

Fictions of Proximity  
The Wallace Nexus in Contemporary Literature

by

Tim Personn  
State Examination, Universität Hamburg, 2010

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

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# **Supervisory Committee**

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Dr. Christopher Douglas, Department of English  
**Co-Supervisor**

Dr. Stephen Ross, Department of English (CSPT)  
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Dr. James Rowe, School of Environmental Studies (CSPT)  
**Outside Member**

## Abstract

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This dissertation studies a group of contemporary Anglo-American novelists who contribute to the development of a new humanism after the postmodern critique of Euro-American culture. As such, these writers respond to positions in twentieth-century philosophy that converge in a call for silence which has an ontological as well as ethical valence: as a way of rigorously thinking the ‘outside’ to language, it avoids charges of metaphysical inauthenticity; as an ethical stance in the wake of the Shoah, it eschews a complicity with the reifications of modern culture. How to reconcile this post-metaphysical promise with the politico-aesthetic inadequacy of speechlessness is the central question for this nexus of novelists—David Markson, Bret Easton Ellis, David Foster Wallace, and Zadie Smith—at the center of which the study locates Wallace as a key figure of contemporary literature. By reconstructing the conversation among these authors, this dissertation argues that the nexus writers turn to indirect means of representation that do justice to the demand for silence in matters of metaphysics, but also gesture past it in the development of a neo-romantic aesthetics that invites the humanist category of the self back onto the scene after its dismissal by late postmodernism. The key to such indirection lies in an aporetic method that inspires explorations of metaphysical assumptions by seducing readers to an ambiguous site of aesthetic wonder; in conversation with a range of contemporary philosophers, the dissertation defines this affective site as a place of proximity, rather than absorption or detachment, which balances out the need for metaphysical distance with the productive desire for a fullness of experience. Such proximate aesthetic experiences continue the work of ‘doing metaphysics’ in post-metaphysical times by engaging our habitual responsiveness to the categories involved. Hence the novels discussed here stage limit cases of reason such as the unknowable world, the unreachable other, the absence of the self, and the unstable hierarchy between irony and sincerity: Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* imagines skepticism as literal abandonment and reminds us of our metaphysical indebtedness to a desired object/world; Ellis’s *American Psycho* shows the breakdown of communication due to a similarly skeptical vision of human interaction and presents a violence that tries to force a response from the desired subject/person; Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* creates a large canvas on which episodes of metaphysical and literal ‘stuckness’ afford possibilities for becoming human; Smith’s *The Autograph Man*, finally, pays attention to gestural language at the breaking point of materialism and theology, nature and culture, tragedy and comedy.

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## Introduction: “Varieties of Silence” in Contemporary Literature

Everywhere it was possible to perceive varieties of silence, small pauses in corners, rectangular planes of stillness, the insides of desks and closets (where shoes curl in dust), the spaces between things, the endless silences of surfaces, time swallowed by methodically silent clocks, whispering air and the speechlessness of sentient beings, all these broken codes contained in the surrounding calm.

—Don DeLillo, *End Zone*

To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric.

—T. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society”

Listen to the silence behind the engines’ noise. Jesus, Sweets, *listen*. Hear it? It’s a love song.

For whom?

You are loved.

—David Foster Wallace, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way”

On December 10, 1950, a feverish and hung-over William Faulkner stepped up to the lectern in a banquet hall in Stockholm to deliver some remarks upon accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature. World War Two had ended just a few years prior, the fallout from the most murderous conflict in human history still lingering in people’s memory. The first Russian atomic test a year before had begun the Cold War for good, inaugurating widespread fears of nuclear annihilation. A new threat hung over people’s heads, reviving fears that the bombs on Japan had not closed the door to a world of nuclear destruction, shocking humanity into peacefulness, but rather had burst it wide open. Likewise, any hopes for art to respond adequately to the terror of the age seemed to have perished in the bomb raids and suffocated in the gas chambers, as well. What was the power of the book compared to a power equivalent to the many kilotons of TNT in a nuclear blast, thinkers of the age asked. “What good is literature,” the critic Julian Murphet would later summarize this dilemma faced by post-war artists, “if two centuries of masterpieces since Goethe’s birth could not prevent Zyklon B?” (127).

When Faulkner spoke to the crowded banquet hall, he gave voice to the most pressing question on people’s minds: “When will I be blown up?” (“Address” 723). Something had

gone seriously wrong with modernity, and Faulkner made no pretences to the contrary: “Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now we can even bear it,” he stated (723), identifying a life lived in the shadow of the bomb as one ruled by the numbness that results from an inability to process a trauma too terrible to take in. This traumatic event, of which the end of the war had given but a frightful intimation, was the absolute detachment of nuclear fissure, splitting reality in its innermost core, and the silence enveloping a radioactive wasteland after the mushroom cloud had subsided. The fear of the atomic bomb, then, was not just a fear of the silence of individual human beings, but of a more terrifying, final silence—the silence of humanity as a whole. In Faulkner’s estimation, humanity had matched the detachment of nuclear destruction with an emotional detachment that allowed people to “even bear” this “fear”; at the same time, however, he saw that the same numbness had also diminished their capacity to address “problems of the spirit” (723) and, in doing so, produce high art and literature.

At this historical juncture, with humanity shivering under the prospect of an eternally silent nuclear winter, Faulkner addressed whom he saw as the only hope for the future: “the young men and women already dedicated to the same anguish and travail” that had occupied serious novelists like himself for ages (723). Only this younger generation of writers, he argued in almost mythical diction, could ensure “that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of [the human being’s] puny inexhaustible voice, still talking” (724). If these young people could find a language that answered to, but was not itself subsumed by, pure abstraction, Faulkner claimed, it was possible that humanity would not only “endure” but might even “prevail” over a modernity at odds with itself. The key to this renewal, he suggested, was in the past: in “the old verities” of “love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice” (724).

The tenor and tone of this promise is reminiscent of the paratactical description Faulkner had given of his own metaphysics a few years before in the short story “The Bear”: “Truth is one. It doesn’t change. It covers all the things which touch the heart—honor and pride and pity and justice and courage and love” (290). In answering to atomic anxiety, Faulkner now imagined the return of a similarly holistic vision to fill the silence of nuclear annihilation. The inexhaustibility of the human “voice,” then, is an indicator of the endurance of metaphysics and humanism, even at the moment of their seeming demise in the silence of a post-human, post-metaphysical world.<sup>1</sup> “A voice comes from the other shore,” the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas would express a similar hope for the human spirit a few decades later; for even the most radical drive to abstraction, Levinas claims, “does not deaden the heartrending bustling of the *there is* recommencing behind every negation” (*Otherwise* 183).

To stay open to this metaphysical event, the revival of the ‘there is’ amidst a void of silence, becomes, in the pages that follow, not only an imperative of ethics, but even, as Faulkner’s myth suggests, a matter of species survival. Indeed, the question of how to address “problems of the spirit” under the hegemonic reign of instrumental rationality did not disappear in the aftermath of his plea to avoid the “end of man.” Faulkner’s addressees, those young novelists coming of age after the war, saw the intensification of ideological strife, heating up an improbably titled Cold War between world powers that avoided direct attacks only to shift their attention and resources to proxy wars. The world had not been renewed, and neither had the language. To the contrary, abstraction reigned supreme, from the language of news anchors to the discourses of popular culture and the jargons of science.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of metaphysics has traditionally been used to refer to an inquiry into the first principles that structure experience. I follow this usage, but with the caveat that, in doing so, I do not mean to make any ontological commitments; rather, I wish to be understood as referring to our habitual responsiveness to these categories of thought. I take this conception, which is ‘critical’ in the Kantian sense, to be at the heart of the philosopher Peter Strawson’s definition of metaphysics as “the finding of reasons, good, bad or indifferent, for what we believe on instinct” (*Individuals* 247).

When the young writer Don DeLillo arrived at Madison Avenue to work as a copywriter for the advertising agency Ogilvy and Mather in the early 1960s, for instance, he encountered a cynical culture he would later, in his magnum opus *Underworld*, associate with the mass death of warfare and the emotional distance of modern human beings: advertisements, DeLillo argued, were “sublimated forms of destruction” (529), written by admen who felt a considerable “measure of detachment from the matters at hand” (526). In modern culture, DeLillo concluded, “you can’t tell the difference [...] between a soup can and a car bomb, because they are made by the same people in the same way and ultimately refer to the same thing” (446).

Around the same time, DeLillo’s contemporary and future competitor for the title of America’s foremost postmodernist, Thomas Pynchon, left the East Coast to work as a technical writer for the Boeing Airplane Company in Seattle, an assignment that necessitated the kind of research into missile technology which would fuel his 1973 novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* with a high degree of engineering expertise. But the beatnik-inspired Pynchon felt out of place among Boeing’s employees, occasionally slipping subversive references to marijuana and the hippie classic *Alice in Wonderland* into the dead language of articles on missile safety he had to write; in fact, the jolly fatalism of the workers at the fictional Yoyodyne Aerospace Plant in Pynchon’s 1966 novel *The Crying of Lot 49* speaks volumes about the young author’s alienation toward his militarized surroundings.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, within a few years of one another, and equally disenchanted with a corporate America which had offered them only the slow death of a deeply detached culture complicit with war and consumerism, both DeLillo and Pynchon quit their Faustian bargain to become full-time novelists.

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of Pynchon’s time at Boeing, see Adrian Wisnicki’s article “A Trove of New Works by Thomas Pynchon? *Bomarc Service News* Rediscovered.”

They faced a 1960s America that became increasingly embroiled in the ideologically motivated conflict over Vietnam and a coeval culture that seemed to repeat on a mass scale the kind of technical discourses the two writers thought they had left behind at Madison Avenue and Boeing. In DeLillo's early work, then, the young novelist can be seen wrestling with this culture and its manifestations in a corporate jargon that approaches the meaninglessness of pure detachment: "Practitioners link the measurement of earnings magnitude to the need for assessing the variability that's expressed in the multiplier rate", DeLillo has one character in his 1972 novel *End Zone* describe the "notion of valuation in the hard market" (97), thus giving the lie to the idea that such a language of abstraction could bring us any nearer to concrete human reality. The same novel, a meditation on the similarities between football and nuclear war set at the evocatively titled Logos College in West Texas, documents how a similar level of detachment suffuses the clinical language of war in the atomic age. "The rate is six per thousand per one hundred R," Major Staley, the college's professor on *Aspects of Modern Warfare*, explains the aftermath of a nuclear attack: "That's twenty four hundred lethal genetic events per four hundred thousand people exposed to one hundred roentgens" (87). The novel's narrator Gary Harkness responds with horror, noting the professor's failure to capture the loss of human life behind the numbers and scientific formulas: "There's no way to express 30 million dead. No words. [...] [The words] don't explain, they don't clarify. They're painkillers. Everything becomes abstract" (85).

But like Faulkner, DeLillo was not ready to concede defeat to the death-dealing powers that be. It was the novelist's task, he agreed with his modernist forebear, to counter this specter of absolute abstraction with an art that set out to renew the language in proximity to life and the human being: "To begin to reword the overflowing world," Harkness states this aim in *End Zone*: "To re-recite the alphabet. To make elemental lists. To call something by its name and need no other sound" (89). In "details," then, in "impressions, colours, statistics,

patterns, mysteries, numbers, idioms, symbols” (112), all of which could only be glimpsed in close attention to the particularity of things, DeLillo sought the very enlivening presence that could renew the language and thus, if Faulkner was to be believed, save humanity from the final silence of its own extinction.<sup>3</sup>

Yet there is an ambivalence in DeLillo’s and Pynchon’s postmodernist presentation of the “varieties of silence” that is missing from Faulkner’s more straightforward plea to avoid the “end of man”—an ambivalence which might also be described as a conflation of two different kinds, or aspects, of silence, lacing the dread of pure detachment with a promise of joyful presence. Perhaps no other writer in the twentieth century was more concerned with these ambiguities of silence than the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in whose work the potentially redemptive naming of particular “details” is in constant tension with an unsayable element. In fact, both Pynchon and DeLillo are readers of Rilke, and both give him a significant presence in their early work, thus signalling an interest in his poetry and its attendant metaphysics of the sayable and unsayable.

In *End Zone*, for instance, Rilke makes an appearance in a course on “the untellable,” which students at Logos College can take with “a man who may or may not have spent three and a half years in one of the camps” (181). DeLillo’s casual reference to the Holocaust here suggests a connection between the trauma of modernity as it manifested in the concentration camps and a speechlessness in the face of such radical dehumanization, the very silence on which this survivor seems to be an authority. Theodor Adorno had made a similar connection two decades before with his injunction to silence in “Cultural Criticism and Society,” pointing to a common source of reification shared by both western art and the Shoah: “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (*Prisms* 34). The critic George Steiner put the same

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<sup>3</sup> A similar horror of silence as the nothingness of humanity’s inconsequentiality in an indifferent universe can also be traced to Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, which dramatizes this silence in a recurring dream that terrifies Mucho Maas, husband of the novel’s heroine Oedipa Maas, with its image of a “creaking metal sign that said nada, nada, against the blue sky” (118).

idea in more concrete terms: “The spheres of Auschwitz-Birkenau and of the Beethoven recital, of the torture-cellar and the great library, were contiguous in space and time. Men could come home from their day’s butchery and falsehood to weep over Rilke or play Schubert” (11).

But when DeLillo’s teacher gives his students Rilke’s ninth *Duino Elegy* to memorize, he is after a different aspect of silence. The implied premise of this assignment, indeed of the whole course, is that moving beyond speech may lead to something of value. It is this second, positive connotation of silence that motivates the students of the untellable, promising a fullness, a silence pregnant with meaning, that seems to have been lost with the plunge into language and its capacity to divide and distinguish what was formerly whole. That, in Rilke, the students read one of the most accomplished examples of poetic diction, but also regard it as “one of the hazards of a course like this” to actually learn some German—thus making language, as one participant says, something “you’re better off without” (181)—is only a fleeting contradiction that can easily be resolved. Language, like Wittgenstein’s Tractarian ladder, which is hinted at elsewhere in the novel (233), is something to throw away to get at the true silence underneath, DeLillo’s teacher suggests; but this also means that it is an indispensable moment in the dialectic leading from the sayable to the unsayable—a dialectic that not only fascinated these prominent postmodernists but arguably still animates novelists writing in their wake.

Indeed, when the writer David Foster Wallace read *End Zone* a decade later,<sup>4</sup> the problematic of abstract, detached language that is the key target of DeLillo’s satirical wit caught his eye, too; and he wrote the simple, yet startling equation “silence = horror” right under the cover page of his paperback copy of the novel.<sup>5</sup> Yet a few years later, Wallace also

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<sup>4</sup> Wallace’s biographer D.T. Max claims that Wallace read DeLillo’s early novels in the fall of 1984 (47).

<sup>5</sup> Wallace’s library is today housed in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, where a number of literary scholars have recently made important discoveries about the author’s thought processes and strategies of composition. The abovementioned annotation in *End Zone* was first reported by Mike Miley.

penned a review essay of David Markson's experimental novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, in which he endorsed, in glowing terms, the novel's play of metaphysical assertion and retraction as a peculiar, though ultimately positive manifestation of silence: Markson's book, he wrote, is "really about the plenitude of emptiness, the importance of silence" (116). Wallace's double gesture, then, hearing in silence both "horror" and "plenitude," indicates that the quandary that Pynchon and DeLillo had found themselves in, inherited from modernists like Faulkner and Rilke, would stay with fiction for the rest of the twentieth century, including turn-of-the-century fiction.

To be sure, what to call these millennial fictions by writers of Wallace's generation—a late continuation of postmodernism, or its succession in a new, yet unnamed literary period—has been a hotly debated topic among scholars of contemporary literature.<sup>6</sup> Noticeably, this discussion around periodization is often being conducted in terms of the inclination of postmodernist art to tend toward silence, too. Thus, writing retrospectively from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, Josh Toth detects in contemporary fiction the spectral hauntings of a postmodernism that refuses to die precisely "because it *continued to speak*" (109). In a footnote, Toth further elaborates this claim: "Had postmodernism been successful in its aesthetic endeavour, it would have ceased to move; it would have become *absolutely silent*" (178-9; my emphasis). In direct response to Toth's account, however, Mary K. Holland asks, "If we define postmodernism as a movement of or toward silence [...], why not dance on its grave rather than write essay upon essay mourning it?" (16).

I enter the conversation at this point in writing a story of how turn-of-the-century fiction was working out some of these same problems as previous generations of modernists and postmodernists. This story centers on a group of contemporary novelists, in a nexus around

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<sup>6</sup> There has been a proliferation of new aesthetic categories intended to capture the essence of early twenty-first century art, from attempts to reframe modernism—e.g., Billy Childish and Charles Thompson's "remodernism" and Robin Van den Akker and Timothy Vermeulen's "metamodernism"—to conceptions that more explicitly aspire to a position of mastery over postmodernism such as Stephen J. Burn's "post-postmodernism."

Wallace, who negotiate something like Toth's demand for authentic silence in direct engagement with the continental theory that led to it, but without giving up on the desire to hold on to the goals of humanism after the postmodern critique of Euro-American culture. Unlike other scholars, however, I do not seek to enter the 'post-postmodernism' debate; rather, what I aim to contribute to the study of contemporary literature in general, and to the burgeoning field of Wallace Studies in particular, is a detailed account of one lineage of major figures in contemporary fiction—David Markson, Bret Easton Ellis, David Foster Wallace, and Zadie Smith—by reconstructing the relationships between these writers as well as to the theorists that influenced their defining works. Since any attempt at periodizing 'the contemporary' is always caught within the limitations of its own particular historical moment, I do so in the modest hope that such a micro study, and many others like it, can provide a more thorough understanding of the contemporary literary landscape than yet another gesture of periodization.

There is, however, a further reason for proceeding by way of a literary lineage of authors in writing this story—one that is directly related to the works themselves, in particular to the way they invite the humanist category of the self back onto the scene after the postmodern critique of Enlightenment philosophy and liberalism. Indeed, one observation I will return to in this study to make a distinction between postmodernists like DeLillo and Pynchon and the Wallace nexus in their attempts at wrestling with the limits of representation, the ambivalences of silence, is the difference of their stances on this concept of the human self. On the most literal level, this difference manifests in the visibility of each generation of artists in the public sphere: while the fact that Pynchon and DeLillo disappear from the public eye in the 1970s and 1980s may be read as a sign of a broader philosophical rejection of humanist models of the self as autonomous and interventionist, engaged in public debate, Wallace and Smith, but even Markson and Ellis, though to a lesser degree, extend the

modernist tradition of public statement by writing manifestoes or finding other ways of self-consciously performing their authorial selves.

In fact, it is in developing such a concept of the human self that continues the critical ambitions of Enlightenment thought, but without falling into the essentialist trappings of a liberal humanism which posits universal truths too easily, that I see the primary contribution of my study to contemporary literary theory and interdisciplinary theory. The key category I introduce to this project is the concept of *proximity*, which allows for a reconceptualization of the dialectic of self and other along *epistemological* and *affective* lines: though faced with the “horror” of a silent other (world/person) that does not respond to the self’s solicitations, this subject of proximity still desires to come closer (to the world, the other person); in a sense, such a movement into closeness is a descendent of a romantic ‘rhetoric of spatiality,’ but one that avoids turning full fusion with the other into the kind of fetish that lets forms of knowing by degrees, rather than absolutes, appear to be worthless by comparison. In fact, since the subject of proximity refuses to fetishize absorption as absolute knowledge, it also does not follow the inevitable failure of such aspirations by bouncing back, angrily and cynically, into the kind of detachment that has often been regarded as one of the shortcomings of postmodernist art. Such a subject of proximity, then, does not imagine itself to be completely sovereign, distant to the point of self-sufficiency; in that sense, it is not the subject of liberal humanism; but it also does not forfeit the ideal of autonomy for critique—this, I argue, is the slightly less sovereign self the Wallace nexus aims at.

The label I give the small canon of turn-of-the-century novels associated with this lineage—fictions of proximity, which is also the title of my study at large—is derived from this concept of proximity, too. Arguably, the affordances of the genitive case in its objective and subjective form make this phrase strategically ambiguous in a sense that is in line with the multivalent thinking of the authors I study here: as fictions of *proximity*, it describes the

kind of fictional narratives by Markson, Ellis, Wallace, and Smith that dramatize, problematize, and enact the aforementioned move into a closeness to the other (world/person); as *fictions* of proximity, however, the formulation indicates a skeptical awareness on the part of these authors that, strictly speaking, when we approach the world or the other person, our metaphysical limitations ensure that we do so as *fiction* writers, telling useful stories rather than unearthing essences. This awareness, then, gives rise to an ironic sensibility in these fictions that lets the frustrations of our epistemological ‘failures’ dissipate in laughter; but by contrast to a pose of detachment as indifference, it does not give up on the humanist hope for continued learning, insight, self-knowledge.

The way this hope plays out in fictions of proximity is often in a complicated relation to the human body as a transcendence of language which, as I read pertinent positions of the Wallace nexus, still cannot serve as the unambiguous ‘ground’ for critique some postmodernists and affect theorists have imagined it to be.<sup>7</sup> Despite such skeptical doubts about the body as unconditional source of insight, however, the romantic aesthetics of these fictions, an allegorical ‘strategy of oversaturation’ I find in major works of the nexus, also *relies* chiefly on the affective dimension of literature, making them suitable examples of the complex kind of thought I associate with fictions of proximity. To be sure, the avalanche of remote connections brought forward by such a maximalist style may induce vertigo in some readers; and, in a sense, the story of the Wallace nexus I am writing on these pages is similarly diffractive, linking scenes and ideas from various contexts and traditions. Still, I proceed in the hope that, like the distant keys on a piano, they may sound together in the end;

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<sup>7</sup> It is for this reason that, when I use the term ‘affect,’ I do not mean to signify the strict separation between somehow unformed, prelinguistic “affects” and narratively structured, social “emotions” that comes out of the work of affect theorists such as Lawrence Grossberg and Brian Massumi. Similarly, I am skeptical about applying a framework such as Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphysics, with its focus on the body as a revolutionary site of liberation, as a hermeneutic for the fictions of the Wallace nexus, even though, as I discuss in the second and third chapter, other critics have done so. Rather, I follow the usage of ‘affect’ by Sianne Ngai, who refuses “to dissolve this subjective/objective problematic by creating two distinct categories of feeling” and instead “aims to preserve it for its aesthetic productivity” (28).

and I am guided by the conviction that all connections I trace are latently present in the works themselves, not the arbitrary imposition of a critic.

Before I turn to this story of contemporary fiction in earnest, however, I want to outline the literary-philosophical background that can help understand the concerns of Wallace's generation, illuminate the theoretical positions they take, and explain the aesthetic choices they make. This will require a return to the Enlightenment philosophy of Immanuel Kant and a look at its aftermath in some modernist and postmodernist literary works; it will also involve a discussion of twentieth-century "theory," or deconstruction, as a frequent interlocutor and sometime antagonist of the Wallace nexus; to conclude this introduction, finally, I will follow intertextual cues by these authors into a reconsideration of ancient Greek philosophy in order to show its contemporary relevance as a source of the reconstituted humanism that animates what I call their fictions of proximity.

### **A Kantian Universe**

Arguably, the very need for a concept of proximity as I develop it in this study comes out of the Copernican Revolution in philosophy that Immanuel Kant instituted in the late eighteenth century. To be sure, Kant's attempt to create a firm foundation on which to rest a science of human knowledge has become the material of introductory textbooks; still, it bears repeating here because the assumptions of the Kantian edifice still structure our worldview to the point that we all, one might say, live in a Kantian universe. What Kant responded to in his *Critique of Pure Reason* were the skirmishes between rationalist certitude and skeptical empiricism that had preoccupied the philosophers of his age. The former claimed that only the creations of the mind are reliable, while our sense perceptions are subject to manifold illusions. The latter, by contrast, emphasized human perception, while dismissing the pure creations of thought as frivolous. Kant merged the two approaches, giving both its due, but also criticizing

each for a lack of compromise. Intellectual concepts without content, Kant conceded to the empiricists, are empty indeed; yet, in a nod to the rationalists, he also agreed that such empirical content must stay blind without corresponding concepts. These concepts of the understanding Kant called categories—formal features such as space and time that are superimposed onto the empirical world by the way our mind works in cognition.

Both modernist and postmodernist poetics still reside firmly within the coordinates of this compromise. In fact, it is only with reference to the Kantian reversal of our metaphysical intuitions, making the structure of the world dependent on our ordering minds, that one of the more obscure pronouncements of a modernist poet like Rilke becomes comprehensible. In his ninth *Duino Elegy*, Rilke introduces the idea of ‘poetic duty’ as a matter of utmost concern capable of redeeming us in communion with the world of things: “because all/ that’s here seems to need us, the ephemeral, that/ strangely concerns us.” This need to be helped along by the human being is then equated with the Earth’s mysterious desire to disappear from sight: “Earth, is it not this that you want: to rise/ invisibly in us? – Is that not your dream,/ to be invisible, one day?” Kant’s system suggests a reason for this desire: for things to come into existence properly understood, i.e., into the world of recognizable things structured by the cognitive apparatus of human beings, they require us indeed; this is the lesson behind the poetic naming of particular details exemplified by Rilke’s conjuring of “house,/ bridge, fountain, gate, jug, fruit-tree, window,” of all “that lives close to hand and in sight”—a lesson that still animates DeLillo’s “elemental lists” and his almost obsessive recounting of “details.” Yet if we name the world in this way, subsuming particular things under the general terms of a language that enables communicability, we miss something about them, an incommensurable element which henceforth becomes “invisible” in the very attempt at grasping it.

Indeed, Rilke's language of the Earth's invisibility here also indicates, however obliquely, the oft-remarked-upon fact that in settling one problem, namely how we can be said to have any knowledge at all, Kant's architectonic introduced another: limiting knowledge to what Kant called *phenomena*, what appears to us under the constraints of the categories, the *Critique of Pure Reason* called into being a new theoretical entity of which these appearances are appearances, and which therefore must remain inaccessible to experience: *noumena*, the things as they are in themselves. In order to save the *phenomena*, Kant had to sacrifice the *noumena*, the world as it is in and for itself. The very concept of thing-in-itself, then, represents the fact that knowledge is always already constrained. Thus Kant drew a line beyond which knowledge could not penetrate. Breaching it, for Kant, was tantamount to yielding to skepticism or fanaticism.

One discomfiting consequence of this demarcation is that we seem to no longer have immediate access to objects in the world. Kant's assumption of intellectual constraints upon our sense apparatus cast them into a metaphysical distance that seems to stay the same no matter what effort one makes to bridge it. "All points that our eyes used to rest on are taken away from us," Rilke described these consequences in the eighth of his *Letters to a Young Poet*, "there is no longer anything near us, and everything far away is infinitely far." To be sure, this was a distance that, for Rilke, was not too infinite to grant the poet a vision of the world; in fact, he still regarded it as the poet's unique task to rename the world—to effect, as the ninth *Duino Elegy* has it, "a saying such as the things themselves would never/ have profoundly said."

And Kant, too, carried on with the discursive development of his system *as if* there was no infinite distance between subject and object, human observer and properly unknowable thing-in-itself; in fact, as the neo-Kantian pragmatist Hans Vaihinger, the author of this 'philosophy of the as if,' would show a century after Kant's revolution, we need the counter-

factual ‘as if’ to set aside the antinomies of pure reason and thus make experience possible at all. “It must be remembered,” Vaihinger wrote, “that the object of the world of ideas as a whole is not the portrayal of reality—this would be an utterly impossible task—but rather to provide us with an *instrument for finding our way about more easily in this world*” (15). This pragmatic emphasis on orientation over representation arguably also guides Kant’s own attempt at avoiding the potentially idealistic consequences of his system in the first *Critique*. In fact, the philosopher tried to save our realist intuitions, e.g., that we have access to reality after all, by locating the origin of all experience in the “raw material of sensible impressions” which precede their “working up” by the understanding (*Critique* A1); that is, Kant proceeded *as if* the body and its sense organs had temporal priority over the categorical schematism of the mind.

This concession to realism, in turn, opened up the possibility of a movement *toward* the body as the source of a temporally prior, pre-discursive fullness that would occupy thinkers in the centuries to come. Yet owing to the ambiguous nature of Kant’s foundational ‘as if,’ a pacifying move that, as Vaihinger shows, was meant to preserve the coherence of human experience without giving up on the limits established by Kantian critique, the story of attempts at chasing transcendence in the silence of physicality is repeatedly haunted by the antinomies of reason, too. As a result, there is a deep ambivalence among modernists and postmodernists about the otherness of the body and the ways it can be made to ‘speak.’

In Rilke, this ambivalence finds its paradigmatic expression; despite the explicitly stated ‘poetic duty’ to name all “that lives close to hand,” the ninth *Duino Elegy* shrouds the experience of affect under a blanket of silence: “what is wholly unsayable,” we read, are “the sufferings” and “the heaviness [and] long experience of love.” In counterpoint to this concession of original separation between self and other, however, Rilke’s somewhat fantastical claim, in the same poem, that the Earth dreams of “ris[ing] invisibly in us” hints at

the possibility of a benign, indeed mutually coveted merging of poetic self and the world of things. There is, then, in Rilke's poetry already an almost proto-posthumanist note, away from the strictures of the modern subject of autonomy and reason and toward its dissolution in a transcendent surrender to the void.

In later readers like Pynchon and DeLillo, this posthumanist note becomes even more pronounced, yet without ever losing its Rilkean tonality. In fact, the two most prominent instances of this kind of surrender in Pynchon's masterpiece *Gravity's Rainbow* are both shot through with explicit references to Rilke. For one, there is the episode involving the main character Tyrone Slothrop's mysterious disappearance in the Harz mountains. At the moment he drops off the page, Slothrop ostensibly experiences a form of release, crying and "just feeling natural," having "[n]ot a thing in his head" (638). Arguably, Slothrop's oblivion here shares more than a superficial resemblance with the Rilkean descent into nature's flux anticipated in a brief quotation from the end of the German poet's *Sonnets to Orpheus* just a few pages prior: "To the stilled Earth say: I flow./ To the rushing water speak: I am" (634). The *Sonnets* revolve around a call for radical transformation that is equated, in one key moment, with the moth's plunge into the burning candle: "Want the change./ O be inspired by the flame" (Part 2, XII).

Similarly, Slothrop's transformation into impersonal flow involves a forgoing of self, too. In a series of metaphors spread out throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, the novel configures this human self as a comatose "albatross" that is a "corporate emblem" for the "Man" (727). Having plucked successively more of the feathers of this "albatross of self" to root out the capitalist system that has colonized his ego, Slothrop finally comes to be at a remove from its influence by the time he hides out in the Harz mountains—a state which, as the novel insinuates, is achieved only at the cost of ego-dissolution, the splintering and scattering of a coherent self, whose "mission in this world," in Pynchonian parlance, "is Bad Shit" (727).

Evidently, Slothrop wants the “change” Rilke promises, and the novel enacts his fall into the “flame” through a range of allusions and archetypes that give the event a distinctly hopeful meaning which stands out amidst the novel’s infamous ambiguity.

That Slothrop, as Doug Haynes points out, is “a kind of parodic Orpheus” (324) does not take away from the significance of this passage for Pynchon’s stance. After all, as Linda Hutcheon has argued in *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, parody is repetition with a critical distance, a discursive strategy which allows for an ironic signalling of difference without erasing the similarities. Hence a parodist not only critiques, but also, in critiquing, reinscribes, reiterates, seeking to salvage what is right and true in the parodied content. Similarly, any interpreter of Pynchon’s book would do well not to dismiss it as pure parody when the scientist Franz Pökler describes the arc of German culture, through its various manifestations in art and science, as pointing to “a form of death that could be demonstrated to hold joy and defiance” (589). Indeed, the novel gives ample illustration to this idea, not only in Slothrop’s defiance to the “Man,” which is also his ultimate surrender, but most obviously through its pervasive imagery of the V-2 rocket.

The V-2 is linked to Slothrop by way of early childhood conditioning, which has turned the rocket into a sexual stimulus for him that he cannot escape. In fact, the theme of eroticism and death structures *Gravity’s Rainbow* from the beginning, when a map appears that matches Slothrop’s sexual conquests in London with recent V-2 strikes, to its grotesque finale, in which a young man named Gottfried finds his romantic “Liebes-Tod” in a V-2 shot at a Dutch movie theater—a death-by-rocket that is presented as an orgiastic, transcendent consummation with nature, the silence following post-coital, a “breath of what was always real” (769). Gottfried’s sacrifice is orchestrated by the sadistic Captain Blicero, another reader of Rilke’s work, who finds in the poet’s call to be “inspired by the flame” a commission to transform and dominate a fallen world and, with it, the fallen human self. In

Blicero's reactionary reading of Rilke, the young man's "Liebes-Tod" is a logical consequence of the fundamentally ambivalent human condition the poet describes in his ninth *Duino Elegy*: "oh, why/ *have* to be human, and, shunning Destiny,/ long for Destiny" (83). There is a longing, a need, for the plunge beyond the symbolic, transcending it into a Destiny that Pynchon's Blicero, again quoting Rilke, associates with silence: "And not once does his step ring from this soundless Destiny" (100). Being human, for Rilke, means longing for something that can only be reached by ceasing to be human. In Pynchon's refusal to grant *Gravity's Rainbow* any closure, instead poisoning his narrative at a point of unresolved tension between redemptive and foolish death, silence as plenitude and emptiness, a similar ambivalence returns.

DeLillo never completely resolves this tension between silence as destruction and salvation, either. In his novelistic work, both early and late, the empty silence that threatens to undo art in general, Faulkner's "ding-dong of doom" requiring the human voice to redeem it, coincides with a concept of silence as plenitude the artwork itself somehow holds within it the same way football, in *End Zone*, offers its players transcendence if only they engage the game to drive toward its silent center. Indeed, it is in the deep stillness of physicality, where the players' actions are "uncomplicated by history, enigma, holocaust or dream" (4), that the novel locates a redemptive simplicity: "Existence without anxiety," Harkness describes this state of bliss in one of his inspired moments: "Happiness. Knowing your body. Understanding the real needs of man" (121). So when one of DeLillo's football players motivates his teammates for an upcoming match in rather unsophisticated terms—"This is footbawl. You thow it, you ketch it, you kick it. Footbawl. Footbawl. Footbawl" (128)—the passage is more than simply facetious. Rather, its diction is brutal in a way not unlike the game itself, approaching the unsayable physicality of football with repetitions that make their referents disappear and thus point to a silence behind the blunt naming of "footbawl" that is

complex, ambiguous, and, the novel insinuates through its most provocative conceit, gorgeous like the stillness at the nuclear epicenter.<sup>8</sup>

What Pynchon's erotics of death and DeLillo's atavism of football have in common, then, is an authorial desire to chase through a particular use of symbols the muteness of physicality itself, the pre-discursive silence of a body left to its own devices. Indeed, both authors approach this vanishing point cautiously, placing silences strategically where words fail them. In a chapter set literally at the center of *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, Pökler visits the concentration camp in Dora during the last days of the war. Here, Pynchon tames his linguistic firepower and describes Pökler's horror in strikingly visceral terms: "Pökler vomited. He cried some" (440). Then, in the darkest corner of the camp, Pökler finds "a random woman," barely alive, and simply sits with her. This embodied response is reminiscent of a scene in *The Crying of Lot 49*, when the heroine Oedipa Maas meets an old sailor and "was overcome all at once by a need to touch him [...] and, hardly knowing what she was doing, she came the last three steps and sat, took the man in her arms, actually held him" (102). In these moments, Pynchon's exuberant textuality slows down in deference to an experience that exceeds what can be said about it.

DeLillo has a similar tentativeness toward direct representations of affect. Based on something like Oedipa's insight that we hardly know what we are doing when we approach the body, he is aware that the "happiness" which, as Harkness reflects in *End Zone*, comes with "knowing your body" (112), cannot be in the strict sense communicable. Appropriately, then, when DeLillo narrates the most important football game of the term at Logos College,

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<sup>8</sup> If it is true, then, as John McClure suggests, that the elder DeLillo has come to embrace the mystery of "spirit-filled ecstasy, which is sharply challenged in his earlier fiction" ("DeLillo and Mystery" 168), this observation should not blind us to the unresolved tensions of the early work that do justice to the very "theology of fear" which, in Faulkner's estimation, numbs us to "the old verities," but which also, as Major Staley argues in *End Zone*, "dwarfs us so much [that] [w]e say let the god [i.e., the bomb] have his way. He's so much more powerful than we are. Let it happen, whatever he ordains" (80). Passages such as these in DeLillo sport a blend of parody and assertion that one disentangles only at the risk of losing its most important ambiguities. As such, they suggest that the germ for what McClure reads as DeLillo's later embrace of transcendence has been present all along in a productive ambivalence toward the promise of silence.

the physical actions are filtered through a thick layer of specialized jargon reminiscent of the ‘nuke speak’ that functions as a ‘painkiller’ against the disruptive immediacy of bodily experience: “Middle-sift-W, alph-set, lemmy-2” (118). In fact, conceding at the outset of his report of the game that “the nomenclature that follows is often indecipherable” (113), DeLillo seems to be intent on instilling in the reader a panicked longing for concreteness here that is not unlike Harkness’s state of mind following his discussion with Major Staley about the abstract language of nuclear war. Soon after, Harkness goes into the desert in a search of a painted stone he had found there before, seeking a symbol of concrete meaning that is “something not probable or variable, a thing unalterably itself” (88). And whatever Harkness hears in the silences that envelop the desert, it becomes unnameable, only approached properly through a dazed enumeration of nouns, devoid of connection or assertable meaning, in a language that indicates its own limitations but is also unable to suppress, indeed is consciously playing at, traces of whispered promises in between the bursts of sound: “The sun. The desert. The sky. The silence” (89).

Other postmodernists of the 1970s and 1980s radicalized this dream of silence as a response to the metaphysical separation between language and reality even further. In fact, as the literary scholar Lee Konstantinou demonstrates in his book *Cool Characters*, silence continued to play a role for literary production as an authentic way of ‘speaking’ in the development of a punk aesthetic. The key figure of this development was, in Konstantinou’s account, the former Beat writer William S. Burroughs. “Punk,” Konstantinou summarizes his claim, is “an apt local name for Burrough’s pursuit [of] silence at the objective level” (125). The reasons for this “pursuit” come out of the same philosophical conundrum that had preoccupied Pynchon and DeLillo, namely, that metaphysical differentiation can only be overcome by registering it through silence. As such, Konstantinou shows, Burroughs uses “a self-destructive anti-language” that results in what he calls “spiritual schlupping” (124),

which is elsewhere defined as “the telepathic union of souls” (120). This utopian vision shares with Pynchon and DeLillo the kind of fetishization of absorption they take from Rilke as a harbinger of posthumanism; and, indeed, Konstantinou explains, “[Burrough’s] imagined punk super-organism dissolves the individual” (125), as well.

In Burrough’s disciple Kathy Acker, however, it becomes clear that this further development of postmodernism has lost some of the important ambiguities of earlier stages. For while Acker follows Burrough’s hopes for “objective silence” with “rigor,” as Konstantinou notes, her almost pornographic art is based on the conviction that “‘the body’ has a nondualistic language of its own, a true language that rationality falsifies” (140). In the 1980s, then, the search for authentic silence meets a pure positivism of physicality in Acker’s “body-focused ethos” (144) that arguably exceeds even the descriptions of bodies and pornographic acts in Bret Easton Ellis’s later *American Psycho*, a kind of yuppie novel with a punk attitude. In fact, despite its infamous presentations of violence, I group Ellis’s book with the fictions of proximity of the Wallace nexus here because, as I show in the second chapter, the novel aims at traditional humanist values, even if it ultimately falls prey to its own ‘melodramatic’ overproximity, and has a more complicated relationship to the body as site of liberation than it may seem at first sight.

The complexity of this relationship, in fact, is a defining feature of the Wallace nexus by contrast to earlier generations of Beats, hippies, and punks. Unlike Burroughs and Acker, for instance, the way in which the nexus writers view and use the body as source of insight is fraught and ambivalent. The same ambivalence can be traced to early Pynchon and DeLillo, with whom the nexus writers share the idea that, in DeLillo’s analogy, you have to go *through* the game—of football, of language— to reach its silent epicenter.

Two intradiegetic tales that appear in *End Zone* and *The Crying of Lot 49* narrate this ambivalence explicitly. Both tell of the inauguration of language and cognition in quasi-

mythical settings that invoke and rewrite religious traditions; both involve presuppositions shared by the modern philosophical enterprise as it comes out of Kant's attempt to reconcile rationalism and empiricism. By pitching their 'creation myths' at this level of theoretical penetration, then, DeLillo and Pynchon acknowledge that the problem of abstraction and detachment they address in their fiction has deeper roots than its manifestations in the mid-century language of warfare or advertising: "the problem," as Harkness tells his teacher of military strategy, "goes deeper than just saying some crypto-Goebbels in the Pentagon is distorting the language" (85). In fact, that words are just "painkillers" (69), that they numb rather than awaken, is the symptom of a philosophical and cultural malaise, DeLillo suggests, namely the prevalence of an abstract mode of engagement in the west.

David Cowart, who has written extensively on both Pynchon and DeLillo, makes a distinction between the two authors' desire for a new mythology: "Unlike Pynchon, who devises fictive myths only to undermine them," he writes, "DeLillo more radically denies myth altogether" (8). This assessment overlooks at least one instance of a myth in DeLillo's early work that cannot be dismissed entirely on its own terms: a fictive novel in *End Zone* that weds philosophical ruminations on language to a generic science-fiction plot. Harkness hears about this book from his girlfriend Myna, who explains that the novel's author Tudev Nemkhu is a "Mongolian science-fiction writer who's got a real big underground following" (102). To be sure, it is a sign of DeLillo's sarcastic postmodernism that he presents his pseudo-mythic origin story as a low-brow work of genre fiction. But Myna's description of the novel resonates with *End Zone*'s themes sufficiently enough not to disregard it as merely one more instance of DeLilloan satire: "It's a whole total experience," she describes Nemkhu's work, hinting at a plenitude of meaning that seems inaccessible in summary, all the more so since the original text was written in German and the translation, Myna states, "leaves a lot to be desired" (170). That there is something lost upon trying to shift meanings

from one medium to another indicates the notion of an incommensurable element impervious to translation. And that DeLillo once again, as in the course on the untellable, insinuates a deeper connection between this element and the German language practically invites comparisons of Nemkhu's novel with a view of language and cognition as conceived in classical German philosophy.

Tudev Nemkhu's novel is set on a remote oceanic planet sheltered from the surrounding universe by a thick foam crust. In an ironic echo of God's invocation of light in Genesis, one day the crust opens abruptly and lets a black light shine through to the surface; it hits a member of the only existing life form, a giant mollusk that has just broken out of its shell. In mutual silent exposure, the black light filters into the mollusk and divides its brain "into phases of light and nonlight" (169). Like the binary oppositions of language conceived as a differential network, then, the light separates being into subject and object, a "duplication" that "[as] Tudev Nemkhu explains it, [...] results in the making of words" (169). Initially, there is a symmetry between the two parts, with one side of the brain mirroring the planet and the other side looking inward, fulfilling a meta-function: "The thing sees itself seeing what is outside it being seen by itself" (169). But this equilibrium is quickly shaken and the brain's recursive function begins to dominate as "the likeness that was the word's picture instantaneously disappears" (169). This is an accurate vision of how language operates: the mental likeness a word comes into being as indicating soon fades and is replaced by other likenesses, ultimately not attaching to anything permanently. So while the mollusk keeps producing words, they neither relate to the world outside nor to stable inner representations. "The words have no meanings" (170), Myna explains this process of increased abstraction, of words essentially becoming tautologies that point back to a mind shrouded in self-referentiality.

What DeLillo describes here is something like the Kantian precept that a judgment about an object is confirmed only by itself, not by holding it up for comparison with the world.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the mollusk's words have no referential function with regard to the outside planet, a skeptical suggestion that is dramatized in the story as the mollusk's transformation into "monadanom—the thing that's everything" (170). With this original word blend, DeLillo invests the suggestion of indivisibility characteristic of Leibnizian monads with the added solipsistic twist that this particular sci-fi monad is nothing but radically self-contained language, producing endless strings of signifiers that have no signifieds. When suddenly, at the end of Nemkhu's tale, one of the words erases itself, a reiteration of *End Zone*'s central critique of the process of abstraction in our western technocratic societies, DeLillo once again stages the appearance of an empty silence that is nothing but painful absence of meaning.<sup>10</sup> What lesson to draw from this, however, is less clear; and this ambiguity is important for DeLillo's overall stance. For one, there is the fact that, at the moment of the word's disappearance, "the thick foam around the planet [...] is slowly closing up again" (170). It is possible, then, that for language to be renewed, we need to open up the crust around us to facilitate renewed contact with the black light of the beginning—a reading in line with Harkness's, and DeLillo's, expressly stated desire to "begin to reword the overflowing world" (89). However, there are indicators in Nemkhu's story that the moment of originary creation has passed, and that the opening of the crust is an event of cosmic significance that cannot be willed into being.

Key features of Nemkhu's tale are present in *The Crying of Lot 49*, as well—language's binary nature, for instance, as well as its self-referentiality and frustrated drive toward the thing-in-itself. But while DeLillo alludes to the beginning of the Bible in setting his myth in a

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<sup>9</sup> Kant's textbook on logic, prepared in 1800 by one of his students, states: "[S]ince the object is external to my mind and my judgment is in my mind, I can only judge whether my judgment about the object agrees with my judgment about the object" (Intro. sect. VII. B).

<sup>10</sup> D.T. Max reports that "'End Zone' originally bore the title 'The Self-Erasing Word.'"

wasteland that is illuminated by a mystical light, Pynchon includes a narrative of language creation that references the later section of Genesis in which humanity receives a divine punishment for its linguistic diversity as represented by the tower of Babel. Indeed, a similar tower appears when Oedipa views Remedios Varo's surrealist painting "Bordando el Manto Terrestre," with "a number of frail girls [as] [...] prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void" (11). Oedipa recognizes that she, like the girls, is a prisoner in her own tower, the creator of the text that is her world, fated to wrestle down an always impending sense of solipsism that threatens to deprive her of a separate outside world. In this situation, Oedipa reflects, she is left with four choices: "[S]he may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disc jockey" (12).

At the beginning of her quest, Oedipa awaits the realization of the first option, the visitation of a sacred reality which 'fills the void' with something not of Oedipa's making. But as the visitation fails to materialize in the course of the story, Oedipa concludes that "it seemed the only way she could continue [...] was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia" (151). This paranoia, figured as the activity of further embroidering Varo's tower tapestry, is evidently preferable to Oedipa's last two choices: madness, which is devalued by her husband's erratic behavior after ingesting LSD (118), and the mundaneness of suburban marriage, which is the kind of death-in-life that motivated Oedipa's quest for meaning in the first place. Yet paranoia as a form of meaning-making has the unfortunate consequence of blurring the lines between truth and falsehood. Like in Nemkhu's story, then, what Oedipa ultimately is to do, which choice to take, is unclear. In fact, the whole idea of mutually exclusive choices is called into question elsewhere in the novel when Oedipa, one night roaming the "hieroglyphic streets" of San Narcisco, imagines herself as "walking

among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left” (150).

Computers made their way into the mainstream in the mid-Sixties world of Pynchon’s novel. Though they were still oversized punch-card terminals owned by big corporations such as Boeing, where the young engineer might have seen exemplars in the computing trenches, the new machines feature in Pynchon’s early work as harbingers of a truly abstract world of digital proportions.<sup>11</sup> While DeLillo imagines a more traditionally supernatural light source that sets the mollusk brain into binary states, then, Pynchon uses the contemporaneous image of the computer to associate this logic of bivalence with the most developed manifestations of a western technocratic culture of abstraction. Indeed, the ambivalences of silence that haunt *End Zone* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* make an appearance in this novel, as well, in conjunction with the familiar demand that all human thinking avoid the ambiguities of excluded middles, the undefinable median between binary choices. Thus Oedipa, during her late-night stroll, imagines the silence of “the bones of the GI’s at the bottom of Lake Inverarity” and tries to settle the question of this silence according to a binary schema: they “were there either for a reason that mattered to the world, or for skin divers and cigarette smokers” (150). Either the soldiers’ death was meaningful, making their silence a resounding echo of their heroism, or it was null and void, a reminder of the ultimate meaninglessness of human striving. That Pynchon’s novel ends on an unresolved note, however, leaving in suspension the question of Oedipa’s paranoia the same way DeLillo does not say whether the crust around Nemkhu’s planet can be opened up again, ultimately troubles this demand, as well.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the unfinished musical satire “Minstrel Island” Pynchon wrote in 1958 as a student at Cornell, which portrays a totalitarian vision of an IBM-dominated future; similarly, characters in Pynchon’s 1960 story “Entropy” debate the idea of “[talking] about human behavior like a program fed into an IBM machine” (86).

<sup>12</sup> It is not surprising, in light of these early parodic ‘origin narratives,’ that Pynchon and DeLillo have often been read as confirming the postmodern gospel that language is a recursive system necessarily cut off from ‘the Real,’ a position that is itself a remote and radicalized echo of Kant’s Copernican Revolution. Thus a critic writing in the late 1980s like Tom LeClair asserts of both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *End Zone* that they are “multilevel games with the reader, metafictional that interpret and interrogate themselves” (60), i.e., essentially

The ambivalence and doubleness that speaks from these tales about language, then, marks a contrast to Faulkner's modernist myth of a humanity prevailing over the possibility of its own demise. Indeed, by the 1960s and 1970s, such confidence rang hollow when heard against the news of increasing casualties in Southeast Asia. Any postmodernist myths, then, DeLillo and Pynchon thought, would have to still address Faulkner's problem of the corruption of language, but also abandon his more overly optimistic affirmation of a humanism they regarded as complicit with a modern culture that had led to the problem in the first place. To understand this desire to go beyond humanism, and why the Wallace nexus would return to a reconstituted form of it, the next section tells the story of another 1960s revolution, coeval with anti-war protests and civil rights struggles: the advent of what would come to permeate humanities departments in North America until the end of the Cold War under the ambiguous name of "theory."

### **Chiasmus**

Around the same time as the technocratic culture of abstraction played out in napalm rain and US airplanes that clouded the skies over Indochina, American academics faced a different manifestation of abstract thinking that, ironically, styled itself as the most rigorous denunciation of abstraction. "Theory," as it came to be known chiefly by its detractors, had

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self-referential texts that dramatize the tautological nature of all textuality. Accounts like this have been challenged in recent years by critics such as Cowart, who argues that LeClair's study "succeeds precisely because it transcends its thesis" of DeLillo as a champion of language's inescapable recursivity (9). Moreover, scholars like John McClure and Amy Hungerford have paid close attention to the ambivalences of these contemporary novelists as indicators, in McClure's reading of Pynchon, of a postsecular desire to receive "limited gifts" (6) from a transcendent 'other side' or, in Hungerford's interpretation of DeLillo, of the "postmodern belief" that language is "a medium that contains the transcendent within it" (72). I am sympathetic to these projects. In fact, Hungerford's thesis that postmodern authors share a 'belief in meaninglessness' has strong resonances with my claim that there is among contemporary novelists a fascination with the ambivalences of a silence that oscillates, ghostly, between emptiness and plenitude. Hungerford's diction, however, indicates an emphasis on institutional religion that is not embraced unconditionally by the writers of the Wallace nexus. I would contend that this difference manifests most clearly in Hungerford's treatment of irony: "I argue," she writes, "that sincerity overshadows irony as a literary mode when the ambiguities of language are imagined as being religiously empowered" (xix). By contrast, I explore what role irony as a 'literary mode' still has to play when the same ambiguities are being imagined as 'philosophically empowered.'

come across the seas by way of French developments in post-Kantian philosophy. In the early twentieth century, the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure had delivered a set of lectures in Geneva that outlined the structuralist principle, anticipated by Kant's settlement with the thing-in-itself, that meaning rests on the contingent conventions of a given community of speakers. It would take a few decades until the philosopher Jacques Derrida explicitly pointed out in his 1967 book *Of Grammatology* what "Saussure saw without seeing, knew without being able to take into account, following in that the entire metaphysical tradition" (43): that the logocentrism of western metaphysics, a belief in the spoken word as the place of knowing the thing-in-itself in full presence, had blinded philosophers to the endless play of material signifiers which, for Derrida, had always already taken the place of the referential function of language.

One counter-intuitive consequence of this analysis, of course, is that 'the world' no longer has any bearing on such purely arbitrary meaning; accordingly, a language thus conceived becomes like a loose sail floating purposelessly on the winds. But the audience members at a John Hopkins University symposium on structuralism in 1966, where Derrida first presented his ideas to the US public, were largely unfazed by such concerns, having been prepared to disregard non-textual matters by the New Critical orthodoxy that had reigned over American literary studies in the post-war years. One such audience member was Belgian émigré Paul de Man, who would become one of the most important popularizers of Derrida's thought on the North American scene. Indeed, de Man took the New Critical detachment from the world in favor of the text to new extremes, conceiving language as the only true reality, invested by an autonomous will that always tends toward the text's own unravelling.

When a critic like de Man turns to Rilke's work, then, his reading differs radically from the promise of poetry that issues from an interpretation such as Steiner's, which is based on the idea that Rilke is invested in an idea of proximity by "using language in new ways in

order to pass from the real to the more real” (298). This difference is a guideline for thinking about the vestiges of romantic metaphysics in postmodern writers like Pynchon and DeLillo, especially in their presentation of the ambivalences of silence, by contrast to the more unforgiving thought of adherents to “theory.” Indeed, Fredric Jameson has called de Man’s reading of Rilke, which first appeared as the introduction to a 1972 French edition of Rilke’s poems, the “most extraordinary full-dress deconstruction of poetic language as such” (*Postmodernism* 252). The thrust of this attack on poetry is on exemplary display in de Man’s introduction when he describes the human being in Rilke’s work as “the frailest and most exposed creature imaginable [...] that can never establish itself in an appeased presence to itself or the world” (23). But the main idea underlying his reading of the German poet, i.e., that poetry could not carry the human self to a state of self-presence or presence to the world, had already been present in a late-Sixties essay entitled “The Rhetoric of Temporality.” In fact, the chastening of poetic aspirations presented there would come to preoccupy de Man for the rest of his life; according to Christopher Norris, there is “not a single essay of de Man, at least after the early 1960s, that doesn’t raise this issue in one form or another” (*Ideology* 49).

The introduction in which he applies this reasoning to Rilke was reprinted in 1979’s *Allegories of Reading*—a title that indicates the central role the trope of allegory had played for de Man at least since the publication of “The Rhetoric of Temporality” a decade earlier. “The Rhetoric of Temporality” stages a radical reappraisal of allegory in order to do away with the idea of symbolism altogether. The very symbolistic striving to interlace word and thing, de Man argues here, reaffirms their original division. Allegory, in de Man’s understanding, best expresses the impossibility of such a link; as such, it involves a self-awareness of its condition as arbitrary sign which, in its arbitrariness, is forever without the

legitimacy a natural bond might confer.<sup>13</sup> These metaphysics of original and irreconcilable division, already firmly within the realm of tragedy, are then brought to their logical conclusion by de Man's demand to refrain from all *desire* for reconciliation or union. Only such abstinence, de Man claims, can form a satisfactory, 'authentic,' last act to the tragedy of metaphysics; and he responds with a concept of irony that meets this resolution with detachment but, as I discuss in the third chapter, ends up being internally inconsistent.

It is also apparent now why de Man would reject a reading of Rilke such as Steiner has it: in de Man's view, the critic cannot help himself from investing certain poets and philosophers with the mystical ability to offer glimpses of 'the Real'; the desire for immediacy, which for de Man is nothing but a confirmation of original division, is simply too strong for Steiner to abstain. De Man's friend Derrida had made a similar point when he accused Hegel, in whose dialectical philosophy thought progresses quasi-autonomously from a thesis and its negating anti-thesis to a synthesis that resolves the contradiction between its antecedent terms, of being "overeager to sublimate the moment of negativity into his positive system" (Roy 119).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> At first sight, de Man's concept of allegory as representative of language 'authentically' conceived—i.e., in light of its constitutional distance between signifier and signified, with each signifier pointing backwards in time to a previous signifier which is "pure anteriority" (207)—seems to run counter to its established meaning in literary history. Yet this reading of allegory as a 'rhetoric of temporality,' in contradistinction to the 'rhetoric of spatiality' associated with the romantic symbol, is in fact continuous with the tradition. As Joel Fineman notes, even Quintilian's classic characterization of allegory as "what happens when a single metaphor is introduced in continuous series" (30) emphasizes the trope's occurrence in temporal sequence, and, as such, prepares a reading of allegory as essentially temporal that comes to full fruition in de Man's account of romanticism.

<sup>14</sup> This unwillingness to stay with restlessness and uncertainty, which Derrida finds in Hegel, is also the reason for why my account of contemporary fiction, despite the *drive toward* plenitude I locate at the heart of emptiness, ultimately differs from traditional Hegelian dialectics. I am more sympathetic to conceptions of dialectics in Julia Kristeva, Adorno, and Walter Benjamin, who "markedly differ from Hegel," as the anthropologist Michael Taussig explains, in their belief that the dialectical "immersion in the concreteness of otherness can only *teeter on the edge* of stable knowledge and stable concept-formation" (36; my emphasis). In my estimation, a key term that is missing from this debate in the context of contemporary aesthetics is the concept of *affect*. Indeed, the literary critic Charles Altieri has pointed out how those aporetic outcomes that 'teeter' on the edge of synthesis are essential for the aesthetic by affording explorations rather than resolutions of their constitutive tensions. Altieri, for one, believes that such ambiguous affordances are important because they allow us "to dwell in affective states until their power begins to rival reason's authority" (130). The concept of proximity I introduce in this study is intended to capture precisely this site of affective engagement between the 'violence' of full synthesis and the 'atrophy' of desire associated with complete detachment. Arguably, this is a position that has become particularly relevant amidst what the critic Mark McGurl describes as a "widespread rejection of the negative in literary studies," at a time when "Wallace's canonization," as McGurl has it, is marked by "a general foreclosure of the possibilities of dialectical thinking in favor of cheerleading" (48). By eschewing such uncritical 'cheerleading,' but also taking Wallace at his word that it is

Given his agreement with the austere logic of deconstruction here, it is not surprising that de Man's attempt at summarizing his own vision of Rilke's poetry makes extensive use of a trope which Derrida has employed repeatedly to explain the double gesture of deconstructive reading: "The determining figure of Rilke's poetry," de Man states in *Allegories of Reading*, "is that of chiasmus" (38).

Chiasmus is a rhetorical figure that relates two normally incompatible properties in such a way that their complementarity becomes apparent. It is literally a crossing, or interlacing, of opposite ideas in one and the same object of thought, somewhat like DeLillo's and Pynchon's presentation of a silence that is alternately figured as empty of meaning and invested with plenitude. I have demonstrated that the text both DeLillo and Pynchon weave into their early novels in order to indicate these ambivalences of silence is Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, whose "ambivalent thematic strategy" de Man recognizes, in line with the use DeLillo and Pynchon make of it, as a chiasmic "reversal of a negativity into a promise" (50). The movement between the poles of a chiasmus, then, is set in motion by a negativity, an absence:

"Chiasmus," de Man writes, "can only come into being as the result of a void, of a lack that allows for the rotating motion of the polarities" (49). In DeLillo's and Pynchon's Rilkean reflections, the emptiness of silence commonly perceived opens up a desire that drives the reversal of its properties in a new poetic figuration, which now involves emptiness and plenitude as complementary rather than as contradictory properties. For de Man, however, the lack that animates the chiasmus seems to be of a specific kind. In the absence of any grasp of things as they are in themselves, his chiasmus tends toward the mechanical materiality of language over its referential function. Hence for deconstructive thought, as Derrida writes in *Positions*, the chiasmus is a "kind of fork [that is] unequal, one of the points extending its range further than the other" (95).

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fiction's job to "illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human" in difficult times (*Conversations* 26), my concept of proximity tries to avoid being pulled in the direction of either extreme.

The furthest, most privileged point indicated here is always the signifier. “All language is language about nomination,” de Man writes, “that is, a conceptual, figural, metaphorical metalanguage” (*Allegories* 152-3). Likewise, for Derrida, language conceived as metalanguage is only concerned with itself. Hence de Man, as one of Derrida’s chief allies, reads the direction of Rilke’s chiasmic figures as unequal, too: the entities in Rilke’s poems, he claims, all “behave like words, which ‘play’ at language according to the rules of a game” (38). This reversal of attributes between things and words, in turn, “allows [words] the freedom of their play without being hampered by the referential constraints of meaning” (47). Like DeLillo’s myth of language as tautological, then, de Man reverses the traditional primacy of the referent, whether as object or mental representation, and replaces it with a notion of the priority of the signifier. But de Man’s assertions lack the ambiguities of a DeLillo, who leaves open the possibility that the planetary crust in Nemkhu’s fictive novel may open up to the otherness of the universe once more. And while de Man’s theory of the primacy of the signifier is akin to Pynchon’s embrace of meaning-making in the absence of a validating response, his own unwavering insistence on the “priority of lexis over logos” (45) is quite unlike Pynchon’s suspension of certainty that no such response will ever occur. Indeed, the only way adherents to “theory” can make good on their claim to have ‘certain’ knowledge about the priority of the signifier is by rigging criticism’s encounter with its object before it has even begun. Hence the peculiar impression that, in deconstructive readings such as de Man’s interpretation of Rilke, it has always been decided in advance that the ‘object’ the theorist meets can only be language itself. It is important to note, then, that deconstructionists are still very much heirs to the Kantian system and its transcendental deduction of a cognitive apparatus that enables knowledge in the first place. Faced with the duality of transcendental subject and unreachable *noumenon*, de Man opts for what seems to be left, the ‘priority of the signifier.’ One year before their meeting at the John Hopkins symposium, Derrida had

already pointed out a similarly ambivalent consequence of Kant's philosophy that novelists like DeLillo and Pynchon would dramatize in their Rilkean intertexts: 'outside' of language, Derrida argued, is nothing; 'outside' is silence.

Lecturing on Heidegger in Paris, he demonstrated to his audience "a certain silent permanence of non-meaning, or rather an absence of meaning that precedes the opposition between meaning and non-meaning" (*Heidegger* 108). This silent absence 'before' the conceptual and essentially metaphorical processes of language have set in, Derrida claims, can never be said as such. It is always already under erasure by the metaphysics of presence that draw every 'thing' into its sphere of influence and, at the same time, cast it into the distance of representation from which, as de Man makes clear in his critique of the romantic symbol, it cannot return into pre-linguistic unity. If, then, as Derrida argues in the Heidegger lecture, "language itself is metaphysics and [...] to that extent one should not expect by speaking to *overcome* metaphysics" (159), there is no way to verbally overcome the subject-object split; and deconstruction, in speaking only the truth of language's self-referentiality, restricts itself, with rigorous discipline, to what is left to be said.

With such claims to 'objective' knowledge about literary artifacts, "theory" aspired to an institutional position alongside, and equal to, the natural sciences, not in the somehow subservient place reserved, disparagingly, for the so-called 'soft sciences.' Humanities departments, often suffering from inferiority complexes vis-à-vis their colleagues in the 'hard sciences,' jumped at the opportunity. By the early 1980s, "theory" had become a dominant mode in literary studies, displacing the extra-linguistic concerns of 1960s scholars and activists that Jameson would retrospectively describe as "liberation, the body, desire, and the senses" (*Postmodernism* 255). What took the place of these concerns was a kind of detached exegesis that always amounted to the same truth of language's circularity; and de Man was

the figurehead of this movement, a prophet, as Jameson has it, of the 1980s and its turn to conservatism in major western democracies (255).

This was, in one version of the story, the state of key debates in literary theory in the late twentieth century. Young authors beginning to write in the early 1980s who were attuned to these debates, then, faced a call for silence that was a moral as well as an aesthetic imperative. They knew of the impossibility, derived from the Kantian *noumenon* and the limits it places on knowledge, to directly grasp something we, as human beings, can never be without: such as language—as Derrida indicates—or being—as Heidegger asserts—or the body, our phenomenological anchor—as DeLillo and Pynchon show. Moreover, in Adorno they had seen how attempts to breach these limits led to a reification and dehumanization that, in the pessimistic analyses of Frankfurt School thinkers, formed the basis for industrialized genocide. And if one wanted to believe Derrida, it was the “whole language of civilization in which we have begun to speak” that was “metaphysical” and therefore implicated in the turn to fascism that western culture had taken in the twentieth century (*Heidegger* 159). Little wonder, then, that language seemed an inept medium for depicting these horrors, if the very act of depicting itself was somehow guilty of sharing in the same metaphysics that had led to the gas chambers. Steiner summarized some of these debates on ethics and the status of language by asking “whether language itself can justly communicate, express, give rational or metaphoric constructs to the realities of modern torture and extermination” (14). And with an aplomb that was rhetorical as well as moral, he answered his own question indirectly by wondering “whether language, being the quintessence of our humanity, must not, indeed ought not, to fall silent at the boundary of the monstrous” (14).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In her study of Holocaust representation in contemporary fiction, Jessica Lang has recently taken Steiner’s injunction against intrusions into the ‘unrepresentable’ trauma of the Shoah as an interpretive guideline for reading those moments in Holocaust texts that defy comprehension as instances of ‘textual silence.’ I am sympathetic to this analysis of “a silence that challenges the norms of thinking” (3), and the modes of indirect representation Lang finds—omissions such as ellipses and dashes, as well as the use of unreliable narrators—are part of the repertoire employed by the authors of the Wallace nexus, too. If thinkers like Derrida and Adorno are

Respectfully falling silent, a strategy that can never fully mollify impressions of capitulation and apathy, may be an appropriate gesture in the face of the horrors of history. As a politico-aesthetic stance, however, it is all but inert. On this point, the silence that Nazi-sympathizers like Heidegger and de Man had kept regarding their complicity with the Third Reich speaks louder than words: there was something unacceptable in Heidegger's post-war refusal to address the question of the extermination camps, later commentators like Philip Lacoue-Labarthe observed; similarly, de Man's lifelong silence on his wartime collaboration as a young Belgian journalist with the German occupiers could not be explained away as a mode of bearing witness, as Shoshana Felman has done, without the remainder of an intractable impression of a failure of morals.<sup>16</sup>

American authors of the 1980s and 1990s faced a different era, but one that was by no means devoid of the same need for committed speech. To be sure, the 1980s saw a period of *glasnost* that melted away the iron curtains that had divided the planet since the time of Faulkner's Nobel Prize address. By the early 1990s, the Cold War had come to an end. The possibility that the western metaphysics of reification and its attendant domination of nature might lead to global annihilation, however, had not disappeared along with the cessation of the decade-long standoff between communism and capitalism. In fact, with the loss of its defining other, American society turned searchingly inward, toward the struggles of a country in need of a new, post-Cold War identity. That traces of fascism still flowed through the veins of western culture, that the vestiges of Nazism could be found in the new world, too, was hardly news for young writers who had read Pynchon and DeLillo. Something remained to be done, they saw, some kind of renewal of politics and culture; and the silence of one who

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right in their claim of a complicity between fascism and the "whole language of civilization," however, it is certainly valuable to also look beyond the restricted corpus of 'Holocaust literature' for the workings of silence in contemporary fiction.

<sup>16</sup> For Lacoue-Labarthe's critique, see his dissertation *Heidegger, Art, and Politics*. Feldman presents her defense of de Man's mutedness in the essay "Paul de Man's Silence."

mutely contemplates the Shoah, not daring to speak a word for fear of complicity, was not an option in this struggle.

Yet falling silent at the boundaries of the unspeakable also offered surprising potentials if it was seen as a continuation of representation by indirect means, not as its abortion. Heidegger had already anticipated this move. Seeing that the project of philosophy would find a dead end, or rather a silent end, in his own destruction of metaphysics, he asked, somewhat incredulously, “who of us today would want to imagine that his attempts to think are at home on the path of silence?” (*Pathmarks* 262). In response, Heidegger speculated that perhaps a way out of this impasse could be to willingly go into and through silence, to find in silence a mode of indicating the ‘outside’ to language, to intuit what cannot ordinarily be thought: “At best, thinking could perhaps *point toward* the truth of being, and indeed toward it as what is to be thought” (262; my emphasis). Steiner seems to have agreed with this answer to the aesthetic dilemma he himself had posed so poignantly, indicating in *Language and Silence* that for a select group of thinkers—he singled out the early Wittgenstein—silence, “which at every point surrounds the naked discourse [...] [is] less a wall than a window [looking] out of language not into darkness but into light” (292). In such indirection, then, in pointing rather than naming, showing rather than telling, the most avant-garde philosophy saw a possibility for inhabiting, as Simon Critchley writes of Derrida, “the limit of logocentric language, looking across into the silence that exceeds metaphysical closure” (*Ethics* 95).

It is my point of departure for this study to trace this post-metaphysical preoccupation with ‘writing’ silence—contemporary philosophy’s seemingly paradoxical response to a century of concentration camps and toxic mushroom clouds—in the most avant-garde practitioners of contemporary fiction. I argue that for a generation of novelists who lived through the heyday of deconstruction, phenomenology, and critical theory, Heidegger’s “path

of silence,” Derrida’s “logocentric limit,” Wittgenstein’s “window into light,” and Adorno’s “unsayable” were stars by which to steer their own literary pursuits in an utterly silent universe. I read these novelists as a literary generation in the sense proposed by F. Scott Fitzgerald:

I mean that reaction against the fathers which seems to occur about three times a century. It is distinguished by a set of ideas, inherited in moderated form from the madmen and outlaws of the generation before; if it is a real generation it has its own leaders and spokesmen, and it draws into its orbit those born just before it and just after. (“My Generation” 193)

One key figure of this generation was arguably David Foster Wallace—hence my name for the nexus that coalesces around him. Indeed, Wallace’s centrality to my study will be highlighted by his recurrence in various guises, as philosopher, critic, essayist, and novelist, in each of the chapters that follow. Trained as a philosopher and literary scholar in the early 1980s, Wallace was extraordinarily attuned to the concerns of “theory.” In fact, in the introduction to one of the first critical anthologies on Wallace’s legacy, the editors describe Wallace as “deeply invested in the possibility of human authenticity, even as he grappled with a neopragmatist and quasi-deconstructionist sense that we might be nothing more than discourse or pretense or irony, all the way down” (Cohen/Konstantinou xvii). Indeed, the preceding discussion of the “varieties of silence” that haunt postmodernist ‘outlaws’ like Pynchon and DeLillo has indicated what now equally applies to the next generation of novelists: anyone concerned with the possibility of authentic expression must fall silent when approaching the threshold of metaphysical inauthenticity, a place where, as Derrida knows, “the categorial system of metaphysics can no longer serve us to speak” (*Heidegger* 160). But Wallace was also acutely aware of how deficient, how inadequate silence could seem in the face of the very human need for practical orientation in a demanding world. And how to reconcile these competing demands, the horror of speechlessness on the one hand, its promise of authenticity on the other—this is, in my account, a central question faced by the members

of this generation: not only Wallace, but also the ‘madman’ David Markson, Bret Easton Ellis—Wallace’s direct contemporary and antagonist in matters of contemporary aesthetics, who is drawn into his ‘orbit,’ too—and Zadie Smith as one of Wallace’s best readers and devotees born ‘just after.’<sup>17</sup>

This generation faced a complex situation in contemporary letters, one that involved manifold allegiances, demands, and traditions. In a 1996 essay on Dostoevsky, Wallace took stock of this situation confronting young novelists after Faulkner, after DeLillo and Pynchon, even after Derrida and de Man:

The good old modernists [...] elevated aesthetics to the level of ethics—maybe even metaphysics—and Serious Novels after Joyce tend to be valued and studied mainly for their formal ingenuity. Such is the modernist legacy that we now presume as a matter of course that ‘serious’ literature will be aesthetically distanced from real lived life. Add to this the requirement of textual self-consciousness imposed by postmodernism and literary theory. (272)

Wallace’s claim here that modernist literature elevated aesthetics to the level of metaphysics becomes comprehensible in the context of my discussion of modern philosophy: the same way that Kant had made the appearance of the object dependent on the subject’s categorial apparatus, leading Rilke to express this inextricability in the fantastical figure of an “Earth” that “needs us,” a modern author like Gustave Flaubert invented an aesthetics that blurs the distinctions between novelist, narrator, and character. As a result, the critic James Wood points out, we face the “basic novelistic tension” of “modern fictional narrative”: “Is it the novelist who is noticing these things,” Wood summarizes the metaphysical conundrum of Flaubert’s free indirect style, “or the character?” (*Fiction* 50) In Flaubert, then, as in Kant’s

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<sup>17</sup> My inclusion of the British-born Smith in a study that focuses mainly on contemporary US fiction requires a justification. For one, I agree with Smith scholars Peter Childs and James Green that there is an “obvious paradox in the retention of a national framework” for an author such as Smith, who, in her life as a bi-racial cosmopolitan professor living in New York as well as in her multicultural novelistic work, positively *embodies* “supra-national themes” (8). Furthermore, the novel by Smith I discuss in the fourth chapter has been singled out by James Wood for its Americanness: “*The Autograph Man*,” he writes, “may indeed be the nearest that a contemporary British writer has come to sounding like a contemporary American” (“Goyish”). And while, for Wood, “the result is disturbingly mutant,” I would contend that this judgment is itself ‘disturbing’—a literary provincialism deeply at odds with our contemporary world and even incompatible with the international reach of what Pascale Casanova has called “The World Republic of Letters” in her study of modern literature.

metaphysics, narrator and character, subject and object, exist in mutual dependence and determination: without the former, the latter is, to use Kant's preferred metaphors, 'empty' or 'blind.'

The transformation of free indirect style into stream of consciousness in the twentieth century, then, brought the illusions of pure mimesis in the representation of interiority. Mid-century philosophers like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, in turn, heightened this seeming disappearance of the author from the text to the posthumanist conviction of a 'death of the author,' even of the human self in general. In "What Is an Author?" Foucault expressed this erasure by quoting from *The Unnameable* by Samuel Beckett, Joyce's direct successor in the line of the 'Serious Novel': "What matter who's speaking, someone said, what matter who's speaking" (qtd. 1623). The paradox inherent in Beckett's words here chafes at our intuitions about novelistic discourse: we hear a voice telling us of its own insignificance, in the context of a book we would not be reading if it were not for the assumption that it must contain something that matters. Thus the novelist Gabriel Josipovici has argued that, far from presenting an author who is company to his own erasure, as Foucault claims, the passage actually stages the appearance of a character "desperately seeking to discover who speaks, to recover himself as more than a string of words, to wrest an 'I' from 'someone says'" (23). Similarly, Holland acknowledges that "Beckett exemplifies how postmodernism encapsulates *from the start* this simultaneous drive toward solipsism and silence," but she also emphasizes his "struggle to escape both through connection and communication" (202).

In Beckett, then, we find the same return of our habitual responsiveness to metaphysical categories, in this case those associated with a 'metaphysics of the novel,' that I trace in the writers of the Wallace nexus. Beckett, too, twists and warps metaphysics, and it is the reader's affective engagement with her own response to the text's absences that invites the humanist category of the self back on the scene—not, however, in the sense of an "entity"

rejected by Barthes and Foucault; rather, Jospipovici notes, the self in Beckett is “a source of potential” (251). This abstention from any reification of traditional metaphysical categories, instead exploring arguments for their utility as idealizations in the absence of ontological promises, seems to me in line with Kant’s critical philosophy. In the end, though, the form such an exploration of our indebtedness to metaphysics takes in Beckett’s austere works is different from the maximalism of the writers of the Wallace nexus—a difference I attribute to the influence of DeLillo’s and Pynchon’s postmodernist aesthetics on the nexus writers’ ‘strategy of oversaturation.’

This strategy is already present in Pynchon’s early work, which disregards traditional concerns of storytelling such as character and plot in favor of what the author would later call the “deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live” (*Slow Learner* 23). Probing these depths, however, required a deep involvement with “the logic of late capitalism,” indeed an immersion in “the massive Being of capital” that, as Jameson has claimed, is characteristic of postmodernism in general (*Postmodernism* 48-49). Arguably, Jameson’s influential characterization of postmodernism applies equally to DeLillo, whose 1985 novel *White Noise* has come to be canonized as a quintessential postmodern text, perhaps second only to Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*. The form this immersion takes in DeLillo is a subversive mimesis of the nodes and networks that constitute US society in the second half of the twentieth century. Cowart agrees with an assessment like that, acknowledging that DeLillo “seems in his fictions to become the American reality he scrutinizes,” but that he does so “out of a desire that is homeopathic, a desire to inoculate (in the most literal sense) cultural production against the tyranny of the two-dimensional that threatens to devalue it” (12). Thus DeLillo, Cowart concludes, “merely feigns ‘going over’” (12).

Wood finds a similar “full-immersion method” in Wallace, claiming that his language is “mimetically full of America’s language” such that Wallace makes us “live through this

linguistic America with him” (*Fiction* 33). While, in the following, I will pursue a reading of Wallace’s method as an argument about the *problems* of full immersion, Wood’s assessment is a valuable reminder of the continuities between these postmodernist ‘outlaws’ and a writer like Wallace. Yet the fact that, as Smith has indicated, “it happens in Don DeLillo’s fiction that everyone speaks exactly like Don DeLillo” (“Interview”), gestures at the subtle difference between Pynchon’s and DeLillo’s art and Wallace’s generation of novelists regarding a traditional matter of literary craft such as characterization; as I have indicated previously, this difference can be traced to their contrasting stances on humanism, in particular on the category of the self.

Indeed, I would suggest that what we hope to find in Pynchon are the grand, sweeping vistas of our transnationalist world of global capitalism and the author’s flights of fancy in exposing its most hilarious absurdities. We read DeLillo, in turn, for the beauty of his language, the sublime and often uncanny tone of his explorations of our modern mediascape, even if, as Smith points out, DeLillo’s characters—philosophers of the signal and the image, tuned into subterranean resonances at the edges of western life—are often too obviously the author’s mouthpieces. By contrast, Wallace and a few others who share his concerns arguably put more emphasis on the human subject in its unique selfhood than these exemplary postmodernists. In fact, the most memorable presence in Wallace’s work is the fragile self in a struggle for survival, wrestling with the emotional detachment of modern culture and the human consequences of postindustrial societies.<sup>18</sup>

What is needed to counteract this culture of detached abstraction, Wallace claims in the Dostoevsky essay, is a form of “[m]orally passionate, passionately moral fiction [that is] also

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<sup>18</sup> The novelist Garth Risk Hallberg agrees with this assessment: “We may come to DFW for the Pynchonian bells and whistles, but we stay for just that sense of being ‘involved, quickened, raised’—moved to compassion by the divine tragicomedies his characters find themselves in.” In a similar vein, Clare Hayes-Brady argues that it “would be difficult to overstate” the importance of “Wallace’s concern with human connection and the establishment of the self among selves” (94).

ingenious and radiantly human fiction” (274).<sup>19</sup> As Smith has noted (“Gifts” 257), the formulation he introduces here for a future literature on the model of Dostoevsky’s best works is distinctly chiasmic. With its crossing of adverbial constructions, the valences of this chiasmus shoot out into two directions at once, ensuring that each concept—‘morality’ as well as ‘passion’—is balanced out by its other, mind by body, intellect by feeling, making for a complex characterization that avoids privileging either one. As such, Wallace’s chiasmus avoids the very imbalance that always tilts the deconstructive chiasmus in the direction of the ‘primacy of the signifier.’

The balance Wallace aspired to with this chiasmic conception was the result of a struggle both personal and aesthetic. Over the twenty years of his writing career, Smith explains, “the two sides of that chiasmus would be in constant tension” (“Gifts” 257). A philosopher by training, Wallace intuitively used the recursive, formal features of his education for explorations of ancient question of metaphysics; but, in the process, he increasingly came to rely on what Smith has called “the emotive side of fiction” (“Gifts” 257) in conjuring ‘real lived life’ as an argument for or against our metaphysical intuitions. This did not only ensure that his chiasmus would avoid following de Man into linguistic idealism. By merging the formal and affective aspects of narrative in this way, Wallace also tried to find a counterbalance to both the modernist demand for ‘aesthetic distance’ and the ‘requirement of textual self-consciousness’ exhibited by his postmodernist heroes Pynchon and John Barth; in particular Barth’s work in the 1980s had struck Wallace as deficient in matters of the heart,

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<sup>19</sup> The challenges such a conception of literature faces are exemplified by a charge made against Wallace’s project by Hallberg: “In the end, Wallace’s body of work amounts to an extended philosophical experiment,” Hallberg explains in terms that largely agree with my account here: “Can ‘morally passionate, passionately moral’ fiction help free us from the prisons we make?” But in examining Wallace’s particular response, which requires the human self to actively invest the world with a passion that is morally motivated, Hallberg raises the possibility that Wallace commits what philosophers call the naturalistic fallacy, a confusion of ‘is’ with ‘ought’: “I’m not 100 percent sure Wallace hasn’t muddled his phenomenology with his ethics here, his *How do we?* with his *How should we?*” Hallberg’s charge, then, presupposes a positivistic view of reality akin to the most rationalistic manifestations of late twentieth-century “theory”: the naturalistic fallacy rests on a metaphysical purification of world from value; what is truly real is seen here as radically divorced from, indeed indifferent to, human concerns in a way that is antithetical to the spirit of Kant’s Copernican Revolution in philosophy.

and although he revered Pynchon initially, he became disenchanted with his unapologetically adolescent satire in later life.<sup>20</sup>

That Wallace's wholesale identification of the 'modernist legacy' with an aesthetic of detachment here may strike one as too schematic, in fact, indicates its status as a strategic argument about the differences between his own and preceding generations of novelists. In reality, Wallace's renewed commitment to "what's really important—motive, feeling, belief" ("Dostoevsky" 273) sounds like an echo of Faulkner's appeal to young novelists half a century earlier. While the ambivalences of a DeLillo and Pynchon still course through the body of work by writers of the Wallace nexus, then, animating it with ambiguous wit and often scathing satire, these younger writers also respond to Faulkner's humanist call for "the old verities" of "compassion and sacrifice and endurance" as well as to the somewhat more gloomy demand to simply "go on" from Beckett's *The Unnameable* (407), a modernist novel in which we hear, as if in response to Faulkner, a persistent voice sounding out against a silent universe. Indeed, that Beckett's narrator can only "proceed" in this endeavor "by aporia pure and simple" (285) marks a shared interest in a form of indirect representation that, as I will show in the next section, precedes all these critical categories by at least two millennia.<sup>21</sup>

### **'To Aporein'**

Faced with the distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena*, the things as they are in themselves and as they appear to us, Kant had found a way out of the antinomies of pure

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<sup>20</sup> I will return to the differences between Pynchon and Wallace in the third chapter, which examines the particular form 'writing silence' takes in Wallace's magnum opus *Infinite Jest*, a novel that also overlaps thematically with DeLillo's *End Zone* in striking ways. Not the least of these similarities is a 20-page sequence in which a group of tennis players stage a game called Eschaton—a simulation of nuclear war with tennis balls as missiles—which reads like a rewrite, down to the textual level of imaginary military acronyms written in all caps, of "a crude form of war game" that Major Staley plays with Harkness (219). But even *Infinite Jest*'s setting at a sports academy and the novel's critique of the media, advertising, and abstraction in general owe a lot to *End Zone*, a debt Wallace was aware of. In fact, David Hering has reported, based on archival sources, that "Wallace was influenced enough by the novel to write apologetically to DeLillo in July 1992" (171).

<sup>21</sup> For Smith's sympathetic characterization of Beckett's work as an example of the kind of "constructive deconstruction" (94) I associate with the writers of the Wallace nexus, see her "Two Directions," 89-94.

reason, such as determination by physical laws or by human will, through the ‘as if.’ Indeed, at a key moment of the first *Critique* (A426-461), he juxtaposed the antinomies, separated into thesis and antithesis, side-by-side on the same page, so that readers could see for themselves the impossibility of theoretically resolving the tension between these equally valid propositions. What the philosopher aimed at with this demonstration was a proof of the primacy of praxis—the idea that, from a practical standpoint, philosophy could carry on *as if*, in Vaihinger’s word, the questions of pure reason had been resolved.

More than two thousand years before, the pre-Socratic philosopher and mystic Parmenides of Elea had followed a different course of action when reaching a similar impasse. In the surviving fragments of his poem *On Nature*, Parmenides, too, distinguished between things as they are and as they appear to us, between a divine ‘Way of Truth’ and a human ‘Way of Seeming.’ But rather than continue with the discursive development of his philosophy by resolving this dichotomy, Parmenides ended *On Nature* by letting a goddess simply describe each of the opposing ‘Ways’—thus perhaps showing the resulting, internally riven poem itself to be the kind of unspecified third ‘Way’ Parmenides himself, in the goddess’s approving estimation, had embarked on. Paradigmatically, we see two different responses to the dichotomy here: while Kant continued writing more *Critiques*, Parmenides, as the philosopher Hager Weslaty has it, “[stopped] at the ineffable” (23).

That, in the 1990s, then, Wallace began reading Parmenides’s metaphysics indicates his interest in a way of thinking that arguably finds an artistic response to the dead ends of reason, affording affective experiences rather than rational arguments; for while *On Nature* offers maybe the first discussion of methodology in philosophical history, this discourse is put into the mouth of a character in a mythical narrative. If Wallace, then, as I argue here, was drawn to the pre-Socratic promise of myth as a source of pre-rational plenitude—a style of thought that, as he would write later, “seems more like Eastern religion than Western

philosophy” (*Everything* 48)—the reason for this may have been that it seemed to him a valuable response to those prominent positions in contemporary philosophy that, as I have demonstrated, came to view the language of reason as metaphysically inauthentic.

Zadie Smith has put a similar emphasis on the “quasi-mystical moments” in Wallace, identifying them with the “real mystery and magic” of his work (“Gifts” 295). In fact, the impetus for Wallace’s fascination with mysticism, she argues, was a “dream of language,” one not unfamiliar to readers of Rilke and DeLillo, which imagines the possibility “that there would be no false gap between the verbal representation of something and that something itself” (“Gifts” 160). The desire that speaks from this dream is an essentially skeptical desire which views the human self as always already cut off from, and therefore longing to return to, the world. That Wallace was intimately familiar with this dream, indeed wrestled with it throughout his life, is apparent in statements from his earliest interviews to his last conversations: “unfortunately,” he stated in 1993, “we’re still stuck with the idea that there’s this world of referents out there that we can never really join or know because we’re stuck in here, in language” (*Conversations* 44), giving expression to one of the cornerstones of a critique of reason, the transcendental status of discourse as making knowledge possible. A decade later, he still noted the same restriction, indicating why any talk about this dream of a pre-discursive fullness breached the conditions of reasonable conversation:

[The] only way we can talk to each other about [how we perceive the world] is with language, and in language, built in is the idea of this distinction [between the inner and the outer] [...]. So, language, and the way we have to communicate with each other and process the world through words I think is the wild card in all of this, and I don’t totally understand it, but... So the answer kind of tails off, I’m afraid. (“Burden” 106)

Language is a ‘wild card’ for Wallace here precisely because its role for human life cannot be determined by way of compromise or rational discourse; after all, in a linguistically disclosed world, we have no way of reaching a position from where to view our life with language ‘objectively.’ The same is true, I have indicated, of other wild cards such as ‘being’ and ‘the

body.’ As conditions of reason, they cannot be recovered by way of reason, just like the subject, or society, cannot be fully transparent to itself. Any answer to the question of their significance, then, Wallace notes, has to “tail off,” and the ambivalent acquiescence he associates with this experience—“So the answer kind of tails off, *I’m afraid*”—is an essential part of human life, an acknowledgement of our metaphysical limitations that I will discuss, in the chapters that follow, as the “truth of skepticism.”

Dreams, however, are not easily dismissed by reference to truths of any kind. There is, then, in the writers discussed in my study, a creative counter-impulse to the forbidding idea that one may never get close to things as they are—an impulse that, as I show in this study, leads to a desire for proximity. Indeed, we might continue Wallace’s line of thought above, if any words about words about the world must ‘tail off,’ in the sense of leading to ‘nothing,’ what is the status of this ‘nothing’? What can it teach us about its operational other, namely, ‘being’? As McGurl has observed recently, this concern with the “agency of nothingness is certainly evident in the emergence of ‘Wallace Studies’” (“Nothing” 34f12). In fact, when McGurl notes that Wallace’s stylistic management of “the ‘nothing’” as an “incessant talkiness” is “perfectly opposed” to the “terseness” of early existentialism (35), he points to the same kind of ‘metaphysical impulse’—the desire for presence in any account that attempts to only focus on absence as the ground of meaning—which, in my account, informs the maximalism of Wallace’s fictions of proximity.

Wallace approached this most abstract of questions about ‘the nothing’ not by inventing a fictive science-fiction novel, as DeLillo did, or by reference to surrealist art, like Pynchon; rather, he followed in the footsteps of an early existentialist like Heidegger and turned to antiquity to think the possibility of a plenitude predating human language and thought.<sup>22</sup> Arguably, he found one such possibility in what the philosopher Jonathan Lear has called

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<sup>22</sup> In *Being and Time* (§§72-83), Heidegger had elucidated his own return to the Greek dawn of western thought as exemplifying an “authentic historicity” that views the past as full of unrealized possibilities for being.

“one of the great histories of a critique of reason,” the story of how the “basic cosmological principle [...] *to aporein* of the Presocratics is refined and criticized by Plato and Aristotle” (“Infinity” 187). This interest answers to the ambivalences about metaphysics I have traced in this introduction’s “varieties of silence”: as a limitless void, “lacking all boundaries and distinctions” (*Everything* 44), ‘to aporein’ is senseless, indeed beyond sense, and thus akin to the ‘silence’ that, in the estimation of a range of twentieth-century philosophers, must be seen as the only authentic way of continuing to ‘speak’ metaphysically; but as radically indeterminate, in fact predating all determination, ‘to aporein’ can also be said to represent a fullness before any human distinctions, a potentially infinite divisibility that ultimately signifies a state of non-division. In fact, this last, monist turn of the argument, redefining the empty void of ‘to aporein’ as a “metaphysically infinite” sphere, was Parmenides’s unique contribution to early pre-Socratic discussions of cosmology (Moore 24). It is readily apparent why this ‘mystical’ interchangeability of being and nothingness appealed to a writer like Wallace, who was seeking to reintroduce the possibility of a return to meaning into philosophical accounts that regarded silence as the only legitimate form of ‘doing metaphysics.’

Wallace’s fascination with “the protomystic Parmenides of Elea” (*Everything* 47) is first referenced in a 1997 interview with a student magazine at Oregon University, in which Wallace counsels reading the pre-Socratic philosopher under the influence of psychedelics. In the interview, Wallace mentions Parmenides in response to a question about what he is “working on right now” (28). This suggests that his attention to ancient Greek metaphysics was part of the research for a pop-science book on the mathematics of infinity that he would publish in 2003 under the title *Everything and More*. Michael North has recently pointed out that this book continues the primary theme of Wallace’s work, i.e., the dangers of detachment for those who, as McGurl puts it, “attempt to chase infinity to the point that it decomposes

any sense of the solidity of the real” (“Nothing” 39). The role Wallace accords to the concept of ‘to aporein’ in the book, then, signifies its importance for his thinking at large. In Wallace’s account, ‘to aporein’ as an infinitely divisible whole is discussed chiefly by reference to Zeno, whom Wallace terms “Parmenides’ #1 student” and “the most fiendishly clever and upsetting Greek philosopher ever” (47). The upset Wallace refers to here is a result of “Achilles v. the Tortoise,” one of the famous paradoxes of western thought, which Zeno formulated in response to the impositions that early Greek mathematicians had placed on ‘to aporein’ to give a “rational, nonmythopoeic account” (47) of this “primal Void” (45). In particular, Wallace singles out the “Law of the Excluded Middle” (26)—which DeLillo and Pynchon had illustrated through the alternating light phases of the mollusk brain and the binary code of early computers, respectively—as a way of taming the inexhaustible divisibility of ‘to aporein.’ Also known as the “*principle of bivalence*” (26n13), this law demands that each component of reality conform to a strict ‘either-or’ schema: something is either big or small, long or short, possible or impossible, etc.

But Zeno undermined this neat schema by showing that, in an imaginary race, Achilles can never catch up with the torpid tortoise because the distance between the two is infinitely divisible such that he will never be able to traverse this infinity of incrementally smaller distances. This would make Achilles’s victory in the race impossible—a consequence that is absurd in light of the fact that such a victory is at the very least *possible*, if not even likely. Thus Zeno had arguably demonstrated that one of the key tenets of western thinking, the “Law of the Excluded Middle,” conflicts with reality as it appears to us. For Wallace, who believed that this early Greek law of non-contradiction was the source of our contemporary “abstraction-schizophrenia and slavery to technology and Scientific Reason” (30n18), a critique that resembles similar objections in DeLillo and Pynchon, Zeno’s absurd inference was unavoidable.

Yet there is disagreement among scholars whether Zeno intended this inference to be a defense of Eleatic monism or whether it was merely meant to confuse, startle, and thereby jumpstart thinking about the underlying ontological incongruences. The poet Bruce Bond realizes the second of these options in his 2015 study *Immanent Distance*. Zeno, he claims, is “a poet of the absurd” (85) who presents a paradox of reason that has the power “to tease us out of thought, to open the interpretive mind to the authority of experience, to what interpretation can never fathom” (81). This “greater sense of being outside of language, a sense of the extra-linguistic real,” Bond argues, is produced by language itself, which thereby registers “its own inadequacy” and gives itself its own *raison d’être* in reaching for “an object, a target” that, as prelinguistic, will always elude it (72). The production of this desire for transcendence is relevant for my study because, as Bond writes, “[the] problem of representing prelinguistic experience mirrors the problem more largely of metaphysics” (71). Indeed, the way in which the writers of the Wallace nexus approach the problem of how to ‘do metaphysics’ will be presented in the pages that follow as a complicated combination of assertion and retraction that signifies *beyond* the written page. Smith has aptly summarized this as an attempt “to make something happen off the page, *outside words*, a curious thing for a piece of writing to want to do” (Introduction xx; my emphasis).

For Bond, this oscillation between seemingly contradictory impulses is characteristic of poetry, which, in its constitutive doubleness as partaking of *eros* and *logos* alike, both enacts the desire for transcendence into silence and, by continuing to speak, thwarts it. And while the writers of my study are novelists, their complex aesthetics have much in common with the ‘dream of language,’ as Smith has called it, that runs through the work of a modern poet like Rilke. In fact, Smith is explicit about the poetic *eros* that drives her own novels and those of her peers: “it’s not unusual for avant-garde fiction,” she observes, “to aspire to the concrete quality of poetry” (“Two Directions” 91). Like DeLillo and Pynchon, then, the

members of the Wallace nexus not only hear the ‘horror’ of silence; they also, as Smith notes, share their forebears’ openness to original infinity: “if we feel a certain horror before infinity,” she explains, “we also hear in it the suggestion of the sacred. As a concept, infinity seems to bear the trace of God’s language” (“Gifts” 276).

In *End Zone*, DeLillo indicates that the only way to approach this infinity is by way of the finite and concrete. Thus he lets a coach at Logos College address the young players “with a brief inspirational message that summed up everything we knew or had to know. ‘It’s only a game,’ he said, ‘but it’s the only game’” (15). For the football-obsessed, the game is total; like language, it is the only game there is; and, as a result, any possible meaning must be found “within the chalked borders of the playing field” (4), a limit marked by the rules of football as much as those of grammar. Whatever DeLillo is after with his interest in the untellable, then, must somehow be hidden within these “chalked borders,” within the confines of language. Similarly, Wallace seems to have tried to signify the ‘alogos,’ which he translated as “the unsayable” in *Everything and More* (77), from within ‘logos’ itself, as well. The form this took in his fiction was a turn to indirection as an aesthetic means: “I also write,” he stated in the same 1997 interview with the *Oregon Voice* that has the first reference to Parmenides, “because it seems to me that all the really important stuff to talk about is stuff that can’t be said except indirectly” (4). That he professes his commitment to indirect representation here in the same breath as discussing Eleatic metaphysics, then, is arguably more than coincidental; it may indicate that Wallace thought about the ‘unsayable’ element his indirect method was meant to invite as a late variant of the undifferentiated plenitude of the pre-Socratics. Yet if Wallace as mystic extended a hand to his readers, promising presence and truth, the skeptic and deconstructionist in him slapped it away again.

Indeed, a reading such as Bond’s, which argues that Zeno drives reason to its aporetic breaking point in order to stimulate the desire for a unity of content and representation, in

some ways constitutes a recuperation of the rhetorical figure of metaphor, or of symbolism in general. And, as I noted earlier, a deconstructionist like de Man had expressly banished this figure from the realm of poetry in his critique of a romantic “rhetoric of spatiality”: “To the extent that metaphor can be thought of as a language of desire and as a means to recover what is absent,” de Man argues, “it is essentially anti-poetic” (*Allegories* 47). In explicit counterpoint to this deconstructive reading, though, Bond now shows the romantic desire for “some absent presence” to be far from ‘anti-poetic’ (5); in fact, he regards it as nothing short of the force animating poetry in general. That poetry in Bond’s account not only *lives* off of this desire but also *thwarts* it in turn seems to mark a point of agreement with de Man—as “a connoisseur of nothingness,” a phrase the critic Geoffrey Hartman has applied to his colleague (86), de Man was certainly attuned to this failure of the ‘dream of language.’

This explains why, at first sight, the assessment by the novelist Tom McCarthy that Smith quotes in describing “Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*” as “trying, and failing, to speak about the thing itself and not just ideas about the thing” sounds almost like de Man (“Two Directions” 91). In the same breath, however, she makes a statement that is programmatic for the nexus writers: “That ‘failing’ there is very important” (91). The difference between a deconstructionist and a romantic view of aesthetics, then, is not so much in the words used to describe this outcome; rather, I believe that what often marks a divergence between these critical traditions is the *attitude* in which one encounters such a finding. De Man’s rhetorical asceticism does not seem to allow for the possibility that a poem which contains both impulses, the longing and the ‘failing,’ could point beyond its own bivalent frame. As I will show in this study, however, it is precisely this belief, i.e., that the failure of the ‘dream of language’ *gestures* toward something, which unites a variety of thinkers from Wittgenstein and Kafka to the members of the Wallace nexus.

De Man's work, which has been described by Jameson as a throwback to "eighteenth-century materialism" (*Postmodernism* 250), seems incapable of admitting this transcendent element into its radically immanent frame.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, his conception of aporia, which the critic Jeffrey Karnicky has called the "de Manian dead-end" (170), reflects *nothing but* language's general failure to refer to anything but itself. This reprises the aforementioned structural asymmetry of the deconstructive chiasmus as always already slanted toward the signifier. Yet without a hunger for the "deeper resources of being," Bond counters this conception, "there is no poetry, no poetic wonder, no *eros* of the bridge made of the distance to be bridged" (2). When de Man's star in the academy began to sink, then, some literary critics took note of this lack of *eros* and expressed a certain disappointment about the deconstructive aporia, with Norris complaining that it "rejects any appeal to human agency or will" (*Interests* 182) and C. Namwali Serpell noting a "passivity" (300) in deconstructive reading practices that, as Hungerford has it, "posit the text as radically autonomous" (*Belief* 19).

It seems, then, that the spirit in which we encounter an aporetic interference of two symbolic codes truly matters. In fact, the alternative to the 'passivity' of deconstructive modes of reading would be to view aporia not just as an expression of failed transcendence, but rather as an immanent experience of incongruence one half of which—the transcendent half—is engendered *performatively* by way of a longing that arises in simultaneity with the perception of aporia itself.<sup>24</sup> This is a conception I associate with the Socratic tradition in

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<sup>23</sup> It is in this insistence on immanence, Jameson observes, that "de Man seems at his furthest [...] from Derrida himself, where hints abound that some radical transformation of the social system and of history itself may open the possibility of thinking new kinds of thoughts and concepts" (*Postmodernism* 237). To be sure, the late Derrida has defended his friend's view of language, writing in *Memoires* of de Man's concept of aporia that it would be misleading to try to "hold it to its most literal meaning: an absence of path" (132). "On the contrary," he argues, "it seems to me that the experience of the aporia, such as de Man deciphers it, gives or promises the thinking of the path" (132). Jameson's verdict suggests, however, that this is an attempt at assimilating de Man's radically immanent vision to Derrida's own philosophical desire, which, as Alain Badou explains, tries to "touch that which flees the Law, that which supplely bounds out of the *nomos*" (140). My reference to a similar desire in Wallace, then, requires a distinction: if Hayes-Brady is right that "Wallace is anti-deconstruction" (25), this would seem to be truer of de Manian deconstruction, as I read it here, than of its Derridian manifestation.

<sup>24</sup> Hartman has observed dismissively in a defense of de Manian deconstruction that any account that "does not stay in the negative with de Man" merely "[dignifies] the void by giving it an existentialist or religious turn" (86). By way of response, I would like to highlight that, as Louis Menand has written about de Man's war-time

philosophy. In light of Wallace's pronouncement that Plato was "the father of abstraction in metaphysics" (*Everything* 10), and therefore in some ways the original creator of the dread of detachment, it would certainly seem dubious to turn to Plato's most famous character in search of alternatives to detachment. But, as I will argue in the third and fourth chapter, both Wallace and Smith are aware that Socrates still occupies a somewhat more ambiguous position than the simple association with his student's metaphysics would suggest.

It is worth remembering, in this regard, that at the heart of Socrates's philosophical investigations lies a statement of ignorance, expressed most famously in Plato's *Apology*: "I do not fancy I know what I do not know" (21d). This declaration has often been turned into the explicit Socratic paradox, "I know that I know nothing." In this form, which arguably captures the spirit of Socratic philosophy more aptly, it expresses an abstention from any knowledge claims that paradoxically takes the form of a knowledge claim itself, thus encouraging investigations of the different meanings of 'knowledge' involved. With Socrates, then, the concept of 'to aporein' undergoes a conceptual shift from mathematical infinity to a stimulus for *inquiry in general*: the Socratic aporia now refers to a state of 'being without passage' for reasons of intellectual perplexity.

That the expression of this philosophical stimulus has traditionally been cast in the form of a paradox, then, indicates a likely kinship between Zeno's and Socrates's modes of presentation. This is the case even if, as Wallace points out, Zeno "can be seen actually kicking Socrates's ass, argumentatively speaking, in Plato's *Parmenides*" (*Everything* 47). After all, in Plato's fictional encounter with the Eleatics, Socrates is still a young man; he might have taken away from his argument with Zeno an awareness of the incongruences involved in expressing a metaphysical theory in straightforward language. The importance accorded to aporetic outcomes in his subsequent practice of dialogical questioning, then,

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collaboration with the Nazis, it was precisely the author's thoroughgoing nihilism, absent any intrusion of wonder or "belief" into his worldview, that allowed de Man to come up with "the chillingly deplorable things" he wrote to support the Nazi cause.

points to a belief in the powerful effects of *wonder* as a catalyst for creative thinking; on this, both Zeno and Socrates seem to have been in agreement.

Bond makes the connection between the presentation of a logical conflict and the production of this affect explicit: “Zeno’s particular deployment of reason,” he claims, “collapses into wonder” (70). Indeed, the history of attempts at managing his paradoxes, from Aristotelian metaphysics to the development of modern calculus, is proof of the fact that the result of this ‘collapse’ is a forceful reengagement with the world, turning toward its problems and conceptual inconsistencies with renewed vigor. This vigor is like a blade sharpened by the experience of wonder glimpsed in *aporia*. For it is the wonder which comes with a lack of understanding that sets the philosopher on his path. As Socrates states in *Theaetetus*: “wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder” (155d). *Aporia*, in the Socratic rather than de Manian sense, is arguably the most distilled form this wonder can take.

The writers I associate with fictions of proximity here are extraordinarily attuned to this production of wonder, deliberately creating aporetic outcomes in order to stimulate thinking. As such, their novels put pressure on our metaphysical assumptions by staging limit cases of reason such as the unknowable world, the unreachable other, the absence of the self, and the undecidable hierarchy between irony and sincerity. Unlike Kant, they do not turn to discursive means to resolve these *aporias*; rather, they put their hope in the idea that the novelistic, and therefore chiefly affective, experience of such *aporias* may lead us back to a habitual responsiveness to the categories involved. To be sure, this outcome is not unlike the Kantian ‘as if,’ the demonstration of the primacy of praxis; on the other hand, though, the difference in *presentation* truly matters in this regard; after all, one would be hard pressed to find anyone who argues that the books I discuss in the following read anything like the Kantian *Critiques*.

These books include Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, which, as I argue in the first chapter, imagines the depths of skepticism as literal, utter abandonment and thereby calls back into being an awareness of our metaphysical indebtedness to a desired object/world. In the second chapter, I discuss Ellis's *American Psycho*, which shows the breakdown of communication due to a similarly skeptical vision of human interaction and presents the inevitable aftermath of a violence that tries to force a response from the desired subject/person; as such, it functions as a reminder of Cavell's "truth of skepticism," the call for the acknowledgment of the other. The focus of the third chapter, Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, creates a large canvas on which 'ironically earnest, earnestly ironic' episodes of metaphysical and literal 'stuckness,' to adopt Wallace's distinctly chiasmic thinking, afford possibilities for truly becoming human. Smith's *The Autograph Man*, finally, presents an argument for a metaphysics of proximity—at the breaking point of materialism and theology, nature and culture, tragedy and comedy—that I will read in the fourth chapter through Walter Benjamin's concept of 'gestus.'

Among these writers, Wallace is not the only one to explicitly address the history of aporia in a discussion of Zeno's paradoxes. Markson and Smith also reference the pre-Socratic philosopher at key points of their major novels. Thus Kate, the heroine of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, is on the brink of tears when faced with "certain things," such as Zeno's paradox, that "can sometimes be almost impossible to put." She mentions this despair at her own speechlessness by reference to the confusion she felt as a seventh-grader, when a teacher demonstrated on the blackboard that "if Achilles was trying to catch the tortoise, but the tortoise had a head start, Achilles could never catch it." "Now I knew, knew," she remembers, "that Achilles could certainly catch that tortoise," and this contradiction between two seemingly valid conclusions, Kate reports, "finally almost made me want to cry." (146)

Given her desperation, then, it is not a surprise that she later states, “I do not frequently allow such things to happen [...] [i.e.,] thinking about things from as long ago as before I was alone,” including thoughts of her eponymous lover “Ludwig” and, in an errant reference to Zeno, of that time in “the seventh grade when I almost wanted to cry because I knew, knew, that Odysseus’s dog could certainly catch that tortoise” (228-9). This avoidance of any memory of her ‘affair’ with “Ludwig” or of Zeno’s paradox indicates that Kate is not always mistress to the philosopher, or to philosophy in general. And her barely withheld tears, an affective response to the possibility of infinite questioning, indicate Markson’s agreement with Wallace on the role that fiction can play alongside philosophy. After all, a philosopher does not cry when encountering the aporia. That the fictional character Kate almost does, by contrast, suggests that another way to explore the ramifications of philosophy’s movement of infinity for the human spirit is by way of the expressive medium of art. In their way of attending to Zeno’s paradox, then, the writers of my study bring the concrete human body, which a range of twentieth-century thinkers valued as an ambivalent pathway to ‘the Real,’ to this most abstract of stories.

In the fourth chapter, I will show that this openness to letting the body reassert its rightful place in the order of human life deeply informs Smith’s novelistic work, too—not only in her use of Benjaminian ‘gestus,’ but also in a focus on the experience of a laughter that does not ignore our finitude, but rather ‘invites’ the fragile human body ‘up to the stage.’ The protagonist of her novel *The Autograph Man* experiences this as he feels the otherness of physicality gain control over him: “He had been laughing for four minutes and every time he thought he was finished with it, it came burbling up again, like water in a blocked plughole” (57). *Pace* Markson’s Kate, then, an apprehension of irreconcilable opposites, absent a synthesis, does not always have to make us “want to cry.” As Smith shows, it can also rack our chest in laughter, double us over, shake us free of our assumptions, open us to ‘the Real.’

Hence the serious side of comedy, the earnest aspect of irony, that I also trace in the writers of my study.

In Wood, I will confront them with a critic who does not seem to fully accept this chiasmus. For Wood, the “weakness” of what he calls, in a withering aside on Pynchon, “a certain kind of postmodern novel” is that it lacks “final seriousness” (*Fiction* 150). Given that Wood has grouped Smith with Pynchon as representatives of ‘hysterical realism’ elsewhere, the charge presumably applies to her, as well. And Smith accepts it confidently, arguing, in “Love, Actually,” against precisely the kind of ‘esprit des sérieux’ upheld by Wood: “The lesson of the comic novel,” Smith claims, “is that our moral enthusiasms make us inflexible, one-dimensional, flat.” For Smith, the history of the kind of moralism she rejects here is long, going back all the way to the Greek tragic playwrights. “[T]he ancients,” she explains in her 2008 treatise “Two Directions for the Novel,” “always end in tragedy, with the indifferent facticity of the world triumphantly crushing the noble, suffering self” (96). In writers like Wallace and Markson—both of whom she taught in her classes at Columbia (“Leaks”)—Smith found a different approach, one which deliberately refuses what she calls, dismissively, “the self-mythologizing grandeur of the tragic” (96).

*Wittgenstein’s Mistress* is particularly interesting in this regard as a paradigm for the ambiguous affect of the Wallace nexus. After all, even though Kate is no stranger to desperation, the novel, as Sherrill E. Grace has it, “finally resists the tragic mythos through its irony, humour” (216). Burton Feldman concurs, stating that Markson’s book is a “comedy, or at least it isn’t tragic” (162). The principle Françoise Palleau-Papin identifies behind Markson’s development of Greek tragedy, then, could arguably serve as a motto for the fictions of proximity I have assembled in this study: “Laughing to keep from writing a tragedy allows anger to dissipate” (xxxiv). Indeed, while tragedy aspires to final certainty about metaphysical concepts such as ‘fact,’ ‘soul,’ ‘world,’ and ‘god,’ in the end silencing us

with the charge of inauthenticity, such ‘laughing to keep from writing a tragedy’ allows these concepts to persist in what Smith calls “comic misapprehension” (“Two Directions” 96). As such, it refuses any final, tragic, conclusions about the world’s “indifferent facticity.”

This was precisely Walter Benjamin’s point in his study on the eighteenth-century German *Trauerspiel*. What distinguished the *Trauerspiel*, literally a ‘mourning play,’ from tragedy, which Benjamin identified with the silence of the human dumbstruck by fate, was the *Trauerspiel*’s comic tendency. “Comedy,” he writes, “is the essential inner side of mourning which from time to time, like the lining of a dress at the hem or lapel, makes its presence felt” (125-6). The wardrobe imagery here subtly interacts with the history of the concept of ‘to aporein,’ which, as Wallace notes, “apparently originated in Greek tragedy, where it referred to garments or binds ‘in which one is entangled past escape’” (*Everything* 44). Benjamin’s image now reverses the affect associated with such entanglement: laughter is what turns these garments inside out, he insinuates, in the process revealing inside and outside, comedy and tragedy, to be sewn together inextricably.<sup>25</sup>

As Bakhtin points out in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (106), the history of this serio-comic mode goes back all the way to ancient Greece, too. To be precise, the common source of tragedy and comedy is espoused by Socrates at the end of Plato’s *Symposium*. Here, Socrates convinces the tragic poet Agathon and the comic playwright Aristophanes after a long night of drinking “that the genius of comedy was the same with that of tragedy, and that the true artist in tragedy was an artist in comedy also” (223d). With this appreciation for the closeness of seriousness and humor, he laid out a model for the kind of self-regarding irony that Wallace, as I will argue in the third chapter, would employ to great effect in *Infinite Jest*.

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<sup>25</sup> As Denis Donoghue has noted, de Man’s “repudiation of symbol in favor of allegory, in ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality,’ is taken directly from Benjamin’s book” (109). This would seem to present a problem for my use of Benjamin’s reversal of affect here precisely against the deconstructive aporia and its cynical affect in de Man. Donoghue’s response, however, indicates a way of continuing to think the possibility of desire that Benjamin, as I will discuss in the fourth chapter, associated with the experience of laughter. This *desire*, Donoghue argues, is not touched by de Man’s epistemological critique of symbolism.

On this view, Socratic irony becomes a springboard toward *atopia*, the ‘no-place’ of transcendence, where all such generic differences collapse. To be sure, these are not the serene heights of wisdom. As Kierkegaard notes, Socrates was ignorant of the “ground of all being,” “that is, he knew *that* it was, but not *what* it was” (*Concept* 195; my emphasis). This ignorance, however, did not preclude any meaningful inquiry—rather, the *aporia* stimulated it, drawing him in time and again; and he, in turn, drew others to it, too. For Socrates, then, *atopia* and *aporia* were connected: two aspects of the same experience of unknowingness. This is brought out in the description he gives of himself in *Theaetetus*: “the ignorant world describes me in other terms as an eccentric person [*atopotatos*] who reduces people to hopeless perplexity [*aporia*]” (149a).

Indeed, his compatriots always saw him as *atopos*: strange, unclassifiable, literally ‘out of place.’ When discomfort with the man peaked among Athenians, they took to calling him *atopotatos*, the superlative of *atopos*, ‘most out of place.’ It was apparent to them that Socrates had been closer to the ‘no-place’ than anyone else—a ‘place’ so unfamiliar it is wholly other, an ‘absent presence’ that drives all our thinking. This is the concept of *aporia* as seduction into proximity to this silent ‘ground of being’ I want to recuperate by studying a group of contemporary writers who arguably activate it in their novels—even if, or indeed because, their work often leaves the reader, as Wallace writes of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, “with the doomed/delicious knowledge that it’s headed toward nothing” (“Plenum” 115).

## 1. “Deep Nonsense”: Romantic Metaphysics in David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*

I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep

—Willa Cather, *My Antonia*

Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind,  
And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.

—William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

In the introduction, I developed an account of how prominent literary productions of the twentieth century responded to a crisis in representation after the critique of metaphysics. I argued that their response, which cuts across common distinctions between modernism and postmodernism, involved a fascination with the ambivalences of a silence that oscillates between nihilistic horror and prelapsarian plenitude. Now I further illustrate this genealogy by turning to David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, a late-1980s novel which literalizes conditions that are somewhat akin to the aftermath of Faulkner’s “last red and dying evening,” when, in the great modernist’s mid-century Nobel speech, the “ding-dong of doom” has died away and silence blankets a world devoid of all human beings.

All but one, that is—for there is Kate, the narrator and protagonist of Markson’s novel, who has spent ten years vainly criss-crossing this wasteland after an unexplained catastrophe, in search of other souls with whom she could share what, quoting Nietzsche, she perceives as an “endless nothingness” (31); someone—anyone—to alleviate her Pascalian dread of “the eternal silence of these infinite spaces” (31). Markson’s allusion to two great moderns in Kate’s perception of her radical solitude here broadens the connotations of the unexplained “doom” that has silenced humanity. Is it the consequence of a global disaster or the outcome of a personal trauma? Is it, as Markson scholar Françoise Palleau-Papin wonders, echoing Adorno, an allegory of the world “in mourning after the extermination in the death camps

during the Second World War” (227)? Or does Kate’s loneliness point even beyond the contingent catastrophe of the Shoa to the same metaphysical “taste for generalization” that DeLillo struggled with in *End Zone* and that, as Palleau-Papin also quotes from Beckett, imposes a worldview wherein “the silence at times is such that the earth seems uninhabited” (qtd. 225)?

In line with the “varieties of silence” I found in other modernist and postmodernist works, Markson’s novel will not say definitively, rather keeping all explanations in play at the same time. Yet what the ‘modern’ quality of Kate’s despair highlights, I argue, is its connection to a picture of ‘possessing’ the world in certitude that I have presented as always already vulnerable to skeptical doubts about the ‘objective’ existence of the world and other minds. In this chapter, I follow up on this connection by presenting Kate’s radical skepticism as a function of the very desire for fusion with the world that resounds in the Cather epigraph above—a fantasy of ‘happy’ mindlessness which is arguably motivated by the prior assumption of a vast gulf between subject and object as it comes out of modern ontology. I contend that only the blindness of love, as it issues from Helena’s words in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, eschews this kind of external validation that modern epistemology requires, unsuccessfully, for certain ‘possession’ of knowledge about the existence of our world.

In fact, I will read the self-consciously poetic moments of Kate’s narrative as expressive of a different kind of desire, one that, like Markson’s heroine at her most ‘balanced,’ no longer ‘looks’ for absolute validation from without, but rather finds creative empowerment in its unwarranted drive toward the always elusive recesses of ‘the Real.’ This is the kind of desire for proximity I associate with the fictions of the Wallace nexus. I will therefore develop this central epistemological and affective category of my study with a view to Wallace’s work here, as well—in particular to his reading of Markson’s novel in the 1990

essay “The Empty Plenum,” which did more to popularize *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* than any publisher’s advertising campaign. What Wallace showed was that the novel contributes to philosophical debates around modern skepticism as an *affective literalization* of the highly abstract idea that our failure to ‘possess’ the other (world/person) is in fact an indicator of its utter inexistence. My reading builds on “The Empty Plenum” in this regard. *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, I argue, does not outright reject skepticism, which cannot be refuted on its own terms anyway, but uses it for productive meditations on our profound limitations as human knowers. I will therefore take the concept of a “truth of skepticism” from the work of Wallace’s one-time teacher Stanley Cavell to find in Markson’s book a dramatization of the kind of limited, metaphysically restricted autonomy that, in my account, is paradigmatic of the self under the sign of proximity. In doing so, I aim to show how Markson’s novel seduces readers into Kate’s radically skeptical mind to begin the process of mourning for an underlying ‘picture of knowledge’ that, in Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein’s late work, is replaced by the romantic concept of falling in love with the world again and again. In the last part of this chapter, I demonstrate the influence of these neo-romantic metaphysics on the poetics of a novelist like Wallace.

Of course, when we first meet Kate, as an exemplar of the modern skeptic, uprooted and thrown into a meaningless existence, such a love of the world would seem to be impossible. Her world is like a museum, with everything that could lend it significance being only an inert memory that is itself falling apart like the misremembered quotations and factoids from western culture jumping about in her head. “We’re at the end of literature, of history” here, as Burton Feldman has encapsulated this state of affairs after the end of human affairs (161), making Markson’s scenario a potent metaphor for a post-metaphysical world in which all accounts, philosophical or otherwise, have been discarded as the kind of intellectual and mental “baggage,” “remnants of whatever one ever knew,” for which Kate no longer has any

use (15). In view of this emptiness, the promise of metaphysics, that something like ‘language’ or the ‘self’ could be a safe haven for dwelling amidst the contingencies of history, comes to seem inauthentic to Kate—the vestiges of a ‘metaphysics of presence’ which, for a philosopher like Derrida, must be deconstructed, dismantled, if not burned to the ground altogether.

This, literally, is what Kate does once she is done travelling the lonely planet, after settling down on a beach occupied by wooden houses somewhere: the first beach house burns down accidentally one day; the second dwelling undergoes a more systematic process of destruction, with Kate prying it apart board by board to burn them in her stove, all the while saying “the word *bricolage* to [herself] a hundred times” (78). It will become clear in this chapter that Kate is mistress to more than one continental philosopher, and the allusion to Derrida’s work here lends her “tedious” but “necessary” project of dismantling the house distinctly deconstructive overtones (77). Indeed, Markson has acknowledged in an interview with Joseph Tabbi that Kate’s “dismantling” of her house is a “subtle” reference to “deconstruction” (114). Critics, in turn, have picked up on this reference and interpreted the object of her deconstructive efforts as a stand-in for language—“Kate’s house is language itself,” writes Paulina Ambrozy (76)—or for the human self in danger of becoming what DeLillo, in *End Zone*, called “monadanom—the thing that’s everything” (170). In the words of Jared Daniel Fagen, “What we witness throughout the novel are the labors of a self—always in doubt and questioning itself—that has nothing left to grasp, to hold itself onto.” In either case, Kate’s world no longer incontrovertibly holds the promise of metaphysical crutches to prop up the solitary human being in a silent universe.

Arguably, how to regain our balance in the absence of such certainty is something a work of art like *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* can teach. But in Kate’s world, not only metaphysics, but art and culture, too, seem to have lost their power to affect human lives. For Kate, a painter in

earlier years, this becomes obvious when she stretches “a monstrosity of a canvas,” “at least nine feet by five” (24), only to gaze at it, unsure of how to fill “its opaque four coats of gesso” with ideas of her own (37). Indeed, Kate’s canvas, according to Fagen “a vestige of her former life” which “represents her inability to either create a new consciousness or recover a history that had once given her life meaning,” presents the real danger of bringing Kate face-to-face with this failure to create meaning. This is allegorized by allusion to Icarus’s fall when, one day during her years of wandering, Kate carries the ‘monstrosity’ up a stone stairway in the abandoned Metropolitan Museum of Art and slips, falling down the central staircase and breaking her ankle (50).

The idea of art as an ambiguous source of meaning-making is already present in the first germ of Markson’s novel, the 1986 short story “Healthy Kate.,” which is set at a time before *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, when Kate still actively works as an artist.<sup>1</sup> Her creative output, however, is intimately tied to her sexuality here: once she realizes her dissatisfaction with her alcoholic husband’s sexual ineptitude, she becomes prolific, trying to replace the validation of marriage with artistic recognition. Yet the turn to art does not bring validation, either, and she has numerous affairs thereafter. In light of this coping mechanism, it is clear that the story’s title asks the question of her ‘health’ ironically. The answer of sublimating sex in art is further undermined ironically by her lover Lucien asking Kate about her manic work habits *before* her private sexual revolution: “What were you presumably sublimating then, that you hadn’t discovered your sexuality?” (143). This idea of one compulsion replacing another implies that there is still something deeper, a lack that leads to compulsivity in art and sex: from the vantage point of the later novel it becomes clear that this lack is the loneliness that

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<sup>1</sup> There is a line of continuity in Markson’s work here, as “Healthy Kate,” anticipating *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, grew directly out of the last words of Markson’s earlier novel *Springer’s Progress*: “Being continued” (234). All three texts are located in the same fictional universe, no matter differences of timeline, names, and the protagonist’s profession—‘Healthy Kate,’ formerly known as the Jessica of *Springer’s*, is a painter, no longer a writer. The Kate of *Wittgenstein’s*, in turn, is both. This continuity allows for some inferences about the source of Kate’s/Jessica’s loneliness that may be considered valid for all texts.

follows from skepticism, a late consequence, as I tried to show in the introduction, of the Kantian compromise in epistemology.

Still, the Kate of the novel turns to art in her loneliness, too—not to a canvas, however, but to a typewriter, embarking on a novelistic account of her situation as the last human being alive. She seeks the permanence of the written word to ‘objectively’ affirm her existence, to furnish herself with the kind of secure ‘home’ she can inhabit as the process of dismantling all other ‘dwellings’ goes on unceasingly like the deconstruction of her beach house. This notion, that a novel could serve as a ‘home,’ the last kind of dwelling for post-metaphysical times, anticipates the idea of art as renewing metaphysics that all writers of my study explore to some degree. Indeed, Zadie Smith writes, “The novels we know best have an architecture. Not only a door going in and another leading out, but rooms, hallways, stairs, little gardens front and back, trapdoors, hidden passageways, et cetera” (“Rereading” 42). In Smith’s image, then, the novel is a ‘place,’ one of shelter and discovery alike.

To be sure, dwellings in Kate’s world are anything but permanent, with the heroine burning them or using a crowbar to take apart some of the very structures that Smith lists as opportunities for retreat here; and so Kate finds herself wondering about the ontological status of these deconstructed objects: “As a matter of fact one can still see a toilet fastened to pipes on the second floor of the house in which I knocked over the kerosene lamp. Even if there is no longer a second floor” (80). Language frequently allows for reference to such shadow objects, she realizes, not just to ‘second floor’ or ‘house’ in the absence of said edifices—“One is still prone to think of a house as a house, even if there is not remarkably much left of it,” she notes (11)—but also to such metaphysical entities as the ‘self,’ even as Kate worries that “what [she] believed to be a person is a shadow,” or “nothing more than an attempt to imply depths” (54-5). Indeed, “[any] number of habits [die] hard” (80), she observes, and so Kate continues to refer to herself, even as the reference slips among

different people and ages, between Kate the modern painter and Helen of Troy. This shows the persistence of our metaphysical habits, if only in what Smith has termed “comic misapprehension.” Even for the last person on earth, in the absence of any possibility for other-validation, there remains a limit case of a concept of the ‘self.’

Still, her solitude puts constraints on Kate’s novel project of writing her identity back into the world. After all, novels demand not just a narrating self, but also plot as the outcome of characters interacting. In Kate’s world, there are no more people, and she has taken to eradicating signs of others in art, too, burning the classics like the planks of her house: “Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripides, I turned into smoke” (16). Literature is being deconstructed in the world of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, where some of art’s basic metaphysical expectations about purpose and ultimate destination in the artwork’s addressee have become untenable. Similarly, Kate fears that her novel might be stillborn before its conception, too, as she realizes that “your ordinary novel is basically expected to be about people too, obviously,” that is, “about certainly a good number more people than just one” (229). That her situation is inimical to novelistic treatment, however, proves to be liberating. For Kate lets her subject matter determine the form of her account, in the process reconceiving the novel genre:

[What] I am suddenly now thinking about is that it could be an absolutely autobiographical novel that would not start until after I was alone, obviously.

And so that obviously there could be no way whatsoever that it could be expected to have more than one person in it after all. [...]

As a matter of fact it might even be an interesting novel, in its way.

Which is to say a novel about someone who woke up one Wednesday or Thursday to discover that there was apparently not one other person left in the world. [...]

Certainly that would be an interesting beginning, at any rate.

Or at least for a certain type of novel. (230)

What this “certain type of novel” dramatizes, then, is a key assumption of the ‘metaphysics of the novel,’ i.e., that it is directed at someone. In a world devoid of other humans, though, the

only destination for a text would seem to be the text's creator herself. And, yet, Kate is writing, and we are reading her ruminations in a book that is clearly not part of the fictional world in which the text, we are told, was conceived. This challenge to ontology, creating uncertainty about the assumptions undergirding all writing, is also a major theme of Wallace's "The Empty Plenum."<sup>2</sup> In fact, for Wallace, the question "at what or whom [Markson's book]'s directed becomes the novel's implicit, or anti-plot" (93). Safe to say, then, that this 'anti-plot' makes of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* an anti-novel, too; but just like a deconstructed house is still a house, a deconstructed novel is still a novel—and, if we follow Kate's hopes here, an "interesting" one at that. For Wallace, this 'interest' seems to lie in the way the book brings to light our expectations about art as a mode of communication—expectations that, as I will show in the last part of this chapter, Wallace associates with the enduring presence of logical positivist thinking in contemporary literature.

At some point, Markson began to feel the same way about the premise of this "absolutely autobiographical novel"; indeed, Kate's slow realization of its possibilities resembles his own process of coming upon his topic. For in the beginning stages of the project, the author wrestled with the conventions of the novel genre in a way not unlike Kate's worries about plotlessness and absence of characters. By the account of the genesis of his book he gave to Tabbi, Markson started Kate's story as the last person on earth in a much more generic, "science-fiction" way: "a straight first-person narration of the next eight or ten months of her life [after finding herself alone on earth], all the panic, the natural disbelief, the terror

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<sup>2</sup> Given Brian McHale's account of postmodernism as producing ontological uncertainty in fiction and thereby revealing the processes of world-creation in our own 'reality,' Wallace's reading here would seem to categorize Markson's book as postmodern. Palleau-Papin concurs with this categorization when she asserts the novel's "postmodern metafictional implications" (206). Markson himself, however, insisted in a letter to Mathieu Duplay that "he has few, if any, affinities with so-called 'postmodern' aesthetics" (153). What this disagreement highlights, I believe, is not the inadequacy of the modernist-postmodernist distinction, but rather the fact that the issue of skepticism transcends it. Markson recognizes this possibility when he claims to Tabbi that "it's quite possible to become a minimalist or a postmodernist or what you will by way of Wittgenstein just as readily as by way of those who use the labels" because "[things] do run parallel in cultural flow" (114). Of course, this runs counter to mainstream literary theory, which adheres to a version of Fredric Jameson's "general historical hypothesis" that "concepts such as anxiety and alienation [...] are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern" (*Postmodernism* 14).

over who else might be out there if anyone still was, the gradual adjustment to it all” (112). This was a more unusual setting than the suburban bedrooms other white male novelists let their priapic narrators stumble through in the 1980s. To be sure, the premise of Markson’s 1977 novel *Springer’s Progress* would have made a Roth or Updike proud with its aging narrator recounting various sexual escapades with a much younger woman. But Markson characteristically cloaked this simple story under a layer of puns and references, foregrounding literary allusion to make the book primarily about the process of rendering the affair into language, indeed making it as seductive as the affair itself. It is not surprising, then, that for his next book he ended up rejecting the conventional sci-fi scenario in favor of a more ambiguous, recursive one, too. In fact, both *Springer’s Progress* and *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* are self-reflexive, involuted novels about how to continue writing novels, given the novelist’s post-metaphysical awareness of being a latecomer to the party of literature, when everything seems to have already been said, leaving him with nothing but overused clichés, the scraps and dregs of earlier guests.

Thus, after revising the first 125 pages of the manuscript for eight months, Markson began working on a second part, with a Kate who has become accustomed to dealing with her situation, “most of [her] fears gone now, simply living with the situation, handling it, psychologically feeding off whatever she was capable of to sustain the balance” (“Interview” 112). Soon he realized that this new emphasis proved to be “as extreme a metaphor [...] as possible” for “that central concept, the idea of aloneness” which he had meant to dramatize (“Interview” 112). So Markson discarded the entire first part of the manuscript, putting it on a “high shelf,” as he told Tabbi, out of the reach of some imagined “harebrained future critic” who “might tack the two [parts] together” (113). And it is at this point that we meet Kate in the book as published: a woman sitting at a typewriter on a deserted beach, years after life as

we know it has ended, who makes do without other people, who has given up ‘looking’ for them, and who has remained sane, she asserts, only because of this surrender.

For this is the great paradox at the heart of Kate’s arrangement with solitude, her way of “sustain[ing] the balance”: while most people maintain their mental health by gravitating towards others in search of validation, Kate attributes her bouts with insanity to this very desire to definitively seek out validating signs. Thus one day in Rome, during the years she spends ‘adjusting’ to her situation, Kate believes she sees a cat in one of the archways of the empty Colosseum, an episode she later dismisses as having occurred when she was “undeniably mad” (29). Notably, her perception of other life is presented here as the consequence of her madness. In turn, Kate is sane when she meets the question of the existence of other life without any expectations. Thus she describes her final adjustment to the new reality as based on the conviction “that she may as well stop looking after all, and so could also stop being mad again” (231). Kate’s ‘madness,’ then, is connected to a form of ‘looking’ based on particular expectations of what can be found. In light of our inclination to seek validation, however, Kate’s attribution of the cause for her madness raises the question of this kind of ‘looking.’ Why did she stop ‘looking’? And why did this restore her sanity?

The obvious answer—because there is no one else left to find—is correct, but it diminishes the novel’s argument. At some point in her typed account, Kate realizes that her current situation, facing the absence of all life as an oppressive presence, is not unlike her situation a decade before: “she had paradoxically been practically as alone before all of this had happened as she was now, incidentally” (231). An unbridgeable distance, cutting her off from all others, had obtained even before the unnamed catastrophe that had left her alone, with “[one] manner of being alone simply being different from another manner of being alone” (231). Slowly it dawns on Kate, sitting at her typewriter, that there is something about our expectations of what it means to be close to others that keeps us forever locked out—the

same insight that has led me, in this study, to propose a concept of proximity in response to the fetishization of certain knowledge that Kate recognizes here. In fact, it was precisely this general dimension of Kate's situation, indicating something of value even for a reader not suffering through her nightmare, which had persuaded Markson that the second part of his manuscript was superior to the first. The new approach at rendering Kate's story, he realized, was suitably more ambiguous and "open-ended," with "the woman *claiming* she was alone, but with nothing in the text to verify it, and all so improbable to the reader—opening things up for all sorts of infinitely more subtle questions of reality than I would have been able to deal with the other way" ("Interview" 112).

Notably, the question of Kate's peculiar form of 'looking,' and its role in the production of such solitude, comes up whenever Kate thinks of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, a novel of barriers and boundaries, in which, as Kate observes, characters are "continually looking in and out of windows" or "climbing in and out of windows, even" (97). To Kate, Brontë's fascination with the permeability of windows, and with the promise of traversing them as spirits are said to do in the Gothic world of *Wuthering Heights*, is connected with a lack in the life of the prematurely deceased author; in fact, she finds an "explanation" for Brontë's symbolism in "the considerable likelihood that Emily Brontë never even once had a lover" (97). Indeed, the act of loving another is to Kate one of the "things Emily Brontë did not do that one wishes she had" (134). It is an absence of love, then, that Kate sees as having kept Brontë obsessed with the image of windows and with a desire to overcome the separateness it implies.

Kate's 'explanation' of Brontë's work here allows for inferences about her own decision to cease 'looking,' as well. The kind of 'madness' she associates with such 'looking' may be based on a misleading conception of our relationship with the world at large that is akin to Brontë's perception of a boundary, however permeable, between the self and the world. The

desire for fusion with the ‘distant’ world this conception produces, a longing for the kind of validation that could once and for all certify its existence, is Brontë’s desire for a spectral crossing of all enclosures; it is also Cather’s desire for dissolution “into something complete and great”—an essentially skeptical, thoroughly modern desire. Kate’s conclusion, in turn, that only love could afford an awareness of our separation from the world in a sane sense, is what Cavell calls the “truth of skepticism.” Skepticism, Cavell argues, is not a scandal to be overcome as a failure of knowledge, but an ever-recurring possibility intrinsic to language and human desire. The novel arguably has a similar view of skepticism. In the following, I will make this case with a view to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who both feature prominently in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*. In fact, I argue that we should read the novel as a dialogue between these two most influential philosophers of the twentieth century: for while Markson, as I show in the next section, refers to Heidegger’s meditations on Dasein’s spatiality in narrating Kate’s skeptical worries and their occasional disappearance, making her a Heideggerian who has not read a single word of Heidegger, the title *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* is ultimately redeemed in light of the influence of Wittgenstein’s aesthetics on the novel’s form and style of argumentation.

### **Heidegger’s Mistress?**

Heidegger’s *Being and Time* presents a forceful challenge to the assumption of our ontological separateness from the world—an assumption that leads to the attendant problem, as Heidegger knows, of how the “subject comes out of its inner ‘sphere’ into one which is ‘other and external’” (60). Unlike Brontë and Cather, however, Heidegger rejects the notion that this is truly a problem, instead seeing it as the outcome of a theoretical framework that suggests the existence of inside/outside as ontologically given. “Rightly considered,” Heidegger announces in a later essay, “the idea of an inner and an outer world does not arise”

(“Thinking” 144). It only arises through a form of cerebral ‘looking’ that meditates on the world and its existence in a detached way—precisely the mode of observation Kate describes as ‘looking out a window.’ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger calls this kind of looking a “rigid staring” (61) and dismisses it as the very source of skepticism about our ability to know the world at all: “When we merely stare at something, our just-having-it-before-us lies before us as *a failure to understand it any more*” (145).

Heidegger’s claim here that ‘staring,’ when pursued with a philosopher’s intensity, may deteriorate into full-blown skepticism echoes Wittgenstein’s assessment that “[t]he phenomenon of staring is linked to solipsism” (*PO* 272); in fact, both Wittgenstein and Heidegger regard such ‘staring’ as one of the main ways in which we let ourselves be mesmerized by certain metaphysical assumptions—“held captive,” Wittgenstein would say, by certain “pictures” of the “workings of our language” (*PI* §§115, 109)—including the impression of an unbridgeable distance between human observer and ‘outside’ world. Similarly, Kate falls prey to this impression whenever her disengaged ‘staring’ makes it seem as if there is a gulf between us and the world of everyday things—moments when, in Heidegger’s account, we find ourselves in the existential mood of anxiety. Indeed, Kate makes this experience of anxiety the defining characteristic of the “certain type of novel” she writes: “Just imagine how the heroine would feel, however, and how full of anxiety she would be” (230). As readers of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, we do not have to imagine this; we can turn to Kate’s own report, from the time of an ill-defined, suppressed “Long Ago” (228) to her decision to write the “absolutely autobiographical novel” we hold in our hands.

And even if her journeys, when Kate was still “[looking] in desperation” for signs of others (188), are over by the time she sits down to recount them, “that question of things existing only in one’s head,” Kate notes, “may still be troubling me slightly, to tell the truth” (152). Given her anxious desire to find absolute precision in accounting for the link between

world and language—a desire that lets her obsessively correct her own formulations in permutations of phrase and content to eradicate any semblance of lexical or syntactical ambiguity—this must be seen as an understatement, a way of downplaying the corrosive effects skepticism can have on the human psyche. For Kate’s uneasy acknowledgment here comes right after she thinks of one of her few remaining sources of delight, a “Garbage Disposal Area” where, one day, she discovers “an enormous heap of broken bottles” which are “extraordinarily pretty, being of various colors” (128). Likening “the entire mound of them” to “a kind of glistening sculpture” (128) or “a painting by Van Gogh” (129), Kate imagines that for an artist like Van Gogh, who would have presumably painted the art piece “at night,” “the bottles could be effectively done by the light of fire,” with the flames’ “frisky shadows” throwing a “strange calligraphy” onto the sand (129).

That Kate’s diction shifts from analytical precision to lyrical inventiveness here indicates the value she attaches to an artistic treatment of such garbage, which is just one more manifestation of the ‘baggage’ of western culture she has been discarding. As art, however, all the “anxiety” (153) she associates with the garbage can be turned into something beautiful. That is why the proposition that even the bottles’ seemingly ‘external’ prettiness could be nothing but a product of her ‘inner’ mind, leaving the world dead and uncertain because the ‘glistening sculpture’ is “something else that exists only in my head” (152), awakens her skeptical doubts again after the promise of art had sedated them. Indeed, what Kate experiences here is the opposite of Kant’s dictum that, from the standpoint of practical reason, we must treat the beautiful object *as if* it existed independently of the subject of the aesthetic experience. Her skeptical tendencies, then, seem to be powerful enough to suspend even the Kantian ‘as if,’ which, as I showed in the introduction, was meant to safeguard the objective existence of the ‘thing.’

But Kate's next mental leap takes her back from the infinite distance of skepticism again, and toward very mundane concerns about artistic success: "Even if a certain amount of the anxiety," she concedes, thinking of the mood of her imaginary Van Gogh painting, "may be simply over the likelihood that the painting will not sell" (153). This touches upon a distinction between two types of anxiety—one described as "the fundamental mood of existence" (216), the other dismissed as a pale shadow of this ordinary experience. Kate spells out the difference explicitly in the proposal of her novel project: "[Every] bit of [this anxiety] being real anxiety in this instance, too," she notes of her own constant dread, "as opposed to various illusions" (230). The *locus classicus* for this distinction between mere fear and real anxiety is Søren Kierkegaard's 1844 book *The Concept of Anxiety*, but in the twentieth century the concept gains prominence through Heidegger's reiteration of it in his existential phenomenology—a genealogy Markson acknowledges by letting Kate express confusion over the authorship of the sentence that "inconsequential perplexities now and again [become] the fundamental mood of existence" (216). Was it Heidegger's or Kierkegaard's, she wonders (217), and it is difficult not to hear Markson chuckle while writing these lines, amused that Heidegger plagiarized the anxiety part of *Being and Time* from Kierkegaard.

Indeed, both philosophers regard anxiety as ambiguous: existential affliction as well as saving power. Yet while Kierkegaard frames this ambiguity in theological terms of sin and salvation, the anxiety of Heidegger's account plays a more general, ontological role as a mood that both constrains and opens up the possibility of 'achieving' existence. In real anxiety, Heidegger asserts in the 1929 lecture "What is Metaphysics?", we feel the world of everyday concerns fall back into an infinite distance: "All things and we ourselves sink into indifference. [...] We can get no hold on things. In the slipping away of beings only this 'no hold on things' comes over us and remains. Anxiety reveals the nothing" (103). This anxious

achievement of distance is unlike fear of something particular, such as a threat to one's life. Rather, it is a condition of such fear; it is objectless, fearing, literally, 'nothing.' In anxiety, Heidegger asserts, we intuit something absolutely indefinite: complete asignification, the very emptiness Kate plunges into backwards as the world ahead of her 'sink[s] into indifference' in a process Sianne Ngai has described as the existential equivalent of a cinematic "track-out/zoom" (235). And Kate's pragmatic response to the disorientation that ensues corresponds to Heidegger's account, too: after recoiling from this fundamental absence at the core of existence, Heidegger claims, we rush back towards our everyday concerns. It is the recognition of 'the nothing' underlying all our activities, then, which gives meaning to these activities. This condition of self-determination is a recurrent possibility: "Original anxiety can awaken in existence at any moment," Heidegger lectures, "It needs no unusual event to rouse it" ("Metaphysics" 108). The disappearance of all life that leads to Kate's anxious episodes is certainly an unusual event. But as the book refuses to clarify it, the extraordinary character of Kate's situation fades into the background, making space for Heideggerian overtones in her exploration of the mood of anxiety. This is by no means a coincidence; rather, Markson has explicitly acknowledged the philosophical influences on *Wittgenstein's Mistress*: "I had a head full of people like Wittgenstein and Heidegger," he told Tabbi, conceding that he had turned to these thinkers in dramatizing "the very way [Kate] questioned things herself" (112).

Owing to the mention of Wittgenstein in the novel's title, much critical attention has been paid to the Austrian philosopher's work as an intertext. However, speaking to Tabbi, Markson has explicitly cautioned interpreters that Wittgenstein's philosophy was only *one* influence, "along with several other's" (113). And while he dismissed much of "contemporary theory" by allusion to Jesus's parable as "old wine in new bottles" (114), Markson did not disavow

Heidegger's importance for the novel.<sup>3</sup> Readings that take into account this influence, however, are rare. One exception is Sherril E. Grace's paper "Messages: Reading *Wittgenstein's Mistress*," which interprets Kate's reflections "on the relationship between physical reality and the representation of it in language or paint" as a variation of Heidegger's discussion of "the problem of Dasein" (214). The answer to Kate's feelings of isolation, Grace suggests, lies in an understanding of this key Heideggerian concept, which succeeds the notion of the self in traditional subject philosophy by giving it a greater extension than intentional self-consciousness. But while Grace presents existential phenomenology as a possible remedy—"the very grail [Kate] is looking for" she writes, "[is] *Dasein*" (215)—she also realizes its impossibility for Kate, who admits that she does not know Heidegger's work: "Her tragedy," Grace argues, "is that she picks up that word, knows that it is important, but does not know what it means" (214).

This is the case in spite of the fact that Kate comes across "no less than seven books by Martin Heidegger" (167) in a carton she finds in the basement of her beach house. Written in the original German which Kate cannot read, however, Heidegger's works function in the narrative much like the book *Baseball When the Grass Was Real*, a classic in sporting circles that deals with a time before the introduction of artificial turf into baseball stadiums, which Kate finds in the carton, as well. Initially, she does not understand the title. Indeed, her comprehension of the book's meaning does not come upon reading it, but when she discovers another carton that contains precisely such artificial grass. Similarly, Kate's settlement with solitude does not come about through a theoretical grasp of Dasein's meaning, either, but through her own lived experience of 'real anxiety.' This notion of the primacy of being over its representations runs like a thread through Heidegger's analytic of Dasein in *Being and Time*. It is in particular one often overlooked aspect of this analytic, namely Heidegger's

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<sup>3</sup> Markson's dismissal of 'theory' strikes me as a bit disingenuous in light of the traces of deconstruction in Kate's account. It is likely, however, that this is what he would call a case of Derrida's wine filling old bottles—among them, as I will show in the third chapter by comparing Socrates and Derrida, antique Greek ones.

reflections on spatiality (§§ 22-4), that I see as a useful hermeneutic for interpreting Kate's monologue—a connection which, to my mind, has not yet been sufficiently addressed in the scholarly debate around *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Thus, in one sequence that meditates on Dasein's particular spatiality, Kate introduces the concept of 'equidistance from each other' for the assumption of a metaphysical distance between the self and the world:

The more I think about it, the more I seem to remember that Rembrandt rarely went anywhere near strangers.

Even if he and William Gaddis would have remained equidistant from each other at all times, of course.

Well, as any other cat and any other person.

Or even as the cat I saw in the Colosseum and each of those cans of food I put out, also.

Even though there were as many cans as there must have been Romans watching the Christians, practically.

In fact, each Christian and each lion would have always remained equidistant from each other, too.

Except when the lions had eaten the former, naturally.

Although I can now actually think of another exception to this rule, as well. (144)

We see Kate going deeply into metaphysical reflections here, meditating on the impossibility of ever overcoming the distance between oneself and the world. Its irreducible otherness, Kate realizes, cannot even be reached by absorbing the other, as lions had devoured the early Christians in a Roman form of capital punishment. The fact that Kate thinks up an "exception to [the] rule" that coming close to someone or something is achieved by literally absorbing them now indicates that what looms in the background of her reflections on spatiality is a *non-literal* concept of absorption, which reflects the epistemological desire for a fusion that would guarantee the absence of any illusions in a complete 'possession' of the world. As I indicated in the introduction, this desire is the consequence of a modern ontology that puts the Kantian thing-in-itself out of reach—a desire to breach the very boundaries between subject and object that we create when we 'stare' at the world in the way Kate does here. And it is this desire which causes skepticism in a detached subject, anxious over its mode of knowing things 'out there.'

For Heidegger, however, writing against the skeptical desire produced by modern ontology, this yearning for absorption is not an original experience. Rather, it is tertiary, premised on a mode of being that is itself secondary when compared with our involvement in everyday affairs. Thus Heidegger proves to be aware that the ‘equidistance’ between self and other which Kate presents as a matter of course is predicated on a particular ontology, not a somehow unassailable truth of metaphysics. In fact, it is in its sole focus on this secondary mode of being—which in Heideggerian terms is called, depending on the translation, ‘objective presence’ or ‘presence-at-hand’—that metaphysics has neglected the original ‘nothing’ that conditions being. Our original state of being-in-the-world, Heidegger argues by contrast, is restored when we cease ‘staring’ at the world of objects and instead reenter our everyday activities. Kate has a similar experience when she engages in activities such as, one day, dressed in nothing but her underpants, taking a stroll in a warm rain that had dampened her beach house through a broken window. The symbolism of Kate’s proximity to nature here gains significance once more by reference to *Wuthering Heights*: just like the main protagonists in Brontë’s novel, Catherine and Heathcliff, are desperate for a window to be open at the moment of their deaths—with the dying Heathcliff’s “face and throat” being “washed with rain” as his window is “swinging open, and the rain driving in” in an imagined reunion with the wild moors of the two lovers’ youth (317-8)—so Kate escapes the confines of the ‘house’ of her self, too, immersing herself in a rain that has already breached the broken boundary separating her from the ‘outside.’ This interpenetration is reprised when Kate soaps her naked body and walks in the rain again until it is rinsed off:

[What] I have basically been doing about the rain is  
ignoring it, to tell the truth.

How I do that is by walking in it.

I did not fail to notice that those last two sentences must  
certainly look like a contradiction, by the way.

Even if they are no such thing.

One can very agreeably ignore a rain by walking in it.

In fact it is when one allows a rain to prevent one from

walking in it that one is failing to ignore it. (184)

In a monologue that is defined by second-guessing, Kate is remarkably certain here about the possibility of “[ignoring] a rain while walking in it.” What is equally clear from Kate’s account is that the rain retreats from her purview once she stops staring at it as a distinct presence. That one might ignore something by immersing oneself in it, then, is only “a contradiction” in Heidegger’s mode of presence-at-hand. In the flowing absorption of everyday activities, this is not a contradiction at all; such forgetfulness of one’s difference from things is the norm here. In this mode of being, which Heidegger calls ‘readiness-to-hand,’ the world has not yet been cast ‘out’ into the distance of theoretical representation. One’s accustomed materials and surroundings do not obtrude yet, but rather slip under the threshold of consciousness in their very use. Hence in such readiness-to-hand, Heidegger explains, “Dasein as being-in-the-world in the sense of concern is *absorbed* in its world in which it is preoccupied, [...] so that precisely in the most natural and the most immediate being-in-the-world the world in its worldhood is not experienced thematically at all” (“History” 185). In *Being and Time* (§23), Heidegger illustrates this through the example of a pair of spectacles which, while being close in an objectively present way, become phenomenally transparent to the point of being environmentally remote in the act of seeing. Similarly, the rain becomes transparent to Kate in the act of walking in it. This whole passage, then, is written in the margins of Heidegger’s analytic of Dasein without making use of the corresponding terminology.

Kate’s shift to everyday existence here is not unprecedented. It has been said, for instance, that what David Hume—another great skeptic whom Markson studied carefully, along with Kant, as an undergraduate<sup>4</sup>—recommended upon succumbing to doubts about the existence of reality was a walk about town. While Hume mingled with average townsfolk,

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<sup>4</sup> Alex Abramovich has noted with a view to the marks in Markson’s “undergraduate philosophy textbooks” that “the future novelist paid more attention to Kant and Hume than to Erasmus, Descartes, and Hegel.”

then, we might say that solitary Kate ‘sustains the balance’ in a related way, by taking a walk in nature, ‘mingling’ with the rain, agreeably distracted from her irreducible distance to the world. What Heidegger’s account highlights is the derivative nature of this ‘irreducible distance’ as the result of a particular ontology of objective presence. Indeed, Kate’s happy forgetfulness of the rain while walking in it serves as a reminder that Dasein is always already *in* the world.

Even in these immersive states of praxis, however, a modicum of distance remains. This is the meaning of Heidegger’s term ‘Dasein,’ which implies that a certain present-ness, a being-there [*Da-sein*], cannot be eliminated from the experience of the world, however absorbed our functioning may be. To be sure, this persistence of distance would entail the recurrence of skeptical doubts, as well. As such, the critic Jeffrey Karnicky has it wrong when he denies that this remainder of representational distance ever tempts Kate to draw any solipsistic conclusions. Indeed, Karnicky argues that Kate “*never* reduces what is outside her to what is in her head” (57; my emphasis). To be sure, Kate’s bouts with skepticism are not permanent. Karnicky’s claim that she “*never*” succumbs to radical skepticism, however, is too one-sided. There are many instances in which Kate’s meandering thoughts devolve into flirtations with solipsism, culminating in a passage that expressly contradicts his statement:

[My imagined pet *Gato*] is obviously in my head.  
But then *what is there that is not in my head?*  
So that it is like a bloody museum, sometimes.  
Or as if I have been appointed the curator of all the world.  
Well, as I was, as in a manner of speaking I undeniably am. (227; my emphasis)

Kate’s confession to a solipsistic view of the universe stands out in this passage; the way she presents this view, however, is hesitant, hedging, indirect to the point of self-contradiction. What matters most in what Kate says here, then, is not her self-description as a solipsist—a statement that is characteristically vague anyway, presented in the form of a rhetorical question—but the qualifiers she uses to limit the scope of her claims: the task of curating a

world by way of nomination can only be said to have been entrusted to her “in a manner of speaking,” and solipsism, it notes, afflicts her only “sometimes.” This suggests that there are other ways of seeing, and Kate, I have argued, is acquainted with both solipsism and immersion as modes of being. The ambiguity of her confession, then, which indicates these shifts in her comportment toward the world, corresponds to Markson’s own description of Kate as a woman who has settled into her situation, “psychologically feeding off whatever she [is] capable of to sustain the balance” (“Interview” 112). Such a balance, it seems, is inconceivable without the occasional turn to everyday life in the mode of readiness-at-hand. After all, that Kate’s stroll in the rain is “agreeable” indicates the absence of the anxiety that afflicts her at other times, when she seeks absolute answers to old questions of epistemology. That distance persists in both modes of being, though to varying degrees, is a function of our desire to hold on to communicability, whether in philosophical discourse or in absorbed functioning. In fact, a collapse of the distance to things as imagined by Cather would mean interrupting the operation of those mechanisms of desire that drive poetry and thinking. This is the reason for my introduction of the concept of proximity as indicating the kind of *eros* that drives toward the ‘thing’ *as if* it could be fully represented in language, but does not meet its final elusiveness with cynical detachment.

By contrast, the Heidegger of “What is Metaphysics?” takes the remainder of distance in Dasein’s present-ness to mean that a meditation on ‘the nothing’ has to coincide with the *cessation* of all speech. His claim here that this meditation *must* be silent follows logically from a notion I have developed in the introduction: that the use of any concept, in response to ‘the nothing’ would force our thinking on this ‘issue’ into subject-object metaphysics, as given by the grammar of our language, and thus lose the ‘ground of being’ in the very attempt at ‘grasping’ it. In anxiety, then, we might summarize Heidegger’s account, Dasein shudders at the sight of the ‘nothing’ at the ‘bottom’ of experience and is necessarily silenced by this

encounter with the aporia, this apprehension of what is wholly other: “Anxiety robs us of speech. Because beings as a whole slip away, so that just the nothing crowds round, in the face of anxiety all utterance of the ‘is’ falls silent” (“Metaphysics” 103). That this silence is also accompanied by the “peculiar calm” (102) of a philosopher who is bewildered, though not agonized, raises doubts about the final fit between Heidegger’s metaphysics of Dasein and *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*. For, in line with the continuation of poetic and philosophical desire I describe through the concept of proximity, Kate does not silently face the ‘the nothing’ to propel herself into an authentic relationship with being. To the contrary, her reflections are shot through with a certain wistfulness, a longing for the proximity of another person who could intervene in the dyad ‘Kate-world’ as a third element capable of guaranteeing the existence of either one from an external point of view transcending this relation.

That Kate lacks precisely such a third element is the reason for her repeated skeptical observation that any two entities—houses, cities, human beings and animals, even oneself and one’s own mirror image—are equidistant from one another. To be sure, she is acutely aware that in the absence of “a yardstick or a field of comparison” (33), the assumption of equidistance is trivially true. This idea already occurs to her when she first picks up the term ‘equidistance’ at the Rijksmuseum, where, one day, Kate is looking for speakers for a phonograph. Finally, she finds two speakers accompanied by instructions for set-up amidst the abandoned belongings in the museum:

[...] What the directions told me to do was to make certain that the two speakers were equidistant from each other.

One certainly had to wonder what the person who wrote the instructions should have meant by that.

Well, or the person who had translated the instructions from the Japanese.

No matter where one situated them, how could there be any way in which any two objects could be any distance from each other except equidistant? (91)

The recommendation of equidistance between the speakers, Kate implies here, is based on a mistranslation from the original instructions, which seem to have pointed to a third element, the stereo unit perhaps, that could actually function as a ‘yardstick’ for measuring distances from a point outside of the relation between the speakers. Kate’s familiarity with the concept of ‘equidistance,’ then, is accompanied from the beginning by an awareness of the desirability of such a third term beyond the binaries of subject/object, inside/outside, mind/world. That this third term is missing, however, that indeed nothing transcends her claustrophobic existence, must be seen as the source of Kate’s anxious longing, the very affect that permeates *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*.

At this point, the novel’s title brings into play a range of ideas from Wittgenstein’s work. For the importance of such a ‘yardstick’ for determining relations between any given elements in the world is a recurring theme in Wittgenstein’s thought. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he addresses it by reference to a standard of measure from the metric rather than the imperial tradition: “the standard metre in Paris,” Wittgenstein explains, is a “method of representation” in the “language-game of measuring with a metre-rule” (§50). As such, it serves as a third element in the relation between measurer and object to be measured. It is this very kind of unimpeachable, external standard that allows for certainty in determining length the same way a stereo unit might have determined equidistance between Kate’s speakers. But while there are clearly defined ‘means of representation’ for specific language games such as ‘measuring with a metre-rule,’ we have no such measure for language at large, i.e., no transcendent perspective from where to survey and thus explain the link between language and world—and it is precisely this relation that Kate, like all skeptics, tries to ‘grasp,’ an attempt which leads her into all kinds of philosophical ‘nonsense.’

In this, however, Kate follows her ‘lover’ Ludwig, too. Markson’s book title sets her up as the intellectual mistress of a philosopher who, in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,

proposed standards for what can sensibly be asserted, excluding any metaphysical generalities about ‘how language works,’ only to breach these standards in the very act of establishing them. Wittgenstein’s way out of self-contradiction was a turn to literary means, an attempt at carrying his argument over into the very manner of presenting it, by *showing* the rules of logic and language that, through this act of showing, need never be *spoken*. The *Tractatus* thus ends with the realization that all its metaphysical talk about the relationship between language and reality was “senseless”—at best the rungs of a “ladder” the philosopher “must throw away [...] after he has climbed up on it” (6.54). The transcendent place a reader reaches through this ascent, Wittgenstein imagined, was one of speechlessness, where one “will see the world aright” (6.54) in a mood of mystical silence not unlike Heidegger’s ‘bewildered calm’: “What we cannot speak about,” the early Wittgenstein concluded, “we must pass over in silence” (7). Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger, then, end up with silence in trying to approach the issue of how to ‘do metaphysics.’ Markson seems to have been aware of this shared conclusion, for he lets his heroine express a desire to turn to Wittgenstein in her longing for another person who could validate her reflections on *Dasein*, a third in the relation ‘Kate-Heidegger’: “[What] one might now wish one’s self,” she remarks upon finding Heidegger’s books, “is that Wittgenstein had been in the basement with me yesterday, so as to have given me some help with that *Dasein*” (170).

This imagined dialogue between the two thinkers, then, may serve as a description of the novel at large. Heideggerian concepts do not occur in isolation here; rather, they are dramatized in tandem with a Wittgensteinian view of metaphysics. Indeed, like Kate, we, too, may need the perspective of another thinker in order to understand Markson’s argument on skepticism, with Wittgenstein’s style of philosophy giving some ‘help’ to the negotiation of Heideggerian concerns. This ‘help,’ I argue, comes chiefly in the form of an openness to continued speech and representation without, at the same time, betraying the significance of

silence as metaphysically authentic. In the following, I will show that a philosophical justification for such openness, which knows of its own ironic nature but persists anyway, can be found in Stanley Cavell's concept of "true silence," which is in some ways a marriage of Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's positions on metaphysics.

I believe that Cavell's work is an ideal guide for Markson's use of these sources in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. For while academic philosophers often regard Heidegger and Wittgenstein as representatives of opposing camps, Cavell is one contemporary philosopher who does not seem to accept this division. In fact, like Markson, Cavell has staged a dialogue between them, too, finding common ground in particular with regard to their treatment of 'the everyday.' And while he stresses that both Heidegger and Wittgenstein attach enormous importance to everyday practices as a way of encountering skeptical doubts, Cavell also points out the different direction each philosopher takes with regard to ordinary life: "Heidegger finds authenticity to demand *departure*," he writes in the 1988 essay "Declining Decline," while "Wittgenstein finds sense or sanity to demand *return*" (64; my emphases). I have already outlined the Heideggerian movement away from the world in anxiety to which Cavell alludes here; Wittgenstein's 'demand' that we come back to ordinary ways of thinking on the rebound from the metaphysical, in turn, is a structuring feature of his *Investigations*, a book which, according to David Sterne, "has more in common with a Socratic dialogue, or an Augustinian confession, than a conventional philosophical treatise" (6).

Sterne's invocation of Plato is apt: like the ancient Greek philosopher, Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* used competing but complementary voices to dramatize his belief that there is value in everyday concepts as well as in bouts with skepticism. A novel, with its multiple perspectives, does not have to adjudicate on the matter of metaphysical priority, either. Unlike a treatise, which is compelled to argue linearly, discursively, it can point, insinuate, and contrast positions without any recourse to 'objectivity.' This would be especially true for

*Wittgenstein's Mistress*, which is based on a fictional scenario that by definition precludes the intervention of an objective observer. To Kate, all certainty has vanished along with the disappearance of the world's population. This is true even when it comes to facts about herself, her past; there is simply nothing left in the world that could verify her assertions—almost all material artifacts, documents, and testimonies are gone; and the few books she finds, for instance, become a source of endless speculations about their meaning and significance. Markson's fictional scenario leaves Kate no resort to communal agreement to dispel her doubts about such questions of hermeneutics.

In fact, Markson is a master at conjuring firm footing for a reader only to pull it out from under her feet in the next sentence. Take, for example, a passage in which Kate detects a seagull sailing over the beach, only to decide a moment later that it is nothing but ash, perhaps even the remainder of a book Kate had burnt herself:

The gull was your *ordinary* gull.  
*Actually* it was ash, carried astonishingly high and rocked by  
breezes. (30; my emphases)

The text configures the first way of seeing as part of the ordinary view of things, in which the appearance of a bird-like shape leads to the assumption that one is seeing a gull. In a swift reversal of perspective, however, the word 'actually' suddenly indicates the first viewpoint's falsity and replaces it with a 'higher-order' perspective from where it has now purportedly become possible to see the way things 'actually' are. But Markson also ironically reverses this idea of metaphysics as *ascent* to truth by presenting an earth-bound character who faces a receding object in the sky, naturally leading a reader to expect this certainty to crumble like Kate's other seemingly firm convictions. I therefore agree with Palleau-Papin when she relates this passage to the novel's overall ambivalent position on metaphysics by asserting that "[the] adverb 'actually' is a lure, just as when we got lost in the syllogism of [Kate's] madness and reason without a third term or a viewpoint other than hers" (206). It is this

ambivalence, in fact, which must be seen as the cause of Kate's own struggles with verification, spread out over the novel's many interlocking paragraphs that show her alternately falling in and out of mystification.

Kate's world, then, is one that is fundamentally shifting, leaving no solid foothold for an elevated observation of things as they 'actually' are. The point of this scenario is to suggest, as Kate herself slowly comes to realize, that her situation is not all that much unlike our life with language in general—sometimes, we are in the throes of skeptical doubts about language's capacity to let us know anything; at other times, embedded in our everyday practices, we do not spend a moment doubting the depth of language's penetration. Thus Markson takes into account the fundamental ambivalence of the two states—one self-sufficient but blind, the other in anxious need of validation—that characterize Kate's situation as I have outlined it here: in Heideggerian parlance, a shift between readiness-to-hand and objective presence; in Wittgensteinian terms, an oscillation between our ordinary view of things and skepticism. Kate experiences these simultaneous realities first-hand, when her head "sometimes manages to jump about" between completely different ways of viewing things (94). But these jumps do not always lead her, as Heidegger demands, from everyday illusion to philosophical mastery; they also take the opposite direction, in a movement from skepticism back to the ordinary that has been prefigured by Wittgenstein's late works. Thus *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, a novel which, as I argue here, stages a dialogue between these thinkers, does not only enact a departure from the ordinary, as in the passage with the remote object in the sky above. It also dramatizes the other direction mentioned by Cavell—a Wittgensteinian return to the 'sanity' of everyday life which, admittedly, can be interrupted again at any point by skepticism, i.e., whenever the distance between self and other comes to seem infinite upon 'staring' at it with sufficient intensity. Note, in this regard, a passage in

which beach-dwelling Kate reflects on arthritis in her shoulder and ankle, the pain of which is exacerbated by the wet environment of the drafty house she occupies:

[...] [If] I am presently hurting in two places at once, as I undeniably am, would this mean that I am actually hurting in four?

Except that I have now completely forgotten what the other two places are that I might have meant, unfortunately. (189)

Here the first way of seeing extends the dualist argument that bodily states are mirrored in mental states; consistent with this perspective, each part of the body that hurts has to correspond to a mental representation of the pain for it to be conscious: two ‘in’ the world, and two ‘in’ the ‘shadow realm’ of metaphysics. That, in the very next breath, she laments having immediately forgotten the logic of this duplication is probably more a sign of Kate’s growing awareness that her reflections are spinning out of control than a sign of the first idea’s inherent superiority.

In fact, the metaphysical and the ordinary way of seeing are poised here, humorously, at the very point of equilibrium that is characteristic of the novel’s overall treatment of binary oppositions—a Wittgensteinian feature that has been commented on by many scholars of Markson’s book. Grace summarizes it as a “tension [...] between motion and stasis, activity and passivity, outer and inner reality in each monologue [that] never slackens, is never hierarchized and ordered to privilege one element in each pair” (213). Ambrozy refers to it in a deconstructive register by asserting that, in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, “language can be seen in its ‘ghosting’ mode, i.e., *suspending the reader between presence and absence*, life and death, despair of finality and its continuously undertaken refusals” (76-7; my emphasis). Another critic who recognizes this spectral vacillation, or ‘tension,’ between different modes of comportment toward the world is Sue-Im Lee. Lee keeps the twin modes together by viewing them as two different, yet coequal aspects of a concept of “ambivalent community” (143). On the one hand, she introduces the notion of “idealized community” as a view of

community under the sign of skepticism, community as homogenous ‘home.’ This is contrasted with “dissenting community,” which Lee simply calls “community as co-existence,” without any aspirations to agreement over common values (152). It would seem, given the novel’s “narrative premise,” which, according to Lee, “emblemizes community as coexistence” (166), that Kate has no choice but to accept that the kind of validation promised by an “idealized” vision of community is unavailable to her. Indeed, Kate’s reported decision to stop ‘looking’ for others in order to preserve her sanity suggests that she has given up on the kind of ‘multi-party agreement’ which could make possible an easy identification with the assumptions of her community and, therefore, her language. But, as I have noted, Kate’s “absolutely autobiographical novel” is motivated by a hope for creating a virtual place of ‘rest,’ a place for her to ‘live’ in. Lee agrees, pointing out that “the *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* book that we hold in our hands, ostensibly, is the most extended and ultimate version of Kate’s ‘looking’” (154). For the reader, then, this raises the question of what she is doing when ‘reading’ Kate’s account—what, given Markson’s limit case of a narrative situation, which abolishes the possibility of communal agreement over the meaning of Kate’s propositions, does such an act of ‘reading’ even amount to?

The academic debate around the novel has to a large degree focused on this question of Kate’s language use: is it possible to enter her consciousness, or does she speak a ‘private language’ to the point that her expression becomes incomprehensible? All scholars of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* note the literary means by which Markson approaches this question of Kate’s incomprehensibility—the short disjunctive paragraphs of her ‘novel,’ her voice’s uncertain cadences, the incessant poking for firm epistemological ground, the obscurity of her subject matter. These are the novel’s great stylistic innovations, which place it squarely in an avant-garde tradition of experimental writing. But while early critics like Tabbi and Steven Moore still ascribe Kate’s confused references to the ‘baggage’ of western culture a

recognizability that allows for a participatory reading of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, a later critic like Karnicky begins to gesture at the limits of such a reliance on canonicity. Denying the option of connecting with Kate through a correction of her mistakes, Karnicky claims that meaning never resides entirely in anyone's head and that, as such, the canonical corrections imagined by Tabbi and Moore do not move a reader any 'closer' to Kate. Lee now takes the argument one step further, recognizing that there is something about Kate's text, and about the existential isolation it reflects, that does not meet the general rules that constitute felicitous speech acts. That, to Lee, this infelicity is a function of Kate's "impure private language game" (166) becomes apparent in the critic's dismissive comment on the text's "unpredictable shifts in topic and the preponderant use of trivia" (155), which, on the whole, she argues, make Kate's text "*absolutely illegible*" (154; my emphasis). This illegibility, in turn, is supposed to be due to the "impurity of her single-party game" (156), i.e., the fact that "her playing is devoid of any outward criteria or agreement of community" (154). It is the absence of such 'pure criteria,' then, which Lee sees as returning Kate to the desire for an "idealized" vision of community: "The more Kate experiences the absence of agreement as an affliction," she writes, "the more her search for 'everybody else' becomes more than an expression of coexistence" (159-160). Although Lee professes to keep the balance between her two concepts of community, then, ultimately the kind of fusion that would permanently banish the specter of skepticism comes to prevail in her reading over the simple a priori 'we' of "dissenting" community vision.<sup>5</sup>

This desire for fusion, "this wish and search for community," is simultaneously, as Lee quotes approvingly a passage from Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, "the wish and search for

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<sup>5</sup> Lee's reading of Markson's novel as "absolutely illegible" due to its alleged 'impurity' has a counterpart in her assertion that Wittgenstein presents a "theory of a private language game" (25) as well as a general "theory of language" (146). Indeed, just like Lee's adherence to an ideal of purity in language as constituted by communal agreement over criteria stands in stark contrast to *Investigations* §107—where Wittgenstein dismisses the "crystalline purity of logic" as an empty requirement rather than an adequate description of 'how language works'—*Investigations* §109 explicitly denies that philosophy could present such explanatory theories: "It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones. [...] *And we may not advance any kind of theory*" (my emphasis).

reason” (*Claim 20*). Her argument, though, that only ‘pure criteria’ can make meaning possible is in some ways the opposite of the case I am presenting in this chapter, namely, that Markson’s novel, like Beckett’s *The Unnameable*, teaches us precisely how to ‘go on’ in the absence of such pure conditions. To further develop this reading, then, I will respond to prior critical positions on *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* by emphasizing a few other Cavellian precepts: namely, that *no* reason can ultimately disprove skepticism; that, even in the *presence* of agreement over common criteria, our situation is not vastly different from Kate’s—after all, we, too, are potentially subject to anxiety over our possession of the world at any moment; and that *criteria*, though purportedly the place where language and world meet, can only give us certainty about what a ‘thing’ is called in our language; what it cannot do, strictly speaking, is *guarantee*, by reference to ‘multi-party agreement,’ the ‘objective reality’ of the thing thus named. To make these points, which arguably form the existential core of Markson’s novel, I will now turn to the philosophical debate over the status of ‘criteria.’ This allows me to further specify what I mean by proximity as a form of comportment toward the other (world/person). In fact, I will mobilize Cavell’s answer to the question of criteria—a re-reading of Wittgenstein’s idea of ‘form of life’ as structurally bilateral, encompassing both the concept’s ethnological and biological aspects—to intervene in the academic debate around Markson’s novel and use Kate’s situation to illustrate the position a self attains under the sign of proximity, rather than the detachment counseled by other critics. This position, I argue, in agreement with romantic metaphysics, is one of *love* toward the other. To develop the significance of such love as an epistemological principle that follows directly from Cavell’s “truth of skepticism,” finally, I show how it informs the few moments of sanity the heroine of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* experiences when she ‘turns poetic.’

## Truths of Skepticism

Criteria are indicators for something falling under the extension of a predicate. If, for example, I observe the criteria for someone being in pain—such as wincing, crying, soothing a particular body part, etc.—then I am justified in saying that this person *is* in pain. The philosopher Saul Kripke, whose 1982 book *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* was motivated by an attempt to clarify Wittgenstein’s conception of criteria, entered the debate at this point. Kripke investigated the possibility that fixed rules, understood as abstract universals, could explain the continuous functioning of criteria across various contexts. In other words, he asked how a grammatical rule lodged ‘in our heads’ could somehow determine an infinity of applications ‘in the world’—a metaphysical question on which Wittgenstein had stayed characteristically silent. The holy grail Kripke sought was a ‘fact of meaning’ that could ensure our continued use of criteria in ‘the same way.’ But he quickly came to realize that the uniformity of our applications could not be a matter of the ‘same’ interpretation of universal rules: any further rules for how to interpret a rule ‘in the same way’ would only lead to a regressus, with one rule specifying the correct behavior requiring another rule, and that one yet another, ad infinitum.

Faced with such skepticism about rule-based meaning in general, Kripke offers what he calls the “community view.” On this view, only an appeal to a consensus of competent speakers can ensure the normativity of a particular way of using criteria. His position, then, resembles doctrines, such as Lee’s “idealized” community vision, that follow the ‘linguistic turn’ toward the conventions of a given community of speakers as making meaning possible. Rather than holding on to a dyadic notion of *adequatio* with the world to make language and thought possible, as correspondence theorists would do, these conventionalists reverse the direction of the correspondence that should account for linguistic meaning. But philosophers who try to ground meaning only in *adequatio* with human conventions lose the world this

meaning was supposed to be *of*, or *about*, and thus fall prey to skepticism. Kripke, too, saw that his way of grounding linguistic correctness in conventionality never reaches beyond the domain of language, and he called the community view a “skeptical solution,” rather than a refutation of skepticism.

In his critique of Kripke, Cavell points out the consequences of these reflections on Wittgenstein—consequences Kripke himself noted with an “eerie feeling” (70-1)—namely that there is no ‘fact of meaning,’ such as universal rules, that could determine the way we use criteria for all eternity; that the way we identify criteria is instead due to contingent factors of socialization and training; and that, as a consequence of Kripke’s conventionalist reading of Wittgenstein, skepticism had come in through the backdoor. Cavell even asserts that Wittgenstein was aware of these consequences: “It is part of Wittgenstein’s vision,” he claims in “Declining Decline,” “that our very sense of arbitrariness in our language, a certain recurrent suspicion or a certain reactive insistence on the conventionality of language [...] is itself a manifestation of skepticism as to the existence of the world and of myself and others in it” (50). What Cavell takes issue with in Kripke’s account is, rather, that Wittgenstein’s vision would somehow entail a ‘problem’ that stands in need of a ‘solution’ such as the community view.

To be sure, Cavell agrees with Kripke that there is a conventionalist aspect to Wittgenstein’s view of our agreement in judgments, and he concedes “[t]hat Wittgenstein *can* be taken so is important.” But, in the same breath, he adds a qualifying statement: “no less important is that he *need not* be so taken” (51; my emphasis). There is a clear sense here of an alternative to conventionalism, and what Cavell sees as the “philosophical task” in response to Kripke’s account is “to uncover the forces in this alternative [...], to discover whether for example one side takes undue credit from the denial of the other” (51). I read this as Cavell agreeing with the notion that traditional correspondence accounts of how the mind

relates to the world face the impossible task of explaining what Colin McGinn has called the “ontological leapfrog” it presupposes. There is evidence that Wittgenstein shared this notion. After all, it was the same impossibility—the fact that, as I noted previously, owing to our nature as symbol-wielding creatures we cannot claim to see clearly, i.e., from ‘above’ or ‘outside’ of language, whether our minds ‘lock into’ the world—which had compelled Wittgenstein at the end of his *Tractatus* to blanket his own preceding ‘picture theory of language’ under a layer of mystical silence.

Tractarian silence makes a comeback, *mutatis mutandis*, in Wittgenstein’s later concept of ‘form of life,’ which has often been read as an attempt to counteract skeptical arguments about the foundations of language and thought. “When I have exhausted the justifications [for using words the way I do] I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned,” Wittgenstein silences a potentially infinite number of skeptical questions in *Investigations* §217; and he concludes categorically: “Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do.’” ‘What it is we do’ is determined, in turn, by our form of life, which, as Wittgenstein asserts elsewhere in the *Investigations*, “has to be accepted [as] the given” (II 226). Form of life, in this view, becomes the unassailable, unquestionable ‘bedrock’ that embeds all our statements about the world, a ground so firm it turns all skeptical questions away. At times, Markson’s Kate reaches this ‘ground,’ too, noting, “I have no explanation” for “generally speaking of Pascal as Pascal, but of Friedrich Nietzsche as Friedrich Nietzsche, incidentally” (105). The only ‘explanation’ she could give in response, then, is no explanation at all, a variation of Wittgenstein’s late call for silence: ‘This is simply what I do.’

Yet even after these moments of hitting ‘rock bottom,’ Kate goes on purging metaphors and removing syntactical ambiguity from her account. This indicates that, even after the ‘exhaustion’ of all justifications, it continues to be possible to make our skeptical questions so sharp as to break even the supposed “bedrock” of ‘form of life’ and dig deep beyond it,

only to find further “bedrocks,” which can be broken, too. Indeed, the ‘solution’ to skepticism that tries to reify our form of life as a firm foundation is itself still based on a skeptical interpretation of the ‘problem’ that suggests we look for absolute answers rather than accept the ambiguities of our life with words. Indeed, human life is such that we can always question our judgments about criteria, for instance by insisting that a person exhibiting pain behavior is just acting, or singing, or under the influence of drugs, or, in one of Cavell’s most idiosyncratic examples, “calling his hamsters” (*Claim* 89). There is no fact in the world that prevents us from doing so, as any fact can be made to conform with any given interpretation.

This neopragmatist conclusion—that no interpretation can ensure our application of criteria in ‘the same way,’ and that, therefore, meaning cannot be said to be grounded in interpretation—coincides with the account of language that comes out of the 1982 essay “Against Theory” by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels. Taking on a perceived hegemony of deconstruction, or ‘theory,’ in 1980s literary theory, Knapp and Michaels critique what they regard as the key assertion of ‘theory,’ which is also a premise of correspondence theories of meaning and truth: namely, that it is possible “to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without” (2475). Indeed, like Wittgenstein, who intimated that we have to remain silent on the question of this ‘ontological leapfrog’ between mind and world, Knapp and Michaels argue that we are always already ‘inside’ our ontological and epistemological assumptions—“the only relevant truth about belief is you can’t go outside it,” they write (2475)—and that, as a result, the perspective imagined by both deconstructionists and correspondence theorists is not available as a way of arriving at ‘objective’ truths. The question for neopragmatists, then, is not *how* to interpret any given marks; rather, Knapp and Michaels argue, the question is *whether* to interpret them as language in the first place. This position has a bearing on the question of intentionality, which

is seen by the ‘theorists’ they attack as “a condition of knowledge prior to and independent of belief” that can supposedly ground meaning not unlike Kripke’s desired ‘fact of meaning’ (2472). Indeed, if the marks are recognized as language, Knapp and Michaels point out, then they have intention already built into them; if they are seen as non-intentional, in turn, they cannot be language and end up being meaningless. Meaning and intention are never separate, they conclude, and authorial intention cannot serve as an external ‘fact’ for anchoring interpretation. The authors illustrate this conclusion through an encounter with a ‘poem’ that is somehow ‘written’ onto a seashore by incoming waves: “Suppose that you’re walking along on a beach,” they stage this encounter, “and you come upon a curious sequence of squiggles in the sand” (2463-4). In keeping with their neopragmatist account here, Knapp and Michaels boil the whole discussion around the possibility of non-intentional marks down to a simple choice facing the wanderer by the shore: “Either the marks are a poem and hence a speech act, or they are not a poem and just happen to resemble a speech act” (2470).

“Against Theory” set off one of the most vibrant debates of early 1980s literary theory. Since there is evidence that Markson was no stranger to these debates,<sup>6</sup> Knapp and Michaels’s essay might have left a trace on the novel, in particular on a section in which Kate describes her practice of using a walking stick, which has one day washed onto the shore, to write messages in the sand of the beach she inhabits:

Now and again I have also made use of the stick to write in the sand with, actually.

In fact I have even written in Greek.

Well, or in what looked like Greek, although I was actually only inventing that.

What I would write were messages, to tell the truth, like the ones I sometimes used to write in the street.

Somebody is living on this beach, the messages would say.

Obviously it did not matter by then that the messages were only in an invented writing that nobody could read.

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<sup>6</sup> A few years before, in 1978, Markson had finally published an extended version of his decades-old Columbia master’s thesis on Malcolm Lowry; moreover, as a devoted community of literary sleuths tracking down the remnants of his library in New York City bookstores can testify, he owned many books on literary criticism from around the time *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* was conceived.

Actually, nothing that I wrote was ever still there when I went back in any case, always being washed away. (57)

For a critic like Lee, the reason why it “did not matter” that nobody can understand the content of Kate’s ‘messages’ is that there is no way of recognizing any rules in Kate’s novel, a lack which supposedly makes the text so “thoroughly unilateral and idiosyncratic in expression” that it becomes “absolutely illegible” (155). This would be particularly true of her ‘Greek’ letters in the sand, an “invented writing,” which, by Kate’s admission, “nobody could read,” and which therefore, Lee argues, “emblemizes the errant nature of Kate’s single-party game” (151). A different position on whether Kate’s writing communicates anything is presented by Duplay. To be sure, Duplay agrees with Lee on the idiosyncratic character of Kate’s writing, which pushes the limits of what we ordinarily call a ‘message.’ But he chooses another way of interpreting the fact that nobody could read Kate’s invented alphabet—a fact which is allegorized by Markson’s decision to let the squiggles be washed away each time she draws them. In fact, unlike Lee, Duplay takes Kate seriously in her assertion that the invented characters in the sand still ‘say’ something, namely, that “[s]omebody is living on this beach.” In a sense, Duplay argues in a neopragmatist frame of mind here: the realization that the scribbles point to this ‘somebody,’ he asserts, is already implied by the very act of recognizing them *as* writing, which presupposes the existence of a mind intent on communicating something, even if only to itself. And it is with regard to this fact, namely that *any* marks may be regarded as the signs of a language, that Duplay claims, “for a text to be legible, it is not essential that it be read correctly, nor indeed that it be read at all” (146).

Kate’s ‘Greek’ scribbles are neither read correctly nor read at all. Following Duplay’s logic, however, they must still be considered legible. In fact, contrary to Lee’s profession of their absolute illegibility, Duplay attests Kate’s scribbles what he calls “minimal legibility” (147). “[B]ypassing meaning,” he claims, “allows the narrator to perceive what the

inscriptions express simply by virtue of being there: ‘Somebody is living on this beach’” (147). A search for agreement over criteria as it comes out of Lee’s reading, however, eclipses this search for an ontologically deeper level of meaning associated with the ‘minimal legibility’ that Kate experiences upon seeing her invented inscriptions in the sand and ‘reading’ her own presence into them. What Duplay highlights, then, is that each and every inscription, if it *is* an inscription, calls for such an acknowledgement of the fact of the expressivity, and hence existence, of its creator. Hence, in making sense of Kate’s situation, Duplay arrives at a conclusion which, he says, is “not epistemological, but metaphysical”: unlike the conventionalist ‘solution’ to skepticism, which seeks certainty in “correct interpretive procedures,” Kate’s report stresses, as Duplay has it, the constancy of “life as the primordial mode of being on which everything else is predicated” (148). Hence the human body, as an expression of such ‘life,’ which even Kant required to save our realist intuitions, and which twentieth-century literature privileged in similar terms, comes back to the fore in Duplay’s reading with a vengeance.

This metaphysical conclusion is also implicit in the alternative to conventionalism that Cavell outlines in his reading of Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘form of life.’ Cavell argues that the conventionalist focus on the *social* nature of human language, a view he identifies with the “ethnological sense” of forms of life, eclipses a “twin preoccupation” of the late Wittgenstein, namely an emphasis on the *natural* aspects that Wittgenstein alludes to in *Investigations* by mentioning the “natural reactions” (§185), “natural history” (230), and “the common behaviour of mankind” (§206) that make language possible (“Decline” 41). Hence the direction he gives Wittgenstein’s work, in tandem with the social view of agreement, is toward features that are universal among all humans: necessities such as the fact that we are mortal, that most of us have two legs, that we need oxygen and food, etc. Cavell has called this the “biological sense” of ‘form of life’ (“Decline” 41). That Markson’s Kate, too, craves

this constancy of biology, itself a kind of ‘yardstick’ in a world empty of other humans, becomes apparent in her pleasure upon encountering natural events such as a rain to walk in, as well as in her meticulous attention to her menstrual and sleep cycles, or to the signs of aging in her body. But just like Wittgenstein’s term ‘form of life’ registers both the historically variable features of humanity *and* our common roots in biology, keeping them together as *two* nominal components of one and the same concept, Cavell is careful to avoid compartmentalizing these two as if they were incompatible, calling upon his readers to think of the two dimensions of form of life, to quote Espen Hammer, “as sliding into one another” (28).

This has profound consequences for his understanding of Wittgensteinian criteria. They are no longer seen as guaranteeing our application of concepts beyond a doubt. Rather, a criterion for Cavell is flexible, shifting: a hinge linking the two directions of language—toward mind and world—and thus keeping together the two emphases—ethnological and biological—of the concept of form of life. In a memorable formulation, Cavell has stated that Wittgensteinian criteria function like “a pivot between the necessity of the relation among human beings Wittgenstein calls ‘agreement in form of life’ (§241) and the necessity in the relation between grammar and world that Wittgenstein characterizes as telling what kind of object anything is (§373)” (“Decline” 49-50). Criteria are thus involved in a double function, a kind of bilateral orientation, that is structurally unsuited for providing the unequivocal answers insisted upon by thinkers in the grips of skepticism. As Cavell writes, dismissing conventionalist ‘solutions’ such as Kripke’s, and arguably Lee’s, “the appeal to criteria against skepticism cannot overcome skepticism but merely begs its question” (“Decline” 51). Neither is there, for Cavell, any real need to overcome skepticism; rather, seeing clearly the life we live as speakers of a language means accepting what Cavell calls the “truth of

skepticism”: “the sense, or fact, that our primary relation to the world is not one of knowing it (understood as achieving certainty of it based upon the senses)” (*Senses* 106-7n).

A beautiful passage in *The Claim of Reason* (431) further specifies the nature of this primary relation, which must seem to us like blindness, the absence of sense certainty, by the standards of the account that skepticism gives of human knowledge. Wittgenstein seems to reference this account in the *Investigations* when he has a proponent of skepticism ask, ““But, if you are *certain*, isn’t it that you are shutting your eyes in the face of doubt?”” (224).

Wittgenstein’s answer, in turn, replaces this vision of radicalized certitude with a simple assertion of human finitude: “They are shut.” There is nothing wrong with the lack of certainty that material-object skepticism specifies, he states implicitly; in fact, speaking of a ‘lack’ here presupposes a misleading ‘picture’ of knowledge. This ‘truth of skepticism’ allows us to reevaluate the mode of our experience of the world in terms less driven by an epistemological ideal of absolute possession and prepares my concept of proximity as an alternative to this common view of knowledge in post-Kantian philosophy. Indeed, Cavell finds a more amorous metaphor for our life with skepticism as a recurring possibility:

“They (my eyes) are shut”, as a resolution, or confession, says that one can, for one’s part, live in the face of doubt. — But doesn’t everyone, everyday? — It is something different to live *without* doubt, without so to speak the *threat* of skepticism. To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it.

Love thus conceived as an epistemological relation is not quite like Cather’s desire for dissolution “into something complete and great.” In fact, as Cavell writes elsewhere, it is not “what the inexperienced may imagine as a claim to the union, or absorption in nature” (*Senses* 105-106); it does not claim to ‘possess’ the loved one, in this case the world ‘the way it really is.’ But it still pays attention to it—its expressions, its particularity—the way one would be responsive to another person. As such, this kind of love is an affect capable of meeting the resurgence of skepticism following each turn to ordinary life. This fraught,

everyday encounter with the uncertain world must be seen by Cavell's account as a deeply human experience, one that is essential in making possible our life with objects in general. Indeed, it is expressive of the same dual directionality, the same 'sliding' between corresponding though opposing aspects, that characterizes Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's concept of 'form of life'—one toward culture, the other toward nature, keeping both together without giving either one the upper hand. Similarly, the love of the world keeps subject and object together in the act of loving, as well, 'eyes happily shut.' Finally, the proximate relation of self to nature this love specifies, Cavell argues, "would be that of neighbouring it—knowing the grandest laws it is executing, while nevertheless 'not wholly involved' in them" (*Senses* 104-105).

Thus 'not wholly involved' in the world, but still involved enough to give it amorous attention, the self attains a position from where it can let go of the madness of certainty. This is the position of proximity, by contrast to full fusion or complete detachment, I endorse in this study as taking into account the 'truth of skepticism' and thus expressing the kind of 'sanity' Markson's Kate experiences when she stops 'looking,' i.e., when she frees herself of specific assumptions about her access to the world and no longer expects a perfectly validating response from the 'other.' The "mournful" character of her "litany" that a critic like Steven Moore hears in Markson's prose (247), then, is quite fitting: Kate is indeed mourning the loss of an idea of 'the world,' but only to regain the world in return; and *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is a dramatization of the work involved in overcoming a metaphysical picture of 'grasping' things as they are. Kate's achievement of her 'sanity,' finally, replaces this picture with a notion of what it would mean to 'live our skepticism' when we learn to stop 'looking' for signs of certitude and start loving again.

Kate associates this position of proximity with a different kind of vision, which, she states explicitly, also has the potential to keep her sane: "Once in a while, when I was not mad," she

writes, “I would turn poetic instead,” adding, “I honestly did let myself think about things in such ways” (31). The almost incredulous tone of Kate’s ‘honest’ admission to having ‘turned poetic’ here is due to her earlier creative blocks as an artist. Indeed, after having transformed her desire away from the illusions of rigid ‘staring,’ Kate reflects on her years of travelling and cannot even remember the impetus behind all her ‘looking’: “Was it really some other person I was so anxious to discover,” she wonders, “or was it only my own solitude that I could not abide?” (31). I have demonstrated that Cavell’s epistemological meditations provide an answer to Kate’s question: a fear of loneliness by itself is not enough to encounter skepticism; rather, what it takes to meet the devastating withdrawal of the world is a trusting love of the other in the absence of expectations to be acknowledged in turn. In the next chapter, I show how such love corresponds to a concept of the ‘true gift’ that will allow me to develop a literary ethics based on the distinction between seduction as manipulation and gift.

Kate has a similar realization of the empowering significance of love halfway through the novel. After being “depressed” by the idea that “novel writing is not [her] trade” (232) and breaking off the typing of her book for almost two months, the first November snow brings a change in her perception of the world and her art. Now, with snow blanketing her beach “all the way down to the water’s edge,” the whiteness suddenly reminds Kate of the equally white “old lost nine-foot canvas of mine” which she had been unable to fill with paint earlier (233). Unlike her stifled prior painter self, however, ‘sane’ Kate perceives this framing of the world “*as if* one could have newly painted the entire world one’s self” (233, my emphasis), and with her sense of purpose renewed, she returns to the typewriter. Thus, letting go of the madness of certainty and purity has freed her to create again, even if she can no longer expect to perfectly validate her creation by cross-reference to a world ‘outside.’

Her way of attending to the world, then, has arguably changed from the positivistic desire for a firm possession of ‘the Real’ to a different “kind of precision” in observing things that

Bruce Bond has identified as a key feature of poetic evocation (3). Poetry, Bond writes, involves a “deep attention” which focuses on “the near at hand,” but, in a kind of double vision, sees “in the act of attention the ghost of the unknown” (5). In fact, the most pertinent example of Kate’s turn to poetry strike me as exemplifying precisely this kind of ‘double vision’ that Bond associates with poetic diction:

A variety of berries grow nearby. And less than minutes past  
my stream there are various vegetables, in fields that were once  
cultivated but are of course now wildly overgrown.

Beyond the window at which I am sitting the breeze is  
frisking with ten thousand leaves. Sunlight breaks through the  
woods in mottled bright patches.

Flowers grow too, in great profusion. (14)

Like Catherine and Heathcliff, the romantic lovers from *Wuthering Heights*, whose final imaginative return to the moors of their youth brings only ambiguous redemption in a world of barriers, Kate cannot fully absorb herself into nature the way Cather does in the epigraph to this chapter, either; indeed, with all her attention on the natural surroundings, Kate’s poetic evocation still has word of the window at which she is sitting, a remaining boundary that prevents her full “dissolution into something complete and great.” But even from this position, which is not quite absorption, her language sparkles with a vitality that is presented as capable of preserving the sanity of the last person on earth because it drives into a proximity to the things *as if* a concord were possible—“As if,” we might say with another great late romantic, the poet Wallace Stevens, “as if, as if the disparate halves/Of things were waiting in a betrothal known/To none” (“Images” 396).

Stevens developed his notion of the ‘as if’ before *Vaihinger* had been published in the US, but their idea of the power of ‘fictions’ in the absence of metaphysical certainty is remarkably similar. Indeed, in his lecture “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” given a decade before Faulkner’s Nobel speech, Stevens stated that the imagination has no choice but to register “the pressure of reality” (665), that elusive domain beyond itself. Otherwise, Stevens

wrote, “[the] imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real” (645). That a conventionalist solution does not suffice for the maintenance of such vitality is one of the takeaways of this chapter. What has taken the place of a conventionalist approach in my account is Cavell’s idea of giving a dual directionality to the concept of ‘form of life,’ sustaining it between nature and culture, partaking of both. I have demonstrated that one way in which this duality appears on the pages of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* is as the sliding between ordinary and metaphysical aspects of things. Kate’s poetic way of ‘sustaining the balance’ now may serve as another illustration of this duality: according to Palleau-Papin, Kate “is toying with the naive idea that she can bring together art and nature, *as if* the written sign were a magical emanation of nature” (220; my emphasis). Arguably, the peace that results from this ‘as if’ is the peace of falling in love with the world. I have shown that Kant had similar pacifying aspirations for the ‘as if’ in philosophy. But in Kate’s romantic evocation of the “ten thousand leaves” that frisk in the breeze, of sunlight falling onto the river in “mottled bright patches,” it is realized in *poetry*, which registers ‘the Real’ through, and *only* through, the vitality of its language—‘a magical emanation’ that results from our proximity and responsiveness, however ungrounded and unassured, to the world. In the last section of this chapter, I will show how such a belief in the power of poetry can be reconciled with the previously mentioned claim that, following the critique of metaphysics, all we are left with in approaching the ‘ground of being’ is silence. It is in Cavell’s concept of “true silence” as a form of “untying of the tongue,” in fact, that I see the germs for a neo-romantic aesthetics that I will trace, in closing, in the poetics of Wallace’s novelistic work, which was developed in a confrontation with the dominant literary fashions of the late twentieth century.

## Untying of the Tongue

Duplay views Kate's desire for moments of relief under the sign of the 'as if' as an antidote to what he calls "the knowledge of universal legibility [which] literature shares [...] with the paranoiac" (149). His argument here stresses a view of Kate as madwoman, whose sprawling connections and obscure references may also give rise to a sense of paranoia in her readers, who "still [try] to make sense of it all," and in doing so have been tempted to follow Kate into nonsense, "forced to use a private language" (qtd. Palleau-Papin 232-3). While ultimately 'legible,' then, for Duplay the text as a whole is a document of a "linguistic solipsism," or "textual autism," that entails a risk of contamination for the reader who engages with it empathetically (qtd. Palleau-Papin 232). Implicitly, he seems to be searching for a hermeneutic stance that would allow the reader to appreciate Kate's discourse without yielding to the paranoia it might elicit. Taking a cue from Kate's previously mentioned ability to understand books without having read them, Duplay identifies her way of finding relief not with the poetic attention I call proximity, but with "a poetics of non-reading." Distilled from Malcolm Lowry's and T.S. Eliot's work as the detached posture, the "withdrawal," of one who decides to "step aside and watch the world go by as if he were no longer a part of it" (156), such hermeneutic detachment is exemplified by the author, Markson himself, whose references to literary figures emphasize, as Duplay notes, precisely what is not to be found in their published works (152-3). In a similar vein, Duplay argues, readers should maintain a distance to Kate's 'nonsensical' text that "allows [them] to sense, beyond the reach of the written text, the unspeakable presence of feelings so raw that words [...] can only betray them" (155).

That the *raison d'être* of Kate's monologue, as this critical account has it, is not the plethora of words on the written page but rather "unspeakable" feelings underneath is also the argument Wallace presented in "The Empty Plenum," his own Cavellian reading of

Markson's novel, which addresses issues of readability and paranoia similar to those raised by Lee and Duplay but ultimately identifies them as *positive* aspects of the novel's way of communicating. I will therefore turn to Wallace's essay now to develop a notion of the influence Markson's method has had on Wallace's own poetics. Indeed, in Wallace's account, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is an *indirect* message that communicates by way of what he calls "deep nonsense," a term that undermines the very distinction between sense and nonsense. *Pace* Duplay, Wallace sees value in such a foray into deep nonsense, in listening to the "whispers" of a book whose "charms and stratagems are very indirect," as exemplified by the text's "seductive order not only in but *via* chaos" (79). The book, he concludes, as I stated at the outset of my study, is "really about the plenitude of emptiness, the importance of silence, in terms of speech, on beaches" (116).

Emptiness, chaos, silence—Wallace's words here clearly correspond to the post-metaphysical preoccupation with 'writing silence' I explained in the introduction as an attempt at bypassing the very 'metaphysics of presence' that are implicated, by virtue of their desire for fusion, in the drive toward abstraction in modernity. At the same time, his concept of 'deep nonsense' also gives expression to another key point of my study, namely, that such an attempt must be seen as always already haunted by its other, the desire for metaphysics; and that, as both Wittgenstein and Heidegger knew, the only way to approach such fullness is by way of emptiness, just like being can only be intuited by way of nothingness, sense by way of nonsense:

You could call this technique "Deep Nonsense," meaning I guess a linguistic flow of strings, strands, loops, and quiffs that through the very manner of its formal construction flouts the ordinary cingula of "sense" and through its defiance of sense's limits manages somehow to "show" what cannot ordinarily be "expressed." Good comedy often functions the same way. So does good advertising, today.<sup>7</sup> So does

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<sup>7</sup> Wallace specifies an example of such deep nonsense in "good advertising" in a footnote: "Audi's '89 slogan for print adverts: 'IT SETS THE STANDARD BY IGNORING IT'" (80). A structurally similar example in Markson's novel is Kate's 'agreeable' act of ignoring the rain by walking in it, which I have interpreted as exemplifying Heidegger's mode of readiness-at-hand.

a surprising amount of good philosophy. So, usually on a far less explicit level than *WM*'s, can great fiction. (80)

Wallace's willingness to be seduced by Kate's nonsense here is in line with Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, which presents "a certain philosophical vulnerability to, or insistence upon, nonsense" as "essential to his philosophizing" ("Event" 205). It is also the exact opposite of the mainstream reading of Wittgenstein he encountered as an undergraduate at Amherst College in the early 80s, where he wrote a thesis on modal logic.

Wallace's teachers at Amherst were second-generation descendants of the kind of logical positivism that had come to North America by way of European émigrés like Rudolf Carnap, a member of the Vienna Circle, who had read Wittgenstein's position in the *Tractatus* as one of renouncing metaphysics altogether, thus putting an end to all propositions, such as Heidegger's 'metaphysics of being,' not in line with their strictly scientific view of the world. After the war, the surviving logical positivists settled in America, where their thought fused with analytical philosophy to become the dominant method of academic philosophy by the time Wallace enrolled at Amherst three decades later. In this intellectual environment, Wallace instinctively turned to the methods of analytical philosophy when it was time for him to write his thesis in collaboration with Jay Garfield, a specialist in symbolic logic. Yet his coursework soon took him in new directions, away from the positivistic certitude that undergirds much of modern logic. Among the thinkers who had raised such "new curiosities" for Wallace, James Ryerson lists Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, and Derrida (20). The different view of metaphysics that issues from the work of these philosophers helped him see the limitations of a logical positivist reading of the *Tractatus*. Indeed, as Ryerson reports, Wallace came to worry whether Wittgenstein's later work undermined the "sort of formal semantics on which he and Garfield were hard at work" (20). This curiosity about approaches to philosophy that were united in their opposition to 'formal semantics' arguably manifested in the conclusion to his thesis "Richard Taylor's 'Fatalism' and the Semantics of Physical

Modality”: “if Taylor and the fatalists want to force upon us a metaphysical conclusion,” Wallace states, “they must do metaphysics, not semantics.” “And,” he adds, “this seems entirely appropriate” (212). In one final move, Wallace challenges the foundational claim of analytical philosophy itself: that *all* we can ever know about the world comes to us through a formal analysis of semantics.

In fact, his hesitant openness to ‘doing metaphysics’ here is in line with Wittgenstein himself, who quickly disapproved of how his *Tractatus* had been read by the Vienna Circle. When confronted in 1929 with their dismissal of Heidegger’s ‘metaphysics of being’ as nonsense, Wittgenstein responded, as his biographer Ray Monk notes, by quoting freely from Augustine’s *Confessions*: “What, you swine, you want not to talk nonsense! Go ahead and talk nonsense, it does not matter!” (282). This is hardly the attitude of one for whom metaphysical talk is inherently sinful; indeed, Wittgenstein had enormous respect for the human tendency to be seduced by the ‘nonsense’ upon which such disciplines as ethics, aesthetics, and religion are founded—a fact to which I will return in the fourth chapter in a discussion of his *Lecture on Ethics*, delivered the same year as the remarks on Heidegger. What this openness to ‘nonsense’ means for an assessment of the philosopher’s stance on metaphysics, then, is that we cannot treat the dogmatic injunction against all ‘nonsense’ to be the last, and only, word on the matter.

Perhaps no interpreter has been more attuned to this discrepancy between Wittgenstein’s worldview and a Vienna Circle vision of philosophy than Cavell, who accompanied the spread of logical positivism in America as a critical observer. In fact, in his memoir Cavell reports that the impetus for his own philosophy had been an overheard skirmish between Hans Meyerhof, an admired professor of his, and a teaching assistant at Berkeley in the late 1940s. The TA’s logical positivist demand that every statement be either meaningful or meaningless, leaving no space for a “line of Rilke’s” the professor meant to defend as

“cognitively meaningful” (253), had left Meyerhoff speechless. Witnessing the event, Cavell realized “on the spot” that his own investment in philosophy would be to “discover a different mode of response to such an assault” (253). The response that Cavell developed over the following decades stipulates that logical positivists aim at a certainty that is irreconcilable with our ‘form of life’ as finite human beings; to Cavell, this means that the positivistic demand that we only speak about things we know with certainty amounts to a prohibition of *all* speech, silencing people the way the TA had silenced Meyerhoff at Berkeley.

Accordingly, Cavell’s reading of *Investigations* §217 exemplifies a more forgiving view of the desire for a metaphysical ‘ground.’ In fact, the mood in which Cavell encounters the paragraph’s assertion “This is what I do” is strikingly different from the *Tractarian* imperative to be silent when tempted to state a metaphysical proposition. Instead of “[insisting] upon obedience” from “a position of assumed strength,” Cavell “express[es] patience” with an interlocutor who cannot be forced into silence but has to find her own way into an understanding of the ‘groundless ground’ of language (“Scandal” 136). This journey, however, does not have to be guided by the hush of mysticism; rather, it may take her through all kinds of ‘nonsense’—whatever it takes to make her understand that, on its own, there is no end to philosophy; but that, as Wittgenstein declares in *Investigations* §133, “[the] real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy whenever I want to.”

Markson’s Kate feels the positivist pull of a logically perfect language, too, noting that “[one]’s language is frequently imprecise” (12). At other moments, however, exhausted in mind and body by this search for logical perfection, she wonders about the value of correction altogether: “Now heavens,” she exclaims and asks a question that is central to the novel’s preoccupation with metaphysics: “Or should I perhaps give up troubling to correct

such nonsense altogether, and simply let my language come out any way it insists upon?” (145). Cavell reconsiders silence as the only way of expressing the metaphysical question of “our relation to the world’s existence” along similar lines (*Senses* 145); indeed, the concept of silence he arrives at in his most romantic book, *The Senses of Walden*, forms an unlikely alliance with its other, the human word: “It is through words that words are to be overcome,” Cavell describes this reading of Wittgensteinian mysticism, adding, “Silence may only be the tying of the tongue, not relinquishing words, but gagging on them. True silence is the untying of the tongue, letting its words go” (44). Arguably, Cavell’s formulation here returns us to the importance of the “biological” elements in Wittgenstein’s concept of form of life: that we may ‘gag’ on silence indicates that there is something about this forced suppression of speech that may be inimical to our health. “True silence,” by contrast, involves a permissiveness that does not shy away from ‘nonsense’ and allows one to ‘untie one’s tongue’ in a manner exemplified by Kate’s disjunctive paragraphs, her incessant poking for firm epistemological ground and probing of all possible connections under the sun. In fact, we may see in the poetic license of Cavellian “true silence” an argument for why the maximalism of the Wallace nexus, which I will later read as a romantic ‘strategy of oversaturation,’ still expresses a commitment to silence, despite, or rather *because*, of its own wordiness.

By the same logic, being seduced by the skeptical speculations of Wittgenstein’s mistress means making oneself vulnerable to what Wallace, in his review essay, calls “the piquant qualia of [Kate’s] lived, albeit bizarrely lived, experience [...] that the philosophy does not & cannot convey” (77); it is in this way, he hints, i.e., by ‘reading with the body,’ that we may arrive at Wittgenstein’s therapeutic ‘real discovery’ of how, and why, to stop doing philosophy. Wallace’s reading, then, revolves around an issue that is crucial for Cavell’s treatment of Wittgenstein—the experience of literary form, as evidenced by the final *Tractarian* appeal to the reader to “throw away the ladder once he’s used it” or by the

incessant interplay between metaphysics and the ordinary contained in, and by, the book *Philosophical Investigations*. It was on this question of literary presentation that agreement between Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle had broken down in the 1920s. Realizing how the logical positivists had simplified his philosophy, Wittgenstein stated famously: “What the Vienna school has achieved, it ought to show not say” (Monk 283). Arguably, this dimension of a ‘showing’ that exceeds what a text ‘says’ also allows for an understanding of the ‘deep nonsense’ Wallace sees at work in Markson’s book—a reading which complicates any simple association of Wallace’s work with the kind of ‘postmodern aesthetics’ that, as Marjorie Perloff explains, “no longer recognizes such ‘depth models’ as inside/outside, [...] or depth/surface” (“Language Poetry” 406). Indeed, the ‘depth’ that Wallace finds in Kate’s ‘nonsense’ is arguably based on this possibility of *showing* a vision of transcendence-in-immanence, a view of an entire ‘form of life,’ by *aesthetic* means. In the following chapters, I will connect this possibility with the function of *laughter* as a way of showing what cannot, by the standards of metaphysically authentic speech, be said.

What this discussion of “The Empty Plenum” has indicated, then, is that Wallace’s essay joins Cavell in opposition to logical positivist surface models of language and thought. Even beyond such shared affinities, however, Cavell’s presence in the essay runs through the entire text, from its title, a play on a formulation in Cavell’s *In Quest of the Ordinary*,<sup>8</sup> to the epigraph from “Declining Decline”—which Wallace might have read at Boston’s Brighton Library, where he worked on “The Empty Plenum” in 1989—to various formulations and ideas on romanticism and skepticism taken from the philosopher’s work in the eighties. D.T. Max elevates these observations to the status of a likely fact of literary influence: “Cavell

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<sup>8</sup> In the Preface to this book, Cavell claims that “[without] providing an answer to this question of skepticism [‘Am I *so much as* alone?’] you do not know whether the world has become a plenum, that is, a statistical crowd, or else a void of others” (xi). With characteristic ambiguity, Wallace’s choice of title merges the two options, thus eschewing a simple answer: for Kate, he insinuates, the world has become an *empty* plenum, with the shadow existence of all others hanging over her head, though only as a fading memory, no longer a source of validation and home.

may have been one of [Wallace's] literary models" (132), he writes, pointing to the fact that in the late eighties, after having completed an MFA at the University of Arizona, Wallace studied under Cavell during a brief stint at Harvard.

The unlikely romanticism of another of Wallace's 'literary influences,' however, may have been just as important in the essay's genesis. Indeed, Wallace's explanation for the holistic power of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*—for its “reach and grasp, for *making heads throb heartlike*” (75; my emphasis)—is, as Max notes (316f21), an allusion to Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Wallace's aesthetic stance, then, also has roots in the countercultural promise of re-enchanting a world of scientific facts through the power of the human heart and imagination. That this promise might also, as Duplay highlights, plunge us into Kate's world of paranoia is a Pynchonian consequence Wallace explicitly accepts in “The Empty Plenum,” viewing it as preferable to the logical positivist conviction “that *nothing* is connected to *anything* else & that *nothing* has *anything* intrinsically to do with you” (88).

In fact, Pynchonian paranoia presided over much of Wallace's early work.<sup>9</sup> Pynchon's later novels, however, left the young author cold. As Max quotes from a letter to Jonathan Franzen, Wallace found *Vineland*, the 1991 follow-up to *Gravity's Rainbow*, “flat and strained and heartbreakingly inferior to [Pynchon's] other 3 novels” (qtd. Max 152). Neither did Wallace have much regard for late-eighties minimalism. When he encountered *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, then, Wallace was in search of a point of reference for the kind of fiction he envisioned as an alternative to these dominant literary fashions. Writing an essay on Markson, I argue, afforded him with an opportunity to gain some clarity about his own

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<sup>9</sup> Wallace's infatuation with Pynchonian postmodernism in writing his first novel *The Broom of the System* was so obvious to some publishers that they were wary of accepting what Max calls “a Pynchon rip-off” (48). His debt must have been equally apparent to Wallace, who exemplified manifestations of a kind of Bloomian anxiety of influence, as evidenced by a subtle difference between the two published versions of “The Empty Plenum.” In the original version of the essay published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, he refers to *Broom* as an example, albeit a failed one, of what he calls a “w(ork).o(f).g(enius)”: “When they fail, *as my own first long thing did*, they're pretty dreadful” (218; emphasis added). In the 2012 reprint of the essay, the entire subclause has been deleted, thus removing any evidence of Wallace's anxiety of influence—but also, in a sense, highlighting it by omission.

aesthetics through a review of one particularly admired model. Indeed, the young author's ambition is visible in the time-stamp at the end of "The Empty Plenum," a send-off reminiscent of *Ulysses*: "7. January '90. Pax" (116).

Markson shared the admiration for a Joycean model of fiction implied by this gesture, and both men agreed that this model was in decline amidst what Wallace dubbed "the rabid anti-intellectualism of the contemporary [i.e., late-eighties] fiction scene" (75). In Markson, then, Wallace found a congenial mind, who himself had struggled with the tastemakers of his day, as evidenced by Markson's sarcastic remarks in his essay "Reviewers in Flat Heels" about the "Fundamentalists of the trite" (128), in whose eyes he had "failed" to put enough "sociopolitical-economic import" (125) into his art and had not sufficiently set markers for ironic allusions. Such objections would have sounded familiar to Wallace, who had run into trouble in his writing workshops in Arizona: his brand of deconstructed fiction had found few admirers among a faculty of Iowa-trained realists who believed in the writing workshop orthodoxy that, as Max puts it, "stories should be character-driven; they should have arcs, with moments of crisis ending in epiphanies" (61). Markson's 'anti-novel,' then, appealed to the young writer because it provided him with a model for merging his own predilection for avant-gardism with his former teachers' emphasis on craft. After all, as Laura Sims has pointed out, part of Markson's achievement was to have "design[ed] characters, stories, and fictional worlds as rich and fully engrossing as those found in traditional works," even as he was "pushing the boundaries of the novel form" (59). In Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*, which studies the conditions of institutionalization in postwar creative writing programs, this traditional role of craft is identified with the demand to 'show, don't tell,' an 'old saw' of narratology which simultaneously coincides with a particularly valued affect: "The imperative to 'show, don't tell,'" McGurl writes, is "strongly associated with the disciplining

of the ‘natural’ impulse to express oneself as a self, that is, with the classically modernist value of ‘impersonality’” (23).

A similarly impersonal affect had also empowered the cold objectivity of logical positivism. Thus Wallace grounded his own post-workshop aesthetic in a critique of the scientism of the Vienna Circle, which had migrated from philosophy departments into writing programs, where it threatened, by way of what McGurl has called “the increasingly intimate relation between literary production and the practises of higher education” (ix), the future of contemporary fiction at large: “Rarely is our uncritical inheritance of early Wittgensteinian & Logical Positivist models so obvious,” Wallace writes, “as in our academic & extra-mural prejudice that successful fiction encloses rather than opens up, organizes facts rather than transcends them, diagnoses rather than genuflects” (“Plenum” 106). Although he conflates the two here, the philosophical schism between early Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle over the question of metaphysics actually plays out in the literary schism between realism and experimentalism, too. After all, Wallace’s distrust of the manifestations of logical positivism resembles Wittgenstein’s rejection of the Vienna School ‘explanation’ of his *Tractatus*. For while a thwarted desire to have Kate’s situation be ‘explained’ caused some readers to reject *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, Wallace’s concept of ‘deep nonsense,’ in turn, was more in line with Markson’s own view of the novel as “open-ended,” “opening things up” in a way more consistent with the insinuations of an indirect ‘showing’ than with the direct ‘telling’ of ready-made facts.

This reincarnation of workshop mantra indicates that Wallace did not reject everything he had learned in Arizona. However, he had to make workshop aesthetics his own by injecting it with a dose of philosophy, in particular by replacing the modernist affect of impersonality and putting renewed humanist emphasis on a slightly less sovereign conception of the self. Arguably, this is what Markson’s dramatization of skepticism allowed Wallace to do. To be

sure, his response to Kate's skeptical doubts—which I have interpreted here as a Cavellian practice of 'untying one's tongue' that prefigures the plenitude of Wallace's maximalist fictions—is in some ways the opposite of the 'disciplining' of natural impulses that McGurl identifies with workshop aesthetics. Yet that Wallace also associated the creative reworking of such doubts with "the whole canon of Anglo-American 20th-century lit" ("Iris' Story") implies that he regarded an aesthetic preoccupation with skepticism as unavoidable for writers aspiring to write the kind of "w(ork).o(f).g(enius)" represented, in Wallace's view, by *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. And that even philosophers may have something to learn from the novel is indicated by the fact that the concept of 'deep nonsense,' as a means of showing what cannot directly be told, answers directly to Wallace's call, at the end of his philosophy thesis, for legitimate ways of 'doing metaphysics.' In its insistence on the contingency of individual aesthetic experience, such a metaphysics would no longer be able to do the traditional metaphysical work of *definitively* calming doubts about the nature of reality; but it would relinquish such ambitions confidently, grounded in an awareness that any adherence to certainty as an epistemological ideal may only lead to violence and fundamentalism. It is this "very involved, sophisticated acceptance of human limitation," as Wallace told Michael Silverblatt in 1997, that Markson, in his "magical book," had dramatized as "an autonomous, almost solipsistic self-consciousness" very different from the pathological self-regard of television-trained narcissists Wallace himself critiques in his novel *Infinite Jest*.

We have arrived at a distinction between two types of self-consciousness here that is decisive for Wallace and those among his peers who also try to challenge the disempowering, recursive form of self-consciousness—what Wallace has called "a toxic, raped-by-psychic-Bedouins self-consciousness" to Silverblatt in 2006—that dominates much postmodern thought. In the fourth chapter, I will demonstrate that he comes to associate the other, 'autonomous' form of self-consciousness with Kafka, but my discussion here has already

shown Markson's work to be another likely source for this distinction. Indeed, the "sophisticated acceptance" of our limitations that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* counsels requires that we avoid viewing skepticism as a problem in need of a theoretical solution and rather embrace Cavell's "truth of skepticism" as a diagnostic of our finitude by recognizing that, as creatures made of signs, we are incapable of full fusion as much as of complete detachment. The resulting space for locating the human is what I describe as a position of proximity. Indeed, given the inaccessibility of either point of escape, there is nothing left for us to do but to 'accept' our necessary involvement in our own destinies—the fact that, if we long for rest, it is *we* who have to give philosophy peace; and that, if we want to stay in proximity to 'the Real,' it is *we* who have start questioning again, too. The 'world,' viewed as final arbiter of certainty, cannot do this work by itself. I have demonstrated in this chapter how Kate arrives at a similar revelation of restricted autonomy through the process of mourning for a picture of knowledge that is suggested by modern epistemology.

Arguably, this ambivalent lesson of Markson's novel, which helped define Wallace's own aesthetics, would never be far from his mind. It undergirds what I will call, in the third chapter of this study, Wallace's own brand of 'ironically earnest, earnestly ironic' fiction—though after writing the career-defining *Infinite Jest* the author confessed to Silverblatt that it was still his "dream" "to someday be able to do something like [*Wittgenstein's Mistress*]." And even by the time of his last novel, he seems to have been negotiating issues raised by Markson's book. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in *The Pale King's* lyrical opening, a passage reminiscent of Kate's evocation of the "ten thousand leaves," which serves to indicate Wallace's enduring interest in a Cavellian 'love' of the world in poetry:

Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where untilled fields simmer shrilly in the A.M. heat: [...] Ale-colored sunshine and pale sky and whorls of cirrus so high they cast no shadow. Insects all business all the time. Quartz and chert

and shist and chondrite iron scabs in granite. Very old land. Look around you. The horizon trembling, shapeless. We are all of us brothers.  
[...] The pasture's crows standing at angles, turning up patties to get at the worms underneath, the shapes of the worms incised in the overturned dung and baked by the sun all day until hardened, there to stay, tiny vacant lines in rows and inset curls that do not close because head never quite touches tail. Read these. (3-4)

The novelist Garth Hallberg reads this beautiful passage as an illustration of Wallace's 'are poetica': "an act of long, hard, loving attention," in which we are "called to attention, called out of ourselves" ("Taxes"). Indeed, that something like "single-point concentration," which Wallace has at different times identified as an antidote to detachment,<sup>10</sup> could help with the supposed excesses of postmodern self-consciousness is a commonplace in Wallace Studies. It guides interpretations such as Allan Dulk's reading of Wallace's oeuvre, in which "paying attention," he claims, "means that consciousness is completely 'in' the world, unaware of itself, fully attending to the object of attention" (51).

However, this possibility of complete self-forgetfulness is antithetical to the spirit of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as I have described it here. For that reason, I prefer Stephen J. Burn's suggestion to call the opening of *The Pale King* a "list poem" (15); in its generic shift toward poetry, which has always been concerned with the 'double vision' of a speaker in the process of observing, Burn's observation is surely more in line with the persistence of an "autonomous, almost solipsistic self-consciousness" Wallace took away from Markson's novel—though, quite literally speaking, the word "almost" makes 'a world' of difference here. In fact, the interpellation of the reader at the end of the paragraph indicates this co-presence of world and observing self in the act of poetic evocation: "Read these," the narrator demands, ostensibly figuring nature as something readable and thereby conflating the difference between words and things into the kind of romantic vision that leaves nothing but poetic 'vitality' as an indicator of the self's intimacy with the 'the Real.' Wallace's notion of self-consciousness in this passage, then, avoids the recoil into complete fusion as well as the

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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., *Brief Interviews* #20, and *The Pale King* §24.

enduring ‘loss of the world’ in skeptical detachment on the model of the incomplete circles that, in his own evocative imagery, are baked into the pasture.

Indeed, the poetic gesture of *The Pale King*’s §1, just like the strange poetry of the novel *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* as a whole, contains both impulses, akin to both directions of Cavell’s reading of ‘form of life.’ Thus, it hints at the very position of proximity that is unattainable for any thought which imagines itself as being either fully inside or outside, completely fused or detached. This is a space inhabited by the kind of chiasmus which, unlike the deconstructive chiasmus, does not assert the ‘primacy of the signifier,’ but imagines the uncertain possibility of a vital closeness to things without thereby ignoring its own transcendental conditions of thought—the same possibility I see as a driving force behind the fictions of the Wallace nexus. Interestingly, Thompson reports that Wallace considered attaching the title “Reply to Theory” to what would become *The Pale King*’s opening section (175). Given the nature of his ‘reply,’ then, it is safe to say that he saw an alternative to what Jameson has called theory’s “refusal of plenitude” (*Postmodernism* 253) in a romantic desire that includes both self-consciousness and a paradoxical hope for its redemption, a desire which, as I have indicated in this chapter, owes a profound debt to Markson’s novel.

## 2. Literary Seduction in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*

Cynicism ventures forth with naked truths that, in the way they are presented, contain something false.

—Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*

In the last chapter, I pointed to the productive character of metaphysical boundaries by locating the passion of poetry in our attempts at going ‘beyond’ the metaphysical enclosure in pursuit of what Stevens has called “vitality.” I argued that, though doomed to fall short of their skeptical ambitions, such attempts ultimately make palpable a sense of the unspeakable silence ‘beyond’ words. In this chapter, I now turn to the ethical question of how this desire for a closer relation to otherness plays out in our encounters with other human beings. I discuss this question with regard to Bret Easton Ellis’s controversial novel *American Psycho*, which the critic Naomi Mandel has recently called “a site where the relation between violence and representation can be addressed” (9). Mandel’s assessment indicates the kinship between a narrative ethics, which Adam Zachary Newton defines as “the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader” (11), and an extra-literary morality. Indeed, questions associated with the former—questions of means and ends, of how to solicit acknowledgement and proximity—do not disappear when we put down a book or leave a theater. Arguably, there is perhaps no book that better demonstrates this continuum than *American Psycho*, whose rhetorical strategy resembles the actions of its narrator and protagonist, a Wall Street broker named Patrick Bateman.

I will therefore read the question of ethics, literary or otherwise, in the context of Bateman’s murderous desire for other-validation and acknowledgment. This requires a concern with the pre-conditions of ethical thought, the more fundamental questions of knowing another and knowing oneself upon which any claim to ethics depends. Under the sign of the skeptical picture of knowing I discussed in the last chapter, only forms of possession that fully ‘inhabit’ the other may count as instances of certain knowledge. Now I

address the logic of this act of ‘inhabiting’ in the realm of human relations—an act the novel actively encourages by turning Bateman, as Serpell has observed, into “a vacuum that draws interpretation toward it” (208). As such, I argue that the nothingness, the empty silence, at the heart of the book’s protagonist sets in motion a drive to penetrate Bateman’s surface in order to “understand” that is akin to Bateman’s own murderous desperation to “understand” his victims.

In short, *American Psycho* features a mismatch between literary means and intended ends that, as indicated by Peter Sloterdijk’s epigraph above, has to be considered cynical. There is a deep and abiding value in what I will present as the “naked truth” dramatized by Ellis’s novel—that a desire for other-validation in response to skeptical demands for certainty leads, in the final analysis, to violence against the very other whose validation is therefore, tragically, lost in the attempt at securing it. The way this truth is presented, though, involves a degree of force that manifests in Ellis’s own ‘melodramatic’ rhetoric. And this force causes him, just like the skeptic whose violence proves self-defeating, to finally undercut the overall thrust of his work, which purportedly maneuvers the reader into a place of radical uncertainty and responsibility but applies a rhetorical strategy that runs counter to this ideal of autonomy.

The chapter’s discussion of representational violence, then, addresses a question Simon Critchley has identified as a key concern of any ethics of reading: “How does the ethical relation to the Other enter into the textual economy of betrayal?” (*Ethics* 48). Critchley’s linkage of ‘text’ with ‘betrayal’ here points to the inevitably manipulative dimension of any rhetorical address. In order to show how ethics may intervene in this ‘seductive’ economy, I will turn to a dialogue between Ellis, Wallace, and Smith over the merits of Ellis’s novel. The front lines in this conversation are marked and fortified by an anxiety of resemblance that leads the authors, especially Ellis and Wallace, to overemphasize differences for the purpose of drawing distinctions between often similar literary projects. Still, Wallace and Smith

introduce into the debate a concept of seduction as a form of gift that serves to both define and challenge its other, manipulation. I will end by mapping this distinction between seduction as ‘manipulation’ and seduction as ‘gift’ onto the endings of a range of recent literary novels in order to show how contemporary writers try to achieve the kind of proximate communion—of mutual acknowledgement and collaboration—that becomes possible through the event of fiction.

It would seem to be exactly this kind of communion, however, that has no place in Ellis’s universe. Acknowledgment here only ever manifests as a failure—a refusal, an absence, a desire that cannot be fulfilled in the way it is solicited—each time Bateman violates his victims to elicit a response. To be sure, for the majority of the novel, which shows him torturing and killing scores of prostitutes, homeless people, and colleagues, Bateman is still capable of deluding himself about the underlying psychological mechanism. But this delusion breaks down at the end of the book, when his dependence on other-validation comes to the fore.

He finds himself, one morning, in a taxi cab, at the mercy of a hostile driver, in a “broken scene in what passes for my life” (389). Bateman’s impression of dissociation and brokenness here is apt indeed, for this scene inverts the dynamics of his prior power trips. Feeling “naked, suddenly tiny” in the cab while the driver robs him of his rolex watch and his sunglasses (392), Bateman’s sense of superiority is crushed. “I just want to [...] keep the game going,” he chokes (394), hoping for a continuation of his excesses of shopping and killing that have laid bare what Walter Benn Michaels, in an approving re-reading of the novel, has called “the actual structure of American society” (“Boom”). Accordingly, when Bateman is robbed of the status signifiers that used to shield him in metaphorical and literal ways, what he grasps for is the most abstracted form of power: “I am rich,” he calms himself, “millions are not” (392). But this appeal, too, fails, rebutting the notion that an impressive

account balance could replace validation by an actual human being; for after stumbling out of the cab, Bateman has a startling encounter:

As I stand, frozen in position, an old woman emerges behind a *Threepenny Opera* poster at a deserted bus stop and she's homeless and begging, hobbling over, her face covered with sores that look like bugs, holding out a shaking red hand. 'Oh will you please go away?' I sigh. She tells me to get a haircut. (394)

The homeless woman is doubly removed from Bateman, different in both class and gender. But even she, who in Bateman's world occupies the lowest rung of the ladder, refuses to acknowledge him as her superior, indeed insults his sense of vanity and ruptures the impeccable facade of expensive hair cuts and designer clothes he has held up as a sign of prestige. This is utterly devastating to a man whose self is reflected back to him rather than experienced inwardly.

Ellis's allusions in this scene are manifold: the working class poor have come to take symbolic revenge on their class enemy; the female body, a common allegory for nature in general and for communism in particular, contrasts with Bateman's commodified appearance; the state of affairs has been reversed for a brief moment in what may seem like a communist utopia in a distorted mirror. These evocations are framed by a reference to the Marxist writer Bertolt Brecht, in whose work depictions of the industrial working class and its oppression by capitalists predominate. That the old woman "emerges behind a *Threepenny Opera* poster," then, is no accident, in particular in a novel which, as Claudia Heuer has demonstrated (175-6), clues readers into its politico-aesthetic intentions by way of an elaborate system of intertextual references.<sup>1</sup>

The valorization of appearance over interiority; the suppression of emotion as 'weak' and 'feminine'; a cult of detachment paradoxically coupled with a desire for public recognition; and a predilection for authoritarianism as well as a contempt for liberalism—these are the

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<sup>1</sup> I read the appearance of the Brechtian woman at a pivotal moment in the story of Bateman's decline along similar lines, as clueing readers in to Ellis's Brechtian strategies of distancing and estrangement. Heuer mentions the allusion to Brecht's work (177) but leaves room for further exploration, in particular regarding its ramifications for Ellis's narrative technique.

characteristics of a view of life that predominated in the classical German modernity of Brecht's time. They are also eerily reminiscent of the postmodern world of *American Psycho*. The figure of the Brechtian woman, then, suggests a historical precedent for 1980s America: the 1920s-30s of the Weimar Republic, on the eve of the fascist take-over. This connection was not lost on Ellis's contemporaries. Indeed, as Jeffrey Severs has noted in a reading of David Foster Wallace's early work through the prism of the 1930s, in the late 1980s such an "equation" of the "two eras" was "a topic debated in the media" (62). For the purposes of this chapter, it is notable that this "equation" further highlights the fragile pretense of civility that separates liberal democracies from totalitarian states.

This troubling continuum has been brought into the public consciousness again with the recent rise of authoritarianism in the United States that culminated in the 2016 election of 1980s icon Donald J. Trump for president. Incidentally, Trump is a household name in *American Psycho* and Bateman's obsession with Trump as an aspirational figure annoys even his fiancée: "Not Donald Trump again," she complains at one point, "Is that why you were acting like such a buffoon? This obsession has got to end!" (194). At another point, Trump is called Bateman's "hero" (109), and he confirms this by recommending Trump's faux memoir *The Art of the Deal* as a "very good" book (276) and calling Trump "a nice guy" (227). Overall, the name 'Trump' appears in the book thirty times, almost as often as other 1980s brand names and status signifiers such as San Pellegrino bottles and Armani suits. At a time when the object of Bateman's admiration has become the president of the United States, making it safe to assume that the Trump brand of cynicism has reached the mainstream of postmodern US culture, there is renewed urgency in understanding the roots of a kind of thinking that, arguably in both Bateman and Trump, tries to hide a pathological dependence on other-validation under desperate projections of confidence and strength.

In pursuing this project, the present chapter revolves around a genealogy that sees a precursor for Ellisian postmodernism in Brechtian modernism. To point out continuities and shared concerns between these two artists' respective aesthetics, of course, runs counter to the popular conception of a fundamental difference between modernism and postmodernism that Fredric Jameson, for one, has presented in his study on postmodernism. Here, Jameson associates high modernism with a "whole metaphysics of inside and outside" that leads to an "aesthetic of expression" in which the subject's hidden emotion is "projected and externalized" (11); in "the world of the postmodern," by contrast, metaphysical "depth is replaced by surface" (12), Jameson explains, which means, in turn, that the modern metaphysics of expression have "vanished" (11). However, it is one of my objectives in this chapter to show that skepticism, and along with it the specter of existential isolation, returns not only in Bateman's crimes, but even in the 'melodramatic' rhetoric Ellis musters to dramatize them. *Pace* Jameson, then, I contend that, rather than their disappearance, the postmodern era experiences an intensification of questions around the knowability and communicability of human interiority.

There is another reason for doubting the veracity of Jameson's schematic summary: the emphasis on surface associated here with postmodernism is already present in a modernist like Brecht, who advanced a "crude thinking" that values only the kind of materialism which makes do without any metaphysical assumptions.<sup>2</sup> In the development of these aesthetics, Brecht, a post-war émigré to the US like the Vienna Circle philosophers I discussed in the last chapter, found inspiration in the scientism of logical positivism. Indeed, as Ulrich Sautter has demonstrated, Brecht studied key publications by members of the Vienna Circle closely and saw them as a guide for his own revolutionary aesthetics, postulating an isomorphism

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<sup>2</sup> To be fair to Jameson, he seems to have recognized Brecht's ambiguous status later, even devoting a whole study to him in 1998. I draw extensively from this book, *Brecht and Method*, in which Jameson stops short of calling Brecht 'postmodern' but nevertheless underwrites my genealogy by arguing that "Brecht's work centrally feeds the cultural stream which leads to the widespread acceptance of [anti-foundationalism and anti-essentialism] today" (174).

between art and empirical science. As a result, his friend Walter Benjamin wrote at the time, Brecht approached the art of writing like an “engineer” who conceives of his efforts in technical terms, not as constituting a “work,” but “an apparatus, an instrument” for breaking up metaphysical assumptions of permanence and presence.

The common denominator between the Viennese philosophers’ strictly scientific world view and Brecht’s Marxist ideology, then, was a commitment to anti-metaphysics. I have noted previously that the logical positivists regarded the reifications of metaphysics, concepts such as ‘world’ or ‘self,’ as ‘nonsense’ insinuated by the predicative logic of human thought. Brecht, in turn, detected a similar metaphysical tendency to reify imagined entities in art, for instance in the static relationships and deterministic plots of classical tragedy. The propositions of art, he reasoned, had lost contact with empirical reality and, as such, were merely tautological—a positivistic critique not unlike the forbidding binary choice Cavell would face in the confrontation with his professor’s TA a few decades later.

This critique of metaphysics, however, was not only prevalent among the vanguard of philosophical thought; it was a ferment in 1920s culture at large. Friedrich Nietzsche had begun the process of disenchantment decades before with a devastating critique of Christianity that relegated ideas such as conscience and duty to the status of metaphysical chimera implicated in a suppression of the passions. Christian inwardness, Nietzsche concluded, was nothing more than the expression of a slave morality that, having lost the material struggle for dominance, took revenge by projecting a realm of the unseen where good deeds were rewarded, bad ones punished. The slaughter of World War One further eroded people’s faith in such metaphysics. After scores of millions had died in the trenches, “the heavens of metaphysics,” as the critic Helmut Lethen would write later, were “cold and empty” (52).

With this dismissal of metaphysics, however, came a crisis in psychology: in the absence of interiority, how was it possible to establish an identity? In fact, for a self that has no depth in which to find its essence, the only point of orientation is the other person, the fellow human being. Personality thus became ‘persona’—a term that has its etymological roots in the masks projected by actors in ancient Greek theater to denote a social role. Performing this role to the eyes of others, a modern-day persona could find itself by reading their perceptions and validating responses. What Nietzsche introduced, then, was a turn to other-direction, and with it a promise of autonomy from the traditional institutions that had regulated human behavior in the guilt culture of Christian religion.

This call for viewing subjectivity as constituted by an interpersonal process that draws validation from the eyes of the other became the rallying cry of an art movement in Germany’s Weimar years that called itself the ‘new objectivity’ [*Neue Sachlichkeit*]. Its members departed radically from ideas about human nature that had predominated in German expressionism, a school of thought that preceded the new objectivity and to which the latter was firmly opposed. Indeed, the new objectivity world of pure appearance was the exact opposite of the anti-realism shared by practitioners of expressionism, who emphasized the pain and suffering of the human under the sign of vulnerable creature. For new objectivity thinkers, such emotional turmoil was a continuation of the Lutheran valorization of interiority, and they counterposed a robust behaviorism that redefined all inner metaphysical entities as observable behaviour. In 1920s Weimar, then, as Lethen observes, “[t]he category of expression, as a form of inner experience, undergoes a dramatic devaluation” (74).

New objectivity thinkers like Brecht were enchanted by this promise. The absence of depth was greeted as liberating, sweeping away what they saw as the stifling Christian concept of an internalized conscience. They embraced the Nietzschean play of masks, with no homunculus lurking behind, over the inward torments of the guilt personality. “In new

objectivity's images," Lethen summarizes this turn to behaviorism, "individuals are no more than motor-machines, feelings are mere motor reflexes, and character is a matter of what mask is put on" (12). For a Marxist like Brecht, this rejection of metaphysics held a revolutionary potential if the human persona was able to flexibly project whatever kind of behavior was required politically. Once the firm rooting in character and conscience had been abandoned, the persona's ability to adapt to the increasing pace of modernization increased. This mobility, however, had to be trained; the structures, institutional as well as psychological, of centuries of Christianization were not cast out overnight. Arguably, the works Brecht wrote in the Weimar years may be seen as training grounds for such distance and mobility.

Brecht's 1926 poem cycle "Reader for Those Who Live in Cities" is an example of a code for modern urbanites that stresses this kind of training through a chorus of voices that give advice like "Cover your tracks" and "Pass [your parents] like strangers, turn the corner, don't recognize them." Behavioral codes also dominate Bateman's 1980s New York, a world that has "rules" even for "a sweater vest" (153). Every detail of Bateman's life, from the suits he wears over the gadgets he acquires to the restaurants he frequents, is governed by a strict system of regulations upheld by the members of his class. In fact, it is this emphasis on social rules that makes Ellis's book, according to Michaels's study *The Shape of the Signifier*, "the novel of manners (rather than mores) it declares itself (beginning with the epigraph from Judith Martin) to be" (150).

The epigraph by the etiquette authority Miss Manners that Michaels refers to here revolves around the 'civilizing' power of codes of conduct; ironically, this is fully in line with Bateman's murderous thinking—in one moment, convinced that he has the manners of civil society on his side, Bateman explicitly mocks the idea that his crimes could make him "the opposite of civilization" (208). The Martin epigraph, then, suggests once more a

continuation of concerns between modernism and postmodernism; indeed, in Martin's words the ideological differences between new objectivity thinking and expressionism recur in the juxtaposition of a 1980s ethos of 'civilization'—"doing it in a mannerly [...] way"—with the corrupting influences of an unchecked expressivity that is associated with "the naturalistic Rousseauian movement of the Sixties" (1).

This genealogy is further strengthened by Ellis's inclusion of another epigraph in *American Psycho*, a song lyric by the 1980s band Talking Heads: "And as things fell apart," this epigraph reads, "Nobody paid much attention" (1). Half of the lyric is lifted from William Butler Yeats's "The Second Coming," a poem that is contemporaneous with the new objectivity movement and its post-war context. In fact, Ellis's explicit, albeit ironic, references to modernist art here indicate, beyond all differences of periodization, that a concern with the role of the individual facing modernization—an ambiguous process which tends toward the destruction of traditional values as it promises liberation—does not break down neatly along the lines of the modern and the postmodern. Rather, as I argue in this study, the conflict between surface and depth, materialism and metaphysics, is a productive force behind both movements, driving aesthetic innovation in mutual attempts at overcoming. Lethen makes the parallel explicit: "The new objectivity generation identified an 'other-directed' figure and accorded it the potential for autonomy," he writes: "We recognize it today in the postmodern type" (185).

### **The Postmodern Type**

By 1991, this type had reached the US mainstream, and an author like Ellis still felt compelled to ask after the survival of the human under conditions of modernization. In doing so, he employed images that recall one of the most iconic modernist tropes of alienation: Brecht had portrayed his mobile city dweller as something of a nomadic figure—isolated in

cityscapes, ducking away from familiar faces, struggling for survival under harsh conditions without recourse to rest or roots. This was itself an urbanized rendition of Nietzsche's image for the modern individual after the death of God—the nihilistic nomad who bears all responsibility for humanity, trudging through a world that has become, in Nietzsche's 1884 poem "The Free Spirit," "a thousand wastelands silent and cold." A century later, Ellis would resort to a similar desert imagery in illustrating the inner afflictions of his postmodern characters.

The teenage protagonists of Ellis's 1985 debut novel *Less Than Zero*, for instance, drive through the desert around Palm Springs with the car stereo turned up to drown out the silence outside; and Clay, the novel's narrator, stumbles through the blackness of the desert until an existential dread overcomes him at images of emptiness and void: "The darkness, the wind, the rustling from the hedges, the empty cigarette box lying on the driveway all had an eerie effect on me and I ran inside and turned all the lights on" (138). This identification of the silent desert with a void of meaning that is antithetical to life gets carried over into *American Psycho*; unlike Clay, however, Bateman no longer tries to escape the implications of this vision, having accepted the conclusion that the true desert, the true void at the heart of things, is inescapable:

... where there was nature and earth, life and water, I saw a desert landscape that was unending, resembling some sort of crater, so devoid of reason and light and spirit that the mind could not grasp it on any sort of conscious level [...]. This was the geography around which my reality revolved: [...] Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in. (374-5)

The "crater" of this landscape, though gesturing at depth, is "devoid" of "spirit," leaving only "surface" as the last remaining locus for value and meaning—a view of things Ellis associates with large swaths of contemporary society: "I think we're a society that totally believes the surface," he told Charlie Rose in 1994, giving expression to the detachment often associated with postmodern culture, "and we want to believe the surface and we find truth in

surfaces.” In this radicalization of new objectivity thinking, which still grows out of similar philosophical assumptions, any appeal to interiority or inner being comes to seem misguided when confronted with the depthless materiality of Bateman’s “geography.”

Consequently, Bateman sees nothing but surface in the women he meets, either: he has a dream involving women made of cardboard (200); and one prostitute he sleeps with is described as “only a shape” (213), while another becomes attractive to him only as he glimpses the letters “MEAT” at a warehouse behind her (168). These descriptions culminate in a particularly stark degradation of another human being in both word and deed that echoes surface models of subjectivity and images of the nullity of existence, when Bateman literally butchers an anonymous woman and a sudden wave of self-reproach rises in him: “though it does sporadically penetrate how unacceptable some of what I’m doing actually is,” he reports, “I just remind myself that this thing, this girl, this meat, is nothing, is shit” (345). What this passage also demonstrates, however, is that behind Bateman’s depravity lies a discourse, a materialist way of framing the human being as soulless matter, that overrides the moral inclinations of the guilt personality.

In 1920s Weimar, this personality and its emphasis on inward questioning had been replaced by a shame culture in which, as the philosopher Agnes Heller has observed, “the authority is social custom (rituals, habits, codes or schedules of behaviour)” that are intended to minimize public exposure (215). The eyes of the other person and her gestures became central; disapproval and correction were out in the open for everyone to see. This reliance on the public sphere, however, brought a fear of the other as conduit of shame and exclusion. The human being was in constant fear of being abandoned, cast out of the ‘civilizing’ circle of mannered society. And the site where this struggle between physical impulse and adherence to behavioral norms played out chiefly was the body.

In spite of their pure emphasis on materiality, then, there is a paradoxical fear of the body and its spontaneous expressions among the members of the new objectivity, whose pervasive self-monitoring testifies to a paranoia about sudden displays of emotion and to a deep anxiety about their own animal nature. After all, for those who regard the very idea of expressivity as ridiculous and somehow undignified, their own embodiedness is a constant source of unease—something to be suppressed and controlled, hidden under an armored façade that betrays nothing but what it allows to leak outside. Drawing a boundary to otherness thus becomes a simple matter of survival under the eyes of society as an all-seeing manifestation of the Freudian superego. The price to pay for such self-control, however, whether in the Weimar years or in 1980s America, is a state of constant alert, the hyper-vigilance of the neurotic urbanite.

The psychoanalytic register employed here is no coincidence. In fact, psychoanalysis offers a concept that can explain the status of those others Bateman destroys. In her study *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva introduces the term ‘abjection’ for the psychological process of expelling whatever cannot be accommodated by the ‘symbolic order’—filth as impure matter, the corpse as a trace of death, and, to follow up on Bateman’s words, even women and animals as reminders of the male subject’s repressed physicality. Bateman is not merely reducing them to objects, he is expelling them as abject, reducing them precisely to “shit”—the expelled substance that consolidates and sustains the subject. In Kristeva, the roots of this process reach back to a primal moment of psychosexual development, when the subject is being instituted by establishing his boundary to the animal and the ‘uncivilized’: “Even before things for him *are*,” Kristeva writes, “he drives them out, dominated by drive as he is, and constitutes his own territory, edged by the abject” (6). For the narcissist, however, this primal repression has to be repeated compulsively for the maintenance of his boundaries, over and over again.

Bateman fits this mould seamlessly: “You need a tough skin to survive in this city,” he recommends to his secretary (262), a reaction to the threatened breakdown of his boundaries to the abjected other. In turn, any sign of animality in humans fills him with contempt and inspires a sadistic response. A homeless man and his dog, for instance, both seem like “pathetic” creatures to Bateman (128), with the man “crying hard” and his dog, a “thing called Gizmo,” “whimpering” (130); consequently, when the man “looks away, shamefully” (129), Bateman is reminded of the possibility of his own shame; the grotesque “tableau” of violence that ensues (132), with Bateman blinding the man and breaking the dog’s legs, then, is a physical manifestation of the yuppie’s desire to deny even the slightest hint of any commonality between him and the beggar—a desire expressed by the words, “I don’t have anything in common with you” (131).

The same logic plays out in his sexual escapades with various prostitutes. Not only does Bateman view the women as dogs, he positions them in such a way that ensures they look canine, too; through his gaze he perceives them as “animals,” who are “bucking,” “humping,” and “grunting”, while Bateman is detached, affectless, speaking “in monotone” only (288-9). And, as in the case of the homeless man, once Bateman has demonstrated to himself the women’s creatureliness in their lack of control and involuntary bodily expression, he kills them violently, thus trying to kill off the creature in him, too. It is no coincidence, then, that “a phrase that fills [Bateman] with a nameless dread” is “isolated farmhouse” (383). The images of rural solitude it evokes connote Bateman’s own dreaded animality and the loneliness he fears upon being found out a creature, thus making this random phrase a window into Bateman’s deepest anxieties.

To be sure, violence like Bateman’s is a surreal radicalization of the kind of materialism propagated in Weimar Germany. However, there is a logic at play in the most avant-garde thought of the time that draws a strict boundary between the ‘civilized’ human and the

‘ridiculous’ creature in a way not unlike Bateman’s desperate need to separate himself from his animal nature. Arguably, then, the ‘cool conduct’ of new objectivity thinking, which suppresses affect for fear of public exposure, is still pervasive in postmodern society. And Ellis, as one of its most famous chroniclers, shows how a well-intentioned emphasis on “the right for spheres of mistrust” (Lethen x) degenerates into a comportment toward otherness that leads to existential isolation, and even murder, if the subject cannot manage his own fear of shame and exclusion. The narrator of Ellis’s *Less Than Zero*, for example, is obsessed with a phrase he hears upon coming back to LA: “People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles” (9). Connoting more than just traffic regulations, the sentence speaks volumes about the prevalence of disconnection in a shame culture that places value only on appearance. In the next section, I show how both a modernist like Brecht and a postmodernist like Ellis employ ironic distanciation in order to critique such a society of detachment. Their investment in irony, however, will turn out to be ambivalent: for one, the value they place on ironic distance indicates once more why the restricted autonomy of human agency under the sign of proximity that I aim to contribute to a reconstituted humanism has to retain a modicum of distance, too; at the same time, though, I argue that the reception of Brechtian theater and Ellis’s novels points to the limits of such distanced critique in a culture that is itself defined by affective distance.

### **Irony and Authenticity**

Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, a book of philosophy that was coeval with the new objectivity, has a category that can help explain the distrust Ellis portrays as an outcome of the “idle talk” (§35) and “curiosity” (§36) that preoccupies Dasein in its most conformist mode, i.e., in subservience to whatever it is the one [*das Man*] says. The German existentialist is close in spirit here to the critique of abstraction I have detected in postmodernists such as DeLillo and

Pynchon. Indeed, Heidegger's desire to return to the human being in its facticity is expressly opposed to an abstract mode of thought that foregoes concrete engagement in favor of the unquestioned clichés of the public sphere. The individual seeking orientation through these clichés is confronted with an all-pervasive "ambiguity" that, as Heidegger argues, prevents her from being able to decide whether something is authentic or not (§37). This is the flipside of the new objectivity reliance on codes of conduct: a person acting in line with established codes could give off an impression of authenticity without there being anything 'behind' her character mask that would validate such an impression; consequently, Heidegger points out, human interaction under the sign of idle talk is characterized by distrust and disconnection.

Incidentally, these are also the most common traits of people in Ellis's fictional universe. "Humans," as Michaels summarizes Bateman's view of others, "lie 'easily and often,' so they can't 'trust one another'" (70). It is not difficult to see that something like Bateman's fear of shame and exclusion is an emotional catalyst for this process, which in *Being and Time* is described as "a tense, ambiguous keeping track of each other, a secretive, reciprocal listening-in" (168). As I have demonstrated in the last chapter, Heidegger's way out of such ambiguity was to regard as authentic only an existence that frames everyday life under the sign of one's own death, solemnly falling silent at the thought of individual extinction as the highest reality in anxiety. All ambiguity, this line of thinking goes, is shattered at the idea of the end of one's own world, which is undeniable and hence necessarily authentic.

What Heidegger overlooked in his pathos of anxiety, however, is a third option, between new objectivity conventionality and existentialist authenticity. While the former would see us absorbed into conformity, subsumed into its categories without the remainder of a critical distance, the latter would seek a distance from public life that is too great for us to remain attached to anything but our own death. By contrast, Brecht's work has the critique of conformity, too, but it does not seek the idea of death to solve it; rather, it doubles down on

ambiguity through the use of a purposively applied ambiguity—irony. In the “Reader for Those Who Live in Cities,” for instance, which is a simulation of the conformist voices of Weimar society, the ironic use of common expressions allows Brecht to ‘actually,’ or ‘authentically,’ communicate across the mask-like character of conventionality, thus affording possibilities for understanding in public that Heidegger does not consider. This becomes most obvious at the end of each poem of the cycle, when a parenthetical line such as “(This is what they taught me)” creates an ironic gap between the voices that have uttered the preceding behavioral codes and a remote voice that listens in to the chorus.<sup>3</sup>

In the way it shows how individual selves are absorbed into society for the purpose of mobility, then, Brecht’s “Reader” is an almost existentialist indictment of conformity. However, the Brechtian irony here is complex, depriving even this anti-conformist reading of its foundation in a secure self of critique. At one point, an elderly working class woman, not unlike the Brechtian woman Bateman encounters when he hits rock bottom, speculates that her complete identification with social norms by literally becoming “The hard mortar with which/ Cities are built” will be empowering: “I’m/ inevitable,” she announces, “the race of the future.” The poem cycle, in turn, mimics this process of self-dissolution by inhabiting various voices until the difference between an authentic subjective voice and the various conformist voices is no longer recognizable. Given this essential ambiguity, it is not surprising that, as Lethen points out, critical analyses of Brecht’s “Reader” have alternated between the extremes of the Kantian “armoured self” and a posthumanist “unbounded self” (136).<sup>4</sup> In fact, the text seems to parody all conceptions of a subject of resistance that could

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<sup>3</sup> Sloterdijk, for one, seems to concur with this way of reframing authenticity beyond a solipsistic consciousness of one’s own death: “‘Authenticity,’” he writes, “if the expression is to have any meaning at all, is experienced by us rather in love and sexual intoxication, *in irony and laughter*, creativity and responsibility, meditation and ecstasy” (207; my emphasis).

<sup>4</sup> In Brecht, we encounter a self-conscious dramatization of how to ground a practice of irony without assuming the existence of an essential, stable subject—an assumption that Nietzsche’s theory of masks had cast out along with the strictures of subject philosophy and its reliance on theological entities. In the next chapter, a similar consideration of the self’s necessary implication in public norms, as well as a desire to exceed them, will recur in my discussion of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. Needless to say, then, that critical readings of

escape the pull of conformity, in the end altogether undermining the idea of a self that is distinct from the public sphere. Along with this discarded notion of a core subjectivity, however, the basis for any rhetorical irony is thrown out, as well.

The view of irony in *American Psycho* is just as ambiguous as in Brecht's "Reader." On the one hand, Bateman's *lack* of ironic distance leads him to literalize the violence inherent in the codes surrounding him. Indeed, Bateman lacks any critical remainder that would let him stand outside the norms of his time and place; he is fully absorbed into the immediacy of what Jameson has called "the world of the postmodern" (*Postmodernism* 11). In fact, his congruence with the hegemonic rules of 1980s New York is so complete that he has "no patience for revelations, for new beginnings, for events that take place beyond the realm of [his] immediate vision" (241). Bateman's eruptions of violence, then, literalize the violence that is latent in what Serpell calls the "masculinist discursive world of Wall Street" in which "sexual violence signifies as humor" (206). In a way, Bateman takes these discourses *too* seriously; while his male colleagues casually joke about sexual prowess, Bateman makes their tasteless banter about "driv[ing] a lead pipe repeatedly into a girl's vagina" a horrific reality (325). Indirectly, then, the very absence of irony in a character like Bateman—his inability to successfully participate in the playful tit-for-tat that is ubiquitous in the cynical world of Wall Street brokers—indicates a potential role for this trope as a medium of critique.

This is certainly true for the reader, who, on the receiving end of Bateman's narrative, can find a remainder of critical distance through irony, too. Bateman's conformism coupled with his deluded claim to uniqueness, for instance, is a prime occasion for the occurrence of ironic

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Wallace's novel mirror those of Brecht's "Reader" in running the gamut from a reactionary emphasis on foundational virtues to a poststructuralist sense of self as constituted by affective flows and semiotic play. In response, I will develop a concept of irony that takes into account the insight that, in the words of the poet Bruce Bond, "the 'self' is too blurry to constitute a bounded phenomenon" (15), without dismissing any aspirations to critical agency in the process. This kind of proximate irony, which may better be described as philosophical than as rhetorical, does not require a foundational self or a clear agenda, but is based on an immanent experience of incongruence between the conditions for excellence available in the public sphere and a transcendent sense that all these categories fall short of true human excellence.

incongruity, and so is his bad taste in terms of fashion and music choices. Furthermore, the novel sets up various occasions for complicity with the reader that follow the complex inside-outside logic of ironic communication, for instance when an arrogant stock broker mistakes Faulkner for Hemingway (34) or Iran for Spain (53). These are authorial winks to the reader, encouraging her to follow Ellis in mocking such uncultured ignorance. The same goes for the many puns that are strewn throughout the text, such as Bateman replacing “mergers and acquisitions” with “murders and executions” in casual conversation (206). “Only Bateman and the reader,” Serpell writes, “are privy to these jokes” (206). At some point, however, a reader laughing along with Ellis will ask herself how different this kind of mockery is from the way some of the most despicable characters in the novel make fun of others. Both kinds of mockery revolve around a similar sense of superiority; both involve adherence to codes of behavior that divide people into in- and out-groups.

While ostensibly a saving grace, then, ironic distance is also a cornerstone of a society whose members are so detached from each other that they pay no attention to the murderous consequences of their life-styles as embodied by Bateman. Thus Ellis’s irony allows for a degree of separation from the world-view it ironizes only to come back to haunt a complacent reader with the prospect of her own complicity. As such, this use of the trope does not allow for stable ironies that would clearly indicate the direction of their criticism. Rather, the text’s ambiguities ensure that the text is both complicit with and critical of Bateman, leaving it up to the reader to figure this out. It is in this sense, then, that “*American Psycho*,” as Serpell argues, “turns ethics back on us” (218).

This was the same in Brecht’s theater, to which I will now turn in order to demonstrate further continuities between the use of irony in modernism and postmodernism. Indeed, as indicated earlier, Brechtian irony is more wide-ranging and slippery than its rhetorical kind as *simulatio*; as such, it is not attached to any clearly defined propositions. In this sense, then,

Brecht's plays are not merely satires, partaking in the time-honored tradition of critiquing established norms in favor of an alternative that is always somehow visible through the derision and mockery. Rather, as Jameson explains in his reconstruction of Brechtian theatre for a postmodernist age, irony is "a property of Brecht's own *Weltanschauung* (if he has one), or at the very least a feature of theatrical demonstrations as such" (21). What Jameson indicates here, then, is that Brecht's theatrical practice takes on features of the aporetic method as I have introduced it previously: as a way of driving thought off established tracks, a possibility of becoming truly other. And the goal, as for all those thinkers who see value in a gesturing 'beyond' the metaphysical enclosure of established categories of thought, is a transformation of ways of seeing wherein "something new and as yet unnamed," Jameson notes, "may emerge from the lexicon of the already classified" (51).

In the 1948 treatise *Short Organon for the Theatre*, for instance, Brecht proposes a reconsideration of seemingly inevitable social situations by propelling their inherent contradictions to a breaking point. Thus he turns to *Hamlet*, by the "great Shakespeare" (12), to bring into view the "contradiction" between readings of the play as a humanist struggle between various psychological instances or as a materialist conflict between different modes of production (39-40). Notably, Brecht does not argue for either reading. He leaves it up to his readers to come up with a "moral." Similarly, the point of his 'theatrical demonstrations' is to turn agency over to the audience, empowering them into autonomy.

Ellis, too, conceives of the writer's task as driving toward a contradiction and leaving it up to his recipients how to resolve it. The silent void beyond words is a case in point; it fascinates him as much as it does other postmodernists like Pynchon and DeLillo. Owing to his favored milieu among coastal neo-nihilists and trustfund babies on both sides of the US, however, Ellis focuses more on the horror of emptiness that lurks under the affectless surface of the lives these characters have established for themselves: "I find that writing about people

who don't [have any guiding passions in their lives] is very interesting," he tells Charlie Rose in 1994: "For some reason, that void fascinates me. And I keep wondering why it's not filled." But this is also where Ellis leaves the issue, with fascination and wonder at the void, avoiding straightforward judgments about how to fill the blankness that enshrouds his fictional universe. "The answer," he asserts to Rose, echoing positions that prefer artistic engagement to a discursive resolution of the aporia, "ends up being the book. [...] And it's up to a reader I think to really sort of decide."

This is precisely the "new beginning" for which Bateman has no patience. In this sense, he would have been an interesting target for Brecht's plays, although his misreading of another revolutionary text, Hugo's *Les Misérables*, casts doubt upon this tantalizing prospect of the reeducation of a cynical stock broker by Marxist theater.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it was precisely Brecht's aim to break the kind of placid immersion in established conceptual spaces that is revealed by Bateman's thought. As such, Brecht regarded both the kind of *catharsis* characteristic of Aristotle's poetics and Wagner's concept of the total work of art [*Gesamtkunstwerk*] as escapist and ideological. Both these influential stage traditions cleared affect through imaginative identification in the music hall or theatre, he argued, so that any impulse for empathy in daily life was no longer powerful enough to turn its agent towards the real social situation. Indeed, the kind of ideology he saw at work in these entertainments was structural, confining spectators to the passivity of the auditorium, while the reality of society played out on the stage, unalterably, so it would seem, like the course of history or the reifications of metaphysics.

For the purpose of returning spectators to the center of events, to recreate a sense of agency amidst their habitual modes of response, Brecht devised a range of modernist methods, most prominently the 'estrangement effect' [*Verfremdungseffekt*], which he

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<sup>5</sup> Heuer points out, for instance, that Bateman mistakes the female figure on the poster advertising the musical version of the novel for Eponine, while it is actually an image of her rival Cossette (176).

developed in the 1930s under the influence of Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky's concept of 'estrangement device' [*ostranenie*]. V-effects are intended to make spectators look at the familiar with new eyes, to dissolve what Jameson has called a kind of "perceptual numbness" associated with Heidegger's 'Man' (39). This is once more of a piece with the aporetic method: in gesturing past established limits of thought, V-effects are supposed to make spectators marvel again and create wonder where there is cynicism and hopelessness. For Brecht, this had a distinctly revolutionary dimension: from the newly established distance of contemplation, he thought, spectators would regard their situation in historical rather than metaphysical terms and clearly see the possibilities for social upheaval inherent in it. In the process, Brecht also revolutionized the available repertoire of theatrical techniques. In Brecht's plays, immersive experiences were shut down, and the creation of empathy was disrupted deliberately, through practices such as quotation, in which actors speak their lines as though they are between quotation marks, and third-person acting, which marks itself as ventriloquistic rather than naturalistic.

There is a structural similarity between irony and V-effects here that shows the importance of such distancing techniques for critique. In a sense, both ironic and theatrical speech resist, in very similar ways, assimilation into ordinary language. Irony, as I have presented it, avoids our complete absorption into conformity because it keeps the question of commitment to the content of one's utterance open. Similarly, the actor playing Hamlet does not *become* Shakespeare's character but rather plays the role, thus also keeping a distance, however small, to the identity that is being performed on stage. This dynamic, which is latent in all acting, is heightened to the status of a theatrical technique in the Brechtian practices of quotation and third-person acting.

To be sure, I have argued for a continuity between Brecht's and Ellis's use of estrangement effects irrespective of generic differences between their works. That Brechtian

defamiliarization is possible even beyond the stage, however, is indicated by a parallel for novelistic techniques that Jameson finds in an essay Jean-Paul Sartre wrote on the American modernist John Dos Passos. “Sartre manages,” in Jameson’s estimation, “to tease out Dos Passos’s mechanism: he is writing first-person narrative in the third person—that is to say, he is doing in his prose what Brecht recommended to his actors” (56). Explicitly identifying it in the essay with “the abject consciousness of [...] what Heidegger calls ‘das Mann’ [sic]” (“1919” 100), Sartre views the resulting third-person narrative as deliberately inauthentic and praises Dos Passos’s U.S.A trilogy, which casts ordinary American life in the language of journalism and news reels, for breaking up illusory boundaries between freedom and determinism, between a view of the human as agent or as pawn in the game of history. What Sartre’s reading of this key modernist practice highlights, then, is this: the point of artistic distancing, for example through a shift between the first and third person in acting or writing, is self-understanding.

Beyond these instances of defamiliarization in key modernists, Ellis’s postmodernist art makes use of V-effects, too. Indeed, his graphic depictions of sexualized violence in *American Psycho* fit Jameson’s description of V-effects as breaking up the ‘perceptual numbness’ of conformist thinking by shocking the reader out of her accustomed response patterns. Given the structural similarity between irony and estrangement techniques indicated earlier, then, it is not surprising that, once again, Bateman’s response is antithetical to the reader’s. Just like Bateman cannot understand his peers’ ironically distanced commentary—and thus lacks the very sense of irony that allows a reader to perceive the book’s lauded social commentary—he, who is fully absorbed into conformity, also seems to be unable to endure the kind of self-understanding afforded by the distance of defamiliarization. This is dramatized in a brilliant scene leading up to his lowest moment, the encounter with the Brechtian woman at the deserted bus stop.

In the corresponding chapter (“Chase, Manhattan”), surrealistic violence alternates with a parenthetical voice of conformity reminiscent of Brecht’s “Reader,” until the text suddenly, soberly, states that “Patrick’s mind is out of synch” (351), cast from the intimacy of the first into the distance of the third person, where a narrative consciousness observes the frantic movements of this ‘object,’ this “Patrick,” on the run from police. “Patrick” escapes into “what he thinks is his building” until “he realizes *wrong fucking building*.” Finally, after gunning down a night watchman, “Patrick” runs over to his actual office building, where, in the “anonymity of *my* new office” (352; my emphasis), the voice shifts back to Bateman’s first-person narrative because “calm is eventually restored” (352). I would argue that this sequence can profitably be read as making use of a kind of Brechtian estrangement effect, with its perspectival shift to the third person that affords an experience of the outside, of otherness.

On stage, the actor models this by creating the attitude of someone who wonders about his own character from a position of distance. Bateman briefly attains this perspective, too; but his response is a panic that indicates the pressures of the outside world with its systems of judgment that he, who neurotically attempts to master these systems in every waking minute, cannot confront directly. In other words, making himself vulnerable in proximity to otherness causes Bateman’s guarded subjectivity to collapse. This is marked, on a formal level, not only by the shift to the third person, but also by recurring ellipses as textual indicators of his ‘blackouts.’ On a metaphorical level, his dissociative episode coincides with Bateman’s movement between two seemingly identical office buildings: in the ‘other’ building, Bateman views himself externally, which is a position he cannot sustain for long; back in ‘his’ building, however, he is reassured, collected again. It is obvious that the buildings here are metonyms for the more fundamental dwelling of the human self—recall Kate’s

deconstruction of the beach house once her sense of self has become compromised by an absence of other-validation in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*.

That the power of Bateman's perspectival shift lingers here, then, is not the least due to the fact that he has glimpsed the lack of distinction between the two buildings, hence between employees at these identical buildings, and therefore between himself and others. Still under the sway of this moment, he decides "to make public what has been, until now, my private dementia" (352); and, improbably, he calls his lawyer, leaving a tearful confession on his answering machine. Ellis links various points of my discussion in one powerful image here: in the sobbing stock broker, who may or may not be a mass murderer, we see the paradigmatic human creature that a range of twentieth century thinkers, on the left and right, tried to force into the straightjacket of codes of conduct; in our uncertainty about his murderous tendencies, we see the latency of a violence that these codes control imperfectly; and from the distance of his third-person narrative, an estranged Bateman sees it too. "Sobbing though I don't know why," after he has returned to himself, he tries to be sincere for once, his body leading the way (352). Ultimately, however, the moment lasts only "ten minutes," and soon Bateman hides this fleeting insight into his creatureliness under the familiar language of status and surface again, calling his lawyer to arrange a meeting at a high-class restaurant.

Arguably, this quick change also indicates Ellis's awareness of the limits of V-effects in general. In Brechtian theater, the surprise fresh views of reality that have been created by means of estrangement must all still mingle around the final representation of a character, even after the curtains are closed. Yet observations by the actor Christian Bale, who played Bateman in the movie adaptation of *American Psycho*, should give anyone pause who is too confident that Ellis's use of this modernist practice in an otherwise engrossing first-person narrative can always achieve a similar double vision for lasting effect. During preparations

for the role, Bale reports, he met Wall Street brokers who used Ellis's novel as a code of conduct, without realizing the satirical take on their lifestyle (James 230). And while the fact that *American Psycho* itself premiered in commodified form as a musical on Broadway in 2016 is an added ironic twist that Ellis would presumably appreciate, the easy consumption of his radical tale in other media casts doubt upon the penetrating power of an experimentalism that counts on audience contemplation for revolutionary effect.

In a Frankfurt School-inspired analysis of Ellis's oeuvre, the critic Georgina Colby concurs with this assessment of *American Psycho*, granting that "the novel functions on one level as a form of refusal and a sharp exposition of the systemic violence inherent in capitalism," while also acknowledging that, "read literally, it has the capacity to become complicit with power structures" (62). Colby even goes one step further and indicates a precursor for Ellis's ambivalent reception in what I have described as the Brechtian model for Ellis's method. "Brecht never stopped missing his mark," she quotes the French post-Marxist Jacques Ranciere, adding that in particular *The Three Penny Opera*, with its popular musical songs, "delights those it hoped to trash" (qtd. 78). It is not difficult to see why some of Ellis's most famous scenes, for instance an argument between stock brokers about who has the best business card, have suffered a similar fate in the hands of an audience that thrives on detached irony. In fact, a 'Patrick Bateman' handing out business cards is a staple at many halloween parties today.

Any literary technique that refuses to expressly state its desired outcome, indeed makes such a refusal a major premise of its pursuit of readerly autonomy, has to contend with the possibility that its indirect aims will not be understood as intended. In fact, I would suggest that Ellis knows this; what is more, I believe that his extravagant depictions of over-the-top violence indicate a lack of trust in the audience, which compels him to resort to manipulative means in trying to ensure the transmission of a certain effect. At any rate, this is the argument

I will present in the last part of this chapter by showing that Ellis's 'melodramatic' rhetoric undercuts his essentially Brechtian aim of autonomy.

### **Fantasies of Purity**

That estrangement techniques still leave space for readings which are perversely reactionary was not lost on some of Brecht's contemporaries, either. As Jameson notes, a Marxist critic like George Lukács, wondering about the general tendency of modernist art to fight "a logic of objectification by way of the objectification of its own forms," had as early as the 1920s questioned whether, in Jameson's words, "the reified modernist work distance[s] and subvert[s] the more general social reifications of modernity, or [whether] it simply replicate[s] and perpetuate[s] them" (46). Similarly, Adorno, who lamented the influence Brecht's 'crude thinking' had on their mutual friend Walter Benjamin, also considered the dangers inherent in Brecht's way of constructing a new stance toward society through the achievement of 'objective' distance. His assessment of such distance fairly summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of new objectivity thinking in general.

In *Minima Moralia*, for instance, Adorno granted a point I made with regard to the critical powers of irony and defamiliarization: that distant observation could lead, as Adorno has it, to an "infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such."<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, he pointed to the possibility that the "detached observer" might misuse "his critique of society as an ideology for his private interests," a possibility that results from the fact that "the very

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<sup>6</sup> This possibility also informs Amanda Anderson's recent reevaluation of detachment in her 2001 study on Victorian literature and culture. Anderson complains that "current disciplinary conditions," which she associates with "materialist, feminist, poststructuralist, and identity-based criticism" (7), prevent an appreciation of the powers of distance. This argument suffers from a bit of disciplinary myopia itself. In other fields, such as academic philosophy, critiques of distance are rather scarce, with the "claims to objectivity or reflective reason" that she misses in criticism still dominating approaches to knowledge. Moreover, I believe that Anderson's account is too schematic, especially in its critique of "the pervasive contemporary tendency to endorse ironic modes of expression and critique while simultaneously viewing critical reason as [...] embarrassingly earnest" (26). This characterization of irony as a form of detachment, in binary opposition to any form of earnestness, flies in the face of a long philosophical tradition for which, as Critchley notes, "[the] just polity is one that can actively maintain its own interruption or *ironization* as that which sustains it" (*Ethics* 238; my emphasis).

moment of withdrawal bears features of what it negates.” More specifically, Adorno reasoned, the person “who stands aloof” is “forced to develop a coldness indistinguishable from that of the bourgeois.” In the process, he might become absorbed into the very mechanism he set out to oppose. (“Antithesis” 26)

This possibility dominates the picture of bourgeois society in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Adorno co-authored with Max Horkheimer during the second world war. The book describes a kind of society that is “total” in the sense that it makes the sheer desire for imagining otherwise virtually impossible. Indeed, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the option of keeping a critical distance from society’s norms required for such utopian thinking has become suspect because—as I demonstrated with regard to the ambiguous status of irony as both means of liberation and oppression in *American Psycho*—the distance associated with critique itself is being coopted by an ideology of coldness that, as in Faulkner’s account of life in the nuclear age, threatens our humanity. Perhaps in an attempt to match this character of modern society with an intellectual force that is equally “total,” Adorno and Horkheimer end up with an analysis that is fundamentally depressing for its lack of hope: there is simply no place for opposition if the very concepts for opposing the status quo, as I have indicated in the introduction, are complicit with the system itself. This “total” structure of a capitalist system that devours every counterforce is aptly encapsulated in Adorno’s infamous dictum from *Minima Moralia* that “[t]here is no right life in the wrong one” (18).

For its full effect, this pessimistic analysis relies on appeals to a kind of purity that measures human behavior by a standard both idealistic and impossible. Thus the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* regard human reason in general as complicit with the kind of instrumental rationality that enables mass genocide (93). This leads down the road of a profound cynicism at whose end we meet the question whether our life and our mundane pursuits are not at heart illegitimate. Under the sign of Frankfurt School-type appeals to

purity, then, philosophy cannot find anything to love anymore in a world that is inherently disappointing and sad. This denial of love, in turn, is accompanied by an absence of trust in the human and a corresponding impulse to foreclose ideological options not in line with its foundational assumptions—a ‘totalizing’ impulse that will help define what I regard as the manipulative dimension of the literary scene of address.

It is not difficult to see how Adorno, writing under the impression of the Holocaust, could have arrived at such a forbidding conclusion. His disappointment with western civilization in all its manifestations was sincere. Nevertheless, the aspirations to purity that emanate from this way of thinking can also be used, by a different kind of person, to legitimize a total refusal of responsibility and cause an avoidance of the complexities and necessary impurities that are unavoidable in trying to live an ethical life. In fact, the way Patrick Bateman, a very different person from Adorno, employs appeals to purity in order to avoid human contact shows the ends a totalizing form of thinking can be put to by a person with questionable motivations.

Two scenes in *American Psycho* illustrate the ideal of purity Bateman employs; both are written in a way that unambiguously renders them fantastic, the product of Bateman’s mind. In the first, he attends a rock concert and imagines that he is “receiving a message of some kind from the singer” (146). In a vision of magical intimacy, he sees “an invisible cord” attached to the singer that encircles Bateman as he senses, actually claims to hear, the rock star’s “message” entering his mind on the connection established by this “bond.” Naturally, amidst the roar of a concert, this kind of communication cannot be anything but silent; it is the dream of a perfect speech that leaves no room for ambiguity and does not require trust or other such human imperfections. In fact, this desire to see directly into the celebrity’s heart, and be recognized in turn, exposes the roots of Bateman’s thinking—his yearning for a contact that is untainted by the impurities of language and human interest.

Similarly, one day at the zoo in Central Park, he is mesmerized by a “snowy owl” that, as Bateman notes, “has eyes that look just like mine” (297). Mutely staring at the animal, Bateman senses a bond like the one that connected him to the singer, and, once more, he imagines a kind of silent, magical communion as “something unspoken passes between me and the bird.” In a novel which usually shows speech failing, in which no one ever really ‘sees’ each other, and in which miscommunication is the norm, these instances of seemingly perfect understanding stand out. What both have in common is the assumption of a necessary inexpressiveness that can only be breached by extramundane means: by a silent, mental bond that overcomes the separateness of self and other.

In Stanley Cavell’s *The Claim of Reason*, such a “fantasy of necessary inexpressiveness” is at the heart of a skeptical understanding of human knowing (351). Something like the purist disappointment in human reason displayed by Adorno and Horkheimer, then, is also a driving force behind what Cavell identifies as skepticism here. In fact, their cynical doubt of reason shows the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to labor very much under the specter of skepticism: they hold reasoners to an absolute standard of certainty that is ultimately unachievable; as a consequence, they altogether repudiate the ‘claim’ of reason that it could help us find orientation regarding the world and our lives with others. The same is true of Cavell’s skeptic, who, as I will show in the following, imagines his own “necessary inexpressiveness” and withdraws from human contact.

In the last chapter, I described Kate’s naked walk in a warm rain as a response to skepticism that allows her to “agreeably ignore” the metaphysical gulf between the observer and a distant world. In fact, what I called, following Cavell, the “truth of skepticism” is precisely the insight that being-in-the-world is not a matter of bridging this gulf in order to possess or grasp the world as one ‘object’ among others; rather, it is akin to Kate’s blind immersion in the rain that has nothing of the scientific distance characteristic of knowledge in

what Heidegger calls a state of ‘objective presence.’ Now, in the context of skeptical doubts about other minds, the emphasis is shifted away from knowledge of material, inanimate objects. What still remains a gateway to skeptical conclusions, however, is the assumption that knowing is a matter of definitively overcoming the distance to the other. It is therefore precisely this desire to undo one’s separateness so as to gain complete fusion with the other person that drives the skepticism here; after all, owing to the commonplace assumption that we have a privileged access to our own minds which cannot be shared by another person, the ideal of knowing with certainty how somebody else feels must come to seem unattainable. Of course, as in the case of doubts about the existence of the external world, the skeptic is quite right in pointing out the limits of visible criteria in responding to such doubts. But that limitation, Cavell has pointed out in a series of writings reaching back to the beginning of his career, is not a failure of *knowledge*. Rather, it is what, in one of his earliest essays, he calls a “failure to *acknowledge*” (“Knowing and Acknowledging” 264; my emphasis).

There is, then, an asymmetry between external-world and other-mind skepticism with regard to the role of the skeptic. If we have lost contact with the world, it is an *absence*, our constitutional ignorance of the thing-in-itself, that causes us to disown the idea that we could have knowledge of it. By contrast, Cavell writes, if we claim to be unable to know the other, or be known by her, then this is due to “the *presence* of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness” (264; my emphasis). And the only one responsible for this “presence” of “coldness” is the skeptic himself. Other-mind skepticism, then, is about a refusal to let our common criteria count when measured by a standard of superhuman accuracy, and about the complex psychological reasons for doing so. This asymmetry also slightly alters the meaning of the “truth of skepticism” in cases of doubting the existence, or knowability, of other minds. If, in such cases, a person’s interiority seems to be out of reach, the “truth of skepticism” allows us to see that this impression of intractable

privacy is not due to a metaphysical impediment, such as the interference of the human body or the transcendence of the human soul, but that there is something in the skeptic's framing of the situation, in the absolute standards for knowledge he demands, that causes his attempts at knowing to fail every time.

Rather prosaically, then, the "truth of skepticism" regarding other minds signifies nothing more than the fact that human beings can learn to suppress their natural expressiveness—primal gestures such as crying, laughing—by replacing it with the fantasy of an absolute privacy that communicative language can always only distort. For someone in the grips of this fantasy, acknowledging another mind, like any attempt at expressing one's own mental life, becomes paradoxical. However, it is only such an act of acknowledgment in the absence of knowledge that can make the other person a presence to oneself. Earlier, I argued that only love can sustain the existence of the world for me; now, it is a structurally similar "willingness to respond empathically to the other," as Espen Hammer explains Cavell's position, that "keeps the other alive to me" (75). In the absence of this willingness, i.e., of this acknowledgment of natural human expressiveness as part of the biological aspects of our common 'form of life,' there is nothing that can break the spell of the impression that other people are unknowable, or, in the most extreme case, mere figments of the imagination.

Still, looking for the 'dancer' behind the 'dance,' to adapt Yeats's phrase, is a habit that dies hard, even under conditions of full-blown skepticism. Markson's Kate is a case in point. At heart, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is a fictitious novel written by none other than Kate herself, and the persistence of her literary act of expression, without any certainty about an audience, indicates how deeply the structure of acknowledgment is embedded in the human life form. Indeed, that Kate returns to her typewriter, long after she has given up 'looking' for other people, is a testament to the lingering force of what Lee calls "the powerfully internalized and naturalized dimension of the habitual" (157). This habit of assuming an audience to our

speech is a *conditio sine qua non* of all felicitous speech acts. And even if Kate's discourse at times approaches the asymptotic point of incomprehensibility, the structure of acknowledgment always remains in place, along with the scene of address implied by language in general.

In fact, a failure or success of communication is logically anterior to the concept of acknowledgement; the latter is evidenced by any outcome, indeed by the very act of expecting an outcome. It is, as Cavell explains, "the sort of concept Heidegger calls an *existential*," i.e., "not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated" ("Knowing and Acknowledging" 263). And this ontological category, which is itself a reminder of the endurance of the metaphysics of self and other, cannot be eliminated except by eliminating human life itself. What happens when we try to overcome skepticism by short-circuiting the structure of acknowledgment, I argue, can be studied in Ellis's novel. In some ways, Bateman faces a similar emptiness as Kate does; both are fundamentally cut off from other human beings, and their isolation is dramatized in a highly ambiguous way that mimics the uncertainty of their diegetic worlds. But while Markson makes a point of showing us Kate, the writer, addressing an implicit and yet uncertain reader, Bateman's response indicates what can happen when the possibility of profane communion that Markson's art imagines no longer has any meaning—when the metaphysical assumption of the existence, or knowability, of other minds has lost its hold on the human subject.

Still, Bateman is a bad skeptic; what we might call, with Adorno, his "private interests" always prevail over any intellectual, let alone moral, consistency. Bateman, we might say, uses any discourse that allows him to conceal himself. This theoretical flexibility encompasses his positivistic view of the human self, which rejects a key premise of literary expressionism as metaphysical nonsense: "... there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some

kind of abstraction,” he confesses at the climax of his narrative, “but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory” (376-7). Similarly, when Bateman’s flirtatious secretary tries to get to know him more closely, he takes the reader into his confidence once again: “she is searching for a rational analysis of who I am, which is, of course, an impossibility.” Mocking her attempts at intimacy, he adds emphatically: “there... is... no... key” (264). And in the tradition of new objectivity dismissals of an interiority to be expressed, Bateman categorically declares the futility of any such narrative endeavor, his own included: “There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this,” he concludes, “This confession has meant *nothing*....” (377). Notably, however, when he tries to legitimize his refusal to engage his girlfriend, Bateman employs the very same category he is dismissing at other times: “She does not fully grasp *a word* I’m saying. My essence is eluding her” (124).

Thus skeptical arguments, the appeal to absolute certainty in knowing another, serve him just as well as nihilistic ones when it comes to avoiding exposure to other people’s judgment. What Ellis’s novel demonstrates is how easily such fantasies of purity can degenerate into violence when they are entertained by a fundamentally insecure subject such as Bateman, whose inability to make himself vulnerable is coupled with an existential desire to be recognized. That, right after his silent communion with the snowy owl, Bateman brutally kills a child at the zoo, then, is not a coincidence: letting in the animal’s piercing gaze had brought on “a tension I started feeling when I first noticed the snowy owl’s eyes,” Bateman reports, and this “weird kind of tension, a bizarre pressure” “fuels” the murder of the child (297); subsequently, after he has symbolically killed the vulnerable, innocent part of himself in the figure of the child, the tension is broken.

Arguably, the contemporary reception of the book has largely ignored the role Bateman’s theoretical flexibility plays in this unethical treatment of others—after all, if there is no one to know, and by whom one can be known, as Bateman seems to insinuate, any ethical

imperative is void from the start. Indeed, in a further indication of continuity between modernism and postmodernism, a critic inspired by poststructuralism such as Jon Buscall even comes close to repeating what I have presented as Bateman's new objectivity view of his self when he regards the character as nothing but a surface where different discourses converge: "Bateman is blankly committed to each narrative style in turn," Buscall writes, "but this is momentary because he metamorphoses into an equally committed narrator as and when the next particular style demands" (201). As universal as condemnation of Bateman has been among Ellis's critics, then, signs of doubt about his conflicting theoretical commitments are rather scarce. Indeed, while much has been made of what Erica Wagner calls Bateman's "weirdly vibrant nothingness," scholars have at times taken this nothingness as license for a certain theoretical arbitrariness of their own. This, at any rate, is the conclusion Serpell comes to in her summary of prior critical attempts at substituting the character's blankness for "whatever discourse the critic has decided that the cipher or sign of 'Bateman' represents, be it consumerism, banality, or an all-pervasive postmodern dread" (199).

Other critics such as Elizabeth Young and Mark Storey have taken Bateman's "nothingness" to indicate the character's non-existence in general. Ontologically speaking, it is not quite clear what a claim like this means. Since he is a narrator in a novel, to think of Bateman as 'existing' would be to commit what a rigorous thinker like de Man calls the kind of 'category error' that naively conflates the linguistic and phenomenal orders of perception; in that sense, Bateman's non-existence is a trivial matter. Yet his narrative is meant to be read, too, and in that way the narrated events acquire a certain reality for the reader independently of the narrator's ontological status. It is in light of such inconsistencies that Storey, for one, ends up acknowledging the performative contradictions implicit in speaking about a subject, including its actions and confessions, as if they were non-existent (63). Still, in the context of my study—which traces the persistence of metaphysics in literary

productions that engage our habitual responsiveness to categories such as ‘world,’ ‘self,’ and ‘other’—it becomes possible to regard such inconsistencies as precisely the point of *American Psycho*: like Kate’s literary address to a world devoid of readers, the confession of a non-subject such as Bateman puts pressure on our metaphysical assumptions, challenging them, but also bringing them back into play.

I therefore agree with those critics, like Serpell, who emphasize the novel’s affective power as an uncertain text and see a danger in filling the blank space of Bateman’s personality with a rational explanation that, as the argument goes, deprives the novel of its discomfiting force. Indeed, Serpell’s desire to rule out possible answers for Bateman’s behavior is meant to sustain a “necessary uncertainty” (221): “The starkness of *American Psycho*, like the Greek tragedies,” she writes, “is dependent on a horror that cannot be conceived or explained” (220). To be sure, in Cavell I have referred to a thinker who has made various attempts at explaining the force behind such tragedies. Somewhat in counterpoint to Serpell’s reading of *American Psycho*, then, which celebrates what the philosopher Bernard Williams has called the “inexplicable necessity” of tragic violence (“Women” 51), my application of Cavell’s concept of necessary inexpressiveness emphasizes a different kind of ‘necessity’—one that is nothing but a mirage upheld by the discourses Bateman uses to justify his detachment. This does not mean I deny Serpell’s claim that the unsettling power of Ellis’s text lies in the fact that it actively precludes a perspective of “sublime contemplation” for the critic to analyze and thereby master it (221). But I would maintain that in the complex affective experience of reading *American Psycho*, Cavell’s insights on the connection between skepticism and tragedy are still a valuable diagnostic tool.

They allow us to think of Bateman as a kind of postmodern incarnation of Shakespeare’s King Lear, who, in Cavell’s essay “The Avoidance of Love,” becomes a skeptical epistemologist driven “by the attempt to avoid recognition, the shame of exposure, the threat

of self-revelation” (286). It is for that reason, Cavell notes, that Lear arranges for Cordelia to declare her love of him in the famous abdication scene, asking her to validate his worth publicly, but without having to make himself vulnerable by acknowledging her in turn. And they allow us to compare Bateman to Othello, whose radical doubt about Desdemona’s faithfulness, in Cavell’s unconventional reading, “is not caused by Iago’s rumouring” (*Disowning* 9). Rather, Cavell interprets the moor’s jealousy as a cover for a much deeper skeptical desire to possess Desdemona in a way that “establishes an absolute or inalienable bonding to himself [...]; as if the jealousy is directed to the sheer existence of the other, its separateness from him” (*Disowning* 8-9). It is through this philosophically relevant jealousy, then, that “Othello’s violence,” as Cavell has it, “studies the human use of knowledge under the consequence of skepticism” (*Disowning* 9).

I would argue that the same can be said of the violence in Ellis’s novel; it, too, is an outcome of skepticism. The inherent ambiguity that humans experience in their attempts at knowing each other leads a troubled subject like Bateman to seek what Michaels has called a mode of “communication as penetration” (*Signifier* 68), a transcendence of the separateness to the other person by violent means. In fact, Michaels is one of the few critics who tie Bateman’s massacres directly to questions of epistemology: “Bateman,” he writes, “has to use a nail gun to find out what people are really thinking” (*Signifier* 70). It is as if, for Ellis’s protagonist, merely observing other people’s responses is not enough; like the skeptic, he mistrusts any utterance, any expression, and this desperation to drive beyond seemingly treacherous surfaces develops a murderous dynamic over the course of the novel, leading him, as Bateman explains in a remark that explicitly frames the question of his violence in epistemological terms, to film other people’s deaths in order to “understand” them (304).

That these other people are primarily women, and that their murders are always connected with sexualized violence, is not just a random fact. As for the cool persona,

Bateman's privileged space for attempts at intimate understanding is the bedroom. Only here, in the presence of a creature associated with redeeming nature, and walled off from a public that represents the possibility of judgment, could the cool persona allow himself to be vulnerable without having to fear shame and its close kin, social abandonment. But Bateman is unable to let go of his coolness, to reveal himself to a lover, and once more the comparison to King Lear illuminates this failure to 'understand.' Lear desperately needs Cordelia but cannot accept the consequence that her love coincides with his dependence on her. Like Bateman, he wields his economic power, offers a bribe, and hopes that way to elicit the desired recognition without having to make himself vulnerable through a public demonstration of the mutuality of their love. His desire, then, is for acceptance as a strong, composed ruler, and the humiliation he associates with vulnerability threatens to undermine this self-image. "It is exactly shame," Cavell comments, "which is the cause of [Lear's] withholding of recognition" ("Avoidance" 278).

The same is true of Bateman. He, too, fears the kind of unchecked, 'naked' expression that could break his carefully calibrated composure. At the heart of his flexible application of arguments about the knowability of the human mind, then, lies an affect, a primitive feeling: whether he projects the cool persona's dream of unimpeded mobility or the skeptic's fantasy of necessary inexpressiveness, the source of his concealment is always an avoidance of shame. But while this drives his attempts at hiding, it cannot eliminate the desire for other-validation that is at the core of the human subject's self-image in a shame culture. In fact, Bateman is particularly dependent on receiving the other's recognition. His sense of self depends entirely on recognition by another person because he regards himself, in new objectivity fashion, as a surface to be written by others: "it's almost as if she's making the decision about who I am," Bateman remarks of his "uninhibited" secretary, who "weakens"

him by appealing to his ability to love her (378). But, like Lear, Bateman knows that he only has “the capacity to accept, though not *return*, her love” (379; my emphasis).

In the many prostitutes and random hook-ups he lures to his apartment, then, Bateman hopes for the kind of recognition that could confirm the idea he has of himself. As the cool persona par excellence, he expects acknowledgement of his character from the “warm” women (121) and is “irritated,” for instance, when they do not admire his work as a stock broker (171). These attempts at receiving validation from another human soul give the lie to the novel’s hyperrealistic emphasis on surface and to the notion, endorsed by one of his colleagues, that “inside [...] *doesn’t matter*” (397). In fact, when Bateman hears this assessment, he is “both disappointed and relieved,” an ambiguity that signifies a desire for depth as well as a fear of the possibility that there could be something transcending mere materiality. This ambiguity, finally, indicates the almost traditionalist goals of Ellis’s novel—for a return of metaphysics that directly contradicts Bateman’s professed ideology of materiality.

This points once more to the broader concerns of my study about the resurfacing of a voice that points beyond all surface, the persistence of expression amidst assertions of silence, and the position of proximity that still allows us to ‘hear’ it. Similarly, the formal qualities of Bateman’s narrative encode the truth even against its intended renunciation of content and meaning: as a confession in novelistic form, it cannot but affirm content—note the energy and vibrancy of Bateman’s voice, and his obvious need to express himself—as well as the ethical commitments between “teller, listener, witness, and reader” that Newton associates with narrative ethics (11). These ‘metaphysics of the novel,’ which a writer can no more abandon permanently than a person trying to hold their breath can escape oxygen, give the lie to Bateman’s statement that his account has meant “nothing”: nothingness it may be;

but this does not mean that a depiction of such nothingness, in turn, amounts to nothing, either.

As such, the ‘crude thinking’ that dominates the nihilistic world of *American Psycho* is displayed to challenge our commitment to this very society of pure appearance. In fact, by Ellis’s own admission, the presentation of depthlessness that pervades his works is meant to be critical, not affirmative; accordingly, his observation in conversation with Charlie Rose that “we’re a society that totally believes the surface” is immediately followed by a statement of critical intent: “All my books are a criticism [...] of a society that is obsessed with surfaces.” I therefore read Ellis’s aesthetics as a manifestation of the claim made by the scholar Timothy Bewes that, in our modern age, “freedom from materiality is achievable not by any conscious self-elevation, but by affirmation of the ubiquity of materiality” (*Reification* 152). To be sure, this line of interpretation alters my description of Ellis’s use of estrangement effects: if I am right in associating *American Psycho* with Brechtian method in achieving what Bewes calls a ‘freedom from materiality,’ the novel must now be regarded as Brechtian against Brecht’s own logical positivist convictions, indeed as staging the return of metaphysical depth in the cynical subject’s call for other-validation.<sup>7</sup>

This, in turn, can help explain why Bateman’s irritation turns to existential terror when the validating answer fails to materialize. After all, just like Cordelia, who refuses Lear’s bribe and instead chooses to remain silent in order to preserve her true feelings, the women Bateman draws to his apartment stay silent, as well. Again and again, his increasingly desperate attempts to force them to admire him are met with “[a]rctic, frigid, utter silence” (302). To be sure, it is Bateman’s Larian incapacity to acknowledge their separateness that causes this silence and prevents any validation of his character, which would have to be

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<sup>7</sup> I have emphasized Brecht’s association with logical positivism here for schematic reasons. Jameson, on the other hand, does not believe that Brecht can escape all metaphysical commitments (148). As such, he reads *Life of Galileo*, for instance, not as privileging materialism, but rather as presenting a contradiction between body and soul that estranges the value of both (124).

rooted in exactly the kind of reciprocity he cannot reconcile with his need for control. Like the third-person view brought on by his moment of Brechtian estrangement, then, the women's silence challenges his self-image, threatening to expose Bateman as unable to make the women declare their love of him. But their refused acknowledgement affects Bateman on an even deeper level, too. It is terrifying not only because it exposes him as 'weak,' but also because it does not allow him to infer any other minds whatsoever, thus auguring the kind of emptiness that afflicts Markson's Kate in her vision of an utterly abandoned world. The silence of Bateman's victims, then, is another instantiation of the equation "silence = horror" that Wallace, as I pointed out earlier, penciled into his copy of *End Zone* in order to summarize the terror of the void that seems to gape underneath human language.

Bateman feels this void, too, and his compulsion to "break" the women's silence is an indicator of his desire for a validating response that could counteract the loneliness it portends (171). In Bateman's cold universe, the only way such silence can be broken is through the heat of sex. But physical intimacy does not provide the desired certainty, either. If anything, it only heightens his awareness of spiritual disconnection and isolation.

Accordingly, Bateman, who always expects "betrayal" from women (203), eventually comes to mistrust even their expressions of pleasure: under the spell of skepticism, he sees a woman's orgasm as only "authentic-looking" (98), because "she could be faking it" (174). It is at this moment, in his turn to a horrific violence intended to finally force the women to 'speak,' that Bateman most resembles Othello. Both men share a pathological mistrust that leads them to deny the veracity of what is right in front of their eyes: like Shakespeare's skeptical anti-hero, who cannot accept any visual signs as proof of Desdemona's faithfulness and thus strangles her to death, Bateman mistrusts the prostitutes' every public utterance and responds with violence, as well. Indeed, in their professional façade, he recognizes his own feigned coldness and detachment. Behind his way of 'plunging' into his victims, then, is a

desperate need to break through the ice of the cool persona—a need that is taken to an extreme by Bateman’s shame and consequent self-concealment. That he uses not only a nail gun to lacerate his victims, but also an ice pick, is therefore not a coincidence but another clue about the motives behind some of the most gruesome murders in all of western literature.

Improbably, these scenes also inform some of the most pressing debates in contemporary epistemology. What issues from Bateman’s excesses in this philosophically relevant interpretation is a warning about a concept of knowledge that has extended its hold on western metaphysics for centuries. Indeed, according to Cavell, the “hopes” placed upon knowledge by this concept can be traced back to “the Renaissance” and “the Enlightenment” (*Claim* 440). Presumably, the thinkers he has in mind here are Descartes and Kant. The former had, in the third of his *Meditations*, declared knowledge to be a matter of certainty, of perceiving something “very clearly and distinctly” (113). And the latter, as I implied in the introduction, stipulated that knowledge is a result of yoking concepts to things so as to possess them. Both philosophers, then, rely on what Cavell calls a “picture of what knowing another, or being known by another, would really come to” (*Claim* 440). And, as in my discussion of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, this ‘picture’ suggests that, for modern philosophy, only absolute absorption and complete union may count as instances of knowing—a standard by which our actual attempts at getting close, to the world or to the other person, must seem like traumatic failures. The trauma that Cavell narrates, then, is the advent of modern skepticism, and the frozenness and detachment that the authors of this study, from Faulkner to Smith, wrestle with can now be explained as the kind of distance that results from an epistemology that casts the human out of the life worlds he inhabits. Indeed, the desire of a dissociated character like Bateman for the kind of perfect union with the other that would calm his skepticism—a desire that drives him to dismiss the imperfect union he already has—

is precisely what, for Cavell, “enters the world” with “the birth of skepticism”: “a new intimacy, or wish for it; call it privacy shared [with the other]” (*Claim* 440). What my discussion here has shown is the extent to which this ‘picture’ still dominates thinking in the age of postmodernism and continues to suggest a lack which is merely a mirage—but which can be used ‘flexibly,’ as Bateman’s case demonstrates, to avoid engagement altogether.

### **Anxieties of Resemblance**

To be sure, in his writings on skepticism Cavell aims at a kind of ‘calm,’ too—though not the calm of fusion a skeptic like Bateman desires. A description of Cavell’s project by the literary scholar Rei Terada in her book *Feeling in Theory* may provide some clarification here. “Cavell,” she writes, “perhaps wants philosophy to be sentimental when he argues that skepticism is melodramatic when it responds in a violently embarrassed way to the domestic, inherited banality of existence.” And this call for ‘sentimentality’ to stand against skepticism’s ‘melodrama,’ Terada explains, is an indicator that Cavell “might like skeptics to calm down” (174n31). Kate’s ‘agreeable’ distraction in the last chapter might serve as a model for such ‘calm.’ That the skeptic’s embarrassment upon realizing his own deficiency in matters of certainty may turn violent, by contrast, is one of the takeaways of my reading of Ellis’s novel in this chapter as ‘studying,’ in Cavellian terms, the use of human knowledge under the sign of a skeptical ‘picture’ of knowing. As such, it is indeed plausible to apply Terada’s terms to Bateman’s behavior—as a ‘melodramatic’ response to the fact of his own creatureliness, and to the purportedly ‘embarrassing’ needs and limitations associated with this ‘domestic’ figure.

Beyond the diegetic world of *American Psycho*, Terada’s reading also provides apt terms for a critical intervention in debates around the mechanisms of recognition that inform Ellis’s rhetoric. Indeed, key concepts from Terada’s account of skepticism recur in a feud between

Ellis and David Foster Wallace that began in the 1990s and extended, rather sadly, even beyond the grave. Thus, four years after Wallace took his own life, Ellis launched a digital diatribe against the dead author, accusing him, essentially, of the kind of desire for acknowledgment that, as the preceding account has shown, exemplifies the psychology of skepticism: Wallace, Ellis writes in a series of tweets in 2012, was “so in need of his fans” and “lusting” for their validation that he, Ellis, can only respond with ‘embarrassment’ to the “halo of sentimentality around [Wallace].” Mockingly adopting Wallace’s idiosyncratically adverbial diction, Ellis concludes that “[the] rejection of middlebrow sentimentality is the most furiously important thing an artist can achieve right now in this historical moment.”

The broader context for Ellis’s charges dates back to a critique of *American Psycho* Wallace presented in an interview with Larry McCaffery two years after the novel’s publication. In Wallace’s view, Ellis yields to the same master-slave mechanisms that motivate his sadistic protagonist. Thus he interprets the book as akin to the nail gun that Bateman uses to tear into his victims and describes Ellis’s novelistic techniques—a shock and awe penetrating the reader’s mind with scenes she cannot forget—as motivated by a similarly skeptical need for a validating response. Indeed, Ellis’s hyperbolic, though skillful, depictions of sex and violence, Wallace argues, reveal that he is just “hungry for some kind of effect” (*Conversations* 16), namely the reader’s attention and, ultimately, admiration. It is in what Wallace describes as “the familiar love-hate syndrome of seduction,” then, that he locates the source of the hostility that emanates from Ellis’s often punishing pages: “if the artist is excessively dependent on simply being liked, so that her true end isn’t in the work but in a certain audience’s good opinion,” he explains, “she is going to develop a terrific hostility to that audience, simply because she has given all her power away to them” (25).

That Wallace dismisses the novel on grounds which sound remarkably similar to Ellis’s charges two decades later not only makes Ellis’s *tu quoque* a curious case of projection; it

also indicates that each writer accuses the other of being a skeptic in Cavell's sense, i.e., 'embarrassingly' desirous of being validated, in a precarious, one-sided relationship with the other person that is always on the verge of violence. Terada's terminology now allows for a reading that takes into account the continuities between modernism and postmodernism I have been indicating here: while the violent 'melodrama' of Ellis's prose is a desperate, and essentially skeptical, cry for recognition to eschew the kind of new objectivity depthlessness that pervades the world of *American Psycho*, the alleged 'sentimentality' of Wallace's works, in turn, indicates a close kinship of his literary project with German expressionism.

There is evidence for this connection in an account Wallace gave to the journalist David Lipsky regarding his deep fascination, dating back to the spring of 1986, with David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. In Lynch's film, Wallace saw the promise of a synthesis between, on the one hand, his own conviction—which would soon come to full fruition in his engagement with Markson's work—that all art is a way of expressing the artists's unique way of perceiving and, on the other hand, the precepts of his workshop teachers in Tucson. Even before encountering the Markson model, then, Wallace received from Lynch's film the "first realization that there was a way to get at what these realist guys were saying, that was via the route of the surreal and expressionist" (171). That Wallace thought specifically of the interiority associated with German expressionism here is apparent in his description of Lynch's work as "expressionist in the way that like *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is expressionist"—which was "very much," as Wallace explained to Lipsky, "about *manifesting* inner states on the film" (170).

To be sure, Ellis is in the final analysis interested in overcoming the 'crude thinking' of materialism, too. His insistence, in response to the novel's devastating early reception, on a distinction between the author and his creation is further proof of these intentions: "The acts described in the book are truly, indisputably vile," he defended himself to *Rolling Stone*,

“The book itself is not. Patrick Bateman is a monster. I am not” (“Psycho Analysis” 49). That Wallace and Ellis have traded accusations over time, then, should not obscure the many similarities between them. Both are acutely aware of the engrossing influence television has had on contemporary ways of thinking—though the degree to which this media critique dominated Wallace’s outlook has, as I argue in the next chapter, been overstated. Given the rejection of logical positivist ‘explanation’ that Wallace developed in his review of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, he would presumably also have been in favor of Ellis’s decision not to provide a clear rationale for Bateman’s behavior—a choice that troubled even Norman Mailer, himself no stranger to shocking content.

Furthermore, what I have described as the Brechtian method of Ellis’s engaged art is not unlike the kind of ideology critique that Wallace depicted in his famous fish parable;<sup>8</sup> indeed, Severs’s recent study on Wallace indicates that the interest in 1930s culture I attribute to Ellis was shared by Wallace, too: “The 1930s are for Wallace,” Severs writes, “the moment of historical apocalypse that needed to be traversed and retraversed in the critical imagination” (65). Perhaps owing to these roots in an era of politicized and iconoclastic approaches to art, Wallace and Ellis alike have been accused of inflicting cruelty on their readers. For instance, the charge of misogyny has been levelled at both of them.<sup>9</sup> Finally, in terms of literary

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<sup>8</sup> As the center piece of Wallace’s Kenyon commencement speech, this parable has become an integral part of many liberal arts curricula. Its origin, however, can be traced to *Infinite Jest*, where it occurs in the form of a joke recounted by a biker named Bob Death: “This wise old whiskery fish swims up to three young fish and goes, ‘Morning, boys, how’s the water?’ and swims away; and the three young fish watch him swim away and look at each other and go, ‘What the fuck is water?’ and swim away” (445). This is a basic lesson on the pervasive and covert nature of ideology, which sinks into the recesses of a culture to lurk in the shadows and send forth its incessant murmur that, by and by, we take to be the voice in our own heads. The effect the joke has on the character Don Gately further emphasizes this invisibility and associates it with a key trope of modernity, and of the new objectivity in particular: the supposedly empowering effects of adapting to the coldness of civilization. After all, the night after hearing Bob Death’s joke, Gately dreams that he is “under a sort of sea, at terrific depths, the water all around him silent and dim and the same temperature he is” (449). In another indicator of continuities between modernism and postmodernism, then, the culture that Gately is a part of continues to train its members to bear the coldness of the civilizing process until their body temperatures are indistinguishable from their surroundings—and, with Faulkner’s Nobel prize speech in mind, we can intuit the consequences of thus forcing oneself to numbly “bear” the harshness of modern life.

<sup>9</sup> In the case of Wallace, this accusation has been made most recently by the critic Amy Hungerford in her 2016 book *Making Literature Now*. Defending Wallace against her highly-publicized charge, Tom LeClair has argued in a review of the book that “Hungerford believes Wallace wants to ‘fuck’ the reader when, in fact, his form and

history, both succeed DeLillo and Pynchon, and the crisis of an increasingly abstract language that, as I pointed out in the introduction, animates the work of these great postmodernists also finds expression in novels such as *American Psycho* and *Infinite Jest*. The former is populated with hollow, interchangeable characters who sound like walking advertisements in a world in which communication has broken down permanently. Similarly, the impetus for *Infinite Jest* was, as Wallace told Lipsky, the novel's opening sequence, written the year *American Psycho* appeared, "about someone who couldn't make themselves understood" (238).

This demonstrates the hold of skeptical thoughts on Wallace even after his engagement with *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Indeed, ideas for a novel project on the topic of pornography he abandoned in the late eighties but ostensibly revisited a decade later for the essay "Big Red Son" indicate the extent of Wallace's preoccupation with shame and concealment—some of which, with its emphasis on sex as a way of counteracting loneliness, is remarkably close to Bateman's obsessions. This is most obvious in the essay's story about an LAPD detective who finds "adult films *moving*, in fact far more so than most mainstream Hollywood movies, in which latter films actors [...] go about feigning genuine humanity." The reason for this, by the detective's own account, is "those rare moments in orgasm or occasional tenderness when the starlets dropped their stylized 'fuck-me-I'm-a-nasty-girl' sneer and became, suddenly, real people." In Wallace's essay, this "interesting vignette" is attributed to a producer by the name of "Mr. Harold Hecuba," though it is difficult to imagine a porn producer talking in this tone. (16fn14)

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style seek to 'fuck up' or create cognitive dissonance in readers." In the next chapter, I will describe this creation of cognitive dissonance as an integral part of Wallace's aporetic method. In fact, Wallace's own critique of *American Psycho* indicates that what Hungerford attacks in *Infinite Jest* can more accurately be said to be true of Ellis at his most sadistic. Ellis has tried to counter similar accusations by asking Charlie Rose in 1994, "Is a depiction of misogyny an act of misogyny?" It may be that he is setting up a false dichotomy here, though. While depiction and enactment are not the same, a reader of *American Psycho* still has to engage with the misogyny that is depicted in order to understand it, the same way one cannot understand the *ironic* evocation of love without first knowing what 'love' is. The pose of affectlessness that Ellis seems to be recommending here reduces readerly activity to stoic spectation over empathetic engagement.

Arguably, then, putting this ‘vignette’ in the mouth of the fictitious Hecuba was Wallace’s way of talking about an observation he seems to have been hesitant to attribute to himself; if so, this operation is highly ambiguous, as it points to a fear of shame and simultaneously makes the argument to overcome it. Indeed, in the very instance of a story emphasizing the value of self-revelation, Wallace hides behind a persona, thrice removed: not only does he invent the detective and the producer, in fact the whole essay is written under the pseudonym of two *Esquire* correspondents named Willem R. DeGroot and Matt Rundlet. Only from this distance does Wallace seem to feel safe enough to endorse what he describes as the detective’s insight that “occasionally, in a hard-core scene, the hidden self appears” (17fn14). The way he dramatizes this possibility of overcoming skepticism, then, has something of Lear’s ‘avoidance of love.’ As such, it is not very different from Bateman’s, and Ellis’s, voyeuristic inability to reveal himself, to actively love rather than just seek another person’s love—the very case Wallace had made against *American Psycho*.

If neither man can effectively escape skepticism, their reciprocal attributions of skeptical desire seem to be quite accurate. That both Wallace and Ellis make these accusations without seeing the same desire at work in their own writings, moreover, points to the pressures of an anxiety of resemblance behind each man’s criticism of a literary project which is rather close, in temporal as well as textual terms, to his own—a resemblance that would indeed function as a constraint on assumptions of their separateness. Notably, such an anxiety about resembling one another too closely is akin to an almost Learian concern about not being acknowledged as unique, making this kind of anxiety between Wallace and Ellis further proof of the persistence of a skeptical ‘picture’ of knowing in each writer’s work. The ends to which they bend this work, however, and the means they choose to do so are different; in fact, it is this difference, I argue in the last section of this chapter, which allows us to make a distinction between two competing forms of literary ethics.

## Seduction as Gift and Manipulation

Someone less intent on rebuking a competitor in order to distinguish her own brand of fiction is Zadie Smith. This vantage point allows her to detect a value in Ellis's novel that Wallace's critique, she argues, simply missed: "When I was about 26, I read *American Psycho* and I knew it was great," Smith states in a 2012 interview, "and I would always remember that Foster Wallace takedown of it and how deeply wrong I thought he was about that book" ("Interview"). What she most admires in Ellis, in fact, is the "ability to see things or attempt to present them as they are and not as you would like them to be." Wallace, in turn, argues in a Cavellian register that great art has "got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved" (*Conversations* 51). Both writers, then, embrace the same criterion for literary greatness—in Wallace's words, to "make the writing more generous and less ego-driven" (51). To be sure, Wallace denies *American Psycho* this quality, while Smith affirms it. What they implicitly agree on, though, is the value to be placed on the ability to love instead of just seeking to be loved; of rendering a work of art a true gift, rather than an invitation to be congratulated for one's artistic prowess.

It is this idea of the gift, then, that emerges prominently from Smith's account—a concept she adopted from Wallace ("Difficult Gifts" 290), but which appears in her assessment of Ellis without being weighed down by any of her friend's competitive anxieties. Indeed, the concept of the gift, which has in its purest state been defined as antithetical to the solicitation of reciprocity,<sup>10</sup> now allows for the distinction between different kinds of seduction I

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<sup>10</sup> The *locus classicus* for modern debates about the idea of the gift is Marcel Mauss's 1924 seminal *Essai sur le don*. While Mauss analyzed the archaic logic of gift and countergift, recent philosophical responses to Mauss have emphasized the uncertainty of the moment of giving, when the giver cannot be sure that her action will be reciprocated. Thus Derrida approaches the aporia of the gift as a way of stepping outside of reason and language, because a gift, as he writes in *Counterfeit Money*, "is at once reason and unreason, because it also manifests that madness of the rational logos itself" (36-7). An equally important text is Lewis Hyde's 1979 study *The Gift*, which Wallace owned and annotated extensively. Hyde defines the gift in opposition to the capitalistic commodity: "unlike the sale of a commodity," he writes, "the giving of a gift tends to establish a relationship between the parties involved" (xiv). Both Derrida and Hyde, then, view narrative under the sign of

announced at the beginning of this chapter. After all, Wallace was not wrong in seeking an explanation for the failures and successes of Ellis's novel in "the familiar love-hate syndrome of seduction." He had a strong sense of the ambiguities involved in any act of seduction. In the 1997 interview with Silverblatt, he explained this complexity as follows: "Seduction can, on one hand, be a neat thing—it can make us feel a whole lot better; and on the other hand, seduction is literally, you know, promising more than you can deliver."

The picture of seduction that emerges here is that of a spectrum, with its manifestation as a true gift for the reader's benefit on one end and its more self-interested instantiation as a form of manipulation on the other. To be sure, most human acts of seduction fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, making it impossible to distinguish manipulation and gift definitively. Smith knows this, too; indeed, she lets the "good stranger" Leah Hanwell in her fourth novel *NW* feel a "thread of pleasure" upon giving money to an impoverished woman at her doorstep (6), thus giving the lie to pretensions of pure selflessness associated with such generosity. Arguably, however, this observation does not invalidate the idea of the gift per se; rather, it confirms the conceptual work it does in our attempts at registering various degrees of selflessness in human behaviour.

A literary site where the concept of seduction as a form of gift is exhibited clearly—though, as Smith might object, never purely and absolutely—is David Markson's novelistic work. This seductive quality of Markson's work has been underscored by Steven Moore, who notes of *Springer's Progress* that it "consciously imitate[s] [...] the rhythm of a sexual encounter" (73). In Markson's increasingly austere final works, the seductive quality becomes distilled into moments of silence that interrupt the short, disjunctive paragraphs of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and the later tetralogy. In 2004's *Vanishing Point*, for instance, Markson inserts a typographical blank space into a quoted description of Spanish massacres

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the gift in order to actualize its potential for bypassing commodified exchange relations and thus approach an ideal of solidarity outside of the *logos* of capitalism.

committed during the crusades in order to prevent the glorification that would come with allowing the original quotation to develop its full rhetorical power (154). It is through such strategic deployment of silences, Françoise Palleau-Papin explains, that “Markson *hushes* a story” (246). This is not a hush, however, which denotes censorship; rather, it evokes a wholeness that would get lost in the reifying thrust of straightforward assertion. Hence it is in these moments that Markson’s narration reaches its full seductiveness by pointing beyond itself to this silence, this “emptiness” that is, to cite once more Wallace’s mystical interpretation, a form of “plenitude” (“Plenum” 116).

For such emptiness to develop its power, however, the reader must be drawn in, listening attentively to the promise of plenitude in the author’s silences from the very position of proximity I developed in the last chapter. This connection to *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* is not a coincidence. In fact, Markson’s reader faces the same necessity as Markson’s fictitious author Kate: although there is nothing that can definitively calm skeptical doubts about other minds, the very act of trying to read, or write, implies a love, however blind and unassured, that alone makes the other a reality for oneself. Establishing a connection through reading or writing, then, means making oneself vulnerable, since every act of love involves the kind of openness that Shakespeare’s tragic figures, in Cavell’s reading, cannot bear. Markson’s rhetorical orchestration of silence perfectly exemplifies this seduction into a proximity that is imaginative as much as it is the very real product of a dialogism created by two consciousnesses, in an uncertain encounter that is sustained by nothing but their willingness to make meaning.

To be sure, the reader of *American Psycho* is also seduced into a position of overproximity to the focalizing consciousness of Patrick Bateman. But Ellis is not seductive the same way Markson is. Indeed, the author of *American Psycho* not only frequently violates the ethical care implied by the constitutive closeness of any narrative encounter—a breach

which might be attributed to Ellis's use of V-effects to break his audience's numbness. But, ultimately, there is a deep current of mistrust running through the novel's rhetoric that causes Ellis to fail at this political ideal of Brechtian autonomy, too. For while Markson's allusive method, for instance, sustains the mutual trust required for the reading-writing situation to come into being in the first place—a trust that may, admittedly, be disappointed when the reader's engagement fails to materialize—Ellis tries to ensure the upshot of his writing before his book has even been opened.

This requires him to 'occupy' his own text in order to ensure the desired effect on the reader by foreclosing the text's options. Newton has an apt description for what, with Levinas, he defines as the "totality" of "such 'invasive' occupation": this is the kind of "drama," he writes, "which casts its roles in advance, whose actors cannot be its authors, and whose outcome another knows beforehand" (50). The difference to Brechtian autonomy, which is achieved precisely by making the "actors" on stage the play's "authors," is obvious here. Moreover, Newton's evocation of 'totality' helps detect behind Ellis's rhetorical 'invasion' the kind of appeal to purity that also informs something like Adorno's wholesale rejection of reason. Indeed, a lack of trust, coupled with an absence of love for the impure state of the world, is present in both men; in Ellis, however, it deteriorates to a skeptical desire that turns his rhetoric in the direction of the manipulative dimension of seduction because he already "knows" the "outcome" "beforehand."

Ultimately, then, I side with Wallace over Smith in evaluating Ellis's book. Its language incites us, as Serpell points out, to "turn the pages seeking sex and violence, if not for pleasure, then for aesthetic scandal" (212). The reader who is drawn in by the novel's scandals, however, frequently experiences an abrupt violence that she, who will have already participated in its creation through the very act of reading, has helped bring into being herself. This is a case of manipulation in the future perfect tense: Ellis will have maneuvered

her into a position from which she cannot escape, because realizing where the book is headed means she must already have assisted in creating its affective force through imaginative collaboration. Wallace has a point, then, in arguing that Ellis's representational violence mirrors the violations experienced by Bateman's victims.<sup>11</sup> Serpell recognizes this when she claims that "under Bateman's command, his victims—submissive readers included—become objects to be manipulated" (223). Laura Tanner has given a similar account of the novel's seductive power, pointing out that it gives us "a sense of being at once subjected to and guilty of violence," as "we become victims of a narrative force that our own participation as readers helps to create" (114).<sup>12</sup>

The point of Ellis's 'melodramatic' rhetoric, then, may be described, to adapt a phrase from Serpell, as a 'hysterical' pursuit of intimacy. Serpell originally develops this concept of "hysterical intimacy" in a reading of Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, which she accuses of the kind of "goal-oriented trickery" (287) that has

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<sup>11</sup> To be fair to Ellis, he has not always taken this logic to the manipulative extremes of *American Psycho*. In fact, *Less Than Zero* anticipates the later work with similar depictions of 'blank vacuity,' but at key moments of his debut novel Ellis still eschews the kind of brutally 'naked' presentation of atrocities that, as I have argued, violates the unsuspecting reader of *American Psycho*. The differences are all the more obvious for Ellis's use of similar details across both texts. For instance, the earlier novel has a torture scene involving instruments—such as "a chainsaw," "an ice pick," a "wire hanger," and "a package of nails" (153)—that are similar to the ones Bateman uses. The novel's teenage narrator, however, chooses not to watch the snuff film of which this scene is a part, and so the reader of *Less Than Zero* is not directly exposed to the violence either, having to deduce it from the reactions of Clay's friends, who reconvene after having seen the footage (154). The silence that blankets this moment of murder, then, has more in common with Markson's rejection of aestheticized violence in *Vanishing Point* than with Ellis's own later narratorial excess.

<sup>12</sup> While both critics agree that Ellis's form of seduction is manipulative, they seem to differ on how to respond to the novel's violence. Tanner recommends an "oppositional reading" that rejects "the very terms of readership implicit in the text" (114). Serpell, in turn, thinks that the overproximity to Bateman's narrative forecloses such "interpretive mastery" (219). Still, in trying to recuperate the novel's uncertain charge, she argues that we can actually experience the violence "without being overwhelmed" (219). This observation contradicts many readers' experience, and Serpell agrees that the capacity for resistance is highly subjective: "For many," she concedes, "*American Psycho* makes the reader the passive object of a sweeping violence" (226). This emphasis on the subjectivity of any response to *American Psycho*, I would argue, also short-circuits an argument Serpell presents for what she considers the subversive power of Ellis's book. Contesting Tanner's view that, in the novel's sex scenes, the reader "imaginatively becomes the violator"—a feminist critique in line with my reading of the novel's mode of 'communication as penetration'—Serpell contends that "the sex scenes function as spaces of uncertainty, even resistance" (215). Of course, it is possible that these scenes have unpredictable effects on a female reader who, as Serpell speculates, "takes pleasure in bisexual sex scenes dominated by a misogynistic homophobic heterosexual male" (216). But while it is true that someone may be able to read Ellis's novel subversively, this is not due to anything the book itself, or its author, has done. Readers, female readers in particular, have long been forced to adapt to mainstream depictions of sexuality in order to derive pleasure from them in spite of their intent. To draw the conclusion that, therefore, all mainstream depictions are potentially subversive is true, but only trivially so.

been associated here with the manipulative aspects of literary seduction. Her argument revolves in particular around the last fifteen pages of the novel, which, through the contrivance of a flipbook, “produce[s] an illusion of motion that intensifies readerly emotion” as we flip through the pages and thus reverse the death of a man falling from the collapsing World Trade Center (282). Foer’s interpellation of the reader here, Serpell claims, is “literally manipulative” in the sense that it always “catches us red-handed” (282), after our participation in an imaginative act whose “outcome,” as Newton has it, the author already “knows.”

Incidentally, the same can be said, though Serpell does not do so, of Dave Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, a novel she discusses alongside *EL&IC*. The ending of Eggers’s book, which dramatizes a Generation-X yearning for transcendent intimacy with the other, is a misguided attempt at overcoming the isolation of ontological uncertainty that fails precisely because the author gives in to the kind of reader manipulation that Serpell attacks in Foer’s novel. It shows us the narrator, a lapsed Catholic, running on a deserted beach after having thrown his mother’s ashes into Lake Michigan. Since there is no church community left for him, he turns to the profane communion with the reader, interpellating her in violent language to literally devour him through the act of reading his words: “Oh do it, do it, you motherfuckers, do it do it you fuckers” (437). The critic Benjamin Widiss sees in this ending a renovation of faith for Eggers, who “casts the very material of his book—the paper itself—as a Eucharistic substance hovering at the cusp of reembodying its author” (111).

But while it is true that the narrator seems to have been left hanging on the cusp of connection, Eggers is in truth more manipulative here than this open ending seems to suggest. After all, by the time the reader has read these last sentences, ‘melodramatically’ exhorting her to devour him in the very form of the book, the desired connection will already have been

completed. This denial of the reader's agency in the very attempt at soliciting it, then, is manipulative in a way not unlike Ellis's seductive appeal to the reader to contribute to her own victimization.<sup>13</sup> What all three writers have in common, it seems, is a mistrust in the energies unleashed by the affective thrust of their narratives—a mistrust that compels them to secure the desired “outcome” before any readerly engagement has even begun.

That these postmodern writers are driven by an essentially skeptical desire to ‘possess’ the meaning of their narratives, then, rather than acknowledge the reader's otherness by surrendering their need to know the “outcome,” underlines once more the continuities between modernism and postmodernism presented in this chapter. Indeed, thinkers of the new objectivity such as Brecht propagated a coldness and detachment we recognize, *mutatis mutandis*, in Ellis's rhetoric of shock and awe today. The willingness to subordinate one's ethics to an expedient political goal, then, does not seem to have disappeared after the rupture with modernism. However, “if every political path to the goal is justifiable,” as Lethen notes, “means and ends have no necessary ties between them” (38). And in the absence of this necessity, to quote once more Sloterdijk's epigraph that frames this chapter, the cynical use of revolutionary means will always contain “something false.”

An alternative to such shock doctrines is the “truth of skepticism”—that I can only recognize you if you let yourself be revealed to me, and that you will only reveal yourself to me if I reveal myself to you. This kind of revelation, I believe, further helps identify the concept of the self under the sign of proximity I develop in this study. After all, such acknowledgment involves more than the Kantian call for mutuality and respect between armored egos, a mainstay of liberal humanism. As Iris Murdoch remarks in her late study *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, “Kant's impersonal call of duty inspires respect, awe, fear, but not love” (146). To be human, however, as both Smith and Wallace emphasize,

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<sup>13</sup> Lee Konstantinou concurs with this charge of manipulation in the novel's ending. Eggers, he writes, struggles to exercise interpretative control here, “thus having his readers enact—by reading his memoir—a version of his own story,” his own experience of “post-ironic grace” (*Characters* 198).

means needing something to love—something other, something that is not us—and it requires that we work on our will, overcoming our shame and learning to be sated by whatever closeness is offered under the name of love. For what the discussion in this chapter has shown is that the only alternative to risking the vulnerability that comes with loving another is utter isolation, the loss of the other, which is also a loss of the self.

### 3. Ironically Earnest, Earnestly Ironic: Stuckness in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

From the fact that irony is present, it does not follow that earnestness is excluded. That is something only assistant professors assume.

—S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*

In the last chapter, I developed a concept of literary seduction as a form of gift. In this chapter, I exemplify such seduction through the mood of ‘stuckness,’ a cognitive breakdown accompanied by anxious wonder, which is the central affect and structuring device of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. I argue that Wallace primes his readers to experience this kind of paralysis as a form of proximate irony, which, as Kierkegaard hints in the epigraph above, transcends the opposition between earnest and ironic modes of communication that dominates the current debate about irony. Take the youngsters at E.T.A., the tennis academy in Enfield, MA, which functions as the setting for major parts of *Infinite Jest*. These tennis aces frequently experience feelings of entrapment, some of which issue from plain teenage angst, as in the case of sixteen-year old Anton Doucette, who is paralyzed by self-consciousness about a large mole on his lip. “Frozen on this anxiety, unable to move” (390), Doucette turns to self-abuse, pounding himself on the chest to distract himself from his fear of ridicule. But, as the novel’s narrator reports: “Doucette says it’s like he’s stuck. It’s becoming all he’s thinking about” (390).

‘Stuckness’ also prevails in the case of another E.T.A. youth, Lamont Chu, though the stakes have now risen from teenage discontent to a deeper confusion about existential values. Chu’s aspirations to be a part of ‘the Show’—E.T.A.’s shorthand for the A.T.P. Tour—are the result of the boy’s envy for its top players. Yet what Chu learns is that the recognition he strives for, to the point that “he can’t eat or sleep or sometimes even pee” (388), has become just as enslaving to these players as his own striving to get to a place they already inhabit. As

with Doucette, the boy feels “stuck in the cage from either side.” “Fame or tortured envy of fame,” Chu reflects bitterly, “There’s no way out” (389).

Nothing, however, illustrates the dangers of this desire for recognition like the story of Eric Clipperton. Appearing seemingly out of nowhere, Clipperton one day enters the tournament cycle and immediately wins the Hartford Jr. Open—not, however, due to athletic prowess, but based on a particular kind of hostage-taking scenario: Clipperton, the narrator tells us, “plays competitive tennis with a Glock at his left temple” (409), threatening suicide if he loses. His opponents in turn, understandably “unwilling to sacrifice Clipperton’s hostage (Clipperton *même*)” (409), engage in absurd forms of multitasking on the court: they talk on the phone, work on their tan, and try trick shots, all to avoid winning and thus having the boy’s death on their conscience. Tennis officials adapt to this instance of ‘stuckness’—the new reality that, as the narrator points out, “[a] win over Clipperton had no meaning because a *loss* to Clipperton had no meaning” (408)—by essentially creating two tournaments: one for Clipperton, and one for everybody else at the Show. This truce ensures both the rankings’ continued viability and Clipperton’s continued existence; still, among participants of the Show he becomes a *persona non grata* who is treated with “that kind of stiffly conspicuous nonrecognition that e.g. accompanies farts at formal functions” (410). A mistake made by a systems analyst, who is unaware of Clipperton’s story and ranks him #1, upsets the fragile equilibrium of this arrangement and thus pushes the feeling of ‘stuckness’ inherent in this episode to an extreme: in fact, contrary to everyone’s expectation that Clipperton will retire now that he has finally achieved the recognition of being “a real and sanctioned #1” (431), the boy ends his life. His death-by-suicide is the logical endpoint of Doucette and Chu’s feeling that “[t]here’s no way out” (389). Having finally achieved #1-status, Clipperton is still being denied recognition—a denial that is due to the very strategy he used to become #1 in the first place. Faced with this utmost form of ‘stuckness,’ Clipperton “blows his legitimated

brains out for real” (433), prompting Wallace’s narrator to remark that the boy had “lent the cliché ‘Win or Die in the Attempt’ grotesquely literal new levels of sense” (408). In the case of Clipperton, the novel suggests, it’s ‘Win and Then Die Anyway.’

While not always with such fatal consequences, ‘stuckness’ emerges in all kinds of situations in *Infinite Jest*. Beyond the tennis academy, it is characters like Ken Erdedy, an advertising executive with a marijuana habit, who illustrate this type of paralysis. Stuck in his apartment while waiting for his drug dealer, Erdedy becomes nearly catatonic with the inability to do anything but intently listen to the silence in his place for fear of missing the dealer’s call. When something finally moves him, the sound of his phone and doorbell ringing at the same time, it only does so for a second; with the amalgamated sound allegorizing the impasse of being faced with two equal choices, Erdedy simply freezes splayed between door and telephone. And this is where the reader leaves him, “entombed between the two sounds, without a thought in his head” (27), in a moment of unthinking stillness that is eerily reminiscent of Slothrop’s disappearance in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, wherein Slothrop, as I pointed out, has “[n]ot a thing in his head” (638), either.

The critic Stefan Mattessich has described *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a novel that is “aware of itself as caught in a breakdown signaled by a *repetition without sense*” (79). Building on Pynchon’s conflation of Nazi Germany and 1960s California, he reads *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in concepts provided by the hippie counterculture, as an escapist withdrawal into “reverie” (5). As a result, the novel seems to him “strangely determined” by “a kind of static motion” (82). In trying to make sense of similar episodes in *Infinite Jest*, Jeffrey Karnicky employs a vocabulary that is similar to Mattessich’s terminology. Indeed, Wallace’s novel, Karnicky argues, promotes manifestations of “stasis”: a breakdown of one’s sense of agency in the world. This is a breakdown, however, that involves frenzied movement: for Karnicky, *Infinite*

*Jest* reads like “a drunk staggering around a lamppost,” with the novel “counterintuitively stagger[ing] back to the post again and again,” thus “continually breaking down” (97).

That Karnicky’s sense of stasis in *Infinite Jest* resembles Mattessich’s reading of Pynchon’s novel—which Wallace, as Max reports, first read as an undergraduate over an implausible period of eight days (34)—is not surprising in light of the fact that both Karnicky and Mattessich share a commitment to poststructuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Thus Karnicky ties the sense of ‘stasis’ he discovers in *Infinite Jest* to a Deleuzian “mutant” subjectivity (121): a new liberating configuration of the self beyond the strictures of the “complex liberal subject” (120), moving toward the same Dionysian flux that also fascinated the revolutionaries of the new objectivity I discussed in the last chapter. Do these shared critical allegiances make poststructuralist readings of Pynchon’s novel a promising model for understanding the kind of ‘stuckness’ Wallace presents—indeed, for reading *Infinite Jest* as partaking of the same philosophical commitments as *Gravity’s Rainbow*?

Karnicky would presumably answer in the affirmative. And there is at least one sense in which he gets Wallace’s attitude quite right. As my discussion of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* in previous chapters has shown, Wallace sought ways for literature to respond *self-consciously* to the loneliness that results from the assumption of an existential primary separation of self and world. After all, Wallace’s assertion that Markson’s great achievement had been to “[make] facts sad” (89) indicates that, for Wallace, experimental novels like *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* were a means by which this rock-solid separation of subject and object, fact and value, could be weakened.

Not surprisingly, then, in the same essay in which he celebrates Markson’s avant-gardism, Wallace also endorses the “Pynchonian contraparanoidia” (88) of another great experimental novel, *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Indeed, he regarded the novel’s paranoia of global conspiracies in which everything is connected, while “wacko & unpleasant” (88), as a

metaphysic capable of reinstating a sense of wholeness. After all, the upshot of Markson's Wittgensteinian lesson was that, in the absence of any standpoint outside of language that would allow for an account of our relationship with it, paranoia becomes indistinguishable from meaning making. This is as close as possible to Pynchon, who presents paranoia in *Gravity's Rainbow* as "something comforting—religious," all the while acknowledging that "anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, [is] a condition not many of us can bear for long" (441).

In another sense, however, there is a subtle difference to Pynchon, who narrates Slothrop's disappearance as if to hint at the possibilities a posthumanist dissolution of the self could inaugurate. As I noted before, Wallace seems to have been much more interested in preserving a self he saw as always already endangered by the threat of skepticism. To be sure, Pynchon has respect for the human propensity to create designs as well, regarding it as the consequence of our inability to tolerate a void of meaning. There is, however, a difference in emphasis between these two writers: though not immune to Pynchon's celebration of countercultural romanticism, Wallace tends to dramatize the difficulties of such attempts at losing oneself in drugs or entertainment, often viewing them as ways of avoiding engagement and self-confrontation. Indeed, if our ignorance of the difference between paranoia and truth results in joyous passivity, then, from Wallace's vantage point, Pynchon emphasizes primarily *one* side of the double-bind of skepticism. The other side with its associations of agency and responsibility, "anti-paranoia" in Pynchon's terms, deserves to be taken equally seriously. In fact, as Wallace argues in "The Empty Plenum," it was one of the strengths of Markson's novel to suspend us between both extremes, "neither all-responsible nor impotent" (115). In this study, I am trying to capture the constitutive doubleness of this stance through a concept of proximity that avoids full fusion as well as radical detachment, thus doing justice to both "paranoia" and "anti-paranoia."

Indeed, if Wallace's undergraduate discovery of Pynchon, as his friend Mark Costello told Max, was "like Bob Dylan finding Woody Guthrie" (*Ghost* 31), Wallace later seems to have had his own Dylan-goes-electric moment, out from under the shadow of the master, away from Pynchon's flirtation with posthumanism and towards the importance of humanist values like responsibility and self-awareness. This difference between their respective presentations of immobility—release for Pynchon, 'stuckness' for Wallace—has implications for an assessment of Karnicky's concept of stasis. In short, Wallace cared more for the skeptic's embattled self than Karnicky's account indicates. This insinuates strongly that stasis as Karnicky defines it cannot fully capture the complexity of Wallace's treatment of 'stuckness' in *Infinite Jest*.<sup>1</sup>

Interpreters who are not attuned to this distinction between Wallace and Pynchon run the risk of identifying 'stuckness' in *Infinite Jest* with a final breakdown of the system of the self—an entropic disintegration which, in Pynchon's work, is associated with the ludic possibilities of a playfulness beyond the requirements of modern life. For those readers, it may indeed seem as if Wallace's central preoccupation, the creation of double-binds that vex the mind and startle the soul, could lead to nothing but nihilism. And in light of Wallace's own untimely end, stories like Clipperton's demise may seem to them to foreshadow what could only be regarded as the inevitable outcome of Wallace's fascination with 'stuckness.' Indeed, this is the interpretive route that the philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Adam Kelly pursue in *All Things Shining*.

In their view, Wallace stood for something more encompassing than his individual depression, which, however, made him "peculiarly sensitive to something that pervades the

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<sup>1</sup> I am wary of contrasting Karnicky's concept of 'stasis' too sharply with the concept of 'stuckness,' though. Indeed, 'stasis' shares with 'stuckness' the "ability to dwell in fascination" (167); moreover, Karnicky reads 'stasis,' somewhat like the Socratic desire for transcendence, as a "blockage [that] can produce new lines of flight" (172). Still, there are no indications that Wallace thought about these issues in a Deleuzian frame of mind, even if he, as Lucas Thompson notes, "was familiar with *Anti-Oedipus*" (143). After all, his humanist commitment to the importance of the self differs in some important respects from Deleuze's posthumanist aspirations.

culture” (24). In fact, for Dreyfus and Kelly, what Karnicky calls *Infinite Jest*’s “drunk staggering around a lamppost” (97) is an expression of modern self-consciousness at large: “we say something, wonder about what we’ve said, unsay it, ask about it again, circle back to it from a different perspective, qualify it, unqualify it, and so on” (23). And since, as Wallace notes, “we are very much Nietzsche’s children” (“Dostoevsky” 264fn14), Dreyfus and Kelly explicitly read the vision drawn up by *Infinite Jest* as “a Nietzschean one” (45). “[Nietzsche] shared with Wallace the nihilistic idea,” they explain, “that, once that transformation [to a secular age] had finally occurred—as it has in Wallace’s world—the lone source of meaning in human existence would be the strong individual’s force of will” (46). Since Wallace took his own life, however, they cannot resist the temptation to read his depression back into his fiction; and what they see in this frame of mind has nothing of the joyous possibilities Nietzsche connected with a ‘transvaluation of values,’ i.e., with the move from a passive to an active form of nihilism, which, as Nietzsche remarks in his late notebooks, “comes from the will to insert a meaning, a *new* meaning, into what has become meaningless” (79). In the final analysis, then, they associate the whole project of transvaluation with the solipsistic delusion of believing oneself a god or a goddess: “[T]here is no joy in Wallace’s world. It is as if the true burden of this responsibility [...] was too much for any human spirit to achieve. It is a possibility that requires us to become gods ourselves” (46). Given Dreyfus and Kelly’s post-secular aim to prepare their readers “for the sacred possibilities still alive in the modern world” (29), it is not surprising that they dismiss Wallace after having framed his work in Nietzschean terms. After all, by identifying Wallace with the modern ideal of radical autonomy, which is notably different from the kind of autonomy Wallace actually endorsed in “The Empty Plenum,” they put themselves in the position of connecting his personal

‘failure’ with the culture of modernity at large. This argument, however, relies on a selective reading of both Nietzsche and Wallace.<sup>2</sup>

For one, their reading of Nietzsche overlooks the dialogic aspects of the transvaluation of values. Far from believing himself to be a creator-god, Nietzsche was first and foremost a writer in search of an audience. Indeed, in the figure of Zarathustra returning to the townspeople from his mountain cave, Nietzsche also specifies his own intended audience: those “bold searchers, researchers” who are “glad of the twilight” that falls with the coming of the night of nihilism and prepares the dawn of an unknown day (III 2). The literary question of which audience could properly receive a work as radically disruptive as Nietzsche’s must therefore be regarded as inextricable from his philosophical hopes.

Dreyfus and Kelly lapse into an early mode of Nietzsche criticism that ignored such literary questions. And against their foil of Nietzsche as a monologic thinker, their Nietzschean Wallace becomes a radical individualist, too—someone who imagines himself capable of creating “a happier meaning by the sheer force of his individual will” (41).<sup>3</sup> Yet this interpretation underestimates the degree to which Wallace designed his fiction as dialogic, a choice highlighted by Katherine Nichols and Adam Kelly.<sup>4</sup> The challenge of all writing, Wallace reflected in a letter to a creative writing class at Yale, “is to form and honor a fairly rigorous contract with the reader” (“Tricky”). And while Wallace, as I explained in the last chapter, stressed that all the novelist’s efforts at seduction have to be for the benefit

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<sup>2</sup> Dreyfus and Kelly concede this selectiveness: “This Nietzschean interpretation of Wallace is contradicted by certain passages in *Infinite Jest*” (229). They attribute this to the fact that “Wallace’s position is nothing like a single, well-developed philosophical view; it is more like a pastiche of observations, many of which conflict with one another [...] Nietzsche’s own perspectivism about truth comes to mind” (229). It is surprising to me, especially in light of Dreyfus’s stature as a teacher of Kierkegaard’s work, that they do not connect this perspectivism to a deeply rooted irony that runs through Nietzsche’s, and Wallace’s, work.

<sup>3</sup> It is quite ironic, in this regard, that the description Dreyfus and Kelly give to what they endorse as the “whooshing up” of “the sacred” exemplifies the same detachment from the world’s particularity they denounce in Wallace. In fact, as Tracy Fessenden has recently argued in “The Problem of the Postsecular,” postsecular philosophers tend to locate the sacred in a form of absorption in “individual feeling” that does not allow, as Fessenden notes by way of “a particularly damning example of the kind of decontextualizing” she finds in *All Things Shining*, for a discerning distinction between a touchdown by the Demon Deacons and Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have A Dream’ speech (162).

<sup>4</sup> See Katherine Nichols, “Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*”; and Adam Kelly, “Development through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas.”

of the reader, he also felt relief by honoring this contract and giving his text away to the reader, viewing such liberation as the takeaway from “Barthian and Derridean poststructuralism,” as he told Larry McCaffery in 1993 (40).

This awareness that complete responsibility for meaning making was a burden to be delegated is reflected in a story from Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. The story, one of the titular interviews, features a reclusive adolescent who compulsively engages in an erotic fantasy inspired by the TV show *Bewitched*: he imagines himself capable of temporarily freezing all people around him except for a woman with whom he has frenzied sex. As the logic of his fantasy unfolds, however, freezing his immediate vicinity no longer suffices, because the boy imagines intruders chancing upon the scenario; consequently, he realizes the need for his control to expand further, soon encompassing our planet, the nearest galaxies, finally the whole universe—“an infinitely complex responsibility” that, as the boy realizes, is “more befitting of a God than a mere boy” (116).<sup>5</sup> The final detail that the boy’s superpower lands him in a mental institution shows, *pace* Dreyfus and Kelly, that Wallace was aware of the dangers involved in trying to control meaning individually. What this means

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<sup>5</sup> Wilson Kaiser has argued that “the internal tensions of this tragi-comic conclusion describe an involved irony that is fundamentally different from the detached irony of postmodernism” (38), calling such a style of writing a form of “proximal irony.” This approach deserves credit for continuing to think about Wallace’s fiction in terms of irony, especially in light of the orthodoxy in Wallace Studies that he was a post- or anti-ironic writer; in fact, Kaiser’s recognition of an “involved irony” anticipates my own account of the ‘first-personal’ character of Wallace’s irony. There are, however, two problematic claims in Kaiser’s article, one historical, the other systematic. For one, Kaiser introduces “proximal irony” as a description of “Humor after Postmodernism.” The chronology implicit in this title resonates with the narrative of postmodern irony’s fall from grace Wallace himself proposed in his manifesto “E Unibus Pluram.” But a range of scholars have recently questioned the utility of that essay as a hermeneutic for his entire oeuvre, with Jeffrey Severs speaking for many when he calls for “more reading of the tales against the teller’s precepts” (5). As such, I take up Severs’s contention that Wallace’s “calls back to the ancient” invoke “a much, much deeper past on the subject of value” (4) by introducing a concept of *proximate* irony that has accompanied its detached manifestations at least since Socrates. Secondly, Kaiser insinuates that Wallace saw as the only response to postmodern detachment a turn to “intensive absorption in a delimited world” (41). Thus he writes of *The Pale King*’s Chris Fogle that he “is drawn to accountancy because it is a practice that promises to immerse him fully” (41). Even leaving aside the question whether Fogle, or indeed any Wallace character, ever achieves this state the way Kaiser envisions, I have reservations about the desirability of full absorption as an existential attitude, broadly speaking, or as a description of Wallace’s aesthetic aims. By contrast, my concept of proximity avoids the collapse of all distance, which arguably short-circuits critique in a way that is antithetical to Wallace’s calls for care in choosing, but also takes into account the movement into closeness Wallace associated with the idea of love.

for an evaluation of Wallace's project, then, is that it seems more befitting to seek in it a delineation of human limitation than an attempt at fully transcending such constraints.

Nietzsche has similarly been charged with aspiring to a god-like position of superiority. The same Nietzsche who exposes the groundlessness of all values, this argument goes, can introduce any *new* values only at the cost of self-contradiction and paradox. What this claim amounts to, however, is an ill-advised fitting of Nietzsche's perspectivism into the straightjacket of classical logic. Nietzsche did not make the mistake of thinking his own construct superior to all other constructs. He was fully aware that his arguments were themselves open to agonistic critique and could, ultimately, be refuted. In fact, he staged such overcoming within the work itself. For instance, his proclamation in *The Gay Science* that "[w]e need new gods" (§125), which Dreyfus and Kelly allude to, is undercut by a paratextual poem that ends as follows: "laugh at each master, mark me well/who at himself has not poked fun" (1). This poem puts into perspective any statements by the "master," in this case Nietzsche himself, including the purported need for new deities. It is precisely because Nietzsche does not provide absolute answers in the guise of a creator-god that he must undermine the statements of his various personae—aphorist, polemicist, critic, prophet—by ironically 'poking fun' at these 'masters.' What is left after this auto-deconstruction, then, is irony, and a tentativeness in handling new prophesies, new affirmations, whether one's own or those of others.

Dreyfus and Kelly do not consider the possibility of such an ironic distancing in Nietzsche. Tied into their overall attack on modern culture is an implicit rejection of irony, which, for them, is "an autonomous and self-sufficient way of life that laughs at everything of sacred worth" (220). Having prepared this picture of Nietzsche, they simultaneously foreclose the possibility of detecting irony in their Nietzschean Wallace. But it is significant that Mario Incandenza, one of the sons of the tennis academy's founder in *Infinite Jest* and

the novel's foremost model of openness and empathy, responds with humor to Clipperton's case of 'stuckness,' finding it hilarious "in ways he can't be very articulate about" (410). Precisely the possibility of such a kind of humor will be explored in the following attempt at making sense of Wallace's 'stuckness.' Rather than seeing in it, like Karnicky, a flirtation with escapist 'stasis,' or, in Dreyfus and Kelly's terms, the necessary failure of a nihilistic worldview, I will argue that the best way to read 'stuckness' in *Infinite Jest* is as Socratic aporia. Dreyfus and Kelly are justified in highlighting the importance of recursivity and infinity for Wallace; but another way of approaching these aspects is by saying that his work is inherently ironic. Far from degenerating into detached play, this kind of irony involves a self-conscious attempt at reinhabiting the social identities available, based on an attitude I call, taking a cue from Wallace's own use of the rhetorical figure of chiasmus, 'earnestly ironic, ironically earnest.' With its multiple valences, this chiasmus restores an ancient aspect of irony, namely irony as proximity, which has been lost in recent interpretations of Wallace's work as a turn to postironic belief or to a New Sincerity.

In fact, what I present here as Wallace's interest in an earlier notion of irony provides an occasion for a reevaluation of irony at a time when it is under attack from proponents of sincerity and earnestness. This reevaluation will first explore Wallace's irony, comparing it to a range of twentieth-century thinkers, until settling on an account of his irony as chiefly first-personal. I will then take the measure of our current cultural climate, highlighting the centrality of Wallace's thought for prominent conceptions of contemporary art. As part of this discussion, I outline irony's internal division between conceptions as detachment or proximity, emphasizing the latter in order to counteract the predominance of the former in our postmodern times. In the end, *Infinite Jest* eludes any straightforward classification as a work of detached or proximate irony; but this conclusion, I argue, is itself a call for readers to

inhabit the text's uncertain "silence" and thereby meet the ethical challenge of determining themselves in response to it.

### **Ironies of Enlightenment**

To be sure, there is something discomfoting about a humor that, as in response to Clipperton's desperation, laughs in the face of misery. It must be peculiar indeed, represented by enigmatic characters such as the empathetic boy and the suicidal tennis player. Still, there is the fact that this humor is presented as related to the challenge of 'stuckness' so central to the novel. *Infinite Jest* does not attempt to cover over this question of Mario's "homodontic laugh" and Clipperton's involuntary smile (410); to the contrary, it positively raises it by focalizing Mario and Clipperton through a narrator who is just as bewildered by their unlikely bond as the reader. When they share their moment of hilarity, the narrator watches from a distance, hedging and betraying uncertainty about the joke that "Clipperton has apparently just let slip" (410). The narrator's discomfort is similarly palpable when reporting that the tennis community "somehow regarded it as healthy that Mario Incandenza's perfectly even smile never faltered even through tears at Clipperton's funeral" (433).

While the narrator's puzzlement, then, offers no hint as to the source of this mysterious cheerfulness, another person at E.T.A is also introduced as capable of comprehending Clipperton—a staff member named Lyle, who is called upon to dissuade the young player from taking his own life. This Lyle is an ambiguous figure. As E.T.A's expert on "conditioning and injury-prevention" (128), he is familiar with the player's episodes of 'stuckness,' having debated them in late-night counselling sessions in the sauna and weight room. Yet the figure these young people turn to is not an unequivocal antidote to 'stuckness,' but rather another instance of it: a parody of a guru "in Spandex and tank top" (127), who literally lives off of the sweat and tears of others but also dispenses "little nugget[s] of

fitness-guru wisdom” (128) that allow those who are stuck to recognize their immobility. Lyle seems to be aware of his own contradictory character; after all, he introduces his ‘nuggets’ of wisdom to the players as “Remarks” (389), ostensibly inflected to indicate a certain distance to his stories. The narrator peeking in at the sauna sessions in turn mirrors this irony by capitalizing “Remarks,” as well. And it is one of these ironically framed stories that opens up a way of thinking about ‘stuckness’ beyond depression and suicide, a ‘Remark’ which relates the case of a man Lyle once knew:

This man earned his living by going to various public sites where people congregated and were bored and impatient and cynical [and] he’d go in and bet people that he could stand on any chair in the place and then lift that chair up off the ground while standing on it. [...] They gaze up at a man who is standing 100% on top of a chair he has grabbed the back of and raised several m. off the ground. [...] [And then he] walks off, leaving behind a dumbfounded crowd still staring up at an object he had not underestimated. (395)

Of particular importance is the adjective ‘cynical’ in the description of the by-standers to this physics-defying stunt. Unlike the man, they “underestimate objects”—which, in this context, is tantamount to saying they think they know what to expect of them. Stuck in their view of things, they feel they cannot hope to be refuted by surprising circumstances. And it is this ‘stuckness,’ which the text deliberately puts in the context of modern cynicism, that leaves them “dumbfounded” upon witnessing what could only be described as a miracle. The ‘Remark,’ then, stages an opposition between a cynical and a naive view of things, in the end surprisingly siding with naiveté; thus it raises the question of what it is in the by-standers’ cynicism that causes them to “underestimate objects.”

Cynicism, in Peter Sloterdijk’s influential account in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, is defined as “enlightened false consciousness” (5). Yet Sloterdijk notes right away the irony of this phrase, which posits a concept that simultaneously asserts and revokes the Enlightenment promise of changing the world through the ‘right,’ namely enlightened, kind of consciousness. In modern cynicism, then, enlightened and false consciousness coincide

paradoxically, making the whole project of the Enlightenment seem wrong-headed and futile. Nevertheless, like *Infinite Jest*, Sloterdijk's *Critique* is far from a straightforward indictment of Enlightenment philosophy. Sloterdijk even approves of the nihilistic move beyond absolute values in the manner of a good Enlightenment thinker, all the while asserting the incompleteness of such a move if it does not also take account of the way people live with nihilism. And it is here, in the effects of nihilism on individual selves, that Sloterdijk locates modern cynicism, the central phenomenon of a postmodern culture we studied in the last chapter.

Sloterdijk thus approaches the political problem of cynicism by turning the matter inwards, towards the human self and its requirements in a culture that seems to offer two options for emancipation, identified by Andreas Huyssen as "the armoured ego of Kant's epistemological subject [and] the schizosubjectivity without identity, the free flow of libidinal energies proposed by Deleuze and Guattari" (xiii). In light of the "reconstructed proximity of experience" Huyssen posits between Weimar and postmodernism (xxii), it is not surprising that these options mirror those of the 1920s thinkers I used as a foil for reading Ellis in the last chapter. At that point, I noted the defensiveness of the Kantian option and the lack of defences associated with Deleuze and Guattari's solution. Sloterdijk has a similar argument, finding neither version of selfhood satisfactory. But he is not after a synthesis of these extremes, either; rather, he pits them against one another in the intuition of a space *between* the Kantian valorization of subjectivity and its dissolution in poststructuralist thought. As such, his *Critique* oscillates between a concept of the self as fortress, which always already runs the risk of skepticism, and the kind of deterritorialized "crossroads" that Pynchon's Slothrop turns into at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

The same ambivalence applies to *Infinite Jest* in general and to Wallace's character Lyle in particular. In fact, that Wallace wanted this character and his engagement with 'stuckness'

to be read in the context of Enlightenment philosophy, indeed as updating this humanist tradition in line with the account of contemporary fiction I present here, can be inferred from the imagery pervading Lyle's locker room scenes: as a thunderstorm flashes across the sky, the huddled youth and their guru form a tableaux that is split along the time-honored dichotomy of obscurantism and enlightenment, with the players nestled into "the dark weight room" (387) and Lyle, seated above them in full lotus, functioning as a "strobe" for the lightning coming in from the sea (395). Thus Lyle's 'Remarks' are configured as similarly illuminating as the person dispensing them. What the ironic capitalization of Lyle's stories indicates, however, is that Wallace refuses to provide unambiguous answers to the problem of cynicism; rather, he follows Sloterdijk in viewing precisely such a desire for absolute values as a factor in the deterioration of nihilism to cynical disillusionment. Hence Lyle's teachings are inherently irreconcilable, with the contrast between them mirroring Wallace's confident uncertainty about the role of skepticism in our lives.

For one, the directive that caps off Lyle's 'Remark' is "do *not* underestimate objects" (394). This is tantamount to pointing out the skeptical threat of getting lost in one's own mind, behind the fortified walls of the Kantian self. But the story is told chiefly in response to the players' anxieties about recognition such as Lamont Chu's desire for fame—a strategy of seeking validation in order "to give [one's] life some sort of meaning" (388) that finds its lethal culmination in Clipperton's case of recognition as nonrecognition. Thus Lyle's 'Remark' fulfills the Enlightenment promise of freeing the players from delusions by exposing their yearning for a foundation outside themselves as "one of [the world's] oldest lies" (389). After all, what emerges from his "bootstrap-type scenario" (395) in spite of its absurdity—no chair can serve as both footing and object to be lifted—is an intuition I explained in the first chapter: namely, that there may be something of value in the idea of validating one's self autonomously, as in the culture of modernity so maligned by Dreyfus

and Kelly. Wallace even doubles down on such ‘deep nonsense’ through another one of Lyle’s ‘Remarks,’ which, in a parody of prophetic language tailored to his fitness room surroundings, warns the kids not to let “the weight thou wouldst pull to thyself exceed thine own weight” (128). With its implication of a tug of war between self and other, this message seems to be directed against Deleuzian ‘schizosubjectivity’: giving yourself away entirely to the world of objects, absorbed and dispersed in between them. In his ‘Remarks,’ then, Lyle emphasizes both sides of the double bind of skepticism which Wallace, referencing Pynchon, called ‘paranoia’ and ‘contraparanoia.’ What this strategy amounts to is an inability on the part of the reader to synthesize the two viewpoints of other-validation and self-validation, foundationalism and nihilism—a fundamental ‘stuckness’ that may coincide with laughter.

Such laughter would be fully in line with Sloterdijk’s *Critique*. For cynicism is not the only way of answering nihilism. Rather, Sloterdijk follows in Nietzsche’s footsteps by meeting the ambivalences of nihilism with an attitude he calls ‘kynicism’ to indicate its affinities with the cynical mood, though it is in some ways the opposite of cynical detachment—a way of arguing with the body that, like Benjamin’s “spasms of the body,” brings people back into proximity through laughter. Sloterdijk locates the origin of this kynicism in a split that is *internal* to the concept of cynicism and can be traced back to the ancient change from “a plebeian, humorous culture-critique to a cynical ruler’s satire” (174).

The way Wallace configured the public setting in Lyle’s ‘Remark’ attests to his awareness of this shift in cynical consciousness. After all, as David Mazella has noted, early cynics like Diogenes placed a distinctive “emphasis upon the crowd in their philosophy,” in fact depending on crowds of “gawkers, gapers, and onlookers who react to [their] provocations” (27). While the early cynics, then, ‘inhabited the stage,’ in Lyle’s story they have changed sides: now it is those who are described as “bored and impatient and cynical” (395) that make up the *demos*, witnessing the dismantling of a familiar convention. This is

precisely the inversion of cynicism Sloterdijk describes as critique having “chang[ed] sides” (174).

In this rediscovery of an ancient form of critical emancipation, Sloterdijk deviates from Heidegger and Adorno, who also reached back into the past to find the fork in the road of history where humanity could have taken a different turn. Unlike Heidegger, he inherits a different legacy of nihilism from Nietzsche than solemnity, instead emphasizing the disruptive power of Nietzschean irony. Furthermore, Sloterdijk replaces Adorno and Horkheimer’s talk of a dialectical reversal of the Enlightenment project with a more embodied notion of the “irony of Enlightenment” (140) that is fully in line with the change of affect I trace in Wallace’s continuation of the Enlightenment project. Indeed, Sloterdijk’s kynical answer to the ‘sad science’ of his Frankfurt School teachers, who pathologized laughter, in Anca Parvulescu’s phrase, as “the new opium of the people” (*Laughter* 149), is a truly ‘gay science.’ As its Nietzschean provenance indicates, this form of critique has not forgotten its roots in satire. Consequently, it understands that it cannot be a discipline founded on ‘objectivity’ and thus seeks to diminish any ‘scientific’ distance to its opponent. In Sloterdijk’s view, the means by which it achieves this is humor. But while he asserts that kynical laughter, unlike cynical objectification, is not in the service of domination, it is unclear whether Sloterdijk can successfully hold on to a notion of satirical critique that altogether avoids hostility. As Huysen points out, it is difficult to imagine “a nonhostile, nonobjectifying satirical laughter” (xx), and Sloterdijk never addresses what happens to people after the kynics are done laughing at them. This ambivalence is also recognizable in the work of Thomas Pynchon, another great writer in the satirical tradition.

Pynchon encoded an explanation of his own brand of humor into a scene in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Following Slothrop’s release into flux, the narration moves back, by analepsis, to an account of Slothrop playing harmonica, describing the way he ‘bends’ notes on his Hohner

blues harp as a transformation of pain: “you suck a clear note, on pitch, and then bend it lower with the muscles of your face. Muscles of your face have been laughing, tight with pain, often trying not to betray any emotion, all your life” (656). Releasing this pain, which had been frozen in a false smile, now turns Slothrop into the kind of “blues-toned laugher-at-wounds” who, as Ralph Ellison writes of his African-American protagonist in a foreword to *Invisible Man*, was able to seize comedy as a spiritual basis for survival under seemingly hopeless conditions (xviii). Whether Pynchon generalizes oppression as a condition affecting all people in a global corporate war against the human spirit here, or whether he aims, like Mailer’s ‘White Negro,’ to participate in what Lee Konstantinou has called a mid-century “racial fantasy wherein white bodies might rebrand themselves as black” to claim the respective cultural capital (*Characters* 52)—the laughing cry of the blues emerges as the author’s preferred remedy in this scene. Steven Weisenburger seizes upon this characterization to make a connection between Slothrop, who, “just suckin’ on his harp, is closer to being a spiritual medium than he’s been yet” (634), and the ‘spiritual medium’ that is the author, Pynchon himself: “This kind of transformation might well be taken as a synecdoche for the satire in *GR*” (266). Building on a pun around the German verb ‘höhnern’ (to mock) that is implicit in Pynchon’s text, Weisenburger further determines the character of the author as medium of transformation: “thus we have a Höhner, one who sneers or derides” (267). Slothrop’s Höhner blues harp, then, symbolizes the possibility of transmuting pain into satire: a way of ‘bending’ reality like the pure notes on a blues harp such that a perspective becomes available from which to perceive aspects of hardship that are humorous and thus liberating.

Wallace had similar hopes for the function of humor in literature. In a 2004 interview with Miriam Böttger, he made a distinction between “forms of humor that offer escapes from pain and [...] forms of humor that transfigure pain.” Nevertheless, there is a real difference

between Pynchon's satire—which, like Sloterdijk's cynical laughter, runs the risk of reinstating the very oppression it aims to overcome—and Wallace's irony. This difference is implicit in their respective emphasis on character. Pynchon populates *Gravity's Rainbow* with legions of quirky characters—soldiers and scientists, dopers and damsels in distress—none of whom, however, achieve independence from his intent to use them for satirical effect. It is for this reason that James Wood has dismissed “Pynchon's characters” as “serfs to allegory,” claiming that they “do not move us, because they are not human” (*How Fiction Works* 174). In addition, Pynchon interrupts the reader's immersion by shifting from melodrama to vaudeville, from character study to screwball comedy, with characters launching into song at a moment of emotional cataclysm. In effect, as Mattessich notes, “[Pynchon's] reader no longer identifies with characters in a realist space so much as caricatures in an oscillating text-world” (94). Similarly, Markson, another important influence on Wallace, described *Gravity's Rainbow* to Tabbi as “somewhat cartoonish” (115).

As I noted in the last chapter, Wallace was by no means a stranger to such defamiliarization. Yet, owing to his concern with skepticism, he also had a genuinely humanist interest in his characters' selves, their traumas and anxieties. Talking to Silverblatt in 1996, Wallace lamented a “discomfort” in some postmodernist novelists “at how to write about sort of heartcraft.” It is this concern for its characters that moves *Infinite Jest*—which Tom Bissel has called a “gripping novel of character”—beyond mere satire and caricature.<sup>6</sup> In fact, protagonist Hal Incandenza's plea for recognition at the outset of the novel is directed precisely against such simplification: “I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex” (11). Wallace's fictional explorations of this ‘complexity’ had a compassion,

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<sup>6</sup> This argument runs counter to a common complaint about Wallace, here voiced by Christian Lorentzen, “that he was a show-off, that his own voice drowned out those of his characters.” In response, I would argue that the degree to which this applies indicates the pervasiveness of Pynchon's hold on Wallace and that his increasing respect for his character creations, beginning with *Infinite Jest*, suggests a weakening of this influence.

and at times even admiration, which makes his characters more than the ‘playthings’ populating *American Psycho* and even *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In fact, that Le Clair has dubbed Pynchon’s novel “a Brechtian epic theatre of argots and lingo” (*Loop* 18) helps identify a common source for the detachment of Pynchon’s and Ellis’s books. In Wallace, by contrast, there is a proximity to his creation that substantially affects the humor of his work, as well—turning it away from the other-directed aspect of postmodern satire, and moving it towards an irony that directs the humorous impulse inwards, towards the ironist’s self.

Some aspects of this concept of irony Wallace encountered in Paul de Man’s “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” an essay he read, as Max reports (*Ghost* 317), in Somerville in the summer of 1989, when the first narrative kernels of *Infinite Jest* began to form. It was precisely de Man’s account of irony as first-personal demystification that fascinated Wallace. Reading in the essay that the realization of one’s self-delusions coincides with a fall into ironic consciousness on the model of a man who trips and is simultaneously amused by his own misstep, “laughing at a mistaken, mystified assumption he was making about himself” (214), Wallace wrote “brilliant” in the margins next to a passage calling on the writer or philosopher to “go down himself” because “[t]he mere falling of others does not suffice”:

The ironic, twofold self that the writer or philosopher constitutes by his language seems able to come into being only at the expense of his empirical self, falling (or rising) from a stage of mystified adjustment into the knowledge of this mystification. (214)

Max reads Wallace’s marginal annotation as a general commentary on authorship (317), but the context of de Man’s passage reveals it to be specifically about irony as a consciousness capable of inhabiting both impulses of the “twofold self,” shifting back and forth between blindness and insight. And while the man in de Man’s example may have gained knowledge of his mystification in one instant, this does not prevent him from falling again at other occasions, which in turn provide further opportunities for ironically glimpsing his self-delusions. If there is such a thing as ironic wisdom, then, it can in no way affect the

inevitability of mystification—to the contrary, it is even premised upon it. The man who trips may erupt in laughter, but he stumbles anyway, and there would be no laughter if it were not for the stumbling. ‘Stuckness’ so conceived, i.e., as referring to an awareness of inevitability, is akin to what I have previously identified as the ‘deconstructive aporia’: that any text can always only refer to itself, never to the world, which is fundamentally unknowable. This awareness, however, does not lead to desperation in de Man’s account; rather, it is greeted with ironic laughter. Wallace’s annotations indicate his admiration for this kind of dedication to ironic suffering. Consequently, he granted Mario in *Infinite Jest* a similar response to Clipperton’s aporia of enforced recognition, in which “the very tactic that let him win in the first place kept the wins, and in a way Clipperton himself, from being treated as real” (431).

Like the man who trips no matter what steps he takes, Clipperton fails inevitably at his goal of being recognized, even if he ostensibly achieves recognition as a #1-ranked player. The text suggests that Clipperton ironically takes note of this aporia, but it is obvious that his constitution does not allow him to muster more than a wry smile in response. This is different in Mario’s case. When Clipperton relates his ironic wisdom to the boy, he causes him to open his mouth “very wide for a homodontic laugh” (410). And a reader of *Infinite Jest*, empathetically reimagining the novel’s many instances of ‘stuckness’—such as Lamont Chu’s desire to find a “way out” of the opposition between “fame or tortured envy of fame” (389)—may ultimately experience her very own version of Mario’s laugh, having become privy to something hilarious in inescapable breakdown. De Man’s notion of ironic aporia as first-personal experience of inevitable self-delusion, then, is conceptually rich enough to explain *Infinite Jest*’s main trope of ‘stuckness.’ Moreover, it points to irony as an affective response to such undecidability—a kind of humor that allows for a ‘way out’ of a situation from which there is, by definition, ‘no way out.’

In the end, however, de Man takes this ironic movement out of ‘stuckness’ too far—to a place Frank Lentricchia has ironically dubbed an “idealist’s heaven” (181), where the ironist surveys the remote play of history with the disaffection of the true aesthete. De Man reaches this position quite logically, based on the trajectory of his argument. Still, in the certainty of de Man’s metaphysical assumption about the ‘radical difference’ between word and thing, irony loses its point, the power to distinguish truth from fiction. Herein lies the fundamental problem of de Man’s account: he wants irony to yield truths about the human condition, but his metaphysics of irredeemable division simply do not allow for such a movement from delusion to truth. If the world is by definition out of reach, how could a subject gain knowledge about it, let alone wisdom? The only ‘wisdom’ left, de Man admits, is for the ironist to recognize “the impossibility of making [his] knowledge applicable to the empirical world” (222). In this gap between the vision of a detached ironist and the concept’s traditional aspirations, de Man’s concept of irony becomes finally incoherent. By contrast, I will now turn to a conception of irony that does not exhibit such incoherence and trace it in Wallace’s own statements on the issue of irony in contemporary culture.

### **The Contemporary Reception of Irony**

In fact, nothing exemplifies the traditional aspirations of irony better than the Socratic act of exposing his interlocutors’ ignorance that Plato dramatized in his dialogues. Given the de Manian impasse, then, it may be time for a reevaluation of the Socratic tradition of irony. This, at least, is the position taken in recent years by Jonathan Lear. Bringing psychoanalytic insights into the discourse about irony and identity, Lear locates the “Socrates effect” in a psychodynamic process that leads to an increasing desire for wisdom. What he offers in his work, then, is a notion of irony that calls the subject back into a proximate engagement with the world, oneself, and others the same way that Socrates was animated to go out onto the

Athenian marketplace to challenge conventional notions of virtue. This notion, Lear argues, has been all but lost at a time in the western world when detachment seems to be the default setting. Consequently, Lear reminds his audiences of an older conception of irony that goes beyond rhetorical dissimulation or aesthetic discernment, aspects that were emphasized in “the contemporary philosophical reception of irony,” which, as Lear asserts in his 2011 book *A Case for Irony*, “has largely been off target” (119). This is not to say that what he terms the ‘contemporary philosophical reception of irony’ is a uniform affair; quite ironically, the seemingly infinite number of essays written on irony mirrors the subject’s own tendency for the infinite. Still, some contributions have received more critical attention than others, chiefly Linda Hutcheon’s reading of irony as a discursive strategy in *Irony’s Edge* and Richard Rorty’s account of irony as the worldview of postmodernity in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. Accordingly, it is these accounts that Lear targets.

For Hutcheon, irony is an indirect transmission of information. It revolves around the presentation of a disjunct between meanings that is meant to activate its addressees to ‘make irony happen’ by observing how the first meaning seems false when measured against the second. This second meaning is fully understandable within the set of conventions available in society today; as such, it lacks the truly disruptive power of Socratic irony and its pursuit of a good that has to remain undefined for it to be untouched by established customs. In Hutcheon’s account, then, irony becomes identical with satire—a rhetorical trope elevated to the status of a literary genre. This puts her in the same camp as Sloterdijk and Pynchon, whose irreverent 1960s humor aims to expose ‘enlightened false consciousness.’ All these postmodern uses of irony are determined, and limited, by a view of irony as rhetorical tool, means of persuasion rather than insight. What worldview guides such a deployment of rhetoric, however, remains largely unaddressed in Hutcheon’s account. For Rorty, this question of attitude takes center stage. Based on a relativistic position in epistemology, Rorty

proposes a stance of metaphysical detachment that allows the ironist to keep a distance from dogmatic commitments. For his ironist, all options of meaning making in western culture are essentially of equal value. As such, Rorty imagines the possibility of calmly evaluating these language games without having to make any commitments—a disinterestedness, however, that is always at risk of degenerating into non-interest. In fact, this is where Rorty's and de Man's ironists meet: in the artificial heights of aestheticism, about to be sucked into a universe of linguistic idealism where only one message is repeated hypnotically: all we can ever know is words.

By contrast, Lear is more interested in what happens in the body when someone 'makes irony happen': the anxious experience of having one's foundations shaken through the attribution of irony to accepted values, and the desire, as Richard Bernstein has it, "to close the gap between our practical identities and the aspirations that are implicit in them" (111). For Lear, 'the contemporary reception of irony' covers up this possibility, ensuring that the ironist never has to make herself vulnerable. A rhetorical treatment of irony as satire, for one, captures only what Hutcheon calls irony's critical edge, "the attribution of an evaluative, even judgmental attitude" in exposing the hypocrisy and bad faith of others (*Case 37*). Since rhetoric is by definition concerned with the effect upon another, third party, any rhetorical understanding of irony must be inherently third-personal, too. Philosophy, by contrast, involves the turn toward the self. Hence a philosophical irony on the Socratic model as Lear reconstructs it is inherently *first-personal*: it is directed at the ironist herself, and therefore does not display hostility toward another; yet neither does it show hostility towards the self, which is merely awakened to a fuller perception of its own possibilities.

Rorty's and de Man's ironists, whom Lear views as "symptomatic of something that has happened in modernity" (*Case 38*), never have to open themselves up to such anxiety. Their use of irony resembles a defense mechanism against precisely the kind of confrontation

between social pretense and higher aspirations that compelled truth-seekers of prior ages. The most influential accounts in ‘the contemporary reception of irony,’ then, all rely on a notion of irony as detachment. Lear, in turn, emphasizes the opposite, the breakdown of this distance, and identifies the subsequent moment of proximity as a crucial, but largely forgotten, aspect of irony: “a moment of anxious breakdown of my capacity to achieve reflective distance—which is nevertheless a moment of excruciating self-conscious awareness” (*Case 95*).<sup>7</sup> So while ‘the contemporary reception of irony’ stresses the movement to a position of distance from society’s ideals, this older tradition regards irony as a two-part process also involving the reattachment to a newly animated version of the elusive ideal.

Wallace had been familiar with this tradition of philosophy from an early age. When he was about 14, his father James, a professional philosopher, had sat the teenager down and walked him through Plato’s dialogue *Phaedo*. “I was astonished by how sophisticated his understanding was,” James would tell David Lipsky after his son’s death-by-suicide in 2008 (“Lost”). Reading a Socratic dialogue with his 14-year old “turned out to be pivotal for [James’s] understanding of his son,” as he later recounted to fellow philosopher James Ryerson: “I had never had an undergraduate student who caught on so quickly or who responded with such maturity and sophistication” (3). Arguably, the parental introduction to philosophy had been pivotal for Wallace, as well. Philosophy would always remain his intellectual home, its arguments and aspirations the fodder for his fictional explorations of free will and human consciousness.

In the course of these explorations, however, Wallace distanced himself from his “philosopher-father,” who, as Thomas Tracey notes, had been “a supplementary influence on the author’s personal and intellectual development beyond the halls of academe” (157). The

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<sup>7</sup> The Heideggerian overtones are unmistakable here, although the German thinker, as Lear notes, did “not concern himself with the peculiar species of anxiety that is irony” (*Case 98*). As I suggested in the last chapter, however, a recognition of irony might have even aided Heidegger in his search for a philosophy of proximity.

reasons for this shift, he hinted to Lipsky, had to do with the fact that James Wallace was an “Aristotelian” with “a really complicated definition of what it is to be a live human being” (*Although* 48). Wallace, who maintained that fiction’s job was to address what it is to be a human being, shared his father’s interest in this question, though he demonstrated something far different than the analytical exactitude of his father’s Aristotelian method. Aware of the need to go beyond the specialized languages of academia for his rhetoric to be consequential, Wallace believed his father’s answers to be “so complicated that they don’t have any effect” on normal people (48). I suggest that Wallace’s search for a less exclusive rhetoric led him to something like the Socratic model of philosophy as it is presented by Plato, Aristotle’s teacher—an assumption which is supported by the fact that, 25 years after the parental introduction to philosophy, he still thought in terms determined by Socrates and Plato when *Rolling Stone* asked a group of writers for their thoughts on the upcoming millennium. Wallace responded with a ‘100-word statement’ that began in familiar Wallace territory, with a remark on the pernicious influence of mass media: “We’re all—especially those of us who are educated and have read a lot and have watched TV critically—in a very self-conscious and sort of worldly and sophisticated time, but also a time when we seem terribly afraid of other people’s reactions to us and very desperate to control how people interpret us.” After this recognizable gesture, however, Wallace set his sights on events that far predated the rise of television and the postmodern world of spin:

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

The confrontation of today’s chic relativism with a Socratic sense of higher aspirations that Wallace stages here is profoundly ironic, and not only in the sense that a reader hears the

ancient philosophers call out her contemporaries in American English. Wallace's irony runs deeper than mere dissonance; his confrontation between surface and depth, social reality and existential desire, exemplifies the ironic experience as Socrates understood it: whatever society has to offer in terms of models for excellence—in our context, being perceived as “cool” or “smart”—falls hopelessly short of the ideal as it can be glimpsed in irony.

Oscillating in the gap between these opposed meanings, a reader may have the anxious realization that she no longer even knows what it would mean to live a meaningful life. The late-capitalist options for excellence that Wallace appropriately, and ironically, puts in today's colloquialisms—‘getting a good job’ or ‘getting laid’—can come to seem laughably insignificant when held up against this fleeting ideal. Indeed, what people “think they want” is relegated to the status of an illusion nourished by our millennial versions of sophistry: television and advertising. Clearly, the anxiety that results from this exposure is an experience in the first person singular, making Wallace's ‘100-word statement’ an instance of philosophical irony as Lear determines it. In his brief account of the state of things at the turn of the millennium, then, Wallace reminds his readers of a tradition of irony and dialogue which seems to have been largely forgotten in our current climate.

This is not to say that irony has gone missing in general. As Wallace insinuates to *Rolling Stone*, in its rhetorical guise as detachment, irony is alive and well. In fact, a reminder of irony's power to dispel illusions may itself even have an ironic ring to it when heard against the ironic clamor of the 1990s—an age in quotation marks, the decade of *The Simpsons*, *Wayne's World*, and *Beavis and Butthead*. In “E Unibus,” Wallace had himself denounced irony as a cultural force that undermined any attempts at creating art for the purpose of communicating serious matters. Yet under this appearance of ironic hegemony, and in no small part due to Wallace's influential critique of ironic watching, a revolution was brewing. By the turn of the millennium, when Wallace penned his reminder of an ancient tradition for

*Rolling Stone*'s readers, irony had already begun to lose some cultural ground. Once a weapon of choice wielded against hypocrisy, irony in its postmodern guise now permeated American culture to the point of over-saturation; hence its antithesis seemed to wait just around the corner of history. In fact, as Konstantinou would argue later, there had been "a range of artistic efforts [since the early 1990s] to reformulate the moral logic of earnestness in an ironic world" ("Blog").

Given the large number of critics eager to stake their claims on contemporary culture, it is not surprising that monikers grouping these "efforts" into artistic movements would soon circulate both within academia and without. Among these, postirony and New Sincerity seem to have had the most staying power. While postirony is Konstantinou's own name for this structure of affect in contemporary fiction, the concept of New Sincerity emerged in film studies around the time Wallace published his early call for "anti-rebels" to take on 'postmodern' irony as a hegemonic force. While Jim Collins, who first introduced the term 'New Sincerity' in 1993, did not link the label to Wallace's work, later film critics explicitly read the work of several contemporary filmmakers in terms provided by Wallace's essay.<sup>8</sup> Yet the recurrence of the label 'New Sincerity' in the works of these critics obscures a shift in the concept's meaning since its inception: while Collins still conceives of it as designating a structure of feeling that is entirely devoid of irony, in the work of later scholars like Adam Kelly the 'newness' of this form of sincerity lies in its co-implication with irony. Konstantinou concurs, emphasizing a similar vacillation in strategies associated with postirony: the "logic of earnestness in an ironic world" he detects is supposedly achieved by using "ironized and self-conscious means of doing so" ("Blog").

No matter the sophisticated dialectical tools in the hands of critics, however, the public debate around irony is still often conducted in terms of a facile dichotomy between irony and

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, James MacDowell's "Wes Anderson, tone and the quirky sensibility," and Jess Fox Mayshark's *Post-Pop Cinema: The Search for Meaning in New American Film*.

sincerity, with a clear preference for the latter. Case in point is a 2014 essay by Matt Ashby and Brendan Carroll with the programmatic title “David Foster Wallace was right: Irony is ruining our culture.” Scholars, in turn, are not immune to this trend of reading Wallace as the harbinger of an unequivocal return to sincerity, either. Take, for instance, the philosophers Nathan Ballantyne and Justin Tosi, who claim that “Wallace clearly thinks that a good life is one of sincere, unironic commitment” (141). There are certainly moments in Wallace’s oeuvre that offer evidence for this interpretation—for example the already mentioned essay on television and his Kenyon College commencement address, released with great success after Wallace’s death as *This is Water*. It is significant for Wallace’s mainstream reception, however, that his most successful is also his least characteristic work.<sup>9</sup> Written in what Paul Giles has called a “hortatory idiom” (6), the speech is the most unironic treatment of free will, responsibility, and compassion Wallace ever attempted. But as Zadie Smith has noted, the address is nothing but “a diving board into his fiction, his fiction being his truest response to the difficulty of staying conscious and alive” (“Gifts” 265). Smith’s distinction is helpful in this context, though many early readers of Wallace will presumably have experienced her diving board metaphor in reverse motion: it is significant that the words from the Kenyon speech—which Wallace never personally prepared for publication—fell onto ears that had by and large already heard the hilarity and loneliness that constituted *Infinite Jest*, a novel that is far from an unambiguously serious statement.

In perhaps a fluke of history, it is a 2012 movie by an alumnus of the very institution where Wallace addressed the graduating class of 2005, Josh Radnor’s *Liberal Arts*, that shows how trite and pretentious Wallace’s thought can be if dramatized in the monotone of

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<sup>9</sup> While many would presumably agree with Laura Miller in calling *This is Water* “perhaps the most accessible and widely read thing that [Wallace] ever wrote,” there has been a growing chorus that observes such critical myopia with discomfort, knowing that Wallace’s oeuvre was, on the whole, less homiletic than a college commencement speech could ever be. Roiland, who bases his critique of Wallace’s consecration in this instance on Jonathan Franzen’s essay “Farther Away,” speaks for many of them when he describes *This is Water*, with palpable irony, as “a spiritual tract on the New Sincerity by Saint Dave” (45).

straightforward sincerity. In the movie, a depressed student named Dean lugs around the campus of Kenyon College a book that is clearly *Infinite Jest*. Arguably, the character of Wallace-quoting, sulking, suicidal Dean serves as a reminder of the danger that, despite its purportedly revolutionary character, the ‘new’ sincerity sometimes ends up being nothing more than a testament to the self-pity of a privileged caste of American society.<sup>10</sup> It is precisely readings of Wallace such as Radnor’s that call for a reevaluation of irony in our culture at large. Given that the current trend towards sincerity is linked to Wallace’s work, revisiting his stance on irony becomes a way of engaging the larger trend that sprung from it.

What Wallace’s attitude toward irony was, however, is anything but clear. There seems to have been a shift in his thinking about irony between what Kelly has called the “essay-interview nexus” (“Development” 268)—a combination of “E Unibus” and his 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery—and statements made later in his career. “E Unibus” has frequently been regarded as Wallace’s manifesto, with its declaration that “irony tyrannizes us” (67) taken to be an interpretive guideline for reading his fiction. When confronted in later years with his essay, however, Wallace would often dodge any outright denunciations of irony. Shortly after the publication of *Infinite Jest*, for instance, he praised irony in an interview with David Wiley as “fantastic,” adding, “There’s nothing wrong with it.” And prompted in a 2004 interview to comment on the famous culmination of “E Unibus,” in which he called on a new generation of literary “anti-rebels” to “treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction” (81), Wallace was dismissive: “The thing even sounds dated to me now” (“Burden” 107). Effectively rewriting its conclusion, he now drew a distinction between two different types of irony: “I don’t know that it’s irony that tyrannizes us, but the fashions that are so easy to criticize but are so

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<sup>10</sup> Williams puts forward the related proposition that “the very need for a New Sincerity might be the preserve of a relatively empowered, elite section of U.S. society” (299). Viewing neither a return to sincerity nor a Hegelian synthesis of irony and sincerity as capturing Wallace’s art, Williams hits upon some of the same notes as I do here. But rather than following Williams in an ad hominem—calling Wallace “conservative, elitist, individualistic” (311)—I suggest that charges like this apply to critics who read him in such unequivocal terms.

incredibly powerful and authentic-seeming when we're inside them, tyrannize us" (108).

Irony here appears to be internally divided, a division that Wallace reiterated the same year in his interview with Böttger: "Irony," he stated, "can be both a wake-up call and an anesthetic, and the difference in the US now is very tricky." Still, it is precisely this 'tricky' difference, and Wallace's ability to elicit the latter manifestation of irony in the pursuit of the former, that animates much of his fiction.

Although it has already been discussed by Thompson (147), Wallace's distinction between two kinds of irony bears repeating. On the one hand, there is irony in the form of a fashionable wit that reinforces social norms such as the 'coolness' and 'smartness' that Wallace had mentioned in his statement on the millennium; this is irony as an "anesthetic." Its occurrence as self-sufficient quip, however, is contrasted with the 'non-tyrannical' meaning that Wallace had highlighted for *Rolling Stone's* readership four years earlier: irony in its ancient role as disruption of the social pretenses that were upheld by the sophisticated use of irony; this is irony as "wake-up call." Crucially, Wallace concluded this revision of "E Unibus" by betraying an awareness of the fact that irony's internal division had been a part of the history of the concept since its inception: "I don't think that it's ever been any different" ("Burden" 108). Like Sloterdijk, then, who detected a split in cynicism, Wallace points to an ancient division between different manifestations of irony that has been obscured by the use of the same term for phenomena that have very different philosophical aspirations.

Wallace seems to have grown increasingly skeptical about claims that irony's co-optation by the media and marketing industry was the sole cause of its toxicity today. Indeed, that the detrimental influence of TV and irony—turning human beings, in Wallace's terms, into "oglers" expecting to be 'ogled' ("E Unibus" 21)—had an earlier precedent in the shame culture of the 1930s I discussed in the last chapter gives the lie to the idea that today's self-consciousness is chiefly the outcome of the televisual age. In fact, Wallace had already

qualified this to McCaffery: “[I]t’s too simple to just wring your hands and claim TV’s ruined readers. Because the U.S.’s television culture didn’t come out of a vacuum. [...] It’s simply another symptom. TV didn’t invent our aesthetic childishness here any more than the Manhattan Project invented aggression” (23). A utilitarian teleology of pleasure that Wallace saw at work in American society prevented people from addressing the roots of this “aesthetic childishness”; television, he noted, while not responsible for this teleology, nevertheless “intensified the consequences of our tendencies” (23). In his last novel *The Pale King*, Wallace no longer regarded the ubiquity of irony as part of “the advertising legacy of the Sixties” (147). Rather, as one character proposes in the novel, it was “almost a matter of metaphysics” (142). I agree with Kelly that the “roots” Wallace finds for contemporary detachment here are “deeper” than in “E Unibus” (“Development” 279). But while Kelly locates these roots “within American intellectual history” (279), my point in this study has been to show that they lie even deeper, in the kind of ‘modern’ metaphysics that configures our relationship to the world and the other person in terms of ‘objective presence.’

This does not mean I diminish the importance of Wallace’s critique of postindustrial life; rather, I aim to emphasize the philosophical significance of his work. This significance lies to a large degree in a revival of what Jon Baskin has called “the ancient conception of philosophy as dialogue” (“Death”). Kelly argues for a similar reading of Wallace’s fiction as dialogic (“Development”). My contribution to this line of inquiry is to emphasize what I suspect has not been seen clearly yet: that viewing Wallace’s fiction as a return to this tradition may bring back into focus an ‘old’ conception of irony, coeval with the conception of philosophy as dialogue. It is because this conception has been all but forgotten that even the most sophisticated accounts of Wallace’s irony rely on an impoverished notion of irony. To be sure, as Thompson notes (158), Wallace has employed detached irony himself at times, and that he did not mention irony’s internal division in “E Unibus” weakens his early

position. But the fact that he provided a corrective to that essay in his millennial ‘statement’ is a good starting point for a discussion of Wallace’s stance that does more justice to his complex (r)enunciation of irony than what is offered by the proponents of New Sincerity or postirony.

In fact, Lear shows that there is no inherent contradiction between an ironic existence and a committed existence, effectively short-circuiting the dichotomy between irony and belief that animates much of their work. After all, Learian irony transcends the difference between affective distance and proximity. This reminds us that irony can essentially occur at both ends of the spectrum. On one end, there is the ironist as detached observer; on the other end, there is the countertype upheld by Lear, who is unable to maintain this distance and instead gets pulled into proximity. And while this turn to proximity bears more than a passing resemblance with issues of belief and sincerity that, as I will show in the next section, feature prominently in Konstantinou and Kelly, the point I am making is that having beliefs and being sincere is in fact part of what Lear calls an ironic existence—which includes an awareness of when it is appropriate, as Hutcheon has it, to ‘make irony happen.’ A philosophical irony on the Socratic model, then, is not antithetical to earnestness—it may even be the only way of remaining sincerely committed to insight and understanding. After all, the flaw that Socrates found among his interlocutors was not that they were devoted to their social roles, but, as John D. Caputo points out, “that they took themselves and their opinions seriously” (258). Still, proponents of New Sincerity and postirony are right in challenging irony as a hegemonic force, because overemphasizing irony runs the risk of feeding into its shallow form as fashionable detachment. What is required, then, is an approach to *Infinite Jest* that reads it as ‘ironically earnest, earnestly ironic’—as a novel that holds both attitudes in suspension, not granting either one the upper hand.

## Reason and Belief

It may be that my quibbles with Kelly and Konstantinou are largely terminological—after all, Kelly does not dismiss irony altogether but preserves it structurally in his reading as “the key concept that opposed sincerity” (“Dialectics”); and Konstantinou concludes his fascinating study of post-war literature by reaffirming the political significance of the “ethos of irony” when he asks that we “cultivate within ourselves an ironic understanding of our countercultural inheritance” in order to fight “political detachment” and “cynicism” in the age of Occupy (*Characters* 288). Still, the name Kelly applies to Wallace’s method arguably indicates which side of the dialectic of irony and sincerity he privileges. And in Konstantinou, we have a critic whose reading of Wallace as the driving force behind twentieth-century postirony comes out of an understanding of irony that differs in important respects from my own. In fact, Konstantinou constructs his reading of Wallace on the basis of Hegelian philosophy, which called for irony’s domestication by means of the universal concepts of philosophy that Hegel held in higher esteem than the particular myths of literature. It is in Konstantinou’s rebuttals to earlier positions in *Wallace Studies* that this becomes most apparent. Critics like Marshall Boswell and Iannis Goerlandt, who initiated scholarly talk of Wallace’s transcendence of irony by means of fiction, read *Infinite Jest* as performing an iteration of ironic commentary directed at ironic commentary itself, effectively bending back irony’s critical edge to aim it at any penchant for irony. For Konstantinou, such an attempt “at a Hegelian sublation of metafiction into metafiction critical of its own impulses” (“Bull” 95) fails because of irony’s inherently destructive character: what Boswell and Goerlandt take to be “yet another turn of metafiction’s ironic dialectic” ultimately leading to positivity, for Konstantinou is merely “another step down the pathway of Hegel’s ‘infinite absolute negativity’” (90). In this way of thinking irony as infinitely and absolutely negative, there is simply no foothold down the pathway of irony; even Boswell’s and

Goerlandt's meta-ironic stance would endlessly proliferate into further ironies, thus never leading to stability.

I believe my suggestion that we view Wallace's work in light of a distinction between proximate and detached irony, thus making the question more about the underlying affect, can clear up some of the confusion here. Konstantinou maintains, however, that we should identify irony with "disruptive negativity" only, and that Wallace does so, too (*Characters* 175). As such, he claims that the solution Wallace hits upon to resolve the problem of reflective irony is not "to sublimate irony by means of a higher order irony" (95). Rather, he attributes to Wallace's narrator a position from which irony has already been transcended, a somehow earnest standpoint from which he "directly address[es] the reader, to 'ask her straight out whether she's feeling anything like you might feel'" (95). Such a direct approach apparently short-circuits the ceaseless dialectic of irony, and the means by which this is supposed to have been effected in Wallace's work is a postironic return to sincere belief. This clear opposition between irony and belief becomes possible because of Konstantinou's reliance on a Hegelian framework. In fact, what is interesting in this regard is his attribution of irony as 'infinite absolute negativity' not only to Hegel, but also to "Kierkegaard after him" (89).<sup>11</sup> For while it is true that the young Kierkegaard as the author of *The Concept of Irony* was still under the influence of Hegel and as such saw only the negative side of irony, the older Kierkegaard came to view this account as one-sided. In fact, in the later *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard in the guise of one Johannes

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<sup>11</sup> This conflation of the two thinkers' positions allows Konstantinou to regard Kierkegaard as a postironist *avant la lettre* by attributing to him an early version of the postironic thesis that "irony's political importance is historical" (*Characters* 12). But Kierkegaard was anything but postironic; even his dissertation on irony, which Konstantinou relies on for his Hegelian reading, was itself structured as a work of irony, containing formulations from the Hegelian system only to let its internal contradictions come to the fore (see Lee M. Chapel's introduction to *Concept*). To be sure, the conflation of the two philosophers has almost become a commonplace in Wallace Studies, even in interpreters who are sympathetic to ironic modes of communication such as Dulk. And while I agree with Dulk that irony "opens up the nothing and, thereby, the possible 'call' of anxiety, to realize a *positive* freedom" (55; my emphasis), his essentially Hegelian position that irony cannot be a "source" of such "positivity, because it is pure negation" (47) seems to ignore the modifications of Kierkegaard's earlier position in his later years.

Climacus regarded his younger self with considerable irony: “As can be inferred from his dissertation,” Climacus asserts, “Magister Kierkegaard” has “scarcely understood” Socrates’s “teasing manner” and thus brought out “only the one side” of irony (90n; 503). The description of ironic activity offered by Climacus in order to right this partiality is ‘movement of infinity’—a phrase that retains the Hegelian emphasis on limitlessness but no longer characterizes it as only negative.

This affirmative reading can help explain why the unsettling laughter emanating from the pages of *Infinite Jest*, inspiring a similar reaction in its readers, does not abandon them in a desert of passive nihilism such as the one we saw *American Psycho*’s Patrick Bateman inhabit in the last chapter. Konstantinou recognizes these affirmative aspirations in his characterization of Wallace’s fiction as “a last desperate effort to make us believe something, to feel anything” (“Bull” 106). Still, he presents irony and belief in Wallace’s work as mutually exclusive by opposing “the incredulous ironist” with an “ethical countertype” termed “‘the believer’” (85). This ‘believer,’ as Konstantinou asserts, uses “a vocabulary engineered to confront the possibly insuperable condition of postmodernity” (86). As such, the ‘believer’ is a representative of the kind of postirony Konstantinou sees as displacing postmodernism. This view of belief as a model for postironic reading is indebted to an assumption of early Wallace Studies represented by readers such as Brooks Daverman, who regarded the “irony-free zone” of Alcoholics Anonymous [AA] (*Jest* 369) as Wallace’s “narrative solution after Postmodernism.” It is indeed tempting to assume that Wallace provided a solution to the malaise of detached irony in the very work that decried the latter; but such unambiguous readings in favor of AA perform an irrational ‘leap of faith’ themselves, sidelining multi-layered ambiguities surrounding AA’s ideology that Wallace did not simply brush aside to embrace the kind of “anti-intellectualism” he had dismissed in his review of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* (75). Rather, in a narratorial strategy he employed from the

first to the last novel, Wallace dramatized the aporia of reason and belief by pitting representatives of opposite ideologies against each other without authorial resolution—a strategy meant to avoid a kind of Tolstoyan moralism and instead, as he put it in his encomium of Dostoevsky, to “dramatize extremely heavy, serious themes without ever being preachy and reductive” (269); yet not by “‘transcending’ or ‘subverting’ [these themes],” as many of Wallace’s critics have it, but “by confronting them, engaging them” (272).

One of the most memorable aporetic confrontations of reason and belief in *Infinite Jest* occurs when Don Gately, a former burglar who has joined AA, patiently addresses an exasperated Geoffrey Day, professor of sociology and, as such, representative of the practice of rational questioning. Day is a prime example of characters in *Infinite Jest* who are trained in sophisticated thinking but cannot get themselves to value anything but their own sophistication, which makes their irony a smokescreen for the fear of being seen as naive. This is also the reading of Day Konstantinou has, even identifying the character with a version of Wallace before he ‘got’ AA, and, as such, reaffirming the critical position that Wallace meant this presentation of the professor’s “Analysis-Paralysis” to prepare his readers’ turn to AA-style belief (*Characters* 337n61). But the Dostoevsky model of fiction, I argue, stipulated that Wallace design dialogues like these such that they would in fact preclude the easy taking of sides. So while Gately initially defends AA’s anti-ironic philosophy against Day’s sarcasm, he later also demonstrates the power of irony. After Day defends his paranoia of being followed by referring to “a well-known surveillance tactic known as the *Box-surveillance*,” Gately responds with a warm irony quite unlike the self-protective kind: “Except I don’t ever remember you explaining why a sociology teacher weaving his way from his fourth bar to his fifth bar is important enough for [...] this real complex conspiracy thing” (1001). This is how the scene seems to have ended in the first draft of the novel, with Day exposed as a narcissist and Gately gaining the upper hand.

Changes Wallace made between what became known as the ‘Moore manuscript’ (“First Draft”) and the published novel, however, show that he later granted Day’s position more space. For instance, a comment by Day that is missing from the early manuscript teases out the contradiction behind AA’s assertion of “Blind Faith in the older guys” (351): “AA’s response to a question about its axioms, then, is to invoke an axiom about the inadvisability of all such questions” (1002). This is not just a parody of intellectualism; what Day highlights is a paradox that might lead to a very real-world abuse of power: “Am I out of line in seeing something totalitarian in it?” (1003).

This co-implication of agency and loss of agency is dramatized by another character in the novel, the German tennis trainer Gerhard Schtitt, who supervises E.T.A. along principles that are inherently totalitarian: every aspect of the lives of Hal and his friends, from daily meals to career plans, is predetermined; independence, at the academy, is not an issue. Yet at the same time, this old German, who has been educated according to “rather Kanto-Hegelian” ideals (82), pronounces what the novel presents as an antidote to the excess that drives its characters’ suffering, namely the thesis that empowerment indeed requires limitation. This makes Schtitt, as Wallace declared openly to Silverblatt upon the novel’s release, “the only one [at the academy] who to me is saying anything that’s even remotely non-horrifying.” But, in keeping with the novel’s aversion to false certainty, he added, “except it is horrifying because he is a fascist”—a concession that complicates McGurl’s claim that “[n]either Wallace nor Wallace’s novel has any serious problem with the [...] ‘whiff of proto-fascist potential’ hovering around Schtitt’s regime” (“Nothing” 40).

Clearly, the critical edge of this irony points in two different directions. On the one hand, the struggle to gain agency demands discipline—not only over enslaving habits, as the novel asserts by way of its main metaphor of addiction, but also for autonomy in general. On the other hand, the fact that the proponent of this philosophy is a fascist throws doubt on the idea

of such discipline, which is essentially empty in terms of content. As Hegel has argued, this emptiness coincides with a potential for its abuse in the name of totalitarian ideologies.<sup>12</sup>

There is, then, the danger of succumbing to authoritarian figures and totalitarian rules; and there is, as *Infinite Jest* also dramatizes in its various victims of excess, the danger of not yielding to authority of any kind. No idea can resolve this aporia; it is a transcendental truth, an expression of the human condition.

In light of this dialectic of agency and submission, Day is certainly not ‘out of line’ to indicate AA’s flirtation with fundamentalism; nor is a critic like Holland, who takes the novel’s ambiguities to belie any simple endorsement of AA’s single-entendre principles on Wallace’s part: “Therapy and the talking cure,” she argues, “offer cures as destructive as the disease they are meant to cure” (“Heart’s Purpose” 232). Again, Wallace’s text is multi-faceted enough to support this reading, for instance through the story of Kevin Bain, who seeks solace in a Boston-area chapter of Narcotics Anonymous. Bain turned to substance abuse, we are told, primarily because his parents abandoned him “with Hispanic nannies while they devoted themselves to [...] various types of psychotherapy and support groups” (*Jest* 803). In Holland’s reading of AA, even such organizations devoted to healing are not immune to, may even be propelled by, the very narcissism they are designed to overcome (233). An institution like AA, then, which simultaneously “stresses the utter autonomy of the individual member” (*Jest* 365) and refuses it based on a reactionary logic of renouncing reason in favor of uncritical belief, is hardly the solution to postmodern irony that critics from Daverman to Konstantinou have seen in it. In fact, Wallace signals his own awareness of the

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<sup>12</sup> Wallace’s hyphenation of Schtitt as “Kanto-Hegelian” obscures a difference between the two philosophers’ sense of ethics. In fact, Hegel argued that Kant’s Categorical Imperative is merely a procedure for testing moral norms with regard to their logical rigor—a necessary, but not a sufficient reason for accepting them. Hence any action based on a formally sound norm absent reflections on its content runs the risk of becoming evil—a Hegelian conclusion that Wallace, judging by his depiction of Schtitt, probably would have accepted. Perhaps Thompson’s observation that Schtitt is “a kind of grotesque German caricature” which “should be read as a deliberate self-parody” (156), then, can help explain this unlikely misreading by the ever-so accurate Wallace. This would make Wallace’s conflation of Hegelian and Kantian philosophy here another example of irony, critiquing what Thompson has called “a conventionally American understanding of European culture” (156), in this case on the part of Wallace’s generically voiced US narrator.

program's ambiguities by continuously capitalizing the AA term 'to Identify.' Since capitalization in our time of skepticism about absolute claims has become a likely marker of irony, I am inclined to read Wallace's practice here as another example of setting us up to 'make irony happen': for one, he *uses* the term in its AA meaning as "aiming for total empathy" (343); yet his capitalization also indicates the ironic *mention* of a concept, 'total empathy,' that is all but clearly definable in light of the skeptical doubts about knowing the other person I discussed previously, thus inciting further inquiry into the question of what such 'total empathy' could even mean.

Whether Holland is right in faulting AA for spawning narcissism, then, is a question of how a success of the program is defined. *Infinite Jest* strains the aporia between, on the one hand, the subjection to formulas offered by institutions like AA and, on the other hand, one's own desire for autonomous thinking to an extreme. Rather than promoting 'stasis,' however, the novel posits the pragmatic prospect of incremental progress. As Baskin points out, in much of his oeuvre Wallace struggled with the fruitlessness of absolute standards—pure autonomy, complete freedom, total selflessness ("Death")—and I have taken this struggle to indicate a desire on Wallace's part for the kind of reframed autonomy that, following Holland, I will associate with 'a new humanism.' *Infinite Jest* clearly evinces this struggle, too; and AA still has some value as a metaphor for social matrices that simultaneously enable and limit individual autonomy. From this vantage point, Kelly notes, "success in the AA recovery program means finding a way to speak sincerely using a formula that possesses no originality" ("Dialectic"). Wallace seems to have never abandoned this conception, accounts of a change in his outlook notwithstanding. In a prose poem by Frank Bidart, he found a formulation that encapsulates this co-dependency of agency and subjection to power; accordingly, he chose it as an epigraph for *The Pale King*: "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed" (2).

Reinhabiting ‘pre-existing forms’ with an awareness of their formulaic character, but without giving up on the hope for truthful expression—this was precisely the project of the Romantics and, in Lear’s Kierkegaardian reading, of Socrates.<sup>13</sup> What this means, then, is that proponents of postirony and New Sincerity miss yet another turn in the dialectic of irony and earnestness: speaking sincerely in light of one’s own indebtedness to social matrices must involve an ironic sensibility. After all, completely embracing AA’s slogans would do an injustice to the very aspirations for a fuller expression of ourselves that fuel the ironist’s incredulity; applying these formulas with an ironic provisionality, however, acknowledges the aporetic nature of our lives as individuals in institutions that fall short of doing justice to who we are. Our life in social codes, then, is as much a part of the human condition as our desire for a ‘way out.’ Who could sustain this aporia without a sense of irony? Kierkegaard did not think it advisable: “No genuinely human life,” he wrote in his dissertation, “is possible without irony” (*Concept* 326). Thus the very reliance on axiomatic formulae that Wallace presents as unfounded through a character like Day becomes an integral part of the kind of knowing that is available to human beings in their metaphysical finitude—though it is essential to Wallace’s success as a writer that Day’s critique is contained in the work, preserved as a moment in a dialectic that can only be resolved at the price of representational violence. Dramatizing the conflict between Gately and Day, as well as similarly aporetic confrontations between characters such as Hal and Mario Incandenza, means that Wallace did not give up on trying to marry reason and belief. As the novel’s inherent undecidability indicates, however, this marriage has to be an equal one; and it is my impression that New Sincerity and postirony, as their names indicate, are manifestations of unequal marriages.

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<sup>13</sup> Konstantinou’s ‘postironic’ insight, then, that we cannot escape institutions, but must exercise more care in choosing them, is already present in earlier romantic thought. For a recent reading of Wallace in this vein, see Dominik Steinhilber’s “The Perils of Self-Consciousness: Heinrich von Kleist’s ‘Über das Marionettentheater’ in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” which argues that “*IJ* provides two contrasting yet coexistent, equally valid readings, the novel oscillating between the postmodern, ironic and the sincere” (555).

By contrast, I have presented the chiasmus ‘ironically earnest, earnestly ironic’ as a more accurate description of the multiple valences afforded by *Infinite Jest*, which also helps disentangle some complexities of Wallace’s stance on irony. After all, it is precisely the kind of ‘ironically earnest, earnestly ironic’ attitude that distinguishes the engaged ironist from her detached cousin. The former now appears as the one who reinhabits social institutions like AA and, in Wallace’s last novel, the IRS; outwardly indistinguishable from the true ‘believer,’ the way in which she inhabits these institutions, however, has changed. Changed by an utmost familiarity with the same aporia between subjection and empowerment that Wallace stages in *Infinite Jest*, she does not hide behind a façade of self-serving criticism; rather, she reengages with the social in a way that acknowledges the necessary blindness that accompanies every insight, the finitude of the ways of knowing available to the human as social animal. If I am right, then, in arguing that irony can no longer generally be seen as the culprit for our detached culture, what comes into view is not only, as Dulk has argued in existentialist terms, the ironist’s “flight from responsibility” (54). Rather, as I have demonstrated in previous chapters by reading detachment as an ‘avoidance of love,’ the root cause for this flight is a fear of *shame*—about one’s humanity, one’s animality—to which the detached ironist tries to respond with an all-knowingness that is nothing but a rhetorical shield to ward off vulnerability and an acknowledgment of very human limitations.

Contrary to its aspirations, this detached irony, as we find it in Rorty and de Man, merely presents the illusion of gaining distance to one’s convictions. Their ‘way out’ into infinite distance, where they glimpse the eternal ‘truth’ of language’s self-referentiality, is also a ‘way in,’ further into the premises of their theoretical assumptions, without ever challenging them. Hence their case of ‘stuckness’ is particularly insidious, because they deem themselves unstuck, free, on the side of logic and scientific knowledge. This is why Kierkegaard thought irony of the proximate kind an essential component of genuine humanity: for those

unknowingly stuck in an illusion, only “the cultivation of anxious, disruptive experiences of irony,” as Lear puts it, can help unsettle their certainties (“Lost” 12). Wallace, who writes in *Infinite Jest* that “logical validity is not a guarantee of truth” (202), seems to have built an entire writing style out of this insight, presenting detached ironists with a literary overdose of their own medicine to stop them in their tracks and let them see for themselves what the concepts of social pretense still have to offer.

### **What Fire Dies When You Feed it?**

This is not to say that Wallace shrugged off the difficulty of overcoming the defense mechanisms of detached ironists. In fact, he facilitated their move back into proximity by way of an affective strategy that, in the original manuscript of *Infinite Jest*, had explicitly been framed as Blakean, though the intertextual quotations and allusions that establish this connection did not survive the way to the printing press. As Moore reports (“First Draft”), in the early manuscript Wallace had included the line “Sorrow brings forth” from Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as an epigraph—a guideline expressing hope for the kind of reader who would absorb the Cavellian lesson from *King Lear* that a key component of genuine humanity was the development of a sense of shame at one’s own shame, which might lead to the ability to share it with others. This hope is complicated by the fact that, in the absence of immediate sorrow, it can be difficult not to seek protection in ironic aloofness. Therefore, *Infinite Jest* attempts to recreate the experience of sorrow on the model of an allegorical story that is recounted by E.T.A. Hoffmann. According to Moore, the story, also cut from the finished book, was entitled “The fable of the Smart Old Bee and the Foolish Young Bee.” In it, an old bee is confronted with a young bee who prefers “terrorizing al fresco diners” over working diligently at the hive; indulging the young one, the old bee “decided, in true Blakean fashion, that [...] ‘You never know what is enough unless you

know what is more than enough” (“First Draft”). A similar logic of fighting fire with fire also animates *Infinite Jest*, a novel replete with irony after self-conscious irony and “Too Much Fun for anyone mortal to hope to endure” (238).<sup>14</sup>

There is no doubt that this ‘strategy of oversaturation’ is far from a guaranteed success. Hence, in suggesting a direction away from detachment, Wallace relied on the evocation of powerfully negative affects. Like Socrates and Kierkegaard before him, he ironically called upon his readers to stoke the fire, go on jesting infinitely—all the while counting on them to feel the flames eating away at their own lives. “What fire dies when you feed it?” (389), Lyle asks at one point in *Infinite Jest*, as if in a meta-textual discussion of Wallace’s own strategy. On the level of the text, the question is directed at LaMont Chu, in response to the boy’s question of how to get out of his case of ‘stuckness,’ a distressing envy for top tennis players. In light of this connection, then, Lyle’s question may be seen as the key hermeneutic problem of *Infinite Jest* and its various instances of aporia. Characteristically, Wallace took care to preclude any unambiguous answers to this question, instead letting its connotations fan out into two directions at once.

In constructing such doubleness, he seems to have once more taken inspiration from de Man. In his 1973 essay “Semiology and Rhetoric,” de Man had adduced two different readings of Yeats’s line, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” In order to show how Yeats renders any interpretation indeterminate, de Man first proposed taking the line as a figural question affirming the unity of creator and creation, only to turn around and read it as a literal call for distinguishing between entities that are commonly considered to be separate. “[Two] entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings can be made to hinge on one

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<sup>14</sup> In light of Konstantinou’s argument that fighting irony with more of the same will be just “another step down the pathway of Hegel’s ‘infinite absolute negativity’” (“Bull” 90), one might wonder whether Wallace’s Blakean method is an appropriate response to detached irony. Would not any reader of *Infinite Jest*, animated to ‘make irony happen’ in response to the novel’s examples of ‘stuckness,’ simply move further into detachment? If we follow Lear in refusing to view irony exclusively as reflective distance, however, Konstantinou’s point is moot: an ironic experience of irony does not necessarily lead to ever greater distance, but may actually coincide with going closer, deeper into the experience of oneself as somewhat falling short.

line,” de Man concluded, adding that there was no way to “make a valid decision as to which of the readings can be given priority over the other” (1521). Arguably, the same undecidability applies to Wallace’s one-line question.

A literal reading would suggest that the only fire which paradoxically dies when you feed it is irony itself. This interpretation implicitly endorses the novel’s ‘strategy of oversaturation’ and assumes the existence of a kind of reader who, upon feeding the flames of detached irony, comes to realize that the fire threatens to burn her alive. Such a reader, faced with over a thousand pages of self-protective irony and underlying shame, will presumably agree with Jonathan Franzen’s assessment in his eulogy on Wallace that “by the end of the book, you felt the book’s title might just as well have been *Infinite Sadness*” (179). In this reading, *Infinite Jest* makes a coherent statement against irony, in favor of earnestness; as I have attempted to show in this chapter, however, such hermeneutic coherence only comes about through a selective view of the text that sidelines the comic responses to its instances of ‘stuckness’ and shifts the novel confidently into the realm of tragedy.

On a reading of Lyle’s question as rhetorical, this confidence dissipates quickly. Now it is more akin to a statement, suggesting that no fire can be contained by feeding its flames. This way of hearing the question implicitly undercuts Wallace’s Blakean assertion that the only way to sense a limit is to transgress it. *Infinite Jest* features scenes that refute this assertion directly, for instance the Erdedy plot, in which the young advertising executive fails repeatedly at kicking his drug habit through a strategy of “simply smok[ing] so much so fast that it would be so unpleasant and the memory of it so repulsive that [...] he would never want to do it again” (22). Similarly, the point of the central MacGuffin of the novel, the film “Infinite Jest,” is directed precisely against the feasibility of such a strategy of “cur[ing] [...] by excess” (22): the film is so addictive that its viewers, rather than instinctively turning it off at some point, lose all contact with their embodied realities and die of complete detachment.

Clearly, these episodes challenge the faith in our bodily instincts as an unconditional source of liberation that, as I noted in the introduction, runs through some variants of postmodernism. In fact, on this rhetorical reading of Lyle's question, *Infinite Jest* presents a fundamental incongruence between an authorial strategy grounded in excessive affect and narratives within it that contradict the very possibility of this approach. As a result, the text self-deconstructs, sending an anxious shiver through its readers, who are faced with the recognition that Wallace will not help them figure out how to meet the novel's onslaught of detached irony.

A similar "cold shiver shiver of recognition" was by Caputo's account the physical manifestation of the "Socrates effect" in ancient Greece: the realization, upon being questioned by the philosopher, that we "do not really know what piety is" or what justice is, or how to define a good state (188). Socrates achieved this by refusing to signal his own intent such that his listeners were thrown back onto their own value judgments; in fact, it was this absence of clarity regarding the status of his words that drew the sophists' ire in their encounters with him. Plato has dramatized this famously at the beginning of *The Republic* (336a-338c), where Socrates, interrogating a young Athenian man who offers a definition of justice, is stopped in his tracks by the sophist Thrasymachos, who forcefully interrupts the exchange and accuses Socrates of feigning ignorance about the essence of justice:

How characteristic of Socrates! he replied, with a bitter laugh;—that's your ironical style! Did I not foresee—have I not already told you, that whatever he was asked he would refuse to answer, and try irony or any other shuffle, in order that he might avoid answering?

Irony in Thrasymachos's words here becomes merely a 'shuffle' in a rhetorical dance with one's opponent. It is no surprise that the sophist presents irony in this way, for this is the use he makes of it himself. A few lines further, confronted with an analogy Socrates uses to uphold questioning as a pathway to knowledge, Thrasymachos exclaims sarcastically:

“Humph! [...] how very like the two cases are!”<sup>15</sup> What Thrasymachos calls for in exposing Socrates, then, is not the abandonment of all irony, just of the kind that does not openly declare itself. Thus Plato dramatizes the very division between irony as rhetorical maneuver and existential unknowingness that, as I argue in this chapter, has become obscured in our time. It is part of Plato’s own irony that he does not let the sophist see the two kinds of irony at play here, either. By pitting them against one another in the figures of the sophist and the philosopher, however, Plato allows his readers to see their difference: one kind is contextual, delimited by verbal markers that signal the speaker’s critical intent; the other goes beyond any immediate context and, as such, occurs without the overt signalling of ironic intent.

Plato made an awareness of this internal division a prerequisite for understanding his most prominent character. However, the ambiguities of the historical Socrates exceeded Plato’s literary treatment; there is a Socratic irony that not even Plato could master. Indeed, a consequence of Socrates’s refusal to set ironic markers is that no one can say conclusively whether what he did was sophistical—tricking people into confusion while having a clear agenda himself—or essentially uncertain and disruptive, ironic through and through. This final and most complex Socratic irony, the essential opacity of the character Socrates, even prevents any knowledge about whether Socrates himself knew the status of his own irony. In this way, he escaped the trap of self-contradiction that, e.g., a cynical ironist like de Man faces when he fails to ironize the subject position from which he revels in the free play of the signifier. The only tangible indicator of Socrates’s state of mind, it was assumed among Athenians, was his refusal to be paid. The contrast could not have been greater to the sophists, who were compensated lavishly for performing the kind of logical tricks we see

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<sup>15</sup> I use Paul Shorey’s rendering of this phrase because, unlike the more common Jewett translation, it preserves the antiphrastic construction of the original Greek “δὴ ὅμοιον τούτο ἐκεῖνω” and expresses the irony implicit in the Greek “Εἶεν,” which is omitted by Jewett, as “Humph!”

Socrates engage in, too.<sup>16</sup> That Wallace was aware of this distinction, which implicitly questions the professionalization of philosophy, can be inferred, as I show in the following, from *Infinite Jest*'s nightmarish introductory scene, which actually represents the novel's chronological endpoint, an opening Wallace explicitly framed in Socratic terms.

Building on Samuel Cohen's interpretation of *Infinite Jest* as a *Künstlerroman*, I read Hal Incandenza as Wallace's mouthpiece in these first moments. 'Mouthpiece' is a misleading metaphor, though, for the defining characteristic of the scene in which Hal faces an admissions committee is precisely that he cannot talk. All the committee hears are "subanimalistic noises and sounds," along with fragmented movements that seem to them "a vision of hell" (14). After having been wrestled down by the distraught committee members, Hal is brought to an ambulance. Lying on a stretcher, he expects to be taken to an emergency room and questioned by a psychiatrist:

It will start in the E.R. [...]: some blue-jawed M.D. [...] wanting gurneyside Q&A, etiology and diagnosis by Socratic method, ordered and point-by-point. [...] It will be someone blue-collar and unlicensed who will [...] catch what he sees as my eye and ask So yo then man what's *your* story. (17)

The phrase "etiology and diagnosis" here serves Wallace as an intertextual marker to "E Unibus," where it occurs in the description of a kind of postmodern irony that predates the dominance of detachment. Wallace identifies this early irony with the idealistic belief that "etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure" (67). Since the phrase reappears in *Infinite Jest* paired with the concept of the Socratic method, it points to what I have described as Wallace's revival of a notion of irony that goes beyond contemporary fashions in the pursuit of its own "cure." But while it is the higher-ranking M.D. who first approaches Hal, demanding "gurneyside Q&A," the outcome of this request is left open. What recognizably sparks off Hal's narrative, however, is a question by "someone blue-collar and unlicensed"—

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<sup>16</sup> Later thinkers would turn to this difference when distinguishing sophistry from philosophy, with Aristotle defining "the sophist" in his *Sophistical Refutations* as "one who makes money from an apparent but unreal wisdom" (1.1 165a22), while Xenophon asserted of "the philosophers" that they "neither honour nor despise [men's fortunes]" ("On Hunting" 13.9).

an orderly, a nurse, or a security guard—who does not specifically get paid to do this work of listening, which has just been explicitly framed as Socratic. True Socratic questioning, then, this inversion of hierarchies suggests, is its own reward. Thus we may read the passage as an indictment of the institutionalization of philosophy, which, as Bernstein has pointed out in *Ironic Life*, “is in danger of becoming barren, pedantic and irrelevant” (125). At Amherst, Wallace seems to have had a similar recognition that there was something wrong with the identity of a ‘professional philosopher.’ “Writing *The Broom of the System*,” he would later tell Lipsky, “it felt like I was using 97 percent of me, whereas philosophy was using 50 percent” (*Although* 261). By comparison with fiction writing, then, which deals with human beings and therefore has an indubitable connection to the ‘art of living,’ professional philosophy seems to have fallen short for Wallace.

This is why he turned to fiction to follow in the footsteps of the great ironists, above all in their belief in the seductive effects of an indeterminacy of voice. As Wood has observed in *How Fiction Works*, the form this indeterminacy took in Wallace was a narrative device called “unidentified free discourse” (32). While Wood’s assessment of Wallace’s so-called ‘hysterical realism’ is marred by a totalizing tendency—a critique I will present more fully in the next chapter—his account can help illuminate Wallace’s use of voice for the purposes of my discussion of irony. In Wallace, Wood argues, “the author and character are absolutely merged [...]: the author’s corrupted language just mimics an actually existing corrupted language we all know too well, and are in fact quite desperate to escape” (34). For the critic, who wears his conservative credentials on his sleeves here, Wallace pushes this “full-immersion method” to “parodic extremes” (33). In light of the generative opacity of Socratic irony, however, what seems to Wood like parody becomes legible as a deliberate refusal to set irony signals and thereby court the indeterminacy that is arguably manifest in Wallace’s key hermeneutic question: What fire dies when you feed it? This absence of markers

therefore signifies beyond any individual voice and produces Wallace's "unidentified free discourse": "the language hovers around the viewpoint of the character," Wood explains, "but really emanates from a kind of 'village chorus'—it is an amalgam of the kind of language we might expect this particular community to speak if they were telling the story" (32).

Indeed, *Infinite Jest* stages a chorus of voices emanating from all strata of North American society: we hear the idiosyncrasies of urban Boston argot, the academic discourses of poststructuralism and annular physics, the inflections of Black American English, the syntactical glitches of Québécois English, and the spirals of marijuana thinking. At one point in the book this polyphonic performance becomes undeniable when a narrator asks—as if addressing the other members of a 'village chorus'—"Has anybody mentioned Gately's head is square?" (476). The effect of this "full immersion technique" is that, in his fiction, Wallace disappears behind the ironic repetition of what it is 'one' [*das Man*] says. The author of *Infinite Jest*, we might say, remains mute, i.e., he does not assert any propositions of his own.<sup>17</sup> Does he know what it is he wants to show through this staging? As in Socrates, such questioning leads only to the undecidability of an ironic stance that refrains from displaying its edge. Kierkegaard was the first to have read this rigorous refusal as a form of silence—"What Socrates himself prized so highly, namely, standing still and contemplating—in other words, *silence*—this is his whole life in terms of world history," he writes (*Concept 49*; my emphasis). This suggestion has been elaborated in recent years by Alexander Nehamas, who quotes Kierkegaard's description of the role of "Socrates' life" in the course of this history

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<sup>17</sup> This muteness is reminiscent of the titular interviews in Wallace's *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, where the interviewer's questions are replaced by ellipses. Hayes-Brady has persuasively argued that this "recurrent, precise figure of the ellipsis" exemplifies Wallace's "use of both silence and incompleteness" (8). And though there is critical disagreement regarding the source of this technique—Hayes-Brady claims that Wallace's ellipses are "Beckettian" (8), while Burn sees primarily William Gaddis's influence (*Guide* 30)—I concur with her conclusion: "Wallace is certainly a writer for whom silence is productive" (8). The silence of *Infinite Jest*, however, is less obvious than the omissions of *BIWHM* and therefore, I argue, even more 'productive.'

as a persistent silence, “a magnificent pause.” “We do not hear him at all,” Kierkegaard notes, “a profound stillness prevails” (*Concept* 222).

I began this study with an account of how prominent twentieth-century thinkers met the critique of metaphysics by putting their hope in the ambivalences of a silence which, as empty, eschewed metaphysical inauthenticity, but which also, in a quasi-mystical fashion, promised a fullness beyond the limits of human language. Kierkegaard now shows Socrates to be an early precursor for this hope in the ‘varieties of silence.’ Indeed, the ‘magnificence’ and ‘profundity’ he hears in Socratic silence prevents any easy dismissals of this strategy as apathy. Similarly, when a philosopher like Nehamas suggests that, in our pursuit of Socrates’s true intentions, we are only met with silence, this in no way means that he would counsel us to abandon inquiry altogether. To the contrary, like the ‘plenitude’ that Wallace hears in Kate’s vague whispers, Socratic silence in Nehamas’s interpretation is a cryptic fullness that compels the listener to pick out strands from its rich weave once the metaphysical conjuring trick that turns absence into presence has been carried out. Again, Kierkegaard anticipates this idea: Socrates “belonged to that breed of persons with whom the outer as such is not the stopping point,” he observes, “The outer continually pointed to something other and opposite” (*Concept* 50). This pointing is the indirect communication of irony; it seduces the hearer into finding out what this ‘other and opposite’ could be, into filling the suggestive silence that remains Socrates’s legacy.

The double gesture of offering up a hidden meaning while at the same time suggesting that there may not be anything there, then, is not only characteristic of Socratic irony as a form of silence; it also corresponds to the doubleness of silence as plenitude and emptiness that has fascinated those writers who are invested in the possibility of contemporary thought becoming ‘post-metaphysical.’ Perhaps the most infamous of these critics of metaphysics was Derrida, who shared with Socrates the experience of having been vilified as a dangerous

charlatan eroding accepted truth.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, some commentators have noted similarities between Socratic questioning and deconstruction, thereby implicitly turning Socrates, against Heidegger's and Nietzsche's verdict, into a post-metaphysical thinker *avant la lettre*. Bernstein makes the comparison explicit by labelling the meaning of Socratic irony, in Derridian terms, “undecidable” (70). Caputo, in turn, finds in Socrates and Derrida the same commitment to keeping open the questions that jumpstarted philosophy—“to let them waver and tremble a bit” (6)—and resist Plato's temptation to give definitive answers to philosophy's challenges. Rorty concurs, listing “the Socratic virtues” as intellectual impulses that “cannot be defended by Platonic means,” but which can be practiced “without any metaphysical comfort” (*Consequences* 174). Clearly, what these contemporary thinkers value in Socrates, as well as in Derrida, is the possibility of indicating the inadequacy of any metaphysical accounts without giving up on accounting altogether. And irony, as I pointed out in the introduction, is a powerful way of letting our metaphysical accounts persist in what Smith has called the kind of “comic misapprehension” that avoids the certainty of tragedy. It is for this reason that the novelists of my study share a desire to keep irony in play. For them, irony is like the famed ‘pharmakon’ that Socrates, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, introduces to indicate the double nature of writing as both poison and cure. Like writing, irony is both bad and good; it is, as I have argued in this chapter, internally divided between detachment and proximity, affording both without settling on either one. And this undecidability, in turn, vouchsafes its seductiveness.

Derrida develops the meaning of the undecidable ‘pharmakon’ in “Plato's Pharmacy,” a text Wallace “reveled in” at Amherst in the early 1980s (*Max Ghost* 38). When Boswell and Kelly read Wallace's seductive method through Derrida's work, then, this is an apt choice that can illuminate the importance of irony for Wallace's fiction. Both Wallace and Derrida

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<sup>18</sup> For Socrates, see the trial by an Athenian court as detailed in Plato's *Apology*. For Derrida, see the 1992 letter to *The Times*, signed by 19 philosophers protesting Cambridge's decision to award him an honorary degree.

had their sights on traditional humanist concerns such as love, trust, faith, and responsibility; but both felt they could only approach them indirectly, holding in suspension a commitment to meaning with a sense of the impossibility of univocity. The overlap with Socratic thinking is obvious here—indeed, Boswell’s and Kelly’s findings on Wallace’s indirection can also support my reading of an ‘older’ conception of irony as proximity in *Infinite Jest*. By contrast, Claire Colebrook argues for a distinction between Socratic and Derridean irony (95). In fact, she views Derrida as implicitly critical of the great forefather’s use of *eironeia*. From a Derridean standpoint, Colebrook claims, what Socrates aims at with his irony, the alleged concept beyond contexts, must be regarded as having itself been generated from contexts.

Lear’s recognition of the role of affect in an ironic life paves the way for a rejoinder here. For Socrates, what constitutes the ‘good life’ is not fixed; it is a matter that needs to be investigated in each context anew. Irony is essential for this repetition, the breaking up of encrusted thought by way of thinking. And as Lear has demonstrated, the experience of irony, as an integral component of the ‘good life,’ is always already bound up with the body, which cannot be regarded as merely one more concept among others; rather, the anxiety and uncanniness associated with irony as an ‘art of living’ highlights the role of the body as the particular, contextual background for all value judgments. As in Wallace’s Blakean strategy, this means that the body gains a central role in determining when to ‘make irony happen.’ Not all commitments are the same, this strategy suggests; some are better for us than others, and the measure of their appropriateness is our body. Hence the excess of irony in *Infinite Jest* is aimed at those detached ironists who still suffer, whose bodies are, in that sense, still healthy. As if in opposition to such oversaturation, however, Wallace leaves finally open whether this assumption of residual health is valid. In fact, the film “Infinite Jest” is a

reminder of the truly frightening possibility that our bodies could have been reprogrammed into making us want what is bad for us.

In his study *Insight and Outlook*, Arthur Koestler has argued that in the case of such uncertain texts, “a great weight comes to be placed on the ‘emotional charge’ of the work, which now becomes the major yardstick by which we differentiate between tragedy and comedy” (O’Neill 58). In the case of *Infinite Jest*, however, the markings on Koestler’s yardstick are not clearly legible; it seems that Wallace has obscured them. Indeed, as I announced earlier, this is a conclusion that holds true for all writers of the Wallace nexus: what emerges from their ambivalent treatment of affect is that the body can sometimes still function as a measure of critique—for instance in the experience of proximate irony as an anxious longing for something ‘opposite and other,’ a better self. But it can also be abused, often through a strategy of detachment that denies, and thereby exacerbates, human vulnerabilities. The ‘idealist’s heaven’ that de Man reaches through an ‘absolute irony’ which no longer harbors any desire for approaching something outside the ironist’s mind, in fact, is the endpoint of this movement away from the anxiety and wonder of an embodied existence. My objective in this chapter has been to show that Wallace had a different conception of the wisdom one gains in irony; to him, the ironist as philosopher cannot be the stoically detached kind, for whom, in the absence of direct access to the world, discourse must forever be radically self-referential, composed of signifiers that are wrapped up in themselves. Rather, per Smith’s verdict, Wallace “was a writer who placed himself ‘in the hazard’ of his own terms, undergoing them as real problems, within life and on the page” (“Gifts” 289). By contrast, de Man once responded famously to another literary scholar, “If you want to talk about men, you are in the wrong field. We can only talk about letters” (Greenblatt viii). Such certainty about the irredeemable division of subject and object must have seemed to Wallace to make use of knowledge about something we cannot know, precisely by virtue of our

subsumption in language. He seems to have preferred a confident uncertainty about whether ‘paranoia’ or ‘anti-paranoia,’ in Pynchon’s terms, has the upper hand in our life as symbol-wielding animals themselves made of symbols. Arguably, the silence of irony allowed him to express this uncertainty without yielding to de Man’s ascetic renunciation of longing. This is ultimately why, as a hermeneutic for *Infinite Jest*, de Man’s aesthetic disinterestedness fails just like Karnicky’s escapist ‘stasis’ and Dreyfus’s complacent ‘nihilism’ in explaining the effect Wallace’s work has had on his readers.

A reason for seeking an explanation in the Socratic tradition of irony is provided by the text itself in the figure of Gately, a Saul turned Paul whom critics have read as an embodiment of the ethics of *Infinite Jest*. When Gately arises from the struggle with his inner demons more conscious, more abiding, Wallace frames this recovery in terms taken from Plato’s philosophy. In an allusion to the statement in the *Apology* about “[a]n unexamined life not [being] worth living” (38a), the reader learns that Gately used to go to “The Unexamined Life club,” a low-down place “throbbing with voices and bass under its ceaseless neon bottle” (*Jest* 476). Yet the club, Wallace’s narrator notes, is a place “where [Gately] no longer goes” (*ibid.*), with the implication being that Gately has shifted to an *examined* life—the ‘good life’ of Socratic philosophy, which is characterized by self-examination as much as AA, the organization that made this shift possible for Gately, but uses irony rather than dogmatism in empowering people to find their own existential truth.

“Truth demands silence before it will raise its voice,” Kierkegaard observed of the relationship between truth and irony, “and Socrates was to bring about this silence” (*Concept* 232). His refusal to provide answers led people back to the flux, the infinite divisibility the Greeks expressed through the concept of ‘to aporein,’ where everything is still full of promise, and yet also difficult in the way of all new beginnings. In light of this passage, Socratic silence might indeed be associated with the absence of metaphysical commitments

characteristic of ‘post-metaphysical’ thought; for a reading of *Infinite Jest* in the Socratic tradition as I have attempted it here, this would mean that Kelly is right in asserting that Wallace’s ‘way of writing’ “displaces metaphysics” (146). And yet I think there is something in the reception of the book—in the wonder and desire for proximity it produces—that resists this conclusion and suggests that a ‘post-metaphysical’ framework alone, such as Derrida’s critique of ‘metaphysics of presence,’ cannot, in the final analysis, do justice to the complexities of *Infinite Jest*.

“The mind,” Victor Hugo once observed in “The Man Who Laughs,” “abhors vacuum” (307). Indeed, the silence Socrates’s listeners encountered contributed in no small way to their anxiety; and, as in Wallace’s reading of Markson’s silence as plenitude, they would rush in to fill the void, turning absence into presence. In this way, ironic silence throughout the ages has seduced people into attempting metaphysical speculations of their own—not, however, by reaffirming established answers, but by going back to the hard work of determining truth for ourselves, thereby determining ourselves. What ends up filling the void is not any universality, then, but rather a manifestation of one’s self—the very self that, as I outlined in the first chapter, seems to have been endangered by the advent of skepticism. The same is true of Wallace’s irony. Sure, *Infinite Jest* is in the good company of long novels that are more being talked about than read. As the work of a notoriously difficult author, however, the book has a surprising presence in contemporary North-American culture. Wallace’s aporias bring readers together in perplexed conversations—not only in classrooms, but in coffee shops and libraries, online chatrooms and forums—to debate obscure passages tucked away into an endnote or random remark in *Infinite Jest*.<sup>19</sup> These conversations range from

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<sup>19</sup> While the evidence for this assertion is arguably anecdotal, the sheer number of blog posts and articles about Wallace can be verified by anyone with an internet connection. Wallace-related content in new media ranges from early projects such as the *Wallace-I* listserv run by Matt Bucher and *The Howling Fantods*, a webpage devoted to research and news on Wallace’s work that is maintained by Nick Maniatis, to more recent collective reading projects like *Infinite Summer*, which was launched in 2009 by Matthew Baldwin, and its 2016

mysterious plot points, for instance why a tennis player's possessions move around his room at night as if by the hands of a ghost (394), to the human motives behind Clipperton's suicide: can it be explained solely by reference to a difficult childhood, with a mother addicted to Valium and a blind father equally addicted to hitting paddle balls (433)?

The efforts these readers expend have a counterpart in the book. Mortally wounded, lying prostrate in a hospital bed as he is battling an urge to succumb to oral narcotics, it is once more Gately who prefigures the kind of dedication to a 'good life' Wallace investigates in *Infinite Jest*. And just as Gately—according to Max, “the first character whose distress seems to touch Wallace” (“Lost”)—learns that “[n]o one single instant of [his suffering] was unendurable” (860), the reader of *Infinite Jest* soon learns to be similarly mindful in reading a thousand pages of labyrinthine prose. As Wallace told Lipsky at the time of the book's publication, this solicitation of readerly commitment was by design. The kind of avant-garde fiction he wanted to write “seduces the reader into making extraordinary efforts that he wouldn't normally make” (*Although* 71). But, as I indicated in the last chapter, the experience of having read an excessive book such as *American Psycho* was still on Wallace's mind as he wrote his long novel. The pull exercised by his own fiction, then, could not operate the same way it did in Ellis. If it was to be truly a gift for the readers' benefit, Wallace noted to Lipsky, fiction had to avoid “pander[ing] or manipul[at]ing them” (72). For him, striking the right balance between seduction as gift and manipulation meant that “a book has to teach a reader how to read it.” Thus *Infinite Jest* conveys the value of ironic uncanniness, of getting 'stuck'—teaching the reader that it is worth expending all the effort of figuring out for herself what it means to live a 'good life.' Talking to Lipsky, Wallace had somewhat more ordinary words for these aims, distilling a whole metaphysics, and its attendant desire, into a few prosaic lines:

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counterpart *Infinite Winter*. Finally, the podcast series “The Great Concavity,” hosted by Bucher together with Dave Laird, has since 2015 served as a gateway for publications in Wallace Studies to reach a public audience.

The goal was to have something that was really pretty hard, but also to sort of be good enough, and fun enough, to make you be willing to do that [hard work]. And in the course of that, teach you that you were ... more willing than you thought you were? (271)

#### 4. “The Great Unequivocal International Gestures”: Gestus in Zadie Smith’s *The Autograph Man*

The ethics of reading is to think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger.

—Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics*

But where danger is, grows  
The saving power also.

—Friedrich Hölderlin, *Patmos*

In the last chapter, I showed that *Infinite Jest* partakes of an earnestly ironic, ironically earnest discourse, poised at the point where one affect is always on the verge of collapsing into the other. I now turn to Zadie Smith’s *The Autograph Man*, a novel whose “vexed issue,” James Wood has it, is a similar “management of irony and sincerity—their proper apportioning,” with Smith being finally uncertain, in Wood’s estimation, about “how to dispose of her own sincerity and irony” (“Goyish”). I argue that the doubleness of Wallace’s novel, which I expressed through the rhetorical figure of chiasmus, also informs Smith’s humor. I will make this point by turning to the work of Franz Kafka as it has been read by Smith, Wallace, and the German critic Walter Benjamin. Both Wallace and Benjamin show that Kafka’s serio-comic mode corresponds to a philosophically relevant interest in the ambivalent nature of human gestures—a concern Smith shares, judging by the obvious recurrence of what she calls ‘I.G.s,’ “the great unequivocal International Gestures” (204), used in *The Autograph Man* to indicate a variety of registers: from the mundane, as in signaling incomprehension—“hands holding invisible football, squinty eyes, head at an angle” (169)—to the crude, as in imitations of fellatio—“the groping tongue in the cheek” (258)—to full-blown transcendence—“brief upwards nod, eyes set on the ceiling” (412).

A ‘gestus,’ I argue, is a way of being-in-the-world; it exists in a vague space between signification and bodily performativity, courting the universality and purity of silence without

giving in to the trauma of speechlessness.<sup>1</sup> Smith's concern with "the great unequivocal International Gestures," then, answers to what I identified as the key question faced by her generation of novelists: how to chart a novelistic path between metaphysical inauthenticity and the existential terror of muteness. The prominence given to Wood in framing this discussion of Smith's novel is no coincidence. Wood's words have publicly accompanied Smith's meteoric rise on the literary scene since her very first publications. As such, her work is fused with Wood's response such that, for many, her name also evokes the name of the critic. Other literary siamese twins come to mind: Faulkner-Cowley, Joyce-Gilbert, even the triad Nabokov-Wilson-Trilling, and, as discussed in the last chapter, the more recent Wallace-McCaffery "essay-interview nexus."

Smith's own 'nexus,' a feud with Wood about the direction of the contemporary novel Christopher Holmes has called a "literary dustup" (143), took place in a series of articles and responses published in *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Review of Books*. Wood's contributions are mixed, sometimes giving Smith's novels the critical stamp of approval—2012's *NW* is even included in Wood's "Books of the Year" list as "the best novel she has yet written"—at other times identifying them with everything deemed wrong and misguided in contemporary writing. To her 2000 debut *White Teeth*, for instance, a sprawling tale of two families, the Joneses and the Iqbals, set against the background of multicultural Britain, Wood attached the label "hysterical realism," thus departing from a critical chorus which praised the novel's fresh vision of millennial life in a globalized world.

Later critics such as Holmes have noticed Wood's different tack on Smith's work and moved

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<sup>1</sup> The reason for the peculiar use of the Latinate noun 'gestus' in those thinkers, such as Benjamin and Brecht, who pay attention to gestural language is that the more common noun 'gesture' signifies the 'unmediated raw material,' the 'natural' language of the body; it is therefore, according to Fredric Jameson, "too restrictive" (Brecht 99), suggesting the possibility of unencumbered access to the *Ding an sich* before its subjection to the symbolic. 'Gestus,' by contrast, like the conception of 'affect' I take from Ngai, registers how the human body becomes a repertoire of physical gestures constrained by power. As such, it allows for explorations of the workings of power on the self without making any commitments as to the precise admixture of power and physicality—a commitment that would inevitably have to rely on a spurious notion of authentic origins. And it is precisely in this "way it keeps the procedure open" that Jameson sees the utility of 'gestus' for critical theorists (100).

to a reconsideration of the Smith-Wood debate, hoping that it would offer “a way of contextualizing Smith’s literary project as a series of formal experiments” in order to avoid the mere repetition of “the most prevalent categories of criticism of Smith’s work” (145).

In this chapter on Smith, I follow Holmes in his shift toward such aesthetic concerns by revisiting Smith’s feud with Wood; doing so, however, by no means runs counter to the political issues raised by much of early Smith criticism. Indeed, what is arguably Smith’s most daring “formal experiment,” a ‘strategy of oversaturation’ that relies on the kind of metaphysical hope expressed by the Hölderlin epigraph above, places her squarely in a camp with the other writers of my study and marks a difference to Wood on matters political as well as metaphysical. What emerges from *The Autograph Man* in light of this disagreement, then, is the notion of a metaphysics that stays open to otherness by avoiding a totalizing impulse that is based on a one-sided desire for purity. The way it does this, I argue, is through attention to what Benjamin calls ‘gestus,’ which is, as Jameson has it, “both a little more and a little less than a concept” (100); as such, it always points beyond itself to an otherness that cannot be signified straightforwardly but only gestured at—the discovery of which, as I show in the following, coincides with bursts of laughter that are occasions for deep thinking about the underlying dichotomy without neatly resolving or ‘sublating’ it. As the epigraph by Newton cited above indicates, this metaphysical openness coincides with a commitment to honoring alterity that connects Smith’s work with the considerations about literary ethics I developed in the second chapter.

*The Autograph Man* is at heart a *Bildungsroman* about the titular character, a young British man of Jewish and Asian descent named Alex-Li Tandem, who lives in the fictional London suburb of Mountjoy. Alex, a collector of famous peoples’ autographs, abandons his girlfriend to attend the Autographicana convention in New York days before she has a major operation. His attendance, however, is merely a cover for the real purpose of the trip: to track

down the old film star Kitty Alexander, with whom Alex has had an extensive, though exclusively one-sided correspondence since his childhood, sending her fan mail that remains unanswered for years. When, at the beginning of the novel, a letter with Alexander's autograph arrives, it turns Alex's world upside down and starts a plot development that leads him to her apartment in Brooklyn. There, he is faced with the reality of an aging actress who has previously served him as an unreachable ideal for projecting unfulfilled desires for transcendence in a secular world—up to this point, Alex has regularly escaped ideas of mortality by watching Alexander's movie *The Girl from Peking*, which, he notes, “was never different, in which people never changed and kept their beauty and did not die” (97).

Replacing the ideal of Kitty Alexander with her mundane reality begins Alex's process of transformation to a new kind of person who freely gives away the actress's valuable autograph for the benefit of others and finally honors his dead father's memory. This issue of the dead father as a structuring device is further indicated by Smith's disclosure of a major inspiration for *The Autograph Man*, when, on the novel's copyright page, she acknowledges “the importance of Leon Wieseltier's wise and poetic memoir, *Kaddish*.” In his memoir, Wieseltier, a student of Benjamin's writings who wrote the preface to *Illuminations*, comes to terms with his father's passing by enquiring into, as well as performing, the Jewish prayer of mourning known as the Kaddish. And this is what Alex does, too, in a final section of the novel which is entitled “Kaddish” to draw an obvious parallel to Wieseltier's text.

On the day before Alex says the Kaddish publicly, however, a private but no less important moment of remembrance occurs at his best friend Adam Jacobs's apartment. This apartment recurs in the novel as a place of spiritual aspiration. In its “boxy, dark, candlelit” interior (97), Adam has regular meditation sessions during which he and his friends stare in silence at a “crude Kabbalistic diagram, ten circles in strange formation” which Adam had drawn on the wall in order to represent “the ten holy spheres, each containing a divine

attribute” (93). For Adam, who searches for “THE UNKNOWABLE, THE INFINITE NOTHING” (131), such silent meditation allows him to lose himself in an “idea of unity in nothingness” (96). In the novel, this ability, which eludes Alex, is presented as due to the fact that “Adam did not forfeit wonder” (96). But it is not only Jewish mysticism which fills Adam with wonder; in fact, we are told, “[e]verything in Adam’s world was wondrous” (96), including pop stars like Isaac Hayes, Stevie Wonder, and Michael Jackson, whose images cover the walls of his meditation room, too.

Indeed, in a corner of the room, there is another diagram on the wall, consisting of “nine black and white photos in Kabbalah formation” (126) of celebrities ranging from Kafka over Wittgenstein to John Lennon. This alternative diagram reappears under the title “Kabbalah of Alex-Li Tandem” as a paratextual element underneath the novel’s dust jacket—equating it, per Wood’s verdict (“Goyish”), with Smith’s stance rather than with her character’s and thus turning it into a key for interpreting Alex’s development. In Philip Tew’s estimation, these extra- and paratextual components, such as handwritten fonts and additional stories that are also hidden under *The Autograph Man*’s dust jacket, stress “both the physicality of the book, its presence and the fact that responding to it involves actions beyond simply reading” (“Reconsidering” 58). And it is precisely such a movement beyond ‘simple’ textual signification that enables Alex to experience the kind of magic that has, to his frustration, eluded him in Adam’s diagrams throughout the book.

The turning point comes after his transformative encounter with Alexander, when, back in London, Alex stands in front of Adam’s wall and has a revelation that comes close to what Pynchon once called the “odd, religious instant” of Oedipa Maas’s view onto the “hieroglyphic” maze of San Narcisco’s skyline (*Lot 49* 14). While “sunshine hit the blinds and divided the room into paragraphs of dusty light and sentences of shadow” (412), Alex, too, apprehends the world as a legible book, in turn opening him up to a very different,

transcendent kind of signification that breaks into the immanence of Adam's apartment with what Smith calls the right "Timing" and "Coincidence" (412). And then, with his mind "elsewhere" as the sun is washing the walls, Alex writes his father's name Li-Jin onto a piece of paper, silently steps up to the Kabbalah, where Adam has purposely left "one branch missing" (128), and sticks the paper "in the empty sun-faded spot, midway between—and elevated above—the popular philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and the popular writer Virginia Woolf" (413).

In a reading of *The Autograph Man* that ties Smith's aesthetics to the concept of the gift I employed in the second chapter to illustrate Wallace's ethics, Lee Konstantinou interprets this one moment as a "textual aporia" involving two mutually exclusive options: either we are meant to read Smith's phrasing, which awkwardly references Wittgenstein's and Woolf's popularity, as a "corrosive irony" that makes "Alex's final juxtaposition of his dead father with celebrities [...] a grotesque moral failure" ("Economy" 139); or, if we accept his gesture as authentic, Konstantinou explains, we would "correspondingly have to abandon the idea that," in a market culture where everything popular is a commodity, "art can remain anything resembling a gift" (140). Konstantinou claims that Smith resolves this aporia in order "to redeem not only her art but also authorship under the regime of global corporate publishing" (138). Thus he identifies "*The Autograph Man*'s postironic solution to the problem of neoliberal authorship" as an attempt "to reconstruct the non-ironic possibility of the (handmade) gift" (139). This is somewhat like the critic's Hegelian reading of Wallace's supposed 'postironic' art in the last chapter: in both cases, a novel's constitutive aporias are resolved neatly in order to clarify the underlying authorial ideology.

I pursue a different reading of Alex's gesture and Smith's novel in this chapter, one that counters both Konstantinou's 'postironic' interpretation and Wood's charge of the novel's failure to 'properly apportion' irony and sincerity. This reading seeks a key to *The Autograph*

*Man* in its ‘textual aporias,’ too; but I do not believe that Smith’s text sublates any of these aporias—of silence, of the gift, of irony—in the way Konstantinou imagines this above; rather, I argue that Smith stages these aporias to afford opportunities for the reader to experience *wonder* at her own ‘stuckness’ in confronting them. Such wonder is a “saving grace” amidst the novel’s oversaturation of pop-cultural signifiers, which, however, does not resolve the contradictions of Smith’s multivalent text, but instead leads to laughter as a way of communicating what cannot be conveyed through words alone. I will make this case chiefly by focusing on the novel’s juxtaposition of the mundane and the transcendent as equal sources of wonder in what Walter Benjamin terms a ‘constellation’ of materialist and metaphysical thinking. Based on the novel’s intertextual references to the philosopher, then, I will use Benjamin as the main guide for my reading of Smith. In fact, as a symbol placed between, even above, a Wittgensteinian philosophy that collapses into silence and a Woolfian literature that expands into verbosity, Alex’s gesture arguably enacts the kind of wonder I will identify in this chapter with Benjaminian ‘gestus.’

That Smith employs a *silent* gesture to express the insight that has led to Alex’s transformation, that indeed she fully embraces the multiple connotations fanning out from the character’s mutely loquacious act, then, points once more to the interest in silence I identified in this study as a feature of twentieth-century literature after the critique of metaphysics. In the introduction, I traced startling intuitions of a fundamental absence beyond the ‘painkillers’ of our established vocabularies in 1970s postmodernism. I then showed how this concern stayed with later writers like Wallace, who penciled a formula into his copy of DeLillo’s *End Zone* that summarized this ‘horror’ of increasing abstraction, and Ellis, who still writes under the impending doom signified by such a breakdown of signification, too. All the while, I paired this breakdown with a corresponding hope in the signifying properties of silence understood as ‘plenitude.’ That we find a similar concern in Smith’s novel now

places her in the same tradition of contemporary fiction; even more importantly, it also runs counter to the description Wood has given of her work as an example of ‘hysterical realism.’

After all, such realism, Wood asserts, “is characterized by a fear of silence” (“Goyish”). Holmes adopts a similar focus in his summary of the Smith-Wood debate as “an argument over essential fullness or absence at the heart of the contemporary novel” (145). This makes their feud a paradigm for the theoretical stakes behind concerns over the status of contemporary fiction shared by the writers of my study. Indeed, Wood’s confident critical brushstrokes paint a panorama of contemporary Anglo-American writing that shows a diverse array of novelists to be in recoil from the ‘horrors’ of silence. In the apparent plenitude of their encyclopedic narratives Wood only hears hysteria, a kind of panicked noise that drowns out the silence underneath. “This kind of realism,” he writes, “is a perpetual motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity” (“Tell me how does it feel?”). I will respond to Wood’s argument now by tracing its roots in the critic’s earlier dismissals of Pynchon and DeLillo, the ‘outlaws’ preceding Wallace’s generation, before turning to Smith’s novelistic work in earnest.

### **The Contemporary Writing Project**

‘Hysteria’ has had a long cultural and gendered history, associating it with an excess of feeling, particularly in women. Wood’s invocation of the term, however, is intended to highlight the opposite—an inability on the part of those novelists who construct such ‘perpetual motion machines’ to make the reader feel at all. “Their mode of narration,” Wood asserts, “seems to be almost incompatible with tragedy or anguish” (“Hysterical Realism” 169). In the following, I will read Kafka’s serio-comic work as a model for an expressionist literature that eschews the binary choice between comedy and earnestness Wood’s critique relies on here. In fact, the model for literary success he counterposes shows his true colors as

a proponent of classical realism, rather than expressionism: “A space may now open, one hopes, for the kind of novel that shows us that human consciousness is the truest Stendhalian mirror, reflecting helplessly the newly dark lights of the age” (“Tell me”).

A positivistic description of mimesis as a “mirror,” and an acceptance of ‘helplessness’ over aspirations to critical agency—it is tempting to see nothing more than a reactionary, pre-postmodernist flight from the present in Wood’s literary hopes here. Smith seems to have shared this impression. Indeed, the line of defense she pursues in her essay “This is how it feels to me,” a direct answer to Wood’s inquiry as announced by its title, marks a disagreement between the two thinkers regarding the impact of postmodern, televisual culture that had preoccupied writers like Wallace and DeLillo: “[Wood] says: tell us how it feels,” Smith concludes, and her response is a bit defensive: “Well, we are trying. I am trying. But as DeLillo dramatised (again, in *White Noise*), it is difficult to discuss feelings when the TV speaks so loudly; cries so operatically; seems always, in everything, one step ahead.”

The argument about hysterical realism, then, is carried out over the value of the novelistic approach of a postmodernist such as DeLillo—and, indeed, this confluence is apt, given that Wood had already exercised the same critical muscles he would later use on Smith in a dismissive review of DeLillo’s *Underworld*, calling the novel proof of “the incompatibility of the political paranoid vision with great fiction” (“Against Paranoia” 181). *Underworld*, with its wide-ranging subplots encompassing all of Cold War history, serves Wood as a convenient example for his major objection to ‘hysterical realism.’ What has taken the place of rendering compelling emotional experiences in DeLillo and his epigones, he asserts, are detailed accounts of “how the world works.” Not characters, then, but ‘the world’ is the focus of what Wood calls ‘hysterical realism’—a claim that outlines a metaphysical difference between two kinds of fiction.

On the one hand, there are self-contained descriptions of human character as Wood finds them in Chekov, his preferred example of a master of literary craft; on the other hand, there is a writer like DeLillo, whose pursuit of human character manifests in and through descriptions of networks, technologies, external realities. Cowart had made a similar point when he attested DeLillo a “homeopathic [...] desire [...] to become the American reality he scrutinizes” (*Physics* 12). But a critic like Wood, whom Holmes has called “the dean of conservative criticism at *The New Yorker*” (145), dismisses the same strategy as a way of “fighting the culture with dialectical devilry” (“Tell me”). As indicated by his reference to dialectics here, Wood is not shy to disclose the broader frontline of his critique: the real target is the Marxism of the Frankfurt School, with its emphasis on how materiality shapes consciousness. DeLillo, in turn, is condemned as a Trojan horse bringing misguided theoretical ideas into contemporary Anglo-American fiction: “The DeLilloan idea of the novelist as a kind of Frankfurt School entertainer,” Wood laments, “has been woefully influential, and will take some time to die” (“Tell me”). For Wood, this is a death that cannot come too soon, as he insinuates that DeLillo’s Frankfurt School influence has spoiled a whole generation of novelists: “[A]ny young American writer of any ambition has been imitating DeLillo,” he explains, “imitating his tentacular ambition, the effort to pin down an entire writhing culture, to be a great analyst of systems, crowds, paranoia, politics” (“Tell me”).

Smith confidently accepts the charge: “I read *White Noise*,” she writes, “to experience, yes, a Frankfurt school comedy.” As I indicated in the introduction, however, she also acknowledges certain shortcomings of this kind of writing. In DeLillo’s fiction, Smith notes, “every boy, girl, man, woman, black, white, lesbian, Jew and Muslim speaks in exactly the same way: like DeLillo” (“This is how”). The totalizing uniformity of the Frankfurt School’s large-scale vision, then, runs the risk of coinciding with a uniformity of voice—a uniformity which threatens to eradicate difference, turning characters into caricatures in the pursuit of

larger conceptual, or even allegorical, points. In fact, some of this danger has carried over into Smith's debut *White Teeth*, and Wood's point is strongest in his discussion of the plot line involving Irie Jones, like Smith the daughter of a Jamaican mother and a white British father. Bi-racial Irie, who seeks secure cultural roots but comes to learn of the hybrid nature of her own family's genealogy, in the end longs for a time when "roots won't matter any more because they can't because they mustn't because they're too long and they're too tortuous and they're just buried too damn deep" (527). Smith has Irie manifest this desire through her decision to first have sex with her friend Millat Iqbal and then, in short succession, with his twin Magid; this plot turn ensures that Irie can never be sure of her baby's parentage, which makes of the unborn child a symbol for the very idea of a future when certainty about origins has ceased to matter.

Wood rightly criticizes the artificial character of this conclusion as trying to make a conceptual point but ultimately verging into improbability: "It is quite clear that a general message about the need to escape roots is more important than Irie's reality, what she might actually think" ("Hysterical Realism" 183). The author writes *over* her characters here, Wood explains; she is providing beautiful philosophical themes and ideas, but, in the process, misses what she had set out to capture: the world, "a picture of life" in verisimilitude ("Hysterical Realism" 182). Wood applies similar reasoning to Smith's description of the leader of a fundamentalist Islamic group who spends five years in his aunt's garage in order to prove his point that freedom lies in restriction. The passage's plethora of comic details—the man's epithet "Guru in the Garage," his "routine of press-ups and sit-ups to prevent muscular atrophy," his practice of passing his "shit and piss" through a cat-flap (*Teeth* 469)—drives Wood to conclude that Smith's rendering of detail too often goes too far: "As realism, it is incredible; as satire, it is cartoonish; as cartoon, it is too realistic," he comments, "it is all shiny externality, a caricature" ("Hysterical Realism" 172).

What Wood is after, by contrast, are the time-honored conflicts of unacknowledged desire and unconscious motive within a character, and, by this yardstick, he argues in his 2008 book *How Fiction Works*, “caricature is generally uninteresting” (128). Yet that he adduces, in the same breath, the observation that “sometimes [caricature] might just be a novelist’s way of sticking to the point” indicates in very general terms his awareness of the theoretical assumptions behind the work of writers like DeLillo, Wallace, and Smith. After all, their ‘point,’ one might continue Wood’s line of thought here, is precisely that character in our media-saturated society approaches caricature, at the point of indistinguishability between essence and contingency, human nature and cultural history. And it is this conclusion that Wood seems unwilling to embrace, sticking, as he does, to an idea of something still ‘alive’ and ‘authentic’ in human character—the very kind of verisimilitude he misses in Smith’s and DeLillo’s “novels of immense self-consciousness with no selves in them at all, curiously arrested and very ‘brilliant’ books that know a thousand things but do not know a single human being” (“Tell me how does it feel?”).

What Smith’s fiction demonstrates, however, is that human character is never divorced from the external world of cause and effect, media and image, as Wood seems to assume, but rather relative to historical and technological change. The most influential change of this kind today, Smith knows from paranoiacs such as DeLillo and Wallace, is the prevalence of the televisual image; and at key moments of *White Teeth*, characters exhibit a response pattern that is borrowed from the imaginaries of the culture industry, prefiguring the range of choices available to them. So when, at the novel’s climax, Irie’s friend Millat ponders whether to assassinate a scientist in the name of the Islamic fundamentalist group, he imagines “Pacino in the first *Godfather* [...] considering for a moment what it means to burst out of the men’s room and blast the hell out of the two guys at checkered table” (*Teeth* 526). And with his decision to kill now an inevitability taken from the “unstoppable narrative” of TV (526),

Mallit, like Pacino, reaches for his gun. At the same time, however, Mallit is watched by Irie's father Archibald Jones, who has also "seen TV" and "knows what such a reach means" (533); thus Archie, jumping into the trajectory of the bullet, shields the scientist by catching Mallit's bullet in his thigh. Over this whole climactic denouement, TV presides like a familiar subtext, its generic stories and images—the Mafia assassin, the aging hero jumping into the line of fire—enabling behavior as well as its interpretation, intervening even in matters of life and death. TV, then, has become a force that makes a Chekavian depiction of consciousness such as Wood favors seem out of step with the times. Indeed, when human behavior moves along tracks laid down by popular entertainments, Smith suggests by way of plot development here, media-based caricature can be part of a believable, even 'authentic,' representation of 'how it feels' to be alive.<sup>2</sup>

This was, as Smith notes, the point DeLillo had "dramatized" in *White Noise*, perhaps the quintessential postmodern text. Wood has little sympathy for such postmodern experiments, which immerse their characters in the cultural forcefields of our time to obscure, and thereby interrogate, the line between signification and substance, representation and 'the Real.' In *How Fiction Works*, narratives like this are dismissed as "metafictional game-playing," which asks, Wood explains, *whether* a character exists, but does so playfully, non-seriously (119). This is contrasted with what he calls "metaphysical questioning," the kind of investigation that asks *how* a character can exist, which is, according to Wood, a question "about the different ways of living, and narrating, a life" (119). In light of its many para- and

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<sup>2</sup> Smith's commitment to a metaphysics that acknowledges the influence of material forces on human consciousness has unanimously been acknowledged by her major critics. Thus Peter Childs and James Green, in their study *Aesthetics and Ethics in Twenty-First Century British Novels*, contend with a view to Smith's work that fiction today faces a "changed ontological context" in which "new subjectivities are emerging [...] under the aegis of new information and communication technologies" (7). Similarly, Tew identifies the broad scope of Smith's novels as a response to the broadened horizons that have opened up for human beings in the 21st Century: "Smith seeks to position all of her characters in the wider complexities and variations of being that affect all social selves and our ontological understandings of them" ("Reconsidering" 56). In a 2012 *New Yorker* interview, Smith has affirmed her belief in this parallelism between changes in material conditions and changes in ontology: "little varietals of voice and lifestyle [...] are fundamentally significant," she stated, "they're the filter through which we come to understand the world. To be born into money is ontologically different than to be born without it, for example."

extratextual elements, its various fonts, diagrams and boxed features, it seems clear that, for Wood, *The Autograph Man* is an example of the former, ‘playful’ category that turns inward by reflecting on its own conventions rather than ‘mirroring’ the object to be represented.

But Wood’s commitment to a distinction between inward- and outward-looking fictions seems misguided, especially when it comes to postmodernist literature, in which, as R.B. Kershner notes in *The Twentieth-Century Novel*, “characters *are* essentially their *situation*” (107). Kershner’s claim here indicates that the stark dichotomy between character and culture, which informs Wood’s concept of ‘metaphysical’ questioning, should be taken with a grain of salt. In response to Wood, I argue in this chapter that the metafictional, self-reflexive elements of Smith’s novel can still serve as a catalyst for metaphysical inquiry, provided we abandon any transhistorical, essentialist aspirations and turn to a concept of metaphysics—Kant would call it a ‘critical’ metaphysics—that regards human consciousness as semi-permeable, open to the impact of culture and history. Given this definitional shift, Smith may indeed be said to explore the very existential categories of narration that Wood associates with “metaphysical questioning.”

In the introduction, I paired DeLillo’s vision of vast, vibrating forcefields in the culture with Pynchon’s conviction that our egos are being ‘colonized’ by similar streams of information networks. Given Wood’s opposition to DeLillo’s “tentacular ambition,” then, it is not surprising to find an early version of his later dismissal of Frankfurt School-type entertainments in the essay “Thomas Pynchon and the Problem of Allegory.” Once more, Wood asserts the autonomy of literary character here—a requirement for successful fiction that Pynchon, in Wood’s opinion, fails to meet. “Pynchon does not, or cannot do the [comedy of character],” he writes, “what he can do, often powerfully, is to make the culture vibrate at high speed, and whip comedy from the rotations” (“Allegory” 171). That this image of frenzied movement is a precursor of the later claim to hear a ‘fear of silence’ in the works of

‘hysterical realism’ becomes apparent in Wood’s description of Pynchon’s work as a ‘comedy of culture’: “It is extracted from the characters, at *their* expense” (“Allegory” 174). In his argument against Smith, then, he merely repeats an idea that had been well-rehearsed in the Pynchon essay; in both cases Wood laments that the authors write *over* their characters. His assessment of Pynchon’s creations a decade later, in *How Fiction Works*, reiterates this familiar complaint: they are “flat characters,” he writes, “not true figures” (150n).

Although I have presented a similar critique of Pynchon, Wood’s sharp distinction between ‘comedy of character’ and ‘comedy of culture’ here amounts to a metaphysical, and ethical, confusion; indeed, to trace the outlines of the systems that constitute us does not mean abandoning Wood’s ethical ambitions as he outlines them in *How Fiction Works*—for the novel to cultivate attention and a Jamesian ‘fine awareness’ (65). Smith is quite explicit about this, writing in her essay “Love, Actually” that she had detected in Pynchon’s work an “ethical strategy” as well as a “narrative procedure” that would exert a strong hold on her during the composition of her own first two novels. Both, she acknowledges, were written under the influence of a Pynchon quote that had been pinned to the door of her study. The passage is from *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and it serves as a perfect summary for the kind of novelistic project that still informs the works of ‘hysterical realism’:

We have to look for power sources here, and distribution networks we were never taught, routes of power our teachers never imagined, or were encouraged to avoid... We have to find meters whose scales are unknown in the world, draw our own schematics, getting feedback, making connections, reducing the error, trying to learn the real function . . . zeroing in on what incalculable plot? (530)

For Smith, sitting under this weighty quote, laboring on her own long books, Pynchon’s imperative issued an “ethical challenge to the composers of narrative” which she wanted to “try to be equal to” (“Love”). “I wanted to be like Pynchon,” she explains in the later essay, “to be in pursuit of hidden information; I thought it the novel’s responsibility to chase and pin down the ghost in the machine.” That a critic like Wood would apply to Smith’s fiction the

same phrase, verbatim, he had used in his earlier essay on Pynchon—making reference in both cases to the “bright lights” of the novel in question, which are mistaken for “evidence of habitation” (170)—indicates, somewhat perversely, the fulfillment of Smith’s Pynchonian ambitions. And Smith herself is quite incredulous about the critical resistance when she asks, rhetorically, and presumably with Wood in mind: “I cannot be the only writer who took to heart Pynchon’s call to arms in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, many years ago now.”

Indeed, she was not the only writer to have taken the baton from Pynchon. Wallace, too, started out as a novelist by following the Pynchonian model, even if, as I argued in the last chapter, his concern for the modern self would inspire him to develop a literary range of empathy and humorous self-awareness that elevates his most memorable characters both above DeLillo’s ‘mouthpieces’ and what Wood calls Pynchon’s “serfs to allegory” (“Allegory” 174). Wood detects this shared influence, noting in “Fundamentally Goyish,” his harsh review of *The Autograph Man*—Smith’s “most ambitious” novel, according to Childs and Green (50)—that the book “bears the impress of American writers like Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace, clever, nervy exhibitionists, [...] writers with a gift for speedy cultural analysis.” In light of the tension Wood sees between such “cultural analysis” and the traditional novelistic business of sketching a character in verisimilitude, it would seem inevitable for his major objection to these novelists to focus on their mode of writing literary characters, too. Indeed, both authors seem to fit the mould neatly. Wallace’s debut *The Broom of the System* has a character who is unsure of her ontological status, worrying about being merely a textual construct. Egger’s faux-autobiography *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, in turn, destabilizes the ontological firmness of categories such as the human self by playing with narrative conventions. Both metafictional works, it seems, are as far from the Chekovian realist ideal as possible.

That Smith presents Alex-Li as a function of the culture around him, then, is fully in line with the Wallace-Eggers model of fiction, which displaces the essentialist assumption of a core self with a more complex interrogation of the interplay between character and culture. Indeed, Alex predominantly references movies, actors, and pop stars in making sense of his reality—partly owing to his profession as a collector of autographs, partly due to his placement in a culture obsessed with fame—to the point that, at a key moment in the narrative, he has to remind himself that “This isn’t TV, Alex, this isn’t TV” in order to maintain a sense of agency (180). In a sense, this is the logical continuation of Smith’s preoccupation with the influence of pop culture on human consciousness, making Alex a spiritual successor to Pacino impersonator Mallit in *White Teeth*. Not surprisingly, then, Wood’s reaction to such a character falls back on the same alleged incompatibility of large-scale socio-political vision and characterological verisimilitude presented in his criticism of ‘hysterical realism.’ “Alex-Li Tandem,” he asserts, “is a dreary blank,” the very reason that Smith’s second novel, in his eyes, must be considered a failure: “The problem is Alex, and the novel’s assessment of his nullity. He is simply an absence” (“Goyish”).

We have encountered similarly ‘absent’ protagonists in this study before: Markson’s Kate, for example, whose sense of self slips away the more she accepts her absolute solitude; and Bateman, who rejects the assumption of a self to be expressed in the ‘confession’ he makes in Ellis’s *American Psycho*. In each case, the character’s ‘emptiness’ was replaced by a plethora of cultural signifiers—in Kate’s case, by trivia and tidbits involving figures from high-brow art; in Bateman’s, by the images and narratives of pornography and daytime television. This would make Alex, who draws on conventions from Hollywood movies to interpret his life, another example of the force such narrative options exert on our sense of self—“an empty centre” that cannot stay nondescript, as Wood concedes, but must continuously be “filled by his pop-culture devotions” (“Goyish”). Yet while Wood

downplays the significance of these information networks for the novelist's task of drawing literary characters, other critics judge Smith's approach differently. Childs and Green, for instance, argue that Smith is "presenting more believable characters" in her second book than in the first one (48). Childs even doubles down on this assessment, describing "the delineation of character as the major focus of [Smith's] interest" ("Inescapable" 210) and calling Alex a "well-drawn character" ("Inescapable" 214).

### **Ancient Wrestling Matches**

Note the critical disagreement here between Wood's fondness for realism as a model for 'how fiction works' and Childs and Green's embrace of a metaphysically hybrid literature that locates the proper place for 'character' at the hazy crossroads of culture and self, sign and soul. A similar opposition reappears in Smith's manifesto "Two Directions for the Novel," where she dubs the realist approach to fiction the "Balzac-Flaubert model" (77). The promise of this model, Smith explains, relies on "the dream that Plato started," a fantasy of being "rendered authentic, real, *natural*" (77). But the caesura of modernism interrupted this dream, greeting the sleeper at the dawn of a new age of literature with the declaration that, as Smith has it, "the world has changed and we do not stand in the same relation to it as we did when Balzac was writing" (77)—a point made in previous chapters by demonstrating that any dreams about metaphysical certainty have been undermined, in thinkers like Cavell and Derrida, by a skeptical attitude about interpreting or knowing the other.

Wood is still invested in this 'dream,' even if he sometimes hides his essentialism under fancy scholastic terms like "quiddity" ("Goyish"). This becomes readily apparent for instance when he labels Pynchonian paranoia, unlike Wallace, "a *falsely* religious stimulant" ("Paranoia" 191; my emphasis). The certainty about the truth of one 'image' over another implied by this phrase is reminiscent of Plato's allegory of the cave, in which Socrates

dismisses everyday perception as deceptive, by contrast to an apprehension of the eternal Ideas. Smith is quite aware of these remnants of Platonic metaphysics in Wood's criticism of 'hysterical realism,' where the critic, she writes, "is hinting at an older idea that runs from Plato to the boys booming a car stereo outside my freaking window: soul is soul." And this idea, Smith explains, leads "with specious directness to an ancient wrestling match, invoked by Wood: the inviolability of 'soul' versus the evils of self-consciousness and wise-assery, otherwise known as sophism" ("How it feels").

In the last chapter, I showed by reference to the ambiguity of Socratic irony that both sides in this 'match' have always been framed ideologically, not the least by Plato himself, who meant to present an alternative to what he perceived as sophistic relativism. As Bakhtin has noted (110), however, the way Plato chose to dramatize this alternative underwent a radical change between early dialogues such as *The Apology* or *Protagoras* and later ones such as *The Republic* or *Parmenides*. Indeed, while critical consensus has it that the Socrates of the early dialogues is closest to the historical figure, Socrates in the later dialogues is usually considered Plato's mouthpiece, a literary character who uses rhetorical strategies to espouse ready-made positions of Platonic metaphysics; the early dialogues, by contrast, stage aporetic endings on philosophical questions, with Socrates being just as 'stuck' at the end of questioning as his interlocutors. It is this second, dialogic way of writing that served me as a hermeneutic for the mood of 'stuckness' that pervades *Infinite Jest*.

In what may seem like an implicit dialogue with Wallace, then, references to the Greek philosopher appear throughout *The Autograph Man*, too. The Socrates in Smith's novel, however, is notably different from the incarnation I conjured by way of Lear's reconstruction of Socratic irony in the last chapter; in fact, I would argue that her presentation of Socratic philosophy provides Smith with an opportunity to critique the rigid universalism she also detects behind Wood's theoretical convictions. For instance, when Alex contemplates

whether to say the Kaddish at the end of the novel, he turns to a Rabbi Burston to discuss the merits of the ritual. The rabbi invites Alex to walk with him around a courtyard: “OK, let’s perambulate,” he commands, “Let’s get Socratic” (403). This vision of a perambulating Socrates differs from a Socrates frozen in awe on the most basic symbolic level. One represents movement, in particular a movement of thought that aims to arrive, didactically, at clear propositions such as the primacy of the Ideas over the material world; the other represents a kind of ‘stuckness’ that is akin to the anxious irony of Wallace’s best works, which activate readers to fill the author’s ‘silences’ with their own answers.

Smith’s Socrates is the former, the confident pedagogue of Plato’s later dialogues, who takes his listeners by the hand but also seeks their agreement at every turn of the argument. Indeed, Rabbi Burston, adopting the role of philosophical ‘midwife,’ ensures Alex’s agreement at every step of their ‘Socratic walk,’ too. Yet when the rabbi finally asserts that what may count as ‘good’ can ultimately only be decided by a “divine judgment” beyond human understanding, their agreement breaks down. “There’s no other good but *feeling* good,” Alex explains his reluctance to simply “accept” whatever has been ordained by authority, religious or otherwise: “It’s not a symbol of something else. Good has to be felt. That’s good *in the world*” (411). What Smith argues by way of Alex here is that the concept of ‘good’ viewed *in abstracto*, beyond its embodied experience ‘in the world,’ runs the risk of becoming totalitarian in its disregard of the key Socratic premise, ‘I know that I know nothing’—a reminder that all knowledge claims must reflect our metaphysical limitations and, as such, respect the particularities of setting, perspective, and culture.

The early Plato might have even agreed with this. Although he advances definitions for the Socratic ‘virtues,’ the one component that recurs in all of them, namely the very knowledge of the ‘good’ that alone makes these virtues ‘virtuous,’ remains undefined. In this way, Plato refuses to *close* the definitional criteria for what counts as something ‘good,’

preferring to let the embodied example of Socrates, and the literary dialogue that dramatizes his questioning, speak for itself. Arguably, this indirect representation has a philosophical point: an openness to difference and alterity, to the always shifting horizons of our knowledge, and, as a result, a sensitivity to the need for defining the concept of the ‘good’ situationally for it to avoid the totalizing grasp of a universalism that ignores our metaphysical limitations. Wood, in Smith’s estimation, disregards precisely this imperative. In his yearning for uniformity, she argues, he closes concepts such as the ‘good’ and the ‘soul’ off from claims to multiplicity and otherness, thus flattening out difference in the name of sameness and eschewing reality in an adherence to the rules of ‘pure’ rationality.

In fact, *The Autograph Man* makes a compelling case against this kind of inflexible universalism when Alex, trying to dodge being ticketed for a train ride, is caught by a ticket agent named Gladys. This Gladys is a “grey-haired woman” who studies philosophy in “evening classes” and, sitting in her glass cubicle, has one broken leg in plaster propped up on a copy of “The Last Days of Socrates” (85). The intertextual reference to Socrates’s execution here is Smith’s way of indicating the target of her satirical portrait of the ticket agent: when Gladys forces Alex to pay a fine based on what she calls “*imperative morality*” (86), she represents the same adherence to universal norms that Socrates had displayed at his trial, even to his own ultimate detriment. Smith’s framing of an unyielding ticket agent as Socratic, then, critiques the kind of rigid universalism often associated with Platonic rationalism; the fact that the character is not depicted as actually *reading* Plato’s works, however, may indicate that she views Gladys’s interpretation as superficial and flawed: the woman uses the closed book as a foothold, Smith seems to say, the same way she relies on a universal notion of morality as a ‘foothold’ for her decision to ignore Alex’s particular situation. The point in each case is convenience, not truth.

In order to advance what she views as the truth, in turn, Smith reaches even further back in time than Socrates, to the same ‘ancient wrestling match’ that fascinated both Wallace and Markson: Zeno’s paradox. The key reference here occurs toward the end of *White Teeth*, when the twins Magid and Mallit finally face off, each a potential father to Irie’s unborn child. After eight years apart, the two are strangers to one another, with their identical “genes,” the reason for Irie’s dream of her daughter as “a puppet clipped of paternal strings” (541), having reached “different conclusions” (463): one, Magid, is a proponent of modern science, assisting in the creation of the very DNA-altered FutureMouse that is the occasion for his brother Mallit, a religious fundamentalist, to assassinate a scientist on the panel of FutureMouse’s first public exhibition. Before the assassination, however, they meet in a “blank” (463) and “neutral” (465) room, which, as such, could serve as an impartial meeting ground for the two brothers—polar opposites that stand opposite one another, unreconciled like the science and religion they represent.

As they shuffle around furniture in the nondescript room to illustrate to one another the superiority of each one’s respective worldview, however, both are “unable to waver from their course,” and neither moves even an inch closer, literally and figuratively speaking (465). This is where Smith introduces the reference to ancient philosophy by likening the twins to “two of Zeno’s headfuck arrows” (465): “Nothing changes. They are running at a standstill. Zeno’s Paradox” (465-6). Like Achilles chasing after the tortoise, but losing ever more ground in the infinitely subdivided space between them, each brother fails at approaching the other. The reason for this, Smith’s narrator suggests, is their propensity to “divide reality inexhaustibly into parts” such as science and religion, matter and spirit, “the result” of which, we are told, “is unsupportable paradox” (466). What is indeed unsupportable here is the certainty that Achilles will always lose—in other words, that we could know *a priori* what to expect of reality merely by applying the laws of logic and

geometry. It is this inevitability, in fact, that is at the heart of Smith's suggestion that believing Zeno is akin to cynicism (465).

In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace surprised the cynics who thought they knew what to 'expect of objects' with a stunt that defied their assumptions about the bounds of reason. Similarly, for Smith, a cynical acceptance that "there is no progress" (466) cannot be the last word on the matter, either: "[W]hat was Zeno's *deal* here," she inquires, "what was his *angle*?" (466). And the point of Zeno's paradoxical assertion of stillness, it turns out, was to "establish multiplicity, the *Many*, as an illusion" and thereby "prove reality" a "single, indivisible One" (466). But like Markson's Kate, who can barely hold back her tears at this realization, Smith knows that the material plurality of the world always prevails over any predictions of uniformity, that, contrary to Zeno's prediction, "Achilles would have made that tortoise eat the dust" (466). And therefore, she concludes, "multiplicity is no illusion" (466). In almost editorial terms, Smith announces her belief in a metaphysics of mixing and multiplicity here, by contrast to the investment in uniformity that characterizes Wood's stance.

Childs comments that the point of including Zeno's paradox in the book is "to illustrate the impossibility of escaping history, whether personal or collective" ("Inescapable" 224). Indeed, what Smith shows in *White Teeth* is that, like the immigrants she depicts as failing to fully "leave their difference at the docks" (465), people "cannot escape their history" (466). Yet if this awareness of our necessary ties to the past prevents an acceptance of different outcomes, different things to come—as it seemingly does in a critic like Wood, who projects past patterns into the future as 'inviolable,' making all of history but an extended *déjà vu*—it becomes, if not outright cynicism, then at least a conservatism that fails to keep the balance between committing to tradition and believing in change. What is more, in his certainty about the inviolability of the human soul, Wood even runs the risk of making the same characterological mistake he attributes to the practitioners of 'hysterical realism.' Indeed, the critic always claims to know how any character, from Smith's Irie Jones to DeLillo's Sister

Edgar, would ‘probably’ behave; the stereotypical assumptions that inform such predictions of probability, though, are only marginally different from the authorial disregard of verisimilitude he sees in Pynchon and Smith: the critic may not be *writing over* the characters here, as he says these novelists are; but, as a reader, his assessment of any given character’s actions fails to acknowledge the possibility that he may be wrong about ‘the Real,’ too.

Arguably, it is a similar fetishization of certainty that drives him to dismiss the conclusion he found unacceptable in DeLillo and Pynchon, namely that, when it comes to modern culture, we have no irrefutable way of distinguishing benign influence from malignant distortion. This would be especially true of his response to the protagonist in *The Autograph Man*: “Fatally,” he writes of Smith’s performance, “she can’t decide about the extent of [Alex’s] corruption by popular culture” (Goyish). In the end, then, Wood wants things to be neatly divided into good and bad, natural and corrupt; he wants an unimpeachable measure for separating one from the other. To be sure, all moral writers aspire to finding a measure for evaluating behavior; what authors like Smith and Wallace have shown, however, is the latent dogmatism involved in any general answers they could give, thus implicitly arguing for a metaphysics on the model of the chiasmus, which takes stock of the multiple valences that are always already at play. Wood does not seem to accept such metaphysical hybridity, and this aversion provides a clue for his attitude toward those novelistic strategies he associates, in *How Fiction Works*, with the “contemporary writing project” (32).

To be fair, by the time of this later study, the critic seems to have taken to heart some of Smith’s argument that historical change ought to be reflected by fiction. Notably, he now acknowledges that those nineteenth-century realists he cherishes did not have the same problem as members of Smith’s generation, who are forced to mimic the “fairly ugly” and “painful” thinking and speaking of their contemporaries in a modern mediascape: “No analogous problem arose for Chekhov and Verga,” he writes, “because they were not faced

with the saturation of language by mass media” (32). It is striking, though, that Wood’s language here betrays his continued investment in purity as an aesthetic value; in this regard, his rejection of ‘hysterical realism’ may in the final analysis be based on a conservative purism which accepts the premise that popular culture ‘colonizes’ human consciousness but sees only outright opposition as the proper response. Wood’s dismissal of DeLillo’s approach, which Cowart has called “homeopathic” (12), once more provides the blueprint for this general criticism. “[T]he problem is,” he claims, “that DeLillo veers toward a complicity with the very culture he wants to defend the novel against” (“Paranoia” 186).

There is a real difference of opinion, then, between the writers examined in this study and a critic like Wood on how fiction should respond to what he calls “the saturation of language by mass media.” All novelists of my study, in one way or other, meet this saturation by doubling down on the supposed contamination with ‘more of the same,’ following a ‘strategy of oversaturation’ based on a belief in something like the kind of “dialectical devilry” Wood explicitly denounces. In Markson, the repetition of skeptical thought leads, dialectically, to the return of habitual responsiveness in a reader who falls back on the promise of metaphysics. Wallace and Ellis share the obsession with seclusion that comes out of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, but unlike the “small compressed sentences” that Markson deploys, according to Wallace’s friend Mark Costello, in order to dramatize solipsism (qtd. Ryerson 33), they turn to much larger canvases and fill them with detail and description on a near-encyclopedic scale. In the first chapter, I described Wallace’s turn to such a maximalist style as a Cavellian ‘untying of the tongue.’ Ellis’s excessive descriptions of brand signifiers and dismembered bodies, in turn, were subsequently interpreted as an aesthetic of shock and boredom whose logic has been spelled out by Elizabeth Young: “[O]nly the most extreme and disruptive experiences can penetrate the blank vacuity of [Ellis’s] generation” (93).

Costello finds a similarly “panicked overstimulation” in Wallace’s work: “Dave tackled the issue [of solipsism],” he explains, “by massively overfilling his scenes and sentences to comic bursting” (qtd. Ryerson 33). In the last chapter, I read the impetus behind such ‘comic bursting’ as Blakean—a strategy that aims at fighting fire with fire, irony with more irony. Smith, in turn, indicates how close this method is to Ellis’s, describing the former in terms I have applied to the latter, when she attributes to Wallace’s work the insight that “only extremity can makes us feel again” (“Gifts” 293). Her own interest in this premise becomes apparent when she has a character in *White Teeth* note at one point, “There’s a lot to be said for the old motto [...] *Fight fire with fire,*” in particular for those people who do not “even know how *out there*” they are (405). In all these cases, then, the repetition of the same is designed to bring into being its other, on the model of Hölderlin’s “saving power,” which appears in the second epigraph to this chapter. A philosopher like Derrida, attuned to the possibility of driving things to their aporetic breaking point, identifies a similar hope in *Of Spirit* as “the path of a repetition which crosses the path of its entirely other,” explaining further that “[t]he entirely other announces itself in the most rigorous repetition” (113). For Wood, by contrast, repetition in fiction only means that something will become “steadily more and more conventional” (236). In fact, it is precisely such a “rigorous repetition” that he dismisses as ‘hysterical’ in the writers discussed here.

Wood is not the only prominent critic of Smith’s work to disparage modern culture in its popular manifestations. Tew also identifies “a broader framework of cultural misdirection or failing beyond the self that Smith describes cumulatively in [*The Autograph Man*]” (“Reconsidering” 59), a novel which is filled with hundreds of names of cultural icons and celebrities, the literal poster children of pop culture. For a critic like Tew, this accumulation must be seen as unambiguously perverse, because “Smith’s attitude toward certain cultural norms that have permeated her protagonists’s life,” he argues, “is essentially skeptical and

even hostile” (57). And while Tew aims to ‘reconsider’ Smith’s second book after a slew of negative reviews, his attempt at redeeming the novel only confirms once more the frontline opened up by Wood against the modern world and its expressions, which Wood has described as “debased, vulgar, boring” (*Fiction* 33). In the last chapter, I challenged critical accounts which place Wallace in the “postirony” or “New Sincerity” camp of novelists who supposedly see as the only response to the failings of contemporary culture a turn away from ironic critique. Konstantinou’s reading of *The Autograph Man* has already indicated an inclination among critics to put Smith in the same camp. Indeed, by associating her with a rejection of today’s entire generation of “dysfunctional individuals,” “who exhibit neither few sustainable values nor very much purchase on how the world functions” (“Reconsidering” 59), and who are “imbued with a cynicism, an inability to identify any authenticity or meaning” (60), Tew now puts a similar ‘postironic’ spin on Smith’s second novel.<sup>3</sup> Notably, in doing so, Tew traces the “rampant reflexivity” (59) of modern thought back to the twentieth-century rise of critical theory in its French and German manifestations and specifically locates behind this “generational malaise” (64) the influence of a critic like Benjamin; what is more, he believes that Smith, who allegedly “reduce[s] Benjamin to a pop culture icon for aspirant vaguely leftist intellectuals” (61), agrees with him on this genealogy.

But it was precisely this kind of simplification, which seeks to separate the good from the bad and cannot find any of the former in pop culture, that set up Wood’s skepticism about the *The Autograph Man*’s ‘devilish’ strategy of oversaturation—an argument he presents, using the exact same phrasing, in reviews of Smith (“Goyish”) and Salman Rushdie (“Nobu” 218):

“to poison a whole novel is a very lengthy way of making a point about a single modern

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<sup>3</sup> Tew even skirts anti-intellectualism when he presents as one of the reasons for Alex’s “distance” his “ordering of the world conceptually” (64). But I would argue that, like Wallace, Smith is too aware of the dangers of atavism to embrace an unambiguous rejection of conceptual critique. Magdalena Maczynska agrees with this assessment, asserting that the “distaste” for “the flight from the rational” attributed to the professor Howard Belsey in Smith’s *On Beauty* is “shared by the author herself” (134). Holmes, who associates anti-intellectualism with positivism, is equally skeptical about any attribution of this “flight from the rational” to Smith, writing that, “[g]iven her predisposition to siding with the self-referential anxieties of the postmodernists of the US and UK, it is unlikely that Smith would rally behind a positivist view of representation” (150).

germ.” Wood cannot conceive of any other stance toward pop culture than along the dichotomy of poison and medicine, forgetting that, as Paracelsus knew, *sola dosis facit venenum*. There is a similar desire to dissociate popular culture from any utopian promises in Tew’s scapegoating of Benjamin, notwithstanding the fact that Benjamin sought to unearth precisely such a “saving power” at the heart of the culture industry’s processes of commodification and reproduction. It is therefore to Benjamin’s work on the culture industry that we must turn for an alternative to the purism espoused by some of Smith’s major critics; this will require a close look at Benjamin’s reading of ‘gestus’ in Kafka’s stories in order to understand how Smith, arguably under the influence of Benjamin’s thinking, actually avoids the bias against modern culture that Tew attributes to *The Autograph Man*. This discussion will demonstrate that Tew’s association of a leftist critic like Benjamin with the supposed failings of postmodern culture is more than an attack, however misguided, on Marxist-style critical thinking; in fact, it is a straw man argument marred by a lack of understanding of the finer distinctions inside the school of thought it criticizes.

### **Benjaminian Constellations**

Indeed, the Frankfurt School that Benjamin belonged to was never monolithic on the value of popular culture. To be sure, it is often equated with Adorno’s metaphysical purism, which resulted in an elitist rejection of all things popular that bears traces of Wood’s opposition to commodified art. But Benjamin, in particular, dreaded the fruitlessness of intellectual compliance and sought out the influence of Brecht’s ‘crude thinking’ to put pressure on his own metaphysical roots. In fact, the controversies between Benjamin and his friends about the right approach to popular culture anticipate some key arguments of the Smith-Wood debate, which Ursula Terentowicz-Fotyga has summarized as follows: “Smith’s diagnosis of the problematic sense of ‘the Real’ in the contemporary, media society [sic] was indicted for

remaining immersed in the reality it meant to expose” (63). In a 1966 essay entitled “Transparencies on Film,” Adorno makes a similar case against Benjamin. His friend’s stance on film was “imbricated with the commodity character which his theory opposes,” Adorno claims in 1966, because it “reinforce[d], affirmatively, the phenomenal surface character of society” (202).

To be sure, unreflective affirmation of the status quo is more likely to feed into it than not, and Smith establishes clearly that she has sympathy for the nostalgic intuition of a change in human consciousness coeval with the rise of mass media. In *The Autograph Man*, this intuition is expressed by “one of the great modern sentences,” namely the notion, as Alex puts it to himself, that “*you watch too many films*,” which “has in it a hint of understanding regarding what we were before and what we have become” (391). One instance of Alex watching his favorite movie *The Girl from Peking* is a case in point for this dynamic: after weeping over a fight with his girlfriend and realizing that “you get no rewind in this life”—an idea he takes from “the black grandmothers in the movies,” making his immersion in a mediated reality complete—Alex calms himself as he always does, by escaping into a fantasy world inhabited by the actress Kitty Alexander (97). His repetitive viewing of *The Girl from Peking*, then, is a benign version of the more lethal immersion in the movie “Infinite Jest” that Wallace presents in his novel. Though therapeutic in the short term, it still carries with it the danger of suggesting a deep unchangeability of things and, in turn, of society in general.

Repetition with a difference, by contrast, is another thing altogether, and it was in such a critical difference, projecting the impermanence of any distribution of power or class, that Benjamin placed his revolutionary hope. The anthropologist Michael Taussig recognizes this in his book *Mimesis and Alterity* when he asks, in response to Adorno’s critique, “Yet is it not the case that precisely in the commodity, more specifically in the fetish of the commodity, Benjamin sees the surreal and revolutionary possibilities provided by the culture

of capitalism for its own undoing, its own transcendence?” (29). Indeed, Benjamin located an improbable “saving power” in the very mimetic machines that others rejected as tools of oppression, embracing them, as Taussig has it, “so as to take advantage of [their] phantasmagorical potential” (29). The redemptive shift he sought in film’s power to affect viewers, then, takes what Taussig has called the “automatic pilot that functions while asleep”—in Smith’s novel, this is exemplified by Alex’s viewing habits, his disappearance into oblivion—and leads it on a road of self-exploration such that it becomes “awakened to its own automaticity” (25). In other words, the revolutionary task in the age of mechanical reproduction is one in which “‘habit’ has to catch up with itself” (25).

The film-based ruminations that guide Mallit’s and Archie’s actions at the climax of *White Teeth* show that Smith’s work offers ample opportunities for engaging in a similar process of reflection. *The Autograph Man* even models this transformative potential of habit ‘catching up with itself’ in a scene that shows Alex’s engagement with an image drawn from the vast repertoire of pictures he has internalized through his practice of voracious watching. Suitably, the moment in question takes place after his fantasy of Kitty Alexander as a remote object of desire has collapsed: following a night of heavy drinking, Alex wakes to find his girlfriend and Alexander, recently flown in from New York, asleep in his bed. His alcohol-soaked brain can only slowly make sense of the sight of their toes “poking free from the duvet at different ends, like two children at a sleepover” (390-1). Indeed, the analogy fails to satisfy him, and it is not until Alex turns to the memory of a televisual cliché that his understanding is led from an idiomatic expression—“top-to-toe, is it called?” (390)—to a flash of recognition. As his field of vision suddenly seems to be saturated “in full Technicolor,” what he sees takes on the aspect of a generic image from crime movies; gradually, it dawns on Alex that the women look “like two bodies in a morgue in a *film*” (391). With this insight comes a deluge of associations: the recombined film image reminds

him, first, of mortality; then, of his friends' mortality; finally, of "the extension" into eternity (390): everyone now alive, a horrified Alex realizes, will one day be dead.

This film perception "suitably, *rightfully*" (391) allows for a perception of the walking dead that leads him to feeling "the death punch, the infinity-slap" (392), a closeness to death that sends Alex to his knees, "wheeled away from the spot, clutching in his hand something he had accidentally ripped from the wall"; and, after years of hesitation, he finally "said his Kaddish," albeit "without gesture or formality—just a wet song into his hands" (392). That the film image can be taken in this way, then, as a reminder of mortality that inaugurates a transformation, shows that, *pace* Wood and Adorno, there is nothing in televisual imagery that essentially prevents it from having the potential to afford a reflection on what Taussig has called our automatic 'habits.'

This reading of Benjamin's work on film coincides with what I described as the importance of 'gestus.' For Benjamin, film was able to visualize 'gestus'—which would otherwise remain unseen, indeed unconscious—through photographic processes of focusing, enlarging, and slowing down its incessant flow, thereby estranging us 'optically' from our customs to the point of realizing their changeability. Indeed, his utopian hope for modern technology was closely related to its ability to reveal an "optical unconscious" behind the daily "prison-world" which, as Benjamin writes, would be burst "asunder" by film's "dynamite of a tenth of a second" ("Work of Art" 236). At the heart of this idea of revolution, then, lies a study of repressed 'gestus' facilitated by the age's possibilities for mechanical reproduction—a point Benjamin first made in a long 1934 essay on Kafka, reading the Czech writer as a vanguard of the modernist revelation of such an "optical unconscious":

Experiments have proved that a man does not recognize his own walk on the screen or his own voice on the phonograph. The situation of the subject in such experiments is Kafka's situation; this is what directs him to learning, where he may encounter fragments of his own existence, fragments that are still within the context of the role. He might catch hold of the lost *gestus* the way Peter Schlemihl caught hold of the shadow he had sold. He might understand himself, but what an enormous effort would

be required! It is a tempest that blows from the land of oblivion, and learning is a cavalry attack against it. (137-8)

The final image here, pointing to the “tempest” that any such revolutionary study of ‘gestus’ has to face, reappears in Benjamin’s last essay, 1940’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Thesis IX of this collection has Benjamin’s most iconic image, the angel of history, who seeks a redemptive relation to history by way of the ‘saving power’ of remembrance: “the angel would like to stay,” Benjamin writes, “awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed,” even as a ‘storm of progress’ that is “blowing in from Paradise” prevents it from doing so (259). The remembrance it represents, then, is an unremitting struggle on behalf of the dead, which seeks to both redeem the past and thereby, as Benjamin at his most messianic suggests, usher in a break from the “homogenous course of history” (265).

Benjamin took inspiration for this ambiguous figure from Paul Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus,” which he purchased in 1921 and carried with him until his refugee suicide. It was then inherited by his friend Gershom Scholem, whose poem on the “Angelus” frames Benjamin’s invocation of the angel. In *The Autograph Man*, the painting shows up amidst the posters and photos in Adam’s candle-lit meditation room as a “badly framed print of the painter Klee’s *Angelus Novus*” (126). That Adam owns a print of it, then, may be read as Smith’s intertextual way of suggesting that the character should be read as a representation of Benjamin’s hope for the kind of revolutionary study of ‘gestus’ in popular culture that also allows for the ultimately redeeming insights of the metaphysician.

Adam is certainly a figure of hope for the protagonist of *The Autograph Man*, reminding Alex of his family, his friendships, and his better impulses at many points of the story. But Adam, the son of African-American Jews, is also a somewhat mysterious character, and his ambiguities may be seen as qualifying the kind of hope he represents. He is variously described as a “prophet” (333), “[h]andsome, bright, enlightened, thin” (129), “agonizingly honest” and empathic as well as “joy-seeking” (409)—a young man with dreadlocks who

smokes pot, runs an underground VHS rental business, and quotes Jewish scripture. A similar split between heterogeneous forces is reflected by the objects assembled in Adam's meditation room, which are testament, we are told, to his "incredible knowledge of pop-music trivia, and various, sublime Judaic insights" (125).

In fact, it was just such a conflation of popular culture with the divine, seeing traces of the latter in the former, that Scholem abhorred in Benjamin's so-called Marxist writings. In this, Scholem agreed with Adorno. Both men wanted their friend to continue his interest in the mystical and theological themes of his earlier work and discard his Brechtian interest in 'crude,' popular forms of entertainment. *The Autograph Man* presents Scholem precisely under this aspect, as a reminder of the fallenness of a "world without redemption" from which God has withdrawn (140). Notably, Adam is a reader of Scholem—presumably one of the many authors whose books, "mostly in Hebrew," line his room (126)—and he quotes the Jewish philosopher's words to Alex to remind him of the importance of saying the Kaddish in order to "[h]eal the father," both the Jewish "godhead" and his own deceased father (140).

There is an obvious appeal to tradition and purity in Adam's call for healing a disenchanted world through religious ritual here, and given my claims for the character's centrality in the narrative, it is tempting to view Smith's overall position on the culture industry as akin to Scholem's and Adorno's. But the novel also frames Adam's room, including its various photos, drawings, and posters of celebrities, as a "saving grace" (126), thus dismissing the idea that such artifacts could have no redemptive potential for wonder and ritual, and thereby highlighting Adam's status as embodying a Benjaminian 'constellation' of metaphysics and materialism.

Smith cues the reader into this theoretical context by way of some intertextual references that depict Adam as a Benjaminian character. Alex's favorite pastime, for instance, is to spend an afternoon with his friend wandering the streets of Mountjoy, "two lazy, stoned

flâneurs admiring the city” (125), instantiations of Benjamin’s modern urban spectator. Furthermore, Adam’s ambiguities extend onto Alex’s uncertainty about the source of his friend’s happiness, a secure resting in his identity that fills Alex, who is “one of this generation who watch themselves” (2), with awe. In the end, he locates it somewhere between spiritual and material influences, between “*God*” and “*marijuana*,” in an ambiguous “split between the two, something like 60/40” (129). Smith enacts this fusion again by recasting the Jewish texts of the Haggadah, detailing the rituals of Passover, and Halacha, concerning Jewish religious laws, as ‘pop quizzes’ between Alex and Adam, interrogating “how much fun was in the rolling” of a joint (134) and “[w]hat is the law concerning the man who is very stoned and the man who is not as stoned as he” (138), respectively. As in DeLillo and Pynchon, parody and philosophical statement are indistinguishable in these passages, deliberately creating confusion about the order of high and low, spirit and matter.

These ambiguities are mirrored in “The Joke about the Pope and the Chief Rabbi,” a story he tells Alex at the end of one long, lazy afternoon. The joke revolves around an apprehension of incommensurability, which, as in response to the ‘pop quizzes’ the two men play, results in laughter. That a choked-up Alex finds the joke “really beautiful,” too—even extends this beauty to his friend, exclaiming, “now *that’s* why I love you” (143)—makes this story more than merely one humorous interlude among others; rather, it indicates that the joke merits further analysis, especially in the context of my discussion of Adam’s significance for *The Autograph Man* and of the theoretical constellation he represents.

The set-up of the joke is historical, based on the frequent papal practice of expelling members of the Jewish community from medieval Italy. One time, as Adam explains, the pope declared that the Jews would be allowed to remain in Italy if a rabbi defeated him in a religious debate. Owing to the pope’s ignorance of Yiddish as well as the rabbi’s

unfamiliarity with Latin, “it was decided that this would be a ‘silent’ debate” (142). Adam’s retelling of the meeting approaches the religious leaders’ silence through its own omissions:

On the day of the great debate the Pope and Rabbi Moishe sat opposite each other for a full minute before the Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. Rabbi Moishe looked back and raised one finger. Next, the Pope waved his finger around his head. Rabbi Moishe pointed to the ground where he sat. The Pope then brought out a communion wafer and chalice of wine. Rabbi Moishe pulled out an apple. With that, the Pope stood up and said, ‘I concede the debate. This man has bested me. The Jews can stay.’ (142)

When the two men return to their respective communities, they present radically different interpretations for their silent gestures. To the assembled cardinals, the pope recounts the debate in strictly theological terms. His three fingers were meant “to represent the Trinity,” he explains, to which the rabbi’s one finger was a reminder that “there was still one God” common to Christianity and Judaism; waving his finger, then, the pope intended to show “that God was all around us,” only to have the rabbi apparently point out that “God was also right here with us”; finally, the sacramental elements were brought forward, the pope notes, “to show that God absolves us of our sins”; the apple the rabbi presented in turn, however, served to remind the pope of “Original Sin.” “He had an answer for everything,” the pope concludes, “What could I do?”

In the rabbi’s address to his followers, an ontological shift occurs: the applied hermeneutic now refrains from any theology, placing the gestures firmly in a socio-political context. The pope’s three fingers become an indicator of a three-day ultimatum for the Jews to leave, while the rabbi’s one finger indicates his indignant reply, “Not one of us is going to leave.” The pope swivelling his finger around his head apparently meant nothing to the rabbi but a threat that “the whole city would be cleared of Jews,” to which he pointed to the earth as a sign of his intention to “stay right here.” And when a woman finally asks what happened afterward, the rabbi’s reply hilariously refuses the Christian allegories of the eucharist and of the apple: “Who knows,” he says, “We broke for lunch.” (142-3)

Two ways of seeing are juxtaposed here, the metaphysical and the mundane, both of which are valid but also seem irreconcilable. As such, the joke gives the lie to the idea, professed throughout *The Autograph Man*, that the silence of human gestures is ‘unequivocal’: “Don’t our bodies say exactly what they mean to?” Alex asks at one point, doubting that “there could be any accidents in the world of gestures” (179). Adam’s joke reads like a response to this notion of authenticity in physical expression, indicating that the “great unequivocal International Gestures” can indeed be interpreted differently. Of the many IGs assembled between the covers of Smith’s book, then, the pope’s and the rabbi’s gestures are particularly pertinent to my concerns: rather than present a natural basis for perfect communication, the raised digits and circular motions are taken up in vastly different interpretive frameworks, leading to quite dissimilar ‘forms of life.’ In the first chapter, I presented a Cavellian reading of this central Wittgensteinian concept as grounded in biology as well as conceptuality. Now, “The Joke about the Pope and the Chief Rabbi” expresses a similar commitment to bi-directionality by registering how physicality is always already overcoded by culture.

This insight invests Smith’s description of “International Gestures” as “unequivocal” with considerable irony. The edge of this irony clearly points at the assumption of an ‘untainted’ state predating the advent of modernity that informs what Smith calls an “understanding regarding what we were before and what we have become” (391). Indeed, if the desired state of innocence that forms the core of media critiques from Adorno to Wood is nothing but a nostalgic chimera, then something like Alex’s self-admonition, “*you watch too many films,*” has lost its critical point. The same would be true of Wood’s belief in a pure position apart from the ‘detrimental’ influence of modern culture that motivates his rejection of any ‘homeopathic’ approaches to fiction. In light of this theoretical pattern, then, “The Joke” may be read as a valuable intervention into the Smith-Wood debate.

After all, it revisits the question of silence, according to Wood the dreaded specter of the ‘hysterical realists.’ Yet the silence in the joke is different from the unsettling “silence from New York,” more specifically from Kitty Alexander, that drives a “desperate” Alex to fly to the Big Apple to find the actress and finally get her to speak, making of her silence a metonym for the silence of the absent godhead in a secular world (151). Rather, the silences of “The Joke” taken together are akin to the silent gesture that concludes Alex’s journey when he completes “The Kabbalah of Alex-Li Tandem”—plenitude rather than absence, mystical fullness rather than unbearable emptiness. Suitably, then, “The Joke” is also enshrined in what Wood calls “a special boxed feature” (“Goyish”), making it a paratextual component of the novel like Alex’s “Kabbalah.” Indeed, all these silent gestures stress the importance of ‘actions beyond simply reading,’ and, as such, demonstrate that there is a way of pointing to an otherness that cannot be named within just one way of seeing: metaphysics *in addition to* materiality, transcendence *as well as* immanence.

This is the way of human gestures: not the unmistakable signification envisioned by Alex, but a mode of communication that is equivocal enough to keep open the criteria for the use of a concept. That Wood, as I noted earlier, seeks to close such criteria by asserting the uniformity of concepts like ‘soul’ and ‘goodness’ marks once more the metaphysical difference between the critic and Smith I developed through different interpretations of Plato. This would make of Smith’s deployment of IGs in *The Autograph Man* an attempt at resisting the totalizing impulse that leads thinkers as different as Wood and Adorno to prioritize purity over hybridity, uniformity over difference. That it is in fact a punchline which allows for the apprehension of multiple points of view in “The Joke about the Pope and the Chief Rabbi,” finally, indicates the close kinship between humor and ‘gestus,’ a relationship that can be traced with a view to their etymological roots: both ‘jest’ and ‘gesture’ derive from ‘gest,’ the medieval word for ‘story’ or ‘adventure.’

Indeed, the hilarity that results from this realization of simultaneous viewpoints has a cognitive function; it affords a higher-order perspective from where “The Joke” becomes an embodied reflection on difference, and on the difficulty, though not impossibility, of understanding—an insight that is due to the experience of seeing a change in perception right on front of one’s very eyes, when one way of framing a gesture gives way to another, equally valid one. This change in aspect coincides with laughter, and indeed anyone who understands the joke has already transcended each individual perspective, with laughter serving as the point of entry into this higher mode of perception. This is what Alex refers to as the ‘beauty’ of the joke, which gestures both at the ‘heavens’ and at the co-presence of a material dimension that is distinguishable from and yet somehow identical with the transcendent one. Laughing at the silent gestures, we might say, is what *shows* this constellation, though it cannot be simply *said* in quite the same way. Arguably, this is a conception of humor both Smith and Wallace associate with Kafka; it is therefore to their accounts of the Czech writer’s work that I will turn now.

### **Franz Kafka, Angel and Everyman**

In fact, “The Joke” exemplifies a new direction in Smith’s work after *White Teeth* that Childs and Green have described as “a working out rather than a move away from the self-conscious cleverness and arch comedy Wood decried” (50). What Adam’s story indicates is that, for Smith, one way of working this out involved an abiding interest in silence as a novelistic virtue and mode of inquiry—the very opposite of the hysteria Wood claims to have heard in *White Teeth*. Smith had already indicated in her response to Wood’s article that she was moving on from the sources for her early work and turning to different literary stars by which to steer her own project: “I admire the high reverence for the blank page,” she confesses, “shown by Kafka, Borges and Cortázar.” What unites these writers in Smith’s eyes, is an

“instinct” she calls “almost religious,” a practice of writing slowly, “as if every extra word is a sort of sacrilege.” (“How it feels”)

This reference to Kafka as a source of influence helps us understand Smith’s use of humor in her second book. Indeed, while Maczynska has argued that “Smith’s playful tone” in *The Autograph Man* places her novel in the tradition of “Jewish humour” (132), I will fine-tune this assertion by linking it more specifically to Kafka’s work. In fact, Smith has been quite candid about her indebtedness to a Kafkaesque sense of humor as a way of viewing the human condition in a moving essay on her father’s death, “Dead Man Laughing,” where she introduces a difference between two types of humor. On the one hand, she explains, there is humor as a form of hiding from ultimate truths, a kind of “death defier” (246). Such humor, Smith concedes, is “bold” like the “humourless laugh of the triumphant atheist, who conquers what he calls death and his own fear of it” (241). But it does not have the truly “unhinged” quality she finds in Kafka’s humor, which is associated in her account with a “metaphysical absurdity” that “comes from the powerless, despairing realization that death cannot be conquered, defied, contemplated, or even approached, because it’s not there; it’s only a word, signifying nothing” (241). This second form, Smith asserts, is a more philosophical humor, found in thinkers such as Kafka and Kierkegaard, who believe that “the only option in the face of death [...] is to laugh” (241).

Such a “cosmic humour” (241), she argues, can make us more vulnerable by helping us overcome a sense of shame at our embodied humanity; it is a form of “anti-comedy” that “not only allows death onstage,” she notes, but “invites death up” (248). This is not a far cry from Wallace’s concept of philosophical irony, and indeed the distinction Smith draws between two kinds of humor maps roughly onto the difference between irony as “anesthetic” and “wake-up call” I introduced in the last chapter on *Infinite Jest*. That Wallace may be regarded as a guide in the development of her new aesthetic, then, is not only explicitly indicated by

Smith herself, who has conceded that it was Wallace who opened her eyes to Cortázar's work ("How it Feels"). Their shared admiration for a Kafkaesque sense of humor now further establishes Wallace's influence behind Smith's interest in different 'varieties of silence,' too. Arguably, then, the reading of Kafka that Wallace presented at a PEN symposium in 1998 can help open up Smith's work, as well.

What Wallace seems to have admired most in the Czech writer's work was the way in which his vision of the human being as vulnerable creature led to a deep sympathy with his own fictional creations. For Wallace, Kafka's stories are haunted and enlivened by this affection for all suffering, even in the case of his villains, who are "never just hollow buffoons to be ridiculed, but are always absurd and scary and sad all at once, like 'In the Penal Colony''s Lieutenant" (63). Wallace's example of a Kafkaesque authority figure here is a case in point for the ostensibly futile, and yet somehow valuable, nature of human striving under the sign of finitude. This Lieutenant embraces a belief in the transformative effects of what Wallace calls "torture as edification" (62). Thus, at the end of the story, he does not hesitate to submit himself to the same kind of torture he has inflicted on his various victims; once the Lieutenant straps himself to the torture device, however, it disintegrates and, killing the man without long hours of torture, deprives him of the very mystical experience that had made him believe in the device in the first place.<sup>4</sup>

As Wallace points out, it is hard to deny the odd 'funniness' of the Lieutenant's fate in this denouement. Still, as a marginal annotation penciled into his copy of Kafka's short

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<sup>4</sup> This outcome resembles Clipperton's story in *Infinite Jest* as a finally #1-ranked tennis player who, nevertheless, takes his own life—a structural similarity the reader is primed to recognize by the occurrence, in the same context, of the term "Kafkaesque" as a description of the rules governing tennis academies in Wallace's fictional future republic (432). That Clipperton's 'stuckness' may in fact be read in relation to Kafka's sense of humor is further substantiated by the role the location of Clipperton's death plays in the aftermath of the suicide. This room, now retitled Clipperton Suite, comes to serve staff at the academy as a reminder of the stakes involved in any case of true 'stuckness': whenever a young player "whinges too loudly about some tennis-connected vicissitude or hardship," he or she is being told upon confinement in the Suite that the only alternative to a final act à la Clipperton is the "hard daily slogging toward a distant goal you can then maybe, *if you get there*, live with" (434; my emphasis). In Kafka as in Wallace, then, the answer to getting stuck is to get truly 'stuck into,' to 'lean in,' to hold on to one's desire in the absence of knowing whether it will ever be fulfilled.

stories demonstrates, this is not the kind of cynicism that is fashionable today: “Our humor,” he writes there, “rests on a cynical rejection of verities. Kafka’s was longing, reverent, religious.” Nor is Kafka’s irony entirely like the kind of satire found in Pynchon, which shares with Sloterdijk’s concept of kynicism a provenance in the irreverent humor of the counterculture. There is evidence that Wallace was conscious of this difference between ’60s satire and the spirit of Kafka’s work, too: in his PEN lecture, he explicitly distinguishes Kafka’s humor from “Pynchonian slapstick with banana peels and rogue adenoids” (62).

At first sight, a critic like Wood would seem to endorse this distinction between different manifestations of humor. Indeed, Wood has drawn a similar contrast himself, writing in his book *The Irresponsible Self* of the difference between a fundamentally stable, didactic “comedy of correction”—akin to what I identified in this study as satire—and a “comedy of forgiveness” that, like Kafka’s humor in Wallace’s reading, aims at sympathy. This latter form of comedy, Wood explains, enacts a “humor that smiles through tears” (13), and, as such, leaves behind any facile opposition behind comedic and tragic forms of narrative in a way that is surely compatible with the kind of tragicomedy we find in Smith’s and Wallace’s novels. When it comes to an assessment of such “anti-comedy,” however, Wood is appalled, for instance, at Smith’s description of a picture of Benjamin in her second novel as “[t]he wise guy Walter Benjamin in need of a comb, a better tailor, a way out of France” (126). Under Smith’s authorial guidance, the thinker’s desperate decision to take his own life to avoid falling into the hands of German secret police in 1940 becomes what she might call a Kafkaesque “wisecrack projected into a void” (“Laughing” 241); to Wood, however, Smith’s remark on Benjamin’s death is nothing but “a deeply unfunny line” (“Goyish”).

The main strands of the Smith-Wood debate culminate in this assessment of a single phrase: while Smith’s ambition makes her a writer with a moral agenda, Wood contends, the playfulness he claims to find in her novels betrays this agenda at every turn. His assessment

of *White Teeth*, then, stands in as a judgment, *pars pro toto*, on her entire novelistic project: “Formally,” Wood writes, “her book lacks moral seriousness” (“Hysterical” 176). But just like Wood’s opposition between metafictional and metaphysical questioning does not hold up under scrutiny, the corresponding dichotomy between humor and seriousness collapses when confronted with the multivalent spirit of Smith’s work, as well. To be sure, Wood’s incredulousness in the face of seemingly contrary impulses in a writer’s oeuvre—funniness or earnestness, morality or playfulness—is not unprecedented, and, once again, Kafka proves to be a reference point. Smith is aware of this, writing in the essay “Kafka, Everyman” of the writer’s best friend that “[Max] Brod couldn’t quite believe that Kafka was being funny when he was being funny. For how could Kafka, in his fearful earnestness, be funny?” (62).

Brod also appears in *The Autograph Man*, where he is associated with the protagonist Alex’s book project *Jewishness and Goyishness*, an unfinished study which revolves around the separation of all things into a binary schema; thus, for example, and rather arbitrarily, a stapler is ‘Jewish,’ but a paper clip is ‘Goyish,’ etc. Alex “had imagined it as an appendix,” we are told, “a sequel, if you like, to Max Brod’s effort of 1921: *Heidentum, Christentum, Judentum*” (88). Wood takes note of what he calls the “shallow binarisms” of Alex’s *Jewishness and Goyishness*, but his overall negative evaluation of Smith’s second novel is driven by the conviction that, ultimately, Smith fails “to apply sufficient irony to this unlikely ethnic mania” (“Goyish”).

That the whole project is misguided in Smith’s eyes, however, can be inferred not only from the fact that Alex abandons the book but also from an epigraph that frames *The Autograph Man*: “Life is more than just a Chinese puzzle,” we read, a line from Kafka’s infamous “Letter to His Father,” and the difference to Brod’s thought becomes undeniable when Alex reflects on the idea again at a later point: “Life is not just symbol, Jewish or Goyish. Life is more than just a Chinese puzzle” (180). *Pace* Wood, then, the book’s facile

distinction ‘Jewish’ vs. ‘Goyish,’ serves as a parody of the kind of bivalent logic that attempts to force the complexity of life into an either-or schema, including the notion, which so irked Wallace, that ‘irony and sincerity are mutually exclusive.’ That Smith aspires to a similarly ambiguous, Kafkaesque tone, pitched at the aporetic breaking point between humor and earnestness which confounded Brod, is confirmed by the assertion of a critic such as Maczynska, who attributes to Smith’s work a “strategy of sincere irony” (133).<sup>5</sup>

Unsurprisingly, given what Smith has called his “sympathy for the theological” (“Everyman” 60), Brod’s way out of this aporia was essentially, even naively, religious. His friend, Brod asserts, had “a smile close to the ultimate things—a metaphysical smile so to speak” (qtd. 61), which could only be explained by the notion that Kafka himself was ‘metaphysical,’ more an “angel,” in Brod’s words, than a man. Under Brod’s editorial influence, Smith explains, this theological interpretation came to dominate the postwar reception of Kafka’s work, making him the ‘prophet’ of an “absent God” (60). But today, she puns, “[w]e don’t want to read Kafka Brodly anymore,” and as proof of this turn in Kafka scholarship she points to a number of revisionist biographies that have recently emphasized the ‘everyman’ of her essay title. Indeed, this is where Smith enters the debate, at the threshold between readings of Kafka as particular—twentieth-century Jew, vegetarian, compulsive letter writer, misogynist—and universal—prophet, angel, man of mystery. This entry point is not unusual for Smith’s critical writing. In an essay on Zora Neale Hurston, she had deconstructed the dichotomy between the kind of universality that Hurston herself claimed for her fiction and the particularity of a black woman’s experience that many critics

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<sup>5</sup> Though I agree with the tenor of Maczynska’s argument, there is a difference between her mode of “sincere irony” and the concept of “ironically earnest, earnestly ironic” fiction I developed in the last chapter. Indeed, like the mode of “ironic earnestness” (286), which Serpell detects as “a pathos that merges irony and sincerity” (269) in authors like Eggers and Foer, Maczynska’s one-sided terminology suggests the possibility of calming the dialectic of irony and earnestness in the safe haven of a transcendent union that ultimately resolves difference. By contrast, the chiasmus involved in my formulation “ironically earnest, earnestly ironic” implies a more multivalent and unstable approach that is closer to the “oscillation” Serpell finds in Pynchon’s *Lot 49* (57); nevertheless, the differences between Wallace and Pynchon regarding their respective aspirations for the human self that I have developed in this study still apply.

assigned it, in the end professing a desire on her own part to embrace the metaphysics of soulfulness that emanates from Hurston's books—an "essence," Smith writes, she could "almost believe [she] share[s]" ("Soulful" 13).

There is something modern in this concluding gesture: the diagnosis of a universal desire for belonging to a culturally particular community, paired with skeptical doubts about any essence that could validate such a connection. She can "almost" belong, Smith says, "but not quite" (13). Smith ascribes a similar hesitation to those European Jews, Kafka as much as Adorno and Benjamin, for whom "[t]he choice of belonging to a people, of partaking of a shared nature, was no longer available" ("Everyman" 70). Nevertheless, she repeats the rhetorical move that concludes her Hurston essay, where a desire for belonging itself, as well as the problems associated with it, are highlighted as something transcending the particulars of one's "melanin count" ("Soulful" 11). Now Smith universalizes the Jewish experience of forced assimilation, of "losing one place without gaining another," as "the template for all our doubts" ("Everyman" 71). And this critical gesture becomes a way of reconciling universal and particular readings of Kafka's work: "Kafka's horror is not Jewishness per se," Smith argues, "because it is not a horror only of Jewishness: it is a horror of all shared experience, all shared being, all *genus*" (70). It is in light of what Smith calls "our modern alienation," then, that she can finally assert, "prophet Kafka and quotidian Kafka are not in conflict" (62); thus Kafka can still be seen as an "existential prophet" (71), yet not only for Europe's assimilated Jews, but for all moderns.<sup>6</sup>

Once more, there is considerable theoretical overlap between Smith and Wallace here: while the former tries to reconcile the "quotidian" and the "prophetic" Kafka, the latter

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<sup>6</sup> This solution is carried over into *The Autograph Man*, where, as Terentowicz-Fotyga notes, the Jewish characters' experiences "are deliberately depicted as universal" (59). Sander Gilman has criticized this as "watered down" Judaism, "separate from its Jewish religious context" (140). But rather than doing an injustice to one homogenous ethnic group by ignoring its particularity, Smith follows Kafka in problematizing the very concept of 'homogenous ethnic group' itself: what Kafka calls "Jewishness," she writes, "was a kind of dream, whose authentic moment was located always in the nostalgic past" ("Everyman" 71).

attempts to balance the particular, literal aspects of Kafka's texts with their universal, metaphysical qualities. These affinities are further substantiated by the fact that Wallace develops his 'balanced' reading of Kafka in a review of a biography of Jorge Luis Borges, whom Smith, as I noted before, has mentioned as one of three writers to have guided the direction of her post-debut aesthetic. Every reference point of this aesthetic, then, leads to Wallace, making of Smith's relationship to her literary predecessors Kafka-Cortázar-Borges a constellation encompassing at least two generations of writers, with Wallace as the hinge linking them all; in light of this influence, I argue, the Kafka interpretation that is at least implicit in Wallace's review can help understand Smith's interests and commitments, too.

According to Lucas Thompson, there are some annotations in Wallace's copy of the Borges biography he reviewed that indicate a deep interest in the metaphysical ramifications of Kafka's tales: "Like B[orges], Kafka writes what appear to be allusions," Wallace jotted down inside the book's flapjacket, "but instead of universal referents and themes, they end up *ramifying endlessly, metaphysically*" (qtd. Thompson, 132fn44; my emphasis). Yet while Borges, as Thompson summarizes Wallace's argument, wrote "stories so radically dehistoricized and mythic in scope as to eclipse the individual self" (133), the point of the Kafka model of fiction as Wallace reads it was precisely to highlight the importance of a compassionate attitude toward this human self struggling with the prospect of its dissolution by skepticism. In the second chapter, I identified a similar concern for the human being as vulnerable creature with the art movement of expressionism. It should come as no surprise, then, that in categorizing Kafka's turn away from realism, Wallace once more referred to the terminology he had employed in his essay on Lynch: Kafka's fiction is "expressionistic," he writes in "Borges on the Couch," and Kafka himself an "allegorist" (288).

This suggests that after Wallace's first intuition of the possibilities of expressionistic art as he met it in Lynch's films, it was Kafka who served him as a guide in exploring the

potentials of expressionism for our contemporary literary moment. Wallace's pairing of expressionism with allegory, however, indicates the dual emphasis he attributed to Kafka's work—more particular than Borgesian myth and more universal than the average realist short story. Achieving this Kafkaesque blend of expressionistic literalization, grounded in the particulars of individual experience, and the kind of allegorical displacement that “ramifies endlessly, metaphysically”—a blend which coincides with Smith's reading of Kafka as “everyman” and “angel”—may therefore be seen as the goal of Wallace's and Smith's fictional projects, too. In fact, it is still on exemplary display in Wallace's late short story “Backbone,” which became chapter 36 of *The Pale King*.

“Backbone” is the account of a boy who attempts to kiss even the most remote parts of his own body as a form of spiritual devotion. As such, it exemplifies how the expressionistic trace manifests in Wallace's fiction, namely as the usage of literal images to indicate mental states on the model of Kafka's fables; this was precisely the kind of “funniness” that Wallace associated with Kafka in his 1998 address—an absurd literalization of an abstract idea, in this case of skepticism. For as the boy moves on to parts of his body he cannot possibly reach, an allegorical displacement occurs in the narrator's discourse, an ontological shift from biology to metaphysics: thinking of the task ahead, the narrator mentions not only “the unimaginable prospects of achieving the back of his neck” and his “ears, nose, eyes,” but eventually even “the paradoxical *'ding an sich'* of the lips themselves, accessing which appeared to be like asking a blade to cut itself” (406-7; my emphasis). Wallace's literalization, then, frames the desire to conquer skepticism, i.e., to achieve absolute certainty by ‘possessing’ the thing-in-itself, as akin to the contortions of a person whose lips are vainly trying to kiss themselves.

As human finitude meets metaphysical desire, however, the narrator refrains from overt jesting or jeering. The story's absurdities are different from DeLilloan satire; and, unlike Pynchon's “serfs to allegory,” the boy emerges as a real, troubled human being. Indeed,

“Backbone” presents his habitual responsiveness, his ‘reverence’ for these inaccessible sites “in such a way as to place them almost beyond the range of conscious intent,” as a sufficient argument for the significance of his impossible project. In fact, that they are out of reach is presented as an opportunity for developing the kind of ‘dignity’ required for becoming human. For while “[the] inaccessibility of these last sites seemed so immense that it was as if their shadow fell across all the slow progress [the boy had made],” he chooses to see this “tenebrous shadow” as “lending the enterprise a somber dignity rather than futility or pathos.” This echoes the thought of another great modernist and contemporary of Kafka, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who also chose to see “dignity” in the human desire for transcendence. This kinship may explain the fact that, as Thompson has noted (129), when it came to concluding his Kafka address, Wallace borrowed a mystical parable from Wittgenstein’s *Culture and Value*.

This parable invites readers of Kafka to imagine his stories as “all about a kind of door” that we long desperately to walk through; when the door finally opens, however, “it opens *outward*—we’ve been inside what we wanted all along” (65). The symbolism here suggests associations with classical notions of transcendence from religious traditions; the twist in Wallace’s Kafka, of course, is that we end up staying in an immanent frame. Still, Wallace concludes, there is great value in such a *desire* for transcendence *as if* it could be fulfilled, in our “total desperation to enter,” an anxiety that we do not understand cognitively but can “feel” in our “pounding and ramming and kicking” (65). Wittgenstein had made a similar point in his 1929 *Lecture on Ethics*, identifying the pursuit of transcendence that Wallace associates with Kafka as the source of values in general, the impetus behind art and morality.

The direction of all this human commotion, this “tendency, [this] thrust,” Wittgenstein asserts in the lecture, “*points to something*” (13). And while he is in agreement with Kafka about the “perfectly, absolutely hopeless” character of such striving (11), Wittgenstein adds a

sentence that is itself a testament to the “tendency” he praises: “it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it” (12). The same belief in the value of transcendence, without positing any metaphysical guarantees, had capped off Wallace’s reading of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*. Likening the main character Kate’s psychic journey to the ascent on Wittgenstein’s ladder (*Tractatus* 6.54), Wallace first acknowledged that “it’s true [Kate’s] ladder goes no place,” but finally ended on a note of hope in the value of literature: “it’s also true nobody’s going to throw either [Wittgenstein’s or Markson’s] book away” (116).

What Wallace’s debt to Kafka and Wittgenstein reveals, then, is this: the kind of literature he thought could advance beyond contemporary cynicism is animated by a certain directionality. If understood properly, Wallace suggests in the PEN address, this directionality alone should fill one with reverence for something that it is “just about impossible to be discursive about” (62). As my discussion of “The Joke” in Smith’s *The Autograph Man* has demonstrated, humor is one way of gesturing beyond these strictures of discourse. Similarly, as Wallace emphasized to Miriam Böttger, for Wittgenstein, too, “the most serious and profound problems and issues and questions could be discussed only in the form of jokes.” A turn to Wittgensteinian parlance may indicate the epistemological depth of his remark here: the German word for “Witz” refers both to the ‘point’ of an expression and to its ‘funniness.’ Humor and understanding, then, are fused in one moment of insight; indeed, as in de Man’s hilarious story of the inevitable falling of the man who trips, we cannot even understand the value of ‘falling’ back onto immanence without an aspiration to transcendence. Similarly, if we always expected the door in Wittgenstein’s parable to open outwards, seeing it do so would not only have lost its ‘point’—it would also, as Wallace puts it, using another multivalent German word, no longer be “komisch” (65).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Despite Wallace’s admission, buried in a footnote, that he has “very little German” (62), Thompson argues that Wallace “knew enough German to know the difference between the nouns [sic] *Spassig* and *Komisch*.” “An

## The Right Distance

The idea that humor affords opportunities for understanding, that indeed a joke *shows* something that cannot be expressed in propositional language, is part of Benjamin's thinking, too. In a 1934 talk on "The Author as Producer," Benjamin links such illumination, an opening to the present moment and its potential for reflection, to the physical experience of laughter. "Let me remark," he states, "that there is no better starting point for thought than laughter; speaking more generally, spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances for thought than spasms of the soul" (101). In her commentary on the passage, Anca Parvulescu notes that for Benjamin, the first modernist to "set the tone for what was to become a fascination with the promise of laughter," humor marks "the beginning of thought in something that seems to be of a completely different order—a spasm of the body" (*Laughter* 12). Arguably, then, there is in Benjamin the same kind of doubleness—a dual emphasis on mind and body, universal and particular—that issues from Wallace's and Smith's Kafka.

For Thompson, however, the Wallace-Smith interpretation "can be read as modifying a particularly European reading of Kafka that originates with Walter Benjamin" (142). While interpreters in Benjamin's wake "sidestepped the theological, sentimental analyses of Kafka's friend and literary executor Max Brod to focus instead on the textual surface" (142), Wallace and Smith, as Thompson has it, differ "from these European intellectuals" by wanting to retain a metaphysical dimension that is "rippling out from the literal, textual surface" (143). This strikes me as an apt description of Wallace's Kafka as an allegorist; as I will show in the following, however, it also fits Benjamin's interpretation, which, contrary to Thompson's

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early draft of the Kafka address contains the former," Thompson explains, "which was then changed to '*Das ist komisch*'" (125f27). Indeed, unlike the more straightforward 'spassig,' the meaning of 'komisch' in German ranges from humor to the peculiar and uncanny. Thompson's report from the vault allows for the inference that the changes Wallace made to earlier drafts show this to be a desired effect.

claim, has the same interest in both “proto-postmodern surface play” and “‘sub-archetypal’ truths” (144) he associates with Wallace.

In fact, Smith’s desire not to see the prophetic and the quotidian Kafka in conflict was shared by Benjamin. “There are two ways to miss the point of Kafka’s works,” he wrote in his essay on Kafka: “One is to interpret them naturally, the other is the supernatural interpretation. Both the psychoanalytic and the theological interpretations equally miss the essential points” (127). This did not mean, however, that Benjamin rejected these approaches altogether; rather, he simultaneously kept each perspective in play without rejecting the other. The resemblance to Smith’s aesthetic is not coincidental here. In fact, Smith was familiar with Benjamin’s writings on Kafka, quoting from a short 1931 draft entitled “Franz Kafka: At the Building of the Chinese Wall” in her own take on the Jewish writer. Moreover, that the same essay also references Arendt’s introduction to *Illuminations* indicates Smith’s likely knowledge of the long essay, too, which was included in the volume, and where Benjamin discusses the “essential points” of Kafka’s work in close relation to his concept of ‘gestus.’

“Kafka could understand things only in the form of a *gestus*,” he explains, “and this *gestus* which he did not understand constitutes the cloudy part of the parables. Kafka’s writings emanate from it” (129). Note the similar emphasis Smith places on such ‘cloudiness’ in her recounting of the “typical Kafka journey [...] from the concrete, to the metaphorical, to the allegorical, to the notional, which last—as is so often the case with Kafka—seems to grow obscure the more precisely it is expressed” (“Everyman” 68). As we have seen, Wallace has the same emphasis on the way Kafka’s work ‘ramifies metaphysically’; but it was Benjamin’s achievement to have connected this necessary ambiguity with ‘gestus’—according to Jameson “both a little more and a little less than a concept” (*Brecht* 100) and thus a valuable theoretical tool for expressing both the expressionistic literalization Wallace highlights and the ‘cloudiness’ Smith finds in Kafka. In fact, the use of “International

Gestures” in *The Autograph Man*—a conscious implementation of Benjaminian themes on a structural level that complements Smith’s intertextual references to the critic—suggests that, in addition to Wallace’s influence, Benjamin’s multivalent approach, forming a constellation of materialism and metaphysics through attention to ‘gestus,’ is an equally important touchstone for Smith’s novel.<sup>8</sup>

The source for the metaphysical elements in Benjamin’s Kafka essay was Franz Rosenzweig’s 1921 study *Star of Redemption*. In the book, Benjamin had read of “a very elemental purity of feeling,” somewhat like Heidegger’s pre-personal mode of readiness-to-hand, that Rosenzweig detected in classical Chinese theater, which “dissolve[d] happenings into their gestic components” as if by putting each gesture into a frame (“Kafka” 120). In Kafka’s stories, Benjamin claimed to see a similar breakdown of life into a series of gestures, and he took the “Nature Theater of Oklahoma” in the novel *Amerika* to be a representation of Kafka’s worldview: “Kafka’s shorter studies and stories are seen in their full light only,” Benjamin writes, “when they are, so to speak, put on as acts in the ‘Nature Theater of Oklahoma’” (120). However, even in this ‘full light,’ the depicted gestures—animal contemplation, an official’s hunched back, a scribe’s breathlessness—are still strange, surreal, somewhat incomprehensible. Indeed, it is in this very ‘cloudiness,’ its opposition to the clarity of a *logos*, that Benjamin locates the essence of Kafka’s expressionistic parables. For if, in some way, every gesture is silent—indeed, if it ‘speaks,’ it can only be said to do so

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<sup>8</sup> There is a lack of scholarly accounts on Smith’s use of ‘gestus’ in *The Autograph Man*. Childs and Green briefly discuss the “‘International Gestures’ that pepper the book,” but dismiss any idea of their larger significance by labelling them “the ultimate expression of a soundbite culture” (47), and, as such, subject to the same critique of the culture industry that writers such as Wood and Tew read into Smith’s second novel. Tew’s viewpoint on ‘gestus’ in *The Autograph Man* is a bit myopic, too. For while he rightly points out that Alex, at the novel’s conclusion, fears that a recital of the Kaddish for his dead father “will only be a gesture” (66), he does not mention the answer given by Alex’s friend Adam, a reply posed as a rhetorical question: “What’s more important than a gesture?” (410). Smith’s likely answer is indicated by her use of a passage from the book *Weight of the World* by the German writer Peter Handke, whose title alludes to the mythical image of Atlas carrying the world on his shoulders that early works of existentialism such as Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* invest with epochal significance and Benjamin viewed as the essential ‘gestus’ of the human under conditions of capitalist exploitation: “Suppose I weren’t allowed the gestures people make when they don’t know what else to do,” Smith quotes Handke, “I’d have nothing to sustain me, I’d be lost” (qtd. 415).

metaphorically—the gestures in Kafka’s work tend not to even ‘speak’ comprehensively in this second, derived sense; indeed, their silence is the very source of their power to reach both the commonplace *and* the metaphysical.

For Benjamin, then, ‘gestus’ has an uncanny relationship to silence and its promise of exceeding the limits of any *logos*. It is this absence of a clear *logos* accompanying Kafka’s silent gestures that makes them “too powerful for our accustomed surroundings” (121), confounding all expectations about the world, and thus, as Benjamin has it, “open[ing] up toward heaven” (121). As I mentioned in the first chapter, there is an infinity of possible interpretations for every unexplained gesture—a fact that had inspired Wittgenstein, and Cavell in his wake, to seek solace in our attunements to other speakers in applying our criteria. Kafka, we might say now, courts this same infinity of interpretation, which Benjamin calls “reflection without end” (121), by refusing to adapt the gestures in his books to familiar situations; in the process, he leaves behind Wittgensteinian attunements, but also, as Benjamin puts it, “tears open the sky behind every gesture” (121). In light of Newton’s epigraph from the beginning of this chapter, it is precisely such an opening toward transcendence, refusing to close the criteria for the use of a concept, that marks the ethical dimension of Kafka’s work—the way it thinks “the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger.”

But this metaphysical impulse is constrained in Benjamin’s work by a concept of proper critical distance he developed almost contemporaneously with the Kafka piece. We encounter this correct “angle of vision,” he explains in the 1936 essay “The Storyteller,” when, to an observer walking about, “in a rock a human head or an animal’s body may appear” (83). For Benjamin, this moment of uncertain perception, when both the existence of the human head and the animal body in the rock formation seem equally plausible, becomes a demonstration of ‘the right distance’—neither too close, in which case there would be room for doubt whether the object had impressed itself on our sense apparatus too forcefully, subduing any

critical impulses; nor too far, in which case the perceived outlines would seem to be a hallucinatory imposition of our minds. This employment of a vocabulary of positionality is the logical outcome of an argument I have been making throughout this study: namely, that the philosophical concept of objective knowledge, if it is affirmed, suggests a false intimacy with things, or, if it is rejected, insinuates a false notion of certainty about the unknowability of said things.

A view of Kafka's work from 'the right distance,' then, demands that any gesture at transcendence also be balanced out by a material dimension. The way this material trace enters Benjamin's work was by way of Brecht, who had exercised an enormous influence on him through a series of conversations between 1924 and the early 1930s. In fact, what Brecht brought to Benjamin's reading of Kafka was the very anti-metaphysical attitude of Weimar's new objectivity movement that I discussed in the second chapter. This is most apparent in the notion that sheer performativity, rather than an expression of authentic selfhood, is at the core of Kafka's work: "Kafka's world is a world theater," Benjamin asserts, in line with the new objectivity fashion of valuing performance over essence, persona over personality: "For him, man is on the stage from the very beginning" (123). Human life, then, becomes an elaborate theatrical act guided by a script that Benjamin recognizes in the "code of gestures" at the heart of Kafka's work (120). And, the "law of this theater," Benjamin asserts, "is contained in a sentence tucked away in 'A Report to an Academy': 'I imitated people because I was looking for a way out'" (124).

This "Report" is the account of an African ape who is abducted by a colonialist expedition and finds himself aboard a ship headed for Europe. Hunched over in a cage under deck, the ape longs for "a way out; right or left, or in any direction." But, paradoxically, the 'way out' he finally devises ends up being a 'way in.' Observing his captors, the ape notices the uniformity of their behavior, with the men mimicking each other such that "it seemed to

[him] as if there was only the same man.” Soon, he imitates them, too, and in effect becomes human himself, quickly managing “to reach the cultural level of an average European.” To be sure, the ape’s submission is not complete; it involves a difference, a remainder of empowering self-awareness, that is structurally suited to be read as ironic. That the ape maintains this ironic distance can be inferred from the report he delivers on his ‘way out’ of the animal kingdom. It has brought him a comfortable, very human existence, with a “bottle of wine on the table” and a place in a “rocking chair,” as he “gaze[s] out of the window.” But in his remarks on this ‘successful’ transition, the ape finds expressions that subtly undermine the hierarchy of humans over apes this new life presumes.

For instance, the “way of humanity” is best captured, the ape claims, by the expression “to fight one’s way through the thick of things.” Kafka’s original German phrasing, “sich ins Gebüsch schlagen,” expresses the ape’s irony better than the translation here: after all, the ‘thicket’ [Gebüsch], rather than the ‘thick of things,’ is precisely where apes live; in the ape’s account, however, it becomes synonymous with being human. The space indicated by this contradiction is where the ape’s irony resides—an awareness of human finitude, of the limits of human aspirations to transcend one’s animal nature, the acceptance of which alone, Kafka’s ironic formulation suggests, allows for the process of truly becoming human. If, in the last chapter, I argued that irony allows for a gradual movement from submission to empowerment, the notion of ‘gestus’ as our way of being-in-the-world now allows us to specify this assertion: What Kafka’s ape teaches is that being human is fundamentally a set of gestures. Like the ape, we must study these gestures and recombine them, but with a difference, in order to increasingly arrive at an understanding of what it means to be a subject, subject to power. Thus becoming truly human is only possible through a subversive performance akin to a quotation of ‘gestus’ in the spirit of Brechtian third-person acting.

That Smith’s literary influences after the publication of her debut novel, then, steered her in the direction of the Kafkaesque serio-comic mode—which Wallace has captured by stating that “Kafka’s comedy is always also tragedy, and this tragedy always also an immense and reverent joy” (63)<sup>9</sup>—gives the lie to Wood’s assertion that *The Autograph Man* fails at the “proper apportioning” of irony and earnestness. Indeed, what this chapter has shown is that Smith deconstructs the binary between irony and earnestness not unlike Wallace, adding the passion of laughter to Wood’s demand for “moral seriousness” to arrive at a truly morally passionate, passionately moral framework. That is also why, to return to Konstantinou’s account of the novel, I take a reading of Smith as ‘postironic’ to be misguided. To my mind, the many similarities between Smith and Wallace I have described in this chapter suggest that the chiasmic formula ‘ironically earnest, earnestly ironic’ can best capture the serio-comic aspects of *The Autograph Man*, as well. For Maczynska, this “serio-comic approach is best exemplified by [Smith’s] rendering of the Kaddish” because “the final Kaddish ceremony [...] is sprinkled with irreverent comic references to the body language of the attendees” (132-3). Since the ceremony also brings together the other concerns of this chapter, I will now turn to the Epilogue to conclude my discussion of Smith’s novel.

Here, at the end of the book, Alex’s journey of maturation comes to an end when he finally follows Adam’s and Rabbi Burston’s advice to publically say the Kaddish in memory of his dead father. In what reads like a transcript of the ritual, Smith arranges religious and ordinary gestures side-by-side in this scene, without privileging either. Thus Alex’s recital of traditional liturgy—blessing and praising, glorifying and raising “*the name of the Holy One*”

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<sup>9</sup> Wallace’s choice of words here exemplifies a rhetorical structure—“always also... always also...”—that is distinctly chiasmic. As I have demonstrated, the use of such figures of speech was one way Wallace chose to indicate the collapse of all binary distinctions to point at the aporia underneath. As such, his formulation chafes at more one-sided readings of “Kafka’s Laughter,” for instance by Parvulescu, who charges that “Wallace does not seem to be able to invoke Kafka’s laughter without shrouding it in a veil of terror” (1421). In fact, Parvulescu determines Kafka’s humor as one wherein “earnestness,” she claims, “is the object of laughter” (1429). However, a chiasmic framework allows for a modification of Parvulescu’s claim, with the added possibility that the “terror” may also be shot through by bursts of laughter, just like the ‘horror’ of silence, as I have argued, may also offer intuitions of ‘plenitude.’

(418) such that “*He who makes peace in His High places [...] Make peace upon us and all Israel*” (419)—is interspersed with the common, earthbound gestures of those who witness his Kaddish: “Adam smiled and performed/ A discreet thumbs-up”; “Esther,” Alex’s girlfriend, “smoothed her skirt down/ With her hands and twisted the seam until/ It rested correctly!” (418); and “Sarah,” his mother, “cried and made no attempt/ To disguise it” (419). This lack of distinction between different registers arguably allows Smith to present a perspective akin to Benjamin’s ‘right distance’ from the phenomenological world. The function of the Epilogue for the novel, then, is not unlike that of a character like Adam: in both cases, Smith conjoins materialism and metaphysics in a Benjaminian constellation that is meant to blur, as Maczynska has it, “the boundary between the categories of the profane and the sacred, revealing their mutual interdependence and interpenetration” (129).

Alex inhabits a similar position of ‘right distance’ from this tableau of gestures at his Kaddish. After all, the Epilogue has no indication of a recognizable synthesis between the two sets of ‘gestus’ in his mind. What Alex does feel, however, is astonishment. Indeed, he marvels at an unknown woman holding “her small/ Belly with both hands,” and at an unfamiliar man yawning “shamelessly” (419). In both cases, all the text states is that “Alex *wondered* what this meant” (419; my emphasis). Confronted with the metaphysical otherness of two strangers as it manifests in their individual repertoire of gestures, then, Alex is struck by wonder, the very affect the Greeks regarded as a stimulus for philosophical thought. It is in this way, finally, with her protagonist moving into a proximity to the other, that Smith appropriately concludes her *Bildungsroman*. Indeed, that Alex is truly “in the world” here is not only indicated by the fact that this phrase is the title of the penultimate chapter, leading up to his Kaddish ceremony. Alex’s involvement also forms a striking contrast to the beginning of the novel, when, as an awkward teenager, he is completely detached from the world, lost in loops of self-consciousness as “one of this generation who watch themselves”

(2). At the time, his mother Sarah thinks he should be “[going] up to the world, going *into* it, and, you know, sort of *engaging* it, getting that vital *interplay*...”—a suggestion Smith immediately ironizes by letting Alex’s father question the idea: “What is it she’s reading these days that makes her speak to him like a self-help book in the middle of the night?” (3). The position of proximity that affords experiences of wonder at the world, at the other person, cannot be imposed, the novel seems to say here; neither can it be taught by the straightforward instructions of a ‘self-help book.’ *The Autograph Man*, though, is not such a book. It avoids resolution by letting a reader go through the same aporias and confusions Alex experiences, grounded in the hope that, at some point, she will feel something like Alex’s astonishment at the sight of the two strangers at his Kaddish, and also ‘wonder’ what this ‘means.’ In that way, then, the end of *The Autograph Man* with its aporetic montage of gestures exemplifies the goal of Smith’s aesthetic, which Holmes has described as an ambivalent textual strategy intended to “give rise to thinking” (141).

With this conclusion, or absence thereof, Smith strikes a similar note as in *White Teeth*, where she ultimately refuses closure to the plot by letting the DNA-altered Future Mouse escape into the sewers of London, thus inaugurating an uncertain future for the city’s mammalian gene pool. And the same uncertainty also concludes her third novel *On Beauty*, where the college professor Howard Belsey, who has made a career out of deconstructing art works, finds himself at a lecture without his notes, lost to the paintings he is meant to describe without a context that could help distance him—a lack of critical distance, however, that holds out the promise of restoring the deconstructionist Howard to a sense of beauty in proximity to the artworks. All three endings, then, exemplify a belief Smith has expressed most clearly in “Two Directions for the Novel,” namely that the way forward for contemporary fiction lies in driving its traditions to the point of a “nervous breakdown” (87). If the ambiguity that accompanies this approach cannot provide the clear illumination we

might hope for—leaving us, as in Smith’s novels, with aporia, paradox, contradiction—at least in the writers I have discussed in this study it often ends up being funny: “It’s all laughter in the dark,” Smith concludes her answer to Wood’s tirade, “the title of a Nabokov novel and still the best term for the kind of writing I aspire to: not a division of head and heart, but the useful employment of both” (“How it feels”). To be sure, this kind of laughter, which follows from the aporetic apprehension of opposites, absent a synthesis, does not teach us how to mend the world’s contradictions; but it may be possible that, in rare moments, it can become the source of our ability to face failure and uncertainty without despair, to ‘go on,’ in Beckett’s words, ‘by aporia pure and simple.’ To my mind, this possibility is on display in the “radiance of a laugh” that Adam laughs when he “turn[s] up at the old Tandem house, amused about something,” one year after Alex’s father’s death, and proceeds to tell his grieving friend another ‘beautiful’ story:

- [...] I was on that train, the Free Train. Just now.
- Yeah?
- And this guy walks on with a bike missing a wheel. And then at the next stop, this other guy gets in, in the same carriage, with a bike wheel but no bike. Everybody noticed, everyone in the carriage. It was driving us all crazy. Except these two gaylords. They didn’t even *look* at each other.
- *And?*
- And nothing! (373-4)

## Conclusion: A Physiognomy of Contemporary Fiction

If words are like bodies, banging against each other, flying apart from each other, then the body is very like an unruly sentence, filled with violent and contradictory impulses which cannot easily be harnessed. The sign of this is the gesture.

—Gabriel Josipovici, *On Trust*

In the last chapter, I showed how a ‘gestus’ can express a whole form of life, including the “violent or contradictory impulses” Josipovici associates above with human gestures understood as the writing-on-the-body of a second, silent language. Peter Sloterdijk is invested in the same return to a more holistic view of being, indeed premises the vision of a post-technocratic world in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* on the development of what he calls a “physiognomic sense” (139). Noting, in a section on the “Psychosomatics of the Zeitgeist,” that “the process of civilization, whose core is constituted by the sciences, teaches us to distance ourselves from people and things so that we experience them as objects,” Sloterdijk indicts ‘enlightened’ modernity for having lost precisely this more embodied, ‘physiognomic’ dimension of being: “Scientists lose the capacity to behave as neighbors of the world; they think in concepts of distance, not of friendship; they seek overviews, not neighborly involvement” (140). And, like the writers of the Wallace nexus in my reading, Sloterdijk concludes with a hopeful plea for proximity: the “physiognomic sense” of reading human gestures, he argues, “provides a key to all that which reveals our proximity to the environment. Its secret is intimacy, not distance” (139).

In response to the disembodied detachment of instrumental rationality, then, Sloterdijk renews the possibility of a philosophy of the body. Rather than advance treatises and propositions, such a philosophy would point at a grimace, or another physical expression, in staging a philosophical stance—somewhat like the modernist image Ezra Pound thought could express a whole context in one ‘complex.’ In this way of thinking, the frown and lean-back, the intransigence of the analytical philosopher, signify a corresponding form of life; so

does the solemn anxiety of the Heideggerians, the deep sincerity of the Wittgensteinians, the rhetorical pathos of the Nietzscheans. To conclude my study of contemporary fiction, I want to contribute two gestures to this repertoire of philosophical ‘gestus’; taken together, they comprise the story of the Wallace nexus I have written in the preceding pages. My hope is that each gesture can help explain the other in mutual illumination through a juxtaposition of their constitutive differences.

This emphasis on human gestures is not meant to suggest any certainty about a return to full presence if we access the more holistic view of life afforded by presentations of ‘gestus.’ Indeed, although Sloterdijk’s ‘physiognomic sense’ teases us with the idea that, by ‘speaking’ this “speechless language,” we could somehow return to our “roots” which “[go] back into the prehuman and prerational” (140), my concluding discussion will reiterate a point made throughout this study: that the body, as always already structured by conceptuality, is an ambiguous ‘ground’ for rooting critique. At the same time, this argument does not suggest the futility of a ‘philosophy of the body’; rather, it has been one of my concerns to show how such a project can be continued in a humanist spirit without giving up on the insights of transcendental reflection. The critic Charles B. Harris, Wallace’s friend and employer at Illinois State University, attributes a similar double investment to Wallace by reading his fiction as “recuperat[ing] the priorities and beliefs of humanism without retreating to prestructuralist notions of essentialism and universalism” (116). That the writers of the Wallace nexus share this commitment has been my argument throughout this study.

To be sure, it is by now a well-rehearsed argument that some practitioners of literary postmodernism prioritized the second part of this double investment at the expense of the first. Wallace himself made this point in his manifesto “E Unibus Pluram” by close reading a “scenelet” from DeLillo’s *White Noise* in which the pop-culture scholar Murray Jay Siskind takes the narrator Jack Gladney to a tourist attraction called “The Most Photographed Barn in

America” (“Pluram” 47). In Murray’s interpretation, dispensed between breaks of contemplative silence once the two men arrive at the site and observe scores of tourists taking pictures, the barn becomes the poststructuralist simulacrum par excellence: a pseudo-object constituted by collective fantasies that obscure any remaining connection to ‘the Real’ because, as Murray notes, “[once] you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (*Noise* 13). And, with a view to the photographers who all take the exact same picture that has been taken by millions before them, Murray concludes: ““They are taking pictures of taking pictures”” (13).

This, then, is the first ‘gestus’ of my epilogue, exemplifying the kind of “metawatching” that, in Wallace’s estimation, is the focus of a “later wave of postmodern literature” (“Pluram” 46): “Murray is watching people watch a barn,” Wallace summarizes the “regress of recordings of barn and barn-watching,” “and his friend Jack is watching Murray watch the watching” (48). Hence, as readers, we are party to a self observing another self watching other selves, a watching of watching of watching, in which each glance slides off its object and enters a potentially infinite regressus that renders the ‘real’ barn an asymptotic vanishing point. To Murray, the barn is therefore the site of a “spiritual surrender,” host to “nameless energies” that render the touristic spectacle a “religious experience,” and it is clear that Murray himself, its distant chronicler, seemingly the last watcher in the line, is filled with awe at his own sublime musings (*Noise* 13). To Wallace’s critical eyes, however, Murray is no different from the “poor Joe Briefcases” taking pictures (49). Indeed, he argues, Murray’s delusion of thinking himself at a remove from the crowd signifies a much greater malaise that Wallace links to the late-century rise of detached irony as ‘infinite absolute negativity.’ As Mary Holland explains, in “E Unibus Pluram” Wallace “identified the ‘aura’ that fixates Murray before the Most Popular Barn of America in *White Noise* as not the missing Benjaminian aura of authenticity, but as what has replaced it: irony itself” (239).

In my reading of *Infinite Jest*, I distinguished two forms of irony, the detached and the proximate kind, with a preference for the latter. Similarly, Wallace's assessment of *White Noise* also tries to balance the contradictory impulses of any position that imagines itself to be transcendent to the point of "scientific" objectivity. Thus, on the one hand, Wallace points out that DeLillo is certainly aware of the absurdity of Murray's self-exaltation: "most of the writing's parodic force is directed at Murray," he notes and describes DeLillo's narrative strategy as "irony's special straight face, w/ Jack himself mute during Murrays's dialogue." This is irony as the kind of "poker-faced silence" that prefers to let Murray's delusion as a "would-be transcender of spectation" undermine itself—the kind of silence as plenitude that "speaks volumes" in juxtaposition to what Wallace calls Murray's "blather." (49)

But it is also the kind of silence that is informed by an awareness of one's possible implication in the system, since, as Wallace has it, "to speak out loud in the scene would render the narrator a part of the farce (instead of a detached, transcendent 'observer and recorder')" (49). And, to Wallace, Jack is DeLillo's "alter ego" here, his silence an eloquent diagnosis of "the very disease from which he, Murray, born-watchers, and readers all suffer" (49). It is part of the "complicated ironies at work in this scene," then, that DeLillo recognizes the same "disease" in himself: the fear of being seen as inauthentic, part of "the farce," open to critique. In this regard, Wallace's second point is a warning call about the possibility of an irony that is motivated primarily by fear of ridicule; and that DeLillo's silence "eloquently diagnoses" this in himself, too, does not by itself lift him out of the conditions that led to his avoidance of vulnerability in the first place.

Zadie Smith agrees that "DeLillo's most-photographed barn holds within it something of the essential DeLillo" ("Gifts" 295). And, with the same attention to gestural expression I traced in her novelistic work, Smith juxtaposes DeLillo's postmodern 'gestus' with "the ultimate DFW image," a gesture taken from Wallace's story "Church Not Made With Hands,"

which has a “climactic scene” in which “a priest kneels praying in front of a picture of himself praying” (“Gifts” 295). Taking a cue from Smith’s observation, then, I read this peculiar prayer as the quintessential Wallace gesture, the second kind of ‘gestus’ to conclude my study. The brilliant essay in which this pairing first occurs is Smith’s “The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace,” published after his death to commemorate Wallace, her favorite contemporary writer. In fact, Smith honors her friend in the one way only a writer can, by giving Wallace a presence in the text through a stylistic homage.

Indeed, the end of her essay stages a Wallacian deconstruction of the essay form itself. Here, Smith does what she describes Wallace as doing in his story “Adult World II,” which ends in radical incompleteness when any conclusion is “offered only in the form of a writer’s schematic notes, unfinished, unfilled in” (287). Yet unlike Wallace’s story, which falls apart due to “an acute case of narrative self-consciousness” (286), and, as such, dramatizes the corrosive effects of the kind of ‘toxic’ self-consciousness Wallace abhorred in much late postmodernism, Smith takes the lessons from Markson and Kafka I described earlier to heart; in fact, the end of her own essay reverses the narrative direction of “Adult World II”: rather than going further into ‘narrative self-consciousness,’ she moves outwards, toward the reader, guided by a realization of the human subject’s need for love and connection. Thus Smith disseminates only her interpretive “keys” to “Church Not Made With Hands,” a story that, as she puts it, “seals its doors tightly” (295). Once again, Smith imagines fiction as a kind of dwelling here, and she seeks company, calling out to the reader, inviting her to share this narrative space. Like the many titular ‘difficult gifts’ Wallace gave his readers, then, Smith’s essay is an art form with non-closure, too, the kind of writing as living interaction Wallace thought all literature should be.

But “Church” is not only an apt choice because it allows for the “joy” that comes “in finding the keys that fit the locks” of a tightly shut fictional edifice (295). In fact, it is a

particularly appropriate story for Smith to end on in an essay that remembers a dead writer because the story explores how grief shapes consciousness and thus culminates, quite organically, in an exploration of humanism and metaphysics. The grief in question is that of a character named Day, who works for a County Mental Health Division in Massachusetts. His daily routine is interspersed with memories of an accident that invade his consciousness, vague images which slowly combine to tell the terrible backstory of his wife Sarah's daughter Esther one day falling into Sarah's swimming pool. Esther sustained brain damage from having been under the water for too long because Day, who cannot swim, was unable to save her in time. How Day tries to come to terms with his own guilt is the emotional core of a story that shows us the suffering of the 'human creature' in a way consonant with key tenets of expressionist literature.

In fact, "Church" is Wallace at his most expressionist, dramatizing the grieving process chiefly by formal means, indeed drawing the reader into Day's 'inner workings' by way of a free indirect discourse that Tom Bissel has called "a microscopically close third person" ("Everything")—a proximate style not unlike Markson's in *Springer's Progress*, where the narrative "looks like the third person," Colin Marshall explains, "but gets so close to one particular character that it's somehow more revealing than the first person." As in Joyce, a malapropism can express a whole state of mind here; and in "Church" this occurs, for example, when Day tries to say the Lord's Prayer but garbles a line because memories of his 'sin' of being unable to 'swim' interfere with the mechanical recital, making the result a layered expression of inner torment: "As I those who have swummed against me" (196). Day's state of mind, then, is one of extreme ambiguity, in which inner and outer are merged as a result of the vulnerability and openness that follows from grief. Is the titular Church Not Made With Hands consciousness, the story asks, or is it the outer world, or is it both?

“Church” enacts such in-between states not only on the level of style; as Smith hints with some of her interpretive keys, the story also comments, internally, on its multivalent narrative form through some images that beset Day’s mind. When he watches a partial solar eclipse on a field of flowers, for instance, Day sees strange fluctuations of light and dark Smith calls “shadow bands (also known as flying shadows)” (296). Undulating across the darkening field, these refractions of sunlight in the earth’s atmosphere “make the ground look like the bottom of a swimming pool” (296), she explains—a “key” that opens up Wallace’s corresponding description of Day’s mind, which has the same conflation of field and pool, present and past. Day experiences both events, the eclipse and the near-drowning of his wife’s daughter, at the same time here; and we participate in this perception through a narration that refuses clarity in the pursuit of Day’s ‘inner’ struggle for atonement. Indeed, that Wallace lets this state of mind coincide with an ambiguous astronomical state becomes, in Smith’s fragmented commentary, a sign of broader, metaphysical significance. “It starts at the apsis,” Wallace writes (“Church” 210), which, as Smith quotes from the OED, is the moment when the earth is at once “nearest to and furthest from” the sun (“Gifts” 297)—like the reader who tries to access Day’s consciousness but, even in reading this ‘microscopically close’ narrative, cannot ‘become’ the character; and, as this study has shown by reference to the debates around modern skepticism, like all of us humans, circling each other, too often confined to our own orbits.

But if light is what separates the world into subject and object, enabling mastery, Wallace’s relocation of the human in the middling zone of the “apsis,” where light and dark fluctuate rapidly, dissolves such clear distinctions and replaces them with the rotations and permutations I have tried to make comprehensible through Wallace’s preferred rhetorical figure of chiasmus. As such, the expressionistic style of “Church” is an example of the kind of fiction of proximity that is guided by the metaphysical speculations about the

interdependence of inside/outside I have summarized in preceding chapters. To be sure, Wallace was versed enough in deconstructive philosophy to be wary of the metaphysical claims of any expressionist art which implies that an artist's, or character's, emotion could somehow be present in the art work alone. Arguably, this awareness motivated a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' expressionism Wallace included in his 1995 essay on David Lynch. "In terms of literature," he writes there, "richly communicative Expressionism is epitomized by Kafka, bad and onanistic Expressionism by the average Graduate Writing Program avant-garde story" (200).

Clearly, this distinction revolves around what Smith has called the "extrorse" focus of Wallace's work ("Gifts" 266): an openness to the reader in a 'rich' form of communication that seduces her into the house of fiction by projecting a vision that is enough like her own way of seeing to be communicative, but also different enough to 'ramify metaphysically' into otherness. With this emphasis on the communicative side of expression, then, Wallace joined the opposition to some major representatives of twentieth century aesthetics—Heidegger, for example, who saw in poetry the retreat of the communicative dimension in favor of an 'expressive' expression that speaks Dasein itself (*Being and Time* §34). By contrast, Wallace was more invested in a sense of the alterity of the other than this homogeneity of Dasein, even conceived as a form of Mit-Dasein, allows for. "We've all probably sat next to people at dinner or on public transport who are producing communication signals," he told Dalkey Press publisher John O' Brian in 2000, "but it's not communicative expression, it's expressive expression." The familiar image of the crazy subway rider speaks volumes here about the viability of an art form that is premised on a similar form of 'expressive' expression. To counter the threat of solipsism, then, Wallace aimed to reinvigorate the idea of expressionist art as communication—all the while knowing that its ultimate destination in the artwork's addressee was not something that could be ensured by the force of will alone;

indeed, knowing that whether a piece of fiction is truly communicative was something that could only be prayed for.

### **A Kantian Priest**

This emphasis on prayer as a response to skepticism returns us to the quintessential Wallace gesture. It occurs in one of “Church”’s vignettes, in which an old priest “kneels in the brittle field at the limit of an industrial park,” facing a canvas that has been nailed to an easel. That the priest, the narration suggests, may be Day’s Jesuit art teacher from college long ago is an unlikely coincidence that marks the whole scene as a dream in which neither “shadows’ lengths and angles” (205) nor Day’s “perspective,” looking outwards from the canvas as the “window onto the scene” (206), make any sense. Other people from Day’s waking life populate the dream: two colleagues from the County Mental Health Division, who try to convince the priest to cease the public display of his strange prayer to the canvas, which shows a picture of himself praying. There is a self-involution in this gesture, then, that is reminiscent of the worst cases of ‘narrative self-consciousness’; in my reading, however, the priest’s prayer also references Kantian philosophy, which is based on the tautological notion that, as I noted earlier, ‘a judgment about an object agrees with a judgment about the object.’

This approach, reading Wallace in Kantian terms, has been prefigured by Smith, who calls “Wallace’s ethical ideas” “profoundly un-American,” and, as such, having “more in common with the philosophical current [of] Kant’s ‘realm of ends,’” which ends are always other people, than with the Anglo-American orientation toward some abstract ethical goal (“Gifts” 291). Building on Smith, then, I read the priest’s self-referential prayer as a reflection on human judgment, which, in Kant’s account, cannot reach beyond itself, to the ‘object’ it addresses. The skeptical implications of this conclusion were clear to Kant, and in the *Critique of Pure Reason* he considered it “a scandal to philosophy and to human reason in

general that the existence of things outside us [...] must be accepted merely on faith” (B519). It is precisely this Kantian rational “faith,” I argue, that motivates the prayer in “the ultimate DFW image”—a prayer for the ‘existence of things outside us’ because, as Kant indicates, we cannot be certain that the world will answer to our judgments; but it is also a prayer for the existence of other people by someone who, in an almost Cartesian manner, has nothing but himself to hold on to and therefore needs what Dorothy Hale has called “the will to believe in the possibility of alterity” (190). In fact, the ‘good’ expressionistic writing of “Church,” which views art as communicative expression, staging experiences of alterity, requires this very belief in alterity, indeed cannot be possible without it.

Wallace chose to illustrate this necessity through the figure of a priest; but the context of the story, with its manifold references to art history, shows it to be equally about the ‘religion’ of art. Again, Kant is an important touchstone here. His *Critique of Judgment*, written to complete the Kantian system, assigns particular importance to ‘taste,’ our sense of aesthetics, as a way of countering the skeptical conclusion of the first *Critique*. While Kant thus already anticipated the isolated individual of romantic aesthetics, he paired it with the possibility of a *communis sensus aestheticus* that alone could guarantee communication, referentiality, the existence of the world and the other as that to which we aspire habitually (§21). This mutual sense of beauty, finally, is what completes critical metaphysics, making the link to all other forms of understanding, indeed grounding philosophy *in toto*. For Kant, then, the aesthetic moves to the center of the human form of life as our last hope for redemption in the face of skepticism, a redemption that can ultimately only be ensured by divine intervention. This is what the priest prays for: that aesthetic expression is, in the end, communicative expression, not just expressive expression—a prayer for the *communis sensus aestheticus*.

That the prayer in Wallace's image is sustained by nothing but an artistic representation of itself speaks to the power Wallace assigned the aesthetic. The perceived beauty of the act of praying, as an embodied holistic 'gestus' in a painting that inspires aesthetic wonder, can fuel the act itself, he seems to say; and that the obvious self-reliance of this prayer, as Day's colleagues complain, "disturbs" passers-by who do not want to "watch it against their will" ("Church" 205) indicates a subliminal resistance to the idea that human life is not grounded by anything but a self-reflective judgment of taste. That they cannot make sense of the priest's act, then, is a sign that the situation they face is an aesthetic experience as Kant understood it: the confrontation with something for which they do not yet have a concept. Indeed, in the third *Critique*, Kant devotes most of his philosophical efforts to showing that the aesthetic is the one medium capable of taking us beyond proper 'knowledge,' defined as sensuous experience in alliance with concepts (§6).<sup>1</sup> In the terms I have introduced in this study, this means that art, understood in this way, is a space where what I have termed proximity can be experienced: a space where we can make do without the distance of conceptual mastery, but are still conscious, still involved. And it also means that the aesthetic, as this space of proximity, is *aporetic*: a way of propelling us outside of accustomed ways of thinking into the openness of a new beginning that has the power to weaken any rigid boundaries between subject and object and thus profoundly shake our self-relation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hager Weslaty has identified this "empty space" of Kantian moral and aesthetic experience, where "intuitions are without concepts and concepts without intuitions," as the place of a "chiasmus": an "X that (un)marks a (non-)place occupied by some 'third something'" (23). This underscores once more the privileged role I accord to chiasmic thinking in reading Wallace's work, which repeatedly gestures at this '(non-)place.'

<sup>2</sup> For a deconstructionist like de Man, this idea that art could mediate the individual with an original otherness is nothing but an aesthetic ideology. But it is far from clear whether de Man can successfully banish the aesthetic from his account, either. I refer once more to Jameson here, who is quite adept at finding traces of metaphysics even in those thinkers who claim to have abandoned it. In fact, this is true of the two most prominent thinkers who represent an anti-metaphysical attitude in this study. Despite Brecht's avowed materialism, for example, Jameson recognizes a "'metaphysical basis' in the dynamics of aggregates and collectives" (*Brecht* 115) that characterize Brecht's dialectical method, and he therefore goes on to affirm "the availability of the metaphysical note" in Brecht's oeuvre (*Brecht* 147-8). Similarly, Jameson thwarts de Man's stated intentions when he finds in his work "a last-minute rescue operation and a salvaging of the aesthetic [...] at the moment in which it seems to disappear without a trace" (*Postmodernism* 251). For even though de Man assigned to "sensory appearance the negative status of aesthetic ideology," Jameson explains, he retains "art itself (or at least literature) as the privileged realm in which language deconstructs itself and in which, therefore, some very late version of 'truth'

This is why, in the proximity of an aesthetic experience, we can become truly other—a possibility that is common to both modernism and postmodernism; indeed, it motivates the desire for a radical “change” that speaks from Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* as much as the hope for an indeterminate, ‘cosmic’ moment that DeLillo stages in *End Zone*’s sci-fi parable when the foam crust around Tudev Nemkhu’s oceanic world opens up to planetary space. This renewal in proximity to profound otherness is what the aesthetic promises—though, as DeLillo hints in *Underworld*, it may be of short duration, an experience that seems almost fraudulent once it has been named, its disruptive force tamed:

Is the memory thin and bitter and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth—all nuance and wishful silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt? (824)

David Cowart has compared DeLillo to Walter Benjamin with regard to this belief in transcendence—not, however, in the sense that their ‘faith’ would make either man an “old-fashioned believer” (“Power” 164). Rather, Cowart sees similarities in each writer’s attention to language, which, Cowart asserts, is a “spiritualizing discourse” for both DeLillo and Benjamin (164). Indeed, at the end of his *Trauerspiel* study, Benjamin had raised the possibility that language’s self-referential play of signifiers, which led a philosopher like de Man to emphasize the mode of allegory as an expression of irredeemable division, could in fact be redeemed by a dialectical process that is inherent in the *Trauerspiel*’s allegorical poetics. On the one hand, Benjamin concedes, “it is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly” and thereby signify the impossibility of discourse to reach beyond itself (178)—an impossibility that, in Benjamin’s imaginary, coincides with the melancholy of the anguished human creature that cannot overcome its own immanence, the sign of which is the decaying human body. Yet on the other hand, he points out, the

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might still be available.” “Aesthetic experience is thus one again valorized,” he concludes, “but without those tempting aesthetic pleasures that always used to seem its very essence” (*Postmodernism* 255). I wonder, however, whether this deconstructive “refusal of plenitude” (*Postmodernism* 253) is not itself an ideology in need of deconstruction from the standpoint of a renewed humanism I develop here.

baroque writers' 'piling up' of the most concrete images is always undertaken "in the unremitting expectation of a miracle" (178).

For Benjamin, then, the dialectical potency of allegory lies in the overrepresentation of particular suffering as a means of evoking such a 'miracle.' The more allegory dramatizes the gap between the world and the words, he suggests, the more it emphasizes that this gap cannot be the last word on the issue. Once again, Benjamin straddles different philosophical traditions here: by continuing to think the possibility of transcendence, he dismisses the kind of positivistic materialism that, in Jameson's estimation, still informs de Manian deconstruction; but the fact that this transcendence is a function, albeit not a direct one, of the very human discourse it transcends also moves beyond theological conceptions that assert the fundamental impotence of language in matters of metaphysics. This is why Benjamin, a scholar of German romanticism, stresses the reversible character of allegorical poetics in the *Trauerspiel*: as Richard Wolin has noted of Benjamin's romantic belief in the aesthetic, "not scripture alone, but also literary works of art, are legitimate objects of the exegetical quest for the key to redemption" (43).

If it is true, then, as Bissell remarks, that Wallace's religion was "a religion of language," exalting not "only certain words" but "all of them" ("Everything"), this discussion bears upon Wallace's work, too. In fact, Konstantinou has indicated how, for Wallace, such a 'quest for redemption' directly answered to skepticism: "Wallace regards the world as linguistic," he writes, "but nonetheless wants to use language as a way of reconstructing an extralinguistic reality, specifically the reality of the existence of other persons" ("Bull" 107). There is, then, an almost Benjaminian hope in Wallace when he asks, as I have interpreted his work in this study, to what degree we can understand silence as both emptiness *and* plenitude. Indeed, as in Benjamin, such a line of questioning imagines the messianic possibility of a moment of grace that turns absence into presence, allegory into fullness. One might say, perhaps, that the

Benjaminian ‘miracle’ Wallace anticipates is the insight that proximity to language *is* proximity to the other (world/person); that somewhere in the incessant attempts at naming the void of aesthetic and moral experience, it will seem *as if* there was no difference between voice and sign. At any rate, this is the hope I locate behind the novelistic ‘strategy of oversaturation’ I have associated here with the fictions of proximity of the Wallace nexus—a romantic ‘untying of the tongue’ that now becomes understandable, in Benjaminian terms, as an allegorical mode that longs to reverse itself the same way the *Trauerspiel* redeems a world of immanence.

Two takeaways from my discussion put the application of this mode in contemporary literature into perspective. For one, the reservations I presented regarding the ‘melodramatic’ form it takes in Ellis’s *American Psycho* point to the necessity of bringing what Newton calls “‘the claim of the other’ or the ‘claim of narrative relations’” (28) to such a strategy in order for it not to misfire ethically. Furthermore, the relationship between its manifestation in the Wallace nexus and the form it takes in earlier novelists like DeLillo and Pynchon is complex. While I have argued for continuity between the nexus writers and these exemplary postmodernists in their use of such a ‘strategy of oversaturation,’ my distinction between their stances on humanism should also have indicated that each group of writers bends this allegorical mode to different ends: in the Wallace nexus, it aims at a transcendent concept of the human self; in early DeLillo and Pynchon, it arguably serves a project Holland has termed the “wholesale transcendence of the human into the information systems-based posthuman” (8).

This emphasis on posthumanism resonates with a philosopher like Heidegger, who saw something like DeLillo’s ‘homeopathic’ novelistic strategy expressed in the opening line of Hölderlin’s poem *Patmos*, which I quoted in the fourth chapter. Indeed, the late Heidegger regarded Hölderlin’s line as a mandate for poetry in dark times: in Heidegger’s gloss of

*Patmos*, “To ‘dwell poetically’ means: to stand in the presence of the gods and be involved in the proximity of the essence of things” (282). As some of her images suggest, Smith is invested in the same idea of literature as a kind of dwelling. Despite a shared critique of the processes of reification that guide modern technocratic societies, however, there is a difference between the writers around Wallace and a posthumanist like Heidegger, who also seeks to return to a position of proximity. After all, Heideggerian proximity describes a position toward being, ‘the essence of things,’ which, in Heidegger’s later philosophy, is fundamentally cut off from Dasein, the being of beings. The difference, I suggest again, is one regarding the viability of humanism—according to Harris the guiding star of Wallace’s own literary enterprise.

In a sense, then, the concept of proximity I reference here is primarily one of proximity to the other person; after all, as Wallace once summarized the consequences of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* to McCaffrey, “we’re at least all in here together” (22). The impression that this distances us from being, however, can only arise on the basis of Heidegger’s distinction between being and beings. In line with Wallace’s own deconstruction of the difference between expressionism and realism—“if you could articulate well enough what something felt like to somebody, you would have a fantastic template for how the world works” (“Burden” 105)—the writers I read here do not seem to accept this distinction; for them, as Smith puts it in “Fail Better,” “a great novel is the intimation of a metaphysical event you can never know, no matter how long you live, no matter how many people you love: the experience of the world through a consciousness other than your own.” If such a novel as ‘intimation of a metaphysical event’ affords a position of proximity to otherness, then, this is proximity to the being of another person. After all, any apprehension of being is always *someone’s* apprehension; this had been Kant’s reason for introducing the concept of *noumenon*, as a limit case that prevents the totalization of our worldview, in the first place. If

we cannot ‘know’ such otherness, as Smith argues in skeptical fashion, then reading great fiction still allows us to approach the aporia of “allow[ing] into [one’s] own mind a picture of human consciousness so radically different from [one’s] own as to be almost offensive to reason.” This, she claims, is the “deep magic” of fiction: not a vision of difference in full presence, but a realization of metaphysical limitation made possible by the act of intuiting another consciousness, another way of seeing, across the boundaries of self and language.

To be sure, achieving such intuition is the outcome of a great struggle, which corresponds to the perceived difficulty of the fictions of proximity I have discussed in this study. As Holland has noted, the best literature written at the turn of the century is “always conscious” of this struggle, “specifically the struggle through language and representation, necessary to access any version of truth” (201). The kind of truth Holland describes here, listing some of the same philosophical quandaries I have ‘struggled with’ on previous pages, is one that somehow lies *in* this very struggle—“in the indeterminacy, in the dialectic between presence and absence, word and thing, in the tension of the both/and” (201). The struggle with, which can also mean the struggle *beyond*, our transcendental conditions, then, truly matters; in the absence of such a struggle, as I have tried to show of both de Man’s ‘cynical’ reason and Wood’s ‘liberalism,’ all that may be left is, in Holland’s words, “power” and “bias” (201).

I believe that this struggle, which Holland identifies with a “new humanism” (3), a “humanism plus humility” she finds in recent works by Edward Said and Kwame Anthony Appiah (5), implies the specific kind of *desire* for proximity I have traced in the works of the Wallace nexus; what is more, I would argue that this desire is in fact the source of the new kind of humanism she mentions.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the humanism lies *in* this desire, in the

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<sup>3</sup> I find Holland’s proposal that we respond to the “striking continuity” between modernism and postmodernism in terms of seeing how both contribute “to the larger Enlightenment project that Habermas called ‘modernity’” (200-201) very compelling. Where I differ from her account is in the assessment of some of the late twentieth-century novels I discuss here. For example, Holland takes *Infinite Jest* to be merely diagnostic, an argument she

seeking itself. The writers I have read in this study often address this as a longing for metaphysics. In the preceding pages, I have tried to show how this plays out in their essays and, above all, in the “deep magic” of their fiction, to quote once more Smith’s phrase, which sounds quite similar to the “magic” the philosopher Iris Murdoch has ascribed to metaphysics as “the putting-into-safety of something pure” (50).

In this light, the contemporary fiction of writers like Smith and Wallace may be regarded as a metaphysical project; it ‘puts into safety’ the alterity of the other person by letting a story cast a profound shadow beyond its visible surface the same way the poet Bruce Bond has described a kind of metaphysical poetry that takes away again what it has given, without taking it *all* away: “Poems are metaphysical insofar as their voices reach into dark recesses that, mercifully, will not relinquish their darkness” (4). In “Church,” Wallace found memorable images for this dynamic, indicating his aspirations not only for this one story but for his entire oeuvre, in which, as Bissel writes, he had made “an almost metaphysical commitment to see reality through [his character’s] eyes.” Thus, again and again, “Chuch” describes the interplay of light and dark, sun and shadow, as resulting in the “glow” of an “aura” around the visible, evoking what is unseen, in the shadows.

These descriptions culminate in Day’s memory of an art lecture by the Jesuit priest. Day remembers sitting in the lecture hall, imagining the college campus and its “De Chirico belltower from which [daylight] has scoured all shadow” (203). In one of her cryptic remarks on the story, Smith reads Wallace’s expressionistic imagery here as an explicit commentary on metaphysics: “Giorgio de Chirico painted what he called ‘metaphysical town squares,’” she explains, “They are full of exquisite renderings of shadow” (296). Such ‘exquisite

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makes by contrasting Wallace’s long novel with the “poststructural realism” of a writer such as Foer, who returns “us to presence and the real” (7). But I hope to have demonstrated that the very affect produced by a 1990s novel like *Infinite Jest* already creates the kind of meaningful relationship between author and reader Holland insists is only inaugurated by later twenty-first-century novels like Foer’s *EL&IC*. In fact, Serpell’s reading of this novel as “literally manipulative,” which I mentioned in the second chapter, shows that *EL&IC* actually illustrates at least one danger “new humanist” meaning-making faces: namely, that it forgets its poststructuralist inheritance in a way *Infinite Jest*, with its author’s expressly stated relief at giving the work away to the reader, arguably does not.

renderings of shadow' depend on a style of painting which foregrounds all that is, as the Jesuit mumbles in his lecture, "lit and rendered razor-clear" (204). As in De Chirico, this sharp focus implies a background of shadow; and while the 'town square' of Day's campus is sun-swept, the shadows have migrated into the lecture hall, where the priest emerges in contours only, standing at the podium, in front of a projector screen: "it's the angle of the bright breeze against the screen," Day observes, "that makes the wet face atop the priest's lit shadow glow" (204). The aura of this "lit shadow" is a premonition of the other person's alterity, remote and seductive like the outline of a distant mountain in the sun, glowing with the promise of things unseen, people unknown.

While such an auratic vision will probably forever frustrate any desire for full presence, it also has the capacity to inspire sublime wonder when we realize that all that is 'lit and rendered razor-clear' may not be enough. This is arguably the modest claim of Wallace's "Church Not Made With Hands." It concludes with a section in which Day reads to the hospitalized Esther from a children's book that shows giants who walk the earth, tall as clouds. This giant imagery inspires in him a child-like vision of the sky as the eye of a "prone giant" keeping vigil (210), a metaphysic that, for Day, may reinstate a sense of wholeness, offering him the atonement he has sought. And Wallace's concluding poem may offer us the same, provided we can—in an earnestly ironic, ironically earnest manner that is informed by a profound sense of our metaphysical limitations—follow its seductive call into a proximity to the 'deep nonsense' of a 'radically different' sense of reality:

The sky is an eye.  
The dusk and the dawn are the blood that feeds the eye.  
The night is the eye's drawn lid.  
Each day the lid again comes open, disclosing blood, and the  
blue iris of a prone giant. (210)

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