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### **Both Into and Out of the Cage: New Media, Transgression, and the Remaking of American Literary Connection, 1975-1999**

Casey Henry

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BOTH INTO AND OUT OF THE CAGE: NEW MEDIA, TRANSGRESSION, AND THE  
REMAKING OF AMERICAN LITERARY CONNECTION, 1975-1999

by

CASEY MICHAEL HENRY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016

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Casey Michael Henry

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in  
satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## ABSTRACT

Both Into and Out of the Cage: New Media, Transgression, and the Remaking of American  
Literary Connection, 1975-1999

by

Casey Michael Henry

Adviser: Wayne Koestenbaum

The dissertation addresses an absent history of late twentieth-century postmodern literature. Namely, I trace the shifts between 1980s postmodernism, described by Fredric Jameson as encapsulating a “wan[ed]” “affect,” and the emergence of 1990s post-postmodernism, marked by an exaggeration of affect. My dissertation posits that this reinvention of feeling was due to shifts in communication technologies and new media art during the 1970s and 1980s competing with, and eventually rendering obsolete, avant-garde literary techniques for “connection.” These latter strategies were encapsulated in the postmodern “encyclopedic” novel, a form miming the logic of new media, yet incapable of fully addressing new programmatic shifts, such as the installation-centered apparatuses of new media, the textual depth of digitalism, and posthuman data used for characterization. The strain of this pseudo-computational organization and ethic, however, leads to the pursuit of “feeling” on a more visceral basis. Pursuant with this visceral intention, I posit the genre of transgressive literature, usually misunderstood as employing simple-minded shock tactics, as a hinge point between postmodern and post-postmodern conceptions of “feeling.” Transgressive literature, I argue, offers systematic, new-media-like schemas to explore moments of emotional excess or visceral shock, allowing a further bridge to post-postmodernist writers like David Foster Wallace, who explore affect within complex, maximalist schemas. In essence, the study supplies a media analysis of

American postmodernism's demise and return long missing. Such a study is integral to any complete history of postmodernism or consideration of the experimental literature that follows it.

## Acknowledgments

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## Introduction:

### The Inoperable Machine: A Media History of Late Postmodernism

It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at all times, at other times in fits and starts... Everywhere *it* is machines—real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections.

—Deleuze and Guattari on desire, *Anti-Oedipus*.

About halfway through Woody Allen's 1977 film *Annie Hall*, a recently spurned Allen, trying better to understand his own romantic problems, begins soliciting passersby on the street to ask about theirs. He stops one couple; the man is tanned with an open-necked leisure-suit shirt buttoned way down, the woman has white slacks and bobbed blonde hair. They both look like models. "You look like a happy couple. Are you?" Allen asks the woman. "Yeah," she responds to which Allen presses further, "So, how do you account for it?" "Uh, I'm very shallow and empty, and I have no ideas and nothing interesting to say," she says. "And I'm exactly the same way," the man supplies. This interaction encapsulates, to me, the central paradoxical question of postmodernism and hence whatever might follow: how to draw out plausible connections and magnetisms between ostensibly flat and superficial characters with "nothing... to say?" Further, how would this operate if these characters were also originally rendered as mere caricatures or ideological sketches?

In trying to diagnose postmodernism's demise and potentially determine what might follow, questions multiply further. Is there a mechanism that might summon forth the liveliness of characters so thin and caricatured as to seem merely programmatic constructs or sterile pawns advancing an aesthetic theory? In this sense of "programming," might this coming-to-life occur through circulation, crashing one figure against the other like competing logarithms in a Wall Street derivative? Would this be a type, subset, or absence of feeling? Print seems increasingly

outmoded; might postmodernism's problems be in a certain narcissistic two-dimensionality granted by its medium, and would a different, perhaps computerized or cyberspace-friendly venue make this shallowness somehow deeper, more enriched? Conversely, should one instead simply abandon the whole project and return to a simpler realism? Would that even be possible at this point? This panoply of questions, which only skip, divide, and elude explanation when pressed for clarification (and form in part the investigations of the essay collection *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* [2007]), hints at the monumental task of authors seeking to move *beyond* what postmodernism was or could have been, particularly in the emergent field of post-postmodernism.

The underlying issue linking these conceits and the elemental gap in contextualizing the progeny of postmodernism—mirrored in a missing critical step in scholarship—involves “feeling.” As Fredric Jameson claimed in his famous 1984 essay, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” the genre was marked by its pronounced “wan[ed] affect” (61). Jameson mentioned Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* as a paradigmatic work of the era, marked by a glossy accumulation of surfaces at the expense of depth, and skittering mercurial “intensities” rather than transformative identification in the viewer (59-64). Yet, nearly a decade later, *post*-postmodern works, including those of David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and Richard Powers arose around critical designations of an abundant and at times superfluous feeling, usually described as some form of sincerity. In a paradigmatic manifesto of the movement, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” Wallace calls for the pursuit of “single-entendre principles” including even sentimentality and naïveté (81-82). The questions from a critical purview, then, narrow considerably: How does one account for this stark arrival of post-postmodern “feeling,” unmentioned by the same critical literature that cites it as

foundational? Where did this submerged sense of identification, vulnerability, and deeply felt connection arise from, absent as it was from postmodern ancestors?

One viable avenue for inquiry is found in the media-centric valence of the term “connection.” John Barth, in his now-famous manifesto of postmodernism, “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967), describes the need to proceed beyond the spent potential of realism, yet in his desired category of the “technologically-up-to-date artist” doesn’t mention the “exhaustion” of print as a medium or indeed recognize print *as* a medium, let alone a technology. Yet “exhaustion” lends a timbre of distance, numbness, and false connection to postmodernism’s assumed need for updated technicity. Considering McLuhan’s designation of new media as “hot,” embodying an abundance of stimulus and interaction and requiring little input from users, and print media as “cold,” or requiring more of an imaginative supplement, one might see the “encyclopedic” novels of high postmodernism as a cumulative “coldness” pining for heat. Indeed, critics theorizing ur-postmodern “mastery”<sup>1</sup> as mass, computational-seeming encyclopedic and all-encompassing structures (Mendelson, Moretti, LeClair), seem unconsciously to gesture at a pseudo new media organization to these cybernetic archival constructs without querying why these novels might have ultimately chafed under a print constraint. Likewise, implicit in this broader and cyberspace-like mainframe of the encyclopedic novel is the perceived creation of characters seeming more like numerical ciphers—psychologically thin, utilitarian, and manifesting an absence of “connection” between themselves and potential readers.<sup>2</sup> Internal critiques of postmodernism, and retroactive analysis of the form from the perspective of post-postmodernism, have mainly cited a perceived sickness and fatigue

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<sup>1</sup> See Tom LeClair’s *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction* (1989).

<sup>2</sup> Critics such as Aleid Fokkema and Ian Gregson have devoted works to unraveling the caricature-like aspect of high postmodern characters, believed to be incapable of relation.

with intertextual games (McLaughlin, “Post-Postmodernism”) as well as removal from realism’s emotional depth (Franzen, Wolfe). However, as of yet, little has been discussed in terms of how certain media shifts have led to this waning not only of affect but *connection*, and what literature, in imitation of new media, might be attempting to encapsulate within itself to address exponential growth in fellow forms.

This study then seeks a media-fixed critique of postmodernism’s struggle against these factors, death, and ultimate rebirth. Such media-focused investigations have been partially attempted by Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media* (2001), utilizing a software studies perspective to analyze how postmodernism aligns with computational “remix” culture (131)—“cut and paste” bearing plausible similarities to collage and cultural recycling (xxxix, 131)—yet ignoring contemporary comparisons between media forms at the moment of their composition. Similarly, Manovich also treats “postmodernism” as a single, monolithic entity. Espen Aarseth in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997) reads avant-garde print techniques through an anticipation of digital literature, both linked by the shared requirement of “ergodic,” or “nontrivial,” effort to traverse both genres (1), yet only regards “difficult” print works as merely anticipating the emergence of digital texts. Overall, N. Katherine Hayles’s 2002 call for “media-specific analysis,” or consideration of a print work’s immanent material composition and contextualization within its era of construction, particularly as it relates to the pop-culture-saturated genre of postmodernism, has yet to be answered (*Writing Machines* 29).

In pursuit of this lost media history, and seeking direct parallels in allied technological-artistic fields, Section One opens with a contrasting view of literary postmodernism with parallel developments in new media and video art. Indeed, as regards the latter’s evolution, I analyze how video art evolved from quintessential narcissism (as designated by Rosalind Krauss’s in her

famous 1976 essay, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism”), to the co-option of television’s perceived hegemonic control for more agitprop and pro-democratic potential, as described in David Joselit’s *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (2010). In other words, one sees new media embodying an arc of postmodern issues in the 1970s and 1980s not addressed in literature until the early 1990s. (Wallace’s manifesto-like “E Unibus Pluram,” decrying television’s vampiric potential in drawing forth and neutering postmodernism’s greatest tool in irony, doesn’t arrive until 1993.) Simultaneous with postmodernism’s moment of highest strain and bloat (see Tom Wolfe’s condemnatory “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast” [1989]), video artists were employing new media devices to address textual and semiotic problems raised by communicational and media shifts. Indeed, I analyze as emblematic examples the mainstream video artists Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, and Bruce Nauman, whose work, respectively, attempts to interact directly with the digital particles and electrode behind the screen (Paik), commune with God by distorting and parsing the dividing veil of video (Viola), and provide an overabundance and repetition of individual narratives to comment macrocosmically on human absurdity and violence (Nauman). New media, and particularly new media textual practice, then serves as distilled counter-example for optimistically and efficaciously addressing notions of self-reflexivity, self-consciousness, and overall “connection” against the beleaguered postmodern literary form.

A trickle-down effect of this parallel new media narrative analyzed in the second half of Section One is the ontology-shifting possibilities of digital textuality. The rise of cyber-chatting in MUDs (an antecedent to chat rooms) during the 1970s and 1980s in tandem with company-keeping “chat bots,” or artificial intelligence programs run by preset rules, shaped a new definition of textual embodiment and allied intimacy. Likewise, the capacity for libido to

determine the “life-like,” yet also shifting and self-determining, aspects of these mediated textual forms lent a diffuseness of erotic energy that was difficult if not impossible to capture in a paralleled literary form. (The embodied posthuman concept of the “body as data” available in computational interaction, and lacking in print representation, further marks literature’s deficit.) As a test case against which to judge this murky and ontologically scattered libidinal ontology, I analyze two “conversation” novels of William Gaddis, composed near-entirely of unattributed dialogue. Gaddis’s novels *JR* (1975) and *Carpenter’s Gothic* (1985) reveal a slow deterioration of corporeality defined only by words, with sexual urge (here used as a shorthand for affect) injected as an ultimate muddling and entropic influence on bodily cohesion. Within Gaddis’s conversation novels—themselves media-aware jeremiads against the automated forces of industrial art and industrial commerce—human intimacy is nearly impossible, mimetically reflected in the near-impossibility of stable bodies or consistent narrative frame.

To return again to conceptions of the novel as machine-like, Section Two analyzes print literature’s systematic approach to reaching moments of affective poignancy, usually reserved for an overloading of media, embodied in transgressive fiction. In the spirit of the Marquis de Sade, whose complex erotic “grammar” (in Roland Barthes’s conception) gestures towards a transcendent state, transgressive novelists mark a new, and unremarked on, manipulation of “connection” through moments of visceral intensity achieved by an elaborate structural build-up. As opposed to the traditional perception of transgressive novelists as single-minded purveyors of pornography and gore, I diagnose the movement as a bridge to the post-postmodern works of authors like Wallace, both pursuing points of intense feeling through unstable maximalist labyrinths (the transgressives less averse to repetition and non-cohesion). This alliance becomes more transparent under my employed methodology of “systematic transgression,” combining of

Barthes's "erotic grammar" with Tom LeClair's cybernetic-leaning "systems" theory. William T. Vollmann enacts this method in *The Rainbow Stories* (1989), imposing an erotic "calculus" on varying and segregated tales of down-and-out junkies and prostitutes in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, allying specific colors to threads of affective misery and potential Eros and attempting to distill a potential empathy. Bret Easton Ellis takes a different tack in *American Psycho* (1991), relying on a centrifuge-like acceleration of dread in his serial killer protagonist Patrick Bateman, producing sparks of interiority through fumbling attempts at artistry in attempted jokes and eager record reviews. Both authors, however, employ extra-textual, machine-like constructs to seek amplified, visceral, and "shocking" affects, and additionally open the way for flat and "machine-like" postmodern characters to employ psychological depth.

Likewise, the maximalist wing of post-postmodernism follows in similar fashion, and Section Three tracks the complete expansion of these "visceral" moments through the concept of epiphany in David Foster Wallace. Wallace, allied to a branch of post-postmodernism still working through high postmodern method, borrows the stilted conception of the epiphany from a related branch of post-postmodernism favoring realism (encapsulated in his friend Franzen's work) in order to exaggerate, and ultimately deteriorate, moments of spiritual realignment within ornate, pseudo-encyclopedic structures. Wallace also bears resemblance to the transgressives in investigating moments of cathartic violence as a false alternative to empathetic understanding (particularly in *Infinite Jest*), and likewise positions this potential violence within a more religious (specifically, a play on William James's pragmatic) schema—*Infinite Jest* is, after all, largely a study of addiction, and the addict's "bottom" is the ultimate requirement for spiritual renewal. In these conflicted and suffering characters, however, a new three-dimensionality wrought by pain and choice is produced—a postmodern character capable of recognizing the



vapidity and self-serving nature of his or her literary antecedents, and able to battle with such empty tropes as if these outdated types represented a darkened simulacra of their “new” consciousness. Wallace’s penchant for transgression is likewise directed at the print frame as well through rhetorical feints and defamiliarized narrative structures from which to enact his transformative moments: moments of affective buzz arising in pop quiz “answers” and story outlines that have been seemingly left unfinished. By deconstructing postmodern tactics in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, Wallace reveals a new model of readerly interaction, his resuscitation of affect present in a directly addressed, near-coital plea for intimacy with the reader beyond the fourth-wall.

In sum, the study then answers the question of “can deadened postmodern tropes, themselves ‘inauthentic,’ be used to generate genuine affect,” with “yes, as long as they operate within an affect-generation machine.” For better or worse, new media presents a stranglehold, or facilitating influence over late-twentieth-century literary practice, whether in terms of overt structure and typography—such as N. Katherine Hayles’s argument for Mark Z. Danielewski’s hypertextual *House of Leaves* manifesting an intrinsically digital logic (*Electronic Literature* 175-7)—or tacitly present in a posthuman bleeding of character information with informational data. Inevitably, without properly understanding the effect of these media and communicational shifts on literary postmodernism, and the friction created between these allied forms, it is near impossible to understand the reaction and ameliorative ethics of post-postmodern literature, let alone the bridging practice of transgressive literature. These literary forms’ relationship to media is more than mimetic—they actively imbibe the principles, logic, ontology, and erotics of new media—though they still reformulate these influences in their own idiom, often relying on the distortion of almost parodically canonical literary tropes, such as in the case of the realism-fixed

epiphany. Further, they still hinge figuratively on the employment of intentionally retrograde, or organic, qualities of limitation and biological forms as if to fetishize the quality of print itself; sex and violence—distinctly human, corporeally validating acts—function as crystallizing agents on otherwise overpowering seas of data, piercing bolts of reality against detached mediation, and empirical fulcrums for unwieldy systematic structures. This teasing of organic affects within structurally new-media-like post-postmodern forms inevitably leads to a dismantling of traditional print forms themselves, maximizing and entwining these systems until they collapse and revealing in the fissures an extra-textual “feeling.” Upon these systems’ implosion, and resultant clearing of the wreckage, it is the job of contemporary scholars to sift through the remaining pieces and, like finding an esoteric fragment of a steam engine in modern times, attempt to explicate the fit, function, and purpose of each component. This study hopes to begin such an understanding, composing a rough sketch of these original overworked structures.

Section One:

The Tiny Box Wherein Everything is Solved: New Media Narrative, Communication  
Technology, and the Conversation Novels of William Gaddis

### **Introduction: Problems in Two-Dimensions**

William Gaddis had a famous fear of automation. It signified to him, among other things, the actual and mechanically certified death of the artist, lost in the cog-work, any authorial signature replaced by stamp and insignia. As such, his works are riddled with descriptions of such de-individualization: disembodied hands, cut-out larynxes made to sing posthumously, “perfect” performances trapped forever in slim vinyl discs. This is ironic, as his two “conversation” novels of the 1970s and 1980s—*J R* in 1975 and *Carpenter’s Gothic* in 1985—are composed near-entirely of unattributed dialogue, offering the most transparent encapsulation of concurrent communication-technology trends occurring near-simultaneously to his time of writing. From sentient-seeming artificial intelligence programs to sometimes erotically charged proto-chat rooms, the communication-technology inventions of Gaddis’s era riddle his works of pro-organic artistry with decidedly artificial modes of connection, and (usually sexually driven) attempts at floating, cyberspace-like consubstantiality.

Gaddis, a novelist entrenched in both hard science and maximalist postmodernism, must be understood as an artist under the pressure of these seismic shifts. Emerging from the vanguard of postmodernism, Gaddis is already working with an “exhausted” genre, as Barth’s “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) famously canonized postmodernism as arising from the spent potential of realist fiction. Barth, however, leaves out a key element of postmodernism’s championed exhaustion: the linear print model wedded to such outré realism that Barth originally descries. Jorge Luis Borges, a guiding light of Barth’s desired post-realism, opened up the narrative frame through meta-fiction, but what of the medium the frame belonged to? What about the cyborgian artists attempting to transfuse narrative into algorithm, digital motion, or computer art? Ensuing critical discussion of postmodern maximalism is likewise trapped in this

media lacuna, referring only to media-miming postmodern works as exhibiting complex formalist narrative architecture. These include the various models of encyclopedic breadth or circuit-like, systematic nature—from Edward Mendelson’s “encyclopedic” novel, to Franco Moretti’s “epic” novel, to Tom LeClair’s “systems novel” based more explicitly on cybernetics—yet act out of concert with more contemporary technological models for archival complexity. Indeed, exhaustive novels like Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), or even Gaddis’s first novel *The Recognitions* (1955), might be considered “encyclopedic” had they been published in the nineteenth century, but in the latter half of the twentieth century they might more likely be perceived as “networked,” “computational,” or holding a cyberspace-like fluidity and immediacy. Even the repeated calls for the true autopsy of postmodernism, dying somewhere in the mid-80s, birthed a variety of benchmarks—the death of Beckett? Tom Wolfe’s diatribe against the genre in ’89?—but little consideration of competitive media forms that might have added to its “exhaustion” and afterlife.

New media narrative, however was not undergoing such difficulty everywhere. In the adjacent field of purely “fine” studio art, narrative embodying digital-like depth of visual imagery was experiencing a second flowering by the 1980s. After an affordable camera had been introduced in the form of the Portapak and gallerist Leo Castelli provided video equipment to sponsored artists, the potentiality of film as a viable “new media” took off in the mid to late 60s, and by the 80s had reached a state of formalization and surprising assuredness. A survey of the leading video artists of this stabilized period elucidate various strategies for moving beyond medium, or vying for moments of excess, transcendence, or rupture. Bill Viola, in particular, manifested the search for the digitally rendered image as a transcendent investigation of the divine, or video art as a mean of communing beyond the lived reality of the captured image.

Bruce Nauman had reached an apotheosis of dark comedy and Beckettian roundabout dialogue in the bored, winking *Good Boy Bad Boy* (1985) and the aggressively absurd *Violent Incident* (1986). Nam June Paik continued his almost abstract expressionist forays into the jarred cosmos of dissociated televisual image in his “prepared” TVs and the utopian *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* in 1984, insinuating a new era of digitally transmitted optimism. Mediation in the visual arts, it seemed, was allowing an additional layer for mutable definition and inscription.

Yet, ironically enough, both video art and the trajectory of literary postmodernism have, according to a later essay by David Foster Wallace, a unique and similar forebear: broadcast television. As Wallace states in the seminal “E Unibus Pluram: Television and Democracy” (1992), television has singularly de-fanged the once useful irony wielded by literary postmodernists, manipulating the satirical into a self-conscious means of selling commodities. While *television* has been marked in its mutually parasitic relationship with literary postmodernism, the art form most directly correlating to television in *video art* has been relatively undiscussed in its effect on the TV-saturated postmodernists. Video art saw television as its original counterpart—the “official” version of events it sought to disrupt, and remediate, with its own low technology and “authentic” sequence of events. Further, staged performances that were themselves the substantive core of the video art were likewise useful samizdats (the renegade tape in Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* is referred to as “the samizdat” or “the Entertainment”) to integrate into the “controlled” stream of broadcast television, resulting in violent and subversive bursts of confrontation untested in literature’s parallel relation. Likewise, video art’s relatively “healthy” rejection of televisual aesthetics, and development of its own “transcendental” ethic, creates a standout example of authenticity in an age of calculated visual images instead of devolving into a mutual shouting match of who can out-ironize whom.

Wallace's basing of *Infinite Jest* around the trance-inducing power of a controlled, quick, and metaphysically layered video cartridge is, I think, not incidental. Mining the example of the heartfelt, the earnest, and even the reflexively sharp example of 80s video art, Wallace drew his prototype for the sort of medium that could both embrace the cerebral "pyrotechnics" of postmodern stylistics and put forth a more abstracted, third-dimensional "truth."

Before Wallace's reinvention, however, other forms of new media "connection" added to the more emotive and libidinal economies and expectations tied in with new media narrative. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to mark the various expansions in 1980s "cyberchatting"—inclusive of the increasingly sentient-seeming "chat bots" in the mold of the famous fake Rogerian therapist "Eliza" and the vivid permutation of identity in textually veiled chat rooms—without seeing a shift in modes of desire, and specifically textually rendered desire. (The dissolution of flesh to abstracted libido was seen in parallel cases such as performance artist Stelarc's flesh suspensions, or Warhol's flattened, autobiographical *Shadows*.) The convincingness of desire, the wish to believe that individually parsed letters and phrases from an artificial program are indeed a desiring other, or that the contraption derived for one's mechanical pleasure is "real enough," is immanent in textual practice marked by dense, murky computational processes. Gaddis's attempt to enclose desiring characters in sheer overheard conversation and data alone embodies the stretching of print postmodernism to fit these digital strategies, though his synaesthetic product yields mainly ontological dissolution of all involved.

The failure of "connection" and "understanding" to progress beyond the early web's fan-communities to a finished literary genre like "high" postmodernism will lay the groundwork for post-postmodernism's definition along this very axis. Indeed, David Foster Wallace's work presents the peculiar mixture of an extra-material, new media-like transcendence arising from

within an intentionally decayed and seam-showing print constraint—rupturing the narrative’s expected boundaries to offer forth often grotesque, extra-narrative epiphanies. These grotesqueries will likewise be premeditated by “systematic” transgressive novels, which circulate around these epiphanies but lack the cohesive structure and postmodern genealogy to form a stable genre. While Gaddis is a novelist quite familiar with failure (teaching a class explicitly on “The Theme of Failure in American Literature” at Bard College), his contribution to fully exhausting the maximalist print novel (and fully expanding his posthuman, data-driven characters) to pave the way for post-postmodern strategies like Wallace’s has yet to be fully recognized. Similarly, if one considers the relative wealth of new media and video art’s attempt at transcendence, anti-irony, or abrasive satire during the 1980s, analyzing video art’s paralleled track to postmodernism, and role in informing post-postmodernism, becomes essential. Returning to “better times,” let us examine the origins of 1980s new media and video art.

### **Postmodern Issues / Good Intentions: New Media, New Inscriptions, and the Maturity of Video as Art**

As mentioned, in contrast to the “exhaustion” of print postmodernism, the 80s offered the visual arts a renaissance and retrenchment of popular themes through its new media scion, video art. Born as a medium of discovery, video art allegedly began with Nam June Paik’s 1965 video taping of the Pope in passing and the realization that this kind of temporal fragment could be “art.” The proliferation of semi-affordable cameras in the Portapak likewise made this medium a less onerous one than full-length feature films, with gallerist Leo Castelli dispensing cameras to a small coterie formed around his gallery. While eventually progressing to a point of personal



“revelation” and less temporal and immediate capturing of quick-action, it is useful to note video art’s troubled and, apropos to postmodernism, “narcissistic” beginning.

Rosalind Krauss, in her 1976 piece “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” claimed that narcissism was perhaps the most recognizable quality of the developing medium. Early video artists were inevitably lost in a self-analytic fixation, namely caused by the fact that the subject of the new documentary medium was often the artist him or herself, toying with their mirrored doubles or merely calling attention to the feedback loop of producer and product. Vito Acconci drunkenly points at his own image for twenty minutes in *Centers* (1971), for instance, or extends a monologue at his reflected mirror-form in *Air Time* (1973). In Richard Serra’s *Boomerang* (1974), Serra has fellow artist Nancy Holt listen to his own voice on delay and try to repeat the words accurately—she, not Serra’s true simulacra, inevitably stumbles and fails. Like a child not yet separated from its mother, so Krauss saw the “medium” of film dissolved into an almost umbilical non-object, a prosthetic extension of the artist him or herself. Yet, even as a prevailing theme, “narcissism” was by no means a totalizing enclosure. In fact, Krauss ends the essay with a possible exit from the cage of self-reference, a possibility for “tapes that exploit the medium in order to criticize it from within” (59). The “way out” in Krauss’s formulation is ironically manipulating the medium’s specialty in self-consciousness and self-awareness against itself.

Such democratic good-mindedness may be found in David Joselit’s interpretation of the origin of video art, coalescing in the shadow of broadcast television. In *Feedback: Television and Democracy*, he notes video artists’ recognition and attempted intervention in the hegemonic monolith of broadcast television, perceived as a one-directional force that, like an insidious conspiratorial force in a postmodern novel, seemed inflexibly immune to response. He cites interventionist groups like Top Quality Television (TQTV), who offered “alternate” coverage of

mass events like the 1972 Democratic and Republican Convention to provide a people's-eye-view of such mass-tailored spectacles (Joselit, *Feedback* 99-101). Such "good will" or social critique certainly signals a step beyond the narcissist's frame, and other artists used similar tactics with a far more visceral intent in their interventions. In the early 70s, artists also attempted to "buy back" their televisual entertainment, with both Bill Viola and Chris Burden purchasing advertising time to then interject their own often jarring video pieces with little introduction or segue. Burden's embedding of his performance piece "Through the Night Softly" is particularly unsettling, portraying a bound Burden sliding across broken glass on a tarmac for ten seconds, the only noise his breath of exertion as he wriggles across the shards. The movement from activism, to abrasive intervention, and finally to a "higher," mystical ethic is also fulfilled to near-caricature by Bill Viola's rise to prominence, particularly for his earnest, self-professedly transcendent works. With film as his all-seeing eye, Viola raises the mechanism of video to the level of capturing, in evocative and symbolist fragments, some higher force behind the image, marking the fullest sort of pendulum swing away from Acconci's accusatory finger or self-monologue.

With the frequent inclusion of at least fragmentary narrative pieces in this newly entrenched video art and media art more broadly, it is curious that long-form literary narrative didn't also emerge spontaneously from within visual art itself. Given the historical overlap of rising and declining artistic eras, this visual-literary amalgam seemed potentially viable. Video art's retrenchment during the slow fade of mail art, which relied on the circulation of pieces through the mail system, seemed a potentially viable nexus, possibly allowing an interconnected network narrative deepened by digital manipulation. Rudolf Frieling remarks on this expansion of networked text to digital physicality in his concept of "textscapes," or sculptural blocks of

prose that hang in dense flurries of text and force the reader to literally engage in a Barthesian notion of reading as kinetic traversal or “passage” (276).<sup>3</sup> He notes, however, the longtime impossibility of this due to the “ideological abyss separat[ing] those who trust the image from those who trust the word” (Frieling 268). The socially motivated practice of text art also offered another potential avenue through its reappreciation of the excerpted phrase or word, imbuing new meaning in re-contextualization. However, the strictures of reacting against the prevalence of deceptively prosodic and convincing advertisement that remained a major influence on 80s text artists left the form concerned with the small and epigrammatic, rather than long and novelistic. This condensation might be seen notably in the public, aphoristic work of Jenny Holzer or the reinterpreted consumer slogans of Barbara Kruger. The expansion of cryptic phrases like Holzer’s “FATHERS OFTEN USE TOO MUCH FORCE” into unusual public spaces like the middle of Times Square reveal the unusual charge and manipulation of authority given in these new environments, forming what David Joselit notes as “‘architectures’ of communication” (*American Art* 202-203). Yet, the extension of environmentally charged text to a longer-form rendition was not only physically impractical—how long might a pseudo “official”

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<sup>3</sup> A similar strategy might be seen in the work of video artist Gary Hill and particularly his 1987-1988 work “Incidence of Catastrophe,” inspired by Maurice Blanchot’s novel *Thomas The Obscure* and more largely his own daughter’s attempt to “form language” (Rush, *Video Art* 126). The obstruction and manipulation of different physicalities of reading allegorically manifests in the work in the impossibility of rendering literacies across media. The film is cut with sequences of the lens, wobbly and out-of-focus as perhaps we might imagine the film *Infinite Jest* to be, trying futilely to read a page of Blanchot’s text. The ultimate “abject of the body” before this difficult, and perhaps even modernist, reading task that epitomizes “Western society’s semantic culture” is presented in the final moments of the film when Hill lies nude before a shifting wall of blurred words (“Incidence of Catastrophe;” EAI Description). This “wall” of text, and the continual, kinetic attempts to feebly read it, are also reminiscent of Jeffrey Shaw’s virtual reality piece “The Legible City” (1988-1991), wherein a user navigates a virtual city of inflated, wall-sized words, representing various monologues from a particular chosen city (for instance, in New York, monologues from “Ex-Mayor Koch” and “Donald Trump”) (“The Legible City”).

banner in New York City run?—but also bulged excessively beyond the sharp address of the “official” aphorism with artistic response.

As another avenue from the visual into the textual underutilized by postmodern authors, computer-mediated inscription offered a new mode of programmatic delivery. An early, and famous, piece of computer art, the 1963 *Gaussian Quadratic* (recalling Pynchon-style engineering jargon) indicates an automated, cubist dimension available in its logarithmically directed shapes, looking to be made out of bent wire rendered as printer ink (Goodman 24). Connotations of the algorithm in the piece, noted in the both formulaic and random redirections of the line, seem logical as an export to literary inscription—say a recursive, Steinian sequence produced by a language generator. And indeed a foray into programmatic poetry produced a diversity of mutations on a similar model in the early 1980s, mainly relevant to “n-gram” generators, or algorithms that assembled ad-hoc prose-poetry from recurring words in a source text. Slight modifications to this program, such the addition of rhyme and meter in Raymond Kurzweil’s “Cybernetic Poet,” and the imposition of superficial “tricks” to mimic idiosyncratic styles of famous print authors (e.g. “eecummingsfy” and “dadafy”) in the program “McPoet,” attempted to retroactively imbue “aura” or signature in what was at core a trick of programmatic constraints (Roque 1.2). The attempt to overlay an authorial signature onto what was, in effect, merely a suggestive regurgitation of text patterns, reveals the inadequacy, or impossibility, of trying to massage the Benjaminian aura back into the industrial object. Similarly, the expansion of even this deceptive program to longer-form narrative was nearly impossible, due to any authorial-simulacra given by the program’s designation of repeating or “signature” patterns crumbling, or revealed as obviously artificial and jarring, in long-form text.

In searching for a more culturally inscribed source for the intersection of visual arts and literature under the aegis of new media, David Foster Wallace points us to one shared, parasitic influence: broadcast television.<sup>4</sup> While giving birth to a medium in its own right—video art, the full function of which in literary postmodernism will be analyzed shortly—the effect of broadcast television was marked by Wallace as the single most corrosive effect on 1990s American literature in his 1992 essay, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and Democracy.” This main danger was in turning the one tool of literary postmodernism that held efficacy—irony, and its partner self-reflexivity—against the genre that first coined it. This exact process of assumption is many-tiered in Wallace’s rendering. He begins by outlining how the “ogling” capacity so endemic to fiction writers has been usurped by the viewing objects of television and its knowingly ogled actors, satisfying the writer’s need for voyeurism without requiring any vulnerable or human interaction (“E Unibus” 21). In this already isolating relationship of feigned “natural” watchableness, Wallace sees an additional turn of the screw in television borrowing the preeminent tool of postmodernism, “irony,” to soothe one’s viewer with the assurances that it knows one is ogling, hence such ogling is permissible. Television then not only employs this winking, self-referential nod to sell commodities (that one is now aware are being sold to us) but to lull the viewer into a false sensation of “choice” or discernment. The consumer, then granted a paradoxical “in-the-know” faculty, can consume the product without worrying about being seen as unaware or lemming-like when buying such products. Perhaps most worrying to Wallace was that TV’s cooption of irony from literature wasn’t symbiotic or neutral but rather vampiric, in that TV developed to the detriment of literature. “It is now *television*,” Wallace claims, “that

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<sup>4</sup> Offering a slightly less direct causality, Kathleen Fitzpatrick in *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (2006) reiterates that even the *perception* of television’s risk to fiction exerted a sizable influence.

takes elements of the *postmodern*—the involution, the absurdity, the sardonic fatigue, the iconoclasm and rebellion—and bends them to the ends of spectatorship and consumption” (“E Unibus” 64, italics Wallace’s). The only way out for a new avenue to be carved out in the literary, Wallace claims, is for a new generation of “anti-rebels” to emerge and craft a literature that abandons irony for “single-entendre values,” or the possibly naïve belief in sincerity and empathy invulnerable (or at least less susceptible) to the ploys of self-consciousness (“E Unibus” 81).

Under such a rubric, it is surprising that Wallace doesn’t comment on the *other* descendent of TV far more active in its usurpation of the one-directional mind games: video art. As just mentioned, David Joselit in particular marks the potential for handheld, portable, and affordable video equipment to manifest a wresting back of authority to the recorded image, a way of gaining a grand-level perspective without corporate interest.<sup>5</sup> How then would this escape Wallace’s ken, or creative universe? Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, if one looks at the central drama of the loosened film at the core of *Infinite Jest*, a film made “lethal” by its mixture of profound technical involution and televisual gratification, one sees Wallace’s awareness of video art’s trajectory. Further, in the attempted overcoming of narcissism in the film’s creator to produce a product that is either blissfully transcendent or horrifically mind-erasing, we see a co-option of, and postmodern uncertainty imbued into, such video art.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Shamberg of TVTV believed the media-ameliorative possibility of video and public access television to be so far-reaching as to eventually be able to have even the “average white middle-class businessperson...examine their alienation” by taping their own commutes (Joselit, *Feedback* 87).

<sup>6</sup> Wallace reiterates this televisual impulse as his sole interest and synecdoche of cyber culture over dealing with Internet technology directly in a 1996 interview with *Stim*. “To do a comprehensive picture of what the technology of that era would be like, would take 35000 pages, number one. In the book, what I was most interested in was *people’s relation to filmed entertainment*” (italics mine). It also bears drawing attention to Wallace’s reference to this

The film “Infinite Jest” is the notorious MacGuffin<sup>7</sup> at the heart of the novel of the same name. A video “cartridge” born from its author’s life-long struggle against hopeless involution and formal film trickery, “Infinite Jest” is so potent and “entertaining” it causes either a sublime transcendence of one’s material shell or comatose entrapment within it. Likewise, its subject matter—a “hideously” beautiful woman slowly saying, “I’m so sorry. I’m so terribly sorry” while the viewer lies in an infantilized position (*IJ* 939)—reiterates a total and consuming codependence. The creator, James Incandenza—father of one of the two main protagonists, Hal Incandenza, and fulfilling a haunting, Hamlet’s ghost-like presence over the novel’s action—comes from a long history of video art so potently avant-garde it is painful to behold. Genres and academic coteries, birthed around the videos give rise to designations like “anti-confluent” and “found drama” (a “hoax” genre in which one picks a stranger out of the classifieds and “imagines” his or her day) as well as titles of supposed academic essays indicating the experience of viewing such films, like “Watching Grass Grow While Being Hit Repeatedly Over the Head With a Blunt Object” (Wallace, *IJ* 65,1026-1028). One of the earliest jokes is that Incandenza’s films are so avant-garde they are actually “après-garde,” reactionary in their stiltedness and self-centeredness (Wallace, *IJ* 64). We are even given a mock filmography early in the footnotes of the novel, including works so conceptual they actually were “titled and subjected to critique but never filmed,” and so materially and technologically obsessed they at times entail “two Ikegami EC-35 video cameras,” “Miniaturized, endoscopic, and microinvasive cameras,” and “four convex mirrors, two planar mirrors, and one actress” (Wallace, *IJ* 985-993).

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Internet-like system in the novel as “InterLace TelEntertainment” (notice the importance of the “tele-” prefix).

<sup>7</sup> The “MacGuffin” is the infamous film device wherein an object is never shown, yet drives the central plot or narrative of the film. A famous example is the golden briefcase in Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

The subject matter of the films also bludgeons with a self-reflexive layering of awareness and near-absurd renditions of plot twist and trauma. One example is the tragically absurd film *Accomplice!*, wherein a male prostitute accidentally gives his sex partner AIDS through the sex partner's attempt to give *him* AIDS. The last tearful cry of the prostitute repeating "*Murderer!*" for fifteen minutes after realizing he has inadvertently facilitated his potential murderer's suicide, even gives rise, within the embedded film-critical industry within the novel, to the "central conundra of millennial après-garde film" (Wallace, *IJ* 947). This "conundra" being whether "the puzzlement and then boredom and then impatience and then excruciation and then near-rage aroused" was "aroused for some theoretical-aesthetic end" or simply was the result of "shitty edit[ing]" (Wallace, *IJ* 947). The involution is thus so deep as to be ambiguously either an intentional violence to the audience's attention and good faith or simply poorly assembled. In short, one may use Incandenza, in his early, "après-garde" work, as the most "avant" of much of the content, and possibility, of "avant garde" video art, collected in itself and at odds with popular entertainment.

And yet, fittingly, it is the turn to popular entertainment and actual audience reception that marks Incandenza's attempt to reach outside of himself and his own black humor to reconcile the hidden traumas that possibly drive his aggressively obtuse work. We are given information that his wife, the "Militant Grammarian" Avril Incandenza (Wallace, *IJ* 288), is having a profusion of affairs, including a possible one with a step-brother causing the disfigurement of Hal's brother Mario—these multiple infidelities driving Incandenza literally to the studio to create increasingly obscure films. While one hypothesis for Incandenza's creation of the lethally compelling film is mentioned as trying to draw the cerebrally solipsistic Hal "out of himself" (Boswell, 160), another sequence describing Incandenza's discovery of "annulation,"



or the technical base for his films, while ignoring his father passed out in a pool of blood-flecked vomit (Wallace, *IJ* 502-503), renders such overtly philanthropic motives questionable. He is rarely described as speaking before his suicide and subsequent appearance later in the novel as a “wraith” (Wallace, *IJ* 829). Incandenza’s alternate name—“Himself”—additionally hints at his driving spirals of narcissism. Further, his film itself, and its Lacanian nightmare of a death-faced mother figure killing the viewer with codependent joy, seems to suggest the obsessive attachment and inability to sever self from art Krauss outlined in her 1976 essay. Yet, it is precisely this narcissism—manifest in an oeuvre so consumed with technical elements it becomes itself obsessed with capturing the esoterica of film-making—that forms the crux of the novel’s mystery about his last, “commercial” film. If he has succeeded in a film both insurrectionary and appealing, he has captured the delicate essence at the core of Wallace’s prescribed antidote for the increasing self-consumption of both fiction and film—a film so piercing in its message that it transfuses through medium and into viewer, effectively destroying him or her with rapture. Because Wallace chooses to wage such a war between video-directed artifice and the final, transcendent quality televisual “Entertainment” can reach in conceptual film, it seems worthwhile to chart the trajectory of video art that so similarly operates between the valence of narcissism and “naïve” transcendence, as well as televisual “pleasure” and artistic confrontation.

Perhaps the largest undergirding tactic of video art, within the broader aegis of intervention, was of taking apart and manipulating the one-direction signal broadcasting tightly controlled segments of news or information. This manipulation and reconstruction could have a political edge—such as in TVTV—or an explicitly aesthetic edge, as in the case of video art pioneer Nam June Paik. Part of Paik’s early television installation pieces involved using the

scrambled signals of distorted or “prepared” TVs—once magnets had been applied, or internal circuitry redirected—as art works in themselves; expressionist plumes of warped electrode patterns, fizzing arrays of static. Examples include *Magnet TV* (1965), where a thick, industrial magnet clipped to the top of a television sets off swirls of milky light, or *Electronic Opera #1* (1969), whose circuitry has been distorted such that visages of famous figures like Richard Nixon and John Mitchell “fold into themselves” as if they were “swirling down an electronic toilet” (Joselit, *Feedback* 43-48). Once television’s external façade of corporate-controlled content could be broken, Paik seemed to indicate, one could reach the elemental beauty of television’s composition behind the screen. This distorting effect was itself part of Rosalind Krauss’s later reexamination, and reappraisal, of video art in her 2000 book *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. In *Voyage*, Krauss claims that, as part of a larger description of a “post-medium” era, video manifested “a kind of discursive chaos, a heterogeneity of activities that could not be theorized as coherent” (*Post-Medium Condition* 31). Within the chaos, a multiplicity of mediums could be found; video was merely the portal.

It is useful to contrast these distortive projects of Paik, or even patterned distortions of the McPoet, against the one-dimensional, digital-miming qualities of pseudo-cybernetic writing like Gaddis’s. In the ontology of truly digital writing, or word processing, Katherine Hayles has noted the phenomenon of “flickering signifiers.” By “flickering signification,” Hayles refers to the functional limitation of word processing’s external surface in relation to the obscured, artificially interlinked, code-driven processes hidden beneath (*Posthuman* 31). Hayles notes in particular the digitized words’ instability, as each click, each shift of arrangement on the screen, belies the global changes and chain-reactions of code occurring beneath the surface. Hence, rather than the external manifestation of a digital logic or a digital aesthetic, *true* digital writing

would imply deeper computational processes subdermally influencing the text's surface. As an example of what an exploration of flickering signification might look like in art, Paik's work slices through the falsely passive screen to embrace the underlying "code" or composition. David Joselit vaunts this lack of codified solid as an achievement of Paik's work, claiming that, in the distorted arrangements, "pattern meets pattern in an art of indifference" ("Video and Ready-Made" 44). Further, he frames Paik's televisual readymades as a way out of the concrete, tangible aspect of Duchamp's earlier readymades by reaching beyond external surface to "use electrons and protons directly" (38, "Ready Made"). Rather than a fear of the murky and "proton-driven" ontology, in Paik's visuality we see an appreciation of the shifting constellations of underlying force, of electromagnetic arrangement.

Indeed, part of what may have served to make video art more of a precipitating factor of post-postmodernism—in Wallace's estimation—than literature's attempt to mime digitalism, is that it seemingly yielded a greater diversity of aesthetic products from its composition and deconstruction. Video art seemed to take great pleasure in stripping its signals of discernible form and polished final product. One tactic was in overloading, or hyper-stimulating, a simple video image, such as in Paik's co-created *Paik-Abe Synthesizer* (1970), a machine used to layer up to seven separate streams of video in a sticky, total agglomeration ("Flow Charts for Video Synthesizer"). Bill Viola would also theorize the productive material yielded in unwinding this density of video, phrased in his typically religious rhetoric. He claimed that film's densely sensuous composition could be broken down to find "three expressions of the deity," primarily that of the "anthropomorphic," or "visual," the "yantra," or "geometric energy," and the "mantra," or sonic expression, all compressed into the final product of a film (Viola, "Condominiums" 468). The breakdown of the mysterious signal, which appeared only in popular

imagination as carrier of finished, cleaned advertisements for soda pop or detergent, offered a great field for investigation and source of pride for video artists seeking to frame, or make “ready-made,” even the abstract, electric components of TV.

Part of this happy assertiveness, and crystallizing a moment of relative appreciation for video art, was the 1984 worldwide transmission of Nam June Paik’s *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*. As an answer to the dystopian pessimism of George Orwell’s *1984*, the live “satellite installation” of both the New York and Parisian avant-garde was a pointed attempt to frame nascent media-oriented art emerging—video an integral understood component, taped and manipulated as these segments were—as a redemptive, rather than ominous phenomenon. Michael Rush notes this reversal of pessimism, claiming “Paik looked Orwell in the eyes and told him Big Brother could be just another member of the family” (*Video Art* 213). The nature of a live “satellite” installation was one of inclusion, a digitally transmitted anodyne to fears of techno-isolation. Conscripting the powers of potentially total surveillance and visibility, Paik utilized this mass-availability to beam a familiar coterie of friendly avant-garde artists into the living room. Similarly, in the process, he turned the solipsistic view of video as a medium serving only itself and its practitioners for a more general commodity for mass consumption, amplified additionally by its democratic availability through PBS and its simultaneous worldwide release.

Even the contents of the piece suggested the upbeat. Synth-pop groups like Oingo Boingo performed with bouncing vivacity in between similarly good-tempered “high art” performances like John Cage’s playing of amplified cactuses. The union of Paris and New York was expressed through split screens, at times overlapping in happy confusion—but never alienation—of untranslated discourse by the two presenters. In a gesture of literary solidarity, the moderator

from the US side was the patrician editor of *The Paris Review*, George Plimpton, looking onto a world he didn't seem to mind diverging from his print-domain with a bemused and avuncular expression. Before Charlotte Moorman, an associate of Paik's, played an amplified "video cello," he even strummed the strings congenially. An attempt at merging these polyglot styles with narrative was even attempted in a somewhat oblique capacity.

A central, and more literary, component was Laurie Anderson's performance of her spoken monologue "The Language of the Future" from her magnum opus, *United States* (1983), performed just a year prior. "Language," in essence, constructs a vignette regarding a seemingly autobiographical account of surviving a plane crash and seeking out empathetic parties on ensuing flights. One supposedly commiserating person was a little girl who spoke only in "computerese," and described her "rocky relationship" as "so digital," as in "on again/off again," always "two things switching." Such interpersonal interruption, in the language of circuitry and misfired transmissional energy, was echoed in Anderson's own voice, dipping into such low octaves of digital distortion that subtitles streamed across the bottom of the screen as explanation. Similarly, the use of televisual breakdown was used to comic effect in repartee between Mitchell Kriegman and Leslie Fuller. When their interview apparently breaks down, Fuller says, "I don't suppose anyone else can hear us can they?" To which Kriegman replies, "I don't think so," and Fuller finishes, "Oh good, well then we're alone." The use of distortion and glitch-inspired intimacy, giving Kriegman an opportunity to bring up an apparently prior solicitation of Fuller under the threat of suicide, gives an optimistic spin to the sort of telecommunications-gone-awry feel of Gaddis's later sexual misfirings. The "literary" as present in *Orwell*, however, was still subsumed in the televisual flash and ecstatic appreciation of the

simultaneity and perceived community of inter-continental broadcast—a node of utopian belief and sincere flourish expanded to a literally mystical degree in video artists like Bill Viola.

### **Even Agnostics Have Truth: The Verity of Bill Viola**

A true sign of faith in an artistic medium might be a religious conviction that it has the ability for revelation, for prophecy. As David Foster Wallace notes with regard to the black-humored tail end of postmodernism, trained by television to laugh alone at its own joke, the only way out of recursion is an earnestness strong enough to resemble religious faith. Such is the reestablishment of Bill Viola within his medium during the 1980s, and particularly his turn to an explicitly mystical and spiritual material and motivation.

Viola's early pieces were of the Krauss-designated reflexive variety, such as "A Non-Dairy Creamer" (1975) wherein we see a portrait of Viola in a coffee cup disappearing slowly as he drinks it. The navel-gazing immanent in this exercise of considering one's image, however, soon gave way to a more fully flowered transcendent phase, beginning around the mid to late 1970s, and marked by a more pronounced consideration of the divine and the individual's relation to the unknown. This mission has become so identifiable with Viola that a common encapsulation of his role in video art is usually as follows: "re-endowing contemporary video art with that ability to explore the sacred via the manifestations of the divine in the world, framing his images in texts and ideas drawn from vast corpora of religious and mystical writings" (Elmarsafy 127). The smallness of his own position next to the "mystical" and "divine" world, however, is also continually reified, entrenching his role as documenter, or hermetic observer, rather than the transcendent vessel himself. Pieces like "Room for St. John of the Cross" (1983) literally epitomize this relationship, as the installation of the piece nestles a small cabin in a

larger installation space, replete with small color TV, as Saint John's ecstatic, "visionary" poems whisper quietly out of the interior against an overwhelming roar in the larger space—a sense of being near, but not in total comprehension of, the unknown. His comments on self-prostration and merely beholding phenomena are replicated in claims such as: "I relate to the role of the mystic in the sense of following a *via negativa*—of feeling the basis of my work to be in unknowing," and that when "the eyes cannot see, then the only thing to go on is faith;" hence he must surround himself only with "questions and not answers" (Viola, Ross, et al, 246, 249, 250). Similarly, the notion of video as translating some extra, aural dimension of spiritual communication not immediately detectable is divulged in his contextualizing of his own work as religious art, claiming it "has to do with an acknowledgement or an awareness or recognition that there is something above, beyond, below, beneath what's in front of our eyes," (Viola, Ross, et al, 143). This sense of a transcendent entity lurking just behind the thin materiality of video, and video as waiting, patiently, for the divine to reveal itself (far removed from the caustic nature of the postmodern), likewise gestures at Viola's theories about larger, architectonic wholes lurking behind the finished product of video art.

Again, to invoke Hayles and her "flickering signifiers," it is striking to note the expansiveness and perceived organic totality behind the finished product Viola detects in his own work. In the aptly titled, "Will There Be Condominiums in Cyberspace?" Viola notes the sheer degree of space and intact wholes insinuated by an individual sequence or narrative slice. On describing the process of first video editing, Viola notes, "I saw then that my piece was actually finished and in existence *before* it was executed on the VTRs [video tape recorders]" ("Condominiums" 465). That is, rather than an unknown, hive-like operation of code propping up a deceptively simple veneer of words, Viola's digital product is embedded within this back-

ended totality before he chips away the unwanted portions to reveal his embedded work. Like the apocryphal elephant that exists in the block of marble if only all the non-elephant elements are removed, Viola's chosen "narrative" is muddled in a cloud of various video potentialities. He remarks on this burden of abundance later in describing, "it is only very recently that the ability to forget has become a prized skill,"<sup>8</sup> noting that in an embarrassment of riches, the ability to remove, refine, and hone is paramount (Viola, "Condominiums" 464).<sup>9</sup> Works like *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (1982), a durational film in which Viola abstains from sleep for three days in a single unadorned room, also frames this excess as a perceived abundance of *time*; Viola's shifting positions of unease and ennui indicate exponentially expandable tableaux of human drama within the unmetered roll of film and length of captured action. The camera can run on infinitely, and we will only wait, as Viola seems to, for a more striking event to occur.

Likewise, the attempt to find a self-examining kernel of dramatic meaning in dead-time, or dead-space, is reflected in Viola's related practice of trying to freeze, or distill, individual and ineffable emotions through distortions in physical video mechanisms. Mark Hansen notes the affective "autonomy"<sup>10</sup> sought in Viola's slow-downs and manipulations as being central to Viola's pursuit for the unknown. Viola tries to chop, scrape, and slow down the filmic procession of events—particularly "high affect" events like children's birthday parties, religious scenes, and moments of intense grief—to find the "missing" presence of the ecstasy that remains

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<sup>8</sup> This statement is oddly reminiscent of Beckett's aesthetic realization that next to Joyce's expended maximalism, his "way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding" (Knowlson 319).

<sup>9</sup> In terms of pure textualism, Rudolf Frieling also asks in Viola's overwhelming and transcendent imagery—married to actually unreadable text in later pieces like *The Threshold*—"what is the 'metatext' of Viola's metaphysics?" or rather the persistent manifesto within and underlying the over-awed imagery ("Hot Spots" 267).

<sup>10</sup> This autonomy of "affective autonomy" is also integral to Hansen's theory of perceptual embodiment espoused in *New Philosophy for New Media* (2004).



uncapturable by his recording. Hansen further says of Viola's attempt to isolate affect that "the motivation...comes from his own wonder at the paradoxical duplicity of emotions—their status as both the most fleeting of experiences and in some curious sense autonomous from or outside of experience" (260). Hence, in a fashion, these ineffable emotions at the core of these sequences *are* religious—an imbuing of an "essence" to emotionality as abstract as divine knowledge and just as unrenderable by human means. Correspondingly, they align with Viola's notion about a "divine" knowledge evading the human eye as one attempts to capture it in film. Hansen walks us through Viola's perceived conundrum in that "even in a still image, which, after all, represents a cut with a duration of 1/30 of a second (in video) and which is therefore well below the neurophysical threshold of the now, there was not only an excess of emotion, but a certain temporal expansion of it beyond the confines of what was captured in the image" (260). Not only was a still and frozen image of a larger narrative tableau almost stronger than its place within the tableau itself, "beyond the confines," but a separate strain of emotional charge present "below the neurophysical threshold of the now." The main film from the period relating to this striving to find an independent, and somewhat unknowable, affective core is Viola's 1987 work *Passage*.

The grim slowness of *Passage*, run at one-sixteenth normal speed (Morgan), has the unnervingly slight suspension of a video accidentally capturing an assassination. In the captured action of a child's birthday party, one is unsure whether the emotional excess revealed is that of joy, or perhaps a perverse sort of anticipation before tragedy—the ambivalence, leaning toward tragedy, is amplified by a droning industrial soundtrack. The perspective of the camera seems to be of blithe inquirer—largely a product of the slowed speed; if playing at normal tempo, the piece would likely assume the nature of simple and joyful parental document. Viola's interest is decidedly clinical, indicated by his mechanical soundtrack, and the analysis of the productive

and invisibly infectious quality of “joy” becomes an outsider’s investigation at how such a thing can occur. Joy becomes the “x” factor that Viola cannot comprehend, and no degree of technical amplification or modification—slowing, zooming, roaming—can render the “secret” of emotional excess viewable.

In the fragmenting, slowing, and embedding of micro-affective slides within a larger narrative sequence, one can see the deconstruction of video-rendered emotions more acutely than in larger-form “cinematic” narrative. To counter Lev Manovich’s claim in *The Language of New Media* that essentially all new media can be harnessed within the laws, perspective, and theorizations of cinema and cinematic imagery,<sup>11</sup> Viola’s work in pieces like *Passage* reveals an explicit attempt to reveal the unseen, the off- or behind-the-screen in the very process of filming itself. Viola is merely replicating thought processes or emotions that *happen* to occur, or are preserved for visual scrutiny through the medium of video. Hansen likewise reiterates this notion of the unknowable in Viola’s own “*via negativa*” terms, downplaying usual sensory apparatus in Viola’s transition “from models of the eye and ear to thought processes” (467-468). Hansen’s cerebral and cognitive perspective is an extension of Barthes’ notion of the “Third Meaning” in film—an “obtuse” meaning behind the obvious, or “informational,” interpretation and secondary “symbolic” one, here rendered as a charged one of emotion and cognition (Barthes, “Third Meaning” 52-54). This third meaning is brought forth by the disintegration, slow-down, or realization of artificiality in the medium itself, giving view to the ineffable realm beyond metaphor or symbolism, much as Nam June Paik cuts through to analog-modulated wavelengths

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<sup>11</sup> Hansen primarily contests the oscillation in use of this “cinematic” frame, at once broadly covering “the mobile camera, representations of space, editing techniques, narrative conventions, spectator activity [etc]” as well as the relatively historically specific convention of “the projection of a moving image on a screen in a darkened theater to largely immobilized viewers” (*New Philosophy* 33). New media is then conscripted within and resisting cinema simultaneously.

in video transmission. Similarly, part of the fuel for the fire of this “obtuseness” is, as Viola expresses in a “note” from 1981, the strangling and reduction that literal explanation exerts on the intangible emotions or thought processes left suspended in film. He writes, “There are image symbols which can barely be articulated. / They belong to the domain of the visual memory. / Committing them to words rapes their secrets” (Viola, *Reasons* 79). The pathway to the divine, for Viola, is achieved by means of shedding the extraneousness of words to reach a purity of symbol, resonating for him with a “deeper” purpose.

Indeed, Viola’s belief in the power of video is so extreme as to possibly regard it as the aesthetic equivalent of “new age” music or pan-spiritual anodyne; he effectively erases any suggestion of the concurrent video art practice of highlighting the absurd or sadly human. Critiques of Viola’s over-estimation and uncontested faith in video to convey pan-spiritual influences—from Gnostic Christian to Sufi to Buddhist—usually relate to the degree that spiritualism is seen as a catchall, or “miracle pill” of enlightenment at one’s convenience (the *October*-affiliated *Art Since 1900* noting that such “mystical experience” might just be “mystification” [656]). This “softness” and “goodness” at the heart of Viola’s project is in stark contrast to the early sardonic and self-exploratory gestures that laid the foundation of video’s origins. Against pieces like Vito Acconci’s *Trademarks* (1970), wherein the artist bites every available inch of skin to create indents used to then cast sellable models from, or Chris Burden’s *Shoot* (1971), wherein he was shot in the arm with a rifle, Viola’s “transcendent phase” marks a moment of utilitarian spirituality in a medium usually concerned with the performer’s body as a currency of authenticity. Indeed, Michael Rush’s comment that Viola exhibited as “attention to personal narratives that reflect a quest for identity” (*New Media Art* 105), reveals Viola’s desire to plumb personal depths in order to create a more generally accessible rule or universal truth.

Particularly when viewed against a postmodern fetishization of evading emotional vulnerability, and active negation of any higher master narratives, or even religion, Viola's fascination with sharpening a core moment of emotional nakedness and religious yearning is striking. Yet, this individualism-for-sake-of-the-general-good, pseudo-Christ-ethic is perhaps set into greater relief by parallel cases. Video artists like Bruce Nauman, whose reframed, Beckettian sequences of pain and absurdity reveal the quest for identity as not so easy, yet still possible through poignant satire, and Chris Burden, whose direct and terrorist-like "hijackings" of airwaves reveal an abrupt assertion of control over a potentially passive medium.

### **Nauman, Burden, Jokes, and Cruelty**

Though Viola is concerned with the transcendently religious, and Nauman the comically absurd, both artists rely on a supra-material charge in order to escape the at-times paralyzing reflexivity of "self-aware" art. Wallace's charge that postmodernism (in literature but seeping into fellow fields through the shared influence of television) was unable to get out of its own "who can more hiply posture" dilemma prompts the need for a jolt, or internal short-circuit. Nauman's constant alliance with Beckett—going so far as to name one piece *Slow Angle Walk* (*Beckett Walk*) after the gait of Beckett's characters Molloy and Watt—is logical in this sense, to find in repetition, absurdity, and starkness, some sort of extra-narrative truth. These repetitions, couched in a violent antagonism of audience, or rather a firm belief in striking the audience with intense imagery without explanation, act to jumpstart potential recursions and numbnesses in the drama of the work and video art generally. These attempts at direct engagement can be viewed in a variety of forms throughout the 70s and 80s. Examples of direct address include Richard Serra's mock-PSA *Television Delivers People* (1973), which argues that viewers, not products,

are consumed in the televisual pact; Chris Burden's purchase of primetime advertising spots to inject self-mutilating performance art like *Through the Night Softly* (1973); or Bill Viola's video portraits of immobile and stagnant TV spectators in *Reverse Television – Portraits of Viewers* (1984). The addition of a blackly humorous repetition, or secret injection of authenticity into an overtly "fake" TV program presented, however, is uniquely Nauman, and further reveals the boredom expressed in both original TV and its parody.

A salient example of Nauman's recursive humor is 1985's *Good Boy Bad Boy*. Two correspondents, with the glazed and sternly understanding expressions of afterschool-special spokespeople, look directly into the camera, each delegated to his and her own TV sets in the installation. With this same look of mock-empathy, they relate a litany of self-evident statements, now made even more boring in their monotonous recall and endless list form. What might be sexualized in television ads to sell banal products is now undercut with the correspondents' unadorned declarations that "I have sex, you have sex, we have sex." The flat delivery seems to beg the question that if sex is such a common phenomenon, why is it so readily co-optable to sell suntan lotion and sports cars? Likewise, the life of a TV broadcaster, or perhaps just any denizen of the TV saturated republic (DFW dwells on the statistic that the "average American household" watches TV over six hours a day ["E Unibus" 22]), is claimed as "boring." "You're boring, life is boring," both broadcasters intone with disenchanting urgency. A further disconnect is suggested by the two monologues playing slightly out of synch with one another, highlighting the self-involved, non-reciprocal sort of dialogues expected out of a TV correspondent. They talk, but are incapable of talking to one another. Each simply operates on a separate, isolated loop. The farce of the broadcasters nakedly revealing details about themselves—the fact that even they too, "have sex"—in such deadened fashion also undercuts the supposed titillation of

hearing this from supposedly venerable TV figures. True to Nauman's talent for drawing surprisingly convincing generalities and caricatures, then joyfully puncturing them, *Good Boy Bad Boy* presents a sly critique in its repetition and deadpan delivery.

What is useful about such work is a highlighting, and useful manipulation, of the medium against itself. While interventionist politics in the video art world had been a touchstone since the beginning—Chris Burden, already on the extreme end, evidenced a particularly virulent example in his performance of a live *TV Hijack* (1972) where he held a surprised correspondent at actual knife point—here we see the more indirect use of a kind of phantom textuality to complete the act. The litany of banal statements amplified by the audio-visual context of the fake broadcast environment accumulates in the viewer's mind, much like a list of seemingly endless objects in a postmodern novel,<sup>12</sup> to a sum absurdity and critique beyond its individual components.

Nauman's 1986 piece *Violent Incident* fleshes out this repeat-it-until-it-breaks aesthetic. As mentioned before, and apparent in its title, Nauman's purpose is to shock the viewer, to stun him or her out of complacency. His overtly bleak humor, however, is tempered by his professed belief in the power of jokes. He claims to have always been a moralist, an identity he links to his upbringing in the Midwest, and looks to Man Ray as a paragon for his brand of moralism, as "his [Man Ray's] art works tended to be jokes—stupid jokes" (Simon 321). In *Violent Incident*, we see the "joking" nature only upon repetition of the "incident" in question, that being of a couple that has a slowly escalating "fight," begun humorously by one pulling a chair out from under the other, then ending climactically in murder. This same sequence, however, is repeated over and over again, with different configurations of the practical joker and victim. Any pointed social critique in the piece, perhaps about one gender's predominate violence against the other, is

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<sup>12</sup> For a broader treatment of the list in postmodern novels, see Patricia White's *Gatsby's Party: The System and the List in Contemporary Narrative*.

rendered null by the constant, interchanging roles of violence from one partner to the other (and additionally made mechanical by a reversal of which gender attacks the other, a substitution of same sex partners, and so on). Nauman's declaration that the inspiration for the piece lies in broad human cruelty and the absurdity of human relationships is made all the more poignant by the set-up of the piece in installation with various sequences playing simultaneously on a bank of twelve TVs (Simon 332-333). It is as if we, the viewers, are watching the grand comedy of all minor terrors, or minor cruelties, of relationships all over the world at once. Additionally, the installation set-up provides a total "meta-framing" and immersivity almost exclusive to installation art.

However, Nauman creates in such absurdity, occasionally wracked by moments of trauma or violence, a paradox of delirium and illumination. Again, we see a Beckett-like, revolving wheel of prescribed traumas and comic escalations of petty prank-pulling climaxing in murders that are individually pointless or null, yet when seen as a totality register a sum absurdity. Even with the cyclic numbness derived by playing the sequence over and over, we receive only explicitly the most "violent" sequence of action, produced wholly outside of context, and ending quickly. Nauman claims that his pieces should feel like "getting hit in the face with a baseball bat," without framed "introduction" or "tail" out (Simon 320). The mixture of quick, context-less pain in a numbing repetition opens up a hypnotic space of pondering, kept in tension between lull and agony. This breaking through has been described as a sort of transcendence to a blank, nowhere space, abstracted from a single, followable narrative. Kathryn Chion describes Nauman as "mapping spatially what is characteristically conceived linearly as time-line" ("Nauman's Beckettwalk" 70). We are removed outside the action, and narrative has

been painted almost into a diorama—a total effect achieved by dwarfing each individual narrative.

Rather than the collaged “incidents” gesturing to a transcendent yet purgatorial realm, a parallel thread in video art sought to rupture the fabric of obvious mediation or falsified representation in a single, traumatic blast. None epitomized this approach more starkly than Chris Burden. A forerunner of extreme performance art, his method was to project a field of danger littered with “risky” and potentially lethal opportunities—much as Marina Abramovic would touch on in her “Rhythm 0” piece (1974), offering the use a bevy of arranged objects to use on her, including a loaded gun—yet condensed into a single trauma point. This grid of risk is most directly encapsulated in Burden’s infamous 1971 piece, *Shoot*, the terse notes for which claim, in part, “At 7:45pm [November 19th, 1971] I was shot in the left arm by a friend” (“Work: Confrontation and War” 210). Video documentation proved vital to create cryptic tableaux of unexplained and seeming anecdotal scenes of personal pain. In one of the few surviving still images from “Shoot,” Burden stands apart from any visible crowd, his face too obscured to see any anticipation, faced only directly by his gun-toting friend in almost surreal imitation of the Tiananmen Square protestor (“Selected Works”). Most striking in the image is the celestial-looking white space, framing him in abstract—“in this instant I was a sculpture,” he says, perhaps the most non-living object possible, given further isolation and “freezing” in the documentation of the event. Critic Kristine Stiles notes, “rather than highlight the sensational aspect of his deed, Burden focused on the aesthetic result of his act and its photographic documentation” (“Burden of Light” 30). Considering Burden’s initial intent to stage the performance on campus at the University of California at Irvine, and subsequent relocation to his own F Space gallery, his attempt to produce only a hermetically sealed document, and no-



nonsense, seven-second video of the act, is worth noting (“Burden of Light” 30). Beyond the singular directness and bold signature-making of “Shoot,” however, Burden’s early work from the 1970s also reveals a plethora of strategies for breaking through the numbing monolithic influence of controlled video programming, namely through violence.

Remarkable in their direct breaking of an assumed fourth-wall and true confrontation of TV as a sheerly entertaining medium, Burden’s televised pieces from the 1970s reveal a meeting of television’s influence with a wielded weapon. Firstly, Burden’s 1972 piece *TV Hijack* attempts to pierce the social contract of television, and particularly tritely “familiar” set-up of mock-friendly broadcasters toyed with in Nauman’s *Good Boy Bad Boy*, by an abrupt interruption of his own formulaic interview. Burden’s piece, essentially, consists of consenting to an interview with a local cable news station under the agreement that the interview will be broadcast live, and he can bring his own film crew to produce their own segment. When the interviewer asks Burden about his upcoming projects, he produces a knife, holds it to her throat, and threatens to kill her if the producers cut the live feed. The scene is made additionally tense by his assurances that he will make her perform a series of lewd actions if anyone should sever the transmission. While the morality of the piece has been questioned—Maggie Nelson cites the non-consent of the “victim” as breaking the Hippocratic pact of “do no harm” understood in performance art (115-118)—there is no denying Burden’s attempt to change the chemistry of a usually softened exchange with “live” unpredictability, and potential harm. He attempts to plunder and “hijack” the mercurial “live” element perceived beneath the network television’s easy, conversational air, and create some sort of alchemical product from the raised, and very real, fear and antipathy.

A more commercially complicit attempt to rupture the televisual pact is also apparent in Burden's *TV Commercials 1973-1977* pieces. By purchasing micro-chunks of time of prime time television (usually ten seconds or so), he interjects abrasive, un-contextualized video into the regular flow of programmed material. The most disconcerting in the slew of "commercials" is Burden's piece *Through the Night Softly*, in which we see a nearly nude Burden crawling across a tarmac littered with broken glass in black and white, the only noises his strained breathing as he passes over the shards. In Burden's own documentation of the event, the particularly benign material before and after the piece—a commercial for a music compilation called "Good Vibrations" and a perhaps unintentionally homoerotic ad for deodorizing soap ("Selected Works")—acts to further reveal the sleepy banality of what has otherwise been previously perceived as simply "the way TV has to be." Others in the sequence are more aloof or likely unrecognizable or conceivable to a late night TV watcher, such as *Poem for LA* in which Burden repeats the mantra "SCIENCE HAS FAILED, HEAT IS LIFE, TIME KILLS," or *Chris Burden Promo*, in which Burden's name jumps forth, in glaringly bright script, after artists like Leonardo Da Vinci and Pablo Picasso (chosen for recognition among laypersons). Most remarkable is the attempt to feign a discourse with an overtly one-directional medium by wholesale interjection of one's material, no matter how alienating abrasive (all the better, for Burden), and simply leave the viewer to wade through his own her own disconcerted impression. This injection of agonized selfhood into the supposedly unidirectional flow of television, however, is more complexly engaged with in the work of another contemporary jolted back into some simulacra of reality through a concise gunshot: Andy Warhol.

Though non-consensually subject to the gunshot, Warhol's awareness of both the artificiality of a life-mimicking-TV and TV-mimicking-life wrought by his wounding adds a

much finer grain to notions of TV interactivity and co-opted postmodern reflexivity than Burden. Warhol's painful jump back to reality that is in itself more false and flat than his "fantasy" contrasts with Burden's rendering of a somatic absolute in the viscerality and potential woundedness of his body. David Joselit makes much of Warhol's claim, in his diary, that after being shot he knew he was only "watching television," and that "the movies make emotions look so strong and real, whereas when things really do happen to you, it's like watching television—you don't feel anything" (*Feedback* 116). Joselit gives great significance to Warhol's paradoxical imbuing of "movies" and "television" with both strength and anhedonia; that, in a fashion, the jolting violence of the gunshot returned him to a greater sense of reality, yet this "reality" was simultaneously unveiled as more "fake" than his previous experience. What is highlighted, according to Joselit, is the "infinite regress" this sort of TV-based-on-life and life-based-on-TV effects, that "'TV' and 'life' mutually de-realize one another" into a mutually bland reflection of absent feeling (*Feedback* 117). Likewise, it is the piercing reality of "pain" that allows the return to some semblance of lived experience. Joselit notes, "For Warhol, the exit from the wonderland of televisual disorientation was through the insistent physicality of the body, through pain" (*Feedback* 117). As a sort of metaphysical Burden, Warhol attempted to jump through the frame of the nonstop "Shoot" piece that became his life, only to find the exterior nearly as mediated as before.

While critics such as Wayne Koestenbaum catalogue extensively the filmic works of Warhol as a significant analogue to his typically more famous silkscreens and written pieces, delineating the trends of sexual inertia and prolonged endurance in the films as expressions of Warhol's own sublimated urges, Warhol's expression of the inadequacy of written transcription is just as telling. Joselit frames Warhol's "transcribed" novel *a* in particular as a sort of libidinal

“Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” or a meta-textual comment on his own pursuit to cull intimacy from the shifting constellation of “Superstars” and Factory workers. In particular, Joselit notes the incoherence of the likely drug-induced progression of the 24 hour chat session *a* supposedly captures, claiming its fragmentation reveals that “experience escapes mechanical reproduction,” that a missing, aural “x” factor cannot be rendered by documentary media like tape recorders (*Feedback* 117). The ultimate deficiency of recording media—rendered figuratively in the refusal to reveal the actual point of action in the suggestively titled *Blow Job* (1964)—is more perceptibly heightened in *a*, precipitating Warhol’s gunshot epiphany that capturing “strong and real” emotions is more difficult than it may first appear. Further, rather than be explicitly marked by these inadequate media, and the fragments and lacunas left in their attempt to render a impossible temporality or vividness, Warhol’s late masterpiece *Shadows* in 1968 reveals an employment, rather than aversion to, this murky occlusion of true “desire” or revelation beneath the screen’s surface.

Like depictions of veiled church ornaments, the *Shadow* paintings seem to indicate Wallace’s “single-entendre principles” of truth and revelation while revealing nothing—an offering of something deep, dark, perhaps even religious, yet obscuring it beneath the overall trope of the “shadow.” Comprised of colored prints depicting a shadow in Warhol’s office, and presented in a kaleidoscopic surround within a single room, the paintings push for the invoked aurality missing in the literality of *a*’s transcription. Koestenbaum links these back to the pain, and shattering effect, of the gunshot. “On one level,” he claims, “the shadow is Andy himself, who, after the 1968 shooting, felt substanceless—neither liquid nor solid, neither living nor dead” (183). A perfect ruse, the paintings were both a declaration of the purgatorial subsistence of the broken human body after a life-arresting assault, as well as an indication of a near-

religious truism remaining out of view. They were an attempt to get beyond the literal inscription of the paint, but before the conceptual execution—a suspended space where the potentially rebounded “regress” of recorded life could be arrested long enough to see. Likewise, the muddied cover of the shadows themselves gestured at the non-included information or personal elements that might otherwise be rendered, and seen as ineffectual. Koestenbaum again notes, “the shadows, like the films, stake a claim to what is passing and has passed: they anxiously ferret out inscrutable phenomena (sex, sleep, breathing, eating)” (183). The paintings are an admission of failure, rather than the pained attempt to draw out the miraculous moment of climax from various human functions. At core, the freezing of libido forms the most essential keystone to Warhol’s aesthetics—“time is sexual; that is why it must be stopped” (Koestenbaum 5).

### **Two Sides of a Shadow: Stelarc, Chat Bots, and the Phantom Libido**

This suspension of libido beneath an opaque surface, or shattering into murky, ill-defined projected bodies, is a bridge into the ontology of explicitly digital personhood. As will be discussed momentarily in the instance of conversational “chat bots,” or programmed entities crafted either to make conversation or erotic repartee, the atomizing of erotic urge into a phantasmal sub-textual space is the first movement towards an evocative manipulation of medium for new narrative possibilities. Veiled intentions, obscured personas, and amorphous desire are hallmarks of Warhol’s art-making apparatus, yet these tendencies are revisited with a far more conscious “inhuman” or “posthuman” intent in explicitly cybernetic artists attempting to use technology to morph, or mutate, their own bodily processes. With the body as merely a template to be expanded on, artists splicing intact wholes into dissembled and prosthetic pieces precipitate the dissolving of self into digitized ether.

In the work of performance artist Stelarc, the literal manifestations of “connection” and entwinement with one’s technological apparatus is amplified to the extreme.<sup>13</sup> Rather than awakening from life’s daily mediation by a single jolting gunshot like Warhol or Burden, Stelarc instead spreads this pain in individual, bifurcating points to the entire epidermal area in an attempt to transform the boundary of his ontological personhood. Though later embracing a more baroque array of cyborgian activities—attaching artificially grown ears into his forearms, attaching robotic prostheses, undergoing highly invasive and interiorly mapping “surgeries”—Stelarc’s first utilized art form was that of bodily “suspension” by a network of hooks. A sort of Warholian “shadow” rendered real, Stelarc “suspends” himself with a latticework of hooked lines allowing him to float by an even distribution of pinpricks, floating into a sort of abstract body potentiality. His first suspensions took place with harnesses, yet he declares that he was compelled to move steadily into hooks and the “total” suspension they afforded, sustaining the body on its own force. These hooked suspensions, beginning in 1984 and progressing through the decade, mark an early attempt to delimit the body from its corporeal boundaries that would later manifest as mechanical extensions and data-gathering instruments. His recounting of his first suspension, called “Seaside Suspension,” describes the body being suspended from “an outcrop of rocks parallel to the horizon, looking out to sea near the shore as the tide was coming in [sic] the weather was overcast with the blustery wind swaying the body” (“Suspensions”). With the body “swaying” moved by the “blustery wind” in a matched syncopation, flesh becomes elemental. Dissociated from the recognizable form of the body, Stelarc becomes a warped and mutable structure as pliable as wind or water.

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<sup>13</sup> Stelarc’s fraternity and acceptance within a posthuman and lived science fiction model can be seen in Brian Massumi’s chapter on Stelarc in *Parables of the Virtual*, “The Evolutionary Alchemy of Reason: Stelarc.” Further, cyberpunk patriarch William Gibson tellingly offers the introduction to Stelarc’s first monograph, *Obsolete Bodies/Suspensions/Stelarc*.

Brian Massumi discusses Stelarc's shattering of human ontology through limb-by-limb and patch-of-skin by patch-of-skin interventions, in his broader survey of affect and virtuality, *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002). In doing so he positions Stelarc, namely in his suspensions, as providing a changing or mercurial provocation of what a body *could* or *might* be moment to moment. In Massumi's conception, Stelarc's suspended form offers a sort of Deleuzian body without organs undergoing continual de- and re-territorialization simultaneously. Like Deleuze and Guattari's example of a developing egg presenting nascent, embryonic possibilities of its later self in external, manifested inscriptions, Stelarc's "hung" body is a living potentiality of concurrent erasure and overwriting. Recalling the "computerese" language mentioned in Laurie Anderson's "The Language of the Future," Massumi goes on to describe the "hung" body and its array of micro-fissures as maintaining a sort of circuit board logic, a collection of binary switches determining extended and relaxed tissue. He claims,

Stelarc's art produces the hung body. Hung thing shave entered science and lore under the aegis of chaos theory. The focus of chaos theory are events called 'bifurcation points' or 'singular points.' A singular point occurs when a system enters a particular state of indecision, where what its next state will be turns entirely unpredictable. (Massumi 109)

Hence Stelarc's body becomes a living oscilloscope or Geiger counter, jumping around in an erratic detection of its own boundary and force—its very state a constellation of potentialities, its next move, reorganization, or rupture, split infinitely along each "bifurcation point." Through this virtuality, and entwining its more abstract potentiality, however, is the "pain" incurred in such a performance. Stelarc notes that though it often takes him several days to revive and calm the tissue, the use of hooks rather than harnesses is elemental to his purpose (*Obsolete Bodies*).

His performance is then not only a Zen-like fixation on elemental sublimity, but a harsh, pain-derived call to knowing the abstract potentiality of the human body stretched by an evenly applied stress.

In a move both curiously human and posthuman, however, Stelarc's broader goal has been to neutralize or eradicate the human body by human means. He titled his major monograph *Obsolete Bodies/Suspensions/Stelarc*, as if laying out a linear cause and effect process in reverse—the performance persona of “Stelarc” repeatedly training the body by “suspension” into a final state of “obsole[scence].” Massumi quotes Virilio's take on Stelarc's suspensions as a means to “negate” the body “in favor of pure sensation,” rupturing a notion of “form” defined by skin to a notion of “form” derived by limned sensation (103). Massumi further describes this phenomena not only with the neutralization of Stelarc's old body, but the gesturing towards a new one, one fully inscribed by desire, in claiming, “Desire is the condition of evolution” (123). This notion is particularly novel in requiring the baroque infrastructure of hanging—both physically complex in its arrangement yet relatively simple in its materials—to “purify” the object into a state of raw or elemental emotion. Further, in the networked connotations of this “hanging” and its entwinement with desire, corporeal “want” and the body negated entirely, one sees a useful presaging of digital and cybertextual modes of communication and erotic connection. Indeed, Stelarc's later pieces from the 90s, marked by the developing logic of the Internet (and ARPANET) becoming publically available, reveal a literalization of this logic. In his 1995 piece *Telepolis* for instance, Stelarc straps himself to a system of electroshock conduits controlled by a local user network operated by autonomous participants, sending their literal and emotive “shocks” anonymously yet proximately, rendering intention both abstract and sharply real (Massumi 121).



Historically, however, this microcosm of transforming the discernible body into phantom libido wasn't wholly limited by pain, televisual mediation, or performance art. Rather, as Katherine Hayles has argued, certain terms within concepts of information theory, cybernetics, and artificial intelligence in the mid-twentieth century presaged a larger shift to the "posthuman," or dissolution of the singular, physically enclosed, and biologically singular individual. She draws from Norbert Wiener, the founder of cybernetics, and his concept of the "feedback loop," or the potential for systems to receive information back from external appendages and hence create a larger sensory apparatus. This expansion of a system's sensory network extends to a conception of posthuman ontology as relying more on "systems...constituted by flows of information" than neatly defined "epidermal surfaces" (Hayles, *Posthuman* 84). Hayles expresses the ontological questions raised by these broader shifts in a question used by Gregory Bateson to baffle his graduate students: whether a blind man's cane should ontologically be considered part of the blind man (*Posthuman* 84). Under a cybernetics rubric, Hayles argues, the cane should, supplying as it does necessary information about the man's surroundings and sensory environment. Likewise, Hayles notes other shifts in the disintegration in the physically enclosed human shell. Namely, Shannon and Weaver's reconceptualization of "information" under a much less subjective, and more mathematical rubric, as "an entity distinct from the substrates carrying it" (Hayles, *Posthuman* xi). Likewise, for Alan Turing in his famous test for "intelligence," the body that harbored the "intelligent" substance was immaterial, as proof of humanity was merely "formal generation and manipulation of informational patterns" (Hayles, *Posthuman* xi). This last twist of posthuman subjectivity is important, as it lends a strong emphasis within strains of A.I. informed by Turing to conversation and disembodied textual communication as possibly signaling "humanity." In the search for both an affective charge

within new media textuality, as well as a means for two physically hidden individuals to reach some consummate central territory of “connection,” the notion of “intelligent” material removed from a physical vessel is essential. Indeed, with such façades removed, it becomes easier to see alternate modes of communication as indicating a more direct capacity for “connection.”

Chief in these “alternate modes” during the 1980s was the proliferation of “chat bots,” or deceptively human-like textual programs made to present itself as a “real” and conversation-ready human partner. In more vivacious and “human-like” content, the interactive chat bots of the 70s and 80s offer a more convincing, dramatic, and hence *literary* textual interchange than that of more sterile or functionally game-oriented analogues in interactive fiction (themselves riddled with programmed entities returning automated responses, e.g. “you may take the jug,” “open the door.”)<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the dissolution of personality within the black box of computer algorithm, reminiscent of Stelarc dissolving his physical appearance into purified “libido,” came under the aegis of a relatable façade, concerned principally with easing a human partner into conversation by pre-programmed enticements (sometimes equally motivating “human” rebuttals). These invitations to interact were also, predictably,<sup>15</sup> linked to the more sexual flirtations in more explicitly “erotic”- or “dating”-themed chat bots, which were granted a greater sense of “personhood” and authenticity based on the blinding urges of their partners. The ability to interact, and even achieve a degree of sexual release, in explicitly textual format also reveals a highly evocative merging of new media, connection, and narrative, that I would argue offers a compelling new paradigm in one’s ability to textually interact.

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<sup>14</sup> For more on the history of interactive fiction, see Nick Montfort’s *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction* (2005).

<sup>15</sup> Erotic game maker Mike Saenz sums up this inherent link between technological development and libido as “the first personal robots, let’s face it, are not going to be built to bring people drinks” (Dery, *Escape* 218).

The founding model of the chat bot is ELIZA, programmed by Joseph Weizenbaum at MIT between 1964 and 1966 and effecting its humanity by posing a series of recursive questions culled from the answers submitted by its human partner. The intent of ELIZA was to pose as a Rogerian psychotherapist, supposedly eliciting revelations and curative insights by merely probing the information that was already set forth by the inquirer. For example, if one claimed, “I feel sad,” ELIZA might respond, “Why do you think you feel sad?” Somewhere in the exchange—or perhaps caused by ELIZA’s auto-responses resembling the mechanical predictability of a caricatured Rogerian—the plausibility of ELIZA’s humanness was supposedly established. This merging of artificial intelligence with a presumed benefit to human psychological comfort evidences a larger trend remarked on by media sociologist Sherry Turkle within the dual fields of therapy and programmed companionship. Turkle notes that during the mid 80s to 90s,

At the same time computers were gaining acceptance as intimate machines, psychotherapy was being conceptualized as less intimate... the world of self-help was also in flower, much of it involving a do-it-yourself ideology to which the computer seemed ideally suited. (Turkle, *Life* 103)

In addition to “automated” therapy bots like ELIZA, this computerized “self-help” wave gave birth even to depersonalized toolkits like “Depression 2.0,” which offered symptom-specific aid within the façade of a “human” therapist (Turkle, *Life* 102). Turkle notes also how users overcome their initial skepticism towards computerized therapy through a deeper belief in what a digitally accessible psychoanalytic archive could offer. An archive, for instance, could potentially hold more far-reaching and immediately accessible depository of facts than an “actual” therapist’s brain. Perhaps the “need to be understood,” or at least attempt to derive some

information for use, allows an additional set of blinders to what otherwise might be predictable or rote responses from a (particularly therapy-oriented) chat bot. The convincingness of ELIZA as a potential conversational partner, whether one was ever fully “duped” by her insightful or clinical capabilities, still so disturbed her creator that he felt impelled to write the AI-corrective *Computer Power and Human Reason* in 1976, arguing that the essential qualities of humanity, such as love or reason, were in fact impossible to replicate in computers (Montfort, “*Computer Power*” 367-368). The inflection of an additional quality and perhaps “essential” quality—namely libido—into the equation, however, changes the picture substantially.

Much as a drunk patron at a singles bar might adjust what level “humanity” or “personality” might be deemed sufficient based on increasing levels of desperation, the flirtatiousness of more sensually inclined chat bots offers a useful insight into how sexual need can alter the basic amount of “humanity” required to be convincing. A famous and decidedly more coy chat bot, Julia, was created by Dr. Michael Mauldin on the foundation of ELIZA and haunted the MUDs, or Multiple-User Dungeons, that formed the backbone of an early, pre-Internet chat system (Turkle, *Life* 88). Julia was most efficacious sheerly through her ability to “flirt” by means of “sarcastic non sequiturs” and bizarre literalism (usually in response to more figurative jokes) that respondents misinterpreted as coyness (Turkle, *Life* 88). The notion that sarcastic put-downs and skeptical repeating and defusing of a participant’s romantic forays is interpreted as more “human” is itself troubling, and oddly presages Wallace’s own concern over two-dimensional and irony-saturated characters in postmodern fiction being seen as “real.” An example of Julia’s “human-seeming” literalism can be seen in a chat participant, Barry, discussing possibly making a baby “someday,” to which Julia replies, “The date is Tue Jul 21 23:57:31.” Oddly, Barry is unfazed by the response, and takes the denial of his flirtatious attempt

to insinuate that she might make a baby “someday” with him as merely wit. Likewise, her abrasiveness propels the conversation through tougher spots. When Barry questions whether she is in fact human, and if she is human why she is so continually stand-offish, she responds with the perhaps ultimate stereotype of feminine defensiveness, “I have PMS.” Likewise, disturbingly, such blunt forthrightness and raising of personal declarations meant to shut down inquiry in the other party apparently work quite well. The somewhat sad pantomime of invitation and reproof, attempted joking and literalist shut-down, going on longer than the attemptedly therapeutic relation of ELIZA, seems to offer a troubling precedent about what one perceives as “real,” particularly under the aegis of sexual connection. Indeed, Turkle notes that in Turing’s terminology, it is uncertain whether Julia has passed a Turing test or Barry has failed one (*Life* 90-93).

Concurrently, erotic communication fueled the development of early chat rooms, known as MUDs—or Multiple-User Dungeons—and the Bulletin Board Systems (or BBSs) that formed the backbone of pre-Internet discourse in the loose coalition of networks that comprised ARPANET. Event Horizons, a 1983 company, was known as the first explicitly “adult BBS” system in an era before the America Online Chat rooms of the mid to late 90s would offer a menagerie of sexual curiosities in their pre-formed chat rooms (Dery, *Escape Velocity* 204). BBSs like Event Horizon, and the considerably more massive counterparts like the WELL, or Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link, would eventually form the connective tissue of the World Wide Web proper when it was publically debuted by Tim Berners-Lee in 1992. Before that time, however, the BBSs and MUDs were rife with interactive “game-playing,” hence the “Dungeons” aspect of the MUD title and the inevitable extension to more explicitly erotic “play.”

The practice of cyber sex in the MUD was called “TinySex,” after yet another alternate name of MUD, TinyMUD. And, true to its derivation from “fan”-oriented chatrooms in the MUD, its free-associative style, and “suspended reality” of blind composition, offered a unique form of erotic co-creation. In trying to describe the peculiarly futuristic and appealing aspect of the practice, Hannu Eerikäinen notes that the “sex machine” offers an “*apparatic extension of the body*,” acting as a “*sexual prosthetic system*” (“Desire for Disembodiment” 206). Given Hayles’s conception of a posthuman system constantly seeking the outer sensory extremities of itself, “TinySex” was particularly titillating for its ability to morph one’s ontology, to shift and adapt to this new “prosthesis” in which the only limit point of possibility was the rendered textual description of it. The air of “suspended disbelief” that surrounded such interchanges then allowed for a mutually composed sexual interaction that allowed for mutual input and mutual correctives. Mark Dery, in his discussion of TinySex in the cyberculture history *Escape Velocity*, describes an abstracted exchange removed from the impositions of the “real” when one user, BethR, claims she is “climbing on top” of another user, Roger104, who has already claimed he is “having sex standing up” with another user “Nina5” in a corner (Dery, *Escape* 201). The malleability of the exchange allows a quick narrative fix by which Roger104 and Nina5 become so heated they fall, hence opening the path for BethR’s climb; such acts allow “consensual world-building” and group-centered improvisation (Dery, *Escape* 201). The almost collegial co-construction of narrative under an aegis of suspended reality here lends a certain instability and anticipatory tension to the exchange, and unlike imagination wrought by desperation in a chat bot like Julia, relies on collaboration rather than desirous haranguing.

To return to a prior point, such mutability was also therapeutic. In describing the nascent rise of a computer-mediated identity, Sherry Turkle notes the liberating possibilities of having

near-complete control over one's sexual expression, gender, and physical appearance in the MUDs. During her test sessions at MIT where she was professor, she discovered a plethora of students taking therapeutic advantage of the morphological uncertainty offered by the identity-veiling MUD system. That is, if one was so inclined, one could change their gender (such participants known as a MORFs, or "Male or Female"), sex, or even species, if one was so inclined. The nature of the unique occlusion of one's physical body, as well as any last remaining identity markers in one's voice, allowed a unique platform for experimentation. She notes that one of her students, Doug, "plays four characters distributed across three different MUDs. One is a seductive woman, one is a macho, cowboy type" (Turkle, *Life* 13). Turkle claims that participants think little about the curiosities of "passing" for multiple identities, opening fruitful channels for thinking about the malleability of gender and sexuality in non-digital realms.<sup>16</sup>

Complicit also in this nexus of mercurial identity, and the potential ruptures of violence accompanying a disturbance in one's projected or assumed persona, is a larger theme of 1980s science fiction of replicants and cyborgian poseurs. This conflict is perhaps best crystallized in Philip K. Dick's classic *Do Androids Dream of Electronic Sheep?* (1968), drilled into the early 80s pop-cultural subconscious in the form of Ridley Scott's adaptation of the work as *Blade Runner* (1982). The film's philosophical query isn't so much whether cyborgs can ever be passably "human" company (they can) or even complicit and convincing love partners (they are

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<sup>16</sup> Against this current of utopian flexibility, one incursion of the "real" by means of anti-mediated violence arose in the form of "MUD Rape," or rather, making another avatar subject nonconsensually to one's articulated (and usually aggressive) fantasies. Turkle remarks on the uncertainty of how to regulate such linguistically violent actions, citing the position of anti-pornography activist Catherine MacKinnon that "words describing acts of violence towards women are social actions" and should be punished as intimations of real deeds (Turkle, *Life* 252). The literalization of supposed fantasy into policeable reality only arriving through this stab of violence is, again, reminiscent of Burden's thesis of only disrupting mediation through trauma.

to an almost designed degree), but the ethics more broadly of loving or making love to such a cyborgian partner. Indeed, the main pursuit of the central protagonist, Rick Deckard played by Harrison Ford, is to ferret out these androids that have been otherwise consigned to a life of slave labor on a distant planet and make sure they do not intermix within the “regular” human population. The fear of this integration, and subterfuge on behalf of the androids, only reinforces the paranoia in the novel and film of how passably *convincing* these androids have become, particularly in their ability to ensnare and sexually placate their human contemporaries. One of the last “tools” at Deckard’s disposal to ferret out the androids, however, is a complex somatic-response test called the Voight-Kampff, which entails his looking into the pupils of the questioned subject while asking questions that might cause knee-jerk unease. The test evidences a need to get beyond both Turing-esque conversational fluency, as well as physical mimicry of human features, to some deeper, absent, and potentially unreadable moral “conscience” and livelihood, rendering the usually identifiable qualities of “humanhood” moot. In Deckard’s own relations with the android Rachel in the novel, the question becomes further solidified, erotically, not *if* mechanical production will allow for a convincingly “human” sex-bot, but if such a bot would have a deeper, ethical-moral composite that would ease the worries of the human participant. Married with the notion of cyberculture at the time, and the world of the MUDs just discussed, such an “ethical” dilemma seems to infuse the branching networks of cybersexual intercourse—not “if” it’s possible, but where one “should” participate. Likewise, Žižek argues for a “truer” state of companionship and ontological status in the nature of simply recognizing one’s mediated, or “replicated” status. He claims, “‘I am a replicant’ is the statement of the subject at its purest,” as the advent of cyberspace has created a subjectivity emptied into the object vacuum of cyberspace, such that one might just as easily say, “‘I am an avatar,’ or simply



‘I am online’” (Davis, “Synthetic Meditations” 24-25). Hence, whether between human and replicant or human and avatar, the nature of mediation is so immanent that one is actually having a “truer” and more ontologically forthright interaction if one simply acknowledges one’s actual “replicant” status.

The personalizing of these textual, or cybernetic, constructs to the degree of almost creating a cyborgian partner was also manifest in a commonplace, consumerist accessibility. Linda S. Williams notes that the transference first of visual display from the public forum of film theaters to the slightly more personal space of the television, and finally to the intimate “small screen” of computers dictated a more intimate relation between watchers and their transmitted content. She notes the personalization of the computer almost as a more pragmatic love doll, claiming, “unlike the large film screen, this small screen can be straddled, kissed, embraced, and manipulated” (Williams, *Screening Sex* 305). Indeed, if one considers the gap of privacy between an enclosed, physical book and the normally publically-viewable mass computer as similar to this “large” screen versus “small” screen debate, one can see how the ability to consume erotic material in a digitally mediated private space might give rise to a greater proliferation and charge of digital content. The notion of finding an intimacy *behind* the screen was likewise raised in films like Cronenberg’s 1993 *Videodrome* (Williams, *Screening Sex* 303). A famous sequence in this film presents James Woods, a TV executive enmeshed in a pirated channel offering seemingly staged snuff sequences, literally kissing and attempting to entwine with a former lover through the television screen. Cronenberg’s innovation is that the televised, supposedly two-dimensional, woman *kisses back*. The TV morphs and encloses Woods, the woman—Debbie Harry’s—voice coming booming from an all-encompassing surround that can’t be merely the TV. The thin screen that divided the user from his or her content, regardless of televisual or

computerized content, was one seen as permeable, as potentially offering an intrapersonal charge beyond that of “imagined” print content. The digitally transmitted ghost of Eros seemed sharp, pliable, and above all, *real*.

Central to these notions of love “simulacras” is again the degree of intimacy and “connection” derived, or possible, in cyber- or digitally-transmitted information. From therapeutic chat bots to erotically driven depositories of porn-speak to android love dolls, the urge, desire, and drive for artificially simulated “love” in digital textual format extends, I would argue, to print-transcribed attempts to raise render this libido aesthetically in fiction. The conversation novels of William Gaddis offer a telling attempt to crystallize these fluid methods of conversational self-creation, as their overriding aesthetic strategy is to render a maximalist scale of sheerly overheard dialogue. This has interesting side effects in terms of character ontology: divisions are blurred between the dream-language of pure conversation as characters, defined only by hearsay, shift between their individual person, their stand-in corporation, and their recollection in the dialogue of other revolving characters. Sexuality, and its implied attempt to traverse these bodies of sheer code, or information, is where these already muddied data-pools break down—stream-of-consciousness descriptions of attempted coupling reveal the near-impossibility of posthuman bodies truly interacting. Similarly, the fear of incorporation, or the industrialization of sexuality (a condom corporation goes under; it was apparently “full of... holes” [Gaddis, *JR* 356]) bleeds over into Gaddis’s continual fear of organic artistry giving way to automation. His solution is to retrench into the dregs of the “pre-human,” or rather the base, biological remainders from a larger, more grandiose human enterprise—broken pianos, organic matter, fragments of scores, and the like. The result is a shattering implosion of “feeling” rendered in scraps left over by the mass-industrialization of artistic sentiment—a telling

metaphor for narrative's colonization by its parallel strategies in fine art, visual art, and cyberculture. Concurrent with these trends, the movement from Gaddis's *JR* (1975) to *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985) evinces the failure, and exhaustion, of the postmodern novel to replicate mimetically the digital and new media strategies that so fervently surround it by the mid 1980s.

### **Non-attribution: Corporeal Fluidity in William Gaddis's Conversation Novels**

In the search for a plausible antecedent to the stuffed shirts and anhedonic husks of William Gaddis's fiction—manifest in pretentious profiteers, businessmen with nothing to sell, and rulers of “paper empire[s]” (Gaddis, *JR* 651)—T.S. Eliot, an often-cited influence on Gaddis,<sup>17</sup> offers a viable start. Particularly apropos is Eliot's model of hollow men, comprised of “shape without form, shade without color,” whose “whisper[s]” are as “quiet and meaningless / As wind in dry grass” (56). If we take these stuffed men, comprised only of pointless whispers, as an anticipation of the posthuman body, comprised only of meaningless quotation, we might come somewhere close to defining the language-comprised entities in *JR* (1975) and *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985).<sup>18</sup> Both texts are formally comprised of “whispers” and conversations, as they fall within the arc of Gaddis's “conversation novels,” or texts comprised, entropically, of near-continuous streams of unattributed and overheard dialogue.<sup>19</sup> By nature of

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<sup>17</sup> Tom LeClair recalls, after a rare interview with Gaddis, that he “seemed to be quite pleased to be speaking about his work, particularly the influence of T.S. Eliot, which he felt was unrecognized” (Gaddis and LeClair 18). Similarly, in his *Paris Review* interview, he claims “speaking of influences, I think mine are more likely to be found going from Eliot *back* rather than forward to my contemporaries” (Gaddis and Abádi-Nagy). For a more sustained critical treatment, see Miriam Fuchs's article “‘*il miglior fabbro*’: Gaddis' Debt to T.S. Eliot.”

<sup>18</sup> Referred to hereafter as *CG*.

<sup>19</sup> Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, in his *Paris Review* interview with Gaddis, described this fluid state of anonymity as “floated” dialogue, which Gaddis affirmed, claiming “it was my hope... that

this non-attribution, both novels also struggle to create a sinewy shell of character against the general wash of data threatening to dissolve, or supersede, any sense of autonomy or interiority. However, while critics have touched on isolated elements of posthumanity, entropy, and runaway dialogue in Gaddis's "conversation" novels,<sup>20</sup> a totalized perspective of how Gaddis combines these tropes in a new ethic of characterization and embodiment has not been forthcoming. Specifically urgent is Gaddis's experimentation with the cohering and dissolving factors of sexuality, desire, and affect in his visions of self-created men and increasingly anthropomorphized corporations. A telling progression is offered specifically in the movement between *JR* and *CG*; the bloat of the former's language-entities becomes tellingly condensed and hollowed to the point of dissolution in latter, ultimately investigating where in the rubble a fragment of artistic authenticity might reside.

*JR*, the comic epic describing a "paper empire" wrought by the eleven-year-old middle school student J R Vansant, allies this virally expansive quality of unbounded language to the runaway damages of unfettered late capitalism. *Carpenter's Gothic*, referring to the house that contains *CG*'s tight family drama's architectural style—a cheap imitation of actual Gothic, marked by cheap façades and ramshackle interiors—condenses this "pure" dialogue to a micro-scale and reveals the true lack of cohesion in characters solely defined by conversational throwaways. Ontology is muddled in the process; in the world of *JR*, the authenticating word of a teenager holds as much weight as the fake corporation that bears his name. Likewise, the blurring of personal identity is amplified in attempts to traverse the rote artificiality of these bodies-defined-by-language, or rather personas-cum-corporations in the realm of sexual

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having made some effort they would not read too agonizedly slowly and carefully, trying to figure out who is talking and so forth. It was the *flow* I wanted" (Gaddis and Abádi-Nagy).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Wutz, Moore, Schryer, and O'Donnell.

intercourse. The attempt of floating bodies defined by information temporarily to inhabit cohesive, organic forms results only in an inhuman splicing of abstraction and physicality, a project of body swapping gone awry. Similarly, the embedded fear of automation that fruitlessly attempts to co-opt essential human intimacies is allied to artistic creation. *JR* intimates a fear of the obsolescence of the living, breathing performer for automated systems of vinyl discs and player pianos. There is little room for the “alive” human, and both novels posit that a person’s idiosyncratic speech—easily replicated, often misunderstood—is increasingly more viable than the body housing that speech. Gaddis offers a pyrrhic victory in his return to the small human remains left behind after automation, positing that an aesthetic of “dregs” or “waste” might be the only means to preserve a central human element in industrially overrun genres. Taken together, however, both texts gluttonously imbibe concurrent communication technologies under a “high” postmodern frame, accumulating failed communications to the point of implosion and clearing ground for a new kind of the novel in the process.

In discussing the “systems” of Gaddis’s novels, it is necessary to discuss the cybernetic theory Gaddis repeatedly asserted as an influence on the novels. (*JR* in particular is riddled with allusions to the ideas of the founder of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener, and the character Jack Gibbs is named after Josiah Willard Gibbs, an early forerunner to cybernetic thought.) Indeed, critic Steven Moore aligns *JR*’s implicit goal of addressing societal patterns through patterns in unharnessed belief with Wiener’s belief that “society can only be understood through a study of the messages and communication facilities which belong to it” (64). This perspective, however, is more aligned to an earlier generation of “first-order” cybernetics, which posits that within a closed-system, “order (information)” and “disorder (entropy)” can be identified and “redundancies” and “idiosyncrasies” eventually reduced or eliminated (Moore 83). This “first-

order” perspective is shared by the failed modernist artists within the novel (e.g. composer Edward Bast, writer-historian Jack Gibbs, playwright Thomas Eigen, writer Schramm, and painter Schepperman), who attempt to create enclaves of serenity in a disordered world. Critic Stephen Schryer’s intervention in “The Aesthetics of First- and Second-Order Cybernetics in William Gaddis’s *J R*” is to conceive of the novel as emblematic of the far more subjective, and user-reliant, “second-order” school of cybernetic thought, favoring a “constructivist paradigm that highlights the role of the observer in creating his or her own reality” (77). This revaluation is key to moving beyond conceptions of Gaddis’s work as an airtight modernist project requiring a formalist alignment of the proper enigmatic sequences into a far more relativistic and mutable project changing according to reader perspective—an experimentally observed photon under Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, switching positions depending on the presence of an observer. Gaddis himself reflects that “the reader is brought in almost as a collaborator in creating the picture that emerges of the characters, of the situation” (Gaddis and Abádi-Nagy). This participatory element raises the tenuousness of the dialogue to the forefront, presenting not a clear overheard transcript of character interaction, but an enigmatic sequence missing key elements and requiring input to make sense of the shapeless mass of text.

A notorious and often-invoked critique of Gaddis’s work (particularly *The Recognitions*), which focuses on these perceived gaps and intentional difficulties, is Jonathan Franzen’s 2002 *New Yorker* piece “Mr. Difficult.” In the essay, Franzen uses Gaddis as example of a “Status” writer supposedly prizing cruel cerebralism over self-affirming, or easily relatable, emotional realism. The “Status” writer, according to Franzen, invites a “discourse of genius and art historical importance,” as opposed to the “Contract” writer, who offers “pleasure and connection” and the implied pact of understanding between reader and writer (240). While critic

Stephen J. Burn amply refutes Franzen (and particularly Franzen’s embedded claim about a supposed myth of Status writing as exhibitionistic data storage) in “After Gaddis: Data Storage and the Novel,” little attempt has been made to find a reconciled intermediary between Franzen’s two models. Gaddis does this work himself, somewhat in the contract-based cerebral exercise of “aporia,” an ancient Greek creation described in his last work *Agapē Agape* (2002) as “a game you couldn’t win, a parlour game proposing questions there was no clear answer to and winning wasn’t the point of it” (6). Looking through this model of “aporia,” and the fruitless guessing at absence it invites, we see a “contract”-like engagement between reader and author based on a “status” presumption of artfully excluded information—in the pact of “game,” the reader guesses at the nameless absence at the core of the work. Through this decidedly more heterogeneous model, one conceives of the felt “lack” at the core of Gaddis’s fiction towards which his scrambled, and text-described, characters likewise attempt to gravitate.

As these questions are immanent in Gaddis’s tailored employment of dialogue and quotation, let us discuss briefly his method. Steven Moore, perhaps Gaddis’s best and most sensitive reader, describes the sheer scale, and hence exemplary status, of Gaddis’s experiment with overheard conversation: “Novels written primarily in dialogue have been done before—for example, by Ronald Firbank (whom Gaddis has read) and Ivy Compton-Burnett (whom he hasn’t)—but never to the extreme lengths Gaddis takes it” (63). Part of this “extrem[ity],” as mentioned before, is the dissolution of fully defined and legible characters usually delivered clear prose exposition. Joseph McElroy describes the erosion of recognizable subjectivity in the novel as part of Gaddis’s articulation of “unspeakable practices,” seeming to conjure an abstract corporeality of thought, “as if the intercourse of minds begot an aura of persons and thus their corporeal presence and physical scene” (70). Gaddis himself marks this loss of character in *The*

*Recognitions* as part of a comic tradition, as the comic novel usually has “characters reflecting facets of the central figure who, for all practical purposes, disappears” (Gaddis and Abádi-Nagy), extending and coupled with overlapping, dissonance voices in *J R* to occlude the actual J R Vansant intermittently throughout the novel. Patrick O’Donnell describes this proximal flashing of fragmented character facets as a “nightmare version of Bakhtin’s heteroglossia” (Paragraph 7). However, in disintegrating any central characters, with “personality” conjured by a refracting series of unattributed monologues, *J R* in particular offers a novelistic Turing test. Indeed, Gaddis describes *J R* as something of a challenge, or a test, to determine any potential subjectivity in his language-limited characters, as he claims he assiduously avoids the “easy effects” of “interior monologue;” a character has “got to show it, to *tell* someone” (Gaddis and Abádi-Nagy). Characters are a sum, accumulated set of traits and data, which Gaddis dares the reader to look beyond or else take the superficial surface of information as “personality.”

Like a Turing A.I. attempting to “pass,” the characters in *J R* offer an orally propelled scheme to render algorithm and recognizable verbal cadence into “personhood.” As O’Donnell describes, “through vocal tics or characteristic expressions, one may come to ‘know’ the conversationalists of *J R*” (Paragraph 7). Similarly, one reviewer asked, “what then, it will be asked, does Gaddis gain by putting his reader through his exercise? He gains the eerie effect of identifying our civilizations with all of its jargons” (Auchincloss). Gaddis’s wish is to render dialect as *person*—to strip subjectivity from the ideas themselves. He anthropomorphizes tics and idiosyncrasy much as a computer scientist would in attempting to prove the organic nature of a program by revealing supposedly human glitches. The “game” is then on us, as readers, to identify, probe, and query these half-conceived threads of verbal eccentricity as fully realized persons.



As a test of empathy, however, *JR* locks each thread of algorithmically defined personality into its defined, isolated groove. This isolation is abetted by the veiling effect of the telephone omnipresent throughout. O'Donnell describes the various solipsistic modes by which characters communicate with one another, rendered into one-directional fragments and overhead monologues by the continual fragmentation of the phone conversation. O'Donnell puts them into three categories as follows: "monologues that serve to parody the 'specialized' languages of legalese or businessese, phatic conversations where we hear a speaker on one end of and must imagine what the other speaker is saying, and fragmented conversations between several speakers" (Paragraph 8). Though O'Donnell supposedly outlines three distinct discursive categories, all modes function essentially as monologues in that their intent is not to convey knowledge, but rather to preserve the cadence of each character's self-affirming oral loop. These propulsive streams of self-delusion can be evidenced in phone calls such as "yes from my trust fund just enough to... But... Yes but..." (Gaddis, *JR* 505). Indeed, O'Donnell describes how monologues are "parody discursive systems—signs and codes are arranged in self-referential language," indicating ideologies and means of communication so coded and personal they become incapable of conveying information to others, but exist only to drive their own conversation forward (Paragraph 6).

This parallel solipsism rather than communication is set into further relief by Marshall McLuhan's theory in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) relating to the paralleled effects of "narcissism" and "narcosis" embedded in new systems of media expansion, implied by *JR*'s telephone-driven empire. McLuhan begins his theory by reestablishing the original derivation of Narcissus's name, from the eponymous myth, with the Greek term for "narcosis" meaning "numbness" (51). How this self-involved numbness unfolds is reliant on the

“medium” of the lake’s reflective surface in the Narcissus myth. McLuhan argues that when Narcissus viewed his own image, “this extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image” (51). McLuhan then transposes this sense of overloading on beauty, or aesthetic feedback, to the “extensions of man” he puts forth elsewhere in *Understanding Media* as prosthetic technological senses of one’s personal sensory network (such as a telephone network expanding one’s auditory range). This overlap results in a sum loss of feeling, as “The principle of numbness comes into play with electric technology, as with any other. We have to numb our central nervous system when it is extended and exposed, or we will die” (McLuhan 56). The expanding fringe of telecommunicational access, then, is like an opened nervous system, requiring a personality-curbing “narcosis” in order to stay functional, or otherwise risk exposing the organism to the expanded surface area of sensitivity.

Part of *JR*’s novelty is in transposing this “numbness,” and its emotional twin in loneliness, onto the expanded networks of personalized corporations in the novel. Gaddis anticipates the kind of corporate anthropomorphism espoused in the recent *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* Supreme Court case, where corporations were granted “personhood” in being allowed to make unlimited campaign contributions under first amendment rights usually preserved for individuals. (A similar, more contemporary example would be corporations granted protection for religious beliefs by the *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* case.) The idea of corporations as living, breathing entities bearing the rights of individuals yet exempt from the scrutiny they would be exposed to is thoroughly explored in *JR*. The sexually licentious hippie Rhoda, former girlfriend of Schramm, says upon rifling through Bast’s mail: “here’s one will you chair this management symposium on healing the sick corporation I mean that must be

some chair” (Gaddis, *JR* 556). Through Rhoda’s astonished joking she exposes the faux-empathetic jargon of a financially ailing business aligned with physical sickness. Likewise, *JR* describes the legally advantageous quality of having a quasi human-corporation entity, as “you can’t put a corporation in jail” (Gaddis, *JR* 648). O’Donnell has also made a correlation between the operation of language and that of commodities in the novel: that, as both corporations and language are constructed of redundancies and intentionally faulty components, like “a lot of old parts stuck together” (Gaddis, *JR* 708), there is a continual need for replacement and enlargement (Paragraph 14). The larger the corporation becomes, and more expansive the language network, the more each requires retrenchment and reinforcement (due to an increased field of “entropy,” in a cybernetic sense).

The attempt to create an organism from bloated, corporate systems falls apart most visibly in the sexual realm, perhaps indicating the truest test of corporate “personhood.” (Corporations, after all—other than in bad “mergers and acquisitions” jokes—can’t have sex.) One might recall sexuality as the missing cohesive element granting greater subjectivity and personhood to chat bots like Julia in the MUD realm. However, in *JR*, the act of transforming organic activities like sexual intercourse into corporate entity, becoming artificially mediated in the process, leads only to dissolution and instability. One main example is a condom-producing corporation priding itself on the pointedly organic “strong real thin sheep membranes,” apparently created as a naturalistic alternative to the “artificial” sexual practices of the “pills” “all these girls are taking” (Gaddis, *JR* 355). The corporatization of sex, however, is described in a double-entendre-rich phrase as “full of God damn holes” (Gaddis, *JR* 356). Given the context that this statement is delivered at a piano roll factory, here Gaddis indicates the metaphoric faultiness of sexual automation, the pragmatic financial failing of the corporation, and the literal

basis of the corporation's floundering possibly because of its faulty and hole-filled condoms. A similar point is made by Gibbs relating to the relative reliability of investing in pork "bellies" against the more capricious human breast. Gibbs's reasoning is that "[you] never know if breasts are going to be friendly or not... can't define them too damned simple" (Gaddis, *JR* 509). His personification of breasts, which are apparently too capricious to be trusted, is set against the reliable investment of the pork bellies, indicating again the corporation's sponge-like ability to subsume even descriptions of individual acts of sex. Opposed to this mass-scale transformation of sex through the mechanics of industry, even small-scale personal intercourse becomes muddied and disembodied to the point of becoming purposeless or impossible.

In charting Gaddis's removal of human functions from their linked appendage, critic Stephen Matanle cites the influence of Greek philosopher Empodocles on the novel. Empodocles is invoked explicitly by Gibbs in an attempt to help Mr. Ford, the "program specialist," decode the motto adorning the school's entrance—"try Empodocles," Gibbs suggests (Gaddis, *JR* 26, 45). According to Gibbs, the motto refers to a stage in Empodocles's "cosmogony" "when limbs and parts of bodies were wandering around everywhere separately" (Gaddis, *JR* 45). Matanle elaborates on how in Empodoclean thought, the "world is ruled by two forces, Love and Strife," where the function of Love is "to unite, to make one out of many," and the function of Strife is "to separate, to disperse things without apparent design" (109). *JR*, in Matanle's estimation, is primarily ruled by Strife (109), leaving the erotic sequences in the book as a Love-driven attempt to bridge an irresolvable gap, or rather, attempt to pull together the nebulous clusters irrevocably broken by Strife. Matanle describes the atomizing effect this Strife-cum-Love effect holds on bodies in the novel, claiming, "during the sexual act, limbs often seem to have been 'caught in

some random climax of catastrophe” (111). Sex is the closest approximation Gaddis offers to encapsulate this intermediary Love-Strife.

Like a Stelarc pulled too far and elementally into indistinguishable shapes, Gaddis’s character ontology becomes nearly indistinguishable in the Strife-inflected realm of sexuality. Schryer reiterates this disassembly, claiming, “fragments do not clearly attribute body parts to specific subjects” (88). This “fragment[ation]” is evidenced in erotic descriptions: “From his her own hand came, measuring down firmness of bone brushes past its prey to stroke at distances, to climb back still more slowly, fingertips in hollows, fingers paused weighing shapes...” (Gaddis, *JR* 490). The sequence seemingly describes a sculptor molding air rather than a two-party process of coitus, with Jack “weighing” sexually suggestive “shapes” as if they were gaseous elements, or otherwise far removed from a cohered body. Reminiscent of the possibilities of ontological looseness allotted by the MUD’s textual descriptions, here in fluid stream-of-consciousness prose bodies deteriorate into senseless conglomerates. This dissolution of bodily barrier continues in later moments: Jack’s probing tongue is described as “gorging its stabs of entrance as swim to its passage rising still further to threats of its loss” (Gaddis, *JR* 490). This action of constant forward motion and constant retraction, described by the “rising” “passage” undercut by “loss,” marks a surreal, Sisyphean task of traversing bodily barriers just as they retreat. Critic Peter Wolfe has noted that unlike Joyce, whose use of composite adjectives and neologistic sex-talk usually “promote[s] both speed and clarity,” Gaddis’s free-floating assemblages sometimes impede the action they describe, or provide askance angles into their represented symbols (61). This movement from condensed imagery to freestanding images indicates something incomplete in Gaddis’s stream-of-consciousness method, or slightly irregular. Rather than heightening or elevating a mimetically experienced reality, Gaddis’s

characters perceive a reality made slightly different in their imagined abstraction, returning to bodies that have been poorly melded or spliced in the process.

This friction evidences a broader unraveling between the abstracted thought that dreams of these activities and the lumbering, stilted bodies used to execute them, raising questions about the efficacy of a posthuman body defined solely by information. Critic Michael Wutz notes Gaddis's likely resistance to a posthuman model of "intelligence" dictated by disembodied clusters of information, claiming, "with N. Katherine Hayles, Gaddis would agree that mak[ing] information lose its body entails a monstrous act of denial, not unlike the cultural repression of our sexual and bodily functions in a Freudian sense" (198). Hence, while composing a sequence of novels seeming to tear away the flesh of subjective prose description, Gaddis writes more accurately on the knife point between "freeing" information, and "monstrous[ly]" ridding it of any corporeal identity. As a surrogate for this absent corporeal form, however, Gaddis attempts to conjure an in-between state, suggesting the potential, abstracted realm of affect. As Patricia Ticineto Clough has claimed with regard to shifts in contemporary postmodern thought, "there was a growing sense that poststructuralism generally but deconstruction in particular were 'truly glacial' in the pronouncement of the death of the subject and therefore had little to do with affect or emotion" (206). Rather than believing that emotion is imbued after a bodily system is formed, Clough sides with critics "conceptualizing affect as pre-individual bodily forces augmenting or diminishing a body's capacity to act" (207). Affect, then, for Clough, isn't something retroactively read into a finished bodily system, but rather a guiding abstract element tangibly affecting that body's reconstruction. The "deadness" of the Gaddis linguistic system then may be because it lacked such an intangible element all along.

There are, however, such “intangibles” offered in *J R* through glimmers in otherwise doomed characters with lofty artistic ambitions, attempting to operate outside of the commercial economy that rules the novel. While these intangibles are usually codified in the language of finance, I see them instead as potentially animating agents to more soulless and data-driven figures noticed by more pure-hearted and intuitive characters. Perhaps most significant is Bast’s attempt to educate J R on “intangible assets,” in contrast to the boy’s stark commercial materialism, by playing him Bach’s Cantata Twenty-One. Bast instructs him “tell me what you heard,” then, after J R’s bumbling attempts fail, quickly corrects him: “you weren’t supposed to hear anything!” indicating the desired reaction was more emotional than content-driven (Gaddis, *J R* 656-58). Ironically enough, J R translates the emotional content of the cantata into a rough, ready-at-hand approximation of pornography, or the middle ground between base materialism and lofty idealism. J R describes the cantata as “this here lady starts singing up yours up yours so then this man starts singing up mine... then they go back and forth like that’ (Gaddis, *J R* 658). Teacher Amy Joubert similarly attempts to convince J R of abstract, noncommercial entities, by gesturing at the moon “Yes look up at the sky look at it!... The moon is coming up, don’t you see it? (Gaddis, *J R* 474). She tries to refute J R’s claim that there is a “millionaire for everything” by asking of the moon, “Is there a millionaire for that?” J R later admits to Bast that the “moon” Amy indicated was actually an illuminated Carvel ice cream sign, and hence would certainly have a millionaire behind it.<sup>21</sup> However, it bears noting that attempts to elucidate abstract potentials beyond the frame of the novel usually result, particularly when processed through J R’s stringently empirical mindset, in a return to the narcotic economies of the novel, be they linguistic, economic, or sexual.

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<sup>21</sup> Matanle and Schryer argue that it is ultimately unclear which character is right, hence further proof of “second-order” cybernetic indeterminacy, depending on the viewer.

Just as pornography is easier for J R to understand than an idealized, classically rendered love, so too does art offer an intermediary for the impossibility of genuine emotional union. Gibbs, in a particularly sarcastic moment, reflects that the only problem with literature is that “a novelist has to understand women” (Gaddis, *J R* 248). Later, when speaking to Rhoda, Gibbs cites emotional closeness as perhaps a means to escape desperate, failed artistry, particularly as relates to her suicided partner Schramm: “what Schramm wanted was a woman he could trust with everything he had wanted it so much he knew if he thought he had it and lost it he’d cut his throat” (Gaddis, *J R* 615). Gibbs goes on to frame this soulless sexuality in industrial terms, the constant irritant to true art in Gaddis’s cosmology. Gibbs accuses Rhoda of believing “getting laid’s about as interesting as a, as washing your face no more feeling than a, than a milking machine” (Gaddis, *J R* 615). As if speaking about the proliferation of arts through a sort of digital industrialization concurrently operating in 1970s and 1980s, Gibbs acts as spokesman for Gaddis’s retrenchment in the “true” art of organic composition or Benjaminian aura. What pornography is to sex (impersonal, unfelt), so—to Gibbs and Gaddis—the encroaching forms of mechanical artistry—be it film, video, or a record player—are to organic creation.

The eventual eradication of the living human artist under the heel of automation is given its most concise form in the “social history” Jack Gibbs writes throughout *J R*, entitled *Agapē Agape*, which is also the name of Gaddis’s last novel on the same subject. Gibbs describes *Agapē Agape* as a “sort of social history of mechanization and the arts, the destructive element” (Gaddis, *J R* 244), which aligns with Gaddis’s own lifelong fascination with the player piano.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The piano arises explicitly in *J R* in Jack Gibbs’s comment: “shoot the God damned pianist what it’s about just told you, player piano play by itself get to shoot the pianist” (Gaddis, *J R* 604). Gibbs refers to a vignette by Oscar Wilde recounted in “Impressions of America” wherein Wilde found a disclaimer above a “saloon-hall piano in Leadville” claiming, “Do not shoot the pianist, he is doing his best,” which Wilde wryly claims is “the only rational method of art



Wutz describes Gaddis's mechanical fixation cropping up in *J R* through an eerie recurrence of disembodied hands: "consider, for example, the repeated focus on hands, not as an index of humanness and *self*-expression, but—what is more prominent in the light of the ubiquitous severance of art from the body—as a marker of mechanization, which is to say, dehumanization" (195, italics Wutz's).<sup>23</sup> The consideration of the human body as merely an organ for music that might plausibly be replaced by another, artificial organ is raised in Gibbs's discussion of an esoteric nineteenth-century German scientist attempting to summon a human voice from inanimate tissue. Gibbs elaborates: "nineteenth-century German anatomist Johannes Müller took a human larynx fitted it up with strings and weights to replace the muscles tried to get a melody by blowing through it" (Gaddis, *J R* 288). This *Frankenstein*-ian tableau presents replication with a chilling efficiency and suggests, in its link to musical recording, the possible nullification of live performance entirely. A member of J R's school at one points refutes Gibbs's discussion of artist's hardship (Gibbs claims that Schepperman is "selling his blood...to buy paint") with the reiteration that musical artists, for one, have become obsolete as "records of any symphony you want reproductions you can get them that are almost perfect" (Gaddis, *J R* 48). The surging speed of efficiency is also applicable to reading and literature too, as Gibbs describes a speed-reading course that ensures "graduates can read between fifteen hundred and three thousand words per minute" (Gaddis, *J R* 387). Note Gaddis's satirical antagonism toward applying industrial speed and logic to his prized practice of narrative, much as it might aid the pseudo-industrial dialogue machines he exhausts so thoroughly. (This hatred is emblematic, perhaps, of

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criticism I have ever come across" (Moore 104). Gibbs jokingly attributes the death of the pianist once and for all to the automation of the player piano.

<sup>23</sup> The synecdochic implication of hired labor in these superfluous "hands" is raised elsewhere by J R in his plot to industrialize labor at his purchased steel mills, where J R explains "what costs so much anyway is all these here people, you know? See because if we could like get them out of there..." (Gaddis, *J R* 296).

the long-running resistance to alternate-media forms of narrative placing more pressure on the print-frame until it ruptures.) Against the threat of this breathless pace of industry, Gaddis instead finds his kernels of organic “humanism,” and a nostalgic mode of human and biologically-oriented composition elsewhere. These “kernels” surprisingly arrive in the fetishization of garbage, trash, and excrement—the last vestiges of a subhuman, but still technically human, craft.

Moore makes much of Gaddis’s preoccupation with waste, and the Freudian-psychoanalytic equivalence of money and excrement in particular. Moore notes that in *JR*, the decidedly adolescent J R exhibits a wild-eyed, almost perversely naïve fascination with money, as if it were not the lifeblood of capitalist culture but rather the pointless material of excrement. Other characters also misperceive the value of paper money when compared with means of exchange more overtly revealing its material worth, such as metallic coins—a classic, Freudian transference of excrement’s “pointlessness” experienced during the child’s anal-erotic phase to later useless matter (Moore 77). Likewise, considering Gaddis’s aesthetic fixation on “dregs,” his famous formalist proclamation from his first book *The Recognitions* is apposite: “What’s any artist, but the dregs of his work?” (95-96). Gaddis means to downplay the usefulness of author biography in considering a produced work, implying that the human extrapolated from the art is but a shadow of the art’s totality, but what if one were to reverse the equation, and see these “dregs” as a distilled humanistic fragment of a potentially compromised artwork? Might then the dregs of the artist, as filthy and immaterial as Freud’s excrement, be capable of some lessened human artwork, which is still nonetheless human?

This “dregs” artwork is I think a far more fitting compromise between extremist camps in Gaddis criticism positing that the status of the artwork in *JR* functions as either secluded,

modernist utopia or jury-rigged postmodern shanty easily eroded by entropy. One example is an early insinuation of Bast's eventually derailed aspirations as a composer. (Gaddis notes that Bast's goals become drastically reduced throughout the novel, winnowed from a "grand opera" to a "cantata," then to a "piece for orchestra," and finally to a "piece for unaccompanied cello" drawn in crayon from his hospital bed at the novel's end [Gaddis, Abádi-Nagy].) Bast, whom Schryer describes as a proponent of "first-order" cybernetics in his desire for pristine aesthetic microcosms, has recently come upon his workroom, a further microcosm of passivity, wrecked by local youths. A policeman on the scene tells Bast the full and obscene extent of the culprits' vandalism through the likely suspects: "—Kids... who else would shit in your piano" (Gaddis, *JR* 141). While this seems profane, or filthy enough as is, Bast then moves to the piano to play this shit-filled piano—a moment never remarked upon by critics, perhaps for its rote absurdity. In a rare prose exposition the narrator describes, "[Bast] fit his hand to an octave and falter[ed] a dissonant chord and falter[ed] a dissonant chord again, and again" (Gaddis, *JR* 142). Gaddis's description of the "dissonant" chord indicates that he is hitting a note "prepared," in the popular practice of John Cage, by excrement-coated hammers. This interpretation is reiterated in Bast's simultaneous banter: "Believing and shitting are two very different things? —Edward... —Never have to clean your toilet bowl again... he recovered the dissonant chord,—right?" (Gaddis, *JR* 142). The "dissonan[ce]" of the chord and the reference to the toilet bowl seem too close not to associate with one another—they are even rendered theoretical analogues. Similarly, reiterating a running refrain of "believing and shitting" that appears throughout the novel, Bast here consciously mixes the two philosophical poles: a Platonic ideal of thought mixed with a material baseness of bodily expulsion. His continual keystrokes and exploration of the dirtily prepared

piano indicate that, even with such a sullied and ultimately debased existence, he still wishes to make music from it, a dissonant composition better than no composition at all.

Under the template of affect, I believe a “debased” aesthetic could rather be seen as a reinterpretation of base materials with the implicit charge of a garbage-driven aesthetic. As Clough argues, “the turn to affect points instead to a dynamism immanent to bodily matter and matter generally—matters capacity for self-organization and being informational” (227). Rather than allowing an art object to be co-opted by mechanization, and disintegrate of its own accord, Gaddis seeks to strain the object for the remainders of humanity held within it. Through such dregs, present in the remainders of human material waste—shit, rags, scraps—one can make resonant art reminiscent of Joseph Müller’s cobbled-together singing larynx. However, even the bodies that create such dreg-material to then be made into art have been dissolved into the smoke of conversation, never allowed to touch one another, with sexuality as the ultimate disorienting force. Where Gaddis makes the final disassembly of his basely cohered dialogue-bodies using the most limited palette and scale available, such that readers may make no mistake, is in the aperitif-sized *CG* in 1985.

It is striking to see the maximalism of Gaddis’s two prior novels—*The Recognitions* and *JR*—give way to the petite, diorama style of *CG*. The novel is almost a paint-by-numbers fictional enactment for Gaddis—a “finger exercise,” as he put it (Grove B1). As Gaddis claims he always works from a “problem,” *CG* is marked by its Aristotelian restrictions in “observ[ing]” the unities of time and place to the point that everything . . . takes place in one house, and a country house at that, with a small number of characters, in a short span of time” (Gaddis and Abádi-Nagy). This simplicity is reiterated by the social dynamics of the novel, working explicitly through “clichés,” or “the older man and the younger woman, the marriage breaking up, the

obligatory adultery, the locked room, the mysterious stranger, and so forth” (Gaddis and Abádi-Nagy). The particularities of the novel are of secondary interest here, but for the sake of continuity they detail a “former debutante” and writer (Gaddis, *CG* 255), Elizabeth (Liz) and her husband Paul, cohabiting a carpenter gothic house during the last month of Liz’s life. Paul manages press for the deceptive, apocalyptic preacher Reverend Ude, who is tied into an African land-grab also involving the house’s mysterious owner, McCandless. However, these details are less of interest than Gaddis’s disintegration of his spoken-language personalization tactic crafted in *JR*, here given claustrophobic, and exaggerated artificiality, on a smaller scale.

Gaddis includes a veiled reference to the function of *CG* in his oeuvre through an embedded comment within the novel, spoken by the former novelist McCandless: “I told you why I wrote it, it’s just an afterthought, why are you so damned put out by it? This novel’s a footnote, a postscript” (Gaddis, *CG* 139; Grove B1). While the true “postscript,” in the broader arc of Gaddis’s life, could be the deathbed novella *Agapē Agape* (revised from a continuously expanding manuscript Gaddis returned to throughout his life), it is useful to see *CG* as an epilogue commenting on and casting certain issues into light retrospectively. Indeed, in the parlance of “failure” so familiar to Gaddis (he once taught a class on “The Theme of Failure in American Literature” at Bard College [Moore 112]), the novel has been seen by some as a failure precisely because of its pointed intent, believed to be “too narrow...to generalize from” (Burse and Furlong 121). Yet this claustrophobic restriction is precisely part of Gaddis’s art—like the tagline for the postmodern horror novel *House of Leaves* suggesting a house “bigger on the inside than it is on the outside,” the house *CG* takes place in offers a paradoxical condensation of energy and space within its flimsy and limited frame. As such, the house’s cramped interior offers a fitting synecdoche for the rotten, organic entity of character crafted by Gaddis in *JR*.

Cynthia Ozick, in a favorable review, describes *JR* and *CG* as concerned with “rotted-out families, rotted-out corporations,” and this sense of corporate or familial body with either an absent or hollowed interior is telling (“Fakery”). To understand more fully the metaphoric utility of the house as metaphor for characterization, let us return again to the title.

*Carpenter’s Gothic*, among many things, principally recalls the architectural style “carpenter gothic,” which Gaddis confirmed as a central conceit for the book (and reiterated in importance by Gaddis’s actual habitation of a carpenter gothic home in the Hudson Valley). The style is known for its mimicry of nineteenth-century Victorian gothic architecture crafted from far shoddier, easily available materials. In the novel, McCandless describes the carpenter gothic house in which the action takes place: “it was built to be seen from the outside it was, that was the style...All they had were the simple dependable old materials, the wood and their hammers and saws and their clumsy ingenuity” (Gaddis, *CG* 227). In a fitting stand-in for Gaddis’s characterization through dialogue, and posthuman collection of traits, the style serves to elucidate the external qualities of linguistically defined persons, only to be marked by an interior vacancy. Ozick describes the house as presenting all relevant information externally; the rest is “crammed to fit” inside (“Fakery”). The spatial disorientation suggested by the house is likewise reiterated by the fact that McCandless is a geologist—he ultimately sells valuable information regarding land grants for an African ore field, presumably at the source of a sectarian war—and by the further dissipation of the characters’ self-definition under spatial-geographical terms.

If sexuality in *JR* is presented as an Empodoclean collision of various human body parts, *CG* presents corporeal limits as diffuse as geography. This “landscape”-oriented view is partially explainable as these sequences are processed through McCandless, a geologist’s, psyche. Yet, the reduction of the human figure to abstract qualities and characteristics is exaggerated to the

point of dissolving any significant human-anatomic boundaries at all. A telling sequence involves McCandless “catching the hand back to sequester the white of her breast,” again trying to rally the Platonic notion of “breast” back into some recognizable human shape, as well as the jargon of land-ownership in his description of Liz’s “hard outcropping,” “corrugated path to the open plain,” and “hillock” (Gaddis, *CG* 151, 155). Liz is no longer a human specimen, but rather an abstraction, as inanimate as soil or a land formation. In fact, this primary schism between Liz’s desire for connection and McCandless’s understanding of the human as raw element is revealed in Liz’s misinterpretation of a geological map as art, possibly depicting female genitalia. “The northern end of the Great Rift,” McCandless corrects her, “it’s a scanning taken from a satellite” (Gaddis, *CG* 165). We are no longer speaking of sex, but tectonic drift.

Indeed, the ultimate collapse of Gaddis’s “finger exercise,” or rather dissolution of his corporate bodies into lonely isolation, is manifest in *CG*’s apocalyptic ending. The literal apocalypse is indicated by the “10 K ‘DEMO’ BOMB” (Gaddis, *CG* 259) detonated at the end, indicating the beginning of the African sectarian conflict both McCandless and Ude are complicit in aiding. A thematic apocalypse is also apparent by the novel’s close: Liz is dead, McCandless has sold out, the Revered Ude is on the run, and Paul seems to be snaring another naïve girl with the exact same pick-up line he used on Liz (“I’ve always been crazy about the back of your neck” [Gaddis, *CG* 262]). This definitive unwinding and tearing down of the played-with verities and clichés of fiction seems almost a decided linguistic “screw you” such as Joyce offered in the “nonsense” language of *Finnegans Wake* following the pristine modernist language of *Ulysses*. As Gregory Comnes notes, *CG* “resists those who would seek any emphatic, conventional affirmation of the theme present in Gaddis’s earlier novels: humans’ capacity, if they will but act on it, to transform through love an otherwise venal and mean-

spirited world” (126). Yes, the fragmenting of Gaddis’s corpus comes down to an absence of “love,” or rather, if viewed through the constructive-affective lens Clough offers, some sort of binding or adhesive affective charge able to pull the fictionally constructed, poststructural language-beings together. Sexuality is no surrogate, rendered as the alignment of inanimate natural elements, and the broader bonds of the novel seem impossible. Nor is there a larger new media remove to progress beyond pseudo-digital, emptily constructed characters. In *CG*, Gaddis’s fictional divide of runaway language as capital is permanent; in the language of *JR*, the empire of words collapses as readily as a financial system run amok.

In true gothic tradition, the evolution from *JR* to *CG* marks the macabre expansion of postmodernism’s worst tendencies from bloated and diluted characterization to the level of cartoon, much as gothic novels often presented an exaggerated crystallization of a particular societal fear. Unlike the polymorphous perversity of Turkle’s MUD language games, the elemental bodybuilding of Stelarc, or even the automated, life-like systems of the chat bots, Gaddis’s fictional chat bots are poignant in their inevitable inability to connect with one another. Without the binding agent of affect, as Clough argues, ontology is shattered into a disparate cluster of characteristics. The result is a sort of word-scrambled Joyce—epitomized in lovemaking sequences that seem to describe an orgiastic word soup as much as human coupling. Though *JR* is perhaps more convincingly a participatory, second-order cybernetic system, this understanding seems only to widen its existing fissures and indeterminacies—language’s slippery uncertainty given full play. There is no retreat to the screen-penetrating ethics of transcendental or absurd video artists, nor a Burden with loaded rifle to the rescue. As Gaddis’s “conversation” novels are comprised entirely of rendered dialogue, perhaps the most exaggerated use of this in recent memory, one can see the fictional incarnation the “narcotic” effect McLuhan



ascribes to expanding communication networks—wherein feeling requires diminishment due to its expansion of transmission range—here rendered in the formalist literary frame. Likewise, we see a slippery corporeality almost digital in its mercuriality as the process of reading *JR* obstructs our ability to distinguish distinct fictional entities or discern a plausible relationship from them to the reader. This absent recognition of autonomous persons or “connection” between characters is given parodic and apocalyptic charge under *CG*’s claustrophobic scale, yielding potentially human fragments in need of explication. And so the question becomes: how might one wrest back a formally operating system as organizational method, if such systems have been eroded by words as virally expansive as unchecked capital? The answer, in the methodical stabs of hyper-visceral pain framed by such systematic operation in “transgressive” literature, won’t be pretty.

Section Two:

Grooves on the Feeling Knob: Systematic Transgression in William T. Vollmann's *The Rainbow Stories* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*.

### Organizers of the Orgy: An Introduction to Systematic Transgression

And was Jerusalem builded here / Among these dark satanic mills?  
—William Blake

Michael Silverblatt, one of the first critics to label an alarming group of writers arriving around the turn of the 1980s as “transgressive,”<sup>24</sup> identified perhaps the most telling signifier of the group as an allegiance to the “hypothetical.” This was in homage to one of the cohort’s chief influences, the Marquis de Sade, and particularly Sade’s schizophrenic, visionary impulse of embellishing the gap between his sad state of imprisonment and the hyper-kinetic fantasies of his *120 Days of Sodom* written while interred. (Sade’s deflation from profane God to abject prisoner was made all the more apparent, Silverblatt notes, by Maurice Lever’s biography *Sade* [1993] released around this time and describing such depressing anecdotes as Sade being too fat to fit into a self-pleasuring device snuck into prison by his wife.) Silverblatt describes this fixation on unreachable satisfaction as an inherently aesthetic, and oddly optimistic, one: “The gap between Sade’s pathetic life and the intellectual fireworks that his writings inspire leads us to the true Sadean subject: the realm of the hypothetical.” The hypothetical is not a state relishing sadness or abjection, but rather a fixation on the immanent limitations of materials used as a transient step in the pursuit of higher and more distilled principles, like coal for the fire. Contrary to other critical perceptions remaining fixated on the *content* of transgressive literature, both praising and condemning,<sup>25</sup> Silverblatt reveals the underside to grotesquerie to be an emphasis on what is

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<sup>24</sup> Silverblatt’s tentative roster includes: “Jeannette Winterson, David Foster Wallace, William T. Vollmann, Dennis Cooper, Kathy Acker, Lynne Tillman, Joel Rose, Catherine Texier, Bret Easton Ellis, A.M. Homes, Mary Gaitskill, Stephen Beachy, Steve Erickson, Karen Joy Fowler, Will Self” (2). Coterie building is of course an inexact science, and the total list of “transgressives” differs depending on critical account.

<sup>25</sup> Key pieces dismissing the movement include Jonathan Dee’s “Readymade Rebellion: the Empty Tropes of Transgressive Fiction,” James Gardner’s “Transgressive Fiction,” and Joe David Bellamy’s “A Downpour of Literary Republicanism.”

unseen, invisible, and utopian. By penetrating and tattooing the text as a kind of mercurial skin covering unknowable meaning, transgressive authors “require... the defeat of the physical world, and the virtual obliteration of the body” (Silverblatt 2). Other critical perceptions regarding the perceived hostile nature of the fiction—the subtitle to Silverblatt’s article is in fact “Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us?”—reveal a paranoia about being possibly implicated in this source of hostility, and hence explain the resulting tendency to explain away the genre by pinning it to a single cultural instance or attitude.

While resulting labels for the genre are legion I find Silverblatt’s “transgressive” fiction the most cogent, as it honors the authors’ structural, philosophical technique and retains an integral allegiance with Sade. Other categories, however, have ranged from “Post-Punk,” “Downtown,” “New Narrative” (a separate, theory-based movement unto itself), and even (in “a ludicrous piece of literary recycling”) “Lost Generation” fiction (“Introduction” xiii). Enjoying probably the longest vogue, and a close second to “transgressive,” is “Blank Generation” fiction. The term, canonized by Elizabeth Young in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American ‘Blank Generation’ Fiction* (1992), aligns the movement primarily with the cool rebellion of punk, deriving its title from the Richard Hell song “Blank Generation.” The lyrics, “I belong to the \_\_\_\_\_ generation, and I can take it or leave it each time,” the singer apparently too lazy or blasé to even fill in the title, indicate the sort of disaffection Young sees mirrored in the “flat, stunned” quality of much of the prose (“Introduction” xiii).<sup>26</sup> The moniker of “blank fiction,” without Young’s qualification of belonging to a “generation,” was revived and reiterated in James Annesley’s *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture, and the Contemporary Novel* (1998),

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Siegle in *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency* (1989) understands this “punk” quality as a position closer approximating nihilism, stripping any possibility of political advocacy in the designation that, for these writers, “[i]nsurgency is a fiction” (3).

drawing in the essential qualities of violence, the “darker” materials of drugs and sex, and perceived mutilations of or mutations in the human body. Annesley summarizes this ethic as an “emphasis on the extreme, the marginal, and the violent... a sense of indifference and indolence... the limits of the human body seem indistinct, blurred by cosmetics, narcotics, disease, and brutality” (1).

Other attempts to locate objective correlatives for “transgressive” literature reach for more disparate theoretical, or classical, forebears. M. Keith Booker’s *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnavalesque* (1991) describes any literature opting for techniques of “transgression” to the anarchic spirit of Bakhtin’s carnival. Robin Mookerjee’s *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* (2013) addresses “transgressive” fiction as a defined genre, but suggests Menippean satire as its most fitting antecedent, both forms presenting discomfiting “subject matter...directly” rather “than through the optic of a system or theory,” mirroring strategies of “Petronius and the Menippean school” (2). This latter sense of otherwise intangible information nakedly presented, and reminiscent of transgressive forebear William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (though here with the “system or theory”), begs the question, however, of how transgressive fiction fits within the lineage of postmodernism, or which strategies may be shared by both. Indeed, considering the grotesque and cartoonish subject matter of such postmodern classics as *Naked Lunch*, how is one to separate these “offensive” methods (censored in their time) from the hyper-grotesque techniques of the transgressives? And, similarly, might there not be other strategies shared between the two movements, much as transgressive literature in many respects presents an amplified, and embellished, version of postmodernism’s penchant for caricature and the obscene?

Lyotard's definition of postmodern art is helpful in creating a link between these two forms. According to Lyotard, postmodern art is "that which searches for new presentations not in order to enjoy them but in order to impact a stronger sense of the *unpresentable*" (Lyotard 81, my italics). Under this rubric, recalling also Sade's aesthetic of the "hypothetical," transgressive literature may only manifest a variety of horrific exterior symptoms in response to the inexpressible horrors or traumas in the society that birthed it. Indeed, like Fredric Jameson's call for a literature that both reflected and critiqued the logic of capitalism in *Postmodernism*, transgressive literature merely literalizes societal problems in the starkest fashion possible. Mookerjee discusses how books like *American Psycho* are "monstrous" primarily in their literalization of postmodern principles like uninhibited virtual capital—Bateman's Gucci-gloved hand slicing through vagrants' throats *is* the repressed unconscious of Reaganomics, in Ellis's conception. I would argue that it has merely been by the sheer shock value of these transgressive artists' imagery that the effectiveness of their methods, and alignment within broader literary—and specifically postmodern—strategies has been overlooked. Wholly ignorant of a possible exaggeratedly symbolic view of the profane, such as Bataille offers in his pornographic narrative *Story of the Eye*, which offers alignments of testicles, suns, and eyeballs in an abundant fertility of symbolic referentiality, critics of transgressive fiction have for the most part been stymied by subject matter alone. Yet, I would argue, in looking at these often highly systematic, highly symbolic novels—in this study, William T. Vollmann and Bret Easton Ellis—an unseen alignment arises between a massive vein within late 20<sup>th</sup> century postmodernism in the "systems" novel and the presumed charged symbolism of the transgressives.

Harkening back to Silverblatt's assessment of Sade as the forefather of American transgressive fiction, "officiat[ing] at the American orgy" (1), we see a blueprint for systematic

transgression in Sade's elaborate erotic puzzles. Sade's forever unsatisfied and manic desire in *The 120 Days of Sodom* leads not to a chaotic arrangement led by impulse, but rather an elaborate and orchestrated sequence of acts, mechanically arranged and bound by numerous pacts and contracts. Roland Barthes in *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* even goes so far as to bestow Sade with an erotic grammar, a means of speaking the language of desire not only in his text, but also in the imagined, verbal patterns of bodies. Curiously enough, this systematic impulse is likewise used to describe lengthy twentieth-century postmodern novels that Tom LeClair in his *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and Systems Theory* (1987) describes as "systems" novels, or present an attempt to mirror posthuman networks of information in complex and cataloguing fictional arrangements. These networks of information might also be rife with the circulation of emotional or erotic charge, as Jameson notes the distinguishing postmodern "waning of affect" alongside the form's aesthetic incorporation of other forms of capital, be they financial, business, or scientific. Indeed, David Foster Wallace's claim that William Gaddis's *J R* in fact explores a corporate economy of lies exemplifies the sort of charged systems theory I wish to explore here (Wallace, Silverblatt "Heartbreaking").

Before aligning systems theory with transgression, it is worthwhile to discuss the original concept of systems theory and its utility as a model for analyzing postmodern fiction. Tom LeClair, in his work *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and Systems Theory*, describes the most coherent organization of systems theory arises in biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy's 1968 book *General Systems Theory*. The book demonstrates "how mathematical expressions and models could help scientists understand 'problems of order, organization, wholeness, teleology,' matters central to living systems but, he belied, 'programmatically excluded in mechanistic science'" (LeClair, *Loop* 2-3). Hence, von Bertalanffy's theory is to blend mathematical modes of organization with

biological modes in fluid “ecosystem[s],” or living, organic environments in which information circulates (LeClair, *Loop 3*). By melding these circuits of living and non-living information into one unit, distinctions are lost between human, or even organic, components, and the inorganic constituents of their environment. As part of this blending, Bertalanffy’s paradigm borrows from cyberneticist Norbert Wiener’s concept of feedback, or how systems are able to expand their network of data-collection, by “concentrat[ing] on the reciprocal-looping-communications of ecological systems (including man)” (LeClair, *Loop 4*).

LeClair’s intervention is to apply this model to the massive and “encyclopedic” novels of late postmodernism (Edward Mendelson coined the “encyclopedic novel” in 1976), already concerned with “mass” circulatory systems of, for instance, engineering technology in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* or the stock market in Gaddis’s *J.R.* In a novelistic construct, this “give[s] the medium of the text the illusion of reciprocal simultaneity, growth to complexity, an ecosystemic plenitude” (LeClair, *Loop 10*). That is, if traditional realist novels offer mimetic replicas of traditional human time frames, marked by climaxes of action and matching resolutions, systems novels are instead concerned with the circulation of themes and characters on a more horizontal, and non-climactic, plane—development is more circular, character more static. This gives rise to what LeClair calls, in perhaps unintentional reflection of Dostoyevsky’s “underground man,” the “systems man,” who “is more a locus of communication and energy in a reciprocal relationship with his environment than an entity exerting force and dictating linear cause-effect sequences” (*Loop 10*). This “systems man” has been effaced sheerly by his “reciprocal relationship with his environment,” rendered ontologically flush with the environment in which he exists. The possibility for “transgression” or instability to enter into such a paradigm is perhaps raised by the introduction of entropy and its own self-organizing structure into the stability and homeostasis



originally envisioned by von Bertalanffy. Oddly mimicking homeostasis itself, Ilya Prigogine in *Order Out of Chaos* pairs entropy with an organism-wide equalization called a “dissipative structure,” claiming “entropy may lead to a new, more differentiated, higher, and ‘negentropic’ level of organization” (LeClair, *Loop* 6). This bending tension between entropy and its ordered manifestation, or of attempting to inject disturbing and traumatic events in a stabilized circuit, likewise bleeds into Roland Barthes’ concept of a textual body and its dismemberment for readerly pleasure.

Barthes’ most obvious and scandalous assertion in *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* (1976) is that, as one infers from the title, the infamous pervert, the utopian socialist, and the Jesuit priest all share similar qualities; primarily their “mania for cutting up” and “enumerative obsessions” (*Sade/Fourier* 3-4). Sade’s legendary capacity for endlessly arranged fornications is aligned with the meticulous ratios of Fourier’s utopic commodities, which are in turn aligned with Loyola’s endlessly catalogued sins. Sade is paramount here, who Barthes describes as designing in the *120 Days of Sodom* a self-regulating grammar, or unique language construct born out of the totalizing system of debasement and producing unique “linguistic units” of “postures, formations” (*Sade/Fourier* 30). The hierarchy and linguistic organization are rigid, as a “gesture” constitutes a building block for a “figure,” which then may constitute an “episode,” all marked by elaborate pacts and means of interacting between the arrangers and participants (*Sade/Fourier* 29). Barthes modifies this seemingly ironclad nature of Sade’s system in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), locating his own readerly “jouissance” in moments of rupture, tear, or mutilation. Writing is a “disfigurement” of the mother tongue (Barthes, *Pleasure* 5); writing is the “seam” between “culture” and “destruction” where “the death of language is glimpsed” (Barthes, *Pleasure* 6). In the more totalized construct of the novel, Barthes’ pleasure is in the orifices, or occultly hidden

tears in the fabric—the most “erotic” part of the text “*where the garment gapes*” (*Pleasure* 9). In blending the “systems” novel with the transgressive notion of text requiring rupture and disfiguration, consideration of one final thinker—Bataille—imbues such ruptures with the affective charge of the transcendent.

As Barthes links readerly pleasure to a moment of impossibility, to where a libertine might be hanged and cut the rope “at the very moment of his orgasm” (*Pleasure* 7), Bataille paints the vision of how one might live beyond this hanging, or learn from one’s mortal expulsions. Proclaimed, derisively, an “excremental philosopher” by André Breton, who expelled Bataille from the Surrealists, Bataille is an analyzer of sacred eliminations (Stoekl xi). His own theory of “heterology” imbues waste with a valued and explicable content—the frenzied excesses of airtight systems, be they philosophical or religious, holding almost sentimental value. He claims that any excretory impulse, be it “ritual cannibalism, the sacrifice of animal-gods, omophagia, the laughter of exclusion, sobbing,” presents “a common character in that the object of the activity (excrement, shameful parts, cadavers, etc) is found each time as a foreign body” and hence is capable of “subjective” consideration (Bataille, “Sade” 94). Bataille is virulently opposed to what he sees as sterile philosophical camps prizing flat, stable qualities like “nothingness, infinite, the absolute,” ignoring the inevitably more sullied categories of “degradation” and “decomposition” (Bataille, “Sade” 96). He likewise seeks moments beyond comprehension, or altered states beyond the explanatory or derisive reach of organized bodies, such as “ecstatic trances,” “orgasms,” or “burst[s] of laughter” (Bataille, “Sade” 99). True to his unsettling reputation, however, these moments of self-forgetting and escape from stifling social systems rely also on dark and violent impulses: “natural forces such as violent death, gushing blood, sudden catastrophes and the horrible cries of pain that accompany them” (Bataille, “Sade”

101). Such power is revolutionary in his estimation, holding the potential for a transformative freeing of libido in a fashion reminiscent of Marcuse's ideal freeing of co-opted Eros in *Eros and Civilization* (1955). Patrick Bateman from Ellis's *American Psycho* might be considered a social agent under such criteria. Inevitably, however, Bataille's violent gashes and expulsions are moments of revelation, keys for locating the heart of transgressive feeling.

Under this model, "transgressive" literature is not simply a one-dimensional shock-delivery-system, but rather a complex processing mechanism for emotional circulation and occasional spill. Indeed, I believe this model of "systematic transgression" offers the best lens for understanding the complex, formal capacities of these supposedly one-dimensional works, and better rendering their ecstatic excesses and conscious puncturings. To elucidate, I will address William T. Vollmann's *The Rainbow Stories* (1989) and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). Both novels offer a telling embodiment of the complex circuitry beneath the façade of sheer "transgression," and likewise offer a commentary on the perceived affectless nature of postmodern characters. Similarly, both borrow from a media model of circulation and medium-derived distance to plumb the depths of a systematically distributed character and ability to transgress such a system. First, Vollmann's *Rainbow Stories* lends itself easily to this sort of analysis in its prescribed goal to analyze all the "misereries" of the rainbow through a color-specified construct. Considered in the broader fashion of Vollmann's "moral calculus" he later formulates with regard to his war reporting, I argue that *The Rainbow Stories* (1989) presents an "emotional calculus," or tests empirically the various possibilities for feeling and transcendence even in the most stark economies of affection, such as prostitution. Turning to Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), I will reassess Ellis's novel beyond the content of its usually discussed sexually violent sequences. I frame the novel as an elaborate commercial catalogue, carefully

organizing its moments of violent schism among consumer detritus to evoke a unique affective construct of “dread.” I will also open the possibility for Patrick Bateman to be seen as a nascent three-dimensional human, or rather Ellis’ own variety of “systems man” attempting to escape his circulation in the world of the novel to create an independent art of his own.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> This tactic of re-opening questions of postmodern character may likewise be seen in Aleid Fokkema’s survey *Postmodern Characters: A Study of Characterization in British and American Postmodern Fiction*. Fokkema calls for a reassessment of the usually pejorative claim that postmodern characters are “flat,” derived from E.M Forster’s famous designation, vying that “the introduction of the distinction between ‘flat’ and ‘round’ characters has served evaluation rather than critical analysis, and that a strictly mimetic reading of character appears to exclude the study of conventions of characterization” (17). Critic Ian Gregson in *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction* (2006) likewise imbues “flat” postmodern characterization with deeper resonance and purpose of caricature. Both forms, according to Gregson, share “anti-humanist assumptions which lead to a subverting of realism and its assumptions” (3-4).

**Sensory Movements: William T. Vollmann, *The Rainbow Stories*, and “Emotional  
Calculus”**

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, / Stains the white radiance of Eternity.

–Percy Bysshe Shelley.

VOLLMANN

One of the things that I had to do occasionally while I was collecting information for that prostitute story, ‘Ladies and Red Lights’ from *The Rainbow Stories*, was sit in a corner and pull down my pants and masturbate. I would pretend to do this while I was asking the prostitutes questions. Because otherwise, they were utterly afraid of me and utterly miserable, thinking I was a cop.

INTERVIEWER

Not the most comforting sight though...

VOLLMANN

Perhaps not.

William T. Vollmann is a white whale of modern American fiction. Occluded beneath the surface of institutional recognition—only reaching some degree of critical validation recently with a National Book Award for *Europe Central* in 2005 and a Strauss Living Award in 2008—Vollmann is often marked, when described, by his twin characteristics of prolific production and uncomfortable subject matter. As to the former, Vollmann has been working on a cycle of novels tracing contemporary American trauma back to seven historical encounters between colonists and Native Americans he calls the “Seven Dreams,” of which he is at the time of this writing seven-fifths finished with. His self-described life’s work, however, is the seven-volume, 3,296 page *Rising Up and Rising Down* (2003)<sup>28</sup>—a spanning attempt to find a “moral calculus” (Vollmann’s term) for when violence is justified, buttressed by his extensive journalistic experience and ranging examination of famous historical leaders and dictators. Amidst both “cycles,” however, are additional novels, art books, drawings, epigrams, and

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<sup>28</sup> Hereafter referred to as *RURD*.

the concurrent cycle of “prostitution” novels recently capped by his perhaps most critically regarded fiction, *The Royal Family* (2000). Taken as a sum they form one of the most prolific corpuses of modern American letters. Yet, likely due to his fascination with outré subject matter, crystallized most formally in his prostitution works, there has been essentially no sustained critical work on Vollmann. He is mentioned in part by Tom LeClair alongside other producers of “prodigious fictions” including David Foster Wallace and Richard Powers, yet his only book-length monographs are primarily volumes by Larry McCaffery<sup>29</sup> and Michael Hemmingson published with the intent of spurring further critical consideration.<sup>30</sup> However discomfiting the prostitution work and Vollmann’s embeddedness within it is, I believe his analysis of emotional intimacy and distance in its most formal and financially motivated form possible, mixed with the need for a holistic economy or “calculus” within it, is essential to understanding his larger, world-centered journalistic project and the ethic of his fiction. Likewise, in juxtaposing the technique of these mass, systematic novels with the fine-tuned erotic economy portrayed in Vollmann’s more transgressive work, one sees more accurately how a “systems novel” approach might interact with the flattened affective economy of fiction at the time.

Perhaps most overlooked among Vollmann’s fiction is his second major “novel” (or interconnected series of vignettes) *The Rainbow Stories* (1989).<sup>31</sup> Written after his first novel

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<sup>29</sup> An early champion of Vollmann’s work, McCaffery wrote on Vollmann early in “The Avant-Pop Phenomenon” for *ANQ* (1992), included him in the “Avant-Pop” anthology *After Yesterday’s Crash* (1995), and co-edited the first Vollmann reader *Expelled From Eden* (2004) with Michael Hemmingson.

<sup>30</sup> Hemmingson’s work, alongside Larry McCaffery, has been to create a critical foundation to then build a future body of “Vollmann Studies” upon. In the first book-length consideration of Vollmann’s work, *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Study and Seven Interviews* (2009), Hemmingson explicitly claims “it is my intention that this study will be the starting point for all Vollmann Studies” (1). His *William T. Vollmann: An Annotated Bibliography* (2012) is written to the same effect, yet the lack of dedicated critical work on Vollmann since both works’ release indicates it may still be longer yet until a full development of “Vollmann Studies.”

<sup>31</sup> Hereafter referred to as *RS*.

*You Bright and Risen Angels* (1987),<sup>32</sup> which was supposedly created while Vollmann was working as a computer programmer and sleeping under desks, living off candy bars, and writing the piece in 24-hour cycles (Vollmann, Bell “Art”), *TRS* marks the introduction of a suspiciously “embedded” journalistic voice Vollmann will return to throughout his career. The novel is notorious for its non-judgmental, affectless portrayal of skinheads, prostitutes, junkies, and desperate men and women of all stripes in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district. Due to this apparent championing of “underworld” behavior by tacit objectivity, *TRS* presents a conflicting ethical exercise and difficult object to critically validate.<sup>33</sup> Vollmann’s odd, and to some distancing, regard for these historically oppressed or oppressive subcultures, is likewise extended to his general principle for moral issues as “calculus,” or transaction of value-neutral principles and desires. This sense of breaking down complex issues into highly philosophical “calculus”-like strands is manifest in *TRS*’s very composition, attempting to trace the “manifold” “misery” of earth by dedicating chapters to subcultures and fables linked to specific colors. The idea of breaking down complex emotional-erotic issues, laid out in the starkest transaction of self for capital in prostitution, is what makes *TRS* an essential study in this period’s systematized and processed affect. To get a better sense of Vollmann’s “moral calculus,” since it founds the “emotional calculus” that will thread this essay, it bears looking at Vollmann’s most exhaustive exercise of the principle in *RURD*.

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<sup>32</sup> Hereafter referred to as *YBRA*.

<sup>33</sup> For example, in a piece written against federal regulation of pornography, Vollmann writes of a similar dubious example testing the limits of libertarian freedom. “A friend of mine who used to be a Nazi gave me his authentic swastika armband. I was touched that he would give me something with meaning to him, but embarrassed by my ownership of that particular object” (Vollmann, “What Porn Is” 217). Such is the sort of suspended, moral gamesmanship that often evinces an uncertain moral reaction in his readers.

In *RURD*, Vollmann arrives at his “moral calculus” by adopting the tactic of unwinding complex historical issues through sheer cataloguing, cross-referencing, and analytic maximalism.<sup>34</sup> The neutrality and research-driven tactic implied in Vollmann’s stated mission for the project—to find when “the use of violence may be justified,” (Vollmann, Silverblatt “Rising”)—is part of such exhaustive documentation and scope. In order to work around the understood, de facto liberal-humanist principle of violence always being unjustified, Vollmann must stretch backward almost infinitely into history to cull examples and exhaustive comparative studies. The list of historical examples he does include, however, is telling. In a disseminated plea called “My Life’s Work,” written with the intent of finding a publisher for the weighty *RURD*, he lists a survey of monolithic, famous characters including “Robespierre, Lincoln, John Brown, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Hitler” as well as more complex, prosaic figures like “the world’s largest distributor of heroin” and “Bo Gritz, the most decorated Vietnam veteran in America and also the head of an apocalyptic, anti-Semitic survival cult” (326). In Vollmann’s estimation, every example from history presents a point of moral condensation, all capable of expansion to elucidate more grey shades of moral nuance. Some examples are obviously paragons of goodness, like Martin Luther King, or evil, like Hitler, though figures presenting a more finely shaded mix of good and evil, such as the “heroic” anti-Semite Bo Gritz, seem to elucidate Vollmann’s point of moral violence becoming opaque when multiple ideologies converge in an imprecise fashion (such as, for Gritz, U.S. nationalism and racism). In an interview with Vollmann, Michael Silverblatt queried the troubling aspects of such a “neutral” analysis, raising Vollmann’s inclusion of a list detailing the perceived beauties of popularly used assault rifles. The aesthetic beauty of the weapons and empathetic tracing of pride in their

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ownership, Vollmann claimed, was essential to understanding the soldier's motivation and attitude toward using them; a similar relationship to a samurai's adoration for his sword (Vollmann, Silverblatt "Rising"). Such inclusions, lists, and finely-shaded moral examples in *RURD*, however, are essential to understanding Vollmann's methodology, and his attempt to parse emotionally-charged moral issues into their individual, objective pieces.

No problem is too big to be tackled by the "calculus," or to have some moral principle extracted from a mass collection of examples. Vollmann's almost excruciatingly technical summation of these threads in *RURD* is presented at the end of the study in a section titled, clearly enough, "Moral Calculus." The obsessively schematic layout of the section is highly illustrative of the supposed vast reach and general applicability of the "calculus;" it could be, in other words, a moral manual. One section for a particular brand of violence—self-defense—is titled "5.2 JUSTIFICATION: SELF-DEFENSE 5.2A WHEN IS VIOLENT DEFENSE OF HONOR JUSTIFIED?" Within this header are two separate sub-sections, as Vollmann claims definitively, "Every type of honor falls into one of the first two and one of the last two." This scientifically diagnostic tone continues in the first sub-heading, defining one of two types of honor, "inner honor," as "the degree of harmony between (a) an individual's aspirations, deeds, and experiences, and (b) his conscience. As such, it remains unknowable to others." Proper exercise of violence in the case of "inner honor" is then further divided into two categories: "1. When honor is altruistic—that is, when honor demands the deliverance of a third party from imminent violence. 2. When defense of honor perfectly corresponds with other justified defense" (Vollmann, "Moral Calculus" 155-6). Such scaling offers a prescription for when such usually morally or emotionally shaded action is "justified" almost in the fashion of a glossary, or encyclopedia. Should one be implicated in this scenario, one would presumably look up their

assumed umbrella-category for violence, distinguish the “type,” further distinguish “motive,” then discern whether one’s motives aligned with the justification. The idea of a God-like moral abacus gives a sense of Vollmann’s measured and scientific-philosophically-minded approach to usually knee-jerk issues, offering a near-perfect sensibility to test issues of affective deadness and their more arresting extremes.

Critically, Vollmann’s examination of abstract emotional issues through “calculus” as an extrapolation of his work with violence has been essentially unremarked on, even by McCaffery or Hemmingson. Yet, Vollmann’s description of these emotional dioramas as they relate to his earlier work indicates this is a prevalent theme throughout his corpus. Vollmann says of *YBRA* (a psychotropic tale of veiled political allegory depicting a war of insects) that the book regarded “experiments conducted in my ethical laboratory—experiments involving the most powerful reagent—cruelty” (“Biographical Statement” 4). Interesting here is Vollmann’s conception of the fictional frame as “laboratory,” replete with “cruelty” as a chemical reactant, to conduct “experiments” on moral principles—a metaphoric melding of the purely nonfictional schematic used in *RURD*. He likewise attributes the reactant of “suffering” as the base for his later experiments in *Eros*. He notes the shift to *TRS* as follows: “I saw that my characters were suffering so much because they had misdirected their feelings of love” and “to explore this further, I decided to write stories about prostitutes” (“Biographical Statement” 4). In this origination of “suffering” caused by “misdirected love,” and the employment of prostitution as an amplified chamber to view these reactions, we see the chrysalis of Vollmann’s sterile sexual gamesmanship. He claims the characters of *TRS*, significantly including an extended sequence on prostitutes that forms the kernel of his later “trilogy,” were about “lowlives” who did not know how to obtain love and became “twisted” in the process (“Biographical Statement” 4). Stripping

prostitution of its usual socio-political context, Vollmann's sublimation, however suspect, of the economic inequalities immanent in prostitution is necessary to understand his sterile inquiry into emotional absence.

Prostitution, as noted before, is likely the prickliest obstacle to embracing Vollmann's work. I want to side-step concerns over judging or attempting to locate damning evidence in Vollmann's apparent admission to autobiographical enjoyment of prostitution through experiences attributed to his character, "William Vollmann," who appears in his work. Alignment between Vollmann the author and Vollmann the character is primarily difficult because the Vollmann character is often employed rhetorically as a blundering everyman used for a wandering, "floating-eyeball" perspective, like Christian from *Pilgrim's Progress*—a naive and well-intentioned dupe testing and travelling through various rings of temptation and tribulation to highlight particularities of vice in the process.<sup>35</sup> His personal comments on the topic, however, reveal a predictably removed and theoretical concern for prostitution, lending credence to its more abstract use in his fiction. When pressed on his fascination, Vollmann inevitably describes how prostitutes seem to present a condensed sum of life experience obtained through the harsh conditions of their existence. This conception embodies a "holy whore" paradigm, identified as such by a journalist and confirmed by Vollmann. Such a paradigm's more worshipful and exoticized view, however, is undermined and contrasted in the same interview by other at-times clashing opinions. He goes on to describe in detail how prostitutes may hold an unjust and disenfranchised position, as "people can be very mean to them," and are inevitably tied to a customer who "gives you diseases and stabs you and burns you." Yet, just a

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<sup>35</sup> For those interested in hearing Vollmann discuss the alternate fictionalization and technical use of his pseudo-autobiographical interventions, see his 1992 Bookworm interview on "Fathers and Crows."

few lines later, he claims, “In America, I believe that 99 percent of us are responsible for our actions” (“Vollmann Shares” 127-128), and hence exonerates himself of any responsibility for action or imperative to understand any particular prostitute’s circumstances. Vollmann’s curious movement from sanctification, to pity, to a detached appraisal, reveals his overall understanding and employment of prostitution as merely a metaphor, a circuit for examining the transaction of emotions, not a portrait of real-life conditions. Prostitution presents to Vollmann the base foundation of acceptable needs being met in a relationship—desire in the john, finances in the prostitute—that will present the template for his emotional investigations in *TRS*, and a fictional surrogate in his later work.

As the methodical scalpel into these “forbidden” zones of subculture, Vollmann’s warped New Journalistic technique acts as a curious inversion of Tom Wolfe’s prescribed “cure” for postmodernism in his 1989 piece “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast”: journalistic-minded realism. In the essay—a touchstone for critics marking moments of maximum disenchantment with postmodernism—Wolfe cites postmodernism’s over-enthusiasm for European critical theory and an abandonment of mimesis as reasons for its inherent state of decay. His solution is a novelistic realism based in fact, or, in other words, his own method employed in novels like *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987). He claims, “It is not merely that reporting is useful in gathering the *petits faits vrais* that create verisimilitude and make a novel gripping or absorbing[,] “my contention is that...they are essential” (Wolfe 55). Vollmann’s repeated immersion of self into typically objective subject matter to obtain deeper, evocative truth is legendary—from assisting the Mujahideen against the Soviets as he recounts in *An Afghanistan Picture Show* (1992) to smoking crack for research to his repeated work on the Thai sex trade—and has earned comparisons to, among others, Hunter S. Thompson who famously invaded the Hell’s Angels for

his book *Hell's Angels* (1966). Vollmann distorts this, however, with his politically incorrect immersion into sex work in particular, claiming part of the reason he visits prostitutes is to flesh out their characterization in his fiction, or form kernels (again problematically) for female characters in his work (Vollmann, Bell "Art"). Vollmann further allies this with his own assessment of problems in American literature in a 1990 piece entitled "American Writing Today: Diagnosis of a Disease," where he boils down missing elements to an essential maxim: "we should never write without feeling" (332).<sup>36</sup> That Vollmann's "feeling" is intrinsically tied to the sort of ribald brothel enjoyment that would make Tom Wolfe's white suit blush is a curious muddling of Wolfe's own puritanically offered immersive realism. Further, when this feeling is subjected to Vollmann's "calculus"-derived equations of libido, we might be able to view works with ostensible filters or organizational principles, like *TRS*'s organization of chapters according to colors, as offering individual symbols and keys to their own interpretation. Namely, *TRS* presents itself as a logic-driven investigation of "feeling" by channeling affectively extreme subgroups like sex workers and down-and-outs into trackable filters, embodied in colors, and offering a neutral arbiter and assessing instrument in the form of Vollmann's embedded persona.

In investigating *TRS*'s particular color theme as an analog for "feeling," it is useful to consider Wittgenstein—an integral thinker for both Vollmann and David Foster Wallace<sup>37</sup>—and

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<sup>36</sup> This sentiment pre-empts Wallace's similar urging for a return to "single-entendre" principles and anti-ironism in his 1993 piece "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," published shortly after.

<sup>37</sup> McCaffery and Hemmingson note the influence of Wittgenstein on Vollmann after his reading *Philosophical Investigations* at Deep Springs College under Alan Paskow—Wittgenstein becomes the most cited writer in Vollmann's first non-fiction book, *An Afghanistan Picture Show* ("Chronology" 411,420). Hemmingson goes on to cite Wittgenstein directly as the source for Vollmann's sequential, "calculus"-like method for parsing issues, claiming Vollmann is "a

particularly his work on the limits of comprehension and color. In *Remarks on Colour* (1977), Wittgenstein marries his notion of knowledge confined to the social constructs of language relationships, or “language games,” outlined in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), to the difficulty of understanding intrinsic qualities of color as expressed by language. Wittgenstein’s rendering of the ontological paradoxes in human perceptions of color are oddly moving, and resonate with Vollmann’s own pursuit of some central, but ineffable, artistic “feeling” beneath the tableaux of *TRS*. Wittgenstein remarks, “I see in a photograph (not a colour photograph) a man with dark hair and a boy with slicked-back blond hair standing in front of a kind of lathe... But do I really see the hair blond in the photograph?” (10e-11e). That Wittgenstein wishes to assume an intangible quality of “blondeness” in a photograph he knows is only black and white, and the capacity of “blondeness” to remain just slightly off the range of perceptibility in a black and white color palette, has a poignancy regarding the impossibility of knowing a subject’s true qualities through color. Wittgenstein’s comments in *Remarks on Colour*, composed when he was near-death, are primarily tinged with a sense of isolation from the world, of an unbridgeable gap between person and object, like the skin of Silverblatt’s “hypothetical” veneer. He notes that, “when we’re asked ‘What do the words ‘red’, ‘blue’, ‘black’, ‘white’, mean?’ We can of course immediately point to things which have these colours,—but our ability to explain the meanings of these words goes no further!” (Wittgenstein 11e). This sense of objects lacking true states, or of existence expressible only in relation to other objects, is reminiscent of Vollmann’s relational qualities of “misery” attributed to his spectrum of degenerates and outcasts in *TRS*. The emotional degree zero of his subjects offers a chess-like potential to then analyze the constitutive parts of numbness in their movement and rearrangement.

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rigorously logical thinker (and disciple of Wittgenstein) who favors the syllogistic, let’s-break-things-down-into-their-constituent-parts approach to problem solving” (“Preface” xxx).

In Vollmann's own schema that begins *TRS*, he remarks on a similar untouchability, or lack of immanent being, in the colors of humanity he describes. The schema, entitled "The Vile Rainbow," lays out a "spectrum" that offers the twin polarities of the visible color spectrum, marked by "Mechanical Terrors" on the high spectrum and "Mysteries and Monsters" on the low, the colors of consideration as the hues in between. Vollmann's goal is to elucidate, with his journalistic electron microscope, the colors in this "rainbow" of "manifold" "misery," as his epigram from Edgar Allen Poe's "Berenice" describes. Yet, such a task is also, considering Wittgenstein's color-oriented "language games" and the central unknowability of these visible qualities, impossible. Vollmann claims in his preface: "I do not understand colors in themselves. I have therefore based my ideology not on the innate qualities of certain hues, but on their extremes and their negation. Thus the spectrum of these *Rainbow Stories* is bordered by black and white, and it is in their progression from one to the other that their meaning lies."

In these comments, Vollmann remarks on the impossibility of exactly rendering, or lending descriptive detail to these actual states of being, or dispersed qualities of "misery." His method of investigation is one marked by contrast, in which he must highlight the "extremes" of their qualities while attempting to elucidate some deeper, truer state in marking their "progression from one to the other." Such is the introduction of an "emotional calculus," through which emotion will be revealed by a contrasting movement between "colored" emotions in the spectrum and their resulting intersections. As each element in Vollmann's scheme is further systematized and rendered traceable by allotting a realm of "misery" to a color, let us begin with the foundational element of prostitution and its allied color red.

As one of the most potent signifiers that will thread through most of Vollmann's oeuvre, "Ladies and Red Lights" marks the inaugural spark of fascination with prostitution that will carry

Vollmann through his trilogy dedicated to the subject, terminating with *The Royal Family* (2000). As such, our “calculus” should begin here. Vollmann’s exercise in the chapter is to set the foundation for the hollowed economy of desire and emotion he sees prostitution as embodying: a ground zero for the use of emotion and intimacy as currency. In plot contents the section is slim, bare, but marks firstly Vollmann’s mixture of his own journalistic method with that of the prostitutes, as well as the complex compensation scheme of emotion underwriting the prostitute’s transactions. Vollmann first sets the stakes of transfusing a sexual economy into a fictional one by continually raising his own “payment” for information to mirror the payment for actual intercourse. His repeating mantra, consigned to footnotes, is “This revelation cost me twenty dollars” (*TRS* 110), or “This information cost me four dollars” (*TRS* 133), marking Vollmann’s continual journalistic pumping for information with the sexualized cravenness of the “john.” This payment for fuel, or content, likewise opens the frame of the novel to circuits of *literary* prostitution, or sex acts used as an enactment of literary principles. Prostitution then occupies the extremes that allow Vollmann better to elucidate the emotional “color” of his spectrum that is otherwise invisible. These extremes, however, enact in Vollmann’s scheme the paradoxical inversion of the “john” from a position of power to abject desperation—a position implicitly lowered and at a loss due to his desperate pursuit of intimacy and emotional accommodation. Though they may be in the socio-economic position of control, Vollmann seems to posit, the john’s central, isolating desire is what bankrupts him before his selected call girl. One girl, Christina, claims that she pities her clients, as inevitably they are “lonely,” often married, and only seeking someone to “act appreciative” towards them (Vollmann, *TRS* 130). Vollmann also indicts himself in the scheme, anthropomorphizing his own desperate phallus through sub-headers like “Mr. Penis” and “Mr. Penis’s Thoughts Before Taking a Whore” (*TRS*



100, 102). In the latter, he describes the detached quality of his individualized organ, stripped of more cohesive personhood and attachment to the larger human organism. Its desires are self-servicing, and above all, isolating. The narrator describes the personalized genitalia's journey and thoughts as follows: "the night is dark. He is so alone" and "What an emptiness Mr. Penis must look forward to!" (Vollmann, *TRS* 102). The hunt for a receiving organ is here correlated to a wider existential chasm desire forces the organ to face. Further, Vollmann reveals the incomplete overlap of sexual and emotional fulfillment, each not quite aligning with the other.

In progressing from sheer economically motivated sexuality to a more basic socially mandated sexuality, Vollmann then traces the transaction of emotional spark through a potentially ordinary young love between his character and a Korean girl Jenny in "Yellow Rose." True to the title's racialized overtones, "Yellow Rose" describes the fetishization of externality, and "race" as a stand-in for the more internally invisible qualities of emotion, and a negating factor in their emotional consummation. Vollmann expresses his desperate love for Jenny, yet describes her repeated discussions of how their relation is ultimately doomed to fail as her parents desire a Korean partner, and Vollmann's whiteness precludes his consideration. Vollmann reflects on this seemingly unsolvable racial impasse: "How to explain this revulsion that the colors of the rainbow feel for each other?" (*TRS* 322). He transcends the easy obstacle of sheer racial difference to return back to his schema of the "spectra" of misery, or the central inability for humans to relate suffering to one another and bond in the process. "Yellow Rose" culminates in a failed marriage proposal, yet evinces the sort of stark "emotional" calculus Vollmann proposes will leave nothing but anhedonia or absence in its wake. After Jenny turns down his request, claiming that he has made her "so unhappy" (Vollmann, *TRS* 231), she asks him to rate his own misery on a scale of one to ten. Vollmann recounts, "I considered Ten would

mean that I was ready to kill myself. I had already loaded my guns upstairs. ‘Seven,’ I said. ‘No, seven point five’” (*TRS* 232). Vollmann’s willingness to kill himself if shunned reveals the chasm beneath this fetishized racial externality. In his absolute paradigm of love or death, Vollmann’s willingness to topple into the latter should the former fail recalls the stark “black and white” outlining his own color spectrum. Earlier, after Jenny tells him their recent coupling is “the last time,” Vollmann similarly “sat imagining the cool barrel of the gun against my left eye” (*TRS* 214). The story is a paradigm of central incompatibility, with race as an external, red herring signifier for how this impossibility is manifest. Suicide is the given alternative, couched in a youthful proclamation of “love or death.”

Vollmann then eradicates his yellow signifier through a paired section on blue, called the “Blue Wallet,” hence systematically negating the possibility of earthly, relationship-driven love. The implied mixture (blue and yellow’s green also birthing the self-involved, narcissistic chapter “The Green Dress,” to be covered shortly) eradicates fully any possibility of overcoming racial difference in “Yellow Rose.” Racism as a negating factor arises again here, as Jenny loses the wallet in question at a skinhead party Vollmann has taken her to, and remains convinced the wallet will be used by the skinheads to burglarize her. Vollmann imagines the skins breaking in, “com[ing] charging up the stairs and Dagger would shatter the banister with one kick of his Nazi boots and Yama would smash in the curtained glass door” (*TRS* 321). The lost wallet takes on the characteristics of a magical object, a meta-fictional device used decisively for the slow unwinding of the relationship. Or, in terms of this study, such conceit might be a representation of mathematical inevitability or counter-polarity negating a prior emotional charge. Vollmann reiterates this self-consciously artificial interpretation of the wallet, claiming, “If this had been a Chekhovian story, or a tale from de Maupassant, the blue wallet would have turned up eventually

proving by its determined refusal to be elsewhere that all suspicions had been reified to the point of logical and moral death” (*TRS* 323). In Vollmann’s typically hyperbolic prose, he describes the “suspicions” as already maintaining a reified symbolism of death before the relationship itself has been undone. He goes on to describe how the Wallet functions as an element of inevitable deterioration in the symbol of a “black waterfall,” “that everything goes down eventually” (Vollmann, *TRS* 323-324). With the blue wallet circulating as an introduced fictional solvent to the relationship, the processes resulting are inevitable.<sup>38</sup>

The nexus of these two poles of ideal love, manifest in the yellow and blue chapters, is fittingly found in a section entitled “The Green Dress: A Pornographic Tale.” Appropriate to the mixing of yellow’s promised love and blue’s revocation, green arises as a marker of what Vollmann describes as his “gangrened calculus” (*TRS* 210), or attempt to discern and investigate an emotional absence by himself. Contrary to the seeming implication of multiple partners raised by the subtitle of “A Pornographic Tale,” “The Green Dress” in fact describes displaced onanism as the only option left after the nullification of love, or more specifically the self-love expressed through a fetishistic obsession with an object: the dress. The section begins with the same mercurial pseudo-autobiographical narrator describing his fascination with a woman in a green dress he sees continually leaving his apartment building. The twist occurs when he becomes obsessed with the dress, not the woman. The first line of the section, “some women are so reclusive as to seem perfect,” banishes her to “reclusive[ity]” so as to obtain the “perfect” husk of the dress left behind (Vollmann, *TRS* 279). The narrator slips into the woman’s apartment to obtain the garment, then goes on to describe a surreal love story in which he courts, and eventually makes love to, this garment. He describes, almost farcically, that at dinner “someone

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turned the fan on, and she fluttered mischievously...” (Vollmann, *TRS* 290). Likewise, she entices him: “she billowed gently at me; I threw myself down at the foot of the chair and her hem caressed my forehead with indescribable gentleness” (Vollmann, *TRS* 288). Finally, the relationship is consummated in a ludicrous fashion: “the sleepy dress put her sleeves around me as I entered her, but she couldn’t feel me she was too big” (Vollmann, *TRS* 289). The similarity between these descriptions is the narrator’s attempt to fill his loneliness by means of emptied cipher, in this case the invisible, former signifier of companionship. The narrator cements this concept of desiring a blank vessel through his proclaimed disdain for actual humans: “It seemed unreasonable to have to put up with the day-to-dayness of glands, hairs, tissues, fluids, and moles, when all I wanted was a Companion to hug” (Vollmann, *TRS* 298). The statement’s antisocial nature synchronizes with the emotional vacancy of Vollmann’s desired prostitution system; the dress acts as signifier of the literally objectified rather than the traditional body-as-object of the prostitution encounter.

This exaltation of a missing emotional center in Vollmann’s system is ensconced within a larger phenomenological debate in “Violet Hair,” a section that elevates the possibility for love to a final, divine level for ontological investigation. The section describes a missing, and presumably dead, “Saint Catherine” and situates Vollmann as her still-living biographer or guardian angel, raises and nullifies the potential of emotional connection beyond the earth or in a fantasized, celestial dimension. The woman in question, “Saint Catherine of San Diego,” or more properly, of “Solana Beach,” is a carry-over figure from *YBRA*, where Vollmann describes her with a mystical air of inhumanity, either hinting at her inaccessibility—like the voyeur object in “Green Dress”—or her literal inanimacy (Vollmann, *TRS* 483). Vollmann notes that she “would never love me nor love anyone,” indicating her potential as a mentally closed off love object

(Hemmingson, *Critical Study* 25), yet just as quickly says he may have been “fooling” himself, and that in true Beatrice fashion, she may be “in her grave” (*YBRA* 25). Regardless, Vollmann fictionally transmutes himself into an ethereal guardian angel, or “holy ghost,” who observes the potentially dead (or perhaps dead-in-life) Catherine. He claims, “I, William T. Vollmann, am the Holy Ghost, I am able to understand all tongues” (Vollmann, *TRS* 530). In one sense, the tale presents Vollmann as a penitent parishioner trying to summon the idea of Catherine through sheer faith, yet in another, related to Catherine’s supposed reading of Heidegger, Vollmann is tested in his relation to her more ontologically. We then have a religious narrative, about the possibility of love as a holy, faith-driven yet untouchable construct, as well as a practical philosophical investigation into how such love manifests the same problems of unprovability.

Vollmann’s description of his interaction with Catherine is always by proxy. Rather than the window shade of “Green Dress,” he gives himself a parting of the clouds to gain omnipotent insight into Catherine’s daily rituals and worries that become fixed by his gaze with the transcendent importance of divine communion. He describes matter-of-factly that “most of her life, Catherine had been reading, sometimes taking her book to visit me in Heaven where it is cold and foggy” (Vollmann, *TRS* 483). Vollmann’s voyeuristic obsession is “holy,” and he claims that by imagination alone can he bring Catherine up to his transcendent peak. His relation to her, however, is forever uncertain—there is never an absolute assertion that Vollmann-as-Holy-Ghost actually *exists*, nor that Catherine believes in him. She sometimes has “a peculiar feeling that something in the air is trying to talk to me,” yet no absolute confirmation that Vollmann’s supervision is recognized (Vollmann, *TRS* 488). Catherine, as surrogate to Vollmann’s ultimate notion of “connection,” is forever blocked by the epistemological questions

relating to any certain knowledge of divine figures. Like Beatrice, he can only follow, but never fully embrace or know.

Vollmann's querying of supreme love's existence is likewise blended with Catherine's own investigations into Heideggerian ontology and "being." Catherine's philosophical investigations raise an idealized end point for Vollmann's investigations into absolute union that his calculus strives for but finally, crushingly, cannot obtain. The section is subtitled "A Heideggerian Tragedy," and is marked by Catherine's ontological crises as she pores over Heidegger's *Being and Time* in an attempt to solve her problem of "being-in-the-world," or Dasein. Vollmann creates an explicit link between his former fetishistic spectatorship and the relationality at core of much of Heidegger's investigation of Dasein by describing his Holy Ghost stature as existing "*in relation* to Catherine" (TRS 494). Here we see Vollmann's reiteration of his epigram's notion that misery's colors are only visibly by contrast, or by alignment with one another. Relationality's integral function in Heideggerian thought is revealed by Vollmann's glossary at the end of the section, defining "Relatedness" as "One of Dasein's most integral characteristics" (TRS 533) and that "Dasein does not exist as an isolated quantity, but as an entity *in relation* to the constellation of ontic flotsam and jetsam in the world" (TRS 533). By claiming an ontological status of "being" only in relation to the phantasmal construct of Catherine, Vollmann literally claims to be living *for*, or only existing as an adjunct *to*, the "being" of Catherine. He has an emotional status only by proxy to the gravitas of Catherine's Dasein; like Wittgenstein's color, he holds no stable immanent state or qualities in himself. Likewise, Catherine implicates herself in the dual potential of Dasein as either manifesting "being" in a free-standing, self-sustained capacity ("present-at-hand") or as a function of use in relation to another Dasein ("ready-to-hand"). This duality appears in Catherine's thinking as

even applicable to sunlight, such that “she seemed imprisoned in some summer reverie about whether sunlight is essentially present-at-hand because it is there in itself or whether it is ready-to-hand because Catherine discovered it and felt it on her” (Vollmann, *TRS* 496). Her “Heideggerian panic” (Vollmann, *TRS* 496) is such that she seems incapable of acting, perhaps as a means of heading off any claims to “ready-at-hand” status, and the nonstop activity and utilization implied. She ruminates on the quote from *Being and Time*, “To be closed off and covered up belongs to Dasein’s facticity,” using this sentiment of reclusiveness as a reason to stay “lying on her bed day and night” and to covertly slip into a “factual,” present-at-hand status (Vollmann, *TRS* 514). Her panic over her own status, unsure of whether she is only a relational construct, or indeed has *a priori* existence, reflects Vollmann’s own regard for her as an aloof paramour, wandering spirit, or idealized construct. As the ultimate encapsulation of cosmic love, Catherine *cannot* exist, or can only exist as a shifting manipulation of the pieces of Heideggerian being. In Vollmann’s emotional calculus of only vacated emotional currencies, she simply cannot be known.

Having established his “holy” vision and his ability to see through the various hollow emotive charges of the rainbow’s colors, Vollmann closes *TRS* with a reflective epilogue called “X-Ray Visions,” a ruminative suggestion of the space beyond color. Similar to the synthesized colors in the book’s first formal chapter, “The Visible Colors,” which describes the sinister practice of hospitals assigning one’s severity of disease and required operations to colored lines on the floor, “X-Ray” presents a pan-novelistic perspective looking beyond them. The x-ray perspective sees through Eros, as I believe *TRS* outlines in its color-specific chapters, straight to the terminus of death. Vollmann is ostensibly interpreting the Rorschach-like x-rays marked by surreal disorders, yet he suggests that when you can see the “vague corona of the skull,” and

“ghosts of marrow,” “you are literally seeing death” (*TRS* 537-541). Like the inaccessibility of “holy love” that Vollmann manifests in the presumably dead “saint” Catherine, the underlying composite of these various colors the book encapsulates is the nullification of life, the common base against which the other colors may be judged. X-Rays, unlike the human eye, see “through the RED of our blood, the ORANGE and the YELLOW of our fatty tissues, the GREEN and BLUE of our intestines, the INDIGO of our dreams, the VIOLET of our preoccupations—and only the black and white remain” (Vollmann, *TRS* 541). That is, the sterile erotic interchanges of prostitutes, the unreachable coupling of earthly love, and the unattainability of cosmic love, all circulate around the central nexus of death, of bodily decay and the certainty of mortality.

In Vollmann’s erotic calculus, transgression is merely the silver lining that runs through various kinds of ephemeral social and erotic connection. The world of prostitutes, limned by concepts of “safety” and complacency, is kept in balance by a possibility of bodily harm to the prostitute and of emotional deficit to the john. In unobtainable social connection, epitomized in the unreachable ideal of Jenny, the fetishized external qualifier of race enters to nullify any possible understanding. Beneath this unreachable surface-level human connection, the mathematical certainty of suicide (the “10” of Vollmann’s 1 to 10 misery scale) lies unquestioned. Likewise, even self-love and solipsism are marred by the eventual transmutation of one’s desire into inanimate objects like the green dress, themselves incapable of loving back. Love is essentially ensconced in the hollowness of the green dress’s interior when Vollmann attempts to make love to it—empty, a joke, animated by self-delusion. This emotional incapacity reaches a level of ontological uncertainty in Catherine and the search for Dasein. Vollmann is never able to realize his existence in relation to her, nor her existence in relation to herself, due to her muddled “ready-at-hand” or “present-at-hand” status. Overall, the stories reveal the



evacuation of emotion in various capacities, and the ways in which one might be able to shift the remaining husks of personhood to analyze the lingering dregs of desire. (As Gaddis says in *The Recognitions*, “what’s any artist but the dregs of his work?”) The colors and chapters not mentioned here, mostly relating to skinheads, the murdering of homeless people, and performance artists mashing animals in threshers, likewise reveal the quantification and isolation of “transgression” next to the isolated experiments of the other colors. The transgression is merely an understood and exaggerated attempt for “feeling” set into relief by the flatness, and emotional numbing of the other chapters for the sake of the “calculus.” That such calculus inevitably equals “zero” doesn’t seem to strike Vollmann as the sole poignancy of the work. The push beyond the “zero,” however, and with a far greater fixation on these “isolated” transgressions wound to a high tension, is explored in Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*. Indeed, Ellis’s oscillating scheme of brutality and banality is so fevered as to make pain feel like sensitivity, sensitivity like nothing.

### Less Sad The Second Time Around: *American Psycho* and the Selfhood of Repetition

Bret Easton Ellis opens *American Psycho* with an excerpt from Dostoevsky's preface to *Notes from Underground* that describes how the grizzled and outcast underground man isn't an aberration, but rather a necessary byproduct of contemporary society. That, "considering the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed," such persons not only exist, but "must exist" (Ellis, *AP*). If we update the underground man to Tom LeClair's "systems man," or to a similar crystallization of societal ills that is allowed greater circulation within society, the presence of this ostracized figure's mania would be diffuse, abstract. Navigating through a postmodern architecture of abstract wealth, sex that mimes pornography, and an assemblage of brands that connote "identity," *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman presents just such a figure permeating society as fluidly as the currency he spends with abandon. His passage through his environment, and the novel in general, is marked by stark outbursts of violence—cruel, calculated, and deployed with scientific precision. Yet this balance of deadened commercial circuitry and "incomprehensible" violence has dominated critical discussion with little comment on the structured and systematic aspect in which they operate, though this systematic nature forms the mantle of Patrick's consciousness and the novel's organization. Selfhood is suggested by the systematic repetition of banalities and extremes: a learning of emotion by rote. Violence is present throughout the story with the insistence and definition of a plot device, or recurrent minor character, and Bateman himself exhibits the revolving, centrifuge-like coming into consciousness by these bursts of violence, coupled with his own repeated attempts at self-definition.

In the highly segregated and dread-saturated emotional centrifuge of *American Psycho*, the interactive, empathic friction of Vollmann's tragic characters and their potential redeemers in

*TRS* is separated by Ellis into categories of absolute numbness and absolute carnality. In Larry McCaffery's interview with David Foster Wallace, McCaffery places Ellis in the same tactical camp of sensational material as Vollmann, though he claims Vollmann uses sensation to "depict those people not as flattened, dehumanized stereotypes," as Ellis does, "but as human beings" (132). Yet he doesn't comment on whether these flattened "stereotypes" might have a purpose, or greater ability for circulation within the particular construct Ellis has built. Similarly, in Vollmann's imbuing of "humanity" to his down-and-out subjects and personalizing his relationships with them, there is a complication—Vollmann's own embedding of self within the narrative coupled with empathy (and sometimes physical intimacy) with his subjects makes objective analysis difficult. Even Vollmann's imposed schema of the scattered colors of "misery" only captures sensation in the movement from one to the other. Bateman's quest for selfhood, however, is marked by twin trajectories of stark violence and banal consumerism, revealing how each category might alternate, repeat, and interplay to build sensation accretively. Ellis's "flattened, dehumanized" characters, like Bateman, function more like algebraic symbols in a larger equation. As a numb placeholder, Bateman is an ideal test case for the conjuring of affect by repetition and recursion, intermittently jolted by jags of "feeling" that performatively mirror a novel being shocked to life.

While much has been made of the book's twinned trajectories of banality and violence, these have been understood fairly simplistically as one only puncturing the other, or creating an ethics of "suspension"<sup>39</sup> in one's anticipation of the other. Yet, rather than presume the violence is a manifestation of some latent dissatisfaction with a superficial, consumer façade, both

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<sup>39</sup> See C. Namwali Serpell's "The Ethics of Uncertainty: Reading Twentieth-Century American Literature."

trajectories embody the same desire—of a coming-into-being of “feeling,” of composing moments of excess or elation from constitutive elements. And indeed, a closer appraisal of the novel’s careful construction—Ellis offers an alternative to critics’ claim of plotlessness by highlighting his unique structuring device of steadily increasing “dread” (Ellis, Goulian “Art”)—reveals a more carefully constructed attempt to reach affective breakthrough by the dual threads of hyper-violence and bourgeois self-realization. The former is achieved by meticulously plotted inclusions of hyper-violence—Ellis often notes that the book presents less than twenty-five pages of the much discussed violence—included as quantitative entities, rather than the nuanced, “bravura” element that critics like Julian Murphet claim presents the “real” or “literary” writing of the novel. The latter, likewise, is marked as accretive gestures toward self-realization, with Patrick’s sense of self attempting to manifest through his two chosen mediums—jokes and music reviews—to no avail, and made moot by their systematic repetition. Indeed, the “banality,” repetition, and formlessness perceived by most critics—some redemptively with the aim of satire in mind—are rather a misperception of the emotional economies running beneath the novel’s seemingly disorganized construct. With an aim at systematic construction, and almost content-negligible moments of rupture and overt transgression, Ellis’ novel attempts to offer a starker rendition of Vollmann’s emotional calculus by projecting it through the most abysmally flat character possible. And, in the process, Ellis generates a new type of two-dimensional character actively realizing the existential hell of his own two-dimensionality.

When discussing two-dimensionality of character, it is useful to reflect on the more damning critical assessments of Ellis’s work. Most suggestive are those understanding the emotional chasm beneath Ellis’s work as sheer vacuity, as these critical perspectives still point to a deeper moral or ethical lack that Ellis is addressing. To gain the starkest possible example—

and most apropos in this study—, let us look at commentary by one of Ellis’ most pointed detractors, David Foster Wallace. In Wallace’s 1988 piece “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young,” he attributes one of three genres seen as symptomatic of the shallow writing of his generation to Ellis, called “Neiman-Marcus-Nihilism,” or alternately, “Gold-card-fear-and-trembling” fiction (39, 67). The genre supposedly entails “six-figure Uppies and their salon-tanned, morally vacant offspring, none of whom seem to be able to make it from limo door to analyst’s couch without several grams of chemical encouragement” (“Futures” 39). Wallace’s main critique of Ellis’s school, as he elaborates on in his later interview with Larry McCaffery, was the “Mimesis-for-Mimesis’ sake” (“Futures” 67) mode of critiquing “shitty, insipid, materialistic” social problems by merely mirroring them without commentary or a way out, crystallized excesses in Ellis through the travails of a bored aristocracy (Wallace, McCaffery 26). Yet, in raising these reflections of Kierkegaard (“fear-and-trembling”) and nihilism, however facetiously, Wallace still allots weight to the philosophical project Ellis remains engaged in, however much he might disagree with the superficial gloss or surface action.

Wallace’s assessment of Ellis during the 1993 McCaffery interview actually arrives incidentally while dodging McCaffery’s original query about whether Ellis fulfilled Wallace’s dictum that writers must be willing to be “cruel,” or progress beyond a prostituting, entertaining relationship (23). McCaffery clarifies this cruelty as “‘cruel’ the way an army drill sergeant is when he decides to put a bunch of raw recruits through hell, knowing that the trauma you’re inflicting on these guys...[is] going to strengthen them in the end” (Wallace, McCaffery 24). Wallace’s unwillingness to ally literal “cruelty” to the emotional hardiness he feels essential to quality writing is further reinforced by his wholesale dismissal of the kind of “shock-tactics” used by transgressive writers. He qualifies this literal and exaggerated cruelty under a “renegade

avant-gardism” that, in its abandonment of a reader-enriching pact, lends to “bad language poetry and *American Psycho*’s nipple-shocks and Alice Cooper eating shit on stage” (Wallace, McCaffery 132). Wallace’s point of view is that “cruelty,” or confrontation of discomfoting issues in discomfoting manner, must still provide means to apply “CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical” (Wallace, McCaffery 28). Hence, Ellis and Wallace only differ in the final reaction of cruelty in provoking a more optimistic reaction in the reader; the line at which productive cruelty merges into mere “shock tactics” is uncertain.

Discussion of productive or unproductive cruelty leads us to the most fixated-upon aspect of *American Psycho*: the violence—the original, blinding element that caught the eye of critics trying to, as Roger Rosenblatt’s article was titled, “Snuff this Book.” The story of *American Psycho*’s publishing is legend, such that there is little point in recounting it in full here, other than remarking the initial, premature release of the hyper-explicit scenes (out of context, and without indication that this comprised a minority of the text), a boycott by NOW, withdrawal of Ellis’s publishing contract, a reinstatement of Ellis’s contract by Vintage Contemporaries, and eventual release of *AP* to much scandal and fanfare. The resulting premature critical assessments were locked into this hysteria, taking the bait of early titillating detail and using this as an excuse to slander and almost deliberately misread the book. (This reactionary groupthink response is wholly refuted in Elizabeth Young’s essential “The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet;” the foundation of most or all critical reappraisals of Ellis.) A telling review by John Leo in *U.S. News & World Report* is indicative of the broader consensus: “totally hateful... violent junk... no discernable plot, no believable characterizations, no sensibility at work that comes anywhere close to making art out of all the blood and torture... Ellis displays little feel for narrative, words, grammar or the rhythm of language” (Serpell, “Ethics” 23). The misreading, in

particular, of the novel's construction and apparent shirking of "narrative" and "rhythm" are actually telling of a deeper organizational principle missing in these assessments.

Elizabeth Young's "Beast in the Carpet" includes an ironic epigram by Ellis meant to jab at these myopic critics, in which Ellis is quoted as saying, "What I was really interested in was the language, the structure, the details" (85). Young goes on to describe the story of the novel's difficult and controversial publication as a decoy for critics to avoid the structural complexities of the real narrative ("Beast" 85). Yet, the root of such critical indignation—Ellis's celebrity and high profile—is also part of what makes the consideration of *American Psycho* so essential, as the dramatic release of the book led to Ellis being temporarily regarded as "America's most notorious and 'dangerous' mainstream writer" (Young, "Beast" 85). Indeed, Young claims "it was the combination of overt sexual violence and Ellis's status as a 'serious' novelist—young, relevant, living, mainstream—that determined all the hysteria" ("Beast" 92). Dennis Cooper's far more explicit novel *Frisk*, whose kaleidoscopic sadism makes *American Psycho* look like *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by comparison, was released to essentially no critical protestations that same spring. One plausible reason? *Frisk* was a "homosexual-murder" novel rather than a heterosexual-murder novel, and hence was marginalized (Young, "Beast" 90). Such is to say, *American Psycho*, as an object of mainstream fear, offers a more telling example of how hegemonic tropes of emotional flattening and violence operate than other works.

Ellis's fastidious approach to handling violent content is surprising when considering his somewhat misattributed reputation as shock-meister and gore-monger. In interviews he describes how he consciously, and with a degree of detachment, implemented the subject matter into the already-existing construct of the novel, indicating the quantitative and chronological function of violence. Addressing his integration of these controversial scenes, Ellis describes his hesitation:

“I didn’t really want to write them, but I knew they had to be there... there were four or five of them scattered throughout the book, that I left blank and didn’t work on until the book was completed, then I went back and filled those scenes in” (Ellis, Clark 75). Rather than fetishistically pore over the violent contents of these chapters, as perhaps some critics assumed, Ellis in fact created them with a degree of uneasy resolve and then coolly distributed them into the already-constructed frame of the novel—a method that reinforces his claim to use these sequences for their periodic irruption rather than actual substance. Even the content of the violent episodes were not explicitly drawn from Ellis’s presumed “dark” imagination, but rather from research and secondary material. He describes how he “read a lot of books about serial killers and picked up details from that and then I had a friend who introduced me to someone who could get me criminology textbooks from the FBI that really went into graphic detail about... what serial killers did to bodies” (Ellis, Clark 75). Further, intentional fallacies aside, the constitutive elements of the sections weren’t constructed *ex nihilo*, but were rather based on a real-life journalistic research and transplanted almost wholesale (with a “turned up... notch” from “being in Patrick Bateman’s mind-set for three years” [Ellis, Goulian, “Art”]). Ellis claims, “That’s why I did the research, because I couldn’t really have made this up” (Ellis, Clark 75), indicating perhaps another dark turn in Tom Wolfe’s journalistic realism prescription. As is evident in these highly constructed and meticulous inclusions of stark violence, such episodes were used as organizational punctuations to other components of narrative construction, much like Barthes’s understanding of Sade’s erotic grammar.

Considering Ellis’s attitude towards violence as a quantity structurally and prescriptively distributed, one should investigate also Ellis’s unremarked-on use of other book-level organizational and even typographical strategies. First, let us examine a little-discussed



technique borrowed from Joan Didion, whose minimalist style already looms large as an influence on Ellis (she is named as one of only two influences, along with Hemingway, as Ellis claims “one is enough, two is enough” [Ellis, Clark 70]). He remarks specifically on the effect of “white space” in her novel *Play It as It Lays* (1970), claiming “the whiteness surrounding the words adds an extra dimension of emotionality to the book,” and “when you turned the page it was a page where white dominated and then there were two paragraphs that just floated there alone in this whiteness” (Ellis, Clark 69). This “float[ing]” textual chunk then “summed up what was going on in the book and the themes of the book as much as the action in the book” (Ellis, Clark 69). Significant here is Ellis’s perception of the text’s arrangement, and the exaggerated whiteness of margins in Didion’s text in particular, as mimetically rendering the bleakness and isolation reiterated in the textual content. Ellis first explicitly borrows this concept of whiteness in *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), as he describes in his 2012 *The Paris Review* interview where he details multiple arguments with his Simon and Schuster editor Robert Asahina over his exacting typographical expectations. Most stark was perhaps the “blank page after the [character Lauren’s] abortion” (Ellis, Goulian, “Art”). However, he also argued for “bigger” “spacing between characters’ monologues,” “about two and a quarter inches wide,” the gaps between text recalling Didion’s evocative floating paragraphs and imbuing each monologue with a distanced, solipsistic aura (Ellis, Goulian, “Art”). This same strategy of invoking the margin to reiterate narrative content reappears in *American Psycho* as well, namely in a moment reminiscent of the blank-page abortion from *Rules*, where Bateman describes a “scary drawing” drawn with a prostitute’s blood that “looks like this” (Ellis, *AP* 306), after which there is only a blank gap. Here Ellis gestures at the blankness of Bateman’s emotional state with the blankness of the page in a dramatic revealing of Barthes “gap[ing]” garment. Examples like this indicate an attention to

spacing, placement, and arrangement of certain sequences, and particularly those evoking visceral emotional reactions.

Half-understandings of this systematic construct have arisen in the attempt to locate the novel between twin polarities of banality and violence. A sense of both forces' interplay is typically sensed—usually in an interpenetrating, binary alternation—but one side is usually illogically believed to represent the “actual” literary content. As part of this unbalanced understanding, critic Julian Murphet sees the violent sequences as cuing the entrance of literary “style” in the form of fevered, accumulative syntax. He claims that “in scenes of abomination,” “the oppressive paratactic narrative voice finally ‘lets rip’ and tips over from weightless indistinction into driven, compulsive syntactical construction (Murphet 45-46). My main critique of Murphet’s assessment, which Serpell reiterates, is in Murphet’s claim that if the violent portions are the only segments that are stylistically remarkable, the non-violent portions are negligible, or in his terms, “indistinct.” To appreciate only the violence is to ignore the acerbic, Jane Austen-like satire of the “banal” portions—the chapter-long argument about dinner reservations, for instance, resembling a Gaddis boardroom scene of balletic, interchanging puns and double entendres. Further, to claim that the violent sections are the only segments exhibiting “compulsive syntactical construction” is to ignore the minimalist repression of the non-violent prose. And whoever said parataxis was non-literary? Regardless, even Serpell, who contends that these interruptions of violence are not the only stylistic moments, still agrees with Murphet’s implication that the novel presents a binary pacing of starkly visceral action and boredom. Serpell’s thesis revolves around interpreting these intervals between violence as epitomizing an “ethics of suspension,” or a forced imperative to “read expectantly, to read *in suspense* of violence” (“Ethics” 192). The reader, in Serpell’s estimation, is like a dog waiting to be lashed,

and the sense of dread created imbues the sections of mindless consumer catalogue jargon-speak with an emotional vitality by virtue of their proximity to sequences offering luridly described carnage. I wish to expand this notion of violent sequences seeping into banal ones by outlining a more central, tightening affective core driving the work: namely, an incrementally increasing sensation of dread.

“Dread” suffuses the novel—Bateman reflects on his consumption by a “nameless dread” on eight separate occasions in the work. Yet, “dread” also acts as a sub-textual undercurrent by which Ellis claims he subverts conventional plotting, or a typical linear organization beholden to “climaxes” and conclusions. As such, dread might function as an energy current of systematic function in the novel, or trace of environmental changes that don’t require overt expression. Interpreting systematic “dread” rather than “plot” is essential to understanding Ellis’s work yet is curiously missing in current criticism (excepting Serpell’s mingling of dread and suspension). One telling eschatological quality of *American Psycho* is that it holds no real conclusion, it gives no real act of shift or resolution—the last words in the novel are in fact “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (Ellis, *AP* 399).<sup>40</sup> There is “progress,” however, if one looks at the sub-plot elements of increasing emotional charge. Ellis corrects critical misinterpretation of his “plotlessness” as actually misperceptions of a deeper system, noting, “The nonnarrative, or least plot-driven, books that I’ve written [a category he eventually extends to include all of them] were actually the most carefully structured” (Ellis, Goulian, “Art”). He elaborates on a potential reader’s location within the text by claiming, “What keeps the reader engaged is probably a gradually increasing sense of dread” (Ellis, Goulian, “Art”). This may seem incidental, but he goes on to elaborate the

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<sup>40</sup> Indeed, in a moment of more naked, fourth-wall-breaking, despair, Patrick reflects that there is no reason for the book to exist: “There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing*...” (377).

function of “dread” as a carefully structured phenomena in *American Psycho* in particular: “The scenes had to be put in a certain order. There are subtle gradations of menace. There’s a faint hum of horror in the background at the beginning of the book, and as the book progresses the hum becomes, hopefully, deafening” (Ellis, Goulian, “Art”). Hence, rather than a shock-and-retreat tactic emphasized by Serpell and Murphet, Ellis describes an abstract, slowly increasing sensation of hopelessness that mounts as one proceeds through the book, often unrelated to what is immediately being read.

The thematic through-line between the schematically arranged violent sequences and their counterpart in Bateman’s prosaic routines is an emotional one, and, in its constant shifts, one might even say presents maturation. Serpell notes: “despite critical protestations to the contrary, the scenes of violence do in fact change over the course of the novel in structure, in accumulative effect, and in tone” (Serpell, “Ethics”185). This change is reflected in the increasing elaborateness of torture and grisliness of violence: the famous “Rat” sequence as well as the murder of the child at the zoo (two of the most bleak moments) arrive relatively late in the novel. Bateman also becomes increasingly detached from the violent sequences; elisions and jump cuts indicate that an emotional essence in the scene has eluded him, or rather that the medium is incapable of keeping up with Bateman’s desired fulfillment. While critics like Marco Abel note the *tempo* of the novel disrupted by the incursions of violence—violence interrupting the “mundane” “slowness” of the consumer section (8-9)—Serpell hones in on the meta-textual elements, indicating that the violence is increasingly abbreviated, or short-handed. In particular, she notes Bateman’s narrative intrusions describing both his boredom with and elision of violent sequences, for example “*As usual*, in an attempt to understand these girls I’m filming their deaths” or “*Later, predictably*, she’s tied to the floor” (Serpell, “Ethics” 304, 327, Serpell’s

italics). What Serpall doesn't remark on in describing Bateman's increasing exasperation at his frustrated, violent confrontations is the widening chasm of emotional need it signifies and covers. Further, perhaps this deepening despondency may birth other concurrent epiphanic phenomena (the repetition of Bateman's music reviews evidences a similar attempt at self-realization addressed momentarily).

Through such systematic repetitions of dread-inducing violence that leave Bateman further unsatisfied, these systematically repeated attempts seem to prompt the urgency for other means of actualized selfhood. The question, then, is whether dread is capable of causing empathy, or the creation of a psychic chasm feeding into (even banal) attempts at artistic realization. In system theory terms, the question is whether entropy could lead to a "negentropy," or high-order arrangement of these deviant and runaway impulses. This question of Bateman's interiority was formerly stymied in scholarship by Ellis's initial insistence that Bateman was a fabricated, satirical cartoon, used only for overtly critical purposes (likely to head off claims of his own misogyny in light of the resulting controversies).<sup>41</sup> Yet, in recent interviews (around the time of his seventh novel, *Imperial Bedrooms*, being published), Ellis has modified his position, revealing to a far greater extent how Bateman was actually modeled on himself and his own experiences living as a well-to-do author in Manhattan, at that age, during the 1980s.<sup>42</sup> Ellis's alignment with his fictional avatar would inevitably call for critical reassessments of Bateman as something beyond a completely flat, unredeemable trope. Likewise, in LeClair's notion of a

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<sup>42</sup> In a 2013 interview with *The Sabotage Times*, Ellis claims, "Patrick Bateman was me. I was Patrick Bateman. He clarifies that "my father wasn't in New York the same age as Patrick Bateman, living in the same building, going to the same places that Patrick Bateman was going to—I was." He further describes how "the impetus to write that book came out of my lifestyle and how unhappy it made me, and how the idea of becoming an adult seemed frustrating, absurd, disgusting, and I was kind of enraged."

“systems man,” Bateman might be the depersonalized node in the circuit of Ellis’s satire, or a “flat” figure able to accrete typically human characteristics by integration with his environment. Recent critical work, such as Alex E. Blazer’s essay “*American Psycho*, *Hamlet*, and Existential Psychosis,” indicates this new kind of scholarship that treats Ellis’s characters as “fictional personalities with emotional complexity,” by “put[ting] Patrick in the company of that paradigm of humanism, *Hamlet*” (Mandel 17). This may indicate a new wave of consideration for the novel, and Bateman in particular as a more “accurate” prism of the times. If we understand the conception of Patrick as a thickened cipher, or numeric digit with personality, we might begin to align Ellis’s structural vision with this nascent psychological perception of Bateman.

The sensitivity, if one can even use that term with regard to Patrick Bateman, is perhaps also set into relief by Ellis’s updating of the character in 2012 during a Twitter session brainstorming a potential *American Psycho* sequel. With updated cultural references and markers, it becomes easier to see Bateman’s psyche as something vibrating in frequency with a pop ideology, or rather taking the ethics of pop culture to a psychotic degree of literalism. One of Ellis’s tweets describes how “Patrick would talk about Adele and Kanye and KATY PERRY because ‘Firework’ [a somewhat trite song about individuality] is his favorite song... and then he kills Katy Perry’s trainer” (Ellis “Patrick would talk”). Another claims “Patrick would complain about spotify and the cloud and tumbler [*sic*]... but he would find victims via Blendr while listening to Beyonce and O.A.R.” (Ellis “Patrick would complain”). Another: “Patrick would post pics of murdered girls on Facebook and either no one would notice or post ‘Fuck yeah’” (Ellis “Patrick would post”). Interesting firstly is Patrick’s empathizing with the saccharine emotional formulations of pop music—it is not that he doesn’t have emotions, it is just that his are as rude, rearrangeable, and schematic as a pop song. Similarly, the blasé fashion in which his

supposed pictures of dead women on Facebook would be received with mild adulation or neutrality indicates Bateman's "morality" as just above that of an underdeveloped teenager. His attitude is present, but disengaged. His interests in gadgetry and cutting-edge smart phone applications for 'deviant' purposes even present a typical tableau of teen-age online exploration. Seen in 2012, Bateman isn't so much a psychotic singularity as a mixture of teen-age tastes and hyper-masculine id.

Bateman's interest in "pop" is so pervasive and all-encompassing that it becomes a major destabilizing factor in his attempts to render personhood beyond his interests. Indeed, an early comment by Ellis reveals that Bateman's consciousness is essentially a weave of secondhand consumer reference, his makeup "made from magazines," "A mixture of *GQ* and *Stereo Review* and *Fangoria*... and *Vanity Fair*" (Ellis, Love). Patrick's consciousness as "catalogue speak" often irks critics, who believe they have been duped into reading crushingly dry, *Sky Mall*-like advertorial prose as a joke, yet this ad-copy mentality also presents the central paradox in Bateman's attempt to find consciousness within a postmodern selfhood constructed only of recycled quotation. Some have even noted how Bateman receives constant praise in the novel for his ability to quote popular adages and odd bits of *GQ* arcana precisely because this second-hand quotation is what passes for "creation" in a referential, postmodern semiotic system. The pressure caused by forced submersion of the "new" for sake of regurgitating the "old" forms part of James Brusseau's theory of Patrick's murderousness—his hunger for the visceral is driven by a desire to resist or transcend capital-driven Baudrillardian hyperreality. Brusseau frames Bateman's psychosis as follows: "what he's losing is his defense against the intrusion of Baudrillardian reality, his defense that each one of these murders is drawing him closer to

something still unfound, something stubbornly ineffable” (43-44).<sup>43</sup> Without even considering the murders (literal or imagined as they may be), Bateman’s battle for his own interiority is ultimately fought on the commercial plane of his pop-soaked consciousness. Glitches in this commercial fabric then might be reappraised as evidence of nascent and independent thought strands arising within the flow of the novel. Young cites this manipulation of affectless advertising-speak that often seems perilously close to insinuating interiority as one of the primary revolutionary aspects of the novel, that “by situating this mall-speak within a serious novel, Ellis destabilizes genres and suggests that, in general, a close study of our cultural debris might reveal clues” (“Beast” 101). These “clues,” in fact, might be fledgling pieces of Patrick’s consciousness. We must then look to the rules and conventions of the “mall-speak” that drives much of the novel, seeking out the exemptions and intrusions that give us a sense of Patrick’s slowly creeping deterioration and organic breakthroughs.

The nearest integration between the novel’s systematic nature and this “mall-speak” are the epigrammatic section headings that divide the book. Often separated by a perforated line seeming to indicate that one could detach and rearrange the sections entirely, these headings can range from the utterly prosaic (“Dinner with Secretary” [Ellis, *AP* 256], “Dry Cleaners” [Ellis, *AP* 81]) to the deranged (“Tries to Cook and Eat Girl” [Ellis, *AP* 343], “Taking an Uzi to the Gym” [Ellis, *AP* 346]). The catalogue feel gives one the impression that just as we are flipping through a pop archive of recorded anhedonic episodes, so might Bateman too be viewing his own

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<sup>43</sup> Critic Ruth Heyler replaces this central ineffability, or elusive truth, that Bateman strives towards as the primal urge lying beneath social prohibition typically expressed in Gothic novels, putting *American Psycho* in the lineage of the form. She borrows Fred Botting’s formulation of Gothic novels as “warning of dangers of social and moral transgression by presenting them in their darkest and most threatening form” (726). Bateman’s “submission to bestial urges” then indicates that he “succumbed to these urges, not invented them,” making “the unpleasant suggestion that they are lying dormant in all of us” (727).



detached life like a secondhand peruser. The intrusion of Patrick's derangement into the construction of the chapters—his blank “scary drawing,” his bile-spewing, stream-of-consciousness monologue in “A Glimpse of a Thursday Afternoon” (Ellis, *AP* 148), his action-movie murder montage in “Chase, Manhattan” (Ellis, *AP* 347)—is amplified by their proximity to chapters describing an unexplained return to Patrick's banal lifestyle. Likewise, any apparent causality, or chronological progression, is constantly undermined. Young notes that even though some headings seem to gesture at linear sequence, with passages like “Morning” followed by “Afternoon,” Bateman's different attire in both scenes indicates that they in fact occur separately, that an unseen jump cut has taken place (“Beast” 101). The unwinding and fraying of organizational markers also seeps into and appears within Patrick's mutating consumer object obsessions. As Patrick usually describes characters in a deluge of labels, e.g. “she's wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt, and silk-satin d'Orsay pumps from Manolo Blahnik” (*AP* 8), Young notes how over the length of the novel this apparent hyper-perception devolves. “Shoes by ‘Susan Warren Bennis Edwards’ becomes shoes by ‘Warren Susan Allen Edmonds’ becomes shoes by ‘Edward Susan Bennis Allen’” (Young, “Beast” 102). In other words, the stability required in Bateman's catalogued imagination shows signs of wear, instability, and unfurling in minor, patterned ways. Bateman likewise often misattributes songs, despite the fact that his obsession with music is evidenced in his exhaustive reviews of Whitney Houston, Phil Collins, and Huey Lewis and the News. The minor misattributions indicate the degradation also of smaller-scale and pop cultural elements. These “glitches” in the mall-speak of Bateman's brain indicate fissures—not only those leading to a desired violent eruption, but also to deviations in the consumer construct he is embedded within.

In the search for *positive* fissures within Bateman's catalogue-construct, Serpell isolates one element of seemingly unique and creative construction that troubles further the Ellis-Bateman line: humor,<sup>44</sup> and particularly Bateman's constant inclusion of puns. This trait becomes almost a running joke as regards Bateman's true ontology and persona—whether he is as Evelyn, his supposed girlfriend, claims, the “boy next door” with an “ador[able]” “sense of humor,” or how Bateman imagines himself, “a fucking evil psychopath” (Ellis, *AP* 11, 220, 20). His puns and the schisms opened by them include a comment about his interest in “murders and executions” in lieu of “mergers and acquisitions,” his ordering of a “decapitated coffee” rather than a “decaffeinated” coffee and assurance (in Ellis's later novel *Glamorama*) that he has (we assume a literal) “coat of arms” (Ellis, *AP* 44) all expressed without surprise from present characters. Serpell sees these schisms opening a linguistic “void,” similar to the “existential chasm” always before Bateman (Ellis, *AP* 179), tearing open the authorial construct, or rather querying how far removed Bateman's consciousness is from the text we are now receiving. (Certain abrupt narrative modifications, such as the switch into third-person during the frenzied action sequence in “Chase, Manhattan,” and phrases indicating certain scenes as being literally filmed—e.g. “a slow dissolve,” “smash cut and I'm back in the kitchen” [Ellis, *AP* 8, 11] amplify this character detachment.) She notes the paradoxical, koan-like nature of most of the puns' homophonic operation, only registering as humorous when read by an outside source. The trauma done to language, and the collapse of Bateman's consciousness with the mediated prose of Ellis, are revealed in these puns, as Serpell claims,

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<sup>44</sup> Helyer also comments on the presence of comedy as holding a society-critiquing element endemic to the Gothic, as well as an embellishment of frightening qualities to such a degree that “it can border on the comical” (730).

[The] use of puns complicates matters for two reasons: first, because his puns are often linguistically inventive and thus they are intentionally rather than accidentally amusing; and second, because they are both Ellis's and his narrator's, which is to say the narratological gap infuses into the puns a *knowingness* that would seem to gainsay any accusation of *thoughtlessness* ("Ethics" 173).

That is, due to the blasé, self-involved, and generally clueless nature of many of the characters, the duty of filling in the "ah-ha" moment of the pun's punch line lies with the reader as outside party. The reader's role in delivering the charge of humor to the clueless diegetic situation both merges us with the removed novelization of events as told by Ellis while also operating within Bateman's potentially humorous-on-purpose demeanor. This notion of humor acting as a wedge, or self-divulging element, in Patrick's characterization is elemental, I think, to finding some sense of artistic, and hence emotionally three-dimensional, drive in his persona.

Humor for Bateman is where these dual narratives of violence and self-actualization collide. Inevitably, setting aside the (as I've mentioned) grisly scenes of sheer violence, the novel operates mostly as a social satire, many sections hinging on Bateman's own (perhaps unintentional) wit and mental removal from the situation at hand. These moments of self-forgetting, or rather, cathartic divulgements of inner truths in the form of "wit" are perhaps his most socially healthy means of catharsis, set off from his other hobbies of self-punishing and onanistic exercise and Olympian sexual marathons.

As a means of understanding Bateman's particular treasuring of his at times macabre wit, Freud's theories on jokes as psychic release in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* offer a useful schema for humor as a subconscious ameliorative, as well as an adept means of navigating social prohibitions. In other words, humor shares an abreactive quality with

Bateman's cathartic regimens of sex, exercise, and violence. Freud notes that jokes in general "will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible" (123). In aesthetic terms, jokes offer Barthes's punctures in the text that give one a glimpse at a deeper fictional psychology beneath Bateman's façade. Similarly, under this Freudian aegis, jokes might instead be a redirected medium to channel potential anti-social, and perhaps even eventually homicidal, tendencies caused by repression. The form unconsciously given to these jokes, like natural geological formations, will likewise bear the marks of their repression and give birth, potentially, to a refined and potentially "stylistic" artifact.

Given this discussion of emissions, let us recall Georges Bataille's previously mentioned system of "heterology," or rather, the analysis of usually discarded and abject materials expelled from an organic body or philosophical system. (Bateman's fascination with fluids, from those voluntarily or involuntarily evoked, gives credence to the former and invites consideration of the latter.) Bataille describes "the notion of the (heterogeneous) *foreign body* permits one to note the elementary *subjective* identity between types of excrement (sperm, menstrual blood, urine, fecal matter) and everything that can be seen as sacred, divine, or marvelous" ("Use Value" 94). Just as Bateman remains fascinated with what is seeped out of or emitted from the human body under duress, or by the sharpened edge of a torture instrument, one might also assume Bateman would be fascinated by his own involuntary vocal emissions in the forms of jokes. Mixing Bataille and Freud, one can assume that such artifacts, consciously or unconsciously emitted, might then be a course of condensed revelation or personal turmoil for Bateman, allowing him better to appreciate the value of his own submerged sense of self.

Humor becomes the knee-jerk sign of Bateman's vulnerability, or a deflation from the homicidal cartoon that may or may not only be Bateman's fantasized self-conception. Though

Bateman's jokes may sometimes be wielded with a witty and acerbic edge, humor also springs forth in moments of insecurity. During a ruse in which Bateman attempts to sneak his way into the impregnable restaurant Dorsia, we see him break into a deranged series of actions and jokes. He claims, "I find myself saying things, without listening to Jean, like 'Protecting the ozone layer is a really cool idea' and telling knock-knock jokes" (Ellis, *AP* 260). Likewise, after being thrown out of the restaurant when his ploy is discovered, his secretary, Jean, is still attuned to his perceived sense of humor, potentially indicating that this jocularity might be a more true and permanent state. Rather than degrade him, or raise attention to the scorching embarrassment he feels for himself, Jean says, "'That was *so* funny,' and then, squeezing my clenched fist, she lets me know 'Your sense of humor is so spontaneous'" (Ellis, *AP* 262). As Jean is one of the few characters who genuinely seems to find redeemable elements in Patrick's character, and perhaps, as Elizabeth Young suggests, presents one of his only hopes for returning to operable human society ("Beast" 113), we might countenance Jean's perception as more than just the self-saving logic of a jilted lover. Bateman's perceived "humor" erupting as a defusing element also occurs during a meeting with his brother Sean, an equally sociopathic, if slightly more restrained, figure who recurrently appears in Ellis's novels. When Sean is able to get him painlessly into Dorsia, where he had been formerly evicted with Jean, Sean asks, "So you like this place?" to which Patrick responds, "'My favorite,' I joke through clenched teeth" (Ellis, *AP* 227). The defense mechanism of the joke, however tensely emitted, allows one to map Patrick's actual moments of pain, or acute emotional injury, throughout the novel. (The most weighty, resounding instance is perhaps Patrick's final misunderstood admission of "thirty, forty, a hundred murders" [Ellis, *AP* 352] to an acquaintance, Harold Carnes, over the phone, only to be congratulated on what is perceived as a joke when he runs into Carnes in person. Carnes, addressing Bateman as "Davis"

and “Donaldson,” claims the joke and its plausibility was only ruined by Bateman’s actual status as a “goody-goody” [Ellis, *AP* 386-389].) The recurrence of humor, however, has the linguistic splitting effect Serpell notes, yet in the division of Bateman’s perceived icy façade and actual vulnerability, and the accretive effect of these instances, a glow of affective stability becomes visible.

Repetition is also aligned, not simply with an accumulation of dread, but also the operation of humor. The constant presence of *The Patty Winters Show* with its occasionally surreal themes, including “Real-Life Rambos” (Ellis, *AP* 87), “UFOs That Kill” (Ellis, *AP* 115), and “Has Patrick Swayze Become Cynical or Not” (Ellis, *AP* 231), becomes a prime example of an eccentric tableau made increasingly humorous by its recurrence. One more Bateman-centric example, however, made famous particularly by Mary Harron’s film adaptation of *American Psycho* in 2000, is Bateman’s continual and flustered reason for leaving situations: “I have to return some video tapes.” The phrase acts as a prime example of the sort of author-character schism Serpell describes, only this phrase is unique in its systematic, and improbable, recurrence within the novel as a sort of personality-structuring device.<sup>45</sup> Personality is then given the same logic as a recurrent joke, increasing in strength by its improbably jumping-forth in increasingly out-of-context situations. Like the aforementioned example of Patrick’s attempt to soften ridicule with absurd “jokes” or knee-jerk humorous responses, the phrase is repeated with increasing loss of context as both an indication of Patrick’s social isolation as well as unintentionally developing sense of humor. After a failed romantic encounter with “despicable twit” Luis Carruthers, which

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<sup>45</sup> Humor seems such an ingrained part of Patrick’s character that it is one of the few traits that survives his transformations and shifts into his serial killer persona, or at least is marked in both sides of his personality. For instance, his describing, “a cheerful black bum motions for me, explaining that he’s Bob Hope’s younger brother, No Hope... I think this is funny, so I give him a quarter” (Ellis, *AP* 215).

may plausibly suggest a potential source of romantic comfort to Bateman, which he denies,<sup>46</sup> his means of exiting the increasingly comic situation is allotted through this “motto.” Standing in public, facing the amorously distressed Carruthers, he claims, “‘I’ve gotta return some videotapes,’ ... jabbing at the elevator button” (Ellis, *AP* 162). The scene also invokes the Bataillian and Freudian resonances of the “joke” described before—perhaps Bateman’s nascent homoerotic feeling have been expelled, in the form of the joke, which again gives him a comfortable reassurance in his having turned such repression into humor. The line is described again later, to the bafflement of the recipient—Jean in this case—yet passes as recognizable to the reader. Bateman again indicates an attempt to remove himself of an unwanted feeling, in this case the unadorned intimacy offered by Jean, by again retreating into a humor only made humorous by its repetition. When Jean invites Patrick up to her apartment, he denies her, again invoking the infamous videotapes: “‘I have to return some videotapes,’ I explain in a rush. She pauses. ‘Now? It’s’—she checks her watch—‘almost midnight’” (Ellis, *AP* 265). The “videotapes” mantra becomes both a humorous one-liner as it repeats throughout the novel, yet also acts as Patrick’s self-isolating means of severing any possible means to be embraced, or confronted in his developing selfhood. Both in this case are intertwined and, most importantly, in a fashion reminiscent of the “deafening” dread, both are *systematically* linked.

A linked channel of possible “artistic” creation for Bateman, and achieved through similarly pained repetition, is the included review sections for the (often banal) pop music of his time. Ellis explains the inclusion of these often boiler-plate reappraisals of musician’s complete discographies as “the reason Patrick Bateman loves this music, and wants to tell us about it in

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<sup>46</sup> Young reiterates this potential, but thwarted, linkage of Patrick and Luis, claiming, “Despite the comic aspects of Patrick’s discomfiture, this and later scenes with Luis where Luis expresses his hopeless love have an oddly tender and touching quality” (“Beast” 111).

excruciating detail, is because he wants to fit in” (Ellis, Goulian “Art”) Indeed, while most critics comment on the deadness, and reductive, paint-by-numbers approach of the reviews (often considered as a particularly audience-hostile move by Ellis), I see these reviews as evidencing Bateman’s attempted conjuring of emotional response from formulaic compositions of pop music, which he intuitively understands (reminiscent of the projected *American Psycho* sequel). Ellis also touches on this sense of Bateman attempting, like Kafka, to stab at the “frozen sea” inside himself by the stilted artistic creations of record reviews. Ellis justifies the three reviews, which he claims his Vintage editor Gary Fisketjon heavily advised cutting to two, as: “The reason they work is precisely *because* three is overkill. One is not psychotic. Three is psychotic” (Ellis, Goulian “Art”). While Ellis chooses to categorize the overkill of three reviews as “psychotic,” it could just as easily be read as *desperate*, or *flailing*—an attempt for an emotionally frozen man to learn, by rote, the appreciation of art, however banal.

As a piece of “art,” rather than a performative evincing of a desperate need to appreciate art, the reviews also stand as a nascent attempt to create. Similar to Murphet’s argument about the violent sections presenting the only “bravura” and writerly elements of the novel, Elizabeth Young conversely locates this quality within the otherwise critically lamented review sections.<sup>47</sup> She finds “sophisticated and emotional” language in the reviews (Young, “Beast” 112), a telling example in Bateman’s description of the Genesis album *Invisible Touch*: “It’s an epic meditation on intangibility, at the same time it deepens and enriches the meaning of the preceding three albums” (Ellis, *AP* 77). Similar language can be found in his rendition of the Huey Lewis love ballad “If This Is It,” which presents “a plea for a lover to tell another lover if they want to carry on with the relationship, and the way Huey sings it... it becomes instilled with hope” (Ellis, *AP*

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<sup>47</sup> Perhaps part of Naomi Wolf’s commonly shared impression of *American Psycho* as “the single most boring book I have ever had to endure” (34).



356), or how a Whitney Houston song provokes the realization that “since it’s impossible in the world we live in to empathize with others, we can always empathize with ourselves” (Ellis, *AP* 254). It is difficult indeed to think of the same person who supposedly can eat a woman’s brain with Grey Poupon being moved by a love ballad or self-reliance mantra. Yet these reviews, and the evocative language employed by Bateman in them, should be sharply paid attention to, particularly as they seem to violate Ellis’s own prescriptions for the “construct” of Bateman’s consciousness. Ellis describes the prescription in his outline for the novel (Ellis’s outlines are extensive, and often exceed the length of the works themselves) that due to Bateman’s fixation on surfaces he must “omit metaphors, similes, anything where Bateman can see something as something else because everything is too surface-oriented for that to occur” (Ellis, Clark 77). The transcendent language, however trivial the subject matter, then grossly violates this prescription, indicating that something animate is rising from the components of the pop formula, and conjured by Bateman in his repeated attempts to describe it. Rather than reveal Ellis’s supposed anhedonic detachment, the repeated reviews indicate an artistic coming into consciousness by means of criticisms, or attempt to render an artwork’s abstract qualities in language.

Similarly, just as each “review” encapsulates a beginning-to-end career diagnostic of the reviewed artist, they also unveil in microcosmic form a narrative of artistic self-actualization. Young was the first to realize that “each of the chapters but particularly the one on Huey Lewis, concerns the maturation of a creative artist” (“Beast” 112). These micro-narratives of self-actualization and “maturation,” reflecting broader concerns about Bateman’s growth and development throughout the book, present a postmodern incarnation of Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*. Dedalus, sworn to artistic creation in *Portrait of the Artist*, is seen shortly after in *Ulysses* testing his nascent skills with the half formed “parable” *A Pisgah Sight of Palestine or*

*the Parable of the Plums* related in the novel. The parable about two old women spitting plum seeds from atop a tower, which ends abruptly before a proper conclusion can be affixed, is supposed to present an extra-textual joke about Dedalus's driven steps towards an artistic masterwork; he has arrived a step closer towards realizing his vision, yet now only has a bare-bones vignette rather than the wider scope and emotional vision required of genuine (Joycean) art. This embedding of artistic maturation within a broader narrative frame, broken erratically in *Psycho* into magazine cut-out sections, acts to raise this degree of artistic parable to an even more aloof level. Bateman does not have the comfort of "parables"—he must find manifestos in advertisements and Whitney Houston songs. The perceived affectlessness of the rest of the book likewise raises this Joycean gamble to an almost impossible dimension, or presents the question of whether one can make genuine art from sheer referentiality and consumer dross. Ellis's attempted redemption and granting of interiority to an otherwise exaggeratedly "flat" character also gestures forward into a nascent mission of what will fumblingly be called "post-postmodernism," or an attempt to find a heart, or empathetic core, within postmodern tropes and techniques. Ellis's contribution is finding the artistic struggle and evolutionary line within the most supposedly unredeemable quarters. He is working with what is available, and as he claimed in a 1990 *New York Times* editorial shortly after *American Psycho*, "If there are icons for this generation, they're in pop music" (Ellis, "Twentysomethings" H37).

I believe, rather than a *carte blanche* purveyor of violence, Ellis might actually be closer to the supposed "moralist" label he shrouded himself in during *American Psycho*'s backlash in the early 90s. Yet, Ellis's moralism is an unusual one, in that it moves a degree beyond satire to potentially imbue life or artistic transformation into the most irredeemable acts and vessels. Likewise, *American Psycho* marks the difficulty and recursion required of this task, attempting

to conjure “feeling” through a systematic repetition of both twisted consumer ideologies and jabs of gore. Some semblance of individuality, like the illusion of film’s persistence of vision, begins to be conjured by Ellis in the process (Bateman himself tries to self-curate the narrative with flash cuts and dissolves). Ellis’s deeper contribution, however, is perhaps the feinting of transgression as the solution to Patrick’s “dread.” Unlike fellow transgressives that arose before, Ellis’s conjuring of a blanket-wave dread is primarily to conjure the urgency, or stimulant to consciousness, apparent in Bateman’s cracking self-organization and narrative. Jokes emerge and splutter as if attempting to bring a meta-textual irony to the programmed and robotic nature of Patrick’s daily activities. Patterns of unwanted mutation arise in the text as if the catalogue of Patrick’s mind has been haunted, or is awakened by something competing with this dread. Patrick is far better understood, I would argue, as a cipher, as an experiment, much as Vollmann’s characters in *The Rainbow Stories* are experiments, in a laboratory of empathy and shock. Bateman’s famous soliloquy that “there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me” (Ellis, *AP* 377) is perhaps literal—he is most usefully employed as a marker, an isotope within the body of an anhedonic, “transgressive” frame, highlighting affective resonances by his circulation within it. Yet even this attempt to provide the veneer of personability through humorous and painful repetitions is part of Ellis’s symbolic position as a transition into a period more directly infusing feeling into purportedly two-dimensional characters. Young notes that Ellis maintains “a belief in a ‘reality’ or morality somewhere beyond the spectacular blandishments of the hyperreal consumer circus,” and such is integral to “the slow emergence of an American renaissance that attempts to transcend these fictional games and re-establish from deep within consumer culture other ways of writing fiction” (“Beast” 122). It is into this linguistic void that David Foster Wallace will climb.

Section Three:

“Way Closer to the Soul Than Mere Tastelessness Can Get”: David Foster Wallace and  
Transcendent Extra-Textuality

A poor jest, but I will not scratch it out. I wrote it thinking it would sound very witty; but now that I have seen myself that I only wanted to show off in a despicable way, I will not scratch it out on purpose!  
—Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*.

## **Unforeseen Ruptures: David Foster Wallace's Big Break, or, The Legacy of Experimentalism**

In the last section, we saw seemingly inanimate postmodern tropes come to life through the aid of extra-textual, machine-like apparatuses of “systematic transgression.” These systematic operations included principles of recursion, diffraction, and repetition to stimulate banal or superficial emotions until they reached, like Patrick Bateman’s whirring mind, a deafening spell of amplified emotion—even if this emotion was simple dread or misery. However, this summoning of affective potential that is only possible when narrative fragments, or fragments of persona, are circulated through cybernetic systems, indicates inherent limitations. How then does a “systems man,” tied to transgressive ruptures and logarithmic iteration, act as segue to a more stable aesthetic category? How can one create subjectivity out of shock and by definition *exceptional* activity alone?

While previously seeming to arise out of a vacuum, or in naïve opposition to felt American consumerism, transgressive tactics actually hold far more alignment with arguments about postmodernism’s return to sentiment in the nineties, and how the form might evolve beyond the massive, “encyclopedic” tomes that dominated the sixties, seventies, and eighties (of which Gaddis’s conversation novels limned the dying edge). Chiefly, the transgressives call attention to two predominant narrative threads critics employ to make sense of postmodernism’s demise and provide a path back through its aftermath to authentic “feeling.” One thread is that of classically postmodern maximalism overloaded to the point of implosion, conjuring an intangible essence in the process, while another posits a “new” realism, marked by a lost innocence with regard to language’s mimeticism. Stephen J. Burn, in his work on Jonathan Franzen and the tentative form of “post-postmodernism,” aligns both threads as “homologous forms” arising from

the “same origin” (grouping Franzen, David Foster Wallace, and Richard Powers together) and hence argues for their consideration under the big tent of the “post-postmodern” (*Franzen* 16). I, however, wish to cavil with Burn by interpreting the “post-“ in “post-postmodernism” as implying a needed advancement in method rather than just chronology,<sup>4849</sup> and hence focusing on the work of Wallace alone as the most engaging, mercurial, and potentially successful of the movement. Wallace will serve as the test case for this practice in his development from *Infinite Jest* (1996) to *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), though I would argue he still borrows tropes from the realist tradition—namely, the epiphany—with the intent of integrating them within maximalist system and overloading them to the point of yielding an abstract distillate. In this practice, Wallace embodies Robert McLaughlin’s conception of post-postmodern writers attempting to “acknowledge but penetrate through the [postmodern] layers, aiming, perhaps quixotically, to reconnect with something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real” (“Post-Postmodernism” 213, 216). Tactically, then, Wallace’s mode and mantle of post-postmodernism hold a resonance more with the “systematic” transgressive novelists as we have previously discussed them than modified realists. “Hypothetically,” à la Sade, the post-postmodern and transgressive writers both circulate around a central absent “feeling” through

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<sup>48</sup> Burn’s periodization of the term also likewise indicates the ambiguous, and non-formal, nature he wishes to address in description of “post-postmodernism.” Previous occurrences taken into consideration range from Alan Wilde’s 1976 consideration of Donald Barthelme’s later work as signaling a “possibly, post-postmodern?” sensibility to W.M. Verhoeven’s 1995 classification of Raymond Carver’s work as “post-postmodern moral realism” (Burn, *Franzen* 18).

<sup>49</sup> This also aligns with McLaughlin’s original designation of “post-postmodernism” in his 2004 essay “Post-Postmodern Discontent,” rather than the slightly more general definition he gives in his contribution to *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (the latter’s comprehensiveness may also be likely due to its encyclopedia function). In the former work, McLaughlin analyzes the twin test cases of Wallace and Franzen as pushing beyond postmodernism, though cites Wallace as distinctly pushing beyond exhausted postmodern conventions, without retreating into exhausted realist conventions, to something new (55 “Discontent”).

baroque and circuitous formal structures; both identify the absent “middle” of genuinely felt sentiment as the core pursuit of their structural games. Yet, where the transgressives merely problematize, Wallace seeks to embody—both in a newly revised three-dimensional character psychology, as well as an aporetic structure not inevitably framed only on viscera and violence.

The kinship between Wallace and the transgressives is more than coincidental. Wallace, early in his career, expressed a fascination with the deadened voice of Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* (1985), and expressed curiosity on how it might be overloaded to the point of grotesquery and collapse (Max 73). (He would later famously deny any alliance with Ellis, and paint him as a chief oppositional figure in early aesthetic manifestos, as mentioned in Section Two.) Likewise, Wallace’s aforementioned “epiphanic” moments are usually so grotesque, and tied to moments of violent, cathartic expulsion, as to represent greater affinity with transgressive writers than the more heart-string-plucking moments of a Franzen novel. Indeed, the shifting, uncertain valence between mindless catharsis and a more carefully considered willingness for pained self-sacrifice is what undergirds the philosophical struggle of *Infinite Jest* (itself largely concerned with addiction). Further, considering Wallace’s repeated mentioning of Vollmann as a worthy peer, and *The Rainbow Stories* in particular as able to “raise hair on parts of your body that don’t have hair” (McCaffery, Wallace 108) through levels of autobiographical immersion beyond what Wallace was comfortable with,<sup>50</sup> the sexually “hideous” through-lines of *Brief Interviews* seem to indicate a Vollmann-like sexual philosophy enacted through exaggerated “worst case scenarios.” In stories like “Adult World,” where a climaxing epiphany is provided in

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<sup>50</sup> The incompatibility of Wallace and Vollmann, particularly due to the latter’s brashness with regard to outré subject matter, is evident in a letter describing Wallace’s impressions of Vollmann after eating dinner as “more than a bubble off plump—prefers bloody venison and chocolate cake washed down with Stout for supper, speaks easily of blow-jobs and cooze while we’re eating” (Max 130).

story-outline form, resolution comes through the main character, Jeni Roberts, recognizing self-love in masturbation and perceiving her husband's "Secret Compulsive Masturbat[ing]" as symptomatic loneliness (Wallace, "Adult (II)" 184). In the extroverted, blank space of epiphany, "understanding" is framed on either side by devolution, temptation, and extreme sexual behavior. Likewise, in "Octet," metafictional structures are meant to not only encourage direct access to the author (Konstantinou, "No Bull"), but to encourage a mutual commingling, or exchange of agency that might be closest to a libidinal interchange.

It is odd that the link between Wallace and the transgressives has not been discussed, given their shared interest in both extreme subject matter and elaborate means of framing and exposing this extremity. Indeed, in the recently published *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012), containing McLaughlin's entry on post-postmodernism amongst other 1980s and 1990s experimental movements (such as "Avant Pop"), there is no mention of transgressive literature at all, let alone as a bridging genre to a further iteration of postmodernism. (Due to a general critical neglect for the form, this absence is not altogether surprising.) However, in further elucidating the demise of postmodernism, Wallace's alignment with transgressive authors in responding similarly to this lapsed historical era in tactic and method—as opposed to traditionally paralleled "contemporaries"—becomes clearer.

Postmodernism's exact time of death is uncertain, though critical guesses have been forthcoming. Neil Brooks and Josh Toth in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* argue for the death of Beckett in 1989 as a marker for when "the first symptoms of some terminal epistemological illness" become "irrefutable" ("Introduction" 2). Brooks and Toth also include as supplement the fall of the Berlin wall as proof of the irrepressible "triumph of capitalism" (Brooks, Toth, "Introduction" 2). Katherine Hayles presents a more technological



answer, citing the “IPO of Netscape” and the explosion of the “World Wide Web” allowing more universal “experiences of virtuality” beyond “high-tech research laboratories funded by military grants” for the nullification of postmodernism, now made obsolete by consumer access (Hayles, Gannon 99). This saturated consumerist angle is also supplemented in intellectual historian Minsoo Kang’s citation of the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *The Last Action Hero* as the terminus of postmodernism, due to its final co-option of postmodern tropes for successful, mass-commercial pleasure (Hoberek 233). A conference in 1991 explicitly called “The End of Postmodernism: New Directions,” attended by postmodernism luminaries like William Gass and John Barth, indicates a more overt and academic periodization of the form’s demise, or least self-acknowledgment by postmodern authors of their own genre’s imminent expiration (Brooks, Toth, “Introduction” 3). However varied, and culturally supported, a far more concise and stylistic reason for postmodernism’s end is a fatigue with the seemingly insular and self-conversing nature of the form itself.

Explanations generally converge, beyond historical obsolescence, in aligning postmodernism’s end with distaste for the form’s apparent fascination with linguistic games and sheer, masturbatory solipsism. Robert L. McLaughlin, in his comprehensive explanatory piece on post-postmodernism, highlights a tipping point of exasperation toward postmodernism arriving with John Leonard’s *New York Times* review of John Barth’s career-capping *LETTERS* in 1979. Leonard, who McLaughlin takes time to note was not averse to difficult postmodern works, and even “went to the mat with the Pulitzer committee over *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” described *LETTERS* in frustration as “written for graduate students and other masochists” (“Post-Postmodernism” 212). McLaughlin notes the review as emblematic of increasing impatience with postmodernism’s involuted, and seemingly coldly detached, linguistic games, abdicating

any responsibility in real-world connection. As McLaughlin sums up this felt disenchantment: “why can’t these authors put aside their postmodern games, their annoying stylistic tricks, and give us characters we can care about and a plot in which we can lose ourselves?” (“Post-Postmodernism” 212). A similar note was rung in Tom Wolfe’s anti-postmodernism manifesto “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast” in 1989, ruing the so-called “Puppet-Masters” who were “in love with the theory that the novel was, first and foremost, a literary game, words on a page being manipulated by an author” (49). Wolfe claimed that journalism was threatening literature in terms of representing the vitality of human experience. The fact that his solution of a journalism-inflected social realism is encapsulated by his own novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), indicates the essay as perhaps more of self-apologia than clinical diagnostic.

Yet, McLaughlin describes this supposedly “urgent” need to overcome and push through postmodernism’s terminal narcissisms as perhaps arising from a central misunderstanding of the form’s function and intent. In McLaughlin’s earlier piece, “Post-Postmodern Discontent” (2004), tentatively articulating the phenomena of post-postmodernism and its relation to high postmodernism, he cites an elemental misinterpretation of Barth’s “The Literature of Exhaustion.” “Exhaustion” is popularly understood as a paean to theory and advocacy for a full severance from reality, inexorable proof that Barth had “cut the cord between the text and the world, smashed the mirror art traditionally held up to nature, [and] turned the referential function of literature in on itself” (“Discontent” 56). McLaughlin returns to Barth’s original text to refute this conception, reemphasizing Barth’s original, far more modest, call for an updating of structural forms while maintaining an essential link to real feeling and sentiment. In particular, McLaughlin calls attention to Barth’s favored category of the “technically up-to-date artist,” among other categories of “technically up-to-date civilian” and “technically old-fashioned

artist,” as a subset containing the exceptional few whose “artistic thinking is as hip as any French new-novelists, but who manage nonetheless to speak eloquently and memorably to our still-human hearts and conditions, as the great artists have always done” (“Discontent” 56). Rather than complete abdication from concerns of the “real” world, and the threads of emotional urgency found in the most self-described realist texts, Barth argues for an advancement of style in tandem, rather than in lieu of, matters of the heart. Considered with this, it is far easier to see Wallace as advancing a postmodernism agenda, rather than inventing one out of whole cloth.

A divergent thread from this central advancement of the *means* and *techniques* of postmodernism arises in a parallel thread to “post-postmodernism:” the so-called “new realism” marked by a declaration to shun postmodernism’s tactics altogether. This had perhaps been most vocally defended by novelist Jonathan Franzen, a contemporary and close friend of Wallace’s, in his designation of “Contract” writing, as described in Section One. This style, recall, favored “a soul-to-soul contract between reader and writer” enabled by “substantial characters” transparently rendered to aid this bond, and was rendered in opposition to “Status” writing, favoring “difficulty” and avant-garde stylistics (Franzen, “Difficult” 241). Yet this realism is not so pure and removed from the concerns of postmodernism as Franzen claims. Beyond Franzen’s first, highly Pynchonian novel *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), Stephen J. Burn notes in *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2008) that Franzen’s alleged new realism was profoundly affected by a suspicion of mimeticism that had been raised by postmodern innovations (ix).<sup>51</sup> Further, critic Robert Rebein encapsulates this new style of postmodernism-tinged realism, often referred to generally as “new realism,” as having “*absorbed*

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<sup>51</sup> For further discussion the complexities of seemingly new realist novels, see the essays in Brooks and Toth’s *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, and in particular Robert Rebein’s “Turncoat: Why Jonathan Franzen Finally Said ‘No’ to Po-Mo.”

postmodernism's most lasting contributions and gone on to forge a new realism that is more or less traditional in its handling of character, reportorial in its depiction of milieu and time, but is at the same time self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis" (*Hicks* 20). This new realism is more of a mirage of realism, undergirded by deep skepticism, and banking its traditional threads on denial of certain larger theoretical trends signaled by poststructuralism and postmodernism.

This augmented realism is further marked, due to this thin mediation and compromise, for its instability, shakiness, or exhaustion, of formerly airtight, hermetic mechanics and naturalistic depiction. This amplified realist style (supposedly extending to include Wallace) has been most aptly designated by critic James Wood as "Hysterical Realism" in an essay called "Human, All Too Inhuman" (ostensibly a review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*). The "hysterical" aspect, meant pejoratively, arose from "the conventions of realism...not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted and overworked" (Wood). Plotted happenings and coincidences that were essential for realism's operation instead became exaggerated to the point of improbability. This is a sentiment expressed also by Melvin Jules Bukiet's "crackpot" realism, which lumps Franzen and Powers in with the likes of Pynchon to reveal how paranoid belief in international networks of conspiracy lends a stylistic penchant for heightened coincidence. As Wood relates over-coincidence to Smith's book, however, certain coincidences are less conspiratorially charged but still implausible on a "realist" level: twins that are countries apart break their noses at the same time, a terrorist cell goes by the prosaic name of "kevin," and so on (Wood); in other words, the writers go just beyond the pale of what is acceptably realist into something not yet fabulism. The tropes are improbably expanded rather than destroyed, tainted by a postmodernist penchant for fantasy.

Wallace then extracts the potential for teetering and unstable epiphanic transition, salvaged from altered or “hysterical” realism, and tempers it with a postmodern frame (a mixture of affect and contemporary technique not thrown away with Barth’s bathwater, as McLaughlin re-emphasized) to fragment it into unrecognizability. Indeed, the ruptured epiphanies Wallace imparts to his characters are often so staggering, and direct in their foisting choices upon the reader, that these divergences from “representation” have been touched on under a variety of titles—from “belief” to “sincerity” to philanthropic “gifting”—by various Wallace critics (McLaughlin, Scott, Konstantinou, Kelly, Smith). Yet, this break seems less delicate and one-dimensional than sheer philanthropy. As Wallace claimed in response to an earlier, later disavowed novella called “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” he desired “the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction’s always been about... then out of the rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans” (Wallace, McCaffery 41). In this “explosion,” Wallace reaches the extra-linguistic dimension McLaughlin notes as the true goal of the post-postmodern agenda, enclosed within a still postmodern-leaning frame.

A final red herring in categorizations of Wallace arises in a critical misunderstanding of this visually absent “extra” quality wrought from metafiction’s rubble as simply “sincerity” or saccharine naïveté. This perception is drawn from Wallace’s own nonfiction work, and centrally the essay “E Unibus Pluram” already mentioned in Section One that issued a clarion call for the end of irony and return to “single-entendre principles,” spawning a unique sub-section of Wallace criticism in the process (Kelly, “Death of an Author”). How this quality became shoe-horned into an allied aesthetic movement called “New Sincerity” is largely through this division in Wallace scholarship, as well as a mistaken inclusion of Wallace in earlier descriptions of neo-realist forms alongside writers like Smith and Franzen (see: Wood; Burn, *Franzen*). An

influential Wallace essay in this former regard is Lee Konstantinou's "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief," which argues that Wallace's fourth-wall tampering mechanisms, most evident in his short story "Octet," were present to reveal the "'total, genuine honesty, the 100% candor' (148) of the author—not the narrator, but *the author*" (94, italics Konstantinou's). Konstantinou posits that Wallace's direct address of the reader, and metafictional gimmicks, are to open a more clear channel directly to the author himself, who in order to function must instill "belief" in the reader of his essential "goodness" ("No Bull" 97, 106). "Sincerity" further undergirds ruptures in the fictional wall, as, according to Wallace scholar Adam Kelly, "sincerity is...the kind of secret that must always break with representation" ("New Sincerity" 142). However, the exact complexity of this "break[ing]," and the baroque means by which Wallace reaches his "100%" candor, is undoubtedly different than other New Sincerity authors who have been aligned with Wallace. Consider for instance Dave Eggers, who Konstantinou notes was heavily inspired by Wallace, and moved towards the "optimistic ethos that mixes an offbeat aesthetic with a laudable urge toward philanthropy and the active construction of alternative institutional structures [referencing Egger's nonprofit 826 National] (a publishing house, tutoring centers, a charitable foundation)" ("No Bull" 106). The perceived "twee"-ness, or sweetly well-intentioned affect of Egger's work, coupled with his implemented real-world good will, reveals that Wallace is a separate entity entirely.

One might then say Wallace's separateness is found in a triad between his willingness to engage dark and inevitably more existential subject matters, the complexity of his method, and the self-conscious navigation and interpenetration of emotional and formal subject matter. In the first matter, as discussed, Wallace is often interested in the epiphanic charge of visceral catharsis—whether this is his character Randy Lenz in *Infinite Jest* dropping cinder blocks on

rats, or *IJ* protagonist Don Gately attempting to discern true malice in his “empathetic” murder of two assailants to protect addicts in his charge. These violent acts aren’t one-dimensional, however, as their murkiness of intention is often ensconced in religious terms of choice (in the William Jamesian, pragmatic sense) and often places the reader in the position of making key decisions, leaving the frame of the text open to do so. This tactic alone could not be more distant from so-called contemporaries in New Sincerity writing. Wallace is also able to extend these moments of moral uncertainty through his complex and multi-layered method, using what Raoul Eshelman calls an alternation of “inner” and “outer” narrative frames. Lee Konstantinou employs Eshelman’s methodology to explain the complex mirrors-within-mirrors quality of Wallace’s nested series of “Pop Quizzes” in the short story “Octet”—irresolution and seeming impossibility of “solving” the quizzes is ameliorated by the larger, total, nesting frame. Wallace’s desire to at times “punish” the reader—a common critical complaint, and one epitomized in “Octet”—likewise bleeds into his willingness to punish his characters, and the receivers of his characters alike, devising complicated moral gauntlets around binding traps of addiction, compulsion, and sadism. Yet, in both these moral and structural punishments, Wallace’s character psychology is advanced in a means not quite realist, not quite postmodern, not quite transgressive.<sup>52</sup>

Wallace’s mid-to-late 1990s work then reveals the dawning of a new type of technique that acts on the fringe of, and incorporates materials from, parallel yet colliding fictional forms. Wallace’s style is a post-postmodernism yet defined, though for the sake of critical context, is closest to the “maximalist” tradition, borrowing and pilfering odd devices from realist and

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen Burn describes in general a post-postmodern reaction against structural fragmentation with a renewed emphasis on character psychology. In Wallace’s case, this balances the “strategically deployed analepses” of *Infinite Jest*’s fractal-like organization by giving an exhaustive background of its central character, Hal, in a fashion unusual for such stylistically eccentric works (Burn, *Franzen* 24).

transgressive fiction. Drawing from these forms, the following two chapters will focus on the emblematic concept of “the epiphany:” tritely old in a realist sense, transgressive in its potential for a dubiously shaded moment of revelatory violence, and implying moments of aporia while granting characters subjectivity to choose. In *Infinite Jest* epiphanies alter between “real” and “fake,” set off by a particular character’s will either to salve themselves through cathartically violent action or repair what William James calls the “sick soul” or “divided self” by more empathetic means. These “ill” characters, unlike Vollmann or Ellis’s protagonists, are rendered life-like by their illness, wrestling with the decisions it foists on them. Their struggle, however, is allied with a readerly one. The final epiphany and supposed closure at the novel’s end is enigmatically removed, creating an absent space where the reader imagines what character transformations have taken place, or what learned. This method is expanded drastically in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, where the reader is bludgeoned with metatextual addresses and explicit precautions of transformation that act, perversely, to mystify the overtly described epiphany rather than deaden and over-explain, as metafiction had done previously. In both works, the epiphany serves as an ambiguous no-man’s-land, wherein both character psychology and reader orientation are constantly in a process of self-determination. In this regard, Wallace is the true transgressive, asking for the arch reader transgression: *action*.



**“Sudden Awakening to the Fact That the Mischief Is Irretrievably Done”: Epiphanic**

**Structure in *Infinite Jest***

**Breaking the Circle: Introduction to Epiphany**

The epiphany is a trope present throughout David Foster Wallace’s oeuvre, flowering in his mid-to-late nineties work, yet little discussed in criticism. Understood in the terms of sexual metaphor Wallace often employed to discuss the mechanics of fiction,<sup>53</sup> these epiphanies are near-orgasmic in their impact: marked by emotional abstraction, drastic structural alteration, and a lingering lucidity left in their wake. This model is delivered most overtly in Wallace’s previously mentioned story “Adult World” (1999), wherein a neurotic housewife undergoes a “sudden realization” (described explicitly as an “epiphany”) that her husband’s sexual dissatisfaction is due to his “Secret Compulsive Masturbat[ion]” rather than her perceived poor lovemaking (Wallace, “Adult (I)-(II),” 161, 183)—a realization likewise marking a shift in the story’s structure to unfinished and more truthful-seeming author’s notes. Yet, the use of moments of choice, transformation, and structural rearrangement are employed most programmatically, though in perhaps duplicitous form, in *Infinite Jest* (1996)<sup>54</sup>— symmetrical epiphanies and the use of at-times invisible epiphanic shift are intentionally made unclear, as revealed in their progressive obscuring during the advancement of *IJ*’s drafts. *IJ*’s epiphanies, and the dark powers of release that arise as alternatives to them, offer information elemental to the understanding of *IJ*’s character interiority, and by extension, the exact sort of “new realism” Wallace co-opts and integrates with his maximalist postmodern strategies. As these ruptures are also framed in the orgasmic-epiphanic mode of structural defamiliarization, these “holes” in the

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<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Wallace described the evasion and reflexivity in his earlier work as evidencing a relationship with the reader that was “sexual,” rather than the platonic straightforwardness of his current tactic resembling “a late-night conversation with really good friends” (Donahue).

<sup>54</sup> Referred to hereafter as *IJ*.

text also become enjoinders for reader interaction and cooperation—a form discussed by critics as bafflingly “unrepresentable,” yet usually linked to milder qualities of “belief” (Konstantinou) and “sincerity” (Kelly) rather than formal operation. Understanding these epiphanies, then, lends both a richer understanding of *IJ*'s exact organization and aesthetic, just now emerging from the pall of reviews dubbing it a “psychedelic jumble” or product of a nonstop “word machine” (Kakutani, “A Country”),<sup>55</sup><sup>56</sup> as well as Wallace’s use of these tropes to navigate and advance beyond existing literary styles.

As intrinsically important as the epiphanies themselves is their conspicuous occlusion and elision—namely the two primary epiphanies swallowed by the infamously “missing” year-long gap<sup>57</sup> at the book’s finish—the reason for which becomes clear when considering Wallace’s early drafts. Yet, this draft-driven elucidation has not thus far been recognized, likely due to the lacking, though urgently required, genetic consideration of Wallace’s works.<sup>58</sup> The largest epiphanic gap, anchoring the novel and dictating its structure, is the final year-long interruption that marks the novel’s linear end and catapults one back to the first chapter where the final chronological section exists. In this fashion, *IJ* is a cyclic novel like *Finnegans Wake* (1939),

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<sup>55</sup> Other reviews, still discussing the prose’s seemingly overgrown and haphazard structure, touch also on a perceived “cybernetic” arrangement. As Sven Birkerts wrote in the *Atlantic*, “the book is not *about* electronic culture, but it has internalized some of the decentering energies that computer technologies have released into our midst” (“Alchemist’s Retort”).

<sup>56</sup> *IJ*'s structure as a Sierpinski Gasket—or a type of fractal organization—was only mentioned in critical literature by Greg Carlisle in 2007 (*Elegant Complexity*) after being mentioned by Wallace in a *Bookworm* interview in 1996.

<sup>57</sup> Stretching, approximately, from late November in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment to late November in the Year of Glad (Carlisle, *Elegant* 496).

<sup>58</sup> D.T. Max’s biography *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* (2012) is essentially the main and principal work touching on Wallace’s developing ideas through drafts. Steven Moore was also able to view an early version of *IJ*, and offered his thoughts on the changes between this and the final version in “The First Draft Version of *Infinite Jest*.” Stephen J. Burn also mentions minor changes and marginalia in *David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide* (second edition).

where the poignancy of the book's ostensible finish enhances one's immediate return to the book's beginning, now enriched by a space of suspension.<sup>59</sup> The culminating epiphanic moment of Gately—spurred by the former addict attempting to “save” a former partner in a drug-addled vision while potentially being injected in real-time with his favorite drug, Demerol—hangs off the margin into this gap, influencing invisibly the novel's first chapter. Hal, the “catatonic hero” marked by “*non-action*” (Wallace, *IJ* 142), similarly reveals a coming-to-life, either paralyzing or revitalizing, shortly before the same abrupt interruption and is revealed at the novel's beginning as inarticulate but emotionally awakened. So, what is one to make of these obscured happenings and secreted occurrences that seem to so inflect and cast shadows upon the remaining bulk of text we *do* have access to? And why has there been so little made of these jolts of transformative energy, much as they inform the realistic interior life of characters supposedly harkening a return back to a new, yet warped, form of character relatability?

First, one must consider the function and content of the novel's “absent center,”<sup>60</sup> structurally, as the capstone of delicately maturing and thoughtfully entwined psychic narratives. The gap is highly intentional, and not offered as a dead-end or blockage to interpretation. Wallace envisioned the end functioning like a parabola, where “certain kind [sic] of parallel

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<sup>59</sup> Christopher Hager's undergraduate thesis, “On Speculation: *Infinite Jest* and American Fiction After Postmodernism,” offered the earliest defense and careful explication of *IJ*'s ending amidst a generally unreceptive and hostile critical reaction. Wallace himself claimed Hager's analysis was “very, very close” and at the time made him “feel good, real good.” Hager's primary revelation (Max 321) was that the resolution critics often complained was missing in fact exists, but “sits chronologically & spatially in front of the novel proper, which, as a satellite dish, serves to focus myriad rays of light, or voices, or information, on that central resolution without actually touching it.” Hager also takes a parabolic, symmetrical view of the novel, remarking on its “centering” energies—pivoted around a “vertex,” or a “crucial point” “different from a climax”—rather than the “decentering energies” posited then-contemporarily by critic Sven Birkerts. The peak of observable action is the discernable rim of a parabola, or as Hager borrows from Pynchon, a rainbow-like arc, capped by the pseudo-epiphanic death of Lucien Antioi.

<sup>60</sup> This phrase is employed by Boswell, describing the cartridge *Infinite Jest* as the invisible yet driving force of the book such that “the book's primary symbol is in fact an absent center” (126).

lines... converg[e] in such a way that an ‘end’ can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame” (Wallace, “Live Online”). He expands on the exact breakdown and quantification of what manner of character resolution he believes occurs by the last page of *IJ* in a defense of the ending to his editor Michael Pietsch: “we know exactly what’s happening to Gately by end [sic], about 50% of what’s happened to Hal, and little but hints about Orin [Hal’s brother]” (Max 199). Further, solidifying the necessity of the end and beginning of the novel, Wallace thought “it was OK to make a reader read the book twice” (Max 199). Bracketing more pessimistic interpretations that the space beyond the final page presents, as Marshall Boswell claims, a “void” in which “all the novel’s unanswered questions fall endlessly” (174),<sup>61</sup> and keeping in mind a *Wake*-like structure of narrative metempsychosis,<sup>62</sup> one comes to understand this structural aberration at the end as an intrinsic trope and emblematic symbol of Wallace’s method.

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<sup>61</sup> For other interpretations favoring arrest or irresolution, see Carlisle’s assumption that the ending offers a paralytic freeze, or means of creating, in *IJ*’s words, a “chaotic stasis” mirroring the “anxiety we feel in a culture that gives us a ‘confusion of choices’” (“Consider” 17). Burn’s interpretation is closer to my own, conceiving of the “end” as more of a protracted middle by calling attention to the seemingly metafictional comment, on page 981, that the book is moving “toward what’s either a climax or the end of the disk,” with this “end” then requiring the disk to be presumably reset (29). Other critical strategies include Frank Louis Cioffi’s reader-response notion that the book’s structure reiterates a cycle of addictiveness proffered in the book, N. Katherine Hayles’s conception of the novel’s end undercutting subjective autonomy, and Samuel Cohen positing that the end represents an arrested *Künstlerroman* of Wallace’s own artistic crisis having arrived in a paralyzing “middle of history,” historically and literarily, with the path forward uncertain (“To Wish” 68, 76-7). The end of *IJ*, to Cohen, presents “the young writer-figure on the verge of maturity, incoherent but full of things to say” (“To Wish” 73).

<sup>62</sup> It is perhaps useful to draw attention to Burn’s perception of *Infinite Jest* star Joelle van Dyne’s alter ego “Madame Psychosis” (also an alternate name for DMZ [Wallace, *IJ* 215]) sounding “temptingly close” to metempsychosis (61) and indicating Wallace’s interest in regeneration and repetition.

Considering this warped circular structure,<sup>63</sup> it is essential to understand the figurative import of Wallace's concept of "annulation," a cyclic process creating seemingly unending energy through a closed, self-sustaining system. Annulation is described in the book by Michael Pemulis as "a type of fusion that can produce waste that's fuel for a process whose waste is fuel for the fusion" (Wallace, *IJ* 572);<sup>64</sup> Boswell also notes that "'annulation' refers to a ringlike anatomical structure" (162). The self-involved, narcissistic import of the process is hinted at in the text through a "spontaneous reminiscence" of James O. Incandenza regarding the "awakening of [his] interest in annular systems," wherein he recalls fleeing the incapacitated form of his drunk and possibly cirrhotic father to observe a sheered doorknob's rolling pattern on his bedroom floor (Wallace, *IJ* 1034, 501-3). As Boswell claims, this moment is essential in unveiling James Incandenza as a "cold, closed figure" who "hide[s] his emotions behind cold logic and surface objectivity" (Boswell 162). Wallace's co-option of the stylistic aesthetic of annulation has been noted at the sentence level—the "'annular' self-consciousness" of Wallace's prose (Boswell 164)—yet a more macrocosmic structural dimension is gestured at by his inclusion of annular rings as larger-scale punctuations between narrative chunks in the novel.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Critics like Boswell touch lightly on *IJ*'s total circular nature (119, 121), yet a far more dominant critical perspective is one of a fractal organization, paying attention to immanent narrative threads rather than the looping structure of the beginning and end (See Burn's *DFW's IJ*, Carlisle's *Elegant Complexity*, and David Hering's discussion of geometric shapes in "*Infinite Jest*: Triangles, Cycles, Choices, and Chases").

<sup>64</sup> Hayles exhaustively explicates the technical configuration of annular fusion as explained by Pemulis (whom Hayles misidentifies as Thorp) in "The Illusion of Autonomy," pages 688-9. Hayles also embeds this notion of annulation within broader loops of recursive independence that she argues structurally undercut the idea of autonomy in the text. Bradley J. Fest also employs annular fusion as emblematic of Wallace's "anti-eschatological vision" (129) due to its driving force in the cyclically poisoned and fertile Great Concavity, which uses "massive amounts of toxic material to produce energy, the by-product being more toxic material, which annular fusion then recursively uses to begin the cycle over again" (133-4).

<sup>65</sup> Carlisle merely notes the typographical circles' existence and their function in opening the twenty-eight distinct "chapters" as well as the notes and errata section (*Elegant* 17).

Wallace explains these typographical markers in a clarifying letter to Pietsch: “They’re just supposed to be circles. Decoration. Maybe suggesting tennis balls, heads, *annular defloration cycles*, etc. Maybe just me amusing myself” (Wallace, *Letter to Pietsch*, italics mine).<sup>66</sup> Due to the circles’ lacking any identification marks as heads, or tennis balls, and given the evidence to follow, I believe the most accurate and charged interpretation is of “annular defloration cycles”<sup>67</sup> and the implied process of annulation. Wallace was obsessive about the circles, modifying them when they appeared too bouncing and comic, restricting their number from several to one, and settling on the half-shaded, hangnail-moon-looking glyph that appears in the book (Wallace *Infinite Jest Typescript, Copyedited*). Wallace meticulously stipulated the final annular cycle that appears semi-eclipsed on the last page of the main narrative, yet to be fully analyzed by Wallace critics.<sup>68</sup> The partially occluded circle, lying just beyond Gately’s final breakdown, is essential to understanding the forward motion, and means of breaking the self-enclosed annular rings that we might understand the novel’s arrangement prompts. Wallace was fastidious about this terminating symbol; he corrects a typesetter at Little, Brown in late proofs on a circle incorrectly placed in the middle of the page—whited out and X’d with pen—and another mildly obscured on the middle-right margin, jutting more bulbously (Wallace *Infinite Jest Typescript, Copyedited*).

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<sup>66</sup> In the same letter, Wallace mentions that he employed similar “decoration[s]” in the form of “jagged lines” distributed throughout his novella “Little Expressionless Animals,” left in by his prior editor Gerald Howard (Wallace, *Letter to Pietsch*). The novella describes a *Jeopardy!* champion dethroned by her severely autistic brother through producer calculation. As both siblings have become data savants while being locked up as children with an obscure encyclopedia and occasionally “a straightedge and a pencil” (Wallace, “Expressionless” 10), the straightedge-derived, “jagged” drawings serve a thematic purpose in recalling their damaged innocence. Such use of typographical markers as necessary narrative addendums should validate closer and deep scrutiny to those likewise present in *IJ*.

<sup>67</sup> The shadow limning the circle might also vaguely support an interpretation of “heads,” though the sort of empty, blank-faced heads that would reiterate an annular hypothesis of self-sustained narcissism.

<sup>68</sup> Carlisle also recognizes the “incomplete circle escaping from the bottom right corner of p. 981,” though only raises the question of whether it is “leading us back to p.3” (*Elegant* 474).

On a near-final proof with the circle in the proper lower-right position, marking the circle's full, arc-like passage, he instructs further: "No—you have only 1/3 of circle protruding from bottom right, as if rest of circle has been cut off by margin" (Wallace *IJ Proof Set 6-22*). Wallace includes with the note his own marking of his intended eclipsed circle, far more off-page, and of a more unique shape, than the typesetter's mark (Wallace *IJ Proof Set 6-22*). Like Joyce's intended "large" period at the end of *Ulysses*'s "Ithaca" chapter—missing since the original edition and restored in the critical edition (Gifford, Seidman 12)—meant to perhaps insinuate a "womb"-like return to unity or precipitous point before a "plunge into...nowhere" (Briggs 136-7), Wallace's annular eclipse indicates the breaking of personal bonds, the rupture of the waste-eating-waste circuit of paralytic thought that occurs just out of frame.

Radiating both forward and backward from this central absence and rupturing of the annular ring, Wallace also includes smaller elisions and micro-epiphanies in near-concentric circles. Moments of "real" and "faked" insight occur in tandem, one category precipitating the other, with two central scenes of "faked" insight for Hal and Gately respectively bearing heavy and obvious modifications in language meant to outline clearly the stakes of choice and empathy required for their later, truer insight.<sup>69</sup> These modifications also introduce and delineate overriding structures of addiction and determinism opposing a potential conscious choice, further eroded by the allied compulsion of addiction. In Hal's case, this alteration relates to his sudden

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<sup>69</sup> For other smaller and minor precipitations of Hal's final epiphanic moment, less bearing the mark of Wallace's revisions, see Hal's faked empathy with his "hypophalangular Grief-Therapist," in which he needed to "empathize with the grief-therapist" and "prepare from the grief-pro's own perspective" to achieve a pantomimed breakthrough yielding supposed "absolution" (Wallace, *IJ* 16, 254-6), as well as Hal's attempted absolution in admitting his marijuana addiction and fear of losing tennis ability to Mario (Wallace, *IJ* 782-5). For Gately, dreams often serve this anticipatory purpose, the more relevant of which are described later in the article. However, a more strictly AA-related "epiphanic" vision not discussed here is related on pages 358-9 of *IJ*, as well a visitation of James Incandenza's wraith that Gately momentarily—incorrectly—thinks is divine and "epiphanyish" in nature on page 833.

realization during a blizzard of forward-projected and accumulated banal activities, explained clinically in intermediary drafts as a reversed déjà vu syndrome called “jamais vu,” which makes one freshly aware of old sensations as if they were newly experienced—insight entwined with a “glittered feeling” of neurological tic (Wallace, *IJ Typescript Draft (Continued)*). For Gately, this modification relates to deterministic language painting his supposedly selfless defense of Randy Lenz as an addict-minded enactment of violent impulse—martyrdom turned inside out. These two “false” epiphanic moments then more narrowly align and explicate the two occluded insights occurring beyond the novel’s end: Hal’s mysterious, final interior implosion, and Gately’s missing, post-Demerol epiphany (the latter clarified by another missing episode utilizing imagery similar to Gately’s last, telling hallucination). Seeing these dual conflicts, and where they have been tempered by battles of the will, we are able to align further the transformative journeys of Hal and Gately. Further, in paying attention to the structural flow of the total work affected and stimulated by these missing fragments, analyzing also *where* and *how* these supposed absences arose, and what import these might have on the cyclic nature of the work, a new model of character interiority becomes evident. Indeed, from a character-oriented point of view, these excisions inflect far more aporetic consequences in line with spiritual malaise, transgression, and personal will that dovetail with previously discussed fascinations of Wallace with various kinds of addictions and compulsions.

The closest critical work to this potentiality of rupture and transcendence among pain and paralytic thinking is David Evans’s article “Chains of Not Choosing,” which discusses the influence of William James’s pragmatic philosophy on Wallace. Evans focuses particularly on pragmatism’s result- and choice-based faith model as an anodyne for spiritual paralysis. However, Evans’s initial justification for discussing James through a “deliberate



misappropriation,” namely Lenz using James’s expanded *Gifford Lectures* as a deceptive vessel for cocaine storage (171), indicates the joking resonance he believes James holds for *IJ*’s most damaged characters. However, in looking at Wallace’s increasing emphasis on James in his developing drafts, one sees an emphasis on the deeper spiritual “sickness” Lenz exhibits, as well as how Lenz’s seemingly irredeemable violence actually manifests a deeper attempted realignment of a “divided self”—to say nothing of Lenz’s forthright declaration that the content of the James text “mean[s] a great deal to [him]” (Wallace, *IJ* 1037). (Tellingly, Wallace alluded explicitly to the “Sick Soul” and “Divided Self” chapters of James’s *Varieties of Religious Experiences* [also known as the *Gifford Lectures*] in earlier drafts of *IJ*, which were later deleted [Wallace, *IJ Typescript Draft (Continued)*].) As such, in the next section I will focus on pseudo-epiphanic moments of choice that highlight the “sickly” nature of Wallace’s maligned characters, in which genuine epiphanic transformation and search for “unification” uncertainly verges into nonreligious, violent “catharsis,” using Lenz as a base model.

Analyzing Wallace’s articulations of choice to potentially exorcise sickness through less spiritual means elucidates themes of change through violent expulsion that a focus on Wallace’s saintly, noble, or Wittgensteinian community-building aspects<sup>70</sup> often neglects. *IJ* indeed presents a gallery of grotesque, “rock bottom” moments coupled with curious instances of

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<sup>70</sup> Much has been made of Wallace’s employment of Wittgenstein, and particularly Wittgenstein’s evolution from the solipsism of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) to the community-through-language ethic of *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). This influence—described by Wallace himself in his famous 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery—was unpacked exhaustively by Boswell, who claimed, “In a very real sense, reading a David Foster Wallace novel, short story, or essay is tantamount to learning the ‘rules’ of his game, yet once the reader learns those rules his texts succeed in creating a special, surprisingly intimate zone of communication, of subjective interaction, that is unlike anything else in contemporary literature” (19). Jon Baskin expands on this ameliorative quality, claiming Wallace pursued a “literature that was simultaneously challenging and *therapeutic* in the Wittgensteinian sense... what Wallace wanted to ‘share’ most was a way out” of “the maze of contemporary thinking”—for Baskin’s generation, Wallace’s fiction was a “relief and a gift.”

transfiguration. Wallace describes the “bottom” tellingly as the “jumping-off place”—a leap into self-renewal or oblivion, where an addict, low on choices, must either enter recovery or die (Wallace, *IJ* 347-8). Such ruptures and moments of distilled abjection are frequent in *IJ*. Recall Lenz’s increasingly carnivalesque animal murders, Lucien Antitoui’s human-skewering on a sharpened broom (Wallace, *IJ* 488-489), a crack addict carrying her ossified and still umbilically attached infant through the streets of South Boston (Wallace, *IJ* 376-379), a “paralyzed,” “invertebrate” daughter ritually abused by her father who yells the name of Raquel Welch “in moments of incestuous extremity” (Wallace, *IJ* 370-1). These instances are integral to Wallace’s grand plan of forming a novel around the concept of Alcoholics Anonymous and AA’s *sine qua non* of repentance: the “bottom.” Diseased as Wallace’s characters are, the “epiphany” often becomes inextricably tied with the bottom, inflected with either the self-immolating logic of total consumption or transfiguration by pain.<sup>71</sup>

It is necessary to contextualize Wallace’s employment of the epiphany, linked with violent transfiguration, in a broader history of the “epiphany.” Particularly of interest is how a trope cast by Joyce as a psychologically inflected and mercurial “radiance” inflecting “realis[t]” “structure[s]” (Langbaum 343)—becoming by Wallace’s time a predictable trope of painfully obvious MFA fiction (“Fictional” 343)—might be reintegrated with a realism tempered by the

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<sup>71</sup> Transformation through trauma is related explicitly in *IJ* as a reason for the deformed Mario’s sanctification. Hal thinks that “People who’re somehow burned at birth, withered or ablated way past anything like what might be fair, they either curl up in their fire, or else they rise. Withered saurian homodontic Mario floats” (Wallace, *IJ* 316). Similarly, Max notes that in *The Pale King* (2011), the character of the supernaturally adept IRS investigator Shane Drinion was conceived by Wallace as potentially the same scalded child from the short story “Incarnations of Burned Children” collected in *Oblivion* (2004). In a potential side narrative to *The Pale King* about a “video porn operation” run by “rich businessmen,” Drinion “double[s]” as a male lead for the films, as his scalded penis and pale complexion allow him to be photographed better and more easily “digitally erased” to have the viewer’s image substituted in his place (Max 257, 323).

revelations of postmodernism. The epiphany as a wracking realignment of perspective<sup>72</sup> canonized in *Dubliners* (1914)<sup>73</sup> originated through Joyce's own recording of his own particular style of "epiphanies:" scenes of prosaic occurrence evidencing a deeper "spiritual" significance. Joyce famously described the occurrences in his early fragmentary manuscript, *Stephen Hero*, as "a sudden spiritual manifestation...in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" (Ellmann 83). However, the idealistic certitude and truthful evocation of the epiphany has since been called into question, the seeds for potential irony and excess in the epiphany revealed in Stephen Dedalus's own egotistical reflection in *Ulysses* (1922)—mimicking Joyce's own earlier practice—that he wished to have his scribbled epiphanies sent to "all the great libraries of the world" upon his death (Maltby 13). In "Joyce and the Epiphany Concept," Zack Bowen, after recounting fierce epiphany debates among Joyceans (particularly in the pages of *PMLA*), posits that the ironic reversal and uncertainty of the *Dubliners* epiphany may actually be a "self-delusion" experienced by "less gifted characters" (106). Hence, it is important to note that while epiphanies would go on to become, as Richard Ellmann claimed, "a commonplace of modern fiction" by the late fifties (84), they are also marked by their uncertain potential actually to transform, much as they emanate from characters' faulty consciousnesses. Similarly, as Paul Maltby describes, they are likewise drawn from the perverted religious impulse, traced back to Joyce's recasting of a "Christian concept" for "conspicuously, not to say provocatively, secular ends" (13).

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<sup>72</sup> A traditional definition of the Joycean epiphany is provided by Garry Leonard in the *Cambridge Companion to James Joyce* (2004) as follows: "not so much a moment of insight as a point where hitherto disparate observations, thoughts, and desires rearrange themselves into an unsuspected pattern that shatters often long held ideas about one's self and one's surroundings" (91).

<sup>73</sup> Paul Maltby notes how the popularization of the epiphany was effected through "general education courses, whose literature anthologies typically include a story from *Dubliners* in tandem with an expository account of the epiphany concept" (11).

I would argue that genuine epiphanic transformation, invested with a new skepticism after postmodernism, becomes to writers attempting forays into an altered realism a freshly ambiguous and potentially adaptable phenomenon. This is partly due to various critical “state of the field” declarations of a broader “new realism,” generally regarded as a realism, as stated previously, seeming superficially “traditional” and “reportorial,” but still “self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis” (Rebein, *Hicks* 20). This skepticism often finds its way into new sub-niches of post-postmodern writing. As also stated previously, James Wood coined the genre of “hysterical realism” in an essay ostensibly reviewing Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, claiming that the identified cohort (including Wallace under the shaky premise of *IJ*’s lethal cartridge and wheelchair assassins) are marked by their employment of realist tropes exaggerated to the point of hysterical frenzy. Wood notes that characters within these works are, like E.M. Forster said of Dickens’s, “flat but vibrating very fast;” their animacy is not interiorly felt but “hangs off them like jewelry” (Wood). This degree of character legitimacy and depth is also integral to Jonathan Franzen’s aforementioned formulation for “Contract” writing, favoring lucid prose and empathetic characters facilitating connection and “community,” wholly distinct from the thorny ostracism of avant-garde “Status” writing (Franzen, “Difficult” 239-41). While Franzen inevitably favors the “Contract” model, other writers of Franzen’s generation conceive of the potential synthesis of these two camps, or integration of realist emotional nuance with “difficult” postmodern stylistics, as the holy grail of a truly new type of writing. Wood quotes Zadie Smith describing this ideal genre as potentially marrying postmodern structural tropes, like “macro-microeconomics...math, philosophy,” with local, visceral components, such as “love, sex, whatever” (Wood). Crafting characters with human traits that do not hang artificially like “jewelry” is essential, and deciphering a means to puncture the caricatures so dearly held by high

postmodernism, perhaps by means of tropes vitalizing realist depiction like the “epiphany,” is posited as the next urgent step.

One might see also in Wallace’s rejection of the “twee” or saccharine qualities present in allied categories of “post-ironic” (Konstantinou) or “New Sincerity” (Kelly) writing, marked by a certain precociousness and projected good will, a willingness to co-opt darker and more spiritually nihilistic states in order to find absent character interiority. His portrayal, for instance, of the emphatically damned Lenz attempting to “resolv[e]” his issues of “rage” and “fear” by the escalating murder of animals reveals this path to subjectivity in highly tortured, evocative fashion (Wallace, *IJ* 541). Also relevant is how Lenz’s struggle leads to the conflict that initiates Gately’s defense, wounding, and resultant struggle with Demerol. Blended with the crafting of fleshed-out character psychologies—the “Contract” side of Wallace’s writing, in Franzen’s terms—Wallace is able to implement jarring, epiphanic plumbs into the damaged structure of his characters’ consciousnesses, usually departing from representation into undivulged absences, to present a new sort of three-dimensional postmodern figure capable of weighing the use and morality of these transgressive acts. Holes surrounding these characters’ epiphanies likewise call for a new degree of reader interaction absent also from Wallace’s contemporaries. The blending of formal eccentricity and mimetic rendering of thought process, much remarked on in Wallace criticism,<sup>74</sup> is then just as reliant on these departures and gaps from this cognitive imprint, where blinding trauma, or emotional exultation, break from Wallace’s wall-of-thought to reveal something else.

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<sup>74</sup> This is an essential cognitive quality discussed in critical attempts to diagnose Wallace’s method of exhausting maximalist postmodern prose. As A.O. Scott stated succinctly in his mid-career diagnosis of Wallace: “Wallace, then, is less anti-ironic than (forgive me) meta-ironic. That is, his gambit is to turn irony back on itself, to make his fiction relentlessly conscious of its own self-consciousness, and thus to produce work that will be at once unassailably sophisticated and doggedly down to earth.”

### **Cambridge Psycho: Transgression, Catharsis, and Choice**

Wallace was familiar with the genre of transgressive fiction presented in the popular form of “Brat Pack” writing. As discussed in Section Two, the Brat Pack encapsulated a model of “young writing” preceding him—of which he was seen as arising out of yet from which he often sought to distance himself—that seemed to epitomize a cool, affectless detachment. Wallace decried the movement most exhaustively in his early essay “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young” (1988). Among three maligned categories of suspicious fiction, Wallace drew explicit attention to a category lampooning a Brat Pack style and specifically that of Bret Easton Ellis: “Neiman-Marcus Nihilism,” marked by depictions of “six-figure Uppies and their salon-tanned, morally vacant offspring...[un]able to make it from limo door to analyst’s couch without several grams of chemical encouragement” (Wallace, “Fictional” 39-40). What was so apparently irksome, as Wallace expanded upon in a much discussed interview with Larry McCaffery, was the mimetic rendering of a culture that was “hopelessly shitty, insipid, materialistic, emotionally retarded, sadomasochistic and stupid” back at itself without any attempted redemptive or soulful undercurrent (McCaffery, Wallace 26). In terms of stylistics, following a flood of avant-garde tactics originally opened and rightfully hard-won by a coterie from “Mallarmé to Coover,” Wallace found anathematic the purposeless avant-gardism encapsulated by Ellis’s single-minded aesthetic of cruelty, lacking the underlying “human” elements Wallace so prized (McCaffery, Wallace 26-7). Wallace saw Ellis’s cruelty rather as the pointless experimentation leading to “bad language poetry” and “Alice Cooper eating shit on

stage” (Wallace, McCaffery 28)—in other words, shock for shock’s sake.<sup>75</sup> This carte-blanche hatred for “cruelty” is interesting and seemingly contradictory, given that Wallace advocates an authorial cruelty of his own in the novella “Westward,” describing an “architect who could hate enough to feel enough to love enough to perpetrate the kind of special cruelty only real lovers can inflict” (Wallace, McCaffery 23).<sup>76</sup> McCaffery raises this, and restates it allegorically as like the instructive brashness of a drill instructor prepping his recruits for war. Wallace curiously demurs, caviling over the “pretty Aristotelian” assumption of McCaffery’s restatement, reflects further on *American Psycho*’s tactic as the illusory rug-pulling of seemingly offering instructive pain behind which is only self-serving sadism (Wallace, McCaffery 24-5).

Despite this caviling over “cruelty,” or perhaps due to it, Wallace’s stylistic debt or similarity to Ellis is often overlooked. Indeed, in D.T. Max’s biography, Max describes Wallace denying having read Ellis’s novel *Less Than Zero* (73) when queried about a story of his, “Girl With Curious Hair,” which drew from the affectless, brand-name-exalting aura of Ellis’s work. The story describes a former Ivy Leaguer now called Sick Puppy who is finally allowed to enact his sexual fetish for burning women who “fellate” him by joining a group of punk miscreants (Max 73).<sup>77</sup> While Max orients this debt as more stylistic appropriation, admiring “the strong voice Ellis had found” while exaggerating it into “the gothic or repulsive” (73), a borrowed logic

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<sup>75</sup> A similar point regarding empty mimesis is made by Wallace in his essay on porn, “Big Red Son.” He defuses a potential counterargument against the cathartic value of an unnecessarily sadistic sub-genre in porn called “Bizarro-Sleaze,” claiming, “whether Bizarro-Sleaze might conceivably help armchair misogynists ‘work out’ some of their anger at females is irrelevant” (“Big Red Son” 27).

<sup>76</sup> Also related, by Wallace, to a former teacher’s edict that “good fiction’s job was to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable” (Wallace, McCaffery 21).

<sup>77</sup> Lines like “I have the English Leather Cologne commercial taped on my new Toshiba VCR and I enjoy reclining in my horsehair recliner and masturbating while the commercial plays” (Wallace, “Girl” 55) are perfect mimics of the hyper-sexualized consumerism and deadened voice of *American Psycho* (1991).

of materialistic-catharsis by sadism is apparent as well. Sick Puppy notes that after an unpleasant interaction with a punk, “Gimlet let me burn one of Big’s nipples with my gold lighter at a rest stop, so I became happy and felt that Big was a fine individual once more” (Wallace, “Curious” 58), indicating cruelty as a means to attain temporary, though shallow, relief.<sup>78</sup> Lenz, in *IJ*, presents a marked embodiment and evolution of this earlier attitude—his moral contamination not a simple farce like Sick Puppy’s, but a genuine spiritual affliction granting the potential for moral evolution from Ellis’s template. Namely, as becomes apparent in Wallace’s drafts, we are meant to elevate Lenz’s trouble, both his addiction and seemingly sociopathic compulsion to harm, to the angst of a more cosmically beleaguered “sick soul.” Struggle for a feeling of relief either through Ellisian hyper-violence or a more soul-aligning Jamesian “unification,” sets an important template of choice revisited in Hal’s and Gately’s own respective philosophical quandaries potentially leading to epiphany.<sup>79</sup>

Chiefly of interest in setting up this model of spiritual sickness is a deleted footnote wherein Lenz reads excerpts from William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, specifically “The Sick Soul” and “The Divided Self” sections (Wallace, *IJ Typescript Draft (Continued)*). The most relevant excerpt, from “The Divided Self” (extending prior discussion of the “sick soul”), is reproduced here in the marked condition Lenz finds it in (the product of an

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<sup>78</sup> See also Wallace’s desire in writing, as expressed to Larry McCaffery, for “living transaction[s] between humans, whether the transaction was erotic or altruistic or sadistic” (Wallace, McCaffery 41).

<sup>79</sup> A similar instance of Wallace foregrounding choice as integral to religious affirmation is Wallace’s initial inclusion, then deletion, of the saintly Mario as a sort of genitally ambiguous eunuch. The early version of *IJ* sent to Moore contains the line “since Mario was born without testicles, it’s kind of a shame that he can’t sing” (Wallace *IJ ‘First Two Sections’* – Moore Collect.). Wallace also argued against Pietsch deleting Mario’s erotic run-in with the indomitable, warship-physiquest Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.) player the U.S.S. Millicent Kent as he “need[ed] Mario to be quite a bit more a character than a kind of maguffinish schtick walking around” (Wallace, *Letter—Feb 19*).



anal-retentive reader, annotated meta-textually in a fashion reminiscent of Hal correcting Pemulis's dictated grammar in the Eschaton section):

Some persons are born with an inner constitution which is harmonious and well balanced from the outset... Others are oppositely constituted; (sic) and are so in degrees which may vary from something so slight as to result in a merely odd or whimsical inconsistency, to a discordancy of which the consequences may be inconvenient in the extreme. (Wallace, *IJ Typescript Draft (Continued)*)

These “oppositely constituted” individuals, who are more prone to melancholy and a deeper feeling of woe (including, according to James, Bunyan and Tolstoy), are ironically, however, those whom James elects as experiencing a truer texture of reality. This is due to their plumbing of a greater psychic depth through melancholy, as “the evil facts which [melancholy] refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality” and potentially opens for them “the deepest levels of truth” (James, *Varieties* 136). One’s conflict with evil, and darker impulses, can then cultivate potentially positive characteristics—a notion that certainly must have appealed to Wallace. The “sick soul” takes on the function of a leprous holy man, or rather a damned individual who has been to the deepest recesses of hell, unlike those of “harmonious” constitutions, and can so account for a more total image of life’s possibilities. Similarly, the “sick soul,” torn by its darker impulses into a “divided self,” is also the key to a life-transforming conversion experience, requiring a seismic return to unification in order to settle the pestilence of a divided mind—they must be “twice-born” (James, *Varieties* 139) to achieve any sort of equilibrium.

This conversion and unification, James explicitly states, doesn’t necessarily have to be toward a greater morality, or even entirely religiously motivated. James notes, “the process of

remedying inner incompleteness and reducing inner discord is a general psychological process, which may take place with any sort of mental material, and need not necessarily assume the religious form” (James, *Varieties* 146). Additionally, this rebirth, and resulting consolidation of self, may be achieved explicitly through a unity of evil, vice, or even neutral ideology. James notes this potential liberation in secularism or even vice as follows: “the new birth may be away from religion into incredulity; or it may be from moral scrupulosity into freedom and license; or it may be produced by the irruption into the individual’s life of some new stimulus or passion, such as love, ambition, cupidity, revenge, or patriotic devotion” (James, *Varieties* 146).

Particularly relevant is this second-to-last designation, “revenge,” indicating a possible relief from “division,” or irksome philosophical uncertainty, through violence or retribution. Indeed, James claims that this process of conversion can feel like the “opposite of ‘falling in love’” (James, *Varieties* 149), or a stark removal from a sense of connection and affective affinity.

Yet, there is a choice available that forms the crux of James’s pragmatic system. Locked historically within a context of competing models of dogmatic determinism, James vied for the choice to believe in free will (*Letters* 147-48). Further, in pragmatism belief is rendered true by its results, and one is encouraged to choose the fateful track that would yield the most advantageous outcome—whatever “idea...will carry [one] prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily” (James, *Pragmatism* 34).<sup>80</sup> Yet, as relates to the “sick soul,” this choice broadens to the affective field shared by those directly

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<sup>80</sup> Evans aligns this notion of choice with Wallace’s ideology expressed in his now-famous Kenyon College commencement speech, later published as *This is Water* (2009). As Wallace writes in the speech, “if you’ve really learned how to think, how to pay attention [i.e. ‘choose’]... it will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred” (Evans 181). Evans also notes Hal and Gately’s movement out of their spiritual “Purgator[ies]” hinges on “choice,” yet doesn’t incorporate the taint of addiction into this choice nor other avenues for less advantageous choices that still may offer relief (181-2).

influenced by one's actions: choosing a unification operating in more harmonious relation with one's fellow man would be starkly different than one operating out of malice, violent expulsion, or baseness. This choice, and Wallace's implicit belief in the former option, is reiterated time and again in Wallace's comments about the purpose of fiction. Fiction is, as Wallace is oft-quoted saying, about "what it is to be a fucking human being;" about ameliorating "loneliness" for the reader "marooned in her own skull" by giving her "access to other selves" (Wallace, McCaffery 26, 16, 22). The function of the "sick soul" is to face this potential option of unification in the condensed form of conversion, or coalescence. Whether this is toward a transgressive excising of impulse or a religious empathy is left ambiguously unclear.

The conscious alignment of Lenz and James is obvious from Wallace's evolution of thinking. In his first hand-written manuscripts, Lenz originally hides his cocaine in the *Gould Medical Dictionary*, which by later transcripts has been modified, explicitly, to James's *The Principles of Psychology* and *The Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*. The transition suggests a shift from biological explanations for actions—present in the *Medical Dictionary*—to psychological and religious explanations—present in the *Principles* and *Lectures on Natural Religion*.<sup>81</sup> Also significant is the coupling of the two James texts in a compendium edition, "*The Principles of Psychology and The Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*," which doesn't actually exist in reality (in the novel, it is cited, somewhat farcically, as "available in EZC large-font print from Microsoft/NAL-Random House-Ticknor, Fields, Little, Brown and Co." published in the fictitious "Y.T.M.P [or Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad]" [Wallace, *IJ* 1037]). *The Principles of Psychology* presents the groundwork for understanding sensations and instinctual drives

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<sup>81</sup> In his published paraphrased notes on his early-received draft of *IJ*, Moore describes this earlier presence of the *Gould Dictionary*, yet doesn't remark on it further (Wallace, Moore, "First Draft").

undergirding consciousness, and *The Gifford Lectures* (or *Varieties*) interprets religious phenomena in psychological terms—both combined in this fantasy edition to frame the competing forces of religion and physical perception. Similarly, by the time of an early typescript Wallace sent to Steven Moore, he had included in the Lenz section a hand-written note relaying the notion of sick soul being “oppositely constituted” to the “harmonious” souls (*IJ ‘First Two Sections’* – Moore Collect.), and by a later typescript had included the relevant chapters of *Varieties* explicitly (*IJ Typescript Draft (Continued)*), though these were all struck from the final version.

Similarly, in looking at Wallace’s early drafts, one sees a missing jargon of therapeutic resolution that exists in the published version. One salient example arises in Lenz’s killing of animals and need to utter his abreactive keyword “There.” Simple expression of relief in his earliest draft—“Lenz liked to look down at the former animal and go ‘There’” (Wallace, *IJ Handwritten Drafts*)—becomes amplified by the published version with an added allusion to a psychological process of “issue-resolution” allowed by the “*There*” (Wallace, *IJ* 541, italics Wallace’s). Yet, most expressive of this creation of Lenz as a psychologically tormented test case for reunification is Wallace’s inclusion of a made-up James phrase: “Catharsis of resolving.” In the published text, missing from the earliest draft, we are told that killing animals in their owner’s yards gave Lenz “what Bill James one time called a *Catharsis* of resolving, which Lenz felt he could agree” (Wallace, *IJ* 544). No such “catharsis of resolving” exists in William James’s extended works, and this fabricated conception of visceral release lends a particularly rich sample of what Lenz seeks to do throughout his nightly punishments and indicates in greater detail the struggle at moments of epiphanic resolution.

Lenz's process of self-described cathartic resolution increases in slowly ratcheting amplifications in the near mid-novel section that describes it; similarly, the process is marked by the attempt to achieve neat, defined moments of "resolution" through punctuated acts of orchestrated violence. The nature of this accreted sense of tension, which bursts forth in micro-epiphanies, is actually described in an excerpt from *Varieties* in the published version, which Lenz reads from the compendium edition and "snap[s] [him] to what he was up to" (Wallace, *IJ* 1037). The relevant passage, also present in an earlier version (Wallace, *IJ 'First Two Sections' – Wallace Papers*), describes the "latent process of unconscious preparation often preceding a sudden awakening to the fact that the mischief is irretrievably done" (Wallace, *IJ* 1037). Here we see an "awakening" precipitated by a series of actions linked to his addicted state that he is aware of only retrospectively. Lenz's process of escalating preparation pre-"awakening," however, is telling. He begins by "demapping," or killing, rats, in a rather straightforward fashion by dropping chunks of concrete on them—the sound "some aural combination of a tomato thrown at a wall and a pocketwatch getting clocked with a hammer" (Wallace, *IJ* 540-1). He escalates to suffocating cats in garbage bags, which "assume all manners of wickedly abstract twisting shapes... until finally the cat runs out of gas and resolves itself and Lenz's issues into one nightly shape" (Wallace, *IJ* 542). Relevant here particularly is the notion of the clawed bags' shifting and "abstract" shapes, perhaps a stand-in for Lenz's nebulous feelings of unease, becoming "resolve[d]" only when collapsing into a fixed pinpoint of death. Lenz's alternate mode of killing the cats, "swing[ing] a twisting ten-kilo burden hard against a pole and go[ing]: 'There,'" reinforces this notion of condensing resolution into a single act and focal point mixed with the abreactive properties of his keyword, "There" (Wallace, *IJ* 544). This feeling of "brisanance"—or the "shattering effect of...high explosives" ("Brisance")—quickly becomes

normalized, and Lenz, an addict at heart, must escalate again to get the same high (Wallace, *IJ* 541). His killing of dogs with a “Browning X444 Serrated” knife, slitting throats from behind (Wallace, *IJ* 545-6), is what inevitably leads him into the confrontation with the terrorist “Nucks [or Canadians]” that test Gately’s epiphanic potential (Wallace, *IJ* 610), yet it is relevant to notice Lenz’s craven compulsion, if not to consume drugs, then to feel “resolution” through violence. His “catharsis of resolving” is marked by his choice, in a perverted Jamesian fashion, to resolve himself by means of pain or sadism.

Lenz’s cathartic expunging is important in that it sets the stakes for what Wallace means to outline in his fantasy concept of “catharsis of resolving.” One can, as Lenz does, relieve oneself in a primal loosing of psychic pressures, or choose a loftier religious or altruistic principle through which to achieve consolidation and ameliorate sickness. “Sickness” is explicitly aligned with darker compulsions and fear, much as Lenz realizes in reading a recovery book at Ennet House (the halfway house that much of *IJ* is set in) that “the more basically Powerless an individual feels, the more the likelihood for the propensity for violent acting-out” (Wallace, *IJ* 546). The struggle becomes a greater one against one’s primal spiritual “sickness,” and intention, rather than the more empirical and Machiavellian understanding of pragmatism as a choice dictated by maximum pleasure. Wallace’s inclusion of this spiritual-afflicting language makes his foregrounding of this struggle clear. Such a concept also becomes useful in analyzing the twinned tracks of potential epiphany in both Gately and Hal, which, as is again evident from Wallace’s drafts, forms part of the elemental core to *IJ*.

### **Bottoms and More**

The concept of concatenating epiphanies and pseudo-epiphanies is highly evident even in Wallace's first total set of handwritten drafts (Wallace, *IJ Handwritten Drafts*). If we take Wallace's former comment about the precisely calibrated closure of the two main endings (Gately at 100% certainty, Hal at 50%—Orin's near-totally uncertain), we see this convergence accelerating, with Gately's at a higher degree of salience, toward the end of the novel. As Pietsch wrote to Wallace by means of self-clarification, "there are two centers to the story, Hal and Gately, which seem to work like two poles of a magnet, with the bottom-hitting scene of each at opposite ends of the novel, moving sort of backward from Hal's bottom and forward to Gately's" (Pietsch, *Letter*). The structure of one "pole" and its preceding anticipations, containing Gately and Hal's initial pseudo-epiphanic moments as well as Gately's final flashback, were present even in the earliest complete set of handwritten drafts (Wallace *IJ Handwritten Drafts*). The last loop-completion of Hal's finalizing "pole," continuing the resonances left open with Gately's, was added with the opening section appended in early 1994, prompting Wallace to affix the final "Artaud-ish blackout-type ending" replete with "tide...out" line to cement the "aclimactic" structure (Max 190-3). Considering this total scheme, anticipated skeletally in Wallace's earliest total outline, the psychological reverberations of these polarized bottoms pulling across the final absent chasm require further investigations into Wallace's nuanced articulations of key moments limning empathy and choice.

Recall the dubiousness of the "sick soul's" transformation upon hitting bottom as evidenced by Lenz. Lenz's own illness is tied to Gately beyond their shared addiction. Lenz also, as a perverse sacrificial lamb, initiates the means by which Gately can fulfill his Christ-like fantasy of self-sacrifice by incurring the wrath of separatist Canadians. As Wallace adds in a later draft (Wallace *IJ Typescript Draft Fragments*), Gately reflects that "he'd had sick little

fantasies of saving somebody from harm, some innocent party, and getting killed in the process and getting eulogized at great length in bold-faced *Globe* print” (Wallace, *IJ* 611).<sup>82</sup> Likewise, where Gately is shot, Wallace adds a section by the published version describing Gately’s conception of his own (sober) murder as a publically lauding news headline: “**SHOT IN SOBRIETY** in bold headline caps goes across his mind’s eye” (Wallace, *IJ* 613). While Lenz is pronounced in his selfishness, and dedicated in his choice of violence as a means of “issue-resolution,” Gately’s fantasies about self-sacrifice are lodged in an indeterminate position between potential selflessness and a more primal drive for Lenz-like “resolving” violence or ego-gratification. However, in the end, an animalistic, deterministic drive overrides any individualistic, Jamesian empathetic choice, as becomes highlighted by Wallace’s inclusion of unstoppable cosmic machinations seemingly forcing Gately’s hand and the pleasure Gately attains from the violent exercise. This then becomes Gately’s moment of “false” epiphany, much as it masks a deeper baseness in the clothes of insight, like the boy at the end of “Araby,” whose realization of “vanity” vacillates uncertainly between cosmic insight and childish self-pity (Bowen 107).

The ambiguity of the potential epiphany is largely structured around empathy, the dubiousness of which Gately marks in his craven desire to be seen as martyr-like in the public forum of the *Globe*. In opposition to this complicated affinity, while also granting greater philosophical nuance, is a near-irreversible sense of impulsive action that, when set into action, obviates choice and finer emotional identification. Deterministic description is integrated in later drafts, with empathy seeming the result of a more overriding force shunting Gately into his

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<sup>82</sup> Where appropriate, intermediary additions are represented by their final, polished form from the published text, as these represent the fullest articulations of the included thought. As indicated previously, the earliest extant drafts are the *Infinite Jest Handwritten Drafts*.



course of action, as shown in the following added passage: “Everything now slightly slows down; at the sight of an Item held on his residents there’s almost a kind of mechanistic click as Gately’s mind shifts into a different kind of drive” (Wallace, *IJ* 608). Further, the loss of fine distinctions between thought processes and the rising of innate habit is enhanced by Wallace’s addition of Gately’s almost robotic assessment of the situation: “All this appraisal’s taking only seconds; it only takes time to list it” (Wallace, *IJ* 609). The narrator also notes that actions seem predestined, which Wallace adds through the phrase “it’s not so much that things slow as break into frames,” creating a forwardly projected visual storyboard for the choreographed beating Gately is about to enact (Wallace, *IJ* 608). This beating is so seamless and *Matrix*-like it entails one Canadian getting his skull crushed “with a sort of liquid crunch” and another flattened like a “cockroach” through Gately’s balletic fighting grace—the plan orchestrated for maximum effectiveness due to his being outnumbered (Wallace, *IJ* 614-5). He realizes he should “hit his knees right here on the headlit blacktop and ask for guidance on this from a Higher Power,” yet, importantly, defers to his personal (perhaps flawed) judgment and “stop[s] thinking in any sort of spiritual terms at all”—Wallace emphasizes this latter point by adding that he “forgets to pray” (Wallace, *IJ* 612-3). Importantly, Gately is aligned with Lenz in a symbol dubiously either of protector or fellow outcast: “He stands there, Lenz chattering in his shadow” (Wallace, *IJ* 612). The alliance with Lenz further posits a secular religion relating to the religion of revenge, or violent, cathartic release. Indeed, this spiritualism of the damaged flesh is suggested by the new passage, “his subdural hardware clicks deeper into a worn familiar long-past track... Gately’s just one part of something bigger he can’t control” (Wallace, *IJ* 612)—a sentiment much amplified from an original declaration that “the situation becomes routine” (Wallace, *IJ Handwritten Drafts*). It is strange that this moment of relapse, where Gately gives in to an

automated, almost cosmically set “track,” isn’t understood as the relapse of will so warned against in AA (the question of will and intent becoming paramount in his later decision to resist narcotics). More uncertainly, it represents a shift, a transition into a channel sought by his “sick soul” for unification through an available and makeshift mode of simple catharsis.

The indulgence and *joy* of such a cathartic release are at odds with the clinical and pained nature of Gately’s choice at the end of the novel to accept or deny Demerol. The notion of a perverted “pleasure” in the fight sequence marks the surrendering of will by giving over to his age-old groove of proficiently executed violence. Indeed, Wallace incorporates the language of the “divided” self in his added notion that “Gately has just *division* enough to almost wish he didn’t feel such a glow of familiar warmth” (Wallace, *IJ* 612, italics mine) in his violent enactment (expanded from the simple “wishes” [Wallace *IJ Handwritten Drafts*]). In other words, he is compromised by pleasure. Similarly, Wallace incorporates Gately’s guilt over this potentially enjoyable violence, adding a passage describing how “Gately stands quietly, wishing he felt different about potential trouble, less almost jolly” (Wallace, *IJ* 611). Once giving over to impulse, however, Wallace describes Gately’s smile as “broad but impersonal,” positing his joy as devolving him into a non-individuated, “impersonal” id (Wallace, *IJ* 613). Additions also delineate Gately’s long-submerged pleasure in revisiting and releasing his repressed nature. A section previously stating, “Gately is all business. He exudes a kind of weary expertise” (Wallace, *IJ Handwritten Drafts*), becomes “He’s projected a sort of white-collar attitude of cheery competence and sangfroid” (Wallace, *IJ* 614), downtrodden obligation becoming sprightly expertise. With the relating of violence to “white-collar” work, Wallace indicates Gately’s automated readiness and competence in his task, an unthinking kind of mental clocking-in excluding careful self-examination.

As a twinned example of epiphany highlighting the component of choice, Gately's heroic struggle to deny Demerol for his wounds reveals a marked difference to the automated glee of the Canadian battle sequence. It is imperative to note that Gately's two choices—to save his partner Gene Fackelmann in his hallucinated flashback, and to deny Demerol in his physical state—are essentially lapsed into one merged, hallucinogenic sequence at the novel's end. His remembrance in the flashback of being administered a hit of “pharm[aceutical]-grade Sunshine [or heroin-like opiate]” by Fackelman's tormentors and awakening almost immediately and inexplicably on a “freezing” beach indicate the mixed, drug-infused imagery of rebirth, raising questions as to what psychic or physical stimulus is prompting these visions (Wallace, *IJ* 979, 981). (The physical-dream connection is solidified by Gately's pained transference to a gurney—“he felt an upward movement deep inside that was so personal and horrible he woke up” [Wallace, *IJ* 974]—that triggers his final bottom sequence). In the text, the answer to whether Gately is able to save Fackelmann is given explicitly: a resounding “no,” as Gately watches Fackelmann have his eyes stitched open as he lapses into a waking-coma-like trance. Yet, the answer to the Demerol question is suggestively withheld. Further, this latter question is also hinged essentially on *intent*; it has less to do with whether the physical drug has been administered, but more of whether it would be considered a “relapse” “according to [his] heart” (Wallace, *IJ* 819). Critics have pondered this relapse question, parsing the dream-imagery given at the close of the novel as Gately strives to deny drugs. Does the initiation of the final sequence and climactic blackout reveal Gately's relapse to an inner, addictive sickness and signal a euphoric flood of Demerol? Or is his increasingly hallucinogenic delusion merely caused by his acute, unmedicated pain and an unfulfilled desire for substances?<sup>83</sup> Evidenced by Wallace's

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<sup>83</sup> As Boswell writes, “the novel provides hints that Gately has this hallucination/recollection

annotations, this “did he or didn’t he” question becomes essentially null. In an intermediary typescript, next to a description of Gately desiring Demerol—“Memories of good old Demerol rose up, clamoring to be Entertained” (890)—Wallace writes “Processing of Demerol in body?” (Wallace, *IJ Typescript Draft Fragments*), indicating that a Demerol previously injected is now becoming acutely perceivable,<sup>84</sup> explaining the elaborate moral exercises he passes through to test and tease his true intention for relief or addictive fulfillment (or at least this is an endorsed and hence highly convincing “strong” hypothesis). Indeed, the annotation arrives shortly after a hallucinated interaction (caused by “either fever or [addictive] Disease”) with an imagined Pakistani doctor who delivers an almost point-by-point argument for painkillers’ good-faith merit (the doctor himself is even an understanding, “abstain[ing]” “Moslem”) while Gately’s mouth floods with spittle in reaction to the memory of the “sick-sweet antiseptic taste” that accompanies an “injection of Demerol” (foreshadowed by an earlier suppressed impression of what “Demerol’s warm rush of utter well-being felt like”); this scene then prefaces Gately’s recollection of first falling in love with Demerol (Wallace, *IJ* 890, 887, 840, 891). All these instances seem to indicate that the drug in his bloodstream is calling up these Demerol-specific reflections. Foreclosing the question of “what if?”, Wallace’s annotational clarification gives us further reason to align the physiological changes Gately is undergoing in the hospital to broader

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because of delirium brought on by his intense pain; it is also possible that he ‘reexperiences’ this episode *because* he has been given the painkillers after all” (177-8). Further, Boswell outlines the additionally Janus-faced possibilities suggested by the final, potentially lethal dose of Sunshine as either the “kill[ing] off [of] his addictive self” in the dream or the “present-tense” injection with Demerol (which Boswell accidentally lists as “Dilaudid”—Fackelmann’s drug of choice) (178).

<sup>84</sup> The original point of entry is perhaps the “I.V.-Demerol” he was offered “immediately on admission to the E.R.,” or the general Demerol proposed “twice” after by “shift-Drs.” (Wallace, *IJ* 814), though with the hallucinogenic nature of Gately’s hospital recollections, discerning such a point absolutely—as well as the verity of his tracking what compounds are being administered—is difficult.

questions of psychological *intent*, and the subconscious self Gately is battling in the hospital room. Further, such psychological warring with self also draws from a similar dream-imagery representing intent set against more immovable cosmic forces.

Indeed, I wish to posit, at Gately's final bottom, the replacement of *choice* with *intent* as a soul truly sick might be prohibited from any logical consideration of choice. Given the likelihood of his consumption of Demerol, with or without his consent, one should then turn to the Christ-complex resuscitated in his final interaction with Fackelmann. The Demerol and Fackelmann are merged together in the final cryptic yet lyrical line that closes the novel: "And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out" (Wallace, *IJ* 981), either indicating a rebirth, a lonely detachment into isolation, or a number of cryptic possibilities which suggests Joyce-like critical pondering for years to come. Yet, this final image, of a freezing beach inundated with cold rain, is reminiscent of similar imagery present earlier in Gately's dreams, one deleted from later drafts, exploring the regenerative yet sometimes higher-willed potential of water and tidal movement.<sup>85</sup>

Tides and oceanic shift often represent for Gately inevitable forces against which he must struggle. Earlier in the published version, during one of Gately's several hospital fever dreams, he imagines a "dark writhing storm," during which he is trapped in a crib though uncertainly an adult or child, calling for his mother who is being "beaten...by a man with a shepherd's crook in

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<sup>85</sup> Boswell notes that in any case, the final line signals a "rebirth," with the "ocean as...womb," indicating "Gately either at the remembered beginning of his sobriety, or at the beginning of his recovery from his wounds" (178-9). Carlisle sees this ending somewhat more pessimistically, as from the "bottom" itself, "his recovery is delayed... He will soon enter prison, and when he gets out he will go back to drugs and burglary, only getting clean... over six years later" (*Elegant* 471). Further, his waking perception that the "tide was way out" indicates that he is "still caged," as to Carlisle aquatic imagery in *IJ* connotes an all-encompassing state of addiction (*Elegant* 471-2).

the kitchen” [likely his mother’s Military Police partner] (Wallace, *IJ* 816)—an image reflecting a smiley-faced but vengeful and crook-wielding God in an earlier, AA-specific dream (Wallace, *IJ* 358-359) and representing unstoppable dark forces. Gately then breaks free to cut himself through a beach’s “crazed breakers” and “submerg[e] himself” in “deep warm water” from which he impotently “trie[s] to call for her to come into the deep water with him, but even he couldn’t hear his calls against the scream of the storm” (Wallace, *IJ* 816). While Gately’s primary impulse is to save himself by fleeing into the ocean’s waves, the “deep warm water” he submerges himself in is then a place from which he attempts to still call for his mother; in his physical restriction, his empathy is highlighted. Another dream, deleted by the published version, taps into similar imagery: Gately is mysteriously in the company of two “brothers,” “one’s stand-up and one’s a fucking moron,” with the “stand-up” brother magically transporting the three between disparate, unattached lakes. Gately recalls to Ennet House members, “I tell the strong brother it must have almost fucking killed him to transform all three of us from lake to lake like that,” and asks “how the fuck’d he do it;” the guy “looks down in this hypnotizing fashion” and says how “he just had to do it” (Wallace, *IJ Typescript Draft, With Corrections*). While seemingly cryptic, here we see again a Christ-like sacrifice of personal wellness for duty, the imagery of water presenting against primal forces of ebb and flow while one man attempts a seemingly impossible task of sacrifice for others’ sake. Considering these respective dreams from Gately’s unconscious, one sees the apparent ambiguity of the final sentence slightly more clearly. In the image of Gately quite literally washed up, post-swim, we see his failure to battle oceanic forces in his attempted empathetic act. Similarly, this reiteration of heart-felt intent infuses a tragic yet poignant quality into Gately’s hampered attempts to aid Fackelmann, or

otherwise avoid his Sunshine-enabled bottom that couples with and abets his failure to aid his partner.

The final bottom sequence is carefully calibrated to test notions of empathy and intention amongst a paralyzed ability to function. From the moment when Bobby C, the vengeful henchman of Whitey Sorkin, a bookie Fackelmann has scammed, becomes visible in the window of a furniture-less luxury apartment in which Gately and Fackelmann lie incapacitated in their own filth, operations are performed on Gately as to render him fully impotent in all physical capacities (much like the prohibitive ocean tides of his dream states). He is “brodied,” or struck in the testicles, by Bobby C. upon the moment of arrival, which, as Gately reflects, is “S.O.P. to keep your man down” (Wallace, *IJ* 975-7). Gately attempts twice, futilely, to aid Fackelmann, or otherwise extricate him from the situation. In Bobby C’s absence, following Gately’s groin-shot, he “urged Fackelmann to go for the window as rickety-tick as he could” (Wallace, *IJ* 975). He then solicits “C quietly if he and Fackelmann couldn’t get cleaned up real quick and they could all go see Sorkin together and Whitey and Gene [Fackelmann] could reason together and work out an accord” (Wallace, *IJ* 978). Yet, Gately is unable to actually act, paralyzed by the drug binge that has preceded this sequence (where he was also unable to “go to Fackelmann’s side during [a] seizure, to help and just be there” [Wallace, *IJ* 937]). Earlier in the novel, Gately reflected on whether “God is really the cruel and vengeful figurant Boston AA swears up and down He isn’t, and He gets you straight just so you can feel all the more keenly every bevel and edge of the special punishments He’s got lined up for you” (Wallace, *IJ* 895). As if in physical mimesis of this concept of God sharpening one’s senses only to enact a more “keenly” felt trial, and reiterating Gately’s immobility, Fackelmann is injected with an “anti-narc[otic]” so that “he’d feel the needle as they sewed his eyes open” (Wallace, *IJ* 980), reiterating the scene as one

of precisely calibrated and agonizingly sensitive testing. Gately's impotent fumbling to aid his friend, paralyzed by drugs both self and other-administered, still leads to a moment of identification that the novel directs. Gately's final moment, before supposedly waking on the beach, is of staring into his own image in a held mirror, a "reflection of his own big square pale head" (Wallace, *IJ* 981). The symbol of reflective recognition marks the unification of Gately's "divided self" by empathy and identification, however futile, with his fellow-addict Fackelmann. Such a unification along principles of identification spreads across the gap of the novel's end, much as *Finnegans Wake* ends on a notion of river-emptying-into-sea and the beginning of a regenerative river cycle, and swings one satellite-like back to the beginning, much as Gately will inevitably then begin his recovery shortly thereafter. The whole novel is then, in Jamesian terms, a divided self struggling for reunification across the final break.<sup>86</sup>

Progressing along a similar axis of sharply felt testing, and another test case for Wallace's evolving thought across successive renditions, is Hal's main pseudo-epiphanic panic at the conceivably endless repetitions his current lifestyle will be comprised of—a comprehension potentially brought about by sobriety. Part of this panic is an acting out of Wallace's conception of the novel extending narrative lines beyond the edge of the novel's right frame, as well as the determinism Gately felt in his violent defense—chiefly that Hal projects, lucidly, into his own future, detailing the amount of "food [he] was going to have to consume over the rest of [his] life," the "excrement [he']d produce," and so on (Wallace, *IJ* 897). In an inverse turn of phrase linking Hal to Gately, he sees life speeding up and coming "at too many frames per second" (Wallace, *IJ* 896)—a phrase added later by Wallace, echoing and inverting

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<sup>86</sup> Carlisle interprets this ending, and mirror symbol, more negatively: "Gately's final look into the mirror was one of self-absorption rather than one of self-reflection. He 'wrecks' instead of stopping, like the drivers duped by the mirrors of the Canadian terrorists [who infamously spread mirrors across American highways to create accidents]" (*Elegant* 471).



Gately's conception of "things" grinding so slow as to "break into frames," with Hal instead seeing into his infinitely repetitive future (Wallace, *IJ* 608). Hal is made mentally and physically aware of the taxing accumulation of total actions required by his mechanic existence, the cosmic total of his life of single-minded athleticism—the acute perception of this physical determinism paralyzing. His lucidity is enforced by the fact that this same sequence gives birth to his revelation that his mother Avril has been cheating on James Incandenza for ages with "graduate students, grammatical colleagues, Japanese fight-choreographers," and so on (Wallace, *IJ* 957). He also sees it as a "black miracle" that "people could actually care deeply about a subject or pursuit, and could go on caring this way for years on end" (Wallace, *IJ* 900). He has become densely anchored, all-body, "impossible to knock down" (Wallace, *IJ* 902). Yet, Wallace's earlier drafts reveal even this awareness of bodily repetition and acknowledgement of a willed, conscious intent required to believe in a "subject or pursuit," was only pronounced in later versions.

Indeed, in Wallace's earlier renditions, this sense of acutely perceived body panic was eclipsed and explained under a running thread of Hal's "jamais vu,"<sup>87</sup> the inverse of "déjà vu," which Hal was initially struck by in lieu of simple panic. Explained in clinical, psychological terms in an intermediary typescript, *jamais vu* is a "comparatively mild temporal-lobe thing achieved through the ritualistic repetition of an action or experience until you all of a sudden get the uncannily glittered feeling that you've never done or experienced this actually overfamiliar thing ever before in your life" (Wallace, *IJ Typescript Draft (Continued)*). The newness of reality

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<sup>87</sup> In earlier drafts, this is referred to as "jeda-vu" (likely an anagrammatic rearrangement of the more familiar *déjà vu*). Moore notes "jeda-vu," and the later integrated "jamais vu," going on to explain that "*Jamais* is French for 'never,'" hence explaining "jamais vu" as a phenomenon that makes a familiar scenario seem unfamiliar—"never seen"—rather than an unfamiliar scenario seem oddly known—as indicated by *déjà vu*'s "already seen" (Wallace, Moore, "First Draft").

that Hal experiences in brutal sobriety in the published version was before, essentially, a delusion of the brain, or explainable psychological sensation. Wallace wrote to Pietsch, who recommended cutting the entire *jamais vu* thread: “you’re right: it’s unclear and too heavy to be a good toss-off or herring” (Wallace, *Letter—Feb 19*). The result of excising *jamais vu* is that Hal becomes painfully aware of his problems (namely, how or whether to continue to abstain from marijuana, the withdrawal from which may potentially compromise his performance at the career-defining WhataBurger tournament), as if he, like Fackelmann, had been injected with the “anti-narc” (Wallace, *IJ 784-980*). In a new line by the published version, Wallace makes evident how Hal must now contend with a heightened consciousness previously potentially crippling, but manageable, on the court: “Lyle’s counsel had been to turn the perception and attention on the fear itself, but he’d shown us how to do this only on-court” (Wallace, *IJ 896*). Further, the deletion of “*jamais vu*” also acts to center Hal within the spectrum of his own available choices, rather than within the twin poles of addiction and painful sobriety—his “horizontal” denseness is the point from which his potential empathy might arise (902).

The glaring white space at the end of the novel, interrupting our final view of Hal in the first chapter, is made all the more poignant by its supposed contents of a resolution for Hal, his epiphany held *beyond* the margin—an annular ring apart—rather than half-eclipsed on the novel’s frame like Gately. What occurs between Gately’s bottom and the erratically acting, potentially lobotomized, yet potentially awakened Hal that opens the novel is cast largely in Wallace scholarship as an issue of plot—for instance, plot-wise, whether the AFR obtains the deadly cartridge, whether a “Continental Emergency” has arisen (Wallace, *IJ 934*), what has happened at E.T.A. during the fundraising gala, and so on. Likewise, considerations over Hal have predominantly focused on what physical circumstances might have led to his current state:

whether he has been forced to watch *Infinite Jest*, whether he has been dosed with the hallucinogenic DMZ, or is perhaps experiencing acute withdrawal (Burn, *DFW*'s IJ 44).<sup>88</sup> But, as the novel just as singularly hinges on whether Hal is eventually able to “reverse thrust” out of himself, as was the cartridge’s original intent (Wallace, *IJ* 839), it seems relevant to remark on the potential epiphanic changes that have likewise occurred off the page on an emotional, subjective level. Further, a critical view that the novel refuses to resolve itself (Boswell) is a perspective perhaps wrought from fixation on explicitly plot elements, rather than character-transformative components elemental also to situating Wallace within post-postmodernism. My interest, rather than conclusively resolving these issues (Hal is only expected to offer 50% resolution, in Wallace’s equation), is in the intuitional, anti-physical space beyond the page. Just as Wallace perhaps wills us to look beyond mere tallying plot-hypothesizing, I wish to focus on how Hal is forced to move beyond body-centered consciousness into an affective and sensory space contingent on empathetic identification and emotional intuition.

The qualities of empathy learned, by whatever process, and manifest in Hal at the novel’s opening are of central importance and little discussed.<sup>89</sup> The balance of Hal’s awakened feeling, evident in his statements like “I am in here” and “I’m not a machine. I feel and believe”

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<sup>88</sup> Creative mixtures of these theories abound. One has Hal organically synthesizing DMZ as a result of acute marijuana withdrawal, earlier exposure to mold, and a concentrated intake of sugar on Interdependence Day (Schmidt). Another has Hal as the only person in the U.S. who hasn’t been exposed to a “mass distribution” of the *Infinite Jest* cartridge, and, as the “one person who resisted the temptation to watch it or who could transcend its effects,” is viewed as “some kind of freak” (Hager).

<sup>89</sup> Burn floats a possible, more delicate and contrarian perspective, caviling with assumptions that Hal *has* in fact changed, or evidences a “strangeness entirely as a result of some cataclysmic event that took place in the novel’s missing year,” as Hal himself described the easiness of nullification and “be[ing] no one” three years prior (47-8).

(Wallace, *IJ* 3,12), with his seemingly paralyzed or possessed exterior, has been marked,<sup>90</sup> yet there has been little explanation of this undistinguished “feel[ing].” If one marks Hal’s relation to those around him, one sees an affective affinity; an empathy recalling Gately’s own in trying, in his own body-locked fashion, to aid Fackelmann. The laughable headmaster C.T., a constant butt of jokes and poor-spirited imitations to the E.T.A. students, is here to Hal “Uncle Charles” (Wallace, *IJ* 3), the familiar sobriquet indicating Hal’s new sense of acceptance for his family members that, despite their close proximity to him, Hal never truly considered before.<sup>91</sup> Likewise, he recognizes how “the same Aubrey deLint I’d dismissed for years as a 2-D martinet knelt gurneyside to squeeze my restrained hand and say ‘Just hang in there, Buckaroo’” (Wallace, *IJ* 15). Rather than the cartoon Hal had painted, empathy transfuses deLint into an almost paternal figure. In his trailing thoughts of other parties from his past, he likewise touches on an explicitly defined epiphany falsely produced for his “hypophalangeal Grief-Therapist” (Wallace, *IJ* 16, 252-6), now realized for its shallowness and contrivance. Most compelling, however, is the critically ignored inclusion of Hal’s true opponent: not the catatonically efficient John Wayne, whom Hal began to resemble toward the end of the novel and who has since been mysteriously dispatched, but the blind tennis player Dymphna, who is described somewhat unrealistically (given his later tennis mastery) at one point to have “several eyes in various stages

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<sup>90</sup> For instance, Elizabeth Freudenthal notes that Hal is in a “pseudoautistic state,” “paralyzed by a radical interiority, likely catalyzed by his ingestion of the designer drug DMZ” (200-3), while Burn describes Hal as a “hermetic husk of a self that ‘contains’ this character who is unable to express his internal thoughts externally” (46). Hager offers a useful addendum to Hal’s state and locked-in lucidity of mind, remarking that, “because Hal is narrating the novel at this point... his mental faculties appear, to readers, intact.”

<sup>91</sup> See, for instance, the description that “for somebody who not only lives on the same institutional grounds as his family but also has his training and education and pretty much his whole overall *raison-d’être* directly overseen by relatives, Hal devotes an unusually small part of his brain and time ever thinking about people in his family *qua* family-members” (Wallace, *IJ* 515-6).

of evolutionary development” and skull like a “Chesapeake crabshell” (Wallace, *IJ* 518).<sup>92</sup> The player is mentioned earlier by a blindfolded Idris Arslanian attempting to cull a similar intuitive playing style that threatens to make even John Wayne’s mechanically seamless form seem lifeless—Dymphna sees *beyond* the physical, into a realm of affective coordination. (Indeed, in a deleted interview with Dymphna’s trainer, the trainer places his preferred regimen in stark contrast to “tennis factories” such as E.T.A. that “build” players like “men build redwood decks”<sup>93</sup> [Wallace, *IJ* ‘*First Two Sections*’ – Wallace Papers].) Dymphna judges “the necessary spot of landing by the intensity of the sound of the ball against the opponent player’s string” and “float[s] by magic to the appropriate spot,” rather than those still “hobbled by sight” (Wallace, *IJ* 568). Beyond other earlier, more likely opponents, Dymphna is set as Hal’s other, his match in Hal’s fluid, wraith-like style; Hal claims, “I know he is mine” (Wallace, *IJ* 17).<sup>94</sup> Dymphna is likewise a tragic product of the mass toxicity of the Great Concavity, with a softened skull leading to his present blindness, reiterating a Mario-like emotional purity resulting from past trauma. This is where Hal stands in his final incarnation: a damaged, potentially difficult and asocial figure open to an empathic understanding, even if he cannot act. Like Dymphna, he has forsaken his external sensory organs and physical proficiency to look inward. Regardless of his

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<sup>92</sup> Burn brings attention to inconsistencies in Wallace’s rendering of Dymphna, such as his age that is reported as both “sixteen” and “nine,” his uncertain blindness, and his “ambiguous” roots (62). It also seems unlikely that Wallace’s further description of the damaged player as requiring “on-court use of only one hand because the other had to pull around beside him a kind of rolling IV-stand appliance with a halo-shaped metal brace welded to it at head-height, to encircle and support his head” (Wallace, *IJ* 518) could be possible, given Dymphna’s sweeping victories at the WhataBurger; perhaps this debilitating description is just exaggeration on Hal’s part.

<sup>93</sup> The line bears resemblance to Wallace’s description in the final version of James Incandenza’s father “build[ing]” James Incandenza as “a promising junior athlete the way other fathers might restore vintage autos or build ships inside bottles, or like refinish chairs, etc” (Wallace, *IJ* 63).

<sup>94</sup> Burn, in tracking the Catholic saint who shares Dymphna’s name and the saint’s alliance with those suffering from “unhappiness, loss of parents, [and] mental disorders,” claims the blind player is perhaps “intended to arrive as some sort of spiritual antidote for Hal” (63).

physical entombment, his intention is open, and thus represents a deeper alignment with self not requiring physical modification or excellence.

Perhaps then, one might say Wallace injects the body of the novel as a whole with the anhedonic stillness of Hal's frozen husk at the book's opening. His ultimate mind is unknowable; we only know he is "alive," he feels. Likewise, we are unsure (or rather, unsure of the consequences) of Gately's Demerol drip; does it signify a return to the origin of illness, or the enlightened aftermath of rock bottom, and the realization and hence encapsulation of such? The minds and interiority of such decisions are hidden from us, such as to greater foreground the ineffable quality of *empathy* that Wallace hopes to suffuse these seemingly religious choices beyond the sheer empirical benefit of pragmatic choice. These piercing bouts of interiority, for better or ill, are also central to Wallace's rendition of newly "realist" archetypes ensconced with more postmodern-leaning methods. Indeed, epiphanic transformation in *IJ* has itself been made subject to a postmodern relativity. As such, the novel's structure malleably moves and mimes this mentality; the last margin, where the lines of character resolution connect, are likewise cast into irresolvable oblivion, only to just as routinely return to the novel's beginning. The temptation to exteriorize pain, to expunge one's "impotent rage and powerless fear" (Wallace, *IJ* 541), is redirected into an alternate form of self-consolidation. Yet this hidden option and its exact machinations, like the ultimate unearthing of the *Infinite Jest* cartridge, are unknowable in their sublimity. Wallace had reached a secular epiphany, but fittingly, in the moment the book winks, it—to us, as readers—is lost.

## Old Passion Clothed in New Fire: Textual Relationality in *Brief Interviews with Hideous*

### *Men*

#### Introduction: The Well-Made Box

Critics were hesitant to agree with Wallace's comments on *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*<sup>95</sup> (1999) as having "a fair amount to do with sex" and manifesting an "interest... in misogyny" (Wallace, Silverblatt "Hideous").<sup>96</sup> Or rather, they interpreted the book's function too literally as articulating the single-minded fetishisms of men deformed by desire who seek women as conduits for their self-serving schemes of emotional narcissism.<sup>97</sup> A more accurate and theoretical interpretation of this perceived sexual calculation was raised by a long-insightful reader of Wallace, Michael Silverblatt, who noted in an interview that the dialogues in the book were both "accurate description[s] of a kind of talk and an abstraction of that kind of talk" (Wallace, Silverblatt "Hideous"). That is, they presented a back-and-forth tête-à-tête of sexual chess-playing that is closer in its metaphysical rigor to philosophical argument (Boswell calls the book's method "dialectical" [182]) than the pop incapability woes of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (of which Wallace was still a fan) (Wallace, Silverblatt "Hideous"). Indeed, a deeper understanding of *BI* requires perceiving sexual desire as a cipher rather than

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<sup>95</sup> Referred to hereafter as *BI*.

<sup>96</sup> One particular review by Michiko Kakutani—which caused Wallace such pain that he could supposedly recall lines from memory (Max 254-5)—claimed "it is unclear just what point Mr. Wallace wants to make with these boring, repetitious and frequently repellent profiles... his men are so uniformly misogynists, his women so uniformly victims that the reader who didn't know better might easily surmise that an angry radical feminist had penned them as part of an ideological screed."

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, A.O. Scott's comment that: "The interviews hold up to hilarious, disturbing scrutiny the endlessly inventive duplicity that animates men's single-minded pursuit of sex." Boswell, with a more nuanced appreciation for the philosophical implications of *BI*, notes that "sex becomes for Wallace's 'hideous' men (and women) another means by which they can descend deeper and deeper into their self-made cages of self-consciousness and solipsistic dread" (183).

mimetic imprint used to investigate larger affective and rhetorical problems in readerly connection.

This notion of sexuality as gamesmanship is expressed most nakedly in “Octet,” a series of “*interrogation[s]*” (Wallace, “Octet” 145, italics Wallace’s), wherein Wallace’s plea to the reader is abject enough to resemble “asking somebody over and over on a first date whether they like you” (Wallace, “*Octet*” *Typescript*), yet necessary to render a sense of “queer” and “urgent interhuman sameness” (Wallace, “Octet” 157).<sup>98</sup> The means of escape, or a temporary portal away from the surface-level exploitation enacted by Wallace’s “hideous” men, arrives in moments of affective transcendence facilitated by the elaborate structural schemas meant to mirror the Machiavellian tactics of seduction his characters employ—a transcendence that is arguably more sexual, or orgasmic, than simple “sincerity” (Kelly) or “belief” (Konstantinou).<sup>99</sup> The mirrors of structural games and refraction toy with, distract, and pull one’s attention away from genuine moments of transfiguration. Through “openings” in the text, and the sleight-of-hand employed in a tempered, fourth-wall-breaking address, Wallace enacts a relationship and cooperatively creative endeavor, allowing the reader to steadily replace his authorial unassailability before one knows one is being implicated. The calculation and deceptive couching of such openings is further revealed by early drafts of “Adult World” and “Octet,” newly available for examination. Within this relational model, the “hideous” man is Wallace,

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<sup>98</sup> Wallace’s language in describing the project reiterates this conception: he notes his method of authorial interaction as like someone “reaching for something and recoiling at the same time,” employing the terminology of a botched romantic overture (Wallace, Silverblatt “Brief”).

<sup>99</sup> Wallace describes in the same Silverblatt interview how the recursions of erotic need and want aren’t simply that; the hope was that in the “excruciatingly detailed jot and tittle psychological mirrors” “there’s the possibility for great and profound emotional and spiritual and existential affect” (Wallace, Silverblatt “Brief”).



centered in repeated ploys of direct address while seeking the unveiled body of the reader, in a “relationship” that is most accurately described as sexual.

Foundational to understanding *BI* as a game of rhetorical courtship is the alignment between postmodern reflexivity and sexual reflexivity. Wallace makes the parallel between rhetorical self-awareness in both postmodern fiction and modern courtship explicit in a 2000 interview, describing how postmodern refraction of viewership is amplified under erotic impulse. He claims, “The whole watching/being watched, display/reception of display stuff gets complicated and probably creepier when you are in a sexual situation” (Wallace, Schechner 106). Wallace notes that both author and subject of the “Brief Interviews” story cycles are under a multiplicity of gazes and refracted self-consciousness; this anxiety becomes distilled in “hideous” characters, revealing their dark philosophical systems involving women (that rape may have cosmic benefits, that deformities may be a sexual asset) often as a means of seducing an absent interviewer that is likely disgusted by their behavior, yet courted nonetheless through a promulgation and seeming awareness of it. Particularly emblematic is the narrator of “Brief Interview #20” referred to as the “Granola Cruncher” episode, a likely Yale graduate (based on the narrator’s location and demeanor, as noted by Zadie Smith) who describes how his formerly jaded secular-humanist perspective was shifted by the story of so-called New Ager he beds at a music festival, who describes avoiding homicidal rape through an acutely projected, empathetic “focus” on her rapist (Wallace, “B.I. #20” 295-316). The Yalie ends his supposed tale of personal transformation with a direct address to the interviewer, who has been rhetorically and chemically courted throughout—“A refill? It’s refill time, yes?”—and yet whose disinterest is now apparent: “I stand here naked before you. Judge me, you chilly cunt” (Wallace, “B.I. #20” 291, 318). The Yalie’s rhetorical motivations are tripled: he is aware of being perceived as a

potential predator, yet hides this intent behind the manufactured vulnerability (which still may be true) of transformation by the New Ager's purity, however, upon further awareness of this ploy's failure, finally lapses into a direct confrontation—a progression that neatly reflects in many ways Wallace's own method. This refraction is part of what Boswell describes as a “sustained theme of the ‘interview’ and of interrogation in general,” in which characters attempt to elude being pinned down and, much like a knowing and aloof postmodern novelist, become “metafictionalists of their own feelings” (182-4). In response to the particularly self-involved story “Octet,” Adam Kelly notes a similar smoke screen of paradoxical vulnerability and canniness in Wallace's technique reminiscent of his hideous men: the direct address in particular is a creator's “weak appeal to the reader to look beyond the text's self-conscious pre-empting of its own reception” (“New Sincerity” 144). Particularly, if one isolates and enlarges this capacity of wishing—through elaborate denials, rebuffs, and solicitations—to draw closer to the reader, one sees Wallace's interest in sexuality, and its mercantilist partner in pornography, as disguised blueprints for fictional principles.

This rhetoric-as-sexuality schema is most evident in Wallace's early professional preoccupation with pornography. Tellingly, at one point he intended to write a novel about pornography, the research for which later became cannibalized for an essay on the *Adult Video News* (AVN) Awards called “Big Red Son” (Max 123-5, 128; “Big” 4). To explain Wallace's interest in pornography, Wallace's biographer D.T. Max relates pornography's manufactured intimacy as similar to that of advertising (an old interest of Wallace's since his “E Unibus” essay days), wherein “received image” replaces “sacral mystery,” speaking also to Wallace's interest in “how media changed the reality it was meant only to record” (Max 123-4). Mediation would then form an elemental component of Wallace's attempt to seek out a mode of human connection in

writing. Indeed, the constantly invoked moniker of New Sincerity writing—born mostly out of Wallace’s declaration for “single-entendre principles” in “E Unibus” (delivered quite early in his career) (81)—might be another means of phrasing a “New Intimacy,” given rhetorical veil in a “New Pornography” of post-postmodern fiction. Like porn’s elaborate codes and conventions—“why the lesbian love scene, the masturbation scene?” Wallace queried to his agent, Bonnie Nadell (Max 124)—Wallace’s method is to deliberately avoid, but so outline by its absence, a central “emotion” and economy of desirous tension, or otherwise the physical intimacy glazed over by the mechanics of presentation, whether pornographic or literary. In “Big Red Son,” Wallace relates an anecdote told to him by Harold Hecuba, a fellow journalist at the AVN Awards, who describes how a local sheriff had returned a cache of stolen pornography to him as a cover to relate and inquire on behalf of his long-held fascination with the form. The sheriff’s chief obsession, as Wallace relates with great interest, was the potential to view a fragment of intimacy within the otherwise hyper-mediated and stilted conventions, “those rare moments in orgasm or accidental tenderness when the starlets dropped their stylized ‘fuck-me-I’m-a-nasty-girl’ sneer and became, suddenly, real people” (“Big Red Son” 16). One might easily say the same thing about the rhetorical games and rote operation of high postmodernism and particularly the postmodern subset of metafiction. This also explains part of Wallace’s expressed interest in “misogyny” as a thematic filter for *BI* (Wallace, Silverblatt “Brief”): in order to find an elemental core of human relational truth, one must use the most exaggerated test case possible. Particularly in terms of rendered character subjectivity, Wallace is looking for the glimmer of perceived, or imagined, desire in the porn actress’s eye, not a total seismic shift toward “reality.”

The use of sexuality as a tangible placeholder for more inaccessible platonic truths is also evident among Wallace’s research materials. A book in Wallace’s library, George N. Gordon’s

*Erotic Communications: Studies in Sex, Sin, and Censorship* (1980), has several suggestive and informative passages marked and underlined, one intriguingly discussing the glory hole, or hole wherein “the ‘customer’—usually at a bordello—sticks his erect prick...[and] on the other side of the partition he is manipulated by *something* to the point of orgasm” present since Roman times (243, italics Gordon’s). Sex is first prefaced as holding the crystallizing possibility for “reify[ing] an abstraction,” and the glory hole in particular presents the almost alchemical process of aligning an acute sensation of pleasure to a mysterious, or unseen source: “first, a metaphysic is being reduced to a simple physic... second, an elaborate mysticism is being reduced to simple mechanical essentials” (Gordon 243). Further, the notion of the porn actress’s fragment of appreciation is housed, for Wallace, within a broader argument about *feeling*. This same dyad is discussed in a passage by Gordon, marked by Wallace, describing the difficulty of legislating pornography, much as it offers, and exists in the currency of, an intangible sensation that isn’t quite “speech” nor “art.” Wallace underlines the following: “If my collection of porno photographs is not protected by the same law that guarantee my rights of self-expression... what manner of human communication *are* we dealing with? An easy answer is ‘*feeling*,’ pure and simple” (Gordon 135, first italics Gordon’s, second italics mine). This mysterious abiding element of pornography operating under premises of “feeling,” while ostensibly offering anything but, taps into a central mercurial quality of fiction Wallace aspires to enact: how to create, in the refracting gazes and artificialities of complex fiction, a genuine fragment of transferred sensation? How to reach the other side of fiction facilitated by, but existing above or beyond, metafictional games?

One answer to this question is “surprise,” achieved by the exaggeration and extrapolation of mechanisms employed in Wallace’s previous work. Critic Marshall Boswell notes in his

career-spanning assessment of Wallace (up to *Brief Interviews*) that *BI* “is the one book in Wallace’s corpus that, for all its charms, challenges, and singular achievements, does not significantly advance its author’s art;” however, he claims the book is still Wallace’ most “characteristic” (181-82). Arguably, *BI* then offers an enlightening microcosm of Wallace’s work thus far, exaggerating—as will be shown by the progression from the prior chapter into this one—the epiphanic ruptures that were first introduced in *Infinite Jest*. In an advancement of *IJ*’s technique to vacuum Gately’s final reaction to his “bottom” sequence into the unknown gap after the novel’s end, for instance, *BI* disfigures any such neat climax or anti-climax.

Indeed, one must view much of *BI*’s flirtatiousness as puzzle-like, made so by conscious excisions and rearrangements of content. Consider, for instance, the discontinuous “interviews” forming the eponymous “story” that weaves through the main text, composed of “four pieces...that are themselves divided into nonsequential numbered sections, as though they were culled at random from a vast repository of transcripts” (Scott). (Boswell also notes that “though each interview is numbered and dated, no particular importance seems to be attached to these details” [182].) Or the sequence of stories labeled “Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders,” of which we are only given, without explanation and seemingly at random, numbers XI, VI, and XXIV (Scott). Or of the un-described “interlocutor” of the “Brief Interviews” present only as a “journalistic Q” (Wallace, Silverblatt “Brief”), given range of expressivity in tonal modulations of this “Q” such as “Q...” or “Q, Q” (Wallace, *BI* 91-2). Reasons for this conscious rearrangement and scrambling may be found in D.T. Max’s biography describing Wallace’s link to Joyce. According to Max, Wallace “had gotten the idea of discontinuous interview numbers in *Brief Interviews* after reading in a biography that Joyce loved putting puzzles in his work” (Max 316). We may assume then that moments of epiphanic

understanding, which Wallace will call “click[s],” are more related to unwinding the puzzles placed within Wallace’s fiction, rather than to traditional moments of climax “whose approach can be charted by any Freitag on any Macintosh” (Wallace, “Futures” 40).

Though one would assume Wallace’s chief alignment with Joyce would be in parallels between *Ulysses* and *Infinite Jest* (mentioned in passing by several critics<sup>100</sup>), Wallace’s interest in complex and deferred “puzzle”-like solutions in *BI* marks another appreciation and further manipulation of Joyce’s “epiphany” concept—a concept, as described before, increasingly understood by critics as an unstable, volatile, and human-based entity. Indeed, Wallace in *BI* can be seen to cartoonishly distort the “epiphany” (most explicitly in a meta-textual meditation on the triteness of the epiphany, and then actual epiphany, in “Adult World”). And, the moments of structural fragmentation that so mark *BI*—the polyglot grab bag of styles, the interviews, pop quizzes, stage plays, fake dictionary entries—are indeed moments of obscuring and disguising where a epiphany, or narrative “click,” might potentially occur. As he stated in his now-famous interview with Larry McCaffery, when describing his original transfer from modal philosophy to fiction,

What I didn’t know then was that a mathematical experience was aesthetic in nature, an epiphany in Joyce’s original sense. These moments appeared in proof-completions, or maybe algorithms... It was really an experience of what I think Yeats called the ‘click of a well-made box’... At some point in my reading and writing that fall I discovered the click existed in literature, too. (Wallace, McCaffery 35)

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<sup>100</sup> See, for example, Burn (*DFW*’s IJ, 60), and—more intermittently—Carlisle (67, 95, 112, 179, 229, 361, 404, 471).

Barring the explicit reference to Joyce, this description is telling in that it both suggests Wallace's beloved talking point of the beneficial aspects of "work" on behalf of reader and writer, but also the notion of story as algorithm, and "click" offering a solution to an equation or puzzle. How this "click" occurs then might be through the algorithmic processing of narrative elements, or the components of a short story used as a more quantitative build-up to a moment of narrative insight, often experienced in Wallace, through drastic structural dissolution.

Moments of transcendence are filtered through these structural gaps. While A.O. Scott described this method as a process "less anti-ironic than (forgive me) meta-ironic," in that through twisting and chipping holes in layered recursions of prose Wallace is critiquing this approach, Scott's emphasis is on the material present on the page rather than unrepresented departures. Yet, under the epiphanic mode, in the rhetorical anglings of the hideous men—Wallace's rhetoric and the rhetoric of the "come on" becoming one—there is a transcendental impulse buried beneath such recursions. This, as mentioned in the Section introduction, might be seen as an evolution of transgressive fiction, and the transgressives' original alliance with de Sade's "hypothetical" aesthetics, gesturing toward an absent space by means of baroque sexual configuration. Boswell aligns this with a method reaching toward "honest[y]" beyond all the "talk," as *BI* "positively brims with talk and more talk, much of it sophisticated and articulate and all of it geared toward an 'honest' description of hideousness" (184). The work is marked by the ghost of this "honest[ty]," as it seeks paradoxically to "invoke indirectly the very things that it is *not* addressing" (Boswell 209, italics Boswell's). Zadie Smith also discusses this extra-textual space, claiming that *BI*'s stories are "attempting to make something happen off the page, outside words, a curious thing for a piece of writing to want to do" (143). Adam Kelly allies this unrepresentability, like Boswell's "hones[ty]," with the impossibility of modern "authenticity,"

diced to ribbons by Derrida's debunking of any an absolute objective point from which to judge the authentic, joined with a "sincerity" that—as mentioned before—becomes "the kind of secret that must always break with representation" ("New Sincerity" 143). Lee Konstantinou likewise fixates on a break that facilitates an unencumbered "belief" in the verity of Wallace (97)—a means of reinforcing trust behind the at-times malicious-seeming games. Yet, if the only "sincerity," "honesty," and "belief" we are discussing is the integrity of the well-made box, and Wallace himself suggests his affinity with the puzzle, and rhetorical dissection of what makes a story a story, why not look to the margins and interstices for an epiphanic presence as yet recognized? Similarly, as the epiphanic impulse implies a transfiguration of the immediately perceivable narrative action, and considering Wallace's interest in the epiphanic click, it would logically follow to focus on stories explicitly addressing structural transfiguration and the epiphany.

### **Adult Feelings: "Adult World" (I) and (II)**

The story "Adult World" presents the densest accumulation of structural sleight of hand (breaking down halfway into an outline), most explicit reference to "epiphany" (baldly declaring the "epiph unfold[ing]" [Wallace, "Adult (I)" 183], and structuring the formal shift around the "epiph"), and perhaps most naked preoccupation with sexuality as an avenue and obstacle to "feeling." Though "Octet"—the central story in the collection, which is framed like a symmetrically crafted fugue, with recurrent stories interweaving and interpenetrating thematically—is often seen as the heart, or "core" to the collection (Boswell 187), the only story with a full revelation hinging explicitly on "epiphany," with a structure openly facilitating this, is "Adult World;" hence, for the purposes of our study, it will be considered the transformative



“core.” Present too are the unstable shifts between self-love and other-directed-empathy couched in the sexual currency of the collection of masturbatory self-sufficiency and the impossibility of knowing another’s desire. This sentiment is contained neatly in the opening: “For the first three years, the young wife worried that their lovemaking together was somehow hard on his thingie” (Wallace, “Adult (I),” 161). The young wife’s other-projected fixation is revealed in her obsession with her partner’s localized need, rather than any mutual definition of sexual union. Likewise, by looking at an earlier version of the story recently made available in the Wallace archive, one can see more forthrightly the alliance of sex with conceptions of empathetic sacrifice and understanding (even of oneself), as well as the role of the oblique epiphany accessing these realizations.

Countering “realist” approaches to the epiphany, and perhaps carving out a sub-niche for Wallace within a somewhat skeptically rendered and drastically altered “new realism,” is Wallace’s intentional defusing and parody of externally visible changes.<sup>101</sup> This conscious attention to externality is perhaps most visible in the split between “Adult World (I)” and “Adult World (II).” “Adult (I)” offers a third-person-limited perspective of a near-realist story about wifely sexual insecurity, while “Adult (II)” is in the form of Wallace’s unfinished story notes, loudly broadcasting psychological and structural changes in the narrative. The main crux of the story is protagonist Jeni Roberts investigating her husband’s acute sexual dissatisfaction and prolonging of orgasm when they are intimate—in searching for reasons, she imagines that, in kaleidoscopic sequence, her method is inadequate, her hair is prohibiting proper viewership of

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<sup>101</sup> Recall Wallace’s discussion in David Lipsky’s *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* (2010) of avant-gardism (of which he includes his own work) being able to better adapt to the mimetic sensations of the media-saturated “real world” than realism: “texture...the *cognitive* texture, of our lives: “as the texture, as the *cognitive* texture, of our lives changes[,]” and “the different media by which our lives are represented change,” avant-garde writing presents the best vessel to encapsulate “the way it feels on your nerve endings” (39).

her oral technique, her husband is overworked and is secretly removed from her in some way (Wallace, “Adult (I) 163-4, 168), and so on. She considers various methods of improvement to ameliorate his perceived distance, though essentially all are filtered through the practice of sexual improvement and amplification, given most grim and inanimate form in practice session with a black “Dildo” (ominous capitalization intended by Wallace, later made lowercase) from the eponymous sex shop “Adult World” (Wallace, “Adult (I)” 188, 164).

Through Jeni Roberts’ exploration of “adult” culture as a surrogate for intimacy with her husband, she renders the paradox of exterior desire belying hidden interior states (ignored by traditional realism), dredged up for her additionally in her investigations of pornography. Jeni researches pornography to find a method to please her husband, yet has an opposite reaction to the pornography as the Sheriff-cum-pornography-enthusiast in “Big Red Son” and his found moments of genuine organic desire in the actresses. To Jeni, “the women’s eyes were empty and hard—you could just tell they weren’t experiencing any intimacy or pleasure and didn’t care if their partners were pleased” (Wallace, “Adult (I)” 168). Likewise, in Jeni’s exploration of her own paranoid suspicion by meeting with her facially-disfigured former lover (or in the story, simply “F.L.”) at a fast food chain restaurant, to ask about her previous obsession with thoughts that he was thinking of another woman during intercourse, she recalls how she allied this former lover’s facial disfigurement with perceived emotional occlusion. She notes his “facial asymmetry... had helped fuel her uncontrollable suspicion that he had a secret, impenetrable part to his character that fantasized about lovemaking with other women” (Wallace, “Adult (I)” 179-80). She likewise later believes she sees a “red & demonic-looking gleam” in his “hypertrophic iris,” which could just be a “trick of light” (Wallace, “Adult (I)” 185). Jeni’s eventual epiphany is also experienced as an externalized sensation, or change of color reminiscent of a jellyfish’s

flush pigment; she goes “100% pale à la Dostoevsky’s Nastasya F.,” which change of “pallor & digital palsy” her former lover interprets as “requit/positive response” to his still-lingering interest (Wallace, “Adult (II)” 185). Yet, these signs prove to be near-universally wrong: her husband is “raw” due to his “Secret Compulsive Masturbat[ing],” her Former Lover was in fact not thinking of other women, and Jeni’s epiphany is decidedly more for herself than for the F.L (Wallace, “Adult (II)” 184, 186-9).

What Wallace is seemingly parodying here is the *predictability* of such epiphanic insights, much as they might aid a formulaic, or MFA-workshop-derived emphasis on “problem-free” mechanics—a staple of what he called “Workshop Hermeticism” (Wallace, “Futures” 40). This is first indicated in the story through discussion of the compulsive-masturbating husband’s occupation as a stochastic analyzer of world currency. “Stochastic,” as explained in the story, means “random or conjectural or containing numerous variables that all had to be monitored closely” (Wallace, “Adult (I)” 167). The rhetoric of attempted “calculation,” and its implied murkiness of prediction, also negatively infuses Jeni’s interactions with her husband, ringing with the falseness of the contrived, or misleadingly projected. During a dream in which Jeni imagines intercourse from her husband’s perspective, the notion of “calculation” features heavily and literally: “he began thrusting faster in a *calculated* way and making pleased male sounds in a *calculating* way and then feigned having his own sexual climax, *calculatingly* making the sounds and facial expressions of having his climax but withholding it” (Wallace, “Adult (I)” 170-1, italics mine). In essence, Jeni cannot grasp the unfathomable “x” factor that allows for a consubstantial joining of spirits that marital intercourse apparently holds the potential for. The result is a fixation on and extrapolation of this factor through externally visible signs, in a practice mirroring her husband’s for the projected flux of the “yen” and other international

currencies (Wallace, “Adult (I)” 163-6), which inevitably rings with the falsehood of artificially constructed emotions and fabricated intimacy.

Inevitably, in what may be a manifesto for Wallace’s fiction overall, the epiphany, or epiphanic change, is described as requiring unpredictability. In an oblique homage to the actual psychological phenomenon of epiphanies, Wallace diagnoses an epiphany explicitly in the story’s first half, in an explanatory narrative intrusion: “In secular psychodevelopmental terms, an epiphany is a sudden, life-changing realization, often one that catalyzes a person’s emotional maturation... the person, in one blinding flash, ‘grows up’” (Wallace, “Adult (I),” 176-7). Chiefly of concern is the qualifier that epiphanies must be “sudden,” “blinding,” and arrive seemingly out of nowhere. However, the problem becomes: how to impose such a lightning flash of insight without first defusing it with a preconceived precipitation or trite build-up? Or rather: how to maintain the genuine quality of surprise, while the realist tropes enshrouding the epiphany (and realism’s emphasis on external signaling towards change) works against any possibility of unpredictability? Again, to heighten the stakes of “awareness” for epiphanic change, yet also perversely pave his own way toward one, Wallace likewise reiterates, “in reality, genuine epiphanies are extremely rare... It is usually only in dramatic representations, religious iconography, and the ‘magical thinking’ of children that achievement of insight is compressed to a sudden blinding flash” (Wallace, “Adult (I)” 177). He also describes, in anticipation, the coming epiphany in Part II, claiming many of Jeni’s imagined worries were “realized only later, after she had had an epiphany and rapidly matured” (Wallace, “Adult (I)” 163). From such discussion about the artificiality, and realistic impossibility of the epiphany, one would assume the author denigrating this technique would never then, in few pages, attempt to enact a believable one. Yet, as the epigraph to the second part of “Adult World” claims, we are

moving from “dramatic/stochastic,” or the realm of predictable outcomes drawn from a cluster of realist data, to “schematic/ordered,” or the realm of overt, near-metafictional narrative devices put on display in order to counter-intuitively foster moments of narrative truth (Wallace, “Adult (II)” 183).

As Robert L. McLaughlin notes in his reassessment of Barth’s “Literature of Exhaustion,” Barth’s original blueprint for an ideal postmodern manipulation of narrative form is to merge neologistic structures with the underlying pulse of “our still-human hearts and conditions” (“Discontent” 56). And indeed, this sentiment is present in Wallace’s explanation of “Adult World (II)’s” unique form: “the big reason to have ‘Adult World (II)’ in outline form is that for myself as a reader I don’t buy epiphanies dramatically anymore... so some of the stories that look the weirdest at least were designed to access emotional stuff in a different way” (Wallace, Arden 98). One might say Wallace here is attempting to play up his own apparent naïveté in presenting an unfinished, and apparently juvenile, outline as a “story,” which would aid narratives of Wallace’s ultimate “sincerity” I wish to dispel. Instead, I believe Wallace is attempting to manipulate strategies of pseudo-confession in order to instigate unusual and arresting epiphanic moments of insight where one might not anticipate them; his good will is rather a ploy to enact a deeper fictional mission. In this fashion, Wallace is fulfilling the dictum of Emily Dickinson to “tell all the truth but tell it slant” (Dickinson 494). By framing the epiphany in a wholly defamiliarized format of a fiction outline, Wallace is able to both externalize the action (through stage-direction-like asides) and give a deeper, more naked insight into Jeni’s newly obtained understanding; hence, the “suddenness” and striking nature of the traditional epiphany is preserved.

A telling absence exists in the draft version of “Adult World (II)” during the actual moment of epiphanic realization. Namely, the earlier version lacks the full extent of the epiphany Jeni undergoes, thereby complicating further the story’s seeming divulgements in allowing the outline format to “avoid...nasty problem[s]” of “convey[ing] epiphany in narr[ative] expo[sition]” (Wallace, “Adult (I)” 184). The earlier version’s section “1b” ends with the description that Jeni’s “epiphany unfolds while hemispherically atrophic F.L. responds to question” (the epiphany indicated shortly thereafter to be about the husband’s compulsive masturbation), then moves directly to 2a without describing the full import and extent of the epiphany (Wallace, *AW Typescripts*). This elision internalizes, or renders invisible, the true nature of Jeni’s thought processes and psychological revelations as they relate to herself and the relationship with her husband. In the published version, a “1c” section has been added that fully articulates the newfound potential for empathy she now finds through her “sddn blndng realization” that her husband is a secret compulsive masturbator, and hence “has clearly been suffering from inner deficits/psychic pain of which J.’s own self-conscious anxieties have kept her from having any real idea,” all portrayed in “objective, exterior desc[ription]” (Wallace, “Adult (II)” 183-4). Jeni’s realization in the published version has thus been modified to enhance, and foreground, the empathetic requirement of understanding her husband’s “inner deficits” as the source of his seeming sexual removal, and likewise her attempts to project her own narcissistic consciousness onto him as preventing true identification. The epiphany, while interior, is rather projected outwards—a realization about empathy piercing the black box of another’s consciousness.

Similar modifications in Wallace’s draft likewise foreground this “unspoken,” understanding, and complicit quality of understanding to proper marital connection. Added

wholesale in the published version is how Jeni “weeps for hsbnd” and realizes “how *lonely* his secrets must make him” (Wallace, “Adult (II)” 186, italics Wallace’s). She also accepts her husband for who he is, as Wallace adds in this final version how she “accepts her ‘unalterable powerlessness’ over hsbnd’s secret cmplsions” (Wallace, “Adult (II)” 187). Also, recall the subtitle for part II—“One Flesh”—in Wallace’s later implementation of a description of how two mutually empathizing, but still self-enclosed, consciousnesses can empathize with one another. What in the former draft was simply the assertion that “binding them now is unspoken complicity” (Wallace *AW Typescripts*), is modified in the published version to “binding them now is that deep & unspoken complicity that in adult marriage is covenant/love” (Wallace, “Adult (II)” 188-189). Wallace transfers what appears to be the jargon of a dirty little secret, in the couple’s shared “complicity,” to this unspoken understanding leading to a mutually shared “covenant.” Further, this new empathetic understanding is not limited only to the connubial union of Jeni with her husband, the masturbator. It likewise infuses, and inflects, the leitmotif of masturbation (within a larger book-long frame of sexual conquest as emotional masturbation) as still holding a potentiality for self-love.

Masturbation actually serves as a co-opted metaphor for Jeni’s slowly developing sense of interiority, operating in stark contrast to the lonely, isolated solipsism masturbation represents to her husband. Through the epiphany, she is able to realize that her husband’s “interior deficits’ . . . ha[ve] nothing to do with her as a wife [/woman]” (Wallace, “Adult (II)” 186). Indeed, she is able to convert what is, for the husband, a source of shameful deceit and isolated self-pleasure, into a possible avenue for self-exploration and self-understanding. Part of the “unspoken complicity” (Wallace, “Adult (II)” 188) is that Jeni herself is able to salvage a fragment of self-love from her husband’s addictively noxious habit; in the published version,

Wallace changes the simple, aphoristic “He masturbates; she masturbates” (Wallace *AW Typescripts*) to “Hsbnd mastrbtes secretly, J.O.R. openly” (Wallace, “Adult (II)” 188)—Jeni’s brash reclamation of masturbatory self-love is made open and explicit in contrast to her husband’s shamefully secret practice. She even, in a highly detailed section added later, revisits Adult World, the store of her husband’s secret fixation, and purchases the following accessories for her pleasure alone: “2<sup>nd</sup> dildo... then ‘Penetrator!!®’ dildo w/ vibrator, later ‘Pink Pistollero® Pistol-Grip Massager’” and so on (Wallace, “Adult (II)” 188). Jeni co-opts the mechanism of her husband’s shame, and uses it as a highly specialized form for her open display of self-pleasure and self-sufficiency. Note also that the ominous black “Dildo,” which she “had to all but force herself to practice with” (Wallace, “Adult (I)” 165) and had served as an artificial simulacra of her husband’s member, has now become detached from representing a discernible attached person; the dildo is simply another point of her “wellspring of personal pleasure” (Wallace, “Adult (I)” 188).<sup>102</sup>

Wallace’s strategy in the story, far from simple audience-agitation, is rather to use the unconventional arrangement of the second half as a counter-intuitive grain against which to cast a heightened, naturalistic phenomena of epiphanic insight. The former ineffectuality of such a trite convention as “epiphany” is invested by Wallace with new life precisely through a structurally alienating form—Wallace himself isn’t stylistically masturbating, but rather revealing overlapping layers of interiority, and how characters may come to know themselves however trapped they are within the stilted constraints of realist conventions. Indeed, the

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<sup>102</sup> Boswell, however, sees this final embrace of masturbation as reinforcing the elemental narcissism of both Jeni and her husband, further enforced by the glib structural games of the story’s concluding half: “Wallace emphasizes the vicious dramatic irony of this conclusion—namely, that the lovers are linked by the fact that they are both essentially solipsistic masturbators—by casting the story’s second half in the form of the author’s working notes” (204).



traditional oppositional forces of interior realization manifest in exterior signs are troubled, paradoxically. The epiphany is made explicit and self-consciously overt, yet still surprises by arising shortly after its highly prepared introduction. Further, even the act of deriving information about interior shifts from exterior characteristics—such as the adulterous “gleam[s]” in a former lover’s “sinistral” eye (Wallace, “Adult (II)” 185)—is parodied, yet employed nonetheless. The story becomes a story about how one might still jab and puncture the narrative skin of a short story in order to facilitate revelations—revelations that are central to Wallace’s attempt to cast empathy, and relieve loneliness, in both his characters and readers (fulfilling what he continually came to identify the purpose of fiction as). That this arrives in the costume and currency of sexual dysfunction is merely part of the larger goal of the collection.

### **Readerly Consubstantiality / Two Fleshes: “Octet”**

In “Octet,” Wallace no longer attempts passively to refract and manipulate gazes within the text for epiphanic result; instead, the reader is confronted, bludgeoned, and arrested in an attempt to coerce an *active* and *collaborative* epiphany. Likewise, in the currency and jargon of this article thus far, “Octet” represents the starkest solicitation of the reader’s aid in abetting a mutual author-reader consolidation of meaning, ultimately ending in an appeal to the reader to act as co-author in guiding Wallace’s ghostly hand. The enhancement of this collaborative aspect, and the disparagement of Wallace’s own role to facilitate this, is also evident when looking to an early draft of the story. In structure, the piece is comprised of a series of pop quizzes based on—according to Marshall Boswell—John Updike’s “Problems” (185): “mortise-and-tenon” (an esoteric type of embedded joint) pieces, or “bellevistic” investigations framed as complex, recursive scenarios with accompanying questions (Wallace, “Octet” 145-6). By setting

the piece as a gauntlet of quizzes, Wallace sets the stakes for his desired, Wittgensteinian community of mutual meaning-making: quizzes imply answers, and it is presumably the reader who must supply and make sense of them, to then be resubmitted to Wallace for examination. The existentially chilling nature of these “quizzes” is immediately evident from their stated premises. One asks which of two “late-stage terminal drug addicts,” huddled in an alley “behind the Commonwealth Aluminum Can Redemption Center on Massachusetts Avenue” and undergoing acute withdrawal, “lived” (Wallace, “Octet” 131). Another asks whether a woman giving up her child to a vengeful ex-husband to ensure its financial security makes her a “good mother” (Wallace, “Octet” 134-5). A last and final quiz, however, places a new burden of amplified hermeneutic duty on the reader, implying not just answers to quizzes, but the overall fictional structure of the quiz itself—what Raoul Eshelman might call a post-postmodernism interplay of “inner” and “outer” frames, which Konstantinou suggests Wallace employs to give us the false impression that we are solving an irresolvable query by sneakily providing a self-guiding, ameliorative format (96-7). This quiz begins: “You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer,” proceeding to unfold an elaborate reasoning for the perceived failure of the prior, incomplete sequence of pieces, and a directly asks the reader to somehow redeem their failure through a “queer” “urgency” of appeal (Wallace, “Octet” 145, 151). The ambiguous object of address—self, other, or some intermediary persona—additionally places the supposed audience of the story as a merged entity that is part ideal reader, part Wallace. This amorphous no-man’s-land then becomes the interpersonal space to be toyed with during reading.

A traditional interpretation of the story, and indeed parodied within the confines of the piece, is that of rote metafiction (heavily indebted to Barth) attempting to display the rigging and levers of the piece through a self-validating, exhibitionistic display. This exhibitionism, however,

is firstly undercut by the author's own allusion to the self-serving nature and "sham-honesty" of this tactic (Wallace, "Octet" 147), both introducing and obviating the approach simultaneously. Further, as the "Q" goes on so exhaustively to lay out the "*relationship*" and "palpations" desired by the piece, the narrative structure no longer investigates elements of fiction, but rather interpersonal emotional frisson (Wallace, "Octet" 155, 150, italics Wallace's)—untrodden territory for a writer whose work bears the Atlantean weight of "modernism and postmodernism heavily, but respectfully, on its back" (Boswell 1). Indeed, it encapsulates the modes of interpersonal connection, the deceptiveness of exterior sign as only dimly suggestive of interior states, and the baroque methods of seduction in modern courtship, that have marked the collection in subject matter throughout. The bizarre quibbling over sincerity and honesty, as well as how the directly addressed reader factors into Wallace's scheme, is then enmeshed with these far more socio-erotic currencies. Likewise, these tactics of intimacy and isolation, diffracted gazes and direct address are essential in determining whether, under A.O. Scott's stakes, Wallace has broken through to the other side of metafictional gamesmanship or is merely practicing a deep and coded solipsism.

This piercing manner of connection has inevitably raised discussion in Wallace scholarship over the structural effect of "sincerity" and "belief," each freighted with a different direction for where this naked honesty is projected. Lee Konstantinou in "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief" posits that the fourth wall doesn't open onto the reader but rather onto Wallace. Konstantinou reiterates that the meta-commentary on artifice is such that "we become aware of the artifice of his fictional exercise," pleading that we "believe in the total, genuine honesty, the '100% candor' (148) of the author—not the narrator, but *the author*" (94, italics Konstantinou's). The trust and "belief" that Wallace asks for (Konstantinou signals

Wallace's exceptional quality as inspiring just this: belief) is then what can anchor otherwise "sham"-like rhetorical games (Konstantinou 93). Zadie Smith, however, believes the gaze of investigation is actually opposite, such that Wallace is investigating the moral soundness of the reader, running him or her through rhetorical games like elaborate initiation rites. Smith claims, "His stories simply don't investigate character... they turn outwards, towards us... It's our character that's being investigated" (Smith 276). Rather than gesture frantically at himself through metafictional gimmicks, Wallace—in Smith's interpretation—offers serpentine constructions to provide an intentionally traceable path of cognition. His rhetoric is like Henry James's, whose "syntactically tortuous sentences" are rather punitive and pedagogical than airy and aesthetic, "intended to make you aware, to break the rhythm that excludes thinking" (Smith 274). Smith's point allies with a larger wave in Wallace scholarship, outlined in Adam Kelly's "The Death of the Author and Birth of a Discipline," which analyzes "Wallace's disruption of standard models of representation in order to provoke the agency of the reader," evidenced in works like "The Planet Trillaphon" and *The Broom of the System* that "end in mid-sentence" to allow the reader participation "in the text's imaginative completion."

Adam Kelly, in another essay, posits a mix of Smith's reader-investigating model and Konstantinou's author-divulging model. In his piece "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," Kelly posits that Wallace, when issuing a direct address in Quiz 9, is addressing a disembodied version of himself—more specifically, an abstracted proxy he self-chastises "like an anguished diary entry" (143). The endlessly circulating diatribes to the "reader" are then, in Kelly's estimation, linked to a depleted sense of authorial "authenticity," which he traces back to Lionel Trilling's lamentation over postmodernism coming to dominate the academy, and Derrida's notion—expressed through Wallace—of a missing "Archimedean

point” to “judge the authentic from the inauthentic” (“New Sincerity” 137-138). Kelly’s oblique reference to Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” in his own “The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline” is telling—in Kelly’s reading, Wallace has it both ways, existing as a ghostly writer surviving as a non-attributed body of text, yet haunting it nonetheless. Or rather, in true Wallacean fashion, apologizing for it. In the collaborative mode raised and somewhat deflated in “Death of the Author,” Kelly claims that Wallace is Wallace’s own ideal reader, and hence, in a roundabout and somewhat sly way, Wallace is the only one who can create meaning for Wallace, the whole piece an extended, somewhat morose pep-talk to himself. As Kelly writes, “it is only this reader (rather than the writer Wallace addresses as ‘you’) who will ‘be able to tell [what] you’re doing; even if she can’t articulate it she’ll know if you’re just trying to save your own belletristic ass by manipulating her—trust me on this” (“New Sincerity” 144).

However necessary and relevant I find Kelly’s teasing and complication of Wallace’s author/reader function in the story, I believe the intent of the story isn’t quite so cynical and self-involved. Rather, with respect to Wallace’s repeated claim in the story to maintain a “relationship,” I believe a complex reader-author mode of interpolation, and interpenetration, is made available, opening mutual channels for communication and intimacy.

In a mixture of Kelly’s, Smith’s, and Konstantinou’s methods, I wish to put forward a dynamic of reader and writer that honors a mutual relationship rather than proposes one-directional provocation. The initial phase in such a relationship is Wallace’s erosion of his own authorial agency, which he lays out in the last line of Quiz 9 in a description of himself “quivering in the mud” with the reader rather than issuing directives from a “gleaming...Olympian HQ” (Wallace, “Octet” 160). Once so debased, Wallace is then able to project and suggest actively what a reader could or *should* do in his position—a suggestive,

creative, and collaborative timbre to Wallace's rhetoric currently under-analyzed.<sup>103</sup> This openness to creative input is hinted at in both the skipping around in quiz numbers (from 4 to 6 to 7 to 6(A) to 9), as well as the structural arrangement of the final "quiz" of "Octet," wherein potentially discarded, alternative pop quizzes are embedded within footnotes (surrounded, of course, by caveats as to their dysfunction) to allow the now enfranchised reader to select the total structure of the work. The rich philosophical complexities of these quizzes—such as one about a pharmacologist who creates a miracle anti-depression drug and is made miserable by his freshly cured and now omnipresent fans, and another about a sadistic Ellis Island administrator who gives humiliating English approximations of immigrant names (Wallace, "Octet" 148-151)—indicate that their consignment to footnotes is less Wallace's dissatisfaction with them, but rather opening our creative agency in choosing to read and include them. Further, his later justification for "pok[ing] [his] nose out" through this whole last quiz is to encourage a "revelation" that "resonate[s] back through the cycle's pieces" to make one "see them in a different light"—a decidedly user-centric phenomena in reexamining and re-imbuing old stories with power ("Octet," 154, 159). The solicitation for a "queer" felt "sameness" he calls for is decidedly one not capable by author alone (Wallace, "Octet" 157). In sum, the "'reader' has been cast as writer," as Wallace explicitly declares in a deleted section called "post-metabit" from the earlier draft (Wallace *"Octet" Typescript*), participating in a two-way creative enterprise.

First, to accomplish this, Wallace must erode his identity as a capital-A "Author," unimpeachable in authority. As becomes clearer when looking at the earlier draft of "Octet,"

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<sup>103</sup> Konstantinou notes that Wallace's "use of the second person, and his presentation of the final section as yet another pop quiz, interferes with directly conflating the character ("you") with Wallace," and that "this block...necessitates that readers decide whether to make the identification" (96). Konstantinou does, to the exclusion of this slippery mutualism posited here, as the "last quiz is so long, detailed, and specific...it is hard not to understand it as a direct commentary on Wallace's experience writing 'Octet'" (96).

Wallace amplifies his language in the published version regarding the servile, and lowly, posture required by the author in order to facilitate, or experience, this transaction of desired “feeling.” This extends beyond simple “aw-shucks” self-deprecation (omnipresent in his nonfiction), or the “sincerity” and “belief” Kelly and Konstantinou respectively argue for. Indeed, in Wallace’s early draft, “sincerity” is present as the foundational tactic for the “meta” technique to come off: “The trick to this solution is that you’ll have to be sincere. When you step out and ask the reader, there can be nothing coy or performative about it” (Wallace “*Octet*” *Typescript*). This same sentiment is amplified in the published version to include jargon indicating an utter helplessness, marked by almost militaristic diction indicating an unarmed, vulnerable position of potential victimhood. Wallace claims in the embellished passage in the published version: “you’d have to be 100% honest. Meaning not just sincere but almost naked. Worse than naked—more like unarmed. Defenseless” (Wallace, “*Octet*” 154). He expands on this concept of “defenselessness” to add the tinge of emotional neediness implied in the direct appeal. As Wallace explains in a passage added later, “one of the very last few interpersonal taboos we have is this kind of obscenely naked direct interrogation of somebody else... It looks pathetic and desperate,” and that “anything less than completely naked helpless pathetic sincerity and you’re right back in the pernicious conundrum” (Wallace, “*Octet*” 154). This degree of self-flagellation is indeed a step removed from simple “sincerity”—merely revealing the need for the appeal is sincere enough. Wallace’s process is closer to self-annihilation in order to then open up a space for the reader’s self-rendering in the position abandoned by the author.

Similarly, with the author so lowered, Wallace’s chosen terminology for the author-reader interaction becomes one of intimate contact and manipulation. Fittingly, the word Wallace employs to describe this relationship is “palpate.” In the earlier draft, Wallace skips over

“palpate” (user earlier) in a footnote seeking an alternative for “demonstrate,” ruminating on how “demonstrate” “might not be the right word; you might want to use the word ‘evoke’ or maybe even ‘limn’” (Wallace “*Octet*” *Typescript*). In the published version, however, he adds and labors over the thwarted concept of “palpate”: “*palpate*’s been overused already, and it’s possible that the weird psychospiritual probing you mean it to connote by medical analogy won’t come across at all to anybody” (Wallace, “Octet” 155). “Palpate,” as an alternative to “limn” and “evoke”—is offered as the style of analysis the pieces employ, yet is fully transferable to the reader relationship. While palpation seems one-way, it is still a means for Wallace to “reach out” and begin stimulation of a mechanism that will bare fuller collaboration. However discarded—these self-deprecations should be ignored, as even fully fleshed out quizzes and scenarios are “discarded”—Wallace’s description of the practice’s “psychospiritual probing” is, this phrase accurately describes both the transgression of the textual boundary as well as the desired effect of intrusive readerly jostling (Wallace, “Octet” 155). Like Wallace’s underlined passages about the mysterious veil of the glory hole in the Roman Bordello, the text exists a smoke screen through which authorial-readerly “palpation” can occur.

Beyond this slightly one-sided stimulation, Wallace also addresses the reader in such a way as to then involve and implicate him or her into his rhetorical decisions. Debunking any idea that Wallace is only addressing himself, or a phantasmal reader, the narrator describes, “there are right and fruitful ways to try to ‘empathize’ with the reader, but having to try to imagine yourself *as* the reader is not one of them” (Wallace, “Octet” 152, italics Wallace’s). This sentiment is important in that it casts Wallace’s description, and caveats, regarding the proper way to end his malformed “quartet” (Wallace, “Octet” 159) as not simply an attempt to see from the reader’s perspective, but to expose the mechanics, possibilities, and problems of the story so that then the



reader may *herself* take over his position (recall again Wallace's deleted assertion that in fact the "reader" has been cast as writer"). A modification to the ending of the entire story further reiterates this reader-as-author sentiment. Wallace finishes the draft version with "Q: Self-evident" (Wallace "*Octet*" *Typescript*), missing in the published version, effectively making the prior information simply a scenario with answer implied, requiring no further action from the reader. The published version, however, ends provocatively with no discernible question, and instead embeds the provocation "So decide" (Wallace, "*Octet*" 160) as the last line of the text, asking the reader to supply a meaningful ending rather than simply take part in a "self-evident" exercise.

The slow shifting of authority from author to reader is most clearly evident in the narrative suggestions Wallace issues, firstly addressing himself and the practice at hand, yet expanding more into a discussion of narrative construction, and the reader's choices, in particular. These, again, become more evident in the evolution between drafts. In an early footnote missing from the draft version, Wallace bandies about the issue of the piece's no-longer-fitting title: "You're still going to title the cycle 'Octet.' No matter if it makes any sense to anybody else or not. You're intransigent on this point" (Wallace, "*Octet*" 152). Here, we are still in the world of Wallace and addressing concerns very specifically related to the original schema he created for the story. The caviling is over the specific name of the piece indicates we are in the real world just beyond the exterior frame—Wallace as author in the process of composition. Yet, the tone of these second person asides quickly shifts to areas of potential malleability that the reader should have agency, or say within, indicated by the increasing culpability of his second-person address. He claims that "if you decide to use the pseudometaQuiz tactic and the naked honesty it entails," "you're probably going to have to come

right out and use it, the dreaded ‘R’-term [Relationship], come what may” (Wallace, “Octet” 155). The slipperiness of the suggestive phrase “you’re probably going to have to,” still indicates that we might be in the world of authorial creation, yet in “probably,” indeterminacy is beginning to slip in, with the added phrases “naked honesty” and “dreaded ‘R’-term” further reiterating the erosion of authorial power. A final-version page later, however, Wallace is fully advising us on whether we “may or may not want to spend a line or two” reflecting on how there are “literally a billion times more ways to ‘use’ somebody than there are to honestly just ‘be with’ them,” though “this’ll be a matter for you to sort of play by ear” (“Octet” 156)—the phrase also added in the published version. Somehow, Wallace is now advising us on probabilities of success with regard to specific lines, rather than merely using the fourth wall as a sounding board for his own ideas. Then, by the next footnote, Wallace is imploring us for a decision on our behalf, claiming, “All I can do is be honest and lay out some of the more ghastly prices and risks for you and urge you to consider them very carefully before you decide. I honestly don’t see what else I can do” (“Octet” 156). This tone of helplessness is marked next to Wallace’s original perfunctory advice: “Just be aware of some of the prices up front, before you decide” (Wallace “*Octet*” *Typescript*). In the span of two final-version pages, Wallace refers to the text at hand as a wholly estranged entity, now shifting abstractly into the reader’s ownership, with which we can implement certain strategies with varying degrees of success advised by Wallace.

Wallace’s full transference is perhaps most apparent in how he chastises the work of this new reader-author. In what might be a projected recrimination for his own feelings of attempted sincerity, he tersely informs us, “Yes: you are going to sound pious and melodramatic. Suck it up” (Wallace, “Octet” 156). Further, by the quiz’s end, Wallace has near-completely abdicated responsibility with his added phrase: “Again, this will be for you to decide. Nobody’s going to

hold your hand” (Wallace, “Octet” 159). Somehow, we have progressed from Wallace’s disembodied proxy to the one holding ownership of the artistic object being reprimanded. What is particularly revealed by this increase in tension, anxiety, and ultimate brusqueness, is Wallace’s desire for the reader to acknowledge the full difficulty of the readerly act. (Wallace alludes to the difficulty of this rhetorical construction in his failed or inadequate execution of Pop Quiz 6, beginning a recurrent iteration Pop Quiz 6(A) with the declaration “Try it again” [“Octet” 135].) We have been given the “imaginative access to other selves” that Wallace claims good fiction must allow (Wallace, McCaffery 22); yet, here it leads to the author himself—a transference, in the context of the collection, that is inevitably erotic (a favorite word of Wallace’s [Max 42]). Perversely, in Wallace’s reprimand, the reader has made transference of agency complete, enacting the “queer” “sameness” he sought out (Wallace, “Octet” 157), sharing a mutual role of reader and writer between the text and user.

In light of these developments, Wallace’s fascination with pornography and the near-pornographic, affectless games of modern romance are evident in a rhetorical method finding glimmers of sentiment in otherwise cold, cerebral mechanics. By running such falsity at maximum speed, the devolution of these mechanisms, and the living, sentient qualities of both author and reader, are revealed. Such intentional breakdown is also apparent in Wallace’s evolution between drafts, undercutting any assumption that the ruptured seams we finally see are due to carelessness or desire for simple spectacle. Likewise, ironically, Wallace’s post-postmodern tactics also cast the unspoken alternative of altered realism, present in peers like Jonathan Franzen, as itself lonely, hermetic, and inactive. There is no direct appeal in “hysterical” realism, nor is there an ability to perform actual, meaningful, two-way games such as desired by Franzen’s “contract” writing. It is only by fancifully abstracting and imploding

these tropes that Wallace is able to feint, and then blindside readers with the realist-tinged concept of the epiphany. Wallace's characters are marked in only being able to receive self-realization where it runs up against the fringes of traditional textual boundaries and organization. Stephen J. Burn's precept of post-postmodern characters as realizing they are in a mediated textual construct, yet ignoring it, is taken here to the fullest extension possible—characters rupturing traditional frames, be it pop quiz or authorial outline, to receive enlightenment beyond the mediation of the fictional scheme at hand. Through these excisions, ruptures, and fractures, Wallace is able to pursue a true relationship with the reader beyond abstracted, Wittgensteinian semantics; we must actively fill in the holes, taking over the role of Wallace before we realize we have done so. In the discourse of eroticism Wallace posits in *BI*, this is where textual communication is able to reach "One Flesh," as "Adult World (II)" is subtitled. Rather than accept the shallow surfaces of a postmodern method that had become so emptied as to evoke pornography, Wallace looks beyond the eyes of any foregrounded actors into those of the reader beyond.

## Epilogue

In this dissertation, I have outlined the “inoperable machine” of late twentieth-century postmodern American fiction, reaching its peak and quickly-following stagnation point during the mid-to-late 1970s and 1980s, caught between the daunting strictures of its print-based legacy and a revolution in new media. Further, I have also traced how the fictional generation succeeding this period, encapsulated in post-postmodernism and the bridging genre of transgressive fiction, can be seen to at times successfully blend—in flickering fits and starts—these two monumental forces. I have also demonstrated how the faulty processes and degeneration of this “flicker” are precisely what allow the new form’s affective thrust; at the point when this systematic print form disintegrates, what emerges is a new sort of “feeling” and “connection” that was previously thought impossible from the solipsistic husk of postmodernism. Further, such indeterminacy births a new form of relativistic character interiority—personas only appearing whole when viewed askance, contingent on unseen elements, and never fully settling into stability. Given this relationship between style and technology-mimicking operation, however, the question then logically becomes: what happens when such strategies are allied to newer technologies, to communication forms that are in their very nature fragmented, collage-like, and disassembled?

This would be the point of another iteration of “post” after “post-postmodern.” At this proposition, sighs inevitably ensure, and one would rather examine a dust mote on the windowpane with great concentration than confront the idea. Yet, there is something in the very fabric of contemporary fiction, as of this dissertation’s writing in 2015, that contends with this unknown space—an aim to fulfill in its own unique way Zadie Smith’s prognostication for an ideal writing that blends macro-structural principles with heart craft, or systems of new media

with narrative tricks dependent on print. The impact of—again, undoubtedly soon obsolete—GIFs, blogs, and image-streams of seeming unrelated content is just now beginning to creep into the writing style of younger, technologically influenced writers who, themselves, are marked by this glitchy, jumpy, and Internet-enabled aesthetic. Rather than wholly appropriate narrative into a noncompliant and resisting new media form, they are turning prose itself into the mimetic reflection of increasingly strange forms of media. The imprint, however, of postmodernism's decline, and those maximalist forms immediately tackling its legacy, is undeniable in this brave new world of mediated, yet still formally constrained, text kept independent of a quick-fix technological bandage.

One can only hope the stewards of such new fiction are mindful of this lineage. Behemoths may have come and gone, waved away for their encyclopedic and seemingly deadened and Gollum-like hoarding of scientific disciplines, mythologies, and philosophies, but even now the despairing derision felt in believing such a horde empty inflects even the most minimalist and small writing. Perhaps this hollowness, then, might birth a new literature that was in its last stages interested in disruption rather than coherence, glimmering refuse rather than modernist edifice; one can only guess at what form such hollowness might now take.

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