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PhD Thesis

Literature Beyond Solipsism: Self-Consciousness, Empathy and the Other in the Short Fiction of David Foster Wallace

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Doctoral Programme in Advanced English Studies: Linguistics, Literature & Culture

PHD THESIS

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DOCTORAL PROGRAMME IN ADVANCED ENGLISH STUDIES: LINGUISTICS, LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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Resumo de Tese de doutoramento

Sergio López Sande | Literature beyond Solipsism: Self-Consciousness, Empathy and the Other in the Short Fiction of David Foster Wallace

O esforzo académico que nos ocupa é en gran parte un exercicio de diagnóstico que nace da tensa relación de David Foster Wallace co ethos do posmodernismo. Tamén aspira a contribuír ao crecente campo dos estudos de David Foster Wallace, que desde hai tempo desatendeu o debido exame da idiosincrasia xenérica da súa ficción breve. A literatura contemporánea sobre a obra de Wallace adoita dar a súa posición por descontada, e gran parte desta pasou a presentar consideracións sobre cuestións intertextuais e interdisciplinares relacionadas coa súa produción. A relevancia desta interdisciplinariedade é moi evidente na obra de Wallace, sendo as referencias filosóficas omnipresentes, e servindo estas como fundamentos para gran parte do desenvolvemento temático da súa prosa. Así mesmo, destacan a súa preocupación pola estrutura social, a política e a teoría literaria que impregnan a totalidade do seu enfoque como escritor.

A posición de Wallace a este respecto suscita a seguinte pregunta: a que xeito de construción ética pretendía coa súa escrita? Ou, o que é o mesmo: que conxunto de valores subxace na súa empresa estética, que lle confire propósito á súa axenda como autor? Ademais, pódese preguntar como esta ambición aberta de "salvar" aos lectores da falta de boa fe a través do que el cualificou de "boa escritura" podería relacionarse con outro dos seus desexos explícitos: a súa ben documentada intención de facer uso das técnicas posmodernas dun xeito que podería resultar máis significativo que o experimentalismo emocionalmente oco que asociaba coa xeración anterior de escritores. Se o problema do posmodernismo de primeira xeración é, supostamente, a súa vacuidade, a súa incapacidade para forxar conexión transformadora e producir historias impulsadas por principios duradeiros que poden gobernar a vida ética das persoas, entón como é que unha cultura que aínda se define en gran medida a través dos principios posmodernistas pode liberarse, aínda que sexa temporalmente, do xugo dunha superestrutura que condiciona as potencialidades da recepción ficcional?

Estas preguntas relaciónanse co traballo de David Foster Wallace en dous niveis primarios. O primeiro, e quizais o máis densamente examinado no campo, é o contido: as crises do eu, a súa metafísica e a súa epistemoloxía, están no centro das preocupacións filosóficas que impregnan temáticamente a obra de Wallace. Preguntas como se é posible que unha persoa dea unha conta fiel de si mesma, coñeza verdadeiramente a outras persoas, fuxa das intuicións solipsistas da mente e forxe vínculos interpersoais incluso se estes están ameazados por sospeitas, reaparecen ao longo da súa produción literaria, e adoitan facelo como as vértebras que articulan o propósito das súas historias. Nun segundo nivel, porén, unha crise formal e contextual de significado envolve tamén a súa produción, fundada na súa propia aproximación á literatura como forma, na súa comprensión das súas potencialidades, e no legado do pensamento posmoderno que chegaría a impregnar o seu achegamento á literatura, a linguaxe (literaria), a comunicación, e o papel do autor para coa experiencia intersubxectiva e terapéutica que (cría Wallace) podería derivarse da lectura de ficción. A aproximación á escritura de ficción de Wallace é definida de xeito recorrente pola ameaza do fracaso; e, máis

particularmente, o seu propio fracaso para crer, certificar e demostrar funcionalmente a capacidade da literatura para transmitir de forma eficaz calquera visión sobre a condición humana, e especialmente, unha visión que puidese recuperar unha posición discursiva estable máis aló de todas as indeterminacións do posmodernismo.

A resistencia de Wallace á desconexión e á anhedonia, e o seu rexeitamento evidente de ambas a nivel extraliterario, testemuñan a súa perenne crenza de que as ficcións que recorrían ao diagnóstico social a través da estase simplemente non serían suficientes para ofrecer aos lectores o que el chamou como "algo que vale a pena ter". Para pechar a miña discusión sobre como a subxectividade informou este desexo aberto de literatura redentora, recurro a un breve exame do binario real/ficcional, cuxa interrogación contribúe aínda máis, argumento, ás inseguridades poiéticas de Wallace sobre a capacidade da literatura para "dar". Abordo este problema desde dous ángulos diferentes: o da semántica do mundo posible, un campo cuxas re-avaliacións epistemolóxicas do valor verdade e da ontoloxía en contextos de ficción permiten a desxerarquización da relación entre ambos; e a da re-presentación lingüística, examinando como os traballos críticos tras a chegada do estruturalismo e do posestruturalismo acentuaron paulatinamente a actitude académica sospeitosa cara á mímese e á referencia mentres se desangraban na vida intelectual posmodernista. Neste sentido, considero que a falla de Wallace para dar conta da conexión intersubxectiva é fundamental para o seu esforzo estético. Este fracaso, afirmo, dá lugar a unha voz literaria cuxo intento de redención se fundamenta fundamentalmente no xesto sincero e sen pechar cara a un outro lector en cuxas mans está a elección de someterse á crenza na humanidade do texto.

Unha segunda dimensión destacada deste traballo, á que lle dediquei o capítulo 2 desta tese, busca a integración da estética do relato, xénero literario ligado a miúdo a diversas problemáticas relacionadas coa idea de peche, na discusión en curso sobre a forma, os temas e o "propósito" detrás da literatura de Wallace. A medida que os suxeitos buscan un outro na súa ficción breve, e fano de xeito recorrente apuntando metaficcionalmente cara ao mundo máis aló do textual, están a explotar as posibilidades do conto dun xeito endémico no xénero e que chega a funcionar só en vistas ao horizonte informacional sustentando a recepción do mesmo. De feito, as conceptualizacións do relato curto despois do modernismo rendiron durante moito tempo algunha forma de homenaxe a dúas ideas centrais: a "unidade de efecto" fundacional de Edgar Allan Poe e o desenvolvemento dunha preocupación predominante pola teleoloxía pola cal os contos se despregan como un traballo entorno á revelación. Estes momentos de iluminación epifánica, no seo da alta praxe modernista, son codependentes da subxectividade: non hai epifanía sen suxeito; e non hai igualmente ningún suxeito que poida reter as altas epifanías do modernismo e permanecer inalterado como individuo narrativo.

O traballo sobre David Foster Wallace como escritor de relatos foi escaso e só raramente se preocupou de como as posibilidades da historia breve xogaron un papel na configuración da súa estética literaria. Por moito que abundan os traballos sobre Wallace e os problemas da intersubxectividade, raramente é a súa curta ficción a que se utiliza para fundamentar calquera afirmación sobre o seu proxecto literario en xeral. O propio conxunto de ideas que adoitan asociarse coa brevidade (brevidade, condensación, compresión, enfoque ou expectativa cumprida, por citar só algunhas) está lonxe das

nocións ás que un se vería tentado a recorrer para tentar definir a estética da obra literaria de Wallace, cando non se descartan como totalmente antonímicas. De feito, raramente hai unha estrutura rastrexable subxacente aos seus textos. Podería ata afirmarse que a prosa de Wallace, definida pola súa característica ausencia de dirección, non é máis que un reflexo dos temas da súa ficción, que se perde na linguaxe, no pensamento e na percepción dos achegados aos seus personaxes ata tal punto que ofrece aos lectores exercicios lingüísticos a miúdo insatisfactorios.

A través dun exame dos patróns intrínsecamente posmodernistas de reapropiación da epifanía modernista, argumentase que as historias curtas contemporáneas se afastan da súa estética precisamente debido ás actitudes cambiantes dos posmodernistas cara á autoridade. En consecuencia, propoño un enfoque tripartito da epifanía posmodernista, ofrecendo unha delimitación tentativa de tres modos de reestruturar a revelación. Fágoo coa esperanza de que isto poida contribuír á inscrición de Wallace nunha tradición de relatos curtos en curso moi en débeda cos desenvolvementos do século XX relativos ás potencialidades teleolóxicas da ficción breve. Para iso, propoño a clasificación das relacións tipicamente posmodernas coa epifanía que segue: (a) a epifanía da forma, preocupada pola metaficcionalidade, ten como obxectivo revelacións máis aló do texto e vai dirixida á propia textualidade, coa esperanza de desencadear a iluminación no nivel do lectorado; (b) a epifanía da ausencia, baseada nunha ausencia-presenza derridiana, está contida en historias que fan da falta dunha revelación esperada, deixada entrever polo xogo de expectativa dos lectores, unha parte activa do seu desenvolvemento estrutural; e (c) a epifanía escura, que torce a iluminación cara a dentro para convertila nunha fonte de ruína, dor psíquica ou desconexión comunitaria para o suxeito.

Prevese que estes modelos se solapen e informen as apropiacións posmodernas da epifanía dunha infinidade de formas. A epifanía escura, con todo, é fundamental para o proxecto literario de Wallace, e sitúase no centro de gran parte da súa ficción curta. Este non é un feito illado no que se refire á presente disertación, xa que está intimamente ligado aos seus medos temáticos como imbricados na suxeitividade: a ameaza do solipsismo emocional; a ansiedade asociada á alienación do outro sospeitoso; e a tendencia actual na caracterización do autor que determina que a hiperracionalidade e a finura lingüística poden non levar ao melloramento persoal, senón a unha certeza que condena ao individuo ao ostracismo psíquico perpetuo. Así, o tratamento que Wallace fai da epifanía escura e a súa prevalencia nos seus contos, levando a bucles interminables definidos polo exceso dos exercicios académicos, é fundamental para comprender as súas ambicións literarias en xeral. Isto débese a que, en parte a través da súa explotación, desprega a retórica do exceso dun xeito dobre: diagnostica o problema cunha afectación sincera herdada do inicio da posmodernidade e, ao mesmo tempo, explota a codificación do relato como xénero que se constrúe cara a un sentido de finalidade para inmobilizar o carácter dentro dun "eu saturado", propiciando unha resposta empática máis aló do textual a través da cal transcender os imperativos anhedónicos que rexen sobre a forma posmodernista.

Por último, o capítulo 3 busca a integración do afecto na análise precedente dos contos de Wallace, e pretende facelo mediante o estudo do que se mantén como unha excepción significativa á tendencia anterior na produción de ficción breve do mesmo: o relato "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" (2004). Por moito que se poida argumentar para exemplificar unha tendencia moi destacada en Wallace, que presenta un personaxe

principal cuxa expresión lingüística recherché o afasta da sinceridade e crudeza da vida emocional fóra del, tamén o presenta como un eu que é moi diferente dos demais personaxes que cumpren esta condición. O ton excesivamente analítico non leva a ningunha confesión ansiosa pola súa parte, non institúe un bucle derivado da epifanía escura e non promete un colapso característico á moda do famoso Hal Incadenza de *Infinite Jest*. Este cambio argumentase para exemplificar un enfoque diferente do desexo diagnóstico na ficción curta tardía de Wallace, chamando a atención sobre o tratado de Richard Rorty, *Philosophy in the Mirror of Nature* (1979), como unha forma de ironizar a posibilidade de que a desafección poida ser só o produto da convicción autoimposta do posmodernismo de que a conexión sen carga é antonímica coas súas prácticas culturais.

Polo tanto, móstrase que a desafección segue sendo a miúdo central nos contos de Wallace, que se ten argumentado que simbolizan un afastamento parcial do posmodernismo de primeira xeración. Cando aparece a desafección, non o fai como produto do desinterese do autor pola honestidade emocional, senón como unha especie de punto morto, provocado polo texto e os seus personaxes a medida que se escriben engulidos polas inclinacións do posmodernismo e, ao ser desbordados así, denúncianse as carencias desas mesmas inclinacións. De feito, a miña análise final da "Philosophhy and the Mirror of Nature" argumenta que o descontento de Wallace adquire unha nova forma nesta obra tardía: a través de reverenciar a falta de afecto e someterse a ela por completo, a estrañeza da autorreferencialidade e interioridade do posmodernismo, ao converterse en influente. patróns para o modo de estar-no-mundo do suxeito, móstrase para que o lector emita un xuízo. A natureza deste xuízo é, na verdadeira moda posmoderna, indeterminada. A intencionalidade nos textos é inútil, mesmo naqueles nos que os insertados metaficcionais (os "Wallaces" ficticios que poboan algunhas das súas ficcións) intentan falar directamente dos seus obxectivos. A crenza ponse a proba debido aos supostos gobernantes dun movemento posmodernista que segue sendo o contexto ao que Wallace e a súa obra permanecen encadeados ata hoxe.

Moita literatura sobre Wallace propúxose examinar o seu endebedamento cos legados dos patriarcas posmodernistas anteriores a el; esta tese, pola súa banda, busca un afastamento das tendencias que acompañaron a conceptualización da posmodernidade tardía. Os traballos futuros sobre Wallace inevitablemente seguirán explicando as moitas presenzas fantasmagóricas que fixo explícitas na súa literatura, pero a medida que o século XXI chega á madurez, quizais estea comezando un momento no que o legado de Wallace pode comezar a disociarse lixeiramente da evocación da grandeza etérea do experimentalismo de mediados do século XX para basearse, máis ben, no que o propio Wallace intentou lograr. Pois aínda no fracaso, e mesmo no medio dunha desconexión epifánica que parece demasiado nefasta para que o suxeito a aguante, a súa escrita da posmodernidade tardía segue impulsada por unha vontade incesante de achegarse á realidade do outro. E esa vontade de existir exteriormente, exposto á verdade e ao engano dunha subxectividade máis aló da comprensión intelectual, ben podería converterse na máis conmovedora, na que máis cambiou de paradigma, de todas as contribucións imaxinables ao posmodernismo literario.

É a esta loita contra a desafección que os escritos académicos sobre Wallace dirixiron recorrentemente as súas investigacións. O seu descontento cos defectos e fracasos do posmodernismo de primeira xeración mantívose durante moito tempo como

eixes definitorios que informan a análise da súa ficción. Porén, pouco traballo ata a data buscou o exame minucioso da súa ficción breve á luz desta desafección, e aínda máis rara é a consideración formal do xénero en relación coa súa loita no posmoderno e, poderíase argumentar, contra o posmoderno. Esta disertación espera arroxar luz sobre como estes asuntos aínda poden resultar fructíferos para o estudo de David Foster Wallace, e tamén poden ter o potencial de provocar reconsideracións da súa lexítima inscrición na crecente historia das letras americanas.

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on existing contributions to the growing field of David Foster Wallace studies, this dissertation seeks to specifically examine the generic idiosyncrasy of Wallace's short fiction production. This exercise is carried out in a twofold manner: on the one hand, via the study of the interrelation of Wallace's literature with the problems of the notion of selfhood following the wake of postmodernism; and, on the other, by attesting to how this crisis is made manifest in his tales through a reappropriation of the modernist epiphany. The conflation of these two problems considered, this study proposes a tripartite approach to the postmodernist moment of being, a distinction paving the way for new readings of the defining themes of Wallace's short fiction.

Key words: David Foster Wallace; Short Story; Subjectivity; Postmodernism; Epiphany

RESUMO

Tomando como referencia as contribucións precedentes ao eido dos estudos sobre David Foster Wallace, en continua expansión, o obxectivo desta tese é proporcionar unha análise da idiosincrasia do xénero literario do relato fundamentada na ficción breve do autor. Esta investigación articúlase bilateralmente: en primeiro lugar, susténtase no exame da interrelación que establece a literatura de Wallace cos problemas que, tras a chegada do posmodernismo, afectan á noción de suxeito; e, así mesmo, no estudo de como a devandita crise queda reflectida na reapropiación da epifanía modernista que caracteriza a súa obra. Considerando a intersección destas dúas inquedanzas, este ensaio propón unha categorización tripartita da revelación posmodernista, distinción que propicia a aparición de novas lecturas dos temas centrais da ficción breve de Wallace.

Palabras chave: David Foster Wallace; Relato; Subxectividade; Posmodernismo; Epifanía

RESUMEN

Tomando como referencia contribuciones previas al campo de los estudios sobre David Foster Wallace, en continua expansión, el objetivo de esta tesis es proporcionar un análisis de la idiosincrasia del género literario del relato fundamentado en la ficción breve del autor. Esta investigación se articula de manera bilateral: primeramente, se sustenta en el desglose de la interrelación que establece la literatura de Wallace con los problemas que, tras la llegada del posmodernismo, afectan a la noción de sujeto; y, asimismo, en el estudio de cómo esta crisis se manifiesta en la reapropiación de la epifanía modernista que caracteriza a su obra. Considerando la intersección de estas dos inquietudes, este ensayo propone una categorización tripartita de la revelación postmodernista, distinción que propicia la aparición de nuevas lecturas de los temas centrales de la ficción breve de Wallace.

Palabras clave: David Foster Wallace; Relato; Subjetividad; Posmodernismo; Epifanía

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INTRODUCTION

In his renowned commencement address, delivered to Kenyon College's graduating class in 2005, David Foster Wallace candidly proclaimed there to be no functional form of pure atheism. "Everybody worships," he argued. "The only choice we get is what to worship" (2009, 100). The role of great stories would be closely tied to his stance on belief, provided how, he argued, tales exist to keep people from misplacing their faith; from disregarding all manner of ethical principles and going on to worship the so-called "wrong things." His words are inconclusive in what pertains to his own belief in any form of structured religion, but they unmistakably showcase his unconditional trust in the transformative power of storytelling. Narrative, he concluded, is unmeasurably useful; it has been codified as "myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams [… and] parables" precisely because of human conduct's dependence on storytelling (2009, 100). Following Wallace, narratives might be maintained to be a precondition for ethics, a mandatory requisite for an "ethical life" to be possible. They become, thus, the building blocks to any construction aimed at somewhat constituting, affecting, or reconfiguring human beings' perception of their moral attitudes toward both the world and themselves.

Wallace's position in this regard begs the following question: What manner of ethical construction was he aiming at with his writing? Or, what is the same: What set of values underlies his aesthetic enterprise, conferring purpose to his agenda as an author? Further, one may wonder how this overt ambition to "save" readers from faithlessness through what he labelled "good writing" might tie in with another one of his explicit wishes: his well-documented intention to make use of postmodernist techniques in a way that could prove more significant than the emotionally hollow experimentalism which he associated with the preceding generation of writers. If the problem with first-generation postmodernism is, allegedly, its vacuity, its inability to forge transformative connection and produce stories driven by lasting principles which may rule over people's ethical lives, then how is a culture that is still largely defined via postmodernist principles to free itself, however temporarily, from the yoke of a superstructure conditioning the potentialities of fictional reception?

OBJECTIVES

The academic endeavour at hand is largely a diagnostic exercise springing from these questions. It also aspires to contribute to the growing field of David Foster Wallace studies, which has long disregarded a proper consideration of his short fiction in its generic idiosyncrasy. This is a piece of work that is markedly substantiated in the consideration of his short fiction for its condition as such, bringing genre studies to the table as a productive tool through which to delve into Wallace's literature. Such a disregard can still be observed despite the critical fecundity that has characterised the field following the turn of the twenty-first century—and, especially, after his suicide in late 2008. The abundance of work on Wallace in recent years has seen a departure from the advocacy for Wallace's canonicity that featured prominently in early scholarship, with publications following his death switching the focus away from a defence of Wallace's contribution to the history of American letters. Contemporary literature on the topic often takes his position for granted, and much of it has moved on to present considerations on intertextual and interdisciplinary matters pertaining to his production. The relevance of such interdisciplinarity is much apparent in Wallace's work, with the ever-present philosophical

references serving as the foundations to much of his prose's thematic development, and his concern with social structure, politics, and literary theory permeating the entirety of his approach to the craft that is storytelling. As put by Jeffrey Severs, "[Wallace] pursued balance on levels that extended from the bodily and the interpersonal to the spiritual, sociological, financial, geopolitical, and comic" (2017, 1).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Edited collections aimed at tackling his body of work first rose to prominence in the 2010s. Publications such as *Consider David Foster Wallace* (2010), *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (2012), *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (2013), *David Foster Wallace and the Long Thing* (2014), and *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace* (2018) share a notorious focus on textual analysis, seeking a more widespread diagnosis of how David Foster Wallace engaged with late postmodernist culture through his fiction and non-fiction. Halfway through the decade, however, a new tendency arose that engaged with the discussion of the significant philosophical dimension of Wallace's work. To the pioneering publication of his undergraduate honours thesis *Fate, Time and Language* (2010) soon followed *Gesturing Toward Reality* (2014), *Freedom and the Self* (2015), *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace* (2016), and *David Foster Wallace and Religion* (2019), edited collections exploring Wallace's work from a rigidly philosophical standpoint. The basis for this critical proliferation is best condensed in the recent *Reading David Foster Wallace between Philosophy and Literature* (2022), a volume construed around the wish to show that "Wallace's work originates from and functions in the space between philosophy and literature" (1). The interdisciplinary quality of Wallace's oeuvre continues to inform present-day approaches to his fiction and non-fiction alike, with Clare Hayes-Brady's *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* (2016) and David Hering's *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (2016) showcasing a previously unheard-of interest in Wallacean structure, and thus bringing formalism—here alluding merely to a concern with form—to the equation that is David Foster Wallace's academic afterlife.

Work on David Foster Wallace as a short story writer, on its part, has been scarce and only rarely concerned with how the affordances of the short story played a part in shaping his literary aesthetics. Similarly, his short fiction has rarely been devoted the attention that his novels, and especially the lengthy *Infinite Jest*, have earned him, with the book itself having inspired three monographs of its own: *David Foster Wallace's* Infinite Jest*: A Reader's Guide* (2003), *A Reader's Companion to* Infinite Jest (2004), and *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's* Infinite Jest (2007). One might go as far as to state that it is precisely length, and its interrelation with the density of a prose rich in syntactic detail and wordplay, that stand behind much of the academic curiosity leading up to Wallace being widely considered a prominent figure in the much disputed, perhaps itself a contradiction in terms, "postmodernist canon." This is readily apparent if one pays close attention to the manifold attempts to dissect his novels through, precisely, the lens of discipline. Numerous of the above studies address the problematic that results from his prose's overlapping with philosophy, the encyclopaedic tendency of *Infinite Jest* in particular, and the frail interdependence of character stories and chapters in both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*. Much as work on Wallace and the problems of intersubjectivity abounds, it is rarely his short fiction that is used to substantiate any claims on his literary project at large. The very set of ideas that are often associated with shortness (brevity, condensation, compression, focus, or fulfilled expectation, to name but a few) stand

far from the notions that one would be tempted to resort to in an attempt at defining Wallace's literary aesthetics—when they are not discarded as altogether antonymic, that is.

Indeed, there is rarely any traceable to-the-point structure underlying his texts; this is so patently not the case that Wallace's prose could even be maintained to be definable by characterial misdirection, with the subjects in his fiction being lost in language, thought, and their apperception of those around them to such a degree that they offer readers linguistic exercises that are rarely felicitous. This is most notorious if read alongside the fact that Wallace's fiction is often concerned, be it overtly or otherwise, with the porous, textual boundaries separating diegesis from readers.[1] Even when they appear at their most eloquent, moments of self-obsessed introspection, deeply disturbing revelation, and alienation from the lived individuality of others, are recurrent in his prose. His "depressed, anxious, and otherwise existentially-pained characters" (Defossez 2017, 16) are submitted to structures that are recurrently dialogic, but stand open before the heteroglossia of "other things" at which they point, struggling to give themselves—and, simultaneously, their textual narratives—closure. Theirs is a process of perpetual gesturing; a layered attempt at dialogism and connection that necessarily fails to give itself satisfactory conclusiveness.

HYPOTHESIS, METHODOLOGY & CHAPTER OUTLINE

The running hypothesis underlying this dissertation is a twofold response to Hayes-Brady's convincing contention that "Wallace's resistance to endings becomes a central part of his creative process, in which the reader is and must continually be a coproducer of meaning" (2016, 3). On the one hand, my dissertation aims at examining Wallace's relationship with the crisis of subjectivity—understood as an intrinsically postmodernist problem—to situate his literary understandings of selfhood at the heart of his constant call for an-other at the far end of his symbolic and linguistic inconclusiveness. Both his concern with the precariousness of intersubjective connection and the fear of solipsism, nearly omnipresent in his prose, can be maintained to be imbricated in the cultural panorama with which he engaged. Chapter 1 is wholly devoted to the contextualisation of these statements, as well as to the assessment of the many patterns of interrelation contributing to Wallace's fiction reaching out across disciplines. His resistance to give in to stable teleologies, I contend, works in the service of Wallace's diagnosis of late postmodern culture, and is unmistakably tied to the epistemological precariousness of the discursive positions of "self" and "other" in postmodern discourse. Characterial distrust of an individuality that is solidly anchored in its surroundings takes place both at the diegetic and extradiegetic levels. Thus, we encounter characters who systematically fail to find solace in their gesturing toward others—be those "others" literary characters or Wallace's readership—because of their relationship with their senses of self and hyper-rational understandings of their subjective being, their distrust or disregard of the individuality of others, or a sheer absence of ability to comply with the tacit social mandate that they must invest some belief in both.

Following the brief historical contextualisation of how the notions of self and authorial subjectivity developed after the arrival of romanticism, coming to occupy a central position in the theoretical delineation of the modernist/postmodernist binary, I draw on postmodernist

[1] David Hering has spoken of this tendency as constituting Wallace's attempt "to stage a dialogic process of *refraction*, enacted […] as a moment of transfiguration and 'seeing-through' of the reflective surface and engaging with the reader outside the text" (2016/2017, 6; emphasis in original).

literary works to exemplify how the movement's partial departure from modernism may be best characterised by the emergence of a sense of constant suspicion toward any form of intellectualism that does not ultimately declare itself suspect. This self-reflexive feature is at the heart of much scholarly work dating from the late twentieth-century, and partly constitutes what Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski have labelled "the ethos of critique" (2017, 20). Wallace's refusal—or, one might argue, Wallace's postmodernism-informed inability—to give closure to his fictions is hence argued to stem from the theoretical collapse of belief systems as a result of postmodernism's near-obsessive tendency to fold in on itself. Thus, I maintain the precariousness of selfhood to become as much a thematic concern of Wallace's as it is definitional of late postmodernism's academic and cultural environment, which was growingly characterised by the setting down of critique and its establishment as the prominent mode of approaching the world through reason.

Wallace's resistance to disconnection and anhedonia, and his overt rejection of both at the extraliterary level, attest to his perennial belief that fictions that resorted to social diagnosis through stasis would simply not suffice to give readers what he famously labelled "something worth having." To close my discussion on how subjectivity informed this overt wish for redemptive literature, I resort to a brief examination of the real/fictional binary, which interrogation further contributes, I argue, to Wallace's poietic insecurities concerning literature's ability to "give." I approach this problem from two different angles: that of possible world semantics, a field whose epistemological re-evaluations of truth-value and ontology in fictional contexts allow for the de-hierarchisation of the relationship between the two; and that of linguistic re-presentation, examining how critical works following the arrival of structuralism and poststructuralism gradually accentuated the academic suspicious attitude towards mimesis and reference as they bled into postmodernist intellectual life. In this regard, I contend Wallace's failure to give an account of intersubjective connection to be central to his aesthetic endeavour. This failure, I argue, gives rise to a literary voice whose attempt at redemption is pivotally founded on the unclosed, sincere gesture toward a readerly other in whose hands rests the choice of whether to submit herself to belief in the human(ity) of the text.

A prominent second dimension to my work, to which I have devoted chapter 2 of this dissertation, seeks the integration of the aesthetics of the short story, a literary genre often linked to diverse problematics related to the idea of closure, into the ongoing discussion on the form, themes, and the oft-mystified "purpose" behind Wallace's literature. As subjects reach for an-other in his short fiction, and recurrently do so by metafictionally pointing toward the world beyond the textual, they are exploiting the affordances of the short story in a way that is endemic in the genre, and that comes to function specifically within the generic understanding informing how short tales are received. Indeed, conceptualisations of the short story after modernism have long paid some form of homage to two central ideas: Edgar Allan Poe's foundational "unity of effect," and the development of a prevalent concern with teleology by which tales are deployed as working "toward a single moment of revelation" (Shaw 1983, 193). These moments of epiphanic illumination, at the heart of the high modernist praxis, are co-dependent on subjectivity: there is no epiphany without subject; and there is equally no subject who can withhold the high epiphanies of modernism and remain unaffected as a narrative individual.

Through an examination of intrinsically postmodernist patterns of reappropriation of the modernist epiphany, contemporary short stories are argued to depart from its aesthetics precisely because of the postmodernists' changing attitudes towards selfhood. I consequently propose a tripartite approach to the postmodernist epiphany, offering a tentative delineation of

three modes of restructuring the revelation. I do so in hopes that this may contribute to the inscription of Wallace in an ongoing short story tradition much indebted to twentieth-century developments concerning short fiction's teleological potentialities. To do so, I put forth the classification of typically postmodernist relationships with the epiphanic that ensues: (a) the epiphany of form, concerned with metafictionality, aims at revelations beyond the text and addressed at the textual itself, hoping to trigger the illumination at the level of the readership; (b) the epiphany of absence, building on a Derridean absent-presence, is contained in stories which make of the lack of an expected revelation, hinted at by the play of readerly expectation, an active part of their structural development; and (c) the dark epiphany, which twists the illumination inwardly and has it become a source of ruination, psychic pain, or communal disconnection for the subject.

These models are predicted to overlap and inform postmodernist appropriations of the epiphany in a myriad of ways. The dark epiphany, however, is central to Wallace's literary project, and stands at the heart of much of his short fiction. This is no isolated fact in what concerns the present dissertation, since it is closely linked to his thematic fears as imbricated in subjecthood: the threat of emotional solipsism; the anxiety associated with the alienation from the suspected other; and the ongoing tendency in Wallacean characterisation ruling that hyperrationality and prodigious verbiage may not lead to the self-improving attainment of a mystified truth, but rather to a certainty that dooms the individual to perpetual psychic ostracization. Thus, Wallace's treatment of the dark epiphany and its prevalence in his tales, leading to unending loops defined by academizing overexercise, is crucial to understanding his literary ambitions at large. This is so due to it being partly through its exploitation that he deploys the rhetoric of excess in a twofold manner: he diagnoses the problem with sincere affectation inherited from early postmodernism, and simultaneously exploits the short story's codification as a genre that builds toward a sense of finality in order to immobilise character within a "saturated self," propitiating an empathic response beyond the textual through which to transcend the anhedonic imperatives ruling over postmodernist form.

Lastly, chapter 3 seeks the integration of affect into the preceding analysis of Wallace's short fiction, and aims to do so through the study of what is maintained to be a significant exception to the above tendency in Wallace's short fictional production: the story "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" (2004). Much as it might be argued to exemplify a very prominent tendency in Wallace, introducing a main character whose recherché linguistic expression alienates him from the sincerity and rawness of the emotional life outside him, it also presents him as a self which is vastly dissimilar from other Wallacean characters meeting this condition. The overanalytical tone does not lead to any anxious confession on his part, it does not institute a darkly epiphanic loop, and it does not promise characterial collapse in the fashion of *Infinite Jest*'s renowned Hal Incadenza. This shift is argued to exemplify a different approach to the diagnostic wish in Wallace's late short fiction, drawing attention to Richard Rorty's treatise, *Philosophy in the Mirror of Nature* (1979), as a way to ironise the possibility that disaffection may be merely the product of postmodernism's self-imposed conviction that unburdened connection is antonymic to its cultural practices.

It is to this disaffection that academic writings on Wallace have recurrently aimed their inquiries. His discontent with the flaws and failures of first-generation postmodernism have long stood as definitional axes informing the analysis of his fiction. However, little work to date has sought the meticulous examination of his short fiction in light of this disaffection, and even more rare is the formal consideration of the short fiction genre in connection with his

struggle *in* and, one could argue, *against* the postmodern. This dissertation hopes to shed light on how these matters might yet prove fruitful to the study of David Foster Wallace, and might, too, have the potential to prompt reconsiderations of his rightful inscription in the ever-growing history of American letters.

1. EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCORDS BEHIND THE FICTIONAL SELF: IDENTITY AND CHARACTER IN LITERARY LANGUAGE

JAY: Why is a story more upfront than life?
LENORE: It just seems more honest, somehow.
JAY: Honest meaning closer to the truth?
LENORE: I smell trap.
JAY: I smell breakthrough. The truth is that there's no difference between a life and a story? But a life pretends to be something more? But it really isn't more?
LENORE: I would kill for a shower.

David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, 120.

Still, may not the partly sincere or even insincere performance of sincerity—this contrived public self—be in some way authentic? May this not actually be Rosseau's "true self," that is the only self available to him, as against the much-invoked "inner self" we have all been taught to look for? May not, still further, the "true self" consist in the performance which is perhaps all we have in life?

Irving Howe, "The Self in Literature," 66.

The history of conceptualisations of the self has been long and manifold, and its evolution has shaped the entirety of Western thought from Ancient Greece to this day, occupying a central position throughout and remaining a core part of contemporary discussions in the humanities. Over the last century, questions of the notions of identity and selfhood have transcended the porous border of philosophy, becoming growingly popular in fields as seemingly disparate as psychology, quantum mechanics, or neuroscience. In this context, it might awaken the sheerest of curiosities to consider how little attention has been devoted to the rigorous examination of non-paradigmatic uses of the notion of selfhood in academia, such as those devised to speak of literary character, a unit simultaneously deprived of conclusive ontologies, when provided any, and yet systematically defined through the same designators that we use to refer to "real" human beings' senses of identity. In literary studies in particular, it has become frequent to speak of "the literary self," "literary selves," "fictional identities" or equivalent formulations, to refer both to fictional characters and to the fictionalisation of experience that is claimed to be inherent

to literary poiesis.[2] Little consensus has been achieved, however, on what such a self may refer to in the context of late postmodernism, be it as an articulate construct inhabiting language, and thus naturally a prompter of literary discussion, or as a soul-like token navigating the unstable, indeterminate network of meaning(s) which has been recurrently argued to be definitory of the contemporary human condition and vital to its potencies regarding human thought.

This extrapolation of the notion of selfhood into "fiction" appears all the more significant if read in conjunction with claims that, in present-day scholarship, "much uncertainty and outright scepticism surrounds the notion of character" (Esheté, 495), be it in or beyond literature.[3] In Andreas Esheté's work, the displacement of character to the periphery of academic discussions is explained by a turn to a discussion on action, plot, and event that theorises on the nature of the occurrence—the act-judgment—instead of on the consequences of that very action to the person performing it—the agent-judgment. Despite some significant attempts to turn the focus back onto character in contemporary academia, as exemplified by the ethical turn to discussions on virtue,[4] the generalised dismissal of character as ethical subject, as well as its centrality to the very existence of plot in both history and literature alike is, Esheté maintains, growingly apparent. The decline of character as thus posited curiously accompanies a growing interest in identity, the self, and the affects that direly responds to a social climate of poorly negotiated differences, hate-founded senses of community, and generalised—or fake-news induced—misunderstanding. In the context of the rise to prominence of these discussions, rethinking previous definitions of the self and elucidating what implications inhere in the use of such a concept present themselves as enterprises of critical importance.

Discussing selves in literature in relation to character is yet problematised by another notional difficulty: that of defining literary character itself. Beyond having been approached from a variety of perspectives, ranging from semiotic poetics that take characters to be text-based units, to mimetic theories claiming them to (at least partly) correspond to extra-literary beings, very little is settled in what concerns working definitions of character. Even the word's etymology is inconclusive, pointing to, "in a figural sense, the stamp of personality, that which is unique to a human being" in English (through the Greek *charaktér*); but to the Latin *persona* in French (*personnage*), Italian (*personaggio*) and Spanish (*personaje*), suggesting, rather, "the mask through which the sound of the voice of an actor is heard;" and to *figura* in German (*Figur*), bringing to mind "a form that contrasts with a background" and thus inviting the distinction, sometimes problematic in itself, between character and setting (Eder, Jannidis and Schneider 2010, 7). The most extended common ground to character studies attests to character being a narrative agent; that is, "an individual capable of fulfilling the argument position in the propositional form DO(X), which is the *sine qua non* of all narrative and drama […;] an individual, human or human-like, of whom actions can be predicated" (Margolin 1982, 1-2). Characters, thus, can only be in plot, either through actions present or (most critically) by

[2] Some instances of this can be promptly found to be giving title to all manner of publications. See, for instance, *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait* (1991), *Literary Selves: Autobiography and Contemporary American Nonfiction* (1993), *Literature and the Relational Self* (1995), *Princes, Peasants and Other Polish Selves: Ethnicity in American Literature* (2009), *Gender, Discourse and the Self in literature: Issues in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong* (2011), *Constructing the Literary Self: Race and Gender in Twentieth-Century Literature* (2013), *Writing the Self: Diaries, Memoirs and the History of the Self* (2013), or *Gender and the Self in Latin American Literature* (2018) to name but a few. These titles not only attest to the centrality that self-concepts have attained in recent years, but all share a common understanding of "the self" as a subjective unit that not only can exist in discourse, but that can, or perhaps even must, be articulated in literature for literature *to be*.

[3] Although, as it will soon be made evident, that of self-articulating characters is only one of the many circulating instances of how selfhood as a notion has come to influence literary criticism.

[4] In virtue ethics, the question 'What kind of person would that action (X) make of me?' is favoured over 'What kind of action is X?' and the ensuing 'Should I then do X?'

endowing them with the ability to engage in any such actions. Once this requisite is met, the reader is cognitively prompted to articulate around a given character any other necessary trait or condition that need be present for it to be imaginatively interpreted as a fully-fledged individual—though *not necessarily a person*. Characterisation, it follows, is a guided process whose critical end rests, obligatorily, on the receiving hands: "character," in Q. D. Leavies' words, "is the creation of the reader, not the writer" (1932/1939, 59). Characters thus become and function as such only insofar as the conditions for their articulation are observed by their reception, much as it happens, I should argue, with extraliterary identities upon their being (narratively) presented and validated through the compliance of others.

The differences at the heart of literary or fictional character and "real" character as a foundational component to the apperceived constitution of human identity are much apparent, and I do not aim to propose a counterintuitive fusion of the two. It appears a matter much more delicate, however, to state that readers engage in literary reading in a manner entirely disparate from their approach to other, allegedly non-fictional consciousnesses; that is, that it is not through narrative, and narratives populated by absence and non-specificity, that "character" comes to be known both in and beyond literary contexts as the result of social and communal construction, irrespective its fictionality and literariness. Through my advancing of the claim that reality, subjectivity and history as we understand them are, fundamentally, story-driven units, not only do I attempt to bridge a long-standing abyss between how Forster's *homo sapiens* and *homo fictus* relate (1927, 87), but also to invite the problematisation of Rawdon Wilson's conclusion that "consciousness in fiction is not like an actual consciousness" (1979, 730). Fictional consciousnesses are different to "actual" consciousnesses, indeed, but they play a comparable part to that of "other" consciousnesses in the self's configuration.

I thus suggest narrative theories of the self to be not merely constructivist approaches to how subjectivity comes into being and is inscribed in discourse in a manner that is narrative in shape, but attacks aiming at the heart of our every epistemology, inviting a reconsideration of the conditions that allow for such deeply connoted notions as truth, value, sincerity, reality, and even identity, to *mean* both in and beyond literary fictions. This comes to play an important role to understanding Wallace's fiction, which faces a twofold conundrum as it perpetually navigates the challenges of solipsism, ostracization, misunderstanding, and imprecision, seeking a way out of existential loneliness, and recurrently facing the omnipresence of postmodernism and its refusal of anchorage; and, perhaps more direly, postmodernism's effects on the stability of self-notions in and beyond literary language.

The terms "self" and "subjectivity" will be used interchangeably in what follows, regardless of the latter's prevalence over the former in most contemporary studies in the fields of literature and literary criticism. Through them, I will designate and question the "inalienable essence" that is often conceptually attached to the self's soul-like mystique (Rimmon-Kenan 1996, 12). Subjectivity will thus correspond with the set of distinct, individual, and stable configurations—and hence also appealing to a particular understanding of immutability in relation to identity constructions to which I shall return through Paul Ricoeur's late philosophy—that are stated to confer a sense of interior uniqueness to any given consciousness by opposing their narrativised inner life to their every other's. "Identity," on the other hand, will not be confined to the rigidity of its metaphysical semantics, and will be made to encompass, rather, the self's formulation in narrative; or, put more plainly, its primary use will be that of designating the subjective descriptors through which an accorded individual, fictional

or otherwise, inscribes a self-conception (meaning the conception of a self, not mandatorily of one's own[5]) in language.

Thus, and much as the self as an alleged inner substance will be understood to be only expressible through narrative, it will be the particular social and political consequences of using language to narrate it that will be deemed specifically identitarian. As can be readily foreseen, the two notions might and will be used interchangeably when referring to the self as narrative, despite the different emphases and social histories they will inevitably carry into the discussion. Similarly, the self's only form of attestable existence will be identitarian; its every description as self mandatorily taking the form of a statement *on* identity—although indeed, not necessarily in socio-political terms.

The self as it is generally understood in the humanities corresponds to some manner of independent consciousness, occasionally equivalent to or interrelated with identity—although sometimes disputedly so—by which a subjectivity is articulated and made to function as being an individual's in contrast to every other's. In strictly philosophical terms, the self occupies a much disturbing position at the centre of human thought, having partly substituted the divinely mediated soul as the product of individual consciousness. Approaches to the idea of the self are most varied, even within specific fields. The selves inhabiting fictional worlds, on their part, are sometimes referred to as such, but very rarely interrogated on the basis of their claim to a sense of identity, regardless of how acutely their differences to "real" selves are thoroughly taken as obvious. It is in these differences, or lack thereof, that the very potential of the literary work to comment on, expand, and contribute to the illumination of "real life" may be argued to rest, and thus to their minutiae that much contemporary literary theory owes their modes of scientific validation. In the field of literature, as Paul de Man suggested in his 1971 *Blindness and Insight*,

> the problem of the self is particularly delicate. […] In the study of literature, the question of the self appears in a bewildering network of often contradictory relationships among a plurality of subjects. It appears first of all, as in the Third Critique of Kant, in the act of judgment that takes place in the mind of the reader; it appears next in the apparently intersubjective relationships that are established between the author and the reader; it governs the intentional relationship that exists, within the work, between the constitutive subject and the constituted language; it can be sought, finally, in the relationship that the subject establishes, through the mediation of the work, with itself. From the start, we have at least four possible and distinct types of self: the self that judges, the self that reads, the self that writes, and the self that reads itself. The question of finding the common level on which all these selves meet and thus of establishing the unity of a literary consciousness stands at the beginning of the main methodological difficulties that plague literary studies. (39)

I am initially building on the assumption that intersubjective (as in, self-to-self) communication is achievable through literary language, and thus centrally constitutive of literature's ability to prompt readerly connection. If one is to take either the stance of post-Barthean structuralism, Russian formalism, or American new criticism to attest to literary works' relative autonomy as linguistic entities, however, the connection between de Man's "self that reads" and "self that writes" becomes a productive problem. If we are to interpret literature to be a discursive space where connections between selves can occur, de Man's taxonomy

[5] It is important to note here that how a self is perceived—even by the human being which might be argued, in Cartesian terms, to "carry it"—might be as significant in identitarian terms as it can be utterly unreliable: alienation and identification as modes of self-conception are equally prevalent in what concerns awareness of one's subjectivity (see Bilgrami 2006).

would have to either be founded on the belief that an author-reader connection takes place through literary expression, or be lacking a fifth, distinct type of self: the self that "lives"—i.e. is successfully stipulated and articulated to have a voice of her own—*in* the literary work. In this regard, three questions appear the most ostensibly urgent: (1) under what definition of "self" can selves be attested to in literature, if under any? (2) should we attest to the self-like quality of literary character, to what extent do those selves relate, both in and beyond the confines of textuality, and how do they embody concerns related to identity and subjectivity experienced by "real" individuals? and (3) assuming (as it is widely, and perhaps necessarily, done in the field of literary studies) for there to be a way for literary character to speak of human experience as lived, what does the way of relating and connecting to themselves and others of Wallace's characters say of late postmodernism as a cultural moment? The following section will be devoted to the positing of these questions and related difficulties, and the delineation of potential answers.

1.1. David Foster Wallace, Late Postmodernism, and the Crises of Character Subjectivity

These questions pertain to David Foster Wallace's work on two primary levels. The first one, and perhaps the most densely examined in the field, is the contentual: the crises of the self, its metaphysics, and its epistemology, are at the heart of the philosophical preoccupations that permeate Wallace's work thematically. Questions such as whether it is possible for a person to give a faithful account of herself, truly know other people, escape the mind's solipsistic intuitions, and forge interpersonal bonds that may not be haunted into malfunction by any such suspicions, reappear throughout his literary production, and often do so as the vertebrae articulating his stories' very purpose. On a second level, however, a formal and contextual crisis of meaning also shrouds his production, founded on his own approach to literature as a form, his understanding of its potentialities, and the legacy of postmodern thought that would come to pervade his approach to (literary) language, communication, and the role of the author to the intersubjective, therapeutic experience that—Wallace believed—could be derived from fiction reading. Even when his discourse on fiction writing stood at its most pseudo-mimetic, claiming literature to be about "what it is to be a fucking human being," his approach to fiction writing would recurrently be defined by the threat of failure (see Hayes-Brady 2016); and, most particularly, his own failure to functionally believe, attest to, and demonstrate literature's ability to effectively convey any insight on the human condition that could reclaim a *stable* discursive position beyond all of postmodernism's indeterminacies.

Thus, his literature would systematically be made to face not merely the difficulties inherent to interpersonal connection, but those menacing literary language's ability to convey successfully, and remain stable before the probing eyes of an unpredictably diverse readership and its growing configurational power under the prevalent literary epistemes of the late twentieth-century and the new millennium. Wallace's inability to *say* wholly, it follows, is philosophically twofold: it springs from the unknowability of the self, the incommensurability of the other, and his unceasing suspicion towards interhuman connection; and simultaneously, it finds in literature a medium whose redemptive qualities remain systematically beyond the rationalising grasp of the reappearing authorial insertees from the metafictional pieces. It is the reader who ultimately faces the choice of whether to allow such a desperate call for connection to transcend the textual; and, in so doing, to succeed.

Having been a philosophy major himself, and having pursued work in formal logic at a postgraduate level for a short period of time, the philosophical dimension to much of Wallace's work appears indisputable from the offset. Through his reiterated resort to questions of explicit theoretical motivation, Wallace "invited interpretations that would seek in his work a philosophical exploration of our deepest beliefs and their existential and social consequences" (Pitari 2020, 1); devised a literary project which had as its primary agenda the task of "opening questions to consideration, dialogic rather than didactic, and strongly resisting the confinement of conventional structure" (Hayes-Brady 2016, 1). The theoretical dimension to his fiction sprang not merely from the introduction of philosophical dilemmas and parables in the work itself, but oftentimes also from the use of direct reference and the mediated expansion on philosophical works. This happens most apparently in his first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), influenced by Wittgenstein's ideas throughout and motivated, diegetically, by the mysterious disappearance of Lenore Beadsman, the protagonist's homonymous grandmother and one of Wittgenstein's last living trainees. In a 1993 interview with Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, Wallace confronted the essay-like quality of his first novel by appealing to the twofold nature of his academic interest, arguing that his two senior theses "kept bleeding into each other;" his work on philosophy being "written in conversational voice" and his early fiction being oppositely affected by the research on formal logic and language that he was carrying out at the time ("Looking," 12).

Philosophical intertext, however, is far from limited to his early fiction, and makes an explicit return in *Infinite Jest* (1996). It does so through Hal's college-application essays and, quite notoriously, via Helen Steeply and Rémy Marathe discussion on the nature of free will and the American perversion of the notion of liberty, a fragmented debate that recurs throughout the novel, to name but two prominent cases. Countless other examples of varying explicitness could be delineated in his fiction and non-fiction alike, ranging from the study on the ethics of animal consumption in "Consider the Lobster" (2004), to the intertextual reference to Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) via the short story of the same name, published as part of *Oblivion* (2004), or to the exposition of logical conundrums in "Good Old Neon" (2001; 2004), a tale belonging in the same collection, where the protagonist refers to the Berry and Russell paradoxes to present his own "fraudulence paradox" and the emotional impasses to which it has led him, thus giving his internal monologue its raison d'être.[6]

Consequently, the central role of philosophy as a necessary tool through which to articulate any comprehensive reading of Wallace's work is undisputed in the growing field of David Foster Wallace studies. The main concerns around which his fiction revolves, ranging from the possibility for interconnection and the eye-opening effect that art can have on readers, to his reiterated wish to write the self *into* fiction and have it speak honestly of its condition as self, are critically dependent on philosophical examination—and often overtly so. In *Freedom and the Self* (2015), for instance, a collection of essays where Wallace's contribution to philosophy in the formally rigid sense of the discipline is examined, he is argued to share a fundamental quality with writers such as George Eliot or T. S. Eliot, both of whom excelled in philosophy and whose work was informed by the prominence of such an interest (Cahn and Eckert, vii). In *Gesturing Toward Reality* (2014), a collection similarly devoted to the outlining and study of the philosophical dimension to his oeuvre, editor Scott Korb refers to Wallace's work as being

[6] For a more comprehensive overview of the explicit philosophical resonances in Wallace's oeuvre, see James Ryerson's introduction to Wallace's posthumously published undergraduate senior thesis (*Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will* 2010).

frequently discussed along the same lines in university courses, bringing to the classroom "[q]uestions without answers. Endless Recursiveness. Life and death" (2).

The greatness of the philosophical undertones and the significance of the thematic questions at the core of his fiction seek, in Wallace's own account, to provide the reader with a sense of awareness that might transcend their own apperception of the multidimensionality of the human condition, expanding and redefining the interweaving corollaries of life in the postmodern world. For, Wallace believed, "the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's heart's purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text." There thus emerges a direct connection between his fiction and the philosophical concerns that haunted him; one by which his claim that "one of the things really great fiction-writers do […] is 'give' the reader something" acquires new significance ("Expanded" 1993, 50). The thing which his fiction attempts to give, it would follow, is not so much an answer but a question; an invitation to enhance our self-narratives through reconsideration; an opportunity to confront our own lives and the experiences of those of whom we know least (Wallace, "Interview with Miriam Böttger," 54:29 – 54:50) and, in so doing, to bring the other to view and attempt to return the self—in the way good fiction can, by finding "a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it" ("Expanded" 1993, 26)—to literary illustriousness.

Indeed, perhaps the most apparent of all philosophical undertones in Wallace's work are found in his non-fictional essays and interviews, specifically those on the nature of the literary text, which have recurrently been used as a lens through which to interpret the aims of his work and the role it is to play in the history of American literature. Essays such as "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" and "E Unibus Pluram" (1993), as well as his very prominent 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, have served the purpose of delineating a set of attitudes towards fiction and a particular approach to its consumption within the postmodernist maelstrom that have much conditioned how readers, critics, and scholars alike interact with Wallace's fictional work. Some criticism has begun to arise in academia, cautioning that Wallace's discourse on fiction should not be taken at face value, nor assumed to provide a valid framework with which to delve into his literature. Much as he repeatedly claimed to have sought to propitiate empathy through his work and build in it a discursive space of "genuine communication" where some quintessential truth could be shared ("Expanded" 1993, 26), his success in so trying should be gauged by what the work does in itself, rather than for what Wallace believed literature—and "good" literature specifically—was meant to accomplish. Even Wallace's paradigmatic want to achieve any such empathetic bond has been the object of some academic questioning. Cory M. Hudson's "David Foster Wallace Is Not Your Friend" (2017), for instance, gathers evidence of "how easily Wallace manipulates and deceives his readers and how willing they are to believe that 'Wallace' is not a 'narrative persona,' especially in those moments where he tears down the fourth wall and appears to be his most sincere" (4).

The readers' propensity to let Wallace, so to speak, "get his way" attests to the persuasive power exerted by his fiction (and his metafictional pieces in more apparent terms) as it calls for readerly empathy. This often takes place, paradoxically, through Wallace's overt failure to achieve the sense of connection that his literary insertees confess to be pursuing. Even in the stories where he explicitly tries to put together a narrative self that might mime his own and project an honest persona into the work, his efforts often remain an "exhaustive attempt to demonstrate the impermeability of the bounds of consciousness" (Hudson 2017, 10). In this context, Wallace is repeatedly forced to conclude that absolute knowledge of other minds is

inaccessible, that his own self cannot but be fictionalised when projected into his literature, and that true communication (in the idealistic, transhuman way where something fundamental—a core part of one's identity—is shared with another) is functionally impossible.

To this reiterated wish for empathy, to which many of his metafictional techniques have been explicitly linked, one must add the contextual minutiae of late postmodernism. Wallace repeatedly made apparent that he had felt anxious about comparison, influence, and the inscription of his own figure into any manner of homogeneous canon, be it "postmodern" or "post-postmodern," neither of which terms he felt at ease discussing. In his interview with Charlie Rose in 1997, for instance, he refused to speak of "postmodernism" as meaning anything more significant than "after modernism," claiming the word to have become "a very useful catch-all term" in whose presence "we all nod soberly as if we know what we're talking about" (21:15 – 21:29). He thus acknowledged the notion's utility as the embodiment of Michael Levenson's renowned statement on modernism: "vague terms still signify" (1984, vii), but rejected the impreciseness inherent to its definition; and thus, he rejected, too, postmodernism's—as is the case with "literature," "art," "fiction" and countless other notions—active resistance of a conclusive explanation, of containment, of stabilisation.

In the aforementioned "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," Wallace described a generation of post-postmodernist young writers (although very significantly avoiding the actual discussion on the notion of "postmodernism" throughout) whose work attested to the consequences of the serious questioning of "the idea that literary language is any kind of neutral medium for the transfer of [… feeling, freedom from phenomena, or any relevant mental condition] from artist to audience," concluding that, "if mimesis isn't dead, then it's on life-support courtesy of those who soon enough will be […, and under such circumstances], the real world of serious fiction just *won't hold still*" (13-14; fn. 5; emphasis in original). In a conversation with Mark Shechner in 2000, he simultaneously praised the work of writers such as Barth, Pynchon, Barthelme or Burroughs on the basis that "[s]ome things in [… their literature] seem […] more 'real' than Dickens or Anne Tyler or pick your realist," and criticised how much of their generation's work would "get so occluded and conscious of itself as text or hall of mirrors, that its only appeal is intellectual and cerebral" ("Behind the Watchful Eyes of Author DFW," 108).

It was along these same lines that he described his uneasiness toward the paradigm and the theories surrounding postmodernism that were rising to prominence at the time of his early writing. Commenting on the legacy of resources and the outlook on fiction that the preceding generation had bequeathed to late twentieth-century American authors, Wallace lamented that "what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem" ("Expanded" 1993, 49). In this respect, Wallace's self-inscription into his writings and his besetting interest in truth, language and fictionality as philosophical problems become but an expected manifestation of his wish to provide the postmodernist movement with the redemptive, healing qualities that—he believed—could be hidden in the literary work; made present beneath the irony, the cynicism, and the self-suspicious tendencies that had come to define much of what had begun to be spoken of as some form of canon of American avant-garde fiction.

1.2. "Something Worth Having:" Brief Remarks on the Intrinsic Value of Literary Fictions

In his reading of the spiritual dimensions of David Foster Wallace's writings, Robert K. Bolger points out that "[o]ur lives are lived through the filter of stories that we've either been born into, been educated into, or simply come to accept as true, but the stories can always be changed" (39). This is the most extended understanding of the transformative power of fictional works, as "we tend to think of the social impact of literature as being more subtly epistemological and ontological: variously confirming or challenging our and our culture's values, raising consciousnesses, occasionally transforming individual lives" (McLaughlin 2004, 53). In Michael Basseler's 2019 *An Organon of Life Knowledge*, he attests to this same literary potential, maintaining that "people turn to fictional literature in order to have their own lives illuminated" (14). Basseler understands stories as vessels carrying knowledge on identity negotiations; cultural mediators with the ability to provide the tools via which we may get closer to the other in a manner that allows for crystallised differences to be (ethically) surmounted. As such, the potential for reformulations of the globalised world's structures, for progress, and for social advancement is made to depend on the narrative constitution of that very world, and, through human being's ability to attest to such a narrative component, the potential that it might be reimagined—and, through such a reimagining, rewritten—becomes thinkable.

Stories, however, as Bolger goes on to clarify, are not authoritative; they do not lay the foundations on which to base claims on truth, contingency and existence as philosophical works might attempt to do; "they are rather the contexts in which statements are judged as true or false;" they erect and have the potential to transform the horizon of what can be imagined—and also possible—and thus preclude that "other possibilities [… be] available without some story-changing work being done" (39). Bolger's optimistic outlook on fiction's political and ethical potentialities not only provides remarkable insight into the narrative component of human existence, but radically places stories at the centre of any discussion on the self as a subjective unit that is both exposed to story-telling as a meaning-making framework, and invited to contribute through narrative to the institution and constitution of history.

Monroe C. Beardsley's contribution to the discussion on the aesthetic value of literature and the problems that surround its definition and (potential im)measurability speaks of such a value as being directly derived from its capacity to produce something worth having. This "something worth having" as derived from literature, he maintains, springs from fiction's ability to impart aesthetic character to "actual" experience, and thus from the connection between fictionally stipulated worlds and "reality." Accordingly, aesthetic character would comprise, Beardsley estimates,

> any or all of a number of properties that are difficult to describe but not difficult to experience: fixation of attention on some portion of the sensory or phenomenal field, a sense of liberation from distractions and practical concerns, a notable degree of distance or detachment from emotional oppression, the exhilaration of exercising perceptual and cognitive powers to an unusual degree, a sense of integration and wholeness. ("Aesthetic Value in Literature," 240)

Beardsley concludes that the aesthetic value of literature is primarily, though not exclusively, to be estimated on the basis that "the experience of a literary work may lead us to ask new questions, to notice new things about real people, to become aware of interesting and valuable truths about ourselves, to sharpen our emotional and moral discriminations, to reflect fruitfully upon the times we live in" (243). It is in this manner that fiction may succeed in

playing the role that Wallace wished it to play: to put an end to existentialist loneliness, build empathy, and propitiate patterns of identification and interrelation whose nourishing and redemptive qualities might make of us "better people;" and, in so doing, become that thing in literature that is intrinsically "worth having."

This, as we shall see in the sections that follow, is not without relation to Wallace's enterprise as a fiction writer, with his literature repeatedly pointing outwardly, hoping to "provide" for the reader and to offer a diagnosis of use, an invitation to become *aware*. This joins, indeed, a wish of the author's making: that they will be met with a complicitous nod on the part of their reception; and that the idea of that nod, as Wallace himself would write in his essay on David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, will help him fight an "ontological insecurity" keeping the writer away from his self-induced threat of non-existence (2012, 82-83). In this way, fiction would serve as a communicative exchange, offering the reader an opportunity to break free from the object revealed and narrativised before her (be it disconnection, disaffection, loneliness, or any other torment) whilst keeping the doubting author from falling prey to the "panic felt by most persons who spend a lot of time up in their own personal heads […:] the feeling that one's head *is*, in some sense, the whole world" (82; emphasis in original). In this "call to awareness," albeit the many difficulties that pertain to it and that will be later examined, may be maintained to rest the "something worth having" that Wallace himself designed to be at the heart of his fiction.

The indeterminacy inherent to the approach that academia has often taken in its attempts to dissect the question of knowledge and worth in literature has led to an inadvertent dismissal of literary character as the very root of literature's value. It is in fictional character that readers may encounter the characteristics and traits which, contextually, allow that reflection, learning and progress be derived from literature. It is through characters, thus, that it becomes possible that "the observer will grasp something which has hitherto never been real for him (sic) […; that] the literary text enables its readers to transcend the limitations of their own real-life situation" (Iser 1980, 79), irrespective of however much plot serves the function of shaping character so that it may fulfil any and all such purposes. Literature hence becomes not only the constituting agent of a parallel structure with the ability to pseudo-mimetically reflect the entire paradigm of human possibility, hoping to shed light on the potentialities of life, but also a fundamental provider of reconfigurations; a tool through which to expand on the "possible" via accounts of the characterised Other whom we imaginatively construe to be unlike us—and just as critically, through those of the characterised other in whom we recognise ourselves; in whose eeriness we encounter the proximity and solace of a projected sense of *sameness*.

The peripheralization of character, together with the reluctance to delve into the metaphysics of the notion in literary terms, may have been maintained as a result of the volatility that has surrounded the discussion on the self after the arrival of postmodernism, however much this very peripheralization could be demonstrated to preclude the success of the numerous attempts of literary theorists to delve into fiction through the lens of identity studies. The fall of the metanarratives of modernity did not masquerade any manner of attack on narrative itself, but rather a change in attitude with regards to the grand narratives of old: it is epistemologically apparent that plot exists, that it constitutes history and story, and that action is at its centre, and little to no discussion surrounds the possibility for its existence. The prospect for the self as a core element to the constitution of subjectivity, on the contrary, has been subjected to interrogation throughout the history of philosophy, and remains as greatly disputed to this day as does the notion with which it interweaves in narratively constituted units: character.

In this context, positing character as the centre of the literary enterprise not only could be imprecise insofar as it neglects plot's comparably pivotal position, but also risks inviting destabilising questions concerning the possibility for character to exist, the possibility that character might articulate identity, and the possibility that identity in literary and non-literary subjects may be fruitfully scrutinised with the same tools and spoken of in the same terms. The arrival of postmodernism specifically, with the subsequent array of uncertainties that began to surround notions of the self, will be later explored as having aggravated the precarious grounds on which "character" as notion, and the characters of the postmodernist American canon in more specific terms, have been erected. The following pages will seek to address the idea of the self in literature and philosophy, contextualising the arrival of postmodernism and its turn to precarious epistemologies of subjectivity which are permeated by the problem of the self's indescribability.

Even the barest aspects of identity that appear to be immediately given and to precede action, as might be those concerned with the nature of one's own being, could be argued to derive from a person's ancestry and social inscription, both of which result, in one way or another, from historical plot. Character would, accordingly, be the creation of the reader's projections, existing as a product of human beings' fictional compliances; or, resorting to Jungian terminology, the result of our rearticulation of archetypal abstractions as drawn from our collective unconscious (Jung 1921, 33). Understandings of character as derived from Jungian psychoanalysis do nonetheless inscribe it in the plot-structure, since archetypal images "are a kind of fiction […] because they can never exhaust the multiplicity of the archetype." They are narrative in form and "Other" in essence, belonging to the realm of the unrepresentable, graspable only through "limited ego fictions" (Rowland 1999, 198).

This centrality of plot, its subsequent equation with story, and the need that both be present for character to be articulated and scrutinised both in literature and beyond are long-standing principles. It is at the core of Aristotle's *Poetics*, after all, that of all elements that may be deemed to constitute narration plot is the one central, indispensable component; that it is in the arrangement of incidents that rests the very nature and purpose of story-telling. Countless works on literature dating from all manner of periods attest to this belief. The very concept of mimesis as posited by Aristotle, having been his understanding of it that has most significantly shaped the history of literary criticism in the West despite prior contributions, draws on the belief that mimetic art does not represent human being as it stands, but rather focuses on human being *in action*. The value of literature is not to be gathered merely from the things taking place, nor from the literary individuals playing their part in the events, but from some manner of admixture of both. Fictionalist and particularly narrative approaches to selfhood dating from centuries later seem to be inadvertently drawing on this stance when they claim that the self exists in narrative; that it is in story-like action that life becomes intelligible, tellable, recallable, and thus subjectivity, too, comes to play a pivotal role in the interpretation of experience.

1.3. Being(s) (in) Narrative: Attesting to Selfhood and Identity in Literary Fictions

The discussion on selfhood is not in any manner limited to the difficulties concerning the categorisation of the self. The very possibility that a self can be attested to, as well as the epistemological questions concerning our ability to grasp our selves as such and have

knowledge of our identities as tokens of our worldly experience, have both been a central concern of philosophical inquiry ever since the self's return to prominence in the seventeenth century, and many of the problems posed within the field remain to this day critically unresolved. For my purposes here, I will be focusing on fictionalist and narrativist approaches to selfhood as examples of how similar vocabularies and imaginaries have come to historically pervade discussions on philosophy and literature alike. Further, it shall be laid bare that it is in the very constructivism surrounding selfhood—one that is often interwoven with these approaches—that one may find both a critical attestation to the discursive constitution and collectivist erection of identity that is much attuned to postmodern thought, and a (perhaps inevitable) deployment of the deferring techniques that destabilised the self to unprecedented extents in the late twentieth-century—an instability around which the greater part of Wallace's fiction might be argued to orbit.

The fictionalist tendency, oft accompanied by a particular stance on the value of fiction and its antonymic relation not only to reality but to truth, can be seen in works as separate and wide-ranging as Hans Vaihinger's foundational contribution to philosophical fictionalism in *The Philosophy of "As if"* (1911/1935); Friedrich Nietzsche's fictionalist conclusions on the "I" *qua* subject in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886/2014) and *Twilight of the Idols* (1889/1990),[7] where he counter-phenomenologically "denies that there is any self-identity and, further, denies that there are things or objects" (Nola 545); or David Hume's empiricist approach to the self as a fiction derived from a chain of perception and expectation in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739/2007), where he famously concludes that "when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat, cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and can never observe anything but the perception" (165).

At the core of these works is an almost derogatory or overtly negationist understanding of selfhood and/or fiction by which they become an illusion; a cluster of phenomenological data lacking verifiable unity; something lesser than, and opposed to "the real"—if something is a fiction, it follows, it does not hold value to the extent and in the manner in which the non-fictional or "real" can, nor should it be claimed to exist fully. *The Philosophy of "As if,"* for instance, attempts to demonstrate how fiction "plays an enormous part in science, in world-philosophies and in life," but retains an understanding of fiction as "appearance, the consciously-false" (xli). Further, it traces the mind's propensity to the so-defined fictional back to a pathologized necessity "to seek every possible means of assistance, external as well as internal" in order to, through developmental compulsion, aid itself out of the "contradictory sensations [… and] assaults of a hostile external world" (12). In learning to exercise imagination as a way of survival, concludes Vaihinger, "man owes his mental development more to his enemies than to his friends" (12). Such a reading of fictionality as being equivalent to falsehood or illusion is transversal to many disciplines, and is often found in those most closely related to analyses articulated under the umbrella of literary studies, too. This leads to interpretations of what is considered to be encompassed under the label "fiction," in a strict sense, that (regardless of one's potential distrust in hard empiricism) much neglect the potentially fictional nature of "reality," as well as the immense contributions to the shaping of such a "reality" of both the "strictly fictional," and the "false."

This disregard of fictionality, together with the demeaning stance that these works often take when they reflect on the self as fictional construct—the self being fictional often equalling

[7] See Cardiello and Gori, 2016, or Hussain, 2007, for detailed discussions on Nietzsche's fictionalism of the self.

a lessened ontology, if any, in related literature—is directly opposite to those of narrative theories of the self, which regardless of their potentially different outlooks, claim the most fundamental manifestation of selfhood to be that of selfhood as *told* and *shared* with others—that is, as narratively and introspectively constituted, and imaginatively reconstructed. Some such theories argue that the self unfolds as such in its very articulation as personal narrative; as a story via which identity comes to be intelligible and sensitively *partageable*. This "personal narrative" would become recognisable as a self only inasmuch the self's very existence is narratively driven. This is not intended to imply that a clear delineation of fictionalist and narrative approaches is possible, as their conceptual proximity and the very limits of language make their overlapping a customary occurrence. Terry Eagleton's *The Meaning of Life*, for instance, draws on Nietzsche's grimmest take on fictionalism and literature in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) to maintain that "[w]hat we call 'life' is just a necessary fiction;" that if there were to be a "real self" beyond the illusory patterns of the literary as conceptualised by Nietzsche, it would stand beyond our reach, for, Eagleton tells us, "[w]ithout a huge admixture of fantasy, reality would grind to a halt" (2007, 9).

Irrespective of his potentially imprecise use of fantasy in opposition to the real, Eagleton's claim succeeds in pointing at the necessariness of fictional construction to our experience of the world. When made to face stories, it follows, human beings can, through linguistic sequencing, make intelligible that which was before unstorylike; unlinked; apperceptibly disengaged. The paradigms of "reality" and "non-fictionality" become substructural to fictions, which, in turn, can become the matrix through which the world can be thought. Without the storylike quality and narrative structure of sequenced thought, that is, truth value and fictionality would not be relevant notions to our thinking. We discuss truth, fiction, and truth in fiction only insofar as our psychologically processed experience of the world is narrative in form. In his study on cognitive narratology and otherworld experience, Richard J. Gerrig examines the metaphorical uses of certain recurrent phrases in the description of the experience of reading (1993, 1-25), such as "being transported by" or "performing" a narrative, and concludes that even the most minimal narrative manages "to transport an experiencer away from the here and now" (3).

This sense of displacement, however, poses further problems with regards to whether identity in narrative can retain any validity when made to face philosophical criteria. It is unclear, for instance, if when we speak of imaginative transportation we refer to the ability to be guided into other realities by the text and extend cognition to them, or to the possibility, much more nuanced and certainly infinitely more complex, of indeed "becoming," in a functional, temporal sense, someone else through our consumption of an-other perspective as articulated in (literary) narrative. Further, if such a sense of self, a disposable garment, is to be understood as replacing or merging with one's own, however fleetingly, it becomes unavoidable to speak of it as a *necessary* tool to reality apperception. We would need the mental structures that erect and dissect narrative to consume and participate in the sensible world. Likewise, narrative processing not only provides knowledge of other subjectivities and worlds, but through its potential to contribute to the shaping of one's views and self-(hi)story, it unfolds as not only transformative but *constitutive* of one's very self. One can only claim a sense of identity by inscription and delimitation (in what would become some manner of Adornian self-reflective recognition), and one can only inscribe their identity in frameworks and paradigms that are narrative in form and must be accessed, consequently, through narrative codes. Reading character, be it fictional or otherwise, thus becomes the primal learning experience in what concerns identity formation—I am only because others exist, I can only ascribe descriptors to

my "self" because I am inscribed in language, and those descriptors can only crystallise into identity-related meaning because there is a collective, historical, and communal agreement that allows that it be so.

John Locke, who wrote extensively on the question of personal identity, argued that there was no functional separation between the metaphysical debate on the condition of selfhood and the epistemological debate on humans' ability to be conscious of themselves. This comes as no surprise, provided how in his early works, Locke was eager to maintain personal identity's quintessential condition to be that for two people A and B to be identical, A must be able to remember having an experience belonging to B.[8] That is to say that Locke would not have attested to any *idea* of the self beyond a given human being's conscious understanding of it as a weaving of all manner of recollections concerning their lived experience.

This conflation of metaphysics and epistemology is much contested, primarily because, should we accept it, it "would deprive us of the resources with which to make sense of the possibilities of ignorance and error with respect to ourselves—of forgetting and delusion" (Rovane, 23). Assuming that the subject can think inaccurately of herself also appears to lead to the conclusion that there is some manner of selfhood beyond the subject's understanding of it, and that the subject can merely attempt to introspectively understand—to whatever extent such an understanding might be possible—the particularities of her personal identity as lived. A further objection is whether other subjects' apperception of a given human being's self can contribute in any manner to that very self's definition; that is to say, whether one may be known by another in the same way one knows oneself or, even, whether another's knowledge of oneself may hold a complementary value to one's own. This last objection, if glanced at through the lens of narrative theories of identity, may even succeed in putting an end to the previous one: if a person's self is a socially-inscribed story, co-written by all relevant agents, then a subject's understanding of herself should not be spoken of as being "hindered" or "imperfect" in light of other people's knowledge of her; her identity would be, rather, subjected to interpretation, and in its being freed from her apperception of it, it would also prove to be irreducible to monolithic stability, no longer able to fill its (i.e. the self's) place as the greatest of all the grand-narratives of the modern episteme.

1.4. A Radically Condensed History of Post-Realist Attitudes toward Literary Subjectivity

Discussions concerning the self in literature (that of the author and its role in fictional poiesis, characters' ability to convey selfhood in a verisimilar way, and the readers' selves before the

[8] This would come to be known as Locke's pivotal memory criterion. For my purposes here, I will not be providing significant insight on the updates and objections to Locke's and other theorists' memory criteria. Neo-Lockeans have repeatedly sought to update the basic formulation in order to turn necessity into plausibility, thus acknowledging that subjects may forget about having experienced what they indeed have. Other theorists, particularly since Shoemaker's *Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity* (1963), have paid a growing amount of attention to the ways in which our bodily experience of identity and the world is a conditioning, complementary factor to the circumscription, and even existence, of a self. Numerous, perfected versions of Locke's criterion have arisen over time, attempting to face these and other related difficulties. The most significant commonality shared by all memory criteria, and the one that appears of most interest to the present study, is that they are all founded on the assumption that a given memory as experienced by a bodily subject in the first-person cannot be shared, transferred, or explained as it is to another in any manner that allows the recalled experience to remain identical in what concerns its mode of apperception—and, consequently, in what concerns its content. It is precisely on this basis that memory may be claimed to serve as a condition for identity: if recollections hold some essential property by which they become exclusive to and *possessed* by a given subjectivity, they thus constitute an identificatory condition by which that very subjectivity may be distinguished from all others.

literary text) have long accompanied these philosophical concerns. Following the advent of romanticism in the nineteenth century, understandings of the self and its potential expression in and through the work of art changed drastically. The poetry of the Romantics was informed by a sense of distrust towards, and rejection of Humean scepticism and the hyper-rationality of the enlightened, Lockean subject, who, through the change in perspective that the Age of Reason had brought upon Western civilisation, Kant had claimed to have "come of age." In the context of these advancements, and most notably in the hands of Coleridge, a new current rejecting the passivity of the thinking mind advanced the idea that the seemingly unbridgeable gap between consciousness and perceptible qualia could be bridged through the creative capacity of the (impassioned) imagination. The self, previously understood as a mere myth of literary consciousness, looming over fiction in the form of a productive abstraction, figures in these works "as creed, goal, burden, necessity, sometimes as token of revolution" (Howe, 66).

Further, and in direct opposition to Locke's theory on the self's formation, both Coleridge and William Blake argued for the subject to be an active contributor to the institution of consciousness, instead of a mere bystander resulting from her experiences. The positing of this active mind, the poetic character of woman, allowed for there to be a predisposition towards transcendental imagination, freeing the poet's poietic capacities from the limitations of qualia and prior understandings of reason: "Mans perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception. He perceives more than sense (tho' ever so acute) can discover" (Blake 1788/1988, 2). Part of this wish for liberation from the Lockean self is expressed through a rhetoric of destruction by which the "'Changeable' and the 'Annihilable' [… become] virtual synonyms" (Clark 1997, 466): "The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself / Affection or Love becomes a State, when divided from Imagination / The Memory is a State always, & the Reason is a State / Created to be Annihilated & a new Ratio Created" (Blake 1788/1988, 132). The Lockean self, thus, is to be rejected and destroyed by virtue of its ephemerality as a state, substituted by human beings' power to imagine; a self unbound by the constraints of enlightened reason and its circumscriptive criteria.

Through the centrality of the projected subject in the work of the Romantics, the divine experience of the world and its extraordinariness became accessible to the writer and conceptually graspable through the work of art. In his "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802/2008),[9] often regarded as marking the beginning of Romanticism in the British Isles, Wordsworth noted how, in springing from observation of human life and the exaltation of the mundane wonders of it, "Poetry […] can boast of no celestial Ichor that distinguishes her vital juices from those of prose […, for] the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both." Upon understanding it so, the glorified romantic Poet as conceptualised in the very preface "acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement;" and Poetry, her craft, became the preferred literary form to speak of the self—as Wordsworth remarked in a later addition to the "Preface"—for in it resides "an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe […;] a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves" (180-422).

Percy Bysshe Shelley spoke of the poet's task in similar terms, arguing that "metrical language […], whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man […] is a more direct

[9] The *Lyrical Ballads* were first published in 1798, but the "Preface" referenced here was significantly expanded four years later, in 1802.

representation of the actions and passions of our internal being, and is susceptible of more various and delicate combinations" (2009, 28). Even Emerson, who was fiercely critical of the romantics, agreed to the Aristotelian romanticisation of plot—and verifiable plot at that—as being foundational to the self's representational potentialities, informed in US literature by "American character [… being] marked by a more than average delight in acute perception" (1836/1950, 241): "Human character," Emerson concludes, "evermore publishes itself. The most fugitive deed and word, the mere air of doing a thing, the intimated purpose, expresses character. If you act you show character; if you sit still, if you sleep, you show it" (1836/1950, 203). It is not only through actions that are present that character is expressed and conveyed; the resting, static self is as much a self, as much in action, and as much traversed by characterisation, as the one that is found, so to speak, "in motional action."

In United States transcendentalism, thus, a similar turn to the reflective self takes place: the thinking author, for whom nature exists within, observes how nature's joke, the spurious and unvirtuous sides of humanity, becomes literature's (Emerson 1836/1950, 239); literature's function, of its part, becoming that of illuminating life: "The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it" (285). The poet is likewise made to occupy the perceiving, passion-driven centre from which, through a sensibility and propensity to observation and wonder, they come to descry the potential of human experience. In the work of Walt Whitman, for instance, the nature of the reflective mind as submitted to the world's maelstrom of events and wonders is questioned to its very core. In *Song of Myself* (1855/2001), the reader first comes in contact with the very intention of the work: self-presenting and self-conveying ("I celebrate myself, and sing myself"), presupposing an honest bond between writer and reader by which the former alleges to be presenting himself—a textualized version of his subjectivity—to the latter. In Whitman's transcendentalism, the romantic poet finds in his verse a way to integrate and inscribe his self into the intensely spiritual worldliness of the reality he filters through consciousness. A particularly renowned instance of Whitman's treatment of the self involves his positing of a plurality of inner, contradicting voices later in the poem ("I am large, I contain multitudes").

The answer to the question posed by the existence of Whitman's plurality of inner voices, one may conclude, lies in the unity of consciousness; in the inescapable realisation, necessary for the subject to process her very intelligibility, that she is to see herself as unified and to justify her "selves" dissonances through narrative, remaining thence "in character," and, in so doing, arriving at an understanding of the self that is definitionally "whole." The acknowledgement of such a plurality, on the contrary, would require from an exercise of introspection that is counterintuitive to the general workings of the mind. This claim is in partial accord with David Hume's in the *Treatise*. Hume's rigid empiricism was nearly antagonistic to the worldview and approach to the arts of the Romantics, but his understanding of the self as a conglomerate of sensations, perceptions, and thoughts, unnecessarily tied beyond the subject's self-imposed belief that they are "owned" by a single entity (1739/2007, 164-171)—what is often referred to as Hume's "bundle theory"—is resonant with Whitman's fluctuant poetic voice and its vindication of a multivocal self. Further, in arguing that "[t]he mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations" (1739/2007, 165), the "Romantic Poet" as a type of subject, nuancedly construed by authors on both sides of the Atlantic, becomes a consonant overtone to Hume's work on the self, regardless of their romanticist rejection of hard empiricism.

The turn to exalted experience and passion of the romantic and transcendentalist worldviews,[10] construed to be the lenses through which to access and confer sublime meaning to aesthetic experience and affective life, also evinced a shortcoming in the mimetic tradition which would gradually become more noticeable through time. In experiencing the work of art, and especially poetry, as a revelatory apparatus "which at the same time defines and completes what it makes manifest," literary Romanticism succeeded in implying the existence of a component beyond the merely representational that would define the value of all artistic production; a component through which—and regardless of the work's potentially descriptive elements—art would be able to prompt a redefining, illuminating experience; some manner of epiphanic moment along the lines of high modernism (what Wallace later labelled "*moment of grace*" in his 2007 story "Good People") to which rigid mimeticism could not possibly aspire to attest (Taylor 1989, 419).

Transcendentalism, albeit identifying inner spiritual experience as the source of the writer's unique approach to the perceptible world, similarly spoke of an imperfect element in the tradition of much realist mimesis, referring to the type of literature that may convey "utter truths," and do so as a consequence of writers' holding "primarily on nature," to "rise[…] above the ground line of familiar facts and [… be] inflamed with passion or exalted by thought" (Emerson 1836/1950, 17). The self behind literature, when "properly stimulated," would thus come to embody some manner of Adamic power by which her "picturesque language" may be bequeathed the ability to refer, transcendentally, to something holy beyond the apperceived. The author's self is hence mystified as extraordinary, being able to resort to language as a way to unravel the deeper significance of experience. The reader, whose self stands before an authorially decoded and signified reality, is to find in the work of art a type of enlightenment, which, both in the romantic and transcendentalist traditions, points at the nobleness of natural objects in their capacity to contain significances beyond the utterly re-presentational.

The tendency to account for a plurality of inner "selves" within a single subject can also be traced onto the *doppelgänger*'s rise to popularity in the context of Dark Romanticism. This uncanny appearance of the double, one sharing my subjectivity as phenomenologically perceptible but who is not myself, along with the sinister qualities that the image was frequently attributed, had contributed to the exploration of the eeriness of split consciousnesses. The image's primary appeal is that of rejoicing in the inexorable horror that emerges from any shattering of the self that results in the misrecognition of one's "multitudes." In many cases, this divided self became an antagonistic other embodying a given character's darkest impulses, resulting from her inability to reconcile them within an intelligible, unified self. This becomes most apparent in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), as well as in much of Poe's short fiction ("William Wilson" is the most evident example in this regard, but instances of duplicity that similarly tear the self in two or pit some affects and impulses against others are more succinctly present in "The Fall of the House of Usher" or "The Tell Tale Heart," to name but a few). This fragmentation of the self as caused by the collision of seemingly incompatible drives can be found throughout the history of Western literature—it may even be argued to be foundational to human inclination to fiction-writing, insofar as it might be due to the helpful in dissecting these complications in lived being that people have turned to fiction

[10] I am here willingly neglecting the substantial ways in which the two movements differ in their approach and interpretation of the world in favour of their similar outlook on authorial subjectivities as corresponding to "liberating gods [… who] are free, and […] make free" (Emerson 1836/1950, 335); the Poet as "describ[ing] and imitat[ing] passions [… with the wish] to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes […] and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs" (Wordsworth 1802/2008, 421).

seeking illumination. In Goethe's *Faust*, the self-other dichotomy is made obvious through the reading of the other as a dark reflection of one's self, inhabiting one's own body: "You only know one driving force, / and may you never seek to know the other! / Two souls, alas! reside within my breast, / and each is eager for a separation" (2014/1808, 30; 1110-1113). The split self's contradicting impulses reflect the tormenting hardship of navigating one's wishes, tensing the notion of what it meant for a literary self to stay "in character;" almost daringly presenting the reader with the conflicting, unassembled plurality of being, a plurality at which the romantic writer—in itself a romanticised figure which shaped contemporary understandings of penmanship—could dare gaze.

In what could be interpreted to be a natural expansion on the introduction of the manifoldness of selfhood at the hands of the Romantics, the arrival of modernism, much opposed to the pretensions of the realist tradition, posited a significant change in the perception of the self as conveyable through the arts. The Aristotelian understanding of mimesis,[11] which had remained definitional to most Western readings on the representational power of fiction and that had begun to shatter as a consequence of romantic transcendentalism, was to be radically challenged by modernism's understanding of literary writing as a (tangentially social) source of direct self-knowledge. Mimesis had been folded in on itself: the representational arts were no longer devices aiming at the minute conveyance of perceptible qualia, but became, instead, "a critical mirror, showing the irreconcilable nature of the aesthetic and the social world" (Habermas 1981, 10). Modernist narrative, thus, came to entail a breakaway from the nineteenth-century novel by denouncing its naiveté, "laying charge against its predecessor that it has falsely assumed that life and the self can be made transparent and coherently ordered by the authority of a narrator who organises the life experiences of characters into logically-ordered plot structures" (Sotirova 2013, 25).

As modes of representing the experience of human beings such as the stream of consciousness rose to prominence in the early twentieth-century, understandings of the relationship between selfhood and literature gradually allowed for subjectivity to be widely spoken of as being a thing *in* fiction, as opposed to a soul-like abstraction to be known through the arts, but never to be claimed to have a life of its own within them. As Baudelaire wrote in his address at the beginning of *Paris Spleen*, speaking of his literary determinations as a bystander to the unfolding of modernity: "Who has not, in bouts of ambition, dreamt this miracle, a poetic prose, musical without rhythm or rhyme, supple and choppy enough to accommodate the lyrical movement of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the bump and lurch of consciousness?" (1869/2010, 3). Resulting from this enhanced interest in lived subjectivity, high modernism, the interwar avant-garde, and the postmodernist developments that were to follow would gradually reject the unified self as artistic muse in favour of a broken or fragmented consciousness feeding on a reality that was beginning to be perceived as progressively more torn apart. Art thus rose to give testament of how, as William Butler Yeats famously advanced in his 1919 "The Second Coming," "[t]hings fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (2000, 158). The mimetic paradigm, which had remained relatively stable and unchanged throughout the ages, was critically questioned in the *fin de siècle* and the early twentieth century

[11] In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that "[e]pic poetry […] and the poetry of tragic drama, and, moreover, comedy and dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-playing and harp-playing, these, speaking generally, may all be said to be 'representations of life'" (1447a), not so much to advance an imitative agenda by which the arts would produce a lesser version of the world, as Plato maintained, but rather to pose "a rich locus of aesthetic issues relating to the status, significance, and effects of several types of artistic representation" (Halliwell 2002, 152). This representational stance, along with the consequential subordination of narrative fictions to "the real world," has lived on to significantly permeate present-day understandings of art, regardless of the post-romanticist challenges as outlined here.

via the novelty of the way in which the self was beginning to be "inserted" in fiction, not so much as a mirrored reflection concerning human beings' roles in society, but rather as a highly aestheticized token of the greatness of what the mimetic mirror could not possibly dream of grasping.

Given the subjective turn which literature thus experienced, and the impossibility to have a multifaceted, plural self be stabilised and contained in the work, the finiteness of the literary work as mirror, offering a glance at the minds of humanity, could no longer be argued to remain determinate. Nor was it its purpose any longer to contain, and to find coherence in, the disjointedness outside of it. Images of the world as provided by the arts gradually began to present themselves, and to be submitted to their being interpreted as, ontology-devoid simulacra (Baudrillard 1981), endlessly deflecting meaning away from stabilisation (Derrida 1967), and thus denying themselves and their readership any definite, representational permanence. As Jamesonean postmodern theory is quick to remind us, the transition between the modern and the postmodern is essentially untraceable; it cannot be pinpointed with any manner of historical precision. This is not merely a consequence of the two movements bleeding into each other, but it also responds to the historical periods' palimpsestic nature; their interdependency draws on their functioning as bridges between a past submitted to unending dissection and a future in the process of being poietically imagined. Their superposition, further, is often a matter of emphasis, with postmodernism instituting merely a change of optics with respect to modernism. In what concerns their treatment of selfhood, argues John McGowan, the strengthening of a sense of inner identity and the threat of its dissolution are ever-present, with modernism and postmodernism both introducing contradicting discourses on the subject and modernist and postmodernist readings of the movements favouring opposite interpretations of all such discourses: "The distinction between modernism and postmodernism," we may read, "becomes whichever side of the tension is emphasized: the formation of a self or the suspicion that identity masks and ever-present and perhaps even blissful diversity" (1990, 419).

These contradictions, further, respond to a wish to conflate polarising views on identity, seemingly antagonistic experiences regarding human beings' interiority and our wish to conceptualise it. The pendulum between fortified discourses on the self, which sustain the prevalence of new modes of representing consciousness in modern art, and weakened ontologies of subjectivity, which respond to the interrogation of selfhood that ensued, has swung in incessant conversation throughout the two movements. Thus, it may be stated that the articulation of subjectivity in the history of the tumultuous twentieth century has been ever-changing to a degree to which it never had before. "The quintessential question of modernity concerned identity" (208), maintains Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real* (1996), drawing on Paul Gauguin's renowned existentialist query.[12] Whereas discourse on modernism often approaches that sense of identity as a driving force, inviting new conceptualisations and modes of representing consciousness, discourse articulated under the wing of the postmodern makes the very possibility for a self a precarious matter, turning the voices of the modern into a dissolving, as opposed to invigorating, force. Following the loss of stable subjectivity that derived from the (predominantly French) works dating from—or sharing a sense of kinship through their relation to—the 1968 social revolts, the question of postmodernism gradually became, rather, that of whether there could be a self to speak of in the first place, and if so, through what manner of social or academic artifice we could go back to *believing in it*. As

[12] Gauguin's celebrated 1897 painting, culminated during his second stay at Tahiti, goes by the title "Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?" ("*D'où venons nous? Que sommes nous? Où allons nous?*" in the original French).

postmodernism continued to increasingly concern itself with subjecthood, literature and theory both bore witness to how

> [l]ittle by little the exploration of the subconscious, a structuralist game, led to its own dismemberment: both the inflation of images that referred only to themselves and the dislocation of a world deprived of meaning challenged the notion of the subject itself. There are no more autobiographies or self-portraits, but instead randomness, scattered pieces, the anonymity of the impersonal "one," a shattered or cobbled together self. Crossing the mirror leads to nothing. The world of the other side is perhaps […] only a doctored replica that not only highlights the shortcomings of the real, but in addition, it inflicts its own inconsistency on itself. (Melchior-Bonnet 2001, 264)

The broken quality of the postmodern subject is readily attestable through the emergence of a series of coetaneous concepts aiming at describing this perceived disunion: R. D. Laing's renowned "divided self" (1960), Jacques Lacan's similarly celebrated "split subject" (1966), or Jacques Derrida's contention that "the subject is […] constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral" (1972/2002, 29). This turn to subjectivity is mirrored in literature, where it oftentimes gives way to the erection of a "broken" or pathologized one; a self that is beyond intelligibility because it has been torn and made sick by its circumstances. In Don DeLillo's 1982 *The Names*, one of the characters reflects on how "[i]n this century the writer has carried on a conversation with madness. We might almost say of the twentieth-century writer that he aspires to madness. Some have made it, of course, and they hold special places in our regard. To a writer, madness is a final distillation of self, a final editing down. It's the drowning out of false voices" (140).

This shift towards shattered subjectivities is manifold, and it would be too ambitious and reductive a task to claim it to respond to any manner of advancement, sentiment or academic turn concerning any given facet of twentieth-century society. The capital question, however, succinctly underlying all such accounts, remains: "What […] about modern writing […] tends to dissolve the self and compel its reinvention?" (Goodheart 1988, 441). I do not aspire to provide an answer to this query that responds to the vast complexity of conditions that allowed for such a change in perception, but would like, rather, to point at the importance of elucidating how twentieth-century developments in different disciplines have located literary studies in what seems to me at once a privileged position with regards to contemporary discussions on identity, and an extremely delicate one in terms of how it is made to coexist with, and navigate through discourses and nomenclatures concerning its very subject matter that did not exist priorly. Further, literary studies are now required to situate themselves in relation to the domains from which these concepts emerge—domains which, very often, did not intersect in a manner this critical with the literary expert's endeavours. Being aware of such developments in science and technology, as well as attesting to the fragmentariness and alienation of modern life, many of the advances that were to define the anglophone literary canon over the last hundred years would be demarcated by the self's new array of (im)possibilities, as though haunted by the realisation that what had been construed to be human identity was not only more problematic a notion than had been believed, but perhaps, in its quintessential instability, not even a centre to narrative articulation that could remain *functionally* unquestioned.

1.5. Thinking the Self beyond Modernism; or, The Postmodernist Turn as a Reconfiguration of Subjecthood

Postmodernism's ever-present anxieties towards subjectivity and the human could be argued to have been inherited from, and the direct product of, an attitudinal change in the generalised perception of the self that had sprung from—and defined—modernism. The paradigmatic, anti-realist change that the modernist movement brought forth—most clearly expressed in its "commitment to aesthetic innovation [and forsaking of] the representational function of art [in favour of] artifice" (Kavaloski 2014, 14) resulted in a radical alteration of what it meant to convey the "human" in literature. Modernism's turn to the inner life of character "equate[d] man's inwardness with an abstract subjectivity" (Eysteinsson 1990/2018, 26), seeking to (re)present the world as experienced through the very lens that allows for the experiencing; to bring back the unquestionably humane and intricately subjective in *lived* reality.[13] Thus, and in direct opposition to the realist-leaning tendencies that had overwhelmingly defined the literary canon up until the twentieth-century, "human" was no longer mimetically contained and portrayed in the work of literature through a detailed examination of the society she lived in and her interplay with other characters, but only via her very apperception of all such circumstances and other identities as limitedly contained in, and presented by the text. In Erich Auerbach's foundational attempt to map the uses and evolution of the mimetic tradition, he reflects on the modernist challenge as being, fundamentally, a change in "the author's attitude toward the reality of the world he represents" (535). Auerbach seeks to reinscribe the challenges of high modernism into the endangered paradigm of Aristotelian mimesis through the argument that, however labyrinthine modernism's exaltation of beauty became, "reality" remained the spring to experimentalism's every course. The focus had changed; there was a difference, indeed, in authorial perception, but, Auerbach proposed, a wish to re-present reality for what it is and encapsulate such an experience cathartically, lived on in modernist fiction.

This became possible for Auerbach because of modernism's overt concern with a historically dismissed "inner reality" that had to be represented; a psychic life which, albeit not as clearly perceptible as the objects of minute description of the realists, remains a part of the empirical world and stimulates responses in the readers accordingly. The presumption of a vast knowledge on the characters' circumstances and the imposition of a framework and a code through which to interpret their actions became in much of modernist fiction a tentative approach to a partial, subjective reality that—almost timidly—revealed itself *in* the work, and was never—as a consequence of its referring to the essential qualities and defining poles of human character—to do so fully.

Virginia Woolf's 1924 essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" becomes, in this regard, a manifesto for this new outlook on the role that authors were to play in the modern era: that of in-lookers, gazing at human nature from afar and yet trying to depict it from within, wanting to explore the implications that it had to the human being suffering from her own condition as human. As Wallace would later write on the particularities of the craft, fiction writers were gradually beginning to redefine what it meant for them to be "oglers [… who] tend to lurk and to stare […,] born watchers […,] viewers" (1993, 656). The literary author was no longer to stare at Mrs. Brown as she looked out the window, devoting herself (i.e. the author) to a detailed description of the lady's history and circumstance, but rather prey on the actuality of her

[13] It should be noted, however, that through the inaccessible aesthetics that would come to define the high modernist canon, the newly found techniques through which to access and display human beings' inner realities also became fundamentally restrictive; a product specifically designed for the intellectual stimulation of a cultural elite.

experience, looking very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically, this once, at her, at life, and at human nature (Woolf 1924, 16). The modernist author draws less pleasure, as does James Joyce's proto-artist Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "from the reflection of the glowingly sensible world through the prism of a language manycoloured and richly storied than from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions mirrored perfectly in a lucid supple periodic prose" (154).[14] In so doing, a change in the onlooker's approach to the object of her devotion took place, and a rereading of the much established notion that "human situations are writers' food" was soon to follow (Wallace 1993, 656), placing at its centre the impending, markedly modernist realisation that the human can only be made present in any such observed situation insofar as that situation is lived by—and thus made to mean something to—a character.

The modernist turn to individuality, along with its multi-perspectival approach to truth, experience, and reality, lingers onto much postmodernist fiction, fulfilling, though most peculiarly, Woolf's prophecy that "the novelist in future will realize more and more the importance of […] reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number" (1921). The ontological questioning at the core of the postmodernist enterprise has often derived in works of literature that interrogate the inward-looking subject of modernism, rejoicing in its fragmentary interweavement with other consciousness, and often doing so to the point of reducing the introspectively subjective character of the modern—and many times through its exposition to a growingly unstable or incoherent outside world—to utter senselessness. In William Gaddis' *The Recognitions* (1955), for instance, as protagonist Wyatt ventures through the streets of twentieth century Paris, remnants of conversations disrupt the narrative to present the reader with the fragmentariness and complexity of social experience. At a particular moment in the novel, the idealistic potential of art to make sense of torn, postmodern reality becomes most apparent, when Wyatt speaks of Picasso's *Night Fishing at Antibes* (1939) and marvels, at a moment of non-aestheticized epiphanic realisation, that

> when I saw it, it was one of those moments of reality, of near-recognition of reality, I'd been… I've been worn out in this piece of work, and when I finished it I was free, free all of a sudden out in the world. In the street everything was unfamiliar, everything and everyone I saw was unreal, I felt like I was going to lose my balance out there, this feeling was getting all knotted up inside me and I went in there just to stop for a minute. And then I saw this thing. When I saw it all of a sudden everything was freed into one recognition, really freed into reality that we never see. (Gaddis 1955, 119).

Pablo Picasso's avant-garde is often praised for its revolutionary inclusion of multi-perspectival approaches to objects within single paintings, the same way much modernist prose rejoices in the fundamental differences that reality presents when apperceived and recounted by distinct subjects. What is most particular in Gaddis' novel is not quite that he draws on the preceding tendencies in this way, but rather, that instead of having his characters attest to this fragmentariness as mimetically responding to the brokenness of the postmodern world, he has them find solace in it, taking refuge in the calculatedly disruptive import of the post-modernist state of art—even though such solace proves to be double-edged as most main characters spiral into death or emotional misery by the end of the book. One of them—devoted composer Stanley—perishes under the metaphorical weight of tradition, having a cathedral collapse on

[14] It is precisely to one of Joyce's closing sentences in *Portrait*, in which the narrative voice claims the soul a smithy, that Wallace intertextually refers through the title of the short story "The Soul Is not a Smithy," which conveys the disruption of the positivity and potential that stood at the heart of modernist ambition, giving way for a broken subjecthood that looks just as searchingly, but stands disheartened by its findings.

top of him as he plays. The only possible consolation that remains is the knowledge, as is made certain by the novel's epilogue, that his art will survive him.

It is unclear, however, whether there has survived an attestable locus in discourse into which to inscribe selfhood so that it may live on in such a way; one through which postmodern art could acquire, following its own precepts, the atemporal value that is often derived from great literature's ability to encapsulate and allegedly re-present universals of human experience—especially if one is to consider how central to the postmodern challenge is the very questioning of all such representations. In Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* (2011), one of the characters muses over a line by theologian Meister Eckhart, who maintained that "[o]nly the hand that erases can write the true thing," and begins to wonder "if he was supposed to erase himself, or his past, or other people, or what. He was ready to begin erasing immediately, as soon as he knew what to rub out" (103). A similar indeterminacy to the one tormenting Eugenides' character appears to haunt much of postmodernist literature, preying on fiction's purpose in the *après-garde* scenario of the second half of the century, where literature as a medium was beginning to feel, as Barth would poignantly attest to, overexploited to the point of exhaustion (1967/1984, 64-65).

Authors, critics, and theorists alike, now perfectly equipped with their respective rubbers, had been carefully trained in the art of de(con)struction. Fiction writers, on their part, had been forcefully submitted to discourse; and discourse's very fabric: language, deemed the preferred locus for all things linguistic, had been pronounced deferringly indeterminate. The canon's biased filtering, together with the growing popularity of aesthetic subjectivism, gradually beclouded any prospective atemporal greatness at which writers could aspire. Notions such as "the Great American Novel" were beginning to descend into a spiral of timely glory, and the concept itself began to be dissected and marginalised, or even claimed to "at long last be headed for permanent eclipse" (Buell 2014, 461). In this context, literature's universal appeal, once unquestioned, appeared to stand at its most precarious. Wallace's own attempt at writing some manner of Great American Novel with *Infinite Jest*, drawing on a Pynchonian, mid-century tradition from the synchronic perspective of metafictional postrealism, became, through Wallace's very discourse, a product of much uncertainty, and one whose greatness (should there remain any guidelines after which to agree to its existence) would be tainted by self-doubt and a hyperconscious hysteria of its own impending limitedness.

The conceptualisation of the postmodern as a socio-artistic array of phenomena has been greatly conditioned by a self-imposed, implied tendency that it should be defined by opposition. Both in continental philosophy, where Jean-François Lyotard's foundational *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) stands out, and in the anglophone tradition philosophy, where we might turn to Fredric Jameson's 1984 "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" for a piece of comparable momentum, we find similar evidence of an inclination towards negativity that had defined much of the artistic production dating from the 50s and 60s, and was, still, to influence writers throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Lyotard's approach to the postmodern, which diagnosed it to be the result of a growing disbelief in the metanarratives of the old world, both reflects a state of affairs as sociologically inferred and sets the postmodernist agenda on a destructionist quest. Jameson's description of the subjugating, invisible mechanisms that the media and the capitalist world had come to constitute is similarly concerned with a desire to oppose the social order and the governing superstructures that characterise it. It is thus by dismantling, questioning and rejecting that the postmodern—and thus postmodernist art—came to be theorised upon. The emergence of a new locus of

importance, where the previously discarded and hierarchically downtrodden would be made to occupy every intellectual centrality, rapidly constituted the new "normal," however ceaselessly questioned such a sense of "normalcy" would be. Similarly, metafiction's revolutionary outlook on storytelling became the standardised procedure permeating the new canon that was inadvertently coming into existence, and postmodernism's renewing logic gradually began to dismount its very principles to dust, particularly so after the rise to extreme academic popularity of French deconstructionism.

The sense of anesthetised optimism and incumbered positivity that defined much of Wallace's work and ideas is oftentimes related to postmodernism's negative approach to intellectual life. Postmodernism's negative take on the climate of verifiable progress of modernity has led many to consider it inherently destructive from its inception, defining it via the things it wished to oppose and, through the use of a much-disputed prefix, as though it wished to signal a temporality that is "after" the modern(ist) but on whose exactitudes and dates we find little consensus. If "postmodernism" in literature should be best encapsulated by a series of artistic tendencies, devices, and attitudes towards the text, one would easily find instances of all such contraptions before the twentieth century, and would thus want to stand against the temporal dimension that the "post" in "postmodernist" prompts.

If, on the contrary, the sociological aspects of the second half of the century were to serve as the grounds on which to sustain the need for its temporality, one would face the much intricate question of why, and in what ways, the Western societies of the second half of the past century could be claimed to constitute a unified period. Similarly—if one subscribes to any such considerations—there emerges a need for an exploration of how they have elicited a uniform artistic response, and in what ways postmodernism as a major movement stands as a primal cultural force that is specifically pertinent to the decades following the World Wars. Because of these challenges in its semantics, postmodernism has often been defined by signalling that which it is not; that which it opposed; that from which it wished to differentiate itself. It thus became "a quality—a deficiency, perhaps—that one attributes to the other: it is that which one denounces, finds at fault, declares oneself against" (Green 2005, 1). Its inner logics, on their part, have been presented in similarly countercultural terms, as being "organized […] through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation" (Krauss 1979, 43); or, in literature's case in particular, as leading "the work [… not to] achieve a purity and aesthetic rigor that compensates for its intransigent refusal to have any use whatsoever, [… stumbling] up against its own incapacity and inertia, and [… thus being] marked by lack and melancholy" (Green 2005, 11).

However oppositional it might be claimed to be, rightful objections have been made that "postmodernism does *not* entirely negate modernism" (Hutcheon 1988, 30), for it needs of the modern to find articulation as a new paradigm; it needs of a prior object (the "pre-postmodernist") to exploit, and exhaust, and rethink entirely. If we, as a consequence, deem them as unequivocally interrelated, postmodernism can be understood, rather, as a natural development of the modern enterprise, shifting the aestheticized experience of literary modernism into a new landscape that is informed by, and contextually mimics how twentieth-century, Western society ventured into novel conceptual territories in every regard imaginable. The postmodern is thus claimed to reinterpret the modern, prompt a critical switch of optics in what concerns the latter's very foundations, and attempt to become a destructing force driven by the hope to rebuild something more genuine and less dogmatic from the remains than the metanarratives of old. Theory does not appear to have yet arrived at the end of this reform,

forever hinted at in the horizon of the deconstructionist endeavour, although perhaps such a sense of resolution, contrary to the very postmodernist impulse, is undesired on principle. Further, this might even be argued to be a mere consequence of postmodernism being "too successful for its own agenda" in its urgency to defoliate thought (Huber 2014, 1), the consequence of which being its becoming at once an ungraspable quality, a powerful tool, and a movement ceaselessly on the brink of collapse.

In this regard, postmodernism's sense of constant suspicion is at once emancipating, insofar as it liberates intellectual activity from the constraints of a rigid ontology and the legacy of tokenised metanarratives, and it constitutes a prison of its own, where stability and permanency are forever precarious. The liberating impulses emerging from postmodernism as a paradigm are at odds with postmodernism's very incapacity to destroy, as opposed to deconstruct, the (material) systems and structures subjugating the individual. Further, when articulated through culture, its revolutionary aesthetics are entrapped from the offset, as they are supported and disseminated by the capitalist-phagocytised industries enabling thought and the arts to have a place in contemporary society. In her commentary on Joe Handler's presidential address to the Law and Society association, Patricia Ewick writes:

> The conception of the postmodern as representing possibility and choice is at odds with more materialist accounts of the postmodern condition as a pathological consequence of late- or post-Fordist capitalism […]. According to this materialist interpretation of postmodernity, what we identify as postmodern […] reveals less about the powerless and their choices than about those in power and how choices are constrained and denied. […] Handler seems caught between these two views of the postmodern condition: on the one hand, it is a way of operating a style […] that we can, through an act of will, decide to cast off; on the other hand, it is a condition of life to which we are shackled. (1992, 756)

This tension between seemingly contradictory forces led to the institution of a sense of generalised stasis in the artistic scene of late postmodernism, a consequential exaltation and natural development of what Barth had defined as "the literature of exhausted possibility" to speak of how "the used-upness of certain forms" had begun to be perceived as a limitation in what could actually be achieved through art (1967/1984, 64). In being immobilised because of the movement's self-negating, prolific contradictions, late postmodernist authors often resorted to conundrums, trauma, open-endedness, and narratives of such insurmountable symbolic weight that their interpretation became complex, and a consensus on their aesthetic value more difficult to achieve.

The paradigmatic turn at the core of the postmodernist challenge has often been argued to have favoured the doxastic over the epistemic, with subjectivism and belief systems often becoming intertwined, argued to have substituted, or even maintained to have become in themselves, modes of knowledge. This, as a consequence, has problematised the very concept of "knowledge," and thus of "knowledge of oneself," too, leaving them both in a state of unprecedented fragility. The all-encompassing terminology of modernity having been demystified and discredited, notions moved from absolute designators referring to a stable reality to catalysers of the individual experience of the subject. Hence why the postmodern subject needs rethinking, since the purpose of its very label has been made to face critical instability because of philosophy's turning into "a theory of multiplicities that refers to no subject as preliminary unit." In such a context, "[w]hat becomes important is not what is true or false, but the singular and the regular, the remarkable and the ordinary" (Deleuze 1991, 95). One thus arrives, following Deleuze, at the core logic of postmodernist thought: singularity is

to prevail over universality, but perhaps aporistically, it is no longer possible to take refuge in any manner of turn to the individual *qua subject*—understood in accordance to modern premises—as the source of either knowledge or belief in those very singularities. There thus emerges an individualistic multiplicity where the self and the subject both seem to have been lost to a growing interest in the specificity of "*pre-individual singularities and non personal individuations*" (Ibid.; emphasis in original) that stand deprived of the once-thinkable "human."

In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy on the matter of subjectivity and the postmodern, Jacques Derrida objected that the work by postmodern thinkers such as Lacan, Foucault or Althusser does not attest to the "liquidation of the subject," but rather evinces a need that subjectivity be rethought entirely and the discussion around it reopened, so that we might pose the question behind the entire problematic, which precedes, even, the arrival of postmodernism: "What are we designating […] under the concept of subject, in such a way that once certain predicates have been deconstructed, the unity of the concept and the name are radically affected?" (Derrida 1991, 99). He thus invites the debate to turn to the conditions that grounded subjectivity and anchored it at the centre of humanist thought and that have now, allegedly, been dismantled. Through such a reconfiguration, we may call for a destitution of "subject" as monad and the institution of a "new subject;" a "post-subject" whose claim on selfhood may "resist" postmodernism's many contrivances. Nancy objects, however, that the destitution of the subject as monad has at its core the deconstruction of the Hegelian claim that the subject is that which can retain *in itself* its own contradiction. Upon facing that it has lost the monopoly of its contradicting plurality, that it no longer retains a wholeness of sense before the probing eye of postmodern philosophy, Nancy invites that we interrogate "[a] *who* that would no longer have *this* property, but that would nevertheless be a *who*" (Nancy 1991, 101; emphasis in original). A subject retaining a sense of subjectivity, that is, which can no longer be the same nor respond to the same structures, but that must nonetheless be attested to as the being from which the discursive position springs; the source of the coordinates that allow a him or a her, however phantasmagorical it might have become, to remain both *in* and *beyond* the textual.

It could be maintained, however, that discourse, language and ideology serve as the fabric to our very social being; that the self and identity exist as emanations of subjectivity from these systems, being both produced and perpetrated by their workings. Judith Butler has gone so far as to maintain, in fact, that the typically postmodernist calls to awareness of—as well as potential fear towards—the omnipotence of discourse, the textual nature of reality, the death of subjectivity and the deconstruction of bodily experience, stem from postmodernism's very articulation "in the form of a fearful conditional or sometimes in the form of paternalistic disdain toward that which is youthful and irrational" (153). However, she also claims it apparent that, when made to serve the interests of political actors, postmodernism calls into question the epistemological, iterable structures and heritages that impregnate certain philosophical notions, and thus "denaturalize[s] the terms […] to designate these signs as sites of political debate" (167).

The thorough questioning of the preconditioning notions of subjectivity, selfhood or language, all three so critically vital to the (postmodern) critic's undertakings, does not deny the existence of that which they are agreed to represent, but rather relocates its interrogation at the centre; forces that all such notions be cross-examined alongside the textual, contentual constructions that their very presupposition has made possible. The nature that the self is to retain in the midst of such criticisms, however, is not fundamentally dissimilar in postmodernism from previous sanctified readings of it as a soul or inner monad. In twentieth

century scholarship, rather, "[t]he subject is [as much] a fable" as it used to be (Derrida 1991, 102). It is the structures of belief and the conditions that allow us to believe in any such fables blindly that have changed—and, in so doing, the very fate of subjectivity as a critical tool, be it narrative, fictional, essential or otherwise, has been put into question.

The questioning of the self along these lines becomes especially complex due to the growing structural complexity that characterises much postmodern art. In the context of growingly multifaceted storytelling and intricate experimentalist turns, the American postmodernist canon, which was gradually becoming not only dense, but also a male-dominated exhibit of mammoth novels and avant-gardist virtuosity, gradually invited echoes of modernist William Carlos Williams' lamentation that T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* had given the poem "back to the academics," renouncing "the theme of rediscovery of a primary impetus, the elementary principle of all art, in the local conditions" (146). Pushing art forward and rebelling against tradition were becoming—in the context of Barthean, exhausted possibility—sources of great frustration. Many turned to the use of the figure of the blocked writer, both as literary image and circumstance descriptor. Thus "[w]riting [… came] under such conditions to seem a quixotic or absurd activity, an anachronistic enterprise, thwarted before even fully begun or prolonged past the fit moment of completion" (Green 2005, 11). Others, as did Wallace, took refuge in pouring those frustrations into their craft, unblocking the collapsing author through detailed elaboration on the very causes of such a collapse, with his short story "Octet" becoming a paradigmatic example of the polyonymous "Postironic Belief" (Konstantinou 2012), "Post-Postmodern Discontent" (McLaughlin 2004), or, most commonly and interdisciplinarily, "New Sincerity" (Kelly 2010). Through his need for a sincerity that could repel the disillusioned outlook and vacuous playfulness of some postmodernist art, Wallace sought to reinscribe a pseudo-authorial self into the work of literature, hoping that, if successfully articulated, it would return the possibility to speak truly on the experience of subjectivity back to the fiction writer.

1.6. Metafictions of Being: David Foster Wallace and the Selves of (Late) Postmodernism

The ongoing conversation on how to describe and label the "third wave of modernism" of which David Foster Wallace would be recognised as some manner of ambassador attests to the terminological difficulty that postmodernism poses (Boswell 2020). Plenty of denominations, both destructive and constructive in their emphases, have sought to give testimony of the shift in authorial position that accompanied Wallace's generation's functional distance from the mid-century; their being "twice displaced" from the aesthetics of Joycean high modernism, a staple in the history of literature into the most recent end of which the likes of Wallace have been recurrently inscribed. Whereas denominations such as "late postmodernism" (Green 2005) and "second-generation postmoderns" (Burn 2016) can be favoured on the basis that they attest to the perspectival distance exhibited by Wallace's generation, "postmodern realism" (Holland 2012) and "hysterical realism" (Wood 2000)—albeit their vastly dissimilar conceptions and equally disparate aims—both acknowledge an admixture of some realist conventions with postmodern techniques in the hands of a particular strand of late twentieth century authors, Wallace included.

"Post-postmodernism" offers an equally insightful perspective on generational distance, although the need for the term remains disputed—the process of allegedly overcoming postmodernism, should one wish to attest to it, appears indefensible when looking at Wallacean

prose, given postmodern form's haunting presence. As the most apparent offspring of the mid-century "School of Difficulty" in American literature (see Lago 2018), the work of Wallace might be argued to embody an inherited tension of three axes: an aesthetics of complexity, an understanding of the "great work of art" as demanding some form of (rewarded) effort from readers, and a wish not to neglect entertainment altogether as the responsibility of the literary author. Labelling Wallace as a "metamodernist" becomes equally appealing on at least two fronts: on the one hand, it accounts for the prevalent use of postmodern form, and metafiction in particular, that pervades his work; on the other, and perhaps most importantly, it sets him apart as some manner of "credulous metafictionist" (Konstantinou 2017), adding a "meta" dimension to the cultural frame itself by which Wallace becomes a user of postmodern form, but deploys it against postmodernism itself—and more specifically, against the unaffected vacuity that he associated with some of its most prominent manifestations. For my purposes here, I shall speak of David Foster Wallace as a late postmodernist or second-generation postmodern, and hence put the emphasis on his dialectics with postmodernism in a broader sense and the work of the so-called "School of Difficulty," for it is to this opposition that I trace the desire for intersubjective connection running through his literature and giving the present academic endeavour its raison d'être.

As a late postmodernist, Wallace was well aware of the techniques, triumphs and failures that he would attribute to the preceding generations, who wrote in the generally conservative Western societies that would precede the student movements in the 1960s and in the cultural turmoil of the following decades. Discussing postmodernism's legacy and validity in a 1997 interview with Charlie Rose, he contended that "postmodernism has to a large extent run its course […, and] a lot of the schticks of postmodernism—irony, cynicism, irreverence—are now part of whatever it is that's enervating in the culture itself. Burger King now sells hamburgers with 'You gotta break the rules'" (Charlie Rose 1997, 21:57 – 22:56). The problem with postmodernism as he perceived it, thus, would not quite be that it no longer served the purpose of being a lens through which to question the paradigms of access to reality, but rather that the questioning itself had become apolitical and vacuous as a consequence of both its immense popularity and society's ability to commodify the deconstructive radicalism at its core through capitalist phagocytosis.

Thus, Wallace believed that the movement's interrogating impulses had affectively departed from a promising turn that would reinvent critical thinking and build a new era in academia, society, and the arts, to have it become a disquieting, destabilising force that could potentially reduce every intellectual endeavour to pointlessness. In attesting to the commodification of (post)modernism in such terms, Wallace would thus be claiming the obsolescence of some of the most poignant readings of the movement. Thus postmodernist art—which, much as it happened with modernism, had been recurrently interpreted to be holding some manner of structural mirror at "the scenario of our chaos" (Bradbury and McFarlane 1978, 27)—became a commodified force, opposing a system which had engulfed it altogether; no longer able to succeed at "providing renewed and sustained attacks on the bourgeois social structure" in any manner that could transcend the hypocritical, and overwrite the phantom of the *insincere* (Bell 1980, 275-276).

The place to be occupied by the self within the postmodern tradition and the readings to be encouraged of such a position have been a matter of much debate at the turn of the century. Whereas (high) modernism has been stated to have, simultaneously, dehumanised—through the anti-Romantic impersonalisation of its authorial poetics—and rehumanised—through the

diegetic subjectivism of its reified modes of representation—the literary space, exhibiting an unprecedented "preoccupation with human consciousness" and promoting "a radical 'inward turn' in literature" (Eysteinsson 1990/2018, 26), its development into postmodernism exponentially embodied all such principles, turning the tendency to subjective individuation into a menace of the status of all knowledge on both literary and non-literary subjects, threatening its stability through an epistemological suspicion of essence and universality. The dialectics between subject- and object-positions thus rose to prominence as a preferred mode for the micro-study of subjectivity, and the binary therein established contributed to the proliferation of countless studies on the interconnected nature of human subjectivity. This occurred irrespective of how often "questions about the self, and particularly questions about the self *as subject*, are deemed anathema" in postmodern thought (Schrag 1997, 8), where claims for unification, totality and sameness have been gradually displaced to a position of (nearly) anti-humanness for their perceived dependency on essentialisms.

By concerning itself with the question "Who is who?", postmodernism's approach to subjectivity was critically devoted to an unprecedentedly unstable presence. The question that the very existence of the postmodern as a paradigm posited, springing from its alleged attack on subjectivity became, by inference, "Who is *there*? Who is present there?" (Nancy 1991, 7; emphasis in original). Hence, the subject was to be retrieved from the textual and returned to a metaphysical realm that could attest to a stable sense of reality and anchor it to such a sense. The postmodern self is given to the subject as a necessary intuition, just as it was before the postmodernist turn, but stands as potentially unconveyable as soon as that very subject is made to face any other person of whom she presupposes the same defining "essence" as a self-containing entity. The self, it follows, cannot be conveyed, but merely assumed. Subjecthood can be taken to exist within another only insofar as one trusts her intuition that the other must be, by indemonstrable inference, a being of one's own "type." Ontological nihilism and intellectual suspicion are thus superimposed—and, since belief itself stands questioned before the postmodern, the other subject recurrently appears as one of whom nothing can be spoken. The threat posed by its indeterminacy is only circumvented. This self is thus seemingly doomed to silence and inexpressibility, forever acknowledged as a precondition to the artist's endeavour but never to be submitted to successful description.

In this context, Wallacean fictions' inconclusiveness and desperate affective reach-outs become not merely the result of an impulse to reflect the precariousness of postmodern diegesis, but an echo of his own failure to verbalise the ineffable; to arrive at the subjective loci beyond the textual and forge a *de facto* connection through which his own self could be collectivistically validated. Wallace's wish that his authorial self—regardless of the shape it was to take in his fictional works—be liked by his readers, paired with the certainty that fear of an audience, critically trained or otherwise, could only become a form of self-censorship, became a source of personal distress that thwarted his literary ambitions; a phantom lurking beneath his every attempt to unchain himself from expectation in writing:

> [I]f the artist is excessively dependent on simply being *liked*, so that her true end isn't in the work but in a certain audience's good opinion, she is going to develop a terrific hostility to that audience, simply because she has given all her power away to them. It's the familiar love-hate syndrome of seduction: "I don't really care what it is I say, I care only that you like it. But since your opinion is the sole arbiter of my success and worth, you have tremendous power over me, and I fear you and hate you for it." […] I often think I can see it in myself and in other young writers, this desperate desire to please

> coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader. (*Conversations* LM 1993, 25; emphasis in original)

Wallace's concern rests on the fact that inevitably readers will contribute, through their engagement with fictional works, to the creation of the subjectivity of the author. The author's fear of reception and her keeping it in mind at the time of writing demonstrates not only that claims for the death of the author often neglect her role in restraining and conditioning the array of imaginable meanings that language can project, but also that it is through the selves with which authors imbue their production and their manner of presentation in the media and through the work that readers come to interpret authorial life narratives and contribute their perspectives on what authors are like—answering, though most often inadvertently, the question "What kind of person would write this?" and the subsequent "Do I like this kind of person?"

The construction of an authorial figure and the projection of affects onto this said figure were both critical concerns of Wallace's both because they would determine the reception of his public image as creator, and because they contributed to the discursive stipulation of *who he was* as a writer. His readers' opinions of his "self" and the nature of his veiled presentation through his works were bound to become a vital part of his authorial persona; a construction that he could be, potentially, incapable of counter-contributing to in any significant measure. Wallace's anxiety about self-presentation, thus, was not as much an acknowledgement of how much he cared about readerly opinion as it was indicative of his awareness of the readers' part in giving a narrative life not only to his characters, but also to himself. An anxiety of reception fundamentally shaped Wallace's literary works in light of what he believed would inform a more accurate or benevolent (re)construction of his identity as author.

A fictional self is hence made to spring from the text as a narrative construction; made explicit in the work instead of looming over it as the powerful abstraction it had been throughout literary history. It is unclear whether such a construction reaches out for rigid reference outside of literature's bounds. The accorded persona resides in the text as implied author, but its interpretation cannot be confined within. A collection of voices, literary and otherwise, integrates it into a narrative. The narrative, on its part, conditions how the reader is to hermeneutically approach its author. The author, as Wayne C. Booth spoke of Jane Austen in his pivotal *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961/1983), "is […] fully as important as any other element in the story," despite its being unionised and brought into the text through a presence that is only "dramatic illusion" (266). It is similarly uncertain whether the authorial self as thus construed upon reading could be made to articulate statements of their own, whether they should have the ability to hold any truth value, and if so, under what premises.

The selves *in* and *of* literature meet their liminal counterpart: another self-as-(re)constructed, another fiction of being, this one treading the path between fictional and non-fictional possible worlds. A living human being whose narrative is not accessed through autobiography nor interpersonal relation, but through literary language and its specific codes, whose potential to constitute epistemological pillars had been invalidated throughout the history of philosophy. The frequent authorial inscriptions found in the work of a wide array of post-modernist writers, Wallace concluded, become, in view of this, a way to exploit this liminal in-betweenness; a way to state, however revolutionarily, that they know their self-narratives to be, through reading, reimagined; their textual lives tensed and construed through fictions *other than their own narrative self-presentation*. In stepping up and entering the literary text unabridgedly, as we will later see, authors reveal a wish to reclaim the self from the text they have produced and guide the reader through their authorial identity (as well as through that of their characters).

William Gass' "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction" spoke of all such emerging metafictional tendencies as encapsulating a coming into awareness in the hands of artists, who had begun "ceasing to pretend that his business is to render the world; he knows, more often now, that his business is to *make* one" (1970, 24; emphasis in original). Gass' approach to metafiction is founded on authorialist grounds; on an understanding of the turn to the "meta-" dimension to respond, definitionally, to a change in perception in the hands of authors who became aware of how their perspective on the state of the art could be made to permeate their fictions—and thus have those very fictions become mimetic of their lived experiences as writers in a new manner.

Linda Hutcheon's renowned *Narcissistic Narrative* (1980/2013) attempts to reintegrate the metafictional challenge in the mimetic paradigm on similar grounds, claiming metafiction, as a particular genre of fictional experimentalism, to constitute a shift from a conventionally realist "mimesis of product" to a "mimesis of process" (36-39). That is to say, a shift from an urge to identify and value fictions as a consequence of the "products" they "imitate" to a paradigm inviting the laying bare of the conventions used, the disruption of the codes presented for acknowledgement, and one which would prompt readerly engagement on the basis of such a dismantling (39). In R. M. Berry's approach to metafiction, he reads Raymond Federman's contention that metafiction sought an "escape from the confines of language" through which narrative may express "that which no dictionary contains" (1975/1981, 76-77) as proof that "what the metafictionists were seeking, the formative principles of their lives and art, might turn out to be, once found, nothing they could just say" (2012, 133). It could be surmised, thus, that the metafictionists' urge to find a new locus in language through which new realities could be not only conveyed, but made to exist demonstrably. This urge did not merely spring from a wish to tense fiction and its potentialities—to "experiment," in a rigid sense—but rather from the need to attest to a disquietude beyond all known convention, to speak the unspeakable, to retrace literature's steps and reinscribe something true onto its paradigms. This "truth" would not quite so much be the "product" of mimetic imitation, but something non-deferring beyond the cyclical self-referentiality of (sometimes markedly authorialist) forms, especially in a world that had come to be perceived as having exhausted poietic possibility; as having fallen prey to a recursiveness by which meta-fictions "attempt to represent not life directly but a representation of life" (Federman 1975/1981, 29).

This anxiety as projected into the work of art results in a particular sort of late postmodernist *doppelgänger*. The self's indeterminacy and plurality derive in the construction of characters who often embody that which is most inconsistent about their humanity. They present affective conundrum to prompt an empathetic response, seeking no resolution to the contradicting impulses that had haunted much Romantic fiction; not aspiring, either, to rejoice in the cathartic complexity of inner life as put forth by modernism. The fragmented self of postmodernism presents itself as broken, unaestheticized, and static. Its natural continuity and illusory cohesion stand imperilled. In late postmodernism, often defined via its growing concern with sincerity, affect, and the human,[15] the fragmentariness of identity becomes, at once, the shared foundation on which calls for interpersonal connection are often substantiated, and—in Wallace specifically—the impasse impeding for any such connection to succeed. Sometimes the trouble resides in intersubjectivity alone, and the problem posed by the confrontation of other minds becomes too daunting to be transcended: "He could look at her face, but not at her"

[15] See Adam Kelly's pivotal "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction" (2010), Rachel Greenwald Smith's "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn" (2011), or Stephen Burn's "Second-generation postmoderns" (2016) for relevant explorations of this shift in artistic praxis.

(Wallace 2007, "Good People"); "I look at her, and there is something in me that can not close up, in that looking" (Wallace 1988, 230). In other occasions, however, it is one's inner brokenness that becomes incapacitating; it is the human condition that reveals itself as infectious and immobilising to the subject, precluding honest action altogether:

> […T]wo great and terrible armies within himself, opposed and facing each other, silent. There would be battle but no victor. Or never a battle—the armies would stay like that, motionless, looking across at each other, and seeing therein something so different and alien from themselves that they could not understand, could not hear each other's speech as even words or read anything from what their face looked like, frozen like that, opposed and uncomprehending, for all human time. Two-hearted, a hypocrite to yourself either way. (Wallace 2007, "Good People")

The self is thus not merely broken into contradicting pieces, but its very plurality, its very array of Whitmanesque muses, stands as the main detractor to its functional articulation as ethical agent. This forces the subject, be it in the form of the implied author, the implied reader, or the characters as successfully stipulated, to face the inevitability of contradiction, incapable of arriving at an actuary sense of self through which the choice to act outwardly on the world might become something other than a source of insurmountable moral collapse. Characters appear entrapped in their "tiny skull-sized kingdoms" (Wallace 2009, 117), desperately seeking to make sense of the world beyond. Through their failure, they recurrently come to embody postmodernism's inability to root notions of the self; they are "trapped in this false way of being" (Wallace 2004, 145), diluted into compulsive patterns of self-destruction through which they come to accept, as Schtitt does in *Infinite Jest*, that "[t]he true opponent, the enfolding boundary, is the player himself. Always and only the self out there […] to be met, fought, brought to the table to hammer out terms" (1996/2016, 84).

This reading of the self as truly experienced by only the individual (as though it were a Cartesian soul contained by a bodily physicality) is conflated with the postmodernist disquietudes concerning language and expression, its describability forever precarious and at risk. Such an approach to the self appears at its most poignant in Wallace's treatment of therapy, with characters being described as "isolated and inadequate and contemptible" (1999/2001, 35); repulsed by the whole world, (understood as an outside apperception) for its being brought to acquaintance only through their minds' sickness (1984, 29); entrapped by depression's imposition of the conviction that the "filter" which "drops down over the whole way you think about everything […] will never go away" (1996/2006, 74); "unable ever to be totally open and tell the truth" to the others beyond one's own body (2004, 145); and incapable, thus, of attributing any value to those very others as anything but an indeterminate set of bundled-together qualia.

The gradual turn to physicalism and biologicism in search of the answers to problems on identity leaves literary experimentalism and the contribution of narrative to the examination of selfhood in a precarious position. Questions which once were at the centre of philosophical inquiry; concerns beyond all known science and at whose grasping literature could contribute a functional epistemology were gradually being marginalised in the mid-century—and continue to be so as the empirical sciences provide new foundations on which to think about, and new vocabulary to speak of, identity. "The epoch of the *I*," maintains Tor Nørretranders, "is drawing to a close" (1999/1991, ix; emphasis in original). Consciousness is being gradually deprived of the mystification it had long benefitted from in Western thought. Science and technology's policing role to the creation, determination and evaluation of knowledge is, following such

accounts, merely contributing to the natural dismantling of the self's foundational fallacy. In this context, these advancements would constitute a most disregarded nuance to much of the development of the postmodernist—and particularly the late postmodernist—literary canon. Works observing this tradition were fated to face from their very conception the problem derived from the impossible reconciliation of much continental discourse—inviting a Foucauldian revision of the history of science for ways to question the absolute epistemological validity that it is often attributed—and the scientific developments that were beginning to shed light on the role that the brain—the ultimate human(ist) powerhouse—played in the configuration of identity, the conveyance of affect, and the social patterns of behaviour that were beginning to be reconsidered at the dawn of what has been labelled "The Age of Neuroscience."

Wallace's postmodernist stance when faced with the erasure of subject-positions into which the "I" could be functionally inscribed was informed by his observation, and often in very critical terms, of the postmodernist dictum regarding essence, identity and rigid signifiers. His desperate search for literary connection with the subjectivities beyond the text, however, is pivotally founded on a fear of solipsism that recurrently results from some manner of detrimental hyper-awareness springing from literary character, a component to fiction reading and writing which stands at the heart of his approach to poiesis. His search for connection when expressed and examined through his literature, further, often derives in a corrupt epiphany that does not contribute to any manner of modernist enlightenment, but rather sets the self on a quest towards utter alienation. Wallacean characters, which are recurrently presented as "ghostly Cartesian consciousness[es] inhabiting [… their] machine[s]" (Redgate 2019, 93), simultaneously invite the engagement in contemporary questions on the nature of bodily experience, and at once come to represent ostracism in dualistic terms, entrapped by a bodily-shaped frontier irremediably distancing their soul-like understandings of who they are from the others beyond. These characters are aware of their precariousness, and yet they are also informed by the cultural notion—which Habermas maintained to be particularly established and prevalent in the Anglo-Saxon world—that "a knowing or acting subject is precisely that which stands over and against the world qua the totality of all objects or facts; yet, at the same time, it must also comprehend itself as a single object among all others" (1988/2018, 18).

1.7. Lived Character: Some Notes on the Mediated Conflation of Fictional and Non-Fictional Narrative

In Alisdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1985/2007), he grounds the very possibility for human ethics on the fact that human beings conceive stories to understand the moral implications of events. It is via these stories, following MacIntyre, that a life can be attributed meaning; it is through our narrative understanding of life as a macro-level tale comprising countless micro-fictions which frame our every experience that we can think of action as subjected to ethical inquiry. This claim is of course resonant of Wallace's own when he argues fiction to be the grounds for the exploration of what it means to be a human being, and thus a source of our ability to imagine ourselves as being "good." MacIntyre's perspective in *After Virtue* is also very critical of the discourses of (post)modernity, both through a radical rejection of the presumed objectivism of modern science and through his disapproval of the individualistic tendencies of much twentieth century political and philosophical discourse—he quite notably criticises the Nietzschean "great man" for being "a pseudo-concept [… representing] individualism's final attempt to escape from its own consequences" (259).

His position comes to ultimately reject both liberal individualism and bureaucratised collectivism as organising principles to the moral life of a society. Between these ever-tense poles, "the concept of a virtue is itself transformed" (225), becoming not quite a resource through which to ethically question human action, holding metamorphic power over justice, but also allowing us "not just to understand how it [i.e. a given virtue] may be exhibited in character, but also what place it can have in a certain kind of enacted story" (125). This conceptualisation of virtue as an organising, moral pole to story-stelling is central to Wallace's fiction. In his works, characters are often so aware of the narrativised, essence-devoid nature of their social experience that they become entirely driven by the appearance and anticipated consumption (in the hands of other characters, most often; though sometimes also in those of readers) of their identity stories.

Much as MacIntyre's understanding of human life as an ethically interrogable unit could be questioned on the grounds of its neglect of the incommensurability of lived narratives, it does pay attention to an important dimension of human's understanding of ethics, as it puts narrative at the centre of moral experience, and maintains that it is by analysing these stories and their dimensions that a life can be ethically interpreted as "a good life." Consequently, a given human being could be held responsible for her actions only insofar as she stands as author of her own story; only insofar as "[t]he subject functions as a writer and an actor at the same time" (Mela 106). The contents therein conveyed can be scrutinised and judged from an ethical perspective due to their being narrative in form (MacIntyre 209). In this regard, it is significant to consider how much of human beings' acquisition of an ethical code could be argued to be strictly dependant on their consumption of ethically charged stories. MacIntyre's view is of remarkable interest to my purposes here, as it provides no functional distinction between "actual" life stories and "literary" life stories. It would be direly optimistic to maintain that he does so as a consequence of his thinking of literary fictions as existing and functioning in a manner comparable to their "real" counterparts, rather than, quite plainly, because of their being entirely irrelevant to his discussion. It is on the lack of conclusive considerations on the potential of literary storytelling to ethical life, precisely, that Ricoeur substantiates the need for a different approach to the narrative self as ethical subject.

Ricoeur contends that there is a fundamental difference between a life narrative as socially performed by a given person and a literary fiction, and claims the latter to function as some manner of ethical laboratory in which thought experiments and new realms of possibility are conceived in order to, among other purposes, prompt human beings' self-examination in "real life" (1990/1992, 159). This distinction is first grounded on metaphysical objection: in literature, Ricoeur reminds us, we find author, narrator, and reader; in "real life," on the other hand, the adscription of the role of author in the interweaved, infinitely-complex pattern of lived experience appears hardly as definitive. Thus, it is unclear how MacIntyre's position could be sustained if not by acknowledging any claim to authorship to be collective and equivocal. Such a claim would then be necessarily shared by all relevant agents rather than monopolised by a given one, regardless of each person's situation at the centre of their own lived experiences (1990/1992, 160).

How is one to claim a life, understood as a story, to have been penned by a single author, and at the same time deny every other human being in it, whose actions rest beyond one's control, the ethical and poietic responsibility that they hold over actions taking place in tales other than their own? I am aware of the difficulties inherent to understanding lived experience to be narrative not only in form but in nature. However, I wish to oppose the view, as put

forward by several literary critics and theorists on narrative, that "[s]tories are not lived but told" (Mink 1970, 557-558) and contend that a story that is read or consumed in any relevant manner is not just articulated as a story and "told" by an author, but also integrative and constitutive of the lives both of that very author and her every receptor. It is these receptors that are affectively and experientially made to respond to fiction, and, in so doing, live *through* and *in* those fictions; feel *for* and *with* their characters.

The notion of authorship appears to be the most productive with regards to Ricoeur's objection, as it forces a distinction between stories that have been "really lived" and "literary fictions" on the grounds of the difficulties that derive from trying to pinpoint a differing spring from which each flow. In Brunerian narrative cognitivism, this distinction is enacted by the functional separation of two modes of thought, namely argumentation and storytelling. Both can share the wide array of pragmatic uses of language, but differ substantially in their teleology: whereas argumentation can aspire to be validated through truth value, empirical or otherwise, narrative aims, rather, at verisimilitude (that is, at the "illusion" of truth through plausibility) (1986/1987, 11). One mode of mental configuration has the reader expecting a truthful reflection on what the world is, whereas the other considers the *possibilia* of the world; articulates a supposedly honest imagining of what the world could have been or be made to become, irrespective of a given story's potentially intricate historical bases.

Such a radical distinction in structure succeeds in shedding light on the nuances of the interpretative positions that a reader can adopt upon facing the written word, but fails to acknowledge, as will later be made obvious, their overlapping nature, and the ways in which literature's standing as a mediated art—which remains, to an extent, dependent on the haunting presence of an author for whose existence a propositional argument can be posited—problematises the very frontier on which Bruner's twofold approach to readerly thought is founded. Further, the indeterminacy of literature and the language games that it propitiates allow for the tensioning of the allegedly monolithic structures that trigger each of the two modes of reception. It remains unclear, thus, whether it is possible to distinguish "lived" fictions from "literary" fictions based on modes of cognition and readerly attitudes.

There remains a problematic bond between them, however, provided that, in the case of literary fictions in particular, there exists at the very least a partial subordination of character to author substantiated by a cognitive restraint: a given person cannot write what they do not know and/or are incapable of imagining. Lived stories as recalled and recounted, on the other hand, pose many problems with regards to authorship, for, much as the roles of narrator and protagonist easily converge in any given person, and much as that very person stands as an agent to the weaving of her story, the role of others as authors of their own stories seems to transcend the domain of their lived experiences and permeate those of their peers. There exists, consequently, a tension surrounding authorship that is imbricated in the idea of the "lived narrative;" it is lived by its author, indeed, but is she the only one actively participating in the writing? The boundary between the two thus appears, initially, much more futile than it may be concluded to be through Ricoeur's and Bruner's dualisms.

A second objection put forward by Ricoeur, and one directly connected to his discussion on time in earlier works, places the perception of beginning and end, as well as their respective potentials in literary and non-literary narratives, at its centre. He maintains that there is a fundamental difference between the two kinds of narrative in what concerns the nature of these notions, as in "real life," our own capacity for memory limits our ability to recount our stories as young children—they "belong more to the history of others […] than to me" (1990/1992,

160)—and the implausibility that our story-telling, authorial selves may survive our deaths renders it equally impossible that such events be contained and assimilated successfully as stories in any way similar to how they are indeed assimilated through fictional tales. This simultaneous conflation of finiteness—a sense of closure which is, quite curiously, often missing in a conventional sense in many postmodernist narratives—and necessary inventiveness—one does not know how one's story ends, and yet one can write an ending to the story of an-other—contribute to literature its ability to "show […] not life itself, but an aestheticized—and to a certain degree conventionalized—interpretation of life" (Basseler 47).

In Ricoeur, the role of narrative as a mediator of identity is articulated through the notion of character. Character is, on the one hand, defined as "the set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same" (119), and thus linked to sameness and permanence; and, on the other, as "the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognised" (121). This reformulation acknowledges the mutability of character traits through their being termed *dispositions*: tendencies; propensities to go back to patterns of behaviour that *might change*. It is through character too, that the other and the identificatory processes by which we come to relate to them are claimed to join in the constitution and configuration of a given self; or, to quote Ricoeur: "[r]ecognizing oneself *in* contributes to recognizing oneself *by*" (121). Indeed, the process of identification of one's own traits in the narrated character of another speaks of one's naturalisation of the other's properties as also belonging to the self; of an absorption and sharing of the other's very otherness. It is thus that narrative comes to be articulated as, on the one hand, a transformative tool that makes it possible for selves to be expressed and shared through fictionalisation, and, on the other, a source of referents through which to understand and express—and potentially redefine—one's sense of subjectivity. The centrality of the self as a para-literary construct, and a para-literary construct only, is hence apparent.

Oneself as Another attempts at a redefinition of character in relation to identity, but only insofar as character and identity are inherent to "real," tangible humans. Irrespective of such a shortcoming, Ricoeur speaks of character as "the self under the appearances of sameness" (128); a construct which is taken to be monolithically inalterable, but is, rather, subjected to influence, circumstance, and betterment. This is most promptly evinced by the prevalence of the construction "being out of character," by which the speaker tries to attest to the identitarian sameness of the person whose behaviours she does not recognise as belonging to them, restraining the interpretative possibilities at a given human's disposal in facing somebody else's actions. These very patterns of comprehensible behaviour are also expected of fictional characters, to whom the same phrase can be easily applied, and often is, to show that they are either poorly written or "insufficiently human" to a given reader, reinforcing the idea that it is through the implicit observation of a series of pre-existing superstructures that so-called "fiction" and so-called "reality" come to share a medium of access: readerly interpretation. The consumption of narratives as conveyed and presented by "real" humans and "fictional" constructs does not seem to arrive at any epistemological disagreement in this regard: indeed, a given human being's behaviour can be out of character and disorienting to another in the exact same way a literary character's might, both being built on assumption and exterior projection (they carry the same objection, always: "he/she/they have not acted in a way I imagined possible").

Wallacean characters are recurrently stipulated around tensions regarding subject-notions, their corruption and their dismantling, self-consciously spotting inconsistencies at their very

heart, or doubting the place their selves have in discourse and their legitimacy as subjects before the probing gazes of their diegetic and extradiegetic others. *The Broom of the System*'s literary exploration of Wittgensteinianism features a note on the nature of selfhood which describes it as "the node of a fan-shaped network of emotions, dispositions, extensions of that feeling and thinking Self," necessarily dependent on the outside world and other people as the natural destinations at which the fan perennially points, but also the victim of their own instability and desperate desire for an impossible fusion, turning she who lives the self into an "ephemeral night-insect, drawn to the light that is intrinsically inaccessible" (1987/2010, 351). In "The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing," the protagonist's medicalised depressive condition leads him to deliriously spot a "really huge and deep wound" on his face—splitting the Levinasian utmost container of his humanity in two—which he then factually weaves into being upon trying to fix the perceptive problem with needle and thread (1984, 26), thus coming to physically embody the dismembered self of postmodernist character. In "Another Pioneer," the utterance of a secret aimed at the central child genius' very identity destabilises his sense of self beyond repair, corrupting it with destructive self-consciousness and bringing his village into sheer chaos as he is forced into awareness that he is revered "precisely because they themselves [his village's peoples] are too unwise to see [… his] limitations" (2004/2005, 138). In "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XXIV)," tensions around sameness and difference become pivotal to the protagonist's configuration of his projected, adult identity as a consequence of his brother's evil mockery, reducing his self-understanding to the reflective product of a "mirror" he would "not know or feel [… himself] without […] ever again" and making of his "copying" twin the evil other par excellence; a natural *doppelgänger* exhibiting some "gross and pitiless *sameness*" against him (1999/2001, 272-273; emphasis in original). In "Good Old Neon," the narrator's extraordinary self-awareness, paired with his tendency to manipulate his social environment into perceiving him to be good, imbue him in a sense of fraudulence and innate dishonesty which is made to taint his every self-perception—as reconstrued by character Dave Wallace, with the potential projective overtness into which such framing may incur—thereafter.

Their sense of scepticism regarding the self motivates many of these characters' urgency towards others, leading them to deploy discursive strategies concocted to weaponise their understanding of their surroundings into manipulative empathetic imperatives. These are recurrently directed at the blurry and indistinct subject-position which their reception is made to occupy, often fusing the site of the reader with that of a ghostly consciousnesses inside the tale itself. This type of strategy is perhaps most apparent in some of the stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, when the reader is allured into occupying the distinct locus of a censored interviewee ("Brief Interviews with Hideous Men"), a member of the "support system" of a depressed woman ("The Depressed Person"), the religious authority to which a moribund father confesses his despising his son ("On his Deathbed"), the recipient of the troubled concerns of an alleged good-doer as he ponders over the possibility for intrinsic goodness in the face of his wish for external recognition ("The Devil Is a Busy Man"), or even the author's itself ("Octet"). Showcasing their "compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking" (Wallace 1996/2006, 203), Wallacean characters feast on loops, paradoxes, and offences aimed directly at the possibility for ethical life and community. Knowing another person truly would, these fictions conclude, incapacitate the subject; it would become "tiring as hell […,] emotionally draining" in a manner entirely insurmountable (1999/2001, 30), and thus Wallace's literary selves find their every configuration as such at its most precarious, forever hindered in between the impending threat of a solipsism they sometimes have to lure

themselves out of; and the incapacity to assume, accept, and welcome the other as subject and agent to their being in a way that is, at once, non-manipulative, non-selfish, and whole.

As the reader comes to occupy these precarious positions, carefully devised to prompt all manner of sympathetic, vicarious relations, her very role as reader comes to be interrogated and submitted to the pressure of the ethical imperative ruling that a hurting other is, mandatorily, a worthy object of compassion. In this way, she too comes to play a part in the Wallacean accordance of instable discursive positions, complicitly agreeing to the institution of character as self insofar as she observes the manipulative conditions through which the text itself invites a response to its characters as human subjects. Characters come into being not by virtue of language's ability to transcend its well-defined limitations, nor as a consequence of the self having become conveyable in any absolute manner, capable to transcend the conclusion to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1921/2001), dictating that "what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (142). Characters come into being, rather, through external validation, through the plurality of readerly configurations and sites of resistance that Wallace's fiction relentlessly—and, one may argue, sometimes manipulatively—invites.

From the perspective of reception aesthetics as most notably developed in the works by Wolfgang Iser, Winfried Fluck and Hans Robert Jauss, the self as a literary construct is only grasped and erected as such via the imagination through which narrative worlds are entered and made intelligible by and to readers. In this manner, the reader, along with her cultural codes and reconstructive capacities as synchronically inscribed in the historical moment of reception, is held responsible for the articulation of subjectivity in the literary work through projection and contrast. The world of the text is thus configured, in each reading of the text, in all its specificity as one of the countless alternatives that a given string of words—carrying the indeterminacy and semantic potentiality that is immanent to language as a system—can prompt. The text is not seen as an authority on its own meaning, and neither is its author; it is in the reader herself and her capacity for imaginative reconstruction that lies the fundamental condition for the successful unfolding of a literary fiction's every potentiality. In so doing, the anthropological, sociological and individual specificities that transverse the reader play a part in shaping the resulting possible world. This way of understanding the act of reading is thus in accord with Bruner's hermeneutical narrative perspective. His shift to readerly experience, though based on hard cognitivism, also contributed to the turn to reception aesthetics in the later half of the twentieth century.

Bruner argued with Ricoeur that stories are models—themselves based in mind-made models of our own—for the redescription of the world, and that however influential and suggestive a string of language could be artificed to be, it remained in the reader's hands to grasp at the concreteness of each and every possible interpretation:

> One rereads a story in endlessly changing ways—litera, moralis, allegoria, anagogia. […] The alternate ways of reading may battle one another, marry one another, mock one another in the reader's mind. There is something in the telling, something in the plot that triggers this "genre conflict" in readers […]. The story goes nowhere and everywhere. […] If we then ask about the nature and role of psychological genre—the reader's conception of what kind of story or text he is encountering or "recreating"—we are in fact asking not only a morphological question about the actual text, but also a question about the interpretive processes that are loosed by the text in the reader's mind. (Bruner 1986, 7)

The self's dual nature as mutable and immutable, thus, would not be demonstrable in extra-literary contexts exclusively, but applies to literature itself through the readers' interpretative processing of the stipulated coordinates from which character is brought into existence.

The logocentric privileging of reality over fiction—particularly in what concerns their respective roles as sources of knowledge, but not exclusively—is perhaps the most commodified of all the inadvertent binaries that, following Derridean deconstruction, are maintained to be the foundations of Western thought. Even though postmodernism has legated some fervent attacks on the power dynamics between the two, which established that reality's quality as apperceived "directly" provided it with an allegedly superior claim to knowledge than its fictional counterpart—often considered to be a mere attempt to represent or convey the former in a significant manner—, the binary has remained a prominent institution in language and thought throughout the years. A notable counter-discursive account has emerged in the form of possible world semantics, which has attempted to dismantle the prevalence of reality over fiction and the understanding of the latter as existing in absolute subordination to the former. Notwithstanding its sometimes naïve contention that words built on the possible or contingent and worlds built on the experientially verifiable are submitted to the same structures and examinable through the same lenses, possible world theories have succeeded in elucidating and clarifying how a significant part of our claims on the nature of fiction are built on, and made to perpetrate—however inadvertently—the adjudication of "real" status to certain narratives and the subsequent conferment of value to those very narratives as opposed to all others. These devalued narratives, lost at the representational end of the referential chain, are the ones to which the label "fiction" is often rigidly ascribed. The characters within, irrespective of their claim to selfhood, are those whose narrative weighing in on "life" is recurrently dismissed.

1.8. Postmodernist Characters' Locus of Truth: Possible World Semantics and Textual Self-Sufficiency

My discussion is here informed by possible world semantics in two related aspects. On the one hand, Lubomír Doležel's critique—which, one must note, is disputed within the field itself (see Ingarden, 1973, or Ronen, 1994, for some relevant instances)—that "denying incompleteness to fictional entities is tantamount to treating them as real entities" (23) succeeds in granting literary particulars a stronger claim to selfhood than any other approach to narrative, even if only by bringing their metaphysical status closer to that of "real-world" human beings. Thus, according to Doležel, the mimetic fallacy behind the contention that fictional entities are incomplete in a manner radically different from their real counterparts—a claim which is, in the literature, argued responsible for the delineation of the actual/fictional binary—does not respond to an essential lack on the part of literary character, but to a fervent wish to attribute a sense of completeness, commensurability, and transferability to "real" humans' experience of their own identities, virtues which do not seem to hold true.

Should we take fictional entities to be incomplete, and do so on the basis that readers presuppose a series of qualities and characteristics to which they cannot verifiably attest, the same would very much apply to human narratives. This would happen in this manner, too, irrespective of the fact that human narratives as put forward by a living being with regards to herself are constantly expanding. This happens in two distinct ways, both in literary and non-literary contexts: by virtue of the countless amount of *qualia* characterising experience, the details of which cannot be made explicit in linguistic sequencing through presence (What was

Holden Caulfield's first word?) and through the experiences yet to be lived, the domain of *possibilia* itself (How many children did Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam Darcy have?). Whereas in the first case, questions on the missing data may be posited in non-literary contexts, and meaning be employed to consequentially fill in all related crevices, narrative fictions provide a closed framework for the delineation of attestable data.[16] Nonetheless, there would forever be more to be stated than it could possibly be told, and incompleteness would hence remain at the core of human identity as linguistically apperceived regardless of the case under scrutiny. A fictional entity, be it self-carrying or otherwise, is no more subjected to the fact that "represented objects are never fully determined in all their aspects" (Ronen 108) than "real" ones are.

On the other hand, however, possible world semantics also prompts a hierarchical (re)structuring of reality-related notions which takes into consideration the different levels and conditions we refer to when we attach the label "real" to linguistically conveyed claims. Further, it helps to show how many of those very claims do not retain such a meritorious descriptor if contextually generated. If we were to take "Edna Pontellier committed suicide" as a sampling, readers of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) would rapidly find that the claim holds true—that is, that it meets the requirements for truth value as agreed to and stipulated—to use Kripke's renowned terminology (1980, 44)—via the textual negotiation of meaning that the possible world unfolding from the work triggers. Those very readers might agree, however, that it is true that "Edna Pontellier does not actually exist," and quite rightly state that they are incurring in no manner of contradiction upon saying so. This calls for the positing of different dimensions to reality and truth notions that respond to the seemingly irreconcilable quality of the aforementioned claims. Identity, truth and possibility conditions as applicable to possible worlds theory unfold to be dependent on both the circumstantial framework into which a contention is inscribed—the stipulated specificities of the world of which descriptors are made to speak and the discursive locus from which claims on such a world are uttered—and the object's specificities as belonging to that world. "Edna Pontellier committed suicide" as uttered to describe the world stipulated in hermeneutic engagement with *The Awakening* holds value as real and true, and yet the very same contention would be utterly false if made to contextually refer to the "real" world, notwithstanding the latter's narrative structure.

The correspondence between conditions as utterance evaluators and the world to which those utterances are made to refer is thus apparent. This correspondence, however, is not merely held as a way to distribute meaning and have the realm of *possibilia* be analysable through relevant matrices, but is at the core of the hierarchisation of the real that has diachronically relegated and submitted fictional forms throughout the history of Western thought. There is not solely a multipartite component to reality and truth as notions through which literature may be examined, it follows, but a "realer reality" and a "truer truth" elsewhere to whose tyrannical chains fiction has been shackled and of whose inexorable autocracy it has been claimed parasitical.

This hierarchical distribution of reality-related notions is neither arbitrary nor unsubstantiated, and responds, rather, to the foundational separation between the immediately apperceived narratives of the experiential, on the one hand, and the deferred grasping of those stories which we reconstruct through the imagination and to whose perceptible content we only respond *after assisting in their creation*, on the other. Drawing on Goffman's renowned frame

[16] The readers' appropriation of such frameworks and the subsequent expansion of the set of data they provide is, indeed, at the heart of fanfiction as a practice.

analysis, this would similarly imply that fictions play a part in the establishment of primary frames for a given culture, contributing to the institution of its "framework of frameworks […,] its belief system, its 'cosmology'" (1974/1986, 27), but are not—despite their being read and interpreted through the application of a version of that very macro-frame—submitted to its conditions as truth-assigners; its own frame being "one lamination away from an imaginable real model" (1974/1986, 149), temptingly (re)signifying a world beyond it, above it, pronounced *superior*.

This has been partly suggested by some existing attempts to resignify the notion of truth as applicable to the fictional context, such as Kendall L. Walton's theorisation of "fictional truths" in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990/1993, 35). Walton's account, however, retains an understanding of fiction and performance as imitative, since it institutes both notions as figurative playgrounds for human beings to test social and political boundaries pertaining to their self-understanding and their treatment of others. It thus pronounces the epistemological parallel worlds resulting from their being acknowledged as sites of experimental re-presentation referring back to "the real"—irrespective of their being granted access to truth value. It remains unclear, however, how any such re-presentations could differ substantially from what is originally *presented*; how much of an independent epistemology is necessary for them to function and be submitted to evaluation as something other than "real" human beings' fictional (hi)stories.

The volatility of self-notions as grounded in overtly fictional universes, it follows, would not quite be due to any manner of epistemological or metaphysical insufficiency intrinsic to those very notions, but rather a consequence of the demeaning qualities that are attributed to fiction within such a hierarchical structure. The foundations for speaking of a self; the difficulties that it posits, are not radically different in nature in "real" and fictional contexts, for the mediated, contrastive, incomplete nature of selfhood remains so regardless of the medium through which the conveyance of identity occurs. Further, much as it is apparent that literary subjectivities are limited and conditioned in their mediated expression on several levels, none of those limits and conditions appear to be wholly escapable to the extraliterary either. Ricoeur's contention that "[t]o follow a story is to actualize it by reading it" (1984, 77), for instance, rightly points at the way in which a reader's individuality and ability to project into fiction reshape and condition the configuration of that fiction's content. It is unclear, however, how this limitation, should one wish to consider it so, is any different in so-called "real" life. It is similarly tough to discern how possible it is, if at all, that any unit of empirical knowledge stands beyond my projection, absorption, and alteration of other-experience as derived from my own knowledge of the world and my individual apprehension of my mental states.

Postmodernist literature in particular has succeeded in bringing forward "an aesthetics of play in which ontological questions about the sorts of worlds characters inhabit and the ways in which readers orient to these worlds constitute a central readerly concern" (Wang 2019, 132). This readerly interest, regardless of its being shaped as a cognitivist question or otherwise, naturally led narrative examination to develop a particular type of awareness of how we process fictional characters, as well as of how influential to and/or independent from our preconditioned thought processes they might be demonstrated to be. Similarly, the prominence of questions on the nature of fictional worlds and the nature of character has unsurprisingly accompanied a history of philosophical developments concerned with the interrogation of language as semiotic system, the stability of self-notions as rigid designators, and the nature of a reality that had traditionally been argued to hold a claim to factual existence beyond subjectivity, and whose

legitimacy to that very claim was beginning to be questioned. In this context, postmodernist fictions present a kaleidoscope of fragmented experiences of fictional worlds, as opposed to the tokenised, intelligible pictures of much of the realist traditions not only as a way to respond to the fragmentariness and chaos of twentieth century society, but also in an effort to respond to the growingly delicate condition affecting human thought in the wake of the linguistic turn and the exponentiation of hyper-capitalism. Much influenced by the maelstrom of subjectivity of modernism from which the vastly diverse array of perspectives on art of the postmodernists emerged—but presenting a multivocality that is often fundamentally shattered beyond all modern pluralisms—, the postmodernist work of art negates the contention that had permeated much of classical aesthetics that "harmonizing tendencies [are located] in the artifact's formal design—as a product of the artist's efforts," and rather invites the argument that "the latent energies of coherence, order, and harmony" that are needed for the possible to be stipulated as potentially accessible, are displaced and turned into a responsibility of "the reader/perceiver/participant/player" (Wang 2019,133).

David Foster Wallace, who repeatedly verbalised his wish to distance himself from the postmodern legacy that had been bequeathed upon him by means of the socio-academic environment of late twentieth-century society, saw in this narrative design and reflection of the incongruence of much lived experience some manner of existentialist challenge on readers. It was only through this type of slightly challenging experience, he maintained, that fiction could come to fulfil its purpose "to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable." Wallace found, however, that it was of critical importance to his literary enterprise that, much as he would rejoice in "some of the richness and challenge and emotional and intellectual difficulty of avant-garde literary stuff […] that makes the reader confront things rather than ignore them," it was equally fundamental to have that happen "in such a way that it's also pleasurable to read" (Interview with Laura Miller 1996, 61). This tension, which was a vital source of conflict that permeated his artistic production, is informative of the type of relationship that his fiction seeks to propitiate with its readers. The keeping of such a balance, however, would prove to be a delicate matter, not only dependant on the author's doing but critically affected by the diverse experiences and acquired tastes of the readers themselves.

Attending this plurality, and doing so in a manner that could aim at remaining affectively significant, would prove to be a task of unprecedented difficulty to Wallace as a late postmodernist. Through its tenacious attempts to represent the unrepresentable, postmodernism's initial act of denying itself "the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste" (Lyotard 1979/1984, 81) had been gradually commodified into modes of artistic expression whose gimmicks and particularities had been glossed, annotated and studied away from their originally destabilising agendas. In this context of reinventing and forwarding of growingly complex modes of telling and (re)presentation onto readers, the articulation of character, "emblematic of a culture's understanding of the subject position" (Olsen 2012, 207), became more nuanced, obsolete, a linguistic innuendo of texts pursuing entirely different aims to that of containing character and using it to speak of postmodern society. The centrality of content to the representation of a collective; the role of character to the periodisation of narrative fiction, was left aside in favour of ever-telling, ever-complex form. This, Wallace lamented, was felt to be at once "hilarious, upsetting, sophisticated, and extremely shallow" (1993, 192).

As language folded in on itself and authors began their search for some enlightening, buried facet to literary-textual communication, the paradox of accessibility as a value of fictional works grew progressively more apparent. On the one hand, the possible worlds of the

postmodern literary canon had to be inscribed in language and accessible through it, however much they may have wished to simultaneously void language of some of its essential qualities in order to demonstrate—as means to its own collapse—that a tension existed; that there is an epistemological barrier that hinders absolute understanding; and that readers should not be tricked into believing said barrier gone by means of cohesive, self-contained story-telling. On the other, however, the nature of this invitation to reconsider the role of the literary work, and of culture at large—as a consequence of its taking the form of a difficulty for readers to access the world of the text, to comply with its inner logic, and to agree to its stipulation—also risked the emptying of the literary project of any prospect of success, prompting a hyper-aestheticized experience in the fashion of high modernism, but one, on top of that, whose very sense of formality and taste was itself disruptive of both "high-" and "low-end" aesthetics.

Postmodernism's apparent disregard for the very channel through which it attempts to tell stories forces the appearance of a quandary between aesthetics and principle. World, character, and the conditions for both to function in postmodernist fiction are dependent on the discourses which postmodernism erected itself against, and force a partial displacement of responsibility from the author-text position, and into the readerly one, who is encouraged to devote time and effort to decode meaning from postmodernist narrative in such a way that her thirst for a cohesive narrative unit may be quenched. Yet this responsibility, as well as the tensions and difficulties that arise from the presentation of less coherent, less cohesive worlds, menaces those worlds' very effectivity to actively challenge our "human need to perceive and experience satisfying unities in the disordered flux of experience" (Shusterman 2000, 76). They become, thus, alienating to the growing majority of readers who do not engage in literary consumption to be challenged in any such way. In seeking a representation of human experience through possible worlds that is more faithful to the nature of that very experience, the postmodernist paradigm seemingly jeopardised its own ability to connect with, aesthetically stimulate, and narratively move these readers. The success of these works appeared—and began to feel, even, by the end of the century—that of a recherché game of linguistic stimuli; the result of what critic James Wood termed an exercise of "hysterical realism" privileging information, vitality and value over all forms of textual humanity—and thus, too, over "the self." Simulation became the generalised mode of interaction through which to escape the game-like nature of the new experimentalist normality. Feeling that they had exhausted realism entirely, writers began to imagine new positions in discourse; new fissures in language through which to approach what could become the meaning of the new century. There rose "novels which imitate the form of a Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author" (Barth 1967/1984, 72), and in their pretension, forced a conflation between real and fictional selves fuelled, entirely, by the forced destabilisation of the traditional, well-behaved loci that each actor was to occupy on the literary stage.

The difference between such understandings of "real" and "fictional" selves, one could surmise, is attitudinal in essence. We claim our narratives to be extant and real, and in thus reaching an accord on their "reality," they become thinkable in such terms; similarly, we claim fictional narratives to be extant and real—we do so when speaking of them from their very discursive position—but only at a sub-level; only as parasitical of a wider-scoped plane of "superior existence" where claims to honesty can, indeed, become claims to truth. Hierarchies of the real are thusly instituted: under certain conditions we are capable of discussing the characters springing from a given literary work as articulating identities and possessing an ontology of their own; under certain others, we reject "Clarissa Dalloway exists" and every subsequent reflection on her actions and thoughts as false utterances attacking the very

foundation of our doxa. The particularities of literary works are not as much particularities of the literary works themselves as they are derived from a generalised—and often demeaning—understanding of literature as encapsulating some quintessential, mystified, re-presentative "truth" concerning the nature of the human. Yet they are also perceived to be incapable of articulating a valid claim to existence within the superior paradigm of the constructed, absolute "real" into which some late twentieth century schools had sought to reinscribe them. In this regard, fiction appears to have been the most direly unassisted victim of Western logocentrism, not only falling prey to the privileging of a sense of reality of which it is an undisputable part, but also bearing witness to a much limited amount of attempts to relocate it radically if compared to those concerned with the long list of subjugated notions upon which cultural studies rightly continue to fix their gaze.

1.9. Selfhood in and beyond Language; or, Can a Self Be Claimed in this Quiet?

Much of the discussion on the representational power of literary works as linguistically constituted units has been concerned with the nature of language and its referential properties. It is thus around these referential properties that most of the work on the possibility that literary language may speak of the "real world" and "actual human experience" has revolved. One of the most significant assumptions with regards to literary language, inherited from the classical mimetic tradition and often ratified to this day, is that art re-presents human action, and, through its re-presentation of human action and its subsequent inscription into the realms of possibility and potentiality, (post-)textuality and "the real" are inevitably bonded by the former's nature as an explanatory tool that permits that we further comprehend and reimagine the latter. This tradition has long benefitted from a history of conceptions of language that understood it as referring to and containing a shadow of the essences of the very things it designated (Plato); as, most prominently, referring to an external reality beyond language's own contrivances; as relating to the things it designates in a fully referential manner only insofar as those things could be demonstrated to "exist" in a rigid sense, and thus to carry epistemological weight (Russell 1905, 1919); as referring to both the vagueness of ideas, concepts and human musings, and the specifics of real-world particulars (Frege 1892); or as instituting a play of referential deferral whose point of origin becomes entirely ungraspable (Derrida 1967).

Early structuralism, and more specifically Saussurean linguistics, offered a way out of the theoretical, referential co-dependency between "reality" and language by claiming language and its inner workings to be understandable as internally referential; as if the structures of language and thought themselves provided the referential relation. Words, following Saussure, do not refer to an extra-textual reality beyond themselves, but rather attest to the tying together of an idea, on the one hand, and a linguistic unit, on the other. Thus, in Saussurean linguistics, "[t]he linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image" (1916/2013, 66). Among the philosophical shortcomings of Saussure's model is that it only allows reference to occur insofar as language is taken to be linked with ideas at the psychological level. The role of language as a tool to contain and convey selfhood could be, thus, much disputed. It is apparent—and perhaps easier than it would be were we to follow virtually any other linguistic model—that the self, should our sense of subjectivity be taken to be a psychological construct, is closely tied to language as understood by Saussure due to its belonging to the sphere of the pensive. It is unclear, in this regard, how language may designate the sense of self of another, if at all.

By this "sense of self" I do not mean the physical nor the behavioural traits of a given human being, nor her defining characteristics as a person, but rather, the illusory unity of her consciousness; her idea of herself as a token of an identity whose experience cannot be fully transmitted "directly." To what psychological unit would the consciousness of another, as phenomenologically given, be connected? Indeed, the problem of other minds and their designation goes far beyond Saussurean linguistics, constituting a long-lived source of debate in epistemology (How can other minds be successfully attested to? How can their existence as such be conclusively demonstrated? What procedure, perceptive or otherwise, allows a subject to arrive at any form of knowledge of them? Can selfhood and/or a "mind" in this sense be argued to be contained and successfully referred to via deixis?). It could be argued, as I have previously hinted at, that the assumption and givenness of other consciousnesses may only be brought into thinkability and describability due to our experience of our own consciousnesses, and that it is that very experience that allows us to understand other selves either by contrastive comparison or by arriving at an awareness that we are both similar to our others and radically and insurmountably different from them. If we take any such manner of pseudo-empathetic inference to be the source of knowledge of others (with the range of lessons therein contained), a similar mental process could be argued to take place upon facing literary character.

Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* attempts to move past the problem of reference by establishing what he labels as "modes of 'verediction'." Following his stance, these "modes of 'verediction'" are made responsible for the ways in which the world of the text is taken to be alluding to and/or informing our own, as they institute a window through which meaning can be validated and acquired via fictions, proposing a way out of the problem of "referential illusions." His argument in *Time and Narrative* draws on his own previous work in *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975), where he suggested that poetic language may be claimed referential due to its allusive capacity functioning metaphorically, rather than descriptively; its connection to the world of the reader is thus accomplished via the commonalities between the two (*Time* I, 216-256). In what concerns literature's complicated relation to the extraliterary world, Ricoeur's stance attacks reductionist theses which claim fictional works are a non-comprehensive, diminished, neo-Platonic expression of a shadow of something "realer." Instead, he claims literary works are carefully weaved products which "depict reality by *augmenting* it with meanings that themselves depend upon the virtues of abbreviation, saturation, and culmination, so strikingly illustrated by emplotment" (*Time I*, 80).

However, objections concerned with language's capacity for meaning and referential properties remain. Analytic philosophy's renowned Verifiability Criterion of meaning, for instance, relegates historical and fictional narratives to meaninglessness, as it stipulates that a non-analytical preposition is meaningful only insofar as its meaning can be attested to empirically; that is, if it is experientially demonstrable. Accordingly, any statement concerned with past events, imaginary situations and fictional characters would be deemed empty of all meaning, for one cannot experience their content in any way other than through interpreting and accepting the linguistic unit itself. This framework runs the significant risk of becoming paradoxical on several levels. Firstly, and perhaps most evidently, it does not account for the possibility that meaning and knowledge be conveyed through claims put forward on the basis of psychological experience, the imagination, and mental states, rather than through the direct apperception of qualia. It similarly neglects the possibility that meaning be ascribed to utterances concerned with anything but the immediate, worldly present, thus condemning any

manner of historical knowledge to obsolescence.[17] Further, such criteria give rise to questions on the very nature of verification. Through nihilistic or solipsistic optics, the very possibility that we may attest to certain modes of experience might be questioned to the point where meaning and knowledge are entirely dismantled. In engaging with a work of literature, for instance, the experiences therein recounted are reconstructed by means of the imagination, and, thus, empirically—even if not physically—faced by the subject. A given criterion aimed at verifying the meaning of a fictional statement would thus have to acknowledge that language provides an experience in itself; that, in being made to face a narrative, irrespective of its historicity, potential truth-value, and literariness, one is situated at the centre of an empirically whole, verifiable experience having its place within the realm of "the real."

The language of narrative fictions in particular has been argued to be "structured linguistically by the conjunction of two unspeakable sentences, the sentence of narration and the sentence representing consciousness" (Banfield 1982/2016, 257). In coming together, they commodify and make explicit the two veiled poles that allow the articulation of any such narration: the fiction itself, along with its story and history; and the textual deployment of voice, forever haunted by the authorial phantom—both present and absent at the same time; always categorised, definitionally, by an ungraspable quality of patent in-betweenness. Something remains unverifiable about language, "unpinpointed," and must stay so for language to allow for the emergence of fictions under its wing.

Even though the syntactic and semantic components of a given language are indiscernible in fictional and non-fictional contexts, Banfield goes on, "[t]he difference between them is that the fictional narrative statement is immune to judgements of truth or falsity; in fiction, they are suspended" (258). This does not merely imply that truth and falsity as categories are inapplicable to fiction in the same way they would speak of the "real world," but that they are entirely vacuous when made to speak of fiction. This is a different perspective to truth value in fiction than that of most possible world theories, where the epistemological weight of propositions is asserted on the basis of whether they fulfil the truth conditions of their ascribed possible universe. What both approaches share, however, is the delineation of truth and falsity as being foundational notions to the understanding of fictions, either through the suspension of judgement, or through the reconfiguration of the thought structures that deem a proposition qualifiable as being either. The referential indeterminacy of language commands that it be dependent on its pragmatics, only arriving at meaning fully through context. In fictional settings, language's referential properties—regardless of the many possible approaches to such referentiality—are critically tensed, precariously seeking to arrive at some form of balance between fiction's tendency to aestheticize the nuanced, the plural, and the misleading in language, and the delicate construction of a cognitively articulate inner logic that readers have come to expect—and even demand—of fictional universes: a tension much reminiscent of Wallace's own discourse on the frail balance that authors embrace when they give way to experimentalism or renounce formal conventionalism too greatly.

Following twentieth century deconstructionism, it became gradually apparent that language as a system could be characterised by the omnipresence of absences: that of stable meanings (always deferred); that of referents (always ambiguous); that of universalised presumptions of understanding (always subjectivized, individualised, and contextual). Through the interweaving structuralist, poststructuralist, and deconstructivist outlooks on language, this absence was conclusively made explicit and placed at the centre of a vast array of criticism on

[17] See Danto 1985, 29-30.

how literary language functioned and what it could achieve as a consequence. Foucault's take on discourse is founded on the very appeal to these absences; these "secrets" beyond all possible graspability that would also feature at the core of Derridean philosophy, where they become self-negating discursive units that should not be uttered, and yet must be told to oneself in order for the secret to exist. "The secret," we may read, "separates and already institutes a negativity; it is a negation that negates itself" (Derrida 1989, 25). It must and must not be told. The self, similarly, must be inscribed in discourse to inaugurate social life, and yet, it simultaneously cannot be shared completely; it cannot surpass the problem of other minds entirely, irrespective of the intricacy with which one may engage in its description.

Literary narration is similarly made to navigate secret-like absences: narrative voice, as we have seen, cannot be pinned down; the author is absent at the moment of consumption; language condemns to dimness the array of possibilities comprising what could have been said but was not. Literature's web-like network of intertextual influence and interrelation remains too complex to be made extant, haunted by an absent presence, a stain that can only be apperceived circuitously, only spoken of through nuance. In Foucault's words:

> [I]t should never be possible to assign, in the order of discourse, the irruption of a real event; that beyond any apparent beginning, there is always a secret origin—so secret and so fundamental that it can never be quite grasped in itself. [… O]ne is led inevitably, through the naivety of chronologies, towards an ever-receeding point that is never itself present in any history; this point is merely its own void; and from that point all beginnings can never be more than recommencements or occultation (in one and the same gesture, this and that). [… A]ll manifest discourse is secretly based on an "already-said"; and […] this "already-said" is not merely a phrase that has already been spoken, or a text that has already been written, but a "never-said", an incorporeal discourse, a voice as silent as a breath, a writing that is merely the hollow of its own mark. (1969/2002, 27-28)

The filtering of these new outlooks on language into postmodernist literature was significant, adding up a formal anxiety to the contentual instability that was to become widespread in twentieth-century fiction. Much of these works indeed deploy hyperreal, manic, anhedonic, humorous, intertextual, and deflective literary devices to strategize their own attestation both to linguistic collapse, and to the subsequent crisis of the subject-positions dwelling within. Strategies devised to observe and diagnose the fall of the Babel of the modern world through the saturation of language and the vacuity of the information overload to which the postmodern subject was exposed, simultaneously become, in much postmodernist literature, an echo of Foucault's 1966 contention that "man is an invention […] nearing its end […; waiting to be] erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (1994, 422). In Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985), for instance, a wanderer at the centre of the novel's mystery by the name of Peter Stillman shares with the protagonist his views on the fragmentariness of the postmodern world and human language's responsibility for its decadence. According to him, the languages of old, now revealed to be imperfect, unstable, and ambiguous to an extent to which they had never been considered to be so, have failed us:

> I am in the process of inventing a new language. […] A language that will at last say what we have to say. For our words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. And yet our words have remained the same. They have not adapted themselves to the new reality. Hence, every time we try to speak of what we see, we speak falsely, distorting the very thing we are

> trying to represent. […] But words, as you yourself understand, are capable of change. [… Because of its permanence and immutability, the spoken word] is imprecise; it is false; it hides the thing it is supposed to reveal. And if we cannot even name a common, everyday object that we hold in our hands, how can we expect to speak of the things that truly concern us? (121-122)

Stillman's delusional wish for the artificial construction of a language of prelapsarian perfection is much too aspirational, but it succeeds in delineating the problem at the core of the postmodernists' approach to language: that it is all defined, praised, condemned, and understood through *what it lacks*; they cannot designate human reality in any manner that makes such a reality not only liveable, but real in a demonstrable sense.

For Auster's Stillman, language lacks concreteness and precision, it becomes an instrument in perpetual bad faith. In J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), it is other people's concretising use of language that is condemned; it is their forcing onto others a lack of possibility that the protagonist rejects most eagerly. Thus Magda, the main character, reflects on the impoverishment of language as derived from the enforcement of a specific meaning, and complains in anger that her speech, which was once free, has been corrupted by other people's private uses and forced to forever carry their denotations. Deixis plays a crucial part in the passage below, with words whose meaning is situational and relative being placed at the heart of her complaint. It is at these words, forever signalling the particularities and circumstances of a self that is denied linguistic uniqueness, that she aims her critique. The following excerpt takes place after she overhears her father with a young woman, locked in the safety of her room—home to her innermost thoughts and the unrestrainedness of her consciousness. Magda laments that their conversation is taking the words from their indeterminacy and potential, bringing them into a reality from which she shall never dissociate them again; evincing how they (i.e. the words) are, irrespective of how different one's subjective experience of one's surroundings may be from another's, always and irrevocably *the same*:

> There are few enough words true, rock-hard enough to build a life on, and these he is destroying. He believes that he and she can choose their words and make a private language, with an *I* and *you* and *here* and *now* of their own. But there can be no private language. Their intimate *you* is my *you* too. Whatever they may say to each other, even in the closest dead of night, they say in common words, unless they gibber like apes. How can I speak to Hendrik as before when they corrupt my speech? How do I speak to them? (74; emphasis in original)

The voice of character—encaged by language, constrained by imagination, subordinated to the author's—finds in its own medium a source of great discomfort in the wake of postmodernism. Character comes alive through narration; narration, through its particular use of language, helps "the reader *qua* textual recipient [… construct] a narrative voice from textual indications;" and yet through its very particularity, it is also often argued to become "a mimesis of real-life verbal interaction" (Fludernik 1993/2003, 434-435): imitative, devoid of a substance entirely its own. The self not only becomes relational because of these developments, but risks vacuity by virtue of its unfolding as such, instituting itself as one of the many "turns and twists of metaphoric language," only truly extant as a conglomerate of signs defined through "the distinctive place they occupy in contrast to other signs in the network of language" (Lovlie 1990, 105). In this context, much of postmodernist fiction's self-aware strategy as expressed through its resorting to recursiveness and metafiction, as will be argued to happen in Wallace's literature, may be maintained to respond not so much to a wish to rejoice in the experimentalist, dismantling urges that are often claimed to respond to the postmodernist climate(s), but to a

pressing need to evince that there is a lack at the heart of language inasmuch as relational. Or further, that this very lack in its nature precludes that much postmodernist literature claim for itself the ability to locate stable meaning if not via its indeterminate delving in the network of signifiers itself.

Hence, following the rise of metafiction—though not always through the overt uses of the technique, which would come to define a particular branch of American literature in the second half of the century—language as theme became a growing concern of characters. Authorial voices fused with the characters' own; their language, learnedly defiant, sought a way out of rigid mimeticism through awareness, only to become entrapped, again, in the hands of their authorial demiurges and the inevitability of their haunting—limiting, constraining, ever-ignorant—presence. This not only served as a mimetic attempt at convolutedly "reflecting" some manner of perceptually fragmented reality, but to gaze at the fragmentariness within as newly conceived through the thought paradigms that had arisen. In this context, literary language was argued to imitate not only through its aspiration to provide readers with a semblance of extra-literary life in the fashion of Aristotelian poetics, but also through its formal axes: conversation in fiction, Fludernik tells us, "has to be analysed in accordance with speech act theory and other discourse structures and discourse strategies" (1993/2003, 434-435), for regardless of literature's specificity, the story level necessitates of all such schemes to erect itself as intelligibly proximal to the "real" world—which, in turn, becomes both its receiving end and point of origin.

Postmodernist challenges derive into a tension that feeds upon itself; it tacitly rules that readers come to stories in search of something, and it simultaneously commands that it is the responsibility and the essence of a good tale to try to give it. "It seems to me that reality is fractured right now," says Wallace in a 1997 interview with Charlie Rose, "and the difficulty about writing about that reality is that text is very linear, is very unified, and I am constantly on the lookout for ways to fracture out the text that aren't totally disoriented […]. There's got to be some interplay," he concludes, "between how difficult you make it for the reader and how seductive it is so that the reader will want to do it" (19:02 – 19:36). Postmodernist fiction, upon trying to pronounce itself a bulwark of this sense of disjointedness and disorientation, opens up a conversation with and against language as a communicative tool; it threatens postmodernist language's functionality, toys with the possibility of impairing its success utterly. These works thus call upon themselves the role of the other; turn themselves into the uncanny presence at the other end, inscribed in a language that reveals itself as self-consciously precarious; proclaim themselves the tain of the mirror. They take, in language, all that is human; they refuse definition, blur reality's borders, remain interstitially elusive at the edge of the cognizable—and then return humanity as literarily conveyed whence it came. They give subjectivity back, but it is now seemingly stained, mere reflection, and so the governing postmodern *episteme* threatens to relinquish its every value.

1.10. Subjectivity, the Face, and the Speaking Self: David Foster Wallace's Characters Discuss the Nature of Linguistic (Non-)Being

The self in (postmodernist) literary language has come to know its prison. It rejoices in the limitedness of its scope. It finds in its existence as parasite of a given human's imagination both a sense of purpose, and a burden. The now-dead subject has its meaning deferred from the discussion on postmodernism, and yet is simultaneously central to postmodern thought's

enterprise. When invoked, the self is either reduced to some manner of superstructural force, made to coexist with it as a semiotic palimpsest, or altogether replaced by the structure itself, be it (meta)narrative, power, language, or some manner of conglomerate of the three. The author's self often seeks to stand liberated from fictionality's devaluing[18] structures; those of characters, on their part, chase after an answer to why they cannot be (seen as) more than linguistic artifice, freed from the need of their own supersedence.

In Jennifer Egan's *The Keep* (2006), one of the characters muses on pretence, belief and language, and concludes that, paradoxically, and even though he is certain that "pretending and believing are opposites," there is something about the frail status of his reality that makes it possible for him to adventure that "if you believe that a word—*door*—is a thing you can walk through, and then you walk on through it like I did, there's nothing out there you won't swallow" (100-101). We might concur with Egan's character that it is only natural to bear witness to the frailty of language and its retaining a near-Platonic essentialism in some of its facets. It is only natural, indeed, that we appeal to language's referential and deictic properties to *name* ("*That* is *a door*"), establishing an attributive relationship of deeply problematic interchangeability between designator and designated. The characters of postmodernism—however sceptical, reluctant, or manic towards language—display a sense of guardedness in what concerns their own inscription; a wariness at least in part inherited from postmodernist authors' experience of the literary and intellectual climate (following the structuralist and poststructuralist challenges) that one may synchronically ascribe to the greater part of the past century.

David Foster Wallace's thematic concern with language takes all sorts of forms in his literature. It is perhaps most readily apparent through short stories such as the unconventional "Datum Centurio," featured in *Brief Interviews*, where Wallace presents us with a descriptivist, future dictionary entry concerning the word "date." Beneath the posthumanist imaginings of the changes that will affect gender and sexual relationships a hundred years from the present—conveyed through the introduction of elaborately ingenious, dense descriptions of a variety of new technologies concerned with data access (the "pentasensory illustrative support" that those consulting the dictionary can receive by affixing their "neural plug[s]" (1999, 107fn)) and sexual intercourse (the much reifying, patriarchal devising of the pleasure-devoted "Virtual Female Sensory Array[s]," through which male users can engage in "Simulated Genital Interface" (1999, 107) with pre-programmed applications)—lies an overt interest in language change and its potential to (re)define the reality of human beings, attesting, however limitedly, however deferredly and unstably, to our social history.

Wallace's interest in language philosophy and linguistics, however, went far beyond the most overt examples—to his intricate execution of "Datum Centurio," one would have to add his 2001 essay on the debate over descriptivism and prescriptivism, "Tense Present: Democracy, English and the Wars over Usage," and of course *The Broom of the System*, where baroque language and intricate reflection are recurrently juxtaposed to the simplicity and communicative focus on everyday speech in a tale brought together, thematically, by Wittgensteinian philosophy of language, to name but only a few of countless examples. His interest in Wittgenstein is perhaps the most apparent of all, and it has been attested to in much criticism on his fiction and non-fiction. In her examination of Wallace's tendency to reconfigure linguistic variables to achieve emphasis and counterplay readerly expectation, Mary Shapiro connects the issue of language to Wallacean prose not only through the reiterated invocations

[18] Culturally perceived and connoted as being reductive of a text's claim to truth.

of Lacan, Bakhtin, Derrida, Ricoeur and the like that populate studies on his literature (2019, 1), but also through the linguistic problem's entire relocation at the centre of Wallace's (often overtly philosophical) inquiry on human nature and interconnectedness in the postmodern era:

> Wallace […] deliberately focused readers' attention on the horror of mindlessness, the tragedy of solipsistic refusal to communicate, which in turn reinforces the understanding of what he valued above all—communication (if not communion) between active minds. The great payoff in Wallace's writing has never been plot-related (as readers often struggle to make sense of a plot at all, and Wallace consistently denies us any closure), nor is it the creation of particularly likeable or memorable characters […]; it is the pleasure readers take in his distinctive voice and—in his own words—'how fascinating everything gets when you pay very close attention to it.' (2019, 8)

It would be opportune, she concludes, that criticism on Wallace began to shift away from a careful examination of the philosophical variables that populate his fiction, to devote itself to understanding, rather, how all such underlying philosophical themes are interwoven and brought together through a shared concern (and outright fascination—though often through patent dissatisfaction) with (literary) language. It is in and through language, after all, that Wallace sought to erect a channel of interpersonal connection through which to transcend the limitations of body-bound consciousness. Such a concern with language resisting the conveyance of a given subject's true being is closely tied to Wallace's acute concern with failure, both in terms of form and content: in his fiction, language fails to communicate the self properly; it fails to account for the genuineness of his existence; it fails to do what he wants it to, entrapping his voice as inserted, entrapping his characters, denying readers resolution. The written word rebels against itself; it fails to perform unquestionably its fundamental role: bridging the interpersonal distance between social beings, and condemns characters to insurmountable anxieties and endless musings on the very possibility for any such connections.

Wallace's "Everything Is Green" grasps at the struggle for true affective and linguistic exchange through a form of communicative synaesthesia: the first-person male protagonist reflects on how he "can not [sic] feel what to say" (1989/1997, 229); he turns towards whom we assume to be his girlfriend "with the taste of something true in [… his] mouth" (230). The unsayable is thus sensorily apperceived, but cannot be grasped entirely; cannot be shared in a way significant enough for it to bridge the interpersonal distance separating the man from his love interest as he stares at her: "there is something in me that can not close up, in that looking" (230). Much as it happens with sensory apperception, the selves of subject and other retain a quality that is intrinsically individualised; the certainty of their existence depends on its being subordinated to the perceiver, and the quality of such a moment of sensory experience remains fundamentally untransferable. There thus emerges what I will argue to be the two central driving forces in Wallace's literary production: the other as an ineffable mystery whose very existence threatens to destabilise the grounds on which Wallacean characters' senses of self are founded; and the instability of all such senses of self, haunted by their incommunicability to the uncanny other beyond.

These notions are indeed interrelated to what have been outlined as the definitional themes for which Wallacean prose should be praised: a patent effort to connect with others in the face of charges of solipsism, addiction and mental illness as self-encaging phenomena, a dire refusal of any teleological pretence, or the reappropriation of failure as a driving force both in form—novels stopped mid-sentence, absent parts of the narrative—and content—irresolute fictions, characters who cannot wield any manner of epiphany to free themselves from their prisons. Wallacean prose problematises, however, Thomas Docherty's reading of the postmodernist turn

as an "attack on the philosophy of Identity ('Know Thyself') and its replacement with a philosophy of alterity ('Acknowledge the Unknowability of the Other')" (1993, 17), placing Wallace, as a late postmodernist, in a place of precarious liminality where awareness of and concern with the two debates became, at once, revolutionary and deeply alienating. For, in Wallace, acknowledging the unknowability of the other oft becomes the only true pathway towards self-knowledge. Where characters appear, they struggle to understand themselves and each other, to gluttonise alterity, to phagocytise others into intelligibility in hopes of forging something true as a consequence of their comprehension, but fail to do so throughout—one need look no further than to *Broom*'s Norman Bombardini, who seeks a way out of the irreconcilable loci of self and other by eating obscene quantities of food, hoping that he will become large enough to eradicate difference altogether and institute a bodily dictatorship where the self-other distinction (together with all the problems therein contained) may become obsolete and malfunction itself into oblivion.

The self is thus recurrently haunted by a lack; tormented by something at once ungraspable in any conventional sense and unspeakable before an other. Wallace's renowned depressed person, featured in a tale by the same name, is entrapped, precisely, by her patent inability to look outside herself, which proves to be the single, most damaging consequence of her incapacity to share her humanity through language and have others understand. The reality of her condition and its selfish, inward-looking expression within the boundaries of the story becomes utterly incapacitating to the protagonist, who has lost the ability both to express the hideousness within and to care for the complexity beyond the limits of her self. The story's main character, diagnosed with a depressive disorder, spirals into a paradoxical, autoreferential, incarcerating loop as she extensively explains how her self-centredness and existential loneliness, to which she resorts to justify her instrumentalization of the people in her life, have become an inescapable prison preventing her from arriving at any empirical proof of her ability for empathy. Her solitary confinement within the boundaries of her own consciousness and the social exploitation of her contacts as scapegoats for her affective, narcissistic needs—she has agreed with her psychologist to labelling them her "Support System," commodifying them and inviting their being read as steppingstones to her betterment—prevent her from achieving any redeeming, therapeutic knowledge on who she is and how to overcome her condition. It is only after the death by suicide of her therapist, and only very precariously, that she succeeds to fully reflect on the nature of her imprisonment: "what kind of person," she asks, "could seem to feel nothing—'*nothing*,' she emphasized—for anyone but herself?" (1999, 57).

The story denies its readers any manner of cathartic conclusion; it stares at the very loop that traps its protagonist, following her circling musings as she tries to find a way out of the depths of her illness. Ultimately, the only way out is only hinted at; phrased in the form of an existential question at the close: "How was she to decide and describe—even to herself—what all she'd so painfully learned said about her?" (1999, 58). Her self-centredness and inability to care truly for others, never acknowledging their incommensurability and alterity, becomes, rather than a break from it, the very obstacle impeding that she succeeds in doing justice to the "Know Thyself" aphorism that Docherty ascribes to the literary enterprise of modernity. There thus appears in Wallace the postmodern urge to attest to the other's unknowability, but it does so in the form of an unanswered question; a quarrel with no imaginable conclusion, tainted, always, by the presence of selves whose inscription in postmodernism precludes that they be liberated from the constraining grip of their own consciousnesses. Through their struggle to gesture towards the lived reality of the other, the reader may catch a guided glimpse, bordering on the didactic, on where exactly lies the ungraspable, human-shaped solution at which

Wallace's fiction seeks to arrive. It is, further, a fundamentally linguistic problem: the depressed person is unable to connect insofar as she is unable to voice; her ostracization from herself is a vital part of her ostracization from the world beyond her bodily confines. The cathartic, conclusive understanding of the other, the "promised land" beyond the actual text, remains unreachable. Standing before the gates of interpersonal paradise, Wallace willingly denies his character access to healing and redemption because of her inability to truly listen to those around her; and his fiction, posited as a quest towards those very doors, is made to equally refuse resolution.

As the footnotes in "The Depressed Person" gradually grow longer,[19] the therapy fiction delves into what might very well be its central paradox: made to stand before the consequences of her self-centredness, the protagonist is alienated from knowledge; alienated from language; submitted to subjective effacement. The self is reduced by its self-examination, its probing maliciousness becomes detractive to the self's very being instead of having it benefit from its introspective strategies. The horror of living such a self reveals itself as not only indissociable from the protagonist's condition, but as fundamentally definitory of who she is as a human being. Cartesian dualism, indeed, comes to pivotally transverse "The Depressed Person" in its entirety: it is only upon perceiving the self to be an inner substance, to reside in and equal her mind as the centre of her worldly experience, that the depressed person may lose her designators and have her humanity be rewritten into the sickness.

She thus faces the growing fear, as the story progresses, that she may be reduced to it, *become it*, reconstruing and encaging herself—and thus making herself prisoner of her therapist's metaphoric cell, brought to life by her habit of "manipulating [her] fingers idly so that her mated hands formed various enclosing shapes" (1999/2001, 36), an image which recurs in Wallace's therapy fictions (see Redgate 2019, 286)—not only in the limitedness of her self-centred being, perceptibly alienated from any redeeming connection with others, but in the very nature of her illness as a superstructural descriptor of her every potentiality as a person. Her pain is not merely inaccessible to others, defined and made unbearable by its own ineffability from the opening: "the possibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror" (1999/2001, 31); but also inacceptable to herself, impossible to face and process as anything other than proof of her inherent hideousness, as a wicked torment beyond language menacing her very self-concepts, corrupting her sense of identity into becoming, by the end, both the incognizable and the unrecognizable: "what words and terms might be applied to describe and assess such a solipsistic, self-consumed, endless emotional vacuum and sponge as she now appeared to herself to be?" (1999/2001, 58).

The depressed person's dire interest in the possibility of empathising with others in a true or transcendental sense might not merely result from the selfish, self-protective tendencies that she attributes to her condition, but to a misunderstanding of the extent to which empathy as a process can truly be made manifest in human intersubjective experience as informed by the problem of other minds. In James Dorson's approach to the story, the empathetic imperative ruling over the protagonist's need for intersubjective connection becomes the very reason why "the sharing of feeling [… results in] a destructive spiral of narcissistic reflexivity that obstructs

[19] In doing so, they reflect on the sources and nature of the psychic distress the protagonist suffers from, colonise the textual space, and establish a formal parallel between the text's oversaturated structure and the protagonist's conflicting need to be better to and for others in the face of her patent incapacity to move past the self-consuming egotism of her individually-experienced condition.

any possibility of genuine sharing. [… T]he examination of the self," Dorson goes on, "turns into self-excoriation once it rejects the social ties that constitute the self" (2016, 72-73). The alienating forces driving the protagonist and the impulse toward tie-breaking that soon come to define the story's tone are thus located at the very heart of the condition that the narrative voice so desperately seeks to convey. Thus, her only hope is to be justified by the readers beyond—a cry epitomising the Wallacean "New Sincerity," via which his characters often display anticipatory self-consciousness to such an extent that they become not only consumed by how "anticipation of others' reception of […] their outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self" (Kelly 2010, 136), but, at once, blinded in the face of any criticism readers may want to put forth, and objects of readerly empathy as a consequence of their very self-deprecatory awareness.

It is thus that "The Depressed Person," with its "unbearably long sentences of merciless precision" through which the story construes the self-conscious persona behind the literary text (Kelly 2018, 90), becomes one of Wallace's most extensive attempts to face the poietic challenge posed by medical discourses' contention that mental illness "can be described only in metaphor and allegory" (Solomon 2001, 16). The centrality of the ineffable to the tale is thus made obvious, not only as resulting from the equation of depression and narcissism that the story itself contributes to supporting, leading the central character to be too self-focused for intersubjective communication to succeed, but also from the inexpressibility of the protagonist's hurting self, the unvoiced reality of which is pinpointed at the very beginning of the story as "a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror" (Wallace 1999/2001, 31). In an instance that is epitomic of Wallacean prose, the self comes to be circumscribed through excess: a rhetoric of detailed grammatical exhaustion comes to saturate the text with meaning, and in the process, prevents the openness of readerly configuration in what concerns the issues disclosed; it overflows with medical histories, confessional surges, conversations and recollections, saturating them with meaning to the extent that all such meaning becomes colonising of the stories' natural inclination to elicit, as they are only fully functional through what remains unsaid.

The identity of the depressed person is lost in Wallace's obsessive textual practices, devoted to meticulously dissecting human behaviour in the face of mental illness. The play of presence and absence becomes effective for readers as a consequence of the story's scrupulous approach to the elements surrounding the subjectivity about which she finds herself unable to speak. The abundance of these elements naturally enhances, however inadvertently, the intolerability of the absent core. The self, should we attest to there being a self to be retrieved from "The Depressed Person" as a story, is here presented through the condition at which centre it rests; its unspeakable nature replaced by the "cluster of appurtenances" to which Henry James resorted in his attempt at its description:[20] exhaustively pronounced through its accessorised doings and undoings, but unutterable at the essence.

Most terrifying, perhaps, is the possibility that the identity the protagonist so desperately seeks to present before others no longer exists, especially as she pursues the empathetic understanding that she finds herself unable to provide; that her very sense of self has been tainted, or even destroyed, by the sickness and its subsequent medicalisation. Drawing on

[20] "There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us--and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for THINGS! One's self-- for other people--is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps--these things are all expressive" (James 1881/2004, 283).

Bourdieu's contention that drug prescription plays a role in identity inscription through the establishment of a "habitus" (1977), Alan Bleakley and Margaretta Jolly argue along the same lines that "[s]uch prescribing then carries over the complications and contradictions inherent to the drug […] to the identity of the 'patient'" (2011, 783). Wallace's depressed protagonist, thus, may be argued to not only be silenced and constrained by her inability to voice her pain successfully, but perhaps deprived of any self-recognised identity from which the pain could be articulated because of the disease.

This contention is particularly poignant if read in connection with Wallace's Cartesian approach to the self: it is only because of the self being equated with the mind, as an identitarian monolith entrapped by the piloted body, that it becomes possible for mental illness and its effects on the mind to be erosive to the self's very fabric. The problem of other minds thus becomes, in "The Depressed Person," a blatant incapacitation that is not overtly philosophical in tone, but, rather, permeated absolutely by the effects of mental illness on interpersonal relationships, making evident in its failure what Wallace's extraliterary discourses disclose: that there is no moving past manic ennui and epistemological suspicion without paying genuine, caring attention to other people, however hard, however debilitating, and however constrained our very ability to care honestly might appear. Perhaps what "The Depressed Person" does best—and the reason why the emotional uncanniness at the heart of the story has received widespread recognition both in academia in beyond—is, precisely, evince the philosophical difficulties that one arrives at upon trying to reconcile the mystified quality attributed to "empathy" as an affective relationship, and the ontological impossibilities that rest beneath its many phenomenologically impracticable metaphors—"to walk in another person's shoes," "to put oneself in someone else's place."

In "The Depressed Person," as happens in much of Wallace's short fiction, the reader is not presented with an affective response to trauma; no form of redemption can penetrate the consumingly narcissistic mind of the depressed protagonist, whose confessional stance invites readerly empathy through self-awareness whilst preventing any form of functional defence of the raw content of her (in)actions. Regardless of whether we take her alleged emotional egotism at face value,[21] the character's identity and the concerns haunting the very possibility of her self-understanding—should these two ideas be argued to be distinct—remain explicitly unutterable at the close of the story. Her "self," implicitly equated with her condition, stays unspeakable, rests beyond her ability for language, and it is thus that its very existence within the story's structure comes to preclude meaningful connection altogether for the main character.

Even as the underlying learning pattern observed by the tale draws to its conclusion—the climactic event then made to affect the character irrevocably—the very last question condemns any such lessons to a silence that is at once a self-imposition and an extension of the opening horror: "How was she to decide and describe—even to herself, looking inward and facing herself—what all she'd so painfully learned said about her?" (1999/2001, 58). The unspeakable dread within becomes both the character's silencer: she cannot verbalise what she cannot face; and the character herself: she cannot be or think herself as anything but the subjective experiencer of that very dread. The tale is thus made to echo Wallace's own perspective on the short story, which he described as depending on exformation: "a certain quantity of vital

[21] It is also possible, I would contend, to maintain that the depressed protagonist is not emotionally impaired, since emotion is necessarily rooted in the self even when incited by the experience(s) of others, but is, instead, incapable of reading her affective responses in any manner that renders such a compulsion undamaging—a claim that could perhaps be extended further and made to speak of Wallace's reappearing conceptual loops and impasses in a more universal sense.

information removed from but evoked by a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections within the recipient" (1998, 23).What the depressed person cannot say is nevertheless utterable to us; it stands before her readers, having been disclosed together with the pain's "etiology and cause" (1999/2001, 31) for foreign selves that are not so conditioned—a "Support System" forever in becoming—to dissect. It so awaits, uninviting, the intangible, unspecific promise of readerly judgement.

"Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XXIV)," the short story closing *Brief Interviews*, illustrates parallel tensions concerning subject positions, and more specifically engages with the effects that a human being's identity as self-perceived may have on their well-being potentialities. The tale follows the monologic reflections of its protagonist, a boy potentially suffering from some form of gelotophobia (i.e. fear of being laughed at), as his mother gives him a haircut in the kitchen, during which process he is face-to-face with his twin brother, subjected to his constant mockery and unable to move. The boy stares at his sibling's inescapable face throughout, a face which "less mimed than lampooned my own [the protagonist's], made instantly distended and obscene whatever position my own face's pieces assumed" (1999/2001, 273), and becomes gradually more anxious the more unconventional and scornful his brother's gestures become. The visual mockery of the sibling ridicules the protagonist's facial expressions by misrepresenting them to absurdity, making them appear impudently inappropriate. Taking his twin brother to be an identical copy of himself, the narrator sees in the face before him "the burlesque of a wet hysteria" (273) which he interprets to be his own. Self-awareness here becomes the source of the self's corruption; a self which will be thenceforth wholly reconsidered, haunted by the realisation of its horror as *revealed* by the other. Thus "[t]he maddening self-consciousness and hyperarticulacy that sometimes seem like mere tics of Wallace's prose become […] the absolutely faithful reflection of a consciousness that knows itself too well, and is disgusted by what it knows" (Kirsch 2014, 205). This uncanny reappropriation of the Greek aphorism "Know Thyself" not only speaks of Wallace's mannerisms as a writer, but also of the recurring themes in his fiction. "Porousness (XXIV)" is a perfect instance of this, as it presents a protagonist who, over the course of a few lines, develops a new sense of self-consciousness by means of experiencing the other before him, and finds in that very other a source of insurmountable self-hatred.

The dialogic nature of fiction which Bakhtin diagnosed as supporting our distinction between self and other in literature (1981, 352), and which Wallace's own thought echoed by firmly maintaining throughout his career that "writing is an act of communication between one human being and another" (1997/1998, 144), is in this short story cycle assaulted by means of an explicit lack in language. This absence is most evident in the title stories, where the interviews are conducted without a transcription of the interviewer's remarks, but does not escape "Porousness (XXIV)," where any insight on the brother's motives is left out of the fiction. Here the other is merely a face on which the most loathsome version of the protagonist's self is inscribed by means of a contracted understanding of 'copying:' "for we called it that" (Wallace 1999/2001, 272). Insofar as the two boys agreed to understand 'copying' as such, the specular nature of the face beheld is also instituted, linguistically, as part of the story: because he is taken to be the same as; or, identical to, the narrator, the latter's defective reflection as provided by the other's face becomes a source of violence from which he must escape. Hence the reason why he desperately "attempts by expression alone to make Mum look up from me [the protagonist] and see him" (273), obsessed "with escaping solipsistic loneliness by communicating with another consciousness" (Natalini 2013, 44) but failing to do so and, in failing, falling prey to the trap of the presented self's inexorable horror.

The cyclic nature of self-awareness turns into a source of agony for the main character, due to his inability to detain the unrestrainable flow of damaging input originating in the other. In "Porousness (XXIV)," moreover, Wallace explicitly points at the source of the traumatic experience; he writes: "I saw in his twin face […] the gross and pitiless *sameness*, the distortion in which there is, tiny, at the center, something cruelly true about the we who leer and woggle at stick necks and concave skulls, goggling eyes that swell to the edges" (Wallace 1999/2001, 273). It is sameness, and not otherness nor selfhood itself, that is responsible for the pain of the subject; unsolicited, forced sameness turned into a form of (identitarian) aggression when being forced upon another in the form of compulsory recognition. The illusion of sameness as provided by the other's expression thus becomes a form of enforcedly visible, direct, psychological violence as would be inscribed in Johan Galtung's renowned typology (1969, 169). The face of the other, which Emmanuel Levinas understood as a token of their humanity, and thus as one which "does not negate the same, *does not do violence to it*" (1969, 203; emphasis added) turns in Wallace into both attacker and weapon; into the irreducible proof that the other is as vulnerable to the self as the self is to him *and* the means by which violence is made possible.

The nature of such an assault is nonetheless a matter demanding further discussion: Galtung's renowned definition of violence posits it as a form of influence by which human beings' "somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (1969, 168). The imperfect mirroring of the facial expressions of the story's main character, it follows, unfolds as a violent act insofar as there exists a manifest difference between the perfected, non-limiting understanding of the protagonist's self (*the potential*) —to which he could have arrived at through 'proper' identifications and projections[22]—and the impeding consequences of the performed parody of his twin brother (*the actual*), by reason of which he incurs in self-negation: because he wishes not to exist as that which is presented before him, he ends up "giving up the ghost completely for a blank slack gagged mask's mindless stare—unseen and -seeing—into a mirror [he] could not know or feel [him]self without" (Wallace 1999/2001, 273). Understood as a form of psychological violence, the twin brother's mimicry qualifies as "brainwashing […] that serve[s] to decrease mental potentialities" (Galtung 1969, 169). Further, the overpowering authority of his distortedly mirrored self, once it has been naturalised as the protagonist's true sense of being, is emphasised by means of the very last sentence: "No not ever again" (Wallace 1999/2001, 273), through which he negates the very possibility that he may undo the psychological damage resulting from the traumatic experience; that he may unsee his face in his twin brother's; that he may appeal to his mutable ipse identity, following Ricoeur (1990/1992, 2; 116), to grow out of the unsolicited, imposed image of himself with which his brother has irremediably presented him.

This very last sentence serves yet another purpose, its multifaceted nature being common to that of most closing remarks in *Brief Interviews*, for it functions as though it were a commissive speech act in the form of "keeping one's word," a phrase employed by Ricoeur as an example of how the subject may attempt to "stand as a challenge to time, as a denial of change" (1990/1992, 124), pugnaciously trying to transform her or his ipse identity into idem identity—to this struggle responds the narrator's use of language, as he speaks of the brother's mockery as "copying" (Wallace 1999/2001, 272): a term which, by definition, refers to a process by which sameness is replicated *ad infinitum*. Thus, as the subject claims that he will

[22] By using "proper identifications" in this context, I intend to refer exclusively to those whose effects on character unfold as non-detrimental to the subject's own consciousness of her or his self, irrespective of their rigorous correspondence to the "actual" subject.

resist the passing of time and the changes that it may naturally trigger in his "self," he establishes a form of compromise to the tormenting bias that has been imposed on his sense of identity by means of a face. In registering the experience as a traumatic one, the self is turned inwardly and crystallises into the illusion of a "same" whose potential alteration in the future will be conditioned by a series of obstacles springing directly from the moment of painful self-awareness which the subject has derived from (mis)identification with the parodying other.

In this manner, Wallace appears to be indirectly attacking the notoriously positive signification that the face has in Levinasian philosophy, where it acquires religious significance. The ethical relation underlying the face-to-face encounter, by which the face of the other, in all its vulnerable, infinite givenness, is presented before the self, is in this short story corrupted by the identification of an eerie same *in* the very other whose gaze the self meets. As though he were a funhouse mirror, the protagonist's twin brother mimics the former's every action to farcicality, triggering an experience where sameness and selfhood are blurred into an insolvable indeterminacy into which the main character inscribes his identity. Trapped in a vicious circle of misidentifications, he becomes more agitated the more his brother parodies his facial expressions, and his brother's ill-natured mimicry becomes more exaggerated, instituting a never-ending cycle through which the 'seen' is incessantly ingrained on the protagonist's identity.

The original responsibility for the other which Levinas claimed to precede ontology and that emerges from the face as an irreducible moment of infinity; as "a source from which all meaning appears" (1969, 299), makes of the brother's mimicry the unethical act by default. By perverting his own face to exert preposterous violence upon the other, the most unavoidable claim behind Levinasian ethics is twice corrupted: mainly by twisting the face's very nature so that it will take advantage of its freedom to lie, a freedom which "already presuppose[s its] absolute authenticity" (1969, 202) far beyond the categories of deceit and veracity, but also by using that very authenticity to attack the other; to violate the appeal to one's humanity that his face's immeasurability as a gate to infinity necessarily conveys. The mocking brother thus resists the expression of the protagonist, whose helplessness defies his very ability for power – '*mon pouvoir de pouvoir*' (Levinas 1969, 198) – and, knowing "how I [the protagonist] hated it" (Wallace 1999/2001 273), chooses to violently exert his power over the other, the face considered.

This sense of absolute authenticity with which the face is imbued turns it into the most apparent means by which to inflict psychological violence on others. Since, following Levinas, it appeals to our humanity and is taken to be irreducibly authentic because of it, what is deceitfully presented to us by means of facial expression is granted a privileged, influential position as self-given-to-us, and is thus favoured over all other visual input that may move inwardly into the subject and affect the self's very articulation. As Mary K. Holland convincingly suggested of the entire short story cycle, "Porousness (XXIV)" "enact[s] the estrangement of the self and suggest[s] that only in placing discrete selves in conjunction, connection, and proximity to each other can anything meaningful and beyond the self arise" (2013, 111). It is the dialogic relation that the self establishes with the other that makes it possible for each of their hermetic positions to become identitarian, given the relational nature that identity maintains throughout Wallace's fiction, greatly reminiscent of Bakhtinian thought and echoing his ultimate contentions that "'self' is dialogic," and, as a consequence of this, "[t]he event of existence has the nature of dialogue" (Holquist 1990, 19-27).

This dialogical other, however, much as it unfolds as the source of transcendental meaning, also ceases to be an other upon being interpreted to convey the infinity contained by the face of the self rather than his own; a hideous face speaking of an infinity beyond all humanity by virtue of which both self and other are eventually denied their status as ontological categories. By commodifying the other as a doppelgänger of the self, phagocytising him and assimilating the tormenting image that he provides into the subject's very identity, the narrator of this short story, as happens repeatedly through *Brief Interviews* in particular and Wallace's fictional oeuvre in general, retreats into solipsism: the other thence becomes not an-other but a mere image of my-self. His narratological escape into solipsism triggers the cyclical nature of the pain: because the narrator conceives his twin brother to be but a reflection of his own being, he cannot but infinitely replicate the exaggerated image before him, acting himself as another "mirror I [the protagonist] could not know or feel myself without" (Wallace 1999/2001, 273).

The Nietzschean hall of mirrors thus folds in on itself, and identity is confined within its glassy walls. Encaged in such a manner, identity as selfhood is eradicated in favour of identity as sameness; or, rather, in favour of the *idea* of identity as sameness conceived by the protagonist, one which he will cyclically perpetrate by means of confirming his worst assumptions about who he believes to be in the face mirroring his own, reflecting himself as image thereafter. The postmodernist self as contained and presented in the story does not stand at the end of facially mediated inference; it does not come into existence, either, as an absolute certainty before its (malevolent) reflection. Its precariousness is not merely diegetic, conceptual, or subjective, but permeates the narration structurally; it reveals itself a parasite of one's totality of being. Ultimately, "Porousness (XXIV)" comes to showcase how unstable and traumatic the process of self-understanding—a socially assisted one—can become, how inessential and mutable identity can unfold to be, and how such a process is obliged to depend on relational configurations to articulate an ontology. And, just as much, it showcases how a corruption of the self of this nature equals a corruption of speech, an imposed muteness symbolised by the protagonist's mother's fastening a cloth over his mouth to protest his disturbing her shears' assertion of his face's true shape (Wallace 1999/2001, 273).

Girl with Curious Hair's "Little Expressionless Animals" provides another instance of Wallace's romantic, Levinasian approach to the face, which is understood, simultaneously, as the ultimate token of the subject's humanity, and as the primal gate to interpersonal connection. As the story nears its end, the two main characters face each other in a conversation where they climactically arrive at the conclusion that Julie's aversion to animals could be easily justified through the argument that "animals' faces have no expression. Not even the possibility of it. […] A man's face," they go on, "has nothing on it. Look closely. Tell them to look. And not at what the faces do—men's faces never stop moving—they're like antennae. But all the faces do is move through different configurations of blankness" (1989/1997, 41). It is on this basis that Julie arrives at defining, finally, Faye's exceptionalness: when her face moves, it in fact succeeds to *mean*. In her visage's relentless changes, it is given as though it were *obvious* that there is beauty, authenticity, and a subjective poetics to her being alive. Facial expression becomes here, as it does in *Brief Interviews*' "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XXIV)," a paralinguistic, Levinasian door through which to access the humaneness of the other—regardless of both stories' purposely cruel exploitation and commodification of it.

In moving; in conveying feeling through bodily action, the gesture towards the other is materialised, and the (other) self's veiled nature precariously glimpsed at for merely an instant.

Wallace's literary subjects' sense of being-towards-the-world, one could surmise, is liberated from the inertia of timelessness through the subjects' success in meaning as they *change* (the pivotal role of *ipseité* to Wallacean characterisation is thus, too, made obvious). The identity of the other as human, presupposed through phenomenological extrapolation, often remains in Wallace's fiction direly inaccessible; only graspable imperfectly, and only at certain moments. In "Little Expressionless Animals," Faye understands the negative implications of her selfless stasis, and asks Julie—eyes wide open, fully expressive, her other-self momentarily perceptible to the both of them—whether she actually likes her face at rest, or merely upon its "moving into expression" (1989/1997, 42). She hence also asks, implicitly, whether she loves her for who she truly is, in spite of the impossibility of sharing such a state linguistically; such a condensation of the pre-postmodern essence of her identity, in any fundamental manner. Or, on the contrary, if it is merely in her coming into resembling, for a fleeting moment, the obvious yet indemonstrable fact that she, too, is a sentient subject, that Julie can turn her into a recipient for her love, her want, and her undivided attention.

Wallacean characters' distrust towards language and their fear of not being understood, even as their manipulative tendencies conquer despicable heights, serves at once to dislocate the self and its certainties from the text and to appeal to the same suspicions that unite postmodern subjects, both in and beyond literary narrative, on the basis of a shared fear that desperately seeks liberation from the nihilistic impulse to inaction. The empathy at which Wallace insistently pointed in his description of his literary ambitions remains hindered, diegetically, but is nonetheless apprehended through the governing doxa that turns its malfunctioning into a (late) postmodern universal. Examining his work as a whole, the only attestable, true connection between selves that may not be utterly tainted by the certainty that subjecthood is trapped inside the natural egotism of the lived body, is that which springs from readerly projection; from the unstated, ever-silent agreement that the indeterminate and plural nature of the act of reading might provide a temporary remedy for Wallacean characters' perennial distrust of the others within and without.

1.11. The Heartfelt Wish to Give Something of Value: David Foster Wallace's Characters and the Promise of Subjective Enlightenment

David Foster Wallace's relationship to character, one may be tempted to conclude, was one of philosophical examination, scepticism, and projected concern for the stability and liveability of the human condition. Their role in the fictions they star in recurrently became that of enabling the author to present impasses, imprisoning them in all manner of physical and psychological cells. These prisons' absolute nature would condemn them—and, in their condemnation, *free* readers as they are forced into a new awareness of the attestable fact that there is more to life than the insurmountable limitations constraining Wallace's character.

Regardless of Paul Ricoeur's concern with fiction-making as a process and with its temporality, his claims also contribute to any discussion of the self in literature inasmuch as they serve as a reminder that the conception and reception of character is bound to the conception and reception of the piece of art of which it is part. It is hardly questionable that literary character may only be brought to existence within literature's metaphysical parentheses, and it has not been my intention to claim it otherwise. Similarly, it is a challenge to the most widespread of our intuitions concerning literature to attempt an understanding of literary

character that liberates it from the constraining imperative that it be parasitical of reality, on the one hand, and of the author's apperception of that very reality, on the other.

The fictionality of selves would thus be made to accompany their narrative nature, rather than attesting to some manner of inherent lack or Derridean, ungraspable absence defining their existence. Because of this, approaches to the entanglement of human beings in stories that reject the fictional component to "real" identities, and thus do not acknowledge the possibility for Said's mental locus of uncertainty where the "real" and the "fictional" components to "being" are blurred (1975, 78), are bound to underestimate the similarities between the fabric of "actual stories" and that of "fictions." In so doing, they risk establishing a dichotomy that—even though frequently resulting from the process of putting forward the most noble attempts to dignify fiction's role in our affective and social development—is precariously sustained on a colonising outlook on the very notion of "fictional others" and the belief that their positing can only be insofar as it attests to their dependency on extra-fictional agents. These would indeed be authors, on the one hand, whose theoretical murdering has, perhaps surprisingly, not contributed much to the rethinking of character as freed from them; and readers, on the other, whose probing, vastly diverse gazes are often suggested to hold the sole responsibility for the articulation of "literary selves."

The selves of postmodernism do not orbit around a single locus. They embrace the problematics surrounding subjectivity, and in so doing, they also embody them. Wallace's characters may be maintained to be different insofar as they encapsulate their author's desire to transgress the intellectual indeterminacy and pretension of his time, but remain nonetheless anchored in the instabilities that define postmodernism. They toy with the possibility of breaking structural silence, but recurrently fail to do so. When identities are voiced and places in discourse claimed, suspicions enter the text: those pronouncing characters insufficient, their surrounding others different from them, the social world mere pretence. In the context of fictions filled with precarious and out-reaching subjects, Wallace's literature becomes an embodiment of unceasing failure, all too aware that it is perhaps in trying, and trying honestly, that lies the one and only consolation that the late postmodernist may bequeath its readers.

2. ANATOMISING MOMENTS OF GRACE; OR, DAVID FOSTER WALLACE: THE SHORT STORY WRITER

> Then it goes, all goes, and I'm far again, with a far story again, I wait for me afar for my story to begin, to end, and again this voice cannot be mine. That's where I'd go, if I could go, that's who I'd be, if I could be.
>
> Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, 94.

> That was when I learned that words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at.
>
> William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 58.

> Here was the bottom line: if we human beings are information processing machines, reading X's and O's and translating that information into what people oh so breathlessly call "experience," and if I had access to all that same information […]- if I had not only the information but the artistry to shape that information using the computer inside my brain (real computers scared me; if you can find Them, then They can find you, and I didn't want to be found), then, technically speaking, was I not having all of the same experiences those other people were having?
>
> Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 81.

David Foster Wallace's fiction has recurrently been praised for its ability to resist the pressing chains of the cultural history he both drew from and remains to this day inscribed in. His work, argues Christoforos Diakoulakis, actively opposes "a postmodern cynicism that self-righteously proclaims the end of propriety, purity, intentionality, meaning, truth and so forth [, resisting …] irony, […] debasement, […] a nauseous, abysmal self-reflection, […] the veneration of the hollowness of language –in short, […] the mandates of his intellectual inheritance" (2010, 147). Through his emphasis in interpersonal connection and the transcendental experience of the self as traversed crudely by the world and others (as opposed to coyly detached from it via cynicism), he repeatedly showcased an aspiration to arrive at a sense of fictional honesty that did not merely constitute a turn back to the ways of old, but rather remained conscious of its cultural history and deployed that awareness to achieve its ends.

Many of the narrative moments that have earned Wallace this particular position in American literary history have characters who trespass some manner of barrier, be it physical

or otherwise, between the known and the unknown; the exhausted in the everyday and what the subject had previously disregarded, and draw their ability to move from precisely these "revelations." These moments of transcendence have been devoted significant attention and scrutinised through diverse lenses. As a consequence of this, they have given Wallace's aesthetic enterprise a sense of cohesion, bringing his role as a hinge of sorts between postmodernism and the phantom of the "post-postmodernist" into intelligibility. Despite this ongoing interest in his resistance and the recurrent focus in the "moments of illumination" in his fiction that have come to iconify his figure in US literary history, little attention has been devoted to exploring how those moments of transcendence function in formal terms, nor to how they draw from the epiphany as conceptualised in high modernism and systematically twist it into something "other."

The epiphany in Wallace, despite the notion being closely tied to the short fiction genre, can be maintained to be unbound by genre categories. In fact, some of *Infinite Jest*'s most renowned moments, such as Hal's or Don Gately's instants of transcendence, or those set in an Alcoholics Anonymous recovery facility, repeatedly bring to the fore an idealised form of near-holy communion by which subjects would be "enlightened" away from their suffering. The religious component to the characters' relationship with the AA meetings, for instance, is emphasised through their expected rejection of scrutiny as a mode of relating to their recovery process. We may even read how some members believed in what Gately thinks of as "the infamous Boston AA cake analogy," which consists in the equation of the recovery process with the baking of a premade cake: "basically the point was if he just followed the childish directions, a cake would result" (1996/2016, 493). This ties yet again these experiences to the epiphany, both in modernist and in theological terms, with revelations coming unexpectedly, striking subjects as the result of an impulse that is not intellectualising in nature, but instead embraces experience from a new perspective that is exteriorly given (be it by the moment of being's transcendental nature, or by some form of "divine grace"). The vocabulary of the real-life Alcoholics Anonymous association is itself reminiscent of that characterising the epiphanic, with their own official text on their savoir faire making recurrent allusions to the "thunderbolt" (2002, 56) the "revelation" (56), and the "spiritual awakening" (60) that is sought for their patients.

These issues stand at the heart of this chapter, in which I will attempt to shed light on some of the particularities of Wallace's short fiction relationship with the epiphany. To do this, I will first turn to the short story genre itself, aiming to dissect and examine how the epiphany came to be a narrative feature that is quintessentially linked to its defining brevity. Then, I will propose a reinterpretation of the modernist epiphany under the wing of the postmodernist that not only seeks the typification of Wallace's short fiction in light of my findings, but aims to inscribe it in a shared history of postmodernist creation and deviation, and to do so drawing, precisely, on the numinous nature of the moment of being.

2.1. Brevity, Expectation, Involvement: Some Remarks on the Affordances of the Short Story Genre

The role of form to our understanding of literature has shifted greatly throughout the decades, with literary genres and considerations on the nature of what constitutes a literary text varying as society and discourse shift. The appearance of new communicative channels after the rise to prominence of the Internet, for instance, has resulted in debates around formal concerns on the

literary unit that retain at their heart the question of what constitutes, ultimately, a "story." Around this question, however, we may find other equally long-lived inquiries, bringing to the fore debates on the conditions for and around literature that have affected the matter at hand since its very advent. These questions include, but are not limited to: How does the medium of communication affect its narrative, and narrative its medium? How do constraints pertaining to time or space inform the nature of a given narrative? How does the codification and establishment of a "genre" category (and its ensuing lexicon of sorts, acquired prior to the consumption of the text) affect the act of reading, and how does this change the narrative itself, if at all?

These questions appear especially urgent in present-day society, where narrative is changing unprecedentedly, standing at the centre of communicative acts whose conditions were once unforeseeable. It is apparent, thus, that an interest in formal arrangement remains a vital part of how the written word is interpreted in aesthetic, social, and political terms. Albeit most commonly discussed in relation to how shape and distribution result in a series of tokenised aesthetic devices—and thus prompt a particular response by virtue of their enhancement of "content"—, the formal component to the arts is informative of, and transversal to, their very functioning as containers, reflectors, and catalysers of meaning. Such a role in the interplay of meaning is not merely an aesthetic matter, indeed, but productively examinable from social, political, or even ethical perspectives. It is through the arrangement of bodies, discourse, space, and fictions, that political and ethical questions become intelligible; and it is through such orders that society as a superstructural narrative comes to function as a meaning-containing and meaning-conditioning framework. In "The Distribution of the Sensible," Jacques Rancière claims form to be at the heart of the arts' interdependence with the environment that allows for their cultural advent, as well as key to their potential to alter and inform that very environment. We may read:

> The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible. Furthermore, the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for rest on the same foundation. (2000/2011, 19)

Thus, the relationship of the arts to the play of presence and absence that underlies the distribution of meaning into structures, and the coming together of all such structures to form societies and cultures, depends on the arts' very formal existence as assemblies of their own, where the interplay of presence and absence also functions. They have an effect on society, according to Rancière, precisely because (and only insofar as) they share societies' (narrative) building blocks. Each artistic unit's conversation with the projects of domination and emancipation that constitute their political and cultural conditions of production and consumption is, however, remarkably distinct. Forms interrelate through patterns of resonance as much as they do through those of dissonance; they speak to their context, to their reception, and to the information they arrange in literal and figurative spaces by drawing on countless other forms, and they do so by evoking narratives *on* form (preconceived understandings of what can be expected from a given distribution) and by instituting distances, both literal and otherwise, from other forms (e.g. a short form is so described by means of an implicit, definitional contrast with a longer unit). When we understand form as an organising principle to the distribution of knowledge—be it deemed valuable or not; its appearance orderly or disorderly with respect to a given structure—, each form's specific affordances become critical to the successful interpretation of the knowledge therein distributed. "Each shape or pattern,

social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities," argues Caroline Levine in her call for an interdisciplinary approach to formalism. "Things take forms, and forms organize things. The prison cell cannot do its work without the hard materiality of metal or stone, but it also operates as an iterable way of organizing experience, a model of enclosure that can and does travel across many contexts" (2015, 6-10).

Form is, thus, both the result of a thing's essential correspondence with itself as the occupant of literal and/or figurative space, and a thing of its own standing. It can designate a trait inherent to a unit as much as it can the unit itself. This intersection might even be argued to be particularly productive in what concerns literary forms, with studies having argued for "[f]orms characterised by brevity [… to be] particularly suited to regulate and shape the interplay of knowledge and narrative" (Gamper and Mayer 2017, 12). Approaching the short story as form, thus, implies the recognition of its being a force contributing to a particular arrangement of literature (with the interpretative consequences entailed), as well as said arrangement of literature. It demands that attention be paid to the short story as the *frame* making a piece of narrative possible (form as superstructural), as well as to how said narrative is its form (form as structural). It functions within and beyond the diegetic, it *conditions* and *is* its expression. Or, as Dominic Head argued in his pivotal study on modernist short fiction, drawing on Eagleton's *Criticism and Ideology* (1976): "It is a question of grasping form no longer as the symbolic mould into which content is poured, but as the 'form of the content': which is to say, grasping form as the structure of a ceaseless self-production, and so not as 'structure' but as 'structuration'" (2006, 23).

The consequences of the interplay of form as thing and form as principle to the interpretation of short stories are manifold. Due to the plurality of form's affordances and to its polysemic nature, it may contribute greatly to explaining the many difficulties that short story theorists have encountered upon trying to come up with a suitable definition of the genre: "[s]hort stories are defined in terms of unity (Poe, Matthews, and others), techniques of plot compression (A. L. Bader, Norman Friedman, L. A. G. Strong), change or revelation of character (Theodore Stroud), subject (Frank O'Connor), tone (Gordimer), 'lyricism' (Moravia), but there is no single characteristic or cluster of characteristics that critics agree absolutely distinguishes the short story from other fictions" (Ferguson 1982, 13).[23] This could be, I contend, due to the short story's definitional feature being a potentiality; an ability to do any of the above distinctively, rather than a conditioning mandate to do so. Form *is* because form *affords*, to put it bluntly, but the affordances do not constitute the genre, nor does the genre call upon itself the necessity to exploit said affordances. Such an approach not only invites questions on how the short story works, but those on how its workings become operational *through* and *in* the arrangements that confer aesthetic and receptive unity to the genre. The short story, thus, is not a formal vessel filled by content, a shape or format awaiting a tale, but a form adopted by the content—which, in presenting itself through such a form, *becomes* the form itself and articulates its every doing and undoing through it. These considerations also encourage that further attention be paid to how order comes to configure the genre's affordances from para- and extratextual perspectives, bringing to the equation cultural understandings of the tale and what it can do, socio-political preconceptions regarding the ordering of bodies both literary and non-literary, and patterns of distribution informing who consumes short fiction—and most

[23] Such a lack of unified definition, with a kaleidoscope of characteristics and cultural circumstances being recurrently brought to endless questioning by short story scholars, makes John Barth's insight on the genre, which he regarded to have been, "in the tumultuous 1960s, […] a-hundred-and-thirtysomething and pretty well domesticated," seem ironic at best, and utterly simplistic at worst.

critically (albeit the potential impossibility to fruitfully address these questions from qualitative study), *how* and *why* they do so. This, indeed, is a fluctuating matter, especially provided how, "[i]n aesthetics […], both the classification and the objects under study come from the creative hearth of man and are subject to constant, sometimes revolutionary change" (Pasco 1991, 409), but it is also just as tied to issues regarding the short story's definitional openness.

The short story is an open form in a twofold sense. On the one hand, due to its potential for countless (re)arrangements in the hands of readers, whose approach to the text is unique and untransferable, it joins all other written forms as units pending closure; communicative acts perpetually in becoming. On the other, however, the short story is open by virtue of its exploitation of silence, its actualisation depending not only on readerly *interpretation* but, most often (albeit not necessarily at the conscious level), on a great deal of readerly *contribution*. In her preface to *A Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English*, Mary Rohrberger alluded to this twofold propensity to openness by maintaining that "the essential form denies closure and accepts ambiguity as central to its being" in a way longer forms do not (2001, xi)—perhaps, precisely, because their exploitation of space allows them not to have to. The short story's openness is, thus, not merely a question of hermeneutics but one of aesthetics; it goes beyond the plurality of takes one may derive from the uttered to point at how much of the unuttered need be considered for there to be a cohesive, complete narrative to be retrieved from the text. This does not imply that questions beyond the textual need be addressed by the reader for her to successfully consume short fiction, but rather that the projection of humanness and roundedness onto short-story characters as agents to their literary illuminations often rests in the receiving hands to a drastically higher extent than it does in most longer forms. This should not be interpreted as subscribing to the contention that the short story is limited in its approach to human life. It should also not be taken to subscribe the claim that novels, due to their greater length, may illuminate existence at large through what they make present, nor to be stating that novels refuse all forms of interplay with absence.

In Frank O'Connor's renowned *The Lonely Voice*, he argued that "the short story writer['s …] frame of reference can never be the totality of a human life" as a consequence of the poetics of the genre, contrary to what happens with novelists (2004, 16). Much as there is some truth to the constraining dimension of brevity, it must also be stated that, should novels be allowed to take human life at large as a frame of reference, they would also have to do so through an appeal to absence. The number of qualia pertaining to sensory experience, paired with the interrelating, infinite complexities of social existence make "life" as a grand narrative only conveyable through acknowledging the insurmountable difficulties that underlie artists' every attempt to word it—both in "short" and "long" forms. Or, what is the same: human life as a framework can only populate the literary space if readers, much as we do before others in non-literary scenarios, agree to assume that the absent will hold meaning; agree to become accomplices to the parts of life that must remain untold.

Writing in 1976, William B. Warde spoke of the short story as a genre lacking "the opportunity to develop the kind of expansive structure that […] would draw the kind of praise Samuel Taylor Coleridge lavished in his well-known dictum concerning the plotting of *Oedipus*, *Volpone*, and *Tom Jones*" (155). Brevity as a spatial limitation, he concluded, prevented the short story from unfolding as an *expansive structure*, its opportunity to articulate character and experience being constrained by the short form's inability to meticulously delve into either one through what it makes present. Expansiveness, however, when made to correspond with a propensity to grow beyond its own confines, is often the short story's raison

d'être. Its exploitation of silence and complicity has resulted in the genre being recurrently defined through what lies dormant beyond the uttered, which is itself a vital component to the short story itself despite its existence beyond the constraints of the written word (in a very literal sense). Further, expansion should be considered a trait of the short story on the basis of its inner workings as a literary entity, as is often the case in Wallace, where exceptionally detailed description often results in expansive structures populating the text, with cross-referencing, puns, and unanswered questions repeatedly bringing attention to the information that form *discards*. This is what Wallace referred to as "exformation" in his discussion of Kafkaesque humour, taking the notion from the field of communication theory and cognitivism. Through his use of the word, he designated how "a certain quantity of vital information [is] *removed from* but *evoked by* a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections within the recipient" (1998, 23). This "explosion," motivated by absence, is aimed at triggering an emotional, or even subconscious response, which ties the short story as an "exformative" form with the discourse that has been articulated around it, claiming it the superior format for dealing with matters spiritual, affective, and revelatory to the human "soul." Indeed, the tendency to imitate "how things 'feel' or 'seem' to the characters" rather than "'how things are' in the 'real' world" (Ferguson 1982, 15), originating in the modernist short story, has prevailed in much of Wallace's short fiction, with impressionist explorations of subjectivity and its enabling conditions playing a vital part in the texts.

Indeed, Wallace was no stranger to the play with form and the dialogue between presence and absence that it necessarily institutes. Ranging from his very first published short story, which ends mid-sentence, to his first novel, which resorts to the same strategy, or to the erased questions of the interviewer in the stories that give its title to the cycle *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, to name but a few examples, Wallace's oeuvre is the result of an authorial consciousness that repeatedly draws attention to how the play of presence and absence, the tension between said and unsaid, and the readerly disposition therein triggered, are all central features of literary writing. Beneath the pun resulting from exploiting the ambiguity in the word "form," the opening quote to the posthumous *The Pale King* hides a much more profound remark on the nature of fiction consumption, and one that might even be argued to glide over Wallace's ambitions as a writer. As we open a novel that is thematically concerned with form-filling in the simplest sense, we may read: "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed" (Bidart 1997/2017, 275).

Beyond inviting reflection on the relationship between form and its reception, understood as being able to prompt some manner of transformative dialogue, this remarkable sentence serves as the title to Bidart's prose poem on Borges' "Borges and I," where a split authorial self admits to having lost all awareness concerning which of the voices that he identifies as his own is, indeed, writing. Wallace's relationship to authority and authenticity is indissociable from form, both on a general or wider level (the problems of sincerity, authorship, and expectation in literary fiction only spring into possibility by virtue of one's observing of the conditions that bring "literary fiction" as a—among others—*formal* category into being), and on a specific one (how can form be put to the service of a literary enterprise that very overtly seeks something beyond itself?; namely, a type of readerly response, a feeling of connection, a redemption *in* and *through* reading). What has been argued to be the central organising principle of the modern short story, which would state, roughly, "that it consists not of several related incidents, but of one incident" (Dawson 1909, 802), is also at play here, if not entirely challenged by Wallace's unfinished sentences (how can the incident be stated to be one and one only when form is used in order to open it into endless possibility?). Regardless of any such challenges, the "single

incident" results in a particular understanding of the tale, whose complexity in dealing with the qualia and conditions surrounding the incident itself are never to condition the singularity of the *moment* with which the text is concerned (irrespective of its potential, diegetic, parallel developments).

Much early short story theory shared a policing intention to glorify the genre's limitedness, with Dawson himself stating that "[o]f the short story proper, it is always true that it could be nothing else but what it is" (1909, 802). In what might be contended to be a consequence of this, the idea that the short story should be concerned with a single incident has prevailed. This incident, further, is conceived as recounted *sufficiently*, with a mystification of word choice by which the "good" tale would stand above both lack and excess in its expression. This sense of expressive economy has been defined in manifold ways, with references to the dynamics of characterisation, plot compression, and the tale's poetics of closure abounding in the literature. In terms of the short story's concern with the conveyance of the human, however, the argument that the short story "will cast a rounded shadow on our minds [… and] will revolve on a self" (Lohafer 1983, 12) joins the seemingly contradictory contention that "the short story [… cannot] be, or should [not] be, used for the analysis or development of character" (Bowen 1962, 78). These claims on the nature of the genre, however, need not be radically oppositional. The absence of "analysis" and "development" in what concerns characterisation hardly equals a disregard of human character, but rather suggests the tale's concern with character to stand beyond description, and sometimes even beyond plot in a conventional sense, to lie instead in the pervasive force of the moment; and (sometimes most poignantly) in the moment's surrounding absences, be those formal or pertaining to content. The incident with which the short story is concerned—enhanced by virtue of its compactness and alleged ability to meticulously direct readerly attention—is not one of human context but of human *event*. Hence why, despite its not being concerned with the study of human character descriptively, the genre functions as a literary form whose central illuminations have recurrently been directed at selfhood.

The central affordance of the short story can thus be conceptualised as leaning very heavily on its reception—and thus as equalling, to some extent, its ability to alter the specifics, or even the nature, of how it is cognitively responded to. The recurrent features of the short story in terms of how it distributes content, as well as how it discerns which content it is to be concerned with, enhance this very feature. By recurrently presenting "allusions, omissions and indeterminacies," argues Renate Brosch, short stories "make multiple meanings possible and activate the reader's visual imagining." These impressions and mental representations, in turn, become "especially vivid and memorable […, constituting] moments of heightened attention and imagining [that] are perceived as significant and are likely to enter into interpretation and memory" (2017, 168).

This ties in perfectly with one of the prevalent notions in the literature on the short story, which states that the potential in short fiction is directly linked to the strategies that it resorts to in other to sketch momentous images before the reader, and thus cognitively draw her interest, to then interpretatively force her to cast meaning onto the depiction in order to fill in its absences. Attention thus becomes an end in itself; engagement unfolds as one of the main aims of the writing. The negotiation of silence and absence, together with the authorial decisions therein entailed, target a critical moment when the reader *gives* to the story by virtue of her having been drawn to it, and in so doing *completes* it into being. The conceptualisation of such a moment has not been necessarily linked to the position of the reader in the scholarship, but

embedded in the short story's very structure as a narrative. It is not merely a functional feature in that it achieves a particular response, but can also be traced back to the form itself. Hence why the short story has not only been conceptualised by virtue of its being "readable in one sitting," or "cognitively impactful to its reception to a greater extent than its novel sibling"—both of which approaches, despite Poe's being quantitative in nature, pertain to readerly experience—but just about as pivotally for its rigidly textual features. It thus becomes a genre "concerned with a central moment," presenting "a single plotline," introducing "unnamed or somewhat incomplete characters," or "building toward a diegetic revelation."[24]

2.2. Approaching the Post-Epiphanic

The idea that, plot-wise, the short story is concerned with a "single incident" has for the most part succeeded in joining Poe's "unity of effect" as a foundational feature to the genre, and one to which the birth of modern short story theory is often linked. Such an incident, further, is polymorphous, simultaneously pointing toward the single-threaded nature of plot in the vast majority of tales, but also toward the conceptualisation of the epiphanic moment as the heart of much of the modernist and postmodernist tradition. Despite some objections to the mystification of the epiphanic as the illuminating summit to the "single incident" of the short story,[25] such interpretations still prevail in much contemporary criticism. "The compactness and focus of the short stories," writes Suzanne C. Ferguson on the subject of James Joyce's short fiction, "makes the theme more readily apparent [in contrast with the novels]" (1982, 16). Brevity is connected with a particular type of poietic focus, with an ability to place more emphasis on the subject matter of choice, to draw greater readerly attention to the point the author is trying to get across. This ties in with the epiphany quite critically, for it is often through a shift in the ontology of attention that the mystical quality of the traditional epiphany is attained by literary character (and thus, too, presented to readers).

A certain canonised history of twentieth century stories has been conceptualised via a particular mystification of this sense of enlightening compactness. The short story after modernism, thus, is recurrently described as working "toward a single moment of revelation" (Shaw 1983, 193), the epiphanic instant where the reader may transcend the confines of her reality and approach what once was (or, even, remains) unutterable. The prevalence of the epiphany has found justification in the modernists' own vocabulary, with a wide array of individual takes joining Joyce's: we find the "moment of being" in Virginia Woolf, the "shock" in Walter Benjamin, the "magic moment" in Ezra Pound, the "still point of the turning world" in T.S. Eliot, the "Proust effect," a revelatory explosion of memory triggered by sensory experience, and so on. Because of the mystification of modernism as a movement favouring modes of narration that would transcend prior structures to achieve an improved narrative conveyance of consciousness, its patent concern with the ordinariness of everyday life has been

[24] These characteristics, indeed, are disputable and could be submitted to great scrutiny as a consequence of how diverse short fiction is. Numerous exceptions to each of them could be outlined, provided how there are stories that interweave a series of separate brief narratives, sometimes even seemingly disconnected ones; stories where characters are named and developed "despite" the form's "constraining" economy, and so on and so forth.

[25] Dominic Head poignantly argued for the Joycean epiphany to function as "a nexus of a *variety* of forces rather than a *single* effect" (1992, 49; emphases in original). Robert Scholes also opposed the mystification of the Joycean epiphany, arguing that "Epiphany" as a literary term was being employed in a way that had nothing to do with how Joyce used it (namely, to refer to one of the genres in which he worked, and one to which *Dubliners* did not belong) (1967, 152). In "The Anatomy of Moments," Finn Fordham sets out to "anatomise" modernist moments, supplementing them with the notion of "prismatic moment," which he uses to point toward the mosaic-like, multifaceted nature of the transformative event, and thus to bring the plural back into considerations on the "single incident" at the heart of the modernist revelation (2018).

often overlooked in favour of the formally innovative and empirically transcendental in its form (see Olson 2009). In the case of the modernist short story specifically, the ordinary is apprehended and explored precisely due to the extraordinariness in it; as a consequence of its ability, that is, to transform human character and come to mean in a way that has the events transcend their apparent triviality. The modernist short story is short, argues Charles E. May along these same lines, "precisely because of the kind of experience of reality embodied in it […] the short story is mythical and spiritual […], intuitive and lyrical […, it] spring[s] from […] one's encounter with the sacred" (1984, 328-329). By virtue of its concern with the subtleties of the unspeakable, the short story has been described as an intrinsically modern form, "closer to the nature of reality as we experience it in those moments when we are made aware of the inauthenticity of everyday life, those moments when we sense the inadequacy of our categories of conceptual reality" (May 1984, 337).

Despite the notion of the "epiphany" being still closely tied to Joyce, and thus not always being deemed worthy of individual consideration as a literary term beyond Joycean scholarship, its uses in literary studies have moved far beyond the definition(s) provided by Joyce, originally extracted from his posthumous *Stephen Hero* and developed through related metacommentary. The propensity of high modernism to favour the "moment of being," further, is closely tied to the tension between ordinariness and extraordinariness that lies at the heart of the movement's literary expression. The epiphany, be it sensorily triggered or otherwise, often articulates itself as a border-crossing experience taking place in a single instant, separating ignorance from transcendental knowledge; the plainness and normalcy of perceived reality from the powerfully significant and overlooked aspects that inform it. Thus, in structural terms, and perhaps quite naturally given the genre's ability to direct attention and effectively focus on pinnacular moments, the epiphany is recurrently deployed either at the climax or the close of short stories, with modernist epiphanic narratives exhibiting patterns of "building toward" moments which are "elaborately synthesized out of elements" (Gillespie 2003/2010, 51). The epiphany functions as an exercise in narrative synthesis, forcing a collision of reality and expectation. A triggering event, however minimal, prompts an explosion of mental connections which becomes distinct within the tale by virtue of its density and relative narrative weight.

The exploration of consciousness—both a structuralist and poststructuralist game, at the core both of the modernist and postmodernist agendas—is inherent to the discussion on the epiphany. There is no epiphany without subject—although, as we shall see, attempts to dislocate the subject of the epiphany often permeate many postmodernist reinterpretations of the phenomenon. The modernist epiphany is informative of the self's being-towards-the-world; it often purports an attitudinal change by which the relationship between the former and the latter is substantially altered, and thus has as its primary concern the relationship between human character's inner sense of being and the sensory and social world around her. In an impressionist instant characterised by its narrative density, the self is expanded by virtue of a shift in how its surroundings are approached. Such a change is not frequently one of hermeneutics—though (re)interpretation may be argued to ensue irrespective of whether the story explicitly concerns itself with it or not—but most commonly of doxa. The epiphany often targets belief systems, manifests itself *through* or *as* the spiritual or otherworldly, and hence points character towards that which would go unnoticed were she to depend merely on her senses—hence the recurrence of the past, the dreamlike, the religious, and the illusory in the literary conveyance of the epiphanic. Its prevalence in modernism goes hand in hand with the movement's emphasis in capturing what Virginia Woolf had labelled "a radical change in human nature" in the early twentieth century. Whereas the graphic arts sought a balance between chaos and harmony that

would encapsulate the new understandings of history as cyclical and fragmentary, the epiphany provided modernist literature with its translucent vision of its surroundings, piercing through the risk of untimely statism with a sense of spiritual enlightenment that was founded, fundamentally, on the *structural* and the *aesthetic*.

The epiphany and its afterlives, further, are very closely linked to the short story genre as one whose definitional challenges are most easily faced through its affordances (as opposed to its length, structure, or relationship with longer, culturally heavier forms). Indeed, the epiphany as a moment only works for the reception by virtue of its exploitation of what several critics have conceptualised as being the central affordance of the short story genre, and its most prominent characteristic: the establishment of an idiosyncratic pattern of engagement, informed by (a) a specific degree of readerly participation, (b) a particular hermeneutics derived from the puzzling, the visual, the disturbing, or the challenging, all of which are argued to occur often in short story writing, and (c) the narrative impact resulting from the above (see, for instance, Korte 2003, Brosch 2017). The group of literary experimentalists that have been recurrently labelled as Wallace's predecessors (i.e. Barth, Pynchon, or even Borges), and that embody a particular understanding of the postmodernist turn, do not entirely negate the epiphanic in any systematic way. In fact, their interplay with the moment of being, even when at its most "destructive" or "omissive," cannot possibly be untied from the cultural prominence of the modernist short story.

This results in an increased intertextual weight that could be attributed to the format, either through presence or absence. It is apparent, however, that they frequently devote their literary endeavours to the examination of a metaphysics of negativity concerning any such epiphanic moments. When the epiphany is indeed made present in some form, it often leads towards either a disquieting, subjectively-perceived-to-be-true piece of knowledge, or an irony-infused, banal(ised) revelation through which the powerfully instructive and the emotional in the modernist epiphany are technically deflected. When the epiphany is entirely absent, on the other hand, the metaphysics of negativity loses its revelatory teleology, and the lack inevitably becomes, albeit sometimes not very prominently, one of the subjects with which the short story is concerned by virtue of its intertextual connection with the canonised history of the modernist tale.

Despite its being closely tied with modernism and sometimes markedly absent from later stories, the epiphany has remained a key notion to the interpretation of the contemporary tale, with indisputably postmodernist short stories sometimes resorting to the transcendental revelation in a similar fashion to that of the high modernists—however deviant their ways might prove to be; and however much our use of the term might have, as it is the case, expanded. As Paul March-Russell suggested of the postmodern short story at large, it moves from the indeterminacy of modernism and into undecidability (2009, 222-223); neglects fragmentation as a pathway towards "unveilable" meaning in favour of revelations that take the form of questions, evincing how meaning and options "multiply around us" instead of lying hidden (2009, 223). The epiphanic can no longer be apprehended; if at all present, it favours the introduction of possibility over the mystified resolution of any given dilemma, becoming a questing, opening force in a sense in which it had not been to the greater part of the modernist canon. In fact, due to postmodernism's emphasis on devoting attention to that which had been denied centrality within all manner of social and aesthetic paradigms, some have argued for the short story to be a particularly fitting genre for literary postmodernism to unfold.

Speaking of postmodern Western culture's propensity to develop a sense of scepticism about everything save scepticism itself, Richard E. Lee concludes that postmodernist fiction's favouring of surface over depth can serve to justify defining short fiction "as the genre that speaks most directly to the parochial and local rather than the totalizing narratives of the novel" (2003, 109). This implies that the short story could potentially be argued to be the one form that institutes a sense of aesthetic harmony between many of postmodernist literature's diegetic emphases and the distribution that contains them; and thus, between form and content. Moments of insight and poietic focus, one could surmise, are in the postmodernist short story often aimed not at the transcendental or the submerged, but at the many facets of the textual experience itself. Such a concern with material textuality would, following Lee, be enhanced by the short story's poetics. The apparent result of this is some manner of epiphany of form or meta-epiphany, with the modern short story's predisposition to be construed around a central revelation being, in metafictional postmodernism, devoted to cleverly pointing to the textual dimension of the act of reading; to the plural, inconclusive and unjudging examination of the conditions for rationality and interpretation; or to the circumstances behind the consumption and/or production of literature themselves.

Even though they are characterised by a shared interest in the epiphanic, modernist and postmodernist short fiction can be thus conceptualised as differing in their way of approaching and displaying the knowledge that the moment of being definitionally entails. Whereas modernism, and perhaps high modernism most pivotally, resorts to the epiphany as a culminating moment, opening a door to a new form of awareness that can be fully apprehended by character and brought to life *in* and *through* their subjectivity, postmodernist epiphanies recurrently dislocate the illumination, with the climactic moment becoming telescopic: the epiphany remains revelatory, but its mediation *in the text* is unfinished. The reader is deprived of conclusive coordinates; because of this, meaning often becomes unsettled, unsettling,[26] or both. This lack of conclusive mediation can, indeed, take a variety of shapes, with some stories depriving the epiphany of an explicit subjectivity altogether; others turning the epiphany into an incapacitating or immobilising moment, reducing the subject's autonomy and/or its capacity for agency; and others directing the epiphanic towards the materially textual or the extra-textual, its connection with lived subjectivity being thus denied direct consideration in the narrative itself. The postmodernist epiphany is permeated by an absent presence: either that of its experiencer or that of the enhancing quality that the epiphany would normally bestow upon her. It exists in the intersection between the necessary mandate that no revelation can be made present in a text without it being embodied in a subject (she who is illuminated), and the deployment of techniques that repeatedly aim at confirming the dissolution and erasure of subject positions.

The tendency to identify the epiphanic moment as the short story's entrance into a post-modernist epistemology, concerned with the unconscious and the latent, is not without criticism. In "After Epiphany: American Stories in the Postmodern Age," Miriam Marty Clark argues that the interpretation of American postmodernist short fiction can be direly misguided by preceding approaches to the genre. "[T]he language of the epiphany," she contends in relation to this body of literature, "is less telling than the language of the labyrinth," with "the absence of epiphany" becoming sometimes palpable "[a]s the language of selfhood shifts from

[26] Even though meaning can very much be argued to be unsettling to character and/or reader in modernist short fiction, the prevalence of disquietude in postmodernism is often not only one of content (taking the form of disturbing revelations), but also of form (with the very framework that allows for the revelation to be made structurally present laying "corrupted" before its reception).

metaphysical to ironic" (1993, 393). Her insight not only points toward the ways in which much postmodern short fiction denies itself any epiphanic, diegetic arrival at transcendental truth, but might also be applied, I contend, to how postmodernist short story writers—Wallace included—resorted to the ironic, the uncanny, or the disturbed to institute a pseudo-moment of being (or, even, a moment of non-being): one providing no solace to character, but rather entrapping her in the contradicting discourses that inform the revelation itself. This, of course, is not a postmodern universal, but rather informative of a particular tendency in the short fiction by late postmodern writers, to disrupt, or even corrupt, the workings of the short form as *enrichingly* epiphanic.

That notwithstanding, Wallace's short fiction does embody these postmodernist tendencies,[27] with readerly attention being drawn not necessarily towards what is (however briefly) present, but, most often, towards the blatantly absent. Further, the stories systematically avoid infusing such absences with the redemptory, developmental quality that is characteristic of many modernist tales, where the transcendental is recurrently apprehended in single moments of illumination. Albeit sometimes retaining these same characteristics, postmodernist short fiction often challenges the redemptory and the developmental in these moments, with revelations that result, rather, in stasis and pain. Following Slavoj Žižek, these moments could be argued to respond to a "violent return to the passion for the [Lacanian] Real," acted out by the postmodern subject: an individual who, embedded in a culture of the immaterial and the thespian, begins to perceive "'real social life'" to have acquired "the features of a staged fake, with our neighbours behaving in 'real' life like stage actors and extras." This results, argues Žižek, in "the dematerialization of 'real life' itself, [in] its reversal into a spectral show" (2002, 10-14). However, one might argue (as Žižek too implies through his reference to self-harm), the return to the experience of reality as bodily, intersubjective and empirically "true" entails a form of violence; an inherent alienation from the established order, argued here to be one of immateriality and detachment. It is in many of late postmodernism's fictionalised epiphanies, I maintain, that authors such as Wallace tried to account for the tension of these symbolic border crossings: those separating the alienated subject from a reality too dire for her to withstand, or destroying a necessary fantasy (the "fantasmatic (sic) spectre" that is the "Real Thing" in Žižek) to welcome her into an order of things where life feels, in some measure, unliveable.

Wallace's case in particular is especially interesting due to his relationship with postmodernism as a movement, as he is both a major figure in its late expression, contributing to the development of its history, and a writer from the first generation who had the opportunity to enjoy a critical perspective on how mid-century fiction had been conceptualised and the genre of discussions, academic and otherwise, that would follow such a conceptualisation. As a matter of fact, the greater part of the achievements that are often linked to his fiction, such as its recurrent interest in establishing a new, sincere bond with its reception, can be associated to, and read through, his relationship with the postmodernist epiphany and its connection to these tensions. In some of Wallace's metafictional stories—which are, coincidentally, the pieces that have been most argued to shed light on his aims as a writer, together with the renowned essay-interview nexus that is regarded to be his literary manifesto[28]—, the postmodernist epiphany's

[27] Though, as I have argued elsewhere in this dissertation, the tonal shift in Wallace's fiction has resulted in him being often considered a transitional figure between postmodernism and its problematic afterlives (the plurally defined, disputed "post-postmodernist").

[28] The "essay-interview nexus" alludes to his work in "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" and his renowned interview with Larry McCaffery, both published in 1993. The label has become rather prevalent in Wallace scholarship to designate how the immense popularity of the two non-fictional pieces has played as much a part in shaping Wallace's academic

tendency to "leave open" is often directly aimed at the reader herself, as it only becomes fully revelatory through the reader's subjective import. In doing this, these metafictional moments not only elicit but directly request of her that she respond to the text, at once observing postmodernist convention and baring it of its force as a cultural *assumption*.

This is also closely linked to Wallace's interest in attention and active reception, with his deployments of metafictional techniques being easily interpretable as an attempt to resist what Theodor Adorno labelled as "the rigid institutionalization" of culture and the subsequent numbing of the reader. "The repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture," writes Adorno, "tend to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the forces of individual resistance" (1952/2002, 223). The epiphany at the heart of the tale, when at all traceable, makes of the short story the preferred genre for such a recuperation of "receptive resistance" to the culture industry's homogenising efforts, and some of Wallace's most patent attempts to awaken the reader to such realisations have taken the form of, indeed, short(er) texts. When these are fictional, the epiphany in its manifold nature can often be inscribed into the literary ambitions of the pieces, and hence its relevance to the present project. A variety of different emphases and differing forces concerning the moment of being coexist within his literature as a body of work, and an exercise aimed at their taxonomy may prove useful in shedding light on postmodernist short fiction's developments at a larger scale.

As a way to take these considerations further, I propose the (admittedly, and necessarily, imperfect) classification that ensues. Its nature as imperfect is hardly avoidable, as is the case with most divisions attempting to do justice to a body of work as vast, diverse, and sometimes as-of-yet-indeterminate, as the ones to which the labels "postmodernism" and "short fiction" are attached to in literature. Imprecise universalisation is a necessary risk, however, and it shall be assumed in hopes that the present insight on an array of postmodernist short stories' takes on the epiphanic may provide an interest typology through which to approach the literary developments of the late twentieth-century, all of which transverse Wallace's fiction in one way or another. Thus, I propose for there to exist three major ways in which a wide range of often considered postmodernist and late postmodernist writers have renegotiated their relationship with the modernist epiphany: (1) via directing the epiphanic in the short story outwardly, prompting a particular type of experience in readers through which they may be subjected to a "revelation" concerning the surface of the text itself, the nature of story-telling, and the like; (2) via the lack of an epiphany altogether, erasing the paradigmatic conclusion to the modern short story and hence turning it into an absence with a voice of its own; or (3) via saturating the epiphany, submitting it to a hyper-rationalising, inquisitive force by which it becomes painful, traumatic, or entrapping. These are not mandatorily exclusive; in fact, they might very well overlap and inform the revelations of postmodernist short fiction in different ways, providing different angles through which to delve into the same stories. Together with the taxonomy itself and a brief selection of relevant examples, instances of several such intersections shall be analysed and presented in what follows.

2.3. A HISTORY OF EPIPHAN*IES*: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE IN TIME

Before delving into this confessedly limited distinction any further, some preliminary notes on the development of Wallace's fiction throughout his career are due, especially taking into

legacy as have any of his literary works, influencing the most widespread set of attitudes towards his production to have lived on to the present day.

consideration how his deployment (or non-deployment) of the epiphany and its related mythologies changed with time. His early stories already show the interest in interpersonal communication and its impossibilities that would come to constitute one of Wallace's most recurring themes. The absence of an epiphany that would make possible to forge any such connection is the most prevalent mode in these tales, with the stories in *Girl with Curious Hair* recurrently closing on unresolved, unrevealing moments of mis- or non-communication. In "Little Expressionless Animals," Julie and Faye's last misunderstanding precedes a closing that deprives the reader at once of transcribed language ("[T]he director […] says something to camera two") and of a settled interpretation (the last sentence, "Julie and the audience look at each other," ambiguously approaches metafiction without directing the reader's construal of meaning, deflecting that responsibility outwardly). A look that fails to infiltrate the reality of the narrator's significant other is at the centre of "Everything is Green," where the emphasis on the unbridgeable distance between the two characters leads to another ambiguously metafictional closing, with the last sentence ("Say her name") pointing towards the possibility that the first person narrator's lover may escape their relationship as a consequence of their mutual lack of understanding (the character's name being, indeed, "Mayfly"). In "My Appearance," a disagreement on the nature of honesty in the age of television sets a couple apart, with the answer to the question that is said to have been "the mistake" being entirely elided from the narrative as it closes. The epiphany as a revelation *on the other*—what would become the preferred mode of enlightening moment in Wallace's later work—becomes the expected end to these pivotal scenes, but is recurrently frustrated by the development of the stories' plots. The other is inapprehensible; connection, understanding, and communion as ideals remain *an epiphany* (and an explicit one at that) *away* from the characters.

Despite being concerned with the exploration of love as a theme, and thus explicitly delving in the possibility for interpersonal connection and the drives behind it, Wallace's 1991 "Order and Flux in Northampton" exemplifies these same tendencies to deny characters a revelation with the power to bring them together and bridge the ontological gap separating them as distinct subjects. The story not only physicalises the experience of love, turning it into a satirical, anthropomorphised "homunculus" inhabiting the body of the tale's protagonist, but also lacks any foreseeable conclusion, radically altering structuration in its last section to introduce a series of vignettes presenting "a tiny percentage of the planet's persons involved in a tiny percentage of the planet's various and ineluctably modal situations" (1991, 116). The epiphany is again denied its traditional modernist realisation: we are merely to imagine what might happen when cross-eyed Barry Dingle finds out that the object of his want, Myrnaloy Trask, is indeed blind. The story's closure, thus, is left to be drawn from the information provided as opposed to laid out before the reader, with the epiphanic being extirpated even more brusquely from the tale as a consequence of its shift in structure, which partly directs readerly attention away from its story and into formal considerations concerning the unusual in its ending.

A seeming exception in this regard might be Wallace's first published short story, "The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing," where the confessions of the narrator second-handedly refer to seeming pseudo-moments of being. The most poignant of these instances occurs when he recounts how he had stitched a bleeding scar on his face upon trying to fix a wound that was never there, but rather deliriously imagined in a moment of revelatory delusion. This is a wound, indeed, which would tear the most patent, outward expression of his being; the Levinasian, religious call to ethical consideration by which true connection with the other might be attained. In metaphorical terms, however, the wound might have already been there, if only as a materialised token of his mental condition, conveying a

fracture that was only visible to him but strained his being in the world—and thus, too, his being towards the world's others. His illuminations as informed by the "Bad Thing" recurrently lead him to suicide attempts from which he conveys a sense of detachment, as though the revelation could not penetrate his knowledge of the world fully (and thus inviting that it be considered as a thing also living in the so-called "Planet Trillaphon," named after his prescribed medication). These epiphanies, if at all to be understood as such, function rather as moments perverting character and overriding his autonomy, as opposed to enhancing the character's understanding of his subjective reality. They are instrumentalised into a haunting discourse which is dislocated from character and contributes to the allegorical treatment of mental illness and its medicalisation that permeate the tale.

In this sense, these epiphanies foreshadow a tendency that would become prevalent in Wallace's mid-period and some of his later fiction, but do so differently. "Planet Trillaphon"'s alleged epiphanies, albeit interpretable through the language of the revelation, do not quite unfold as such in formal and developmental terms within the story, but are rather used to indirectly characterise the experience of depression as "other-worldly." Hence the misleading pertinence of the language of the epiphanic. Indeed, the short story's ending, where the function of the epiphany is most frequently realised, responds to his early favouring of openness and inconclusion, with the sentence where the true name for the so-called "Bad Thing" is to be revealed stopping halfway: "Except that is just highly silly when you think about what I said before concerning the fact that the Bad Thing is really" (1984, 33). This symbolically connotes the experience of mental illness as one beyond utterable language, anaphorically referring to the clinical description of the "Bad Thing" as "severe clinical depression" that appears in the opening section, and thus very explicitly going back to a void as opposed to moving beyond into some manner of epistemological, literary transcendence.

It is primarily after *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* that Wallace's interest in the epiphany becomes overtly revelatory, and the ensuing revelations powerfully destructive to character, both structurally and plot-wise. What was originally an open quest to see the reality of the other and infiltrate its porous envelope in any significant way, becomes, in Wallace's mid-short fiction, a poisonous curse upon characters' senses of being, with subjects encountering revelations which directly impoverish their ability to relate to their surroundings. Even though the themes of interpersonal connection and (mis)communication remain at the heart of many of these tales, when such ideals are attained and empathic bridges built between subjects, the truth at the other end is recurrently damaging, excruciating, or altogether numbing. Silence is replaced with unbearable noise on the apperceived truth of interpersonal understanding. At a certain moment in *Brief Interviews* this takes the form of a traumatic memory of child abuse that resurges after an undetermined trigger (63 onwards), at another it is apprehended "too late" and leads character into a downward spiral of powerlessness, the knowledge contained in the epiphany having been rendered useless and unbearable by circumstance (57-58), or, at another, it becomes an empathetic understanding of the other which proves to be excessive, "tiring as hell" making it impossible for the subject to remain functional (30).

In "Forever Overhead," the epiphany takes the form of a tense, symbolic border crossing by which a young boy of thirteen pierces through the surface of the waters at a public swimming pool and enters the social order of teenagerhood, characterised by a "new vulnerability" (4). The other-worldly nature of the revelatory moment is repeatedly emphasised as the story closes. When the child jumps into the waters, being naturally welcomed into a new order of things

described as "a new kind of hard […; a] kind of blind," the transcendental moment is triggered where a paradigmatic shift beyond active consciousness takes place. "It all changes," concludes the mature voice of the omniscient narrator, as the boy's literary disappearance is prompted, and a rebirth, haunted by the rhetorical questions that precede it ("So which is the lie? Hard or soft? Silence or time?") is hinted at by the teleological "Hello" that serves as the last word to the narrative (13). The epiphany is here tonally connoted as an experience that is not enlightening, not "clarifying" in any relevant respect, but rather one that results in the character being lost to a superstructure beyond all conscious understanding.

Even in the interviews themselves, where the epiphany would feel less "at home" due to the mode of narration not favouring focalised introspection through anything other than dialogue, the encounter with the sublime is again devoted attention, and again twisted. Upon recounting a tale of sexual abuse with mathematically precise, cold language, one of the hideous male interviewees speaks of the abusee as having prompted an epiphanic call to compassion in him through the so-labelled "Female Gaze," thanks to which a "true" connection had been forged by which the rapist and his victim could truly "see" one another. This epiphanic encounter with absolute empathy, however, is not only perverted by means of its context, but also diegetically, with the speaker admitting that "even this moment of maximum connection […] has this void of piercing sadness to it" (269), and declaring to have wanted to cry as the bond withered and disappeared. The epiphany is revelatory but destructive; the spiritual and the transcendental beneath are not to be desired for their redeeming or instructive qualities, but rather feared for their ability to induce pain and ostracise the subject from his surroundings, prompting moments of being where the very conditions of existence are targeted and made precarious by the nature of the revelation. Instances of this are numerous and permeate the collection and other coeval stories, and some of them shall be discussed in further detail later on. This tendency lives on in his later works and remains prevalent throughout most of his career, only shifting again in his late fiction, and not universally.

Before moving on to how new understandings of the revelation found their way onto his oeuvre, one poignant instance of how the dark epiphany remained at the heart of Wallace's fiction even in his late work is section 13 in his posthumous *The Pale King* (2011).[29] The chapter introduces a self-standing story concerning character David Cusk—though his identity is not immediately evident nor does it need to be ascertained by the reader for the piece to work. The sixteen-year-old protagonist of the piece is thermally over-responsive, which causes him to sweat profusely in situations when others would not. The pivotal moment of the section comes after David's being awakened to a new self-consciousness in a high school class on World Cultures, when his prolific sweating is radically exacerbated, and the dark epiphany that the first paragraph hints at apprehended: "It was in public high school that this boy learned the terrible power of attention and what you pay attention to. He learned it in a way whose very

[29] Albeit often labelled a novel, the result of editor Michael Pietsch's painstaking assembly work is no less than problematic in generic terms. Admittedly, David Foster Wallace intended to write a novel; a new "long thing" that would live up to the expectations raised by the success of *Infinite Jest*, but the novelistic quality of the end product is far from apparent when we submit the text to careful scrutiny. Chapters abound which work perfectly well on their own, such as the above mentioned section 13, and to which the label "short story" could be easily attached if elsewhere published and differently labelled. Their connection to the main story at large is sometimes precarious, too, with the identity of the character with which section 13 is concerned, for instance, being discernible only through tangential information. The value of the chapter, further, stands on its own, with the text providing isolated insight on the subject introduced and the origin of his problem, as opposed to offering any development that is vital to a plotline, critical insight towards understanding the motives of characters, or serving as a bridge towards any form of temporal linearity. Other excerpts from *The Pale King* were published in magazines as stories before the novel's posthumous reassembly. This adds to the generic indeterminacy of the piece, which may easily overstep the line between the novel proper and the composite novel or short story cycle.

ridiculousness was part of what made it so terrible. And terrible it was" (93). The revelation that his problem may return at any given moment, and his sweating be perceived by those around him, open before him the door to a sense of self-awareness that soon becomes hard to bear. As this happens, his bodily "oddity" crosses the line between the physical and the psychological: in cold November weather, his heat-induced sweating disappears and leaves way to one that is entirely anxiety-induced; the product of the dark epiphany, marking the beginning of his monomania: "[O]n that one day this thought [*What if all of a sudden I start sweating?*]," explains the third-person narrator, "[…] made him break instantly into a heavy, unstoppable sweat, which the secondary thought that it must look even creepier to be sweating when it wasn't even hot in here to anyone else made worse and worse" (95-96). The story stands in close thematic and structural similarity to earlier tales by Wallace, introducing a character that is epiphanically presented with knowledge on other subjects, on how other subjects go through life, or on how other subjects allegedly perceive her, and then spirals into dysfunctionality because of her self-conscious exacerbation of the problem as revealed (by a question, here; by a dream, a mocking sibling, a whispered invitation to self-doubt, elsewhere). His anxiety as resulting from the revelation, further, cannot be rationally stopped; it feeds itself. Knowledge, however fraudulent or ill-natured, becomes the threat: "what he really had to fear was fear of the fear, like an endless funhouse hall of mirrors of fear, all of which were ridiculous and weird" (98).

The dark epiphany, albeit often entirely destructive, sometimes presents itself as a merely dismantling assumption, allowing characters an entrance to a form of empathy before which they stand resourceless. In "Good People," a short piece published in *The New Yorker* before becoming section 6 of *The Pale King*, the epiphany is treated as an impactful moment aiming at the foundations of the main character's understanding of his immediate surroundings. The epiphany proves not to be utterly incapacitating, nor in any way enhancing of the subject's sense of being, but rather leaves the protagonist in a questioning state, unable to take the knowledge he has apprehended and move forward. The modernist closure, recurringly presenting an epistemological structure where a new understanding of life is seized for a reason; as an answer *en soi-même*, becomes here an open quest for a meaning that has been lost. In the tale, a first-person narrator is "struck" by what he labels a "moment of grace;" "a type of vision" (44) on the nature of his relationship with his partner, their nature as human, and her innermost moments and considerations on the two of them, as they picnic together by a lake. The revelation—which, following his belief system, he interprets to be some manner of heaven-sent message concerning their destiny ("Later on, he believed that what happened was he had a moment of almost seeing them both as Jesus might see them" (44))—awakens him to a new understanding of the person before him, whom he had earlier admitted to never have loved. As he reflects on how immobile and constrained by convention she is (unable to escape her situation as she expects a child of his, bound by society and belief in a way he had previously failed to consider fully), he arrives at a new form of self-questioning. Unable to ascertain whether his conclusion that he does not love her can stand his own scrutiny, he balances on the precarious borderline between immobilism and the changing aftermath of what he believes to have learned about them both, remaining reflective in his uncertainty throughout the story's closure:

> There on the table, neither frozen nor yet moving, Lane Dean Jr. sees all this, and is moved with pity and with also something more, something without any name he knows, that is given to him to feel in the form of a question that never once in all the long week's thinking and division had even so much as occurred—why is he so sure he doesn't love

> her? Why is one kind of love any different? What if he has no earthly idea what love is? What would even Jesus do? […] What if he is just afraid, if the truth is no more than this, and if what to pray for is not even love but simple courage, to meet both her eyes as she says it [that he is a good person] and trust his heart? (44-45)

The spiritual dimension to the moment of being is recurrent in Wallace's late work. In the posthumous "All That," for instance, the child protagonist's religious inclinations are traced back to a memory concerning the contrasting interpretations of a war film at which his father and himself had arrived years ago. Whereas the narrator recalls the movie to have presented "the hero" suffering "private anguish over the moral question of killing in combat," his father remembers him dying to an enemy grenade. As the distinct difference in what the film had meant for them is considered, the experience of it and its beauty is reminisced by the narrator as one "that was almost too intense to bear, especially as I lay across my father's knees" (2009). It is unclear whether the epiphany and the religious awakening are here derived from the catharsis in the film itself, from the experience of watching it with his father and reading it in dramatically different ways, or from some admixture of both. This unclarity of presentation also extends to structure and tone, with the epiphany being introduced through memory and lacking the momentous weight that it carries in other stories, where it shakes the character's sense of subjectivity altogether.

The bleakness of the epiphanic found in earlier tales gives way to a less destructive "moment of grace," with the allegory on faith and spirituality that the first section construes around a toy cement mixer being only episodically tied with the closing reflections on the screening of the war film. The moment of transcendental entrance into a new order, once more characterised by a reinterpretation of existing structures—the child labels it his "spiritual awakening," setting him on a different path from that of his "devoutly atheist" parents—is still made present, but gazed at from a distance. What was previously damaging and unbearable in the epiphanies found in earlier stories, becomes here merely transformative. The over-rationalising impulses that permeate the outlook on life of Wallace's characters, and that would often shape his own relationship to spirituality and religion,[30] give way to a sense of acceptance of the beauty of a discrepancy that can be acknowledged, but need not be dissected. The questions in "Good People" need not be answered; the other is not pierced with the inquiring scalpel of a consciousness that *needs* to understand, but is rather, through faith, allowed a space of its own in the memory of the narrative voice.

In this way, some of Wallace's late stories, as does his often-tokenised inaugural speech at Kenyon college, sometimes turn away from the bleakness of the dark epiphany to adopt a less destructive tone, delving in the same issues of interpersonal communication, solipsism, and the meaning to be derived from the subjective experience of the world, but renouncing the destructiveness of his earlier conclusions. Some of these pieces, rather, hint at the possibility of community and find some form of peace in the acknowledgement, often through spirituality, and very overtly so, that some questions are not to be met with closure, but faced, as does the child protagonist of "All That," with a "reverence for magic [… and a belief that] magic not only permeated the everyday world but did so in a way that was thoroughly benign and altruistic and wished me well" (2009). This shift, however, was remarkably short-lived, with Wallace's suicide in 2008 putting a stop to what might be argued to have been a spiritual turn in the making, and one that would draw on his previous engagement with belief and community—in

[30] See Martin Brick's introductory chapter to his and Michael McGowan's 2019 *David Foster Wallace and Religion*.

Infinite Jest's very prominent AA sections, to name but the clearest example—and relocate it at the heart of his short fiction production.

These shifts duly noted, and some of the diachronic developments of the epiphany in Wallace's oeuvre covered, I now move on to discuss my admittedly-tentative, tripartite taxonomy. I do so in hopes that the inscription of Wallace's stories onto what I regard to be some central features of the postmodernist tale's take on the epiphanic may further contribute to shed light on how his short fiction engaged with the problem(s) of subjectivity.

2.4. The Epiphany of Form and the Reader-Surface Relationship

Much of the metafictional experimentation that defined a significant part of American short fiction in the mid twentieth century could be maintained to explore another facet of, or even precede, the anti- and counter-epiphanic in later postmodernist stories. Through their recurrent emphases on laying bare the conventional in literature as art, practice, and experience, the metafictional drive of some post-mid-century tales prompts a particular type of readerly response, directed not at the diegetic content of the piece of fiction, though it may, but also at the fiction itself as cultural product. By virtue of the experience itself being one of coming into awareness of the ordinary, it welcomes being conceptualised via the vocabulary of the epiphany. This I have labelled an "epiphany of form" for its being aimed at the unnoticed conditions of fictional expression, directing readers towards a realisation that is aimed at the surface level of the text, at a form of enhanced, active consciousness of its structure, its workings, its potentialities, and its limitations.

The primary way to retrieve something "worth having," to use Wallace's own phrase, from the metafictional literary exercise is through a reflection *on form* (this, indeed, considers metafiction specifically, without paying much regard to any other components that might inhere to the narrative at large towards which other readerly approaches may be instituted and favoured). Further, such metafictional exercises institute the moment of revelation by bringing forth a tension, surprising their reception with a new context for literary consumption, and thus forcing onto readers—as opposed to describing for them—a new way of approaching their shared object of study (and one that becomes, in the process, a prerequisite for the text to succeed in signifying as it was intended to; or, in some cases, perhaps even signifying at all). The epiphany as a redefining force on a facet of the everyday, thus, comes to naturally permeate descriptions of any such successful approaches to these works as prompters of a change in readerly hermeneutics: upon consuming these fictions, we may read, "[t]he reader *becomes aware* that 'meaning' is constructed primarily through internal *verbal* relationships" (Waugh 1984, 23; emphasis my own); "[m]ore and more the reader is *made aware* of the fact that the existence of verbal and structural materials conditions the formation of images" (Hutcheon 1980, 14; emphasis my own); "[t]he reader of metafiction is *made hyper-aware* of the pragmatics of the text's communicative meaning and of the directed act of interpretation, and in turn is kept overtly conscious of her own constructed reading subjectivity" (Macrae 2019, 8; emphasis my own).

The focus is here placed on the prompting of a form of sensibility towards the text through the metafictional practice, having the reader "come into a new awareness" concerning the object before her. Literary metafiction as thus understood aims at forcing paratextual considerations out of their convention-driven slumber; it pursues the "eye-opening" effect that results from demanding from the reader that she treat the piece of fiction before her as much as a text as she

does as a story, when (and if) at all introducing a story that might be "classically" interpreted through her knowledge of plot and its structures. One of the most recurrent examples in this regard would be Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*. The title-story in Barth's cycle, indeed, is the primary (and very overt) intertextual point of reference for Wallace's own "Westward the Course of the Empire Takes Its Way," where he agonistically tries to exhaust postmodernist metafiction into a form allowing for a different type of readerly experience. Following Charles B. Harris, "Westward" may be argued to function as Wallace's attempt at a redeployment of metafiction aimed at "achieving pre-postmodernist values through postmodernist narrative techniques" (2014, 122), acting as the first literary manifestation of his wish to deploy hackneyed postmodern forms in service of a new—arguably post-postmodernist—agenda where the pleasures of fiction reading and the celebration of the human might once again take centre stage.

Either of these two expressions of metafictive experimentalism,[31] even when deployed in the short story genre specifically, is rarely connected with any vocabulary of the epiphanic, being this a term which, in its literary history, has been systematically linked to the diegetic; associated with a pseudo-religious experience by which the extraordinary in the everyday is cognitively apprehended. The vocabulary of the epiphanic, however, seems suitable to speak of readerly illumination as guided by the text, for it was too at the conveyance (and potential institution) of this type of appreciative stance that the modernist epiphany aimed. Further, as we have seen, much postmodernist metafiction works precisely towards the prompting of such unconventional stances from which the ordinary is imbued in new meaning. Such a meaning is not produced nor projected (albeit individually conditioned), but rather *found*. The question driving the endeavour invites the discovery of what was already there. Thus, the eye-opening effect, much as it happened to the literary subject of the modernist epiphany, is subjectively *mediated*, as opposed to created; it springs from a change in perspective, an enhanced, or altered, ability to *pay attention*—a quality, which, incidentally, Wallace would recurrently praise in his approach to the subjects of fiction reading and ethics as the most valuable lesson to be extracted from engaging with the humanities.

The fact that both Barth's and Wallace's are relatively short pieces—often labelled a short story and a novella, respectively—points towards metafiction's tendency to sometimes feature more prominently in the short form over the novel, especially in its earliest coming into the mainstream of American experimentalism. This, too, has been read in connection with metafiction's readership and the response it is designed to awaken in them, with Robert Scholes claiming the conditions of "conventional" fiction reading to have the ability to regain the discursive space and the modes of interpretation through which it is accessed should metafiction become too crude, excessive. "When extended," Scholes argues, "metafiction must either lapse into a more fundamental mode of fiction or risk losing all fictional interest in order to maintain its intellectual perspectives." As he closes his considerations on metafiction and the short form immediately after, he does so by appealing to the short story's affordance in terms of focus and emphasis, maintaining that "[t]he ideas that govern fiction assert themselves more powerfully in direct proportion to the length of a fictional work" (1970, 29). Metafiction, when deployed continually as the backbone of a fictional text, risks losing the readers' interest; and as such, finds in the short form the ideal vehicle for all such sustained expressions. Furthermore, it

[31] On the one hand, Barth's formal wish to bare the text of every cultural assumption allowing for the reader's awareness of the story as such to be suspended upon reading; and, on the other, Wallace's anxious exploitation of Barth's wish through a dialectical exercise whereby his novella becomes both its own formal prison and Wallace's getaway of choice into the possibility of forging a new relationship with his readership.

cannot be resorted to as the main ingredient to a "long" fictional exercise without being provided with a fair admixture of convention, should its author wish for its text to "work" in narrative terms and engage its readers. Its meditative nature on fiction and fiction writing can only be extended to the readership, one may conclude, insofar as metafiction retains their interest to take part on a reflection that is unable to provide them with any of the elements in "conventional storytelling" that draw us to fiction reading. In metafictional short stories, thus, the appearance of the epiphany of form is twice compromised: on the one hand, it depends on its own ability to successfully direct the reader towards the scrutiny of the text as such; on the other, it relies on the readers' attention and complicity in agreeing to having their expectations betrayed, and thus, too, on their predisposition to accept the epiphany in revelatory terms and not reject the piece of literature in its entirety as one under whose self-conscious stance lies nothing of value.

Barth's opening "Frame Tale" in *Lost in the Funhouse* becomes a poignant instance of this. Designed as a strip of paper with print on both sides, the story is meant for the reader to physically interact with as they follow the instructions provided to manipulate the sheet into an infinitely productive ring: a Möbius band. The endless loop instituted upon successfully following these instructions establishes a recursive cycle, where the string of words can be followed indefinitely into an ever-growing sentence that would read as follows: "Once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time…" (1968/1980, 1-3). The invitation to consider the text as a material unit, subjected to the conditions and limitations imposed by its container, is apparent. Similarly, the deployment of the folk tale's tokenised opening "Once upon a time," alluding to an indeterminate, past setting, erects what might perhaps be the most readily recognised door into classical diegesis, but does so to shatter readerly expectation immediately after. Beginning and ending are superimposed, they pull the reader towards opposite conclusions, its infinite regression inviting simultaneous allusions to "origins and closures, progenitors and progeny," introducing tensions around the notions of storytelling, time, and poiesis through which the cycle at large may be interpreted (Schulz 1984, 401).

Thus, the story's focus on the text's materiality calls awareness to dimensions of literature that are traditionally dismissed as the reader suspends disbelief to consume stories: its temporality, its ephemerality, its dependence on its container, the plurality of meaning(s) as extractable from it, and so on. Because of this, much of its success depends on its ability to trigger some manner of illumination in its reception; an epiphany concerning the nature of the act that they have engaged in, together with the relationship between such an act and the one that they had been expecting to actually be involved in—and, indeed, the many ensuing questions: Why were those my expectations? How does this piece of literature manage to be any different from what I had been expecting, being articulated through language and resorting to patterns I recognise? The epiphanic is, in this regard, twisted outwardly: as we turn to the collection, we are also coming to terms with its being a text and with the array of implications therein entailed. "Playful" metafiction becomes a prompter of awareness; it invites an illumination on what is already known by the reader, on ordinary data (texts are material; stories are bound by convention) that are contextually, and situationally made extraordinary, due to their being dismissed for the act of reading non-metafictional texts to work in its conventional fashion.

Modernist transcendence lingers onto such postmodernist practice, and it does so at the surface level, as has been recurrently pointed out, but also as a consequence of its elicitation of

a response on which the transcendental depends. The revelation does not close in on itself; it does not stand on its own. Character, thus, cannot be written into being provided a conclusion by the enlightening episode; the revelation is not interpreted nor filtered by any given subjectivity. It is, rather, left open, becoming a recursive question addressed to the reader. The epiphany of form, when articulated through overt metafiction, depends on its reception, varies as interpretation, individual forms of consumption, and circumstance come to permeate the meaning of the text itself. Form, on its part, becomes a tool of Barth's: he deploys the short story as an inquiry; its brevity leaves time and space in the hands of readers so that the plurality of questions and answers springing from the format may substitute classical diegesis and justify its corruption of conventional plot structures.

Epiphanies of form, indeed, need not be as apparent in their intent, nor as acutely concerned with laying bare the conditions for fictional consumption as Barth's might be argued to be. They are often a result of unconventionality; of a tension established between an absorbed paradigm concerning what fiction is, how it works, and how it is to be consumed, and an unexpected element preventing the full application of those concepts to a given text. Hence how they become "enlightening," and hence the reason why they remain so regardless the innovativeness (or lack thereof) in the exercise: they exist in formal conversation with a structure opposing the literary "norm"—a socially acquired and historically dictated set of rules concerning patterns of fictional expression—to any manner of diversion from it, notwithstanding issues of canonisation, accessibility, and public opinion. All such literary exercises "force" readerly reconsideration, and thus may be interpreted through the epiphanic, but only insofar as they do not allow productive entrance into their fictional worlds save via the reader's agreement with new condition(s) regarding their stipulation and/or conveyance. Donald Barthelme's "The Balloon"—a short story where the title object, symbolising the work of art, floats around New York to a wide variety of impressions and interpretations—provides a poignant example of how such conditions work: lest the metafictional component to the story is grasped and the revelation (in all its plurality and manifoldness) arrived at, the tale becomes, content-wise, no more than a fictional wasteland. In so doing, its value as a short story becomes potentially irretrievable to any reader who does not observe and participate in the metafictional allegory. The revelation—when deployed as the raison d'être to the writing, as its driving force and purpose—can be preclusive, subordinating a fiction's every success to its ability to trigger the "eye-opening" effect in its readership and welcome them into the surface-discussion that it institutes.

Even when the metafictional component to these stories is less overt, as might be the case in Borges' "The Immortal," the revelation at the heart of the story is still subordinated to its prompting a particular readerly response, and one directed at questioning the ontology of the text itself. Looking at Borges' story specifically, when the identity of Roman soldier Marcus Flaminius Rufus begins to shift and his identifiers are altered as the tale explores timelessness, the text and its narrator come to be perceived as deceitful, oscillating between seemingly incompatible statements that force the reader to question the nature of the piece of literature before her; the possibility that it may hold a claim to meaning; and, if that is to be the case, what kind of parabolic meaning may be extracted from the labyrinthine surface of Borges' story. Here the narrative voice's shifting nature not only accompanies and exemplifies Borges' own reflections on immortality, but forces the reader to turn to the text as narrative vehicle and reconsider pre-postmodern storytelling as a type of *distribution*, inviting them to question how the story before them relocates—and in so doing resignifies—the oft-treaded patterns of the "tale" as codified in our cultural imagination. Further, at certain points in the narrative, when

the relative omniscience of the last narrator functions as mere foreshadowing of the final overlapping of voices, Borges' own remarks and his philosophical approach to the notion of time are made to merge with the narrator's, who, in being every man, unbound by time and its flux, is, too, his demiurge:

> There is nothing very remarkable about being immortal; with the exception of mankind, all creatures are immortal, for they know nothing of death. What is divine, terrible, and incomprehensible is *to know* oneself immortal […]. Taught by centuries of living, the republic of immortal men had achieved a perfection of tolerance, almost of disdain. They knew that over an infinitely long span of time, all things happen to all men. (1949/2004, 13; emphasis in original)

This overlapping of voices functions as a dislocating force, disrupting the readerly position and the comforting stability of the folktale-like narration, which—irrespective of the many changes narrative mode was subjected to throughout Western literary history—had remained a pre-modernist staple shaping readerly attitudes towards the text. Such attitudes can no longer stand unquestioned upon facing Borges' story. His is not merely a coveted shift in narrative perspective, but a plot-justified fusion of all imaginable points of view. The question "Who speaks?" and its pivotal position in postmodernist epistemologies of subjectivity is brought to the fore and made to collapse under the tale's own discourse. "Everyone," is the reply offered by Borges' philosophy of time, brought to life in a voice that is, but simultaneously cannot be, (just) his. The epiphany of form does not illuminate an untrodden path by providing an answer to the implicit conundrum in "The Immortal"—"Who can be a speaking subject, and how important is it for there to be a discernible, intelligible one, with an identity that is bound by immutability and assigned unchanging descriptors, in literature?"—but rather sheds light on the question itself. In so doing, it invites consideration on why its literary contradiction is perceived as one, and how such a contradiction may speak to readers as subjects of their own, with articulate identities and voices that exist, too, *in time*.

Even if we were to trace Borges' epiphany to the story's diegesis exclusively, and argue for its treatment of time to prompt the revelatory moment, we would again be made to face how the dissolution of the subject as forced by the story precludes the Joycean epiphany from taking place within it. The modernist epiphany is once more redirected; it cannot be filtered by character and experienced *in the text* as an unveiled truth found by a given subjectivity. It points, instead, towards the reader. Should Borges' words be regarded to be "illuminating" in any fashion, they would be illuminating to the only subject, literary or otherwise, involved in the act of literary production and consumption whose response to the Proustian activator cannot be entirely conditioned by the author's deployment of literary language: the reader.[32] The reader's complicity to the epiphanic is thus unspecific; it may stand as a requirement to access the value of the literary work or not, be necessary for the retrieval of the text's meaning or be otherwise conceived as a superimposed layer on top of an exercise in conventional storytelling. The epiphany of form, be it overtly metafictional or otherwise, is characterised by a greater dependence on reception, as well as by its need to prompt readerly engagement through an awareness of the text as surface—be it in terms of its being a product, of its having been produced within a system, of its being tensed by the interrelating patterns governing said system and any related structures, of its manifold relationship with language, culture, society,

[32] This is not to say that character can stand as an autonomous literary unit, free from readerly interpretation, but merely that its potential interaction with the epiphanic rests in the hands of the author (they can be made to experience the epiphany, plain and simple) to an extent to which the reader's response to any attempt at manipulating their engagement cannot.

convention and expectation, or of its having been conceived by an author with the (presumable) intention of having it one day arrive before the reader herself.

2.5. David Foster Wallace's "Octet" and the Epiphany of Form

Approaches to David Foster Wallace's metafictional exercise in "Octet," a composite short story at the heart of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), have often claimed the tale's concern with the mediated relationship between author and reader to institute a shift in perspective by which postmodern form is made to serve a new, allegedly more human(e) interest. The story introduces a series of carefully concocted "belletristic pieces," each closed with a question or request to consider some manner of moral or developmental dilemma pertaining to the events as presented, and thus institutes a back-and-forth dialogue between reader and text where the former's projection of meaning is repeatedly requested by the latter. As the tale draws to a close, however, with "Pop Quiz 9" corrupting the already disorderly labelling of the pieces, the projection of a fictionalised authorial conscience, explaining his metafictional exercise in "Octet" through the second person, discloses the true purpose of the story, its poietic history, and his fears that its reception may think him a merciless tactician shielding on self-pity.

Because of its explanatory rhetoric, the story has been similarly typified as "the book's ironic meta-explanation of its own postmetafictional strategy," introducing a character that, albeit knowing itself mere artifice, weaponizes his insecurities and his ability to articulate a genuine-sounding confession to present a form of "self-consciousness [that] is designed paradoxically to seem real" (Boswell 2003/2020, 185-186). Indeed, Wallace's enterprise in "Octet" is concerned with directly appealing to the text's ontology and the epistemological conditions allowing it to hold a claim to one, but not as a means to awakening in its reception an awareness on the text itself, but on the deferred, presumed human being at the other end of the act of reading: the author. This is achieved through two primary shifts: one specifically formal, concerned with the disruption of the short story format and its revelatory teleology; and one tonal, favouring the admixture of overt, ironic irreverence as metafiction stops the course of the fictional pieces halfway through, and a sense of honesty and confessionalism brought to life via the author's problematic self-insertion.

In generic terms, "Octet" introduces a form of metafictional recursiveness that is aimed, precisely, at the short story's propensity to illuminate the ordinary into extraordinariness. The epiphany of form as a manner of textual self-consciousness seeking to guide the reader's own consciousness of the text toward productive interrogation is directly addressed throughout, with the vignettes posing irresolute questions that repeatedly break the fourth wall and patently invite readerly consideration: "Which one lived" (1999, p), "Is she a good mother" (p), and so on. In Adam Kelly's words, David Foster Wallace's writing style, as does Jacques Derrida's, "relentlessly interrogates its own commitments," prompting an experience of the text whereby "truth" is no longer understood as "simply existing beneath the surface, a contingent absence that can be rendered present via the processes of critique," but rather as being "uncannily on the surface, impervious to those processes" (2010, 138). The epiphany of form prompts a new relation to such truths; a new experience of "honesty" that is triggered, precisely, by the text stripping itself of any attempt at veiling meaning and purpose from its readers to instead face—and in so doing reveal—its intentions. The interrelation of all such intentions with the epiphany and its lexicon, further, is directly addressed by the end of "Octet" itself, with "Pop Quiz 9"

opening up by explaining how the pieces are "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…" (123). The dialogic element to the tale, repeatedly luring readers in, prompts the epiphany of form through overtly demanding that readers pay attention to a dilemma that has been made explicit for them. The story's aesthetic shift in "Pop Quiz 9," however, does not renounce the epiphanic, but once again twists its workings by demanding of the reader that she rethink her previous conclusions in light of the mediated authorial monologue. His hope, confesses the authorial insertee, lies in the possibility that "coming out hat in hand near the end and trying to interrogate her directly is going to induce any kind of revelation of urgent sameness that'll then somehow resonate back through the cycle's pieces and make her see them in a different light" (p). Following the colonisation of the exercise by the commenting author's narrative voice, however, such an invitation takes a new shape, becoming an overt, first-hand request that the purpose of the piece be observed; and that the probing, ever-irresolute nature of the postmodernist epiphany be devoted time, attention, and readerly sympathy.

Wallace's "Octet" can thus be interpreted as an attempt at manipulating the epiphany of form so that it may allow him to anxiously seize control over readerly response, and hence to be instituting a tonal shift toward some form of "new sincerity:" a rhetoric unbound by postmodernism's propension to deconstruct and interrogate, where "truth" may be ruled by a new epistemology.[33] It does so, further, by fuelling the realisation through a power fantasy: that founded on the "control" that the reader, as the only agent who can face and give meaning to the piece's imperative close, might hold over the anxious writer with whom they are grammatically made to fuse. Wallace's "Octet" is often interpreted in these terms by virtue of its patent wish to move beyond the culturally established paradigms of cynicism and irony that the contemporary reader has been asked to resort to when faced with postmodern techniques. If so interpreted, the story's aim becomes, at heart, that of arriving at a tonal shift by which metafictional self-consciousness may serve a new purpose. To do this, Wallace deploys metafiction as a way to address the very problem that may prevent his tale to transcend all such limitations: "acknowledg[ing] the existence of the specters of irony and self-referentiality […] to expose their vapidity" (Williams 2015, 303). Moreover, he does so through an appeal to the author's (albeit his fictionalised condition as character in the story itself) own humanity, conversationally introducing his fear that connection and readerly empathy may have become unattainable for writers and readers under the governing episteme.

Thus, the narrative voice's authorial discomfort may be argued to function as a show of his concern that his metafictional piece may fail to engage its reception in the expected way, as an acknowledgement of the text's inability to seize control of what lies beyond it. In so doing, the confession of Wallace's persona becomes yet another textual strategy, a technique aiming at properly directing readerly response, but doing so not so much toward the oft-pinpointed conditions of literary reading as a material process shaped by convention, but toward the *human* in the author himself. It appeals to a revelation that, albeit identical in technique to the previous ones,[34] seeks the institution of interhuman connection at a conceptual level, despite its resorting to a relationship between reader and the text's conditions (namely, its having an author) in order

[33] The nature of such a turn is hard to pinpoint in the literature, with the term "new sincerity" often being used to refer both to a return to some form of pre-postmodernist honesty, and to an overcoming of postmodernism's tonal incapacities by moving forward into an as-of-yet unspecific form of "post-postmodernism."

[34] Here, too, the metafictional effort is directed at making explicit an element to the reading exercise that would otherwise go unnoticed as a consequence of the reader's suspension of disbelief.

to do so. Its call to complicity, and thus its appeal that the reader comply with the moment of illumination, is strengthened by virtue of its diction, with a line of argument that, by the end of the tale, has become that of an insecure creator begging to be mercifully spared of all responsibility for having failed to "conventionally" accomplish what he had initially set out to do. It is in this sense that Wallace's weaponised epiphany of form becomes manipulative, functioning, as Iain Williams has suggested (2015, 309), as a sort of Socratic dialogue where the answer is not genuinely requested as pending contribution, but rather unfolds as a pre-existing truth that the text merely covets through form (and, in this case, also tonal unease). "There are right and fruitful ways to try to 'empathize' with the reader," writes Wallace, "but having to try to imagine yourself *as* the reader is not one of them [… T]here 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*'" (p; emphases in original). In resorting to demeaning self-interrogation and confessing to an anxiety of reception, I should argue, the story's approach to the epiphany of form becomes tonally distinct; its manipulative rhetoric unfolds as unusually supplicant, the text's consciousness of itself borders on the epistolary, and the reader's unspecifiable response towards it is addressed so overtly that its absence—the uncaring, disengaged mode of reading that metafiction sometimes risks—becomes almost impossible. The reader is guided to the questions; they are not elicited from her, but rather posited as part of a self-conscious exercise which can afford to be plain and evident by virtue of its concern with exposing a different type of self-consciousness: that of the fictionalised author, whose initial enterprise is revealed to be informed by bared, human doses of diffidence and fear toward the artistic object and its afterlives.

Despite the epiphany of form being transversal to a significant part of Wallace's short fiction, with metafictional exercises recurring in different shapes throughout his work,[35] none of these metafictional moments has been attributed comparable significance to that of "Octet," which enjoys praise for its ability to function as a descriptive tale that might stand at the heart of Wallace's entire oeuvre, actively showcasing his individual ethos as a writer. Zadie Smith's contention that "Octet" "will make you or break you as a reader of Wallace" (2011, 290) foresees much of the academic discourse around the piece, which has found in it a fictional proclamation of the turn towards the new sincerity, and thus would have it function as some manner of literary commentary on the possibility to leave the dishonest tendencies of the postmodern behind. Past the debate concerning Wallace's achievement of honesty and intersubjective connection through the piece, permeated by issues related to the notion of sincerity itself and its (new) epistemologies, stands an anxiety pertaining to subjectivity.

The disassembled subject of much early postmodernism, creating a subjective reality through her experience of an equally disassembled world, becomes in Wallace a source of indeterminacy. Upon facing "Octet," the reader is requested to approach the revelation *as though she were the writer*; she is asked to share an individual experience that the very standardised foundations of the postmodernist paradigm would deem irretrievable to her. Therein lies the attempt at "overcoming" the postmodernist, irrespective of whether one should claim it successful: the illumination to be found in the text (desperately) seeks to "stabilise" the subject, it reaches for an understanding of the receptive self that may allow for meaning, or the illusion of meaning, to be shared entirely. This "meaning," further, does not stand as an

[35] The futuristic dictionary entry for the word "date" in the story "Datum Centurio" becomes a poignant example of how the epiphany of form may be derived from the formal exploitation of the vehicle for expression, whereas *Oblivion*'s "The Suffering Channel" may be maintained to call awareness to the text's surface by thematically introducing the discussion on how art and culture arrive at conveying aesthetic meaning and moving their reception.

accomplishment or a conceptual destination, but as "a thing in the making" (the stories were unfinished, a failure, their aim merely sketched by the second-person voice), finding epiphanic value in the self-deprecating narrator's hope that the text will be perceived as sincere—and upon meeting readerly empathy, also become factually sincere.

The meta-epiphany or epiphany of form, thus, contributes to "Octet" more than just an exercise in readerly engagement; more than just an attempt to lure the story's reception into complicity so that they may agree to observe the conditions on which this "new" sincerity that springs from authorial[36] self-awareness is founded. It also provides the tale with a distinct emphasis on reaching beyond authorial self-awareness for the subject that is diluted from the collection's opening story, lost in the liquidity of a social structure where one's being and the perception of one's being become unprecedentedly difficult to distinguish. In Bauman's terms, postmodern life's changing definitional paradigms force stability out of its every equation, with the range of notions that rule over life's meaning-making structures resisting all forms of consolidation. The role of the individual within this maelstrom becomes, precisely, one of the overarching themes of Wallace's *Brief Interviews*—and, one may argue, his literary oeuvre at large.

The unsolvable paradox at its heart, further, is where "Octet" as a story appears to be aimed. "[I]ndividuality," argues Bauman, "seems to be burdened with an inborn *aporia*: an *insoluble* contradiction. It needs society as simultaneously its cradle and its destination" (2005, 18; emphasis in original). No form of introspection, irrespective of how honestly it be conveyed through language, can reconcile the inescapable fact that, in reaching for an "other" to validate one's distinctness, the task of grounding the individual through self-reflection is deferred. Upon being deferred, it malfunctions, for the exercise of looking "into" the doubting self is mirrored back onto the subject as though accusing her of not being "in control" of her sense of being. "Octet" remaining unfinished also works to replicate this tension: its meta-demands ask for an epiphany that Wallace and his text cannot fulfil on their own. The illumination beneath literary closure is inherent to the dialogical component of the exercise. "Octet" awaits a nod of complicity toward the "self" as linguistically created, one that is left for its reception to provide. Upon being appointed the task of ontologically validating the individual, however, society (or, here, the story's reception) freezes the self-aware subject out of its independence; out of its own ability to form itself and claim for itself *what it can be*. Hence how the epiphany of form is here also a diagnosis: it speaks of a postmodern society that is perceived to force the clash of possibility and actuality. One can only perceive oneself to be insofar as validated by the fleeting structures around one. The question behind "Octet," the self-conscious demand for *recognition* on the other end, becomes, too, a cry for an epiphany forever pending closure, a plea for an answer, whichever it might be, with the ability to stabilise the coming and going of the deflected responsibility to make the writing subject *mean*.

2.6. Uprooted Illuminations: The Absence of Epiphany as Embodiment of the Postmodernist Ethos

The "emergent, gestaltlike qualities" that are often regarded to constitute the postmodernist repertoire, appealing to aesthetic experiences that revolve around "images of indifference, insignificance, and ineffectuality," have been argued to "cut across modernism and

[36] Authorial here refers to the author as character.

postmodernism, […] less as distinct episodes in the history of culture than as diverging responses to a single process of modernization" (Ngai 2012, 15-18). The question, then, becomes how such long-standing categories should be connoted and differentiated, should their differentiation be deemed, in fact, relevant to the typification of any particular facet of twentieth-century experience. For Shianne Ngai, the postmodernist constitutes some form of coming into awareness of the two movements' shared aesthetic enterprise, a collective instrumentalization of the ongoing artistic praxis (16). Drawing on Fredric Jameson's interrelation of capitalist and artistic structures, which he deems a consequence of the increasing "frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods" (1991, 4), Ngai argues for artistic postmodernism—a movement ever-informed by its coaeval critical impulses—to have entailed "a destabilization of art's more specifically modernist, twentieth-century mission of producing perceptual shocks" (21). Postmodern culture, here characterised by an overruling awareness of the enterprises of modernity, exploited the paradigm that allowed for its advent too greatly for any such (diegetic) shocks to retain their value, lest they be redefined via some manner of mediation or implement.

The epiphany of form as previously conceptualised becomes one remarkable way in which postmodernist literature weaponized its ability to prompt awareness of the text as surface to ensure the prevalence of the type of impactful reflection that stood at the core of what postmodernist art aimed to achieve from the offset. It exists only insofar as postmodernism has come into a distinct awareness of the overarching, modern *savoir faire* that was previously imbricated in the culture but not necessarily a "tool" in the hands of artists. Another prominent postmodernist redeployment of technique via which it has retained the impact of the epiphanic and come to embody this new awareness concerns its relationship with silence, absence, and omission. Such a technique is typically postmodernist, following Ngai's remarks, in that it instrumentalises its awareness of the role that the epiphany had come to play in the conceptualisation of the modernist short story, and then suggests the possibility for its return without ever providing readers with its solace. This establishes a productive connection between the openness of a form that keeps some of its meaning from being made explicit and the typified postmodernist emphasis on elicitation, with the indeterminacy of subjectively mediated meaning often equating irresolute, or even contradictory stances concerning the text's import and purpose. The veiled and hidden meanings of modernism, accessed via the epiphany as a diegetic moment, are frequently rejected in favour of literary exercises which vaguely "give directions," point towards the existence of an individual veil to be hermeneutically taken away by the reader. Thus, much of the resolution to these postmodernist stories—together with the experience of the epiphany itself, when at all traceable, and the social commentary that sometimes ensues—is rendered post-textual, only retrievable by means of readerly interpretation from the silence following the tales' closings. The absence of the epiphany as a diegetic resource hence becomes a technique that is not only recurrent, but markedly postmodernist by means of its calling attention to how the creation of meaning (and of transcendental meaning at that) rests almost wholly in the hands of readers, and as such, may be best left beyond the mimetic mediation of literary character.

My argument here does not intend to imply that any postmodernist text where the epiphanic is untraceable, either in its typified modernist expression or otherwise, is indeed deploying silence as a way to disrupt the workings of the epiphany as revelatory, and thus fulfilling some form of postmodernist prophecy by which both the movement's doings and undoings are made to serve the purposes that critical theory has long ascribed to it—namely, those of placing epistemological pluralism at the heart of the artistic practice and evincing the relativizable in

the experience of meaning itself. The absence of the epiphanic as here conceptualised, rather, aims to address how certain ellipsis of information, or the absence of diegetic experiences of what could be a transcendental moment, are sometimes resorted to as a way to prevent diegetic prescriptivism; or, in some cases, to reflect the stasis of postmodern character before their subjectively apperceived reality. This does not merely replicate some form of Hemingwayan iceberg, but rather circumscribes such a technique to the awakening of a response on the part of readers by which the postmodern nature of the element elucidated is formally accentuated because of its being left unsaid, open, "unforced into presence." The overarching power of discourse and society as conditioning superstructures to individual experience is transversal to many of these stories' removal of the epiphanic, with characters being recurrently made to comply with their being surfaces themselves, tentatively moving through postmodern society and its hyper-awareness of the systemic and the power it exerts over the individual.

In Alice Munro's 1964 "Boys and Girls," the possibility for any manner of epiphanic enlightenment is prevented by the child protagonist's resignation. As the story draws to its close, the first-person narrator, a young girl living in her family's fox farm, comes to accept her being written into the societal narrative construed around her gender—a narrative, indeed, towards which she had previously expressed both suspicion and discomfort. On the one hand, because she doubted her mother's intentions as she tried to raise her into traditional womanhood: "My mother, I felt, was not to be trusted" (1964/1998, 105); and on the other, due to her facing the realisation that she was still a thing "in becoming," somehow not quite fulfilling the requisites for being what she had always thought of herself as: "The word *girl* had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the word *child*; now it appeared that it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become" (1964/1998, 106; emphasis in original). Upon being so articulated, the tale denies itself any manner of mystified revelation, to instead submit its character to the domesticating forces of gendered life. It is thus that her coming to terms with her affections—resulting directly from her empathetic response to one of the family's horses, which she tried to free on the eve of its slaughter (1964/1998, 111)—becomes tainted by her resignation, as though she had been burdened with a new weakness. When made to face the consequences of her actions at the very close of the story, his father refuses to punish her and dismisses the matter entirely by saying that "[s]he's only a girl," a statement which she comes to painfully accept, becoming aware of the range of social implications therein conveyed: "I didn't protest that, even in my heart. Maybe it was true" (1964/1998, 113). In a moment of enlightening resolution, the girl protagonist submits herself to narrative; complies with the superstructural interpretation of her own existence, and is so stranded off the enabling potentialities of the traditional moment of being. Her anagnorisis is not epiphanic, but rather comes to function as a surrendering of all resistance. Her silence, carrying the weight of the non-epiphany, showcases how her subjectivity, placed at the centre of the tale, is indissociable from the social structures conditioning her upbringing; structures toward which the postmodernist movement at large would direct its scrutiny and attention.

Munro's tendency to impressionist closings, where the mundane and the ordinary are exalted under a light previously unknown to the character(s), is especially noticeable in this and her other early writings, but changed halfway through her career (see Hunter 2007, 166). However, even in the early pieces, when she was still approaching her endings as meaningful, punchline-like commentary on the tales, the absence of the epiphanic in its most transcendental, modernist sense remains traceable. This only became direr as the century progressed, with Munro herself stating that if she could, she "would go back […,] rewrite most of those stories,

and […] chop out a lot of those words and final sentences. And I would just let each story stand without bothering to do the summing up, because that's really what it amounts to" ("The Real Material," interview with J.R. (Tim) Struthers 1983, 9). Her progression towards the overt absence of the epiphany, exploiting the short story's relationship with omission, thus joins the detrimental transcendence of other post-modernist closings, to which I shall return in the following section.

Another poignant instance of how the absence of the epiphany comes to play a part in conveying the inescapability of gendered, cultural imperatives is Jamaica Kincaid's renowned "Girl" (1978/1983). Her short story presents a univocal succession of cultural codes and instructions passed on by a mother to her daughter, most of which are concerned with how to play the role of "woman" in society. In tonal terms, the entirety of the tale's 681 words—save for a shift to italics at the very end, where the daughter voices a question to which I will return momentarily—function as a string, lacking any stops, and sending a unique message made of countless single-entendre assertions. As though painting a picture, the mother touches on the skills she wishes to pass on to her daughter, the way she will be expected to behave and relate to others, and other pieces of advice aimed at preventing her from "looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming." The fragility of girlhood as a construct is emphasised as the list grows longer and longer, one semicolon after another, instituting a kind of tension that accentuates the feeling that it is functionally impossible to succeed in doing justice to the weight of cultural expectation that the mother feels responsible for presenting in order to (the reader may surmise) keep her daughter "safe(r)" within the constraints of gendered life than she would be were she to defy them. As the story closes, with the daughter's question failing to put a physical stop to the list—it is also encaged by the semicolons, the "success" and attainability of closure awaiting a final rebuke—we see her asking an insightful "*but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*" (emphasis in original) after she is instructed to always squeeze the bread before purchase, and it is her mother's disapproval, callous and demanding as though carrying the whole weight of society's expectations, that closes the piece: "you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?"

The absence of an epiphanic moment in this narrative is especially loud. The information on the paradigm under scrutiny is laid out before the character, and the shift thus not only prompted, but almost dissected for the daughter. Kincaid's protagonist, unlike Munro's, need not surmise anything about the world around her through a pivotal experience; it is instead exposed before her. The impulse of the epiphany is lost to an ending that again focuses on imposed resignation and immobilism: the daughter's perspective does not infiltrate the narrative, she is silenced by the weight of convention altogether, the mother's voice serving as that of the social superstructure impeding the epiphanic from finding a way into the story. No critical moment of illumination can close the tale, for there is no escaping the structures of gendered education from the position of the child. Its non-existence is, in itself, part of the social commentary underlying the narrative: in leaving any form of subjective arrival at a new epistemology out of the story, the imprisoning nature of gender norms comes to speak, too, *in* and *through* that absence.

This turn to the epiphany as absence can be interpreted to parallel the emergence of the new understandings of the written word that resulted from Heidegger's outlining of philosophy's long standing metaphysics of presence, and Derrida's later critique of such a metaphysics. Irrespective of whether this may happen consciously or otherwise, postmodernist rejections of the diegetic epiphany exist in perpetual, intertextual conversation with new

approaches to absence at large; new understandings of how a text happens to mean; and new readings of what a text as a vessel of knowledge can be argued to encompass. In his renowned *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida maintained that "there is no outside-text" (158), alluding to how both presence and absence, which he regarded to be foundational features of all mediated, linguistic communication, are contained in every conceivable form of writing. Postmodernist short stories' acknowledgement of the epiphany through the erasure of the revelatory voice might be argued to be bringing to the surface the play of presence and absence that Derrida maintained permeated linguistic exchange at large. In their doing so, they not only engage with the literary history and preceding modes, but also attempt to subvert those very modes by critically weaponising the devices that were once at their disposal so as to bring to the fore an awareness of synchronic, sociocultural circumstance that prevents transcendental understanding to free even the mind. This same tendency, as we shall see, lived on in some of Wallace's tales, where contemporary life's stasis and monotony are placed at the centre and from which the epiphany is altogether removed.

2.7. David Foster Wallace and the Absent Presence of the Epiphany

As has been repeatedly noted, Wallace's relationship with silence deserves careful attention. Absence plays a vital part throughout his literary production, both in material and symbolic terms, and its recurrence is perpetually exacerbated by its natural contrast with the grammatical and lexical density that has come to characterise his prose. Clare Hayes-Brady's remarkable work on Wallace and failure already examined the productivity inherent to all such tensions, arguing that "the marriage of opposites can […] prove counterintuitively fruitful, proliferating into plural interpretive potential. That plurality," she goes on, "extends, most importantly, to the consideration of communication as a phenomenon" (2016, 34). The lack of anchor points to bind the exercise of literary communication to is a recurring issue in Wallace's fiction, and one that is critically tied to the fragility of the assumed positions and ontologies of author, implied reader, and text. Intention and attention become valuable framing notions both to Wallace's literature, and to his own perspective on said literature. His insight on literary creation, further, is built on a firm belief in the multivalence of the work of art, irreducible to any considerations on mimeticism, referentiality, or single-entendre interpretations.

The introduction of these notions and their relative vacuity, with attention remaining out of reach to the author, and meaning becoming unpinpointable by virtue of the text's postmodernist opening onto plurality—a plurality that is not merely experimental anymore, but attempts, too, to be moral; to configure a new textual ethics—becomes as well the source of the great frustration underlying Wallace's oeuvre, both thematically and structurally: the fleeting, irreducible nature of all such processes (communication, literary reading, interpretation at large…) and the insecurities and uncertainties resulting from the fleeting and the irreducible in them take centre stage. When read in conjunction with all such ideas, Wallace's own claim that "writing is an act of communication" (1997/1998, 144) appears to be very much devised to function as a proclamation on the ethics of reading that he was after, and not merely a statement on the pragmatics of the literary act. Passivity hence becomes the enemy of connection, whereas multi-perspectivism poses no challenge to Wallace's communicative endeavour (the greater issue is not that the reader may hermeneutically approach the text in an unforeseen way, but that she may not engage with it significantly whatsoever). Active engagement, however, is hardly measurable; and impossible to measure from the author's imagined "gleaming abstract Olympian HQ" in whose fortified isolation he creates (1999/2001, 136). The reader, an

unspecified other whose concrete disparities cannot be approached through any form of factual apprehension, poses the only fully-out-of-authorial-control threat to the attainment of the objective at the heart of Wallace's literary enterprise in writing fiction.

The persistent ellipses in Wallace's work can be easily interpreted to function as an attempt to contain and manipulate inattentiveness and passivity into becoming their opposites. By removing certain amounts of vital information from his texts and prompting what he labelled as "exformation," the need for readerly engagement becomes not only especially critical, but often the one element on which the success of the stories depends entirely. The quieted voice of the epiphanic, thus, is sometimes resorted to as a questing force, obstructing clear interpretation in order to have the reader actively interrogate the story and engage with the text for what it "does" without "saying."

The non-epiphanic, however, is also deployed as diegetic commentary on a subject matter, and not merely as a trick aimed at capturing the reader's attention. "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life" is perhaps one of Wallace's most poignant examinations of the conditions of postmodern living. Functionally, however, it may also serve as an exploration of the ways in which all such conditions prevent the epiphanic from finding a way into some postmodernist art. As the micro-story opening *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, it works primarily toward providing a setting; in so doing, it introduces a concern with postmodernist selves and their ability to connect with themselves and others that can be argued to be transversal to Wallace's literary production. The opening micro-story's brevity, beyond merely attesting to the short form's sufficiency in encapsulating the core of post-industrial experience, turns it into a paramount instance of how the short story can be made to provide "knowledge of a historically general kind […] not by means of comprehension, but by means of omission, exemplification, and compression" (Basseler 2019, 152). It is in this intersection between formal elicitation and diegetic vacuity that the epiphany is deprived of its every possibility. Characters cannot move past the stasis of their context; their identities, on their part, unfold as the result of conglomerating actions that merely attempt at masquerading their own vulnerability, and their shared emphases in "hoping to be liked" and "preserving good relations at all times" make it impossible for any such moments of transcendence to actually permeate the text and direct its agents towards the illuminating in themselves and their surroundings (Wallace 1999/2001, 0). Here, much as it happens in Munro's "Boys and Girls," it is the internalisation of an observed social structure that leads character to, and in so doing entraps her in, a manner of stasis from which all contact with the liberating element in the modernist epiphany appears impossible.

The lack of an epiphany in "Radically" is also formally conditioned by the tensions informing the micro-story, which has been argued to stand as a subgenre characterised (among other shifts) by a renunciation of short fiction's propensity towards impressionism (Nelles 2012, 97). The absence of the epiphany comes hand in hand with this rejection of the impressionist, and thus, too, of the element in the short story genre that allowed for the epiphany to take centre stage so pivotally in the first place. Also central to micro-fiction is the idea that it must resort to "an original and surprising twist at the end" (Campbell 1942, 61), thus exploiting the economy that its dimensions create and giving its reception something memorable, funny, or interesting, in exchange for their attention. "Radically," however, does not even allow itself the solace of an in-story witticism, but merely institutes a loop through syntactic recursion that opens the tale even further, as opposed to closing it with a twist and allowing the reader to do the same and move forward. Its absolute and relative shortness (being short in terms of what

literary writing normally looks like, but also remarkably short if looked at alongside Wallace's other production, both in *Brief Interviews* and elsewhere) contrasts here with how sweeping the social commentary underlying the vignette may be argued to be, with insightful specificity being entirely removed from its 80-word extension despite having its omniscient narrator devote itself to the exploration of human motive. The punchline in "Radically" is not the exceptional, nor the exceptional within ordinariness that the modernists may have devoted attention to, but rather the ordinary itself, and how it may be informative of—or lay out before the reader for her to examine—a new ontology of postmodern being. Characters are plain in their universalness; their characterisation rests on their taking on an attitude towards others whose core feature in the tale is, indeed, the fact that it is so widespread that it uniformises subjects into some form of late postmodernist inauthenticity. The revelation is emptied of any manner of enhanced value within the story, it is denied any transcendental moment, any technical marvel, and its most important co-dependant: an experiencer.

The ending of Wallace's "Here and There" offers a distinct attack on the epiphanic by presenting a closing remark that is revelatory for its doxastic (as opposed to epistemological) nature. The short story is structured as a replica of a dialogue, with the man or woman involved in it discussing a breakup they had gone through in separate contexts. The ensemble jumps from one's confessions to the other's in a conversational style, exploring the same themes through the ex-couple's individual optics as it unfolds and bounces from one to the other and back. It is apparent from the offset, however, that the two characters are in fact not together nor discussing these issues with each other, but merely have their voices presented in that way to feign communication, a notion with which the tale will be pivotally concerned. Due to such a structural decision, it is often hard to tell whose voice drives each intervention, with subjectivity becoming uncertain in formal terms by means of the story's recurrent refusal to point at the speaking subject behind each remark. Further, the first pages of the story introduce a third voice, their therapist's, who is putting them through "fiction therapy" so that they may arrive at emotional reconciliation with their shared (hi)story. "[F]iction therapy," we may read, "in order to be at all effective must locate itself and operate within a strenuously yes some might even say harshly limited defined structured space." Such a fiction, the dialogue goes on, would "construct an instance" where character Bruce's ex-lover "is to be reader, as well as object […] as to be for once subject as well." Bruce himself, not entirely convinced that such an approach could ever be based on the truth of how he saw and sees her, appears to complain that "[t]he therapeutic lie is to pretend the truth is a lie" (1989/1997, 153). The narrative constitution of reality as utilised by fiction therapy incurs in a paradox of sorts, inviting questions on the nature of psychotherapy itself (how is it exempt from being "fiction" too?) and reality's own (how much of this problematic concerning subject-object positions within the stories human beings tell themselves can be said to pertain to the therapeutic context and not to life itself?). Such a concern with fictionality is accentuated at the frame level by the unnaturalness of some of the interventions, with first-person dialogues reproducing Wallace at his densest and not even attempting to replicate how human beings communicate in most contexts.

This deliberate use of artifice dehumanises the conversational structure further, leaving subjects on both ends ostracised not only from one another, but also from the readers' presupposed ability to empathise with them. Bruce suspects fiction therapy not to be what he needs, nor something he could whole-heartedly believe in. In this context, the fact that the story itself turns to a nearly artificial use of language seems to constitute a purposeful attempt to induce in the reader the same sense of automatised detachment from its characters as communicative beings that they struggle(d) with in their relationship. We may read, for

instance, Bruce's intervention in the opening section, contextualising his situation in inordinate detail (and prosopopeic, as the tale promptly mocks by making the metafictional choice to mention a made-up town of the name Prosopopeia):

> By late May 1983 her emotional bus has pulled out. I find in myself a need to get very away. To do a geographic. I am driving my mother's enclosed car on hot Interstate 95 in southern Maine, moving north toward Prosopopeia, the home of my mother's brother and his wife, almost at the Canadian border. Taking I-95 all the way from Worcester, Mass., lets me curve comfortably around the west of Boston, far from Cambridge, which I don't wish ever to see again. I am Bruce, a hulking, pigeon-toed, blond, pale, red-lipped Midwestern boy, twenty-two, freshly graduated in electrical engineering from MIT, freshly patted on the head by assorted honors committees, freshly returned in putative triumph with my family to Bloomington, Indiana, there to be kicked roundly in the psychic groin by a certain cool, tight, waistless, etcetera, Indiana University graduate student, the object of my theoretical passion, distant affection and near-total loyalty for three years, my prospective fiancée as of Thanksgiving last. (1989/1997, 153-154)

Bruce's odd speech patterns are consistent throughout, and tie in with his ambition to become "the first really great poet of technology." His understanding of art, further, becomes an implicit twist on the theme of interpersonal communication; he envisions the literature of the future as one that will have "[w]ords as fulfillers of the function of signification in artistic communication […] wither like the rules of form before them. Meaning," he goes on, "will be *clean*" (1989/1997, 155, emphasis mine). This idea of a literature that is clean in its approach to meaning for the sake of efficaciousness dehumanises language as a tool and turns it into a mathematical, mimetic re-presenter of that which simply *is* beyond it: an all too noble aspiration that fails to account for the ways in which subjectivity in language is, ultimately, inapprehensible. It is to this consequence of Bruce's worldview that the fiction therapist turns as the story progresses, arguing that Bruce repeatedly fails to see the other as fully human; fails to identify that very humanity as the thing causing his unease: "one becomes uncomfortable at this new silence from a subject in a west we have evidence you remember," argues his therapist (1989/1997, 158).

As the tale progresses, Bruce's anxiety toward the influence others naturally exert on him is devoted specific attention, with the character admitting to "feel[ing] as though my thoughts and voice here are in some way the creative products of something outside me, not in my control, and yet that this shaping, determining influence outside me is still me" (1989/1997, 165). This statement again invites a metafictional reading. It is unclear whether Bruce is referring to David Foster Wallace the author or to his ex-partner, and the nature of the influence would change accordingly. As though trying to bring together Wallace's fears and his characters' own by having the latter obscurely allude to his existence, Wallace repeatedly plays with ambiguity, delving in themes that are not only omnipresent in his fiction, but that pertain to the process of fiction writing in itself (monolithic meaning in literature and true communication between subjects, as we have seen, but also perfection and its potential attainability in what follows).

Besides being plagued by the clash of all sorts of binaries (science and art, the masculine and the feminine, logical-mathematical intelligence and emotional intelligence), the thematic unfolding of the story repeatedly places connection at its centre. This should come as no surprise, provided how "Here and There" is ultimately a story about an instance of human dis-connection and its aetiology. As it nears its close, the unsolvable in these structural disagreements takes centre stage, with Bruce's partner explaining how "[h]e said real poetry

won't be in words after a while […, that] the icy beauty of the perfect signification of fabricated nonverbal symbols and their relation through agreed-on rules will come slowly to replace first the form and then the stuff of poetry," and that to her, on the contrary, "a big part of the realness that poems were about […] was feelings. I wasn't going to pretend to be sure," she admits, "but I didn't think numbers and systems and functions could make people feel any way at all" (1989/1997, 167). Bruce's ensuing condescendence as he accuses her of being afraid of "new things" sets them even further apart, making it difficult to discern whether they could ever arrive at any form of honest understanding. In the following scene, where Bruce relates an incident where he was unable to fix her aunt's stove, several of the sentences again allude to the possibility that the distance between self and other may be unbridgeable, such as the italicised conclusion stating that he lacks the necessary information for his engineering degree to come in handy: "There is *no way to know*," coming in immediately before he breaks the stove and admits, somewhat insightfully, that he has "never bound a wire" (1989/1997, 170-171, emphasis in original). As the story closes, we find Bruce defeated, admitting to his fear of everything, which the reader might even contend to be behind his inability to give himself truly to others and accept them in their alterity. No revelation comes to occupy the closing confession, tied to the episode concerning the stove but also deeply informative of Bruce's remarkably human struggle with communication and acceptance. Instead, his words admit to the issue itself; he makes the overarching tone with which the theme is approached explicit, and thus labels fear to be at the heart of his relationship's failure, his being's every weakness, and in a way, too, of the short story.

Thus, the modernist epiphany is once again absent, substituted by the blaring presence of a postmodernist fear of fears; an unbearable anxiety experienced by a character whose relationship with connection and presence is one of perpetual panic. It is not what the character comes to know (i.e. what he is revealed; the would-be epiphany) that occupies the position of climactic tension at the end of the tale, but a confession on what he believes to be true (a subjective remark on his belief system; and thus, too, a form of self-diagnosis). Upon being shared by her interlocutor, the observation that he believes to be "afraid of absolutely everything there is" comes to build on the understanding of the "postmodern condition" in interpersonal terms that is put forth by the collection at large. "The other" is feared in its incommensurability. The lengths to which the subject goes to keep this fear at bay appear to be limitless, and to take place involuntarily. The closing words, "Then welcome," do not serve as an entrance into a new order, but rather carry the vague irony that is often directed at a statement too superfluous to be met with any other type of undertone. Fear towards disconnection, the uncontrollable in others, and loneliness—irrespective of the character's pathologised response to these notions—is thus conceived as the very experience through which to remedy the solipsism that may result from the fear itself. The success of any such bridging, however, is uncertain, with the tale's closure offering no insight on how the afflicted character will understand her interlocutor's "Then welcome," nor any directions on whether her reading of it will grant her solace. The title itself, "Here and There," already points towards this unbridgeable distance between the self and everything beyond it, with the terms' vague deictics framing the story as one concerned with a spatial separation, be it literal, metaphorical, or (as the reader soon comes to discover) both, even standing at the heart of the therapeutic conversation driving the tale forward. The communal space is already banished from the text as it opens, with its title also bringing forth the idea of a binarism; a twofold order of sorts around which the circumstances of the breakup at the heart of the plot are construed.

The possibility that the epiphany might be absent from the closings of Wallace's short fiction should come as no surprise, and exists in close connection to his favouring of what I have labelled the "dark epiphany" in his literary production. Sometimes the two become functionally indissociable, as might be argued to be the case in "Here and There" and in some of the tales that shall be brought forth in what follows. This is so because it is precisely in the lack of a redeeming epiphany that the doxa ascribed to the focalising character may be argued to become, indeed, detrimental. This type of absence is not merely found in the above stories, but could be read into many of Wallace's tales, especially in his early and mid-period. The aforementioned "Forever Overhead" could be easily interpreted to be denying itself the modernist epiphany, with the child character's border crossing instead responding to a different transcendence—or, even, to the opposite sort, diluting his beliefs and dismantling the known frame of his world instead of bringing before him a new understanding of it. Irrespective of the frame provided for the analysis, the twist remains at the heart of the story, with *something* happening to the closing moment, and that something affecting the relationship between the short story character and their apperception of their subjectively lived reality in a way that, in one way or another, defies the modernist epiphany as canonised and turns it into something disturbingly "other."

2.8. Postmodernism and the Dark Epiphany: The Prevalence of Teleologies of Self-Destruction in Wallace and Beyond

In their pivotal *Critique and Postcritique* (2017), Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski speak of critique as a distinct, twentieth-century mode of relation between scholar and text. Coming into its apogee as the century progressed, the academic and social environment that critique influenced came to constitute much of Wallace's own literary ecosystem. Critique, argue Anker and Felski, establishes a near-medicalised relationship between the two ends of the hermeneutic endeavour, maintained to result from its early intertwining with psychoanalysis, by which a *specialist* with distinct expertise submits an object to *scrutiny*, revealing something about it which was previously hidden or remained unseen to those lacking her knowledge and *savoir-faire*. By the late twentieth century, however, a central characteristic of such a critical stance would eventually become its

> distrust of anything that does not persistently call its own assumptions into question. As a result, analysis often proceeds through a "hide the ball" structure; rather than espouse stable terms or conclusions, the critic undermines his or her own claims at the very moment when they might appear to reach a stopping point. In its resistance to normative assertions, critique thus unfolds through a spiraling loop of self-complicating questions and reservations. The use of scare quotes, italicization, and qualifiers like so-called or self-styled can thus highlight the critic's awareness of the constructed and artificial nature of representation. (8-9)

This is not without implications to postmodernist literature at large, and just as much to postmodernist short fiction. The institution of perpetual questioning as a model of validation, justifying critique as a practice, not only contributed to the destabilisation of meaning, but rendered the epiphany at the close of the modernist short story incompatible with the existing structure of epistemological demonstration. The moment where character would be granted access to knowledge on the nature of being, and stable knowledge at that, clashed with the overarching framework of "critique," which established that conclusions were expected to be brought in for questioning for their content to remain insightful and the probing eye of its

reception to still find value in its probation. The impulse to self-critique could be easily linked to much of Wallace's metafiction, and offers a very patent opportunity to gaze at "Octet" as a manifesto of sorts, showcasing an awareness of the story's literary environment. Such an impulse, however, is also seemingly incompatible with the traditional epiphany insofar as its structure (one of entrance into new knowledge, of illumination, of nearly-divine apprehension of that which was hidden) is necessarily one that closes itself to external questioning. The subjective transcendence of the epiphanic moment places character beyond narrative interrogation; it leaves the self as portrayed in a place impenetrable to the narrating voice. This is so because any detailed examination of the epiphany's content would inevitably have it no longer function as an epiphany, emptying it of any and every mystical quality it could have previously been argued to possess.

Facing this conjuncture, Wallace's turn to the dark epiphany is of great significance, as it constitutes an attempt at circumventing the seeming incompatibility between the epiphanies of high modernism and the deployment of postmodernist technique. Wallace repeatedly introduces diegetic self-consciousness and self-critique prior to the epiphany itself, contaminates character with the injection of such impulses, and has the destabilisation in which they result become revelatory only to induce some form of psychic pain. Critique's prospective tendency to give itself to (over)analysis and to the perpetual deferral of certainties, to put it bluntly, informs the postmodernist short story, potentially explaining its favouring of a form of revelation through which knowing and understanding become sources of (among other things) pain (and, more specifically, pain before a truth that cannot be borne, a meaning that cannot be settled). These detrimental epiphanies are deployed in manifold, vastly diverse ways, sometimes taking the form of prophecies of self-destruction; revealing the unbearable nature of the hideousness within a given character; or, more generally, exposing a logic (flawed or otherwise) on some aspect of postmodern living which, upon being so interpreted, makes existence malicious, painful, or static, in a way previously unknown to the protagonist.

An instance of the epiphany being directed towards the illumination of postmodern stasis may be found at the close of Jeffrey Eugenides' "Complainers" (2017), a short story concerned with two women's negotiation of autonomy and space (both literal and proverbial) amidst the gerontophobia and medical malpractice of contemporary Western society. At the tale's close, the protagonist, suffering from dementia, stares at the whiteness of the snowy landscape outside her window and sees herself reflected in the uniformity of the canvas before her:

> Looking at the snow, blowing around beyond the window glass, Della has the feeling that she's peering into her own brain. Her thoughts are like that now, constantly circulating, moving from one place to another, just a whole big whiteout inside her head. Going out in the snow, disappearing into it, wouldn't be anything new to her. It would be like the outside meeting the inside. The two of them merging. Everything white. (33)

The evident parallel to the ending of James Joyce's renowned "The Dead" is here also deeply effective in shedding light on how the two stories were published a little over a century apart and under the influence of different literary movements. The epiphanic moment, in Eugenides, does not have the character understand some ubiquitous truth concerning human nature, but rather comes to symbolise the protagonist's acceptance of her own social erasure. The modernist universal becomes a materialist particular, and one directly concerned with the main character finding some manner of solace in her own (socially imposed) insignificance, and, most critically, doing so in lack of a way to fight or resist the conditions constraining her horizon of possibility. Even the last sentence in the story, coming shortly after the above

passage and providing some manner of redeeming counterpoint to her dreaming of giving herself to the overruling whiteness, comes from a place of deep uncertainty, at the sole moment when third-person omniscience is suspended: "Maybe she'd meet someone out there, maybe she wouldn't. A friend" (2017, 33).

When not with a form of stasis that precludes the epiphany from being diegetically brought to life, postmodern character is faced with a revelation on that very stasis; an epiphanic illumination that does not shed light on the particularities of a life worth being lived, nor guides her towards any form of fulfilment, but rather alludes to her insignificance, giving her access to a pseudo-revelation that works directly against the form of personal and intellectual growth that most modernist short fiction had linked to the epiphany itself. Even when the modernist epiphany finds its bleakest expressions, as it might argued to do in Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party," the finding of a dead body does not immobilise Laura, nor does it freeze her in the traumatic experience, but rather enhances her understanding of life and how it should be lived, with her being at a loss for words merely emphasising the transcendental and the unutterable in the lesson learned—an experience which she significantly describes as having been "simply marvellous" (1921/2002, 349).

The same could be argued of Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894), a short story which, albeit preceding Joyce's renowned typification of the epiphany, concerns itself with a moment of being along modernism's same lines, hinting at the short story's near-universal concern with saturated moments of inordinate subjective importance. In Chopin's story, a wife is struck by a "brief moment of illumination" upon being informed of the death of her husband; a moment which is overtly described as belonging to the realm of the mystical, of belief, and is characterised not by "a glance of reflection, but rather […] a suspension of intelligent thought." As the protagonist is overwhelmed by the illumination, she comes to understand her own emotions and behold her future unquestioningly, coming to terms with the history of her marriage and her part in (and beyond) it only moments before her own demise:

> She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstruous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial. She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.
>
> There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination. (1894)

Whereas the reader might be allowed to share in Mansfield's Laura's ecstasy in having understood something deeply significant, or to partake in Chopin's protagonist joy as she imagines a future for herself, the same is not true of Muriel Spark's "The Girl I Left Behind Me," first published in 2007, where the epiphanic closure is also triggered by the appearance of a dead body, albeit in dramatically different circumstances. Here the short story is again deployed as an anticipatory form, working towards a final revelation. The tale introduces a first-person narrator—a woman working at an office—who spends her day trying to shake off the impending feeling that she has forgotten something at work, which is consuming her entirely and submerging her in a depressive state. The main incident in the story has her return to the

office to ecstatically discover that it was her strangled body that she had left behind after her murder. The tone employed at the close of the ghost story is deeply ironic to the reception, with the unveiling of the horror of the plot being accompanied by the "great joy" of the protagonist, who claims her sadness to have left her at once upon reencountering her body and embracing it "like a lover" (2007/2018, 283).

The tale's impulse, thus, borders on the anti-modernist as a consequence of its rejection of the enhancing, the illuminating, and the subjectively human in the final discovery. Instead, it presents a type of epiphany that works simultaneously at the diegetic level (the ghost protagonist remembers what she had forgotten in a deeply transformative moment) and the extra-diegetic one (the reader finds out about the nature of the events of the plot at once, as the revelation re-connotes all previous information). This happens, further, to opposite affective responses: the delight of the character before the pseudo-epiphany contradicts the shock and the horror that it invites in its reception. It stands at the interstice between the epiphany of form and the detrimental epiphany, presenting an illumination that is structurally (by virtue of the narrative voice keeping the true nature of the plot secret until the end) made to function as such for reader and character, and judged injurious by only the former (albeit especially so as a consequence of the ghost protagonist's eccentric response to death; or, what is the same, it is the character's post-mortem neglection of death as tragedy that makes the detrimental epiphany all the more so to the reader).

Dark revelations of the above sort abound in postmodernist literature, however much their shape and nature may differ. They range from moments of insight where the self is revealed to be somewhat "lesser" than what it could be or had been in the past, to instants where despair and hopelessness become utterly evident, unavoidable, or, even, seem to literary subjects an inescapable condition of being. "[P]erspective was what I lacked," concludes the protagonist of Jennifer Egan's "Passing the Hat" as the story closes. "I've become a smaller version of myself, distilled from an earlier abundance I was not even aware of." The shift in how she thinks of herself and her history comes in a moment of insight, but its revelatory nature does not allude to any form of wise introspection, but rather comes from a position of what might even be read to be fear. This has her speak of the volatility of her own self; its ultimate exposure to the unexpected and its potential dangers. We may read: "I carry my wine to the window and wait, my face near the glass. The sky is clear and dark, the lights of the city trembling beneath it. As I watch them, I'm overwhelmed by a feeling I haven't had in years: a sweet, giddy sense that anything might happen to me" (2015, 110).

This sense of vulnerability as derived from the dark epiphany need not spring from observation (with Egan's window evoking once again Joyce's "The Dead"), but might also be derived from anxiety, as will often be the case in Wallace. Thomas Morris' "Clap Hands" closes on one such note, with the revelation moving away from the ordinary and becoming, rather, a gut feeling that the chaotic and wrong in the world will certainly come to obstruct the individuals as they move through life. As two of the story's characters engage in their last exchange, one of them admits to believing he is going mad: "[I]f I could just see that bathroom again, I might be able to make sense of things," he pleads, despite having been in the room only once in the most unmeaning of scenarios: pretending to be a plumber for some extra money and failing appallingly. "Otherwise, something bad is gonna happen to me. I can feel it." The protagonist remains quiet before him, ruminating a final observation; a pessimistic universal which she then accepts as a truth speaking of life itself: "opportunities rarely knock, chances for change are few and far between, but disaster […] always finds its way" (2015, 147).

2.9. David Foster Wallace and the Dark Epiphany

Perhaps the most significant of Wallace's approaches to the modernist revelation is what I have labelled here the dark epiphany, which stands at the heart of his middle period and prevails, too, in many of his later short stories. It does not only tie in with other writers' deployment of similarly uncanny or destabilising revelations, but becomes a central tool to approaching his fiction at large, and more specifically his concern with subjectivity. The dark epiphany appeals to revelations which are transcendental, mystified, and often conclusive in the manner of those of modernism, but which Wallace twists into some form of "moments of unbeing" where the unknown is approached by characters, revealed to them, and, because of their enhanced understanding of it, made harmful or destructive. Their perspective is twice removed from "healthy" understandings of the world: firstly, because of its being painful to them, and thus reductive of their well-being and potentialities; and secondly, because such an enhanced perspective recurrently sets them apart from the other, isolating them and cornering them into positions which often border on the solipsistic. This often institutes a paradox, provided how several of these detrimental revelations take the form, precisely, of revelations on an "other" or some tangential circumstance pertaining to how the subject relates to them (and thus would naturally be assumed to hold the power to bring the subject closer to their surroundings). In "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XI)," the epiphany unfolds as debilitating, with the narrating protagonist ending up exhausted by the sublimation of his empathy after dreaming of being blind. In "Another Pioneer," a whispered, ill-natured revelation aimed at a child's sense of self-worth awakens unprecedented doubt in him and ends up wreaking havoc in his village.

In "Several Birds" (1994), a short story featuring *Infinite Jest*'s character Tony Krause and published in *The New Yorker* when Wallace's magnum opus was in the making, the revelatory quality of the epiphany only becomes graspable through immense pain, and comes to fill a void resulting from the instability of the addict protagonist. The epiphany is here preceded by an overt, de-aestheticized, Proustian awakening to a new sensibility: Tony suffers from his epiphanically-charged seizure after sensing the odour of "Old Spice Stick Deodorant […], his late obstetrician father's brand," which brings forth "the Classic Scent of times past" and causes his body to begin to swell as he is described to be feeling "nothing, or rather Nothing, a pre-tornadic stillness of zero sensation, as if he were the very space he occupied" (1994). It is precisely in the moment when meaning is more utterly absent from his system that Tony Krause experiences his seizure, the characteristics of which very much draw on the vocabulary of transcendental and spiritual awakening that has come to characterise the literary epiphany. Being overwhelmed by memory and sensation as triggered by his personal history, Tony Krause is overcome with cognitive and affective data to the point of collapse:

> […] the pain hit seemed like the gathering of a kind of orgasm of the head. His head inflated and creaked as it stretched. Then the pain (seizures hurt, is what few civilians have occasion to know) was the sharp end of a hammer. There was a squeak and rush of release inside his skull and something shot from him into the air and hung there and sparkled. His father knelt beside him […]. He didn't feel one bit like a puppet. […] Then he saw his father, still green-gowned and rubber-gloved, leaning to read the headlines off the skin of a fish a newspaper had wrapped. That had never happened. […] Time wasn't passing so much as kneeling beside him […] (1994).

The epiphany not only unfolds as a patently painful experience; the result of the addict protagonist being forced out of the normal, stable conditions of existence that he would otherwise be kept safe by, but also as a direly alienating event in its illuminating extraordinariness: "seizures hurt, is what few civilians have occasion to know," writes Wallace. Irrespective of the irony in the remark, it succeeds in pointing at the subjective, untransferable nature of that to which the subject of the dark epiphany is being subjected. Even though most people do make a conceptual association between the notion of seizure and terrible pain, the great majority of Tony Krause's equals will go without having had "occasion to *know*" that this is so. The empiricism in this epistemology of the revelatory moment is central to the Wallacean dark epiphany, and crucial to interpret how it interrelates with the prevalent notions of solipsism and connection that have been widely examined in his oeuvre. It is precisely because of characters perceiving the knowledge resulting from these damaging epiphanies to be functionally impossible to share that these moments recurrently become ostracising. In other words: the epiphany is not only painful by means of its often-twisted content (or, in this case, due to its resulting from an intrinsically painful medical event), but also, and perhaps most critically, because it leaves the experiencing subject feeling alone in their knowledge. The moment of non-being is destructive, indeed, because it reveals an unbearable truth and condemns the enlightened subject to feeling that no such truth can ever be communicated in a way that will have her feel entirely *understood*.

This "perversion" of the modernist epiphany may be argued to be the most prevalent in Wallace, and to have been recurrently used to explore dangers of self-and other-knowledge. Quite remarkably, the prevalence of the dark epiphany is often made to accompany an over-rationalising impulse, with the idea of "knowing too much," of being awakened to some form of unbearably "excessive" dissection of what a lived subjectivity is like, proving incompatible not only with true connection, but with any manner of stable sense of one's own selfhood, too.

Instances of how the locus of the epiphanic is diegetically "contaminated" by destruction abound in Wallace's short fiction. In "Suicide as a Sort of Present," the third-person narrator details the mother protagonist's mental history and the self-controlling predispositions that had come to define her way of approaching the world. After merely four pages of examining her emotional history, the narrator concludes that her inner loathing, which she derives both from what she perceives to be her failure as a mother and from the unhappiness of her delinquent son, has become inexpressible, and that it is her child, "desperate, as are all children, to repay the perfect love we may expect only of mothers," who may—and so the story closes—"express[…] it all for her" (1999/2001, 244). Indeed, the seeming openness of the ending is only so if one disregards the title, which invites the interpretation that it is the boy's suicide—unspeakable both through societal accord and as a consequence of death's cathartic function as the ultimate silencer—that succeeds, finally, to return to the mother the ability to voice her pain. The promise of language; the direct inscription of the pain in the story's structure, remains beyond the reach of Wallace's writing. "Suicide" only points; only suggests; only invites the consideration of emotion, never renouncing its exquisite descriptiveness to navigate the crudity of lived feeling. The story, as does the greater part of Wallace's short fiction, points at the traumatic event, but refuses itself any consideration of the characters' mourning that moves beyond the baroqueness and insight that Wallace brings into the history of the pain. Further, the place of the would-be epiphany, suggested by the promise of language at the very end, unfolds as one that is tainted by the horror of the boy's suicide. The mystified revelation, should we argue for there to be one within the frame of the tale, springs from pain itself. Its transcendental quality, it follows, is that of bringing the unsayable back into utterability; of allowing the

psychological agony of the mother to break free from its bodily prison and affect the world beyond her and her way of relating with it.

The renowned "The Depressed Person" could, along these same lines, be interpreted as a tale exemplifying a subject's chase after the enlightening revelation of modernism, but whose (i.e. the subject's) own self-awareness prevents her success and leads her, rather, to the dark epiphany. As the story closes, the main character implores her friend to share with her the truth of her hideous existence, "begging for […] the judgement of certain trusted and very carefully selected members of her supportive community" (1999/2001, 57), so that the friend's opinion may somehow liberate her from the excruciating truth she has grasped following the death of her therapist. "[T]his shatteringly terrifying set of realizations,"[37] we may read, "instead of now awakening in her any feelings of compassion, empathy, and other-directed grief for the therapist as a person, had […] seemed, terrifyingly, merely to have brought up and created still more and further feelings in the depressed person about *herself*" (56-57). The result of the epiphany is appalling to the point of resisting description: "what words and terms might be applied to describe and assess such a solipsistic, self-consumed, endless emotional vacuum and sponge as she now appeared herself to be?" (58); its negative impact on the well-being of character so acute that she feels incapable of facing the foundations of the revelation itself: "How was she to decide and describe—even to herself, looking inward and facing herself—what all she'd so painfully learned said about her?" (58).

These forms of absence and/or corruption of the "traditional" epiphany, illuminating in the way a gateway towards some manner of mystified truth would, are not without relation to the short story's formal affordances. Such affordances are not merely a product of the short form itself, which they indeed are, but also conditioned and enhanced by a specific, construed capability resulting from the history of the genre and the prospects derived from it, with readerly expectation, patterns of discovery, and anticipation of an ending playing a central part in the tale's readerly configuration. Much like in its modernist counterparts, the lack of a revelation in much postmodernist short fiction—or the presence of a disturbing, ostracising one—works as a diegetic device as a consequence of the short story's definitional impact; it draws on the tale's format and its alleged ability to induce an affective response in its readers that is direr and more focused than longer forms would allow for. In the following section, I will draw on these characteristics in hopes to shed light on how David Foster Wallace's oeuvre as a short fiction writer deployed the epiphany to not only logically exploit the genre's affordances, but just as much to use these very affordances to speak of the late postmodern subject distinctively.

2.10. David Foster Wallace's Post-Epiphanies and the Crisis of Subjectivity in American Literature

To date, work on David Foster Wallace as a short story writer has not only been scarce, but also rarely concerned with how the genre's affordances came to play a part in his understanding of his craft and the examination of the themes and motifs most commonly linked to his fiction. Such a disregard of form appears especially critical if considered alongside other formal features of Wallacean baroque, with overbearing detail, syntactic recursion and paratext playing a core role in the conceptualisation of Wallace's position in literary history, both in the hands

[37] It is remarkable in this regard to note how the "set of realizations" that Wallace uses to describe the experience of the depressed person directly evokes the vocabulary of the epiphanic, with connections that multiply beyond the character's control and a new perspective on what was already present being acquired as a result of a pivotal, narrative moment.

of academics, and through his own self-awareness of the role he sought to play in taking American postmodernism a step beyond the commodified experimentalism of the mid-century. The tension between aesthetic maximalism and formal minimalism—being short fiction comparatively defined through, and pivotally concerned with what it silences, omits, leaves out—becomes a remarkably productive issue in Wallace, whose densifying techniques prevailed across forms. This made his short stories a body of work populated by the tension established between the intricate examination of superficial detail concerning human situations, and the critical absence of self and other as fully utterable units to the narrative focaliser of choice. All such matters are particularly interesting if read alongside Brendan Beirne's suggestion that Wallace's characters' mastery over language is inversely proportional to their ability to healthily negotiate their affective lives: "one of Wallace's favorite conceits […] posits an inverse relationship between verbal sophistication and emotional honesty" (2009, 22).

In fact, detail-oriented description and over-rationalising impulses toward "critique," when featured in conversation or internal monologue, recurrently hinder, rather than enhance, interpersonal understanding. Language thus becomes an obstacle, promising itself as the pathway towards emotional communion whilst simultaneously preventing that any such connection be truly achieved. The tales are recurrently informed by a substantial lack beneath the ornament; a suggested subject position beyond pronounceability whose haunting nature draws on the short form's propensity to elicit the projection of meaning onto its definitional quietness; and hence, too, by a specific need for (attentive) readerly complicity. Thus, a sense of expansive complexity and one of structural reduction coexist in the pieces.[38] Expressive containment, upon being juxtaposed to the above techniques, not only calls attention to Wallace's negotiation of authorial failure in approaching honesty and true connection in the communicative act, but makes such a lack all the more unbearable, encouraging the reader to contribute (through empathic projection) to assuage the grief of character, be it (e.g. said grief) the consequence of solipsism or of a near-epiphanic realisation concerning the intolerable hideousness of the self, that of the other, or the traumatising nature of intersubjective communion.

To the issues concerning the ontology of the short story itself, one must also add those informing the status of David Foster Wallace as a short story writer. This is particularly treacherous ground as a consequence of his novels' own "weakened" ontologies, with their definition as such being made precarious as a consequence of their interrelation with a variety of other genres. The essayistic quality of much of Wallace's fiction, for instance, has been outlined on multiple occasions. Further, the status of the novel itself as a monolithic piece following a certain structure, with plot and subplots playing specific roles to its orderly unfolding, stands imperilled in Wallace's longer works by virtue of his writings' relationship with fragmentation. All such fragments, coming together to shape his so-called "novels" in (most prominently) *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, are sufficiently connected to the work's general enterprise for them to not disrupt any such typologies, but are often just as independent, with the choice of reading certain passages on their own being merely an unconventional possibility, and one going against the social accord on how to approach a book labelled as a novel at that. Passages from *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* were, indeed, published and/or sent away for consideration independently as stories before the novels' coming together—one organically; the other, posthumously. Along these same lines, the entire problematic on genre

[38] "Reduction" should be here understood as referring to brevity, and not to the short story being in any way reductive and/or lacking in communicative potential as a consequence of its appeal to absence.

could be argued to respond to the tendency to dilute the boundary between the novel and the short story cycle in much late postmodernist fiction,[39] pointing toward the possibility of labelling them "composite novels" or "short story cycles" (Dunn and Morris, 1995). Further, it favours specific understandings and preconceptions regarding what his fiction sets out to achieve and the affordances at its disposal, as well as conditioning readerly interpretation by filtering it through widespread biases of what a novel is, as opposed to a short story, and how it articulates itself into existence.

Sara Ahmed's discussion on utility and use in her 2019 *What's the Use?* is of remarkable significance to the discussion on the short story as a genre in this context. "Use can be a way of being in touch with things," argues Ahmed. "We learn from past experiences about what to use for what. […] Use gives us a sense of things: how they are; what they are like […]. Use offers a way of telling stories about things" (21-22).[40] The short story as a genre, thus, not only serves as a framing device containing a tale intended, at least in some measure, to be consumed within the limitations imposed by "shortness." In its being deployed, be it in overtly metafictional ways or otherwise, the short story also shapes itself and tells a story about its potentialities, especially when informed by postmodernism's urgency to tense the epistemological boundaries of the themes that it is made to explore. The question hence becomes, in its plainest formulation: "What does postmodernism use the short story for?" Alternatively, it may be formulated, roughly, as follows: "How do the distinct potentialities of the short story as a genre and the uses to which it has been put intersect with postmodernism's probing conversation with (and, to some degree, also *against*) human subjectivity?" And, more specifically: "What affordances does the short story genre allow Wallace as a writer, his fiction's most prominent themes considered?"

The questions at hand are simple in their formulation, but manifold in their implications and inscrutable regarding the range of factors that come to play a part in the debate that shall ensue. One very apparent tension, already introduced at the beginning of this chapter, takes now centre stage: short fiction as a genre, defined in essence by its relationship with linguistic economy, necessarily has "less" to "say" about human character through presence than longer forms have the potential to do. Definitionally, there is a lot less "room" in a short story for subjectivity to be presented, explored, scrutinised, and in some measure, too, "expanded." This need not result in a dismissal of character in short fiction, and it very much does not; not even in the work of the writers who might be argued to stand at the heart of the canon of American postmodernism to this day. Thomas Pynchon, for instance, criticised his own approach to his renowned short story "Entropy" for not having started with its characters, a disregard which he condemns as "a procedural error beginning writers are always being cautioned against" (1984/1985, 12). In his view, it is precisely character that should stand at the heart of a good

[39] This, indeed, is not a synchronic occurrence, but has rather found itself magnified in contemporary literature. Examples from the early and mid-century abound, and one may even take the terminology backwards to redefine the generic taxonomy of earlier writings (Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* might come to mind immediately). James Joyce's *Dubliners*, to name but what might be the most poignant twentieth-century example, is often referred to as a "composite novel" or "short story cycle" due to the recurring themes, motifs, characters, setting, and as a consequence of the tales' interpreted function as commentary on Irish stasis when read as a unified whole; John Barth's pioneering *Lost in the Funhouse*, on its part, was labelled "a series" by its author for their being "meant to be received 'all at once' and as here arranged," which again betrays the stories' interconnectedness and the "unity of effect" that they pursued not only as individual forms but by virtue of their arrangement into a larger unit through conceptual cohesion.

[40] Ahmed's discussion on use pertains to "things" in the most physical sense of the word, and draws on examples that understand them as tangible elements of the world around us. Because of this, my take on her words necessarily incurs in the treatment of the short story genre as a "thing." The lexical discussion that would ensue falls beyond the scope of the present work. Nonetheless, I do regard the appropriation to be enlightening in context, this discrepancy noted.

short story, and hence why it should be character that the writer starts with, later incorporating and adapting all other elements (plot, setting, and their related subsets) to the story so that they may build on—and in so doing, enhance—the literary subject as presented before the reader.

Pynchon's take on the tension between the short story and subjectivity directly implies that character must remain at the heart of story-telling irrespective of the form it is to take, even when the roundedness of character cannot be explored (due to the format's definitional constraints) through sized narratives where their motives and actions could be devoted detailed consideration, outside perspectives, a paced build-up, or lengthy description. A new epistemology of character results from these inevitable shifts: the core of the literary subject no longer rests on the shoulders of description, nor does it depend on a gradual unfolding of a series of actions and decisions and their aftermath, but more often than not, comes into itself through the *moment*. It is not an epistemology of development, but one of event. Characters as subjects are often sketched and introduced early in the stories, but only come into any theorisable form of roundedness upon being faced with a single moment, a pivotal decision, a transformative event, or a lasting condition around which the story may revolve, irrespective of whether those moments and features be related to the epiphanic. Short story characters relate to the idea of human subjectivity in an iceberg-like fashion, recurrently hoping to present something radically true about what it means to live a life with such poignancy that the rest of their personality will be presumed or inferred—and thus, too, *believed in*.

This ties to postmodernism's anxieties toward the subject substantially. The subject had become inapprehensible, veiled by a series of understandings of qualia and subjective experience that had significantly destabilised the subject's potential to be made *present* and studied as an integrated unit. When called into the arts, the subject after modernism becomes polymorphous, mutable, incomplete. It is all too conscious of her subjectivity for its countless parts; all too aware of how much of it she can hope to convey. Because of this, the subject also finds herself in a tense, overt relationship with her newly reconceptualised *absences*. The short story's link to postmodernism's artistic approach to a subjectivity that is shattered, incomplete, or untransferable, becomes apparent. Absence is the motivating, definitional factor—albeit not necessarily to be privileged over the choice of what is indeed written—of the short story genre, policed by the coordinates given by what is uttered, but remaining an expanding, imagination-bound whole beyond it.

Postmodernism's approach to subjectivity, on the other hand, draws on these same features, finding in subjectivity a component to being that is irremediably bound to what context and history provide; but also, too, to what is not there, as well as to the self's perceived impossibilities. This is not to say, indeed, that postmodernism was the first movement in history to have brought to the fore questions on how qualia are individually bound, or subjective experience may set a person's reality apart from another's, but it did turn these matters into superstructural concerns informing the workings of society (and social movements), as well as the arts' relationship with themselves. Further, both the short tale's and postmodernism's are absences that depend on belief. Short stories might be argued to relate to postmodernism's rapport with selfhood precisely because of the epiphany's call to a doxastic involvement that functions directly as a consequence of the reader suspending disbelief to accompany the fictional subject. Taking the manifoldness of the postmodern subject to be left (contextually) indigestible, the necessary omissions of a short tale may be maintained to become the gateway into accepting a grand narrative of sorts, but one that is not overtly presented before the

individual, but instead relegated to a silence from which it may be retrieved without instilling in its reception the urge that it should be (for the sake of critical thinking) dismantled.

This tendency toward the absent can also be traced to cultural products that could not possibly be argued to "naturally" gravitate towards the implicit if compared to most modern short stories. The mammoth novels penned by many postmodernist and late postmodernist writers, albeit arguably different in their approach to the nature of human character, often remain unconcerned about "expansively" examining subjectivity; and further, often refuse to treat any such examination as an inward quest toward the core of "being." This is not to say that the (admittedly bulky, indisputably gendered) canon of postmodernist American novels, which have occupied an important position with regards to the conceptualisation of US literature in the past century, is not interested in building and rounding literary character, which it very much is. However, the vocabularies associated with all such developments often differ very greatly if compared to those of modernism. Postmodernist novels take the sense of a searching effort toward examining how the inner reality of a subject unfolds and turn this sense of subjective complexity into a reoccurring prompter of isolation; a structural, tonal, and thematic "brokenness" that goes beyond the fragmentariness and plurality of modernism and into an existential detachment all of its own.

In Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, the narrating voice comments on one of the characters: "Here is Bernard […]. He is composed; he is easy. He swings his bag as he walks. I will follow Bernard, because he is not afraid." Louis' description of Bernard is seemingly plain, but refuses superficiality in that it soon also features context, inviting an interpretation along the lines of the metacommentary that would plague much later fiction, with the shifting narrator following Bernard just as much as Louis will. This form of implicit metacommentary goes on in the passage: "We [Bernard and I] are drawn through the booking-office on to the platform as a stream draws twigs and straws round the piers of a bridge. […] London crumbles. London heaves and surges. There is a bristling of chimneys and towers. There a white church; there a mast among the spires. There a canal" (1931/1990, 17). The novel, albeit different in its goal, retains a traceable interest in depicting the reality of its time through some form of mimetic description. Character interrelates with the world in its shifting passion; there exists a definite interest throughout high modernism in exploring how the mutable environment of the city and the new social orders that inhabit it can affect and inform the subjectively construed reality of the individual. The artist here takes a deeply Baudelairean approach to her surroundings; she is a being of form, "[t]he picture of external life […] filling [… her] with awe and taking hold of [… her] brain." This, indeed, is seen throughout the high modernist movement, with passionate bursts of devoted attention shaping the conceptualisation of the artist's relationship with her metropolitan surroundings. It is a sensibility that is argued to be distinct for its being shaped by raw curiosity, inviting a "nervous shock which has its repercussion in the very core of the brain." The genius of the artist, concludes Baudelaire, "is nothing more nor less than *childhood recovered* at will—a childhood now equipped for self-expression" (1863/1992, 8; emphasis in original).

Here the contrast between the two canons is at its most evident. The ravaging curiosity of the modernist inner child is in much postmodernist fiction a poignant temper tantrum, just as equipped with reason, and just as able to allow for self-expression and insight, but not for those reasons any less of a pained attack on some perceived injustice, imbalance, be it within or without the subject. Thus, modernism finds itself opposed to the dispassionate, disappointed, condescending, or even mocking (however exalted its humour and poignancy might get)

outlook that pervades much postmodernist description. In the first section of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon plays with the twofold implications of things getting blurry to his character Slothrop: one grounded in his development as subject, resulting from monotony, detachment, or even trauma; and another superstructural, as though he were commenting on the literary shift that would, in all its subtlety, haunt artistic debate for the decades to come. We may read: "Once upon a time Slothrop cared. No kidding. […] A lot of stuff prior to 1944 is getting blurry now" (1973/2006, 24). This lack of care for the superstructural, this sense of emotional detachment before the environment of a time, becomes a recurrent feature of many postmodernist focalisers. This same sense of conformism and anhedonic acceptance reappears at the close of Salman Rushdie's pivotal *Midnight's Children*, with the closing paragraph alluding to the subject's insignificance under the unyielding weight of history, this time in the postcolonial context following India's independence. We may read:

> Yes, they [the so-many-too-many persons I have been] will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (1981/2006, 647)

The tone of detached understanding of the narrating midnight child, gazing into the inner logic of his lived reality with a probing eye, is ultimately one infused with an unmistakable sense of doom for the generations to come. This sense of doom, provided at a closing that is not entirely separate from the epiphanic for its favouring a feeling of prophetism, goes hand in hand with the dissolution of subjectivity into the collective: subjects are inscribed in history as a grand narrative, but not in a history of their own making; not in a history they may own ("my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his […]"). Thus, the subject is forced to give up control over her story, which becomes rather entangled with the frame stories that came before, the ones under which her existence becomes meaningful, and in whose constraining grip all hope for originality, for knowledge of one's narrative as a cohesive, apprehensible unit, is doomed. Even bleaker is the close of Jim Dodge's *Stone Junction*, in which, in diary-fashion, character Jennifer Raine states to have found identitarian freedom and a feeling of sanity upon giving herself to utter ignorance, no longer attempting to force sense into the interweaving chaos beyond—one to which she, as are all subjects, is intrinsically linked. "I don't know a fucking thing," she concludes. "That must mean I'm finally sane. And that's an excellent place to start going crazy again" (1990/2019, 515).

Taking this sense of subjective disorientation to be at the heart of much postmodernist prose sheds a new light on how the notion of the quest plays a special role within the genre. On the one hand, as it appears to be for Jennifer Raine, a given character's ultimate goal may be that of deconstructing their own adherence to a given structure. By allegedly "going crazy," losing all grip on how the world may be argued to be ruled by an inner logic, Jennifer finds in herself some manner of paradoxical sanity. Ignorance, as goes the hackneyed saying, becomes her bliss. The destruction of all imaginable sense of commitment to a narrative of reason, the retrieval of a pure "beginning" free of all too treaded lines of thought, becomes the symbolic end to the quest that character embarks in. Self-discovery results in an absence; characterisation,

it ensues, can become the process of leading character to her finding herself isolated, or unbound, from a structure ruling over thought, society, or her own existence.

This awareness of, and disconformity towards the superstructures ruling over the policing of freedom, however, need not be configured as an end in itself. Indeed, instances abound where characters' psyches are introduced and described through their relationship with these structural tensions at the beginning of the narratives that they are featured in. The self, thus, can just as often be ontologically weakened from the offset. This is the case in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, where Jack Gladney, the main character, speaks of himself in one of the opening chapters as having found in his devotion to the field of Hitler studies a reason to grow into an identity of his own. This is very clearly delineated as an identity that he does not "own," as a self that does not belong to him, but towards which he coyly advances by means of adherence, as though an impostor of some sort chasing after subjective stabilisation (the nature of his inscription, of course, contributing to the darkly humorous undertone informing the novel's academic satire). We may read:

> The chancellor warned against what he called my tendency to make a feeble presentation of self. He strongly suggested I gain weight. He wanted me to "grow out" into Hitler. […] If I could become more ugly, he seemed to be suggesting, it would help my career enormously.
>
> So Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward, tentative as I have sometimes been in the effort. The glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses were my own idea, an alternative to the bushy beard that my wife of the period didn't want me to grow. Babette said she liked the series J.A.K. and didn't think it was attention-getting in a cheap sense. To her it intimated dignity, significance and prestige.
>
> I am the false character that follows the name around. (1984/2011, 19)

The struggle to find and stabilise a sense of oneself becomes in much postmodernist literature a quest all its own. This is not merely a feature along the lines of those in coming-of-age narratives, nor built on the idea of coming to terms with one's identity or discovering something new about one's character by means of facing life's tribulations. The quest is inherently incomplete; or, even, one aimed at incompletion, posed as an undertaking entirely dissociated from identitarian success. There is no relieving sense of purpose awaiting Jack Gladney as he emerges from his struggle(s). Unlike what happens with Joyce's artist upon leaving Ireland at the close of *Portrait*, or with Mrs. Dalloway standing atop the stairs as a new outlook on her life is suggested after a momentous evening, Jack will not redefine his quest by the end of his story, nor will he find a meaningful set of values through which to reread into becoming one that feels truly his own.

The rejection of personality and individuality, understood as given units to the configuration of the self in society, has been traced to be at the core of both the modernist and postmodernist movements despite these differences. In fact, impersonality as a term is often used in studies on modernism to refer to this very shift, and modernism has been interpreted as a movement characterised by a rejection of some manner of chronic remnants of the romanticist outlook on selfhood. Commenting on Wyndham Lewis' renowned *Blast*, the short-lived periodical standing at the cultural heart of the Vorticist movement in Britain, Edward P. Comentale maintains modernism to be theorised in these early years as a rejection of this "vulgar sentimentality of the self, a widespread faith in the freedom and vitality of the individual." The subject, Comentale remarks on Lewis' views, faces "the impossibility of attaining true individuality in a cultural market that consistently appropriates all difference" (2004, 9). This letting go of personality is not without connection to the modernist artist's

outlook on her craft, with T.S. Eliot's celebrated "Tradition and the Individual Talent" boldly stating that "progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of the personality" and the subsequent favouring of a scientific (though not for it disimpassioned) outlook on life (1932/1982, 37). Though this presumption of an objective outlook on lived reality is patently lost in much postmodernist literature, Eliot's attitude toward personality as a notion already hints at what would become an ongoing disenchantment with the idea of the self. Eliot's perspective on impersonality has been criticised by modernist scholars on the grounds that it cannot possibly hope to relinquish the indoctrinating tone and authority position from which springs the very possibility to filter reality to produce a piece of fiction (see Levenson 1984), though arguments on an intrinsic incompatibility between impersonality and propagandising authority have not remained uncontested (see Rives 2012). Irrespective of Eliot's favouring of impersonality in what concerns the creative potentialities of the modernist artist, however, works dating from this period still showcase some manner of "faith" for the self as a concept, approachable through introspection.

This same tendency can be observed in US modernism, with short stories often culminating in moments of self-discovery; of coming to terms with one's sense of being; or of self-acceptance. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Ice Palace" (1920/1922), Sally Carroll finds in herself the resolution to make a decision that aligns with what she truly wants after an epiphanic "succession of moments that went fast and then slow, but seemed to be ultimately resolving themselves into a multitude of blurred rays converging toward a pale-yellow sun," which "break her new-found stillness" (1920/1922, 81). Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" (1964/1965), in its overtly religious tone, has its protagonist, Mrs. Ruby Turpin, be overwhelmed with "some abysmal life-giving knowledge" concerning the questionability of her character and her destined redemption, which she interprets to foretell her arrival at the Christian afterlife. Despite the epiphany not changing Mrs. Turpin within the diegetic framework of the story, it sheds light on who she is, allowing her to envision the consequences of the faults in her character so that she may comprehend, truly, in what terms she stands before the eyes of her God. Even in Hemingway, whose fictional aesthetics has been argued to be profusely anti-epiphanic by virtue of his active rejection of spirituality in favour of the "things of this world" (see Lamb 2010, 166), one may find situations where characters are torn from each other or themselves, but in which the bridging of those distances is systematically implied to be possible. The poignant metaphor at the heart of "Cat in the Rain" equates a woman's unfulfilled wishes in her marriage with an abandoned animal, but there is no ontological claim on the impossibility of arriving at the promised peace of the pet (which the woman in fact receives by the end of the story). This belief in the self as ascertainable can also be traced to "In Another Country." At its close, we find the story's town major struck by the pain of the recent loss of his wife. He stares out of a window, crying, oblivious to the photographs that adorn the walls behind him. The last sentence implies that his looking at the pictures might have changed his ability to navigate the experience, resulting in some form of self-amelioration, but will not "because he only looked out of the window" (1927/1987, 241). It is in the self as "discovered" that character can often find solace and feel at ease, and it is sometimes in order to have characters arrive at these states of inner correspondence that the modernist epiphany is functionally deployed. Its absence, as is the case in much of Hemingway's short fiction, can speak of stasis or immobilism. However, it does not prominently convey an ontological distrust of the self; a fear that it might not be able to change, to be understood, or to find harmony in the others around it.

It is here that the contrast between the literary self of modernism and that of postmodernism becomes most poignant. As the scientific aspirations of the modernist writer morphed into the

individual accounts of the postmodernists—often tainted by a sense of pessimism, detachment from reality and its structures, or even utter disconnection from those very structures—the correspondence between the positions of author and character also grew more blatant. The ogling writer does not aspire to objectively portray the world as observed; her aspiration is not to depict the world as observed by another, either. No mystified sense of impersonality from which a good account of reality as lived may be produced persists in the cultural imaginary. Impersonality, rather, is recurrently perceived to be a feature of postmodern being, and as such, permeates both author and character equally. Detachment, it follows, becomes not an artistic pretension aiming at objectivity, but rather a cultural universal to be projected into the text and its subjects so that they may better speak of the circumstances that allowed for their advent. Even when at their most impassioned, postmodernist characters' affordance to feel often goes hand in hand with their disconnection from a stable or coherent identity. Emotion sometimes goes hand in hand with the subject's being "out-of-her(-)self." In this movement, too, and as a consequence of the dislocation it entails, the postmodern self might be functionally argued to become some manner of heterotopia of illusion: a fictional space in language and thought that is seemingly circumvented by a clear frontier, alluding to what is believed to be present, but which instead exposes the reality of the conflict between "hereness" and "thereness" in what concerns subjectivity, and makes of the spatial self a fiction *of* and *in* these tensions.

Irrespective of my admittedly free appropriation of Foucauldian terminology, the prevalence of examinations of these very tensions in the literary explorations of the postmodern subject is readily apparent in the short fiction of David Foster Wallace. The anxious coming into awareness informing his dark epiphanies offers a remarkable instance of this. In the aforementioned "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XI)," the narrating protagonist gains access to the perspective of another through a dream, and in so doing is completely overwhelmed by the incapacitating realisation that his life is unlike this imaginary other's. The response that this coming into the self of another results in is visceral and affective in nature, with the character admitting being ready to start crying whenever the memory of the dream comes back to mind (1999/2001, 29). There is no absolute account of things; no mystified truth beyond the epiphanic. What we find, rather, is a self that is deeply *moved* (and "moved" here retains all its spatial implications; it refers to the subject's emotional life as deeply as it does to his standing in someone else's shoes) by the individual perception of the world of another, and one that was not merely apprehended subjectively, but through the intrinsically unverifiable nature of a dreamlike experience. Being "out of oneself" becomes the triggering condition to the epiphany, and the epiphany, in turn, is made responsible for the unbearable feeling that takes control of character.

A similar process can be observed in "Brief Interview #20," a deeply disturbing tale about the connection forged between a rape victim and her abuser as reported by a third-party. Here, it is the otherworldly nature of the victim's response that allows her rapist to "transcend" the confines of his perspective and enter what he imagines to be her subjectively mediated experience "in an almost terrifyingly vivid realistic way" (1999/2001, 254). As he does so, the victim is said to have reported to have felt "the plummeting terror and infantile conflict this feeling of connection aroused in his soul and stated again without drama or self-consciousness that she too could feel this terror, *not her own but his*" (264; emphasis mine). The myth of the feminine is observed by the narrating character and elevated onto a pedestal where it becomes all-powerful, towering over the nature of the events and allowing for their misinterpretation, but also, and perhaps most importantly, one whose divine nature allows for the character of the

rapist to be developed through a purely epiphanic experience, reconstructed and imagined in the third-person.

The twofold description of the woman's actions within the tale is deeply ingrained in patriarchal thought, drawing on a long dual tradition connoting the figure of woman as both the victim par excellence and the ultimate bringer of disaster. The girl in the story is textualized through these mythologies of the female, as she is described to be endlessly compassionate, her facial expression being "the most heartbreaking thing of all," but also as being inadvertently responsible for the agony her unimaginable empathy had inflicted upon her abuser (265-266). On a superficial level, the tale serves as an arguably distasteful, hideous description of an event forced into transcendence by the filtering male voice who narrates her story, built on the exacerbation of culturally gendered characteristics and propensities—most patently the socially widespread belief that empathy as a cognitive process is coded in the female, and that there is some innateness to a woman's ability to be compassionate in response to her empathetic understanding of the troubled other. This, indeed, takes here a nearly mystical quality, with the aforementioned ability to empathise being weaponised to such an extent that it is imagined to be able to prompt some form of role reversal; a shift in power dynamics by which the rapist is *moved* by emotion (into an empathetic response of his own, forcing him into the pain of his victim) and thus rendered unable to accomplish her dehumanisation: "[albeit unintentionally, she had used] acquiesce or compassion as a tactic to empty the rape of its violating force, […and] the focus and soul-connection themselves as tactics to cause in him conflict and pain and gibbering terror. […] Her focus and the connection were inflicting far more pain on the psychotic than he could ever have inflicted upon her. This was how she described the vision — a hole in the world" (264-266).

The hyperreal nature of the postmodern world, with a cultural panorama defined by saturation and a generalised distrust of metanarratives, is projected into Wallace's work as a near-universal incapacity to infiltrate "the other" as a grand narrative and successfully interpret the nature of their existence. Upon being unable to do this, the narrating subject often finds herself at a loss, struggling to preserve a sense of self without the anchorage of the other-self. However, when the opposite happens and absolute empathy is attained (which results in the subject being incapable of not *believing* in the narrative of the other), characters do not fare much better, as we have seen. Transcendental empathy plays an important part in much of Wallace's short fiction, but it tends not to provide any solace to the characters to whom it allows an enhanced understanding of their surroundings. Instead, it opens their experience to something utterly traumatic; something that corrupts their very sense of subjectivity, as though blind belief in the other as metanarrative equalled an even more painful form of disassociation from them than finding oneself deprived of all faith in the possibility for connection and mutual understanding.

Paradoxically, the most local of all narratives, that informing the individual and the construction of their subjectivity, becomes the mystified master narrative afflicting postmodern character in these stories. It is in the narrative of the other self, universalised and feared for its unknowability, that the subject encounters a truth too absolute for her own self to remain stable. The contrast between the metanarrative and the local narrative becomes here productive in a post-Foucauldian sense, leaving behind the dichotomy between one and the other as an absolute hierarchy ruling over the flows of power. The clash of the two, and the bleak consequences to the self as an object of belief that ensue, force that the dualism be questioned altogether. "[T]he picture itself serves as a warning," maintains Kerwin Lee Klein in his discussion on the legacy

of the notion of "master narrative," "for without contextual or intertextual points of reference, the image is either hopelessly plastic or impossibly opaque" (1995, 297). The interesting thing about Wallace's treatment of empathy as a connection between selves lies precisely in the exploitation of this plasticity: the points of reference that a given character might take to be the foundations of her thought (the epistemological certainty that self and other exist, and that they are ruled by similar paradigms and affected by the world in comparable ways) become the objects of scrutiny of the reflective (though not for this less impassioned) subject. The history of the other and the history of the self as distinct narratives are thus interweaved; any form of belief toward them is questioned, and the rulership of one over the other becomes blurry. Upon being transcended, the narrative of the other and their experiences and affectations infiltrates a self that had already been questioned in most of the stories, and in so doing overwhelms it with both a logical and an emotional conundrum: "Who am I before you, and how can my feeling be truly my own now that I have epiphanically apprehended what they are in your eyes?"

This places the dark epiphany, which I have argued to be central to Wallace's short story production, at the meeting point where the author's take on the postmodernist revelation encounters one of his literature's central themes: empathy. These characters' revelations are not bleak or damaging by virtue of their denying themselves of empathic knowledge in any form, but often show the opposite tendency: they result from an inferential, vicarious process that is excessive, misdirected, over-rationalising, uncontrollable. The epiphany is not isolating or harmful because it does not speak of empathy; it afflicts the subject, rather, precisely for its speaking of a *failed* empathic approach to otherhood. This failure, further, recurrently unfolds as a failure to bring the revealed datum on otherhood closer to the self, to have the subject relate to that knowledge healthily, or to tolerate its content. It is *not* a failure to reveal, to speak of other-experience inferentially. It remains, thus, illuminating, albeit the subject's falling prey to varying forms of twistedness upon being enlightened.

Wallace's perversions of empathy may be argued to take here a diagnostic character, and hence to stand at the heart of his literary ambition to combat the cynicism and disillusionment that he associated with the reigning cultural panorama at the turn of the century. If so interpreted, his turn to the darkly epiphanic might be maintained to function as a prompter of awareness through excess: a veiled complaint that the late postmodern subject may find herself trapped against her will, struggling to abandon an anhedonic cage in whose superstructural making she did not take part. Upon being "affected," she stands either pained or alone; ostracised by the cultural maelstrom or by her resistance, but isolated regardless. She cannot feel unknowingly. Knowledge, however, stands behind the bars of postmodern epistemology's propensity to a rationalism that, because of its subjectivist turn, concerns itself with individual experience whilst remaining an intellectualising endeavour. Wallace's subject is *affected* only momentarily; she is moved over the course of an instant before giving herself to questioning. The epiphany becomes a window into a (re)discovered reality, but, as we shall see, remains a window only, unable to redefine the codes through which she consumes what awaits beyond. On the other side of the revelation, the subject's mode of relation with the revealed becomes sheer inquiry; a compulsive need to hyper-analyse experience into exhaustion. Empathy, in short, turns out to be not only the bringer of her epiphany, but her trap.

3. THE LITERARY SELF MEETS LITERARY SHORTNESS: SOME NOTES ON THE DISSENSION BETWEEN AFFECTS AND SOLIPSISM IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S "PHILOSOPHY AND THE MIRROR OF NATURE"

C said 'Hold on to your hat.' He poked the assistant's shoulder. 'Tell him.'

'It's pharm-grade Sunshine,' the assistant said, tapping for a good vein.

'Hold on to your heart,' C said, watching the needle go in.

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 979.

What fallen reader dare back away from ironic watching?

David P. Rando, "David Foster Wallace and Lovelessness," 592.

Forms of power and meaning become circuits lodged in singularities. They have to be followed through disparate scenes. They can gather themselves into what we think of as stories and selves. But they can also re-main, or become again, dispersed, floating, recombining […].

Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 6.

Work on affect and emotion has long attributed sharply variable meaning to the two terms, whose interchangeability is often questioned in the literature. "In everyday usage," Jonathan Flatley reminds us, "[…] there are significant connotative differences […:] Where *emotion* suggests something that happens inside and tends toward outward expression, *affect* indicates something relational and transformative. One *has* emotions; one is affected *by* people or things" (2008, 12; emphases in original). Whereas one places expression at the centre, the other prioritises, however inadvertently, the relational quality of the experience, bringing the source of the affective experience into the equation. The favouring of affect over emotion in much work in contemporary cultural studies, thus, could be maintained to vaguely correspond with a

growing interest (a countercultural interest, even) in the mechanisms by which human beings relate to one another which escape the intellectualising impulse and focus on language and cognition which could be maintained to define much twentieth-century academic work.

In his pivotal *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), Brian Massumi establishes a distinction between affect and emotion by which the two are assigned to orders altogether separate. Whereas affect refers to intensity, alluding to a movement springing from within and that exists in dissociation from societal structures, language, and communal consensus, emotion appears as the result of qualifying affective intensity as a subjective unit filtered through semantic, semiotic, and narrative (or, even, literary) convention (27-28). Thus, affect would allude to sensation and feeling at their rawest, describing the "movement" within, the feeling of *being moved* at its most literal, before the displacement can be linguistically mediated and coded into emotional signification.

It is apparent, however, that there exists an overlapping of affective and emotional significance in most of the experiences under scrutiny, since emotion is hardly ever undirected—that is to say, it is often made sense of through narrative, and thus explained in relational (or, affective) terms. This tendency is, indeed, particularly prominent in the case of literary fictions, where, one might argue, the explanation itself becomes the sole locus with the ability to contain lived feeling. Due to this terminological coincidence, the terms will (as happens often in the literature on emotion) be used interchangeably for the purpose of analysis, lest there be a conspicuous interest in providing an account of how the history of disparity concerning the words' etymologies plays a part in my study of David Foster Wallace's fiction.

The impersonality of affect, when opposed to the subjective nature of emotion, also implies that it cannot be "simply 'owned' by an individual in the way we often consider emotions 'ours'." Further, by virtue of its unfolding as "'impersonal' or 'autonomous,' more a *relational force* between people, things, and events," affect does not favour the commodification by which emotion is often linked to (at least a risk of) perceived solipsism (Clare 2022, 2; emphasis in original). In other words: because affect is not private nor actively conscious at the same level nor in the same ways emotion can be, it cannot be rationally accused of being an informing force or contributing factor in the discourse around the self's ostracization from complete understanding (by the other).

The fear of emotional solipsism running across Wallace's fiction and non-fiction is not to be dismissed on the basis that his literature could demonstrably prompt affective responses in readers. His work could indeed be argued to be able to trigger moments of community togetherness where affects are shared by individuals prior to their definition and social filtering. Wallace's fear, however, is not actively dismissive of this distinction as later conceptualised by Massumi, but rather draws on a series of issues that stand at the heart of fiction reading as a practice. One of them being, quite prominently, that reading happens alone. When appealing to the "Olympian headquarters" from which readers perceive literary authors to be writing in "Octet," Wallace's veiled complaint is inevitably twofold: it is not merely intended to expose that "you" (the reader) perceive "me" (the author) for what I am not, and do so due to a pre-existing misconception concerning my craft, but just as much that "you" shall never find a remedy to any such misconceptions that will ever consist in us sharing the experience of being moved "together" in "here" (here being, indeed, the non-Olympian "headquarters" from where writing actually takes place). Unless specifically gathered for the purpose (and even then, only to some potentially-mediocre degree) affective intersubjectivity—the pre-emotional response of bodies reacting together to a same stimulus—is not as immediate a consequence of the act

of reading a novel as it might be of the act of attending a screening of a film or a multitudinous match at a soccer stadium. It is only *a posteriori*, and only via the narrative (self-)mediation of the emotional lives of readers, that some level of interpersonal connection at the level of the readership might be argued to occur.

On the other hand, and perhaps most importantly, stands the problem that the author cannot "provide" her affects via literature, but rather only "describe" them from the "culturalized" standpoint of emotion. Literary writing, be it by alluding to the author's experience or by drawing on the imagination, is always poietically retrospective. It creates its object from a mediated "after" where the unmediated "moving" is done and coded. It is only in the coding, further, that affect and emotion both become potential objects of literature (and in so doing, become functionally emotional, following Massumi's typology). Language as a social phenomenon both favours that culturally coded emotions be featured in a literary text and prevents affects from doing the same. While affects can become a referenced part of this type of text through their description, they cannot be *reproduced* in it. Their study contributes to the essayistic and the exploratory in a given narrative, but never to the literary dimension of such narratives.

Thus, Massumi's foundational distinction is fundamentally fruitless to a literary author facing fear of solipsism. It offers no escape from the suspicion that her emotions, which she "owns" and pertain to her "private," "enclosed" experience of the world, might be functionally untransferable (nobody can claim any knowledge on how "I" really feel). Simply put, there exists no affective component to a literary text that can be immaterially and intersubjectively shared as an embodied intensity by both an author and her reception. Wallace's open fear of being misunderstood, alone, and fundamentally isolated from the communal ideal at the other end of the literary act—which sometimes appears as a direct projection, voiced by his fictional insertees, and sometimes informs his other characters—could perhaps be disproved and dismissed at the extraliterary level drawing on affect theory's conceptualisation of affect as intersubjective and impersonal, but stands in more treacherous grounds when applied to the deferred communicative act that is reading specifically.

Solipsism is not merely a philosophical possibility to these texts, a human anxiety to be exploited by 1990s fiction so that it may distinguish itself from a generation that had seemingly embraced the inevitability of stasis. It had rather become an active threat to any artistic endeavour; the immediate offspring of the overfed cultural anhedonia that permeated American literary postmodernism in and around the 1980s. Solipsism and disaffection had grown to be key to a stance that was to be immediately presumed by any reader acquainted with her literary and cultural environment. They had to be actively fought for literary experimentalism to become dissociable from it. "From the standpoint of considering affect, emotion, and feeling," writes Clare on the cultural tension that informed Wallace's attempt at a transition, "we can see that the post-1980s fiction writer cannot take authentic emotions and feeling things for granted, as somehow 'the same' or untainted as they appeared to be in the past" (2022, 6). For a sincere (naïve, even) approach to emotion to re-enter the textual space and prompt affects anew, the elephant in the room (prey to solipsism and disaffection, its reality inaccessible to the concerned American beholder) had to be addressed.

Wallace's addressing of the elephant is manifold. On a first more general level, we may find remarks on solipsism and disaffection running through his non-fiction, as well as through his declarations about what "good literature" should aim to achieve. Quite prominently, he believed that fiction writers in the 1990s should actively engage with, and thus challenge, the

climate of generalised disaffection that he argued to be imbricated in American culture. In this context, fiction's mimetic capacities as descriptive of lived reality risk crossing the line separating its ability for diagnosis and communal introspection from a loop of perpetrating catastrophism. To play its part in helping the subject break free from this call to disaffection, literature must become aware not only of itself, but just as much of its own potential to bridge the distance between the culturally saturated, self-absorbed self, and the culturally saturated, equally self-absorbed other.

Wallace praised David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988/2015) for its ability to remind us of "fiction's limitless possibilities for reach and grasp, for making heads throb heartlike, and for sanctifying the marriages of cerebration & emotion, abstraction & lived life, transcendent truth-seeking & daily schlepping" (Wallace 2012, 74). The novel's aim has this diagnostic tendency at its very core, being set in a world where Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* has become the governing principle. Its protagonist's cry for belonging permeates the very first pages: "Was it really some other person I was so anxious to discover, when I did all of that looking, or was it only my own solitude that I could not abide?" (1988/2015, 31). The sentence reappears as the fictional-philosophical exercise progresses (134), bringing the reader's attention to the recurrence of her need; the impossibility for progress within the Wittgensteinian framework as diegetically established.

Further, her exercise unfolds as a quest not necessarily for connection with another self, but for connection with a self at all, even if it has to be her own subjectivity, prey to an unnatural sense of isolation resulting from her disbelief of the generalised assumption that there are others like me experiencing inner lives much like my own. In his essay on the novel, Wallace speaks of the character's written search for a recipient of her words as "a function of *need*, not art" (2012, 81; emphasis mine), appealing to a loneliness that is "metaphysically ultimate [, belonging to a …] world [that] is 'empty' of all but data that are like holes in a reticular pattern, both defined & imprisoned by the epistemic strands she knows only she can weave" (2012, 90). Information, knowledge, and overbearing detail are, once more, an obstacle standing in the way of intersubjective communion; they become part of the generalised "too much information" to which Wallace's characters also turn as they are made to withstand their dark epiphanies.[41] Intersubjective communion, on its part, is regarded to be a universal, human necessity, and not merely a theme for fiction to exploit.

This sense of epistemological loneliness, understood as supra-artistic, is no stranger of Wallace's short fiction. In his texts, characters are not systematically isolated through their suspicion that others may not exist, but find other-knowledge essentially ostracising. The horror is not merely the absence of an other like oneself, but just as much the other's presence as unintelligible, hurtful to the individual, or even ontologically evil. There is an "other-subject" onto which to project one's experience; there exists an attestable being to reach for, but upon doing so Wallace's characters repeatedly fail to give themselves the solace of a sameness regained. The frailty of the self-other connection is inversely proportional to the distress caused within the self when any such connection is formally attained. In fact, upon encountering the other or trying to reach for its lived reality, Wallace's characters are often faced with either their own inability to disentangle their own linguistic skills into coherence, or an inexplicable fear

[41] This tendency to reject the downpour of information on the other that characterises many of Wallace's dark epiphanies interestingly echoes the death by "information poisoning" to which Richard Powers would put one of his short story characters (haunted by the abundance of superfluous data resulting from a dystopian spread of social media technologies) about a year after Wallace's own demise (2009/2011, 310).

that the consequences of their reaching out will result in the traumatising aftermath that I have argued to characterise the dark epiphany.

This propensity to feature disaffected or solipsism-ridden characters has been interpreted to exemplify "the horror of lovelessness" as a recurrent theme in Wallace's writing, featuring prominently at the heart of Joyce's closing epiphany in "The Dead," and, albeit in a more self-aware manner, just as critically in Wallace's "Brief Interview #20" or "Good Old Neon" (Rando 2013, 580). This "epiphany of lovelessness" would, following David P. Rando, be similarly characterised by a conflation of irony and affect by which "irony […] itself [… becomes] a response to the emotion of fear, a kind of affect, while ironic or loveless structures emerge as the condition for affect in the first instance" (2013, 590). The emotional distress of Wallace's characters is channelled through ironic detachment, but the detachment itself does not preclude the existence of affect, but becomes, instead, a poignant diagnosis of the affective life underneath. "Wallace's fictional irony," concludes Rando, "is […] a form of lovelessness that cannot be made to love" (2013, 591). When at their most ironic, one might argue, his characters allow the reader to gaze into their emotional turmoil the most. When at their most troubled, conversely, their tendency to ironic deflection becomes more common. Emotional solipsism and the possibility for disconnection cause these characters to fear their own isolating tendencies beyond any traceable form of textual remedy.

The self-aware, ironic characters universalised in Rando's analysis are indeed prevalent in Wallace, and their irony could well be maintained to speak of the unbearable fear within. They are not, however, the only type of character to be featured in Wallace's fictions, not even in those thematically characterised by an overt preoccupation with affective disconnection. An interesting instance in this regard takes place in "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,"[42] a short story told from the first-person perspective of a hyper-analytical boy recounting a facial surgery incident resulting in his mother being disfigured into looking "*insanely frightened* at all times […, her face] a *chronic mask of insane terror*" (2004/2005, 182; emphasis in original). The story, told in a single paragraph spanning several pages, showcases characterial alienation through two distinct techniques, one of them being quite recurrent in Wallace, whereas the other one is very unusual. On the one hand, we find the aforementioned struggle to recover emotional truth from the density of postmodernist prose and recherché linguistic expression; on the other, a depiction of a completely unbothered self that exhibits no remarkable anxiety as he provides a detailed description of his circumstances.

The first of these two issues is readily apparent in the story. The unnamed narrating protagonist goes over his and his mother's alienation from the social world around them in scrupulous detail, deploying italic typescript at seemingly arbitrary moments, as well as introducing his use of Latinisms and reported speech. His use of language is "excessive," attesting to Wallace's tendency to densification even when the short story genre works at its briefest. It might even be maintained to be uncanny both in its challenge of convention (his apparent interior monologue does not align with the register one might expect to find in such circumstances) and in its exacerbation of affective detachment (the impeccable descriptiveness and unmoved stance of his account contrast with the disagreeability of the situation itself).

His overly analytical approach to the horrible situation his family are faced with manifests itself in both form and content. Both his language and what it conveys appear detached from

[42] The story was originally published under the title "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (VIII)" in the first volume of McSweeney's Quarterly Concern (Autumn 1998). The edition I will be referring to in what follows is the slightly edited, renamed version found in Wallace's last short story collection *Oblivion*.

the nature of the events to a degree of near absurdity. His linguistic inadequacy is readily apparent, with what the readers are invited to receive as interior monologue being elevated in register to a nearly implausible degree. He refers to the subspecies of widow spiders featured in the story as "the phylum *arthropodae*," speaks of his mother's relationship with the animals in terms of "*ignorantia facti excusat*," and describes the message underlying his expression as he is approached by other bus passengers to convey a bemused, conveniently unpunctuated: "*Why who knows for certain why anyone wears the face they do my good fellow let us not leap to conclusions based on incomplete data!*" (2004/2005, 185; 188; emphases in original).

The content of his reflections is hardly dissimilar. His narration is devoid of affect to absurdity, evincing an absolute disconnection from the nature of the situation before him. When musing on how strangers would stare at his mother as they board the bus, or even interact with them out of concern, the narrative voice merely maintains that "[n]othing in sources sufficiently explains why people perform the scan of faces when they first board though anecdotally it appears to be a defensive reflex species-wide" (2004/2005, 183). Instead of displaying some degree of distress upon being faced with the social ostracization and outright rejection of her mom after the surgery (and, consequently, also of himself), he confines his every observation to the realm of meticulous analysis. The same could be argued to happen as the narrator engages in self-reflection, with the descriptions provided being entirely devoid of all imaginable self-consciousness: "Physically I am a large specimen and have distinctive coloration, to look at me you would never know I have such a studious bend." His interpretation of external input showcases the same tendency to hyper-rationality, with him asserting that "[s]tandardized testing has confirmed that I have both a studious bend and outstanding retention in study" (2004/2005, 183-184). His approach to his mother's description does not fare much better, as he labels her "decent-hearted if vain, [a] bitter and timid female specimen […] who is not a colossus of the roads of the human intellect" (2004/2005, 185).

"Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" thus provides an interesting exception to what might be argued to be a near universal in David Foster Wallace's production. His fiction recurrently engages with the description of characters whose emotional lives are overridden by anxiety, led into epiphanic perversions by virtue of their awareness of themselves and others, and hence they exhibit what might be defined as "emotional misdirection:" upon failing to accept and make sense of the conclusions they arrive at through rationality, introspection, and the like, they find themselves unable to provide their emotional lives with a functional scapegoat, and are thus trapped into various forms of social estrangement, suspicion, or even trauma. This story, on the other hand, is affectively challenging by means of its refusal to channel any affect whatsoever. Cultural disaffection is not targeted by means of resistance, but through what might even be defined as a rigidly mimetic exercise: the flaws of postmodernism are not under attack through an overt attempt at connection, however twisted, but through the presentation of human disconnection at its rawest. Wallace introduces a boy who has fallen prey to academicism and analysis to such a degree that he withdraws from any form of gesturing toward the emotional realities around him. The withdrawal itself becomes, at once, the source of his immunity to the psychic pain it would be reasonable to expect from him, and a contributing factor in his remaining isolated from his surroundings as his mother's objectified "sematic accessory or escort" (2004/2005, 189). He embodies, thus, what Marshall Boswell argued to be a prevalent characteristic of Wallace's late short fiction in *Oblivion*: an "unrelenting pessimism" that "locates the reader in the protagonist's word-drunk interior and traps her there for the story's grueling duration" (2020, 152).

This character's is a self entirely detached from any form of affective relationship with emotional awareness. What he knows and discovers about himself is neither accepted nor rejected, neither embraced nor repudiated, but merely scrutinised; facts are presented for the reader to study, but not to connect with. Wallace's intentions in this regard might be argued to be ambiguous, especially if we take into consideration the story's being published in his late period. His presenting a character devoid of affective life could be interpreted to pursue an eye-opening effect through a different means than the one examined in previous chapters, seeking the retrieval of a readerly response characterised by a parallel analysis leading to the rejection of the boy's disaffected stance. On the other hand, it could also be assumed to encapsulate a renovated display of his own failure as a writer, mocking his tendency to deploy densifying techniques to the point of linguistic oversaturation, and to recurrently introduce characters whose senses of identity are so entrapped in their own heads that any form of affectation is condemned from the offset.

Due to affect requiring an object triggering the "movement" in the self, the protagonist of "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" fails to be affected and to portray feeling in the text due to his inability to genuinely submit his lived subjectivity to the influence of his surroundings. He does not "give" himself so that a plethora of others may "move" him; instead, he takes in what is given to him by means of sensory apperception, seeking to amass an inventory of data on his circumstances through which to relate to the events described. The relational connection sustaining affect is thus sabotaged. His self is saturated beyond the possibility of external influence. The protagonist has seemingly abandoned any form of concern for the situation; he stands unbothered before the displacement of affective signification.

In this manner, the text functions more as a philosophical exercise than as an honest reflection on its main character; it is not aimed at presenting a facet of late postmodern living that might speak of the reader's lived experience (though it may, indeed, serve as commentary on the superstructural logics ruling over said experience). The protagonist's internal monologue succeeds in posing a question to the reader, but no particularity concerning the nature of being is functionally reflected in the text (for, in order to articulate their senses of self functionally, individuals are inescapably connected to their surroundings through affect, and this character is not). The challenge is here directed at the very foundations of lived humanity. Scholarship on solipsism has recurrently brought attention to how "[e]ach of us has beliefs about a world that allegedly exists outside our own minds [… and t]he problem is to justify these nonsolipsistic convictions" (Sober 1995, 547). Upon presenting a text that is threatened by the possibility for emotional solipsism without allowing that any such convictions play a part in characterisation, the resulting literary self is articulated in a way that feels uncannily "inhuman."

Wallace's protagonist does not challenge the possibility that outside reality be reified, and consequently believed in, nor does he fear the possibility that he might be in some manner unlike his surrounding others. His acceptance of his exceptionality is implicit and impersonal: he simply does not emotionally *react* to, and is thus perceived not to *care* for, *anything*. The absence of significant connection is vaguely dismissed throughout the story, but the dismissal is made not to hide any concern whatsoever. We may read, for instance, his brief allusion to his failed attempts at a love life: "Respecting mating I have been on dates but there was insufficient chemistry" (2004/2005, 189). He weaves a reality where linguistic and social isolation are not a concern of selfhood, threatening its stability, but the radical foundation of individuality altogether. Solipsism is not a source of fear, nor a possibility to be submitted to scrutiny, due

to its affective *irrelevance*. Put bluntly: the story's central character appears not to have the capacity to care about whether others hold the same claim to selfhood he does. His analytical compulsions, together with his tendency to thorough academic dissection, immunise him to the array of concerns that recurrently haunt Wallace's characters into the traumatic realisations whose prevalence I have argued for in previous chapters.

An interesting parallel to the protagonist of "Philosophy" is, of course, *Infinite Jest*'s Hal Incadenza, whose academic excellence and verbiage play a similarly crucial part in the depiction of his anhedonia. I would like to contend, however, that the short story exponentiates the horror of disaffection by means of its exclusivity: by being concerned with the character's internal monologue only, and doing so without prominent ironic undertones and with no other character arcs to speak of,[43] the protagonist's detachment from emotional life becomes formally absolute. Further, there is no aesthetic enterprise serving as the foundation to the protagonist's anhedonia. Whereas in *Infinite Jest* we may find an overt statement on the nature of Hal's depersonalising tendencies (what Wallace describes as "a […] radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content" (1996/2016, 693), which are accompanied by the meta-reflection that "the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool," and thus lead to a near universal wish to embody disaffection driven by what Wallace labels "peer-*hunger*" (1996/2016, 694; emphasis in original).

This, indeed, sets the two characters apart on yet another basis: whereas the protagonist of "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" remains narratively unexamined on the basis of his analytical and undisturbed stance throughout, musing on his surroundings in a state of utter disconnection, the narrative voice in *Infinite Jest* brings attention to how Hal feels "lonely […] to the limit," and does so, precisely, due to the self-obsessive tendencies that may be argued to bring the two characters together: "he despises what it is he's really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask" (1996/2016, 694-695). This contributes yet another layer to the conditions of reception being dissimilar, with the nature of Hal Incadenza's characterial self-saturation being dissected before the reader by the third-person narrative voice.

Hal's breakdown at the beginning of the novel, placed at the forefront despite its being the last event in chronological terms, puts an end to his suffering; places a conclusion before the reader which implicitly condemns (however imprecise this condemnation may be argued to be in terms of pinpointing an expected interpretation) the anhedonia and self-isolation at the heart of his character. His affective disenchantment, depersonalised approach to those around him, and academic outlook on life are made to structurally invite the passing of readerly judgement through the character's fall into traceable dysfunctionality. The hints provided by the novel on why Hal's communication breakdown might have taken place are numerous (see Andersen 2014, 15) and condition the readers' interpretation by encouraging one to favour the adoption of an empathic stance towards Hal for his upbringing, and the rejection of the characterial flaws he ended up developing as a consequence.

"Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature," on its part, provides no meta-explanation of its strategy, offers no guidance on how to "receive" the affectlessness "given" by the text. The short story leaves all such matters unexplained; stands isolated, devoid of all imaginable maps

[43] It is noteworthy, in this regard, how some of the sub-narratives within *Infinite Jest* do allude very directly to the possibility for empathy and emotional communion, and thus come to indirectly inform the nature of the readers' engagement upon facing Hal's relationship with anhedonia and emotional solipsism.

through which it might assist its reception. Thus, the anxiety of disconnection with which Wallace recurrently injected his texts is here entirely absent. The character showcases no ironic detachment from his own self as he perceives it; there exists no tension on which to found a claim for the presence of a "narcissism at the basis of selfhood" in Wallace's protagonist, no desire for "transformation" through the "*continual* mitigation" of a tendency to self-centredness (Woodend 2019, 472; emphasis in original).

One might feel tempted to argue the story to be incongruent with Wallace's literary production in these regards, or even to challenge his approach to subjectivity altogether. It is true that it offers no attempt to gesture toward otherness, no crisis of selfhood as experienced by an individual who exhibits a pained self-awareness of the conditions sustaining its collapse. It similarly denies itself the questioning of connection; it blatantly ignores all solipsistic suspicion, be it emotional or otherwise. Its internal monologue, written in the first-person, paradoxically shows Wallace's writing of character at its least humane. In this regard, the short story could just as much be maintained to stand not merely as an admission of authorial failure, nor as a surrendering of the very intentionality beneath Wallace's literary enterprise, but as a formal rejection of all responsibility concerning the guiding of readerly attention. Aloneness and ostracization are not embraced, I contend, but rather *exposed*.

"Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" functions, ironically, as a mirror to the problems of late postmodernist society, but the story does not reflect any such problems through mimesis (its protagonist does not engage in action; he does not, as we have seen, embody a self that could be readily taken to be plausible). What it does, rather, is to embrace the isolation of self to absurdity, to "pretend" that the problems pertaining to its anchorage do not exist, and it does so, further, through a character that is unbearably saturated of all such problems. The text's relationship to Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), which it presents before the reader in its only moment of hermeneutic guidance, could be argued to be subtly ironic in its embodiment of Rortian principles. Much as Rorty does in his treatise, Wallace dismisses the problems of (post)modernity as difficulties summoned by theorists themselves, only contributing to the language-game which they simultaneously constitute. His character's immunity to all such cultural and philosophical difficulties, however, only succeeds in bringing him solace *within* diegesis. His sheer affective seclusion impedes that he reaches for his readership in a significant manner, and so prevents the erection of a sense of any form of Rortian "community" through which to finally give the self and its lived experience to the solace of "epistemic authority" (1979/1980, 188). Wallace's becomes, thus, a diagnosis through literary empiricism, testing Rorty's theory through his tale: by submitting the self to the possibility that the concerns that haunt him are irrelevant, he proves them otherwise. He writes, in the process, what might be the most poignant exception to a body of literature Richard Rorty might have praised on its ability to be "therapeutic rather than constructive" (1979/1980, 5): a short story that deliberately refuses to be either.

CONCLUSIONS

I have argued throughout this dissertation that Wallace's concern with subjectivity was not merely an attempt at bridging an ontological distance at the interpersonal level. For Wallace, subjectivity worked as much at the micro-level of individuality—be it that of character, author, or reader—as it did at the macro-level, conversing with the state of postmodern thought and criticism at the time of his writing. Wallace's concern was, thus, the proclivity to suspicion and the generalised disaffection ruling over postmodern living. By analysing Wallace's relationship with character in the context of late postmodernism, this thesis has shown how his whole approach to storytelling—all in terms of his use of metafiction, his diction, his reluctance to surrender his narratives to conventional teleologies, and his depiction of intersubjective relationships—can be productively interpreted to inscribe Wallace in a liminal position characterised by (1) his overt discontent with the postmodern, and (2) his tendency to use postmodernism's gimmicks and communicate through the very codes at the heart of such discontent. This, I have here contended, is far from being dissociated from the academic history of postmodern thought nurturing Wallace's fiction. Indeed, it productively engages with the theoretical outlooks that became widespread in the late twentieth-century, showcasing concerns about literature-writing that took centre stage as postmodernism left behind what could be argued to have been its perigee.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

In the context of late postmodernism, I examined Wallace's contribution to American literary history from two interrelating angles: on the one hand, I contended the greater part of Wallace's themes and his discourse *in* and *on* fiction to spring from a philosophical concern with ontological subjecthood; on the other, I turned to the short story form to assess the relationship between this preoccupation with literary selves and his use of the genre. This dissertation's efforts to dissect Wallace's epiphanies—what I have elsewhere labelled "moments of unbeing"—respond to Wallace's twofold cry for paradigmatic reformation of literary tradition that I contend underlies his project as a fiction writer: a cry searchingly demanding for a subject beneath ornamental exercises of prodigious prose, fearful of postmodernism's detachment, while simultaneously uttered by a consciousness producing texts saturated with both diegetic and extradiegetic density. These epiphanies become so poignant in their malfunctioning precisely because of the inference that stems from my joint analysis of selfhood and the postmodernist revelation: a subject that is ineffable, structurally questioned or in crisis, cannot be illuminated into believing in itself. And, upon seeing this "coming into belief" fail, I have argued the epiphany to be inwardly twisted, erratically searching for the very personhood that would function as its precondition.

In an effort to advocate for Wallace's inscription in the history of postmodernist short story writing, I have established a tripartite classification based on his treatment of the epiphanic, both in terms of form and content. I have therefore proposed there to be three distinctly postmodernist epiphanies in Wallace's stories: the epiphany of form (the metafictional epiphany aimed at the reader through the laying bare of the conditions of textuality), the epiphany of absence (the epiphany that is structurally invited and contextually expected, but not featured explicitly in writing), and the dark epiphany (the epiphany that works against the

development, knowledge, and/or belief of the illuminated character). This has not only shown how Wallace's work reinterprets the legacies of modernism, but also how these attempts at "postmodernising" the revelation can be extrapolated to postmodernist writers in the entire anglophone tradition and even beyond, with examples being drawn from a range of authors writing after the mid-twentieth century.

I have argued the dark epiphany to be the most prevalent device in Wallace's short stories, and for this to be closely linked to his stance on subjecthood. As his tales promptly show, a recurrent tendency in Wallace's short story characters has them undergo a dark revelation as a consequence of their attempts to intellectualise their approach to themselves and/or other people. Individuality thus becomes, more than an unfathomable mystery, a source of epistemological distress. When connection at the affective level is precluded or exacerbated by the intellect, both of which processes can be attested to in Wallace's short fiction, subjects are repeatedly faced with a "moment of unbeing." What the epiphany reveals has an effect on their apperception of the world and belief systems that, contrary to what often happens in modernist stories, hinders their ability to face the paths that the epiphany itself reveals before them.

Disaffection is hence shown to often remain central in the tales by Wallace—which have been argued to symbolise a partial departure from first-generation postmodernism—, albeit unembraced. When disaffection appears, it does so not as the product of the author's disinterest in emotional honesty, but rather as an impasse of sorts, brought forth by the textual and its characters as they are written into being engulfed by postmodernism's proclivities—and, in being thus overwhelmed, the shortcomings of those very proclivities are denounced. Indeed, my closing analysis of "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" argues that Wallace's discontent takes on a new form in this late piece: through revering affectlessness and submitting to it wholly, the uncanniness of postmodernism's self-referentiality and inwardness, upon becoming influential patterns to the subject's way of being-in-the-world, is displayed for the reader to pass judgement on.

The nature of this judgement is, in true postmodernist fashion, indeterminate. Intentionality in the texts is futile, even in those when metafictional insertees—the fictionalised "Wallaces" populating some of his fictions—attempt to speak of their aims directly. Belief is tested due to the governing assumptions of a postmodernist movement that remains the context to which Wallace and his work remain chained to this day. Much literature on Wallace has set out to examine his indebtedness to the legacies of the postmodernist patriarchs before him; this dissertation, on its part, seeks a departure from the backward-looking tendencies that have accompanied the conceptualisation of late postmodernism. Future work on Wallace will inevitably still account for the many ghostly presences that he made explicit in his literature, but as the twenty-first century reaches maturity, it is perhaps dawning a time when Wallace's legacy can begin to be slightly dissociated from the evocation of the ethereal grandeur of mid-twentieth century experimentalism, and grounded, rather, on what Wallace himself tried to accomplish. For even in failure, and even amid an epiphanic disconnection that seems too dire for the subject to endure, his writing of late postmodernism remains driven by an incessant will to get closer to the reality of the other. And that will to exist outwardly, exposed to the truth and the deceit of a subjecthood beyond intellectual comprehension, might well become the most stirring, the most paradigm-changing, of all imaginable contributions to literary postmodernism.

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Drawing on existing contributions to the growing field of David Foster Wallace studies, this dissertation seeks to specifically examine the generic idiosyncrasy of Wallace's short fiction production. This exercise is carried out in a twofold manner: on the one hand, via the study of the interrelation of Wallace's literature with the problems of the notion of selfhood following the wake of postmodernism; and, on the other, by attesting to how this crisis is made manifest in his tales through a reappropriation of the modernist epiphany. The conflation of these two problems considered, this study proposes a tripartite approach to the postmodernist moment of being, a distinction paving the way for new readings of the defining themes of Wallace's short fiction.