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Choosing What We Worship: The Subtle Conservatism of David Foster  
Wallace

STEVEN SCHNEIBLE  
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Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Kevin Bell, Associate Professor of English  
Thesis Supervisor

Christopher Reed, Distinguished Professor of English, Visual Culture,  
Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Art History  
Honors Adviser

\*Electronic approvals are on file

## ABSTRACT

This paper endeavors to explore David Foster Wallace's body of work as it relates to American conservatism and American modes of thought. In investigating the relationship between American self-conception, the American individual, the American mind, and the struggles of mental illness in David Foster Wallace's fiction, with supporting elements from his nonfiction work, an argument develops that his diagnosis of the American condition — in terms of both its shortcomings and the proffered solutions to those shortcomings — stems from an ethos of a kind of traditional American conservatism.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*Well, it may be the Devil, and it may be the Lord / But you're gonna have to serve somebody*

*-Bob Dylan<sup>1</sup>*

The legacy of David Foster Wallace — in the usually college-educated circles in which the name is known as a big one indeed — inevitably centers his largest-by-far project, *Infinite Jest*, as an object of pop-intellectual consternation; its detractors span Harold Bloom to Dana Schwartz, the literary behemoth claiming the book demonstrates that Wallace, “can’t think, can’t write,”<sup>2</sup> and the author-cum-twitter-celebrity mocking the tome as an artifact of conspicuously male literary consumption in her parody account project, @GuyInYourMFA, and in her comic graphic essay-book, *The White Man’s Guide to White Male Writers of the Western Canon*, whose jacket invites the reader to read it “so instead of politely nodding along next time you make an acquaintance at a housewarming party in Brooklyn, you can roll up your sleeves and get to work schooling them in character arcs and the experimental form of your next great American novel.”<sup>3</sup>

In the contemporary era of Trumpian politics — what *Commonweal* magazine editor Matthew Sitman describes as an era of the “illiberal Right”<sup>4</sup> — and largely ephemeral cultural battles fought bitterly over lines of identitarian critiques, one can understand Schwartz’s wry dig, even if it does operate only at the comparatively superficial level of culture and appearances. Wallace is, after all, just another dead white male. As such, his lived experience reflects a

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Dylan, “Gotta Serve Somebody,” Bob Dylan, Accessed August 24, 2020, <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/gotta-serve-somebody/>

<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom via Lorna Koski, “The Full Harold Bloom,” *Women’s Wear Daily Magazine*, April 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Dana Schwartz, *The White Man’s Guide to White Male Writers of the Western Canon*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Matt Sitman, *On the Media*, by Brooke Gladstone and Bob Garfield, WNYC Studios, December 2019.

necessarily blinkered approach to what life is and ought to be, in the eyes of such detraction. Wallace's characters are, in fact, overwhelmingly white, and when they're not high-caliber exemplars of WASPish erudition, his effort to make known the gulf between his academic muscled and their more everyman foils stands out on the page (note his regrettable African American Vernacular English chapter from the perspective of a young Black girl early on in *Infinite Jest*, which features phrases like "Wardine be cry")<sup>5</sup>. Wallace's characters span a diverse range in some instances, most especially in *Infinite Jest*, from the struggles of homeless, drug-addicted trans youth to the simple material hardships that American poverty wreaks on Black characters. But Wallace can't ever really escape a fact about his style, one which does somewhat obviate the surface-level "diversity" his work includes with its ranging casts of characters from different backgrounds: Wallace's true notes of resonance really hit home with the people who are like him, namely, overeducated, in-their-head, clever-to-a-fault white people with little material concern. Wallace characters, with varying degrees of egregiousness, all tend to speak and think in Wallace-inflected language and thought; his work is saturated with high-brow/low-brow language combinations that feel distinctly, well, pretentious. Though obviously the word "normal" is a fraught one, we can pretty safely agree that most normal people do not say things like "I have zero intent of forthrightly answering any stained-family-linen-type questions from anybody, much less somebody who takes shorthand,"<sup>6</sup> to mean that they don't want to speak about personal matters to a journalist. That is Wallace's ethos in terms of the lived experience. In this sense, Schwartz is right: Wallace does reflect a

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<sup>5</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996), 37

<sup>6</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 247

privileged, white, and very male background, which he likes to show off with his overtly erudite style. His persona lives in the language he uses to shape his worlds.

The final computation hardly needs to be spoken. Necessarily, from the perspective of his identity and the lived experiences that inform his work, Wallace is a literary conservative — perhaps not as a salt-the-earth culture warrior conservative who detests liberals and tunes into Fox News, but rather as one whose undertones conserve an older version of American self-conception. His perspective reifies a white, Ivy-influenced culture of neurotic male fretting over how to self-actualize; such a perspective *conserves* an ethos of literature, a cultural instantiation in the canon that prioritizes an identitarian status quo. Though Wallace does engage in postmodernist deconstruction of ideas about America, and what it looks like, he does so with his own privileged perspective. QED.

That may be so. And it may not. True, Wallace reflects a white American ethos; we can't escape that, nor should we try to. However, the writer who both excoriated George W. Bush to the point of having joined the cries of those who declared plans to move to Canada should he win 2008 re-election *and* who voted for the arch-reactionary Ronald Reagan<sup>7</sup> raises more complex questions regarding the political implications of his writing. In the 1990s, one essay of his, “*E Unibus Pluram*,” makes repeated citations of *The New Left Review*.<sup>8</sup> And before the decade was out, another essay Wallace published defended the AIDS crisis as rejuvenating a lost moral element of human sexuality and did so in the language of dragons, conquering, and chivalry, no less — a very old-school kind of conservatism indeed, reaching back so far as to a mythical era. Given the (at-best) writer's ambivalent personal politics, one can't help but feel an invitation to

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<sup>7</sup> D.T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, (New York: Penguin, 2012), pn

<sup>8</sup> David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1997), pn

think about Wallace's work in an explicitly political context, especially the American context of which he felt so a part.

Let's return to the praised and maligned 1079-page project for which Wallace is best known, in which people struggle to be (generally) and struggle to be American (specifically). The novel tells the stories of academic whizzes, sports prodigies, and urban drug addicts, and not one of them would strike even the most cursory reader as a contented or untroubled person. But within those struggles of both the banal and the profound — though colored through with Wallace's signature style of heavily intellectualized showing off, which has garnered him those aforementioned detractors — the same distinct focus repeats: the individual. The locus of Wallace's emphases in *Infinite Jest* on the singular human being speaks to something larger in his body of work, a subtle but pervasive focus on the individual's struggle with Americana and the broader American context: addiction and consumption, an American need to be free and a person's need to give in, and the contradictions of how American materialism and work ethic attempt to intertwine. Wallace's Americans often do not know how to *be* because they are caught in the morass of their nation's tangled prescriptions. It was a question often heightened to postmodern literary excesses of absurdity, and the question echoes in Wallace's work: how does the individual deal with itself? How does one make sense of one's singular self in the state of being that is America? In the hyper-real, unresolved, messy tangle of a nation that *Infinite Jest* presents, that very postmodern absurdity generates a complexity that both invites and defies engagement, creating a new question for every answer proffered — even as the postmodern backdrop colors the world of individual characters who are almost modernist in their



individualism. America, Wallace's work suggests, doesn't understand itself coherently, and that incoherence becomes a problem for the American individual to deal with.

It is that driving force of individuality that has brought me to examine the potential political implications of Wallace's work in the light of a subtle, thoroughgoing conservatism in the man's writings. Our analysis must not aim toward any execution of, as Wallace would put it, an act of "literary parricide".<sup>9</sup> Rather, we seek to examine how individuality, consumption, national identity, and deontological prescriptions in Wallace's fiction and nonfiction cohere into a political expression of a distinctly American conservatism — one that understands itself as maintaining the American concept of individuality even against the contradictions inherent to the political economy upon which such a concept is based. We will not speak of conservatism merely as a cultural affect of reactionary tendencies; rather, we will seek to understand it as an ideological commitment to the individual within the context of America, one whose spiritual and political outlets are necessarily tied to a pulling up of one's bootstraps to achieve perfection as an actualized, singular node within the socio-political context. This paper shall identify the conservative apologia that underscores elements of Wallace's writing in both his fiction and non-fiction. *Infinite Jest*, "Good Old Neon," "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," and "This Is Water" shall figure in our analysis.

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<sup>9</sup> D.T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, 145

## Chapter Two: Defining Conservatism

For the purposes of this paper, we will be using a distinctly American definition of how we might consider a conservative ethos. The point is not to showily out Wallace as right-wing (and, by extension of how literary critics tend to see the world, denounce him in doing so), but rather to pin down what a subtle literary conservatism can look like in the fiction of a writer who so self-consciously identified with the American project and the 20th-century American project at that.

The definition of any broad construct like “conservative” or “liberal” is almost inevitably imperfect and fraught; we will have to make some assumptions and concessions with which the more political-science-minded might take some umbrage. Nevertheless, we will make use of a more generous definition of conservatism that recognizes its own intellectual tradition within the 20th-century United States, rather than a strict prescriptivist definition from a certain camp. Arguably, such a conception could be categorized as a version of a classical liberalism — one that, irrespective of its commitments to the political economy or hierarchies of social values, depends upon a government with a monopoly on violence, elected representatives, a jurisprudential tradition, etc.

The conservatism that will factor in our analysis, in these respects, contains a procedural liberalism; the political project of 20th-century American conservatives seeks to literally conserve a certain tradition within an established framework — namely, that of the hard-working individual who maintains a sense of responsible, self-regulating individuality; a sense of national citizenship with all attendant American drives to consume while supporting one’s country; and a sense of communal citizenship of local citizenship. This tradition of the citizen consumer who

works hard and cares for American with a sense of self-sacrifice does indeed rhyme with might be termed “neoliberalism” in a contemporary moment. But in reading Wallace for strains of his own conservative tendencies, we have to remember that they hark back to a smaller America, not the large global capitalist America of neoliberalism. For Wallace, tradition has a role to play.

Illiberal conservatism, in the context of the contemporary reactionaries who seek extrajudicial solutions to political problems (those who advocate for militia violence against the government and political enemies, for the cessation of habeus corpus, for overt authoritarian measures to suppress elections, etc.), remains distinct from the “liberal” conservatism we’ll speak of. Though one can compellingly argue that illiberal conservatism necessarily follows from liberal conservatism, such in-depth political analyses will not factor in this paper; if we were to buy into the Marxist assertion that any form of liberalism, be it liberal or conservative, leads to fascism, then that would erase the nuance we seek to preserve in articulating Wallace’s American conservative ideals.

Perhaps no better individual exemplar of what Americans would consider a conservative consensus exists than Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, who embodied a more contemporary idea of how conservatism perceives itself. His reluctant 1964 presidential campaign, though it ended with a humiliating shellacking against incumbent Lyndon Johnson, embodied a distinctly conservative ethos that had spread to many Americans in the years preceding his drafting for the presidential bid by activist right-wing of the Republican Party.<sup>10</sup> Goldwater’s *Conscience of a Conservative* can be used as a rule of thumb to capture a functional definition of conservatism — with the understanding that this definition is in the context of U.S. conservatism with electoral

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<sup>10</sup> Perlstein, Rick, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, (New York: Nation Books, 2009).

goals — that ought not upset too many an academic applecart. Though the goal is not to make Wallace out to be a Goldwaterite, the senator’s framework nevertheless grounds us to some key elements of conservatism that can be used as a point of reference in identifying conservative strains in Wallace’s writing.

Let us examine what Goldwater has to say about the conservative ethos in his introduction (as the introduction captures Goldwater’s ethos of conservatism, rather than devoting whole pages to perorations against taxes). The flag that he hoists in the introduction immediately appeals not to reactionary tendencies but rather to an *additive* and oddly spiritual proclamation.

Conservatism is *not* an economic theory, though it has economic implications. The shoe is precisely on the other foot: it is Socialism that subordinates all other considerations to a man’s material well-being. It is Conservatism that puts material things in their proper place — that has a structured view of the human being and of human society, in which economics plays only a subsidiary role.<sup>11</sup>

In this sense, Goldwater’s conservatism rejects the materialism at the heart of how conservatism might otherwise be viewed — as an ideological rampart that justifies capitalism and greed. Instead, the philosophy of what it means to be an American conservative is concerned primarily with the goal of anchoring absolute individuality and individual responsibility as a means of self-actualization: “the conscience of the Conservative is pricked by *anyone* who would debase the dignity of the individual human being.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, (New York: McFadden-Bartell, 1960), 11, emphases original

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 13

An external means of ameliorating one's problems fundamentally violates a conservative ethos. Those problems may be economic or spiritual. The problems may also be complicity in submitting oneself to consumption, entertainment, and one's own libidinal drive for pleasure. For both Wallace and Goldwater in terms of conservatism, these problems nevertheless remain the domain of the individual, lest they be subject to an external force that would deface them and take away their freedom. The human being must fully realize themselves as just that: a human being with flaws to overcome and a duty to overcome them on one's own, lest they subject themselves to the tyranny of external subjugation. The government of liberalism, or even the moral consumerist rot of liberalism, poses a threat to this kind of conservative.

Goldwater-ian conservatism's most crucial question is of preserving freedom: "the Conservative's first concern will always be: *Are we maximizing freedom?*"<sup>13</sup> But that conservatism also concerns itself with the moral justification of the individual relative to a social order. Because though Goldwater ostensibly maintains individuality as central to his notion of conservatism (and that is indeed a strain of thought that leads to certain subsets of the conservative umbrella that could be more accurately described as libertarian), he defends individuality-based conservatism as having a morally impelled core:

Conservatism, we are told, is out-of-date. The charge is preposterous and we ought boldly to say so. The laws of God, and of nature, have no dateline... These principles are derived from the nature of man, and from the truths that God has revealed about His creation... The Conservative approach is nothing more or less than an attempt to apply the wisdom and experience and revealed truths of the past to the problems of today. The

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 2

challenge is not to find new or different truths, but to learn how to apply established truths to the problems of the contemporary world.<sup>14</sup>

So not only does conservatism place an individual at the center — that individual *shares* the center of reality. Instead of sharing it with a liberal or socialized collective, the conservative occupies the nexus of reality as an agent unto themselves whose agency is *granted* by a history of derivation from God and God’s morality — in other words, the agency of the individual is accounted for as having come from a higher power morally superior to the self alone. This sharing accounts for cultural conservatism as an ethos instead of mere libertarian conservatism, which eschews culture and moral questions. For our understanding of conservatism, individuals must understand themselves as absolute agents within a morally ordained context of higher principles toward which the individual must strive in order to self-actualize.

When we look at Wallace’s writings as they relate to conservatism, we must entertain the following questions: who is responsible for the problems of the characters? How does Wallace offer solutions to the problems of the characters? How do the characters conceive of themselves, and is the conception adaptive? And American cultural values are held above other American values when Wallace makes value judgments about our culture and social order as Americans? Ultimately, Wallace’s conservatism constitutes a rejection of base pleasures, consumptions, and wholly selfish worldviews. “The Spider”<sup>15</sup> is the term used for the *Infinite Jest* conceptualization of an addict’s addiction, a term appropriately reflective of the world that Wallace is building: one in which consumerism and capitalist materiality prey upon an individual. An *Infinite Jest* character reformed from addiction recalls a nightmare in which a yellow smiley-face invites him

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>15</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 321

to imbibe once again, to give into addiction and consumerism: to “have a nice day.”<sup>16</sup> The Goldwaterite conception of what it means to be a conservative is a fundamental belief in the individual’s responsibility to and capacity to self-actualize as an isolated agent who, paradoxically, subsumes their desires and egos into a moral higher power greater than themselves as a means of that isolated self-regulation. This worldview advocates for wholly individual agents whose relationship to other individuals manifests in the shared conservative moral system of deontological commitments to fair treatment, hard work, self-improvement, and self-regulation. Don Gately, reformed addict and thief, runs the halfway house with compassion and stricture — and after suffering a gunshot wound, Don feels a strong temptation, entirely on his own, to give in to the opiate painkillers he’s forsworn in his sobriety. He is both citizen of a community, prescriber of and subscriber to a deontological sense of order, and entirely on his own in his struggle. He is Wallace’s American individual, and as such, he is a conservative figure.<sup>17</sup>

Ironically enough, this kind of what we might call small-c conservatism (even if it is a kind of distinctly American small-c conservatism) fuels one of the hallmarks of Wallace’s work: the almost inherently therapeutic nature of his writing. The process of reading through certain works but particularly *Infinite Jest* necessarily incorporates an individualist experientiality of the contexts he sets up; Wallace as the small-c and rather American conservative seeks to uphold and reclaim the individual as a protagonist who might find salvation amid their mired state in the American hyper-real. The work that Wallace undertakes in detailing the neuroses and failings of the individual American depend upon his critique of America, a critique born of contextualized

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 437

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 789

hyper-reality, one in which individuals' thinking feels conditioned by (almost hypnotized) by the incessant American call to consume, to give in to pleasure; the hyper-reality is political and personal because that call suffuses a world built on the consumerist principle that jars with the principles of personal responsibility. Furthermore, he knows that his readers experience that hyper-reality, readers who slog their way through the daily assault of media and advertising and the penumbra of the pleasure principle. *Infinite Jest* re-creates that reality and heightens the reader's experience of it via its farcical excesses — induced American experience via a maximalism that captures the nature of sensory bombardment.

The therapeutic aspect of Wallace's work comes alongside his small-c conservative worldview, in which the individual must sublimate themselves within the hyper-real world in which they find themselves. We must look at how *Infinite Jest* seeks to induce and then attempt to solve the psycho-spiritual turpitude with which Wallace's characters struggle. Wallace portrays the mental illness, primarily addiction, but also depression and anxiety, comorbid to our setting and the way that we conceive of ourselves. As we'll see, he does not *blame*, as other styles of American conservatives might, the individual for the sin of addiction or mental illness. But neither does he suggest that we are mere products of our experience. Wallace's conservatism that still centers the individual allows for him to construct a paradigm within *Infinite Jest* that takes the reader as an individual through the experience of mental health crises and then demonstrates the way out as posited by David Foster Wallace. His treatment of American suffering replicates the functions of cognitive-behavioral therapy (abbreviated in this document as "CBT") by centering the American individual and the American individual's mind as the locus of experience and change. Such an approach allows Wallace to circumvent more callously



up-by-thy-bootstraps conservatism while maintaining the individualistic nature of the small-c conservative worldview that does in fact allow for individual people to help themselves.

### Chapter Three: Wallace and the American mind

*This is America, you live in it, you let it happen.*<sup>18</sup> -Thomas Pynchon

In order to tie Wallace's conception of the American with a conservative conception of identity and spiritual conflict, we must first get a very firm hold on how exactly Wallace gets inside of and diagnoses the state of what we will call the American mind, a concept that he takes especial care to outline in *Infinite Jest*. The American mind poses, for Wallace, a problem. Let us explore how Wallace sees Americans and how we think. Wallace's characters suffer greatly from their own minds and how they function in the American context, an apparently irresolvable conflict between the urge to consume and the loneliness inherent to superordinating the process of consumption (in typically American fashion) to all else in life; once we understand his complex culture-to-self relational structure, which takes into account the oppression of living in America as an inescapably individualized-yet-unfree subject, we can see how his brand of conservatism emerges as a solution to the fundamental problem of The American mind. Wallace's characters consume, via spectacle, a televisual reality laden with contradictions that the characters cannot help but feel, even as they attempt to make sense of their constructed realities in their own heads.

The idea of Americana or an abstract Americanness — how this nation of people conceives of itself, identifies within itself characteristics and values — is not reducible to any one coherent thing, as evidenced by the existence of scholars whose entire project is the understanding of American culture. Americans vote. Americans love freedom. Americans are responsible for themselves. Americans consume. Americans work hard. Americans have fun.

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1965), 123

The country has an innate level of contradiction that we are called to re-order in our own heads. Granted, the question of what America exactly is vexes many, but we can say definitively that whatever uneasy and semi-articulate consensus the American populace may have regarding a conceptual Americana derives from the popular media representations of Americans and American institutions that the American citizenry consumes — the primary mode of which, for decades, has been televisual. Televisual messaging has been the mode through which those “Americans are,” “Americans do” statements have flowed. The age of television now having passed into the age of constant, methamphetaminic media consumption thanks to the internet’s literal totalitarianism, Wallace’s discussion of television and fiction in “*E Unibus Pluram*” can be understood both as a teeing up of himself for *Infinite Jest* (see, for instance, how the reference to “Special Treats (e.g., candy, liquor), i.e., treats that are basically fine and fun in small amounts but... *really* bad for us if consumed in the massive regular amounts reserved for nutritive staples”<sup>19</sup> and the unabbreviated mention of “Depend Adult Undergarments”<sup>20</sup> connect directly to Rémy Marathe’s analogy of the “rich father who can afford the cost of candy as well as food for his children [but he] cries out “Freedom!” and allows his child to choose only what is sweet”<sup>21</sup> and the first mention of the “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment”,<sup>22</sup> respectively) and as a critical artifact of Wallace’s distinct American cultural moment in which he defined himself.

One of the principal theses of “*E Unibus Pluram*” — the assertion that “televisual culture has somehow evolved to a point where it seems invulnerable to any such transfiguring assault

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<sup>19</sup> Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1997), 37, emphasis original

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 27

<sup>21</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996), 320, double quotation marks *sic*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 17

[by “a certain subgenre of pop-conscious postmodern fiction”]”<sup>23</sup> — demonstrates Wallace’s keen awareness of televisual media’s effects on the American psyche, even to the extent of that psyche’s literary expression. For critic James Wood, the problem of writing fiction is a three-tiered puzzle of linguistic balance:

There is the author’s own language, style, perceptual equipment, and so on; there is the character’s presumed language, style, perceptual equipment, and so on; and there is... the language of the world — the language which fiction inherits before it gets to turn it into novelistic style, the language of daily speech, of newspapers, of offices, of advertising, of the blogosphere and text messaging.<sup>24</sup>

And for Wallace, the true snare of televisually informed and self-aware/-deprecating irony lay in its ability to subsume and dominate the meaning of its own text. To put it as Woods might, this pop-cultural totality of the American zeitgeist perpetuated by TV (without which, for Wallace, the then-young fiction writer “cannot imagine life”<sup>25</sup>), when deployed in literature, uses the mass-appeal techniques of postwar, late-capitalist media language to engage the reader, but in its doing so allows the third gear of novelistic language — of “daily speech, of newspapers,”<sup>26</sup> etc. — to overtake and wash away the languages of characters and the author. How does one “recreate life out of life”<sup>27</sup> when that lived experience is reduced to naught more than a collectively recognized series of referents, unified not through interpersonal relation but shared hyper-individualistic relation to the material world? Language becomes its signifiers, which is to

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<sup>23</sup> Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 49-50

<sup>24</sup> James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Random House, 2008), 28-29

<sup>25</sup> Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 43

<sup>26</sup> Wood, *How Fiction Works*, 29

<sup>27</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Random House, 1964), 159

say nothing, if the referents are brands and products and patterns of consumption and waste — referents about which nothing more is felt than a guiltily self-aware but ultimately indulgent, selfish attachment. An attachment which is *felt* experientially, as part of the American experience of televisual onslaught, but one which is not felt as holding intrinsic, self-actualizing meaning.

Wood and Wallace seem to be in accord with respect to the issue of the novelist's world overtaking the characters and novelist by the sheer relational and thus reductive force of media-saturated language. But rather than circumvent the fraught nature of fictionally navigating a concept of America so informed by its own self-aware media and consumer products, Wallace tacks straight into the storm by inventing hyperbolized extensions of the hyper-real America he wants to critique but does not want to emulate. Emulation would risk the central problem Wallace articulates in "*E Unibus Pluram*," the problem of a solipsistic breakdown and negation of barriers between self and experienced American world. Wood criticizes Wallace for this with the most backhanded of literary compliments: "the novelist's job is to become, to impersonate what he describes, even when the subject is debased, vulgar, and boring. "David Foster Wallace is very good at becoming the whole of boredom,"<sup>28</sup> but Wallace's evocation of debasement and vulgarity comes, paradoxically, in the form of a kind of fun.

*Infinite Jest*'s American mind does not live in our America or even Wallace's contemporary America: it occupies a novelistic space created by an additive rather than reductive critique of the culture. Wallace's satirical framework balloons outward into a fictional structure and superstructure that, though absurd, derive their guiding principles from the underlying, less advertised (but still popularly experienced) consequences of American individualism. Time is

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<sup>28</sup> Wood, *How Fiction Works*, 28

subsidized by corporations. Entertainment is so pleasurable it kills (in the case of the in-book and eponymous film, *Infinite Jest*). Sponsorships abound, fictional brands like InterLace have what a 2019 critic might call Amazon-esque market dominance, and drug abuse — the ultimate self-indulgence and fulfillment of a consumerist pleasure drive — becomes a psychic cross on which many characters hang. And all of this takes place within Wallace’s only slightly futuristic setting of the geopolitically fictional Organization of North American Nations, not-so-subtly referred to as O.N.A.N. (as in the biblical Onan of dubious, seed-spilling fame) throughout the book. Lurid exaggerations that adhere to logical principles — e.g., the dawn of subsidized time arising out of nothing more than the banality of market pressures and the slowing of capital — allow Wallace to vivisect the American experience without falling into the “*E Unibus Pluram*” trap of a loss of distinction between criticism of the nature of entertainment and entertainment as such (i.e., the “Special Treat” of biting humor does not become its own end but rather a means to an additive end with theses instead of nihilistic shoulder-shrugging). Contained within the farcical framework, the recreations of internal angst, mental illness, and turmoil persist not as addenda to the farce but rather as their grounding human elements.

The American exaggeratedness is great fun, However, Wallace differentiates himself from one of his most influential predecessors, Thomas Pynchon,<sup>29</sup> by expanding his scope beyond the meaningless noise produced by the American project. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas’ world devolves into an utter chaos of subjectivity, a Nabokovian “referential mania”<sup>30</sup> in which she cannot determine whether the narrative in which she finds herself — for

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<sup>29</sup> “Pynchon saturates the book’s [*The Broom of the System*, Wallace’s first novel] DNA.” Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 48

<sup>30</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, “Symbols and Signs,” *The New Yorker* (May 7, 1948)

Oedipa, the novel's narrative is functionally indistinguishable from its world, heightening the sense of instability — is a conspiracy or practical joke or even a hallucination. *Lot 49* reads rather like a black comedy, a joke world whose jokes are cruel and to which there's no apparent answer. *Lot 49* Pynchon is fun in that his absurdity makes points without positing solutions, and readers can laugh at the mess of Oedipa's world. Wallace's worlds, particularly that of *Infinite Jest*, borrow from the postmodern surfeit of utter noise, but Wallace drives his characters not further out into the ambiguity of their worlds but rather into themselves in order to achieve a "chaotic stasis"<sup>31</sup> of the individual as they relate to their own personal psyche.

This stasis of self-conception as defined by a negation of relation to the chaotic noise of the external world constitutes Wallace's American mind in its fundamental moment. One of the first buildups to a chaotic stasis point takes place in the introductory vignette of Ken Erdedy, in which the book becomes the whole of the language of Erdedy within the first sentence: "Where was the woman who said she'd come."<sup>32</sup> The Mind of the book merges with Erdedy's almost completely, providing narratively necessary expository information not with novelistic deployment of past perfect clarification from a semi-omniscient third-person narrator but instead as the information is experienced by the character, in a memory coded with the same anxiety-fractured freneticism of his own mind:

She had promised to get him a fifth of a kilogram of marijuana, 200 grams of unusually good marijuana, for \$1250 U.S. He had tried to stop smoking marijuana maybe 70 or 80 times before. Before this woman knew him. She did not know he had tried to stop. He

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<sup>31</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 996 via Greg Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group, 2007), 35

<sup>32</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 17

always lasted a week, or two weeks, or maybe two days, and then he'd think and decide to have some in his home one more last time. One last final time he'd search out someone new, someone he hadn't already told that he had to stop smoking dope and please under no circumstances should they procure him any dope. It had to be a third party, because he'd told every dealer he knew to cut him off. And the third party had to be someone all-new, because each time he got some he knew this time had to be the last time, and so told them, asked them, as a favor, never to get him any more, ever. And he never asked a person again once he'd told them this, because he was proud, and also kind, and wouldn't put anyone in that kind of contradictory position. Also he considered himself creepy when it came to dope, and he was afraid that others would see that he was creepy about it as well.<sup>33</sup>

We know this to be Erdedy's thinking and not a narrator's due to the stylistic indicators of frenetically articulated style with the added stress fracturing of the anxious moment, hence sentence fragments ("Before the woman knew him,"<sup>34</sup>), casualized redundancy ("One last final time"<sup>35</sup>), progression from certainty to equivocal self-contradiction ("He always lasted a week, or two weeks, or maybe two days,"<sup>36</sup>), and repetition of sentences beginning with words meant to elaborate upon or clarify previous statements as though the new information's integration into the text had not been considered, a textual mimesis of continuous thought ("And the third party had to be someone all-new... And he never asked... Also he considered himself creepy,"<sup>37</sup>). The

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<sup>33</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 18

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*



text is self-consciously not lucid, forcing upon the reader an experience of ragged thinking designed to evoke an Americanized — with attention to the minutiae of American colloquial patterns (“He’d say *ass* instead of *butt*,”<sup>38</sup>), American focus on class-, profession-, and consumer-related details (“Her family was well-off, she’d said to explain how her condominium was as nice as it was when she worked designing sets for a Cambridge theater company that seemed to do only German plays, dark smeary sets,”<sup>39</sup>) — context of anxious, addiction-driven thinking. The ungrammatical adherence to anxious self-dialogue’s comma-splice-simulated speed and sentence-fragment-and-run-on-sentence-produced instability brings the reader completely into the perspective of Erdedy; the reader cannot find a stable lexical purchase on the text as it progresses toward the empty singularity of the chaotically static moment of Wallace’s American mind: in this case, Erdedy’s Bottom.

Someone’s “Bottom,” in the parlance of Wallace’s semi-fictionalized Boston Alcoholics Anonymous, is “the kind of a hell of a mess that either ends lives or turns them around... The term [Bottom] is misleading, because everyone here [in AA] agrees that it’s more like some place very high and unsupported: you’re on the edge of something tall and leaning out way forward....”<sup>40</sup> The Bottom forms a life-and-death nexus of sudden and stark recognition of one’s own powerlessness over oneself with respect to cognition, perception, and consumption, to the point of the solipsistic obliteration of control and agency. The Bottom is a natural internal terminus brought on by external processes of consumption and waste, processes that for Wallace constitute both the macro- and microscopic American self-contextualizations in relation to the

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<sup>38</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 23

<sup>39</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 19

<sup>40</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 347, quadruple-period ellipsis *sic*

world. With respect to the macroscopic O.N.A.N.ite United States, this is the chaotic stasis of the fictional annular fusion, which (dramatically oversimplifying here) derives energy from toxifying toxic waste to the point of absolute efficiency, negated toxicity, and energy production<sup>41</sup> at the expense of an “experialist” gift of a toxified, consumer-waste-laden, and ruined New England to Canada at Canada’s and especially Québec’s significant expense. And for Hal Incandenza, one of two main protagonists of the book, this individual consumption-waste cycle materializes as a lurid vision of a lifetime’s eating and defecating. It is “the image of a broad cool well-lit room piled floor to ceiling with nothing but the lightly breaded chicken fillets I was going to consume over the next sixty years”<sup>42</sup> and “another, dimmer room, filled with the rising mass of the excrement I'd produce, the room's double-locked steel door gradually bowing outward with the mounting pressure.”<sup>43</sup>

As Erdedy’s mind comes closer and closer to the point of a true Wallace-defined Bottom, the tension and stakes increase as we learn more of how Erdedy’s powerlessness to his marijuana habit has trapped him within himself; he cannot call the woman about whom he is anxious, lest he either A) seem anxious and out-of-control, thus violating the pseudo-control his anxious brain has constructed regarding this purported final binge or B) tie up the line of the phone by dialing, potentially blocking an incoming call from said woman. The room, save an insect moving along a girder on a shelf unit, is completely still, and yet the moments pass with the tension of palpable drama thanks to the internal dialogue of Erdedy. Nothing happens except the mundane passage of time, but the American mind maps onto the utter emptiness of its locale a complex series of

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<sup>41</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 402, 572

<sup>42</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 897

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*

interconnecting potentials, artifices that technically exist only within the Mind's perceived reality (to the frustration of the Mind, frustration evidenced by such self-lambastings as "he began to grow disgusted with himself for waiting so anxiously for the promised arrival of something that had stopped being fun anyway"<sup>44</sup>). These complex potentials and neuroses fill the void of external space with a drama begotten, yes, by a rugged American individual; however, the total freedom of supposed choice to consume — both goods and narratives, each being in this case marijuana and the view of oneself as in control of the drug habit, respectively — renders the chooser totally immobile, almost catatonic, and certainly helpless. The internal world finally recedes into itself while it recognizes the helplessness endemic to its own artificiality: "He thought very broadly of desires and ideas being watched but not acted upon, he thought of impulses being starved of expression and drying out and floating dryly away, and felt on some level that this had something to do with him and his circumstances."<sup>45</sup> In a classically ironic twist of fate, both the buzzer of the apartment and the phone ring at the exact same moment, and Erdedy "moved first toward the telephone console, then over toward his intercom module, then convulsively back toward the sounding phone, and then tried somehow to move toward both at once, finally, so that he stood splay-legged, arms wildly out as if something's been flung, splayed, entombed between the two sounds, without a thought in his head."<sup>46</sup>

The narrator of the Erdedy section becomes — at this, its very end — once again the world, backing out of Erdedy's solipsistic head. He has reached the chaotic stasis of utter reduction to external relation that is imposed rather than, as the American mind would frame it,

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<sup>44</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 21

<sup>45</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 26

<sup>46</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 27

chosen. The Americanness of individualist choice demonstrates its fundamental contradiction: the freedom to move and consume has “entombed [Erdedy] between the two sounds,” placing him into the thoughtlessly desperate Bottom. *Infinite Jest*’s voice backs out of Erdedy’s experienced thought only in this last sentence, demonstrating the uniquely isolated position of Wallace’s moment of truth — the truth that will “set you free. But not until it is finished with you.”<sup>47</sup> This profound individuality of the American mind allows Wallace to frame his solution to the mental illnesses he portrays in his fiction. An ultimate abdication of selfhood as understood in the Americanized context of zeitgeistic hyper-awareness — advertisement, products, popular entertainment, the noise generated by other individuals — must require a reckoning with patterns of consumption and its wastes. Agency’s reclamation comes from a paradoxical rejection of absolute freedom of movement and choice in a literal re-cognition: exercising a control not over how one consumes — a false control that A) is determined by choosing essentially arbitrary variations on self-presentational narratives and conspicuous consumptions of certain tiers of goods (an individualism negated by the fact of mass markets’ definitional need to appeal to the masses, as elucidated by the self-evident ridiculousness of “Burger King [selling] onion rings with ‘Sometimes You Gotta Break the Rules’”<sup>48</sup>) and B) becomes impossible due to the background panoptic awareness that everyone else constructs similar artifices, thus inducing a paranoia regarding an unachievable authenticity with respect to consumption patterns because those patterns are dictated not by the self but by a choice-patina’d acquiescence to zeitgeist pressure — but over how one thinks and perceives. We should understand that the idea of individual responsibility is absolutely crucial here; and while individual onus is not, ipso-facto,

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<sup>47</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 389

<sup>48</sup> Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 68

*inherently* conservative, the nature of conservatism in an American context extrapolates this nature of the perfectly deontologically bound individual to the fabric of society. Alienation exists as an internal problem in this framework, something personal not only in the experience thereof but also in how one is expected to deal with alienation by resolving it within their own head.

In short, for Wallace, the American mind grappling with itself and its inherent problems, like addiction and mental illness and totalizing alienation, must grapple with its own Americanness in a kind of cultural de- and then re-programming on the route to Wallace's proffered secular salvation: a formally secular but experientially spiritual salvation subsumed into a distinctly conservative context in which the individual is at the helm of their own ship; the winds are understood to Wallace as powerful and mighty indeed, but the individual nevertheless must still steer the vessel through the American waters.

## Chapter Four: The Individual and American Mental Illness

“Welcome to the meaning of individual. We’re each deeply alone here. It’s what we all have in common, this aloneness.” - David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram.”<sup>49</sup>

In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault gives us an exceptionally useful insight into the mechanics of what the civilized apparatuses of societies perceive as madness;<sup>50</sup> rather than occupying the realm of pure irrationality or unreason, madness co-opts the reasoning, cognitive faculties of the human mind. For example, a man who believes — due to his madness — that he is made of glass will conclude with a coherent logic that he must be exceptionally careful so as not to shatter himself.<sup>51</sup> Applying Foucault’s crazy rationality to depict mental illness in the individual isn’t a novel Wallace conception, though he makes extensive use of the application; rather, irrational reason echoes back to modernism, that age of the individual from which Wallace borrows as a literary conservative writing in a postmodern context. A “maddening reason” can also be seen in Septimus Smith of *Mrs. Dalloway*, a man whose adherence to a hyper-rationality ultimately does him in:

The main problem for Septimus is not that his emotions are chaotic, but rather that he has a dogged tendency to try logically to analyze every situation in which he finds himself, including ones that affect him emotionally. It is this trait that ultimately makes him

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<sup>49</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 112, emphases original

<sup>50</sup> A Foucaultian “madness” here functions as a very clumsy but basically useful catch-all for mental illness and disturbance, ranging from the hallucinatorily delusional to the more recognizable and mundane experiences of depressions, manias, and obsessive compulsions; trying to rework Foucault’s language about spirits, fibers, and humors into a modern psychiatric parlance is beyond our scope, but it’s important to note his basic assessment of mental illness’ logical framework within an explicitly social context

<sup>51</sup> Michele Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Random House, 1965), trans. by Richard Howard, 94

morbidly introspective and keeps him alienated from the world in which he lives—it is what positions him, in Woolf’s words, “always [. . .] outside human affairs.”<sup>52</sup>

Applied to Wallace, such a perspective on the nature of mental illness brings once again to the forefront the problem of simple thinking, of cognition that understands itself and the world. Knowing what we know of his American mind and its obsession with relationality to self and Other (of culture, of individuals, of goods, etc.), we can begin to explode Wallace’s framing of his CBT-verified solutions. This framing depends on cognitive reworking, one that attempts to escape solipsism and self-obsession; it opens outward and toward others rather than retreating inward. Wallace’s solutions re-orient one toward the outside world and away from the televisually inscribed madness in the individual’s head.

But why the fiction? Before we analyze how Wallace does this with his writing, why would he make characters and worlds and perform the Woodsian triple-balance if he could just instead write an analytical memoir of his own experience (Wallace, of course, being a talented nonfiction writer in his own right)? It cannot be accidental that a self-identified “memoir of depression,” *Shoot the Damn Dog* by Sally Brampton, begins with an introduction titled, “Don’t Look Down,”<sup>53</sup> — linking almost directly with Wallace’s own Bottom, the “place very high and unsupported. . . on the edge of something tall and leaning out way forward”<sup>54</sup> — that contains the thesis, “Life is about connection. . . Depression is the opposite; it is an illness defined by alienation. So I offer this book by way of connection.”<sup>55</sup> The theses sound similar, although

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<sup>52</sup> Sautter-Léger, Sabine. “Railed in by a Maddening Reason: A Reconsideration of Septimus Smith and His Role in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*.” *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2017, 5-6.

<sup>53</sup> Sally Brampton, *Shoot the Damn Dog: A Memoir of Depression* (New York: Norton, 2010), 1

<sup>54</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 347

<sup>55</sup> Brampton, *Shoot the Damn Dog*, 1

Brampton's simplifies quite a bit. What does Wallace have to gain in terms of effectiveness in his fiction?

Wallace answers this question in a story that highlights and captures the experience of mental illness, "Good Old Neon," told from the fictional first-person perspective — a perspective that the reader is, falsely, given to believe arises from the nonfictional fictionalizing of an inserted Wallace character, making the story a "metafictional titty-pincher."<sup>56</sup> The problems of consumption, language, and ego are merged in "Good Old Neon" in its first sentence: "My whole life I've been a fraud."<sup>57</sup> This mirrors *Infinite Jest's* first-person opening in which the narrating character, Hal Incandenza, is unable to communicate; Hal feels trapped within himself — "I am in here"<sup>58</sup> — and cannot make himself understood to his interlocutors. The narrator of "Good Old Neon" immediately expresses his inability to communicate authentically, merging the problem of solipsism with the problem of perceptive optics:

Pretty much all I've ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired. It's a little more complicated than that, maybe. But when you get right down to it it's to be liked, loved. Admired, approved of, applauded, whatever. You get the idea.<sup>59</sup>

Already we see the emergence of language's flimsiness, with the addressing of its shortcomings within the first paragraph ("whatever. You get the idea"<sup>60</sup>) along with a subtextual teeing up of the postmodern paranoia endemic to both the problem of communicating authentically and the

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<sup>56</sup> Wallace, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (New York: Hachette, 2011), 69

<sup>57</sup> Wallace, *Oblivion: Stories* (New York: Hachette, 2004), 141

<sup>58</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 1

<sup>59</sup> Wallace, *Oblivion*, 141

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*



powerless feeling of anxious depression: if “any word is capable of so *much* meaning, because it can appear in so many different contexts and is so overlaid with the history of its different uses and nuances, [then] every word is forever on the verge of becoming gibberish.”<sup>61</sup>

“Good Old Neon” takes this to an extreme, demonstrating the internal inescapability caused by a maddening reason; if a man believes he is fraudulent *a priori*, then he will not believe anything he says or thinks is unaffected by that fraudulence. Wallace shackles the isolation to his American mind by making the narrator an advertising consulting firm, ensconcing him in a culture of the “professional smile”<sup>62</sup> and systemic inauthenticity. The postmodern problem of rampant implicit meaning to every word and text becomes the driving force behind the narrator’s experience; any action or thought, if rendered into its mode of common communication via language, can have onto itself interpolated a meaning desired by its reader — the reader of the thoughts and actions, in this case, being the narrator. The logical recursion demonstrates a classic case of Wallace’s isolation via language: “Words and chronological time create all these total misunderstandings of what’s really going on at the most basic level. And yet at the same time English is all we have to try to understand it and try to form anything larger or more meaningful and true with anyone else, which is yet another paradox.”<sup>63</sup>

The inescapable loneliness of this linguistic reasoning once again forces the reader to grapple with the fact of mental illness as a kind of trap, and a recursive one at that. Brampton’s implicit heeding on the first page of her book is one of external connection; if depression is a disease of loneliness, then mustn’t the cure be reaching out to others? Wallace demonstrates that

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<sup>61</sup> Niall Lucy, “Introduction: On the Way to Genre” in *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 3, emphasis original

<sup>62</sup> Wallace, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 289

<sup>63</sup> Wallace, “Good Old Neon,” 151

the mentally ill person cannot reach out to others to save them without first solving the hyper-logical, internal schematic problems of the American mind. Depression (not explicitly named in “Good Old Neon,” although we can derive from the feelings of helplessness and self-hatred communicated in the story, in addition to its ending with the narrator’s suicide, that the illness more or less applies) locks oneself inside and away from the people with whom one might try to connect, reducing the Other to internalized apparatuses of self-validation:

Even if being fraudulent and being unable to love were in fact ultimately the same thing... being unable to really love was at least a different model or lens through which to see the problem, plus initially it seemed like a promising way of attacking the fraudulence paradox in terms of reducing the self-hatred part that reinforced the fear and consequent drive to try to manipulate people into providing the very approval I’d denied myself.<sup>64</sup>

Depression for Wallace brings reader into the mental framework of the American mind, establishing a kind of hyper-solipsism into which any attempted escape via outward interactivity can only result in the dissolution of the border between Troubled Self and Other into a recontextualized, larger Troubled Self in which the internal conception of the Other serves only as an added element to the depressed reasoning and its maddening paradoxes.

When the tragic time comes to “end the charade,”<sup>65</sup> an admission of a certain lack of agency that belies the narrator’s ostensible taking of action to fight his fraudulence, the terrible paradox of logic or reason as it is classically understood comes to the forefront of mental illness’

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 166

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 169

control over its sufferers: “The German logician Kant was right in this respect, that human beings are all pretty much identical in terms of our hardwiring.” The same universality of human experience of thinking that allows for Kant to make his moral arguments is the same universality that gives rise to the danger of falling completely into oneself, unable to think one’s way out — the thinking itself coming from a diseased or distressed mind as it makes futile attempts to relate to itself in its diseased state for the sake of attempted relief. Wallace’s assertion is a potentially scary one, but it highlights his capturing of mental illness as a hyper-real and all-encompassing experience: the mentally ill person cannot think, in the word’s traditional and logical sense, their way out of the illness.

Just as Erdedy’s chaotically static moment left the reader behind, so too does the downwardly convergent moment of suicide — the fall implied by the depressed and anxious feeling of being at a place that is “high and unsupported... something tall and leaning out way forward”<sup>66</sup> — begin to demonstrate the futility of language as a means of understanding the desperation at the moment of fatal decision:

I won’t really even try to describe the several different times that day when I sat in my living room and had a furious mental back-and-forth about whether to actually go through with it... It was intensely mental and would take an enormous amount of time to put into words, plus it would come off as somewhat cliché or banal in the sense that many of the thoughts and associations were basically the same sorts of generic things that anyone who’s confronting imminent death will end up thinking.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 347

<sup>67</sup> Wallace, “Good Old Neon,” in *Oblivion*, 174

We must notice that, as the words leave us behind from the true internal black box of thought that the narrator cannot fully express, the more we become a device of perception; we are understood by the narrator to actively perceive him in accordance with our own American minds, focused as they are on the banality and predictability of narrative patterns. The problem of mental illness for Wallace is emerging as one of optics: seeing others; seeing oneself; the feeling of being seen; fears regarding being seen incorrectly; and so on. The narrator cannot help “thinking what a fine and genuine performance in a drama [my suicide note and suicide] would make if only we all had not already been subject to countless scenes just like it in dramas ever since we first saw a movie or read a book,” a line of thought that reduces oneself to a total point of agential ineffectualness, of total sameness to all others. In other words, Wallace makes a spectacle of the act of suicide within the spectacle of a short story; he and his narrator know and are almost haunted by the act’s theatricality, its transformation into spectacle. This final moment of reduction constitutes an inverse: the Other that became self inverts, and self becomes Other, even as this inversion is paradoxically contained within the mental framework of the self. Utter noise becomes the world becomes you as “the millions and trillions of thoughts, memories, juxtapositions... flash through your head and disappear.”<sup>68</sup>

“Good Old Neon,” after the narrator completes suicide, ends from his perspective as disembodied and circumniscient from an unknown place that is its own chaotic stasis, a point of infinite unmoved motion containing all. We are told that what reality “really is, it turns out, is a matter of perspective,”<sup>69</sup> one that allows for the inclusion of a semi-fictional David Wallace who’d known the deceased narrator in high school. This self-insert draws attention to both the

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 178

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 180

nature of the fact of this story's story-ness, its fictionality, but also within the author. The narrator is subsumed post-suicide into that tertiary voice of the world, which world bends now around the thoughts of the inserted Wallace. Though fictional, the author's persona lends a powerful conclusion to a story recounting depression and pain as the in-story Wallace attempts to empathize with the death and causal distress of a former classmate whom he'd never suspected of suicidality:

David Wallace also fully aware that the cliché that you can't ever truly know what's going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid and yet at the same time trying very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt or sending the whole line of thought into the sort of inbent spiral that keeps you from ever getting anywhere (considerable time having passed since [high school], of course, and David Wallace having emerged from years of literally indescribable war against himself with quite a bit more firepower than he'd had at [high school]), the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him commanding that other part to be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, 'Not another word.'<sup>70</sup>

The story ends with a command levied at the solipsistic and analytical tendencies of the author even as it hints at Wallace's own inability to escape himself and his own mental illness. Here we see Wallace the writer, not the inserted character, providing a justification for exposing the horror of mental illness via fiction as opposed to memoir; Wallace takes on the whole of depression and suicidality by empathizing with his fictional character. He embodies the perspective of the Other and charts the hyper-logical progression toward a bottom, and then he zooms out to his moment

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 181

of chaotic stasis presented not from the redemptive side of recovery but from the negative side of utter hopelessness. The narrator of “Good Old Neon” becomes the totality of his own self and then nothing, but the tragic scene is observed by the inserted Wallace, an observation that challenges the reader even as it develops a metafictional audience surrogate. We are drawn toward the in-text Wallace, reading the story of the narrator even as he tries to conceive of it, and we receive the same warning and challenge toward renouncing the American mind’s awareness of narrative structures and cliché as we might be tempted to apply them to mental illness: “‘Not another word’”<sup>71</sup> of unempathetic thought is tolerable if we are to learn in any way.

“Good Old Neon” demonstrates via its awareness of narrative — with its fictional narrator, its fictional conceits, and its tenuous relation to a kind of metatextual reality via its inclusion of the author — just how malevolent depressed and anxious thoughts can be. Worthlessness and guilt find purchase on the supposedly logical grounds of feeling like a fraud, a feeling derived from observations of one’s own thoughts and behaviors. The recursion of rationality operates like a buzzsaw, bringing with it a sense of despair and indelible angst. This is the gift Wallace gives to the reader: language that, by its own admission, falls short of capturing the turmoil and isolation of mental illness in an effort to recreate it upon the page. Having sketched the architecture of the American mind — an architecture shared by Wallace’s readers — Wallace follows the logical pathways of this selfish reasoning to their own deleterious ends.

We must take especial note, however, of the ending of “Good Old Neon,” for it does not crescendo in total hopelessness but rather leaves the reader with a stern warning that reconfigures the cognitive structures that conceive of self and Other. The narrator of “Good Old Neon,” as an

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*

advertising executive, knew totally the manners in which human beings are susceptible to certain narratives and televisual commonplaces. Irony of a self-confessed fraud working in the business of selling and defrauding notwithstanding, we are led to understand that the awareness of certain patterns of the American noise plenum lead back into the self, at least in the case of the narrator. Expressing the facts of mental illness' effects in terms of the predictable and banal devalues the sufferer because it reduces them (the sufferer) to an outside figure, a participant in the American mind's model of the utterly external. Such reduction by way of connection to empty patterns leads to total isolation and inability to communicate. In effect, Wallace gives us a slippery slope argument: if you see the world as a series of predictable stories, you will not be able to interact with others in a meaningful sense because your entire worldview becomes undifferentiated information that you alone process. And eventually, you, too, become a part of these patterns of narrative and cliché, totally without agency — the only agency left being the decision to terminate oneself and the world, which have become at that point indistinguishable.

Perhaps this is rather bleak; “Good Old Neon,” is, after all, a sad story of pain and death, elements of human suffering that, in their starkness, leave the reader no choice but to empathize. But the sheer fact of that empathy implies an escape from the solipsistic mess that dissolves the world of self and other into continuous, meaningless noise, an escape elucidated explicitly in that final command that Wallace levies at his own depressed self and at the readership: “not another word”<sup>72</sup> of cynicism or aspersion. Because the noise of the stories' sameness and meaninglessness, reduction of all into naught, only can occur within the cynical American mind, one that sees people and things and stories as elements to be consumed by the self. Suicide is, in

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*

fact, a deletion of self, but it is not the only way. A nuanced form of self-control — the same one commanded at the end of “Good Old Neon” — forms the basis for Wallace’s escape from mental illness, one we can see in *Infinite Jest*, “The Depressed Person,” and “This Is Water.”

We now know what happens at the Bottom; the self encompasses all, consumes all as part of building its own conception, and cannot bear the pain of existing alone any longer. There is but one option: the elimination of self. Wallace tells us that the point of utter helplessness and alienation leaves the person at their Bottom at “the jumping-off place. You now have two choices. You can either eliminate your own map for keeps... Something whimpery instead of banging. Better clean and quiet and (since your whole career's been one long futile flight from pain) painless,”<sup>73</sup> — note the emphasis on avoidance of pain, itself an abstracted notion of individualist consumption of pleasure, if we conceive of pleasure and pain as occupying distinct ends of a continuum — or they can submit to the helplessness with a conscious abdication of their own ability to overcome the trap of their American mind. This other option, in the case of *Infinite Jest*, manifests itself as making a call to Alcoholics Anonymous, and already we begin to see how empathy begins to make headway out of isolation. It begins with an admission “to a gentle, grandparentish voice that you’re in trouble, deadly serious trouble,”<sup>74</sup> an admission of an implicit guilt.

American freedom — the freedom to do, the freedom to choose, the freedom to be an individual — values highly, if not centrally, the role of individual judgement. Agency and the ability to move unrestricted are necessary both to Horatio Alger and Route 66. However, when

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<sup>73</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 348

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*



the American mind, as Wallace proffers, is fundamentally a mechanism that is free to consume — both narratives and products, each being central to the other (i.e., to buy something is to buy the narrative that you are the ideal consumer of that thing) — that individual freedom becomes tenuous indeed. “This appetite to choose death by pleasure if it is available to choose — this appetite of your people unable to choose appetites, this is the death,”<sup>75</sup> says Rémy Marathe, speaking of the American mind’s corrosiveness to its own self. Deriving meaning from mere consumption, from mere wish fulfillment, cannot sustain the soul in any purposeful sense. The American mind’s foundation upon optical relationality allows for an ersatz version of a flourishing, healthy life, but that flourishing is predicated upon watching oneself flourish, upon the comparing oneself’s accomplishments to the televisually constructed, abstract version of what oneself aspires toward. The consummate business man, in one era, might have been understood to smoke Lucky Strikes, for example; the cultural mores driving the purchase of Luckies necessarily drive the continuation of the business man image with which they’re associated. American choosing, as a result of the American mind, is a matter of choosing how to seem rather than choosing how to be: they become one and the same, hence the “Good Old Neon” fraudulence paradox.

When the Bottom is finally reached, then, at the end of mental illness’ road, it must be understood as a fundamental shortcoming on account of the individual — a shortcoming that can be best understood in the language of classical Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy as developed and by Aaron and later Judith Beck. For this shortcoming of the individual stems not from any intrinsic badness as such or moral flaw but rather from the American mind’s modes of optical

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<sup>75</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 319

relation to itself and others, including the world around it. As discussed, at the Bottom's point of desperation, the world in its entirety has become the self, and if the world is uninhabitable or distasteful — as stated by *Infinite Jest's* psychotically depressed Kate Gompert, “Everything gets horrible. Everything you see gets ugly. Lurid is the word... That's the right word for it. And everything sounds harsh, spiny and harsh-sounding, like every sound you hear all of a sudden has teeth,”<sup>76</sup> — that is a result of conflated perception. The American mind's conception of itself and its surroundings must be understood as a problematic worldview. How can one escape the inescapable? One must transcend the self and abdicate the notion of absolute individuality — which doing so involves the ultimate act of self-determination. To be free, for Wallace, one must choose to opt out of absolute freedom.

Of course, the solutions proffered involve more than mere opting; the work of undoing mental illness' hold depends upon the invocation of agency. As discussed, the precarity of the Bottom is one of an extreme isolation and helplessness due to the fact that the Bottom, which originates from within the mind's own cognitive frameworks, imposes itself upon the ego of the afflicted individual. The self becomes a victim of self: the American idea of “the individual's right to pursue his own vision of the best ratio of pleasure to pain: utterly sacrosanct. Defended with teeth and bared claws all through our history”<sup>77</sup> allows the mind to spiral inside itself, permitting the difficult questions of life purpose and meaning to “grow real beaks and claws.”<sup>78</sup> This pernicious cycle that so concerned Wallace just happens to implicitly but dramatically assert itself in the very first principle of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy: “Cognitive behavior therapy is

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 73

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 424

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 900

based on an ever-evolving formulation of patients' problems and an individual conceptualization of each patient in cognitive terms."<sup>79</sup> Each patient presents with the unknowable internal experience encapsulated in "Good Old Neon," but the escape from mental torment and the transcendence depends on using individual agency to combat those individual thoughts and reckon with them, as elucidated by Beck's third principle and ninth principles, respectively: "Cognitive behavior therapy emphasizes collaboration and active participation [on the part of the patient],"<sup>80</sup> and "cognitive behavior therapy teaches patients to identify, evaluate, and respond to their dysfunctional thoughts and beliefs."<sup>81</sup>

Cognitions, then, are not to be ignored or offered up: the patient must want be willing to engage in the difficult work of engaging with them, meaning that the process outlined by Beck necessitates heavy psychic lifting — or as Wallace would put it, learning. The focus on psychic optics and perceptive frameworks becomes an intersecting basis for both the traditional CBT approach and Wallace's fictionalized approach to escaping the solipsistic trap; this focus leaps off the page when we examine the famous Kenyon College commencement address, in which Wallace advises the graduating class of liberal arts students that their educational experience of learning how to think has more than surface value:

"Learning how to think" really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience... Think of the old cliché about "the mind being an excellent servant but a terrible master." This, like many

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<sup>79</sup> Beck, Judith *Cognitive Behavior Therapy: Basics and Beyond* (New York: Guilford, 2011, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 7

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 8

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 10

clichés, so lame and unexciting on the surface, actually expresses a great and terrible truth. It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in the head. And the truth is that most of these suicides are actually dead long before they pull the trigger.<sup>82</sup>

What Wallace spells out in nonfiction above demonstrates a keenly therapeutic approach to solving the problem of the American mind. Both CBT and Wallace use the fact of the noisome world and its fundamental arbitrariness as an antidote to the problems that it can cause: if one's relationality to the world, to others, and to oneself is understandable only through semiotic-level attributions of meaning, then one can teach oneself to abdicate unnecessarily negative and/or destructive attributions of meaning. Once again, the problem boils down to one of perception, and not in a metaphorically optical sense; "cognitive therapy is based on the *cognitive model*, which hypothesizes that people's emotions, behaviors, and physiology are based on their perception of events."<sup>83</sup> Reality as such, even one so all-consuming as the American reality, does not ipso facto matter; the experience of perceiving reality is what matters to the patient. Changing one's perception, then, is all that matters, functionally speaking.

However, substantial psychological changes of perception are easier described in the macroscopic than simply undertaken — hence the helpfulness of fiction. *Infinite Jest's* crucible of psychic reform, Ennet Recovery House, gives Wallace the mundane and literally sobering backdrop to sketch the mental framework of coming to certain CBT-verified conclusions regarding oneself and one's thoughts:

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<sup>82</sup> Wallace, David, "This Is Water" (Purdue: 2005, Purdue University), 4

<sup>83</sup> Beck, *Cognitive Behavior Therapy*, 30, emphasis original

If, by the virtue of charity or the circumstance of desperation, you ever chance to spend a little time around a Substance-recovery halfway facility like Enfield MA's state-funded Ennet House, you will acquire many exotic new facts... That no matter how smart you thought you were, you are actually way less smart than that... That loneliness is not a function of solitude... That logical validity is not a guarantee of truth... That most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking. That the cute Boston AA term for addictive-type thinking is: Analysis-Paralysis... That 99% of compulsive thinkers' thinking is about themselves; that 99% of this self-directed thinking consists of imagining and then getting ready for things that are going to happen to them; and then, weirdly, that if they stop to think about it, that 100% of the things they spend 99% of their time and energy imagining and trying to prepare for all the contingencies and consequences of are never good. Then that this connects interestingly with the early-sobriety urge to pray for the literal loss of one's mind. In short that 99% of the head's thinking activity consists of trying to scare the everliving shit out of itself.<sup>84</sup>

Here, Wallace lays out the mental pathway toward internal cognitive reconfiguration; reckoning with the pain and suffering of mental illness necessitates an agential choosing of which variants of metacognitive analysis are worth engaging in. American-Minded solipsistic analysis can only lead inward and back on itself in a recursive loop, but a more objective and outward guided analysis necessitates something akin almost to ego death: the “literal loss of one’s mind.”<sup>85</sup> In short, this process requires at a fundamental level an ultimate stepping outside of oneself in order

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<sup>84</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 200

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*

to truly recognize oneself. The drawing of negative conclusions about one's own relationship to thinking is to achieve two key reconfigurations simultaneously: the first is to lose oneself as the absolute individual through the process of seeing oneself as other individuals do, an unshackling of the American mind from egocentric exceptionalism (e.g., “no matter how smart you thought you were, you are actually way less smart than that”<sup>86</sup>); secondly, one begins to recognize from said outward-looking-in perspective that the negativity of recursive and self-absorbed thinking is not in any sense necessary but is instead futile and pain-inducing (“99% of the head's thinking activity consists of trying to scare the everliving shit out of itself”<sup>87</sup>). The process still requires thinking — even to the point of constituting a deceptively simple logic — but the thinking involved is of a categorically different nature.

Wallace's fiction-accounted process of moving from a cognitive space of inward-to-out toward outward-to-in mirrors exactly the goals of what the traditional CBT therapist sets out to do. The point is not to establish a traditionally logical set of inductive modes of reasoning that derive significance from a top-down continuation of philosophical argument; instead, CBT emphasizes a pragmatic approach, one that identifies the utility of not only “automatic thoughts” — thoughts whose rapid, involuntary emergence constitute the standard internal stream-of-consciousness<sup>88</sup> — but the underlying core beliefs that comprise the automatic-thought-engendering logical structures.<sup>89</sup> Implicit notions of the American mind, then, begin to disintegrate if the recovery process continues; defining success by one's ability to seek pleasure or to perform certain kinds of consumption cannot be valid beliefs if they lead to

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>88</sup> Beck, *Cognitive Behavior Therapy*, 35

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 36

damaging automatic thoughts and behaviors. Importantly, this reframing embraces rather than contradicts the problem of postmodern total noise; the patient, in seeing herself as a constituent part of the whole zeitgeist in all its underlying arbitrariness, uses that arbitrary nature of thought and reality as the basis for determining which thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors to keep. Beck describes this as evaluating thoughts in a “conscious, structured way”<sup>90</sup> so as to circumvent the problem of solipsistic emotional reasoning (the tendency of patients to draw logically conclusive thoughts like “I am worthless” from momentary instances of feeling worthless). It is an examination first of whether a thought is useful and valid to have and then, second, an examination of the usefulness and utility of the underlying belief whence it originated.<sup>91</sup> Both Wallace and therapist instruct reader and patient to question with their own consciousness the constituent elements of that consciousness; if a thought arises from a part of the self that has been pragmatically identified as having negative utility and/or validity, then it follows that it is better to dismiss the thought as an artificial product rather than an absolute truth.

Contingent truths and postmodern relativism, then, become devices for liberation rather than imprisonment. An individual can indeed dispose of their own efforts to determine meaning from within as experienced within the context of the chaotic zeitgeist via the invocation of independent agency — the free choice to choose which thoughts and feelings are useful and valid and which are not. Recovering narcotics abuser Don Gately of *Infinite Jest* conceives of his own individual will as diseased and “spider-bitten” (“spider” being the term his counselor applies to the cognitive framework of addiction). Escape is possible, but only with the recognition that escape by self-justification is impossible. Only in connecting to the outside world and deciding

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 138

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*

to sacrifice a part of our agency do we become able to see ourselves as parts of a whole in a meaningful sense — an awareness that allows for true change. Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* offers to its recovering characters and to the reader the stories of those who “abandon common sense and resolve to Hang In and keep coming and then find their cages all of a sudden open, mysteriously,”<sup>92</sup> freed by their own sacrifice of their freedom.

Of course, this answer that Wallace provides is not an easy one. For one, the process of reverse engineering and then modifying one’s own worldview and sense of self is extremely difficult and arduous — the Bottom brings people to the point of wanting to end their suffering with death, but the way out only serves to analyze the meaning of the pain, not to ameliorate all of it. Gately himself, at *Infinite Jest*’s final moments of chaotic narrative stasis, chooses a brutal consequence of pragmatic belief evaluation: he cannot take sufficiently strong painkillers for his gunshot wound in the hospital because his detached assessment of his own thoughts and desires leads him to the provisionally true conclusion that to take an abusable narcotic, even in such a painful situation, is to give in to a damaging, rapacious set of internal desires, values, and beliefs.

Even the Beck approach to Cognitive Behavior Therapy recognizes that our innermost truths are extremely difficult to change; they comprise who we are, and therapists are advised to take slow action toward modification of deep beliefs by working at automatic and intermediate-level beliefs first because they are easier to work with due to a dependence on context rather than ideology.<sup>93</sup> And Wallace’s project of undoing the American mind’s constituent matrices as a way of alleviating the Americanized experience of mental illness — of

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<sup>92</sup> *Infinite Jest*, 350

<sup>93</sup> Beck, *Cognitive Behavior Therapy*, 230



problematic thinking and one's relationship to it — concludes with an ultimate rejection of the individual self as it is traditionally understood. What makes *Alcoholics Anonymous* profound to Wallace's recovering character is its power to bring people together by shared experiences with an utter sameness: "if you sit up front and listen hard, all the speakers' stories of decline and fall and surrender are basically alike, and like your own." He exhorts us to reach out to one another as true equals among the miasma, not as self and other — an invitation that implicitly requires rejection of the totally internalized and solipsistic self. It's a big ask. Wallace's proffered solution is indeed CBT-tested and mapped onto the empathizable medium of fictional literature, but that doesn't make it easy. The truth of learning to evaluate our thoughts as just that — as mere thoughts — can set us free. But not until it is completely and utterly finished with us.

## Chapter Five: Wallace's America

We have now come to understand that Wallace's diagnosis of the American mental condition focuses on connection and escaping the bounds of the individual. How might this be conservative? Subsuming oneself into something grander, turning away from the self and toward others, seems rather universalist — if not downright collectivist! — of this writer whose work excoriates what has become of an America in which the individual is positioned to, bred for, and driven to madness by a drive to consume on behalf of oneself, on behalf of the marketized individual. Wallace understands our American minds and what America *does* to us, on a fundamental level, and he goes so far as to reject it! Surely, no conservative would...

Unless that conservative had an investment in an imagined America of yore. Unless that conservative saw the self-conception of the individual not as the problem, but as a part of the solution. How does Wallace demonstrate mental illness? As in individual experience, totalizingly and isolatingly personal. And how does he demonstrate that way out? He demonstrates an individual giving over of oneself to the higher power via *Infinite Jest's* AA, lest the individual's own sin, as it were, be allowed to consume them. Such a framing offers salvation and a turning outward; however, that salvation depends upon a key assumption that the individual, despite being railed into their suffering by the apparatuses of a *contemporary* America — one having strayed from a former path of righteousness — must pull themselves up out of their own morasse. Out of their own Bottom. David Foster Wallace's therapeutic tendency as a writer of experience does not reject, out of hand, conservatism. Certain reactionaries of the current moment may sneer at Cognitive-Behavior Therapy, but CBT nevertheless exists and exists prominently in our hyper-individualistic culture of latter-day American capitalism. Effective

CBT approaches as pioneered by the Becks were developed in the American context of which Wallace writes and with which he merges. The individual, paradoxically tending toward connection with others and yet preserving itself as a moral and more-or-less-free-will-possessing agent — a conservative, and distinctly American, synthesis of what it means to live under the penumbra of a world driven mad by consumption and pleasure and advertising.

Now that we've seen how Wallace therapizes the reader in a framework that preserves (or, perhaps more saliently, conserves) a certain kind of American project, we have to ask: what kind of America does Wallace envision that allows his proffered individual to flourish? Surely we can't just bootstrap our way through AA and open-minded subsumption toward the end of salvation; what would Wallace have us arc toward? Or, in a more conservative framing, what might Wallace have us *return* to?

The essay "The View From Mrs. Thompson's," probably at least partially due to the fact that Wallace does tend toward a more didactic approach, offers a glimpse of what he sees as a form of America worth conserving, worth keeping the individual within. "In true Midwest fashion, people in Bloomington aren't unfriendly but do tend to be reserved,"<sup>94</sup> the essay opens, having been preceded with a header dated September 11th, 2001. Already Wallace has drawn attention to the nature of his Americans in this piece: Americans existing as individuals. He calls this to attention not in a malicious way at all. Wallace does not begin an impugment of hedonism and wanton consumption against his essay's subjects as he does in others. Rather, he frames these people as they are — American individuals operating, reservedly, within a functioning community.

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<sup>94</sup> Wallace, "The View From Mrs. Thompson's" in *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2005), 128

The events of 9/11 begin to unfold, giving the essay its narrative framing, and the first-person Wallace finds himself, not being possessed of a television, in the sitting room of the titular Mrs. Thompson, and he begins to further develop what Wallace's ideal and conserved America might be in this character. "One of the world's cooler seventy-four-year-olds" and "a long-time member and a leader in the congregation [of their church],"<sup>95</sup> Mrs. Thompson serves as something of a moral role model for Wallace during the unfolding of the terrorist attacks; she keeps her cool, but does so as a figure who embodies a kind of Rockwellian ethos, an American individual not driven by a pleasure principle or apparent narcissism. Not only does Mrs. Thompson adhere to certain fundamentally conservative ideas of a person who acts as a pillar of one's community, but she meets the criteria of a warm and gracious host, as well, even in a time of comparative calamity: "Mrs. T. has coffee on, but another sign of crisis is that if you want some, you have to go get it for yourself."<sup>96</sup>

Here, Wallace has constructed a kind of American whom readers cannot help but look up to, even if they are not interested in reading the essay for deeper meaning; subtextually, Mrs. Thompson may be an ideal American of a greater generation more able to keep grace under pressure, etc. But even at the surface level of a casual essay-enthusiast opening up their copy of *Rolling Stone* (in which the piece was originally published), "The View From Mrs. Thompson's" asserts her figure as a fundamentally cool and kind person — the kind of person we all like and all, naturally, want to be. Further, that positioning depends upon mores of character, integrity, humility — values, in other words, abstract concepts of morals not available for purchase. She's a Midwestern strawman, granted — a generalization of Midwestern values stuffed into the

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 135

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 138

personage of a little old lady. But in constructing the character as someone with idiosyncrasies alongside her older American values, Wallace offers the postmodernly confused, media-saturated cynics — like himself, he admits — an alternative narrative to consume and model themselves after. The Mrs. Thompson character may be a shopping mall mannequin the store window of individuality, but then, what American individual doesn't shape themselves around narratized individual typologies?

Wallace even provides a foil to Mrs. Thompson to highlight how much he thinks of her in the character of a Duanne Bracero, the son of a church lady there, who makes repeated comparisons to how 9/11 resembles a movie and whom Wallace describes as “normally pretty much useless and irritating.”<sup>97</sup> Whether aware of it or not, Wallace has constructed a moral dyad within his essay that comes to resemble the conservative tradition of the morality play: are you a Mrs. Thompson American, or are you a Duanne American? Wallace jabs at the reader with Duanne; little old Midwestern ladies don't read David Foster Wallace books, and Wallace himself knows this. His readers are there for the movie references and educated cynicism that Duanne, with what's probably hyperbolically irritating affect, embodies. Mrs. T and Duanne are both individuals, and it's not especially certain that Wallace even believes it's possible for a Duanne to transform into a Mrs. Thompson: the past is past. But the dyad nevertheless illustrates a *model* for self-regulation and non-narcissitic, traditionalized individualism. The answer as to which Wallace prefers is emphatically — and again, even didactically — clear to even the plainest of readers.

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 137

As the fairly short essay closes, Wallace writes one of his most explicitly conservative passages of his career, worth quoting extensively. Less important to our analysis is the play-by-play of 9/11 that Wallace presents in the essay than the explicit thematic thesis, which, in his didactic way, he makes in the last couple of paragraphs:

What these Bloomington ladies are, or start to seem to me, is innocent. There is what would strike many Americans as a marked, startling lack of cynicism in the room. It does not, for instance, occur to anyone here to remark upon how it's maybe a little odd that *all three* network anchors are in shirtsleeves, or to consider the possibility that Dan Rather's hair's being mussed might not be wholly accidental, or that the constant rerunning of horrific footage might not be just in case some viewers were only now tuning in and hadn't seen it yet. None of the ladies seem to notice the president's odd little lightless eyes appear to get closer and closer together throughout his taped address, nor that some of his lines sound almost plagiaristically identical to those uttered by Bruce Willis (as a right-wing wacko, recall) in *The Siege* a couple years back. Nor that at least some of the sheer weirdness of watching the Horror unfold has been how closely various shots and scenes have mirrored the plots of everything from *Die Hard I-III* to *Air Force One*. Nobody's near hip enough to lodge the sick and obvious po-mo-complaint: We've Seen This Before. Instead, what they do is all sit-together and feel really bad, and pray.<sup>98</sup>

Even as Wallace distances himself from the incumbent Republican George W. Bush and even sallies forth with an apparent anti-conservative quip with the comparison between Bush & Willis' "right-wing wacko" character, he nevertheless finds himself drawing a direct line of an

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 139-140

older America's virtue through the characters of the older church ladies and most especially Mrs. Thompson, an American virtue that existed before Wallace's world of *Infinite Jest* and postmodern cynicism and media saturation. Mrs. Thompson is still a character, still an artifact of a narrative created by authorial interpretation, but Wallace makes her into an exemplar of sorts. As such, she takes on a moral quality, one which diminishes her personhood as it relates to the others. Simply put here, Wallace begins to project and interpolate his conservatism onto and through Mrs. Thompson.

One final quotation from "The View From Mrs. Thompson's" solidifies a distinct nonfictional articulation of Wallace's multiple Americas: an America he seeks to conserve, and an America he seeks to indict (as detailed in the moral turpitude so many find themselves caught in in *Infinite Jest*, for example). Wallace closes the essay on one of his more moralizing notes:

Truly decent, innocent people can be taxing to be around. I'm not for a moment trying to suggest that everyone I know in Bloomington is like Mrs. Thompson (e.g., her son F— isn't, though he's an outstanding person). I'm trying, rather, to explain how some part of the Horror was knowing, deep in my heart, that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more my America, and F—'s, and poor old loathsome Duanne's, than it was any of these ladies'.<sup>99</sup>

David Foster Wallace takes in the truly horrific events of 9/11 and proceeds to write about them in a way that attacks America not for its explicitly political actions — imperialism, Middle Eastern involvement, violent assertions of global hegemony — but for its having *fallen*. And fallen to whom? America has fallen to and because of the moral degeneration over time, Wallace

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 140

implies so heavily that he comes just shy of outright declaring it — not to belabor the point, but that feels, well, conservative. In fact, with this closing paragraph from “The View From Mrs. Thompson’s,” Wallace crafts a thesis that rhymes with the words of hyper-conservative pastor Jerry Falwell in the wake of 9/11<sup>100</sup>: “The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked... All of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say, ‘you helped this happen.’”<sup>101</sup>

Of course, the self-admittedly hyper-academic Wallace does not join Falwell in laying blame at the hands of people who are in the ACLU or who think abortion should be legal; again, David Foster Wallace does not especially advocate for socially reactionary strains of conservatism. But both men find a way to establish a connection between the murders of September 11, 2001 and a perceived moral decline in the United States of America. Wallace’s tone and fundamental idea of what a moral America might look like does indeed depart from the arch-Christian views of a Jerry Falwell, but the two men nevertheless take umbrage with their own constructed views of how America has strayed from its righteous path. What’s more, that straying from the righteous path originates in — because both Falwell and Wallace espouse different kinds of conservatism, but visions of conservatism nonetheless — the actions of individuals, be they cynical postmodernism-enveloped Duannes or haughtily secular abortionists. Wallace does indeed reject America, but he rejects a certain kind of America, one that encourages the worst of the American, fundamentally conservative idea of the individual. The

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<sup>100</sup> Although “hyper-conservative” speaks to a much less subtle and much more reactionary conservatism than the kind that Wallace espouses and which has been discussed in this paper

<sup>101</sup> Laurie Goodstein, “After the Attacks, Finding Fault: Falwell’s Finger-Pointing Inappropriate, Bush Says,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2001 via Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2020), 15



world of *Infinite Jest*, with its hedonism and all-encompassing advertising economy, seems to produce Duannes; Wallace's therapeutic promise still maintains the individual but seeks to make of them a Mrs. Thompson.

If Wallace indicts a heady, pleasure-addicted and postmodern America and pined for a version of an older, more staid America, then what does he propose people do? We have seen his effective but fundamentally bootstrap-based advocacy for individual triumph over the pleasure principle and the suffering it generates. But what does a Wallacean America, one in which that individual has escaped the Bottom but still finds themselves within the context of a busy and temptation-laden American context, actually look like? Wallace's attempt to answer this question comes in perhaps his most widely circulated and maybe most widely read pieces of writing (because for all its fame, *Infinite Jest* is not known for being easy to complete), the Kenyon College commencement speech "This is Water."

Again donning the mantle of nonfiction writer rather than experimental fiction author, David Foster Wallace addresses the graduating class of Kenyon with what might be considered a blueprint on how to live a life in accordance with the fundamentally conservative principles that Wallace holds dear — a life in which the individual has control of themselves and is allowed to exist as such even while engaging with other individuals conceiving of themselves as such, all interacting based on an agreed-upon framework not of hedonism but of morality: a rather conservative proposition indeed.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Explicit political positions in terms of what good government would look like are beyond the scope of this paper, but it's not hard to imagine the question "if individuals all act beneficently, then why bother with a state?" being asked in reference to such a posited worldview

Wallace undermines the concept of an individual agent in the American context of maximizing pleasure and consumption; in other words, he takes time to articulate why the individuality that brings people to their Bottom in *Infinite Jest* is wrongheaded, and in doing so, he rejects both this concept of the individual and the America in which such a concept is fostered:

A huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded. Here's one example of the utter wrongness of something I tend to be automatically sure of: Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely talk about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness, because it's so socially repulsive, but it's pretty much the same for all of us, deep down. It is our default-setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: There is no experience you've had that you were not at the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is right there in front of you, or behind you, to the left or right of you, on your TV, or your monitor, or whatever. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real — you get the idea. But please don't worry that I'm getting ready to preach to you about compassion or other-directedness or the so-called “virtues.” This is not a matter of virtue — it's a matter of my choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default-setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered, and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Wallace, “This Is Water.” (Purdue: Purdue University, 2005).

Already Wallace has located the problem at the nexus of the individual and how one sees oneself, and obviously, the narcissism inherent to that is objected to. That objection does not chide too harshly, though, for Wallace's talk about hard-wiring speaks to his understanding of how America pushes us toward that place of utter and abject selfishness, being driven by raw pleasure and consumption. He rejects both the fallen individual and the fallen America that produces it.

When he pivots to additive critique, Wallace drives his conservatism home, the paradoxical union of the individual and the higher power into which the individual is subsumed without one being sacrificed for the other. This is *the* view from Mrs. Thompson's, as it were:

The freedom to be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talked about in the great outside world of winning and achieving and displaying. The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom.<sup>104</sup>

In this construction, Wallace literally calls for a new American individual who has given themselves over to, somewhat paradoxically, the idea that they are not at the center of the universe; the idea that other people are individuals, too. Wallace doesn't come out and embrace true collectivism, because he is, again, a kind of conservative who believes that if everyone just does right, we will be ok. But his conservatism is of a kind that does, at the end of the proverbial day, seek to achieve salvation of the individual via the individual. "This Is Water" encourages its

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*

audience to choose a form of idiosyncratic worship in which the individual chooses a conscious abdication of absolute self-centeredness; that choosing, for Wallace, *must* take place by the individual not only therapizing themselves but giving themselves over to their own higher power. Put simply, David Foster Wallace articulates a specific and maybe idiosyncratic form of American Protestantism: one that unites every individual in the country not by *denying* the individual in favor of the collective, but by empowering every individual to pursue a more righteous path.

Ultimately, Wallace's works have deep therapeutic value and the ability to help us re-center ourselves. Throughout this paper I have sought to demonstrate how Wallace espouses a fundamentally conservative ethos and worldview, but I want to stress again that this analysis does not seek to take Wallace down any kind of peg. Wallace's vision of an America united by a rekindled moral spirit of enlightened and bootstrapped individuals may well seem blinkered to the Marxists and collectivists; being a conservative worldview that makes an attempt to conserve the American project, the Wallace vision of what a newly moral America could be might not be the most realistic. But in the meantime of living in a United States that comes more and more to resemble a version of O.N.A.N., Wallace's ability to speak to how individuals can indeed come to save themselves somewhat and reorient themselves toward a higher moral purpose — well, even if it's conservative, Wallace's thesis offers help and guidance toward a more perfect union. David Foster Wallace's work has helped and no doubt will help many troubled Americans living as troubled individuals. And even though he doesn't possess all the answers, Wallace can point us toward adjusting our lenses, escaping our Bottoms, and seeing the world through Mrs. Thompson's.

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## ACADEMIC VITA

STEVEN SCHNEIBLE

**Positions**Rock Ethics Institute - Spring Ethics Research Fellow, Jan 2021-present

Competitive ethics research fellowship in collaboration with The Rock Ethics Institute and Professor Jeremy Engels on his new book, *The Politics of Breathing*; media research, academic research, and project coordination on book subject material and collation thereof

Kalliope Literary Magazine - Fiction Editor May '18-May '20; Managing Editor May '19-May '20; Nonfiction Editor May'20-Present

Leadership of selection committees analyzing submissions for publication, including standards control and process management; contributor relations and distribution management; copyediting, formatting, and production of the magazine; contributions to magazine leadership decisions, conference representation, and counsel to the editor-in-chief

Empathy & Moral Psychology Laboratory - Research Assistant, Aug. 2019- Mar. 2019

Running experiments, gathering data, and assisting graduate students with experimental design under Dr. C. Daryl Cameron

Penn State English Department - Research Assistant, Jan. 2020 - May 2020

Assistant to Professor Debra Hawhee for her book on the rhetoric of climate change; accrual, compilation, organization, and analysis of rhetorical artifacts with relevant academic significance

Penn State College of Liberal Arts Alumni Board - Student Representative, Aug. 2019- Present

Advocacy for students and provides policy feedback from a student perspective to the alumni

board; development of programs and communications alongside board alumni and the Dean

### **Awards & Honoraria**

Eagle Scout January 2017

Phi Beta Kappa Member April 2020

“Collegiate Laws of Life” Academic Essay Contest Winner January 2018, as the first freshman ever to do so; January 2019

Lehman Writing Award, Fiction, First Place April 2021

Moore Undergraduate Scholarship in English September 2019

Lehman Writing Award, Nonfiction, Second Place April 2019

Lehman Writing Award, Nonfiction, Second Place April 2021

President Sparks Academic Award February 2019

President’s Freshman Academic Award February 2018

Psi Chi Psychology Honors Society Member February 2019

### **Publications**

“For Dust Thou Art,” *Liberal Arts Voices*, January 2018

“Due Tuesday, 11:59 P.M.,” *Kalliope Literary Magazine*, April 2018

“Morning’s First Beam,” *ShortEdition at Penn State*, April 2018

“And They Were Found Wanting,” *Liberal Arts Voices*, January 2019

“The Lost Luster of a Seventh Snow Day,” *Onward State*, February 2019

“State Patty’s Day Came Upon A Midday Dreary,” *Onward State*, February 2019

“No Refund Theater’s ‘Ordinary Days’ Delights, Serenades, & Subverts Any Negative Expectations About Musicals,” *Onward State*, March 2019

“RAWR & Trying to Understand Improv,” *Onward State*, March 2019

“On Ideological Mutability in Automotive Modalities,” *Folio Literary Chapbook*, November 2019

“Terminal,” *Kalliope Literary Magazine*, April 2021