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JONATHAN BASKIN

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Abstract

In exploring what was “philosophical” about David Foster Wallace’s fiction, “Different Therapies” attempts both to offer a new interpretation of what unifies the American author’s various novels and stories, and to contribute to the growing scholarship on the intersection between literature and philosophy.

In my Introduction, I lay out what I take to be the central convictions behind Wallace’s “therapeutic” fiction. Although many commentators have noted Wallace’s allusions to Wittgensteinian language and themes, I argue that Wallace’s mature novels and stories can be most profitably viewed as a “series of examples” in the Wittgensteinian sense, meant to expose not only a set of problems but also a point of view or what Wittgenstein would have called a “picture.” Later in the chapter, I discuss who Wallace perceived himself to be writing for, and how his fiction marked out the various features of the mindset it intended to philosophically “treat.”

In my first chapter, I try to justify what I call philosophically therapeutic criticism as a mode for engaging with imaginative texts like Wallace’s. In chapters two through four, I offer readings of three of Wallace’s works of fiction—*Infinite Jest*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, and *Pale King*—all viewed in terms of the “different therapies” they offer their readers. In my chapter on *Jest*, I focus on the Wittgensteinian challenge (especially evident in the AA sections) that is posed to the Cartesian picture (especially evident in the opening scene) of what Robert Pippin has called “modern and postmodern self-consciousness.” In the chapter on *Brief Interviews*, I home in on Wallace’s treatment of a particular way of speaking about

other people—which has consequences for the relationships we attempt to form both in everyday social life and through literary fiction. In the chapter on *Pale King*, I emphasize the distinction Wallace draws between his own (philosophical) therapy and more conventional therapeutic techniques.

In the conclusion, I offer some thoughts on what it means to conceive of Wallace as a philosophical artist—and if we might not do better to think of him as an artistic philosopher.

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Introduction: Habits of Mind

Among commentators on the novels of David Foster Wallace, there is widespread agreement that Wallace was an uncommonly “philosophical” fiction writer. As for what it means to say this, there exists little consensus or even much common ground. Aside from certain facts about his biography (Wallace studied analytic philosophy before turning to fiction), the agreement is based mostly on the observations that Wallace’s books are dotted with allusions to figures in the Western philosophical tradition, that his characters occasionally engage in philosophical discussions a la *The Brothers Karamazov*, and that it is helpful to read certain philosophers (like Wittgenstein) to fully appreciate what is going on in certain of his passages. These are all ways in which Wallace’s fiction engaged or intersected with philosophical themes or language. One of the main arguments of this dissertation will be that Wallace’s fiction was not just sporadically or instrumentally philosophical, however, but that his project as a whole employed philosophical methods and was trained toward a philosophical end. To appreciate the consistency of Wallace’s project, I will claim, means to appreciate the pervasiveness of those methods and the centrality of that end.

Of course, to be specific about *how* Wallace’s writing was philosophical is immediately to step out onto thin ice, for there never has been much agreement *among philosophers* on the question of what it means to call one or another writer “philosophical”—especially when the writer in question does not abide by the

normal conventions of academic philosophy. Wallace, like anyone who has engaged in philosophy since Plato, not only endorsed but also implicitly prioritized a certain conception of philosophy over others. Attracted during the early 1980s to the debates then consuming analytic philosophy, Wallace's decision to become a fiction writer was accompanied (and perhaps caused) by his own disenchantment with formal logic, brought on in part, according to him, by his reading of the later Wittgenstein.¹ Philosophers who have addressed Wallace's fiction so far have tended to focus on Wallace's explicit references to Wittgensteinian arguments and themes (such as solipsism, or meaning-as-use, the latter of which is the subject of a monologue in Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*), whereas my argument will hinge on the notion that Wallace's fiction as a whole can be viewed as a continuation of the later Wittgenstein's project by other means. The most important way that Wittgenstein's later philosophy can be said to have influenced Wallace was in Wittgenstein's (methodological or "meta-philosophical") notion that philosophy,

¹ In the introduction to Wallace's undergraduate thesis on the concept of free will in the philosophy of Richard Taylor (published in 2010 as *Fate, Time and Language*), James Ryerson offers an excellent critical overview of Wallace's biographical experience with, and comments about, philosophy. Briefly, Wallace seemed headed for a career in analytic philosophy before a "midlife crisis" about the meaningfulness of logic encouraged him to swerve to fiction during his junior year at Amherst. So, alongside his thesis on Taylor, Wallace completed a fiction thesis that would later become his first novel *The Broom of the System* (1987), whose protagonist was the granddaughter of a famous Wittgenstein scholar. After completing an MFA at University of Arizona and publishing his first two works of fiction, Wallace enrolled at Harvard to do graduate work in philosophy; he studied there with Stanley Cavell among others, but left the program when he discovered that he "didn't want to be an academic philosopher anymore." In his non-fiction, Wallace has covered philosophical topics such as Wittgenstein's private language argument and the afterlife of Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author"; his essays and fiction are studded with references to Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, Emerson and Cavell among others (Schopenhauer's "The Vanity of Life" was discovered on his desk with the fragments collected in his posthumous novel). He was the author of a book about infinity, *Everything and More* (2004), and a short story named for Richard Rorty's "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature." In his book *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), Marshall Boswell argues that Wittgenstein's theory of language is "the key" to unraveling the mysteries of *Broom*. More recently, Stephen Mulhall has offered an interpretation of that novel in a similar vein. ("Quartet: Wallace's Wittgenstein, Moran's Amis" [Forthcoming]). Wallace's father was a philosophy professor at the University of Illinois, and remembers reading Plato's *Phaedo* with Wallace when he was 14 years old.

properly conceived, should be *therapeutic*, rather than theoretical. The key passage in Wittgenstein, for understanding what this means, comes in the *Investigations*:

The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to.—The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question.—Instead, we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off.—Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem.

There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies.²

Much of Wallace's mature fiction should be looked at as a "series of examples" meant to treat not only a set of problems but also a point of view or what Wittgenstein would have called a "picture." That picture was the one he believed had captivated his readers—which means that, as with Wittgenstein's language games, Wallace's philosophical fiction doubles as a kind of cultural criticism.³ That criticism was, however, broader and deeper than has so far been appreciated. It encompassed more than a narrow set of cultural institutions (e.g. television, avant-garde art, white-collar bureaucracy), and can be elucidated only *in part* with reference to the rhetorical excesses (irony, cynicism, etc.) of "postmodern" culture,

² *Philosophical Investigations*, (Prentice Hall, 1958), §133, p. 51. The importance of Wittgenstein's notion of a philosophy as a form of therapy has been a source of controversy in Wittgenstein scholarship. The passage quoted here is still ignored by many contemporary philosophers interested in Wittgenstein, but it has gotten increasing attention in recent decades, thanks largely to the attention paid to it by philosophers like Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond. In the introduction to a collection of essays entitled *The New Wittgenstein*, Alice Crary describes the selections as agreeing in "suggesting that Wittgenstein's primary aim in philosophy is—to use a word he himself employs in characterizing his later philosophical procedures—a *therapeutic* one." (Routledge, 2000), p.1 In a blog for *The Stone*, "Was Wittgenstein Right?" Paul Horwich presents the keystone of Wittgenstein's "notorious doctrine" as being that "a decent approach to [philosophy] must avoid theory-construction and instead be merely 'therapeutic,' confined to exposing the irrational assumptions on which theory-oriented investigations are based and the irrational conclusions to which they lead." (NYT, [3/3/13](#)) Horwich was distilling a view he has worked out more fully in his influential book, *Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy*, (2012, see especially pp. 6-7). Throughout this study, I will refer to Diamond's, Horwich's and especially Cavell's glosses on Wittgenstein's later philosophy when they help me bring out the sense in which that philosophy resembled what Wallace attempted to do in his fiction.

³ Cf. Cavell, "Wittgenstein as Cultural Critic"

which Wallace was known for lamenting in his essays and public statements. Indeed, for Wallace, both the institutions and the rhetoric of his contemporaries were themselves facets or symptoms of a picture that had become embedded in his culture's notion of what constituted serious or sophisticated thought.

Wallace's writing has been called "a kind of exemplar for difficulty in contemporary fiction"⁴—but the contention of this study will be that, in paying insufficient attention to its philosophical ambition and target, critics have been prone to misdescribe this difficulty—or, at best, to address only the most easily digestible facets of it. Set alongside the novels to which Wallace's have often been compared (Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Barthes' *The Sot Weed Factor*, Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, DeLillo's *Underworld*), Wallace's lexical difficulty is mild, his plots entertaining and relatively easy to follow. Yet I will argue that Wallace *is* a more "difficult" writer than his most prominent literary predecessors and contemporaries, because his fiction challenges its likely readers in ways those authors did not—namely by recommending a "way of thinking" that therapeutically challenges their cultural bias toward a scientific, a theoretical, or, in some cases, a "metaphysical" approach to problem solving.

Before giving a more straightforward account of how that challenge works, I'm going to attempt—first by looking closely at an early short story, and second by examining some critical responses to Wallace's fiction—to bring out some of the fundamental features of the picture of thinking that I take to have been Wallace's therapeutic *target*. Insofar as critics have insisted on addressing predominantly the

⁴ Stephen Burn, *Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*, 10

logical or theoretical puzzles posed by Wallace's fiction, or assumed Wallace himself to be advancing a certain "theory" of fiction, or of culture, or (in the case I'll look most closely at here) of communication, they themselves have testified to the pervasiveness of the modern philosophical framework or "picture" that his fiction is arranged to challenge. Having marked out the most prominent features of the picture Wallace is addressing, and implied their relevance with reference to Wallace's academic critics, I'll briefly discuss how Wallace's therapy compares and contrasts with more familiar "therapeutic" methods we have inherited, mostly from Freud, before ending with a note on why Wallace's project is not, coming after both Freud and Wittgenstein, simply redundant.

Just as Wittgenstein emphasized different aspects of the perspective or mindset that he wanted to challenge at different times in the *Investigations*, so different works of Wallace's attempt to bring out specific features of what he took to be his readership's assumptions or habits of mind. This is to say that the *whole* picture does not emerge every time that Wallace addresses some feature of it. At the same time, it is no accident that critics have often felt any description of Wallace's fiction to be "insufficient without some account also of his readership, that social body to which his works are directed and in which they seek completion."⁵ Wallace's supporters, as much as his detractors, have spoken often of the unusually intimate

⁵ Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program." *Boundary 2*, 2014, vol. 41, p. 29

relation they bear to Wallace’s writing—something that was in evidence during the “Infinite Summer” movement, an online reading group, convened in the summer of 2009, to bring together “bibliophiles from around the world” to read and discuss Wallace’s 1,0000 page novel in 75-page weekly chunks.⁶ More recently, the film “The End of the Tour,” which chronicles four days in Wallace’s life at the end of his *Infinite Jest* book tour, has stirred up unusually personal reactions among both Wallace’s supporters and his detractors.⁷ The passion and personal pathos of responses to Wallace’s work testify in part to the fact this his fiction is intensely “dialogical,” not just in the Bahktinian sense that it gives credence to contradictory voices or viewpoints, but also in the Platonic sense, revived by Wittgenstein in his *Investigations*, of a philosophical writing which attempts to simulate a dialogue between the author and his audience. It was no accident that Wallace himself frequently referred to his fiction as a “conversation.”

But who was the conversation *with*? The question can inspire at least two different kinds of answer. So far, accounts of Wallace’s readership have most often been given in terms of demographics—Mark McGurl, for instance, hazards that Wallace’s readers are “largely young, educated, middle-class white people, mostly but not exclusively men.”⁸ Such a description—endorsed by Wallace himself in his

⁶ <http://infinitemsummer.org/>.

⁷ See, for examples of both, “Why the End of the Tour isn’t Really about my Friend David Foster Wallace,” by Glenn Kenny in *The Guardian*, 7/29/15 (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/29/why-the-end-of-the-tour-isnt-really-about-my-friend-david-foster-wallace>); and Brett Easton Ellis for “The Talkhouse,” 8/11/15: <http://thetalkhouse.com/film/talks/novelist-and-screenwriter-bret-easton-ellis-the-canyons-talks-james-ponsoldts-the-end-of-the-tour/>

⁸ *ibid*, 43

conversations with journalist David Lipsky⁹—might be verified or refuted by sales figures, which work was partially (though not exhaustively) undertaken by the critic Ed Finn, in an illuminating essay examining Amazon.com data and readers' comments about Wallace's books.¹⁰ My approach to the question of Wallace's audience, however, will start from a different angle. Since I am attempting to understand the method behind Wallace's fiction, I am more interested in what makes McGurl's demographic description—a description that is characteristic and even kneejerk among Wallace commentators—seem so apt in the first place, than I am in whether it is accurate. For to answer that first question means turning to the fiction itself—that is, to the kinds of characters that appear in Wallace's fiction, and to the sorts of problems they claim to have. An advantage of starting here is that, whereas the demographic description of Wallace's audience is often marshaled as part of an argument about the limitations of Wallace's appeal, a focus on the kinds of problems that recur in his fiction leaves open the possibility that, if white, middle-class intellectuals of a certain age have so far been most likely to recognize such problems as their own, it is still possible that Wallace's fiction might, framed in the right kind of way, come to be recognized as having relevance for a broader cross-section of modern readers.¹¹

⁹ In a line of dialogue that's repeated in the movie, Wallace describes his likely readership as "mostly white, upper middle class or upper class, [and] obscenely well educated." *Although of Course you end up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*, by David Lipsky (Broadway Books, 2010), p. 82

¹⁰ cf. Ed Finn, "Becoming Yourself: The Afterlife of Reception," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, pp. 151-177.

¹¹ Given that I precisely fit the description of Wallace's most likely demographic of readers, I realize that, in arguing for the more general significance of my demographic's problems, I may be engaging in a simple act projection. I cannot prove that I am not doing that. Besides acknowledging that not every book is for everyone, I can only defend my suspicion that, whatever addresses (what

The outlines of Wallace's imagined audience are apparent in the very first short story he ever published. Written when Wallace was still in college, "The Planet Trillaphon as it Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing" is told from the point of view of a teenager on antidepressants. Trillaphon is the name he gives to the planet he feels the antidepressants have put him on (the specific drug he's been prescribed is called *Tofranil*, but to himself he refers to it as *Trillaphon*, based on the "trilly and electrical" feeling he has when he's on it), where he is doing "somewhat better" than he was doing back "on Earth." But the story begins by describing why he had had to leave Earth in the first place, on the principle that "if someone tells you about a trip he's taken, you expect at least some explanation of why he left on the trip in the first place." The reason he had had to leave earth was because of what he calls the "Bad Thing": in other words, clinical depression. The majority of the story is taken up with his description of what it was like to live with clinical depression.

Two linked features of this description are significant for appreciating the kind of reader Wallace seems to have felt himself to be addressing. The first is that the narrator of the story presents himself as having been in pain. It seems worth mentioning, that is, that Wallace presumed his "social body" of readers to be—despite certain privileges with regard to education and class—in pain: i.e., suffering, lost, depressed, etc. The second is that the narrator indexes his pain, not to any external stimulus or event (a childhood trauma, poor treatment by friends or parents, capitalism, etc.), but to his *form of thinking*. Indeed the narrator locates the source of his problems *entirely* in his way of talking to himself. In language that

Wittgenstein called) the "real need" of any given demographic, will also be likely to address something that has relevance beyond the confines of that demographic. (cf. *Investigations*, §108)

could equally be applied to Hal Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*,¹² or to the “Depressed Person” in one of Wallace’s best-known short stories, the narrator describes his pre-antidepressant self as a “troubled little soldier who could withstand neither the substance nor the implications of the noise produced by the inside of his own head.” (PT, 9) The way to combat the Bad Thing, he goes on to say, is “clearly to think differently, to reason and argue with yourself, just to change the way you’re perceiving and sensing and processing stuff.” (PT, 12) This is made difficult by the fact that the depression makes its home in the very mind you need to have control over if you’re going to “think differently.”

Wallace addresses a readership that he presumes to be in pain, and whose pain is connected to, and possibly a function of, a certain way of thinking. These are foundational points that I will assume for the rest of this dissertation, as I take them to be obvious to anyone who spends any time reading Wallace’s fiction—and they are not seriously contested in the criticism. So far, though, we have merely outlined the mental predicament of Wallace’s audience; we have not brought out the set of assumptions or (what Wittgenstein would have called) “connections” that really compose their picture of the world. And not every feature of that picture is evident in “The Planet Trillaphon.” However, what I take to be a foundational aspect of that picture is evident, albeit in embryo form. The foundational assumption that the story brings out is indicated in the boy’s conflation of “thinking differently,” with the ability to “reason and argue with yourself.” The boy assumes that what it will take to “change the way” he perceives the world and quiet the “noise” in his head is a

¹² It might be relevant in this context to allude to a recent discovery, in the Wallace archive, that Hal (on which much more in chapter two) was originally named “Dave” in Wallace’s notes.

soundly reasoned argument. This is what he assumes thinking differently amounts to.

That this assumption is not just a function of the boy's personality, or of his immediate cultural environment, but is in fact rooted in a *philosophical* confusion, is alluded to, if only briefly, when the boy hazards what is likely to strike most readers as an extremely bizarre description of his feeling when he's depressed as being "like Descartes at the start of his second thing" (PT, 10). By "second thing" he means the "Second Meditation," which begins with Descartes' admission that "yesterday's meditation has thrown me into such doubts that I can no longer ignore them, yet I fail to see how they are to be resolved. It is as if I had suddenly fallen into a deep whirlpool; I am so tossed about that I can neither touch bottom with my foot, nor swim to the top."¹³ The whirlpool metaphor gives some clue as to why the comparison might have recommended itself to Wallace (he has just analogized the feeling of depression to being "under a body of water that has no surface" [PT, 10]), but it hardly exhausts its implications. It can be said that it is in Descartes' second thing that the tenor of modern philosophy—and therefore, for a writer like Wallace, the tenor of modern thought—is established. Having been thrown into doubt (but he threw himself into it, of course) in the previous day about questions so fundamental as whether he is awake, and exists, the philosophical investigator now decides that he will "stay on the course" he has undertaken until he knows "something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least know for certain that nothing is

¹³ Rene Descartes, "Meditation Two: Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind: That It Is Better Known than the Body." In *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, eds. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress, p. 13

certain.” By the end of the meditation, he has convinced himself that there is one certain thing—his thinking. This means that he is “precisely nothing but a thinking thing; that is, a mind, or intellect, or understanding, or reason ...”¹⁴

The point is not that Descartes must have been depressed when he came to that conclusion, but that depression, for the narrator of Wallace’s story, is related in some way to a Cartesian approach to problem solving. Before moving on to describe what I take to be Wallace’s objection to the appropriateness of this approach in this context, I want to pause to emphasize the fact that, in situating whatever ails his characters in such a way, Wallace suggests that, whatever their problems are, they cannot be *merely* attributed to their exposure to new forms of media like television, or to the addictive seductions of late capitalism, or to the jargon-filled pabulum of conventional therapeutic discourse, or even to the “value-neutral” forms¹⁵ taken by the most popular advanced art and theory of Wallace’s era. All of these cultural phenomena play prominent roles in the mature Wallace’s fiction, and at different times can be said to contribute to or exacerbate the “dis-ease” (as one of the AA veterans in *Jest* puts it) of his characters. One of the truly philosophical things about Wallace as a thinker, though, was that he considered culture *as a whole* to be

¹⁴ *ibid*, 13, 15

¹⁵ “The depressed person’s therapist, whose school of therapy rejected the transference relation as a therapeutic resource and thus deliberately eschewed confrontation and “should”-statements and all normative, judging, “authority”-based theory in favor of a more value-neutral bioexperiential model and the creative use of analogy and narrative (including, but not necessarily mandating, the use of hand puppets, polystyrene props and toys, role-playing ... and in appropriate cases, whole meticulously scripted and storyboarded Childhood Reconstructions), had deployed the following medications in an attempt to help the depressed person find some relief from her acute affective discomfort and progress in her (i.e., the depressed person’s) journey toward enjoying some semblance of a normal adult life: Paxil, Zoloft, Prozac, Tofranil, Welbutrin, Elavil, Metrazol in combination with unilateral ECT ... None had delivered any significant relief from the pain and feelings of emotional isolation that rendered the depressed person’s every waking hour an indescribable hell on earth...” From “The Depressed Person,” in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, p. 40.

disciplined toward certain ideals or pictures of what constituted sophisticated or healthy thought. Therefore whatever habits of thought had become natural to his characters, they were likely also to be infecting many of the cultural institutions that those characters turned to for help or relief. The absence of virtually any contemporary signifiers in “Planet Trillaphon” shows what is most fundamental: the Cartesian approach lies deeper than, and therefore informs the development of, all the usual “postmodern” suspects that it is tempting to focus on as the villains in Wallace’s fiction.

To return to the question of what might be objectionable about that approach, art in general, and sometimes Wallace in particular, has at times been associated with a challenge to Descartes’ seemingly limiting conclusion that we are “thinking things.”¹⁶ This is not, however, the assumption that Wallace takes aim at in his fiction; he does not, that is, propose that affect, or faith, or belief in something bigger than ourselves, represent ways of proceeding that are superior to “thinking.”¹⁷ What Wallace does take aim at is Descartes’ assumption that the same *kind of thinking* which threw the boy into a whirlpool of doubt will prove capable of rescuing him from it. For Descartes, the way to assuage doubt is to arrive at the knowledge of “something certain.” The way this knowledge is to be achieved is by

¹⁶ Initially one might think of the kind of romantic art that privileges the emotions or the passions over the intellect, but the point can be extended to include much postmodern literary criticism. In recent years, a series of challenges to the Cartesian notion of the human as the thinking animal have been united under the title of “affect theory,” which has privileged emotional, neurological, or otherwise non-intentional processes over intentional or self-conscious uses of reason.

¹⁷ It is no accident, though, that many critics have attributed versions of this move to Wallace, something I will discuss in the next section of this Introduction. In my view, to accept any of these conclusions is to accept that Wallace’s engagement with philosophy was either incidental or oppositional—since it makes his project *anti*-philosophical—rather than (as I am arguing) that his fiction manifests a philosophical ambition.

reasoning one's way to the right theory; that is, a theory that corresponds with a "true" state of affairs. And this reasoning will involve—a subsidiary point but still an important one for Wallace, as it was for Wittgenstein—the theoretical re-definition of certain words and concepts (such as "seeing" or "thinking"), for otherwise the investigator might be "deceived by the ways in which people commonly speak."¹⁸

To say that Wallace was a philosophically therapeutic writer in the Wittgensteinian sense is in large part to suggest that his fiction represented a challenge to what he took to be these guiding assumptions of Descartes' investigation: that serious thinking begins with the questioning of common language and common sense (that we are awake, that we exist, that we know what a word like "awake" means),¹⁹ and proceeds, via what Quine once called "semantic ascent,"²⁰ to establish certainty about common usage or common sense where before there had existed (according to this picture) either doubt, ambiguity, or a false and ungrounded *illusion* of certainty. The technique takes its model from science and the mathematical proof. Its criteria of success are (a) the invulnerability of its premises to logical counter-argument and (b) that the conclusion allows us to replace confusion or error about some phenomena with certainty, even if that certainty consists (a possibility Descartes allows for) in our knowledge of the impossibility of certainty.²¹

¹⁸ Descartes, 17

¹⁹ Also, by implication of what we share in common—i.e. institutions.

²⁰ Quine, "Semantic Ascent," in *The Linguistic Turn*, ed. Richard Rorty, p. 169. I will return to the phrase, but the reference is also meant to emphasize the degree to which the Cartesian approach, especially to language, could still be seen in operation a couple of centuries later.

²¹ To put it explicitly, as Cavell often did, this tradition of thinking assumes that there are only two conclusions, once it has undertaken the investigation of a given phenomenon: certainty, or skepticism.

(As for *why* the Cartesian or “scientistic” [as it is sometimes called, for reasons I will go further into in Chapter 1] ideal of thinking has become so pervasive in contemporary, Western culture, that is a question for which philosophers and intellectual historians have provided many compelling answers: secularization, capitalism, grammar, the obvious practical advantages of scientific reason, etc. But, taking a cue from the AA portion of *Jest*, where the addicts are instructed to avoid the wormhole of “why,” I will focus in this dissertation not so much on providing a causal account of how we got here, as on helping the reader to recognize how this ideal functions across various spheres of our society: from the way we talk about politics and institutions, to the way we talk about mental health, to the way we talk about (and therefore experience) social relationships, literature and our own inner lives. It is possible, even probable, that the Cartesian form of thinking is related to the very structure of modern society, something some of Wallace’s commentators wish he had spent more time addressing the reform of. What he did believe—and this is why I think it is important to locate the therapeutic impulse at the very foundation of his fiction—was that it was possible for individuals, in our current society, to reform themselves. All they needed to free themselves from the habitual reproduction of Cartesian-style scientism, he believed, was to catch themselves in the act of succumbing to it.)

Descartes’ conclusions are widely contested in modern philosophy, and even his picture of what philosophy should look like has been subject to deep challenges, by philosophers as variable as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. What distinguishes and makes Wallace’s fictional treatment of it relevant and interesting

is his identification of Descartes' approach with what has become a habitual way of thinking (and not just among *philosophers*) about the self. This way of thinking about the self may, Wallace concedes, have its uses, but it offers no comfort to a person in pain; indeed it often ushers them ever deeper into the regressive spiral of doubt that has given rise to the pain in the first place. The beginnings of Wallace's response to the problem can be glimpsed with reference to the fact that, in "Planet Trillaphon," it is not a better theory (or, as the boy might put it, "*arguing differently*") that helps change the boy's way of perceiving the world. Within the story, there is only one thing that makes the boy feel "somewhat better," and that is the antidepressant Tofranil. It is not a complete solution. The boy misses several things about being back "on Earth," feels distant from other people and himself, and moreover is not convinced that the Bad Thing will not eventually appear on his new planet. At the same time, the way the boy describes his new state of being on Trillaphon shows something about what Wallace believed was involved in "thinking differently." On Planet Trillaphon, the boy sees things differently than he did on Earth. But this is not because he has come up with a new *argument*; in fact he cannot say *why* he no longer feels the force of the Bad Thing, now that he is on Planet Trillaphon. He simply does not feel that he is in its grip anymore. (The story could be received as an exposition on Wittgenstein's pronouncement from the *Tractatus*: "The world of the happy man is a different world from that of the unhappy man.")²²

I choose to focus on this early short story, however, because it offers an unusually transparent view of the picture Wallace wanted to treat, not because it

²² Cf. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Cosimo Dover, 1998, 6.43, p. 87

provides a model for *how* he would later endeavor to treat it. In fact “Planet Trillaphon” contains the seeds of its own self-criticism—judged from a therapeutic perspective—when the boy, having just delved into some of the details of his previous depression, confesses that “even thinking about it a little bit and being introspective and all that, I can feel [the Bad Thing] reaching out for me.” (PT, 12-13) Here the boy expresses what we can safely take to be Wallace’s own cautiousness about the pitfalls (and also the seductiveness) of Cartesian-style introspection. The story itself, however, recruits our sympathy for a character who is unable to do much more than expose us to his pain; and report that a drug has made him feel “somewhat better” about it. As with much other fiction about depression, it thus risks tipping over into a romanticization of its subject—or of encouraging its reader in the “frankly idealistic” assumption that Wallace would associate, in his well-known essay on television, with “early postmodern irony”: namely that “etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom.”²³ (The assumption goes back at least to Freud, if not to Descartes.)

Insofar as Wallace presumes that fiction can and should do more than simply describe and diagnose pain—that it should actually try and “treat” it—the story thus hints at the need for a new form of storytelling. Viewing his mature fiction as a “series of examples” in the Wittgensteinian mode is a way of viewing it as a series of treatments, akin but philosophically superior to Tofranil in the story, for what he takes to be the various forms of contemporary despair that are related to the picture

²³ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, p. 67

I have begun to sketch above. For them to be philosophically superior means that we can give some account, outside of physiology, for *how* they address those forms of despair. But what kind of account would this be? From the story we have discussed so far, all we know is that these treatments will *not* depend on Cartesian-style argumentation and explanation. But how could a form of writing that itself makes liberal use of argument and explanation, as Wallace's does, actually challenge our conflation of "thinking" with a certain form of—explanatory, argumentative—thinking?

That is a question I hope this dissertation will go some way toward answering (or showing how Wallace answered) through a detailed reading of Wallace's mature fiction. In the first chapter of what follows, I intend to justify what I call philosophically therapeutic criticism as a mode for engaging with literary texts like Wallace's. In chapters two through four, I will offer readings of three of Wallace's works of fiction—*Infinite Jest*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, and *Pale King*—all viewed in terms of the "different therapies" they offer their readers. Although there is considerable overlap in the content and methods used in all three books, I'll attempt to emphasize the way that each brings out, or attempts to get its reader to recognize, a particular "picture" that is restricting her from achieving something she claims to want. In my chapter on *Jest*, the focus will be on the Wittgensteinian challenge (especially evident in the AA sections) that is posed to the Cartesian picture (especially evident in the opening scene) of what Robert Pippin has called "modern and postmodern self-consciousness."²⁴ In the chapter on *Brief*

²⁴ *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, by Robert Pippin (Wiley-Blackwell, 2nd Ed., 1999), p. 6

Interviews, I will home in on Wallace’s treatment of a particular way of speaking about other people—which has consequences for the relationships we attempt to form both in everyday social life and through literary fiction. In the *Pale King* chapter, I’ll emphasize the distinction Wallace draws between his own (philosophical) therapy and more conventional therapeutic techniques (something I’ll touch on as well in the chapter on *Jest*), as well as discuss Wallace’s attempt to extend *his* form of therapy into the spiritual sphere. In the conclusion, I’ll offer some thoughts on what it means to conceive of Wallace as a philosophical artist—and if, indeed, we might not do better to think of him as an artistic philosopher.

One benefit of the approach I plan to take here will be to expand the scope of philosophical thinking about Wallace, putting him in dialogue not only with Wittgenstein but also with some of the other philosophers that come up repeatedly in his fiction—for instance Hegel, Kant and Descartes, as well as other writers I consider to share a notion of philosophy as fundamentally therapeutic, such as Kierkegaard, Thoreau and Cavell. A second benefit, which I will expand on below, is to yield an appreciation for the consistency of Wallace’s mature writing, where critics have often found inconsistency or contradiction.²⁵ For the consistency

²⁵ Below I’ll focus more on academic criticism of Wallace’s work, but here it might also be helpful to say something briefly about a view held often by his non-academic critics. During Wallace’s life, it was common for book reviewers and cultural commentators (James Wood, Michiko Kakutani, Walter Kirn, A.O. Scott) to point out that, although in his essays and public statements Wallace might denounce the formal sophistication, reflexivity and “poisonous irony” of postmodernism in the arts, his novels were nevertheless filled with irony, metafictional intrusions, self-referential footnotes and

inheres not in any theory that Wallace argues for with regard to technology, communication, self-consciousness, institutions, individualism or politics, but rather in the approach he takes to all of these subject matters, and in what he conceived of as being his fiction's therapeutic activity.

A good way of appreciating the importance of that activity for Wallace's readers is by examining the tendency of critics (who are some of his most passionate readers) to resist it. The initial set of academic responses to Wallace's fiction almost invariably concluded that it could be utilized to illustrate or advance arguments about subjectivity, language or media, the outlines of which were already familiar from the era of Big Theory in academia. In *Consider David Foster Wallace* (2010)—the earliest collection of academic essays on Wallace's fiction—Wallace's writing is said to illustrate theoretical constructions previously worked out by Ricoeur, Baudrillard, Jameson, Rorty and Derrida, among others. An initial problem

pop-culture references reminiscent of the high-postmodern productions of Pynchon, DeLillo, and Barth. This "contradiction" was attributed sometimes to poor personal discipline—often but not always related to Wallace's well-known problems with addiction—and sometimes to an irreconcilable contradiction within Wallace's corpus.

Those wishing to defend Wallace from such charges largely did so by means of omission, emphasizing *either* the Wallace that carried forward the project of his high-postmodern precursors (see Tom LeClair, "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, Richard Vollman and David Foster Wallace." [*Critique* 38.1], as well as Sven Birkerts's rave review of *Infinite Jest*, "The Alchemist's Retort: A Multilayered Postmodern Saga of Damnation and Salvation." [*The Atlantic Monthly*, February, 1996]), or the Wallace who spoke of returning fiction from the clutches of literary theory to what he once called the "desperate questions" of individual experience (cf. Nathan Heller's, "David Foster Wallace: why he inspires such devotion in his fans" [*Slate*, 4/21/11], John Jeremiah Sullivan's "Too Much Information." [*GQ*, May, 2011], and Jenny Turner's "Illuminating, Horrible, Etc.," [*London Review of Books*. April, 2011], as well as my own 2009 essay, "Death is not the End," [*The Point*, Issue 1]). But the either/or framework for defending Wallace's project, just as much as the criticism of that project as being contradictory or undisciplined, relies on what I will argue is an unsophisticated conception of Wallace's Wittgensteinian *use* of experimental techniques (only some of which were "postmodern") to communicate with his audience. These techniques—the footnotes, the fake interviews, the endless, recursive sentences—were used, in most cases, not to advance a "theory" of fiction but to expose whatever theory of fiction—which was also, always, a theory of thinking—that Wallace believed was being habitually idealized by his readers. That is part of what I mean in calling those techniques "therapeutic."

with such an approach is that Wallace's fiction was often *addressed* to the ideas and rhetoric of such thinkers, and therefore could not be reduced to a demonstration of them. A larger problem with it is that it presumed that Wallace's fiction was engaged primarily in a theoretical argument—regarding the impossibility of the “unitary self” (Claire Hayes-Bady), or the death of the autonomous subject (Mary Holland, N. Katharine Hayles), or our “loss of reality” in postmodernism (Connie Luther), whereas in my view his fiction is engineered to challenge our attraction to, not just one specific theory or another, but to the theoretical approach *as a whole*.

More sophisticated criticism of Wallace has begun to appear in recent years, and frequently it has focused on what I take to be a more plausible evaluation of his project with regard to postmodern (and other) “theory.” Although this wave of critics has sometimes associated Wallace's ideas with that of prominent literary theorists (for instance Adam Kelly sees his approach to communication as Derridean, while Lee Konstantinou sees his conception of institutions as “vaguely Foucaultean”—on both of which more below), usually to misleading effect, they have also recognized his animus against the most familiar manifestations of high-postmodernist art and theory. Indeed the more recent group of critics have often gone further, concluding that Wallace considers our contemporary intellects to be so hopelessly corrupted by media, or culture, that he appeals instead to his readers to simply “believe” (Lee Konstantinou), to invest their “Blind faith” in him as an author (Adam Kelly), to reconnect with their feelings (Timothy Aubry), to take a

“leap of faith” (Zadie Smith), or to give over their agency to the care of institutions (Mark McGurl).²⁶

The earliest example of this mode of criticism was Adam Kelly’s “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” which has been called “the best work” to come out of the *Consider David Foster Wallace* conference that gave rise to the collection.²⁷ I choose here to focus on Kelly’s essay in part because it represents one of the most sophisticated attempts to engage with the philosophical intent of Wallace fiction, and also because, by focusing on sincerity, it addresses a topic that was clearly important both to Wallace and to his critics. Virtually since Wallace’s name began to enter the public consciousness, it has been thought that he was advancing some novel theory of literary communication and especially of literary sincerity. Yet in attempting to describe that theory, his critics have often, on my interpretation, fallen into the very Cartesian trap that Wallace is attempting to chart a course out of. This is to say that they seem ineluctably pulled toward a scientific or metaphysical frame for their investigations of sincerity in Wallace’s fiction. According to this frame, Wallace *either* advances a new theory of sincerity, *or* he attempts to demonstrate to his readers that sincerity is simply an inappropriate object for rational consideration.²⁸ Their tendency, which Wallace had first illuminated in the Planet Trillaphon story, to make personal and interpersonal

²⁶ Smith and Kelly generally approve of Wallace’s move in this direction; Aubry, Konstantinou and McGurl are all critical of it to varying extents.

²⁷ Stephen Burn, *Modernism/modernity*, (18.2), April, 2011, p. 466. The quotation marks are not meant to signal any skepticism about this judgment, only that those are Burn’s words. I agree with them.

²⁸ A third option, evident in some more negative criticism of Wallace, is that he advances a theory of sincerity in his non-fiction, but that his fiction demonstrates either his inability to live up this theory, or the inability of fiction in general to live up to it.

problems into theoretical problems—was itself both a cause and a symptom of the despair or “lostness” that Wallace’s fiction documented and attempted to treat.

As I suggested above, Kelly’s essay represents the most sophisticated and perceptive entry into the literature on Wallace and sincerity,²⁹ connecting Wallace’s self-conscious rhetoric about sincerity and intentionality with Derrida’s use of a certain “way of writing” to undermine the “metaphysical assumptions” of his audience. I am sympathetic, especially, to Kelly’s claim that for Wallace “true sincerity” and intention could not be determined theoretically; indeed Kelly shows how Wallace’s familiarity with the “use” of sincerity in modern advertising and art (“sincerity with an ulterior motive,” as Wallace called it)³⁰ had made him especially sensitive to sincerity’s unverifiability in any given circumstance. At the same time, Kelly’s conflation of Wallace’s and Derrida’s approach to sincerity and authorial intentionality ends up leading him down the very (quasi-Cartesian) path that I take Wallace, throughout his fiction, to be attempting to warn his readers against. It is as if, having concluded that sincerity cannot be proved theoretically, Kelly is *forced* to the conclusion that it must be illusory, something we only imagine we know anything about. And the way he gets to that conclusion can serve as a kind of object lesson in both the attractions and the dangers of this path of inquiry.

Having established that Wallace shares Derrida’s impression that it is impossible, in practice, to ever determine for certain whether “any single event of giving or receiving is the genuine article or not,” Kelly suggests that Wallace also

²⁹ A topic he expanded on in a more recent essay, entitled “Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace,” for *Post45* (10/17/14). For our purposes, the new essay does not add anything of significance to Kelly’s original claims about Wallace’s conception of sincerity.

³⁰ In *Infinite Jest* (369). Quoted by Kelly on p. 141

agrees with Derrida that there is therefore “no way to present sincerity positively in cognitive terms.”³¹ Were it not for the final two words (“cognitive terms”), this statement might immediately strike us as extreme (can it really be possible that there is *no* way to present sincerity positively?)—yet the qualification has dropped out by the time Kelly suggests, a few pages later, that “in Wallace’s fiction the guarantee of the writer’s intentions cannot finally lie in representation—sincerity is rather the kind of secret that must always break with representation.”³² The position is calculated to repel what are taken to be two mistaken views about intentionality and sincerity. One is the “naïve” view that the author’s intentions are obviously present on the surface of a given text. The other is that “true sincerity” can be ascertained if one looks deeply enough into the text, using the right theoretical tools. Surely there is something dissatisfying about both of these conclusions: the first appears to be innocent of the problem (as if it a writer’s intentions were always perfectly transparent), while the second misrecognizes the problem as (what Stanley Cavell would call) a problem of knowledge.³³ Kelly is right to reject both positions as insufficient but, from what I am arguing is the Wittgenstein-Wallace perspective, his rejection of the second position turns out to be incomplete, since it accepts that position’s framing of sincerity and intentionality as concepts with abstract theoretical content—which, in ideal (say non-textual) conditions, it would be possible for us to achieve certainty about. Since it is not possible for literature—and especially contemporary literature—to provide those conditions, Kelly, drawing

³¹ Kelly, 140, 141

³² *ibid*, 143

³³ *ibid*, p. 140

heavily from Derrida, claims that literary intentionality and sincerity must be “secrets” which lie “beyond representation” and can be accessed *only* through an act on the reader’s part of “trust and Blind Faith.”³⁴

Better than any of Wittgenstein’s other commentators, Stanley Cavell has made clear why Wittgenstein would, when a discussion seemed to be running along such a track, appeal to our “ordinary” use of language. Wittgenstein’s point, as Cavell says, was not that ordinary language is always superior to theoretical language (for some purposes, theoretical or technical language is clearly superior), but that such an appeal can sometimes bring us to confront “the illusions produced by our employing words in the absence of (any) language game which provides their comprehensive employment (cf. §96).”³⁵ The illusion produced by Kelly’s discussion of “sincerity”—which is a discussion he takes himself to be having through Lionel Trilling with the philosophical tradition—is that the word can mean anything at all (whether “secret” or not) once it is abstracted from its role in a specific act of communication. Part of the task of Wallace’s fiction, as I’ll expand on particularly in chapters two and three, is to remind his reader of the contexts that give concepts like intentionality and sincerity their urgency in the first place. How do I deduce what you intend from what you say? *It depends*. If we are face to face, I might look at your eyes, interpret your body language, or consider (if I have known you for a while) how far your words are supported by your past behavior. Art may not allow for *those* kinds of considerations, but that does not mean we are cast with it into the realm of guesswork and omens. If I have read enough, I will get a feel for when a

³⁴ Kelly, 143, 146

³⁵ Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 65

writer means what she says. I might find that her writing helps or hurts me—that it knows or is ignorant of my real needs. Or I may not be able to shake the sense that I am being merely flattered; that not enough is being required of me or that the author is simply “showing off.” Indeed there are *countless* ways for me to judge, based on the words I hear or read—the sincerity of their author.³⁶ (Which does not mean I might not be led to believe, based on further reading, or living—or because someone convinces me with a superior argument—that I was initially mistaken in my judgment.)³⁷ Because Kelly accepts the premise that sincerity and intentionality can be interrogated as theoretical (we could say “metaphysical”) abstractions, he is led to posit that, if they are not completely transparent to our analytical reason, then the reader must only be able to access them via some non-rational process like

³⁶ I cannot go here into all the ways that Wallace himself gets his reader to think this way: that will be the work of chapter three. I do wish however to challenge Kelly’s use of one bit of evidence, from Wallace’s nonfiction, to support his own reading of Wallace’s position on authorial intentionality. Kelly notes a distinction Wallace draws, in his review of Bryan A. Garner’s *Dictionary of Modern Usage*, between two kinds of appeals a writer can make to his readers: the Logical Appeal and the Ethical Appeal. In that essay, Wallace praises Garner for making the Ethical appeal, which he describes as “a complex and sophisticated ‘Trust Me.’ It’s the boldest, most ambitious, and also most democratic of rhetorical appeals because it requires the rhetor to convince us not just of his intellectual acuity or technical competence but of his basic decency and fairness and sensitivity to the audience’s own hopes and fears.” (*Lobster*, 77) While Kelly takes this to support his claim that Wallace considers authorial sincerity to be a matter of “Blind Faith” on the part of the reader, I would emphasize two things about the passage that should complicate such an equation. First, trust and “blind faith” are not the same—and the difference between them makes a difference, with regard to the quotation. Trust is often if not always granted for a reason that can be communicated to another person, even if that person does not agree with the reason, whereas blind faith by definition excludes reasons (it is not blind in the relevant sense if there is a reason for it). Wallace’s “Trust me” is therefore not equivalent to Kelly’s idea that he is asking the reader to have “Blind Faith” in him. Second, Wallace does not put the burden for determining the validity of the ethical appeal on the *reader*. I do not say that Wallace considers the reader to be an entirely passive member of the author-reader relationship, but in this quotation particularly he stresses that it is the ethical author’s job to rhetorically *convince* the reader of his decency, fairness and sensitivity. This means it is his job to give the reader reason to trust him. Trust, that is, is the end-result of the Ethical appeal, not its precondition.

³⁷ This would only rarely take the form of finding out some matter of fact about the writer (for instance, that James Frey did not go through what he said he went through in his memoir, or that an author had been paid to write the story by an advertiser)—besides those kinds of special cases (and even in those the situation is not simple), try imagining others where it could be “proven” that a writer was in fact insincere.

intuition or faith.³⁸ But it is precisely this premise, or “conjuring trick,” as Wittgenstein would have called it, that Wallace intends for us to take notice of. For such a dichotomy only appears attractive once we make the problem of literary intentionality seem theoretical as opposed to practical³⁹—a move that has been habitual, in literary criticism, since at least the days of Wimsatt and Beardsley. Once the problem appears, it appears to be insoluble.

For Wallace, as I suggested at the beginning of this section, the tendency to make personal and interpersonal problems into theoretical problems—and then to try and solve them via abstract argument—was itself connected to the despair or “lostness” that he often claimed to observe in his friends and contemporaries. He did not mean only to question the “metaphysical assumptions” (as Kelly, quoting Derrida, calls them) of his readers, but also (and more importantly) to address their habit of *making their problems look metaphysical*. “The first step is the one that altogether escapes notice,” wrote Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*. “We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometime perhaps we shall know more about them—we think. But that is just what commits us to a particular

³⁸ The same reasoning leads smoothly to the “death of the author” conclusion, which holds that since we can never know why an author has written what he has written, we should treat the text as being *completely* detached from any notion of intentionality.

³⁹ Although I do not intend to get very deep into such arguments in this dissertation, my view on the relation between art and “conversation” shares some things in common with Noel Carroll’s argument that our attitude toward artworks can be analogized to our attitude toward conversations in the sense that “we have interests in artworks that are like the interests we have in many conversations—namely, interests in understanding our interlocutor.” (cf. “Art, Intention and Conversation,” 1992) Of course, different artworks can set us off in radically different directions in terms of how we are supposed to evaluate the author’s intention—that said, I take Carroll to be making explicit what is basically a common-sense view, notwithstanding how controversial it may seem to literary theorists. When we read literary fiction, we want to know what the author is trying to tell us. And we have various strategies, just like we do in conversations, for figuring that out. (Of course, the author himself may not know everything he is trying to tell us, just like our interlocutor in a conversation might communicate to us more, or something different, than that which he had “intended” to communicate.)

way of looking at the matter.”⁴⁰ It is this first step—often in an argument they are having with themselves—that Wallace wants to get his readers to recognize. For once the problem has been detached, so to speak, from its foundations,⁴¹ no amount of “arguing with ourselves” will close the gap. The therapeutic task, then, is not to find some “secret” that will close that gap, but to bring the concepts in question *back*, as Wittgenstein famously put it, “from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”

There are other examples of Wallace’s commentators seeming to repeat the habits of thought in their criticism that I take Wallace to be attempting to undermine, which I will address in turn as I examine the specific works.⁴² I want to proceed here instead by offering a fuller sense than I have so far of what kinds of things I mean when I speak of Wallace’s literary method(s) as being philosophically *therapeutic*.

Therapy, of course, can mean many different things, related but also all distinct. The word comes from the Latin *therapia*, from the Greek *therapeia*, meaning “curing, healing, service done to the sick.” It can be proper to speak of almost any medicine or course of treatment for a health problem as a “therapy,” and

⁴⁰ PI, §308

⁴¹ “It may easily look as if every doubt merely revealed an existing gap in the foundations; so that secure understanding is only possible if we first doubt everything that can be doubted, and then remove all these doubts.” (PI, §87)

⁴² As I’ll say more about in chapter one, an assumption of therapeutic criticism is that, whatever the text under discussion is trying to get its reader to recognize, resistance to that recognition will likely be manifest in the criticism of that text. (This is one way we can measure the relevance of the therapy to that text’s audience.)

health professionals will often speak of “gene therapy,” “hormone therapy,” etc., in just this way. In common speech, however, we use the word “therapy” on its own especially in reference to the kind of “talking cure” that has been popularized since Freud (this is usually what we mean when we ask someone if they have “been to therapy.”) The relevant difference for our purposes has to do with the patient’s level of participation in, and awareness of, her treatment. When the treatment is purely physiological, as in the “Planet Trillaphon” story, the patient will not be able to give any non-scientific account of how her health has improved. The ideal of Freudian therapy—“To make the unconscious conscious”—on the other hand, links a cessation of suffering to the achievement of self-understanding (especially an understanding of what is causing the suffering), which is what makes it so potentially congenial to philosophy. It is also why Freudian therapy originally and for many of its inheritors still predominantly focuses on etiology and diagnosis, under the presumption that these are the fastest routes to self-understanding and thereby health.

The later Freud would, however, de-emphasize the importance of diagnosis and etiology in favor of procedures by which the psychoanalyst, especially through the process of transference, could compel her patient to recognize how she was applying (or “projecting”) habitual or inherited frames of understanding to a current situation, for which it was likely inappropriate. No matter how well she understood the causes of her sickness, the thought went, it was only through being able to recognize its operation *in situ* that the patient could begin to free herself from it. The later Freud thus prefigures, in various interesting ways that we cannot fully explore

here, the notion of philosophical therapy advanced by Wittgenstein, which is also designed to catch its audience “in the act,” so to speak, of habitually applying a frame (in reference to philosophers, this could be a “metaphysical frame,” or a “logical frame”) to a problem for which it might be inappropriate.⁴³

To summarize and expand on what I have attempted to say above, then, Wallace can be seen as carrying on Wittgenstein’s therapeutic project insofar as his fiction is viewed as a “series of examples,” engineered to confront his readers with the mismatch between the *form* of their problems and the means they were habitually applying in attempting to solve them. Wallace shared with Wittgenstein the conviction that we are able to move beyond specific philosophical problems only once the inherent confusion in the picture or form of life that produces those problems becomes real to us. A picture being real to us means that we recognize it *as* a picture, and therefore something that we could choose to free ourselves from. And the mechanism for making a picture real to ourselves (to really allow us to “see” it) is a matter finally not of (what Wittgenstein called) “explanation,” but of description or representation—something the fiction writer ought to be at least as prepared to deliver as the philosopher (or the psychoanalyst, for that matter).⁴⁴ One example of Wallace’s therapeutic technique was described in the previous section as helping his reader see the “conjuring trick” by which an everyday problem has come

⁴³ I’m thankful to my classmate Ben Jeffery for sharing a paper on Wittgenstein and Freud that helped me think through this relationship.

⁴⁴ As I’ll discuss in chapter one, and in my conclusion, some of the resistance among philosophers to taking Wittgenstein’s method (or “meta-philosophy,” as Paul Horwich calls it) as seriously as he meant it may stem from the fact that doing so appears to make it difficult to tell the difference between philosophy and related activities such as psychoanalysis, or fiction.

to look like a metaphysical one. A few other examples of Wallace's therapeutic techniques are as follows:

1.) **Revaluation:** In several places—but perhaps most prominently in the form of Alcoholics Anonymous orderly Don Gately in *Infinite Jest*, and of the IRS auditor “irrelevant” Chris Fogle in *Pale King*—Wallace presents typologies of thought and behavior that he knows would normally be dismissed by his readership (often represented within the fiction by characters who themselves dismiss them) as corny, banal or simplistic. Just by making the thought processes of such characters philosophically *compelling* (Gately can sound a lot like Wittgenstein, Fogle like Kierkegaard), Wallace challenges his readership's assumptions about what kinds of patterns and problems are truly worthy of their attention. It is one measure of Wallace's readership's need of such therapy that so many early critics assumed that Wallace was only half-serious in his recommendation of such characters, or that there are elaborate jokes being played at their expense. Indeed, Wallace does stop short of straightforward valorization of these figures, using formal and rhetorical tools to undermine his reader's ability to identify directly with or to romanticize them (one critic has called them “ethical countertypes”⁴⁵). But just to find oneself *interested* in such figures becomes a therapeutic exercise insofar as it prompts the reader to re-examine her former presuppositions about what merits interest, which may (or may not) now emerge as ungrounded or arbitrary.

⁴⁵ Konstantinou, “No Bull,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, p. 85

2.) **Disenchantment/Criticism:** In many ways the flipside to (1), Wallace attempts to disenchant his readers with modes of thought and behavior, such as those represented by the “hideous men” in his collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, which he saw as having been idealized by his and his previous generation’s advanced artists and intellectuals. These artists can be said to fall into two camps: on the one hand, the postwar realists (Updike, Roth, Mailer), and on the other the metafictionists or postmodernists (Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon, DeLillo), with their allies in critical theory (Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, Baudrillard). I will claim that the *Brief Interviews* collection, as a whole, seeks to express and to criticize (seeks to criticize *by* expressing) what Wallace saw these two camps of writers as sharing in common—namely, an unreflective (for all their “reflexivity”) self-absorption or narcissism which demonstrated itself in the former case in a romanticization of alienation and misogyny, and in the latter in what Wallace conceived of as an addiction to abstraction or “theory.” Again, Wallace criticism has suggested that his readers remain far from sober in especially the second sense: it is impossible to do justice to the spirit of his critique of postmodern theory as a rhetorical tool if one attributes something resembling a “theory” of fiction, or culture, or subjectivity, to Wallace himself.

3.) **Illustration/Examples:** In the most straightforwardly Wittgensteinian of his methods, Wallace seeks to illustrate, via concrete examples, the *costs* of the impasses he believed his readers to have reached concerning certain topics at the nexus of philosophy and practice, including but not limited to communication, subjectivity and solipsism. (I will examine in detail one prominent example of this

strategy in Chapter 2.) One of the things Wallace wanted to show in such cases was how what had become customary and seductive modes of addressing such topics often aggravated, as opposed to alleviating, what he considered to be the most urgent forms of contemporary distress. This form of therapy often begins as a critique of proximately “postmodern” habits of thought, but it views such habits (as I have argued above) as products of a “scientific” approach to emotional and social life that both precedes and survives postmodernism.

In all three cases, the ambition is to help the reader recognize her captivation by one picture or another (often memorably represented in the minds of Wallace’s characters as “cages”). I cannot claim that such techniques are always *effective*; that is something each reader can only know for herself. What I will insist on is that, at its best, Wallace’s writing was not prescriptive, in the sense of advancing a theoretical construct capable of guiding our conduct. Although Wallace provides some hints—increasingly strong hints in his later fiction (see Chapter four)—about what his reader might do if she manages to free herself from her various bewitchments, Wallace’s best writing is, as Cavell says of Freud’s and the later Wittgenstein’s writing, “deeply practical and negative.”⁴⁶ It is intended to “aggravate” our sense of—and therefore to get us to really *see*—the cages in which we already live; what we should do once we get out is left largely up to us.

⁴⁶ Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” in *MWM*, 72

Saying more about such methods and their deployment in actual fictional settings will be the work of the ensuing chapters. But I want to end this introduction by dealing with what I take to be an obvious objection to the importance I am assigning to Wallace's project, which stems from the very associations on which I may seem to be pinning my assessment of its significance. The objection is that, seeing Wallace as engaged in a Wittgensteinian project might seem to make Wallace redundant. Hasn't Wittgenstein—not to mention a long line of other well-known modern philosophers—already exposed the limitations of the Cartesian picture of thinking? After all, if I am not arguing that Wallace advances a new theory, then what *could* he be adding to what Wittgenstein has already shown us?

I have two answers to this question, the first simpler than the second. The first is that the project of philosophical therapy, as laid out by Wittgenstein, is endless. This is one of the qualities it shares with more traditional Freudian therapy. As Cavell has so often pointed out, the desire to make our problems metaphysical is something we will never be free of, since it is endemic to our condition as human beings, or at least as Western human beings educated and assimilated under the aegis of Enlightenment rationalism. To the extent that our form of life remains intact, so too will the pressure to treat *all of* our problems as if they might be solved by better arguments, by “semantic ascent” (in one form or another), or by a scientifically grounded theory of meaning.⁴⁷ The whole notion of philosophy as a

⁴⁷ As I write this, neuroscience might be seen as the most prevalent manifestation of this phenomenon. What I mean by that is that it represents for the current (scientific) ideal among

“series of examples” already implies a form of endlessness, and, as Wallace’s fiction attests, there will always be fresh cases for the therapeutic philosopher to grab hold of, which may help illuminate for his contemporary readers the specific contours of the “picture” holding them captive. Wallace’s fiction may be conceived of as a catalogue of examples from late twentieth-century America; or it may be conceived of as specifically showing how certain structures of thinking have managed not only to survive, but even to be reinforced by, what is commonly (and mistakenly) thought of as the anti-metaphysical onslaught of postmodernism.

I think this way of conceiving of Wallace’s philosophical contribution is accurate, but incomplete. For Wallace, in dedicating his fiction to the Wittgensteinian “activity” I have described above, also dedicates himself to certain claims about the extension of that activity to the realm of everyday life. Let’s say that some of Descartes’ earliest critics rejected his method, or his conclusion (call it “dualism”) because they considered it to be metaphysically inaccurate—that is, inexact, or not as good as another theory for describing what we do when we “think” or “mean.” Wittgenstein could be said, on the other hand, to reject Cartesianism not for its inaccuracy but for being metaphysical at all, in the sense that it results from an inadequate understanding of the “grammar” of our language (from, for instance, the illusion that “thinking” has a metaphysical content that can be abstracted from our everyday ways of employing it). Although this rejection may have consequences beyond professional philosophy, these were not the consequences that were chiefly emphasized by Wittgenstein, who was more concerned with how and why

educated people for how various personal and social problems are going to finally be addressed and solved.

philosophers seemed continuously to be getting themselves stuck in logical cul-de-sacs. Wallace, too, is “anti-dualist,” but not because he thinks dualism fails to explain the way things are, or because it can lead logicians down blind alleys. His case against dualism rests on the suggestion that, in situations his fiction documents, dualism proves to be an ineffective framework for addressing the kinds of problems by which characters tend to be afflicted. Now, in a sense, this was precisely the problem that Wittgenstein took himself to be addressing with regard to certain philosophical problems. But whereas for Wittgenstein what was meant by “ineffective” was, more or less, “failed to account for the full phenomena in question”— for Wallace it means that it fails to alleviate, and quite possibly exacerbates, a form of practical suffering.

In trying to maintain this distinction even briefly, however, I have been moved to exaggerate the extent to which *I* think Wittgenstein can be said to only have been speaking to other philosophers. One of the services Cavell has done as a commentator on Wittgenstein is to bring attention to the fact that, for Wittgenstein, philosophical problems really could be “painful” in something like the sense in which they are often painful for Wallace’s characters. When Wittgenstein compares a philosophical problem to an “illness,” when he speaks of being “tormented” by philosophical problems, when he chooses “pain” (not to mention the sentence: “He was depressed the whole day”)⁴⁸ as the example to illustrate the problem with the way we habitually analyze mental states, when he speaks of wanting “peace” from

⁴⁸ PI, §151

the problems of philosophy,⁴⁹ these are unlikely to be randomly chosen figures of speech. They support the suspicion that Wittgenstein knew the problems he was addressing could be a source of (not *just* intellectual) anguish for those who suffered from them. Moreover, it was a natural corollary, especially of his reliance on “everyday” examples, that only bad philosophy could be carried out in complete abstraction from those forms of concrete confusion and suffering.

At the same time, I would suggest that first Cavell rather tentatively,⁵⁰ and now Wallace more forcefully, have at the very least seized on something that remains latent in Wittgenstein’s philosophy (and almost completely absent in commentary on it), when they insist on the application of his method to the problems of everyday life—that is, especially, to the problems of how we relate to ourselves and to others in society. It might seem, at times, that I am attempting to elevate Wallace’s project as a fiction writer by comparing what he did to, or anchoring it in, Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*—and there are times where I believe the *Investigations* can help resolve apparent contradictions in Wallace’s oeuvre, or clarify what he might have been up to in certain places. But I also want to emphasize what I take to be a genuine discovery of Wallace’s fiction, which has to do with how the set of “pictures” that a given culture subscribes to can become sources of actual

⁴⁹ PI, §255, 133

⁵⁰ By “tentatively” I do not mean that Cavell made tentative arguments, but that he was somewhat tentative in how far to take them, given the audience he took himself to be addressing. It is significant, I think, that Cavell, for all his talk of how philosophy should re-assess its relationship to literature, never himself wrote for an audience of the size that literature still regularly reaches. With a few exceptions, his writing remains for other philosophers: philosophers well versed in the arguments about language and meaning that he continuously refers back to Wittgenstein, and Wittgenstein’s academic critics, to anchor. He certainly instructed the academic philosophers of his day to widen their vision—but he did not quite have, as Wallace did, the courage to abandon them entirely.

human suffering—or, at the very least, can aggravate what we all know to be the common, consistent sources of human suffering. Wallace, so to speak, literalizes the Wittgensteinian analogy. His methods are not meant to be “*like* different therapies”; they are in fact meant to be therapeutic.

Chapter One

Thinking Differently: Toward a Philosophically Therapeutic Criticism

Having laid out in the introduction some of what I believe to be the hallmarks of David Foster Wallace's therapeutic method, I intend in this chapter to give a sense of what it would mean to therapeutically "criticize" his fiction. For it might seem that, if we consider an artwork to be therapeutic, there would be nothing for the *critic* to do beyond recommending that her readers attend carefully to it. And in a sense I do believe that what I want to call philosophically therapeutic criticism can be said to amount to a recommendation, perhaps to a wider audience than might normally be attracted to it, to attend to a given work. At the same time, the therapeutic critic is also motivated by her sense that, even for those who do attend to it, it will be easy for them to avoid or misrecognize the therapy a given work is offering to them. As I will say more about below, the dangers of avoidance and misrecognition are related to an important aspect of the therapeutic critic's agenda. For the critic must account not only for what she sees in the work, but also for why previous readers and critics may have *missed* what she has seen in it.

One of the things that critics—and especially the more philosophically inclined critics—have missed in Wallace's fiction, I would argue, is the extent to which it represents not just an expression but also a *criticism* of philosophy, in the vein that Wittgenstein, too, considered himself to be criticizing philosophy. But this is characteristic of the conventionally "philosophical" approach to fiction that I will discuss briefly below, since this approach looks for ways in which literature

augments or confirms particular philosophical theories; if it is not engaged in a dialogue with these theories, then it is not engaged with philosophy. The idea that literature might offer an alternative, and in some cases a superior, way of knowing some of the same things that philosophy wants to know has largely been taken seriously only in moral philosophy, and only there by a semi-contiguous line of philosophers, stretching back to Wittgenstein and his English-language translator G.E.M. Anscombe, which has for good reason been considered heterodox (though not entirely alien) within the tradition of mainstream analytical philosophy. Indeed Cavell's famous question, at the end of *The Claim of Reason*, about whether philosophy, if it were to accept the poets back into its vision of the just city, could "still know itself,"¹ implied that philosophy's self-identification had become inextricable from its refusal of the literary. His own work, as well as that of some of the other moral philosophers I'll discuss in this chapter, was meant to test the limits (and the limitations) of that refusal.

At the end of this chapter I will suggest that, in the fiction of David Foster Wallace, we have something like a form of philosophy that has become literature. One of the tasks of this dissertation will be to help philosophy "know itself"—or see itself—in that form.² But it is not at all clear, at the outset, how a critic would go about bringing about such (self)-knowledge. Before expanding on the philosophical claims I intend to make for Wallace's fiction, it will be helpful therefore to have

¹ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 496

² Robert Pippin reminds me that Hegel was the first philosopher to consciously undertake this kind of activity. And that a precondition for it is Hegel's belief that philosophy, religion and art were all interested, in the broadest sense, in the same subject-matter. As I'll say something about in my conclusion, I'm not sure I agree with Hegel that all art is engaged in the (essentially philosophical) search for self-knowledge. I do think that Wallace's was.

before us some examples of philosophical approaches to literature that have been employed for similar purposes. After my brief survey of more conventional philosophical approaches to literature below, I'll focus on two philosophers who have had a significant influence on my own method, Robert Pippin and Stanley Cavell. Rather than attempting to find philosophical theses in their chosen works of literature, both emphasize literature's ability to bring the reader to consciousness or recognition about aspects of her own historical and philosophical predicament. Looked at together, I believe they can provide a roadmap for how a philosophical critic might bring out the *thinking* in a work of literature, even and perhaps especially when that thinking does as much to challenge prevailing "philosophical" assumptions as to augment them.

In his recent book, *The Cognitive Value of Philosophical Fiction* (2014), Jukka Mikkonen lays out the various positions taken by today's professional analytic philosophers in the "perennial debate" about whether literary works may be philosophical—or, as he puts it, "may provide knowledge of a significant kind."³ According to Mikkonen, the majority of philosophers have traditionally believed that fiction does not provide significant philosophical knowledge; however, in recent decades some "cognitivists" have proposed two ways in which literary works

³ The phrasing of the question is significant, and it lays out what will be the central area of contention: What counts as knowledge "of a significant kind"? Mikkonen seems to leave little room for the idea that there may be various, but equally "significant," forms of knowledge.

can convey non-trivial philosophical truths. They can do so propositionally, through assertion, implication or suggestion—as in a Dostoyevsky or Thomas Mann novel where characters who may be presumed to speak for the author advance explicitly philosophical views. Or they can do so non-propositionally, by elevating our ethical understanding, educating our emotions, stimulating imaginative skills, or calling moral views into question. Mikkonen describes the non-propositional camp of cognitivists as being held together by the supposition “that the knowledge which literature affords is practical or phenomenal knowledge; that literature illustrates ways people understand the world or that it is itself a form of understanding.”⁴

The method of philosophical literary criticism I’ll be attempting to develop in this chapter could be said to engage in the project of ascertaining how (some) works of literature produce “knowledge of a philosophical kind.” And many of the moral philosophers I am interested in take, broadly speaking, what Mikkonen defines as the non-propositional cognitivist approach to literature. But Mikkonen does not do justice to what I believe makes these philosophers and their approach to literature distinctive and unsettling: namely, their use of literature to challenge modern philosophy’s tendency to reduce all forms of thinking to what Hegel called the “reflective thought of philosophy,”⁵ a tendency that was itself reflective of the wider culture’s privileging of systematic or theoretical forms of explanation. This is to say that these thinkers allow for a possibility barely hinted at by Mikkonen, according to

⁴ Jules Mikkonen, *The Cognitive Value of Philosophical Fiction*, pp. 9-10

⁵ The phrase is from the Introduction to the *Science of Logic*. Hegel calls the product of this reflective form of thinking “*after-thought*,” since it “has to deal with thoughts as thoughts, and brings them into consciousness.” Hegel did not deny that philosophy trafficked primarily in after-thoughts; what he did deny—which is the reason that he took art and religion so seriously—is that the reflective thought of philosophy was the only kind of thinking that was relevant to philosophy. *The Logic of Hegel*, trans. William Wallace, Second ed., (Oxford Press, 1892), p. 5

which literature may offer not only an augmentation to (or a confirmation of) philosophical theses, but also potentially a (philosophical) criticism of philosophy's customary methods or habits.

In claiming that philosophy might “know itself” in the literary form of Wallace's fiction, I am not merely claiming that philosophy might be carried on in various ways; I want also to suggest that, quite self-consciously for Wallace, the attempt to migrate philosophy into such a form registered a critique of its more customary one. This means I am less interested in Mikkonen's attempt to theorize about how literary works convey philosophical truth, or in how they advance topical discussions already underway in professional philosophy, than I am in attempting to see how specific literary works may function to engage and challenge their readers' philosophical self-understanding—including but not limited to their understanding of what they are doing when they are engaging in “philosophy.”

What I want to call “philosophically therapeutic criticism” is therefore philosophically therapeutic in at least two senses. First, it is concerned with works of art that it believes are intended not only to reflect (as in Stendhal's mirror) but also to call into question, and thus to help “treat,” the habits of mind of their readers. Second, it offers a therapy specifically *for* philosophy, or for a cast of mind that we associate with philosophy (shared by many who would not call themselves philosophers)—one which denies the title of “knowledge” to anything that is not theoretically verifiable in the Cartesian sense I attempted to outline in my introduction. An interesting and not irrelevant detail about this kind of (after)-thinking is that, at the time when Wallace began writing fiction, it had become as

dominant in literary studies departments, and even in certain works of advanced fiction, as it had been for some time in philosophy departments.

None of this is to deny that, as Mikkonen points out, there are literary works—Tolstoy, Mann, Musil—that offer straightforward theoretical propositions for evaluation—and others that offer them somewhat less directly, relying on the reader to complete the work of philosophical interpretation.⁶ To the extent that they do this, such works of literature surely incorporate some philosophy into them, which may then be excavated and explicated by a philosopher. But the work of the philosophically *therapeutic* critic is not, as in Mikkonen's idea of a philosophical approach to literature, to recover propositional knowledge from a literary work—which, no matter how sensitively it is done, cannot but treat the work of literature as an illuminating case study—so much as it is to recover and (in some sense) re-present the work's "thinking"—and therefore to re-present the contribution the work attempts to make, in the interrelation of its content and its form, to the self-understanding of its reader.

Although Cora Diamond, Martha Nussbaum, Joshua Landy and James Conant, among others, have all approached literary works in something like the spirit I have discussed, I take Robert Pippin and Stanley Cavell to have worked out most completely and enrichingly this model of philosophical literary criticism. As I will argue below, both Pippin and Cavell see literature's philosophical value in its capacity to "bring to consciousness" commitments, perspectives and values that

⁶ Mikkonen ultimately argues that philosophical literary texts convey their philosophical values via incomplete arguments or *enthymemes*, which persuade readers of a philosophical truth by "implying the deliberately omitted conclusion: the unstated part of the argument is suggested by the work and filled in by the reader." P. 88

might not be brought out by conventional philosophy, either because conventional philosophy operates at too far of a remove from the “facts on the ground” (as Pippin calls them), or because it is committed to forms of presentation (for instance, the peer-reviewed philosophical paper) that tend to reproduce the very commitments and values that stand in need of criticism.⁷ These commitments and values, once they are brought to consciousness, are not then mined for philosophical “truth” by the philosophically therapeutic critic. Confronting the reader with herself, i.e. her own assumptions about or “picture” of the world, just *is* the philosophical therapy that certain works of literature are capable of doing.

Not every work of literature is amenable to this kind of criticism, or will reward it. But philosophically therapeutic criticism allows us to see some works, which may not explicitly engage with philosophical themes—or may not do so very originally—as being animated nevertheless by an impulse that we would like to call philosophical, even if the “knowledge” produced by this impulse may not normally be recognizable to conventional philosophy.

Taking off from Mikkonen’s survey, I have alleged that attempts by many contemporary philosophers to address literary works have been characterized by a scientific or propositional approach to the “knowledge” that may be found in them,

⁷ For a good discussion of this problem, see Arthur Danto, “Philosophy as/and/of Literature,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Sep., 1984), pp. 5-20. See also Cavell, in *Must We Mean What We Say* (Foreword, xxxv).

largely because of the pervasiveness of this approach in (mainstream) contemporary philosophy.⁸ This approach tends toward seeing if it can make literature yield objective truths about the external world—or, in rare cases, about our inner life. If it cannot, then it denies that literature is philosophical in any “significant” sense. But if literature is to be philosophically therapeutic in the way I have been suggesting it can be, then this requires that we see it as being engaged in a critique of philosophy’s customary methods and conclusions.⁹ Such a critique, though, can also be found within philosophy.

When Cavell raised the question of whether philosophy’s Platonic “exile” of the poets had come at too high a cost, he was drawing on a line of thinking that can be traced back to G.E.M. Anscombe’s landmark 1958 essay, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” in which Anscombe, who is also known as the foremost English translator of Wittgenstein, attacked what she called “consequentialism” as an umbrella term for the theories put forward by the previous two centuries of significant moral philosophers. Anscombe did not (in that essay) mention literature at all, but she did draw attention to both the difficulty and the limitations of judging moral action according to abstract rules, or (especially) by reference to their potential consequences. The problem with the approach of previous moral philosophers was plain, she reflected, once one acknowledged that, in most practical

⁸ There are plenty of exceptions, many of which fall into the category I’ll discuss shortly.

⁹ It ALSO means that we agree with Hegel (but not Plato) that philosophy and literature are engaged in a complementary project. In this dissertation, I will be putting forward the claim that Wallace is engaging in a complementary project: I do not intend to make the case that all of what we call literature, or even all of what we call great literature, is complementary to philosophy. (See conclusion.)

cases, the rightness or wrongness of an action was contextual—and thus could only be really *seen* “by way of examples.”

Philosophers have always used examples *from* literature to support their arguments, but Anscombe’s observation inspired some to go further. Literature was not only a place where one could find convenient case studies; it was where one could observe, as one could not in (most) conventional philosophy, the practical workings and development of the moral imagination. In *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch chose a narrative she said should be familiar from “innumerable novels” to illustrate Anscombe’s point about the narrowness of conventional moral philosophy. The narrative involves a mother, “M,” who initially feels hostility toward the woman, “D,” whom her son has married, considering her to be “lacking in dignity and refinement.” Despite the hostility she feels toward her, M always treats D with complete propriety and kindness. Over the years, however, she begins to come to a different conclusion inwardly about D; having “looked again,” she realizes that D is “not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous.” This change is not expressed in M’s external behavior toward D or in any discernible action she takes—and yet, Murdoch insists, we want to describe such a change in perspective as *moral*:

What M is *ex hypothesi* attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly. Notice the rather different image of freedom which this at once suggests. Freedom is not the sudden jumping of the isolated will in and out of an impersonal logical complex, it is a function of the progressive effort to see a particular object clearly. M’s activity is essentially something progressive, something infinitely perfectible. So far from claiming for it a sort of

infallibility, this new picture has built in the notion of a necessary fallibility. M is engaged in an endless task.¹⁰

The first thing to notice about this story is that it does not “prove” a point or rule about morality. Rather it shows us, via a certain kind of description, the shape that a moral development might take. Second, the “action” that is described takes place in time—that is, in narrative—and would be incomprehensible apart from it. M does not simply make a decision one day about D, applying whatever criteria or rules she has deliberated on; rather, she finds that, paying attention to D over time, in a “progressive effort to see” her clearly, her opinion of her gradually evolves, eventually to the point where she is able to see her “justly or lovingly.”¹¹

For Murdoch, to admit that such an “endless (inner) task” belongs within the realm of moral philosophy amounts to nothing less than the “liberation of morality, and of philosophy as a study of human nature, from the domination of science: or rather from the domination of inexact ideas of science which haunt philosophers and other thinkers.”¹² Here can be glimpsed the continuity of Murdoch’s and Anscombe’s thought with Wittgenstein’s, particularly in the portion of his

¹⁰ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 17-23

¹¹ There is, as one of my readers has pointed out to me, a “perfectionist drift” in Murdoch’s description of this moral development (to see someone “justly or lovingly” is not just *subjectively* better than to see them otherwise), something that informs Cavell’s (especially later) literary criticism as well. Murdoch and Cavell, that is, do not work entirely without some objective sense of the good life. I think it is significant, however, that in both cases the focus is on the development of the kind of attention that make the good life possible, as opposed to some form of objective knowledge that constitutes it. Still, I will take up the differences between Cavell’s positive perfectionism and Wittgenstein’s more negative therapy in chapter four.

¹² *ibid.*, 26. One finds in the philosophers I discuss in this chapter an almost continuous restatement of this kind of thought. Cora Diamond, for instance, describes the proper task of what she calls “realistic” philosophy as being to allow us to see (and see through) the “illusion” that philosophy is “an area of inquiry, in the sense in which we are familiar with it.” She means, in the scientific or scientific sense, or in the sense where we equate realism with empiricism. (cf. “Realism and the Realistic Spirit,” in *The Realistic Spirit*, pp. 69-70). Cavell, at the very beginning of his Foreword to *Must We Mean What We Say*, concedes that his notion of what philosophy should do will not be acceptable to “someone who thinks philosophy is a form of science” (*MWM*, Foreword, xxxii).

Investigations (a work comprised largely of examples) devoted to debunking what had come to be the predominant (and largely scientific) notion among the philosophers of his time of “ideal analysis.” What can also be seen, I want to suggest, is the pressure in both cases for philosophy to become more literary.¹³ This pressure does not come about because literature offers examples to complicate or confirm philosophy’s theories, but for the linked reasons that literature 1.) gives us narratives that show how moral actions take place in time and therefore 2.) holds the power to cure or correct traditional moral philosophy’s (over)reliance on static rules and theories. This would seem to be one of the (endless?) tasks of the “philosophy of psychology” that is called for by Anscombe.

The aforementioned section in the *Investigations* (roughly §81-§133) concludes with Wittgenstein’s insistence that “there is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies.” Like Murdoch, Cavell and Pippin seem to have been influenced by the way that section recasts philosophy’s work as one of “rearrangement” and “description,” as opposed to one of (what Wittgenstein calls) “explanation.”¹⁴ The shift in method comes with, or is motivated by, a shift in focus. Philosophical problems are not “empirical problems,” Wittgenstein says, the key to which would be something “abstruse” or “hidden.” Rather, “the aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity.”¹⁵ The philosopher’s job is not thus to make our language more precise, or to “resolve a contradiction by means of a mathematical or

¹³ It’s no accident that Austin and Cavell’s “ordinary language philosophy” was already so much closer to literature in its feel and method than the rest of midcentury Anglo-American philosophy.

¹⁴ “We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place.” (§109)

¹⁵ *Investigations*, §129

logico-mathematical discovery,” but to “assemble reminders for a particular purpose.”¹⁶ What we need to be reminded of is the “frame” or “foundation” of our inquiry, the very thing that, because it seems so natural to us, is hardest for us to catch hold of. Cavell sometimes describes this concept of philosophy as one in which the goal is to bring “the world of a particular culture to consciousness of itself.”¹⁷

Both Pippin and Cavell approach literature—or some literature—as having the potential to bring its readers to consciousness about some feature of their historical or philosophical picture of the world. More to the point, these works expose what might be taken by such a reader as simply being “given” as a picture—and therefore something that might be relinquished, or chosen (as opposed to being merely accepted, mindlessly reproduced, or capitulated to). Although there is nothing wrong with their doing so, readers need not analogize themselves to (or “identify” with) the characters in these books in order for this process to occur;¹⁸ it

¹⁶ *Investigations*, §125, §127

¹⁷ The formulation may bring to mind another philosopher whose approach to literature was influenced by Wittgenstein’s emphasis on re-description, Richard Rorty. Rorty valued literature for the material it gives to help us “re-describe ourselves.” It could do this, he suggested in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, in two ways: 1.) by helping us imagine, and empathize with, the suffering of others, and 2.) by giving us, through the employment of a new language or vocabulary, the ability to step back and view our own potential to cause harm to others. (More than Pippin and Cavell, Rorty focuses especially on the way literature can contribute to the creation of a specifically defined liberal subject, whom he calls the “ironist.” Even though they did not mean exactly the same thing by “irony,” a deep difference between Rorty and *Wallace* might be expressed if we say that for Rorty self-reflexivity is the answer, whereas for Wallace it is the problem.) Although he did not have as much influence on my own thinking about literature and philosophy, some of the things I say about Pippin’s and Cavell’s philosophically therapeutic approach to literature approach could be applied to Rorty’s as well. A difference between the Pippin-Cavell approach and Rorty’s is that Rorty considered literature’s cultural criticism to be fundamentally contextual, whereas for Pippin and Cavell literature, in bringing us to consciousness about our cultural habits, could not help but reveal the deeper “truths” of which those habits could not but be expressions

¹⁸ cf. Candace Vogler, “The Moral of the Story,” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 34 (Autumn, 2007), pp. 5-35. Vogler claims that Nussbaum, Pippin and Cavell all privilege forms of (analogical or direct) identification with characters in their philosophical approach to fiction. She states her problem with this approach at the very end of her essay, when she points out that “Individualist moral psychology is not the whole of moral psychology,” and that “practical reason” will tend to take us “off the page.”

would be better to say that, if the literary description is convincing enough, they will be compelled to recognize themselves in it. To call that recognition philosophical is simply to refer back to the notion (I could call it Wittgensteinian but Wittgenstein was picking up on a thread that goes back to Plato) of philosophy as a self-critical activity, whose aim is to produce a kind of (self-) knowledge, unlikely to be arrived at through either unexamined practical experience, or “pure” logical analysis.

Indeed, as I’ll claim in Chapter three, Wallace’s own therapy was aimed in part at the prevailing modern prejudice, perhaps most powerfully described by Hegel and therefore implicit in Pippin’s and Cavell’s philosophical-literary projects as well, that logic, or theory, represented the “ideal” route to knowledge in every circumstance.

Before moving on to their specific readings of literature, though, I want to pause to point out a significant difference in emphasis between Pippin’s and Cavell’s philosophical procedures. Pippin and Cavell both seem to take up certain aspects of Wittgenstein’s notion of philosophy as therapy, which I’ve outlined both above and in the introduction. However, Wittgenstein is hardly the only and perhaps not even the most significant influence on their approach to literature. A way of stating what I see to be a difference in emphasis between the two philosophers is to say that Pippin’s approach to literature is also deeply influenced by his work on Hegel, while Cavell’s approach is informed at various crucial points by his early appreciation for Freud. The result is that, while both speak of literature’s ability to bring readers to

(35) I doubt that Pippin or Cavell would deny that reading novels is not the *only* way to engage in moral thought; as far as Vogler’s charge that their method tends to privilege a certain form of liberal individualism, this would be better applied to Rorty, who more or less defines what he is doing in terms of the kind of individual (the liberal ironist) that he would like literature to contribute to creating (cf. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. xvi, 167). Pippin and Cavell are more concerned with the way literature can help us see whatever ideology we might be gripped by.

“consciousness” about their condition, the word “consciousness” carries a different emphasis depending on who uses it. In Cavell’s case, the concept has more specifically psychoanalytic implications, while for Pippin it will often have predominantly historical or political ones. (This is not to deny what both philosophers insist on—that there can be no clear line between collective history and individual psychology.)

It might in fact seem paradoxical to call Pippin’s approach to literature “therapeutic” *at all*, given that one of the targets of his criticism is what he calls a “psychological” reading of the works of literature he chooses to discuss. If characters like Strether or Marcher in Henry James, or the narrator Marcel in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, are often considered to be primarily of interest for their psychology, Pippin wants characteristically to show their psychology to be a symptom of something more general and objective. For Hegel, art was one of the organs through which a society could reflect on (by making explicit to itself) its form of life—which meant not only its habits of thought or speech but also the institutional structures and power relations that were underwriting those habits. Much of Pippin’s philosophical criticism of literature is devoted to making explicit how novelists like James and Proust can help us recognize configurations of thought that are less eccentric than common, less a function of individual history than of “the situation of modernity

itself.”¹⁹ Indeed one of Pippin’s recurrent points is that (exclusively) psychological readings of individual action can itself become a socio-historical habit, so seemingly “natural” to us that we do not even see it as a choice.

That so much of our social and communal life has become so fine-grained and circumstantial that it is difficult, from any amount of distance, to see as anything other than the result of arbitrary pathology, is in large part why Pippin believes the novel “might be the great modern philosophical form.”²⁰ He means that the novel can show, in a manner philosophy has not been able (or interested) to show, the way that ordinary people today actually encounter moral claims, or the claims of other supposedly free agents. As a novelist Henry James is bound to treat moral life less as a matter of abstract rules than “as a matter of mores, and that means as a matter of essentially social and historically specific practices, institutions, and largely implicit rules and expectations.”²¹ And this is particularly appropriate for documenting “one of the most confusing and complex periods” of historical transition—the modern period, which we still inhabit. If one might think, from the overhead view of ideal analysis, that the new historical world James depicts can leave no other choice but moral skepticism—a conclusion reached by many modern philosophers and some of its novelists—James’s novels do not so much argue for a different conclusion as they show how we continue to “go on” confronting moral claims in our everyday lives, despite and even in some cases because of our uncertainty and the breakdown of shared criteria for moral judgment.

¹⁹ Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*, 98

²⁰ Pippin, *Henry James and the Modern Moral Life*, 56

²¹ *ibid*, 5

In attempting to bring out this feature of James's fiction, Pippin's philosophical criticism of literature is meant to tilt against two tempting readings of modernist novels. On the one hand, there is the psychological reading described above, according to which characters like "Marcel" (*In Search of Lost Time*) or Strether (*The Ambassadors*) or John Marcher ("The Beast in the Jungle") are personally eccentric or psychologically "interesting" in ways that are said to be reflective of their author's own eccentric proclivities, or which have to do with their veiled homosexuality, their artistic sensibility, their abnormal passivity, and so on.²² At the other end of the spectrum, one finds critics who perceive such characters and such situations as expressive of timeless, existential conditions—say the condition of human aloneness (in Marcher's case), or the human inability to lay hold of one's immediate experience (in Marcel's). For Pippin, both the psychological and the existential (or metaphysical) readings miss what should make the thinking in such novels relevant to a contemporary reader; they miss what it is that is being "brought to consciousness" by the work in question. For this has directly to do with the historical situation—the "modern moral life"—of which the novels offer both a reflection and a diagnosis. The trouble Marcel has interpreting his experience, says Pippin, is not best received as a metaphysical statement about the human condition; it is rather "historically indexed, tied to the sort of world where sexual identities can

²² One could easily do a similar analysis of contemporary Wallace criticism, much of which draws lessons about his characters based on what we know of Wallace's own troubled and highly eccentric life. (Wallace's fellow novelist Brett Easton Ellis recently described *Infinite Jest* as "an addict's belabored performance." [cf. "The Talkhouse", 8/11/15: <http://thetalkhouse.com/film/talks/novelist-and-screenwriter-bret-easton-ellis-the-canyons-talks-james-ponsoldts-the-end-of-the-tour/>].) As in the interpretations Pippin challenges, one has the sense that these critics not only write wrongly about such characters, but that they are attempting to write them off.

seem to change instantaneously, information circulates rapidly and often without context, and moral hierarchies crumble and are rebuilt unpredictably.”²³ Likewise Marcher’s difficulties with time and memory, far from simply mimicking some of the well-known personality traits of his author, should suggest to the contemporary reader “larger problems with historical time and this historical time in particular.”²⁴

Such readings are philosophically therapeutic insofar as they offer, not a psychological interpretation of the novels, but a re-presentation of the novel’s thinking that allows its readers to see their own psychology—as reflected by James’s or Proust’s characters—in a new light. To say that James can tell us about “modern moral life” is itself to claim for his novels the kind of moral-philosophical role that Hegel prescribed for art, which could “externalize” features of historical life that might otherwise remain merely sensuous or implicit and therefore insensible to reason or evaluation.²⁵ For Pippin, what modernist novels furnish examples of (in the Anscombian sense), much better than the kind of philosophy being collected in academic journals, is why and how, in our historical moment, “the achievement of free subjectivity requires a certain sort of social relation among subjects, and that this relation of mutuality and reciprocity is highly sensitive to social arrangements or work and power and gender relations.”²⁶ It is as if what James’s novels describe, perhaps most conspicuously through the example of Strether in *The Ambassadors*, is a philosophical journey from a merely superficial or constrained sense of oneself as a “free” agent to a more durable form of freedom which rests in part on a “greater

²³ Pippin, “Proust’s Problematic Selves,” in *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 321

²⁴ Pippin, *Henry James and the Modern Moral Life*, 96

²⁵ cf. *Hegel’s Aesthetics*, Introduction, pp. 10-14

²⁶ Pippin, *Henry James and the Modern Moral Life*, 173

capacity ... to take account of others better,” and therefore to better account for oneself.²⁷ (As with the example I took from Murdoch above, it can be seen why this kind of moral realization would be extremely difficult to explore *outside* of a literary narrative.)

This is not the same as the argument (often presented as a philosophical argument, sometimes by philosophers but more often by literary theorists) that we are not free but are in fact merely ciphers, automatons, functions of language or society, etc. That such a possibility is being ignored is behind the charge that Candace Vogler levels *against* Pippin, when she accuses him and Cavell of treating characters in literature “as particular persons.”²⁸ I agree with Pippin (and Cavell, as he lays out in a different context in “The Avoidance of Love”) that Vogler, like many literary critics before her, posits a false choice when she implies that we have either to treat characters in literature as persons or treat them “as properties of or instantiations of structure, words, images, social or libidinal forces, and so forth.”²⁹ Indeed one of the things modernist art can show us, for Pippin, is how we negotiate our desire for freedom against the backdrop of our *own* anxiety about our historical dependency and contingency. That is, on the one hand, the characters in the novels of Proust or James, and later in the films of Tourneur and Welles, have the (very modern) desire to be independent, free agents, and yet on the other they are surrounded by reminders (lately not least by academics who resemble Vogler) of

²⁷ *ibid*, 175

²⁸ “What is depressing in finding one’s work on individuality driven toward meditations on types of person and types of situation is that the challenge of individuality is met and decided by particular persons facing particular circumstances.” cf. Vogler, “The Moral of the Story” in *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn, 2007), p. 32. This criticism strikes me as slightly more consequential when Vogler applies it to Nussbaum.

²⁹ Pippin, *Fatalism in American Film Noir*, 108

their “profound dependence on others,” or they are forced to come to terms with “how terribly *limited* explanations that focus on the moral psychology of individuals turn out to be ... given how unstable, provisional, and often self-deceived are their claims for self-knowledge.”³⁰ That this anxiety has itself become a background feature of life in modernity is precisely why it is important that we seek out cultural forms capable of bringing those features of our life to consciousness—for we are extremely apt to forget them, either by asserting a false and unsustainable freedom for the individual, or by giving in to various forms of moral skepticism and nihilism advertised to us (strangely enough) *both* by academia and popular culture.

As I’ll argue especially in chapter three, the acknowledgment of (historical, metaphysical, and social) uncertainty, and yet the refusal to surrender completely to it, is one of the capacities Wallace hopes his 1999 collection of stories, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, will therapeutically encourage in his readers. But before moving on to Wallace, I want to spend some time describing the more psychological, or psychoanalytic, idea of literature-as-therapy that appears in Cavell’s most prominent philosophical writing on literature. For Wallace’s procedure (and mine, in attempting to describe his), while keeping in mind the kind of historical texture that Pippin, following Hegel, has found in modern novels, is also indebted to Cavell’s more Freudian approach to the philosophical potential of literary *form*.

³⁰ Pippin, *HJMM*, 55, italics in original; Pippin, *Film Noir*, 4

More directly than Pippin, Cavell has attempted to define what he calls “philosophical [art] criticism.” If there were such a thing, he argues in his essay on *King Lear*, “The Avoidance of Love,” then its objective would be to bring “the world of a particular work ... to consciousness of itself.”³¹ This can seem obscure in several ways, not least because a work of art, properly speaking, does not possess a “consciousness.” What Cavell is trying to draw our attention to is the fact that a particular work of art, like a particular culture, *is* a world—and that, as in any world, certain aspects will be seen at first glance (and maybe even at thousandth glance) more easily than others. But what is not easily seen is not necessarily something that is hidden deep in the work, awaiting the right scholar to track down the relevant allusion, or the right theorist to fit it into its proper place. Rather, just as a whole culture may be unaware of what is most familiar or natural to it, so what has not been seen by a particular work’s audience is (very often) hidden “in plain view”—something whose “meaning has been missed only because it was so utterly bare.”³² This is the psychoanalytic sense in which elements of the particular work may remain, before this philosophical criticism takes place, sub- or un- or half-conscious.

This prescribes an unusual double function for the philosophically therapeutic critic. On the one hand, the critic is faced with the burden that every critic is faced with—of making the reader see what she has recognized in the work. At the same time, though, she will have to account for how something that is

³¹ “Avoidance of Love,” in *MWM*, 313

³² “Ending the Waiting Game,” in *MWM*, 119

“already in plain view” could have been so easily missed in the past. If criticism can be described as the history of a culture’s attempts to read and contend with a work of art, then the therapeutic critic will have to analyze this history in order to see what might have motivated the culture to miss what is now revealed as the work’s “obvious” meaning. That is why, just as Wittgenstein’s “therapies” often begin by imagining the genesis of a particular philosophical blindness, so Cavell begins his essays on literature by engaging with the interpretations of canonical critics.³³ The point is not (or not merely) to argue with their conclusions, but to hold them up as testaments to “the difficulty of seeing the obvious”³⁴—or whatever is obvious in that particular work of art.³⁵ And that is also why what the therapeutic critic has to say to us, if we accept it, must eventually seem “*obvious*,”³⁶ as if we had known it (but not been able to describe it to ourselves) all along.³⁷

An example (the most striking one) of this method in Cavell’s criticism comes during his discussion of Lear’s motivation in the opening scene of *King Lear*. Despite

³³ The Lear essay begins with a historical sketch of Shakespeare criticism, and then engages directly with the criticism of Paul Alpers; the Beckett essay starts with a juxtaposition of the interpretations of Martin Esslin and Georg Lukacs, the former of whom “does not see the problem,” and the latter of whom “does not see Beckett’s solution to the problem.” (*MWM*, 116)

³⁴ “Avoidance of Love,” in *MWM*, 310

³⁵ Of course, a critic might not mention something because he considered it irrelevant or trivial, not because he “missed” it. So it is not enough to show that something obvious has not been mentioned—the therapeutic critic must be able to make her reader feel the significance of that thing’s being missed—how to miss that thing is to miss something that bears on the *whole* meaning of the work. (cf. Cavell: “A critical discovery will present itself as . . . a provision of [the work’s] total meaning.” [“Avoidance of Love,” in *MWM*, 309]).

³⁶ *ibid*, 311 (*italics in original*)

³⁷ When calling Cavell’s approach to literature “psychoanalytic,” it is important to distinguish it from how that school of criticism is conventionally construed. Psychoanalytic literary criticism has consisted mostly in turning authors or their characters into clinical case studies, and looking to psychoanalytic theory for answers to the mysteries of their behavior or motivations. Cavell’s discussions of literature *are* influenced by Freud, but not in this direction, and his readings share little with those of the canonical psychoanalytic critics like Ernest Jones and Janet Adelman. In Cavell’s best readings, the goal is not to psychoanalyze the characters or the author so much as it is to psychoanalyze the interaction (strange as it sounds) between the work and its audience.

a long and distinguished history of Shakespeare criticism, Cavell makes us feel that we have never been quite satisfied by the interpretations, or descriptions, that have been offered for the king's seemingly erratic behavior, including most prominently his harsh treatment of Cordelia. The problem with the customary explanations for Lear's behavior (that Lear is ignorant or going senile, that Shakespeare could think of no other way to get his drama going, etc.), Cavell suggests, is not only that they are incomplete or inconsistent with what else we know of Lear's character (or of Shakespeare's artistic talent), but also that they fail to account for the scene's—and the ensuing play's—power over its audience; that is, for the audience's willingness to *accept* what happens in it.

Cavell's "discovery" is that Lear's behavior in the opening scene, if we can only see it clearly (as opposed to theoretically, or from the vantage point of how it all comes out), is "far from incomprehensible ... it is, in fact, quite ordinary." An aging king accustomed to being flattered for his power, Lear is doing something common enough for a patriarch: he is trying to "brib[e] love out of his children."³⁸ And it goes like it often does, except with a twist at the end. Two of Lear's daughters "accept the bribe, and despise him for it; the third shrinks from the attempt, as from a violation." So Lear punishes Cordelia not because he is mad, or stupid, or because he misreads her refusal to flatter him as expressing a lack of love, but because he "*knows* she is offering the real thing"—that is, a love that scorns flattery, and is thus "putting a claim upon him he cannot face." She threatens both to expose his plan,

³⁸ "Avoidance of Love," in *MWM*, 288

and to “expose the necessity for that plan—[Lear’s] terror of being loved, of needing love.”³⁹

This claim of Cavell’s, if we are inclined to accept it, is one that we as readers almost “cannot face,” since it will have, as Cavell says in another context, “the effect of showing us that it is *we* who had been willfully uncomprehending, misleading ourselves in demanding further, or other, meaning where the meaning was nearest.”⁴⁰ Why “willfully” uncomprehending? Because the critic here seems to provide the most *obvious* account of Lear’s motivation—and yet we had failed to see it. It is not difficult to grasp this motivation intellectually (it is devastatingly easy to grasp), nor, once we have been told about it, can we deny that there is evidence for it in the play. So we can only conclude that we have failed to see it because we did not wish to see it (psychoanalytically speaking, perhaps we ignored Lear’s “terror of being loved” because we did not want to be made aware of our own). Literary criticism is often conceived of as a process of looking under the surface of the text, but therapeutic criticism—in both Cavell’s and Pippin’s hands—is concerned with what has kept us from seeing what is right on the text’s surface. It seeks to expose, not something hidden in the work of art, but rather something we have hidden from ourselves. That is why one may not only be surprised by its critical “discoveries,” but also ashamed by them.

In “Ending the Waiting Game”—a perhaps more relevant (because more contemporary, and experimental) text than the Lear essay for the purposes of this study—Cavell also begins by pointing out the “quite ordinary” aspects of what might

³⁹ “Avoidance of Love,” in *MWM*, 290

⁴⁰ “Ending the Waiting Game,” in *MWM*, 119

look at first to be exotic or mysterious. Critics, he argues, have tended to emphasize the “extraordinary” nature of the happenings in *Endgame*, but the four gnomic figures in Beckett’s drama are “simply a family,” one that “bickers and reminisces ... and comforts one another as best they can.”⁴¹ Their dialogue, flat and alien as it looks, is no more extraordinary than our own; the difficulty for the reader is not so much to “interpret” the sentences in the play as it is to contend with what they simply say. This is not the same as insisting that the play is “realistic”; indeed Cavell argues that *Endgame* exposes the comforting fraudulence of much of what we call “realism” (that may be one of the games it is meant to be the end of). What Cavell means to expose is how the work implicates its audience in precisely the moments where it looks strangest, or most distant. This is part of what is meant in calling his approach Freudian. The critical task becomes not to find out how the behavior of such figures and words can be made consistent, or logical, but to make it clear what they have to do with *us*.

This can sound like the old-fashioned command to “identify” with characters, something Vogler hints at when she says Pippin and Cavell “invite us to take the textual situation personally—to shoulder its burden.”⁴² The problem with identification in this context, for Vogler, is that it is over-determined, for the characters Pippin and Cavell ask us to identify with all seem to model a way of taking on ethical challenges via a certain Enlightenment model of reflection and self-cultivation. The claim has some plausibility in the novels of Proust or James (although Pippin points out many cases where what we are meant to learn is

⁴¹ “Ending the Waiting Game,” in *MWM* 117

⁴² Vogler, “The Moral of the Story,” p. 19

described by the deleterious consequences of a character's "resistance to" her historical situation),⁴³ but Cavell's emphasis, at least in the essay on *Endgame*, is precisely on how Beckett's figures, who are not depthful or dynamic, can *mean* anything to us at all. We cannot "see ourselves in [Beckett's] characters," Cavell writes, "because they are no more characters than cubist portraits are particular people. They have the abstraction, and the intimacy, of figures and words and objects in a dream."⁴⁴ And as figures in a dream they do not "*invite us*" to take them personally—nor does Cavell. That we *do* take them personally is the data he begins with, as if (to extend the analogy) he were a psychoanalyst approaching a patient's dream. The patient is the whole culture that produces and receives such a work of art. That words and figures "*can mean in these combinations*" (that *these four* figures can be a family), is presented by Cavell not as something the viewer should or could ask herself to imagine, but as a fact she will have to confront, if she wants to explain the play's meaning to herself at all.⁴⁵

In Cavell's and Pippin's essays on literature, the artwork does not then "model" a way of dealing with ethical challenges; still less does it offer universalizable ethical guidance, or contain propositional knowledge, whether

⁴³ cf. HMML, 98

⁴⁴ "Ending the Waiting Game," in *MWM*, 131

⁴⁵ Some of these formulations, I'm aware, can start to make Cavell sound perilously close to a deconstructionist. In fact therapeutic criticism could not be farther, in ambition and method, from deconstruction, although it will be hard here, when I am more concerned with distinguishing therapeutic from other forms of *philosophical* engagement with literature, to convincingly state all of their differences. One shorthand for doing so would be to say that whereas the deconstructionists tended to suspect the work of art (or the artist) of being ideological, therapeutic criticism suspects the *reader* of being ideological—or, at least, stuck in habits of thinking and reading which prevent her from seeing what the artist has *successfully* said to her. Methodologically, Cavell differs from much of literary theory precisely because he attempts to build up what is in the text, rather than to tear it apart or search for its meaning behind its back. In any event, Cavell's implicit distance from the dominant trends in critical theory has been theorized by some to account for his relative neglect in literature departments. (cf. Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie, "Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, pp. 1-13)

fragmentary or otherwise. Rather, the artwork itself *constitutes* an ethical and philosophical challenge. The critic's role is to make us face that challenge, which means resisting the temptation to explain the artwork's power in a way that is complimentary to our habitual way of life, rather than a provocation to it. There is no reason that such a criticism cannot focus, when it wants to, on "characters," and Vogler is right that it could remain consistent with an ethics of "self-cultivation." Arguably, in his later work on Perfectionism, this is how Cavell employs his philosophical criticism. But, strictly speaking, neither Pippin's or Cavell's criticism can be consistent with any settled ethical picture, since it conceives of the power of art as lying in its ability to "bring to consciousness" *whatever* explanation a society (or an academic discipline, or a person) has grown accustomed to giving for itself, to itself.

Philosophically therapeutic criticism, like other kinds, arises in response to a specific historical situation, and it will be drawn to certain kinds of art. Whereas some contemporary moral philosophers are drawn to works which may contribute to the work of moral philosophy, or which allow us to see issues in moral psychology more perspicuously than they could be seen speculatively, the philosophically therapeutic critic is most interested in works he believes are actually *doing* philosophy, at least according to the therapeutic sense of philosophy I have attributed to Wittgenstein above. United aspirationally more than formally,

such works will share less a set of defined methods than an orientation or ambition with regard to their audience—the orientation will be toward what Iris Murdoch called “the freedom from fantasy”—and what Wittgenstein called (as if to state the therapeutic benefit of such freedom) “peace.”⁴⁶

It may seem funny to say that art could have a role to play in *freeing* us from fantasy; in a sense, the concept of therapeutic art is meant to account for the fact that certain works of (especially modern) art *do* have this as their aim—abandoning escapist narratives in favor of various strategies aimed at compelling their readers to actively grapple with the limitations of whatever picture (or fantasy) they may have been seduced by. (At their extreme end, they may become hostile to *all* pictures, and therefore to art itself—for many of the same reasons that Plato was hostile to it.)⁴⁷ These works contribute to our self-knowledge insofar as they draw us into a dialogue (Wallace always referred to his stories as “conversations”), with the author of the work and with themselves. As if in response to the literary theorists so fond of deriding works of art that engage us in the “bourgeoisie” process

⁴⁶ Cf. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 65; Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §133. Murdoch’s description can also be compared to Wittgenstein’s response to someone who questions the “importance” of his investigation, since “it seems to destroy everything interesting; that is all that is great and important.” Wittgenstein responds: “What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand.” (PI, §118). Cavell has glossed this as suggesting that “our investigation gets its importance from what it destroys, and in particular from its destruction of a construction of fantasy, precisely a fantasy of importance.” (*A Pitch of Philosophy*, 75)

⁴⁷ As I will discuss in chapter four, Wallace’s late fiction manifests an ascetic suspicion about the moral value of all forms of artifice, and of the impulse that lies behind them. In “Ending the Waiting Game,” Cavell inventively reads the picture with its “face to the wall” as signaling that Beckett believes “it is art itself which is disgraced.” (*MWM*, 152) I think that Wallace and Beckett can both be said to belong to an artistic genre that is, so to speak, anti-art. (Tolstoy might have been this genre’s founder.)

of “self-making,”⁴⁸ such works testify to the connection between self-making and self-disruption. They implicitly assume that human freedom and growth come from the disruption of whatever myths the self tells itself.⁴⁹ Seeing such dynamics at the center of *Lear* and of *Endgame* is in part what allows Cavell to present those works virtually as philosophical precursors to and extensions of the *Investigations*.

Likewise, Pippin’s readings of James and Proust encourage us to re-consider many of the stories we have told ourselves about philosophical modernity.

Of course, the conjoining of the work of the *Investigations* with the work of an ostensibly avant-garde drama like *Endgame*, threatens to blur the straight line many would like to maintain between art and philosophy. At the very least, it would seem, the therapeutic philosopher would want to employ some of the artist’s tools (as Wittgenstein does, following Plato, and Nietzsche)—including illustration, dialogue, etc.—if she wanted to have her desired therapeutic affect. But, pushed a little further, this train of thought leads to the question of how we can know that the *Investigations* is a work of philosophy at all,⁵⁰ or that *Endgame* is a work of art. Torii Moi has said that we “do not wonder about the relationship between philosophy and literature because we have trouble telling them apart,”⁵¹ but, granted that this is rarely the starting point for inquiries into that relationship, the questioning of our

⁴⁸ cf NancyArmstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719–1900* (Columbia, 2006), pp. 3, 139. Quoted in Vogler, 24.

⁴⁹ Perhaps this is the reason that therapeutic artworks are rarely “realistic,” with that word connoting the genre that tends to re-enforce dominant mythologies as opposed to challenging them. At the same time, nothing precludes a so-called realistic work of fiction from being therapeutic in principle. I think Tolstoy’s “Family Happiness” is a realistic work of fiction that is also therapeutic.

⁵⁰ When Cavell calls the *Investigations* a modernist work, he means to emphasize the fit between its form and its content—the attention to which he believes is rare among philosophers. Of course anyone who really experiments with form risks being called something other than a philosopher; they just have to decide if it is a risk worth taking.

⁵¹ Moi, “The Adventure of Reading,” in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, 18

conventional categorizations can seem unavoidable once that inquiry gets going. I think Pippin's and Cavell's answer would be that we cannot *know* whether a work is philosophical or literary in nature, at least not before giving our full attention to it. For if we accept that philosophy really can be a "series of examples," or "reminders assembled for a purpose," then we would have to be open to the possibility that those two books (*Endgame* and the *Investigations*) as performing the same, or similar, tasks.

Indeed, Cavell has suggested that one of the reasons professional philosophers have been hesitant to take seriously Wittgenstein's comparison of philosophy to therapy is that it leads so naturally to the conclusion that the artist (not to mention the psychoanalyst) is a true competitor to the philosopher.⁵² Plato at least considered this possibility, which is why he saw it as necessary to banish the uncensored artist from his republic, not on the grounds that the artist used improper tools (he himself used some of the same tools), but because he used them blindly—that is, without knowing what they were for. But Plato left open the possibility that a given society might itself blindly take someone for an artist, possibly because he wrote novels or made films, who was in fact doing philosophy, and vice versa.⁵³

⁵² cf. "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *MWM*, p. 84; and *In Quest of the Ordinary*, p. 12

⁵³ One way of putting this thought is that the question of whether Beckett or Wallace would be allowed into Plato's republic is inseparable from the question of whether Wittgenstein would be (see conclusion).

I'll conclude with a potential objection to what I have just said, having to do with the relationship I'm proposing between philosophy and art. This objection, in my experience, is especially likely to come from philosophers, who have been inclined to balk when I compare what Wittgenstein does in the *Investigations* with what I believe Wallace is attempting to do in much of his fiction. The objection is that I am conflating two distinct and possibly incommensurate kinds of problems—the problems dealt with by the artist (sometimes called practical or psychological problems, or the problems of life) and the problems dealt with by the philosopher (the problems of logic or reason). It can seem illegitimate, after all, to compare a philosopher who has stumbled into a blind alley in logic (the kind of figure so often popping up in the *Investigations*) with the kind of figures that populate Wallace's novels (or Beckett's plays)—figures in severe emotional and psychological distress.

It would not be fatal for this study to admit that there are philosophical problems that are simply disconnected from the problems of life; these, we might say, are not the problems that interested Wallace—nor do they speak to the potential confluences of literature and philosophy. At the same time, I hope that I can go some way toward showing, or bringing attention to how Wallace shows, the problems of philosophy and of practical life to be interrelated not only in their content⁵⁴ but also in their structure. Cavell sees this as a primary lesson of Wittgenstein's later philosophy; I believe it is just as much a lesson (and a more vividly shown one than it is in Wittgenstein) of Wallace's mature fiction.

Wittgenstein and Wallace both start with a sense that their readers *are* in severe

⁵⁴ For more on this, see introduction

distress (the former says his readers are “tormented” by “deep disquietudes,” the latter that they are “depressed,” “sad,” or “lost”), and that this distress is simultaneously philosophical *and* practical or psychological. Again and again, in Wittgenstein, we think we are treading safely in a region of philosophical logic and suddenly we are plunged into the most concrete kind of concern (“How am I filled with pity *for this man?*”).⁵⁵ Over and over in Wallace we think we are dealing with a concretely emotional or practical distress, when the problem is suddenly revealed to be one of philosophical method (“[I was] going around and around inside the problem instead of really looking at the problem.”)⁵⁶

I have mentioned Cavell’s worry that philosophy might not be able to “know itself” if it became literature; I will end by suggesting that one of the things Wallace’s fiction helps us to recognize is how the failure of philosophy to “know itself” in literature, and vice versa, is not merely an abstract or an academic problem; it is indicative of our form of life and of the various crises and disappointments to which that form of life exposes us. Insofar as Wallace’s fiction is calculated to help us see the *connection* between psychological suffering and our habits of thought, it not only demonstrates the potential interrelation of literature and philosophy; it is about the consequences, both philosophical *and* practical, of our failure to acknowledge and attend to that interrelation.

⁵⁵ *Investigations*, §287, p. 98

⁵⁶ Meredith Rand in *Pale King*, p. 496

Chapter Two

Playing Games: *Infinite Jest* as Philosophical Therapy

Long, allusive and narratively fractured, *Infinite Jest* (1996) has been called “a kind of exemplar for difficulty in contemporary fiction.”¹ Published in 1996, it became a best-seller despite running over 1,000 pages, including more than 200 pages of small print endnotes. Like Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, or Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, the book contains a vast panoply of characters and situations, with the connections between them clarifying gradually (but in some cases never completely) as the novel unfolds. Because of its surface resemblance to those earlier landmarks—in addition to the conspiracy-laden plot, there were the long, thorny sentences, digressions on technology and media, reproductions of emails and fake interviews, etc.—it was read by early reviewers as the next big postmodern novel or, in the (in)famous words of the *New York Times*’s Michiko Kakutani, as a pretentious “word machine,” which left its reader “suspended in midair and reeling from the random muchness of detail and incident.”² Other professional reviewers linked *Jest* with the works of contemporaries like William Vollmann, Rick Moody and Brett Easton Ellis, a group perceived as carrying on the project of the canonical postmodernists.

More sophisticated scholars have by now recognized that *Jest* is meant, at least in part, as a response to what Wallace considered as the excesses of his

¹ Stephen Burn, *Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide*, 10

² Michiko Kakutani, “Infinite Jest,” NYT, 2/13/96: <http://www.smallbytes.net/~bobkat/jest2.html>

postmodern forbears. Both Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn, in long works on Wallace, have connected *Jest* with the search for a literary “third way” that endeavors to move beyond what had become a set of stultifying quarrels between modernism and postmodernism, although without entirely disavowing the formal techniques of either.³ Lee Konstantinou has situated Wallace as a “post-ironist,” attempting through his fiction to create “believers” in a secular age,⁴ while Adam Kelly has focused on Wallace’s commitment to the artistic and moral value of sincerity, which cuts against early characterizations of his project as pretentious, cold or excessively abstract.⁵ Similarly, Timothy Aubry has read the novel as directed therapeutically against what Wallace perceives as his self-consciously intellectual readership’s “inability to feel” deep and authentic emotion.⁶

It is good that critics have moved beyond the early broad-brush criticism (or praise) of Wallace as the latest over-clever postmodernist, and in some ways I will agree with Boswell and Burn about Wallace wanting to find a way out of the modernism/postmodernism dialectic. I will argue, however, that Wallace’s animus against postmodernism, or against postmodern thinking, has still not been fully appreciated. It is symptomatic of even the most insightful Wallace criticism that it often culminates by ascribing to Wallace a theoretical position—for instance,

³ The books are Burn’s *David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide* (Continuum, 2011) and Boswell’s *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, (University of South Carolina Press, 2003)

⁴ Lee Konstantinou, *Wipe that Smirk off your Face: Postironic Literature and the Politics of Character* (Stanford Philosophy department, 2009)

⁵ Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” collected in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, ed. David Hering, pp. 131-147

⁶ Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy* (University of Iowa Press, 2011)

against the “illusion of autonomy” (N. Katherine Hayles),⁷ or for the Derridean questioning of “certain metaphysical assumptions” (Kelly)—in familiar postmodern debates. Even Konstantinou, who positions Wallace against “historical postmodernism,” ends up reading his project as “vaguely Foucaultean.” Such criticism misses not only the target of Wallace’s project, but, so to speak, its depth. To bring “the world” of *Infinite Jest* to consciousness of itself is to bring to consciousness how strongly we as readers may be implicated in the problems it attempts to address. This is, in the first place, to see postmodernism as denoting not a set of distinct arguments or artworks, which we may already consider antiquated or irrelevant, but rather as a symptom of a modern philosophical “picture” that still determines both what we take to be our most serious problems, and how we go about trying to solve them.

As such, the novel’s real “difficulty” lies not in its long sentences, its digressions, or its allusions to post-structuralist critics (Wallace’s readers were ready for those challenges), but rather in what it endeavors to get its reader to see. The demographic of those likely to read a novel like *Jest*, Wallace presumed, was made up of ambitious and highly educated individuals who had turned previously to advanced art, literature and social theory for answers to (what Wallace once called, in an essay on Dostoevsky) the “desperate questions” of existence (CTL, 269). The novel’s challenge may be described as *therapeutic* because it asks those readers to acknowledge the *failure* of these forms of culture to address the sources of their confusion or bewilderment (or, as Wittgenstein would have it, their bewitchment).

⁷ N. Katherine Hayles, “The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*.” *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999)

To put things like this is helpful in part because it emphasizes the deepest affinity between *Jest* and Alcoholics Anonymous, which emerges as a *successful* therapeutic model for those within the novel who have been let down, even betrayed, by more fashionable forms of therapy. Just as the alcoholic must begin by admitting the failure of her previous attempts to cure herself of her “Dis-ease” (as the veteran AA members like to spell it out for newcomers), so Wallace’s novel hopes to compel its reader to recognize that her feeling of “lostness” is connected to her philosophical and rhetorical commitments, as opposed to being addressed by them.

Below, after briefly summarizing the novel with an emphasis on the relation between its two main characters, I’ll offer a close reading of the book’s famous opening sequence. My hope is that the reading establishes 1) the centrality to the novel’s overall ambition of Wallace’s engagement with philosophy and 2) the nature of the philosophical problems (or the problems with philosophy) that he wanted his novel chiefly to address. This will set the stage for my discussion of the Alcoholics Anonymous passages, which, despite taking up almost half of the novel, have been treated dismissively or neglectfully by most critics. I will argue that Wallace’s AA⁸ must be read as offering a counter-philosophy—with significant affinities to the philosophy-as-therapy approach outlined most explicitly in the work of Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell—to the set of half-conscious beliefs and habits that lie at the root of Hal’s crisis in the book’s opening sequence. That we begin the novel in Hal’s head and end in Gately’s signals where Wallace takes his reader to begin,

⁸ I’ll call it “Wallace’s AA” to be clear that I am referring to the presentation of AA within the novel, not to the organization itself. From what I know, Wallace’s depiction of AA is accurate in most ways, but I am not in a position to evaluate where it might be inaccurate, nor would such discrepancies be of concern to me here.

and where he hopes she can conclude. Hence my chapter will end with a consideration of the final scene in the book, where Gately is placed in a situation that is externally similar to Hal's in the beginning. Throughout, I will attempt to show how the extant criticism of *Jest*, though helpful in some particulars, betrays many of the very prejudices that Wallace intended his novel to address or "treat."

Summary

The plot of *Jest* is anchored in the asymptotic narratives of its two main characters, the teenage tennis prodigy Hal Incandenza and the recovering Demerol addict Don Gately. At first, Hal and Gately seem to represent inverse notches on the bell curve of American achievement, with being Hal a gifted student-athlete, about to set off a recruiting war between top colleges, and Gately a burned-out former football star, now an orderly at a shabby recovery center down the hill from Hal's school. The setting is a dystopic near-future America where the years are sponsored by multinational corporations ("The Year of the Whopper," "The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment"), the president is a big business stooge, and terrorists, bitter at having their land and culture polluted by America, attack with a weapon of potentially mass destruction. Meanwhile, the shell-shocked American public plays sports, watches TV on the fancy new "Interlace" holographic media system, or indulges its addictions in what one of the terrorists refers to as a vast "confusion of permissions."

Preceding the frame of the novel is the suicide via microwave of Hal's father, an avant-garde filmmaker, world-class alcoholic and the founder of Ennett Tennis Academy, where Hal goes to school and prepares for "the show." As we learn during Hal's largely farcical sessions with a "grief counselor," Hal had discovered what was left of his dead dad's exploded (Hal's brother Orin calls it "deconstructed" [251]) head in his kitchen, but he had refused (except sarcastically) to discuss what he'd found with his mother or therapist. As the novel progresses, Hal withdraws from family and friends, taking solace in a secretive daily marijuana-smoking ritual under center court at the tennis academy. Repeatedly he describes himself as feeling "empty," or complains (to the reader) that his life seems "theoretical," as in an early dream:

In this dream, which every now and then recurs, I am standing publicly at the baseline of a gargantuan tennis court. I'm in a competitive match, clearly: there are spectators, officials. The court is about the size of a football field, though, maybe, it seems. It's hard to tell. But mainly the court's complex. The lines that bound and define play are on this court as complex and convolved as a sculpture of string. There are lines going every which way, and they run oblique or meet and form relationships and boxes and rivers and tributaries and systems inside systems: lines, corners, alleys, and angles deliquesce into a blur at the horizon of the distant net. I stand there tentatively. The whole thing is almost too involved to try to take it all in at once. It's simply huge. And it's public. ... High overhead, near what might be a net-post, the umpire, blue-blazered, wired for amplification in his tall high-chair, whispers Play. The crowd is a tableau, motionless and attentive. I twirl my stick in my hand and bounce a fresh yellow ball and try to figure out where in all that mess of lines I'm supposed to direct service. ...

The umpire whispers Please Play

We sort of play. But it's all hypothetical, somehow. Even the 'we' is theory: I never quite get to see the distant opponent, for all the apparatus of the game. (67-68)

The dream is not just a recapitulation of a certain kind of postmodern metaphor;⁹ it is also a critique of it. The problem with the game in the dream, *for Hal*, is not that it is not “real,” or interesting (or even that it cannot tell us something about reality; perhaps it can), but that it fails to facilitate contact. For “all the apparatus of the game,” Hal cannot see his opponent on the other side of the net—and in a sense he does not even believe in him (“even the ‘we’ is theory”). Hal might as well be alone on the court, “twirling his stick” and bouncing a ball to himself. The dream thus emerges as a parable about a game that fails to facilitate communication, one of dozens that are laced throughout *Infinite Jest*, a novel that attempts to communicate with its reader in large part by showing her how far she has been failed by the forms of communication (including the brand of literary novel that stops with the description of the contemporary world as “unplayable”) to which she has been customarily attracted.

Later on, we learn from Hal’s deceased father, who appears as a “wraith” over Don Gately’s hospital bed in the novel’s closing sequence, that Hal had begun to sink into his anomic malaise even before his father’s death, which was why the elder Incandenza had left his son a message in the form of a film. The film had been designed to address the very feeling that Hal describes having in the dream. The wraith explains that he had

⁹ Although it is that. E.g., “Each language partner, when a ‘move’ pertaining to him is made, undergoes a ‘displacement,’ an alteration of some kind that not only affects him in his capacity as addressee and referent, but also as sender. These ‘moves’ necessarily provoke ‘countermoves’...” This is how Lyotard describes a conversation. (cf. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1984)

spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and [his] muted son could simply *converse*. To concoct something the gifted boy couldn't simply master and move on from to a new plateau. Something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come *out*—even if it was only to ask for more. Games hadn't done it. Professionals hadn't done it ... His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make his eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to laugh. To bring him 'out of himself' as they say. (838-39)

The father's intent was concomitant with Wallace's own ambition to carry on a therapeutic "conversation" that brought his readers out of *themselves*. But, underscoring the delicacy and risk of such a project, the "entertainment" crafted by Hal's father—called "Infinite Jest"—turns out to be *too* entertaining, immediately paralyzing its viewers with insatiable desire (literally, they can *only* ask for more). Intercepted by wheelchair-bound Quebecois separatists planning to disseminate it en masse to the American public, "Jest" never reaches Hal, who, in the book's opening sequence—chronologically its end—reports that he can no longer make himself understood. What he means is that when he *thinks* he is talking, his listener registers chaotic animal grunts. It is not immediately clear why this has happened—although two popular explanations are that Hal has somehow seen the film, or that his toothbrush had been spiked with an especially lethal batch of DMZ. (Much more on this scene below.)

Hal, however, is not the novel's only protagonist, and he fades from the second half of the book in favor of Gately and his grizzled peer group of survivors at Ennett Recovery Center. Through Gately, the reader is introduced to Boston AA,

whose meetings, regulations and customs Wallace catalogues with the meticulousness of a dedicated anthropologist. An appropriately skeptical reader is led to wonder when Wallace will puncture the balloon of respect he inflates around “this goofy slapdash anarchic system of low-rent gatherings and corny slogans and saccharin grins and hideous coffee [that] is so lame you just know there is no way it could ever possibly work except for the utterest morons.” (350) But, contra some of the criticism of the AA portions of the novel, Wallace finally means to suggest that AA’s “corny slogans” are wiser than the condescending witticisms with which we might dismiss them. As a response to despair, the program turns out to be both more serious and more *effective* than the high-concept entertainment crafted by Hal’s father.

The precocious teens at Hal’s tennis academy are addicted too, the novel implies, some to substances and almost all to the individualistic, irony-soaked cultural style that Wallace had described in his earlier fiction and essays,¹⁰ and describes again in *Jest*. This is a world the reader is meant to recognize as her own, only more so. The Recovery Center—an “irony-free zone”—represents an alternative (“unromantic, unhip, clichéd ... unlikely and unpromising”) path open to those willing to admit that their “best thinking” has mired them in isolation and pain. It is no surprise that the AA portions of the novel have often been dismissed by critics, or interpreted as an index of Wallace’s despair with our present condition

¹⁰ See especially the novella “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,” in Wallace’s first short story collection, *Girl With Curious Hair* (1989), and his well-received essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” originally published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1993) before being collected in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (1998) I discuss Wallace and irony specifically in “Death is not the End” (*The Point*, 2009)

(Aubry, Konstantinou), since, taken at face value, they seem directly to challenge many of the unspoken pieties of twentieth-century high-culture: for instance that culture's faith in creative self-expression, its contempt for clichés and received wisdom, and its reliance on theory and (science-based) knowledge as the preeminent forms of understanding. *Jest's* "arguments" against these intellectual commitments are not made systematically; they are made through characters like Gately, the novel's supreme embodiment of the AA philosophy. To see Gately as a real hero—and not a parodic or hopelessly compromised one—is to see what is most radical about the novel Wallace has written. And it is the key to understanding in what respect precisely he hoped his novel would be *therapeutic* for his readers.

Opening Words

Because *Jest* is so long and complicated, it has not generally recommended itself as a material for close or concentrated reading. But although aspects of the novel's philosophical structure and argument may be described in broad strokes, the way it actually *works* as what I have called philosophical therapy is best described in detail—with an attention to individual sentences and words. Below, I will focus on the novel's famous opening scene—a stretch of approximately thirteen pages. I do not do so because I believe the scene can or should be considered in isolation; quite the opposite, I argue that the opening must be conceived of according to its place within the novel as a whole. Part of the logic behind my method below will be to

reproduce the experience of the naïve reader as the scene unfolds, since it seems that something about that opening has proven to be especially difficult for critics to take as the first-time reader would be prone to take it—that is, as an invitation into a reading experience rather than as its concluding gesture.

In chapter one, I laid out three therapeutic “methods” that I believe Wallace returns to throughout his fiction, each of them aimed at “externalizing” or bringing to consciousness habits of thought he believed had come to feel natural (and therefore inescapable) for his readership. Overall, I read *Jest* as deploying the strategy of *revaluation*, prompting its reader to re-evaluate what are likely to be her initial assumptions about Hal and Gately—and specifically to arrive at a vantage from which she can see that Gately and his AA brethren have something to teach (although it is not a new *argument*) Hal and his fellow sophisticates at the tennis academy. Taken in isolation, however, the opening passage of *Jest* employs one of the other three strategies I laid out: illustration or example. Namely it offers an example, in the Wittgensteinian sense, of the picture of thinking that is encouraged by what Robert Pippin has called “modern and post-modern self-consciousness” (also “the modern sensibility”).¹¹

What are the marks of this sensibility? They may not be easily paraphraseable (that is part of why we need the example), but, by way of introduction to the scene, it is worth briefly recapping some of the sounds of the quarrel between modernism and postmodernism, as artistic movements (in the sense that Burn and Boswell refer to them) but also as philosophies or what Cavell

¹¹ cf. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, p. 6, 4

has called “cultural styles.” Very roughly speaking, the hallmark of this quarrel was a debate about the status of the individual and her relation to society, which often shaded into, or depended upon, a difference of opinion regarding the possibility of rational agency and the relation between the inner and the outer self. Characteristically, the modern commitment to a pure private space (“I think, therefore I am”; “The point of interest lies very likely in the dark place of psychology”; “All things are inconstant except the faith in the soul”)¹² was pitted against the postmodernist diagnosis of (and seemingly preference for) total exposure (“We will have to suffer this new state of things, this forced extroversion of all interiority”; “Not only is the bourgeois subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth”; “The soul is the prison of the body”).¹³ With this quarrel in mind, it might seem perverse to speak of a “modern *and* postmodern” sensibility; one of the functions of the below example is to show how, according to my reading, the arguments worked to mutually reinforce one another. Meanwhile what the two sides shared in common—the language and style of the conversation itself—may be taken as taken as the philosophical “illness” that the opening of *Jest* is intended to expose.

¹² Descartes, *Discourse on Method*; Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction”; James Joyce, “Letter to brother Stanislaus.”

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication”; Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

Wittgenstein writes, “The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought to be quite innocent.” (§308) *Infinite Jest* opens with the sentence: “I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies.” (3)

If it has been remarked that *Jest*'s opening scene is enigmatic, it has not often been acknowledged how the narrator's language contributes to, or expresses, what is enigmatic about it. In the scene Hal, a highly sought-after high-school tennis star, meets with admissions officers and Deans from the University of Arizona. The meeting has been convened to determine Hal's suitability for an athletic scholarship at the university; its subject is the precipitous fall-off in Hal's grades and test scores during his final year at Ennett Tennis Academy. It is easy, once one has read the rest of the scene, to retrospectively attribute Hal's choice of opening words to what we are soon to learn about his compromised condition. But this would be to ignore how the words express Hal's condition—even more than that, how they invite the reader into it. For it is only on re-reading the scene that we will be prepared to take a small step back and see the sense in such questions as: Why does Hal not say he is in a room surrounded by other people? Or by administrators from the University of Arizona?

From the Wittgensteinian perspective we might say, according to the *picture* that has captivated Hal, there are no people in the room with him, only heads and bodies. (“A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.” [§116]) But what would this mean, for Hal? Possibly, Wallace is going to show us. That is, he is going

to show us how the world may come to seem for a person in the habit of describing human beings as “heads and bodies.”¹⁴

But the opening sentence does not give the full measure of Hal’s philosophical picture; for that we are made to wait for the fourth sentence of the novel: Hal’s portentous “I am in here” (it is not in quotations in the text). I say it is portentous because it will be the first statement to strike even the casual reader as bizarre. Of course, Hal might simply mean to say that he is “in the room,” but it is impossible to know why he would need to *insist* on that. So we move to a second interpretation: Hal is “in” something else—say, his body. The same question then returns at a deeper level, for who (what kind of being) would want to insist on *that*? The statement would seem to be redundant, unless it were necessary to insist that we are in ourselves. And where else would we be?

Burn has said that *Jest* is a novel that “begins and ends with materialism,” which he defines “within the philosophy of mind” as a “monistic thesis that does away with appeals to ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ in its insistence that mind is simply an emergent phenomenon of the biological matter of brain.”¹⁵ But Hal’s “I am in here” has the opposite sound from materialism; actually it would seem only to make sense in a context where materialism presents as a threat. Samuel Cohen has accurately described the sense Hal gives in the scene of being “a soul trapped inside a body,

¹⁴ A description of people that, as Burn points out, is “revealingly empty of human agency.” (*Reader’s Guide*, 39)

¹⁵ *Reader’s Guide*, 44

literally strapped down, struggling to express himself,"¹⁶ but Cohen does little to connect this struggle to its context, of assorted adults at an institution of higher learning who are attempting to evaluate and define Hal. "I am in here" is the opening salvo in Hal's attempt to respond to, or resist, this attempt. It should lead us to suspect that Hal's philosophical outlook, at least in this opening scene, is not so much materialist as it is a Cartesian or dualist response to the *threat* of materialism. The suspicion would seem to be confirmed by the way Hal goes on to talk about his body—as if it were separate from him, distant and alien: "I believe I appear neutral, maybe even pleasant, though I've been coached to err on the side of neutrality and not attempt what would feel to me like a pleasant expression or smile." And then: "The familiar panic at being misperceived is rising, and my chest bumps and thuds. I expend energy on remaining utterly silent in my chair, empty, my eyes two great pale zeros" (8).¹⁷

Already we had noted an anxiety regarding the correspondence between inner and outer, but here Hal states explicitly that he has been presented with guidelines regarding how he should appear, as if only such guidelines could keep his behavior from descending into obscenity. This coaching was either the result of or has caused Hal's loss of confidence in his ability to communicate his emotions and thoughts. The situation is both exotic and familiar, an extreme rendering of a familiar modern nightmare. The nightmare's philosophical dimension can be stated

¹⁶ Samuel Cohen, "To Wish to Try to Sing to the Next Generation: *Infinite Jest's* History," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 67

¹⁷ Besides for Shakespeare's Prince Hal, and Hamlet, Hal's name and situation should call to mind *2001: A Space Odyssey's* HAL 9000. Hence the significance of the eyes as "zeros"—as well as one inflection on Hal's (upcoming) denial that he is "not a machine." HAL 9000 articulates essentially the same denial when it is being dismantled in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. (Of course HAL 9000 *is* a machine.)

as follows: How can we ever *know* that we are communicating with another human being? Hal's "belief" that he appears neutral is stated provisionally, as if waiting for confirmation. But what would be the criteria for confirmation?

As the conversation commences, one of the Arizona Deans attempts to summarize Hal to himself: "You are Harold Incandenza, eighteen, date of secondary-school graduation approximately one month from now, attending the Enfield Tennis Academy..." Hal contends that the Dean is "a personality-type I've come lately to appreciate, the type who delays need of any response from me by relating my side of the story for me, to me."

Why would Hal appreciate having his "side of the story" related for him, to him? Only, we can assume, because he has begun to dread the responsibility of relating his story for himself. This is to say that self-expression has become a burden for him, even (as we are to see) an impossibility. The interview format aggravates the burden at the same time that it raises its stakes. Yet as the meeting continues, Hal grows more and more agitated at the way in which his "story" is being related back to him, including the insinuation that his application has been tampered with or that he is a jock without a brain. Although Hal does not want to have to tell his side of the story, he is not satisfied with the way that story is being told back to him either.

Hal's dissatisfaction bears some reflection. The problem is not just that Hal cannot speak, but that he is being spoken for. Cohen, in his treatment of this scene,

turns Hal into a burgeoning artist with significant affinities to Wallace, whose anxiety can be attributed to the fact that he is undergoing a crisis of expression.¹⁸ But it is not necessary to make Hal into an artist to articulate what worries him in this scene. The causes of Hal's anxiety are obvious, and they are described clearly within the scene itself: 1.) Hal is unable to tell his side of the story or "speak up for himself." 2.) The administrators at the college are telling Hal's story for him, to him, but they are doing it clumsily and in a manner he does not wish to affirm. Hal's concern is related to, but bigger than, the local concern that the administrators might "misperceive" what he says; it is, essentially, that they will misperceive who he *is*.¹⁹

Such a concern need not have anything to do with Hal's development *as an artist*;²⁰ although the fact that such linked difficulties—of self-expression, say, and of reception—now concern ordinary, educated men, and not just the artist, is an important and historically specific feature of the problem Wallace is here attempting to mount. The task of self-expression, and of recognition, has been problematic for modern art for some time, but now, as Cavell has noted, it has also become problematic for the "modern man," who feels the burden of finding "something he can be sincere and serious in; something he can mean."²¹ How this

¹⁸ in *Legacy*, pp. 67-77

¹⁹ We are in range here of a topic that Pippin has written much about—from a Hegelian perspective, it is the problem of recognition. Pippin has called "a central concern in a strand of European philosophy (sometimes called the 'romantic' strand) that stretches from Rousseau to Hegel, Emerson, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre"—the anxiety that "in our official or public roles we are not really or authentically 'who we are,' that we are not what we are taken to be by others." Pippin, "On 'Becoming Who One Is' (and Failing)," in *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 307

²⁰ Hal is nowhere pictured as an artist—except insofar as tennis may be construed as an art form—and Cohen's attempt to make him resemble Wallace seems like a stretch. It will be my contention that if there is any figure in *Jest* for the kind of artist Wallace himself aspires to be, it is Gately, not Hal.

²¹ Cavell, *MWM*, 212

became a problem for the “modern man” is a long story, and not one I can tell here; that it has come to have the *feel* of a problem, a deep problem (a “deep disquietude”), is one of the things I believe Wallace to be indicating by featuring it so centrally at the beginning of his novel. After all, *Jest*’s reader’s kinship with Hal—and therefore his motivation to delve into this dense 1,000 page novel—depends largely on his being able to recognize, and be disturbed by, the problem with self-expression he here observes in the protagonist.

This is also to say that Hal’s problem must be not just relatable but, in some sense of the word, attractive. Wallace employs various strategies to make the reader identify and sympathize with Hal, including making him the primary narrator of the scene, which emphasizes the very interiority that would be appear to be absent from any other point of view in the room. Moreover, it begins to seem a mark of distinction that Hal, in a room full of adults that seem comparatively corrupt and stupid, is so alone and withdrawn. One of Hal’s precursors in *Jest* is Hamlet. And Wallace, as did Shakespeare, begins his drama with a character who seduces the reader into suspecting that it is a mark of special intelligence, and depth, to have difficulty communicating one’s “inner” self. To be “in here” means in this sense to be protected, special (compare it to Hamlet’s saying to his mother that he has in him “that which surpasseth show,” while in both cases what lies outside the subject is presented as threateningly corrupt, toxic, or “rotten”)—the reader may suspect that such a man thinks, as Harold Bloom has said of Hamlet, not too much but too well.²²

²² I take a further point emphasis of the comparison of Hal and Hamlet to say something about grief (both having recently lost fathers)—and the power of grief to exacerbate the problem of the distance one may feel between an inner and an outer self, making it seem starkly as if all that we say and do is a “performance,”

Jest's therapy (like Hamlet's?), will consist in part in the reader's coming to see how what makes its protagonist "special" is also what makes him miserable—and not, or not just, because he sees the world more clearly than his peers. The connection the reader will eventually be compelled to draw is between what she might be inclined to admire and romanticize about Hal—his academic intelligence, his precision with language, his various private "theories," his sentimental relationship with his inner self—and what she cannot deny about the connection between those things and Hal's loneliness, his alienation, and his pain. One of the "corny slogans" Wallace explores later in the novel, familiar to Gately and his Alcoholics Anonymous cohort, is "My Best Thinking Got Me Here." (1026) In this case the challenge posed to the reader is to discover what Hal's "best thinking" (and the best thinking of his culture) has to do with where he has ended up—that is, "in here."

As questions continue to be raised about Hal's incongruous transcript, Hal's surrogate from the tennis academy (and also his stepfather) C.T. assures everyone that Hal will be a model student and an asset for the tennis team at Arizona. At that point, the Dean Hal refers to as "Athletic Affairs" (Hal uses only professional appellations for the administrators; we are never told any of their names) asks: "Is

whereas what is real and serious remains "in here" or "surpasseth show." The Bloom reference is from Harold Bloom, *William Shakespeare's Hamlet* (Chelsea House, 1996), p.5.

Hal all right, Chuck? Hal just seemed to ... well, grimace. Is he in pain? Are you in pain, son?" (5)

This is the first direct indication that Hal is failing in his coached attempt to "appear neutral." And it is significant that Athletic Affairs reads *pain* into Hal's expression. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses the phenomena of pain to illustrate his argument against the coherence of the idea of a private language, inaccessible from the outside. Here the phenomena is treated from the opposite side—Hal does not claim to feel pain, yet his outward behavior signals it to those around him. Hal thus seems obscure (say "theoretical") to himself in the way that the one who believes she has a private language imagines herself as being obscure to others. The example, taken flatfootedly, might seem to conflict with Wittgenstein's idea that we can hardly separate our notion of what constitutes pain from the various ways we are used socially to expressing it (here Wallace presents a case, we might say, of "unconscious pain"). But, as will become clear, Hal's condition is an abnormal one; and it is precisely the divorce between behavior and intention (the distance between Hal's body and his "I") that will signal his tenuous position in the human community. (That we would banish—or hospitalize—a person who behaved in such a way is Wittgenstein's point.)

The scene begins to build toward its climax when Hal's surrogates are asked to leave the room so that Hal can "speak up for himself." Before speaking, Hal offers a characteristically abstract reflection on his situation:

“This is not working out. It strikes me that EXIT signs would look to a native speaker of Latin like red-lit signs that say HE LEAVES. I would yield to the urge to bolt for the door ahead of them [Hal’s surrogates DeLint and C.T., on their way out] if I could know that bolting for the door is what the men in this room would see. DeLint is murmuring something to the tennis coach. Sounds of keyboards, phone consoles as the door is briefly opened, then firmly shut. I am alone among administrative heads.”

The return to “heads” emphasizes the “inexorable” purchase of the novel’s opening expression, as well as the fact that Hal’s failure of communication with his own body is concomitant with his inability to recognize others as anything other than disembodied, partial. This is one of the Cavellian (and Wittgensteinian) themes of the scene and of *Jest* as a whole. Acknowledgement of the other depends on acknowledgement of the self; if my own head and body are disconnected from my “self,” then I will likely perceive others also as “heads and bodies,” which I cannot penetrate or see beyond. The language in which the problem is phrased—again going back to the opening sentence of the novel—guarantees its conclusion; that is, the conclusion that it is impossible to “really” know another person from the outside. Which is, as Cavell and Wittgenstein both pointed out, the background for the conclusion of solipsism, or what Wallace would call “excluded engagement in the self.”²³

²³ “To withhold, or hedge, our concepts of psychological states from a given creature on the ground that our criteria cannot reach the inner life of the creature, is specifically to withhold the source of my idea that living beings are things that feel; it is to withhold myself, to reject my response to anything as a living being; to blank so much as my idea of anything as having a body.” (Cavell, COR, 84) Cavell presents this in part as a gloss on Wittgenstein’s famous quote, “The human body is the best picture of the human soul.” Hal has come here to exactly the opposite conclusion (that the human body offers NO picture of the human soul).

Meanwhile it is symptomatic that Hal's mind deflects into a kind of academic investigation, this time of the word EXIT, before turning to the desire motivating it; *he* wants to leave. Hal does not want to be "in here" anymore.

Before turning to the beginning of Hal's speech, it is worth briefly stepping back again to examine the nature of the Arizona administrators' concern, as they articulate it to Hal. Although multiple things about Hal's high school transcript are bothersome to the admissions officers, they return several times to one worry—the worry is that Hal's application is so *obviously fraudulent* that the administrators could be accused of taking advantage of Hal for his athletic prowess. "Look here," one of them says, "please just explain to me why we couldn't be accused of using you, son. Why nobody could come and say to us, why, look here, a boy so shy and withdrawn he won't speak up for himself, a jock, with doctored marks and a store-bought application." (10) Of course, the administrator's concern is not with the possibility that the university might *actually* be using Hal (that they will do that goes without saying); the concern is that the administration might be leaving itself open to being *accused* of doing so. So what is really being asked of Hal is that he help the college administrators in their (very open) conspiracy to use and exploit him. This is an important context for what we might call Hal's refusal. It is one way of interpreting Hal to get, at the end of the scene, exactly what he wants: an EXIT or way out.

What Hal says when he is finally compelled to “speak up for himself,” in any case, would seem to express his understanding not only of the conspiracy, but also of the assumptions that lie behind the conspiracy:

“ ‘I am not just a jock,’ I say slowly. Distinctly. ‘My transcript for the last year might have been dickied a bit, maybe, but that was to get me over a rough spot. The grades prior to that are *de moi*.’ My eyes are closed; the room is silent. ‘I cannot make myself understood, now.’ I am speaking slowly and distinctly. ‘Call it something I ate.’”

This last statement, initially a non-sequitur, calls forth a memory from Hal’s childhood. Actually, it is not Hal’s memory—Hal begins by saying he does not recall it; his older brother, Orin, has described it to him. (10) The memory involves Hal appearing in his front yard as a little boy, having come up from the damp family basement with something “darkly green” on his fingers and saying over and over “I ate this” while holding out “what turned out to have been a large patch of mold.” What is truly memorable about the scene, at least for Orin, is the way that Hal’s and Orin’s mom (referred to as “the Moms”) reacted to Hal’s declaration. “[Orin] remembers her face as past describing,” Hal says. “O. says his memory diverges at this point, probably as a result of anxiety. In his first memory, the Moms’s path around the yard is a broad circle of hysteria: ‘God!’ she calls out. ‘Help! My son ate this!’ she yells in Orin’s second and more fleshed-out recollection, yelling it over and over, holding the speckled patch aloft in a pincer of fingers, running around the garden’s rectangle while O. gaped at his first real sight of adult hysteria.” (11)

Among other things the memory—literally a study in hysteria—functions to suggest the first two of what are to be a series of potentially causal explanations for Hal’s condition in the college meeting. The condition could be caused physically, and thus in some way related to whatever it was that Hal had eaten in the damp basement (later it will be suggested that he might have “eaten” something more recently: hallucinogenic drugs). Or its causes could be pop-Freudian—namely, the Moms’s hysterical *reaction* to what Hal had eaten, which might signal a pattern of childhood trauma and avoidance about to repeat itself in the present. Both of these explanations turn out to be no more than pseudo-explanations, although they are hardly chosen at random. Drugs and family trauma are familiar bogeymen for psychological problems in Hal’s cultural milieu—that is, by implication, in the milieu that makes up Wallace’s readership.

More proximately, however, the scene foreshadows the response of the adults in the interview room to Hal’s personal statement. The Arizona administrators will respond to what Hal is about to say in roughly the same way as the Moms had responded, according to Orin, to his announcement that he had eaten a piece of mold. The following is what Hal announces to the administrators:

‘My application is not bought,’ I am telling them, calling into the darkness of the red cave that opens out before closed eyes. ‘I am not just a boy who pays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I’m complex.’

'I read,' I say. I study and read. I bet I've read everything you've read. Don't think I haven't. I consume libraries. I wear out spines and ROM drives. I do things like get in a taxi and say, "The library, and step on it." My instincts concerning grammar and syntax are better than your own, I can tell, with due respect. 'But it transcends the mechanics. I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you'd let me, talk and talk. Let's talk about anything. I believe the influence of Kierkegaard on Camus is underestimated. ... I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror. I believe, with Hegel, that transcendence is absorption. I could interface you guys right under the table. I'm not just a *creātus*, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function.' I open my eyes. 'Please don't think I don't care.' (12)

The statement, which Hal gives with his eyes closed (as if in anticipation that he will not be able to look at its reception), begins with the denial that Hal is just a jock ("I am not just a boy who plays tennis"), but shades quickly into a broader denial of materialism or reductionism ("I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings"). What is most notable is that Hal feels the need to deliver these words at all—for why should a human being ever need to *insist* that he has experiences and feelings, that he has an intricate history, that he is not a machine?

Apparently in Hal's world such statements are felt to be controversial, and have been felt so for some time.²⁴ (It was Hamlet, a character known for being used

²⁴ Burn perceptively points to a passage later in the book, but much earlier chronologically, in which Hal's father, James Incandenza, is informed by *his* father that, if he wants to make it as an athlete, he'll have to accept the "hard news" that he's "a body." If this might be taken as a garden-variety cliché, he

as a symbol of modern self-consciousness, who worried that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would “play upon” him like a pipe.²⁵) But it is also worth noting that what is offended is less Hal’s spirit than his intelligence. Hence his denial depends, significantly, not on Hal’s being, say, mortal, or loving; it depends on his “interesting” opinions and his facility with grammar. And on his having novel opinions about philosophers. Hal is like the young Hamlet, a student. And what he gives is, so to speak, a graduate student’s defense of his humanity.

As such, it will naturally bear some close reading. In his speech, Hal names four modern philosophers and a (philosophical) writer of fiction. It could be said that Hal names two dyads of philosophers—Hegel and Kierkegaard on the one hand, and Rousseau and Hobbes on the other—often taught as offering opposing notions of the interaction between inner and outer, or the individual and society. In ending with Hegel, Hal signals slyly what the novel he is opening will attempt to do—not to settle such long running disputes but to help its reader come to consciousness about and therefore be able to move beyond them. Hal himself, however, does not offer an example of someone who has moved beyond these oppositions; he is rather a product of them, boomeranging from one pole to the other. In this scene, Hal identifies with his “inside” at the expense of his body (“I am in here,” as Kierkegaard

clarifies that he means it all the way down, telling his ten year old son, “That quick little scientific-prodigy’s mind [your mother]’s so proud of and won’t quit twittering about: son it’s just neural spasms, those thoughts in your mind are just the sound of you’re head revving, and head is still just body, Jim. Commit this to memory. Head is body. Jim, brace yourself against my shoulders here for this hard news, at ten: you’re a machine.” (*IJ*, 159, quoted in Burn, 43)

²⁵ “Why, look you now how unworthy a thing you make of me: would you play upon me! You would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to my compass. And there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ. Yet cannot you make it speak. ‘Sblood! Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you like, though you fret me you cannot play upon me.” (3.2.355-363)

might say to Hegel), whereas for much of the book, as a potentially ascendant professional tennis star, he will identify (as per the instructions of his tennis instructor Schtitt, a known Hegelian)²⁶ with his active body over his “empty” inside (cf. 175, 694). The only critic I know of who has noted this “reversal” has accounted for it by asserting that Hal has been the victim of a drug-related prank.²⁷ This may be the case, although Wallace makes it unconfirmable. Either way, Hal’s shift can also be described philosophically, as the consequence of a conversation that has for too long been drawn to extremes, emphasizing either the mind or the body, the inner or the outer. (It was a variant of this dynamic that motivated Cavell to call for philosophy to turn to literature, as if literature had something to teach it about accepting or “acknowledging” the inescapable ambiguity of what he called “the human.”)²⁸

Hence Hal’s speech, while it indicates his intelligence and an ability to grasp complex philosophical ideas, simultaneously suggests the failure of philosophy to have helped him, *therapeutically* speaking. If it represents a graduate student’s defense of his humanity, it also signals the poverty of the version of humanity being defended. If we do not see this poverty, it may be because we share it.

²⁶ “Schtitt was educated in pre-Unification *Gymnaseum* under the rather Kanto-Hegelian idea that jr. athletics was about learning to sacrifice the hot narrow imperatives of the self—the needs, the desires, the fears, the multiform cravings of the individual appetitive will—to the larger imperatives of a team (OK, the state) and a set of delimiting rules (OK, the Law).” (83)

²⁷ Cf. Aaron Swarts, “What Happens at the end of Infinite Jest?” published on his blog, “Raw Thoughts,” 9/16/09: <http://www.aaronsw.com/weblog/ijend>

²⁸ “Wittgenstein’s motive,” Cavell writes, “is to put the human animal back into language and therewith back into philosophy.” (COR, 207) This assumes what Cavell says elsewhere—that modern philosophy has somehow exiled the “human.” And one of the places he thinks it has lived in exile is in literature, especially in the literature known as romanticism. See also COR, 83-84.

The reaction to Hal's speech confirms the completeness of its failure, at least as an act of communication. Having finished speaking, Hal opens his eyes and looks out. Directed his way is "horror." "Good God," whispers Athletics. "What in God's name are ... those *sounds*?" yells one of the Deans. Hal hears (it is impossible to know whether anyone actually says it) "*God!*" and "*Help!*" in the room—the same exclamations Orin had told him their mother had made when he had eaten the mold. In the chaos around him, Hal does what anyone would do who is faced with such a yawning gap between what he believes he is saying, and what is apparently being heard; he attempts to reassure himself. " 'There is nothing wrong,' I say slowly to the floor. 'I'm in here.'" Then: "I am not what you see and hear." And finally, as he is pinioned and dragged out of the room, "I'm not." (13)

Hal makes three overt philosophical statements at the end of the scene: "I'm in here," "I am not what you see and hear," and "I'm not"—and the order of the statements is instructive. The first approaches a classical formulation of Cartesian dualism. It was Descartes who set out to prove, and believed he had proved, "that the mind is distinct from the body," identifying his "self" as the "thing that thinks."²⁹ The second statement, "I am not what you see and hear," may be taken as an aggravation of the first, denying sharply that what is "in here" can be expressed or properly communicated to others (this is the denial that Hal shares with Hamlet: not only is he "in here," but what is in here seems to him to "surpasseth show"). Finally

²⁹ *Meditations*, Letter of Dedication, 3

in the third statement, “I’m not,” we have what looks at once like a negation of rational agency (Hal really has, he realizes now, lost the struggle “to be” in the historically modern sense that Pippin has sketched of “being the subject of one’s life”), as well as a kind of surrender to the supposed death of the subject in the age of postmodernism.³⁰

Initially, it is hard to see how the three statements could form a continuum, since the third seems naturally to stand in contradiction to the first two. But it is less surprising if we take the scene to be about the *failure* of dualism as a response to materialism or determinism—or indeed to the skepticism or nihilism that it sees lurking behind those positions. My sense is that the opening scene of *Jest* is meant to dramatize, philosophically, the inability of the thing that thinks to escape the problems of the body, much less to escape the problem of being perceived as a body—or, say, as “a creatus ... bred for a function” by modern society. If Hal’s inner “I” is conceived of as a representation of the deep dualist (also modernist or romantic) self, then one of the lessons of the scene is that that self cannot survive in total isolation from the world (this is one thing postmodernism is *right* about), just as it cannot bear total exposure to it (what modernism is right about). This is relevant to Wallace’s fiction as a whole insofar as that fiction rejected the postmodern taboo against the representation of deep subjectivity, even as he refused to simply return, as many of his contemporaries now have, to the modernist faith in the depthful and self-sufficient subject. (Hal is not self-sufficient, but the

³⁰ “Today, from any number of distinct perspectives, the social theorists, the psychoanalysts, even the linguists ... are all exploring the notion that that kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past; that the old individual or individualist subject is ‘dead’; and that one might even describe the concept of the unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism as ideological.” (Jameson, 1982)

reason we are able to sympathize with him is that he remains, unlike the flat automatons that were showing up in the novels of Pynchon, Ellis or DeLillo, recognizably human—and concerned, as might be expected, by the rumors of his own demise.)

This is also to get into a topic that occupied Cavell—namely, the topic of modern philosophy’s (over)reaction to the threat of skepticism or nihilism, its flight into such certainty-inducing formulations as “I think, therefore I am,” or “I am in here.” Not only the fact that such responses failed intellectually to meet the skeptic’s challenge, but also that they represented failures of humanity, of the human imperative to speak and act without perfect knowledge or certainty, was central to Cavell’s attempt to substitute “acknowledgment” for “knowledge” as a criterion for philosophical progress. From this perspective Hal’s problem is that, in response to the threat of determinism or (as Burn would have it) materialism, he denies too much. His “I am in here” is not just an announcement of imprisonment; it expresses itself the picture that imprisons and (in the Wittgensteinian sense) captivates him. Later in the book Hal will describe one of his great fears as being of “excluded engagement in the self.” But the novel as a whole would seem to suggest, especially in the sections dealing with Alcoholics Anonymous (on which more below), that the roots of Hal’s condition are in his language and therefore in his way of life; the way he describes and conceives of his anxiety guarantees its power over him.

Hal is not *Jest*’s stand-in for every millennial American, but neither is his problem meant to be a unique one. His philosophical response to social pressure (the retreat farther and farther into the self) reflects not just an academic but also a

popular contemporary notion of subjectivity, perhaps especially prevalent among the literary intellectuals most likely to be Wallace's readers. The opening scene thus dramatizes a common confrontation—namely, the confrontation between an individual who identifies his most precious self with his inner “feelings and beliefs,” and a society that *treats* human beings more or less like automatons, “bred for a function.” The confrontation, Wallace suggests, is mutually reinforcing. The harder the inward-facing individual bumps up against this alienating society (it is symptomatic that as Hal gets more and more uncomfortable one of the administrators gives the great modern-bureaucratic excuse that they are just “doing our jobs” [9]), the farther he is encouraged to retreat from it, until there can hardly be any communication between what the individual conceives of as his essential self and society at all. This is the sense in which “I am not what you see and here,” is just a stepping stone from “I'm not.” The dynamic is also one way of unpacking the significance of Hal's claim that “Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror.”³¹

What is *scary* about the scene, though, lies not in this theoretical point, but in the way it dramatizes how human communication—and therefore human community—can break off or down. We are initiated into its horror if we feel we have some reason to fear such a break—that is, if we fear that we may become, as Hal has become, stuck in our heads, alone, unable to describe our “experiences and feelings,” much less our pain. That Wallace does not say *how* Hal came to this pass (that the reader at this point has no idea) is an aspect of this horror, as if to suggest

³¹ The idea being that Hobbes is the theorist of a society that does not acknowledge the inner or authentic individual at all, while Rousseau would seem to pit the inner, unknowable individual against a cold or inhuman society.

that to live today is simply to be subject to such breakdowns.³² Certainly, Hal's intelligence, his vocabulary and grammar, his reading and his interesting opinions, have done little to stop it from happening *to him*.³³

The chapter ends with Hal being wheeled, or imagining himself being wheeled, down the hallway at a hospital, an orderly "looking down in the middle of some bustled task" and asking, "so yo then man what's *your* story?" (17)

The reader initially assumes that the rest of the "story" of *Jest* will account for Hal's compromised condition at its beginning. Critics have agreed, however, that the novel does not ultimately resolve the question of what, in the opening scene, is wrong with Hal (although it provides many false leads and half-explanations). They have tended to see Wallace's refusal to offer such resolution as an invitation to provide their own theory or explanation. So for Hayles the opening scene signifies the puncturing of the illusion of "autonomous selfhood."³⁴ Frank Cioffi reads it as a part of the book's "disturbing text performance," supposedly aimed at causing readers to virtually experience addiction.³⁵ Similarly to Hayles, Mary K. Holland sees

³² It is likely no accident that two well-known postmodern novels—DeLillo's *Great Jones Street* and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*—end rather than begin with characters suddenly unable to express themselves. Also that, in both of those cases (and in contrast to Hal's case), the character in question feels his dumbness to be a *relief*, as if he has finally gotten what he was after.

³³ As Cavell notes when he speaks of readers identifying with Othello, this does not mean the reader need literally worry that she will lose the ability to talk. "Not exactly. But I claim to see how his life figures mine, how mine has the makings of his, that we bear an internal relation to one another; how my happiness depends upon living a life touched but not struck by his problems; or struck but not stricken." (COR, 453)

³⁴ N. Katherine Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*." *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999), p. 695

³⁵ Frank Cioffi, "'An Anguish Become Thing': Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Narrative* 8.2 (2000)

Hal's breakdown as signaling the way in which Hal has been "doomed to the solipsistic death of his pathological society."³⁶

Such explanations are not only incomplete or implausible; they do not address what calls most urgently for explanation. First, if Wallace wanted to communicate what Cioffi and (especially) Hayles and Holland say he wanted to communicate, why would he *begin* the novel with Hal's crisis, rather than ending with it? Hayles says that, in such an unorthodox and spiraling narrative, the starting point is largely "arbitrary," but the fact that the meeting at Arizona represents the latest chronological moment in the book surely exacerbates the force of the question, rather than rendering it irrelevant, since it would be customary to put the latest thing last. It is more reasonable to assume that Wallace *opens* his novel with Hal's crisis so it is the first rather than the last word on the possibility of "autonomous selfhood" in Hal's "pathological society." There remain many characters to be introduced to, including Gately—with whom the novel ends—who handle communication issues very differently from Hal.

And second, considerations of his desire for the reader to do a certain amount of "work" notwithstanding, why does Wallace not himself provide a more straightforward explanation—or more decisive evidence for one (there are literally not two critics who read the opening scene the same way)—during the course of the novel for what happened to Hal?

³⁶ Mary K. Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose: Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest." (Critique, Spring 2006)

“The clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. ... When no questions remain ... just that is the *answer*.” (§133)

Glossing this quote from Wittgenstein in his “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” Cavell approaches what he takes to be the “central concept” of Wittgenstein’s later work, i.e. the notion that “the problems of life and the problems of philosophy have related grammars, because solutions to them both have the same form: their problems are solved only when they disappear, and answers are arrived at only when there are no longer questions—when, as it were, our accounts have cancelled them.”³⁷ A language game was one way of drawing a reader into a philosophical problem—that is, into its grammar—and then bringing that reader to some recognition of the limits of that grammar (and therefore, simultaneously, to the recognition that he might use some different grammar). It can be easy to read Wittgenstein’s language games as constructed explicitly for other philosophers and even for a certain kind of philosopher (the one who is after an ideal language, for instance). One of the services Cavell does as a Wittgenstein commentator is thus to bring out an analogy that is sometimes latent in Wittgenstein between, as he says above, the problems of philosophy and the problems of life. This allows a Wittgenstein to emerge who is speaking not only to the philosopher in search of an ideal language, but also to the desire within each one of us for certainty and protection, laying bare that desire’s personal cost alongside its philosophical one.

³⁷ Cavell, in *Must We Mean What We Say*, 85

Fictional scenes, like language games, can help a reader come to “account for” the limits of her habitual grammar—but fiction is almost unavoidably about life, so the philosophical problem will only come alive if it is simultaneously, even urgently, a life problem. Hal’s predicament in the opening scene of *Jest* is exemplary in this sense. His life problem is obvious: communication between himself and his “audience” has broken down. The philosophical problem, less obvious but (I think) fairly clear, is his captivation by a rigid dualistic picture of his inner/outer self—a picture which reproduces itself in virtually every sentence he (tries to) speak. One of the ambitions of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy—thinking especially of the private language argument—was to demonstrate the inadequacy of the dualistic picture for dealing with the skeptic about other minds. The opening scene of *Jest* does not reproduce this argument; it merely imagines the most extreme consequences for a subject who fails to recognize (or sees no alternative to) that inadequacy. Consistent with what I take to be Wallace’s project as a whole, the scene draws our attention to the power of the threat posed by a deterministic and often inhuman society (a common trope in the literature and criticism of Wallace’s time), but its aim is to make the reader acknowledge the futility of her most common ways of responding to that threat. This accounts for the philosophical significance of Wallace’s *opening* his novel with Hal’s crisis (as if, like one of Wittgenstein’s language games, inviting the reader into a grammatical cul de sac), as well as of his leaving it causally unexplained. Although it is tempting (actually irresistible) to look to the rest of the book for clues as to what is wrong with Hal, it is also helpful to remember what Wittgenstein meant when he said that a philosophical problem

could be solved—i.e. that it would “completely disappear.” This means not that we would have definitively discovered its answer or “cause,” but rather that, through some change in orientation or perspective, we would have found a way to stop the problem from tormenting us.

I believe that, for the reader who has truly understood *Jest*, the question of how and why Hal has become the way he is in the opening scene will recede in significance, until it is transcended by a different set of questions and concerns—namely, those raised in the Alcoholics Anonymous portions of the novel and embodied by Don Gately, lying in his hospital bed.

A Critique of Theoretical Reason

Although the early part of *Jest* is taken up mostly with Hal and his fellow adolescents at the Tennis Academy, the book’s focus shifts significantly, with its final two thirds being dominated increasingly by scenes taking place at Ennett Recovery House. It is in those scenes that Gately, who first appears as just one of the many former criminals attempting to recover his sanity at Ennett, emerges as a character who competes for and eventually (if the novel works as I am arguing it is supposed to) surpasses the reader’s interest in Hal.

Early critical responses to the AA portions of *Jest* tended to range from bafflement to condescension. Some critics chose not to speak of them at all, as if they represented an embarrassing (and embarrassingly personal, given what is known

about Wallace's own addiction issues in his late-twenties) foray into a self-help world that can have little relevance for the kind of people that tend to read novels by David Foster Wallace. Others read the AA portions against Wallace's obvious intentions for them, seeing in AA instructions, for instance, a repetition of the very "recursivity of addiction" (Mary Holland) that the program is supposedly meant to treat.³⁸ But I will start with two critics—Lee Konstantinou and N. Katharine Hayles—who have taken the AA portions seriously, although each of these critics has nevertheless, in my view, mischaracterized the role they are meant to play in the novel as a whole, as well as how they are meant to help the reader reflect back on Hal's crisis in the opening.

As a preview for what I will say in more detail below, for both Konstantinou and Hayles, the AA portions of *Jest* are meant primarily to offer the reader an alternative to critical thought, or *reason*. For Konstantinou, the AA sections of the novel represent Wallace's attempt to instill the experience of "belief" in his readers, who are portrayed as having become variously disillusioned, nihilistic and skeptical, while for Hayles Wallace's AA is employed as a counterweight to the "power of ratiocination," which has been, in the case of the addict, coopted by the disease of addiction. But according to my reading, Wallace's AA offers not a way out of or around "ratiocination," but rather access to a non- and perhaps to an anti-theoretical *form* of reason. That such a form exists—that is, that there may be rationality and even philosophy that is not theoretical or critical—is one of the hardest lessons of Wallace's AA, for some of the characters within the book and also

³⁸ Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose": Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest," in *Critique* 47.3 (2006), p. 233

for some of its critics. Another way of making this point is to say that if Wallace's AA is anti-philosophical, it is anti-philosophical only insofar as Wittgenstein's *Investigations* is anti-philosophical. The profound change it seeks to work in its members could be expressed by the seemingly paradoxical Wittgensteinian discovery that "The real discovery is the one that enables me to stop doing philosophy when I want to."³⁹ And from this perspective Hal's problem is precisely that he is never able to stop doing (a certain kind of) philosophy.

For Konstantinou, the key to understanding the importance of AA for Wallace is found in Wallace's description of the relationship that AA encourages between its adherents and God—or whatever the individual conceives of as her "Higher Power."⁴⁰ Konstantinou focuses on the AA directive to Don Gately to go and pray every night, even if he cannot believe in what he prays to—a directive that is consistent with the broader AA instruction: "Fake it Till You Make it." Gately, one of whose virtues as a counselor to new members at Ennett House is said to be his ability to honestly articulate his early difficulty accepting some of the AA directives, confesses that, even after ten months sober, he has trouble with the concept of the Higher Power, and does not know, even as he does it, what exactly he is praying to:

[Gately's] sole experience so far is that he takes one of AA's very rare explicit suggestions and hits his knees in the A.M. and asks for Help and then hits his knees again at bedtime and says Thank You, whether

³⁹ PI, §133

⁴⁰ It is no accident, I don't think, that Konstantinou zeroes in immediately on the aspect of Wallace's AA that secular intellectuals I know are the most skeptical about in *real* AA.

he believes he's talking to Anything/-body or not, and he somehow gets through that day clean. This, after ten months of ear-smoking concentration and reflection, is still all he feels he "understands" about the "God angle." ... He feels about the ritualistic daily Please and Thank You prayers rather like a hitter that's on a hitting streak and doesn't change his jock or socks or pre-game routine for as long as he's on the streak. (443)

The ritualistic relationship between the AA adherent and his higher power, Konstantinou says, should be read as a metaphor for the relationship Wallace is trying to build between his reader and the text of *Jest*. Wallace's goal in *Jest*, according to this interpretation, is to instill a similar kind of content-less "belief" into a readership disillusioned by the deconstructive tactics of metafictionists as much as by such Rortian announcements as that we now live in an age of banal irony. "Though some critics have interpreted *Infinite Jest* as harshly critical of AA," Konstantinou writes, "we must understand the formal situation of Gately relative to God in terms of the relationship Wallace wants to posit between the reader and belief. That is, belief is not merely a thematic content ... of the text, but an ethos and an experience it tries to instill in the reader through formal means."⁴¹ As such, Konstantinou takes the appeal to AA to be a sincere failure. The problem, he says, is that Wallace does not consider the social and economic arrangements that have given rise to the ironist, or the nihilist, and thus he offers a merely "symbolic toolkit" against the concrete reality of "bad institutions."

Hayles begins as does Konstantinou by chiding critics who do not take the AA portions of *Jest* seriously, emphasizing that the "immensely hard work of rebuilding subjectivity from the ground up is performed in the story of Don Gately ... who

⁴¹ Konstantinou, 125

discovers to his amazement that Alcoholics Anonymous actually works.” Next Hayles homes in, like Konstantinou, on the aspect of AA that forestalls the critical faculties:

Although Gately has no idea why the Twelve Steps have the power to release him from the terrible cage in which he found himself trapped, it gradually dawns on him that he does not have to understand why, only what. Addiction is deadly, he learns, because it infects the will; once reason has been coopted, it uses the power of ratiocination in the service of the Disease, inventing rationalizations that continue to operate until the Substance kills the Subject. “Analysis-Paralysis,” *AA calls this kind of thinking, a state typical of addicts who indulge in making finer and finer distinctions about a situation while failing catastrophically to intervene or act constructively*, a state that Hal often finds himself in after taking marijuana hits.”⁴²

So for Hayles, as for Konstantinou, the goal of AA is to replace “reason” with something else—call it belief, or Twelve Steps. That is to say: AA does not represent an alternative form of reason, or a critique of a certain form of reason; it represents an end run around reason, an instruction manual for how to short circuit it.

A third critic, Timothy Aubry, offers a modified but still complementary presentation of Wallace’s AA, even though Aubry, unlike Konstantinou or Hayles, does interpret Wallace’s AA within the horizon of the novel’s attempt to offer therapeutic solace to its “self-consciously intellectual readership.” Still, Aubry characterizes Wallace’s presentation of AA as “ambivalent,” approvingly paraphrasing A.O. Scott’s pronouncement that “Wallace appears to be no less addicted to the aesthetic habits that he claims to find tiresome than his characters

⁴² Hayles, 693 (my italics).

are to various substances.”⁴³ More importantly, according to Aubry, Wallace signals in passages such as the one Konstantinou quotes above that he is actually critical of AA’s insistence that its members repeat slogans and clichés they may not fully understand. “Uttering a slogan whose truth you are not prepared to affirm,” writes Aubry, “would seem to be an exemplary instance of irony.” And it is this kind of irony of which Wallace himself is guilty, insofar as he laces his novel with platitudes about the wisdom of a program that he himself could not possibly be prepared to affirm.

The three responses share certain assumptions; I take these assumptions to be related to precisely what Wallace found challenging and edifying about the philosophy behind AA. Konstantinou and Aubry see that the target of Wallace’s critique is not just drug addicts, but Wallace’s readers, themselves subject to the “extravagant self-conscious, self-doubting, ironic processes undergirding addiction” (Aubry). Yet Konstantinou believes that AA can only represent a “symbolic” (and therefore “perverse”) rebuttal to this problem, in the form of an injunction to simply *believe*—while Aubry argues that the goal of Wallace’s AA (a goal Wallace himself is said to be ambivalent about) is a somewhat nostalgic “recovery of feeling.” Hayles sees that AA seeks to address a problem of the will, yet, far from recognizing this as a problem that she, as an academic literary critic, might *share*, she describes it in such a way that its applicability appears limited to the corrupted wills of drug

⁴³ Aubry, 99, 101, 109. The Scott article is “The Panic of Influence” (NYT, 1996). Wallace *does* want us to see that our relationship to certain aesthetic habits bears comparison to the relationship that addicts have with their substances. Whether he himself is addicted to those habits is another matter—and not one I can settle here, although as a whole I take this dissertation to be advancing the view that Wallace deploys the habits in question (irony, metafictional intrusion, alienation, etc.) with a level of control and restraint that would be inconsistent with addiction.

addicts.⁴⁴ What binds all three interpretations together is a notion of a single, healthy form of “ratiocination” or reason, which Wallace is presumed to share with said literary critics—and which stands in opposition to AA’s pseudo-religious dogmatism. So for Hayles, AA can be appropriate for an addict whose reason has been “co-opted” by the Disease of addiction, while for Konstantinou and Aubry it offers access to non-rational experiences (of belief, or of affect) from which Wallace’s secularized readers may have become estranged.

There is no question that Wallace sometimes portrays AA as helping its adherents learn how to shut off their critical faculties when necessary, and that AA is valued in part for opening its members to certain experiences (empathy, most notably) that are in short supply at, for instance, Hal’s tennis academy. However if my interpretation of the book is correct, the therapy offered by Wallace’s AA is aimed at precisely the kind of reader—we might call her an *academic* reader (but this does not mean she need necessarily *be* an academic)—who mistakes a certain picture of critical or analytical thinking for reason *tout court*. Alcoholics Anonymous, that is, does not function for Wallace as a way of forestalling thought or of instilling belief, or sentiment; it offers, rather, an alternative picture (in the Wittgensteinian sense) of thought, bearing a different kind of respect for the limitations of specifically theoretical reason, including an appreciation of theoretical reason’s need for limitation. What the reader is encouraged to see over and over is the *similarity* between addicts, who are described at one point as “addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own

⁴⁴ It is, of course, not just *drug addicts* who are known for “making finer and finer distinctions about a situation” while “failing catastrophically” to intervene in it.

thought,” (203) and the recursive, self-undermining habits of thought of a clever literary sophisticate like Hal. If one way of describing Hal’s problem in the opening scene is to return to the dream about the tennis game, where “even the ‘we’” has become “theory,” then a way of describing the role AA plays in the novel is to say that it makes compelling a mode of thought that emphasizes, instead of theoretical sophistication, interpersonal contact, intellectual discipline, and a respect for clear and distinct boundaries (sometimes known as conventions). If Hal is an example of “modern and post-modern self consciousness” taken to a terrifying extreme, the veteran AA members become examples, not exactly of an anti-modern sensibility, but of a sensibility that recognizes the temptations and potential excesses of self-consciousness, and has adopted a set of pragmatic restraints in order to avoid indulging in them.

In a short article for the *New York Review of Books*, Elaine Blair has gotten closest to what I want to argue here, describing the AA portions of the novel as a “corrective” to the corrosive cynicism about received wisdom practiced by “earlier generations of the American avant-garde.”⁴⁵ As Blair notes, contra Konstantinou, this corrective is the opposite of symbolic; indeed what the AA scenes allow Wallace to do is imagine a scenario in which modifying one’s habits of thought “might be a pressing matter of survival.” Through the often harrowing stories of the addicts at Ennett House, Wallace is able to dramatize positively precisely what he established

⁴⁵ Elaine Blair, “A New, Brilliant Start,” *The New York Review of Books*, 12/6/12

negatively through Hal: the potentially life-saving urgency “of simplicity and sincerity, and the potential hazards of overintellectualization and cynicism.”⁴⁶

Blair uses something of a shorthand for the way the AA portions of *Jest* address “overintellectualization and cynicism,” which might be misconstrued as according with the view that the AA portions of the novel are anti-intellectual, although that is not exactly what she says. In any case, it is not only by emphasizing simplicity and sincerity (in fact Wallace goes to considerable trouble to show that some of AA’s directives, including the one to be sincere, are anything but simple), but by advancing a picture of thought, and of (a) philosophy, that will seem unfamiliar and perhaps initially banal to most of his readers, that Wallace’s AA plays its central role in *Jest*’s philosophical therapy. The idea is not to instill belief in AA or in anything else, but rather to expose the confusions and limitations of the picture of thinking to which many of Wallace’s readers and characters already subscribe. Quite the opposite of Konstantinou’s conclusion, Wallace uses AA not to introduce his readers to a new model of belief, but to bring them to consciousness about what they *already* believe.

Below, I’ll focus briefly on three ways—all laid out from approximately pp. 270-374, when Wallace introduces his readers to Ennett Recovery Center—that Wallace’s AA can be said to expose and challenge (to expose by challenging) the sensibility exhibited by Hal in the novel’s opening, but *without* recommending that its reader give up her critical faculties or trade thought for belief or sentiment.

⁴⁶ Blair, “A New, Brilliant Start.”

Roughly, these will be 1.) AA's appreciation for common sense. 2.) AA's attitude toward communication. 3.) AA's suspicion of theory.

Common Sense: Wallace's AA's attitude toward common sense can be understood most clearly from the central place it accords to clichés or slogans. The creative writing teacher and the twentieth-century literary critic would seem to agree that the cliché is the lowest form of communication, betraying a lack of originality and a laziness with language; it has become a cliché itself for clichés and slogans to be connected culturally with lowest-denominator consumerism and politically with authoritarianism. The sophisticated *Infinite Jest* reader's likely hostility toward clichés, already hinted at in Hal's demeaning judgment of the word choice of some of his interlocutors in the opening sequence, is given voice toward the beginning of the section introducing Boston AA by "Freelance Script writer" Randy Lenz and a professor and the editor of a "Scholarly Quarterly," Geoffrey Day. Lenz and Day are both considered "intellectuals" within the Ennett House community—and it is no accident that Day, during his intake interview, complains that there is "something totalitarian" and even "un-American" about AA's use of clichés. (ft 90, p. 1003) Lenz and Day are known for being the most difficult kind of addicts. "It's the newcomers with some education that are the worst," according to one of the intake officers. "They identify their whole selves with their head, and the Disease makes its command headquarters in the head." (272)

Lenz and Day initially express their contempt for AA as a whole through their contempt for its reliance on, and lack of suspicion about, clichés. "So then at forty-six

years of age I came here to learn to live by clichés,” says Day. “One day at a time. Easy does it. First things first. Courage is fear that has said its prayers. Ask for help.” (270) To Gately, who listens to Day deliver these sarcastic lectures, “Day is like a wide-open interactive textbook on the disease.” (279) “If Day ever gets lucky and breaks down,” Gately thinks, “and comes to the front office at night to scream that he can’t take it anymore and clutch at Gately’s pantcuff and blubber and beg for help at any cost, Gately’ll get to tell Day the thing is that the clichéd directives are lot more deep and hard to actually *do*. To try and live by instead of just say.” This is a wisdom that is repeated and reinforced by the novel as a whole, which, despite being often lauded for its verbal originality, is studded with praise for the (sometimes life-saving) consolations of clichés. “Even if they are just clichés,” Gately thinks at one point, “clichés are (a) soothing, and (b) remind you of common sense, and (c) license the universal assent that drowns out silence; and (d) silence is deadly, pure Spider-food, if you’ve got the Disease.” (278)

The idea that one might need to be “reminded” of common sense is central to AA, and it might at first glance be taken to be anti-philosophical (it might seem that philosophy is there precisely to question common sense; certainly this is a presumption that most contemporary analytic philosophy shares with Descartes). But for those familiar with Wittgenstein, the idea cannot but remind them of his conception of the work of the philosopher as “assembling reminders for a particular purpose.” This could be a motto for Wallace’s AA. AA assumes that it is a problem for its members if they have become estranged or alienated from what we share in common, and pass down to one another, often in the form of clichés. Cliches, that is,

become an important aspect of the form of life encouraged by AA; a form that valorizes what is common, and attempts to facilitate it. Of course, Lenz and Day want to tear the clichés out of that form of life (which they do not yet accept as their own), and hold them up for ridicule. This is an eruption of (what Wittgenstein would have called) bad philosophy, in the midst of AA.⁴⁷ Lenz and Day are analogous to the Wallace critics who have insisted on seeing the clichés within the novel as capable of being held out for analysis (and often for ridicule), without seeing that they are part and parcel a way of living that is being recommended as a whole.

It is worth noting, before moving on, that Gately's defense of clichés is not *merely* pragmatic or functional. Clichés do not just allow the desperate addicts at Ennett House to get through their days; they can also help them to achieve what the book posits as something resembling peace, or grace. "I Didn't Know That I Didn't Know is another of the slogans that looks so shallow for a while and then all of a sudden drops off and deepens like the lobster waters off the North Shore," Gately reflects at one point, adding that such slogans can help "these poor yutzies ... start to get a whiff of what's true and deep, almost magic, under the shallow surface of what they're trying to do." (271) Wallace does not say much more, in *Jest*, about what's under the surface of what the residents at Ennett House are trying to do (he'll pick up on the thread in *Pale King*). The point of emphasizing it here is just to suggest that Wallace is after more than simply to show his readers how an addict can be taught to make it through the day. Not just survival, but something that is "true and

⁴⁷ "When we do philosophy we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions from it." PI, §194. Some of my own thinking on this topic has been influenced by Rush Rhees's essay, "Language: a family of games?" in *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, ed. D.Z. Phillips (1988)

deep” is held to result from the repeated use of this common (not to say “ordinary”) language.

Communication. As the reliance on clichés goes some way toward demonstrating, the AA community does not always privilege preeminent highbrow values such as originality, creativity or (in the artistic sense) self-expression. What it does privilege is encapsulated perfectly by the name the members give to their nighttime public gatherings: “Commitments.” At a Commitment, addicts take turns going to a podium and telling their stories—exactly the thing that Hal had found himself incapable of doing at the beginning of the novel. The stories, we are told, share a reliable formula, beginning with the speaker’s introduction to his substance of choice, climaxing with his having reached his “bottom,” and culminating with his discovery of solace after he “Comes In” to AA. Although some of the AA members initially chafe at the rigid structure, they eventually come to see it as a source of comfort, as they do the rules (some written, some enforced implicitly by the audience) governing language and style. For instance, every speaker begins with the same four words: I am an alcoholic. After that, they are encouraged to “Keep It Simple.” The audience, meanwhile, learns to view jokes, irony and sarcasm with suspicion—not for aesthetic or symbolic reasons, but rather because they are so well-acquainted with their danger:

The thing is that it has to be the truth to really go over, here. It can’t be a calculated crowd-pleaser, and it has to be the truth unslanted, unfortified. And maximally unironic. An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in a church. Irony-free zone. Same with sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity. Sincerity with an ulterior motive is something these tough ravaged people know and

fear, all of them trained to remember the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they'd had to construct in order to carry on Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle. (369)

The values around communication at Wallace's AA diverge sharply from those that reign supreme at Hal's Tennis Academy. One thing that Hal's father, the avant-garde filmmaker, *successfully* passed down to his son is an anxiety, and a suspicion, about the possibility of authentic or truthful communication. Wallace himself was critical of writers in the foregoing generation such as John Barth who grew, he felt, more interested in the problem of communication than in actually communicating. For these writers jokes, sarcasm and self-conscious irony were seen as marks of sophistication; in AA, the same qualities are known as "self-presenting fortifications" that allow people to remain isolated from others and indulge in their addictions.⁴⁸ But it is worth emphasizing, again, that Wallace's objection to the postmodern focus on communication was not, itself, theoretical. Rather, Wallace attempts to show through the addicts, as Blair suggested, the real-life, concrete consequences of an unchecked propensity toward irony, reflexivity, and "double-entendre principles" (as he called them in his television essay).

If, at the time of *Jest's* writing, much of advanced art and criticism had come to seem, in Wallace's estimation,⁴⁹ like the "game" that Hal was unable to play in his dream, Wallace's AA provides a model in which "play" is sharply discouraged. The Commitments, in a Wittgensteinian sense, are also a (language) "game," but they are

⁴⁸ Again, Wallace was not thinking only of drug addicts or clinical cases when he had a doctor observe, early on in the novel, that "Sarcasm and jokes were often the bottle in which clinical depressives sent out their most plangent screams for someone to care and help them." (71)

⁴⁹ See "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993)

a game in which to play well is precisely to eschew “play.” As Gately reflects, this is “harder than it sounds.” Sincerity, in other words, is not easy—nor is it a matter *simply* of speaking directly or not making jokes. As the AA veterans know, any communicative strategy, including earnestness, could be used with an “ulterior motive,” which is to say that there is no way to *theoretically* protect oneself against fraudulence, or self-deception. But this does not mean it is impossible to get better at “committing” to what one says, nor that the norm of verbal honesty is incoherent or meaningless. “Gately’s most marked progress in turning his life around in sobriety, besides the fact that he no longer drives off into the night with other people’s merchandise, is that he tries to be just about as verbally honest as possible at almost all times, now, without too much calculation about how the listener’s going to feel about what he says.” (Even here, Wallace’s AA expresses realistic expectations—Gately does not pretend he can speak without *any* calculation; he merely acknowledges that there is a point where such calculation becomes “too much.”)

A second aspect of the AA stance toward communication might be described as its privileging of intention over text. Wallace’s preceding generation of postmodern authors were often complicit in a critical and theoretical program that had declared the “Death of the Author”—that is, the death of our interest in the intentions of the author, accompanied by the birth of our exclusive interest in the text. As Day and Lenz demonstrated the prevailing view about clichés, so Wallace imagines a kind of postmodernist critic in the midst of one of the AA meetings, in the form of Joelle van Dyne, a late arrival at Ennett, eventually to become a good friend

of Gately's but originally connected to the avant-garde art scene through Hal's deceased father (she is said to be the star of the film, "Infinite Jest"). Soon after arriving at Ennett, Joelle tells Gately that she finds it "especially hard to take when," at Commitments, "these earnest ravaged folks at the lectern say they're 'Here But For the Grace of God.'" Gately assumes Joelle means she has trouble with the religious aspects of AA, and starts to comfort her by confessing his own initial confusion about the Higher Power, but Joelle interrupts him. Her problem is not spiritual, she says, but grammatical:

"'But For the Grace of God' is a subjunctive, a counterfactual, she says ... so that an indicative transposition like 'I'm here But for the Grace of God' is, she says, literally senseless, and regardless of whether she hears it or not it's meaningless, and that the foamy enthusiasm with which these folks can say what in fact means nothing at all makes her want to put her head in a Radarange at the thought that Substances have brought her to the sort of pass where this is the sort of language she has to have Blind Faith in." (366)

Gately immediately interprets this speech as involving "Denial-type fortifications [combined] with some kind of intellectualish showing off"; at the same time, he "doesn't know what to say in reply," and finds himself genuinely distressed ("he feels a greasy wave of the old and almost unfamiliar panic"). By questioning the text (specifically in this case the grammar of the text), as opposed to what the text communicates about the speaker's intention, Joelle has broken a kind of spell. If her goal was disenchantment she has been cleverly successful; the words, here, begin to seem as if they have been alienated from the people speaking them (perhaps she has *cast* a spell); and they threaten to lose their power—even over Gately.

But what does Joelle accomplish with this disenchantment? It might seem that Joelle here is on the Wittgensteinian side, taking a deep-sounding statement and cutting it down to size (“literally senseless”). In fact, however, at least the late Wittgenstein would point out that the sentence’s “sense” does not depend on its grammatical or logical consistency (one of the things you learn at Ennett Halfway house is that “logical validity is no guarantee of truth” [202]); it depends, rather, on a kind of unspoken agreement between its speaker and her community of listeners. For the AA adherents at Ennett house, the phrase makes plenty of sense; they no more need “Blind Faith” than they do analytical tools or grammatical training to grasp what the speaker means. Language is conceived, in Wallace’s AA, as a conduit for intention; if the goal for the speaker at Commitments is to purify her intentions (to become “verbally honest”), then the audience plays its part by privileging, not what was literally said—evaluating its “logical validity,” say, or judging its originality and cleverness—but what it thinks the speaker means *by* saying it.

This, rather than the relationship between the AA member and God that Konstantinou focuses on, is the proper analogy to use if one wants to draw one between AA and its members and Wallace and his readers. For that relationship to work, Wallace suggests, both the reader and the writer have to value verbal honesty over empty cleverness. To read the text against its speaker, as Joelle does in the above example, is not only to miss the point but also to mock and endanger it. It is to be the witch in the church.

Theory (and philosophy). Konstantinou makes it sound as if Wallace reads the relationship between an AA member and her “Higher Power” as expressing a theory of the importance of “belief” to everyday functioning, something that is not appreciated by, say, the sophisticates at Hal’s tennis academy (and by extension by many of Wallace’s readers). But Wallace makes clear that one of the things he admires about AA is that it does not get its authority from its coherence *qua theory*. Indeed, Wallace emphasizes that AA is, on the one hand, analytically mysterious even to those whom it helps (“Nobody’s ever been able to figure AA out ... it seemed impossible to figure out just *how* AA worked” [349]), and, on the other, positively disdainful of attempts to establish chains of causation (a staple of the Cartesian model of thinking), since this is identified as the first move in the theorist’s attempt to displace responsibility for her problems (“So but also know that causal attribution, like irony, is death, speaking-on-Commitments-wise” [370]) to larger, institutional or cultural forces (for instance to family trauma, or late capitalism). (A third feature of theory, or at least of postmodern theory, is also contradicted by AA. Postmodern theory is expected to be interesting, whereas AA’s trite truths are “not just un- but *anti-interesting*.”)

It is easy to see how commentators could see Wallace as therefore granting (whether approvingly or critically) that AA is hostile toward serious thinking. What I have been trying to argue is that Wallace’s AA advances an alternative picture of serious thinking—in fact a picture in which much of what passes for serious thought in contemporary philosophy and art is revealed to be little more than (a very dangerous form of) “play.” I press this point because it has been tempting for

Wallace's critics to view his valorization of AA as part of a larger turn in his mature fiction toward mysticism, or faith, or (as Konstantinou calls it) "belief." There are moments, indeed, in Wallace's final novel (see Chapter 4) where it would seem he may really begin to creep in this direction. But to take Wallace seriously as a philosophical author involves seeing his endorsement of AA as pointing, not away from thinking, but towards a picture of it that exposes and challenges the customary one of his readers.

As a picture of thinking, Wallace's AA takes its authority from other sources than logical validity or being provocative—for instance, from the program's practical efficacy, or from the sense of community that the shared customs and language engender, or from the inner change its adherents report undergoing over time.⁵⁰ Gately, for instance, prays to his Higher Power every night not because he wants desperately to believe in something, or because he is convinced by the practice's theoretical soundness, but rather because the praying does help him, he finds, to stay sober, day after day, "like a hitter who's on a hitting streak and doesn't change his jock or socks." Why it helps is a question he is not uninterested in, but also one he knows it can be dangerous to ask too insistently. "The Why of the Disease is a labyrinth it is strongly suggested all AAs boycott, inhabited as the maze is by the twin minotaurs of Why Me? and Why Not?, a.k.a. Self-Pity and Denial, two of the smiley-faced Sergeant at Arms' more fearsome aides de camp." (374) The

⁵⁰ This also speaks to Wallace's AA's debt to Wittgenstein, at least as interpreted by Cavell: "Like Freud's therapy, [Wittgenstein's later writing] wishes to prevent understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change. Both of them are intent upon unmasking the defeat of our real need in the face of self-impositions which we have not assessed (§108), or fantasies ('pictures') which we cannot escape (§115)." ("Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy, in *MWM*, 72)

idea is that sometimes the reasonable thing to do is not to ask a question—especially when the question one wants to ask may be of the kind that does not admit of a satisfying answer.

At the end of the introductory portion of the novel on AA, Wallace posits AA's "root axiom" as being to "Check Your Head at the Door." Gately knows that this can sound "classically authoritarian, maybe even proto-Fascist," a judgment Hal would probably share with Joelle and the rest. But remember it is only the intellectuals who "identify their whole selves with their heads." That is why it can never occur to them that it might sometimes be rational to "check" one's head—just as it is unlikely to occur to most philosophers how the "real discovery" can be the one that allows them to stop doing philosophy when they want to.

Portrait of an Artist?

Were Wallace ambivalent about what he presents as AA's picture of thinking, a plausible way for him to express that ambivalence would be to show it failing one of its members (which means, especially in this novel, showing him failing to communicate with his community) at a crucial moment. But he does precisely the opposite, concluding his novel with a portrait of a subject who remains capable of carrying on a "conversation" even under the most dire of external circumstances.

Having been shot in the side in the process of defending some of his charges at Ennett House, Gately finds himself lying heavily and in great pain in St. Elizabeth's Trauma Ward. As at the beginning of the novel, the reader is thus placed inside the

head of a protagonist who cannot speak, but whereas Hal is unable to speak for reasons that are obscure and abstract, there is no mystery about why Gately cannot speak: Gately has a tube stuck down his trachea. Moreover Gately, unlike Hal, does not need to be told he is in pain (his pain is not “unconscious”); his situation is the more familiar one in which he feels his own pain, but does not know how to communicate it:

Gately] couldn't feel the right side of his upper body. He couldn't move in any real sense of the word. ... His throat felt somehow raped. (809)

Everything on his right side was on fire. The pain was getting to be emergency-type pain, like scream-and-yank-your-charred-hand-off-the-stove-type pain. Parts of him kept sending up emergency flares to other parts of him, and he could neither move nor call out. (815)

Despite this excruciating pain, what is truly horrible about Gately's situation is similar to what is truly horrible about Hal's—he cannot, at least at first in the hospital room, make himself understood. Like Hal, Gately is moved by his condition to certain philosophical speculations. (“Are they words if they're only in your head, though?” [832]; “What would it be like to try and talk and have the person think it was just their own mind talking?” [833]). Unlike Hal, Gately does not become bogged down in these speculations, and finds, mostly by reminding himself of AA directives, the resources to check and channel his anxiety. Whereas Hal's speculations lead him down a rabbit hole that only exacerbates his personal crisis, Gately has developed a method of thinking that helps, rather than hinders, him adjust to his predicament. Philosophically speaking, the difference may be described as that between a dualist response to a materialist threat, and a Wittgensteinian or a Cavellian response to a materialist threat (Gately, too, is in danger of being thought of in the hospital as “just

a body”—not least by the doctors who want to prescribe him painkillers despite his personal history.)

The proof of AA’s effectiveness as a picture of thinking is finally shown, appropriately, not through any explication of its theoretical foundations, but in its practical efficacy for Gately. The climax of the novel’s final scene consists in Gately’s epiphany that the key to enduring his pain lies in his ability to *resist the temptation to theorize about it*:

No one single instant of it was unendurable. Here was a second right here: he endured it. What was undearable-with was the thought of all the instants all lined up and stretching ahead, glittering. ... It’s too much to think about. To Abide there. But none of it’s as of now real. What’s real is the tube and Noxzema and pain. ... He could just hunker down in the space between each heartbeat and make each heartbeat a wall and live in there. Not let his head look over. What’s unendurable is what his own head could make of it all. What his head could report to him, looking over and ahead and reporting. But he could choose not to listen; he could treat his head like G. Day or R. Lenz: clueless noise. He hadn’t quite gotten this before now, how it wasn’t just a matter of riding out the cravings for a Substance: everything unendurable was in the head, was the head not Abiding in the Present but hopping the wall and doing a recon and then returning with unendurable news you then somehow believed. (860-61)

Whereas for both Hal and the formerly drug-addicted Gately, pain was rendered somehow unreal or theoretical (one of the advantages of drugs, Gately remembers, is that “pain of all sorts becomes a theory, a news-item in the distant colder climes way below the warm air you hum on” [891]), here Gately acknowledges that the pain is real (“What’s real is the tube and Noxcema and pain”). What is “unreal” is what Gately knows his head is capable of doing with the pain—that is, of “looking over and ahead and reporting”—that is, of theorizing about it. But Gately recognizes,

as per AA, that he “could choose not to listen” to his head. We might say that this is precisely the choice that never occurs to Hal.

The result is that whereas Hal, with all faculties in tact, is unable to communicate with the Arizona administrators (just as Hal’s father, for all his brilliance, is incapable of “conversing” with his son), Gately gradually finds ways to communicate with those who come to visit him in the hospital, even without words. Of course, Gately is confronted with a more sympathetic audience—the kind of audience whose expectations were shaped by the AA “Commitments.” One after another, Gately’s friends from Ennett come to share their stories and offer him words of encouragement. His first desire to speak out loud is sparked when he wants to tell his friend Tiny Ewell that he can “totally fucking I.D.” (815) with a story Tiny shares from his childhood. When his sponsor Ferocious Francis drops by, Gately wants to explain to him “how he’s discovered how no one second of even unnarcotized post-trauma-infection-pain is unendurable. That he can Abide if he must.” (885) At one point he scribbles signs into a notebook to make sure the doctor doesn’t put painkillers in his I.V. (888); at another, he gestures to show Joelle that he sympathizes with something she says to him, reflecting that “It makes him feel good all over again that Joelle had understood what he’d meant. She hadn’t just come to to tell her troubles to somebody that couldn’t make human judgment-noises.” (884) The point is not just that Gately conquers his anxiety about communication whereas Hal succumbs to it, but that Gately and Hal want different things—that, perceptually speaking, they inhabit different worlds. Hal’s world is impersonal, judgmental, suspicious. The Arizona administrators are there to evaluate Hal, a process with

which, having been weaned at an elite prep school, he is mind-numbingly familiar. That he describes himself repeatedly as being “alone” in the room only underscores the extent to which he has been coached (and not just for that meeting) to stay in himself (“in here”) even when around other people. Hal finds his “exit” from the situation, but it is an exit that secludes him in a privacy inseparable from madness. For Hal, the only way out is to retreat further in.

In the world of Gately’s hospital room, by contrast, the prevailing expectations are for empathy, identification, and endurance. Far from feeling judged by those who come to visit, Gately worries, as above, that they will mistake his inability to speak for an incapacity to sympathize. Far from feeling himself to be alone, he worries that his conversational partners will feel that *they* are alone. The problems of intention and reception which seem so intractable to Hal are here conceived of as practical, rather than theoretical or metaphysical. This is what allows Gately to succeed where Hal and his father—Wallace’s stand-ins for a line of experimental artist who could never, so to speak, *get over* such problems—both fail. For Gately, too, communication has become difficult, but he does not inflate that difficulty into something more mysterious or interesting than it is. Wallace follows his lead insofar as his own experiments within *Jest* can be viewed as having the aim not of alienating or mystifying his audience, but simply of getting through to it.

Kinds of Therapy

To conclude, I want to return to my assertion that the novel is therapeutic. One other critic, Timothy Aubry, has described *Jest* as having a therapeutic intent, and there is a lot that I agree with in Aubry's reading. However, Aubry ultimately argues that *Jest* represents an endorsement of conventional therapeutic culture, adapted to the needs of Wallace's "self-consciously intellectual" readership,⁵¹ whereas I believe that Wallace wanted to challenge the habitual preconceptions of his "self-consciously intellectual" readership, in part by offering a form of therapy that would conflict with what they had come to expect from an advanced author of literary fiction.

This is why it is important to distinguish between therapy in the conventional sense that Aubry describes (the figure of conventional therapeutic practice within the novel being Hal's farcical "grief counselor"), and therapy in the literary-philosophical sense introduced by Wittgenstein (see introduction) and glossed helpfully here by Cavell:

It is my impression that many philosophers do not like Wittgenstein's comparing what he calls his 'methods' to 'therapies' (§133); but for me part of what he means by this comparison is brought out in thinking of the progress of psychoanalytic therapy. The more one learns, so to speak, the hang of oneself, and mounts one's problems,

⁵¹ Aubry, 99. Specifically, Aubry interprets Wallace as endorsing conventional therapy's "presumption of the psychological as a space of depth and fascination that can rival the aesthetic or the philosophical." I do not see how such a perspective can account for AA's Wittgensteinian suspicion of excessive psychological probing. Significantly, Aubry spends more time on Hal than on Gately, often taking Hal to express Wallace's opinions directly. But it is Hal, not Wallace (and certainly not Gately), who "theorizes privately" about his "hideous internal self" (694)—and it is Hal who ends up, like the *pre*-Ennett House addicts, in a state of "analysis-paralysis."

the less one is able to *say* what one has learned; not because you have *forgotten* what it was but because nothing you said would seem like an answer or a solution: there is no longer any question or problem which your words would match. You have reached conviction, but not about a proposition; and consistency, but not in a theory. You are different, what you recognize as problems are different, your world is different. ('The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man' [*Tractatus*; 6.43]).⁵²

A novel that subscribed to a conventional, pop-Freudian variety of therapy (I call it “pop” to distinguish from the more complicated matter of that Freud himself might have believed), would have culminated with a discovery of what had caused Hal’s crisis in the interview room—perhaps it was his relationship with his father, or the episode his brother remembers involving the mold and Hal’s mother. *Jest* does not follow this model, and in fact includes disquisitions on the grave dangers of “causal attribution.” Rather, it begins by introducing its reader to one world (the world of Hal’s tennis academy, which is meant to remind us of our own), and it ends with her having been introduced to a different world, in which there are different problems. To return to Kakutani’s initial complaint that Wallace leaves his reader “suspended in midair,” I want to suggest that the book’s open-ended structure is meant not to provoke critical detective work, but is a matter of, or a model for, a certain kind of philosophical procedure. The reader of *Jest* is left with the sense that one set of problems (say the problems of adolescence, or of postmodernism) has, without ever being solved, been superseded by another (say the problems of maturity, or of life)—moreover, that the second series reveals the first to have been in some sense fantastical.

⁵² “Aesthetic Problems in Modern Philosophy,” in *MWM*, 85-86

That *Jest* is a work of *philosophical* therapy is evident precisely in the fact that it does not compel its readers (contra Aubry) to “connect” with her feelings, but rather to come to terms with the philosophical presuppositions and habits that could have ever led her to feel that she was “disconnected” from them in the first place. Above I have argued for the various ways in which Wallace’s AA is *methodically* philosophical, but Ennnett House is also philosophical in its *aim* insofar as its guidelines (both spoken and unspoken) are engineered to get its members to distinguish real from false desires, concrete from imaginary needs. This is a classical task of philosophy, although one from which it is easily and habitually (from the Wittgensteinian perspective) distracted. It is, in any case, also one of the main tasks of *Jest*. If the novel’s therapy has been successful, the reader does not emerge with (for instance) a new and improved theory of communication, but rather with a sense of conviction about a world where communication is an everyday human problem capable of being addressed with the right blend of creativity and common sense, rather than an abstract or a theoretical one that leads into anxiety and darkness. We might say that *Jest* seeks to bring communication “back from [its] metaphysical to [its] everyday use.”⁵³

Such an interpretation might be accused, as Wittgenstein imagines someone saying of his *Investigations*, of “destroy[ing] everything interesting, that is, all that is grand and important” about *Infinite Jest*. Yet, as Wittgenstein responds there, “What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards”—that is, phantoms that we had

⁵³ PI, §116

invested with a fantastical importance.⁵⁴ To be disabused of such fantasies is not to be clear of suffering, as the troubled souls of Ennett House are no doubt meant to testify. Still, as Freud once said in what might have been a paraphrase of the journey that *Jest's* reader takes from Hal's consciousness to Gately's, "much has been gained if we succeed in turning ... hysterical misery into common unhappiness."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ PI, §118

⁵⁵ cf. *Studies on Hysteria* (1895)

Chapter Three

So Decide: *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men as Philosophical Criticism*

“You don’t have to think very hard to realize that our dread about both relationships and loneliness ... has to do with angst about death, the recognition that I’m going to die, and die very much alone, and the rest of the world is going to go merrily on without me. I’m not sure I could give you a steeple-fingered theoretical justification, but I strongly suspect a big part of real art fiction’s job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what’s dreadful, what we want to deny.
—David Foster Wallace

“We have got on to slippery ice where there is not friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk.”
—Wittgenstein, *Investigations*

Early reviewers of David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) complained that, although the collection presented as a “sardonic commentary on our narcissistic, therapeutic age,” the stories themselves were as “tiresome and irritating” as their target.¹ It is not hard to see how critics might arrive at such a judgment. The stories are formally difficult and often grotesque; some are dense with footnotes and a cold, academic vocabulary; others seem mean-spirited or engineered to shock the reader with the ugliness of the behavior they document. It can easily seem that Wallace is offering little more than a tour into the theme park of the educated American male’s psyche, a place studded with arrogance, misogyny

¹ See especially Michiko Kakutani’s scathing review in the *New York Times*: “No doubt these portraits are meant as sardonic commentaries on our narcissistic, therapeutic age, but they are so long-winded, so solipsistic, so predictable in their use of irony and gratuitous narrative high jinks that they end up being as tiresome and irritating as their subjects.” Also A.O. Scott, who wondered, in the *New York Review of Books*, if Wallace’s work represented “an unusually trenchant critique of that culture [of narcissism] or one of its most florid and exotic symptoms.” (His answer: both). (cf. “The Panic of Influence.”)

and a self-regard that is inseparable from narcissism. Indeed the collection itself could be (and has been) accused of marginalizing women, minorities, and the rest of the American scene in just the fashion that some of its most “hideous” characters do.

A different evaluation of the stories is possible if one takes seriously Wallace’s contention that literary fiction’s job is to “aggravate” a reader’s sense of entrapment (or “engagement,” as it’s called in *Jest*), to make them “face what’s dreadful” about life in general or their lives in particular. The stories in *Brief Interviews* can sometimes be “tiresome and irritating”; taken as a whole, however, I will argue that the collection deploys fatigue and irritation tactically, as part of a strategy to reorient its presumed reader’s attentiveness from a set of (often exhausting) exercises in theoretical self-justification to the ramifications of those exercises in the messier, often unavoidably interdependent and uncertain modern social world. In comparison to *Infinite Jest*, *Brief Interviews* may appear to be darker and more cynical; there are few “ethical countertypes” to be found in it, and its subject matter is, as mentioned above, almost relentlessly unattractive. Insofar as Wallace conceived of himself as offering therapy to his readers, however, I believe the collection to constitute one of his signal achievements. In its focus on everyday situations and social relationships, the collection manages, more concretely if perhaps not as terrifyingly than in *Jest*, to lay bare the practical consequences of the patterns of thought that it suggests have become habitual for its readers.

As such a judgment might indicate, I believe the philosophical therapy of *Brief Interviews* must be understood in relation to the book’s criticism of a particular demographic and cultural milieu. Accordingly, there is much at stake in Wallace’s

being able to establish that his hideous men, far from representing what A.O. Scott called a “florid and exotic” group of misogynists, are in fact products of a pervasive historical and intellectual environment—or of a response to that environment that had come to seem, among the demographics we have been associating with Wallace’s readership, the most sophisticated and serious. It is no accident that the language of Wallace’s hideous men mimics at times that of the postwar realists (Roth, Updike, Mailer, etc), and at other times that of the ascendant metafictionists (Barthes, Barthelme, Gass) of the 1980s and their counterparts in critical theory (Derrida, Baudrillard, etc.). The collection suggests a continuity between these two types of discourse insofar as both simultaneously attempt critically address, and yet cannot help but end by reinforcing, the sense of uncertainty and drift that they take to be endemic to late-twentieth-century American life. The hideous men, the book is engineered to make us recognize, represent the endpoint of “our” way of speaking, and thinking—and therefore of living. The commentary on our “narcissistic, therapeutic age” may in places be “sardonic,” but it is always also supposed to be therapeutic.

In the first section of this chapter I will lay out, as Wallace does in the collection’s opening “vignette” and elsewhere, the relevant features of that historical and philosophical predicament. In the next section I’ll look at two consecutive short stories, also from the beginning third of the collection, that present preliminary responses to the predicament in which the hideous men find themselves: philosophically speaking, one of the responses could be characterized as the skeptical or solipsistic response that Wallace perceives as being common among his

readership; the other (in the one notable exception to the book's lack of "countertypes") as the therapeutic one. In the third section I'll discuss "Octet," a complex metafictional conversation that Wallace places at the center of the collection and whose focus is the literary strategy of self-reference or "metacommentary," viewed as a potential solution to the forms of uncertainty (most often, about other minds) that had been evoked in the earlier stories. It is symptomatic that the problem of communication in "Octet" is imagined as, simultaneously, literal *and* literary, with the story frequently shading between concrete social anxieties and a more abstract argument concerning the relation between the author and her audience in fiction. This is typical of the collection as a whole, which unravels what its characters believe to be insoluble literary-theoretical puzzles—regarding sincerity, meaning, understanding, the problem of other minds—in part by showing their origin in the most humble everyday situations. (This is one of the senses in which *Brief Interviews* contributes to Wallace's Wittgensteinian project of bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.)

I'll conclude by exploring the final long piece in the collection, "Brief Interview #20," in which an erudite Ivy League graduate student attempts to explain or "prove" to his interviewer the love he had developed for a young woman he had initially intended to sleep with and abandon. The story is framed by the interviewee as one of self-transformation, and can be easily (mis)read as offering a kind of "way out" of the suffocating self-consciousness that has characterized most of the book. In fact it represents the culmination of Wallace technique of therapeutic

disenchantment, taking its reader on an emotional roller coaster that ends with a warning against our inclination to indulge the tempting fantasy that we can defeat uncertainty through the discovery of the “right story” (or the right girl). It is no accident that the collection’s final story is also its darkest and most “aggravating” (in every sense of the word).

In order to see how *Brief Interviews* is intended to address its readership, it is first important to acknowledge the intentionality of its organization. The collection has not always been conceived of as a unified whole, nor have its (few) academic commentators often considered how its various pieces fit together. The book combines semi-conventional short stories with vignettes, epiphanic think pieces, a couple of long monologues, and an ongoing series of fictional “interviews,” arranged like selections from a broken off field study, and appearing as a series of answers to questions that are signaled only by a “Q,” followed by a blank line. On its face, it makes no claim to being any more unified than any other collection of stories, which may simply have been written within a certain time period, or published in similar kinds of magazines. And as with Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*, there is no third-person narration or commentary to tie its various vignettes and free floating “interviews” together. Similar also to the *Investigations*, however, the several elements of *Brief Interviews* appear to be addressed to a recurring set of problems or “temptations,” which occur in a specifically demarcated historical and social

milieu. Marked as occurring on page 0, the short vignette that begins the collection brings out many of the relevant elements of that milieu:

A RADICALLY CONDENSED HISTORY OF POSTINDUSTRIAL LIFE

“When they were introduced, he made a witticism, hoping to be liked. She laughed extremely hard, hoping to be liked. Then each drove home alone, staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to their faces.

The man who’d introduced them didn’t much like either of them, though he acted as if he did, anxious as he was to preserve good relations at all times. One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one.” (0)

The vignette appears to be set at a dinner party or small social gathering, where people come to make “connections.” It is the kind of event at which one might be consumed by the self-conscious query that frames the interaction between the man and the woman: Will I be liked? This is simply to emphasize that nothing in the vignette transcends or attempts to go beyond the social. When Hegel said that art, after the end of Art, would be concerned with the contingent trivialities of modern bourgeois individuals, he may have had in mind scenes like this. But it is to misread Wallace to see him as calling nostalgically for a return to a time (call it pre-industrial) where the questions of mundane social life might have seemed less urgent. For the most part, Wallace joins the Western modernists, and (some of) the postmodernists in situating his fiction in a thoroughly disenchanted social world. As with the characters of Woolf, or James, what motivates the characters in *Brief Interviews* is not some transcendental, political or (traditionally conceived) romantic project, but rather the “basic human need [for] some sort of connection”

with other people (cf. 258). If such a need has become particularly urgent in post-industrial modernity, not to mention unprecedentedly complicated to satisfy, this is all the more reason for a writer like Wallace to take it seriously.

Yet there *is* something under attack in *Brief Interviews*. Chief among the differences between Wallace and some of his modernist and postmodernist forbears is that Wallace is not content to *reflect* contemporary alienation in his fiction; he wants therapeutically to “treat” it. The result is that whereas in much of twentieth-century literature loneliness or isolation are presented as products or signs of special sensitivity to the problems of modernity, or society, or existence (you might think of Musil’s Ulrich, Pynchon’s Slothrop and Camus’ Meursault respectively), here they appear as both deriving from and contributing to a pervasive confusion. What is under attack in *Brief Interviews* as a whole will be a certain way of talking, and therefore of living, which seems to exacerbate the problems of postindustrial life—social atomism, the fear of fraudulence and inauthenticity—under the pretense of addressing them. This is why it is significant how the vignette ends up, with both of the introducees, having attempted to act in such a way that they would be liked, driving home alone, that peculiar “twist” on their faces. Meanwhile the host, described as being “anxious to preserve good relations at all times,” reveals that he dislikes both of the people he has just introduced to one another.

This all risks seeming trivial, or being simply derivative of the brand of sharp and cynical social observation that we might find in Updike, Cheever and Richard Yates. And it is not immediately clear that it has anything to do with history, or philosophy: that concluding “One never knew...” could refer merely to the host’s

uncertainty about the course of social life, in which you may after all come to depend on someone tomorrow whom you can do without today. As the coda to an opening vignette that claims to be a history of postindustrial life, though, I think we are justified in reading more into that concluding statement. Wallace would hardly be the first to consider it a genuine insight of, and also a genuine problem for, postindustrial life—or, more broadly, for what various philosophers and artists like to call “modernity”—that *one never knows*. That is one of the consequences of the various intellectual revolutions, having brought with them the destabilization of traditional knowledge and normative authority: We do not know who we are, why we are here, what our purpose is, even (as Descartes said) whether we are here, awake, sitting by the fire, etc. Centrally for the book we are about to read, this epistemological uncertainty has often become linked to, or developed into, a social uncertainty, which presents itself to us as the puzzle of whether we can really *know* another person. In academic philosophy this has been named the “problem of other minds”; for Wallace’s characters, it manifests in a question they feel with a special urgency: Do “other people deep inside experience things in anything like the same way you do”?

In his book on Henry James, Robert Pippin situates James’s achievement as being related to the refusal, in the face of the uncertainty of modernity, to become simply a moral skeptic. James’s novels, Pippin says, reflect and investigate the myriad ways in which free, modern subjects, in the shadow of the breakdown of normative authority, continue to create and feel compelled by a newly emerging set of socially negotiated norms and values. The difference in the world the reader is

plunged into in *Brief Interviews* is not so much with the historical or metaphysical situation (that uncertainty, and whatever forces of secularization, industrialization, etc. seem to have caused it, is still pervasively there), but with the set of responses that seem available and tempting to the author's characters. Wallace is separated from James by a century of artists and academics (indeed by the rise of whole academic departments that are devoted to) exploring and addressing, with more and more confidence and insistence, the contours of the new social world that was beginning to emerge in James's fiction. The result is that Wallace's hideous men do not, for the most part, share the innocence or the reserve or the hesitancy of James's or Virginia Woolf's characters in the face of an encroaching modernity; they rather give the impression of being "well-versed," not only in the nuanced cultural conventions that have come to stand in for the old authorities, but also in the semiotic codes that govern how they are expected to talk about those conventions.

I raise this here because it might seem that, in what follows, I'm going to be treating two very different kinds of problems—one set of which is applicable primarily for artists and intellectuals, and the other for ordinary citizens of modernity. My claim is that Wallace's collection is valuable in part for insisting on the connection between what might seem to be artistic or philosophical problems with "uncertainty"—both social and epistemological—and much more practical or "everyday" modern difficulties. This connection is sometimes (as will be seen below) brought out via analogy; more often, though, Wallace shows through the juxtaposition of characters and situations the manner in which the everyday modern person has become enmeshed in problematics surrounding self-knowledge

and communication that may at one time have seemed limited to artists and philosophers. This is why it is significant that, besides offering a succinct statement of the bourgeois, capitalistic, historical situation, the opening vignette also contains a dramatic critique (a critique *through* dramatization) of the way two ordinary modern people respond to that situation, and that their responses can be so easily mapped on to strategies familiar from twentieth-century art. One can romanticize uncertainty, as some modernists did (hence the slightly enervated poetry of that final line—“one never knew...”); one can attempt conservatively to mitigate its worst consequences, say, shoring fragments against our ruin, as the host attempts to do with his talk of “preserving good relations,” and one can make “witticisms,” as the man does at the beginning, coolly ironizing if not celebrating that uncertainty—i.e. the postmodern response.

Examples of all three kinds of responses to the modern fact of uncertainty are strewn throughout the collection, but Wallace does the most to develop and aggravate the response of the guests who drive home alone, which he considered most characteristic of the advanced art and academic work of his time. Many of the “hideous men” who come in the stories to follow resemble sophisticated postmodern rhetoricians, psychoanalysts, and literary theorists, skilled in the art of “unmasking” the root causes of antisocial behavior, both others’ and their own. “Much of the annoying, pedantic jargon I use to describe the rituals also derives from my mother,” says interviewee #48, having earlier ascribed his habit of tying women to his bed to a “desire symbolically to work out certain internal complexes consequent to my rather irregular childhood relations with my mother and twin

sister” (BI, 94, 88). In interview #2, a man attempting to rationalize leaving his girlfriend admits that, given his pattern of past abandonments, he “might be a psychopath.” (BI, 84) In interview #28, two men debate the question of what contemporary women “want,” acknowledging that this is a complicated matter in part because

today’s postfeminist era is also today’s postmodern era, in which supposedly everybody now knows everything about what’s really going on underneath all the semiotic codes and cultural conventions, and everybody supposedly knows what paradigms everybody is operating out of, and so we’re all as individuals held to be far more responsible for our sexuality, since everything we do now is unprecedentedly conscious and informed. (BI, 195)

In many regards the two men name acutely the historical situation of the audience Wallace considered himself to be addressing—and they do so in the casually academic language that audience may be presumed to associate with sophistication and forward thinking. Yet the passage seems to hint at something paradoxical: learning how to talk knowingly about the unmasking of cultural conventions is not the same thing as learning how to go on in their absence. Diagnosis is not the same as cure and in some cases—for instance when the diagnosis is fetishized or comes to seem like an end in itself—it can even impede it. Read back against the opening vignette, the quote suggests the primary criticism Wallace’s collection will make of what its characters seem to consider the most advanced way of approaching social life. Postmodernism, the men theorize, suggests that “supposedly everybody now knows everything” about cultural conventions and paradigms. That “supposedly” indicates the skepticism with which these men regard this postmodern “truth”; and yet, at the same time, their own way of talking would

seem to enmesh them in it. They can admit, rhetorically, that we only “supposedly” know everything, but even this is presented as a bit of analytical knowledge, which the men cannot allow to lay the groundwork for a form of life where the fact that “one never knows” would be actually lived with, as opposed to being ironized, romanticized, or denied. It is as if they grant the insufficiency of theory, but only theoretically.

This is a familiar predicament throughout the collection, where men frequently express cynicism about, or ironically distance themselves from, a form of speaking they cannot seem nevertheless to abandon. One senses that in this case, as in many of the others, the men’s explanation of their predicament has been inefficacious even if accurate; it is not necessarily mistaken so much as their reliance on it reveals their entrapment within a certain way of talking (and therefore of thinking).

This can lead us to address, at least provisionally, what Wallace considers to be really “hideous” about his hideous men. The adjective has many meanings, and there are superficial ways in which some of the hideous men will register to the reader as simply physically ugly or just repulsively cruel (especially to women). But what strikes us as hideous in every sense of the word (i.e. monstrous, “repulsively unnatural,” morally ugly, etc.) about the man who constantly leaves his girlfriends is not that he finds it hard to commit (a common human difficulty), but rather his rationalistic attempt to justify this difficulty in a language that grows progressively more abstract and generalized. Similarly it is the “pedantic jargon” of the man who ties up his dates, his articulate but ultimately self-serving self-awareness about the

sources of his proclivity, that disables what might in other circumstances emerge as an empathetic response.

Likewise the two men discussing what women “want” make several insightful—and in some cases unassailable—observations about the bind contemporary women are in, yet there is something ugly, I think we are meant to infer, about two men discussing this topic in the manner that they do *at all*. The truncated interview #36 helps us fill in what that something is:

“So I decided to get help. I got in touch with the fact that the real problem had nothing to do with her. I saw that she would forever go on playing the victim to my villain. I was powerless to change her. She was not the part of the problem I could, you know, address. So I made a decision. To get help for *me*. I now know it was the best thing I’ve ever done, and the hardest. It hasn’t been easy, but my self-esteem is much higher now. I’ve halted the shame spiral. I’ve learned forgiveness. I *like* myself.”

Q.

“Who?” (BI, 28)

We are in no position to judge whether or not what this man says about his situation is accurate or “true.” The point is that, even if his description is in some sense accurate, the way he relates his self-growth condemns him to a kind of moral error, insofar as it transforms a woman that the story makes clear must have at one time been close to him into a stepping-stone for a justificatory personal revelation. Moving to the literary level (which the collection continuously encourages us to do), this is an intellectual habit Wallace sees the metafictionists and the postwar realists (or “great male narcissists” as he once called them²) to share. In the case of the realists, it is a well-worn complaint that the women in the novels of Bellow, Roth,

² ... *New York Observer*

Updike and Mailer are often simply pawns and punching bags for the men.³ Meanwhile Evelyn Waugh defined the metafictionists as being a group of writers who endeavored to “explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction.”⁴ Politically, of course, the metafictionists were opposed to what was seen as the retrograde misogyny and solipsism of the realists—and yet, as Wallace’s collection encourages us to see—many of their own methods (and their prevailing *focus* on method) risked impressing readers with a complementary form of self-regard. From the point of view of philosophy, fiction or narrative had traditionally been the art form that honored the particular; but in the hands of the metafictionists, it became complicit in philosophy’s necessary disregard for the particular. The hideous men are, often, storytellers. But they are united by an inability to tell a particular story without theorizing about or abstracting from the story they are telling.

Wallace can be accused of doing the same thing—indeed, he self-consciously hales from this tradition, and this is part of what Scott and Kakutani accuse him of when they point out that his collection represents both a diagnosis and a symptom of a certain contemporary sickness. One might think after all that the reasonable response to the observation that literature (and therefore culture) had grown too reliant on an abstract and theoretical vocabulary would have been to produce a

³ These writers are not the same in their treatment of women in every respect, of course. Still, their most famous books are always about men, and usually they are about men attempting to free themselves from the constraints imposed on them by women (and sometimes children). Updike’s Rabbit tetralogy may be the signal example here, Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *Sabbath’s Theater*, as virtual bookends to his career, are not far behind. Bellow’s *Humboldt’s Gift* follows the general pattern as well, while Mailer’s *American Dream* may be the most baroque and disturbing example of them of them all. Suffice it to say that all four novelists provide plenty of templates from which Wallace could draw in imagining his hideous men.

⁴ Waugh, 2

work of emotionally earnest or “sincere” fiction, similar to what Wallace is often thought to have called for in his early essay on television. This is not the route Wallace took, for reasons I have been arguing here have to do with his commitment to fiction as a form of philosophical therapy. The point was not to inspire his reader with a vision of a completely different form of life, which may in fact remain inaccessible or alien to her, even if she admires it. Rather it was to get her to consider, via a series of aggravating examples, the confusions intrinsic to her own. This was one way of acknowledging that such confusions were not the result simply of obtuseness, or of individual psychology, but of something that lies at least as deep as the language we seem compelled to use to describe them. Part of the project of bringing *Brief Interviews* “to consciousness of itself” is, I take it, to bring forward the background against which the hideous men speak. Accordingly, I turn next to two stories that begin to articulate the philosophical causes, and consequences, of the social uncertainty that is the subject of the Radically Condensed History.

Right after his condensed history of postindustrial life, Wallace places two short pieces depicting male characters at the sides of pools. The first, entitled “Death is not the End,” observes a highly decorated “fifty-six-year-old American poet”; the second, entitled “Forever Overhead,” concerns a boy celebrating his thirteenth birthday.⁵ If the condensed history describes the historical predicament of Wallace’s

⁵ Water plays an important symbolic function throughout Wallace’s fiction and non-fiction, culminating in his famous Kenyon commencement speech, entitled “This is Water.” In a later story in

characters, and some artistic responses to it, these two stories outline what might be called their philosophical predicament, alongside two options for philosophically responding to it.

The poet's story, often taken to be a satire of Updike, Roth or John Ashbery, is told in one three-page paragraph, in the third person. The poet sits "reading his magazine in his chair on his deck by his pool behind his home." Thinking back on his myriad awards and fellowships, as well as the one fellowship of which he was unjustly deprived (the Guggenheim), the poet is conspicuously, even extravagantly, alone. He does not make any movement to get into the pool; the "whole enclosed tableau of pool and deck and poet and chair and table and trees and home's rear façade is very still and composed and very nearly wholly silent." The poet's environment, its stillness and enclosedness, reflects an inner condition of decadent self-satisfaction. Another way to describe this state would be to call it stagnant or lifeless; Iannis Goerlandt says that "one of the points the story makes is that the end lies in this stasis, not in death itself."⁶ The story's title, "Death is not the end," is most naturally taken as referring to the artist's desire for immortality through art. But it is precisely this desire, Wallace implies with his tableau, which causes death to come *before* the end. Paradoxically, the vignette implies, the artist's desire to stand apart and transcend finitude or death will lead him to create dead or lifeless art; after all there is only one way (as Cavell would say) to escape the human.

Brief Interviews, "Church not Made with Hands," a little girl gets sucked into the drain of a backyard pool while her mother, who can't swim, watches helplessly from the side.

⁶ Iannis Goerlandt, "This is not Wholly True": Notes on Annotation in David Foster Wallace's Shorter Fiction (and Non-Fiction)," in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, p. 165

This represents, then, a solipsistic and therefore doomed response to the problem of uncertainty—one presuming that art, i.e. language, is capable of rescuing us from it. Rhetorically, the story discourages identification or empathy such as to reproduce the feeling of distance and alienation that the poet seems to invite and relish.

In the next story, by way of contrast, the reader is immediately invited to put herself in the protagonist's place, even to consider herself *as* the protagonist. "Happy Birthday," the story begins. "Your thirteenth is important. Maybe your first really public day. Your thirteenth is the chance for people to recognize that important things are happening to you." (4)

The thirteenth birthday, of course, reflects a turning point or an initiation; here it is marked also for its proximity to puberty and adolescence, and thus to the emergence of the kinds of desires and fears that can lead to the passion for isolation expressed by the acclaimed poet. Already, the boy is reckoning with the costs and complications of his newfound desires:

This afternoon, on your birthday, you have asked to come to the pool. You wanted to come alone, but a birthday is a family day, your family wants to be with you. This is nice, and you can't talk about why you wanted to come alone, and really truly maybe you didn't want to come alone, so they are here.

The boy had wanted to come alone; the boy can't talk about why he had wanted to come alone; the boy is not sure he actually wanted to come alone. But although he has ultimately accepted the company of his family, there is still something the boy has determined to do alone—"You have thought it over. There is the high board." (6)

The thing the boy has to do alone is dive into the public pool, which may prompt us to consider what the boy thinks the public pool is, or represents. First, the boy thinks, the pool “is a system of movement. Here now there are: laps, splash fights, dives, corner tags, cannonballs, Sharks and Minnows, high fallings, Marco Polo.” (7)⁷ But the boy does not want to think about this *too* much. “Get out now and go past your parents, who are sunning and reading, not looking up,” the narrator advises him:

Forget your towel. Stopping for the towel means talking and talking means thinking. You have decided that being scared is caused mostly by thinking. Go right by, toward the tank at the deep end. ... A board protrudes from the top of the tower like a tongue. Each of your footprints is thinner and fainter. Each shrinks behind you on the hot stone and disappears. (7)

The metaphors begin to pile up. If the diving board is like a tongue, then what does that make the pool? One of the cultural developments that Zadie Smith reads *Brief Interviews* as responding to is “philosophy’s demotion into a branch of linguistics.”⁸ Is the boy’s dive off of the board meant to dramatize a fall into language? Or is to jump off of a tongue meant to mark one’s escape from language? Or does the dive itself, at the precipice of manhood, represent a decision about what the boy will mean? And why, again, should he do it alone?

This question becomes tied up with the question of how the boy will confront his newfound appreciation for the consolations of solipsism or solitude. If the poet by his pool has settled in, comfortably, to his solitude, the boy sees solitude all

⁷ I don’t think the examples here are random: it is significant for the pool’s function in the story that, within the story, it is the location of history (Marco Polo, cannonballs) and nature (sharks, minnows), as well as the trivial everyday (dives, corner tags).

⁸ Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind*, p. 266

around him, as a temptation and a trap. Getting in line for the diving board, he notes that “few talk in the line. Everyone seems by himself.” But when he gets to the top of the board, he spends a moment reflecting on the attractions of being by oneself:

The late ballet below is slow motion, the overbroad movements of mimes in blue jelly. If you wanted you could really stay here forever, vibrating inside so fast you float motionless in time, like a bee over something sweet.

Smith has interpreted “Forever Overhead” as marking Wallace as a “moralist,” someone for whom what mattered was “not the end but the quality of our communal human experience before the end ... what passes between us in that queue *before* we dive.”⁹ I agree that Wallace’s fiction has a moral aim, but I think Smith has drawn the wrong moral from “Forever Overhead.” Her formulation suggests that the dive off the board represents a dive into death, whereas the thrust of the story implies that the dive is into life—that is, into finitude and history. To stay up on the board, “forever overhead,” is the desire of the poet by his pool, not to mention the philosopher by his fire. The boy is marking his first taste of the temptation to remain outside of time, as if poised theoretically above it (“like a bee over something sweet”), looking down on it. Being alone up on the board has its pleasures, chief among them the pleasure of a great “view”; to remain forever overhead is to remain—alone—in a place where death is not the end. The pool, on the other hand, represents what he calls the “forever below.” But never does he imagine this as a lifeless or dead location. Rather, he thinks, “forever below is rough

⁹ Smith, 264

deck, snacks, thin metal music, down where you once used to be; the line is solid and has no reverse gear.”

Such a description of “forever below” might seem to only reinforce one’s desire to stay forever overhead. And so, in a sense, it does. But the boy, although he is by himself up on the board, has not come to the pool alone. Standing on the board, he realizes that “forever below” is not only bad music and existential finitude but also his family (“a birthday is a family day”). Below lies the whole social world of attachments and mortality and love. “So which is the lie? Hard or soft? Silence or time? The lie is that it’s one or the other. A still, floating bee is moving faster than it can think. From overhead the sweetness drives it crazy” (13). The sweetness is the sweetness of the external world, and that sweetness will, eventually, draw the boy into it. But the affirmative jump into the world (“The board will nod and you will go ... this is forever”) requires the boy to let go of something. What it requires him to let go of is a conception of the self that can remain impassive and alone, forever overhead, watching.

In what follows in *Brief Interviews*, what it means to be hideous, or morally ugly, will be closely correlated with the inability to let go of this overhead, self-conscious self—a self that is “scared” by thinking, but even more scared by admitting the limits of (certain kinds of) thinking. The point is not simply how the boy conducts himself in line before he dives, but *that* he dives (something the poet in his yard had never even considered doing); or, put another way, that he refuses to be immobilized by his realization that thinking cannot *solve* the problem of whether he should dive or not.

This does not mean that the boy *simply* acts, or *simply* takes a leap of faith, for the story also warns against the opposite extreme: “It may, after all, be all right to do something without thinking, but not when the scariness is the not thinking itself.” As with the AA sections in *Jest*, the two stories of men and pools in *Brief Interviews* dramatize a choice not between thought and action, faith or belief, but between different forms or procedures of thought, including procedures that allow one to keep from being overwhelmed or paralyzed by one’s thoughts. Such a recognition is necessary to resist the suspicion (voiced most prominently by Smith in regard to *Brief Interviews*) that Wallace advances simple faith as an alternative to intellectual analysis, or that he considers all forms of self-consciousness equally deleterious. Wallace is a self-conscious writer, hardly hostile to the modern project of self-knowledge. What the stories in *Brief Interviews* remind us of is just that “explanations”—the form of thinking that Wittgenstein and Cavell associated with modern philosophy after Descartes—come to an end somewhere: in this case, at the end of the tongue-like board. And that after an explanation comes to an end, what we are left with will be a decision—though not necessarily a blind one. (“Did you think it over? Yes and no.”)

“Forever Overhead” concludes with this final instruction and salutation:

Step into the skin and disappear.
Hello.

To step into the skin of the pool is to step into a new skin, to be reborn, as in a baptism, except the baptism requires acceptance not of God but of one’s dependency and mutual entanglement with the world. The “hello” welcomes the boy, as it welcomes the reader, to a home (call it modernity) where uncertainty, dependency,

not to mention finitude (“there’s been time this whole time”), will have to be acknowledged, just as a condition of really living there. And in the context of a collection of stories, or of *this* collection anyway, the pool is also the stories. What is being asked of Wallace’s readers is that they submerge themselves in the stories, which means that they be willing to risk stepping out of their own skin (“Happy Birthday”). It is as if to meet the stories on their own terms is not merely to mark Wallace’s procedures but to allow oneself to be marked by them.

It is not easy to say what this means, or just how it will work (or whether it *does* work, which is something each reader can only determine for herself). The pivot, though, from a social situation depicted within one of the stories to a consideration of the relationship between the stories and their reader is symptomatic of Wallace’s method throughout *Brief Interviews*. It is clear early on in the collection that Wallace draws a connection between the way an author and a reader can be “with” each other in a work of fiction, and the kinds of social relations we manage to pursue (or block ourselves from pursuing) in practical social life. The conundrum faced by the boy on the board is thus returned to in a far more complex (or maybe I should say, a *seemingly* more complex) literary context later in the book, in the elaborate set piece called “Octet.”

As I mentioned in the first section, for Wallace any investigation of the form of life of his “hideous men” had also to be an investigation of the literary and theoretical arts that had both helped to shape and existed as a reflection of that form of life. This is

why, at the very center of his collection,¹⁰ he places an experimental exercise meant to emphasize the similarity between the communicative uncertainties facing the fiction writer or artist and those confronting the ordinary modern individual—the kind of self-conscious individual who worries at parties not only about whether he will be liked, but also about whether others can tell that he’s worried about whether he’ll be liked, and so on. The procedure of the story is meant first to dramatize the source of the temptation to attempt to “solve” such social and metaphysical uncertainties via some new method or technology of communication, and second to show the ways in which that form of solution manifests a (not uncommon) misunderstanding of the problem.

Formally, “Octet” is one of Wallace’s most complicated literary experiments. It begins as a series of “pop quizzes,” echoing (as many commentators have pointed out) John Updike’s “Problems,” but with some relevant differences.¹¹ Each quiz depicts discrete interpersonal situations, calling for a moral “decision” on the part of

¹⁰ The two most serious works of criticism on *Brief Interviews* both focus centrally, or maintain a centrality for, “Octet,” finding in it Wallace’s theory of fiction (Stephen Mulhall), or the final test of whether the reader will have “faith in the agenda of the consciousness” behind the text (Zadie Smith). Mulhall begins a close reading of the story with the observation that it appears “at the center” of the collection. The Mulhall I refer to here and throughout this section is (as far as I know) unpublished. It was sent to me through Jonny Thakkar in draft form, as an essay entitled “Quartet: Wallace’s Wittgenstein, Moran’s Amis.” Hopefully it will be published before this dissertation is finished so that I can add page numbers and citations; for now, I have just attempted to make it clear in the text whenever I am quoting or paraphrasing Mulhall.

¹¹ “Problems” takes the form of a series of word problems, some involving practical conundrums (how can A time his visit to his Laundromat and his therapist?), some having to do with conflicting desires (“During the night, A, though sleeping with B, dreams of C”), before concluding by asking the reader what “feels wrong” about a scenario in which most of A’s practical problems, at least, have been resolved. Updike’s story thus hints at what one suspects Updike may think of as the truth about our modern social condition, that it has simply revealed the fact that, even after the end of history, society is incapable of satisfying our deepest needs. Wallace’s “quizzes” are also about our needs, but they confront those needs on a whole different—I want to say on a philosophically therapeutic—level. One of the things *his* quizzes are meant to test is what constitutes our real needs, as opposed to those whims and preferences that merely *present* themselves as needs. (“One might say: the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need” [Investigations, §108]).

one (or more) of the protagonists. It is hard to say at first what unites these decisions except that they do not seem to be the kind of decisions that can be judged by their practical outcomes, or according to some theoretical criteria. Nor can the right decision be arrived at by reference to prevailing rules or conventions, for such norms are either absent in the cases at hand or they clash with one another in such a way as to render them practically useless. Indeed each scene is designed to reveal the decision to be not, as Wittgenstein would say, a problem of the intellect but one of the will, which is another way of saying that they hinge not on the application of principle but rather on the exercise of a moral virtue, such as courage, trust, or compassion.

The first quiz is in one sense the simplest and in another the most enigmatic. Entitled "Pop Quiz 4," it tells the story of two "late-stage terminal drug addicts [who] sit against a wall in the cold on January 12, 1993." Only one of the drug addicts has a coat; the other appears "gravely ill." The one with the coat stretches it as far as it can go over both of them. At the end is the question: "Which one lived?" (111). The question is bizarre and obviously unanswerable, and the quiz itself might seem an outlier given that the ones that follow it all trace complex moral situations, whereas this concerns a simple act of compassion. I think the situation externalizes and simplifies what Wallace takes to be involved in making a moral sacrifice for another person, even in cases that appear on their face to be much more complicated. As in every other case in "Octet," the question at the bottom is meant not to prompt an answer but rather to remind the reader of something. In this case it reminds us that, in sharing his coat with the gravely ill terminal drug addict, the other terminal drug

addict has exposed himself; that is, he has literally risked his life.¹² The use of the word “terminal” underscores how late in the day it is for both men, and that they are both going to die soon—a fact which itself makes the question somewhat ironic. Yet the irony of the question does not mitigate its ability to evoke the outlines of a Kantian moral universe: it is possible even in the darkest of circumstances, the story suggests, to act with either a selfish or a generous will.

What follows PQ4 are a series of more subtle moral conundrums (a woman who has to choose between raising her baby in poverty and abandoning it to her ex-husband’s repugnant but incredibly wealthy family; a man attempting to hide how much he loathes his dying father-in-law from his wife), in which nevertheless the moral question seems to hinge on a capacity for the kind of sacrifice that, while explicitly a sacrifice for someone else, also requires one to sacrifice some treasured conception of oneself. But one of these conundrums is abandoned in midstream (“the whole *mise en scene* here seems too shot through with ambiguity to make a very good Pop Quiz, it turns out” [113]), and in a footnote the narrator describes several other proto-quizzes that never made it into the published story. The question of what exactly constitutes a good pop quiz has therefore been raised even before the announcement of PQ9, which begins with an abrupt shift of perspective—or, say, of responsibility:

You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. You are attempting a cycle of belletristic pieces, pieces which as it happens are not *contes*

¹² We can only infer, based on what we have here (although it is impossible not to think of some of Wallace’s other treatments of addiction), the serial selfishness and solipsism that has led the terminal drug addicts to their current pass, and which make such an act of selflessness even more extraordinary and “self”-sacrificial.

philosophiques and not vignettes or scenarios or fables, exactly, though neither are they really quantifiable as ‘short stories.’ ... Maybe say they’re supposed to compose a certain sort of ‘interrogation’ of the person reading them, somehow—i.e. palpations, feelers into the interstices of her sense of something, etc. [...] though what that ‘something’ is remains maddeningly hard to pin down, even just for yourself as you’re working on the pieces... (123)

The immediate effect of this second person address, echoing the second person opening of “Forever Overhead,” is to shift the reader’s burden from attempting to answer or “figure out” the riddles posed by the previous “interrogations,” to imagining herself *as* a fiction writer—one who is attempting to produce such a cycle. As this writer, “you” are told that you had set out to write an octet, comprised of eight situations that would together convey some “ambient sameness” in human relations. You had immediately realized that five of the eight pieces didn’t work at all, “meaning they don’t interrogate or palpate what you want them to, plus are too contrived or too cartoonish or too annoying or all three.” (124) You were left with the previous PQs. At this point you tried to read the octet “objectively” and figure out if, in its fragmented form, it was meaningful. Yet this turns out to be an extremely difficult question to answer; after all, the pieces are obviously meaningful to *you*, the one who wrote them. How can you be sure they will be meaningful to your reader?

The problem of other minds is thus raised here in the form it would be most likely to take for a literary artist. But even *thinking* about this question puts you, as a fiction writer, perilously close to trying to figure out if the reader will “like the octet,” which “both you and the very few other fiction writers you’re friends with know that there is no quicker way to tie yourself in knots and kill any human

urgency in the thing you're working on than to try to calculate ahead of time whether that thing will be '*liked*.' It's just lethal":

An analogy might be: Imagine you've gone to a party where you know very few of the people there, and then on your way home afterwards you suddenly realize that you just spent the whole party so concerned about whether the people there seemed to like you or not that you now have absolutely no idea whether you liked any of them or not. Anybody who's had that sort of experience knows what a totally lethal kind of attitude that is to bring to a party. (Plus of course it almost always turns out that the people at the party *didn't* actually like you, for the simple reason that you seemed so inebriated and self-conscious the whole time...) (130)

In the "radically condensed history of post-industrial life," we inferred a set of aesthetic and philosophical problems from the depiction of an everyday social situation; here the analogy works the other way around, bringing what may seem like an "artistic" problem down to the level of mundane social interaction. The party brings again to mind a contemporary setting where people are attempting to be liked, which habit is revealed to open them to a dual failing. On the one hand, the person consumed with whether she will be liked will fail to actually get to know any of the other people at the party, presumably "driving home alone" like the man and the woman in the opening vignette; on the other, this person will not, even on the most superficial level, succeed in coming across as likable.

A solution to this problem might seem to be to deny that the judgment of others has anything to do with who we are, or what we mean. But this option, sometimes associated with romanticism or modernism in the arts, is connected in *Brief Interviews* to the temptation to remain "forever overhead," as per the decadently isolated writer in "Death is not the End" or the boy poised on the edge of

the diving board. Insofar as it tends to reinforce the very isolation that we turn to other people to escape, it is neither possible nor advisable, Wallace wants to suggest, to dispense entirely with the question of what others will think. The writer, like any other citizen of modernity, must find some way of taking into account whether what he does will be meaningful to a world of people that do not live inside her head. Solitude amounts to an attractive way of denying the problem of other minds (we might say, of other people) as opposed to a durable way of addressing it. This helps reveal the simultaneously philosophical and social challenge at the center of the collection: How, as contemporary individuals (or as contemporary artists), to acknowledge our need for the approval of others without becoming that need's victim.

But the problem of other minds might be approached in another way: perhaps, instead of worrying silently about whether everyone at the party likes you, you might simply acknowledge your insecurity, and the artificiality of the party setting, by going up and *asking* other people at the party what they think of you! This, Wallace indicates, is the social/aesthetic wager of the literary movement known as metafiction. Metafiction, that is, presents itself as one way of "puncturing the fourth wall," and allowing an artist to "be with" his audience without becoming its prey. "Because now it occurs to you that you could simply ask her. The reader ... whether she's feeling anything like what you feel" (130-31). It is this thought that prompts you to create an appendage to the octet, PQ9, which would be "a kind of metaQuiz." The metaQuiz would, you hope, find a way of addressing the problem of interpersonal uncertainty. Yet the author of "Octet" points out that such a strategy is

far from foolproof. In a footnote, he relates that the strategy of stepping back from something and commenting self-reflexively—sometimes taken to have been invented by sophisticated postmodern novelists—had in fact filtered into pop culture decades ago to such an extent that the tactic is sometimes referred to as “The Carson Maneuver,” based on how Johnny Carson used to “salvage a lame joke by assuming a self-consciously mortified expression that sort of metacommented on the joke’s lameness and showed the audience he knew it was lame.” (135, ft 17) Anyone who undertakes the strategy of metacommentary these days has therefore to reckon with the possibility that it “may well be that all it’ll do is make you look like a self-consciously inbent schmuck, or like just another manipulative pseudopomo Bullshit Artist.” (135)

The key to avoiding this fate, says the narrator of the story, is that “you’re going to have to eat the big rat and go ahead and actually use terms like *be with* and *relationship* and use them sincerely—i.e. without tone-quotes or ironic undercutting or any kind of winking or nudging.” (132, ft. 9) In other words, you’re going to have to be really sincere, or “naked,” in your employment of metacommentary. Yet this opens you to the opposite danger: not of being seen as a manipulative “bullshit artist” but of coming across as overly credulous and sentimental. At *best*, the quiz (and the story) concludes,

It’s going to make you look fundamentally lost and confused and frightened and unsure about whether to trust even your most fundamental intuitions about urgency and sameness and whether other people deep inside experience things in anything like the same way you do ... more like a reader, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a *Writer*, whom we imagine to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence and

unwavering conviction as he coordinates the whole campaign from
back at some gleaming abstract Olympian HQ.
So decide.” (136)

Although it is tempting here to immediately evaluate what Wallace is saying in the conclusion to the story, I believe it is impossible to do so without first considering what Wallace is *doing* by including such a quiz in the octet in the first place. PQ9, remember, is both part of the octet and stands outside of it as a kind of commentary. As commentary it describes some of what the previous pop quizzes have in common; but by presenting PQ9 as part of the quiz Wallace suggests that, whatever the previous quizzes share with one another, they must *also* share with PQ9. The “ambient sameness in different kinds of human relationships,” that is, extends to the relationship between the fiction writer and her reader that is described in PQ9. This means that, if they are going to have a successful relationship, both the writer and the reader will have to make sacrifices—similar in kind if not in degree to the sacrifice that the terminal drug addict makes to the other terminal drug addict in PQ4.

Here at the end we finally get a sense of what Wallace thinks this sacrifice consists in. As Stephen Mulhall puts it, “[Wallace] aspires to write in such a way as to ‘be with’ his readers, to meet them as equals on the common ground of their lostness and confusion and self-doubt; and the idea of the Authoritative author makes this impossible. Hence he aspires to write in such a way as to do without—to disavow or sacrifice—this immensely comforting self-image, and thereby to encourage his readers to do without its foundational role in their self-image as well; for both parties, this will amount to a radical kind of dying to the self (as that self is

presently constituted).” Whether the sacrifice that is being called for (of authority, on the writer’s side, and of idolatry, on the reader’s) really amounts to a “kind of death”—as Mulhall and also Wallace imply—is debatable; the broader point of marking what is required of both is to suggest that writing is (no more or less than) a form of communication like many others, fraught with many of the same risks (pretension, sentimentality, misunderstanding) and promising some of the same potential benefits. The author is not some separable entity, of the kind that could “die” (as in the Barthian, postmodernist conception) or be transformed into a faultless authority (as in the Joycean, modernist one), but a human being attempting to communicate something she considers to be of importance.

Yet this only begins to address the question of what the reader is ultimately being asked to decide. As Mulhall reads it “So decide” is “something between an order and a reminder.” I take it that Mulhall means to evoke Wittgenstein’s conception of a “reminder,” in the sense that “The work of the philosopher consists in marshaling reminders for a particular purpose.”¹³ That would lead us to consider what the “purpose” is of this reminder. Yet at just this point Mulhall breaks off his interpretation of the story to note that the reader is less likely to seriously consider how to deal with these authorial problems (she is not, after all, an author) than she is to “decide” whether what Wallace is doing constitutes “one more shallow, dissembling and hypocritical metatextual exercise—... Or ... an unprecedentedly explicit, pervasive and sophisticated way of acknowledging the primacy of the reader’s imagination.” By posing this question at the end, Mulhall joins his reading

¹³ Philosophical Investigations, §127

with that of the critic Adam Kelly, who, in an essay on Wallace and sincerity, interprets that “so decide” as indicating that “in an era where advertising, self-promotion and irony are endemic, the endpoint to the infinite jest of consciousness can only be the reader’s choice whether or not to place trust and Blind Faith.”¹⁴

For both Mulhall and Kelly, then, the decision at the end of “Octet” amounts to a power transfer from Wallace to the reader, with the reader being asked to “decide” whether Wallace is being sincere in turning over this power to her. Both observations connect back to Zadie Smith’s suspicion that “how you feel about ‘Octet’ will make or break you as a reader of Wallace, because what he’s asking is for you to have faith in something he cannot ever finally determine in language: ‘the agenda of the consciousness behind the text.’”¹⁵ What Smith means by this is that “Octet” is so dense, enigmatic, and potentially obnoxious that, unless the reader has faith in the agenda behind it, she will give up on it; that is, refuse to work out whatever its appeal is to her—assuming instead that Wallace has simply invented yet another literary mechanism for talking to himself. And it is true that “Octet” has often been treated in Wallace criticism as a limit case, exemplifying for the critic either the richness and moral urgency of Wallace’s project, or that project’s hopelessly pretentious and convoluted moralism.

But to the extent that Mulhall, Kelly and Smith all consider the “decision” at the end of the story as a referendum on *Wallace*, they reinforce the framing of the author/reader relationship that the story seeks to therapeutically undermine.

¹⁴ Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, 145

¹⁵ Smith, 287

Remember that the reader has been asked, at the very beginning of PQ9, to imagine that she is a fiction writer. In arguing that the reader, not actually being a fiction writer, is unlikely at the end of the story to maintain this perspective, Mulhall betrays his own lack of confidence in Wallace's procedure (his own refusal to step into its skin). For when Wallace begins PQ9 by saying that "you, *unfortunately*, are a fiction writer" (emphasis added), this need not strike us as merely a speculative pronouncement. Indeed if we can resist the academic urge to read the sentence metaphorically, we might linger over what it would mean to actually imagine the extent to which it might just be true. I think Wallace means to show us how the modern person really *is* confronted by the same kinds of problems, and the same kinds of opportunities, that the modern fiction writer is confronted with. And this condition (as readers, as writers, as human beings) *is* unfortunate, at least from the perspective assumed by most of the characters in the collection, who picture it as a deficiency of (their form of) communication, rather than a condition of it, that it cannot be made immune to misunderstanding.

Metacommentary is thus revealed as a tool of communication—nothing more and also nothing less—which the modern individual can use to "puncture the fourth wall" (134) if she so chooses. Yet the phrase "fourth wall" itself represents an example of the kind of language we habitually use to insinuate that the challenges facing the artist are matters primarily of technical competence (with Brecht, for instance, as an expert in how to scale such a wall). Wallace does not deny that art poses technical or theoretical challenges, but these are not, the author of "Octet" wants his reader to recognize, its chief challenges. That "so decide" is a reminder in

the form of a command. The command is for the reader, as the writer, to decide on a strategy of communication, but the reminder behind the command is that decisions about communication, artistic or otherwise, cannot be divorced or isolated from decisions about human relationships. Metafiction, just like any other literary strategy, might make the author look “100% honest” or it could make her look like “just another pseudo pomo bullshit artist.” Nothing the metafictionists did necessarily challenged our picture of the author as an authority, yet this does not mean metafictional strategies might not be useful for a writer who truly did want to emphasize the commonalities between herself and her reader. Meanwhile from the point of view of the reader, whether to trust (or not trust) the agenda of the consciousness behind a text is here revealed as a decision (which is not the same as a leap of faith) just like the decision to trust, as far as we dare, another person. The therapeutic recommendation on both sides is to confront our doubt and skepticism without denying or trying to “solve” them—not to stop thinking but to stop denying the limitations of what a certain form of (analytical or explanatory) thinking can achieve.¹⁶ This means recognizing the role that decision and mutual dependency inevitably play in modern human relationships, whether between two terminal drug

¹⁶ The way Kelly and Mulhall misread the end of “Octet” is reminiscent of the way some philosophical commentators often (mis)read two comments of Wittgenstein’s. The first is “explanations come to an end somewhere”; the second is “If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do.’” Critics have often read these comments as if Wittgenstein is saying that there are certain times we simply have to throw up our arms and leave things, anti-intellectually, up to fate, or tradition. As in Wallace’s case, the misreading reinscribes the dichotomy that the author is attempting to undermine. To admit that we cannot always explain or justify our actions is not the same as admitting that our actions are senseless or thoughtless, or that we bear no responsibility for them. Nor need we view blind faith as the only alternative to explanation or justification. I do not take this family of remarks as wanting to deny the role explanation plays in our decisions, so much as wanting to bring out how often it is unable to *settle* them—as well as to account for the suffering we cause ourselves (or others) when we fool ourselves into thinking it can.

addicts sitting against a wall, or between a writer and a reader of an experimental collection of stories.

“Octet” thus resolves into a therapy, not a theory. Having brought its reader, in part by asking herself as a writer, to the rhetorical impasse that makes metafiction seem attractive, the story shows self-reference to be just as haunted by the threats of inauthenticity, and fraudulence, as the conventionally realistic “illusions” it was meant originally to supplant. This does not mean that every artist that undertakes such a strategy is a fraud, only that she deceives herself insofar as she thinks her method of communication can ever protect her from the possibility of fraudulence. Wallace himself, as will be seen in the next story, does not carry on by calling for a pre-reflective form of writing, or even by joining what was sometimes trumpeted in his name as the fiction of “new sincerity.” In fact the darkest story in *Brief Interviews* is precisely about both the attractions and the inaccessibility of simple sincerity—the polar opposite of self-conscious metafiction—as an antidote to self-consciousness.

If “Octet” is an exploration of metafictional strategies of self-reference as a potential solution to modern, social uncertainty, the collection’s final interview, B.I. #20, stages a confrontation between that way of communication and another form of rhetorical “openness.” The interview is with a man who claims to have been transformed by precisely the kind of “earnest” or “sincere” story that one might have thought, given his objections to theory’s influence on fiction, Wallace would

have tried to *write*. The story itself, however, is related to the reader second-hand, by a “hideous man” who believes it holds the key to his own emancipation from solipsism or loneliness. This should make us immediately suspicious of his claims that he was “moved, changed” by the story he re-tells—and this suspicion will, ultimately, prove to be justified. At the same time, it is important not to underestimate, simply based on his ugliness, the extent to which the man’s problems represent a therapeutic aggravation of our own.

The story begins with a declaration of love, delivered as if in *medias res* and related to another story—ostensibly about rape:

B.I. # 20 12-96
New Haven CT

And yet I did not fall in love with her until she had related the story of the unbelievably horrifying incident in which she was brutally accosted and held captive and very nearly killed.

Q.

Let me explain. I’m aware of how it might sound, believe me. I can explain. In bed together, in response to some sort of prompt or association, she related an anecdote about hitchhiking and once being picked up by what turned out to be a psychotic serial sex offender who then drove her to a secluded area and raped her and would almost surely have murdered her had she not been able to think effectively on her feet under enormous fear and stress. Irregardless of whatever I might have thought about the quality and substance of the thinking that enabled her to induce him to let her live.

“Everything seems to be played out,” says Chistoforos Diakoulakis,¹⁷ in this story’s opening lines, which announce both the end result of the interviewee’s encounter with a woman (he fell in love with her) and also the precipitating cause of this end

¹⁷ Diakoulakis, “Quote unquote love ... a type of scotopia’: David Foster Wallace ‘s Brief Interviews With Hideous Men,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, 153

result (she told a story of having been raped and almost killed). In the ensuing paragraphs, the interviewee fills in the blanks. The interviewee—possibly a Yale graduate student (hence New Haven, and his frequent recourse to academic jargon)—met and “picked up” a woman at an outside concert (“the pickup itself [was] ... almost criminally easy”); the woman came home with him and they had sex; the interviewee had been planning to leave the woman with a fake number in the morning (she was a “strictly one-night objective”) until she told him “the story of the unbelievably horrifying incident” in which she had convinced a dark-skinned rapist in a pickup truck not to kill her.

It is noteworthy that the interview begins, as it will end, with the interviewee attempting to explain how the woman’s harrowing story affected *him*. The beginning also prepares us, although sneakily, for the role of “the story” (the story-within-the-story) in “B.I. #20.” The interviewee says he is going to “explain” how he fell in love with the woman; but his explanation consists primarily of the story that the woman told him, since the reason he fell in love with her was the story.¹⁸ It is not only the content of the story, but also, even predominantly, the form or manner in which she tells it, which caused him to fall in love with her. Repeatedly the interviewee interrupts his recounting of the woman’s story to deliver details about her presentation. “She was not melodramatic about it ... nor affecting an unnatural calm the way some people affect a natural nonchalance about narrating an incident that is meant to heighten their story’s drama and/or make them appear nonchalant and sophisticated”; “she was, or seemed, oddly unposed for someone this attractive

¹⁸ *ibid*

and with this dramatic of a story to tell”; “She seemed ... open to attention but not solicitous—nor contemptuous of the attention, or affecting disdain or contempt, which I hate”; “she seemed, quote, sincere in a way that may in fact have been smug naiveté but was nevertheless attractive and very powerful in the context of listening to her encounter with the psychopath.” (BI, 253)

It is as if the woman has found the way out of the maze of “Octet,” able to offer her story nakedly (she is literally naked, on the man’s bed, as she tells it) and yet avoiding the potential pitfalls (melodrama, condescension, manipulative self-consciousness, posing) that had been said to haunt metafiction. Her sincere delivery, the interviewee reports, helped him

focus almost entirely on the anecdote itself and thus helped me imagine in an almost terrifyingly vividly realistic way just what it must have *felt* like for her, for anyone, finding yourself through nothing but coincidence heading into a secluded woody area in the company of a dark man ... It was tribute to the—her odd affectless sincerity that I found myself hearing expressions like *fear gripping her soul*, unquote, as less as televisual clichés or melodrama but as sincere if not particularly artful attempts simply to describe what it must have felt like, the feelings of shock and unreality alternating with waves of pure terror. (254)

As with the AA members in *Jest*, the interviewee here gestures toward a renewed appreciation for clichés, and for our everyday ways of describing things—as if to emphasize that we have forgotten, or lost touch with, the effectiveness of our common, everyday language. Yet as throughout the interview (and unlike in the AA portions of *Jest*, which are mostly told through the eyes of a non-intellectual), the interviewee also communicates a coldness and skepticism toward the woman (it “may in fact have been smug naiveté”; her expressions were “not particularly artful”;

“Irregardless of what I might have thought about the quality and substance of the thinking”) even when he is supposedly attempting to praise her. (Notice also that nearly every observation is modified by the suspicious verb, “seemed.”)

This paradox runs throughout the interview. Explicitly, the interviewee claims to have been “moved, changed” by the woman’s story, and particularly by his realization toward its end (the woman ultimately forms a “soul-connection” with her rapist, thereby short-circuiting the method by which he typically dehumanizes and then destroys his victims; the rapist still rapes her, but he leaves her alone in the woods and does not kill her) that his approach to women was hardly any better, or less empty, than the rapist’s. Yet his self-consciousness, his use of the word “quote” before words like “sincerity,” and his skepticism about the interviewer’s ability to understand *him* (“I can’t make you feel what I felt”; “I will not even try to explain it to you”; “I was moved, changed—believe what you will” [269, 270]) tell a different story.

At the end of the woman’s narrative, the interviewee recounts, she “indulged in” a moment of commentary, mentioning “that her whole life had indeed led inexorably to that moment when the car stopped and she got in, that it was indeed a kind of death, but not at all in the way she had feared as they had entered the secluded area.” (270) We are not told enough about the woman’s life either before or after the incident (itself a telling omission) to do anything more than speculate about how the experience with the rapist could have represented a “kind of death” for her, though we can infer, thinking back to “Octet,” that the statement implies the death of some idea or “picture” of herself. Perhaps it was the picture of herself as a

free agent to whom the life and needs of a psychotic Mulatto rapist had absolutely no relevance. It is this kind of dependency—on the desires and even the whims of others—in any case, that the interviewee shows himself unable to accept in his own interaction with the interviewer (on which more below), even as he insists on the supposedly transformational effect the woman’s story had had on him.

It is also the willingness to risk this kind of death—the death of the imperious, free subject, able to think or talk himself to certainty—that for Wallace separates morally efficacious from merely self-serving rhetorical “nakedness.” At the end of the interview, when the man claims to “stand naked” before the interviewer, we are invited to compare his nakedness with the woman’s. But in drawing attention to his (figurative) nakedness, the interviewee has already registered a self-consciousness about nakedness that separates him inexorably from the woman. Moreover, it is a self-consciousness accompanied by hostility, as is made more than apparent in interview’s explosive conclusion:

“It didn’t matter if she was fluffy or not terribly bright. Nothing else mattered. She had all my attention. I’d fallen in love with her. I believed she could save me. I know how this sounds, trust me. I know your type and I know what you’re bound to ask. Ask it now. This is your chance. I felt she could save me I said. Ask me now. Say it. I stand here naked before you. Judge me, you chilly cunt. You dyke, you bitch, cooze, cunt, slut, gash. Happy now? All borne out? Be happy, I don’t care. I knew she could. I knew I loved. End of story.” (271)

In a book where it can seem that, as Smith points out, the questions are “not only formally ‘missing’ from the conversation, *their respondents have internalized them*,”¹⁹ one might think that the *explosiveness* of the interviewee’s anger would be

¹⁹ Smith, 268 (italics hers)

underwritten by his own suspicion that his emotional conversion was in some sense fraudulent, self-serving, or narcissistic. But this tells only part of the story. As throughout Wallace's book, what makes the man truly hideous is laid bare by his language, both throughout the interview and here in its final moments—where he is fully revealed, nakedly as it were, though not in the manner he supposes. The verbs he uses to express his certainty that he had been saved, each one further down the road to certainty than the last (“I *believed* she could save me”; “I *felt* she could save me”; “I *knew* she could [save me]”), should remind us of the metaphysical and historical uncertainty that underlies the personal one throughout the collection (“One never knew...”). The interviewee is not content with believing he had been saved, or even with feeling he could have been saved; he is only “borne out” when he arrives at certain knowledge (and not just about being saved—he also “knew” he loved). The violence of his language at the end is therefore provoked by his frustration that his words are failing to *prove* to the woman what he himself “knows.” Though he continuously refers to the interviewer's skepticism (and by proxy his own self-doubt), he is incapable of accepting that words alone are incapable of (dis)solving that skepticism. If the rhetorical assault of the female interviewer can only be seen as approximating the physical one recounted by the woman inside the story, in both cases, we are meant to see the attacks as representing not a failure of communication but the refusal to recognize that communication cannot be rescued from the possibility of failure; that it is inseparable from it.

Indeed “B.I. #20” does not, as has sometimes been supposed, offer a program for future fiction—exemplified, say, by the woman’s sincere delivery of her story. What we feel of the girl’s “sacred otherness”²⁰ is entirely a product of the hideous man’s distance from her; even as we are attracted to the picture he draws of her, we cannot help but see it as a the product of his ambivalent idealization of what he perceives to be her naivete. Indeed, even as he praises her “rhetorical innocence” he conveys something else—a transparent hostility toward that innocence, combined with doubt about its authenticity (mirrored by his skepticism about his own authenticity, and about the interviewer’s motives toward him; he is, as it were, held in place by his skepticism). Moreover, in coming to see the rapist as literalizing his own tendencies toward women, the hideous man only appears to have made a “profound” breakthrough, for he shows from the words “let me explain” that he has not drawn the relevant lesson from that breakthrough.

Like the rest of the men in the collection, the final interviewee has not learned how to bring his explanation to an end—or, say, that the “love” he professes in the opening sentence is not the kind of thing that can be certified via explanation. When Wittgenstein speaks of not being able to “get outside” of a picture, because the picture “lay in our language, and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably,” he was talking about this man. The hideous man had earlier analogized himself to the rapist because of his intention to leave the woman with a fake phone number; the real analogy, however, consists in his refusal to accept the independence of a female’s judgment of him. The (especially male) craving for certainty is thus

²⁰ Smith, 294

revealed to be not just confused or selfish but, in this final case, truly monstrous—a secret fount of misogyny and violence both rhetorical and otherwise. The woman and her story may indeed strike us as inspirational, but “B.I. #20” is *therapeutic* insofar as it promotes the self-critical realization that it is also, so far as we remain committed to the skeptical, abstract language game that many of us share with the interviewee, inaccessible.

“A perspicuous representation, “ writes Wittgenstein, “produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections.’”²¹ Reviewers and commentators on *Brief Interviews* have wanted to see the hideous men as eccentric, or at least as extreme (“florid and exotic,” as Scott says) representatives of our narcissistic culture. But “B.I. #20” is told from the point of view of a man who has mastered a way of speaking that is widely admired among America’s educated elite; if his outburst at the end strikes us as extreme, what leads up to it can hardly be dismissed as extraordinary. This would be a way, in any case, of refusing the therapy that is being offered. For the story is designed to compel us as readers to grasp a connection between what we might normally be inclined to admire about the man—his erudition, his vocabulary, his analytical insights into human behavior—and what we cannot help but see as pitiable about his predicament. This does not mean that we weigh the pros and cons of his rhetoric and presentation against what we find objectionable in his behavior. According to the Wallace of *Brief Interviews*, we are not so much convinced by a way of talking as we are bewitched by it. To see the connection is to see our way free of it.

²¹ Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §122

One way of stating the relationship between philosophy or “theory” and fiction writing or storytelling that I have been discussing in this chapter would be to say that Wallace, although he respected philosophy for certain purposes, “understood theoretical explanations to be too generalized and distorting of the phenomena they seek to explain.” This is the formulation of the critic Randy Ramal, in a section of his essay on Wallace and philosophy entitled “On Wittgenstein and the danger of theorizing.”²² Ramal suggests that Wallace shared this insight with Wittgenstein, who also criticized philosophy for its overreliance on theory. Both Wittgenstein and Wallace, on this view, considered explanations dangerous because they were not attentive enough to particularity, and therefore distorted or generalized about some of the phenomena they were meant to account for.

I think that Wallace and Wittgenstein did share an insight about the “dangers of theorizing,” but it is not the one Ramal describes. There is nothing “dangerous” about a theoretical explanation that distorts or simplifies certain phenomena. This is simply a feature of theoretical explanations—theories explain some things well and other things less well; perhaps a better theory will come along that will, building on the first, explain more things better. What Wittgenstein and Wallace saw to be “dangerous” about theoretical explanation was rather the way it could come to crowd out all other forms of justification. A whole culture, that is, could be captivated by “theoretical explanation” as simply *the* mode of sophisticated thinking

²² The full essay is called “Beyond Philosophy: David Foster Wallace on Literature, Wittgenstein, and the Dangers of Theorizing.” In *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*. P. 189

and communication. Wittgenstein felt in his time that something like this had happened to a certain group of elite, academic philosophers; Wallace's insight is that, in our time, many of us even outside of academia have come to resemble such philosophers, refusing to acknowledge that there are modes of human interaction which theoretical explanation does as much to corrupt as to encourage.

This is why I have argued that, far from being a psychological commentary on certain neuroses or eccentric prejudices, Wallace's collection is targeted at a specific historical and philosophical predicament, and also at a way of talking about that predicament that is tempting but (he thinks) self-defeating. One way of describing that way of talking would be to point out the unrivaled prominence it accords to theoretical explanation. The collection places its characters in situations—usually moral situations, involving the uncertainties the hideous men associate with other people and especially with women—such that we are able to see why to deal with a problem only on the level of theory is often not to deal with it at all; worse, it is to deceive oneself about whether one is dealing with it or not. Hence the connection between the final hideous man's promise to "explain" his love, and his explosive anger when he feels he has failed to explain it. *His* problem with theoretical explanation is not that it distorts certain phenomena, but that it has become a habit rather than a choice.

"Suppose that Descartes discovered for philosophy that to confront the threat of our temptation to skepticism is to risk madness," writes Cavell, going on to say that since the *Investigations* confronts the "temptation" to skepticism at every point, it "finds its victory in never claiming a final philosophical victory over (the

temptation to) skepticism, which would mean a victory over the human.”²³ *Brief Interviews* contains many characters seeking to secure victory over skepticism and therefore over their dependence on other people, and on the external world—a view from “forever overhead,” as it were. In criticizing this aspiration—a criticism carried out not through analysis but via a representation of its practical consequences—Wallace encourages just such an endless refusal of victory. This can sound irritating, and exhausting, words that some critics of the book have employed to describe it, usually alongside the warning that the stories are not for those looking to literature for an escape from their problems. But I think the book offers, to the reader willing to dive into its challenges, exactly that.

²³ Cavell, “Wittgenstein as Philosopher of Culture.” In *This New Yet Unapproachable America*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Chapter Four

Untrendy Problems: *The Pale King's Philosophical Inspirations*

“It is not all books that are as dull as their readers. There are probably words addressed to our condition, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us.”

—Thoreau, *Walden*

Wallace’s final published fiction is a collection of fragments that were posthumously pieced together by his long-time editor Michael Pietsch, following the author’s death in 2007. It would therefore be foolish to assess the structure of *The Pale King* in the same way as we have done with Wallace’s other works of fiction. For that reason, I plan in this chapter to assess two parts of the book largely independently, as separable chunks of writing which both illuminate and, in the second case, also show the limits of of what I have been calling Wallace’s philosophically therapeutic project.

The first of those, the section of the novel dealing with the mental history of IRS auditor Meredith Rand, makes explicit a distinction that runs throughout Wallace’s fiction, between the form of (philosophical) therapy Wallace hoped his fiction would offer to his readers, and the more conventional forms of (generally conventional talk) therapy that characterize our “therapeutic age”¹—and to which Wallace elsewhere subjects his characters. The second section I’ll consider is the

¹ Cf. *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*, eds. Timothy Aubry and Trysh Tavis (University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.1

longest continuous portion of the book, dealing with the spiritual transformation of IRS auditor Chris Fogle. In that case, I'll argue that Wallace fully indulges, perhaps for the first time in his *fiction*, his desire to move beyond the confines of negative therapy to full-fledged inspiration. Linking Fogle's "journey of ascent" in this section with Cavell's idea of "perfectionism," I'll explore to what extent such a development in Wallace's method can be considered an extension of Wittgenstein's idea of philosophical therapy, and to what extent it might be considered to break with it.

As I have tried to do in other chapters, I'll begin by briefly recounting some ways that critics have received *Pale King*, along with some of Wallace's other, late non-fiction writing. This recap will be limited to some extent by the fact that responses to *Pale King*—with the notable exception of a recent essay by Mark McGurl, published in the Fall 2014 issue of *Boundary 2*—have come so far from mostly non-academic critics. Addressing the claims of these critics will be appropriate, however, to the extent that Wallace's later fiction, I will argue, is addressed precisely to the kind of reader who thinks there exists a bright line between "personal" problems and philosophical (or academic) ones.

Early in his career, non-academic critics often chided Wallace for his "pretentious" postmodern difficulty, a criticism that I have argued betrayed confusion about the

use of postmodern techniques in his fiction.² But in the years following his death a new and in some ways more instructive criticism of his writing emerged. The criticism was expressed in different ways, by different kinds of critics. One symptom of it is apparent in Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly's chapter on Wallace, in their book on modern ethics, *All Things Shining* (2011). Dreyfus and Kelly begin by calling Wallace "the greatest writer of his generation; perhaps the greatest mind altogether," yet in what follows they suggest that his ethical outlook was juvenile and hubristic, and can usefully be compared to that of the sentimental memoirist Elizabeth Gilbert.³ A second version, or variety, of this kind of criticism can be found in Jonathan Franzen's 2011 *New Yorker* essay, "Farther Away." Wallace, Franzen suggests, was a gifted writer with a rare talent for describing Midwestern weather, whose fiction was marred by his penchant for "moralism and theologizing," bad habits at least partially attributable (Franzen implies) to his lifelong battle with mental illness.⁴ A third instance appears in an article by the critic Gerald Howard, posted on Salon.com late in 2012. In the article Howard, who helped edit Wallace's first novel, confesses disappointment with Wallace's late fiction and essays and especially with Wallace's famous Kenyon commencement speech, which struck him as "uncomfortably close to those books of affirmations, no doubt inspiring but of questionable use when the hard stuff arrives."⁵

² I take chapters two and three of this dissertation to imply this argument, but for a more direct engagement with Wallace's non-academic critics, see my 2009 essay for *The Point*, "Death is not the End." <http://thepointmag.com/2009/criticism/death-is-not-the-end>

³ Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining*, p. 22. Free Press, 2011.

⁴ Franzen, "Farther Away," *New Yorker*, 4/18/11.

⁵ Howard, "I Know Why Brett Easton Ellis Hates David Foster Wallace." *Salon*, 9/7/12

What the three commentaries share, despite differences in tone and intention, is the identification of Wallace with a directness and earnestness about moral matters that's considered to be excessive and possibly jejune. All three authors express an anxiety, even an embarrassment, about the fact that Wallace, especially in his later fiction and essays, really did commit himself to "untrendy human problems and emotions," just as he had promised he would in his oft-quoted early essay (SFT, 81). A way they express their condescension toward this commitment is by implying, each in their own way, that it stems from fundamentally "personal" concerns, rather than, say, literary or philosophical ones.⁶

I am less interested in defending Wallace against the charge that his later fiction or essays resemble "books of affirmations" than I am in showing how Wallace's late fiction therapeutically questions the assumption that motivates the charge—namely, that the genre to which such books belong, call it "self-help," operates in a region distinct from and irrelevant to what we take to be more serious forms of culture. One way of crediting the "insights" above, without crediting their implication of reproach, would be to say that they indicate, far better than the charge that Wallace was an over-clever postmodernist, that to take Wallace seriously as a thinker is to take seriously his fervent, perhaps even sometimes his embarrassing, commitment to the problems of the self. But that does not mean that that commitment need be conceived of as grossly personal, or sentimental, or that it should consign Wallace's writing to the same kind of (in)attention we reserve for what we normally call self-help. Indeed one of the things I hope to have shown

⁶ Dreyfus and Kelly, for instance, intersperse their chapter with paragraph-length descriptions of the depression that led to Wallace's suicide.

Wallace's fiction to demonstrate is how problems customarily cordoned off into self-help, or (in their high form) "psychology," are also philosophical problems, or have components that can be best addressed philosophically.

The Pale King, long portions of which take their cue from the Kenyon commencement, is the book critics have been most apt to associate with Wallace's supposed deviation into sentimentality or moralism or self-help.⁷ And it is true that in *Pale King* we find Wallace at his most morally direct. But it is no coincidence that we can also find in Wallace's late, unfinished novel some of the most vivid examples of the methods Wallace employed in the hopes of returning literature—and the people reading it—from the high ledge of abstraction and theory to what he conceived of as the concrete problems of everyday experience.

The two longest portions of *The Pale King*—one dealing with the "legendarily attractive" IRS agent Meredith Rand, the other with the former "wastoid" auditor Chris Fogle—offer unusually transparent examples of strategies Wallace employed, especially in his late fiction, to bring out the *philosophical* aspect of what might at first glance appear to be merely "personal" problems. In their form, as well as their content, they look as much like philosophical dialogues as they do like fictional scenes; in the first case, especially, there is virtually no action, only a long

⁷ An academic corollary to the critiques leveled above was more recently supplied by Mark McGurl, who accuses Wallace of being a "conservative" who believes individuals can only thrive "in submission to the human institutional order." This order is represented most clearly, according to McGurl, by the institution of the IRS in *Pale King*. (Mark McGurl, *Boundary 2*, Fall 2014, pp. 40-41) As I'll say more about below, McGurl's central criticism of Wallace's supposed deference to institutional authority ends up recreating the very distinction between individuals and institutions that Wallace means to question.

A curious paradox of much of today's academic literary criticism is that it affords institutions an almost talismanic power to negatively shape—or distort—individuals, and yet seems to want to hold on to the idea that there remains some individual human core that, in the right kind of society, would be immune to the influence of institutions. At least this is the picture one gets from McGurl. Wallace is in fact more radical than McGurl insofar as his fiction may compel us to question what might have ever made us think we could separate out individuals from the institutions that shaped them in the first place.

conversation between two seated protagonists. In the second, the action seems organized, even more schematically than usual in Wallace's fiction, to communicate a didactic message.⁸ As I have mentioned, I will connect the first of these scenes directly with Wittgenstein's notion of philosophy as therapy, which I have been developing along more jagged lines throughout the rest of this study, and the second with the literary-philosophical tradition that Stanley Cavell calls "Perfectionism"—a tradition that draws on Wittgenstein's therapeutic method but also deviates from it.

If much of Wallace's mature fiction can fruitfully be viewed as a "series of examples" meant to treat the point of view he takes to be characteristic of his readership, the strategy is rarely as transparent as it is in *Pale King*. Particularly, it can be seen at work in the series of dialogues recounted at a bar after work one night by the accountant Meredith Rand.

The story Rand tells, in the second longest chapter in *Pale King*, revolves around several sessions with a sickly nighttime attendant at a recovery center where, as a teenager, she had been sent for "cutting." The attendant was not a doctor, Rand makes sure to point out, but rather a "natural therapist" who spoke to

⁸ I want to bracket, for now, the question of whether *Pale King* ought really to be thought of as a work of philosophy that employs certain literary tropes and tools, as opposed to the other way around (that it should be thought of as a work of literature with philosophical themes or aspirations). It is worth noting that Wallace's fiction from beginning to end can be seen to become less and less concerned with the creation of what might be called "fictional worlds." *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, as we have seen, is largely a collection of dialogues, with few references to any kind of world that extends beyond the consciousness of the characters involved; and the same could be said for many of the most prominent portions of *Pale King*. This is a topic I will return to in my conclusion.

Rand as if he were “talking to a child”—i.e. to “somebody so locked into the problem that she can’t even see that it’s her problem and not just the way the world is” (499). It is not immediately clear what Rand means by calling the attendant a “natural therapist,” but the dialogues she recounts with him certainly resemble the “scenes of instruction” in Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*, in which, as Cavell notes, a “central character is the child.”⁹ The late-night attendant, for instance, explained to Rand that she had set herself a “neat little trap [to] ensure that I never really had to grow up and so I could stay immature and waiting forever for somebody to save me” (498). The trap was common to girls in Rand’s extremely juvenile or adolescent generation, the attendant said. Rand’s real wish was to be able to “go around thinking that my real problem was that no one could see or love the real me the way I needed so I’d always have my problem to sit and hold and stroke on and make believe was the real problem” (498).

We might be tempted to call the trap the attendant describes “psychological” rather than “philosophical”—for Wallace, it does not matter what we call the trap; what matters is how we treat it. What we commonly call psychology has its ways of treating it, and these ways of treating it, as Wallace goes on about *ad nauseum* in his fiction,¹⁰ is not likely to help Rand with her “core problem,” and possibly not even with its symptoms (e.g., the cutting). The biggest difference between the attendant’s therapy and the therapy practiced by the conventionally trained doctors at the

⁹ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 124.

¹⁰ Probably no writer has ever presented more scenes of *failed* talk therapy than Wallace. See chapter 2 on the mockery Hal makes of his “grief counselor,” following his father’s death, in *Infinite Jest*. In chapter 3, I briefly touch on one of Wallace’s best-known short stories, “The Depressed Person,” from *Brief Interviews*, which is comprised entirely of a failed therapeutic experience.

facility is that the attendant informs Rand “it doesn’t ultimately matter why I do it or what it, like, represents ... all that matters is that I was doing it and to stop doing it.” The doctors, on the other hand, “thought that diagnosis was the same as cure. That if you knew why, you would stop” (PK, 486). Rand calls this latter thought “bullshit,” which is a succinct summary of Wallace’s own judgment, in an early essay, of the “frankly idealistic” contemporary (postmodern, but also modern) belief that “etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom” (SFT, 66). As I argued in my introduction, Wallace traces this “idealistic” belief as far back as Descartes, although it was Freud who claimed psychological benefits for those willing to apply Descartes’ enlightenment rationalism to their own emotional life. Wallace’s therapy is anti-Freudian in the sense that he attempts to break rather than to encourage his reader’s addiction to introspection; more precisely, to get her to see introspection as a human activity that is capable of becoming addictive—with its pleasures and potential excesses like any other. The sickly late-night attendant teaches Rand that “it doesn’t matter why I cut or what the psychological machinery is behind the cutting, like if it’s projecting self-hatred or whatever. Because whatever the institutional reason, it’s hurting myself, it’s me being mean to myself, which was childish” (PK, 506).

Evidently, since it is repeated several times, this is a conclusion Wallace senses his reader will be apt to doubt or to misinterpret. The attendant’s point is not that institutions have nothing to do with Rand’s problem (how could he know what they have to do with it?; how could she?); it is that, at the pass she has come to, it will not be of any help to Rand to understand her problems as being produced by

her upbringing or her society, and that it is precisely this way of thinking that keeps her “going around and around inside” of her problem as opposed to “really looking” at it (496). It is worth pausing to note that this habit of thinking seems to afflict not only narcissistic teenagers but also a significant portion of Wallace’s readership, insofar as that readership can be assumed to be represented by some of his prominent academic critics. Indeed the attendant’s advice to Rand might be applied equally to the kind of critics—Konstantinou, McGurl—who reprimand Wallace for not paying greater attention to “institutional failures.” Like the attendant, Wallace does not argue with Konstantinou or McGurl on the theoretical level about the institutional factors responsible for the distress of his characters; he merely shows, within his fiction, how a focus on institutions *can* be yet another way of circling around (or “sitting and holding”) a problem under the guise of addressing it.

But what does it mean to “really look” at one’s problems? This is at the heart of the therapy that the attendant, and thereby Wallace, is offering to his audience. The more experienced doctors at Rand’s clinic in this case represent our default cultural answer to the question; to “really look,” they explain to Rand, is precisely to investigate causes and symptoms analytically, just as Wallace’s academic critics have so often encouraged *him* to do. But the attendant’s visual framing of the problem (it is not insignificant that he says “really look” as opposed to “really understand”) serves to re-enforce the Wittgensteinian difference in Wallace’s approach, the deepest target of which is not some institutional bogeyman, but rather the younger Rand’s adolescent—one might say “romantic”—philosophical picture of herself.

As in Wallace's short story from *Brief Interviews*, "The Depressed Person," the dialogue here reproduces in spirit if not in exact wording certain moments from the section on private language in the *Investigations*. "I wanted people to look past the prettiness thing and the sexual thing and see who I was, like as a person," Rand says, "and I felt really mad and sorry for myself that people didn't." But "in reality," the attendant gets her to see, "everything was the surface ... because under the surface were just all these feelings and conflicts about the surface; about how I looked and the effect on people I had" (499). Rand, in other words, had concocted an unknowable private self, yet this private self held no content, for in fact what lay "under the surface" was nothing more than a constant worry about what other people were seeing on the surface. Her problem was not therefore metaphysical—and it would answer to no hermeneutics of suspicion. The problem, rather, is what Wittgenstein would call "grammatical." And this means it requires, not a theoretical unmasking (for there is nothing, Rand now sees, beneath the mask), but a grammatical therapy. "Such an investigation," says Wittgenstein, "sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language."¹¹ In Rand's case, the lonely, private self is born and endlessly reproduced in phrases like the "real me" and "under the surface." The sickly attendant might have told Rand, "The human body is the best picture of the human soul."¹²

¹¹ *Investigations*, §90

¹² *ibid*, p. 178.

As is often the case when Wallace depicts a therapeutic process, the extent to which the sickly late-night attendant's message has really sunk in for Rand—the extent to which she now lives what she claims to have learned from him—is unclear, and not just (I don't think) because Wallace never finished *Pale King*. Rand tells the entire story about her time at the rehabilitation center to an IRS co-worker, Shane Drinion, during an after-work happy hour. The conversation is laced with Rand's anxiety that what she is saying is "boring" or "banal" (say that her story is no more interesting, or deserving of respect, than self-help); moreover, as she gets deeper into the story, she begins to imitate aspects of her younger, less mature self (489). Drinion, described by co-workers as "possibly the dullest human being currently alive" (448), is nevertheless capable of exceptional feats of attention, so much so that he is later said to participate in an auditing competition with a computer. Toward the end of the story, having paid close attention to what Rand is telling him (not only is Drinion never bored, he claims not to know what the word means), Drinion wonders matter-of-factly at the paradox that, though the sickly attendant had seemed to teach Rand a valuable lesson about her childish and self-destructive need to be "saved," the story would seem to cast the attendant himself—who later became Rand's husband—as precisely the savior she had (so childishly) been looking for. Rand admits this paradox, and cannot resolve it.

Insofar as Wallace's therapy is always aimed ultimately at his reader, rather than at the characters inside the book, it is fitting that his fiction's most explicitly therapeutic scene would include a kind of warning about the inherent dangers, in therapy (philosophical or otherwise), of transference or idolization. But a second,

harder point of the scene—or of the indeterminacy of Rand’s therapeutic outcome—might be described like this: there is no once-and-for-all way to escape, to put behind us for good, the human dimension of adolescence. A way of summarizing Rand’s problem as a teenager is that she was narcissistic—that is, she thought her difficulties were special, rather than common or natural. This is an adolescent thought, but it is also a human one. The grammatical point would be that the problem was not with Rand’s narcissism, but with her perspective on (or her description to herself of) her narcissism—namely, the perspective that made her narcissism into a bigger and different kind of problem (“just the way the world is”) than it was.¹³ But Wallace also wants to do justice to how seductive and even natural that perspective is, to the adult Rand as surely as to the adolescent one. Rand’s conversations at the recovery center helped her to see her problem from a new vantage, but they did not offer (as most self-annointed self-help would) a permanent solution to it. If we equate such conversations with the kind Wallace attempted to carry on with his readers, then this would be one way of underscoring the interiminability (and also the inexhaustibility) of Wallace’s literary-philosophical project. The “series of examples” can go on and on; our need for “reminders” will come to an end only when life does.

One concluding note about the conversation between Rand and Drinion, which may appear tangential here but will bear on the next section. At a climactic moment in the conversation, much remarked upon by early reviewers of *Pale King*,

¹³ I am thinking of Wittgenstein’s claim, which comes right above the already-quoted portion of §133 in the *Investigations*, that, using his method of philosophy, “philosophical problems should completely disappear.” The line can look very different depending on whether you emphasize the word “problems” or (as has been customary in English translations) the word “completely.”

Drinion is said to “levitate slightly”¹⁴ as he becomes so “completely immersed” in Rand’s story that he loses consciousness of himself. This appears to be Wallace’s way of dramatizing Drinion’s complete innocence and impartiality—a kind of fantasy of unselfconsciousness that held no small appeal for many in Wallace and his television-obsessed generation.¹⁵ Yet Wallace seems to suggest, precisely with such notes as the levitation, that Drinion has not overcome narcissism; he has never felt it; hence he is not properly human, rather in- or sub- or superhuman. This means that nothing in the therapy Rand (or Wallace’s reader) receives would put her on a path toward becoming Drinion, for Drinion has not mastered the problem of narcissism so much as he has been spared from it (a similar point could be made with regard to the relationship between Hal and his deformed brother Mario in *Infinite Jest*). At the same time, one can sense the appeal of such a figure for Wallace; and there are long portions of *Pale King* devoted to exploring how a more normally self-conscious being might approximate Drinion’s seemingly mystical equanimity and focus. The most prominent of these sections is the one recounting the story of Chris Fogle, to which we turn next.

¹⁴ I’m not sure what to make of it, but this is the same feeling Wallace described having had while writing fiction in college (Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, p. 167).

¹⁵ In “E Unibus Pluram,” Wallace writes of television actors who carry the “Emersonian holiday” in their eye, i.e. “the promise of a vacation from human self-consciousness. Not worrying about how you come across. A total unallergy to gazes. It is contemporarily heroic. It is frightening and strong. It is also, of course, an act.” (*SFT*, p. 25) This “self-conscious appearance of unself-consciousness,” Wallace said, was the “the real door” to TV’s “hall of mirrors” appeal. The connection of Emerson to acting is itself borrowed from Cavell’s *Pursuits of Happiness*, according to Paul Giles (“All Swallowed Up,” 9).

Like Wallace's fiction, significant portions of Stanley Cavell's philosophy can be seen as grappling with the question of how to inherit the late Wittgenstein. The term "Moral Perfectionism" combined for Cavell the instructive or therapeutic elements he admired in the *Investigations* with more traditional modes of literary-philosophical "inspiration," evident in works as diverse as Augustine's *Confessions*, Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* and Emerson's "Experience." In the introduction to his Carus Lectures, Cavell describes Perfectionism as an (oft-neglected) tradition in Western thought concerned with "what used to be called the state of one's soul," and which imagines philosophy less as a search for better facts than as a "journey of ascent" toward a better self.¹⁶ In lieu of further definition, he advances a list of texts containing Perfectionist elements, beginning with Plato's *Republic* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and carrying on to Cavell's "doorstep" with works by Freud, Thoreau, Beckett and Wittgenstein.

Even more than Rand, Chris Fogle is imagined, in the longest continuous portion of *The Pale King*, as the product of an extended and debilitating adolescence. But the pivotal sequence in Fogle's life involves, not a set of therapeutic conversations but a lecture, almost a sermon, which presents as inspirational precisely what Fogle, in his conformity with his culture, had previously viewed as banal or pathetic. This is what marks the section, for me, as being more Perfectionist than (philosophically) therapeutic. In tone and method, it resembles less the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* than it does the Kierkegaard of *Either/Or* or the Thoreau of *Walden*. For Cavell—and perhaps for Wallace—such texts were

¹⁶ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 2, 7.

precursors for a project he initially identified with the late Wittgenstein. After describing how *Pale King* can be read as participating in the perfectionist tradition, I will register some doubt about whether the core perfectionist works mentioned by Cavell—inherited by Wallace in this section—really do participate in the Wittgensteinian project, particularly insofar as that project is conceived of as negatively challenging, as opposed to positively inspirational.

Perfectionism arises out of the intuition that life can stop being meaningful to us, or that we act in such a way that the meaning is drained out of it, and therefore fail to live up to our best or higher selves, the selves we are, as Emerson says, when we “best know” who we are.¹⁷ The great philosophical enemy of the Perfectionist text is therefore skepticism or nihilism (they are intimately related in Cavell’s hands), but with these words being understood to describe less a self-conscious philosophical position than a perspective or a way of life. In the course of his narration, Chris Fogle refers to his younger self as a nihilist no less than four times, but he does not mean by this that he read or aspired to live according to the dictates of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Fogle’s nihilism, rather, was the result of what he unreflectively assimilated from his culture and upbringing. Like many in his generation, Fogle says, he “was not raised as anything” and as a teenager he romanticized what he now recognizes as a “narcissistic despair.” (He might have said that he and his friends felt a “stereotyped but unconscious despair.”)¹⁸ It wasn’t until sixth grade that Fogel learned the definition of the word “nihilism”

¹⁷ Cf. “If any of us knew what we were doing, or where we are going, then when we think we best know!” (“Experience,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 308)

¹⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Walden and Other Writings*, 8.

(appropriately, in the “sixth week of theater class in high school”) (163), by which time he was already on his way to becoming “a real nihilist,” who “drifted and quit because nothing meant anything, no one choice was really better” (223). In this, he was much like his peers. “Everyone I knew and hung out with was a wastoid,” he remembers. “It was hip to be ashamed of it, in a strange way ... or just to feel directionless and lost” (165).

Several events, including the untimely death of his father in a gruesome subway accident, prompted or “primed” Fogle for what he describes as his “change in direction”—that is, his move out of or beyond nihilism. But Fogle did not finally manage to “put away childish things” (172) until he wandered, mistakenly, into an Advanced Accounting class at the Catholic DePaul University in Chicago. The class was being taught by a “substitute Jesuit” (in a Freudian slip, Fogle later calls him a “substitute father” [176]), capable of summarizing extant property tax law with a dry yet apparently undeniable majesty. At the end of the class, in what is alternately a parody and a paraphrase of Kierkegaard, the Jesuit delivers a peroration on the necessity of the “leap outward” into adulthood. The leap is into “reality,” where there is “no audience,” but from the perspective of which all other kinds of heroism appear as mere “theater” (229). The students in the class had so far lived a “crude approximation of a human life,” the Jesuit says. Real heroism or courage was not what they thought it was. To work day after day at a thankless job, giving oneself to “the care of other people’s money”—this was “effacement, perdurance, sacrifice, valor” (231).

For all its hyperbole, the speech works a change in Fogle. The change begins with his recognition that he really had been living a “*crude approximation of a human life*” (237, italics in original). The recognition is inseparable from his realization that there might be something else he could be living—say (what Thoreau called) a “whole human life.”¹⁹ As Cavell points out, Perfectionist thinkers—like the line of moral philosophers I discussed in chapter one—do not take sides in the various Kantian problematics that occupy much of professional moral philosophy; their concern is not with what *should* compel us to change our behavior, but with what *does*. By showing us visions of our rejected selves, of selves that look better than our current ones, such texts hope to trigger in us “that aversion to ourselves in our conformity that will constitute our becoming as it were, ashamed of our shame.”²⁰ For Fogle, the Jesuit functions something like a substitute self, manifesting exactly the qualities that Fogle believed he had rejected in himself: the Jesuit “was ‘indifferent’—not in a meaningless, drifting, nihilistic way, but rather in a secure, self-confident way”; he had “a kind of zealous integrity that manifested not as style but as the lack of it”; he didn’t feel the need to “joke or try to slightly undercut what he was about to say.” (226)

Here is virtually a catalogue of the qualities Wallace himself said he admired in certain literary “authorities” (such as Dostoevsky), but which he confessed it was not easy to reproduce, either for himself personally or for any contemporary writer, in a literary climate where the undermining of authority was valued more highly

¹⁹ Cf. *Walden*, 311

²⁰ *Conditions*, 58.

than the expression of it. This is one reason for taking the Fogle section, despite its own undercutting gestures (in a certain mood, the substitute Jesuit can seem merely hilarious, and it is hinted that Fogle's "transformation" was at least in part abetted by a prescription drug), as the moral and philosophical center of *The Pale King*—the place where we, the readers, may become averse to our own conformity, our own penchant for "hip nihilism" and our own romanticization of despair. Fogle, for his part, now sees that all his own "non-conformist" behavior was little more than theater ("I remember once shaving off just one sideburn and going around like that for a period of time, believing the one sideburn made me a nonconformist—I'm not kidding" [161]). Later he announces the discovery of a better, deeper self:

There were depths in me that were not bullshit or childish but profound, and were not abstract but much realer than my clothes or self-image, and that blazed in an almost sacred way—I'm being serious; I'm not just trying to make it more dramatic than it was.

That this is one of the places Fogle stops to insist ("I'm being *serious...*") hints at what Wallace takes to be the radicality of the claim, for his audience, that there might be something "much realer" than one's personality. The idea, though, that there is a Self that lies deeper than the (ego's) self, is a relatively familiar one from transcendental philosophy to the teachings of the eastern mystics. Perhaps what is most radical, or challenging, about the story is the fact that Fogle believes that his decision to work as an accountant for the IRS has anything to do with his access to such inner "depths."

American fiction has generally privileged characters who have preferred not to assent to the deadening daily grind of office work—and contemporary culture

boasts no shortage of books and TV shows whose comedy is predicated on the widespread consensus that the white collar office is as absurd and soul-destroying as it is inescapable.²¹ As Mark McGurl's essay on Wallace and institutions indicates, it is difficult for academics to see the claim of meaning for a colorless (everyone who works there is not just white but, of course, pale) bureaucracy like the IRS as anything other than a reactionary maneuver. In a footnote to his essay, however, McGurl concedes a point that would seem to undermine his argument that Wallace is naively affirmitive toward institutions, which is that Wallace distinguishes between different institutions according to their "social ends."²² The IRS processing center in *Pale King* and Ennett House in *Infinite Jest*, he acknowledges, do not play the same role in their respective books as do the MFA program in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way," and Ennett Tennis Academy in *Jest*. The tennis academy and the MFA program both fail spectacularly to provide their individual members with a stable sense of meaning—or, so to speak, with any relief from their fear and loathing of Bad Things. Wallace makes clear that they fail because, as institutions, they tend to reinforce neoliberal values like individualism and competition, along with broader cultural dominants such as cleverness, irony and the conflation of intelligence with a facility for abstract reasoning. These are precisely the cultural values that are called into question by Alcoholics Anonymous as it is portrayed in *Jest*, and then again by the IRS processing center that is the main setting of *Pale King*.

²¹ The newest entry is Nikil Saval's *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace*. (2014) "After such knowledge as 'Office Space' offered," Saval writes, "what forgiveness?"

²² *ibid*, ft. 18

Indeed the effectiveness of *The Pale King*, or of its philosophical instruction, depends upon the reader coming to see that the renunciation of conformism may take many forms, and that the forms of rebellion we learned about as children will almost by definition turn out to have been childish. McGurl, in his assumption that to embrace an institution is ipso facto to privilege conformity over self-determination or freedom is himself, in this sense, being childish. Even the tax collector could escape conformism, said Kierkegaard, because conformism was a matter of inner freedom and not, as we may be tempted to believe in our eternal adolescence, a matter of “self-image.” The moral lesson of Fogle’s monologue is intrinsic to his recognition that his choice to work for the IRS, which had looked to the younger Fogle like it would represent a narrowing of his freedom, led instead to the discovery of a “much realer” self than the one that had “chosen to have nothing matter.” The monologue thus doubles as a demonstration of the point Wallace emphasizes somewhat more dramatically (and maybe sentimentally) in his Kenyon commencement—that even the “tedious and the dronelike” can be understood, if we really *choose* it, “as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars.”²³

A difference between Rand’s and Fogle’s philosophical journeys might be described as follows: Whereas Rand is brought, via a series of interactive dialogues, to see the

²³ Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 91

contingency of what she had been convinced was her “real self” (“the real me”), Fogle is inspired, primarily by the Jesuit’s peroration, to trade a false or a shallow for a real or a deep self. In a sense, then, Fogle ends up where Rand begins. In another sense, Fogle progresses to a state that is unimagined by (the teenage *or* the adult) Rand—call it authenticity, or wholeness, or happiness, or grace.

Precisely the fact that Rand would be unable to imagine it, however, may prompt us to question how Wallace’s own conception of such a state reflects back on what I have described so far as a predominantly negative therapeutic project. Indeed the difficulty—bordering on the impossibility—of narratively dramatizing such states of grace is one of the explicit topics of other portions of *Pale King*;²⁴ moreover, it may be responsible for what Wallace came to see as the almost insurmountable challenge of completing the book.²⁵ For the purposes of this chapter, it’s also relevant that it is the aspiration to positively imagine such a condition that may tip aspects of the book into the very kind of sentimental moralism that Wallace tried so hard elsewhere to avoid.

Cavell implies that Perfectionism is an outgrowth of Wittgenstein’s notion of philosophy as therapy,²⁶ as if the goal of philosophical therapy is the same kind of grace that is vouchsafed to the Kierkegaardian knight of faith. But the difference

²⁴ Most conspicuously in a fragment where an anonymous IRS auditor describes a play he would like to write about life at the IRS. The play, he says, would be a “totally real, true-to-life play. It would be unperformable, that was part of the point.” An auditor would sit at a desk in front of a bare wall. “At first there was a clock behind him, but I cut the clock.” Then: “He sits there longer and longer until the audience gets more and more bored and restless, and finally they start leaving, first just a few and then the whole audience, whispering to each other how boring and terrible the play is. Then, once the audience have all left, the real action of the play can start.” (PK, 106)

²⁵ The auditor/playwright never writes his unperformable play because “I could never decide on the action, if there was any, if it’s a realistic play.” (ibid, 106) The idea might be profitably connected with Kierkegaard’s suggestion, in *Either/Or*, that what’s *really real* (so to speak) cannot be dramatized; it can only be lived.

²⁶ Cf. *Conditions*, 2.

between Rand's and Fogle's stories in *The Pale King* demonstrates what I consider to be a consequential distinction between their methods of instruction, or inspiration. Famously, Wittgenstein maintained that the philosopher should not speak directly about ethics. Accordingly, and in contrast to many of the authors Cavell counts as perfectionist, Wittgenstein does not offer his reader a vision of some better, more authentic or more awake way of living; he does not speak at all (as Thoreau does) of a "whole human life," or of an ethically or spiritually fulfilling life (as Kierkegaard or Augustine might), or of an authentic or a natural one (as do Heidegger and Rousseau). Wittgenstein speaks strictly of a human life, and of the human being's all-too-human desire to go beyond the human, and thus of her need constantly to be called back, as to herself, her humanity (he calls this condition "peace," and it is always temporary).²⁷

Rand's therapeutic progress in *The Pale King* remains provisional; and, for his part, the "sickly" late night attendant is not presented as leading a spiritually superior life to Rand's, only a (slightly) less tortured one. In Fogle's section, however, there is a suggestion that certain lives are not just more "peaceful" than others, but that they may be lived at a higher, or deeper, or more sacred pitch. In the notes arranged after the culmination of *The Pale King's* narrative, probably the most quoted passage in reviews of the book, there lies a vision of a life lived in what might be called the sacramental key:

²⁷ I have stolen this description of Wittgenstein's ambitions from Cavell. My favorite of Cavell's many evocative descriptions of Wittgenstein's project comes in his autobiography, where he calls "the subject sketched in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* the subject perpetually seeking peace, therefore endlessly homeless" (*Little Did I Know*, 100).

It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and, in waves, a boredom like you’ve never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it’s like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert.

We do not know how Wallace would have incorporated this passage into his novel (they appear in the notes next to other notations regarding Drinion), had he finished it; at the same time, the interest it has held for critics would seem to support the suspicion that it encapsulates something that was new, or newly direct, about *The Pale King*. For all his desire to be a “morally passionate, passionately moral” writer in the Dostoevskian mode (CTL, 274), Wallace would seem to have accepted, in the majority of his mature fiction (possibly for different reasons, possibly not),²⁸ Wittgenstein’s prohibition against direct ethical appeals. *The Pale King* marked a new stage in Wallace’s development insofar as it aimed not merely to free his reader from philosophical confusions but also to galvanize her with a quasi-ascetic vision of a life ecstatically lived. If Rand’s section reprises Wallace’s attempt to give his readers some temporary “peace” from their torments, in Fogle’s portion, and elsewhere in the book, there emerges a vision of a mode of experience that would seem to transcend the therapeutic, together with the “untrendy human troubles” it is meant to address, altogether.

²⁸ Commentators have often described Wallace’s trepidation about writing fiction that was too morally or spiritually direct as stemming from his fear of appearing sentimental or moralistic, or of disappointing the sophisticated audience he had built up with his early fiction. Wallace sometimes described the struggle that way himself. But it can also be conceived of as a struggle between conflicting intellectual commitments—on the one hand, Wallace’s commitment to the idea that literature should be morally edifying for a large audience; on the other his commitment to Wittgenstein’s eloquent argument (made especially at the end of the *Tractatus* and in his “Lecture on Ethics”) that ethical and spiritual matters should be approached in language only indirectly, if at all.

If these can be described as the most Perfectionist moments in the book, they are also connected intimately to *The Pale King's* expression of the counterpart to Perfectionism's lofty idealism—namely, its intense despair about our *present* condition. Cavell begins his lectures on Perfectionism with the question of whether Moral Perfectionism is “inherently elitist” with regard to society, granting that “some idea of being true to oneself—or to the humanity in oneself, or of the soul as on a journey (upward or onward) ... requires a refusal of society, perhaps above all of democratic, leveling society.” Cavell argues that Perfectionism in fact “happily consents to democracy” and is even inextricable from the “democratic aspiration.” I do not want here to judge Cavell's case for Perfectionism as a democratic necessity, but I do mean to raise the possibility that the consequences of Perfectionism's elitism can manifest themselves personally (as elitism toward the unimproved self) before they do so socially, or politically (as elitism toward society as it stands). The sense that is voiced repeatedly by Thoreau at the beginning of *Walden*, that Americans are living impoverished or desperate lives, that they “labor under a mistake,” that they are “doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways,”²⁹ finds its counterpart in the portions of *The Pale King* that regard its characters' self-consciousness and narcissism as symptoms of spiritual deficiency and cultural decline. When the critic Jonathan Raban described a “fundamentalist streak” in Wallace's final novel, it was likely these elements of the book's tone and subject matter that he had in mind.³⁰

²⁹ Cf. *Walden*, 4, 5, 6, 8

³⁰ Raban, “Divine Drudgery.” *New York Review of Books*. May, 2011.

Doubtless Cavell would describe any “fundamentalism” in the book as marking a deviation from Perfectionism, not an expression of it. Yet for the person who accepts Fogle’s picture of the sacred within the human (which is also often Perfectionism’s picture), it may be hard to resist the suspicion that he is falling short of his highest, most authentic potential, failing to measure up to his “genius” (in Emerson’s version) or to be who he is (in Nietzsche’s). His sense of failure, or of falling short of authenticity, or sincerity, is the engine that gets Perfectionism going; the danger is just that, *therapeutically* speaking, that same sense of failure is also one of Perfectionism’s likely outcomes.

Likewise, what I would identify as the novel’s aesthetic failure—its failure as a work of narrative drama—can also be connected to Wallace’s ambition to artistically dramatize, not just the ascent out of moral nihilism that is characteristic of perfectionism but, in some cases, the actual achievement of moral or spiritual maturity. In *Either/Or*, a book devoted to delineating the virtues of maturity as against those of what might be called adolescence, the husband who writes the second letter affirms that the “ideal husband ... cannot be represented” by art. This is because while poetry and art are made to represent things in the “process of becoming,” the virtues of such a husband—humility, patience, consistency—are properly achieved only insofar as they are “present constantly.”³¹ *Pale King* is not about marriage, but Fogle’s internal reckoning with his younger self can be usefully compared to the dialogue in *Either/Or* between the seducer and the husband. The conflict, also central to other aspects of Kierkegaard’s philosophy, is between what

³¹ *Either/Or*, 460

the substitute Jesuit implies are the juvenile or theatrical virtues of adolescence, and the more mature virtues that Wallace had been attempting to guide his readers toward at least since the Alcoholics Anonymous portions of *Infinite Jest*. I believe *Pale King* is effective in therapeutically demonstrating, as so much of Wallace's earlier fiction does, the shortcomings of the adolescent outlook. The book's failure to cohere as a whole, however, may be attributable, among other things, to Wallace's desire to go further than that, into the very territory that Kierkegaard had warned should be considered off limits to dramatic art, since it could only be demonstrated, over long and painstaking duration, in life.

Having marked out some of where I take Wallace's final book to have been less effective than his previous mature fiction, I want to end by emphasizing two things that unite Rand's and Fogle's stories, and thus draw attention to the way *Pale King* continues, and indicates the continuing relevance, for Americans living today, of Wallace's philosophically therapeutic project. The first is the book's preoccupation with self-knowledge, and the modes and methods by which it might be achieved. A second is the conjoining of states of philosophical confusion with stages of personal development—with childhood, or adolescence—as if these are not simply biological moments we will grow out of but perennial human possibilities and temptations.

In regard to this second point, I would emphasize again the language that Rand and Fogle use to describe their younger selves. Rand was not just confused

and self-indulgent, she was “going around and around inside the problem instead of really looking at the problem” (496). Fogle was not only dejected and aimless, he was “the worst kind of nihilist—the kind who didn’t even know he was a nihilist” (154). In both cases, the subject had assumed a philosophical position, but without meaning to and without (until much later) recognizing that s/he had assumed one. Rand and Fogle thus both demonstrate how one can “go around and around” in a philosophical problem while all the time thinking that one is addressing it, or (even more troubling) that there is nothing to be addressed. (It is precisely this ignorance that is “worst” about being a nihilist without knowing it.) This is why they furnish such clear-cut examples of Wallace’s attempt to dramatize how philosophical problems manifest themselves in personal lives—even and especially in the personal lives of *non*-philosophers.

A critic may maintain, perhaps condescendingly, that adolescence is a trivial and banal subject, surely a serious obstacle for certain damaged Americans (like Rand and Fogle), and even something that may once have occupied a class of serious philosophers and poets (call them romantics), but, for all that, not particularly worthy of serious investigation today, when we have so many more pressing problems to attend to (like debt for instance—cf. McGurl). A task worthy of Wallace criticism would then be to show, or to demonstrate how Wallace shows, adolescence to be not only *a* philosophical problem but to be *our* philosophical problem. This would be at the same time to show that there could be *no* words “addressed to our condition” which were not addressed to our—extended and debilitating—adolescence.

For *The Pale King*, like Thoreau's *Walden*, posits that a whole culture can persist in a state of immaturity and blindness to itself. Possibly this culture fetishizes the notion of choice at the same time that it "chooses [like Chris Fogle] to have nothing matter" (223). In *The Pale King's* various "civics" chapters, there hums an argument about the truly awe-inspiring childishness of the American people, a people so sheltered and self-deluding that they could demand lower less taxes and more public services at the same time, and not even acknowledge the contradiction. "[Not] infantile so much as adolescent," one of the accountants says of this benighted people, "that is, ambivalent about its twin desire for both authoritarian structure and the end of parental hegemony" (147).

In such an America the pervasiveness of self-help, not to mention books of affirmations, yoga, evangelical preaching, and television makeover shows, might be seen as evidence not of the insignificance or shallowness of the problem of adolescence, but of its depth and urgency. A benefit of Cavell's coining of the term "Perfectionism" is to remind us of, and to give us a vocabulary for talking about, philosophy's perennial commitment to such a problem. The Perfectionist, says Cavell, treats "what we call adolescence" less as a "phase of individual development [than as] a dimension of human existence as such."³² It is simultaneously the dimension in us that desires to be helped and yet does not know what help it needs, that wants to change but is stuck within a perspective from which there appears to be no path forward, or (more likely in what Wallace once called our national

³² *Conditions*, 51-52

“confusion of permissions”) so many paths that it seems impossible to ever choose one.

The ability of this self to transform itself is for the Perfectionist hardly peripheral to philosophy; it is rather something like philosophy’s guiding ambition, though one from which it is easily and almost systematically distracted. To remain faithful to it may demand, among other things, an embrace of formal experimentation, as well as the courage to cross disciplinary boundaries into areas more usually reserved for literature, or religion, or therapy, even if that means risking one’s thought being confused with what Cavell calls “debased perfectionisms”³³—those omnipresent lists of instructions attempting to tell the self, as from the outside, and dogmatically, how it ought to improve. And perhaps this is the real problem with most self-proclaimed self-help: not that it is so often unhelpful (what would be the harm in that?), but that it can so easily become programmatic, even dangerous in its self-certainty.

The virtue of philosophy as Perfectionism, or as therapy, would then lie in its ability to answer the question of how reading (or culture) may benefit the self without tyrannizing or sentimentalizing it. If Pale King demonstrates the potential pitfalls of this approach, itself falling at times into precisely the trap of sentimentality, at its best it still participates in a tradition of literature that does not

³³ *Conditions*, 16.

offer answers so much as it prompts or “primes”³⁴ its readers to ask themselves certain kinds of questions.

The Pale King's narrative threads almost all coalesce into stories of conversion or transformation, with its narrators recounting their paths from a self-incurred immaturity to something resembling enlightenment, maturity, or wisdom. That maturity *requires* wisdom, or enlightenment—rather than just natural growth, or experience—may be described as the discovery that unites Rand’s and Fogle’s narratives, just as it constitutes a recurring motif in philosophy from Plato to Kierkegaard to Wittgenstein to Cavell. The reader may ignore or condescend to such a discovery but, if the Wallace of *The Pale King* is to be believed, such tactics will only postpone her from having to contend with it.

³⁴ The word surfaces several times in *The Pale King*, usually in the context of a character about to make a major change in her life. “Primed” is also “one of the IRS words for putting Examiners in a state where they pay maximum attention to returns” (*PK*, 540).

Conclusion

In Heaven and Earth Some Reflections on Literature and Philosophy

When I arrived at graduate school in 2007, it was with the intention of studying what I had described in my application as the “intersection between literature and philosophy.” Behind this intention lay something like the following thought: the best literature is not just “literary”; it involves ideas, and the best philosophy is not just logical; it employs literary tropes and often a creative use of language or rhetoric. As a critic or scholar, I thought, I could help show how reading philosophy as literature and literature as philosophy would illuminate the meanings of both. Beneath this thought, I can now see, lay another one: I presumed that, when properly illuminated, it would be revealed that the greatest literature and the most convincing philosophy were or could be part of the same, or at least a complementary, intellectual and/or ethical project.

Besides for many of my classmates at my graduate program, the Committee on Social Thought, there were many professional academics, in both English and Philosophy departments, already working at this “intersection.” But this did not mean I was able to find unanimity, or even rudimentary agreement, about what it meant to study literature philosophically or vice versa. The “field” seemed to be held together less by a common mission than by a set of complaints against those who misunderstood the mission. On the one side, said the philosophers, there were literary theorists who peppered their criticism with shallow bursts of “theory,” often ignorant of the context or intricacy of the ideas they proclaimed were supported or challenged by imaginative texts. On the other side,

said those concerned for the autonomy of literature, were the philosophers who threatened to reduce fictional narratives to a series of examples for illustrating their argumentative theses.

There seemed to me to be ways of avoiding these traps, many of them modeled admirably by professors in my graduate program, and by some of the philosophical literary criticism they assigned us to read. As I've attempted to lay out in this dissertation, one of the helpful ways I've found to read literature philosophically is to conceive of it as a form of philosophical or moral therapy, in the vein developed by Iris Murdoch, Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty and Robert Pippin, among others. In one way or another, I think, all of these philosophers have attempted to reproduce or excavate the thinking behind imaginative narrative works without thereby reducing them to a disguised form of argumentative philosophy. Specifically, they have conceived of distinctive ways for literature to contribute to our self-knowledge or to our social consciousness—that is, for it to tell us things we do not already know, and possibly could not know, were we to remain stranded with only academic philosophy's customary methods and tools.

This dissertation has been an attempt to take what I learned from these figures, all of whom enlarged my sense of possibility regarding the intersection between philosophy and literature, and apply it to a contemporary American fiction writer, David Foster Wallace. Wallace, I believe, represents a particularly rewarding subject for this kind of approach; I have even suggested that the approach is essential to understanding the unity, depth, and ongoing relevance of his project.

As opposed to summarizing yet again my conclusions about the philosophical method and aspiration of Wallace's fiction, however, I want in this conclusion to instead focus on what I now take to be a flaw in the assumption with which I began graduate study, that there exists a fruitful and important intersection between philosophy and literature. To adequately treat the topics I'm going to raise here would take a whole other dissertation, probably focused around a very different kind of writer from Wallace. Still, in the spirit of therapeutic self-examination that I've tried to promote in this dissertation, I hope it will be worthwhile to raise the question, even if briefly, of whether there really exists an "intersection" where literature and philosophy can be said to engage in a complementary activity, as I had initially supposed.

As I mentioned in chapter four, Stanley Cavell seeks in his work on perfectionism to group together various works the study of which are often divided into different academic disciplines, according to his intuition that these works all seek to engage their audience in a "journey of ascent."¹ Two of the books he groups together in his attempt to say what he means by perfectionism are Plato's *Republic* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.² Given that these two archetypal works of Western culture take virtually as their point of departure an explicit exclusion of the other—that is, of art (in Plato's case), and of philosophy (in Shakespeare's), it is worth asking how convincing Cavell's case is for assimilating them to a common project. I take the answer to be relevant to the question of whether, or how,

¹ Cf. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 7

² *ibid*, p. 5

Cavell really responds to his own earlier question, in *The Claim of Reason*, of whether philosophy can “know itself” once it allows art back into its vision of the just city.

It is of course in the *Republic* that Plato articulates what is usually taken to be philosophy’s vision of the just city, and it is also there that he refers to the “long quarrel” between literature and philosophy—and asks, after banishing the uncensored poets from his ideal city, for an “apology” for tragic poetry. There are a surprising amount of commentators, especially among those who study literature, who have found reasons not to take Plato’s banishment of the poets seriously. Some have implied that Plato had merely been talking about mass “entertainment,” like reality TV, as opposed to what we think of as great literature³—an opinion contradicted bluntly by the discussion in Book ten of how the tragic poets affect “even the best of us.” Others have seemed to imply that Plato simply lacked the poetic temperament (an assertion contradicted by both his life story and his own literary talents, among other things) or that he had missed something obvious about the great good of tragedy (what this thing is is rarely produced coherently). But the question I was asked about the *Republic* for my Fundamentals exam (the test that students in my program take before moving on to the dissertation phase of their degree) expresses a more consequential misunderstanding about the basis for Plato’s banishment of the poets—one repeated so often it has become a common punch line seemingly even among many who have never read the *Republic*. The question ran as follows: Plato himself uses images throughout the *Republic*—the allegory of the cave, the ship

³ Cf. Miles Burnyeat’s “Art and Mimesis in Plato’s Republic” for one prominent example of this approach.

metaphor—and even compares philosopher-kings to painters: How could he be against poets or artists when he is so dependent on their methods?⁴

The question is prompted mostly by the discussion of art in Books two and three of the *Republic*, where Plato focuses on the inherent dangers of imitation or mimesis. A careful reading even just of these books, I believe, reveals that the question lacks a strong basis in the text; nevertheless, it has always seemed to me that, even if one was under the impression from the earlier books that Plato's case against the artists rested primarily on a suspicion of their tools, this impression could not survive the more comprehensive discussion of art in Book ten, when Socrates returns to the topic explicitly to articulate a much deeper charge against the "image makers." In Book ten, Plato does repeat some of the charges that he had leveled against the activity of imitation in the earlier books, but there it arises explicitly as a prelude to the broader charge that the poets do not know *why* they use images and thus cannot be trusted to wield them. When he says that tragic poets are imitators in the "highest possible degree," Socrates does not mean that they are the most skilled at using images but that their use of images answers not to the logic of the good (that is, the logic of philosophy), but rather to the logic of the marketplace: i.e. what is popular or pleasing to their audience.⁵ The implicit distinction being drawn with philosophers is not based on the fact that the image makers employ imitation and other imaginative tropes but that they "play" with these powerful rhetorical tools without knowing what they are for. Hence those "praisers of Homer who say that this poet

⁴ I most recently came across the assumption behind this question—that Plato's banishment of the poets is based on his distrust of their methods—in a recent article for the *London Review of Books* by the prominent American poet Ben Lerner. Cf "Poets are liars not because, as Socrates said, they can fool us with the power of their imitations..." (Ben Lerner, "On Disliking Poetry," LRB, 6/18/15: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n12/ben-lerner/diary>)

⁵ cf. "As it seems, whatever looks to be fair to the many who don't know anything—that he will imitate." (602b)

educated Greece” are mistaken: Homer could not have educated Greece because his poetry prioritizes “pleasure and pain” over “that argument which in each instance is best in the opinion of the community.”⁶ According to this logic, philosophers like Plato are the *only* ones who should be allowed to use images, since they are precisely the ones who can discipline them to serve the good—or what the community has decided through dialectic and dialogue is the good.

Based on Book ten, then, there is no problem in seeing why Plato would have recourse to images within the course of the *Republic*; indeed the real burden of proof is shifted to the person who wants to argue that a non-philosopher should be allowed to freely practice imitation. That task appears to be twofold. First, one would have to show how a work of art, whether fiction, poetry, theater, film or painting, contributes to the good in a manner that would be acceptable to Plato.⁷ Second, one has to show why it is necessary that this contribution comes distinctively in the form that it does—that is, of verse, or prose, or drama. (In other words, one has to show why the art that is acceptable to philosophy is not itself merely another form of philosophy.)

The first attempt to thread the needle and satisfy both criteria is also the most famous. In Aristotle’s account of catharsis, the tragic poets perform a distinctive function within the just city by providing citizens with a safe space to purge their unruly desires, thereby making them more rational and virtuous citizens outside of the theater. Aristotle’s way of satisfying these two criteria has set the agenda for subsequent responses to the Platonic challenge to art’s virtue or civic usefulness. The idea of catharsis was central to the early Freud’s treatment of art—and it suffuses the

⁶ 607a

⁷ The way Plato puts it is that he is looking for an “argument showing that [poetry directed to pleasure and imitation] should be in a city with good laws.” (*Republic* 607c)

psychoanalytic vocabulary that seems almost natural to us today when we speak about art's positive therapeutic potential. Whether or not they explicitly reference Freud or Aristotle, both academic and popular commentators on film, literature, and art today often assume that to praise a work of art—even or perhaps especially a superficially “disturbing” work of art—is to say how it can help us “come to terms with,” “address,” “identify,” “expose,” or “acknowledge” aspects of our experience that are, so this argument goes, holding us back from leading a happier or more morally just social and personal life.⁸

The theory of catharsis has always seemed dubious to me on the grounds of my own experience. I mean that art has functioned in my own life much more as Plato describes it—by reinforcing, strengthening or causing me to idealize whatever desires the skilled artist manages to convey through his artwork, including desires that I do not judge to be virtuous or productive—than, as Aristotle describes it, by purging me of them. That is one reason why I was more attracted to the notion, gestured toward by Wittgenstein but developed most coherently by Cavell and Pippin (drawing on Freud and Hegel, respectively), of great art and literature as helping us less to feel than to *see* something—something it would be difficult for us to see in any other way. The idea of literary-philosophical therapy that I have traced out in this dissertation shares with Aristotle's theory of catharsis, however, an acceptance of the *framework* for the evaluation of art that had been laid down by Plato. What I mean by this is that both catharsis and the idea of

⁸ I leave “empathy” off this list only because it was not a large part of Aristotle's or Freud's conception of art's power. Probably this was because it was not a large part of their conception of what made for a virtuous citizen or a healthy psyche. In a society where “social justice” has become a ubiquitous rallying cry, however, it is no accident that art's therapeutic power is so often described today in terms of its ability to make us see through the eyes of those less fortunate or different from ourselves.

literature as a form of philosophical therapy are ways of “saving” art for philosophy. Having accepted Plato’s picture of the soul, and of the just city, they then assert that a given artist, read or interpreted in the right way, actually does contribute to, fortify, or encourage the development of our (broadly speaking) capacities for rationality, moral or historical progress, personal growth, etc.

Toward the end of my Fundamentals essay, I mentioned Tolstoy and the filmmaker Terrence Malick as examples of “artists” whose art can be interpreted as manifesting such a fundamentally Platonic impulse and aim, encouraging their audiences to undergo that “journey of ascent” that Cavell associates with perfectionism. But I put the word “artists” in quotation marks here as I did there because I also meant toward the end of that paper to indicate that perhaps we are simply mistaken to think of such figures as artists, as opposed to philosophers who employ images, like Plato (or, later, Rousseau), to turn their audience toward their vision of the good. From Plato’s perspective, after all, it was precisely the mark of one who truly understood what images were for that she would not conceive of herself as an image-maker. An interesting and not always articulated byproduct of this dynamic is that it leaves open the possibility that there may be those we mistake for “image-makers,” because they present their thought in forms we have become accustomed to calling artworks (e.g. films or novels), but who in the Platonic sense are really philosophers, with an understanding of the power and importance of images for the education of their audience.⁹

In pointing out the affinity of Wallace’s negative therapeutic project with Wittgenstein’s, I have meant to do more than to cement the centrality of philosophical thinking to Wallace’s fiction; I have wanted to suggest a deep continuity between what

⁹ Also vice versa: perhaps Nietzsche, for instance, is an artist who only *looks* like a philosopher.

Wittgenstein was aiming at in the *Philosophical Investigations* and what Wallace was hoping to achieve in such works as *Infinite Jest* and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. For me, as I mentioned in chapter one, the question of whether Wallace would be allowed into Plato's philosophical republic cannot be separated from the question of whether Wittgenstein would be allowed in. (Just to make sure my cards are on the table: I think they would both be allowed in.)

I do not believe Wallace to be unique in his aspiration to use literary means for philosophical ends, but I also do not wish to imply that everyone we recognize as a great artist is actually a disguised Platonist or Wittgensteinian. In fact, thinking of writers like Wallace or Tolstoy in such a way as I have outlined here may help reveal a deep but often unexamined fault line within what we are accustomed to calling the arts between those who are fundamentally devoted to the use of images for philosophical ends, and those who appear to be doing something else.

In large part my thinking about this “something else” has been prompted and shaped by the courses I took, during the second half of my graduate program, with Irad Kimhi.¹⁰ In contrast to other classes I had taken on art and philosophy in graduate school, which were usually directed toward finding ways in which the two disciplines could complement one another, the classes I took with Professor Kimhi were focused on the irreducible differences between art and philosophy—not only as forms of communication but also as

¹⁰ What follows should not be taken as any kind of definitive statement on Professor Kimhi's teaching: I do not want to speak for him and it is likely that he would disagree with or qualify much of what I am about to say.

ways of knowing and being. Essentially, Professor Kimhi began from Plato's indication (though without taking up the hierarchy that went with it) in Book ten that the most consequential difference between art and philosophy hinged not on their relationship to imitation or dialectic, but rather on a teleological difference. Professor Kimhi liked to begin classes by drawing a picture of Plato's cave on the white board. Then he would draw two lines—the line leading out of the cave was meant to describe the trajectory of the philosophy. The line leading back or down, deeper into the cave, was art.

Perhaps the most important thing that I took from my several courses with Professor Kimhi was the idea that, if one wanted a truly “artistic” response to Plato's challenge to the poets, it was futile (if sometimes instructively so) to look to other philosophers (e.g. Aristotle, Arendt, Heidegger) or to artists who seem to manifest philosophical ambitions (e.g. Tolstoy, Wallace). Toward the end of a memorable class called “Unhappiness,” it seemed to me that Professor Kimhi came close to suggesting that the greatest or most essentially “artistic” response to Plato comes in fact in the form of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The passage in the play that he emphasized came early on in Act 1, just after Hamlet and Horatio have had their first encounter with the ghost. Horatio, a philosophy student who is visiting from Wittenberg, describes the encounter as “wondrous strange.” “And therefore as stranger give it welcome,” Hamlet responds, for, he continues, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”¹¹

Hamlet is talking explicitly about the ghost, but Professor Kimhi interpreted the line as making a larger claim—about the “more” that would always remain “strange” to philosophy and yet was central to both the subject matter and the perspective of the arts.

¹¹ *Hamlet*, 1.5.163-66

This “more” included aspects of human experience such as love, family, dreams, ghosts, sensuality and, as the name and description of our course indicated, unhappiness. Though I’m sure this was not an original realization, it occurred to me for the first time, in Professor Kimhi’s class, that the *Republic* might conclude with a banishment of the tragic poets not merely because Plato had failed to make his full case against them in the earlier books, but also because the tragic poets threatened to reintroduce into society, not just poetry, but *through* poetry so many of the other aspects of human experience (like the family) that Plato had sought in the rest of the dialogue to discipline or purge. The *Republic* might thus be read as *organized* to exclude, as opposed to being incidentally opposed to, the “more” of art.

If this were the case, then it would be no accident that any attempt to satisfy Plato’s call for an apology for poetry would necessitate either turning the artists into philosophers who simply used images—like Plato did—to teach their audience about the good, or making the artists into the handmaidens of the philosophers, as has so often been done by even the most sensitive contemporary philosophers and is arguably the method embraced by Aristotle. Perhaps the most subtle thing Plato does in the *Republic* with regard to art is to undermine the idea that the artists might have, like the philosophers, a characteristic subject matter or sphere of authority. The insinuation is that, either they find a way to make their art amenable to philosophy, or they simply wallow in a confusion that is all the more dangerous due to the potential power of their tools. This was what was being challenged, at least as I interpreted Professor Kimhi’s interpretation of the case, by Shakespeare.

Hamlet has often been referred to as a philosophical or a political drama; and many philosophers, Hegel, Freud, and Cavell among them, have attempted to show how the play can be read as directing its readers toward philosophical ends. As I alluded to in chapter four, Cavell conceives of Shakespeare working here as elsewhere in the perfectionist tradition—a tradition he believes spans the distance usually posited between philosophers and artists, showing them all to be engaged in an activity whose most powerful image is provided by Plato’s allegory of the cave. As is obvious from what I have said above, Kimhi’s emphasis on Hamlet’s “more” is meant precisely to cast doubt on the suggestion that we could or should span that distance in the way Cavell recommends. This is not to say that there can never be any benefit to reading Shakespeare’s tragedies philosophically, as Cavell has often done productively. It does mean that the philosophical critic, in accepting Plato’s framework regarding the direction (up, out of the cave) and ultimate ambition (happiness, justice, or flourishing) of worthwhile thinking, has always already committed himself to reading a work of tragic art on terms other than those it might set for itself. I mean that he begins by asking, as Cavell often does in his writing on Shakespeare, “What is the good of such a tragedy?”¹²

In the case of *Hamlet*, Cavell has an answer: the play, he says, is about the “work of mourning.” Paraphrasing Melanie Klein, he describes such work as being characterized by “the severing of investment, the detaching of one’s interests, strand by strand, memory by memory, from their binding with an object that has passed, burying the dead.” But, Cavell adds—rather conspicuously considering the play under discussion—“the condition of this work is that you *want* to live.”¹³ *Hamlet*, this reading

¹² Cavell, “The Political and the Psychological,” in *Disowning Knowledge*, 162

¹³ “Hamlet’s Burden of Proof,” in *Disowning Knowledge*, 186

tells us, shows us how to live through our grief. But does it? I think that this is the point where Cavell seems not himself to consider a possibility that would appear obvious to anyone who has not already decided that there is a (philosophically recognizable) “good” to *Hamlet*: that Hamlet, the character, may *not* want to live; and that Shakespeare, his creator, may not think he *ought* to want to.

This is not the place for a full reading of *Hamlet*, or of Cavell’s interpretation of it. I would only point to an interpretation of the play that I find more convincing and more faithful to the play’s spirit than Cavell’s, and which rejects the notion of *Hamlet* as offering a therapeutic benefit in any form. In Harold Bloom’s reading, which to some extent follows Nietzsche’s, it is not Hamlet’s grief but his “insight into the horrible truth” about the world that forestalls him from taking action. Moreover, Bloom’s reading brings attention to the fact that, if Shakespeare had wanted to help purge us of our grief, or show us some way to free ourselves from it, he chose a very strange ambassador to do so. The prince’s melancholy may appear partial and extreme in Act I, but the mature Hamlet of Act V does not so much overcome that grief as he learns to generalize it; the way Bloom puts it is that the Hamlet of Act V has grown “sorrier for mankind than he is for himself.”¹⁴ If Socrates may be thought of as the Western exemplar for philosophical optimism—the view according to which death is a small thing, not even worth our fear—then Hamlet would seem to remind us of our ceaseless attraction to annihilation; our desire, which Freud also noted, to descend.

This might seem a strange point to be making at the end of a dissertation that has made the case for a philosophically therapeutic literary criticism. For me, though, to pick

¹⁴ In a direct response to Cavell and many others, Bloom also chides commentators for making “too much” of Hamlet’s mourning. (*Poem Unlimited*, 131)

up on something at the end of chapter one, the point is helpful in distinguishing which works are appropriate for this form of criticism, and which will be more rewarding of a different kind of engagement. Wallace's greatest work of fiction, *Infinite Jest*, begins with a protagonist, Hal, whose blend of brilliance and existential angst is meant to remind readers of the melancholy prince, but it is precisely the undermining of Hal's authority, and even of our interest in him as readers, as the novel unfolds, that I believe marks the novel as a work with a philosophical ambition in the Platonic sense. As I hope I've shown in this dissertation, I think it a worthwhile question to ask what the "good" is of *Infinite Jest*. I am less sure than I once was that such a question can be profitably asked of *Hamlet*, a play that seems only to confirm the authority and attractiveness of its protagonist's "pragmatic nihilism" (as Bloom calls it).

Therapy, philosophical or otherwise, depends on the idea not only that we want to live, but also that we want some of the things that the philosophers have always held to adhere to a good life: happiness, justice, or (as in Wittgenstein) "peace." Plato's rhetorical achievement in the *Republic* and elsewhere is to make it look as if, if the tragic poets do not accept that this is what people want, it is because they are separated from true knowledge, live in confusion, or "keep company" with the lower, irrational parts of the soul. I think that Wallace more or less reproduced this logic in his fiction: it is why he sought to show through his characters how what we often perceive as an existential lack is in fact attributable to confusion, philosophical and otherwise. To see this is, I think, to see what was of value about Wallace as a thinker at the same time as it is to recognize the limitations of his value from a point of view that we might properly call artistic. For it may be reasonable (if risky) to presume, based on what we now know of his life and

death, that Wallace chose not to convey everything he knew in his fiction: for instance, that there are things on heaven and earth that we want even more than we want happiness.

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