cannot invent the meaning of the world and then claim its objectivity. If anti-realism, constructivism, or pragmatism are right, then "the truth" and "the objective world" are fictional constructions, and the only remaining truth is the ubiquity of fiction.

Second, L&O argue that "there simply is no unitary notion of fiction" (ibid. 191) that can unite the various theories of the ubiquity of fiction, and that "this lack of unity exposes as a myth the alleged 'ubiquity of fiction'" (ibid.). Yet, even if the premise were true, the conclusion that L&O come to doesn't follow at all. There's absolutely no reason to think that the existence of myriad particular theories of fiction undermines the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction. There are, for example, myriad different theories of capitalism: does this expose capitalism as a myth? It doesn't. There have been myriad definitions of philosophy

throughout history. Is the existence of philosophy a myth? It isn't, and examples of these kind could be provided in infinity. Thus, while it's true that, as L&O write, "Kant's 'synthesis,' Bentham's 'fictitious entities,' Russell's 'logical constructions,' Quine's 'posits,' Dennett's 'notional worlds,' Vaihinger's 'as if'" (ibid.) all conceptualize different theories of fiction, this doesn't undermine the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction one bit. In fact, through all their myriad differences, these theories actually find unity in their assertion that what is "synthetic," "fictitious," "constructed," "posited," "notional," "as if," does not correspond to what's "out there" in the "objective world," but it is instead fictional, made up. Therefore, if anything, the presence of these myriad theories *supports* the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction by showing how widespread it is. L&O thus fail to undermine the theory.

On Metaphysics and Literature

The fact that L&O fail to undermine the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction, however, doesn't mean that the theory cannot be undermined. And paradoxically, there's a sense in which L&O's work appears to be inspired by Rorty's pragmatism. As we've already discussed, one of L&O's central worries is that "metaphysical concerns show a remarkable resilience in philosophy and also, in the last decade or so, in literary theory" (*Truth* 163). L&O wish to free literary conversation of all metaphysical concerns, and in this sense they consciously align with Rorty: "Richard Rorty exhorts us even now to abandon our metaphysical ambitions and stop thinking that there are deep philosophical questions about reality, truth, the world, and the rest" (ibid. 162-3).

L&O, however, must face the problem of rejecting Rorty's denial of truth and objectivity if they wish to defend their no-truth theory, and so they specify that "Rorty's view is fundamentally different from ours" (ibid. 193). L&O thus cite Rorty to corroborate their rejection of metaphysics, and then seek to refute the "extreme rhetoric, characterizing a widespread trend in modern thought, according to which there is no 'real world,' what exists is just what is constructed, truth is an illusion, fiction is everywhere" (ibid. 162), and according to which "the discourses of science, philosophy, literature, history, the social sciences, are more or less arbitrarily distinguished and rest on nothing more fundamental than institutional divisions of labor" (ibid. 161), i.e. the extreme rhetoric of which Rorty is the most famous spokesperson.

Rorty is far more coherent in his conclusions than L&O: what Rorty means to say when he rejects all metaphysical discourses is exactly that all discussions about objective truth

must be abandoned because the only truth is the ubiquity of fiction. When L&O, instead, argue that discussions about literature must be freed from metaphysics but that the definition of literature must depend on the recognition of the objectivity of truth (to which literature can't connect), they contradict themselves much more than Rorty does, because their claim to knowledge of objective truth necessarily requires a fundamental theory of the Truth of the nature of Being.

Nonetheless, this same kind of contradiction is present in Rorty as well (even though to a much lesser degree). As L&O write, Rorty "is insistent that there are implications for literature in what he says about truth" (ibid. 194). He argues that once the correspondence theory of truth falls, then the distinction between fact-stating and fictional discourse also falls, and so "there is no longer much point in trying to distinguish literature from philosophy" (ibid.) and other truth-seeking practices. The contradiction in Rorty resides once again in his belief that his discourse is free from metaphysical premises when his denial of the correspondence theory of truth is, in truth, itself a metaphysics.

Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (1989) is the work in which Rorty defines literature after having rejected the idea of objective truth, writing that "the word 'literature' now covers just about every sort of book which might conceivably have moral relevance—might conceivably alter one's sense of what is possible and important. The application of this term has nothing to do with the presence of 'literary qualities' in a book" (*CIS* 82). This definition abolishes all distinctions between fact-stating and fictional discourse, to which L&O respond that "the only direct support" (ibid.) that Rorty offers in favor of his definition is the arbitrary "changing the meaning of key terms" (ibid. 194), which "clearly" exhibits the "very weak ground" (ibid. 195) on which his argument rests.

This accusation of pure arbitrariness can be levelled at Rorty only in terms of his attributing morality to literature, and not – as L&O do – at his abolishment of all distinctions between fact-stating and fictional discourse. Rorty's Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction is not arbitrary, it follows from his denial of objective truth. What's arbitrary is his calling literature a moral and valuable practice. The only way to disprove the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction is to do metaphysics. That is, to show that Rorty's rejection of the correspondence theory of truth is untenable. Once the foundations of the argument are broken down, then so will Rorty's entire discourse. But L&O refuse to address metaphysical matters, and they even grant the right of some of Rorty's fundamental ideas. As a result, their rejection of Rorty's conclusions is both inadequate and contradictory, and therefore so is their rejection of all

other contemporary no-truth theories of literature, which they don't accept because they are founded upon this Rortian "fashionable skepticism about truth and reality" (ibid. 3) which they want to counter but fail to.

Contradictions of Rorty's Pragmatism

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty divides philosophers into metaphysicians and ironists. Metaphysicians are those who believe in the Truth out there. They believe in the Enlightenment and "take science as the paradigmatic human activity" (*CIS* 3). They "insist that natural science discovers truth rather than makes it" (ibid.) and contrast "'hard scientific fact' with the 'subjective' or with 'metaphor'" (ibid. 4). (In this sense, Rorty's "metaphysicians" seem to be all, in truth, *empiricists* who believe that science knows the truth.) On the other hand, ironists see "science as one more human activity" (ibid.) that "invent[s] descriptions of the world which are useful for purposes of predicting and controlling what happens, just as poets and political thinkers invent other descriptions of it for other purposes. But there is no sense in which *any* of these descriptions is an accurate representation of the way the world is in itself. These philosophers regard the very idea of such a representation as pointless" (ibid. 8-9). Ironists (i.e. pragmatists), in short, see that the idea of the correspondence theory of truth is both false and pointless, and that no discourse can know the Truth itself, and that thus all discourses are fictional, and that this is no cause for despair. (Rorty forgets – as does our time – that there are metaphysicians who argue that the Truth is "out there" and *not* scientific.)

Rorty, of course, places himself among the ironists, and everything he says on literature depends on this initial decision. In this sense, the real refutation of his theses on literature should rest on the analytical refutation of the fundamental principles of his philosophy. This refutation is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Suffice it to recall here his writing at the beginning of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* that "to say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states" (ibid. 5). Such an affirmation is already enough both to negate both Rorty's supposed freedom from metaphysics (because the affirmation of the objective world is metaphysical) and his Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction (because at least the affirmation of the objective world does present itself as the objective Truth that escapes fictionality) and to demonstrate that he does not truly understand Nietzsche, whom he cites as his main inspiration. If the ubiquity of

fiction is true, then life must be pure relativism and the will to power, and not even the existence of an objective world can be affirmed. If there's no truth out there (no absolute) to constrain inquiry, then human beings have the right to say and do anything they want, provided that they can overpower the opposition. This is why the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction belongs to the will to power, because if there's no truth out there to constrain our affirmations and actions, then the "truth" becomes whatever has the power to establish its dominance over opposing discourses, in a world where *all* discourses are fictional, man-made.[20]

If the truth is a human construct, then truth, knowledge, morality, and virtue are nothing but an arbitrary agreement, and not even an agreement between a community, but an agreement between those who have the power to affirm their will over others. In "Is There a Problem about Fictional Discourse?" (1982), Rorty asks the rhetorical question: "how would it be different if everything were a dream? How would it be different if it were all *made up*? How would it be different if there were nothing there to be represented? How does having knowledge differ from making poems and telling stories?" (128-9). Once again, this passage exhibits his inability to see the proper consequences of his pragmatism. On this passage L&O rightly note that Descartes pursued philosophy because he realized that, if it were all made up, then *everything would change*, and life would become a "solipsistic nightmare" (*Truth* 164) in which you wouldn't know whether anything outside yourself actually exists, including other people, and this would make you "uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out," as David Foster Wallace would say in *This Is Water* (60).

And that Descartes wrote his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) precisely because he knew that if it were all made up then everything would change is not a peculiar interpretation of L&O's; it is standard knowledge. Plus, Nietzsche, Rorty's hero, knew very

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[20] Pragmatism and the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction entail the absolute freedom and limitlessness of interpretation. Those who think that anything can be done with a piece of literature and that fidelity is an illusion are coherent with the premises of this philosophy. In fact, in literary terms, Rorty's philosophy leads to the radical pluralism of works like Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* (1971), J. Hillis Miller's "Tradition and Difference" (1972), and E.D. Hirsch "Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics" (1972). For oppositions to radical pluralism see Stanley Fish's "How Ordinary is Ordinary Language" (1973) and "Is There a Text in This Class?" (1980), Alexander Nehamas's "The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal" (1981), Robert Stecker's "Art Interpretation" (1994), and Umberto Eco's "On Some Functions of Literature" (2004).

well that if it were all made up then there would also be no reason to feel empathy toward anyone else, since you wouldn't even know if they actually exist. If there is no absolute truth then there are no constraints to impede the exercise of one's pure will to power, and no justice on which to found moral and ethical limitations. In this picture, justice is the war of all against all, and the truth becomes what wins the war. Rorty's unwillingness to affirm these conclusions and his claim that the world out there objectively exists speak of the fundamental contradictions of his philosophy. Rorty's conclusions violate the fundamental principles of his pragmatist philosophy and the untenability of his philosophy.

On the Ontology of Fiction

In L&O's words, "to say of a thing that it is fictional is to suggest that it does not exist, the implied association being between what is fictional and what is *unreal*. To say of a description that it is fictional is to suggest that it is not true, the implied association being between what is fictional and what is *false*" (*Truth* 16). Two great thinkers of the twentieth century who make this argument are Bertrand Russell and Nelson Goodman. In *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1950), for example, Russell writes of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that "the propositions in the play are false because there was no such man" (*IMT* 294). And in *Of Mind and Other Matters* (1984), Goodman reiterates that "all fiction is literal, literary falsehood" (*MM* 124). Russell and Goodman are thus two great exponents of the commonsense theory that equates fiction with falsehood, because fiction speaks of things that *do not exist*; that is, it affirms the existence of the non-existent. In this view, fiction violates the most fundamental principle of rationality as described by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*: "to say that what is is not, or that what is not is, is false; but to say that what is is, and what is not is not, is true" (1011b 26). Fiction says that what isn't is, and so it is guilty of the greatest irrationality, contradiction, and falsehood.

This is an ontological argument. The theory that the propositions in *Hamlet* are false because there was no such man entails the belief in the correspondence theory of truth and in empiricism. That is, it entails the belief that what "exists" are only the material things to which our senses refer to, and the belief that what is true is what describes those material things. Thus, the theory says that the propositions in *Hamlet* are false because there's no flesh-and-blood human being named "Hamlet." But this simple commonsense theory is full

of ontological presuppositions that are highly questionable. Why should we think of fictional objects as things that must refer to something outside themselves? And why should they refer to something *material* to be true? Couldn't they assert their own specific mode of existence and be true in themselves? These are all ontological questions, and it is here that everything we say about literary fiction is decided (far from the freedom from metaphysics that L&O desire).

The fundamental question here is "what is a fictional object?" which in turn depends on the answer to the even more fundamental question "what is a thing?" From our wondering about a seemingly purely literary and fictional question, then, when we truly want to get to the heart of the matter, we soon find out that our investigation must begin at the ultimate and most fundamental question of ontology, because everything we say depends on our most basic interpretation of reality. The original question of ontology is: can we really speak and think of things that aren't? Can we speak and think of nothingness?

The theories that state that fiction is false because it affirms the existence of the non-existent must first of all face the problem of their ontological foundation, which also turns out to be the fundamental problem of rationality itself. To say that fiction is false because it affirms the existence of the non-existent is to say that human beings, through fiction, can think and speak of nothingness. At least since Parmenides, rationality warns against this danger of thinking that human beings can think and speak of nothingness. In his great poem *On Nature*, Parmenides states: "For never shall this be forced: that things that are not exist" (*ON* 73); "you could not know that which does not exist (because it is impossible) nor could you express it" (ibid. 32).

What is not (what does not exist) is nothingness, and nothingness cannot appear, and what does not appear is not available to human thought, speech, nor knowledge. It's thus impossible to think, speak, and know of what is not. The greatest folly is to disobey this fundamental principle, this greatest paradigm of the necessity of the principle of non-contradiction. This principle founds the entire history of rationality, of all speech, and of all thought (even though humanity constantly *attempts to* disobey it.

Russell's and Goodman's theories of fiction are two of those instances in which humanity attempts to disobey this most fundamental principle, because their judgment that fiction is false is founded upon the belief that fiction speaks of what is not. Yet, this is *impossible*. Parmenides's great fault was to believe that to remain coherent to the great principle one must affirm that all life is illusion, appearance, and nothingness. But while in

his *History of Western Philosophy* Russell explains the contradiction that pervades this Parmenidean conclusion, what's most significant for us is that Russell doesn't see that within his explanation he exhibits his own contradiction about fiction when he states that fiction is false because it speaks of things that aren't. The propositions of *Hamlet* appear, and with them appears the character "Hamlet" to which the propositions refer, and therefore, since they appear, they are and must be real. Since we think and speak of it, "Hamlet" must be part of reality, because it appears, and therefore it cannot be nothing. In this deepest sense, "Hamlet" *exists* as part of reality, and so the statement that "the propositions in *Hamlet* are false because they speak of what is not" is contradictory and false. There is no entity that is not (what is is not nothing), and it is impossible to express what is not. Therefore, "Hamlet" and the propositions that refer to it exist as part of reality, and so Russell's and Goodman's argument that fiction is false is itself false.[21]

But one could specify that Russell's statement indicates that the propositions of *Hamlet* are false because they speak of *a flesh-and-blood human being* that does not exist. In this sense, one would say that the propositions of *Hamlet* are false because they attribute to "Hamlet" a mode of existence that does not belong to it. But this specification itself is plain falsehood. Obviously, the propositions of *Hamlet* do not affirm the existence of a flesh-and-blood human being named "Hamlet"; they affirm the existence of *a fictional character* named "Hamlet." They thus do *not* attribute an improper mode of existence to its object. In this sense, L&O are right that fictional propositions do not do what Russell and Goodman claim they do. If one were to "utter assertorically" the propositions of *Hamlet*, these wouldn't translate in "'Hamlet' is a flesh-and-blood human being" but instead in "Hamlet is a fictional character who exists only in accordance with the fiction wherein it appears, and in accordance with the mode of existence that is proper to it." That is, as David Lewis argues in "Truth and Fiction" (1978), all descriptions of fictional characters should be understood to implicitly begin with the operator "In such-and-such fiction…."

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[21] Further complications arise when we realize that, even from the commonsense point of view, it is not at all clear what is fictional and what isn't. In *Narrative and the Self* (1991), for example, Anthony Kerby writes that "it is as a character in our (and other people's) narratives that we achieve an identity" (*NF* 40), reiterating Paul Ricoeur's argument in "History as Narrative and Practice" (1979), which is one of the other myriad instantiations of this argument. Are our identities themselves fictional characters? And if so, would we say that therefore our identities are not real, or that they do not exist?

There's thus no sense in which fictional propositions disobey the Parmenidean principle. Fictional propositions do *not* say that what isn't is. They do not even attribute any improper mode of existence to the entities they present. Thus, one cannot argue that fiction is false because it speaks of things that aren't or because it attributes improper modes of existence to the things it speaks of. The character "Hamlet" is and exists and is real as a character, and he belongs to the world by virtue of the reality of its being a fictional character, and the propositions of the play refer to it in the mode of being and existence that is proper to it, and they belong to the world by virtue of the reality of their being fictional propositions.

If there's one conclusion we want to get at here, it's precisely this: that *yes*, rationality imposes that we begin to grasp that our treatment of material things as the only things that are and exist is contradictory. Everything that *appears* in any mode of appearance belongs to being and existence and should be treated accordingly in order to have a coherent relationship with being (and therefore with fictional objects, among everything else). The "golden mountain" and the "unicorn" are *real*, in accordance with the proper mode of reality that belongs to them. Their reality is the condition that allows their appearance to thought, our picturing them in our minds, our descriptions of them, our drawings of them. If they were nothing, if they didn't exist, none of this could happen. Therefore, we must commit to fictitious entities.[22]

Conclusion

We haven't established a pro-truth theory of literature, but we've challenged various no-truth theories as well as various criticisms of pro-truth theories, together with the idea that literary

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[22] Alexius Meinong's "The Theory of Objects" (1904) may represent a first step toward this recognition. Meinong expresses the self-evidence of the Parmenidean principle and on that basis affirms that non-material objects like the "golden mountain" – since they do appear to human consciousness – possess "being." In this sense, he sees that fictional objects *are* real, but on the other hand, he was influenced by empiricism and therefore attributed "existence" only to empirical objects, differentiating "being" from "existence." Instead, what we try to indicate here is that *everything that appears* appears in experience, and therefore that every object is an empirical object that possesses "existence," including fictional objects. The "golden mountain" both is and exists; fictional objects, like all other things, are and exist in their own proper mode of being and existence, like everything else.

value can be separated from the truth. The negative work that Lamarque and Olsen do is in many ways extremely valuable, as they do manage to show various failures of past theories of literature, but on the other hand there are many times in which their criticisms of other theories show their precariousness. This is largely due to what's most important: the positive work that L&O attempt in defense of their no-truth theory is lacking, and its faltering basis also affects their criticisms of other theories.

The question concerning the ontology of literary fiction remains open, and readers continue to read with a belief in the profundity of literature that is inextricable from its relationship with the truth. We feel deep inside that literary works explore the depths of human nature, and we go through the work of reading them prompted by the sense that we will learn something through them, about ourselves and the world. If no theory has ever been able to present a successful and comprehensive rational account of this process, this doesn't mean that such theory will never see the light of day, nor that things aren't the way they are no matter whether we can explain them or not.

L&O are right: literature is not philosophy. But this doesn't automatically deprive literature of any serious, valuable, fundamental relationship with truth. The meaning, profundity, and value of literature still remain inexplicable without truth. We relate to literature's content, which we value as humanly interesting, because we believe that there is truth in it. This is the necessary condition which allows us to believe that in reading we can converse about deep human concerns that regard our lives. Maurice Merleau-Ponty testifies to this experience in *The Prose of the World* (1969) when he writes: "I have access to Stendhal's outlook through the commonplace words he uses. But in his hands these words are given a new twist. The cross-references multiply. More and more arrows point in the direction of a thought I have never encountered before, and perhaps never would have met without Stendhal" (*PW* 12). And so does John Stuart Mill in his *Autobiography* (1873) when he says that the poetry of William Wordsworth saved him from near-suicidal depression – "Wordsworth's poems [are] a medicine for my state of mind" (*A* 150) –, and he retraces this salvific power of poetry in its truth: "Wordsworth taught me […] the common feelings and common destiny of human beings" (ibid. 152).

As Catherine Wilson writes in "Literature and Knowledge" (1983), taking novels as examples, experiences of the kind of Merleau-Ponty and Mill can occur only if the reader "(a) recognizes the conception presented in the novel as superior to his own and (b) adopts it, in recognition of its superiority, so that it comes to serve as a kind of standard by which

he reviews his own conduct and that of others" ("LK" 495). Or as Robert Stecker writes in "What Is Literature?" (1996), such experiences can occur only if reading consists of "(1) vivid conceptions we derive from the work" ("WIL?" 688), by which literary value becomes "(2) what we learn about ourselves, and more speculatively, of other people, when we see how we react to these conceptions" (ibid. 688). In literature, therefore, we gain a "cognitive value" that "consists in the provision of new ways of thinking (new conceptions) about potentially any aspect of human experience, in such a way that we do not merely entertain such ideas in the abstract, but we concretely imagine what one does and feels when one thinks of the world in this way" (ibid.). These are conceptions that "we take away from the work for the purpose of being able to think better about the actual world" (ibid.).

These cognitive processes would be unimaginable if literary propositions didn't possess truth-value. The conceptions of the literary work *must* have truth-value if one is to confront them and decide upon them, whether to adopt or discard them. Literature and philosophy *are* two distinct practices, and literature *does* differ from other truth-seeking practices as well. Literature is a kind of *poíesis*, a *téchne*, a *mythic téchne*: it affirms a certain meaningfulness of the world, an image of life, in order to save humanity from suffering. Philosophy is the rejection of all *poíesis* and myth: it has always wanted to demonstrate the incontrovertible truth through rational reasoning, and so it rejected all literature as a myth, i.e. as an uncertainty incapable of demonstrating the truth of its claims, and thus constituting itself an inadequate remedy to suffering. In this sense, philosophy is the denunciation of the insufficiency of *poíesis*. And yet literature and philosophy nonetheless share an essential and deeply rooted core that constitutes the reason of their original unification. They are both human *discourses* that aim to save humanity from suffering. All discourses create an image of the world, and every image constitutes itself as salvific by bestowing meaningfulness upon the world.

Neither literature nor philosophy have ever given up their wish to produce true images of life, in order to bring to light the true meaning of being, and contemplate it, and gain knowledge of it, so that we could be saved from suffering. This is why the boundaries between literature and philosophy are blurred, and why so much literature is philosophical and so much philosophy is literary.

Here lies the originary unity of literature, philosophy, and truth. Literary value remains inconceivable without truth. And if no one has ever provided a good theory of the ontology and value of literary fiction, here we've tried to offer a new starting point for this

discussion. Whatever we say about literary fiction will never make sense if we do not begin by recognizing that fictional objects are and exist in accordance with the mode of being and existence that is proper to them. This means that fictional objects are not false in any sense, and that they do not *need* to refer to anything outside themselves to be meaningful and true, and that too many theories have been led astray by the mistaken assumption that fictional objects are false to begin with. Only if we start anew in this sense, we'll get a chance to understand the proper ontology of literary fiction, and only then we'll be able to say something real about its truth-value.

The Influence of Leo Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* on David Foster Wallace's Literary Project

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Everyone knows that Tolstoy placed truth highest of all the virtues.
Isaiah Berlin, "Tolstoy and Enlightenment."

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Introduction

In 1993, David Foster Wallace publicly defined his conception of literature and the ends of his literary project. He planned to re-establish the connection between literature, truth, and what is most important in our lives so that literature could retrieve its traditional role as a force of cultural criticism and as a means to respond to the predicaments of its time. In so doing, he invited interpretations that would seek in his work a philosophical exploration of our deepest beliefs and their existential and social consequences.

Here, we analyze Wallace's conception of literature in order to bring to light his fundamental belief in the inextricable connection among literature, philosophy, the truth, and the existential-social function of literature (its ability to address what is most essential in our lives). And we do so through the unveiling of the direct influence of Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* (1897)[23] on Wallace's entire literary project.

In a 1993 interview with Kennedy and Polk, Wallace called himself "the only 'postmodernist' you'll ever meet who absolutely worships Leo Tolstoy" (KP 19), explaining that he appreciated Tolstoy because Tolstoy believed that the eternal objective of art is "to communicate" and to "affect somebody, make somebody feel a certain way, allow them to enter into relationships with ideas and with characters that are not permitted within the cinctures of the ordinary verbal intercourse" (ibid. 18), and because he believed that art strives to do this for the good of its receiver who, through the experience of art and together with its author, can try "to learn how to be a human being, or to have good relationships, or decide whether or not there is a God, or decide whether there's such a thing as love, and

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[23] Hereafter *WIA?*.

whether it's redemptive" (ibid.).

This shows that Wallace recognized the fundamental principles of his writing in Tolstoy's conception of art, which fact constitutes only one of many proofs of the direct influence we want to unveil here. In another 1993 interview, Wallace cited Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* among the masterpieces that most influenced him (McCaffery 50), and in the 1996 interview with David Lipsky he referred to Tolstoy as the paradigm of the traditional Realist author who had striven to represent the truth in his narratives (Lipsky 37-38). In this sense, Tolstoy had done exactly what Wallace was trying to do in the 1990s (the difference between Tolstoy and Wallace being that one-hundred years had passed and thus the contingencies of life had changed: the perception of the truth was different, and so was the ideal of the literary form capable of representing the truth).

All these explicit references to Tolstoy indicate Wallace's familiarity with the work of the great Russian author and the extent of the latter's influence, which is not to deny that there are elements of Tolstoy's thought that Wallace outright rejected. For example, while Wallace felt a life-long attraction to Christianity and had a strong sense of the existential consequences of the denial of God, he ultimately could never abandon the democratic spirit and the techno-scientific rationality he was born into. He thus could never overcome his final distrust of God. Tolstoy, instead, in Wallace's own words, was a "fundamentalist Russian Orthodox Christian" (KP 18) whose fundamentalism led to a strict and self-righteous moralist attitude that led Wallace to declare: "I'm not trying to line up behind Tolstoy" (McCaffery 26).

These disagreements, though, didn't stop Wallace from accepting the major tenets of Tolstoy's artistic thought: i.e. the ideal of art as a calling to the truth and to moral responsibility. If anything, that Wallace took the time to express both his agreements and disagreements with Tolstoy indicates the extent of Tolstoy's influence. But the real proof of Tolstoy's influence on Wallace's conception of literature resides in the evident alignment of Wallace's discourse with *WIA?*'s: Wallace's theses so openly recall Tolstoy's that it is truly striking that no other scholar has pointed this out before.[24]

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[24] In *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (2016), Lucas Thompson dedicates a chapter to Tolstoy's influence on Wallace, but he focuses on the relationship between *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and "Good Old Neon." Thompson does refer to *WIA?*'s clear influence on Wallace, but he doesn't explore it at length and thus doesn't illuminate its extent. He also limits Tolstoy's influence to Wallace's early period, which idea here

In the following, we demonstrate that Tolstoy's thought influenced Wallace's entire literary project to its core and that we can rightfully interpret the relationship between Tolstoy and Wallace as one of *direct* influence. We can do this (1) because of the extent of the alignment of their discourses, and (2) because of Wallace's multiple direct references to *WIA?* throughout his work, the last and most direct of which appears in "Deciderization 2007 – A Special Report," one of Wallace's latest writings (which fact shows that Wallace never forgot *WIA?*), where he writes: "What exactly are the connections between literary aesthetics and moral value supposed to be? Whose moral values ought to get used in determining what those connections should be? Does anyone even read Tolstoy's 'What Is Art?' anymore" (311). Finally, we can do this (3) because we can now read Wallace's own heavily annotated copy of *WIA?* at the David Foster Wallace archive.[25]

Manifestos to Redeem Art

In his "*Introduction à l'analyses des manifestes*" (1980), Claude Abastado writes that, besides the difficulties in establishing a final definition of the "manifesto," we may say that "we call 'manifesto' all texts that fiercely take a position and institute a blatant injunctive relationship between an emitter and his listeners" ("*on nomme 'manifeste' tout texte qui prend violemment position et institue, entre un émetteur et ses allocutaires, une relation injonctive flagrante*," 4, my translation). In *Machiavelli and Us* (1972-1986), Louis Althusser states that *The Prince* is a Manifesto because Machiavelli "mak[es] it serve as a means in the struggle he announces and engages" (23). In *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (1999), Janet Lyon argues that a "particular hortatory style" is perhaps "the only uniform convention among manifestos" (13) and that "the manifesto often fashions a foreshortened, impassioned, and highly selective history which chronicles the oppression leading to the present moment of crisis" (14). In *Legitimizing the Artist* (2003), Luca Somigli maintains that "the power sought by the manifesto writer is in

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we reject, recalling – among other things – that Wallace referred to *WIA?* in "Deciderization 2007," one of his latest writings.

[25] When I realized the extent of *WIA?*'s direct influence on Wallace I didn't know of the existence of the copy at the archive. My research at the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) only *confirmed* what I thought textual analysis shows in-itself. Thus, references to the copy will function only as secondary confirmations provided by the archival proof and will, therefore, all be unveiled in footnotes.

the first instance that of responding to the authority and authoritativeness of the dominant discourse" and that "it is in this sense that the manifesto is always a 'self-declaration'" (37). In *Poetry of the Revolution* (2006), finally, Martin Puchner states that the basic convention of the artistic-literary manifesto is "the act of declaring a new departure" (70), the act that unites all the *avant-gardes* and manifesto writers of the past two hundred years.[26]

Tolstoy's *WIA?* adheres to all the above definitions of the manifesto. Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram" (1993) – together with all the adjunct writings that form Wallace's manifesto – does too, and it does so precisely by consciously taking on the principles that drive Tolstoy's writing: that is, first and foremost, the necessity to condemn the art of the time.[27]

In *WIA?*, Tolstoy's denunciation is immediate: art has "become dull to all serious phenomena of life" (4). Tolstoy reiterates it throughout the entire text: "almost everything regarded as art, and good art, and the whole of art in our society, is not only not true and good art, nor the whole of art, it is not even art at all, but only a counterfeit of it" (113). Wallace makes Tolstoy's driving necessity his own ever since the publication of "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (1988), one of his earliest essays, where he writes that the "narrative art" of his time is "trash," "*unreal, empty*" and strives "not to change or enlighten or broaden or reorient" (52-53) but only to entertain. Thus, like Tolstoy, Wallace comes to write his manifestos out of the necessity to condemn the art of his time (Tolstoy took on art in general, Wallace limited himself to literature and to some forays into cinema). Wallace's "Fictional Futures" is, in essence, an early draft of EUP, and EUP is the manifesto where – just like Tolstoy in *WIA?* denounces the art of his time as dull and counterfeit – Wallace denounces the literature of his time as "extremely shallow," "dead on the page"

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[26] I owe these references to my colleague Luca Cortesi's PhD thesis "*La nechudožestvennaja proza di Velimir Chlebnikov: forme dichiarative, saggi, dialoghi*" ("The Non-Fictional Prose of Velimir Khlebnikov: Declarative Forms, Essays, Dialogues," my translation).

[27] "E Unibus Pluram" (hereafter, EUP) is certainly Wallace's main literary manifesto. Critics usually consider it as the main text of "the 1993 essay-interview nexus" (EUP plus the McCaffery interview) that they hold to constitute Wallace's manifesto. Here, we argue that Wallace's manifesto should rather be understood as a system of multiple essays and interviews. The system revolves around EUP and includes, *at least*, the essays "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (an early version of EUP), "The Empty Plenum" (where Wallace praises David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as a novel that obeys Wallace's dicta about what literature should be), "David Lynch Keeps His Head" (where Wallace describes Lynch as his cinematic equivalent), and "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" (where Wallace describes Dostoevsky as the paradigmatic example of the ideal writer), and the interviews with McCaffery, Kennedy and Polk, and David Lipsky.

(EUP 81) and devoid of "a genuine socio-artistic agenda" (ibid. 51).

In both Tolstoy and Wallace, though, the driving necessity is not simply negative. Tolstoy condemns the art of his time in order to offer a way to redemption. He writes that art must become "good, useful art" (*WIA?* 8): art that is "true," "serious," and promotes "love among people" (ibid.). Wallace aligns with Tolstoy's positive spirit too: this is why EUP ends with the famous pronouncement that "the next real literary 'rebels' [must] endorse and instantiate single entendre principles […] with reference and conviction" (81). Wallace's manifestos call for a literature of engagement that must recover its potential to act "as an anodyne against loneliness," to "make people less lonely" (KP 16), and that must act as a force of empathy and love in the world: "the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's heart's purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It's got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love" (McCaffery 50).

Wallace therefore aligns with both facets of Tolstoy's spirit: the negative (the condemnation of the art of the time) and the positive (the offer of redemptive art). Like Tolstoy, he establishes a sociology of art that exposes the predicaments of his time and art's responsibilities therein. And like Tolstoy, he specifically condemns the literature of his time for being art for art's sake and having no connections to what is most serious and real in our lives. Finally, like Tolstoy, he demands a literary return to truth and profound moral and human engagement. Tolstoy writes that this is the only possibility for the redemption and restoration of true art and literature. One hundred years later, Wallace follows in his footsteps and appropriates his reasoning down to its most specific details.

The Condemnation of the Pleasure Principle and of Art for Art's Sake

In *WIA?*, Tolstoy condemns art for art's sake together with all the theories that see beauty and pleasure as the central aim of art. He makes an analogy between art- and food-consumption and writes that "just as people who think that the aim and purpose of food is pleasure cannot perceive the true meaning of eating, so people who think that the aim of art is pleasure cannot know its meaning and purpose, because they ascribe to an activity which has meaning in connection with other phenomena of life the false and exclusive aim of pleasure" (*WIA?* 35). For Tolstoy, the problem with the ideal of artistic pleasure is that it

diverts art away from the truth, i.e. its connection with the other phenomena of life, what is most real and important in our lives. This is why he concludes (by maintaining the art-food analogy) that just as "people understand that the meaning of eating is the nourishment of the body only when they cease to consider pleasure the aim of this activity. So it is with art. People will understand the meaning of art only when they cease to regard beauty – that is, pleasure – as the aim of this activity" (ibid.).

Wallace follows Tolstoy and criticizes his own time in the same terms. In the McCaffery interview, he says that today's audience has "been raised to expect art to be 100 percent pleasurable and to make that pleasure effortless" (22), and he criticizes contemporary art precisely for spreading "the idea that one of the main goals of art is simply to *entertain*, give people sheer pleasure" (24). Throughout all the texts that compose his manifesto, Wallace links the ideal of artistic pleasure with the pervasiveness of infantilism and spectation that, to him, characterize contemporary Western-industrial society. And like Tolstoy, he argues that the ideal of pleasure deprives art of its true meaning – i.e. its connection with what is most real and important in our lives – and renders it "*unreal, empty.*"

In this sense, Tolstoy's condemnation of art for art's sake and its pleasure-ideal found Wallace's entire literary project, with its denunciation of minimalism and metafiction and its call to the restoration of a literature that's "about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (ibid. 26) and that's written "to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human" (ibid.) in this world.[28] Wallace follows Tolstoy even in making use of the art-food analogy to explain the grim consequences of the pleasure principle. He refers to this analogy in multiple interviews and essays (including EUP 37), the best-known instance of which is the interview with David

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[28] Wallace's copy of *WIA?* available at the HRC is the 1978 Bobbs-Merrill first edition. Vincent Thomas opens the introduction by writing that *WIA?* "remains one of the most vigorous attacks upon formalism and the doctrine of art for art's sake ever written" (vii). He explains that Tolstoy had written it to fight against "'the dehumanization of art,'" its "depreciation of subject matter," and "the 'divorce of art from life' that were to become more and more dominant features of 'modern art' in the twentieth century" (ibid.). Wallace underlines all of these passages, together with the vast majority of p. 49 (from "The inaccuracy of all these definitions" to "receive the same artistic impression"), where Tolstoy argues that the goal of true art is not pleasure but the betterment of human life through the establishment of communication between people. Here, Wallace brackets the sentence wherein Tolstoy says that value of art resides in the "purpose it may serve in the life of man and of humanity," and he draws a star next to it. The star was Wallace's particular marking for what was of the greatest importance to him, and he seldom used it (there are three stars in his copy of *WIA?*). There is no doubt that he found inspiration here.

Lipsky, where he takes candy as an example and says that it is "real pleasurable, but it doesn't have any calories in it. There's something really vital about food that candy's missing, although to make up for what it's missing, the pleasure of masticating and swallowing goes way up" (Lipsky 79). In other words, candy is the ultimate pleasure-giver, but it doesn't fulfill the true purpose of food, and it will thus leave you empty. So it is with art: art made for pleasure doesn't fulfill the true purpose of art and it is thus empty, it deprives us of what nourishes our lives.[29]

Extending the Condemnation of the Pleasure Principle to the Social Scale

Wallace also appropriates from Tolstoy the extension of the criticism of the pleasure principle to Western-industrial society as a whole. In *WIA?*, Tolstoy retraces the history that brought to the social pervasiveness of the pleasure principle (of which art for art's sake is but a consequence) and argues that "the Renaissance of science and art" (47) is responsible for "the denial of any religion" and "the recognition of its needlessness" (ibid.). For Tolstoy, the Renaissance founded a society of people who do "not believe in anything" (ibid.), do not know good and evil, and cannot have "any other standard for evaluating good and bad art than personal pleasure" (ibid. 48).

Wallace's criticism of contemporary society in EUP appropriates Tolstoy's discourse both in its content and in the logical steps which the argument follows. Only the historical contingencies change. Tolstoy holds the Renaissance responsible for instituting a world without religion; Wallace denounces "postmodern irony" (EUP 41) for its destruction of all "guides for living" (ibid. 79) and its "ridicule" of all "passé expressions of value" (ibid. 63). Tolstoy condemns the rejection of religion because its consequence is a society where people cannot believe in anything; Wallace decries "irony's aura" (ibid. 54) because of its ethos of

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[29] In his copy of *WIA?*, Wallace underlines both the introductory passage (page x) where Thomas explains Tolstoy's art-food analogy (here Wallace annotates "Art & Food") and virtually the entire last six paragraphs of chapter four (from "In order to define any human activity…" to the end of the chapter, 45-47), *where all of Tolstoy's above-cited passages appear*. Here, Wallace again writes (in big characters) "Art & Food," and frames it with a square (46). Finally, he underlines the full last paragraph of chapter sixteen, where Tolstoy describes true art as "real, important, necessary spiritual food" (159). All of this constitutes further proof that Wallace appropriated the art-food analogy directly from Tolstoy.

"irreverent cynicism" (ibid. 36) and "blank indifference" (ibid. 63) and its derision of all values and believes. Tolstoy sees the pervasiveness of counterfeit art as the consequence of the denial of religion (i.e. of all values except personal pleasure); Wallace see the proliferation of literature "doomed to shallowness" (ibid. 81) – i.e. literature whose "sole aim is, finally, to *wow*, to ensure that the reader is pleased" (ibid. 79) – as the consequence of our society's debunking of all "conventional standards as hollow" (ibid. 62), which leaves us with a destructive ethos that can offer "no sources of insight of comparative worth, no guides to *why* and *how* to choose" (ibid. 75-76).

In other words, Wallace reformulates Tolstoy's argument in precise detail. The argument denounces the contemporary ethos for its negation of all values except personal pleasure, it exposes the society as one where people cannot believe in anything and emptiness and cynicism reign, and it diagnoses art for art's sake as yet another dire consequence of this destructive ethos. This is why art for art's sake is deplorable, and why the connection between art and what is most true and important in our lives must be reestablished. Tolstoy makes the argument in *WIA?*; Wallace appropriates it all throughout his own manifestos. Both authors see that the predicament is not in-itself artistic: art is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Thus, for Tolstoy, the real problem is that the culture of his time *divides* people, and for Wallace the problem is the same: our ethos is the source of "great despair and stasis" (EUP 49) among people. As a result, both Tolstoy and Wallace conceptualize the redemption of art as a means to fight against isolation and nihilism: this is this hope that drives them.

Therefore, Wallace appropriates Tolstoy's argument, reiterates it throughout his manifestos, and makes it the driving principle of his art. A few more examples. In the McCaffery interview, Wallace criticizes Western society for its utilitarianism, i.e. its "whole teleology predicated on the idea that that best human life is one that maximizes the pleasure-to-pain ratio" (23). In such a society, Wallace continues, "pleasure becomes a value, a teleological end in itself" (ibid.), and this constitutes a culture of childishness (facing what is real involves effort and suffering) and of "aesthetic childishness" (ibid.). To Mark Caro, Wallace describes our time as one where "sheer pleasure" is at an all-time high and yet we are "essentially miserable" (55). And to David Lipsky, he explains that the motive behind *Infinite Jest* (1996) was his desire to explore the contemporary "confusion of permissions, or this idea that pleasure and comfort are the, are really the ultimate goal and meaning of life. I think we're starting to see a generation *die*…on the toxicity of that idea" (Lipsky 160)—which fact explains why *Infinite Jest* is centered around a movie so pleasurable that it is a weapon of

mass destruction: people die alone, of dehydration and starvation, while watching it because they stop caring about anything else but the infinite pleasure it provides. Finally, Wallace's most famous essay, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" (1997), is itself an exploration of these themes. The cruise ship is the embodiment of "the promise […] not that you can experience great pleasure, but that you *will*" (267): the promise of the total fulfilment of "the Dissatisfied Infant part of me" (316) through the administration of infinite "pampering and passive pleasure" (ibid.). Here Wallace non-coincidentally finds the ship "unbearably sad" (261): he's in "despair" and empathizes with the teenager who, some weeks before, had jumped off a similar Megaship.

These are only a few examples meant to indicate how these themes are ubiquitous in Wallace's work and thus how Wallace made the argument of *WIA?* the prominent driving force of his entire literary project. Like Tolstoy, Wallace criticizes not only art but also the entire society for its endorsement of the pleasure principle, and he intends this criticism to culminate in the offer of an artistic redemption of the Tolstoyan kind.

The Metaphysical Horizon, Where Everything Occurs in Relation to Everything Else

Yet, for both Tolstoy and Wallace after him, society does not represent the final dimension wherein everything acquires its meaning. If we leave aside the contrast between Tolstoy's commitment to God and Wallace's ultimate distrust in all absolute principles, it is evident that Wallace shares with Tolstoy the belief in the inextricable tie between the conception and practice of art and the entire infinite metaphysical horizon: the horizon that contains everything that has ever appeared, appears, and will appear, and wherein everything occurs. This means that, for both Tolstoy and Wallace, one cannot treat the question of artistic value as an independent question. Art is necessarily correlated with the history of ideas and of human practices, and with the specific conception of being that a people holds at a given time. This is why both Tolstoy and Wallace insist that artistic redemption will be achieved only by overcoming the ethos of their respective times.

Thus, in *WIA?* Tolstoy writes that "the appreciation of the merits of art […] depends on people's understanding of the meaning of life, on what they see as good and evil in life" (42), and that "the unbelief of the upper classes of the European world created a situation in

which the activity of art […] was replaced by an activity the aim of which was to afford the greatest pleasure to a certain group of people" (58). Wallace follows Tolstoy and writes that "people's values and self-perception" (EUP 53) – in our case, our culture's "congenital skepticism" (JFD 272) – define artistic creation and consumption. This is why he explores various philosophical discourses – even "of such aliens as Husserl, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Lacan, Barthes, Poulet, Gadamer, de Man" (FFs 63) – to discover ideas on which to found the rebirth of "serious, real, conscientious, aware, ambitious art" (ibid. 68).

Tolstoy and Wallace believe that our conception of art depends on our most fundamental beliefs about the meaning of life. These are matters of epistemology, metaphysics, ontology, theology, and ethics from which art is inseparable. This is why Tolstoy denounces "Nietzsche and his followers, as well as the decadents and English aesthetes identical with them" (*WIA?* 144), and why he postulates that only the reaffirmation of the Christian ideal can save art. And this is why Wallace decries the contemporary ethos as the source of artistic emptiness, why he founds the redemption of a new literature on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, why he writes *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989) as "a very traditionally moral book" (KP 19), and why he declares in *This Is Water* (2005) that "everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship" (100-101). What we worship defines our most fundamental beliefs about the meaning of life, and therefore our beliefs about art.[30]

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[30] Our social ideals themselves depend on our metaphysical ideals, which is why in his copy of *WIA?* Wallace fully underlines all of Tolstoy's above-cited passages (i.e. all that we have quoted here in both sections 4. and 5.). Also, Wallace strongly marks the passage "The estimation of the value of art (i.e., of the feelings it transmits) depends on men's perception of the meaning of life, depends on what they consider to be the good and the evil of life. And what is good and what is evil is defined by what are termed religions" (54), and he draws a star next to it, also adding the annotations "morality" and "'Religion' = Wisdom about good & evil." On pages 59-60, Wallace also finds the philosophical explanation of the nihilism that affects our time and to which his art seeks to respond. Here, he underlines "In reality these people believed in nothing, just as the Romans of the first century of our era believed in nothing" (59) and he writes "1980's upper-class nihilism. Nietzschean invention in face of inability to worship – worship evil" on top of the page. Then he also fully underlines the long passage "No longer able to believe in the Church religion, whose falsehood they had detected, and incapable of accepting true Christian teaching, which denounced their whole manner of life, these rich and powerful people, stranded without any religious conception of life, involuntarily returned to that pagan view of things which places life's meaning in personal enjoyment. And then took place among the upper classes what is called the 'Renaissance of science and art,' and which was really not only a denial of every religion, but also an assertion that religion is unnecessary" (59-60), and he draws a third and final star next to it. Finally, he

The Necessary Eclipse of the Literature of Amusement

Here we find the most unforeseeable and nonetheless indisputable feature of *WIA?*'s direct influence on Wallace. As is well-known, Wallace decried the literature of his time for its "morally vacant" nihilism (FFs 39), and he criticized postmodernist metafiction as the predominant contemporary form of the literature of amusement, postulating that metafiction's own principles must lead to its necessary auto-destruction and thus to its overcoming and to the advent of a new literary era. Tolstoy had levelled these same exact criticisms at the literature of amusement of his time. Wallace appropriated Tolstoy's arguments and adapted them to our era.

First, Wallace formulates a *social* ethical criticism of the minimalists and metafictionists of the 1980s and 1990s. He accuses writers like Mark Leyner and Bret Easton Ellis (exemplars, to him, of the fashionable literary fiction of the time) of "genuflecting to" (EUP 76) the ideals of the culture of entertainment and writing fiction that "panders shamelessly to the audience's" (McCaffery 25) worst impulses. In *WIA?*, Tolstoy had already criticized Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine in the exact same terms, decrying them as paradigms of the counterfeit art that bows to the pleasure principle: their success, for Tolstoy, had "only one explanation": that is, "that art for the society in which these two versifiers are active is not a serious, important matter of life, but is merely an amusement" (71-72).

Second, Wallace formulates an *existential* ethical criticism of the minimalists and metafictionists. He blatantly states that "the only real point of that shit is 'Like me, because I'm clever'" (McCaffery 29). In other words, the purpose of this so-called art is "showing the reader you're smart or funny or talented or whatever, trying to be liked" (ibid. 50). Again, in

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underlines the equally long passage "And so these people remained without any religious view of life. And, having none, they could have no standard wherewith to estimate what was good and what was bad art but that of personal enjoyment. And, having acknowledged their criterion of what was good to be pleasure, i.e., beauty, these people of the upper classes of European society went back in their comprehension of art to the gross conception of the primitive Greeks which Plato had already condemned. And conformably to this understanding of life, a theory of art was formulated" (p. 60), and next to this he annotates "Neat—Eerie applications. Today it's not Church Christianity but Science as Meaning that's been debunked – and we've nothing to replace it."

WIA? Tolstoy had already criticized Baudelaire, Verlaine, and other artists of amusement in these exact terms by writing that these so-called artists "lose their sense of human dignity, they develop in themselves such a passion for public praise that they suffer permanently from unsatisfied vanity, inflated to a morbid degree in them, and they use all the powers of their soul to satisfy just this passion" (140).

Third, Wallace formulates a theoretical analysis of metafiction as the literature of amusement. In "Fictional Futures," he writes that both metafiction and minimalism are "simple engines of self-reference" (65) and hence "primitive, crude" (ibid.), "*unreal, empty*" (ibid. 53) literary forms that are "deeply influenced by the aesthetic norms of mass entertainment" (ibid. 47). Then, in EUP, he describes metafiction as "literature unshackled from the cultural cinctures of mimetic narrative and free to plunge into reflexivity and self-conscious meditations on aboutness" (34). For Wallace, metafiction's freedom from the world constitutes its essential emptiness, an emptiness that must render metafiction a form of amusement that is *subservient* to the culture of pleasure: "less a 'response to' televisual culture than a kind of abiding-in-TV" (ibid.). In this sense, metafiction has always been destined to such emptiness (and therefore to constitute itself as a literature of amusement) because its driving principle has always been "to treat formal ingenuity as an end in itself" (McCaffery 29), and thus to empty literature of all values except formal, aesthetic pleasure. *Once again*, Tolstoy had already theorized this in *WIA?*. He wrote that the poetry of Baudelaire and Verlaine is empty and shallow because it has no interest in "the real things" (72) (i.e. it is unshackled from mimesis), that this poetry is thus "filled with artificiality" and "forced originality" (ibid.) (i.e. it treats formal ingenuity as an end in itself), that this makes the essence of such poetry "the supplanting of morality by the concept of beauty" (ibid.), and that this exposes its authors not as artists but as "entertainers of the wealthy" (ibid. 140) (i.e. producers of a literature that is not a response to the culture of pleasure but an abiding-in-pleasure).

Fourth, Wallace theorizes the necessary auto-destruction of metafiction. As early as in "Fictional Futures," he writes that minimalism and metafiction "seem already to have reached the Clang-Bird-esque horizon of their own possibility" (65). He then fictionalizes this idea in the novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (1989), an allegory of the self-destruction of metafiction and its overcoming written in reference to John Barth, whose essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) epitomize, for Wallace, the best that metafiction can achieve together with its most destructive consequences (See Harris 2014). Wallace would later tell interviewers

that "Westward" was "my homage and also patricidal killing thing to Barth" (Lipsky 63), whose work was "the trumpet call of postmodern metafiction" (ibid.). In "Westward," he would add, "I wanted to get the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction's always been about" (McCaffery 41). For Wallace, therefore, metafiction "gets empty and solipsistic real fast. It spirals in on itself" (ibid. 40) because of its abandonment of the real world, its empty formalism. Metafiction is destined to exhaust its possibilities because of its constitutive emptiness – "Metafiction's real end has always been Armageddon. Art's reflection on itself is terminal" (ibid. 30) – and it is this constitutive emptiness (pure formalism, infinite self-reflexivity) that destines metafiction to the mistaken conclusion that there is nothing new to say and that possibilities are exhausted. *And what is most striking is that even this theory was already presented by Tolstoy in* WIA?*, and through the exact same argumentative steps*. Tolstoy's argument was that the poetry of Baudelaire and Verlaine – precisely because of its abandonment of "the real things" and its resulting "artificiality" and "forced originality" (i.e. its pure formalism) – "becomes boring with repetition" (72) and must therefore constantly "renew" and "innovate" its formal structure in order to survive. This process, though, must lead to auto-destruction because below the superficial formal "innovation" of this so-called art "the essence remains the same" (ibid.): that is, in the end, "its content, becoming ever more limited, finally reaches the point where artists […] think that everything has already been said, and it is no longer possible to say anything new" (ibid.).

Redemption of Art as a Means to Human Communion

The core of Wallace's aesthetic enterprise is his call for the redemption of literature: literature must be an anodyne against loneliness, a means to human communion. Wallace appropriates *WIA?* even in instituting this ultimate end, and he models his conception of literature after Tolstoy's down to many of its specific details.

The conception of literature

Wallace defines true literature as what "addresses the concern of and acts as an anodyne against loneliness" (KP 16). Literature is what "addresses and [aggravates] the loneliness that dominates people" (McCaffery 31) in order "to move people to countenance it" (ibid. 32), because only by countenancing loneliness can people hope to overcome it. This is why

literature must constitute itself as a means to "human redemption" (ibid.): it must open the possibility of overcoming loneliness and attaining communion. Literature must be where "we can leap over th[e] wall" of self and overcome the "existential loneliness" that defines our lives in "the real world" (Miller 62). And if Tolstoy doesn't *explicitly* insist on the concept of "existential loneliness," it is nonetheless obvious that Wallace found direct inspiration in *WIA?*, given that its main message is that true art is a "means of communion" that "serves to unite people" (38) and an activity that "is based […] on this capacity of people to be infected by the feelings of other people" (ibid.) and without which people would be "more divided and hostile" (ibid. 40).[31] Therefore, Tolstoy himself insists that true art is "one of the most necessary means of communication, without which mankind cannot live" (ibid. 41), and Wallace follows in Tolstoy's footsteps when he establishes his own conception of literature. Further confirmation of this is the fact that Wallace postulates precisely the two levels of artistic communion that Tolstoy himself postulates, and he derives from them the same ethical responsibility of the author that Tolstoy does.

The first level of human communion in literature

For Wallace, "the first level" (Miller 62) of human communion in literature occurs through "mental or emotional intimacy with a character" (ibid.). This is the first means by which literature can achieve the overcoming of existential loneliness. The reader can leap over the wall of self because "a piece of fiction that's really true allows you to be intimate with […] a world that resembles our own in enough emotional particulars so that the way different things must feel is carried out with us into the real world" (KP 16). For Wallace, this entails that "serious fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves" (McCaffery 21-22), because "if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside" (ibid. 22). Tolstoy didn't explicitly theorize two different levels of communion in art, but he obviously did formulate a direct precedent of (and inspiration

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[31] Wallace underlines most of page 50 of his copy of *WIA?*, where the above-cited passages appear. Most notably, he underlines the passage "it is upon this capacity of man to receive another man's expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself that the activity of art is based," and next to it he writes two annotations, "Art as Empathy" and "Schopenhauer's Basis of Morality." Finally, on page 149 Wallace underlines "art, all art, has this characteristic, that it unites people," and he circles "unites people" for emphasis.

for) Wallace's "first level" when he wrote that "being infected by the feelings of another, which makes us rejoice over another's joy, grieve over another's grief, merge souls with another's, […] constitutes the essence of art" (*WIA* 120) as a "means of communion" that "serves to unite people."[32]

The second level of human communion in literature
For Wallace, there's a second level in which literature is a means of human communion: "a piece of fiction is a conversation. There's a relationship set up between the reader and the writer" (Miler 62) that makes the reader "feel less lonely" (ibid.). True literature must therefore establish "a real full human relationship […] between the writer's consciousness" (McCaffery 34) and the reader's. Through this relationship, the reader can feel "a kind of Ah-ha! Somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do. […] I feel unalone—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness" (Miller 62). For Wallace, this second level is the deepest level of human communion through art, and even here he found direct inspiration in *WIA?*, since Tolstoy articulates this principle in terms that Wallace's clearly recall. Tolstoy writes that "every work of art results in the one who receives it entering into a kind of communion with the one who produced or is producing the art, and with all those who, simultaneously with him, before him, or after him, have received or will receive the same artistic impression" (38). Tolstoy also specifies that the production of this communion is the essence of art and that an object "is not an object of art unless it calls up in a man that feeling, distinct from all other feelings, of joy, of spiritual union with another (the author) and with others (listeners or spectators) who perceive the same artistic work" (ibid. 121). In fact, this is one of the two aspects in which Wallace's direct appropriation of Tolstoy's discourse appears most striking (the other one being the denunciation of the literature of amusement and the postulation of the necessity of its auto-destruction). Tolstoy even explains the feelings that occur in the mind of the recipient of the true work of art in

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[32] Wallace's conception of the reader's empathy with the characters is a direct consequence of Tolstoy's discourse. Here, though, there is a substantial difference between the two authors: Tolstoy was a nineteenth-century Realist who had unshaken faith in literature's ability to represent the truth, Wallace was an end-of-the-twentieth-century avant-gardist who was too aware of postmodernism and deconstruction not to doubt literature's ability to represent the truth. This is why he specifies that emotional intimacy with characters "is a delusion or a contrivance that's set up through art by the writer" (Miller 62).

terms that Wallace's above-cited description of the second level of human communion in literature almost explicitly recalls. The passage is thus worth quoting at length:

> The chief peculiarity of this feeling is that the perceiver merges with the artist to such a degree that it seems to him that the perceived object has been made, not by someone else, but by himself, and that everything expressed by the object is exactly what he has long been wanting to express. The effect of the true work of art is to abolish in the consciousness of the perceiver the distinction between himself and the artist. […] It is this liberation of the person from his isolation from others, from his loneliness, this merging of the person with others, that constitutes the chief attractive force and property of art (ibid. 121).[33]

The ethical responsibility of the author

As is well-known, Wallace derives from his conception of literature a specific ethical responsibility to which every author is subject if he wants to produce true literature. Every author, that is, must make the ethical commitment to *sincerity*. Only on the basis of sincerity can all of the author's other ethical responsibilities – i.e. to produce communicative, other directed writing rather than expressive, solipsistic writing, "to talk out of the part of yourself that can love [and] *give* the reader something" (McCaffery 50), etc. – be founded. In his interview with Wallace, Steve Paulson says that EUP was written to instigate writers to "ditch irony in favor of sincerity" (Paulson 134), and most famously, in the essay "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction" (2010), Adam Kelly demonstrates that Wallace established a new ideal of "truth now associated with the possibility of a reconceived, and renewed, sincerity" (Kelly 146)—a conclusion that arises within "the widespread agreement […] that David Foster Wallace affirmed and embodied sincerity as a crucial value in his life and work, perhaps even as that work's defining feature" (ibid. 131).[34] That sincerity was one of Wallace's fundamental tenets is hence an uncontroversial matter, and even this most central of Wallace's ideals was already affirmed by Tolstoy in *WIA?*. Tolstoy, that is,

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[33] Wallace will always believe that this ability to merge artist and perceiver is the essence of true art. Non-coincidentally, in the essay "Borges on the Couch" (2004), he praises Borges because he "collapses reader and writer into a new kind of aesthetic agent" (293).

[34] Williams (2015) and McLaughlin (2018) follow Kelly. Elderon (2014) attempts to argue against "new sincerity" interpretations, but her counterargument appears overwhelmed by contrary evidence.

had already written that works of art are such only if they are sincere and other-directed, and he had also specified that objects produced only to please audiences bear only deplorable results and constitute counterfeit art. In other words, for Tolstoy, art is true and communicative only when it is infected by the sincere feelings of the author: this is why he writes that "most of all the degree of infectiousness of art is increased by the degree of the artist's sincerity" (122) and that when the artist "does not himself feel what he wants to express, there is immediately a resistance, and then the most particular new feeling, the most artful technique, not only do not produce any impression, but become repellent" (ibid.). It is therefore clear that *WIA?* directly inspired Wallace to commit to the ideal of sincerity.[35]

The final aim of literature

As we have seen, the central message of *WIA?* is that the true artist produces works in order to provide "a means of human communion" for the people, so that they become less "divided and hostile." In this sense, Tolstoy wrote *WIA?* as a call to artistic redemption: a redemption intended as the reaffirmation of the original meaning of art, which entailed the denunciation of the so-called art of his time. A century later, Wallace appropriated both the content and the logic of Tolstoy's argument, and on them he established his own literary project. Like Tolstoy's, the central message of Wallace's manifestos is that the true artist produces works in order to truly "affect people" (KP 16), to "make people less lonely" (ibid), and to illuminate how "we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections" (McCaffery 27). Wallace himself thus structured his entire literary project as a call to artistic redemption: a redemption founded upon the wish to "reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans" (ibid. 41), and one that entailed the denunciation of the so-called art of his time—a so-called art that is, in truth, mere entertainment, a product of the negation of all values except personal pleasure (like Baudelaire's and Verlaine's was to Tolstoy). All of these ideas and their structure had already composed the fundamental argument of *WIA?*, and this justifies the claim that Wallace appropriated Tolstoy's work, adjusted it so that it could function as a response to the predicaments of our time, and

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[35] In his copy of *WIA?*, Wallace underlines "central to Tolstoy's view are the notions of 'infection' and 'sincerity'" (xiii), and he later annotates "Feeling must be real" (50). *WIA?* also clearly inspired Wallace to make his own the distinction between expressive and communicative writing. In a passage of the introduction, Wallace underlines that, for Tolstoy, "language is not merely the external manifestation (expression) of an internal psychical state, but the *communication* of it from one mind to another" (xiii).

rendered it the foundation of his entire literary project.

Aspects of Tolstoy's Discourse that Wallace Rejected

First, as we have mentioned, while Wallace felt a life-long attraction to Christianity and, above all, to the ideal of worship, in the end he could never overcome his distrust towards all absolutes. Ultimately, he couldn't believe in any absolute truth except maybe a scientific one (if there are any), and therefore he couldn't truly believe in God, which is why he rejected Tolstoy's fundamentalist Christianity together with his Christian ideal of art.[36]

Second, Tolstoy conveyed his ideals through a strict, fanatic, self-righteous, moralist attitude that Wallace – a contemporary artist of secular and democratic ideology – found despicable. Tolstoy, for example, called all those connected with the art of amusement "people who stand at the lowest level of moral development" (*WIA?* 35). Wallace disregarded this attitude, and while he criticized the structure of society, entertainment, and art, he almost always avoided judging individuals, and his general attitude was that of identifying the forces that have brought to the affirmation of the social and artistic structures that he considered empty and dangerous, not that of insulting those who think and act otherwise. In this sense, in "David Lynch Keeps His Head" (1995), Wallace praises Lynch because his art considers evil by "diagnosing it without the comfortable carapace of disapproval" ("DL" 204). This is what makes Lynch's art "redemptive" (ibid. 191): its denial of the "black-and-white ethics" (ibid. 205) with which we try to delude ourselves into thinking that we are just good and the other is just evil. This is also why Wallace ultimately chose Dostoevsky over Tolstoy as his true literary idol. As Wallace writes in "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" (1996): "you need only to compare the protagonists' final conversions in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and FMD's *Crime and Punishment* in order to appreciate Dostoevsky's ability to be moral without being moralistic" (269).

Third, Tolstoy believed that the final aim of true art is the attainment of the unity of

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[36] This rejection was necessary especially considering Tolstoy's zealotry, the highest exemplar of which is the following affirmation: "people who do not recognize Christianity in its true sense […] invent various sorts of philosophical and aesthetic theories for themselves which conceal from them the meaninglessness and depravity of their lives" (*WIA?* 125).

all people under Christian brotherhood. He thought that this could be achieved only through the highest degree of "the infectiousness of art" (*WIA?* 120), which means that the best works of art should change a recipient's mind "without any effort on his own part" (ibid.) because this is the only way art can spread the Christian message universally. Wallace fought against this ideal throughout his career, on account of the specific social and artistic predicaments of our time. To him, one of the most dangerous features of our culture was precisely its promotion of "high-dose spectation" (EUP 57); that is, the kind of pleasure that "engages without demanding" (ibid. 37), that infects the receiver without any effort on his own part. For Wallace, the exploitation of our "willingness to be pleased" (ibid. 44) turns us into childish adults, unwilling to take responsibility. And ultimately, it empties our lives of meaning until we fall into bottomless despair. Therefore, true literary art must be the opposite of infectious and effortless: it must be engaging but also demanding and "uneasy" (McCaffery 33). It must remind the reader that, if she wants to establish a real full human relationship with the author, "she's going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work" (ibid. 34). For Wallace, therefore, in order to respond to the predicaments of our time, literature must "force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort" (ibid. 22). If literature does this, it will also "teach the reader that he's way smarter than he thought he was" (Lipsky 71).[37]

Wallace's Divergence from John Gardner's Moral Didacticism

In line with his rejection of Tolstoy's fanatic, moralist attitude, Wallace also dismisses what he defines as the "moral didacticism" (Kennedy and Polk 18) of John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction* (1978)—that other contemporary, American moral call to literary redemption inspired by Tolstoy's *What Is Art?*. In this sense, when Wallace states "I'm not trying to line up behind Tolstoy or Gardner" (McCaffery 26), he means precisely that he wants to reject the self-

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[37] In his copy of *WIA?*, Wallace annotates where Tolstoy writes that a true work of art is composed in language that is "understood by all" (96). He circles the word "all" and writes "So trash" next to it. Wallace's work is in direct opposition to this ideal, and hence his literature requires of its readers the following tasks, as Wallace told Donahue: "'keeping track of enormous amounts of information' […], 'being required to pay attention to some of the strategies that regular entertainment uses' and 'having certain formulaic expectations that go along with reading commercial stuff fucked with. Not just disdained. Fucked with'" (Donahue 71-72).

righteousness that inheres to the idea "that it's fiction's duty to edify or teach, or to make us good little Christians or Republicans" (ibid.). That Gardner inherits the self-righteous moral absolutism of Tolstoy is evident as you move through his argument, which begins with the idea that "true art instructs," and then specifies that only art that teaches to be "unselfish, helpful, kind, and noble-hearted" is true art, while every other kind must be dismissed. Toward the end of the book Gardner even explicitly states that "this notion of the artist as better than other people is irritating, I admit," but that it's nonetheless true.

This is the moral arrogance from which Wallace wants to distance himself, because he wants the triumph of what, in "Authority and American Usage" (1999), he calls "a true Democratic Spirit" (AAU 72), over the self-righteous absolutism that Tolstoy and Gardner embody. Wallace knows that the artist is not better than other people at all, that he has no right to say what's Right or Wrong as if it were Godly Law, and that so he has nothing to teach, and no instructions, because he isn't superior to anyone else. The only thing that literary fiction can and must teach, for Wallace, is precisely that we're all equally fallible and in need of help, and that we're all in this together, not alone, and so we should have serious conversations about it, and about the truth. What true literary art must do is to offer a means for conversation, so that we feel less alone inside, and we begin to face the truth about ourselves, together.

But, again, Wallace's rejection of Tolstoy and Gardner is only partial, confined to the problem of moral absolutism. When Wallace states that "I'd agree with Gardner to the extent that he has the sense to be parroting Tolstoy—if you edit out the heavenly Christian stuff" (KP 19), he means to say exactly what we've tried to show throughout this piece: in a nutshell, that Wallace's artistic credo is Tolstoy's credo (and Gardner's), but with the heavenly Christian stuff (the moral absolutism) edited out. Therefore, for Wallace, Gardner is Tolstoy's parrot, and his general view is retrograde, because he hasn't edited out the mortal absolutism that is today unacceptable. But it's nonetheless important, for Wallace, to reiterate that there's a deep sense in which "both of them [Tolstoy and Gardner] are right: what fiction and poetry are doing is what they have been trying to do for two thousand years: affect somebody" (ibid. 18). *This* is what Wallace finds worthy in Tolstoy and Gardner, and what he thinks is needed in our times. In *this* sense, Wallace also aligns with Gardner, and agrees with him that their generation's literature and criticism have become trivial and false, that literature ought to go back to the ethical commitment of writers like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, that the mere formalism of genres like the 80s metafiction speaks of the emptiness, cynicism,

nihilism, and despair of our capitalist society, and that it's necessary for literary art to recover belief, value, a concern for what makes us human, a social commitment, and most importantly a high sense of duty to the truth.

Conclusion

Wallace conceived literature as an anodyne against loneliness and a means of human communion. He theorized this communion as structured in two levels of emotional intimacy: the reader's relationship with the artistic world he encounters and the relationship between reader and author. From this conception on literature, he derived a specific ideal of the ethical responsibility of the author, founded upon the principles of sincerity and other-directedness. Today, we can affirm that Tolstoy's *WIA?* directly influenced Wallace's conception – so much so that Wallace's discourse can be called an appropriation of Tolstoy's – in light of the correspondence between the contents of the two discourses *and, above all, between their lines of reasoning*. The direct references to Tolstoy that are scattered throughout Wallace's work (from his earliest to his latest writings) and the presence of Wallace's own heavily annotated copy of *WIA?* at the HRC constitute further proof of the value of this interpretation. In 1993, Wallace told McCaffery that "the only stuff a writer can get from an artistic ancestor is a certain set of aesthetic values and beliefs" (McCaffery 49). In saying this, he may have thought of Tolstoy. A large set of Wallace's aesthetic values and beliefs are derived from *WIA?* through a process of direct conceptual appropriation. "Appropriation," here, is intended as entirely devoid of negative connotations; it is, rather, the positive consequence of Wallace's possession of "the historical sense" that T.S. Eliot presents in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), the historical sense that "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence," and which "compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer […] has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (85).

Of course, that Wallace appropriated Tolstoy's discourse doesn't mean that he didn't conceive of many (or all) of his ideas before reading *WIA?,* nor that he couldn't have conceived them without it. What we have discovered here testifies only to the historical fact of the direct influence of *WIA?* on Wallace's conception of literature. The discovery is

interesting in-itself in relation to the study of the history of ideas, but it also offers cause for reflection on broader issues. How is it that an author like Tolstoy – whose historical and cultural environment were in so many ways so different from Wallace's – influenced a contemporary author so directly and on so fundamental matters? Does this perhaps say something about the timelessness and universality of our core human and artistic concerns? Does it say something about the presence of a cultural structure that underlines the whole of modernity? To conclude, one must not forget that Wallace's appropriation of Tolstoy's discourse contains explicit rejections of some of Tolstoy's ideas. In this sense, the relationship between *WIA?* and Wallace's discourse is one of direct appropriation with rectifications contrived by an author of contemporary, secular, and democratic spirit for a time when all gods and absolutes are treated with suspicion, a time when people struggle, more than ever before, in their hanging between, on the one hand, their belief in the falsity of all absolutes and their awareness of the horrors of the past and, on the other hand, their perception of the horrors of nihilism.[38]

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[38] In his copy of *WIA?*, Wallace underlines a passage of the introduction where Thomas writes that "while there is no denying that Tolstoy's theory is one-sided and, in some respects, even fanatical, it is, when seen in broad outline, a coherent and plausible alternative to other equally one-sided and fanatical views, which are fashionable today, and for which it may suggest needed qualifications and corrections" (vii). In this sense, we may say that Wallace's "appropriation with rectifications" of *WIA?* attempts to answer Thomas's call and to establish a discourse that avoids the faults of both opposite fanatical views, Tolstoy's and today's nihilism's.

The Influence of Sartre's "What Is Literature?"
on David Foster Wallace's Literary Project

Introduction

There are only two direct references to Jean-Paul Sartre in Wallace's work: one to Sartre's *Nausea* in "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*" (1990), and the other to Sartre's general philosophy in "Iris's Story: An Inversion of Philosophical Skepticism (review of Siri Hustveldt's *The Blindfold*" (1992). Wallace never referred to Sartre's great literary manifesto "What Is Literature?" (1947) (hereafter, WIL?), and yet a number of factors suggest that WIL? may have had a profound and direct influence on Wallace's conception of literature. First, there are many direct references to the French Existentialists in Wallace's work, as e.g. in *The Pale King*: "maybe it's not metaphysics. Maybe it's existential. I'm talking about the individual US citizen's deep fear, the same basic fear that you and I have and that everybody has except nobody ever talks about it except existentialists in convoluted French prose. Or Pascal. Our smallness, or insignificance and mortality" (*TPK* 143). Second, we know that Wallace was familiar with a wide range of French writers, that French was the only foreign language he could read, and that he had learned French precisely to read the Existentialists in the original (see chapter five of Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace*). Third, in her essay "*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace" (2009), Zadie Smith writes that Sartre was one of Wallace's great influences, and she describes in accordance with the categories of Sartrean philosophy both Wallace's characters – "*Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you*. This, Sartre's dictum, hangs over these passive people. […] Thrown into the world, condemned to be free—and hideously responsible for that freedom" (Smith 264) – and Wallace's own artistic creed – "If Wallace insists on awareness, his particular creed is—to use a Wallacerian word—*extrorse;* awareness must move always in an outward direction, away from the self" (ibid. 268).

That people are thrown into the world, condemned to be free, and responsible for their freedom are the fundamental categories of Sartre's ontology, and the idea that human consciousness always looks outward is the fundamental tenet of his phenomenology. Sartre

presents all these ideas both in his major work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and throughout his other writings, and as Allard den Dulk shows in his critical work (exploring and expanding upon Zadie Smith's indication), these Sartrean concepts pervade Wallace's entire work.[39]

Here, we argue that while Sartre's influence on Wallace has already been recognized, its extent is far from being fully appreciated and broadens to regions yet unexplored. While Thompson has shown that Wallace had read Sartre, and while Smith, den Dulk, Ryerson and Hirt have all exhibited part of the influence of Sartre's philosophy on the existential content of Wallace's fiction, here we focus specifically on the striking correspondence between the contents of WIL? and Wallace's own literary manifestos.[40] Thompson himself has already mentioned that it seems likely that Wallace read WIL? and that many of Wallace's ideas cohere with Sartre's manifesto. But Thompson only mentions a possibility. Here, we want to prove and to explore the extent of WIL?'s influence on Wallace, and to submit that, in light of the above-mentioned factors and of the extent and depth of the correspondence between WIL? and Wallace's discourse, WIL? can be interpreted as a text that directly and profoundly influenced Wallace's conception of literature. Perhaps, this interpretation of direct influence cannot be ascertained beyond all doubts due to the lack of references to WIL? in Wallace's

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[39] den Dulk explores Sartre's influence on Wallace in his essay "Good Faith and Sincerity: Sartrean Virtues of Self-Becoming in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" (2014), in his major monograph *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (2015), and in his essay "David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* as Contemporary Core Text: Re-Evaluating Postmodernism and Existentialism" (2017). James Ryerson too mentions Sartre's influence on Wallace in his "Introduction" to *Fate, Time, and Language*, and Stefan Hirt also address Sartre's influence on Wallace in *The Iron Bars of Freedom: David Foster Wallace and the Postmodern Self* (2008).

[40] If one had to pick one text to call "Wallace's literary manifesto," that would certainly be "E Unibus Pluram." Critics in general consider EUP as the main text of the "1993 essay-interview nexus" that they say constitutes Wallace's manifesto (formed by EUP and the McCaffery interview). More properly, though, Wallace's manifesto should be understood as a system of multiple essays and interviews revolving around EUP (the core of the system) and including, *at least*, the essays "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (an early version of EUP), "The Empty Plenum" (where Wallace praises David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as a novel that obeys Wallace's dicta about what literature should be), "David Lynch Keeps His Head" (where Wallace describes Lynch as his cinematic equivalent), and "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" (where Wallace describes Dostoevsky as the paradigmatic example of the ideal writer), and the interviews with McCaffery, with Kennedy and Polk (also given in 1993, where Wallace sets down some of the foundations of his project) and with David Lipsky in *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* (where Wallace expands on all the facets of his conception of literature and his literary project).

work. Nonetheless, what follows exhibits what is almost surely the direct influence of WIL? on Wallace and what is certainly (1) an outstanding degree of concordance between two of the great literary minds of the twentieth century regarding the meaning of literature and (2) the yet-unexplored extent and depth of Wallace's adherence to the concepts of Sartrean philosophy.

The analysis shows that there is still much more to understand with regards to the extent of Sartre's influence on Wallace, despite the good work done by other critics thus far. Likewise, it confirms the fundamental role of Existentialism in Wallace's oeuvre and at the same time it indicates that we haven't yet come to a full understanding of the depth and width of Wallace's alignment with this philosophy. This contributes to the development of our awareness of the degree of Wallace's use of appropriation as a means of artistic creation: Wallace's relationship with postmodernism has long been studied but substantial research in Wallace's relationship with writers from other periods and countries is a fairly recent critical phenomenon and there is still a lot to discover. We need to further our knowledge of Wallace's cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and cross-temporal artistic relations. This work in comparative literature will give us a deeper understanding of Wallace's oeuvre while at the same time telling us something about the dynamics in the history of art and literature. This essay aims to contribute to this process—and (last but not least) to display one of the infinite ways in which Jean-Paul Sartre's work still influences Western literature and thought at large.

The Ontological horizon, Where Everything Occurs in Relation to Everything Else

The first correspondence between WIL? and Wallace's discourse is that, in both, the idea of literature is a necessary consequence of larger ontological beliefs. For Sartre and Wallace, that is, the concept of literature depends on one's fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality, and therefore it is impossible to think of literature as a specialized field independent of all that occurs in the world. Sartre builds WIL? upon the ontology of *Being and Nothingness.* This is why WIL? presents an ideal of literature-as-freedom: by writing, "the writer chooses to appeal to the freedom of other men" (63), and the reader, by opening the book, asserts that "the object has its source in human freedom" (ibid. 61). As a result, both writer and reader act so that they "may re-adapt the totality of being to man" (ibid. 63) and thus change

the world and "assume responsibility for it" (ibid. 56) through literature.

This conception of literature can be correct only if the ontology of *Being and Nothingness* is true. And if Wallace doesn't make the relationship between his ontological beliefs and his conception of literature as obvious as Sartre does, yet his commitment to the ontological horizon manifests itself in his decrying of the postmodern ethos as the cause of the fall of art, in his finding the redemption of literature in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, in his fundamental focus on worship, and in the striking correspondence between his and Sartre's conceptions of literature, whereby – as is shown in what follows – Wallace follows WIL?'s argument down to many of its most specific details. For Wallace too, one's conception of literature must be derived from one's ontology.

The Necessary Partiality of Literature

Sartre writes about the authentic prose writer that

> He has given up the impossible dream of giving an impartial picture of Society and the human condition. Man is the being towards whom no being can be impartial, not even God. For God, if He existed, would be, as certain mystics have seen Him, in a *situation* in relationship to man. And [man] is also the being [who] cannot even see a situation without changing it, for [his] gaze congeals, destroys, or sculpts, or, as does eternity, changes the object in itself. It is in love, in hate, in anger, in fear, in joy, in indignation, in admiration, in hope, in despair, that man and the world reveal themselves *in their truth* (WIL? 37, Bernard Frechtman's translation with my emendations in square brackets).[41]

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[41] The French original reads: "*Il a abandonné le rêve impossible de faire une peinture impartiale de la Société et de la condition humaine. L'homme est l'être vis-à-vis de qui aucun être ne peut garder l'impartialité, même Dieu. Car Dieu, s'il existait, serait, comme l'ont bien vu certains mystiques, en* situation *par rapport à l'homme. Et c'est aussi l'être qui ne peut même voir une situation sans la changer, car son regard fige, détruit, ou sculpte ou, comme fait l'éternité, change l'objet en lui-même. C'est à l'amour, à la haine, à la colère, à la crainte, à la joie, à l'indignation, à l'admiration, à l'espoir, au désespoir que l'homme et le monde se révèlent* dans leur vérité" (Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, 28-29). Frechtman's English translation first appeared in the 1949 Philosophical Library's edition of WIL?. From then on it has been used in various re-editions of the text, and now appears in both the Routledge edition and in the Harvard UP edition that is the

For Sartre, the authentic prose writer is one who knows that the truth is in subjectivity and in partiality (objectivity and impartiality are not available to human beings) and writes accordingly. This is why the prose writer must abandon the impossible dream of traditional literary realism – "the error of realism has been to believe that the real reveals itself to contemplation, and that consequently one could draw an impartial picture of it" (ibid. 66) – and must embrace the particularity of the individual situation, knowing that one's perceptions change the observed object – "perception is partial" (ibid.) – and that the truth resides within the idiosyncrasies of a man's feelings in relation to being.

Wallace shares the same worldview and consequent conception of literature. He laments that "while serious science butters its bread with the fact that the separation of subject/observer and object/experiment is impossible" (McCaffery 40), still "fiction likes to ignore this fact's implications" (ibid.). Like Sartre, Wallace extracts the following specific conception of the writer's responsibility from this belief in the ontological truth of subjectivity and partiality: writers must write in accordance with this truth and therefore reject traditional literary realism. This is why in various interviews Wallace states that "the conventions of what was called Realism don't seem all that real anymore" (Shechner 108) and that "obviously realism is an illusion of realism" (Paulson 130). This is why he holds that the literary artist's job is to represent the "fragmentary, scrambled, jumbled" (McCaffery 38)

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main reference here. This translation seems to be the only one available in English today, *if not ever*, and it is the only one I could find. Frechtman, though, commits a serious mistake in translating the above passage, which is why I had to present it *with my own emendations* and add this footnote. He translates the sentence that I present here as "And [man] is also the being [who] cannot even see a situation without changing it, for [his]…" etc. as "And He is also the being Who cannot even see a situation without changing it, for His…." This means that Frechtman confuses Sartre's discourse about man with Sartre's discourse about God, and thus condemns the entire English-reading world to commit the same error. Frechtman was fooled into this error by the fact that, in the midst of his discourse on man, Sartre inserts one single sentence with God as a subject ("*Car Dieu, s'il existait, serait…*") only to then continue to speak about man by starting his next sentence with an implied subject ("*Et c'est aussi l'être qui…*"). Frechtman misinterpreted the implied subject of this next sentence as God, but *it is man* (the only sentence where God is subject is where "God" appears explicitly, and this is also the only sentence that's written in the conditional tense: Sartre didn't believe in God). Frechtman's mistake is a serious one because it attributes all the characteristics of man's finitude to God. This makes it seem as if Sartre could conceive of such a finite "god" and consider it a viable concept. But Sartre wasn't such a naïve philosopher and knew very well that the concept of God is and must be a concept of an Absolute. Thus, Frechtman's translation gives a mistaken idea of Sartre's philosophy, and one that makes it seem inferior to what it actually is.

nature of reality in a way that "feels real to me" (Goldfarb 145) and is "true to me" (Kennedy-Polk 13). For Wallace, reality is *to me*, it is subjective and partial, and a literary work that aspires to truth must represent this. Therefore, like Sartre, Wallace begins from a worldview based on principles similar to what in physics is called the observer effect, and from there he derives his rejection of traditional literary realism as well as his affirmation of the need of a new literary form that respects truth as it appears to our twentieth-century minds: subjective and partial.

We thus witness another instance of Wallace's discourse aligning with WIL?'s in detail, both in its content and structure. This is the kind of proof that leads us to infer the direct influence of WIL? on Wallace's conception of literature, and what follows is an accumulation of further proof of this kind. The agreement between Sartre and Wallace on this point is definitive; both authors take their rejection of objectivity to its logical end: that is, to the affirmation that their rejection of traditional literary Realism is what actually defines them as true realists, i.e. representors of the truth. This is, e.g., the sense in which Wallace states: "I've always thought of myself as a realist" (Miller 60).

To Reject Traditional Literary Realism is
to Reject Traditional Mimesis as Imitation

The rejection of traditional literary realism also brings Sartre and Wallace to reject the traditional conception of mimesis. Sartre writes that that the artist "wants to create a thing" (WIL? 26), not to represent another, that "there is no reason why" works of art "should have a definable significance, that is, should refer particularly to another object" (ibid.), and that, in talking about artistic creation, "I say 'create,' not 'imitate'" (ibid. 333), because it is wrong to think of artworks as imitations, i.e. as objects whose essence and end is mimesis.[42]

Wallace follows Sartre in this sense too. In "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (1988), he writes that "the idea that literary language is any kind of neutral medium" (63) or "a mirror" (ibid. 64) to reality "has finally taken it on the chin" (ibid.). Here, he closes

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[42] This is also why Sartre praises Alberto Giacometti: "*Il a compris depuis longtemps que les artistes travaillent dans l'imaginaire et que nous ne créons que des trompe-l'œil*" ("Les Peintures de Giacometti" 362); "He has long understood that artists work in the imagination and don't create anything but *trompe-l'œil*" (my translation).

the argument with the blunt statement: "the crux being that, if mimesis isn't dead, then it's on life-support courtesy of those who soon enough will be" (ibid.). Five years later, he would tell McCaffery that the "sixties had the effect of finally demolishing the authority that mimesis had assumed" (McCaffery 27) in tradition. Wallace thus explicitly follows WIL? in declaring the end of mimesis. And he, like Sartre, founds his rejection of mimesis on his most fundamental ontological beliefs.

Both Sartre and Wallace reject traditional mimesis, and yet they both still want their works to represent the truth and thus be mimetic. For Sartre, in literature the "aim is to give the fullest possible representation" ("WIL? 70) of the truth and therefore to "correctly indicate a certain thing or notion" (ibid. 35). For Wallace, the aim is still to generate "a kind of mimesis" (Shechner 109), or "to create enough mimesis" (Lipsky 291), through the use of a new form capable of representing "a world whose texture and sensuous feel is totally different" (ibid.) from the past. The goal is "to show that nothing's really changed [and] that what's always been important is still important" (ibid.).

Therefore, in both Sartre and Wallace the rejection of mimesis becomes a re-affirmation of mimesis. This is only a surface paradox that is resolved once one sees that this process is a rejection of traditional mimesis in favor of a new conception of mimesis, one to be constructed in accordance with the knowledge of contemporary philosophy. For Sartre and Wallace, it is the traditional realist mimesis founded on the beliefs in absolute truth and absolute representation that must be rejected; on the contrary, the new mimesis founded upon the truth of subjectivity and partiality must be affirmed. Neither Sartre nor Wallace, though, could ever articulate a proper definition of this new mimesis to clearly distinguish it from the traditional one in both theory and practice. But for both of them, what remained unchanged was that literary art, through mimesis, discloses the truth. This is why Sartre states that "to write is thus both to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader" (WIL? 65), and why Wallace says that to write is to set down "what's true" (Lipsky 38).

A late-Wittgensteinian Notion of Language
and the Resulting Concept of Literature

In WIL?, Sartre writes that every "speaker is *in a situation* in language; he is invested by words"

(30).[43] From this premise, he derives that a prose writer is "a man who *makes use* of words" (ibid. 34), a man who *acts* through words in the world of human communion. Obviously, this conception of language is closely related to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*' ideal of "meaning as *use*," which is precisely the ideal to which Wallace dedicated his first novel *The Broom of the System* (1987) and on which he built his literary career, declaring that the *Investigations* "is the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made" (McCaffery 44).[44] In this sense, the late Wittgenstein, Sartre, and Wallace all share the same view of humanity and language: human beings exist in a linguistic situation and must act accordingly, they are invested by words. It's very likely that Wallace recognized in WIL? this Wittgensteinian view of language, thus finding further reason to align with Sartre's philosophy. Wallace follows Sartre even in deriving the same conception of literature from this theory of language: since human beings are invested by words, literature must constitute itself as a means of human communion and social action, an anodyne against loneliness that invites people to establish full human relationships and to take responsibility for their being-in-the-world. From these postulates Sartre and Wallace even derive yet another corresponding consequence: a specific ideal of the writer's responsibility towards the other.

Literature Must Entail Existential and Social Commitment

For Sartre, "the project of writing" (WIL? 76) must be founded upon the responsibility to act towards "the free exceeding of a certain human and total situation" (ibid.). In other words, writing must favor the general improvement of the human condition. Sartre derives this artistic ethos from the entire set of his ontological premises: every individual is free and therefore burdened by the responsibility of his freedom—"the world is my task" (ibid. 65)—, and therefore every individual must take upon himself the responsibility of respecting the truth and making the world a better place. Plus, "*being situated* is an essential and necessary

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[43] In "*Un nouveau mystique*," Sartre adds that "*Les hommes ne sont point d'abord pour communiquer ensuite, mais la communication les constitue originellement dans leur être*" (152): "The existence of men does not precede their communication with one another; rather, communication constitutes their originary being" (my translation). This makes Sartre a Bakhtinian, like Wallace.

[44] On Wittgenstein's influence on *Broom* also see Luter (2018).

characteristic of freedom" (ibid. 133), and therefore every individual is fully responsible for the situation that surrounds him and for the others that exist within this situation. From this it follows that a writer must write writing that is other-directed, because "the author is in a situation, like all other men" (ibid. 132). Finally, since language is a communal means wherein humans create meaning through the use of words (a meaning that is thus communal by definition), the writer must use language for the community; that's his particular responsibility. And for Sartre, the writer takes this responsibility by submitting the truth of the human predicament to the inherent freedom of the reader who, in encountering the text, must take on the responsibility of confronting its content.

In this sense, Wallace again follows Sartre in his views about literature and the writer's responsibility. Wallace thinks that the true artist must take on the responsibility of writing "serious, real, conscientious, ambitious art" (FFs 68), and that he must do so with "moral rigor" (JFD 266) and for the reader: he must "*give* the reader something" (McCaffery 50) and attempt to "effect change" (FFs 67), i.e. "to change or enlighten or broaden or reorient" (FFs 52) both individuals and society at large. Wallace, like Sartre, derives this ethos from his own most fundamental beliefs, which also closely recall Sartre's. Wallace pronounces his most explicit adherence to the existentialist tenet that *the world is my task* in the essay "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed" (1999), where he writes that a self is not "something you just *have*" (64) and that "the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (ibid.). Like Sartre, Wallace derives his ideal of the writer's individual responsibility towards engagement with the world from this main tenet of Existentialism, and likewise, he derives his ideal of the writer's commitment to the other and society from the theories of facticity (Sartre's in-situatedness) and meaning-as-use. And while Wallace doesn't insist on facticity as much as Sartre does, he does repeatedly state that all writers are "sentient citizens of a community" (EUP 34) and that therefore their writings arise in relationship and response to that specific community. We can then say that Wallace *acts out* Sartre's ideal of facticity, an ideal that both authors also extend to language. Finally, for Wallace – as for Sartre and Wittgenstein – language is "dependent on human community" (McCaffery 40) and thus always "a function of relationships between persons" (ibid.), and this entails (as Sartre also believed) that the writer's responsibilities are to "reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans" (ibid. 41) and to commit to "the fact that language and linguistic intercourse is, in and of itself, redeeming, remedy-ing" (ibid. 33).

The Opposition Between True and False Writing

In WIL?, Sartre postulates an ontological opposition between the nature of poetry and prose, and while he does not explicitly say that poetry gives a false representation of reality, he says that prose is the realm of truth and that poetry stands in opposition to it. Wallace says nothing about the difference between poetry and prose and would probably reject Sartre's opposition between the two (Wallace admired Philip Larkin, e.g.), but what must draw our attention is that Wallace formulates his opposition between the truth of avant-garde writing and the falsehood of traditional realism in terms that are very similar to those in which Sartre formulates the opposition between poetry and prose. In turn, said terms stand in close relation to both authors' rejection of traditional literary realism and affirmation of a Wittgensteinian conception of language.

Sartre writes that "poets are men who refuse to *utilize* language" (WIL? 29) and who therefore "name nothing at all" (ibid.). Poets think that "language is a structure of the external world" (ibid. 30) and "the mirror of the world" (ibid.). They see "in the word the *image*" (ibid.) and think that "it too is a thing, uncreated and eternal" (ibid.), and from this they conclude that they can relate to language as if they existed "outside language" (ibid.). Thus, poets fail to understand the true nature of language, its embeddedness in human subjectivity, freedom, facticity, action, and becoming, and therefore they use language according to a false idea. On the contrary, prose writers work with the knowledge that "we are within language as within our body" (ibid. 35) and that "the word is a certain particular moment of action and has no meaning outside it" (ibid.). Prose writers know that "to speak is to act" (ibid.36) and that "the quest for truth takes place in and by language conceived as a certain kind of instrument" (ibid. 29). For this reason, they *make use* of language and "dream of *naming* the world" (ibid.), knowing that to name is to *reveal* and that to reveal is to *change*. As a result, prose writers want "to be essential to this universe" (ibid. 66), and they treat language according to the truth.

We have seen that, in "Fictional Futures," Wallace writes that writers must know that the ideal of language-as-mirror-of-nature is false and obsolete. Five years later, Wallace tells McCaffery that writers must follow Wittgenstein's late rejection of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) with its "picture theory of meaning" (McCaffery 44) and its presumption

"that the only possible relation between language and the world is denotative, referential" (ibid.). Wallace aligns with the late Wittgenstein (and Sartre) because to him words are *not* "little mimetic pictures" (ibid.) and because probably "there's nothing 'outside' language for language to have to picture or refer to" (ibid. 45). This is why he concludes that the traditional literary realists (like Sartre's poets) are wrong in treating language as an objective mirror of reality, as something one could stand outside of and observe with scientific detachment. In this sense, Wallace follows Sartre in declaring that the writer who knows the truth of language understands that "we're *in* language" (ibid.) and "stuck in" it (ibid. 44). This ideal writer knows that "we're at least all in here together" (ibid.) and writes in accordance with this truth and with the intention of "being *true* to the way the language works now" (Lipsky 272). The ideal writer thus also respects Wittgenstein's dictum "I don't know my way about" (McCaffery 45), the dictum that expresses one's awareness of one's untranscendable immersion in a specific linguistic situation.

From this Wittgensteinian-Sartrean theory of language, Wallace derives (following Sartre) the idea that the writer must know that language is an instrument for action and communion in the human-linguistic world and work accordingly. This is why, for Wallace, writing is the quest for what "feels real" (Goldfarb 145) and "what's true" (Lipsky 38), a quest that – since we're all stuck in language together – the writer must pursue with and for the reader. In this sense, Wallace aligns with Sartre's own project in WIL? to reject the picture theory of language, affirm the conceptions of meaning-as-use and in-situatedness, and derive a specific ideal of the writer's responsibilities from this worldview: literature must overcome the falsity of realist works created according to the picture theory of meaning.

For both Sartre and Wallace, the "author's intentions" (WIL? 60) are a fundamental, non-subtractable part of literary meaning, and one that is necessary to overcome the falsity of realism and objectivity. To them, intentionality is required for the literary work to constitute itself as a relationship between writer and reader, and this relationship is the essence of literary meaning. For Sartre, the highest literary moments occur when an author names and thus reveals a specific truth that belongs to the "individual" (ibid. 36) reader. When the author does this, the reader "sees himself" (ibid.) in the work and feels that he himself is revealed in the work. Wallace's ideas correspond perfectly. To him the magic of fiction occurs when, in reading, you realize that "somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do" (Miller 62), when you feel as one with the author and the author, in revealing himself, also reveals who you are, when fiction sets up

"an intimate conversation between two consciousness" (Lipsky 289), the writer's and the reader's, so that the reader sees himself in the work and feels less alone inside.[45]

This is why Sartre and Wallace agree that literature must be a *gift*. Sartre states that "the work is never a natural datum, but an *exigence* and a *gift*" (WIL? 67), Wallace that the "feeling of intimacy between the writer and the reader" is "our opening" and "our gift" (Lipsky 72).[46] Finally, this is why they agree that the production of literature must be a moral action: for Sartre, "at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative" (WIL? 67); for Wallace, writers must write "morally passionate, passionately moral fiction" (JFD 274).

The Writer's Responsibility: (1) To Reveal the Truth

As we have seen, for both Sartre and Wallace everything follows from a particular theory of the truth: from Existential ontology they derive their discourse. The writer is a being-in-the-world and a being-in-language, and he must act accordingly. The existence of a being-in-the-world is a project: "the world is my task" and "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* 20). We do not *have* a self; our *existence* is the "struggle to establish a human self." This struggle is our project, and a project has an end, and to reach an end man uses means. The writer pursues the establishment of the self through the means of literature and, in turn, words are his means to produce literature. This is why, for Sartre, the writer is "a man who *makes use* of words" (WIL? 34), and this is why Wallace finds the basis for his work in Wittgenstein's meaning-as-use.

Both Sartre and Wallace think that the end of literature is to reveal the truth (this is how literature can help us establish our human selves). They therefore think that words are means to reveal the truth. As we have seen, for Sartre the writer must name (and thus reveal) the world, and for Wallace, he must represent what feels real, what's true. Sartre writes that the writer must choose "action by disclosure" (ibid. 37) in order "reveal the situation" (ibid.)

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[45] Winningham (2015) and Miley (2016) both show – their approach differs from Boswell (2014) – that even Wallace's use of metafiction, and his complex relationship to his fictional persona, develop with this conversational goal in mind.

[46] The influence of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift* on Wallace is well known. Adam Kelly exhibits it in "David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts" (2017).

and to "reveal it to myself and to others" (ibid.). Wallace states that the writer must "capture and talk about the way the world feels on our nerve endings" (Lipsky 36); that is, he must pursue "the sense of *capturing,* capturing what the world feels like to us" (ibid. 38), in order to represent and confront "real lived life" (JFD 272).

Both Sartre and Wallace, then, clearly establish that the end of literature is the disclosure and revelation of the truth. For both of them, though, this quest for the truth is a means to further ends. To write is to act by giving each thing its proper name, thus capturing its truth. To name is to reveal, and to reveal is to break open the minds of both oneself and the other in order to let awareness shine into them. In this sense, to reveal the truth is to change the world and the individuals therein. This is why, for Sartre, the writer reveals the situation "*in order* to change it" (WIL? 37), and why, for Wallace, true literature captures what's real in order to "effect change" (FFs 67); that is, "to change or enlighten or broaden or reorient" (ibid. 52). This is why the writer must take the responsibility of existential and social commitment upon himself, and why he is responsible in front of the other. To write is to reveal the truth and to reveal the truth is to change the world, but to change the world is, first and foremost, to accept responsibility for oneself and for what happens around you. We are all here, first and foremost, to be responsible for the truth. There is no better artistic expression of this ethos than Boris Pasternak's famous scene in *Doctor Zhivago* (1957), when Lara walks along a pilgrims' path and "for a moment she rediscovered the purpose of her life. She was here on earth to grasp the meaning of its wild enchantment and to call each thing by its right name" (67).

The Writer's Responsibility: (2) To Confront the Reader

For Sartre and Wallace, to unveil the truth in writing is to force the truth upon the consciousness of the reader. Therefore, the writer's job is to change the world by confronting the reader with what he does not, by himself, dare to face. In this sense, Sartre writes that the writer must accept the responsibility of being the man who "has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the object which has been thus laid bare" (WIL? 38). For Sartre, therefore, "the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about" (ibid.). Likewise,

for Wallace, "'the magic of fiction is that it addresses and [aggravates] the loneliness that dominates people'" (McCaffery 31).

Wallace thinks that literature must not act as an "anesthetic" (ibid. 32) against suffering, but rather it must "move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny" (ibid.). In this sense too, then, Wallace follows Sartre: like Sartre, he says that literature must force the truth upon the reader's consciousness. And if, for Sartre, literature must do this by naming what has not yet been named, for Wallace likewise, literature must recover the original truth of all things "over there across the chasms of illusion, mediation, demographics, marketing, imago and appearance" (EUP 52), and therefore it must give each thing its right name and also shatter the false names that, in the '80s and '90s, the culture of entertainment has given to things in its veil of illusion, established to anesthetize the mass audience. This means that the final aim of the writer must be to produce literature "that makes the reader confront things rather than ignore them" (Miller 61) and that forces the reader "to put away childish things and confront stuff about spirituality and values" (ibid. 59). In this sense, true literature must "disturb the comfortable" (McCaffery 21) and "teach the reader that he's way smarter than he thought he was" (ibid.). Finally, it must teach that "the moral job is ours" (ibid. 84).

Quite clearly, then, Wallace follows Sartre in theorizing that literature must give each thing its right name in order to confront the reader's consciousness and force him to take responsibility for himself and for the world.[47] Literature must do this because responsibility is both the burden of humanity and the only possible human redemption. This is why Wallace also *acts out* Sartre's principles through the undertaking of his literary career.

The Writer's Responsibility: (3) Commitment

Entailed in the ideals of literature as revelation of the truth and of literature as antagonizer

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[47] This is why a narratologist like Cioffi (2000), in describing a novel like *Infinite Jest*, uses "the term 'disturbing text' to refer not to a genre of literature identifiable by the usual formal elements, but as a way to describe the rather private performance of a text as it enacts itself within the consciousness of the reader" (163). Likewise, the common reading of *The Pale King* – exemplified by Clare (2012) – as a novel that explores boredom in order to force its readers to work hard and pay attention must be traced back to Wallace's commitment to confront his readers.

of the reader's consciousness is the notion of the writer's existential and social responsibility. Sartre writes that "the writer should commit himself completely in his works" (WIL? 46). The committed writer knows that words are means to reveal the truth, and therefore he "knows that words are actions," "because to name is to show, and to show is to change" (ibid. 81), and to change is to act. This is the sense of Sartre's famous quote of Parain: the committed writer "knows that words, as Brice Parain says, are 'loaded pistols.' If he speaks, he fires. He may be silent, but since he has chosen to fire" (ibid. 38) he must take responsibility for his choice and write literature of existential and social commitment.[48]

Likewise, Wallace called out writers to produce literature of commitment ever since "Fictional Futures" (1988). Here, he writes that "it [is] *imperative* that art *not* be nihilistic" (FFs 67) and that we need "serious, real, conscientious, aware, ambitious art" (ibid. 68). In addition, "E Unibus Pluram" (1993), Wallace's most famous manifesto, is itself a call for writers to "endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles" with "reverence and conviction" (EUP 81). Wallace too then thinks that writers must commit themselves in their work completely, and in "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" (1996) he presents Dostoevsky as the very incarnation of this ideal. Wallace writes that Dostoevsky was always looking to "dramatize the profoundest parts of all humans, the parts most conflicted, most serious—the ones with most at stake" (JFD 265). Dostoevsky always wrote "fiction about the stuff that's really important": "identity, moral value, death, will, sexual vs. spiritual love, greed, freedom, obsession, reason, faith, suicide" (ibid.), "his concern was always what it is to be a human being—that is, how to be an actual *person*, someone whose life is informed by values and principles" (ibid.). In this sense, Dostoevsky was a champion of individual-existential commitment. But to Wallace he was more than that. He managed to connect his individual-existential commitment with a communal-social commitment, which is why his writings "dare to try to use serious art to advance ideologies" (ibid. 274) and "'dramatize his moral-spiritual themes against the background of Russian history'" (ibid. 258). In other words, Dostoevsky was aware of the in-situatedness of his being and language, and thus he was able

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[48] In "Departure and Return" Sartre delves deep into philosophy of language through the figure of Brice Parain, whom appears as a kind of French Wittgenstein. Sartre considers Parain's own *Investigations* and writes that "Parain is concerned with language 'as it is spoken,' that is, he sees it as a link in a chain of concrete action" (136). One of the tenets of Parain's philosophy is that "I am '*situated in language*'" (160), which is why one of Parain's most fundamental concerns is what he "calls, in his *Essay on Human Wretchedness*, 'the giddy feeling of an inexactitude in language'" (135).

to create literary works that incorporate both the "universal and particular" (ibid. 258), the communal-social commitment and the individual-existential commitment.

For Wallace, this is the essence of the true work of art, and Dostoevsky is the paradigm of the true artist. Contemporary writers instead produce works that are "effete and aestheticized" and "removed from what's really important" (ibid. 273). Wallace denounces that "we have abandoned the field" (ibid.) that Dostoevsky used to occupy. Today's writers should follow Dostoevsky's model, what Wallace himself would try to do throughout his career. In this sense, we can say that Wallace tried to follow Dostoevsky's model in order to answer Sartre's call to a literature of commitment. Critics have rightly defined Wallace's literature as "an attempt to address [the] problems [of our time] and suggest ways to alleviate or even overcome them" (Dulk, *Existentialist* 267), and as "engaged with cultural, social, and political issues" (Burn, "Introduction" xii). This is certainly the case, and it seems highly probable that Sartre influenced Wallace to undertake this literature of commitment.[49]

The Writer's Responsibility: (4) Counterculture

Wallace also follows Sartre in positing that the writer's commitment must lead to the production of literature whose social function is critical. Sartre writes that the writer's "activity is *useless*" (WIL? 80), and even detrimental, to society, because "it is sometimes harmful for society to become self-conscious" (ibid.). The committed writer names the truth and therefore shows society for what it really is. Just as literature confronts the reader's consciousness, so it confronts society's. This is the critical function of literature: the production of social self-consciousness, which inhibits blind "progress" and diverts energy towards self-questioning: "the writer gives society a *guilty conscience*" (ibid. 81).

Wallace re-proposes the same outlook: to him, literature must confront the predicaments of Western-industrial society at the end of the century. In "Fictional Futures," he argues that it's the writers' job to respond to the "new and singular environment in and

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[49] It is no coincidence that, in his non-fiction, Wallace praises only literature of commitment, and that, in "Rhetoric and the Math Melodrama" (2000), he defines "literature" as the set of "what are really complex and essentially human dramas" (224). To make just one example, Wallace praises Zbigniew Herbert's *Mr. Cogito* (1974) because it "grapples with the Big Questions of human existence" and "communicates an emotional urgency that postmodernism's integument of irony renders facile and banal" ("Mr. Cogito" 121)..

about which we try to write fiction" (FFs 41). Writing must be a social commitment and thus react to its environment. "1987's America is not a nice place to be" (ibid. 67), and literature must remind society of this truth. "When the poor old issue of trying to *be* good no longer even merits a straight face" (ibid. 67-68), literature must confront society and offer ways to overcome the predicaments of our time: "art is meaning, and meaning is power" (ibid. 68). Likewise, in EUP, Wallace says that writers must be "sentient citizens of a community" who create works with "a genuine socio-artistic agenda" (51). In our time, the agenda is to confront our "distinctly Western-industrial" (McCaffery 34) escapism from the reality of suffering, responsibility, value, faith, etc., which we enact through our culture of pleasure, entertainment, and consumerism.

Thus, literature must be critical, countercultural. In this sense, Wallace follows Sartre down to multiple specific details. Sartre berates critics because they don't understand that "our great writers wanted to destroy, to edify, to demonstrate" (WIL? 43), not to pursue mere empty formal innovation. For Sartre, the formalism of critics results from their own bad faith and parasite attachment to bourgeois wealth. They don't know anything about real literature.[50] Likewise, in EUP, Wallace faults critics for thinking that postmodern literature arose from "aesthetic theories out of the bazoo" (EUP 34), as if literature and aesthetics could be detached from the real world. For Wallace, the truth is that "the best postmodern fiction wasn't just credible as art; it seemed downright socially useful in its capacity for what counterculture critics called 'a *critical negation*'" (ibid. 66). The true postmodern artists wanted "to illuminate and explode hypocrisy" (ibid. 65) just as the Sartrean writers of the past wanted to destroy, demonstrate, and edify.

Wallace agrees with Sartre that literature is critical negation *and* that critics have lost sight of the true meaning of art. In addition, Sartre's social agenda in WIL? is to take aim at

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[50] This is one of the reasons why Sartre founded *Les Temps modernes* with Simone de Beauvoir. In the introduction to the journal, Sartre writes that his aim is to argue against "the theoreticians of Art for Art's Sake and of Realism" (*Introducing* 249), who have rendered the phrase "man of letters" disgusting. Sartre goes on to say that the committed writer must "embrace his era—tightly" (ibid. 252) because he's implicated and compromised in his in-situatedness anyway, whatever he does, even in silence and retreat. This is an ontological axiom, and so are the ideas that "a person is nothing other than his freedom" (ibid. 264) and that man is "alone in bearing the burden of himself. In this sense, freedom might appear to be a curse; it *is* a curse. But it is also the sole source of human greatness" (ibid.). Even such short text displays the development of Sartre's argument from his fundamental ontology through the resulting conception of literature to the condemnation of his time.

the bourgeoisie's essential ethos of utilitarianism—"the justifying myth of this industrious and unproductive class was utilitarianism" (104). And utilitarianism is Wallace's own great enemy, it is the origin of the pleasure principle that drives the culture of entertainment and empties our lives of value: "look at utilitarianism—that most English of contributions to ethics—and you see a whole teleology predicated on the idea that the best human life is one that maximizes the pleasure-to-pain ratio" (McCaffery 34). Finally, Sartre chastises the writers of his time for bowing down to the demands of entertainment culture and doing so in bad faith, for fame and wealth. Likewise, Wallace denounces the writers of his time for "genuflecting to" (EUP 76) the ideals of entertainment culture in order to be liked. Also, both authors take aim at writers who aestheticize literature (i.e. empty it of values). And when Sartre writes that "the bourgeois writer and the 'damned' (*maudit*) writer moved on the same level" (WIL? 114), he even accuses the same writers who Tolstoy denounces in *What Is Art?* (1897), that other major influence on Wallace's literary ideals. There is no doubt, then, that an extraordinary amount of WIL? returns in Wallace's work.

The Writer's Responsibility: (5) Oppose Spectation, Enforce Engagement

One of Wallace's main goals was to overcome entertainment culture and force the audience to wake up out of its passiveness and *engage* with the world. In WIL?, Sartre had already tried to do this. He wrote that literature must be an appeal to the reader's "pure freedom" (WIL? 56), an invitation to active collaboration from the writer to the reader. In this sense, he wrote WIL? because he thought that most literature of his time was not true art. He denounced that "the majority" of writers "furnish a whole arsenal of tricks to the reader who wants to go on sleeping quietly" (ibid. 77). These writers arouse emotions that "are foreseeable, manageable" (ibid.), because this guarantees for them a certain level of success. But these are not true artists because true art appeals to the reader's freedom and thus forces him to engage and take responsibility. A true artist writes literature of commitment, and to do this he himself must be committed in the first place: "I shall say that a writer is committed when he tries to achieve the most lucid and the most complete consciousness of being embarked, that is, when he causes the commitment of immediate spontaneity to advance, for himself and others" (ibid.).

In reading the above, who's familiar with Wallace's work has already seen that

Wallace's discourse aligns perfectly with Sartre's. Throughout his career, Wallace has stated repeatedly that true literature must force the reader to confront the human predicament and to take the responsibility of commitment upon himself, in collaboration with the author. In "The Nature of the Fun" (1998), he wrote that "writing fiction becomes a way to go deep inside yourself and illuminate precisely the stuff you don't want to see or let anyone else see, and this stuff usually turs out (paradoxically) to be precisely the stuff all writers and readers share and respond to, feel. Fiction becomes a weird way to countenance yourself and to tell the truth instead of being a way to escape yourself" (198-199). This is why, for Wallace, it is literary art's job "to make you uncomfortable, or to force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort" (McCaffery 22). True art opposes the ideal of seduction and does not reward passive spectation because those divert the audience away from commitment with the world. True art is uneasy – "serious art makes people uncomfortable" (Jacob 153) –, it demands active responsibility on the part of the reader, it isn't manageable and foreseeable, to use Sartrean terms. Finally, then, one of the essential goals of literature must be to shake the reader out of his quiet sleep: "a particular job of fiction is [...] to wake readers up" (Shechner 105). This is one of the reasons that brings Wallace to use avant-garde form. In the age of passive entertainment, one cannot write classical Realist fiction because "the classical Realist form is soothing, familiar, and anesthetic; it drops us right into spectation" (McCaffery 34). On the contrary, "if avant-garde stuff can do its job, it is tremendously difficult and not that accessible, and seduces the reader into making extraordinary efforts that he wouldn't normally make. And that's the kind of magic that really great art can do" (Lipsky 71). Literary form is a means to an end, and when Wallace writes *Infinite Jest* and sets down a text where "the narrative arrangement has to be done by the reader" and "the reader has to fight *through* the mediated voice presenting the material to you" (McCaffery 33), his goal is to pursue a thematic (existential, social) end. This is why Jonathan Franzen has called the book "a critique of 'the culture of passive entertainment'" (Caro 54), and LeClair (1996) a "frightening warning against the feral future it depicts" (36).[51]

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[51] See also Sayers (2012).

Form is the Means, Content the End

Sartre develops all of his artistic ideals in accordance with his fundamental belief that "the end of language is to communicate" (WIL? 36). This belief entails specific conceptions of literary form and of literature as a reader-writer conversation. Wallace follows Sartre: both authors conceive form as a means to an end and, as we have seen, they accuse the formalists and aesthetes (those who treat form as an end in itself) of distorting the true meaning of literary art and emptying it of all meaning. About the critics and the purists, Sartre writes that "everything happens for them as if all literature were only a vast tautology and as if every new prose-writer had invented a new way of speaking only for the purpose of saying nothing" (ibid. 43). Likewise, Wallace indicts critics for treating literary history as one of "aesthetic theories out of the bazoo" (EUP 34) and writers who "treat formal ingenuity as an end in itself" (McCaffery 29) for losing all contact with reality. For Sartre, "we know very well that pure art and empty art are the same thing" (WIL? 41). For Wallace, pure art is "*unreal, empty*" (FFs 53), and "effete" (JFD 273), pervaded by a "thematic poverty" (ibid. 271) that is the result of our time's elevation of "aesthetics to the level of ethics – maybe even metaphysics" (ibid. 271-272). We evaluate works "mainly for their formal ingenuity," and so "presume as a matter of course that 'serious' literature will be distanced from real lived life" (ibid. 272).

In light of this criticism, both Sartre and Wallace propose a theory of form not as an end in itself but as a means to an end. Sartre writes that "there is nothing to be said about form in advance" (WIL? 39), that "it is a matter of knowing what one wants to write about […]. And when one knows, then it remains to decide how one will write about it. Often the two choices are only one, but among good writers the second choice never precedes the first" (ibid. 40). Form is a means to an end, and the end is always content, and content is what you want to talk about with the reader because it's true and important. Thus, the evolution of literature is always a necessary corollary to the evolution of society and, ultimately, of metaphysics: "the always new requirements of the social and the metaphysical involve the artist in finding a new language and new techniques" (ibid.).[52]

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[52] In "On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner," Sartre makes it even more explicit: "a fictional technique always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics" (84). About Faulkner, he concludes: "I like his art, but I do not believe in his metaphysics. A closed future is still a future" (93). In addition, in "Camus' *The Outsider*," he explains Camus' formal choices as an example of metaphysical grounding: "A nineteenth-century naturalist would have written 'A bridge spanned the river.' M. Camus will have none of this anthropomorphism.

Wallace doesn't define the meaning of form in terms as abstract as Sartre's, but he describes the responsibilities of the writer in accordance with Sartre's ideals, which he also *acts out* in his own work, through his postulation of the primacy of content and social and metaphysical commitment. In this sense, if Sartre writes that form is a means in service of content, Wallace states that all great writers in history "think of themselves as realists" (Paulson 129). By this he means that, notwithstanding all the superficial formal differences throughout the evolution of literature, all great writers choose their literary form in service of the specific content that they think is true, important, and therefore worthy of representation

In other words, form changes because the conception of the truth does. For example, Wallace opposes his avant-garde writing to Tolstoy's traditional Realism not as a formal difference in itself but as a necessary corollary of the contrasting perceptions of truth and experience that separate the two writers and their respective ages. What was perceived as "experience," "truth," "meaning," etc. in nineteenth-century Russia differs from what we perceive now in our twenty-first century Western-industrial society. Our whole interpretation of life is different, and this is why literature needs new forms to represent this new reality. Hence why Wallace says that "experimental and avant-garde stuff can capture and talk about the way the world feels on our nerve endings, in a way that conventional realistic stuff can't" (Lipsky 36). Traditional realism feels false *now* because "it imposes an order and sense and ease of interpretation on experience that's never there in real life" (ibid. 37). But for Tolstoy it felt true, and Wallace understands why: "I imagine Leo getting up in the morning […], sitting down in his *silent* room, overlooking some very well-tended gardens, pulling out his quill, and […] in deep tranquility, recollecting emotion" (ibid. 37-38).

Wallace knows that the real difference between him and Tolstoy is a difference in the character of lived experience. If Tolstoy could live in deep tranquility, Wallace admits that "life seems to strobe on and off for me, and to barrage me with input" (ibid. 37). Wallace is an inhabitant of the twenty-first century, confused and overwhelmed by fragmentation and chaos: "my life and my self doesn't feel like anything like a unified developed character in a linear narrative to me" (ibid. 39). This is why he must write avant-garde literature and reject Realism (this is actually the third reason why. The first is the ontological rejection of absolute

He says 'Over the river was a bridge.' This object thus immediately betrays its passiveness . It *is there* before us, plain and undifferentiated" (42).

objectivity. The second is the opposition to spectation). Therefore, Wallace's formal choices are means to the end of representing the truth as he experiences it just as Tolstoy's traditional Realism was his means to the representation of the truth as he experienced it (and just as Sartre's own choices were his own means). In this sense, Wallace's conception of form as subservient to content and truth aligns perfectly with Sartre's. This subservience of form entails the primacy of social development and, first of all, of ontology. This is why, for Sartre and Wallace, a work of art is first and foremost a work that responds to its time and place, to the social predicaments and ultimately to our beliefs about the truth, because a society's structure depends on the specific fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality on which that society is founded.

Literature Is a Conversation Between Reader and Writer

The aim of literature is to establish a conversation between reader and writer wherein they can confront the truth. Sartre specifically writes that "it is not true that one writes for oneself" (WIL? 51) and that "the creative act is only an incomplete and abstract moment" (ibid.) until the reader participates in the production: "it is the joint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others" (ibid. 51-52). The author's creative act is an appeal "to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work" (ibid. 54) and the experience of literature teaches that "both of us bear the responsibility for the universe" (ibid. 66). The writer must know that literature "can find its fulfilment only in reading" (ibid. 54) and that the reader himself creates the meaning of the work "in a continual exceeding of the written thing" (ibid. 53). Therefore, "reading is directed creation" (ibid.), and the imagination of the reader has a constitutive function. This is why literature truly is a communal endeavor: "the artist must entrust to another the job of carrying out what he has begun" (ibid.), knowing that "it is only through the consciousness of the reader" (ibid.) that the object can become a work of art.

Wallace places all of these ideals at the basis of his conception of literature, and he (like Sartre) writes his manifestos because he thinks that his contemporaries have forgotten that this is the true meaning of literature, and because he wants to reaffirm this meaning and call for a literary revolution. For Wallace, "a piece of fiction is a conversation" (Miller 62). In

a true literary work "there's a relationship set up between the reader and the writer" (ibid.) whereby art acquires the power to "make me feel less lonely" (ibid.). In great works of literature, the reader feels "this sense of a conversation about loneliness" (Lipsky 68) that's produced as the work confronts his consciousness, and through this feeling he is redeemed when he comes to recognize himself in the work: "somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do" (Miller 62). Wallace follows Sartre and believes that, in this process of redemption, the reader collaborates with the author in the creation of meaning. He states that "the reader's own life 'outside the story changes the story" (McCaffery 40), and that while "you could argue that it affects only 'her reaction to the story' or 'her take on the story'" (ibid.), the truth is that "these things *are* the story" (ibid.). Thus, in a work of literature, "language lives not just in but *through* the reader. The reader becomes God, for all textual purposes" (ibid.). And while Wallace attributes this teaching to "Barthian and Derridean poststructuralism" (ibid.), it is worth considering the possibility of Sartre's great influence even here. We have seen in how many respects Wallace's discourse follows Sartre's, and here Wallace even uses the same language, as both authors state that literature lives through the reader's consciousness. Most importantly, though, Wallace spent his career opposing the conclusions that poststructuralism derives from this understanding of language and the reader's role, and instead he affirmed the conclusions that Sartre derives from these same ideals. Poststructuralism affirms that the meaning of the text can never be fixed, it cannot refer, it lives through each individual reader, and therefore it can never mean in relation to the world and it can never be object of true human conversation, i.e. communion. Sartre agrees with the premises but comes to the opposite conclusions: since the text can never be fixed and it cannot refer, then it becomes the place wherein each individual must commit to the responsibility of creating the meaning of the world, and since the text lives through each individual reader, then it becomes the place for linguistic intercourse and human communion, where meaning arises as a result of the shared effort of human beings in dialogue.

Wallace follows Sartre and states that the writer's end must be to "reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans" (McCaffery 41) and to write works that "affect somebody, make somebody feel a certain way, allow them to enter into relationships with ideas and with characters" (KP 18) and with the authors himself. Literature must be an "anodyne against loneliness" (ibid. 16). It must remind the reader that "this process is a relationship between the writer's consciousness and her own, and that in order to be anything

like a real human relationship, she's going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work" (McCaffery 34). These are Wallace's fundamental tenets, and Sartre influenced them way more than anyone has ever noticed.[53]

Conclusion

Of course, there's much of Sartre that Wallace rejects. For one thing, he has no interest in Sartre's communism. But more importantly, Sartre claims to have no doubt that all objectivity is illusion both in WIL? and throughout his other writings, and since he thinks that literature must represent the truth of Existential ontology even in content, we can see his absolute denial of objectivity even in his literary reviews. In "John Dos Passos and 1919," he writes: "I regard Dos Passos as the greatest writer of our time" (103). Dos Passos represents pure human individuality in its truth of pure indeterminism without explanation and *this* is why, for Sartre, he is the greatest writer of our time. Likewise, in "Francois Mauriac and Freedom," Sartre praises Mauriac because he represents the truths of subjectivity and perspectivism: "a novel is an action related from various points of view. And M. Mauriac is well aware of this, having written, in La *Fin de la Nuit*, that '…the most conflicting judgments about a single person can be correct; it is a question of lighting, and no one light reveals more than another'" (15).

Wallace too affirms the subjectivity of life both in existential (I cannot know the contents of your mind, your pain) and ontological terms (science teaches that relativity is a fundamental law of nature), but he remains uncertain with regards to the truth-value of this affirmation and conscious of its great dangers (it may entail absolute solipsism). On the one hand, Wallace's rejection of traditional literary Realism is an affirmation of perspectivism (objectivity is impossible). On the other hand, Wallace was well aware of the dangers of the "idea of truth that as far as I can tell comes from Nietzsche, that all truth is perspectival"

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[53] For Wallace, this ability to merge author and reader is one of the main traits of a great literary writer. Non-coincidentally, in "Borges on the Couch" (2004), he praises Borges because "Borges collapses reader and writer into a new kind of aesthetic agent, one who makes stories out of stories, one for whom reading is essentially—consciously—a creative act" (293-294). For further inquiry into Borges's influence on Wallace see Thompson (2014).

(Goldfarb 148), and in many ways he sought to reject it.[54]

Another fundamental divergence is that while Sartre affirms with absolute certainty that "the recognition of freedom by itself is joy" (WIL? 64), Wallace – while he too is an Existentialist who thinks that individual choice is the ultimate (see *This Is Water*) arbiter of meaning – is much more dubious and aware of the great dangers of free will. His writings are pervaded by the perception of the endless and bottomless despair that may lie within the idea of individual freedom (hence, e.g. why AA addicts in *Infinite Jest* find salvation in the renunciation of free will). Sartre's is an absolute apologetics of "the pride" and "the anguish of individuality (WIL? 88); Wallace instead always maintained a contradictory relationship with the concepts of free will, individuality, pride, and angst. On the one hand, he (like Sartre) thought that these concepts constitute both the essence of humanity and its only chance at redemption. On the other, he felt that they were the origin of unbearable despair.

These are significant differences between Sartre and Wallace, but they take nothing away from the recognition that, in light of all that we have seen above, the relationship between WIL? and Wallace's conception of literature manifests itself as almost surely one of direct influence, an influence so profound that it extends to multiple, specific fundamental ideals, both in content and in the logical structuring of that content. The alignment between Sartre and Wallace comprises the postulation of the primacy of ontology, the rejection of the possibility of objectivity (from which follow the rejections of traditional literary Realism and traditional mimesis), and the affirmations of a late-Wittgensteinian conception of language and of a resulting conception of literature as a means to existential and social commitment that entails the following set of artistic tenets and writerly responsibilities: there is an opposition between true and false writing, form is a means to an end, literature is and must be a conversation between reader and writer, the writer must tell the truth, confront the reader's consciousness, write countercultural literature, oppose spectation, and enforce individual engagement on the part of the reader. The scope and detail of this affinity are

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[54] Wallace's work is wide, complex, and, in many cases, contradictory, and it is impossible to unpack it in all its nuance here. But in fact the same is true for Sartre's. We have seen that Sartre defends his own version of perspectivism, and he comes very close (much closer than Wallace) to the explicit affirmation of the "*relativisme total*" he refers to in "*Denis de Rougemont:* 'L'amour et l'occident'" (60). But then what to make of the fact that Sartre too defends his truth (the truth of *Being and Nothingness*) as the absolute truth? When Sartre affirms the reality of human freedom, for example, he certainly doesn't mean to say that determinism and fatalism may be possible from some other perspectives.

evident, and they testify to the magnitude of Wallace's adherence to Existentialism and use of appropriation as a means to artistic creation. The fundamental tenets of Wallace's literary project follow Sartre's, and this constitutes only one of myriad instances of Wallace's cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and cross-temporal artistic appropriations, on which we still have much more to learn.

THE SOCIOLOGY

OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

On the Ethical Foundation of Wallace's Literary Commitment

The System of Wallace's Sociology

Introduction

David Foster Wallace was, first and foremost, a fiction writer who thought of himself as a fiction writer. When interviewers asked him about his non-fiction, his answer was: "I'm not a journalist and I don't pretend to be one […]. I'll be honest: I think of myself as a fiction writer" (Scocca 83). So why write (and read) a piece on Wallace's sociology? Is there even such a thing, and why would it be interesting? The answers to these questions unveil the core of Wallace's lifelong project.

What follows demonstrates that there is a sociology by David Foster Wallace. His sociology presents a clear and convincing diagnosis of our society of loneliness and its causes, and it founds Wallace's proposed solutions to the contemporary predicament. It is thus central to his entire literary project because, as Claire (2018) wrote, Wallace's work "reflects upon and questions American values and democratic ideals" (4).

What is sociology? — Ideology determines all definitions of "sociology." The ideological character of all definitions of "sociology" is one of the infinite consequences of the pervasiveness of philosophy in all discourses. An "ideology" is a "system of ideas" (*OED*), and every definition of "sociology" (as all other definitions) depends on a specific system of ideas (here "ideology" retains its original meaning devoid of all the pejorative connotations that our contemporary culture attaches to it). Every system of ideas has its own values and beliefs about the nature of things in the world. These fundamental beliefs constitute a philosophy, and most specifically a metaphysics or ontology. Metaphysics and ontology constitute the foundation of every form of human knowledge (science is its own adherence to a specific ontology).

In fact, sociology was born as the consequence of a *specific* ideology: the philosophical doctrine of positivism. Auguste Comte (1798-1857) founded both positivism and sociology in his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-1842), and as positivism is the mother of sociology so the Enlightenment is the mother of positivism. The Enlightenment is the philosophy of

"reason and individualism" (*OED*), the ideology that has utmost faith in man's power over the world. This central faith is what the Enlightenment, positivism, and sociology all share, in their essence, and it is also what drives all the sciences. "Positivism" is "a philosophical system recognizing only that which can be scientifically verified or which is capable of logical or mathematical proof, and therefore rejecting metaphysics and theism" (*OED*). This definition in itself expresses the *philosophical* character of positivism's affirmation of science and rejection of metaphysics and theism: the choice of reason and science over the traditions of religion and philosophy is itself a philosophical choice.

Thus, sociology exists in accordance with positivism's belief that truth is scientific and mathematical—and therefore in accordance with Enlightenment philosophy. This explains why the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines "sociology" as "the idea of a 'science of man,' devoted to uncovering scientific laws determining the basic dynamics of human interactions" (*ODP* 342). Sociology has always been conceived as a "social science," a "scientific study" practiced through the "scientific method." Yet, we should ask: what exactly is the "scientific method"? The *OED* defines it as the method "consisting in systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses." But this definition is too vague. All serious thinkers observe the world with care and formulate, test, and modify their hypotheses. To think that philosophers or theologians don't is just a form of contemporary bigotry. In daily life, what we in fact indicate by "scientific method" is the method that believes that truth is empirical and thus defines itself *in opposition to* humanistic, philosophical, and religious methods, broadly conceived.

But empiricism is itself a philosophy, and so how can the scientific method define itself in opposition to philosophy? And consequently: how can sociology define itself as a science in opposition to philosophy? Remember that positivism is itself a philosophical doctrine that originates in the Enlightenment, another philosophical doctrine. According to positivism, only what can be scientifically verified can be true. But is this a scientific claim? Can this claim undergo empirical testing? Can it be scientifically verified? Or isn't it rather a philosophical claim? Can science's claims about itself be scientific? In *What Is Called Thinking* (1951-52), Heidegger famously states that "science does not think" (*WCT* 8). Edmund Husserl, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Alfred Schmidt, and many others agree with him. And in *Gesamtausgabe I.16*, Heidegger offers a concise explanation of what he means: "using physical methods, for example, I cannot say what physics is. What physics is, can only be thought following the manner of philosophical question" (*G* 705; trans., see Riha 80).

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Heidegger's reasoning here is simple, concise, clear, and incontestable. Nothing can pursue the goals of science like science itself. This is why a philosophy in the service of science is useless. But what science cannot do is define itself. What defines science is a discourse, a language, a meaning, an interpretation of the world. Physics and mathematics cannot say what and why they are, and they cannot demonstrate their truth. Philosophy says what they are and what rights they have. Our most fundamental beliefs about Being say what they are. It is no coincidence that in Ancient Greece the first scientists were first and foremost philosophers. And while today neuroscience claims the right to moral knowledge, the question is who has told neuroscience that it has the right to make moral claims, and that it has the power to understand and change the universe, and that is should pursue x goals for y reasons?

We take the meaning of "science" and "scientific" for granted, but within these terms lie abysses of ideological presuppositions and uncertainties that pervade our interpretation of the world. Sociology claims to be a social science, i.e. a scientific study of society. But what does this mean? It is clear that the meaning of "science" and "scientific" determines the meaning of sociology. In this, sociology's ideological presuppositions become most apparent. The meaning of our terms (together with the actions that follow from them) depends on our philosophical postulates. Every dimension of human life is the instantiation of an ideology, and so every action that wishes to define itself in opposition to ideology makes contradictory claims: it is an ideology that says to be independent from ideology.

One of the ways in which the philosophical essence of sociology expresses itself is in the historical fact that every great sociologist has defined sociology in his own terms (i.e. according to his specific ideology). Accordingly, the field has gone through an anti-positivistic turn, beginning with the twentieth century. Yet, positivism and the Enlightenment aren't dead, and if they are your ideology then you may agree with Émile Durkheim's definition of sociology's purpose in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895): "to extend the scope of scientific rationalism to cover human behaviour" (*RSM* 33).

Durkheim wouldn't have accepted Wallace's non-fictional discourse as a sociology, but sociology has changed. Many have appropriated Hegel's critique of empiricism and Marx's new dialectics. Weber and Simmel have pioneered *Verstehen* (the interpretative method). Every great sociologist has defined sociology in his own terms and so has argued that a specific dimension of society should be the focus of the practice: Durkheim institutions, Weber actions, Simmel groups and their interactions, etc. Now the field is open,

fluid, interdisciplinary, and barely definable. It certainly doesn't fit into a positivist definition. Today the *OED* defines sociology as "the study of social problems," or as "the study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society." A definition that is as wide as it can be so as to contain the largest variety of works under its label.

In 2016, Bauman and Mazzeo published *In Praise of Literature*. The book argues that literature is fundamental to sociology, and there's possibly no claim that can be more anti-positivistic and anti-scientific than that. But more importantly, if you open any great book of sociology published in the last fifty years you'll find hundreds of pages dedicated to philosophy, psychology, and even literature.[55] It's thus arbitrary to define "sociology" as anything more specific than the study of social problems and of the development, structure, and functioning of human society. But if that's what sociology is, then every serious discourse that wishes to understand society is sociology, and further delimitations of the definition become futile and absurd.

After all, "socio-logy" literally means "*lógos* of and about society," to reason and converse about society. Sociology is an ideology and therefore a philosophy, and its philosophical character becomes most evident in its prescriptiveness. Sociology is never objective, even when it claims to be, it always tells us what we *should* do; or, if it doesn't *tell* us, it is nonetheless pervaded by this *should*. E.g.: for the Becks' *Individualization* (2002), "we are living in a highly moral world despite what the cultural pessimists try to tell us" (*I* 212), and therefore we *should* continue in this direction. For Bauman's *The Art of Life* (2008), Nietzsche's ideal of the Higher Man rules our society but is destined to failure, and so we *should* leave behind our present ideals. For Giddens's *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), our society exacerbates engulfment and ontological insecurity, and therefore we *should* strive to make significant changes to it. For Lasch, our culture is imprisoned in narcissism, and therefore we *should* follow Freud's teachings to get out of it.

Where do these *shoulds* come from? Where does the very idea of "ought" come from?

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[55] Citations of all kinds of philosophers from Plato to Heidegger are common. The favorite psychologists are Freud, Jung, and Adler. Here are some examples: the Becks' *Individualization* (2002) refers to Kant and Nietzsche as major influences, and cites Arendt, Hegel, and Hobbes to name only a few; Bauman's *The Art of Life* (2008) is dedicated to demonstrating that "ours is the time of Nietzsche's resurrection" (*AL* 121); Giddens's *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) is grounded in R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self* (1965); Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) and *The Minimal Self* (1984) find their cornerstone in psychoanalysis, especially Freud's, and they both also delve into literary criticism.

What about "good" and "bad," "right" and "wrong"? These ideas are not scientific, and they found every human discourse, including sociology. Sociology is never just an objective study of society. It is always ideological, and full of shoulds and presuppositions. Bauman is right when, in *Liquid Modernity* (2000), he writes that "a non-committal sociology is an impossibility" (*LM* 216).

A sociology by David Foster Wallace? — Sociology is the study of social problems and of the development, structure, and functioning of human society. It is prescriptive, and its method is interdisciplinary and includes philosophy, psychology, and literature. *Therefore*, Wallace's discourse rightfully belongs to sociology, and two of his most famous non-fictional texts, "E Unibus Pluram" (1993) and *This Is Water* (2005), are clearly sociological works. These two texts are essential to Wallace's artistic manifesto, which fact indicates that Wallace's sociology is fundamental to Wallace's entire literary project.

In these two works, Wallace asks what the problems of society are today and what caused the advent of today's social structure. In posing these questions, he formulates a sociology that diagnoses today's social predicament and proposes a solution to it (i.e. a *should*). His diagnosis is that "this is a generation that has an inheritance of absolutely nothing as far as meaningful moral values, and it's our job to make them up, and we're not doing it" (Kennedy and Polk 18),[56] while part of the solution is that the literary writer has the specific duty of going back to producing true literary art that can function "as an anodyne against loneliness" (ibid. 16)—loneliness being the disease that our society is responsible for (see e.g. Houser 2012).

Wallace's sociology defines the predicament against which Wallace can theorize writing as therapeutic, corrective, redemptive, a response to the problems of our time. This is why his sociology constitutes the foundation of his entire intellectual project, and why in confronting it we go straight to the fundamental premises of the argument that pervades all of his work. Wallace cannot be subdivided into Wallace-the-essayist and Wallace-the-novelist, as if his fiction didn't depend entirely on the historical, social, political, ethical, and cultural reflections that constitute his non-fiction. There is only one Wallace, and his work explicitly constitutes a unity whose common end is the hope of salvation from suffering.

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[56] A point he reiterates to Lipsky: "the moral job is ours" (Lipsky 84), and even the later essay "Up, Simba" (2000) where he focuses on the "'moral poverty' in America" (US 185).

Within this structure, his non-fiction focuses on the diagnosis, while the fiction is supposed to constitute the principal means of cure from the diseases that cause our suffering.

For Wallace, truly artistic fiction makes arguments (social, political, existential, philosophical, etc.). This is why, in the essay "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" (1996), Wallace praises Dostoevsky as a model: because his "mature works are fundamentally ideological and cannot truly be appreciated unless one understands the polemical agendas that inform them" (JFD 258). Or, why in "The Empty Plenum" (1990) Wallace writes that "Mr. T. Pynchon […] argues in *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* (TEP 88).

These are just two examples of many more that could be given. And while the idea of "argumentative fiction" may strike some purists as mistaken, arguments are "sets of reasons given in support of an idea" (*OED*), and fiction can produce them through all of its means: dialogue, dramatization, plot, formal structure, etc. Wallace's fiction is a great example of fiction that is always concerned with producing arguments through all of its means, and this is perhaps the most important reason why we call it *philosophical fiction*—"we" meaning that many critics agree on calling it so. For example, James Ryerson writes that Wallace's works "belong to the genre of the novel of ideas" (Ryerson 21), and Kennedy and Polk that "his writing benefits from a mathematical and philosophical grasp of symbolic systems and large, overarching concepts, drawing out every implication to its fullest" (K&P 11). But again, these are just two examples.[57]

Wallace chose philosophical fiction over philosophy because he saw that fiction was best suited to connect with people's hearts. He chose fiction because he wanted to confront philosophical problems by making them concrete. As he told Eggers, good fiction must have "the ability to talk meaningfully to us" (Eggers 89), and in Wallace's case: to talk meaningfully to us about philosophical problems—which intention also explains his formal choices, which

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[57] For more proof, see the success of Adam Kelly's "Development Through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas" (2012), as well as at the publication of two collections of criticism on Wallace and philosophy: *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy* (2014) and *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace* (2015). Most importantly, see Wallace's own words: "I come to writing from a pretty hard-core, abstract place. It comes out of technical philosophy and continental European theory, and extreme avant-garde shit" (Donahue 71).

are dependent on the philosophy that drives them.[58] Thus, Wallace' fiction exists in indestructible relationship with his non-fiction. His work is characterized by consistency in subject matter and myriad variations in perspective. It attempts to weave fiction, non-fiction, literature, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and science together in the hope of finding salvation from despair. Its peculiarity is that it is systematic in its rejection of systematization, a systematized anti-systematic discourse where the same fundamental issues are confronted over and over from myriad different angles. At the bottom of this structure lies Wallace's sociology, which diagnoses our social structure as the cause of great loneliness and despair and prompts the fiction to constitute itself as a response to this diagnosis.

In "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World" (2004), McLaughlin writes that Wallace's project was "to reenergize literature's social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world, have an impact on real people" (McLaughlin 55). And in *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace* (2015), den Dulk writes that Wallace's fiction is a "fiction of engagement in response […] to the problems of our time, an attempt to address these problems" (xii, 267). Both are right: Wallace's fiction is a response to the diagnosis of his sociology, and this makes the sociology the foundation of Wallace's entire literary project. We can therefore question the fundamental premises of Wallace's project by asking whether his sociology is correct. Too many studies of Wallace's work have taken Wallace's sociology as legitimate *a priori*, and this unfounded legitimization has influenced too many readings of his work and evaluations of his solutions to the human predicament.

While the two fundamental texts in Wallace's sociology are "E Unibus Pluram" and *This Is Water*, Wallace's sociology actually spreads throughout all the non-fictional texts that should be deemed in their entirety as composing Wallace's manifesto, and we hold these to be many more than those critics usually indicate. The critical consensus is that EUP and the

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[58] In this sense, see Wallace's interview with Schmeidel: "Most of the modern writing I like the best is both sophisticated and colloquial […] and I think I do little more than try to achieve this same high-low blend" (Schmeidel 59). Or critical assessments like Katovsky's that can in large part be extended to all of Wallace's fiction: "*The Broom*'s multilayered narrative structure and excessively antiminimalist style bring to mind the metafictional playground of Thomas Pynchon and Robert Coover. […] The challenge to the reader is wading through densely written passages that touch upon metaphysical conundrums, language games, theories of the self and tantalizing antinomies […]. But balancing his heady philosophizing is a playfulness of intent rooted in pop culture" (Katovsky 5).

McCaffery interview constitute "the 1993 essay-interview nexus" that is Wallace's main manifesto, and this is of course true. But Wallace's *entire* manifesto is a system of multiple essays and interviews that revolves around EUP and includes, at least, the essays "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (1988,), "The Empty Plenum" (1990), "David Lynch Keeps His Head" (1995), "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" (1995), all of Wallace's interviews, especially those with McCaffery (1993), Kennedy and Polk (1993), David Lipsky (1996), and Laura Miller (1996), and the speech that would become *This Is Water* (2005). In this sense, Wallace's sociology extends throughout Wallace's entire career – from "Fictional Futures" (1988) to *TIW* (2005) – and again this is proof of the centrality of sociology within his project.

As Wallace's sociology extends through all of these texts so will the present analysis, even while focusing on EUP and *TIW* as the two main texts that deserve the most attention. To confront Wallace's sociology is to ask first whether the picture of society it represents is correct and second whether the solutions it offers are viable. Criticism has evaluated Wallace's fiction for its ability (or lack thereof) to provide the solutions to the problems that Wallace's sociology diagnoses. Here, we question the very foundations of the project and ask whether the diagnosis makes sense to begin with. We thus call Wallace's sociology into question to determine whether it can withstand criticism, and we do so by contrasting it with the works of some of the major sociologists of our time: Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck, Anthony Giddens, David Harvey, and Christopher Lasch. Most of these authors have already found their way into Wallace criticism,[59] but here we use their works in an unprecedented comparative method that contrasts them with Wallace's sociology in order to test it. This will shed new light not only on Wallace's sociology but also on the works of these great authors. And while the analysis will focus on illuminating problems in Wallace's sociology, this *won't* mean that the work of these great sociologists is superior to Wallace's, nor that their sociologies provide clearer and unquestionable readings of contemporary society capable of conceiving effective and viable remedies to its predicaments. On the contrary, there's a unity in the following interpretation that is rooted in one single idea: that

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[59] Notable examples: several works have recognized Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* as a major influence on Wallace. The best-known are Marshall Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), David Hering's *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (2016), and Mary Holland's "'The Art's Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of *Infinite Jest*" (2006)—see also Dorson (2016). Allard den Dulk studies the relationship between Wallace and Giddens in his *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace* (2015). And Nicoline Timmer talks a lot about Bauman in *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (2010).

all the sociologies under analysis here break down in their theoretical flaws on agency, freedom, and free will. That is: all of these authors take the truth of these philosophical concepts to be self-evident, but they fail to understand their necessary consequences and so their true meaning.

Preliminary Note: The relationship Between Wallace's Fiction and Non-Fiction

This relationship is fundamental. The fiction and non-fiction can't be split apart. When considering this, one will see how natural it is that Wallace's non-fiction is fictional and that his fiction is philosophical. In other words: how natural it is that fiction and non-fiction are always merged in his writings, thus making their boundaries unclear. Wallace's fiction itself belongs to that genre of INTERPRET-ME fiction that he defines in the essay "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*" (1990). Here, Wallace writes that INTERPRET-ME novels "carve out for themselves an interstice between flat-out fiction and a sort of weird cerebral *roman à clef*" (TEP 74); that is, they "concern themselves thematically with what we might consider highbrow or intellectual issues—stuff proper to art, engineering, antique lit., philosophy, etc." (ibid.). In other words, these novels blur the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, storytelling and argumentation, and they present stories whose themes are abstract issues that are made concrete. Thus: these novels actualize the abstract, and this constitutes their greatest value, because they "serve the vital and vanishing function of reminding us of fiction's limitless possibilities for reach and grasp, for making heads throb heartlike, and for sanctifying the marriages of cerebration & emotion, abstraction & lived life, transcendent truth-seeking & daily schlepping" (ibid.).

INTERPRET-ME fiction teaches us that the abstract is only too concrete, the essence of everyday life. Wallace cites Voltaire's *Candide*, Gombrowicz's *Cosmos*, Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, Sartre's *Nausea*, Camus's *The Stranger*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as great examples of this genre, but his own fiction belongs to it. Like Dostoevsky before him, Wallace chose fiction precisely to care for philosophy by manifesting its pervasion of the daily concrete; that is, he chose fiction to make philosophy itself concrete, in a spirit that we may call – in honor of Wallace's intellectual hero – Wittgensteinian. This is precisely the sense in which Wallace quotes Wittgenstein's famous

note to Norman Malcolm, from Malcolm's *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, which reads: "what is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc. and if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life?" (qtd in Wallace "TEP" 86).

In "The Empty Plenum," Wallace uses a technique that he employs throughout his non-fiction: he praises artists who actualize the ideals, goals, and features of his own art, and yet he never makes the reference to his own art explicit, nor states that someone represents a model for *him*. Rather: he lets the obvious and essential conformities between himself and other artists arise through the strategy of implication that pervades his non-fiction (Severs 2018 makes a similar argument as well). Thus, he never writes "artist *x* produces great art because he strives to do *y*, as I try to in my work." But rather, in essay *a*, "artist *x* produces great art because he does *y*," in essay *b*, "the contemporary human predicament needs art that does *y*," and in interview *c*, "I humbly attempt to do *y*"—and note the importance of it being "*interview*" *c*: Wallace never wrote about his own art. Not once. Nowhere. Only in interviews does he let himself slip into direct and explicit expression of the intentionality behind his own works.

This strategy of implication is very common throughout intellectual history, it manages to affirm one's ideals without reducing them to an individual's opinions, it lets the argument stand for itself. Wallace uses it to align himself with some of the greatest writers in history and to point to himself as the leader of the new literary rebels without ever making any grandiose statement. Within this system, every word of praise for e.g. David Lynch in "David Lynch Keeps His Head," Dostoevsky in "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," or Markson in "The Empty Plenum," resounds as a description of Wallace's own art.

In TEP, e.g. Wallace praises Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* for its "imaginative portrait of what it would be like actually to live in the sort of world the logic and metaphysics of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* posit" (TEP 86). Markson's novel is an example of great INTERPRET-ME fiction because it is a "philosophical sci-fi" (ibid. 85) that successfully roots the abstract in the everyday and shows that anyone who accepts the fundamental tenets of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is condemned to live in "metaphysical hell" (ibid. 86), "a hell of utter subjectivity" (ibid. 105), of "ultimate loneliness" (ibid. 91), of "solipsism" (ibid.). Markson is thus a true artist because "he has fleshed the abstract sketches of Wittgensteinian doctrine into the concrete theater of human loneliness" (ibid. 108).

It is no coincidence that this review comes three years after the publication of *The*

Broom of the System (1987), where Wallace had tried to do just *that*; i.e. flesh the abstract sketches of Wittgenstein's philosophy into the concrete theater of human loneliness. Just as Markson fleshes the abstractions of the *Tractatus* into Kate's concrete loneliness in his own novel, Wallace had tried to flesh the abstractions of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* into Lenore's concrete loneliness in *his* own novel. Lenore is the protagonist of *The Broom of the System* and she is incredibly lonely and afraid of other people. She believes that she may be nothing but the linguistic construct to which people try to ascribe the function they desire. She's afraid that she's a character in other people's stories, and that human interactions are inextricably violent and consist in individuals trying to force specific identities (functions) upon one another in order to fulfill their individual needs. If this were true, life would be only a narrative constructed by one's consciousness, a consciousness that ascribes functions to itself and to everything else, thus dominating all Being. That is: if this were true, solipsism would be the truth, and human interactions would be nothing but the infinite clash of solipsistic narratives that want to ascribe to all beings the specific functions that they want, which would mean that infinite war is the truth. In other words: Lenore is terrified by the prospect of living in a Wittgensteinian metaphysical hell. Thus: as Markson's novel is a conscious concretization of the metaphysics of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* so Wallace's is a conscious concretization of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). And only from a private letter do we learn that Wallace consciously created his fiction as a philosophical fiction and an INTERPRET-ME fiction. The following passage comes from a letter that Wallace wrote in 1986 to the editor of *The Broom of the System* (and it is taken from Max's biography of Wallace, entitled *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*):

> a big subplot of the book, which is essentially a dialogue between Hegel and Wittgenstein on one hand and Heidegger and a contemporary French thinker-duo named Paul DeMan and Jacques Derrida on the other, said debate having its root in an essential self-other distinction that is perceived by both camps as less ontological/metaphysical than essentially (for Hegel and Witt) historical and cultural or (for Heidegger and DeMan and Derrida) linguistic, literary, aesthetic, and fundamentally super or metacultural (Max 69).

But *The Broom of the System* is only one example of Wallace's fictionalization of his fundamental non-fictional concerns. Another is *Infinite Jest*, the magnum opus where Wallace dramatizes

the social predicaments that he analyzes in his sociology—above all in "E Unibus Pluram." Wallace even links the two works explicitly in a scene of the novel that presents tennis athletes conversing about the loneliness of their pursuit for individual success: "'We're all on each other's food chain. All of us. […] Welcome to the meaning of *individual*. We're each deeply alone here. It's what we all have in common, this aloneness.' '*E Unibus Pluram*,' Ingersoll muses" (*IJ* 112).[60] Such explicit examples regarding the inextricable relationship between Wallace's non-fiction and fiction occur throughout Wallace's career, and here we've given only a couple as proof of this general pattern. The relationship between the non-fiction and fiction can be roughly described as one of question and answer. The non-fiction diagnoses loneliness and despair and *asks* how they can be overcome, and the fiction, while reiterating the question, also tries to *answer* both in theory and practice; it tries to ameliorate what in "Back in New Fire" (1996) Wallace identifies as "our struggles to connect with one another, to erect bridges across the chasms that separate selves" (BNF 172).

The Structure, Content, and Development of Wallace's Sociology

We can analyze "E Unibus Pluram" and *This Is Water* to understand the infrastructure of Wallace's sociology and the unity of Wallace's entire production. EUP's main focus is social analysis while *TIW* is concerned with psychology, existentialism, and ontology: i.e. the individual's relationship with being. Yet, in-depth analysis shows that the same spirit pervades the two texts, and above all the same dread, the dread of Wallace's entire production, what he variously calls "existential loneliness" (Miller 62), "solipsism" (Burn xiv), "our default setting" (*TIW* 38), etc. Throughout his writings, Wallace conceptualizes this dread in both existential and sociological terms, and this dread constitutes the essential thrust

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[60] Wallace's work constitutes an effective response to the social dynamic highlighted by Ulrich Beck in "On the Mortality of Industrial Society" (1995), where he writes that: "what emerges from the fading social norms is naked, frightened, aggressive ego in search of love and help" (MIS 40), and that "someone who is poking around in the fog of his or her own self is no longer capable of noticing that this isolation, this 'solitary confinement of the ego' is a mass sentence" (Mortality 40). Wallace reminds us of this truth in *Infinite Jest*: "everybody is identical in their secret unspoken belief that way deep down they are different from everyone else" (*IJ* 205). Bartlett (2016) is right that the novel constitutes a genuine conversation between reader and writer.

of his sociology, of which EUP and *TIW* represent the first and last (in chronological order) major non-fictional instantiations.

Solipsism was Wallace's perpetual dread — Wallace gave the *This is Water* speech in 2005 and died in 2008. In that three-year span, he published only a few secondary non-fiction pieces and two excerpts from *The Pale King*.[61] This means that *TIW* is the last major work Wallace presented to the world while alive. In it, he diagnoses our eternal psychological, existential, and ontological predicament and proposes a solution to it (in this diagnosis -› cure structure, *TIW* replicates EUP). Our predicament is our default setting, the most fundamental ontological truth of our experience, what we are essentially made of, what we forget, lose sight of, are unaware of because it is always right in front of our eyes, all around us and within us. Therefore, the text aims to manifest the most fundamental truth of existence, and so belongs among Wallace's most ambitious works.

The speech opens with the statement that "the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about" (*TIW* 8).[62] Here, Wallace again follows the teachings of his life-long idol Wittgenstein, who wrote a famous 1940 diary note that would become one of Wallace's favorite quotes: "how hard it is for me to see what is *right in front of my eyes*" (*Culture and Value* 44).[63] This is why Wallace highlights that we must beware of our tendency "to get lost in abstract thinking instead of simply paying attention to what's going on right in front of me. Instead of paying attention to what's going on *inside* me" (*TIW* 48-49). When we look inside, we see that "our default setting, hardwired into our boards at birth" (ibid. 38), is our "natural, basic self-centeredness" (ibid. 37), i.e. "my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence" (ibid. 36). In this sense, our default setting is the solipsistic nightmare that Descartes hypothesizes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) and which Wallace cites in "The Empty Plenum"; this natural condition that makes us "uniquely, completely,

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[61] The essays are "Host" (2005), "Roger Federer as Religious Experience" (2006), "Deciderization 2007 – a Special Report" (2007), and "Just Asking" (2007). The excerpts from *TPK* are "Good People" (2007) and "The Compliance Branch" (2008).

[62] This is the point of the fish parable that Wallace had already included in *Infinite Jest* (p. 445) and which is further proof of the unity of Wallace's entire production, given that the point comes from Wittgenstein, which indicates that it had been in Wallace's mind since his undergraduate studies.

[63] Roiland (2012) shows that this is the driving force of all of Wallace's nonfiction.

imperially alone, day in and day out" (*TIW* 60). This is the "terrible truth" (ibid. 57) of our experience, but fortunately it is a delusion, and so we *can* free ourselves from the suffering it entails.

On the surface, "E Unibus Pluram" seems to not have these ontological concerns, but to truly understand Wallace, one must recognize that at its core resides the same dread of solipsism of *TIW*. EUP's problem with contemporary society is its exacerbation of existential loneliness. The phrase "E Unibus Pluram" means "out of one, many" – meaning that our society has become fragmented into an infinity of individual monads.[64] The title ironically inverts the US motto on the Great Seal "E Pluribus Unum," ("out of many, one") and this inversion is denunciatory: it indicates that the values of togetherness, citizenship, and brotherhood have been replaced by egoistic individualism, and that all we have in common is loneliness: "from some community of relationships to networks of strangers connected by self-interest" (EUP 26). Thus, Wallace criticizes contemporary society for aggravating the existential suffering that affects individuals, for aggravating solipsism (not just American society but Western society as a whole).[65]

EUP's sociology is grounded in Wallace's psychological, existential, and ontological dread of solipsism—which he states most explicitly in *TIW*. EUP opens by stating that only few people can "bear the psychic costs of being around other humans" (ibid. 22), and that this is the origin of loneliness. For Wallace, a fundamental truth of psychology is that many are unable to bear the burden of human interaction and are thus driven to shy away from it, too self-absorbed with fear to remain intact when faced with other people's judgment—as Wallace told Lipsky: "I think being shy basically means being self-absorbed to the extent that it makes it difficult to be around other people" (Lipsky 16). His sociology rests upon this existential premise, on which he bases his criticism that our society aggravates our original

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[64] This is what sociologist Richard Sennett focuses on as well in all his major works: *The Fall of Public Man* (1978), *The Conscience of the Eye* (1991) *Flesh and Stone* (1994), *The Uses of Disorder* (1996), and *The Corrosion of Character* (1998).

[65] As the opening story of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) testifies by its most generic title "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life." The problem is not America, but postindustrial life as a whole, and the solipsism it has institutionalized. This story is only a few lines long, but these are enough to dramatize the loneliness that permeates relationships today. Every social action these characters perform is meant to give off a false image of the self and is rooted in the fear of being judged by others. It seems no coincidence that the story is on page zero: the number zero testifies to the dreadful nothingness that these characters must feel within.

psychological condition (the default setting). That is: our society both raises the psychic costs of interaction to unbearable levels *and* eases us into loneliness by providing infinite distractions by which we can numb the despair of loneliness and of our inability to bear the burden of living.

The basis of EUP's social criticism is therefore *TIW*'s ontology because, for Wallace, our culture is at fault for nourishing the individualism and isolation that are already our default setting. Our culture aggravates the worst parts of our psychological condition when it should try to ameliorate them. Likewise, Wallace criticizes today's competitiveness on the basis of his belief in the ontological analysis of personal relationships in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943).[66] He understands that relationships are by definition clashes of subjectivities that attempt to objectify one another, wars of actualization between selves, disputes between Self and Other, and when our culture raises the psychic costs of the other's gaze, then sociality becomes outright unbearable, fearful, and we begin to hide.

EUP and *TIW* share the same essence, as well as all other Wallacean texts: the dread of solipsism and the consequent criticism of contemporary society for worsening it. In "Fictional Futures" (1988), Wallace writes that our "existential predicament" is that we "tend to think of our own lives this way: we're each the hero of our own drama, others around us remanded to supporting roles or (increasingly) audience status" (FFs 50). Seventeen years later he will state the same in *TIW*: our default setting is "my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence" (ibid. 36). From 1988 to 2005 the dread is always the same: solipsism, aloneness, what Wallace defines in "The Empty Plenum" (1990) as "metaphysical hell" (TEP 86), as the "Cartesian nightmare" (ibid. 93) of "ultimate loneliness" (ibid. 101), a "hell of utter subjectivity" (ibid. 105) that leads "straight into insanity" (ibid. 93).[67]

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[66] As Wallace also writes in "Authority and American Usage" (1998): "Of course, people are constantly judging one another" (AAU 97). Relatedly, see Burgess (2014).

[67] Another example is Wallace's essay "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All" (1993), which too addresses the fundamental concern of solipsism in the same terms as *TIW*. Here, Wallace talks about his memories as a child, and about having "this weird, deluded but unshakable conviction that everything around me existed all and only *For Me*. […] That everything exterior to me existed only insofar as it affected me somehow" (GA 89). The young Wallace felt as if everything existed "For-Him alone, unique at the absolute center" (ibid. 89-90), and the more mature Wallace now realizes that "it was radically self-centered, of course, this conviction, and more than a little paranoid" (ibid. 89-90).

The road to salvation has always been the same — In *TIW*, Wallace argues that we can overcome our default setting by "learning how to think" (*TIW* 53), which he defines as learning to exercise "the choice of what to think about" (ibid. 14). To him, this equates learning to free oneself from the prison of the lens of self. If we don't, all we have is "the freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation" (ibid. 117). To learn how to think means to become truly free; free will is an ability you have to *regain* by learning "to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience" (ibid. 54), thus emancipating yourself from your default setting.

Clearly, this is Existentialism. For Wallace, the self is not a given, one must attain it, and the only capital-T Truth is free will: "the only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to *decide* […] what has meaning and what doesn't" (ibid. 95). One must create oneself and meaning arises only through creation. In turn, creation is possible only when one accepts the struggle of freedom and responsibility. But Wallace also attempts to redirect Existentialism toward other-directedness. In order to free oneself from one's default setting, one must sacrifice for others: "the really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day" (ibid. 120).[68]

This is Wallace's redemption from unbearable suffering, and it too has always been present in his work. EUP exposes the "irony, cynicism, narcissism, nihilism, stasis, loneliness" (EUP 73) of our culture *because* these deprive us of ways by which to construct our (other-direct) meaning of life; there are "no sources of insight on comparative worth, no guides to *why* and *how* to choose" (ibid. 75-76). Contemporary society thus makes it almost impossible to learn how to think, and how to become "conscious and aware enough to *choose* what you pay attention to" (*TIW* 54). Once again, then, EUP already expresses what is there in *TIW*. Solipsism goes hand in hand with nihilism (the chaos of equal meaninglessness), because nihilism makes conscious choice (the only way out of solipsism) impossible. Both EUP and *TIW* are dedicated to confronting this contemporary predicament, and to offering the idea that we should learn how to think (following guides that teach us *how* and *why*) in

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[68] Wallace defends the necessity of commitment to the Other throughout all of his work, even in essays like "Authority and American Usage" (1998) – supposedly about grammar and word usage – where he writes that "we should share what we have in order to become less narrow and frightened and lonely and self-centered people" ("AAU" 113).

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order to redeem ourselves.[69]

This is why Wallace conceives his fiction as an anodyne against loneliness.[70] Fiction must provide guides to why and how to choose, it must teach people how to think, how to pay attention, how to achieve the freedom to construct meaning from experience. It must show readers that this is where their future – i.e. whether they will save themselves from solipsism and despair – is decided. This is the true sense of EUP's famous ending, where Wallace calls "the next real literary 'rebels' [to] treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (EUP 81). EUP's rebels must confront *TIW*'s default setting and its social aggravation and attempt to indicate its Existentialist redemption.[71]

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[69] Further proof of the essential unity of Wallace's nonfiction is that one of Wallace's very last essays, "Deciderization 2007—A Special Report," directly recalls EUP in all of its content. Here, Wallace writes that contemporary culture is "a kind of Total Noise" (D2007 301) where we as citizens "are reduced to being overwhelmed by info and interpretation, or else paralyzed by cynicism and anomie" (ibid. 316); therefore, today's best literary have a duty to help us "handle and respond to the tsunami of available fact, context, and perspective that constitutes Total Noise" (ibid. 312), or in other words to "serve as models and guides for how large or complex sets of facts can be sifted, culled, and arranged in meaningful ways—ways that yield and illuminate truth instead of just adding more noise to the overall roar" (ibid.).

[70] This is a point that Wallace tirelessly reiterates throughout his career. In the interview with Kennedy and Polk: "I think all good writing somehow addresses the concern of and acts as an anodyne against loneliness" (K&P 16). In the McCaffery interview: "fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves. […] We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside" (McCaffery 22). In the interview with Lipsky: "there's stuff that really good fiction can do that other forms of art can't do as well. And the big thing, the big thing seems to be, sort of leapin' over that wall of self" (Lipsky 289). And in the interview with Miller: "there is this existential loneliness in the real world. I don't know what you're thinking or what it's like inside you and you don't know what it's like inside me. In fiction I think we can leap over that wall itself in a certain way" (Miller 62). But these are only a few of myriad possible examples.

[71] Likewise, in "The Nature of the Fun" (1998) Wallace writes that fiction must be "a way to countenance yourself and the truth instead of being a way to escape yourself" ("NF" 198-99). The meaning of these words is Existentialist. Through fiction, you must look within, see the truth of your default setting, and be moved to overcome it.

Social criticism has always been the same —*TIW* also reiterates EUP's same exact social criticism. As we have seen, EUP denounces contemporary society for making us "feel inadequate" (EUP 38) and "fundamentally apart from [the world], alienated from it, solipsistic, lonely" (ibid.). Our culture turns other people into "The Group" that is "something fearsome" (ibid. 56) and constantly reminds us that "it's better, realer, […] to fly solo" (ibid.). Within these dynamics "other people become judges" (ibid. 49), and this causes "fear of ridicule" and "great despair and stasis" (ibid.) for all of us.

TIW affirms the same, explicitly stating that our society encourages us to dwell in the default setting: "the so-called "real world" will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called "real world" of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self" (*TIW* 115).

This is further proof of the unity of Wallace's sociology, of which EUP and *TIW* are the two cornerstones, sharing the same fundamental axioms and concerns. Wallace's sociology is a system constructed according to this diagnosis → cure structure. It postulates an ontological premise and formulates a sociology, diagnosing our existential and social disease. The ontological premise is our default setting of solipsism and our endowment with free will.[72] The sociological diagnosis is that our time encourages the default setting, while the cure is to learn to exercise our free will through "attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort" (ibid. 120).

The essence of Wallace's Existentialist solution is to achieve "real freedom" (ibid. 121) by learning how to think and caring for others. We must strive to free our individual selves (which equates commitment to the Other) and this will enable us to free our society, which in turn will help us remain free. Everyone must act in the social space so as to rebuild our mutual commitment to one another. It will be a virtuous cycle.

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[72] The central unity of solipsism and free will that this research aims to explain was intuited by Mullins (2014) as well: he wrote that "the themes that occupied Wallace's works perhaps more than any other [are] solipsism and human freedom" (240).

On Narcissism:
David Foster Wallace and Christopher Lasch

Introduction

Many scholars have explored the thematic relationship between Lasch and Wallace, and we now know that Wallace read *The Culture of Narcissism* (*CN*), as Wallace's own underlined copy of the work is now available at the Harry Ransom Center archive. Yet, no one has ever realized the extent of Lasch's influence on Wallace: "E Unibus Pluram" can be read as a direct appropriation of *CN*. So many of EUP's key concepts are already defined in Lasch's work, and in addition these key concepts, as we have seen, constitute Wallace's reworking of "Fictional Futures" into EUP. In this sense, not only is much of EUP a direct appropriation of *CN* but also Wallace's encounter with Lasch seems to have been a major influence in Wallace's decision to rewrite FFs into EUP.

Wallace turned FFs into EUP to make the essay explicitly sociological and existential in its concerns, and comparative analysis shows that there's reason to believe that Wallace read *CN* between 1988 and 1993 and was influenced to restructure his manifesto. There are much more than deep affinities between *CN* and EUP, and considering the relationship between the two texts sheds light on many nuances of Wallace's sociology. EUP mirrors *CN* even in its analytical structure and language, and so many of Wallace's arguments, e.g. his famous criticism of irony in metafiction (see e.g. Boswell 2018), are already present in *CN*. In addition, Lasch's influence goes way beyond EUP and, in this sense, to show the extent of Lasch's influence on Wallace is to unveil the degree of Wallace's sociological commitment and the responsive nature of his fiction; it, furthermore, presents an effective method for questioning the positions of both authors.

"E Unibus Pluram" as an Appropriation of *The Culture of Narcissism*

Let us begin by looking at a series of sociological considerations that Wallace appropriates

directly from Lasch's *CN* into EUP:

Dreams of transcendence: EUP argues that the media is one of the forces of loneliness in contemporary society, because it "purveys and enables *dreams*, and most of these dreams involve some sort of transcendence of average daily life" (EUP 39). Dreams of transcendence imply that we *ought to* transcend our lives, and so that *we ourselves* are worth transcending. To dream of self-transcendence in this manner is to be in constant contact with a vision of what we should be but are not, which cannot but destroy our self-confidence, and this makes the prospect of living as shut-ins instead of exposing our worthlessness to others ever more appealing, constituting a vicious cycle that is EUP's main sociological concern. All of this was already denounced in *CN*, where Lasch writes that "the media give substance to and thus intensify narcissistic dreams of fame and glory" (*CN* 21), and so erode people's self-esteem and increase the levels of narcissism, since narcissism originates in fear, and fear leads to dreams of transcendence, which erode self-esteem, which increase fear, hence the vicious cycle.

Your average life is meaningless: EUP thus argues that our society's messages "are unsubtle in their whispers that, somewhere, life is quicker, denser, more interesting, more…well, *lively* than contemporary life as Joe Briefcase knows it" (EUP 39). Joe B.'s life is meaningless or close enough to that, when compared to the lives of those who live the dream we dream of living. We Joe B.s have no reason *not* to feel ashamed. In fact, we ought to. And again: Lasch had already pointed this out in *CN*, writing that our society's messages "make it more and more difficult for [anyone] to accept the banality of everyday existence" (*CN* 21). Everyday existence is banal, and since most of us live that kind of life so are we.

To have meaning is to be watched: EUP states that human worth is now identical with and rooted in watchableness, in a process that encourages loneliness and individualism: "the crowd is now, paradoxically, both (1) the 'herd' in contrast to which the viewer's distinctive identity is to be defined and (2) the witnesses whose sight alone can confer distinctive identity" (EUP 56). Again, EUP reiterates *CN*, whose *raison d'être* is precisely to diagnose our narcissistic "dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness" (*CN* 33). Narcissism isn't the gratuitous wicked conduct of self-involved individuals. Narcissism is the result of our perception of our inner emptiness combined with the knowledge that only the judgment of other people can bestow meaning upon us. *CN* diagnoses this in 1979. EUP follows in 1993. Both texts highlight that meaningfulness in our society is achieved only through transcendence of the herd: *CN* states

that the media "encourage the common man to identify himself with the stars and to hate the 'herd'" (*CN* 21), and EUP that the deep message of the media is "that true actualization of self would ultimately consist in Joe's becoming one of the images that are the *objects* of this great herd-like watching" (EUP 56).

The essence of this social suffering: interpersonal conflict thus becomes our environment. The gaze of others *is* judgment, and life is deep fear and loneliness. EUP calls this "the metastasis of self-conscious watching" (EUP 34), Lasch calls it the culture of narcissism, but for both authors self-conscious watching and narcissism are exactly the same thing. *CN* sets down that "experiences of inner emptiness, loneliness and inauthenticity […] arise from the warlike conditions that pervade American society, from the dangers and uncertainty that surround us" (*CN* 27). EUP *exemplifies* these conditions and their consequences: "the most frightening prospect […] becomes leaving oneself open to others' ridicule. […] Other people become judges; the crime is naiveté. The well-trained viewer becomes even more allergic to people. Lonelier. Joe B.'s exhaustive TV-training in how to worry about how he might come across, look to watching eyes, makes genuine human encounters even scarier" (EUP 63).

The metastasis of self-conscious watching: EUP focuses on the despair of heightened self-consciousness and its social causes, and even in this most central aspect it appropriates *CN*. For Lasch too, narcissism is the despair of heightened self-consciousness: heightened self-consciousness, narcissism, and despair are one and the same thing. What EUP diagnoses is the culture of narcissism. When Wallace writes that "human beings […] become vastly more spectatorial, self-conscious" (EUP 34), he again rewrites *CN*: "a number of historical currents have converged in our time to produce not merely in artists but in ordinary men and women an escalating cycle of self-consciousness" (*CN* 90).

Irony: EUP's fundamental concern is irony as a pervasive *nihilist* social force. When it states that we, today, "view ridicule as both the mode of social intercourse and the ultimate art-form" (EUP 63), and that "the numb blank bored demeanor" (ibid. 64) has become our generation's version of cool but actually constitutes our shell against "the most frightening prospect" of "leaving oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability" (ibid. 63), it once again reiterates *CN*: "by creating an ironic distance, [the narcissist] takes refuge in jokes, mockery, and cynicism. […] In this way he attempts to make himself invulnerable to the pressures of the situation. […] The posture of cynical detachment becomes the dominant style of everyday intercourse" (*CN* 95). In addition, even EUP's citation of Lewis Hyde's phrase "'Irony has only emergency use.

Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage'" (EUP 67) finds its precursor in *CN*: "escape through irony and critical self-awareness is in any case itself an illusion; at best it provides only momentary relief. Distancing soon becomes a routine in its own right. […] Self-created roles become as constraining as the social roles from which they are meant to provide ironic detachment" (*CN* 96).

Criticism of contemporary fiction: the most surprising facet of EUP's possible direct appropriation of *CN* is that even EUP's criticism of contemporary fiction is already there in *CN*. When EUP criticizes "most Image-Fiction writers" because they "render their material with the same tone of irony and self-consciousness" (EUP 52) that constitutes the essence of our contemporary predicament, it reiterates *CN*'s criticism that today's art "suffers from the same crisis of self-consciousness that afflicts the man in the street" (*CN* 96). Likewise, when EUP criticizes contemporary literature's irony and self-consciousness because they detach literature from the real world and from social and existential engagement – stating that contemporary fiction is "free to plunge into reflexivity and self-conscious meditations on aboutness" (EUP 34) –, EUP once again echoes *CN*'s own disapproval of contemporary literature: "novelists and playwrights call attention to the artificiality of their own creations and discourage the reader from identifying with the characters" (*CN* 96-97). Even EUP's criticism of postmodernist metafiction is originally *CN*'s: as EUP denounces that "that American subspecies into fiction writing starts writing more and more about… [writing]" (EUP 34), so *CN* denounces that "by means of irony and eclecticism, the writer withdraws from his subject but at the same time becomes so conscious of these distancing techniques that he finds it more and more difficult to write about anything except the difficulty of writing. Writing about writing then becomes in itself an object of self-parody" (*CN* 97). Finally, EUP follows *CN* even in its ethical criticism of contemporary literature: when Wallace states that Mark Leyner's "*My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*'s sole aim is, finally, to wow, to ensure that the reader is pleased and continues to read" (EUP 79), he repeats *CN*: "these writers […] try to charm the reader instead of claiming significance for their narrative. They use humor […] to ingratiate themselves, to get the reader's attention without asking him to take the writer or his subject seriously" (*CN* 18).

Conclusion: the uniformity between *CN* and EUP is so striking and fundamental that we can hypothesize direct appropriation. Both *CN* and EUP define the contemporary mode of social being as narcissistic and ironic, both retrace the cause of this narcissism and irony in the deep fear of vulnerability, and both theorize that the consequences of narcissism and

irony are individualism, loneliness, and despair. EUP's analyses of our dreams of transcendence, the meaninglessness of our daily lives, meaning as watchableness, everyday individualism and the fear of others, the metastasis of self-conscious watching and our relationships to mirrors, irony, the destruction of authority, and the faults of contemporary fiction are all already there in CN, and formulated in very similar form. This manifests the extent of *CN*'s influence on the writing of EUP and on Wallace's general intellectual project, and it points to the likelihood of direct appropriation, even more so considering that Wallace read and annotated Lasch's book (as we can see at the HRC), and that Lasch's influence doesn't stop at EUP at all.

The Larger Influence of *The Culture of Narcissism* on Wallace

Expressive v. communicative writing: "Wallace stresses the difference between communicative and expressive writing" (Burn, "Introduction" 15). For Wallace (in his own words), "there is a fundamental difference between expressive writing and communicative writing" (O'Brien 114). Expressive writing assumes that whatever you say is "interesting because, you, yourself, say it" (ibid.). Therefore, it is "alienating and unpleasant," and it feels "as if someone is going through all the motions of communicating with you but in actual fact you don't even need to be there at all" (ibid.). Expressive writing is solipsistic and narcissistic, the kind of writing of the "Great Male Narcissists" – Updike, Mailer, and Roth (CE 51) – that Wallace criticizes in "Certainly the End of Something or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think" (1998). On the contrary, communicative writing knows "that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another" ("Greatly Exaggerated" 144), and therefore constitutes the kind of real, serious literature that acts as an anodyne against loneliness. In this sense, Wallace also states that "fictionists or literary-type writers are supposed to have some special interest in empathy" (Eggers 75), and that creative writing teachers are responsible for creative writing as "converting" students "from 'expressive writing' to 'communicative writing'" (Fry 75).[73] This critical framework too is already present in *CN*,

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[73] Wallace extends this communicative vs. expressive framework to all the arts. In "David Lynch Keeps His Head" (1995), he writes: "Art, after all, is supposed to be a kind of communication, and 'personal expression' is cinematically interesting only to the extent that what's expressed finds and strikes chords within the viewer"

where Lasch criticizes contemporary literature for expressing our narcissistic and solipsistic ethos, blaming today's writers – Mailer and Roth among others – for writing literature "whose only claim to the reader's attention is that it describes events of immediate interest to the author" (*CN* 18).

Criticism of metafiction: throughout his career, Wallace advocated the necessity of overcoming metafiction, a genre that "gets empty and solipsistic real fast" (McCaffery 40) because it is the expression of "all the weary ironists" (ibid. 49) and in it "postmodern irony and cynicism become an end in itself" (ibid. 48). It is striking to see that Wallace recalls *CN* even here. Lasch writes that authors like John Barth – Wallace's own major postmodernist reference, to whom he dedicated "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (1989) – "attempt an escape through irony and self-awareness [that] is itself an illusion" (*CN* 96) that results in literary shallowness. Finally, Lasch's criticism becomes ethical, and in this it anticipates the essence of Wallace's: "having called attention to himself as a performer, the writer […] waives the right to be taken seriously, at the same time escaping the responsibilities that go with being taken seriously" (ibid. 20).

Narcissistic literature: Wallace denounces fiction that tries "merely and always to *engage*, to *appeal to*" as "trash fiction" (FFs 53). Trash fiction performs "formal stunt-pilotry […] serving the rather darker purpose of communicating to the reader 'Hey! Look at me! Have a look at what a good writer I am! *Like* me!'" (McCaffery 25). Once again, Lasch had already seen in this kind of literature a paradigmatic instantiation of the culture of narcissism, where "the writer thus attempts to charm the reader instead of trying to convince him" (*CN* 20) to take a specific matter seriously. For Lasch, the narcissistic writer only seeks "to seduce others into giving him their attention, acclaim, or sympathy and thus to shore up his faltering sense of self" (ibid. 21), and so his "art" is counterfeit, it fails to perform what should be its proper existential and social functions.[74]

The pleasure principle and worship: perhaps most surprisingly, even Wallace's

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("Lynch" 199). He also laments the pervasiveness of expressive writing today in "Authority and American Usage" (1998), saying that a view of writing as "self-exploratory and -expressive rather than as communicative's" (AAU 81) is causing the "self-absorption" (ibid. 106) of contemporary literature.

[74] Wallace also criticizes narcissistic writing in one of his last-ever essays, "Deciderization 2007 – A Special Report": "There is probably a sound, serious argument to be made about the popularity of confessional memoirs as a symptom of something especially sick and narcissistic/voyeuristic about U.S. culture right now" (ibid. 309).

fundamental worldview finds prior expression in *CN*. For Wallace, our Western Utilitarianism, where "pleasure becomes a value, a teleological end in itself" (McCaffery 23), is the central source of contemporary despair. In the interview on ZDF, Wallace states that "corporate-capitalist logic" rules our existential lives: our ethos is to gratify every one of our immediate impulses, and in the long run this empties our lives of all meaning.[75] For Wallace, in order to live meaningful lives, we have to construe a sense of the world, and to do that we must worship, give ourselves away to a cause that is larger and higher than ourselves. As he tells Lipsky, "we're absolutely dying to give ourselves away to something" (Lipsky 81), but we have become unable to do so because we have lost all belief and all guides to why and how to choose (EUP). Once again, *CN* gives voice to the same ideals in its criticism of the culture of narcissism, and this makes the possibility of direct appropriation ever more stringent: "modern society 'has no future' and therefore gives no thought to anything beyond its immediate needs. […] It hardly occurs to [us] to encourage the subject to subordinate his needs and interests to those of others, to someone or some cause or tradition outside himself. [We pursue only] the immediate gratification of every impulse (*CN* 13).

Conclusion: Wallace's discourse thus follows *CN* not only in defining the contemporary mode of social being as narcissistic and ironic, in retracing the cause of this narcissism and irony in the deep fear of vulnerability, in theorizing that the consequences of narcissism and irony are individualism, loneliness, and despair, in analyzing our dreams of transcendence, the meaninglessness of our daily lives, meaning as watchableness, everyday individualism and the fear of others, the metastasis of self-conscious watching and our relationships to mirrors, irony, the destruction of authority, and the faults of contemporary fiction—; it also follows *CN* in postulating an opposition between expressive and communicative writing and another between real, engaged literature and empty, narcissistic literature, in criticizing metafiction, in denouncing the ethos of pleasure and instant gratification, in indicating that worship may constitute the only way to salvation, and in problematizing psychotherapy. The extent of these parallelisms indicates a strong possibility of direct influence, especially given that we know Wallace read *CN*. With that said, though, it's always important to reflect on what an

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[75] Wallace criticizes contemporary culture for its ideal of pleasure throughout his work, even in *Signifying Rappers* (1990): "the headlong pursuit of present-tense pleasure, after all, has risen to chief among American rights; no?" (*SR* 50). Only Morrissey and Thompson (2015) saw how *SR* relates to Wallace's entire oeuvre.

author *rejects* in his appropriations of someone else's words.

The Definition of the Psychological Man

CN defines the contemporary narcissist as a "psychological man": "plagued by anxiety, depression, vague discontents, a sense of inner emptiness, the 'psychological man' of the twentieth century seeks neither individual self-aggrandizement nor spiritual transcendence but peace of mind, under conditions that increasingly militate against it" (*CN* 13). Wallace fits this description perfectly. *This Is Water* is in essence a quest for peace of mind. It presents the individual as one who dreads a "totally hosed," "pissed and miserable," lonely life and hopes to find liberation from such condition. It speaks to those who are plagued by anxiety and depression. It's controversial whether *TIW* can be said to seek "spiritual transcendence"; after all, the text states that "the capital-T Truth is about life *before* death" (*TIW* 129), *not* about religion or any other kind of transcendence. Thus, *TIW* seeks to rise above "the default setting, the 'rat race'" (ibid. 123), that constitutes our standard being in contemporary corporate-capitalist logic, but whether this kind of transcendence can be termed "spiritual" depends on a variety of factors amongst which stands the question of what exactly does Lasch mean by "spiritual."

 TIW remains secular in nature, as all of Wallace's texts, even when it obliquely points towards transcendence: it states explicitly that "none of this is about […] religion" (ibid. 128). If we thus assume that Wallace fits Lasch's description of the narcissistic psychological man, then this entails one of two consequences: either Wallace disagrees with Lasch's definition of narcissism *or* he agrees with Lasch but then contradicts himself in practice. And we shall argue that this second option is the case: Wallace himself believed that "being shy basically means being self-absorbed to the extent that it makes it difficult to be around other people" (Lipsky 16), and so he believed that to be a psychological man means to be so focused upon one's self (narcissism) that one can't find peace of mind.

 This second option is also substantiated by the fact that Wallace's fiction represents various instantiations of Lasch's psychological man, always depicted as a narcissist and in critical fashion. Wallace also sets many of these representations in psychotherapeutic environments, thus exemplifying the criticism of contemporary psychotherapy that Lasch sets down in *CN*. In this sense, there's literally no fiction by Wallace that doesn't contain a

problematization of psychotherapy. In *The Broom of the System* the two protagonists see the same therapist. In *Girl with Curious Hair*, the story "Here and There" reports the monologues of two exes in conversation with a "doctor" during "fiction therapy." *Infinite Jest* contains various scenes of psychotherapy, including sessions between the protagonist and his father. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is entirely built around psychotherapeutic sessions. "Good Old Neon" is the central story of *Oblivion* and it tells of a man who manipulates his therapist before he kills himself. And finally, one of the central storylines of *The Pale King* is Meredith Rand's pathological relationship with her therapist.[76]

But Wallace's quintessential representation of Lasch's psychological man is "The Depressed Person" (in *Brief Interviews*). The short story tells of a woman who goes to psychotherapy to find peace of mind and instead falls into ever deeper self-involvement and narcissism, inner emptiness and solipsistic self-interest. The depressed person attempts to narcissistically manipulate the members of her "support system," and her actions and language represent what in the ZDF interview Wallace defines as today's "popular Freudianism": "a compendium of all the worst and most painful features of the popular psychology movement in the US." In this sense, both the story itself and Wallace's description of it recall *CN* directly, as *CN* itself takes issue with "post-Freudian therapies"

(*CN* 13) and cites Gail Sheehy's *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (1976) to argue that "the ability to manipulate […] 'life-support systems' now appears to represent the highest form of wisdom" (*CN* 49).

Even Wallace's short story, then, seems to be directly influenced by *CN*. And yet, in light of this great influence, we must then ask: while *This Is Water* preaches the need to worship something larger than the self and to commit to the other, isn't it true that its fundamental message leads back to the self-involvement of the narcissistic psychological man? Aren't worshipping and committing to the other in *TIW* only means to attain the end of individual peace of mind? Aren't they techniques employed individually towards individual self-realization? In *CN*, Lasch argues that "the psychological man of our times," who seeks "to find a meaning in life," is "the final product of bourgeois individualism," i.e. the equivalent of the "economic man" (*CN* xvi). The psychological man is the type who carries

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[76] Helen Dudar writes, about *Broom*, that one of the book's main characteristics is that "in several of the book's psychiatric sessions, Mr. Wallace seems to impale modern psychotherapy" (Dudar 9). Jamie Redgate (2017) sees in Wallace a pronounced interest for therapy that originates in the influence of Sylvia Plath. Staes (2014) analyzes the children Incandenzas complexes in relation to their mother in *Infinite Jest*.

"the underlying principles of capitalist society to their logical conclusion" (ibid. 69), and in this sense, for Lasch, he does not differ from the characters envisioned by the Marquis de Sade in works like *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785) and *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (1795)—that is, Lasch thinks that these are all instantiations of "bourgeois enlightenment, carried to its logical conclusions" (*CN* 69-70).

And while *TIW*'s intention is to convince its audience "truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day" (*TIW* 120), in truth its discourse starts within the self and ends within the self. Despite its intention to overcome the default setting, its logical conclusions remain within the boundaries of solipsism. If an end (whatever end, even commitment to the other) is to be reached through the exercise of free individual choice, will and effort, attention and awareness, the achievement of "real freedom" (ibid. 121), then this process must remain one of pure individuality. And if the only capital-T Truth is that you get to decide how construct meaning from experience, that entails the paradox that you are not free at all to decide what to worship, but you are forced by necessity to worship one thing only, your own free will, and therefore your self. From the beginning of time, we worship what we consider to be the Capital-T Truth. For the true Christian, e.g., the worship of God is not a choice but a necessity. God demands worship because it manifests itself as the Capital-T Truth. But if the Capital-T Truth is your own free will, then your own free will (being the only capital-T Truth) is superior to anything else in the world including all gods, and that means that you must worship your own free will – and hence finally your own self – above all else, including all gods, all values, and all other beings in the world. If your choice constructs meaning from experience, then you are the arbiter of Being. You are "the Decider," as Wallace writes in "Deciderization 2007" (D2007 303). If You decide the meaning of life, then you are God. This is the logical conclusion that Wallace must come to terms with, and with him all the Existentialists (even the Christian Existentialists like Kierkegaard and Pascal). This is what these Existentialists don't see, and that within this ontology, there's absolutely no reason to sacrifice for the other, no reason to avoid pure individualism, no reason not to use the other as means to one's ends, no argument that can justify these altruism (and the situation is even worse from a scientific point of view).

Even if it were true that I could overcome my default setting of solipsism through the exercise of my own free will and effort (which it isn't), why shouldn't I then feel remarkably superior to all those who don't manage to overcome it? If I have freed myself

through my own free choice, then my free will and effort have shown themselves as superior, and therefore *I* am superior. And if I fail, how is that not entirely my fault? If I fail, I am inferior, and how can this framework constitute an escape from the "rat race" in any sense? There is no escape. No escape from pure individualism, solipsism, and capitalist-corporate logic. An ontology of free will demands this ethos and more. Free will has its ethics. If free will is the capital-T Truth, then solipsism, pure individualism, and the war of all against all are not only necessary but also just, and today's concrete facts are but mild instances of what this justice will entail in the future. In this sense, unwillingly, *TIW* establishes yet another hierarchy of power, another rat race where everyone must fight, alone and by himself, against himself and everyone else. This is its necessary consequence, despite Wallace's intentions. In *CN* Lasch cites Peter Marin's "The New Narcissism" (1975) to argue that today's new therapies "teach that 'the individual will is all powerful and totally determines one's fate'; thus they intensify the 'isolation of the self'" (*CN* 9). *This Is Water* does exactly this. Thus, the confrontation between *CN* and *TIW* helps us grasp the contradiction within Wallace's sociology and entire intellectual project (this latter point we still must prove). And yet it doesn't say anything regarding the value and coherence of Lasch's sociology (in fact: Lasch's work is even more contradictory than Wallace's, and more nihilistic), nor about the opposition between a free will that wants to commit to the other and one that explicitly wants to pursue self-aggrandizement, nor about the problem of the value of the opposition between egoism and altruism in the first place (the problem being that we think of ethics as freedom).

Free Will and the Opposition Between Self and Other

Confronting Wallace's sociology with Lasch's later work *The Minimal Self* (1984) opens further perspectives and helps us reconfirm Wallace's alignment with Lasch while we also grasp the differences between the two authors and the extent of Lasch's own contradictions. *MS* strengthens the alliance between Lasch's and Wallace's criticism of our time, but it also delves deeper than *CN* into psychotherapy, thus further problematizing a theme central to Wallace and adding to the dispute regarding the "psychological man." *MS* makes manifest many of the psychological and philosophical postulates that found Lasch's entire discourse, and in so doing helps us go deeper into what concerns us most.

On free will: *MS* reproduces the same fundamental contradiction that underlines all of Lasch's and Wallace's sociology: their unconscious intuition that free will is the essence of suffering tied with their inability to believe in anything but free will. *MS* considers views such as Morris Berman's concept of cosmic connectedness in *The Reenchantment of the World* (1981) and Gregory Bateson's theory of the holistic consciousness in *Steps toward an Ecology of Mind* (1972) only to reject them because they long for the dissolution of the entire foundation of Western rationality and liberalism – meaning the autarkic, individual, free self –, and therefore they present a "simpleminded case for 'cultural revolution'" (*MS* 57) that, by destroying the basis of individual sovereignty and responsibility, "betrays its affinity with the consumerism it claims to repudiate" (ibid.). Thus, *MS* maintains that the only solution to our existential and social predicament resides precisely in individual autonomy and freedom, even while it explicitly states that today's individualism, narcissism, materialism, emptiness, etc. originate in "the 'independent self so dear to Western thought'" (ibid. 54).

Lasch hopes to find the solution to the independent self in the independent self, while he denies the truth of the independent self. He hopes to find the solution to liberalism in liberalism. This contradiction is common to all discourses, including Wallace's, that attempt to affirm a middle ground between transcendence and facticity, freedom and determinism. Lasch believes there can be an individual self that is free and sovereign but not independent, but such thing is impossible. *MS* cites Peter Clecak's statement in *America's Quest for the Ideal Self* (1983) that "selfishness is the 'deficit side' of cultural liberation—an 'unavoidable byproduct of the quest for fulfilment'" (*MS* 58), and yet Lasch doesn't realize that his own work leads precisely to the same byproduct, and that his emphasis on the autonomy of the individual will leads precisely to pure selfishness and all its various manifestations. In this sense, Lasch's contradiction is more conspicuous than Wallace's because Lasch explicitly propounds the worth of autonomous free will throughout his work. Wallace, instead, especially in his fiction, presents various instances of the despair that the ideal of autonomous free will entails. He thus shows that he *feels* the despair of free will, and so the contradiction in his work is more nuanced. In *Infinite Jest*, e.g. the students at ETA know that our vision of the world entails that "'We're all on each other's food chain. All of us. […] Welcome to the meaning of *individual*. We're each deeply alone here'" (*IJ* 112); they know that the truth is "alienation," "existential individuality," "solipsism" (ibid.). And yet

Wallace too is unable to envision any other truth but free will.[77]

In *MS*, the contradiction is hyper-explicit because Lasch even states that "a genuine affirmation of the self, after all, insists on a core selfhood not subject to environmental determination, even under extreme conditions" (*MS* 59), and he's obviously right: the affirmation of the self, its ability to make decisions and to act, necessitates that the self be free from environmental determination. That is: notwithstanding whatever conditions, for us to be free autonomous beings who can choose and act, our self must always be free from – and so separate from – everything else. These are *necessary* conditions for the individual to be autonomous, i.e. free to choose, and so they are necessary if the individual of *This Is Water* is to actually exist and to freely choose how to construct meaning from experience. Yet, what both Lasch and Wallace fail to see is that, if our self is free and so separate from everything else, then solipsism is the truth. Or, *perhaps* ontological solipsism isn't true (perhaps other consciousnesses exist), but *surely* epistemological and existential solipsism are true (that is: I experience only my own consciousness, I cannot know whether any other consciousness exists, and I live according to this experiential fact, and so all I care about – all of my values and ideas and conversations – occur only within the I and according to the I's will). And if solipsism is true then why wouldn't pure individualism (and all it entails) be just? And what reason would one have to overcome self-absorption, or the hyper-reflexivity that affect so many of Wallace's psychological men? In *The Betrayal of the West* (1978), Jacques Ellul writes that "there is no freedom without an accompanying critical attitude to the self" (*Betrayal* 22); he is right, and the problem is that in freedom there is no reason to put an end to the self-criticism. This is the curse that must afflict every return to the autonomous self, and it constitutes the contradiction in Lasch and Wallace, who want more than anything to avoid and disprove solipsism and end up reaffirming it.

On the opposition of Self and Other: MS postulates the distinction between Self and Other as the

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[77] That Wallace *always* believed in free will and found it essential to all of our values is proven by his undergraduate philosophy thesis – entitled "Richard Taylor's 'Fatalism' and the Semantics of Physical Modality" (1985) – in which he tries to "demonstrably resists fatalism by allowing agents freedom of choice" (RTF 198). As Cahn and Eckert write in their "Preface" to *Fate, Time, and Language* (2011): "This extended essay explored a puzzle about free will that was deeply rooted in the history of philosophy" (Cahn and Eckert vii). And as Ryerson writes in his "Introduction": "Wallace was understandably bothered by the odd worldview […] of a world without human agency" (Ryerson 6).

fundamental law of epistemology: "the distinction between the self and the not-self is the basis of all other distinctions, including the distinction between life and death" (*MS* 184); it is "the axiomatic principle without which mental life cannot even begin" (ibid. 163). This is most definitively correct. In fact, the distinction between Self and Other is the principle that establishes itself as a necessary precondition for all human freedom and action. My "life" is possible only if "I" can change the "Other," and so, first and foremost, only if "I" am not the "Other" and the "Other" is not "me." This is why this distinction has been the basis of all human thought and action since the beginning of time (even in the most ancient Eastern wisdom that claims that All Is One). It is, actually, a necessary corollary of the principle of non-contradiction.

This may be obvious, but the point is to see that taking this interpretation of the world for granted enables us to live. As Lasch writes: the distinction between Self and Other is "the source of our intellectual mastery of the world around us" (ibid. 164). This is because "I" can master only what is "Other." To dominate, I need something over which my domination can be exercised. But if this is the meaning of "life," my mastery over what is Other, then life is war, which fact explains much of human history. Lasch cannot see it, Wallace can only feel it, but the most ancient Eastern and Western wisdoms know it: the distinction between Self and Other entails that life is suffering. The distinction between Self and Other, so necessary to life, is the essence of life's transcendent suffering and violence (of which solipsism and individualism are but two instantiations). In the ancient West, the fragments of Heraclitus encapsulate this wisdom: all things are "at variance"; therefore, "war is the father of all and king of all"; therefore, "justice is strife" (Curd 47), and so does the fragment of Anaximander, the beginning of all philosophy, which expresses the necessity that all things pay the price for the injustice they perpetrate by the mere act of living.

All things vary and differ from one another; therefore, they constitute themselves in opposition to one another and fight for their place in the world; therefore, war is justice, the natural condition in which things live. All of this follows from the truth of the Self/Other distinction. Neither Lasch nor Wallace fully understand the extent to which this distinction is "the source of our existential uneasiness" (*MS* 164). As Existentialists, they believe that this uneasiness characterizes our lives but can be overcome through individual autonomy. But in truth, the concept of individual autonomy can only constitute itself *within* this uneasiness and belongs to the essence of our strife. Thus: the finality of Sartre's dictum that "hell is other people" looms over Lasch's and Wallace's hopes. Within this interpretative

framework, there is no avoiding the downfall instantiated by Sartre's own Existentialism, which started with the hope of overcoming solipsism only to become one of solipsism's greatest affirmations. This is the end to which Existentialism must come.

But, at least, Sartre and Wallace *feel* the necessity of the despair their thought leads to, while Lasch is largely unaware of the contradictions in his thinking. An example of Wallace's feeling for this truth is that, if the Self/Other distinction as envisioned by Western rationality is true, then what happens to Norman Bombardini in *The Broom of the System* is inevitable. Bombardini goes to a restaurant and warns the waiter that "human beings act in their own interest" (*Broom* 83). In fact, this is happening to him right now: his wife "is leaving" (ibid.) on her own interest and so, he proclaims: "Tonight I will eat. Hugely, and alone, for I am now hugely alone. […] I'm going to grow and grow, and fill the absence that surrounds me […]. Yin and Yang" (ibid.).

Bombardini's plan is to eat until he fills the whole universe. To fill the universe with Self in order to defeat the suffering imposed by the Other. He meets Rick and Lenore (the two protagonists) at the restaurant, and he explains to them "the transparently true fact that for each of us the universe is deeply and sharply and completely divided into for example in my case, me, on one side, and everything else, on the other. This for each of us exhaustively defines the whole universe, […]. The whole universe. Self and Other" (ibid. 90). To this, Rick replies "sounds uncontroversial to me, Norman" (ibid.), because the Self/Other distinction is what we all agree upon, what we take to be the fundamental, unquestionable truth of Being. And so Bombardini continues: it's "not only that each of our universes has this feature, but that we are by nature without exception *aware* of the fact that the universe is so divided, into Self, on one hand, and Other, on the other. Exhaustively divided. It's part of our consciousness" (ibid.). From this awareness, he says, we generate the "*pre*scriptive axiom" (ibid.) of "the undoubtedly equally true and inarguable fact that we each ought to desire our own universe to be as *full* as possible, that the Great Horror consists in an empty, rattling personal universe, one where one finds oneself with Self, on one hand, and vast empty lonely spaces before Others begin to enter the picture at all, on the other. A non-full universe. Loneliness" (ibid.).

The Other's rejection of our Self is the greatest danger, the Great Horror, the menace of emptiness, of the void, of meaninglessness. Our commonsense solution to this Horror is "to have as much Other around as possible" (ibid.), which means to be desirable, to obtain acceptance from the Other, to have the Other bestow meaning and fullness upon us by virtue

of his or her gaze, and so his or her positive judgment and so his or her presence. But Bombardini, who's experienced the Other's rejection, now envisions another solution: "it occurs to me that I couldn't care less. A full universe […]. We each need a full universe. […] Rather than diminishing Self to entice Other to fill our universe, we may also of course obviously choose to fill the universe with *Self*. […] An autonomously full universe […]. Yes. I plan to grow to infinite size. […] And tonight Project Total Yang begins" (ibid. 91).

Bombardini decides to fill the universe with his Self in order to kill the danger of the Other. This is of course existential solipsism, a mode of war of the Self against the Other. But to decide otherwise and fill one's universe with Other is itself a mode of war between the Self against the Other, a mode of solipsism. We find it easy to say: of course, Bombardini has lost his mind because he couldn't handle rejection, a life lived properly is one lived in communion with the Other. And yet, even a life of receiving continuous positive judgment from the Other's gaze is a life of suffering and solipsism, because to live for the Other's judgment is to objectify oneself and to live *for* the Other's gaze, and to live such a life entails no lack of suffering and loneliness, not even in comparison to a life lived in absolute loneliness. Plus, when living for the gaze of the Other we live in perennial inauthenticity: not true to ourselves, we instead live for what we think the Other wants us to be, which dynamic entails all sorts of suffering and loneliness as well.

We all desire a full universe, and within the framework of the Self/Other distinction, whether we live alone or for the Other, the Other is always a means for the Self to obtain what it desires. The Other is always the means, and the Self is always the end. The end is to have a full universe for the Self, either way. By necessity, everyone pursues one's own ends, and the Other always poses a threat to the pursuits of the Self, unless he aligns with them and so serves as a means to them. But even when the Other aligns with the pursuits of the Self, the Other is still a danger merely by virtue of its being Other and having a will of its own. And even when the Other fills our universe, the Other is still only functioning as a means in the project of absolute Self: the desire that the Self has for fullness. It is still Project Total Yang, in all cases. And even when the Other fills our universe, the Other still is the Great Threat. The Other can withdraw his or her acceptance at any moment and so leave the Self alone with the Great Horror of the void by a mere and arbitrary act of will. The Other can destroy the full universe of the Self instantly and for no reason at all. The Other can, and will (as he or she must), fight against the will of the Self. The Other will try to impose his/her own will, and its will always differs from the will of the Self, and so a war between

wills characterizes the essence of social living. And since living *is* social, then living is war. Hell is other people, as Sartre himself was forced to admit it in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), when he tried to build an argument against solipsism.

The Self/Other distinction entails this infinite war between Self and Other. There is no exit. And our entire world instantiates this war. If one agrees with this interpretation of the world, Bombardini's solution is not condemnable. To think that these existential predicaments can be overcome by individual autonomy is an illusion. The despair that Lasch and Wallace hope to overcome is the necessary conclusion of our Western ethos. That despair necessarily follows from our most fundamental belief that the individual human being is one who can decide and act (an idea that itself depends on the Self/Other distinction), and so transform and dominate the world and make it according to his or her will. If this is the life of the Self, then it must be constant war between its will and the will of the Other. And then, by necessity and *justly*, the Self must live to will its omnipotence, infinity, and eternity (and within this framework even the love of the Other is a form of individual power); that is, to make its own universe full and to shape it according to its will.

Lasch hopes that there can be a solution to the suffering of the illusion of the autarkic self of the Enlightenment in the acknowledgement that human life is "a creative tension between separation and union, individuation and dependence" (*MS* 177). Wallace's hope is essentially the same: that we, as Selves, freely choose to live for the Other. Theirs is a specific kind of Existentialism, but Existentialism cannot be a solution, because it belongs to the very essence of the problem (Wallace and Lasch hope to affirm a middle ground between transcendence and facticity that is contradictory and therefore impossible). The free Self always fights a war against its dependence. The Self wants individuation; it seeks to dominate dependence and free itself from it. And dependence *is* the Other. The fact that I am an autonomous free Self that is also, somehow, in necessary connection with an Other, does not force me to pay respect to the Other at all. On the contrary, it forces me to go to war against the Other in order to free my Self from dependence and obtain my individuation. It forces me to most effectively use the Other as a means toward my own ends. In the most extreme cases, it forces me to eliminate the Other (my dependence) to obtain my freedom. Leopardi and Nietzsche knew this. Severino knows this, and long before them so did Anaximander and Heraclitus. Sartre couldn't escape it, Lasch is unaware of it, and Wallace feels it with great sadness. This is why the story of Norman Bombardini ends in tragedy, and why all of Wallace's other stories also end in tragedy or, in the best cases, just do not end.

There is never a positive ending in a Wallace story, because within the framework of his thought (Western thought) a positive ending is impossible, and Wallace feels this impossibility. In "Farther Away" (2011) Jonathan Franzen writes that there's "a near-perfect absence […] of ordinary love" ("Farther" 39) in Wallace's stories, and that Wallace's characters are always scheming "to prove to themselves that what feels like love is really just disguised self-interest" (ibid.).[78] He's right, but he's right because Wallace could sense that within our interpretation of being what we call "love" cannot be anything but yet another mode (albeit the most preferable and sacred mode) of violence, an awareness that Franzen doesn't possess at all.

Postscript: A Response to Mary K. Holland

In "'The Art's Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of *Infinite Jest*" (2006), Mary K. Holland presents an extensive analysis of the relationship between *The Culture of Narcissism* and Wallace's work.[79] Holland shows that there is an alignment between Lasch and Wallace but, indeed, she only speaks of "a remarkable alignment" (*Succeeding* 66), while here we argue that Wallace appropriated Lasch's work. But most importantly, we disagree with Holland's statement that "Lasch's critique goes farther than Wallace does" (ibid.) because "while Wallace simply diagnoses the problem of entrenched irony in media and literature, Lasch critiques American culture as a whole in terms of his broader accusation of a crisis of liberalism" (ibid.). We submit that this is not the case, and that Wallace exhibits higher awareness in his sociological discourse by *feeling* the uncertainty inherent in the contradiction that he and Lasch share (while Lasch is absolutely certain of the impossibility of his contradiction).

Lasch denounces the advent of narcissism, pure individualism, the inability to take responsibility, and ultimately nihilism. Yet, yet he thinks that liberalism can be the solution to these predicaments ("liberalism" meaning thought rooted in free will). Lasch wishes for the re-institution of a truly liberal society, where individual authority and responsibility can

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[78] Rando (2013) too has noted the "lovelessness" of Wallace's fiction, which contradicts the "critical axiom" that Wallace constructed means of communion through his stories.

[79] In 2018, Holland rightly argues that solipsism is the central concern in *Infinite Jest*.

reign. In Holland's own words, he wishes for the restoration of "individual power, authority, and so selfhood" (ibid.). But this means that Lasch, like Wallace, tries to cure poison with poison, the despair of individual freedom with individual freedom. He denounces contemporary psychotherapy because it teaches that the individual will is all powerful, and he decries narcissism as the ultimate product of bourgeois enlightenment and capitalist ideology. Yet, his solution to the contemporary predicament is liberalism, which is itself the essence of enlightenment and capitalism. Like Wallace, he contradicts himself because he cannot envision any other theory of being except the one our society is built upon. Narcissism, solipsism, self-absorption, self-contempt, individualism, and the war of all against all (etc.) are the necessary consequences of believing that human beings are rational beings endowed with free will who have power over the things of the world. Lasch and Wallace both believe that humans are such beings, and yet they hope to commend an ethics of altruism. Here resides their contradiction. A contradiction that manifests itself in Wallace most clearly on the ontological and existential levels and in Lasch on the socio-political level.

Holland is wrong when she says that Wallace only considers irony and the media while Lasch analyzes various "social forces and symptoms that escape Wallace's media-minded analysis" (ibid.). All of Wallace's work is dedicated to a broad analysis of the isolation of the self, narcissism, and the rat race in our society, and this analysis is far from being merely media-minded. For example, Holland writes that Wallace doesn't see what Lasch sees, as e.g. "the destruction of paternal authority" (ibid.). But in fact, Wallace explicitly laments our culture's "authority vacuum" (ibid. 62) and condemns the American ethos as "one enormous engine and temple of self-gratification," founded upon the message "that you are the most important, and what you want is the most important, and that your job in life is to gratify your own desires" (ZDF interview). He even expresses the need for paternal authority *specifically* in the McCaffery interview: "*we're* going to have to be the parents" (McCaffery 52), and it is no coincidence that most of his suffering characters live problematic parent-child relationships. Then, Holland writes that Wallace doesn't see how "the culture of advertising and consumption enabled by this mediation stimulates 'infantile cravings' for fulfillment that can never be satisfied" (ibid. 67). But again, she forgets that both "A Supposedly Fun Thing" and *Infinite Jest* undeniably connect consumption with the worship of instant pleasure, narcissism, and infantilism—thus also (in *IJ*) exhibiting addiction as the ultimate consequence infantilism and of the consumerist lie that our will can be so satisfied.

Holland's criticism of *Infinite Jest* is therefore untenable. She writes that the novel is

guilty of an "unconscious stagnation in the culture of narcissism that prevents it from fully accomplishing the goals Wallace sets forth in his agenda for novelistic redemption" (ibid. 68), but there is nothing unconscious in *IJ*'s portrayal of infantilization and narcissism. It isn't by chance that "pathologically compensatory adult narcissism permeates *Infinite Jest*" (ibid.); it does because Wallace consciously structured the novel as a criticism of our narcissistic, and so to dramatize its destructive effects. The whole Enfield Tennis Academy, for example, is a picture of the rat race and its relationship with narcissism and loneliness, but this depiction functions as a *criticism*, not an affirmation. All the young athlete-students know that "we're all on each other's food chain. All of us" (*IJ* 122), and that this is "the meaning of *individual*," being "each deeply alone here. It's what we all have in common, this aloneness.' '*E Unibus Pluram*'" (*IJ* 112).[80] It is this loneliness and competitiveness that generates their narcissism: LaMont Chu becomes addicted to pictures of fame and success because he knows that within this world of loneliness and competition, those are the only ways to become meaningful, to "justify one's seed," and here is where his narcissism originates (like everyone else's).

In addition, the whole novel is an exploration of the degenerative effects of infantilism in relation to the pursuit of pleasure in instant gratification. The movie "Infinite Jest" is a weapon of mass destruction by pure pleasure, and it produces such pleasure because it places the viewer in the position of an infant whose needs are entirely fulfilled by a beautiful mother. The point of representing addiction in the novel is the same, as Wallace himself told Stein about AA: "you see for the most part privileged people who, through their own inability to preserve autonomy in the face of available pleasure, have ruined their lives and look like Dachau survivors" (Stein 91).

Holland's criticism is therefore misguided. Wallace *can* be criticized, but for other reasons; and likewise, there *are* divergences between Lasch and Wallace, but they are not those Holland indicates. We have argued for both the reasons and divergences above. Both Lasch and Wallace remain trapped with the Existentialist Contradiction, but Wallace feels and fear the possibility of suffering with an awareness that is entirely absent from Lasch, and this feeling infuses his work with uncertainty, nuance, and alertness, and these are the measures of its value.

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[80] Wallace makes this sense of shared loneliness explicitly personal in the interview with Schmeidel where about his years in college he says: "that feeling alone and inferior was actually the great valent bond between us all" (Schmeidel 58).

The Project of Life:
David Foster Wallace and Zygmunt Bauman

Introduction

Zygmunt Bauman attempts to show the philosophical foundations of our contemporary predicament, how our ideas become concrete, because how we conceive ourselves becomes how we live, suffer, and feel joy. David Foster Wallace strives to do the same through his literary works, and this makes the present comparison particularly fruitful. In *Practices of Selfhood* (2015), Bauman writes that all of our social dilemmas "could be plotted on the same axis – one end of which is designated by fate and determination and the other by choice and freedom" (*PS* viii). On this note, we want to say that all questions regarding human existence are plotted on this axis. There is no human question that is not fundamentally about freedom and fate. Not in ethics. Not in psychology. Not in metaphysics. Not in science. Not in religion. The question of God itself is about freedom and fate, and so are those of general relativity and quantum mechanics. Wallace's ethical questions too are about freedom and fate. In fact, ethics itself is about freedom and fate; whether we are or are not free decides the meaning of ethics.

Commonsense believes that human life exists on the edge between freedom and fate, as an admixture of facticity and freedom—predetermined biological and environmental circumstances on the one hand and the exclusively human ability to transcend these circumstances through free will on the other. This is why we, as a society, postulate that the ethical (the proper way of life) is to enact this understanding of our forever being on this edge. This is the position of Wallace's and Bauman's Existentialism as well, as we will see.

But there are great thinkers in Western history who disagree and think this idea of in-betweenness to be an impossible contradiction. Leopardi and Nietzsche are for sure among these (Wittgenstein and Heisenberg may have been as well – this feeling often reappears throughout history). For them, the conflict between freedom and fate is an either/or: either freedom or fate, and everything in-between is impossible. Being must be an either/or because freedom always transcend facticity, by definition. Free will must always be

above and beyond the circumstances in which it finds itself, or else it wouldn't be free. In order to be free (in order to exist), free will must have the power to reign upon all Being. If it does not reign, it is not free, and therefore it is not at all.

The original conflict between freedom and fate is where the meaning of our lives is decided. Our analysis of the Existentialist Contradiction is another attempt to interpret it.

The Same Existentialist Criticism of Our Time

Bauman begins *Liquid Modernity* with a quote from Paul Valéry's "The Outlook for Intelligence": "Interruption, incoherence, surprise are the ordinary conditions of our life. […] We can no longer bear anything that lasts. We no longer know how to make boredom bear fruit" ("OI" 130). Anyone familiar with Wallace's work recognizes here an outstanding condensation of Wallace's entire intellectual project. It is no coincidence that Valéry himself is strongly connected with Existentialism.[81] The quote sums up both Wallace's existential-sociological diagnosis of our time ("interruption, incoherence, surprise are the ordinary conditions of our life…") – which Wallace expresses ever since *The Broom of the System* (1987) and "Fictional Futures and the Conspicously Young" (1988) and most famously in "E Unibus Pluram" (1993) and *Infinite Jest* (1996) – and Wallace's final proposed solution to our predicament ("…to make boredom bear fruit") – which he formulates most explicitly in *The Pale King* (2011).

In this sense, the following analysis will demonstrate that Bauman and Wallace too (like Lasch) are united in Existentialism, on which they construct both their criticism of our time and their solution to it. This is why their sociological interpretation of our time is so complementary. But since we have already explored Wallace's social criticism at length in the previous chapters, here we limit ourselves to some hints regarding the extent of Bauman's agreement with Wallace (and Lasch).

In *The Art of Life* (2008), Bauman laments today's "vexing shortage of *firm and reliable*

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[81] For literature on the connection between Valery and Existentialism see: Gullace's "*Les Lettres et L'absolu: Valéry, Sartre, Proust*" (1963), Webber's "Pure and Applied Consciousness in Valéry and Sartre" (2014), Pilkington's "Valéry and Sartre: The Nature of Consciousness" (1989), and LeSage's "Paul Valéry and Jean-Paul Sartre: A Confrontation" (1971), as few of many examples.

orientation points and *trustworthy* guides" (*AL* 87), thus echoing Wallace's denunciation of the disappearance of all "guides to *why* and *how* to choose" (EUP 76). This situation – Bauman says in *Liquid Modernity* – provokes in the individual "a perpetual agony of indecision linked to a state of uncertainty [that is] likely to make life a living hell" (*LM* 20), because "under the new circumstances, the odds are that most of human life and most of human lives will be spent agonizing about the choice" (ibid. 61). We immediately recognize in these words Wallace's own beliefs and concerns. For both Bauman and Wallace, freedom is a means to an end, we need it to pursue our goals, but if every goal, every meaning, is taken away from us, then our freedom is a means to nothing. Without meaning, we have nothing to live for, and this is exactly what we have done: created a society that promotes absolute freedom by tearing away all meaning from life.[82]

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes that "if you have your '*why*' in life, you can get along with almost any '*how*'" (*TI* 157). Wallace and Bauman know that without a why you can bear no how. If you have a reason to live, an ideal that you worship, you can bear the suffering because your reason makes it meaningful. But if you don't have a reason (a why), then the suffering is meaningless, and there is no reason to bear it, no reason not to end it. Bauman says that after meaning falls "only doubt and fear are left" (*LM* 21), and that – because our society's relativism is bordering on nihilism – "precariousness, instability, vulnerability is the most widespread (as well as the most painfully felt) feature of contemporary life conditions" (ibid. 160). He thus follows Wallace's words on irony, cynicism, nihilism, and the absolute necessity of worship.

Likewise, in stating that "the present-day uncertainty is a powerful *individualizing* force. It divides instead of uniting" (*LM* 148), Bauman echoes what Wallace has to say about fear-generated self-interest, as well as Lasch's diagnosis of the culture of narcissism (Bauman also writes a piece entitled "Individually, Together," the equivalent of "E Unibus Pluram").

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[82] This reasoning connects Bauman and Wallace with a long history of thought. Two major examples are Leo Strauss and Alexis de Tocqueville. In "The Crisis of Our Time" (1947-1948), *On Tyranny* (1948), and "What Is Political Philosophy?" (1959), Strauss (whom Bauman read) argues that liberalism involves a tendency towards extreme relativism, this in turn leads to nihilism, which entails "freedom from" everything but absolute absence of "freedom to" anything, and leads either to tyranny or – in the case of liberal democracies – to a "permissive egalitarianism" that amounts to hedonistic aimlessness without values. And this is precisely the vision of our liberal democracies that Bauman and Wallace share and trace back to de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835-1840), in relation to Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958).

And when Bauman insists that "'rational' choice in the era of instantaneity means *to pursue gratification while avoiding the consequences*" (*LM* 128), he reiterates Wallace's criticism of today's Utilitarian ethos. But Wallace knows too that today's uncertainty and individualism also entail an unbearable burden of responsibility upon the individual's shoulders, which leads to paralyzing self-consciousness, and Bauman follows him here as well, writing that in our society people "are told daily that what is wrong with their […] has been their own fault" (*LM* 71), and that this necessarily leads to "compulsive *self*-critique born of perpetual dissatisfaction" (ibid. 38).

Finally, what Bauman and Wallace both come to is the affirmation of the I's absolute need for companionship with the Other. Bauman writes that happiness is "utterly unattainable, nay inconceivable, in the loneliness of self-concern and where attention is focused narrowly on self-creation, self-assertion and self-enhancement" (*AL* 17); happiness is to "live for each other" (ibid.), to believe that "we are one" (ibid.), it is "the pleasure of 'making a difference' that matters not only to you" (ibid.). Once again, these words find their match in the prescription that lies at the heart of *This Is Water*. Bauman also translates a passage from Gilles Lipovetsky's *L'ère du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain* (*The Era of Emptiness: Essays on Contemporary Individualism*, 1983) to say that "sacrificial culture is dead. We've stopped recognizing ourselves in any obligation to live for the sake of something other than ourselves" (*AL* 41); and in doing so, he invites us to worship, "to give ourselves away to something" (*IJ* 900), just as Wallace always has. Both Bauman and Wallace, in the end, see the possibility of redemption from today's meaningless individualism in the opportunity to choose to give oneself away to the Other. This is their profound agreement, to which we now turn to, to question their conceptualization of the ethical.

The Beginning of the Fall

On what grounds do Wallace and Bauman's moral and ethical prescriptions rest? Why are the destruction of all authorities, the affirmation of pure individualism, the ethics of self-gratification, etc. wrong? Why should their alternatives be right? If one cannot answer these questions, then every criticism of our time is insubstantial. We have constructed this society according to our beliefs. We have rejected the ideals that Bauman, Wallace, and others commend. On what grounds can these losing ideals claim their right? Wallace and Bauman

argue that our social structure produces suffering, but has there ever been one that doesn't? Has there ever been one that produced less suffering? Is it possible to construct one? They denounce utilitarianism, but their arguments are themselves utilitarian: they denounce contemporary society because it produces suffering, and this means they want to increase well-being and decrease pain. Suppose our social structure truly is undesirable; does this make it *wrong*? Can a utilitarian argument against a utilitarian society constitute an actual redemption from its utilitarian ethos?

Wallace and Bauman know that the affirmation of a meaning of life entails the renunciation of absolute freedom, that absolute meaninglessness is absolutely necessary for absolute freedom, that meaningfulness entails some limitation to freedom. Worship restricts freedom, and only an ideal can imbue your life with meaning, and when an ideal imposes itself upon you, you act it out, and so the ideal restricts your actions to those that constitute a life lived in accordance with the ideal, and yet this restriction of action is what makes action at all possible in the first place, because the restriction of the ideal is what gives you reason to act, and without a reason to act you will not act at all. Existentialist choice demands that one chooses to renounce absolute freedom in favor of a commitment, a meaning. This is the ethical path in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843) and in Sartrean ethics. This is the salvation that both Wallace and Bauman indicate. But this ideal is contradictory; Existentialist choice is impossible. You cannot *choose* the Absolute. If you *choose*, then *You* are the Absolute. A true Absolute is not chosen, it imposes itself upon you. You do not choose God. God either imposes itself upon the world or it does not. Either He is there, or He is not. Life is either fate or freedom, and this either/or depends on no choice at all: there is no continuum between fate and freedom.

In Existentialism, one must enact the middle ground between freedom and necessity by freely choosing one's own worship (necessity). This is the choice of one's enslavement, the renunciation of absolute freedom. Only this Existentialist choice generate meaningfulness. For Kierkegaard, Bauman, and Wallace (and countless others), only this choice can free the individual of from despair. But in so saying, Existentialism makes salvation from absolute freedom absolutely a matter of freedom. If the individual freely chooses his own enslavement, then his capital-T Truth must remain his own individual freedom and nothing else. Free will remains the ultimate truth. When we *choose* our absolute, deep down we know (consciously or not) that the ultimate foundation of our being remains our free will. On what grounds, then, can one prevent radical doubt and paralyzing self-

consciousness and self-criticism? What *reasons* can an individual have for not being devoured by doubt? None, because the ultimate foundation of his entire Being is his own arbitrary and finite choice. On the contrary, the individual has every reason to be devoured by doubt. An individual is finite, and every one of his choices is a finite, biased, unreliable, arbitrary choice that postulates an absolute—an ideal that is infinite and eternal (Sartre knew all too well that in every decision a man affirms an absolute ideal). To act is to endlessly perform this contradiction: a finite choice of the absolute. To act is to want this impossibility: a finite affirmation of the infinite. The rational reaction to the problem of choice is existential paralysis.

Not only that: if the distinction between the aesthetic (meaningless) and the ethical (meaningful) lives is constituted by individual choice, then the entire burden of responsibility must weigh entirely upon the individual's shoulders, and this is not only necessary but also just. If the origin of action is the individual's free will, then responsibility is fully individual, and so are merit and fault, pride and shame. Whether your life is meaningful or meaningless is only a matter of your worth. If you believe in free will, not even Taoism can free you of the self-absorption of constant comparative self-judgment—in "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley" (1990), Wallace writes: "I had developed a sort of hubris about my Taoistic ability to control via noncontrol" (DSTA 12). This is why ours is the time that quotes Lao Tzu in self-help, finance, entrepreneurship, and marketing books.

If we have free will, there is also no reason not to pursue self-gratification. On the contrary, pursuing self-gratification is the ethical choice. Ethics has always meant to act in accordance with the truth, and if the capital-T Truth is the free power of the Self, then the ethical life is the life that pays due to the will of the Self. But we have seen that freedom in itself is meaningless, and therefore if the only capital-T Truth is free will, then the ultimate is meaninglessness. There is therefore no ideal that should stop your from pursuing your own pleasure and pain. We want free will, but free will entails solipsism, pure individualism, and the final meaninglessness of existence. By founding their hopes on free will, Bauman and Wallace reaffirm the inescapable justice of all the plights they hope to redeem.

Our Time Is Existentialist

Wallace and Bauman propose Existentialism as a solution to the problems of late modernity,

but late modernity is Existentialist to the core. Bauman postulates a distinction between "solid" and "liquid" modernity and characterizes the latter as the loss of Sartre's "*projet de la vie*," saying that only liquid modernity is an "individualized, privatized, version of modernity" (*LM* 7-8). Bauman thinks that if only we could go back to solid modernity and its Sartrean ideals, then we could redeem ourself. But this historical interpretation is indefensible. Without a doubt, all of modernity has placed the individual at the center of creation, as the locus of power, freedom, decision, and action, who must bear the private and fully individual responsibility that his power entails. All of modernity is individualized and privatized. In fact, this is the fundamental meaning of the Enlightenment, as Kant writes *"What Is Enlightenment?"* (1784): *"Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another.* […] The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your *own* understanding! […] Only a few, by cultivating their own minds, have succeeded in freeing themselves from immaturity and in continuing boldly on their way" (*WE* 1-2).

Solid modernity never avoided individualism. Modernity *is* individualism. Secularism is individualism. Rationality is individualism. Existentialism is individualism. Bauman writes that individualization (the structuring principle of modernity) "consists of transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task' and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance" (*LM* 31-2), specifying that "needing to *become* what one *is* is the feature of modern living – and of this living alone" (ibid. 32). He is right: "modernity replaces the heteronomic determination of social standing with compulsive and obligatory self-determination" (ibid. 32).

But then why does Bauman lament liquid modernity? He is an Existentialist, and he goes as far as to say that Sartre's "*projet de la vie*" is the "secular equivalent of the road to salvation" (*AL* 74). Yet, Sartre's Existentialism is a deafening prescription of "compulsive and obligatory self-determination," and therefore Bauman should recognize our society as the institutionalization of Sartrean philosophy (he should *praise* our social structure). In *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1945), Sartre writes that "existence precedes essence" (trans. Macomber 20) – meaning that the self is a *task*, not a *given* –; that "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (ibid. 22), that therefore the individual "cannot avoid bearing full responsibility" (ibid. 45), and that "the first effect of existentialism is that it […] places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders" (trans. Mairet 291).

As we have seen, Bauman describes modernity as the passage from an ascription to an achievement society, where individuality becomes a task. Yet, he doesn't realize that this is the description of the concretization of Existentialism. His diagnoses and cure are contradictory: he laments individualism and the solitude of the individual under the burden of responsibility, but these are *the first effects* of Sartre's project.

In *The Art of Life*, Bauman cites Todorov's *Les Aventuriers de l'absolu* (*The Adventurers of the Absolute*, 2005) to argue that the Absolute is not something to be found but something that must be "*individually* chosen and *individually* lifted to the rank of supreme value on the *individual* responsibility of the chooser" (*AL* 81). Clearly, Todorov too is an Existentialist, and like all Existentialists he believes that the ethical duty of the individual is the choice of one's Absolute. Above, we have said that this choice is impossible. Here, we want to leave this impossibility aside and focus on the problem of the burden of responsibility (of interest to us because Wallace too believes one must choose one's Absolute and yet hopes to relieve the burden of responsibility).

Bauman does not realize the burden that the idea of choosing an Absolute entails. But Sartre, once again, does. He knows that, if we are free, that is because there is no God, and therefore that in our free choice of the Absolute, in fashioning ourselves, we fashion the whole of humanity and are responsible for the whole of humanity: "of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. [...] Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole [...] I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man" (*EH*, trans. Mairet 291-292).

In Existentialism, one must bear not only one's full burden, but the burden of all of humanity. The individual, as a free creator of Absolutes, is a finite being who must bear responsibility for the whole world. Sartre knows that this causes extreme "anguish," "abandonment," and "despair" (*EH*, trans. Macomber, 25), and his answer is that the individual must find within himself, alone, the strength to bear them. Wallace too is an Existentialist strongly influenced by Sartre,[83] and therefore – in wanting release from

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[83] See Zadie Smith's "*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace" (2009), Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (2016), and Allard den Dulk's "Good Faith and Sincerity: Sartrean Virtues of Self-Becoming in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" (2014), *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (2015), and

individualism, solipsism, and despair through free will, and in hoping that Existentialism can be a solution to our plights – he too is trapped in the same contradiction that afflicts Bauman. In "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness" (1999), Wallace writes that a self is not "something you just *have*" ("SRKF" 64) and that "the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (ibid.). In "Back in New Fire" (1996) he adds that "only the human will can defy, transgress, overcome, love: *choose*" (BNF 169) and that "nothing from nature is good or bad. Natural things just *are*; the only good and bad things are people's various choices in the face of what is" (ibid. 171). These citations immediately make manifest Wallace's Existentialism, and therefore indicate that – if it is true that Existentialism belongs to the essence of modernity and that solipsism, individualism, narcissism, paralyzing self-consciousness, anguish, abandonment, and despair are all inescapable in Existentialism – then Wallace's thinking is doomed to entrapment in these dismal outcomes.

The Rationality of Paralysis

In *Practices of Selfhood* (2015), Bauman and Raud write: "we know that no final solution to a serious existential problem can ever be found. […] It is those interim, imperfect solutions that make us what we are" (*PS* 47-8). Of course, Wallace agrees with them, because this claim belongs to Existentialism: it is the affirmation of the impossibility of all absolutes, of any definitive answer, of any final truth.[84] But if only imperfect solutions are possible, then it is all the more rational for the individual creator to be drowned by self-consuming doubt and paralyzing self-consciousness, in light of what we have seen.

Not only does the individual know that all of his decisions are arbitrary and imperfect, he also knows that they have infinite costs for which he is entirely responsible. Every decision is the actual killing of infinite possibilities. When you decide, you decide to make one possibility be and condemn infinite others to nothingness. In Existentialist decision, we must

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"David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* as Contemporary Core Text: Re-Evaluating Postmodernism and Existentialism" (2017).

[84] See e.g. Clare Hayes-Brady's *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* (2016), which presents Wallace's constant rejection of any "final solution to a serious existential problem" as itself the solution Wallace believed in. Before her, in two 2012 articles, Fest interpreted Wallace's fiction in the same note.

deep down we must feel the despair of the contradiction of decision, because we know that our decision is the postulation of an absolute when all absolutes are impossible. This decision is an irrational act whose consequence is the killing of infinite possibilities, an infinity of deaths for which we are entirely responsible. There are no such things as interim, imperfect solutions. All of our decisions are final decisions in the moment we take them, final decisions of which we postulate perfection in order to overcome self-destroying paralysis (the Absolute Sartre refers to). To decide is to postulate a final solution *now*, a final solution that we think to be irrational and arbitrary and entirely our own responsibility. Paralysis is a rational response to this feeling.

Suppose you decide to leave your spouse. This is not an interim, imperfect solution, it is a final solution at t_1. If you attempt to restore the relationship at t_2, then that is another final solution at t_2. When you make the decision at t_1, you know that the decision is final because t_1 and the conditions that belong to it are right here right now and will never be again. When the moment is gone so are its conditions. To make a decision is to create an entirely different universe, and there is no going back. What we call "going back" is actually the creation of another brand-new universe, which we confuse with the previous one by interpreting them as similar. If decisions truly were interim, then we'd be able to go back to t_1 to change our minds. But obviously we can't, and this is why all of our decisions are final postulations of Absolutes perpetrated by finite beings who are aware of their finitude. In this sense, to decide is both irrational and contradictory and entails an unbearable burden: to feel entirely responsible for the outcome of a decision you know you are not entitled to make. In this feeling, paralysis in the self-consuming despair of self-consciousness is rational.

David Foster Wallace wanted to have faith in an Absolute one could worship. His offer of salvation is to choose the Absolute of your worship. But in the end, he could never truly worship, because Western rationality to him always remained the ultimate truth. And the reason he could never worship is right there in *This Is Water*; it is his belief in free will.[85] To say that "the only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to *decide*" (*TIW* 94), "to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience" (ibid. 54), is to say that there is no Absolute besides your free will, and that therefore all worship is arbitrary (outside of the worship of your own free will). But it is impossible to worship an Absolute that one *knows* to be only

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[85] De la Durantaye (2014) too has seen that, in *This Is Water*, "Wallace's argument…is that the goal of…education…is free will" (24).

arbitrary. This is the contradiction of Existentialist choice, which infuses Bauman's work as well. The impossibility of worship condemns Wallace to paralysis in the default setting of solipsism and despair, thus causing the tragic fall of his work.[86]

Individualism is Right

Throughout his work, Bauman denounces contemporary society for its abuse of "self-realization"—"a myth heavily exploited nowadays by the currently hegemonic neo-liberal ideology" (*Practices* 64). This abuse leads to individualism and to the disintegration of our communities into networks of strangers. Wallace does the same throughout his sociology, and yet their Existentialism is *the* philosophy of self-realization. Self-realization – the "fulfillment of one's own potential" (*OED*) – literally means "to make the self real." It means to realize one's self as a task, to create what is not given. Self-realization is the end of Existentialism. As Wallace and Bauman reject neoliberalism because of its focus on individual self-realization, their contradiction appears glaring.

Bauman denounces neoliberalism, but he describes life "as a movement without a final destination, yet governed by certain principles that I have chosen for myself [...]. I want to realize myself, yet I don't know who I am" (*PS* 63). This is the language of Existentialism *and* of neoliberalism, and therefore Bauman's discourse is a great defense (unknown to its author) of neoliberalism. The same occurs in David Foster Wallace. *This Is Water* is again a paradigmatic example of his language of self-realization. Wallace describes learning how to choose to construct meaning from experience as "actually a matter of personal, intentional choice, of conscious decision" (*TIW* 28), as "a matter of my choosing to do the work" (ibid. 44). This work that "involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort" (ibid. 120). Clearly, the ethics that emerges here is one of self-realization, where the individual retains full power over his own life and therefore bears full responsibility for the realization of his self. Wallace's language is the language of individual will, free choice, effort, and power. This is the language of Existentialism *and* neoliberalism. The foundations of this ethics are

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[86] Bolger (2014) is therefore right in interpreting Wallace's ethics as a "practical mysticism" or "pragmatic spirituality," but he's wrong in believing this can work: you cannot truly believe in God when you *know* that you are holding to this belief for pragmatic reasons.

individual freedom, existential uncertainty, and the necessities of constant choice and of the bearing of full responsibility, but these are the very foundations of neoliberalism, the ideology Wallace wants to overcome.

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), David Harvey writes that "for any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires" (ibid. 5). Neoliberalism is hegemonic today because it appeals to our most fundamental beliefs: "the founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental, as 'the central values of civilization'" (ibid.). It is a fact that neoliberalism affirms that human beings are endowed with free will. In fact, one may say that neoliberalism is built in respect to article one of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience." But the article continues with the injunction "and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood," and yet this does *not* follow from the premise, and neoliberalism knows it. That you and I are both endowed with individual freedom does not entail that we should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. On the contrary, it entails that (since every one of us is free) our relationship should be judgmental and evaluative, and that each one of us is fully responsible for himself and doesn't deserve help. Neoliberalism is more coherent than the universal declaration, in this sense, because it places our fundamental belief in free will at the core of our social structure and attempts to do away with all the incoherent hindrances ("the spirit of brotherhood" being one of them) that try to limit it.

One may therefore say that neoliberalism is the most coherent concrete structuration of our most fundamental beliefs that the world has ever seen. In "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy" (2003), Wendy Brown writes that neoliberalism "convenes a 'free' subject who rationally deliberates about alternative courses of action, makes choices, and bears responsibility for the consequences of these choices" ("NELD" 7). And in *Individualization* (2002), Ulrich and Elizabeth Beck write that our time is "founded upon freedom, choice, the individual, and existential uncertainty" (*I* 210), that neoliberalism "corresponds to an image of society in which individuals are […] active shapers of their own lives" (ibid. 24) and that, as a result, "the emphasis today is on individual blame and responsibility" (ibid.).

In postulating the ethics of individualism, neoliberalism is coherent with the fundamental belief in free will we all share. In "The Neoliberal Self" (2014), Jim McGuigan

is among the few to see the essential equivalence of Existentialism and neoliberalism: "it is as though the post-Second World War philosophy of existentialism that flourished in Parisian cafe society has lately achieved mass-popular diffusion" (McGuigan 233-34). McGuigan sees that neoliberalism is the concretization of Existentialism just as Harvey, Brown, and the Becks see that neoliberalism is founded upon free will. Existentialists like Bauman and Wallace speak the language of free will, of power and responsibility, and therefore the language of neoliberalism.

Wallace attempted to build an ethics of self-transcendence and commitment to the other, but he couldn't avoid falling into that same emphasis on the individual self that constitutes the logical grounding of neoliberal ideology. Compare the words of Sartre, Bauman, and Wallace with those of Rockefeller and Thatcher. Sartre writes that Existentialism puts every man in possession of himself and places the entire responsibility squarely upon his shoulders. Bauman that life is governed by the principles I have chosen for myself in order to realize myself. Wallace that life is a matter of personal, intentional choice, of conscious decision, of my choosing to do the work with attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort. John D. Rockefeller – the richest man in modern history, the greatest capitalist and oil man of all time, and a believer in the justice of social Darwinism (see Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought* and the Schultzs' *A History of Modern Psychology*) – agrees with them: the engraving on the wall of the Rockefeller Center in New York reads: "I believe in the supreme worth of the individual and in his right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; I believe that every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation; every possession, a duty." Margaret Thatcher too agrees with them. This capitalist prime minister who said that "there is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women" (Mooers 45) and that "if you want to cut your own throat, don't come to me for a bandage" (Benson), also gave voice to great Existentialist maxims like: "disciplining yourself to do what you know is right and important, although difficult, is the highroad to pride, self-esteem, and personal satisfaction" (Loffler and Church 65); or, "watch your thoughts, for they become words. Watch your words, for they become actions. Watch your actions, for they become habits. Watch your habits, for they become your character. And watch your character, for it becomes your destiny. What we think, we become" (Sorensen 222).

Neoliberalism and Existentialism belong to the same fundamental ideology. But neoliberalism is more coherent than the Existentialism of Wallace, or Bauman's. Rockefeller

and Thatcher are more coherent, and Peter Drucker's famous verdict "no more salvation by society" (*LM* 64) is more coherent. If every individual possesses free will, then he bears full responsibility for his own shortcomings. The origin of your failures is your self, and their solution too is in your will and power. Do not knock at society's door for help that you do not deserve. You are a free agent; your life is what you make it.

Each One for Himself

Bauman asks the rhetorical question: "can we really rise up to the neo-liberal demand to resolve individually, with individually possessed and commanded resources, life problems that are socially generated?" (*PS* 64). The answer of his and Wallace's Existentialism must be: "yes, and if you don't, it is your fault." Many great individuals have resolved their problems individually, and since they have done so through free will, effort, and individual power, then their success is their merit, and your failure is your fault. For someone to win there must be many losers, after all. It is the basic truth of natural selection. The most fundamental message of all social hierarchies is that your success is the measure of your worth. There is no escape here from individualism, constant value judgment, loneliness, paralyzing self-consciousness, and despair, nor is there any reason to think of these as problems that ought to be solved. The strong overcome them, the weak are left behind, and this is only just.

Bauman laments that today "redemption and doom alike are of your making and solely your concern – the outcome of what you, the free agent, have been freely doing with your life" (*LM* 64), and that therefore "the absence of happiness, or insufficient happiness, or happiness less intense than the kind proclaimed as attainable to all who tried hard enough and used the proper means with proper skills, is" (*AL* 15) your own "full and sole responsibility" (ibid. 79). But in Wallace we see that their Existentialism (unwillingly) reaffirms this neoliberal culture of great individual accomplishments. When Wallace establishes the extreme difficulty of overcoming one's default setting – "it is unimaginably hard to do this" (*TIW* 135) – and affirms that one can achieve independence only through free will, effort, attention, and awareness, his discourse must necessarily imply (unknown to him) that the few who actually overcome the default setting and gain "real freedom" (ibid. 121) are those who are most capable of exercising free will, effort, attention, and awareness,

and that the majority who go through their "respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to [their] head and to [their] natural default setting" (ibid.) are the herd of the incapable who do *not* exhaust their will, effort, attention, and awareness to become free. The few who overcome the default setting are achievers of a great individual accomplishment of which they have full merit, the others have failed of their own fault.

How can Wallace's discourse avoid these undesired conclusions? How can it not fall precisely into that individualistic ideology that is Wallace's greatest enemy? Is it not an undesired consequence of his Existentialism that its logic implies that, since getting free of your default setting depends on your choosing to do the work, and paying attention and discipline, then, if you are totally hosed, and unhappy, that is entirely your fault? There is no reason why the well-adjusted shouldn't consider themselves as better than the multitude who have failed to overcome the default setting, and there is no reason why the inferior shouldn't admit their worthlessness and assume full responsibility for it—each one for himself. These are the consequences of every hierarchy established on free will. Neoliberalism is more coherent than Wallace's Existentialism and social Darwinism would be even more coherent. Bauman and Wallace share this fundamental Existentialist contradiction: they attempt to affirm both free will *and* an ethics of compassion. This is the contradiction of our entire culture.[87]

The Absurd and the Other

Albert Camus was one of Wallace's and Bauman's favorites.[88] Bauman owes the title of his *The Art of Life* (2008) to the maxim from Camus's *The Rebel*: "everyone tries to make his life a work of art" (R 261). This maxim expresses the fundamental precept of Existentialism: we are all individual creators; life is what we make it. Bauman describes this "as a statement of

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[87] E.g.: this is the same contradiction that affects even works as diverse as Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*'s (1954-1959), which attempts to affirm Marxism *and* Christianity *and* that "to be revealed the New demands the most extreme effort of will" (*PH* 4).

[88] Wallace in an interview: "the abilities of writers like St. Paul, Rousseau, Dostoevsky, and Camus to render so fully, passionately, the spiritual urgencies they felt as, saw as reality continue to fill me with an awe that is almost despair: To be able to be such a person! But what are envied and coveted here seem to me to be qualities of human beings—capacities of spirit—rather than technical abilities or special talents" (Jacob 157).

fact":

> the proposition 'life is a work of art' is not a postulate or an admonition, […]
> but a statement of fact. Life can't *not be* a work of art if this is a *human* life – the
> life of a being endowed with will and freedom of choice. Will and choice leave
> their imprint on the shape of life, in spite of all and any attempts to deny their
> presence and/or to hide their power by ascribing the causal role to the
> overwhelming pressure of external forces that impose 'I must' where 'I will'
> should have been, and so narrow the scale of plausible choice (*AL* 52-3).

As every proponent of freedom should, Bauman *here* recognizes that the power of free will is *always* superior to the constriction of external forces: your life is your work of art, and you have full responsibility for it. But Bauman fails to address Camus's own awareness of the absurd meaninglessness of life and the suffering it generates. In *The Rebel*, Camus writes that "we should better understand human suffering if we knew that it was eternal" (*Rebel* 261) and worse that "eternal suffering would at least give us a destiny. But we do not even have that consolation, and our worst agonies come to an end one day" (ibid.). In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), he wonders why one should not kill oneself. In both cases, his answer is that life must be lived in the knowledge of the truth of absurdity and without false hope, in constant revolt. Yet, this is another unjustified leap of faith like those of the other Existentialists (Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, Husserl) Camus himself denounces for having false hopes and forgetting the truth of absurdity. The truth of absurdity, properly lived, demands suicide in the awareness and feeling of the meaninglessness of everything. There is no meaning in Sisyphus's struggling with the boulder for eternity expect pure suffering: one *cannot* imagine Sisyphus happy. Camus himself refuses to acknowledge what his reasoning entails, i.e. that suicide is the only rational act. Like Camus, Wallace *feels* the inevitable despair of this interpretation of the world, but he cannot express it nor overcome it. This is why his work constantly hypothesizes solutions that it ultimately negates, and why there is never salvation, never love, never un-aloneness in his work.

The danger arises with mighty strength through Camus's pages. If Existentialism is the truth, then absurdism and solipsism are the truth. Camus sees the truth of absurdity and understands its unbearable meaningless suffering, and he knows that "revolt" – in the sense of caring for others – requires a metaphysical leap of faith (faith that others exist and that

they matter). But then he takes this leap of faith – declaring "I revolt, therefore we are" –, and his action is not only purely irrational but also contradictory with his own will to do justice to absurdity.

In response, the ancient wisdom of Silenus speaks the truth of technology (as Nietzsche reports it in *The Birth of Tragedy*): "wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you *not* to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon" (*BT* 23).

If the individual must impose meaning upon experience, then experience is meaningless in itself, because every individual construction of meaning is ultimately arbitrary, and every individual knows that beneath this arbitrary imposition of meaning rests the actual truth of meaninglessness. The only possibility for meaning is the truth of an Absolute that imposes itself upon Being and so negates human free will. Meaning can only be understood, not created. But Existentialism – as an instantiation of technology – negates all absolutes and affirms that becoming and free will are the only capital-T Truth. But this must mean that there is no meaning out there to limit human action and give it meaning. The only limitations I encounter are only my shortcomings, and meaning I encounter nowhere. In this interpretation of the world, there is no escape from absurdity, solipsism, individualism, the solitude of self-realization, self-gratification, unbearable suffering, paralyzing self-consciousness, and despair.

Emmanuel Lévinas[89] is the highest voice of this Existentialist hope of being-for-others that guides the ethics of Camus, Bauman, and Wallace. Lévinas affirms that I am responsible for what is *not* my deed and even for what is of no interest to me: responsibility for the Other is the core of human subjectivity; I am for others, and therefore I am responsible for them. Since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for her, whether I want to or not, whether I have taken responsibility for it or not. The face of the Other ordains me, and therefore my relationship to Being is ethical in the originary sense: Being is the ethical dimension where I am guided by the good of the Other. This is why, for Lévinas, the question "why should I be ethical?" is in itself the collapse of ethics: ethics is the originary dimension of Being and

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[89] In works like *Totality and Infinity* (1961), *Humanism of the Other* (1972), *Otherwise than Being* (1974), *Ethics and Infinity* (1982), and *Alterity and Transcendence* (1995),

needs no demonstration, and it is not a self-imposing Absolute that can be explained but a *choice*, an intrinsically free decision that is the expression of the truth of the self: there is no ethics without free will.

But this view of ethics is impossible. To claim that ethics doesn't require foundations is to treat ethics as an individual preference, and individual preferences have no right over opposing preferences. Abstention from argument cannot persuade who disagrees and cannot demonstrate the justice of caring for the other (over, say, the justice of caring only for oneself). Ethics has always been alignment with the truth, not commitment to the Other. To define an ethics, one must define the truth, and Lévinas's ethics cannot resist the objection that, since I am a free self, then ethics is my commitment to my own self and to nobody and nothing else (as we have argued above).

Lévinas, Camus, Bauman, and Wallace affirm the impossibility of absolute truth. But if there is no absolute truth, ethics is impossible. Without absolute truth, no limits can impose themselves upon human action: "everything is permitted." What absolute truth can ground the affirmation that "ethics must be commitment to the Other"? What truth supports denunciations pure individualism? What prohibits gratuitous torture? There is no absolute truth that imposes itself upon me, and therefore I can *decide* whether this particular gratuitous torture for me, right now, is good or bad. I can do what I want. I may choose not to torture, but when someone chooses otherwise, I have to recognize that their choice is as arbitrary as mine (I cannot condemn it). If I try to stop him, then *I* am doing violence by trying to impose my will upon his freedom, when he has the right to do whatever he deems fit.

This hope of Existentialist ethics is born from love for humanity, but in its contradictions, it unleashes the will to power. We live in a world of conflicting wills, and if there is no absolute truth to bestow right and wrong, then everyone's arbitrary will is as right as anybody else's. Within this interpretation of the world, the ethical becomes what is willed by the most powerful, and earthly power becomes the good. Ethics without absolute truth is the will to power. To commit to the Other, to sacrifice, to love thy neighbor, to respect human life—these have always been *consequences* of a certain belief in Absolute Truth, whether it be in God, Nature, or the *Lógos* (Reason). Such ethical commandments can be meaningful only if the Absolute Truth establishes their Right. Jesus is not "nice" and "altruistic," He is Power itself, He is God, and God is Power, and "love thy neighbor" becomes ethical because of the Absolute Truth and Power of God, which states that to "love thy neighbor" is Right.

Our civilization has seen that the claims to "absolute truth" of our traditions were

unfounded, but in doing away with Absolute Truth for good, we have destroyed the foundation of all of morality and ethics as we know them. Even thinkers of the caliber of Wallace, Lévinas, Camus, and Bauman cannot see the contradiction of our culture that runs through their thought. We cannot affirm both free will and compassion. We cannot affirm both the impossibility of Absolute Truth and the Right of traditional ethical and moral concepts. This impossibility is what we indicate here to be the content of the Existentialist Contradiction in Wallace (Lévinas, Bauman, Camus, etc.).

Neoliberalism is Existentialism:
David Foster Wallace and *Individualization*

Introduction

Individualization (2002), written by Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck, theorizes a three-dimensional concept called "individualization" to describe our contemporary social dynamics.[90] Their conceptualization comes to the following conclusions: for the Becks, "the *neoliberal idea of the free-market individual*" (I xxi) is *not* what leads our society, rather, what leads our society is "*institutionalized individualism*" (ibid.), which overcomes the shortcomings of neoliberalism and of the binary opposition that characterizes our social history. In the past, we have either subjugated the individual to the community or affirmed the delusion of the autarkic self. Now, we can combine individual freedom with "an ethic of 'altruistic individualism'" (ibid. xxii); we are, then, in the ideal social state.

It is therefore immediately clear that the Becks contradict Wallace's sociology. Like Wallace, they see the idea of the neoliberal self as ominous. But in opposition to Wallace, they see our society as *not* neoliberal but constituted by individualization, an institutionalized individualism that affirms both the individual's free will and the necessity of social cohesion, and so constitutes the best social configuration ever established. As a result, the Becks challenge Wallace's sociology on what's most fundamental: his metaphysics, Existentialism, the concept of self-realization, the meaning of ethics, of individuality, of life. This is why their confrontation is valuable: to see whether Wallace's sociology can withstand criticism.

By the end of our analysis, the sociological opposition between the Becks and Wallace will exhibit a more profound *philosophical* agreement. The Becks' affirmation of individualization as the solution to neoliberalism is contradictory and illusory because both neoliberalism and individualization sprout from the same fundamental beliefs and therefore lead to the same consequences. Wallace's affirmation of Existentialism as the solution to

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[90] See Midori Ito's "The Concept of Ulrich Beck's *Individualization*: Individual and Society in Reflexive Modernity" (2008) for a schematic explanation of the concept.

neoliberalism is equally contradictory and illusory, because Existentialism too sprouts from the same fundamental beliefs and therefore leads to the same consequences. The sociological opposition between the Becks' and Wallace thus hides a deeper agreement, i.e. the sharing of the same fundamental contradiction: the belief that affirming the individual's free will is compatible with affirming an ethics of compassion.

Is Existentialism the Solution to Neoliberalism?

Individualization opens with a foreword by Scott Lash, entitled "Individualization in a Non-Linear Mode." Lash is known for his work on technology, globalization, and the media – *The End of Organized Capitalism* (1991) is his best-known work –, and his foreword provides clear-cut support for the Becks. Lash and the Becks believe that Existentialism reigns over our time. This is immediately clear as Lash writes that "at stake in this book is […] a process of 'becoming individual'" (*I* vii) which stands in opposition to the autarkic neoliberal notion of individuality, because "Enlightenment individualism is more about 'being individual' than becoming-individual at all" (ibid.). Neoliberalism is constructed upon the notion of being-individual, but what drives our society is individualization, and individualization is constructed upon becoming-individual. Individualization distinguishes itself from neoliberalism by rejecting being-individual for becoming-individual. This is the fundamental concept from which Lash and the Becks begin; everything else derives from this. To them, that is, neoliberalism results in "possessive and ego-istic individualism" (ibid.) precisely because it is constructed upon being-individual. Individualization, instead, gives rise to "'the second,' 'reflexive' modernity" (ibid.), because it is constructed upon becoming-individual. This is why we now postulate "a rationality that is forever indeterminate" (ibid.). why we regard knowledge as "ever-incomplete knowledge" (ibid.)

The Becks reject neoliberalism throughout. They write – in reproach – that "neoliberal economics rests upon an image of the autarkic human self. It assumes that individuals alone can master the whole of their lives, that they derive and renew their capacity for action from within themselves" (*I* xxi). For them, it's this belief in the autarkic self that ultimately must result in individualism: "the ideological notion of the self-sufficient individual ultimately implies the disappearance of any sense of mutual obligation – which is why neoliberalism inevitably threatens the welfare state" (ibid.). Here, the Becks exhibit a level of

awareness uncommon to other sociologists. That is, they say that self-sufficiency *entails* individualism: if one is self-sufficient, then he's entirely responsible for himself, thus help is unjustified and undeserved, and individualism is just. But the Becks then contradict themselves, because they reject self-sufficiency in rejecting the autarkic self of neoliberalism, but then they affirm individual freedom and self-realization, not seeing that there can be no freedom nor self-realization without self-sufficiency. Free will *is* self-sufficiency. Free will is the ability to alter life autonomously. It is the freedom from every dependence. It is to be self-sufficient in the moment of choice. Only self-sufficiency can make choice free. Without self-sufficiency, choice is always *entirely* constrained and pre-determined. Without self-sufficiency, that is, free will is false, and determinism and fatalism are true. And of course, the Becks affirm free will as constitutive of individualization, and they don't realize that therefore they reaffirm the same self-sufficiency that constitutes the autarkic self, i.e. the very idea that they know entails individualism and neoliberalism, and which they want and claim to reject.

The Becks know that self-sufficiency, individualism, and neoliberalism are necessarily connected, and they argue that the ideological framework of neoliberalism is wrong by writing that "this ideology blatantly conflicts with everyday experience" (ibid.) and that "the individual is not a monad but is self-*in*sufficient and increasingly tied to others" (ibid.). Instead, they think, "individualization" is constructed upon the belief that the individual is self-*in*sufficient *and* free, and in this sense "individualization" is supposed to be *the third way*, capable of overcoming the dichotomy of the past: "the stereotype in people's heads is that individualization breeds a me-first society, but, as we will try to show, this is a false, one-sided picture" (ibid. xxii): individualization leads "towards an ethics of 'altruistic individualism'" (ibid.).

For the Becks, individualization can affirm both individual freedom *and* an ethics of compassion because it is founded upon becoming-individual. Becoming-individual is the fundamental tenet of Existentialism. Sartre makes this explicit in works like *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1945), and before him so did Kierkegaard in works like *Either/Or*, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), and *The Sickness unto Death* (1849).[91] For Existentialism, existence precedes essence, the individual does not *have* a self,

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[91] See Merold Westphal's *Becoming a Self: A reading of Kierkegaard's* Concluding Scientific Postscript (1996) for a specific introduction to becoming-individual in Kierkegaard.

he must *become* a self, becoming a self is the *task* of the individual, becoming-individual is every individual's responsibility. This is true for all Existentialists, David Foster Wallace and the Becks included. That Wallace is an Existentialist is well-documented by Wallace criticism, and proven by the great extent of Sartre's influence on Wallace, and most-explicitly expressed in Wallace's "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed" (1999), where he writes that a self is not "something you just *have*" ("Kafka" 64), and that "the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (ibid.).[92]

Both Wallace and the Becks, then, are Existentialists. It's no coincidence that the Becks too often refer to Sartrean concepts. They write that "individualization is a compulsion" (*I* 4), following Sartre's maxim in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*: "man is condemned to be free" (*EH* 29). Then they also cite Sartre explicitly: "individualization is a social condition which is not arrived at by a free decision of individuals. To adapt Jean-Paul Sartre's phrase: people are condemned to individualization" (*I* 4). This means that the Becks know that individualization is the institutionalization of Existentialism, and since individualization is the solution to neoliberalism, therefore Existentialism is the solution to neoliberalism.

Wallace and the Becks thus agree that Existentialism offers a true description of the world and the solution to neoliberalism. Wallace expresses this belief throughout his work, both fictional and not. His discourse couldn't be more Kierkegaardian: his idea of becoming-individual as the overcoming of neoliberalism mirrors Kierkegaard's conception of becoming-individual as the overcoming of the aesthetic for the ethical way of life. Like the Becks and all other Existentialists, then, Wallace thinks that becoming-individual overcomes the shortcomings of the despairing life (the aesthetic, individualistic, neoliberal, etc. life). But there's a fundamental sociological difference between Wallace and the Becks. The Becks believe that becoming-individual is already here and that therefore our society instantiates the best of our values. Wallace believes that what rules our society is neoliberalism, that therefore loneliness and despair are ubiquitous, and that we're far from the ideal social state. The Becks and Wallace agree that Existentialism solves neoliberalism, but the Becks believe that our society is already Existentialist while Wallace that our society is neoliberal

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[92] In reference to Kierkegaard's influence on Wallace see Hirt (2008), den Dulk (2012/3, 2014, 2018), and Cisney (2020).

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(individualistic) and therefore causes unnecessary suffering. The landscape of contemporary sociology appears even more complex if we introduce Christopher Lasch and Zygmunt Bauman into the picture. They too believe (each in their own particular way) that Existentialism is the solution to neoliberalism and, like Wallace, that today's society is neoliberal. But their vision of Existentialism as the solution to neoliberalism differs from Wallace's and the Becks'. This complexity of agreements and disagreements is tied to the problem of the split in modernity. All of these authors agree that there's been a split, but each of them has its own theory about it. In this sense, contemporary sociology presents us with a complex landscape of similarities that hide fundamental disagreements within even deeper agreements.

Conflicting Interpretations of Modernity

For Lash and the Becks, the split in modernity has led us from believing in the autarkic self (the origin of neoliberalism and individualism) to believing in becoming-individual (the foundation of Existentialism and individualization). For Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism*, and for Bauman in *Liquid Modernity* (each in his own way), the split has led us from a situation where self-assertion and Existentialist commitment were truly viable options (by virtue of the union of individual freedom and respect for traditions and institutions) to a situation where uncertainty and liquidity make those impossible, thus rendering our culture neoliberal, i.e. narcissistic and nihilistic (because no value is left except individualism and self-gratification). Therefore: for Lash and the Becks, the split has led us from what was untrue, unjust, and undesirable to what is true, just, and desirable, while for Lasch and Bauman it's the other way around.

For Lash and the Becks, we live in the most desirable society ever established. For Lasch and Bauman, a return to past conditions would be desirable (a return with adjustments, a brand-new version of a return). David Foster Wallace develops a third view. He agrees with Lasch and Bauman that now is the time of uncertainty, loneliness, nihilism, narcissism, and despair, but he never focuses on the impossibility of self-assertion as the essence of the predicament. He too traces a split in recent history, but to him the split occurred when the institutionalization of irony (and therefore of cynicism and nihilism, hedonism and narcissism) took over Western-Industrial society in the 80s and 90s (addressed most clearly

in "E Unibus Pluram"). He too advocates a return to worship (throughout his work and most explicitly in *This Is Water*) – a return to respect for traditions, institutions, and beliefs, in order to reconstruct meaning in life and overcome our present nihilism. But on the other hand, for him Existentialism cannot simply be a return to the past. It must establish a new path for the future. This is because Wallace knows that the despair of the present finds its roots in the past. He knows that there's no going back. For example, in "The Empty Plenum" (1990) he makes clear that our present despair has been around at least since Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). Wallace writes that "Descartes's hell" (TEP 99) – or, the "Cartesian nightmare" (ibid. 93) – is solipsism; Descartes knew that "solipsism [...] head[s] straight into insanity" (ibid. 93) through all the predicaments that affect our time: unbearable uncertainty, loneliness, nihilism, narcissism, despair, etc. This is why solipsism "informs the neurasthenia of Descartes's *Meditations* & so births modern philosophy (and with it the distinctively modern 'alienation' of the individual from all wholes natural & social)" (ibid). For Wallace, modern alienation begins when modern philosophy postulates the possibility of solipsism, in the seventeenth century. Wallace knows that the danger of solipsism pervades all of modernity, and he *feels* that Existentialism itself is dangerously close to this hell. This is why all of his writings embody deep existential uncertainty and the despair that results from it. This uncertainty is what distinguishes Wallace from all the other authors under consideration. It's what demonstrates his heightened awareness of the multiple paradoxes that result from thinking of Existentialism as a possible solution to the existential and social problems of our time.

David Foster Wallace's Realism

The Becks would consider Wallace one of those cultural pessimists who portray a false picture of our time. In this sense, *Individualization* constitutes a direct criticism of Wallace's sociology. Yet, in their criticism the Becks show their lack of awareness and the deeper insight of Wallace's sociology. They argue that "we are living in a highly moral world despite what the cultural pessimists try to tell us" (*I* 212), and that our world is founded upon "a new ethics that combines personal freedom with engagement with others" (ibid.)—that ours is a world where "the decline of values which cultural pessimists are so fond of decrying is in fact opening up the possibility of escape from the creed of 'bigger, more, better'" (ibid. 28)

which constitutes the heart of neoliberalism.

For the Becks, that is, "the ethic of individual self-fulfillment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society. The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time" (ibid. 22-23). Therefore, it's true that "there is hardly a desire more widespread in the West today that to lead 'a life of one's own'" (ibid. 22), that "the emphasis today is on individual blame and responsibility" (ibid. 24), that "money means your own money, space means your own space" (ibid. 22), and that "this is not only an individual perception, but a culturally binding mode of attribution. It corresponds to an image of society in which individuals are not passive reflections of circumstances but active shapers of their own lives, within varying degrees of limitation" (ibid. 24).

But for the Becks, this ethics of individual self-fulfillment does not result in individualism, loneliness, and despair. To live a life of one's own, reaching for self-fulfillment and achievement, bearing full blame and responsibility, obtaining your own money and your own space—these are the just concretizations of the truth that the individual is an active shaper of his own life, and they do not entail the loneliness and despair that Wallace denounces as characteristic of our society. This is why the Becks would call Wallace a cultural pessimist, because for Wallace the ethics of individual self-fulfillment lead directly to egoistic individualism and condemn each one of us to loneliness, and to levels of fear and anxiety so high that they become despair.

In *This Is Water*, Wallace writes that "the so-called "real world" of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self" (*TIW* 115). The Becks too recognize that we live "a reflexive life" dominated by the "compulsion to self-realization" (ibid. 26), but to them in individualization "the interest of the individual and rationalized society are merged" (ibid. 23), the most desirable ethical balance is stricken: "whereas, in the old value system, the self always had to be subordinated to patterns of collectivity, these new 'we' orientations are creating something like a co-operative or altruistic individualism. Thinking of oneself and living for others, once considered a contradiction in terms, is revealed as an internal connection. In fact, living alone means living socially" (ibid. 28).

And here's where the Becks' show lack of awareness. They claim that individualization overcomes neoliberalism, all classical individualistic social structures and, in essence, the very notion of self-sufficiency. But even in their description of this "new"

concept of individualization, they add nothing to the most originary notions of capitalism. They denounce capitalism because it is founded upon the Enlightenment's notion of the autarkic self and present individualization as the new conception that unites "thinking of oneself" with "living for others," "living alone" with "living socially," but the theorization of this unity is the very origin of capitalism itself. Thus, in conceiving "individualization," the Becks are only reiterating what Adam Smith – the first great theoretician of capitalism and a disciple of David Hume's Enlightenment philosophy – set down in the eighteenth century. When Smith established the theory of capitalism in *An Inquire into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), he argued that the pursuit of rational self-interest is both just *and* useful for the wealth of the entire community, i.e. that "living alone" is not only just but also the proper way of "living socially," that "thinking of oneself" means "living for others."

This is, of course, well-known, and Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations* following his previous *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), where he establishes sympathy as the foundation of morality and living-together. This is to say that capitalism wasn't born as a theory of pure egoism, and that its evolution "neoliberalism" isn't either. The driving principles of neoliberalism remain the same original principles of capitalism, and capitalism is an ethical commitment to rational self-interest in the belief that (1) an ethics of individual self-fulfillment is just and (2) by pursuing one's good one creates benefit for the entire community (the principle of the invisible hand), thus fulfilling his ethical duty towards others. The Becks' "individualization" adds nothing to this original framework of capitalism, and it certainly cannot refute it. In fact, individualization amounts to a reiteration of the original principles of Enlightenment capitalism that claims to be a rejection of them and is therefore contradictory.

Yet, the world is moving towards the realization that Smith's theory is itself contradictory. There's no reason why, in my rational self-interest, I should care for the other, much less commit to the other. There's no reason why I should care about "living for others." But as we move towards this realization, we see that the Becks' theory must be rejected too, precisely because it is only a reiteration of the same principles. If we are active shapers of our own lives, and if therefore an ethics of self-fulfillment is just, then social Darwinism is much more coherent than capitalism or individualization. The Becks believe that the distinction between the autarkic self of the Enlightenment and the so-called self-insufficient free-shaper self of individualization is key. But this distinction is only illusory; there can be no free will without self-sufficiency and its resulting individualism. Wallace's "pessimism" is therefore

realism, an insight into the true consequences of our ethos.

The Tragedy of an Impossible Dream

The divergences between all of the mentioned authors originate in a profound, fundamental agreement; in the depth of all of their thoughts resides the same contradiction: they all envision Existentialism as the solution to neoliberalism. This is their contradiction: their belief that free will can coexist with an ethics of compassion. They all focus on defining the split in modernity, but they lose sight of the essential sameness that unites all of modernity. Even Wallace, who does see the unity of modernity, still looks for a solution within modernity, in Existentialism. He only feels the despair that his thought must lead to, but he cannot recognize the mistake: to envision Existentialism as a solution to neoliberalism is contradictory because, in their essence, these two philosophies are the same. Jim McGuigan in "The Neoliberal Self" (2014) is one of the very few who recognize this:

> it is as though the post-Second World War philosophy of existentialism […] has lately achieved mass-popular diffusion. Now […] everyone is abandoned to their fate like an angst-ridden French philosopher. […] When things go wrong there is no excuse for anyone. That would be *mauvais foi*. The Individual is penalized harshly […] in a highly competitive and relentlessly harsh social environment. Although the Becks deny it, such a self – condemned to freedom and lonely responsibility – is exactly the kind of self cultivated by neoliberalism (McGuigan 233-234).

Loneliness, suffering, paralyzing self-consciousness, hyper-reflexivity, despair, solipsism, and other predicaments belong to neoliberalism as they belong to Existentialism. All that Wallace hoped to overcome belongs to Existentialism. Everything the Becks accuse neoliberalism of belongs to individualization. Wallace and the Becks (and Bauman, Giddens, Lash, Lasch) have tried to cure poison with poison. This is the fundamental contradiction in their work, which unites all who affirm free will and hope to affirm an ethics of compassion. The poison is free will. Whatever split has occurred in modernity, it's insignificant when compared to what unites it. Modernity is when we begin to render coherent our belief that the true,

fundamental, defining characteristic of the human being is free will. Free will is the foundation of modernity, of Existentialism, of neoliberalism, of our time. Free will belongs to the essence of inescapable despair. Neoliberalism is the most coherent social structure ever constructed, given our belief that human beings are endowed with rationality and free will. You cannot affirm free will and reject neoliberalism. Unless your rejection of neoliberalism affirms an alternative that's even more coherent with free will, like social Darwinism. There's no affirmation of free will that doesn't entail the absolute despair of solipsism and therefore of paralyzing self-consciousness—what Wallace calls "toxic, paralyzing, raped-by-psychic-Bedouins self-consciousness" (Lipsky 19), and there's no affirmation of free will that doesn't entail what Stephen J. Burn calls Wallace's "thematic obsessions" ("Introduction" ix), i.e. all the above-named predicaments.

In *This Is Water*, Wallace writes that "the only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to *decide* […] what has meaning and what doesn't" (*TIW* 95); you get "to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience" (ibid. 54). But if the only capital-T Truth is that you get to decide, then the only capital-T Truth is your free will, and your free will is always more powerful than the situation you're thrown into. For Wallace, as for all Existentialists (for all of modernity and for all of humankind throughout history, including its deniers), free will is the only capital-T Truth, and all of our values reside in free will. This thought pervades Wallace's work. In "Back in New Fire" (1996), e.g., he writes that "only the human will can defy, transgress, overcome, love: *choose*" (BNF 169), and that "nothing from nature is good or bad. Natural things just *are*; the only good and bad things are people's various choices in the face of what is" (ibid. 171). Or in his undergraduate philosophy thesis, entitled "Richard Taylor's 'Fatalism' and the Semantics of Physical Modality" (1985), he attempts to build "a construal and a system that demonstrably resists fatalism by allowing agents freedom of choice" (RTF 198), his goal is to resist Richard Taylor's fatalism and its arguments that "lead directly to the *metaphysical* conclusion that human beings, agents, have no control over what is going to happen" (ibid. 144), a conclusion that Wallace calls "a strange and unhappy metaphysical doctrine that does violence to some of our most basic intuitions about human freedom" (ibid. 146).[93]

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[93] Almost all of *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace* (2015) is dedicated to the analysis of this early work of Wallace's. In the collection, Hasker argues that Wallace's denials of Taylor's thesis "cannot be sustained" (*FS* 23), and so do Fiocco and Eckert (only Sher agrees with Wallace). Daniel Kelly defines free will as the "one big thing" in Wallace's entire work and, in this sense, his essay is a forerunner to this research.

Wallace attempts to defend free will ever since his first writings. Even *The Broom of the System* (1987) – Wallace's first novel – is, in his own words, "the sensitive tale of a sensitive young WASP who's just had this mid-life crisis […] which also shifted his existential dread from a fear that he was just a 98.6° calculating machine to a fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct" (McCaffery 41). Either a 98.6° calculating machine or a linguistic construct, but the dread remains the same: not to be endowed with free will.[94] In this sense, even Wallace's conception of literature is Existentialist and so must be understood as a validation of free will: In "The Nature of the Fun" (1998), e.g., he writes that fiction is a way "to go deep inside yourself and illuminate precisely the stuff you don't want to see or let anyone else see" (Nature 198), "a way to countenance yourself and the truth instead of being a way to escape yourself" (ibid. 198-199). For Wallace, fiction is a way to fulfil the Existentialist task of achieving your own self: you must look within you, at the truth, so that you learn how to think and achieve real freedom, i.e. the real power to exercise free will.

Wallace envisions free will as the truth and as the core of all values.[95] But if the only capital-T Truth is my free will, and so my life is my choice, then my life is my sole responsibility, and so how not to be devoured by radical doubt and self-consciousness? There are no reasons not to be devoured by doubt and, in fact, rationality shows that we should be devoured by doubt. I am finite, and all of my choices are finite, biased, unreliable, arbitrary choices that deal with an infinity that I cannot deal with, that postulate an absolute (Sartre teaches that every choice is the postulation of an absolute) that I have no right to postulate. Not only that: if my life is my sole responsibility, then all that happens within it is my merit and my fault, my pride and my shame. So why not to be devoured by self-criticism and self-judgment? How not to perceive all human interactions as war? Whether your life is meaningful or meaningless is only a matter of your worth, and you learn your worth through the Other's judgment. You prove your worth by imposing your power upon others. If free will is our essence, who achieves more is a superior human being, and who achieves less is an inferior human being. We achieve through our use of our free will, i.e. our essence, and

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Finally, Ballantyne and Tosi discuss how free will relates to Wallace's project of defining "the *good life*" (ibid. 133) through literature.

[94] O'Donnell writes that even "the title of the novel is, indeed, indicative of Wallace's concern with 'agency'" (3).

[95] E.g., David H. Evans (2013) rightfully sees that *Infinite Jest* aligns with William James for his affirmation that belief in free will is essential to live a good life.i

therefore achievement is the measure of our essential value. There's thus no reason for the superior to help the inferior. The inferior are so because they haven't exercised their free will, which is their responsibility. It's up to them to work to become superior. To everyone what he deserves. Help is unfair.

There is therefore no escape from the war of all against all. Every individual choice postulates a hierarchy. Every hierarchy judges everyone. Every individual constructs his own hierarchy, in accordance with the meaning of life he wants to establish. The social space is where every hierarchy clashes with everyone else's. Because every hierarchy must judge everyone, the social space is where everyone attempts to force his hierarchy upon everyone else. It's where people fight for power, where they fight to impose the meaning they want life to have. Everyone of your actions enacts the hierarchy you have chosen. By acting, you attempt to force your meaning upon others. This is inevitable, even if you act so as to make sure that everyone else is let be. Your actions impose upon others your hierarchy, you cannot live and let live. To live you must negate the life of the other. This is why life is violence. Why a world of free individual wills is a world of war. Self-gratification here is the ultimate ethical choice. If the only capital-T Truth is the power of your Self, then the ethical act is to pay due to your Self and gratify it. If the capital-T Truth is your free will, there's no ultimate meaning except your freedom. There's nothing to respect except your freedom and yourself, and so your feelings of pleasure and pain. These are the necessary consequences of every discourse that affirms free will, and so of Wallace's discourse, as well as every other sociologist's here mentioned.

Therefore, all their sociologies set themselves in irremediable contradiction when they claim to provide a way to compassion.[96] Envisioning the self as a project-in-becoming, characterized by incompleteness, uncertainty, and reflexivity, entails paralyzing self-consciousness as the rational outcome. There's no reason for the free individual not to drown in the abyss of his own hyper-reflexivity. Wallace, Lash, and the Becks, like all other Existentialists, ultimately believe that the human being is a "socio-technical subject" (*I* xiii). This is the most profound agreement that unites them. But neoliberalism is the most coherent structuration we've ever seen of our belief that we are socio-technical subjects. Far

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[96] Jürgen Habermas is another eminent sociologist who runs into this contradiction. See Habermas's *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews* (1992), "Individuation through Socialization" (1992), "Freedom and Determinism" (2005), and "The Language Game of Responsible Agency and the Problem of Free Will" (2007).

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from decrying it, then, Wallace and the other Existentialists should support it, and they should reject it only in favor of the institutionalization of social Darwinism, of pure egoistic individualism, because this social structure presents the ultimate coherence with our belief that we are socio-technical subjects. If free will is the capital-T Truth, then Ragnar Redbeard's *Might Is Right: or the Survival of the Fittest* (1890) describes the true ethics, and Francis Galton's argument, in *Inquiries Into Human Faculty and Its Development* (1883), that welfare institutions are unjust and permit the survival of the inferior, is fair. In *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902), the anarchist Peter Kropotkin argues that the survival of the fittest is a concept that supports co-operation rather than competition because the fittest are those that are best at working together. But this too is an illusion. It doesn't matter how you conceptualize the survival of the fittest. Even if it's a matter of co-operation, the best co-operation is among the best individuals, and one of the keys to successful co-operation is the ability to quickly get rid of those who aren't useful, i.e. to fire the inferior without useless remorse. In this sense, human co-operation would achieve much more if we fired from existence those who are less capable and worked only with those who are best. Or we could just let the inferior perish (Galton). We'd be much more powerful if we had no guiding principle other than fitness. The fittest would finally have the full right to establish pure dominance over others, which would lead to the concrete and finally non-contradictory affirmation of an ethics of free agency, the ethics that might is right, power is justice (Redbeard). This scenario would not only unleash power, but it would finally do justice to our fundamental belief that we are free agents who construct the meaning of life and are responsible for their actions. Kropotkin's false hopes cannot escape what Galton and Redbeard know: that Darwin's teachings have one necessary conclusion. And Wallace, like all the others, has the same false hopes. But what distinguishes Wallace from everyone else is his heightened *feeling* for the uncertainty and despair that results from the fundamental beliefs that he cannot abandon. Wallace *feels* the despair that inheres to free will, and this is why, in his work, uncertainty and despair remain pervasive and inescapable to the end. More than anything else, this is what reveals the greatness of Wallace's intuitions.

Surely many would denounce what has just been said as a caricature of our real thinking, and as the disgusting prospecting of outcomes one shouldn't even dare to envision. But this is all only a matter of rhetoric that hides the truth. In our time, compassion takes on the guise of thinkers like Peter Singer, who's considered as one of the most important philosophers – rationalists – of today, and can argue, in books like *Practical Ethics* (2011), that

the ethical choice is to take the lives of disabled children in order to replace them with non-disabled (i.e. supposedly happier) ones, and this is absolutely no different than killing who's less useful to our society (and so supposedly sadder) in order to replace him with a more useful (i.e. fitter, happier) human being.

The Becks' begin *Individualization* by quoting a speech by Friedrich Schorlemmer, German Protestant theologian, from 1993:

> now, in freedom, they may and must decide for themselves; all the existing
> institutions have collapsed, all the old certainties are gone. The joy of freedom
> is at the same time a falling into a void. Now let everyone look after himself. […]
> What is certain? That everything's uncertain, precarious. Enjoy your lack of ties
> as freedom ("Der Befund" 1).

Throughout his work, Wallace sees that the so-called joy of freedom is actually the void of nothingness, and that the void is despair. The void is in its true depth existential, but also sociological. As Wallace tells Arden: "America is one big experiment in what happens when you're a wealthy, privileged culture that's pretty much lost religion or spirituality […]. It's very difficult to think that the point of life is to double your salary so that you can go to the mall more often. Even when you're making fun and sneering at it, there's a real dark emptiness about it" (Arden 99-100). The example may seem superficial, but it constitutes one of the social instantiations of the real dark emptiness that reigns within the void of the Self in our belief that we are free agents living in a world of things that are meaningless in themselves.

Wallace, like Schorlemmer, bemoans the fall of traditions. They both see in it the fall of all beliefs and therefore of the meaning of the world. They know that the void, meaninglessness, is the greatest dread. This is an historical fact: the end of tradition, the death of God, has opened the void of nothingness, which we have filled with the unlimited angst and despair of freedom. But bemoaning the past doesn't account for the fact that God had to die, that His death was necessary, that there's no going back. As the Becks write: "whatever we consider – God, nature, truth, science, technology, morality, love, marriage – modern life is turning them all into 'precarious freedoms.' All metaphysics and transcendence, all necessity and certainty are being replaced by artistry" (*I* 2). In this sense, they are definitely right, and it's true that "individualization means the disintegration of previously existing

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social forms" (ibid.). Our time is the time when all metaphysics and transcendence, all necessity and certainty, have died and are dying. God is dead or is in the process of dying.[97] Technology, the *lógos* of *téchne*, has explicitly taken its place (implicitly: it was always our foundation, thus why the death of God is necessary). We believe in contingency, chaos, arbitrariness, freedom, the power of the will. There's no going back to our old traditions (we have killed them because we have seen into their contradictions). We're certain that we are individuals capable of decision and of transforming the world according to our will. We're certain that the world is meaningless in itself and available to human domination. The Becks represent our time in that they don't see the absolute despair that this interpretation of the world entails. Wallace could never imagine an alternative to this interpretation, and this may be why he never explicitly affirmed the inevitability of absolute despair. It may be why he tried to argue that salvation within this interpretation is possible. But his work (and his life) speaks beyond his intentions. There is never salvation in Wallace's work, because there's never salvation within our interpretation of the world. The hopes of love and compassion, and of overcoming solipsism, all always inevitably collapse in the certainty of doom. But at least Wallace feels the inevitable despair of our interpretation of the world. This is what sets him apart and above most writers and thinkers of our time. Yet, the most important of all questions remains open, and it's a question that Wallace could never truly ask, i.e. whether our interpretation of the world is actually true.

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[97] E.g.: even our law is changing accordingly. In *General Theory of Law and State* (1945), Hans Kelsen describes the passage from natural law to positive law exactly in these terms, i.e. as the consequence of our denial that there is an absolute principle in "God, nature, or reason" (*GTLS* 392) that can endow the law with inherent rights.

Rational Insanity:

David Foster Wallace and Antony Giddens

Introduction

In *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers, and Foer* (2015), Allard den Dulk gives an extensive account of the close affinity between Wallace and Anthony Giddens's *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991).[98] His account is extensive, comprehensive, and convincing, and yet there is still more to say on the relationship between Giddens and Wallace, for two reasons: (1) the truth shines in Giddens's work as it does in the work of no other sociologist of our time. Giddens shares Wallace's Existentialist Contradiction, and like Wallace (unlike any other sociologist) he is extraordinarily *aware* of the danger of unbearable despair that resides within our interpretation of the world (his awareness originates in his knowledge of ontology, which infuses his writings with a feeling for the truth).[99] In this sense, like Wallace, Giddens commits to understanding our most fundamental beliefs because he knows that they are the origin of our unbearable suffering; and (2) the agreement between Giddens and Wallace extends to constitutional axioms den Dulk could not focus on in the framework of his research. Giddens and Wallace see in radical doubt the essence of paralyzing self-consciousness and unbearable despair. To them, radical doubt is the problem of modernity, and it is "not only disturbing to philosophers but [also] *existentially troubling* for individuals" (Giddens, *MSI* 21). Also, both Giddens and Wallace find in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) the solution to the greatest danger: solipsism. That Wallace regarded the *PI* as "the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made" (McCaffery 45) is well-known. Perhaps less known is that Giddens wrote in *MSI* that Wittgenstein solved the problem of Cartesian rationalism and Husserlian

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[98] For Giddens's full picture of modernity see the trilogy published at the beginning of the 90s: *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), and *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992).

[99] As Steven Loyal writes in *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens* (2003): "Giddens's substantive account of modernity has to be viewed in relation to his earlier writings of ontology" (Loyal 125), to the point that his sociology must be recognized as "a social ontology" (ibid. 34).

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phenomenology, i.e. the problem of other minds for which "I can only know the body of the other […] since I have no access to that person's consciousness" (*MSI* 50). Here, Giddens says that those philosophies terminated "in an irremediable solipsism" (ibid. 51) but Wittgenstein solved their difficulties with a worldview where "self-consciousness has no primacy over the awareness of others, since language – which is intrinsically public – is the means of access to both" (ibid.). Finally, both Giddens and Wallace connect radical doubt and solipsism to the existential danger of unbearable despair in reference to R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1960). Laing's influence on Wallace's is well-known,[100] and Giddens constructs *MSI* on Laing's analysis of "ontological insecurity." Laing is therefore central to the work of both authors, as they both fight against the despair of ontological insecurity—what Giddens calls "the looming threat of *personal meaninglessness*" (*MSI* 201).

We can truly understand their work only if we look at it through the lens of this fundamental concern. In Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) we encounter a character named Ken Erdedy who is a paradigmatic instantiation of ontological insecurity and of how philosophical, supposedly abstract, problems cause the most concrete sufferings of our daily lives. Erdedy is destroyed by radical doubt. He sits at home, paranoid, awaiting "the woman who said she'd come" (*IJ* 17), the woman who must bring him the drug he craves. The inattentive reader may think that Erdedy's self-conscious paralysis is a result of drug addiction, but the very opposite is true: his addiction is the result of his original ontological insecurity, which manifests itself in his existential, self-conscious paralysis.

Erdedy is "disgusted with himself" (ibid. 21), "terribly self-conscious" (ibid.), and entirely alone. He sits at home in total paralysis, staring at an insect, paralyzed in an endless cycle of self-conscious, self-destructive thought. He lives ontological insecurity, manifested in radical doubt and paralyzing self-consciousness. He tries to *reason* himself out of it, half-consciously knowing that one cannot *reason* oneself out of ontological insecurity. This process degenerates in a downward spiral whose final result is despair and insanity, and these are,

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[100] We can now consult Wallace's own annotated copy of Laing's work at the Harry Ransom Center. On the influence see: Stephen J. Burn's "'Webs of Nerves Pulsing and Firing: *Infinite Jest* and the Science of Mind" (2013), Peter Sloane's "The Divided Selves of David Foster Wallace" (2014) and *David Foster Wallace and the Body* (2019), Simon de Bourcier's "'They All Sound Like David Foster Wallace': Syntax and Narrative in *Infinite Jest*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* (2017), and Jamie Redgate's "David Foster Wallace's Treatment of Therapy after Postmodernism" (2018).

finally, the fundamental concerns that unite Giddens and Wallace:

> he thought very broadly of desires and ideas being watched but not acted upon, he thought of impulses being starved of expression and drying out and floating dryly away, and felt on some level that this had something to do with him and his circumstances and what […] would have to be called his problem, but he could not even begin to try to see how the image of dessicated impulses floating dryly away related either to him or the insect, which had retreated back into its hole (ibid. 26-7).

Ontological insecurity

For R.D. Laing, the essence of madness is ontological insecurity, which in the most extreme cases can cause an individual to literally believe that he and everyone and everything around him is nothing. Ultimately, ontological insecurity is the feeling that everything is nothing, and as a society we call "mad" those who feel this feeling and act accordingly. To exemplify the feeling, R.D. Laing cites Kafka's "Conversation with the Supplicant" (1936): "there has never been a time in which I have been convinced from within myself that I am alive" ("CS" 14). Wallace annotated the citation in his copy of Laing's book (available at the HRC[101]), and Giddens quoted it himself in *MSI*.

This testifies to the Existentialism of all of these authors, and in their sharing (within Existentialist ontology) the great dread of ontological insecurity, the feeling of the void of nothingness at the core of the Self. For an Existentialist, ontological insecurity is not so obviously definable as insanity (as commonsense would have us believe). Jean-Paul Sartre speaks of human existence as comprised of Being and Nothingness: Being is what exists in its contingency (i.e. what was nothing, will be nothing, and could have not been), and Nothingness is our consciousness, our freedom, what allows us to choose and to transform, what's most dear to us, our core (without Nothingness, Being would be eternal and unchanging, and so freedom would be impossible). And Giacomo Leopardi – who in his reasoning takes the Existentialist ontology of *Being and Nothingness* to its end –, writes in the

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[101] On Kafka's influence on Wallace also see Staes (2010).

Zibaldone (1817-32): "I was frightened to find myself in the midst of nothingness, a nothing myself. I felt as if I were suffocating, thinking and feeling that all is nothing, solid nothing" (*Z* 85).

Why is it irrational to feel ontological insecurity when we know that existence is a temporary coming out of absolute nothingness that is destined to go back into absolute nothingness and is therefore contingent, gratuitous, and meaningless? To feel ontological security is to feel real, like one exists, like one *is*. To feel safe and meaningful and not split apart from everyone and everything else. Not alone in a solipsistic universe. Not screaming in dread that everything is going to explode right now. Giddens writes that "to be ontologically secure is to possess, on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, 'answers' to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses" (*MSI* 47). To feel ontological security is to be sane. But what reasons do we have to be sane? Do we have reasons for feeling meaningful? Doesn't rationality tell us that all is contingent, gratuitous, destined to nothingness, meaningless? Do we have reasons to not feel alone? Didn't Descartes demonstrate in the *Meditations of First Philosophy* (1641) that all we can know is the "I"? "Realists" argue that posing the problem of other minds hides a certain arrogance, a rather fastidious self-importance. But what is truly arrogant is to claim to know what you cannot know, to see what you cannot see, to experience what you cannot experience, and the truth is that "I" have always experienced only one consciousness, wherein other beings appear only as bodies, machines. Empirical truth says: other "people" appear only as bodies, i.e. as moving things like all other moving things. True empiricism is the recognition that other "people" are just things that look similar to me. Why is it irrational, then, to believe in solipsism, when experience shows only one consciousness and myriad things?

And what is irrational about screaming in despair that everything might explode right now? In *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1934), Karl Popper theorizes falsifiability as the leading principle of science. Today, all the sciences define themselves as falsifiable hypotheses—even math and physics do, after Gödel's *On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems* (1930).[102] But doesn't what is hypothetic and falsifiable have only a 50/50

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[102] Wallace was more than a little familiar with Gödel's work. See, e.g., this excerpt from an interview with Crain: "Gödel is able to come up with a theorem that says, 'I am not provable.' And it's a theorem, which means that, by definition, math is either not consistent or it's not complete. Packed in. He is the devil, for math. After Gödel, the idea that mathematics was not just a language of God but a language we could decode to

chance of being true? The problem of induction tells us that what we have seen in the past doesn't allow us to infer anything about the future. If this is true, then, to scream in despairing fear that the floor may crumble right now is not irrational, because there is a 50/50 chance that it will. Once upon a time, a turkey was very proud of its knowledge. After a lifetime of empirical observations and tests, it knew with certainty that every day at 9 a.m. it would get fed by its master. It had never occurred to him that inductive reasoning doesn't allow knowledge of the laws of the universe nor statistical predictions about the future. This is why the Turkey couldn't know that the plan had always been to cut its throat on Thanksgiving Day. This is why it couldn't know how irrational its belief was.

The Problem of Induction

Sextus Empiricus was among the first to question the validity of inductive reasoning in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and *Against the Logicians* (second century CE). Yet, the problem of induction truly comes to the fore in modernity with David Hume. In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Hume notes that we postulate a necessary connection between causes and effects from repeatedly observed experiences. We have observed that after *A* always comes *B*, and as a result we *presume* that the next time we see *A*, we will see *B* after that. But this, Hume says, is an unfounded presupposition which no argument can support. Hume calls it the presumption of the "uniformity of nature": it's our *unreasonable* expectation that what we have observed in the past will keep recurring in the future. We may say that this is, e.g., what led us to conclude that "all swans are white" until Dutch explorers found black swans in 1697 in Australia for the first time. It's the same irrational expectation the leads the turkey to happily walk into the hands of its killer. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), Hume insists that "there can be no *demonstrative* arguments to prove, *that those instances, of which we have had no experience, resemble those, of which we have had experience*" (*Treatise* 390). It is not just irrational to expect that what has happened in the past will keep occurring in the future, it is also illogical: to think that one can possess true knowledge of cause and effect, or of the laws of nature (generally: of anything that implies necessity) through empiricism is an error of

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understand the universe and understand everything—that doesn't work anymore. It's part of the great postmodern uncertainty that we live in" (Crain 125-126).

reason, an irrational faith.

There have been populations who sacrificed people every night to see the sun rise again. We now look down on these primitive people and the bloody consequences of their unfounded beliefs. Yet, what reason do we have to be certain that the sun will rise tomorrow? Hume presented the problem of induction as unsolvable, and the problem returns with overpowering strength in Wittgenstein's last work *On Certainty* (1950-51). He writes that our "difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing" (*OC* 349), and that what we consider knowledge is actually belief: "What I know, I believe" (ibid. 351). What we call (scientific) knowledge is in truth unfounded belief, but we find it impossible to accept this truth for psychological reasons: we cannot act out this realization, because to act it out is to become mad. To feel that cause and effect are unfounded beliefs and that everything has a 50/50 chance of exploding right now is to fall into the paralysis of absolute fear and despair. To function, we have to ignore the dictates of reason and have faith in technology.

Wittgenstein asks the rhetorical question: "If someone supposed that *all* our calculations were uncertain and that we could rely on none of them […] perhaps we would say he was crazy. But can we say he is in error?" (ibid. 356). The implied answer is no. This individual's problem would be that he couldn't function (he'd be mad), but he would be *right*. This is the sense in which Wittgenstein writes that "the reasonable man does *not have* certain doubts" (ibid. 356), and that in life "I can't help believing…'" (ibid. 365) because "doubt would seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos" (ibid. 427). To be able to function I must believe that things are so and so, and yet these beliefs are groundless. Wittgenstein sees this, as did Hume. Yet, both conclude that, since we want to live, we should call "rational" or "reasonable" these groundless beliefs that are necessary to function. But to call these beliefs rational or reasonable is misleading. We should rather say that the man of faith doesn't have certain doubts, and therefore he can function. Those who function want to call functionality rational and dysfunctionality irrational. But rationality (according to Hume and Wittgenstein themselves) shows that dysfunctional people, i.e. those who doubt everything and are therefore paralyzed, are the ones who are right.

Wallace had certainly read *On Certainty* just as he had read the chapter "On Induction" in Bertrand Russel's *The Problems of Philosophy* (available at the HRC), where Russell writes that "the general principles of science […] are as completely dependent upon the inductive principle as are the beliefs of daily life. All such general principles are believed because

mankind have found innumerable instances of their truth and no instances of their falsehood. But this affords no evidence for their truth in the future [...]. Thus all knowledge which, on a basis of experience, tells us something about what is not experienced, is based upon a belief which experience can neither confirm nor confute" (*PP* 38).

Experience cannot confirm any of the theories we postulate about its laws and therefore affords no evidence for their truth. But there is a mistake in this Russellian passage. It is not just we have no evidence for the validity of these general principles in the future, we also have no evidence for their truth in the present and the past because, as Hume noted, we never experience cause and effect (those are only unfounded interpretations we impose on existence), we only experience empirical regularities. We have never found any instances of the truth of these general principles precisely because "experience can neither confirm nor confute" them. Experience has never and will never show the truth of the general principles of science and of our fundamental beliefs about our ability to function, if Hume's formulation of the problem of induction is correct. We interpret the world according to our postulates, but these postulates (as Hume, Russel, and Wittgenstein know) are exactly that: postulates, unfounded beliefs.

If this is true, we know *nothing* scientifically about the laws of the universe (Wittgenstein scorned those who believe in knowledge of natural laws), and therefore can have *no idea* of what could happen *right now*. In *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945), Russell says that if the problem of induction is unsolvable, then "there is no intellectual difference between sanity and insanity" (*HWP* 699). Here, again, he only comes *close* to the truth: if the problem of induction is unsolvable, then what we call insanity is in truth rationality. When one knows that we cannot know predict anything about the future, one knows that there is a 50/50 chance that the world is going to explode right now. One thus becomes inescapably paralyzed in unbearable terror.

The Problems of Induction and Solipsism in David Foster Wallace

Life is therefore founded on faith, faith that the world is not going to explode right now, faith in my ability to cause effects. Ontological insecurity is therefore far more daunting than people realize, and with their concern Giddens and Wallace display a level of awareness that most intellectuals lack. In *MSI*, Giddens aligns with the most profound teachings of

philosophy when he writes that living wholly rationally "would produce a paralysis of the will, or feelings of engulfment" (*MSI* 3). Life (functionality) necessitates "trust": "that 'leap of faith' which practical engagement demands" (ibid.).

Here, Giddens's opposition of reason and faith recalls Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843) and its own opposition between rationality-as-despair and faith-as-hope. This opposition constitutes a particular wave of Existentialism to which Wallace belongs. Wallace's insistence on worship acquires its meaning precisely in this Kierkegaardian sense: belief is of radical importance, the leap of faith is necessary, in order to endow life with meaning and purpose, and so ultimately in order to live at all. When Wallace says that "in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship" (*TIW* 98-101), he is saying precisely that it is impossible to live without worship, because to live *is* to worship, life *is* faith, both in the Existential sense that every action is guided by worship (a postulated value) and in the deepest ontological sense that to live is to have faith in certain general principles that make "life" (as we think of it) possible. If we lose faith, we lose life.

Wallace himself addresses the problem of induction in this sense at the beginning of *Everything and More* (2003).[103] While reflecting on the nature and value of abstract thinking, he writes that, e.g., "it can suddenly and for no reason occur to you that you've been getting out of bed every morning without the slightest doubt that the floor would support you" (*E&M* 13), and that when this thought occurs to you, "it doesn't seem logically impossible" (ibid.) that a catastrophe might happen right now: for example, the floor could collapse due to a flaw in construction, "its molecular integrity could make it buckle" (ibid.), quantum flux could cause you to melt right through it, etc. None of these thoughts are unreasonable. They just come to mind when you're "not just focused on whatever needs or obligations you're going to get out of bed to attend to" (ibid.).

These thoughts are not functional to life, but they are rational, logical. Wallace doesn't reach the conclusion that despairing that the floor could crumble right now is the only

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[103] In "David Foster Wallace and the Mathematics of Infinity" (2013), Roberto Natalini too saw the inextricable connection between the contents of *E&M* and the existential concerns of Wallace's fiction—"the agonies of cognition," as Quinn defines them (Q 104). In this sense, Natalini was a forerunner to this research. He writes that Wallace saw such things as Weierstrass's dissolution of Zeno's paradox as fundamentally related to the way in which we can dissolve the Vicious Infinite Regresses that take hold of our minds and condemn us to existential solipsism.

rational inference available to us (like Hume, Russell, and Wittgenstein, he can't imagine any other interpretation of the world, and so to affirm its consequences would make him mad), but he does bring to light the gratuitousness of our certainties. He is therefore aware of the dangers of rationality (and "The Empty Plenum" proves that he always has been, because in it Wallace cites Kierkegaard and Laing together, connecting the dangers of rationality to the idea that the leap of faith is the only possible salvation).

Wallace continues by writing that "the abstract question [now] is whether you are truly justified in your confidence about the floor. The initial answer, which is yes, lies in the fact that you've gotten out of bed […] well over ten thousand times so far, and each time the floor has supported you" (ibid.), and in the fact that "without this confidence based on past experience we'd all go insane" (ibid. 14) and "life as we know it would be impossible" (ibid.). Yet, Wallace is aware that this answer is only "*initial*," because all of these supposed certainties are based on the principle of induction – "the fundamental precept of modern science. Without the Principle of Induction, experiments couldn't confirm a hypothesis, and nothing in the physical universe could be predicted with any confidence at all. There could be no natural laws or scientific truths" (ibid.) –, and "our only real justification for the Principle of Induction is the Principle of Induction, which seems shaky and question-begging in the extreme" (ibid. 15).

Wallace knows that all of our attempts to justify the principle of induction are *petitio principii*, circular arguments that presume what they were supposed to justify. Our belief in the principle, therefore, is unjustified and unjustifiable. This interests Wallace particularly because problem of induction is closely connected to the problem of solipsism. Wallace makes this most manifest in "The Empty Plenum" (1990):

Are facts—genuine existents—intrinsic to the Exterior? admitting of countenance only via the frailties of sense-data & induction? Or, way worse, are they not perhaps perversely *de*ductive, products of the very head that countenances them as Exterior facts & as such genuinely ontic? This latter possibility—if internalized, genuinely believed—is a track that makes stops at skepticism & then solipsism before heading straight into insanity. It's the latter possibility that informs the neurasthenia of Descartes's *Meditations* & so births modern philosophy (and with it the distinctively modern 'alienation' of the individual from all wholes natural & social) (ibid. 93).

Wallace writes that solipsism leads straight into insanity and that the answer to solipsism would be knowledge of the Exterior, which we are supposed to get through "sense-data & induction." But in *E&M*, Wallace admits that all defenses of the problem of induction are *petitio principii*. Therefore, there seems to be no reason to assume that we can gain any knowledge of the exterior and so solve the problem of solipsism. Our belief that sense-data & induction can provide knowledge is unjustifiable, and so there is no rational justification for casting aside the dreads of solipsism and insanity.

This is one further explanation why Wallace could never escape the dread of solipsism, why from his earliest to his latest works, solipsism remains the central dread. Even in the early essay "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All" (1993), Wallace struggles with "this weird, deluded but unshakable conviction that everything around me existed all and only *For Me* […] alone, unique at the absolute center" ("GA" 89-90), and as we have seen, this struggle permeates his oeuvre until his latest works *This Is Water* (2005) and *The Pale King* (2011). The inability to solve the problem of induction is also the inability to solve the problem of solipsism. In showing us this connection, Wallace once again teaches us that "abstract philosophy" is about what is most concrete in our lives.[104]

Life Is Faith

Wallace feels the despair of rationality and hopes to find "a way out of the potentially bedridden-for-life paralysis of this last conclusion" (*E&M* 16)—this last conclusion being that induction is unjustifiable. The way out he hopes for is his final argument regarding

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[104] Wallace's interview with Crain (2003) also testifies to this connection between the philosophical problems of rationality, induction, and solipsism, and the existential predicaments that Wallace represents in his fiction. Crain tells Wallace that "a character in *Infinite Jest* describes 'Marijuana Thinking' in a way that reminded me of how you talk about a certain kind of math-philosophical abyss in [*E&M*]" (Crain 124) – In *IJ*, Marijuana Thinking is defined precisely as the "tendency to involuted abstraction" (*IJ* 1048), and it condemns people to existential paralysis –, and Wallace answers that "the stuff that drives us crazy is the really, really, really basic stuff. What are numbers? What exactly are these three dimensions we're sitting in? Stuff that it's embarrassing to talk about […] but in some sense, this is what mathematicians—and back in the Greeks, philosophers, […] this is what they did" (ibid.).

induction: "'rational justification' might not apply here: it might be more the fact that, if you cannot believe your car won't suddenly get crashed into out of nowhere, you just can't drive, and that your need/desire to be able to drive functions as a kind of 'justification' of your confidence" (ibid. 16).

This rhetorical move aligns Wallace with Hume and Wittgenstein: he too concludes that we should treat our unjustifiable beliefs as reasonable because we need them. This is a utilitarian-pragmatist move, and one which cannot sustain scrutiny.[105] It amounts to saying that, when things get too scary, we should just call "truth" and "rationality" what we want and need. With this argument, a religious person has the right to say that religion is rational because that is what he wants and that is the end of the argument. But deep down we know we cannot call "rationality" what is irrational and "truth" what is false only because we feel better in doing so. Wallace is right when he writes that "the ability to halt a line of abstract thinking once you see it has no end is part of what usually distinguishes sane, functional people […] from the unhinged" (ibid. 17), but this is no reason to call "rational" what is not—we have seen Wittgenstein writing in *On Certainty* that the insane are not wrong. It is true, the way out of bedridden-for-life paralysis is the interruption of rationalist thinking, but this interruption is neither rational nor right. On the contrary, as Nietzsche and Leopardi knew, the point to recognize here is that rationality runs opposite to life, that to function is to have faith.

Life is faith. If a human being is not absolutely crushed by paralyzing self-consciousness and despair, he is a man of faith. There is no way out of the "toxic, paralyzing, raped-by-psychic-Bedouins self-consciousness" (Lipsky 19) in rationality. This faith is not the faith of any specific religion or spirituality. It is faith in its largest sense: the arbitrary and unfounded hope that irrationally overcomes doubt and terror, believing that things are as we need and desire them to be.[106] It is the faith Wallace refers to even when he says that "the more I believe in something, and the more I take something other than me seriously, the less bored I am, the less self-hating. I get less scared" (Streitfeld 69): only belief can save the living self.

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[105] Tracey (2014) was right in highlighting "the significant influence of the Pragmatist legacy upon David Foster Wallace" (175).

[106] In "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart" (1994), this truth emerges about great athletes: they are paradigms of great faith, and their faith is their greatest talent, because it liberates them from the self-consciousness that would make their performance as mediocre as anyone else's.

Giddens aligns with Wallace in this sense, and here resides their deepest affinity. Giddens too – as we have seen – writes that ontological security can be attained only through the "leap of faith" (*MSI* 3) and that truly living by rationality "would produce a paralysis of the will, or feelings of engulfment" (ibid.). And when he explains why he uses the same reasoning that Wittgenstein presents in *On Certainty*: "no one can show that it is not 'rational' to worry constantly over the possibility of ecological catastrophe, nuclear war or the ravaging of humanity by as yet unanticipated scourges. Yet people who do spend every day worrying about such possibilities are not regarded as 'normal'" (ibid. 183). Therefore, Giddens too knows that we call the ontologically insecure insane, but they are not wrong. And so ontological security is a matter of faith, and practical consciousness is grounded in faith, the faith that can override rationality's "flooding in of anxiety" (ibid. 37) and "*dread* in Kierkegaard's sense" (ibid.).

In this sense, we may say that Giddens describes the existential consequences of rationality while Wallace represents them in his fiction. Wallace's characters attempt to *reason* their way out of solipsism, paralysis, despair, self-consciousness, etc., and they all fail every time because the necessity of their failure resides in the nature of the attempt. That is: they become ever more trapped in solipsism, paralysis, despair, self-consciousness, etc. *because* they attempt to *reason* their way out of them; this is the spiral of self-destroying thought that Wallace represents throughout his work. When Lenore, in *The Broom of the System*, tries to think her way out of her fear of being only a character in a story, a function in other people's discourses (a function of their will), "just a 98.6° calculating machine" (McCaffery 41) and/or "nothing but a linguistic construct" (ibid.), she becomes ever more trapped within herself and paralyzed with fear. In *Infinite Jest*, the addicts at the Ennet House are explicitly told that if they try to reason their way through recovery they will inevitably fall back into addiction, which is what happens throughout the novel. The only way to recovery is giving up, trusting the process, having faith. In "The Depressed Person," the more the protagonist tries to analyze her way out of narcissism and depression the more she becomes narcissistic and depressed. In "Good Old Neon," which Wallace defines as "basically a story about a lot of different kinds of loneliness" (Goldfarb 146), reason leads the protagonist, Neal, directly into committing suicide. Neal tells us explicitly that he is "smart and self-aware" (GON 145), and that he possesses a "firepower" (ibid. 154) – meaning ability to reason – greater than anyone he's ever met; but he also tells us that his firepower led only to exhaustion and solipsism (ibid. 155), fear and sadness (ibid. 141), the realization that "the fact that I was lonely was my

own fault" (ibid. 145), and finally to suicide.

The examples could go on and on, but these are sufficient to prove the point: Wallace represents how rationality inevitably leads to ontological insecurity, just as Laing theorizes in *The Divided Self* and Giddens reports in *MSI*. In this sense, Giddens's description of the bleak consequences of modernity aptly depicts the existential predicament that afflicts Wallace's characters: "the actor subjects his behaviour and thoughts to constant scrutiny, [his] self-scrutiny…is obsessional; its experiential outcome is…a feeling that the living spontaneity of the self has become something dead and lifeless" (ibid.). Wallace's work represents "pathological states" of immobilization, universal doubt, and paranoia that originate in "a paralysis of the will so complete that the individual withdraws from ordinary social intercourse" (ibid. 196). The end result is a loss of "a normal sense of self-identity" (ibid. 54).

The addicts in *Infinite Jest* are paradigmatic representations of the faithful character of ontological security and the rational character of ontological insecurity. We have seen how Erdedy is plagued by "paralysis of the will" and develops "pathological states": Erdedy lives in the ontological insecurity of rationality, as do his fellow addicts. Kate Gompert, for example, lives in a suicidal state of psychotic depression, and as Thomas (2013) rightly notes, while the novel posits a neuroscientific, material explanation for her condition, "there also exists a spiritual-philosophical undercurrent" (277) that causes her condition. On the other hand, Giddens writes that in ontological *security* many of life's risks are "given over to fate" (*MSI* 183): i.e. the secure individual (either consciously or unconsciously) has faith that many of life's plights will take care of themselves; he has faith in fate, and this allows him not to be drowned in terror. To have faith, therefore, is to surrender to Fate, the Power that bestows its Law upon Being. This is precisely what AA and NA ask the addicts in *Infinite Jest* to do: to give up their illusions of rationality and control and have faith in Fate. This is what their recovery depends upon: having faith in Fate is the condition of salvation. If the addicts cannot *believe*, and if they remain attached to their individuality and will, they will be forever crushed by the dread, uncertainty, and solipsism of ontological insecurity, which will kill them.

Imprisonment

But Giddens and Wallace contradict themselves. They feel the extreme consequences of their

intuition (that to live is to have faith and that rationality is unredeemable despair) but then they deny what they feel, ultimately because they don't want to believe what they feel: for them, our interpretation of the world cannot but be true, and therefore it *must* offer a rational solution, because if it does not, then life truly is unredeemable despair.

Giddens thus turns his affirmation that rationality entails ontological insecurity to the more acceptable (to today's commonsense) one that ontological security is also "emotional rather than simply cognitive" (*MSI* 37-8). Likewise, he writes that "cognitive frames of meaning will not generate that faith without a corresponding level of underlying emotional commitment – whose origins, I shall argue, are largely unconscious" (ibid. 38). He thus smooths his discourse in order to save rationality by making it part of ontological security, because *now* ontological security is emotional *and cognitive*, and faith is "largely" (*not* entirely) unconscious and therefore partly conscious, and "cognitive frames" now do play a part in ontological security.

And as we have seen in previous chapters, the same happens in Wallace. He turns the affirmation that salvation (ontological security) is worship into the affirmation that salvation is the *choice* to worship, and choice is always a cognitive endeavor that originates in rationality and free will (and which therefore stands outside faith). This must mean ultimately, that Wallace's foundation of ontological security is not worship but the rationality and free will of the self, which fact contradicts Wallace's own premise that ontological security is the Gift of having faith in Fate. In reaffirming the truth of Western rationality, Giddens and Wallace manifest their Existentialist Contradiction.

The most revealing manifestation of this contradiction is the story of the addicts in *Infinite Jest* and of how AA must ultimately condemn them to despair. As we have said, in AA salvation depends on faith, you must have faith and give up your individuality and will. Newcomers are explicitly told this: "Eugenio Martinez over at Ennet House never tires of pointing out that your personal will is the web your Disease sits and spins in" (*IJ* 357). In AA, to be saved, "you have to surrender your will" (ibid.), "your own sick will" (ibid.). It is either "do it or die" (ibid.), and when you are ready to give up your will, you have received "what's called The Gift of Desperation" (ibid. 354). The fundamental tenet is that you have to go into AA with "a Blind Faith" (ibid. 351) that is born "of a chilled conviction that you have no faith whatsoever left in yourself" (ibid.). This is the only condition by which recovery can work, and this is why "a conviction common to all who Hang In with AA, after a while, [is] abstracted in the slogan 'My Best Thinking Got Me Here'" (ibid. 1026).

AA makes it crystal clear: salvation depends on Blind Faith, and as far as rational argument goes: "it just works, is all; end of story" (ibid. 350). You can ask any questions, but you will always get the same answer: "Just Do It they say, and like a shock-trained organism without any kind of independent human will you do exactly like you're told [...]; and now if the older guys say Jump you ask them to hold their hand at the desired height, and they've got you, and you're free" (ibid. 350-351). AA thus presents salvation as the giving up of one's free will and rationality. It does so, *initially*. But then here too the contradiction creeps in, as Wallace himself attempts to save rationality. Because now the principles of AA begin to shift from "you have to surrender your will" to "you have to want to surrender your will [...]. You have to want to take the suggestions, want to abide by the traditions of anonymity, humility, surrender to the Group conscience" (ibid. 357).

Now you have *to want* to surrender your will. To surrender is not enough, you have to want to surrender in the sense that you have *to choose* to surrender. Here, salvation is not a Gift bestowed upon you anymore. Now, it depends on your will, on your choice (as in *TIW*), and therefore on your cognition, on your rational deliberation in accordance with your free will. The entire process becomes once again an affirmation of the power of the individual's will and rationality. But this of course contradicts the principle that AA explicitly set in the beginning: AA recognizes that the Disease is precisely the personal will, and yet ultimately tells you that salvation must begin in your personal will. This is the Existentialist Contradiction that must imprison the addicts at Ennet House in inescapable despair. Because to want to surrender your will is a contradiction and an impossibility. If you conceive the surrender of the will as a willed act you remain trapped within the domain of the will, your own isolated, solipsistic, cognitive, rational will, the domain that AA originally recognizes as the house of despair. In the same sense, it is impossible to choose to have faith, because faith that depends on choice must remain a rational act. AA thus instantiates Wallace's contradiction, the same contradiction that we have until now explored throughout his sociology.[107]

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[107] The contradiction also entails Wallace's reaffirmation of relativism, even if he partially acknowledges its danger. See e.g. the interview with Goldfarb (2004): "one of the hallmarks of postmodernism is that it's not at all clear anymore that there's some kind of platonic truth that rests behind people's interpretations of the truth" (Goldfarb 140); "I think this is an interesting legacy of postmodern skepticism. The idea that everything is spin. That there is no truth" (ibid. 148); "I think that any time capital-A Authority is brought into question is exciting. Also it seems to me to have a huge capacity for danger" (ibid. 149).

This is the contradiction that belongs to the wave of Existentialism to which Wallace and Giddens adhere, and which we have seen in our first chapter on technology become especially clear in Heidegger's "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking" (*Discourse on Thinking*, 1959). The contradiction of Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* is the same contradiction of AA. Like AA, Heidegger hopes salvation can be to "want non-willing" ("Conversation" 59), to "willingly renounce willing" (ibid.), to "want a non-willing in the sense of a renouncing of willing" (ibid.). But these formulations are paradoxical, contradictory, and therefore auto-negating: to want non-willing is to will non-willing, and to will non-willing is to perform an act of willing and hence to think and live in accordance with one's will. It is to remain trapped within the will, the source of suffering from which one is seeking liberation. Heidegger writes that "higher acting is yet no activity" (ibid. 61), but every acting is and must remain an activity; there is no act that is not an act, and every act remains within the domain of the will.[108]

Existentialists like Heidegger, Giddens, and Wallace understand that the will is the essence of suffering, but like all Existentialists, they ultimately cannot imagine life without believing that free will is the essence of human beings. This fundamental belief entails solipsism and all related plights. Even AA must culminate in the affirmation that the addict's salvation is entirely a matter of his own responsibility and personal worth, since whether he chooses salvation or death "is his choice and on him alone" (*IJ* 363). The addict is therefore condemned to unredeemable suffering, because His Best Thinking Got Him There on the verge of death, and now he is being told (implicitly and contradictorily) that he has to think and choose his way out of his own thinking and will.

Likewise, when Marathe argues that we are "all of us fanatics" (*IJ* 107), that we are "our attachments…what we worship…what we give ourselves away to, what we invest with faith" (ibid.), but then turns to personal choice as the origin or our attachments – "*Choose*

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[108] Giddens and Wallace are also Heideggerian in their relation to death. Giddens writes that "all humans live in […] *existential contradiction*" (*Modernity* 49): they live with the "existential awareness of non-being" (ibid.), i.e. with the knowledge "that non-being is part of one's being" (ibid.). In this sense, Giddens insists that human beings are determined by the awareness that no other being possesses: the awareness of death. This is how he aligns with Heidegger's conception of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* and with Paul Tillich's Christian Existentialism in *The Courage to Be*. Wallace aligns with Heidegger's notion of being-for-death in "Fictional Futures," where he writes that our "sense of eschatology" (FFs 51) gives us "teleology," and that without this sense our lives are "emptied of intrinsic meaning" (ibid.). He concludes: "it seems transparent to me that, if we forget how to die, we're going to forget how to live" (ibid.).

your attachments carefully. *Choose* your temple of fanaticism with great care" (ibid.) –, he reaffirms the ontological dominance of free will as the capital-T Truth, he exemplifies once again the Existentialist Contradiction of AA an *TIW* (of Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*, etc.).

In an essay about tennis player Michael Joyce – entitled "Tennis Players Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquery, and Human Completeness" (1996) –, Wallace writes in a footnote, wondering about Joyce's love for the game, that "whether there's '*choice*' involved is, at a certain point, of no interest…since it's the very surrender of choice and self that informs the love in the first place" ("MJ" 228). In that brief moment, Wallace sees that love and choice, redemption and free will, are mutually exclusive. But the Existentialist Contradiction that infuses his work testifies to his inability to remain true to that brief intuition, to *believe* in that gut feeling. Wallace feels the despair that is inherent in our conception of the world, but he cannot abandon it, because he ultimately believes in its truth, just like Giddens, who too sets down the fundamental principles of Existentialism in his work, writing that "the 'struggle of being against non-being' is the perpetual task of the individual" (*MSI* 48); that "self-identity, in other words, is not something that is just given, […] but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (ibid. 52); and that "freedom is not a given characteristic of the human individual, but derives from his own acquisition of an ontological understanding of external reality and personal identity" (ibid. 47).[109]

We have already seen that for Wallace too the self is not "something you just *have*" ("SRKF" 64) and "the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (ibid.). Giddens and Wallace are Existentialists, and this is why their language ultimately shifts from faith to rationality and free will. Ontological security, from a gift, becomes a task of the individual, and a task is of course the very opposite of a gift. In the task, the gift, the faith, the giving yourself away, the

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[109] We thus disagree with de la Durantaye's (2014) belief that the Joyce essay is Wallace's "last word on free will and choice" (28), just as we disagree with Curtis (2016) that *Infinite Jest* presents a successful liberation from the double bind of addiction. Paul Giles (2007) – Kaiser (2014) follows – argues that Wallace is a "posthumanist" in the sense that he "takes issue…with comfortable liberal assumptions about the sovereignty of the human subject" (329). While that is certainly true, nonetheless Wallace always, ultimately, comes back to the belief that the human subject *is* sovereign, *because* he is endowed with free will. Contrary to what readings like Harris (2010) and Henry (2015) argue, then, *Infinite Jest* too fails in providing epiphanic redemption.

temple, the worship of something other than the self, are all lost in the postulation of the primacy of the will. The Existentialist task is individual, perpetual (it takes up one's entire existence), and identical with one's Self (inseparable from it). Ontological security becomes the "acquisition" that results from one's "understanding," the "achievement" that one obtains through the exercise of the power of one's own free will. This is the very opposite of the renunciation of the will in acceptance of Blind Faith.

In our discussion of technology, we have seen that to affirm that free will is to declare the truth of nothingness, contingency, and chaos: the infinite meaningless void. To make ontological security dependent on the Existentialist task is therefore to leave the individual alone with the burden of having to overcome the dread of the infinite meaningless void. Giddens and Wallace criticize our time for exacerbating individualism, but what can ontological security be for them – within their Existentialism – if not the achievement of the lonesome, powerful, meritorious individual? What is it if not the measure of one's worth? Making ontological security dependent on Existentialist choice is equivalent to saying (despite what Giddens and Wallace hope) that ontological security (sanity and happiness) is the achievement of the meritorious, while ontological insecurity (insanity and despair) is the failure of the unworthy. Sanity and happiness are your merit, and insanity and despair are your fault. Within this worldview, it is impossible not to remain trapped within "self-absorption manifested as terror and inadequacy" (Schmeidel 57).

Ontological insecurity is the inevitable end of Existentialism: in Existentialism "everyone's alone, and free" (*Signifying Rappers* 145). If human beings are endowed with free will, there is no escape from unbearable despair. In "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" (1995), Wallace addresses "the dreadful corrosive action of your adult consciousness and agency and dread […] and despair" (ASFT 267).. This is the essay in which Wallace's awareness of inevitable despair reaches its peak. It is a reportage about a vacation on a cruise ship that, as so often happens in Wallace, becomes an essay about the dread of solipsism and unbearable suffering. Wallace here knows that "*the* Big lie" (ibid. 316) that the cruise sells is the hope that one's will can "be sated" (ibid.). As the Buddha and Schopenhauer did before him, Wallace sees that the will can never be satisfied and is therefore the origin of perpetual, everlasting suffering. But the will is true and it is free (hence why Wallace insists throughout the essay that free choice is the only way to meaning), and therefore life is "unbearably sad" (ibid. 261).

As in the Michael Joyce essay, here Wallace feels for a second that salvation may

occur in "some kind of marvelous distended moment of transferring control to large automatic forces" (ibid. 284, but then he immediately returns to his attachment to the capital-T Truth of free will. Throughout his artistic life, Wallace always rejected anything that could put in danger our sense of agency, even though he always felt that this interpretation of the world entails unbearable and unredeemable despair. Wallace's entire work testifies to this feeling: the feeling that our interpretation of the world entails a suffering so unbearable and inevitable that it leads to suicide. Wallace always felt it, but he also always felt that free will *has to* be true, and that in it lies the only possible salvation.

This entrapment is Wallace's legacy. It is the reason why, e.g., Wallace had to admit the complete hopelessness of his short-story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999),[110] and also the reason why Boswell describes *Oblivion* (2004) as the "bleakest" of Wallace's works ("Constant Monologue" 151), Phillips as a "desperately sad book" (676), and Hering (2018) as a collection of "embodied suffering." *Oblivion* contains the short story "Good Old Neon" (2004), where the protagonist Neal tells us why he always felt "so sad" (GON 141), "frightened, lonely, alienated" (ibid. 147), and "solipsistic" (ibid. 151), and so why he finally decided to kill himself. For his entire life, Neal felt he was a fraud. He always presented a false mask to other people. This false mask was what made him a fraud and kept him separated from others and lonely. In the end, he killed himself because he *knew* he couldn't help being a fraud, and he knew because rational thinking had showed him that fraudulence (loneliness, solipsism) is inescapable, inescapable because free will is the truth: "of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock" (ibid. 177).[111]

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[110] "There's no denying it—this is pretty sad. One of my friends said, 'Everyone is so completely fucking doomed in this,' because they are. They have a reasonable sense of what's going on and they're very self-aware. God knows they're self-conscious. And yet they're trapped" (Arden 98).

[111] Our interpretation aligns with Cory M. Hudson's essay on "the fraudulence of empathy in David Foster Wallace studies and 'Good old Neon'" (2017). Hudson denounces how "a troubling trend has settled into Wallace studies" (4), whereby the analyses of Wallace's fictional works begin outside of the texts themselves, in Wallace's own described intentions in interviews and essays (what we call his "sociology"). These interpretations are guided by the author's prestige and therefore misinterpret a story like "Good Old Neon" as "seeking to create an empathetic relationship between the author and the reader" when, in truth, the story "demonstrate[s] the impossibility that a person can truly know someone else"

THE EXISTENTIALIST CONTRADICTION
IN WALLACE'S FICTION

THE EXISTENTIALIST CONTRADICTION IN FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY AND DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

A Critical Overview of the Philosophical Criticism on Dostoevsky and Wallace

Si Deus est, unde malum? If God is, wherefrom evil? And if God isn't, wherefrom good? This is the fundamental question that Boethius asks in *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Book I, IV, p. 12). It's the question that encapsulates the essence of all of theodicy and also of all of Dostoevsky's major works. Critics as penetrating as Nikolai Berdyaev – in *Dostoevsky* (1921) – and Paul Evdokimov – in *Dostoïevski et le problème du mal* [*Dostoevsky and the Problem of Evil*] (1942) – have already shown this to be the case. Dostoevsky's fiction is a theodicy: he dedicated his entire life to the confrontation of evil. This is why David Foster Wallace found in him the greatest novelistic inspiration. His fiction too is a secular version of a theodicy. Wallace wrote "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" (1996) to tell the world that Dostoevsky is the model to follow (JFD 274); never did he pay such tribute to any other writer. Dostoevsky's influence on Wallace is therefore explicit, yet still mostly unexplored. There's only one way to do justice to their works in investigating them: to focus exactly on what they focused: evil, despair, God, salvation, whether life has any meaning, and ultimately whether life is worth living at all. To read Dostoevsky and Wallace is to be forced to confront evil, which is exactly what they consciously wanted their fiction to ask to its readers. Thus, confront evil we will. But let us first outline the critical readings of the past. This will introduce and contextualize our work.

Criticism on the Influence of Dostoevsky on Wallace

As of today, there are only two known critical essays that address Dostoevsky's influence on Wallace: Timothy Jacobs's "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" (2007) and Adam Kelly's "Development through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas" (2012).

    Jacobs attempts to overturn Marshall Boswell's contention in *Understanding David*

Foster Wallace (2003) that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is more influential to *Infinite Jest* than *The Brothers Karamazov*. He is right, and he manages to show that *Infinite Jest* "is a *transposition* of *The Brothers Karamazov* into the specific ideological environment of contemporary America" ("TBI" 267). Wallace follows Dostoevsky in exploring "the continual conflict between reason and faith" (ibid. 276), which acquires its meaning (Jacobs doesn't insist on this enough) in relation to the problems of evil and suffering.[112] Just as *TBK* confronts its time's nihilism, *IJ* confronts today's "enlightened self-interest" (*IJ* 428) and "unconsidered atheism" (ibid. 443). Wallace's characters "have no belief in anything beyond the 'hot narrow imperatives of the Self'" ("TBI" 276), just as Dostoevsky's nihilists have not. *TBK* revolves around Alyosha's attempt to negate Ivan's "everything is permitted" and *IJ* around Marathe's confrontation of Steeply's Utilitarian-Neoliberal American ethos of "*Anything is going*" (*IJ* 320). This is precisely the case, and Jacobs does a good job in showing that Dostoevsky and Wallace are "united as authors of belief, […] struggling for belief in something larger than the self" (ibid. 289).[113]

But the analysis can go deeper and see in their unity what has never been seen. That is: their sharing of the same essential contradiction that condemns both to despair, suffering and a belief in the impossibility of salvation from evil. In this failure, Dostoevsky and Wallace achieve their highest value as pioneering voices of the thought of our civilization. This is the conclusion the present analysis leads to. In an unpublished note, Dostoevsky asked himself what the truth is: "The law of necessity or the law of love?" (*The Unpublished Dostoevsky* 151). His belief in this opposition defines all of his life and work, and Wallace's too. But the question already contains the fundamental contradiction that necessarily leads to the failure of all answers. Both Dostoevsky and Wallace always believed that necessity stands in opposition to love. But what if, on the contrary, only necessity is love? And what if to choose

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[112] Konstantinou (2012) reminds us that disbelief was at the core of our contemporary sadness, for Wallace.

[113] See also what Wallace says in an interview: "believing in something bigger than you is not a choice. You either do or you're a walking dead man […]. I absolutely believe in something, even though I don't know what it is" (Wallace, "1458 Words" 42). Also, in this sense, what André Gide writes in *Dostoevsky* (1923) can be said for Wallace as well: "Hell, according to Dostoevsky, is the first region, the realm of mind and reason. Throughout his works, if our attention be at all alert, we shall become conscious of a depreciation of mental powers […]. Dostoevsky never deliberately states, although he often insinuates, that the antithesis of love is less hate than the steady activity of the mind. In his eyes it is intellect which individualizes, which is the enemy of the Kingdom of Heaven, life eternal, and that bliss where time is not, reached only by renouncing the individual self and sinking deep in a solidarity that knows no distinctions" (Gide 127).

the opposite of necessity is to choose hate? Dostoevsky and Wallace wanted love to triumph over necessity, and they turned to God to find the spring of love. But God is, has always been, and always will be necessity, and Dostoevsky and Wallace could never resolve this contradiction. This great failure is their art ("He who thinks greatly, must err greatly."[114]). It's a condemnation to despair and it belongs to the essence of our time. But this we shall see later.

Kelly's "Wallace and the Novel of Ideas" is one of the best-known pieces of Wallace criticism, and it focuses on the philosophical quality of Wallace's work. Here, Dostoevsky is not directly addressed, but Kelly's piece is nonetheless most insightful for us as it reads Wallace through the dialogism that Mikhail Bakhtin formulates in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) (Nichols 2001 is a precursor to Kelly). Kelly recognizes Wallace as "a deeply philosophical thinker" ("DTD" 280) who writes novels in "close engagement with abstract ideas" (ibid. 267). This is what unites him with Dostoevsky, especially since both place "heavy reliance on scenes of dialogue between characters as a means of exploring structuring ideas" (ibid. 268-9).[115]

Dostoevsky's influence on Wallace emerges as Kelly uses Bakhtin's work to explore the structuring principles of Wallace's novels. Kelly does a great job in bringing to light the ideals that found Wallace's compositions, but here too deeper paths are walkable. Most notably, Kelly makes the same mistake that unites all post-Bakhtinian thinkers (including

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[114] "Wer groß denkt, muß groß irren": Heidegger, Martin. *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens: 1910-1976*, vol. 13, *Gesamtausgabe*. (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1983), p. 81.

[115] In this sense, the one fundamental thing that Dostoevsky and Wallace share is that, like all great literary writers, they both wanted to represent and embody the truth in their fiction. They wanted to get to the deepest labyrinths of the human psyche. See e.g. what Dostoevsky writes in a letter to M.N. Katkov about *Crime and Punishment*: "in my story there is also a hint of the idea that the prescribed judicial punishment for the crime frightens the criminal much less than lawgivers think, partly because he himself morally demands it" (*Notebooks for Crime and Punishment* 172). Dostoevsky's ability to get into the depths of human psychology is the reason why Reik has called Dostoevsky "one of the greatest psychologists" of our time in *The Compulsion to Confess* (275), and why Freud in *Character and Culture* (ch. XXIV) and Kohut in *Self Psychology and the Humanities* (41) have agreed with him. This is also the reason why we read David Foster Wallace today. But there is even more truth than that in the work of these authors. René Girard is right in *Mensonge romantique et Vérité romanesque* (*Romantic Falsehood and Novelistic Truth*, 1961) when he writes that Dostoevsky's works unveil the truth of Being and that, therefore, Dostoevsky is a metaphysical novelist. And with this work we want to point to the fact that Wallace too is a metaphysical novelist. Dostoevsky and Wallace are novelists of ideas because they not only delve into the depths of psychology but also into those of metaphysics.

Boddy, 2013): he doesn't see that pure dialogism is impossible and as a result he mistakenly describes Wallace's works as if they were purely dialogic and in opposition to "standard monologic novels" – just as Bakhtin did with Dostoevsky's works. This criticism of Kelly is not a rejection; it is a notice that his argument exhibits only a partial truth and thus requires adjustment and completion. Of course, most of the responsibility is originally Bakhtin's, especially because Bakhtin did recognize the impossibility of pure literary dialogism, even in reference to Dostoevsky's works, but he did so only in passing and only to then insist throughout the rest of his book on the uniqueness of Dostoevsky's dialogism – as if this set Dostoevsky completely apart from all monologic authors.

The passage of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* to which I am referring is the one where Bakhtin writes that there's "a unique conflict between the internal open-endedness of the characters and dialogue, and the *external* (in most cases compositional and thematic) *completedness* of every individual novel," and adds that "almost all of Dostoevsky's novels have a *conventionally literary, conventionally monologic* ending," only to then cut short and say that "we cannot go deeply into this difficult problem here" (ibid. 39-40), and then leave the problem forever unaddressed.

But this problem is *central* to a proper interpretation of Dostoevsky's (and Wallace') novels, and in not addressing it Bakhtin commits a major sin. No one should deny that both Dostoevsky and Wallace make their works forums "for competing ideas […] in a dialogic context" ("DTD" 269) and that this peculiar quality grants them canonical literary status. But this doesn't and cannot mean that their works are finally dialogic, when dialogism is taken to mean that they do not put forward a clear monologic message. In this sense, if it's true that, in the moment of their utterance, Ivan Karamazov's ideas in *TBK* and Hugh Steeply's in *IJ* preserve their "full capacity to signify" (*Problems* 85) just as do Alyosha's and Remy Marathe's – and if it's true that *this* gives Dostoevsky's and Wallace's novels a dialogic quality that accounts for large part of their high literary value –, it's nonetheless true that in the larger context of the whole novels and in the even larger context of the authors' oeuvres, the narrative and authorial voices of the works (tend to) negate Ivan's and Steeply's points of view and to monologically affirm Alyosha's and Marathe's.

To ignore the monologism of Dostoevsky's and Wallace's works is to radically misinterpret them. There's a reason why every nihilist in Dostoevsky must either redeem himself or kill himself. Just as there's a reason why *Infinite Jest* is entirely given to the fictionalization of the existential and social disasters that Steeply's Utilitarian-Libertarian

ideals must lead to (not to say anything of the fact that, in *This Is Water* and various interviews, Wallace reiterates Marathe's point of view as his own, and Dostoevsky chooses Christ as salvation in his letters).

Thus, just as it's important to acknowledge the dialogic quality of Wallace's and Dostoevsky's novels, it's also central to recognize their final, intentional monologic messages. Wallace himself states in "The Empty Plenum" (1990) that all novels of ideas set down an argument. And arguments are necessarily monologic, because to affirm something rather than anything else is to utter a monologic message. This is why, in fact, *all utterances are necessarily monologic*, and so why pure dialogism is impossible. Without being monologic, any utterance wouldn't be able to mean anything, because to mean, something must hold firm its identity, and to hold firm its identity, it must negate everything else. It must say "I am this and nothing else."

It's therefore vital to insist on the final necessarily monologic nature of Wallace's and Dostoevsky's novels because it's in their monologism (a monologism that includes their dialogism) that they express the philosophical-existential content that constitutes their message for the world. The Bakhtinian myth that Kelly reiterates in his piece, writing that Wallace's novels have "no bottom line" and "no master discourse" ("DTD" 280), is therefore patently erroneous and leads to false interpretations of Wallace's novels. It's thus not true that in the novels "both sides of the argument [are] offered to the reader, without a clear authorial conclusion drawn" (ibid. 275). Both sides *are* presented as equals *in the moment* of the dialogue, but then they *aren't* in the context of the entire novel, which *does* have a bottom line and a master discourse. Therefore, *The Broom of the System* (1987) isn't monologic because "Rick's voice dominates" ("DTD" 271) Lenore's in the dialogues, as Kelly thinks. It's monologic because, through its structure (voice, plot, characterization, etc.), it communicates that Rick's behavior hides a deep insecurity that manifests itself as verbal violence, which is his failed attempt at domination. In other words: it's monologic because it *judges* Rick. And *Infinite Jest* is dialogic only in the moment Marathe and Steeply voice Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958). But then the novel's structure makes clear the final victory of positive liberty over negative liberty (of Marathe over Steeply). And finally, *The Pale King* (2011) – notwithstanding its dialogic-in-the-moment elevator scene – is the most monologic of all of Wallace's novels, especially given how directly it reiterates the ideals of *This Is Water* (2005). In *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, D.T. Max writes that for Wallace "*The Pale King* was supposed to be prescriptive" (*ELS* 280). Everyone knows he's right: with this novel, Wallace

wanted to give the world an idea of the possible salvation from suffering. And nothing can be more monologic than a prescription. And within this monologic message, the elevator scene cannot by be interpreted as the Marathe-Steeply conversation in *Infinite Jest*.[116]

Monologism thus pervades both Dostoevsky's works and Wallace's. But this isn't Kelly's only mistake. Another substantial mistake in his otherwise insightful interpretation occurs when he argues that, while Wallace follows Dostoevsky in incorporating dialogism into his fiction, he also "adds an extra element to the mix, which rests in the anticipatory anxiety his characters feel in addressing others" (ibid. 270). This mistaken assumption seems to be the result of Kelly's not directly referring to Dostoevsky's works in his piece. Because the truth is that anticipatory anxiety is an *essential* element of Dostoevsky's nihilists, and one in which Wallace clearly found direct inspiration. This anticipatory anxiety in Dostoevsky is most obvious in *Notes from Underground* (1864), which had immeasurable influence on Wallace – he was known to recite the Underground Man's monologue in his creative writing classes (Max 310) –, who most obviously re-wrote it in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999).

We shall see that this is another central element of Wallace's work that is essentially and directly influenced by Dostoevsky. All of these most important aspects of Wallace's relationship with Dostoevsky still haven't been addressed in Wallace's criticism. But they – and more – will be, in the chapters to follow.

Dostoevsky and Wallace as Literary Philosophers

Many critics snub philosophical interpretations of literature. On the contrary, the present analysis supports those great critics who have seen in Dostoevsky one of the great philosophers in our history, and it attempts to show that Wallace too was a (literary) philosopher. Those who have argued that Dostoevsky's novels have nothing of the philosophical in them, claiming that their disjointed, chaotic, concrete "philosophizing" is actually a kind of novelistic and stylistic experimentation rather than the representation of a philosophical outlook, have forgotten that to delve deep into the vortex of evil and affirm

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[116] E.g., Boswell (2012) rightfully interprets the novel as bearing a clear "political" (478) message. After him, Severs (2015, 2016, 2017) too explores the fundamental moral concerns of Wallace's oeuvre for their social, political, and economic implications, as do Veggian (2012), Shanske (2013) and Warren (2018).

the impossibility of all univocal and comprehensive meanings is itself a philosophical endeavor, and one that unites such philosophers as Friedrich Nietzsche, Giacomo Leopardi, and Giovanni Gentile to name only a few. (To say nothing of the fact that Dostoevsky *does* summon the all-comprehensive meaning that subjugates chaos and constitutes his philosophy: God). And of course, Nietzsche himself knew very well the philosophical depth of Dostoevsky's works.[117]

It's no wonder, then, that Emanuele Severino considers Dostoevsky as one the few

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[117] Nietzsche's appreciation for Dostoevsky is well-known. He opens *Daybreak* (1881) with a reference to *Notes from Underground*: "In this book you will discover a 'subterranean man' at work, one who tunnels and mines and undermines" (*D* 1). And he writes in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889): "Dostoevsky, by the way, the only psychologist who had anything to teach me: he is one of the best strokes in my life, even better than discovering Stendhal" (*TI* 219). He also expresses his admiration of Dostoevsky in various letters. In a letter to Franz Overbeck (Feb 23, 1887), he reveals his "instinct of affinity" (Nietzsche, *Selected Letters* 260) for Dostoevsky. In a letter to Peter Gast (Mar 7, 1887), he writes that *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* is "one of the most human books ever written" (ibid.). And in a letter to Georg Brandes (Nov 20, 1888), he says that he prizes Dostoevsky's work "as the most valuable material known to me—I am grateful to him in a remarkable way, however much he goes against my deepest instincts. Roughly as in my relation to Pascal, whom I almost love because he has taught me such an infinite amount—the only *logical* Christian" (ibid. 326). Of course, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky ultimately stood at the opposite ends of the spectrum. Dostoevsky wanted God. Nietzsche wanted liberation from God. Nietzsche voices a rightful consequence of the death of God when he writes in *The Will to Power* that "One has no right to existence or to work, to say nothing of a right to 'happiness': the individual human being is in precisely the same case as the lowest worm" (*WP* 398-9). Dostoevsky would consider this Evil. Nietzsche to him would be one of the nihilists in *Demons*. For Dostoevsky, God grants eternal harmony and redemption to every single soul. And for Nietzsche, Dostoevsky's faith is the expression of his essential weakness. In this sense, aphorism seven of *The Anti-Christ* (1895) should include Dostoevsky's name: "The instincts of life should lead people to try to find a remedy for the sort of pathological and dangerous accumulation of pity you see in the case of Schopenhauer (and, unfortunately, in the case of our whole literary and artistic decadence from St. Petersburg to Paris, from Tolstoy to Wagner), to prick it and make it *burst*" (*A-C* 7). And yet Nietzsche writes that Dostoevsky has taught him an infinite amount, because (with Pascal) he was the only logical Christian. Nietzsche and Dostoevsky stood together in suffering: that is, they both saw what the depths of human suffering are made of. And they both knew that right beneath extreme superficial oppositions reside deep essential agreements. In *Demons*, Father Tikhon tells Stavrogin that "total atheism is more respectable than worldly indifference" and that "a complete atheist stands on the next-to-last upper step to the most complete faith (he may or may not take that step), while the indifferent one has no faith, apart from a bad fear" (*D* 426). Dostoevsky knows that Nietzsche is a complete atheist. And Nietzsche knows that he stands on the next-to-last upper step to the most complete faith. One must remember the differences. But these lie if one forgets the essential sameness.

who dwell within the philosophical underground of modernity and that Sergio Givone in *Dostoevskij e la filosofia* (*Dostoevsky and Philosophy*, 2006) asks the question: "If you don't believe in the philosophical value of Dostoevsky's works, whom and how many can you name who have seen the essence of our time with greater depth?" Dostoevsky has fictionalized the essence of nihilism, and he's shown how secular humanitarianism would lead to totalitarianism. In this sense, it isn't inaccurate to say that he predicted history. And these are philosophical achievements of the highest kind.

Dostoevsky certainly wasn't a methodical student of philosophy, and neither was David Foster Wallace. But Wallace did study logic, philosophy of language, and metaphysics and carefully examined works like Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). And Dostoevsky too showed explicit interest in philosophy, sending letters such as this to his brother: "Send me the Carus, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and if you are able to send things clandestinely, slip Hegel in without fail, especially Hegel's *History of Philosophy*. My entire future is tied up with that" (Frank, *Years of Ordeal* 224).

But whether and how much they knew of traditional philosophy is secondary. Philosophy is first and foremost something you do, and only secondarily something you study. In this sense, other quotes are of much more importance, like this letter in which Dostoevsky affirms the essential companionship of literature and philosophy, saying that literature can comprehend and communicate the Truth of God: "Remark that the poet, in the moment of inspiration, comprehends God, and consequently does the philosopher's work. Consequently poetic inspiration is nothing less than philosophical inspiration. Consequently philosophy is nothing but poetry, a higher degree of poetry!" (Dostoevsky, *Letters* 7).

Or Wallace's affirmation that "the ontology and grammar of abstractions have always struck me as one of the most breathtaking problems in human consciousness" (Max 274), which indicates the immense passion for abstractions that would necessarily infuse his writings. When Dostoevsky wrote the famous letter to N. N. Strakhov (June 6, 1870) saying "I am weak in philosophy (but not in my love for it; in my love for it I am strong)" (Dostoevsky, *Best Short Stories* xx), he meant to say precisely that he may have been weak in his professional, academic knowledge of the history of philosophy, but not in his passion for thinking about the world: that is, not in *doing* philosophy.

Dostoevsky's fiction shook the world of contemporary philosophy and sparked what are now one hundred and fifty years of philosophical conversations around his work. *This* is

the testament to the philosophical character of his fiction. He wrote novels of ideas, and Wallace chose to follow in his footsteps. Wallace criticism has begun to pick up on this truth. Dostoevsky criticism sees a long history of philosophical interpretations of Dostoevsky's works. Here, we'll focus on these, with the intention of contextualizing our own following philosophical interpretation of the Dostoevsky-Wallace relationship.

Dostoevsky was a torn thinker. He was broken, split in two directions. He wanted to believe in the Light but, in spite of himself, he was also a nihilist. The history of the philosophical interpretations of his works is a history of readers trying to make sense of this opposition. It's the history of the confrontation between those who see in his works the Light and those who see an inevitable tragic fall. And here's where the true communion of Dostoevsky and Wallace comes to light: Wallace was as torn as Dostoevsky, he too wanted to believe in the Light but was a nihilist in spite of himself, and Wallace criticism too will inevitably become the history of the confrontation between those who see in him a possible salvation and those who see in him an inevitable and tragic fall.

Our interpretations aligns with those who see in Dostoevsky the inevitable tragic fall, arguing that the same tragedy occurs in Wallace. Both men descended into the depth of hell, hoping to reemerge, saved by the Light. Yet both were inevitably trapped by the rational feeling of the truth of nihilism. Their hope for God ultimately couldn't endure their faith in the rational Truth of the *lógos* of *téchne*; that is, as we have seen at length in chapter …. the idea that human beings are autonomous centers of action, freely capable of organizing means toward the realization of ends, in a contingent world where things are available to human domination. Both Dostoevsky and Wallace were insightful enough to *feel* that this belief entails the necessary Right of nihilism and its unbearable despair. This is why they were terrorized by the suffering and the world, and why they looked to God (albeit a different kind of God for each one) hoping for salvation that they couldn't find in the end.

A Philosophical History of Dostoevsky criticism

In the *Three Speeches in Memory of F. M. Dostoevsky* (*Tri rechi v pamyat' F. M. Dostoevskogo*, 1881-83), Vladimir Solovyov initiates the history of the philosophical interpretations of Dostoevsky's works, construing his fiction as a glorious theology of true Christian theocracy (as in a theocracy *truly* in the name of God, and *not* in the name of temporal power, like the

catholic Church). For Solovyov, Dostoevsky's fiction embodies the triumph of light over darkness, of the positive over the negative, of Being over Nothingness. That is, it achieves the reconciliation of the *illusory* severance and contradiction of Being which finds its actual True harmony in God.

Solovyov reads in Dostoevsky a descent into hell (into the tragedy of despair) which finds its solution in Christ's revelation, which explains and redeems all. But Solovyov sees in Dostoevsky his own hopes. This is why in his *Lectures on Divine Humanity* (1877-91) and in the essay "Beauty in Nature" (188) he picks up on Prince Myshkin's maxim in *The Idiot*: "beauty will save the world" (*I* 382). Solovyov shared with Dostoevsky the same hope for Christian salvation, hence the reason why his interpretation neglects the seriousness and concreteness of the tragic in Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky's characters descend into the unredeemable evil of Nothingness and their salvation still awaits demonstration, or at least explanation. But Solovyov could provide none, and so he sparked the history of philosophical criticism on Dostoevsky as other readers set down to refute him. Vasily Rozanov's *Dostoevsky and the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* (1894) was the first authoritative opposition to Solovyov. But the most powerful confutation of Solovyov, to this day, remains Lev Shestov's *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy* (1903), which, in fact, is perhaps the most profound reading of Dostoevsky that the world has ever seen.

Shestov knows that there can be no real tragedy if there is a knowledge capable of subduing the tragic. If there's the Light, if there's a God that contains the tragic within Himself so that the tragic is always and forever transcended, *then* there is no real tragedy. Therefore, there can be no tragedy where there is faith. This is what the great philosopher Ivan Karamazov tells his brother Alyosha: to claim that there's a God is (among other things) to disrespect the reality of the suffering of little children. Therefore, if tragedy is true, if suffering is real, then there can be no light, no answer, no reconciliation, no redemption. The tragic is pure and unjustified suffering. And tragedy is the exposition of this Truth and of the silence that communicates the impossibility of all remedies to suffering. A suffering that is justified is not suffering: justification is the denial of suffering. *But we all know that suffering is true (this is the undeniable)*, and so there can be no remedy (no justification) to the tragedy of Being. Shestov sees how Dostoevsky went so deep as to catch sight of the truth of unredeemable suffering, but then he attempted an impossible escape into faith to try to flee from the total horror of this truth, hoping that by veiling the truth he could be saved: *De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine* (Psalm 130).

Shestov was inspired by Nikolai Mikhailovsky's *Dostoevsky: A Cruel Talent* (1882), which reads *Notes from Underground* as a piece of art that is as great as its brutality. But few interpretations can go as deep as Shestov's, which greatly inspires the present research. Solovyov and Shestov opened the history of the philosophical interpretations of Dostoevsky by offering the two opposite models that guide the critical discussion over the existential world of Dostoevsky's novels. The fundamental questions remain the same throughout all criticism because they are the questions that Dostoevsky himself asks throughout all of his works: what is the Truth, God or nihilism? Can human beings live in a world that has no Meaning? Can they relate to God? How does the battle within all human hearts end? etc. The critical debate is on whether the final answers to these questions should be positive or negative, and on how this plays out in Dostoevsky's works. This should be the case for Wallace criticism as well, because Wallace too asked the same questions: these are the foundations of his work as well.

One of Dostoevsky's philosophical merits is that he showed that both explicit nihilism and all other forms of secularism belong to *nihilism* proper. What does this mean? Vissarion Belinsky expressed explicit nihilism in his letter to V.P. Botkin dated 8 September, 1841: "My God is negation! [...] my heroes are the destroyers of the old—Luther, Voltaire, the Encyclopaedists, the Terrorists" (Belinsky 164). This is explicit nihilism, but Dostoevsky shows that it's the same nihilism of socialism and of all scientific thought. Contemporary science rejects all traditions, it belongs to the death of God, it is the rejection of Christianity as well as of all other possible Absolutes (we have seen this in our discussion of technology). This is why, in Dostoevsky, science and explicit nihilism always meet together in true nihilism. Proof is that the nihilism of Dostoevsky's socialists is always scientific. Scientism is embodied in *Notes from Underground* in the image of the "crystal palace" (*NU* 34), and Shigalyov leads it to its ultimate consequences in *Demons* (1872) by proposing the following nihilistic-material-scientific "social formula" (*D* 402): "starting from unlimited freedom, I conclude with unlimited disposition" (ibid.): "we'll extinguish desire" (ibid. 417) and as a result we'll eliminate all inequality.

And of course, none of this was just made up: nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary anarchists like Bakunin and Pisarev wanted to establish the "tyranny of freedom" through all means necessary. Through his works, Dostoevsky asks whether a human being can be happy while others suffer. All of his readers feel the tragedy of this question and the absence of viable answers. Can God exist when suffering is so real and

limitless? Solovyov saw in Dostoevsky the Light at the end of the tunnel, the art that elevates human beings to spiritual regeneration. But Shestov answers that you cannot dispel the tragedy of life: not with faith, not with thought. To recognize the absurd meaningless and gratuitousness of existence is to see that suffering too is meaningless and absurd. The truth demands that suffering be not salvaged by any illusion of positive Meaning. This is the Truth. To call upon God is to negate the reality of suffering and to deny what we all consider to be the evidence of Being.

Shestov's final judgment is thus merciless: Dostoevsky is guilty of deceit, and his deceit is a self-deceit that originates in fear and culminates in the false hope of a way out. The way out is God, but the way you get to God – for Dostoevsky – is through the free individual will. This commitment to the free individual will is what makes Dostoevsky an Existentialist, and it is also what makes David Foster Wallace an Existentialist. They both indicate God as salvation but, ultimately, since they see the way to God to be the free individual will, what they truly designate as the Decider between salvation and hell is the individual's own free will. And there is another great contradiction here: the power of the free individual will and the Grace of God are two contradictory ideals that mutually exclude one another. Free will renders God's salvation impossible, and vice versa. This contradiction further condemns Dostoevsky and Wallace to despair. Here's where Nietzsche went a step further than them: he knew that the will is always will to power and necessitates the death of God. Instead, Dostoevsky (and Wallace with him) believed that one could choose God. Hence the reason why the Elder Zosima teaches his devotees that "active love is labor and perseverance" (*TBK* 58): to be with God is to constantly choose to be with God, through hard work freely chosen. This is the central Existentialist tenet that Wallace too would make his own (*This Is Water*).

But Shestov knows, with Nietzsche, that the free individual will is real only because God is dead, and the truth is Chaos. If God were true, then the free individual will wouldn't be real. This is why *tragedy* is real. Therefore, for Shestov, *Crime and Punishment* is fraudulent in its final promise of redemption, and *The Idiot* is dedicated to a character whose evangelic meekness is in fact the helplessness of a "pitiful shadow," a "cold, anemic specter," a "void," a nobody (Shestov 216). Finally, the hope that traverses *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) is mediocre and presents no actual counterargument to the great truth of tragedy. The descent into the underground cannot be mediated. There's no coming back. Dostoevsky's greatness resides in his grasp of the truth of evil. His hope for salvation in faith is a dim, evasive,

contradictory mistake caused by terror, the terror that we all cannot help but feel in the face of tragedy.

Contemporary to Shestov is Dmitry Merezhkovsky's *L. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* (1901), which too argues that Dostoevsky reached the most profound depths of the abyss only to then – in shock at the terror of the consequences of his own thoughts – attempt to look away and turn back to Christian Slavophilia for salvation. Vyacheslav Ivanov stands on the opposite (the Solovyovian, positive) side with his *Freedom and the Tragic Life: A Study in Dostoevsky* (or *Dostoevsky: Tragedy, Myth, Mysticism*, 1932). According to Ivanov, Dostoevsky represents the terrible, lethal plague of human *hýbris* and its destruction of all Meaning and values, but then also, and most importantly, its overcoming. This is why Ivanov sees in Dostoevsky the alternative to nihilism (which nihilism finds its perfect expression in the idealistic solipsism of the characters in *Demons*).

Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) too stands on the positive side, all in all, even though Bakhtin seeks to transcend this opposition between the positive and the negative in offering his completely new philosophical interpretation. Obviously, Bakhtin's dialogism entails the impossibility of attributing to Dostoevsky any one definitive meaning. Dialogism entails that there cannot be any monologic, transcendent, higher voice in Dostoevsky's work, and so no final philosophy that the reader can judge:

> Where others saw a single thought, [Dostoevsky] was able to find and feel out two thoughts, a bifurcation; where others saw a single quality, he discovered in it the presence of a second and contradictory quality. Everything that seemed simple became, in his world, complex and multi-structured. In every voice he could hear two contending voices, in every expression a crack, and the readiness to go over immediately to another contradictory expression; in every gesture he detected confidence and lack of confidence simultaneously; he perceived the profound ambiguity, even multiple ambiguity, of every phenomenon. But none of these contradictions and bifurcations ever became dialectical, they were never set in motion along a temporal path or in an evolving sequence: they were, rather, spread out in one plane, as standing alongside or opposite one another, as consonant but not merging or as hopelessly contradictory, as an eternal harmony of unmerged voices or as their unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel. Dostoevsky's visualizing power was locked in place at the moment diversity

revealed itself—and remained there, organizing and shaping this diversity in the cross-section of a given moment (*Problems* 30).

The same should be said of David Foster Wallace. But Bakhtin's dialogism is full of internal contradictions. Even the fundamental dialogic principle that truth can be arrived at only through dialogue is monologic, because it negates its refusals. The truth itself is and must always be monologic. The sky cannot be both blue and not blue. You need only say "the sky is blue" to be within monologism. This is true for every proposition. Thus, even Bakhtin's affirmation of dialogism is monologic, by virtue of its will to maintain its identity and deny its contradictions. And even if Dostoevsky's (and Wallace's) novels are truly polyphonic and dialogic, then they would be monologic at least in affirming *this* polyphonic and dialogic philosophy and could therefore be judged accordingly.

But again: Bakhtin's greatest fault is to put aside his own admission that "almost all of Dostoevsky's novels have a *conventionally literary, conventionally monologic* ending" (ibid. 39). This entails that the multiplicity of voices in Dostoevsky does become reunited under the principle of unification of a higher, transcendent voice, which bestows upon each story-world one single monologic Existential meaning. And this demands that their proper philosophical analysis relates to their final monologic meaning, which Bakhtin fails to do. After all: it's obvious that there's an incredibly strong monologism in Dostoevsky's novels, given the extent of the parallels between each of them and the giant divide between the fate of nihilists and believers in every single story.

We all know that Dostoevsky's characters embody their ideas not only in words but also in actions, and Sergio Givone is right when he writes that "Dostoevsky associates all his nihilists to a *fate* that expresses the 'essential trait' of their existence (Givone 139). Dostoevsky's nihilists all end in madness and/or suicide. They're all united in this fate. Nothing could speak more clearly of Dostoevsky's monologism. This is why we can look at Dostoevsky and say that his novels bring nihilism to its final consequences. This is why we can see his philosophical greatness. He's a contemporary writer who delved deep into our most ancient terrors. Aeschylus wrote in *Persians* that "mortal man should not vaunt himself excessively. For presumptuous pride, when it has matured, bears as its fruit a crop of calamity, from which it reaps an abundant harvest of tears" (vv. 820-2). Dostoevsky's characters pay the price of believing that God is dead and that, therefore, Man is God.

Berdyaev relates to their monologism when he interprets Dostoevsky's novels as a

positive theodicy, writing in *Dostoevsky* (1921) that his novels argue that "God exists precisely because there are evil and suffering in this world. The existence of evil is a proof of the existence of God. If the world consisted wholly and uniquely of goodness and righteousness there would be no need for God, for the world itself would be god. God is, because evil is" (Berdyaev 87). Like Solovyov, Berdyaev believes that suffering belongs to the divine Meaning of Being and is so redeemed in God, and he sees in Dostoevsky's novels this same belief enacted in his story-worlds. These were certainly Dostoevsky's intentions, and no one has ever denied that. But as Shestov knew, such positive theodicy is impossible, and so is Dostoevsky's dramatization of it.[118]

Possibly, the greatest value of Berdyaev's work is that it recovers the centrality of Dostoevsky's intentionality and monologism in the process of interpretation. And the same is true of Evdokimov's *Dostoevsky and the Problem of Evil*, which follows the Solovyov-Berdyaev path. The path continues with Walter Nigg too, and with his work by the self-explanatory title *Dostoevsky: The Religious Overcoming of Nihilism* (*Dostojewskij. Die religiöse Überwindung des Nihilismus*, 1940). On the same line, Fedor Stepun gives his peculiar reading in his own *Dostoevsky* (1950). Stepun's interpretation is a blending of Bakhtinian dialogism with neo-Kantian transcendentalism and the religious metaphysics he inherits from Berdyaev and Solovyov (he wrote his doctorate thesis on Solovyov's philosophy of history). Stepun asks what philosophy Dostoevsky's words communicate, but he also problematizes the question arguing that the lack of any "ordering principle" in Dostoevsky makes the question controversial from the start. His conclusion is that, precisely because this lack of ordering principle pervades all of Dostoevsky's works, then we must acknowledge that this lack is the ordering principle itself: this "feverish chaos" that allows the doubling of every point of view against its opposite. Under Bakhtin's influence, Stepun ignores the obvious monologism of Dostoevsky's works. Stepun, however, has the merit of recognizing that even dialogism is a monologism precisely because it establishes itself as an ordering principle.

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[118] But Berdyaev is right about the fact that, in Dostoevsky, "the battle between the divine and hellish elements is carried on deep down in the spirit of man: he finds the antagonism of the two principles in the very essence of being" (Berdyaev 58). This is part and parcel of his greatness. Gianlorenzo Pacini reiterates this in *Deboluccio in filosofia: saggio sul pensiero di F. M. Dostoevskij* (*Weak in Philosophy: An Essay on the Thought of F. M. Dostoevsky*, 1997), and he links Dostoevsky with Kafka in this sense: writing that Kafka's "Before the Law" (1915) and "An Imperial Message" (1919) too belong to those few most beautiful moral tales capable of depicting the essentially-divided nature of human beings.

Around those same years, Henri de Lubac publishes his Christian reading in "Dostoevsky as Prophet" (1944). The French theologian sees in Dostoevsky the Christian answer to the likes of Nietzsche, Comte, and Marx, and so he attributes to the Russian novelist a fundamental role on the right side of the strife between reason and faith. Of course, this reading too necessitates the affirmation of Dostoevsky's monologism, as does Reinhardt Lauth's *Die Philosophie Dostojewskis in systematischer Darstellung* (*A Systematic Representation of Dostoevsky's Philosophy*, 1950), which is perhaps the most explicit affirmation of Dostoevsky's dialogism ever published: Lauth immediately declares that he will extract from Dostoevsky's texts the unitary philosophical content that constitutes Dostoevsky's moral message to the world (the most interesting part of Lauth's analysis concerns his treatment of moral *decision* as the cause of the destruction of all values).

The most famous treatment of Dostoevsky's monologism is certainly Albert Camus's *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (1951), which can also be seen as a sort of counter narrative to Lauth. Camus converses with Ivan Karamazov as he does with the other great philosophers of the past. He rightly observes that Ivan adopts an original position: not to deny God but to judge Him. For Ivan, Justice is above God, and creation must be refused because it is unjust. Even if God and the eternal harmony that awaits all of us are real, this is *still* not worth even a single unnecessary tear of a defenseless child. This is an incredibly powerful argument, as Camus recognizes. Ivan refuses to belong to the world of God because God is evil: He is responsible for the unnecessary suffering of little children.

But this is only the first side of Ivan's revolt. The second is his denial of God (besides what many have argued: Ivan does deny the existence of God – not even Camus fully understands this). It's in this sense that we must understand Camus's affirmation that with Ivan's "'everything is permitted' the history of contemporary nihilism really begins" (*Rebel* 57). Camus knows that the romantics did not dare go so far as Ivan. Ivan exercises his right "to despair and to negate" (ibid. 58), because he knows that, since there is no God, what we call "evil" and "good" is purely arbitrary, and so he "compelled himself to do evil so as to be coherent" (ibid. 57). Ivan did evil to prove that everything is permitted. Nihilism is to treat things as if they were nothing, and Ivan knows that things *are* nothing. To treat them as you will is therefore justice because, as St. Thomas Aquinas so appropriately said: justice is to treat things according to their nature (*Summa Theologiae*).

Every individual's free will is therefore the only true power in Being. Or, in other words: the will to power is Being. Camus writes that with Ivan nihilism becomes conscious

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of itself, and "nihilism is not only despair and negation but, above all, the desire to despair and to negate" (ibid. 57-8). Nihilism is "*the desire*": that is, it is the free will of the individual that exercises its power to despair and to negate. The death of God marks the enthronement of human freedom. "Everything is permitted" means that humankind sits on the throne of the kingdom of Being. There is no Law outside the one we create that can stop us from doing what we want. Therefore, we must become God because we are already God. Everything is subject to human action, domination, and manipulation, and these can be limited only by inherent inabilities, which are always temporary and can be overcome. This is why the True goal of humanity must be to infinitely increase our power: so that there will be no more deficiencies in our domination of Being. We must dominate Being. But of course this "we" immediately dissolves into the "I": every "I" is its own free individual will that desires something other than all other "Is" and which therefore finds itself at war with other "Is" in order to obtain what it wants. The world of the will to power is the world of the war of all against all.[119]

Ivan is Nietzsche's forerunner. As Camus writes, he knows that every atheist must recognize "the legitimacy of murder" (ibid. 58). But Ivan is superior to Camus, who therefore can't understand him to the end. Camus thinks that Ivan made the mistake of "not want[ing] to reform anything in creation" (ibid. 59) and that this is why "with him the rebellion of reason culminates in madness" (ibid. 61). This is because Camus believes with Nietzsche that we are Gods and can live as Gods. But this is not reason's last word. If God isn't, then things are nothing too. That everything is permitted means that there can be no responsibility. Like our civilization, Camus is still attached to a God-originated ethics when he makes his moral arguments, but he's deluded in thinking of himself as a pure atheist. Ivan is right: everything is permitted, and therefore murder is legitimate. And genocide and rape too. And as Camus himself sees almost to the end when he talks of Absurdity: the opposite of murder and genocide are legitimate too. Everything is permitted means that it's all arbitrary, all the same.

That "everything is permitted" is not even the worst, final consequence of the affirmation of the Absurdity of Being. This is the complete meaninglessness and absolute

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[119] In *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkuhn As Told by a Friend* (1947), Thomas Mann creates a rewriting of Ivan's conversation with the devil (i.e. the dark side of his own self-consciousness) that is also necessarily an interpretation of Dostoevsky. Mann transposes Ivan into Adrian Leverkuhn, the protagonist of his novel, who seizes Ivan's "everything is permitted" and celebrates the time of humanity's pure and unlimited free domination of Being by creating his music of war and Nazism.

nothingness of everything. The inconsequentiality of all murders and rescues. The meaninglessness of all actions and the destiny-to-annihilation of all things. The consciousness of this truth is madness and suicide. This is why Ivan's madness is much more coherent, deep, and rational than Camus's blind hopes. "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matthew IV:2). Camus is like Dostoevsky: he saw the true terror of Absurdity and then (understandably) tried to flee from the horror. But there is a nihilist in Dostoevsky who's more coherent than all others, Ivan included: Stavrogin. He's the only demon who truly brings nihilism to its end. He too begins with "everything is permitted," but he then quickly understands that everything means nothing anyway. So he abandons seriousness and becomes ironic, and after abandoning all delusions he performs the only coherent action left. His suicide is *entirely* different from Kirillov's.[120]

In *Gorod i ljudi «Prestuplenija i nakazanija»* ("The city and the people of *Crime and Punishment*"), Leonid Grossman writes that a spirit of need, despair, miserly speculation, and wretched rapacity pervades *Crime and Punishment*. He sees in Raskolnikov Dostoevsky's first full-length embodiment of the tragedy of nihilism: Raskolnikov is the "new man" of the age of technology, the kind of man who knows that God is dead. Nikolay Strakhov was the first to immediately notice this. In *Otechestvennye Zapiski* ("Annals of the Fatherland," Vol. III, 1867), he wrote that in *C&P* we were, for the first time, face to face with a deeply human character who suffers the consequences of nihilism.[121]

For both Strakhov and Grossman, then, Raskolnikov is the first modern figure to bring nihilism to its logical conclusions. But both of them are wrong, because Dostoevsky

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[120] For one of the best-ever philosophical interpretations of Kirillov see chapters four and five of Vincenzo Vitiello's *Cristianesimo e nichilismo: Dostoevskij – Heidegger* (*Christianity and Nihilism: Dostoevsky – Heidegger*, 2005). Also note that Nietzsche too inscribes himself within the history of the philosophical interpretation of Dostoevsky with this outstanding note on Kirillov in *Notizheft 1887 11:331:* "The generous Kirillov was defeated by one thought: he shot himself. I see the greatness of his soul in the fact that he has lost his head. I would never be able to do that. Never would I believe in an idea so passionately… More than that, it is impossible for me to occupy myself with ideas to such a point… Never, never I would be able to shoot myself… I know that I should kill myself, that I should cleanse the earth of myself, how miserable an insect" (my translation).

[121] In his monumental biography *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work* (1935), Leonid Grossman writes that "A Gentle Creature" (1876) is one of the most powerful and deepest stories of despair ever written. This is the point on which every reader of Dostoevsky agrees: Dostoevsky travelled to the deepest recesses of despair as few thinkers have ever been able to do.

gets to the true logical conclusions of nihilism – which are way worse that what happens to Raskolnikov – in his following novels, and most of all in the character of Stavrogin in *Demons*. Stavrogin is the man who truly sees the meaningless of all things: "everything is permitted" because raping a little girl and freeing an enslaved nation from tyranny are two actions that are absolutely equal in their meaninglessness and gratuity, and therefore absolutely equal in their value: which is zero. Characters like Raskolnikov and even Kirillov still have ideals, and in this sense, they have their own Gods. But Stavrogin is the true nihilist who sees the final truth that Leopardi brings to light in his work: since everything in the world comes out of nothingness and into an existence that is chaos and has no meaning, then nothing means anything. There is, therefore, no reason to live. In the moment of reflection, when one steps outside one's pure will to power, one sees that the only correct self-reflective feeling of relation to the world is absolute boredom, because all things are nothing, they are pure meaninglessness destined to annihilation. When one sees this, one knows that the only rational act is suicide, a suicide that has no other reason than quitting with this meaningless boredom that is existence.

The Italian Existentialist philosopher Luigi Pareyson too analyzes Dostoevsky's work as a descent into the hell of nihilism in order to find salvation from it in *Dostoevskij: Filosofia, romanzo ed esperienza religiosa* (*Dostoevsky: Philosophy, the Novel, and Religious Experience*, 1993). Pareyson too sees in Dostoevsky the greatness of a philosopher who was capable of bringing nihilism to its final conclusions with extreme coherence. He places "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" at the center of Dostoevsky's production, insisting that its proper interpretation cannot ignore the entire context of all of Dostoevsky's major works. For Pareyson, "The Legend" exhibits with bright clarity the essence of the predicament of our time. With it, Ivan raises *the* problem: the scandalous absurdity of worthless, meaningless suffering. Suffering that doesn't allow the affirmation of any transcendence. Worse: suffering that, if used to affirm transcendence, denounces these affirmations as utilitarian, cruel, and unjust exploitations. Nothing is more deplorable than betraying and dismissing the reality of suffering, evil, and monstrosity that human beings have to endure as if they were only means for an imagined future eternal harmony.

In this sense, Pareyson is one of the few who don't get fooled by Ivan's only apparent acceptance of the existence of God (as we've said: Camus too is among the fooled). Ivan supposes the existence of God only to further demonstrate the Absurdity and Evil of Being. God is not. But even if he were, he'd be evil. Existence is pointless, meaningless, and

pervaded by absurd suffering, and *therefore* God *cannot* be. Not because if he were existence would be good. But because if he were existence would have Meaning, and therefore suffering would be unreal. But we all know that suffering is the undeniable evidence of existence, and therefore God cannot be. This is what Ivan is truly trying to do: to *demonstrate* that God isn't. This is why at the end of "The Legend" Alyosha final answer is: "You don't believe in God" (*TBK* 262). Pareyson is one-hundred percent right on this point. But as an Existentialist he's subject to the same contradiction that condemns Dostoevsky and Wallace to despair. He argues against Shestov that those who believe that there's no possible answer to Ivan's demonstration have unforgivably misinterpreted Dostoevsky's thought. But that is not the point. It's not that Dostoevsky didn't try to prove Ivan wrong. The point is that, despite Dostoevsky's indubitable intention to prove Ivan wrong, he couldn't succeed in doing it.

This is Shestov's argument. Dostoevsky's counterargument against Ivan and all the other nihilists is to have them all live in suffering and anguish that inevitably leads to madness and suicide. But even if it's true that nihilism must inevitably end in madness and suicide, this still says *nothing* about whether it's right or wrong. That there is no *argument* against nihilism in his works demonstrates Dostoevsky's inability to argue against nihilism. It's true that Dostoevsky's intention is to express that *non in commotione dominus* (1 Kings 19: 11-13); that is, that the Good and Positive is in itself tacit, silent, and so inexpressible through the categories of Euclidean thought; and that, therefore, human beings should bow in humility before God and become conscious of the ignorance inherent in their finitude—as St. Augustine writes in the *Confessions* (XI, 25): *ei mihi, qui nescio saltem quid nesciam!*; "I am in a sorry state, for I do not even know what I do not know!"

But in truth, the silence of the *supposed* Positive hides its impossibility. And at the very least, if you cannot express the Positive, then you have no answer for those who can express the Negative. The point is that Ivan (the atheist) and Alyosha (the believer) *agree* that suffering is real. From this premise, Ivan shows Alyosha that *because* suffering is real*, then* the Positive cannot be. And Alyosha has no answer. And as Ivan proclaims: we must not forgive. Even if he were wrong, even if God existed, He would be unjust and cruel. We must not forgive, because forgiveness would do injustice to the reality of the gratuitous suffering of all those little children. "Universal harmony" is a deception that crumbles under the weight of its auto-contradictions. Ivan rhetorically accepts the existence of God only to show that the seeds of God's destruction reside within God Himself. You only need to admit that there's been a

single case of worthless suffering in the history of the world and you will kill God and affirm the Absurdity of existence. In *The Idiot* Ippolit gives us another great expression of this argument in his "Necessary Explanation": you only need to admit that there's been one – just one – being who's been excluded from the pleasures of the universal "banquet" (*I* 412) – just *one* who has suffered – to destroy all hopes of harmony, forever.[122]

The contemporary Italian philosopher Emanuele Severino too proposes an analysis of Dostoevsky's work in "*Il «muro di pietra»*" ("*The 'Stone Wall*,'" 2006). He begins with a reference to Dostoevsky's famous letter to Mme. N. D. Fonvisin (March 1854), which has always been the object of critical scrutiny:

> I have not lived your life, and much in it is unknown to me, and indeed, no one can really know exactly his fellow-mortal's life; […] I want to say to you, about myself, that I am a child of this age, a child of unfaith and scepticism, and probably (indeed I know it) shall remain so to the end of my life. How dreadfully has it tormented me (and torments me even now)—this longing for faith, which is all the stronger for the proofs I have against it. And yet God gives me sometimes moments of perfect peace; in such moments I love and believe that I am loved; […] If anyone could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth really did exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with truth (Dostoevsky, *Letters* 67-8).

Severino tries to explain the proper meaning of the last two lines. What does Dostoevsky mean by choosing Christ over the truth? The answer shows why Dostoevsky is one of the few philosophers who opened this final era or our civilization: he saw our time's necessary negation of all absolute truths, of every center and of every immutable foundation, of every God and of every eternal harmony. The "stone wall" is what the Underground Man continuously refers to: "the laws of nature, the conclusions of natural science, mathematics" (*Notes* 13). It is all the theories that establish necessity and negate free will. It is the "two times two is four" (ibid.), and "two times two is four is no longer life, gentlemen, but the

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[122] There's a hidden reference to Ippolit's "Necessary Explanation" in the first unpublished scene of Wallace's *The Pale King*: "The lives of most people are small tight pallid and sad, more to be mourned than their deaths. We starve at the banquet: we cannot see that there is a banquet because seeing the banquet requires that we also see ourselves sitting there starving—seeing ourselves clearly, even for a moment, is shattering" (*TPK* 551).

beginning of death" (ibid. 33). Shestov had already noted that ultimately the "stone wall" is the principle of non-contradiction. What in Book IV of his *Metaphysics* Aristotle calls the *bebaiotáte arché*, the incontrovertible principle that reigns over everything. The Underground Man doesn't just reject contemporary scientific truths; he rejects the entire history of Western rationality by refusing its foundational principle. The greatness of Dostoevsky's "anti-heroes" is that they are *so* close to being heroes, the Underground Man expresses one of Dostoevsky's fundamental truths: life – intended as individual consciousness and free will – over rationality. But the Underground Man explicitly agrees with Nietzsche: the only truth of life is the becoming of the world and what I do in it. Dostoevsky, instead, attempts to turn to Christ for salvation *in* becoming.

The Underground Man, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky all agree that life and necessity are mutually exclusive. Thus – Severino explains, when Dostoevsky chooses Christ over the truth, he's identifying Christ with contingency and freedom. But Severino also tells us that Dostoevsky is surpassed by his Underground Man and by Nietzsche, because Christ (God) is itself a form of the Absolute and of Necessity, and so He must be impossible in order for "life" to be. There is no God without the Necessity of the *Lógos*, and therefore God cannot be, since life *is* contingency and freedom of the will.

Dostoevsky belongs to the underground of the voice that leads our civilization towards its future because his works contains the negation of all truths. As he writes in "Something about Lying": "the truth is something far too dull and prosaic for us and much too ordinary" ("SL" 271). In this sense, once again, Shestov had already seen that Dostoevsky's thought could be traced back to Tertullian's argument that life stands irremediably beyond the arid and rigid networks of rationality. Dostoevsky thinks that life is what breathes beyond our comprehension. Our time is moving towards this interpretation, and so science as well is abandoning the truth in favor of functionality. Dostoevsky calls it Christ, Kant the *Ding an sich*, other cultures the unsayable, the unthinkable, the unattainable, the mystery, the enigma, the absolutely other. Its most general name, though, is chaos or becoming. Rationality kills whatever the true living nature of the chaos of becoming, it kills the living flesh of concrete living.

This is what the Underground Man, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky think: theirs is the affirmation of the evidence of becoming, and of the freedom of the will that can be thought of only in becoming. But Severino warns us that this is also the essence of Dostoevsky's thought, and that it must lead to Nietzsche's affirmation of the will to power, and so to the

unbearable despair that Dostoevsky hoped to overcome in Christ. Nietzsche reminds us that becoming is creation and destruction, and the Underground Man anticipates him, saying "I'm certain that man will never renounce real suffering, that is, destruction and chaos" (*Notes* 34): humanity will never renounce suffering, destruction and chaos because these are necessary for human free will to exist: they are the other side of the coin on which the human ability to transform the world is carved. As Nietzsche would write in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889): "There has to be an eternal 'agony of the woman in labour' so that there can be an eternal joy of creation, so that the will to life can eternally affirm itself" (*TI* 228). The will to power wants to eternally affirm itself. This too the Underground Man had already said: "wanting is a manifestation of the whole of life" (*Notes* 28), this is the essence of his thought.

But this thought entails the affirmation of the impossibility of God. This is what happens in *The Brothers Karamazov* with Ivan's refusal of the "eternal harmony" (*TBK* 235). This is, for Severino, the final – unanswered – argument for becoming in Dostoevsky. Severino's interprets *Rebellion* as the most important chapter of the novel, saying that *The Grand Inquisitor* has the function of confirming *Rebellion* with style. Alyosha had asked Ivan to "explain to me why you 'do not accept the world'?" (ibid. 236). These chapters are Ivan's necessary *explanation* (like Ippolit's), what Ivan calls "my argument" (ibid. 238). This means that Ivan has *reasons*: his rejection is not an arbitrary act of will, *not* a preference. And his argument, for Severino, manifests the thought of the necessary impossibility of "eternal harmony," i.e. of everything immutable, the affirmation that the only necessary truth is that everything is becoming. Severino thus agrees with Pareyson that many readers (Camus above all) have been led astray by Ivan's "it's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket" (ibid. 245).

Many have thought Ivan is someone who believes in God but reject his creation. But this is not the case. Ivan wants to demonstrate why God is impossible. He does *not* believe in God. That part in which he allows the existence of God has the function of demonstrating that even if we granted His existence, He would be contradictory and therefore impossible. Textual evidence makes this clear. Alyosha himself understands that Ivan is trying to demonstrate atheism: "with great sorrow" (*TBK* 262) he tells him "You don't believe in God" (ibid.).

Severino shows that Ivan's argument is twofold. Its foundation is suffering, i.e. that the tears of the innocent little child who's been molested, raped, and violated "remain unredeemed" (ibid. 245) and "they must be redeemed, otherwise there can be no harmony.

But how, how will you redeem them?" (ibid.). Ivan's answer is that they cannot be redeemed. His first, weaker but still devasting argument is the one Camus deals with in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: a God that redeems those tears is evil and unjust, because that kind of redemption is an exploitation of the concrete suffering of little children for the affirmation of an abstract theory of universal harmony. To say that she (that little girl) must suffer so that we can be redeemed in the end is a form of psychopathy: this kind of redemption uses the unjust suffering of tortured little children as "manure for someone's future harmony" (ibid. 244). This is the sense in which Ivan says: even if God were true, I'd respectfully return the ticket. Because redemption founds happiness "on the unjustified blood of a tortured child" (*TBK* 246), and "if the suffering of children goes to make up the sum of suffering needed to buy truth, then I assert beforehand that the whole of truth is not worth such a price" (ibid. 245).

The second, incontrovertible argument, instead, is that: to claim that suffering is redeemed is to claim that suffering is an illusion, but since suffering is real, then redemption cannot be. "Redeemed suffering" is an impossibility. Suffering is true only because tragedy is true: that is, only because suffering is a factual experience of this entirely gratuitous and meaningless chaos of becoming in which we live. This is where Ivan's *rational* atheism comes to the fore. The supreme evidence of existence – for *all* of us (believers included) – is suffering, *therefore* God cannot be. Ivan thus stands with Leopardi who, in the "Dialogue of Timander and Eleander" ("*Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro*," 1824), wrote that "There is nothing, I think, more clear and palpable than the necessary unhappiness of all living beings" (DTE 199). Both Ivan and Leopardi know that the *reason* for "necessary unhappiness" of existence is the truth of becoming, and therefore of the suffering, meaninglessness, and final annihilation that becoming entails. This is what the Grand Inquisitor calls "the spirit of self-destruction and non-being" (ibid. 251). And what Leopardi sings of in the "Dialogue of Frederick Ruysch and his Mummies" ("*Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue Mummie*," 1824): "O death, sole everlasting thing, and final / Outcome for every creature! / In you our naked nature / Settles for evermore ("FRM" 150).[123]

No event nor theory can erase the evident reality of suffering. Not vengeance nor forgiveness. Redemption *lies* about suffering by treating it as a necessary precondition for happiness. Nothing will ever make it so that the suffering that occurred did not occur; therefore, redemption is impossible: *factum infectum fieri nequit* – "what is done cannot be

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[123] For these English translations of Leopardi sees the translation of *Moral Fables* by J.G. Nichols.

undone." Ivan and Leopardi see that the tragedy of suffering is true and unbearable. Therefore, like Nietzsche, they see that humankind must deceive itself and divert its eyes from the truth in order to survive. This is the reason why the Grand Inquisitor sets up his universal deceit: to relieve human beings of "so terrible a burden as freedom of choice" (*TBK* 255), which is the burden of becoming, the burden of *bellum omnium contra omnes*: "freedom and earthly bread in plenty for everyone are inconceivable together, for never, never will they be able to share among themselves" (ibid. 253).

Face to face with the Grand Inquisitor, Christ remains silent. He has nothing to say. He kisses him. Christ is a pure act of love that has no argument. But of course, *this* is the argument: love over reason. Dostoevsky's hope is to exhibit love enacted in response to the theoretical evil of rationality, and thus to see love win. But Shestov had already noted that: that Christ remains silent means that he has no answer, and so that He is incapable of *demonstrating* His right. Why should love be true? Why should it be right? What's the counterargument against those who do not care about Christian love? Christ has no answers and "the dread spirit of self-destruction and non-being" has the arguments of rationality.

Like Shestov, Severino argues that in Dostoevsky (albeit unwillingly) the necessity of the truth of nihilism – within the framework of Western thinking – emerges against the impossible hopes of faith. This is why there are never any *answers* in Dostoevsky to the arguments of the nihilists. Because within our thinking there can be none. We (think we) know that existence is the meaningless chaos of becoming that ends in annihilation. This entails suffering without redemption. It entails the nihilism that Dostoevsky's anti-heroes argue with such clarity. It's thus for the depth of the nihilist side of his thought that Dostoevsky is a forerunner of Nietzsche. In this sense, Severino highlights that the Underground Man and Zarathustra even use the same metaphor of the "stone." The Underground Man wants to demolish the "stone wall." Zarathustra's hammer rages against the stone: "But to reveal my entire heart to you, my friends: *if* there were gods, how could I stand not to be a god! *Therefore* there are no gods. […] In order for the creator to be, suffering is needed and much transformation. Indeed, much bitter dying must be in your life, you creators! […] Thus the hammer is driven toward the stone. […] Now my hammer rages cruelly against its prison. Shards shower from the stone: what do I care?" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 65-7).

The problem of evil and suffering in Dostoevsky has never been solved. The arguments of his nihilists seem unassailable, and the solution on offer in his works appears

to crumble in the face of the power of what the Grand Inquisitor calls "the dread spirit of self-destruction and non-being." In this sense, we submit that Dostoevsky criticism and Wallace criticism share the same essential problem and that this problem relates to larger social dynamics that affect our concrete lives: they too are infused with the Existentialist Contradiction. What follows explores these dynamics.

A Criticism of Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (The works of Dostoevsky and Wallace are monologic)

Unnoticed by the majority of readers, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) Bakhtin admits that

> We do in fact observe in Dostoevsky's novels a unique conflict between the internal open-endedness of the characters and dialogue, and the *external* (in most cases compositional and thematic) *completedness* of every individual novel. We cannot go deeply into this difficult problem here. We will say only that almost all of Dostoevsky's novels have *a conventionally literary, conventionally monologic* ending (especially characteristic in this respect is *Crime and Punishment*) (*Problems* 39-40).

The passage is important because it helps us understand that there is a contradiction in Bakhtin's claim that Dostoevsky's novels are dialogic. How can Bakhtin say that Dostoevsky's works are dialogic if "almost all" of them have a "*conventionally monologic* ending"? Isn't this definitive proof that they're not dialogic at all? This is obviously a fundamental problem for Bakhtin's thesis, and so why does he gloss over it? Why say that "we cannot go deeply into this difficult problem here" when this is *the* problem that must be addressed in order to defend the thesis?

Clearly, this points to a serious inconsistency in his argument. And what we want to prove here is that – despite the undeniable dialogism that Dostoevsky's fictionalizations display and which Bakhtin had the great merit of bringing to light – Dostoevsky's works cannot be said to be dialogic: on the contrary, they are monologic down to their essence (even if they are, in a sense, polyphonic). Therefore, *if* Bakhtin's argument is that Dostoevsky's novels are purely polyphonic and dialogic (he is too often unclear on this point), in the sense that they suppress the authorial/narrating voice to the point of letting each of his characters speak fully for himself without ever introducing any monologic master-meaning into the work, *then* his interpretation of Dostoevsky is wrong. This is what we want

to demonstrate here: not only are Dostoevsky's works monologic, but that this truth is fundamental to a proper interpretation of them.

An Opposition Too Extreme

One of Bakhtin's fundamental mistakes is that he treats dialogism and monologism as if they existed in extreme opposition to one another and then interprets the novels accordingly. Thus, on the one hand he writes that "in literature […] the statement of an idea is usually thoroughly monologic" (ibid. 82) because ideas are usually "either confirmed or repudiated" (ibid.) as they're all "merged in the unity of the author's seeing and representing consciousness" (ibid.). On the other, he claims that Dostoevsky is "capable of *representing someone else's idea*, preserving its full capacity to signify as an idea, while at the same time also preserving a distance, neither confirming the idea nor merging it with his own expressed ideology" (ibid. 85, my italics). This is the peculiarity of his literary genius, according to Bakhtin: Dostoevsky instantiates true polyphony in his novels. Every one of his characters embodies "a *fully valid* idea" (ibid.) and he manages to get his authorial consciousness out of the way so that the opposing positions of the characters are not dialectically synthesized into a final, higher, authorial meaning.

This is the extreme opposition that Bakhtin establishes between Dostoevsky and the classic monologic novel. It's in this extreme opposition that his argument is incorrect, even if his prior explanation of the monologism of the classic literary work is both convincing and exhaustive. In this respect, he explains that usually in literature "the fully valid authorial idea" (ibid.) dominates and shapes the literary work. This is why most literary works are monologic, and why they take on the specifics of this structure:

> In a work of the monologic type, a confirmed and fully valid authorial idea can perform a triple function: first, it is the *principle for visualizing and representing the world*, the principle behind the choice and unification of material, the principle behind the *ideological single-toned quality* of all the elements of the work; second, the idea can be presented as a more or less distinct or conscious deduction drawn from the represented material; third and finally, an authorial idea can receive direct expression in the *ideological position of the main hero* (ibid. 82-3).

The monologic idea also "merges with the form" and thus "determines all formal accents" and "all those ideological evaluations that constitute the formal unity of an artistic style and the unified tone of the work" (ibid. 83). This is all true. The only problem is that everything that Bakhtin correctly describes as the classical characteristics of the monologic novel happens in Dostoevsky's novels too. In fact, Dostoevsky's works perform all the classic monologic moves *while* giving all of their characters the strongest voice they can have (as do Wallace's mature works). This is why Bakhtin's original mistake is its postulation of an extreme opposition between monologism and dialogism. The end result is a great misinterpretation of Dostoevsky's works.

Dostoevsky is certainly "capable of *representing someone else's idea*," but he doesn't preserve a distance that results in the suspension of judgment. He strongly expresses his own (i.e. not truly his own but the authorial) ideology through all of his works. It's thus not literally true that every character in Dostoevsky expresses a *fully valid* idea, because *there is* a higher authorial consciousness that bestows a hierarchy of meaning upon the events of the novel and the ideas that appear therein. This doesn't mean that it isn't true that Dostoevsky is perhaps the greatest novelist there ever was in creating a polyphonic novel. It just means that the term "polyphonic" must be taken with a fair grain of salt: nothing can be truly polyphonic or dialogic and so what we should say is that Dostoevsky's novels are monologic novels that are as polyphonic and dialogic as they can be. (This is true of Wallace's works too, and so what we say of Bakhtin also applies to Kelly's Bakhtin-inspired "Development through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas.")

In another sense we may say it is simultaneously true and not true that each character in Dostoevsky's novels speaks a fully valid idea, and that this is due to the doubleness of language. The doubleness of language is the originary reason why every utterance speaks *both* of the intentionality behind it *and* of the objective meaning that the utterance has despite the intention of the one who utters it. The objective meaning can display itself because the *Lógos* transcends all individuality and intentionality and infuses everything. The doubleness of language is the reason why we can see that someone contradicts him- or herself: it's because we see that the intention of the utterance opposes its objective meaning. In this same sense, we can fully grasp the ideas of a Dostoevskian (or Wallacean) character while we also grasp that the higher authorial intentionality doesn't agree with it, and this is why we can choose to agree with the character rather than with Dostoevsky (or Wallace).

For example, Kirillov is one of the greatest characters in literary history because he's one of the greatest philosophers of modernity. This we can say because we do grasp his idea fully – Dostoevsky's ability to let him speak for himself is truly unbelievable – even though we also see that the higher authorial voice of *Demons* (Dostoevsky's voice) clearly rejects Kirillov's nihilism as one of the higher forms of evil. By virtue of the doubleness of language and of the quality of Dostoevsky's "polyphonic-dialogic" characterization, we can relate to Kirillov even though the intentionality of the novel opposes his point of view. We can also grasp this *opposition* between Kirillov and the intentionality of the novel and so choose sides. We can even decide that the higher authorial voice is wrong and unjust to Kirillov and that Kirillov is right.

And we can do all of this only because *Demons* is in the final analysis a monologic novel, and thus not because – as Bakhtin incorrectly argues – the novel is purely polyphonic and dialogic and doesn't have a higher authorial consciousness imposing its meaning upon the narrative events. Proof of the monologism of Dostoevsky's novels is that they do have a unifying "*principle for visualizing and representing the world.*" Suffice it to remember that they all mirror each other in plot and structure: it's always nihilists vs. believers and the nihilists always either die alone or go mad while the believers live; that they do have an "*ideological single-toned quality*" – the irony with which Dostoevsky's narrators very frequently treat the nihilists has been greatly overlooked – and that they do always have an "*ideological position of the main hero*" – Razumikhin in *C&P*, Myshkin in *The Idiot*, Alyosha and Zosima in *TBK* – which clearly represents the idea (always the same idea) that Dostoevsky's narrators always endorse, and for this very reason they're all clearly the heroes of his novels.

Therefore, Bakhtin's conclusion that in Dostoevsky's novels "One should learn not from Raskolnikov or Sonya, not from Ivan Karamazov or Zosima, ripping their voices out of the polyphonic whole of the novels (and by that act alone distorting them) – one should learn from Dostoevsky himself as the creator of the polyphonic novel" (*Problems* 36), is wrong. It's wrong because Dostoevsky's monologic intention clearly is to argue that you should learn from Zosima and Sonya and reject what Ivan and Raskolnikov say and do.

Bakhtin keeps doing a great job of describing the dynamics of the monologic novel, but the problem always remains that he doesn't see how those dynamics all apply to Dostoevsky's works. Thus, Bakhtin writes that in monologic novels "certain thoughts – true, signifying thoughts – gravitate toward the author's consciousness, and strive to shape themselves in the purely semantic unity of a worldview" (ibid. 80). There, thoughts are "not

represented" but "affirmed" (ibid.), and "we can always hear them in the context of the work; an affirmed thought always sounds different from an unaffirmed one" (ibid. 81). And this is all true, but it happens in Dostoevsky too, and it doesn't negate that the novels can have a certain – outstandingly high – degree of polyphony (albeit it can never be *true* polyphony). How can Bakhtin argue that *The Brothers Karamazov* maintains a distance from and suspends judgment over its characters? It is explicit that Alyosha is the hero of the novel because he represents the good – the winning – side of the argument regarding how and why human beings should live. And it's therefore explicit that Ivan's argument should be rejected, and this rejection is also enacted in that Ivan goes crazy. At the end of chapter three, the narrator, speaking of Alyosha, says "I have to introduce my hero" (*TBK* 17).[124]

We shall therefore read Dostoevsky's novels as works that have strong polyphonic-dialogic characteristics but are, at their core, monologic-ideological (as everything must be). And we shall do this for David Foster Wallace as well. *Infinite Jest* (1996) is the epitome of Wallace's own version of Dostoevskian polyphony and dialogism, and in it too the authorial voice is authoritative and monological. The novel is an endless juxtaposition of shards every one of which gives voice to a different character. Yet, this polyphony doesn't inhibit the authority of the narrative consciousness at all. On the one hand, it's true that one of the monologic principles of the novel is precisely its care for dialogic polyphony. And in this sense, the late scene in the novel where the wraith speaks of revolutionary ultra-realistic art as the art where there are no mute figurants and all characters are protagonists who can speak fully for themselves *is* truly an affirmation of Wallace's hopes for his own poetics (as many have argued). But on the other hand, Wallace knows very well that this hope is utopian and impossible, and so his wish for democratic polyphony doesn't inhibit the novel from promulgating its own ideology. Thus, if the characters Marathe and Steeply are both given full voice in the moment of their discussion regarding ethics and socio-politics, in the end Steeply's classic libertarian ethos, with its utilitarianism and rational individualism, loses and Marathe's respect for tradition, community, state, and nation as instantiations of the ideal of being part of something larger than the self wins. That is, as a whole: the novel takes Marathe's side, even accepting the risk of his totalitarianism over the risk of Steeply's

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[124] Against Kelly, we must reiterate that this is true of David Foster Wallace too. Take two random examples: *Infinite Jest* is a condemnation of the utilitarian libertarianism of today's post-industrial society, and "The Depressed Person" is the representation of the destructive self-obsession that certain kinds of therapies can entice. These are strong monologic messages.

nihilism. This is why the entire novel is dedicated to portraying the destruction and despair that ensues in a society that adopts Steeply's ideals: *gaudeamus igitur*. It's exactly the same dynamic that occurs in *The Brothers Karamazov* with Ivan and Alyosha.

Therefore, both Dostoevsky and Wallace write novels that are strongly polyphonic-dialogic in their texture but are ultimately monologic-ideological in their essence. This framework is fundamental for the proper interpretation of their works because without it it would be impossible to relate to their monologic message and to recognize the strong presence of the authorial/narrative consciousness that decides so much of the meaning of each novel. While he was writing *Infinite Jest*, Wallace wrote an essay entitled "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" (1996), in which he himself argues that Dostoevsky was of inspiration to him not so much because he was a genius but because "he was also brave" (JFD 272): brave because he "never stopped promulgating unfashionable stuff in which he believed," brave because he spoke against "the unfashionable circumstances in which he was writing," always "confronting them, engaging them, specifically and by name," with never-ending "ideological passion" (ibid.).

Wallace could see Dostoevsky's bravery and interpret his works accordingly because he saw in his works the monologism that belongs to them. Bravery is a consequence of monologism. This is why monologism cannot be overlooked. Plus: clearly, monologism was the most fundamental meaning of the works for Wallace himself. Wallace saw in Dostoevsky a writer who was ready to commit to the ideology he believed in, and to do it concretely and within the social context of his time and place. Dostoevsky is inspiring because he gave himself away to an ideal. This is his monologic bravery. Which for Wallace is the antidote to a sickness of our time: "congenital skepticism" (ibid.). This is why Dostoevsky represents "the model" for him; all of his praise of the Russian author converges around this theme:

> Dostoevsky wrote fiction about the stuff that's really important. He wrote fiction about identity, moral value, death, will, sexual vs. spiritual love, greed, freedom, obsession, reason, faith, suicide. […] His concern was always what it is to be a human being — that is, how to be an actual person, someone whose life is informed by values and principles, instead of just an especially shrewd kind of self-preserving animal (ibid. 265).

Dostoevsky was always concerned with what it means to be human being. But it's not just

that. It's that he wrote with a "compassion and moral rigor" (ibid. 266) that makes him a true artist. It's that he produced with a level of ideological (i.e. monologic) commitment that is itself a teaching on what it means to believe: "The big thing that makes Dostoevsky invaluable for American readers and writers is that he appears to possess degrees of passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral issues that we — here, today — cannot or do not permit ourselves" (ibid. 271).

Wallace valued Dostoevsky's monologism to the highest degree without discounting the importance of dialogism at all. And this he applied to his own novels, of course, as Dostoevsky did to his. Again, this doesn't negate Bakhtin's dialogic insight that "every thought of Dostoevsky's heroes […] senses itself to be from the very beginning a *rejoinder* in an unfinalized dialogue" (*Problems* 32). Wallace himself accepts this tenet not only as a novelistic tool but also as a fundamental ontological truth. To think is to dialogue with the entire history of the world. But what the fundamental monologic-ideological essence of Dostoevsky's works does negate is that they are as purely non-monologic as Bakhtin claims. Wallace's aren't as well and, in this sense, Wallace's reading of Dostoevsky is more profound than Bakhtin's.

Bakhtin's Inconsistencies

Bakhtin's argument that "*a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels*" (*Problems* 6, italics mine) is therefore untenable. Bakhtin takes one characteristic of Dostoevsky's poetics and makes it the whole of Dostoevsky's poetics. The fallacy resides in this extremization. There is a plurality of fully sketched-out consciousnesses in Dostoevsky, but there is also the merging "in the unity of the event" (ibid.) and in the "single objective world" that is "illuminated by his single authorial consciousness" (ibid.). A further inconsistency here is that Bakhtin himself interprets Dostoevsky's nihilists as people who are, *in their solitude*, dominated by ideas. Bakhtin refers to Vyacheslav Ivanov's *Freedom and the Tragic Life: A Study in Dostoevsky* (1932), writing that Ivanov is right that "at the heart of the tragic catastrophe in Dostoevsky's work there always lies a solipsistic separation of a character's consciousness from the whole, his incarceration in his own private world" (*Problems* 10).

This interpretation – which is undoubtedly correct – entails that Bakhtin too sees the

monologism that lies deeper than polyphony in Dostoevsky's work. Bakhtin doesn't consciously realize, however, that he's relating to Dostoevsky's fundamental monologism. That is: Bakhtin sees that Dostoevsky's novels make the following monologic argument: "close yourself in your own private world and you will become solipsistic and evil ideas will dominate you and lead you to catastrophe." He just doesn't explicitly recognize it as a fundamental monologic argument. "Solipsism is a tragedy, it is evil." This is a clear monologic affirmation in Dostoevsky and it is central to the meaning of his entire work. This is why not even Bakhtin could help but confront it as the strong monologism that it is. This is one of Bakhtin's internal contradictions. He even criticizes all the critics of the past, writing that "everyone interprets in his own way Dostoevsky's ultimate word, but all equally interpret it as a *single* word, a *single* voice, a *single* accent, and therein lies their fundamental mistake" (*Problems* 43). But then he himself interprets Dostoevsky's ultimate word. And more precisely: what *he thinks* is his ultimate word regarding solipsism and dialogism. In this sense, he even agrees with Ivanov's interpretation, which is supposed to be one of those interpretations that have made the fundamental mistake of thinking there's an ultimate word in Dostoevsky, and this is another contradiction.

And even if Bakhtin were right that Dostoevsky's characters' consciousnesses "combine in a higher unity, a unity, so to speak, of the second order, the unity of a polyphonic novel" (ibid. 16), this still would entail that Dostoevsky's final, ultimate, monologic word is the affirmation of polyphony as the highest ideal. This too is a final monologic meaning. This higher unity too must necessarily be affirmed by the authorial consciousness – which Bakhtin declares to be absent from Dostoevsky's works – in order to present itself as the higher principle of the works. But Bakhtin is clear: the absence of the authorial consciousness is *necessary* for dialogism to be the case. And we answer that this absence is impossible, even by Bakhtin's own argument. In saying that Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel combines all consciousnesses into the higher unity of dialogism, Bakhtin is (whether he wants to or not) affirming the presence of the authorial consciousness without whose affirmation of polyphony this higher unity would be impossible. He therefore implicitly affirms what he explicitly negates, and this is another contradiction.

Finally, what Bakhtin does with Ivanov applies to many others. Just two examples to close. Bakhtin agrees with Viktor Shklovskii's *Za i protiv. Zametki o Dostoevskom* (*Pro and Contra: Remarks on Dostoevsky*) and its affirmation that, for Dostoevsky, "a*s long as a work remained multileveled and multi-voiced, as long as the people in it were still arguing, then despair over the absence of a solution*

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would not set in" (*Problems* 39). Again, Shklovskii's argument entails the presence of monologic meanings of "despair" and "solution" in Dostoevsky's works, as well as the monologic affirmations that "solutions are now absent" and that "we must necessarily fall into despair without a solution." In agreeing with Shklovskii, then, Bakhtin too recognizes these monologic meanings in Dostoevsky's works. This is another contradiction, and it's only the tip of the iceberg.

Bakhtin even cites this passage from Dostoevsky's diary: "It is not enough to define morality as fidelity to one's own convictions. One must continually pose oneself the question: are my convictions true? Only one verification of them exists – Christ. But this is no longer philosophy, it is faith" (*Problems* 97). What can be more monologic than that? And when we read Dostoevsky's novels we all recognize their attempt to communicate the same morality. Dostoevsky has his heroes embody his ideals. Zosima, Alyosha, Sonya, Razumikhin, they all have the blessing of the authorial consciousness behind them. Christ is the only possible salvation and foundation of morality. This is why there are heroes in Dostoevsky's novels. Deep down, Bakhtin knows this. The title of chapter two of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* is: "The Hero, and the Position of the Author with Regard to the Hero, in Dostoevsky's Art." How can Bakhtin not see that the mere fact that *there are* heroes in these novels entails their monologism?

Wallace's Reading of Dostoevsky
as an Indirect Criticism of Bakhtin's Interpretation

Wallace and Dostoevsky share a passion for *ideas*. They embody ideas in their characters, plots, and in the formal devices of their novels. This is why theirs are *philosophical* novels. In their stories, ideas are led to their concrete consequences in the lives of their characters. In this sense, Čujko was right when he defined *The Brothers Karamazov* as a "treatise in characters" (Givone 125). Wallace and Dostoevsky show how ideas guide the lives of human beings. We may even say that they show how ideas are our soul. And not only our soul: ideas also guide the historical eras of human civilization, and their fate.

Dostoevsky and Wallace state so much explicitly. Think of the beginning of *Notes from Underground* (1864), for example: "*In this fragment, entitled* "Underground," *this person introduces himself, his outlook, and seeks, as it were, to elucidate the reasons why he appeared and had to*

appear among us" (NU 3). Dostoevsky's narrator is saying that the Underground Man *had to* appear in the context of nineteenth-century Russia by necessity. That is, he is a necessary product of his time: of the ideas that guide the individual behaviors and social configurations of his time. He's therefore both an individual with his own soul and his own specific existential troubles *and* a paradigm of the era he belongs to.

And in the essay "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" (1996), Wallace insists exactly on this point, taking it a step further. he writes that the Underground Man is both an individual soul and a paradigm of his time and "a universal figure in whom we can all see parts of ourselves" (JFD 256). *This* is what demonstrates the genius of Dostoevsky in characterization, for Wallace, and this is the ideal that every writer should aspire to: to have one's characters embody the three-dimensional consequences of every idea. Because every idea is embodied (1) in the particular individual soul with all its unique peculiarities, (2) in the paradigmatic socio-historical character of that individual soul, and (3) in the universal nature of that individual soul, which transcends all socio-historical contingencies and relates to humanity at large through all times.

This is why, in great appreciation, Wallace writes (a) that "Dostoevsky's mature works are fundamentally ideological and cannot truly be appreciated unless one understands the polemical agendas that inform them" (ibid. 258), and (b) that "without ever ceasing to be 3-D individuals, Dostoevsky's characters manage to embody whole ideologies and philosophies of life" (ibid. 265). Because the genius of Dostoevsky resides in his ability to depict a 3-D individual (not a mouthpiece) through which he can also "dramatize his moral spiritual themes against the background of Russian history'" (ibid. 258) while also creating "the admixture of universal and particular that […] really marks all the best work of FMD" (ibid.). The end result is that, when we read Dostoevsky, we are called upon to relate both to the individual stories and to the ideas they embody: "Raskolnikov the rational egoism of the 1860s' intelligentsia, Myshkin mystical Christian love, the Underground Man the influence of European positivism on the Russian character, Ippolit the individual will raging against death's inevitability, Aleksey the perversion of Slavophilic pride in the face of European decadence, and so on and so forth. . . ." (ibid. 265).

This is why Wallace elevates Dostoevsky to the status of literary model to follow. Because he teaches writers to "dare try to use serious art to advance ideologies" and to write "morally passionate, passionately moral fiction" that is "also ingenious and radiantly human fiction" (ibid. 274). And of course, Wallace here implicitly declares that following Dostoevsky

is his own personal intention: Wallace too wants to write philosophical fiction that is simultaneously existential (individual) and ideological (social and universal). He too wants to write about the opposition between reason and faith, nihilism and belief, meaninglessness and hopefulness, solipsism and trust in the feeling that there is something larger, bigger, and more meaningful than the self to which one can give oneself away to.

In this sense, it's no coincidence that Wallace opens the essay with the famous nihilist citation from Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862): "'At the present time, negation is the most useful of all—and we deny—.' 'Everything?' 'Everything!'" (JFD 255). Nihilism was Dostoevsky's greatest enemy and it is Wallace's. Every one of his works demonstrates this, from the first ones – *The Broom of the System* (1987), "Fictional Futures" (1989) "The Empty Plenum" (1990) and "E Unibus Pluram" (1993) – to the last ones – *This is Water* (2005) and *The Pale King* (2011). And this for Wallace was further reason to find inspiration in Dostoevsky. And in various interviews – take the one with Streitfeld as an example –, Wallace explicitly said that "we're living in an era of emotional poverty" (Streitfeld 68) and that this nihilism pervades the lives of contemporary individuals. Explaining the meaning of *Infinite Jest* (1996) in the same interview, Wallace goes on to say that nihilism "is something that serious drug addicts feel most keenly" (ibid.). The novel treats addiction as the paradigmatic consequence of nihilism, because nihilism empties the world of all values and then the illusion arises that perhaps, if we seek limitless pleasure, we can fill this emptiness at the core of our being.

For Wallace as for Dostoevsky, faith is a not-transcendable necessity of life. We all need to believe in something, or else nihilism will eat us alive. Faith is salvation. But for Wallace, faith doesn't necessarily have to be religious in the traditional sense. What we need is an ideal, an ideal that is larger than the self and infuses life with meaning, an ideal we can believe in. Because even in the simplest tasks of everyday life, "the more I believe in something, and the more I take something other than me seriously, the less bored I am, the less self-hating. I get less scared" (ibid. 69). With belief, life becomes something that can be lived rather than an unbearable hell that we're forced to withstand but can't.

This is why Wallace follows Dostoevsky in arguing that we need faith beyond pure rationality, as rationality can lead to the kind of hyper-self-consciousness that inevitably leads

to nihilism.[125] This is the sense in which Wallace denounces "our own culture of 'enlightened atheism'" (JFD 264): because it leads to despair. Which gets us to the essence of Wallace's and Dostoevsky's literary projects. What these two authors truly have in common, deep down, is that they conceive their literature as a means to care for human suffering. This is *the* inspiration that Wallace finds in Dostoevsky: a literary care for suffering and for all the facets of suffering. Wallace writes that Dostoevsky "seems like the first fiction writer to understand how deeply some people love their own suffering, how they use it and depend on it" (ibid.). And this is important because one needs to understand the dynamics of suffering if one is to attempt to redeem it.

Wallace intended his entire work as an attempt to antagonize and overcome suffering, which he always conceptualized as related to loneliness and solipsism. Hence his famous statement that true literary art is an "anodyne against loneliness." This intention truly pervades all of his works. Even essays like "Big Red Son" (1998), which is superficially about the porn industry, in the end turns out to be about pain, sadness, and loneliness above all. About it, Max writes that, "in all, the convention left him with much the same feeling as the Caribbean cruise had: how sad the world was when you opened your eyes, how much pain it contained" (245).

Wallace's one main concern is suffering, and whether suffering is redeemable, and if so how to redeem it. And he found in Dostoevsky a literary forerunner in this sense as well. Suffering is individual, social, and universal. And it is both abstract and concrete, in the sense that ideas can create suffering and that suffering can affect our lives. That the structure of the nature of suffering is mirrored by the characterization (described above) that Dostoevsky and Wallace pursue in their works is not a coincidence. Their attempt to create 3-D individuals who are also paradigms of their social environments and also embody human universals, as they are affected by ideas that become concrete in their actions, is their way to try to mirror the reality of life and its suffering, in order to try to redeem it.

And Wallace also finds a forerunner in Dostoevsky with regards to the postulation of an essential connection between loneliness and suffering. That is, Dostoevsky and Wallace also share the idea that suffering is loneliness and redemption – if it ever were possible – would be the overcoming of loneliness and so the achievement of human communion. For

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[125] Interesting in this sense is Steinhilber's (2017) exhibition of von Kleist's influence on Wallace regarding the loss of grace through self-consciousness.

example, see how they mirror each other in their personal remarks. Wallace frequently interrupts his essay on Dostoevsky with his private existential reflections, in which he worries about the negative spiral of lonely solipsism and the suffering it entails, and he wonders how this can be overcome. In one of these ponderings, he writes: "But if I decide to decide there's a different, less selfish, less lonely point to my life, won't the reason for this decision be my desire to be less lonely, meaning to suffer less overall pain? Can the decision to be less selfish ever be anything other than a selfish decision?" (JFD 262).

Here, Wallace is clearly, personally, worried that selfishness can never be overcome, and that therefore loneliness and suffering can never be overcome as well. This is the worry that he would infuse his fiction with, and the worry he found Dostoevsky's fiction to be pervaded by. And Dostoevsky too was personally affected by the same terror. His famous diary entry note dated April 16, 1864 testifies to this. This is written on the day after his first wife's death. Her corpse lies on the table as per Russian customs, and Dostoevsky looks at her:

> *16 April.* Masha is lying on the table. Will I see Masha again? To love a person *as one's own self* according to Christ's commandment—is impossible. The law of personality on earth is the constraint. The *I* forms an obstacle. Christ alone was able to do this […]. After the appearance of Christ as *the incarnated ideal of man*, it has become clear that the highest, the final development of the personality should lead precisely to the point (at the very end of the development, at the point of attaining the goal) where man finds, realizes and becomes convinced with all the strength of his nature that the highest use which man can make of his personality, of the fullness of the development of his *I*, is as it were to destroy that *I*, to give it over wholly to each and everyone, wholeheartedly and selflessly. This is the greatest happiness. […] This is precisely the paradise of Christ (Tolstaya 66).

For Dostoevsky and Wallace, the only possibility of true redemption and happiness resides in the hope of transcending the *I*: the law of personality that governs life. If such transcendence is impossible – as Dostoevsky explicitly says here –, then so is happiness. And this is what Wallace points to in *This Is Water*: if you remain the prisoner of your natural default setting of solipsism, then you will likely shoot yourself in the head. But neither

Dostoevsky nor Wallace ever gave up as writers: they kept striving for salvation.

And this is the function of their literature. It is the sense in which Wallace consciously aligns with Dostoevsky's artistic intentionality and subject matter. An intentionality that is necessarily monologic, and not dialogic. This is where Wallace implicitly rejects Bakhtin's reading, because Wallace himself reads Dostoevsky's works as monologic. Let us quote the crucial sentence in this respect again: "Dostoevsky's mature works are fundamentally ideological and cannot truly be appreciated unless one understands the polemical agendas that inform them" (ibid. 258). This means that Wallace reads in Dostoevsky the monologic affirmation of a specific ideology informed by his political agenda. Further proof of this is a passage of Wallace's essay that has evaded critical attention, where Wallace sides with professor Joseph Frank against Bakhtin, thus stating that Dostoevsky's works were monologic, and explaining Bakhtin's attention for polyphony and dialogism as a tactic of self-defense against Stalinist censorship:

> The political situation is one reason why Bakhtin's famous *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetic*s, published under Stalin, had to seriously downplay FMD's ideological involvement with his own characters. A lot of Bakhtin's praise for Dostoevsky's "polyphonic" characterizations, and for the "dialogic imagination" that supposedly allowed him to refrain from injecting his own values into his novels, is the natural result of a Soviet critic's trying to discuss an author whose "reactionary" views the State wanted forgotten (JFD 269).

Wallace reads Dostoevsky's works as fundamentally monologic and ideological, claiming (with Frank) that Bakhtin's reading is the result of the non-transcendable negative influence of the totalitarian regime under which Bakhtin had to live. Actually, Wallace's (and Frank's) interpretation may even explain why Bakhtin states that "almost all of Dostoevsky's novels have a *conventionally literary, conventionally monologic* ending" only to then cut short and say that "we cannot go deeply into this difficult problem here" (*Problems* 39-40). This is, of course, speculation. But it *is* possible that Bakhtin had to ignore the fundamental monologic ideology of Dostoevsky's works out of fear of the repercussions he would have suffered.

Perhaps, Bakhtin lost sight of the essence of Dostoevsky's works, or perhaps he just was forced not to write the truth. The bottom line is that Dostoevsky's works are ultimately monologic and strongly ideological and that so are Wallace's, who follows in his footsteps.

This again doesn't mean that there isn't polyphony and dialogism in Dostoevsky's and Wallace's novels. As we have seen, there *is* polyphony, if we intend polyphony as the ability to give each point of view its full, just voice, before the authorial voice affirms its superior monologic meaning. But there is *not* polyphony, if we intend polyphony as refraining from injecting one's own values into the work.

What we can find in both Dostoevsky and Wallace is *polyphony within monologism.* Wallace writes that Dostoevsky's characters "are alive — retain what Frank calls their 'immense vitality' — not because they're just skillfully drawn types or facets of human beings but because, acting within plausible and morally compelling plots, they dramatize the profoundest parts of all humans, the parts most conflicted, most serious — the ones with the most at stake" (JFD 265). They are all alive because they all speak fully of their true nature, both in speech and action. But this kind of "polyphony" coexists with the fact that "Dostoevsky is first and last an ideological writer" (ibid. 269), and so accordingly injects his deeply held beliefs into all of his works.

This is the kind of writing intentionality that Wallace consciously inherits from Dostoevsky. This polyphony within monologism that, Wallace thinks, incarnates the essence of what he calls the "democratic spirit." It's the will to let everyone speak for themselves, fully, and so to steel-man their arguments, *without* renouncing the assertion of one's own opinions, values, and deeply-held beliefs. The democratic spirit doesn't renounce engagement and commitment and doesn't fall into nihilism. In letting others speak, it definitely doesn't step away from the fight that life is. These are the hopes that Wallace sees embodied in Dostoevsky's works and attempts to make the driving principle of his own art. If we think of *Infinite Jest* in this sense, the famous speech of the wraith indicates *this* desire to fully represent everyone as a rounded protagonist, equal in his humanity to everyone else, *while* still establishing an overt authorial voice that communicates the novel's monologic meaning, which in the case of *Infinite Jest* is its criticism of our society's contemporary nihilism and pleasure-culture, which turns us into addicts who feel the emptiness, loneliness, and sadness of our lives.

In this sense, the novel lets Steeply speak for himself fully (sort of; that is, with the limitations necessarily established by its monologism), but it ultimately sides with Marathe. Wallace consciously worked to be a polyphonic, ideological writer like Dostoevsky. These were his hopes; then the question becomes whether he succeeded in actualizing them, and even whether Dostoevsky did. Can you truly let others speak for themselves fully, within

your own monologic higher meaning? The literal, ultimate answer, is no, of course. But there is a way in which you can, in the same sense in which you can choose whether to steelman or strawman someone's argument. In this, Dostoevsky and Wallace have succeeded, in this is one of the measures of their literary value. The ideological battles within their works are battles of giants: all sides know how to defend themselves, despite the fact that the authorial voice finally takes one side.

To see this polyphony within monologism is the proper way to relate to Dostoevsky's and Wallace's fiction. Only through this approach can one move to ask the final question: do Dostoevsky and Wallace achieve – through the establishment of their final monologic meanings –what they hope to achieve?

Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and Wallace
United in Existentialism

Too often in literary criticism people treat Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* as a stand-alone work. But it is important to recognize that Bakhtin's dialogic interpretation of Dostoevsky's work is itself built on a whole philosophy that Bakhtin develops through all of his works. In this sense: Bakhtin's dialogism is as monologic as Dostoevsky's and Wallace's own philosophies.

In fact, Bakhtin goes deep into matters of metaphysics and ontology, and as Gardiner writes in *The Dialogics of Critique: M.M. Bakhtin and the Theory of Ideology* (1992), his influences were of the most varied range: "besides Marxism, these include neo-Kantianism, Formalism and other early Soviet *avant-garde* movements, evolutionary biology and Einsteinian physics, and classical thought" (Gardiner 2). Michael Holquist provides a great introduction to Bakhtin's philosophy. In *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (1990), he explains that the foundation of Bakhtin's thought is the assumption that: all Being is shared-Being. The Russian word for "event" is "*sobytie*," which is constructed on "*bytie*" ("being") and the prefix "*so-*" ("co-"). Bakhtin refers to this original wisdom of language to argue that all being is co-being, in the sense that every event in life is always a shared event. Holquist summarizes the fundamental principle as follows: "dialogism's fundamental a priori [is] that nothing is in itself. Existence is sobytie sobytiya, the event of co-being; it is a vast web of interconnections each and all of which are linked as participants in an event whose totality is so immense that no single one of us can ever know it. That event manifests itself in the form of a constant, ceaseless creation and exchange of meaning" (*Dialogism* 40).

The destiny of the essential connection of all things is the a priori from which Bakhtin deduces that dialogue is the non-transcendable dimension of Being. And because every being is a co-being, then also every *self* is a relation: that is, every self is dialogic. Not only that: of course, dialogue must also be the non-transcendable dimension of thought (one cannot think in and by himself) as well as the formal manifestation of the truth. This is why dialogism must be a philosophy of language: because "it is clear that language cannot avoid playing a special role in a universe conceived as endless semiosis" (ibid.).

In this sense, despite Wallace's disagreement with Bakhtin's interpretation of Dostoevsky, it's important to see that Bakhtin and Wallace share a deep philosophical connection. It is well-known that Wallace profoundly agreed with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) in its affirmation that language is the all-comprehensive principle under which all things come into being *as meaningful* in the context of our human community. And at least in this sense: Wittgenstein, Wallace, and Bakhtin all stand together in the affirmation of this fundamental principle.

And Bakhtin and Wallace share an even deeper metaphysical agreement: that is, they both understand that the opposition between Self and Other belongs to the fundamental principle of existence. In fact, this opposition is necessary for Bakhtin's affirmation of co-being (Holquist 33), and Wallace insists on this in his first novel *The Broom of the System* (1987)—his most *explicitly*-philosophical novel. In it, a character named Norman Bombardini explicitly says that we all conceive the opposition between Self and Other as the foundation of existence and that therefore we act accordingly. This is why our greatest terror is to perceive the void in our Being that the Other can leave if he or she decides to withdraw his or her presence. A void that we can also feel if our Self is crushed or fragmented under the external pressures of Otherness. Bombardini is the only character who gives this truth *explicit* voice. But after him, Wallace will always explore, throughout all of his works, the relationships between people as specific concretizations of this original ontological principle. Which in turn unites him and Bakhtin to the great Existentialist phenomenologist Jean-Paul Sartre, who, as we have seen in chapter …. deduces the maxim that "hell is other people" from this original premise, asking: how could one feel at peace with and connected to Others when *the Other's look* objectifies the Self, thus depriving it of its essential subjectivity?[126] And Dostoevsky too partakes of this fundamental worldview: his famous diary note on Masha's death demonstrates it. When he speaks of the law of personality that prohibits the *I* from loving the Other as It loves itSelf, he too speaks of the original opposition of Self and Other

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[126] Bakhtin's concept of "addressivity" also anticipates Sartre's ontology, as it states that consciousness is always consciousness *of something*. In turn, this idea of consciousness derives from the original opposition of Self and Other: the Self has consciousness of the Other. In this sense, Holquist writes that "Bakhtin begins by accepting Kant's argument that there is an unbridgeable gap between mind and world" (Holquist 16). The mind is the Self and the world is the Other, and they are in irreconcilable opposition. Which in turn entails that the world in-itself is unknowable, and so human knowledge is relative and arbitrary.

(which explains why he, like Wallace, fictionalizes the war between the Self and the Other's look: *Notes from Underground* being the most obvious example).

Our inquiry thus begins to show the vicinity of all these thinkers: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, Wittgenstein, Sartre, Wallace. In this framework, all of these thinkers – and Bakhtin and Wallace most of all, to maintain our focus –, derive from the opposition between Self and Other, which always exists within events in becoming, which are all co-events that come to light in the shared community of Being, the conclusion that in this dialogic truth all meaning must be relative and neutrality is impossible. There are no absolute meanings, and no one can be objective because everyone is thrown into the world into a specific position of engagement. See what Bakhtin writes in "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (ca. 1920-23):

> there is neither a first word nor a last word. The contexts of dialogue are without limit. They extend into the deepest past and the most distant future. Even meanings born in dialogues of the remotest past will never be finally grasped once and for all, for they will always be renewed in later dialogue. At any present moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogue's later course when it will be given new life. For nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will someday have its homecoming festival (Holquist 37).

The parallel with Wallace is immediately apparent. Many have written about the absence of first and last words in Wallace. Wallace ends his first novel *The Broom of the System* by cutting the word "word" from the end of the last sentence, so that literally there wouldn't be a last "word."[127] *Infinite Jest* has a circular narrative that never ends and invites infinite re-readings. There is no first nor last word in *Infinite Jest* because what we find in the beginning is neither the beginning nor the end, and so it is for the end. And also, the narrative constantly jumps through time, so that events from the past and the future constantly come to alter the meaning of the present, just as Bakhtin describes in the above passage. *The Pale King* too has no last word because it is unfinished. And many of Wallace's short stories follow this same

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[127] In *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2009), Boswell has already argued that, with this choice, Wallace was trying to leave the novel open to further dialogue.

pattern. "Good Old Neon" (2004) ends with the pronouncement "Not another word" (GON 181), but to it Wallace attaches a further footnote, as if he wanted precisely to express the impossibility that the infinite flow of discourse will ever come to a halt. In this sense, everything in his oeuvre seems to lead to the affirmation of this kind of dialogism as a fundamental truth of existence.

Wallace envisions every individual life as an event that takes place and acquires meaning within the infinite dialogue of existence. One of the formal devices by which he represents this belief is that many of his stories are presented as someone's speech, as if there were invisible quotation marks at the beginning and end of the story, hinting that someone may be telling this story in response to someone else, in a conversation. (Allard den Dulk noticed this about "The Depressed Person," highlighting that *this* may be the reason why Wallace uses single quotes as if they were double quotes: because the double quotes may be *outside* the story.)

Nothing suggests that Wallace ever had any knowledge of Bakhtin's dialogism besides the one he got indirectly through Frank's study on Dostoevsky. In this sense, it seems likely that he was immediately alienated by Bakhtin's denial of Dostoevsky's fundamental commitment to an ideological monologism, and that this in turn killed any interest he may have had in getting to know more about Bakhtin. But if he had, he would have found a lot that resonated with his sensibility (and Wittgenstein's).[128] Given what we are describing now, Wallace's deep beliefs and hopes would have found a home in dialogism, because Bakhtin's philosophy offers not only an account of what Wallace too believed to be the truth, but also another reason to regard literature as an "anodyne against loneliness," a reason to see literature as a means of conversation in this endless dialogue that is human life.[129]

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[128] Around those same years in which Bakhtin was formulating dialogism, in the English-speaking world George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) was making very similar arguments, of which Wallace may have been aware. In "Social Psychology as Counterpart to Physiological Psychology" (1909), Mead writes that "consciousness of meaning is social in its origin" ("SPCPP" 101), that "thought remains […] sublimated conversation" (101), and that "if the self-form is an essential form of all our consciousness it necessarily carries with it the other-form. Whatever may be the metaphysical impossibilities or possibilities of solipsism, psychologically it is nonexistent. There must be other selves if one's own is to exist" (ibid. 103). Likewise, in "The Objective Reality of Perspectives" (1927), he writes that "in the process of communication the individual is an other before he is a self" ("ORP" 312).

[129] *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929) is a work of which the authorship is debated. Some attribute it to Bakhtin and others to Valentin Voloshinov. As of today, Voloshinov is still considered the official author.

This is because, just like Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* – which for Wallace is "the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made" (McCaffery 42) – dialogism too "is rooted in social experience" (Holquist 42), and in fact: it "is based on the *primacy* of the social" (ibid. 37, my emphasis). More than that, dialogism is a fundamental negation of loneliness: "in so far as my 'I' is dialogic, it insures that my existence is not a lonely event but part of a larger whole" (ibid. 36). Thus, for Bakhtin, you can feel lonely only if you don't know the truth, and the truth is consolatory: you *are* part of a larger whole.

We know that Wallace regarded "being part of a larger whole" as the only possible salvation. All of his hopes were attached to this idea, and he struggled mightily throughout his life to find a *reason* to feel as part of something larger than himself rather than lonely and alone. (*This* is why he'd have been interested in dialogism.) He said it explicitly in various interviews: "we're absolutely dying to give ourselves away to something" (Lipsky 81), to "believe in something bigger than" ourselves (Gilbert 79). Of course, this unites Bakhtin and Wallace with Wittgenstein and Dostoevsky as well. Dostoevsky looked at Christian faith as the only salvation precisely because he saw in it the ideal that is larger and higher than the Self that one could give oneself away to. To him, Christian faith was the only way out of the loneliness, solipsism, and nihilism that inevitably leads to madness and suicide—again, this is exactly what he says when he's looking at Masha: Christ is the ideal that overcomes the law of personality which prohibits selfless love of the Other.

This preamble had the function of highlighting the extent of some of the agreements that all these authors share, with the goal of getting us to reflect upon this idea: Bakhtin, Wallace, Dostoevsky, Sartre, and Wittgenstein (and many more thinkers who are relevant in Wallace studies) have worldviews that are similar enough in their most fundamental beliefs that as to be grouped under that general outlook that in our culture we call "Existentialism." This is of key importance for our reflection on the relationship between Self and Other. Because, of course, Bakhtin, Wallace, Dostoevsky, and Wittgenstein are peculiar as Existentialists in that they *insist* that *the Other* is fundamental to our well-being to an extent that few other Existentialists do. And yet, they are Existentialists nonetheless, and

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In any case, he was a disciple of Bakhtin's and, in this work, we find this principle of dialogism expressed with great concision: "Any utterance […] makes response to something and is calculated to be responded to in turn. It is but one link in continuous chain of speech performances" (*MPL* 72).

Existentialism is "A philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will" (*OED*).

Reflecting on the Existentialism of these authors is fundamental, we think, in order to see that: even if their hope for salvation resides in their overcoming of the Self in order to give oneself away to the Other, their most fundamental beliefs, however, always lead them back within the Self, where they know that the despair of solipsism resides. Thus, even in Bakhtin, even if "I get my self from the other" (Holquist 27) because I need the other to see me in order to exist as an "I" (Sartre says the same), and therefore I'm dependent upon the other, this is only a partial truth. The other, fundamental, truth is that I am as an individual fully responsible for freely creating my own existence: "I author myself" (ibid.), and therefore I have "to forge a self" (ibid.) that is not given to me but is *the* task for which I'm responsible: "the act of creating a self is not free: we must, we all must, create ourselves, for the self is not a given (dan) to any one of us. Or, as Bakhtin puts it, 'we have no alibi in existence'" (ibid.).

Suddenly, here, Bakhtin's words seem to come out of the ontology of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. And Bakhtin's belief that self-creation is not a free choice but the only must anticipates Sartre's famous maxim in *Existentialism Is a Humanism* that "man is condemned to be free" (*EH* 29). Even the ethics that Bakhtin derives from this fundamental truth are the same as Sartre's: "we have no alibi in existence." Wallace shares this same fundamental belief. He says it explicitly in the essay "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness" (1999): a Self is not "something you just *have*" ("Kafka" 64), and "the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (ibid.).

This means that for Wallace too the self is not a given and its self-creation is the only necessity. We are free to choose anything, but we're not free to refuse our freedom. This is the essence of Existentialism. To which Dostoevsky belongs too, albeit his is a religious Existentialism that is closer to Kierkegaard's. Dostoevsky's own Existentialism has always been recognized, from Shestov to Walter Kauffmann's *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (1956).[130] And in fact, his Existentialism was further reason for Wallace to find inspiration in

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[130] Here are a few of infinite possible references: Lyall Bourgeois's "Dostoevsky and Existentialism: An Experiment in Hermeneutics" (1980); Serdyukova's "Russian Existentialism: Dostoevsky – Berdyaev" (2014); Auweele's "Existential Struggles in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*" (2016); "Existentialism, Epiphany, and

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him—as Wallace himself refers to Dostoevsky "as a forerunner of existentialism" (JFD 270).

The essence of Existentialism is *the project of the self.* Bakhtin uses the word "*zadanie*" to indicate the "project"; with this word he plays on the opposing relation between "*dan*" (what is "given") and "*zadan*" (what is "created" as the result of performing a task): we are given this situatedness in which we must undertake the task of creating our Self. *This* is the dimension in which Bakhtin's philosophy of language arises, as well as Wallace's and Wittgenstein's. In the sense that, for all of them, the project of the self is a linguistic project, hence the centrality of language. Holquist explains that for Bakhtin the task of the self is linguistic because "it is dominated by a 'drive to meaning'" (Holquist 22). The project is always one of meaning, and in turn "meaning is understood as something still in the process of creation" (ibid.): the project of the self is always the project of constant creation of a meaningful life. We give meaning to things through our speech, and this applies to our lives and to our own selves. This is why Bakhtin, Wittgenstein, and Wallace all consciously focus on language.

Dostoevsky's divergent focus on Christianity, though, is important, but it doesn't change the essence of the project: Dostoevsky looks at God as Bakhtin, Wittgenstein, and Wallace look at language; that is, in order to find meaning in Him. To him the project of the self must be religious because this is the only way to create meaning for one's own self. The only other choice is nihilism, which empties Being of all meaning and leads to self-destruction. In all cases, though, the essence remains the same. It's what Wallace famously calls the only capital-T Truth in *This Is Water*: i.e. that your duty as an individual human being is that you have to choose how to construct meaning from experience, and you do this through acts of your own free will for which you are entirely responsible.

In this dialogic-Existentialist sense, therefore, Bakhtin is a forerunner of Wallace (as much as Wittgenstein is) despite Wallace's not knowing it. We all know how much Wallace insisted on the problem of the chaos of our time of globalization and wealth and media and information. In interviews, he released statements like: "Life seems to strobe on and off for me, and to barrage me with input. And that so much of my job is to impose some sort of order, or make some sort of sense of it. […] I received five hundred thousand discrete bits of information today, of which maybe twenty-five are important. And how am I going to

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Polyphony in Dostoevsky's Post-Siberian Novels" (2019); Vaškovic's "A Path of Authenticity: Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky on Existential Transformation" (2020).

sort those out?" (Lipsky 37-8). And then he dedicated his fiction to trying to develop an answer to this Existentialist question. *Infinite Jest* displays a world of endless fragmentation where individuals struggle to find meaning in life, and *The Pale King* attempts to find the answer to this predicament in the individual's attainment of a sort of Buddhistic ability to choose what to pay attention to and so create order and meaning out of chaos (see e.g. Andersen 2014).

Wallace certainly had an insight into the predicament of our situation, but he was wrong in thinking that this problem of chaos is peculiar to our time. He saw inspiration in Existentialism because he understood that it has something to say that is of great importance with regards to our time, with its attention on the need for the individual to undertake the task of creating meaning out of chaos. But he lost sight of the fact that our present problem *has always been* the problem of Existentialism. In our time of globalization and of the rejection of all traditional meanings, certainly the problem is becoming more global and impactful. But still, when Wallace asks "how am I going to sort all this meaninglessness out?", he's reiterating the contemporary version of a question that has always afflicted humanity. He's thus wrong in the sense that it is not true that Tolstoy didn't have to face this existential predicament. He too faced the dread of the chaos of becoming and felt the need to restore some order and meaning out of it.

Bakhtin's work too is proof of this fact. Dialogism establishes that for things to have meaning they must hold themselves stable "against the ground of the flux and indeterminacy of everything" (Holquist 23). And to become a self is exactly to perform "the action of me fulfilling my task […] by making the slice of existence that is merely given (dan) to me something that is conceived (zadan)" (ibid.). In other words: to become a self is to construct meaning from experience through one's own choices. Bakhtin anticipates what Wallace would later make the driving principle of his work. My Existential duty is to take on the responsibility of constructing meaning amidst the flux of infinite indeterminacy. This confirms that this predicament is not just contemporary.

Bakhtin says that "I can make sense of the world only by reducing the number of its meanings—which are potentially infinite—to a restricted set" (Holquist 46). Here is where the primacy of free individual *choice* over the chaos of existence becomes radical. *This* is the meaning of Existentialism (we have seen this most specifically in the comparative analysis of Wallace and Bauman). The heart of the individual is the battleground between good and evil. All of these Existentialist authors – like Freud and Laing in psychology – know that the self

is divided.[131] But the deciding factor is which one will you choose. Good or evil.

Even in *Rabelais and his World* (1940) Bakhtin speaks of this truth. He dedicates the work to Rabelais because he sees in him a kinsman: Rabelais knows that modernity is the time of lost certainties and chaos. Bakhtin dedicates this monograph to the praise of a writer who was capable of diagnosing the modern condition and of confronting the constant flux of chaos in Existential terms. Which is exactly what Wallace tries to do in our contemporary context.[132] And it's also what Dostoevsky tried to do. In his novels too, the salvation of the characters depends on their taking responsibility for their Existential choices. All of Dostoevsky's nihilists could choose redemption in faith, and when they don't hell awaits. As Bakhtin himself knew, the ending of *Crime and Punishment* (1866) is the most explicit – and most moralistic – in this sense. Sonya's love saves Raskolnikov. But this gift turns out not to be enough for salvation. Salvation will come only if Raskolnikov chooses to accept this gift and moves on to take responsibility for the task of creating his own Self: "He wasn't even aware that this new life would not be his for nothing: he was going to have to pay dearly for it, to redeem it by some great exploit in the future…" (*CP* 486).

You have to pay dearly for redemption. To accomplish some great exploit. It doesn't come for nothing. You have to *deserve* it through strenuous free individual effort. *This* is the meaning of Existentialism. The *monologic* meaning of Existentialism within which Bakhtin's dialogism belongs as well. The best of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* comes in chapter two,

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[131] Holquist writes that, like Dostoevsky, Bakhtin too "sees the self as divided" (Holquist 52). As we have seen in our comparative analysis of Wallace and Giddens, R.D. Laing applies this Existentialist insight to analytical psychology in *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Madness* (1960). And before him Freud too can be described as an Existentialist. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), he too writes that the self "is fallen apart into two pieces, one of which rages against the second" (*Group* 52), and then adds that "the piece which behaves so cruelly is not unknown to us" (ibid.).

[132] In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin analyzes the novel as the representation of the "Manichean sense of opposition and struggle that he sees at the heart of existence" (Holquist, "Introduction" xviii). Like Dostoevsky and Wallace, he sees the novel as the formal representation of the truth of the ontology of Being. He reiterates the idea in "Epic and Novel: Towards a Methodology for the Study of the Novel" (1941). Here, Bakhtin opposes the novel to the essay. The novel is the formal representation of the chaos of post-industrial civilization. The epic is the formal representation of our past traditions and myths and their affirmation of a unitary, necessary meaning of the world. This unites him with György Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* (1916-20) and Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946). Lukács sees the same opposition but differs in that he sees the novel as a fall rather than a liberation (see chapter "On the Intimacy of Literature and Philosophy in Modernity"). Auerbach opposes Homeric and Biblical texts within this same framework of chaos and unity.

where Bakhtin describes Dostoevsky as a novelist of ideas, once again anticipating what Wallace would later make his own values. Bakhtin writes that in Dostoevsky "the idea really does become almost the hero of the work" (*Problems* 78), because in his works "all of reality becomes an element of the character's self-consciousness" (ibid. 48), and in turn "the idea itself can preserve its power to mean, its full integrity as an idea, only when self-consciousness is the dominant in the artistic representation of the hero" (ibid. 79).

It's striking to see how well these words describe Wallace's own poetics. Of course, we all know that the negative side of self-consciousness was among Wallace's greatest concerns. But the positive side of self-consciousness, to him, was a necessity, both in terms of individual life and in literary terms. After all, he always thought of literature as the mirror of life, and this explains his particular brand of avant-garde writing. Wallace saw the downfall of metafiction as a collapse into negative self-consciousness, but he never disregarded the great original power of the form becoming conscious of itself. As a result, he tried to create a form that would inherit the positives from the past while avoiding the negative. Because a life is a human life, and an action is a human action, only when it is conscious of itself. And an idea is a proper, fully developed, and truly personal idea, only when the self is conscious of retaining that idea.

But of course, the danger of plummeting into the dark side of self-consciousness is always lurking. And it finds its most explicit coherent consequences in what Sartre describes as the terror of the Other's look. And here too, what Wallace and Dostoevsky create, and how Bakhtin interprets Dostoevsky, coincide perfectly. Bakhtin writes about *Notes from Underground* that

> What the Underground Man thinks about most of all is what others think or might think about him; he tries to keep one step ahead of every other consciousness, every other thought about him, every other point of view on him. At all the critical moments of his confession he tries to anticipate the possible definition or evaluation others might make of him, to guess the sense and tone of that evaluation, and tries painstakingly to formulate these possible words about himself by others, interrupting his own speech with the imagined rejoinders of others. [...] The hero from the underground eavesdrops on every word someone else says about him, he looks at himself, as it were, in all the mirrors of other people's consciousnesses, he knows all the possible refractions

of his image in those mirrors" (ibid. 53).

Bakhtin then applies this reading as a general consideration about all of Dostoevsky's characters. This further proves that Adam Kelly is wrong when, in "Development through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas" (2012), he argues that – compared with Dostoevsky – Wallace "adds an extra element to the mix, which rests in the anticipatory anxiety his characters feel in addressing others" (ibid. 270). It is not so. This element too was already in Dostoevsky, and Wallace found inspiration in it. It is a fact that becomes most obvious in the confrontation of *Notes from Underground* with *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. And this fact in turn highlights another central concern that Dostoevsky and Wallace share and which Bakhtin analyzes, writing that "Dostoevsky's hero always seeks to destroy that framework of *other people's* words about him that might finalize and deaden him" (ibid. 59).

Once again, this interpretation unites Bakhtin, Dostoevsky, and Wallace with Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and its description of the Other's look as the danger of objectification for the Self. "Hell is other people," and Dostoevsky and Wallace dramatize this infinite conflict that is necessarily inherent in dialogism. But this dramatization opens the most fundamental region of questioning. We have until now reiterated that Wallace looked at this idea of our togetherness in language as the salvation from the horror of solipsism. But can dialogism truly present itself as a sort of salvation? Can the fact that there *is* a relationship between Self and Other be itself the salvation? Because war itself is a form of relationship and a form of dialogue. And Dostoevsky and Wallace and Sartre know it.

Dialogue now appears *not* to be good in itself: peace and war are both, equally, forms of dialogue. The consequences of these reflections we will explore through our readings of Dostoevsky's and Wallace's fiction. And here still, all threads lead us back to Existentialism, because the dialogue that Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and Wallace invoke is a dialogue that appears within the Existentialist worldview. It is Existentialism, therefore, that decides the quality of the dialogue these authors invoke. We shall therefore close this section with a few words on Bakhtin's most explicit Existentialist work, knowing that we will explore Dostoevsky's and Wallace's Existentialism in the following sections.

Bakhtin's most explicit Existentialist work is also his major early work: *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1919-1921). In the "Foreword," Holquist writes that "the themes that first appear here […] will guide Bakhtin's thinking throughout the course of his long life" ("Foreword" ix). The work is about authoring and responsibility, the opposition between

Self and Other, and the infinite responsibility of having no alibi in existence. Bakhtin writes that no act nor selfhood is ever given but "must always and everywhere be *achieved*" (ibid. xii). Human beings must account for their being. They have to take responsibility for their freedom, and this duty is entirely individual: I cannot "abdicate from my *obligative (ought-to-be) uniqueness*" (*TPA* 42). And most specifically, my duty is to take responsibility for my "acknowledgment of my obligative (ought-to-be) uniqueness. It is this affirmation of my non-alibi in Being that constitutes the basis of my life being actually and compellently given *as well as* its being actually and compellently projected as something-yet-to-be-achieved" (ibid. 42).

Here it is again apparent that Bakhtin is a precursor of Sartre. This is the fundamental ontology of Existentialism: I am free and responsible for this freedom, and if I neglect to acknowledge this responsibility I will fail to become a human being. Here is where Bakhtin's central idea of "answerability" arises. I come into Being with a responsibility toward myself: I am responsible for the achievement of my Self. But this is also a responsibility to the world. Everyone comes into Being in this original condition, and so everyone must care for himself, and those who fail to do so leave a hole in the fabric of Being.

In "Art and Answerability" (1919), Bakhtin writes that every individual "must become answerable through and through" (A&A 2). To become answerable means to become responsible for one's own self in the context in which one exists. Our world is running away from individual responsibility, and so is art. The artist too, then, has the duty of reclaiming responsibility and engagement with the world. Again: Bakhtin's philosophy of art anticipates Sartre's "What Is Literature?" (1947), which in turn exercised a crucial influence on Wallace's conception of literature (as we have seen in the dedicated chapter). The thread of Existentialism infuses this side of their thinking as well.

And accordingly, Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* too is an Existentialist work. Bakhtin praises Rabelais because he "seeks to destroy the forces of stasis and official ideology" (*Rabelais* xvi). Rabelais explores the opposition between the stasis of tradition and the movement of modernity. Bakhtin uses him to discuss the danger of chaos but also to argue that the totalitarian character of tradition was an even greater danger, and that chaos is the negative side of what we want and need: the truth of freedom. Therefore, chaos is what we must and want to reckon with because it is the truth and because our freedom depends upon it. In this sense, this work too is Existentialist because it is an apology of the ontology of Existentialism, which makes the freedom of the will possible and attaches all that is of value

to it: Holquist is right when he writes in the prologue that this "book is finally about freedom": a "celebration of liberty," of "the courage needed to establish it," and of "the horrific ease with which it can be lost" (ibid. xxi).[133]

Bakhtin and Rabelais see that the affirmation of freedom entails the rejection of tradition, and this is another insight of Existentialism: to affirm freedom, one must affirm contingency and reject necessity and so reject the cultural forms of necessity, i.e. traditional authorities. To affirm freedom is to affirm that the individual is the only authority. But Bakhtin, Dostoevsky, and Wallace, all maintain an ambiguity with regards to this insight, which belongs to their wave of Existentialism. Because, as Wallace would say, this worldview is "both liberating and exciting and also extremely scary" (Goldfarb 148). If there is no truth out there, no necessity, no authority, then this is exciting because it opens the world to individual freedom, power, and responsibility, which are the origin of all that we value most. But at the same time this is scary, because it places the burden entirely on my shoulders. But most of all because it opens up the danger of pure chaos, of the infinity of interpretations, and so ultimately of our degeneration into nihilism.[134]

Nietzsche knew that only a *Übermensch* could bear the burden of life without a God to turn to. And Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and Wallace belong to the wave of Existentialism that seeks to resolve this ambiguity by trying to find a reconciliation in the affirmation of the coexistence of freedom and necessity, free will and God, transcendence and facticity. But Nietzsche teaches that such reconciliation is impossible. Between freedom and necessity there can only be an either/or. Either existence is destiny (God) or – as Existentialism

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[133] There are also scholars who directly refer to Rabelais's Existentialism. For example, David M. Levin's "Existentialism at the End of Modernity: Questioning the I's Eyes" (1990) argues that "the history of existentialism may be traced back to the Renaissance humanism of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with its defiance of dogmatic authority, […] its faith in the individual, its love of freedom […]. Something of existentialism […] can be seen, for example, in Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), Francois Rabelais (1490-1553), and Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)" (in McBride 351).

[134] In *Between Philosophy and Literature: Bakhtin and the Question of the Subject* (2013), Erdinast-Vulcan explains Bakhtin's version of this ambiguity: "Bakhtin recognizes the fallacy of extending the presumption of Cartesianism—logic-bound, systemic, abstracted from all particularities and contexts—to ethics. But he also knows that contingency is a double-edged sword and is fully aware of the danger of relativism or nihilism lurking at the other end: like his hero Dostoyevsky, he knows that if God—the authorial other—is dead, everything is allowed" (Erdinast-Vulcan 15).

originally affirms – the only necessity is the freedom of Being. But even the Existentialists see the be absolutely devastating consequences of thinking of existence as pure contingency and freedom. The difference between Nietzsche and the above-mentioned authors is that he was the only one to embrace these consequences by virtue of their truth, the only one to not shy away from the devastation they entail. If the truth is that existence is absolutely meaningless, that only you yourself can create a meaning for yourself that is absolutely arbitrary, and that the entire burden of responsibility is solely upon your shoulders, then you should strive to become a *Übermensch* rather than attempt a cowardly escape into Christianity, or dialogism, or other people, the community, etc.

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes that you must rejoice in suffering "so that *you yourself may be* the eternal joy in becoming" (Cambridge 228). To embrace the truth of freedom and take responsibility for self-creation, you must love the *"Lust am Vernichten"*: the joy in destruction, extermination, and annihilation, because these are all necessary for creation. There is no freedom without suffering and destruction, and no justice where the stronger do not dominate the weaker. The suffering of the weak is necessary for the joy of the strong. Your own suffering is necessary for your triumph. Nietzsche shows that the necessary consequence of the affirmation of freedom is the death of God. Individual human creation is possible only if God is dead. God fills the whole of Being. God is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. God cannot be surprised by human actions. But this is destiny, and where is freedom in that? But I do create, and I am free, says Nietzsche. And therefore, there is no God: Being is absolute meaninglessness, chaos, and freedom, of which I am in control.

"I freely create." This is also what Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, Wittgenstein, Sartre and Wallace say to be the capital-T Truth of Being. But these thinkers refuse to derive from this fundamental principle the consequences that Nietzsche derives from it. When they think of the positive values we need, their thoughts turn to the necessity of our traditional authorities. But so the most fundamental question becomes: who stands higher in the hierarchy of modernity? Who leads the thought of freedom closer to its proper consequences, Nietzsche or these other Existentialist group to which Wallace belongs?

The Existentialist Contradiction
in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Pale King*

Introduction

In her "*Prefazione*" ("Preface," 1947) to *Crime and Punishment*, Natalia Ginzburg writes that this "is a dark book, where no one is happy, and there are no glimmers of hope" (viii, my translation). The novel is pervaded by "chilling horror, torment and revolt (ibid.). Raskolnikov's rational musings give life only to specters "of suffering and misery" (vi).

Ginzburg encapsulates the phenomenology of the novel. We want to understand *why* the novel is so dark, to delve into its essence and see that this fictional world *had to be* dominated by suffering and despair because these are the logical conclusions of Dostoevsky's most fundamental beliefs. Dostoevsky meant to write cautionary tales, but his works took a life of their own. Dostoevsky saw (almost) right down into the deepest essence of what we think and feel, but his novels surpass even their own intentionality. As Shestov said: Dostoevsky saw the terrifying truth of our tragedy and then tried to run away from the terror.

Dostoevsky and Wallace share this trajectory. They both dedicated their entire work to finding redemption from evil. Their research led them into the darkest recesses of human thought, from which they both turned away in terror, hoping for a salvation that they couldn't explain nor ultimately believe in. What constantly comes forward in their works is the *feeling* that rationality entails despair. This feeling then becomes hope that rationality is false, and so becomes faith: faith that the necessary terror that rationality shows is *not* really the ultimate truth.

But faith could never overthrow the feeling of rational truth for them. Being children of the age, they could never bring themselves to believe what is doubtful (faith) and discard what seems certain (rationality). This is why their stories offer us grand representations of rationality led to its logical conclusions (or close enough). We begin our exploration of their works by confronting *Crime and Punishment* and *The Pale King* because these are the two novels in which they make their monologism – and therefore their affirmation of the truth of Existentialism – most obvious. This will help us understand how Existentialism infuses all

of their works.

Dostoevsky and Wallace hoped Existentialism could save us. This is the fundamental monologic meaning of all of their works. For example, Ginzburg knows that Razumikhin is the hero of *C&P* because he is the embodiment of moral balance, optimism, insightful thought, cordiality, and good will. We say that she's right because Razumikhin embodies the novel's monologic ideal: the noble spirit of healthy thinking and bright acting and of all the positive values that Dostoevsky wants to affirm. Razumikhin opposes all the "progressives" (socialists, rationalists, westerners) who subsume humanity to theory, thinking that rationality can grasp everything about life. He looks at contemporary science and empiricism and sees that they still know *nothing* about the true essence of human life: consciousness and free will. He stands for the living process of life, the human soul and its individual freedom of the will. He stands against rationality because it loses sight of and negates these truths.

This is the monologic truth that Dostoevsky fictionalizes in *Crime and Punishment*. But its highest affirmation comes not through Razumikhin but in the novel's ending, when Raskolnikov's chance at redemption is presented to us as the *choice* that he must make of his own free will: he must *choose* to bow before Sonia; he must *choose* humility and love; and to truly be saved, he must choose the right thing, through strenuous effort of the will, every day until the end. Only the effort of this constant free choice to worship and to honor the worship will save him. This is monologic message of the ending of *CP*: it is Dostoevsky's warning that only Christian Existentialism can save you from unbearable despair.

Wallace's works aren't as Christian as Dostoevsky's, but their morality is just the secular version of this same Existentialism. As we have already seen, *This Is Water* says that salvation can only come by accepting the burden of the effort and responsibility of choosing how to (individually) construct meaning from experience. Wallace's secular Existentialism is ultimately equal to the Christian Existentialism of Dostoevsky. The content of *This Is Water* is instantiated in all of Wallace's novels just as Dostoevsky's Existentialist ideal infuses all of his works. That they both wanted to believe in Existentialist salvation even while they were aware of many of the dangers of Existentialism. What neither of them could see was that Existentialism entails nihilism: the inescapable evil and suffering that they knew human beings cannot live with.

Wallace's Secular Existentialism in *The Pale King*

In *The Pale King*, Stuart Nichols utters the most explicit affirmation of the fundamental ontological truth of Existentialism in all of Wallace's work:

> Maybe it's existential. I'm talking about the individual US citizen's deep fear, the same basic fear that you and I have and that everybody else has except nobody ever talks about it except existentialists in convoluted French prose. Or Pascal. Our smallness, our insignificance and mortality, yours and mine, the thing that we all spend all our time not thinking about directly, that we are tiny and at the mercy of large forces and that time is always passing and that every day we've lost one more day that will never come back and our childhoods are over and our adolescence and the vigor of youth and soon our adulthood, that everything we see around us all the time is decaying and passing, it's all passing away, and so are we, so am I, and given how fast the first forty-two years have shot by it's not going to be long before I too pass away, whoever imagined that there was a more truthful way to put it than "die," "pass away" (*TPK* 145).

Nichols presents the deep fear of being described by Existentialism as the core foundation of all of human actions—the passage is his response to a conversation about the contemporary social situation in the USA. He understands that the nucleus of this fear is the idea of nothingness. We think of "our insignificance and mortality," of our destiny to "die" and "pass away."

Nichols too, then, raises the question of how can we live knowing that becoming is the only truth? Because of course – just like Raskolnikov –, Nichols has no doubt that we *are* insignificant and mortal and that this gives us reason to live in fear. The terror of nothingness that Nichols summons takes us back to the tragedies of Ancient Greece, but the Greeks had their *epistéme* to save the essence of all things from nothingness, the Christians had God to save their souls for eternity; today, we don't believe in any of those old delusions, but this leaves us with a void, we are unbelievers who *believe* only in science and have no reason to hope for anything, and so no means for coping with the suffering of existence. Because proper rationality shows that "scientific progress" and "secular values" are delusions too.

The problem of nothingness and annihilation may seem abstract, but you do not

need to worry about the afterlife to see its concrete consequences. *Why* should you consider this moment of your life as meaningful? What makes it worth living? *Why* should you endure this pain? *Why* not get it over with right now? *Why* not use every other living being as a means to your end? What *reasons* guide your answers to these questions in this meaningless and gratuitous existence that is here for no reason at all and is governed either by scientific determinism or pure chaos and will end in absolute nothingness?

These are the questions that Existentialism tries to answer, taking for granted that the absolute meaninglessness of life-in-itself *is* the fundamental truth of ontology. Wallace takes it for granted too, and he thus confronts the despair inherent to our interpretation of the world: the despair of becoming, of it all being meaningless and destined to annihilation. Our Existentialist despair is our *feeling* that we need reasons for living in contrast with our *knowing* that there is none. Wallace's answer to this fundamental problem is the answer of Existentialism and of our entire culture: through free will we can create the meaning and value of our lives. This will be apparent in our analysis of *The Pale King*.

Wallace's Existentialism is today's commonsense: the universe is meaningless but through free will we create our reasons for living. This also explains why determinism became an ever-greater fear in Wallace's work as years passed. Determinism began to appear to him as ever more difficult to deny, scientifically. And this is why the extent of his concern for our "hard-wiring" becomes so prominent in his later works: *Oblivion* (2004), *This Is Water* (2005), and *The Pale King* (2011), where a character famously asks "What am I, a machine?" (*TPK* 372).[135]

But determinism for Wallace (as for Dostoevsky) was a problem because he believed that it would take away all possibilities of meaning for life, and so all reasons for living. The central narrative arc of *The Pale King* about whether the IRS will replace all human elements with machines is (also) a concrete metaphor for this fundamental problem of existence: is there a human element (i.e. is there free will and the human creation of meaning) in this world or not? And consequently: will we create a society that respects the sovereignty of each individual or one that treats everyone like a machine (evaluating functionality)? In his fiction, Wallace (like Dostoevsky) sets down these kinds of relationships between the fundamental

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[135] See Wouters (2012) for further analysis on this specific line. Also, Giles (2012) too notes how Wallace was fundamentally invested in human authenticity while taking seriously (worrying about) pragmatist, deconstructionist, neuroscientific views of the self.

ontological questions of Being, the subsequent social and individual problems of daily life, and the fiction's setting.

Wallace's secular Existentialism is made manifest in the belief that: if I am just a machine, then life is not worth living. He never abandoned this belief even though he was convinced (especially in later years) that we are largely predetermined. Largely but not wholly, this is key to Existentialist values: there is facticity, but also transcendence, and transcendence is free will. For both Dostoevsky and Wallace, free will is necessary for life to be meaningful and therefore bearable, livable. Wallace's characters never reach the insight that "if there is no God [no Meaning out there], then everything is permitted." Here Wallace stops one step short of Dostoevsky, whom also realized that meaning should be out there (that it cannot created). Yet, Wallace's characters share with Dostoevsky's nihilists the same feeling of the meaninglessness of life, and they all act accordingly. In what follows, we want to show (by way of example) that the basis of the existential predicament of the characters in *The Pale King* is the same of Raskolnikov: it's suffering that pervades the concrete daily lives of people once they believe in the truth of becoming.

A mantra of Wallace's, which recurs in *TPK*, is that "reflection is paralyzing" (ibid. 554). All critics have noted this, seeing in reflection itself the problem. Yet, the more fundamental question is: *why* is reflection paralyzing? Reflection in itself is empty of content, and it may very well be enlivening. In Wallace, reflection is paralyzing because the truth it sees inside is *chaos*. *Chaos* is paralyzing, not reflection itself. And when Wallace, at times (like Dostoevsky), attempts to argue that reflection and abstraction are themselves the problem, *he* (not his characters) is engaged in the escapism he so dreaded.

Looking within any character in *The Pale King*, we find the truth of chaos embodied. The first character that appears in the novel is Claude Sylvanshine. He's affected by a condition called *Random-Fact Intuition* (ibid. 120). He's engulfed by the "abundance" and "irrelevance" of all the "intrusive facts" (ibid. 120-1) that constitute his daily life. The meaningless chaos of the stimuli that affect his mind is "overwhelming" (ibid. 123). What seems impossible to him is precisely to find any sort of meaning in this chaos: "perhaps one in every found thousand such facts is relevant or helpful" (ibid. 122). This is the structure of the unbearable suffering he feels.

His condition is a symbol for the truth of life: the human mind struggles with the chaos of becoming. Sylvanshine is "under stress" (ibid. 7) because "nothing would hold still in his head" (ibid. 8), and this "storm in his head" (ibid. 11) condemns him to suffering and

anguish that are unbearable: Sylvanshine feels "the edge of the shadow of the wing of Total Terror and Disqualification pass over him" (ibid. 26). This condition must thus be alleviated somehow, and Wallace's proposal for alleviation is the classic answer of French Existentialism (including Pascal): *yes, one can bear the chaos of becoming, and the meaninglessness and annihilation of existence, but only if one takes the responsibility of freely choosing to construct meaning from experience.*

This is why Wallace focused on paying attention and worship. *This Is Water* is fictionalized in *The Pale King*. In order to overcome the meaningless chaos of becoming, Sylvanshine must learn the "anti-stress technique called Thought Stopping" (ibid. 17): he must learn "to pay close attention to his surroundings" (ibid. 23) in order to make life meaningful and "avert […] anxiety" (ibid.). *This* is the answer of Wallace's secular Existentialism to the suffering of becoming: to freely create the meaning of one's life, to impose order upon chaos (but one must do this for oneself and by oneself, and therefore avoiding madness and suicide becomes a matter of one's choice).

Dostoevsky looks to God to find Meaning. Wallace looks to one's own creation of meaning. This is the difference between their Christian and secular Existentialism. In this sense, one may say that Dostoevsky looks without while Wallace looks within. Ultimately, though, this is not true, because Dostoevsky makes believing in God a *choice*, and so he too looks within. This looking-within is the essence of Existentialism and so of their thinking. If we compare Sylvanshine's condition with what Razumikhin says in *Crime and Punishment* – Razumikhin being the hero who voices Dostoevsky's deepest beliefs –, we are struck by the extent of the alignment between Dostoevsky and Wallace: "We have the facts! They say. But facts aren't everything; at least half the secret lies in how you manage to deal with the facts!" (*CP* 121). Wallace made Razumikhin's lesson his own. *You* have to learn to manage to deal with the facts; if you don't, hell will break loose. It's on you.

- The near-religiosity of Wallace's secular Existentialism: Raskolnikov won't simply be saved by God. He must choose to worship through strenuous efforts (a great exploit is needed, with a great price to pay) to save himself. Likewise, nothing will save Sylvanshine either. He must impose order on the chaos of becoming by taking responsibility and constructing meaning from experience. This is why we say that free will is the core of Dostoevsky's and Wallace's beliefs: not only do they regard it as an unquestionable evidence, but they also think of it as the only possible source of meaning, and so they hope to find salvation in it.

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Wallace's vicinity to religious thinking arises within this framework. There's a *feeling* at times in Wallace's work that rationality must move toward belief to save itself (yet Wallace always wavers here and finally comes back to rationality). To hope to overcome the meaningless suffering of the chaos of becoming, you must learn to construct meaning from experience, but to construct meaning, you must choose what to *worship*, because you need an ideal to guide your interpretation of life: "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship" (*TIW* 98-101).[136]

To truly live you must *choose* what to worship. You either choose a good ideal (your God) or you will die either by actually killing yourself or by living an unconscious, nihilist life. This is Wallace's fundamental monologic message, and it is also Dostoevsky's. To live is to worship, only worship can keep you alive. But that Wallace chooses the word "worship" underlies a deeper truth that he doesn't even fully realize, and this deeper truth entails a *problem*. That you need to choose what to "worship" in order to construct meaning from experience means that the ideal (the God) you choose is not an evident truth but a matter of faith, and so that rationality cannot justify any one choice of an ideal over another, and so finally that every worship (being a choice) is entirely arbitrary. One resulting problem here is that Wallace's argument becomes *entirely* Utilitarian (*à la* Pascal's wager), and we know that Wallace himself knew very well the limits of Utilitarianism. But the worst problem is that one *cannot* truly worship *x* knowing that the worship of *x* is entirely arbitrary and utilitarian (i.e. not actually believing deep down that there is *reason* to think that *x* is the Truth).

When Wallace says that "an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it J.C. or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-

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[136] In this sense, while Timpe (2014) is right that *TIW* is a warning against self-deception, he's wrong in insisting on religious self-deception particularly. Wallace did not regard religion as a form of self-deception. Rather, as Bustillos (2014) writes, Wallace's was "a highly inclusive, pro-Enlightenment, post-secularist, post-postmodern approach" to Christianity" (137). For example, Brick (2014, 2020) argues that "Wallace's spirituality was a genuine personal interest" (67), and Rob Short (2020) that AA was Wallace's first serious engagement with religion. Particularly interesting is Patrick Horn's (2014) analysis of Wallace's Wittgensteinian view of language as a form of recognition of the Mystery that is inherent to life. In 2020, we have seen the publication of the essay collection *David Foster Wallace and Religion* (McGowan and Brick eds.), dedicated to the exploration of the meaning of Wallace's secular Christianity. Finally, O'Connell (2015) "contends that David Foster Wallace should be read as a contemporary Christian existentialist" (266)—but in doing so, he loses sight of Wallace's ever-present secularism. For another exploration of Wallace's spirituality, see Mullins (2018).

goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive" (ibid. 102), his Utilitarianism becomes evident, and he sets aside a fundamental question that cannot be overlooked at all: does any of these ideals display its truth, and if so, which one?

Dostoevsky too makes a Utilitarian argument for belief by dooming his nihilists, but (like Pascal) he also finally believes that the Christian God *is* the Truth. Wallace was never ready to make such a step, and this is why he remained a secular thinker. But his vicinity to religiosity (to worship and God) manifests his feeling for the limits of rationality. The meaning of the otherwise unexplainable interpolation in §36 of *The Pale King* must be traced back to this: Wallace was never sure that secularism could ever find any "recovery from rationalist despair" (*TPK* 401). This is why this interpolation is dedicated to the stigmata of Padre Pio, St. Veronica Giuliani, and St. Francis of Assisi. We're here told that believers report seeing stigmata on said saints, but that the sciences say that "hands lack the anatomical mass required to support the weight of an adult human" (ibid.), and that "skeletons confirm that classical crucifixion required nails to be driven through the subject's wrists, not his hands" (ibid.).

Belief in the stigmata doesn't make any rational sense, but the narrator of the novel – by the name of "David Wallace" – tells us that he agrees with "existential theologist E.M. Cioran […] in his 1937 *Lacrimi si sfinti*" (ibid.) about the "necessarily simultaneous *truth* and *falsity* of the stigmata" (ibid.). In other words, "David Wallace" believes that faith is both true and false. The stigmata are false from the rationalist perspective, but they are true because they truly save from "rationalist despair." What the novel points to here is once again the central monologic message of all of Wallace's work: choose carefully what to worship or you will die under the despair of unbearable suffering; in life, there is no such thing as not worshipping.

The difference between Dostoevsky's and Wallace's Existentialism is all here, then: Dostoevsky actually believes in the Christian God while Wallace believes in none but recognizes the value of worship. Here's also where they have to solve opposite problems: Dostoevsky's is how to actually defend the truth of God and Wallace's is how to worship something you don't truly believe in. Instead, the problems they share are the fundamental problems of Existentialism: can meaning actually be constructed by an individual? Can solipsism, antagonism, the deep feeling of the void of nothingness be avoided within an ontology of becoming and free will?

Raskolnikov must pay a high price through a great exploit. The individual of *This Is Water* must do what "is unimaginably hard" (*TIW* 135) and make it "the job of a lifetime" (ibid. 136), through "attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort" (ibid. 120). Of Claude Sylvanshine we're told that "it was true: the entire ball game […] was that you gave attention to vs. what you willed yourself to not" (*TPK* 14). Sylvanshine himself knows that his paralysis has one ultimate cause: "Sylvanshine viewed himself as weak or defective in the area of will" (ibid.). Sylvanshine's suffering is a matter of weakness of will: that is, it is his own fault. He's suffering because he's not taking responsibility for constructing meaning from experience, for achieving true freedom by establishing order upon the chaos of becoming, for choosing what to worship.

Wallace of course never meant for these judgments to arise through his works. But don't they? Aren't we just taking notice of the necessary consequences of the thought that arises through his works? Sylvanshine's predicament is Existentialist to the core, and if his suffering is a matter of weakness of will – meaning, in Wallace's framework: a matter of his not making the *free choice* to pay attention and exert discipline and effort in order not to suffer –, why should we be compassionate to him, and most importantly why should he be compassionate to himself? Because it is a matter of will, then it must all be his responsibility and fault.

In what follows, we will see that Existentialism pervades not only the lives of Raskolnikov and Sylvanshine but also of all the other characters in *The Pale King*. We begin by noticing how nihilism follows from the thought of becoming both in Raskolnikov and Chris Fogle, and then we move on to analyze what has already emerged in these initial pages: that Existentialism – most specifically: the thought of becoming and free will – cannot offer any answer to nihilism, solipsism, and antagonism, because it *entails* them. The thought of "insignificance and mortality" that Nichols knows generates all the suffering of the world is the thought of free will. This is what Dostoevsky and Wallace could never truly see: that the thought free will *is* the thought of insignificance and mortality and chaos and solipsism and war. There can be no escape within this ontology.

On the Relationship Between Loneliness and Abstraction

Wallace inherits from Dostoevsky the idea that there is a vicious cycle that leads from

loneliness, through abstraction, to nihilism. All of their nihilists are shut-ins who become hyper-reflexive and trapped in anti-functional and paralysis-inducing thought. It is *certainly* part of both authors' intentionality to argue that nihilism *derives* from loneliness: the isolated individual develops a detachment from reality, he becomes lost in abstraction and progressively entrapped in obsessional thinking, which leads to paralysis.[137]

But there is an escapism inherent to the postulation of this cause-effect relationship, which satisfies some of our intuitions but not all. Here, a contradiction arises in Dostoevsky's and Wallace's thought every time it becomes obvious that human communion, by itself, cannot solve their characters' plights: when love presents itself as salvation from nihilism, it's not love that saves, it's whether the nihilist becomes able to choose love. That is: the nihilist must, by himself and within himself, become able to choose to accept love. *This* is salvation, but this process is prior to human communion, it is lonely, it occurs entirely within the self. And this means that nihilism is *not* the result of loneliness; it's the other way around: when the individual chooses nihilism, the result will be loneliness, and when the individual chooses to worship, the result will be communion.

But this means – at least in this sense – that Dostoevsky's and Wallace's warnings against loneliness and abstraction as the causes of nihilism are false, contradictory, and ineffective. Because in this sense loneliness is the *result* of nihilism, and abstraction is what occurs prior to all choices and is therefore unavoidable: before you choose what to worship you must think about it. This is why love itself cannot be the solution, ultimately. The problem remains finding a reason, a reason not to think nihilism is the truth, a reason to accept love.

In the beginning of *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov is in an "irritable frame of mind, almost like hypochondria. He had retreated so deeply into himself, withdrawn so completely from everyone else, that he not only feared meeting his landlady—he feared meeting anybody" (*CP* 3). This sounds just like a description of one of Wallace's characters: they're all alone, at home, withdrawn into themselves, in a state of fear that borders into insanity, afraid even of just being seen by other people. (We'll later see that the terror of the Other's look is inextricable from nihilism because all of these sufferings belong to the essence of Existentialism, i.e. to affirmation of becoming, contingency, and free will.)

In this sense too, then, Raskolnikov is a predecessor. *Crime and Punishment* constantly

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[137] This is the process described by Ramal (2014).

repeats that "he had utterly cut himself off from everyone, as a tortoise withdraws into a shell" (ibid. 26); it also says that "obsessional people who focus excessively on one particular thing, are like that" (ibid.). Raskolnikov's isolation is the consequence – not the cause – of his thinking. In fact, everything he does is the consequence of his thinking. As the officer Porfiry Petrovich rightly says: "he's committed a murder, two murders, all because of a theory" (ibid. 403). And here is where we find the greatness of Dostoevsky, and Wallace too: theirs are novel of ideas because they show us how ideas possess people, i.e. how theory irrevocably becomes action.

Their warnings against abstract thinking are understandable, their cry is to not travel the paths that lead you to hell. The narrator of *CP* tells us that Raskolnikov "was young" and so "had an abstract and therefore cruel outlook on life" (ibid. 286). Later, Porfiry says the same: "Rodion Romanovich […] you're still young; you're in your first youth, as it were, and consequently you rate the human intellect above anything else, as all young people do. You're seduced by playful wit and abstract arguments" (ibid. 302).

This same warning occurs in *The Pale King* as well (as in all other fictions by both Dostoevsky and Wallace). Young Chris Fogle's nihilism is presented as inextricable from and caused by abstract thinking. Fogle describes even his humanities classes as the institutionalization of nihilism: "everything was fuzzy and abstract and open to interpretation and then those interpretations were open to still more interpretations" (ibid. 157); "fuzziness and abstraction and endless interpretation are the essence of subjects like psychology, political science, and literature" (ibid.); "even the whole point of these classes themselves was that nothing meant anything, that everything was abstract and endlessly interpretable" (ibid.).

In university, Fogle learned to abstract life, including his own life. This is how he became a nihilist: thinking about himself in abstraction. It was only much later – he tells us – that he learned that if you engage in "an intentional bout of concentrated major thinking, where you sit down with the conscious intention of confronting major questions like '*Am I currently happy?*' or '*What, ultimately, do I really care about and believe in?*' or […] '*Am I essentially a worthwhile, contributing type of person or a drifting, indifferent, nihilistic person?*,*' then the questions often end up not answered but more like beaten to death, so attacked from every angle and each angle's different objections and complications that they end up even more abstract and ultimately meaningless than when you started. Nothing is achieved this way" (*TPK* 192-3).

Fogle's is a warning against abstraction: only loneliness and paralysis will result from dwelling too long in rational thinking! It's one of Dostoevsky's warnings, and it recurs in all

of Wallace's works: in *The Broom of the System*, Lenore's paralysis results from her questioning her own reality; in *Infinite Jest*, addicts are victims of "analysis-paralysis" (*IJ* 203); in "Good Old Neon," it is Neal's rational "firepower" ("GON" 154) that leads him to kill himself. But this kind of warning must remain ineffective. To think of avoiding abstraction is, first, escapism, and second, impossible, because ultimately abstraction is just thinking.

The contradiction becomes obvious and concrete if we think about Dostoevsky and Wallace as flesh-and-blood human beings: two individuals who spent their lives writing books looking for answers to abstract questions who warn against abstraction. Abstraction *is* dangerous, but it is dangerous because so are the contents of rational thinking, and there is no way out except confrontation. Dostoevsky and Wallace themselves become two of their characters: two people who warn against abstraction while they can't stop abstracting.

In this sense, nihilism is unafraid skepticism. When one becomes aware that there are questions that need answers one cannot stop until answers are found. The nihilist is one who's never found the answers and has the courage to live according to this truth: I've asked myself why I should go on living and I found no positive answer. The nihilist refuses all cowardly escapes, he accepts nothing but the truth; if rationality shows that there are no reasons for living, then so be it. Characters like Raskolnikov or Ivan Karamazov or Neal of "Good Old Neon" *know* that this cry to stop abstracting is only the retreat of cowards: stop thinking or you won't function anymore—but who said I should care about functionality? Other characters, like Hal and the addicts of *Infinite Jest*, Lenore in *The Broom of the System*, and Terry Schimdt in "Mister Squishy," they *feel* that stopping is impossible, and they will go on questioning existence until they find an answer: an answer is a reason, i.e. an ideal that can display its right and value through evidence and argumentation, i.e. not something that you just arbitrarily choose to worship because it is convenient.

An unknown character in *The Pale King* says, "I don't reflect much: reflection is paralyzing" (*TPK* 554). Raskolnikov would tell him he's a coward and he'd be right. Deep down, Dostoevsky and Wallace knew this, and this is why they themselves kept on looking for answers throughout their entire lives. They were both children of this age, as Dostoevsky writes in his famous letter to Mme. Fonvisin. In *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* (2003), Wallace begins with his interpretation of the tendency to insanity of the greatest mathematicians in history; his answer is that their insanity is likely fueled by their refusal to escape "the dreads and dangers of abstract thinking" (*E&M* 13), i.e. the dreads and dangers that we common, functional people will do everything to flee and forget, hoping

to live lives as terror-free as possible.

But Wallace's answer entails that great mathematicians gone insane were martyrs for human rationality and progress. They had the courage to choose to face "potentially bedridden-for-life paralysis" (ibid. 16) rather than escape into the dogmas of commonsense, and they did it with one single goal in mind: to understand the truth. This is the necessary conclusion of Wallace's thinking; his warning against abstraction pales in comparison. Great mathematicians show that there is nothing abstract about abstraction. Abstract thinking is thinking, and it dominates our daily lives. The entire global economy is founded upon the abstractions of mathematics: abstraction is all too concrete. And Wallace knew all too well that not to think would be to try an impossible escape, to live an unself-aware, unconscious and dead life (*This is Water*), to recoil from the truth that paying attention would manifest (*The Pale King*).

When they try to warn against abstraction, Dostoevsky and Wallace contradict themselves (Dostoevsky *theorizes* in favor of God), and their warning has no power under the necessary development of their thinking that leads the opposite way. Their nihilists are people who know that someone should never accept to settle for dogmas in fear of the consequences of rational thinking. They want to know why, and they know that wanting to know why is the first step to awareness. When this *why* manifests itself in one's mind, there is no escaping it. There is no escape from the mind and so no escape from thinking. To try to escape is to try to escape from yourself, and there is only one way to do that, the way that Dostoevsky and Wallace try everything in their power to avoid. Raskolnikov is the free thinker who asks why and never stops until he finds an answer. For him, what we call nihilism is just what rational thinking must lead to, it is the truth one sees in sincerity and courage.

Chris Fogle's Nihilism in *The Pale King*

Nihil is the Latin word for nothing. Nihilism is the thought of nothingness, "the belief that nothing in the world has a real existence" (*OED*). A nihilist is one who treats the world as if it were nothing. The most basic feeling of nothingness is "the belief that life is meaningless" (*OED*); this is exactly the fundamental problem that affects Dostoevsky's and Wallace's characters. But this is no wonder, because Existentialism is a nihilism. Existentialism thinks that life is absurd, i.e. absolutely meaningless. This is a *fact*, for Existentialism, but then

Existentialists think we can live with this knowledge, but this is impossible.

Nothingness (absurdity, meaninglessness) is *the* existential predicament of our time. We have rejected all traditional authorities and think that scientific naturalism is the truth. We know that life is meaningless, and we like to say it. We pay lip service to this knowledge and state that it is up to us to create meaning. We look at nihilism, paralysis, and suicide and call those people "unwell," "sick," "lazy," "violent," "criminal." But do we ever stop to ask ourselves why are we so sure of our beliefs? Do we ever ask ourselves *why* and *how* should I create a meaning that I know is just my arbitrary wish? What reason do I have to say that I am right and they (people who don't do anything, people who are mad, suicidal, murderous) are wrong?

Dostoevsky's and Wallace's characters are the kind of people who seek answers to these questions, the kind of people who don't just rest on the laurels and the will to power (to affirm the *truth* of its ungrounded claims) of commonsense. They are the kind of people who ask *why*, knowing that without a *why* our lives are arbitrary falsehoods that dominate each other. The problem for them is that as soon as they ask these questions their demise begins. They wander through all of rationality and can find no answer. This rationalist despair is their unbearable suffering, what they all have in common. But if there's a path to salvation it begins at the crossroads with the way to hell. Dostoevsky and Wallace know this, and so their characters move us to ask ourselves the most dangerous questions: why choose life at all?

§22 of *The Pale King* is an endless monologue by one Chris Fogle about how he came to work for the IRS. It begins with: "I think the truth is that I was the worst kind of nihilist. […] My essential response to anything was 'Whatever'" (*TPK* 156). Fogle is talking about his university years. "Whatever" is the automatic response to meaninglessness; thus, that his general attitude was "Whatever" means that he thought that life itself was meaningless; in other words, "Whatever" is the exclamation of nihilism. For us today "Whatever" is a fairly ordinary attitude, either a cool show or a standard phase of a young life. But we seldom reflect on true consequence of truly thinking "Whatever" to the end. This is what Wallace wants us to reflect upon with Fogle, and it's what Dostoevsky fictionalizes most of all in Stavrogin of *Demons*: nothing matters; therefore, everything is permitted; but in the end, everything is meaningless.

The young Fogle was a human being who asked *why*: why live, what for, why choose one thing over another, why do anything at all? And he wasn't the only one: "Everyone I

knew and hung out with was a wastoid, and we knew it" (ibid. 166), "our common word for this kind of nihilist at the time was *wastoid*" (ibid. 164). Nihilism is what happens when you ask why and find nothing. Wallace makes nihilism a communal plight in his fiction in order to represent our culture's inability to answer our whys: i.e. to say that nihilism is the existential predicament of our time. We are generations "directionless and lost" (ibid.), suffering from "a weird kind of narcissistic despair" (ibid.). There are no ideals to worship, nothing larger than the self. "Why live?" is now a serious question. At university, Fogle found a community in which nihilism was shared, it was the environment, it was "romanticized" (ibid.), nothing to shun.

The solution can never be to prohibit someone from asking legitimate questions. Who tries the prohibition way is *afraid* of the truth. Fogle asks why and sees only absurdity: that "none of it meant anything" (ibid. 160) and that to live with this feeling is to be "dead" (ibid.) already. His fundamental question was: what can make life meaningful? What ideal stands so that no negativity (no postmodernism, no relativism, no nihilism) can destroy it? Sitting on the couch, doing nothing, high on Obetrol, staring at the TV, Fogle realized that "I might be a real nihilist […]. That I drifted and quit because nothing meat anything, no one choice was really better. That I was […] free to choose 'whatever' because it didn't really matter" (ibid. 225).

The young Fogle experiences the realization of the truth of the chaos of becoming and of the inherent meaninglessness of existence, i.e. the realization of the absolute lack of foundations. Fogle's great insight is that, since nothing means anything, then the first consequence is that every choice is possible ("I was free to choose 'whatever'") – i.e. Raskolnikov's and Ivan's everything is permitted –, because there is no meaning that limits actions (no ideal out there to say what is good and bad), and so I can create whatever meaning I want, whatever good and bad I want: I can call murder good and altruism bad. But this is only the first, more superficial consequence of the truth. The second and final consequence is that, since nothing means anything, then *no choice is possible at all*, because every choice presents itself as equally meaningless, there is no *reason* to do anything, and so paralysis becomes the only rational option. A rational reaction to becoming aware of this truth is to kill oneself, because life now presents itself for what it is: all meaninglessness except unbearable suffering and paralysis. This is exactly the process Stavrogin goes through in *Demons*: he lives the "everything is permitted" to the end (more than any other character in the history of literature) until he realizes that that "everything" was in fact a *nothing*, and so

he kills himself because suicide at least ends the negativity of this life: the negativity of suffering, boredom, and paralysis.

The young Fogle presents a dawning awareness of the thought that Stavrogin made concrete. Fogle too sees that absurdity is what opens the world to free will, and it is also what makes impossible, unbearable. This was the insight of his young nihilism. But that is the Fogle of the past. He now presents himself as more mature and as having overcome nihilism. That is, he claims to have found an answer to the *why*. We'll see later what his answer is. Now let's see how Raskolnikov begins from the same nihilism of the young Fogle, only to then actually proceed to truly lead rationality (almost) to its concrete logical conclusions.

Raskolnikov and the Truth of Nihilism

- *Three kinds of nihilism*: Raskolnikov's journey begins with the negation of all those discourses that derive false consequences from the fundamental principles of rationality. It is useful thus to know that Dostoevsky's novels present three kinds of nihilism. Two kinds are very serious and are theorized by the nihilist (anti-)heroes of his works, i.e. those individuals who are capable of truly thinking for themselves, like Raskolnikov (the Underground Man, Ippolit, etc.), and who can lead rationality to its logical conclusions. Another kind of nihilism, on the other hand, is treated with irony so as to exhibit its foolishness. This is the fashionable nihilism of the socialists and of whoever thinks that science can found an ethics of compassion, i.e. traditional ethical propositions like "Thou Shalt Not Kill" or "Thou Shalt Love Thy Neighbor." Dostoevsky's works constantly make fun of the "parrots" of this thinking. In *Crime and Punishment*, for example, the parrots are Piotr Petrovich and Luzhin.

Raskolnikov openly declares his opposition to the pseudo-nihilism of these imbeciles. Criticism knows well that Piotr Petrovich and Luzhin are parodic representations of the kind of fashionable scientism expressed in *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, whom Dostoevsky hated. Raskolnikov shares the same fundamental beliefs that Chernyshevsky holds and so do we all, but he also knows that the logical conclusions of these beliefs are the opposite of what the Russian socialists and the Western secularists claim they are. Raskolnikov knows it and he also demonstrates it, in two steps: the first is to show that the illusion of a *rational egoism that benefits the community* must be overcome by the logical realization that naturalism demands pure utilitarianism, without any ethical boundaries; the

second (and deepest) is to show that even utilitarianism must be overcome in favor of pure individualism and will to power, because logic finally shows that nothing nor anyone must be respected beside the will of the self.

Sarah J. Young is therefore wrong when she writes – in her "Introduction" to the novel – that Raskolnikov's murder derives "from the utilitarian thinking adopted by the young radicals known as 'nihilists,' who were influenced by the writer and critic Nikolay Chernyshevsky's concept of 'rational egoism'" ("I" xiv). This reading misunderstands the very essence of the novel. Raskolnikov *explicitly* declares that utilitarian thinking is only a delusion; he doesn't murder for utilitarian reasons at all. He murders to see if he can be a Napoleon rather than an average piece of meat like everyone else. *This* is the logical conclusion that he derives from rationality: rational truth manifests the right of the will to power, everything is permitted, the fittest survive, and the law is the will of the strong.

Accordingly, Raskolnikov knows that his inability to kill at will is not a sign of his morality: it is only the manifestation of his pathetic weakness. Napoleon caused the death of 3.5 million people and no conscientious nor earthly nor heavenly law ever stopped him from doing it. He was a great man, capable of saying something new: *he* could overstep the boundaries because he was powerful. Napoleon's only fault was that he lost his final battle. Raskolnikov knows that he'll be sentenced to eight years of penal servitude in Siberia not because he committed a crime but because he's weak and pathetic and so incapable of establishing his will as the law. Napoleon is the great ruler of France, one of the greatest human beings in history, his statues still stand all over Europe, we study him in school. His 3.5 million murders were not crimes because he was powerful. Raskolnikov's two murders are a crime because he's weak. This is why Napoleon was never sentenced to anything like penal servitude in Siberia. All are not equal before the law, nor have they ever been, nor will they ever be. Napoleon was only exiled on the island of Saint Helena to live the rest of his days with his fellow comrades and write his books and that was it, and what he had done was to try to conquer the world by exterminating as many people as needed. If he'd never lost his final battle, he'd never even been exiled. Where is your old traditional Justice here? There are no crime and no justice. Actually, crime is the actions of the weak, and justice is the will of the strong. There are only winning and losing. There is only the power of great men and the pathetic weakness of the masses. This is the greatness of Raskolnikov's thinking. His nihilism is his ability to lead rationality close to its logical conclusions.

- *Fashionable nihilism and its delusions of scientific morality*: Dostoevsky's works show that the idea that there can be a scientific foundation for an ethics of compassion is delusional. By "ethics of compassion" we mean any sort of traditional ethics or morality, any thinking that imposes limits upon the actions of an individual in respect of other people. The specification "of compassion" is needed because – even though we too often forget it – morality and ethics do not mean doing good unto others. Morality and ethics mean to live according to the truth. The *OED* defines morality as "principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour," and as "a particular system of values and principles of conduct." Raskolnikov's murders are moral acts, and so is the terrorism of ISIS. These people are moral in the sense that what they do is in their minds what the truth demands be done. And if they are immoral, it is not because they don't do good unto others, but because what they think is right is actually wrong. If the survival of the fittest is the actual law of the universe, then ethics is to live accordingly. A good action is the action that performs in accordance with the truth, and so with right and justice.

Dostoevsky's nihilists show the truth of scientific morality. This is why they line up against socialism: because it derives the wrong consequences from the right premises. But when westerners use Dostoevsky to denounce socialism and praise western democracies, they exhibit their own complete lack of understanding. This is obvious in that Dostoevsky always refers to nihilism as a European idea, coming from Paris and England, equally inspired by the likes of Charles Fourier and Adam Smith. In his works, Dostoevsky shows that socialism is just another version of the delusions of secular humanism, that Western secularism and Russian socialism are just two equally incoherent mistakes, deriving from a basis – scientific naturalism and, originally, the affirmation of the truth of becoming and chaos – that leads far away from them.

In *Crime and Punishment*, e.g., we meet the socialist utopist Lebeziatnikov and are told that: "Mr Lebeziatnikov, who keeps up with modern ideas, was explaining the other day that in our time, compassion is actually proscribed by science, and that's already the way of things in England, where they have political economy" (*CP* 13). This is the thinking that Dostoevsky debunks through Raskolnikov: "modern ideas" say that "compassion is actually proscribed by science" – Dostoevsky's works unveil the hell hidden beneath this deception. Capitalism and socialism are thus only subsequent problems. The real problem is the scientific and secular interpretation of the world. The problem is "the new fashion for unbelief" (ibid. 36), and that "there aren't any particularly sacred traditions in our educated society these days"

(ibid. 435).

These last two citations immediately remind us of Wallace from "E Unibus Pluram" onwards. And like Wallace, Dostoevsky built fictional worlds in which people couldn't find reasons to live as a result of this new fashion for unbelief. In *CP*, the police officer Ilya Petrovich comments on Raskolnikov's murders that "these days, of course, there are a great many nihilists around," and that "that's understandable; look at the times we live in" (ibid. 468). These times we live in are responsible for murders, but also for "all these suicides happening everywhere—you can't imagine" (ibid. 469). Nihilism takes away all meaning and so all reasons not to murder and all reasons to live.

This is why Dostoevsky hates those who propagate the deception that modern ideas are good and progressive. For Dostoevsky, these are people who don't even understand what they're saying. Non-coincidentally, in *CP* this fashionable scientism is embodied above all in Pyotr Petrovich Luzhin, the clear-cut evil character of the novel: he's egotistical, full of himself, and mean to others, his name derives from *luzha* (puddle), and he wants to blackmail Raskolnikov's sister into a marriage of slavery and then tries to frame Sonya for a theft she didn't commit. Dostoevsky sets Luzhin's scientism in debate against Razumikhin, the hero of the novel who embodies Dostoevsky's Christian Existentialism. *Razum* means "sense," "rationality," "intelligence"; Razumikhin is strong-minded, loyal, resourceful, and entirely committed to his ideals.

Luzhin enters the debate "with a shade of triumph and superiority in his manner" (ibid. 133), knowing that his is the voice of our time. He tells Razumikhin that "you must agree […] that there are advances, or what is nowadays termed progress, if only in the name of science and economic truth" (ibid.). This progress is not just technological but ethical, Luzhin says; we now have a more advanced ethical system which respects both the self-enterprise of the individual and the common good:

> If I had always been told to "love thy neighbour", and I did so, what would be the result? […] The result would be that I would tear my cloak in two and share it with my neighbour, and each of us would be left half-naked […]. But science tells us: "Love yourself above all, for everything on earth is founded on self-interest." […] And economic truth adds that the better that private concerns are managed in our society […], the firmer society's foundations become, and the more the common good is promoted. Hence by acquiring wealth exclusively for

myself alone, I thereby acquire it for all others too (ibid. 133-4).

These are the consequences of "universal progress" (ibid. 134), and of course, we all recognize that Luzhin's thinking is our commonsense of today. But what is most spectacular about Dostoevsky's works is that both his heroes (e.g. Razumikhin) and his anti-heroes (his nihilists, e.g. Raskolnikov) show the falsity of this view. Razumikhin calls Luzhin's thinking "a cliché" (ibid. 133), and the delusion of progress "The 'Crystal Palace'" (ibid. 142), thus showing his (unexpected) kinship with the Underground Man, who's the first to use this expression in *Notes from Underground* to denounce the illusions of contemporary scientific rationality. Dostoevsky's heroes and anti-heroes stand respectively on the last and next-to-last step of the way to the truth. In this sense, Dostoevsky fictionalizes in all of his works the truth that Saint Bishop Tikhon tells Stavrogin in *Demons*: "total atheism is more respectable than worldly indifference […]. A complete atheist stands on the next-to-last upper step to the most complete faith (he may or may not take that step), while the indifferent one has no faith, apart from a bad fear" (*D* 426). Raskolnikov, Ivan, the Underground Man, Kirillov, and Stavrogin stand one step short of the truth, for Dostoevsky. On the other hand, people like Luzhin who believe in modern ideas are just indifferent individuals not worthy of the same respect. There is more truth in Raskolnikov's murders, in Stavrogin's rape of a little girl, and in Kirillov's suicide than there is in Luzhin's legal profession and worldly business.

This is why Razumikhin respects Raskolnikov and does not respect Luzhin, because both Razumikhin and Raskolnikov know that this idea that naked self-interest promotes the common good is a lie. Raskolnikov accepts the idea that self-interest is the basic truth of existence and leads it to its logical conclusions. Razumikhin, instead, voices the other side of Dostoevsky's concern, i.e. the fact that scientific determinism denies the human freedom of the will: "I'll show you their pamphlets—it's all because people have been "corrupted by their environment", nothing else! […] That's why they dislike the *living* process of life: they don't want the living soul! The living soul will demand life; the living soul won't obey mechanical laws" (ibid. 226).

Just like the Underground Man, Razumikhin denounces scientific determinism for denying the truth, i.e. that human consciousness and free will are not explainable by scientific laws and are nonetheless undeniable. And like the Underground Man, he discards rationality's wish to know all: his "logic alone won't bypass nature!" (ibid. 227) reiterates the Underground Man's "two plus two is five." But the reasoning of the Underground Man and Raskolnikov

is superior to Razumikhin's (despite Dostoevsky's hopes). Razumikhin's cry against modern ideas is the cry of Christian Existentialism: he sees that science does injustice to the soul God has given us. But there's one sense in which Razumikhin is wrong and another in which he hasn't proven anything. First, not all modern ideas are deterministic. Western capitalism, liberalism, and democracy are all founded upon free will, even in their scientific secularism. Razumikhin thus couldn't decry these social configurations for denying free will—even though he could reply that there's absolutely no scientific basis whatsoever for free will, that scientists who believe in free will are contradictory, and that modern Western societies still believe in free will because they still believe in the teachings of Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian mythology, i.e. those ancient traditions which we like to regard as the false pre-scientific past that we've overcome through the progress of modern science, and he'd be right.

But most importantly, what Razumikhin argues still says nothing about whether Christian Existentialism is true or not. On the other hand, characters like Raskolnikov have an *argument*: they reject modern ideas precisely for the same reason that Razumikhin rejects them, but they also show that—beginning from the same premises of both Christian Existentialism and modern ideas—nihilism is the truth that follows. Raskolnikov too wants to recognize the truth of the living soul of life, that is: individual free will. But he also knows that modern ideas ultimately do *not* deny free will, because for all the talk about the "environment," they still maintain that individuals have the power to choose how to transform the world. This is all Raskolnikov needs: since I have the power to choose how to transform the world, and since (therefore) there is no God, then it follows that nihilism is the truth and everything is permitted. There are two ways to demonstrate the falsehood of a scientific and secular ethics of compassion.

- *Raskolnikov and true utilitarianism*: Luzhin has told us that the foundational principle of modern ideas is "love yourself above all, for everything on earth is founded on self-interest." This is a theory about the fundamental truth of nature from which a specific idea of justice follows: justice is the pursuit of one's self-interest, and a just society, therefore, should allow everyone to act accordingly. But then Luzhin adds another principle, which is care for the common good. Act for your self-interest, he says, and you will also increase the common good. But why should I care for the common good (where is the foundational theory here)? And is the cause-effect relationship postulated here actually true?

In any case, Raskolnikov begins by assuming the truth of these two fundamental principles – self-interest and utilitarianism –, and he leads their combinations to its logical conclusions. This first reasoning of his constitutes his weaker and nonetheless absolutely deadly attack on the idea of a modern ethics of compassion. The debate between Luzhin and Razumikhin takes place at Raskolnikov's and so he has the chance to interject. As soon as Luzhin says that today's progress is the realization that justice is self-interest and that self-interest promotes the common good, Raskolnikov stops him: "if you take it to its logical conclusions, all that you were preaching just now, then it turns out that you can cut people's throats" (ibid. 136).

This is Raskolnikov's first reasoning: even taking for granted (mistakenly) that I should care for the common good, who says that respect for an individual human life should hinder utilitarian considerations? *Christianity* says that we are all made in the image of God. Ancient philosophies say that everyone has a soul that partakes of eternity. But those are delusions for modern ideas, are they not? So what is the rational principle for respecting individual life? But you will say: all our countries have secular constitutions that grant the right to life, liberty, and equality; we even have a Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yes, but what is *their* foundation? I look at science and I see no values, I look at the natural world and I see no rights. What in nature says murder is a crime? Nature is the struggle for survival, to live is to murder. *Inequality* is the law of nature, and struggle is the fundamental relationship between living beings. This idea of respect for individual life is itself an ancient fable, it has nothing to do with science, nature, or rationality.

To give further strength to Raskolnikov's reasoning, Dostoevsky embodies it in other characters as well. Even Luzhin's roommate Lebeziatnikov, who's a socialist companion as well, can understand that modern ideas of this kind entail pure utilitarianism: "What does 'honourable' mean? […] 'More honourable,' 'more generous'—all that's just absurd nonsense, outdated superstitions which I reject! Anything that's *useful* to humanity is honourable! There's only one word I understand, and that's *useful*! Snigger as much as you like, but that's a fact!" (ibid. 330-1).

Lebeziatnikov understand that the highest value in science is usefulness, that is a fact, everything else is "just absurd nonsense, outdated superstitions." (But we shall later ask: usefulness to whom?) And what are the concrete consequences of this fact? Raskolnikov understands that one of the consequences of the truth is that there's no reason *not* to kill an old evil rich pawnbroker lady to take her money and use it for the common good. Actually,

not only there's no reason not to kill her, but you *ought* to kill her – i.e. it is your moral duty to kill her – in order to *increase* the common good. If you don't do, you're just too weak and scared to do what's right. If you don't do it, you are in the wrong. This is the actual truth and good of scientific/naturalist/secular utilitarianism, and Raskolnikov understands it. The murder of Alyona Ivanovna will increase both his well-being and the overall well-being of the human community.

Once again, to prove that this thinking isn't just Raskolnikov's delirium but is actual, proper rational thinking, Dostoevsky has another character voice it exactly in Raskolnikov's own terms. Before committing the murder, Raskolnikov overhears a young student in a bar making the same argument to a friend. And not only does the young student make the same argument, he also uses Alyona Ivanovna, of all people, as the exemplary victim:

> 'Hundreds, perhaps thousands of human beings could be given a start; dozens of families saved from beggary, decay, ruin, vice, venereal disease; and all with her money. If you killed her and took her money, and used it to devote yourself to serving all humanity and the common good: what do you think, wouldn't those thousands of good deeds wipe out that one tiny little crime? One life for thousands of lives, rescued from corruption and decay! One death, in exchange for thousands of lives—it's simple arithmetic! Anyway, what does the life of that consumptive, stupid, wicked old crone count for, when it's weighed in the balance? No more than the life of a louse, a cockroach—even less, because the old woman's actually harmful.' She's eating away at another person's life: the other day she bit Lizaveta's finger out of pure spite, and they almost had to cut it off!' 'Of course, she doesn't deserve to live,' remarked the officer; 'but that's just nature.' 'But look, man, nature needs to be put right and directed—otherwise we'd all be drowning in superstition. If that wasn't done, there could never have been a single great man. People talk about "duty" and "conscience"—and I've no objection to duty or conscience—but what do we mean by them? (ibid. 59-60).

What *rational counterargument* can disprove this rational argument? We choose how to transform the world, and with Alyona Ivanovna we have this choice: we can either choose to do the good of a thousand lives (by killing her) or *not* to do the good of a thousand lives

and let an harmful, evil person take advantage of her innocent, handicapped sister (by letting her live). Do you have the strength to do what's right and good or will you let evil take over?

The rational goal of utilitarianism is to reduce beggary, decay, ruin, vice, venereal disease, and general misery. Killing the old woman would certainly contribute to that, and there are no reasons not to do it: therefore, we should do it. Human beings have the power to freely choose what to make of the world. We can freely choose between good and evil. In secularism – i.e. in utilitarianism –, good is what we want, and what we want is well-being. Therefore, our only duty is to do what secures well-being, and killing the old lady secures well-being. As the young student in the bar tells his friend, "nature needs to be put right and directed" by us, the only beings who are endowed with free will and so with the power to choose between good and evil and transform the world accordingly. With science, we've acquired the means to quantitatively measure well-being, which is the good we seek. *This* is the quest we are impelled to realize. Everything else is *superstition* (this key word that both the student and Lebeziatnikov use); "duty" and "conscience" do not mean what traditions and religions say they mean, their meaning changes in reference to ontology, ideology, anthropology, and morality the community makes its own, and now that we know that the only truth is science, our duty must be to the utilitarian notion of well-being.

But the officer's reply to the young student anticipates the most fundamental truth – more fundamental than utilitarianism – that will actually move Raskolnikov to murder. He says that "she doesn't deserve to live" and that "that's just nature." This simple sentence hides the deepest truth of our interpretation of the world. We all come into existence as gratuitous, contingent, and meaningless beings. *Therefore*, as we come into existence, none of us deserves to live. We're just random things, and as random things we do not have an inalienable right to exist, just as that chicken, that plant, that rock don't (and we treat them accordingly). But we're not just things, we are living beings, and that means we *consume*. To live I consume, and what do I consume? The lives of other living beings. Do I deserve the right to do that? Or isn't it the case that others deserve to live by consuming my life?

This is Darwinism properly understood, i.e. "that's just nature." We come into the world and we do not deserve to live, the right to live must be earned (notice the parallel with Existentialism: the self is not a given, it is a task to be achieved). The survival of the fittest is the struggle by which the merit of those who deserve to live emerges. By no traditional standard has Alyona Ivanovna proven her right to live, she has never done anything good,

all her life she's been an evil parasite. The officer so indicates another reason to murder her, not utilitarianism but a notion of justice: it is our job to punish evil and make sure evil doesn't reign upon this world, she doesn't deserve to live and so it is right that she should be dead.

This feeling that we do not deserve to live unless we prove otherwise is at the core of our interpretation of being—and what we mean by "prove" is the driving force of our individual and social actions. This is the feeling that infuses all of David Foster Wallace's work. There is a constant refrain in *Infinite Jest* (1996) that expresses the existential anxiety of the young athletes at the Enfield Tennis Academy: your duty is "justifying your seed" (*IJ* 173). It is constantly repeated throughout the novel, it haunts the novel's protagonist and it haunted his father and his father's father, as well as all of his fellows. Of course, the context here is competitive tennis, and justifying the seed is obviously a necessity in the sport's rankings. But as it so often happens in Wallace, this is a symbol of much larger social and existential dynamics (competitive sports themselves are such symbols).

These young tennis players are overwhelmed by the anxiety of having to justify their seed because they – like all of us – feel that they either prove their worth (by demonstrating their superiority to other people in the ranking) or their nothingness will be revealed, i.e. that they are meaningless and do not deserve to live. For all of us, competitive sports symbolize that as human beings we are constantly evaluated and ranked and assigned a value in a hierarchy. In every area of life, you will be recognized and treated according to the seed you justify, and if you don't justify any seed, you will rightfully be treated as non-existent. This principle is not arbitrary at all, it is the logical institutionalization of what we believe to be nature's truth: that beings do not deserve to live unless they prove otherwise, that the weak perish and the strong survive and that's the law of nature. Therefore, E.T.A's mantra of "justifying the seed" points to this original truth of our interpretation of existence. Even in language, it tells us that in life you have to justify your seed, in the absolutely original sense of having to justify both your having come into existence and your right to reproduction. This right is not a given but a task. No one deserves it until he or she proves otherwise. We know this scientifically.

All of Wallace's characters are crushed by the unbearable burden of this knowledge.[138]

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[138] It is thus *not* the case, as Bresnan (2008) argues, that the characters in *Infinite Jest* become "able to construct meaningful autonomy" (51). Nor that, as Cohen (2012) argues, the novel succeeds in discovering "a lost self or first person."

Of course, Raskolnikov takes a path that is entirely unknown to Wallace's characters, but we truly understand these fictional works only when we see that his choice too originates in this same devastating anxiety that haunts Wallace's fictional worlds. Because Raskolnikov too is crumbling under the anguish of the knowledge that he hasn't justified his seed yet, and *this* is what moves him to commit the murder: he hopes to achieve some great, just, courageous deed that will prove that he deserves to live. He must prove to himself and to the world that he has the courage to do what is right and great. He knows that what he heard the young student say is the truth. The only problem is to overcome fear and actually do it. Thus, he resolves to follow "his rational judgment and his will" (ibid. 65), and to do what's right, no matter what.

- *To be a real man is to deserve to live*: this is where Raskolnikov greatly surpasses the reasoning of the student in the bar. This is where he overcomes utilitarianism too and leads modern ideas (almost) to their logical conclusions. Raskolnikov doesn't kill the old lady for utilitarian reasons. He does it to prove to himself that he is a great man, to prove to himself that he deserves to live, to justify his seed. Here Raskolnikov also debunks all secular affirmations of the Golden Rule. A frequent counterargument to the utilitarianism described above is that the Golden Rule (supposedly) demonstrates its rational, secular, utilitarian right because *everyone* desires a world in which he or she is not killed. That is: I won't do evil unto others out of self-interest because I don't want others to do evil unto me.

This is the rational attempt to defend the Golden Rule, but Raskolnikov proves its falsity in multiple ways. He shows that, given our interpretation of the world, the Golden Rule is both unjust and incompatible rational thinking. There is no Golden Rule in nature because animals know instinctively and perfectly well that the pursuit of one's self-interest is incompatible with respect for the Golden Rule. The actual natural law is "do unto others what you will, and make sure they can't do it to you." When the lion kills the antelope, it doesn't apply the Golden Rule, and when it kills another lion to become the leader of the pack or gain the right to reproduce, it still doesn't apply the Golden Rule.

But you may say human beings are different, and are they? Did the great leaders of history like Napoleon live by the Golden Rule? And do *you* live by the Golden Rule? Do you follow the Golden Rule when you rise in human hierarchies? The recognition of your value depends on the negation of the value of others. For there to be one winner there must be a hundred losers. To raise the value of your seed you need to defeat people who aren't good

enough to justify theirs. There is no Golden Rule in nature as well as in the construction of our hierarchies of value. These are the kinds of thoughts Raskolnikov comes to, in his effort to lead rationality to its logical conclusions. Who says that I should care about others? Where is the natural, rational reason to care for anything besides my self-interest? If anything, my self-interest is my only duty, and other people are means to the pursuit of my self-interest. The great human being is the one who knows that the will to power is justice and has the courage to enact it. Raskolnikov sets down this understanding in his article "On Crime."

Here, he says that there are "certain individuals who […] have the full right to, commit all kinds of outrages and crimes, and that the law does not apply to them" (*CP* 229). And more precisely, "that an 'extraordinary' person has the right […] to allow his conscience to overstep…certain obstacles" when "the practical fulfilment of his idea […] demands it" (ibid.). But why? What does Raskolnikov mean? His first explanation is utilitarian and still looks at the common good. He proceeds by way of example: "Kepler's and Newton's" discoveries" (ibid. 230) have meant more to humanity than the lives of millions of average people combined; therefore, if Kepler and Newton found themselves in need of doing it for any reason at all, they "would have had the right, indeed the duty…to eliminate those ten or a hundred people, in order to bring [their] discoveries to humanity at large" (ibid.).

By speaking of duty, Raskolnikov speaks of justice. This is his rational argument: existence itself is meaningless; therefore, human beings *create* all ethical boundaries by their will; their will is to achieve well-being; therefore, it is the duty of truly great people to not let any superstitions stop them from doing what needs to be done. Great men like Kepler and Newton have the right (through the individual power they have proven), first, to define what is good and bad, and second, to make sure that what they define as good is promulgated at any cost. The end justifies the means, this is the fundamental truth of rationality.

But that's only the first argument against the Golden Rule. The second is a simple and an undeniable review of historical facts: not only does nature constantly display the falsity of the Golden Rule but so does human history, and so our speaking of the Golden Rule only makes us hypocrites: "all the […] leaders of men, in history, beginning from ancient times and going on by way of Lycurgus, Solon, Mohammed, Napoleon, and so forth, were each and every one of them criminals, […] these men didn't hold back from shedding blood, so long as the shedding of blood served their purpose" (ibid. 230).

To create, you must destroy, this is why all leaders shed blood. Who are the people whose names are immortal in our history books? "They're all destroyers" (ibid.), is

Raskolnikov's decisive answer. Don't our leaders unleash war every day? and there is no punishment for them, especially if they win, there's only increase in power and esteem. There's no equality before the law, let alone respect of the Golden Rule. And what about justice? Why can't I kill an old lady when leaders lead precisely because they willing to kill? I do not kill not because I'm just but because I'm weak. There's no God to tell me not to kill, nature confirms that killing is natural (murder in itself is as meaningless as all other actions, the only question is whether it is useful to me or not), and human history clearly shows that those who kill gain the power and right to do whatever they want. It's a matter of whether you are strong enough to live by this truth; if not, you will be a slave.

This is Raskolnikov's final argument: given what we all know to be true, the human race is obviously divided in two categories: "ordinary people […] and real men" (ibid. 231), those who haven't justified their seed and those who have. Real men are great creators and destroyers, nothing will stop them from accomplishing their goals. They are the few "who possess the gift or talent of saying *something new*" (ibid), and thus the right "to destroy what exists in the name of something better" (ibid.). Their right to cut other people's throats is more than utilitarian, it is justice itself: no God prohibits murder; therefore, great men are the creators of laws and so laws can't stop them; and by murder they fulfill their true nature, they justify their seed, they transform the world according to their free will, they destroy the present they don't want for the creation of a future they want.

On the other hand, the mass of ordinary people is just "material that serves solely to reproduce" (ibid.), and so they are rightfully used accordingly. Ordinary people are as meaningless as every other thing in nature that doesn't prove its right to exist (by demonstrating its power). We are all born contingent and gratuitous and meaningless, and the world will go on without us, it won't even notice our annihilation. Great man are noticed. The unnoticed death of an ordinary man is the measure of his meaninglessness. This is the truth, and why real men have the right to use ordinary men as material, just like we crush ants and flies (Bakunin and Nechayev – two figures Dostoevsky embodies in his works – knew what they were doing). Our cries of repugnance are the remainders of our ancient superstitions and the manifestation of our weakness. You are either a destroyer or one who will be destroyed, a predator or prey, master or slave, this is the whole natural truth.

This is why Raskolnikov murders the old woman: he doesn't want to help anyone, he doesn't want the money, all he wants is to feel meaningful, to feel like he deserves to live. Raskolnikov wants to justify his seed. Like all of Wallace's characters, the unbearable

suffering he feels, and the tragic life that ensues from it, is the result of the sensation that the void of nothingness is the true core of his being: the terror of feeling that I mean nothing, I am nothing, and that perhaps, if I do this one thing, I can justify my existence. Raskolnikov murders because he wants to prove to himself that he is a real man, capable of saying something new, courageous enough to live according to the truth. He wants to look in the mirror and think: I mean. He wants to not feel like a parasite who's here for no reason and sucks life off a planet that would be better off without him.

This is where Raskolnikov takes modern ideas (almost) to their proper logical conclusions, destroying all claims to a scientific thesis for compassion. Empiricism shows only that Napoleon is more powerful than the herd, and that therefore he is right, just, great, and meaningful. This is the truth of becoming and science: the will to power. The most powerful lion is the law. Raskolnikov kills the old lady to see whether he can be a Napoleon too.

The investigator Porfiry Petrovich tries to irritate Raskolnikov by asking him what happens when a "misunderstanding" occurs and an ordinary person comes to believe he can be a real man and so "sets about 'eliminating all obstacles'" (ibid. 232). Raskolnikov's answer is perfectly coherent: "that frequently happens!" but "in fact there's no need to [worry]: they'll thrash themselves" (ibid.). Raskolnikov murders to see what kind of man he really is. You can't know unless you try, and at least he tried. The chapter ends with a question from Razumikhin that goes straight to the essence of the matter. Porfiry asked about "ordinary people," but Razumikhin asks "What about the true geniuses? […] Those who are granted the right to cut people's throats: so they shouldn't have to suffer at all, even for the blood they shed?" (ibid. 234).

Raskolnikov's answer is lapidary, and *this* is the actual essence of rationality: "Why use the word *should*? There's no question of permission and prohibition" (ibid.). *This* is the end of secular thinking. This is what a secular civilization in the twenty-first century should really reckon. We proclaim our indignation, but we have no answer to the question "why use the word *should*?" Razumikhin says *should* because he thinks of God. But Raskolnikov, like all of us, knows that there is no God, and that in nature there are no shoulds, but only what you have and don't have the power to do, that's all. You *can* do what you have the power to do and can't do what you don't have the power to do. You murder someone, and if that makes you a leader, you'll know you have the right to murder because you have the power to do it with success. On the other hand, if you're condemned, then you'll know you're just weak,

the material to be destroyed the fit to create. This is rationality: the "spilling of blood *in the name of conscience*" (ibid. 233), murder as duty, "*vive la guerre éternelle!*" (ibid. 231).

- *Rationality enacted*: no one, not even the narrator, has a rational counterargument against Raskolnikov. This is what happens in all of Dostoevsky's novels: there is never any counterargument to nihilism, the "counterargument" is the representation of the nihilists' demise. There is no counterargument because there can be none. Nihilism is rationality (the rationality of becoming) properly thought, and not even Dostoevsky's plots can undermine this truth. Raskolnikov sets forth to see whether he's a Napoleon or just another piece of meaningless material, and to find the strength he keeps reminding himself that "there are no boundaries" (ibid. 25), everything is permitted. Nature is the only truth, the courageous man lives according to facts, and the fact is that dog eat dog out there, everything else is myth: "just convention, it's all relative, all meaningless" (ibid. 84).

Raskolnikov tells the truth in the most explicit terms only to Sonia (not a coincidence: her love allows him to open up): "What's to be done? Smash what needs to be smashed, once and for all, that's what! […] Freedom and power, but the main thing is power!" (ibid. 291). This is the truth of becoming, nature, science. It's actual Darwinism, the only fact. Accordingly, the novel's development is Raskolnikov's attempt to overcome "pure cowardice" and become "capable of anything," to not be "afraid" and "scared" and find the courage of "taking a fresh step, saying something new" (ibid. 3). Raskolnikov tells Sonia: "I wanted to make myself into a Napoleon" (ibid. 367). By which he means that he murdered because "I wanted to have that courage…I just wanted to have the courage, Sonia, that's all it was" (ibid.). He killed because he wanted to see "whether I had the right to assume power" (ibid. 371); that is, whether he had the courage to "do the deed without asking any questions" (ibid.). Raskolnikov killed to see whether he had the right to live: "I needed to discover, straight away, whether I was a louse like everyone else, or a human being. Would I manage to overstep the boundary or not? Would I dare to stoop down and pick up what I wanted, or not? Am I a tremulous little creature, or do I have the *right*…?" (ibid.).

Self-interest demands that one's highest value be the limitless increase of one's own power. To make concrete "the reign of reason and light" (ibid. 168) on this earth is to live according to "will, and strength" (ibid.). This is what it means to be Napoleon, and what Raskolnikov attempts: "now we'll try our strength!" (ibid.). The deepest essence of Raskolnikov's reasoning comes to light when he speaks with Dostoevsky's heroes, before

with Razumikhin, now with Sonia. Raskolnikov's is true rationality, freed from God. Like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Raskolnikov understands that, since there is no God, *we* create and destroy, *we decide* what this world must be, who and what must live or perish, and so it is our duty to take responsibility for it. But Raskolnikov – unlike our commonsense – is ready to truly take on this responsibility, and so he asks Sonia questions like these: "Well then: supposing all this had been left for you to decide: does he, or do they, carry on living on this earth—I mean, is Luzhin to live on and commit vile deeds, or does Katerina Ivanovna have to die? So, how would you decide? Which of them is to die?" (ibid. 361). There is nothing abstract about such questions. The powerful make these kinds of decisions every day. Your own life is pervaded by such questions, you just ignore the responsibility they entail. What do you do when you know the existence of an evil person means the slavery – or even death – of a good person, what do you do when you know this is all in your hands to decide right now? Will you do what needs to be done or will you flee from your responsibilities? Don't give us superstitious nonsense about divine providence. We all know that the world is what we make it. You're either a hero or a coward, that's all.

This is what Raskolnikov is trying to tell Sonia, who is of course horrified, but *why* is she horrified?, because she believes in God: "'How can you ask about something that's impossible?' said Sonia with revulsion. […] I can't know God's providence… And why are you asking things that can't be asked? What's the point of such empty questions? How could it ever depend on my decision? And who has appointed me a judge here, to say who's to live and who's not to?" (ibid.). Rationality – not Raskolnikov – says she's a coward. There is no God and she's fleeing her responsibilities: it *does* depend on her decision. And Raskolnikov, who is rational, treats her accordingly, recognizing that she's deceiving herself in bad faith so that she doesn't even have to recognize her own cowardice: "Then it's better for Luzhin to live and do vile things! Didn't you even have the courage to say that?" (ibid.).

Sonia invokes God, but God is dead. The world is what we make it, the world is our decision. We constantly reiterate this belief in all areas of life, it is the fashionable mantra of our civilization, and yet we're too scared to admit that *therefore* who must live or die is our decision as well. We pay lip service to the ancient ideal of being non-judgmental and yet our entire sociality is built on judgment, and our concrete daily lives show it: we judge everything, ourselves and each other constantly. To think of whether I deserve to live or not is simply the ultimate decision, the most fundamental judgment.

Raskolnikov just takes the next-to-last step of techno-scientific rationality (the last

step is Leopardi's). Sonia cries that "you've abandoned God" (ibid. 370), but that of course is no rational argument, and Raskolnikov's answer is unassailable: "I've argued it all out with myself, down to the very last detail, and I know all of it, all of it" (ibid.). In this meaningless existence of pure becoming and chaos and will and freedom "all you have to do is dare!" (ibid.): this is the "only one condition" (ibid.) for living an actual life. "The one who dares most" is "the master," and he "make[s] their laws" and is "right in their eyes" (ibid. 369)— the masses. Might Is Right is the law of the world, "that's how things have always been, and always will be! You'd have to be blind not to see it" (ibid.).

- *Hell within*: Dostoevsky attempts to summon God through the plot by making hell break loose within Raskolnikov's heart. Raskolnikov cannot live in the knowledge of his evil, because his conscience – the voice of God – won't let him. After the murder, life becomes more unbearable than ever, and Raskolnikov faces an either/or: either redemption or madness and suicide. This is Dostoevsky's answer to rationality: forget God and you'll go insane and wish for death. This is his argument for faith: Raskolnikov has the absolute rational right, but the concreteness of life shows that rationality knows nothing about the truth of the living soul. This is why Raskolnikov must choose redemption in faith. It's the necessary *choice* of faith that is the only alternative to rationalist despair, and it constitutes Dostoevsky's Christian Existentialism—very similar to Kierkegaard's in works like *Either/Or* (1843) and *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849).[139]

The moral of *Crime and Punishment* is that Raskolnikov must *choose* God over rationality, but this kind of choice is impossible (we'll see this in the following section). In addition, despite Dostoevsky's intentions, the plot does *not* suffice to demonstrate that the rational life Raskolnikov tried to live is unlivable. Perhaps no one has ever noticed this, but Dostoevsky has forgotten about Napoleon. In other words, his plot demonstrates only that Raskolnikov is no Napoleon. Sure, Raskolnikov couldn't live a murderous life, but what about Napoleon, Caesar, Muhammad, etc.—they are all *real*. Raskolnikov's failure doesn't prove the necessity of choosing God. In fact, it may well only prove the reality of Raskolnikov's greatest fear: that "I'm exactly the same sort of louse as everyone else!" (ibid. 371). Perhaps it may prove that *the weak* need to choose God in order to survive in their slave

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[139] That Wallace found inspiration in both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky is further proof of his vicinity to this thought.

lives (Nietzsche).

At the end of *Crime and Punishment*, there's still no proof for God, and Napoleon remains a fact whose right is sustained by rationality. There's no reason not to see Raskolnikov's final choice of faith as the retreat of the defeated coward into self-deception. The narrator hints that Raskolnikov will finally choose God, but right until the end we see Raskolnikov struggling with the thought that "he was too weak and insignificant" (ibid. 481), and that "those men succeeded in doing what they did, and consequently *they were right*; whereas I didn't succeed, and therefore I never had the right to let myself take that step" (ibid. 480). Raskolnikov knows that he didn't commit a crime. Or more precisely, he knows that his murder was a crime only if he turns out to be weak, only if he trashes himself. There is no crime except weakness. The crime is being insignificant. But murder itself is definitely not a crime. This is what Raskolnikov tells his sister right before giving up in the end:

> 'Crime? What crime?' […] 'Blood that everybody spills,' he retorted in a rage; 'blood that's shed and always has been shed, in torrents, all over the world— blood that's poured out like champagne, blood that gets you crowned with a laurel wreath in the Capitol and called a benefactor of the human race. Just look a little closer and see what you see! […] I'm contemptible! That's what it all boils down to! […] If I'd succeeded, I'd have been crowned with glory, but as it is, I'm caught in the trap!' (ibid. 460).

Dostoevsky knows that Raskolnikov's rationality is unassailable. This is why Raskolnikov is superior to all supporters of fashionable modern ideas, and why Dostoevsky's novels set down the conflict between rationality and faith, and not between the (supposedly mistaken) rationality of nihilism and another (supposedly right) rationality of compassion and value. Part of Dostoevsky's greatness is precisely that he shows that there are no rational ways out of war and despair. Rationality *is* war and despair. This is why Dostoevsky tries to turn to God, but his novel doesn't prove the necessity of God, it only proves that Raskolnikov is a pathetic louse.

The Impossibility of Existentialist Redemption

The story of Raskolnikov may seem to differ radically from those of *The Pale King*, but we've brought to light their essential sameness. The unbearable suffering all these characters feel originates in their feeling of being nothing, of meaning nothing and being nothing, unless perhaps one can prove otherwise. We've tried to show that this feeling is rational. Given what we believe about the world, it is the right and just way to look at oneself and the world. This explains the configuration of our civilization, and why the predicaments Dostoevsky and Wallace tried to find redemption from are necessary and inevitable. Today's neoliberalism is not arbitrary, it is built on this fundamental rational truth that we all believe in: that we don't mean anything unless we prove otherwise. Much is made of the fact that today's civilization provokes high levels of stress, anxiety, competitiveness, loneliness, and depression. But today's civilization in truth does nothing but coherently institutionalize what we think is the rational truth. Stress, anxiety, competitiveness, loneliness, and depression are the obvious necessary consequences of living in a world in which you have to justify your seed, and to do it you must defeat others. But this world is not capitalism; it's nature itself.

The universe is full of suffering and is gratuitous and meaningless and destined to annihilation: there is no *reason* – in our rationality – not to be crushed by these feelings, and Dostoevsky and Wallace – in their failed attempts to find solutions to these problems – teach us that our interpretation of the world can offer no answers, because it *entails* the inevitable existence of such feelings as self-absorption, paralysis and self-judgement. There is only becoming, science, nature, the struggle for survival, and the power of free will. The power of free will is where we see the only potential for meaning, and free will is precisely an *individual power* and therefore it is the measure of your worth. It entails all that was said above. Because of free will, we are exactly what we do. Because of free will, life is the original feeling of being nothing and having to justify your seed. Dostoevsky and Wallace are Existentialists because they try to solve the problem of the feeling of nothingness by arguing that *the individual human being must freely choose to take on the responsibility of constructing meaning from experience*. But free will *is* nothingness, it is the *necessity* of anxiety, competitiveness, loneliness, depression, and all the unbearable sufferings that affect Dostoevsky's and Wallace's characters. In trying to redeem suffering, these authors hoped to find a solution in the essence of unredeemable suffering. This is what condemned them to entrapment.

- *Raskolnikov's impossible redemption*: Sonia is the possibility of Raskolnikov's salvation. She is love, the pure gift of love, agape, grace. She is *the possibility* of salvation *because* she is grace. She forgives Raskolnikov and hugs and kisses him. Rather than judge him, she feels sorry for him, and swears she will always be by his side to help him, they will help each other. It's something Raskolnikov has never experienced, and he doesn't know how to react. Here is the moment of his either/or choice. The gift of love opens up the possibility for this choice, the possibility for redemption, but *actual* redemption depends on whether Raskolnikov will make the right choice (the same occurs in *Notes from Underground* when the Underground Man meets Liza).

The choice between good and evil is Raskolnikov's own responsibility, *this* is the truth of Existentialism. Sonia offers him love, but love comes at "a great price" that Raskolnikov must choose to pay. He must confess and accept the punishment for his evil deeds, he must choose eight years of penal servitude in Siberia. This is the necessary choice Sonia presents him with: "You have to accept suffering, and redeem yourself through it, that's what you must do" (ibid. 371). The alternative, as we've said, is madness and suicide. This is why Dostoevsky's Christianity is an Existentialism, because he sees that ultimately the love of grace is impotent before the free choice of the individual. Raskolnikov's future does *not* depend on the love of God, it depends entirely on what Raskolnikov will make of it by virtue of his free choices.

Ultimately, grace cannot save Raskolnikov. Only Raskolnikov can save himself. The responsibility weighs entirely upon his shoulders. The "profound change," "future resurrection," and "new view of life to come" (ibid. 481) that await him depend wholly on his making the willful choice of "endless sacrifice in the future" (ibid. 479), because redemption "would not be his for nothing: he was going to have to pay dearly for it, to redeem it by some great exploit in the future…" (ibid. 486).

This Existentialist redemption is impossible. It doesn't solve the problem of Napoleon *and* it contradicts the invitation to abandon rationality, making grace impossible too (this is the contradiction in Wallace too). Because like Wallace, Dostoevsky warns against the dangers of rational thinking up to the last page of the novel. The narrator tells us of Raskolnikov that "that evening he wasn't capable of thinking long and coherently about anything, [and that] in fact he wouldn't have wanted any conscious thoughts; all he could do was feel. The dialectic had given place to life, and now something entirely different had to work itself out in his consciousness" (ibid. 486).

But the abandonment of "the dialectic" in free choice is impossible. Dostoevsky presents redemption as the abandonment of rationality in favor of life, and in this passage, he even presents this abandonment as a gift of grace. Raskolnikov didn't *choose* to become incapable "of thinking long and coherently," he didn't choose to abandon the dialectic. It's this "something entirely different" – this life and faith and love – that "works itself out in his consciousness" and of which Raskolnikov is only the passive and unconscious receiver, which no choice at all on whether to accept it or not.

This is true grace, but the novel immediately negates it in its ultimate affirmation that redemption is a matter of Raskolnikov's free will, of his choice to pay dearly for it by some great exploit. And free choice is impossible without "the dialectic," and here we are at the heart of the Existentialist Contradiction. Because free choice depends on the dialectic, it *is* the dialectic, and since the dialectic is where evil and suffering reign – as Dostoevsky knows –, then free choice condemns you to evil and suffering as well – which is what Dostoevsky doesn't realize.

Free will makes both the abandonment of rationality and the acceptance of God impossible. This is the essential contradiction that makes Dostoevsky's Christian Existentialism impossible. The existential consequence of this impossible is that the individual is condemned to remain trapped within the self. Because a free choice is by definition entirely in the hands of the individual who makes it, and so the individual is fully responsible for that choice. If Raskolnikov's actual redemption depends on his free choice, then it is entirely a matter of his merit and demerit. This view only changes the goal from choosing to be Napoleon to choosing to be Christ, but the chessboard on which the game is played remains the same: it is the individual alone, in the solipsism of his rationality and free will, who must understand what the actual truth is and raise himself to the highest possible power by acting in accordance with the truth. Every failure is his sole responsibility.

- *The measure of Sylvanshine's worthlessness*: we've seen that in *The Pale King* Claude Sylvanshine struggles with a condition called *Random-Fact Intuition*, the symbol of the human mind's clash with the chaos of becoming. Sylvanshine is overwhelmed by the abundance and irrelevance of life. He's under stress and subject to the storm in his head. He feels suffering and anguish, but worst of all he feels "the shadow of the wing of Total Terror and Disqualification." Why? Because he thinks that this suffering and anguish is *his own fault*, because he thinks of himself as weak in will. Sylvanshine does suffer because he is an impotent object of absurd

meaninglessness of pure chaos, but this is *not* the worst part of his suffering. The worst part is self-Disqualification, i.e. the thought that he is suffering because he has never found the courage to learn how to effectively exercise his free will. Sylvanshine knows that, since his endowed with free will, then his suffering must be his own fault, and *this* makes his suffering truly unbearable.

Wallace never intended for this to be the case, but his Existentialism entails these consequences. That Sylvanshine feels "Total Terror" is understandable: the inability to impose order upon chaos generates this kind of suffering. But "Disqualification" is a reflective feeling, it is self-judgment at work, it is the feeling of one's inadequacy. This feeling can originate only in the thought that I possess free will and thus the power to transform the world – i.e. to dominate the chaos of becoming –, from which follows that the world is what I make it, that the configuration of my world is entirely my responsibility and the measure of my worth; because my free will is my potential, and how I exercise it determines my value as a human being, and since my suffering is my fault – Sylvanshine suffers because he is "defective in the area of will"; if he wasn't, he'd be able to control the "storm in his head" – and my happiness is my merit, *therefore* that I suffer demonstrates that I am worthless.

That I am endowed with free will *entails* these consequences. If I am endowed with free will, the paralysis of constant and hyper-reflexive self-judgment is rational. The feeling of self-Disqualification is rational, and so is the feeling of self-disgust at the sight of my unhappiness. If free will is true, (self-)forgiveness is an act of bad faith. Wallace's Existentialist Contradiction lies in his hope of finding reason for (self-)compassion within this fundamental belief in free will. The contradiction manifests itself in his hope that Sylvanshine could find the solution to his suffering in his own will. If free will is true, there is no solution to Sylvanshine's suffering. On the contrary, such suffering is necessary and, precisely by suffering, Sylvanshine manifests a higher awareness of the truth than those who do not suffer.

Most importantly, Sylvanshine is condemned to remain trapped in solipsistic suffering by looking for a solution within his own free will. In this sense, while it's true that (as of today) critical analysis has focused too narrowly on *This Is Water* and hasn't gone into Wallace's fiction enough, it's nonetheless true that the Existentialism of *TIW* infuses *all* of Wallace's work. Sylvanshine himself says that the solution to his condition is learning "to pay close attention to his surroundings" (*TPK* 23) and thus learning the "anti-stress technique called Thought Stopping" (ibid. 17). He too says that he must "be disciplined about it" (ibid.

345) if he wants to free himself from suffering. The Existentialist Contradiction that traps Sylvanshine is the exact same contradiction of *TIW*. Nothing will save Sylvanshine. He must save himself. He's entirely on his own, and this is why he's doomed, because like Raskolnikov and our entire civilization, he regards value and meaning as possibly originating only in free will, and this condemns him to solipsism and to all the consequences that Wallace knew solipsism entails. Because, if the meaning of your life depends entirely on your exercise of your free will, then it depends entirely on the power of your self. Therefore, life *is* solipsism, because all meaning and values are generated by you and within you. To not take responsibility for being the sole author of your whole existence is to live in bad faith, and therefore there is no reason for you not to be crushed by the unbearable weight of loneliness, responsibility, self-judgment, hyper-reflexivity, and all other feelings that lead to existential paralysis.

This all becomes manifest in this passage: we're told that Sylvanshine knew that "It was true: The entire ball game, in terms of both the exam and life, was what you gave attention to vs. what you willed yourself to not. Sylvanshine viewed himself as weak or defective in the area of will. Most of what others esteemed or valued in him was unwilled, simply given, like a person's height or facial symmetry. Reynolds called him weak-minded and it was true" (ibid. 14).

Sylvanshine sees weakness and Disqualification in himself because he interprets his suffering as his own fault, the fault that results from his inferior use of his power of free will. Free will is the source of his additional *self-reflective* terror, which is far worse than outer-directed terror because *the rejection of oneself* is the truly unbearable suffering. Giacomo Leopardi expressed this clearly in the *Zibaldone*, writing that "there is perhaps nothing more conductive to suicide than self-contempt" (Z 74). And self-contempt is both possible and necessary only because of the thought of free will. I *can* interpret my suffering as my own fault only because I think I am endowed with free will and I *must* interpret my suffering as my own fault if I think I am endowed with free will.

There is no escape from self-Disqualification: believing in his free will, Sylvanshine must feel self-contempt. But not only that: there is no escape from the feeling of personal worthlessness too, because the ontology of free will establishes that only free will itself can be a possible source of meaning and value. McGurl (2014) was right when he wrote that "the question of self-worth…is everywhere in Wallace, an ominously metaphysical dilemma one suspects might not be susceptible to solution" (29).

As we've said, we all believe that existence in itself is meaningless and that only we can construct meaning and value. This is the fundamental belief of our civilization: we are the only beings who can construct meaning and value because we are the only beings endowed with free will. Wallace believed this – as he wrote in "Back in New Fire" (1996): "nothing from nature is good or bad. Natural things just *are*; the only good and bad things are people's various choices in the face of what is" ("BNF" 171) – and so does Sylvanshine, who knows that he's worthless and that all the compliments other people pay him mean nothing because "most of what others esteemed or valued in him was unwilled, simply given, like a person's height or facial symmetry."[140]

Sylvanshine understands that there is no meaning nor value in what hasn't been achieved through the effort of one's own free will. Sylvanshine doesn't receive compliments for his will; therefore, he's worthless. Why? Because there's no merit involved in any of that. Another necessary consequence of our belief in free will is that meaning and value equate merit. Where there is no merit there are no meaning and value, and of course, merit is a measure of comparative worth, so that for one to obtain merit another must demerit, and only other people can judge who merits and who doesn't, which finally means that: for one to become meaningful and valuable as a person, one must defeat other people before the court of society's judgmental gaze (Raskolnikov on becoming a Napoleon).

Finally, then, belief in free will must entrap Sylvanshine (and all of us) not only in loneliness, solipsism, constant self-judgment and hyper-reflexivity, the unbearable burden on total responsibility, self-contempt at every minimal failure, and the feeling of worthlessness for every shortcoming of his will; it must trap him also in the feeling that life – the *achievement* of the Existentialist task of becoming a self, of becoming meaningful and valuable – is the dialectic of *bellum omnium contra omnes* (because one's worth is another's worthlessness), and therefore in self-interest, egotism, narcissism, conflict, etc. In this interpretation of the world, the existential paralysis that affects Wallace's characters (and Dostoevsky's nihilists) is inevitable. Not only is it inevitable, it is also the most coherent form of awareness of the truth—the most coherent rationality. This is why the Existentialist Contradiction in Wallace's

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[140] In this sense, Sylvanshine also suffers from impostor syndrome, and this suffering too is inextricably related to free will. This is the case in "Good Old Neon" as well (the famous short story that Wallace dedicated to the impostor syndrome). "David Wallace" is the true protagonist of this story, and in projecting the reasons for Neal's suicide he says: "of course you're a fraud, of course what other people see is never you […], of course you try to manage what part they see […]. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock" ("GON" 179).

thinking condemns him to the paralysis of unbearable suffering: to believe in free will is to believe in an ontology that entails all the unbearable consequences Wallace knew make life intolerable.

- Fogle's impossible redemption: we encounter Fogle through the perspective of the narrating-I, i.e. his monologue in §22 is his recounting of the past in response to someone's invisible question. He's telling someone the story of how he changed his life, how he came to abandon nihilism and live a meaningful life in the IRS (Michaelson (2015) was right that Fogle's is a search for meaning). In short, he's consciously telling the story of how he redeemed himself. In the biography of David Foster Wallace, D.T. Max writes that *The Pale King* was meant to be *prescriptive*, i.e. to indicate the way to redemption from the existential problems of our time. Chris Fogle's story is one of the passages that makes this monologism obvious, showing once again that the novel is a fictionalization of the philosophy of *This Is Water*.

Fogle's redemption is thus another version of the Existentialist redemption Wallace – like Dostoevsky – attempts in all of his works, and so it too is doomed to fail. As we've seen, the young Fogle suffered from nihilism, he felt life was meaningless and so just drifted through it without reason, but this is how he describes his moment of redemption: "it had something to do with paying attention and the ability to choose what I paid attention to, and to be aware of that choice, the fact that it's a choice. […] I think that deep down I knew that there was more to life and to myself than just the ordinary psychological impulses for pleasure and vanity that I let drive me" (*TPK* 189).

This is obviously a direct fictionalization of *This Is Water*: Fogle is talking about overcoming his hardwired default setting (i.e. the equation between determinism and suffering) in order to achieve real freedom (i.e. the equation between free will and fulfilment). He is saying that salvation is becoming aware "that there is *more* to life and to myself" than the laws of scientific determinism ("the psychological impulses that drive me"); or in other words, that salvation is becoming aware of having free will. He hammers this point home in various ways throughout the speech: he says that redemption was learning that "I simply had to make a choice of what was more important" (ibid. 251), and "that now a meaningful choice lay in herding, corralling, and organizing that torrential flow of info" (ibid. 242) into meaning, that "I was a machine that suddenly realized it was a human being and didn't have to just go through the motions it was programmed to perform over and over" (ibid. 184), and that "most people are always feeling or adopting some attitude or choosing to pay

attention to one thing or one part of something without even knowing we're doing it. We do it automatically, like a heartbeat" (ibid. 185).

Of course, at the core of Fogle's argument reside the fundamental beliefs of our civilization. Implicit in what he says is the theory that: without free will, existence is meaningless. If one doesn't live according to free will – which in Existentialism is not a given but a power that must be unlocked – then life *is* nihilism. But in the language Fogle uses a truth emerges that we haven't discussed yet: our certainty that free will is the fundamental evidence that appears in our existence is actually *our belief* that there is something "more to life and to myself"; that is, our belief in free will is a *metaphysical leap of faith*, something that neither scientific rationality nor experience can attest—as even Immanuel Kant, who *was* a theorist of free will, knew very well, writing that "freedom is a mere idea, the objective reality of which can in no way be shown according to natural laws or in any possible experience" (78) in his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

Wallace owned and studied Kant's *Foundations*. The book is among the most annotated in his archive at the HRC, and Wallace also directly mentions Kant in "Good Old Neon" – a short story written during the composition of *The Pale King* – about these same matters of determinism and free will. It is therefore possible that Wallace consciously let this Kantian awareness slip through Fogle's words. Fogle's fundamental beliefs are the foundation of Western civilization: we believe that life without free will is meaningless, but free will is our metaphysical leap of faith—so fundamental to our being that we forget that it is and treat it as unquestionable evidence.

But given that free will cannot be experienced nor makes any sense from the standpoint of scientific rationality – which is the only reasoning we think is capable of knowing the truth –, our faith in free will is not only entirely irrational but outright anti-rational. This should further move us to pause and reflect on the possibility that our most fundamental beliefs may be contradictory and false. Because Fogle (like Wallace and his other characters and every one of us) must also deal with the fact that free will in science is impossible – both determinism and indeterminism do not allow it –, and that no one in history has ever presented a successful rational argument for demonstrating its truth. His anti-rational faith that he's endowed with free will must therefore be *haunted* by the awareness that his faith makes no sense and that every rational argument seems to prove that he's in fact a machine, which of course is his greatest terror, and would plunge him right back into nihilism.

The idea of domination pervades our relationship to ourselves and the world, all of our meanings and values, and once again we find this truth slipping through Chris Fogle's words. We've seen how he described redemption as becoming aware "that there was more to life and to myself than just the ordinary psychological impulses for pleasure and vanity that I let drive me" But notice how the truth of free will pervades this sentence: to be endowed with free will is to be a transcendence that always transcends its facticity, which means that one can *never* be victim of anything (in this case: the "psychological impulses"), in the sense that one's being a victim is *always one's own fault*: psychological impulses drove the young Fogle *because he let them* ("…that I let drive me").

In other words, because he believes in free will, Fogle knows (or must feel deep down) that his unhappiness and nihilism were entirely his own fault, just like Sylvanshine knows that his shortcomings are all his fault. Accordingly, when Fogle says that "most people are always…" driven by their hardwired impulses, he must know that that is because *they let them* drive them, and so that it is entirely their fault: meaning once again that rationality here provides no basis for compassion; it is hard to see why the "enlightened" Chris Fogle shouldn't look at his past with self-contempt and at other people with the haughty triumph and superiority of someone who has overcome the disdainful condition of the masses entirely by the merit of his own free will.

The feeling of domination that inheres to free will also sleeps through this other central affirmation of Fogle's: to "feel *alive*" is to feel "like I actually *owned* myself" (ibid. 188). In the ideology of free will, we think that being alive means to be powerful enough to own oneself and one's surroundings, to control ourselves and what is around us, i.e. to decide what should and shouldn't be. You cannot choose over things you do not dominate. To us, scientific determinism empties existence of meaning because it denies our ability to dominate, it makes us impotent and subject to fate. This makes manifest that deep down, we equate meaningfulness with domination, and all this makes itself manifest through Fogle's words, despite his intentions. Yet, we keep engaging in self-deception every time we refuse to admit that Napoleon is more meaningful than us.

Sylvanshine and Fogle must feel all of this, deep down, and so must have Wallace— the author of *This Is Water* and all his other works which manifest its philosophy. This interpretation of the world always leads back to individualism, conflict, the terror of self-nothingness, and to the realization that there is no reason to give oneself away to something larger than the self. This is why Fogle's redemption – as well as Sylvanshine's – is impossible,

and there is also textual proof to argue that this impossibility is consciously testified by the novel itself.

Following D.T. Max's indication that Wallace meant *The Pale King* to be prescriptive, critics have generally read it as such: a novel that offers a solution to suffering in which its author believed. But this kind of reading ignores the fact that there are *numerous* instances in which the novel's intentionality appears to clearly negate its own proposed solutions (most importantly with Fogle and Drinion), as if exhibiting the incontrollable overflowing of Wallace's own doubting of his beliefs, which may also explain Wallace's decade-long struggles with the novel and its final unfinished status: it may be that Wallace wanted the novel to be prescriptive, but that he could never actually find a prescription that would work, one that would free him from the deep fear that his hope was just self-deception.

Nothing in the novel tells us what happened to Sylvanshine regarding his struggles with *RFI*. We have a Wallace note that says "Drinion is *happy*" (*TPK* 548), but the novel itself *doesn't* show his happiness, it shows only his inability to truly connect with other people—which we know in Wallace is the unequivocable proof of unhappiness. And with Fogle, we have a character who claims to have redeemed himself, but the novel tells us he actually hasn't, and it does it with *irony*—which Wallace always denounced as the voice of cynicism and nihilism (the same ironical negation occurs with Meredith Rand, no one is saved in this novel). The irony is that while Fogle claims to have redeemed himself from the nihilism that made everything look equally meaningless to him, he is still nicknamed "Irrelevant Chris" at the IRS because of his never-overcome inability to filter out facts and choose which are meaningful and which aren't – as proven by the fact that §22 is his one-hundred-plus-pages-long monologue of an answer to an invisible but easily intuitable simple question like "What brought you to work for the IRS?" –, which means that he hasn't learned what he claims he has ("to choose what is more important"), and also that he too is subject to his own version of Sylvanshine's *RFI*.

In reading *The Pale King*, we witness the *factual* negation of Fogle's claimed redemption. We see once again Wallace's maxim "diagnosis does not equal cure" in action, as we will later in the novel with Meredith Rand. There is no salvation in this novel, as proven by both rational argument and textual evidence. In this sense, *The Pale King* is Wallace's bleakest work, not *Oblivion* (as Boswell writes in "Constant Monologue"), because at least *Oblivion* was meant to be descriptive, but if *TPK* was truly meant to be prescriptive, then it is

the testament to Wallace's final tragic failure to find his way to redemption.[141]

- *the novel's ironic rejection of the substitute teacher's speech*: the novel's irony explodes the hypocrisy of Fogle's claimed redemption, and it does the same with the famous substitute teacher's speech on the heroism of accounting (as it will with Rand's claim to maturity and Drinion's supposed happiness)—i.e. the speech Fogle presents as his final moment of awakening.

The teacher's monologue begins with the affirmation that adulthood is "to experience commitment as the loss of options, a type of death, the death of childhood's limitless possibility, of the flattery of choice without duress" (*TPK* 230). We immediately recognize this as Wallace's own voice from "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again": "…if I want to be any kind of grownup, I have to make choices and regret foreclosures and try to live with them" ("ASFT" 267-8). This alerts us to the fact that we are here confronted with a possible prescription, a way out of nihilism into meaning, one that was dear to Wallace. This intuition is confirmed when the teacher gets to the heart of his speech, telling the class that a true meaningful life is one of attention and care and sacrifice, continually chosen in the knowledge that no audience will be there to applaud:

> Gentlemen, here is a truth: Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space
> is what real courage is. […] I mean true heroism, not heroism as you might know
> it from films or the tales of childhood. You are now nearly at childhood's end;
> you are ready for the truth's weight, to bear it. The truth is that the heroism of
> your childhood entertainments was not true valor. It was theatre. The grand
> gesture, the moment of choice, the mortal danger, the external foe, the climactic
> battle whose outcome resolves all—all designed to appear heroic, to excite and
> gratify an audience. Gentlemen, welcome to the world of reality—there is no
> audience. No one to applaud, to admire. No one to see you. Do you understand?
> Here is the truth—actual heroism receives no ovation, entertains no one. No

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[141] The present argument thus obviously negates Baskin's (2014) affirmation that "*The Pale King*'s narrative threads almost all coalesce into stories of conversion or transformation, with its various narrators recounting their paths from a self-incurred immaturity to something resembling enlightenment, maturity, or wisdom" (156). On the same line, it rejects Hayes-Brady (2018). Particularly interesting is Staiger's (2015) interpretation of *TPK*, which sees Wallace failing to reach "the spilling responsiveness to life he found in a master like Dostoevsky" (111) because of his always-theoretical and calculated attention to formalism.

one queues up to see it. No one is interested. […] True heroism is minutes, hours, weeks, year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care—with no one there to see or cheer. This is the world. Just you and the job (*TPK* 231-2).

A true meaningful life is a life that does not depend on the applause of an audience, a life that is not driven by narcissism—the condition that hides the deep feeling of the void of self-nothingness and self-meaningless, and which needs the audience's approval to escape this feeling. We recognize that this is a belief that Wallace cherished deeply because it is voiced all over his work. It *is* a prescription, but once again the tragic truth is that the novel itself negates the prescription, and it does it ironically because, while giving the speech, the substitute teacher becomes ever more exhilarated by the fact that he *is* – right now – the object of the audience's gaze, which makes ever more obvious the fact that he is *performing*. The novel's irony explodes the hypocrisy of his speech, his praise of true heroism without an audience is his way of chasing self-aggrandizement by performing for the audience, hoping to be seen as a hero.

The irony doubles in that Fogle (hypocritically) claims to have been saved by this (hypocritical) substitute teacher's speech, which Fogle himself actually realizes was performance, saying that his "rhetoric about heroism […] seemed a bit over-the-top to me even then" (ibid. 242). The more the teacher speaks, the more he becomes rhetorical and grandiose: "This may be the first time you've heard the truth put plainly, starkly. Effacement. Sacrifice. Service. […] This is effacement, perdurance, sacrifice, honor, doughtiness, valor. Hear this or not, as you will. Learn it now, or later—the world has time. Routine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui—these are the true hero's enemies, and make no mistake, they are fearsome indeed. For they are real" (ibid. 233).

He uses listings, the common rhetorical move of great orators who want to excite the masses. He uses bygone syntactical forms for higher effect ("*for* they are real"). Most importantly, he puts himself up on a pedestal, exhibiting his feeling of superiority – the superiority of the object of the audience's gaze. He is the bearer of the truth ("This may be the first time you've heard the truth put plainly, starkly"). His devotees have only one choice, either listen to the truth or continue to err ("Hear this or not, as you will. Learn it now, or later—the world has time"). And of course, the truth is that accounting is heroism and

therefore *he is the hero*, while they – the audience – aspire to his heroism (because he's the accountant teaching aspiring accountants).

This is why he can tell them that he knows "joy unequalled by any you men can imagine" (ibid. 232). But where his self-absorption and deep narcissism become most obvious is in the end of the sentence: "True heroism is *a priori* incompatible with audience or applause or even the bare notice of the common run of man" (ibid. 233). The end of the sentence tells us that the substitute teacher is a narcissist who has never obtained the notice he needs for self-sustainment, and that the result of his deep sadness is his attempt at self-deception through self-aggrandizement, which also hides the factual misanthropy that must ensue out of one's deep fear at feeling entirely dependent on other people's approval, and the despair inherent in never having been recognized and loved. *This* is why the teacher is giving this speech and giving it in such fashion: he's hoping for recognition, a recognition that is so vital to him that he must rationalize its absence as *the common run of man*'s inability to understand true genius.

The teacher is trapped in the unbearable suffering of narcissism. The novel itself displays his entrapment as it displays Fogle's. This happens so often in Wallace and all over *The Pale King*, so that in reading the novel we feel as though Wallace has simultaneously set down his hopes and his irremediable disbelief in his hopes. Once again, we have a diagnosis, but we never get to a cure. Wallace once said that he could feel the nihilism of our age inside him whenever he'd profess a profound belief about anything, because then he always heard the voice of cynicism respond in his head, making fun of his naivete for believing, and his posthumous novel is a textual representation of this entrapment.

Wallace's fiction displays the impossibility of his Existentialist Contradiction by continuously negating the prescriptions they offer, and by showing "a near-perfect absence […] of ordinary love" (p. 39) as Jonathan Franzen writes "Farther Away" (2011). It's as if the fiction made manifest what Wallace must have felt deep down but always tried to break free from: the feeling that his hopes were contradictory and impossible, and that rationality showed that his fundamental beliefs entailed the unbearable suffering he hoped to overcome. The highest value of his Existentialism is its awareness of the dangers of meaninglessness, individualism, solipsism, self-judgment and hyper-reflexivity, the conflict of human relationships and the terror of the other's look, but its limit is its hope to find a solution where there can be none.

- *Lane Dean thinking of suicide*: if there is one character who perhaps comes close to salvation in *The Pale King*, it's Lane Dean Jr. At the same time, his story is undeniable evidence for Franzen's denunciation of the absence of ordinary love in Wallace, as well as a fine representation of the terror of the other's look and the original conflict of all human relationships as described by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*,[142] so that the fact that he is the one character who perhaps comes close to love may itself be tragic. For these reasons, and because his story demands the most complicated interpretation of all of the characters in *The Pale King*, this section will end with the attempt to say a few words about him.

We first meet Lane Dean in §6, which was also published as a stand-alone story with the title "Good People" (in *The New Yorker*). The title has a twofold meaning: it wants to tell us that Lane Dean and his girlfriend truly are good people despite what they're about to do, and most importantly that they are terrorized of not being good people, i.e. of other people's judgment, and *therefore* of self-judgment – they live in hyper-reflexive extreme fear of not being good enough. This is another story about the feelings of self-nothingness and self-meaninglessness and the consequent terror of judgment and objectification of the self, and it is about the resulting interiorization of the Other's look within the self, as an extreme form self-objectification, exercised in cruel and severe self-judgment. And it is a story about the concrete dire consequences of these dynamics in human relationships. It's an instantiation of a problem that is central in Existentialism from Heidegger's *Being and Time* and its warning against inauthenticity to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and its conception of being-for-others.

We meet the young Lane Dean sitting on a bench in a park with his girlfriend Sheri. They are a young Christian couple who incurred an unwanted pregnancy. What we witness is their subtle, incredibly complex, and *mostly* unconscious and self-deceptive attempt to manipulate each other and themselves, caused by the fear that governs their lives: the fear

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[142] This analysis shall be the next step to continue this research in progress, because "the look" pervades Wallace's and Dostoevsky's works. *Notes from Underground* is a great fictionalization of the effects of "the look," and so is Wallace directly-*Notes*-inspired *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. In discussing the collection, Holland (2013) is wrong in saying that "sexual desire for women taints and often prevents any attempts by men to extend empathy" (H 108). It is not sexual desire that prohibits men's empathy but their terror of the women's look, their judgment. Wallace himself said so in his 1999 "bookworm" interview with Michael Silverblatt. This terror of the look goes hand in hand with existential solipsism and finds its concretization in insincerity and manipulation in human relationships, which is why Wallace dramatizes them throughout his fiction (see Thompson's "Sincerity with a Motive").

possesses them; everything they do is an attempt to divert their eyes from the truth they feel inside. The irony is that we come to understand – by fine textual clues – that they're *both* trying to manipulate the other with regards to their agreement on the abortion, when the truth is that *they both do not want the baby*. That is, if only they could tell each other the truth, they would find out that they feel the same, and so the problem will be solved, but they both can't bear the truth (for fear of the look), and so they will have the baby.

The tragedy is that Lane Dean and Sheri truly are good people. They're just human beings like us struggling to overcome their fears. The tragedy is that the fear possesses them, it traps them in a life that is not theirs. Lane Dean is the focalizer of the whole section. We experience everything through his mind, which should force us to realize that we know nothing of the actual Sheri, we only know *his projection of her*. This is a formal device with which Wallace represents solipsism, a central theme of the story and of all of his work. He represents *the actual truth of* experiential solipsism (in which he never ceased to believe, despite what most critics believe), which is founded upon the basic ontological opposition of self and other, and without which there could be no fear of the other's look (the other is terrifying *because* she is forever mysterious).

Lane Dean sits next to Sheri terrified because she is "as unknown to him now as outer space" (*TPK* 43). Only truly knowing what goes on in her heart could comfort him, but he cannot know, because that is just the truth of the life we live in. All we get is the other's language and behavior, and we can never know nothing about what actually goes on in her heart. All we (can) do is *interpret* her behavior and *project* what is in her heart, but this interpretation is always a violence that we do to the other, because it imposes the meaning we create upon her, it objectifies her, and it doesn't quiet our fear, because we know that our interpretation is just a guess that cannot but remain doubtful.

Thus, Lane Dean wonders and tries to guess, "but he did not know why Sheri herself had not gone to Pastor Steve—he could not read her heart. She was blank and hidden" (ibid. 42), and in this blankness he experiences why "hell is other people." Sheri is the greatest danger because her otherness is a mysterious will that clashes with his own. Not just in this circumstance but by definition as every will seeks its own individual fulfilment, and so it always exists in conflict with all other wills, peace is the finite time in which two wills happened to be aligned and convenient to one another. The other *is* the constant danger of possible attack on the self. Fear of the other is therefore, once again, entirely rational, and accordingly, it is this fear that drives Lane Dean's will to want to know Sheri's heart: to know

her heart would be the best *defense* against her endless possibility of attack, it would allow him to know exactly what she feels and thinks, and so to *predict* the danger, and to know what needed to be done in order to obtain what he wants.

We meet Lane Dean and Sheri when they've already agreed on the abortion, but they've done it by trying to constantly cast the burden of the *evil act* upon the other's shoulders. We realize that they *both* tried to do this only at the end, though, because – since Lane Dean is the focalizer – for almost the entire section all we see is *his* manipulation, of both her and himself. Lane Dean's problem is that not only does he want to make sure Sheri goes through with the abortion, he also wants to be relieved of the responsibility for the abortion as much as possible, because he knows that the other people of his community would think of it as an evil act done by a bad person, and so *he too* thinks of it as an evil act done by a bad person.

   Lane Dean wants the abortion to happen, but since he "knows" abortion is evil he wants neither others nor himself to know he really wants it to happen. Wallace emphasizes this by making the obtainment of the abortion very simple for Lane Dean, by creating a fictional world in which he *does not* love Sheri, and in which he'd only need to tell her "I do not love you" to be *certain* she'd go through with it. Lane Dean doesn't love her and doesn't want the baby, and he only needs to tell her the truth to solve all of his "concrete" problems, but he can't:

> neither did he ever open up and tell her straight out he did not love her. This might be his *lie by omission.* This might be the frozen resistance—were he to look right at her and tell her he didn't, she would keep the appointment and go. He knew this. Something in him, though, some terrible weakness or lack of values, could not tell her. It felt like a muscle he did not have. He didn't know why; he just could not do it, or even pray to do it. She believed he was good, serious in his values (ibid. 42).

He can't because telling her he doesn't love her would still reveal his true evil character: he would be the guy who impregnated a girl he doesn't love and left her with no choice but to go through with the abortion; he would *not* be the good and serious in his values guy anymore. This is why he cannot tell her *nor himself* the truth: "He knew it was wrong, knew something was required of him […], but he pretended to himself he did not know what it was that was

required. […] He pretended that not saying aloud what he knew to be right and true was for her sake, was for the sake of her needs and feelings" (ibid. 39-40).

He pretended to himself that not saying "I don't love you" was for her sake, to not leave her alone in this hard time, but in truth it was all for his fear of being crushed by the judgment of the other and self-judgment – the fear infuses the whole of his being. It's this "terrible inner resistance" (ibid. 42) that drives him: "he was desperate to be good people, to still be able to feel he was good" (ibid. 40-1). As a result, their relationship becomes "balanced on a knife or wire" (ibid. 39), because everything in it becomes manipulation resulting from terror, and even when he tells her that "the appointment could get moved back; if she just said the word" (ibid. 41), he is still trying to manipulate the situation to make sure *he looks good.*

And Sheri knows this, which we understand because "she shook her head and laughed in an unhappy way" (ibid. 39). This is a moment when Wallace's narrator uses his privileges to great value. He elevates himself above the focalizer's (Lane Dean's) consciousness so as to disclose the true *unconscious* war within his being: "This was true, that he felt this way, and yet he also knew he was also trying to say things that would get her to open up and say enough back that he could see her and read her heart and know what to say to get her to go through with it. He knew this without admitting to himself that this was what he wanted, for it would make him a hypocrite and liar" (ibid. 41).

The terrorized part—*not the whole*—of Lane Dean is trying to manipulate Sheri, and Lane Dean *both knows and doesn't know* he's doing it ("he knew this without admitting it to himself"). But what does this mean? This is one of Wallace's deepest psychological insights, which too finds its precedent in Sartre's Existentialist phenomenology of *Being and Nothingness*: Lane Dean doesn't know it because he's living in self-deception and bad faith as the terror stops the truth from becoming conscious awareness that can lead one's actions, but he knows it because beneath self-deception and bad faith always lies the deeper awareness of one's lying to oneself, which is why self-deception always entails suffering: self-deception is the always-failed attempt to hide the truth from oneself.

This is why the word "hypocrite" recurs six times in this story: Lane Dean's fear tries to prevent the truth from arising to consciousness, but the deeper voice within his being keeps telling him that he's being a hypocrite. He is divided, split off like all of us. This is why he is paralyzed, why "he hate[s] himself for sitting so frozen" (ibid. 39) next to Sheri. He experiences the world according to our interpretation of the world. He feels himself as the

self who must manipulate his surroundings according to his will in order to achieve what he wants, and he feels that the other's will is a danger to his own will, and that if he fails then he'll be *rightfully* judged. *This* is what terrifies him: the other's look terrifies because we believe it tells the truth.

The extreme fear inherent in this interpretation of the self and the world makes paralysis inevitable. This is why characters like Lane Dean continue to exhibit the symptoms of what AAs in *Infinite Jest* call "Analysis-Paralysis." Lane Dean too is trapped in the hyper-reflexivity that affects all of Wallace's characters and of which the Existentialist Contradiction reaffirms the necessity: "He promised God he had learned his lesson. But what if that, too, was a hollow promise, from a hypocrite who repented only after, who promised submission but really only wanted a reprieve? He might not even know his own heart or be able to read and know himself. He kept thinking also of 1 Timothy and the hypocrite therein who disputeth over words" (ibid. 42).

Like Neal and Sylvanshine, then, Lane Dean too suffers from the impostor syndrome, and this is natural, because a world of free will must be a world of terror of the other's look, which terror entails the suffering of impostor syndrome. If my meaning and value are what others say they are, then I within my possess no meaning nor value. The incurable evil of the impostor syndrome that affects Wallace's characters is not so much the idea of presenting a mask to other people (this is a symptom), but the more fundamental truth that I can never feel authentic, nor know who I am (and so whether I'm lying to myself or not), if the ones who decide who I am is other people. In other words, the fundamental problem is the complete loss of self-identity, feeling as nothing inside and not knowing who I am, believing that *other people decide* who I am. Once that feeling is established, terror of the other's look – and so performance, fraudulence, and narcissism – are unavoidable. Paralysis so becomes the inevitable feeling of our perception of existence and its resulting impossibility of establishing a self-identity, and Lane Dean feels all of it:

> now he felt like he could see the edge or outline of what a real vision of Hell might be. It was of two great and terrible armies within himself, opposed and facing each other, silent. There would be battle but no victor. Or never a battle— the armies would stay like that, motionless, looking across at each other, and seeing therein something so different and alien from themselves that they could not understand, could not hear each other's speech as even words or read

anything from what their face looked like, frozen like that, opposed and uncomprehending, for all human time. Two-hearted, a hypocrite to yourself either way (ibid. 43).

But the moment of most dreadful paralysis is also the chance for awareness. Salvation dwells right next to hell (just as Tikhon says in *Demons*). Lane Dean's vision of self-paralysis may finally condemn him to eternal doom, but it is also the necessary (but insufficient) precondition for a possible moment toward salvation. By itself, this awareness is final condemnation, but it appears together with a possible way out, then it can be the initial spark of salvation, which seems to be what happens Lane Dean: he has a new "type of vision, what he would later call within his own mind a vision or *moment of grace*" (ibid. 43-4).

The graceful vision is that he "was not a hypocrite, just broken and split off like all men" (ibid. 44), so that he had *reason* to stop the vicious cycle of cruel self-judgment, reason to stop hating himself, and reason to replace self-hatred with compassion, self-absorption with care for the other, paralysis with action. Here, like Dostoevsky, Wallace *initially* presents salvation as *grace*. Grace – which has *nothing* to do with free will and individual responsibility – appears to be saving Lane Dean from suffering. And accordingly, it is only when grace descends upon him that Lane Dean can, for a moment, actually see within Sheri's heart, and see that *she too* has been trying to manipulate him all along, *she too* doesn't want to have the baby but wants to feel like good people, *she too* feels two-hearted and paralyzed, and that her words will be lies and self-deceptions. This is the great moment of revelation:

> she would say that she cannot do it. […] That she will carry this and have it, she has to. […] That listen—this is her own decision and obliges him to nothing. […] Her voice will be clear and steady, and she will be lying […]. It will be a terrible, last-ditch gamble born out of the desperation in Sheri Fisher's soul, the knowledge that she can neither do this thing today nor carry a child alone and shame her family. Her values blocked the way either way, Lane could see, and she has no other options or choice—this lie is not a sin. She is gambling that he is good. There on the table, neither frozen nor yet moving, Lane Dean, Jr., sees all this, and is moved with pity (ibid. 44).

In this moment of grace, Lane Dean experiences the truth of human reality: we are all divided

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between love and fear. This is why we owe each other compassion, pity, because all of our mistakes are the result of an original deep fear that is no fault of our own. The salvation of grace has nothing to do with free choice, nor does compassion. Lane Dean is moved with pity now *because* he sees that Sheri has never had "other options or choice." She merely is who she is, the same conglomerate of love and fear we all are. Her lie is not a sin *because* she has no choice; it's this awareness of *fate* that constitutes the content of Lane Dean's moment of grace and moves him to compassion. Because if Sheri had a choice, she would be guilty of sin, and so she would be at fault, she would be evil, and she would deserve judgment. But in this moment of grace, Lane Dean sees that free will is an illusion. Sheri has no choice; she is trapped between the fear that the illusion of free will generates (she's crushed by the burden of being the one who freely chooses between good and evil) and the love that constitutes her deepest essence but can't triumph over the fear.

In this moment of grace, the light of the truth shines on Lane Dean and saves him. This knowledge is salvific because it gives *reason* for love, brotherhood, and compassion, and it negates that other interpretation of the world, the interpretation by which everyone is the responsible author of his own being, which entails the unbearable and inescapable sufferings of solipsism and conflict which we all must feel deep within (since we all believe in *this* interpretation of the world).

Or so it seems for a moment, because in the end Wallace decides to make it once again unclear whether there can be salvation or whether Lane Dean too, like all of his other characters, is destined to hell. Finally, the moment of grace moves Lane Dean to "something more, something without any name he knows, that is given to him 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? What would even Jesus do? [...] What if he was just afraid, if the truth was no more than this, and if what to pray for was not even love but simple courage" (ibid. 44-5).

But this "something more" moves Lane Dean to decide *to lie* in answer to Sheri's lie, to have a baby and a family founded upon lies. They had agreed to go through with the abortion. Lane Dean wanted the abortion but also to preserve an appearance of goodness. This is why he needed to make sure he didn't appear as though he was forcing Sheri into it, why he needed to maintain the appearance of one who was to do the right thing and be a dad if she ever said a word. To meet these two opposing needs, he never told her he loved her (which would have been a lie), nor the he didn't (which would have been the truth). He

didn't tell her he loved her not because it would have been a lie, but because it would have forced them into having the baby and the family: "good people" don't go through with an abortion when they love each other. And he didn't tell her he doesn't love her because that would make him out as the evil guy. It's all manipulation out of fear either way. This is why he never mentioned his feelings, said he would be there for her either way, while trying to make sure she'd go through with it.

But now we learn that she knew all of it and that she too is trying to manipulate him, that she too is engaged in deception and self-deception for fear of not being good people. This is the revelation in Lane Dean's moment of grace: Sheri will say that she won't be able to go through with the abortion, that "this is her own decision and obliges him to nothing," and "*she will be lying*" – she will be lying "out of the desperation in her soul." Sheri doesn't want the baby and she doesn't love Lane Dean. She is only desperate, desperate because "she can neither do this thing today nor carry a child alone and shame her family." *This* is why she tries to manipulate him, because she too is terrified by the feeling of being trapped between two scenarios both of which make her out to be not good people at all. It is shameful either way, abortion or single motherhood, even if they were not to tell anyone of the abortion (which seems to be the plan), because the judgment of the other's look is internalized, and so whether other people know it or not is indifferent: self-judgment will never leave her alone, she will shame her family anyway (even if they don't know it).

Out of this inescapable terror, she decides to manipulate Lane Dean into marriage (or into forcing her into abortion by saying out loud that he doesn't love her and doesn't want the baby) even as *she knows* that he doesn't love her. She's ready to have a loveless family built on lies to save herself from the judgment of the look. We understand this as the text says that "she will be lying" *because* "she is gambling that he is good," where "good" means precisely that she's gambling that *he too* is so terrified of the judgment of the look that he will do what he knows is considered the right thing to do, in order to be good people, *against his true feelings for her and the baby*. This is why we're told that "she is gambling that he is good" and *not* that she is gambling that he loves her or that he wants the baby. She *knows* he doesn't love her nor wants the baby, and therefore she knows what he was trying to manipulate her into and why, and yet she tries to manipulate him back anyway, in order to save herself from her own present imprisonment in inescapable shame.

This also tells us that she doesn't love him either (or at least that her own fear is much stronger than her love for him), because if she would then she would at gamble that

he loves her back, or she would try to protect him from his fears and try to see what the actual truth is. Instead, she tries to manipulate him back hoping that, by lying to him, he will be completely crushed by the unbearable burden of judgment, because her lie ("I will have this baby without you") will push his back against the wall, the burden will be entirely upon him, he will have no choice but either to explicitly be evil – by *explicitly refusing* to be with her and be a dad – or be good by lying. Thus, the sentence "she is gambling that he is good" actually means that she is gambling that her final lie will dominate him so completely that he will have no choice but to lie and accept to be her husband and the father to her son, so that they will both be saved by the terror of the judgment of the look by living a life of (self-)deception.

In his moment of grace, in what looked like his salvation, Lane Dean sees all of this, and decides to willingly lie and tie himself and Sheri into this (self-)deception. Is this what Jesus would do? To lie in answer to another lie and tie both of them into a deceitful life in hoping to escape fear this way? This ending seems disastrous, and to run against every value Wallace ever espoused, and yet once again Wallace complicates the interpretation even further, because there seems to be an actual chance that this willful self-entrapment in (self-)deception may constitute a kind of salvation for Lane Dean, a way to give himself to something larger than himself, another person, an ideal, a family, to human communion.

We meet Lane Dean again years later in §33, and he now works for the IRS. He's in the office struggling to control thoughts of suicide, induced by the unbearable boredom of the work—the boredom that makes us feel the "hole or emptiness" (ibid. 380) at the core of our being. He now feels that hell is not being split-off within but *being bored*: "lock a fellow in a windowless room to perform rote tasks […] and just leave the man there to his mind's own devices" (ibid. 381). Boredom is "soul-murdering" (ibid. 385) *because* the mind's own devices irremediably go right to the nothingness (the "hole or emptiness") we feel within, and *as a result* "unbidden came ways to kill himself with Jell-O" (ibid. 382). But here is when we get confirmation that he *is* with Sheri, and they *did* have the baby, because Lane Dean tries to concentrate on calm, soothing thoughts to divert his mind from suicide, and *they* are the only thought that seems to work:

> His little baby boy's face worked better than the beach; he imagined him doing
> all sorts of things that he and his wife could talk about later, like curling his fist
> around one of their fingers or smiling when Sheri made that amazed face at him.

> He liked to watch her with the baby; for half a file it helped to have them in mind because they were why, they were what made this worthwhile and the right thing and he had to remember it but it kept slipping away down the hole that fell through him (ibid. 382)

For a moment, the lie seems to have become the truth. Lane Dean now has a *why*, something larger than himself that can infuse his life with meaning and save him from drowning in nothingness, and this "something larger" is two concrete persons to care about and share his human condition with. This is the only thought that can save him. Nietzsche said in *Twilight of the Idols* that "if you have your '*why*' in life, you can get along with almost any '*how*'" (*TI* 157). This why is the "heavenly bread" of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and it is the moment of grace that moved Lane Dean to communion with Sheri. Human beings need to believe life has meaning if they're going to live: without a why you can bear no how. We think to try to understand with certainty – with grounds, with reasons – whether life has meaning or not and what this meaning might be. But our rationality, what we all regard as unquestionable evidence *now*, shows us plainly that life has no meaning at all, and even if we refuse to admit the soul-murdering consequences of our interpretation of the world, we still feel them inside, and they guide our lives.

Because from the point of view of rationality, there's not even a reason why Lane Dean should care about Sheri and the baby. This section mentions Albert Camus as "The Frenchman pushing that uphill stone throughout eternity" (*TPK* 386), and Camus knew this: in *The Rebel* he wrote that care for others requires another *metaphysical leap*, because from the rationalist point of view others *have no meaning* to me, except what all other objects have: they are either means for, or hindrances to, my desires, but that is all (and *my desires* will not save me from this soul-murdering interpretation of the world). In fact, our rationality cannot even show that other people actually exist, let alone that we should care about them. Other consciousnesses can never appear, not in daily life nor through any amazing future technology. Experience doesn't show other consciousnesses; thus, empirically speaking, solipsism is true. So how could Lane Dean ever be saved by the thought of Sheri and the baby? *Why* care about someone when I can't even know if they exist, and even if they exist, they exist in this meaningless life, made up of meaningless beings, all pursuing their own self-interest against one another, until they are all annihilated into an eternity of absolute nothingness?

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Lane Dean's metaphysical leap is his Christian faith. Only in his *faith* can he find *reason* to care. But faith is not reason, and as a culture we've already seen the contradictions and impossibilities that inhere in our old traditions, which is why this kind of faith cannot save, why "*God is dead!*" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 5), and why we will keep on moving away from our past. The story of Lane Dean is a rare occasion of a *possibility* of salvation in Wallace, but its premature end leaves us with the sense that Lane Dean was almost surely finally destined to entrapment like the other characters of the novel. Not only because his concrete application of Christ's teachings appears to be contradictory – Jesus said "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32) and Lane Dean traps himself and Sheri in a room of mirrors of lies –, but also because the novel's narrator tells us that Lane Dean was trying very hard to stay attached to his thoughts of Sheri and the baby "*but it kept slipping away down the hole that fell through him.*" Once again in Wallace, nothingness wins. The rational feeling of the unquestionable truth of nothingness (the void without which our belief in free will is impossible) is far too stronger than any far-fetched hope of meaningfulness. Lane Dean's soul-murdering thoughts of suicide are an entirely coherent consequence of our interpretation of the world, and so they cannot be stopped.

But if *we* want to see a positive in this story, it is that besides showing the entrapment our interpretation of the world must lead to, it also shows the hint of a possibility of *another way*, another way that neither the novel nor its author could ever actually believe in. Because in this last time we see him, we're also told that "Lane Dean summoned all his will and bore down" (ibid. 381) and tried to concentrate to control his thoughts (Wallace's Existentialist prescription), and that in doing so he "began imagining different high places to jump off of" (ibid. 381). We can interpret this as a representation of the absolute impossibility of redeeming unbearable suffering through one's will. The novel says *and* not *but*. Lane Dean summons all of his will to try to save himself *and* he begins imagining different high places to jump off of. There is a causal relation there. Sylvanshine thought he was doomed because he was weak in his will, but in truth he was doomed because he looked for salvation in his will. Fogle remained trapped within his own room of mirrors of contradictions. Lane Dean summons his will and thinks of suicide. No redemption appears in Wallace's Existentialism, a philosophy that is nothing but a specific configuration of the fundamental interpretation of the world we all share. But this doesn't make Wallace a pessimist, because this has nothing to do with the tendencies of one's character. This has to do with the fact that certain consequences are *necessary implications* of certain fundamental beliefs.

The tragedy of Wallace's work is its value, because the depth of its analysis of suffering and its failure to redeem it move us to feel the danger inherent to the way we think about ourselves and the world. Martin Heidegger once said that "he who thinks great thoughts often makes great errors." Wallace's work shows us that his belief in free will, which he thought could save him, was the very reason he was condemned to suffering. It was a great error of a great thinker (and an error that can pride itself of a long history of great thinkers). There's one final detail in Lane Dean's story that adds to its meaning. It's the fact that, however you interpret it, nothing can move you away from the acknowledgment that *if* he was saved it was *only* a matter of grace, grace that has nothing to do with free will, nothing to do with choices and actions and merit and effort, nothing to do with any specific God nor any divine choice, nothing to do with time and space and earthly values. Just grace.

Conclusion

The will to overcome unbearable suffering is the essence of Wallace's work, but Wallace could never find an answer, and this is why his works remain bleak to the end. This tragedy is the great value of his work, because the depth of his failed project shows us what lies deep within our interpretation of the world. Wallace wanted to overcome the unbearable sufferings of solipsism and antagonism, but his Existentialism – founded upon his fundamental belief in free will – made these unbearable sufferings inescapable and non-relievable. This is the burden of his Existentialist Contradiction: the impossibility of affirming free will *and* an ethics of compassion. Free will belongs to the *lógos* of *téchne*, the logic that founds our entire civilization and therefore our scientific rationality. Within it, loneliness, solipsism, constant self-judgment and hyper-reflexivity, the unbearable burden on total responsibility, self-contempt at every minimal failure, and the feeling of worthlessness for every shortcoming of his will are inescapable, and so is the dialectic of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, and therefore self-interest, egotism, narcissism, and the feeling that "hell is other people." To live within this interpretation of the world entails the existential paralysis that affects all of Wallace's characters as the most coherent form of awareness of the truth. Free will belongs to an ontology that entails all the unbearable consequences that Wallace knew

to make life intolerable. Wallace's belief in free will thus makes him a nihilist.[143]

Our becoming aware of this truth may move us to reconsider what we take for granted. The truth is and must always remain beyond our desires, but our desires move us to reconsider our beliefs about the truth, to ask questions. Thus, if Wallace's works truly show the destructive consequences of our fundamental beliefs, then we may be moved to wonder whether they are actually evident. Especially so, if we realize that they entail even more intolerable suffering than that we've been able to bring to light here. This is the reason why, in the analysis of *Crime and Punishment*, we always said that Raskolnikov brings rationality *almost* to its logical conclusions. The suffering of Raskolnikov, Sylvanshine, Fogle, and Lane Dean Jr. is rational, but not as rational as Stavrogin's in *Demons*, the one character that truly enacts the most coherent and final step of our rationality, of which Giacomo Leopardi brought to light the essence in the *Zibaldone* (1817-32), writing that "all is nothing, solid nothing" (*Z* 85).

The universe is meaningless, and therefore too is life. Human beings cannot create meaning, free will can't be the source of meaning and value. Leopardi knows that the hope that we can create meaning is illusory. There is no meaning endowed in existence and therefore whatever you do is a purely arbitrary act that is as meaningless as everything else and which will soon be annihilated together with everything else. Every choice is meaningless, the world is meaningless, and so is existence. You can try to delude yourself to the contrary, but beneath self-deception always lies the deeper awareness of the truth of nothingness. The end of our interpretation of the world – which Leopardi thought was the truth, just as we all do today – is the recognition that "all is nothing, solid nothing."

Leopardi *consciously* shows the inevitability of this conclusion—the conclusion of "our miserable reason" (ibid. 393). Because "reason shows us all too clearly that there is no hope for us" (ibid. 139), and what we consider the truth entails "the most intense despair" (ibid. 917). The real awareness of this truth is the "awareness of the meaningless of things" (ibid.), and therefore – Leopardi writes: "the truth […] encourages suicide" (ibid. 71), and we can rejoice only in knowing that we have "the power to put an end to our misery whenever we please" (ibid. 393). Like Wallace, Leopardi was not a pessimist; he was the man who truly thought our rationality to its end. Wallace never *consciously* reached Leopardi on the final step,

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[143] In this sense, the present interpretation finds a strong precursor in Dreyfus and Kelly (2011) and rejects McGowan (2020), as well as Hamilton's (2014) analysis of *The Pale King* as transcending boredom.

but his works – unconsciously and unwillingly – show the same inevitability of the same conclusion. This is why they force us to question our most fundamental beliefs.

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The Existentialist Contradiction: The Necessary Unbearable Suffering of Free Will in David

Foster Wallace ....

....

Dottorato di ricerca in Lingue, culture e società moderne e Scienze del linguaggio.........

(in cotutela con Ludwig-Maximillians-Universitaet Muenchen ....)

Ciclo .32....................

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Estratto per riassunto della tesi di dottorato

Studente: Paolo Pitari   matricola: 828083

Dottorato: Lingue, culture e società moderne e Scienze del linguaggio

Ciclo: 32°

Titolo della tesi[1] : **The Existentialist Contradiction: The Necessary Unbearable Suffering of Free Will in David Foster Wallace.**

Abstract (English)

The Existentialist Contradiction:

The Necessary Unbearable Suffering of Free Will in David Foster Wallace

The will to overcome unbearable suffering is the essence of Wallace's work. Wallace could never find an answer, and this is why his works remains bleak to the end. Wallace's entrapment is the entrapment of our entire culture, and here resides the great value of his work: the depth of his failed investigation may move us to reconsider our interpretation of the world, because Wallace wanted to overcome the unbearable sufferings of solipsism and antagonism, but his Existentialism – specifically: his fundamental belief in free will – made these unbearable sufferings inescapable and non-relievable. To prove these claims, the thesis analyzes "the Existentialist Contradiction" (the impossibility of affirming free will *and* an ethics of compassion) that infuses Wallace's works with reference to other great Existentialists (Heidegger, Camus, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky…). It argues that Existentialism belongs to the essence of neoliberalism (Giddens, Bauman…); that Existentialism is a manifestation of the *lógos* of *téchne*—the logic that leads our entire civilization and entails unbearable suffering (Severino…); that Wallace belongs to the millenary history of writers who believe in literary truth (Aeschylus, Tolstoy, Sartre…), and that such belief still remains unrefuted despite all attempts to debunk it (Russell and Goodman, Lamarque and Olsen…). The final aim is to confront our most fundamental beliefs with Wallace, and to question them. This research is still in progress.

Abstract (Italiano)

La contraddizione Esistenzialista:

La necessaria insopportabile sofferenza del libero arbitrio in David Foster Wallace

L'essenza dell'opera di Wallace è la volontà di superare l'insopportabile sofferenza della vita. Ma Wallace non riuscì mai a trovare la risposta che cercava. Ciò che imprigionò Wallace imprigiona l'intera nostra cultura, ed è

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[1] Il titolo deve essere quello definitivo, uguale a quello che risulta stampato sulla copertina dell'elaborato consegnato.

questo il grande valore della sua opera: la profondità del suo fallimento ci spinge a riconsiderare la nostra interpretazione del mondo. In Wallace vediamo che l'Esistenzialismo – nello specifico: la fede nel libero arbitrio – rende le insopportabili sofferenze del solipsismo e dell'antagonismo necessarie e non alleviabili. Per dimostrare ciò, la tesi analizza "la Contraddizione Esistenzialista" (l'impossibilità di affermare il libero arbitrio *e* un'etica della compassione) che pervade l'opera di Wallace, riferendosi ai grandi Esistenzialisti del passato (Heidegger, Camus, Nietzsche, Dostoevskij…); affermando che l'Esistenzialismo appartiene all'essenza del Neoliberismo (Giddens, Bauman…); che l'Esistenzialismo è una manifestazione della tecnica – la logica che guida la nostra civiltà ed esige che l'insopportabile sofferenza (Severino…); che Wallace appartiene a una storia millenaria di artisti che considerano la letteratura come via della verità (Eschilo, Tolstoj, Sartre…), e che tale ipotesi non è mai stata smentita, nonostante i molteplici tentativi al riguardo (Russell e Goodman, Lamarque e Olsen…). L'obiettivo finale è affrontare le nostre convinzioni fondamentali, insieme a Wallace, e metterle in discussione. Questa ricerca è ancora in corso.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Der existentialistische Widerspruch:

Das notwendig unerträgliche Leid des freien Willens bei David Foster Wallace

Zentral für Wallaces Werk ist der Wille, das unerträgliche Leid zu überwinden. Wallace selbst konnte nie eine Antwort finden und so bleiben seine Werke bis zum Ende ohne Trost. Wallaces Gefangenschaft ist die Gefangenschaft unserer gesamten Kultur und hier findet sich der große Wert seiner Arbeit: Die Tiefe seiner gescheiterten Untersuchung vermag uns dazu bewegen, die eigene Interpretation der Welt zu überdenken, denn Wallace wünschte zwar das unerträgliche Leid von Solipsismus und Antagonismus zu überwinden, aber sein Existenzialismus – insbesondere sein fundamentaler Glaube an den freien Willen – ließ dieses unerträgliche Leid unausweichlich und unauflösbar werden. Um diese Aussagen zu belegen, unternimmt die vorliegende Arbeit eine Analyse des „existentialistischen Widerspruchs" (der Unmöglichkeit, den freien Willen *und* eine Ethik des Mitgefühls zu behaupten), der Wallaces Werke durchzieht, und nimmt dabei Bezug auf andere große Existentialisten (Heidegger, Camus, Nietzsche, Dostojewski…). Es wird argumentiert, dass der Existenzialismus zum Wesen des Neoliberalismus gehört (Giddens, Bauman…); dass der Existenzialismus eine Manifestation des *Lógos* der *Téchne* ist – der Logik, die unserer gesamten Zivilisation vorausgeht und unerträgliches Leid mit sich bringt (Severino…); dass Wallace zur jahrtausendealten Geschichte von Schriftstellern gehört, die an die literarische Wahrheit glauben (Aischylos, Tolstoi, Sartre…) und dass dieser Glaube immer noch unwiderlegt ist, trotz aller Versuche, ihn als falsch zu überführen (Russell und Goodman, Lamarque und Olsen…). Schließlich liegt ein letztes Bestreben darin, unseren grundsätzlichen Ansichten zu Wallace entgegenzutreten und sie in Frage zu stellen. Diese Forschung ist noch im Gange.

Firma dello studente

Paolo Pitan

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